

Beth Israel's centennial book offers much history of Bangor

By Roxanne Moore Saucier
NEWS Religion Writer

In 1888, there was no rabbi in Bangor, and certainly no synagogue, but Jews gathered for Rosh Hashanah — the Jewish New Year — anyway. Little did they know that in 1988, Jews in Bangor would celebrate a century of tradition and worship for Congregation Beth Israel.

And part of that celebration is a handsome hardbound volume, "Congregation Beth Israel 1888-1988."

The 169 6½-by-11-inch pages of text are full of history — names, events, forces which influenced the congregation's history. Editor James Emple wrote: "This book is a testament to all the men and women who have made this synagogue what it is today. Without the vision of a group of young men 100 years ago, we might not be celebrating this milestone. It is important that we carry on their vision and provide future generations with a bright tomorrow."

Emple began with the 75th anniversary publication, done by Henry H. Segal, and added much to that. The book also is full of pictures, beginning as far back as congregation founders Lemke Allen and Joseph Bernstein, through present-day members and events.

In addition to the text are several pages of sponsor ads, of interest in themselves. Some contain pictures, and many contain memorial lists of family names that amount to genealogy, and actually add to the history and origins in the previous text.

It is interesting to find that the first building of Beth Israel, constructed on Center Street in 1897, was also the first synagogue building in the state. Support for the small edifice came from beyond the Jewish community — even the local Catholic priest contributed to the effort, canvassing Catholic businesses on Exchange Street.

The book includes articles from the Bangor Daily Commercial and the Bangor Daily News, showing how the newspapers reported the addition to Bangor's faith community.

The synagogue was one of many buildings — including several houses of worship — lost in the Great Bangor Fire of 1911. The First Church of Christ, Scientist, contributed a small amount to the reconstruction of Beth Israel, as it did to the affected churches.

Beth Israel's new synagogue, done in Byzantine-Romanesque style, was dedicated in March 1913, at a new location on York Street, and the mortgage was paid off in late 1923. A wonderful old picture shows the 17 men who were directors of the con-



gregation at the time.

Among the many other interesting pictures are the boys' choir of 1930, Rabbi and Mrs. Avraim Freedman being honored before they left for Israel in 1960, Sy Chamoff and Rabbi Irving Margolis holding Toldoth Yitzhak Torahs to be sent to Israel, a children's workshop for the High Holy Days, author Rabbi Harold Kushner speaking at the synagogue's rededication in 1968, and the congregation's rabbis, officers and Beth Israel Sisterhood.

Readers with a long memory may remember that world-famous violinist David Rubinoff was married at Beth Israel in 1942. More recently, in 1987, an interfaith Thanksgiving service found people of all religious denominations joining members of Beth Israel in giving thanks to God. These and many other items reflect the history not just of one congregation, but of the Bangor area, as well.

Copies of the centennial volume are still available at a cost of \$72. For information, call Paula Adelman at 842-2775 or 667-4246, or Norman Minaky at 945-5137.

Beth Israel's present spiritual leader, Rabbi Joseph P. Schenberger, wrote in the book, "It is only when we step into the sanctuary at Beth Israel that we realize the great debt we owe and the depth of connection we have to our forebears. No other place captures the spirituality of this particular synthesis of human personalities, striving to grow as Americans and as Jews. In the sanctuary we find the blessings of a Jewish center of holiness that has withstood the test of the 19th and 20th centuries, the onslaught of Jewish indifference and division. Now, our responsibility to parents, ancestors, God and ourselves is to ensure that Beth Israel remains a clear, inspiring and empowering Jewish medium for the next century. ... May we continue to be guided by God and His commandments throughout our second century."