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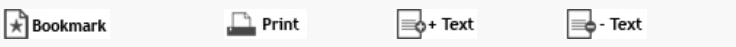
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Mazel tov

Congregation B'nai B'rith celebrates 90 years

By ERIN GRAFFY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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Editor's note: Historian Erin Graffy recounts the roots of Congregation B'nai B'rith in celebration of the temple's 90th anniversary

During the 1920s in Santa Barbara, a dedicated group of young Jewish families armed with only their faith and plucky determination set out to find other observant Jews and to create a community in which to practice their religion, celebrate their heritage and uphold their traditions.

By 1927, they founded Congregation B'nai B'rith (Sons of the Covenant) - the only local Jewish temple and the community's first Jewish institution. For 90 years, the Congregation presence has been one of spiritual comfort, of cultural continuity and community accomplishment. The group will be celebrating its anniversary at the sold-out Dreamers Ball Jan. 22 at Bacara Resort & Spa.

Intriguingly, the first Jewish community in Santa Barbara had arrived a half-century earlier, when about two dozen French-speaking Jews from Alsace-Lorraine fled Europe for America following the Franco-Prussian War. Although many of these Jews moved elsewhere or died, the few remaining families went on to become well-known retailers on State Street, such as Michael Levy Shoes, Eisenberg's and Byron Abraham's Travel Bureau.

After the turn of the century, the great period of European immigration brought a new wave of Jews to Santa Barbara, arriving here between 1914 and 1924. They were Orthodox or traditional Jews, hailing from Eastern Europe: Poland, Romania, Russia, Ukraine and Lithuania. (One couple was Irving and Evelyn Firestone from Romania; their son, Gerald, later became the first Jewish mayor of Santa Barbara.)

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90 and counting! Congregation B'nai B'rith's leadership includes, from left, Cantor Mark Childs, Rabbi Stephen Cohen and Executive Director Elizabeth Gaynes.

DANIEL DREIFUSS/NEWS-PRESS



Leo Sanders, with wife Frances, was a natural entrepreneur and great businessman (he even owned Stearns Wharf at one point!). He and Frances and his in-laws, Morris and Celia Bodsky, were founding members of the temple. His son, Macky, and daughters, Gladys Tevis, Joyce Rosenthal and Phyllis Kearney, grew up in CBB, as did the grandchildren. Frances was the first president of Hadassah and was renowned for holding beautiful teas and fundraising luncheons to support hospitals in Israel.

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The struggle of these early "people of the book" was finding a minyan - enough Jewish men to hold a proper service. The women took it upon themselves to help out: Sophie Friedman would greet any unsuspecting Jewish men passing through the area, invite them over to a nice family dinner and call the others in town to join for an impromptu service.

The Jewish families began holding informal prayer services at the Carrillo Recreation Center and by 1923 were calling themselves the Judean Social Circle. Next, they began meeting in people's homes, with laymen officiating, such as Max Friedman.

The first High Holy Days was celebrated in 1924 with a visiting rabbi from Los Angeles. In 1925, the first bar mitzvah was held for Maurice Rosenthal, with a young rabbi, Ernest R. Trattnor, officiating (later to become the celebrated author of "Understanding the Talmud"). The following year after the first orthodox service was held, the Jewish community recognized it was time to create a formal organization.

Most of the Jewish men were leading businessmen in the community, including Irving Firestone, Max Friedman, Lester Girsh, David H. Hein, Louis Kaplan, Nathan Leeker, Julius Liker, J. Ross, Joseph Safina, Leo Sanders, Abraham Snyder, Henry Swatzberg, Max Washer, Nathan Weides and Isidor Wilensky. These men worked to develop the charter, officially establishing Congregation B'nai B'rith, which was signed in 1927.

Max Friedman became the first president of the small congregation and served for 20 years. A women's auxiliary was formed, with Evelyn Firestone as its first president.

In 1932, within just five years of establishing Congregation B'nai B'rith, the religious community had grown to 30 families - enough to sustain their own building.

The first temple building (1932-1950) was at 1028 Garden Street. Dr. Lester Girsh traded the Parmelee property he owned at the end of State Street for this site, which was the old Coppedge Grocery store. The men worked on weekends to repair and refurbish the interior. It was ready in spring of 1932 with a dedication taking place in June (attended by a dozen friars from the Santa Barbara Mission who came to bless the little temple). For High Holy Days, the congregation used the new, larger Unitarian Church at 1535 Santa Barbara St.

War & Post-War Years

During World War II, CBB played its part in the effort. There were 36 young men from the temple serving their country overseas. On the home front, CBB women provided outreach to young Jewish men in the armed forces stationed locally and opened the temple every Saturday night to serve as a canteen for them, hosting dances and offering refreshments. Indefatigable leaders such as Helen Motto rallied the ladies to help with refugee children and families, and to reunite the foreign-born.

COURTESY PHOTO



Top photo, the first temple building was at 1028 Garden St. (1932-1950), now the Spiritualist Church of the Comforter. Dr. Lester Girsh traded the property he had at the end of State Street for this site. The CBB men worked on weekends to repair and refurbish the interior, while the women sewed draperies and arranged for the furnishings inside. Temple B'nai B'rith opened in spring of 1932 with a dedication in June.

Bottom photo, the second temple (1950-1968) was at 2112 Santa Barbara St. Originally designed by Winsor Soule (1921) as a private residence for the Hodge family, it was owned by temple member Leo Sanders at the time he sold it to CBB in 1950. It was converted into the temple, with a beautiful garden in back for weddings. The side property on Padre Street was acquired for Sunday school. The Fielding Graduate Institute occupied the site for years; it is now once again a private residence.

RAFAEL MALDONADO/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

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 ARCHIVE Nov 3, 2012

As the congregation continued to grow, members would meet in Eagle Hall (now the site of Arlington Plaza), the Riviera Theatre, Santa Barbara Woman's Club - Rockwood, or the Knights of Columbus hall. Looking to move to a larger site, founding member Leo Sanders offered his house at 2112 Santa Barbara St. and this became the temple home for the next approximately 18 years (1950-1968).

Entering the 1960s, there was great debate on the direction of the temple. People new to the community wanted to have a reform temple; its progressive approach and emphasis on individuality, ethics and assimilation was typical of most American temples. However, CBB's founding families and longtime members were passionate that their successful temple of nearly 30 years should remain conservative, preserving treasured rituals while emphasizing prayer and tradition. At one point, there was serious discussion of simply starting a second temple. But wiser heads prevailed to ensure such a small community should not be split. The members voted Congregation B'nai B'rith become a reform temple, yet accommodate conservative elements.

Also at this time (1950s to the mid-1960s), there was another jump in the local population. Post-war U.S. in-migration, high-tech firms moving into the Goleta Valley, and UCSB relocating to Isla Vista contributed to the town population increasing 28 percent in 15 years. The temple on Santa Barbara street had truly been a wonderful "home," but now the family had grown and was, again, in need of bigger quarters.

A search committee found five beautiful acres along San Antonio Creek for \$40,000. At this time, Goleta was just beginning to develop but was still considered to be out in the country. Members began to weigh in that the location might prove to be off-putting, since it was "so far away."

Yale Coggan and other CBB men pulled out a big map of the area and plotted the location of every Jewish family that they knew living in the Santa Barbara area. Next, they calculated the distance from the parcel at 1000 San Antonio Creek Road to every single home. They could demonstrate that more than two-thirds of the Jewish families lived less than five miles from the location of the proposed new temple. Moreover, only a dozen families lived more than 10 miles away.

Ultimately, as the community expanded, the site proved to be convenient, beautifully situated and a good price. A new temple was built and dedicated in 1968 during Rosh Hashanah services.

During the 1980s, the temple opened its Beit ha'Yeladim Preschool, launched educational programs and started its Havurah fellowship gatherings.

And because the congregation believed music was a significant component both ritually and spiritually in worship, the temple made the commitment to invest in a full-time cantor.

Approaching the millennial, CBB turned its focus on interfaith activities and social action. As early as 1940, CBB members were providing Christmas baskets for migrant workers, and entering the 21st century, the congregation continued to engage in Tikkun Olam - endeavors to "heal the world" - whether by preparing meals for the homeless in Pershing Park, launching a preschool for the children in Rwanda, or building homes for Habitat for Humanity such as the new affordable housing development on Canon Perdido Street.

The Temple Today



Top photo, Congregation B'nai B'rith's Executive Director Elizabeth Gaynes with Cantor Mark Childs, center, and Rabbi Stephen Cohen outside the temple, 1000 San Antonio Creek Road.

DANIEL DREIFUSS/NEWS-PRESS

Bottom photo, Viola and Dr. Lester Girsh were founding members of Congregation B'nai B'rith. Dr. Girsh was especially adept at handling figures and financing, serving as treasurer of the temple for years. His wife and family, including daughter Ruth Hochman, son-in-law Lou Hochman and grandson Daniel Hochman (former temple president), have been lifelong leaders and generous supporters of CBB throughout its history.

COURTESY PHOTO

Congregation B'nai B'rith has now grown to 800 families, necessitating an executive director position (currently held by Elizabeth Gaynes). More firsts: An assistant rabbi, who was also the first female rabbi. Alyson Solomon was hired in 2009, succeeded by Suzy Stone in 2012.

In the early years of the temple, guest rabbis came from Los Angeles to conduct services. Since 1946, the congregation has had 10 rabbis. (The current rabbi, the beloved Steven Cohen, has served since 2004.)


This 90th anniversary year of the temple also marks the 25th anniversary of Mark Childs as cantor of CBB. He was hired as only the second cantor and as co-clergy of the congregation, and will be honored as part of the 90th anniversary celebration at the temple's Dreamers Ball held next week.

The CBB tradition continues l'dor v'dor - "from generation to generation" - with a number of families who have been with the temple since its founding, such as the Sanders-Tevis, Percal, Rosenthal and Safina families. Member Barry Liker's grandfather, father and uncles were all founding members of the temple.


The Girsh-Hochman family (Dr. Lester and Viola Girsh and their daughter and son-in-law, Ruelene and Lou Hochman) all served in leadership roles at the temple since its inception; even grandson Daniel Hochman was a recent president of the temple.

"We are trying to make Temple B'nai B'rith in Santa Barbara not merely an edifice of stone and brick," founding member Helen Motto wrote more than 50 years ago, "but a House of Worship that will bring spiritual meaning into our lives and by our united efforts, merit and retain the respect of our entire community."

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