

Thursday, April 19, 1984

# Spring Hill Ave. Temple: state's oldest Jewish congregation

The Spring Hill Avenue Temple, the oldest Jewish congregation in Alabama and one of the oldest in the United States, was organized in Mobile on Jan. 29, 1844.

The state formally granted a charter to this group under the name of Sha'arai Shomayim Umaskil el Dol, Gates of Heaven and Society of Friends of the Needy.

Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs, in relating the history of the Spring Hill Avenue Temple, said in the beginning stages, members met in private homes, prayed their prayers, and sang their hymns. Then, on Dec. 27, 1846, the St. Emanuel Street Temple was dedicated, and the infant congregation had its first house of worship.

Within just a few short years the congregation outgrew the building and on March 10, 1853 a new synagogue was dedicated and consecrated on Jackson Street. This new synagogue became the house of worship for the Jewish community in Mobile for the next 54 years. The tablets of the Ten Commandments from this structure can be seen today embedded in the west wall of the Pollock Auditorium.

In 1907, the congregation dedicated a new edifice on the corner of Government and Warren Streets, in which it was destined to worship for almost half a century. Replicas of the stained glass windows from the Government Street Temple are exhibited on the west wall of the Pollock Auditorium. The foyer of the current Temple is graced by two menorahs (candelabras) which were on the pulpit of the Government Street structure.

Ground was broken for the present home on Spring Hill Avenue on Feb. 21, 1954. The Temple was formally dedicated at religious services on Sept. 2, 1955.

On that occasion, Rabbi Solomon E. Cherniak, spiritual leader of the congregation, summed up the hopes and aspirations of those who had built the new temple.

"To God, to Israel, and to America we dedicate our new Temple," he said. "We pray that with thankful hearts we shall put to the fullest use our new Sanctuary and Religious School building. Here, may we, our children, and those who will follow us in the years to come, find a good and blessed life in the sight of the Lord."

Since moving into their new home the congregation has continued to grow. Today the membership has increased to well over 200 families with over one hundred children in the Religious School.

Officials of Spring Hill Avenue Temple said they are thoroughly committed to the Reform perspective within the Jewish tradition and heritage.

"As such, we therefore understand our collective responsibility as a congregation to preserve, adapt and innovate those aspects of our historical past which we find spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, intellectually and religiously meaningful and satisfying.

"As American Reform Jews, we remain equally committed to those cherished ideals which have made this country great, and have, in the process, provided our people with a creative and nurturing environment which has enabled us to express ourselves and our faith, freely without fear of retribution or reprisal...."

Information concerning the Temple states that congregationally they understand the responsibility to make the Temple a House of Prayer, a House of Study and Learning, and a House of Gathering.



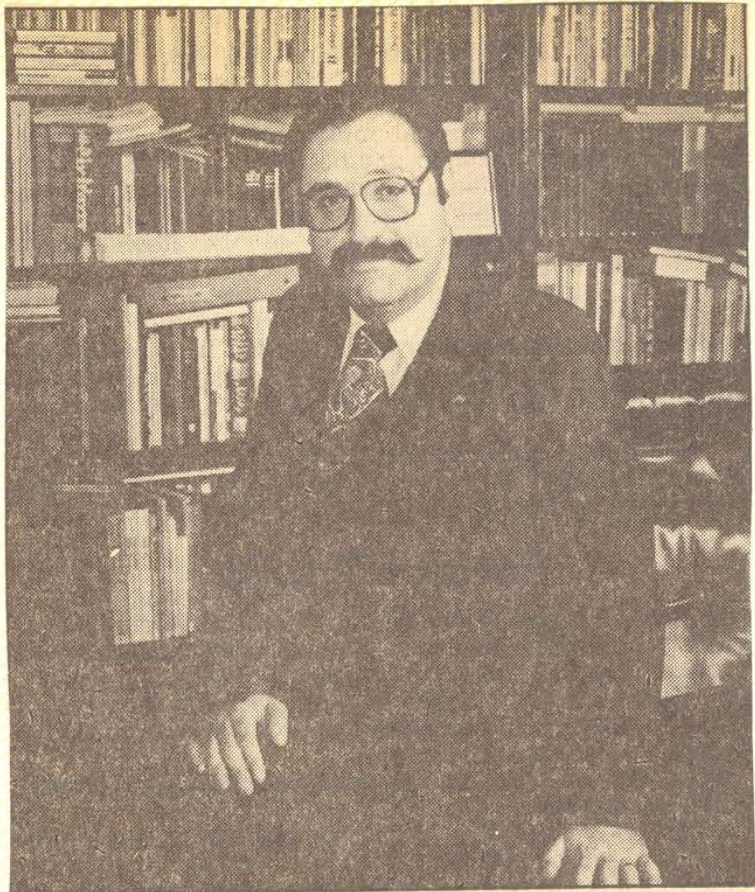
Far sighted members of the congregation saw the need for a Temple Cemetery, and in March of 1876, following a brief period when members of the congregation were buried in a special section of the Magnolia Cemetery, land was secured for their burial sites.

Beginning in 1962, and continuing today, the local congregation hosted the annual Ministerial Institute for the Christian Clergy which brings a Jewish scholar of note to the Mobile area to present information on Judaism in order to cultivate a better understanding of the interrelationship between Judaism and Christianity.

Since 1975 members of the congregation have been actively involved in an ongoing Jewish-Christian Dialogue program which is the most unique in the entire country, officials said.

Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs assumed the rabbinic leadership of the Temple on July 1, 1977. Prior to his joining the congregation here he served as the association Rabbi and Director of Education of Temple Shalom in Dallas, Tex., and was the assistant Rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, in Birmingham, Ala.

He is a 1974 graduate of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati Campus. In addition to his Ordination, he holds the degrees of Master of Arts in Hebrew letters and Bachelor of Hebrew Letters from the College-Institute.



**Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs**