

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TEMPLE BETH EL

The first Jewish congregation in Glens Falls was organized about 1892. In 1920, several families instituted weekend classes to provide their children with a liberal, Jewish education. They quickly recognized the need for a new congregation in the spirit of the Reform movement, and Temple Beth El held its first religious services in 1922 and organized as a Reform congregation in 1924. Initially, services were conducted on Sunday evenings twice a month, by student rabbis and guest clergy. The congregation met in a space above a local store, and its first Torah was housed in a borrowed china cabinet. However, in 1925, with only 35 member families, and support from the local community, the congregation was able to erect the gracious, Colonial-style building which, enlarged, still serves Temple Beth El today. An early member was Adolph S. Ochs, owner and publisher of The New York Times, who had a summer residence on Lake George.

The congregation survived the Great Depression, sent its sons to war, and reached a population peak during the years of the Baby Boom. Afterward, with fewer Jewish children in the area, the Temple combined forces with the local Conservative congregation to create the Temple Synagogue Religious School, which served the families of both congregations for several decades. An affiliation with NFTY was dropped when the religious schools were combined. For some years, the students participated in the B'nai Brith Youth Organization.

At the end of 2013, Temple Beth El ended its affiliation with the combined religious school and resumed education of its children with a Reform curriculum. Approximately twenty students learn Jewish history and observance, the Hebrew language, and how to celebrate Shabbat and the holidays. They observe their B'nai Mitzvah, as well as Confirmation. As yet, there has been no resumption of formal youth group activity. In many cases, our students are the only Jewish children in their respective public schools.

Until the 1960's, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony was rarely observed, and kippot and tallitot were not seen in the Sanctuary. Nor, in the early days, was Hebrew instruction included in the religious school curriculum. The spiritual life of Temple Beth El has been shaped in large part by two long-tenured Rabbis. Rabbi Dr. Kurt L. Metzger, a scholar and refugee from Hitler's Germany, served at Temple Beth El from World War II until the early 1960's, and retained a close connection to the congregation until his death. Rabbi Emeritus Richard J. Sobel retired in 2005 after twenty-five years of service and continued to live in the Glens Falls area until he passed away in 2009. His widow, Elaine, remains active in the local Jewish community. Following a brief period with another rabbi after Rabbi Sobel's retirement, our spiritual needs were met by a student rabbi until July, 2008, when we welcomed the newly-ordained Rabbi Matthew J. Durbin, who left in June, 2014, to lead a larger congregation. Our current rabbi is Rabbi Jeffrey N. Ronald, who has been with us since July, 2014.

Today, Temple Beth El is a community which warmly welcomes traditional, unaffiliated, intermarried, and non-traditional families, and all degrees of observance of Judaism. Our

active members live in Glens Falls, the surrounding area, and as far as an hour away. A number of congregants have maintained their memberships even after moving to distant locations. Our members and regular visitors also include families who vacation in the Adirondacks or have second homes in the area. In recent years, we have been privileged to welcome several of the partners of our intermarried members as Jews by choice.

As a congregation, our current practice is to conduct a Shabbat service on Friday evening, followed by an Oneg Shabbat, as well as Torah study on Shabbat morning.

Approximately once a month, an early, child-friendly Friday evening service is followed by a potluck dinner. With the assistance of a local caterer, we gather in our large Home Room for a community Chanukah dinner and a Second Night Seder. We observe Yom Hashoah with the local Conservative congregation at a service which alternates between the two synagogues. For several years, we have invited the members of a predominantly African American Baptist church to join us in a special Shabbat service to commemorate the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We have combined our adult clubs as the Chai Society, which conducts educational and entertaining programs on general subjects, usually on Sunday mornings or afternoons. Temple periodically offers a distinguished lecture series named in memory of Rabbi Richard J. Sobel. Other activities include Café Beth El, which produces musical performances, and a new tradition, Latke Fest, a popular, annual cooking competition. Our community outreach efforts have focused on support of a local food pantry and soup kitchen.