

Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob Congregation, Records, 1880-2005

Rauh Jewish Archives MSS# 438
Senatory John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center
1212 Smallman Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
5 boxes (Boxes 1-5); 73 volumes ; 9.5 l.f.

History of Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob (1869-

Beth Hamedrash Hagodol (BHH) was founded in 1869 by Lithuanian Jews, who had fled to the United States after the unsuccessful 1863 Polish revolt against the Russia Empire. The congregation was chartered as B'nai Israel in 1873. The congregation grew as more Orthodox Jewish Yiddish-speaking immigrants arrived. In 1880, the congregation moved into a building at the corner of Grant Street and Third Avenue.

In 1883, members of the congregation from the Lithuanian region around the town of Suwalk split off and formed a congregation which they chartered in 1883 as Beth Jacob (BJ). In 1901, they moved from a building on Wylie Avenue to Epiphany and Townsend.

The B'nai Israel congregation continued to expand as more Yiddish-speaking immigrants arrived. When the congregation outgrew the building on Grant Street, the congregants built a new synagogue in 1892 on Washington Street with seating for 1600 people. The congregation renamed itself Beth Hamedrash Hagodol or the Great House of Learning and was known colloquially as the Washington Street Schul.

During the first part of the twentieth century, as immigrant Jews acculturated, they began to move from the Hill. As the population of Jews living on the Hill declined, synagogues closed or moved to the areas east of the Hill where Jews were establishing communities. BHH and BJ, however, stayed on the Hill. In 1960, the Washington Street Schul was destroyed by fire and the congregation moved into temporary quarters. This happened just as planned urban development was about to clear the lower Hill. In 1964, the two congregations merged forming Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob. A new building was built on Colwell Street and was dedicated in 1965. Built into the new building was the ark that had been saved from the fire that destroyed the old building. Without a resident Jewish community in the vicinity, the synagogue now serves those Jews who work in downtown Pittsburgh. The BHH-BJ is the oldest existing Orthodox congregation in Pittsburgh.

Scope and Content Note:

The Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob Records are housed in 5 boxes and 73 volumes and arranged chronologically. The bulk of the collection precedes the merger and is from BHH. Those materials which are clearly from Beth Jacob are identified. However, since

no name is evident on many of the ledgers, the ledgers are arranged together. Much of the early material is in Yiddish. Many of the ledgers contain several types of information.

The collection includes a wide range of materials related to the function of the congregation. Most of the financial records are contained in the ledgers. These detail receipts and expenses, dues, seat sales, and membership dues. Of interest are membership lists, meeting minutes, and documents related to the merger of the two congregations and the building of the Colwell Street synagogue. The functioning of the congregation can be seen in the correspondence related to the hiring of cantors, correspondence with members, receipts for goods and services, and pay records for rabbis. Of note is information concerning the hiring of Rabbi A.M. Ashinsky. The cemeteries are documented with correspondence concerning plot purchase and upkeep. The building related records include architectural specifications for the building of the Colwell Synagogue, and maintenance records of the Washington Street Schul. Receipts are available for the goods and services required for the function of the congregation, including quantities of fabric for the making of shrouds. Of interest as well are the appeals for funds from Jewish organizations to which donations were made. The nature of the appeals reflects the historical context in which they were made from pre-World War I through the establishment of the state of Israel.

Provenance: These materials came in 4 accessions and were combined into one collection in October 2006.

Acc# 1993.0122	Gift of Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob Congregation
Acc# 1994.0177	Gift of Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob Congregation
Acc# 1997.0058	Gift of Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob Congregation
Acc# 1999.0007	Gift of Morris Naimark

Restrictions: None

Processor: October 2006; records arranged and inventory written by Susan M. Melnick.

Separations:

To the photographic collection: three folders of photographs arranged as MSQ# 438.

To the oversized collection: one folder of materials arranged as MSO# 438.

Container list:

	Administration		
box 1	folder 1	Beth Jacob—miscellaneous	1887-1964
		Building	
		Colwell Street	
		Architect	
	folder 2	RFP	1963
	folder 3	Specifications	1963

folder 4	Construction	1963-1967
folder 5	Landscaping	1964-1981
folder 6	Washington Street	1905-1954
folder 7	By-laws	1914
folder 8	Cantor employment	1923-1953
folder 9	Chevre Misnayoth	1928-1946
folder 10	Choir	1933-1937
folder 11	Consolidation	1964
folder 12	Events	1924, 1942, 1965
Meeting minutes including financial information		
shelf vol 1	1900-1928	
shelf vol 2	1902-1957	Beth Jacob
shelf vol 3	1912-1946	
folder 13	1925-1928	
folder 14	1946-1963	
Rabbis		
box 2 folder 1	Ashinsky	1926, 1934
	Savage	1986
folder 2	Sermons	n.d.
Seats		
folder 3	1893-1957	
shelf vol 4	no date	
shelf vol 5	1893-1916	
shelf vol 6	1912-1914 (and ledger)	
shelf vol 7	1925-1926	
shelf vol 8	1926-1927	
shelf vol 9	1926-1927	
shelf vol 10	1930-1933	
shelf vol 11	1931	
shelf vol 12	1933-1936	
shelf vol 13	1934-1937	
shelf vol 14	1938	
shelf vol 15	1942-1945	
shelf vol 16	1946-1949	
shelf vol 17	1950-1953	
shelf vol 18	1954-1956	
shelf vol 19	1958-1959	
folder 4	Service announcements	1944-1945
folder 5	Stationary	n.d.
folder 6	World War 11 materials	1942-1944
Cemetery		
Burial costs		
folder 7	1909-1927	
folder 8	1931-1945	

	folder 9	1946-1981	
	folder 10	Burial permits	1918-1985
	folder 11	Burial ritual	1932-1951
	folder 12	Maintenance	1915-1957
	folder 13	Property	1918-1990
	folder 14	Visitations	1940-1957
		Beth Jacob	
	folder 15	1936	
shelf	vol 20	1968-1975	
		Correspondence	
	folder 16	19 31-1981	
	folder 17	Between members and congregation	1903, 1928-1953
	folder 18	Kochin, Rabbi Eliyahu	1937
		Financial	
		Contributions by members to congregation	
shelf	vol 21	1890's-1900's	
box 3	folder 1	1920-1945	
shelf	vol 22	1922-1924	
shelf	vol 23	1922-1926	
shelf	vol 24	1927	
shelf	vol 25	Chevra Mishnayos	1927-1936
shelf	vol 26	1930-1951	
shelf	vol 27	1945-1956	
	folder 2	1946-1949	
	folder 3	1950-1957	
shelf	vol 28	1952-1955	
	folder 4	1963-1981	
	folder 5	Browarsky estate	1931-1958
		Contributions to other organizations	
	folder 6	1914-1939	
	folder 7	1940-1944	
box 4	folder 1	1945-1949	
	folder 2	1950-1953	
	folder 3	Correspondence	1914-1948
		Expenses	
	folder 4	1915-1929	
	folder 5	1930-1939	
	folder 6	1940-1953	
		Ledgers--Receipts and expenses	
shelf	vol 29	1903-1906	
shelf	vol 30	1906-1911	
shelf	vol 31	1911-1918	

shelf	vol 32	1914	
shelf	vol 33	1916-1921	
shelf	vol 34	1921-1928	
shelf	vol 35	1924-1942	
shelf	vol 36	1928-1930	
shelf	vol 37	1930	
shelf	vol 38	1930-1933	
shelf	vol 39	1936-1940	
shelf	vol 40	1937-1950	
shelf	vol 41	1938-1953	
shelf	vol 42	1940-1951	
shelf	vol 43	1940-1942	
shelf	vol 44	1942-1946	
shelf	vol 45	1945-1949	
shelf	vol 46	1947-1960	
shelf	vol 47	1949-1952	
shelf	vol 48	1951-1967	
shelf	vol 49	1955-1958	
shelf	vol 50	1957	
shelf	vol 51	1964-1970	
shelf	vol 52	1970-1977	
shelf	vol 53	1977-1982	
shelf	vol 54	1981-1986	
	folder 7	1987-1990	
	folder 8	Miscellaneous	1944
	folder 9	Mortgage burning	1921
	folder 10	Reports—annual	1905-1956
		Histories	
	folder 11	1880-2005	
	folder 12	Anniversaries	1973-1998
		Jewish community	
	folder 13	Soviet Jewry	1972-1980
Box 5	folder 1	Studies	1938-1939, 1950
		Membership	
shelf	vol 59	n.d.	
shelf	vol 60	1904-1913	
shelf	vol 61	membership, cemetery, seats, synagogue expenses	1904-1913
shelf	vol 62	1914-1916	
shelf	vol 63	1914-1917	
shelf	vol 64	1917-1923	
shelf	vol 65	1924-1929	
shelf	vol 66	1925-1930	
shelf	vol 67	1926-1930	

shelf	vol 68	1927	
shelf	vol 69	1928-1934	
shelf	vol 70	1935-1956	
shelf	vol 71	1937-1939	
shelf	vol 72	1956-1980	
shelf	vol 73	1958-1964	
	folder 2	Correspondence	1942-1953
		Deaths	
shelf	vol 55	1908-1924	
shelf	vol 56	1915-1951	
		Yahrzeits	
	folder 4	Yahrzeits/memorials	undated
shelf	vol 57	1880's-early 1900's	
		Yiskor	
shelf	vol 58	Yiskor payment	1913-1928
	folder 4	Yiskor service book	undated
	folder 5	Dues	1905-1966
	folder 6	Honor Roll Plaque	1945
	folder 7	Lists	c1920-1956
	folder 8	Officers	1926, 1942-1949