Temple Sinai
Sumter, South Carolina

“The Temple is an inherent cornerstone of my life.”
—Robert Moses, Temple Sinai lay leader

For Robert Moses, he and Temple Sinai were inextricably linked. A Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) congregation in Sumter, South Carolina, the temple was founded in the 1800s by settlers from Charleston. Robert’s grandfather, Altamont Moses, was among them. Robert’s grandfather became one of the temple’s founders. Robert’s father was the temple president. As Robert tells it, he was born of the temple, educated at the temple, married at the temple, and raised his family in the temple.

Fast forward 150 years. Temple Sinai’s children were leaving the area and not coming back. Membership was declining and the once vibrant religious school, sisterhood, men’s club and youth group were no longer sustainable.

It was time to think realistically about the congregation’s future. While some felt the congregation should close, a reluctant Robert Moses held out hope for revitalization. Enter the Jewish Community Legacy Project (JCLP).

“We listen to issues and make connections with other organizations and institutions that can help extend the life of a congregation while they work to create a legacy that honors the past as it looks to the future,” said JCLP President David Sarnat. “We don’t come with boiler plate solutions for congregations.”

In the case of Temple Sinai, JCLP was able to facilitate a relationship with Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE), a URJ congregation about 100 miles south of Sumter. Today, both congregations benefit from the relationship. A visiting rabbi from KKBE enables the Temple Sinai community to continue to gather in prayer. KKBE has expanded its community to embrace the Jews of Sumter. With guidance from JCLP, Temple Sinai has a fiscal management plan in place and
KKBE holds an endowment fund that ensures that Temple Sinai and its history will be remembered and Jewish charities will be funded in the future. “We are now planning for the time when it will be no longer be feasible to operate our temple,” said Temple Sinai member Roger Ackerman. “With the expertise of the Jewish Community Legacy Project, we have in place an outstanding plan that will perpetuate our congregation longer than might have otherwise been possible.”

In many ways, says Sarnat, the relationship of Temple Sinai to KKBE is a 360-degree story that spans more than 150 years. From Charleston, Altamont Moses brought his Jewish culture to Sumter and now the Sumter Jewish Community returns to its roots. “There are so many larger congregations that can—and want— to help smaller communities,” Sarnat said. “They just needed someone to bring them together. That's what we are here to do.”

The Marcus Foundation has funded the Jewish Community Legacy Project since its inception in 2008. URJ now seeks to ensure that the Legacy Project itself has a future. To that end, URJ will serve as administrative partner beginning in mid-2014. Interested individuals and communities should contact David Sarnat at (770) 690-8230, david@jclproject.org, Noah Levine at (678) 429-8895, noah@jclproject.org or Merry Lugasy, (212) 452.6742, mlugasy@urj.org.