

Congregation Shaarie Torah

By Elaine S. Friedman

Shaarie Torah is the name of both a synagogue in northwest Portland and the Jewish congregation that makes its spiritual home there. In Hebrew, *shaarie torah* means “gates to the Torah.” The first Orthodox synagogue in the Pacific Northwest, Congregation Shaarie Torah was formed in 1905 to meet the religious needs of Portland Jews who were most comfortable with traditional Jewish observance.

As early as 1902, a group of Jewish Portlanders, unhappy after the merger of two other synagogues, began to hold religious services together. Three years later, they officially formed Congregation Shaarie Torah. Joseph Nudelman, the congregation’s first president, led the effort to purchase a church building, which they moved to First Avenue near Hall Street. Once the church was reopened as a Jewish synagogue, it became known fondly as the First Street Shul.

Originally formed by men who had come to Portland from the same part of Eastern Europe, Shaarie Torah grew steadily as more Jewish immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe arrived in Portland. Initially, the congregation engaged rabbis and cantors on a short-term basis, but in 1916 they brought Rabbi Joseph Faivusovitch to Portland in a permanent position. He soon changed his name to Fain, because his daughter disliked writing her long surname on school papers.

A respected Torah scholar who had trained in Lithuania, Rabbi Fain was a well-loved and charismatic leader who remained at Shaarie Torah until he retired in 1949. Cantor Yonia Glantz, who came from a famous family of cantors, also served the congregation from his arrival in the 1930s to his death in 1962. Under the leadership of Rabbi Fain and Cantor Glantz, liturgy and practices remained traditional. As had been the practice in Eastern Europe, for example, women were seated in a separate area upstairs and did not participate actively in the religious services.

By the late 1930s, the congregation had outgrown the First Street Shul, but plans for a new building were put on hold with the outbreak of war. In 1952, the congregation began to raise funds for a new building. The endeavor proceeded in earnest when they learned that the First Street Shul was to be razed as part of urban renewal.

On May 15, 1960, Shaarie Torah dedicated a new, modern building at the intersection of Park and Jackson, and Rabbi Yonah Geller soon arrived from Texas to lead the congregation. Within six months, however, a crisis hit when a proposed freeway had the new synagogue in its path. The congregation needed to build again.

Rabbi Geller, who remained at Shaarie Torah for forty years, would not only shepherd the congregation’s move to its current location at Lovejoy and Northwest Twenty-Fifth streets, but he would also lead the congregation’s move away from the strictest of orthodox practices. While the sanctuary now includes separate sections for men and women, the large center area is reserved for those who prefer mixed seating.

The original 1965 building, “a massive structure of masonry and copper, firmly tied to the earth with concrete, yet sweeping to the heaven with strong, upward lines,” was renovated and refurbished in 2002 in time for Shaarie Torah’s hundredth birthday. In 2009, with Rabbi Arthur Zuckerman and Cantor Dr. Aaron Vitells, Congregation Shaarie Torah’s traditional services, holiday celebrations, pre-school, Bar and Bat Mitzvah training, adult education programs, and cemetery served a membership of about 300 Portland families.

Sources

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