

= Congregation Beth Israel (Meridian , Mississippi) =

Congregation Beth Israel in Meridian , Mississippi , is a Reform Jewish congregation founded in 1868 and a member of the Union for Reform Judaism . The congregation 's first permanent house of worship was a Middle Eastern @-@ style building constructed in 1879 . The congregation moved to another building built in the Greek Revival style in 1906 , and in 1964 moved to a more modern building , out of which they still operate .

The congregation was initially made up of only ten families but grew to include 50 members by 1878 . By the time their second building was built in 1906 , the congregation included 82 members , and Meridian as a whole had grown to include 525 Jewish residents by 1927 . By the 2000s there were fewer than forty , mostly elderly Jews remaining in the city , however , and the congregation no longer has a full @-@ time rabbi . Former rabbis include Judah Wechsler , after whom the Wechsler school was named , and William Ackerman , whose wife Paula Ackerman became the first woman to perform rabbinical duties in the country after her husband 's unexpected death .

In 1968 , the education building of the new complex was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan . Pieces of glass were salvaged from the destruction and are now incorporated into the front windows of the current synagogue building . The congregation owns and maintains a historic cemetery at 19th Street and 15th Avenue which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989 .

= = History = =

In the early days of Lauderdale County before Meridian was established , the nearby town of Marion was the largest settlement in the area . The families of Abraham Threefoot , Isaac Rosenbaum , Leopold Rosenbaum , E. Lowenstein , and Jacob Cohen lived in Marion during these early years . These families , along with other Jews in Marion , worked with Jews from the up @-@ and @-@ coming Meridian to build a temple halfway between the two towns . After the American Civil War , Meridian began to grow rapidly and Marion began to decline . As a result , many of Marion 's Jews elected to move to Meridian . In 1868 , the Jewish community established the first Jewish congregation in Lauderdale County , Beth Israel , and bought the lot which is now the Beth Israel Cemetery for \$ 100 (today \$ 2 @,@ 000) .

The congregation initially consisted of only ten families and met in several temporary locations before moving to a permanent building . These locations included a house on 24th Avenue and 9th Street , a room above Carney 's Grocery Store , and Sheehan Hall . In this interim period , the congregation grew to include 50 members by 1878 , with David Burgheim serving as rabbi . The Middle Eastern style building at the corner of 8th Street and 22nd Avenue , constructed by the growing congregation in 1879 , was the first building in the city with gas @-@ powered lighting . Rabbi Burgheim was succeeded by Rabbi W. Weinstein , then Rabbi Jacobs , and then Rabbi Judah Wechsler . Wechsler , who became rabbi in 1887 , led a movement to provide public schools for blacks , which culminated in a bond issue to construct the first brick public school building for African Americans in the state . The Wechsler School was named after him and has since been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and as a Mississippi Landmark . The congregation stayed in this building for several years , before eventually being forced to move due to complaints of flies attracted by horse droppings outside of a nearby retail store .

In 1906 , a new Greek Revival octagonal synagogue designed by architect P.J. Krouse and modelled after the Temple of Athena Nike was built at the corner of 11th Street and 24th Avenue . The marble steps leading to the entrance of the building were flanked by large Ionic columns . The new synagogue could seat 500 and featured stained glass windows displaying the Ten Commandments , a menorah , the Star of David , and Noah 's Ark . A fire damaged the building during its first year of operation , and while it was being repaired , services were held at St. Paul 's Episcopal Church . By 1907 , the congregation had grown to include 82 members and was led by Rabbi Max Raisin . By 1927 , the Jewish community in Meridian had grown to 525 people , partly due to an influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe . The members of Beth Israel sponsored these newcomers , helping them to find jobs and homes and holding night classes to teach them English .

Some of the congregation 's members had preferred a more strict form of worship and a smaller Orthodox congregation , Ohel Jacob , had been formed in 1895 . The two congregations had good relations , however , and a number of Meridian Jews belonged to both .

In 1951 , the congregation included 100 members and was the second largest Jewish community in the state . When Rabbi William Ackerman , who had served the congregation from 1924 to 1950 , suddenly died while still in service , Beth Israel asked his wife Paula Ackerman to take his place until they could find a replacement . No women had been ordained at this time , and it would be a full 20 more years before the first woman would be officially ordained in the United States . Nonetheless , without ordination Paula Ackerman served as " spiritual leader " (the congregation elected not to call her " rabbi ") for three years until Beth Israel could find another . Despite the unwillingness to call Ackerman " rabbi , " she performed all the duties of a normal rabbi , including conducting weekly Shabbat services , giving sermons , and performing marriages and funerals . In spite of much media attention and criticism from other Jews in the country , the congregation remained united under her leadership . (Ackerman would later move to her original home of Pensacola , Florida , where she would serve as an interim rabbi at Temple Beth @-@ El for nine months in 1962 until a replacement was found .)

By 1964 , the temple was in need of repairs , and some older members found it difficult to get up the steep marble steps at the entrance . Instead of repairing their 60 @-@ year @-@ old building in downtown , they purchased a 5 @-@ acre (2 @.@ 0 ha) plot in the Broadmoor residential subdivision of Meridian and built a new synagogue . The new facility , located at 57th Court and 14th Avenue , was dedicated in December 1964 and was composed of a 200 @-@ seat sanctuary , a social hall with a kitchen and a library , and an education building .

= = = 1968 Ku Klux Klan bombing = = =

During the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s , the leadership of Beth Israel spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan 's attacks on black churches . In response , Thomas Tarrants of Mobile , Alabama , who had helped bomb the synagogue building of Beth Israel Congregation and its rabbi 's house there bombed Beth Israel 's education building on May 28 , 1968 . The blast was caused by about 15 sticks of dynamite planted by Tarrants and his accomplice , Danny Joe Hawkins , a top hitman in the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan . The force of the blast knocked down several walls of the education building and caved in part of the roof while also destroying a door at the opposite end of the synagogue building . A hole approximately 24 inches (61 cm) in diameter was left in the concrete floor , and damages were estimated to be around \$ 50 @,@ 000 (equivalent to \$ 340 @,@ 000 today) . A reward of \$ 10 @,@ 000 was offered by the Meridian City Council , and \$ 15 @,@ 000 extra was promised by the Jewish community of the city . According to Sammy Feltenstein , past president of Congregation Beth Israel , pieces of stained glass that survived the bombing were salvaged and adorn the front window of the synagogue today .

On June 30 , Tarrants returned to Meridian to bomb the home of Meyer Davidson , an outspoken leader of the Jewish community , on 29th Avenue . The FBI and police chief Roy Gunn convinced Raymond and Alton Wayne Roberts , local Klan members , to gather information about the Klan 's operations . Alton was free on bond after being convicted in connection with the Mississippi civil rights workers murders in 1964 . Leaders of the Jewish communities in Jackson and in Meridian had raised money to pay the two informants , who tipped off the FBI about the attack before it happened . Fifteen police officers were hidden around Davidson 's house shortly after midnight when a car stopped about 50 feet (15 m) away from the house . Tarrants exited the vehicle with a box , later found to include 29 sticks of dynamite , and approached Davidson 's carport . When police ordered him to stop , he dropped the box and fled to his vehicle . Officers then chased him for about 15 blocks before ramming the back of his vehicle , ending the chase . Tarrants opened fire on the policemen with a German @-@ made 9mm submachine gun , striking officer J.M. Hatcher four times in the chest (though critically injured , the officer survived) . Tarrants fled through the neighborhood continuing to fire at the policemen . Robert Burton , a resident of the neighborhood , opened his door to see what was going on and was struck by stray bullets . Police eventually found

Tarrants in a pool of his own blood in a local resident 's backyard . Kathy Ainsworth , a 26 @-@ year @-@ old fifth grade school teacher from Jackson who had helped with the bombing of Jackson 's synagogue a few months earlier , was found dead in the car with a loaded pistol in her purse . The car 's owner was identified to be Danny Joe Hawkins , who had helped bomb Beth Israel ; he was arrested on robbery charges a few weeks later . Tarrants survived his wounds and was sentenced to a thirty @-@ year term in Parchman prison . He was paroled eight years into his term to enter the University of Mississippi after a religious conversion , and in 1992 he was training missionaries in North Carolina .

= = Cemetery = =

Besides their main campus in Broadmoor , the congregation also operates Beth Israel Cemetery , listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989 . Located at 19th Street and 5th Avenue , it was originally outside of Meridian 's city limits and was intended to be a rural cemetery , but the city has since expanded and annexed the area containing the cemetery . The cemetery contains generations of German and Alsatian immigrants , as well as many big names of the largely mercantile Jewish community of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries . Beth Israel Cemetery is the only remaining built memorial for many of Meridian 's early Jews since the era of the 1879 and 1906 temple buildings , neither of which still stands .

A stuccoed brick fence with cast iron gates and an iron Star of David enclose the cemetery . Within the walls , there are two main pathways which meet in the center of the cemetery at a circular decorative piece including a fountain . The oldest graves are in the northern half of the cemetery while newer graves were added progressively south . Many grave sites are adorned with well @-@ maintained Victorian era funerary art , which gives the cemetery its historic significance . Among the monuments include the grave enclosure of the Winner family , which includes a bronze bust of Mark Winner , and two marble angels at the entrance of the plot . Other examples include the grave of David L. Rosenbaum , topped with marble shoes and stockings , the grave of Julius Elson , marked by a carved marble fainting couch , and a memorial to Mattimore Meyer , featuring a marble angel .

Because the cemetery is so small ? only 2 @.@ 9 acres (1 @.@ 2 ha) ? it cannot be fully compared to such prolific rural cemeteries as Mount Auburn Cemetery in Massachusetts , but it was clearly laid out in the rural cemetery fashion . Many of the first people buried here were European immigrants , so that could explain why there are no trees on the property . Jewish cemeteries in Europe are generally not planted with trees because of the possibility that roots could disturb the bodies .

= = Decline of the Jewish community = =

Congregation Beth Israel experienced decline along with the rest of the city and state 's Jewish community . The Jewish population in Mississippi peaked in 1927 at 6 @,@ 420 and has since decreased steadily . By 2001 , only 1 @,@ 500 Jews remained in the state . Children of the original Jewish immigrants ? mostly merchants ? were more interested in going to college to become professionals than taking over family businesses . The rise of national retail chains pressured many Jews to move to larger cities , leaving empty storefronts to line streets of smaller cities that were once economic centers . As of 2006 , there were thirteen Jewish congregations left in the state , and only two still had a full @-@ time rabbi . Meridian as a whole has also seen a decline in population . Between the censuses in 1980 and 2000 , the city 's population declined over 16 % from 46 @,@ 577 to 39 @,@ 968 .

By the early 21st century , there were fewer than 40 Jews remaining in the city of Meridian , most of whom were elderly . Ohel Jacob , the local Orthodox congregation , first shared services with Beth Israel on all but High Holy Days and then disbanded completely in 1990 , with its handful of members joining Beth Israel . By the 2000s , there were no longer enough children in the Beth Israel congregation to support a Sunday school class or youth group . Beth Israel no longer has a full @-@ time rabbi ; instead , since 2005 , retired rabbi David Goldstein from Touro Synagogue in New

Orleans , leads services once a month . The synagogue serves about 30 member families and houses a Family Growth Services Group , which " seeks to sustain and advance the reach and contributions of the Jewish community within Meridian . " In January 2010 , Beth Israel launched a Family Relocation Program , which provided grants of up to \$ 25 @, @ 000 to families looking to relocate to the Meridian area .