Chevra Anshei Lubawitz Synagogue
(original Temple Beth El of Borough Park)

Request for Evaluation
to the
New York Landmarks Preservation Commission

Collection of the Brooklyn Public Library

Photo by Dovid Shor, 2018

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Summary

The Chevra Anshei Lubawitz synagogue, at 4024 Twelfth Avenue in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, is the first built and oldest surviving synagogue in Borough Park. It is also believed to be – together with its near contemporary Ahawas Israel in Greenpoint – one of the two oldest purpose-built synagogues still in synagogue use anywhere in Brooklyn.[1] As Brooklyn has long been home to one of the world's largest Jewish populations, and Borough Park is one of the best-known Jewish neighborhoods in the country, the synagogue has great cultural and historic significance for the history both of Brooklyn and of New York City's Jewish community.

Constructed in 1906-07 for Temple Beth El, a congregation of Eastern-European origin organized in 1902, the building dates to the beginning of the period when Brooklyn was emerging as a major Jewish population center, and Borough Park as a new Jewish neighborhood. Designed by Brooklyn architect John C. Walsh, it is organized on the classic "tenement synagogue" plan that developed on the Lower East Side, with a design that references both classical style and Moorish influences – the latter having become a common way to suggest the Eastern origins of the Jewish people.

When the original Beth El congregation – which had grown enormously in membership and resources – built a larger home elsewhere in the neighborhood, it sold the building at 4024 Twelfth Avenue in 1922 to Chevra Anshei Lubawitz, one of the earliest Brooklyn congregations to affiliate with the Lubavitch Hasidic movement. The Lubavitcher headquarters moved from Europe to Brooklyn in the 1940s, and the movement is now a world-wide phenomenon, with its central address at 770 Eastern Parkway. But the Chevra Anshei Lubawitz congregation predates that event by two decades. Despite the distance from the movement's center in Russia and then Poland, the Brooklyn congregation maintained ties with the leaders of the movement, as is evidenced by surviving correspondence.

Most of the New York City synagogues that have been designated as individual landmarks are in Manhattan; outside that borough, there is only one in Queens and one in Brooklyn.[2] Given Brooklyn's place in the Jewish history of New York City, there

[1] According to Ann Friedman, Director of the Sacred Sites Program at the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Conservancy's survey of Brooklyn synagogues has determined that Beth El/Anshei Lubawitz, of 1906, and Ahawas Israel in Greenpoint, completed in 1905, are "the two oldest surviving purpose-built synagogues in continuous synagogue use" in Brooklyn. A handful of earlier synagogue buildings survive, but they have been converted to other uses. Ahawas Israel falls within the boundaries of the Greenpoint Historic District, so it is protected. The Beth El building has no such protection; it has been closed for the past year while its future is debated. (NB: The Landmarks Preservation Commission's designation report for Greenpoint dates Ahawas Israel "about 1895," but Ms. Friedman has determined, through *Brooklyn Eagle* press accounts, that the date is actually 1904-05 – see "The New Synagogue at 108 Noble Street," *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 25th, 1904, p. 13.)

[2] Magen David Congregation in Bensonhurst, built 1919. There are also several Brooklyn synagogues included within the boundaries of historic districts, but most of these were built as churches. The only

should be more. Given Temple Beth El's age (it is currently 112 years old), its place in the history of Borough Park, and its place in the history of Brooklyn Jewry and synagogues generally, the synagogue deserves consideration for landmark status.

The Jewish community of Brooklyn and of Borough Park[3]

Since 1898, the borough of Brooklyn has been home to one of the largest and best-known Jewish communities in the country and the world. Its history can be traced back to the 1830s, with the arrival of Jewish immigrants from England and Germany.[4] The population remained small until the latter part of the 19th century – an 1870 history of Brooklyn counted perhaps one thousand families and four congregations.[5] But as Brooklyn grew into the country's third largest city, and then New York City's most populous borough, its Jewish population grew exponentially.

Beginning in the 1880s and reaching its peak in the early decades of the 20th century, a major wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants fleeing poverty, religious discrimination, expulsion and massacres found refuge in the United States. Of the roughly two million Jews – perhaps one third of all the Jews in Europe – who arrived here, the great majority settled in New York,[6] where they created an enormous Yiddish-speaking community in which they were able to find *kosher* (ritually acceptable) food, Yiddish-language newspapers, and mutual aid societies. Brooklyn shared in this growth; its Jewish population grew from roughly 100,000 in 1905 to 568,000 in 1918 (out of a city-wide total of 1,330,000),[7] to 800,000 in 1930. By 1927, Jewish residents accounted for roughly a third of Brooklyn's population, and made up almost half the Jewish population of the entire city,[8] and, according to one estimate, "about one-sixteenth of all Jews." In the words of Samuel Abelow, a historian of Brooklyn Jewry:

> In view of the fact that Brooklyn Jewry began with a handful of settlers about 1837, the growth of the community presents one of the most remarkable social phenomena in history.[9]

After World War II, the borough's population, including its Jewish population, began to decline. The 1980s and '90s, however, saw a resurgence, as the flight to the suburbs slowed, and a wave of new Jewish immigrants found their way to

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purpose-built Brooklyn synagogues within a historic district, other than Ahawas Israel, are Congregation Beth Elohim in the Park Slope Historic District and Temple Beth Emeth of Flatbush in the Prospect Park South Historic District.

[3] The material in this section has been condensed from the author's nomination to the National Register of the successor synagogue, Temple Beth El of Borough Park at 4802 15th Avenue.

[4] Samuel P. Abelow, *History of Brooklyn Jewry* (Brooklyn: Scheba Publishing Company, 1937), pp. 5-9.

[5] Henry Stiles, *A History of the City of Brooklyn*.

[6] Moses Rischin, *The Promised Land: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (New York, 1970), p. 20, cited in Andrew Dolkart, *National Register Nomination: Lower East Side Historic District* (New York: 1999).

[7] *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City 1917-1918* (New York: Kehillah [Jewish Community], 1918).

[8] Abramovitch and Galvin, p. 5.

[9] Abelow, p.13.

Brooklyn.[10] Today's community – roughly 420,000, out of the city's total of 1.13 million – is made up of many different elements:

> Brooklyn's Jewish life is breathtaking in its diversity. Major groupings in the borough include Jews from the former Soviet Union, from Syria, Jews of central and eastern European origin, Israeli Jews, Jews from Arab lands, Iranian Jews. There are large numbers of elderly Jews, yuppie Jews, Holocaust survivors, Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox…. Within its borders, Brooklyn has contained major centers of Jewish religious, educational, and all varieties of Zionist and anti-Zionist life.[11]

Among the most heavily populated Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn is Borough Park (also spelled Boro Park[12]), located in the southwestern part of the borough within the old town of New Utrecht. Its boundaries are variously described, but generally considered to be 37th Street on the north, 64th Street on the south, McDonald Avenue on the east, and 8th Avenue on the west. Development began in the 1880s; [13] by 1911 the neighborhood had become heavily built up.[14]

Jewish immigration into Borough Park began early in the 20th century. A lengthy article in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1909 described the newly flourishing community, noting that the neighborhood now had five Jewish congregations. By 1930, the Jewish population of Borough Park had reached roughly 60,000, or half the neighborhood.[15]

In the period following World War II, the Jewish population of Borough Park became, in historian Mayer's words, "the most important Orthodox Jewish community in the country."[16] Today, as described in *The Jewish Week*:

> Ninety percent of the inhabitants are Jewish, most are *chasidic* or *haredi* [fervently Orthodox]…. With over 100,000 inhabitants, that makes Boro Park the largest religious Jewish community in the world outside of Jerusalem.[17]

<u>Synagogues in Brooklyn and Borough Park</u>

Synagogues have always played a major role in the life of New York's Jewish population. Brooklyn's synagogues reflect the religion's varied modern history – there

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[10] Marc D. Angel, Jeffrey S. Gurock, "Jews," *Encyclopedia of New York City*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 622.
[11] Abramovich and Galvin, p.3.
[12] In this report, the name is spelled "Borough Park" unless it appears as "Boro Park" in a quoted source, in which case that spelling is retained.
[13] General information from John J. Gallagher, "Borough Park," *Encyclopedia of New York City*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p.129.
[14] "South Brooklyn's Rapid Development," *New York Times*, April 23, 1911, p. XX2.
[15] Mayer, p.24.
[16] Mayer, p.34.
[17] Joshua Halberstam, "A Rebbe's Grandson Returns Home," *Jewish Week*, March 6, 2009, p. S4-S5.

are synagogues associated with the Reform and Conservative movements, as well as Modern Orthodoxy and the synagogues of the borough's many Hasidic communities.[18]

Brooklyn's first Jewish congregation, Beth Elohim, met informally in 1848 in Williamsburg, and officially incorporated in 1851. In 1859, the congregation bought a Lutheran church on South First Street and converted it to use as Brooklyn's first synagogue. In 1862, Brooklyn's second Jewish congregation, Baith Israel, constructed Brooklyn's first purpose-built synagogue at the corner of Boerum Place and State Street.[19]

Within 40 years, Brooklyn synagogues numbered in the hundreds. New York's 1918 Jewish population was served by 700 synagogues, of which not quite 300 were located in Brooklyn; of those, Borough Park had 27 permanent synagogues and 13 temporary ones. Of the 27 permanent synagogues, 15 were identified as orthodox, 7 as conservative, and 5 as reform. Twenty of these permanent synagogues had their own buildings.[20] The neighborhood's first synagogue building, Temple Beth El (now Anshei Lubawitz), still stands, and is considered – together with its near contemporary, Ahawas Israel in Greenpoint of 1904 – to be one of the two oldest built as a synagogue and still in synagogue use surviving in all of Brooklyn.[21]

Temple Beth-El of Borough Park: The Congregation[22]

Temple Beth-El of Borough Park, now called Anshei Lubawitz, has served an Orthodox congregation for most of its existence. The original congregation appears to have been formed in 1902 as a Reform congregation – which would account for its original name, "Temple" being a name more typical of Reform synagogues. But by the time of the synagogue's opening in 1907, Beth El was led by a prominent Orthodox rabbi, Rav Avraham Eber Hirschowitz, who stayed with Beth El until after the congregation moved into a larger home in 1922.

The congregation initially met in temporary quarters at 40th Street and 13th Avenue. As described in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1903:

> Congregation Beth El was organized on July 15 and incorporated August 2, 1902.

[18] Though Judaism is small in numbers of adherents, compared to such religions as Christianity and Islam, it has many different theological manifestations. For a description and history, see Isidore Epstein, *Judaism* (Penguin Books, 1959, reprinted 1973), especially Chapter 21, "Modern Movements in Judaism."
[19] The congregation moved to more residential Cobble Hill in 1905, and their former synagogue was demolished to make way for the Brooklyn House of Detention in the 1950s. (Information courtesy of Ann Friedman at the New York Landmarks Conservancy.)
[20] *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City 1917-1918* (New York: Kehillah [Jewish Community], 1918), chart opposite page 122.
[21] See footnote 1 above.
[22] The material in this section has been condensed from the author's nomination to the National Register of the successor synagogue, Temple Beth El of Borough Park at 4802 15th Avenue.

> The congregation is in a flourishing condition and has progressed far beyond the expectations of the charter members. The membership is increasing constantly. Congregation Beth El is a reform body.

The *Eagle* quoted the congregation's chairman, Bela Tokaji:

> "Its members are reformers in the full meaning of the word, and take great pride in announcing to the Jewish residents in this growing section of the Borough of Brooklyn that they will do their best to promote modern Judaism, American Judaism," said Mr. Tokaji last night. "They are determined to arouse the Jews of Flatbush, Windsor Terrace, Kensington, Flatlands, Martense, Borough Park, Bath Beach and Bensonhurst from their lethargy, to induce them to take an interest in Jewish affairs, and to promote social intercourse. They heartily approve the resolutions adopted by the delegates of the Union American Hebrew Congregation [sic], in convention in the City of St. Louis last year, to find ways and means to bring together the orthodox and reform Jews and to establish unity, not only throughout the length and breadth of our glorious country but all over the world."[23]

It is unclear what precisely the founders meant by "Reform," however. When the new building opened in 1907, the congregation was being led by Rabbi Hirschowitz, and a 1909 article described Beth El as:

> …the most prominent Orthodox congregation of Borough Park. In addition to having a Talmud Torah [religious school], there is a Woman's auxiliary…. Within the last two years this orthodox element of Borough Park has been increasing and has settled in the section of Borough Park below Thirty-ninth Street. Here, as in Brownsville and Williamsburg, the Russian, Polish and Hungarian Jews are very anxious to adapt themselves to the conditions and make themselves part of their environment and to become good American citizens.[24]

Among the founders were Jews from a variety of backgrounds. Henry I. Lyons, founder and first president of the congregation, was a

> …retired woolen merchant of Manhattan and well known in philanthropic circles in Brooklyn…and the first president of the Hebrew Educational Foundation of Borough Park.[25]

Another founder was Samuel Honig,

> …vice president of Schranz & Bieber, Inc., wholesale toys, 115 Fifth Avenue… Mr. Honig was born in Austria in 1897 and made his home in the Boro Park

[23] "Reformed Jews at Work," *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 6, 1903, p.10.
[24] "Borough Park Jewry Progressive Community," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* June 20, 1909, p.1.
[25] *New York Times*, obituary, June 12, 1932, p.30.

> section of Brooklyn. He was a founder and member of the board of governors of Temple Beth El, Brooklyn....[26]

Yet another founder, Louis Jesse Robbins,

> … was born in Russia, and for many years had been a field agent for the Mutual Life Insurance Co.[27]

In 1908, a survey in the *American Jewish Yearbook* described Beth El as having a membership of 110; officers included President Moses Napelbaum, Treasurer Philip Gurian, Sr., and Secretary Henry Lyons. The synagogue had daily services in Hebrew, and a school with three teachers and 78 children.[28]

The Temple Beth El Synagogue

In 1905, the congregation had grown to the point where it was able to build its own synagogue. The new building was designed by Brooklyn architect John C. Walsh and constructed by a local Borough Park builder, Vito De Fino.

J.C. Walsh (as he was known professionally; dates undetermined) was active in Brooklyn from the mid-1890s until at least the end of the first decade of the new century; he had offices on Eastern Parkway (1897) and Fulton Street (1899-1900),[29] before settling at No. 4 Court Square, a building favored by Brooklyn architects and construction companies, close to Brooklyn Borough Hall. Much of his work was residential; in 1906 and 1907, apparently two of his busiest years, he filed plans for dozens of houses and tenements in various parts of the borough.[30] He also designed a large Colonial-inspired house at 171 Westminster Road in what is now the Prospect Park South Historic District,[31] as well as a three-story school building in Long Island City[32], and a four-story office building in Baltimore.[33]

Temple Beth El appears to have been his first venture in synagogue architecture, but its design must have impressed the community, because the following year, 1907, Walsh was hired to design a larger and more expensive synagogue, also in Borough Park, for Congregation Emanuel[34] (that synagogue, unfortunately, was recently demolished).

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[26] *New York Times*, obituary, July 17, 1955 p. 61.
[27] *Brooklyn Eagle*, obituary, May 29, 1922, p. 5.
[28] *American Jewish Year Book, 5668,* Henrietta Szold editor (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1908), p. 262.
[29] Dennis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice New York City 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979), p. 97.
[30] As reported in various issues of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle.*
[31] New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Prospect Park South Historic District Designation Report*, LP- 0979 (New York: City of New York, 1979), p. 131.
[32] *School Board Journal* (Vol. XXVIII, No. 4, Milwaukee NY, April 1904), p. 27.
[33] *Industrial Development and Manufacturers' Record*, March 3, 1904, p. 143.
[34] *American Architect and Building News*, July 20, 1907, p. 92: "Architect J.C. Walsh, 4 Court Square, has plans prepared for a temple at Fourteenth Avenue and Forty-ninth Street for the Congregation Emanuel. Cost, $75,000."

Not much is known about the synagogue's builder, Vito De Fino (?-1918),[35] but his daughter wrote a short article about the family in 1994:

> In 1906, the recently established congregation of Temple Beth-El hired my father to build a synagogue. Completed in 1906 [sic], the synagogue is still standing at 4022 12th Avenue but is now occupied by Congregation Anshei Lubawitz. The previous year, 1905, my Parents, Tecla and Vito De Fino, and their children had moved from Manhattan to the house they had recently bought on 39th Street and 10th Avenue…[36]

Cornerstone of Congregation Beth El (photo: Dovid Shor)

Plans for laying the cornerstone of the new synagogue attracted attention in the press:

> NEW TEMPLE TO BE BUILT FOR CONGREGATION BETH EL
>
> Plans have been filed with the Building Department for a temple to be erected at the northwest corner of Twelfth avenue and Forty-first street by the Congregation Beth El of Borough Park.
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> The building will be of Moorish design, half brick and half frame, and according to present arrangements is to be completed by the middle of August next. J.C. Walsh is the architect.

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[35]From *The American Contractor*, September 28, 1918, p.27: "Vito de Fino, a contractor of Brooklyn, N.Y., died at his home in that city September 18, aged 44 years."
[36] Belle De Fino Gambaro, "I Remember Boro Park: Historical Highlights," *Boro Park Community News*, May 4, 1994, p.151.

> Michael Furst will on Sunday June 10, lay the cornerstone with the appropriate ceremonies. The congregation, which was the first one in the section, was organized about four years ago by a few men…. Its present membership numbers nearly one hundred. The Building Committee, of which Henry Lyons is the chairman, is working very hard to bring the undertaking to a successful conclusion.[37]

Additional details followed in reporting on the cornerstone ceremony:

CONGREGATION BETH-EL CORNERSTONE LAID.

The cornerstone of the congregation Beth El was laid yesterday at Twelfth avenue and Forty-first street. M. Napelbaum, president of the board of trustees, presided at the ceremonies.

Michael Furst laid the cornerstone while the Fourteenth Regiment band played the national anthem. Addresses were made by Borough President Coler, Henry Lyons, Rabbi H. Wessler and M. Napelbaum.

Congregation Beth El was organized in 1902, since which time services have been held in Forrester's Hall, at Fortieth street and Thirteenth avenue. From a membership of seventeen persons the congregation has increased to nearly two hundred.

The new temple will cost in the neighborhood of $30,000, which amount has already been pledged. The edifice will be of Moorish style of architecture. It is expected the building will be completed early in the fall. The dedication services are set for the first Sunday in September.

The officers of the Congregation are: M. Napelbaum, president; E. Rapaporte, first vice-president; H. Saftschink, second vice-president; P. Gurean, treasurer; W. Wasserstrom, recording secretary; Henry Lyons, financial secretary; and the Rev. H. Wessler, rabbi.

Brooklyn Standard Union, June 2, 1906.

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>
> Michael Furst laid the cornerstone while the Fourteenth Regiment band played the national anthem. Addresses were made by Borough President Coler, Henry Lyons, Rabbi H. Wessler and M. Napelbaum.

[37] "New Temple to be Built for Congregation Beth El," *Brooklyn Standard Union*, June 2, 1906.

> Congregation Beth El was organized in 1902, since which time services have been held in Forrester's Hall, at Fortieth street and Thirteenth avenue. From a membership of seventeen persons the congregation has increased to nearly two hundred.
>
> The new temple will cost in the neighborhood of $20,000, which amount has already been pledged. The edifice will be of Moorish style of architecture….[38]

A more expansive description appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and gives an indication of how the new synagogue was seen at the time. It included descriptions of two dignitaries who participated in the ceremony: Bird S. Coler, Brooklyn Borough President, and Michael Furst, not a member of Temple Beth El, but a well-known Brooklyn lawyer active in Jewish affairs, son of the founder of Brooklyn's first synagogue and a prominent member of Brooklyn's Jewish community. Furst's "father was the president of the first congregation in the Western District of Brooklyn."[39] On his death in 1934, Michael Furst was referred to as "the grand old man of Brooklyn Jewry."[40]

> Borough President Bird S. Coler was the principal speaker at the ceremonies attending the laying of the cornerstone of the Temple Beth El….which comprises most of the Hebrews of the Martense and Borough Park sections.
>
> Michael Furst laid the cornerstone with a silver trowel made especially for the occasion, while the borough president and a thousand Hebrews looked on…
>
> Mr. Lyons introduced Borough President Coler, who said, among other things:
>
> "It is always a pleasure to me to attend at the opening of any enterprise that will tend toward the elevating and uplifting of the citizens. There are more Jews in this great city of ours than in any other city of the earth, and as time goes on you are beginning to play an important part in the workings of this great nation. If we are to have good citizens, it must be through the religious organizations, and I hope that the Jews will be in the forefront of that work. It is your duty to do all you can to help raise this synagogue…." Mr. Coler was heartily applauded.
>
> …Michael Furst…was given a great ovation. He spoke of the onward march in the progress of the Jews in this country, saying in part:
>
> "Fifty years ago there was but one Jewish congregation in the then City of Brooklyn. But since those early days there have come to us people who have so utilized their meager resources that the Jewish race to-day plays a very important part in the affairs of our city, state and national government.

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[38] "Congregation Beth-El Cornerstone Laid," *Brooklyn Standard Union*, undated clipping.
[39] "Hebrew Home of Worship Opened in Borough Park," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 13, 1907.
[40] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 28, 1834, p. 15 col. 1.

> "This event we celebrate to-day…will mean much to the Jewish people of this Borough Park section…where we will worship God according to the most ancient customs. Our religion was old when various other creeds sprang into being. But while we are doing our duty in perpetuating our belief, let us not forget that, aside from religion, we are citizens of the United States of America, our country, the greatest nation on earth."[41]

Borough President Coler and Michael Furst, among others, returned in May of 1907 for the dedication of the completed building.[42]

The synagogue's cornerstone laying was also noticed in the Yiddish-language press, and one account gives the community's perspective on the new synagogue. Aside from recounting the events of the ceremony, the article noted:

> Borough Park is one of the neighborhoods in which the Jewish population has grown a lot in recent times. It now boasts about 400 families…and their number is growing exponentially every day. Until now, the congregation…would gather in rented space. But now they are about to have their own grand temple….
>
> It is said that the "boom" began around 8-9 years ago – but they would not sell lots to Jews. It is therefore heartening to see the Jewish community flourishing here, and tending to its communal needs.
>
> Nearly all of the Jewish residents of Borough Park were present at the ceremony….
>
> Mr. Michael Furst, a renowned lawyer, held an hour-long address in which he gave an overview of growth of the Jewish community in Brooklyn. He related that exactly fifty years earlier, his own father had placed the cornerstone for the first synagogue in all of Brooklyn. At that time there was only a handful of Jews in Brooklyn, and today Brooklyn Jews comprise ten percent of all Jews in America…. He concluded with an appeal that the Jews should be good Jews inside the synagogue, and loyal citizens outside it….[43]

<u>The Design of Temple Beth-El</u>

John C. Walsh does not appear to have had much experience – perhaps none – in designing synagogues, but likely had some direction from the congregation, and may have looked at other synagogues of the day, because his design conforms to two broad patterns in late-19th and early 20th-century synagogue design: the layout as a "tenement synagogue" and the use of the "Moorish style."

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[41] "Laid a Cornerstone," *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 11, 1906, p. 10.
[42]" Hebrew Home of Worship Opened in Borough Park," *op. cit.*
[43] "New Synagogue in Boro Park," *The Morgen Zhournal*, June 11, 1906. (Translation from the Yiddish by Yitzchok Shteierman.)

The history of New York synagogues extends back to the construction in 1729 of the original "Shearith Israel" or Mill Street synagogue (demolished). In the intervening three centuries, synagogue architecture has gone through many iterations. Surviving New York synagogues include a number of distinct types, ranging from "stieblach," or store-front synagogues; to vernacular "tenement synagogues" – long narrow structures suited to the 100x20 foot lots typical of the Lower East Side (e.g. the National Register-listed Stanton Street Shul on the Lower East Side); to grand, high-style "cathedral" synagogues (e.g. Central Synagogue, a New York City landmark in midtown Manhattan).

The Temple Beth El synagogue was designed as a local synagogue for a small neighborhood population, not as a grand architectural statement. Though built in an outlying neighborhood, Temple Beth El is remarkable in that it closely resembles the vernacular "tenement synagogues" that sprang up on the Lower East Side. Small vernacular synagogues on narrow tenement lots were the most common type there – much as vernacular synagogues were by far the most common in Europe and the Middle East.[44]

The architects of such Lower East Side synagogues, which had to be shoehorned onto narrow tenement lots, developed what has been characterized as a unique vernacular style. On their exteriors, these buildings were similar in size, materials and proportions to neighboring tenements or small commercial buildings. Their facades were often an adaptation of forms popular for larger synagogues. The resulting designs often featured a brick and stone tripartite façade, in a neo-Classical or Beaux-Arts style. Inside, the architects had to adapt the long, narrow proportions of a typical tenement lot to the ritual requirements of the congregation: an ark at the far end to hold the Torah scrolls, a *bimah* in the middle, facing the ark, from which services were led and the Torah scrolls read, and a gallery for women worshippers (who sat separately from men, in accordance with Orthodox Jewish practice) ringing the space on three sides. Traditionally, synagogues faced east so that congregations could pray in the direction of Jerusalem. Many small synagogues, however, with limited budgets, had to make do with narrow lots facing north or south, and so were unable to have sanctuaries facing east.

Temple Beth El follows the "tenement synagogue" pattern almost exactly, though it was able to take advantage of a wider lot, and unlike versions on the Lower East side it is a free-standing structure on a corner lot. The building is oriented southeast-northwest rather than east-west. Inside the synagogue, the long, narrow sanctuary includes a raised reader's platform towards the center, and a built-in ark for the Torah scrolls at the south end. Rising above the room on either side are galleries for the women's section, and a shallow barrel-vaulted plaster ceiling painted to suggest a cloudy sky. The walls on either side are adorned with tall stained-glass windows with Jewish symbols, notable the *magen*

[44] Interview with Dr. Samuel Gruber, author of *Synagogues* and Director of the Jewish Heritage Research Center in Syracuse, N.Y., quoted in Shari Goldberg, "Vernacular Synagogue Architecture," *Common Bond* (New York: New York Landmarks Conservancy, Winter 2001), Vol. 16, No 2., page 2.

David (shield of David, commonly called star of David). The far wall with the ark is covered by illusionistic painting suggesting elaborate drapery.[45]

Photo: Dovid Shor

The synagogue's façade is arranged in a typically tripartite design with a central entrance and reflects both Classical and Moorish influences. Though partially obscured by a one-story added porch, the façade is arranged as a central entrance flanked by a slightly projecting tower on either side. The details – notably the round-arched windows – are modestly classical, as is the cornice supported on console brackets. The organization, on the other hand – as suggested in the newspaper accounts describing the synagogue's

[45] The painting appears to be a later addition.

design – reflects the popularity of Moorish-style ornament of a type that developed in Europe and America from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries – in the belief that the Moorish represented a more "Eastern," and therefore more culturally appropriate style, for Jewish buildings.

Early photo of Temple Beth El from the collection of the Brooklyn Public Library

As one historian explains, in discussing the introduction of Moorish ornament into 19th-century European synagogues:

> When churches began to forsake classical architecture for the Gothic styles of the Middle Ages, synagogues (with few exceptions) did not follow suit, partly because Gothic was thought to be identified too closely with Christianity. Perhaps the revival of interest in the Jews of medieval Spain was responsible for a return to the architectural style of their synagogues. In a spirit of romantic escapism, the [synagogues] of the industrial age evoked the splendor of the palaces and gardens of the Alhambra. Reports of the synagogues of Toledo, now used as churches, began to percolate. Perhaps there was also the thought that the Jews derived from the Middle East, and in Islamic countries, had enjoyed a greater continuity of residence and respect than in the west; their architectural association with Saracenic detail would therefore have been of longer duration than other styles.[46]

A modest use of the style by Gottfried Semper in 1838-40 for interior detail at a synagogue in Dresden may be the earliest example. It was followed by grander examples in Cologne, Vienna and other European cities. Architect Leopold Eidlitz brought the style to New York in 1868, in his design for the former Temple Emanu-El (demolished). Frank Furness (unlike Eidlitz, not himself Jewish) used the style at the Rodef Shalom synagogue in Philadelphia (1869/70).

> By 1866, elaborate angle towers which characterized this design, were an accepted feature of the Moorish style; they were adopted in many countries, crowned with balloon-like cupolas or onion-shaped and bulbous domes. They flank synagogues of varying sizes at Liverpool, London and New York (Lexington Avenue) [Central Synagogue].[47]

It is the use of flanking towers that most connects Temple Beth El to the Moorish style. Large, elaborately ornamental synagogues in Europe and the United States share this arrangement of a central entrance under a pediment or gable, flanked by slightly projecting towers that rise higher than the central area. Examples range from the Jubilee Synagogue in Prague to Central Synagogue in midtown Manhattan. Temple Beth El is far more modest than such buildings, and lacks the typical horse-shoe arch and other Moorish-inspired details, but the arrangement is clear, and the intention spelled out in those contemporary newspaper accounts of the building. In 1920, when the congregation had grown much larger and wealthier, a new Temple Beth El (listed in the National Register) was designed in a far more elaborate version of the style – but both of the congregation's two homes, each its own way, reflect the interest in Moorish design for synagogues.

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[46] Edward Jamilly, "The Architecture of the Contemporary Synagogue," in Cecil Roth, ed., *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 766.
[47] *Ibid*., 767.

Jubilee Synagogue, Prague

Temple Beth El, Borough Park

Temple Beth El has undergone alterations, in particular being refaced with stucco, and having the addition of a porch, supported by four columns; its roof appears to have been re-shingled, and the molded and bracketed cornice has been simplified and soffit encapsulated in aluminum or vinyl siding. The building's overall design, however, remains largely intact, as does its interior.

Temple Beth El from 1907 to 1922

Though modest in size, from the start Beth El played a major role in Borough Park's Jewish life. In 1906, a Chanukka celebration at the synagogue was noted in the press:

> Kanuka [sic], or the Feast of Dedication, an everlasting memorial to the glorious victory won by Judas Maccabeus over the Greeks and Syrians, was celebrated Tuesday afternoon and evening by the Women's Auxiliary of the Congregation Beth El of Borough Park at their new synagogue…. About a thousand men, women and children were present. The programme was very elaborate, consisting of songs, piano solos, recitations, cornet solos and violin solos….[48]

An event in 1907, too large to fit into the synagogue itself, attracted press interest:

[48] *Brooklyn Standard Union*, 1906 (only the year of the clipping is known).

MASQUERADE BALL FOR BETH EL SYNAGOGUE

A brilliant event in the South Brooklyn social circle was the first annual masquerade ball given by the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Congregation Beth El of Borough Park, this congregation being the first Jewish congregation in the great and growing Martense and Borough Park section. The ball was held last night at the Borough Park Clubhouse, and the affair was an entire success.[49]

Even as more synagogues were built in Borough Park and around Brooklyn generally, Temple Beth El was listed in a group of eight of the borough's "prominent synagogues" in a front-page article about Brooklyn's Jewish community in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1909:[50]

From *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 3, 1909, front page
Temple Beth El is pictured in the upper left-hand corner

[49] *Daily Standard Union*, March 5, 1907, p. 9.
[50] "The Jews of Brooklyn," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 3, 1909, p. 1.

Another article that year described Temple Beth El's importance:

> The most prominent orthodox congregation of Borough Park is Congregation Beth-El. In addition to having a Talmud Torah, there is a Women's Auxiliary. Mr. Tokaji is the president of this congregation. Within the last two years this orthodox element of Borough Park has been increasing and has settled in the section of Borough Park below Thirty-ninth street.[51]

The congregation's first rabbi, Rabbi Wesler, was present at the cornerstone laying in 1906, but by the building's completion in 1907, Rabbi Wesler had been succeeded by a well-known and highly respected Orthodox rabbi, Rav Avraham Eber Hirschowitz.[52] Born in Lithuania, Hirschowitz and his family emigrated to Australia, but eventually moved to New York City in 1894 for a position at the Eldridge Street Synagogue. From there he moved to Toledo Ohio, but returned to New York in 1906, and in 1907, having moved to Boro Park, took what would be his last rabbinical post, at Temple Beth El. Among Rabbi Hirschowitz's publications is *Religious Duties of the Daughters of Israel*, originally published in 1902[53] and reprinted in a third edition in 1917.[54] Rabbi Hirschowitz accompanied the congregation to its new building,[55] and then retired in 1922 and moved to Jerusalem.

Though new synagogues came to Borough Park, Beth El continued to grow in numbers and wealth, until by 1919 it became necessary to build a much larger new home. As described in the *Brooklyn Eagle*:

> This [new] temple…is the outgrowth of a small congregation that started about 19 years ago with a membership of 25 men….[56]

That synagogue, the current Beth El of Borough Park, still stands at 4802 15th Avenue. But the original Beth El continued in synagogue use. It was sold in 1922 to Chevra

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[51] "Borough Park Jewry Progressive Community," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 20, 1909, p. 1.
[52] The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article describing the opening of the synagogue in 1907 listed "the Rev. A. Herschowitz" and "the Rev. Philip Jaches" as addressing the congregation. The 1908 *American Jewish Yearbook* of 1908, *op. cit.*, lists Beth El's rabbi as "Solomon Hershowitz," but this appears to be an error. In *The American Jewish Yearbook* in 1917,"Hirschowitz, Abraham Eber" is listed as the rabbi of "Cong. Beth El of Boro Park." ("List of Rabbis and Instructors," page 377). For more on Rabbi Hirschowitz, see Yitzvhok Steierman, "Rav Avrohom Ever Hirschowitz," in *Yated Ne'eman*, November 10, 2017, p. 127.
[53] Rabbi Abraham E. Hirschowitz, *Religious Duties of the Daughters of Israel* (New York, 1902); he is listed on the title page as "Rabbi Abraham E. Hirschowitz, Rabbi of Cong. "Sons of Israel," Anshei Kalwarier, New York, formerly of Melbourne, Australia." Congregation Sons of Israel Anshei Kalwarier, also known as the Pike Street Synagogue, is a New York City landmark.
[54] Titled *Yohale Sarah, containing Religious Duties of the Daughters of Israel and Moral Helps* (New York, 1917).
[55] He was present at the cornerstone laying ceremony for the new Beth El synagogue on 15th Avenue. "Sell Cornerstones at Temple Exercise," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 14, 1920: "Rabbi Hirschowitz of Temple Beth-El offered prayer."
[56] "Imposing Temple to Be Dedicated By Borough Park Jews on May 13," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 22, 1923.

Anshei Lubawitz, one of Brooklyn's first congregations of Lubavitcher chasidim, with its own special history.

Chevra Anshei Lubawitz[57]

The Lubavitcher movement – also known as Chabad, an acronym of the Hebrew words chochma (wisdom), bina (understanding) and da'at (knowledge) – is perhaps the largest, and certainly the best known, branch of Hasidic Judaism. Founded in the late 18th century in eastern Europe by Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the movement relocated to Brooklyn c. 1940. For most of its existence, the movement was led by seven Rebbes – "Rebbe" being the title of the heads of various Hasidic groups – all with names including some variant of Shneur or Shneer. Chevra Anshei Lubawitz had direct connections with the Sixth and Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbes, and by extension, possibly, with the Fifth Rebbe.

The history of Anshei Lubawitz (alternate transliteration of Lubavitch; the Hebrew phrase translates as "the people of Lubavitch" or "the Lubavitch community") goes back to its founding in 1914 (the congregation, not the building). Though located thousands of miles away from the center of the movement, the congregation not only adopted the name "Lubawitz," but actually specified in its constitution that that name could never be changed (article 1 point 1).[58] The full name specified, in fact, was "Chevra Anshei Lubawitz Nusach HoAri of Boro Park" – "Nusach HoAri" refers to the particular version or rite of the traditional prayer book preferred by the Lubavitcher movement; the constitution specified that "the President must open every meeting with the name of Chevra Anshei Lubawitz Nusach HoAri of Boro Park; he must do the same upon closing the meeting" (article 2, point 12).

The Constitution lays out the working arrangement of the institution – election and duties of officers, dues – and details of how synagogue services shall be conducted. But it also requires very specific ethical behavior that members ("brothers" and "sisters") are obliged to follow, e.g., "When a brother in good standing reports himself as sick, then a sick committee must immediately visit him; on the Sabbath and on Sunday, the President and Vice President must go visit him" (article 6, "Benefits of the Sick," point 1). Or: "When a brother, or the wife of a brother, has died, God forbid, the society must provide all of the deceased's needs. Regardless of whether rich or poor, everything has to be provided by the society: preparation of a plot, undertakers, death wagon, carriage" (article 7, "Benefits in the case of a Death," point 42). Such specific requirements – though in general required by Jewish religious tradition – are believed to derive from a letter written by the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe that asked Lubavitchers to follow the ways of his father, the Fifth Rebbe.

Though the first rabbi of the congregation, Rabbi Waltman, wasn't himself a follower of the Lubavitcher movement, his successors were. In 1928, Rabbi Waltman was succeeded by Rabbi Eliahu Simpson, a disciple of the Sixth Rebbe (Yoseph Yitzchak Schneerson)

[57] I am indebted to Rabbi Yaakov Behrman, who provided, and in many cases translated from the Yiddish, sources cited in this section of the report.
[58] Constitution of Chevra Anshei Lubawitz, 1914.

who printed a book of Hasidic texts based on his teachings, in honor of the anniversary of the Sixth Rebbe's liberation from a Soviet prison.[59]

Rabbi Simpson's booklet

The Sixth Rebbe wrote a letter to the congregation in praise of its decision to hire Rabbi Simpson. Dated 27 Nissan 5688 (April 17, 1928), mailed from Riga in Latvia, the letter reads:

> To my dear friends, people of our union, members of Congregation Anshei Lubawitz, Boro Park, Brooklyn. Peace and blessing. On the occasion of their appointing my dear disciple, the honored and distinguished, possessed of so many good qualities, Rabbi Elya [Simpson]. I would like to wish the entire Congregation Anshei Lubawitz…everything good in body and in spirit…. Your friend who is concerned for their well-being, Yosef Yitzchak [Schneerson][60]

[59] Rabbi Simpson's booklet, *Discourses from the Rebbe to Study Publicly on Yud-Beis-Yud-Gimmel Tammuz, During the Days of Redemption*, was printed 1929-30 for the members of the Anshei Lubawitz synagogue and for followers of the Lubavitch movement across the United States. See Shneur Zalman Berger, *Chassid Neiman* (Brooklyn, 2008), p. 100.

[60] Letter printed in a collection of the letters of Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak: *Igrot Kodesh - Rayatz* (Kehot Publication Society), Volume 10, p. 92 (tzadi beis in the Hebrew numbering), letter no. 3815; translated here by Yitzchok Shteierman. Handwritten letter reproduced here courtesy of Rabbi Yaacov Behrman.

Handwritten letter from the Sixth Lubavicher Rebbe to the Lubavitch community at Chevra Anshei Lubawitz

The same day, the Rebbe wrote directly to Rabbi Eliyahu:

> …With this I would like to wish you Mazel Tov [congratulations] upon being appointed to the Rabbinic position at Congregation Anshei Lubawitz of Boro Park…. May God strengthen you that you may produce many students who are imbued with the values of Torah and fear of Heaven…. Yoseph Yitzchak.[61]

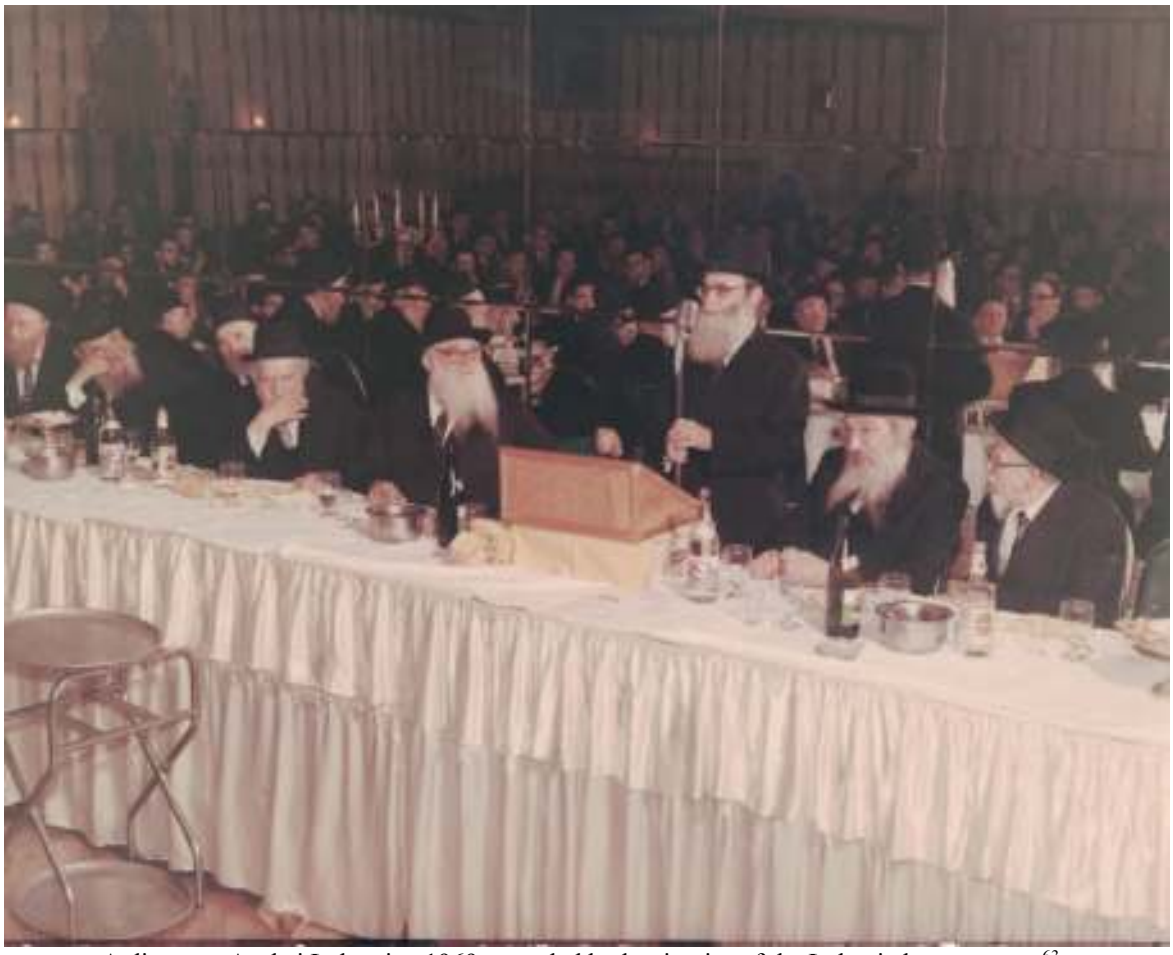
Another rabbi of the congregation with a direct connection to the Sixth and also the Seventh Rebbe was Rabbi Yitskhok Duber Ushpal, appointed rabbi in 1957. Rabbi Ushpal was a noted author, head of the Lubavitch Burial Society, and a leading legal authority on the laws of death and mourning. Dozens of his students moved to Borough Park to join his congregation. By this time, the movement had relocated from Europe to Eastern Parkway, and was led by the Seventh Rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson); in a letter of April 30, 1957, addressed to Congregation Anshei Lubawitz of Boro Park, the Rebbe wrote:

> With sweetness and joy I received the good news that, in a good hour, you have chosen and appointed as your Rabbi, the brilliant and kind Rabbi Yitzchok Dov Ushpal, who is blessed with many good qualities …

[61] *Ibid.*, Volume 10, letter no. 3816.

> Having known Rabbi Ushpal for so many years, knowing his impressive background, and the schools in which he has studied, and given the many years of personal instruction and guidance that he has received from my illustrious father-in-law [the Sixth Rebbe], may his memory be a blessing, I am strongly confident that, with the support…of the members of your congregation, he will indeed by successful in strengthening and broadening this house of worship so that it serves as a model to others, especially since you carry the name of "Lubavitch."….[62]

Congregation Anshei Lubawitz continues to be associated with Chabad Lubavitch.



A dinner at Anshei Lubawitz, 1969, attended by luminaries of the Lubavitch movement.[63]

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[62] Letter printed in a collection of the letters of the Seventh Rebbe: *Igrot Kodesh - Rebbe* (Kehot Publication Society), Volume 15, p. 85 (pey heh in the Hebrew numbering), letter no. 5405; translated here by Yitzchok Shteierman.

[63] Photo courtesy of Rabbi Yaakov Behrman, who provides this list of attendees shown in the photo: "Famed Borough Park Rabbinic Authority Rabbi Abraham Bick. Chabad-Lubavitch's 'globetrotting ambassador' and noted author, Rabbi Yosef Wineberg. Dean of Chabad's Central Yeshiva at 770 Eastern Parkway, Rabbi Mordechai Mentlick. Senior member of the Chabad hierarchy Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Kazarnovsky. Former Rabbi of Anshei Lubawitz, Rabbi Simpson."

Temple Beth El / Chevra Anshei Lubawitz as a potential landmark

The New York Landmarks Commission has designated as individual landmarks a variety of synagogues (there are others that fall within the boundaries of historic districts). Most of these are in Manhattan. Some are former churches converted to synagogue use: the Bialystoker synagogue on Willet Street, the Brotherhood Synagogue on East 20th Street, Beth Hamedrash Hagadol on Norfolk Street, Tifereth Israel/Town and Village Synagogue. Some are large, purpose-built, high-style synagogues designed by prominent architects: Central Synagogue on Lexington Avenue, Shearith Israel on Central Park West, the Park East Synagogue on East 67th Street. Some are grand structures on the Lower East Side: Anshei Slonim on Norfolk Street, considered the oldest purpose-built synagogue in Manhattan; the Eldridge Street synagogue; the Pike Street Synagogue. But there are also "tenement synagogue" buildings that have become landmarks in part because of their unusual history or their architectural design: Kehila Kadosha Janina on Broome Street and Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshei Ungarn on East 7th Street, both in Manhattan. Only two synagogues have been designated individual landmarks in the city's other boroughs: Congregation Tifereth Israel Anshei Corona, another "tenement synagogue" type, in Corona, Queens; and the Magen David Synagogue in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

Temple Beth El in Brooklyn shares characteristics of several of these buildings: It is a modest "tenement synagogue" like Kehila Kadosha Janina, Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshei Ungarn, and Tifereth Israel Anshei Corona. It has undergone alterations, like Anshei Corona. It is associated with specific Jewish communities like Kehila Kadosha Janina (Romaniote Jews from Greece), Magen David (Syrian Jews), Shearith Israel (Sephardic Jews), and Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Anshei Ungarn (Hungarian Jews). And it is one of the two oldest surviving purpose-built synagogues in its borough still in synagogue use, making it a counterpart to Manhattan's Anshei Slonim.[64]

Though Brooklyn's Jewish population and history is second only to Manhattan's, it has only one individually designated synagogue. As the one of the two oldest surviving purpose-built synagogues in Brooklyn – 112 years old – in continuous synagogue use; as the first synagogue to be built in the prominent Jewish neighborhood of Borough Park; and as one of the earliest New York synagogues to be associated with the most widely known Hasidic movement, Temple Beth El / Chevra Anshei Lubawitz merits designation as an individual New York City landmark.

[64] Though Anshei Slonim is operated largely as a cultural center, the Orensanz Center, it also hosts High Holiday services and other events for the Shul of New York, a Reform congregation.

PHOTOS

Temple Beth El, historic photo

Anshei Lubawitz, photo: Dovid Shor, 2018

Photo: Dovid Shor, 2018

On a corner lot. Photo: Dovid Shor, 2018

41st Street façade. Photo: Dovid Shor, 2018

Stained glass windows along the 41st Street façade, seen from inside the synagogue
Photo: Dovid Shor, 2018

CURRENT CONDITIONS
All photos: Anthony W. Robins, January 2019

12th Avenue facade

Porch facing 12th Avenue

Porch: side view

Porch detail

41st Street facade

Rear of building

Rear of building, window detail