

Vassar Temple

175 Years of Worship and Service

As Vassar Temple celebrates its 175th anniversary, we are especially proud of the long history of our congregation which was founded in 1848 as Congregation Brethren of Israel. Twenty years later the members moved their worship services from the upper floor of a building on Main Street in Poughkeepsie to a former church they had purchased on Vassar Street. Matthew Vassar, Jr. held the \$3,000 mortgage on that building whose location inspired the nickname of the congregation, Vassar Temple.

For newcomers to America, and to a small city with few Jewish dwellers, the temple quickly became an important institution, providing a place of worship, a sense of community, important friendships, and opportunities to help one another make their way in a new land. Membership grew dramatically from the original sixteen families. Children attended Religious School in the basement of the temple which was also the site of teas, oneg shabbats and family celebrations. In 1906 a Fair and Exposition was held for the purpose of raising money to retire the mortgage. Mayor Hine of Poughkeepsie described the exhibits as "the finest ever displayed in the city."

The congregation began as an Orthodox one and in the early years of the twentieth century gradually moved toward Reform Judaism. In 1923 Vassar Temple officially became Reform when it adopted the Union Prayerbook. It joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism) in 1951. In the 1930s the Sisterhood and Men's Club had become formal auxiliaries, although the women of the congregation had long been active supporters of temple life. When Gates of Prayer was published in 1975 it replaced the Union Prayerbook at Vassar Temple's worship services and more recently, we began using Mishkan T'filah when it was published by the Union for Reform Judaism.

For the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the congregation in 1948 a committee was headed by Henry Morgenthau, former Secretary of the Treasury under President Franklin Roosevelt, as Honorary Chairman and Albert Kahn as General Chairman. The Century Fund Committee, chaired by Dr. Albert Rosenberg, raised funds for the construction and furnishing of the building on Hooker Avenue at Cherry Street in the City of Poughkeepsie on land donated by Richard Satz. The current home of Vassar Temple was dedicated in 1953 and has proved to be flexible enough to accommodate the changing needs of an active congregation.

Our members have always worked toward *tikkun olam* (the repair of the world), serving the community in many ways. We have promoted blood drives through the Red Cross, made the unhoused comfortable through Hudson River Housing, assisted victims of domestic violence through Grace Smith House, and come to the aid of people in other states and nations in challenging times. The congregation contributes food every month for distribution to Dutchess Outreach and since 1983 has sponsored a monthly free lunch, currently offered at the Family Partnership Center. Congregants continue to participate in the annual CROP Walk and to be active in other activities of the Dutchess County Interfaith Council. Many of Vassar Temple's rabbis have worked with other local clergy for the benefit of our neighbors. We have recently redoubled our efforts to foster inclusion and equity in the temple and the wider community. We also focus on improving the environment. In 2023, the Dutchess County Interfaith council awarded Vassar Temple the Legacy Award in recognition of our social action initiatives.

Vassar Temple is proud to be the oldest continuously functioning Jewish congregation between New York City and Albany, and among the oldest reform congregations in the nation.

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