

בית אל

Celebrating Our 25th Year



Congregation
Beth El



Twenty-five Years and Counting

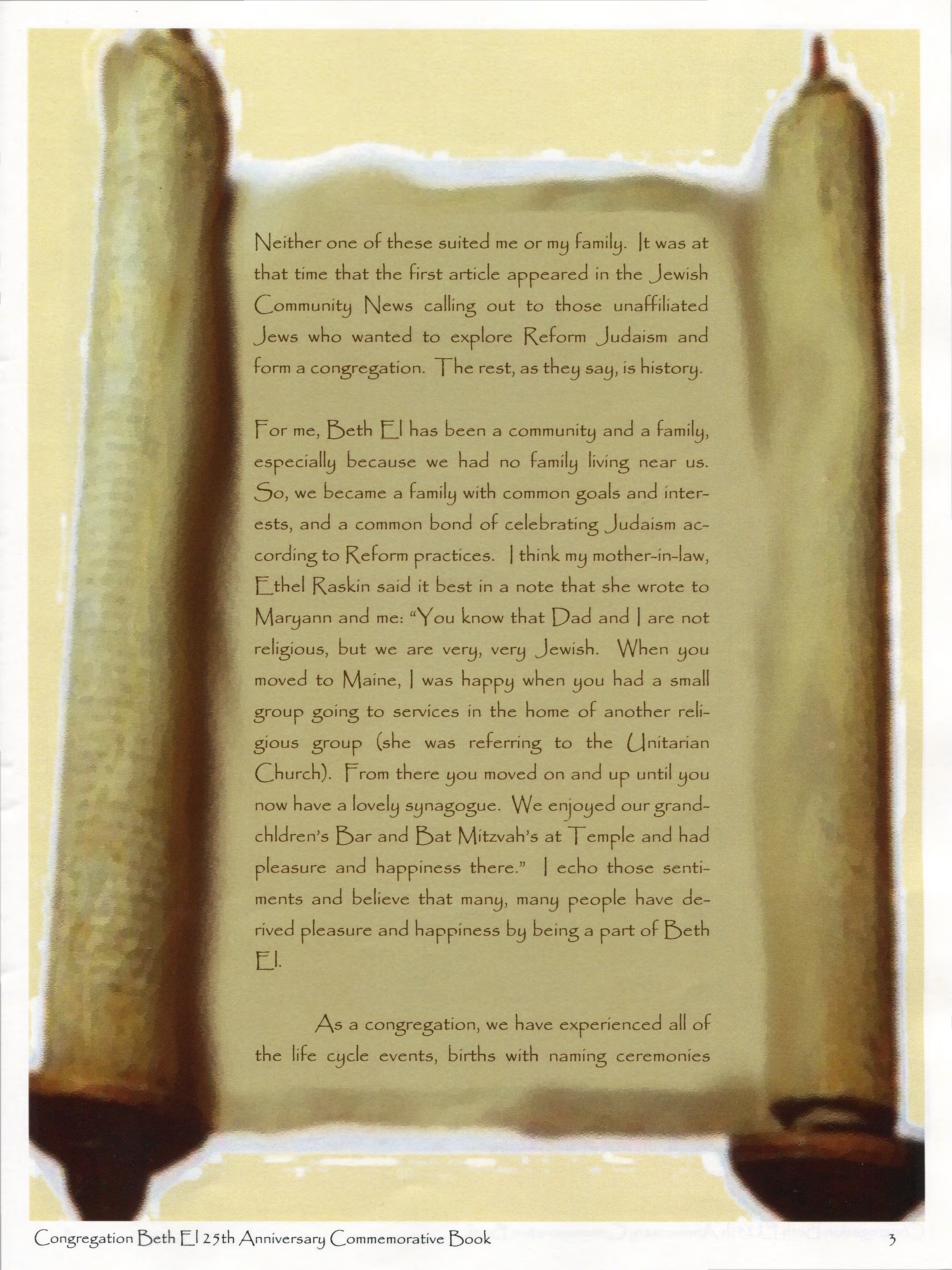
Mark D. Roth, Chair

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Celebration Committee

It has been my very great pleasure and honor to have chaired the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Celebration Committee commemorating twenty-five years since the formation of Congregation Beth El. For me, being a part of Beth El since the very beginning, I can look back and see the enormous growth that has occurred and the profound impact that Beth El has had on the greater Bangor community.

Though I come from a Conservative tradition, having been a Bar Mitzvah in a Conservative synagogue, I didn't have a great attachment to Conservatism and didn't continue to attend synagogue after my Bar Mitzvah. Once I married and had children, there was a greater sense of urgency to return to the synagogue as my wife, Maryann and I wanted to not only raise the children with Jewish tradition, but we also wanted them to be educated in Judaism and then, ultimately celebrate their B'nai Mitzvah.

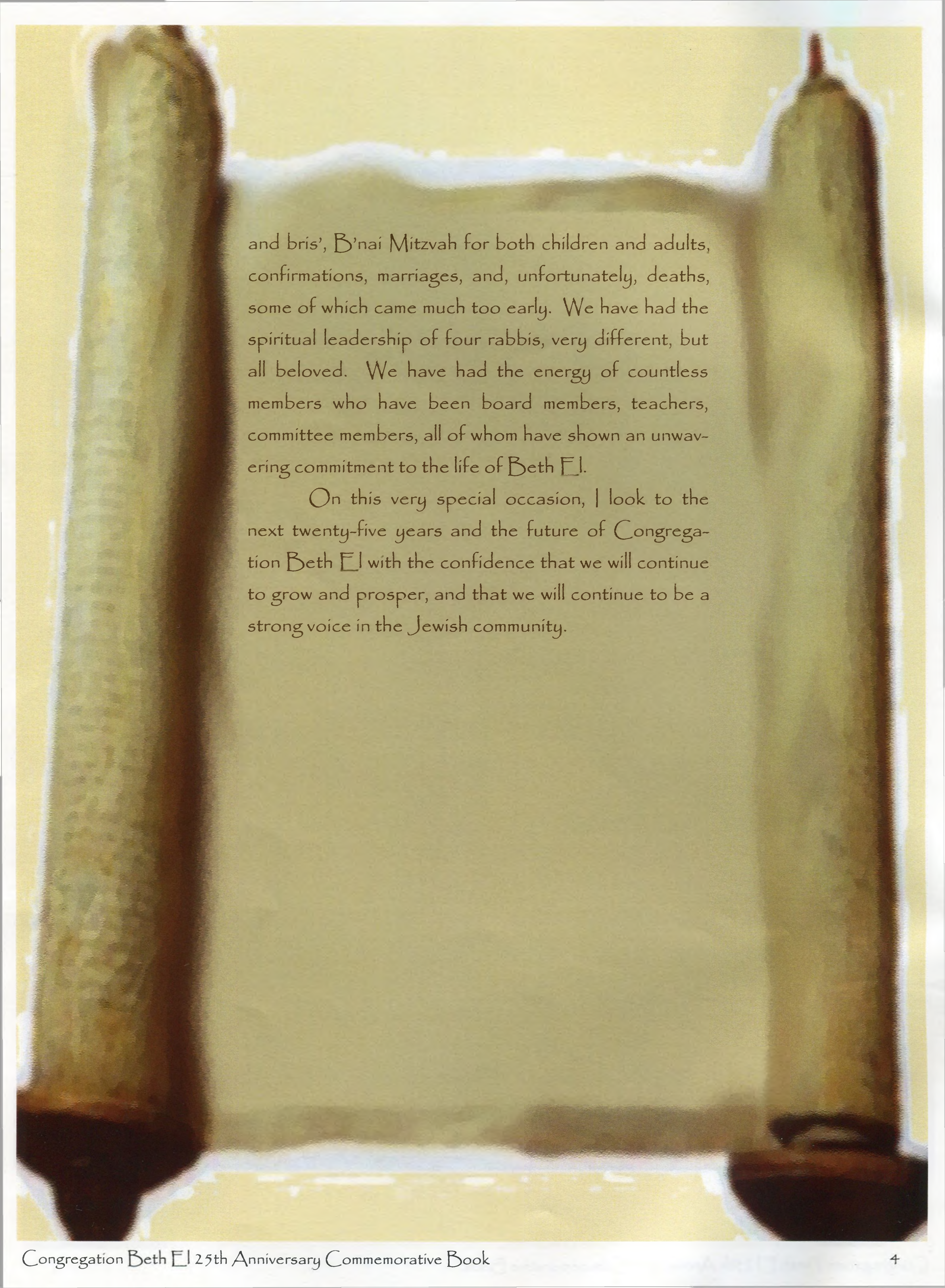
In 1981, there were only two choices in Bangor for worshipping, Orthodox and Conservative.



Neither one of these suited me or my family. It was at that time that the first article appeared in the Jewish Community News calling out to those unaffiliated Jews who wanted to explore Reform Judaism and form a congregation. The rest, as they say, is history.

For me, Beth El has been a community and a family, especially because we had no family living near us. So, we became a family with common goals and interests, and a common bond of celebrating Judaism according to Reform practices. I think my mother-in-law, Ethel Raskin said it best in a note that she wrote to Maryann and me: "You know that Dad and I are not religious, but we are very, very Jewish. When you moved to Maine, I was happy when you had a small group going to services in the home of another religious group (she was referring to the Unitarian Church). From there you moved on and up until you now have a lovely synagogue. We enjoyed our grandchildren's Bar and Bat Mitzvah's at Temple and had pleasure and happiness there." I echo those sentiments and believe that many, many people have derived pleasure and happiness by being a part of Beth El.

As a congregation, we have experienced all of the life cycle events, births with naming ceremonies



and bris', B'nai Mitzvah for both children and adults, confirmations, marriages, and, unfortunately, deaths, some of which came much too early. We have had the spiritual leadership of four rabbis, very different, but all beloved. We have had the energy of countless members who have been board members, teachers, committee members, all of whom have shown an unwavering commitment to the life of Beth El.

On this very special occasion, I look to the next twenty-five years and the future of Congregation Beth El with the confidence that we will continue to grow and prosper, and that we will continue to be a strong voice in the Jewish community.

Dear Members and Friends,

Twenty five years! Who would have dreamed back in 1981 what we would accomplish and how far we would come:

From a handful of families, to more than one hundred and fifty today.

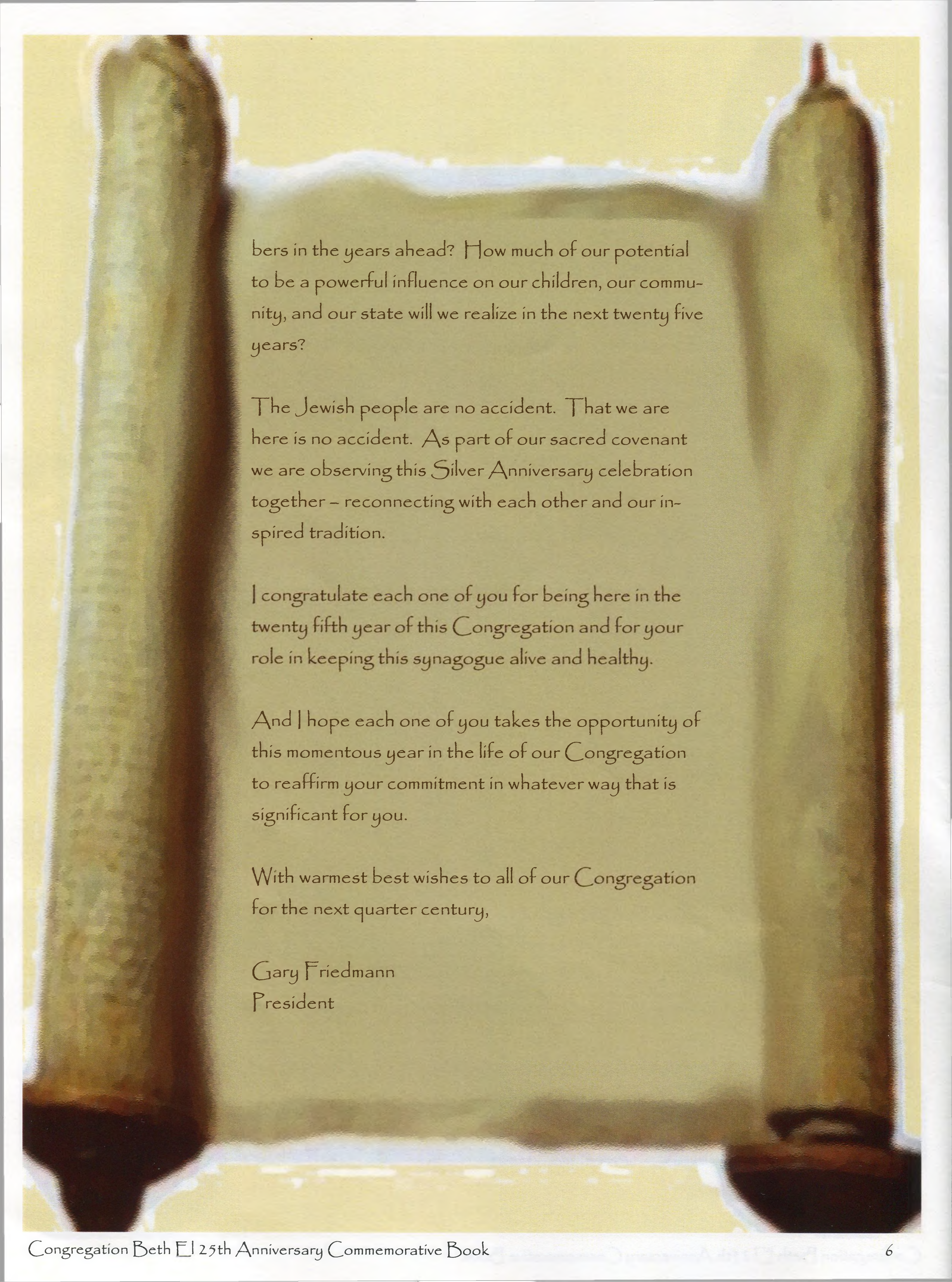
From a few B'nai Mitzvah classes to a fully-functioning religious school of grades K-12.

From a visiting rabbi on high holidays to a full-time rabbi delivering pastoral services, life-cycle ceremonies, adult education, and spiritual inspiration.

This Congregation is the intentional outgrowth of our members' yearnings and aspirations for a meaningful and relevant Jewish life in Eastern Maine. Each of us has made a conscientious decision to affirm our Jewish identity and to live consistently with the precepts of Reform Judaism.

As Reform Jews, we know that our work is here and now, not in the future, in the afterlife, nor out of reach of any one of us who strives for meaning and fulfillment.

What will we make of our collective strength and num-



bers in the years ahead? How much of our potential to be a powerful influence on our children, our community, and our state will we realize in the next twenty five years?

The Jewish people are no accident. That we are here is no accident. As part of our sacred covenant we are observing this Silver Anniversary celebration together – reconnecting with each other and our inspired tradition.

I congratulate each one of you for being here in the twenty fifth year of this Congregation and for your role in keeping this synagogue alive and healthy.

And I hope each one of you takes the opportunity of this momentous year in the life of our Congregation to reaffirm your commitment in whatever way that is significant for you.

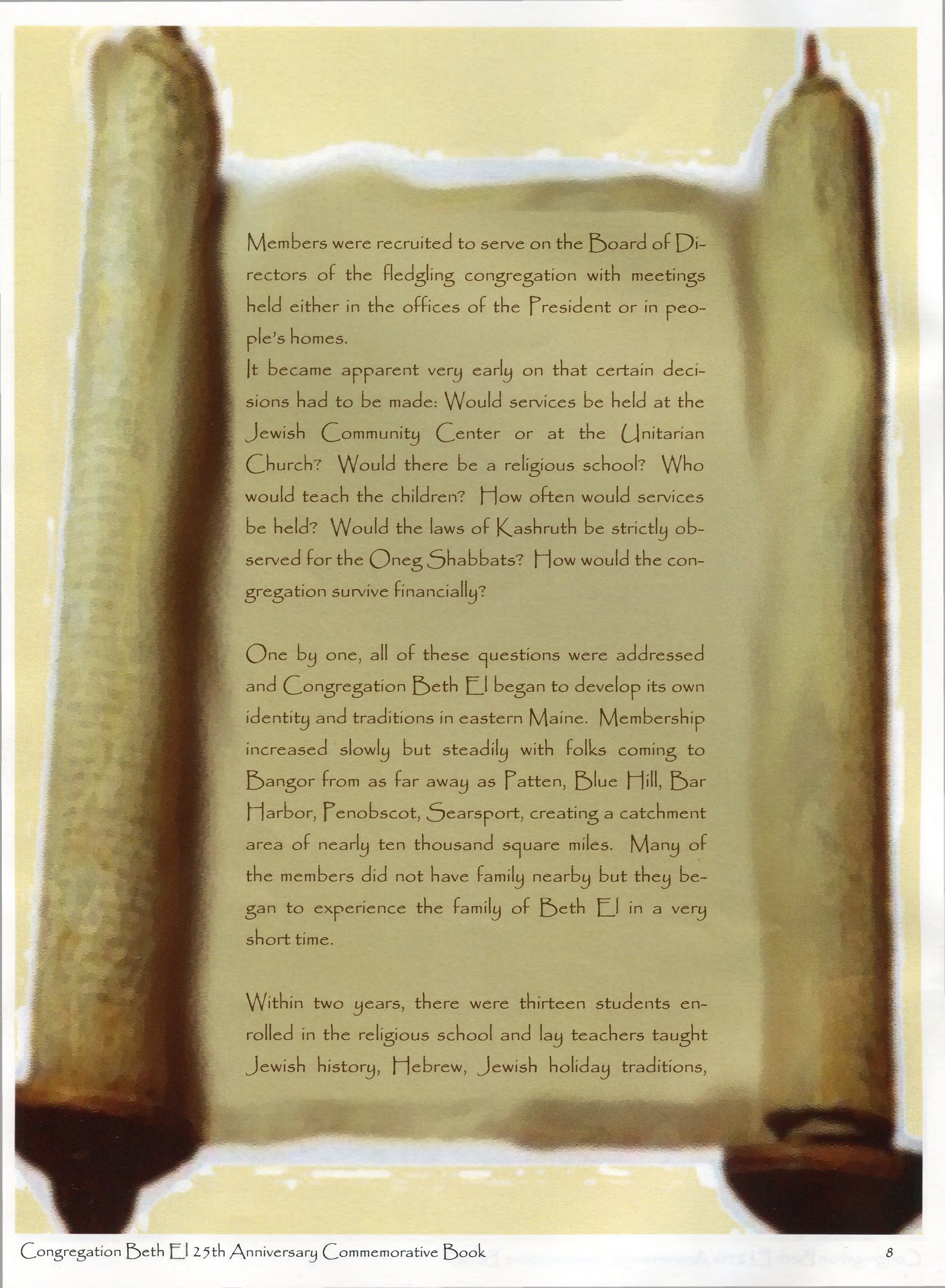
With warmest best wishes to all of our Congregation for the next quarter century,

Gary Friedmann
President

A Brief History of Congregation Beth El

Congregation Beth El was born in the Spring of 1981 from the vision of five families who believed that the time was right for a rebirth of a Reform presence in eastern Maine. An earlier Beth El had existed in Bangor forty years before, but had been subsumed under Congregation Beth Israel and lost its reform identity. The families placed a small advertisement in the Jewish Community Council Newsletter announcing an open meeting for those who were interested in sharing their thoughts about establishing a Reform congregation in the area. The response was powerful and, within a very short time, there were twenty-five families embarking on the journey of developing a reform synagogue together.

Services were scheduled one Friday a month and were led by congregation members alternately using the facilities of the Jewish Community Center and the Unitarian Church. The time-honored tradition of the Oneg Shabbat caught on very quickly and soon there were more families, many with small children, some with grown children, enjoying services, challah, wine, grape juice, and any other goodie that had been prepared by the newly established Social Committee.



Members were recruited to serve on the Board of Directors of the fledgling congregation with meetings held either in the offices of the President or in people's homes.

It became apparent very early on that certain decisions had to be made: Would services be held at the Jewish Community Center or at the Unitarian Church? Would there be a religious school? Who would teach the children? How often would services be held? Would the laws of Kashruth be strictly observed for the Oneg Shabbats? How would the congregation survive financially?

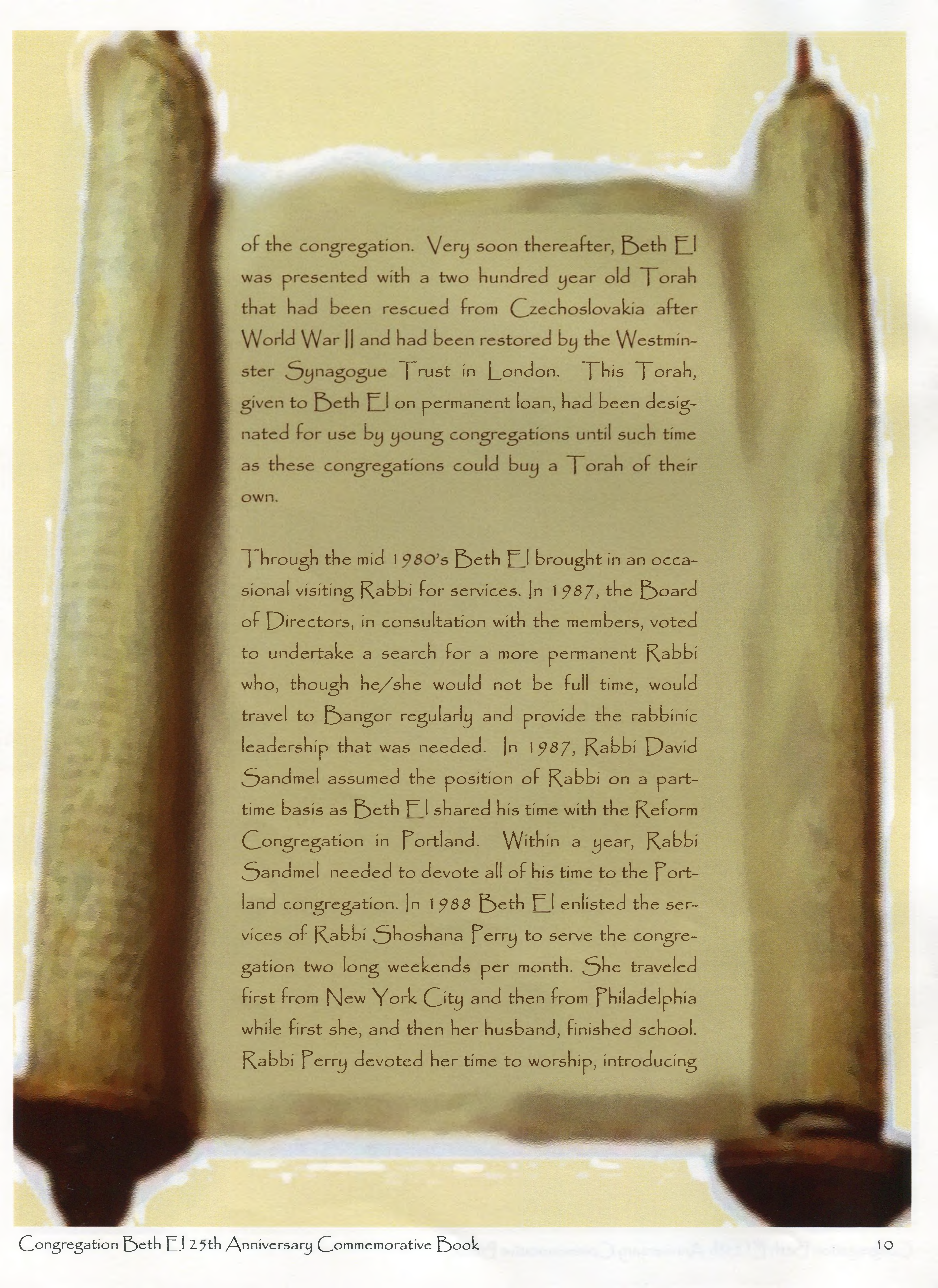
One by one, all of these questions were addressed and Congregation Beth El began to develop its own identity and traditions in eastern Maine. Membership increased slowly but steadily with folks coming to Bangor from as far away as Patten, Blue Hill, Bar Harbor, Penobscot, Searsport, creating a catchment area of nearly ten thousand square miles. Many of the members did not have family nearby but they began to experience the family of Beth El in a very short time.

Within two years, there were thirteen students enrolled in the religious school and lay teachers taught Jewish history, Hebrew, Jewish holiday traditions,

and preparation for B'nai Mitzvah, the first occurring in October, 1983 and several more following in the Spring of 1984. Beth El elected Dr. Sidney Block as its first president in 1981. He served for five years until Mark Roth was elected to a two year term, the length being designated in the newly adopted bylaws in 1986

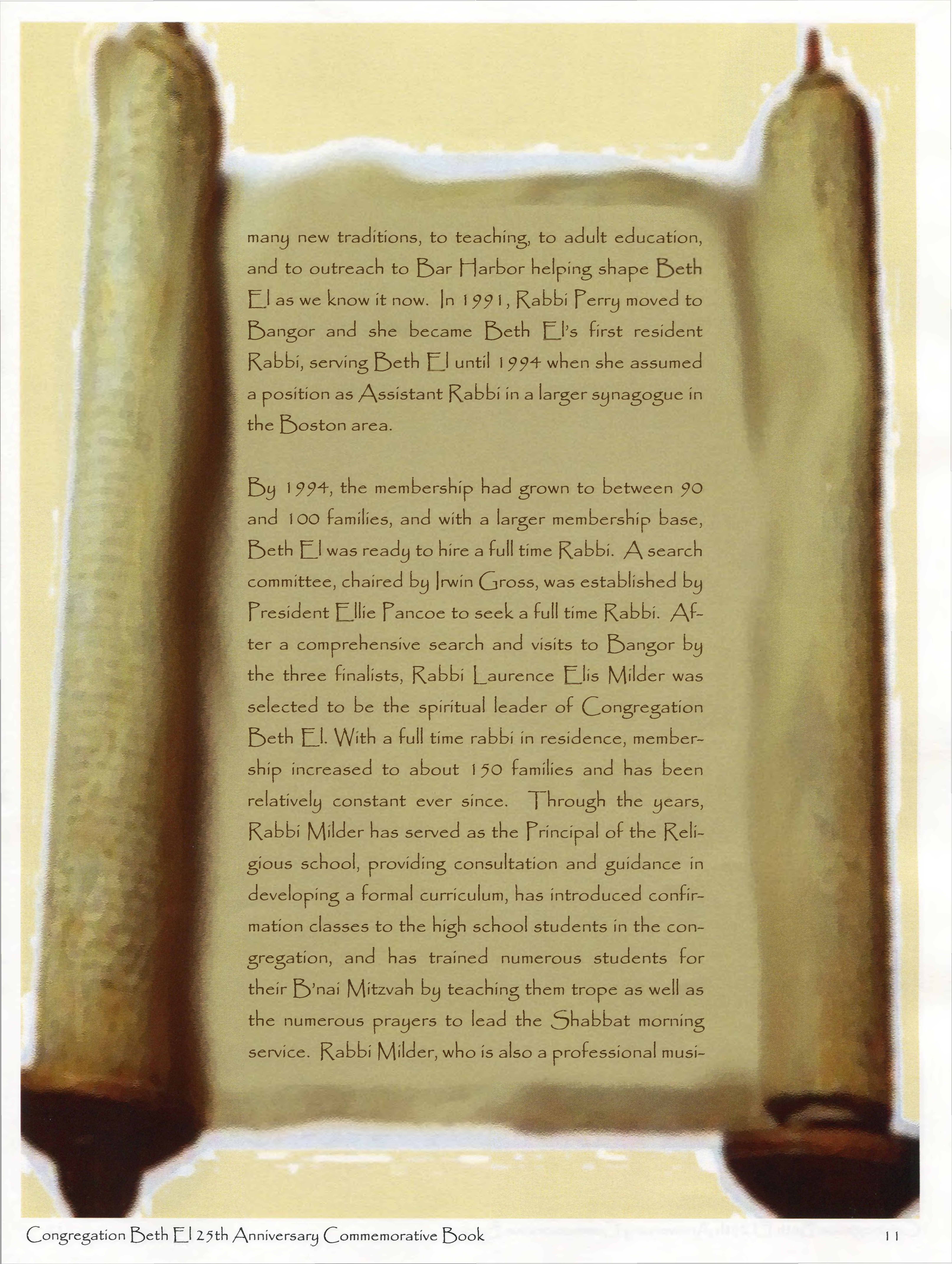
All subsequent presidential terms of office would be for two years.

Early in the life of Beth El, a strong need arose for rabbinic leadership and guidance, but the congregation was not large enough or financially able to employ a rabbi. Partly because of these circumstances, and partly because he felt a strong commitment to this small congregation in Maine, Rabbi Paul Menitoff of the (then-named) Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) began to come to Bangor with his family in 1982 to serve as Rabbi for the High Holidays. Each year that he would travel the Maine Turnpike to Bangor, Rabbi Menitoff brought a borrowed Torah to use during the services. When the holidays were over, Rabbi Menitoff and his family, and the Torah, returned to Boston. During one of the Rabbi Menitoff's visits, Beth El was presented with a plaque signifying its acceptance as a member in good standing of the UAHC, a joyous day in the life



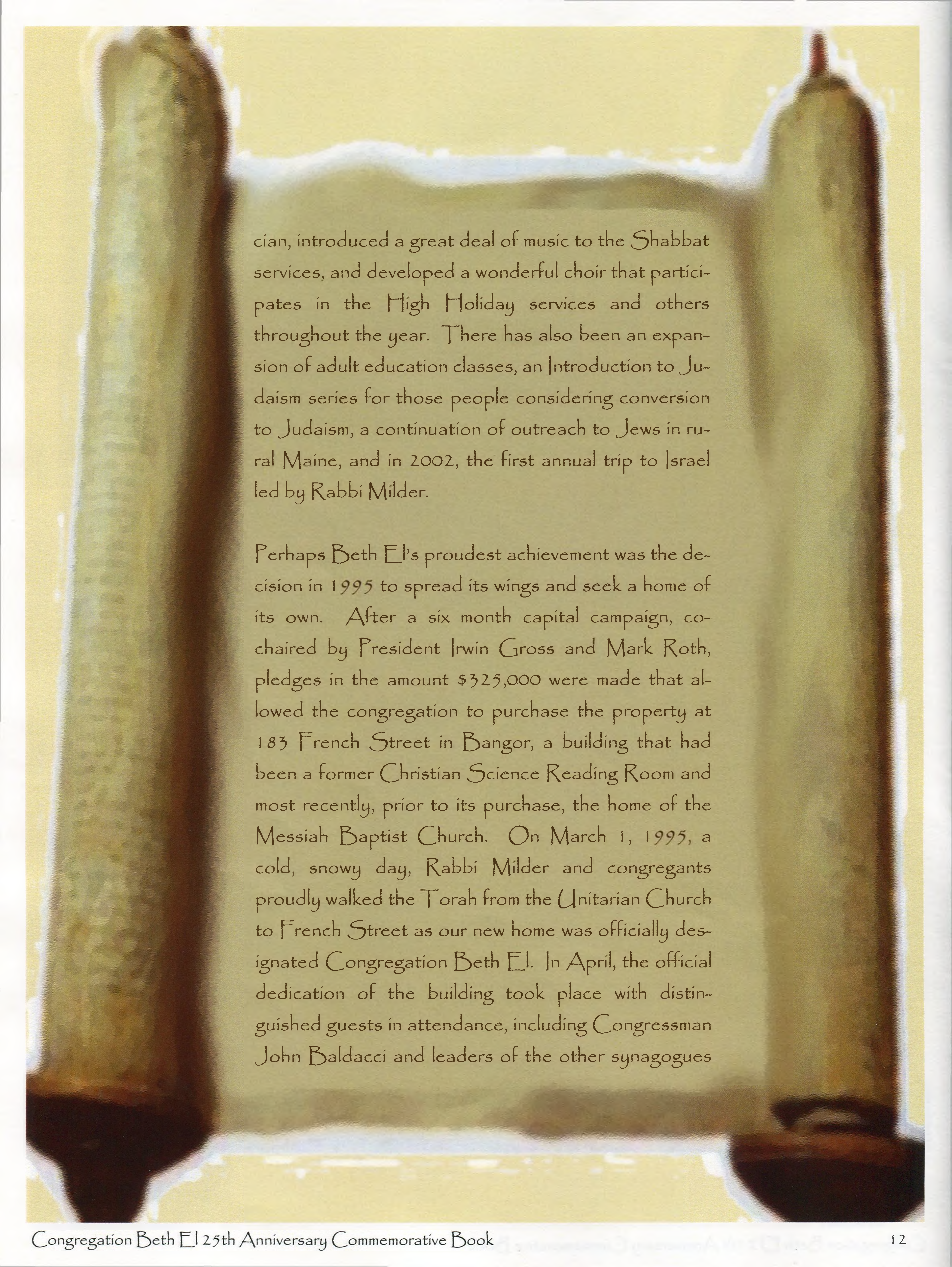
of the congregation. Very soon thereafter, Beth El was presented with a two hundred year old Torah that had been rescued from Czechoslovakia after World War II and had been restored by the Westminster Synagogue Trust in London. This Torah, given to Beth El on permanent loan, had been designated for use by young congregations until such time as these congregations could buy a Torah of their own.

Through the mid 1980's Beth El brought in an occasional visiting Rabbi for services. In 1987, the Board of Directors, in consultation with the members, voted to undertake a search for a more permanent Rabbi who, though he/she would not be full time, would travel to Bangor regularly and provide the rabbinic leadership that was needed. In 1987, Rabbi David Sandmel assumed the position of Rabbi on a part-time basis as Beth El shared his time with the Reform Congregation in Portland. Within a year, Rabbi Sandmel needed to devote all of his time to the Portland congregation. In 1988 Beth El enlisted the services of Rabbi Shoshana Perry to serve the congregation two long weekends per month. She traveled first from New York City and then from Philadelphia while first she, and then her husband, finished school. Rabbi Perry devoted her time to worship, introducing



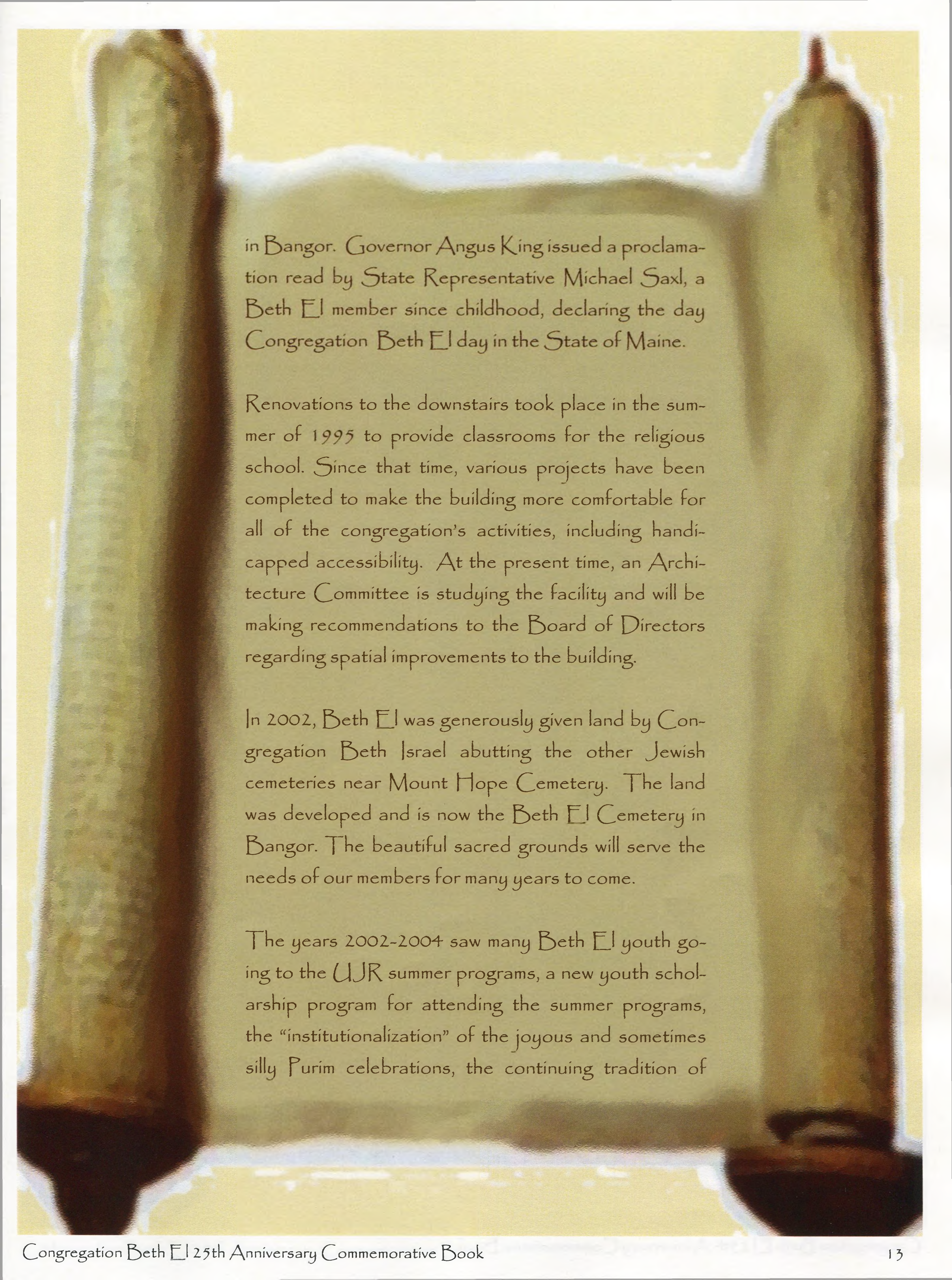
many new traditions, to teaching, to adult education, and to outreach to Bar Harbor helping shape Beth El as we know it now. In 1991, Rabbi Perry moved to Bangor and she became Beth El's first resident Rabbi, serving Beth El until 1994 when she assumed a position as Assistant Rabbi in a larger synagogue in the Boston area.

By 1994, the membership had grown to between 90 and 100 families, and with a larger membership base, Beth El was ready to hire a full time Rabbi. A search committee, chaired by Irwin Gross, was established by President Ellie Pancoe to seek a full time Rabbi. After a comprehensive search and visits to Bangor by the three finalists, Rabbi Laurence Elis Milder was selected to be the spiritual leader of Congregation Beth El. With a full time rabbi in residence, membership increased to about 150 families and has been relatively constant ever since. Through the years, Rabbi Milder has served as the Principal of the Religious school, providing consultation and guidance in developing a formal curriculum, has introduced confirmation classes to the high school students in the congregation, and has trained numerous students for their B'nai Mitzvah by teaching them trope as well as the numerous prayers to lead the Shabbat morning service. Rabbi Milder, who is also a professional musi-



cian, introduced a great deal of music to the Shabbat services, and developed a wonderful choir that participates in the High Holiday services and others throughout the year. There has also been an expansion of adult education classes, an Introduction to Judaism series for those people considering conversion to Judaism, a continuation of outreach to Jews in rural Maine, and in 2002, the first annual trip to Israel led by Rabbi Milder.

Perhaps Beth El's proudest achievement was the decision in 1995 to spread its wings and seek a home of its own. After a six month capital campaign, co-chaired by President Irwin Gross and Mark Roth, pledges in the amount \$325,000 were made that allowed the congregation to purchase the property at 183 French Street in Bangor, a building that had been a former Christian Science Reading Room and most recently, prior to its purchase, the home of the Messiah Baptist Church. On March 1, 1995, a cold, snowy day, Rabbi Milder and congregants proudly walked the Torah from the Unitarian Church to French Street as our new home was officially designated Congregation Beth El. In April, the official dedication of the building took place with distinguished guests in attendance, including Congressman John Baldacci and leaders of the other synagogues

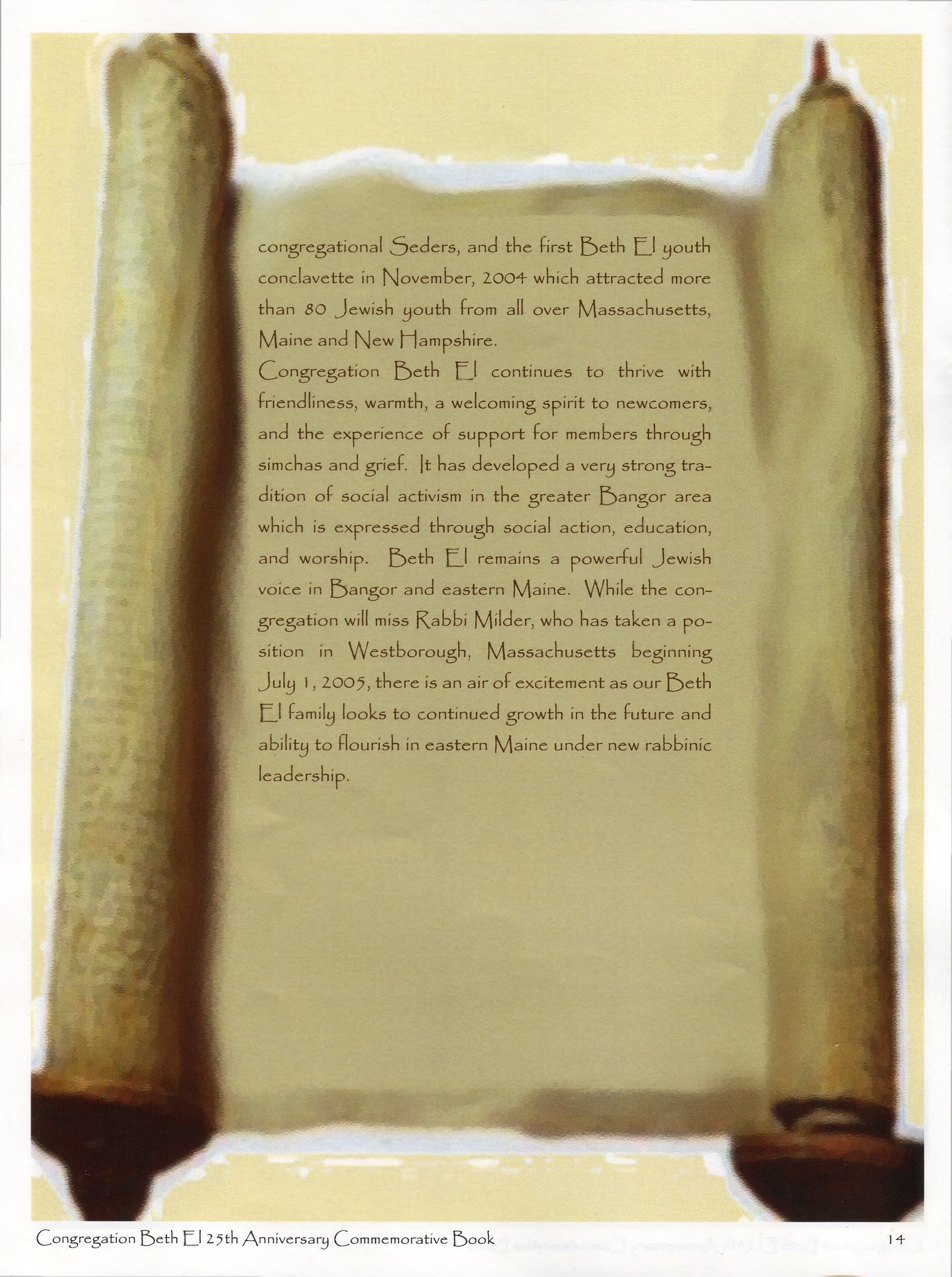


in Bangor. Governor Angus King issued a proclamation read by State Representative Michael Saxl, a Beth El member since childhood, declaring the day Congregation Beth El day in the State of Maine.

Renovations to the downstairs took place in the summer of 1995 to provide classrooms for the religious school. Since that time, various projects have been completed to make the building more comfortable for all of the congregation's activities, including handicapped accessibility. At the present time, an Architecture Committee is studying the facility and will be making recommendations to the Board of Directors regarding spatial improvements to the building.

In 2002, Beth El was generously given land by Congregation Beth Israel abutting the other Jewish cemeteries near Mount Hope Cemetery. The land was developed and is now the Beth El Cemetery in Bangor. The beautiful sacred grounds will serve the needs of our members for many years to come.

The years 2002-2004 saw many Beth El youth going to the UJR summer programs, a new youth scholarship program for attending the summer programs, the "institutionalization" of the joyous and sometimes silly Purim celebrations, the continuing tradition of



congregational Seders, and the first Beth El youth conclave in November, 2004 which attracted more than 80 Jewish youth from all over Massachusetts, Maine and New Hampshire.

Congregation Beth El continues to thrive with friendliness, warmth, a welcoming spirit to newcomers, and the experience of support for members through simchas and grief. It has developed a very strong tradition of social activism in the greater Bangor area which is expressed through social action, education, and worship. Beth El remains a powerful Jewish voice in Bangor and eastern Maine. While the congregation will miss Rabbi Milder, who has taken a position in Westborough, Massachusetts beginning July 1, 2005, there is an air of excitement as our Beth El family looks to continued growth in the future and ability to flourish in eastern Maine under new rabbinic leadership.

Twelve Defining Moments in Beth El History

The first meeting to talk about establishing a Reform Congregation in May, 1981 with the six founding families of Beth El: Sid and Martha Block, David and Beverly Levy, Michael and Ingrid Solomon, Elliott and Jacqueline Strom, Cliff and Donna Rosen, and Phillip and Astri Brooks. This marked the formation of the first Reform Congregation in Maine since 1940. Within a few months, membership had increased to twenty-five families.

The selection of the Unitarian Church as the meeting place and the adoption of the name Congregation Beth El.

Establishing the Religious School in 1982.

The first Bar/Bat Mitzvah class in 1982, the first Bar Mitzvah in October 1983 and the first Bat Mitzvah in May, 1984.

Acceptance as a member in good standing of the Union of American Hebrew Congre-

gations (now called the Union of Reform Judaism).

The gift of a Holocaust Torah from Czechoslovakia restored by the Westminster Synagogue Trust in London.

The hiring of Beth El's first rabbi, David Sandmel, in 1987 and the first rabbi in residence, Shoshana Perry, in 1988.

The first adult Bat Mitzvah of four women in 1989.

Purchasing and moving into the first house of worship on March 1, 1995.

Achieving a membership of 150 families in 1996.

The opening of the Beth El Cemetery in 2002.

Celebrating 25 years as a Reform Congregation in Bangor in 2006.