
OUR FIRST FIFTY YEARS

Like the story of the Jewish people, the story of our congregation is one movement, of a continual search for a resting place.

And again like the story of the Jewish people, that of this congregation has been marked by a singular devotion and profound faith; that no matter how uncertain its wanderings, the Ark of the Lord securely abided among its people.

The progress toward the goal was not only slow and at times painful, but it was beset with doubt and fear. Always, however, the congregation was blessed with leaders who were men of stout courage, enthusiasm and vision. These leaders set the example of perseverance and team work that culminated in success.

And what kind of men were these leaders who worked so tirelessly and with such zeal? By the accepted standards they were ordinary men, workers who would be expected to have very little to give to "community" affairs. Nobody of great wealth or indeed of any wealth can be found in the records of the early years of this congregation. Its leaders were tailors, shoemakers, small merchant-doers used to the every-day chores of the world.

But all of them were dedicated to a single ideal—to establish a synagogue that would reflect the glory of Israel's noble past. What they lacked in scholarly achievement, in the academic manner that too often passes for dynamic leadership they more than made up in cheerful guidance and loyal service.

These early leaders kept alive the old Jewish love of learning for its own sake. They had come from a Europe that was forsaking the old virtues for expediency.

This congregation began with hardly more than a "double minyan" (20 people) soon after the turn of the century. Refugees from Europe's age-old conflicts, seeking religious tolerance, found in this city the inspiration and warmth to nurture their hopes and raise their bruised spirits.

In a rented hall in Cincinnati's West End this little group in 1904 established themselves as the Bnai Israel Congregation. Rented halls indeed were the only houses of worship which the young congregation knew for about a score of years. As with any growing body, serious difficulties were encountered, factional splits developed over questions which at the time seemed almost as vital as finding a permanent home for the Ark and the Torah. But strength came from mergers with other groups and the first of these was the uniting with the Congregation Agudath Achim to form a new body under the name of Anshe Sholom Romanian Harmony Congregation, or Men of Peace.

Progress was more rapid from then onward culminating in the purchase of a property at 422 Clark Street for a house of worship. By that time, however, Cincinnati's population had shifted widely. Thousands of families had left the downtown area to find homes in the attractive suburbs. Avondale seemed to draw the majority of the Jew-