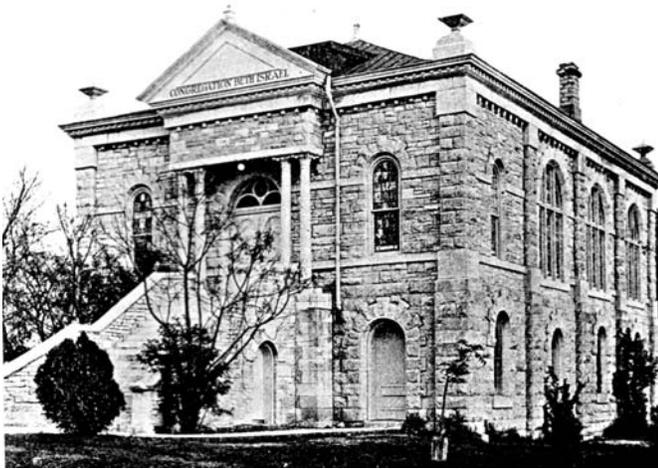


# 127 YEARS OF CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL



*Temple Beth Israel 1884-1957*

## A NEW CONGREGATION, THE FIRST BUILDING FUND

While Americans celebrated the centennial of the country, Alexander Graham Bell patented the telephone and Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," became a best seller, in Austin, on Sept. 24, 1876, a group of 30 Jews gathered at Odd Fellow's Hall at Sixth Street and Congress Avenue to start Congregation Beth Israel. Henry Hirshfeld was elected president. Phineas deCordova, the first Jew in Austin when he arrived in 1849, became vice president.

The Daily Statesman recorded the event by writing: "All the larger cities of Texas have their temples for Jewish worship, and we can see no reason why Austin should not keep company with them."

That day the 30 members pledged \$1,682. Within three weeks, another \$775 in pledges came in. On May 26, 1877, the congregation bought a plot of land at 11th Street and San Jacinto Boulevard for \$2,500 and held a masked ball at Millet's Opera House for Purim to raise money.

On October 20, 1879, the congregation received its charter with the State of Texas. It was signed by 17 congregants.

In April 1881, the congregation authorized a building project to create a permanent synagogue, but the temple would not be completed until 1884.

As the building neared completion, the Hebrew Ladies Society purchased the first ark for \$120. Members bought their pews for \$150 or more. Tobias Schanfarber, a student from the Hebrew Union College officiated those first holidays in the new temple in 1884.

The new sanctuary didn't see its first wedding until March 1885 when B. Melasky's daughter Goldye married Elias Krohn. Krohn contributed the carpets for the aisles of the temple.

## THE FIRST RABBIS

In the early years, rabbis came and went — most serving only for the high holidays. In 1877, Rabbi Gluck came for the holidays and stayed on for three months and was paid \$50 a month. Tickets for the high holiday services were \$2.50. B. Melasky donated a Sefer Torah to the congregation.

During Rabbi Gluck's three months in Austin, he started the first Sunday School and confirmed seven students in the first confirmation class in 1878. Students paid 5 cents a week to attend our Sunday School.

In 1883 the congregation formed its first choir, which sang for the holidays that year.

In 1885 the congregation advertised for an "American Hebrew Minister" — a full-time rabbi — for an annual salary of \$1,200. Rabbi A.R. Levy was hired for one year in 1886. During that year, the second confirmation class with five students was confirmed in June.

A full-time rabbi didn't become common practice until Rabbi Aaron Levy was hired for \$1,350 a year in 1892. At his request we hired our first janitor for \$5 a month.

## THE START OF THE KOEN LEGACY

Under Levy's watch, Joe Koen became the congregation's president in 1899, a job he held for 45 years until his death in 1944. Two years later, his son William became president from 1946-1948. His daughter Carolyn Koen Turner continued the legacy and became the first female president in 1984.

"I thought my grandfather was God," said Turner before her death in December. "He ran everything."

Joe Koen donated a new ark to the Temple in 1943 in memory of his wife Justine. Today that ark rests in the chapel, which was redecorated during the building of the administration wing in 1988, an effort championed by granddaughter Carolyn.

## THE RABBIS OF THE EARLY 1900S

We hired Rabbi A.P. Drucker after Rabbi Levy left in 1907. Rabbi Drucker wanted the congregation to use the new Union Prayer Book. A unanimous vote

approved the book, but a group who opposed the new book and did not come to the vote delayed the use of Union Prayer Book until 1911, after Rabbi Drucker left the temple.



*Joe Koen, president 1899-1944*

While at Beth Israel, Rabbi Drucker instituted the wearing of yarmulkes, a practice that continued until the early 1920s.

In 1907, we officially joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Our temple started the Benevolent Society to help needy Jews in Austin. This society was the beginnings of the Austin Jewish Federation. The Ladies Auxiliary society, which began in 1892, gave the temple its first stove during 1907.

In 1908, when Rabbi G. Grad joined us, he brought with him a knack for carpentry and converted the empty basement into his office.

Rabbi David Rosenbaum came to Austin in 1911 and we started using the Union Prayer Book. We also made improvements to the building for electricity.

Families donated new chandeliers and the Menorahs. Between 1915 and 1920, sidewalks were installed outside San Jacinto Street, we bought new front doors and gas heaters and a pipe organ arrived from Maryland. Rabbi Rosenbaum also began a tradition of the Sunday School picnic.

Rabbi Nathan Barasch came in 1922 and left in 1924. The congregation went a year without a rabbi, but Dr. H.J. Ettlinger, a professor of math at the University of Texas, served as a lay leader during the holidays.

When Rabbi Walter Peiser came in 1925, he asked the congregation to rise for the Kaddish for the first time.

Rabbi Jacob I. Meyer came in 1927 and left in 1929, the same year the Hillel Foundation at UT began. After Rabbi Meyer left, one rabbi served both Beth Israel and Hillel for the next 16 years, starting with Rabbi Jacob Weinstein, from 1929-1930.

Rabbi Samuel Halevi Baron served from 1930 to 1935. He was a champion of equal rights and also, the only rabbi to leave and come back, serving again from 1945 to 1947.

In between, the two Rabbi Baron tenures, Rabbi Abram Vossen Goodman came for six years, from 1935-1941. In 1940, the current women's organization Sisterhood began with Myra Ravel as the first president. (Brotherhood began in 1955 with Phil Parker as its first president.)

#### **A CONGREGATION RESPONDS TO WAR**

In 1941, when Rabbi Newton Friedman came, we had 89 members and Hillel had 350 students.

Congregants were active on the home front and abroad during World War II. We bought war bonds for the temple, housed soldiers and loaned Camp Hood a Sefer Torah for services.

In 1942, we named congregant Sam Greenberg a lifetime honorary trustee of the congregation. Greenberg was active in our war efforts.

In 1946, the congregation started Brotherhood Week, a yearly citywide interfaith event. One highlight was the Negro spiritual choir that came to Beth Israel every year.

#### **A FRESH LOOK FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOOL**

At the end of World War II, the congregation began to grow. We now had 95 members. The Sunday School was feeling cramped in the basement of the building, so in 1947, David Bassist and Milton Smith led a project to add 5 rooms to the north of the tem-

ple for \$5,000. Also at this time, the one religious school that had served both Congregation Beth Israel and the then-orthodox Agudas Achim, separated into two religious schools.



*Groundbreaking for the new temple, September 23, 1956  
Top: Milton Smith, Front Row: Lou Snyder, Chester Snyder,  
Sam Lichenstein, Sam Rosenfield, and Hymie Samuelson.*

Rabbi Bertram Klausner came that year. He revamped the religious school. Arts and crafts instruction was added, along with the study of Hebrew. We purchased a movie projector, a record player and a slide projector. We also started a children's library.

Bar mitzvah celebrations also became a custom under Rabbi Klausner. Only one boy had become a bar mitzvah before and that was Joe Koen's son William, in 1912. In 1948, Marvin Lebo became the second. In 1953 Lonnie Smith became the first bat mitzvah.

Rabbi Klausner also began the tradition of pageants as part of the Friday night services. In 1953 we created a wonderful tradition for Friday night services. Congregants were asked to usher, bless the candles, open and close the ark and bless the Torah for the reading. Sisterhood also began a gift shop that year.

In 1950, the Joe Koen Nursery School began for children ages 3 to 4.

#### TIME FOR A NEW BUILDING

Rabbi Bertram Krantzler joined the congregation in 1953. We hired a part-time secretary for him. The congregation had 225 members and 96 religious-school students. There was not enough room at the temple to teach them, so classes were held at the First Federal Savings and Loan building across the street from the Temple.

During the high holidays, a full congregation tested the structural engineering of the building. When everybody stood up and sat down, the building shook, remembered longtime member Sam Rosenfield, who was in his 30s at the time.

"We called in an engineer from the city. He examined it and said we had too many people up there. 'Tell the rabbi to tell them not to stand up and sit down as much as they do,' he said. We figured we had problems."

Rosenfield, Hyman Samuelson, Victor Ravel, Sanford Bauman and Milton Smith were in charge of finding a new home for the congregation. They found a "big block of creek bottom" in Northwest Austin, which the congregation bought for \$13,500.

"We took every member of the congregation by car to see the land," said Rosenfield. "It was just a horse pasture."



*Three generations of the Bernheim-Hanna family, our first President Henry Hirschfeld's daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter, participate in dedicating the new Temple.*

To get to the land, you had to take 39th Street to Seiders Avenue. Shoal Creek Boulevard wouldn't be built until 1962.

Former congregation president William Koen was the first to turn a shovel on the new land on Sept. 23, 1956. The congregation built an auditorium that

seated 600 people, a fellowship room for 80, a small chapel for 125 congregants and 12 classrooms. They made a promise to build a sanctuary later. Sisterhood outfitted the kitchen for \$5,000.

The congregation moved everything from the old temple except the pews, which were sold to a Black church, and the Yartzheit plaques, which went to the Gellman family, who put them in their building at Sixth and Brazos streets.

The stained-glass windows went into storage, then disappeared. Jay Podolnick found them years later at a flea market. They became part of the chapel in the new temple.

The one item that was forgotten was the organ. Homeless people, who took up residence in the old sanctuary, began selling off the pipes as scrap metal. What was left of the organ was sold for \$3,000 to a man who fixed organs.

In May 1957, the congregation began using the new building for Shabbat services. We dedicated the building in December 1957 with a three-day event. Rabbi Goodman came back to give the Friday night sermon. Three generations of the Bernheim-Hanna family held the Torah. At the Saturday banquet, Sam Shanblum was the toastmaster and Governor Price Daniel and Mayor Tom Miller attended. On Sunday, Rabbi Krantzler led the religious school dedication.

In June 1957, Joy Lichenstein and Kenneth Parker became the first couple married in the new temple.

### A NEW HOME, A SANCTUARY TO BUILD

In 1958, Rabbi Krantzler left the congregation. We decided to hire Rabbi Charles Mintz, who had one year left in his Air Force service. He joined us in 1959, the same year the temple and the Downtown Optimists started a Broadway Theater League to bring plays and musicals to Austin. Helen Smith led the league.

During the 1960s, the 10th grade officially became the confirmation class. The congregation started a visiting committee to tend to the ill; Sisterhood started a sanctuary fund with \$10,000 in it; and Austin Temple Teens was formed.

In 1961, Sisterhood began a tradition of "An Evening In..." These musical extravaganzas were lead by Mrs. Louis Goldberg and written by Sander Shapiro. Each year, for \$10 a couple, the congregation visited a different part of the world: "An Evening in London," "An Evening in New York," "An Evening in Arabia."

"They were all wonderful," said Ruby Baum, former sisterhood president.

"We made some money, but we didn't concentrate on that. It was just fun."

The programs were popular from the first year, and Sisterhood eventually had to turn away people when the audience reached more than 350.



*Sisterhood's "An Evening In..." with Louise Samuelson, Etta Levin, Barbara Tocker, Lonnie Karotkin, and Diane Rutt*

In 1962, the congregation hired Rabbi Louis Firestein from Temple Emmanuel in Houston. He would be our rabbi for 25 years — a record that stands today.

In 1966, the congregation held a Rosh Hashanah reception on the construction site for what would become the new sanctuary.

The first wedding in the sanctuary happened in December 1966, when Phyllis Rosenfield married Philip Stoup. The Thursday before, congregants joined the carpenter to get the pews installed in time for Friday night services.

The first bar mitzvah in the sanctuary was Joel Silberberg in January 1967.

The next month the congregation dedicated the new sanctuary in a weekend event. Helen Smith, chairman of the building committee, gave the keys to then-president Sanford Bauman at the Friday night services. Twelve past presidents carried the Torahs into the new building. Rabbi Firestein officiated the event. At the Saturday-night banquet Victor Ravel was toastmaster with 400 people attending including Mayor Lester Palmer. On Sunday, the Sunday School held an open house. The Milton and Helen Smith children presented a Torah in honor of their grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Gross.

That Torah was the one thing a certain woman from Hungary brought with her when she fled the Nazis. She sold it to start her life in America.

Some of the money for the \$150,000 sanctuary came when the congregation sold some of its land to

the city to build Shoal Creek Boulevard in 1962. The eternal light was presented by Lonnie Karotkin, Tina Gardner and Helen Smith in honor of their father and husband Milton Smith. Hyman, Danny and Rosalie Samuelson made the 10 commandments over the ark out of plywood and papier mâché to fill the empty space. This 'temporary' solution still hangs today. In the next 10 years, more gifts were added to the Sanctuary.

A third Torah was given by the Robert Tocker family in the memory of Mrs. Joseph Tocker. Two candelabras in the Sanctuary foyer were given by the children of Maurice Glosser for his 75th birthday. In 1973, the confirmation class gave the tapestry for the pulpit table. It was designed by Jayne Samuelson and stitched for two years by Mrs. Malcolm Geller.



*Milton and Helen Smith receive the Smith Auditorium dedication plaque from Sandy Bauman, Jr., President.*

At the 1967 congregational meeting, the temple decided to name the auditorium Smith Auditorium for Milton and Helen Smith.

In 1968, the congregation began to hold two consecutive services for Erev Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a practice that stayed until 1998, when the congregation began holding high holiday services at the Promiseland church.

#### **A CONGREGATION OF CHANGE IN THE 1970s**

The 1970s saw more involvement in temple activities by groups who had not been included before. The temple youth president became a voting member of the board of trustees in 1971. In 1972, women were allowed to sit on the pulpit for high holidays. In 1976, Paulina Stark became the first female music director.

Services and education also began to change. In 1973, adult education programs returned. In 1974 Sisterhood voted to buy the new Gates of Prayer books, which were first used on Feb. 20, 1976. Also in 1974, Sisterhood started quarterly Shabbat dinners before Friday night services and the Break-the-Fast tradition began. In 1975, Mrs. Joel Barlow started children's services, and the congregation attempted once again to start a preschool.

In our 100th year, we began Saturday morning services. About a dozen people came together to create a service that would draw in people who may not be able to attend on Friday night or were looking for something different. The service was built on singing some of the traditional prayers, and it allowed lay leaders to learn how to read from the Torah and conduct the services. The services became such a part of our tradition that bar mitzvahs shifted from Friday nights to Saturday mornings.

For the 100th birthday of our congregation, Austin Mayor Jeff Friedman, a member of the congregation, read a proclamation from the city at Rosh Hashanah services.

#### **THE THIRD KOEN ADMINISTRATION**

Many changes happened the years Carolyn Turner was president from 1984 to 1986. She became the first female president, something she didn't believe at the time would happen.



*Carolyn Turner,  
CBI's First Female President*

"David Kuperman came up to me and said, 'I want you to be vice president.' I said, 'They're not going to let me do that. They're not going to let a woman do that.'"

But the congregation did, and "The women were let out of the kitchen," said Turner.

The first Selichot service was held in 1984. The service was written by Leonard Rosenbaum and music was sung by Charles Gray.

We hired our first full-time religious school educator, Bill Bronstein, and a temple administrator, Paula Kent, that same year.

Technology came to the temple in 1985 when Brotherhood donated our first computer. David Mann helped the new administrator Paula Kent learn how to use it.

In 1985, Social Action Committee chairman Frank Kasman began a fund to buy a new Torah scroll. President Carolyn Turner and her husband, Milton, traveled to London to buy a Torah for \$500 that had been saved from Czechoslovakia during World War II. It was mailed back to Austin, folded into a square and wrapped in brown paper.

"On the night we dedicated it, the past presidents brought it in, this small square. They unwrapped it, put it on rollers and we blessed it. It was just heart stopping," Turner said.

### **A THIRD CEMETERY**

On Nov. 24, 1985, we dedicated the cemetery at Capital Memorial Park in Pflugerville. A mezuzah was affixed to the gazebo in appreciation of Nate Hoffman. The cemetery was actually the third one owned by the congregation. In 1866, before the congregation was formed, Jews in Austin bought a plot of land, Cemetery No. 1, at Oakwood Cemetery on 16th Street. In 1900, the congregation added another acre, considered Cemetery No. 2. But by 1950, upkeep began to become a problem at Cemetery No. 1 and No. 2. Sam Rosenfield helped find land in Pflugerville for a new cemetery.

A cemetery's not a cemetery unless someone is buried there. In 1973, a drifter Maurice J. Buchelman became the first Jew interned in cemetery No. 3. It would be awhile until the congregation's loved ones would joined him. Meanwhile, that same year, the city of Austin placed a historical marker at the Oakwood cemetery, which mentions Congregation Beth Israel.

After Buchelman was buried, Capital Memorial Park became interested in buying the cemetery from the congregation. At the time, Pflugerville was so far away, it would cost the congregation \$500,000 to build roads to get to the cemetery. Capital Memorial Park took care of our problem. They bought our land

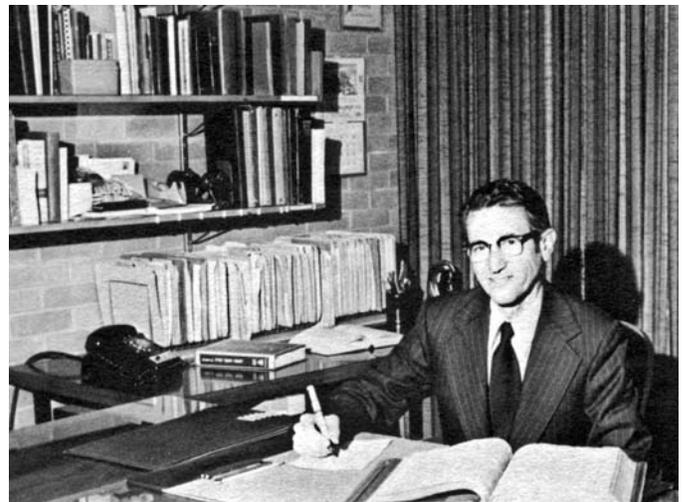
for \$6,500, built the roads to get to it and gave us an acre of land for our exclusive use that they would maintain. What a deal.

For the 1985 dedication of Cemetery No. 3, the congregation got a court order to move Buchelman. Two years later, he was moved again when his mother wanted a plot next to him, but none was available. Buchelman has stayed put since then.

### **THE END OF AN ERA: RABBI FIRESTEIN RETIRES**

In 1987, after 25 years, Rabbi Firestein became rabbi emeritus. We hired Rabbi Scott Saulson who served the congregation for three years.

Around that time, a \$600,000 administrative wing was added onto the building. The addition included a new gift shop, offices for the rabbi, a boardroom, the Koen Foyer and the chapel. The chapel used the Joe Koen ark from the old Sanctuary on 11th Street. The stained-glass from the old temple became part of the chapel as well.



*Rabbi Louis Firestein*

The second blessing happened when the Child Development Center, started by seven moms, opened its doors in 1989 with 80 children and a waiting list. Parents put in a playground in memory of Dolly Smith.

### **A NEW RABBI FOR BETH ISRAEL**

The search for a new rabbi began after Rabbi Saulson left, without much luck. We went without a rabbi until 1991.

Then-president, Beber Helburn remembers it as a great time for the temple. Ritual committee chair Mort Kent trained congregants how to lead services and give d'vrei Torah.

"Folks really stepped up," Helburn said. "The congregation felt a need to reassert itself and leading services helped us do that."

The rabbi search committee had been through a list of 15 names without a candidate. They asked the Central Conference of American Rabbis to give us a new list with their three best shots.



*Rabbi Steven Folberg*

Helburn said the first was a really bad choice, the second was a good rabbi, but not right for our congregation, the third was "in his very early 30s. We looked at that and thought, if he's on the list he must be something special," said Helburn.

The committee, led by David Kuperman, first interviewed Rabbi Steven Folberg by speaker phone. Then Folberg came down for a weekend to see Austin and meet congregants. Helen Smith was in charge of checking references. She checked him out with relatives who were members of his congregation in Great Neck, N.Y.

"They told her something like, 'If he were to leave our congregation for another on Long Island, we're pretty sure we would follow him.' Helen considered it her job to convince everybody that Steve should be hired," Kuperman said.

Rabbi Folberg came down to Austin one more time. This time, the congregation broke the rules and asked him to deliver a sermon. He did and the congregation voted to hire him.

After a short honeymoon, he and wife Sandra came to Austin in June 1991.

#### **LOOKING BACK, AS THE CONGREGATION MOVES FORWARD**

After Brotherhood, led by Don Levin, provided the evidence that we are, indeed, a part of Austin his-

tory, on May 7, 1995, the Travis County Historical Commission placed a historic marker at the front of the temple.

On June 10, 1995, we celebrated Rabbi Folberg's 10 years in the rabbinate with 'An Evening to Remember' at the Stouffer Hotel. The day was declared Rabbi Folberg Day in Austin by Mayor Bruce Todd. State House Resolution 1023 was passed on May 26, 1995, honoring him. The event raised \$60,000 for the Education Fund.

On May 11, 1996, the congregation held "A Renaissance Affair" honoring the 50th wedding anniversary and 50 years of membership of Louise and Hymie Samuelson, with an auction to raise money for the temple.

In June 1996, we welcomed our first assistant rabbi and the city's first female rabbi, Rabbi Elizabeth Dunsker.

In June 1997 our growing congregation welcomed its first invested cantor, Jaime Shpall.

#### **A FLOOD OF MIXED BLESSINGS**

The great flood of 1998 happened on Father's Day. A few days into his presidency, Paul Keeper got the call from Administrator Paula Kent to come quick. Not knowing what had happened Keeper brought his daughter and her sleepover friend who had never been to a temple before. What they saw was the contents of the entire neighborhood's sewer system rushing from the ladies bathroom outside the sanctuary into the sanctuary, chapel and part of the administrative wing. The flow actually went under the bimah and out the back of the building.

The congregation cleaned up but it would be months before new carpet and new chairs could be installed. The flood left us with several problems. The insurance didn't want to pay for the replacement value. We filed a lawsuit and won. But more perplexing, we were a congregation without any place to house high holiday services. For Shabbat services we met in Smith Auditorium, but that couldn't accommodate the more than 2,000 people that come on Kol Nidre.

We looked around and found the Promiseland, a church on 51st street with a large auditorium and no overtly religious symbols. For the first time since 1968, our congregation could worship as a whole for the holidays, instead of splitting into two evening services. Even after the sanctuary was repaired, we've chosen to go to the Promiseland for the holidays.

## A CONGREGATION ADJUSTING TO GROWTH

The 1990s were marked by extreme growth in Austin and the congregation. In 1983, we had 350 members, by 1995 we would grow to 650. The congregation began strategic planning in 1992 on how to deal with the influx of people. Through a 10-year period, many options were considered. Our current site required a zoning change and had floodplain requirements to deal with.

We then looked at a site on Hart Lane that had been purchased by computer CEO Michael Dell for the eventual purpose of an Austin Jewish Community Campus. Soon it became clear that this campus was going to be an immediate reality.

We took a first vote on whether to become part of it. The vote passed. Planning began on our new home that would include a sanctuary paid for by the congregation and an educational building paid for by the campus.

As time went on, the terms of the deal began to change, said Paul Keeper, president from 1998 to 2000. By Yom Kippur 1998, Keeper announced that the deal would probably not be a reality. We voted again that November and decided not to go to the campus.

The search for a new home led us to a site off Loop 360 near St. Stephen's Episcopal School. Plans were drawn up for the \$18 million project, but fundraising stalled and we lost the option on that land.

We again set our sites on our current land. We looked at keeping the sanctuary here and moving the

religious school to the Dell Campus. By then, a new Reform congregation was being formed, Beth Shalom, and the education building deal was no longer available.

We hired a new architect to work with our existing site. In December 2001, we broke ground on the Learning Center, a \$10 million project with the additional renovation of Smith Auditorium, and an endowment fund. When the slab was poured in May 2002, we held a party and signed our names in the cement. Sunday School began October 20, 2002, with the younger kids moved into the first floor. The following day, the CDC took over the first floor.

In November, the older kids moved into the second floor, then the third floor. By late December, Dolly's Playground moved to its permanent home with two new playscapes and a tricycle track.

Our religious school that had held classes in the bride's room and board room, now has the space to hold both Sunday School and Hebrew School classes on Sunday and have adult education programs led by the rabbi.

"It's amazing to look outside and see it actually in existence and to see how beautiful it is," said president Shelli Miller. "After all we went through, it's hard to believe we got it done. It's so wonderful to go into the building and know we've been apart of it."

Tonight we dedicate our new space and the renovated Smith Auditorium. May it be enjoyed for another 127 years.



*Congregation Beth Israel's Sanctuary, Smith Auditorium, and new Learning Center, February 2003*