

CONGREGATION B'NAI DAVID  
A History

The rush to settle California in the mid-1800's included many Jewish pioneers, some of whom were recent immigrants from Eastern Europe. The historical accounts detail hardship and perseverance, disaster and success in their many enterprises including mining, farming, publishing and merchandising. According to Tulare County historian Annie R. Mitchell, author of many important volumes, Jewish pioneers to this area came primarily from the earlier-established Jewish community in Stockton, including her grandfather, Levi Mitchell who founded a mercantile store in Visalia in 1854, the year this city was officially surveyed. Among other Jewish merchants arriving about that time were Solomon Sweet, Henry Goldstein and Myer Iseman. She tells us that the first newspaper was published in Visalia by Jewish newspaperman I. W. Carpenter in 1859-handset one page at a time in a basement shop. Hanford was created by the arrival of the railroad in 1877 and Nathan Weisbaum and Jacob Manasse opened The Pioneer Store that year.

There are no historical records of the existence of a formal Jewish congregation in Tulare/Kings counties area in the 80-year span from the mid-1800's. However, the size and influence of an early Jewish community here is evident by the existence of a Hebrew Section (Block 11) of the five-acre Visalia Cemetery located on West Goshen Avenue. A January 14, 1880 Visalia City Council Order charges the cemetery caretaker " ... to care for the lots within the Hebrew plot and sell them only to Hebrews."

The local newspaper mentioned High Holiday observances, this for example from the September 1874 *Visalia Delta*: "The holy day of atonement will be observed next Monday by all of our Jewish citizens, and of course many of the business houses in town will be closed. The event will be celebrated as is any holiday."

And we note that finding rabbinical leadership for our area and "doing the best we can" has been a local challenge for 100 years-as the October 12, 1894 item from *The Jewish Progress*, San Francisco, attests:

"Israel multiplies in California. We are informed of holiday services held in Hanford, Tulare County. Our correspondent writes that the meetings were numerously attended by the people of the neighboring Villages, who came last Tuesday and remained all night to celebrate the Day of Atonement. Having no officiant, the people did the best they could and divided the duties among themselves, one of them even reading a sermon from a collection in his possession. It must have been a glorious service. The spirit of devotion made it holy, the piety of the people made it great. We are happy to chronicle such an event."

To chronicle the tales of settlement and success of the early comers to our area would fill volumes. For example, Newman Ranches of Tulare/Visalia was founded by Ike Newman, great-uncle of Esther Newman-Greenberg, Young Harold and Rose Mirviss moved to Hanford in 1927 and opened Mirviss Dress Shop (prior to that they had tried chicken ranching in the famous co-op in Petaluma, California). Morris and Celia Levin founded Morris Levin Hardware in Tulare in 1934. About 1940, the Hanford Sentinel had a Jewish owner and Julius Jacobs served as editor for ten years. Dr. I.M. Lipson practiced medicine in Visalia prior to WWII and in those early days, he is recalled saying, the most common disease he treated was malaria.

1948 - The South County Group

In 1948, the population of Kings County was about 52,000; Tulare County stood at 100,000 and was poised for expansion. Jewish families in the two county area numbered about fifty (about one person in 600)

Several attempts were made to establish a Jewish congregation in Tulare County. In 1948, Mr. Tanchic moved to Porterville and on his initiative a few families in Lindsay, Springville and Porterville

were assembled and all agreed to institute Friday night services. Mr. Tanchic was Orthodox and it was decided to follow the Orthodox persuasion. Orthodox prayer books were purchased for the services which were held in private homes. About twenty families were active in this group, (none from Visalia) including Mr. and Mrs. Joe Sokol, Mr. and Mrs. Ben Sokol, Mr. and Mrs. Grey of Springville, Mr. and Mrs. Yos Friedman, the Smith family, Mr. and Mrs. Axelrod, and other families. As Yos recounts, "We even gathered for a Bar Mitzvah celebration of the Grey's son in Springville." This informal congregation was active for eighteen months in the south county until Mr. Tanchic and others left the area and it disbanded.

B'nai Brith, (the world's oldest and largest Jewish service organization which through its Anti-Defamation League-ADL is strengthening interreligious understanding and cooperation and protecting the status and rights of Jews) is mentioned most often as being active at this time and sponsoring Purim parties and Passover Seders in Visalia, Hanford, and Tulare, offering a spirit of community to the scattered residents. At the same time, from about 1947 to 1950, in Tulare, several families organized a Sunday School for their children. Cecil Levin (son of Morris and Celia Levin) , a Tulare psychologist, was a volunteer leader for the youth group.

#### 1957 - The Visalia Group

Then, in 1957, on the initiative of Mr. Richard Ottenheimer, an engineer with the then-new Armstrong Tire Plant in Hanford, a group of about ten families gathered and decided to establish a congregation in Visalia. A Prayer Book Committee was appointed to prepare a Prayer Book; a collection of Prayers was typed and copied and formed the basis for Friday night services. Mr. Ottenheimer (being an admitted frustrated cantor) conducted services as a rule, assisted by Yos Friedman, Max Blechman and Nate Unikel, who all knew Hebrew and remembered the melodies. Services were held in private homes every other week.

The original participants in the Visalia congregation included Mr. and Mrs. Ottenheimer, Dr. and Dr. Irv Schor, Dr. Pete and Hennie Brauner, Dr. Walden and Augusta Klaus, Nate and Sylvia Unikel, Dr. Max and Gertrude Blechman, Hirschel and Annette Schwartz, Mr. and Mrs. Bill Cosloy, Mr. and Mrs. Everett Krackov, Yos and Pauline Friedman of Woodlake, and Mr. and Mrs. Max Porter of Dinuba, and Julie and Esther Greenberg of Tulare.

These were all young families who moved here after WWII. In 1945, Dr. Irv Schor was discharged from the Navy and joined his wife, Dr. Debbie Pineles who had arrived from New York to Visalia in 1943 to practice medicine with Dr. I.M.Lipson, and await her husband's return from the war. (Dr. Lipson founded the Visalia Medical Clinic). Returning from the China-Burma war theatre in December 1945, Julie Greenberg's destination was Tulare-to claim his bride, Esther Newman, whom he met at Temple Beth Israel, Fresno, in 1943. In February 1946, Yos and Pauline Friedman moved from San Francisco to Lindsay where Yos was the chemist for Matmor Olive Co. (after a brief sojourn in Petaluma, chicken ranching). That same year, leaving his San Francisco office, Max Blechman purchased an optometric practice in Visalia, and for a short time the family lived in 1-112 rooms in the rear of the building. Dr. Klaus came from Mississippi in answer to an ad and was the first doctor hired by the Visalia Medical Clinic.

In 1949, Nate and Sylvia Unikel learned of a dry goods store for sale in Farmersville and bought it. Six months later, Nate was amazed to find Yos Friedman at his door-it happened that a minyan was needed to say Kaddish and only nine Jews could be found in the Lindsay-Porterville area. But someone remembered that a Jewish retailer had located recently in Farmersville, so they drove there and went store to store until they found Nate. Pete Brauner, with his wife Hennie, came to Visalia in 1952, where Pete was Tulare County Public Health Officer; he subsequently entered private practice.

Nate summed up the formative years of Congregation B'nai David: " ... despite poverty of Jewish resources and the hardship of adapting to an alien environment, the situation was a cementing factor and brought us together to a common goal to maintain continuity and raise our children in the Jewish tradition. There was the cumulative need and individual need to join others in practice and fulfilling the understanding of Judaism .....

#### The Children Always Helped with Services

Services in the home meant that every service was a "children's service" - parents came with

their children as a family unit and they participated together. There were always lots of kids, and they took part in reading the English, memorizing the Hebrew, and joining in songs, sometimes teaching new songs they had practiced beforehand. They felt they were an important part of the congregation from the beginning. As one person remembered the home services as a child, "... when you're right in the middle of the service every other Friday night, year after year, after a time you just know it by heart."

A Sunday school and Hebrew school was organized. The principal, Yos Friedman, and his staff were all volunteers. After a year, the home-made Prayer Books were replaced with the Conservative Prayer Books (Mr. Ottenheimer had been associated with the Conservative branch previously) and it was decided that the member who hosted the service should assist in conducting the service, in Hebrew if possible or in English as necessary.

#### Steering Committee & Official Name

Being an informal group, it was two years later that a seven-member steering committee was elected to preside over the needs of the small congregation. The steering committee in turn appointed the president and officers from their numbers. There were minimal expenses at the time so minimal dues of \$20 per year sufficed. No High Holiday services were conducted locally so most travelled to Fresno or Bakersfield or elsewhere. However, all other holidays were celebrated here, including Pesach Seder which at times drew a crowd of about 130 people. The Seders were held at the Veterans Memorial Building and Eagles Hall in Tulare. Hanukkah parties were often celebrated in Tulare at the home of Julie and Esther Greenberg. (Julie's latkes were famous in those days, too!).

In 1958, the congregants chose an official name. There were several names suggested, such as "Ba Midhar" - "In the Wilderness" - a name meant to suggest the reality of the situation of being in a Jewish cultural desert; however, "Congregation B'nai David" was the name of choice. Communication with members began as a two-page flyer called "*Kol B 'nai David*"-(*The Voice of B'nai David*), edited most of the time by Nate Unikel and Bob Rothchild.

The membership grew and in 1961, with 20 to 25 families enrolled, private living rooms became too crowded (everyone bring your own chair, remember?) so public meeting places were sought.

Sunday school was first held in 1961 at the Hotel Johnson (which stood at the site of downtown Rank of America today) due to the largess of the manager, Mr. Robert Styr, a member of the Congregation. Two rooms [or services and religious school were provided for a nominal fee of \$10. Each family hosting Friday night services then had the option of using their own home or the hotel facilities. Several Passover Seders were also held there. The hotel closed in 1963 so the Sunday school was held in other places, one being the Episcopal Church Annex on West Main Street. All services returned to the homes.

#### CBD's First Torah

For its first ten years, the Congregation had no Torah. But, on May 28, 1967, the first *Sefer Torah* scroll was dedicated, a gift received through Max Blechman whose father, Zelig Blechman, belonged to the J 8th street congregation, Ahavas Achim, in San Francisco. The Jews moved out of that area and the congregation had disbanded, and Zelig Blechman requested one of their two Torahs for Visalia. He was allowed to choose a Torah, which he carefully mended and cleaned (both were in need of attention) and then sent it on to Visalia. The practice of reading the Torah portion each Friday service was initiated by Yos Friedman and he thus became the official Torah reader and has continued as such to this day.

The "traveling synagogue" needed a house for its new Torah, so a gun case with glass side panels was remodeled by Irv Schor's good friend, a Pentacostal preacher, thus enabling the transport of the Torah from place to place as was the first biblical Holy Ark of yore. According to printed schedules in "The Kol", between 1971 and 1978, services were rotated among the following homes: Woodlake-Yos Friedman; Tulare, Paul Atlas, Julie Greenberg; Hanford-Ted Newman, Martin Levine; Visalia-Max Blechman, Bob Stallers, Pete Brauner, Lou Blechman, Everett Krackov, Walden Klaus, Don Woolfe, Roger Stein, Nate Unikel, Joe Lichaa, Dr. Gardner, Fran Florio, Irv Schor, Sara Reagan, Sid Cooper, Laurie Hart, Randy Firstman, Mark Rosenthal, Leonard Miller, Leonard Ginsberg, the Gorbachs, the Levich's and the Bartels.

#### Formal Affiliation

In the early 1970's, career moves took a number of the original members from the area, but by mid-1970's, many new young Jewish families with small children located in Visalia and surrounding areas. The religious school had ceased operating some years earlier, and the local children were carpooled to attend religious school in Fresno. On the initiative of the Rich Sigmunds, Jerry Newmans and Bill Gorbachs, a group of young parents sought to arrange a central location for services and reestablish a local religious school. So it followed that a public meeting was organized to determine the level of interest in the ideas. After publicity in all the area newspapers (the Visalia Times-Delta headlined it "Jewish Church to Meet") over 80 Jews attended the meeting, most of whom were new to CBD. The group decided to increase dues (by 10 times) and authorized a committee to pursue an affiliation with either the Reform or the Conservative movements. When contacted, the Reform branch sent Rabbi Hermann to offer assistance; the Conservative branch responded with a list of costs and requirements. A majority of members voted to affiliate with the Reform Movement, and on December 23, 1980 Congregation B'nai David received its Charter, twenty-three years after its founding. In 1979, services were moved to Rivera Hall, courtesy of Father Don Cole, Pastor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Visalia, and the every-other Friday night schedule continued there until 1986.

#### More Exciting Milestones

Cantor Michael Loring (nee Samuel Mirviss, uncle of Lee Mirviss) from Fresno, conducted one of the services each month for several years. CBD entered into the Student Rabbi Program with Hebrew Union College and three student rabbis came to Visalia over the next four years. Two half-time rabbis were hired over a four year period, until 1991.

In 1985, the property at 1039 South Chinowth was purchased, an acquisition made possible in part by a bequest from Anna Leasure to whose memory the sanctuary building is dedicated. The remodeling project costs were kept to a minimum by the willing participation of congregants to draw plans, clean, clear, paint, panel, cut, and repair buildings and grounds. These eager beavers dedicated many weekends of hard work to transform the property into a useable facility. The new synagogue was dedicated October 26, 1986, on Simhat Torah.

The October 1986 *Shofar* ran the following notice:

"Please note: Now that we have moved into our new home, we are looking for all those items that have been stored in closets and garages throughout two counties! Do you have any items that belong to the Congregation-such as tablecloths, books, or ??? If so, please call these numbers .... "  
Our "traveling synagogue" was home.

In the last two years, our own cantor Herb Schwartz and resident Biblical scholar and Torah reader, Yos Friedman, along with other lay leaders Phil Appelbaum, Michael Sheltzer, Rich Sigmund, have conducted services and led our congregation's religious practices, with a visiting rabbi conducting High Holiday services. The religious school has an enrollment of 40 students in five grade levels. Hebrew school offers four levels of study and a bar/bat mitzvah trainer is employed. In 1994 we subscribed to the Student Rabbi Program through the Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles.

#### Groundbreaking - 5758

A historic ceremony took place November 16, 1997 when CBD broke ground for the first temple in Tulare and Kings Counties. On the first day of Religious School, Sunday September 13, 1998, congregants placed the mezuzah and dedicated the new synagogue in preparation for the High Holy Days. A public dedication was celebrated on October 4, 1998. The second phase of our building plan-a Family Education Center wing-was launched in May 2006. We are seeing the results of our hard work, a place to meet our spiritual and social needs, a center for the Jewish community.

Hanukkah 1997/5758 marked the 40th anniversary of CBD, for it was at the Hanukkah party, 1957 at Julie and Esther Greenberg's home in Tulare, that the founders each put \$10 seed money on the table and decided to form a congregation. Since then membership has grown from 12 to 92 families. In October 2008 (Tishrei 5769) we will celebrate ten years in our new Temple.

Through the tireless and dedicated efforts of so many of our members and friends, goals are being met. Every Jewish person and family in Tulare and Kings Counties has a stake in the future of Congregation B'nai David; each of us has something unique to offer and much to gain through association with the Jewish community. Communal Jewish participation is essential to being a complete Jew and, for the Central Valley, CBD will continue to be the link to Jewish wholeness. ∴