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National Park Service

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8. Narrative Statement of Historic & Social Significance

There have been Jewish residents and distinct Jewish communities in New York City since 1654. The first Jewish settlers were Sephardic Jews who escaped Brazil and the Inquisition, when that country changed from Dutch to Portuguese rule. This group thrived and contributed to society in numerous ways. The descendants of this group include Justices Cardozo and Brandeis and poet Emma Lazarus, who wrote the famous poem inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. This first group of settlers was succeeded in numbers and influence in the 19th century by German speaking Jews from the German States and the Austrian Empire. Then in the late 19th century came many thousands of very poor Jews from the Russian Empire (including Poland) and from Romania. Although some spread out to other cities, most settled and remained in New York City.

The story of East Midwood Jewish Center is the story of the “development of second generation (Eastern European) Jews into an urban ethnic group....The most important place to commence a re-examination of Jewish ethnicity is New York, which by itself accounted for almost 50% of American Jewry in 1920. As the largest Jewish center in the United States, what happened in New York City alone describes the experience of half of the American Jewish population.” (1) Because East Midwood Jewish Center played an important role in the evolution of urban Jewish ethnicity, we believe it merits recognition from the National Register under Criterion A, a property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of American history.

Between 1916 and 1926 the total Jewish population in the United States grew to four million, the number of Jewish congregations nearly doubled, and the size of congregations increased from an average of 221 to 1300. Brooklyn soon had a larger Jewish population than Manhattan, i.e. 750,000 versus 706,000 for Manhattan.

During the 1920s Jewish residents of New York wanted to move out of strictly immigrant neighborhoods into new areas that were more Americanized, and thus they pioneered in the settlement of many outlying sections of the city. Midwood, in the southern half of Brooklyn or Kings County, was considered “out in the country” and was actively promoted by real estate developers as “New Brooklyn.” This was in contrast to the densely populated, older, northern parts of Brooklyn. Thanks to new residential zoning, cheap land, a 10 year tax abatement which encouraged new construction, the creation of new sewer lines and the availability of subways, the new areas of Brooklyn (and the Bronx) developed rapidly in the 1920s and 30s. “The settlers of new areas

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were so eager to build that their new community synagogues often preceded a community, that is the synagogue was established before large scale migration had even begun. They then served as magnets for Jewish population movement and as incentives for community development, trends encouraged by real estate agents and rabbis alike.” (2)

These newly developed areas represented the fourth stage of large scale twentieth century Jewish settlement in New York. The Eastern European immigrants first settled on the Lower East Side. The second stage began when those who could moved on to Williamsburg following the opening of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1907. The third stage was the move to the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, once called “The New Jerusalem,” and the fourth stage was to “New Brooklyn.”

East Midwood Jewish Center (EMJC) was organized in 1924 by young, prosperous American born Jews. Midwood was then almost rural. Many streets were unpaved, houses were separated by empty lots, apartment buildings did not yet line Ocean Avenue, and neighbors had to walk through fields to reach each other’s homes or subway stations. .

Dr. J. R. Schwartz, a young dentist, concerned about the lack of a nearby Hebrew school for his sons, was the spirit behind the creation of East Midwood. By making a house to house canvas among his new neighbors, he was able to recruit enough people to help him develop practical plans for a new Conservative synagogue. The Conservative movement was more modern than the Orthodox, but more traditional in its practices and outlook than the Reformed Jews. For example, it followed the traditional, long Hebrew service of the Orthodox, but like the Reformed Jews, used English for some prayers. Also, both Conservative and Reformed rabbis gave sermons in English, rather than Yiddish. Conservative Judaism, like the Reformed, also, allowed for mixed seating of men and women, instead of confining women behind a screen or upstairs.

Dr. Schwartz and his colleagues wanted to provide not only a Jewish education for their children but a Jewish context for their social gatherings within a thoroughly American environment. After several months of meetings in their homes, the organizing group agreed to incorporate and raise money to purchase a suitable property on Ocean Avenue, which was obviously destined to become a major neighborhood thoroughfare. The cornerstone was laid in 1926, and the building completed in 1929. Both these events were fully reported in Brooklyn’s newspaper of record, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, and were attended by elected officials, as well as by rabbis and other Jewish dignitaries.

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There are four facts about East Midwood that are of historic importance in the evolution of a distinctive American Judaism: (1) the services were from the beginning conducted in Hebrew and English (not Yiddish), because English was preferred by those who were American born; (2) the members represented not just one specific Russian, Polish or Romanian town, as was the case with synagogues in immigrant neighborhoods, but were a mix of persons whose families had arrived at different times from many parts of Europe; and (3) the enterprise was created by local residents, without the guidance of rabbis or Manhattan elites.

The fourth fact of historic importance is that they decided to create a synagogue center, not just a place of worship. "The synagogue center is a distinctive American Jewish creation. The physical structure tends to include a main sanctuary for worship, a smaller prayer chapel, a hall for social functions, classrooms, a library, offices...In 1875 the American synagogue was little more than a worship hall with a few dark and dingy school rooms in its basement. By 1925 the complex synagogue-center had become a leading trend in modern Jewish life and a national "Jewish Center" movement was in full swing. It is the first synagogue type without precedent in the European past. It is originally and quintessentially American." (3) It combined many activities in one building and was designed to involve people of all ages throughout the week, not only on Saturdays, and to bring Jews together for worship and for social and cultural activities outside the home. The synagogue center absorbed the functions of the settlement house (created by the elites to foster Americanization) the independent Hebrew school for young boys (created by laypeople) and the YMHAs (which encouraged not only sports but provided proper meeting places for young adults, so as to prevent assimilation and inter-marriage).

The story of East Midwood was repeated throughout Brooklyn and throughout the United States. From early on East Midwood had a men's club, a women's club, young people's society, sports facilities, engaged in charity work, such as recordings for the blind, sponsored lecture courses, rented out space to various societies, and had a catering kitchen, in addition to space for traditional daily, Sabbath and holiday services.

Each new Brooklyn neighborhood had its own new synagogue center, because as Rabbi Israel H. Leventhal, the famous head of the Brooklyn Jewish Center, wrote in 1940, "The story of Brooklyn Jewry is made complex by the fact that communities developed in more than twenty five villages and districts, independently and often simultaneously. Each new development area of Jewish settlements would need a focus of Jewish communal life and the synagogue center recommended itself time and time again. (4)

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East Midwood Jewish Center demonstrated by its placement on Ocean Avenue, by the size and style of the building and by its expansive program that it was steeped in Jewish culture but confidently and proudly at home in the American environment. It was not hidden away on a side street, nor did it attempt to blend discreetly into the surrounding landscape. It is a bold statement on a major thoroughfare, and is a concrete illustration of the cultural pluralism described by Abraham J. Karp in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, edited by Jack Wertheimer:

“The synagogue center drew its ideological justification as an American institution from cultural pluralism, whose proponents argued that a minority group has both the right and the duty to retain and develop its culture. Indeed, such adherence and creativity were not only in the best interests of the individual and his group, but were a singular contribution to the strengthening of democracy and the flourishing of American civilization.”
(5)

The Brooklyn Jewish Center, the Jewish Communal Center of Flatbush and many of the synagogue centers created in New York and other cities between the two World Wars no longer exist, having been sold to African-American churches or converted to Orthodox Yeshivas as neighborhoods changed. East Midwood has to date absorbed the Jewish Communal Center of Flatbush (of which Louis Allen Abramson was the architect) and two other nearby congregations, because they had lost so many members that they lacked the economic resources to remain where they were and/or the leadership to reinvent themselves. It is likely that in the near future East Midwood will absorb at least two or three more Conservative synagogues built in the period 1920-1950.

Despite many dramatic demographic changes in its neighborhood and in Brooklyn, The East Midwood Jewish Center is still serving its original purpose in its original, unchanged building, as a Conservative Jewish house of worship, offering multiple activities to serve all ages and interests, as well as serving the larger community. A few years ago it made what became a difficult transition from male dominated to egalitarian services under the leadership of our very well regarded and scholarly rabbi, Dr. Alvin Kass. Since then EMJC has attracted a new younger generation of leaders and members, as well as a new young cantor. Among the many activities taking place in the building and the school throughout the week are: morning and evening services in the small chapel and Saturday and holiday services in the sanctuary; the Rabbi Harry Halpern Solomon Schechter Day School (Kindergarten to Grade 8); after school and Sunday programs for children and teenagers; a synagogue choir, composed of men and women; active women's and men's organizations which provide a full schedule of lectures, trips and social events; a year round program of day and evening classes; Saturday Lunch & Learn sessions; concerts and films; a Russian outreach program providing English and citizenship classes; an active pool and gym program; an organized Interfaith Program (now in its eighth year) with Our Lady of Refuge

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Roman Catholic Church and the Baitul Jannah Mosque & Community Center. Meeting rooms are rented out to the Senior League of Flatbush, Hadassah, and the National Council of Jewish Women, to the Social Security Administration for special outreach events and to other secular and ethnic organizations. The ballrooms are rented for social events

We look forward to the honor of receiving recognition from the National Register of Historic Places of the historic importance of our Renaissance Revival building as an outstanding representative of early twentieth century synagogue design (under Criterion C) and of the congregation itself under Criterion A for its significant role in the development of the New York Jewish community and in the development of American democracy and cultural pluralism. Such recognition will help us attract new members and raise the large sums needed for building preservation.

We believe that EMJC has an important role to play in the continuation of Judaism and the American tradition of cultural pluralism in the 21st century, just as it did in the first part of the 20th century. Our task today as it was 80 years ago is to transmit to new generations and to the public at large the Jewish emphasis on education, social justice and our mutual responsibilities for each other and to reinterpret the relevance and beauty of old traditions.

Footnotes

1. Deborah Dash Moore, *The Emergence of Ethnicity: New York's Jews 1920-1949*, Xerox University Microfilms: Columbia University Doctoral Thesis, 1975, p. 17.

2. David Kaufman, *The Shul with a Pool: The Synagogue Center in American Jewish History*, Hanover & London: Brandeis University Press, 1999, p. 186

3. *ibid.*, p. 2.

4. *op. cit.*, p. 248-249

5. Jack Wertheimer, editor, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987, a Centennial Publication of the Jewish Theological Society, p. 20.