

The Hebrew Benevolent Society (1784)

The Hebrew Benevolent Society of Charleston (Hebra Gemilut Hasadim in Hebrew or literally “Society for Deeds of Loving Kind”) is the oldest Jewish charitable society in the United States, founded June 25, 1784, just after the Revolutionary War.

Like other ethnic organizations of the time, such as the St. Andrews Society (Scots), the Hibernian Society (Irish) and the Saint George Society (English), the Hebrew Benevolent Society’s mission was to help less fortunate Jews of Charleston. It gave aid to those who were sick, indigent or unable to work, as well as to new immigrants. The society buried the dead in accordance with Jewish religious law and tradition. Its original seal depicts a skeleton representing the Angel of Death with a scythe on the right hand and an hour glass in the left hand. Its motto, “Tsadakah Tatzil Mi-Mavet,” means “Charity Delivers from Death,” Proverbs 10:2.

In the 19th century, the society held fund-raising events such as benefit balls to raise funds for the poor. Non-Jewish Charlestonians recognized and appreciated the role of the Hebrew Benevolent Society by aiding in its effort. The St. Andrew’s Society, for example, declined any compensation for the use of its hall. Members of the society were assigned places alongside other ethnic organizations in the funeral procession of John C. Calhoun in 1850.

After the Civil War, when most Charlestonians were economically devastated, the society fell on hard times. It reorganized in October 1866, sending representatives to New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore to raise funds. From the 1870s and 1880s into the 20th century, the society helped Jewish refugees from Russia’s pogroms and assisted victims of the 1886 earthquake.

In 2011 the Society celebrates its 242nd anniversary with its traditional, formal, men-only dinner, and continues in its benevolent mission.

Hebrew Orphan Society (1801)

When the Hebrew Orphan Society was chartered in 1801, the Hebrew Benevolent Society was operating as an arm of Congregation Beth Elohim. Thus, the Hebrew Orphan Society is the oldest *incorporated* Jewish charitable organization in America that is still in existence.

The Hebrew Benevolent Society was open to all Jewish men and for it’s first 100 years the Orphan Society had a general membership. In 1944 membership was restricted to 18 men (18 is significant as the word for the number in Hebrew is “chai” which also means “life”). Membership became a recognition of community service. Today there are 36 (double chai or life) men and women. Membership is still by invitation. Doing good deeds (mitzvah) in the community is still a criteria for membership.

The translated full name of the organization is “Society for the Relief of Orphans and Children of Indigent Parents. This name in Hebrew and English and the date 1801 can be seen on a plaque between the second and third story windows of the Society’s building at 88 Broad Street. Although the society owned the building from 1836 to 1932, they rarely housed orphans there. They society gave money to families who kept orphans in their homes. When the first synagogue on Hasell Street burned in 1838, the congregation used the Hebrew Orphan Society building for services while a new structure was being built on Hasell Street.

Today, the organization gives scholarships to the College of Charleston and supports other organizations that give medical aid in the community.