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Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard

Few people in the history of Pinecrest, or the part of "Unincorporated South Dade County" that became Pinecrest, have had as much influence on the growth and character of this community as Herbert M. Baumgard, Rabbi, D.H.L., D.D.

The founding rabbi of Temple Beth Am first saw what would become Pinecrest in the mid 1950's. Obviously he didn't see the neat, trim, upscale community we know today. What he saw was 15 acres of swampy land that would eventually become the site of one of the largest Reform congregations in the Southeast United States. That visit took place long before Dadeland was opened, long before the Palmetto Schools were built...when people referred to the area as Kendall, or if they wanted to be more specific, as Sunniland.

Rabbi Baumgard came to South Florida as the Miami area director for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations with the intentions of starting a college. He had just completed a seven-year tenure as the founding rabbi of a Reform temple in Elmont, Long Island and was looking forward to serving co-religionists as a teacher, the literal translation of the word rabbi.

In 1955, several Jewish families living in the southern part of the county, established a Reform congregation, called the South Dade Jewish Center. In 1956 they asked Rabbi Baumgard to conduct services, the first of which was held at Sunset Eementary School. At Rabbi Baumgard's urging, they changed the congregation's name to Temple Beth Am and in 1963 proudly opened the first building of what was to become one of the most comprehensive and highly regarded religious, educational, and community centers in the nation.

Generations of community leaders, businessmen and women, teachers, scientists, physicians, attorneys, and other professionals have received religious and/or secular training at Temple Beth Am. Countless numbers of boys and girls have received the benefits of a progressive education at its highly regarded day school. Multitudes of music lovers, of all ages, races and religions have enjoyed superb performances at its acclaimed fine arts program. And thousands of families have found a spiritual home at Temple Beth Am. All under the inspired leadership of this exceptional individual.

In 1987 Herbert M. Baumgard retired as the chief rabbi of Temple Beth Am, but not as the teacher, mentor, counselor, and friend of many of its long-term congregants. He still maintains an office at the temple where the benefits of his wisdom, experience and understanding are available to those with the perspicacity to seek them.

When asked what he considers his most important accomplishments, he precedes any discussion of achievements with references to his wife of 53 years, Selma, and their three children, Dr. Jonathan Baumgard, a pediatrician; Shira Garvett, a clinical psychologist,



and Daniel Baumgard, a shopping center developer. Each member of Rabbi Baumgard's immediate family has made significant contributions to the development and quality of Pinecrest in their own right.

Of his service to the people of South Florida, Rabbi Baumgard is proudest of his 12 years as chairman of the Dade County Community Relations Board, a body that achieved a synergy between distant factions of the community and diffused situations with the very real potential of extremely serious consequences.

Interfaith activities have been an emphasis of his career. He has been President of the Clergy Dialogue Group sponsored by the local chapter of the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ).

He has been invited to speak in many churches, including the First Methodist Church of South Miami and the St. Louis Catholic Church. There have been pulpit exchanges with the ministers, of these churches and other ministers. The Honorable Bishop Edward McCarthy has graced the pulpit of Temple Beth Am, as has Reverend Ed Graham.

He has been President of the Synagogue Council of America when it contained official representatives of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism.

He has taught for many years in the Department of Religion of the University of Miami as an Adjunct Professor and has recently authored a book entitled, "Finding My Way to God," available at the Beth Am library.

The son of a tailor in Norfolk, Virginia, Herbert Baumgard, left law school at the University of Virginia to be an assistant to a Jewish Post Chaplin. Upon discharge he entered the Rabbinical Seminary in New York City and studied under the direction of Rabbi Stephen Wise. He was ordained in 1950, studied for a Ph.D. at Columbia University and received a D.H.L. – Doctorate in Hebrew Letters – from Hebrew Union College.

In this interview the rabbi stated, "The Pinecrest community would be well advised to be more mindful of the value of the religious institutions in our community, and the members of our religious institutions should be more mindful of the fact that they are a part of a significant community which deserves their attention and help."

Herbert Baumgard is one of the most respected religious leaders in South Florida. His accomplishments at Temple Beth Am, in the South Florida Jewish Community, and Miami-Dade County as a whole, are well documented and widely admired, as are his contributions to the part of "Unincorporated South Dade County," now known as Pinecrest.



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