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In Retrospect from Redication

Henry Marks, update by Sol Miller

(This is an update of an article written on the occasion of the Congregation's Centennial Celebration in 1976.)

Huntsville is the second oldest city in Alabama as well as the oldest English settlement in the state. The first permanent settlers arrived before 1810 and Huntsville was incorporated in 1811.

Jewish people began to arrive in Huntsville in the 1840's and Jewish marriages occurred here at least as early as 1849. These first pioneers were primarily merchants and cotton factors. They quickly began to prosper in the antebellum period, some acquiring important real estate in Huntsville and the surrounding area. Some owned slaves, and there are records of sales transactions involving slaves before the Civil War, the papers of which are still in the hands of present members of the Congregation.

During the Civil War, the Jewish population generally supported the Confederacy and at least one member served with the Confederate military forces.

After the war, a number of Jews moved to Huntsville from Cincinnati. Earlier they had emigrated to the United States from Central European states, principally the Germanies. In the 1870's they took steps to form a congregation. On July 30, 1876, dreams became reality and thirty-two men formed B'nai Sholom Congregation. At this time there were approximately 230,000 Israelites and 270 congregations in the United States.

The constitution, submitted at the founding meeting, contained laws and standing rules similar to those of Congregation B'ne Yeshurum of Cincinnati, led by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. The mode of worship was to be in accordance with Wise's radical prayer book *Minha-Amerika*, written in Hebrew and German. The

membership set up finance, school, and choir committees. The religious functions of Hazzan (the title was later changed to Rabbi) and Shamas were performed by members of the Congregation. The Rabbi performed all the duties of a Hazzan, conducted regular and special services, performed funerals, led the Sunday School, and taught the students. Another man trained the choir and instructed in liturgy.

It is possible that Divine Services had previously been held at the Opera House, but for the High Holy Days of 1876, they were conducted in a newly refurbished room rented at the Masonic Lodge. The Congregation purchased an organ and hired a choir. There was mixed seating and hats were worn "with due respect to the service."

In June 1877, a motion was approved to apply to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) for membership. However, at various times in the future, the Congregation would be required to withdraw from the organization due to lack of funding.

In order to compel unaffiliated residents of the community to join, Temple admittance was restricted to contributing members. They were charged 25¢ a visit, or \$5.00 a family, or \$3.00 for a single person during High Holy Days, although out-of-town visitors were welcomed at no charge. The Congregation also maintained and controlled the Jewish section of the cemetery, established soon after the Congregation. The Congregation charged a fee for the burial of Jewish non-members in this section. A chapter of B'nai B'rith was formed on March 1, 1875.

The Hebrew Ladies Aid Society, organized soon after the establishment of the Congregation, was the bulwark of the Congregation, and was called upon and volunteered to assist on numerous occasions. They raised funds and held social functions, sometimes inviting the general community.

After the death of a faithful lay leader, the Congregation in 1890 decided for the first time to seek the services of a full-time rabbi. An advertisement which ran in Wise's *The American Israelite* called for a rabbi who spoke English fluently and offered

an annual salary of \$1000.00, with traveling expenses paid only to the successful candidate. A student rabbi conducted High Holy Day services in 1890, and an older rabbi served in 1891. On November 23, 1892, the Congregation secured the services of its first ordained religious leader, Rabbi A. M. Bloch, whose contract was terminated by a dissatisfied congregation before the year had passed. I. E. Wagenheim assumed the pulpit in 1894 and remained until 1897. He provided firm and progressive leadership. He was the first in a series of seven rabbis who remained from one to three years and then moved to larger congregations. In February 1898, the Congregation adopted the *Union Prayer Book*, published in 1894.

Perhaps the longest step forward for the Congregation occurred on May 1, 1898, when it purchased land at the corner of Lincoln and Clinton streets for \$1500. A building committee contracted with William Meyers of New York to construct a house of worship for \$16,000. The building was dedicated on Sunday, November 26, 1899, and later there was an auction of pews. Rabbi Nathan Michnic was spiritual leader of the Congregation at this time.

During the illness of one Rabbi, in 1905, Rev. Claybrook of the Episcopal Church offered his services to the Congregation on Friday nights. His offer was accepted. Rabbi Jacob Z. Lauterbach served the Congregation from 1910–1911. While here he wrote several scholarly books. He later served for many years as a professor at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Rabbi Lauterbach proudly showed his students a gold pocket watch presented to him by the member of Temple B'nai Sholom upon his departure from Huntsville. There had been a recurring problem in obtaining and maintaining a Rabbi, and so in May 1913, the Congregation decided to use lay readers instead of a full-time rabbi, but to assume a Rabbi's expenses in the event of a death. Some lay readers over the years were Gustav Marx, Leo Cohen, Abe Goldstein, and Sam Alexander. In the early decades of this century, most of the Jewish newcomers to Huntsville were of Eastern European origin.

Sidewalks were constructed in 1922, and in 1923 the Jewish section of the cemetery was extended. The Congregation had the normal financial worries of periodic repairs and maintenance of the Temple building. As hard times began to be felt in Huntsville dur-

ing the Depression, the Temple was hit by a wave of dues reductions among its members. In 1935, the Rabbi engaged for the High Holidays was paid by subscription.

World War II marked the revitalization of this country and especially that of Huntsville. Redstone Arsenal was developed from a combination of two Army arsenals established in 1941 for the production of chemicals and explosives. In 1948, Redstone Arsenal was designated the center for rocket research and development. The Marshall Space Flight Center officially began operations in mid-1960. The vitally important space and defense activities attracted private contractors and Huntsville grew rapidly. The Jewish populations of Huntsville also grew as scientists, engineers, and other professional people were attracted to the city. Many of these new arrivals joined the Congregation, and Religious School enrollment increased to the point that new classrooms were required. In June 1956 the Congregation bought the Carlisle Davis house, located next to the Temple, for \$18,500. The Temple Sisterhood held Holland bulb sales, rummage sales, and numerous card parties and dinners to help pay off the mortgage on this property.

The Congregation engaged student rabbis to conduct High Holy Day services from 1948 to 1952. Student rabbis were employed on a biweekly basis from 1953 until August 1963. At that time Rabbi Sherman Stein became the first full-time rabbi since 1913. The Congregation purchased a house for the Rabbi for the first time in its history. He served through August 1966, after which Dr. Abraham Feinstein, Rabbi Emeritus of Mizpah Congregation in Chattanooga, began to commute to Huntsville on a weekly basis to serve the needs of the Temple. He retired in June 1969, and was succeeded by Rabbis Michael Eisenstat, Charles Emanuel, Robert Scott, Sherwood Weil, and Dr. Steven Jacobs, the Temple's current Rabbi.

The Congregation became so large in the 1960's that it was necessary to hold High Holy Day services in the post chapel at Redstone Arsenal. It also became necessary to enlarge existing Temple facilities. The Davis home was demolished and in 1967 construction was begun on the Educational Building. It was completed in 1968 at a cost of \$100,000.

Almost from the beginning of the Congregation, its young people have served it well. The first Confirmation was held in 1897, and this was one ceremony reinstated in the early 1950's. The first Bar Mitzvah was held in 1958, and the first Bat Mitzvah in 1967. Coleman Balisok trained all Bar and Bat Mitzvah candidates until his death in 1968. The Temple Brotherhood was formed in 1962 and our fine volunteer choir has served us since 1963.

In 1975, renovation of the sanctuary was undertaken and completed in time for the Congregation's centennial celebration. Later High Holy Day services were transferred to the new, larger Bicentennial Chapel on Redstone Arsenal. This was necessary due to the continued growth of the Congregation, which in 1994 maintains a membership of over 170 families. Continual problems with the structure of the Temple sanctuary forced a complete renovation in 1993 and 1994. The Congregation is extremely proud of its "new" house of worship.

Our temple is truly a house of living Judaism. A house of worship, a house of study, a house of joy, and a house of sorrow, it is the living link among the past, the present, and the future.

Henry S. Marks
Doris Kirshtein