

# A HISTORY OF TEMPLE ISAIAH \*

compiled and written by  
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On this Chai anniversary of our Temple -- a time of remembrance and rededication -- it seems appropriate to look back at our beginnings so that we may truly appreciate the dedication and foresight of those responsible for creating a Jewish community within historic Lexington.

Since 1977 is a time of tracing our lineage to "our roots," we can say that the Jewish community began here in the early 1900's, when Jewish families from the West End in Boston heard of a new area of homes built in the country. A little shtetl was formed on Sylvia Street, which is half in Lexington and half in Arlington. The people came for many reasons. They were attracted to the restful atmosphere, so different from the crowded tenements and noisy city streets. There was healthful clean air and some families came for a tuberculosis cure. "Lexington is very high," Reverend Harold Hanley has stated. "If you stand on the Lexington Green, you are as high as if you were at the top of the Bunker Hill Monument in Charlestown." Also, the fact that Sylvia Street was at the end of a bus line to Boston was an important factor in its growth.

By 1911, there were enough Jewish families to form the East Lexington Hebrew Congregation. They met in homes until 1916 when land on Sylvia Street was purchased and Temple B'nai Jacob was built. This structure still stands at Sylvia Street. The ritual was Orthodox. The years between 1920 and 1930 saw much activity concentrated around Temple B'nai Jacob. Then with the older people passing on and many of the younger ones moving, the low ebb of the community's existence was realized around 1936.

Only the influx of a totally new population could reverse the downward trend, and fortunately this began to develop in the post World War II period. There were no Hebrew classes or religious school during this period. Those children of religious school age were either sent to Temple B'nai Brith in Somerville or to Waltham.

In 1945, in the neighboring town of Arlington, a new line of development was initiated. A group of 30 families organized the Arlington Jewish Center and met in the D.A.V. Hall. Following a pattern which had been well established in other Jewish communities, it flourished as a social and cultural organization, separate and distinct from the East Lexington Hebrew Congregation of Temple B'nai Jacob, but drawing upon the latter group for its membership. Many families from both towns were active in both groups: the Center at times using the Temple building for special services; yet, each pursuing its own aims. One of the founders of this new group was Lou Derby, father of Marshall Derby. The primary goal of the group in 1945 was the establishment of a religious school.

Written for our Chai 7 Anniversary, June, 1977,  
and taken from our Temple bulletin.



Would you believe -- dues were \$6 per family and tuition for children enrolled in the school was \$5 per child. Religious services conducted at Temple B'nai Jacob were now in the Conservative tradition. Members came from many diverse towns, but most were residents of Lexington, Arlington, and Bedford.

This period was marked by great activity and innovation. The Sunday School grew to include three-days-per-week Hebrew classes, with a curriculum drawn from the Bureau of Jewish Education. Youth groups were formed. Harvest suppers, plays, musical frolics, sports events, etc. strengthened the group's determination to grow and consolidate all their activities in their own building. The Arlington Jewish Center, incorporated as a charitable institution, started a building fund and became affiliated with the Jewish Centers Association of Greater Boston.

In 1955 an important step was taken by the organization now known as the Arlington-Lexington-Bedford Jewish Community Center when they decided to purchase the building at 1508 Massachusetts Avenue in Lexington. The Sacred Scrolls of Temple B'nai Jacob were transferred and the Temple membership willingly agreed to sell the building on Sylvia Street and apply the monies to the purchase of the first and only home of the Arlington-Lexington-Bedford Jewish Community Center. With the move into the building, the membership increased to more than 100 families, and the desire to move in the direction of a Temple-Center began to be voiced.

A community self-survey conducted at this time demonstrated that the membership regarded itself as a religious body and expressed a desire for a spiritual leader. Rabbi Judah Stampfer, who was then completing his doctoral studies in English Literature at Harvard, accepted the post and served with distinction, offering religious and intellectual inspiration to the congregants. The first Bar Mitzvah in the new building on Massachusetts Avenue was that of our own Marshall Derby.

The Center building, dedicated in 1957, soon became too small to hold the membership during the High Holy Day Services, and the Hancock Congregational Church in Lexington graciously granted them the use of one of their large meeting rooms for the next few years.

The facilities of the Center were in turn made available to the newly established Pilgrim Church in Lexington, when their needs for Sunday School classrooms and a meeting room for worship services became known.

In 1958, the Center had a membership of about 150 families. The school was vibrant and active, extending over six or seven grades. In 1959, a Rabbi Selection Committee had been formed. It was at this point that many of the underlying differences which had existed between the Reform and Conservative elements in the membership became evident. The Board voted to select Rabbi Bernard Bloom, a Reform rabbi, as its spiritual leader. Then, members of the Board who leaned toward a Conservative rabbi called a meeting of the entire membership which subsequently rescinded the decision of the Board.

At this point, a group of forty families honoring the commitment to Rabbi Bloom made their decision to form a congregation dedicated to liberal Judaism. Temple Isaiah was born June 5, 1959, at the home of Edith and Sherman Starr. Under the vigorous leadership of its first president, Leo Dunn, and Rabbi Bernard Bloom, a full program of religious, educational and social activities was immediately set in motion. A series of temporary homes were found. During that first summer, the Methodist Church of Lexington was the host. For the next three years, the First Parish Church (Unitarian) was used for our High Holy Days and the Hancock Congregational Church for our year-round services and school classes. The magnificent hospitality of these good neighbors in Lexington will never be forgotten.

On December 11, 1959, Temple Isaiah received the charter of membership in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. And the year 1960 became a year of firsts ... our first Torah; our first Bar Mitzvah; the beginnings of our Sisterhood; our new youth organization, LEFTY; and so it went. 1960 might also be called a year of growing pains; but as the Temple grew, it developed strength and maturity. Thus, in February of 1961, a campaign was initiated to buy a six-acre tract of wooded land on Lincoln Street, in the heart of Lexington. This was to be the site of the future home of Isaiah. The campaign for the needed sum of \$32,000 was a success, and our first material step towards the building of a structure of our own had been accomplished.

In July 1961, Dr. Samuel Globe, our second president, wrote a letter to the membership, raising the questions of "how much, how big, and how soon", with regard to our proposed new building. He answered these questions by saying, "While we recognize the need for the building, we do not intend to build elaborately or extravagantly. Good taste, rather than extravagance, will guide us ...." After many interviews with architects and many works inspected, the architectural firm of Perley F. Gilbert Associates was selected. The principal architect and president of the firm is Herbert H. Glassman, A.I.A., a member of our congregation.

The ground breaking ceremonies took place on May 6, 1962. It is interesting to note that in September of 1962, our membership had climbed to 108 families, our professional school faculty numbered fourteen, and our school enrollment totalled over 200 children.

Our Rabbi, Bernard Bloom, and his wife Bailey had helped mold our members into a congregation, kindling within us a special love for music. Our talented, enthusiastic members volunteered their time to comprise a choir that added that extra measure of beauty to our services. Martha Globe, the group's first choir director, was an important factor in the first few years of the Temple's existence in turning a group of inexperienced singers into a singing body of quality.

Much of the effectiveness of the choir's performances derived from the excellent group of soloists available from its own membership and from the congregation at large. Notable among these was Eunice Alberts (Mrs. Dean Nicholson), who is recognized as one of the leading contraltos singing today. The solos of Florence Gould, Sydney Corday of blessed memory, Morris Bloomberg, David Schneider, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Kaplan,



Ed Furash, Bill Revis and others are most worthy of mention. Devotion to the choir of Carol Bloom, of blessed memory, shall be remembered. The choir had the accompaniment at the organ of Daphne Glassman for many years. Robert Glassman, chairman of the Ritual Committee in our early years, was responsible for ensuring that the radiant sound of the Temple's sonorous Allen organ would be heard in our Sanctuary.

And so Temple Isaiah went into 1963 with Leo Dunn once more the president. The walls of the building rose swiftly, the interior came alive with bima, ark, eternal light, classrooms and all those objects of beauty and reverence that transform a mere building into a house of worship. In September 1963, it all came to fruition at the glorious Dedication Weekend, a time of joy for every member who had contributed his share towards making this dream a reality. All this was accomplished in four short years -- but they were years of work and sacrifice and selfless devotion by a congregation determined to keep the light of liberal Reform Judaism shining brightly for all to see.

In 1963, a new era was about to begin for this young congregation numbering 160 families. With the building of a home accomplished, it could turn its energies and talents towards the building of a religious and educational program. The force behind the innovations was our new rabbi, Haskell Bernat, who came to our congregation together with his wife Gladie. Our sanctuary, without permanent seating, gave Rabbi Bernat the flexibility to experiment with various seating arrangements, thus providing our members more intimate contact with one another. His creative talents were absorbed by our affiliate organizations, such as Sisterhood and LEFTY, and translated into creative Shabbat services which have been recognized on a national level, as well as his own have been.

Combined Adult Education classes with Temple Emunah were begun at this time and have continued successfully throughout the years. It is perhaps worthy of mention that cordial relations have continually existed between both temples, with both Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods joining together for meetings and combined events.

The Temple Choir continued as an integral part of our Shabbat Service with the addition of a folk musician, giving us the reputation of a "singing congregation". As the years went on, our congregational volunteers sang for the High Holy Days, and for special musical services during the course of the year. The music of the Shabbat was rendered by a small group of professional singers under the direction of a choir director. Phyllis Isaacson, a congregant, was one of our outstanding choir directors.

In 1964, the Isaiah Arts Institute was created, in response to a conviction that art is the signature of a creative living culture. Judaism is the religious culture of the Jewish people, a vital force constantly searching for and creating new forms of artistic experience. The Isaiah Arts Institute sought to bring into our midst several times each year Jewish artists and performers of stature who could enrich our Shabbat and in turn relate how their Jewishness affected their art forms. Temple Isaiah made the pages of "Life" Magazine with Naomi Aleh, a dancer whose interpretation of our prayers was integrated into our worship service.

These Arts Institute Sabbath Services were funded by the proceeds from the Isaiah Arts Weekends which have included champagne galas, art previews and sales, dinner or dessert parties at members' homes, and entertainment. They have continually proven to be a highlight of our Temple's program year. Through the years, the chairpersons have included Mae Sherman, Eleanor Block, Marilyn Abel, Estelle Cushner, Phyllis Reservitz, Merry Gerber, and Carol Siegel.

Under the administrations of Presidents Milton Gould (1963-64), William Hammer (1964-66), Edward Furash (1966-68), Arnold Wolf (1968-70) and Rabbi Bernat, our congregation and religious school continued to grow. A professional educator was hired as principal of our Religious School. Double sessions on Saturday and Sunday became necessary for the School. Double sessions in our Temple for High Holy Day services also became necessary to accommodate our ever increasing congregational families. And then even that proved unsuccessful and the Lexington Armory became our home for High Holy Days. Long range planning committees were formed to study the future needs of our congregation. Building committees were established to work with our architect to provide suitable plans for meeting our present and future space requirement needs. Finally, in 1970, the congregation was presented with the building plans, which doubled the sanctuary and added many new classrooms, and a financial package, which proved to be untenable for the majority, due to the depression of the economy at the time. It must be mentioned that our congregation has never been as fully represented as it was at those meetings in 1970. The full expansion was denied.

Then, under the presidency of Allen Dickerman (1970-72), the desperate situation of space in religious school was attended to. Plans for an addition to the school were passed by the congregation. In addition to the new school wing, the plan enabled the principal to come out of his closet into an adequate office area. The Rabbi's study was enlarged; and the temple office, made large enough for all the office machinery, was moved to the school area.

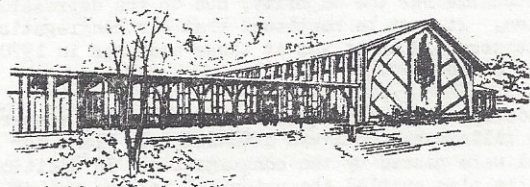
Another change in our temple life came in the spring of 1971 when Rabbi Bernat accepted the offer of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations to become the Regional Director of the Chicago area. We were proud for him and in tribute to his eight years of creative service to our congregation named our library the Haskell M. Bernat Library. He, along with our dedicated and indefatigable volunteer librarian, Emilie Klein, was responsible for the noted excellence of our collection.

President Allen Dickerman appointed a Rabbinic Search Committee, with Vice President Stanley Kolodkin as its chairman. This committee sought out and hired our present rabbi, Cary David Yales, who along with his wife Bonnie has brought a true feeling of "community" to our congregation. With the leadership of Presidents Stanley Kolodkin (1972-1974), Morton Hodin (1974-76), and presently Howard Cravis (1976-77), Rabbi Yales has continued our creative programming and instituted new ideas:



Family and Couple Weekend Retreats to celebrate the joy of the Shabbat while forming closer ties with one another; High School Seminars at Rabbi's home and weekends away; the Helping Community, to better acquaint the congregation with the needs of its members and to try to address those needs through our membership; Chavurot, formed to personalize the temple institution by providing nuclear families with an extended family of temple members who want to grow and express themselves Jewishly together; the addition of a special needs class to our religious school program; a Temple Nursery School which provides a positive involvement in Jewish traditions, holidays, and music, along with a stimulating nursery school experience for three and four year olds. All of these programs, plus the collective Bat Mitzvah of twenty women, who never had the opportunity for this honor or who heretofore never had a Hebrew education, have been instituted by Rabbi Yales.

And here is where we stand today -- a strong thriving congregation of 335 families, led by a beloved rabbi, Cary David Yales. Our religious school of 385 children is the fourth largest in New England. As our congregation moves into its Chai year, we can feel pride in our past achievements and look forward with hope to our future.



— THE WORDS OF THE SAGES —

The day is short and the work is plentiful.