

our history

Israel Congregation is a vibrant Jewish center in the southern Vermont community.

beginnings

There were a few Jewish families in Manchester before 1918, but no communal recollections of any gatherings to conduct services in the town, even on the High Holy Days. In 1918 two men, Philip Cohen and Noah Kamenetsky studied the possibility of conducting services in town. These men were well versed in the teachings of the Torah and Talmud. Discussions and meetings were held around a pot-bellied stove in a little corner store in Manchester Depot. The Congregation was established in 1920. Services were held. Their sons, sons-in-law, and relatives made the minyan. Later on, other Jewish families moved into town assuring a male minyan.

A Torah was given by one family. Religious necessities were donated by other families. A second Torah was given by a synagogue in Troy, NY. Eventually the elders passed on and some families moved away. The remaining group consisted of just 10 families. It was traditional for everyone to come to High Holy Day services.

As late as 1946 we continued as a small Congregation of about 10 families. Services were conducted each year by the elders. Later, descendants and new arrivals carried on their tradition. The services were conducted in various places in town. In 1946 a large storage space in the rear of what is now a restaurant was converted to a suitable meeting room and proper place for the Torah, together with other religious articles. For years this was the home of the Congregation.

To furnish this home, monies were raised. At a sheriff sale in progress at a small restaurant, tables and chairs were purchased for what would be a very nominal price by today's standards. An oil stove, prayer books, tallitot, and even a new floor were also purchased. The town responded generously to our appeal for funds in order to build an edifice to replace the many thousands of synagogues ruthlessly destroyed by the Nazis during World War II.

settling in

The Congregation was incorporated in 1962. Each incorporator donated 200 dollars, saying, "For this amount, I build myself a house of worship." The then president of the Rutland (VT) Railroad donated to the Congregation the Depot Park. This parcel of land was eventually sold by the Congregation. The proceeds were used to buy a small annex to the Odd Fellows Hall in Manchester Depot.

After extensive planning and work, the synagogue, in its new location in the Depot (in what is now a part of a lumber yard) was dedicated on Aug. 23, 1964. Suitable ceremonies marked this culmination of the dreams of what was then one of the smallest congregations in the United States. All clergy in the churches in town and many townsfolk attended the ceremony. Fourteen hand-hewn pews were presented. An eternal light lamp, newly electrified, was given. This lamp had been in the donor's family for many years and originally came from a century old Temple in Syria. Later, a beautiful Bible printed in Vienna in 1878 in both English in Hebrew was presented. From time to time, tables, furniture, silver pointers and a clock with Hebrew lettering were presented, as were memorial candelabra.

The 10 families of the Congregation showed off with pride their new place in the sun, their House of Worship. This small group carried its share of religious participation in town, and actively engaged in ecumenical projects. They participated in town activities including the interfaith group. An interfaith dinner was held at the Equinox House on May 28, 1964. It was chaired by Congregation members. Other memorable activities included the Lead the People program held in 1957. All the nations of the Middle

East were represented by towns people. Congregants represented Israel. Their program included a seder table complete with traditional Passover delicacies. Each year we participated in the Loyalty Day parade on the last Sunday in April. For this we decorated several floats among them the "Four Freedoms" and the "Three Chaplain" floats.

new home, new rabbi

We had become an established and integral part of the religious community and of Manchester. The synagogue was open for town activities. Various groups were invited to use our facilities. The congregation grew. We became egalitarian. Women were counted in the minyan. Although we were justly proud of our past accomplishments and cherished our synagogue, it was realized that once again we faced the prospect of having to relocate.

Through energetic leadership and concerted and unselfish efforts, land was purchased, and a new synagogue building was designed and built. In 1985 that building, which is still our synagogue, was dedicated.

In 1989 the Congregation engaged a young graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinic College, Rabbi Michael Cohen, as its full time spiritual leader. Under his enthusiastic leadership, and with the active participation of members, the congregation grew to over 210 family and single members. Now Rabbi Emeritus, Michael Cohen remains our teacher, colleague, and friend.

In July 2000, the Congregation engaged Rabbi Bob Freedman, who brought his talents and years of experience as a cantor to our synagogue.

today & tomorrow

In October 2005, just in time for the High Holy Days, Israel Congregation completed a comprehensive building renovation and expansion that created a new synagogue ready to serve the community well into the future. An education wing, library, social hall, chapel, and professional kitchen were added, allowing the addition of exciting new educational, cultural, and social programming for our members. In December 2005, the new building was re-dedicated, giving a new meaning to the Hanukkah season. The entire community, including all local clergy, helped celebrate this great new beginning.

In June 2007, the Congregation engaged Rabbi David Novak. Rabbi Novak brought a dynamic presence and warmth to the community, and his multiple worship styles bridged the diverse streams of Judaism (Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, and others) within our congregation. He was committed to a strong pastoral presence for our community.

Cantor Scott Buckner was engaged as our spiritual leader beginning June 2017. He left behind a 1,300 family congregation in Minnetonka, MN to share his passion and experience with our community. His music, spirituality and soul begins another chapter at ICM. Cantor's immense pleasure and enthusiasm for life in Vermont spills over into all that he does and shares with us and our entire northshire community.

Through this journey, we maintain the feeling and spirit envisioned by our founders: a small town, with a welcoming synagogue open to all. Israel Congregation owes a deep and ongoing debt to our founders, our early members, our past presidents and to all those whose vision and leadership have brought us to where we are today. We are now a full-service congregation that offers a wealth of programming to the community and stands ready to provide a vibrant Jewish experience in Manchester Center, Vermont for present and future generations.