

The Story of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim of Charleston, SC



Congregation Founded 1749
Religious School Founded 1838
Present Sanctuary Built 1840

A National Historic Landmark of the United States
The Oldest Synagogue in continuous use in the United States
Founding Reform Jewish Congregation in the United States

www.kkbe.org



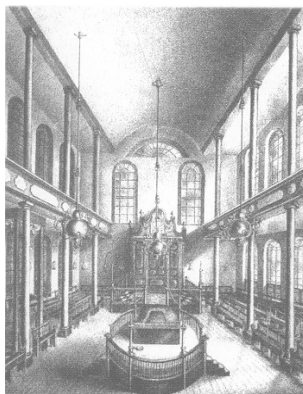
Beginnings

The story of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE) is one of faith, devotion, and perseverance in the American tradition of freedom of worship.

Charleston was established in 1670; the earliest known reference to a Jew in the English settlement was in 1695. Soon other, primarily Sephardic, Jews followed, attracted by the civil and religious liberty of South Carolina. By 1749, these pioneers were sufficiently numerous to organize our congregation, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (Holy Congregation House of God). Fifteen years later, they also established the now historic Coming Street Cemetery, the South's oldest



1794 Synagogue before fire in 1838



Interior before 1838 fire by
Solomon Nunez Carvalho

remaining colonial Jewish burial site.

At first congregants worshipped in private homes; in 1780 they used an improvised synagogue adjacent to the present Temple grounds. In 1794 they dedicated a new synagogue building described then as the largest in the United States, "spacious and elegant" which signified the high degree of social acceptance Charleston Jews enjoyed. This handsome, cupolated Georgian synagogue was destroyed in the great Charleston fire of 1838 and replaced in 1840 on the same Hasell Street site by the present imposing structure. The colonnaded Temple, dedicated in early 1841, is renowned as one of the country's finest examples of Greek Revival architecture. Our

KKBE sanctuary is today the second oldest synagogue building in the United States and the oldest in continuous use. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1980.

In 1790 President George Washington responded to the congratulations of K.K. Beth Elohim by writing,

"The affectionate expressions of your address again excite my gratitude, and receive my warmest acknowledgment... May the same temporal and eternal blessing which you implore for me, rest upon your Congregation..."

Birthplace of Reform

Charleston is acknowledged as the birthplace of Reform Judaism

in the United States. In 1824, forty-seven KKBE congregants, led by Isaac Harby, Abraham Moïse II and David Nunez Carvalho, petitioned the Adjunta (the trustees) of the synagogue to change the Sephardic Orthodox liturgy. The petition, seeking a briefer Hebrew ritual, English translation of prayers, and a sermon in English, was denied. The disappointed liberal members thereupon resigned from the congregation and organized "The Reformed Society of Israelites." The Society was influenced by ideas of Jewish Reform and the atmosphere of religious freedom in America. It lasted only nine years, but many of its innovations have become part of today's Reform Judaism. The progressives rejoined the old congregation and persuaded a majority of the congregation to install an organ when the present Temple was built in 1840. This was the first time in America that a synagogue introduced instrumental music into its worship. Since then, KKBE has been connected with religious reform. In 1873, KKBE joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, now known as the Union for Reform Judaism.

Women's Groups

The first formal organization of women in Beth Elohim was The Society for the Religious Instruction of Jewish Youth in 1841. A similar women's group was organized in rival Orthodox congregation, Shearit Israel, in 1844 called, Society for the Instruction of the Jewish Doctrine. In 1866, after the War, when Beth Elohim and Shearit Israel became one congregation again, The Hebrew Ladies Sewing Circle, organized for charitable deeds, absorbed the functions of the other two groups. In 1900 it became The Ladies Auxiliary Guild. The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods was officially formed in 1913. Soon after, our Sisterhood affiliated with NFTS, today's Women of Reform Judaism.

Leadership

For more than two and a half centuries members of Beth Elohim have been eminent leaders in the city, state and country. Notable early congregants included Moses Lindo, who, before the American Revolution, helped to develop the cultivation of indigo (then South Carolina's second crop), and Joseph Levy, veteran of the Cherokee War of 1760-1761 and probably the first Jewish military officer in America. Almost two dozen men of Beth Elohim served in the War of Independence, among them the brilliant young Francis Salvador, who, as delegate to the South Carolina Provincial Congresses of 1775 and 1776, was the first Jew to serve in an American Legislature. Killed shortly after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Salvador was also the first Jew known to die in the Revolutionary War.

Members of the congregation founded Charleston's Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1784, the nation's oldest Jewish charitable organization, and in

1801 established the Hebrew Orphan Society, also the country's oldest. Both are still active.

In 1838 the second oldest Jewish Sunday School in the United States was organized by congregant Sally Lopez. The famous poet, Penina Moise, was an early superintendent and teacher.

Congregants pioneered in steamship navigation (Michael Lazarus), introduced illuminating gas to American cities (Joshua Lazarus), and numbered four of the eleven founders of the country's Supreme Council of Scottish Rite Masonry (Israel DeLieben, Abraham Alexander Sr., Emanuel De La Motta and Moses Clava Levy).

Our Campus

The Sanctuary: The current building was constructed in 1840-41 by member David Lopez, Jr. from the architectural design by Tappan and Noble and the work plans of Cyrus L. Warner. The Temple grounds are fronted by a graceful iron fence dating from 1819. The large marble tablet above the huge entrance doors proclaim the *Sh'ma* (Deut. 6:4) in Hebrew. In the foyer in a similar position are four of the eight original dedication stones of the 1794 Sanctuary.



The impressive Ark is made of Santo Domingo mahogany. By local tradition, the Ark doors are kept open throughout worship services. Within the Ark, handsome glass doors provide a barrier to the four Torah scrolls. The current pews were installed in 1879 when the Bimah was moved from the center of the room to its current place in front of the Ark. Although women moved from the balconies to join the men on the main floor for worship services in 1879, the balconies remained until they were destroyed during the Great Earthquake of 1886. Stained glass windows, which feature Jewish religious symbols, date from 1888 and are replacements of plain glass windows destroyed in the earthquake.

Pearlstine Family Building: After the original synagogue building was destroyed in the 1838 fire, a "temporary structure," known as the Tabernacle, was hurriedly erected. This structure was replaced 111 years later, in 1950, when the congregation celebrated its 200th anniversary. In conjunction with KKBE's 250th anniversary, the Tabernacle underwent additional major expansion and renovation. The Pearlstine Family Building now houses the **Berlinsky Lobby, Chosen Treasures Judaica Shop, Religious School, Barbara Pearlstine Social Hall, administrative offices, Patla/Yaschik Library, Mildred Bernstein Kitchen, Freudenberg Board Room, Rosenberg Museum Gallery** and the Museum.

The Heyman Building: The reconditioned and expanded 18th century residence to the rear of the Sanctuary contains the **Kronsberg Youth Lounge**, **Doris L. Meddin Activity Room** and multi-purpose rooms.

A Holocaust Memorial, dedicated in 1992, is located at the east end of the **Baker Walkway of Life** which holds the **Patla Memorial Fountain**. The **Carmel Ann Goodstein Memorial Fountain** lies just inside the main wrought iron gate. The **Honor Garden** pays tribute to those who came before us and celebrates happy occasions on its **Chai Wall** which is dedicated to **Rabbi Stephanie Alexander**. Here also is the **Robin Shuler Musical Playground**.

The Art in Barbara Pearlstine



The two large murals on either side of the hall were painted by the well-known Charleston artist William Halsey, son of the late congregant Eleanor Loeb Halsey. As one enters the hall, the mural on the right depicts "**The Founding of Beth Elohim.**" Representing the founders are Isaac DaCosta (Hazan), Michael Lazarus (Secretary), Joseph Tobias (President) and Moses Cohen (Spiritual Leader). The building and flames shown in the left part of the mural represent the fire destroying the 1794 synagogue. On the right side of the mural one sees the present Temple. One six-branched menorah, representing KKBE's early orthodox status and one seven-branched menorah, representing reform, are shown. The hands outstretched with divided fingers is the traditional way in which the priestly benediction is given.



The mural on the left depicts ***“The Patriots of Beth Elohim.”*** The figure on the horse represents the young Revolutionary patriot and legislator, **Francis Salvador**, who was killed by Tory-led Indians. He was one of more than twenty Beth Elohim congregants who fought in the American Revolution, symbolized by the standing figure holding a prayer book who represents **Abraham Alexander**, a Revolutionary officer and religious leader of Beth Elohim between 1764 and 1784. The soldier seated with the broken sword and bowed head, possibly depicting Judah P. Benjamin, represents some 180 Jewish South Carolinians who served in the Civil War. The tablet with rampant lions and flames represents the brave Maccabees who fought for religious freedom in the second century BCE. The soldier and the flag on the left represent KKBE members who served in subsequent wars.

The two striking pieces of steel sculpture on the rear wall were made by another of our well-known local artists, the late Willard Hirsch, a member of KKBE. “The Prophet of Consolation” is on the left and “The Prophet of Admonition” is on the right.



Prophet of Admonition

Our Cemeteries

Coming Street Cemetery

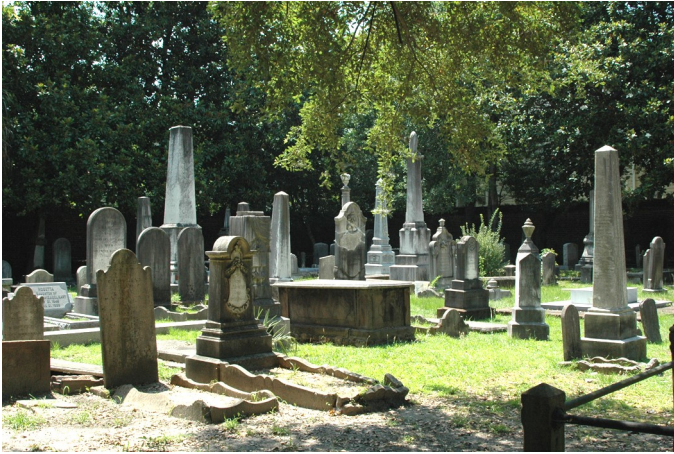


Photo by Ira Rosenberg

The Coming Street Cemetery is the oldest and largest Colonial Jewish cemetery in the South. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Here are the graves of Revolutionary soldiers, as well as those of many distinguished Charleston families. When this site was first used as a cemetery, it was outside the then city limits at Boundary Street, now Calhoun Street.

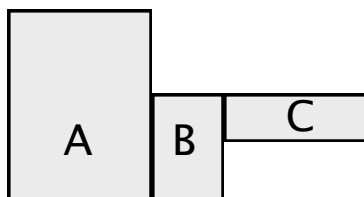
The cemetery contains over 800 souls; many graves are not marked. It was purchased by Beth Elohim from Isaac DaCosta in 1764. The oldest identifiable grave is that of Moses D. Cohen, the first spiritual leader of Beth Elohim, who died in 1762.

The Coming Street Cemetery is a significant resource for Jews and non-Jews from all over the United States looking for ancestors or studying early American Jewish history.

Among those buried here are:

- Twelve Revolutionary War soldiers
- Eight soldiers of the War of 1812
- Two soldiers from the Seminole Wars in Florida
- Twenty-three Civil War participants
- Six rabbis of the congregation
- Twenty past presidents of the congregation
- Four of the eleven founders of the Supreme Council of Scottish Rite Masonry in 1801
- Several cenotaph monuments created to honor some who are buried elsewhere

The cemetery has three sections:



Section A: From 1754 it was the DaCosta family burial ground, and from 1764 was the original congregational cemetery;

Section B: This part was developed by former members of Beth Elohim who had seceded in 1841 over the installation of an organ in the synagogue & other reforms and established orthodox Congregation Shearit Israel. When the two congregations merged after the Civil War, a dividing wall was taken down;

Section C: The Lopez family plot was established in 1843 when Shearit Israel refused burial to David Lopez's first wife who had not been converted to Judaism.

The Historic Coming Street Cemetery Restoration Fund has been established to restore and maintain this historic treasure.

Huguenin Avenue Cemetery

The congregation's present burial ground was established in 1887 and it is located south of Magnolia Cemetery on the banks of the Cooper River. Buried here are members of many prominent Charleston Jewish families, including Rabbi Jacob Raisin who served the longest term as KKBE's religious leader—31 years and Rabbi William A. Rosenthal who served KKBE both as Rabbi and Rabbi Emeritus for a total of 29 years.

The Huguenin Avenue Cemetery also contains graves and stones removed from Shearit Israel's old cemetery at Rikersville (1857-1887) and stones from the old **DaCosta** and **Harby Cemeteries** which once were on Hanover Street.

The **DaCosta Cemetery** was active from 1780 until 1939 and was established by Sephardim who had seceded from Beth Elohim and formed Beth Elohim Unveh Shalom (1780-1790). The **Harby Cemetery** was active from 1798 until 1939.

Chronology of Charleston Jewish Congregations

1749—Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim established 1749 by Sephardic Jews, one of the six oldest Jewish congregations in the United States; chartered in 1791; located at 90 Hasell (pronounced Hazel) Street since 1775; original Sanctuary built in 1794; present building since 1840 (now a National Historic Landmark), second oldest Jewish house of worship in the U.S. and the oldest in continuous use; Coming Street Cemetery since 1764 and Huguenin Avenue Cemetery since 1887.

1782-1790—Congregation Beth Elohim Unveh Shalom formed by dissidents from Beth Elohim; worshipped on Beresford St., now Fulton; rejoined Beth Elohim; cemetery on Hanover St. about 1782 (no longer in existence).

1824-1833—Reformed Society of Israelites formed by dissidents from Beth Elohim, the first attempt at reform in Judaism in the U. S.; worshipped in Seyle's Masonic Hall, about a block south of Hasell St.; most eventually rejoined Beth Elohim.

1840-1866—Congregation Shearit Israel established by traditionalists who seceded from Beth Elohim over the installation of the organ and other reforms; built synagogue on Wentworth St., east of Meeting St. in 1847; cemeteries on Coming St. and Rikersville; amalgamated with Beth Elohim in 1866. Wentworth Street Synagogue no longer exists.

1855-1954—Congregation Berith Shalome (now Brith Sholom) organized by Polish and Prussian Jews, one of the oldest Ashkenazi congregations in the South; worshipped on St. Philip St. south of Calhoun; dedicated synagogue building in 1874 (no longer exists); cemetery at Pine and Lemon Streets from 1856; cemetery on Sycamore Ave. in West of the Ashley (Maryville), from 1887.

1911-1954—Congregation Beth Israel organized by seceders from Brith Sholom; worshipped on St. Philip St. south of Morris St., then in a new building at 192 Rutledge Ave. south of Morris St.; cemetery is on Pine and Lemon streets.

1947—Congregation Emanu-El formed by seceders from Brith Sholom whose petition for Conservative services had been rejected; worshipped on Gordon St. until 1977, then from 1979 at new synagogue on Windsor Dr., West Ashley; cemetery on Sycamore Ave., West Ashley (Maryville).

1954—Brith Sholom and Beth Israel congregations merged to form Congregation Brith Sholom Beth Israel and worships at the synagogue on Rutledge Ave. and maintains a minyan house on Lord Ashley Dr., South Windermere. Cemetery on Sycamore Avenue.

1956 - Addlestone Hebrew Academy, Community Jewish day school, general & Jewish education, serving children 18 mo. - 8th grade. 1675 Wallenberg Blvd. West Ashley.

2012 - Congregation Dor Tikvah (Generation of Hope) is a new, vibrant, and growing modern orthodox congregation located in the West Ashley suburbs at 1645 Wallenberg Blvd. which welcomes and is open to all Jews regardless of their affiliation and which is within the eruv, and maintains kosher kitchen facilities; cemetery in Mt. Pleasant 1494 Mathis Ferry Road.

Synagogue tours available

Monday -Friday at 10:15 am, 11:15 am, 1:15 pm and 2:15 pm
and on Sunday at 1:15 pm and 2:15 pm

Coming Street Cemetery tours by appointment

Chosen Treasures Judaica Shop - (843) 723-7324
Sunday through Friday—10 am until 4 pm

Prints, posters, postcards, and other souvenir items relating to the history of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim are available in the Sisterhood gift shop—Chosen Treasures.

This publication is the work of many hands, past and present. We express our sincere appreciation to the following individuals: Solomon Breibart, OBM, Historian and recipient of Order of Jewish Palmetto by Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina; Anita Moïse Rosenberg, Past President of KKBE, historian and docent; and Randi Serrins, historian and docent; designed by Alexandra Sandefur.

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Photo by: Steven Hyatt

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