

Temple B'nai Or Collection
Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest Archives
Prepared by Jill Hershoin – December, 2008

Record Group: 1

Collection Number: 29-01

Creator: Temple B'nai Or

Inclusive Dates: 1965-2007

Extent: 6 cf

Abstract: Congregational records and published material

Acquisition information: Donated by the Temple in 2001

Preferred Citation:

Temple B'nai Or of Morristown, Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest

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History:

In the late 1800's there was a significant Jewish presence in Morristown. It was more than fifty years later that the Reform movement took its place along side of its neighbors. Temple B'nai Or, the oldest Reform temple in Morris County, was founded in Morristown in 1954.

Sam Hollander was in the navy during WWII. During his service he was an assistant chaplain to a Reform Rabbi. It was his introduction to Reform Judaism and the beginning of a life long love. In June of 1954, he and Ruth Epstein, of Epstein's Department Store, gathered 11 families together to see if there would be support for a Reform congregation. The number of families grew to 25 and by November of the same year, 58 families came together to receive the UAHC Charter of Affiliation.

From its very beginning the congregation of Temple B'nai Or, which means "the children of light," has been intertwined with the community around it. Due to

Sam's connections with the school district, religious school classes met in a public school. Friday night services were held in the parish house of the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer and High Holiday Services were conducted in the parish house of the Presbyterian Church. The first congregational meeting was held at the Women's Club of Morristown.

The new congregation hired a student rabbi, Hillel Gameron, who stayed on for six years. A growing congregation, they found it was time for a building of their own. They approached a wealthy Morristonian, a vestryman at the Church of the Redeemer and former Mayor, Parsons Todd, about the purchase of land on South Street. He told them the property was not for sale, but then added that he would donate the land! And so the beginning of a permanent home began.

Ground was broken in November of 1957 and the first service was held in the new building seven months later. Meanwhile, former Mayor Todd gave adjacent land to build the school. Eventually, the third gift of land was donated to the growing congregation.

In honor of this first true friend of Temple B'nai Or, in 1976 a scholarship was established by the Temple to be given annually to both a male and female graduate of Morristown High School who not only excelled academically, but who was involved in the community, just as Mayor Todd had been.

In 1968, Temple land was taken for a state highway-that and a growing congregation which led to the acquisition of a new site. Land on Overlook Road was acquired from a Jesuit institution, and in 1971, a new building was dedicated. The next year, B'nai Or reciprocated church hospitality, by hosting services after the Methodist church had been destroyed by fire.

There were over 100 families by the time Rabbi David Baylinson arrived. He served briefly before taking a pulpit in Brighton, England. It was at this point, 1962 that a new rabbi was hired and would stay for the next 28 years. Under Rabbi Z. David Levy, the congregation took on its identity and many of the characteristics that remain to this day. Levy wasn't ordained until he was 39, having spent eleven years prior to that as an ordained cantor and teacher at the HUC-JIR School of Sacred Music in NYC. So, the first identifiable attribute that he brought to the congregation was his love for music. He formed a choir, he introduced musical instruments to the High Holiday services, first the French horn and later the cello, violin and timpani. In 1969 the Rock Service by Gershon Kingsley (which was commissioned by Temple B'nai Jeshurun) was performed by Rabbi Levy and Cantor Ted Aronson. It was such a success, with a capacity audience and people looking in from the outside, that it was performed the following year at the Presbyterian Church on the Green with 1200 Jews and non-Jews in attendance.

Today, the great passion for music continues. Special musical services have been conducted on an ongoing basis running the gamut from Sefardi music to a jazz service with renowned jazz pianist Rio Clemente to the "Rock Shabbat" with Cantor Bruce Benson, to the "Shiru Ladonai" Service conducted monthly.

As an active participant in social causes, Rabbi Levy marched in Selma, Alabama and eventually took a group of congregants to Washington DC, to hear Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. He strongly supported the Women's Movement and opposed the Vietnam War, both of which created inter-generational conflicts in the congregation. During those turbulent years Jane Fonda, Daniel Ellsworth and Cesar Chavez were all guests of the Temple. Another cause that the Temple remains active in is the fight against homelessness. Temple B'nai Or is a member of the Interfaith Coalition for the Homeless and helps by housing, feeding or entertaining homeless families throughout the year.

The African-American dialogue that Rabbi Levy established with black churches in Newark continued under Rabbi Rossoff, with an emphasis on building connections to the black churches in Morristown.

Although the Temple did not have a paid full time principal until 1974, it was commended by the UAHC in 1970 for exceeding all curriculum requirements and the school had over 400 students at the time. Adult education was equally important and the Temple hosted lecture series with renowned speakers such as Elie Wiesel, Arthur Goldberg, Abba Eban and Isaac B. Singer.

Rabbi Donald Rossoff joined the congregation in 1990 and brought his own priorities and style. He continued the emphasis on music and social action, bringing with him devotion to innovative Jewish Education for children and adults, Reform Jewish Camping, Israel, and the implementation of creative worship and a variety of worship modalities. Emphasis on family fills our congregation with Family Shabbat, Torah Explorers, Family Education and Class Shabbat dinners that draw in excess of 120 people to our not nearly big enough social hall. Speakers and scholars in residence have included Rabbis Eric Yoffie, W. Gunther Plaut, Daniel Syme, Gary P. Zola, Michael Cook, Mickey Boyden, David Forman and Leonard Thal, as well as Daniel Matt, Danny Seigel, Gerard W. Kaye, and Carol Ochs.

In 1998, Temple B'nai Or spearheaded a special Morristown celebration of "Israel at 50," with a festival at the Vail Mansion. The event brought together the synagogues and Jewish institutions of Morristown, along with local civic and elected officials. In 1994-5, the Temple celebrated its 40th Anniversary with a year of special events which included visiting scholars, a dinner dance and Temple-wide celebration.

In 2004, the Temple celebrated their 50th Golden Anniversary. The Celebration was "kicked off" at a Shabbat Service at which URJ President, Rabbi Eric Yoffie,

both lauded and challenged the Temple. Special events included an Anniversary dinner dance at which our past presidents were honored, scholar in residence Dr. Gary P. Zola, Director of the American Jewish Archives, a concert with Peter and Bethany Yarrow, and a picnic at which the mortgage was burned.

[\(http://www.templebnaior.org/who/history/\)](http://www.templebnaior.org/who/history/)

Scope and Content:

This collection contains the minutes of the various committee, board and congregational meetings from 1965-1996. While these documents are key to understanding a variety of thoughts and decisions of a host of subjects, there are many gaps in the collection. The archivist would like to add to the collection some documents which would help tell the story of the congregation. Some papers may include (if they exist): Minutes from meetings at the infancy of the Temple, documents related to the donation of land, any materials related to the group trip to see Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, and materials related to other social causes and events.

This collection is comprised of paper and photographs and is divided into 10 series as follows:

- I. Administrative
- II. Calendars
- III. Clubs and Groups
 - a. Men's club
 - b. Sisterhood
- IV. Constitution
- V. Correspondence
- VI. Events
- VII. Finance
- VIII. Meetings (Minutes)

Conservation Notes:

None

Removals:

None

Organization:

The materials are arranged alphabetically, then chronologically within the series.

