

CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL

"If you will it, it is no dream." Theodor Hertzl

Asheville was a village before the railroad came in 1880. Then it began to grow quickly, adding immigrants who followed the rail line looking for economic opportunity, patients coming to breathe the clean mountain air, and friends and relatives answering the invitations of those lucky enough to live here.



At the 1913 wedding of Ida Pollock and Meyer Levite were many founders of Congregation Bikur Cholim. Rabbi Elias Fox is in the front row wearing a yarmulke. He was the congregation's second rabbi. The older man with the long white beard (next to the groom in the second row) is the father of the groom. He is dressed like a person from "the old country." Lou Pollock name sake of one of Asheville's Jewish cemeteries is seventh from the right in the front row. (Additional identifications are available in the digitized Ada and Lou Pollock Collection)



September 26, 1916, the day before erev Rosh Hashanah, the synagogue building was finally finished. The total cost had been in excess of \$11,000. Suddenly tragedy struck! A fire destroyed the building, leaving only the brick walls standing. The congregation had only insured it for \$3,000. The difference was a staggering sum to the small struggling group who had planned and saved for so many years.



Though the synagogue building was small, it had a beautiful interior. Arranged strictly according to Orthodox precepts, the synagogue was visited by many who came just to admire its sanctuary. It was first used for High Holy Day Services in 1912, although the building was not fully completed for four more years.

Bikur Cholim

By 1891 there were enough Jewish residents to form a Conservative synagogue—Congregation Beth HaTephila. Some, however, wanted to follow more familiar, stricter European traditions. By February of 1899 eight men met and officially formed a new Orthodox congregation, naming it Bikur Cholim, "visitation of the sick." In 1904 there was an attempt to consolidate the two synagogues. A meeting to discuss this

matter was presided over by Dr. Solomon Schechter, then president of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Asheville, it was felt, did not have a large enough Jewish population to support two synagogues!

After using various locations around downtown Asheville, congregants of Bikur Cholim wanted their own synagogue. Land was purchased on South Liberty Street near Woodfin in 1911, where a hotel now stands. Fundraising was a long and arduous process because wealthy members were few and most members were small business owners or merchants.

By 1916 their new sanctuary was finally completed, but was immediately destroyed by a fire (mentioned in the synagogue caption). Fellow Asheville residents came forward with offers of aid, cash donations, building materials and even the services of four Protestant ministers. Plans were immediately begun to rebuild the structure. The Asheville papers periodically reported on the progress of the synagogue's fundraising. Contributors were Jews and gentiles alike, including former Mayor James Eugene Rankin.

Soon after the fire, a group of congregants split off from Bikur Cholim to form a new congregation, Anshei Yeshuran, meaning "Fellowship of the Upright." In the early 1920s that congregation reunited with Bikur Cholim. The synagogue building was finally completed again in 1924. It was the home of the congregation for the next 45 years. In 1949 Bikur Cholim affiliated with the United Synagogue of America and became a Conservative congregation. In 1950, Congregation Bikur Cholim changed its name to Beth Israel.



Bar Mitzvah of Herbert Schulman in the 1950s.

Sunday school and the Community Talmud Torah were open to any child regardless of parents' affiliation and were important activities of the congregation.



The Ladies Auxiliary, later known as the Beth Israel Sisterhood, was started in 1922. Besides fundraising, producing social events and doing beautification projects, they prepared gallons of chicken soup for Jewish patients at local sanitariums who had come to Asheville for a cure for respiratory ailments.

The Men's Club of Bikur Cholim was formed in 1944. Its purpose was to assist the congregation in business and financial affairs and to organize social and recreational events.



RABBIS

The first religious leader of Bikur Cholim was Rev. Louis London, who came from Baltimore in 1897. He also ran a grocery store to supplement his income. In 1948 the congregation purchased a parsonage for their fourteenth rabbi, Rabbi Martin Kessler. Rabbi Kessler was succeeded by Rabbi Alexander Gelberman and Samuel Friedman, who stayed 10 years accepting the challenge of "trying to bring my people back to the old traditional standards of our religion." Since Rabbi Friedman's retirement in 1980, the congregation has seen a succession of spiritual leaders, most notably Rabbis Paul Grob and Shmuel Birnham. Throughout the history of the congregation, there have been many extended periods without a spiritual leader, but knowledgeable lay leaders have again and again stepped in to fill the void.



Congregation Beth Israel is especially known for Celebration Israel, an annual festival of Israeli food and culture, which coincides each year with Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day). Photo courtesy of Patrice Murillo, Wildstarfish Photography 2013.

Beth Israel

In 1959 in response to rumors that the City of Asheville would be taking land for a new highway, Congregation Beth Israel purchased the lot it currently occupies. By 1964 the Asheville Development Commission appraised the old building at around \$66,000. Later negotiations brought the offer to \$88,250 and the City agreed to delay removal of the old South Liberty building until a new one could be completed.

Dr. Dodi Schandler headed the Building Committee and Aaron Schandler the Publicity Committee. Once again a large sum of money needed to be raised. Jerry Sternberg took on that challenge and practically every congregant

pitched in to make the new building happen. In 1969, on the day of the last service in the old building, the furnace malfunctioned and filled the structure with smoke. Then President of the congregation, Benson Slosman, said that this is a sign it was time to leave.

During the 1980s women's roles in the synagogue expanded and in 1987 Celine Lurey became the first female president. In 1989 a merger of Beth HaTephila (which had, by this time, become a Reform Congregation) and Beth Israel was again debated. By now there was the financial burden of the community supporting three Jewish institutions—the Jewish Community Center being the third. Consensus could not be reached on defining who was a Jew, so the merger again did not succeed.

By the 1990s, Asheville's population began to grow and its Jewish community grew along with it. Congregation Bikur Cholim/Beth Israel has now celebrated its 50th and 100th anniversaries (in 1949 and 1999). Serving the Asheville Jewish Community in three different centuries, it has faced many challenges. Countless numbers of people have given their "time, talent and tzadakah" to insure this congregation continues to offer a variety of religious, educational, and cultural programs for adults and children.



"This Synagogue is justly a memorial to the charter members and their successors in maintaining a house of worship against almost insurmountable odds, and is a clear illustration that nothing is impossible when the efforts of those possessing the vision and desire are directed to the establishment of a worthy cause."

Congregation Bikur Cholim 50th Anniversary booklet 1899-1949

