

History of Temple Etz Chaim

Temple Etz Chaim was born through the passion, energy, vision, and commitment of a group of people who felt the need for a center for Jewish worship, study, and community in Franklin, Massachusetts. Before the temple was founded, there had been no organized Jewish presence in Franklin for many years.

In November, 1989 a group of eight area families held a Chanukah party. This was followed by a gathering to celebrate Rosh Hashana the following September. Building on the sense of community established by these events, the participants planned and advertised a Kabbalat Shabbat service and pot luck supper in March, 1991. Thirty families attended, and this marked the beginning of our congregation.

The first High Holiday services were held at the Franklin Federated Church in 1991, conducted by Alan Teperow, the executive director of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts, using a Torah borrowed from Temple Sinai in Brookline. Over a hundred worshippers attended, many of whom were surprised to find evidence of such a large Jewish community in Franklin. Those who were there remember the occasion as a moment charged with excitement, a moment in which our perceptions of our greater community changed, when we realized that we were not alone in our Jewishness.

The publication of a story about those services in the Boston Globe led to the generous donation by the Gildersgame family of the temple's first Torah. A member of this family read about the High Holiday services in the Globe and called Alan Teperow to offer the new congregation a Torah that had been brought from Poland by the caller's grandfather before the Second World War. The Torah was wrapped in a binder that had been rescued from Poland during the Holocaust and had come into the possession of the Gildersgame family at a later time. While the Torah has been badly damaged over the years and it cannot be restored or used for services, it has great symbolic value for the temple.

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The religious school began operating in September, 1991 with four classes, a volunteer staff and forty-four students at the Dean College campus center. Members of the congregation led monthly services throughout that year, until Rabbi Arnold Fertig joined the congregation in July, 1992 on a part time basis.

Up to this time, the congregation had operated under the name of the Reform Temple of Franklin. The congregation voted on a new name and the temple was rededicated as Temple Etz Chaim on Chanukah, the holiday of rededication, in 1992. Temple Etz Chaim became a full member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now known as the Union for Reform Judaism), the congregational arm of Reform Judaism.

Temple Etz Chaim is a charter member of the Franklin Interfaith Council. The organization had formerly been known as the Franklin Ecumenical Council, and the name was changed to reflect the participation of Temple Etz Chaim and the resulting multiplicity of faiths represented in the Franklin community.

From its beginnings, Temple Etz Chaim participated in the Franklin Fourth of July celebration by operating a booth on Franklin Common. This increased the temple's visibility in the wider community and became a wonderful way of participating in a festive local event. Many people in the area remember the men from our congregation circulating around Franklin Common in grass skirts and coconuts, selling glow necklaces and frozen drinks to the crowd that gathered before the fireworks.

Temple Etz Chaim benefited from the use of facilities of many local organizations. Without a temple building of our own, the congregation held services and religious school classes in a wide "campus" of venues in the area, including the Franklin Federated Church, Dean College Campus Center, Franklin High School, Hawthorn Suites Hotel, the First Universalist Society in Franklin, and Medway Middle School. The temple rented an office from which to conduct business and in which to hold meetings.

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The spirit of volunteerism has permeated all aspects of Temple Etz Chaim from its inception. Perhaps nothing symbolizes this better than the image of members of the congregation transporting the Torah from one venue to another, to and from the Franklin Federated Church, and helping each other carry it up the steep stairs of the Dean College chapel. After three years, the temple returned the Torah that had been borrowed from Temple Sinai and since that time has had the use of a Torah borrowed from the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts.

As the congregation grew, the first baby naming was celebrated in 1992 and the first bar mitzvah in 1995. By 1997, Temple Etz Chaim had grown to the point where we needed a rabbi to serve the congregation full time. Rabbinical student Jeffrey Goldwasser became the temple's student rabbi for a year while a search was mounted.

In 1998, Barbara AB Symons became the rabbi of Temple Etz Chaim. For the first time, there were Shabbat services every week. A full schedule of holiday services and celebrations, b'nai mitzvah services, active committees, and religious school events strained the capacities of the facilities throughout the community that were serving the temple's growing needs. In 1999, the first confirmation was held at the Franklin Community Center. In 1999, Temple Etz Chaim purchased the building at 900 Washington Street in Franklin, a beautiful property which had been a private residence and which has been transformed into the congregation's spiritual home. The congregation continued to use other community gathering spaces for large services and for religious school classes.

In 2000, Temple Tifereth Israel in Winthrop donated a Torah. Two members of Temple Etz Chaim had attended this temple in their youth. The membership of Temple Tifereth Israel had dwindled and they generously decided to donate one of their Torahs to our young and growing congregation. A Torah scribe restored the Torah, and members of the congregation were given the opportunity to hold the quill as the scribe put the final letters

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on the parchment. Symbolically our congregation thereby reaffirmed its connection with this Torah, the first to belong to Temple Etz Chaim that can be used and read by worshippers at services.

Between 2006 and 2012, Rabbi David S. Widzer served as Temple Etz Chaim's Rabbi and under his leadership, initiatives were launched to continue to enhance the sense of community among members. Educational and engagement opportunities for post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students expanded and the congregation adopted Mishkan T'filah as its prayer book, bringing a contemporary, inclusive feel to our worship.

July, 2012 marked the beginning of Rabbi Tom Alpert's tenure as the spiritual leader of the community. Rabbi Alpert was ordained from the New York campus of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in 2000 after a previous career as a lawyer.

True to its history of diversity and inclusiveness, Temple Etz Chaim looks forward to continuing to enhance Jewish life in Franklin and the surrounding area. Temple Etz Chaim will continue to be a House of Prayer, a House of Study and a House of Gathering at its home on Washington Street and in other locations throughout the area. We welcome you to our congregation.

This historical account is a work-in-progress. We welcome additional anecdotes and reflections on our history. Please contact us (history@temple-etzchaim.org) with your additions.