

A Piece of Jewish History

The following historical information is drawn from "The Jewish Community in Rochester" by Stuart E. Rosenberg.

First Jews in Rochester

A history of the Jews in Rochester is a study in American history. Rochester was a major location for people moving west to tame the wild frontier. But few Jews left Rochester once they arrived. Over the years the Jewish community adapted to meet its needs. But it was also a living example of the practice of democracy and its practical applications. The Jewish community was also a perfect example of America's "melting pot," Jews from many different countries lived, worked, and worshipped together.

In 1843 the first Jews arrived in Rochester. By 1850 there were 60 Jews in the city, many of them involved in the clothing industry. When Jews arrived in Rochester they often had no money because they had spent everything they had just to get to America. The new arrivals were unable to speak English and had few skills. They looked for work that would allow them to observe the Sabbath, and hence many of these early arrivals became peddlers. The hours were long and work was very hard. But the Jews prospered. Soon they had their own businesses in the garment industry. The Jews that followed this first group became tailors or peddlers.

The financial panic of 1857 greatly threatened the economy of the city, which relied heavily on such industries as grain milling. But the little noticed clothing industry is what saved the city. The clothing industry not only saved Rochester from disaster but also became a significant source of employment for Jews in the city for decades to come.

One reason why the clothing industry was overlooked when the city was seeking its economic salvation is because the industry was not yet organized. It was scattered about the city with much of the work taking place in people's homes. With the onset of the Civil War the clothing industry boomed, topping one million dollars in business and employing over one thousand people.

The German Jews in the clothing business became wealthy by taking advantage of the Civil War. They also took advantage of thousands of arriving Polish and Russian Jews who were willing to work for low wages.

The German and English Jews began a temple which later became known as Berith Kodesh. This congregation quickly moved from Orthodox traditions to the more liberal services of the Reform movement. They felt that by abolishing some of the old traditions they could better blend in with their new American neighbors. These new Jewish immigrants found it fairly easy to assimilate themselves to the American way of life. Although they were Jews, they considered themselves Americans first. This attitude was greatly applauded by the community at large and the press.

Eastern European Jews, primarily from Poland, began arriving in Rochester shortly after the end of the Civil War. These Jews found more than a language barrier between

them and their German Jews already in Rochester. The Eastern European Jews had very strong ties with their own traditions and culture, and had no desire to break with them.

At the same time, the Jews who resided in Rochester saw the new immigrants as a different group of people. Twenty years of American life and the Civil War gave the German and English Jewish population a different view of life and the world.

The Jewish immigrants had their share of disagreements but education of their young, housing newly arrived immigrants, and a deep sentimental and psychological unity gave the Jewish community a sense of belonging.

Beth Israel

At first, these newcomers met in their homes to observe religious services. Their first act as a group was to purchase a section of burial plots for a Jewish cemetery in Mt. Hope Cemetery. It was not until 1870 that the Eastern European Jews formally created Congregation Sheves Achim.

Berith Kodesh withstood much dissension over the years, but Sheves Achim began on rocky ground. The Orthodox community was riddled with dissension. Groups splintered off, were reabsorbed, and re-formed for many years.

Dissension among members caused this group to split a year later. The new congregation was called Bene Shalom. In 1874 the two congregations reunited and took the name Beth Israel. The Congregation's first leader was a Mr. Gluck from Cincinnati. The Congregation moved to larger quarters on Jordan's Block, now known as Main Street.

In the summer of 1879, Beth Israel dedicated a new building at 54 Chatham Street (which today is called Ormond Street). The event was significant because the German Jewish group also participated in the dedication. Dr. Max Landsberg, Rabbi at B'rith Kodesh, was invited to preach the dedicatory sermon.

In 1882 a group of Russian immigrants arrived in Rochester and formed Congregation B'nai Israel. In 1886, B'nai Israel merged with Beth Israel.

In September 1886, Beth Israel moved to a new location on Leopold Street. (This building still stands today near the Amtrak railroad station, and has been designated as a National Landmark.) With the move to Leopold Street came an unheard of and revolutionary idea. Beth Israel opened a Hebrew School in their basement. Previously Orthodox Jewish children received their religious education from private tutors at home. This meant that only the families with money could afford to have their children receive religious education. With Beth Israel having a Hebrew School in the basement, it promoted the idea that the entire Jewish community was responsible for seeing that every Jewish child received a proper Jewish education. Beth Israel's school became the first publicly sponsored Jewish education program in Rochester. The sanctuary seated 800 people.



Figure 1. Congregation Beth Israel's new building at 30 Leopold Street opened in 1886.

In June 1889, a revolutionary event took place at Beth Israel. There were a number of American children in the Congregation. In an attempt to make these Rochester-born children feel closer to the Congregation, Rabbi Solomon Kahn from Buffalo came and addressed Congregation Beth Israel in English. Rabbi Kahn's sermon marked the first time English was spoken during a service in an Orthodox service in Rochester.

Rabbi Abraham Rosen became the Rabbi for Beth Israel in 1891. He was also the Chief Rabbi for the entire Orthodox Jewish community of Rochester.



Figure 2. First floor of Congregation Beth Israel's Leopold Street shul.

Four years later, in 1895, Rabbi David Ginsberg took over as Rabbi of Beth Israel.

The younger children all attended School Number 9 - including German, English, Polish and Russian Jews as well as the American children. But once the children were a little older, especially in the poorer families, many of them began working. The most popular form of employment for these children was peddling newspapers on the streets. The

newspaperman Dr. William C. Gannett started a school in the evenings for those boys who sold his newspapers, called The Boys Evening Home.

In 1895 higher education (high school and beyond) was a rarity and Jewish education at that level was non-existent. A group of enthusiastic teen-aged boys from Dr. Gannett's Boys Evening Home received permission from Beth Israel to meet in the basement, where they would learn from each other and invited guests. The group became the Judea Club, but remained at Beth Israel for only a short time, although the Club prospered and grew. As the members became adults, they also became outstanding leaders in Rochester's Jewish community.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw many reforms in American Judaism, especially among the German and English Jews. But there was one area where the traditions, rituals and ceremonies were not touched, nor were they allowed to be modified - the burial rites. One burial society served the entire Jewish community - German, English, Russian and Polish alike. This burial society, Hevra Kaddisha, was the only area the two groups (Orthodox and Reform) shared.

A portion of the Jewish population was poor but they somehow managed to have their etrog and lulav for Sukkoth and the wine for Pesach brought to America from Palestine.

In 1905, the Russian Revolution sent Russian Jews to America in large numbers. The Jewish community banded together to raise money, construct housing and offer humanitarian aid to the refugees. The effort was humanitarian, not ideological, so the entire Jewish community banded together to help like never before.

Beth Israel had two Rabbis in 1906 - Rabbi David Ginsberg and Rabbi Nathan Blechman. Rabbi Blechman was the first English speaking rabbi in Rochester, and was hired only a few weeks after being ordained as a rabbi. He was one of the first graduates from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Rabbi Blechman represented the Congregation of Beth Israel in a number of non-Jewish circles, which gave the Congregation a wider civic recognition. He and University of Rochester President Rush Rhees were friends. Rhees spoke at many Beth Israel functions. Blechman also held a number of Zionist meetings at the synagogue.



Figure 3. Hebrew School children at Congregation Beth Israel.

intentions of reform, but they did realize the American born children of their members required special attention to keep them coming to services.

Blechman was hired as an English-speaking rabbi as a way to attract and relate to the younger generation. The Friday night services became more of a social gathering, which also attracted more people.

Beth Israel was an Orthodox congregation with no

Rabbi Blechman organized an afternoon Hebrew School, and the first Orthodox Sunday School in Rochester. Beth Israel was the first Orthodox shul to concern itself with the public education of its youth. Along with the Sunday School, girls of Orthodox families were given the opportunity to receive Jewish religious education. Women were allowed a wider sphere of activities.

Blechman remained at Beth Israel for only one year, but in that time he was instrumental in aiding the Congregation to adapt to its environment in America. They did so without compromising their Orthodox traditions and rituals.

In August 1911 Rabbi Paul Chertoff replaced Rabbi Lauterbach at Beth Israel. Rabbi Chertoff graduated from Jewish Theological Seminary and was hired barely a month after he graduated.

Beth Israel became known as the most distinguished Shul in the city. Its members were the oldest and most respected of the East Europeans, and were among the wealthiest Yiddish speaking people in the community. Having the largest number of American-born children, and a young and enthusiastic Rabbi who gained the confidence of the young people in the Congregation also gave Beth Israel stature.

The women in the reform movement were very active in social and political issues as well. They formed the first National Council of Jewish Women in the nation, and a branch was formed in Rochester. The local women saw it as their "duty" to "Americanize" the new Russian and Polish immigrants. The old School No. 9 was where most of the new immigrant children attended school. These families were very poor, so for many years, the local National Council of Jewish Women provided a fund that gave parties, picnics and short vacations to this children.

Under Rabbi Chertoff, a Bar Mitzvah boy was expected to make a speech in English to make the boys feel more a part of the Congregation and services. This was an innovation for an Orthodox shul in Rochester. Rabbi Milton Steinberg was one of the young men who had been influenced by Rabbi Chertoff. Steinberg distinguished himself as a respected author and rabbi.



Figure 4. Bema at Leopold Street shul.

As the younger and wealthier Jewish families moved into the East Avenue area, they felt the need to establish a congregation in their new neighborhood. They wanted a new synagogue that would “conserve” Judaism and would blend in with their new environment. A new congregation was formed in 1915, which was eventually named Beth El. They became the first Conservative congregation in Rochester.

Beth Israel remained on Leopold Street until 1973 when they sold the building to the Church of God and Saints of Christ.

Beth Hamedresh Hagodel

As new immigrants arrived in Rochester, they added to the chaos of creation and merging of synagogues by creating their own congregations. One of the many small congregations that formed was Ahavas Achim Congregation. In 1878 they changed their name to Chevra Tillem Society, and in 1882 they again changed their name to B’nai David.

In 1884 Congregation Ahavas Achim was formed. It too changed its name and became known as Chevra Chayteem, the Congregation of Tailors.

1911 brought a new era to Rochester’s Jewish Community. B’nai David and Chevra Chayteem joined forces and built a brand new synagogue at 32 Hanover Street. The tireless efforts of Hyman Goldman was instrumental in seeing the project completed. Up to now, the Congregations frequently used existing buildings for their synagogues, but the members of B’nai David and Chevra Chayteem sought to find a design which they felt was appropriate for a new synagogue. The building on Hanover Street was modeled after a synagogue in Toronto, and construction was completed in record time at a cost of \$75,000. A little over five months after ground was broken, on September 10, the building was publicly dedicated. It was named Beth Hamedresh Hagodel (the Big or Great Shul). Constructed from sandstone, the outside walls gleamed like gold in the sunlight. Columns on either side of the building contained the staircases which led to the women’s section in the balcony. The columns were topped with golden six-pointed stars. The men entered through high wide doors at the top of steps made from wide stone. Inside the seats were constructed from mahogany. The large dome ceiling was painted blue to match the night sky complete with whit puffy clouds and stars. Large oil paintings of Biblical scenes adorned the walls. The windows were stained glass.



Figure 5. Ark of the Leopold Street shul.

At this point there were some 17 Orthodox congregations in Rochester. Some of these were near Beth Hamedresh Hagodel. People from the various shuls would often



Figure 6. Congregation Beth Hamedresh Hagodel's new building on Hanover Street.

congregate to chat in Beth Hamedresh's court yard. It was also a place where the boys and girls could meet and get acquainted with one another while under the watchful eyes of adults. In Orthodox tradition a boy and girl are not permitted to be left alone before they are married.

Rabbi Solomon Sadowsky, new to Rochester, and Berith Kodesh's assistant Rabbi Horace J. Wolfe gave the dedicatory addresses. Seven thousand people attended the event.

The union between B'nai David and Chevra Chayteem was the last time that two small Orthodox congregations were united. These two congregations had been sharing a number of activities together since 1902.

The synagogue seated 2,000 people. At its peak, Beth Hamedresh Hagodel had a membership of 500 families, making it the largest congregation in Rochester. The synagogue on Hanover Street was

listed as one of the Jewish show places in the United States.

Beth Hamedresh Hagodel remained on Hanover Street until 1960 when the entire area, which included a number of synagogues, was demolished to make room for a federally funded urban renewal program. The Baden-Ormond Urban Renewal Program was designed to construct inner city housing. In 1960 and 1961, government officials did not concern themselves with the preservation of historic landmark sites.

The Orthodox community was very splintered and would not unite in matters of religious practices. At one point there were nearly 20 Orthodox congregations in Rochester. Many of them were created along socio-economic lines or national origin. Each group of immigrants had their own traditions and cultures. These immigrants were not willing to compromise.

The rabbis were also constantly squabbling over ritual laws and practices. As a result, the power the rabbi and the synagogue usually had over the congregants and immigrants was weakened considerably.

Rabbi Horace J. Wolfe was the rabbi at B'rith Kodesh but he sought to unite the Reform and Orthodox communities. The Orthodox Jews felt that Rabbi Wolfe understood and related to them.

For a time the German and East European groups worked separately even in non-religious areas. Eventually they came together to form the Jewish Welfare Council. Working together to raise money for humanitarian reasons caught on when the Russian Jewish refugees arrived. This cooperation carried over into the First World War, aiding Jews in war stricken Europe. Rochester surpassed its fundraising quota of \$60,000 by several thousand dollars.

The Jewish Military Welfare Society was formed in 1917. It was among the first such groups formed in America. In May of 1918 it became a branch of the National Jewish Welfare Council.

As each new generation was born, especially the members of the Reform congregation, they thought of themselves as Americans first and Jews second. The idea of a separate Jewish identity, their Jewishness, was not a major concern to the younger generation. For some, Judaism was a religion and not a way of life.



Figure 7. Bar Mitzvah certificate presented to Jack D. Sherman in 1937 from Congregation Beth Hamedresh Hagodel.



Figure 8. Interior of Hanover Street shul.

from the Daughters of Zion as Haddasah. That evening in the home of Mrs. Bernard Rose, Henrietta Szold started a chapter of Haddasah in Rochester. The first chapter formed under the new name and in the city where it received its new name.

After leaving Hanover Street, the Congregation moved from store front to store front while they searched for a suitable location to call home. At this time, the Congregation numbered approximately 50 families. In 1964 Beth Hamedresh Hagodel purchased a new permanent home. They found that home on East Avenue in an old historic mansion that was occupied by the Alpha Lutheran Church for the Deaf. The building was large for the small Congregation to maintain. On October 4, 1964, Beth Hamedresh Hagodel held its first service at 1369 East Avenue.

But the Eastern Europeans understood the plight of the refugees. This was also the same group for whom Zionism was a major topic of interest and concern. Rabbis Ginsberg, Blechman, Lauterbach and Chertoff were very instrumental in aiding the Zionist groups who met at Beth Israel, helping arrange programs and speeches.

In 1914 the Federation of American Zionists held their seventeenth national convention in Rochester. Among those in attendance at the conference was Henrietta Szold. Szold was National President for the Daughters of Zion, who also held meetings that were open to the public as a part of the national conference. The Daughters of Zion's eight chapters and local women met and passed two referendums of historic proportion. The first referendum stated that young girls were no longer allowed to sell flowers on the street because it "made for boldness and the loss of modesty in children."

The other referendum that was passed that day was to change the name of the group



BETH HAMEDRESH HAGODEL
(BIG SHULE)
HANOVER ST.

Figure 9. Hanover Street building prior to demolition circa 1957.

When the Congregation made the move to East Avenue, they also made the move from an Orthodox to a Conservative congregation. The main reason for the decision was so families could sit together. Rabbi Charles L. Heilpern was the first Conservative rabbi in the Congregation's history. Rabbi Heilpern was born in London, England, and his father Samuel was a Kabbalist. Heilpern received honors from Israel's first President Chaim Weizman and Dr. Isaac Herzog, Chief Rabbi of Israel, for organizing hospitalities for the Jewish American soldiers during World War II. He also received an award from the National Jewish Welfare Board of New York for his efforts. Rabbi Heilpern came to Rochester from Temple Beth Shalom in Lake Worth, Florida. He was the first full time rabbi at Beth Hamedresh in over a decade.

Beth Hamedresh - Beth Israel

The year 1973 brought about a major transition for the Congregations Beth Hamedresh Hagodel and Beth Israel. When Beth Israel sold its building on Leopold Street, they merged with Beth Hamedresh. Both Congregations maintained their names in the merger. Today the Congregation is known as Beth Hamedresh - Beth Israel. This merger marks the only time in Rochester's Jewish history that two congregations merged and kept both names. Previously, anytime one congregation was absorbed by another, only one name was kept. The only other occasions when a true merger took place, neither name was kept; these occurred when Beth Israel was formed in 1874, and when Beth Hamedresh Hagodel was formed in 1911.

The membership of Beth Hamedresh - Beth Israel reached over 150 families in the late 1980s. Due to the age of long-time members, our current membership is less than 100 families because a number of members have passed away.

In the early 1990s there was a major change in the role of women in the synagogue. The question of whether women should be given full and equivalent religious rights with

men had been raised. Numerous heated debates occurred, and several Rabbis from the Rochester community addressed the issue in a series of educational seminars at the synagogue. Eventually, the Congregation voted to give women nearly equal rights with men. They can now perform almost every prayer and function in a service, with the exception of several key prayers.

During the same time frame, there was much debate as to whether Beth Hamedresh - Beth Israel should build a new synagogue in a suburban location, or renovate the current building. The Beth Hamedresh - Beth Israel Board of Trustees and members voted to stay in their present location and renovate their beautiful landmark building. For Beth Hamedresh - Beth Israel, deciding to renovate required more than a big commitment to the future. It also involved finding a way to best serve the Congregation while maintaining the integrity of their landmark building.