

## A Brief History of the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey

### HISTORY

Although there has been a small Jewish population in Warren County since the 1920s, it was not until about a quarter-century later that the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey was officially founded. The original members came from Brooklyn and Plainfield, and from across the Delaware in Pennsylvania. Merchants, manufacturers, factory workers, educators, businessmen, professionals, and farmers, they incorporated our temple in 1946, with a mission to have a Jewish place in which to socialize, educate their children, and celebrate Shabbat and holidays. A very generous Jewish manufacturer donated the land on which the temple now stands. A modest temple building was constructed so as to blend harmoniously into the surrounding residential neighborhood. Shops owned by Jewish merchants lined the main streets in Washington and neighboring Hackettstown. With Fridays being a major shopping day, stores remained open until 8 p.m., which posed a problem regarding Shabbat services. The founders decided to hold services on alternate weeks and to start at 8:30 p.m. Unable to afford a full-time rabbi, they sought one who would accommodate this schedule. After the first several years, the congregation engaged Rabbi Joseph Gelberman from New York City who continued to come on a regular schedule for the next thirty-one years. After his retirement around 1989, several rabbis followed in quick succession until the arrival of Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis in 1994. The “country Conservative” congregation soon affiliated with the Reform Movement; UAHC helped us find our current rabbi, who celebrated her eighteenth year with us in June 2012. We remain a part-time pulpit with weekly Sunday school, an active PTO, Sisterhood, confirmation class, and creative, committed lay leaders.

### EDUCATION

The Sunday school has become a cooperative in the best and most literal sense: all the teachers are parents/members. The chair or co-chairs of the Education Committee, along with committee members, perform the necessary administrative work. Supplementary activities are planned and carried out by the PTO—and every family participates. PTO members teach crafts at Chanukah (and run a Chanukah gift sale for adults); they set up the Purim carnival; they organize a model Passover *seder*. The children are treated to weekly music and Hebrew, Jewish history and ethics. Our part-time cantor works with a talented parent who has assumed responsibility for the music program. After many years of requiring a fee for Sunday school (in addition to dues), the fall of 2003 brought a new policy, adopted by the congregation at its annual meeting the previous June. As first stated in the fee schedule for 2003–2004, it is “the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey’s philosophy that the entire Congregation is responsible to educate our children. Therefore, we have instituted a new approach . . . *free Sunday school* to any child of a member in good standing. This applies to Kindergarten through Confirmation-age children.” The B’nai Mitzvah program in many respects goes hand in hand with the Sunday school program. Families engage a tutor—again, a member—for a year or so before the *bar/bat mitzvah* (tutors charge hourly fees). For the past decade or so, students have been required to design and complete a mitzvah project. Some students continue their projects beyond the *bar/bat mitzvah* year. The confirmation class, a three-year program of study, discussion, and fun, is taught and led by the rabbi, who, together

with several college-age past confirmands as assistants and chaperones, leads an annual weekend retreat for the group at URJ Camp Harlam. With the assistance of the education committee chair, the rabbi acts as principal and also teaches grades 6–7 (the non-Hebrew-language portion of the curriculum; Hebrew is taught by a parent/teacher). The rabbi's other significant teaching duty is the adult education class, which meets monthly; topics vary and are set each year, according to the interests of the rabbi and class participants. The lay-led Torah study group meets monthly without rabbinical or cantorial participation, working its way slowly and meaningfully through the Pentateuch. In addition, an adult Hebrew class, ongoing for several years and taught by two congregants, culminated in a group *bat mitzvah* for the seven participants in 2011.

## **RELIGIOUS SERVICES**

When she retires as a congregational rabbi on June 30, 2013, our spiritual leader, Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis, will have served our congregation for nineteen years. Religious services during the period of her leadership—the only one most of us have known—have been inspiring, uplifting; her sermons thoughtful, challenging, often sprinkled with humor. She has a way of keeping people interested, getting you to think, whether she is addressing adults or children. Most of our Shabbat service is conducted in Hebrew, and with the adoption in 2010 of the prayer book *Mishkan T'filah*, which has transliterated Hebrew texts throughout, the entire congregation—including those who don't yet read Hebrew—is able to participate fully. We hold a full Shabbat service on alternate Friday nights, followed by an *Oneg Shabbat*, which is hosted by several families on a rotating basis. The Torah portion is read on Friday night. (There is no Saturday service unless there is a *bar/bat mitzvah*). The congregation celebrates with families the *b'nai mitzvah* of its children; typically, there are five or six each year. The child leads most of the Saturday morning service, which includes a *d'var torah*, prepared under the guidance of the rabbi. The congregation has also celebrated with two groups of adult *b'not mitzvah*—eight women in June 1998 and seven in June 2011. High Holiday services have evolved, becoming even more music-filled, primarily on account of the participation, first, of a series of cantorial soloists, followed, starting in 2004, by student cantors from HUC-JIR (all four of whom went on to become fully ordained cantors), and most recently, by the hiring of a part-time ordained cantor through a special program under the auspices of the American Association of Cantors; in addition, one of our members, a professional pianist, has acted as High Holiday accompanist, also since 2004.

## **FUND-RAISING**

In addition to an annual congregational meeting at which issues are discussed, officers elected, plans proposed and approved (or not), a day-long goals meeting is held in alternate years, usually run by a past president and attended by current and anticipated future leaders; at this time, it is customary to assess how we're doing and propose new ideas. In this way, we came to such varied things as a musical Purim *shpiel* performed by adult congregants (available on U-tube) and a major fund-raising effort to purchase and install an elevator to make the three levels of the temple accessible to all. For the elevator, the congregation raised more than \$70,000, using the occasions of the rabbi's twenty-fifth year in the rabbinate (2005) and the temple's sixtieth anniversary (2006) as the foci. Other fund-raising events in recent years have included the annual *Mishloach Manot* (Purim baskets), used-clothing sales, and the sale of supermarket scrip. In

2012, the congregation raised \$19,000 to purchase a new, light-weight Torah scroll and its accoutrements in honor of Rabbi Lewis's eighteen years with us. The congregation has two additional handsome (but very heavy) Torah scrolls. The new Torah is making it possible for us to literally dance with the Torah at Simchat Torah; it is also a fitting way to honor our rabbi and to make it possible for older (and younger) congregants to hold the Torah comfortably on the bima.

### **HONORING A LOVED ONE**

In early February 2012, a tragic accident took the life of a beloved long-time member, one of whose *mitzvot* for the past decade had been to blow the *shofar* at High Holy Day services. In his honor and memory, we held a *shofar* workshop, bringing in an expert cantor who worked both in person and via Skype to teach the next generation of *ba'alim t'kiyah*: two adults, one confirmation student, and two pre-*bar mitzvah* students; this was accomplished in time for the High Holy Days in September.

### **HELPING IN THE COMMUNITY**

In addition to assisting temple members who need special help (usually on account of illness), congregants regularly perform community service of various kinds. These have included: years of road clean-up on Route 31 by the men's club; apple picking/gleaning by membership under auspices of Sisterhood, again for donation; Chanukah gifts to residents of a local institution; blood drive; donations of food to local food banks (collected twice a year—at the High Holidays and at Pesach); assisting Sunday school students with their *mitzvah* projects, which occasionally involve collections of money and/or goods.