

# Our History

The devastating Napoleonic Wars caused many Jews, of German origin from Bavaria, to emigrate to Albany around 1830. It is true, records indicated Jewish Albanians docked in Nieuw Amsterdam and were residents in the 1600's and 1700's; many were of Spanish-Portuguese descent from Brazil e.g. *Asser Levy*. Later, documents note a tradesman named *Jacob Lucena* made public his wishes to do business in Albany and Esopus, now Kingston. Regardless, those early Jewish settlers were too few to create a "congregation."

## Congregation Beth El

It was in 1838 that Joseph Sporborg and others suggested organizing a synagogue. They named it *Beth El, House of God*, and incorporated officially that August. The following year the group obtained rented quarters. Then they purchased 166 Bassett Street, and as was the custom of the time, most of the needed \$1500 was obtained from New York City businessmen, the remainder from the "organizers." A building was theirs!

A splinter group left *Beth El* early in 1841 to form *Congregation Beth El Jacob*, locating on Rose Street. The remaining forty or fifty *Beth El* congregants continued to hope that they could build their own building. It was not financially feasible. However, a church at 76 Herkimer Street was secured for just over \$2000 from the Hibernian Benevolent Society and, on the Shabbat preceding Rosh Hashanah, *Beth El Congregation* was dedicated. The mortgage was \$1000; land rent was one dollar a year paid to the Dutch Reform Church. Their constitution called for dues of six dollars to be paid quarterly, and any member refusing election to office or resigning from office would be fined ten dollars. Should a trustee miss a board meeting or a member not attend a congregational meeting, the fine was fifty cents! In December 1843 in the town of Bethlehem, the congregation acquired two acres of land for a cemetery.

## Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise

En route to a dedication in Syracuse, a then unknown rabbi, *Isaac Mayer Wise* was invited to stop off and preach a Sabbath sermon at *Beth El*. In 1846, Rabbi Wise returned to our *Beth El* ... his first congregation, a post he retained for eight years as the first rabbi. At his residences, at 77 South Ferry Street and then at 73 Westerlo Street, *Rabbi Wise* conducted a Day School for children; a full day with public school curriculum plus religion and Hebrew.

Remember that both *Congregation Beth El Jacob* and *Beth El Congregation* observed Orthodox ritual and though *Rabbi Wise* officiated at the *Beth El Jacob's* cornerstone and dedication ceremonies, he ardently advocated a Reform practice. *Beth El* remained on Herkimer Street until 1864 when a Methodist church became available in the South End at Ferry and Franklin. The final service was conducted on December 5, 1885.

Outright verbal attacks on Orthodoxy by this liberal rabbi prevailed in Albany and elsewhere, which did not endear him to those who had brought fervency of Judaism as they knew it in Central and Eastern Europe. Tensions rose to a point of physical violence and, on Rosh Hashanah in 1850, the police were called to stop the fighting.

## Congregation Anshe Emeth

As a result of the *Beth El* debacle, supporters of *Rabbi Wise* organized a further splinter group. On a floor in a rented building at Madison Avenue and South Pearl Street, *Rabbi Wise* led Yom Kippur services from the pulpit of the newly formed congregation...the fourth

Reform Jewish congregation in America, *Anshe Emeth* or *People of Truth*. Their first president was *Joseph Sporborg*, the original crusader for a Jewish house of worship in the City of Albany.



A young Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise

*Anshe Emeth* later moved to Green and Hamilton Streets and shortly thereafter in September 1851, the congregation bought a Baptist church at South Pearl and Herkimer Streets. Dedication ceremonies included oratory by *Rabbi Wise* in English and the *Rev. Dr. Max Lienthal* in German. For the first time in a Jewish house of worship, “assigned” family pews were introduced, inherited from the Baptist congregation, later to be accepted by all American Reform synagogues. Also in 1851, two acres of land were purchased adjacent to Albany Rural Cemetery in the town of Colonie for purposes of burial for the *Anshe Emeth* congregation.

Changes in religious practice credited to *Rabbi Wise* were both in and out of favor. Decorum and order in the worship service were demanded, as were the “altering” and “deleting” of certain prayers. Minhag Amerika, or “American Ritual” was the Rabbi’s siddur. He changed seating to mix men and women, combined English and German hymns for the choir and now faced the congregation instead of the Ark.

*Rabbi Wise* told of his decision to become the rabbi of *Congregation B’ne Jeshurun* in Cincinnati in October 1853. He delivered his farewell sermon at *Anshe Emeth* on April 19, 1854. Succeeding *Rabbi Wise* was *Rabbi Elkan Cohen* who remained for six years during which, in 1855, our first Confirmation service was held and the observance of the second day of Rosh Hashanah ceased! In 1862, after the outbreak of the Civil War, an abolitionist, *Rabbi Moritz Mayer*, forced to leave Charleston, South Carolina because of his views, came to the pulpit at *Anshe Emeth*. In January 1864, *Dr. Max Schlesinger* from Germany became our rabbi and served until his death in 1919. *Rabbi Schlesinger’s* rabbinate saw the change from usage of the Orthodox *Machsor* to a newer Reform Jewish High Holy Day prayerbook. Another historical note occurred in 1873 with the establishment of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) and on April 13, 1879 *Anshe Emeth* was numbered among the earliest members.

## Congregation Beth Emeth

*Anshe Emeth* and *Beth El* came to realize that the former had a growing membership and the latter suffered from a declining one and could not afford to pay a rabbi. In December 1885, in an effort to bridge their religious differences, they agreed “officially” to share the ‘*Beth*’ of *Beth El* and the ‘*Emeth*’ from *Anshe Emeth* and become (Congregation) *Beth Emeth, House of Truth*. *Dr. Schlesinger* was elected rabbi of the newly merged congregation and in 1897, *Rabbi Alexander Lyons* was engaged as *Rabbi Schlesinger’s* assistant with *Julius Laventall* first president. *Beth El’s* Ferry-Franklin building was sold to *Congregation Sons of Abraham*, an Orthodox *shul* formed three years earlier; *Rabbi Schlesinger* re-dedicated the building in 1886.



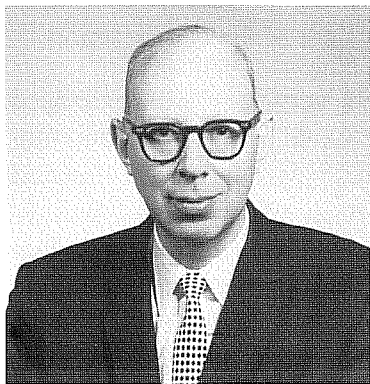
*Rev. Dr. Max Schlesinger*

Desperately seeking larger quarters, *Beth Emeth* secured a land site at Lancaster, Jay and Swan Streets. The consulting architect engaged was *Isaac G. Perry*, then architect and supervisor of the State Capitol currently being built. The total cost of the new temple was estimated between \$145,000 and \$200,000. Only two hundred families shared the cost.

Our cornerstone was laid on Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1887 and the first congregational worship in January 1889 coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Rabbi Schlesinger’s* rabbinate at *Beth Emeth*. Dedication ceremonies brought *Dr. Wise*, now president of *Hebrew Union College*, back to Albany. The mortgage was burned in 1917 and throughout World War I, the American flag was draped over our pulpit. *Beth Emeth* flourished at the Lancaster Street address growing to three hundred families around 1920, to four hundred in 1938 and after sixty-eight years at that location, its families numbered eight hundred. During his tenure as Governor of New York State (1933-1942), *Herbert H. Lehman* and *Mrs. Lehman* were often in attendance at *Beth Emeth’s* High Holy Day worship services. Following *Dr. Schlesinger*, were *Rabbi Martin Meyer* in 1903, and then *Rabbis Samuel Goldenson*

in 1907, *Eli Mayer* in 1918, and *Marius Ranson* in 1921. By now, Reform Jewish practice embraced a new expression more in parallel with changes in American history and society, thereby creating a religious outlook sometimes referred to as “American Judaism.”

Lancaster Street Beth Emeth was a structure of magnificence with its deeply elegant mahogany



*Rabbi Bernard J. Bamberger*

walls, its expansive organ and choir lofts, front and rear respectively, and the most impressive oak *Aron Hakodesh, Holy Ark*. The temple purchased an organ in 1927 and was one of the first to do so. Downstairs with planked flooring, there were very modest rooms - a rabbi's study, religious school-rooms, office, kitchen and rest rooms which formed the perimeter of the social hall. *Rabbi Bernard J. Bamberger* was our rabbi for fifteen years, beginning in September 1929. Through periods of great emotional as well as financial duress, Dr. Bamberger saw to an intellectual infusion into our Judaism. He left Albany to accept the pulpit at Congregation Shaaray Tefila in New York City and was succeeded by *Rabbi Samuel Wolk*, an incredible example of a “pastoral rabbinate.”

Illustrious rabbinate, exemplary administrations of congregational presidents and trustees as well as devoted members brought our Beth Emeth to what then became *Greater Beth Emeth*. It was during Rabbi Wolk's leadership that this Academy Road Temple came into being, ratified at a congregational meeting in June 1953. Seventeen acres were purchased the following year with *Milton Alexander* chairing the building com-

mittee. *Lewis Swyer* was the builder and *Percival Goodman* the architect who described the building “set on its great lawn, the building rests quietly in the landscape with the great folded roof of the Sanctuary, the dominating and striking element.”

Despite an unfinished Temple, our Sanctuary incomplete, the Religious School's ten grades commenced operations in their wing in February 1957.

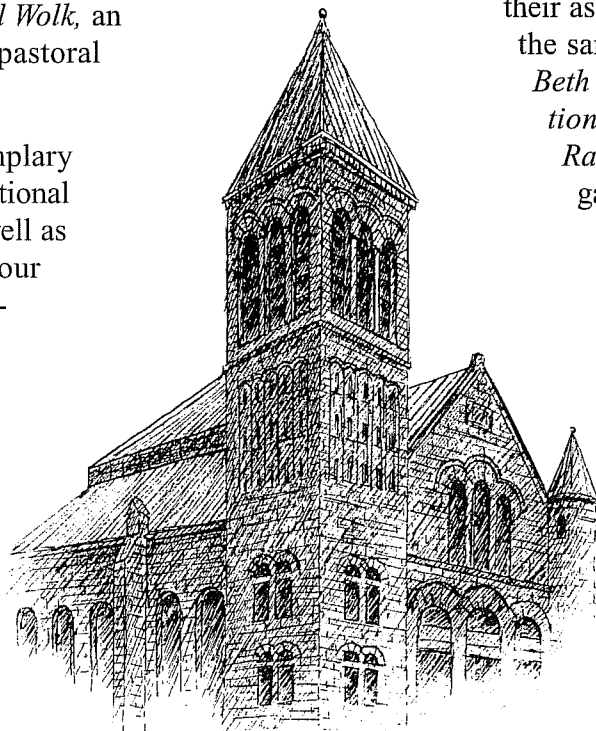
Dedication ceremonies of the Temple were to be held at the end of May. All ceremonial events were postponed due to *Rabbi Wolk's* death on May 29.

The formal dedication did occur on erev Rosh Hashanah, September 1957. Dr.



*Rabbi Samuel Wolk*

*Goldenson* returned to *Beth Emeth* to preach the sermon at the service led by *Rabbi Alvin S. Roth* who came to *Beth Emeth* in August 1956 as Assistant Rabbi, becoming Rabbi in 1957. In 1965, the congregation ratified the position and selection of *Rabbi Arnold H. Miller* to be Assistant Rabbi, a post he retained for three years at which time, *Rabbi Bernard H. Bloom* was elected Associate Rabbi. In 1971 *Rabbi Roth* and the congregation concluded their association, and in December of the same year, a group parted from *Beth Emeth* and formed *Congregation B'nai Sholom* and elected *Rabbi Roth* to serve their congregation.



*Lancaster Street Building*

A Co-Rabbinate was recommended and ratified by the congregation in 1972 with *Rabbi Bloom* sharing it with *Rabbi Martin I. Silverman* who joined Beth Emeth that year. In 1984, the Co-Rabbinate disbanded; *Rabbi Silverman* became Senior Rabbi and *Rabbi Bloom* joined *Temple Gates of Heaven* in Schenectady as their spiritual leader.

*Rabbi Scott L. Shpeen* was elected Assistant Rabbi at the Annual Congregational meeting in March 1985, moving to Albany and the Temple in June. In 1987, *Rabbi Shpeen* was named Associate Rabbi and in 1992, when *Rabbi Silverman* became Rabbi Emeritus, *Rabbi Shpeen* became our Senior Rabbi. That year, *Rabbi Arturo Kalfus* joined the congregation as Assistant Rabbi for four years; succeeded by *Rabbi Alan Litwak* who is also Director of Youth.

The position of Cantor/Director of Youth was created in 1955 by the Board of Trustees. It was ratified by the congregation and *Cantor Robert Miller* joined our Temple, remaining with us for seven years, succeeded in 1962 by *Cantors Harold Dworkin* and in 1972 by *Howard M. Stahl*. *Cantor Glenn Groper* celebrates his ninth anniversary with *Beth Emeth* this year.

With continuing expansion, it became imperative the temple have an administrative overseer, and the office of Executive Secretary was created by the Board in 1959. *Norman M. Paul* assumed the position in July, remaining for thirty-one years. *Donald Davidoff* took the reins in 1991 at which time the position was re-named Executive Director.

From the time of *Rabbi Wise's* teaching Reform Judaism in the Day School at his home, we have progressed through the generations to our present *Beth Emeth Religious School*. Our student population has grown from one hundred seventy five in 1985 to our present population of four hundred and forty! In the past three generations (for which there are records), our school has always had the supervisory skills and caring of a School Director, namely *Esther Isen-*

*bergh, Ruth Linn, David Bray, Daniel Ganeles, Dr Richard Weiner, Joan Milowe, Norma Ball, Jane Architzel, Judith Arian* and our present education director *Wendy Barnet*.

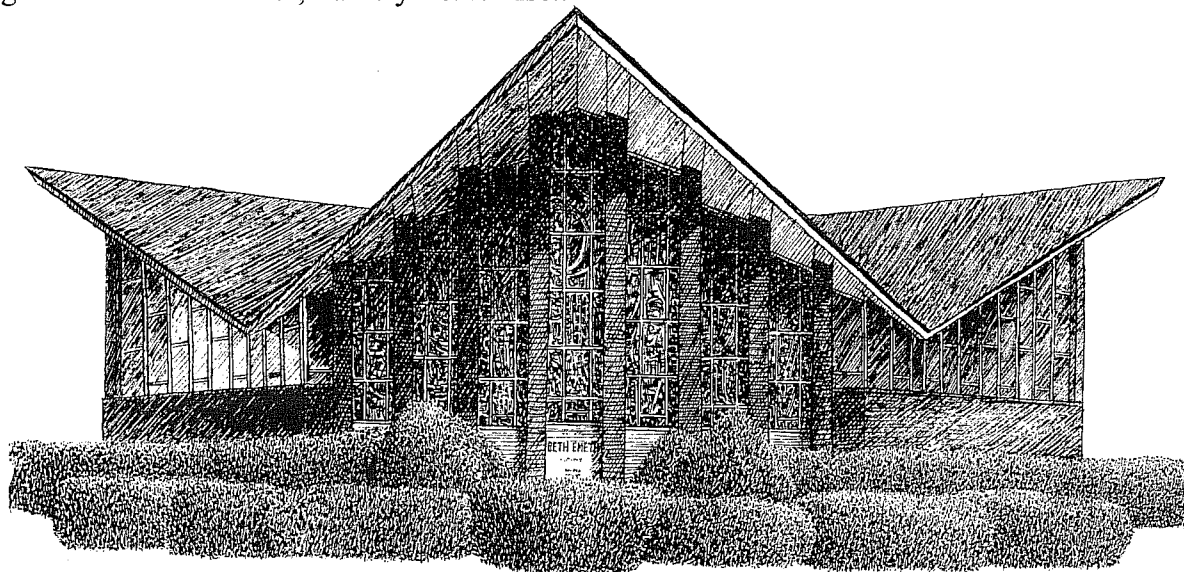
In 1923 *Beth Emeth* elected *Henrietta E. Blatner* to the position of Temple Secretary, a position she held until her retirement forty-nine years later. *Miss Blatner's* successor was *Barbara Kalfon* who retained the position until 1997 when the Board of Trustees voted it be held by an officer of the congregation.

Land for *Beth Emeth's* cemetery was extended again in 1903. In 1919, funds for land and building of a chapel on the cemetery grounds were donated to the Temple by the family of *Aaron and Rosalie Mendelson* in their memory with one proviso...that the chapel be maintained in perpetuity. Since then, that Chapel has served us primarily at our Annual Memorial Services held on the Sunday between our High Holy Days. Three generations of one family have maintained our *Beth Emeth* cemetery; *Robert Burns III* is today carrying that family legacy as Caretaker.

## On To The Millennium

And so, we are one hundred and sixty! Continuing onward, having learned from those persons and situations of the past, examining our present. We proceed now to write the next chapter of our *Beth Emeth* history...entitled "*The Master Plan*", further developing, enhancing, and enriching our programs and our facility and our Congregation as we go "*from generation to generation*"..."*l'dor v'dor*."

*Compiled by Patricia Snyder*



Academy Road Building