

History Of Congregation Am Echad

Telling the history of Congregation Am Echad in a few short sentences is like learning the Torah while standing on one foot.

First of all, there is the eternal mystery of exactly who were the founders of the congregation which was known as South Suburban Synagogue. In 1956 the Congregation was initiated by Henry Aron, Robert Brown, Henry K. Deitch, Sam Roth and Ed Shimberg. At first, services were held in homes of various members. Then in November 1957 facilities were rented from Faith United Protestant Religious Education Building. The first president was Henry Aron. The Sisterhood was organized in December 1956, with Betty Roth as first president.

In August 1957 the Congregation was affiliated with Associated Talmud Torahs, and Hebrew and Sunday School classes began that September. In September 1957 when the Congregation numbered 35 families, Rabbi Marshall Berg was chosen as Spiritual Leader, and the first High Holy Day services were conducted. In October the first Adult Education classes were scheduled.

1958 saw the first Men's Club organized, and Dieter Frankel was elected president of the Congregation. Also, plans were made for building a House of Worship and congregants approved the purchase of the lot at Westwood and Wildwood, in Park Forest. While waiting for the construction of the building, a house at 217 Nauvoo was rented in September 1959 to be used both for services and school. The first teachers in our Hebrew School were Rabbi Berg, Mort Shinbrood, and Roslyn Greenberg.

Betty Braunstein (now Jones) was chosen to be Sunday School Director for years, 1959-61. The first Bar Mitzvah was that of Marshall, son of Dan and Lil Mendelsohn, and the first Bat Mitzvah was Susan, daughter of Otto and Ursula Stern.

In the Spring of 1961 purchase of the land at Wildwood and Westwood was completed. With the efforts of Sheldon Braunstein and Elliott Greenberg, who worked

with the architect, visited congregants to solicit pledges and obtained the mortgage, the first part of the building was erected and occupied in 1965. At that point the congregation totaled over 100 families. The first part of the building was the classroom wing which had sliding partitions between rooms so they could be opened up for services.

In 1968 Beth Israel Synagogue of Chicago Heights merged with the much younger South Suburban Synagogue. Beth Israel dated all the way back to the first influx of Jews into Chicago Heights in 1893, at the time of the Chicago Columbian Exposition. Services began as soon as they were able to have a minyan. Most of the members were businessmen in Chicago Heights. Their building was on Otto Boulevard in Chicago Heights.

The combined Congregation South Suburban-Beth Israel held groundbreaking ceremonies for the Sanctuary on August 31, 1969 with Rabbi Norman Kleinman presiding. The sanctuary was completed the following year.

In June, 1977 another congregation joined with South Suburban-Beth Israel. This was Congregation Etz Chaim which had been formed in 1968 in Flossmoor when there was a new influx of Jews into the South Suburban area. The combined congregations became known as Congregation Am Echad, meaning One Nation, which amply describes the present congregation. Thus are recounted the firsts. In the following years there were many presidents and rabbis who all contributed to make Am Echad the excellent synagogue it is today.

In recent years the Hebrew school was combined with that of B'nai Yehuda/Beth Shalom, making a new milestone in relations between the two congregations. Rabbi Podwol was president of the Park Forest Inter-Faith Association and he initiated a new dialogue between the leaders of the churches and synagogues in the area.

After learning the history of the congregation while standing on one foot, we can only summarize by saying, "The Congregation in its present form is the result of the efforts of a great many people who all had the interests of the synagogue at heart." All the rest is commentary.