

= Congregation Beth Elohim =

Congregation Beth Elohim ( Hebrew : ????? ????? ) , also known as the Garfield Temple and the Eighth Avenue Temple , is a Reform Jewish congregation located at 274 Garfield Place and Eighth Avenue , in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn , New York City , United States .

Founded in 1861 as a more liberal breakaway from Congregation Baith Israel , for the first 65 years it attempted four mergers with other congregations , including three with Baith Israel , all of which failed . The congregation completed its current Classical Revival synagogue building in 1910 and its " Jewish Deco " ( Romanesque Revival and Art Deco ) Temple House in 1929 . These two buildings were contributing properties to the Park Slope historic district , listed as a New York City Landmark district and listed on the National Register of Historic Places .

The congregation went through difficult times during the Great Depression , and the bank almost foreclosed on its buildings in 1946 . Membership dropped significantly in the 1930s because of the Depression , grew after World War II , and dropped again in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of demographic shifts . Programs for young children helped draw Jewish families back into the neighborhood and revitalize the membership .

By 2006 , Beth Elohim had over 1 @, @ 000 members , and , as of 2009 , it was the largest and most active Reform congregation in Brooklyn , the " oldest Brooklyn congregation that continues to function under its corporate name " , and its pulpit was the oldest in continuous use in any Brooklyn synagogue . In 2009 , it was listed by Newsweek as one of America 's 25 " Most Vibrant " Jewish congregations .

= = Early years : Pearl Street = =

Congregation Beth Elohim was founded on September 29 , 1861 by 41 German Jews at Granada Hall on Myrtle Avenue , members of Congregation Baith Israel who had become disaffected after they attempted and failed to reform practice there . The synagogue name was chosen by a vote of the membership , and the services were led by George Brandenstein , who served as cantor , and was paid \$ 150 ( today \$ 4 @, @ 000 ) a year . Brandenstein was hired as cantor , not rabbi , because " the congregation believed having a cantor was more important " , though in practice he filled both roles . A shamash ( the equivalent of a sexton or beadle ) was also hired for \$ 75 a year .

While searching for a permanent location , the congregation continued to meet and hold services at Granada Hall . Men and women sat together , unlike the traditional separate seating , and services were conducted in German and Hebrew . Within a few months , the former Calvary Protestant Episcopal church on Pearl Street , between Nasau and Concord , was purchased for \$ 5 @, @ 100 ( today \$ 121 @, @ 000 ) and renovated for another \$ 2 @, @ 000 ( today \$ 47 @, @ 000 ) . The new building was dedicated on March 30 , 1862 , and the congregation became known as " the Pearl street synagogue " . By 1868 , membership had increased to 103 , and by 1869 , almost 100 students attended the Sunday school .

Beth Elohim had originally conducted its services in the traditional manner , but on February 19 , 1870 " inaugurated the moderate reform services " instead . In an attempt to stem defections and make the synagogue more attractive to existing and potential members , that same month the congregation purchased , for \$ 55 @, @ 000 ( today \$ 1 @, @ 030 @, @ 000 ) , the building of the Central Presbyterian Church on Schermerhorn Street near Nevins Street . Sufficient numbers of new members did not , however , materialize , and the congregation was forced to give up its new building , forfeit its \$ 4 @, @ 000 ( today \$ 75 @, @ 000 ) deposit , and return to the Pearl Street building . Instead , the Pearl street building was renovated , and an organ and choir added .

Beth Elohim voted to retire Brandenstein in 1882 , an action which created some controversy both within the congregation , and among other Brooklyn synagogues . Younger members of the congregation found no specific fault with Brandenstein , but wanted " a change " , and succeeded in dismissing him and electing an entirely new board of officers . The final vote was 29 in favor , 21 against , out of a total membership of 53 or 54 ( only the male heads of households were counted as members during this era ) . Solomon Mosche was hired to replace Brandenstein .

In April 1883 , Baith Israel , Beth Elohim , and Temple Israel , Brooklyn 's three leading synagogues , attempted an amalgamation . This was the third such attempt ; the previous two had failed when the members could not agree on synagogue ritual . The combined congregation , which would purchase new premises , would have 150 members ; members would be refunded half the purchase price of the pews in their existing buildings . Mosche and the rabbi of Temple Israel were to split the offices of rabbi and cantor : Baith Israel , at the time , had no rabbi . Though this attempt also failed , in the following year the three congregations carried out combined activities , including a picnic and a celebration of the 100th birthday of Moses Montefiore . Membership at that time still hovered around 50 .

Mosche fell ill in 1884 , and after being unable to serve for six months , was replaced by 26 @-@ year @-@ old William Sparger . Despite his illness , Mosche lived until age 75 , dying on November 3 , 1911 .

Sparger was Hungarian by birth , a graduate of the Prince Rudolph University of Vienna , and , according to a contemporary New York Times article , " belong [ ed ] to the extreme liberal school of Hebrew theology " . He introduced changes to the services , including improving the choir , bringing in a new prayer book , adding Friday night services , and the " radical reform " of making the sermon the most important part of the service . He appealed to younger congregants , and , under his direction , the synagogue experienced a large increase in attendance .

= = State Street = =

Though more seats had been added to the synagogue by narrowing the aisles , as a result of Sparger 's innovations Beth Elohim outgrew its Pearl Street building , and a new one was sought . After a three @-@ year search , in 1885 Beth Elohim purchased the building of the Congregational Church at 305 State Street ( near Hoyt ) for \$ 28 @,@ 000 ( today \$ 740 @,@ 000 ) , and moved in that year .

In 1891 , Temple Emanu @-@ El in Manhattan offered Sparger a salary larger than Beth Elohim could match , and he moved there . Beth Elohim subsequently split the offices of cantor and rabbi , hiring G. Taubenhau as rabbi and the Mauritz Weisskopf as cantor .

Born in Warsaw , Taubenhau could read the Pentateuch fluently in Hebrew at age four , and began studying the Talmud at age six . He attended the " Berlin theological seminary " ( likely the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums ) for six years . Upon emigrating to the United States , he served at Kehillah Kodesh Bene Yeshurum in Paducah , Kentucky , Temple Israel in Dayton , Ohio , and Congregation B 'nai Israel in Sacramento , California , before becoming the rabbi of the Shaari Zedek ( " Gates of Hope " ) synagogue in New York . Differences with the latter congregation led to his resignation there shortly before being hired by Beth Elohim . Taubenhau 's brother Joseph would be appointed rabbi at Baith Israel , Beth Elohim 's parent congregation , in 1893 , and another brother , Jacob / Jean Taubenhau , was a famous French chess master .

By the time of Taubenhau 's hiring , Beth Elohim was , according to the Brooklyn Eagle , " recognized as the leading Hebrew synagogue of Brooklyn " . The views of the congregation regarding kashrut ( the Jewish dietary laws ) were by then quite liberal ; in 1892 , when Hyman Rosenberg was expelled as rabbi of Brooklyn 's Beth Jacob synagogue for eating ham , Taubenhau stated that he did not believe his congregation would expel him for doing the same .

In 1895 , Samuel Radnitz succeeded Weisskopf as cantor , a role he filled until his death in 1944 .

By the turn of the twentieth century English had replaced German in the services and official minutes , and the second days of holidays eliminated . The synagogue had 106 members and annual revenues of around \$ 8 @,@ 000 ( today \$ 230 @,@ 000 ) , and its Sunday School had approximately 300 pupils .

Taubenhau left the congregation in 1901 , and the following year Alexander Lyons was hired as the congregation 's first American @-@ born rabbi . Lyons went on to serve the congregation for 37 years , until his death in 1939 at the age of 71 .

In 1907 , the women 's auxiliary was founded ; until then , though seating was mixed , women had little say in the running of the synagogue . That year the congregation had 110 member families and

annual revenues of \$ 9 @, @ 259 @. @ 55 ( today \$ 240 @, @ 000 ) . The congregational school , which held classes one day a week , had 15 teachers and 200 students .

= = Garfield Place and Eighth Avenue = =

= = = 1908 ? 1929 : New buildings = = =

In 1908 , the congregation purchased a 100 @-@ foot ( 30 m ) by 112 @-@ foot ( 34 m ) lot on the northeast corner of Garfield Place and Eighth Avenue . Plans were made to erect a new synagogue building there with a sanctuary seating 1 @, @ 500 people , at an anticipated cost of \$ 100 @, @ 000 ( today \$ 2 @. @ 6 million ) . The structure was designed and built by the Manhattan architectural firm of Simon Eisendrath and B. Horowitz ( or Horwitz ) . Construction began in 1909 and completed in 1910 . Designed in the Classical Revival style , this " monumental example " of " austere neo @-@ Classical grandeur " had five sides , representing the five books of Moses , a sanctuary that ultimately sat 1 @, @ 200 , and was capped by a saucer dome . The entrance faced the corner of Garfield and Eighth , and carved in stone over it was the Biblical verse fragment " MINE HOUSE SHALL BE AN HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE " ( Isaiah 56 : 7 ) . The basement held classrooms , an auditorium , and administrative offices , and behind the Torah ark was a combination Rabbi 's study / Board meeting room . The State Street building was sold to Congregation Mount Sinai .

1909 was also the year Judah Leon Magnes proposed and founded his Kehilla , a " comprehensive communal organization for the Jews of New York " , which operated until 1922 . Lyons opposed its creation , arguing that Jews in New York were too diverse to co @-@ exist in one organization with a single set of standards , that Jews should not organize as Jews for anything except purely religious purposes , and that in any event Reform Judaism was the future and Orthodox Judaism would not survive . As Lyons put it ,

To me Reform Judaism is an irresistible conviction . I believe it to be the religion of the Jewish future , while I regard orthodoxy as a survival that may have a galvanized life now and then , but on the whole is doomed .

By 1919 , Beth Elohim had 133 member families . The congregational school , which held classes once a week , had 305 students and 16 teachers .

Negotiations to merge with Union Temple ( the successor to Temple Israel ) were started in 1925 . A confirmation vote eventually passed , and the impending merger was announced in the Brooklyn Eagle . However , younger congregants feared a loss of identity , and forced a withdrawal .

Instead , the congregation raised funds for a second building , and in 1928 ? 1929 built the six @-@ story Temple House ( used for all congregational activities ) on the corner opposite the main sanctuary . Designed by Mortimer Freehof and David Levy , the cast stone building 's architectural style was " Jewish Deco " , a mix of Romanesque Revival and Art Deco decorative forms that was common in Jewish buildings of the period . Romanesque features included the fenestrations , while a prominent Art Deco feature was " the figure of Moses and the Tablets of Law , emphasizing the corner of the roof parapet . " The doorway and balcony at the east end of the building had " a distinctly Moorish flavor , featuring symbolic ornament : the Star of David , the Menorah , and the Lion of Judah . " The names of major figures from the Tanakh ( Hebrew Bible ) were inscribed on the Garfield Place facade , and the Biblical verses " SHOW ME THY WAYS O LORD TEACH ME THY PATHS GUIDE ME " ( Psalms 25 : 4 ? 5 ) on the Eighth Avenue facade . The building was also decorated with bas @-@ reliefs of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish and Babylonian charioteers . It housed a 125 @-@ seat chapel , a large ballroom , social halls , class rooms for the religious school , meeting rooms , administrative offices , a library , handball courts , a gymnasium , and a swimming pool .

Lyons took on a number of causes in the 1910s and 1920s . He worked with Bishop David Greer and Rabbi Stephen Wise to expose conditions in New York 's tenements , dissociated himself from Tammany Hall candidates , tried to secure a re @-@ trial for Leo Frank , and opposed some of the

views of Samuel Gompers . In 1912 , Lyons was a founding member of the Eastern Council of Reform Rabbis , an organization of Reform rabbis from the Eastern United States that was created despite opposition from the Central Conference of Reform Rabbis . In 1919 he withdrew from the Brooklyn Victory Celebration Committee ( celebrating the Allied victory in World War I ) and asked that his contributed funds be donated instead to the Red Cross ; many committee members eventually resigned in protest over the overt politicization of the event , and its control by William Randolph Hearst .

= = = 1930s : Landman joins , Great Depression , Lyons dies = = =

Isaac Landman , a graduate of Hebrew Union College , joined Lyons as rabbi of Beth Elohim in 1931 . Born in Russia in 1880 , Landman had come to the United States in 1890 . In 1911 , with the assistance of Jacob Schiff , Julius Rosenwald , and Simon Bamberger , he founded a Jewish farm colony in Utah , and during World War I he was " said to be the first Jewish chaplain in the United States Army to serve on foreign soil " . A leader in Jewish ? Christian ecumenism , he was editor of American Hebrew Magazine from 1918 , served as the delegate of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations ( now Union for Reform Judaism ) to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference , and in the late 1930s and early 1940s was editor of the new ten volume Universal Jewish Encyclopedia .

Landman had also been a prominent opponent of Zionism : when , in 1922 , the United States Congress was considering the Lodge ? Fish resolution in support of the Balfour Declaration , Landman and Rabbi David Philipson had presented the Reform movement 's ( then ) anti @-@ Zionist position to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs . Landman also printed many opinions against the resolution and Zionism in his American Hebrew Magazine . The bill was eventually unanimously supported by both houses of Congress , and approved by President Harding .

During the Great Depression synagogue membership decreased significantly ; experiencing financial difficulties , the congregation stopped paying its mortgage . Nevertheless , Beth Elohim was not completely moribund ; in 1931 it opened its Academy of Adult Jewish Education , which " offered courses in Bible , religion and contemporary Jewish life " , and operated throughout the Depression . By 1937 the congregation had elected Lyons " rabbi for life " .

In 1938 Lyons made common cause with Thomas Harten , the black pastor of Holy Trinity Baptist Church . Speaking to a mixed black ? Jewish audience at the church , Lyons informed the listeners that he was planning to attend the second Joe Louis versus Max Schmeling boxing match in order to protest Adolf Hitler 's " view that a bout between a German and a Negro was improper " . Lyons denounced the Nazi racial ideas , which he noted discriminated against blacks as well as Jews , and encouraged the audience to boycott all German @-@ made goods until " Hitler comes to his senses " .

Lyons died the following year , and Landman served as sole rabbi . After his death , the Central Conference of American Rabbis described Lyons as the " dean of the Brooklyn rabbinate from the point of view of service " .

= = = World War II and aftermath : Sack joins , Landman dies = = =

The synagogue 's fortunes improved in the 1940s , but in 1946 , its bank threatened to foreclose on its buildings , in anticipation of their sale to the local Catholic diocese , as the congregation had not paid the mortgage in many years . The congregation succeeded in convincing the bank to re @-@ negotiate its mortgage , and reduce the outstanding loan , and Max Koeppel led a drive to pay it off completely .

Eugene Sack , the father of Second Circuit Court of Appeals judge Robert D. Sack , joined Landman as rabbi in 1946 . While serving as assistant rabbi of Congregation Rodeph Shalom of Philadelphia , Sack had been instrumental in the founding of the Reform movement 's National Federation of Temple Youth in 1939 , and had presented a paper at its first biennial convention . Starting in 1943 he spent 18 months in the Pacific Theater of Operations of World War II as an army chaplain ; at one point he had to substitute peach juice for Passover wine .

Sack had also previously been involved in anti @-@ Zionist efforts amongst the Reform rabbinate . In 1942 the Central Conference of American Rabbis had abandoned its former anti @-@ Zionist stance , and adopted a resolution favoring the creation of a Jewish army in Palestine , to fight alongside other Allied armies , and under Allied command . Sack and other prominent Reform rabbis opposed this ; meeting on March 18 , 1942 , they agreed " there was a need to revitalize Reform Judaism , to oppose Jewish nationalism , and to publicize their point of view " . They planned " for a meeting of non @-@ Zionist Reform Rabbis to discuss the problems that confront Judaism and Jews in the world emergency " , to be held in Atlantic City . 36 rabbis eventually attended the two @-@ day conference on June 1 , 1942 , including Beth Israel 's Landman . The conference led to the formation of the anti @-@ Zionist American Council for Judaism , " the only American Jewish organization ever formed for the specific purpose of fighting Zionism and opposing the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine . "

Landman died suddenly in 1946 , leaving Sack to head Beth Elohim alone ; Sack would eventually serve as rabbi for 35 years . Richard Harvey also joined as cantor in the 1940s ; he would serve until his death in the 1970s .

After the war , Beth Elohim allowed women to become full members , granting them full voting privileges and allowing them to hold office . The congregation subsequently elected Jeanette Marks as a trustee . At this time the origins of the membership began to change , as Jews of Eastern European descent started joining the congregation .

In the late 1940s the central vault ceiling of the main sanctuary cracked , and had to be repaired . At that time the pulpit was also rebuilt , so that the rabbi and cantor had separate pulpits . Underneath the sanctuary ran an underground stream which would regularly overflow , leading to flooding problems . The flooding was fixed in the 1950s with the installation of check valves , and a concrete slab floor was installed . Though the intent was to provide usable space in the basement , it was rarely used .

By 1953 , Beth Elohim had grown to over 700 families , and the religious school had over 550 students . In the 1960s , however , membership began to decline , as young families moved to the suburbs .

= = = 1970s ? 2000s : Decline , Weider joins , re @-@ birth = = =

In 1970 , the congregation again encountered difficulties , " faced with dwindling membership and bleak prospects " . The members , however , created one of the earliest nursery schools in the neighborhood , which , along with the Brownstone Revival movement in Park Slope , helped draw Jewish families back into the temple and revitalize the membership . One of those young families was that of Gerald I. Weider , a young rabbi who joined the synagogue 's staff in 1978 .

A native of the Bronx , Weider graduated from Rutgers University , and was ordained at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1973 ( he would be granted a Doctor of Divinity degree by Hebrew Union College in 1998 ) . Before joining Beth Elohim , he served as Assistant Rabbi of Temple Ohabei Shalom of Brookline , Massachusetts , and as the Associate Rabbi of Washington Hebrew Congregation in Washington , D.C. At Beth Elohim , he focused on programming and services for urban Jewish families . Under his leadership , Beth Elohim opened after ? school and early childhood centers in 1978 , and a day camp the following year , all housed in the Temple House .

The 1970s also saw a return to more traditional practices in the service , under Weider 's guidance . Some members began wearing head coverings in the sanctuary , some Hebrew prayers were added to the Sabbath service , and the Reform movement 's new High Holy Days prayer book *The Gates of Repentance* was adopted . The synagogue building and Temple House were contributing properties to the Park Slope historic district , which was listed as a New York City Landmark district in 1973 , and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 .

In 1985 , Weider and Beth Elohim , in cooperation with the rabbis of the Park Slope Jewish Center and Congregation Baith Israel Anshei Emes , proposed opening a liberal Jewish day school in Brooklyn . Though housed at Beth Elohim , it would not be affiliated with any specific Jewish movement , and was intended for children from all branches of Judaism . Planning began in earnest

in 1994 ; the school was modeled on New York 's Abraham Joshua Heschel School , as an outgrowth of Beth Elohim 's preschool program . The intent was to start with only first grade in 1995 , but extend to eighth grade by 2000 . At the time Beth Elohim had approximately 500 member families and 141 children in the preschool . The school opened in 1995 , and continued for three years , growing to 38 students , before moving to new premises and becoming independent under the name " Hannah Senesh Community Day School " .

In the 1980s and 1990s Beth Elohim 's buildings were repaired and refurbished a number of times . The sanctuary ceiling cracked in the early 1980s , and services were held in Temple House for a time . The congregation mounted a " Save our Sanctuary " campaign in 1982 , and repaired the ceiling . In the 1980s Beth Elohim also refurbished the Moses stained glass window , and painted the main sanctuary . The congregation restored and renovated its buildings in 1990 , and in 1992 did emergency restoration work to the facade of Temple House and restored the pews . In 1997 the synagogue began its " Kadimah Capital Campaign " , which was intended to raise funds to repair and renovate the buildings . By 1999 , the congregation had restored Temple House 's facade , rebuilt the collapsed Garfield St. entrance , made entry into the synagogue handicapped accessible , added a multipurpose space and classrooms in the basement of the sanctuary , and planned to add a fifth floor for more classrooms . That year Sack ( by then Rabbi Emeritus ) died ; the year before his death his son , Robert , at his induction as a Second Circuit judge , had described his father as " the most open minded man he had ever known " .

Janet Leuchter joined as cantor in 2001 . A native of Vineland , New Jersey , and 1999 graduate of Hebrew Union College , she had previously served as cantor of Temple Avodah in Oceanside , New York .

= = = Weider retires , events since 2006 = = =

Weider retired as senior rabbi in 2006 , after 28 years of service . He was succeeded by Andy Bachman . At that time , Beth Elohim had over 1 @, @ 000 members . In 2007 , the synagogue was a winner of the Union for Reform Judaism 's Congregation of Learners award for medium size synagogues , for " those synagogues that provide an exceptional environment of varied and comprehensive learning opportunities and have imbued their synagogue communities with a culture of learning " .

In 2009 , Beth Elohim was described as the largest and most active Reform congregation in Brooklyn . Prominent members included U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer . In April of that year , Beth Elohim was listed by Newsweek as one of America 's 25 " Most Vibrant " Jewish congregations . In September , just four days before Yom Kippur , a part of the sanctuary ceiling collapsed . No @-@ one was hurt , but the sanctuary had to be closed . The nearby Old First Reformed Church ? with which Beth Elohim had had close ties since the 1930s ? offered its premises for the holiday ( Sunday night and Monday ) , and accommodated over 1000 worshipers . The day before the holiday , the synagogue was picketed by members of the Westboro Baptist Church , who shouted antisemitic and anti @-@ gay slogans .

As of 2012 , Beth Elohim was the " oldest Brooklyn congregation that continues to function under its corporate name " , and its pulpit was the oldest in continuous use in any Brooklyn synagogue . Its rabbis were Andy Bachman , Shira Koch Epstein , and Marc Katz , the rabbi emeritus was Gerald Weider , and the cantor was Joshua Breitzer .

Bachman , a graduate of University of Wisconsin ? Madison with a 1996 rabbinic ordination from Hebrew Union College , became Beth Elohim 's first new senior rabbi in 25 years on October 25 , 2006 . Before becoming senior rabbi he had previously been an educator there from 1993 to 1998 . An advocate of more traditionalism in the Reform movement , in 2002 he started a small , more traditional , Hebrew @-@ focused spinoff prayer group at Beth Elohim , and has spoken in favor of a more traditional liturgy . Bachman and his wife , Rachel Altstein , have been instrumental in bringing 20- and 30 @-@ year @-@ olds into the synagogue , and in December 2007 , Bachman was named one of The Forward 's " Forward 50 " . In 2008 he was a regular contributor to the Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive website . Epstein , born in the Bronx and raised in New

Milford , Connecticut , attended Wesleyan University and Hebrew Union College , and served as the coordinator of the Institute for Reform Zionism . In 2008 she was a member of " Rabbis for Obama " , a cross @-@ denominational group of more than 300 American rabbis supporting Barack Obama 's 2008 presidential campaign . Barrington Rhode Island native Marc Katz graduated from Tufts University and studied at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem before becoming Beth Elohim 's rabbinic intern in 2009 .

On September 22 , 2013 , Beth Elohim celebrated its 150th anniversary and dedicated a new Sefer Torah . Members of Beth Elohim stated it was " the first Torah in New York City to be completed by a woman " .

= = = Bachman departs , Timoner joins , Events since 2015 = = =

In June 2015 , Andy Bachman departed to join the 92nd Street Y as the Director of Jewish Content and Community Ritual . In July 2015 , Rachel Timoner became the Senior Rabbi .