A Time to Remember

THE FIRST 150 YEARS

A History of Congregation Beth Israel in San Diego

By the Beth Israel History Project
Led by Lawrence Krause, Stanley Schwartz and George Wise

Liz Levine, Editor
Anna Newton, Project Coordinator

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May 2012

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Anna Newton, Project Coordinator

Steve Gould, Photo Assistance
Karen Shein, Cover Design
Aaryn Karp Marchisa, www.aaryn.com, Inside Design and Layout

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Sidebars – some spanning several decades – are interspersed throughout the book.

"For 150 years, the dreams of our founders have been the blueprint for a vibrant, creative, ambitious Jewish community.... They gave us Beth Israel, along with an obligation to continue to dream of all that this congregation can become."

— Rabbi Michael Berk

FOREWORD

From its modest beginning in Old Town to its magnificent, Jerusalem-inspired campus in University City, Beth Israel has been a second home to generations of San Diego's Jews.

AS BETH ISRAEL concludes the year-long celebration of our 150th anniversary, we recognize that our congregation stands on the shoulders of giants – those who had the vision and the courage to establish our great synagogue in 1861. Those pioneers could not have imagined how their fledgling religious community would grow and prosper over 150 years. The momentous occasion of our 150th anniversary affords the joyous opportunity to reflect proudly on the landmark achievements of Beth Israel's past and to dream about the promises of our future.

Throughout our distinguished history, Beth Israel has served as a spiritual second home, where San Diego Jews celebrated with one another and consoled one another, sought answers through worship and study, and worked together to make the world better and more just. None of this would have been possible without the legacy left to us by those founding families 150 years ago.

Now it is our turn to create a legacy for Beth Israel's future. The 150th anniversary year is a time to remember and a time to dream. Every member of the Beth Israel community has his or her own special Beth Israel story to tell. Our walls and our history are full of these wonderful, heart-warming stories – 150 years' worth.

We proudly publish *Congregation Beth Israel: The First 150 Years, A Time to Remember* to chronicle the endeavors of those visionaries who long ago imagined a thriving Jewish community in San Diego, and record the challenges, accomplishments and revelries of multiple generations of San Diego Jews. This comprehensive historical account – the work of many dedicated historians, volunteers and staff – celebrates as many as possible, but certainly not all, of the stories of 150 years of our congregation. This volume is intended to advance our children and grandchildren's sense of Jewish identity and the continuity of Judaism itself – responsibilities we take very seriously.

I hope that this volume will endure for the next 150 years and beyond, and will help Beth Israel continue to serve and lead San Diego's Reform Jewish community. Let us now start building the next 150 years together. Future generations of San Diego Jews are depending on us.

Emily Jennewein

Emily Jennewein
President, Congregation Beth Israel
May 2012

PREFACE

By Lawrence Krause

GROWING UP WITHIN A STONE'S THROW of Fort Stevens, the northern-most fort guarding Washington, D. C., it was natural for me to become a Civil War buff. My wife, Sallye Krause, encouraged me in my research, because she grew up in the same neighborhood and as a girl played in the derelict Blair Mansion, home of Lincoln's postmaster general.

Hence, when I learned that Congregation Beth Israel was founded as Adath Yeshurun in June 1861, I was amazed and intrigued. How could 10 men in San Diego occupy themselves with creating a religious institution when the entire country was focused on civil conflict? Since Beth Israel was approaching its 150th anniversary, I decided to involve myself in learning its origins and writing its history.

In June 2008, I invited several members of the Men's Club board, including Ernie Abbit, Jay Harris, Jim Malkus, Bob Metz, Ben Schneider, Ben Weinbaum and George Wise, to the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Faculty Club for lunch and to discuss my idea of making the writing of Beth Israel's history a project of the Men's Club. The idea received a warm response, but I was urged to check first with the temple. Executive Director Lesley Mills felt the project had merit but reminded me that Stanley Schwartz was Beth Israel's archivist and recommended that I contact him.

The Men's Club history project group met for a second lunch at the Faculty Club and formulated an action plan. We agreed to include Beth Israel members who were not members of the Men's Club. George Wise and I began interviewing people who could shed light on our history, and Stan Schwartz was obviously the first target.

When George and I met with Stan and his wife, Laurel Schwartz, Stan informed us that he had written a brief history of Beth Israel for the congregation's 135th anniversary volume, a history he had been keeping up to date.[i] Stan was eager to participate in the new history project.

We held the first formal meeting of the history project on June 30, 2008. Our roster had expanded to include David Schlafman, Steve Gould, Joan Jacobs, Sallye Krause, Jerry Levy, Anna Newton, Jay Shirley, Joe Oppenheimer and Sheryl Russell. Assignments were made. Ernie Abbit agreed to review *Tidings*, the temple newsletter. Steve Gould promised to help select appropriate photos. Jay Harris volunteered to explore the question of why Jews came to California. Sallye Krause accepted the assignment to research the origin of banking in San Diego. Jim Malkus and David Schlafman agreed to review the minutes of the Beth Israel board of directors. Ben Weinbaum accepted the task of exploring in depth the lives of the founding fathers of Beth Israel. George Wise volunteered to compile the history of Jewish businessmen in San Diego. Lesley Mills became the link between the history project and the temple.

Early on, we learned of a manuscript by Rabbi Ronald Gerson entitled *Jewish Religious Life in San Diego, 1851–1918*, which he wrote in 1974 as a master's thesis at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. Rabbi Gerson grew up in San Diego and was a graduate of Beth Israel's religious school. We contacted Rabbi Gerson, and he was very willing to let us use his manuscript; ultimately, his thesis served as the basis for more than two chapters of our book. We also had the pleasure of interviewing Rabbi Gerson during one of his visits to San Diego. We are indeed indebted to Rabbi Gerson as the writing of this history would have been exceedingly more difficult without his research.

Don Harrison, creator of the online newspaper *San Diego Jewish World*, had written the book *Louis Rose: San Diego's First Jewish Settler and Entrepreneur*, which also proved useful. Importantly, we had Stan Schwartz's expanded history from the 135th anniversary volume and Laurel Schwartz's

extensive descriptions of our three Beth Israel homes. All these works became the skeleton for additional research.

A strategic decision was made to incorporate sidebars in the text. This would permit us to include greater detail about subjects of interest without unbalancing the major, chronological narrative. While members of the history project wrote many of the sidebars, we also turned to other members of the congregation to write about subjects they knew – or could research – best. Each of the sidebars in the text is attributed to its writer except when compiled from several sources.

The history project group met on average once a month over a period of 18 months. As we neared our target deadline, toward the end of 2009, twice a month meetings became the norm. Draft chapters were circulated, and spirited discussions were held not only to get the facts right, but also to hit the right tone.

In relating the events of Beth Israel's history, we sought to answer a series of questions: Why did its founders form a congregation in1861? Why did Beth Israel join the Reform Movement? How was Beth Israel affected by the ups and downs of population movements in San Diego? How did the congregation survive the Great Depression of the 1930s? What happened at Beth Israel during World War II? What was the reaction of the congregation to the creation of the State of Israel in1948? Perhaps most importantly, how has Beth Israel evolved as an institution in its governance, and what have we learned from the earliest days until today? How did we begin, and where are we now?

We answered these questions to the extent that available documentation permitted. As mentioned, we were able to utilize Rabbi Gerson's master's thesis, Stan and Laurel Schwartz's original research, and Don Harrison's book on Louis Rose. In addition, we had most issues of *Tidings* from 1966 to the present, the first issues of *Tidings* from 1912–1913, most, but not all, board of directors' minutes from 1969 to the present, and most board proceedings from the 1920s and 1940s.

Beth Israel is a vibrant, continuously evolving institution. Its history is a living history.

We conducted numerous interviews with Beth Israel staff members and congregants. Liz Levine and President Emily Jennewein copyedited the manuscript and requested and researched additional information. The document was sent to a review committee that included Rabbi Michael Berk, Rabbi/Cantor Arlene Bernstein, Cantor Emeritus Sheldon Merel, Executive Director Lesley Mills, Program Director Bonnie Graff, Early Childhood Education Director Tammy Vener, Director of Education Emerita Helene Schlafman, Director of Communications and Marketing Karen Shein, Librarian Anna Newton, Past Presidents Si Coleman, Mary Ann Scher and Jerry Goldberg, and congregants Sandy Feldman, David Schlafman and Stanley Schwartz, to examine it for accuracy and omissions. Steve Gould helped identify and select photographs. Anna Newton served as project coordinator, keeping us all on track, handling the many logistical details, and coordinating with the publishing house. She and Louise Winheld assisted in proofreading.

Despite our best efforts, there are gaps in our narrative because of the scarcity of primary sources and because it is impossible to include everything from our 150-year history. We included what we thought most important, acknowledging that our research might not have uncovered equally important individuals and events. We did not try to fill the gaps with assumptions or postulations, and in fact, we included from our interviews only information we could corroborate with a second source.

Beth Israel is a vibrant, continuously evolving institution. Its history is a living history. The first and only Jewish religious institution in San Diego for almost half a century, Beth Israel's 150-year history remains important not only to its members, but also to the non-Jewish community of Southern California and to the history of Reform Judaism in America. We are proud to have participated in chronicling this history to the present time.

INTRODUCTION

By Lawrence Krause

FOR MANY OF ITS MEMBERS Congregation Beth Israel is a second home. It is a place where individuals and families come together frequently and regularly to discuss issues of consequence, consider and reflect on their lives, debate disagreements, and pray. Beth Israel is a home (a "house of Israel") for spiritual reinforcement and renewal, for *kvelling* at the good fortune of others and oneself, reciting Mourner's Kaddish when remembering the death of a dear one, and educating adults and children in Torah, tradition and Jewish life.

Beth Israel also has been a major contributor to the San Diego community. It has become a monument to what is possible to achieve. For many years it was the only Jewish religious institution in San Diego. Its members were central to major developments in the city.

This is the story of Beth Israel's creation, development and growth to its unique stature today.

BETH ISRAEL IN CONTEXT

It is impossible to follow the 150-year evolution of Beth Israel without relating the congregation's history to developments elsewhere in the United States, to events in California, and especially to developments in San Diego. In the 1850s and 1860s, San Diego was a very small, rough, semi-arid, frontier community on the extreme southwest edge of the United States. Its most telling characteristic was its isolation.

Three elements were responsible for there even being a settlement in San Diego. First, and most important, is its magnificent and protected harbor. It was the harbor that brought the Spanish explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo in 1542 that convinced the Spanish authorities to establish a military outpost in 1769 and a mission in 1774, and that encouraged ships after rounding the Cape of Good Hope or coming from Panama to stop on their way to San Francisco.

Second is San Diego's mild climate. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 brought riches and people to Northern California, but the miners and their camp followers needed provisions. It was in San Diego that cattle and sheep could be raised, the animals slaughtered, and the hides, tallow and meat shipped north.

Third is San Diego County's size – it was called an empire in itself.[ii] San Diego County included what later became Riverside, Imperial, San Bernardino and the easterly portion of Inyo counties, an expanse far larger than all the New England states added together. With San Diego's incorporation as a self-governing city by the newly formed California state government, the city and the county had huge tracts of real estate to sell or give to developers.

Thus, San Diego had a great harbor, a mild climate and cheap real estate. Yet, fewer than a thousand people lived in San Diego in 1850. In part this was because there was also a considerable drawback. To the east of San Diego are formidable mountains that fall off steeply into deep valleys. This made overland travel from the east very challenging. Despite the belief and hope of its residents that its natural harbor would make San Diego the obvious choice for the western terminus of a transcontinental railroad, the cost and engineering challenge of its geography proved otherwise.

Nevertheless, from this humble beginning, San Diego has become the eighth largest city of the United States, and to its residents, America's Finest City. The ups and downs, fits and starts of San Diego also constitute the history of Beth Israel.

AN UNSETTLED TIME

The 1850s was a very unsettled time for the 31 not-very-united states of America. Slavery was eating away at the union's common ground that had grown out of the challenges of the 18th century. The Clay Compromise of 1850 brought California into the Union as a free state, but at the cost of a stricter return-of-fugitive-slave law. Then a series of events inflamed the slavery issue.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was published in 1852. The contentious Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in 1854, which permitted slavery to be introduced into western territories, rescinding the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had prohibited slavery in those areas. The Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court, which came down in 1857, held that slaves were not citizens as defined by the Constitution, and thus not subject to its protections. When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, slave-holding states in the south began to secede. This made the Civil War to sustain the Union inevitable.

Interestingly, California's entry into the Union as a free state did not fully settle the slavery issue here. Many farmers who had come from the south wanted to bring slavery with them. One of California's first two senators in Washington, D.C., William Gwin, advocated for slavery[iii] with the idea to divide California into two states with the southern half as a slave state. In San Diego, J. J. Ames, editor of the *Herald*, the only newspaper in town, was a proponent of this idea.[iv] When it became clear that California was not going to be divided, backing for the newspaper dried up and it ceased publication. Hence, San Diego was without a newspaper from 1860 to 1868.

The discovery of gold in California enticed adventure seekers, avaricious dreamers, ruffians, thugs, prostitutes and even some merchants and professional people to its shores. California did not go through the maturing process of being a territory before being accepted as a state. While institutions and legislation could be copied from other states, as was done in writing its constitution in 1849, the human capital needed to govern effectively had not yet been developed. California was an ineptly governed, rather lawless state.

WHY JEWS CAME TO SAN DIEGO

Because Jews in Europe were long restricted in how they could earn a living, they focused on a limited number of occupations. Peddling was one livelihood that attracted many Jews, and in which many became successful. Such was the humble origin of many of the great department store empires of New York City such as Macy's and Gimbels. By the 1850s, however, there were few opportunities in the eastern United States for budding, entrepreneurial peddler-merchants. The west, though, was an entirely different story. Don Harrison documented the story of Jewish merchants coming to the west:

Jews came to the West as individuals, rather than as part of larger communities, and upon arriving in a town, typically entered the retail trade. Having some savings, or obtaining credit from Jewish wholesalers in larger cities, pioneer Jewish settlers gravitated to developing towns and communities of the West, where they opened general stores from which they supplied mainly Gentile settlers with necessities for various aspects of their lives: clothing to wear, simple furniture and fixtures for their homes, food products and cooking utensils for their kitchens, toys and books for their children, seeds and tools for the farms, and hay and oats for their livestock. These single men generally devoted themselves to their businesses, economizing whenever they could and sleeping on the premises or nearby.

As they built up their capital, the young men, in a phenomenon the scholars dubbed "chain migration," sent for other single members of their families to join them in the enterprises, sometimes as clerks, sometimes as operators of smaller satellite stores. If their businesses failed to prosper, the Jewish merchants might sell off their inventories and move to other communities. On the other hand, if their stores indeed were profitable, the merchants would begin to set down roots in their adopted communities.[v]

There were many small and isolated communities throughout the west that were inviting destinations for Jews trying to carve out a new life for themselves, and Jews went everywhere. Non-Jewish settlers in the west seemed to leave their prejudices behind and were willing to accept and do business with those providing necessary services. The Jewish peddler-merchant was ubiquitous throughout the west.

Along with other Americans, Jews were attracted by the lure of riches in California. Many were disappointed. Even some members of successful families found their way south from San Francisco to seek their fortune in San Diego. Others found the climate of San Francisco not to their liking and headed south for warmer temperatures. Some Jewish immigrants who landed in southern ports such as New Orleans or Galveston moved on to Southern California after difficult times in their initial destinations. One look at San Diego's harbor quickened the entrepreneurial juices of many Jews who aspired to become merchants.

MERCHANTS IN A NON-BANK ECONOMY

The ceding of California to the United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe ended the war with Mexico in 1848. Hence, it is not surprising that San Diego in the 1850s was a town still fashioned in the Spanish-Mexican style, with a square surrounded by adobe buildings used for businesses and homes. In earlier times, during the Spanish and Mexican administrations, the square had been closed off for bullfighting. This area is now called Old Town. The inhabitants were Mexican, Indian, Spanish, American and European. As time passed, San Diego increasingly became dominated by Americans.

Due to its small population and isolation, San Diego did not attract its first bank until June 1870. (A second bank opened in October 1872, and subsequently the two banks merged.) The absence of a bank until 1870 was a huge detriment to the economy of San Diego. Through a well-recognized process, banks create money. Currency can also be created by the printing press of a national government, but Washington, D.C. was far away. Hence, San Diego was chronically short of funds. The consequences were profound for merchants and others trying to do business here.[vi]

Merchants were forced to sell on credit. Customers often paid with products or services. This ancient system of barter was inefficient, but it dominated the commerce of the region. Without the possibility of bank loans, personal promissory notes were used for investments and often were sold and resold among individuals. When there was a refusal or inability to pay, a legal judgment was required, real assets had to be seized in payment, and the process had to be enforced by the sheriff. At best the system was cumbersome, and at worst, it caused significant disputes among neighbors. This was the climate that welcomed San Diego's first Jew, Louis Rose, in 1850.

The following document is divided into several sections. Chapter 1 describes informal worship in San Diego through the creation and years of Adath Yeshurun. Chapter 2 covers the congregation's incorporation and naming as Congregation Beth Israel and its first home at Second and Beech. Chapter 3 reviews the growth of Beth Israel and its new building at Third and Laurel. Chapter 4 covers the period from World War I to World War II. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the evolution of Beth Israel from World War II through the building of the current campus in University City. Chapter 7 discusses the congregation today. This history concludes with an afterword, appendices and endnotes.