

Synagogue expires but its heart will go on

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TEMPLE

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Ahavath Achim: Shalom and farewell

erage age is about 70, decided there were not enough members to warrant a replacement. Berkowitz instead used his basic knowledge of Hebrew to conduct services.

"The college crowd has moved elsewhere," Berkowitz said. "We turned around and we were down to 40 or 50 people."

Three decades after they were married there, the Mellingers, both in their early 60s, still worship at the synagogue, but Janet Mellinger's two sisters have moved away.

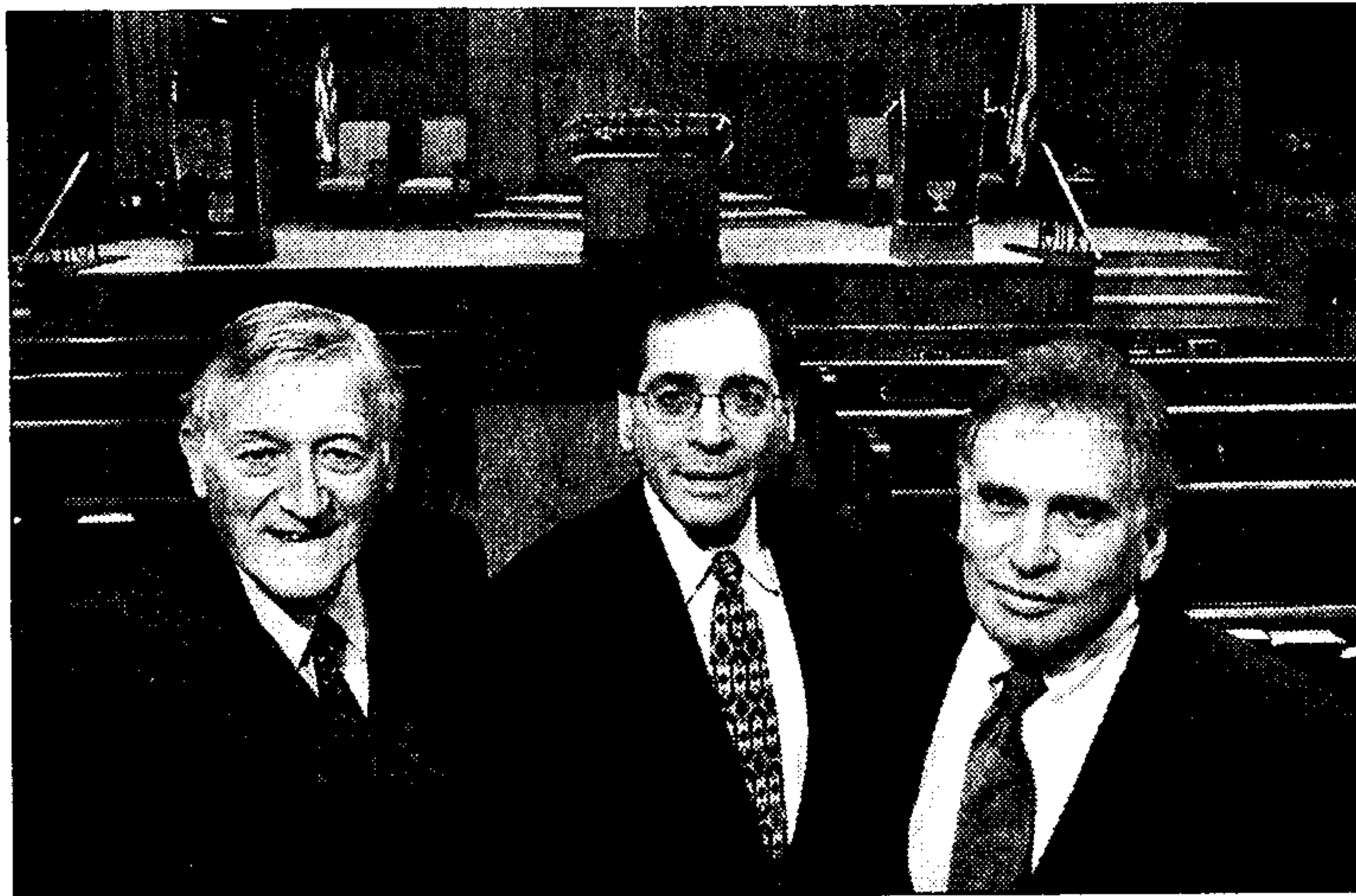
Ahavath Achim will sell its building, and the proceeds will be used to help B'nai Shalom expand. The temple's four Torahs — the scrolls inscribed with the first five books of the Bible — have been moved to B'nai Shalom, where two will be kept and two donated. Then there are the prayer books that have to be disposed of in a special ceremony, and the bronze memorial plaques that will be moved to West Orange.

"It's sad they couldn't continue, and I know they have mixed feelings, but it must be wonderful for them to come here and see life," said Bennett Schwartz, a former Ahavath Achim member who is B'nai Shalom's president.

Experts say the move to the suburbs reflects a nationwide demographic shift in the Jewish population. It is no surprise that the Jewish populations in communities such as Newark and Belleville are shrinking as congregants age and their children move elsewhere.

Newark, which once boasted 50 temples serving a population of 58,000 Jews, now has only two functioning synagogues. And in recent years, the synagogue in Nutley has closed, while Kearny's synagogue is holding on with few members.

"The suburbanization of American Jews is a national trend that has been going on for some time but that is now accelerating because the people who sustained these congregations are elderly Jews who are dying off or moving to Florida," said William B. Helmreich, author of "The Enduring Community: The Jews of Newark and MetroWest."



PHOTOS BY NOAH ADDIS/THE STAR-LEDGER

The transition: Ahavath Achim President Irving Berkowitz, left, stands inside his soon-to-be-closed temple next to Rabbi Stanley Asekoff, whose B'nai Shalom congregation is welcoming the Ahavath Achim members with open arms and a sense of family. At right is B'nai Shalom President Bennett Schwartz, a former Ahavath Achim member.

"When a congregation becomes too small to sustain itself, it tries to extend its life by moving to a larger, more affluent population," Helmreich said.

And B'nai Shalom is doing well, with about 400 families, a Hebrew school with about 200 kids, and plenty of social activities.

"There's so much to choose from," said Janet Mellinger. "It's a different world and nice to be sitting next to 150 people as opposed to 12."

Sephardic Jews first moved to Belleville in the early 1800s to work at a copper mill on the Passaic River, Helmreich said. In the 1840s, they were joined by Jews moving into town from Newark. By the early 1900s, Jews from Manhattan began flocking to Belleville.

But because the township lacked a synagogue — Town Hall was used as a makeshift place of worship through the early part of last century — much of the Jewish population would travel to Newark or New York and spend the night in hotels during the High Holy Days. It was out of that frustration that Ahavath Achim was incorporated in 1921, with the congregation erecting a building on Washington Avenue in 1924.

"They just wanted a place of their own to pray," Berkowitz said.

After experiencing more growth, the foundation was laid for Ahavath Achim at its present location on Academy Street in 1956.

When the last members decided about two years ago that it was time to move on, they visited several other congregations, looking for a merger partner.

Berkowitz said 95 percent of the members agreed on B'nai Shalom because the two Conservative congregations shared theological views and they liked the free-flowing style of Rabbi Stanley Asekoff.

"I understand that this synagogue was the life of the community," Asekoff said. "It's not just walls, it's filled with Jewish life and memories. We want the people who are joining us to feel at home and feel that they are a part of the community."

A couple of the leaders at B'nai Shalom are former Ahavath Achim members. Berkowitz remembers his bar mitzvah there.

Schwartz, the B'nai Shalom president, said: "When I read the memorial plaques, I see the names of a lot of people I've looked up to. Some of the people joining us were the founding and leading officers of Ahavath Achim when I was a kid and now I'm trying to help them."

Members of Ahavath Achim say the spirit of the tight-knit congregation will never die. They still carpool to temple events and keep in touch with the members who have decided to worship elsewhere.

"Deep down we knew this had to come, and we prepared ourselves," said Janet Mellinger. "We are losing a shell but taking what's most important."

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Chanukah gift: Other temple's open arms

BY JEFFERY C. MAYS
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When they were married in 1969, Janet and Martin Mellinger had no idea theirs would be one of the last holy unions celebrated at Ahavath Achim, the only synagogue in Belleville.

"I knew there weren't that many other young Jewish couples in town and that the congregation was small," said Janet Mellinger.

Most of the 125 guests at the ceremony were not members of Ahavath Achim. And in a few years, when the Mellingers had a son and daughter ready to attend Hebrew classes, the children had to attend them in West Orange and Montclair, since Ahavath Achim's Hebrew school had closed.

"We just ran out of human beings," said Irving Berkowitz, Ahavath Achim's president. "We have a bigger ex-community in Florida than we do in Belleville."

After several years of trying to keep alive one of the last synagogues in this part of Essex County, the 40 remaining members of Ahavath Achim have decided to take their Torahs, memorial plaques and other Judaica and merge with the thriving congregation of B'nai Shalom in West Orange.

Members say it is a gut-wrenching but practical decision that will extend the life of the congregation, which was simply running out of members and money. Ahavath Achim congregants observed the High Holy Days at B'nai Shalom and are celebrating Chanukah there — the Festival of Lights, commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, begins tonight — before tying up the formal loose ends early next year.

"We went for as long as we could, but we knew it was time to go," said Martin Mellinger. "We saw the handwriting on the wall."

Instead of the 100-plus families that the synagogue counted as members during its peak in the mid-1960s, it's now a struggle to get a minyan, the minimum of 10 adult worshippers required to begin services.

When the rabbi retired last year because of health problems, the congregation, whose members' av-