History of
Beth El Hebrew Congregation



Beth El Hebrew Congregation was established in Alexandria in the 1800’s and by 1856, more than thirty Jews took up residence in Alexandria.  These immigrants came primarily from Germany.  Virtually all were in some phase of retail trade—clothing, dry goods, shoes, groceries, scrap—and they soon played active roles in the civic affairs of the city.  In 1856 they organized the Alexandria Literary Society, and in 1857 established a Hebrew Benevolent Society to provide a Jewish burial ground.  In 1859, two Congregations were formed, one reform and one Orthodox.

After an influx of Jewish families, Beth El decided to obtain permanent quarters for worship and a religious school, resulting in the establishment of their own Temple on Washington Street in Old Town Alexandria in 1871.  In the beginning there was no Rabbi and congregants carried out the role of leader.  The Old Town location served the Congregation for the next 84 years.   A rabbi was soon hired, and in 1871, a major step was taken in the Americanization of Beth El as he began to deliver his sermons in English.  Services were conducted in both Hebrew and German until 1882, when German was eliminated from the services.

Between 1883 and 1938, Beth El was essentially a “family” Congregation with membership of about 20 families.  The Beth El building served mainly as a house of worship and a small religious school and music was always a featured part of the service, as it is today.

In spite of the small numbers of congregants, they continued to meet religious and life cycle needs, provide for education, as well as retain an active interest in the outside community.  Beth El members served in the Civil War, First and Second World Wars, Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

Around 1933, two historic events influenced local Jewish growth: the election of Franklin Roosevelt, with the expanse of federal programs, and the fall of Germany to Hitler and the Nazis, resulting in the death of more than 6 million Jews.  Because of this influx of Jews into the area (and into our congregation), in 1938, following Kristallnacht, the congregation engaged a rabbi from Germany to become the spiritual leader of the congregation--the first in over 50 years.  His tenure was followed by many devoted rabbis who led us through decades of growth, both numeric and in service and programming.  However, the Old Town building did not have space for these growing numbers of congregants and activities.  Thus, the land for the present building on Seminary Road was purchased and building began in 1956.  This building has been remodeled and updated several times, in order to meet on-going congregational needs.  From 1955-1961 Beth El member Leroy Bendheim served as mayor of the City of Alexandria.