

Temple celebrates 90 years in Bordentown City

B'nai Abraham congregation includes 60 local families

By Susan Van Dongen, Packet Group

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You might blink and go past the double house with the lovely stained glass windows at 58 Crosswicks St. in Bordentown — and you might certainly miss the sign that tells you this is the home of Temple B'nai Abraham.

Look even closer, though, and you will note that B'nai Abraham was founded in 1917. The temple is “quite a miraculous place,” according to Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein, if for nothing else, sustaining a healthy congregation for 90 years.

Reflecting the down-to-earth, do-it-yourself sensibilities that have kept the city of Bordentown going strong for 325 years, the synagogue is a small, hardworking place with a lot of integrity.

A member of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, B'nai Abraham is not defined by its movement, however, “but by the same qualities that make up the character of Bordentown,” says Rabbi Lazarus-Klein. “For one thing, we have a membership that cares and supports one another. Reconstructionism really fits in with that, people taking responsibility for Judaism. It's the idea that each generation needs to reconstruct (the faith) according to the past, but also keeping in mind their experience of the present.”

A part-time rabbi who commutes to Bordentown from Philadelphia, Rabbi Lazarus-Klein says his job is made enjoyable by the many volunteers in the congregation, a modest but robust 60 families.

“We have the same number of calendar events you'd see at a large synagogue,” he says, noting that a knitting group and movie nights are among many other activities. “It's a well-rounded community with a lot of participation. We couldn't survive without it.”

In fact, B'nai Abraham's physical size might be a major reason why it has lasted so long. Rabbi Lazarus-Klein was at one time the Mid-Atlantic director of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation and often traveled around the tri-state region visiting Reconstructionist organizations.

“I noticed that the ones that were really suffering — that were down to their last few congregants — were in structures that were very large, built for 200 or more people,” Rabbi Lazarus-Klein says. “As the community changed and people left, these buildings became hollow and dark. When you're not filling up the seats, it can look really empty. It's also hard to keep up with the high costs of maintaining a large place.

“But (B'nai Abraham) has had the same membership for most of its existence,” he continues. “It's never been a big congregation, always around the 60-family range. The sanctuary fits 70 people, so it never feels empty.”

According to B'nai Abraham's Web site (www.bnai-abraham.org), records of the Jewish community in Bordentown date back before the 1830s, when local Jews played an important part in the town's history. Moses Wolf, a Jewish tailor and clothing store owner, was elected mayor in 1874 and served through 1877.

As the Jewish community grew and became more active, a group of energetic residents formed the “Bordentown Hebrew Association” in 1917. Their stated intent was “to hold and maintain services for the worship of God and the promotion of good fellowship according to the tenets of the Hebrew faith.” It also gave its corporation the power to build a synagogue and Hebrew school.

In July of 1918, the Bordentown Hebrew Association purchased the double house at 58-60 Crosswicks St. By that same fall, the residence was converted to a shul (synagogue), and High Holy Day services were conducted there for the first time.

Rabbi Lazarus-Klein says that because Bordentown and the surrounding communities were agricultural, the many farming families — often intermarried — simply felt more comfortable in Bordentown as opposed to the more formal Trenton Jewish community.

“That's why they started their own community, which was very inclusive,” he says.

This sense of inclusiveness continues today. Rabbi Lazarus-Klein says some 50 percent of B'nai Abraham's members are intermarried. Also, some of the families attending B'nai Abraham have roots in the temple's very beginnings. Not long after he came to Bordentown in 2003, Rabbi Lazarus-Klein did the funeral for a congregant who was one of the first young men to be bar mitvahed at the synagogue.

A movement founded at the turn of the 20th century by Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983), Reconstructionism is the youngest of the four “streams” of organized American Judaism. It was intended to take the modern sciences of sociology and psychology, along with an understanding of democracy and pluralism, and incorporate those phenomena into the faith.

One of the differences to Reconstructionism is that “the language of the prayers includes the feminine,” Rabbi Lazarus-Klein says. “When we pray for peace, we pray for everyone, not just for Jews. Also, Rabbi Kaplan was uncomfortable with ‘chosenness.’ The biggest difference with Reconstructionism, though, is that we are ‘heimesh,’ — down-to-earth.”

The building's 1971 renovation, tackled by the congregants themselves, is a testament to the hardworking spirit of B'nai Abraham. Partly to celebrate



From left to right: Corrine Nissim, 1, is held by 15-year-old Samantha Shain of Bordentown; Rachel Aubry, 5, of Roebling, Jessica Dauber, 7, and her sister Gina, 4, of Bordentown look at the menorah lit on Friday night at B'nai Abraham in Bordentown City.

the temple's 90th birthday — and partly just to modernize — the place had another facelift in the last couple of years. The dark wood paneling was removed, the interior was re-painted, new carpeting and bathrooms were installed, and B'nai Abraham was made wheelchair accessible.

"Last year, after extensive interior renovations, we did a re-dedication," says temple president Betsy Ramos. "We were very pleased to show off our synagogue at the Holiday Tour for the Historic Society last December (2006)."

Raised in Philadelphia, Rabbi Lazarus-Klein attended the joint program between the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, where he received a bachelor's degree in Jewish history and later a master's in Jewish education, and Columbia University, where he received a bachelor's in writing and literature. He went on to teach Jewish studies and Hebrew for several years at the Hebrew Day School of Central Florida in Orlando. Rabbi Lazarus-Klein is currently in a chaplaincy-training program at Albert Einstein Medical Center in North Philadelphia.

Although he has to make the commute from Philadelphia, most of B'nai Abraham's congregants live within five or 10 miles of the synagogue in Hamilton, Robbinsville and Columbus. A few others come from South Jersey to worship. Some live in Bordentown and can walk to the synagogue.

"That's rare, especially with such a small Jewish community," Rabbi Lazarus-Klein says.

A stroll around Bordentown shows the city to be a true home of churches, all of which have reached out to and supported B'nai Abraham, sponsoring interfaith services and working together on social action projects.

"We feel very included," Rabbi Lazarus-Klein says.

Temple B'nai Abraham is located at 58 Crosswicks St., Bordentown. For information, call 609-298-1527. On the Web: www.bnai-abraham.org

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