

Jewish community mourns passing of Beth Israel's rabbi emeritus

By **Tonyia Cone**

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Although Rabbi Louis Firestein, rabbi emeritus of Congregation Beth Israel, died Jan. 9 at age 8, he will long be remembered as a man who touched the lives of the many he served as the rabbi of longest tenure in the congregation's history.

Born in Philadelphia to Jewish immigrants from Russia on June 4, 1922, Firestein studied religion at Yeshiva University and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. He was ordained in 1953.

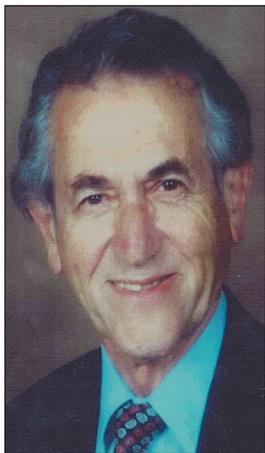
After serving in the Air Force as chaplain at Amarillo Air Force Base, Firestein was assistant rabbi at Houston's Congregation Emanu El in 1955-62. In Austin, he led Beth Israel — the city's oldest and largest Jewish congregation — from 1962 until he retired in 1987.

Rabbi Steven Folberg, Beth Israel's senior rabbi, noted that because Firestein served the congregation for so long, he was able to connect with multiple generations of families, and continued caring for his congregants long after he retired.

"I'd run into him in the elevator at the hospital," Folberg said.

"He would be noted for being a steady presence. Twenty-five years is a lifetime in terms of a congregation."

Firestein shepherded Beth Israel through most of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, right up to the cusp of Austin's population explosion of the 1990s, Folberg said.



Rabbi Louis Firestein,
rabbi emeritus of
Congregation Beth
Israel

David Firestein, the rabbi's son, said that the Temple was at the center of his family's religious life.

"It wasn't just a job or office he drove to on Shoal Creek Boulevard," Firestein said of his father. "It was very much a part of who he was. The congregation was more like family than anything else."

David Firestein explained that the memories he has of Beth Israel are meaningful not just because it was his family's Jewish home, but also because it was where his father, who conducted many life-cycle events, was the rabbi.

What the son most often hears from his father's congregants is, "He was my rabbi."

"That says something about the heart and soul he poured into his service, into his work as rabbi at Beth Israel and into Jewish leadership here in the city of Austin," he said.

Mary Ethel Schechter, who served as Beth Israel Sisterhood president during Firestein's tenure and was on the congregation's board when he was selected, described him as a "true Southern gentleman."

"He was my friend as well as my rabbi," Schechter said. "His door was always open to anyone. The only time his door closed was when he had someone in there. He'd tell you to come in, sit down and talk to him. He was a kind, sweet, humble man."

Hymie Samuelson, who served as the congregation's president in 1963-64 and was confirmation teacher for Firestein's children, spoke at the memorial service held Jan. 13 at Beth Israel.

"I think of Louis Firestein not only as my rabbi, but also as my friend," Samuelson said. "If Louis Firestein had a fault, it was his modesty. It shrouded his keen intelligence and his special gift for understanding people."

David Firestein said that his father's experience with President Lyndon B. Johnson when the two met, in December 1963, at the benediction for the opening of Congregation Agudas Achim's facilities on Bull Creek Road exemplified his modesty.

Lacking a rabbi at the time, Agudas Achim asked Rabbi Firestein to give the benediction. Johnson was scheduled to follow him with a speech. When the president, who was running late, was asked if Firestein should start the ceremony without him, he said to wait because he wanted to hear the rabbi's speech.

While David Firestein believes his father never told anyone but his son and wife the story, it always meant a lot that the president did not want him to speak until he was there to hear his words.

"Internally he was proud of it, but he was so modest and humble he didn't share it with anyone else," David Firestein said.

White House transcripts, he added, show that when President Johnson spoke, he referred to Louis Firestein as "a great, good and decent soul."

The rabbi never displayed photographs from the event in his home. David later persuaded his father, however, to give him the photographs, which he hung in the room where his father stayed when he visited him. (Firestein left Austin three years ago to move closer to his children in Colorado and then the Washington, D.C., area.)

"Maybe I should have put them up 40 years ago," the elder Firestein declared.

Johnson later requested that Firestein draft a speech for him. When David Firestein joked with his father that he was a speechwriter for the president, the rabbi simply pointed out that he had only written one speech for him.

In his remarks at the memorial service last month, Samuelson said of Firestein, "He gave little attention to his professional career as a rabbi. His role in life was mapped out for him — right here, at Temple Beth Israel, where he served the members of his congregation."

Rabbi Firestein is survived by his four children, Beth, Karen, Julie and David, and nine grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his wife of 45 years, Margaret Furman Firestein, in 2001; his parents, Abraham and Rebecca Firestein; and four siblings, Joseph, Rose (Jean), Minnie and Harry.

Private graveside services were held Jan. 11 at the Furman family burial site in



President Lyndon B. and Lady Bird Johnson and Rabbi Louis Firestein in December 1963 at the dedication of Congregation Agudas Achim's synagogue, then on Bull Creek Road.

Houston's Beth Yeshurun Cemetery (Post Oak), where he was buried next to his late wife, Margaret.

Shoal Creek Blvd., Austin 78731.

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