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HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 845

Offered February 3, 2009

Commending Beth El Hebrew Congregation on the occasion of its 150th anniversary.

Patrons—Englin, Ebbin, Eisenberg and Watts; Senators: Barker and Saslaw

WHEREAS, Beth El Hebrew Congregation, located in Alexandria, is celebrating its 150th anniversary and its special status as the oldest Jewish congregation in Northern Virginia; and

WHEREAS, by the late 1850s, more than 50 German Jewish immigrant families lived in the City of Alexandria, having come to America to escape religious persecution in Europe; and most individuals worked in some aspect of the retail industry, including clothing, dry goods, and groceries and increasingly became involved in community life; and

WHEREAS, on September 4, 1859, the Jewish community gathered to form a congregation, but instead the congregants split into two distinct groups, an Orthodox congregation and the Beth El Hebrew Congregation, which became the first Reform Jewish congregation in the Washington Metropolitan area; and

WHEREAS, worship and the religious school were conducted in rented rooms at Stewart's Hall on the corner of King and Pitt Streets until the first Beth El Hebrew Congregation synagogue was built on Washington Street and dedicated on September 1, 1871; and

WHEREAS, Beth El's spiritual leaders were gifted teachers instead of ordained rabbis during the early years, until Rabbi Hugo Schiff came to the synagogue from Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1939 and under his leadership membership rose to around 100; and

WHEREAS, after graduating from Hebrew Union College, C. Melvyn Helfgott served as spiritual leader from 1949 to 1953 and Beth El grew to a synagogue of 180 families; and

WHEREAS, Rabbi Emmet A. Frank came to Beth El in 1954 and the congregation continued to flourish until a new building was needed and the current temple was built on 5.5 acres on Seminary Road and dedicated on September 13, 1957; and

WHEREAS, Beth El received nationwide attention in 1958 when Rabbi Frank delivered a powerful sermon against Virginia's "massive resistance" policy; and

WHEREAS, Rabbi Arnold G. Fink served Beth El from 1969 until his retirement in 2002 during a period of tremendous expansion of the congregation and religious school, physical buildings, religious programs, and services to the local community and abroad; and

WHEREAS, an integral partner with the Alexandria community, Beth El Hebrew Congregation established Beth El House in 1993 to provide formerly homeless families with transitional housing so that they might work toward self-sufficiency and stability; and

WHEREAS, the Beth El Social Action Committee and its volunteers also support ALIVE!, ALEXANDRIANS INVOLVED ECUMENICALLY, which provides a safety net for families in Alexandria; conduct blood drives and feed the hungry through food banks and other programs; and aid countless other people in need at home and around the world; and

WHEREAS, Rabbi Brett Isserow has been Beth El Hebrew Congregation's outstanding senior rabbi since 2002, and today the synagogue has a full-time professional staff, a cantor, a director of education, and an executive director who oversees a wealth of religious programs, inspirational events and activities, and education services for over 650 families and the community of Alexandria; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the General Assembly commend and congratulate Beth El Hebrew Congregation on the occasion of its 150th anniversary; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to Beth El Hebrew Congregation as an expression of the General Assembly's appreciation of the synagogue's many outstanding works and its longtime commitment to the people of Alexandria and best wishes for a joyful anniversary celebration.

INTRODUCED

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