

Beth Israel's Cemetery Committee & Chevra Kadisha

A Jewish cemetery, in the traditional parlance of Jewry, is a Beth Olam, a "House of Eternity," a term that may be said to combine a love for euphemisms with a belief in immortality.

Life without the rituals of his religion was bearable for a Jew, but burial in unsanctified soil was not to be thought of. Hence it was that in this community as in many other communities, before a synagogue — before any other community project — a Jewish cemetery was the first step toward religious identity. Our founders, faced with the choice of burying their dead in a non-Jewish cemetery, decided in a positive Jewish spirit to seek ground which could be called Jewish to cover the remains of their dear ones.

In the earliest years of its existence the cemetery was owned and supervised by the Independent Order of the Sons of Benjamin, a fraternal order organized in 1885 for the sole purpose of maintaining a burial ground for the Orthodox Jewish community of Bangor. The sense of community gave this band of fellow Israelites the impetus to organize the Chevra Kadisha. Even as the patriarch Abraham purchased for 400 shekels of silver, from the children of Heth, a plot for a grave for his beloved Sarah, so did the Independent Order of the Sons of Benjamin, the forerunner of the Beth Israel Society, purchase from the city of Bangor a plot of ground for \$45.

This was not the first time a burial society was to precede a synagogue. In many parts of Europe, the only collective property the Jews were allowed to own was the cemetery. The synagogues were often privately owned chapels. The organization of this burial society was not only an act of reverence for the dead, it was an act of loyal committal to our future in these United States. The soil where our dead are buried is hallowed soil because memory transmutes common clays into sanctuaries.



One of the entrances to the new section of the Beth Israel cemetery.

Tom Hindman Photo

It was not until 1907 that Congregation Beth Israel formally purchased this tract on Webster Avenue for \$335. Eventually, more land on Mount Hope Avenue was purchased.

The congregation has a genuine sense of pride in its possession of what poet Henry W. Longfellow has so fittingly called "God's acre." In this "House of Eternity" we have the symbol not of the dark and gloomy shadow of the fear of death, but rather the tangible possession of a beautiful and rich garden of memories. While it is the resting place of our physical destiny, it is also the hallowed ground in which we mix our tears with the sacred ashes of our departed. Thus the physical earth becomes the spiritual symbol of life, death and immortality.

The cemetery was for a long time the most important adjunct of this congregation. Their full youthful energies devoted to the acquisition of a firm economic hold in the new land, our early immigrants inevitably neglected the amenities of social intercourse and the joys of religious fellowship. But death was a more insistent creditor.

In 1907, within a year after the purchase of the cemetery from the Sons of Benjamin, the congregation, which had dwindled to 63 members, swelled to more

than 90. The first to be interred in the burial ground on Webster Avenue was Sarah Goldman, wife of Israel Goldman. Congregation records reveal that, in a less medically advanced age, a high mortality incidence prevailed among the children.

In 1988 the synagogue was using three of the five sections in its cemetery on Mount Hope Avenue. Cemetery Committee Chairman David Adelman said plans are under way to prepare the remaining sections for future use. He said the committee plans to have roads built and shrubs planted in sections 4 and 5 in the spring of 1989.

The development of the cemetery over the years is a reminder of the dedicated efforts of Harold Epstein, who died Aug. 18, 1987, and Dr. Joseph Ornstein, who passed away Nov. 18, 1985. Those dedicated men looked after the last inevitable needs of our members, as well as supervising improvements, landscaping and care of the grounds. This hallowed ground is truly a place of peace and beauty.

Now, as Epstein and Ornstein had done in the past, David Adelman carries on the duties as a devoted member of the shul.

The perpetual care fund of the congregation provides for permanent care of the resting place of the beloved departed. A contribution made during life or a bequest directed in a last will and testament, provides the necessary funds in each instance.

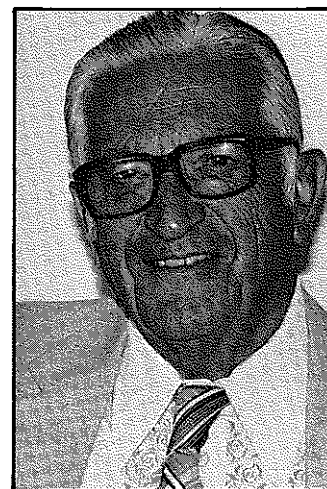
The Chevra Kadisha

The function of the Chevra Kadisha is the preparation of the body for burial according to the prescribed rules. This first mutual-aid society gave assurance of a Jewish burial with Jewish rites. It had been a primary concern of Jews for thousands of years. It was to provide for this — financially and religiously — that the Chevra Kadisha, or burial society, had been formed in the Jewish communities of Europe, and as an institution it was several centuries old. In America it grew up within the synagogue. The society performed many functions including praying by the side of the corpse, preparing the body for burial, and seeing that there would be a minyan of mourners after the funeral. The society also served as overseers of the cemetery. The Chevra Kadisha was the first religious organization to be created by our founders and preceded the establishment of the synagogue itself.

It was considered a matter of religious merit to belong to the Chevra Kadisha, and its membership included the leading personalities of the community. Every new member had to pay an entrance fee and had his name registered in the minute book. During the first year he had to take part in the burial rites, and it was not until some time later that he was entitled to vote in



Joseph Ornstein



Harold Epstein

the election of officers or himself be a candidate for office.

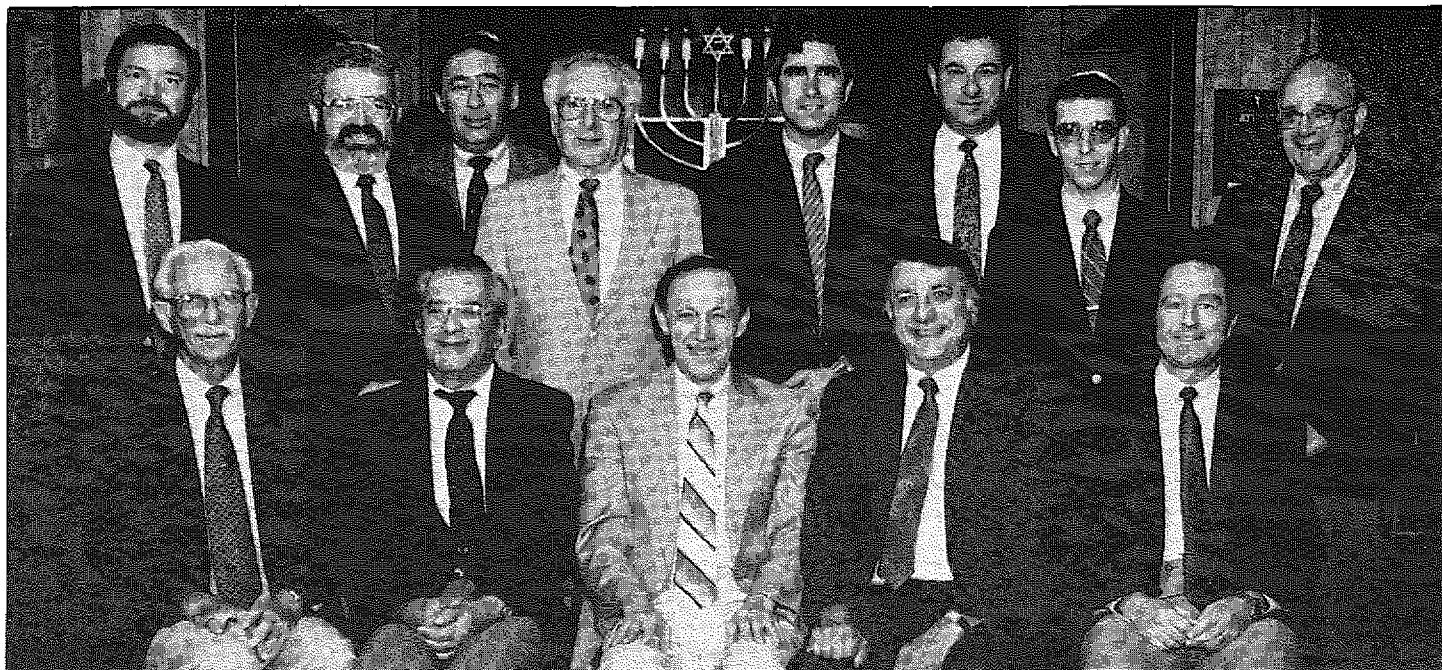
The executive board consisted of the gabbaim and their immediate assistants, who were elected annually on the second of the intermediate days of Passover. In order to stimulate the enthusiasm of the members a seudah was arranged for them every year on the 15th day of Kisleiv. The first seudah of which we have record took place in December 1894. It was voted to spend \$6 for this gala affair and the following were appointed to make the arrangements: Israel and Hanna Frank, Joseph and Malcha Bernstein, Simon Kominsky, Morris Golden, and Sam Dennis.

In the early days of the congregation the Chevra Kadisha undoubtedly used a horse and wagon to carry the dead to the cemetery. By 1915, the congregation purchased a hearse and hired a horse from a local livery when the occasion arose. This was the first hearse to be owned and operated by a local synagogue. It is recorded that the Chevra Kadisha rented the hearse to the other two synagogues for a "small fee."

Harry Epstein, one of the longtime leaders of the Chevra Kadisha, retired as chairman in 1982. Neil Glazier was then appointed by President Harold Baron to succeed him as chairman. Epstein continued to serve on the Chevra Kadisha as an honorary member and remained active until his death.

Members of the 1988 Chevra Kadisha are: David Adelman, Rose Baron, Norman Bravemen, Ron Dennis, Dave Dorsky, Grace Dorsky, Arnold Garson, Alan Glazier, Frances Glazier, Neil Glazier (Gabbai), Joan Golden, Edgar Goldsmith, Hazel Goldsmith, Jerome Goldsmith, James Goodman, Mike Goodman, Michael Kaprow, Bernard Kubetz, David Leen, David Lieberman, Adele Miller, Bernard Miller, Gloria Miller, Sanford Miller, Beryl Ruben, Rabbi Joseph Schonberger, Irwin Singer, Marshall Stern, David Striar, Miles Theeman and Sharon Theeman.

By Henry Segal and John Ripley



Members of the 1988 Chevra Kadish include (front, left to right) Edgar Goldsmith, Dave Dorsky, Neil Glazier, Billy Miller, David Adelman, (back, left

to right) David Leen, Miles Theeman, David Lieberman, Sanford Miller, Bernie Kubetz, Irwin Singer, Alan Glazier and David Striar. (Brian Higgins Photo)



Members of the 1988 Chevra Kadisha include (front, left to right) Adele Miller, Sharon Theeman, Frances Glazier, Gloria Miller, (back, left to right)

Hazel Goldsmith, Grace Dorsky, Beryl Rubin and Rose Baron. (Brian Higgins Photo)

The United Jewish Chapel

New residents of the Jewish community in Bangor, and those who have lived here less than a quarter of a century, may view the existence of a funeral chapel as a given. However, it was not always so. Until March 25, 1952, when the United Jewish Chapel was incorporated, there was not even a hint that such a facility would be available for use in times of sorrow. And it was not until later in that decade that it was actually used.

It took many meetings and intense hard work to make the dream a reality. Before that time, funerals were held at the home, and there was no place except the living room or bedroom to prepare the body or hold services. There had long been a heartfelt need for an alternative, but it took 40 years of campaigning by Annie Berger, one of the first Jewish settlers in Bangor, to get the ball rolling.

Mrs. Berger used to buttonhole everyone she could at funerals to impress upon them the need for a formal structure to serve the community, according to those who remember the early days before the chapel existed. A plaque to her memory within the present chapel attests to her efforts. She was the mother of attorney Shirley Berger, in whose office the first meeting of the fledgling chapel society was held and continued to be held for many years.

In the articles of incorporation, which were signed in Berger's office, Harry Broder was elected the first president. Louis Rolnick was elected vice president; Abraham J. Stern, secretary; and Shirley Berger, treasurer. Elected unanimously to the board of directors were Stern, Broder, James A. Cahners, Myer Minsky, David Goldberg, Albert J. Schiro, Louis Rolnick, and Berger. Upon the death of Harry Broder in August 1953, Albert Schiro assumed the presidency. Abe Berg was elected to the board of directors to replace Broder. In 1956 Harry Epstein became a director.

Once incorporation was accomplished, the next step was the selection of a site and construction.

Albert Schiro had purchased a lot at the corner of Grove and State streets, which he turned over to the corporation for the sum of \$18,000. The corporation borrowed the money from Merrill Trust Co. The lot was subsequently sold for \$22,000 to the American Oil Co.



The United Jewish Chapel on Center Street in Bangor.

Tom Hindman Photo

Albert Schiro and Shirley Berger were named to the Building Committee to look into a possible site for the new chapel. They settled on a lot on Center Street owned by Robert Cohen, for the sum of \$3,000. This land was the site of the first synagogue in Bangor.

Bids for the actual construction of the chapel were solicited. In March 1953, at the annual meeting of the board of directors, the contract was awarded to Perry & Morrill for the sum of \$37,450, and construction was begun. The original architect for the venture was John Larsson, but before the building was completed, three architects had died, according to Berger. A fundraising campaign brought pledges in slowly, but eventually the campaign succeeded.

In 1954 plans were made for the formal opening of the chapel. Two years later 29 families already had used the chapel. By March 1961, 107 people had used it.

At the annual meeting in March 1959, it was reported that the bank loan had been paid in full and the chapel was free of debt.

In 1984 only four of the original board members were alive — Shirley Berger, Albert J. Schiro, Louis Rolnick, and Harold Epstein — and it was decided to meet June 29 to elect new members. Warren M. Silver was elected president, Jerome Kirstein was elected vice president, Norman Minsky was elected secretary/clerk, and Stephen Emery was elected treasurer. In addition to the new officers, the four remaining original board members joined the new board.

By Riva Berman