

A HISTORY of BAIS YITZCHOK CHEVRAH THILIM
Updated for the 2009 Annual Gathering

by Dr. Bernard Lichstein

The Bellevue Street *shul*, then called *Bais Yehudah*, was built in 1923 more than two decades before its incorporation as *Bais Yitzchok Chevra Thilim* in 1946. Somewhere during those intervening years a group of people left *Bais Yehudah* to pray in a storefront *shul* on Pennington Street. They returned to Bellevue Street when it became *Bais Yitzchok* (below).

Now, pay close attention to how the origins of the *shul* turn out to be intimately tied to our honorees. Beginning with Zilpah Nulman's grandparents, the Feldmans, originally from Poland/Russia (depending on where the border was that day) who were the second Jewish family to move into Elizabethport in 1870 shortly after the Civil War. Chaya Sara and her husband Charles (Yitzchok) Feldman eventually moved to the house in the Elmora section in which the Nulman's now live. Max Fern (of Wakefern-Shoprite), an entrepreneur, *shul* builder and member of the Murray Street (*Adath Yeshurun*) *shul*, built the Bellevue Street *shul*.

In 1945 Yitzchok Feldman's son, Al. assumed the mortgage of the Bellevue Street *shul* from Max Fern, to whom he was related by marriage; and named it for his father Yitzchok. The former *Bais Yehudah* Pennington Street storefront *shul* members returned to the *Bais Yitzchok* and memorably contributed to its mission and growth.

The *Shul's* Certificate of Incorporation, dated January 10, 1946, gives a soul-stirring glimpse into the vision of the 15 founders – each of whom were a significant force of support and *chesed* in the growth of the Elizabeth Jewish Community and of Rabbi P.M. Teitz (who arrived ca. 1935) and the JEC.

The purposes for which this corporation is formed are the founding of a religious congregation of Israelites, otherwise called Hebrews, in the City of Elizabeth, for the establishment of a place of worship according to the tenets of the Torah; to provide a place for the assembling of its members in the worship of almighty G-d according to the Orthodox Precepts of the Hebrew faith and as set forth in the 'Shulchan Oruch' to stimulate an interest in Judaism and promote the spiritual and moral welfare of the community; to further and foster the study of Thilim and for all religious activities connected therewith.

Signers of The Certificate of Incorporation:

A. H. FELDMAN, B. LEVY, JULIUS BLANK, H. WASSERMAN, ADOLPH ISAACMAN,
LOUIS WEISS, MEYER TARLOWE, EDEL SHELLOR, AARON POLTIS, LEON
WEISSBERG, PHILIP FLEISHER, HERMAN LEHR,
ABRAHAM OSTROFSKY, DAVID BRODKIN,
MAURICE ENRIGHT.

Since its beginnings, *Bais Yitzchok* has been an extremely friendly *shul*. It has welcomed, as its extended family, all who have come to stay, those who have come for a day, and those who have moved away or made *aliyah*. Those who leave do so with a sense of longing and yet belonging. *Bais Yitzchok* has a way of accommodating everyone's needs and individuality without compromising its principles. The *shul* uniquely reflects the character of Elizabeth's Jewish Community's people who value individuals for what they are and what they do for others, rather than for who they are, their station in life and what they possess.

Bais Yitzchok has always served and reflected the needs of its congregants. Until 1973, its weekday *Shachris minyan*, known as the *Shochtim's Minyan*, started at 5:40 am to accommodate those who worked in the local slaughter houses, butcher shops and other businesses that opened early. That year, in addition to the closing of the slaughter houses, Daylight Savings Time was extended - thereby making it much too early to put on *tefilin*. Today, the *minyan* starts at 6:30 am.

During the '60s through the '80s, *Bais Yitzchok* was also referred to as the Scientists' *shul*; due to the large influx of chemists, physicists, mathematicians and engineers. Newcomers to *Bais Yitzchok* were often asked: "are you a chemist or a what"? Throughout the '60s and '70s the *shul* was home to the New Jersey Chapter of The Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists (AOJS). During that time the *shul* hosted many AOJS meetings and a *Shabbaton*, in which we were addressed by distinguished speakers expert in the physical, mathematical, biological, medical and social sciences as well as in *halacha*.

1945 began the Blank-Cohen era, lasting 30 years, with Julius Blank as President and David Cohen as Vice President. Mr. Blank set the tone for the *shul* with his frankness, friendliness and especially his humorous stories which continue to be told and retold to this day. Mr. Cohen guided the *shul's hashkafa*, discipline and practices. It wasn't done unless DC (Dave Cohen) said it should be done. Examples: "Don't take your *talit* off until after *Adon Olam*"; and on installing air conditioning - "We don't need it, I don't want it and we're not going to have it". He also exerted powerful *hashpoa* as a teacher for the congregants and their children.

Following the three decades of Blank-Cohen leadership, Dr. Nate Glidear began a mandatory three-year term limit presidency era. This no doubt reflected the American fear of lapsing into the monarchy which marked the pre-revolution British rule; and the recognition that the leaders of the past were such *gibborim*, that we could not hope to attain their greatness, stamina, and charisma. Notice, that everyone quotes Blank and Cohen. Hardly anyone, except their own children, quotes the three-year group. However, today pragmatism rules. Term limits have been suspended in favor of Rabbi Moshe Abramowitz's continuing terms - recognizing his inestimable organizational and leadership abilities; and that no one seems to be anxious to undertake the awesome responsibility of keeping *Bais Yitzchok* afloat and vibrant, when most of its members live west of Westfield Avenue; and many have either not become younger or have moved elsewhere or made *aliyah*.

The '60s and '70s saw the first families making *aliyah*, beginning with Gershon and Miriam Metzger; and then Yaakov and Risha Krakower, Avi and Betty

Greenfield and Judah and Pitzi Landau and their families. This has continued up to the present, with subsequent waves of *aliyah* by congregants and by children who grew up in *Bais Yitzchok*, married and made *aliyah*. The ties remain strong between those who now live in Israel and those who have stayed in Elizabeth. These ties extend to our children and their children.

The following true story reflects continuity and the ties that bind those who remain here to those who made *aliyah*. Yaakov Krakower took over a Monday evening *shir* at Bais Yitzchok formerly given by Rabbi Pinchas Teitz. Yaakov taught *gemara* for many years until he and his family moved to Bnei Brak. The *shir* was taken over by Rabbi Yitzchok Goldstone; and continues to this day, now at the Elmora Hills Minyan. Several years ago when Barbara and I stayed with the Krakowers during Succos in Bnei Brak, Avi Greenfield told me that he had convinced Yaakov to continue his weekly *gemara shir* in his apartment. On returning home, I excitedly told Yitzchok that the *shir* responsibility that he had assumed was also continuing by Yaakov in Israel. Without blinking an eye, Yitzchok's immediate response was: "Really? So where is he holding?"

The *shul* used to be quite crowded on *Shabbos* during the '60s through the '80s. It was very difficult for newcomers to get seats during the *Yomim Noraim* unless someone was away for *Yom Tov*, moved away or passed away. Today, because people moved across the tracks and elsewhere, the *shul* has fewer people. Those who once lived closer still come because they love the *shul*, the quality and decorum of the davening; and the comradeship, honesty and unpretentiousness of its members. Those who have more recently moved to Elizabeth come because they are attracted for the same reasons; and because they are encouraged to play an active part in the day to day operation and ritual of the *shul*. In a way, it is a bit like the '40s, '50s and '60s, the pioneering days of *Bais Yitzchok*, when Mr. Blank was happy to welcome a newcomer and mispronounce or replace his name, e.g., when Mr. Lachs was welcomed as Mr. Karp, Mr. Blank explained, "Nu, a fish is a fish." Today, we again have the chance to encourage new people to experience the joys of *Bais Yitzchok*.

Some memories – yesterday and today:

- Being blessed with the finest *Shlichei Tzibor, Baalei Koreh and Gabbairn*
- Rabbi P.M. Teitz teaching *Mishna* Sunday mornings.
- Lenny Brandwein teaching *Mishne Berura* weekday mornings and *Kitzur Shulchan Oruch* (formerly taught by Rabbi Oratz) Sunday mornings.
- The entire *Mishne Berura* was completed a few years ago. The easy decision of what to study next was easy: "Let us do it again". We have now completed about three quarters of Vol 2.
- Rabbi Goldstone's *Gemara shir* Monday night.
- Rabbi Lichtman's davening and being the "candy man".
- *Purim* gifts for the children. Little children confidently knowing their way around *Bais Yitzchok*, upstairs, downstairs, the ladies section, the men section.

- A *Sefer Hachinuch mitzvah* lesson every *Shabbos* before *layning*, begun in 1988 for about ten years. The study of *Mishlei* is now being taught and almost completed.
- Mendel Farkas leading the congregation in saying *Thilim* between the now defunct *Mincha* and *Maariv minyan*.
- A sit-down *kiddush*, every *Shabbos*, with a "5 minute" *Dvar Torah*, for birthdays, anniversaries, engagements, graduations, *bar mitzvahs*, *bas mitzvahs*, *yahrtzeits* or for no reason at all.
- Yonah Metzger, A"H, preparing *kiddush* every *Shabbos* including *gehakte tsores* (chopped herring) and mixing different liquors to make his, *kol haminim*. Yonah taking care of our children as "his children" and catering their *simchas*.
- A new *kiddush* room and *Bais Medresh* built in 1983.
- Master caterer Jean Zimmer, and her helpers, preparing daily *Shachris* breakfasts, *kiddushim*, gala *simcha* celebrations and special *yom tov* and *Yom Haatzmaut* luncheons and dinners.

Having described some of what makes *Bais Yitzchok* so special, the following should be added: The singing – where everyone becomes a grand choir of harmony and song, regardless of who is actually leading the *davening*. The annual dinners/gatherings which are like family gatherings where people are recognized not for financial support but for important *Torah* and *shul* functions such as being a *gabbai*, *shliach tzibur*, *baal koreh* and contributing *shul* officer. The ambiance - maybe it is the crystal chandeliers; and who can help but be mesmerized by the “*Shaar HaShamayim*” mural with its peak into the world to come? As the inscription above the mural wall tells us, “Our Father our King, Open the gates of Heaven to our Prayers.”

And while the appeal of the main *shul* makes a lasting impression, what goes on downstairs in the *Bais Medresh* is equally memorable; learning, breakfasts, *Shabbos Kiddush*, *Seudos*, *Melavah Malkas*, and more. And when the food is finished (and is usually includes some kind of herring), there is always the lilting melody of “*yifrach beyomov*” which seems to have become our theme. Although the exact date is unsure, it seems to have become popular in the 80s, and became the standard closing of *Shabbos Kiddish* since then.

For almost three quarters of a century *Bais Yitzchok Chevra Thilim* has stood out as place of warmth, sincerity and strength for the Elizabeth Community. May *HaShem* give us the means and resolve to continue this *avodas hakodesh*.

Bais Yitzchok's Presidents:

Julius Blank, z"l	1945 - 1975
Dr. Nathan Glidear z"l	1975 - 1978

Herbert Prager, z"l	1979 - 1981
Dr. Louis Schneider	1982 - 1984
Sheldon Rich	1985 - 1988
Dr. Daniel Scheinbein	1986 - 1987
Martin Knecht	1988 - 1989
Dr. Joseph Waldman	1990 - 1991
Michael Katz	1992
Rabbi Moshe Abramowitz	1993 - 1995
Dr. Bernard Lichstein	1996 - 1997
Leonard Lauer	1998 - 2000
Rabbi Moshe Abramowitz	2001 - present

Bernard Lichstein