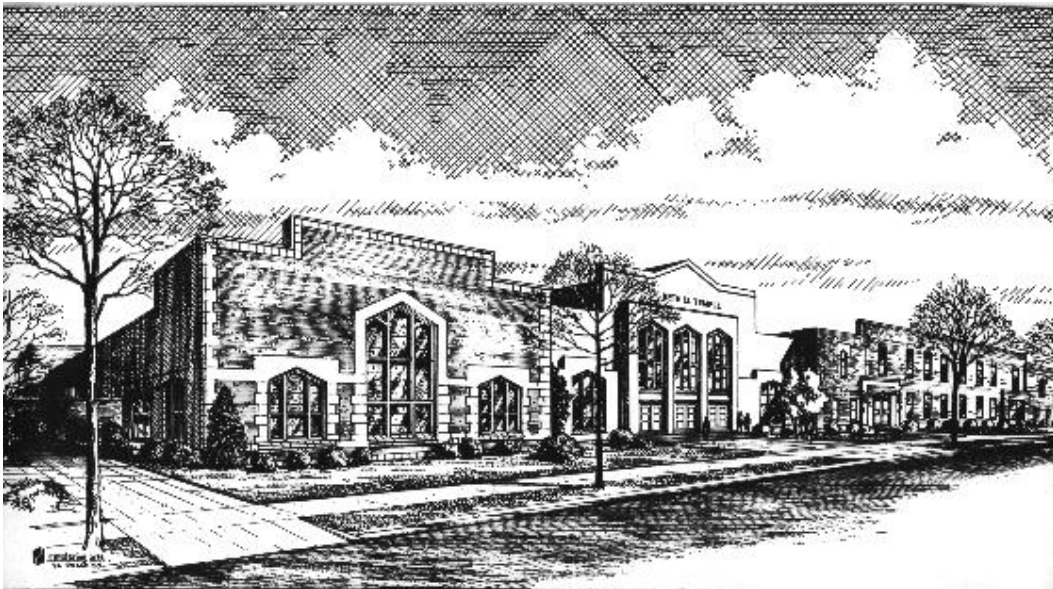




# **A Brief History of Beth El**

**Edited by Stanley J. Serxner, MA**



**(Final Version November 2008)**

## PROLOGUE

This narrative is a facet of the celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> year of Temple Beth El's presence in the Tidewater area. It is compiled, in many instances verbatim, from personal reminiscences and various other sources.

Sources for this brief history were: Early History of the Jewish Community of Norfolk and Congregation Beth El, edited by Dr. Eugene Kanter, who researched a major portion of this essay. Stanley J. Serxner, MA enlarged upon this with excerpts from "The History of Tidewater Jewry" by Irwin M. Berent in Renewal magazine (1985-1989), the minutes of the Board of Directors of Beth El, the Beth El Menorah, the Sisterhood's Beth El Chronicle, and an article concerning Exodus 1947 from a maritime encyclopedia.

Mario Cuffee, of Beth El's staff, located real estate deeds pertaining to Beth El as well as a scrapbook compiled by Mrs. Goldyn Balaban in 1961. Excerpts from the book To Life: Stories of Courage and Survival published in 2002 by the Holocaust Commission of the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater were included. Thanks to Mrs. "Boots" Buchanan of Tidewater Council #596 of the Boy Scouts of America who supplied copies of the Beth El Troop's records.

Grateful appreciation is extended to the Southern Jewish Historical Society, The Virginia Historical Society, Mrs. Louis B. Stern for the estate of her husband, Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern and for their permission to liberally reprint portions of their publications.

Advertisements in many of the publications noted are an indication of the involvement and participation of the Jewish community in the professions and commerce of the "Tidewater – Hampton Roads" region.

The compiler/editor is responsible for all errors of omission and commission. He respectfully requests that any corrections or additions be forwarded to the address given at the end of this recounting.

Here is a general Jewish time line:

- 1869 – The Emancipation of the Jews of Germany
- 1871 – The beginnings of Modern Anti-Semitic Movement
- 1896 – The Dreyfus Affair
- 1897 – The First World Zionist Congress
- 1903 – The Kishinev Pogrom
- 1917 – The Balfour Declaration
- 1925 – The Establishment of the Hebrew University
- 1933 – The Rise of Adolf Hitler
- 1948 – The Establishment of the State of Israel

Stanley J. Serxner, M.A.

These paragraphs are taken from a Bulletin celebrating the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Beth El:

1850: Beth El Congregation organized. Though little is known of Beth El's early days, it began in a home of a German immigrant, Jacob Umstadter, and then moved to rented quarters on Cumberland Street. Its predominantly German membership earned it the nickname "Deutsche Schul" by the newly arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe.

1909: Rabbi Louis Goldberg, a disciple of Dr. Solomon Schechter, the founder of Conservative Judaism in America, arrives at Beth El and establishes it as a pioneer conservative synagogue.

1921: Beth El is built on its present site on Shirley Avenue.

1922: Dr. Alexander A. Steinbach serves as rabbi of Beth El from 1922 and remains until 1934: Author and poet, he was a man of great charm. When asked for a description, the many that knew him say the word "charisma" comes to mind.

1934: Dr. Paul Reich begins his service as Rabbi of Beth El in 1934 and remains until 1967. During Rabbi Reich's years at Beth El, we grew from the small beginnings of Cumberland Street to a larger and stronger congregation of Conservative Judaism. Beth El was given inspiration and direction as a people and institution. He was a rabbi, teacher, and friend to all.

1939: The Beth El Center is built, expanding its facilities with an auditorium, ten classrooms, a kitchen and offices. Later, the Beth El center was re-dedicated in honor and in memory of Phillip and Dena Adelston Barr.

1948: The Beth El School Annex is built, known today as the Edwin Neil Waitzer Building, and provides ten additional classrooms for our Hebrew and Religious Schools. (*Editor's Note: today the Religious School wing is known as the Gordon Education Center*)

1949: The "New" Beth El Temple is constructed, providing 1,400 seats plus a chapel. Charles P. Leavitt played a major role in this development.

1950: The thirteen stained glass windows that grace Beth El's sanctuary were designed by Paula Mallery, head of the Department of Fine Arts at William and Mary (ODU). They were built and set in place by B.F. Biehl of Audubon, New Jersey.

1952: The original Beth El Temple is converted into a social hall and renamed Myers Hall to honor Julius A. Myers, who served as president of the congregation for thirteen years.

1978: Pauline Zfass, of blessed memory, at age 87, becomes the first adult Bat Mitzvah at Beth El.

1982: Ada Michaels is elected the first woman president of Beth El.

1985: Cantor Jacob Tessler begins his association with Beth El (he retired in 2006). His beautiful and moving melodies combined the traditional Eastern European flavor with the songs of modern Israel. Cantor Tessler initiated efforts with our children following their Bar or Bat Mitzvah and

established a cadre of youth Torah readers. These young people are able to read Torah during the High Holidays as well as during regular Shabbat services throughout the year.

1988: Rabbi Arthur Ruberg begins his religious leadership at Beth El and continues to serve as our spiritual leader. He has not only contributed to the growth of our congregation but has spiritually raised the level of thought and participation in every phase of synagogue life.

1989: The Beth El Endowment Committee is formed with Milton “Mickey” Kramer as Chairman. Co-Chairmen were Armond Caplan and Tavia Gordon, and Vice-Chairmen were Audrey Groh and Dr. Arthur Kaplan.

A Building Committee was also formed to plan and oversee improvements to the facility as well as new construction. Irwin Kroskin and Jay D.A. Barr, or blessed memory, served as Co-Chairmen. Jacob Aftel also served as part of the committee.

The renovations to Myers Hall were completed.

1990: The beautiful Caplan Gordon Atrium is built and dedicated. It provides much-needed space for receptions and social gatherings.

1994: The Beth El Endowment Foundation is formed. Income from these funds will support Beth El’s long-term growth and development. Larry Dobrinsky serves as President. The monthly Beth El Bulletin lists our funds and endowments.

1995: Beth El celebrates its 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary and honors its three trustees, Armond Caplan, Tavia Gordon and Mickey Kramer.

## A [BRIEF] HISTORY OF CONGREGATION BETH EL

Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern initiated the most historically accurate research on the beginnings of organized Jewish life in this old southern port city. Rabbi Stern served as the rabbi of Ohef Sholom Temple in Norfolk from 1947 until 1964 and for many years as the distinguished genealogist of the American Jewish Archives. In 1963 he wrote an article for the first issue of The Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society titled “Moses Myers and the Early Jewish Community of Norfolk”. Moses Myers was the son of Hyman Myers, who arrived in New York City from Amsterdam, Holland in the late 1740’s as an impoverished immigrant, and secured employment with Congregation Shearit Israel as a ritual slaughterer (*shochet*) for a short time before he became a trader, exporting goods to Canada. Dr. Stern followed that article two issues later with another, more comprehensive one, titled, “Some Notes on the Early History of the Organized Jewish Community of Norfolk, Virginia”.

In addition to several historical documents, Dr. Stern utilized the deed books of Norfolk County, preserved in the County Court House in Portsmouth, as well as birth, marriage and death certificates recorded in the Corporation Court of the City of Norfolk.

In 1997, the Virginia Historical Society, in partnership with the Jewish Community Federation of Richmond, created an exhibition interpreting the history of the Jews in Virginia, titled “Commonwealth and Community: The Jewish Experience in Virginia”. The exhibition appeared in major museums throughout the Commonwealth. Dr. Melvin I. Urofsky, a trustee of the Historical Society and professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University, wrote the exhibition catalogue with the same title.

## THE FIRST JEWISH COMMUNITY IN NORFOLK

The arrival in Norfolk of Moses and Eliza Myers in 1787, following their marriage in New York, marked the beginning of a continuous Jewish presence in Tidewater. It is possible that around 1815 there were enough Jewish families in the city to provide the necessary ten adult males needed to conduct a religious service; however, no records exist of any formal congregation. In 1817, the death of a Jewish resident prompted the establishment of the Norfolk Jewish cemetery in Washington Point (later known as Berkley). In 1840, while only two families remained in Norfolk, several Torah scrolls were found in a closet in a large house, “the fine white pretentious dwelling” on Cumberland Street known as “The Castle”. This led to the logical conclusion that they had been used in Jewish worship. The arrival of German Jewish immigrants in the middle of the nineteenth century revived the community. The late Malcolm Stern, the longtime dean of American Jewish Genealogists who served for a time as rabbi of Ohef Sholom Temple, credited the revival to Jacob Umstadter, who settled in Norfolk in 1844. Umstadter had trained both as a *shochet* and a cantor. His strong Orthodox background affected the local community.

Umstadter did not come alone and within a few years the community had grown sufficiently to permit the establishment of a congregation. On October 22, 1848, an organizational meeting was held and the committee approved the renting of two rooms in the house of Nathan American, one of the members, for the purpose of holding religious services.

Aaron Goldsmith, a newcomer from Baltimore, agreed to return to that city to secure a Torah scroll. The members of the new congregation defrayed the cost by assessing each member for an equal contribution.

The following year, on October 7, 1849, they elected Goldsmith as the first president of the congregation and adopted the name “Chevra B’nai Ja’acov,” which, literally translated means “Association of the Sons of Jacob”, later anglicized to “House of Jacob”. Under the guidance of President Goldsmith and Cantor Umstadter, who led the religious services, the congregation grew swiftly as more Jews settled in the city.

On February 13, 1850, a number of members acting as a burial society purchased a plot of ground, 55’ x 400’ for a cemetery. On December 6, 1865, the growth of the community required an additional adjacent plot to be purchased. This cemetery, located on Princess Anne Road at the intersection of Tidewater Drive, is known as the Hebrew Cemetery and is still in use.

On file are documents relating to the “Hebrew Cemetery Company”, a corporation dating from July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1934, and a gentleman named Simon Cohen who received sums of money on that date. M. Lidman, H. S. Tumin and I. Saunders as Trustees signed the papers.

In September 1957, the city of Norfolk agreed to take over the maintenance and operation from the Hebrew Cemetery Association which until then was managed by a joint board, consisting of equal members from Beth El Temple and Ohel Sholom Temple.

In 1962 an additional piece of slum-cleared property was added to the cemetery.

Through an act passed by the Virginia Assembly on March 23, 1853, the congregation House of Jacob established a school in the city of Norfolk incorporated as the Hebrew and English Literary Institute for “the instruction in the English and Hebrew Languages”.

Around this same time, in 1853, the congregation rented the first floor of the Odd Fellows Hall on Wolf Street (later named Market Street) at the head of Avon Street. This building was destroyed by fire on February 18, 1859. The members worshipped for about a year at 137 South Church Street, near Widewater Street (which later became known as Water Street).

The Beth El Chronicle of September 22-23, 1979, P. 2 provides a reproduction of the beginnings of formal Jewish education in Norfolk, Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Umstadter’s seat reservations in the synagogue, and the original deed for the Hebrew Cemetery Company. Already in 1852 there had been talk of erecting a building of their own, but it was not until March 3, 1859, that the Congregation House of Jacob purchased a lot on the east side of Cumberland Street opposite the old Norfolk Academy building. Jacob and Fanny Umstadter had acquired the lot five years earlier. Three months later, on June 9, one John M. Sale was commissioned to erect a brick building at 153-63 Cumberland Street to serve as a permanent home; the first actual synagogue of Chevra B’nai Jacob. To pay for the new building, the congregation secured a \$1,760 mortgage. Their first services in the new synagogue were held before the end of the year.

Jacob Umstadter, apparently trusting no one but his maker, took pains to record the purchase of his synagogue seats in the deed book of the Norfolk Corporation Court, specifically noting that they were “for the purpose of hearing divine worship according to the Old Jewish Orthodox principle.”

An act of the General Assembly of Virginia dated February 17, 1860, changed the name of the Hebrew and English Literary Institute. It is not known why it was necessary to make that change. By the terms of the act, all property in the name of the House of Jacob was deeded to the Norfolk Hebrew and English Literary Institute.

Until the arrival of Rabbi Bernard L. Fould in 1869, the Jewish community was ministered to by a number of unofficial *chazzanim* (cantors) and educated laymen, who bestowed upon themselves the title of rabbi or minister but who, in all probability, lacked either the *smicha* (ordination) or the educational attainments of a rabbi. This situation was characteristic of these embryonic German-Jewish congregations of the times. Insofar as it has been possible to ascertain, the following served as ministers of Chevra B’nai Jaacov:

Reference has already been made to Jacob Umstadter, who served intermittently from 1848 to 1868, including performing a number of marriages during this period.

|             |                    |             |                   |
|-------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1850 – 1852 | Rueben Oppenheimer | 1858 – 1863 | Aaron Oppenheimer |
| 1854 – 1859 | Isaac C. Campe     | 1863 –      | L. Heilner        |
| 1857 –      | J. Jacob           | 1864 – 1867 | Jonas Hecht       |

There are no records of the presidents who succeeded Aaron Goldsmith until 1860, when S Gutman held office. He was succeeded by Michael David Levy in 1860 to 1861; Isaac Hofheimer, who served from 1861 to 1863; then Samuel Seldner, who held the position from 1863 until 1865, when the office reverted back to Isaac Hofheimer for one year, 1865 to 1866. Henry Deicher became president in 1866, and when the Norfolk Hebrew and English Literary Institute became merely a real estate holding company, he held the high office in that body until his death in 1898.

The Civil War brought with it a sweep of liberalism in American Jewish life, which penetrated the Norfolk Jewish community. Factions developed within the Congregation House of Jacob generated by the new spirit of Reform.

One of the first acts of the post-war government of Virginia was to require new charters of all incorporated bodies in the state. A meeting was held to adopt new articles of agreement on September 4, 1867. It was at this meeting that it was resolved for the members to reconstitute themselves as a congregation. The synagogue was to be leased from the Norfolk Hebrew and English Literary Institute, which was now to be formed for a term of ten years.

In addition to other articles, it was further resolved that the reconstituted body should be known as Ohef Sholom Congregation or “Lover of Peace”, at that time located at Freemason and Tripoli (now Monticello). Linguistically, the proper Hebrew transliteration would be Ohev Sholom; however, since all of the founding members were of German birth or extraction, they pronounced “v” as “f” and so they became Congregation Ohef Sholom, later, Temple Ohef Sholom.

Unfortunately, the congregation could not live up to its name and serious ideological differences caused a split among the members. The older, traditionally Orthodox founding members could not accept the Reform philosophy of newer, more liberal members agitating for a change in ritual practice. Consequently, on January 2, 1870, traditionalists Michael Umstadter (Jacob Umstadter's son) and Simon Marx resigned.

On January 16, Jacob Umstadter and a number of others refused to sign an amended Constitution and by-laws and were stricken from the roles of the congregation. With the Orthodox faction gone, Ohel Sholom became a fully reform congregation, becoming a part of the movement that adopted rituals from non-Orthodox Jewish traditions, such as the seating of men and women together, the use of a mixed choir, and the introduction of organ music.

### **CONGREGATION BETH EL – THE BEGINNING**

The date of the founding of Congregation Beth El is a matter that could be considered open for some debate. Rabbi Paul Reich placed the date at 1850. That is the year inscribed on the cornerstone of the present Beth El sanctuary.

In June 1940, the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot issued its 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Supplement, which contained the histories of many of Norfolk's leading houses of worship. Rabbi Reich prepared the history of Beth El for the newspaper and relied heavily on William H. Stewart's History of Norfolk County. That book, which is a standard work on Norfolk history, states that Ohel Sholom was founded in 1836 and Beth El in 1850. Much of the information from that source, with additions, was incorporated in Rabbi Reich's article "Norfolk" for the Universal Jewish Encyclopedia.

The publication of Stewart's book and an early attempt to narrate the history of Norfolk Jewry by the late A.B. Seldner, a son of one of the early members of the organized community, contained a number of inaccuracies.

Since those researches were made, a number of interesting and authentic data have come to light and were utilized by Rabbi Stern in the preparation of his historical investigation of the early organized Jewish community of Norfolk. They also provide evidence of the exact date of the establishment of Congregation Beth El.

There is a plausible explanation for the designation of 1850 as the beginning of Congregation Beth El. The fledgling congregation, House of Jacob, to which Beth El traces its history, purchased a plot of land in February 1850 to be designated as a cemetery. Many Jewish houses of worship selected as their time of origin the date that they acquired a graveyard. Those congregations, made up of struggling new immigrants who could not afford to build a synagogue, began by holding religious services in rented rooms, houses or buildings that could also be used for a multitude of other purposes. In such a situation, they were not specifically identified as a Jewish property or entity. Burials, however, had to take place in land explicitly consecrated for Jewish use. Hence, the importance of designating that purchase time as the founding date when a permanent synagogue had not as yet been noted as the home of the congregation. This could be the reasoning behind the acceptance of 1850 by Rabbi Reich as the proclaimed inception of Congregation Beth El.

If one chooses to mark the founding of Beth El from the period that the traditionalists split away from the Ohef Sholom Congregation and started a new house of worship, the date of February 27, 1870 becomes evident. A copy of The Owl, official paper of the Young Men's Hebrew Association of New Orleans, for December, 1902, devotes twelve pages to the history of Norfolk Jewry and alludes extensively to the minutes of both congregations. The article gives the founding date as February 27, 1870, and lists the organizers as: Jacob Umstadter, Aaron L. Goldsmith, M.D. Levy, Samuel Westheimer, G.M. Levy, Joseph W. Spaget, Michael Umstadter, F. Selig, S. W. Seldner, and Charles Myers. According to the 1899/1900 American Jewish Year Book, Beth El had about 75 members. Wives and children, however, may not have been counted as members. The same source, volume 2, 1900-1901, gives the date of the founding as February 7 (an easy misprint for February 27, 1870).

The first mention of Beth El Congregation in any contemporary record is in the Minute Book of Ohef Sholom of a Board of Directors meeting in May, 1870, when the secretary was requested to invite the "Minister, President, and members of Beth El Congregation to witness the consecration of a new *Sefer* (Torah) on Sunday next, 1<sup>st</sup> day of Shevouth". It is interesting to note that the list of those dropped from the rolls of Ohef Sholom on January 1870 is almost identical with the list of founders of Beth El Congregation. Finally, while 1850 is accepted as Beth El's inception, it is emotionally and historically arguable that Beth El's antecedents extend to the earliest involvement of Jacob Umstadter and the founding of Congregation House of Jacob on October 22, 1848.

Mr. Aaron Goldsmith, the first president of that congregation, and Mr. Jacob Umstadter, who served as *chazan*, were staunch traditionalists, along with the other founding members. They championed the purchase of a plot of land for a Jewish cemetery. Mr. Umstadter sold the congregation property to erect its first synagogue and together they championed the cause of traditional Judaism in synagogue practice. When liberal reform elements introduced a change in ritual worship, they and the other traditionalists left to form a new congregation – Beth El – thus providing a historical continuity from 1848 to 1870, even though traditional religious services took place under several different congregational names.

### **BETH EL – THE NEW SYNAGOGUE**

Referring once again to The Owl, the publication with the extensive article on the history of Norfolk Jewry, Beth El's first rabbi was a Rev. L. Hartfeld (or Harfeld), a British gentleman who had vied for the same position in Ohef Sholom just before Beth El was established. There are records to indicate that Rev. Hartfeld's British manners and his beautiful chanting created a most favorable impression on Jacob Umstadter and others, leading to his engagement as the first leader of the new synagogue.

Beth El met for ten years in a building at the corner of Fenchurch and Cove Streets. In 1870, Samuel W. Seldner (his grave is at the cemetery on Tidewater. He and his family are buried next to the Umstadters) was elected president, Mr. M.E. Myers, secretary. Mr. Seldner held office until his death in June 1898. 1873 saw the installation of Rev. Samuel Mendelssohn as rabbi, who served the congregation until 1876. The Orthodox flavor of Beth El is suggested by the fact that the Rev. Mendelssohn was a Russian Jew, with training in a *yeshivot* in Vilna and Berlin.

The following paragraphs show the interrelationship of the “first families” in this area.

Mr. David Seldner of Karlsruhe, Germany, writes that “*Jacob Umstadter, the founder of the Norfolk Jewish community (if I can say so) was Samuel Seldner’s father-in-law. There is a relationship also to other people mentioned in your paper. I am enclosing some data, mainly the descendants and the ancestors of Samuel W. Seldner (as a matter of fact, he was born as Samson Wolf Seldner – on his tombstone his name is Samuel, but the Hebrew inscription says “Shimson Se’ev” = Samson Wolf) as well as the descendants of Michael Umstadter, the father of Jacob Umstadter. Samuel Seldner married Jacob Umstadter’s daughter Henriette. Henriette’s sister married Felix Goldsmith, whom you also mention.*

*I also found the name Westheimer in your paper. According to my family tree, Samuel Seldner’s brother Louis Seldner also lived in Norfolk, at least in 1860, and in 1868 he married Sophie Westheimer. Samuel Seldner’s son Michael was president of Oheb (sic) Sholom congregation and that at least Samuel Seldner’s daughter-in-law Rose (née Louchheim, wife of Aaron Seldner) was active at Oheb Sholom. There is a picture of her hanging there. It seems as if presidency in Jewish communities has a long history in the Seldner family. My G-Grandfather was president of a congregation here in Germany, and my G-Grandmother’s uncle was Leo Katzenberger, who was president of the Nurenberg Jewish community, maybe you heard of the famous Leo Katzenberger trial?”*

Mr. Seldner also encloses a family tree, which is archived.

Are there any descendants of these founders who are still in the area? If there are, please let us know.

In 1880, the Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, which had exchanged buildings with Oheb Sholom two years earlier, defaulted in its payments and the old Cumberland Street Synagogue was sold at auction on June 15, 1880. Michael Umstadter, M. Levy and E. Tischler, acting as “trustees for the Hebrew Congregation that meets at the building at the corner of Cove and Fenchurch Streets,” were the highest bidders at \$1,800. Beth El had found a home, which it occupied until the erection of a new building in 1921 on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, now 422 Shirley Avenue, that eventually became the synagogue’s social hall after the present sanctuary was constructed in 1950.

The Cumberland Street location was described as an “imposing building...(with) two flights of white marble stairs with shining brass railings on either side (which) led to the center entrance door. Not too large a temple, perhaps, seating about three hundred, the Bima (pulpit, which rests on a bama, (sic) or platform) at the far end, separated from the congregation by an open low divider with two openings to walk up to the reader’s desk. Red plush carpet and red upholstered chairs on the Bima gave it an air of elegance. ...Between the outside staircases was the opening to what we called the Vestry Rooms. Here the Hebrew and Sunday school classes were held. Sisterhood and Hadassah held their meetings in the Vestry Rooms.” The synagogue was the center of Jewish life in Norfolk through WWI.

Following Rev. Mendelssohn’s departure for a temple in Wilmington, North Carolina, Rev. I. Levy served the congregation for a brief time. From about 1882 to 1889, Daniel E. Levy, a member of the congregation, served in the capacity as rabbi and cantor. The Rev. D. Tobias

Salzman, 1889 to 1894, who resigned to take a pulpit in Baltimore, then succeeded him. Rev. Salzman conducted some of the marriage ceremonies for the Orthodox Russian Jewish immigrants in Berkeley (a predominately Jewish neighborhood in Norfolk). His place was taken by Rev. J. Schwartz of Philadelphia, who served until about 1896, and who gave way in turn to Rabbi Herman Benmosche, born in Cairo, Egypt, January 3, 1858. At the age of 35, after studies in various countries, he moved to the United States, coming directly to Norfolk and becoming the rabbi in 1896. Rabbi Benmosche was highly regarded in the general community. After Benmosche, Rabbi Leopold Heiman came to the synagogue around 1904 or 1905 and served until about 1907. Little else has been learned about him.

Dr. Louis Mendoza served as the distinguished rabbi of Ohef Sholom Temple from April 24, 1907 until 1945. During his rabbinate, he referred members of his congregation who desired to participate in the ritual of Bar Mitzvah to Congregation Beth El for preparation and performance of the ceremony.

Edward B.M. Browne of New York became the rabbi of Beth El after Leopold Heiman left the congregation in either 1907 or 1908, and served for one year. Browne “was a man of broad learning and splendid scholarship”. Rabbi Browne secured the consent of the superintendent of the Norfolk public schools to allow Jewish students to take their final exams at a time that would not conflict with a certain Jewish holiday. (This did not end the overall situation, but was a beginning of a solution.)

Congregation Beth El entered the 20th century having accumulated fifty eventful years of history – born in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century out of the great German Jewish immigration, surviving through a struggling period of organizational and ideological hardships, and positioned to enter the 1900’s with the advantage of a new influx of Eastern European arrivals to the shores of America.

As part of her scrapbook concerning the activities of the Sisterhood, Mrs. Balaban included a copy of the following letter from the files of Rabbi Reich:

*“M. Umstadter, President C. Meyers, V-P and Treasurer, J. Umstadter, Sec.*

*Umstadter-Meyers Company.  
Nos. 230 And 232 Main Street  
Norfolk, VA, June 17, 1904*

*Comm. Congregation Ohef Sholom:  
Gentlemen:*

*A meeting of the Board of Directors of the Congregation Beth El was called this evening in order to give your favor of the 15th inst. the earliest possible attention. The personal considerations you have so kindly expressed have been duly considered and many of the members of Congregation Beth El recognize that many of their best friends are members of the Temple but the differences as to worship and ceremonies are not personal, but are differences of conscientious belief and are of such a character that these features that you regard as the most attractive to your worship are those we regard as impossible to our ideals of the essentials to the essence of observance in our faith.*

*We are at present without a Rabbi and cannot easily secure such a one as we want, but we abide in hope and in the words of our sages “The Lord will provide.”*

*For your Rabbi, the Committee and the members of your congregation we desire to express the greatest esteem and for many of them the strongest personal affection, and would be glad if we could see our way either to bring you to the faith as we see it, or could school our conscience to steps in the direction you indicate, but we deem both of them impossible.*

7.

*With assurances of our highest regard, we are, Very respectfully,*

**M. Umstadter”** (Founder of the Norfolk Retail Merchants Association, 1903.)

The next hundred years enriched Beth El’s preeminent presence in the Tidewater area of Virginia. Balaban notes that: “In 1910 at the instigation of Harris Crockin and Isaac Fass a building fund was created for the new site in Ghent.” However, it was not until 1921 that the reality of a new Beth El was realized. In 1912, the first Hadassah chapter in the Commonwealth of Virginia was organized at Beth El by Miriam Blaustein. Under the outstanding leadership of Rabbi Louis I. Goldberg (1909-1918), Beth El in 1913 became one of the 13 charter members of the United Synagogues for Conservative Judaism. In 1916 Virginia Zionists held their first state convention in Norfolk, with Beth El Rabbi Goldberg as President and Mrs. Blaustein as Executive Secretary. There is a deed dated November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1919, in which the Fairmont Land and Building Corporation grants to Isaac Fass, M. Umstadter and H. Crockin, as Trustees of Congregation Beth El, a plot of land on Colonial Avenue in Ghent. Subsequent deeds, the last dated December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1969, which grant “certain lots, pieces or parcels of land, with the buildings and improvements thereon, ... to the Trustees for Congregation Beth El.” In 1921, Beth El moved to its present location, built a new 1,400-seat sanctuary in 1949 (?), and with further expansion now covers almost the entire city block.

On April 11, 1921, Beth El congregation thanked Norfolk Atlantic Lodge 2, Ancient Free and Accepted Masons for their service in laying the cornerstone of the building.

The dual causes of Conservative Judaism and Zionism were furthered during the distinguished rabbinates of Dr. Alexander Alan Steinbach (1922–1934) and Dr. Paul Reich (1934–1967). In 1939, Barr Center, with office and classroom facilities, was constructed. In December, 1952, a fifth structure was added to the growing physical plant: the Edwin Neil Waitzer Memorial Building was dedicated. He was a WW II Navy veteran. The original Waitzer school wing has since been completely renovated and rededicated as the Gordon Education Center. Beth El’s total complex now comprises almost an entire city block. In 1971, Beth El spearheaded the formation of the United Hebrew School.

In the course of the next nine years, Rabbis Marim Charry, Jerome Kestenbaum and Charles Freundlich and Cantors Edward Portner and Douglas Neswald served the congregation.

During the rabbinate of Dr. Reich, a number of events took place:

The minutes of the Board of Directors of Congregation Beth El and their deliberations with officers of Brith Sholom Lodge, quoted verbatim, follow. This selection indicates cooperation, if

not always satisfaction, in the community. Many people held joint membership in both organizations.

Under the letterhead of Congregation Beth El, dated December 17, 1935:

*“Tuesday night, December 17, 1935, a special meeting was held of the board and officers of the affiliated organizations of Beth El Congregation was called by the president at his home. Those present were: Julius Myers, J. Kravitz, Harry Kaplan, William Raymond, Dr. L. Friedman, Dr. R.D. Glaser, Mrs. Edward Marx, Mrs. Berlind, Albert Lewis and Mr. Halprin.*

*The purpose of the meeting was to decide whether or not to approach Brith Sholom Lodge in reference to combine with them in their plans to build a center for the various activities to accommodate Beth El and Brith Sholom Lodge.*

*After a lengthy discussion pro and con, a motion was made by Harry Kaplan and duly seconded by Mr. Kravitz that the chair appoint a committee to ask Brith Sholom to have both boards to meet in conference and discuss the proposed meeting.”*

Under the letterhead of R.D. Glaser, M.D., 718 Medical Arts Bldg., Norfolk, VA:

*“January 8, 1936*

*A special called committee meeting for the purpose of formulating suitable plans to propose at the joint meeting of Beth El and Brith Sholom Center to take place Sunday morning, January 12, the following were present:*

*Messrs. Simon Cohen, Dr. L. R.D. Glaser, H.H. Block, Harry Kaplan, Julius Meyers and R.D. Glaser. The following was decided upon: to combine in a cooperative way in building a community center to be called a suitable name, not bearing the names of Brith Sholom or Beth El. The location to be near Beth El as the present site for the proposed Brith Sholom Center on Boissevain Avenue is objectionable for many reasons.*

*Beth El is to match the funds of Brith Sholom and the new corporation absorb the present property of the Brith Sholom center. After this has been arranged [by] popular subscription and, depending on the results, the kind of structure can be planned.*

*In order that we display the true spirit of a Jewish center, the present organization must bear in mind that in the future this is to be absorbed by the general community as this information is the only nucleus for the future and in building we should so construct it that later other organizations can be accommodated.*

*Beth El feels that this is a wonderful opportunity and the time ripe for such an adventure and there is no reason why the two most active organizations in the city cannot sponsor such an enterprise.”*

*“January 12, 1936*

*At a special joint board meeting of Brith Sholom Center and Beth El held at the office of Mr. Theodore Amelson on this day in which a lengthy discussion was held in reference to the advisability of joining in a cooperative plan for building which organization was to be the nucleus of a Jewish center in time to come. After lengthy discussions by members of both boards pro and con, a motion was made by Harry Kaplan and seconded by R.D. Glaser to adjourn in good faith since no satisfactory solution could be consummated.”*

Here recounted is an event ancillary to Beth El’s evolution:

### **Exodus 1947**

“Built for the Baltimore Steam Packet Company and named for its late president S. Davies Warfield (uncle of Wallis Warfield, the future Duchess of Windsor), the steamboat *President Warfield*, built in 1928, served in Old Bay Line service between Norfolk and Baltimore, except for two seasons in Long Island Sound, until taken over by the War Shipping Administration in 1942. On September 21, 1943, she departed St John’s, Newfoundland, with convoy RB-1. The “Skimming Dish” convoy of shallow-draft passenger vessels lost the *Boston*, *New York*, *Yorktown*, and the escort HMS *Veteran* to U-boat action. After serving as a barracks ship in England, she was commissioned as USS *President Warfield* (IX-169) and saw service in England and France.

Decommissioned at Hampton Roads in 1946, the former ferry boat was bought from the Maritime Commission by the Potomac Shipwrecking Company and two days later by the Weston Trading Company of New York. The latter was a front for the Palestine resistance organization Haganah, which had been smuggling Jews from Europe to Israel since before World War II. Renamed *Exodus 1947* and illegally flying the Honduran flag, she sailed from Baltimore on February 25, 1947, Itzhak Aronowitz, master, with 25 tons of life preservers and mess kits.

At Sète, France, she embarked 4,554 Jewish refugees for Palestine. There is a commemorative plaque on Sète’s waterfront as a perpetual reminder of part of the Exodus drama. On May 4, trailed by an ever-growing flotilla of British ships, including the cruiser HMS *Ajax*, five destroyers and two minelayers, she was forcibly boarded; three passengers were killed and 217 wounded. A number were forcibly transferred to the “*Empire Rival*”. The ship was towed to Haifa and put up for sale. After refusing passage to France, the refugees were landed at Hamburg on September 7, 1947, in an action that turned the tide of world opinion against Britain’s Palestine policy. *Exodus 1947* burned at Haifa on August 26, 1952, and was finally scrapped in 1963, but not before playing its part in the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.”

A fact that is generally not well known is that the crew was housed and fed by members of Beth El and Brith Sholom at Brith Sholom Center until their departure from our shores.

To return to the history of Beth El on a less somber topic, we note that:

A complete record of Troop 29 from its application for charter on 1 December 1919 is archived. The “duly authorized representative of institution, organization or group which is responsible for

this troop” was Mr. Isaac Fass, (57, of 805 Court St., Portsmouth), who answered the question of whether or not the troop had been previously registered by stating “Yes”, the date of original registration being in 1915. Mr. Fass notes that he had been a Scoutmaster (#23094) for four years previously. The last “executive officer” was Rabbi Bernard Glassman. The unit leader was Mr. Paul Swartz, (42, 623 Penn. Ave, Norfolk 8, VA, Telephone MA53149) when the charter expired in October, 1963. Cub Pack No. 29 meetings were held every Wednesday night in the new Beth El gymnasium. The pack was started in 1947/48. Beth El also sponsored a Brownie Troop, No. 134 under the leadership at one time of Naomi Comess, and a Girl Scout Troop, No. 34, under the leaderships of Elsie Martin, Mrs. Sol Warsaw, Mrs. Sidney Horwitz and Mrs. Larry Macon.

In 1939, what is now Barr Center was built to house a growing Sunday school. In 1998/9, the school was renovated. In 1950 the new sanctuary, designed by Charles P. Leavitt, second vice president of the congregation was erected. The sanctuary holds 1,400 persons with additional space for 200 seats which can be installed for the High Holy Days; a balcony, lobby, organ, choir lofts, and an air-conditioned chapel which will accommodate 75 worshippers. Excerpts from the Norfolk Virginian Pilot of Sunday, August 20, and October 5, 1950 report that thirteen stained glass windows for the Temple were designed by M. Paula Mallory, assistant professor of art at the Norfolk Division of the College of William and Mary. They were executed by B.F. Biehl Studios of Audubon, N. J. Eleven large arched windows line the walls of the sanctuary representing the principal Jewish holidays. A large and brilliantly colored rose window occupies the wall over the Ark, and two additional windows, installed in the granite and stone façade of the temple, represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The windows are bordered by a panel which represents the verse from Psalm 137.

*‘By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst therefore.’*”

A pamphlet prepared by Rendering Arts, Virginia Beach, 1984, describes the designs for a total renovation of the present Meyers Hall and a “... one and one-half story atrium-style lobby which will serve as an entry to the sanctuary’s lobby, the social hall and the Dena and Phillip Barr Center, and as a pre-function room for receptions”. The renovations and additions were completed in 1990.

One preliminary sketch for the new sanctuary had inscribed, in Hebrew, on the proscenium arch over the bimah:

*“Ma Yedidut Mishkanetecha Adonai Tsevaot”* “How special are your dwelling places, Lord God of Hosts”

The present inscription reads: *“Hishtachavu L’Adonai B’derech Kadosh”* “Worship God in sacred splendor” (Psalm 29)

Translations courtesy Rabbi Arthur Ruberg.

From the Beth El Menorah in its issue of September 15, 1971: “It happened in Norfolk! An Orthodox, Conservative and Reform temple combined to create a superior Hebrew School at the Jewish Community Center.

In December, 1995, Agudath Achaim Synagogue in Suffolk held its final service, having found a new home for its Torah scrolls, memorial boards, Judaica and members at Congregation Beth El in Norfolk, Virginia, and for its stained glass windows at Congregation Chapel Hill Kehillat, 1200 Mason Farm Road, Chapel Hill, North Carolina and the chapel of Beth Sholom Village in Virginia Beach, Virginia. (Information courtesy of Ms. Sara Trub)

For 150 years the walls of Temple Beth El have absorbed and echoed to congregational voices raised in prayer and celebration. The walls of the atrium are engraved with those who have served our synagogue. The names noted below were members of the Board of Trustees who signed the deeds which allowed Beth El to grow and whose voices were heard in shul. They are not listed chronologically.

|                        |                 |                   |
|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| H. Crockin             | Isaac Saunders  | Isaac Fass        |
| Morton Cushner         | Louis Tabakin   | H.S. Tumin        |
| William L. Finklestein | M. Umstadter    | Harry S. Saunders |
| Moses Lidman           | Samuel Weisberg |                   |

## PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

Since history is more than just facts, this section is intended for personal reminiscences, such as those of Leonard (Lenny) Goodman, “My Memories of Congregation Beth El”, as printed in the [Congregation Beth El Chronicle /5762/ 2001-2002](#), a publication of the Beth El Sisterhood, Miriam F. Kroskin, and Edward Marx. These memoirs contain similar material, but told from a subjective point of view. Mr. Leonard (Lenny) Goodman:

### **My Memories of Congregation Beth El**

“Having been born into Beth El in 1925, I often reflect on the intervening years as I glance at the plaques and the names on the walls of our synagogue.

I started coming to Shul on Saturday mornings when I was seven years old. We lived in the Del Argo Apartments on Gates Avenue and Hampton Boulevard. I walked to Shul and often waited on the corner of Colonial Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> Street (before it was changed to Shirley Avenue) for Dr. Steinbach and asked for the honor of holding the Torah on the Bima while the Haftorah was chanted. We did not have fancy Torah holders in those days.

I was at Beth El seven days a week – Monday through Friday afternoons in Mr. Harry Rekonty’s Hebrew class, Shabbos services on Saturdays, and Sunday School on Sundays, and speaking of Sunday School, how many can recall the portable blackboards that were placed between the rows to partition the classrooms for Sunday School?

Until the Barr center was built in 1939, practically all activities were held in the one and only building (now Meyers Hall): religious services, Sunday school, Confirmation, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, fraternities, discussion groups, weddings, etc.

Many of the religious school holiday celebrations: Purim Carnival and Chanukah plays were held at different places, such as the Brith Sholom Center, the Pythian Castle, or the Plaza Theater. This was necessary due to the fact that our building did not have the space or facilities to take care of the growing number of children.

This growth came about after the arrival of Rabbi and Mrs. Paul Reich in 1934. He came here at a time when the lay leadership had been and continued to be in the hands of men like Harris Crockin, Dr. R.D. Glasser, Louis Tabakin and Sol Kaplan, who were setting the stage for men like Julius Myers, Maxwell Zedd, Buddy Kantor, Harold Groh and Joe Rafal to bring us forward.

On the High Holidays, our services were from 8:00 am until at least 1:00 pm. On Yom Kippur, we did not know anything about a recess. It was from 8:00 am to sundown, no air conditioning and no microphone.

Since we did not have a full-time cantor, we brought down cantors from New York for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to help our Mr. Zachariah Finestone, who led our services throughout the year and was our Baal Koreh.

In those days, we had many gentlemen who could daven and relieve Mr. Finestone during the year. Men like Isaac Fine, I.W. Legum, Moses Lidman and Harry Kravitz. That made it tough for post Bar Mitzvah boys like Maurice Miller, Manuel Saunders, of blessed memory, and this writer to break into the line-up, but thanks to Gabbai Nathan Polis, we weren't shut out completely.

When Barr Center was opened in 1939, we became the focal point of most Jewish activities in Norfolk – Hebrew School, Sunday School, Confirmation classes, Scouts, fraternities (two AZA's, Sigma Alpha Rho), [sororities], Adult Education classes and Men's Club Forum.

And who can forget the activity on Tuesday nights when the fraternities met here and on Wednesday nights at the Blair Jr. High School gym where the Hebrew Fraternity Basketball League played and the Jewish teenagers gathered to cheer and socialize.

An added plus – we no longer were wandering Jews. After 1939, we had the facilities for our own celebrations, classes and administrative spaces.

From the religious perspective, the growth of the congregation necessitated an additional High Holiday service in Barr Center, which was led by Mr. Julius Lomitz, who had been engaged in the late '30's as a part-time Cantor and music director. Several post-Bar Mitzvah boys helped him.

I should mention that during World War II many of our young men were in the Armed Forces. Some did not return. Many of our congregants participated in war related activities, such as making bandages, as Red Cross or USO workers and some as aircraft spotters. Needless to say, services during this period were well attended and intense. After the war, several of our congregants were active in outfitting the "Exodus" (the Old Bay Line President Warfield) for the trip overseas to Israel.

In 1950 our new, magnificent sanctuary was dedicated and for the first time in several years, all of our members were able to worship together on the High Holidays. The auxiliary service was

discontinued and in its place we started having services for our preteens and teenagers in Barr Hall led by some of our lay-leaders and post-Bar Mitzvah boys.

As an aftermath of the war, the Jewish population of the city began to grow and settle in the Wards Corner area; and in 1950 Temple Israel was organized. As a result, we lost some of our members.

In January 1950, this writer became a father of twin boys and my activities were curtailed for a while; but as time passed, I got back into the flow as a Sunday school teacher and president of the Men's Club, a position I had to give up when I changed employment in 1959.

Once again, I was sidelined and it wasn't until the late 60's that I became involved again, first as a member of the Education Committee, then as Chairman, and finally as Third Vice President, which covered the Education Committee.

By then, Rabbi Reich had retired (in 1967). Rabbi Charry was our rabbi and Mrs. Frances Richman was our Director of Education, a position she held until the mid-70's when it became too difficult to obtain qualified teachers and we had to shut down our own Hebrew School. Mrs. Richman and Rabbi Freundlich, with a boost from our lay-leadership, were instrumental in forming the concept of the United Hebrew School, embracing originally most of the temples and synagogues in the area. This was in 1973. Initially all classes were in classrooms seated at the JCC. Eventually, after repairs to our school wing, classes were held in alternate years at Beth El and Temple Israel.

I might add that during the time that Virginia's High Schools were closed in the 50's due to massive resistance, Beth El played a leading role in providing classroom facilities for Maury High School's students, an act that was greatly appreciated by the city. Needless to say, the frequent turnover in our religious leadership had a detrimental affect on our membership level. After Rabbi Reich's departure, we had Rabbis Charry, Kestenbaum, Freundlich, Novak, Leftin and Elkins, plus Rabbi Sam Sobel, who held us together between Rabbi Elkins' departure and Rabbi Ruberg's arrival in 1988.

In the cantorial position, we had Cantors Seidelman, Tigger, Sandlow, Weisner, Wechsler, Portner, Neswald, Albert, Reich and Bell. Since 1985, Cantor Jacob Tessler has been a great asset on the Bima and as a teacher.

I have seen many changes over the years, but one thing we've had as a constant since Rabbi Reich's arrival in 1934 has been our Daily Minyan, morning and evening. It hasn't always been easy, but we had dedicated leadership, first with Gabbai Nathan Polis until his sudden death in 1968 and than Harold Groh, Irving Aftel, Hymie Soroko, all of blessed memory, and Tom Lindsey, Joe Jaffe and this writer.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Rabbi Benjamin Martin, of blessed memory, who led our services and was our mohel, Baal Koreh and mentor during the 40 plus years he was with us.

Prior to the arrival of Rabbi Ruberg in 1988, there was no question that Beth El's brilliance had been diminished. But after Rabbi Ruberg's arrival, the brilliance began to glow again. In conjunction with Cantor Tessler, Jewish awareness in the congregation both among the youth and

adults has grown. The caliber of Bar and Bat Mitzvah students speaks for itself. The warmth and congregational participation at our services is heartwarming, as is the parental involvement in all phases of our children's religious experiences.

While a great share of the turnaround can be attributed to the Rabbi and Cantor, we have been blessed with a group of hard working lay leaders during this period. People like Presidents Harvey Coleman, Eugene Kanter, Stuart Held, Michael Weisberg, Linda Belkov, Irwin Kroskin, Martin Waranch and our current leader, Ina Mirman Leiderman. [2000-2002].

How can we overlook our ever-present trustees, Armond Caplan, Tavia Gordon, Mickey Kramer and Clay Barr. And our devoted administrator, Pam Gladstone and her capable staff.

Support groups play a major role in a Shul's success. A re-energized Sisterhood and Men's Club are contributing factors.

In summary, let me recall something my father, Mr. Jake, as he was known, told me when I was president in '72 and '73. We were facing some precedent-breaking issues at that time. He told me, "Son, I've seen a few changes in my lifetime. You'll see many more, some you'll like and some you won't. Go with the flow." He was right. I've seen many changes at Beth El since then. And I like what I've seen. I feel great about the position we're in! Hazak, Hazak, Vaitz Hazak!"

(n.b. Cantor Tessler retired in 2006 and Beth El has called Cantor Gordon Piltch. In 2007, Rabbi Susan Tandler joined us as Assistant Rabbi and Director of Education and Programming.)

The next selection is from a feminine perspective, supplied by Milton Kaplan. It is a clipping from the Beth El Bulletin of June 1985 – Sivan/Tammuz 5745. ‘

### **“A Look into the Past” By Miriam Finestone Kroskin**

“Shalom! It is a real blessing and a privilege to be among the few members of our Congregation who can recall and recount that period of Beth El's history when we were still in the beautiful temple on Cumberland Street. This was the period just before we moved to our new Sanctuary that is now Myers Hall.

Our Rabbi during that period was Dr. Lewis Goldberg, a handsome, very modern and knowledgeable man whose presence in the pulpit was always an inspiration. He taught the Hebrew School, administered Sunday School and also was an outstanding leader in the early days of Zionism in our community.

All the classes were held in the rooms on the ground floor of the Temple. There was also a large bright room that we used for assembly and for special gatherings. The teachers were all volunteers, dedicated and very informed. We felt very fortunate to have as our teachers young men and women who inspired us. When we grew older many of us realized that they taught by precept and example. I still can recall the names of some; Irene Fass, of Portsmouth, daughter of one of the presidents of our Temple for many years; Ruth Berlin Alees, who is a member of the Congregation at present; Augusta Eisenstat, also of Portsmouth and William Lidman, brother of

Dr. Bernard Lidman. There were many others who taught us not only history, but also a love of our heritage.

The school was comprised of students mainly from Congregation Beth El, Temple Emanuel and Temple Israel. For a number of years, many families had been attracted to Beth El from Portsmouth as well as from Norfolk. The more conservative form of service, the inclusion of English, men and women sitting together had brought an influx of new members to the Congregation. Of special attraction was the well run Sunday School and the daily Hebrew classes. When my parents joined in 1912, they and many of the others were from the eastern section of the city. One recalls such names as the Berlins, the Lidmans, the Clarks, the Crockins, the Meyers, the Banks, the Haskells, the Jacob Saks; and from Portsmouth the Fass family and the Henry Levys. Of this group, Mr. Harris Crockin, Mr. Isaac Fass and Mr. Julius Meyers served as presidents of the Congregation and Mr. Henry Levy was superintendent of the Sunday School for many years, even after we moved to Fifteenth Street.

In 1918, I was one of eight girls who formed the second Confirmation Class, taught and trained by Dr. Goldberg. The others were Helen Berlin, Florence Block, Sadie Caplan, Mary Coplon, Rena Crockin and Josephine Mann. (Time robs me of the eighth name.) We were confirmed on the first day of Shavout, and this has always been one of the most precious memories of my youth. Many of us also attended Hebrew School and I now realize that our parent's influence and Dr. Goldberg's inspiration are largely responsible for much of our interest in Judaism and Jewish life.

Before the 1920's life was so different. Everything revolved around the area of Beth El and B'nai Israel Synagogue, which was just a block away, also on Cumberland Street. The Y.M. and Y.W.H.A. were around the corner on Church Street, and the Hebrew Sheltering Aid Society which took care of itinerant travelers operated in the same area. Kosher butchers, delicatessens, bakeries, clothing stores, jewelers – the forerunners of our current day malls were there, and offered a meeting place for the Jewish community.

In this way the Synagogue and the temple were in the center of Jewish life and interests. Beth El was also involved in youth activities. A Boy Scout group and a Young Judea group met regularly in the Vestry of the temple. These were the days before Sisterhoods. However, Beth El had a sewing group which met in a house next door to the Temple. These 12 women, thru the influence of Mrs. Jesse Haskell (Fannie) and her brother Jacob Saks, started Hadassah – the first chapter outside of New York – in November 1912.

It is exciting to recall Chanukah and Purim programs and celebrations at Beth El – carnivals in the Vestry – Freida Cohen Amilson singing “In My Sweet Little Alice Blue Gown.” What simple, joyful times!! Parents and children together, all under the temple roof. Cokes and corned beef sandwiches were special treats of the time.

There were no discussions of cults, billion dollar deficits or the Holocaust. Yet, there was the same old story – persecution of Jews in Poland and Russia, the need of freedom for all people, regardless of race, color or creed – the importance of secular and Jewish education and the concerns for the future of everyone's children. Many things change, but interest and regard for people and caring for our own remains: always the responsibility of the Jewish heart and mind. Beth El went on to a new Temple and larger memberships and all the problems still besetting Jews

here and elsewhere; little knowing what horror the future held in store. But – that is another story for another time.

Beth El can well be proud of its long history and the dedication of its leadership and its members to all vital Jewish and communal causes, as well as for the security of the State of Israel. May this continue for many years to come, adding to the strength of our Congregation to Judaism, to the Jewish people, and to our community. Let us hope that Beth El's impressive past will be with us in the present and continue into the future.”

(n.b. Miriam Finestone Kroskin passed away on May 11, 1990)

### **“I Remember Beth El in the 1900's” – Edward Marx**

(Mr. Edward Marx was the longest standing member of Beth El, having been born in our congregation in 1896. Mr. Marx passed away in November, 1986. He was a member for 90 years. His wife, Augusta Ehrlich Marx, who has also since passed away, was Sisterhood president from 1934 to 1937.)

“When my parents (Michael Marx and Miriam Weil) were married in New York City in 1885 they promptly came to Norfolk to make their home and immediately joined Congregation Beth El. I was born June 5, 1886 and can, therefore, legitimately claim that I attended services even before I was born.

Mr. Michael Umstadter, who was my godfather, was president of Beth El at that time. He and Mr. Charles Myers conducted a thriving retail business in furniture and carpets. He was president of the Retail Merchants Association and his portrait hangs on the wall of the association to this very day along with those of all the other presidents. He was president of the Association in 1903. Mr. Umstadter was a veteran of the Confederate Army, having fought in the War Between the States. His father, Jacob Umstadter (1808-1871), founded the original Norfolk Congregation (Chevrah B'nai Jacob) in 1848, and the Hebrew cemetery on Princess Anne Road in 1850 and Congregation Beth El after the split with Ohel Sholom Temple in the late 1860's. After Mr. Umstadter's term as president of the congregation, or more likely, several terms, he became the Superintendent of the Beth El Sunday School. He liked to entertain the children with stories, sometimes legendary, sometimes humorous, but always with a moral. The teaching staff of the Sunday School, was composed of about five or six young ladies, all daughters of Beth El members, who taught on a voluntary basis with no pay. There being no separate school building, the classes were held in the seating area of the Schul, the groups being separated as far from each other as possible. Those teaching seemed to be dedicated and knowledgeable and no serious trouble was experienced. I was a pupil for about four years and looking back, I feel that we were all very well instructed in Biblical history. Later, my three daughters were sent to Beth El Sunday School.

Mr. Henry Levy of Portsmouth succeeded Mr. Umstadter as Sunday School Superintendent. The men succeeding Mr. Umstadter as president of Beth El were Messrs. M. Seldner, J.W. Spagot, Isaac Fass of Portsmouth, Harris Crockin and Julius Myers, in that order.

Rev. Herman Benmosche became Rabbi in 1896 or shortly thereafter. I accompanied my mother on a social visit to the Benmosche family on the ground floor of Beth El in about 1903. Rabbi Benmosche was working on some instruments which I thought pertained to astronomy, but being only about seven years old I did not have sufficient interest to ask questions.

In 1909 when I became Bar Mitzvah, Rabbi Benmosche was no longer with Beth El. In 1910 he was principal of the Norfolk Hebrew Grammar School at 208 Fenchurch Street. Rabbi Hyman succeeded Rabbi Benmosche, who was succeeded by Rabbi Brown, whom I remember as a forceful speaker. In 1909 Dr. Louis Goldberg came to Beth El. He was a man of imposing appearance and personality. After Dr. Goldberg's departure in 1918 he was succeeded for a very short time by Rabbi Nahum Krueger. He left Beth El just as we were preparing to move from Cumberland Street to 15<sup>th</sup> Street (now Shirley Avenue).

Dr. Alexander Alan Steinbach came to Beth El in 1922, the first rabbi to conduct services in the new building on 15<sup>th</sup> Street. He was a fine young man of 27 and injected new life in the membership, especially the young. He was a poet and author of several books of which I have three. They were gifts to my wife and me from Mrs. Harris Krokin. In 1943 Dr. Steinbach resigned to take the rabbinate of a Reform temple in Brooklyn, New York. Rabbi Paul Reich, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, succeeded him. He was more Conservative, more of a traditionalist, yet we acquired and began using an organ during services in his later years with the congregation in the 1960's.

The building occupied by Congregation Beth El was on the east side of Cumberland Street between Charlotte and Freemason Streets. Entrance to the sanctuary was gained via two wooden stairways on either side of the front of the building. Years before vacating the building the wooden banisters were replaced by brass tubing and the wooden steps or treads were replaced by marble slabs.

Until shortly after 1909 men and women sat separately at Beth El. On the right-half side facing the pulpit were two rows of benches with an aisle in the center. This was duplicated on the left hand side with a shoulder high immovable rail between the two sides. The men sat on the right side and the women on the left side. There were approximately twelve benches in each row which allowed about 240 seats which I feel was more than the number of members we ever had on Cumberland Street."

### **We continue back to the future!**

On January 31, 1945, Messrs. T.J. Amilson and S. David Cohen witnessed the signing of a receipt for \$635.80 given to Mr. Moses Kassner by Congregation Beth El for services rendered. Mr. Kassner, according to a handwritten note on the back of the receipt, lived at 1127 Wilkins Avenue, The Bronx (59) New York. Until 1950, Mr. Stanley J. Serxner, native Bronxite, current Beth El member, and compiler of this document, lived at 1308 Hoe Avenue, The Bronx, (59) two or three blocks from Mr. Kassner.

In 1994 the First Annual "Unto Every Person There Is A Name" was held, a memorial program sponsored by the B'Nai B'rith on Yom Hashoah with the cooperation of the Men's Club of Beth

El. A portion of the names of the 6,000,000 Jews murdered by the Nazis in WWII were read in Barr Chapel during the day. Stanley J. Serxner and Joel R. Stein initiated this annual program, having conducted similar memorials in Pennsylvania and New Jersey respectively.

The United Hebrew School is the intercongregational Hebrew School of the Conservative congregations in the South Hampton Roads area. Whereas each congregation has its own Sunday school, the synagogues chose to combine their afternoon Hebrew Schools. The United Jewish Federation of Tidewater also supports the school.

All students from Congregation Beth El, Temple Emanuel and Temple Israel now attend classes at the Sandler Family Campus in Virginia Beach on Wednesday afternoons and Sunday school at their home synagogues.

Congregation Beth El, Temple Israel and Kempsville Conservative Synagogue (KBH) co-sponsor two youth programs. Kadimah is for students in grades 6 through 8, and United Synagogue Youth (USY) is for those students in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades.

Above the sanctuary doors in Beth El are *yadaim* in beautiful frames. There are also framed photographs of *yadaim* on the walls of the staircase leading to Barr Hall and in Barr Hall itself. These silver Torah pointers are from a collection given in memory of Jay D. A. Barr, courtesy of Mrs. Clay Barr. Some date to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and others are more recent, one of which is a 19<sup>th</sup> century *yad* from Afghanistan. Their provenance is another story. Also on display is a Holocaust memorial *yad* designed and crafted by Linda Gissen.

A Holocaust Torah and a Yad Vashem memorial light that once hung in Temple Agudath Achim before it closed in Suffolk and merged with Beth El are found in a case in the back of the sanctuary. A Torah cover, a kiddush cup, a *yad*, a menorah, and a spice holder are displayed there, as well.

The Torah is of Hungarian origin, coming from a part of Czechoslovakia that was eventually incorporated within Hungarian borders. According to the records, this Torah scroll was written by a scribe in the Hungarian town of Divisov about 200 years ago. The residents of that community were deported to Auschwitz.

A perusal of our many publications details the functions and activities of the Men's Club, the Sisterhood, our youth groups, educational programs, Beth El's roll in the Russian Resettlement Program, housing of the homeless and general activity in the Southeastern region.

“And the Beat Goes on ....” is an apt phrase to characterize the evolution of Beth El as our congregation and individual members have interacted with the Jewish and general community through war, peace, depression, assimilation, covert and overt anti-Semitism, secular and religious stresses and strains in our continuing guardianship of traditional Conservative Judaism.

Our spiritual leaders have influenced the evolution of Beth El. With the support of the congregation and the leadership of Rabbi Ruberg and Cantor Jacob Tessler, we entered the new secular millennium as the oldest Conservative synagogue in Virginia, and with the additions of Rabbi Susan Tendler and Cantor Gordon Pilch, we're stronger than ever.

Dr. Eugene Kanter has further detailed two important parts of Beth El's history, as follows:

### **The Sisterhood of Congregation Beth El: A History**

Congregation Beth El was officially chartered in 1870 but dates back in its antecedents to 1848.

The first Hadassah chapter in the state of Virginia was organized at Beth El in 1912, and in 1913, Congregation Beth El became one of the thirteen original members of the United Synagogues for Conservative Judaism.

Zionism attracted people of Eastern European origin to Beth El in the late 1800s and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The women of the congregation organized themselves into a Sisterhood and affiliated with Women's League for Conservative Judaism in 1920. The first president was Augusta Marx, of blessed memory.

Since its inception, the Sisterhood has taken an active role in all aspects of synagogue life as well as community projects.

More than 50 years ago, the Beth El Sisterhood participated in building the *mikvah* to be used by any Jewish women in the community regardless of synagogue affiliation.

Under the leadership of Phyllis Frieden, of blessed memory – and others who preceded her – Sisterhood became involved with the Torah Fund of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Phyllis was a member of the Board of Directors of Women's League, as well as the Seaboard Branch of Women's League, and of the National Cabinet of Torah Fund. A plaque in Phyllis' memory can be seen upon entering the women's synagogue at the Seminary in New York.

Nancy Kanter, also a Sisterhood past president, has served as a vice-president of the Seaboard Branch and a national board member of Women's League. Phyllis Frieden and Sylvia Benas, both of blessed memory, and Evelyn Eisenberg realized that the Beth El Sisterhood was missing out on information and opportunities by not having representation at the Women's League's national conventions. And so, for many years, they made up the delegation that annually attended the national conventions. Before they gave up the activity, Nancy Kanter joined the group for several years.

During World War II, and for many years after, Sisterhood members received recognition for participating in the Cancer Clinic project that met weekly at the synagogue to make bandages for the Red Cross.

Two Sisterhood presidents, Ada Michaels, of blessed memory, and Linda Belkov, went on to become the first and second women presidents of the congregation. Ina Leiderman, also a long time Sisterhood member, became the third woman president of Beth El.

Members of the Sisterhood serve on the *Chevra Kadisha* Committee.

Sisterhood engages in a number of fund raising activities to benefit a variety of projects. The youth receive Hanukkah lunches, model Seders, and children's lunches during High Holiday services. Those in need receive financial aid to assist in preparing for religious events. Scholarships are provided for Camp Ramah and USY activities. College Care Packages are sent twice a year at holiday times to younger members of the congregation who are away at college. Gifts are sent to the residents of the Beth Sholom Home.

One of Sisterhood's more recent successful endeavors has been the annual summer Garage Sale. Started at the end of the last century, it has become another excellent source of income to fund Sisterhood projects. Merchandise is collected from Beth El members throughout the year, stored in trailers behind the synagogue, and then transferred to Myers Hall. That's when a large number of volunteers descend on the collection to sort it out by category – clothes, furniture, jewelry, appliances, books, etc. The final procedure is the major task of pricing all of the hundreds of items. The three day sale has become well known throughout the area and attracts a large crowd of individuals. In recent years, the leftover clothing has been donated to a charitable organization that sends supplies to Africa, the Ukraine, and Israel.

The Sisterhood is responsible for providing floral arrangements on the *bima* for holidays and the beautification and landscaping of the synagogue grounds.

For a great many years, Sisterhood has managed a Judaic gift shop located in the synagogue's office area. The earliest workers that can be documented were Mollie Gordon and Sarah Burnstein, with Leah Hoffman doing the bookkeeping chores, all of blessed memory. After being in charge for many years, Mollie passed the duties on to Beverly Handel, also of blessed memory, and Esther Stark assumed taking care of the records and has done so up to the present time. After about 25 years, Beverly yielded the management of the shop to her daughter, Gina Rose, who guided it for the next 16 years. Currently, Deborah Kaufman has been at the helm since 2005. For an equally long time, Sisterhood held a Purim Carnival that was always well attended and was the source for funding many worthwhile projects. Sara Weinraub, of blessed memory, held a bake sale every year that was a feature of the carnival and raised many hundreds of dollars. While mention has been made of a number of Sisterhood members who gave such long time service to the organization, not to be overlooked is Cilda Meltzer who has been the treasurer for the past 35 years and is still holding strong in that office.

In the past, once a month Sisterhood sponsored a Kiddush following services on Friday evenings at the Norfolk Naval Base. More recently, committee members visit the sick in area hospitals and money has been sent to Israel to help those in financial need. The entire synagogue kitchen has been renovated by the Sisterhood at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars.

In March 2004, four large boxes of food and personal items were sent to servicemen and women ground troops in Iraq and on ships in the Persian Gulf. Although some food was kosher for Passover, it was with the understanding that food and items were for distribution to anyone regardless of their religious preference.

Going back for a great many decades, one of Sisterhood's major projects has been the compilation, printing, and distribution of the annual "Beth El Chronicle". It features messages from the religious and lay leaders of the congregation, High Holiday greetings, memorials, pictures of the

past year's synagogue events, and, most usefully, a directory of synagogue members. The advertisements appearing in the "Chronicle" cover its cost and produce a surplus that is used to further other Sisterhood undertakings. The "Chronicle" has been made possible down through the years by the dedicated efforts of many different Sisterhood volunteers.

Sisterhood presents a Shabbat morning service every year in which the members conduct the entire service, including reading the Torah, giving the sermon, and preparing a Kiddush luncheon.

Under the direction of Sara Weinraub, of blessed memory, and now Nancy Kanter, who was assisted for fourteen years by Joyce C. Serxner and an ever growing group of loyal volunteers, Sisterhood is active in catering in-house events such as Bar and Bat Mitzvot, Aufrufs, baby namings, birthday, and anniversary kiddushes, as well as special family dinners for those occasions when engaged. Sisterhood prepares Shabbat dinners several times a year for as many as 250 to 300 congregational members and their guests. The food committee enjoys an outstanding reputation in the Jewish community for the excellent quality of their catering service.

Over the long history of the Sisterhood, only four male members of the congregation have been awarded the title of "Honorary Member of Sisterhood" because of their valuable assistance and service to the organization. They are, in order of their acceptance, Thomas "Tommy" Lindsey, Aaron "Red" Behrman, Eugene Kanter, and Stanley Serxner. The Beth El Sisterhood begins the 21<sup>st</sup> century continuing their tradition as a vibrant organization playing a vital role in the life of its distinguished and venerable synagogue and a significant presence in the local Jewish community.

- By Eugene Kanter

### **Beth El Men's Club History** (Summer 2008)

The earliest written record in which it can be inferred that Congregation Beth El's Men's Club existed is a memo dated April 1990, by a Mr. Harry Bodansky who was a past president of the Seaboard Region of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs and, at the time, along with two others, represented the Seaboard Region as a member of The President's Cabinet of the National Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. The paper is entitled "Seaboard Region: A Historical Sketch" and states that an organizational meeting of men's club leaders was convened at Temple Emanuel in Virginia Beach in mid-August of 1955. The meeting resulted in the formal creation of the Seaboard Region. Representatives of ten clubs chose an individual from Chizuk Amuno Synagogue, Baltimore, as the first regional president.

Geographically, the Seaboard Region included, in addition to the population centers of Greater Washington and Baltimore, the Tidewater area, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Currently, the Region includes, along with Tidewater, Northern Virginia as part of the greater Washington area, Richmond, the rest of Maryland, and a small portion of Delaware. The Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky are no longer a part of the Seaboard Region.

Referenced in the 1990 memo was information on new projects and events. The first annual 1990 "Men-of-the-Year" Blue Yamulka dinner – and in the case of Tidewater, a Sunday morning

breakfast – at which more than one-half of the affiliated clubs honored one of their outstanding leaders, was noted as the most recent "first". The Region sponsored youth advisor training in 1985 and 1986 to strengthen the Conservative youth program. Seaboard organized the training of lay instructors in Washington and Tidewater to teach observance of the Sabbath and Passover Seder in the home as part of the Federation's "Art of Jewish Living" initiative. The Seaboard Region has actively promoted the Federation's "Hebrew Literacy" program which has made many hundreds in its jurisdiction and more than fifty thousand nationwide "Hebrew Literate", that is, taught individuals to participate in the Sabbath evening and morning service.

While there are no records dating the Men's Club prior to the mentioned 1955 historical sketch, that is not to say that it is entirely likely that it did exist as a synagogue entity along with the Sisterhood. While the Men's Club has accumulated a large box of files and folders, it contains, unfortunately, no accurate record of minutes or activities prior to 1962. There are notes and correspondence to indicate that in December of that year, Stanley Sacks, as president, with committee members, planned a father-child dinner that took place in 1963, with a representative from the National Aeronautics and Space Agency in Hampton speaking and showing a film.

It is possible to pinpoint a number of other presidents and when they served: Julius Barker, of blessed memory, 1971, Thomas "Tom" Lindsey, 1973, Larry Kreshin, 1974, Paul Schneider, 1982, and in 1986, it was necessary to utilize a presidium composed of Howard Rosenblatt, of blessed memory, Larry Kreshin, and Dr. Steve Laderberg. Other names of early presidents are Bill Eisman, Charles Richman, of blessed memory, Dr. Rufus Tonelson, of blessed memory, Irving Aftel, of blessed memory, Howard Rosenblatt, of blessed memory, who served singularly as well as a member of the presidium, and Gary Rothman, 1990, serving in a more contemporary time.

While 1990 marked the beginning of the Blue Yamulka Man-of-the-Year Award to an outstanding synagogue leader at a Sunday morning breakfast in league with other area Conservative synagogues, for many years the Beth El Men's Club presented a Man-of-the-Year Award at a Saturday night banquet. Entertainment, in addition to the presentation, varied from a dance, a New York comedian, to an original play written and performed by Beth El members.

For a great many years the Men's Club has undertaken the responsibility of providing ushers for the High Holy Day services, and in more recent times, ushers for Shabbat morning services.

To raise funds for the synagogue, the Men's Club has undertaken a number of novel approaches – in 1984, they sponsored a "Casino Night". Aaron "Red" Behrman, of blessed memory, was chairman of a raffle committee that sold tickets for a prize. The person selling the largest number of raffle tickets also received a prize. The Men's Club decided to use the profits from their successful endeavor to improve the Sunday school facilities, and that arena has remained the favorite recipient of their efforts. For three years, they held a night of indoor horse racing, and when the synagogue wanted to use Casino Night and racing for their fund raiser, the Men's Club switched to Bingo preceded by a hot dog dinner. Bingo, through the efforts of Richard Gross and Mark Kozak, has proven to be a real popular attraction and this year, 2008, over 400 adults and children attended. Stanley Serxner was the original number caller but Maury Handel took over after a short time and has been the caller for the last number of years. These activities have enabled the Men's Club to donate thousands of dollars to the Sunday school.

On a more serious note, for the past nine or ten years the Men's Club has marked Yom Hashoah by reading the names of the six million that were killed in the Holocaust. It has taken place in the Beth El Chapel with Stanley Serxner and Joel Stein, until he moved out of town, the official readers. Any visitor who wanted to take part was given the opportunity to read names for as long as they desired. Since 2007, the reading, with Stanley, has been relocated to the Jewish Community Center with community participation encouraged.

In 1989, Norman Soroko became involved with the Men's Club, an act that was destined to become a turning point for the floundering club. His family had recently left another synagogue and joined Beth El. Norman attended a Men's Club meeting with his father and met Gary Rothman. At that time, the club was going through rather difficult times – membership was down and composed primarily of older men. Enthusiasm, activity, and participation were low. Gary accepted the presidency and asked Norman to be the vice-president. The purpose was to get younger people involved and to benefit from Norman's experience in leadership. Gary resigned in the summer of 1990, and Norman assumed the presidency in October. Meetings were held around a Sunday morning breakfast sporadically followed by a program. Norman's father, Hymie Soroko, of blessed memory, Irving Aftel, of blessed memory, and Marian Baydush prepared the breakfasts. Norman, with Larry Rossen as vice-president and Mark Levin as Treasurer, breathed new life into the ailing club. When Norman took over the reins of leadership, there were approximately fifty members and within four or five years had built the roster up to between 180 and 190.

Activity and enthusiasm picked up. Dave Lenes, a member with a lot of drive, initiated interest in a new round of fund raisers. In 1993, and again in the following year, he sparked a Garage Sale Auction of donated items held in Myers Hall. It was following those events that the three horse racing fund raisers were held. The success of those five endeavors enabled the Men's Club to donate \$25,000 to renovate the Laibstein Lounge kitchen, and with permission granted by the family, allow it to be known as the Men's Club kitchen. The Sunday School Renovation Fund was also started using monies from those five efforts and along with other major projects held up to recent times, has allowed the Men's Club to earmark between \$100,000 to \$125,000 to be used for supplies and equipment to the Gordon Education Wing and kitchen.

Norman Soroko served as the President of the Men's Club from 1990 until 1998 – the longest service that can be documented in the Club's history. Norman served as the Seaboard Region's Vice-President of the Tidewater Area in 1992, Executive Vice-President of the Region in 1997, and from 1999 until 2001 held the position of Seaboard Region President, becoming the first to hold that post from the Tidewater area.

A number of activities, other than the ones already mentioned, have become a part of the Men's Club reputation.

- Since 1992, the organization, under Norman's guidance, has conducted an annual Shabbat morning service with each part taken by a Club member. Prior to that date, for an undetermined period, a Men's Club service generally consisted of several aliyahs taken by members and the Haftorah chanted by Joseph Jaffe.

- At 20 years old, the Men's Club Mother's Day Program has become a Men's Club institution. All ladies are the Men's Club's honored guests at a Sunday morning breakfast,

receive a lovely carnation, and enjoy a program prepared by the president and vice-president. Any flowers that are left over are distributed to the residents of the Beth Shalom Home. At this writing, the Men's Club kitchen volunteers are David and Anna Jancewicz, Marc Davis, Ron Gladstone, Richard Gross, Seth Fleishman, Brad Klavan, Wayne Mitnick, Alex Pomerantz, Norman Soroko, Rick Yarow, and Harold Zedd.

- Since 1990, the Men's Club has conducted at least one annual, and sometimes more, Friday night Shabbat service at the Beth Shalom Home with a number of Club members taking parts of the service. At different times, the service has been under the direction of Seth Fleishman, Alex Pomerantz, and Mark Schneider, with assistance from Cantor Elihu Flax and Brad Lazernick.

- In 1995, as a fundraiser, the Men's Club, in response to donations, distributed yellow Shoah candles to be lit as a memorial to the 6 million. Since 2003, the financial aspect has been removed from the project and the candles are given out to the Sunday school, Hebrew School, Hebrew Academy, and interested members of the congregation. Mark Schneider and Harold Zedd guide the project.

- For more than 7 years, the Men's Club has held an annual outing to a Tides baseball game with a hot dog dinner at Beth El first and then the game at Harbor Park. Marc Davis, with the help of the Men's Club kitchen volunteers, is in charge.

Several newer programs are becoming a staple of the Men's Club activities:

- Through the generosity of Patricia and Avraham Ashkenazi making their sky box available, the Men's Club is able to offer an Old Dominion University men's basketball game to a limited number of interested Beth El members.

- Alex Pomerantz has initiated an annual family horse racing visit to Colonial Downs, a track a little west of Williamsburg.

- The newest project to be undertaken by the Men's Club is the ritual of Shomrim - sitting with the deceased until the funeral takes place. It has been many years since there have been several individuals from the orthodox community who were available to be engaged to perform the rite of Shomrim. Currently, the Men's Club is attempting to fill that void and Stanley Serxner, Norman Soroko, and Rick Yarow are heading the effort to compile a list of volunteers interested in reviving the custom and willing to participate if called.

Having established the Beth El Men's Club on a solid footing and with excellent leadership ready to take over, Norman Soroko gave up the presidency to Martin Leiderman, who was followed by Dr. Adam Foleck. Norman again took over in 2005 and 2006, before bringing in Seth Fleishman, who was followed by Alex Pomerantz, the current president.

The Beth El Men's Club has begun the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a dynamic and energetic member of the Beth El family providing meaning and substance to the Jewish life of the Congregation.

- By Eugene Kanter

## EPILOGUE

This history of our place of prayer and the people who worship therein is ongoing; this narrative is but a temporary rest stop.

By going back to the future, perhaps we can gain more insights into our present.

I would like to obtain more information about the Girl Scout troop, and other organizations which formed a part of the congregational family. Personal reminiscences are most welcome. You may contact me at:

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**Note:** With reference to pp. 3 and 4, some of the early presidential terms of office, as engraved on our atrium wall (and possibly other dates) appear to differ from those years as noted by Rabbi and genealogist Michael Stern of Temple Ohef Sholom in his recounting of congregational histories.

I will not attempt to reconcile those terms of office, leaving this research, as well as the story of each *yad*, for other scholars. These stories would make most interesting reading.

Any errors of fact remain mine. Many thanks to Noelle Wright, editor, for her expert help.

SJS