

A History of the Congregation

“Seek the Lord while He may be found” – Isaiah 55:6
“Where may He be found? – in the School and the Synagogue” – Talmud

Throughout its 80-year history, B'nai Israel Congregation has been a microcosm of Jewish Washington, reflected in its geographic, religious, and social development. From its humble beginning in a house on Georgia Avenue, N.W., to its magnificent home in Rockville, the congregation has followed demographic trends, as the Jewish population grew and moved farther north, eventually into the Maryland suburbs. From its original orthodox liturgical heritage to its present traditional egalitarian Conservative practices, the congregation has provided meaningful opportunities for all members. From its first school with a handful of students to its current full program of educational and social opportunities for all ages, the congregation has evolved into a vital and vigorous center of synagogue life.

In 1925, Washington's Jewish population numbered less than 15,000. Washington's Jews were migrating from southwest and from downtown into the Petworth and Brightwood sections of the city and into the area between First and 14th Streets, north of Upshur Street. With the move into Northwest Washington, there were those who were concerned about having both a place for their children to learn Hebrew and a place for prayer. It was this impetus that led to the founding of Congregation and Talmud Torah B'nai Israel in 1925.

In that year, Harry Himelfarb, a retail oil operator, and Henry C. Reiner, also in the oil business and later a real estate and land developer, talked frequently about the need for a Talmud Torah when they would meet at Barnett Merzel's kosher butcher shop, located at Georgia Avenue and Emerson Street. Their discussions dovetailed with the desire of Hyman Klavans, a tailor, for the establishment of a congregation in the area. Late in 1925, an historic meeting was held in the Klavans home, which was to result in the organization of B'nai Israel Congregation. That gathering included Klavans and his wife Sarah; Himelfarb and Reiner; Reverend Maurice S. Lavine, a shochet by profession, who became the first acting spiritual leader and teacher of the Hebrew School; Merzel; Ellis Stearman, a cabinet maker; Morris Friedenber, a grocer and his wife, Bessy, who was to become the first president of the Sisterhood, which was organized shortly afterward.

The group arranged to purchase a private home at 4708 Georgia Avenue, N.W., which served as the improvised synagogue until growth three years later would require a permanent house of worship. Reverend Lavine was responsible for buying the house, and Himelfarb and Reiner underwrote the mortgage. At the outset, dues were \$12.00 a year. Himelfarb and Reiner contributed \$100.00 each to start the school and synagogue. On August 3, 1926, B'nai Israel's charter of incorporation in the District of Columbia was signed by William Halam, Harry Himelfarb, Hyman Klavans, Maurice Lavine, Barnett Merzel, Sol Spivak, and Elisha Stearman. From the very beginning, the Talmud Torah was an integral part of B'nai Israel. As a matter of fact, the name under which the Congregation was incorporated – Congregation and Talmud Torah B'nai Israel – implied the importance given to religious education. Many of the early synagogue founders had come from Eastern Europe and had first established roots in Baltimore or New York. In the early years, it was difficult to schedule activities on Sunday, because so many of the members returned to Baltimore to visit with their families.

B'nai Israel was started as an orthodox congregation using *Nussach S'fard*. This was the rite familiar to several of the founders who had come from the area of Volyn, Galicia, in Southern Poland. In 1951, when the building at 16th and Crittenden Streets was opened, mixed seating was instituted in the sanctuary and the congregation was designated as "traditional Conservative". In 1957, it became affiliated with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

Hyman Klavans served as the first congregation president and is often described as "Papa" of the shul. His devotion to B'nai Israel earned him a rare honor, when he was accorded a seat for life on the pulpit as a token of gratitude by the synagogue. Others of the founders, too, were to leave a lasting imprint upon the congregation's history. Harry Himelfarb, the first vice president, was to follow Klavans as synagogue president. His brother, Paul Himmelfarb, also was to serve as president for six terms. Henry Reiner was to serve as president, too, and assumed a prominent role in the building effort for the 16th Street facility. Ellis Stearman's talents were freely contributed to the congregation, and his son, Maurice, was to serve as president.

In 1929, Harry Himelfarb was appointed as a committee-of-one to negotiate with the trustees of Hamline Methodist Church, good neighbors of the synagogue, for the purchase of their old building at 14th and Emerson Streets, N.W., which was to be sold at auction. Himelfarb, with the cooperation of the church trustees, arranged the purchase of the building for \$25,000. The synagogue agreed to put \$2,500 down and to pay another \$2,500 after Yom Kippur, when an appeal was to be made. The balance of the purchase price was financed. For the next 22 years, B'nai Israel worshipped and maintained a Talmud Torah at that site. About 420 people could be seated in the synagogue proper and 150 people accommodated in the basement vestry room. In those days, the rabbi served on both pulpits during the High Holy Days.

During Harry Himelfarb's administration, the congregation acquired a 4 ½ - acre plot in Oxon Hill, Maryland, for \$4,500 and consecrated it as B'nai Israel Cemetery. A chapel was built on the burial ground and was dedicated during the administration of William M. Sachs.

For seven years until 1936, Rabbi Aaron Volkman was the spiritual leader of B'nai Israel. That same year, Rabbi Harry Segal was asked by Yeshiva University to travel to Washington. Rabbi Segal and his wife, Yetta, had been married only six months when they came to B'nai Israel. He took the post without a contract and with only the commitment for a one-year trial period. "At B'nai Israel, I found a congregation of 150 families, a Hebrew school of 19 children, and a Sunday school of 60. The facilities were very meager," recalled Rabbi Segal.

Rabbi Segal was the only full-time teacher, and his wife, Yetta, helped part-time as a volunteer. Rabbi Segal set about involving himself in every aspect of congregational life. "The affairs of the congregation were my affairs," he said. "It was attending services daily, organizing and personally teaching in the school, organizing a campaign for the growth of the school and of the congregation."

After the 1936 school year, Rabbi Segal developed a new six-year curriculum for children starting at the age of eight. To get new members and to stimulate enrollment in the expanded Talmud Torah program, Rabbi Segal went door-to-door in the neighborhood, increasing the

school enrollment to about 300 in four years. In 1938, one year of Hebrew studies for girls was instituted as a prerequisite for confirmation, and in 1940 it was raised to two years. B'nai Israel had opened its Hebrew School program to girls in 1934 and was the first Washington-area school to phase out Sunday-only classes except for primary students. Rabbi Segal restructured the school's fiscal basis and instituted payment for Sunday school teachers, who had previously served on a volunteer basis. He also introduced late Friday evening services and English readings. Upon completing his fifth year with B'nai Israel, Rabbi Segal was offered a contract, but declined the formal arrangement. This informal but binding relationship between B'nai Israel and Rabbi Segal continued for decades. On the weekend of February 9-11, 1962, the congregation marked the silver anniversary of the rabbi's service. Under his spiritual leadership, B'nai Israel had grown from 150 families in 1936 when he arrived to almost 1,100 families.

For many years, B'nai Israel did not have a resident cantor. A hazzan was engaged to conduct services only on the High Holy Days. In 1940, a part-time cantor, Reverend Epstein, was appointed. He was succeeded by Cantor Ashry in 1942, and for a short time, Cantor Jacob Brightman followed. In 1944, Cantor Simon Weiss came to B'nai Israel and officiated for nearly six years. In 1950, he was succeeded by Cantor Philip Brummer who served until 1952. In 1954, the congregation elected Cantor Jacob Friedman, who had come to the United States from Czechoslovakia in 1946. He had been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp in Germany during World War II. Under Cantor Friedman's influence, B'nai Israel organized and established a choir for its Friday evening and High Holy Day services. The choir was directed first by Chaim Weiner and then by Carl Dosik. Cantor Friedman also organized a Youth Choir composed of students from the Talmud Torah. He was awarded the title of "Cantor Emeritus" in 1977.

The growth of the synagogue resulted in the creation of the position of Executive Director in 1946. Joseph Hurwitz, a native of Baltimore, came to B'nai Israel in 1929. He became an ardent worker for the congregation, serving on the Board of Education and as financial secretary. In 1946, he was chosen as the first full-time Executive Director and served capably through 20 years of rapid growth and transition before retiring in 1966. Frank Arshawsky, previously a teacher in the Saskatchewan, Canada school system, came to B'nai Israel in 1951 as bookkeeper and later as assistant to the Executive Director. Upon Hurwitz's retirement, Arshawsky became Executive Director. He administered the congregation through a period of many challenges and changes. As Rabbi Segal said in 1971: "Frank has exercised in his own quiet way, a very strong, calming influence on B'nai Israel . . ." In 1979, Arshawsky became Director of Capital Funds and was awarded the title of "Executive Director Emeritus."

The major responsibility for the development of the Talmud Torah rested with Rabbi Segal until 1954, when Eli Grad became principal of the Religious School. Mr. Grad had come to B'nai Israel in 1950 as head teacher and assistant principal, and continued to serve as principal through the 1956 school year. Dr. Benjamin Yapko succeeded Mr. Grad and served for six years. He was followed by Dr. Sheldon Brown as principal and Roberta Milgram as assistant principal. In 1963, Rabbi Joseph Stern headed the educational program, and in the 1966-67 school year, Barbara Levin served as principal. Yetta Segal was acting Educational Director as well as teacher, and Alice Haber was acting principal of the Primary Department.

Following World War II during the administration of Samuel Eig, a leading developer of Montgomery County, the first steps were taken toward building a new synagogue facility for B'nai Israel. Mr. Eig and Rabbi Segal took rides together on Sundays to locate possible sites for the congregation's future home. On behalf of the synagogue, Eig was responsible for buying property at 16th and Crittenden Streets. Rabbi Segal felt that education of the children should not be relegated to basement classrooms and consequently a well-arranged classroom wing was included. It was also his idea as that as many of the synagogue's facilities as possible should be accessible on the main floor. The new building was dedicated in 1951, with distinguished guests in attendance.

B'nai Israel has consistently maintained a varied program of activities – social, cultural, religious, and educational – for all age groups. Even before B'nai Israel moved into the 16th Street location, a Young Couples Club was started in 1947, and in 1950 became the Mr. and Mrs. Club. The B'nai Israel Men's Club was organized in 1949, and Nathaniel Goldberg, later to become congregational president, was its first president. One of the most successful youth activities was the B'nai Israel Minyannahs, which began in 1947 in a home basement. Ernest Sherman, a trustee and long-time member of the Board of Governors, devoted many years to this youth group, which met weekly for Sunday morning services. At each session, there was a quiz on religious topics with winners receiving prizes of silver dollars and commemorative stamp blocks.

By the mid 1950's, B'nai Israel faced a new dilemma – the steady migration of its families from the District of Columbia into the suburbs of Maryland. But the synagogue responded resolutely by continuing to reach out in new forms to its membership. Home study groups were formed, and morning and evening adult education classes developed into an Adult Institute of Jewish Studies. Emphasis was also placed upon late Friday evening services and the Junior Congregation.

In May 1956, Nathaniel Goldberg was elected president of the congregation and in 1958, for the first time in its history, a husband and wife team, Nathaniel and Rae Goldberg, were elected to head the congregation and its Sisterhood. During Goldberg's term, further plans were developed to cope with the congregation's ever-growing suburban membership. In 1964, with the help and generosity of Homer Gudelsky and Lawrence Levin, B'nai Israel acquired land at Georgia Avenue and Evans Drive in Silver Spring and constructed an educational facility. A dedication service was held on October 22, 1967 – with the building named the Paul Himmelfarb Hebrew School of Congregation B'nai Israel in honor of the generosity of the donors, the Paul and Annetta Himmelfarb Foundation.

The purchase of land in Silver Spring for our Talmud Torah was not enough to stem the tide of history that was overtaking the congregation's home on 16th Street. The death of Rev. Martin Luther King and the subsequent D.C. riots in 1968 accelerated the need for yet another change. Evening services were poorly attended and talk of a full-scale move resumed.

As Washington's Jewish population continued to grow and migrate north and west, Montrose Road in Rockville became a new center for Jewish life. B'nai Israel was fortunate to become part of that transition. Homer and Martha Gudelsky, long-time and dedicated leaders of the congregation, were particularly visionary and supportive in facilitating the relocation to suburbia.

In 1973, Rabbi Matthew Simon joined the congregation. In 1976, Rabbi Simon led B'nai Israel Congregation into its new home in Rockville, which set the tone for another period of dramatic growth. He was also active in the establishment of the Consolidated Hebrew School which educated children from five different Conservative congregations at the site nearest their home, thus eliminating many hours of travel time for hundreds of grateful parents.

Through Rabbi Simon's ongoing efforts, the congregation continued its trend toward equal religious rights for women, affording all members the opportunity to be counted in a minyan, to receive an aliyah and to read from the Torah. In addition, B'nai Israel became much more involved in the broader metropolitan Washington Jewish community. Rabbi Simon was awarded emeritus status in 2000.

Cantor Robert Kieval came to B'nai Israel in 1977, after having been hazzan at several congregations in New York. In partnership with Rabbi Simon, he served as our Hazzan for 23 years until becoming Cantor Emeritus in 2000. Under his guidance, B'nai Israel developed a full bar/bat mitzvah program, with each child reading from the Torah. Cantor Kieval also enhanced the religious services with special musical selections and began an adult bar/bat mitzvah program.

In 1989, Rabbi Jonathan A. Schnitzer joined the congregation. Bringing 15 years of previous experience to his work at B'nai Israel, he has been particularly involved in developing a broad range of outreach and programming. Mitzvah Day, the expansion of our Havurot, a profusion of Adult Education opportunities, the welcoming of newly-arrived immigrants from overseas, monthly Family Service and Family Group events all became integral parts of B'nai Israel – helping to make our congregation responsive to the needs and challenges of contemporary Jewish life. Rabbi Schnitzer and his wife, Beverly, also facilitated biannual trips to Israel for B'nai Israel members. Today, under Rabbi Schnitzer's leadership, B'nai Israel is experiencing an all-time high in its membership size, staff size, facility size and programmatic scope, while remaining a warm, participatory and caring congregation.

Glen Easton served B'nai Israel as our Executive Director for six years, leaving in 1990. He brought innovative administrative systems and perspectives to our synagogue.

Gail Bloom became Executive Director in 1990 and remained until the spring of 2001. During her years of service, B'nai Israel continued to grow and also took the significant step of "reclaiming" our Talmud Torah as an integral part of the congregation.

For 15 years, Diane Lipson Schilit brought a deep measure of devotion to her responsibilities as B'nai Israel's Youth Director. She pioneered many of the programs which have become the hallmark of the Youth Department.

In 1995, as B'nai Israel's new Talmud Torah was reestablished, the congregation's long range planning committee, under the direction of past president Greg Friedman, began investigating the feasibility of a new handicapped-accessible school building that would include classrooms to house our Talmud Torah, a youth lounge, library, all-purpose room, kitchen and playground. Potential sites in both Potomac and on the Route 28 corridor of Rockville and North Potomac

were considered for a satellite facility. For several years, temporary off campus Talmud Torah sites were used for weekday classes. Ultimately, the parents rejected the idea of an off-campus facility, citing the “disconnect” with the synagogue and clergy.

The leadership undertook a feasibility study to determine the next course of action. The result was a Vision 2000 plan and the launching of what became a \$15,000,000 campaign to construct an educational facility on the B'nai Israel campus, to renovate and modernize the existing building and to establish an endowment campaign to insure the ongoing flow of dollars for the operating budget of the synagogue. The capital campaign, chaired by Elaine Goodman and co-chaired by Vickie Abrutyn, enabled our congregation to complete the original plan from the 1970's. Paul Chod chaired the Building Committee and supervised a myriad of construction details. Today as a result of an extraordinary expression of support from our congregants, the Thelma and Melvin Lenkin Educational and Activities Center and Gerald S. Snyder Building now complete the campus of B'nai Israel Congregation.

Fran Zavin had worked at a congregation in New Jersey before relocating to Maryland and joining the staff of B'nai Israel in 1997 as our Education Director. She was responsible for repositioning and strengthening the Talmud Torah and incorporating it more fully into congregational life. With her professional eye and dedication, she continues to expand the horizons of our Talmud Torah, while overseeing all the varied aspects of our complex educational program.

Karen Gerton, who joined the staff of the Schilit Nursery School in 1989 as a teacher, became its Director. Her overreaching goal has been to provide a loving, nurturing Jewish environment for our youngest children. She knows each child by name and has been instrumental in the dramatic growth of the Schilit Nursery School. Today our nursery program includes 180 children. It would be an amazing statistic for our founders to contemplate.

In more recent years, B'nai Israel experienced many other staff changes. Rabbi Allen Selis served as Assistant Rabbi from 1999-2002. In July of 2001, Sandy Cohen joined the congregation as Executive Director. In that capacity, he was instrumental in facilitating the new road we had set for ourselves. He retired in August of 2003.

The late Hazzan Deborah Togut joined our staff as Ritual Director in 1998. An ordained Hazzan, she served as Torah Reader, teacher and mentor to many of our B'nai children and their families until her untimely passing in April 2010.

Cantor Josh C. Perlman joined the B'nai Israel family in 2001 after a decade at B'nai Israel in Albuquerque, New Mexico. From nursery school students to the bar and bat mitzvah students with whom he works, the name “Cantor Josh” always brings a smile. His wit, his desire to create music to “sing with” and his annual concerts have become an integral part of the B'nai Israel community.

As we were moving into our Lenkin Education and Activities Center, Larry Trope arrived for his first day as our new Executive Director. He has been running ever since. He believes in providing friendly attention to each individual member. At the same time he has addressed many administrative needs. Under Larry's guidance, our membership continues to grow.

As our congregation reached our 80th year, it was heartwarming to see so many young faces among our clergy and staff. Rabbi Michael Safra joined our family in July 2002 upon his ordination. He has been instrumental in the expansion and integration of program offerings in many realms. His sermons are insightful. As of July 1, 2005 Rabbi Safra assumed the title of Associate Rabbi.

Sharon Rosenberg Safra, our Family Education Director, has been pivotal in the development of Family Education as an opportunity for positive Jewish experiences for our congregants of all ages. From Tot Shabbat to “Putting Your Children to Sleep Jewishly” to L’Mazel for expectant parents, Family Education has become a very visible and meaningful component of B’nai Israel.

The dedication of the Lenkin Education and Activities Center created many added possibilities for innovative education and programming. Members find a diverse and dynamic congregation for worship, learning, celebrating and sharing memorable occasions. Some of our families span two, three, and even four generations; others have only recently affiliated, as career and family bring them to the area. Both our congregation and our schools are growing rapidly.

B’nai Israel’s 80th anniversary was an auspicious milestone. At celebrations throughout the year, we honored our past and those who provided the foundation on which we have accomplished so much. We re-committed ourselves to responding as effectively as possible to the challenges of the present and look hopefully to the future and to those who will create the next chapters in the history of B’nai Israel. In the words of our liturgy, we say: “How fortunate are we . . . how good is our portion . . . how pleasant is our destiny . . . and how beautiful is our heritage.”

Sources: This paper, originally written by Lester Rosen 1968 and published by the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington, was based on the Minutes of the Congregation as recorded by Max Bernstein and Joseph Schimmel, reports in The Synagogue News and The Scroll, publications of B’nai Israel, and interviews with Rabbi Henry Segal, Joseph Hurwitz, Harry Himelfarb, Henry C. Reiner, Irving Kamins, Mrs. Joseph Tudor, and Ernest Sherman. It was modified and amended by Paul Chod, based on the information provided him by the professional staff of B’nai Israel Congregation. This information was updated on the occasion of B’nai Israel’s 75th anniversary, and again by the 80th anniversary committee. Minor changes have been made for website publication.

Presidents of B’nai Israel Congregation

Hyman Klavans (1926-1930)
Harry Himelfarb (1930-1934)
Morris Wittlin (1935-1936)
Paul Himmelfarb (1936-1942)
William Sachs (1942-1943)
Abraham Mendelsohn (1944-1945)
Sam Eig (1945-1948)
Maurice Stearman (1948-1949)
William Bornstein (1949-1952)
Henry C. Reiner (1952-1954)
Nathan Levin (1953)

William M. Sachs (1954-1956)
Nathaniel Goldberg (1956-1961)
Joseph Schimmel (1961-1964)
Irving Kamins (1964-1966)
Herschel W. Blumberg (1966-1968)
Charles M. Pascal (1968-1970)
Willard J. Mazie (1970-1972)
Carl K. Lane (1972-1974)
Stanley Hayman (1974-1977)
Chaim M. Uberman (1977)
Seymour S. Abensohn (1978-1979)
Margaret D. Uberman (1979-1980)
Dr. Lawrence J. Thomas (1980-1981)
Stanley E. Berger (1981-1982)
Lawrence A. Shulman (1982-1984)
Lloyd B. Koenick (1985-1986)
Howard M. Arnold (1987-1988)
Sheldon I. Grosberg (1989-1990)
Gregory Friedman (1991-1992)
Allan Zendel (1993-1994)
Sonia Polsky (1995-1996)
Stephen Storch (1997-1998)
Dr. David H. Goodman (1999-2000)
Sherry Wachtel (2001-2002)
Bernard Forseter (2003-2004)
Vickie Abrutyn (2005-2006)
Lawrence Wachtel (2007-2008)
Irwin Barney (2009-2011)
Lois Alperstein (2011-2013)
Andrew Schechter (2013-present)

Full Time Rabbis

Rabbi Aaron Volkman (1929-1936)
Rabbi Henry Segal (1936-1973)
Rabbi Melvin Libman (in the late 1960's)
Rabbi Matthew Simon (1973-2000)
Rabbi Aaron L. Mackler (1985-1987)
Rabbi Amos Chorny (1987-1989)
Rabbi Jonathan Schnitzer (1989- present)
Rabbi Allen Selis (1999-2002)
Rabbi Michael Safra (2002- present)

Full Time Cantors

Cantor Ashry (1942)
Cantor Jacob Brightman (1943)
Cantor Simon Weiss (1944-1950)
Cantor Philip Brummer (1950-1952)

Cantor Jacob Friedman (1954-1977)
Cantor Robert Kieval (1977-2000)
Cantor Josh Perlman (2001-present)
Cantor Deborah Togut z"l (1998-2010)
Cantor Ilana Wolpert (2010-present)

Men's Club Presidents

Nathaniel Goldberg
Joseph Schimmel
Joseph Tudor
Joseph Kronman
Albert Schwartz
Gunther Schwartz
Bernard M. Levy
Carl Lane
Samuel Lebowitz
Albert Kaizen
Allan Doris
Jerome L. Saidman
Mickey Freedman
Jacob Neufeld
Michael Heiserman
Lloyd B. Koenick
Allan Zendel
Joel Aronson
George Kligfield
Phil Sherman
Danny Boehr
Steve Storch
Larry Wachtel
Irwin Barney
Danny Glazer
Jeff Moss
Michael Meliker
Wayne Berman
Jeffrey Fredman
Stuart Shalloway
Joel Goldberg

Sisterhood Presidents

Bessy Friedenber
Mrs. Charles Miller
Rose Kalichstein
Frances B. Davidson
Frances Rubinstein
Leah Benjamin
Anne Garner

Mary Oshinsky Schneider
Sylvia Cohen
Anne Garner
Honey Zarin
Ella Ehrlich
Fay Kossow
Elizabeth Reiskin
Marion Sherman
Jeanette C. Sherman
Minnie Salen
Bertha Cohn
Rae Goldberg
Esther Kronman
Edith Pascal
Betty Katz
Gwen Goldstein Freishtat
Birdie Schweizer
Lila Mensh
Evelyn Mitzner Wohl
Annette Novak
Claire Mazie Libber
Harriet P. Best
Barbara J. Weitz
Shirley Light
Beverly R. Freedman
Bobbie B. Berger
Elaine L. Goodman
Ruth V. Freedman
Susan H. Canter
Micki B. Gordon
Rosalind Zeidman
Doris Lane
Lori Yadin
Sherry Wachtel
Matlee Yadin
Sue Taffet
Susan Lazerus
Debra Anolik, Sheila Franks, Susan Lazerus