

History of Sisterhood of Congregation Beth Israel

“Ladies, I’m sorry. Because of illness, I must resign my office so soon after being elected.”

With these words, on May 10, 1921, Mrs. J. Ehrenfeld handed the gavel to Mrs. Max Levy, who became the first acting President of the newly formed Sisterhood of “Israelitish Church”, named some years earlier the Houston Congregation of Beth Israel. The purpose of this former Ladies’ Aid Society was “to raise funds to equip the Sunday School, engage in charitable activity, and instill religious consciousness in the children.”

These three ambitions were not formidable because the “Hebrew Ladies of Houston” had been actively engaged in their pursuit since 1859 when twenty-two men incorporated the Hebrew Congregation of the City of Houston and considered the women to be “official hostesses”. However, these enterprising ladies had extended their assumed obligations to more than preparing food and serving at picnics and social gatherings. They cared for the sick and needy, made certain their children received proper religious instruction, and offered charitable assistance whenever and wherever needed. By 1864 they were permitted to use their small synagogue when necessary and four years later demonstrated their value by being instrumental in the establishment of a congregational choir. Gradually, during the next twenty-five years they began limited assistance in fund-raising and other congregational efforts. Yet, it wasn’t until six-nine years later in 1921 that the women were granted suffrage in decisions affecting Beth Israel.

As the scope of Sisterhood broadened, so did its financial demands. Bank account records of 1924 display a balance of \$879.98 with dues ranging from \$.25 to \$2.00 per year. Twenty years later the amount had risen to \$6.00 annually for each of the 324 members and in 1961 funds were augmented by the publication of the first year book at \$.25 a copy.

During these formative years of the 1930s, other innovations were initiated that included Seder dinners for \$2.00 each and enjoyable Friday night social gatherings after services. A revolutionary breakthrough occurred in 1937 when the first woman was elected to the Board of the Congregation. Specially-formed U.S.O. Committees that had been occupied in sending packages overseas to the soldiers of WWI transformed themselves into peace and legislative activists. In 1947 The House of Living Judaism became a reality and eight years later the Institute on Judaism was heralded as a unique and all-embracing actuality. Thus Sisterhood happily welcomed the burgeoning Classical Reform movement in Jewish life.

With the women’s vista expanded in every direction, eight special funds were established to underwrite charitable and educational events. Sisterhood’s voice was listened to in congregational matters and women began to play roles equal to those of male members. Their wide participation in the 1954 Centennial Celebration gave them recognition as a group whose involvement was essential to the health and welfare of a large congregation.

This official acknowledgement intensified their desire to offer communal programs open to all in the City of Houston, such as the 1951 Institute on Judaism and the beginning of the annual Rabbi H.J. Schachtel Book Lecture Series.

During the next few years Sisterhood felt the pressure of raising sufficient monies to meet the needs of its operating budget, and still have the ability to send one-half of its income for the National and Regional activities. So an annual gala event was inaugurated, highlighted by such events as its “Fun at 40 Birthday Party” which was enlivened with entertainment written, produced, and performed by Congregational members. Yearly excitement followed including a 1970 Silver Ball honoring Dr. Schachtel. In 1979 the Sisterhood became deeply involved in the 125th Anniversary of the Congregation and the resulting commemorative exhibit entitled “Judaism in the Arts”. This became a prelude series to the definitive Torah Convocation of 2001, and cemented the Sisterhood’s position as a vital force in the life of Congregation Beth Israel.

Today this ‘vital force’, with its recognized status, has the same dedication as stated in its original purpose—“to quicken the religious consciousness of Judaism, to espouse education and welfare activities, and to better social relations between its members.”

Written by Virginia Battelstein Segall Oct. 1, 2010