

Bohnai Yisrael / Young Peoples Synagogue

Young Peoples Synagogue was formed in 1946 and incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1955. The Hebrew name 'Bohnai Yisrael' (translation: Builders of Israel) was added more recently when the children of some of the founding members emigrated to Israel.

The founders were young men, then members of Hapoel Hamizrachi, a religious Zionist youth group, who felt that the older members of the established congregations were excluding them from direct participation in the liturgical and administrative conduct of the synagogues. The founders were all graduates of Hebrew day schools or of seminary preparatory schools and had sound Jewish religious educations. They resolved to conduct their own traditional services, without benefit of formal clergy.

Since that time, the same principle has continued to guide the development of the Congregation. Continuing to this day, the members of the Congregation take their turns in leading the services, giving the sermons, and leading the classes in the study of the weekly Pentateuchal portion and the commentaries thereon. Wives take an equal share in membership on the Board of Trustees and in active chairmanships of committees.

The members of the Congregation represent the complete spectrum of the lay professions: businessmen, attorneys, physicians, scientists, engineers, and academics in all those disciplines, nearly all of whom take their turns in conducting the services.

The Congregation is not a 'full-service' synagogue -- we hold services only on Sabbath and HolyDay mornings and evenings, and we do not operate a religious school. As a result, many (perhaps most) of our members also hold memberships in the more formal synagogues to avail themselves of the services there offered, including week-day services and the support of the local rabbinate, but continue to attend our Sabbath and HolyDay services because of their attractive participative quality. Our children receive their Hebrew educations in the Pittsburgh Jewish day schools. Our members can be found as active participants in all of the Jewish community's organizations, and in the general community as well.

We own no real estate (we hold services in the auditorium of the Hebrew Institute) and have no professional secretariat. Because we are a very low overhead operation, we typically donate about a third of the Congregation's income from membership fees and contributions to charitable and educational institutions.

We consider ourselves a 'teaching' synagogue. By this we mean that we place a higher priority on giving people opportunities to develop their liturgical and administrative skills rather than on excellence of performance. The tenure of the principal officers of the Congregation is limited to two years. We encourage our older children to take leading parts in the conduct of the Synagogue's affairs. Our greatest pride is in the number of our children who, on pursuing their professional careers in other cities, have there taken on significant leadership roles in synagogues and in community affairs, primarily, we believe, because of the examples we have tried to set them.

David H. Fax
25 August 1988