



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By Eric Lidji, Director, Rauh Jewish
History Program & Archives

“A community for ourselves” — Bet Tikvah Congregation Records

An anonymous letter to the editor in the July 27, 1989, *Jewish Chronicle of Pittsburgh* announced the existence of a new Jewish congregation. A group of “gay and bisexual Jewish women and men” had recently begun meeting for prayer and fellowship under the name Bet Tikvah, or “House of Hope.” As the writer explained, “Bet Tikvah is a place where gay Jews can unite two areas of importance in their lives; a place where they can begin to heal the wounds of separation from their heritage. The views of people who believe we should not exist pains us but will not make us go away. For too long we have let others define the terms of our religion. We have chosen to no longer participate in their dictates and have created a community for ourselves.”

Bet Tikvah recently donated its records to the Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives at the History Center, making it the first LGBT religious organization to donate its records to the Detre Library & Archives. The records document a community finding ways to “unite two areas of importance” and becoming increasingly accepted by both the wider Jewish community in Pittsburgh and the world at large.

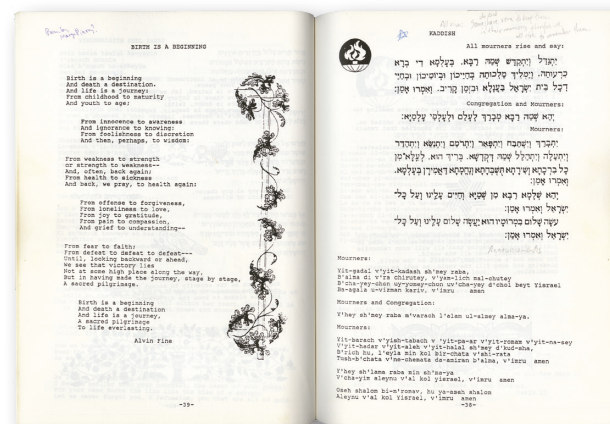
Little in the way of documentary evidence exists from the early years of Bet Tikvah. The informality of the early meetings and an

**Bet Tikvah Congregation
members marching down
Ellsworth Street in Shadyside
during a Pride parade in 1999.**
All images HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Bet
Tikvah Congregation Records, MSS 1155.



Bet Tikvah congregants Val Monaco and Deb Polk (center) married in 2014, after a federal judge overturned a Pennsylvania statute prohibiting same-sex marriage. Bet Tikvah had no one at the time who could perform a wedding and so the couple relied on Rodef Shalom Congregation. Monaco and Polk are seen here with their daughter, Aviva, and Rabbi Aaron Bisno and Rabbi Sharyn Henry of Rodef Shalom Congregation.

The liturgy used by Bet Tikvah Congregation for its prayer services has been through several revisions. Marginalia written in older editions document the revision process.



understandable hesitation by some members to be publicly identified were not conducive to the creation of the sort of documents that often appear in early congregational archives, such as deeds, charters, or minute books. The Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives is working with the congregation on an oral history project to capture the memories of some of the surviving founders.

The earliest materials in the collection date to the mid-1990s, when the growing congregation began holding monthly prayer services in the Cohen Chapel at Rodef Shalom Congregation, a large Reform congregation in the Shadyside neighborhood, and started a monthly newsletter now titled, simply, *The Newsletter*.

Like many LGBT Jewish congregations,



The cover of the first edition of the Bet Tikvah Congregation prayerbook for *Erev Shabbat* services on Friday evenings, created in March 1995.

Bet Tikvah Congregation made a special prayerbook when the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force held its "Creating Change" conference in Pittsburgh in 1998.

Bet Tikvah Congregation launched its monthly newsletter, now called *The Newsletter*, in September 1997.



continue elements of the print collection, such as photographs and meeting minutes. Others are unique to the digital realm. A saved bookmark from the Chrome web browser links to a website with a potato latke recipe for Chanukah, the sort of document that might have been slipped between the pages of a congregational cookbook in earlier times. A group of PDF documents created on September 11, 2013, collects Wikipedia research into alternative voting systems such as the "single transferable vote" and the "Borda count," suggesting that Bet Tikvah was looking for ways to represent its various constituencies without instituting a formal hierarchy.

One digital folder contains internal deliberations from 2008 and 2009 as Bet Tikvah considered an opportunity to formally affiliate with Rodef Shalom Congregation. The decision forced Bet Tikvah to articulate its core principles, leading to a Microsoft Word document from the night of December 5, 2008, titled "What we would not change about Bet Tikvah." The document describes the congregation as "LayLead" [sic], "participatory," "egalitarian," "non-hierarchical," "Non-Denominational within Judaism" and "open to Non-Jews." Bet Tikvah purposefully had no rabbi, staff, or building of its own, feeling that the financial obligations would alter its core mission: "members feel a spiritual connection, not a monetary one." Bet Tikvah ultimately retained its legal independence from Rodef Shalom while maintaining its longstanding rental partnership.

Attitudes toward LGBT individuals have changed dramatically in the 30 years since Bet Tikvah was founded, and the collection reflects those changes. One wonders what the anonymous letter writer of 1989 would make of the wedding photographs of Bet Tikvah congregants after a U.S. Federal District Court judge in 2014 overturned a statutory ban on same-sex marriage that had been in place in Pennsylvania since 1996.



Bet Tikvah created bespoke prayerbooks for services including the Sabbath, the High Holidays, Passover, and the "New Year for Trees" known as Tu B'Shvat. The congregation also created a special prayerbook when the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force held its "Creating Change" conference in Pittsburgh in 1998. The practice of creating individualized liturgy was once common among Jewish congregations but fell out of practice as denominations solidified in the early 20th century. Bet Tikvah's liturgy combines traditional Hebrew prayers with gender-neutral translations and a diverse selection of readings, including quotations from the writings of LGBT allies such as Judy Chicago and Leonard Nimoy. The process of revising these prayerbooks over the years is

documented in the collection both through meeting minutes and through marginalia written onto the pages of older editions.

A thorough run of *The Newsletter* provides glimpses into the month-to-month activities of the congregation and also reveals the needs of its membership. Amid the expected logistical details about services and social events are inspirational messages, notices about congregational confidentiality policy, and reminders to vote. *The Newsletter* shows Bet Tikvah making partnerships through events such as the Pittsburgh International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (now Reel Q) and the Pride parades.

A noteworthy feature of the Bet Tikvah collection is the size and variety of its digital materials. Some of these materials simply