

= Temple Sinai ( Oakland , California ) =

Temple Sinai ( officially the First Hebrew Congregation of Oakland ) is a Reform synagogue located at 2808 Summit Street ( 28th and Webster Streets ) in Oakland , California , United States . Founded in 1875 , it is the oldest Jewish congregation in the East San Francisco Bay region .

Its early members included Gertrude Stein and Judah Leon Magnes , who studied at Temple Sinai 's Sabbath school , and Ray Frank , who taught them . Originally traditional , the temple reformed its beliefs and practices under the leadership of Rabbi Marcus Friedlander ( 1893 ? 1915 ) . By 1914 , it had become a Classical Reform congregation . That year the current sanctuary was built : a Beaux @-@ Arts structure designed by G. Albert Lansburgh , which is the oldest synagogue building in Oakland .

The congregation weathered four major financial crises by 1934 . From then until 2011 , it was led by just three rabbis , William Stern ( 1934 ? 1965 ) , Samuel Broude ( 1966 ? 1989 ) , and Steven Chester ( 1989 ? 2011 ) .

In 2006 Temple Sinai embarked on a \$ 15 million capital campaign to construct an entirely new synagogue campus adjacent to its current sanctuary . Groundbreaking took place in October 2007 , and by late 2009 the congregation had raised almost \$ 12 million towards the construction . As of 2015 , Temple Sinai had nearly 1 @,@ 000 member families . The rabbis were Jacqueline Mates @-@ Muchin and Yoni Regev , and the cantor was Ilene Keys . The synagogue has two emeritus rabbis , Samuel Broude and Steven Chester .

= = Early years = =

Founded in 1875 as the First Hebrew Congregation of Oakland , Temple Sinai is the oldest synagogue in the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay Area . It grew out of Oakland 's Hebrew Benevolent Society , which had been organized in 1862 by eighteen merchants and shopkeepers from several foreign countries ? predominantly Polish Jews from Posen . Although Hebrew Benevolent Societies typically ceased operations upon the founding of a synagogue , Oakland 's was unusual in continuing to function independently for a number of years ( the two groups did not merge until 1881 ) .

By 1876 , the congregation had purchased land on the south side of 14th and Webster streets ; however , due to a severe recession in California at the time , the congregation did not construct a building until 1878 . The wooden structure , with Moorish Revival elements and onion domes , was completed at a cost of around \$ 8 @,@ 000 ( today \$ 196 @,@ 000 ) .

Services were initially traditional , following the Polish rite . Men and women sat separately , but the mehitza separating them was soon done away with . In 1881 the new president , David Hirschberg , led a campaign to modernize , and convinced a small majority to introduce a number of reforms , including the addition of a mixed choir of Christians and Jews and organ music , and the removal of the requirement for a minyan . Traditionalists ? who mostly came from the Hebrew Benevolent Society ? objected and withdrew , forming their own Orthodox minyan , which eventually became Oakland 's Congregation Beth Jacob .

= = Levy , Sessler eras : 1881 ? 1892 = =

In 1881 , the congregation hired Oakland 's first rabbi , Meyer Solomon Levy . Born in England in January 1852 and raised there , he was the son of Rabbi Solomon Levy of Borough Synagogue in London . Meyer Solomon Levy had been ordained in England as an Orthodox rabbi before he was twenty , and moved to Australia as a young man . An early supporter of Zionism , he had served as a rabbi in Melbourne before moving to California in 1872 or 1873 , where he served as the rabbi of Temple Emanu @-@ El ( then Bickur Cholim ) in San Jose . Levy was paid \$ 100 a month ( today \$ 2 @,@ 450 ) , and donated a percentage to the poor .

Levy came into conflict with Oakland 's public schools , which refused to excuse Jewish students on High Holy Days . He petitioned that they be excused , but the superintendent and district went even

further , and directed teachers not to schedule examinations for those days . Although sensitive to the needs of the members , Levy was more observant than his congregants , which also led to conflict . He accepted the reforms of shortening the Shabbat services , and facing the congregation ( rather than the ark ) during prayer , but he successfully resisted attempts to adopt Isaac Mayer Wise 's 1885 " Minhag America " Prayer @-@ Book .

Although traditional in some ways , Levy was progressive in others . " Deeply affected by the enlightened spirit of his day " , according to historian Fred Rosenbaum , he " delivered lectures with titles such as ' Progress of Science ' and , while at the First Hebrew Congregation , he invited Oakland 's Unitarian minister to give a series of talks at the synagogue . Levy in turn was well received at the Unitarian Church , where he spoke on the theory of evolution . "

In 1885 , the synagogue burned down , although the Torah scrolls were saved by a congregant who entered the burning building to retrieve them . Levy made prodigious efforts to raise funds for a new building , traveling as far away as Vancouver . The synagogue 's female members also raised significant funds through a " Grand Fair " . Their combined efforts were successful , and by 1886 a new building had been erected at 13th and Clay streets . The structure had " Moorish elements inspired by Isaac Mayer Wise 's Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati " .

The tensions between liberal @-@ minded members and the traditional Levy were never resolved , and in 1891 , the rabbi moved to San Francisco 's Congregation Beth Israel . That year the women of the congregation formed the Ladies Auxiliary ( Temple Sisterhood ) , whose initial mandate was to assist the work of the synagogue 's Sunday school , and increase its enrollment .

During Levy 's tenure , the synagogue had several congregants who were famous , or would become so . Ray Frank , the first Jewish woman to preach formally from a pulpit in the United States , settled in Oakland around 1885 , and taught Hebrew Bible studies and Jewish history at First Hebrew Congregation 's Sabbath school , where she was superintendent . Her students there in the 1880s included Gertrude Stein , later to become a famous writer , and Judah Leon Magnes , who would become a prominent Reform rabbi . Magnes 's views of the Jewish people were strongly influenced by First Hebrew 's Rabbi Levy , and it was at the building on 13th and Clay that Magnes first began preaching ? his bar mitzvah speech of 1890 was quoted at length in The Oakland Tribune .

Morris Sessler succeeded Levy as rabbi in 1892 . He had served at Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David in Providence , Rhode Island , from 1887 to 1892 . His tenure lasted only six months , as " his ideas did not harmonize with those of the congregation " . He became rabbi of Congregation Gates of Prayer in New Orleans that same year , where he served until 1904 .

= = Friedlander , Franklin eras : 1893 ? 1919 = =

The congregation hired Marcus Friedlander of Congregation Baith Israel in Brooklyn , New York in 1893 . Soon after he was hired , California experienced another economic downturn , which hurt the finances of members of the congregation . The congregation sold its property at 13th and Clay ( which had become the heart of the business district ) in 1895 , and moved to a less expensive location at the northwest corner of 12th and Castro streets , and renovated the building there in 1896 . Over 500 people , both Jews and non @-@ Jews , were sheltered in the building for days after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake . The synagogue had 95 members by 1907 , with annual revenues of \$ 6 @,@ 000 ( today \$ 152 @,@ 000 ) .

Friedlander and former congregation president Abraham Jonas persuaded the congregation to introduce a number of significant reforms in the service : they first adopted the Jastrow prayer book , and later the Reform movement 's Union Prayer Book ( though in a revised , less radical version published specifically for First Hebrew , and authorized by the Central Conference of American Rabbis ) . By 1908 , the congregation had eliminated the second day of Rosh Hashanah , and few men wore head coverings in the service , and by 1914 the congregation had moved completely to the radicalism of " Classical Reform " .

In 1910 , First Hebrew bought a lot on Telegraph Avenue at Sycamore Street , near 26th Street , for \$ 28 @,@ 000 ( today \$ 710 @,@ 000 ) , and sold its property at 12th and Castro for the same

amount . The congregation , however , decided not to build there . In 1912 it found a better location , and purchased its current site at 28th and Webster for \$ 12 @, @ 050 ( today \$ 310 @, @ 000 ) . Groundbreaking took place on October 26 , 1913 , and the building was completed there in 1914 at a cost of \$ 100 @, @ 000 ( today \$ 2 @. @ 4 million ) . Fourteen thousand dollars ( today \$ 340 @, @ 000 ) of the costs were raised by the Ladies Auxiliary , which also purchased a new Austin pipe organ for the sanctuary at a cost of \$ 5 @, @ 000 ( today \$ 120 @, @ 000 ) . The new building was called " Temple Sinai " , and thereafter the congregation itself became known as " Temple Sinai " , although it retained the official name of " First Hebrew Congregation of Oakland " .

Designed by noted American architect G. Albert Lansburgh , the Beaux @-@ Arts structure had six tall stained glass windows , an " elliptical dome " , and an entrance characterized by " graceful Corinthian columns supporting a Greco @-@ Roman portico " . Carved into the entablature above the entrance was the Biblical verse " MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE " ( Isaiah 56 : 7 ) . More modest in size than most Beaux @-@ Arts buildings , it nevertheless had features typical of that style , including its " cross @-@ axial composition " . However , it was adorned with " simpler materials such as pressed brick and carved wood " , rather than the usual " florid Classical design elements " . Along with the sanctuary , the building included a social hall and classrooms . It is the only example of Lansburgh 's work in Oakland , and one of about 150 Oakland buildings given an " A " or " Highest Importance " rating by the Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey , which signifies " outstanding architectural example or extreme historical importance " . The building has a status code of " 3S " in the California Historical Resource Information System database , indicating that it " appears eligible for the National Register of Historic Places " ( NRHP ) .

The outbreak of World War I , and the costs of the new mortgage , placed a significant financial strain on the members , and in 1915 they decided to release Friedlander from his contract . Temple Sinai hired Harvey B. Franklin as rabbi in 1917 , but his tenure there was only two years . During his term , the congregational school held classes twice a week , and had 285 students and 8 teachers . Franklin next served at Bickur Cholim in San Jose ? the congregation from which Temple Sinai 's first rabbi , Myer Solomon Levy , had come .

= = Coffee era : 1921 ? 1933 = =

After going without a rabbi for another two years , in 1921 Temple Sinai hired Rudolph I. Coffee , an Oakland native and cousin of Judah Leon Magnes . Coffee was outspoken , and passionately advocated liberal causes : he supported disarmament , birth control , and separation of church and state , and opposed prohibition , antisemitism , and Tammany Hall . Along with other local rabbis Jacob Nieto and Jacob Weinstein , he demanded the release of labor leaders and accused bombers Thomas Mooney and Warren Billings . He also supported California 's compulsory sterilization of the mentally ill and mentally retarded , and eugenicist E. S. Gosney 's advocacy on this issue .

Coffee was involved in the California State Prison System , and during his tenure at Temple Sinai he was head of the Jewish Committee of Personal Service , a California @-@ wide organization that " ministered to Jews in state prisons " . In January 1924 , California 's governor appointed Coffee to the State Board of Charities and Corrections , which was responsible for supervising California 's state prisons .

In 1931 , Coffee opposed California legislation intended to regulate the kosher food industry and prohibit fraudulent claims that foods were kosher . In a letter to state senator E.H. Christian he stated :

... I am unalterably opposed to this bill because Judaism need not call upon the State to settle its own internal affairs . We are starting a dangerous precedent in California which can only lead to evil consequences .

Four years ago you assisted in preventing an increase of " wine rabbis . " The law relative to sacramental wine was properly surrounded , and California Jews do not suffer the disgrace which eastern brethren feel .

This will bring a " meat rabbi " into existence . New York state has this kosher law and yet it did not

prevent the terrible scandal which was uncovered last month in New York City . Use your best influence to prevent it .

If Judaism has not enough inner resources to meet present day conditions , the sooner it passes away the better .

Despite Coffee 's opposition , the legislation was enacted .

Coffee 's advocacy , and Temple Sinai 's financial instability , eventually contributed to his dismissal from Temple Sinai in 1933 ; at the same time that the membership was experiencing financial distress due to the Great Depression , Coffee was advocating higher salaries for government employees . After leaving Temple Sinai , he became chaplain at San Quentin State Prison .

= = Stern era : 1934 ? 1965 = =

In 1934 , Temple Sinai hired William M. Stern ( originally Sternheser ) as rabbi . A San Francisco native and son of an Orthodox rabbi , he had been persuaded by Rabbi Martin Meyer of the Reform Congregation Emanu @-@ El to attend Hebrew Union College ( HUC ) , where Stern received his ordination . He served as rabbi at a number of Southern and Midwestern synagogues in the 1920s and early 1930s .

Much less formal than his predecessor Coffee , Stern was seen as a poker @-@ playing , cigar @-@ smoking " regular guy " , and he focused on combating the spread of antisemitism . His wife Rae was also very active in the congregation . She taught at the synagogue 's Hebrew school , and led the sisterhood .

Although originally anti @-@ Zionist , Stern 's views changed in the 1940s , and by 1942 he was strongly supported Jewish nationalism . When an Oakland branch of the anti @-@ Zionist American Council for Judaism formed in 1944 , Stern opposed its creation , even though many members , including its president , were leading members of Temple Sinai . By 1948 , however , the congregation had also become supportive of Zionism .

During Stern 's tenure Temple Sinai expanded its facilities , adding a religious school building , offices , and a chapel in 1947 ? 1948 , and moving the main entrance to Summit Street . The main building 's interior was also significantly remodeled , aside from the sanctuary . The congregation also built the Temple House ( called Covenant Hall ) , in 1950 . The following year the synagogue put on an exhibition called " Arts in Action " , " that included sculptors , weavers , filmmakers , ceramists , and others . " The event 's director asked poet , artist and art critic Weldon Kees to jury a show of paintings ; Kees ended up having to find the paintings as well . When the Temple 's board saw the selected works , they did not want display all of them , but acquiesced after " a strong protest " .

In 1965 , the congregation bought land in Oakland Hills , anticipating a future move . In December of that year Stern died unexpectedly . Following his death , Temple Sinai held for many years an annual Stern Lecture series in his memory .

= = Broude era : 1966 ? 1989 = =

In 1966 , the congregation hired Samuel Broude as rabbi . A graduate of the University of Chicago , in the late 1940s he had worked in Pasadena at a Reconstructionist synagogue , as a part @-@ time cantor and Hebrew teacher , and then in the early 1950s as cantor of Reform University Synagogue of Los Angeles . After completing his rabbinic training , he became associate rabbi at Congregation Ansche Chesed in Cleveland , where he served under Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld for six years before coming to Temple Sinai .

Like Temple Sinai 's previous rabbis , Broude passionately supported liberal causes , opposing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War , and taking part in Civil Rights marches . Although he was a Reform rabbi , he had gone to an Orthodox yeshiva as a boy , and religiously he was in many ways more traditional than his predecessors . He re @-@ introduced ritual into the synagogue , but more contentiously opposed intermarriage . His immediate predecessor , Stern , had officiated at

intermarriages " under certain conditions " . Broude initially did so as well , under " extenuating circumstances " ( e.g. if the bride were pregnant ) . His position later hardened , and he refused to perform such marriages under any circumstances . He even refused to allow other rabbis who would be willing to do so officiate at intermarriages at Temple Sinai . The issue eventually came to a congregational vote in 1972 , which supported Broude , although the debate was never completely settled .

Broude was , however , not opposed to all religious innovations . Under his leadership , Temple Sinai began holding monthly fine arts performances as part of the Friday night service , in place of the usual sermon . In December 1970 , the Temple 's fine arts committee commissioned an original dance work from Anna Halprin and her multi @-@ racial dance troupe . For the next two months Broude met weekly with Halprin , educating her regarding the Friday night prayers . The completed work , titled Kadosh , included a candlelight vigil , and dancers tearing their clothes and shouting questions at Broude that reframed the classic question about God and The Holocaust in terms of the Vietnam War : " How can there be a God if He allows all the suffering of the Vietnam War to continue ? " The performance engendered passionate responses from the congregation ; according to Broude " I don 't know if anyone was neutral . Half thought it was fantastic , half thought it was terrible ! "

Broude also argued that the congregation should remain in downtown Oakland , and in 1975 , convinced them to stay . He retired in 1989 , the year the buildings survived the Loma Prieta earthquake . After his retirement from Temple Sinai he remained active , filling in at synagogues mostly in the Bay Area , and teaching . He also wrote an autobiography , and a one @-@ man show based on it called " Listening for the Voice " , which he performed at a number of East Bay synagogues , including , in 2009 , at Temple Sinai .

= = Chester era : 1989 ? 2011 = =

Steven Chester , a graduate of UCLA , and ordained by HUC in 1971 , became rabbi in 1989 . He had previously served as rabbi of Temple Beth Israel in Jackson , Michigan , from 1971 to 1976 , and Temple Israel in Stockton , California , from 1976 to 1989 , where he was also an adjunct professor in the Religious Studies department of the University of the Pacific . Chester added a pre @-@ school and adult education programs to the services offered by the synagogue , and supported the congregation 's return to more traditional practices , including the re @-@ introduction of Hebrew into the service . He also continued his predecessors ' passion for social justice , taking up causes " from advocating for local affordable housing and health care for the disenfranchised to supporting women 's reproductive rights and protesting the genocide in Darfur . " In 2006 , Chester was voted Reader 's Choice for " Minister / Rabbi / Imam with the Biggest Heart " in the East Bay Express .

The synagogue survived the Oakland Firestorm of 1991 mostly unscathed , although a number of congregants lost their homes . Membership was over 640 families by 1993 . In 1994 , the congregation again significantly remodeled the interior of the main building , aside from the sanctuary . In December of that year , the building was designated a Historic Property by the City of Oakland .

Temple Sinai has had three associate or assistant rabbis since 1998 . Andrea Berlin joined the synagogue as its first assistant rabbi in 1998 , after being ordained at HUC in Cincinnati . From 2006 to 2008 , she also served on the board of the Jewish Family and Children 's Services of the East Bay . Suzanne Singer joined Temple Sinai in 2003 , after graduating from HUC in Los Angeles . Before becoming a rabbi , Singer had for two decades been a producer of television programs and documentaries , winning two Emmy Awards . In 2005 she became interim rabbi of Temple Beth El of Riverside , California , and later its permanent rabbi . Jacqueline Mates @-@ Muchin , a San Francisco native , graduated from HUC in New York in 2002 . After serving as an assistant rabbi in Buffalo , New York , she joined Temple Sinai in 2005 .

To accommodate the large number of people attending on the High Holy Days , since 2001 Temple Sinai has held its main High Holy Day services at Oakland 's NRHP @-@ listed Art Deco Paramount

Theater . While it still holds smaller High Holy Day services in the sanctuary at 2808 Summit Street , the main services at the Paramount fill the entire 1 @, @ 800 seats on the mezzanine of the theater , and most of the 1 @, @ 200 seats in the balcony .

In 2006 , the congregation embarked on a campaign to create a new campus for Temple Sinai , to be located adjacent to the existing sanctuary and social hall . The \$ 15 million project included " new offices , a larger chapel , a kitchen upgrade , outdoor sacred space , a new preschool with six classrooms and a 4 @, @ 500 @-@ square @-@ foot playground ... 10 additional classrooms for Midrasha teens and adult education , an art room , library , teen lounge and expanded parking . " The L @-@ shaped two @-@ story school / office building would be 16 @, @ 300 square feet ( 1 @, @ 510 m2 ) , and accommodate approximately 100 children in the pre @-@ school . The 2 @, @ 500 @-@ square @-@ foot ( 230 m2 ) chapel , which would hold up to 250 people , would be an addition to the rear of the existing social hall .

Groundbreaking took place in October 2007 , with an expected completion in Autumn , 2010 . In order to accommodate the new buildings , the school and chapel built in the late 1940s were razed , along with two office buildings on adjoining lots purchased for the expansion . Nine portable buildings were installed on the campus of Merritt College in Oakland Hills to serve in the interim . As of December 23 , 2009 , Temple Sinai had raised almost \$ 12 million from 651 households ( 70 % of the congregation ) .

Chester had planned to retire in June 2009 , and the congregation embarked on a search for a new senior rabbi in 2008 . Twenty @-@ three candidates were narrowed down to one finalist , but in early December that individual informed the search committee that he was withdrawing his name from consideration . While the search was progressing , Chester had realized that , due to the 2008 financial crisis , he would have to keep working . After the main candidate withdrew , the synagogue 's president approached Chester , asking if he would stay on for another term , which Chester agreed to do . Chester retired in June 2011 , becoming ( along with Broude ) Rabbi Emeritus .

= = Present era : 1989 ? 2011 = =

Andrew Straus joined Temple Sinai as senior rabbi in December 2011 . A graduate of HUC , he had previously served as assistant rabbi of Peninsula Temple Sholom in Burlingame , California , Temple Beth Sholom of New City , New York , and most recently for 13 years as rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Tempe , Arizona . Rabbi Straus resigned his position in 2014 by mutual consent with the Board of Trustees . In January 2015 , Rabbi Mates @-@ Muchin was overwhelmingly elected senior rabbi . As of 2014 , Temple Sinai , the East Bay 's oldest synagogue , had nearly 1 @, @ 000 member families . The full @-@ time rabbis were Mates @-@ Muchin and Yoni Regev , and the cantor was Ilene Keys .