

Jewish congregation celebrates 100 years

SUBJECT FILE

Congregation Shearith Israel, the first Jewish synagogue in DeKalb County, will begin a yearlong celebration of its founding beginning this fall. Eastern European immigrants started the group in 1904.

For the first two years, services were held in the homes of congregants, and later in a church on Hunter Street. An early rabbi of the synagogue, Tobias Geffen, served the then orthodox congregation for 60 years. Rabbi Geffen also led the move to the Morningside site of Shearith Israel.

The synagogue purchased land on University Drive and used a building that

had once belonged to Lanier College and served as a home for the Ku Klux Klan. The congregation grew with the neighborhood and broke ground for a new building in 1956 to accommodate a growing congregation. Membership rolls are increasing today with young professional families under the leadership of Conservative Rabbi Hillel Norry, who assumed the pulpit in 2002.

To celebrate its dynamic first century, Shearith Israel is launching a series of programs and exhibits throughout 2004 that capture the growth of a synagogue, neighborhood and city. For more information call the synagogue, except on Saturdays, at 404-873-1743.

Dekalb's Oldest Synagogue Celebrates Centennial

by Annabelle Robertson

Congregation Shearith Israel, the first Jewish synagogue to put down roots in Dekalb County, is gearing up for a year-long celebration of its 100-year history.

"There are plans for events, celebrations, partying, reunions and recognitions," said Annette Z. Easton, chair of the Centennial Committee. "My personal goal is to celebrate the 100 years of existence with as many Shearith Israelites as possible, from both near and afar. The opportunity is now for all to participate in the accomplishment of existing in a free country of religious freedom for 100 years."

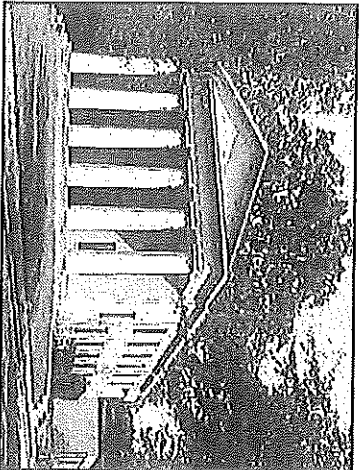
The synagogue was founded in 1904 by a group of Eastern European immigrants under the leadership of Rabbi Tobias & Hene Gelfen. They named

their new community Shearith Israel, or "remnant of Israel," as a nod to their pioneer status in the American South, and to the tradition from which they had come.

Their first meeting place was in an antebellum Methodist Church on Hunter Street, located at the heart of Atlanta's Jewish community. The congregation moved into its first synagogue building in 1929, near the present-day Turner Field.

After World War II, under the leadership of Rabbi Tobias Gelfen, who served the congregation for 60 years, the congregation followed the shift in Jewish population to the Emory/Morningside/Virginia-Highland area and settled on residential University Drive. They pur-

chased a building that had once belonged to Lanier College and which had even served as a home to the Ku Klux Klan. They



Dekalb's Oldest Synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel.

later added another building to the site to accommodate their burgeoning membership.

With the move to University Drive, Congregation Shearith Israel became the first syna-

gogue in Dekalb County.

The 1960s brought an increased connection to the Conservative movement for the synagogue, while also drawing from Orthodox tradition. For example, leaders opted to remove the "mehitza" (the barrier between the men's and women's sections) and increased the participation of women in services. Then, in 2002, the Synagogue became officially affiliated with the Conservative movement (although separate seating remains available at the front of the sanctuary for members who prefer.)

Some 600 families now worship at Shearith Israel, participating in a wide variety of activities that include shabbat services, holiday celebrations, shul and religious school (including consecration classes). And, with

the centennial on the horizon, dozens of activities are planned that include musical programs, theatrical productions, exhibits and, of course, special meals.

"Sharing our food together is the earliest and most fundamental kind of communal activity," said Rabbi Hillel Nory, who has been leading the congregation since 2002. "Perhaps community, often hard to define, could best be described as the people we eat with. For the Jewish community this is a basic. Food is a part of everything. All our celebrations include a healthy measure of treats."

The Centennial kick-off event will be a celebratory luncheon on Sunday, Oct. 12. For more information call the synagogue (except Saturdays) at 404-873-1743.