

Architectural Profile Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid

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Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid (CBINT), formally known as Congregation Beth Israel (CBI), is a Conservative Jewish congregation currently located at 6880 N. Green Bay Avenue in Glendale, Wisconsin. With roots tracing back to 1884, the congregation originally flourished in the Jewish neighborhood of Milwaukee, known as the Hay Market, on 5th street between Vliet and Cherry streets. This neighborhood was dominated by European immigrants who practiced Orthodox Judaism. By 1924, CBI had 315 members and was preparing to erect a larger more ornate synagogue on Teutonia Avenue built to seat 1400 people. Services were first held in 1925. By the 1950's the size of the congregation shrank from its peak of 1000 members to approximately 50 families. Attendance faded, as the neighborhood changed. In the words of John Gurda, "Beth Israel was in some ways a victim of its own members' success. The congregation always attracted the North Side's most prosperous families, and those families tended to move northeast rather than northwest as their circumstances improved" (Gurda 2009, 165). A resilient congregation, CBI purchased 15 acres on Green Bay Avenue in neighboring Glendale after a failed attempt to build in Fox Point. The \$450,000 complex to be built included a school, social hall, and a sanctuary. The Teutonia building was sold to the Greater Galilee Baptist Church in 1959. Congregants of Beth Israel worshipped in a rented space in Shorewood until 1962 when the first phase of building was completed on Green Bay Avenue. Along with a change in location, the congregation also formally resigned as an Orthodox synagogue and restructured itself as a Conservative congregation.

Officially breaking ground in 1959, the congregation complex had three phases of construction with dedications occurring between 1962 and 1980. 2006 marked the fourth phase of extensive renovations. The completion of Phase I in 1962 was the establishment of the Donald Blankstein School Building, which was named in memory of the son of Sol and Ester Blankstein, longstanding members of the synagogue and sponsors of Phase I. This building was comprised mainly of classrooms with multi-purpose gathering areas on the lower level. According to Don Bass, grandson of Sol and Ester, building the school first was important to the congregation as it represents the future, children, and families. Since this building did not contain a dedicated sanctuary, congregants worshipped in a community space within the school known as Karlin Hall. This space has continued to host a combination of activities from worship to socialization since its inception, facilitated by an adjoined kosher kitchen. Karlin Hall also has its own *aron*, or Ark, which holds the Torah scrolls and is one of the most sacred spaces within the synagogue. Within this enclave there is also an Eternal Light or Ner Tamid, which can be as simple or ornate as the congregation wishes. In the 1960's, when Karlin Hall was the primary site of worship, the ornate wooden Ark from the Teutonia Avenue synagogue was moved to this room, though it has since migrated to the Jacobson Chapel. Worship still occurs in Karlin Hall for children and for family services on High Holy days. Presently this building is primarily used for activities such as instruction, daycare, and as the base for their youth group. This space primarily reflects the

utilitarianism of a school with little overt religious iconography, allowing for a fluidity in the purposes it serves the congregation.

Phase II expanded the complex to the east and south of the school, adding a larger social hall, offices, and expanded kitchens. By 1966, when Phase II was dedicated, the synagogue served approximately 600 families. Regular religious services moved from Karlin Hall to the newly built Siegel Hall. A much larger room, Seigel Hall included stackable chairs and movable walls to facilitate switching the room between a sanctuary and a place of socialization such as post-worship community building, wedding receptions, or other community gatherings. A memorial was created to honor those who helped fund this expansion. Today the wooden “Builder’s Wall” stands in the newer, glass enclosed foyer on the east side of the CBINT complex. Once again, these areas, while also serving religious functions, had an integrated flexibility built within them which allowed CBINT to serve the needs of the congregation on multiple levels.

Phase III was extensive, entailing the construction of the Jacobson Chapel, a dedicated sanctuary, as well as the reconfiguration of Siegal Hall. Phase III was dedicated in 1980 once the sanctuary was completed. The Jacobson chapel seats approximately 50 people and hosts two daily prayer services and family Shabbat services. It is in this chapel that the original wooden Ark from the Teutonia location is now installed. The most striking feature of this chapel are the *Yahrzeit* plaques. A form of traditional remembrance within synagogues, these bronze plaques each contain the name of a deceased congregant with their birth and death date. Installed on larger panels, which are sponsored by the community, they line the walls of the chapel, surrounding the worshippers, a reminder of those who have passed. Each plaque is installed next to a small orange light which will be lit on the date of their death, a physical reminder to any who enter the space of their memory. These plaques have been in use since at least the 1920’s within CBINT.

Phase III is also notable as it included the first sanctuary that did not serve other purposes. The sanctuary is a large space with wooden chairs in a fan formation. The focus of the worshippers is on the *bimah*, a raised platform from which the Torah is read. The original *bimah* was twelve-sided in remembrance of the twelve tribes of Israel. Above the congregants, there is a skylight dome, which conveys that “the Torah is light,” “Light is sown for the righteous” and “That the Torah is here – nigh unto us”. The original “Gates of the Holy Ark,” or “*Aron Hakodesh*” from the 1980 construction no longer stand in this location. A booklet on “Congregation Beth Israel Sanctuary Art and Symbols” provides a description. The centennial book from 1985 includes a picture of the gates.

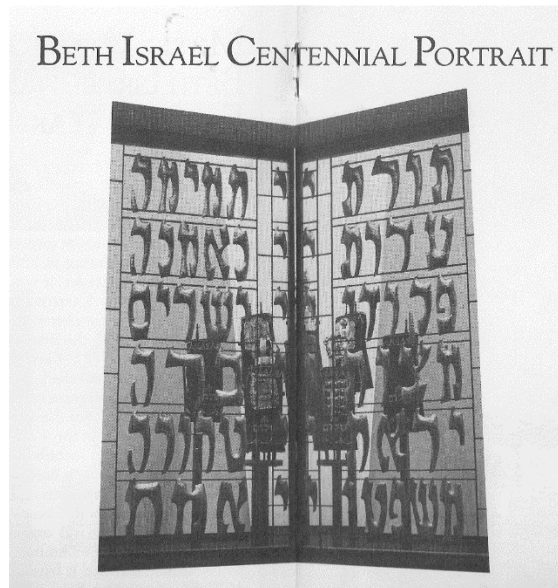


Figure 1: *Gates of the Holy Arc (1980) (Congregation Beth Israel Centennial)*

The original gates were 12 feet high and 12 feet wide. They weighed 900 pounds and included six lines taken from Psalm 19:

The law of the *Lord* is perfect ...
 The testimony of the *Lord* is sure ...
 The precepts of the *Lord* are right ...
 The commandment of the *Lord* is clear ...
 The fear of the *Lord* is pure ...
 The Judgements of the *Lord* are true ...

As one closed the gates the central word “Lord” would be formed by the two gates coming together. This is a reminder that the Torah contains the revelation of God’s will. Each letter was hand cut from hammered brass and was 20 inches high. The gates were designed by CBINT’s Rabbi Herbert G. Panitch, executed by the Kenosha-based Studios of Potente and crafted by artist Michael Houle.

Within the Ark were eight torah scrolls. The number eight was chosen to signify the individual covenant one is to make with God. Within the Ark, there were ten windows which reflect the Ten Commandments as well as the teachings and values that come from the Torah. The number ten was also chosen as it represents a *minyan*, the minimum number of worshippers required to constitute a representative “community of Israel” for liturgical purposes. The windows were composed using a pallet of blues, purples, reds and oranges. Each window had a theme: *Emet* (Truth), *Tzedakah* (Charity), *Rachamin* (Mercy), *Tzedek* (Justice), *Avot-Uvanim* (Family Relationships), *Reut* (Brotherhood), *Chesed* (Kindness), *Cherut* (Freedom), *Chayim* (Life), and *Shalom* (Peace). The windows also contained symbols of the “Flame,” which symbolizes God’s spirit, and the “Hand,” to represent the good that humanity is capable of. The windows were designed and created by Chicago artist Phyllis Mandler. The sanctuary’s Ner Tamid was designed by Susan Derzon and crafted by Michael Houle. A commemorative plaque from the 1980 dedication can be found in the eastern foyer.

The area between Siegal Hall and the main sanctuary is known as the Jacobson Promenade. Prior to Phase III and the building of the present Sanctuary, this area was usually sectioned off by movable walls to provide a space for socialization after services. The purpose of this Promenade, now that there is a dedicated sanctuary, is to provide a physical space to separate the sanctuary from the social hall, allowing congregants a transition between the religious and the secular.

In 2006 the building complex underwent a renovation that cost several million dollars, which we are calling Phase IV of CBINT's construction. Updates were made to the library, office, kitchen, bridal suite, Siegal Hall, the main sanctuary and Jacobson Chapel. Hunzinger Commercial Interiors was hired to do the interior design work along with Engberg Anderson Architects as the project designers. While much of the renovation included updating administrative spaces and the library, a meaningful part of this project was the addition of a meditation area to the Jacobson Chapel. When the synagogue, formally known as Congregation Beth Israel, merged with another local synagogue, Congregation Beth El Ner Tamid, in 2012, it was this meditation space that would house the *yahrzeit* plaques from Congregation Beth El Ner Tamid. The inclusion of these *yahrzeit* plaques serves as an important gesture of integration to the joining congregation.

Another part of Phase IV was the expansion of the kosher kitchens, allowing CBINT to feed up to 400 people at one time. For some years a kosher catering company, Three Doors Catering, operated out of this kitchen, showing the congregation's focus on providing their community with necessary services outside of the synagogue. Siegal Hall, with space for 1500 to 1900 people, was updated to include colored lights and a band pit, cementing its purpose as a social space. The impressive Star of David decoration on the ceiling is a reminder of the religious significance of the space.

Elements of the sanctuary were also refurbished in the 2006 renovation. Most significantly, the massive doors for the Ark were replaced. The new steel doors measure 12 feet in height by 5 feet in width. The gates are surrounded by Jerusalem stone and the design depicts a flame going upward and outward. The stained glass is used as a teaching device for the ideas and values of Jewish faith. The design's other purpose is to help the congregants achieve a worshipful state of mind with the use of vivid colors to uplift the spirit. The fire symbolism references the fire of Torah, which is often called the tree of life. The Torah provides instruction on how to live an ethical and moral Jewish life in partnership with God. As with the earlier gates in the sanctuary, Psalm 19 is written in Hebrew in the design of the doors. Keeping the Psalm as a component of the new door design, directly references the previous design and is in keeping with the Conservative Jewish movement's motto "Tradition and Change." Two stained glass windows bookend the gates and represent an extension of the flame. The design of these windows includes iridescent sparks. The theme of the right window is the basic Torah principle from Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." The theme of the window on the left is the congregation's connection to the written and oral law of Judaism, Torah and Halakha respectively. A beautiful blown glass Ner Tamid completes the design. The Ner Tamid, Holy Gates, and adjacent windows were all designed and created by David and Michelle Plachte-Zuieback of Plachte-Zuieback Art Glass in California.



Figure 4: Gates of the Holy Ark (Current) {Plachte-Zuieback Art Glass (website)}

Phase IV also included the completion of a Holocaust Memorial. Abstract metal gates evoke imagery of concentration camps as one enters the space. The northern wall lists the names of concentration camps from the WWII period. The western wall contains memorial panels with names of those linked to the congregation who perished in the Holocaust by name, camp and year of death. The south wall contains a mini museum of historical artifacts which include a Czech Torah that the Nazis confiscated in Prague, printed materials from that time including antisemitic propaganda alongside contemporary literature. During times of remembrance of those lost to the Holocaust (Shoah), adjoining doors are opened to connect this memorial to the sanctuary, allowing those lost to be included in ritual.

The current glass entranceway, the Zetley Promenade, at the eastern most point of the Congregation complex was also part of the Phase IV renovations. Within the space, one will find the “Honor Walls” for the congregation. The north wall is dedicated to the sisterhood and men’s groups of CBINT. The south wall contains a history of the Rabbis, Cantors and other prominent members. The west wall recognizes the donors of the 2007 renovation campaign. Donors are represented on this wall by acrylic squares which extend slightly. Those who donated more to the campaign have a bigger square. There are three doors leading from the glass foyer to outside on both the south and north sides of the Zetley Promenade. The inclusion of three doors within the design, is a reference to the old synagogue on Teutonia Avenue.



Figure 5: Zetley Promenade (Photo: Liz Spaide)

Although this synagogue was erected over the course of two decades, the architectural style remains coherent in the modernist style of its 1960s origin. A distinct departure from the proud and domineering Byzantine synagogue the congregation had built previously, this synagogue focuses on providing a multipurpose community space. When considering the stages of construction for CBINT, one can see the priorities of the congregation. Much of the earlier focus by CBINT revolved around creating community space with an emphasis placed on artistic expression coming much later. The rooms used as the sanctuary in earlier phases were simple and easily converted to areas for social events, indicating a priority for providing space for the community over the need for a dedicated sacred space. It is also easy to see how important the people and history of the congregation are through the numerous dedication plaques for rooms, donor walls, memorials, and mini-museum exhibits throughout the building.

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