

History of B'nai B'rith

Written by B'nai B'rith Europe

B'nai B'rith is an international Jewish organisation bringing Jews together from all backgrounds to serve the communities they live in.

With its head office in Washington, several hundred thousand members in fifty-eight countries, a European office in Brussels, an office at the E.U., Non-Governmental status at the United Nations, an office at UNESCO, it is the largest and most active Jewish body in the world. It is also one of the oldest, having celebrated 160 years in 2003.

The Background

B'nai B'rith was founded in 1843 in New York at a time when American Jewry was greatly divided on theological, ethical and ideological grounds. Jews from many different backgrounds seemed unable - or unwilling - to get along together.

In 1843, twelve German Jewish immigrants resolved to found a society which would be based on the teachings of Judaism, but free from everything dogmatic or doctrinaire. This association would develop a mutual understanding and respect among all the segments of the Jewish community.

The vision of those leaders was formalised six days later into the Preamble of the B'nai B'rith Constitution which remains at the core of the B'nai B'rith mission to the present day:

"B'nai B'rith has taken upon itself the mission of uniting Jews in the work of promoting their highest interests and those of humanity; developing and elevating the mental and moral character of the people of our faith; of inculcating the purest principles of philanthropy, honour and patriotism; of supporting science and art; alleviating the wants of the poor and the needy; visiting and caring of the sick; coming to the rescue of victims of persecution; providing for, protecting and assisting the aged, the widow and orphan on the broadest principles of humanity."

After considerable growth in America, the first B'nai B'rith group outside the USA was founded in Berlin in 1882, and in 1888 the Jerusalem Lodge was initiated.

Now, B'nai B'rith members - men and women from all generations are involved across the globe in pursuing the ideals of B'nai B'rith.

Continuously playing a key role in communal leadership, B'nai B'rith at the UN led the way in the rescinding of the 1994 Zionism equals Racism 1994 Resolution and also initiated the campaign for a UN Commissioner on Human Rights.

B'nai B'rith - Our Mission Worldwide

The goals of B'nai B'rith aim to bring help to victims of natural disasters in co-operation with major international humanitarian organizations. This is how B'nai B'rith actively helped victims of Hurricane Mitch, of the earthquakes in Salvador, in India and in Haïti, of the tsunami in Asia, of the fires in Haïfa, as well as help to civilians in Kosovo.

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The mission of B'nai B'rith also brings Jews together to work in Friendship, to improve communal harmony, to strengthen the Jewish community, to combat racial and religious intolerance and to help the less fortunate.

The Core Objectives of B'nai B'rith

- To foster friendship through social, cultural and recreational programmes.
- To support the State of Israel and world Jewry.
- To work for charitable endeavors and help all victims of natural disasters wherever they occur.
- To initiate and develop community projects.
- To strengthen B'nai B'rith links across Europe.

We carry through this mission via local Lodges, in Regions and throughout Europe, and in co-operation with major humanitarian organisations worldwide when and where needed.

The Lodge Approach

The name "Lodge" is still very much part of B'nai B'rith culture from its beginnings in the 1840's. The Lodges work with central office to further the Regional objectives and projects, but they also have their own local agendas, priorities and programmes.

Each Lodge has its own programme of social and cultural meetings as well as numerous charitable activities to support the elderly, youth, Israel projects and fund raising for a wide variety of charities including of course B'nai B'rith regional projects.

Over the years B'nai B'rith has been involved in a host of major communal initiatives and activities, such as the previously mentioned Balfour Declaration, the creation of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation and the creation of the B'nai B'rith Youth Organisation (BBYO), both of which B'nai B'rith brought over from the USA.

Add to this the B'nai B'rith Housing Society, the B'nai B'rith Jewish Music Festival, B'nai B'rith Enterprise Europe, which over five years gave major assistance to small and medium enterprises in the newly emerging central and eastern European states and the Qiryat Gat Israel and Technion Scholarships fund to help needy Israeli and European Students with their education.

B'nai B'rith Europe

B'nai B'rith in the United Kingdom and B'nai B'rith Continental Europe have created a unified structure to add strength to the Jewish voice in Europe, known as B'nai B'rith Europe. Our office in Brussels will act as a centre not only for European local activities across the Continent and Great Britain but also as the voice of B'nai B'rith in the European Union.

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Extending the work of the B'nai B'rith Centre for Public Policy in Washington DC, and following the initiative taken by B'nai B'rith in the UK with the London Bureau of International Affairs, an office for Public Policy was opened at the headquarters in Brussels.

Due to B'nai B'rith's membership in 58 countries around the world; NGO status at the United Nations in New York and Geneva, representation at UNESCO, and the office in Brussels at the E.U., we are ideally placed to gather, disseminate and act upon information where Jewish interests are concerned.

The major point always to emphasise is that B'nai B'rith is a cross community organisation which welcomes Jews from every sector of the community. Add to this our vigorous activity in 58 countries around the world and it will be readily understood why we are so proud of being at the forefront of community work with a series of innovative projects to take us into the future.