

Oldest Synagogue in State to Say Farewell in Helena

BY LAURA LYNN BROWN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The dwindling congregation of Temple Beth El in Helena-West Helena, the oldest synagogue in Arkansas, will hold its last worship service tonight before a private deconsecration service Saturday that symbolizes their disbanding and turning over the house of worship for secular use.

A bronze plaque in Temple Beth El lists 31 members who served in the military during World War II. Those names outnumber the current 15 or so members, mostly in their 80s, said Miriam Solomon, 87, who has been part of the congregation since she was born. The congregation has donated the building to the Department of Arkansas Heritage, which will rent it for community gatherings.

Congregation Beth El - Hebrew for "house of God" - was formed in 1867 with 65 members, meeting at first in homes. The current Greek Revival building was built in 1916 in Helena and still has its original organ, said Stuart Rockoff, director of the Institute of Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, Miss.

Beth El was one of the first members of the Reform Union of American Hebrew Congregations, joining in 1875. The temple "embraced classical Reform Judaism, a new American style of Judaism that used English more than Hebrew and incorporated elements of Christian worship, like sermons, choirs and organs," Rockoff said.

Two members of the congregation were mayors of Helena. Member Jacob Trieber was a city councilman and was appointed by President McKinley as a federal judge, the first Jew to hold that position. Members were always prominent in Helena society, Rockoff said, especially in the late 1920s when the town's Jewish population reached its zenith of 400.

Rockoff also praised the congregation's interfaith history, noting that it has shared its space with various Christian denominations when they were building their own buildings.

"They have worked hard to keep Judaism alive in that region," Rockoff said. "It's a tribute to them that they have persevered for as long as they have."

Rabbi Debra Kasso of Mississippi, who also is affiliated with the institute, has served the congregation as a visiting rabbi for three years. The members' numbers may have dwindled, but not their intensity, she said.

Members will worship in Memphis or in Little Rock "or in our homes, as did our forebears," said David Solomon, president of the congregation.

Miriam Solomon said 125 people are planning to attend the final services, including many children and grandchildren of members.

Rockoff will speak on the temple's history at 1 p.m. today. The talk at the temple is open to the public, and people may also take self-guided tours. Services tonight and Saturday are closed to the public.