

TEMPLE BETH EL

Temple Beth El: The Heart of Community

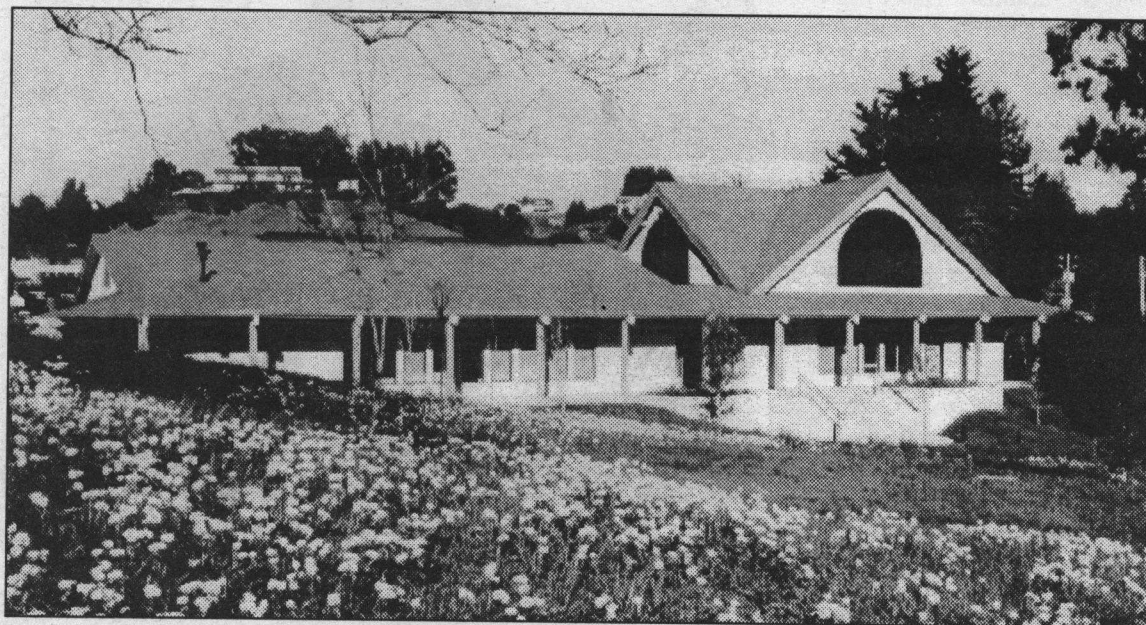
by Carolyn Swift

Set comfortably in the lowland of Porter Gulch, Temple Beth El and the Jewish Community Center is gracefully united with its surrounding countryside.

The architectural lines are refined but uncomplicated and without pretention. Around the building are children's equipment, play yards and the beginnings of a landscaped garden.

Inside the lower-level entrance an art exhibit of bold masks draws the eye toward an outdoor meditation garden at the rear of the hall. Even in the lobby, impressions of spirituality, cultural expression and history are made powerful by the space left around them.

The five-acre site next to Cabrillo College in Aptos is the synagogue's fourth home in Santa Cruz County. The original dates back to the 1870s in the upstairs hall of a building on Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz. The next was a place acquired in 1933 on Chestnut Street. The third was the Temple Beth El constructed in 1954 on Bay Street on the west side of town, a building designed to serve 40 families.



It was crowded with a membership of 70 families when Rabbi Richard M. Litvak arrived 18 years ago from his studies at school in Los Angeles. Today 450 families are members.

"With the move to the new synagogue we are light years from where we started as far as spiritual and social activities," he said, "yet we are the same in basic identity."

The identity embraces the traditions of faith and Jewish culture, the expressions of community, and social justice. These have expanded in dimension, scope

and size.

Temple Beth El had planned its move over ten years. It took that long to arrange purchase of the property. On the other hand, construction on the building was finished in only six months.

"We were ready," said Rabbi Litvak, glancing up through a spacious skylight near the front door.

Fortunately, the structure was in early construction stages when the earthquake hit in 1989. Hundreds attended the dedication festivities in the spring of 1990.

"Our goal in construction was

to incorporate two aspects of the spirit of God," he explained. "One is a sense of God's presence in nature."

The temple's orientation through the windows is toward the sky, the trees and the border the gulch. God's presence in relationship to people is achieved in the arrangement of interior spaces. The location is perfect, since members come from the Summit and as far south as Aromas.

Rabbi Litvak is proud of the building and the commensurate blossoming of the Jewish com-

munity.

"There is a great commitment by a tremendous number of people who have volunteered with love and dedication," he added.

The devotion is evident. In the meditation garden, for example, is a sculpture made of stone from the same quarry used by Michaelangelo. The marble likeness of Moses looking into Israel was sculpted by Dr. Len Goldstein, an orthopedic surgeon.

The theme of inner and outer sanctuary is strikingly visible in the synagogue, which invites all who enter to take a deep spiritual breath. Rabbi Litvak explained how the roof, ceiling, walls and windows are all coordinated toward a sense of both intimacy and openness to God's greater sanctuary.

The Sabbath Menovah, an exquisite modern interpretation of the seven-branched candleabra, was crafted by noted sculptor Morris Brose as a gift in honor of his granddaughter Julie's Bat Mitzvah.

Illuminated glass doors to the Ark command immediate attention. These doors were created by David Benebento from the glass that had been in the Ark of the

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synagogue on Geary Street in San Francisco, and survived the Great Earthquake of 1906. Carolyn Hyatt, who is in charge of the temple art shows, and Maria Stoltz were instrumental in arranging the gift of the restored glass to Temple Beth El.

The Ark is where the embroidered Torah scrolls are kept. Rabbi Litvak, a true teacher, helpfully makes clear the importance of these sacred scrolls.

He moves to a stand that holds the handcrafted Shabbat candles and tells how friendship, family and community come together in the Sabbath worship on Friday nights and the Shabbat Minyan services on Saturday morning.

"The Saturday morning service is very warm," he said. "It is a blending of traditional and contemporary Jewish practices. There is always a Torah discussion and the membership is involved in leading the services."

Smiling, Rabbi Litvak picked up a clock with the hours imprinted in Hebrew.

"We also use the sanctuary for Hebrew lessons," he said.

They are many Jewish studies: basic Judaism; introduction to the Hebrew alphabet and practice reading prayers; a sharing of Jewish meditation practices; teaching of the melodies that accompany the Torah text...these begin the list. The education program is extensive.

Spiritedness is threaded all through the Jewish Community Center's calendar.

Adult education courses have a widespread interest. "Baby and their Aging Parents," for instance, is a support group that helps daughters and sons deal with special needs of their parents as they get older. An intergenerational women's discussion group is a mix of ages with no more than two participants from each generation. The participants share their

perspectives and wisdom. "Through Our Eyes: The Jewish Woman" is a discussion group with women talking about the messages and perceptions that have shaped their lives.

One of the special upcoming programs is the Founder's Shabbat to be held at 8 p.m. on March 3. Shmuel Thaler has created the special presentation, "The Temple Beth El Story," assembling a history of the temple and its congregation.

The sense of history is crucial. Temple Beth El marked in January the 50th anniversary of the Soviet Army's arrival at Auschwitz in January, 1945. While many of the observances at the Jewish Community Center are joyful ones, other occasions are solemn and the memories horrible.

A moveable wall between the synagogue and the community social hall allows room for large participation in all the rituals, feasts and celebrations. There's seating room for 450 in the social hall alone. The full commercial kitchen is spacious, with a list of dietary rules posted near the door.

"Food is an important part of our traditions," the Rabbi commented, "Everyone using the kitchen must follow the dietary laws."

Food and cultural expression, ceremony, theater, music and tradition are the events of the social hall. A set of risers can provide theater-style seating for such productions as the Kosher Comedy Night, and the upcoming Beth El Players *Murder On The Cutting Edge*, to be "a gourmet evening filled with suspense, mayhem and delicious food."

"Where else can you get a meal and a murder for 25 bucks?" quips the ad in Temple Beth El's *Shofar* bulletin.

This April 1 event starts with a no-host bar at 6 p.m., and a dinner at 6:30 p.m., with advance reservations required.

Jewish holidays are important festivities which are depicted in



Rabbi Richard Litvak

the social hall in the bright watercolors of renowned artist-illustrator David Hilberman.

A particular emphasis of pride is upstairs, where the Temple Beth El Religious School shares quarters with the Simcha Pre-School.

Simcha means joy, and it is easily found by those aged two to five years who begin their Jewish education here. This school is the third in the county, following Cabrillo College and UCSC, to attain the status of National Certification for Early Childhood Education.

Rabbi Litvak picks up a puzzle of numbers and one identical one with the Hebrew alphabet to show how the children are introduced to spiritual teaching as well as traditional education. The room has a comfortable loft and a busy schedule for the enrollment of 65 youngsters.

The rest of the school serves K-12, and meets twice weekly to guide children in the Jewish way of life. Everybody studies hard.

Books are everywhere, and Rabbi Litvak observed "We are a people of books."

Downstairs, the library takes up an entire room, with large tables for research and study. The collection of Jewish liturgical books is outnumbered only by UCSC. Temple Beth El books are in a circulating library for members and are available as a resource for the community at large. Volumes include fiction and other works by every noted Jewish-American author, a youth fiction section with more than 260 titles, plus illustrated books by young readers. Nearly 200

books were recently added to the collection.

In the corner of the room are large memorial tablets, preserved and brought from the old synagogue in Santa Cruz. Listed here are some of Santa Cruz County's best known pioneers.

Many of the pioneers listed on the memorial tablets rest in the Home of Peace Cemetery on the south side of Meder Street near Western Drive in Santa Cruz. It was established by the Hebrew Benevolent Society in December of 1877. The Home of Peace cemetery has the appearance of an old and well-tended garden behind a Victorian gate and surrounded by tall trees. At the rear is the gravesite of Moses Meder and his family, who were not Jewish but provided the spot with terms that they could be buried there.

"The legend is that Meder said he wanted to be buried in the cemetery because the devil wouldn't look for him there," said Rabbi Litvak.

Around the corner from the temple library is a panel of stained glass Sabbath candles created for Temple Beth El by a Christian glass artist.

"He wanted to contribute something in honor of the Jewish community on the occasion of moving into the new temple," the Rabbi explained.

Down the hall, a fully stocked gift shop offers Judaic jewelry, books and ritual items from Israel. The shop is popular both with the Jewish community and the general public searching for appropriate gifts for Jewish friends. The hours are Sundays

from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.; Wednesdays, 3:30 to 5:30 p.m., or by appointment, 462-3883.

The Jewish Community Center welcomes non-Jewish visitors to its programs and has strong commitments to all the people of Santa Cruz County. On March 3 and 4, for example, the Social Action Committee of Temple Beth El will co-sponsor two dance events to benefit AIDS organizations. The March 3 event will be held at 8 p.m. in the Kresge Town Hall at UCSC and the March 4 dance will be at 8 p.m. at the Pacific Cultural Center on Seabright Avenue in Santa Cruz.

Local social action programs further include benefits for the Santa Cruz Women's Crisis and Support, Habitat for Humanity, the Grey Bears, Santa Cruz Hunger Relief and the River Street Shelter, where meals are provided by Temple members on an on-going schedule. Temple Beth El led contributions to the annual Chanukah food package drive for Soviet Jews, then renewed energies for a "toys for tots" drive that distributed items to 123 children in Santa Cruz County.

"While we do not observe Christmas, we were delighted to bring happiness to the children of our community," he added.

Temple Beth El regards surrounding institutions as good neighbors, too.

"We're fortunate to have Cabrillo College next door," the rabbi said. "We exchanged classroom space and have co-sponsored programs together."

Similar cooperation exists with the Twin Lakes Baptist Church, which has hospitably allowed the use of its parking lots on Jewish high holy days.

Rabbi Litvak himself spends a great deal of time out in the community. He recently spoke at a class at UCSC on development of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism in America. He delivered the benediction at the NAACP dinner honoring the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. The rabbi is a representative on HALT (Hate Action Limitation Team) to combat anti-Semitism.

Concluding his tour, Rabbi Litvak moved down the hall beneath the skylights and through the offices of his staff to his own, lined with more books. He confided that the new temple turned out even better than everyone had envisioned.

"There's so much to it," he said, "I'm very proud of our congregation." □

