

An Ear to the Ground: Institutional Response to Demographic Change by a Houston Synagogue

By Maximilian F. Murdoch

Texans see themselves as a people apart. Those travelling in the United States are often met with the same sentiment as Americans travelling abroad, and in the stories told to children from birth through high school lie the seeds of cultural exceptionalism that quite usually flower into bouquets of boots, hats, and braggadocio. It's not terribly surprising then that this unique sense of self finds its way into most walks of life, and even in its own way is adapted and adopted by a group of Texans more associated with Hester Street than the Big Thicket: members of the Jewish community. Like their neighbors, they see themselves as a people apart, but in more ways than one. The dominance of the Christian faith in Texas, even more so than elsewhere in America, has historically been keenly noted by both Jewish and Gentile observers alike, and yet has, with some notable exceptions, been a relative non-issue for the members of the Jewish community vis-a-vis efforts to identify themselves fully as Texans. Race has played a far larger role in determining social hierarchies, and Texas Jews have for the most part managed to fit the bill of Anglo and have therefore inherited the triumphant Texas Anglo narrative. But religious tradition has well and truly set them apart, if only in their own minds at first. Leary of risking their status as Anglo's, for the better part of early Texas Jewish history all efforts were made to outwardly identify with Christian Texans. Extant documentation clearly shows though the awareness of the difficulties presented by being actively Jewish, with such small numbers of adherents in such a big state. Isolation, already an issue in a sparsely populated rural polity, was

all the more pressing for those who could barely muster the numbers for a *minyan*.¹ In such an environment, the role played by synagogues in fostering and maintaining these communities cannot be overstated. Clearly and unsurprisingly, nothing has been as instrumental in the development of a separate Jewish religious community than separate Jewish religious institutions. The early twentieth century, with its influx of immigration from Europe and elsewhere, brought with it a proliferation of synagogues in Texas, especially in the rapidly growing urban areas of the state, Houston among them.

Founded in 1891 as Adath Yeshurun, Beth Yeshurun, as it would be known following the merger with Beth El, would prove to be one of the most influential religious institutions in the city. In its 120-year history, it would grow to gargantuan size, with well over 2000 families.² Old, it is not however a static institution, and has been forced to adapt to vagaries of the twentieth century as everyone else did. The reality of Jewish Texan's identification with Anglo society has meant that in Texas's racialized social hierarchy, they have by and large enjoyed the privileges of their fellow white Texans, and to a degree shared in their prejudices as well. With the rapid expansion of cities in Texas following World War II, demographic changes and growing economic prosperity led many white Texans to leave the inner parts of those cities where increasingly large numbers of African-Americans chose to live. This phenomenon, known as white flight, is not unique to Houston, or Texas for that matter, instead reflecting national trends and problems of the 1950s. The Jewish community, largely concentrated in Riverside Terrace and the immediate surrounding neighborhoods, was just as impacted by these national

¹ Bryan Edward Stone, *The Chosen Folks: Jews on the Frontiers of Texas*, (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2010), 62.

² "ISJL - Texas Houston Encyclopedia," Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.isjl.org/texas-houston-encyclopedia.html>.

trends as their non-Jewish neighbors, and by the early 1960s most had chosen to relocate to Southwest Houston, specifically the Meyerland area. In 1960, Congregation Beth Yeshurun, which had been located since 1949 at a site on Southmore Boulevard, elected to build a new synagogue on Beechnut Street in Meyerland, near the junction with I-H 610. In doing so, it marked with finality the exodus of the Jewish community from Riverside.

The Congregation's departure from Riverside stands as an interesting case study in the rapidly changing Texan Jewish experience. Beth Yeshurun's move from Southmore to Beechnut was the result of the desire of numerous individuals to move as a *community*. The migration of a large portion of its congregants pulled the Congregation with them, in a bid to maintain the integrity and cohesion of a community despite change in locale. This reflects a Jewish tradition in Texas that sought to mitigate geographic isolation and was indicative of an increasingly unique identification in contrast to the rest of their fellow Texans.

The two components of the Beth Yeshurun moving to Meyerland are the individual circumstances of the members, and institutional reasoning. In order to understand fully why Congregation Beth Yeshurun relocated, it is necessary to examine what relocating means, and demonstrate the interplay between private decisions, and aggregated community decisions.

Congregants from Beth Yeshurun began to leave Riverside far before the move of the synagogue to Meyerland. Flush with post-war prosperity, many Americans, African-Americans included, sought to better their own situations and build the lives for themselves they wanted to see. The construction of the major highway systems led to the rapid urban and suburbanization of the nation, and Houston, quickly enriching itself from the glut of oil passing through its port, quickly emerged as a sprawling, automobile dominated metropolis. In Riverside specifically, there were a number of factors that led to changing demographics. Black Houstonians were

enjoying a improvement in standards of living themselves, and an increasing number of educated and skilled professionals began to look for neighborhoods and homes that befitted their rise in means and status. At the same time, the law and society were less quick to catch up with the times than the economics were, and there were still large areas of the city where black residents were deeply unwelcome. Washington terrace, Riverside Terrace, and Riverside were all immediately adjacent to the 3rd Ward, and after the Supreme Court ruling in 1948, not deed restricted based on race.³ So the arrival of wealthy black cattle rancher Jack Caesar in 1952 should come as no surprise, but many residents of the community were deeply shocked by the bombing attack made on his home shortly after. This event, along with fears of declining property values and aggressive blockbusting techniques by unscrupulous realtors, led to a quick departure of most white residents. There were of course many Riverside residents that harbored racial prejudices and chose to leave for those reasons, but among the congregation of Beth Yeshurun, the issue was perceived as more nuanced. Avrohm Wisenberg, a long time Beth Yeshurun member and then young family man, described the increase in black residents as expediting an existing process of suburbanization. “Certainly integration...created some apprehension on the part of whites,” he noted in interview with Jon Schwartz. But even still, “I would like to think that at least part of the movement was a natural thing that would have occurred even without integration.” Founded in 1927, many of the residents of the area had been there for the better part of twenty years. “Children grew up, moved out, got married, and had families of their own,” said Wisenberg. “So when people grew up, it became logical for people to move somewhere, and since there was no new construction going on in Riverside, and the new construction, and the new financing, and the new excitement was to the southwest, this is where

³ Barry Kaplan, “Race, Income, and Ethnicity: Residential Change in a Houston Community, 1920-1970,” *The Houston Review* 3 (Winter 1981): 189.

people went.”⁴ Even those who had no intention of leaving found themselves eventually pressured, whether by isolation from their friends, the construction of Highway 288, or fear of losing the value of their homes.⁵ Riverside Terrace, 79% white in 1950, would remain only 5% white by 1970.⁶

As a result, the future of the congregation on Southmore came into question. What was once viewed as “a location for the present and for the future”⁷ became a source of doubt. When built in 1949, the facilities on Southmore were dedicated for a school, but no hall for worship was built at the time due to a lack of funds.⁸ Education was deemed more immediately important, so the decision was made to wait a few years until such a time as was financial possible to finish the campus and dedicate a synagogue. Weekly worship services were held in the auditorium building, but High Holy Days were observed at rented facilities in the city. In October 1953, in response to difficulties securing a venue for High Holy Days, the congregation began a capital funds campaign to raise money for completing the synagogue on Southmore.⁹ The fund-raising effort sought to raise \$850,000 for the building, and got off to a good start, but by 1954 the effort had stalled. By March 1st, 1954, only \$137,000 of the \$500,000 needed to break ground had been raised¹⁰, and on October 3rd, just over a year since initial plans were formulated, the congregation

⁴Avrohm Wisenberg, “Collection: *This is Our Home, It is Not for Sale*,” University of Houston Audio/Video Repository, accessed Dec 10, 2018, https://av.lib.uh.edu/media_objects/tt44pm87g

⁵ Margie Abrams, “Collection: *This is Our Home, It is Not for Sale*,” University of Houston Audio/Video Repository, accessed Dec 10, 2018, https://av.lib.uh.edu/media_objects/mk61rg962

⁶ Barry Kaplan, “Race, Income, and Ethnicity: Residential Change in a Houston Community, 1920-1970,” *The Houston Review* 3 (Winter 1981): 193.

⁷ Avrohm Wisenberg, “Collection: *This is Our Home, It is Not for Sale*,” University of Houston Audio/Video Repository, accessed Dec 10, 2018, https://av.lib.uh.edu/media_objects/tt44pm87g

⁸ “Dedication Book of Beth Yeshurun, 1962,” Houston Jewish History Archive. Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

⁹ “Beth Yeshurun Meets to Discuss Building of New Synagogue,” *The Message of Congregation Beth Yeshurun* 8, no. 2 (October 2, 1953), Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

¹⁰ “\$137,000 Contributed for Our Sanctuary,” *The Message of Congregation Beth Yeshurun* 8, no. 7 (March 1, 1954), Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

elected to suspend the capital funds campaign. In a referendum on the issue, members of Beth Yeshurun voted overwhelmingly to bide their time and see what the next few years brought, with only 17% of the congregants voting to proceed at the Southmore site immediately, and an equal number voting to build at a different location immediately. The remaining 66% of all the families voted to “await further developments before constructing our Sanctuary.”¹¹

The next several years would bring continued demographic change: by 1960, the congregation voted, evidently without much debate¹², to build a new synagogue and school building on Beechnut Street in Meyerland.¹³ The decision came after many of the members of the congregation had already moved to the area, and while more were following. Melvin Dow, a lawyer and member of Beth Yeshurun involved in the purchase of the new site at Beechnut, described the decision to leave Riverside as easy. “It was not a really emotional, fervent fight,” he noted in a phone interview. “I don’t think there was a large contingent of Beth Yeshurun members that thought the long-term future was going to be... [in] Riverside.”¹⁴ In order to best serve the members of the congregation, it would be necessary to leave the Riverside area, however unfortunate to do so after beginning there only ten years before. After collecting the requisite funds, construction commenced, and the new facility opened in 1962. The old school building was sold to Houston ISD and repurposed as an elementary school before being finally torn down in the early twenty-first century. If membership numbers are any indicator of success as a religious institution, then Beth Yeshurun has been very successful. In 2011 it numbered

¹¹ “Board of Trustees Announce Building Plans,” *The Message of Congregation Beth Yeshurun* 9, no. 3 (October 13, 1954), Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

¹² Avrohm Wisenberg, “Collection: *This is Our Home, It is Not for Sale*,” University of Houston Audio/Video Repository, accessed Dec 10, 2018, https://av.lib.uh.edu/media_objects/tt44pm87g

¹³ “Annual Meeting Votes to Build,” *The Message of Congregation Beth Yeshurun* 14, no. 8 (April 1, 1960), Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

¹⁴ Phone Interview with Melvin Dow, December 4, 2018, Rice University.

2170 families, earning it the distinction of the largest Conservative congregation in the United States.¹⁵

The ways in which the synagogue served the congregation were numerous. In a note in the fundraising book for the Southmore site, Rabbi William S. Malev said that “The synagogue has always been the heart of the Jewish community and it’s passport to survival. Here we pray for God’s help in hours of danger and peril; here we thanks Him for our freedom and our security; here we gather to be inspired to live better and nobler lives in service to our people and our faith.”¹⁶ In the planning of the building, the congregation leadership conceived of its construction as a response to the existential crisis of the Holocaust and World War II, noting that, “To meet this challenge, we must preserve our faith... strengthen our communal life... inspire our children with the beauty of our great heritage... and in our children... our descendants... we must build the character necessary to bring order in a time of chaos.”¹⁷ The plans for the whole facility at the time included the synagogue, kitchens, a chapel, lounge, and of course, a school. Many of these same features would be found in the later building on Beechnut. In its modern location, Beth Yeshurun offers the use of three sanctuaries, multiple conference rooms, auditoriums, kosher kitchens, and the day school, indicating the variety functions the institution served in.¹⁸ Its role in the community was and is multifaceted, having a hand not only in direct worship, but also in facilitating a individually religious life, and educating children. This made it

¹⁵ "ISJL - Texas Houston Encyclopedia," Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.isjl.org/texas-houston-encyclopedia.html>.

¹⁶ “Beth Yeshurun Ascends – for your Descendants,” Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Our History Cont..." Congregation Beth Yeshurun, June 04, 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://bethyeshurun.org/our-history-cont>.

an even more integral part of community life than other Jewish organizations, or many secular ones for that matter.

It made sense for the synagogue to be located in the same place as most of its congregants. Issues cited in making the decision included the necessity of carpooling to the school in increasingly large distances, into the double digits for some people.¹⁹ Though Beth Yeshurun was a Conservative congregation and therefore more lenient in the strict observation of rules on travel for the Sabbath, the congregation still maintained an Orthodox element from its founding. “While the new congregation would be officially Conservative, Beth Yeshurun held daily Orthodox minyans in its chapel to accommodate traditional members, a practice which continues today,”²⁰ making it more important for the synagogue to be easily accessible on foot from a short distance. This is reflected in the location of the synagogue relative to members of the congregation while still in Riverside. The situating of the site at Southmore took into consideration the location of the Jewish community at the time of construction, being physically near to the bulk of the Houston Jewish population. Conducting a brief spatial study of the riverside area at the time reveals the dense concentration of leaders in the congregation around where the building would open three years later. A membership list from Beth Yeshurun in 1946 shows the addresses of every member of the congregation at the time.²¹ When the addresses of the board of trustees are plotted, their density makes it clear that it was a logical choice to put the

¹⁹ Avrohm Wisenberg, “Collection: *This is Our Home, It is Not for Sale*,” University of Houston Audio/Video Repository, accessed Dec 10, 2018, https://av.lib.uh.edu/media_objects/tt44pm87g

²⁰ “ISJL - Texas Houston Encyclopedia,” Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.isjl.org/texas-houston-encyclopedia.html>.

²¹ “Beth Yeshurun Membership List, October 1946.” Houston Jewish History Archive. Woodson Research Center. Rice University, Houston, Texas.

synagogue on Southmore, and that in 1946, the Jewish community was very much still concentrated in the area.²²

The history seems pretty clear on the how's and why's of the move to Meyerland. Demographic shifts moved people from where their synagogue physically was, and so the synagogue eventually moved to meet them. But this dragging along of an institution with the community it served is telling of the Jewish experience in Texas in number of ways that aren't immediately apparent. Given the context in which Texas Jews lived, the presence of a synagogue was of the utmost importance in creating an actively Jewish community. The absence of one in the Meyerland area before Beth Yeshurun moved resulted in a vacuum that had to be filled. So, while the ultimate decision to move to Meyerland was relatively seamless, the process by which most of the congregants got there to begin with was not without stress. In 1954, Congregation Brith Shalom was founded by former Beth Yeshurun members living in Meyerland, to address their immediate need for a religious institution based in the area and desire to be part of a smaller congregation.²³ Families were initially capped at 300, though that cap sits at 500 today. For Jews, the emphasis on support from a synagogue comes from the difficulty in maintaining Jewish identity in Texas without strong community ties. Very early Jewish arrivals to Texas in the nineteenth century often wrote about the isolation they faced when sometimes all of their neighbors were non-Jews, and though twentieth century urban Houston is a far cry from the frontier of the 1880s, the reality is that Texan society is not organically supportive of Jewish tradition. As religious minorities, Texas Jews have historically faced an uphill battle in preserving traditional practices in the face of an overwhelmingly Christian environment, with

²² Refer to Figure 1.

²³ "Brith Shalom History," Congregation Brith Shalom | Your Spiritual Home, August 18, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.brithshalom.org/about-us/brith-shalom-history>.

efforts to do so waxing and waning depending on the social context. At points in the past, it has been expedient for Jewish Texans to mitigate the differences between them and their neighbors by participating in traditions, like putting up a Christmas tree, that seem innocuous but certainly help to aid in integrating them in the minds of those around them. The historically strong relations between the various Houston congregations and their Protestant and Catholic counterparts has aided the impression of Judaism as one of the Three Major American Religions, rather than an oddity or foreign import.

There have been times as well when strict adherence to Jewish tradition was simply not possible. In an address to the Jews of Galveston in 1852, Rabbi M. N. Nathan of New Orleans acknowledged the hardships they faced in their peculiar circumstances, noting “their small number, ‘too few,’ he said, ‘to build a Synagogue, to form a congregation for public worship.’...He reminded them of the religious options that were available to them even in their remoteness. They could pray at home, they could circumcise their sons, and, with ‘respectable and populous congregations...in your immediate neighborhood,’ presumably Nathan’s own congregation in New Orleans, they could seek ‘suitable alliances with Hebrew blood’ for their children.”²⁴ In a world beset foremost with the concerns of secular, material life, like in nineteenth century Texas, institutionalization of religious life made it easier to maintain.

At the time of the creation of Brith Shalom, the role played by the synagogue was not however to make Jews disappear into the crowd. Inherent to its nature is a division from the rest of society, an emphasis on the marginality of Jews living in cowboy Christiandom. But by this point, Texas Jews were becoming more comfortable with identifying in contrast to other Texans.

²⁴ Bryan Edward Stone, *The Chosen Folks: Jews on the Frontiers of Texas*, (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2010), 57.

The trauma of the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel stand out as watershed moments in Jewish history and set the rest of the twentieth century immediately apart from what preceded it. These events played an enormous role in the American Jewish psyche and world, something that Texas Jews were increasingly connected to by the 1950s. The reality of post-war America is that the way in which the country was changing was reflected in how the Jewish community changed. The realignment of the nation has meant that “Many scholars look back upon the period from 1945 to 1967 as one of strong consensus among American Jews who appeared to share similar views on aspirations for their families, on their responsibility to Jews both within and outside the United States, and on politics. They appear increasingly confident of their place in America and the waning of antisemitism that had shaped the consciousness of immigrants and their children in the 1930s.”²⁵ The pressure of the war past, Jews in Texas increasingly identified themselves more actively as Jewish, and participation in Jewish public life through the synagogue was an excellent way to do that.

Moreover, traditional Jewish identification as Anglo was becoming less and less of a matter of survival. Beginning in the 1950s, as the Civil Rights movement got under way and tolerance for racism began to decrease dramatically, Anglo identity was becoming slowly less of a requisite for social privilege. It shouldn't be inferred that the 50s saw the advent of a colorblind utopia, but there was a definite acknowledgment of the rights of minorities and the disposal of many racially motivated legal statutes. Assurance of status for members of the Jewish community allowed for stronger Jewish identification as unique.

²⁵Riv-Ellen Prell, “Triumph, Accommodation, and Resistance: American Jewish Life from the End of World War II to the Six-Day War,” In *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 115.

So, Beth Yeshurun's move from Riverside to Meyerland represents more than just providing basic services. It also reflects the desire of Houston Jews to identify strongly as Jews, in Texas. The relative effort needed to move a synagogue compared to a family is massive: if those who moved to Meyerland were not interested in active Jewish religious life, they would not have gone through the effort to raise the \$1,500,000 necessary to start again on Beechnut.²⁶ It's interesting to note that the opening of the new facilities on Beechnut were viewed with much the same optimism and futurity as the opening of the school on Southmore. Rabbi Malev wrote in the 1962 Dedication Book that "As we move into our new and beautiful Sanctuary and Education Building, we look with hope and faith into the years, looking to our men and women to carry on the fine traditions and ideals of Conservative Judaism, making possible the kind of community of which the prophet of the exile spoke and said, 'Everyone that will see them will point to them as a community blessed by the Lord.'"²⁷ The message was laden with optimism and hope for the future, that had been seen before as well. In moving, the congregation believed it was affirming the vitality of their community by changing with the times. Malev would say at the announcement of the new site in 1959 that it was proof that "Beth Yeshurun is a dynamic, growing congregation and with traditional Jewish courage, devotion, and ability it will build for the future."²⁸ This understanding of the events reflects that increasingly confident attitude attributed to waning anti-Semitism and an acknowledgement of the prominent role played by Houston Jews in their community. Some might be tempted to view it as ironic that the

²⁶ "Annual Meeting Votes to Build," *The Message of Congregation Beth Yeshurun* 14, no. 8 (April 1, 1960), Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

²⁷ "Dedication Book of Beth Yeshurun, 1962" Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

²⁸ Irving N. Wilson, "Beth Yeshurun Trustees Authorize Acquisition of New Synagogue Site," *The Message of Congregation Beth Yeshurun* 13, no. 8 (March 27, 1959), Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

congregation could so quickly abandon the place where many could previously “rejoice in knowing that it ascends for our descendants,”²⁹ especially in light of the Conservative focus on historicity. But contrary to how it may seem, there was a demonstrated awareness and understanding of the historical process that brought them to Meyerland, and many viewed it as the fulfillment of that process, with then President Sol Weiner describing it as “the culmination of the dreams, aspirations, and hopes of over three generations of devoted Synagogue leadership.”³⁰ For the members of Beth Yeshurun, the final completion of the facility on Beechnut was a point of pride and identification, affirming their commitment to their traditions and a new comfort in their identity as Texans who were unmistakably Jewish.

Jewish life in Texas remains undeniably unique. The peculiarities of living in a largely urban state with a frontier mentality are doubly felt for a people that have been described as being on an internalized frontier themselves. In current times Jews continue to play an integral role in the life of Houston and yet are often seen as incongruous with Texan culture. In touch with national Jewish life, they are still set apart by their distance from its center. History has not ended either, with gentrification bringing continued demographic changes to the old stomping grounds of Riverside Terrace, and historic flooding once again calling into question the future for the Jewish community in Meyerland, where it thought it had settled for good. Among these changes, the case of Beth Yeshurun offers unique insight into how people and their institutions respond to changes and why. Personal decisions predate collective ones, and successful institutions respond flexibly to the needs of the people they serve. Beth Yeshurun’s leadership

²⁹ “Beth Yeshurun Ascends – for your Descendants,” Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

³⁰ “Dedication Book of Beth Yeshurun, 1962,” Houston Jewish History Archive, Woodson Research Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas.

recognized the futility in trying to anchor people in a place they no longer wanted to be, for whatever reason. Instead, it took its cue and followed, connecting the decision to the historical narrative and seeing in it an opportunity to continue building for the future. All these choices were made within the context of an emerging confidence, celebrating their distinction from their fellow Texans while asserting their right to Texan-ness. The desire to be a part of a community, and the role the synagogue had to play in that, stemmed from the unique social and historical context that the community found itself a part of. With that particular historical context, the Houston Jewish community has the proven template for continuing to adapt, thrive, and grow.

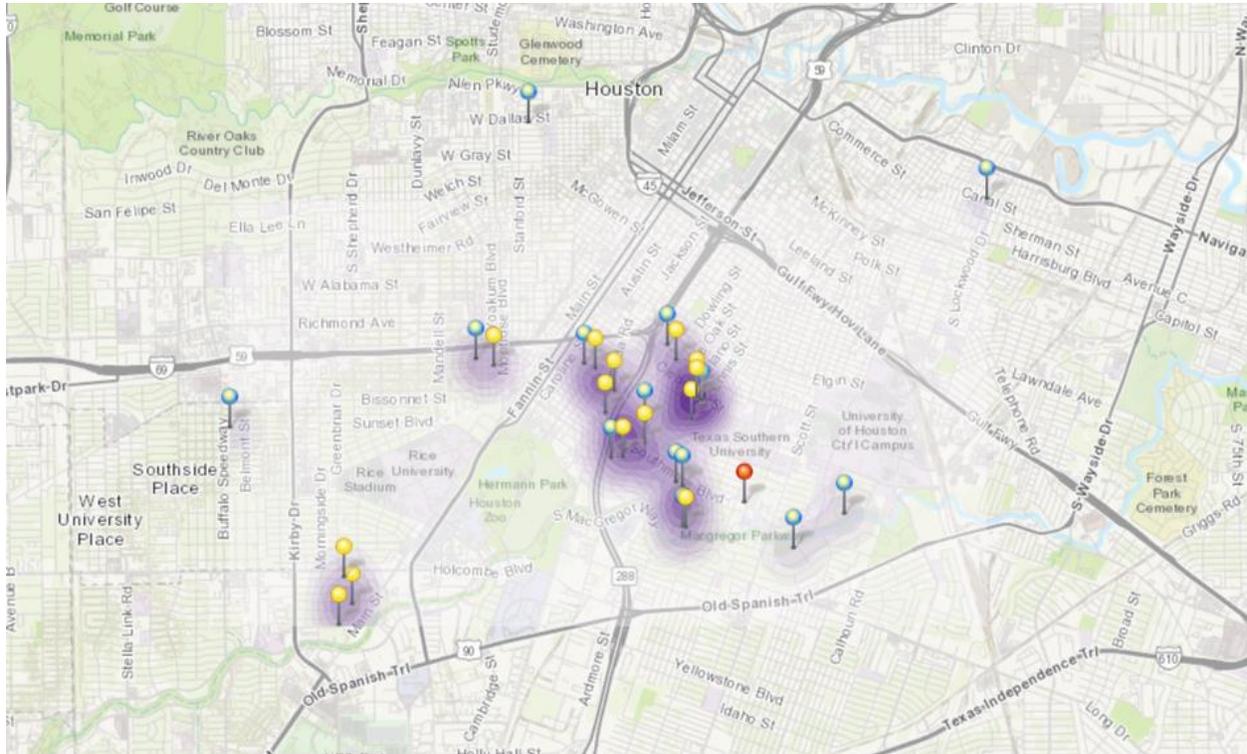
Figure 1.

Density Map of Beth Israel Board Members Residencies, October 1946.

Blue: Former Adath Yeshurun Congregant

Yellow: Former Beth El Congregant

Red: 3501 Southmore, Location of Beth Yeshurun Facilities, 1949.



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