

## THE PIONEERS

*The following is the story of the pioneer years and struggle of the original Temple Beth El as written by Estelle Lincola Paden, Historian of Temple Beth El from 1950 through 1979. Estelle passed away on February 18, 1998. The following is in the original form as written by Estelle in 1977 and has not been edited.*

### TEMPLE BETH EL, ITS BEGINNING AND THE PIONEER YEARS.

Do you know the early history of Temple Beth El of Fort Pierce?

Do you know that in 1948 there were about seventeen known Jewish families in Fort Pierce in addition to the Blocks (Marian and Arthur) in Vero Beach and three known Jewish families in Stuart (the Auerbachs, the Kanarecks, and Judge and Mrs. A. O. Kanner)?

The first Jewish family came to Fort Pierce in 1912. They were Sara and Isadore Holtsberg, who were later joined by their son Fred. The Holtsberg's opened a grocery store on Second Street. Son Fred delivered groceries as far south as Jensen . . . by row boat. Fred Holtsberg married Harriet (Hattie) Wild of Indiana, and they were blessed by the addition of Harold Holtsberg who became the official Shofar blower of Temple Beth El.

Fred Holtsberg served as Mayor of Fort. Pierce for two successful administrations. He also served as one of the early presidents of Temple Beth El.

The next Jewish family who came to Fort Pierce also made an indelible print on the Jewish life and times of the community from 1926 to the present. They were Ida and Ralph Rubin. Ralph Rubin became an established merchant, was involved in many community projects, and served as one of the early presidents of the Chamber of Commerce. The Rubin store is still located on North Second Street and is known as "One of Florida's Better Stores." Ralph Rubin became one of the most loved and respected merchants in town. The original Rubin store was not as large or as attractive as the present one; but it was indeed one of the most popular and well known stores in Fort Pierce, particularly since Second Street was the popular area in Fort Pierce at that time.

Arthur Rubin continues in the Rubin establishment in the same tradition of his parents--of highest integrity and consideration of customers and employees. Arthur Rubin also has been involved in community projects, Temple activities, and all Judaic needs as well.

Bernard Rubin has officiated as Mayor of Fort Pierce and served as mayor for two successful administrations.

Nathan Zelmenovitz of Okeechobee resided in that community for many years prior to moving to Fort Pierce. He served in the Florida Legislature, and during his lifetime in Fort Pierce served on the Board of Trustees of Temple Beth El. The two large bronze

Menorahs beautifying the Temple Rostrum were given by Nathan Zelmanovitz when the Temple was organized and in the process of adornment.

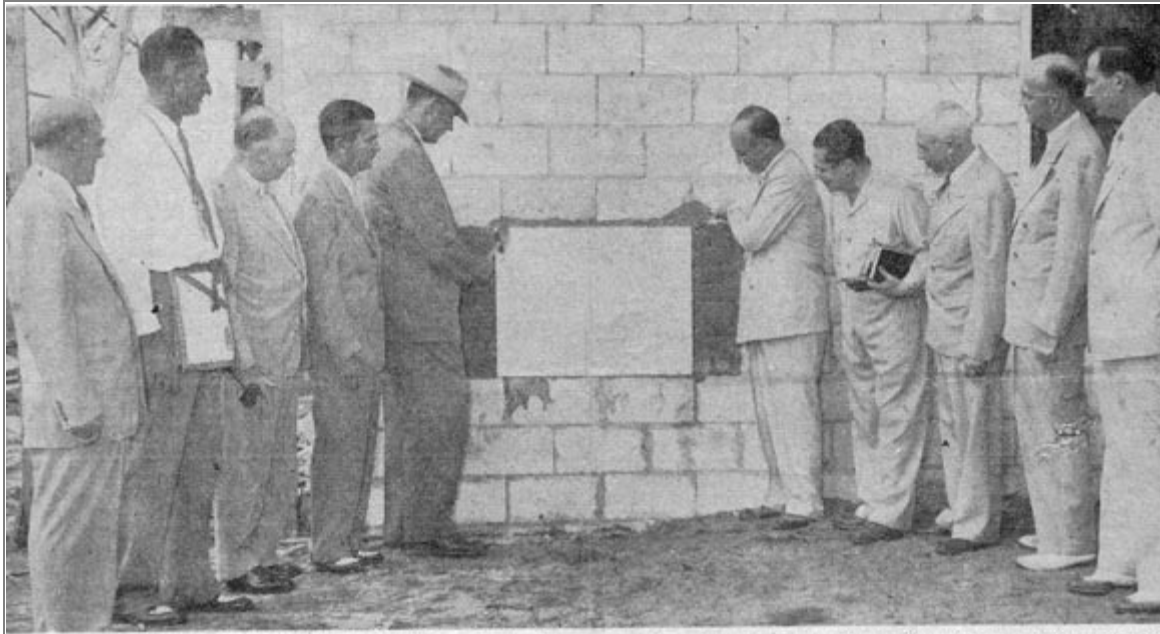
Ben and Gerri Duke were early residents of Fort Pierce and owned a small variety store on North Second Street. The Dukes donated the lots on which Temple Beth El was built.

In 1948 Rabbi Menachem J. Freedman, a retired rabbi turned businessman, and his wife, Ethel, came to town and operated a store which at that time was adjacent to the original building of the Woman's Club of Fort Pierce located on North Second Street. Rabbi Freedman, known to the children as "Uncle Jack," was a dynamic speaker and a dedicated worker in the cause of creating an organized Jewish Community. Although the home of Ida and Ralph Rubin was used during the war years as a meeting place of friendship and Judaic togetherness; nevertheless, there was no assembled Jewish Community.

Together with Ralph Rubin, Fred Holtsberg, Ben Duke, and Hubert Paden, Rabbi Freedman began to hold Sabbath Services on Friday nights in the original Woman's Club building. When Rosh Hashona of 1948 was to be observed, Rabbi Freedman was offered the use of the Sanctuary of the First Methodist Church located on Seventh Street and Orange Avenue. Rabbi Freedman also had the same privilege for the Yom Kippur holiday. During the afternoon service, Rabbi Freedman introduced the urgent need of establishing our own House of Worship and suggested a building fund dedicated to the purpose of constructing a synagogue. One of the congregants said, "Let us call it Temple Beth El." The building fund was started and not only did the Jewish Community donate to it, but the Christian Community of Fort Pierce donated in the amount of \$1400 in appreciation of the many kindnesses and generousities to the various churches by Ida and Ralph Rubin.



**Temple Beth El, Ft. Pierce as of August 4, 1949. Taken from NE corner**

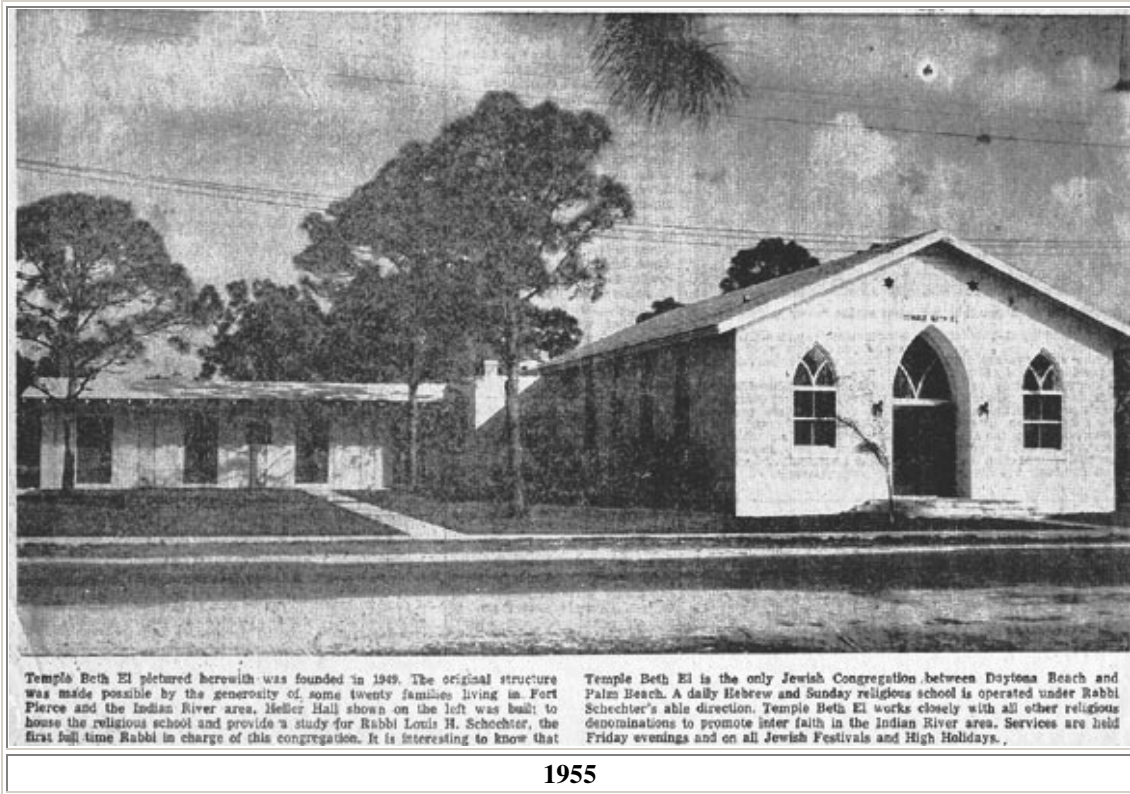


**TEMPLE CORNERSTONE LAID—Fort Pierce, Sept. 15—** Cornerstone of Fort Pierce's first Jewish synagogue; Temple Beth-El, was laid recently with appropriate ceremonies. Shown here is the group officiating at the ceremonies, left to right: Ralph Rubin, finance committee chairman; J. B. Dobbs, master of Fort Pierce lodge No. 87, F. and A. M., which conducted the rites; Dr. James M. Howard, pastor of the First Pres-

byterian church; Mayor Frank Fee; W. B. Hendry, district deputy grand master of Masons; Ben Duke, who donated the site; Jack Freedman, acting rabbi; Rabbi Emanuel Greenstein, West Palm Beach; the Rev. R. A. Alley, pastor of the First Methodist church; and Milton Tucker, congregation president.

**September 15, 1949**

In September of 1949, the first High Holy Days Service was conducted in our beloved Temple Beth El by Rabbi M. J. Freedman. The floor was yet bare, there was no air conditioning, and there were a variety of seats. An old piano had been acquired; and a choir consisting of Estelle and Hubert Paden and the Kaplan girls under the direction of Mrs. Max Masters, participated in the services. The windows of the Temple were opened to capitalize on the cooling September breeze; however, a few nearby roosters unexpectedly assisted the newly formed choir to the chagrin of the congregation. Our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Gahn, disbanded their barnyard in deference to the Temple. During their years of close-by residence, they were very cooperative neighbors; and the Temple enjoyed friendly community relations.



The first Haftorah Service conducted in Temple Beth El was chanted by Arthur Block and his brother the late Emanuel Block. Our beautiful Ark and Ner Talmid were donated by several of the pioneer members. The bronze Menorahs adorning the rostrum were presented by the late Nathan Zelmanovitz. As mentioned, the lots on which the original Temple was built were donated by the late Ben Duke. The Founders of Temple Beth El were: Rabbi M. J. Freedman, Ralph Rubin, Ben Duke, Hubert N. Paden, Arthur Block, Fred Holtsberg, George Gilbert, Charles Peckelis, Max Shainfeld, and Nathan Zelmanovitz.

The first community Seder conducted by Rabbi Freedman was held in the Burston Hotel, then located on South Second Street. The Hotel was managed and owned by George Gilbert, father of Spencer Gilbert and grandfather of Fred and Martin Horowitz. The site on which the hotel was located is now, an office building.

Hubert Paden was the first "shamus" and all-around handyman for the Temple--no job too small or too menial or too difficult. Hubert was a volunteer and enjoyed being involved. The Padens came to Fort Pierce in 1948 and for about 25 years were very active in all Temple functions and responsibilities. He was the first convert to Judaism in Fort Pierce. He studied with Rabbi Freedman; and when he was certified for conversion, the honor was celebrated at a Friday night service under the guidance of the Rabbi. Hubert was the first House and Grounds Chairman, the first Board of Trustees Secretary, and the first Chairman of the Cemetery Committee. The Tablets of the Law adorning the Ark in Temple Beth El were carved by Hubert Paden and presented to the Temple in 1950. When Rabbi Freedman organized a small Temple choir, Hubert was a member and

furnished transportation to those in need. He was on the Board for 13 years and served as president for one term in 1966.

When Rabbi Freedman was unable to conduct Sabbath Services due to ill health, services were usually conducted by either Fred Holtsberg, Hubert Paden, or Ralph Rubin.

Charles and Alice Peckelis were among the charter members of Temple Beth El. Charles Peckelis served on the Temple Board of Trustees and helped formulate the Temple Constitution and Bylaws. Charles and Alice were also very active in the local Elks projects, particularly the Anna Miller Circle.

Do you know that Marian and Arthur Block were the only Jewish couple in Vero Beach for many years? In later years they were joined by Emanuel (Manny) Block and Ben Block. Arthur and Manny Block were the first and only ones for many years to chant the Haftorah Service during the holidays. Marian and Arthur Block originally had a variety store in Vero and worked diligently. However, in later years fortune smiled on them; and Temple Beth El has greatly benefitted through their generosity. Marian served as the first President of Sisterhood of Temple Beth El in 1949 and served again in 1973. She has chaired several Donor luncheons. In addition to her Sisterhood and Temple activities, she was active in the Vero Beach Community--having served several years on the committee for the rebuilding of the Indian River Hospital. Arthur served on the Temple Board for many years. The Blocks presented the Temple with the special High Holy Day adornments.

Sisterhood held an organizational meeting at Ida and Ralph Rubin's home, then located on South 12th Street. Sisterhood was sponsored by the later Ethel Freedman (wife of our First Rabbi) and the late Ida Rubin. Sisterhood, even though small in number, became the helping hand of the Temple not only in fund-raising but in spiritual endeavors as well. After the original Hadassah Chapter was discontinued, Sisterhood, under the chairmanship of Estelle Paden and Marian Rubin, sponsored an annual fund-raising drive dedicated to the Hadassah Medical Organization. As our numbers increased so did the Hadassah Fund. On several occasions, Estelle and Marian collected hundreds of dollars. Sisterhood kept Hadassah alive and thriving for approximately 25 years.

Marian Rubin served as Sisterhood President. She also assisted in the Sunday School and chaired the children's Seder, the Yom Kippur Break-Fast, and for many years the Seder. She was the third and last President of the Hadassah Chapter, which was disbanded due to a small group of members unable to support two vital organizations. However, together with Estelle Paden, Marian helped with the Hadassah Annual Drive for HMO. Marian Rubin and Estelle Paden kept the Hadassah Drive alive for over a period of about 25 years; and because of their efforts and determination, anywhere from \$400 to \$700 was collected from our small membership. The annual Flower Fund for the High Holy Days services was chaired by Marian Rubin and Estelle Paden. The Ida Rubin Book of Life was started by the Sisterhood of Temple Beth El. Marian and Arthur Rubin have financially backed this project by paying for the Book of Life cards for many years., The

Hammond organ in the Temple was financed by the Rubin family, and community friends, in memory of Ida Rubin.

It was not an easy task to organize a group of people from many different religious backgrounds, such as Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. It was the determination and fervor of the faithful few who not only brought it to fruition but helped to keep the Jewish Community in working order and interest. Also, with the cooperation of the membership, a House of God was built to support Judaism for those current members and to the future generations of children and adults, fervently hoping that Temple Beth El would always maintain a Temple and Jewish Community dedicated to the teachings of Torah and to not only speak the words, but live according to the basic philosophy of Judaism--to "love Mercy; to do justly and to walk humbly with our God."

Estelle Paden, although born of the Jewish faith, became truly dedicated to Temple Beth El and to Judaism under the zeal and guidance of Hubert Paden and Rabbi M. J. Freedman. Estelle was the first Publicity Chairperson for Sisterhood and Hadassah, also first Recording Secretary for a period of 20 years, important soprano in the Temple choir, and also part of the special High Holy Days choir when it was composed of many professionals from the various churches. She chaired many important projects and was the second President of Hadassah. She also played an active part in the Woman's Club of Fort Pierce officiating as Corresponding Secretary, first Chairperson of the Americanism Department, and establishing the first radio inter-racial program on this subject. She also worked for many years on the local Mutual Concert Series. Time and ill health made it necessary for her to curtail many activities. Estelle and Hubert Paden, at this writing, year 1977, are the last senior survivors of the original pioneers. Temple Beth El, Sisterhood, and all Temple activities have become a joyful way of life for them. They are most grateful to all the Rabbis with whom they enjoyed an important, warm, and meaningful relationship.

Harold Holtsberg is the grandson of the first pioneers, Sara and Isadore Holtsberg. After his college days were over and Harold returned to Fort Pierce, he became interested in Temple-Beth El and served as one of the early Presidents and served most diligently on the Cemetery Committee of Beth El Memorial Park. Harold became the official shofar blower under the guidance of Rabbi Freedman.

Lucy Hantman completed the unfinished term of Ida Rubin, who was unable to continue as Sisterhood President. She chaired several of the original rummage sales for Sisterhood. The pioneers of Temple Beth El were determined to make the Temple and Judaism an important element in Fort Pierce. They adorned the Temple with a cloak of dignity, significance, and established community goodwill. They presented to the Jewish Community a mortgage free building; and it was they who built the groundwork for a striving and healthy community, hoping that eventually our group would increase in number.

Honorable mention must be given to the following, although they did not number among the original pioneers:

Meyer and Dorothy Heller were the first, "financial angels" of Temple Beth El. They financed the building of Heller Hall and installed air conditioning in the Temple. Meyer also served as one of the early Presidents of the Board of Trustees, and at his suggestion Hubert Paden was presented with a beautiful silver tray in appreciation of many years of service and was proclaimed an "honorary member." Meyer Heller also sponsored and chaired the Temple Beth El Annual Souvenir Year Book. Dorothy Heller was most generous to Sisterhood and Hadassah and most cooperative at all times.

Ellen Ringer, although not a pioneer of Temple Beth El (as she was only a winter resident of Fort Pierce at the time Temple Beth El was organized and built), co-chaired and edited all the Year Books for at least 22 years. As a result of the financial success of the Year Book, Temple Beth El was enlarged, Heller Hall was enlarged, the Sunday School rooms were built surrounding the patio, the Rabbi's Office and the Temple Office and Library were added. Ellen was also Corresponding Secretary of the Sisterhood for a period of 20 years and gave most generously to Sisterhood and the Temple. The red carpeting and the beautiful drapes in the Temple were presented by Ellen Ringer. For many years Hubert Paden physically assisted on some of the projects she undertook for Sisterhood and Temple.

Sidney Ribakoff came to Fort Pierce in 1957, and he has been a most helpful and generous member of the Temple and has served on the Board of Trustees for many years.

*The following is a message for future generations from Estelle:*

PLEASE REMEMBER THAT THIS IS THE STORY OF THE PIONEER YEARS, AND STRUGGLE, AND ALTHOUGH MANY WHO CAME IN LATER YEARS WERE INTERESTED AND WORKING MEMBERS, THIS IS THE STORY OF THE PIONEERS OF TEMPLE BETH EL. THE TORCH OF PROGRESS IS NOW HANDED TO THE NEW FRONTIER. MAY THEY CONTINUE WITH ZEAL AND DEDICATION TO TEMPLE, TO SISTERHOOD, AND TO TORAH. A GOOD DOCTRINE HAS BEEN GIVEN TO YOU. CHERISH IT, PROTECT IT, AND FORSAKE IT NOT.

SHALOM AND LOVE TO ALL.

Estelle Lincola Paden

Historian of Temple Beth El 1954 - 1979