

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Howard Starkman: Beth Israel President

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Beth Israel was an integral part of my upbringing. As I mentioned to you, we would attend *tallis* and *tefillin* classes when I was a youth and then there was the inevitable wane, as the tide of times changed. When I was going to high school and university I spent less time certainly involved in Beth Israel and in that world. But as a young lawyer I was asked to serve as a secretary early on in Beth Israel. I started to go to services when they needed a minyan at the behest of one of our famous predecessors Nate Siegel. Nate Siegel was a man to whom you did not say no. He would call me or one of my contemporaries (or two or three of us) to help make up a minyan on a certain morning. We always showed up out of *derech erez* or respect for Nate. As years went on, I became secretary to the board and then again had a hiatus. There was a movement afoot to build a new synagogue or to change the location from where it was on 119th Street to a new location. The leadership at that time felt it important to have, what we were referred to as, “young turks” involved in that transition and I think it was Zane Feldman, who was president, called me and some of my contemporaries to serve on the board. We started to serve on the board and of course, eventually, I was secretary again. I think David Axler was also a secretary. Then we moved, or the movement was complete, to build a new new site and I became less involved in the building, but more involved as I was asked to be president during the transition in 1999. We moved into the new Beth Israel in the year 2000 and that was probably one of the most involved and interesting tasks that I enjoyed as being involved in the community.

It was difficult to say the least; the tensions between the old guard and the new guard were ever present. We were changing presidents, we were changing rabbis. My two predecessors in the old school were quite wonderful -- Mr. Levine, Ron Levine, and then he was followed by Alvin Weinstock. I took over from Alvin, but as you can see, we were all a younger group. There was some tension between the established older people in the congregation and the younger people. My job, as I saw it, was to create a smooth transition and to create a an ambience that was a big umbrella to allow a comfort zone for all ages in the synagogue and for all manner of observance

in this modern Orthodox synagogue. Many interesting board meetings took place and, of course, the saw turning took place in, I think, 1999 -- it was a huge event. It's still a beautiful synagogue. I think it's one of the nicest ones in Canada. Kudos to all those senior members of the community that worked tirelessly to raise money and to build the synagogue: the likes of Joe Shoctor springs to mind, Mr. Hersch Bookhalter, a man by the name of Mr. Laskin, my brother-in-law Jack Soroka was a long-time secretary and fundraiser. There was a whole cadre of people that were involved -- Elexis and Eric Schloss were big contributors and active in putting the synagogue on its feet.

Then we had to deal with finding an appropriate rabbi. That was a challenge in itself. So our first rabbi that we hired was a young fellow, and those were still the memorable glory days of the Oilers. I was mindful of the fact that Wayne Gretzky came to the Oilers as a young man and proved to be a superstar. So we hired a very young, first term rabbi by the name of Rabbi Enkin and that proved to be a very challenging and interesting time period. He was subsequently replaced by a wonderful rabbi of many years, Rabbi Friedman and his wife Batya. If ever a dynamic duo they were and they really put Beth Israel on its feet. But there were many issues during that period of time involving the degree of observance that we wanted the synagogue to have such as the mechitza, which was a big problem, and the sound system. In the synagogue on 119th Street we had a sound system and it had been approved by a rabbi in South Africa. The religiosity of that sound system became a problem in the new synagogue. So we had many discussions and attempts to find ways of satisfying those with hearing difficulties at the synagogue. We encouraged seats near the front during "sermon" time but I don't know how successful we were there. "Sermon" time was nap time for me anyways, but as president I sat on the *bimah* and it was a fight to stay awake and to participate. I remember many financial incidents in that context but that was a great adventure in Edmonton and proved to be a very interesting building.