

HISTORY OF CONGREGATION

B'NAI ISRAEL

HILLEBURN, N. J.

The origin of what was to become Congregation B'nai Israel of Millburn can be traced almost to the beginning of this century. Jewish families, few in number, residing in Millburn, Springfield, Vaux Hall and Union, met for religious services in private homes or in rented stores. Later on for several years, High Holy Day Services were held in the Parish House of St. Stephen's Church with Reverend E. W. Dickenson extending the hospitality of his church to the Jewish group. Although the number of Jewish families increased steadily it was not until 1924 that ground on Lackawanna Place was purchased from the Casa Columbo Club and that a contract was signed with the firm of Rieber & Long for the building of a Synagogue. At the laying of the cornerstone, Reverend H. Dickenson and Reverend Le Roy Lincoln participated thus lending emphasis to the fact that this first Jewish house of worship had come about not only through the determined effort of the pioneering Jewish families but also through the generous assistance of Christian Neighbors. The building was completed just before the High Holy Days of the year 1925. During the following years the Congregation was consolidated. Gradually classes were instituted for the children and the interior of the Synagogue made serviceable to the cultural and social needs of young and old. These classes developed into a regular religious school with Mrs. Rae Hoffman as Principal. In 1943 Melvin Kieffer was installed as the first Rabbi. At that time about eighty families belonged to the Congregation. When Rabbi Kieffer joined the Army as a Chaplain in 1944 Dr. Max Gruenewald substituted for him. In the fall of 1946 he became his successor. Immediately with his installation plans were formulated for the purchase of a site for a new Synagogue

and for the establishment of a building fund. Plans to build at 165 Millburn Avenue were abandoned. Through negotiation with the Township Committee which rendered constructive assistance during the entire building program of the congregation, the present site was obtained in exchange for the old Synagogue in the center of town. Percival Goodman was chosen as the architect and the firm of J. A. Peterson was entrusted with the construction. At a congregation meeting Percival Goodman explained his thoughts about "building a Synagogue in America in our time". His plans were approved. On May 14, 1949 ground was broken and on October 3, 1950 the laying of the cornerstone took place. The new Synagogue was dedicated on April 29, 1951. Dr. Max Arzt, Professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary delivered the dedicatory address. Hailed by many writers as an outstanding example of modern religious architecture our synagogue was also the first one to introduce abstract art. Three artists were commissioned. Adolph Gottlieb designed the Ark-Curtain, Robert Motherwell created the mural, and Herbert Ferber the sculpture: The Burning Bush. These works of art were dedicated at a ceremony highlighted by an address of Renee D'Harmoncourt, Director of the Museum of Modern Art. Two stones of synagogues in Mannheim which were destroyed by the Nazis were sent to Millburn through the good offices of the American Jewish Army Chaplain stationed in Heidelberg. They were set in the Memorial Wall of the Synagogue.

The continued growth of our congregation, particularly of the youth program and of the Hebrew School made the acquisition of additional ground in the direction of Locust Avenue necessary. On this an annex was erected including amongst other rooms, additional school rooms, the library, and a large auditorium to be used for recreation and religious youth services. In 1946 there were 48 children taught by two teachers in our Hebrew School. At~~the~~ the present time there are almost 250 children in the Hebrew School and the high school department

taught by the Principal, Mr. Morris Arzt and four full time teachers. The Synagogue is affiliated with the United Synagogue of America. Its main services are conducted by Dr. Max Gruenewald, Mr. Michael Alexander the Cantor, assisted by a voluntary Choir of members.

The new building built by the same architect and contractor was dedicated on January 22, 1956 with Mr. Herbert Abeles, President of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Board, as guest speaker.

Although we are mindful of the signal services rendered by members of our congregation in all the stages of its development, we like to look upon our congregation and its religious home as the result of a great collective effort and of a joint dedication and love.