

# The Records of Temple Beth El

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Almost 170 years ago, on May 9, 1847, the founders of the first synagogue in Buffalo met to establish a synagogue of Orthodox ritual that eventually became one of Conservative Judaism. Temple Beth El records fill over 80 boxes, and are now housed at the University at Buffalo (University Archives on North Campus) but the stories of this synagogue which merged with Temple Shaarey Zedek in 2008 to form Temple Beth Tzedek, fill the memories of thousands of individuals in Buffalo and beyond.

After various temporary sites in member homes and rented space, the nascent Temple Beth El purchased an old schoolhouse site in the block around Main, Pearl, Eagle and Court streets. Refurbished for synagogue use, the first service was held in July 1850 and Rabbi Samuel M. Isaacs of New York City



gave the celebratory oration. Once the congregation outgrew this location, a new space was purchased on Elm Street in 1873. Within thirty years, this site was also too small and another search began. Eventually a home on Richmond Avenue was selected and a cornerstone was laid in

1910, with the new building dedicated in 1911. This beautiful building still stands, and is now a church, but many current community members can remember when it was their temple on Richmond, just as others recall the modern suburban synagogue and school on Eggert Road, with classrooms, a library, an archives and a museum as well as a sanctuary and social hall. After the fire in 1978, an archives collecting program slowly began from the records salvaged and grew over time from additions from members and new records from the temple. Although subsequently affected by several floods in the basement, the synagogue archives of Temple Beth El provide a wide range and depth of materials including the first minutes book, as seen on this page, and other fascinating records, including subject and correspondence files, school, Sisterhood and Brotherhood materials, as well as a whole array of photographs --mostly from the 1920s-1960s, a sampling of which are already online at NY Heritage. A detailed collection guide, which runs more than 70 pages, is available on the Bureau of Jewish Education's website, but just a few highlights are touched on here as space allows.

Apart from a beautiful photograph collection, a significant strength of the collection is an array of materials relating to dramatic and musical expression as well as the annual temple ball event. Synagogues as centers in the community offer member's not just religious expression and educational opportunities, but also served as sites

of cultural production. This is why Beth El records relating to play productions and annual balls are so voluminous, (and just a part of numerous cultural outlets afforded to members). These activities also raised essential funds for synagogue programs and enabled participation by members in many ways, as planners, publicists, and performers, among just a few roles! As expected, the 1947 ball held during a yearlong centennial celebration was particularly lavish. In addition to a souvenir ball book, the collection includes a script of the play "Through the Years," tickets, bills and correspondence. The ball materials, however, stretch back to 1879, and a few small hand-sized dance cards with their original cotton bracelets. These cards are filled with dance names including the *Monnie Musk*, *Portland Fancy* and *Highland Schottische* in addition to the more familiar marches, quadrilles, and the Waltz. Looking at these cards you can almost see the dance floor and hear the sound of many feet marching or reeling to the music!

Another significant part of the archives is an array of musical scores and other music records relating to Samuel Luskin, who was the Musical Director at Temple Beth El and a cofounder of the Buffalo Choral Society (this part of the archives will be the subject of a future article). Samuel Luskin also taught decades of bar mitzvah students, and collections of *parshah* speeches are bound in several thick volumes along with the names of each child's assignment. Architectural sketches and plans are another large part of the collection and among other aspects, show the different designs imaged for the Eggert Road sanctuary. Beyond these concentrations is a significant cache of genealogical information in the form of detailed membership and cemetery lists, much of it created by Muriel Selling (this part of the records will also be the subject of a future article). Our thanks to Ed Drozen who donated the Temple Beth El archives in 2007, and to Muriel Selling for the Beth El records she collected and created.

**To learn more about the Temple Beth El collection and other papers, you can contact Chana Kotzin at [archivesproject@bjebuffalo.org](mailto:archivesproject@bjebuffalo.org), or 716-204-5388. Many more collection guides are on the Bureau of Jewish Education website at [www.bjebuffalo.org/jbap](http://www.bjebuffalo.org/jbap)**

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