

Chapter Three

Congregation Etz Chaim

The Struggle Over Acceptable Religious Change, 1919-1929

Congregation Adas Israel, later known as Congregation Etz Chaim, featured two very distinct groups within. However, despite differences in their understanding of what constituted acceptable religious modernization, both groups thought of Etz Chaim as the “*modern shul*.” Etz Chaim first formed when Rabbi Chaim Shohet was fired from Shaarey Tphiloh, the result of a power struggle with the board of directors. Shohet, together with a group of supporters, founded Adas Israel in 1917 and represented those who had previously not supported any religious modernization. A second group that comprised Etz Chaim’s membership were those who had originally joined Temple Israel and supported religious reforms. An uncomfortable liaison between these two groups came together after the dissolution of Temple Israel, as they negotiated conflicting notions of their understanding of justifiable and practical religious change. Tracing the early history of Etz Chaim will show how the two factions interacted and differed in their understanding of acceptable religious modernization. In this institution, the Conservative faction would still be unable to impose its more modern conception of religion upon the community. While members of Etz Chaim did justify some religious change that had never before been acceptable in Portland, they still rejected the Conservative notion of religious modernization.

The roots of Congregation Etz Chaim lie in a small, breakaway faction from Shaarey Tphiloh, and it must be stressed that it was not organized because of any specific ideology, but rather as the result of a power struggle. The group was organized in 1917

and at first was known as Adas Israel.¹ The history of this institution began in 1914 when Reverend Morris Lebovitz was embroiled in a contract dispute with Shaarey Tphiloh.² Lebovitz acted as *mohel* and cantor for Shaarey Tphiloh and as *shochet* for the Va'ad Haschita, the organization overseeing Kashrut in Portland. On October 3, 1915, the board of directors announced that Lebovitz was suing the shul for \$1,000. Then, on October 21, 1915, the board of directors voted to discharge Lebovitz as cantor and mohel for not attending to his duties according to his agreement, and insulting members of this congregation while performing the services on the bimah. The board also accused him of making disturbances in the synagogue, and performing his services in an unfit manner. Lebovitz appealed the board's decision to Rabbi Chaim Nossim Shohet in November.³

The rabbi's relationship with the board appeared strong until that time. In September 1915, the board of directors had asked the rabbi to consult with the shamus before deciding questions of religious law, and he immediately consented. Moreover, on November 9, the rabbi was awarded an extra \$5 per week for the next ten weeks. However, in late December 1915, the board's opinion of Rabbi Shohet changed dramatically. Without an official hearing whereby the board of directors could argue their case, Rabbi Shohet decided that Cantor Lebovitz should not be terminated and should remain at Shaarey Tphiloh. The board was outraged and issued the following ultimatum. "A motion was made and seconded that the rabbi's wages would be stopped immediately and inform him he will no longer be paid." On January 9, 1916 the directors

¹ *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol. 21, (Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee, 1920).

² *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol. 21, (Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee, 1920) indicates that this organization was reorganized in 1917. Due to the presence of breakaway institutions that did not last long, it can be assumed that Adas Israel existed as a small group, and then reorganized itself following this dispute at Shaarey Tphiloh.

³ Shaarey Tphiloh minutes, 10/21/15

reaffirmed their decision by a 7-1 vote and “Passed to notify the rabbi that the shul wouldn’t pay him further wages and wouldn’t recognize him as the rabbi.”

However, both Lebovitz and Shohet continued to attend shul and on July 27, 1916, the issue finally came to a head as the board of directors issued the following statement.

Passed that Cantor Lebovitz should be notified not to come to synagogue and trustees and officers should see to it that he doesn’t come... Passed not to accept Rabbi Shohet as a rabbi in the synagogue and take away all the privileges that belong to a rabbi. It was voted to take away [his] two seats in front of the Aaron Kodesh. It was also decided... to ask that within 30 days the rabbi would stop coming to the synagogue. It was also voted that Jacob Judelsohn shouldn’t come to shul after 30 days.⁴

Rumors abound as to how this action was carried out. Some people say that the rabbi was sitting in his seat when it was ripped out of the floor and thrown outside. Others say that the seats were ripped from the sanctuary and left in the bathroom. The only clue that remains in the director’s minutes is that on November 4, a committee of three was appointed to look into “what happened in the shul”. In any case, the parting of Rabbi Shohet roused the emotions of many members of the community.

Rabbi Shohet did not return to Shaarey Tphiloh and instead aligned with Congregation Adas Israel in 1917. By May 1917, other members of Shaarey Tphiloh had begun to do so as well, as the directors issued a warning to those Jews who chose not to affiliate with Shaarey Tphiloh.

Everyone who is a member of the synagogue may use the services of our cantor, ritual slaughterer, and mohel, and if not he loses any benefits he might have as a synagogue member. Any member who is against the synagogue cannot hold an office in our synagogue. Only when a member has a reasonable excuse, he should report it to the president of the synagogue. Strangers with everyone against the synagogue will be dealt with by the board of directors.

⁴ Shaarey Tphiloh minutes, 7/27/16.

Clearly, a significant number of individuals had decided to leave Shaarey Tphiloh, and it is probable that those individuals were beginning to create Congregation Adas Israel. Shaarey Tphiloh tried to avoid the creation of this breakaway on November 20, 1917 by offering money to Rabbi Shohet in exchange for disaffiliating with Adas Israel. As the minutes indicate, “Special meeting to consider about peace with the rabbi. After long debate, we came to the conclusion to give the rabbi \$12/week, perhaps more, if he’ll give up the Rabbinate and wont help anymore claims to the Portland Rabbinate. This was passed by all.” However, Shohet refused and the minutes were crossed out in the record book with the phrase “The whole thing is cancelled.”⁵

With this final nail in the coffin, the stage was set for Congregation Adas Israel to challenge Shaarey Tphiloh for the allegiance of Portland’s Jews. At some point in 1917, the Adas Israel Congregation was reorganized at 79 Middle Street, the former site of Shaarith Israel.⁶ Adas Israel gained many members from Shaarey Tphiloh who followed Rabbi Shohet. However, on June 12, 1921, Rabbi Chaim Shohet passed away at the age of 69. His son Moshe succeeded him in 1922, and the synagogue renamed itself Etz Chaim, meaning “Tree of Life” in Hebrew, in honor of the late Rabbi Shohet.⁷ Moshe Shohet had served as the Rabbi of Beth Israel Congregation in Bangor since 1913. Beth Israel, Bangor, was organized in 1888, and while the congregation had modernized slightly, it never introduced substantial reforms. By the early 1900s, the synagogue

⁵ Shaarey Tphiloh minutes. 11/ 20/17.

⁶ Adas Israel was officially reorganized in 1917, indicating that this group had existed previously, but could not sustain itself. No further information on this earlier Adas Israel is available.

⁷ Smith Street Cemetery records, Benjamin Band, *Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development*, (Portland: Jewish Historical Society, 1955), 45.

ceremony was described as “impressive and decorous” by a gentile observing the service.⁸

While many of Portland’s Jews followed Rabbi Shohet from Shaarey Tphiloh, coming to the new synagogue with no background of religious modernization, there were also a significant number who migrated from the former Temple Israel. Some of these Conservative Jews began to join Adas Israel immediately following the dissolution of Temple Israel, but others did not join until later. The connection of Temple Israel and Adas Israel began as early as March 1920, only months after Temple Israel closed, when Adas Israel purchased a new building on a parcel of land from 267-271 Congress Street. Slowly, the names of Temple Israel members began to appear as donors to the new building fund. Clearly, these members provided needed funds, as the Adas Israel Synagogue donated only \$200 toward the initial \$15,000 loan. However, Jacob Rosenberg donated \$500 on March 22, the day that the building was turned over to the group for synagogue purposes. On April 14, 1920, David Beckelman donated \$235.90, and on June 21, Mark Levine donated \$10. Dr. J. L. Davis donated \$333.00 on September 20, and Dr. Elias Caplan first donated to Etz Chaim on March 3, 1922, and was chairman of the board by 1926. David Schwartz is listed as having some type of financial connection by January 1924, and Max Pinansky was known to have been a member before 1926. However, Pinansky also became a member of Shaarey Tphiloh in March 1920, and served on their board of directors in 1921.⁹ Thus, of the people known to have been leaders of Temple Israel, all were also affiliated with Adas Israel in the

⁸ Goldstein, Judith, *Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1992), 55.

⁹ Etz Chaim financial records and board of directors minutes; Shaarey Tphiloh minutes 3/14/20, 6/6/21.

1920s. These Conservative Jews likely affiliated with Adas Israel in exchange for the addition of reforms to the synagogue. The Conservative members of Adas Israel were in contact with the United Synagogue of America, as United Synagogue records indicate that during the summer of 1921 the United Synagogue rendered services to a congregation in Portland, Maine.¹⁰

Congregation Etz Chaim, as the institution came to be known in 1922, was known as the “*modern Shul*” and both the group that arrived from Shaarey Tphiloh as well as the former Temple Israel members viewed their synagogue as modern in different ways. Both viewed their shul as modern because it attracted an economically elite class of members. A very large percentage of Portland’s wealthiest Jews, including those who were members of Temple Israel, joined Etz Chaim. These Jews had demonstrated that they were modern in the sense that Bernard Aaronson and Shaarith Israel defined the concept. They were integrated and quite successful members of Portland’s business community. They dressed well and were the wealthiest of Portland’s Jews, as several were lawyers or doctors. Members of Etz Chaim in its early years were also accountants, insurance salesmen, and successful businessmen. They demonstrated their wealth by building a new synagogue and attractively adorning the building. Thus, in much the same way as Temple Israel had functioned as an organization of status, Etz Chaim allowed its members to feel modern by their association with each other.

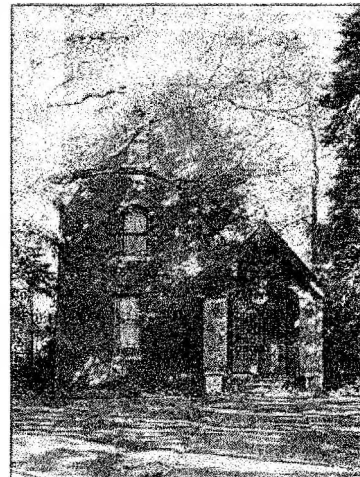


Figure 3-1. Congregation Etz Chaim. Photo from Portland Landmarks.

¹⁰ Abraham Karp, *A History of the United Synagogue of America 1913-1963* (New York: United Synagogue of America, 1964), 42.

However, Portland's Jewish community had long accepted this social and economic modernization. The conflict in Etz Chaim instead stemmed from the difference in the understanding of what constituted justifiable religious change. These differences were so profound that each faction held separate services.¹¹ The Conservative group conducted services that included religious reforms similar to those adopted by other Conservative institutions. However, these changes were considered unacceptable by much of the congregation. The Orthodox group also introduced religious changes, yet because their understanding of acceptable religious reform had changed slightly, these changes were not opposed by the congregation.

The changes approved by both factions within Etz Chaim included the hiring of an English-speaking rabbi to serve alongside their Yiddish-speaking rabbi. In addition, the entire congregation came to expect order and decorum within the sanctuary. Etz Chaim's members, however, viewed both of these changes as practical, and they could justify them within their changing notion of an Orthodox institution. Jacob Judelsohn and his son Harry, for example, worshipped at Etz Chaim, and when Congregation Beth Judah disbanded in the 1920s, most of the members of this traditional shul became members of Etz Chaim. Certainly, Judelsohn's selection of Etz Chaim can be explained by the poor treatment that he received at the hands of the board of directors of Shaarey Tphiloh when Rabbi Shohet was expelled. Nevertheless, Judelsohn, a pious Jew, would never have worshipped in such an institution in 1900. The definition of acceptable religious modernization in Portland was slowly changing.

¹¹ Bertram Silverman, interview by author, Providence, RI., 19 February 2000.

This change was certainly not rapid or drastic. The first change that set Etz Chaim apart from Shaarey Tphiloh was the addition of order and decorum to the service. At Shaarey Tphiloh, quiet was not required throughout the service and children would often be noisily playing within the sanctuary. Etz Chaim members, aware of their status and appearance, sought to introduce a more orderly and thus dignified service that was only practical as it reflected their status without altering the liturgy of the service. Dr. Mordecai M. Kaplan visited Portland on December 10, 1924 and detailed in his diary the difference between the two synagogues:

[Congregation Etz Chaim] has about 180 members which I assume means about 150 families. There are two [other] congregations in Portland... [Etz Chaim] was organized in 1920 by a small group of somewhat Americanized Jews who could no longer endure the old Orthodox synagogue where the services are carried on in the most indecorous fashion, and where Yiddish is the vernacular, and where not even the slightest attention is paid to the young children.¹²

Following his attendance at the installation exercises of a rabbi, Kaplan again wrote about the level of decorum that he observed.

The installation exercises and banquet were carried out with a great deal of more promptitude and decorum than I expected. There was of course a good deal of running around in the [women's] gallery and making of noise outside on the part of children, but the adults listened attentively and seemed to be able to follow the talks in English.¹³

Clearly, Kaplan judged this institution by the presence of decorum, and he also noted that English was used in place of the traditional Yiddish.

The second major change allowed by the traditional faction at Etz Chaim was the hiring of an English-speaking rabbi in 1923. By that year, many of the first generation immigrants had children who grew up speaking English. To many of them, Yiddish was a foreign tongue, and to expect them to attend services conducted in Yiddish was not

¹² Kaplan Journals, Ratner Center, 12/10/24.

¹³ Ibid., 12/14/24.

particularly realistic or practical. Thus, an English-speaking rabbi was hired primarily to officiate in conjunction with the Yiddish-speaking Moshe Shohet at the Orthodox service. Although both the Orthodox and Conservative factions were instrumental in hiring this rabbi, it was clear to the Orthodox group that he was to act primarily as a traditional rabbi.¹⁴ Thus, despite the addition of order and decorum to the service and the hiring of an English-speaking rabbi, Etz Chaim's leadership refused additional change and remained an acceptable religious option for even the most pious Jews in Portland.

The Conservative faction, however, saw the hiring of the English-speaking rabbi as the catalyst for further changes. Dr. Phineas Israeli, a Jewish Theological Seminary graduate, was hired by Etz Chaim in November 1923, and both Israeli and the



Figure 3-2. Student Rabbis at JTS, 1900. Phineas Israeli is seated in the middle row, second from right. Mordecai Kaplan is seated two to the left. Photo from Kaufman, 208.

Conservative members of the congregation hoped to convince the congregation to accept further religious reforms. Rabbi Israeli was born April 24, 1880 in Elizabethgrad, Russia, attended cheder, and then immigrated to Hartford while

he was still young. He married Sophie Kaplan, the sister of boyhood friend Mordecai Kaplan, and had two children, Nathan and Esther. He graduated from City College of

¹⁴ Bertram Silverman, interview by author, Providence, RI., 19 February 2000. In this interview, Mr. Silverman remembered that Jacob Rubinsky, president of Etz Chaim supported “modernization”, but never would have hired a rabbi for the primary purpose of introducing the change associated with Conservative congregations.

New York in 1899 and received his MA from Columbia and his rabbinical degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1902. His graduating class of eight also included Kaplan. He received his DHL from JTS in 1912, and published “The Rabbi and the Jewish Youth” in 1921.

His career as a rabbi began in 1903, where he served as rabbi of Congregation Titereth Israel in Des Moines, Iowa from 1903-1906. He served at Congregation Ohabei Shalom in Williamsport, Pennsylvania from 1906-1908 and then at Congregation Adath Jeshurun in Roxbury, Massachusetts from 1908-1918. He also served at Congregation B’nai Israel in Woonsocket, RI from 1919-1924 and had hoped to be appointed to a post as the rabbi of Providence’s Conservative congregation.¹⁵ Of all of Israeli’s posts, the most is known about his time in Roxbury. His time as rabbi of Adath Jeshurun illustrates Israeli’s goals as a Conservative rabbi and the changes that he would later seek to introduce in Portland. However, Israeli faced similar opposition to his plans in Roxbury as he would later face in Portland.

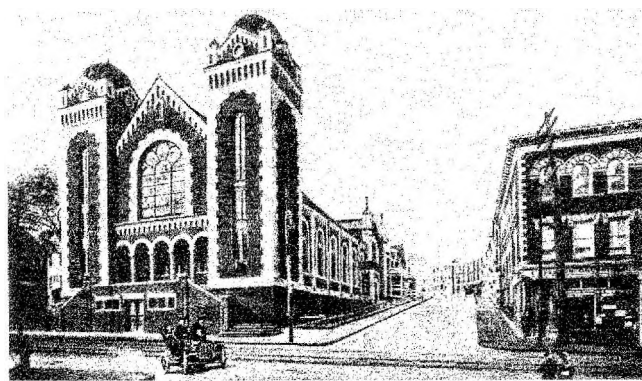


Figure 3-3. Congregation Adath Jeshurun. Photo from Kaufman, 209.

in 1900. Its rabbi prior to Israeli was Moshe Zevulun Margolies, who as Chief Rabbi of Boston served many congregations. Margolies was very traditional, and Israeli was chosen as an American-trained, English-speaking rabbi who might

¹⁵ From Israeli’s rabbinical school alumni files, Rather center; David Kaufman, *Shul With a Pool* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 207-211.

appeal to the younger generation. During Israeli's time in Roxbury, the synagogue deviated only slightly from Orthodox practices by adding a late Friday night service that Israeli called *Junior Congregation*. This innovation by Israeli was the first late Friday night service at an Orthodox institution in America. In that service, "the main auditorium of the synagogue was filled with young and middle aged people, men and women sitting together."¹⁶ Clearly Israeli was a champion of the Conservative cause and was willing to make innovations within the sanctuary and to the service.

However, the new Friday night service stood in sharp contrast to the services throughout the rest of the week. "In the morning the auditorium was half filled with middle aged and old men and a few women of the old fashioned type in the balcony."¹⁷ In fact, according to David Kaufman, a professor of Jewish history at Brandeis University, "Israeli had split his congregation into two separate entities, split between old and young, separate seating and mixed, Sabbath morning and Friday evening services."¹⁸ When Adath Jeshurun hired a traditional rabbi in 1911 to serve alongside Israeli, the traditional rabbi refused to acknowledge Israeli, and was "outspoken in his opposition to modern rabbis."¹⁹ Thus, a great divide was created between the two rabbis and the traditional and modern members of the synagogue. This split in the synagogue is described in a *Jewish Advocate* editorial of November 17, 1911 as "a house divided against itself." According to Kaufman, "Rabbis like Phineas Israeli were caught in the middle, simultaneously expected to preserve the old and foster the new."²⁰ Likewise,

¹⁶ Kaplan journals, 12.29/14 in Kaufmann

¹⁷ 12/29/14 Kaplan journals in Kaufman.

¹⁸ Kaufman, 211.

¹⁹ Jeffrey S. Gurock and Jacob J. Schacter, *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 82.

²⁰ Kaufman, 210.

Rabbi Israeli faced the same obstacles to carrying out his goals when he arrived at Etz Chaim.²¹

Rabbi Israeli came to Etz Chaim with the goal of introducing reforms, and also with the knowledge that many of its leaders were proponents of the Conservative cause. Israeli had spoken in Portland previously and was familiar with the leaders of Temple Israel. In fact, Israeli referred to Etz Chaim as Temple Israel, indicating that many of the leaders of Temple Israel had joined Etz Chaim and were continuing their cause in a new congregation. In a telegram to Dr. Cyrus Adler on September 16, 1923, Israeli wrote, "Prefer not to go south. Temple Israel of Portland, Maine will probably want a rabbi soon. I understand that they mentioned my name favorably there. And I spoke in Portland a few years ago. Believe it would be timely for you to recommend me there now."²² Despite the Orthodox faction's insistence that Israeli was to be hired primarily as an Orthodox rabbi, Israeli was clearly most excited about his role as a leader of Conservative Judaism.

Upon his election to Etz Chaim, Rabbi Israeli introduced late Friday night Conservative services very similar to those he first brought to Roxbury. The Orthodox leaders of Etz Chaim may have allowed Israeli to conduct this service because they did not view it as an official religious service, since they had already welcomed the Sabbath at the "*proper*" time and in the "*proper*" fashion. These late services featured an English sermon as well as discussions, and attracted a wide variety of individuals. Many of those at the late services were members of Shaarey Tphiloh, and the while the services

²¹ This section is taken from Israeli's rabbinical files, Gurock's book on Kaplan, and Kaufmann's, *Shul With a Pool*.

²² Telegram from Israeli to Adler, 9/16/23, From Rabbinical Files at Ratner Center.

attracted individuals of all ages, many were the younger members of the community. Within these services, men and women were permitted to sit together. The Hebrew portion of the service was shortened, and English and responsive readings were added. Essentially, these late Friday services were modeled on the developing Conservative tradition, but this was the only way in which Etz Chaim allowed Israeli to fulfill his Conservative agenda.

Dr. Kaplan visited Portland in December 1924 for Rabbi Israeli's installment ceremonies, and noted that the Conservative faction was present in Etz Chaim but that they had difficulty carrying out their goals because of the traditional faction.

These younger people, however, have not the courage to rely upon their own convictions, nor the desire to attend services frequently. Hence they defer to their fathers who constitute the privileged characters in the synagogue, and who cause no end of trouble with their [illegible] attitude toward any improvement.²³ Rabbi Israeli's wife Sophia also noted the presence of the rival factions at Etz Chaim. In a January 28, 1926 letter to Cyrus Adler, Mrs. Israeli wrote, "In order to keep harmony, the two great extremes of which our congregation exists requires the patience and perseverance of only one like Rabbi Israeli."²⁴ The divisions present in the congregation suggest that Rabbi Israeli could not convince Etz Chaim to adopt the reforms that he had introduced in his late Friday night services.

Dr. Kaplan predicted as early as his 1924 visit to Portland that Rabbi Israeli would not be successful in changing Etz Chaim's understanding of acceptable religious change. The following excerpt from Kaplan's diary is extremely critical of Israeli's ability to unite the two "great extremes" behind Conservative Judaism.

Last Saturday night I left for Portland, Me. to attend the installation exercises of my brother-in-law Phineas Israeli. He was elected to that position about eight

²³ Kaplan Journals, 12/10/24.

²⁴ Israeli Rabbinical files. Ratner Center.

months ago. I do hope that he has at last gotten a position which he will be able to keep. He has by no means been successful in the ministry. I attribute his lack of success to his intellectual shortcomings. In a reform pulpit in a small town he would probably have been able to hold his own, but he is no match for the hard headed and hard hearted Jews who constitute the...Orthodox congregations toward which he has always gravitated. It is true that he is entirely devoid of personal aggressiveness. But that lack being another aspect of his intellectual under-development calls forth contempts on the part of those who want a leader to be their superior in intellect and personality. Though he is my brother-in-law, I must admit that men of his type can not possibly do more than maintain the status quo of some struggling Jewish community. But as to creating new Jewish values, developing new Jewish ideas, he is no more fitted than the overwhelming majority of the men graduated from the Seminary. He belongs merely to the class of rabbinical breadwinners.²⁵

Dr. Kaplan believed that it would take a leader stronger than Rabbi Israeli to convince Etz Chaim to adopt the beliefs and practices of a Conservative institution. In fact, he believed in general that Jewish leadership in New England was much weaker than elsewhere. According to his analysis, the state of affairs, whereby the older generation prevents change by the younger generation,

exists in many New England cities, where Jewish life is in a worse state of maladjustment to the American environment than anywhere else in this country. I once asked someone to explain how it is that New England Jewry is the most hopelessly backward of any Jewry in America, and he answered me by saying that New England was the place where the least capable of our people remained. Any of our people who possessed ability and initiative would always go west where the opportunities for making money has always been greater. I believe there is a great deal of truth in this explanation.²⁶

As Dr. Kaplan predicted, reluctance toward religious change shaped Portland's response to Rabbi Israeli, and he soon realized that he could not accomplish his goals.

On December 30, 1925, only one year after he was hired at Etz Chaim, Rabbi Israeli was already looking for another congregation. He argued that he was not making enough money to pay for his children's education, but less than one month later, Israeli's wife wrote the letter to Dr. Adler in which she referred to the "two extremes of which our

²⁵ Kaplan Journals. 12/10/24.

²⁶ Ibid.

congregation exists.” Adler responded promptly on February 9, 1926 in a letter to Mrs. Israeli, offering to look for a better opportunity for “a pulpit which might offer a larger scope for Rabbi Israeli’s ability and better opportunities for you and your children.”²⁷

There are also other indications that Israeli was not able to achieve his goal of introducing further Conservative religious practices. On January 11, 1926, Max Pinansky, one of the most prominent proponents of the Conservative cause, reduced his membership from Class A to Class C. It is not known what this reduction entailed, but it likely also involved a reduction in dues. Nonetheless, Israeli addressed the board on May 20, 1926, “Appealing them to join the United Synagogue of America and extolling the work of their organization and it was voted that every member should be asked to pay 25 cents before the High Holidays and this sum collected be sent to the organization as dues.”²⁸ While it would seem that sending dues to the United Synagogue would indicate a Conservative bent on the part of the congregation, this was not in fact the case. Indeed, no dues were ever sent, and Israeli stepped up his efforts to gain a new pulpit. On December 1, 1927, he wrote to Adler, “I cannot endanger my health or peace of mind or the welfare of my family anymore by going to these little places, where the modern rabbi is looked upon as an agent of [illegible].”²⁹ Clearly, Israeli was not able to convince Etz Chaim to adopt the religious changes of Conservative Judaism.

Portland’s continued rejection of such religious modernization is also demonstrated by a strengthening of the union among the synagogues. While Israeli was scurrying to find new work, Portland’s rabbinical situation had come under scrutiny from

²⁷ Israeli Rabbinical Files, dates given.

²⁸ Etz Chaim board meeting minutes, 5/20/26.

²⁹ Kaplan journals, 12/1/27.

the entire community. Beginning in 1925, committees representing both Shaarey Tphiloh and Etz Chaim met to try to more effectively organize the operations of the two synagogues. At this point, Etz Chaim paid two rabbis, and Shaarey Tphiloh paid one. Each congregation also had its own shochet and slaughterhouse. This duplication in services was not economically feasible, and the community began to look into ways to consolidate its operating costs. In early 1926, Shaarey Tphiloh's Rabbi David Essrig decided to leave his post for a job in California, intensifying talks that the two shuls should share a rabbi.³⁰

Despite Israeli's feeling that he had failed in his attempt to win Etz Chaim's support for the Conservative movement, he was still well liked by the board of directors. This is clearly evident in a plan that was proposed by the Etz Chaim board on April 11, 1926, only a month before Essrig left Shaarey Tphiloh. Under the plan, the two synagogues would share a united group to oversee kosher slaughter, while each synagogue would hire their own person to act as chazan and shochet. What was most interesting was that Etz Chaim "shall maintain and pay Rabbi Israeli and that one Orthodox Rabbi for the entire city be elected by both synagogues..." The Orthodox rabbi would visit Etz Chaim on specific intervals, and this plan would be "subject to satisfactory agreement being made with Rabbi Shohet."³¹ While Etz Chaim had largely rejected Conservative Judaism, they still supported Rabbi Israeli and the minor religious reforms he had brought to their congregation, and had hoped to keep him despite the merger between congregations.

³⁰ Band, 47-48; Etz Chaim minutes, 29 September 1927. In these minutes, Chairman Jacob Rubinsky reported on the "bad state of the Shul" while discussing the hiring of rabbis and retention of current rabbis.

³¹ 4/11/26 Etz Chaim directors meeting.

However, the plan to retain Rabbi Israeli at Etz Chaim fell through as the physical and mental health of Rabbi Israeli deteriorated. In a letter from his brother Samuel, we learn that Rabbi Israel “had a physical and nervous breakdown. It occurred last November [1926], and has not improved. His wife said it was necessary to send him to an institution.”³² The cause of the breakdown is not known, but Israeli did link his job to his health and peace of mind in the December 1927 letter in which he emphatically asked for a transfer. Dr. Kaplan visited Rabbi Israeli and offered this assessment of the rabbi’s health:

...I went to see poor Phineas at the New England Sanitarium at Melrose near Boston. The condition I found him in is too sad for words. He is afflicted with melancholia; he is obsessed by a sense of sin and black despair. He talks or rather mumbles constantly of his having lost his will power of having ruined everybody, etc. Nothing that I say to divert his mind from the obsession had the least effect. Sophie is distracted in her grief and helplessness. [I Wish] to [G-d] I knew what to do to be great help to her and to Phineas in this their hour of trial.³³

It is not known if this breakdown was related to Israeli’s perceived failure in his job, but he was no longer capable of acting as Rabbi of Etz Chaim.

Without Israeli, the two synagogues continued their plan for consolidation. The modern faction hoped for a new modern rabbi, arguing that “certain members appealed that... we should not break up the work that was done until now...”³⁴ However, the modern faction was not recognized in the settlement, and in 1929, this consolidation was completed as the Vaad Hoir, the forerunner to the Jewish Federation, was created. Unlike the Federation, which was a secular organization, the Vaad Hoir, or Jewish Community Council, was designed to oversee the religious activities of the Portland Jewish community. Shaarey Tphiloh allowed Rabbi Joshua Meriminsky, who had been

³² Rabbinical files, letter from Samuel Israeli March 11, 1927, Ratner Center.

³³ Kaplan Journals, page 184.

³⁴ Etz Chaim minutes, 29 September 1927.

retained to replace Essrig, to seek employment elsewhere. Similarly, Etz Chaim terminated their employment of Moshe Shohet and their shochet Rev. Meyer J. Levinson. The agreement, now between Shaarey Tphiloh, Etz Chaim, and Anshe Sfaard, placed the supervision of kosher meat under one central organization. In addition, one community rabbi was hired, and Shaarey Tphiloh's shochet, Rev. Harry Simansky, was hired as community shochet. The Vaad Hoir also subsidized one community Hebrew School.³⁵

While this consolidation represented a major accomplishment for rival Orthodox factions in their efforts to unify and strengthen themselves, it dealt a major blow to the hopes of the Conservative faction of Etz Chaim. No longer did they have the support of a Conservative rabbi to champion their cause. In fact, the overseeing body of religious affairs in Portland had a decidedly Orthodox bent, and was not sympathetic to the Conservative cause. Therefore, ten years after Temple Israel had failed under Conservative leadership, the Conservative faction at Etz Chaim also failed to popularize Conservative Judaism in Portland and to create an institution representing their cause.

Why did Conservative Judaism fail to win over the support of the Portland Jewish Community? Jews at Etz Chaim identified themselves as modern, but their understanding of what that term entailed still did not include the religious changes supported by the United Synagogue. What were the reasons for this? First, Portland's Jews were still loyal to previous understandings of Jewish religious and social life, as defined by Bernard Aaronson and Congregation Shaarith Israel. Under this definition, Portland's Jewish institutions refused to alter the religious service in their quest to become modern Americans. Instead, they strove for social and economic integration, and the byproduct of this integration was beginning to show in the 1920s. Daniel Epstein, a

³⁵ Band, 48.

Portland resident and member of Etz Chaim agreed that religious change was not welcomed. “The feeling among the populace who was not strictly Orthodox was that they welcomed part of the service in English. But they wouldn’t stray from an Orthodox liturgy or an Orthodox form.”³⁶ Etz Chaim adopted this understanding of acceptable religious change, and refused to alter the synagogue any more than necessitated by changing circumstances.

The description of Etz Chaim’s modest transformations suggests that notions of Orthodoxy and of acceptable religious practice were somewhat fluid. At the turn of the century, an Orthodox rabbi would likely never have defended the changes that Etz Chaim made. However, changing circumstances over the first quarter of the twentieth century allowed Etz Chaim to make changes that were considered still to be in line with religious Orthodoxy. The addition of order and decorum to the service only changed the atmosphere in which Jews worshipped. The liturgy itself remained unchanged, and the atmosphere created was more reflective of the members’ status as modern Americans.

Along the same lines, English would never have been allowed or desired as the vernacular in a 1900 Orthodox synagogue in Portland. However, because many members of the younger generation of Jews did not understand Yiddish, it became necessary for Etz Chaim to hire an English-speaking rabbi. The addition of English to the service could therefore be argued as an extension of Aaronson’s definition of acceptable modernization. As Orthodox Jews integrated into Portland, they lost their unique language in favor of English, but remained traditional in their religious practices. Therefore, Hebrew remained the language of prayer, yet it was practical to change the

³⁶ Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Daniel Epstein, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September 1977.

vernacular from Yiddish to English. These changes were brought about by changes within the community itself, and were not imposed by outsiders. Thus, the changes were acceptable within their parameters of Orthodoxy, and the late Friday night services could also be justified by Orthodox leaders under halachic law. Orthodox services legitimately welcomed the Sabbath at the proper time and in the proper fashion, rendering these late services little more than social gatherings. In addition, worshippers could justify these services because they took place in their own Orthodox institutions. Regardless, more extreme Conservative religious practices were a violation of Portland's understanding of contemporary Judaism and were not welcomed.

Why, then, did the modern faction win the tug-of-war with the traditionalists in other places yet not in Portland? Roxbury, for example, also had a traditional faction that staunchly opposed the changes made by Rabbi Israeli, but these traditionalists generally lost out to the modern factions, thus bolstering the rise of Conservative Judaism. Why did this not occur in Portland? Again, these ideas that were not developed within the community had difficulty gaining legitimacy in Portland because of its size and cohesiveness, and this kept the modern voice relatively quiet. In addition, one could argue that elsewhere, Reform temples had already set a precedent for religious change, creating greater support among local populations for more modest change. Orthodoxy was all that Portland Jewry knew. Whereas some Jews in other places held a view of Orthodoxy that did not allow for significant religious change, nearly *all* Jews in Portland had accepted that Jewish tradition could not be compromised. They put these beliefs into practice in the institutions that they created. Thus, this belief still dominated and controlled Portland's religious landscape when Etz Chaim was formed.

Regardless of the ideology or practices of Conservative Judaism, unnecessarily reforming the service was still a notion foreign to Portland Jewry. In much the same way as East European immigrants shunned Reform Judaism, Portland Jews shunned Conservative Judaism. Both were seen as egregious breaks with tradition and halachic law. However, there was a small faction that remained loyal to Conservative Judaism, and there was also a larger group of individuals who were introduced to the Conservative service by Rabbi Israeli's late Friday services. While many people were willing to attend these services, most were unwilling to support an institution that championed greater changes. In Portland, the modern faction still had no legitimacy unless it was supported by an Orthodox institution and Orthodox law, and for this reason, the Conservative faction could not create an institution of its own in Portland.

Institutional competition serves as another explanation as to why Portland was so slow to accept the conservative movement. In Portland, there were still no Reform temples to provide an example of extreme religious modernization. There were no other institutions in which men and women could sit together, or where organ music and congregational singing were allowed. Therefore, those Jews who wanted to modernize the service had no choice but to attend the late Friday night services at Etz Chaim. Etz Chaim could set the rules about what was acceptable and what was not because it was the only organization offering these services. Therefore, its more traditional members could easily limit the Conservative service to Friday nights, hence limiting the options available to those hoping to modernize the religious service.

One final reason that Portland Jews refused to embrace Conservative Judaism is that they had no desire to offend their parents. The reality of religious life in Portland

and elsewhere was that many Jews were unaffiliated with synagogues. However, while many of these Jews, as well as many Jews affiliated with Orthodox institutions, may have had practices in closer alignment to Conservative Judaism than Orthodoxy, they did not support this movement out of respect for their parents. Kaplan touches on this phenomenon when he describes the synagogue as being led by the elders of the congregation because “The younger people, however, have not the courage to rely upon their convictions... Hence they defer to their fathers...”³⁷ Oral history testimonies also echo this same notion. Morris Cox, a Portland resident, argued that people retained Orthodoxy “because they want to keep some of the tradition- their fathers founded Shaarey Tphiloh.”³⁸ Because their parents had developed an understanding of acceptable and unacceptable modernization, their children felt compelled to uphold their parents’ notions and the traditions with which they were familiar. Conservative Judaism was a radical departure from these norms, and violating these community norms would have pitted child against parent in a relatively small Jewish community.

Therefore, the core of wealthy individuals who had first introduced Portland to Conservative Judaism had still not succeeded in creating a successful institution that supported their ideals. For myriad reasons, Portland by 1929 still had not departed from its notion of Orthodoxy, and Conservative Jews remained without an institution that was recognized as legitimate by the members of the community. While the rest of America’s Jews were beginning to adopt Conservative Judaism in greater numbers, Portland’s

³⁷ Kaplan journals, 12/10/24.

³⁸ Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Morris Cox, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September 1977.

community refused to sanction any profound changes. Here, tradition remained firmly rooted in the community's Jewish institutions, and major change was kept at bay.