

History of The Emanuel

by Dr. R. Leonard Kemler



On a cold February day in 1919, a group of young men met on a street corner on the east side of Hartford to discuss the formation of a new synagogue. They envisioned the establishment of a congregation prepared to accept modern interpretation of age-old ethics and observances that, nonetheless, retained the spiritual beauty and appeal that for so long had been an integral part of their religious being. The names of the individuals who laid the philosophical groundwork for what was to become, in 1919, Hartford's newest synagogue, were dutifully recorded in the oldest documents to be found in the archives of The Emanuel Synagogue:

Louis H. Katz, Louis E. Kemler, Louis Y. Gaberman, Max M. Epstein, Max Blumenthal, David T. Weinerman, Barney Rapaport, Herman P. Koppleman, Walter Beatman, and Saul Berman.

Also recorded was the first slate of officers for the newly established congregation, originally known as B'nai Israel Congregation, later to be changed to The Emanuel Synagogue to avoid confusion with B'nai Israel Congregation of New Britain: President: Walter Beatman, 1st Vice-

President: Saul Berman, 2nd Vice-President: Barney Toretzky, Treasurer: Louis E. Kemler, Recording Secretary: David T. Weinerman.

Initially, informal services were held in an orthodox synagogue on Winthrop Street. Later Talmud Torah Hall on Pleasant Street provided a more formal setting for prayer. Both buildings have since been demolished. Rabbi Leon Spitz, an ordained rabbi from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was engaged to assist the members of Connecticut's first conservative congregation. A Chaplain on leave from the United States Army, Rabbi Spitz, under the auspices of the Jewish Welfare Board, devoted most of his time to organizational duties.

The need for a permanent home for the congregation became clear, and \$30,000 was raised for the purchase of the North Methodist Church on North Main Street. The new synagogue was dedicated in 1920, the same year in which a large tract of land was purchased in Wethersfield to serve as a cemetery. It was also in 1920, that Rabbi Abraham Nowak came to The Emanuel as its first full-time spiritual leader (1920-1922). Under his direction, a

Sisterhood was organized with Miss Annie Fisher as its first president, and a Brotherhood was established with Louis H. Katz as chairman. In 1921, the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut passed House Bill 1050 incorporating The Emanuel Synagogue as an official religious congregation.



Though early records do not mention the size of the original congregation, it is known that by 1922 The Emanuel had 220 families. There was a separate Sunday School with an enrollment of 320 pupils, the city's largest. The Hebrew School, which met three times weekly, had an enrollment of 100. At that juncture, a Mr. Weisberg served the congregation as cantor, Hebrew teacher and choir director.

It is interesting to note that in the Synagogue's early days the Sisterhood undertook as its main project, the funding of the entire religious school.

The building on North Main Street was old, and the need for larger and better facilities soon became apparent.

A functioning farm, on the east side of Woodland Street, between Albany Avenue and Greenfield Street,

opposite the old Northwest Grammar School, was soon purchased. The portion of land from Albany Avenue north to the last two lots on the corner of Woodland and Greenfield Streets, was sold for the original purchase price of the entire parcel, and the remaining property became the site of the new Emanuel.

When Rabbi Nowak resigned in 1922, the synagogue engaged Rabbi Morris Silverman (1922-1963). The innovative young spiritual leader introduced organ music to services, formed a Junior Congregation, Bar Mitzvah Club, Young Peoples League, Athletic Programs, a non-sectarian Boy Scout Troop and introduced many other programs which benefited the congregation as well as the community-at-large.

As The Emanuel flourished, national speakers were introduced to the rosters of the Emanuel Literary Circle.

Rabbi Silverman gained statewide recognition as chairman of the Civil Rights Commission of the State of Connecticut, and national and international recognition when he compiled and edited the Sabbath and Holiday Prayer Book, the High Holy Day Prayer Book and numerous other tracts still in wide use today.

His wife, Althea Silverman, deeply involved in and beloved by the congregation, wrote children's books, staged patriotic and Jewish pageants and served as chairperson of the Board of Education of the City of Hartford.

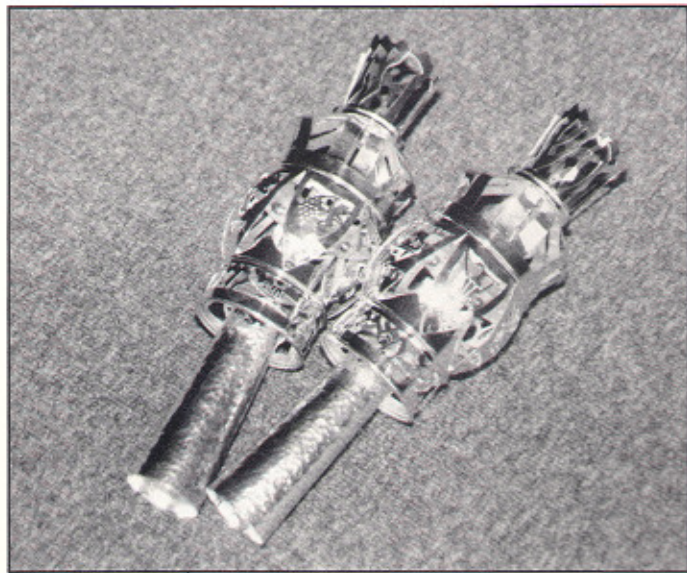
Both religious and social life centered in The Emanuel. The Young People's League staged its annual "Yenta's Follies"; the Sisterhood's Annual Ball was the social event of each fall season; the synagogue was the setting for numerous college weekends. The Emanuel had become an "institution"! High Holy Day services, by this time, were held in three locations to accommodate all worshippers.

In 1927, morning and evening minyan services were begun and have continued uninterrupted since. Among the capable and honorable ritual directors who have held forth over the years are: Louis Felberg, Louis Levine, Joseph Buechler, Harold Monschein, Daniel Nesson and, in this, our seventieth year, Martin Segal.

The Woodland Street building was dedicated in 1927. The religious school enrollment continued to increase and, in 1957, grew to more than 800. In the early '50's a new concept, that of the Unified School, was introduced (see article by Mark Levy on "Education in the Emanuel"), and students were encouraged to attend

Hebrew School three times a week. Though the school had been led by capable teachers, and Rabbi Silverman functioned as its director, enrollment dictated that a full-time educational director was needed. Mr. Alexander Kaminetsky (Kay) was engaged in 1950. Alfred Weisel followed in 1952 and Mark Levy in 1987.

Hazzanut at The Emanuel was enhanced by the beautiful baritone voice of Cantor Paul Discount (1922-1931). Much of the liturgical music The Emanuel "grew up with" were his compositions. He was an accomplished composer, pianist and organist. Miss Annie Pratt was subsequently hired as the congregation's first organist. It is interesting to note that her loyalty to The Emanuel dictated she play at our synagogue, rather than her own church when conflicting schedules arose. Anecdotes about synchronization problems as a result of her hearing deficiency are part of our musical history as well. The first Emanuel choir was organized in 1923 by Choirmaster Edward Gehrman for Shabbat and Yom Tov services. Many Emanuelites will recall soloists Sadie Yellin, Ida Yudowitch and Mr. Gehrman, himself. In 1931, Cantor Discount left The Emanuel for the golden opportunities of Hollywood where he continued his cantorial career and wrote musical scores for the silver screen.



Then came the years of the Great Depression which saw Max Schwartz occupy the cantorial pulpit for Selihot and the High Holy Days. Rabbi Silverman doubled as cantor during that era and was assisted by Torah readers Harry Sobol, Abraham Leikind, Paul Mitnick and Saul Leavitt.

In 1948, a young choir member by the name of Arthur Koret was asked to lead the High Holy Day ser-

vices in the vestry. It was no surprise that he was offered the full-time cantorial position the very next year, a position in which he served with great ability, love, and devotion until his retirement in 1986. During his 37 glorious years, Cantor Koret's fame reached far beyond The Emanuel. Among his colleagues he became the "cantor's cantor", known and respected not only for the unique quality of his voice and his musicianship, but for his "menschlichkeit" as well. Many are the cantors today who were inspired, tutored and nurtured by this unique man. Respect and recognition from his colleagues were apparent in his election to the presidency of the Cantor's Assembly of America. Not only did Arthur Koret leave his mark on the history of The Emanuel, but Mrs. Koret, known and loved by all as Bea, put her artistic endeavors to work as well. The needlepoint of the ark doors in the destroyed chapel, paintings in the Youth Lounge, the Hebrew lettering in the sanctuary, as well as The Emanuel logo used on printed matter are all fruits of her artistic creativity. Through the years of Cantor Koret's tenure, the choirmaster and organist of The Emanuel had been Jacob Teller. Upon his retirement, the keyboard and High Holy Day choir were taken over by Alan Conway.

Hazzan Don Gurney was selected in 1987 to succeed Cantor Koret. While retaining many "old" melodies, he has introduced new cantorial compositions and carries on the tradition of cantorial excellence at The Emanuel. It was a touching moment for all when Cantor Emeritus Koret officiated with Hazzan Gurney in the splendor of the Rosh Hashana liturgy during High Holy Day Services in this, our synagogue's seventieth year. Of particular interest is the fact that Hazzan Don and his wife, Hazzanit Faith Gurney, often officiate together bringing new melodic dimension to The Emanuel pulpit.

Upon the retirement of Rabbi Silverman in 1960, The Emanuel engaged Rabbi Simon Novick (1958-1968) as its spiritual leader. Rabbi Novick's interest and strength lay in adult education. Renowned lecturers came to teach or preach. During a four year period, Rabbi Novick enriched and edified the members of The Emanuel with his teachings on Jewish history.

Prior to Rabbi Novick's arrival, it had become obvious that the religious school had outgrown its Woodland Street quarters. More than half of Emanuel's members now lived in West Hartford or contiguous towns, and a proposal to build a school in West Hartford was in the air. In June, 1958, during a highly charged congregational meeting climaxed by a moving appeal by Miss Annie Fisher, the move to West Hartford was endorsed.

Land on Mohegan Drive, current site of our synagogue, was purchased, and the school and social hall buildings were completed in time for High Holy Day services in 1959. Though services continued at both the Hartford and West Hartford locations for several years, the synagogue's move to Mohegan Drive had begun. The last Woodland Street services were held in 1967, and construction of the present sanctuary was started in 1970.

Rabbi Novick accepted a pulpit in Toms River, N.J. his wife's home town, and he was succeeded in 1969 by Rabbi Howard Singer (1969-1982). An author of renown and teacher par excellence, Rabbi Singer encouraged congregational participation in his lecture/sermons. With Mrs. Stanley Fisher he forged an alliance with the University of Hartford which brought leaders of the academic world to the pulpit of The Emanuel. During his tenure, Rabbi Singer wrote several well received novels about modern Jewish life, as well as many critically acclaimed articles in contemporary Jewish and Rabbinic publications. His Friday evening lectures, using the format of historic installments of Eastern European Jewry, were popular and well attended.

1983 marked the beginning of The Emanuel's present era. It was in that year that Rabbi Gerald Zelermyer, his wife Heske and their children, Gideon and Salo, made the trek from Cranston, Rhode Island to West Hartford. Before the congregation had the opportunity to officially welcome Rabbi Zelermyer, the West Hartford community was beset by a series of fires. The Young Israel on Albany Avenue, its Rabbi's home, the home of Dr. and Mrs. Leonard Kemler, Emanuel members (he a former synagogue president), and The Emanuel itself, were objects of the arsonist. Our beautiful chapel, with its stained glass windows, and needlepointed ark-doors, was gutted, and Torah scrolls were charred beyond recognition. The main sanctuary suffered the loss of Torah scrolls and severe smoke damage. The newly arrived Rabbi Zelermyer quickly exhibited his leadership qualities. With smoke still curling from the smoldering synagogue, he led morning services on the lawn at 160 Mohegan Drive and eloquently addressed his sometimes solemn, sometimes bitter congregants expressing a need for optimism, faith, strength and the ability to forgive.

On the morning of August 15th, our heartbreaking experience made headlines in the national and international press. Through media interviews, Rabbi Zelermyer reestablished the strength, sense of unity and heart that are The Emanuel legacy. Fundraising, cleanup and rebuilding were immediately begun. High Holy Day services were held in the damaged sanctuary less than two weeks after the disaster.

In a touching ceremony which was especially written for the occasion by Rabbi Zelermyer, and which was attended by thousands of members and friends of The Emanuel as well as civic dignitaries, seven scrolls were buried beneath the Hebrew word "Emanuel" which appears on the structure's facade.

Less than a year later, the Rose and Israel Hoffman Chapel was dedicated, thanks to the generosity of many, especially Mr. & Mrs. Burt Hoffman.

If there is strength that grows out of adversity, Rabbi Zelermyer seized the momentum. He and his wife have become active and visible in the community-at-large, and together with their young sons, portray the traditions of family worship. On any given Shabbat service, young families mix with the members of longstanding, joining hands to form the next generational link of our venerable institution. Rabbi Zelermyer, in a unique format of services, brings together what the original founders had in mind when they met on that cold February day seventy



years ago—a modern interpretation of ancient text and tradition; a warmth and an approachable rabbinate that links old and new, bringing a special blend of sensitivity to a Bar and Bat Mitzvah and other life cycle events; a constant search for improvement while retaining deep love and respect for the rich history of The Emanuel.

Its rebuilding completed, The Emanuel continues the tradition of excellence in service to community and congregation. Mark Levy was named to the position of Education Director of the Hebrew School in 1987. He has introduced new teaching techniques that reflect the traditions established by Annie Fisher.

The Emanuel is strong, vibrant and growing.

In this, our 70th anniversary year, it is as pleasant to look back as it is to anticipate the future. Many new Conservative congregations in our community were sponsored by The Emanuel: Beth El in West Hartford; Beth Tefila in East Hartford; B'nai Shalom in Newington. We have hosted Rabbi Hans Bodenheimer and his Congregation, Tikvoh Chadoshoh, in the past and continue to offer the Israel & Rose Hoffman Chapel to the Sephardic Congregation of Hartford during the High Holy Day Season.

In all Jewish activities in the community, be they the Greater Hartford Jewish Federation, the Hebrew Home and Hospital, Jewish Family Service, the Jewish Community Center, the Zionist Organization, Hadassah, B'nai B'rith, or Women's League, members of The Emanuel have always played leading roles. Its rabbis have taken leadership positions. Its staff has gained local and national recognition.

As we celebrate our 70th anniversary, we pray that we may continue to go from strength to strength.

