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Religion

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IT MUST BE...

The Daily Calumet

Landmark synagogue 'like home'

By MARGARET BEAUCHAMP
Correspondent

The history of South Chicago would be incomplete without mention of the city's oldest synagogue, Agudath Achim-Bikur Cholim at 8927 S. Houston Ave.

Built in 1902, the synagogue housed a congregation of 500 families at its peak. After years of ethnic change the South Chicago neighborhood is primarily Christian. Still, this remnant of a South Chicago past that prominently featured Jews and Jewish institutions remains.

The congregation began in 1888 in the Bush, says congregation member Nathan Hecht. "Then, in 1902, the same year that I was born in Russia, they built this synagogue."

Designed by architect Alfred Schuler, the Romanesque structure is tucked away on a quiet row of houses one block east of Commercial Avenue.

The Hispanic names on store fronts in the neighborhood give no hint that in the first half of this century, many of businesses were owned by European Jews.

"I was in the poultry and egg business," says Hecht, who came to Chicago in 1921. "My father was a Kosher butcher. All of the meat packers were in this neighborhood. It was the largest meat-packing area outside of the stockyards."

Burt Mendelson, a teacher at Olive Harvey College, elaborates on the saga of Jews in South Chicago. "My father, Hyman, was an editor for The Daily Calumet in the 1920s when the paper was located at 91st and Baltimore."



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The present synagogue is a merger of two congregations. The original group is Bikur Cholim, which means "visiting the sick." Agudath Achim, meaning "society of brothers," joined the Houston Avenue synagogue after moving from its location at 79th Street and Yates Avenue.

There are around 50 members in the congregation now and about 12 people gather for services every Sabbath and weekday prayer services Sunday morning.

From the outside, the building has a boarded-up, abandoned look. Within, the picture is different.

The plan of the building includes a "bimah," a platform in the center of the main sanctuary. Prayers and readings from the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament of the Bible) are conducted from the "bimah."

Because Orthodox Judaism requires the separation of men and women during religious services, Agudath Achim has a balcony for women.

At present, none of the members of the congregation lives in South Chicago, although some live in South Shore and Hyde Park.

Irving Cutler, who conducts guided tours of Chicago and is a retired professor, says that the South Chicago Jewish community was always "very small, when compared to Hyde Park and Lawndale, on the West Side. This explains why so little has been documented about the neighborhood and the city's oldest synagogue."

In spite of the dwindling and elderly membership, the congregation has the resolve to maintain its synagogue as long as it can.

Architect David Offenber, who at 39 is the youngest member, says he "likes the smallness of the group."

Julian Kushner likes "being able to participate."

Other members point out that there is no other Orthodox synagogue on the South Side.

But the main reason members still worship at Agudath Achim is probably best expressed by Zipporah Lesman, who says the synagogue "is comfortable, just like home."



Staff photo by Scott Stazzante

Burt Mendelson, a member of the Agudath Achim-Bikur Cholim synagogue at 8927 S. Houston Ave., gets ready for prayer wearing some of the traditional religious symbols of the Jewish faith: a prayer shawl, called a talit, which is worn for morning prayers, and a tefillin, a leather thong with boxes, worn around the head and arm. The boxes contain written parts of the Hebrew Torah. The tefillin is worn for morning prayers only on weekdays, such as Sunday. Agudath Achim is the oldest synagogue in Chicago.

Springtime, freedom, joy are themes of Passover

By MARGARET BEAUCHAMP
Correspondent

Each year on the 15th of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar, the eight-day observation of the Feast of Unleavened Bread known as Passover begins. This year the celebration starts at sundown Wednesday.

In the basement of Agudath Achim, Chicago's oldest synagogue, located at 8927 S. Houston Ave., members enjoy a Sunday morning breakfast and express their views of this Jewish holiday.

"Passover is a joyous holiday," says Nathan Hecht, the elder statesman of the group and a member of the Orthodox congregation since 1921.

"Like other Jewish holidays, this one revolves around freedom," says architect David Offenber.

Picking up on the theme of freedom, Julian Kushner says that for him Passover is a remembrance of the Biblical experience of the Jews in Egypt. "The hardships of slavery in Egypt led to freedom."

The word "Passover" is taken from the events in the book of Exodus connected with the story of the 10 plagues. Jewish Scripture includes the Torah, which consists of the first five books of the Bible, and the other books of the Old Testament.

During the 10th plague, God "passed over" the houses of the Israelites but slayed the first-born of the Egyptians. After the plague, Pharaoh let the Israelites leave Egypt.

Passover is also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread because, by tradition, the Israelites were in a hurry

to leave Egypt and the bread they baked did not have time to rise.

According to Rabbi Michael Stevens of Tempel Beth-El, 6947 Hohman Ave., Hammond, a Reform congregation, Passover is the most popular of the Jewish holidays, because of the theme of freedom and the "elaborate liturgy and full-course dinner called the seder."

Passover really revolves around the children, says Spertus College of Judaica archivist Norma Spungun.

The pattern of the seder is found in the Haggadah, a book filled with prayers in a call-and-response format. The prayers are read during the meal and everyone at the dinner table participates.

An important aspect of the gathering involves the question posed by the youngest child: "Why is tonight different from all other nights?" The question is asked four times during the meal and is answered by passages from the Bible.

This is an educational process for children and adults, says Spungun. "In our home, we use this as an occasion to discuss freedom and the lack of it in today's world."

The seder plate is filled with ritual items having a symbolic meaning. Matzah is the unleavened bread. Horseradish, "maror," represents the bitterness of slavery.

"Haroset," a sweet paste, represents the mortar used by the Jews during their enslavement.

A roasted lamb bone represents the paschal lamb that was sacrificed during the days of the Temple in Jerusalem. A roasted egg represents life. Parsley is dipped into salt water to represent the tears of slavery.

Although it is not on the seder

plate, wine is also a part of the ritual of prayers and blessings.

Not only does Passover commemorate a deliverance from bondage, it also carries a theme of springtime and renewal.

For Agudath Achim member Zipporah Lesman, the holiday means "newness." That's what the exodus was all about, she says. "It meant that the Jews had a chance to start all over again."

On a practical note, Stevens explains that Reform Jews follow the Israeli calendar and celebrate the holiday for seven days. Conservative and Orthodox Jews — like the members of Agudath Achim — outside of Israel celebrate for eight days.

In Reform Jewish households, some families use separate sets of dishes for Passover, but others do not.

Because the holiday is closely associated with food, it is not surprising that certain favorites would emerge over the years.

Stevens says that haroset, made with wine, nuts and honey, is always popular at the dinner table. Matzah ball soup is also a favorite at the rabbi's home.

Jennie Hecht has made gefilte fish for more than 40 years. Another Passover dish she said her family really enjoys is "tzimmes," a pudding of white and sweet potatoes and prunes that is baked in the oven.

Although most of the celebration for Passover is in the home, Stevens says that in the synagogue on the Sabbath during the holiday, the entire "Song of Songs" is read. "This is in accordance with the theme of renewal and rebirth."

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קאנרעניישאן עורת
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