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# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

## 1 NAME

HISTORIC

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim; Congregation Beth Elohim

AND/OR COMMON

Beth Elohim Synagogue

## 2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

90 Hasell Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Charleston

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

First

STATE

South Carolina

VICINITY OF  
CODE

045

COUNTY

Charleston

CODE

019

## 3 CLASSIFICATION

### CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

### OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

### STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

### PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- COMMERCIAL
- PARK
- EDUCATIONAL
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ENTERTAINMENT
- RELIGIOUS
- GOVERNMENT
- SCIENTIFIC
- INDUSTRIAL
- TRANSPORTATION
- MILITARY
- OTHER:

## 4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (Rabbi William A. Rosenthal)

STREET & NUMBER

86 Hasell Street

CITY, TOWN

Charleston

VICINITY OF

STATE

South Carolina 29401

## 5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Charleston County Register of Mesne Conveyance

STREET & NUMBER

Courthouse Square

CITY, TOWN

Charleston

STATE

South Carolina

## 6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Historic American Buildings Survey

DATE

1938, 1963, 1974

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress

CITY, TOWN

Washington, D.C.

STATE

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The following description was compiled by Harley J. McKee in 1963 and 1974 for Historic American Buildings Survey, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. The data contains building contract-specifications now on deposit at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio:

### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

#### A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: A synagogue in the form of a Greek temple, with a suspended plaster dome and rich ornamentation. In size and character it approximates the Theseion.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, well maintained.

#### B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Number of stories, over-all dimensions: One story over a podium; main part 56'-2" x 99'-10"; robing room 19'-2" x 21'-9". 3 x 5 bays; faces west.
2. Foundations: Granite ashlar facing; molded stucco water table, which does not continue on north and east sides.
3. Walls: Brick, covered with white painted stucco, marked off in 2'-0" courses simulating stone joints. Corner antae, caps a simplified version of Erechtheion. Slight settlement at northeast corner, repaired in recent years by underpinning of foundations.
4. Portico: Six fluted, equally spaced Greek Doric columns, stucco over molded brick, approximating Theseion order. Diminution if straight (no entasis). Two metopes nearest corners are wider than others. Mutules are not continued in raking cornice of pediment. Architrave is of sandstone, three blocks in thickness, painted. Tympanum is brick, stuccoed. Overhang of cornice is supported by projecting flagstones, varying in size from 2" to 5" in thickness by 11" to 2'-6" in width, stuccoed. Five granite steps with nosing, with granite end blocks and simple wrought-iron rail, ascend from ground level to floor, which is paved with 7-3/4" square marble pieces, laid diagonally, alternating white and blue-gray. Ceiling is coffered, plaster on wood lath, two rows of ten each; deep coffers are double, each part crowned by egg-and-dart molding.
5. Chimney: A small hooded brick chimney projects from ridge above west of building.

(CONTINUED)

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1824, 1840

BUILDER/ARCHITECT David Lopez/Cyrus L. Warner

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim possesses national significance as the birthplace, in 1824, of Reform Judaism in America. Originated by German Jews (Ashkenazim) in the early 1800's, the Reform Movement spread rapidly through central Europe and to the United States, where it led to radical changes in Jewish doctrine during the remainder of the 19th century. The influx of German, Austrian, and Bavarian Jews that began in 1836 and continued into the 1890's was a major factor in the success of American Reform. Thus Beth Elohim's pioneering role is accentuated both because the Reform group arose within an Orthodox and mainly Sephardic (of Spanish and Portuguese ancestry) community and because it antedated the first large-scale Ashkenazic immigration by more than a decade.

Congregation Beth Elohim, established in 1749, is the Nation's fourth oldest Jewish community. Its present house of worship, a fine Greek Revival structure erected in 1840, is the second oldest synagogue extant in the country and the oldest in continuous use.

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim demonstrates eligibility for Landmark designation under items I (Association) and IV (Integrity) of the Criteria for National Significance.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Charleston was founded in 1670, and Jews began to settle there soon afterward. Religious services were held informally until their number was sufficient to found a congregation. Most of the immigrants were Sephardim, though a few were of German ancestry. Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (Holy Congregation House of God) was officially organized on the day after Rosh Hashannah (New Year) in 1749. At first the young congregation recited prayers in private quarters and, from 1775, in an improvised synagogue, a converted residence, adjacent to the modern temple grounds.

This congregation was the religious home of Moses Lindo, who before the Revolution developed the fabulous Carolina indigo trade, and of Joseph Levy, probably the first Jewish military officer in America. Francis Salvador, who became a deputy to the Provincial Congress of South Carolina in 1775, was the first Jew to hold an important elective office. In 1784 the Beth Elohim community established the country's first Hebrew Benevolent Society, and its Hebrew Orphan Society, organized in 1801, was one of the earliest such groups. Both remain in operation.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(CONTINUATION SHEET)

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than one acre

UTM REFERENCES

A 17 599940 3627460  
 ZONE EASTING NORTHING

B           
 ZONE EASTING NORTHING

C           
 ZONE EASTING NORTHING

D           
 ZONE EASTING NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

(CONTINUATION SHEET)

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Polly Ann Matherly, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION

HCRS (NR/NHL)

DATE

April 1980

STREET & NUMBER

440 G Street NW

TELEPHONE

202-343-6404

CITY OR TOWN

Washington, D.C. 20243

STATE

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL   

STATE   

LOCAL   

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

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I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

*Designated  
8/19/80*

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND RECREATION SERVICE

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TITLE: Survey of Historic Sites in South Carolina

DATE OF SURVEY: 1969, State

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS: South Carolina Department of Archives and History

CITY, TOWN: Columbia

STATE: South Carolina

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6. Openings: Entrance doorway. Opening is centered on portico, granite threshold, wide stucco architrave, crossetted at head, corona with steep wash. Lower 2/3 of opening has double sliding doors of white pine, rails 4" thick, single panel with carved egg-and-dart molding, brass knobs in circular recessed escutcheons, brass morticed lock. Pair of fixed panels above doors of similar design, with wrought and cast-iron grille in each, altar motif.
7. Windows: Have stucco architrave, crossetted at head, corona, molded sill. Those on north and east sides have no architrave, simple lintel and sill.
8. Roof: Gable roof, covered with sheet metal. Entablature of portico continues as building cornice. Slight irregularity of triglyph spacing at junction with portico. Alternate mutules omitted on north and east sides. Metal antefixae have been removed in recent years.

C. Technical Description of Interior (Excellent condition throughout)

1. Plan: A vestibule with stairs at each end opens through three doorways into an auditorium, at the east end of which is a raised platform (bimah) containing the Ark. Behind this is a small robing room which projects from the main rectangle of the temple.
2. Stairways: Each vestibule stair has an open well, open string with turned mahogany newel, handrail and turned balusters, yellow pine treads. Rail at outer side across window.
3. Flooring: Vestibule is paved with 3" hexagonal ceramic tile, with fret border--probably a replacement of about 1870. Auditorium floor is carpeted over yellow pine. Gallery floor has been raised during alterations.
4. Wall Finish: Plaster, painted light neutral green.
5. Ceiling of auditorium: This is a suspended plaster paneled saucer dome with shallow pendentives, and segmental coffered spandrel arches at the east and west, on wood lath whose forming boards are suspended from the lower chord of roof trusses. Sixteen panels, with egg-and-dart moldings,

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radiate from the central portion; they diminish in depth proportionate to their diminishing width--egg-and-dart moldings likewise. There is a triangular panel in each pendentive and seven rectangular panels in each spandrel arch. Panels are painted a lighter color than rails, which match the wall color.

At the crown of the dome is a centerpiece, apparently of carved wood; the center is rounded. From it radiate three successive bands of 18 small smooth leaves, staggered. There is a band of 18 larger smooth leaves, between each of which is a stalk bearing an ornate Greek palmette; the palmettes constitute the outer band. Beyond them is a ring of 16 paterae. This work is painted the same color as the panels, in contrast to the smooth background. (An electric fixture now hangs from the center, having replaced the original chandelier.)

Other ceilings: The vestibule has a small leafy plastic centerpiece. The soffit of the gallery is plain.

6. Trim in Auditorium:

- a. Windows: Windows have a wooden architrave, and pockets which originally contained folding interior shutters.
- b. Doorways between vestibule and auditorium have similar trim. The center door is double, the others single; each has three molded panels, the upper and lower ones being small and horizontal.
- c. The bimah is at the center of the east wall, raised on a platform. There are four Corinthian columns (Monument of Lysicrates type) of wood widely spaced at the center, carrying an entablature, above which are the Tablets of the Law (black with gold letters), set in a grille of anthemion and palmette motifs. A modern brass lamp (eternal light) hangs on three chains below the entablature. This shelter, with engaged columns at the wall, enframes the ark, whose case is of San Domingo mahogany, paneled over large carved acanthus leaves; the case is curved in plan at the front, and is set in a partially recessed area.

At the front edge of the platform is a paneled lectern, with molded cornice and base, at the center; at each front corner is a simpler paneled pedestal, carrying a seven-branched candlestick. Below each pedestal is a console with a large acanthus leaf. The front of the platform has panels with egg-and-dart molding, between stairs on each

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side. (This woodwork, except for the Ark case is painted off-white.) A slightly elevated space in front of the platform has a mahogany balustrade, with turned double balusters, and a richly carved gilded rail, with an anthemion frieze below leaf-and-tongue and egg-and-dart moldings. This balustrade appears original but seems to have been moved or altered. At the center of this space is a mahogany reading desk; it appears to be of more modern workmanship but of reasonably harmonious design.

- d. Pews are placed on each side of three aisles. They are open, with simple paneled ends, of painted (brown) wood, top rails being natural mahogany. A wainscot of molded and beaded vertical boards at outer walls.
- e. Gallery: this is at the west end of the auditorium. It is supported on four wooden Ionic columns (order of the Erechtheion, modified) and two engaged columns at the ends. The central portion is straight in plan; the ends are curved and projecting, with a console carrying the projection. The entablature is simple, but contains two bands of carved moldings, and carries a balustrade with turned balusters. (This woodwork is also off-white.) In recent years a light metal grille has been placed above the balustrade.
7. Organ: this is located on center in the gallery. It probably dates from about 1880. The case, of off-white painted paneled wood, has a central gabled pavilion and lower pavilion, each displaying a tier of pipes. The main pipes of the organ are enclosed, over the center of the vestibule.
8. Order of the auditorium: at each corner of the auditorium a square anta projects, carrying an entablature. The corona and upper part of the architrave, each crowned with egg-and-dart moldings, are light in color.
9. Vestibule: wall surface beneath the lower flight of stairs is of vertical molded and beaded boards, painted white.
10. Stained glass windows: These are colored, mostly geometrical, and date from about 1880. Central mullions divide each window into two parts. Glass contains symbols--sacrificial altar, harp, Star of David, dove, and rainbow, chalice, cluster of grapes, Eternal Light, burning bush, sacred scrolls, Tablets of the Law, Noah's Ark, etc.
11. Robing room: simple mantel.
12. Miscellaneous: plaques in the vestibule feature stone fragments of

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memorials, and of the cornerstone of the 1792 synagogue which formerly occupied the same site.

## D. Site

1. Orientation: the temple stands on a level, rectangular lot with its south elevation facing Hasell Street. Small areas of lawn are located to the west (front) and south of the structure. A walkway separates the temple from the adjacent social hall, built along the north edge of the lot in 1950. A narrow driveway borders the eastern end of the synagogue. On the opposite side of the drive is a late 18th century residence that serves as administrative offices of Congregation Beth Elohim.

(Note: the social hall and administration building do not contribute to the national significance of the temple and are therefore excluded from the Landmark boundaries.)

2. Fence and gates: these antedate the present building. The wrought-iron fence is set on a low brick wall with sandstone coping (somewhat spalled), consisting of fifteen 9'-6" sections (vertical 1" bars set diagonally, horizontal bar near top, each bar terminating in a barbed arrowhead). Between sections are braced pedestals with finials. The main gateway has double gates of simple design, the opening topped by a band of intersecting circles and a scrolled gable. The smaller gateway at the southeast corner of the site, has a single gate; it is similar in design but simpler.

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By the end of the 18th century, Congregation Beth Elohim had become the largest Jewish community in the Nation, with a membership of some 500. In 1792-94 it constructed its first permanent home, an impressive Georgian structure reminiscent of a Christian church in both the basilican plan and two-story, octagonal lantern. That temple was destroyed in the great Charleston fire of 1838. The congregation then built a temporary tabernacle just north of the ruined synagogue. Services were held there until a second house of worship was erected on the site of the first. (The "temporary" tabernacle survived until 1950, when it was replaced by a new social hall.)

The new temple, an excellent example of the Greek Revival style, was designed by New York architect Cyrus L. Warner and constructed by Charleston builder David Lopez (a member of Beth Elohim). It was completed in 1840 and consecrated the following year. The inclusion of an organ in the synagogue marked the final stage in the conversion of Congregation Beth Elohim from Orthodox to Reform doctrine.

The Reform Movement had begun as an attempt by laymen to modernize traditional synagogue worship and developed into a critical reevaluation of Jewish theology by rabbis and religious thinkers. Actual systematic worship reform occurred first in the Hamburg community, which formed the New Israelitish Temple Association in 1817 and issued a Reform prayer book two years later. Innovations included choral singing, organ music, and the use of the German language instead of Hebrew for prayers and sermons.

Reports of the Reform activity in Europe soon reached Charleston. In 1824, some 47 members of Congregation Beth Elohim petitioned the Adjunta (trustees) of the synagogue to change the Sephardic Orthodox liturgy. The request for abridgement of the Hebrew ritual and use of English for the prayers and sermon was denied. The liberal members then resigned from the congregation and established the Reformed Society of Israelites.

Within a comparatively short time, the membership of the Society increased fourfold. Its services were both abbreviated and conducted for the most part in English; distinctive features included instrumental music and worship with bared heads for the male members. In 1831 the group issued a statement of principles, an important section of which declared that the members were "...their own teachers, drawing their knowledge from the Bible, and following only the laws of Moses, and those only as far as they can be adapted to the institutions of the Society in which they live and enjoy the blessings of liberty."

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Two years later the Reformed Society disbanded and its members rejoined Congregation Beth Elohim, where they exerted steadily increasing influence. In 1836 they gained added support when Gustavus Poznanski was elected the synagogue's new rabbi. A native of Poland, he had been educated at Hamburg in the years when that community was the center of Reform in Europe. Although still strictly orthodox when he arrived in Charleston, he soon adopted the goals of the progressive congregants and eventually became an extreme radical.

During the construction of the new temple in 1840, the liberal members, with Poznanski's approval, petitioned for an organ "to assist in the vocal parts of the service." This time their numbers were large enough to assure success. At the opening service in the new house of worship in 1841, a modernized ritual was introduced and Beth Elohim formally became the first Reform congregation in the United States.

Many other Reform communities were to appear in the next few decades as the immigration of German Jews grew larger. In the 1840's and 1850's groups of Ashkenazim began to organize so-called Reform Vereine. Out of these emerged full-fledged Reform congregations, among them Congregation Har Sinai in Baltimore (1842), Congregation Emanu-El in New York (1845), and Temple Sinai in Chicago (1860). Gradually the impetus for Reform shifted to the Midwest, where many of the Ashkenazic immigrants settled, and by the 1870's Cincinnati had become the acknowledged center of the Movement. Isaac M. Wise, rabbi of Cincinnati's Bene Yeshurun from 1854 until his death in 1900, has been called the "master builder of American Reform Judaism." (Bene Yeshurun's Plum Street Temple was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1975.)

While Beth Elohim's influence waned in the years after 1860, it remained an important community. It was one of the founding synagogues of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873 and continues to be firmly committed to the principles of Reform Judaism.

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Verbal boundary description:

The National Historic Landmark designation for Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim pertains only to the synagogue, located at 90 Hasell Street. Boundaries for the designation are: on the south, the north curb of Hasell Street; on the east, the western edge of the driveway between the temple and its administration building; on the north, the northern edge of the walkway separating the temple and its social hall, and an extension of the same line to the western edge of the synagogue property; on the west, the property currently occupied by Kerrison's Department Store.