

Congregation B'nai Jacob History **Phoenixville, Pennsylvania**

Pre-Charter Years – As no synagogue existed in Phoenixville, the Vogels, one of Phoenixville's first Jewish settlers, needed to travel to Philadelphia to worship. In time, their Main Street home became the starting location for Congregation B'nai Jacob synagogue.

About 1880 the Benowitz family arrived from Europe and established a clothing store at 135 E. Bridge Street. Five years later they brought over their children, Morris and Bertha (Mrs. Samuel Gross).

The Siegel, Lang, Kaplan, Neumann, and Phillips families joined the community in the 1880's. About 1900, the Baer, Goldberg, Phillips, Kohn, Einhorn, Lang, and Sugerman families arrived as well. Maggidin (learned travelers) served the community's religious, cultural and educational needs. For special occasions, the group brought in a Rabbi from a larger community and when needing more structure, some families joined Philadelphia congregations.

The small group held religious services in the Siegel home and in 1902 rented a room in the Sturges building for a synagogue and social hall. They also rented a larger location for High Holiday services.

Chartered in 1912 -By 1912 our 30 family community decided to create a more formal religious organization. On November 26, 1912 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania granted an incorporating charter to "the Jewish Congregation B'nai Yacob of Phoenixville, Pa." Incorporating members included Morris Einhorn, Samuel Gross, Samuel Ginns, Harry Hurwitz, Abraham Sugerman, and Morris Lang with initial trustees Harry Hurwitz, Simon Susman, Charles Siegel, and Jacob Raubfogel and charter officers, Isaac Baer and Joseph Kohn. Our first president, Samuel Gross, served more than twenty years.

For the next few years we used an East Bridge Street building next to the Columbia Hotel. When the location proved unsatisfactory, we purchased a Main Street property.

Cemetery Founded - In 1909 Morris Einhorn donated a tract of Montgomery County ground for a cemetery. In 1940 the Herman Neumann estate donated adjoining ground known as the B'nai Israel Cemetery. We then changed the enlarged cemetery's name to "Israel B'nai Jacob" -currently called "B'nai Jacob Cemetery".

World War I Era -The Phoenixville Jewish Community energetically supported World War I efforts. Veteran's Honor Rolls included Allen Phillips, Samuel Miller, Louis Seigel, Jesse and Marcus Neumann, Morris Hofner, Morris Sampson, and Max Raubfogel. At this time congregational youth organized a Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association for recreational and social activities.

Sisterhood Origins - In 1918 our women joined the “The Daughters of Zion” with Mrs. Max Miller as president. The organization became Sisterhood B’nai Jacob in 1927 with Mrs. Lena Goldberg as president and Mary Farkas and Mary Phillips as officers.

Sarah Trachtenberg served as president for over 10 years. An affiliate of the National Women’s League of the United Synagogue of America, the group strongly supports all facets of our Congregation through present day.

Between the World Wars - The Synagogue served as a second home for congregants’ families - most of who lived within a few blocks of the building. Younger congregants met in the backyard. Members kept busy with youth groups, United Jewish Appeal, and the American Hebrew Benevolent Association with Joseph Leichman active with the latter two groups. As late as the 1930’s, we often collected dues as a door-to-door canvass for silver.

In 1933 the congregation added a single story addition with a large social hall and kitchen. The Sisterhood raised funds to repay the addition’s mortgage and in 1947 we held a gala mortgage- burning affair.

1920’s –early 1940’s - Our spiritual leaders; Reverends Jones, Shulman, and Hyman I. Friedman; served a dual role of “Rabbi” and Schochet Mr. Friedman came in the mid twenties from England and raised 3 of his children and a niece through the depression years in the shul’s small second floor living quarters.

In 1941 our first ordained Rabbi, Dr. Davin Schoenberger, came from Germany. As recorded in Congregational meeting July 21, 1941 minutes, Dr. Schoenberger’s program included *“A Religious School, in which boys will prepare for Bar Mitzvah and girls may prepare for confirmation. It will include Sunday School, Hebrew classes, history of our Religion, and Religious Philosophy. Activities for the youth groups will be conducted at the Center. There will be lectures for adults in History of our Religion, Hebrew, and Meaning of our institutions.”* He suggested the possibility of a *“Jewish library”* and added that *“a Jewish note in our social affairs would be desirable.”*

World War II – As World War II approached, the community supported the Red Cross, Valley Forge Army Hospital, U.S.O. and Civil Defense. Members serving in the armed forces included Daniel Baer, Ralph Cherashore, Harry Ehrenkranz, Louis Etter, Joseph Farkas, Alex and Max Fink, Albert, Daniel, Harold, Louis, Martin, and Sidney Goldberg, Alfred Kohn, Martin Green, Lester Nathan, Gordon Phillips, Bernard Sugerman, Frank and Sidney Greenstein, Harold Krechovitz, Ethal Jean Miller (Perry), Harry Miller, Leonard Neumann, Herman and Jacob Phillips, Manuel and Martin Raubfogel and Mitchell Seltzer.

During this time our rabbis were Sidney Lebor, Arthur Weiss, Israel Botwinick and Jacob Kurland.

1945-1960’s - After World War II, returning veterans and many new young families, joined our lay leadership. They decided the Main Street facilities were inadequate and recognized the population center shift away from the Bridge Street area. Rabbi Albert Ginsberg, whom we shared with Lansdale, served from 1950 to 1955. Rabbi Ginsberg up-dated our religious school and encouraged our new B’nai Brith chapter. In the early 1950’s President Harold J. Berger’s four-year administration initiated a building campaign and we purchased the triangular plot of ground at Starr and Manavon Streets.

Daniel Baer became President, and during his three terms led a drive for a new building. Rabbi Kenneth D. Poplack came to us in 1955. An steering committee headed by Nathan Brown and Louis Etter and construction chairmen Albert Goldberg, Baer, Berger, Alfred Kohn, Meyer Shusterman and Sydney Weiss culminated in constructing the original portion of our building with groundbreaking, January 13, 1957 and dedication, March 6, 1959.

In the late 50s and early 60s, the Jewish community grew rapidly as the Phoenixville area became more industrialized and the Schuylkill Expressway (I76) completion made Philadelphia more accessible. Synagogue growth reflected the local population growth. Although basically a Conservative congregation, we made attempts to meet the needs of a heterogeneous membership. At this time, B'nai Jacob marked the transition from a little shul to a vigorous, suburban Jewish Center.

1980's - Further Growth - By the mid 1980's, our building needed up-dating. After a quick population growth and area land cost survey we realized a new building was not feasible. We also realized our present location was central to expected area growth.

The congregation selected John J. Parson as architect and Phoenix Construction Company won the almost one-half million dollar project. Construction started in mid-1989. The project added the present sanctuary and new offices for the Rabbi and administrative staff, expanded and up-dated the kitchen, installed new heating, air conditioning and lighting; renovated the social hall, bathrooms, first floor classrooms, the old library, and lobby (Founders Hall). We dedicated the building on April 19, 1991. During this period Rabbi Harold Kamsler was our spiritual leader.

1990's -The Macy B. Solomon School to present day - By 1995 the religious school outgrew the classrooms with congregants using all available space. A Building Committee of Gill Liss, Estelle Solomon, Paul Drucker, Mike Zatuchni, Chuck Epstein, Andy Baskin, Paul Actor, Mike Trachtenberg, and Wendy Liss explored expanding or moving.

We decided to expand our building and 1996 retained Cornerstone Design Architects to increase the number of classrooms and also to keep the synagogue operational during construction. We added four new classrooms, renovated two classrooms and the lower level, and also constructed a Manavon Street school entrance.

C. Raymond Davis and Sons started construction in March 1999 and we dedicated the new Macy B. Solomon School in October 1999. Hal Katz, Gil Liss and Estelle Solomon led such a successful construction campaign; we soon paid off our mortgage. During this period Rabbi David Meyer was our spiritual leader.

Wendy Liss coordinated a Sisterhood project converting two first floor classrooms to a modern library. The group also furnished the new library and all the classrooms. In 2007 Wendy oversaw a Sisterhood sponsored renovation of the first floor ladies room and in 2009 a Lobby up-date including new art works.

Our current leader, Rabbi Brown, joined us in 2005.