

Adapted from "Reflections on One Hundred Years of Temple Beth El"

by Bridget C. Mann

(written for the 100th anniversary of Beth El, 1987)

There have been Jews in Tyler since before the Civil War. When the great Adolphus Sterne, the leader of the flourishing Jewish community in Nacogdoches, visited Tyler, this little pre-Civil War settlement of 276 persons, his dictum was devastating: there was no reason for this little town ever to grow into anything. Perhaps the fact that "he ate the worst meal of his life there" influenced his judgment. But reason or no, grow it did. By the 1880's there was a town of 5,000 and the few Jewish pioneer merchants had grown to about 50 families. Like Jewish settlements everywhere, the first organized community effort was the formation of a chevra kadisha, a burial society. A three-fourths acre lot at Oakwood Cemetery was purchased from the city, and the first record is that of a Miss Rachel Wolinsky, age 19 buried there in 1884. Officially grave No. 1 was occupied by Mrs. Ernestine Wadel, the mother of Burnett Wadel, one of the founders of the congregation. Sadly the death records of those early years reflect the state of public health and hygiene. The majority of those buried were infants or small children. Respect for one's relatives and a deep sense of family cohesion were present in many of the cemetery events. Jacob Lipstate had his brother Philip, who died in Jackson, Tennessee, exhumed and reburied in Tyler, in the family plot, a rare occurrence in Jewish burial customs. Family togetherness also caused the fierce "Battle of the Body" which can be glimpsed through the dry entries of the Temple Minutes of the year 1901. A Mrs. Lewis had died here, and her family wanted her back in Chicago for reburial. Nothing doing, said the congregation, unless outstanding plot charges are paid first. No way answered Chicago - we have no objection to making a reasonably small contribution, but a plot levy - never. Pay, or else no body. Or else turned out to be illusory, advised the congregational lawyers, and Mrs. Lewis left for Chicago, probably unransomed after all.

With the dead taken care of, interest turned to the living, and informal services were begun, led by lay leaders. A Sunday school for the children was started as a tribute to the eternal Jewish dedication to education. At that time the community consisted in about equal numbers of Reform-minded German Jewish immigrants, many of whom were related and came from the little town of Rogarsen, near Posen in what was then East Prussia, and the later wave of vehemently traditionalist Orthodox Jews from Russia. By 1887 there were 53 families, and it was decided to apply to Austin for a charter for a Jewish Congregation. The application was signed on April 5, 1887 by Joseph Lipshitz, Max Rosenfeld, Louis Freedman, Jacob Lipstate and Marcus Daniel. It was returned approved on the 11th of April. Temple Beth El was in business.

Its business was run by a small, tight-knit group of friends and relatives, few of whose descendants are still around. For many years the names of Lipstate, Lipshitz, Wadel, Goldstein and Goldstucker, A. Harris, the Liebreich brothers and Joseph dominated the congregational records as trustees and Sunday School superintendents. Max Goldstein held the secretary's position from 1887 to 1901. A strange tribute was paid to one treasurer: "Thanks are due our worthy treasurer, especially in view of the fact that he always cheerfully paid out monies, whether he had funds on hand or not."

Of the early congregation founders, there are few descendants still living, and with the exception of Jake Baer and Rae Liebreich Baer, none in Tyler. Miss Helen Wadel is living in New York, and John Lipstate in Florida; his brother Gene lives in Lafayette, Louisiana and is still a member of his grandfathers' congregation in Tyler.

However, Tyler is a city with warm traditions and many descendants of those who watched over the congregation's growth during the twenties and thirties of this century still live in town, lovingly remembering their fathers and grandfathers. Among those who come to mind are former Presidents Sigmund Bruck; Jacob and Philip Lipstate; Jake and Jennie Wolf; the Friedlander families, from whom the lot for our current Temple

was acquired; Max Gross, whose devoted labors helped to get the new Temple built and after its construction ensured that it was well maintained; and Max Krumholz and his wife, Florence, our first District President of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.

Services were first held at the Oddfellows Hall on the Square. The Square was then the center of life in Tyler, and there were so many Jewish enterprises around it that a local historian, Howard Pollan, noted a stranger might well have thought this was a Jewish town. No time was wasted in preparing for a permanent home for the new congregation. September 27 of the year of the incorporation, a lot was bought on College and University, and the building of the new Temple soon began. Our first Temple completed, it was dedicated on June 16, 1889, by the Reverend Dr. E.M. Chapman, Rabbi of Reform Temple Emanu El of Dallas, assisted by the Temple Choir. Our continued association with Emanu El has indeed been close. They not only sponsored our Charter celebration, Rabbi David Lefkowitz was the principal speaker at our 60th anniversary, Rabbi Levi Olan came to pay tribute to his friend Harvey Wessel, and this year our 100th Anniversary year of events was ushered in by a magnificent concert of the Emanu El Temple Choir. We have come full circle; what will we do for an encore in 2087?

A home there was, but no Rabbi as yet. There was lay leadership at services, notably one Major Levy who had come from Sherman. By 1898, the records tell us, one Rabbi Kaiser was hired for Friday night services and the High Holidays for \$900.00 per annum. Those were the years when the congregation's finances were in such good shape that members often had \$2.00 returned on their annual dues of \$6.00. In 1900 the congregation took a major step forward, a search was begun for a full-time rabbi. Several were interviewed, and the congregation agreed to pay their train fares: one-way if they were given a contract, or return if they were rejected - at ministerial rates!

Finally the Reverend Dr. Maurice Faber was engaged as full-time Rabbi at a salary of \$1,200.00 per annum. He came from Keokuk, Iowa and stayed for 34 years, until his death in 1934. Born in Hungary and European-educated, he had profound learning, and a new spirit of humanism and tolerance blew into Tyler with him. Deeply convinced of the validity of Reform Judaism for his time, he had broken with the Orthodoxy of his childhood - so much so that his father disinherited him for this unfilial act of rebellion.



DR. M. FABER
1900-1934

These early years were filled with ideological struggles between the two different sections of the congregation. An entry for July 7, 1895, in one of the earliest extant minute books, states: An amendment to the By Laws was proposed and carried, as follows: "The services of the congregation shall be conducted during the holidays (Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah) in conformity with the Minhag Yastrow (the Orthodox prayerbook), the balance of the year with the Hebrew Union Prayerbook."

A further striking example of the Orthodox leanings of this Reform Congregation in its early history is another excerpt from this early constitution: "No applicant shall be qualified for membership who is...united in marriage contrary to the ordinances of the Jewish religion and any member marrying out of the pale of Judaism shall thereby forfeit his membership."

Only a few years later, in 1902, after two years of the stewardship of the redoubtable Dr. Faber the by-laws read "that any Israelite who is honorable shall have the right to join this congregation - and that all services, weekly and High Holidays shall be conducted in accordance with the rites of the Hebrew Union Prayer Book."

But by that time the split that had been looming became inevitable. In 1895 the Orthodox Conservatives of the congregation had broken away to form their own congregation. This was no doubt hastened by a resolution, adopted in July, 1895, for the congregation to join the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, though, according to the Charter in our Temple, this step was not officially taken until 1907.

Under Dr. Faber, Congregation Beth El took a giant leap into the 20th century's active Reform Judaism. The yamulka was banned, the Sabbath School transformed into a Sunday School, and bar mitzvahs were replaced by confirmation. Women, who had previously been involved only in Sunday School teaching, were now forming a very active Sisterhood. This group exerted a considerable influence on Temple Board decisions. A sense of buoyant optimism prevailed, quite in tune with the rapid development of the very Baptist City of Tyler which, if perhaps not overly enthusiastic about them, certainly tolerated its Jewish citizens comfortably.

Rapid growth must pay its price. From an initiation fee of \$5.00 and dues of 50¢ a month in the 1890's, to a rise in the annual dues of \$22.00 a year in 1902, there never seemed to be enough money. Gone were the happy days of refunded dues. The sale of pews figured largely in the High Holiday preparations of each Board of Trustees, with a good bit of acrimonious bickering as to who sat where, and how much each member should contribute for his seat. The new Rabbi needed a home, and in 1901, land was bought adjoining the Temple for a parsonage. Generations of children were raised with lasting memories of their confirmation lessons there, taken in considerable awe of the learned and demanding Rabbi Faber. Generations of ladies can still tell their daughters of today about the marathon cooking events done in the Rabbi's kitchen. Even though there was a fire in 1914 that razed the parsonage, it was soon rebuilt "with meagre but adequate comforts," according to a contemporary report. There were financial and attendance problems that strike a responsive chord with today's Temple administration: not enough money for Sunday school books; members not paying their dues; the roof leaking; not enough members attending Friday night services; the roof leaking...The repetitive themes run endlessly through the pages of the minute book. The women always came up with some help, but things were not easy. In 1915, finances were so bad that Rabbi Faber was asked to take a cut in salary, a proposition he respectfully requested the Board to reconsider! The Rabbi did his best. He was a great circuit rider, and considerably increased the out-of-town memberships, with an ingathering of the Jews of Henderson, Longview and other adjoining towns. He was so successful that the Trustees even gave him a travel allowance.

Beth El was very fortunate in its choice of rabbis. In a hundred year history, the pulpit was graced by only five, a remarkable record of longevity. At Rabbi Faber's death in 1934, just a few months short of his 80th birthday, there was a great outpouring of tributes from all over the state. He was followed by Rabbi David Alpert, long one of the old Rabbi's admirers. He took over the congregation's reigns at a difficult period, while it was outgrowing the aging premises. There was considerable growth of the city, with the discovery of the Spindletop, and the congregational membership stood at about 63. Rabbi Alpert guided the congregation through the problems of planning, financing and building the new Temple, and then tendered his resignation upon the dedication of his project.



This dedication, in September 1938 was one of the many milestones Beth El celebrated in the next few decades. Unlike family birthdays which are given their candles every year, congregations tend to be more dignified and celebrate by decades. Fifty years ago we had our Golden Jubilee, and in a great celebration, the City of Tyler took note of this achievement of its Jewish brethren. Tom Ramey, Chairman of the Board of Education, said: "I am astounded at what a significant part this group of less than 500 has played in our civic

life." And the Rev. Frank Richardson, of Marvin Methodist, the President of the Tyler Ministerial Alliance, with which Beth El has always maintained the most cordial relations, said: "We moderns stand upon common ground. We want peace and not war in the world. We want every racial barrier broken down..." These were good words, at a time when Hitler's vituperations against the Jewish people were reaching a crescendo, and war was not far off.

The pulpit stood vacant for a year, and then came Beth El's beloved Rabbi Harvey Wessel, who occupied it from 1939 to 1970. He retired but did not leave us, staying on as rabbi emeritus till his death in 1983, within a couple of months of the death of Rabbi Alpert in Connecticut.



HARVEY WESSEL
1939-1970

What Rabbi Faber had begun, Rabbi Wessel deepened with one significant change of direction: he was an ardent Zionist, something that had been anathema to the old guard Reform rabbis. Of course, with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, this change in thinking became de rigueur in Cincinnati, but Rabbi Wessel was in the vanguard long before, as he was on so many other issues. A very original thinker, he was never afraid to guide, lead, and if necessary, push his congregation along the paths he felt they ought to choose. The Temple Confirmation ceremony, under Rabbi Faber, had been a bit of an ordeal: he was somewhat dictatorial, demanding that the speeches be delivered in his tone of voice. Under Rabbi Wessel, Confirmation became a milestone in every young person's life. Although as demanding as his predecessor, his personal warmth and love for young people shone through the occasion.

Never one for fostering divisiveness in the community, Rabbi Wessel started the Temple Beth El Bulletin in February 1942, under the title "Weekly Bulletin of the Tyler Jewish Community." The primary aim of the bulletin was to underscore the unity which is implicit in every Jewish community. This editorial unity went through some stormy periods, when each congregation published its own newsletter, and ended on September 7, 1950. On that date, the Temple Beth El Bulletin reappeared as a separate entity and has been published without interruption for the following 37 years.

Before the next milestone, the 60th Anniversary in 1947, the country was at war. Tyler did its part, and so did its Jewish population, which, though barely numbering 500, sent 83 of its young people into the service. Some families like the Edelmans provided four sons, and the Golenterneks five. The women did their part, too; every Sunday morning, the Temple was open for breakfast. Afterwards different families would take the young men home for the day. Flo Gross said that in those days the Grosses had more "nephews" at Camp Fannin than anyone else. On September 30, 1945 a note of thanks was received from Camp



Fannin: "In appreciation: The Jewish members of this camp hereby express a deep sense of gratitude for the many courtesies and hospitalities extended to them by the Tyler Jewish Community."

With a shortage of rabbis around, Rabbi Wessel worked ardently as circuit rider, keeping the various congregations in the area alive and serving Jewish servicemen.

The 60th Anniversary, in 1947 was a time of great optimism. The country had won the war, times were good economically. and the Congregation had grown to 87 members, many of them young college graduates who had been at Camp Fannin and liked both the area and the local girls. The Temple family grew very close-knit during the next decade. Social life centered around the Temple. The women worked very hard on fund raising. Beth El's catering service for parties, weddings and meetings grew famous in Tyler. Its home-made tamale sales, at 50¢ a dozen, flourished. But life was not all work. The newly formed men's club, with Gus Rosenthal as its first president, saw to that. They partied happily too - at the Temple. There were dances and card parties; New Year's Eve united old and young for a fabulous party every year. Old timers like Flo Gross, who came to Tyler as a young woman, and those like Florence Leonard and Norman Shtofman, who grew up here, all agree: family and Temple life in those days was warmer and closer than it is today.

The next milestone was the 70th Anniversary, a very big occasion indeed, since it was the ground-breaking for the new Rachel S. Wessel Religious Building. In 1957 the baby boomers were beginning to flood the religious school, and there seemed no reason to assume that this would ever cease. So the Temple entered the big time: \$40,000 was borrowed to build the annex which blended very harmoniously with the original structure that had already won a national award as one of the best houses of worship in the U.S. It was also Dr. Irving Brown's first chairmanship of milestone arrangements; he has devoted himself to bringing to fruition our successful 70th, 80th, 90th and now our 100th Anniversary celebration, getting bigger and more impressive each decade.

Beth El needed a big party and could not wait for the 80th anniversary; in 1964 it celebrated Rabbi Wessel's 25th anniversary in Tyler with a dinner at the Blackstone Hotel. The speaker, fittingly, was Rabbi Levi Olan from Temple Emanu El in Dallas. Then came the 80th anniversary, a beautiful formal dinner, catered by the Sisterhood at the Temple, with an elegant golden program given to each participant. Between 1967 and 1977 the congregation went through many changes. In 1969 there was another party to celebrate Rabbi Wessel's thirtieth anniversary with the congregation, and the following year he stepped down, to make way for the new generation, represented by Rabbi Jeffrey Ballon. Son and son-in-law of rabbis, Rabbi Jeff was the new breed coming out of Cincinnati: both more conservative and more traditional than Reform had been. The country was experiencing a return to fundamentalist religion; Reform Judaism, always attuned to new spiritual trends, revitalized some of its own roots. The yamulka was occasionally seen on the bima; there was new emphasis on Bar and soon Bat Mitzvah. Relations with the synagogue improved, leading to the combination of the two Sunday Schools, long an unfulfilled dream of Rabbi Wessel. Hebrew was employed more frequently in the services, and there was an overall intensification of Judaism taught to B.E.S.T.Y. both in their own programs and in the Summer Camps - all of which ushered in the new ways - sometimes horrifying the oldtimers!



JEFFREY BALLON
1970-1975

Rabbi Ballon stayed five years, long enough to introduce the congregation to the new era, and in 1975, Rabbi Eugene Levy came on board to continue this change in direction. It was easier for him; Rabbi Wessel had become used to his new status, enjoying his rabbinical cruise trips and the pleasure of his retirement. He was

always available to share in the naches of his older congregants, and he remained a warm friend and advisor, when called upon, to a younger generation. The Levys and the Wessels became close friends, and when Rabbi Gene had to deliver Rabbi Harvey's eulogy in 1983, the tears in his eyes and voice not only signified his personal sorrow, but the congregation's realization of the definite end of an era.



EUGENE H. LEVY
1975-

1977 saw our 90th Anniversary. Relations between Jews and Christians were excellent, with members of both congregations serving on every imaginable board of the city's humanitarian, social, cultural and financial institutions. Two of Temple Beth El's congregants, Jerry Nasits and Norman Shtofman, had served as mayor. The dinner was held at the country club and another precedent was set, because the President for the first time in our congregation was a woman, Mrs. Lionel Eltis. This was quite a step forward, considering that women had not even been elected to the Board in their own right until 1950. But this precedent was to become a tradition, with Evelyn Muntz now our current President. There were new names to be found beside the Old Guard among the officers, Presidents of Sisterhood and B.E.S.T.Y., and membership stood at 106. Tyler's Jewish population, though never large, has always been consequential. The new relationship between the congregation and the churches was also enlightened. Rabbi Levy consolidated his influence in the Ministerial Alliance serving as President in 1984. Outside Jewish organizations and clubs had sprung up and withered, but with the exception of the Edward Lasker Lodge of B'nai B'rith, founded even before Temple Beth El, and Hadassah, Tyler's Jewish social and organizational life is still largely centered upon the Temple and the Synagogue. Parochial though this may have been at times, it cemented the community spirit of Temple Beth El.

The wheel has turned full circle. We are standing on the threshold of our second hundred years. From a small group of merchants and shopkeepers, given \$100 as a start-up stake to begin a store of their own, Tyler has witnessed a growing congregation of doctors, lawyers, dentists, teachers and service oriented professionals. Technology has exploded and we have changed with it. At our 50th Anniversary, Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston was thrilled to be connected to us with a telephone hookup to express his congratulations: today we video-film the entire proceedings to be stored for posterity on a video cassette. Our Sunday school evolved from the European cheder to today's project-oriented youngsters who learn about mitzvot and tzedaka by collecting for PATH, adopting Senior Citizens' Homes, or going to live for a while in an Israeli kibbutz. They are singing Jewish songs and, proud of their identity, they become Bar and Bat Mitzvah today not because of the parties or presents, but because they want to stay connected to their Jewish heritage. And if the Temple family is no longer as close-knit as it was in the fifties and sixties, that again mirrors the times. While we sorrow for those who have lost interest in their heritage, we rejoice with the many who have rediscovered their roots.

2012 ADDENDUM
by Rabbi Neal Katz

Since Bridgett Mann wrote these words some 20-plus years ago, our congregation has continued to be a voice for Reform Judaism in East Texas. Picking up where Bridgett left off in 1987, I may offer a brief history from then. In the late 1980's, Beth El was housed in a wonderful building on the corner of Augusta and Shaw, not too far from Tyler's azalea district. However, the building was in need of some repairs and the Jewish community began moving farther away from the Temple. With the leadership of Phil Hurwitz and Ray Edelman, Beth El purchased land in southwest Tyler to build a new building. In 1990, Beth El's new home on Kinsey Drive was dedicated.



Soon after our 100th celebration in 1987, Rabbi Gene Levy took a position to be the rabbi of B'nai Israel in Little Rock, Arkansas. He was followed by Rabbi Stephen Weisberg. Unfortunately, Rabbi Weisberg passed away within his first year at Beth El, and the congregation had rabbis from Dallas fill-in until a replacement was found in 1989. Rabbi Stephen Gold joined Beth El in 1989, and helped dedicate the new building. Rabbi Gold stayed for nine years before he moved to serve a congregation in Lakewood, New Jersey.

In 1998, the Reform Movement was facing a shortage of rabbis. Beth El had been with a rabbi for nearly 98 years - with limited interruptions. With so few rabbis available to come to Tyler full-time, Beth El hired student rabbis from the Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College - the Reform Movement's rabbinic seminary. The student rabbis were hired to travel from Cincinnati to Tyler twice a month. During their visits, they would lead Shabbat worship services, offer adult study, and teach in the Religious School.



In 1998, Beth El welcomed David Kaufman as its first student rabbi. Rabbi Kaufman is now in Des Moines, Iowa. He was followed the next year by Daniel Plotkin, who is now serving as the rabbi of a congregation in Baltimore, MD. Beginning in 2000, Neal Katz began a two-year position as the student rabbi. In 2002, Beth El welcomed Alan Cook

to serve as the fourth student rabbi in five years. Rabbi Cook is now in Champaign-Urbana, IL. In 2003, after his rabbinic ordination, Rabbi Neal Katz returned to Tyler to accept the full-time position at Beth El. He is now the eighth full time rabbi at Beth El in 123 years.

In 2012, Beth El celebrated its 125th anniversary, and the next chapters of our history are waiting to be written.

