

Temple Emanu-El of San Jose

An Essay
Presented to
The California Pioneers
Of Santa Clara County

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Preface

Temple Emanu-El has a rich past of 140 years and a hopeful future. Looking around the synagogue, alone, there are many reminders of that past. In it's lobby is the Minute Book from Bickur Cholim's first meetings way back in the 1860's. All around the walls are the names of the resting souls that helped make the temple what it is today. Through the double doors far in the distance one can see the Ten Commandment Tablets and the Ner Tamid, from the original synagogue, staring down in a holy manner. Echoing off all the walls are vivid memories of weddings, funerals, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and memorable sermons given by past rabbis. A heavenly light gently illuminates the chapel through stained glass windows, which for some brings back memories of both joyous and tragic events. That's not the only reminder of the past in this little room; walking up to the bihim, or altar, one finds an ancient, sacred Torah. History is all around.

Jewish Pioneers

Jewish pioneers made San Jose their home in the 1850's. They came here from Europe in hopes of a better life.

The first Jewish pioneer to die served as a reason for the Jews in Santa Clara to form a community. Henceforth the Common Council, known today as the City Council, formed a committee consisting of "two Protestants and two Catholics and two Jews." This committee helped the county surveyor to select burial ground for each of these three faiths at the Home of Peace Cemetery, now called Oak Hill Cemetery. The Jews bought three acres for one dollar. ⁽¹⁾ About ten years later, trees and a gravel road were added to the Jewish acres for three hundred dollars. ⁽²⁾ It is here that the earliest known Jewish tombstone in San Jose, belonging to a young boy, Joseph Brownshield, lies. The cemetery is still owned and operated by Temple Emanu-El. Home of Peace holds traditional monuments, memorial lawn sections, mausoleum, cremation niches, and urn plots.

For several years after the cemetery was set up, little took place among the Jewish community. In 1860 it was noted that, "Ten of the fifty Jews in San Jose are married. They have neither a benevolent society nor a hazzan [sic] but on the New Years and Day of Atonement they sent for a cantor." ⁽³⁾

On August 5, 1861, the local press advertised a meeting to be held by Marcus Stern, the founder of a leather goods business, and the Rich brothers. It was to be held

at City Hall "for the purpose of organizing a Hebrew Society." The society was named Bickur Cholim, suggested by a founder, Morris Lubliner. Translated to English, the name Bickur Cholim means, "visiting the sick" . When formed one hundred and forty years ago in 1862, the founders laid down three main purposes for the society. First was the need to establish religious worship. Second was the necessity for establishing care for the needy and third was to establish a burial place for Jews. (4)

After the meeting at City Hall, Bickur Cholim's first officers were elected. Jacob Levy served as president, Jacob Rich as vice president, Morris Lubliner was treasurer, Solomon Eisner as secretary, with Meyer Levy, S. Morris and Hyman Rich as the first trustees. Two of them, Lubliner and Rich, led the first High Holy Services at the Masonic Hall. (5)

Bickur Cholim Society

In 1862, a building fund campaign was set up. Soon the society began looking at prices and locations for the new synagogue. From the money raised, eight hundred and fifty dollars were used to buy the land. ⁽⁶⁾ It was purchased from members Jacob and Meyer Levy. The location was at the northeast corner of Third and San Antonio Streets. For the building to be completed, half the land bought had to be sold for twelve hundred dollars. ⁽⁷⁾ In addition to local funds, contributions came from as far away as Paris, France.

The work on the synagogue is progressing rapidly. The siding is now on, as is the sheeting overhead. Part of the floor is down, and when a roof is put on it, the building will present an almost finished appearance. On the front elevation some peculiar and attractive features have been introduced, which did not at first appear. The building will not be plain and uninviting, as was supposed at the beginning, but will be highly ornamented and really beautiful. ⁽⁸⁾

On Sunday August 21, 1870, the five thousand two hundred dollar synagogue was dedicated with a Grand Inaugural Ball. ⁽⁹⁾ The synagogue was sixty by forty feet and could seat two hundred and six members. Attached to the new building were a few schoolrooms. At this time there were thirty-nine family congregants.

Early Leaders

The first ordained rabbi, Rabbi Mayer Sol Levy, came to the congregates from London. Soon after arriving in San Jose he sent for his wife and son. He conducted the first confirmation and Bar Mitzvah. Then in 1874 the congregation was honored to have founder and President of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, as their guest. He strongly wished that Bickur Cholim would join the U.A.H.C. (Union of American Hebrew Congregations), the organization of reformed Jewish congregations. Rabbi Levy wanted to accept the offer, but the members didn't want to be affiliated with the reform movement at the time. Marcus remembered that "after many furious meetings that lasted well into the wee hours we finally settled on the basis that we didn't care if they prayed with their hats on or off, tallith or prayer book of their choice." ⁽¹⁰⁾

At the time of Rabbi Mayer Sol Levy's departure from San Jose in 1883, Bickur Cholim had expanded. There were forty-two religious school attendants, the real estate value was ten thousand dollars, and there were about two hundred sixty five Jews living in San Jose. ⁽¹¹⁾ The Reverend Henry Philip Loewenthal followed by Rabbi Gustave Adolph Danziger, and later Rabbi Aaron B.J. Brown served as the religious leaders for the congregation until the end of the century.

New Century

From 1903 Rabbi Julius David Nathanson served as religious leader until his death in 1916. He had a different view on Judaism, and combined Orthodoxy and Reform ideas with which to lead his services. The rabbi's nephew, Norman Jesse Nathanson, once said, "He was trying to please the Orthodox and...the Reform and he was getting caught and squeezed in the middle, all the way." ⁽¹²⁾ Nathanson also stated that during years of war, activity at the synagogue declined. "Many, many, many a night we did not have services because nobody would show up." ⁽¹³⁾

Although the temple was built just after the earthquake of 1868, it did not completely escape damage from the earthquake of 1906. However, Bickur Cholim luckily had only minor damage due to its frame structure.

Jesse Levy, the congregation's first Bar Mitzvah, noticed the building's need for refurbishing. He quickly helped to raise funds to refurbish the synagogue. After Bickur Cholim became affiliated with the U.A.H.C. and the reform movement in 1917, membership and attendance increased. The congregation was given a new rabbi, Rabbi Harvey B. Franklin.

With membership increasing it soon became impossible to hold religious school in the synagogue. So in 1923 a community house was built next to the synagogue. Colorful glass windows were added to the sanctuary and a memorial plaque was placed beneath each panel that named the people who donated the window.

Tragedy

The Great Depression hit the synagogue just as it hit other communities. San Jose was predominantly agricultural and many lost their property. Bickur Cholim set up a soup kitchen to help the unemployed. Store owners and other members of the congregation opened hearts and home to give succor. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Rabbi Franklin recalled that when police discovered an unknown trap door on one of the synagogues' outside walls, they found an inner apartment that was being used by vagrants and contained an old nonfunctionable bomb.

Meanwhile the United States had formed a policy of isolationism and did not pay much attention to events in Europe until years later. The Nazi events in Germany and other countries in Europe startled Jewish communities throughout the United States. The few refugees that were allowed into the United States and made it to San Jose were offered jobs and places to stay by the kind members of Bickur Cholim.

The membership increased. Activities were still constant. Sisterhood put on monthly luncheons, tzedakah continued, holidays kept up traditions and made happy memories during the tragic years. The Board of Trustees kept up the old facility and "how to pay the light bill." Dues were still just fifty cents per month. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Tragedy again hit home in 1940 when the seventy-year-old building was destroyed by fire. Unfortunately, the building was unrepairable. Kurt Oppen, a German man working at the gas station across the street, saved all the torahs, glass, and eternal light, Ner Tamid.

The old property was sold and the current property was bought. The first Bickur Cholim location is marked by a city historical marker and is included in the San Jose Historical Walk.

World War II delayed construction of the new synagogue. Local churches kindly offered facilities for the congregation's needs. In 1948, the new facility on University and Myrtle Street was dedicated. Bickur Cholim renamed this synagogue Temple Emanu-El. In English this translates to "God be With Us." The new facility consisted of a sanctuary that sat four hundred and fifty, a foyer garden, and social hall. The tablets of Law and Ner Tamid were placed in the sanctuary.

Golden Years

Following the dedication of the bigger facility, membership again increased. The Temple Emanu-El Drama Group was formed. Two years after the dedication Rabbi Joseph Gitin became leader of Temple Emanu-El. Reflecting on the early years that he spent at the temple he recalls, "it was like a large Havurah, a small, warm, intimate group."

Friday night services soon were packed with 153 people in attendance. During the next twenty-five years membership increased and buildings were added. Religious, social, civic, and educational programs grew constantly. In the early 1950's, Temple Emanu-El was the only synagogue in the county. In order to accommodate everyone, duplicate services had to be held on High Holy Days and seats were reserved. Three building phases soon took place. The first was a five thousand square foot social hall dedicated in 1955. It served social, religious and educational purposes. More land was purchased next to the facilities. It would later hold a huge school building. Pesach, or spring, 1956 marked the dedication of the chapel connected to the sanctuary. The old glass windows from the original building were placed in the chapel. The final phase involved the building of a schoolhouse at a cost of two hundred thousand dollars, which was dedicated on September 13, 1959. The building contains twenty classrooms.

Rabbi Gitin became extremely involved in the community. A column in the monthly synagogue newspaper highlighted the rabbi's activities in the community. He regularly made speeches. A tradition started in 1950 when Thanksgiving Day services

were held in conjunction with the Calvary Methodist Church. In addition, a thirty-minute program was broadcast on radio KEEN on Yom Kippur. From year to year the program changed slightly but it always included traditional music, readings, and a message from Rabbi Gitin. Once in a while the temple's choir and cantor were featured.

Facilities

Temple Emanu-El contains many facilities. Its sanctuary seats 500 people and a newly refurbished hand-carved torah ark. The wall facing Meredith Avenue contains beautiful and historical stained glass windows that portray Jacob's ladder. On the opposite wall is a set of dark wooden panels that lead to the adjoining chapel.

The temple house, or social hall, contains a lobby with past clippings of the temple's immense history. Newly refurbished in 2001, the hall contains a stage and adjacent kitchen. Members can rent the hall for social events including weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs.

By the entrance of the chapel is the temple's gift shop. Volunteers run the shop weekly. In it one may buy gifts, cards and other Jewish items. During hot summer months the courtyard is full of religious services and social events. In winter parents come to work while students are in school. Next to the courtyard is located the Benefactor's Friendship Room. This small room acts as a meeting hall for the temple's many different groups.

Community Involvement

Temple Emanu-El played a big part in helping establish other synagogues around the Santa Clara Valley of which Congregation Sinai was the first in 1952. The Board of Trustess and Rabbi Gitin also were deeply involved in the establishment of the Camp Swig U.A.H.C., dedicated on August 2, 1953 and then known as Camp Saratoga.

With membership at a high, social needs of the congregation grew. Adult Home Study and the XYZ (Xtra Years of Zest) were formed in 1968. Soon other groups formed; the Ladies Directorate, Mr. and Mrs. Group, Brotherhood, youth groups, singles groups, and an expanded Havurah network. The members of Sisterhood, the oldest and largest auxiliary, serve the congregation.

The ways that services were run changed because traditions changed. Hebrew was used more often, and discussions with congregation members took place at some sermons. Women were called to the Torah, and Bar and Bat Mitzvah services were introduced. Finally, different kinds of and more music were entwined into services. As a result of the many changes, congregational participation increased. Membership again increased so much that in 1964 High Holy Day services were held in the sanctuary and Temple House for the first time. Years later the temple even had to use the San Jose Center for Performing Arts. Meanwhile the religious school was being led under Principal Fred W. Marcus until 1981. It was the first to be accredited by the U.A.H.C. and the first to hold school in the Hebrew Union.

By 1976 over one thousand families belonged to Temple Emanu-El, ⁽¹⁶⁾

seven hundred students were enrolled in the religious school and two hundred and fifty were in the Hebrew school. ⁽¹⁷⁾ In honor of the retiring Rabbi the school building was renamed the Rabbi Joseph Gitin and Rosalie Gitin Religious School. After Gitin's retirement in 1976 assistant Rabbi David Robins became the senior rabbi.

Four years later the bimah, or stage, in the sanctuary was remodeled for the first time since its original placement in 1948. Then in 1985 Rabbi Dr. Jonathan V. Plaut came from Canada. In addition to his rabbinical duties he served as Chaplain to the San Jose Fire Department and lectured at Santa Clara University and was chairman of the Rabbinic Association of Greater San Jose. Rabbi Plaut also wrote a column for the Jewish Federation Community News and was a member of the San Jose Rotary Club.

Education

Temple Emanu-El's Rabbi Joseph and Rosalie Gitin Religious School is located on the Temple grounds. It is three stories tall, with the basement floor used as the pre-school, which recently reopened its doors. Members, adults and teenagers run the Sunday school. Curriculum guidelines are made by UAHC. Mora and madrihim (teachers and teacher aids) teach people of all ages.

Preschool through eighth grade students are taught on Sunday mornings. Babies and parents meet through a program called "Shalom Chaverim." High school students are taught through a Teen Jewish Studies program Wednesday nights. Tenth grade Confirmation students meet with the rabbi weekly in preparation for their confirmation. Kallah, eleventh and twelfth graders, are taught Wednesday nights as well. Children are taught lessons about Torah, ethics, Hebrew, current events, Israel, values, prayer, customs and history. Music and art programs enrich the students' learning. A Judaic library is also in the building containing hundreds of books from children's to adults'.

Hebrew school is taught on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. The class is started at a young age, preferably about eight years old. The children are taught Hebrew with an emphasis on t'fillot (prayers). Each year the students lead a Friday night family service and upon completion of four to five years of Hebrew school lead a Friday or Saturday service called a Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

The preschool offers full and half-day programs for children eighteen months to

five years of age. Here they develop basic skills such as ABC's, 123's, science, music, and art and go on field trips. They celebrate Jewish holidays and customs. Every Friday Shabbat is celebrated as well.

Adults have the opportunity to learn more about Jewish history, culture, Hebrew, relationship building and personal growth. The rabbi, professors, scholars, and volunteers throughout the community come to lead these educational groups.

Present

After Rabbi Plaut's fifteen years of service to the congregation, Rabbi Mark Schiffan's service followed. Rabbi Dana Magat took over the rabbinic job at Temple Emanu-El. He was originally from Los Angeles, California. Rabbi Magat was raised in a reformed Jewish home and was the first known in his family to become a rabbi. He came to San Jose from his past rabbinic job in San Diego. Rabbi said he was "interviewed at various places and this was the only place I felt a connection to...looking for a place to be a right match with my views...this was the place."

Under Magat the temple continues to flourish. Sisterhood and Brotherhood have taken active parts in congregation events with events such as Brotherhood's blood drives. The youth groups are being lead by the Rabbi and have strong goals for the future. Religious school this past year opened up a preschool. The 2002 Confirmation class is donating money as their class gift for an ambulance to be bought for Israel. Teen Jewish studies are held every Wednesday night with the Rabbi leading the confirmation class. Mitzvah days are held to help the community. Student's sadaka money is sent to Israel. This past year the torahs and temple house each were refurbished.

Security has also been raised due to recent events around the world such as the fighting in Israel and many anti-Semitic acts shown across the United States. Rabbi Magat sadly noted, "there is greater anti-Semitism in the United States and thus every synagogue and Jewish community has heightened security...of which we can't talk about." Although Temple Emanu-El of San Jose is fortunate, it has not been hit badly by

anti Semitic acts as severe as other downtown congregations. At the time of the three synagogue fires some graffiti swastikas were painted on parts of the temple. It was assumed that this was an act played by a few kids. (18)

Future

Temple Emanu-El serves the community well. Some of the temple's traditions have changed through the years. "As Reform Judaism changes, so too does our synagogue. Reform Judaism is about balancing tradition and changing with modern times," wrote Rabbi Magat. "We do not judge others. We are loving and warm," making Temple Emanu-El a good Jewish community for people of all ages and cultural backgrounds to join."

The temple has many plans and goals for its future. "Bring back our past glory for our synagogue to become capable of what it is capable of becoming," Rabbi said proudly. First, "being a part of the interfaith community." Secondly, "having a top notch school for all ages." Finally, "being a place that provides extended family for Jews and those who wish to come through our doors."

As Rabbi Gitin once said, "We have a fine rabbi...It [Temple Emanu-El] has the facilities, the leadership, the enthusiasm, great potential!"

Leaders of Temple Emanu-El once agreed that,

There are many people and their families participating in the growth of Temple Emanu-El. From the earliest records to today, one sees involvement, commitment, concern, and caring. With...help and God's will, surely we shall go from strength to strength. ⁽¹⁹⁾

Endnotes

1) Temple Emanu-El of San Jose; 125th Anniversary Commemorative Yearbook. June, 1987. pg. 2

2) Ibid. pg 3.

3) I.J. Benjamin's "Three years in America: 1859 – 1862," where he tells of his March 19 – 21, 1860 visit.

4) San Jose Mercury News. "Temple Emanu-El has Anniversary." Sunday, December 23, 1956.

5) Arbuckle, Clyde. Clyde Arbuckle's History of San Jose. San Jose, CA: Memorabilia of San Jose, 1986. pg. 267.

6) Temple Emanu-El of San Jose; 125th Anniversary Commemorative Yearbook. June, 1987. pg. 2.

7) Ibid. pg 3.

8) San Jose Weekly Mercury, April 7, 1870, p. 3.

9) Temple Emanu-El of San Jose; 125th Anniversary Commemorative Yearbook. June, 1987. pg. 3.

9) Arbuckle, Clyde. Clyde Arbuckle's History of San Jose. San Jose, CA: Memorabilia of San Jose, 1986. pg. 267.

10) Arbuckle, Clyde. Clyde Arbuckle's History of San Jose. San Jose, CA: Memorabilia of San Jose, 1986. pg. 268.

11) Temple Emanu-El of San Jose; 125th Anniversary Commemorative Yearbook. June, 1987.

12) Ibid. p. 12.

13) Ibid.

14) Schwartz, Jane. Temple Emanu-El Connections. "Our First Hundred and Forty Years." (San Jose), March 2002.

15) Arbuckle, Clyde. Clyde Arbuckle's History of San Jose. San Jose, CA: Memorabilia of San Jose, 1986. pg 268.

16) Temple Emanu-El of San Jose; 125th Anniversary Commemorative Yearbook. June, 1987.

17) Ibid.

18) Magat, (Rabbi) Dana. Temple Emanu-El of San Jose. April, 17, 2002 (interview).

19) Temple Emanu-El of San Jose; 125th Anniversary Commemorative Yearbook. June, 1987. pg. 16.

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