

**THROUGH THE YEARS**  
**CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL**  
**of**  
**MEDIA, PENNSYLVANIA**

**by**  
**JULIAN H. PREISLER**

**1994**  
**Congregation Beth Israel of Media**  
**Gayley Terrace at Baker**  
**Media, Pennsylvania 19063**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## AUTHOR'S FORWARD

It is with great pleasure and joy that I dedicate this booklet to the members and rabbis, past and present, of Congregation Beth Israel. The journey that led to this point was indeed one of interesting discovery. It is my hope that all who read this volume will feel even closer to the congregation that means so much to so many people.

I would like to thank those individuals who helped out with the research for this project. I would especially like to thank Helen Schachner for all her help, Rabbi Leila for suggesting this project to me and providing her editing expertise and last but not least Vin Harwell for all his encouragement, and help with desk top publishing. Thanks are also due to all those members of Beth Israel who have supported and sustained the congregation both in the spotlight and out of the spotlight over the years. The strength of the community depends on those who give of their time and talents so generously.

I hope that all who read this volume will enjoy learning a bit about the history of their congregation as well as discovering a window to the future.

As with all undertakings of this kind, omissions or errors may occur, hopefully very infrequently. Due to a severe lack of congregational records prior to 1970, much of the information in this volume is based on interviews with members.

Julian H. Preisler  
December 8, 1993

## A MESSAGE FROM THE RABBI

"I cannot have a future unless I embrace my past." So wrote Cantor Debbie Friedman in a song about youthful visions and building community. With the publication of this congregational history, Beth Israel of Media proudly embraces its sixty-five year past as it looks to the future.

In its six and a half decades of life, Beth Israel has welcomed hundreds of Jews through its doors, and has offered a hospitable home in which the "three foundations" of Jewish life - **Torah**, **avodah** ("worship or godly service") and **gemilut chasadim** (deeds of loving-kindness) - have been strengthened.

**TORAH:** In this modest building, almost three generations of Jewish children have received a rich Jewish education, and Jews of all ages have studied our people's traditions, customs and history. Lively discussions of the weekly Torah portion have led to new insights into our textual tradition, thoughtful sermons (by Beth Israel's rabbis and congregants alike) have stimulated a renewed engagement with Judaism, and special educational programs and scholars have enriched our community's intellectual life.

**AVODAH:** Prayer and ritual are naturally a part of every synagogue community, but a spiritual life goes beyond rote recitation. Here at Beth Israel, our voices have been raised in joyful song, our services are participatory and characterized by a link to ancient traditions as well as a strong connection to the contemporary world, and our celebration of life-cycle rituals has been vibrant: young ones have been welcomed into the covenant of the people of Israel, children on the brink of adulthood have been called to the Torah as **b'nei mitzvah**, loving couples have consecrated their relationships in marriage, and individuals who have chosen to join the Jewish people have studied and learned, and become "Jews-by-choice," prayers for healing have been offered, the bereaved have been comforted and the memories of loved ones who have died have been honored.

As a community, we have welcomed Jewish holy days and festivals with joy and celebration, feeling our connection to millennia of Jewish

celebration, proudly taking our place as links in the chain of Jewish tradition.

**GEMILUT CHASADIM:** Beth Israel can be proud of its history of human caring. It would be a lengthy task to accurately and comprehensively record the countless small "acts of random kindness" that so many of our members perform quietly and anonymously as well as the larger projects of tzedakah and caring that members of Beth Israel have carried out in the past many years. Some representative examples of Beth Israel's record of communal responsibility are: the adoption of a Soviet refusenik family (the Elberts) during the height of Soviet repression and an Ethiopian college student in Israel more recently, and the organized feeding of homeless people and support of a local women's shelter.

As a **Reconstructionist** congregation, Beth Israel strives to embody the principles of egalitarianism, active engagement with Jewish history and tradition, deep involvement and participation in the ritual and spiritual life of the community, a contemporary approach to theology, and communal study and decision-making. To a great extent, this congregation has succeeded in embodying a Reconstructionist approach, though there is always room for more learning, deepening of understanding, widening of perspective and expanding of this synagogue's communal vision. As Beth Israel approaches its seventh decade, I hope, pray and believe that this community will proudly and lovingly hold on to its past even as it passionately embraces the future - a future filled with a vision of a community ever more deeply rooted in its Judaism and ever more committed to welcoming all Jews back "home."

**Chazak, chazak v'nitchazek: from strength to strength we are strengthened.**

**B'Shalom,**

**Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, Ph.D.**



## A BRIEF HISTORY

Congregation Beth Israel traces its beginnings to the year 1925 when a group of dedicated Media Jews met to form the town's first Jewish congregation. Synagogue documents from the early years of the congregation are virtually nonexistent, thus information is somewhat sketchy. We do know that this small group, headed by Harry Dramann and Isadore Kashinsky, met in various business locations as well as in private homes. The first High Holy Day services were held in 1926 in a vacant store on Orange Street. That location is now the parking lot for the Fidelity Bank. Over the next few years these services were held primarily in the American Legion Post Home on East Front Street. It was at this time that the synagogue became known by members as the "folding chair synagogue".

Beth Israel did not formally organize until 1929. On April 6, 1929, Beth Israel Congregation of Media was granted a charter by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Fourteen members, all men, signed the charter document. The first official president of the congregation in 1929 was Harry Dramann.

Beth Israel began to grow in size and scope and in the months following the official organization a Sisterhood, Men's Club and Junior group were formed to further the interests of the membership in Judaism and Jewish culture.

Despite the many positive accomplishments of these early years, the congregation did not have a permanent building to call home and continued to meet in a variety of locations in Media. The dream of a permanent synagogue was finally realized on September 11th, 1938 when Beth Israel

dedicated its current synagogue facility on Gayley Terrace in central Media. The two story structure, which had previously housed a Religious Society of Friends School (Quaker), was purchased for \$5,650.00 and was immediately pressed into service.

Following the purchase of the spacious and permanent facility, a Hebrew School and Sunday School were started for children of members. A youth or singles group called the "Ben-Bos" was also active at this time. The congregation was fast becoming a "full service" congregation with an active and involved membership. As the congregation grew in the 1940's, the ritual shifted from an Orthodox ritual to a more "traditional" one with mixed seating allowed. Despite these changes, instrumental music was not allowed nor were women permitted on the bimah. Once rabbis began to serve the congregation, longtime members Helen and Joe Schachner fondly remember that many of these rabbis used their home as a food and fuel stop at all times of the day. Prior to 1948, when the congregation began to engage rabbis supplied by the Yeshiva University Synagogue Council, services were led by male members of the congregation.

Beth Israel continued to effectively use the building they had purchased in 1938 and on March 17, 1946 they joyously celebrated the Burning of the Mortgage. The second floor of the synagogue houses the Sanctuary which is intimate and filled with natural light. The beautiful Ark that graces the sanctuary was designed in 1949 by Chester, Pennsylvania architect Jack Swerman. It was installed in the Spring of 1950 and is of a modified Roman Doric Order in design. The rich, dark Honduran Mahogany wood brings warmth and beauty to the simple interior of the sanctuary.



The period following World War Two and into the 1950's represented a time of phenomenal growth for religious institutions in America. Synagogues were no exception. New synagogues were formed all over the country and existing congregations experienced growth while others achieved a certain amount of stability. Beth Israel too shared in this phenomenon, albeit on a smaller scale. Membership grew to approximately 70 families with dues being quite reasonable. A family including husband, wife and children under 18 could join for \$50.00 per year. Hebrew school was \$25.00 per child and Sunday school was just \$10.00 per child. The membership rate, however, did not include High Holy Days seating which was a whopping \$5.00 per seat!!

A newly-remodelled "all-purpose" room and modern kitchen permitted a greatly expanded social program of dances, card and bingo parties, and the Annual Cabaret Night sponsored by the synagogue Men's Club. Renovated classrooms and rabbi's study greatly enhanced the educational opportunities offered to congregants. As stated in a synagogue brochure from 1953, Beth Israel offered members religious services, Hebrew and Sunday school, a Sisterhood known for putting together tremendous Onegs, a Men's Club, adult education, a Passover Seder, and social and religious activities at other holidays. Beth Israel strived to meet the various needs of its membership and was known for a time as the Beth Israel Synagogue and Community Center.

A turning point for Beth Israel and its future occurred in 1957 when the first full-time rabbi was hired by the congregation. Rabbi Sol Steinmetz, a graduate of Yeshiva University was warmly welcomed into the congregation, thus beginning a new chapter in the history of the congregation. Rabbi Steinmetz now lives in Chicago and

often writes for the New York Times Magazine. Other important events of the 50's included the creation of a synagogue newsletter, the "Beth Israel Bulletin", the naming of the first girl (Susan Weiss) on the bimah, the Annual June Fair sponsored by the Sisterhood, and the installation of the first memorial plaque in the sanctuary.

The 1960's were known as a tumultuous period in our country's history and Beth Israel too faced challenges and much change during this decade. Younger members were becoming involved in the life of the congregation at the beginning of the decade. The Sisterhood continued to provide a strong fund-raising and social presence within the congregation. A house for the Rabbi at 13 W. 6th Street in Media was purchased in 1961. It was during this period that Beth Israel developed a relationship with the Workman's Circle Home which included a number of their residents worshipping at the synagogue as well as visits by Religious School children. Beth Israel at this time also became strongly involved in the State of Israel Bond Drives. By all appearances the congregation was continuing in a stable fashion, but the foundation of the synagogue had many hidden cracks. The synagogue building was in appalling physical shape and had not had any major renovations for a number of years. It indeed was an embarrassment to many in the congregation. Membership was declining and many congregants felt that a non-Orthodox approach to Judaism was needed as more and more young Jewish families gravitated towards contemporary approaches to the Jewish religion and culture.

Continued declines in synagogue affiliation at Beth Israel resulted in the total membership standing at only 33 families by 1969. Many families had moved out of the immediate area and others were deciding to join

Congregation Ohev Shalom in Wallingford and Beth El Suburban in Broomall. Unfortunately, Beth Israel did not have the facilities and the programs to attract new members and sustain many current members. The congregation had declined to the point that merger talks with Congregation Ner Tamid in Springfield and Congregation Ohev Shalom in Wallingford began. A committee comprised of Helen and Joe Schachner, Alex Silberman, Irv Goldberg, Mel Drukin, Sam Anmuth, and Mel Josephs was formed to discuss the feasibility of such a merger. These talks progressed to the stage where there was even discussion as to where to place Beth Israel's memorial plaques. The talks broke down, however, due to philosophical and membership differences and the desire to retain a Jewish presence in Media. The proposed merger did not take place.

Many people felt that the only alternative to merger was to close the synagogue altogether. The congregation struggled with ideas and plans that could rejuvenate the congregation. One item that clearly needed immediate attention was the condition of the building. In order to attract new members and reverse the decline that had set in, much would need to be done to the structure both inside and out. A substantial amount of money was donated by Alex Silberman in order to begin this process. Mr. Silberman had come to the aid of the congregation before and a service honoring his devotion to Beth Israel was held on December 11, 1970. The Sanctuary was remodelled including the enlarging of the Ark, installation of new seating, lighting, and carpeting. In addition a new speaker system was installed as well as new paneling in the Social Hall.

The idea of a more contemporary approach to Judaism remained alive for many in the congregation. During this

period of upheaval and uncertainty the congregational leadership was introduced to the Reconstructionist Movement, a fourth movement in American Judaism, by member Mel Drukin. Reconstructionist Judaism was unknown to many in the congregation, but after much discussion and debate that was often heated, Beth Israel decided to hire student rabbis from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC). These student rabbis began to re-energize the congregation and in 1970 Beth Israel decided to affiliate with the RRC then located on North Broad Street in Philadelphia. This association continued to bring in student rabbis to lead services and minister to the congregation. The infusion of new and unique ideas and the vitality of the student rabbis enabled the synagogue to continue the process of reversing the serious decline of the past few years. In many ways, the synagogue became a training ground for students in the RRC. This phenomenon is still noted with great pride by the congregation and a very strong relationship still exists between Beth Israel and the RRC. In 1972 Beth Israel joined the congregational arm of the Reconstructionist Movement; the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (FRCH). Also in 1972, the congregation installed Rabbi Aaron Peller marking a significant event in the history and growth of the congregation. This was the first time that a rabbi from the RRC was formally associated with the congregation on a permanent basis.

Slow but steady growth was experienced at Beth Israel after joining FRCH. At this time in its history, Beth Israel had the distinction of being the only Reconstructionist congregation in the greater Philadelphia area. Membership began to increase in the mid 1970's as a number of members moved from other synagogues in the area to Beth Israel. The house for the Rabbi was sold in 1972 with money from the sale invested in certificates. The interest



was to be used for the running on the synagogue. The present kitchen off the Social Hall was relocated from the basement with some of this money. Beth Israel instituted a number of social events that brought people together and also raised funds for the synagogue. Longtime members recall that the "Pinto Dinner" was the most favored. Though it no longer is held, it remains a fond recollection to many. The congregation sold raffles with the grand prize being your choice of a Ford Pinto or \$2500. Since the event first began in 1970 members have always looked forward to joining each other for dinner at the Concordville Inn. Another popular event was the "Musical" which was a dinner and musical show.

The mid 1970's saw the end of the Synagogue Men's Club and Sisterhood as the congregation realized that these organizations drained people resources from within the congregation. The congregation was also moving toward a less gender specific approach to communal life. Beth Israel is one of the earliest synagogues to progress in this area by phasing out the Sisterhood and Men's Club. The year 1978 witnessed the election of the first woman congregational president. Merle Saft made history in that respect and also brought many new ideas to the congregation. During her time in office, the congregation's social life was re-activated and the Menorah was installed in Rose Tree Park. Also during this period the drive to install synagogue signs leading to Beth Israel was headed by Loraine Gross.

In 1980, Rabbi Sid Schwarz, who was at the time serving as the part-time student rabbi of Beth Israel, accepted an offer from the congregation to become its full-time rabbi. Upon his graduation from the RRC, Rabbi Schwarz became the first full-time Reconstructionist rabbi to serve Beth Israel since 1956 when the congregation hired its first full-time rabbi. Rabbi Schwarz brought a creative energy and

spirit to the congregation that is remembered by many. Under his leadership, the principles of Reconstructionist Judaism took strong root in the identity of the congregation. Rabbi Schwarz is also credited with reinstituting Shabbat morning services at Beth Israel and beginning the discussion of the role of non-Jewish spouses in the life of the synagogue.

During the 1980's, the congregation continued to offer stimulating Shabbat services, Adult Education progressed as did the Religious School and many new programs such as the Congregational Retreat and Flea Market were introduced. What was formerly known as the Pinto Dinner continued although it was now the Annual Dinner Dance minus the Ford Pinto. The growing high price of cars prohibited the congregation from offering this particular prize. Despite the change, this event remained the major fund-raising event of each year along with the Progressive Dinner.

The congregation became involved in a variety of new issues at this time including Soviet Jewry and increased involvement in the ways of leading meaningful and educated Jewish lives. The commitment to social action also grew and in 1983 a Social Action Group was formed to specifically address social action issues. The congregation also realized the need to address the issue of growth so that the congregation would still retain its sense of family and intimate sense of self.

After leading the congregation as student rabbi and ordained rabbi for 8 years, Rabbi Schwarz left Beth Israel in the summer 1984 to relocate to the Washington D.C. area. Beth Israel's second Reconstructionist rabbi was Brian Walt, a native of South Africa. Rabbi Walt was installed in September of 1984. The four years that Rabbi Walt



served as Rabbi are remembered as years of growth and increased involvement. As the congregation grappled with a number of controversial and emotional issues, divisions of opinion began to be apparent between those who emphasized social and political activism as an expression of their Judaism and those who stressed a more traditional, religious, and social approach to Judaism. During these four years the congregation became involved in such issues as the Central American Sanctuary movement, Arab-Israeli Relations, and opposition to Apartheid in South Africa. The congregation also became more involved in the plight of Soviet Jews. In 1986 membership reached 150 family units with 70 children attending the Religious School.

As tension grew regarding the issue of Sanctuary and the role that the congregation was to play regarding non-Jewish social action issues, the congregation became increasingly divided and decided to begin a healing process. In March of 1988, a professional mediator was engaged to try to bring the polarized congregation together. Despite these efforts, a parting of the ways occurred when Rabbi Brian Walt resigned as rabbi in the summer of 1988.

Rabbi Leila Gal Berner became the first full-time female rabbi at Beth Israel and was installed on Friday, November 17, 1989. Beth Israel has entered the 90's as a strong, vital, and committed community. Under the inspiring leadership of Rabbi Berner, the congregation has begun to tackle issues such as Judaism and Homosexuality, Abortion Rights, and also to re-examine the role of non-Jewish spouses in the life of the congregation. Social Action activity has been expanded to include Ethiopian Jewry and Homelessness. Rabbi Leila's love of music is apparent in the many worship services that are enriched by the music of her guitar. Her belief in strong Jewish education is evident in the variety of topics that form the Adult

Education component of the synagogue. Topics in Jewish History as well as Intermarriage workshops and Adult B'nai Mitzvot classes are now a part of the program offered at Beth Israel.

As the congregation continues to attract new members, issues associated with this new growth will undoubtedly challenge the members as they seek to retain the warm and intimate feeling of the religious services and programs available at the synagogue. A dedication to Jewish education, Jewish values, and meaningful social action will help to keep Beth Israel strong. As it moves into the future the community can be proud of the congregation's many achievements over the past sixty-nine years. Always keeping an open mind to the ideas of the future will ensure that Beth Israel will remain a vital Jewish presence in Media

Beth Israel is many things! It is the second oldest existing congregation in Delaware County; it is the oldest Reconstructionist congregation in the metropolitan Philadelphia area; it is also the center of Jewish spiritual life in the Borough of Media. It is these things and much more, for it is a caring community of committed people; young and old, dedicated to ensuring not only the survival but more importantly, the vitality and growth of Jewish life in their community and beyond,

More than sixty-eight years have passed since the early

beginnings of Beth Israel. As the congregation prepares to enter its seventieth year, we are indeed grateful for the past and are determined to meet the challenges that the present and future hold.

to be continued...

## HISTORICAL MILESTONES

1925	Congregation Beth Israel founded	1984	Holocaust Torah dedicated High Holy Day Services begin at Ridley Creek State Park First Goods & Services Auction
1926	First High Holy Day Service held	1985	First Annual Jewish Book Fair
1929	Congregation is Chartered Sisterhood and Junior Group formed	1986	First Annual Congregational Calender Adbook Membership reaches 150 family units Long Range Planning Committe formed
1938	Current Synagogue is purchased Sunday and Hebrew Schools formed	1987	Intermarrieds Group formed Beth Israel Student Scholarship at RRC established
1946	Building mortgage burned	1990	First Sabbath of Song (Shabbat Shirah) Women's Havurah first meeting
1952	First Girl Baby Named on Bima (Susan Weiss)	1991	Building Restoration Fund instituted Soviet Jewry Havurah formed First Annual Passover Bazaar
1956	"Beth Israel Bulletin" debuts First full-time Rabbi is hired	1992	Synagogue membership reaches 120 Religious School enrollment passes 50 Pro-Choice Havurah formed
1965	First Bat Mitzvah (Susan Weiss)	1993	Major renovations to Social Hall and Classrooms completed
1970	Congregation affilliates with Reconstructionist Movement First Annual Car Raffle & Dinner (Pinto Dinner)	1993	First Adult B'nei Mitzvot celebrated
1976	"Israelight" newsletter debuts		
1978	Congregation elects first Woman President		
1980	Pinto Dinner changed to Annual Raffle Dinner Congregation becomes sister synagogue to Mavakshei Derekh in Jerusalem		
1983	Social Action Group formed Synagogue cookbook published "Family Favorites" Young Adults Group formed		



### CONGREGATIONAL OFFICERS 1993 - 1994

Carol Shatoff	President
Fran Taber	Vice-President
Larry Shatoff	Treasurer
Steve Singer	Financial Secretary
Jeff Deitch	Recording Secretary
Helen Schachner	Corresponding Secretary

### BETH ISRAEL RELIGIOUS SCHOOL 1993 - 1994

Principal	Liz Bloch-Smith
Teachers	Bridgit Cabibi Bram Duchovnay Ruth Ehrenstein Ira Kedson Myriam Klotz Josh Lesser

### COMMITTEE CHAIRS 1993 - 1994

Membership	Andrea Bruno
Religious Practices	Joyce Romoff Ron Romoff Zave Smith
Education	Helen Plotkin Susan Raab
House	George Seidman
Fund Raising	Merle Saft
Social	Penny Bernick
Social Action	Susan Gottesman Randee O'Donnell
Life Cycle	Candy Berlin
Israelight Editor	Florence Leffler
Past President	Linda Cohen
Council of Past Presidents	Marc Werlinsky
Members At Large	Larry Dworkin Stu Levy Rissa Sklar
Gift Shop	Renee Gal Primack

## BETH ISRAEL CONGREGATION CHARTER MEMBERS

1929

William Charo  
Harry Draman  
Samuel Draman  
A. Fishman  
Joseph Gershenfeld  
Louis Golden  
Louis Goldstein  
Isadore Kashinsky  
Keiffman Kaufmann  
Morris Kraft  
Max Lampert  
Isaac Rudnick  
Alex Sugarman

## FIRST BOARD OF TRUSTEES: 1929

Harry Draman	President
Isadore Kashinsky	Vice-President
Philip Kramer	Secretary
Max Lampert	Financial Secretary
Keiffman Kaufmann	Treasurer
A. Fishman	
Joseph Gershenfeld	
Morris Kraft	
Alex Sugarman	

## SYNAGOGUE RABBIS

Congregational Lay Readers	1925-56
Sol Steinmetz	1956-58 first full-time rabbi
Louis Wolfish	1958-60
Philip Goldman	1960-61
Gerald Turk	1961-65
Norman Chaim Strickman	1965-70
RRC Student Rabbis	1970-80
Sidney Schwarz	1980-84
Brian Walt	1984-88
Yoheved Woolf	1988-89
Leila Gal Berner	1989-present

## STUDENT RABBIS

Ron Aigen	David Lev
Sandra Berliner	Joy Levitt
Moshe A. Birnbaum	Rikki Liebowitz
Barry Blum	Mark Margolies
Jeffrey Eisenstat	Aaron Peller
Bob Feinberg	Bezalel Porten
Gail Glicksman	Sandy Sasso
Andrea Goreze	Sidney Schwarz
Linda Holtzman	Steven Tunick
Beth Jarecky	Jonathan Woocher
Bonnie Koppel	

\*\* a partial listing

## SYNAGOGUE CANTORS

Kenneth Berger	Nate Levinson
David Braverman	Itzhak Lieberman
Morton Chwalow	Jane Meyers
Ray Entin	Joe Schachner
Joseph Horowitz	William Walberg

\*\* a partial listing



## SYNAGOGUE PRESIDENTS

Harry Draman	1929-1930
Harry Kimmelman	1938-1939
Maurice (Mo) Horen	1950-1951
Max Witten	1953-1955
William (Bill) Gross	1956-1957
Samuel Anmuth	1957-1958
Milton Gross	1958-1960
Leon Wolkov	1962-1964
Irv Goldberg	1964-1967
Dave Kravitz	1967-1969
Joseph Schachner	1969-1970
William (Bill) Gross	1970-1971
Mel Drukin	1971-1974
Alan Soffer	1975-1977
Larry Murray	1977-1978
Merle Saft	1978-1980
Ronald Goldstein	1980-1981
Burton Cohen	1981-1983

Carl Beresin	1983-1985
Larry Wallach	1985-1987
Eleida Simenhoff	1987-1989
Marc Werlinsky	1989-1991
Linda Cohen	1991-1993
Carol Shatoff	1993-present

## STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

### Preamble

Beth Israel is a community that works together to explore those ways of living that will enhance Jewish survival as well as lend meaning to our individual and group lives. Although religious beliefs and practices of our congregation cover a broad spectrum, we endorse the concept of Reconstructionism as a process. Inherent in this concept is the recognition that people take precedence over doctrine, and communities over institutions; as well as the recognition of the equality of opinions of congregants and professionals. As part of the process of Reconstructionism, decision making includes the entire synagogue community as well as the opinions of legal religious experts. The congregation insists that the essential guidelines of our faith be judged by standards of feasibility, morality, and justice which members of Beth Israel feel to be relevant to their lives. Based on these concepts, religious observance at our synagogue is performed in a meaningful traditional manner which is consistent with evolving Jewish values and culture.

### Principles

The Beth Israel Congregation accepts members at all levels of commitment and observance to Judaism. We view Judaism as conveying a sense of peoplehood. As Jews, we share a common history and are committed to a common destiny. Therefore, our unity as Jews is derived from our history and peoplehood, as well as from our religious beliefs.

Beth Israel strives to be a community where Jews at all levels of observance are encouraged to freely express

their Judaism and freely express themselves. This freedom of expression encompasses differences of opinion.

We strive to maintain a consistency between our values, our beliefs, and the ways in which we conduct our daily lives, both in and out of the synagogue. This means that we place human needs over material needs, and we should expect no more of others than we are willing to do ourselves. We should also be prepared to take actions which, while socially responsible, may be difficult or unpopular. Ultimately, the true test of our commitment is revealed through our actions, more than our words or prayers.

Active participation is a necessary and integral part of the working of our synagogue. All members are encouraged to participate, and the extent of the participation is limited only by one's imagination, initiative, and energy.

Beth Israel works to foster a sense of community through active commitment among its congregants. We recognize the necessity of ongoing commitment to one another and attempt to evoke mutual caring and responsibility among members of all ages. We appreciate and utilize individual talents, skills, and experience of our members.

At Beth Israel we recognize that learning produces growth: intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. We experience the rich variety of traditional and contemporary Jewish belief and practice through our exposure to a wide range of religious, social, and educational programs. These opportunities to learn are available to members at all age levels and are often shared among different age groups. Additionally, Beth Israel maintains a unique relationship



with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. We provide rabbinic interns with the opportunity to share their varied and often fresh ideas with our congregation, and conversely, our ideas with them.

Beth Israel strongly affirms the principle of sexual equality in all areas of Jewish life. Women and men are equally encouraged to participate in the responsibilities and voluntary activities of the synagogue to whatever level they feel comfortable. This principle extends to such religious and life cycle events as Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, marriage and divorce proceedings, calling to the Torah, counting of the minyan, and selection of rabbinic leadership.

In recognition that the Jewish family is central to our survival, Beth Israel provides many opportunities for family enrichment and growth. Shabbat and holiday services, children's seders, and educational classes are designed to facilitate family interaction and involvement. It is our hope that family participation in all facets of synagogue life sets examples necessary for the perpetuation of our Jewish heritage.

We feel connected to Jews everywhere by our religious beliefs, our traditions, and our history. We support the State of Israel and recognize its importance to Jewish renewal and survival. We encourage our members to forge ties to the land and its people through study and personal visits, as well as offering financial and emotional support. We believe that all Jews must have the freedom of religious expression which we consider a basic right, and support efforts to gain this right.

The future shape and direction of our synagogue community depends primarily on what we do and the

decisions we make. At Beth Israel we operate on a democratic model with decisions made by the community as a whole. The congregants and rabbi work in responsible concert, with final authority for decisions resting with the congregation. By actively engaging in the design of our own worship patterns, synagogue practices, and policies, we are creating a Jewish community that is relevant, fulfilling and ever evolving

**Letter from Rabbi Ron Aigen, former Student Rabbi,  
now Rabbi of Congregation Dorshei Emet in  
Hampstead, Quebec, Canada**

October, 1993

Dear Friends:

My experience as student Rabbi at Beth Israel Congregation from 1974-76 was an unexpected pleasure. Unexpected, mainly because I had never envisioned myself becoming a pulpit rabbi. I had previously worked for Jewish Family Services as a family therapist and as a prison chaplain at Graterford, and then I was co-manager of Makom, the Jewish coffee house in Center City. When the funding for Makom was suddenly withdrawn, and there were no other student jobs available except the student pulpit in Media, I considered the unthinkable.

It turned out to be more than "a job". It soon became an affair of the heart. The small family of members (there were approximately 60-70 households in those days) took me in with open arms. I was warmly welcomed with the home hospitality which I received, mostly as the Shabbat evening guest of Helen and Joe Schachner or as dinner guest at the homes of Alan and Libbie Soffer, Rissa and Stan Sklar, Mel and Marilyn Drukin, Elissa and Norm Chansky, Eleida and Michael Simenhoff, and the many parents of b'nei mitzvah who took me in as one of the family.

Alan Soffer was President at the time, which made the experience above all a lot of fun. He and I were both open to finding new and creative ways to experience our Judaism. One of my most memorable times at Beth Israel was the Friday evening services in which we used clay to

express our spiritual inner lives. I had found some poetry that expressed the concept of centering, which is part of the potter's task, and which we sang or listened to niggunim, Alan, who was the budding potter led the group in a guided meditation using clay. Toward the end, after he asked us to join all the works of our hands together into one unified sculptured offering, I suddenly had the sinking, horrified feeling that we had just replicated the experience of the Golden Calf. But somehow, with humor and goodwill, that willingness to take risks in exploring our spirituality was very important to helping all of us to find our way back to our Jewish home and grow closer to our spiritual tradition.

There was, of course, a great deal more that molded us into a community - there was Mel and Marilyn's "Pinto Dinner" a tradition which preceded my tenure, the Shabbat seder dinners which I introduced, the adult study groups (I particularly recall the intensity of our study group on Death and Dying), picnics and simply the amount of caring which was shared with one another as well as others outside our community such as the members of the local old age home. All of this led me to realize that indeed I could find fulfillment and more than that, great personal enjoyment as a congregational rabbi. When I graduated in 1976 and left Beth Israel in order to take on full-time employment in Montreal, I remember saying then that psychic bonds are never broken. It is true. I still feel indebted to all of those who put their trust in me and thankful for having shared with me their friendship and the grand experiment of creative Jewish living.

B'vrakha,

Rabbi Ron Aigen

**Letter from Rabbi Jeffrey Eisenstat, former Student Rabbi, now Rabbi of Congregation Ramat Shalom of Plantation, Florida**

October 18, 1993

In the fall of 1971 Aaron Peller and I were Rabbinic interns for the year at Congregation Beth Israel. Each week we alternated leading services and used a civilization approach to Jewish history as our theme.

I remember it well, because it was my first year of Rabbinical School and I would spend hours preparing material I had not even studied yet. What a great experience and Beth Israel members were so supportive.

I stayed with Mel and Marilyn Drukin and even got snowed in on Shabbas morning. Jeff and Stephanie were just babies at the time.

Friday night services averaged around 25 members. Helen and Joe Schachner were always there and Joe always led the Reconstructionist Kiddush with a booming voice. Other regulars at the time were the Soffers, Grosses, and Silbermans.

Shabbat mornings we conducted a traditional Minyan for the Workmen's Circle and we even had a few Bar/Bat Mitzvahs in the Spring of 1972.

The Congregation events which stand out in my mind;

1. Purim Play - "My Fair Esther" - that was truly hilarious.

2. A pre-Pesach dinner in the basement with barely enough room to eat. Great food and terrific singing was all part of the exciting year at Media for a young student Rabbi.

Congregation Beth Israel in Media will always be a part of my Rabbinic odyssey. I am now at Ramat Shalom, in Plantation, Florida and invite any members of Beth Israel to come and visit us down here.

Thanks for your guidance and support.

Rabbi Jeffrey Eisenstat



**letter from Rabbi Sidney Schwarz, former Rabbi, now  
Rabbi of Adat Shalom in Bethesda, Maryland**

October 1993

Reflections on My Tenure at Congregation Beth Israel

I came to Congregation Beth Israel in 1976 under some strange circumstances. I was a first-year student at the RRC, and knew that Beth Israel had been using student rabbis for some years prior to my arrival in Philadelphia. Periodically, the synagogue would invite students at the RRC to lead Friday night services in the place of the regular student rabbi, who at the time was Ron Aigen. My first service at Beth Israel, in the spring of 1976, coincided with Ron's final year at the College, and he was about to depart for the pulpit that he currently holds in Montreal. When Beth Israel began its own interview process to replace Ron, they indicated to College Dean, Rabbi Fred Kazan, that they would like to hire me as their new student rabbi. The only problem was that the school had a rule that the few student pulpits available would be reserved for fourth and fifth year students. Through a series of negotiations, to which I was not privy, but which resulted in Rabbi Kazan allowing me to take the position, I learned some important lessons about the politics of Jewish life.

Needless to say, I was thrilled with the opportunity to get a student pulpit in my second year at the RRC. Not only did it pay better than teaching Hebrew school, which is what I did during my first year to support myself, but it gave me a chance to experiment with some ideas that I had had about how synagogues could function more creatively than was the conventional case. Ironically, I took the position without ever having the intention of going into the congregational rabbinate upon the completion of my

rabbinic training. When I entered the RRC, I had such negative feelings about the way synagogues functioned, and the rabbi's place in most synagogues, that I was inclined in the direction of becoming a Jewish camp director. Lest readers chuckle at the thought, I hasten to add that some of the most exciting Jewish experiences that I had prior to rabbinical school happened in the Jewish camp setting, and I was persuaded that it was a context that could significantly impact on the richness of Jewish life in America.

Beth Israel can take a lot of the credit for changing my career direction. When I came there, there were only about 30 - 40 member-unit families. The transformation it had undergone, from a Conservative leaning congregation with an Orthodox rabbi, to a born-again Reconstructionist congregation using students from the RRC, made the group extremely open to innovation. It was a setting in which I thrived. I had many ideas, some well thought out, many others half baked. But I found a congregation willing to experiment in ways that was exhilarating for a student rabbi. By the late 1970's, I started to do a good bit of writing for the Reconstructionist magazine. As I look back at those pieces, most of which dealt with alternative ways for synagogues to function, it was clear to me that Beth Israel served as a wonderful laboratory for my ideas. Even more, I found at Beth Israel a host of creative, intelligent, and energetic members, who helped so many good things happen.

As I think back on some of the most significant endeavors during my tenure at Beth Israel. I think for example of how the congregation came to understand what I later called "Reconstructionism as Process" -- that being the way that an entire community could engage in decision making with regard to religious rituals and standards, and therefore



create a dynamic approach to halacha. I think back also to the process that we launched which resulted in the congregation creating a statement of principles -- as far as I know the first of its kind in this country, and one that is now being replicated in many synagogues in all denominations. I think about our institution of an annual retreat, which began at Camp Arthur and then found various other settings over the years, but which provided a wonderful learning and bonding experience for a large percentage of the membership. I remember struggling with the issue of growth, sometime during the middle of my tenure at Beth Israel we got to the 100 family-unit mark, and the community began to get nervous about losing its intimate sense of self. We engaged in an elaborate series of coffees and discussions about growth, how to handle it, and how to retain the qualities that had become so precious to us at Beth Israel. It is interesting to recall that notwithstanding the fact that the outcome of that community decision making process was not to limit membership, but to work on ways to make the membership a committed and qualitative membership, for several years after that process I kept bumping into people in Delaware County who told me that they thought that Beth Israel's membership was closed!

I also have very fond memories of doing two parallel High Holy Day services. This was before the synagogue discovered Ridley Creek State Park, and we used to have a traditional service conducted in the sanctuary, and an alternative service conducted downstairs. Since it seemed to me that the traditional service was the far easier of the two, we hired another student rabbi to do the upstairs service, and I had great fun putting together some of the most creative services in my rabbinate for the alternative High Holiday Service in the social hall downstairs.

One of the biggest challenges I recall facing as a rabbi came towards the end of my tenure at Beth Israel, when I asked people at the High Holiday services to make a pledge to come to as many Shabbat morning services as possible, indicating that we would run an experiment the following year of doing ten successive Shabbat morning services. It was my attempt to turn Beth Israel from a Friday night congregation into a Shabbat morning congregation, and I remember the idea being met with great enthusiasm, and the experiment meeting with great success.

When, after a hiatus of five years, I found myself back in a situation of helping to found a new Reconstructionist congregation in Maryland, I reflected back on that experience and insisted that I would only serve the congregation if the primary service was Shabbat morning. I attribute the vibrancy and dynamism of my current congregation, Adat Shalom, in Bethesda, Maryland, to the fact that Shabbat morning is simply when you can make so much more happen when a synagogue gets stuck in the rut of simply observing Shabbat on Friday nights.

On a more personal note, long time members will recall that for most of my tenure at Beth Israel, I was single. This led to great interest in my personal life, and on social occasions when I would bring dates, it seemed to me that the membership had great fun rating my girlfriends by some scorecard, which always remained a mystery to me.

One of the things that I remember most fondly was how close I became to so many people. All of the rabbis that I knew in other congregations seemed to be filled with stories of animosity between rabbi and congregants. This was never my experience at Beth Israel, and the fact that I felt so supported during my time as rabbi had a lot to do with the fact that by the time I left Beth Israel, the

congregational rabbinate seemed a lot more welcoming option to me than it had when I entered rabbinical school. From being a virtual adopted son of Helen and Joe Schachner, staying there and eating there innumerable weekends, to playing tennis with congregants, and seeing how concerned a wide range of members were in my personal and professional well being, makes me remember my time at Beth Israel as one of the happiest times of my life.

After serving Beth Israel as a student for four years, I graduated in 1980 and decided to stay on. Though the position continued to be part-time, I was able to do a good deal of writing, finish my doctorate, teach at Akiba Hebrew Academy, and then teach at the Reconstructionist College, in a combination career that was most gratifying. My decision to leave Philadelphia and assume the post of Executive Director of the Jewish Community Council in Washington was a terribly difficult one. It was clear to me that the professional opportunity was one that I could not turn down. For many years congregants at Beth Israel would say that I was "too good to stay at Beth Israel". Nonetheless, when I indicated that I was leaving, it was hard on everyone; it certainly was for me. I recall the bittersweet goodbyes in 1984 -- joy for my future, and sadness over the end of a wonderful relationship.

To this day, Sandy and I continue to get the Beth Israel newsletter every month, and we have the great pleasure of staying in touch with a number of the people who are still active members. If Beth Israel feels indebted to me for whatever growth I helped facilitate during my time there, I owe Beth Israel far more. I learned at Beth Israel how to be a rabbi, how to work with people, and how to make Judaism exciting for Jews. I know many colleagues who went through five years of rabbinical school, and felt that

they learned none of those skills; that fact that I learned them is as much a tribute to the Beth Israel community as it is to the institution from which I graduated.



**Letter from Rabbi Aaron Peller, former Student Rabbi,  
now Rabbi of United Congregation Mikve Israel-  
Emanuel, of Curacao, Netherlands Antilles**

November 1993

Dear Beth Israel Congregants:

It was my privilege to be among the first group of student Rabbis who served Congregation Beth Israel. At first, four of us took weekly turns conducting services and serving the congregation. As time went by, the number of student Rabbis decreased and by 1973-74 I was the only student Rabbi in the Congregation. My fellow colleagues included Jon Woocher, Jeffrey Eisenstat, our beloved colleague Ken Berger z.l. and Moshe Birnbaum.

My time at Beth Israel was truly a growing and learning experience for a young rabbi. We were guided by our first Dean of Students Rabbi Arthur Gilbert z.l. and subsequently by the expertise of Rabbi Federic Kazan.

We were helped greatly by a dedicated group of lay people who helped us in so many ways (please forgive me in advance for any names I do not mention specifically, but after all 20 years is 20 years). Among these were my first President Mel and his wife Marilyn Drukin, the entire Gross family, the Anmuths, the Goldsteins, Abe Levine, the Wittens, the Gershenfelds and most especially Helen and Joe Schachner.

Helen and Joe were like Mom and Dad to practically every Rabbinical student who served Beth Israel during my years (1971-1974) and thereafter, from what colleagues have told me, for another decade. And indeed for me they will always occupy a very special place in my heart and mind.

Helen, with her good council and sagely advice which at times was more helpful than I realized. Joe, serving for so many years as our "Chazzan", and having the patience to endure so many strangers in his home for so many Shabbatot and Chagim. Sabbath dinner at the Schachners was truly a heart warming experience.

As my mind wanders over those wonderful years at Beth Israel, I am reminded of the Pinto Dinner lottery to raise funds for the synagogue, the Law Day parade on State Street, the graduation invocation at Garnet Valley High School, costumes from our very eccentric Mr. I. Stern, Sharon Forman and Debbie Davis in the Hebrew School, etc., etc.

My most personal memory is of Sunday night March 3rd, 1974, the night that my wife Rivkah and I were married in the sanctuary of Beth Israel.

I trust that my recollections have stirred some positive memories for the current membership and I wish the congregation well for the future.