

History of Cape Cod Synagogue from 1933

Before the turn of the century, and long before they organized themselves into a congregation, there were Jews living on Cape Cod. They had come to this quiet rural area mostly as merchants, recognizing the need as well as the potential in providing the communities of the Cape with the material goods people required. Many were peddlers selling from wagons or packs on their backs in those early days. Eventually, when they were ready to open permanent stores, they hoped to have built up a following who would come to them.

Once settled on the Cape, the newcomers experienced loneliness more sharply than they had anticipated, for they were far away from friends, families and a familiar way of life. There was, too, a lack of welcome for this new and therefore strange people. Because of the loneliness and because they enjoyed their beautiful new surroundings, they lured their friends and relatives down from the cities for frequent visits. Those who visited the Cape got the proverbial "sand in their shoes" and moved down to stay, bringing their trades, their skills and their professions to serve the communities in which they settled.

Jewish families lived in different towns on the Cape, remote from one another as a people, and observed their religious lives in different ways, within their own homes. Most of the early settlers were Orthodox and lived strictly by the laws of the ancient Jewish tradition, observing the dietary regulations (not easy to do on the Cape in the early '30's) and marking the Holy Days.

By 1933 the Jewish population had grown to about twenty-two families, most of whom lived in Hyannis. Drawn together socially, they discussed a mutual problem of great concern: the lack of formal religious training for their children. With this in mind, the women of the community banded together and formed the Jewish Womans Club in July of 1933. Within two weeks the first Sunday School session was held, with three parents assuming the teaching duties for the 23 small students. "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children..."

One step led to another. The Jewish Mens Club organized in November 1933. That same month, the first Rabbi, Samson Shain, came to help create what was to be the Cape Cod Synagogue. The first formal Friday evening

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service was held in the home of one of the congregants. The learning was now more toward the Conservative branch of Judaism than Orthodox. Bi-weekly lectures on Jewish history and interpretation were begun by the new rabbi and the feeling of community was strengthened. The first bulletin was composed and distributed on December 14, 1933. Editor: Rabbi Shain.

In January of 1934, the Jewish Womans Club voted to become a Sisterhood in the service sense of the word, but did not want to change its name. In 1935, recognizing the need to support Judaism on both local and international levels, the club decided to affiliate itself with Hadassah. Working out a compromise, the name now became Jewish Womans Club and Cape Cod Chapter of Hadassah, with fundraising activities designed to further the goals of both. Hebrew instruction for the children began on September 5, 1934. Sixteen pupils made up the entire student body.

With fellow Jews in mind, the small community held its first UJA appeal drive and raised the impressive sum of \$1,000.00.

The first High Holy Days services were held at the Grange Hall on Louis Street in Hyannis on September 9, 1934, with Rabbi Shain's father serving as cantor for his son's congregation.

A special service was held on July 8, 1934, to dedicate the congregation's first Torah.. A gift of a handcrafted ark was fashioned by one of the charter members to hold the new Torah.

And time passed. Holidays were observed, bar and bas mitzvahs were marked, community parties were enjoyed and the years sped by. During the period of World War II the community participated in the war effort by taking Jewish servicemen into their homes for Friday evening dinner and services and by visiting the wounded at the nearby Camp Edwards hospital.

In the ten years from 1938 to 1948, two more rabbis, first Benjamin Barsky and then Eric Lowenthal, served the congregation, holding services and classes in a series of rented meeting rooms. For regular Friday evening services, two small dark adjoining rooms upstairs over a supermarket sufficed. For several years that location, now Bradford's Hardware on Main Street, Hyannis, was used. When more room was needed to accommodate the High Holy Days capacity crowd, the Hyannis Womans Club on Ocean Street (no

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longer standing) and later the Grange Hall on Louis Street (later the Greek Orthodox Church and presently an apartment house) were rented.

It soon became evident that the congregation must have a permanent house, and so in 1941 it was voted that a Synagogue be built in Hyannis to serve the Jewish people of Cape Cod. For seven years the little congregation planned and saved and fundraised. How courageous of them to assume such a financial burden! And it was with joy and steadfastness of purpose that some fifty people attended the groundbreaking ceremonies at the Winter Street site where our present magnificent building now stands. The first and only Synagogue on Cape Cod, it remained the focus of Jewish life for many years.

By 1950 the Jewish community numbered 53 families and the consensus of the membership was now pointed toward affiliating with the Union of Hebrew Congregations, thereby officially changing its status from Conservative to Reform. This was a major step, but it was agreed that the Reform movement seemed to meet more realistically the religious needs of the modern day American Jew on Cape Cod.

Other needs, of a purely social nature, were met when seven or eight young couples in their early twenties came together in 1951 to form a loosely knit organization called Syn Caps. It was just for fun...and fun it was, lasting about seventeen years officially, with deep friendships existing on individual levels to this day.

This also was an interim period for the Cape Cod Jewish community because for a time there was no ordained rabbi here at all. Services were conducted by laymen when student Rabbi Hirsch Cohen came to assist until 1953 when Rabbi Benjamin Kelson assumed the pulpit.

At the time of the 20th celebration of the founding of the congregation, held on November 19, 1954, the observance quite naturally included a number of area clergy who shared the pulpit with our Rabbi in an ecumenical statement of good will. The weekend included a dinner dance and, on Sunday, a special party for the children of the congregation. Everyone was involved.

For many years the members of Cape Cod Synagogue and the Federated Church of Hyannis visited each others houses of worship during a Brotherhood Week each February. In 1956, Rabbi Harold Gelfman was invited to preach a sermon at the church. This was the first time a rabbi had

ever spoken from that pulpit and it was an important beginning. The neighbors had become friends over the years, and "it was good to dwell together in peace."

The Jewish Womans Club had continued as an important force for progress through all these years. Now, with its membership greatly increased, it considered the advisability of becoming a Sisterhood in name and affiliation. Much discussion ensued, pros and cons were discussed and debated, and finally the decision was made: Sisterhood of Cape Cod Synagogue became the official name.

In the years from 1957 to 1959, Rabbi Harold Spivack served the community. Under his guidance, a Confirmation Class was added to the religious school and the first group of students was prepared and confirmed at Cape Cod Synagogue. The Religious School was flourishing and the hope for the future of Judaism was receiving appropriate attention.

The Mens Club, too, was undergoing changes. Its name had become Brotherhood of Cape Cod Synagogue and in 1958 it reorganized itself completely, emerging as Cape Cod Lodge of B'Nai B'Rith #2179.

The arrival of Rabbi J. Jerome Pine in 1959 saw more progress for the school. Rabbi Pine brought with him a well rounded curriculum for kindergarten through confirmation. This was the first formal curriculum the Religious School had known and it was implemented in the Fall of 1960 to the delight of the School Committee. In 1962 the Synagogue purchased the "house next door", a two story residence which became the official Sunday School.

As the community grew, so did its resources. The Synagogue Library was begun in 1963 as a gift library with a nucleus of 282 books and contributions from the congregation as an enthusiastic community effort. Today it houses hundreds of volumes of history, art, poetry, fiction, periodical and reference materials and is administered by the two dedicated librarians who started it all and have continued to nurture it to this day.

It soon became apparent that a Chapter of Hadassah was needed again on the Cape. This was due to the large numbers of regular and life members who were moving here and wanted to transfer their membership to their new homes. Hadassah never really faded from the minds of Jewish women on the

Cape. It had been carried as a line item in the Sisterhood budgets and annual contributions were sent to headquarters. But, in response to the desires of the abovementioned members, a new charter was applied for and received and in the spring of 1972, the Cape Cod Chapter of Hadassah was reborn.

The Synagogue was now too small for the numbers of people attending services on the High Holy Days, so double sessions were initiated in 1964 to cope with the situation.

As this unprecedented growth spurt continued, the religious leadership changed again, with the arrival of Rabbi Ronald M. Weiss. He was to deal with the benefits and tensions created as the "old" congregation became new. No longer did everyone know everyone else as the small town living patterns began to change.

In 1965 the Town of Barnstable transferred to Cape Cod Synagogue a section of Mosswood Cemetery in Cotuit. This was in exchange for a piece of land previously donated to the Synagogue for a cemetery, but soon needed by the Town for its airport's use. When the "swap" of land completed, Rabbi Weiss consecrated the new cemetery, providing the only burial site on the Cape exclusively for its Jewish population. It was, however, only for residents of the Town of Barnstable, a fact that was to become a real concern in future years. Ultimately, the problem was solved with the acquisition of space at Woodside Cemetery in Yarmouth.

With the increase in population came a need for an increase in associated activities through the Synagogue. In the Fall of 1973, the Leisure Club was formed to provide a social forum for older members. Shortly thereafter, the Minyan Club organized: its purpose was to assemble minyans when no regular services were scheduled. The Minyan Club also helped the community to accommodate traditionalists by setting up a second day of Rosh Hashanah services for the many congregants who desired it.

A volunteer choir was formed, adding new beauty to the ritual of service. An Adult Education Committee created new avenues for intellectual growth, planning discussion groups, films, experiential workshops and a Marriage Encounter weekend. The large numbers of people supported all of this and requested more: a community Seder and a Passover luncheon were arranged to share the holidays.

In 1974-75, there were 78 children enrolled in the elementary grades of the Religious School, 21 in senior school, 43 in Hebrew classes, 14 studying to celebrate their bar/bat mitzvahs and 5 in the Confirmation Class.

With all of this expansion, it was inevitable that a Building Needs Committee be established to plan for the future. This committee was to labor for five years before its work saw fruition. Truly a labor of love.

The 40th anniversary of the community was celebrated on May 31, 1974, with a weekend of events. At Friday evening services, a very special gift was presented in honor of the Founding Families by the community: an old restored Torah, rescued from a European synagogue destroyed in World War II, accompanied by a scroll describing its previous home and a new-remembered congregation.

The years 1975 and 76 brought more changes to the community. A Youth Commission was created to coordinate activities and assist the advisor of CAPTY, our own youth group. The former rabbi's residence was converted to a Community Center, which was to house meetings of the young and older members of the congregation alike and to serve as temporary classrooms for the ever-growing Sunday School. Soon it was to become an official office for the Synagogue.

The community soon found itself embroiled in the moral/financial debate that preceded the decision to sponsor Bingo. Opinions were strong and clearly voiced. In a community vote, it was agreed finally that the majority favored the venture and that there were the necessary teams of ten people per week to run the games. In its first six months of operation, the Bingo Committee turned \$9,000.00 over to the Synagogue treasury.

In November of 1975, seeing the financial feasibility created by the Bingo income, the Building Committee presented plans to the officers of the Synagogue. An exciting vision!

In June of 1976, Rabbi Weiss moved to another community. The next year was one of chaos and coping. A congregation of 243 families needs full time professional leadership. In the absence of this, the volunteer committees worked exceptionally hard, scotch-taping the year together as they went along. Rabbi Sanford Seltzer came to conduct High Holy Days services and to advise the community as to courses of action available until a rabbi could be

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found. Rabbi Albert Goldstein was engaged as a weekend rabbi, responsible for Friday evening services, Saturday morning discussion groups and Sunday morning school. The Pulpit Committee renewed its efforts and continued to search diligently for the rabbi that would be right for Cape Cod Synagogue.

In February of 1977, Rabbi Harold L. Robinson was welcomed as the committee's selection. He would begin in July. Assessing the needs with the proper committees, plans were made. Of prime importance was the school. For the past several years, committee discussions had indicated that a principal and perhaps a school secretary were needed to support the faculty of a dozen teachers and over 100 students. Rabbi Robinson suggested that there was a profession that could fill both positions, that of Cantor-Educator, and a new search began. It ended in success when Cantor Bruce Malin was engaged to fulfill the myriad duties of Cantor-Educator for Cape Cod Synagogue. The staff now numbered two full time clergy, an office secretary, a religious school secretary, an organist, a custodian and eleven members of the school faculty.

Another major milestone was observed on May 5, 1978, when many members and guests attended the ground breaking ceremonies for the long awaited building addition. The Synagogue was now a complex enterprise, administered by a team of professionals and volunteers working together. With a budget of nearly a hundred thousand dollars and a membership approaching three hundred families, it addressed itself to its serious fiscal responsibilities with a number of committees, each geared specifically to one aspect of the total operation.

The Bingo Committee was still working hard as the reality of the building expansion took shape. In its three years and two months of existence it had brought \$149,000.00 in new money to the Building Fund.

For several weeks during the winter of 1979, the Synagogue was uninhabitable. Construction was proceeding apace and critical services such as heat and electricity were interrupted. During this time of upheaval, Friday night services were relocated to the Carl Fearing Schultz Memorial Hall at the Federated Church. The friendship begun so many years ago was still a sound one, and the sharing of worship facilities was an easy thing to do.

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And in April of 1979, before the building was really completed, it was in use. Meetings and simchas took place, as, around and between them, workmen moved rapidly ahead with finishing touches.

And, finally, it was done. The planning and replanning, the delays and despairings, the anxiety and awaiting...all were one. Now there was excitement and enthusiasm. With smiles and mazeltovs on May 25, 1979, we formally dedicated our newly enlarged home, looking forward to new accomplishments and new joys that living as Jews on Cape Cod would bring.

Rabbi Robinson emphasized the concept of "tikun olom", the Jewish responsibility to help care for the world. So, responding to the plight of people living in Southeast Asia, Cape Cod Synagogue formed a Resettlement Committee and brought a 5-member family to the Cape to begin a new life. The committee housed, fed, clothed, healed, employed and educated the family with tender loving care over many months, and saw them through to successful integration in their new community.

Bingo staggered on, with pleas for more volunteers emanating from the dedicated few who continued to make it work. All of us benefited from the interest income generated from Bingo, as it was used to pay for our beautiful new buildings.

In October 1981 Rabbi Robinson started a Saturday morning study group. A wide age range of members attended and enjoyed this group, which was destined to continue for years.

The congregation approved plans to build a sorely needed wing for classrooms and the library. The Learning Center would feature a total of seven classrooms (some fixed, other multi-purposed), the library and two lavatories. The social hall would also be enlarged as a part of this building plan and a youth room would be included.

At the annual meeting in May of 1982, the congregation elected its first woman president, Barbara Horne Sheaffer.

The Community House, former rabbi's home, was sold and moved away from the Synagogue grounds as part of the building expansion plan.

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In a gesture of support and solidarity, one hundred prayer books were sent to our sister congregation, Or Chodesh in Haifa, from Sisterhood and the Synagogue together.

Bingo got a new look: new format, cards, microphones, volunteers and accompanying enthusiasm. Its chairman predicted another two years of successful operation.

The Board accepted the gift of a meditation garden, to be called the Joseph Porter Garden. It would incorporate plantings, walks, and meditation benches as well as an area where up to two hundred people can gather.

In the Fall of 1982, our growth was reflected by a youthful population of 115 children who were enrolled in Religious School.

By a unanimous vote, the Synagogue library was formally named in honor of our founding librarians, who continued to serve regularly. The Leona Penn-Marcy Burman Library is identified by a plaque on its door in appreciation of more than twenty years of service by these intrepid volunteers.

In February of 1981, a subcommittee of the Religious Education Committee was formed to do a feasibility study regarding the establishment of a daycare/preschool.

The 50th anniversary of Cape Cod Synagogue was celebrated on May 13, 1983, with a weekend of activities, religious and social. Friday evening services included a tribute to all Past Presidents, most of whom attended. On Saturday night a Broadway Musical review and champagne reception was a sellout success.

An Endowment Fund was established with a contribution of \$1,000.00 from a summer visitor. The Fund will accept donations in any amount and will be managed by a committee of three members of the congregation.

An important, and first-ever, Interfaith Program was held at St. Francis Xavier Church in November, the result of efforts by the Interfaith Committee of the Cape Cod Council of Churches. Our Cantor Malin was chairman of that committee.

In December of 1988, the La Am Drop In Center was officially opened. An informal gathering, it offered (and continues to) a place for socializing, study, crafts and games. Mostly it is a wonderfully warm group that meets in the Synagogue every Wednesday morning. La Am means "for the people" and it surely is.

The first of ongoing Family Services was initiated in January of 1984, set for the first Friday of each month. Services were scheduled for 7 p.m. to accommodate even the youngest family member.

Another first, a joint service with the Falmouth Jewish Congregation, was held with both rabbis sharing the pulpit.

Operation Moses was an heroic effort by this congregation in December 1984 to save 36 Ethiopian Jews. It raised \$72,000.00 in private donations from our congregants and was augmented by \$3,600.00 in Synagogue funds for that humane undertaking.

Bingo brought in \$93,000.00 in 1984-85, enabling the Synagogue to pay off its building encumbrances.

Other pertinent figures from fiscal 84-85

367 members units were on our rolls

98 kids were in our Sunday School

40 kids were in our Hebrew classes

607 volumes were stacked on our library shelves

And our Endowment Fund reached \$100,000.00

We were growing in many directions as our efforts embraced matters religious, educational and financial in our own house. And we continued to make our presence known in the greater community through outreach and cooperation programs that continued to demonstrate our heritage of responsibility to those around us.

Barbara H. Sheaffer