

HISTORY OF SHAAREI-BETH EL CONGREGATION

In 1952, eight to ten Jewish families in town met in one another's homes- the men for a friendly game of poker while the women played mah jong. Over the next few years, other Jewish families began moving into town during those years, a number of whom were builders and developers. Oakville was indeed beginning to expand. All of these builders were immigrants from Europe, and in later years, some of them served as President of the synagogue.

There was discussion on forming a Jewish Community Centre, as more and more people were coming into the area and Oakville was growing rapidly. It was then decided that a meeting of the Jewish men in the area should be called in April 1955. The meeting to make plans for the future took place in Ben Lebof's furniture factory. Henry Kalmus came up with the idea and was the original founder who served as the first President. It is to Henry that the Congregation owes a great deal.

At this April 1955 meeting, plans were drawn up to organize the community which consisted of about 15 families, and to consider Jewish education for the children. One dollar was collected from each person present, and the Oakville Jewish Community Centre (as it was then known) was formed.

A great deal of credit for the early formation must also go to the Solomon, Blechman, Lebof, Kleinstein and Burke families amongst others, for their untiring efforts in organizing the community. Monthly meetings were held in various downtown premises which were rented, at which Henry Kalmus would provide a report on the progress being made.

A Hebrew school was organized, although at that time there were not many children, and the classes were held in the basement of the Kleinstein family's home on Sunday mornings. These classes were conducted by a rabbinical student who came out each week from Toronto.

By 1960 as the number of Jewish families in the area had grown to approximately 30-35, it was decided that the Community needed a shul. Plans were made to purchase a suitable piece of land.

An architect was then engaged to draw up the designs; construction of the edifice commenced, and in 1962 the building was completed, dedicated and the cornerstone laid.

Several rabbis were hired over the ensuing years. Children were taught in the rooms in the lower level of the synagogue; and services were held on a regular basis during the 1960's and 1970's.

As many new Jewish families moved to Oakville and the surrounding area and joined the shul, unfortunately many others moved away.

It was then that discussions were held regarding merging with the Burlington Jewish Community which had quite a number of families but no building of their own (they met monthly at the Shell House on Lakeshore Road, and later in the basement of the Union Gas building in Burlington). In 1981 the BJC was approached by Beth El Congregation (a smaller group which had acquired a lot on Morrison Road and built a small synagogue). After much discussion and many meetings with the Burlington group, the two communities amalgamated in 1982 and agreed to rename the synagogue Shaarei-Beth El.

Rabbi Edward Goldfarb became the community's Rabbi in 1982. During Rabbi Goldfarb's 18 years as spiritual leader, the community grew from 35 families at amalgamation to about 120 families. There are now about 130 member families..

Due to the expanding membership, in 1985 it was decided that our present facilities were inadequate, and plans were drawn up for a new sanctuary. The ground in front of the old building was filled in and the new sanctuary constructed. The beautiful edifice where we all now worship and hold functions was consecrated and dedicated in September 1986. Rabbi Goldfarb retired in 2000 and Rabbi Paul Sidlofsky was our Rabbi until 2007, when Rabbi Stephen Wise succeeded him..

Shaarei-Beth is now a member of the Union for Reform Judaism, a liberal branch of Judaism with over 900 congregations in North America. Among the tenets of Reform Judaism are the equality of men and women, emphasis on social justice, and the creation of services which are inviting in terms of length, music and balance of Hebrew and English.

In November 2006, the synagogue celebrated its 50th anniversary.

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