Asheville was a village before the railroad came in 1880. Then it began to grow quickly, adding immigrants who followed the rail line looking for economic opportunity, patients coming to breathe the clean mountain air, and friends and relatives answering the invitations of those lucky enough to live here.

By 1891 there were enough Jewish residents to form a Conservative synagogue—Congregation Beth HaTephila. Some, however, wanted to follow more familiar, stricter European traditions. By February of 1899 eight men met and officially formed a new Orthodox congregation, naming it Bikur Cholim, “visitation of the sick.” In 1904 there was an attempt to consolidate the two synagogues. A meeting to discuss this matter was presided over by Dr. Solomon Schecter, then president of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Asheville, it was felt, did not have a large enough Jewish population to support two synagogues!

After using various locations around downtown Asheville, congregants of Bikur Cholim wanted their own synagogue. Land was purchased on South Liberty Street near Woodfin in 1911, where a hotel now stands. Fundraising was a long and arduous process because wealthy members were few and most members were small business owners or merchants. By 1916 their new sanctuary was finally completed, but was immediately destroyed by a fire (mentioned in the synagogue’s caption). Fellow Asheville residents came forward with offers of aid, cash donations, building materials and even the services of four Protestant ministers. Plans were immediately begun to rebuild the structure. The Ashevile papers periodically reported on the progress of the synagogue’s fundraising.

Contributors were Jews and gentiles alike, including former Mayor James Eugenio Rankin. Soon after the fire, a group of congregants split off from Bikur Cholim to form a new congregation, Anshei Yeshuran, meaning “Fellowship of the Upright.” In the early 1920s that congregation reunited with Bikur Cholim. The synagogue building was finally finished. The total cost had been in excess of $3,000. Suddenly tragedy struck a fire developed and burning, leaving only the black walls standing. The congregation held its initial prayer for $2,000. The ransom was a sum of money that the congregation was able to raise.

The Most Hon. Rabbi Soloveitchik was the first rabbi hired at Bikur Cholim. He was succeeded in 1925 by Rabbi Louis Londow, who came from Baltimore in 1927. Rabbi Londow, a graduate of JTS, was a popular minister and organized social and cultural events.

In 1927 Bikur Cholim was able to support a winter program for Jewish patients at the local general hospital. Later fundraising was used to assist the local “homeless and destitute.” By 1932 Bikur Cholim was an active member of the United Synagogue of America. The next year, 1933, Bikur Cholim affiliated with the Conservative movement. By 1939 Bikur Cholim affiliated with the United Synagogue of America and became a Conservative congregation.

In 1949 Bikur Cholim affiliated with the United Synagogue of America and became a Conservative congregation. In 1950, Bikur Cholim changed its name to Beth Israel. During the 1980s women’s roles in the synagogue expanded and in 1987 Celine Lurey became the first female rabbinical student to receive an ordination.

By 1990s, Asheville’s population began to grow and its Jewish community grew along with it. Congregation Bikur Cholim/Beth Israel has now celebrated its 50th and 100th anniversaries (in 1949 and 1999). Serving the Asheville Jewish Community in three different centuries, it has faced many challenges. Countless numbers of people have given their “time, talent and tzedakah” to insure this congregation continues to offer a variety of religious, educational, and cultural programs for adults and children.