

CHAPTER 8

In War And Peace

The first quarter of a century of Beth Israel's history was enacted against a background of world-shaking events. The 20th century, which started so serenely and auspiciously, suffered a rude shock when World War I ushered in an era of chaos and upheaval. Unprecedented material progress and scientific advance had held forth the promise of a better life; at the same time, spiritual anarchy and social revolution kept the world poised at the brink of disaster.

With America's entrance into the conflict, several of Beth Israel's young men rushed to enlist. The congregation honored its fighting men at a special service on March 29, 1918, and service flags bearing their names were dedicated. Men, women and young people of all age groups were involved in one form of patriotic work or another. Tragedy struck the community with the announcement of the deaths of Hyman Hillson and Henry Lait. Both were killed in action. Citations for bravery were awarded these men only weeks before.

The war and its aftermath saw many critical changes for the Jewish people. On Nov. 2, 1917, Lord Balfour, with President Wilson's endorsement, proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to a homeland. A Jewish Legion helped General Allenby to win Palestine from the Turks — it was this same military unit that received a tumultuous welcome from the Bangor Zionists as it passed through Bangor to Canada on its way to a point of embarkation.

World War I made an indelible impression upon the Jewish community of Bangor. The problem of war relief became a communal responsibility but the organizational and administrative problems were assumed by Beth Israel. A committee composed of Abe Segal, Morris Rosen, Joseph Byer and Simon Kominsky assumed the task of canvassing the city for the initial drive. Throughout the hostilities funds were collected and distributed to the Central Relief Committee. When the task assumed proportions too weighty for a single congregation a citywide committee was appointed with Louis Kirstein as director.

There was hardly a person who was not related to some war-stricken family in war-torn Europe, for the vast majority of Jews here were the immigrants of the period of 1880-1914 and their children. The cry of the starving, the homeless and the refugees touched the hearts of every Jew who wanted to help. The incomplete records tell a greater story of philanthropy and human



Henry Lait



Hyman Hillson

kindness than do these inadequate accounts.

Armistice Day was wildly celebrated in Bangor on Nov. 11, 1918. In Philadelphia Jews met in the first American Jewish Congress with a sprinkling of Maine Jewry represented. At Versailles in 1919, Jewish delegates secured acknowledgement of Jewish claims to a homeland in Palestine and of equal rights in Eastern Europe. In Detroit Henry Ford's anti-Semitic Dearbon Independent began publishing in 1920 the forged protocols of the Elders of Zion. Arab riots in Palestine could not halt the efforts to colonize the land which was to come under the British mandate. The League of Nations was founded without the United States. America went dry for 13 years, but speak-easies thrived. Women finally got the vote. The Munich Beer Hall Putsch led by Hitler was put down in November 1923. The cruel immigration laws were signed by President Coolidge, excluding many who might later have been saved from Hitler.

The Mortgage Is Burned

The year 1923 was notable for the removal of a great burden from the financial structure of the congregation. The York Street synagogue had served the congregation well, but it had encumbered the treasury of the congregation with a \$10,000 mortgage. Under the dynamic co-chairmanship of Morris Rosen and Adolph B. Friedman a campaign was undertaken to liquidate the mortgage. That campaign was brought



The Sons and Daughters of Zion in Bangor, June 9, 1920.

Photo courtesy of the Bangor Historical Society

to a successful culmination at a memorable dinner held Dec. 9, 1923. On the stirring occasion the co-chairmen, who led a group of devoted workers to victory, presented the canceled mortgage to Adolph B. Friedman, president of the congregation. He then proceeded to burn the mortgage in an impressive ceremony. The Beth Israel Synagogue at last belonged to the people of Beth Israel.

A Common Interest

With the arrival of Rabbi Levine in 1925, representatives from Beth Israel and Beth Abraham met to discuss matters of common interest and made a startling attempt at unity by engaging the rabbi to serve both institutions. Each synagogue, however, still conducted its own affairs independently and each was still considered a separate unit. The community was a federation rather than an organic union; for example Levine's salary was not paid out of a common treasury, but each of the affiliated congregations assumed one-half of the obligation. Levine's installation was held in the grand manner befitting an occasion in which two congregations collaborated.

Rabbi Levine's duties were fixed; he was to preach at each of the synagogues in turn, to supervise the Talmud Torah, to deliver religious opinions, and to perform marriages. The records reveal the inner workings of the rabbinate and the many problems of various types which were faced. The minutes show the federated character of the community clearly, for they indicate that the joint board was ultimately obliged to turn to the members of the individual synagogues for sanction on any important matter, such as kashruth

DAILY COMMERCIAL, NOV. 26, 1917

Bangor Hebrews' Aid Fund For Brethren

Wedding Ring and Other Jewelry
Given at Mass Meeting in Synagogue
Sunday Night About \$3,000 Raised

New York Attorney Makes Stirring
Appeal for Jewish War Sufferers
In Stricken Europe

Bangor Hebrews contributed approximately \$3,000 at the Congregation Beth Israel on York Street Sunday night in aid of their war-stricken brethren in Europe. This will be added to the \$1,030 already pledged here and sent to swell the relief fund which is being raised all over the United States. Members of the local committee will continue to solicit subscriptions and it is expected that the sum given in this city will reach a considerably higher aggregate.

Practically every Jewish family in the city was represented at the mass meeting which was called to order at 7 o'clock by Simon Cohen, the chairman. Charles Zunsler, a well-known Jewish lawyer of New York City, made a stirring appeal in behalf of the stricken old world Jews who, he said, lacked even the barest necessities of life. He said it was impossible for the Jewish War Relief committee to even furnish the barley water which alone has kept the breath of life in many of them. It was proposed, he said, to raise \$10,000,000 in this country to help them and a leading Hebrew had promised to add a \$1,000,000 to that sum. Bangor's share is \$10,000. Non-Hebrews will not be asked to contribute, although gifts from them will be thankfully received.

An incident was related of an impoverished rabbi in New York who, although he had no money, gave a gold watch to be auctioned off for the relief fund. It brought \$4,000. Mr. Kirstein asked those present to give their treasures in the same spirit of sacrifice. The scene which followed was an unusual one.

One woman offered her wedding ring, and it quickly brought \$100. Rings, watches and various articles of jewelry were offered by the wholesale and the bidding for them became spirited. The articles were all sold at good prices, the bidding continuing uninterruptedly for several hours. When the receipts were checked up, it was found that approximately \$3,000 had been added to the fund

JEW TO BURN A MORTGAGE SUNDAY

Beth Israel Synagogue Indebtedness Now Paid

An unusual event will take place at the synagogue of the Congregation Beth Israel on York Street, Sunday afternoon, when the members and friends will gather to witness the burning of the mortgage which has just been paid after 10 years of hard work and careful economy in the handling of the church affairs. There will be a service with a long and interesting program, which will be followed by a banquet. Many of the former rabbis, who have been connected with the church, will be present.

Everyone will be welcome at the ceremony which will be Sunday afternoon at 4 o'clock sharp. Maurice L. Rosen, chairman of the committee, announced Friday. Every effort will be made to take care of all who desire to attend and the committee desires to extend an invitation to the public in general to join with the members of the synagogue in the day of jubilee.

The program for the synagogue ceremony is elaborate and will consist of music by a choir and orchestra, addresses by distinguished speakers and other interesting parts, while for the banquet to follow, which will be served by a committee of ladies, there will be another fine program of music and brief speeches. Among the distinguished visitors, who have already sent in their acceptances, are: Rabbi L. Seltzer of Bridgeport, Conn. first rabbi of the Congregation; Rabbi M. Shohet of Portland, another of Beth Israel's former leaders; and Rabbi Magdison of Congregation Beth Abraham, a sister synagogue to Beth Israel.

The announcement of the day has been sent out by the committee, composed of J. L. Rosen, chairman; Simon Kominsky, Harry Cohen, A. J. Berson and Max Ginsberg, as follows:

On Dec. 9, next, Bangor Jewry will indeed have occasion, the jubilation, for on that occasion, one that is certain to live long in the memory of every attendant, the mortgage on our synagogue will be put to the torch. Those of you who have resided in Bangor for a great many years can fully realize the meaning of this momentous occasion. A forty thousand dollar structure, dedicated to God and consecrated to the best ideals of man, is free of every incumbrance. The joyousness of such an occasion should be heralded to the high heavens and to the four corners of the earth.

As a member of the Congregation Beth Israel, you are wanted and urged to share in the joy of this happening. You and lady are extended an open hearted invitation to be present at the synagogue on Sunday, December 9, 1923, at 4 p.m. sharp. There will be a program of speaking of noted Jewish orators. An excellent musical and vocal program has been secured for this occasion, which will be followed by the ceremony of the burning of the mortgage. Following the ceremony, a banquet in charge of an able lady committee, who are sparing no labor or money to make this the most splendid affair ever held in this city, will take place.

It is very important, however, that each member respond to this invitation, as only as many plates will be set at the banquet as is indicated by the replies. Please state in replying whether you will come alone or with lady.

Please remember that this matter of response is important, as only those who reply will be taken care of at the banquet.

The committee also advises that there will be no charge whatsoever for any part of the afternoon or evening entertainment. There will be no collections of any kind. The occasion will be one of unalloyed joy.

Come. Come with your lady. Come and make the occasion a glorious one.

BANGOR DAILY NEWS, DEC. 10, 1923

DAY OF REJOICING FOR BETH ISRAEL

Hebrews Celebrate With Ceremony and Banquet Freeing of Synagogue from Debt

Sunday was a day of unusual significance for the members of the Congregation Beth Israel, as on that day was celebrated the freeing of their place of worship from all indebtedness, the mortgage being burned in the presence of a large assemblage including many prominent Hebrews from Bangor and elsewhere, amid great rejoicing. The program included musical numbers, a history of the Congregation of Beth Israel since 1885, given by M. L. Rosen, chairman of the committee in charge of the celebration, and a banquet for which 300 invitations had been issued. The synagogue was filled with members of the congregation and friends, and the ceremonies were most impressive.

Among the prominent Jewish leaders in attendance were Rabbi L. Seltzer of Bridgeport, Conn., the first head of the congregation. Rabbi M. Shohet of Portland who was also at one time rabbi of Beth Israel; Rabbi Magdison and Cantor Engel.

The synagogue was erected in 1912 following the Bangor fire which destroyed the synagogue on Center Street, and cost approximately \$40,000. The money necessary for the building, with the exception of \$10,000, was raised by the members of the congregation, and the new building, which was ready for occupancy in September 1912, was dedicated with appropriate ceremonies. But

the existence of the mortgage was distasteful to the congregation and recent efforts to lift it brought ready response from all, and on Sunday they had the satisfaction of seeing the evidence of debt go up in smoke, and they rejoiced in the knowledge that their place of worship was free and unencumbered. Many out of town Hebrews aided the congregation by substantial contributions which were gratefully appreciated, the list of donors being read during the meeting which was held at 4 o'clock Sunday afternoon, the banquet following at 6:00 as M. L. Rosen, chairman of the committee which undertook the task of raising funds to wipe out the indebtedness on the synagogue presided at the banquet, and proposed at this gathering that a sinking fund be established for use in time of need. The sum of \$1,000 is to be placed in this fund each year.

Beth Israel congregation has a membership of 140, and is noted for its many works of charity, having contributed to many worthy causes including contribution of \$1,000 to the Bangor Hebrew School. The present head of the congregation is Cantor Engel, who came to Bangor about a year ago and who has made many friends among all classes.

The board of directors of the Congregation Beth Israel is composed as follows: Simon Kominsky, president; Louis Richardson, vice president; S. Harris, financial secretary; I. Stone, recording secretary; A. J. Berson, treasurer; M. L. Rosen, Abram Brown, James Striar, Max S. Kaminsky, L. Rapaport, B. Kamenkovitz, H. Epstein, Max Ginsberg, Max Epstein, R. M. Cooper, S. E. Rudman, W. Lipsky, J. L. Richardson, L. Rolnick, A. Emple and A. Segal.

problems. Charges and counter charges were the order of the day and it was not long before Rabbi Levine was forced to relinquish his post and return to New York.

Tensions Loom On The Horizon

The years ahead looked promising for peace with the adoption of the Dawes Plan and the Locarno agreement. Throughout the United States Americans were both dismayed and amused by the debate between Bryan and Darrow on whether man had come from a monkey. Jews were coming into Palestine where the Hebrew University was dedicated in 1925. World Court membership was approved by the United States but with reservations unacceptable to the Court. In 1927 Lindbergh made his solo flight across the Atlantic. Non-Zionists and Zionists began discussions for joint participation in the Jewish Agency for Palestine, and in 1929 it became a fact largely through the efforts of Louis Marshall. In 1928 the first talking movie presented Al Jolson in the "Jazz Singer." The Kellogg Pact to outlaw war was signed. These had been the roaring '20s — the years of flaming youth.

The stock market crash came in October 1929. "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," would soon be not just a name of a song but the cry of hungry millions. The same year saw Arab riots in Palestine and Britain further restricting immigration. Japan seized Mukden in 1931 and the fires of World War II were being kindled in the Far East. In Washington, bonus marchers were driven off. Bonuses like "two chickens in the pot" were not the order of the day.

The long lines of unemployed were stretching. More drastic remedies were necessary. Franklin Delano Roosevelt would provide them. 1933 was the year of the Blue Eagle and the end of prohibition. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," President Roosevelt proclaimed. Louis Brann, a Democrat, became governor of Maine.

With the coming of the Depression, bad times seriously affected the congregation. A. B. Friedman, who had been elected president in 1927 in succession to Simon Kominsky, sought to meet the problems that the crisis had wrought. Friedman believed that the problems of the Depression as they began to affect the security of the congregation could only be met by collective action on the part of all three synagogues with respect to maintaining a shohet-mohel. The president urged a union of all congregations toward that end. It was reported at the annual meeting on Nov. 27, 1933, that Beth Israel's financial condition was the worst in 25 years. The membership had fallen, no payment on principal or interest could be met on the indebtedness of the congregation. It was only due to

the rigid austerity program of Mr. Rapaport that Beth Israel weathered the storm.

In 1933, Morris L. Rosen succeeded Louis Rapaport as president. Mr. Rosen strove earnestly to meet the oppressive financial burden and continued the program of his predecessor.

Hitler was now chancellor of Germany. Jewish books were burned in Germany; Jewish shops boycotted. Henrietta Szold started Youth Aliyah to save Jewish children. Jews protested against Hitlerism, but not all Jews. "Power would tame Hitler," they said. Before 1933 ended, the United States and Russia had resumed diplomatic relations on the latter's promise not to propagate Communism here. In 1934 Roosevelt was using the whole alphabet to save the nation, and people began to show their optimism by singing "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?"

1935 saw Mussolini priming for war and Hitler declassing German Jews. In 1936 a World Jewish Congress met in Switzerland to seek ways to save world Jewry. But some still doubted Hitler's intent to annihilate all Jews. The fire was lit in Ethiopia by the Italians and in China by the Japanese. The United States proclaimed neutrality. The AFL and the CIO were at war, but labor profited from the passage of the Wagner and Social Security acts. In 1937, Spain was a battleground for another dictator. The Kremlin purged itself of so-called traitors. Ghetto benches were ordered for Jewish students in Poland. In Palestine, Arab violence broke out again under Nazi influence. And the Haganah trained by Charles Orde Wingate saved the Jewish settlements.

A New Rabbi In Bangor

At its meeting on June 30, 1937, the board received the recommendation to call Rabbi Bernard L. Berzon of New York. The board unanimously adopted the recommendation and proclaimed its determination to go forward under his ministry. President Morris L. Rosen then called upon the members of the board to subscribe to a special fund to help guarantee the functioning of the congregation for two years. Although the clamor for an English speaking rabbi was beginning to break down the resistance of the "old guard," the young yeshiva graduate did not appease the younger element. The change from a Yiddish sermon to the English did not fulfill the growing need for change that the tide of time could not stem. Realizing that the innovations demanded would compromise his philosophy of Judaism, Rabbi Berzon tendered his resignation after a tenure of two years.

Nazi oppression of Jews increased. Our members signed affidavits to help many come here. Jews were

harassed in Poland, Rumania and Hungary. Mussolini declassd Italian Jews. In November 1938 the synagogues in Germany were burned; and as if in defiance Beth Israel marked the 25th anniversary of the present edifice with the dedication of a Sefer Torah donated by Mrs. Max Epstein in memory of her late husband. The local press had this to say about the ceremony:

A Torah, which is the written law of Judaism, was formally accepted and inscribed by Congregation Beth Israel yesterday in a ceremony at once impressive and unusual.

The Torah was presented by Mrs. Max B. Epstein in memory of her late husband. Members of the Epstein family, their relatives and friends, were present in large numbers from many communities; and there was a great outpouring of Bangor Jewry. Presentation of a Torah occurs very seldom in any congregation, and the occasion always is memorable.

Members of Congregation Beth Israel, with others of the faith, first marched from the residence of Rev. Charles N. Goldberg to the synagogue on York Street. This was in the traditional manner, the sacred book being borne beneath a canopy while various members of the congregation took turns carrying it — a high honor. There was singing as the procession moved through the streets. At a point opposite the synagogue, older members of the congregation came forward with copies of the Torah already in existence there — this also being in accordance with ancient rite.

Then the procession entered the synagogue, where there were addresses by Rabbi Adams of New York, Goodman Gaffin and Edward Stern, president of the congregation. Following this, the Rev. Goldberg officiated at the inscribing of the Torah — an impressive ceremony itself.

Each copy of the Torah is written on parchment with a quill pen, this taking from two to three years. The work is by experts — those who spend their lives doing nothing else.

The strong man of the Beth Israel old guard, Morris Rosen, bowed to the demands of the younger members and did not stand for re-election. Goodman Gaffin a newcomer in the ranks of shul politics took the reins of leadership.

A new era in Jewish community life was inaugurated with the opening of the Community Center. By now, Beth Israel had ceased to be the single center of Jewish community life in Bangor. Other congregations had grown up. Organized philanthropic work was now carried on by the federation. Social activities flourished in various lodges, while cultural life was varied and fruitful. So the Beth Israel Synagogue which had once provided the sole institutional stability for Bangor Jewry was joined, though not superseded, by other congregations. As the Jewish community grew in numbers and as its formal structure left primitive stages, many co-workers joined Beth Israel in cultivating the fields of Jewish endeavor.



Mr. and Mrs. Max B. Epstein

Within this period Beth Israel, still a dominant force within the community, also underwent a fundamental change. The first indication was the election of Edward Stern, at the age of 30, as the first American-born president. With a Jewish education which was completely native, the younger generation managed to acquire a working knowledge of the fundamental elements of religious forms, services and rituals, without any real training in Jewish lore or law. Considering how limited their Jewish learning was by the European standards of their fathers and grandfathers, their devotion to Jewish life was all the more remarkable. The older generation with a European background was slowly giving way to the demands of the "young Turks." The congregation was to be led by the first generation of Jews born in a democracy.

Our World In Turmoil

The British White Paper in 1939 dimmed the hopes of Europe's Jews for refuge in Palestine. There was no refuge in most places of our world. Many American Jews were at the Zionist Congress at Geneva when Russia and Germany made their pact. War came on Sept. 1, 1939, before they reached home. Upon their return, they warned of war's threat to America and urged the rescuing of European Jews. Six million would be lost before the war was over. Poland fell quickly, but Jews withstood the terror in the Warsaw Ghetto for four more years. In June 1940, the Germans entered Paris unresisted. In America, we arose at every gathering to sing "The Star Spangled Banner." "God Bless America" was not only a song but a prayer. By the time bombs fell on London in 1941 and our ships were menaced on the seas, we had become the arsenal of democracy. It was suggested by President Roosevelt the "War of Survival" should be the name of the conflict America was fighting against Nazi Germany and Imperialist Japan.

Dedication To The Nation's Cause

The congregational meeting in 1941 was transformed into an occasion for dedication to the tasks called for by the National Emergency. The program had been planned to enlist the efforts of the membership to engage a rabbi for the congregation. It became instead an occasion to urge the purchase of government bonds and participation in those activities that would strengthen the nation at home and the democratic forces abroad. The election of officers was held and Harold R. Epstein was elected to succeed Edward Stern as president.

The year 1941 was significant in the annals of the congregation, and drew from its past the inspiration to minister to a community, which for the second time in a single generation had blundered into the horror of world war. As always had been the case when the safety of the country was at stake, the families of Beth Israel gave generously of their sons and substance to the nation's defense. Nearly 100 men of Beth Israel served in the armed forces of the United States.

Despite the efforts of the advancers, the synagogue fell back in some fields. It was warned by Henry Segal, chairman of the Religious Committee, that "Beth Israel will have to look to its laurels if it would continue to maintain its long prestige of being the leading congregation in Bangor. Names on the membership rolls is not enough. We earnestly hope that it will not lose its title as the leader in northern New England Judaism. It will have to wake up and lead, or it will someday find itself shorn of its glory by the younger congregations. At times there is a bare minyan."

On Feb. 1, 1943, death came to Solomon Harris. The community mourned his loss. At the funeral service it was said of him: "Faith characterized his life, faith in God, faith in man, faith in his co-religionists. Nothing Jewish was alien to his soul."

Through the years Congregation Beth Israel has had the unique distinction of being the training ground for a number of distinguished rabbis who have gone on to fill pulpits in large cities and serve on the faculties of great centers of Jewish learning.

The war had a religious consciousness that manifested itself in a movement for spiritual leadership. Consequently Rabbi Moishe Zucker, a refugee newly arrived in America and rabbi of the Jewish Community Center in Brooklyn, N.Y., accepted an invitation issued by James Striar to serve both Beth Abraham and Beth Israel congregations. The rabbi's oratory

both in Yiddish and English won for him a warm place in the hearts of the congregants. The installation ceremony paid tribute to the scholastic fame achieved by this young rabbi.

Franklin D. Roosevelt died April 12, 1945, having brought the United States within sight of victory in Europe. It was only a month later when that victory was realized and the end of the war in the Pacific followed in a few months. Beth Israel desired to honor this great war president. At first, it was thought that a memorial plaque should be dedicated but it was finally decided to hold a memorial service. The synagogue was filled; Rabbi Zucker delivered the memorial address.

In the United States the years following the war were marked by wrangling of Republicans with Democrats. But far worse were the quarrels between Russia and the Western powers, shaking the foundations of the United Nations. The non-fiction best seller was Joshua Liebman's "Peace of Mind" — but there was no peace. Jews were being freed from the concentration camps and thousands were coming into Palestine despite the White Paper and the British fleet which drove refugees into the sea or dumped them on the island of Cyprus.

On Nov. 29, 1947, the U.N. General Assembly voted 33-13 to partition Palestine, making possible an independent Jewish homeland. Following the passage of the partition plan, Zionists in New York City gathered and were addressed by Chaim Weizmann, while Jews in Tel Aviv danced in the streets. The next day the Arabs showed their dissatisfaction with the U.N. vote and attacked U.S., Soviet and French legations in Damascus.

Talmudical tradition has it that a triviality led to the ultimate destruction of the Second Commonwealth; similarly, it was a minor issue which led to the resignation of Rabbi Zucker and the disruption of the entire edifice so well planned and dreamed of by its architect, Gimpel (James) Striar. The proposal to unite the three congregations originated with Striar, and he interested Harold Epstein, president of Beth Israel, as well as the leaders of the two Sephardic congregations. The argument in favor of fusion maintained that there was neither point nor need for three separate congregations in the Jewish community of Bangor. The protagonists envisaged a large place of worship with one spiritual leader.

Had such a fusion taken place, the rabbi engaged