

History of Congregation Beth Israel Brotherhood

The following is a history of the Brotherhood and its ongoing involvement in Temple life.

The Men's Club (later renamed Brotherhood) was organized in 1924. The purpose of the Men's Club as stated in its original constitution is: "To promote fellowship, to provide a forum for discussion of questions of interest to the members, and to further the welfare of Congregation Beth Israel." In 1927, the Men's Club along with The Mishkan Israel Brotherhood of New Haven and 63 other Brotherhoods banded together to form NFTB, The National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods (now called the North American Federation of Temple Brotherhoods) and became an auxiliary of the UAHC, Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now called the Union for Reform Judaism.)

As the years went by, Brotherhood activities and programming took on many faces. One of the most notable is the Institute for Christian Clergy, which began in 1945. The Institute has been conducted every year since, and as such, is the longest continuous activity of its kind in the country. It has been expanded to include clergy of all religions. Its purpose is to explore aspects of Reform Judaism in detail. A volume of Judaica related to the subject under discussion is presented to each participant. Many clergy take great pride in their "Judaica Library" which they have collected over the years. The Brotherhood serves as hosts and provides funding for the luncheon and the aforementioned volume. The NFTB, through its national project, The Jewish Chautauqua Society, has adopted the Clergy Institutes as one of their "four phases" and uses our Institute as its model.

During Rabbi Abraham Feldman's tenure at Beth Israel (1925-1977), the Men's Club sponsored a weekly Sunday morning breakfast at which the rabbi presided at an "Ask the Rabbi" session. Participants would be awarded the "golden bagel" if anyone could "stump" the rabbi. (Nobody ever did!) A monthly evening meeting was held, sometimes entertaining, sometimes serious. Guest speakers were the norm. Rabbi Feldman was the "prime mover" of the programs just described. Brotherhood took on other meaningful forms of programming after he retired.

Although not specifically stated as one of the original activities of Brotherhood, the children of the congregation are always involved in Brotherhood programming. Perhaps our most memorable event was the annual congregation picnic, held on the last day of Sunday School at Hartford's Keeney park during the 1930s and 1940s, and later moved to Farmington's Batterson Park. Brotherhood organized all the games and activities, awarded prizes to just about all the participants, and provided ice cream and soda. To this day, Brotherhood remains committed to the welfare and entertainment of our children with its ongoing involvement in the annual Purim and Hanukkah parties.

Brotherhood pioneered the daily Minyan services, and for many years provided the readers for these services. Although it had to discontinue after a few years hiatus, the Congregation took over and resumed this important aspect of our religious life.

Going way back in the history of our Congregation, Brotherhood (recently Sisterhood, too) has provided ushers for High Holy Day and weekly religious services.

Brotherhood remains "on call" to provide any other assistance when called upon by the trustees, Rabbis or house committee.