

# 1953 ~ 2013

*2013/5774 is a year to celebrate:  
It is 60 years since the founding of Congregation Beth El.  
Our achievements are many, and we have much to be proud of.*

## **Beth El's Beginnings**

The history of Congregation Beth El began in October 1952 when a group of eleven enthusiastic families recognized the need for the formation of a Jewish group within the community. They came together as a social/athletic organization to discuss the possibilities of commitment. On October 18, 1953 the "Fairfield Jewish Community Group" was named. Members held weekly services in members' homes and elementary schools. The group's first High Holiday services in fall of 1954 were held in the American Legion Hall, under the direction of group members and volunteer cantor, Charles R. Feld. Since that day, the congregation and its leaders have grown from a handful of pioneers into the vibrant, energetic, community-centered congregation that is today's *Congregation Beth El*. What follows is a brief overview of the growth of this wonderful community.

## **A Growth Spurt**

In September 1955, the first Sunday school of nineteen children was formed, with Trudy Engelberg as principal. Classes were conducted in Fairfield Woods School and Osborn Hill School. The following year, the group's membership had grown to 112 families and in 1957, the first rabbinical leader, Rabbi Arthur Haselkorn, was hired at a salary of \$4,500 per year. And while consideration was given to create a relationship with Congregation Rodeph Sholom to combine facilities, promote growth socially, expand education, and establish a physical plan to support both groups, the membership met and voted to "go it alone." In October 1957, three-and-a-half acres of land were purchased from the Hay Family at 1200 Fairfield Woods Road for the sum of \$23,000.

Following the resignation of Rabbi Haselkorn in January 1959, the Rabbinical Assembly suggested Rabbi Jack Bloom for the position of "Rabbi of the Fairfield Jewish Community Group and Assistant to Rabbi Harry Nelson of Congregation Rodeph Sholom." Rabbi Bloom was hired at a salary of \$7500, half paid by Rodeph Sholom. This dual relationship was short lived and Rabbi Bloom became affiliated solely with Congregation Beth El. In June 1959, the Board of Directors of the Fairfield Jewish Community Group approved a change of name to Temple Beth El, which officially became Congregation Beth El of Fairfield in July 1960.

In March 1960, architect Fred Gellert's plans for the new synagogue building was approved and a loan for \$100,000 was obtained from Connecticut National Bank, with collateral guaranteed by the personal signatures of congregants. Hewlett Construction Company was awarded the \$225,190 bid to erect the new building, which included a sanctuary-social hall, kitchen, offices and six classrooms. A twenty-year construction mortgage from People's Bank for \$150,000 was approved. On April 16, 1961, the groundbreaking ceremony for the new building was held across the street at the Fairfield Woods School, due to a torrential downpour. The rain didn't

stop the approximately 1,000 people who attended. The building was completed and dedicated on September 15, 1963.

In August 1962, a \$25,000 90-day renewable loan from the City Trust Company was negotiated. Still, financial problems continued to plague the synagogue. It was only through the generosity of the Sisterhood and Brotherhood that monthly mortgage and loan payments were made. Frequently, dedicated congregants rescued the office by paying bills from their own pockets, in order to meet payroll needs. To help ease the financial difficulties, a weekly Bingo game began in 1970 and ran continually for 14 years.

In April 1967, Beth El purchased 50 cemetery plots from Workman' Circle at \$100 per plot. The option to purchase 50 more was exercised in November 1967.

### **A Time of Transition and New Leadership**

In 1969, Rabbi Bloom informed the congregation that he would be leaving the pulpit to attend school full time. During his ten-year tenure, he created many initiatives, one of which was the creation of an evening Hebrew High School. The students participated in numerous volunteer activities in the community and in regular Shabbat weekend retreats. His dedication to Camp Ramah resulted in many students attending Ramah each summer.

After Rabbi Bloom's departure, the congregation hired Rabbi Mark Elovitz who served for one year, followed by Rabbi Louis B. Dimpson, who served for two years. In August 1972, Rabbi Leon Waldman became rabbi of *Congregation Beth El*, where he led the growth of the congregation and its Jewish community for the next thirty-two years.

In 1973, Beth El was the recipient of a Holocaust Torah from the Czech city of Kladno. This scroll was received on extended loan from the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust, and remained on display in the foyer of the synagogue, directly opposite the main sanctuary doors, until 2007, when its importance and role in the history of Congregation Beth El evolved.

### **The Formative Years and Rabbi Waldman's Lasting Contributions**

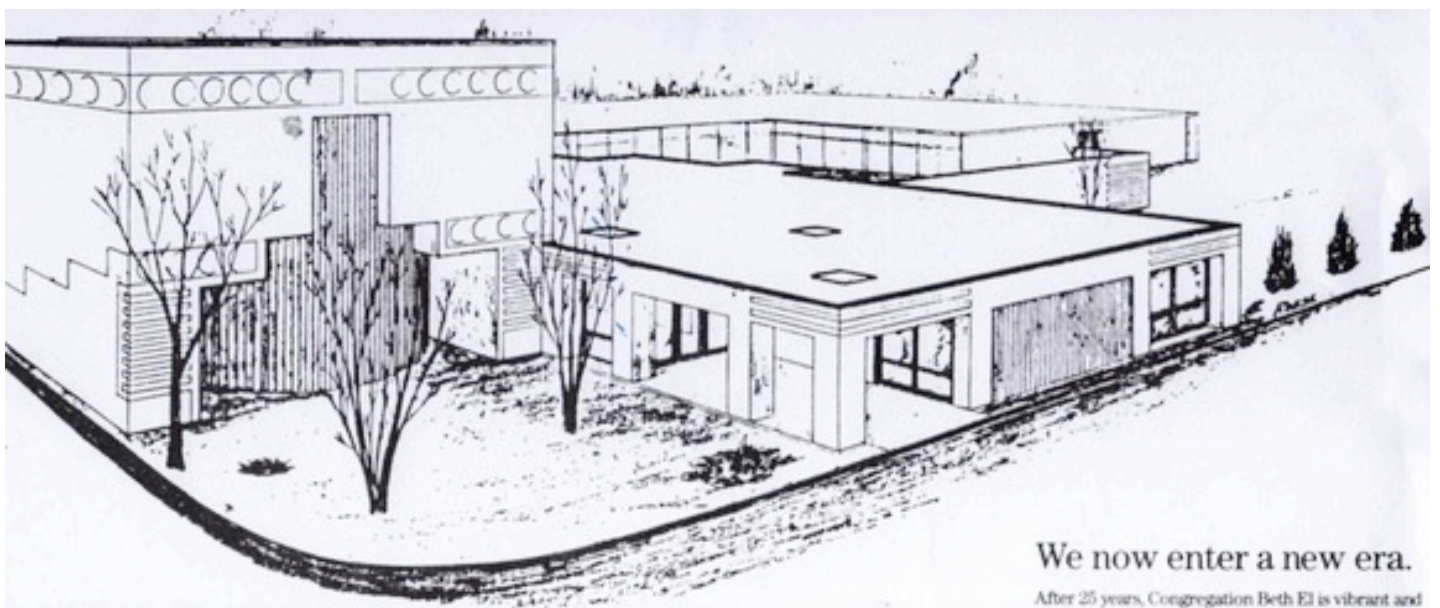
Rabbi Waldman was instrumental in the development of a strong and involved, fully egalitarian congregation, initiating many programs that continue to this day. During 1973 and 1974, Rabbi Waldman began discussions with the ritual committee regarding the role of women in religious services at Beth El. With the support of the entire congregation, *Congregation Beth El* was the first Conservative synagogue in Connecticut to fully count women as equals.

In September 1973, congregants asked for a minyan on Monday and Thursday mornings, for which Rabbi Waldman served as minyan leader. Gradually, other weekdays and Sunday were added to the schedule. Today, the daily minyan is led by congregants and pre-and post-bar/bat mitzvah students and serves both the important social and religious life-cycle needs of the congregation.

Other important groups were born as well during this time, including the Beth El Sisterhood, which sponsored its first interfaith, ecumenical Sukkot luncheon in 1974. It grew from fifteen people on the lawn, advanced to the kiddush room with 100 guests, and now remains in the

social hall with 200 people attending annually. This luncheon, loyally attended by both Jewish and Christian clergy is a seminal, yearly event within the greater Fairfield community and has continued, without interruption, until today. Speakers have included local clergy, Bishop Lori of Bridgeport, nationally know authors and university professors. Proceeds from the luncheon, at least \$2,000 annually, are donated to Operation Hope of Fairfield, Inc.

During 1978 and 1979, Rabbi Waldman and his family took a sabbatical, spending the year in Israel. In May 1979, Rabbi Waldman arranged for the first of several congregational pilgrimages to Israel. Twenty-five members of the synagogue and two non-members participated. Like many other important traditions, congregational missions to Israel, are still held today, and are now supported by funds raised by the Torah Fund Project in 2005, which advocates for sponsorship of first-time student and adult visitors to Israel.



### WELCOME TO A NEW BETH EL

#### It's Bigger

- Our beautiful Sanctuary will be able to accommodate more Congregants.
- Our Social Hall and the Old Library will be able to handle larger functions and Simchas.
- Much needed classroom space will be added.

#### It's More Functional

- Our Sanctuary, Social Hall and the School Wing will be individually climate controlled.
- The Social Hall acoustical conditions will be greatly improved.
- The kitchen will be modernized and enhanced.
- Mens and Ladies lavatories will be added near the Sanctuary and Social Hall.

#### It's More Beautiful

- Wooden pews will replace the Sanctuary folding chairs.
- The Social Hall will be totally decorated.
- The offices will be modern and attractive.
- The new wing will blend with and complement the architecture of our Sanctuary.

We now enter a new era.

After 25 years, Congregation Beth El is vibrant and continues to grow. But as our membership has expanded, our need for a larger more comfortable facility has also increased. Additionally, over time, the elements have taken their toll and today Beth El needs restoration, and more — the support of each and every one of us to complete the biggest rebuilding in the Synagogue's history! It's time we all said "thank you."

אִישׁ כְּמַתְנֵת  
 יָדוֹ כְּבְרַכְתָּהּ  
 אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ:

Every man shall give as he is able according to the blessings of the Lord your God which he has given you.

Deuteronomy 16:17

The congregation and its needs continued to grow, and in 1980, architect Herbert Newman was hired to design a structure that would include an enlarged, permanent sanctuary, synagogue offices, and an enlarged kitchen. Kaleng Construction, with a contract for \$350,000 won the bid

and groundbreaking took place on March 14, 1981. The cornerstone of Jerusalem marble, brought from Israel by Charles and Trudy Engleberg, was placed in the foundation on May 3, 1981. Today, that cornerstone has been moved and is on display inside the front entrance to the synagogue lobby. That same year the Hyla Loewith Garden was dedicated to the memory of *Congregation Beth El's* first woman president, and the first female president of a Conservative synagogue in Connecticut.

Rabbi Waldman's understanding of *Congregation Beth El's* community reached outside the walls of synagogue building. In the fall of 1982, he brought to the congregation's attention Fairfield's need for a shelter to protect the homeless. He was instrumental in the founding of Operation Hope and served as its first president, encouraging other local clergy to participate. First Church Congregational of Fairfield offered part of its building as a site for the homeless. Today, Operation Hope's services have expanded to provide temporary and permanent housing for the homeless as well as meals, and social services to those in need. Beth El remains one of its staunchest supporters.

Rabbi Waldman's forward-thinking vision for the Beth El community resulted in the core beliefs and programs that our congregation has continued to build upon. Aside from Operation Hope, which continued to serve an ever-growing population within the town of Fairfield, Rabbi Waldman was a staunch believer in education, whether it be within *Congregation Beth El*, or further a-field. Under his guidance, Beth El's Religious School established itself as the preeminent three-day-a-week after-school program, ensuring that all students graduated with an in-depth understanding of their Jewish identity, an ability to articulately chant Torah and Haftarah. Perhaps most significantly, he imbued his teachings and sermons with a passion for Israel and its role in the lives of Jewish adults and children.

The fall of 1989 marked Sisterhood's first annual Juried Craft Show spearheaded and coordinated by Esther Dansky. What made the event unusual was the 100 congregants who volunteered to work on this annual project. They helped with everything from directing traffic, putting up signage, housing crafters, to baking cookies and cooking soup. Esther remained at the helm until the last show in 2003.

An addition to the north end of the building in 1990-1991 offered new general office space, new offices for the rabbi and the cantor, a privacy room, and a Sisterhood gift shop.

The religious leadership of *Congregation Beth El* remained constant for two and a half decades. Rabbi Leon Waldman and Cantor Charles Feld led from the bimah, officiated at life cycle events, and taught the congregation's young people. Celebrations to honor each of them were held within a one-year period. Over the weekend of December 5-6, 1997, Rabbi Waldman was feted at a gala recognizing the twenty-fifth anniversary of his becoming a rabbi for Congregation Beth El. And on December 6, 1998, Cantor Feld was honored in recognition of his retirement from Beth El after forty-six years of service. Charlie's love of children inspired the building of the playground and the blocks in front of it are a testament to the many families he touched while at Beth El.

## Capital Contributions

In 1999, Beth El's congregational co-presidents kicked off a capital campaign created with three purposes: to refurbish the now aging facility, to pay off the mortgage, and to establish a capital endowment fund for future repairs and improvements. The goal was to raise \$750,000. Within a year, their expectations were exceeded, and \$1 million was raised. Today, despite the ups and downs of a turbulent economy, *Congregation Beth El* remains financially sound based on endowments built with the donations and passion of its leaders and members.

## Outstanding Programs

*Congregation Beth El* has engaged in some of its most important and far-reaching programs involving the arts, education, and spiritual renewal and growth. The weekly calendar is complete with entertaining and educational opportunities, including lectures from some of the country's leading Judaic scholars, fundraising dinners, musical, and comedy nights, and the heartfelt celebration of Jewish ritual and life cycle events. Numerous outstanding programs have galvanized Beth El's commitment to its Jewish community needs.

Rabbi Waldman encouraged a group of ten women congregants to study and become a bat mitzvah. As an egalitarian synagogue Rabbi Waldman wanted the women to have the skills to fully participate in all aspects of synagogue services. Throughout 2001-2002, each woman individually achieved her goal. Ten years later, six women were Bat Mitzvah. Fall 2013 another group of people are likewise preparing to achieve this personal milestone.

2002 was a year of great violence in Israel. Board leadership at Beth El spearheaded a drive to purchase an ambulance for "American Magen David for Israel." This drive netted \$120,000, and the congregation was able to provide two mobile intensive care ambulances.



For the past forty years, Congregation Beth El has been actively involved in bringing members to Israel on educational programs of various sorts. From the beginning of his tenure at Beth El, Rabbi Waldman led trips with strong educational components utilizing Ramah programs in Israel. March 2000 marked the last Rabbi Waldman pilgrimage and consisted of 27 members. These trips were always preceded by a classroom component outlining subjects from geography to culture, history to politics.

Beginning in June of 2002, Beth El was the driving force in the organization of seven community wide missions in response to the second intifada. These missions, many organized by Alan Feldman, led over two hundred area residents, raised over \$150,000 in funds donated to a variety of charitable organizations from Magen David Adom, ZAKA, Sarah Herzog Emunah Center and the Afula absorption center for immigrants. From 2002 to 2009 Congregations, Beth El, Ahavath Achim, Bnai Israel, Bnai Torah, and Rodeph Shalom along with their rabbis as well as the Eastern Fairfield Federation joined forces in an unprecedented setting to see first hand the effects of the turmoil of the intifada and also to explore the land of Israel from every

perspective. Our last Israel mission took place in 2011 when Rabbi Satlow led three families to explore Israel, many for their first time.

In July 2004, Rabbi Leon Waldman retired after serving thirty-two years as rabbi of *Congregation Beth El*. Under his leadership, Beth El has built a strong and vibrant Talmud Torah, seen the enrollment of many students in Ezra, the Solomon Schechter Hebrew Day School in Woodbridge, CT., and a strong Jewish presence and understanding of Tikun Olam within the Fairfield community and beyond.

In August 2004, Rabbi Daniel Satlow joined *Congregation Beth El* as its new rabbi. Among the new initiatives Rabbi Satlow created is Friday night Kabbalat service at the beach. This has had a wonderful impact during the summer season. With songs, guitars, tambourines, challah and grape juice, the sabbath is welcomed in an open and beautiful setting.

In the fall of 2005, “The Torah Project” was created. Congregation Beth El commissioned the creation of a new Torah and the congregants were able to participate in the mitzvah of its creation. On February 5, 2006, Beth El celebrated the “birth” of our new Torah with an inspiring ceremony. The sanctuary was packed with congregants, friends and community leaders. The ceremony culminated with our dear friend and teacher Mike Hirsch receiving the special honor of being the first congregant to write the first letter in the Torah. Afterwards, with the assistance of Torah scribe and educator, Rabbi Moshe Druin, scores of congregants had the opportunity to write a letter on the Torah parchment. The beauty of this project is that it lives on, not only in the wonderful Torah we read from regularly, but also in the Torah Fund that was established with the significant contributions raised as part of the Torah Project. These funds have been used to underwrite new educational programming at the synagogue, as well as provide scholarships to send our Jewish youth to Jewish camps and first time visits to Israel.

In 2006, Tara Cook-Littman and her committee explored the feasibility of establishing a pre-school at Beth El. The board approved their proposal and with seed money from the Torah Project, Sheila May was hired to be the director. She spent the initial year conducting a Judaic Story Time for one year olds and a monthly Tot Shabbat as well as setting up the school. In September 2007, The Beth El K’tanim Nursery School began with classes for two year olds and three year olds. The following year added a classroom for four year olds. The program has expanded to include enrichment classes in science, cooking, art, yoga and dance. The curriculum is enhanced by field trips, family programs and special events. The pre-school has brought new life and laughter to Beth El’s hallways.

During 2007 and 2008, Ellin Yassky along with a handful of congregants researched the history of the Holocaust Torah, which was loaned to Beth El in 1973 by the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust. In December 2007, 18 members of Beth El journeyed to Kladno, the city where our torah originally served its now lost community of 1634 Jews. The group met with the Christian Hussite community of Kladno in the building which was once the town’s synagogue and had been transformed in 1939 into the Hussite congregation’s church. A book documenting the lives

of all the Jews from this city who perished during the Shoah was undertaken and completed by the city archivist. A bridge, despite language and religious differences, was forged allowing both communities to engage in an international project of Tikun Olam. In June 2008, dignitaries from Kladno traveled to Beth El for the rededication ceremony of this remarkable Torah, restored to its original splendor and filled with thousands of rare Kabbalistic letter forms. Kaddish for the Kladno Jews is recited each year on Shabbat Zachor. The Torah is now used on Yom Ha-Shoah and on the Bar/Bat Mitzvot of all children whose families descend from those who survived the Holocaust.

Beginning in 2006, clergy and community lay leaders from Fairfield and New Haven counties came together to build a network of faith based institutions that could organize to collectively fight social injustice in Connecticut. Rabbi Satlow and Beth El were among the leaders who championed this effort, and in November 2011 after years of hard work, CONECT (Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut) was officially founded. CONECT is affiliated with the national Industrial Areas Foundation and currently includes 24 synagogues, churches and a mosque.

In 2010, following the passing of Mike Hirsch, a fund was established in his memory. Mike loved to read Torah and encouraged many others to do the same. A special Tikun is given to congregants who do three Torah readings within a six month period. To date, 51 Tikuns have been presented, a wonderful tribute to Mike.

In August 2012, Rabbi Macelo Kormis came to Beth El from his pulpit in Chile and has added much to Beth El with his personal warmth and dedication. We welcomed his wife Fernanda Auba and their sons Micael and Ari and in February of 2013, his daughter Leah. All of them have endeared themselves to our congregation.

### **What is special about Beth El?**

Our services, including our morning minyan, are well intended and filled with songs and joy. Many congregants are capable of leading services. Our support of Israel is unmatched, and we have provided leadership to the Greater Jewish Community of Bridgeport. Our contributions to the general community are enormous. Recipients such as Operation Hope, Habitat for Humanity, literacy programs and clothing programs are benefactors due to the efforts of our Tikun Olam committee.

From our inception sixty years ago, certain congregants had the foresight, energy and willingness to create and sustain Congregation Beth El. To them we owe our thanks.