

IN SOLIDARITY

THE BETH EL CIVIL RIGHTS EXPERIENCE

# GUIDE







## intention

This project reflects the Jewish community's desire to collect and preserve its history, especially as it relates to struggles for civil and human rights in Birmingham and beyond. It began with asking, "How can we understand ourselves in relation to pivotal events in our city's past?"

The very making of the Beth El Civil Rights Experience has become a way to open conversations with ourselves and our neighbors. This is more than a museum; it's an invitation to both learn and act, and we want you to be a part of that dialogue.

Throughout your visit, we encourage you to think about how these stories

inform the way you make sense of the past, present, and future. What does it mean to be in solidarity with our neighbors? How can you be an advocate for the causes that you care about – whatever they may be? Where are *you* on the spectrum of action in your own life?

Keep this book as a guide for your visit and the days ahead. We hope that as you go forward, you not only listen, but you get your hands into this history, turn it over, feel it, and question it.

We are grateful you are here with us today and wish you the best as you continue to explore these topics in the future.

# through my lens

*Reflections on the Jewish Experience  
from congregant Sheri Krell*

## WHAT IS JUDAISM?

Judaism is a belief in one God that is based on teachings from the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Bible, and rabbinic interpretations of the Torah over the last two thousand years. Like most religions, we have many rules, but I take the parts that make sense to me and help guide my life through the lens of Judaism.

## WHAT MAKES SOMEONE JEWISH?

A Jew is someone born to a Jewish parent or who has converted to Judaism. It is not a proselytizing religion, but anyone can convert through a process. Many with Jewish ancestry don't observe the faith but still practice traditions like eating certain foods and celebrating holidays. For these reasons, being Jewish can't be limited to just an ethnicity, nationality, or religion.

## WHAT ARE SOME COMMON TERMS?

*Shabbat*, or Sabbath, begins at sundown on Friday through sundown on Saturday and is a time of rest and reflection. The Temple, also known as shul or synagogue, refers to our place of worship. Services are usually led by a rabbi, who is a spiritual leader but not an intermediary between us and God.

## DO MOST JEWS LIVE IN ISRAEL?

Jews live all over the world in practically every country, with the majority in the U.S. and Israel. The State of Israel was founded in 1948 after the Holocaust, and many Jews find comfort in having a safe place where they are welcome. If you do not live in Israel, it is said you live in the *Diaspora*. For thousands of years, Jews have assimilated and absorbed culture from the world around them.

## WHAT IS ANTISEMITISM?

Antisemitism is an "ism" like sexism or racism, when someone hates a group for no valid reason. Today, it mostly refers to discrimination against Jews, which can come from both the left and right politically, and is sometimes called history's oldest hatred.

## WHAT MAKES THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BIRMINGHAM SPECIAL?

It's a community of people that look out for each other. Even if someone hasn't been in a synagogue or met somebody Jewish, I think people here generally assume that we're a larger population than we are, just because Jews are so involved (there are only around 10,000 for the entire state of Alabama). And for the most part, people are proud to say they're Jewish.

## WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU VISIT THE SANCTUARY IN TEMPLE BETH EL?

Tradition is very important in Judaism because it makes you feel part of something bigger. Growing up here, I still remember where my grandmother would sit. My husband and I sit in the very first row of the back section so you can get in and out easily. Different rabbis want us to move up, but I've tried to sit in another place, and it's like I'm in a different building. There's a ritual to everything!

## ARE THERE CERTAIN ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS THAT ARE SIGNIFICANT?

Our synagogue looks very similar to churches built around the same time with a pulpit, what we call the *bima*, surrounded by rows in a semicircle. The Torah scrolls are kept inside the Ark on the *bima*, and we stand as a

sign of respect when it is opened. Look up and you'll notice the Eternal Light, symbolizing God's presence. We do have stained glass but one difference from churches is that there are no human images depicted, traditionally considered a form of idolatry. In the back of the sanctuary, you can find our memorial plaques called *Yahrzeit*, with lights commemorating a loved one's passing.

## LASTLY, WHY IS YOUR FAITH MEANINGFUL TO YOU?

Judaism is personal. There's not a black and white. I'm saying one thing, but someone else would say, "What is she talking about?" The core reason of Judaism for me is that it's a values-based religion, grounded in principles like truth and justice. If it's not making me a better person on this Earth while I'm here, then it's not worth doing. How can it translate into some act of kindness for the greater community?



*Sheri Krell is a member of Temple Beth El and a third generation Birmingham resident, whose family immigrated from Eastern Europe and grandfather owned a men's clothing store downtown.*



# when are we?

*A timeline of  
key moments in our story*



1872

## THE FIRST JEWS ARRIVE IN BIRMINGHAM

As soon as the city is established, Jewish families begin to arrive. A Reform congregation forms in 1882 near the present-day site of the 16th Street Baptist Church. Despite the end of Reconstruction after the Civil War, racial segregation persists in the Jim Crow Era.



1907

## TEMPLE BETH EL FORMS

Birmingham is growing into a leading industrial hub with the Jewish community involved in key aspects of civic and business life, despite anti-Jewish tensions growing across the country. Samuel Ullman, his daughter Carrie, and Bertha Gelders are among the Jewish progressives who try to improve educational opportunities for marginalized groups. Temple Beth El splits off of the Orthodox Knesseth Israel with a desire for egalitarian worship and a modern, yet traditional, practice.

1938

## THE SOUTHERN CONFERENCE FOR HUMAN WELFARE

Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor breaks up this interracial meeting to enforce segregated seating. One of the event leaders is Joseph Gelders, a Jewish suspected-Communist who is kidnapped by the Ku Klux Klan for his role in labor organizing. He and Jewish lawyer Abe Berkowitz fight against white supremacists' actions throughout the 1930s and 1940s as Jewish refugees begin to arrive from Nazi Germany.

1958

## ATTEMPTED BOMBING AT TEMPLE BETH EL

As demands for civil rights intensify, so do connections between racism and antisemitism. Though Jews never experience the violence Black men and women do, bombs are placed at Jewish sites in North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Georgia, Illinois, and here at Temple Beth El in Alabama, which has become Alabama's largest Conservative congregation. Anti-Jewish hate speech rises in Birmingham in the 1950s as well, blending with fears of communism.

1962

## CITY GOVERNANCE CHANGES

A public referendum orchestrated by a group of white professionals, including Temple Beth El congregants Abe Berkowitz and Karl Friedman, successfully change the city's government structure to remove avowed segregationist Bull Connor from power, though he maintains influence and fights against relinquishing control for a year.







1963

**THE BIRMINGHAM CAMPAIGN INTENSIFIES**

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference renews a local selective buying campaign, focusing on department stores like Pizitz and Parisian, which are Jewish-owned. The non-violent boycott puts pressure on merchants to desegregate their businesses. A group of white clergy, including Reform Rabbi Milton Grafman, publish a letter critiquing Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. for perceived haste in these and other demonstrations, to which King responds with the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Earlier that year, the same group of clergy sent a similar letter criticizing Gov. George Wallace for his "segregation forever" speech.

**19 RABBIS INTERVENE**

Images of police brutality towards demonstrators compel a conference of Conservative rabbis in New York to act. When they arrive in Birmingham unannounced, they are confronted by the local Jewish community who are unhappy for not being consulted and fear the visit will spark antisemitism and hurt negotiations. The rabbis proceed with their visit, although one expresses remorse later. Local Jewish labor lawyer Jerome "Buddy" Cooper helps make bail arrangements for jailed protestors, including those from the Children's Marches.

**THE BOMBING OF 16TH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH**

On the morning before Sunday services on September 15, a bomb explodes, killing 14-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and 11-year-old Cynthia Wesley. Their funeral is attended by Rabbi Grafman and a Jewish community member, Gertrude Goldstein. The incident serves as a national turning point for many white people.

1965

**VOTING RIGHTS MARCHES**

Members of the Concerned White Citizens of Alabama join marchers in Selma the day before "Blood Sunday." Participants include three local Jewish couples: Frederick and Anny Kraus, Florence and Abe Siegel, and Gertrude and Fred Goldstein. The following march to Montgomery includes interfaith leaders such as Rabbi Abraham Heschel and at least two of the 19 rabbis who had visited Birmingham two years earlier. Many of these individuals continue to work directly with the Black community, even as shifts in national politics make the perceived Black-Jewish alliance less visible.

2022

**PRESERVING MEMORY OF THE ATTEMPTED BOMBING**

A historical marker is installed at the site where 54 sticks of dynamite were planted by a still unknown suspect. Though the bomb did not detonate, its impact continues to be felt in the community, which has seen a rise in antisemitism along with the rest of the country. The Beth El Civil Rights Experience begins in the spirit of strengthening bridges between all who stand against hate.

Photo credit: Associated Press



# a jewish prayer for juneteenth

Our God:  
Compassionate redeemer,  
Emancipator,  
Liberator  
Of the oppressed,  
Downtrodden  
And enslaved.

You heard our ancestors' cries as  
slaves in Egypt,  
Freed us from harsh labors with an  
outstretched arm,  
Delivered us from bondage,  
Took us to be your people,  
And brought us to our Promised Land.

You heard the cries of Black  
slaves in this country.  
Freed them, officially, on this day  
with an outstretched arm.  
May you continue to:  
Deliver us from the bondage  
of injustice;  
Take us to be your people,  
treated by all with love and equity,  
And bring us to a moment when  
this Land fulfills its Promises.

Ever-listening, attentive One:  
Hear us now.  
The journey has been long,  
The steps arduous and ongoing.

But we celebrate freedom this day:  
with love,  
memory,  
honor,  
resolve to be a force for  
positive change and fervent hope  
for freedoms still yet to be realized.

As you have shown us compassion,  
help us to be compassionate.  
As you have liberated us, help us  
stand up against injustice everywhere.  
As you have delivered us, help us fight  
for freedom for all still enslaved.  
Remember us, hear us,  
and be with us always.

And let us say, Amen.

*By Rabbi Shaaron Barr Skolnik and Rabbi Hillel Skolnik, in honor  
of Juneteenth, commemorating the end of slavery in America.*

*This prayer was read by congregant Suzanne Bearman at the  
historic marker dedication at Temple Beth El in 2022.*

# speaking out

"For so many years, I didn't even know about the bomb that was placed at Temple Beth El, which is another testament to how we need to make sure the whole history of our history, here in Birmingham and across the country, is shared with students.

But once I heard about it, I already knew that hate doesn't have a color. Hate doesn't have a race. Hate doesn't have a religion. It can come from anywhere. It can attack anyone.

We, as people of God, need to make sure that we speak out and encourage others not to hate. When we see racist things, we must address them. We have to be a party of one, each of us, to live that out every day."



*Lisa McNair is a public speaker, author, activist, and the sister of  
Denise McNair, who was killed in the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church.*

*This excerpt is adapted from her address at the dedication of  
the historic marker.*







# to be continued

## THANK YOU

*Thank you for becoming an active participant in the Beth El Civil Rights Experience.*

## WHAT'S NEXT?

With these stories comes an opportunity to pass them on and deepen your own pursuit of learning. For us, that involves a commitment to fostering relationships and ongoing acts of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. This means our work is never finished.



## LEARN MORE

To explore ways you or your organization can get involved or contribute to the future of this initiative, visit our website ([templebetheexperience.org](http://templebetheexperience.org)), or scan the code where you can find:

- **Our free self-guided audio tour** at sites throughout Birmingham's Jewish and civil rights history
- **A curated list of resources**, including readings, oral histories, and community projects
- **Direct ways to engage** through research, training, and additional programs

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**The Beth El Civil Rights Experience is made possible through the generous support of many members of our community, including:**

Charles and Esther Lee Kimerling Media Fund of the Temple Beth El Foundation  
Maxine and Stanley Lapidus Special Projects Fund of the Temple Beth El Foundation  
Tenenbaum/Spielberger Tikkun Olam Fund of the Temple Beth-El Foundation

Alabama Humanities Alliance	Southern Jewish Historical Society
Alabama Power	Temple Beth-El Men's Club,
Birmingham Jewish Foundation	<i>who generously supported the</i>
Dentons Sirote PC	<i>installation of our historic marker</i>

**"In Solidarity," the site-specific installation at Temple Beth El, was produced by 1504 in association with Temple Beth El and the following:**

Margaret Norman, <i>Director of Programming &amp; Engagement</i>	Samantha Richardson, <i>Designer</i>
Dr. Melissa Young, <i>Historian</i>	Teresa Cribelli, <i>Artist</i>
Tyler Jones, <i>Director</i>	John Tompkins, <i>AV Consultant</i>
Mark Slagle, <i>Producer</i>	Gary Pennington, <i>AV Installer</i>
Mollie Schaefer-Thompson, <i>Studio Manager</i>	Ezra Bookman, <i>Advisor</i>
Bob Miller, <i>Cinematographer</i>	Abby Fifer Mandell, <i>Advisor</i>
Daniel Lawson, <i>Assistant Camera</i>	Elizabeth Jarrett, <i>Advisor</i>
Lane McGiboney, <i>Sound Engineer</i>	<i>Featuring photography</i>
	<i>by Spider Martin</i>

**Special thanks to our Civil Rights Experience committee and docents, including:**

Howard Kaplan	Duncan Lamb	Marc Rice
Sheri Krell	Susan Lapidus	Ellen Erdreich
Karen Weinrib	Suzanne Bearman	Barbara Bonfield
Michael Sznjaderman	Sue Lischkoff	Jessica Nissenbaum
Toby Siegel	Larry Brook	Barbara Royal
Cindy May	Julian Brook	Sallie Downs
Sherrie Grunfeld	Eddie Griffith	Jonathan Wiesen



## A Jewish Prayer of Gratitude

*The Birkat Hagomel is a blessing recited to thank God for a myriad of reasons, including safekeeping from life-threatening situations. As we reflect on the attempted bombing of Temple Beth El, this prayer reminds us to express gratitude, rather than fear.*

### THE READER RECITES:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַגּוֹמֵל לְחַיִּים טוֹבוֹת שְׂגָמְלָנִי כָּל טוֹב

Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, ha-gomel l'hayavim  
tovot she-g'malani kol tov.

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, ruler of the world,  
who rewards the undeserving with goodness, and who  
has rewarded me with goodness.*

### THE CONGREGATION RESPONDS:

מִי שְׂגָמְלָךְ כָּל טוֹב הוּא יְגַמְלָךְ כָּל טוֹב סְלָה

Mi she-g'malkha kol tov, hu yi-g'malkha kol tov selah.

*May the One who rewarded you with all goodness  
reward you with all goodness for ever.*