

= Agudath Israel Etz Ahayem =

Agudath Israel Etz Ahayem ( " Congregation of Israel Tree of Life " ) is a Conservative Jewish congregation located at 3525 Cloverdale Road in Montgomery , Alabama .

Agudath Israel was established as an Orthodox synagogue in 1902 by Yiddish speaking Ashkenazi Jews , recent Eastern European immigrants who rejected the Reform practices of Montgomery 's established Congregation Kahl Montgomery / Temple Beth Or . After renting quarters for a number of years , the congregation purchased its first permanent building on Monroe Street in 1914 , and constructed a new building at McDonough and High Street in 1928 .

Agudath Israel came to national attention in 1955 because of the Civil rights movement activism of then @-@ rabbi Seymour Atlas , who eventually left the synagogue as a result of it . In 1957 it constructed its current building on Cloverdale Road , and joined the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism , though it subsequently hired several Orthodox rabbis . Cynthia " Cyndie " Culpeper became Agudath Israel 's rabbi in 1995 , the first Conservative woman rabbi in Alabama , but left in 1997 to seek treatment for AIDS , the result of an accidental needle prick while working as a nurse .

Etz Ahayem , was established in 1912 by Ladino speaking Sephardi Jews , particularly from Rhodes . The congregation grew slowly , and completed construction of its first building in 1927 . In 1962 the congregation moved to a new building , but by the 1990s it had dwindled , as children of congregants moved away from Montgomery , and the synagogue had difficulty finding rabbis to lead it .

The congregations merged in 2001 , and adopted the current name . In 2007 Scott Kramer became Agudath Israel Etz Ahayem 's third rabbi since the merger . As of 2015 , Kramer was the rabbi and Joy Blondheim was the president .

= = Agudath Israel = =

= = = Early history = = =

Ashkenazi Jews immigrated to Montgomery from Russia , Poland , Romania , and Galicia in the late 19th century . Agudath Israel was established in 1902 by 16 of them , former members of Montgomery 's oldest synagogue , Temple Beth Or . Though originally organized as the Orthodox Congregation Kahl Montgomery by German Jews in 1849 , during the 1870s Kahl Montgomery had steadily adopted Reform practices . It changed its name to Temple Beth Or in 1874 , and officially joined the Reform movement in 1879 . The more recent Eastern European immigrant members wanted a service in Hebrew that followed Orthodox practice , and decided to organize their own synagogue .

The congregation 's first president was Max Shuwolf , a Hungarian Jew who had first immigrated to Galveston , Texas , then ran a small dry goods store in Montgomery . He donated two rooms in his house , where the new congregation held its first services . The congregation 's first constitution was written in Yiddish . Services were held in Hebrew and Yiddish , men and women sat separately , and men covered their heads , as mandated by the constitution .

Over the next few years the congregation grew , and moved to a number of rented locations , including " rented office space above the National Shirt Company on Court Square and an annex of the First National Bank . " By 1907 , the synagogue had 30 members , and an annual revenue of \$ 500 ( today \$ 12 @ , @ 700 ) ; that year Temple Beth Or had 188 members and revenues of \$ 9 @ , @ 500 ( today \$ 241 @ , @ 000 ) . Reflecting the membership 's " growing assimilation " , in 1914 Agudath Israel re @-@ wrote its constitution in English . That same year the congregation dedicated its first permanent building , on Monroe Street , and hired its first full @-@ time rabbi . The State of Alabama purchased the building on Monroe in 1927 , and the congregation built a new synagogue on land at McDonough and High Street , a handsome , brick Rundbogenstil building , notable for its hexagonal shape , which they dedicated in 1928 . At the time Agudath Israel had 65 member

families .

Morris Casriel Katz , a native of Felosveresmart , Czechoslovakia ( now Velika Kopana , Ukraine ) was rabbi from 1923 to 1926 , his first pulpit before moving to Agudath Achim of Shreveport , Louisiana . Alexander Sandor Wiesel , a Chicago native , was rabbi in 1934 . He had previously served at Brith Achim Synagogue in Petersburg , Virginia , and would move to House of Israel Synagogue in Calgary , Alberta . Benjamin G. Eisenberg served as rabbi from 1938 until at least 1942 . By then membership had dropped to around 60 member families .

= = = Seymour Atlas era = = =

Agudath Israel came to national attention in the wake of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 . At that time , then @-@ rabbi Seymour Atlas had been serving as Agudath Israel 's rabbi for almost ten years . A southerner ( from Greenville , Mississippi ) , he was " in the 8th generation of a line of rabbis " , and had become friends with Martin Luther King , tutoring him in Hebrew , and speaking at his Dexter Avenue Church . As a result of his friendship with King , Atlas became involved in the Civil rights movement , and became known for his liberal sermons , and for frequently appearing on local television and radio stations with King , where he would discuss civil rights and issues including desegregation and the boycott .

In 1956 , during National Brotherhood Week Atlas spoke on a panel of clergy at the local WRMA radio station , which also included Michael Caswell , a white Roman Catholic priest from nearby Gunter Air Force Base , Roy Bennett , a black Baptist minister , and black activist Ralph Abernathy ; Bennett and Abernathy were subsequently arrested " on an obscure conspiracy charge " . A picture of Atlas , Bennett , and Abernathy appeared in Life magazine in an article about the boycott , and the leadership of Agudath Israel grew concerned that Atlas 's activism would lead to an antisemitic backlash . The trustees called an emergency meeting , and sent then congregational president Yale Friedlander to demand Atlas recant his support of the boycott , ask Life to withdraw the article , and agree to submit all public speeches to the board in advance for pre @-@ approval . Atlas refused , and insisted that his participation in Brotherhood Week was not an endorsement of the boycott . However , Atlas wrote a sermon for the following Shabbat which included a prayer for the participants of the boycott . The sermon , as with all others , was to be printed beforehand in the Montgomery Advertiser , and a typesetter there called one of the synagogue 's trustees to inform him of the contents . The trustee asked Atlas to modify the sermon , but he refused .

The trustees then ordered Atlas to stop inviting black clergymen to his weekly Hebrew class , " make no further speeches or statements outside the synagogue " , and , as long as he was rabbi there , " disassociate [ himself ] from the Negroes completely " . Atlas again refused , and the trustees responded by shunning him , refusing to visit his home , and literally turning their backs on him when he was around .

When his contract came up for renewal that year , Atlas argued that the matter should be put to a congregational vote . The trustees refused to do so , and voted 27 to 1 not to renew the contract . After Atlas left , the trustees unanimously voted that the next rabbi would have to sign an agreement not to discuss " Negroes " or segregation .

= = = Post Atlas to 2000 = = =

During the 1950s the synagogue had been " traditional " ( Conservadox ) , rather than strictly Orthodox ; for example , the Monroe Street building had seating for men on the left , seating for women on the right , and mixed seating in the middle . Following Atlas 's departure , the congregation formally moved from Orthodox Judaism to Conservative , hiring a Conservative rabbi , Joseph Reich , and , in 1957 , moved to its current location at 3525 Cloverdale Road . In 1959 , however , it hired as rabbi Aaron Borow , who had just graduated from the Modern Orthodox Yeshiva University . While Borow did not undo the synagogue 's mixed seating , he did turn off the synagogue 's microphone , and turn the bimah so that the cantor faced the front of the synagogue ( rather than the congregation ) , in the Orthodox style . In November 1964 , Borow was hired as rabbi

of the Orthodox Nusach Hari B ? nai Zion Congregation of St. Louis , Missouri , where he served until his retirement in 1999 .

Borow was succeeded by Irving Rubin , also a graduate of Yeshiva University , who served from 1965 to 1968 , before moving to Keshet Israel Synagogue in West Chester , Pennsylvania . Raphael Gold was rabbi from the mid @-@ 1970s to the early 1980s . David Arzouane , another a graduate of Yeshiva University , joined Agudath Israel in 1986 as director of the Hebrew education program , a position he has held since then . Upon receiving his ordination from the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary of America ( JTSA ) in 1988 , Aaron Krupnick joined Agudath Israel as rabbi . He served until 1994 .

Agudath Israel hired Cynthia " Cyndie " Culpeper as rabbi in 1995 . Culpeper , a convert from Catholicism and former nurse , had been posted at Agudath Israel as a rabbinical intern , and was hired there full @-@ time upon graduation from the JTSA , the first Conservative woman rabbi in Alabama . However , the following year she revealed that she had AIDS , the result of an accidental needle prick while working as a nurse . The congregation rallied around her , insisting she continue to work , and wearing red AIDS awareness ribbons , but in 1997 she gave up her position and moved to Birmingham , Alabama , where she could get " cutting edge " treatment at the University of Alabama at Birmingham 's AIDS research clinic . Culpeper died in 2005 .

Shalom Plotkin joined Agudath Israel as rabbi in 2000 . A graduate of the University of Maryland , and ordained by the JTSA in 1998 , he had been an " assistant rabbi at a synagogue in Marietta , Georgia " before coming to Agudath Israel . A chaplain in the United States Navy Reserve , he had been stationed with the U.S. Navy in the Adriatic Sea in 1995 , during the Bosnian War . During his tenure at Agudath Israel , he remained in the reserve .

= = = Notable members = = =

Aaron Aronov , former president of Agudath Israel , was inducted into the Alabama Academy of Honor in 1988 . Former Secretary of State , Attorney General , Lieutenant Governor and Governor of Alabama Don Siegelman and his family were also members of Agudath Israel . Though Siegelman is Catholic , his wife Lori ? who grew up in Birmingham , Alabama ? and two children are Jewish . His daughter Dana celebrated her Bat Mitzvah at the synagogue in February 1998 .

= = Etz Ahayem = =

Ralph Nace Cohen , a Sephardi Jew from Rhodes , settled in Montgomery in 1906 , sponsored by a Greek Orthodox friend . Other Sephardi Jews followed , first from Rhodes , and then from the rest of Greece and Turkey . By 1908 this small community celebrated held its first High Holiday services in the Orthodox Community Center , space which was rented by Agudath Israel . In 1912 , they named themselves Congregation Etz Ahayem ( " Tree of Life " ) , writing a constitution in Ladino . Temple Beth Or gave them a Torah scroll , and in 1916 they formally incorporated . The congregation bought a house at 450 Sayre Street in 1918 , but it was not until 1927 that they completed construction of a building there . At the time the congregation comprised 27 families .

During the German occupation of Greece almost all the Jews of Rhodes were sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp ; as a result , most members of Etz Ahayem had close family members who were killed in the Holocaust . Before the occupation , however , members of the Kal Grande congregation in Rhodes had buried their Torah scrolls . After the war the scrolls were retrieved and sent to Israel , and a Dr. Nace Cohen was able to procure one of them for Etz Ahayem .

During the 1950s Etz Ahayem added a great deal of English to its prayer services , which had formerly been conducted solely in Ladino and Hebrew . During the Montgomery Bus Boycott , then rabbi Solomon Acrish spoke in favor of the boycott and against segregation , " citing the demand in Torah for social justice " . However , after being followed , and told by gentile friends he could no longer come for dinner , and after Etz Ahayem received a bomb threat , he " toned down his support for desegregation . "

In 1962 , the congregation moved to a new building , but the children of the congregation generally

moved away from Montgomery . By the 1990s the congregation dwindled , and had difficulty finding Sephardi rabbis , relying instead on " lay leaders and the occasional rabbinic services from nearby Maxwell Airforce Base . " In 2001 Maxwell Air Force Base ended its rabbinic services , and the congregation was down to 22 member families . The board of directors decided to accept an offer from Agudath Israel to enter into merger negotiations .

= = Agudath Israel Etz Ahayem = =

Agudath Israel and Etz Ahayem merged in 2001 . Agudath Israel 's Rabbi Plotkin oversaw the merger , and became the rabbi of the merged congregation , Agudath Israel Etz Ahayem . Along with the new name , the synagogues combined traditions , and Ashkenazi and Sephardi rituals . Plotkin moved to Albuquerque 's Congregation B 'nai Israel in May 2002 .

From 2002 to 2006 Stephen Listfield was the rabbi ; for the previous eight years he had been the rabbi of Congregation Beth Shalom in Pompton Lakes , New Jersey . Listfield led protests by the congregation against the posthumous induction into the Alabama Military Hall of Honor of prominent United States Navy officer , frequent political candidate , and outspoken antisemite John G. Crommelin . Listfield moved to Pittsburgh 's Tree of Life Congregation in August 2006 .

In 2007 , Scott Kramer became the congregation 's rabbi , his first rabbinic post . A native of Baltimore , Kramer had a Master 's degree in physics from the University of Utah , and for over two decades had worked as a software engineer . He began studying at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in 2002 , and was ordained there in 2007 . As of 2015 , Kramer was Agudath Israel Etz Ahayem 's rabbi and Joy Blondheim was the president .