

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Temple Beth El of Borough Park

other names/site number Young Israel Beth El of Borough Park

2. Location

street & number 4802 15th Avenue ☐ not for publication

city or town Brooklyn ☐ vicinity

state New York code NY county Kings code 047 zip code 11219-3221

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ruth A. Perpoint DBAPO
Signature of certifying official/Title

3/16/10
Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau.

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper

date of action

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ see continuation sheet
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ see continuation sheet
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain) _____

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	TOTAL

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

n/a

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

n/a

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th & 20th Century Revivals -

Other: Moorish Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation

walls Granite. Limestone.

Terra Cotta.

roof

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

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Temple Beth El of Borough Park
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DESCRIPTION

Location/Setting

Temple Beth El of Borough Park (today known as Young Israel Beth El of Borough Park) is located at 4802 15th Ave at the corner of 48th Street, in the Borough Park neighborhood of the borough of Brooklyn in New York City. The synagogue was built in 1920-23 to designs by architects Shampán & Shampán. The boundaries of the property are described as Brooklyn Tax Block 5636, Lot 36. The synagogue's immediate neighbors on both 48th Street and 15th Avenue are three-story houses and multiple dwellings, including another synagogue on 15th Avenue.

Exterior

Temple Beth El is a three-story building with a principal façade on 15th Avenue and a secondary façade on 48th Street. Its design is described in contemporary accounts as:

...the blending of several styles and periods of architecture, more or less related, and is termed a "first century design" with suggestions from Moorish and Egyptian sources.¹

An article in *Stone Magazine* in 1923 noted that the façade was of

...seam faced granite... furnished by Arlando Marine, New York City.²

Belt courses and corner piers, on the other hand, are of limestone, and the entrance ways and coping are of terracotta.

15th Avenue façade

The principal façade – approached by a broad flight of steps – is a monolithic stone-faced composition whose main feature is a grand entrance with successive layers of colonnettes of varying design supporting a series of round arches. The two main colonnettes are decorated with an ornate diaper pattern often seen in Moorish design. The triple entrance within the arch is framed in cast-stone adorned with Arabesque designs, into which are mixed Judaic symbols, notably a shield with a *menorah* in the triangular pediment above the central doorway. Above the triple entrance is a set of three blind *bifore*, each round-arched supported on round columns; the infill includes more Arabesque designs topped with a *magen david* ("shield" or "star" of David); the area directly above each pair of blind arches is adorned with a diaper pattern, and a shield set between the

¹ "New Brooklyn Temple; Will be Built at Fifteenth Avenue and Forty-Eighth Street," *New York Times*, June 13, 1920, p. 102. This description was repeated, in a slightly shorter version, almost word for word in an account in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, suggesting that it was based on a press release of some kind issued by the congregation or the architects.

² "Granite Temple Dedicated," *Stone Magazine*, vol. XLIV, no. 6, June 1923, p.346.

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two arches, just above the central column, is adorned with a *menorah*. Rising above the three sets of *bifore* is a large lunette window adorned with a *magen david* inscribed within a circle.

To either side of the main entrance, but at a slightly lower level, is a secondary entrance – a single pair of wooden doors on the south and a single pair of glass doors on the north – each of which leads into a stair hall. There is also a third set of entrances, one on either side, at the sidewalk level.

The rest of the façade is largely featureless, aside from narrow slit-like windows is reminiscent of an ancient Moorish fortress. The top of the façade rises up in a curve matching the curve of the entranceway directly beneath it.

48th Street façade

The 48th Street façade is longer than the 15th Avenue façade. Its central portion mirrors that façade to some extent, with a central arch, but the detail is simpler – no Arabesques, spiral columns or diaper patterns. The central arch – above which the roofline curves upward, just as on the 15th Avenue façade – is filled principally with glass panes. To the left and right of the central arch are tall rectangular window openings; the opening on the right is arranged as one tall rectangle, the openings on the left are arranged as a small square in the lower portion and a tall rectangle above it. Steps lead down to an entrance to the basement level, flanked by rectangular window openings. Because this façade is longer than the principal façade, there is an additional section to the left of the main section; this is organized with four sets of three windows, one above the next, with simple square panels in the spandrels between one level and the next.

Interior

Entrance vestibule

The entrance vestibule, reached through the triple entrance at the top of the steps leading up to the 15th Avenue façade, is a long, narrow hall with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. One wall has three double-door entrances leading outside, while the other has three sets of double doors leading to the sanctuary. The ceiling is divided into three sections, each arching from one wall to the other. They have been painted with scenes of Jerusalem at either end connected by a section of sky. Three metal chandeliers hang from the ceiling. Staircases through double-doors at either end lead upstairs to the balcony and downstairs to the basement. Above either double door is a lunette adorned with a central *magen david* inscribed within a circular band, flanked by Arabesque designs.

Main Sanctuary

Contrasting with the relatively severe façade is the sumptuously ornamental sanctuary. It is arranged as a square space with a rear balcony and an enormous ceiling dome supported by eight clusters of floor-to-ceiling piers attached to the side, rear and front walls. Each of the columns in these clusters has a shaft adorned with elaborate arabesque designs and an elaborately designed capital. The dome dominates the entire space, which is

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organized around its eight column clusters, a pair of which divides each of the sanctuary's four walls into three parts.

Between the two clusters of columns at the front wall is a tall arch framed by spiral forms, the entire area covered in arabesques. On the arch's face is a series of arabesque designs interspersed with *magen david* forms, within each of which is a painted *mazel*—symbols of the zodiac that are sometimes found in synagogue interiors. At the top of the arch is a cartouche supporting a sculpted representation of the two Tablets of the Law inscribed with the Hebrew words representing the Ten Commandments. Set within the arch, centered in a four-columned section, is the Ark. The ark is located behind a central curtain, framed by the two inner columns; above the curtain is a blind arcade of horse-shoe arches carried on slender colonnettes. The background wall is covered with an ornate diaper pattern. Between the columns at either side are rectangular panels with similar diaper-pattern ornament. The four columns—which appear to be of scagliola (faux marble)—support an ornamental section with elaborate arabesque designs, above which the wall is painted sky blue with clouds. The wall sections to either side of the central arch are plain, with one very tall rectangular window with colored glass (relatively new, but with ornamental geometric patterns matching the originals³).

The side walls of the sanctuary each have a large arched window in the central bay, and a long rectangular window in the bay to either side, each window with colored glass (relatively new, but matching the original ornamental geometric patterns). The upper portion of the rear wall has a large lunette in its center, with original polychromatic glass centered on a large *magen david*; the walls to either side each have a narrow rectangular window and a door leading to a stair hall. The lower portion of the rear wall has in its central bay three double-door entrances from the vestibule, and to either side plain walls with various memorial plaques affixed to them.

The floor is divided into rows of wooden pews. A *méchitza* (ritual separation barrier), added c. 1980 separates the men's pews from the women's. In the center of the floor is an elevated wooden reader's platform, added c. 1975; the original reader's platform extends from the raised area in front of the ark. To make room for these additions, several rows of pews were moved to the basement chapel, reducing the seating capacity (originally said to seat around 1,400).

A balcony wraps around the sides and rear of the space, effectively bisecting most of the column clusters and windows; its balcony rail is adorned with square panels alternating with narrow rectangular panels, all with arabesque ornamental patterns. The central square panel on the rear portion of the balcony rail has a clock in place of an arabesque panel. The rear of the balcony is organized on the stadium plan, with benches set in rising tiers. At either side of this section is a raised seating area with an enclosed exit stair hall; it is adorned with arabesque panels similar to those on the balcony rail.

The ceiling with its enormous dome has an elaborately ornamental treatment. Large console brackets extend from above each cluster of columns to support the dome; the console brackets are connected to each other by ornamental beams extending from—and resting atop—each of the column clusters. The narrow areas defined by

³ See illustration in Oscar Israelowitz, *Synagogues of New York City: A Pictorial Survey in 123 Photographs* (New York: Dover Publications, 1982), p. 39.

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each set of console brackets, the ornamental beam, and the rim of the dome itself are adorned with heavily molded versions of the *magen david*. The ceiling areas beyond the beams are adorned with coffers in the form of eight-sided stars surrounded by stalactite motifs known as *muqarnas*. The dome itself is adorned with octagonal coffers inscribed with octagonal star shapes, and at the center an enormous *magen david* surrounded by concentric circles adorned with arabesques.

Four large chandeliers hang from the ceiling; they were manufactured in 2005 to mimic the originals, but are both smaller and of a simplified design.⁴

Social hall

Stairs from either side of the entrance vestibule lead down to the basement. A narrow hall serves as a vestibule to the social hall, which is a large room with a wooden floor and a plaster ceiling divided into large panels by beams.

Other basement spaces

Other spaces at this level include a "beit midrash," or study room, which also has a small ark and is used for daily prayer services. Also located at this level are the synagogue offices.

⁴ Photos of the originals appear in Oscar Israelowitz, *op cit.*, p. 38.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- ☒ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave
- ☐ **D** a cemetery
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Ethnic Heritage: Eastern European Jewish

Religion

Period of Significance:

1920-1960

Significant Dates:

1920

1923

1952

Significant Person:

n/a

Cultural Affiliation:

n/a

Architect/Builder:

Shampan & Shampan

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by historic American Building Survey
- # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record
- # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal Agency
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other repository: _____

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SIGNIFICANCE

Summary

Temple Beth El of Borough Park, today known as Young Israel Beth El of Borough Park, at 4802 15th Ave in Brooklyn in the Borough Park neighborhood, is historically significant under Criterion A in the areas of ethnic history and religion as an early 20th-century synagogue surviving in Brooklyn. Built in Borough Park in 1920-23 for Temple Beth-El, a congregation of Eastern-European origin, to designs by Brooklyn architects Shampman & Shampman, it dates from a period when Brooklyn had emerged as one of the world's major Jewish population centers, and Borough Park had developed a significant Jewish population. Beth El became known in particular for its cantorial tradition, gaining a reputation as "the Carnegie Hall of Brooklyn." Its most notable cantor was the renowned Moshe Koussevitsky (1899-1966), described as "one of the premier cantors of the 20th century," who served at Beth El from 1952 until shortly before his death.

The building is architecturally significant under Criterion C as an example of an intact early 20th-century synagogue in Brooklyn. Its unusually handsome design combines Moorish ornament with Judaic motifs. The Moorish style of ornament 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. Beth El specifically reflects the influence of the recently built B'nai Jeshurun synagogue (NR listed) in Manhattan, which created a "Semitic" style much emulated in synagogues of the period. Beth El's design includes a Guastavino dome that was considered, at the time of its construction, to be the third largest of its type in the country.

The period of significance runs from 1920 -- the beginning of construction -- to 1960, thereby including the cantorial tradition that flourished under the tenure of world-renowned cantor Moshe Koussevitsky. Temple Beth El survives as a distinctive architectural, cultural and religious landmark of the Jewish community of Brooklyn and New York City.

The Jewish community of Brooklyn and its synagogues

Since 1898, when the City of Brooklyn became the Borough of Brooklyn within the City of Greater New York, the Jewish population of Brooklyn has formed a major portion of the Jewish population of New York City. Long home to roughly half the city's overall Jewish population, Brooklyn remains to this day one of the chief Jewish communities in the country and in the world.

Unlike Manhattan -- whose first Jewish settlement dates to the 17th-century Dutch colony -- Brooklyn traces its Jewish population to the middle of the 19th century. Jewish immigrants to Brooklyn during this period -- like Jewish immigrants generally -- came largely from the German-speaking states of central Europe. Samuel P. Abelow, the author of a 1937 history of Brooklyn Jewry, lists the earliest residents he could ascertain:

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When the Jews first settled in Brooklyn is not known definitely. In the Brooklyn directory for 1838-1839, published by A.G. Stevens and Wm. H. Marschalk, appear such names as Benjamin Levy, auctioneer, at 79 Fulton St., Benjamin Levy, variety store, at 137½ Fulton St., and Daniel Levy, cartman, 175 Pearl St. According to a tradition, the pioneers used to row across the East River to New York to attend services there Friday nights, Saturdays and holidays.⁵

The earliest Jewish residents of Brooklyn chronicled by Abelow included Solomon Furst, who emigrated in the 1850s and

...settled on Atlantic Avenue, where he earned his living as a merchant tailor and invested money in real estate in that section. [He] joined Congregation Baith Israel and became its president.

His son, Michael, was

...the first Jewish boy of Brooklyn to attend any college. Although he was the only Jewish boy in Yale, he spoke at the graduation exercises on the topic, "The Modern Jew." He was selected as one of the speakers because of his high scholastic attainments. He graduated in 1876. Then he studied law at the Columbia Law School and, after graduation, opened an office in Brooklyn. He was proud of the fact that he never moved out of Brooklyn and was associated with many of the leading Jewish and civic movements.⁶

Elias Isaacson

...came from London, England, in 1838, and settled on DeKalb Avenue, near Myrtle Avenue.... Elias Isaacson became one of the "Forty-niners" who rushed to California to dig gold out of the soil but returned to Brooklyn with a bag of misfortunes. Elias' son, Mark N., was a great violinist and occupied a very important part in the history of Brooklyn music. The son of Mark, Charles D., who died in 1936, was also a famous musician.

Levi Blumenau came from Germany in 1845 and settled "in the Court Street section." Bernhard Schellenberg, "born near Frankfort...opened a merchant tailor shop at 119 Myrtle Avenue" in 1857. That same year, James Gru "settled in Brooklyn... [and] established a men's hat business on Atlantic Avenue near the East River...."⁷

Distinct from the Brooklyn Jewish community was a sister community in Williamsburg, a separate village before uniting with Brooklyn.

The first known settler here was Adolph Baker, who arrived in 1837.⁸

⁵ Samuel P. Abelow, *History of Brooklyn Jewry* (Brooklyn: Scheba Publishing Company, 1937), p.5.

⁶ Abelow, 6-7.

⁷ Abelow, 8-9.

⁸ Abelow, 9.

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The Jewish community grew, but it was some time before it achieved great numbers. In 1870, Henry Stiles' *A History of the City of Brooklyn* listed only four Jewish congregations, and stated only that "there are in Brooklyn nearly one thousand families of the Jewish faith."

Over the next few decades, however, as Brooklyn grew into the country's third largest city, reaching a population of approximately 600,000 by 1880,⁹ its Jewish population grew enormously. The subsequent opening of the Brooklyn, Manhattan and Williamsburg bridges, and the extension of the IRT subway into Brooklyn, facilitated the continuing growth of both the borough and its Jewish population.

Following a major wave of immigration from Eastern Europe of Jews fleeing poverty, religious discrimination, expulsion and massacres – a wave beginning in the 1880s and reaching its peak in the early decades of the 20th century – New York City, including Brooklyn, became home to an enormous Eastern European Jewish immigrant community. From about 1880 up until World War I, some two million Jews – roughly one third of all the Jews in Europe – arrived in the United States.¹⁰ The vast majority first settled in New York City, many settling in the crowded tenements of Manhattan's Lower East Side. The Jewish immigrants created an enormous Yiddish-speaking community, in which they were able to find *kosher* (ritually acceptable) food, Yiddish-language newspapers, and mutual aid societies. Major Jewish immigration stopped only with the passage in 1924 of new immigration laws.

Brooklyn shared in this massive growth. From 1905 to 1930, the Jewish population of Brooklyn grew eight-fold, from 100,000 to 800,000. In 1918, New York City's Jewish population was estimated at 1,330,000, most of whom lived in Manhattan (696,000) and Brooklyn (568,000).¹¹ Some of Brooklyn's new Jewish arrivals moved there from the more crowded neighborhoods of the Lower East Side, while others settled directly in Brooklyn after arriving in the United States.

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.¹² In this pre-Holocaust period, wrote Abelow,

...as the estimated Jewish population of the world is 16,240,000, according to Jacob Lestschinsky, of the Jewish Scientific Institute, Brooklyn has about one-sixteenth of all the Jews. 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.¹³

⁹ Ilana Abramovitch and Seán Galvin, *Jews of Brooklyn* (Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life; Brandeis University Press, 2001), "Introduction," p. 5.

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City 1917-1918* (New York: Kehillah [Jewish Community], 1918), p.86. [FIX check page number]

¹² Abramovitch and Galvin, p. 5.

¹³ Abelow, p.13.

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Today's Brooklyn Jewish community is made up of many different elements.

In 1990, Brooklyn Jews numbered about 420,000 out of New York City's 1.13 million Jewish inhabitants.... 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.¹⁴

Synagogues have always played a major role in the life of New York's Jewish population, and Brooklyn's first synagogues date back to the pre-Civil War era. Brooklyn's synagogues reflect the varied modern history of Judaism – there are synagogues associated with the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements, as well as Modern Orthodoxy and the synagogues of the borough's many Hasidic communities.¹⁵

Brooklyn's first Jewish congregation, Beth Elohim, met informally in 1848 in Williamsburg, and officially incorporated in 1851. Its founders were a group of German and Alsatian Jews; perhaps not coincidentally, the year 1848 was the year of the various failed revolts in German-speaking European states. In 1859, the congregation bought a Lutheran church on South First Street and converted it to use as Brooklyn's first synagogue.

Just three years later, 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.

In the words of Rabbi Israel Goldefarb, the Congregation's first historian, it was "the first altar dedicated to the God of Israel" to be built on all of Long Island, for it was not until 1876 that Williamsburg's Kahal Kodesh built its own synagogue on Keap Street.¹⁶

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. Brooklyn's synagogue count that year, broken down by district, included (and this listing is indicative of the location of the major Jewish communities within the borough at that time):

Borough Park: 27 permanent, 13 temporary
Brownsville: 48 permanent, 23 temporary

¹⁴ Abramovich and Galvin, p.3.

¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Judith R. Greenwald, "First Synagogues - The first 144 Years of Congregation Baith Israel Anshei Emes (the Kane Street Synagogue)," in Abramovitch and Galvin, *Jews of Brooklyn*, p. 33.

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Bushwick: 5 permanent, 6 temporary
Central Brooklyn: 26 permanent, 26 temporary
East New York: 24 permanent, 29 temporary
Williamsburg: 49 permanent, 20 temporary¹⁷

After World War II, Brooklyn began losing much of its population and industrial employment. In particular, the population of Jewish neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn shrank due to death and movement away from city neighborhoods. The 1980s and '90s saw a resurgence of Brooklyn's Jewish population. The flight to the suburbs slowed, and many Jews moved to the city in the '80s from the Soviet Union, Israel, Iran and from other Middle Eastern countries. By 1990, there were 420,000 Jews in Brooklyn.¹⁸

Today Brooklyn still has hundreds of active synagogues. In neighborhoods that have historic or new Jewish communities, synagogues continue to thrive. Such is the case with Temple Beth-El of Borough Park.

Borough Park and its early Jewish community

Borough Park (also spelled "Boro Park") is located in the southwestern part of the Borough of Brooklyn 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 when the neighborhood was known as Blythebourne.¹⁹

An article in the *Brooklyn Eagle* describes the development of the neighborhood with expanding public transportation:

About the turn of the century trolleys were running on New Utrecht Avenue from 39th Street to Bath Beach. McDougall's farm with the mansion and the windmill was on the hill west of the West Brooklyn Station on 44th Street and New Utrecht Avenue. A new station was added at 49th Street and New Utrecht Avenue, and the Blythbourne station was at 55th Street and New Utrecht Avenue. The space between the west Brooklyn and Blythbourne stations and between New Utrecht Avenue and 15th Avenue became known as Borough Park. The ex-State Senator, William H. Reynolds, a real estate man, developed Borough Park in collaboration with Edward Johnson, a builder.²⁰

By the first decade of the 20th century development had picked up enormously. As described in the *New York Times* in 1911:

¹⁷ *Jewish Communal Register*, op. cit.

¹⁸ Jackson, "Jews," *Encyclopedia of New York City*, p. 622.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Cited in Egon Mayer, *From Suburb to Shtetl: The Jew of Boro Park* (Temple University Press, 1979), p. 32.

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In the past six or seven years a wonderful change has taken place in the character of the localities along the line of the Brooklyn, Bath & West End Railroad from Thirty-ninth Street to Coney Island. Take the Borough Park section from Forty-fifth to Fifty-fifth Street, westerly from New Utrecht Avenue to Fort Hamilton Avenue, comprising about twenty city blocks, known as the Backhouse farm, purchased about six years ago by the Realty Associates. This company opened streets and avenues, put in sewers, water, gas, and sidewalks, and asphalted the streets and offered the lots for sale to builders at prices from \$750 to \$1,250 per lot. Within a few years over 500 buildings were erected on this tract, and all of them sold. To-day the remaining lots offer fine opportunity to builders and can be had at reasonable prices....

The land on the easterly side of New Utrecht Avenue from Forty-third to Sixtieth Street is the older section of Borough Park, purchased about twelve years ago by the William H. Reynolds syndicate. This property is restricted to one house on each plot of not less than 50 feet front by 100 feet depth. Hundreds of high-class one and two family houses have been erected....

The Blythebourne section is located on the westerly side of New Utrecht Avenue, from Fifty-fifth Street to Sixtieth Street, and westerly to Eleventh Avenue. This locality was about the first development in this section of New Utrecht. It built up rapidly under the management of Thomas S. Sands of the Blythebourne Improvement Company....²¹

Early residents of Borough Park were of Irish descent, but Jewish immigration into the neighborhood 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.

A survey of synagogues in Borough Park in 1918 found 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.²² By 1930, the Jewish population of Borough Park had reached roughly 60,000, or half the neighborhood.²³

The Jewish population of these early years has been described as largely second-generation and upwardly mobile, and the neighborhood's new synagogues reflected the economics of the population. Historian Egon Mayer characterizes these synagogues in general:

The construction activities of the early residents were quite amazing. Expensive, large edifices dotted the area, thus lending it a very specific definition.... The sheer physical appearance of these structures testified to the success of the residents who built them... Synagogues, which are the primary reflection of the commitments of the early residents to the traditions of their ancestors, clearly reflected the newly

²¹ "South Brooklyn's Rapid Development," *New York Times*, April 23, 1911, p. XX2.

²² *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City 1917-1918* (New York: Kehillah [Jewish Community], 1918), chart opposite page 122.

²³ Mayer, p.24.

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achieved status of Boro Park Jews. Decorum and dignity played a significant part in the services of even the Orthodox synagogues. Unlike the haphazard interiors of the ghetto *shtieblach*, the synagogues all contained a separate prayer sanctuary with fixed pews and ornaments. The members, especially the officers and the clergy, were required to wear formal dress on Saturdays and holidays. Yiddish...had been replaced by English in many if not most of the synagogues as the *lingua franca* apart from prayer.²⁴

In the period following World War II, the Jewish population of Borough Park evolved, becoming established as a predominantly Orthodox community, in historian Mayer's words, "the most important Orthodox Jewish community in the country."²⁵ Today, as described in *The Jewish Week*:

Ninety percent of the inhabitants are Jewish, most are *chasidic* or *haredi* [ultra-Orthodox]..... With over 100,000 inhabitants, that makes Boro Park the largest religious Jewish community in the world outside of Jerusalem.²⁶

Temple Beth-El of Borough Park

Beth-El of Borough Park has been an Orthodox congregation for most of its existence. It appears to have been formed in 1902, however, as a Reform synagogue – which would account for its name, "Temple" being a name more typical of Reform congregations. As described in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1903:

Congregation Beth El was organized on July 15 and incorporated August 2, 1902. 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, 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."²⁷

²⁴ Mayer, *Ibid.*

²⁵ Mayer, p.34.

²⁶ Joshua Halberstam, "A Rebbe's Grandson Returns Home," *Jewish Week*, March 6, 2009, p. S4-S5.

²⁷ "Reformed Jews at Work," *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 6, 1903, p.10.

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It is unclear what precisely the founders meant by "Reform," however, and by 1909 Beth El, still led by Mr. Tokaji, was already being described as:

...the most prominent Orthodox congregation of Borough Park. In addition to having a Talmud Torah, there is a Woman'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. 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.²⁸

The congregation initially met in temporary quarters at 40th Street and 13th Avenue, approximately half a mile from its current location. According to historian Abelow:

In Borough Park, Temple Beth El was organized on August 28, 1902. Its house of Worship on Twelfth Avenue and Forty-first Street was built in 1906.²⁹

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.³⁰

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 section of Brooklyn. He was a founder and member of the board of governors of Temple Beth El, Brooklyn, a director of Yeshiva Etz Chaim and a member of Menora Masonic Lodge.³¹

Another founder, Louis Jesse Robbins,

... was born in Russia, and for many years had been a field agent for the Mutual Life Insurance Co.³²

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 rabbi was

²⁸ "Borough Park Jewry Progressive Community," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 20, 1909, p.1.

²⁹ Abelow, *op. cit.*, p. 54. The original synagogue building still exists, at 4022 12th Avenue; today it houses Congregation Anshei Lubawitz.

³⁰ *New York Times*, obituary, June 12, 1932, p.30.

³¹ *New York Times*, obituary, July 17, 1955 p. 61.

³² *Brooklyn Eagle*, obituary, May 29, 1922, p. 5.

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Solomon Hershowitz. The synagogue had daily services in Hebrew, and a school with three teachers and 78 children.³³

The congregation grew quickly, and by September of 1919 was able to announce the construction of a new home, one that would be, according to the *Eagle*, a "beautiful temple" to cost \$350,000:

It will have a balcony and mezzanine floor and another large auditorium in the basement. Work will start on the excavation on Monday next and the cornerstone will be laid in two weeks.³⁴

The following June, the estimate had risen to \$750,000 as reported by the *New York Times*, which described the proposed synagogue as "a new house of worship of unusual beauty" designed by architects Shampman & Shampman.³⁵ An article in the *New York Tribune* noted that "The building will be surmounted by a large Guastavino dome...."³⁶

Shampman & Shampman

Brothers Joseph (c.1886-1961) and Louis (d. after 1961) Shampman opened their architectural firm in Brooklyn in 1907, and had a very active practice in the decades prior to World War II. The firm

...in the last fifty years designed and built many commercial structures in the garment center, taxpayers in Queens and apartment houses in Brooklyn....

They also designed

...the Thrift Bank of Pratt Institute, and the Greater New York Savings Bank in Brooklyn, and the Veterans Temple of Peace at the [1939-40] New York World's Fair. Their structures included the Shampman Building and the Shampman & Shampman Building in the garment center.³⁷

Little is known about the firm. Unlike many other architects, they maintained several of their buildings as investment properties, in particular in the Garment District (NR listed) where they designed and owned the Shampman Building at 252 West 37th Street and the Shampman & Shampman Eighth Avenue Building at 555 Eighth Avenue noted in the article.

³³ *American Jewish Year Book*, 5668, Henrietta Szold editor (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1908), p. 262.

³⁴ "Big New Temple," *Brooklyn Eagle*, September 21, 1919 p.7.

³⁵ "New Brooklyn Temple; Will be Built at Fifteenth Avenue and Forty-Eighth Street," *New York Times*, June 13, 1920, p. 102. This description was repeated, in a slightly shorter version, almost word for word in an account in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, suggesting that it was based on a press release of some kind issued by the congregation or the architects.

³⁶ "Plan Synagogue for Brooklyn to Cost \$350,000," *New York Tribune*, September 23, 1919, p. 19.

³⁷ "Joseph Shampman, 75, An Architect Here," *New York Times*, December 16, 1961, p.25.

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Shampan & Shampan drew plans for several synagogues, including Congregation B'nai Israel at the corner of Bedford Avenue and Hewes Street, Brooklyn, in 1916³⁸; Tifereth Israel, on 14th Street near Seventh Avenue in Park Slope, in 1919³⁹; Tifereth Israel in Glen Cove, Long Island, in 1921,⁴⁰ and Temple Beth-El of Borough Park.

*Guastavino*⁴¹

The dome of Temple Beth-El was constructed by the company created by the father-and-son team of Rafael Guastavino y Moreno and Rafael Guastavino y Esposito. The elder Guastavino (1842-1908) was born in Barcelona; working as a foreman and untitled architect in his native Catalan region of Spain, he perfected the centuries-old Mediterranean system of laminated board vaults. He mixed the traditional Plaster of Paris with high-quality Portland cement mortar, then applied this adhesive to curved surfaces of thin terra-cotta tiles laid with staggered joints in two or more layers. The structurally efficient "cohesive" form, essentially a cohesive beam extended into space and also called a timbrel arch, did not rely on gravity for its stability and could be erected without centering, formwork, or scaffolding.

Having emigrated to the United States with his young son, Guastavino founded the Guastavino Fireproof Construction company in 1889. It offered innovative, fireproof, laminated tile vaulting for wide spans, resulting in unique spatial effects for many buildings erected between the 1880s and 1940s. Significant examples include the New York University Library (now Gould Memorial, NR listed) (1894-99, McKim, Mead & White), in the Bronx; the oval rotunda of the United States Custom House (1899-1907, Cass Gilbert; NR listed) at Bowling Green, in Manhattan; the City Hall Underground Station (1899-1904, Heins & LaFarge; NR listed) on the IRT subway line; the Oyster Bar and smaller spaces within Grand Central Terminal (1903-13, Warren & Wetmore, with Reed & Stem; NR listed); the vaulted ceiling (1918) in the Registry Room (Great Hall) of the Main

³⁸ "Plans for New Synagogue to be Erected on Site of Old Lutheran Church," *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 23, 1916, p.13.

³⁹ "Park Slope Synagogue," *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 26, 1919. Tifereth Israel is the historic name for today's Park Slope Jewish Center at 14th Street and 8th Avenue, listed in the National Register; that nomination dates the Jewish Center to 1925, to designs by architect Allen A. Blaustein. Since the current Jewish Center is located half a block east of the proposed location of 1919, it appears that Shampan & Shampan designed an early proposal that was later abandoned.

⁴⁰ "Built \$300,000 Temple," *Brooklyn Eagle*, January 19, 1921, p.3. Tifereth Israel of Glen Cove later built a new home at 40 Hill Street in the 1950s.

⁴¹ This summary is based almost in its entirety on the discussion of Guastavino in the *(Former) Della Robbia Bar (aka The "Crypt," Now Fiori Restaurant)*, in the *(former) Vanderbilt Hotel Interior designation report* (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, LP 1904, April 5, 1994), prepared by David M. Breiner. That discussion cites the following sources: For the elder Rafael Guastavino's own writings, see: *essay on the Theory and history of Cohesive Construction Applied Especially to the Timbrel Vault*, read before the Society of Arts, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, 2nd ed (Boston: Ticknor, 1893); *Lecture Written for the Congress of Architects, in Connection with the Columbian Exposition, on Cohesive Construction, Its Past, Its Present; Its Future?* (Chicago: s.n., 1893); *Prologomenos on the Function of Masonry in Modern Architectural Structures I* (New York: the author, 1896); II (Boston: the author, 1904). See also: "Sweet's" *Indexed Catalogue of Building Construction*, 1906, 82-83; Rafael Guastavino obituary, *New York Times*, February 3, 1908, p.9; Rafael Guastavino [son] obituary, *New York Times*, October 20, 1950, p. 27; George Collins, "The Transfer of Thin Masonry Vaulting from Spain to America," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 27 (October, 1996), pp. 176-201; Collins, Guastavino y Moreno, Rafael, and Guastavino y Esposito, Rafael, *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, vol. 2, pp. 280-281.

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Building on Ellis Island (NR listed); and the crossing dome (1908-09) of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, the largest dome ever erected without scaffolding.

The younger Guastavino (1872-1950) continued his father's work, and developed ornamented and colored ceramic tile. Before closing the 1960s, the company had installed vaulting in over 1,000 buildings around the world and held twenty-four patents.

Detailed drawings of the dome by the Guastavino Company exist at Columbia University.⁴²

Shampan & Shampan's design for Temple Beth-El

The new home for Temple Beth-El was a grand structure, eclectic in style, which attracted much attention in the press.

As described in the *New York Times*:

The structure will by 85 feet in width by 110 feet in depth, upon a plot of 100 feet by 120 feet, and will have an elevation of 85 feet from the grade to the uppermost point of the dome. The facades have been designed with the blending of several styles and periods of architecture, more or less related, and is termed a first century design. To carry out this feeling and to give the temple an antique effect the architects have selected a seam face granite, which has a natural texture and will run in colors of yellow, buff, tan and dusty purple, which, when completed, will show an influence of Egyptian stone work.

The predominating feature of the front will be the main portal, richly ornamented with suggestions from Moorish and Egyptian sources, which will ease the severity of the facade. The main lobby is treated with simplicity, the walls to be finished with a buff cast stone and the floor with buff-colored brick floor tile. At opposite ends of the main lobby marble staircases with cast stone railings ascend to the balcony and descend to the basement. The basement is utilized for a large auditorium for daily services, trustees' room, social room, janitor's quarters, coal storage, heating and artificial ventilation rooms, &c. The cornerstone will be laid today with the customary ceremonies.⁴³

The synagogue's construction was noted in *Stone Magazine* in 1923:

⁴² R. Guastavino Co., *Temple Beth-El* (Brooklyn, New York, NY): "Congregation Beth-El, Temple, S.W. cor. Fifteenth Ave. & Forty-eighth St., Borough Park, Brooklyn, N.Y. [graphic] : [detail drawings of dome] / R. Guastavino Co." The drawings form "part of the Guastavino Fireproof Construction Company/George Collins architectural records and drawings."

⁴³ "New Brooklyn Temple; Will be Built at Fifteenth Avenue and Forty-Eighth Street," *New York Times*, June 13, 1920, p. 102. This description was repeated, in a slightly shorter version, almost word for word in an account in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, suggesting that it was based on a press release of some kind issued by the congregation or the architects.

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Granite Temple Dedicated

The new home of the Beth-El Congregation, a magnificent edifice in seam faced granite, located at Fifteenth Avenue and Forty-eighth Street, Brooklyn, N.Y., was dedicated on May 13th after being in course of construction more than two years, and at a total cost of about \$1,000,000. The structure is unique and original, yet simple in design and construction. It is built on a square pattern, combining the graceful curve of modern architecture in three huge portals with overshadowing dome effect. The roof of the dome is eighty-one feet in diameter, the third largest in the country and the largest of its type in Brooklyn. The granite for the exterior was furnished by Arlando Marine, New York City. Shampán & Shampán were the architects.⁴⁴

Although it is unclear what a "first century design" might be, the reference to Moorish influence reflects the 1920s 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.

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.⁴⁵

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:

At mid-century, the interior of the Cologne Synagogue, designed by E.F. Zwirner of Berlin... shows how much more elaborate the Moorish decoration had become since Semper's comparatively restrained interior at Dresden. The synagogue in the Tempelgasse in Vienna (1853-58)... was carried out in full-blooded Arabic detail by the well-known Viennese architect and city planner Ludwig von Förster, in conjunction with Theophil von Hansen. Förster was also responsible for the synagogues in Vienna

⁴⁴ "Granite Temple Dedicated," *Stone Magazine*, vol. XLIV, no. 6, June 1923, p.346.

⁴⁵ Edward Jamilly, "The Architecture of the Contemporary Synagogue," in Cecil Roth, ed., *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 766.

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(Leopoldstadt), at Miskolez, Hungary and at Pesht (1860) – the latter banded externally with colored bricks, its façade interspersed with stone and terracotta, decorated with angle towers and cupolas.⁴⁶

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 a Liverpool, London and New York (Lexington Avenue) [Central Synagogue].⁴⁷

A more recent review of the subject points out that the use of Moorish elements remained strictly ornamental:

No architect ever aimed to recreate on Western soil an actual Oriental palace or mosque (let alone one of the famous "Oriental" synagogues such as those of medieval Spain). The ground plan, structural engineering, and important stylistic elements always reflected contemporary Western tastes and practices. What was Islamic was mainly decorative. The only structural element adapted from the "Orient" were perhaps the slender pillars with floral and vegetal capitals. And these, too, were often made of iron, using the latest Western methods of construction.⁴⁸

The version of the Moorish seen at Temple Beth El had been developed just a few years earlier at the B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue in Manhattan by architects Walter S. Schneider and Henry B. Herts. As described by historian Andrew S. Dolkart:⁴⁹

Schneider and Herts's design for B'nai Jeshurun began what Robert Stern has called "a new phase of synagogue design." For their B'nai Jeshurun design, Schneider and Herts...returned to a Middle Eastern design vocabulary. However, their design differed from the idiom used for nineteenth-century synagogues. The exterior of the synagogue does not have the ornate decorative quality seen on the facades of the Central Synagogue and other early Moorish synagogues. Rather, B'nai Jeshurun is an austere stone building with ornament limited to the tall centrally placed entrance portal.

Dolkart notes that:

The ornament used on the façade of B'nai Jeshurun was inspired by actual Middle Eastern architecture. As Herts noted, "the designs and symbols used in the Synagogue, were suggested by symbols found in

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 767.

⁴⁸ Ivan Davidson Kalmar, "Moorish Style: Orientalism, the Jews, and Synagogue Architecture," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Spring/Summer 2001 (New Series), p. 72.

⁴⁹ Andrew S. Dolkart, National Register nomination for Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York County, N.Y., 1989.

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the ornament and in the walls of extant remains of buildings in ruins and graveyards in Palestine, in Egypt, and in Iberia." In a 1920 article on the synagogue published in *Architecture* and probably written by Walter Schneider, the source of the building's design is also discussed: "The purpose was to seek among the archaeological fragments of the period and time most closely related to Jewish unity as a nation in Palestine. Extensive research in the various collections in the Metropolitan Museum of Art furnished inspiration for a design that reflects a blending of several styles and periods more or less related."⁵⁰

The result was called a "Semitic" style.

In the years just after World War I, when a large number of new synagogues were built in New York City, Semitic architecture, with its mix of forms from Middle Eastern cultures where Judaism had flourished, became popular for synagogue design. This form originated with the design of B'nai Jeshurun.

One of the synagogues inspired by this new "Semitic" style was Temple Beth-El, which bears a strong resemblance, both inside and out, to B'nai Jeshurun. Shampman & Shampman's design includes a monolithic stone-faced façade whose main feature is a grand entrance with successive layers of colonnettes of varying design supporting a series of round arches. The two main colonnettes are decorated with an ornate diaper pattern often seen in Moorish design. The triple entrance within the arch is framed in cast-stone adorned with Arabesque designs, into which are mixed Judaic symbols, notably a *menorah* and a *magen david* (shield or "star" of David). Within the arches, above the entrance is a set of three *bifore*, and above those a lunette window adorned with a *magen david*. The rest of the façade with its narrow slit-like windows is reminiscent of an ancient Moorish fortress. The façade's roofline curves upward to follow the curve of the central entrance. Most of these elements – grand entrance with arches and colonnettes, monolithic façade, and narrow slit windows – can be found at the Manhattan synagogue.

Contrasting with the relatively severe façade is the sumptuously ornamental sanctuary, a large square space with a rear balcony and an enormous octagonal ceiling dome. The ark is set within a tall arch enframed within spirals, the entire area covered in arabesques, with Judaic symbols mixed in. This arrangement mirrors the arrangement of the ark at B'nai Jeshurun, although with somewhat different shapes, and with different ornamental details, most notably the inclusion on the arch of a set of *mazelos*, symbols of the zodiac that sometimes appear in synagogues. The ceiling in general and the dome in particular are given an elaborately ornamental treatment, again reminiscent of B'nai Jeshurun, which also has an octagonal dome. The ceilings in both synagogues are adorned with what Dolkart describes (at B'nai Jeshurun) as:

...coffers in the form of eight-sided stars surrounded by stalactite-like dripping motifs; these are known as muquarnas. Muquarnas are a major design motif on the greatest of all Moorish monuments, the Alhambra.

⁵⁰ Sources for Dolkart's citations: Herts quotation is from Israel Goldstein, *A Century of Judaism in New York: B'nai Jeshurun 1825-1925* (NY: B'nai Jeshurun, 1930), p.262. Probable Schneider quotation is from "The Temple B'nai Jeshurun," *Architecture* 41 (January 1920), p. 18.

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The congregation and its later history

The new synagogue's dedication of May 1923 was a major celebration:

The officers and members of congregation Beth-El of Borough Park have announced that the building will be dedicated on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, May 13, 14 and 15.

An elaborate program has been arranged. A big motorcar parade will be held at 1 o'clock on Sunday, May 13, from the Hebrew Institute on 13th ave. and 50th st. At 2 o'clock the builder, H. Wilner, will hand over the key to Morris Kulok.

Many prominent rabbis, high city and State officials and members of the judiciary have accepted invitations to be present. Cantor Mordicai Hershman will officiate. On Sunday evening a banquet will be tendered to the officers and members....

This temple, declared to be the most spacious, most imposing in architecture and most gorgeously decorated of all synagogues of America, when fully completed will show an outlay in excess of three quarters of a million dollars, is the outgrowth of a small congregation that started about 19 years ago with a membership of 35 men.⁵¹

The article included a large photograph of the new synagogue building designed by Shampman & Shampman.

Beth-El had several rabbis in its early years, but eventually was led for 62 years by one rabbi, Israel Schorr. According to Rabbi Schorr's *New York Times* obituary:

Rabbi Schorr was an Orthodox Jewish leader and noted Talmudic scholar and was also learned in secular fields like philosophy and literature. He strongly advocated the interweaving of strict Orthodox learning with contemporary humanist thought. He was the rabbi of Congregation Beth El and then, after a merger, of Congregation Beth El - Young Israel for 62 years. He was also a past president of the Hapoel Hamizrachi, a Zionist organization, and the Vaad Harabonim, a Brooklyn rabbinical organization. Rabbi Schorr, an energetic man, usually delivered several sermons and lectures at his synagogue every Sabbath, often to standing-room-only audiences, until two months before his death. He was born in a small village that was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and is part of western Ukraine. He went on to be recognized as what one American Jewish publication called "a staggering scholar," and he studied with Rabbi Meir Arak and other prominent rabbis in Eastern Europe. In 1927, at 21, he moved to the United States. He learned English and went on to study English literature at Columbia.⁵²

⁵¹ "Imposing Temple to Be Dedicated By Borough Park Jews on May 13," *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 22, 1923, p.6A.

⁵² "Rabbi Israel Schorr, 94; Led Brooklyn Synagogue," *New York Times*, April 18, 2000, p.B8.

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The congregation flourished throughout the 20th century, and became especially famed for its cantorial tradition, gaining a reputation at one time as "the Carnegie Hall of Brooklyn."⁵³ Its most notable cantor was the renowned Moshe Koussevitsky (1899-1966), who served at Beth El from 1952 until shortly before his death, and has been described as "the celebrated cantor of pre-World War II Warsaw, Poland,"⁵⁴ and "one of the premier cantors of the 20th century."⁵⁵ According to his obituary in the *New York Times*:

Mr. Koussevitzky received his training in Vilna [present-day Vilnius in Lithuania], where he became cantor of the Great Synagogue. Later he was cantor of the Tlomackie Synagogue of Warsaw. During that period he made his first concert visit to the United States in 1938. When the German invasion threatened the Polish capital he found refuge in the Soviet Union, where he gave concerts and appeared in operatic roles. In the Tsibilis [sic] (Georgia) Opera he sang tenor parts in "Rigoletto" and "Tosca." One of his most moving public appearances came after the Germans were driven from Warsaw. He was permitted to chant the Hebrew prayer for the dead, "El Mole [sic] Rachamin" ("God, Full of Mercy") at a service in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto before newly liberated survivors. He sang it 20 years later at a service in memory of the 6 million Jews who died in the Hitler holocaust. That service was held on April 11, 1965, in the grand ballroom of the Americana hotel before 2,500 persons. Members of his family who had escaped to London arranged for him to join them after the war. He resumed his concert performances, including an appearance in Royal Albert Hall. He came to the United States in 1947, and gave many concerts in the classical cantorial and folk repertory before going to Congregation Beth-El in 1952. He was a member of the board of directors of the Jewish Ministers Cantors Association of America and Canada, the organization of Orthodox cantors. His colleagues said yesterday that they planned to establish an academy for training cantors in his honor.

Cantor Koussevitsky came from a noted cantorial family – other cantors in the family included

...a son, Cantor Alexander Koussevitzky of Utopia Parkway Jewish Center, Queens, [and] two brothers, Cantor Simcha Koussevitzky of Capetown and Cantor David Koussevitzky of Temple Emanu-El of Borough Park....⁵⁶

Koussevitsky's brother David, in an interview, recalled how the brothers found their way to America after the war:

Simon Ackerman, a clothier...used to come back and forth to America, and he told me about [his] shul [synagogue]. "Would you be interested in coming over?" ... He gave me a letter to the consul, and they gave me a visa. And I came. This was '48.... In 1946 we heard that Moshe was alive and well, and arranged to bring him over.... [He] came from Warsaw, they allowed him to go back to Warsaw [from

⁵³ Gigi Yellen, "Scales Out of Shul," *Hadassah Magazine*, May 2007, Vol. 88 No. 9 (n.p.).

⁵⁴ Sholom Kalib, *The Musical Tradition of the Eastern European Synagogue* (Syracuse University Press, 2005), Volume 2, Part 1, p. 342.

⁵⁵ Velvel Pasternak, *The International Jewish Songbook* (Tara Publications 1997), p. 255.

⁵⁶ "Moshe Koussevitzky Dies at 67; Noted Cantor and Opera Tenor," *New York Times*, August 24, 1966, p.465.

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Russia]. Moshe came without a sheet of Jewish music from Russia. David spent the entire time writing out all his repertoire. This is the love of the brothers.

[Interviewer: How did America strike you?] I was fascinated, and it brought back my youth. Here's a choir, and they're singing those compositions that we sang in Vilna, because the choir leader came from Odessa, he was in our shul nearly fifty years....⁵⁷

Moshe Koussevitsky was considered one of the last great exponents of the cantorial tradition. According to the *Jewish Weekly Forward*, in an article recounting a 2006 cantorial concert at New York's Metropolitan Opera House:

But if there is one figure on whom discussion of postwar American cantorial history lingers, it is Moshe Koussevitzky, the Lithuanian-born master who performed at the Royal Albert Hall in 1955 and spent the final years of his life as the cantor of Temple Beth El of the Boro Park section of Brooklyn. For Cantor Benny Rogosnitzky, president of Cantors World, the four-year-old organization that sponsored the concert at the Met, Koussevitzky's death in 1966 signaled the end of an era.⁵⁸

Since Cantor Koussevitsky's time, Beth El has been served by two other noted cantors, Moshe Stern and Benzion Miller.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Moshe Stern, who served the congregation during the 1970s, was:

... one of the great *cantors*, contemporary and otherwise. Born in Hungary in 1935, trained in Jerusalem, [he was] made famous via his pulpit at Borough Park's Congregation Beth El....⁵⁹

Cantor David Tilman attended Stern's first appearance at Beth El:

Universally regarded as the greatest cantor of his era, Chazzan Koussevitzky died during Passover of 1966, and the synagogue's officers searched the world for two years to find a successor to their lamented cantor.... I knew that my friend Dennis was taking me to Temple Beth El to hear the first service led by the new chazzan, Cantor Moshe Stern of South Africa, but I was both totally unprepared and overwhelmed by the experience of davening [praying] in that congregation for Selichot [a midnight service on the Saturday night before the Jewish New Year].

More than 1,500 men, women and children who had purchased tickets specifically for this service filled every corner of the sanctuary, including the women's balcony, before the stroke of midnight.

⁵⁷ Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story Of The American Cantorate* (University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 86.

⁵⁸ "After Years of Decline, Cantorial Music Gets a Second Act," *Jewish Weekly Forward*, December 8, 2006, p. B1 ff.

⁵⁹ Ben Jacobson, "Capturing the spirit of the High Holy Days," *Jerusalem Post*, September 22, 2004, p.24.

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Temple Beth El of Borough Park

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Following the rabbi's preservice derasha, or "sermon," spoken totally in Yiddish, *Cantor Stern* appeared on the pulpit for the first time at 12:45 a.m. A stir ran through the congregation because of his close physical resemblance to his predecessor, Koussevitzky.

Cantor Stern sang the equivalent of two operatic performances, finally arriving at the last line of the "Kaddish Shaleim" at 3:45 a.m. No one left or even moved. Scattered applause was heard throughout the large sanctuary as the congregants savored the overwhelming religious and musical experience of the past three hours; every congregant present felt that *Cantor Koussevitzky* had been succeeded by a worthy chazzan.⁶⁰

Benzion Miller is the congregation's current cantor:

When Beth-El merged with Young Israel, Miller recalls, [Miller] had two years left on his contract. Some members of the Modern Orthodox Young Israel opposed having a professional cantor on staff; they preferred lay members lead the services. Today, Miller says some of his staunchest supporters are those who originally objected to keeping him. The shul's choir—which began as Miller's son and grandson's spontaneously harmonizing with the cantor—now includes a full contingent of boys and men who back him up with the full harmonies, dramatic crescendos and sudden sforzandos of Golden Age hazzanut.⁶¹

Miller has been quoted in the Jewish press lamenting the decline of the cantorial art:

"I see the handwriting on the wall," says Benzion Miller, the longtime cantor of Young Israel/Beth-El of Borough Park in Brooklyn, who says his own concert schedule has dwindled rather than grown in the past few years. "I'd like to see shuls turn around and start hiring cantors. I'd like to say it will get them more members, but I know that's not true," he says. "I only hope that by the time they turn around, there will be cantors to fill the positions."⁶²

But Beth El continues the cantorial tradition. According to the *Jewish Week* in 2001:

The synagogue's popularity has definitely not been hurt by the marquee attraction of Benzion Miller, a reigning star of the world cantors' circuit and scion of a long line of Bobover chasidic mohels and chazans who, solo, has sung every week at the synagogue since 1980 to a sanctuary filled with up to 250 worshipers.

The same article describes the synagogue's current services:

Since last winter, on every fourth Shabbat as well as holidays, this modern Orthodox synagogue sees its 1,500-seat main sanctuary often swell to full capacity with a crowd of liturgical music lovers. The draw

⁶⁰ David F. Tilman, "In Record Time: Melodies That Give Voice to Memories," *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia), September 13, 2001, p.67.

⁶¹ Yellen, *op. cit.*

⁶² Sue Fishkoff, "Where are the Orthodox cantors?" *Washington Jewish Week*, September 18, 2008, p. 50.

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is noted Cantor Benzion Miller accompanied by a male choir led by Miller's son, Shimon.... The gatherings are not just big, but considering the demographics of this largely black hat [fervently Orthodox] neighborhood, the synagogue draws a dazzlingly diverse crowd, mixing chasidim, other fervently Orthodox Jews, Modern Orthodox, Conservative and the unaffiliated, with a large infusion of roots-seeking Russian immigrants. "Music brings people together," explains Shimon Miller. Other neighborhood non-chasidic synagogues have revived attendance with a variety of programs, including energetic outreach to Russian immigrants, but none have yet seen the dramatic numbers of Young Israel Beth-El.

The article noted the changing Jewish demographics of Borough Park, and the challenge posed to Beth-El:

Recent years have been rocky for Young Israel Beth-El, the product of a merger between the Young Israel of Borough Park and Congregation Beth-El in the 1980s. Like other Modern Orthodox and "Litvak" synagogues in Borough Park, the Moorish-style institution at 15th Avenue and 48th Street has suffered a large slide in membership due to the shifting demographics of the area. Nevertheless, even in the face of falling numbers, Young Israel Beth-El has mostly held its own, boasting several simultaneous weekday minyans [daily prayer quorums] and a generous schedule of Saturday and weekday classes in Talmud, basic Judaism and Hebrew geared to religious novices, such as Israeli and Russian immigrants. The synagogue, which has stabilized at around 200 member families, has made a special effort to reach out to disaffected young people from Orthodox homes. "People look for a shul they feel comfortable in," said Young Israel Beth-El spiritual leader Rabbi Moshe Snow. "Here they find an amazing confluence of events. It enhances their closeness to God and Torah."⁶³

Today, Young Israel Beth El of Borough Park continues to thrive. The synagogue reflects the history of Brooklyn Jews in the 20th century, including the cantorial tradition, and now also the history of Brooklyn Jews at the beginning of the 21st century. As such, Young Israel-Beth El of Borough Park remains a vital part of the living history of its neighborhood, and of its city.

⁶³ Lehman Weichselbaum, "Hitting The High (Holy Day) Notes," *The Jewish Week*, September 21, 2001 (n.p.).

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Temple Beth El of Borough Park

Name of Property

Brooklyn, New York

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Section 9 Page 2

Temple Beth El of Borough Park

Name of Property

Brooklyn, New York

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Section 9 Page 3

Temple Beth El of Borough Park

Name of Property

Brooklyn, New York

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Section 10 Page 1

Temple Beth El of Borough Park

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

Temple Beth El of Borough Park occupies Brooklyn Tax Block 5636, Lot 36, Kings County, New York. The lot dimensions are 100' by 120'. The boundary is delineated on the accompanying map.

Boundary Justification

The nomination boundary includes the entire lot upon which the historic synagogue building is located.

Temple Beth El of Borough Park
Name of Property

Kings County, New York
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 11 8 5 8 5 6 1 5 4 4 9 8 5 0 2
Zone Easting Northing

3 1 8
Zone Easting Northing

2 1 8

4 1 8

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By (See continuation page for author)

name/title Contact/Editor: Kathleen A. Howe, Historic Preservation Program Analyst

organization NYS OPRHP, Field Services Bureau date December 23, 2009

street & number P.O. Box 189, Peebles Island telephone 518-237-8643, ext. 3266

city or town Waterford state NY zip code 12188

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner (Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO)

name Young Israel Beth El of Borough Park

street & number 4802 15th Avenue telephone 718-435-9020

city or town Brooklyn state NY zip code 11219

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20503

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 10 Page 1

Temple Beth El of Borough Park

Name of Property

Kings County, New York

County and State

Form prepared by:

Tony Robins

Thompson & Columbus, Inc.

50 West 67th Street, Suite 10F

New York, NY 10023

212-877-7637

Prepared on behalf of:

The New York Landmarks Conservancy

One Whitehall Street

New York, NY 10004

United States Department of the Interior
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Section 11 Page 1

Temple Beth El of Borough Park

Name of Property

Kings County, New York

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Photo List

Temple Beth El of Borough Park

4802 15th Avenue

Brooklyn, Kings County, NY

Photographer: Anthony W. Robins

Date taken: October 2009

CD-R with .TIF images on file at NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Waterford, NY

1. Beth El of Borough Park, 15th Avenue façade, looking southwest
2. 15th Avenue façade, ornamental detail above main entrance
3. 15th Avenue façade, entrance detail
4. 48th Street façade, looking southwest
5. South façade (mid-block), looking northwest
6. Entrance vestibule, looking north
7. Main sanctuary, west and north walls, looking from balcony towards ark
8. Main sanctuary, looking toward rear (east) wall
9. Main sanctuary, north and east walls, looking towards rear corner
10. Main sanctuary, ark at west wall
11. Main sanctuary, dome
12. Main sanctuary, ceiling detail
13. Main sanctuary, ceiling detail
14. Social hall, basement
15. Beit midrash (study room), basement

Temple Beth El of
Borough Park.
Kings County, N.Y.

Zone 18

Easting: 585615

Northing: 4498502

USGS map
Brooklyn Road
1:24000



Produced by the United States Geological Survey
Topography compiled 1966. Planimetry derived from imagery taken
1977 and other sources. Photospected using imagery dated 1995;
no major culture or drainage changes observed. Survey control
current as of 1967. Boundaries, other than corporate, revised 1999
Selected hydrographic data compiled from NOS charts
275 (1964), 542 (1967), and 745 (1966). This information
is not intended for navigation.

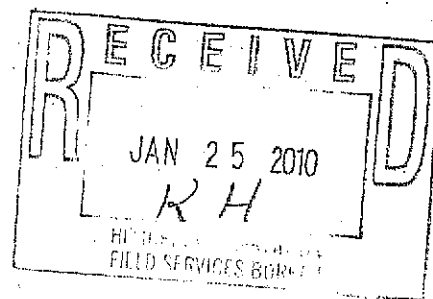


**Temple Beth El of Borough Park
(current Young Israel Beth El of Borough Park)
4802 15th Avenue
Brooklyn, Kings County, NY**

Nomination boundary indicated by dark line
Brooklyn Tax Block 5636, Lot 36
Lot dimensions as indicated
Source: NYC OASIS Maps at www.oasisnyc.net



Landmarks Preservation
Commission



Robert B. Tierney
Chair

January 21, 2010

Kate Daly
Executive Director
kdaly@lpc.nyc.gov

Ms. Ruth Pierpont, Director
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation
Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau
Peebles Island
P.O. Box 189
Waterford, New York 12188-0189

1 Centre Street
9th Floor North
New York, NY 10007

212 669 7926 tel
212 669 7797 fax

Re: (Former) Temple Beth El of Borough Park, 4802 15th Avenue, Brooklyn

Dear Ms. Pierpont:

I write on behalf of Chair Robert B. Tierney in response to your request for comment on the eligibility of the (Former) Temple Beth El of Borough Park, located at 4802 15th Avenue in Brooklyn, to the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

The Commission has reviewed the materials submitted by the Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau and has determined that this building appears to meet the criteria for inclusion on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Therefore based on this review, the Commission supports the nomination of the (Former) Temple Beth El of Borough Park.

Sincerely yours,

Kate Daly

cc: Robert B. Tierney, Chair
Mary Beth Betts

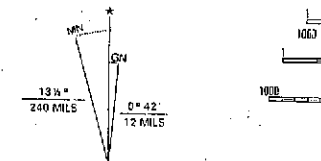
Maple Bell E. on
Prospect Park
Singe County, N.Y.

Zone A
asking 585615
for them 4478502

150 000
FEET
40°37'30"



Produced by the United States Geological Survey
Topography compiled 1966. Planimetry derived from imagery taken 1977 and other sources. Photinspected using imagery dated 1995; no major cultural or drainage changes observed. Survey control current as of 1967. Boundaries, other than corporate, revised 1999
Selected hydrographic data compiled from NOS charts 275 (1964), 542 (1967), and 745 (1966). This information is not intended for navigational purposes
North American Datum of 1927 (NAD 27). Projection and 10 000-foot ticks: New York coordinate system, Long Island zone transverse Mercator
1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid, zone 18
North American Datum of 1983 (NAD 83) is shown by dashed corner ticks. The values of the shift between NAD 27 and NAD 83 for 7.5 minute intersections are obtainable from National Geodetic Survey NADCON software
There may be private inholdings within the boundaries of the National or State reservations shown on this map
Entire area lies within New York City
Information shown in purple may not meet USGS content standards and may conflict with previously mapped contours



UTM GRID AND 1999 MAGNETIC NORTH DECLINATION AT CENTER OF SHEET















