

= Congregation Beth Israel (New Orleans) =

Congregation Beth Israel (Hebrew : ??? ?????) is a Modern Orthodox synagogue located in Louisiana . Founded in 1903 or 1904 , though tracing its roots back to 1857 , it is the oldest Orthodox congregation in the New Orleans region . Originally located on Carondelet Street in New Orleans ' Central City , it constructed and moved to a building at 7000 Canal Boulevard in Lakeview , New Orleans in 1971 .

At one time the largest Orthodox congregation in the Southern United States , its membership was over 500 families in the 1960s , but fell to under 200 by 2005 . That year its Canal Boulevard building was severely flooded by the 2005 New Orleans levee failure disaster during Hurricane Katrina . Despite attempts to save them , all seven of its Torah scrolls were destroyed , as were over 3 @, @ 000 prayer @-@ books . The building suffered further flooding damage caused by the theft of copper air @-@ conditioning tubing in 2007 .

In the wake of Katrina another 50 member families left New Orleans , including the rabbi 's . The congregation began sharing space with Gates of Prayer , a Reform synagogue in Metairie , a suburb of New Orleans . In 2009 , the congregation purchased land from Gates of Prayer , and by 2012 had built a new synagogue next to it at 4000 West Esplanade Avenue . As of 2016 the rabbi was Gabriel Greenberg .

= = Early history = =

Beth Israel is the oldest Orthodox congregation in the New Orleans region , and its most prominent . Though it was founded as early as 1903 , it traces its roots back to much older synagogues . In the mid @-@ 19th century New Orleans had a number of small Orthodox congregations of Eastern European Jews , generally " structured along nationalistic lines " . These included a synagogue of Galitzianer Jews (Chevra Thilim) , and two of Lithuanian Jews , (one ? Chevra Mikve Israel ? following the non @-@ Hassidic liturgy , the other ? Anshe Sfard ? following the Hassidic liturgy) . In 1857 , a congregation consisting primarily of Prussian Jews from Posen organized as Tememe Derech , " The Right Way " . As they followed the Polish rite , they were known as " The Polish Congregation " .

Tememe Derech built a synagogue in the 500 block of Carondelet Street in the Central City section of New Orleans in 1867 . It was the sole Orthodox congregation to construct its own building ; only a minority of New Orleans ' Jews were Orthodox , and other congregations rented space or met in members ' homes . Tememe Derech 's membership , however , never exceeded 50 , and in 1903 or 1904 the synagogue disbanded , and merged with a number of other small Orthodox congregations and a burial society to form Beth Israel . Services were initially held in rented quarters in the same 500 block of Carondelet Street .

In 1905 , Beth Israel purchased the home of New Orleans ' former mayor Joseph A. Shakspeare at 1610 Carondelet Street . Funds for the new acquisition came from both the Orthodox and Reform communities of New Orleans . After remodeling the building , the congregation began holding services there , in time for the 1906 High Holy Days . Membership grew quickly ; by 1910 Beth Israel was the second @-@ largest Jewish congregation in the city , with 180 member families , and by 1914 that number had grown to 250 families . By 1918 , however , membership had fallen to 175 families . That year the synagogue 's income was \$ 6 @, @ 000 (today \$ 94 @, @ 000) .

Moses Hyman Goldberg was the congregation 's first rabbi , but within a year he moved to Chevra Thilim . Goldberg served as New Orleans ' mohel until his death in 1940 .

= = 1920s to early 2000s = =

Beth Israel rebuilt its synagogue at the Carondelet Street location in 1924 . The new building was designed by Emil Weil , a noted Southern architect , particularly of Jewish religious buildings . He designed other New Orleans ' synagogues , including the Touro Synagogue and the Anshe Sfard , as well as other non @-@ religious buildings throughout Louisiana . Beth Israel 's new Byzantine

Revival building , with its seating capacity of 1 @, @ 200 , reflected " the growing economic and social confidence of the membership " : it had " beautiful " stained @-@ glass windows , a " magnificent " imported European chandelier , and " hand @-@ carved Stars of David in the ceiling " . The building was dedicated on September 12 , and a Boston rabbi , Henry Raphael Gold , was a guest speaker . He was so impressed that he stayed on , becoming Beth Israel 's rabbi .

In 1926 Beth Israel built the " Menorah Institute " Talmud Torah building on Euterpe Street , adjoining the Carondelet synagogue . The school , which served as an Orthodox alternative to the existing Communal Hebrew School , comprised a nursery school , a Hebrew school , and a Sunday school . The building also housed Beth Israel 's offices , and the " Little Shul " (" shul " is the Yiddish word for synagogue) , where services were held twice a day .

The congregation leased land for burials in the Chevra Thilim Cemetery on Canal Street , a site that had been used by Tememe Derech as early as 1860 , and which was shared with several other congregations . In the 1930s Beth Israel purchased its own cemetery on Frenchmen Street .

Uri Miller joined Beth Israel as rabbi in 1935 , a post he would hold through the early 1940s . He was president of the Hebrew Theological College Alumni from 1936 to 1938 , and of its successor the Rabbinical Council of America from 1946 to 1948 .

During Miller 's tenure the synagogue 's neighborhood began to deteriorate . Members started moving uptown , and the congregation embarked on a search for a new location . In 1963 Beth Israel purchased a block of land at 7000 Canal Boulevard at Walker Street in the Lakeview neighborhood . It moved into its new larger building there in 1971 .

Former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke 's successful 1989 run for a Louisiana House of Representatives seat in nearby Metairie was a cause for concern in the congregation . Then @-@ rabbi Gavriel Newman spoke out against Duke , feeling that people were being " taken in " by " the modern guise of Klan members of Duke 's ilk is the two @-@ piece suit , the blow @-@ dried hair and the sweet smile , which seem to serve them very well to hide the inherent racism and the propensity to violence . " During the campaign an anti @-@ Duke rally was planned to be held at Beth Israel by Mordechai Levy of the Jewish Defense Organization (JDO) . It was , however , cancelled by Beth Israel , after strong objections by members of Beth Israel and the larger Jewish community , in part because it was felt that the JDO 's actions would actually create more support for Duke , and in part because of Levy 's statements that the JDO would not rule out violence in its efforts against Duke .

From 1914 through World War II Beth Israel described itself the " largest Orthodox congregation in the South " , and in the 1960s it had 500 member families . By 2005 , however , that number had been reduced to fewer than 200 . Nevertheless , Beth Israel still held services twice a day , the only synagogue in New Orleans to do so .

= = Hurricane Katrina and aftermath = =

As a result of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent 2005 levee failures in Greater New Orleans , the congregation 's building at 7000 Canal Boulevard filled with at least ten feet of water , and Beth Israel garnered national attention after attempts were made to save its Torah scrolls . Beth Israel 's rabbi , Yisroel Shiff , who had evacuated to Tennessee before Katrina hit , contacted Rabbi Isaac Leider , who had worked on ZAKA search @-@ and @-@ rescue teams in Israel for five years . After contacting federal officials and the Louisiana National Guard , Leider hired a helicopter to fly him to within a mile of Beth Israel , met with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) search @-@ and @-@ rescue team appointed to retrieve the scrolls . The group used rubber rafts to reach Beth Israel and enter it , where Leider waded into the sanctuary and rescued the Torah scrolls and their silver ornaments .

Despite Leider 's efforts , all seven Torah scrolls were unsalvageable , and had to be buried . They had initially been buried in her backyard by Rebecca Heggelund , Beth Israel 's non @-@ Jewish secretary , who first received them after their rescue , and were subsequently re @-@ buried next to the grave of Beth Israel 's gabbai Meyer Lachoff . Lachoff had died just after Katrina , but could not be buried in New Orleans until months later .

In addition to losing all of its Torah scrolls , Beth Israel lost all its furniture , and over 3 @, @ 000 siddurs and mahzors , and almost all of its members ' homes were flooded , forcing them to move . The congregation did , however , receive assistance in replacing some of its assets ; the Orthodox Union immediately sent Beth Israel 50 ArtScroll siddurs , and Brith Shalom Beth Israel Congregation of Charleston , South Carolina , and Congregation Shaare Zedek Sons of Abraham of Providence , Rhode Island each donated Torahs . Hayley Fields , a 14 @-@ year @-@ old from Los Angeles , heard of Beth Israel 's difficult circumstances , and with the support of her mother , spearheaded a fund @-@ raising drive , selling 3 @, @ 500 watches . \$ 18 @, @ 000 was ultimately raised to buy a Torah , which was dedicated in August , 2006 , two days before the first anniversary of the hurricane . At that ceremony the National Council of Young Israel also donated 150 new Artscoll mahzors , in time for the High Holy Days .

In the wake of Katrina 50 families that were members of Beth Israel left New Orleans , and gave up membership in the congregation . These included Rabbi Schiff and his family . After the flood Beth Israel 's board of directors informed Schiff , who had joined they synagogue in April 2002 , that it would not be able to meet its contractual obligations and pay him past December . Schiff and his family had also lost their home and much of their possessions , and had been living in Memphis . Schiff resigned effective November 1 , 2005 , citing this loss , and the lack of a functioning Jewish Day School in the area for his children .

Soon after the flood , Beth Israel received an offer to temporarily use space from Congregation Gates of Prayer , a Reform synagogue in Metairie , a suburb of New Orleans . The congregation began holding weekly services and renting office space there .

In 2006 it was unclear if Beth Israel , which had already been in difficult financial shape , would be allowed , or have the means , to re @-@ build its synagogue . The building suffered further flood damage in July 2007 when thieves stole the copper tubing for the main air @-@ conditioning system . They broke the water main , and water from the second floor flooded the building for three days , to a depth of three to four feet , before it was discovered . The property was put up for sale .

= = Recent events = =

In 2007 , the congregation began some joint programming with Anshe Sefard , New Orleans ' only other remaining Orthodox synagogue , and in the summer hired Uri Topolosky as its new rabbi . A graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah , Topolosky had previously served as the associate rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale , and had been one of 21 rabbis arrested at the United Nations during an April 2007 sit @-@ in demanding that Iran be expelled from the U.N.

To help attract new members , in the summer Topolosky started a recruitment campaign , placing an advertisement in the New York newspaper The Jewish Week , and re @-@ designing Beth Israel 's website . The campaign 's tagline was " If you believe in the ability to destroy , you can believe in the ability to rebuild " , a saying of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov , and by the end of October ten new members had joined . However , while all New Orleans synagogues lost membership after Katrina , as of 2007 , Beth Israel was the only New Orleans synagogue that had not re @-@ opened in its former location .

Beth Israel started " The Minyan Project " in 2008 , an effort to attract 10 (see minyan) new Orthodox families to New Orleans . The families were given " generous financial assistance " , and in return had to " commit to providing community service , from maintaining the eruv enclosure that 's due to be completed within the month to assisting in kosher supervision at a local supermarket . " According to Topolosky , with the move of four new families to the area , New Orleans likely had proportionately the fastest growing Modern Orthodox community in the United States . In April of that year the Orthodox Union gave the congregation \$ 235 @, @ 000 towards a new building . At the time , Beth Israel had 80 member families , and 80 " associate member " families (families who belonged to other synagogues as well) .

By 2009 , the congregation had decided to erect a new synagogue on land it had purchased from Gates of Prayer , part of the lot on which the Gates of Prayer synagogue stood . For the 2009 High Holy Days , Topolosky planned to launch a capital campaign to raise \$ 1 million towards the

construction of the building . The new building at 4004 West Esplanade Avenue was completed and occupied in August 2012 . The old building , which still stood vacant , had been purchased by a surgeon for use as medical offices . All that was saved from it and brought to the new building were a bimah (originally from the building on Carondelet Street) , a ner tamid , two menorahs , a hanukiah , and " a stained @-@ glass window and a wooden plaque honoring pioneer donor families from Carondelet Street " . The hanukiah had previously been featured and lit at the 2010 White House Hanukkah Party .

Topolosky and his family left Beth Israel the following year , citing " the deteriorating Jewish educational landscape in New Orleans " . New Orleans ' only Jewish school , which had been established in 1996 , closed for a year after Hurricane Katrina , and was never able to regain its peak enrollment of over 80 students . Although by then New Orleans ' Jewish population exceeded its pre @-@ Katrina size , demographic changes negatively affected the school 's population . In 2012 the school 's board began recruiting non @-@ Jewish students , and changed the name from New Orleans Jewish Day School to Community Day School , but enrollment continued to fall to 29 students , half non @-@ Jewish , by 2013 . The same demographic changes affected Beth Israel ; its Saturday morning service only attracted around 40 worshipers , its Friday night service only 25 , and it had no daily minyan .

In 2013 Beth Israel hired Gabriel Greenberg to succeed Topolosky as rabbi , though he could not join the synagogue until the following year . A native of New England , he , like Topolosky , received his rabbinic ordination at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah . As of 2016 , Greenberg was Beth Israel 's rabbi .