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Beth Sholom Synagogue: The Building of the Sarasota Jewish Community

On the 19th of July in 1928, the Sarasota Herald proudly published an article announcing the construction of a new 'church,' being built on the corner of North Washington Boulevard and Twelfth Street. This was a first for the reason, attested by the misnomer, as this building would become the Beth Sholom Jewish Community Centre and Synagogue, the first of its kind in the region. While the history of Jews in the Manasota area at that time only spanned back fifteen years, the synagogue signified the first Jewish space in Sarasota, attracting families from as far as Palmetto and Arcadia. While the founders may not have foreseen this when they held their first service in the new building on Rosh Hashanah in 1928, today Sarasota and Manatee counties host thirteen synagogues of varying movements, with the area as a whole supporting thriving and vibrant Jewish life, coming in many forms and aimed at multiple levels. But the Jewish culture one would find on the Florida Southwest coastline would be vastly different if not for the formative years of communal establishment, if not for the efforts of the first members of the area's first congregation, if not for Temple Beth Sholom.

This paper examines the beginning of the Sarasota Jewish community, using the first synagogue building as the lens of observation, in hopes that it can clarify the image of early Jewish life in Sarasota and expand the scope of contemporary Sarasota Jewry. The physical grounds of this synagogue functioned as the first Jewish landscape in the region, and by positioning the core of this analysis within the building itself, more light can be shed on the operational and functioning aspects of Jewish life itself; to use Ingold's terminology, it seeks to use the *landscape* to expound on the possibilities of the *task-scape*. The task-scape is the activities one performs within the context of a landscape, the efforts and labours put into it which define the purpose of the place and enables

socialisation of people via shared activities. Synagogues are Jewish spaces, and Jewish spaces are understood as “spatial environments in which Jewish things happen, where Jewish things are performed, and which in turn are shaped and defined by those Jewish activities” (Weissbach 9); to rephrase it using Ingold, the synagogue is a Jewish space because the task-space is characterised by Jewish socialisation. Socialisation predisposes the community to adopting certain traits or directing development in another direction. By examining some of the exact decisions consciously made within the task-scape of Beth Sholom, this paper outlines how the landscape of the synagogue (both as a physical structure and an organisational one) manifested these Jewish activities and briefly go over the lasting impact had on the contemporary community.

The Formation of Beth Sholom

The first acknowledge Jewish resident of Sarasota—Phillip Levy—moved to the region in 1913, only fifteen years prior to the foundation of the synagogue building. Most other founding members



moved to the Sarasota area during the mid-1920s, drawn in by the real estate boom and the warmer climate, earning livings as merchants and shop-owners. 1925 marked the first official Jewish social organisation, the Jewish Community Centre of Sarasota, originally consisting of only twenty individuals. Their first meeting at the Woman’s Club on Palm Avenue (now the main building of Florida Studio Theatre) attracted enough attention that plans for Yom Kippur service ensued, holding the service in 1926 on the second floor of the old Tyler building, located on Third Street. The locale could not be secured for Erev Shabbat services on Friday evenings, although the High School on Main Street gave space for the informal services. High Holy Day services for the following year of 1927 occurred in the Women’s Club, with *yahrzeit* minyans held on occasion in the back rooms of

Jewish-run stores. By this point, with regular attendance of services and a clearly active community, the creation of a synagogue became more and more attractive and necessary.

The fundraising process was heavily aided by willing donation of Sarasota community members, both Jewish and Gentile. In terms of allocating specific funds, card parties, selling bricks, and bonds in denominations of one to five hundred dollars were brainstormed. The largest singular fiscal contribution came from John Ringling, and building materials were donated by various builders. The land itself—the city lot—was donated by the city, after being foreclosed on and deemed virtually worthless. To the community, however, it was a priceless opportunity, and the land would operate as a place of Jewish congregation and worship until the 1970s.

Jewish Life in Beth Sholom

The services during the synagogue's beginnings were conducted by laypeople, most of whom had a large hand in forming the congregation. The closest rabbi was in Tampa—Rabbi Zielonka—and would be called seldom. Prior to World War II, the synagogue was only open for Friday evening services, otherwise remaining closed. During the war, it fell out of frequent use, with more service attention focused on the nearby airfield, converted into an Army base. The Jewish Welfare Board sent a student rabbi to balance service life with religious service, largely benefiting the local Jews in the interim. By 1946, the synagogue had been more or less closed, prompting upset from newer community members who wanted to at least keep the appearance of services going, for the sake of public view. The renewal of activity within the walls enabled the establishment of a Hebrew School in 1948, along with Bar Mitzvah tutoring. The admission of Rabbi Pizer Jacobs that same year, the temple's first permanent rabbi, cemented the educational curriculum. After Rabbi Jacobs' departure, classes were taught by two congregants. As the area within the city grew more congested, the first part of the synagogue to move to Beth Sholom's current location was the educational facility, built in 1958. The need for decent classrooms to support Jewish education took precedence over moving the sanctuary, which would not begin until 1972 and only in 1974.

The congregation, for most of its time at the Washington premises, remained unaffiliated. The latest boom of the 1950s coupled with the permanence of rabbinical staff led to an array of different viewpoints of how the synagogue ought to be run, as new families of various backgrounds entered the scene. People were given the liberty to worship in their own way, allowed to wear a kippah or tallit at their own discretion; this relaxed policy led to quick turn over for rabbis, six in around a decade. The synagogue was only open for Friday evening services, with the slow starts to Saturday morning services. Anecdotes of particularly Orthodox congregants venturing to the grounds for daily prayer—with cases of stalled success—implied hesitation of the majority of moving too far in the traditional direction. Such uncertainty can be seen in the changes in prayer books; initially, the Silverman books were utilised after being purchased with the help of the Jewish Welfare Board, but during the tenure of Rabbi Joseph Asher, with a strong Reform background, the synagogue started using the Union prayer book. Following Asher's departure—driven by the issue of official affiliation—the Birnbaum Siddur prayer book came into use, not for its Orthodox affiliation, but its judged advantages in translation.

The question of affiliation came to a head in 1954, when Rabbi Asher brought it to a vote. The years of lax policy made possible by the community's diversity had to be solved, especially since the Sisterhood affiliated with the Reform movement. The exceedingly narrow vote ultimately dictated the desire to remain unaffiliated, displaying the majority's uncertainty about the decision. Rabbi Asher resigned, with a few Reform-minded families following, and the group would form Temple Emanu-El in 1956. No longer was Beth Sholom the only congregation in the area, and the community finally grew to a point of needing more than a single place of Jewish worship. Although families wavered back and forth between the Emanu-El and Beth Sholom during the period of uncertainty—in what people wanted from a synagogue and what people running the synagogue wanted to offer—Beth Sholom began distinguishing its own new character during the term of Rabbi Shoter, partially because his term oversaw the recover from the synagogue hiring a fraudulent rabbi (dubbed “Yaker the Faker”). The question of official affiliation remained in the air until September of

1960, when Beth Sholom positioned itself within the Conservative movement by allying with the United Synagogue. To date, it is the only congregation in Sarasota relating to the Conservative movement.

The Building and the Space

The building went through a few architects, with the main names being W G Donald, who was initially sought after due to previous work in the area with constructing churches, and Clare Hosmer, the final architect. The synagogue comprised one building, with an additional one for education purposes. Both were made mostly from stone, with the exemption of the wooden frame

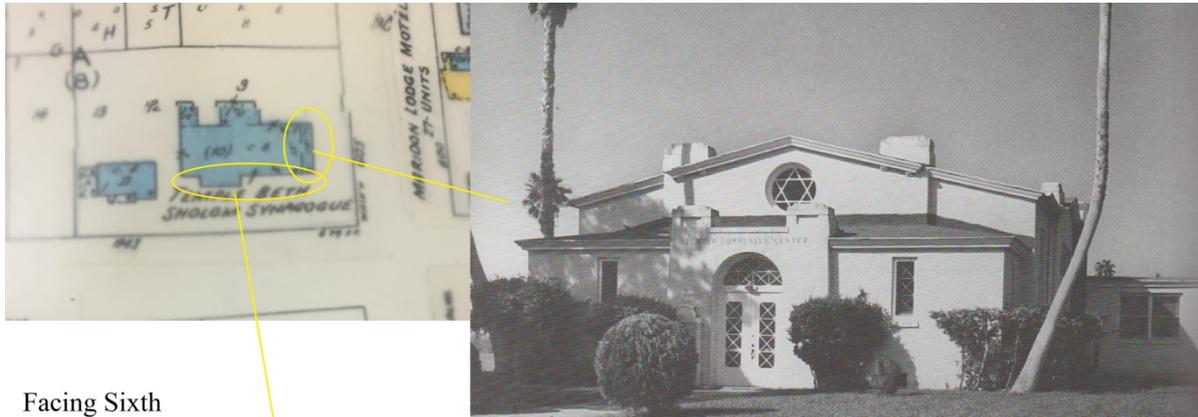


at the entrance to the education building. By the 1954, following the synagogue's renovations, the material of the frame changes to unmarked, and another extension is noted on the Sanborn Insurance Map. The synagogue would have been

within walking distance of the historic neighbourhood Gillespie Park, located in the northerly area of Sarasota Overtown to better reach its congregants, most of whom lived in that surrounding area. The aerial attached is from 1948, flight 1D over the Sarasota County area, with the approximate overhead of the synagogue and its surrounding intersection pointed out along with other marked Sarasota landmarks that existed around the time and can ease in identification.

The synagogue property sat on the Northwest corner of the Washington and Sixth intersection. The primary facade of the synagogue building faced Washington Boulevard, giving it its address of 771 N Washington, with a side entrance visible and overt from the edifice facing Sixth Street. Due to flooding issues, the side entrance eventually became more primarily used, with the

main entrance cemented to prevent the floors from flooding during immense rainfall. Renovations to the building occurred in 1953, with evidence of it showing up on the 1954 Sanborn Insurance Map, updated from the 1929 version. The synagogue's details—including its full, proper name—were updated in the 1954 version (accurate until 1963), correlating well with the recent renovations.



Facing Sixth



Facing Washington

Temple Beth Sholom, 1954
771 N Washington Boulevard

Renovations in completed in 1953 “tripled the seating capacity, provided ample classroom space, doubled the kitchen space, increased the pulpit area, and included a modern heating system and the structures for eventual air conditioning,” along with increasing storage and utilising indirect lighting sources (Konovitch 31). The renovations reflected the rising membership of Beth Sholom and general increase of Jewish presence in the Sarasota area.

Only five years later, though, a committee purchased the grounds on Tuttle and Bahia Vista, with plans to construct a new synagogue. The main catalyst for the move to the seven and a half acre site—where the synagogue presently stands and operates today—was the expansion of Highway 301, or Washington Boulevard. The real estate boom of the 1950s meant increased traffic

in Sarasota, necessitating more adequate infrastructure and roads; widening and busying Washington Boulevard would eliminate opportunities for parking when space in the synagogue lot was already inadequate for all its congregants. While the location in the northern part of Sarasota was ideal at the time of its construction, with many Jews living in the Main Street and Overtown area, an increasing number of congregants started to branch out to other parts of Sarasota, buying available properties in lands undeveloped decades prior. The transition made more sense, even though the destination seemed far to congregants still situated northern Sarasota. By 1970, when the construction of a new sanctuary became more pressing, Beth Sholom supported around 300 families; High Holy Day services resulted in an overflow of people who outgrew the tripled capacity the synagogue boasted about years prior.

Records regarding the fate of the synagogue building following the move's completion are unclear, mostly due to lack of obtaining the concrete documentation at this present time. The main inference one can make just by going to the address is simple: it no longer exists. The building no longer functioned as a Jewish space, and had to be repurposed for other human activity. The resulting decision demolished the building, and in its place presently stands the Sixth Street Plaza.

There is no indication or marker that clues the wandering tourist or even youthful Sarasota local in on the site's history

as a place of religious significance and

communal

congregation. Instead,

one is more prone to

notice the sign for

Gillespie Park,

established in 1925



and viewed as a historic part of Sarasota, or the Speedway across the street in the case that one's car needs more gasoline to venture to more exciting Sarasota locales. The history of the site's usage is unapparent and not noted.

The site today is not a Jewish space; it ceased to be a Jewish space as soon as the congregation finalised its move. The site virtually became insignificant, as it held no purpose in the context of a Jewish task-scape any longer, and would be of better use to land developers who could reshape the land just as the founding Beth Sholom members did when they were first gifted the property. So why is this space still relevant? In what setting does it hold any bit of meaning?

Presently, it holds none. It was the site of a synagogue. It no longer is. But it is the choice of the local community—the present Jews of Sarasota, the Historical Societies of Sarasota, and so on—to judge whether it can have meaning. Nothing inherently has meaning; meaning must be assigned. For years, this space had meaning as a synagogue and was assigned that by the Jewish community living in the region. It can regain meaning as a milestone of local Jewish history, honoured through a placard or other form of informational signage. Or, the space can be left as is, with the attention turned to the present Beth Sholom community on Tuttle and Bahia Vista. Rather than honouring only the achievements of those no longer present, the community can continue recognising the oldest Jewish congregation in the Greater Sarasota. There is one main problem with both of these posed methods of commemoration: who is being commemorated?

Yes, it appears clear in both scenarios, but in actuality is it the institution or the people? Is it the Jews who established the community in Manasota or the Jews who uphold it today? Is it synagogue's past or its present? Is it the building or the building of? And why does it mean anything?

Who is Beth Sholom?

Since the 1970s, Sarasota's population distribution has been notably different from most other areas in the country. Rather than an even dispersal of all age groups, there is a polarisation

caused by the families living in Sarasota from beginning and the elderly dwelling in Sarasota until their ends. There is a lack of people in-between, a hole. Along with this hole is a sense of newness; many of the older crowd will come to Sarasota for the purpose of visitation, while others here yearlong know little of the area beyond the first few years prior to their settlement. Although all elements of history are prone to fall through the cracks, the unique makeup of Sarasota hastens this process, and even those who remember do not necessarily disclose their information, because they are not inclined to. This is further complicated in operational aspects, as the lack of a coherent lineage severs the connections between institutional past and present, jumbling things together into a clutter of fragments. It creates the same lack of cohesion exhibited during the 1940s and 1950s, with people wavering back and forth between threads of the past.

Beth Sholom, in its age, develops these breaks in memory. Congregants grow old and pass on, new members enter the scene and contribute, staff is fired and rehired. But the reason why the past of this place matters is because without it, there would not be the same thirteen synagogues standing today throughout the counties, would not be Jewish organisations in the same capacity they function today, would not be the same idea of the Sarasota Jew in existence now. One can ask: what is the Sarasota Jew? Outside of a Jew living in Sarasota, the answer is up for interpretation; how it is interpreted now is because of the contributions made by Beth Sholom.

The formative years of Beth Sholom illustrate the maturation of the community here. Once, it spread thinly, stretching across two counties, but now holds its roots throughout. Such roots could never be planted without the synagogue, the seed that grew into a shelter for the Jewish community. Other faith establishments existed in the region for centuries, with a place of worship an element in legitimising the faith to the community. Possessing physicality—a material sense—gave the community a sense of place and a sense of self. Most of Jewish history as a whole centres on a sense of self, arguably because of a lack of that sense of place; personally, this notion does not have complete credence. While the Diasporic nature of Jewish life shaped its progression time and time



again—and continues to impact it today—the synagogue is a clear marker of a sense of place. Within a local community, the synagogue is the symbol of Jewish existence in that society, whether sprawled across two counties or centred in a few close-knit neighbourhoods.

Beth Sholom is a synagogue, a *beit kneset*, a house of assembly. Jews from the surrounding areas all came together in the walls of Beth Sholom to socialise together under a commonality: their Jewishness. They got

together and defined how they would express that part of their identity. No, it was not a wholly collective endeavour, but the precise details of their expressions did not change the overall fact that they were expressing the same shared identity, that they were a part of sharing that and showing that to others. As Beth Sholom grew, it enveloped other aspects of the synagogue, functioning as a *beit tefilah*—a house of prayer—by hosting actual services for Shabbat, High Holy Days, along with other holidays and observances; and it acted as a *beit midrash*—a house of study—by offering schooling to local children and strengthening its focus on youth education. Beth Sholom was the first of its kind in this part of Florida, both in being a building *called* a synagogue and *being* a synagogue.

When Beth Sholom should be honoured, it should be for its role in the creation of a community as well as its role in maintaining its upkeep. It should be for the people who began the institution because of their want to congregate and the people who go now because of their continued desire and enjoyment in getting together. It should be for the people who were, are, and will be Beth Sholom. It is not simply the landscape that is being commemorated, but the task-scape, the one that every present member of the Sarasota Jewish community has inherited to some degree,

and continues to uphold. It is a shared past that the Sarasota Jewish community possesses, and because of its fragility—existing in the forms of mostly memory, some written accounts, personal photographs, and other scant materials—it should be protected. It is a part of the formation of a whole facet of Sarasota life, and that should never be forgotten or ignored, especially not after just over one hundred years.

Conclusion

The ark was installed in the new Beth Sholom building during the spring of 1974, with a minyan gathering for the first prayers shortly after. Dedication occurred in early November that same year, with much fanfare and jubilee. By the completion of location shifts, Beth Sholom witnessed Sarasota turn from a small fishing village to a moderate tourist hub, going from supporting tens of families to hundreds. It channelled its energies from the broad sweeping entirety of the area community to a more centralised group with specific needs and desires. Whenever a new need or desire arose, Beth Sholom acted in accordance, whether it was an organisational alteration or a spatial one. The story of Beth Sholom is far from over, not simply because the congregation itself exists in Sarasota today, but because Jews exist in Sarasota today.

Beth Sholom was the epicentre of a change in the whole of Sarasota, the birthplace of a new community that would impact all of Sarasota, with Jewish residents making indispensable contributions both to the Sarasota skyline and to the cultural centres alike. Just the want to find others, others who share something, have a common identity, led to the development of a verdant and flourishing culture, one that Sarasota would truly be lost without. Beth Sholom



provided the grounds to direct and act out the trends and changes in Sarasota Jewish life, and it is for this reason it holds premier importance. Beth Sholom is the building and the building of a culture.

Future Plans

In terms of full research goals, this paper only covers a shallow overview of the synagogue. For sake of brevity, only the scope of the original building on Washington and Sixth was covered, with post-1970s

developments untouched. The only other congregation mentioned in any capacity was Temple Emanu-El, due to the direct relationship between the two congregations, but still others could have been included. They were omitted out of fear of taking too much focus off of Beth Sholom, which was the paper's clear star.

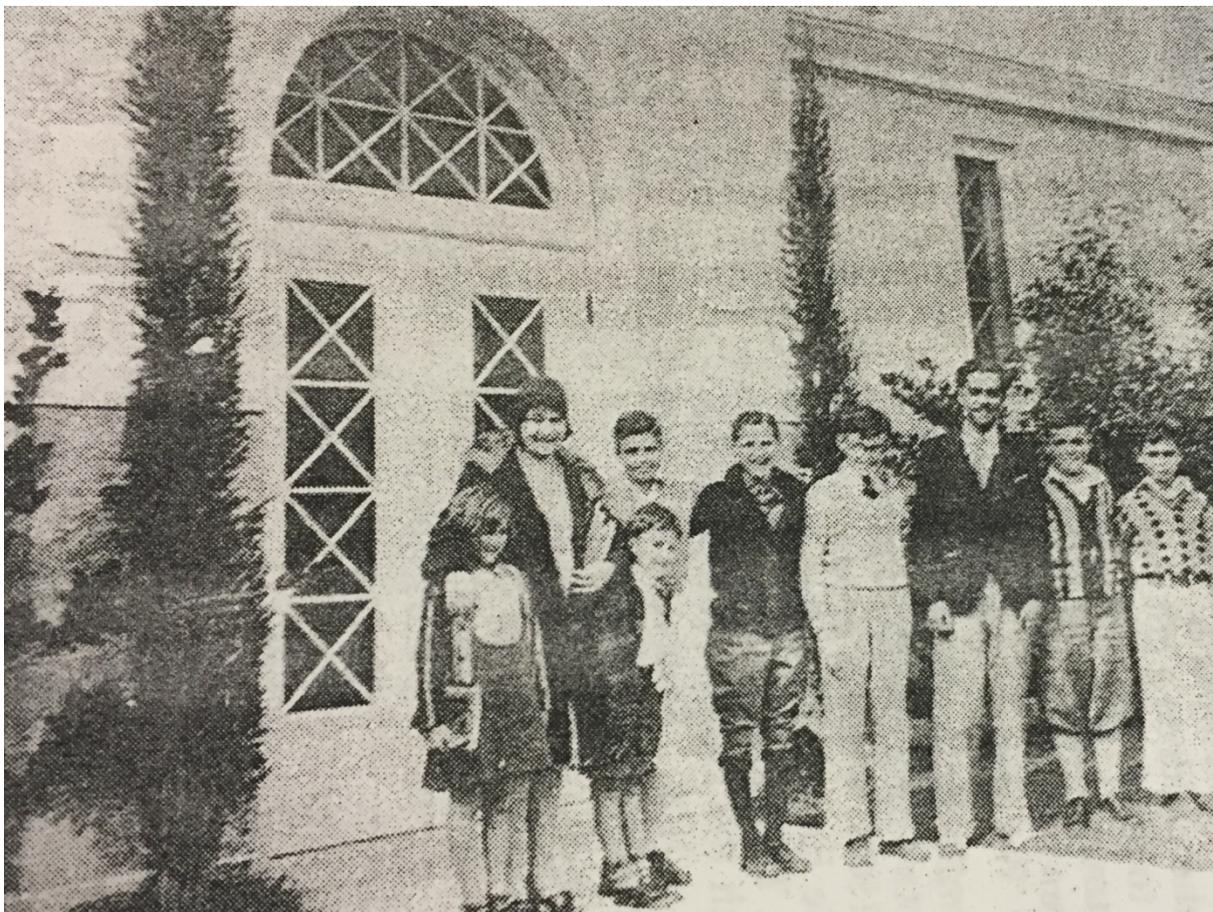
The project will hopefully be expanded over the course of the next few months, as the information learned is integral to the community's lineage and heritage. By first looking at Beth Sholom, the oldest congregation, there can later be a timeline tracking the development of each congregation in the area, connecting and relating them to one another. Along with that, a website could be set up that showcases floorplans of each building, with the option to upload photographs or stories. Uploads would need to be labelled with a year, then identified with a location inside the building, and with the use of a filter system one can travel through time and watch the changes of the interiors and exteriors of the buildings themselves, along with the completion of other additions to the complexes. Although the focus at the moment is synagogues, the project can later be expanded to all local houses of worship in Sarasota to create a thorough picture of the growth of religious life in the area from initial settlement to present occupation. It can also serve as a digital record of those involved in each organisation, and connect with related organisations and charities



to create a web of intersections in community service and religious life. Additionally, I did not cover the cemetery in this paper, which is an important aspect of the community to consider as well.

Exploring the cemetery can be a related project to this or another one entirely.

The direction of the project is somewhat up in the air, with uncertainty about how to go about these plans precisely. The next step would be connecting with more local community members and compiling oral histories, in hopes of filling out the picture and creating a more personal feel to the project as a whole. Above all this is a project about people and their contributions, so any form of input or additions would be greatly valued.



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