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 8827-S.-Houston Ave.

Built in 1902, the synagogue housed a congregation of 300 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 Alschuler, 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.”
Springtime, freedom, joy are themes of Passover

By MARGARET RAEBECHAMP
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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. Roosevelt Ave., members enjoy a Sunday morning breakfast and express their views of this Jewish holiday.

"Passover is a joyous holiday," says Nathan Hacht, 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 Offenberg.

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 Homan 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 Spungen.

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 Spungen. "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 Leeman, 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 foods 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 "strames," 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."