

Lone Star (of David) Story

A 'moving' tale of a synagogue being trucked across Texas

By [Samuel D. Gruber](#) | December 24, 2014 12:00 AM



This is a moving story—really. This past week, during Hanukkah, the 121-year-old wood-frame, clapboard-sided B'nai Abraham synagogue of Brenham, Texas, has been sliced in pieces, trucked across four counties, and re-erected on the Dell Jewish Community Campus, in Austin. For the first time in decades the synagogue will host a daily Orthodox minyan and be the central place for an active Texas Jewish community. Brenham native Leon Toubin, whose family has cared for the synagogue since most of Brenham's Jews moved away, has mixed feelings. He's devoted himself to keeping the synagogue ready for worship in Brenham, but has to admit that Orthodox Jewish life isn't coming back to the town. Leon is in his 80s, wants to see the old shul be a center for prayer again, and wanted to settle things while there was still time. He decided to look for new options, and reached out to the Austin Jewish Federation.

At a groundbreaking ceremony in October at Austin's Dell campus, with his Texas drawl and cowboy hat, Toubin declared to Rabbi Daniel Millner—who has just moved to Texas this year to lead Austin's Orthodox Congregation Tiferet Israel, which will use the building: "You are getting a one hundred percent glatt kosher shul. It's only been used by Orthodox Jews!"

B'nai Abraham's Orthodox identity is one of the distinctive aspects about the Brenham shul. It is the oldest standing intact synagogue in Texas, founded by Orthodox Jews from Poland and Lithuania in the 1880s and rebuilt in 1893 after a fire. It has only allowed an Orthodox *minhag* ever since, but it has been about 50 years since regular services were held. The building is modest in appearance. Its pointed arched entryway and the triangular window heads give a simple Gothic look, like many small town Southern churches, but without a steeple. Inside, however, it is arranged like an eastern European shul, with a central bimah and a gallery for women over an entrance vestibule opposite the Ark.

The synagogue was moved piece by piece this week (first the roof, then the bottom of the building) to the 40-acre Dell Campus, established in the 1990s by a gift from Michael and Susan Dell, and already home to Conservative and Reform congregations, as well as Austin's Jewish day school, JCC, and Federation offices. For many years, an Orthodox minyan has met in the educational wing of the day school, amid toddler toys and school furniture. Now, for the first time, they will have their own space—the renovated B'nai Abraham. (Work on the restoration and building on site will begin in January.)

My great-grandfather Pesach (Philip) Susnitsky, who had come from Lithuania to Brenham around 1880, was one of the founders of B'nai Abraham. I use a Brenham picture of him with his cow in lectures whenever I can. My grandmother was born and raised in Brenham, and my mother, who was raised in Houston, regularly spent summers there. A return visit to Brenham in 1988 helped set me off on a career documenting, protecting, and preserving Jewish historical sites worldwide. So when I heard of plans to move the old shul, alarm bells went off—personally and professionally. So much has changed in the world of Jewish heritage in a quarter of a century, but it wasn't clear how much of this news had made it to Texas. In the last few decades, other communities with empty but historic old synagogues have found new ways to preserve them, and moving them is not a new idea. The Brenham-to-Austin move was, conceptually, not unique; it was just, for me, extraordinary.

This is hardly the first time an American synagogue has been physically moved to preserve it. As early as 1904 Beth Israel Congregation in Charlottesville, Virginia, was forced to move its still recent Gothic-style brick building—opened only 20 years earlier—when the government wanted the land for a new post office. Legend says the building was disassembled and moved brick by brick. There are no bricks at Brenham, but the move is still ambitious, at least in terms of distance traveled. No synagogue has ever been moved more than a few miles.

During the 1960s and '70s, a few old synagogues were salvaged from former Jewish neighborhoods, then mostly black, that faced the wrecking ball. Four former synagogues were identified and moved by preservationists. In 1969, in Washington, D.C., the 1876 former Adas Israel (where President Ulysses S. Grant attended the dedication) was moved to its present location a few blocks away and renamed the Lillian and Albert Small Museum. New plans by the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington to move this building are afoot as part of a museum expansion. In 1970, the small wood-frame synagogue in San Leandro, California, was brought to its congregation's new home to serve as a chapel. Former synagogues were also moved in Madison, Wisconsin (1971) and San Diego (1978) and repurposed as non-religious event venues.

By the 1980s, such efforts stopped, as preservationists focused on saving synagogues in situ. The trend started in Baltimore, where the Lloyd Street Synagogue was saved in 1968 by the Jewish Historical

Society of Maryland, but a condition of sale and preservation by the last occupant of the building, an Orthodox congregation, was that it be always closed on Shabbat and Jewish holidays and never be used for Jewish worship. The fear, not unlike Leon Toubin's in Brenham, was that any worship would not be "glatt" enough.

When the former Congregation Beth Israel in Hartford, Connecticut, built in 1876, was saved in 1972, however, it was the local Federation and other synagogues that only grudgingly recognized the project after the promise that the building wouldn't serve for worship or Jewish life cycle events. This wasn't due to piety; there was fear of losing members who only paid synagogue dues for b'nai mitzvot, weddings, and funerals to new competing "historically Jewish" locales.

This shift from moving synagogues to restoring them was pretty much complete by 1975, when Gerard Wolfe first opened the door on massive and massively neglected Eldridge Street Synagogue in New York, and launched plans to restore the grand synagogue—leading to the largest and most expensive such effort for any synagogue without a substantial active congregation. It took decades to complete, but along the way the Eldridge preservationists nurtured both the tiny Orthodox congregation and the nascent Jewish preservation movement, recognizing that the preservation of the congregation was on a par with the need to rebuild walls reframe windows.

Eldridge encouraged other (relatively easier) efforts, so that in the past quarter century scores of synagogues have been saved from demolition and often active Jewish worship or cultural purpose was worked into the new identity.

Each project is different, and almost every project struggles for purpose, audience, and funding. Among the successful American protection and preservation projects are synagogues in Tucson, Arizona; Miami, Florida; Leadville, Colorado; Boston, Massachusetts; Virginia, Minnesota; Natchez and Brookhaven, Mississippi; St. Louis, Missouri; Woodbine, New Jersey; Corsicana, Texas; Portsmouth, Virginia; and Steven's Point, Wisconsin. Most saved buildings are now cultural centers of some sort, but a few have returned to Jewish religious use.

Many transformations, especially of smaller synagogues, are predicated on an acceptance that organized Jewish religious life will not be returning to the town, so deals are struck with local historical societies and museums to maintain synagogue buildings and maintain some Jewish identity, while adapting space for new exhibitions or events.

An early and inspiring example of such a transformation is in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where Beth Israel, built in 1905, is the third oldest synagogue building in the state and the oldest with its sanctuary intact. In 1985, when the congregation could no longer supply a minyan, it disbanded and deeded the building to the Portage County Historical Society to serve as a museum of the Jewish history of the region and of other aspects of local history.

Just slightly further west, the empty and only remaining synagogue on Minnesota's Iron Range, B'nai Abraham, dedicated in 1909, was saved in 2004 when the Friends of B'nai Abraham acquired it for preservation. The volunteer group has raised funds, and is restoring the building to serve as a museum and cultural center for Virginia, Minnesota, and surrounding areas, and to preserve the region's Jewish history.

Another successful synagogue rescue is in Portsmouth, Virginia, where a Jewish Museum and Cultural

Center is housed in the newly restored former Chevra T'helim (House of Psalms) synagogue, built in 1918 on Effingham Street. The brick exterior is fronted by a Colonial style columnar façade while inside the architecture and furnishings maintain a traditional Eastern European synagogue arrangement, with galleries for women in three sides and a central bimah.

Restoration of the deteriorating synagogue began in 2001, after intense and sometimes acrimonious negotiations among several groups seeking the site. Effingham Street is an area essential to the revival of the city so civic leaders and a secular foundation have backed the preservation project. Currently, despite the fact that a new \$50 million Jewish Community Campus has been erected nearby on the way to Virginia Beach, there is no active Jewish historical center or archive for the region so the Friends of Chevra T'helim look to the achievements of Jewish museums and archives in Washington, Baltimore and Richmond, and have high hopes.

In the Deep South, the Institute of Southern Jewish Life pioneered this approach in Natchez, Mississippi, in the 1990s, working with the small congregation to guarantee the preservation of its beautiful classical style synagogue. For now, it is open for worship and houses exhibits, and if and when it closes will become a Jewish history museum. In smaller Brookhaven, Mississippi, ISJL started the transition process so when B'nai Sholom closed its doors in 2011, it was donated to the Lincoln County Historical and Genealogical Society as a county history museum that includes a Jewish heritage exhibit, organized by the ISJL. As in Wisconsin, and Minnesota, the synagogue is an exhibition itself, and it can still be used as such if a visiting group makes arrangements. But the space is also adaptable for lectures, concert and other activities. And in Texas itself, the old Moorish style Reform Beth El synagogue of Corsicana, built in 1898 was saved in the 1980s. It is a recognized town landmark—advertised on billboards—with its two distinctive onion-domed towers. Although it was saved as a community meeting hall, I'm told that a Jewish congregation is worshiping there again, at least now and then.

I had always thought preserving the synagogue as a museum or cultural site in this manner might be a solution in Brenham, too.

But Leon Toubin has always had a different vision for the old synagogue. He hoped it would come back to life not as a historic relic, but as active Jewish house of prayer and community. He reached out to Austin Federation executive director Jay Rubin, who responded quickly with interest. After touring the synagogue (and the Blue Bell ice cream plant) in Brenham, and being exposed to Toubin's persuasive charm, Rubin got to work. Within the year all the arrangements were made and this month the city granted permits.

When the synagogue is moved, the physical memory of the role of Jews in Brenham will be diminished, and a century-old sense of place will certainly be lost. But in this case preservation of use trumps preservation of place. In Austin the synagogue will once again be a Beth Tefillah—a House of prayer—and in its new location many more Jews will experience B'nai Abraham as house of history, too. Not a few of Austin's Jews are descendants of the Brenham pioneers, and the Austin Federation promises some historical homage to Brenham's Jewish past.

Personally, I will lose an anchor in Brenham—but frankly it is an anchor mostly in memory and imagination. It has been 20 years since I was last in Brenham. Can I be so selfish to think my wanting an anchor in a place I do not live and rarely visit is enough?

The answer is no. I've told Rabbi Millner that I look forward to helping make a minyan at B'nai Abraham on a future visit, but I also look forward to celebrating in the sanctuary (perhaps in a more secular way)—with my extended Brenham mishpacha when the building reopens its doors—in Austin.

This article is adapted from a keynote speech at the 2014 annual meeting of the Southern Jewish Historical Society.

Like this article? Sign up for our [Daily Digest](#) to get Tablet Magazine's new content in your inbox each morning.

Samuel D. Gruber, an architectural historian and cultural heritage consultant, is president of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments and author of [American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community](#).

Find this story online: <http://tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/187754/lone-star-of-david-story>

Tablet Magazine is a project of Nextbook Inc. Copyright © 2014 Nextbook Inc. All rights reserved.