

The History of Congregation B'Nai Jacob of Jersey City

Written by Sid Canter

Congregation B'Nai Jacob was "born" in 1959 to three women sitting on a bench in College Towers Apartments in Jersey City. They were all mothers of young children. They thought it would be a good idea to have a synagogue nearby for our children to attend with their parents and, in many cases, grandparents. The three women were Lillian Zwain, Irma Fineberg, and Jane Canter. Each adult involved had ideas of what form of Judaism they wanted to follow: either Reform or Conservative, or Orthodox.

Irma had friends in the Orthodox world. Lillian and Sid had neither. Irma arranged for us to meet with her friends. The Orthodox community in New York was willing to give us money to get started, but it wasn't what we thought would meet the needs of most Jewish members of our area.

Jane knew a recent graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary which followed Conservative Judaism. They were in Manhattan and offered advice, but no money.

Lillian liked the Conservative idea, so we decided to try that and to bring the husbands into these very preliminary discussions. We also thought it would be a good idea to start with a few more families. The following friends, in alphabetical order, formed the Founders of what would become Congregation B'nai Jacob: Jeanne and Alan Beer, Rita and Harvey Brody, Jane and Sid Canter, Irma and Bernie Fineberg, Judy and Herb Siperstein, Ruth and Artie Smith, Toby and Ray Wiener, and Lillian and Harold Zwain. Meetings began in December, 1959 in the homes of the aforementioned families who all lived in the Greenville area of Jersey City. The first Chairman was Alan Beer whose goal was to set up a synagogue for the community.

The first Friday evening services were held at the Bethany Lutheran Church on the corner of Audubon Avenue and Kennedy Boulevard, made available to our young group by Reverend T. Englund and some of the church elders. This was an effort to foster

religious and neighborhood relations in our area. The services took place in February, 1960, attended by many Jewish families. It was guided and officiated by men from the Ritual Committee of the Hillside New Jersey Conservative Congregation who donated their time, prayer books, and some religious necessities. Reverend Englund very kindly removed religious symbols related to his church to make us feel more comfortable. We greatly appreciated the gesture. It was a good start for newbies to the religious community.

By March, 1960, an old house at 347 West Side Avenue was purchased by the now growing group. On March 18, 1960 the first Friday Shabbat services were held in that building. The growing group had reached 100 families, officially called Charter Members. The Torahs for the first services were borrowed from Congregation Bichur Cholim of Jersey City. The group named the synagogue B'nai Jacob at the suggestion of Harold Zwain.

During that early period, the first officers pro-term were elected and installed as follows: Alan Beer, President; Sidney Canter, Secretary; Artie Smith, Vice-President; Ray Wiener, Treasurer; Harvey Brody, Financial Secretary; Sol Schustrin and Herb Siperstein, Real Estate Chairmen. These men served until the first set of permanent officers were elected and installed in June, 1960. They were as follows: Lionel Kronberg, President; Alan Beer, First Vice-President; Sidney Canter, Second Vice-President; Ray Wiener, Treasurer; Harvey Brody, Financial Secretary; Harold Zwain, Recording Secretary; Irma Fineberg, Corresponding Secretary; Sol Schustrin, Herbert Nelson, Albert Denerstein, Emil Kropack, Arthur Smith, and Rober Canter, Trustees. Josie Taube, a prominent leader of the Jersey City Jewish Community Center, was the Installing Officer.

In June, 1960 our first Rabbi, Howard Hersch was engaged as Spiritual lead. Harry Trattner was our first Cantor. They were to be our religious leaders for the beginning years. Plans to start a Hebrew School in the fall of 1960 were made.

Because the Congregation, now numbering 100 families, could not be accommodated at the newly refurbished building at 347 West Side Avenue, a decision was made to rent the auditorium of Public School #38 on Stegman Parkway for our first High Holy Day Services. They were attended by 500 men, women, and children! Services on the holidays were held for the next three years at this school.

B'nai Jacob grew quickly. Needs of every aspect were met by a large, active group of members of all ages from the Greenville community. The Jewish Community Center availed its services for many of our needs in its extension facilities, providing classes in arts and crafts, social activities, and folk dancing.

Recognizing a need, the women formed a Sisterhood in 1960 with Ruth Silberglitt as its first President. The Sisterhood raised funds to help maintain the Congregation for many years. In addition, the Sisterhood supported the Congregation in its many endeavors.

A Men's Club was formed and led first by Dr. Aaron Axelrod, succeeded by Artie Smith who remained as President of this group for many years. He garnered honors and citations for his group and the Congregation. His extraordinary efforts initiated what became a national effort honoring the heroes of the American Revolution. This included a United States Postage Stamp which honored Haym Salomon, financial support of the United States in that war. January 6, 1976, was designated as Haym Salomon Day in New Jersey. The Men's Club also memorialized the Holocaust with a Memorial Wall in the Sanctuary. The Men's Club was the first to honor the Danish people for their heroic rescue of thousands of Jews. There were also many Sunday breakfasts with programs that always drew large crowds.

In 1961, Lionel Kronberg was re-elected President. He served for another 6 years. During the following years, congregational presidents include Herb Nelson, Phil Basow, Sid Canter, Bea Rubin, Jane Canter, Nat Saltzman, and Nat Sloodnick. Rabbi Isaac Moses was engaged as Rabbi and Principal of the rapidly growing Hebrew School, later

named in memory of Peggy Schustrin who ardently supported the growing congregation.

This time the group realized its need for a larger, more permanent home for the religious school and the large membership. Member and Councilman-at-Large Evelyn Holender and former Mayor Thomas Gangemi made efforts to obtain a piece of land on the corner of West Side and Fulton Avenues. It had been previously used for housing veterans of World War II. The land was purchased at a City Auction and the rest is history!

In 1962 the architectural firm of Morgan Davis and William Chester was retained to design and build a synagogue. Dr. Abe Glatt, a Hoboken High School Art teacher and member of the congregation, was commissioned to design the stained glass windows using a technique Dr. Glatt formulated. These windows enhanced our sanctuary with their exceptional beauty.

In 1963 the firm of A. Kerzner, Inc., was engaged to construct the building, including the only synagogue in Jersey City that offered a parking lot. On Friday, November 23, 1963 the building was to be dedicated with a major program to which nearly 900 guests and speakers from New Jersey and New York were invited. A formal dedication with a Torah Processional from 347 West Side Avenue to the new location at 176 West Side Avenue was scheduled with Dr. Theodore Friedman, President to the Rabbinical Assembly as the main speaker. Sadly, however, that day President John, F. Kennedy was assassinated. The program was canceled and rescheduled, leaving a very large community of members and friends in a state of mourning and utter confusion. This date became a part of the history of B'nai Jacob, the United States, and the entire world.

Construction of the building brought many members to the realization that they wanted to be donors of an important piece of Jewish life in Greenville. Dr. Aaron and Edith Axelrod donated the Library which was under the expert guidance of Librarian Esther Burg for several years. The Siperstein family donated the Auditorium. The Kronberg

family donated the Sanctuary. The Schustrin family gave us the Hebrew School and its classrooms. Various members contributed individual stained glass windows. Many other parts of the building were dedicated and labeled in honor of or in memory of additional members of the community. Seats in the sanctuary have plaques indicating those who are honored for their much-appreciated efforts to maintain our congregation. Members offered financial support to build every aspect of 176 West Side Avenue.

Over the years additional rabbis included Rabbi J. B. Sacks, Dr. Solomon Herbst, Rabbi Samuel Smerling, Rabbi Geoffrey Goldberg, Dr. Marsha Dubrow, Rabbi Aaron Katz and our current leader, Rabbi Bronwen Mullin. We are honored to have Rabbi Mullin as our religious leader as she is changing the focus of our dwindling membership

B'nai Jacob became an Egalitarian Congregation many years ago, fully including women in every aspect of Jewish life. Bea Rubin was our first female congregational President and may have been the first woman to lead a Conservative congregation in the country. In our beginning years, we were affiliated with the Conservative movement and an affiliate of the United Synagogues of America. Although we are no longer part of that organization, we still remain a Conservative congregation where, during our growing years, our building housed Girl Scout groups, Boy Scouts, and Cub Scouts, B'nai Brith and B'nai B'rith Girls, Aleph Zadek Aleph, United Synagogue Youth Groups, and many local organizations.

Today our building is used by members of various religious sects, having become a modern version of who properly represents the City of Jersey City in a more current example of today's community at large. B'nai Jacob's membership consists of children of original members as well as those who are new to our City. We welcome all and look forward to growth under Rabbi Mullin, with guidance from Michael Zwain, the current president, and members of the current board - Carla Main, Vice President, Michael Rubin, Treasurer, Graeme Schranz, Secretary and Dean Brody, Past President..