

Congregation Children of Israel

In 1853, the Jewish population in Memphis first warranted a synagogue. It was organized under the name of "B'nai Israel," Children of Israel with M. Simon as president and Solomon Hess as secretary. A hall in a building on Front Street was leased and Jonas Levy, formerly of Little Rock, Arkansas, was engaged as chazan and shochet. A Hebrew School was established under the direction of Rev. L. Sternheimer. At this time, Judah Touro, of New Orleans donated \$2,000 to the Congregation. With this money, a lot was purchased on Second Street, but no building was erected. Services were held in the hall on Front Street for five years.

In 1854, the Congregation Children of Israel applied for a charter, which was granted to J. I. Andrews, Moses Simon, John Walker, D. Levy, Julius Sandac, R. Folz, M. Bamberger M. Bloom, Joseph Strauss and H. Reinach and their successors in office.

On November 1, 1857, A. E. Frankland, who was secretary of the Congregation, began the minute book that through succeeding years was kept in the florid penmanship of the different scribes.

In 1858, the Congregation Children of Israel was ready to make a move. A committee conferred with the owners of the building at Main and Exchange Streets then known as "The Farmers and Mechanics Bank," negotiated the sale, and invited Dr. Isaac M. Wise to dedicate the new temple. The dedication was held on March 26, 1858. At this time there was a great need for a leader of the congregation.

Rev. Jacob J. Peres came to Memphis to minister to the Congregation Children, a capacity in which he served until 1860.

On July 1, 1860 the Rev. Simon Tuska, of Rochester, New York, was elected to succeed J. J. Peres as preacher and teacher, and served the Congregation through a stormy period.

During 1864, the Congregation Children of Israel adopted certain by-laws pertaining to prevalent conditions,—sickness and death. New ideas were also introduced, new suggestions of Reform in the ritual and the customs. At this time, an organ and a mixed choir were installed and family pews were instituted. The orthodox rose in rebellion and formed the Congregation Beth El Emeth, but the Congregation B'nai Israel kept to the path of more liberal practices and grew in popularity.

Rabbi Tuska's sudden death in 1860 left the Congregation without a rabbi until July 1871, when Max Samfield, a young rabbi connected with B'nai Zion, of Shreveport, Louisiana was elected for one year. He was installed on August 15, 1871; and during his rabbinate, which extended for many years, the congregation entered upon a season of many changes and betterments.

In 1870, the Congregation voted for the Rabbi to hold Friday evening services in English. In 1871, plans were being made for a new temple, which however did not materialize until 1884.

In 1875, the congregation had 114 members. That year mark-

ed another break with the past. A letter from the trustees demanded that the heads of members be uncovered in temple, and the rabbi also uncover his head and remove his gown during the sermon. The ancient customs were gradually giving way to the customs of the laity. In 1876, the first Sabbath School Building was erected.

In December 1882, the orthodox congregation, Beth El Emeth again consolidated with the Congregation Children of Israel. At this time, the assets of the Congregations were used to purchase a lot on Poplar Street, where the new reform temple was built.

During all this time, burials were made in the Bass Avenue Cemetery which had been purchased before the beginning of the Congregation. Meanwhile, this burial ground fell to disuse. In 1885, the present ground, on Hernando Road was purchased and the cemetery was dedicated on October 11, 1885.

The new temple of which Elias Lowenstein was president had a membership of 187, a poor representation. In 1889, a children's choir, directed by Miss Marie Hitzfeld was organized. The Sabbath School was improving in attendance, and in 1892, it had 123 pupils.

In 1895, The Hebrew Union Prayer Book was introduced and in this year, Dr. Samfield celebrated his twenty fifth year in the rabbinate.

Some months later, a fair was given to raise funds to renovate the temple. In 1898, a new organ was purchased and three organs were then in use.

On April 29, 1900, the Congregation participated in a widespread memorial service for Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, and for a month the temple was draped in black in memory of a man so influential in the establishment of modern judaism.

Within the congregation several changes had been made. The paid choir system was again adopted. Four grades were authorized in the Sunday School instead of three.

In 1903, the congregation acquired the Austin Miller Place, a two story brick structure at 104 Adams Avenue as a parsonage for Rabbi Samfield, which was later sold and the money given to the Congregation. In the same year the rabbi's sermon was limited to thirty minutes.

On March 26, 1905, the congregation celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the temple. A year after this celebration, the congregation felt an urge to more. However, no definite plans were made by the committee which was appointed and the committee was dismissed in 1908.

In the year 1908, the congregation's membership increased to 300, the largest in the history to that time.

On May 8, 1910, at a special meeting, Dr. Samfield was elected for life and a resolution was offered whereby an associate rabbi would be chosen by the congregation. A committee was chosen to select the rabbi and Rabbi William H. Fineshriber was chosen for two years. This decision was made at a special meeting held May 14, 1911.

On September 15, 1911, Rabbi Fineshriber, of Davenport, Iowa, was installed as associate rabbi.

In October 1911, Joseph Newberger revived the matter of a

new building. After a lapse of about a year definite plans were made to build a new temple as soon as money could be raised. In December 1812, the building committee recommended the purchase of the property at the southeast corner of Poplar and Montgomery.

In 1914, bonds for the new temple were authorized.

On December of that year, the Ladies' Auxiliary, a valuable adjunct to the Congregation which was organized on December 5, 1907 busied itself raising funds for an organ for the new temple. On January 11, 1915, the contract to build the temple was let. On June 13, a committee for laying the cornerstone was appointed. It was composed of Jacob Goldsmith, Elias Gates, and Sam Slager.

On September 15, 1915, Rabbi Samfield was elected Rabbi Emeritus, and Rabbi Fineshriber was elected rabbi for five years beginning October 1, 1915. Rabbi Samfield did not enjoy the office of Rabbi Emeritus for very long for in August of that year, he passed away, greatly mourned.

Rabbi Fineshriber now took full charge of the growing congregation. The new temple was being erected. The dedication ceremonies were to continue from Friday, May 12, 1916 through Sunday May 14.

The fourth home of the Congregation Children of Israel was now completed and ready to be dedicated. On May 5, 1916, farewell services were held at the old temple on Poplar Avenue.

The new home could seat 1,200 persons. Its Sunday School facilities were excellent, with fourteen well-lighted class-rooms, equipped for modern needs. There was an auditorium with a stage, where exercises could be held with an assembly.

On May 12, the dedication began. For two days, the dedication continued. On May 14, the religious school was dedicated.

In October, 1916, a memorial stone was dedicated to Dr. Samfield. A month afterwards, visions of the past arose again. The orthodox congregants desired a new home and purchased from the Congregation Children of Israel the old Poplar Avenue Temple, the Congregation Beth El Emeth.

Unassigned or free seats became for the first time the rule in the congregation, the plan being adopted June 2, 1918.

The first annual meeting of the Congregation was held on June 6, 1920.

On January 18, 1921, the first Junior Board was organized.

During 1923, a Memorial Fund was established at the suggestion of Rabbi Fineshriber.

1924 brought high honor to the rabbi and sadness to the congregation. A call had come to Rabbi Fineshriber from the Congregation Knesseth Israel of Philadelphia, the largest Reform congregation in the country. Rabbi Fineshriber accepted the call and tendered his resignation to the Congregation Children of Israel on March 28, 1924.

It was not an easy task to find a successor, but the difficult business had to be accomplished. A committee was named to inquire about a leader for the congregation and to recommend one. Several rabbis came to the temple to lecture among them Dr Harry W. Ettelson, of Philadelphia. At a special meeting

on December 30, 1924, it was decided to invite Dr. Ettelson to accept the pulpit. Meanwhile, Rabbi Fineshriber had left the city.

On April 3, 1925, Dr. Harry W. Ettelson, who was called from the ministry of the Rodeph Sholem Congregation at Philadelphia, was inducted.

On April 14, 1925, Vice-President Samuel Schloss, the last charter member of the congregation died.

The Ladies' Auxiliary, who are now known as the Temple Sisterhood, was given recognition and allowed two members on the Temple Board. On November 12, 1925, the first two members took their offices.

On July 17, 1926, President Joseph Newburger, knowing the need of the Temple for a larger religious school, offered \$12,000 towards the building which is now known as the Joy and Mary Newburger annex and houses 300 children.

On December 17, 1926, Mr. Newburger died and on January 27, 1927, a community memorial service was held in his honor.

Following Mr. Newburger's death Leon Sternberger, vice-president of the Congregation became president. At the annual meeting in 1928, Milton S. Binswanger was elected to the presidency.

The Temple Men's Club was organized in April, 1927, and sponsors a scout troupe.

In April 1928, the Salon Circle Regina Lodge and B'nai B'rith began meeting at the Temple.

In 1928, the Board created a limited membership for boys between the ages of 18 and 25. In this same year, Benjamin Tuska, of New York, the son of Rev. Simon Tuska tendered his father's library to the Congregation.

The Diamond Jubilee was now at hand. A Jubilee Banquet was held on April 6, 1929, after the Congregation had served seventy-five years in this community.

Dr. Louis Levy, prominent communal leader of Memphis succeeded Mr. Binswanger in 1930, and has remained in this office to the present time.