

Beth El Ner Tamid Synagogue

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May 16, 2019

Beth El also Connects to:

- **St. Thomas Lutheran Church**
- **Union Hill Baptist Church**
- **Parklawn Assembly of God**
- **Christian Life Church**
- **Reconstructionist Congregation Shir Hadash**
- **Congregation Beth Israel**

Historical Overview:

Congregation Beth El became the first established Conservative synagogue in the state of Wisconsin with the construction of their original building in 1923. There are three major forms of Judaic religious practice: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. What all forms share is their belief in the Torah as a sacred text, however they vary based on how literally the congregation decides to take the words of the Torah. Conservatism falls in the middle of the spectrum, practicing the words of the Torah as more of guidelines than as strict laws. Matching Milwaukee's overall demographics, Beth El's founders were predominately German-born immigrants. This would continue to shift as Jewish immigrants began arriving from other parts of the world, specifically Eastern Europe.

In 1949 the congregation obtained the funds to construct a new building on Sherman Boulevard. At this time the community also agreed upon an extension to their name, Beth El Ner Tamid, meaning "House of God—Eternal Light" in Hebrew. Under the leadership of Rabbi Swichkow (1937-1985) membership at Beth El Ner Tamid peaked in the early 1960s at over 1,000 families. Many of these families not only attended worship but also sent their children to the large Jewish school connected to Beth El to learn Hebrew, prepare for their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and take part in other social or religious events. One of the most notable features of Beth El's community in this heyday was the choir. In addition to providing frequent evenings of musical entertainment for community members, the choir also toured nationally under the combined leadership of composer and choir director Max Janowski and Cantor Norton Siegel. Many members from this time recall the congregation beginning to embrace an egalitarian structure, allowing women to take part in the choir and take more active roles in religious life, which was not a widely accepted practice within Conservative Judaism.

Like many congregations in the late twentieth century, Beth El witnessed a migration of their members away from the city and out into the suburbs. As the community demographics on Sherman Boulevard transitioned from being predominately Jewish to mostly African American, the

congregation decided relocating to the North Shore made sense for maintaining its membership and remaining in closer proximity to its community.

In 1984 Beth El Ner Tamid opened a new synagogue on Mequon Road. Similar to Beth El's previous location, the Mequon synagogue contained a large community space adjacent to the sanctuary, serving the dual purpose for worship overflow on high holidays and excess guests for social gatherings. This location also continued the highly popular Jewish school connected to Beth El, although adolescent membership had begun to decline. Shortly after the move to Mequon, leadership of the congregation transitioned from long-time Rabbi Swichkow to Rabbi Gideon Goldenholtz, who ushered in an even more liberal egalitarian movement, allowing women to be up on the Bema, the sacred alter, and read from the Torah for the first time in this congregation's history.

With an aging congregation, the members of Beth El Ner Tamid recognized that the expense of maintaining their large Mequon facility might become untenable in the coming years. Thus, they began exploring options for securing the congregation's future. Ultimately, the possibility of joining with another Conservative congregation on Milwaukee's North Shore emerged. Congregation Beth El Ner Tamid decided to join with Congregation Beth Israel in Glendale, WI, becoming the only conservative synagogue in all of Milwaukee today. The joining process was completed on August 27, 2012, with Beth Israel appending 'Ner Tamid' to its name in recognition of the coming together. The members of Beth El brought more than just part of their name to their new congregation; the congregation carried over their own special traditions such as social elements like a greeting program, and their knitting group, to name just a few. The story of Congregation Beth El Ner Tamid is one of legacy and preservation, as well as new beginnings, with the joining of two congregations to become one stronger community.

Timeline:

1854 – Zecharia Frankel and Solomon Schechter founded the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau

1886 – Founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City

1887 – The Jewish Theological Seminary of America held its first class

1912 – Solomon Schechter, head of the Jewish Theological Seminary, founded the United Synagogue of America by bringing together 22 like-minded synagogues

9/25/1922 – Be El Conservative Temple founded; consisted of 70 families

11/18/1922 – Charter is granted; Rabbi Eugene Kohn

6/17/1923 – Cornerstone laid at Garfield and 49th St.

1926 – Rabbi Philip Kleinman

August 1937 – Rabbi Lewis J. Swichkow arrives

10/21/1945 – Congregation adopts a resolution to construct a spacious Conservative Synagogue on the West Side

1948 – Beth El Temple Choir

10/10/1948 – Groundbreaking of new Synagogue at Sherman Blvd

4/10/1949 – Cornerstone Dedication of Sherman Blvd. Synagogue

1950s-1960s – Heyday of the Jewish Conservative Movement as a whole

1956 – Senior Choir formed

1957 – High School Youth Choir formed

2/17/1957 – Max Janowski (famous Chicago composer) Concert

1958 – Junior Choir, Men’s Choir, Sisterhood Choir formed

August 1959 – Cantor Norton Siegel Arrives

1962 – Peak membership of 1,030 membership units (~3 family members per unit)

1979 – Founding of the Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel

1983 – Groundbreaking of new Mequon Synagogue

1985 – Rabbi Goldenholz; also the start of women being allowed up on the Bema

1980’s – Beth El Ner Tamid makes large strides towards an Egalitarian institution

April 1990 – Holocaust Memorial Dedication

1992 – The United Synagogue of America became the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism with about 760 affiliated congregations

2000 – 33% of synagogue-affiliated Jews in the USA were followers of Conservative Judaism, signifying a fall from 43% 10 years earlier

10/29/2006 – Dedication of Beth El Ner Tamid’s Sefer Torah

2012 – Joining of Beth El Ner Tamid and Beth Israel to form Beth Israel Ner Tamid

8/27/2012 – Completed process of joining

9/9/2012 – Joining event

7/30/2013 – Sale of Beth El Ner Tamid completed to Christian Life Center, Inc.

2014 – Memorial plaques installed at Beth Israel Ner Tamid Glendale Synagogue

Annotated Bibliography

Beth El Ner Tamid Archival Collection. Jewish Museum Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 2019.

All paper and photographs, as well as limited film, was donated from Beth El Ner Tamid to the Jewish Museum Milwaukee for safe keeping. This collection is made up of over 20 boxes and is accessible to the public upon request.

Hyland, Jay. "Beth El Ner Tamid Synagogue." Encyclopedia of Milwaukee. 2016.
<https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/beth-el-ner-tamid-synagogue/>

A short entry briefly describing Beth El Ner Tamid's history and eventual joining with Beth Israel Synagogue. The entry includes further readings and an image of the congregations second synagogue.

Swichkow, Louis J., and Gartner, Lloyd P. *The History of the Jews of Milwaukee*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963.

This book documents early Jewish life in Milwaukee as a whole. One of the writers, Louis Swichkow, was the Rabbi for Beth El Ner Tamid for the majority of the congregations' founding and early existence. This work both mentions Beth El Ner Tamid as well as many of the other major Synagogues around the city from Milwaukee's founding up to the time of publication.