

CHAPTER XIV

RELIGIOUS LIFE SINCE 1942

In January 1942 Rabbi Mendel Lewittes accepted a post in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and the Vaad Hoir began to seek a new rabbi. This ordinary, routine affair of any Jewish community served as a ground for protest by a segment of Portland Jewry. True, it was a veiled protest, nonetheless a significant one, in the light of future developments.

The first articulate expression of discontent with the existing state of affairs in religious life was an editorial appearing in the *Center Bulletin* of February 27, 1942. It purported to represent the views of the "younger groups", and as such attempted to explain the indifference of a large segment of the community to the selection of a new rabbi. Since the critique offered in the editorial is significant as a "sign of the times," the entire text is reproduced below:

The Jewish Community of Portland is in the process of selecting a new Rabbi. Despite the fact that this selection is of importance to all sections of the Jewish population, the attendance at the lectures given by candidates for the position consisted solely of older members of the Community.

It is not enough to view with alarm this lack of interest in the choice of a spiritual leader. There is no doubt that religion is more a part of life of the older folks than it is of the others. But there is more to it than that. Part of the blame for this disinterestedness must be laid to the feeling among the younger groups that the final choice of the Rabbi will be made in any case by the elders and that the Rabbi will be chosen without an adequate consideration or even appreciation of the needs of the younger members of the Community. More is needed in a Rabbi, they feel, than the ability to bring tears to the eyes with impassioned oratory. There may or there may not be any basis for this feeling but the mere fact that it exists indicates that care must be taken to ensure that the Rabbi chosen is qualified to

serve the needs of all age groups. And if the needs of any groups have to be sacrificed, let it not be the youngest, for once the Jewish Community has let the new members slip away, it will be found extremely difficult to effect the revitalization of spiritual feeling. Therefore the ability to attract the interest of high school students and to inspire in them a sympathetic feeling toward the spiritual things in Jewish life is most important.

It is also necessary to have a Rabbi qualified by temperament to deal with the college trained. More is needed than continual attacks upon college students and their secular education. The Jewish youth of Portland will continue to go away to school and unless the Rabbi chosen is of the type to be able to give sympathetic and realistic understanding to their religious and spiritual problems and ideas, this important element of the Community may be further driven away from close association with the Jewish Community.

It is true, then, that the younger elements have little interest in the choice of a new Rabbi. Much can be done to re-fire this interest if they can be made to feel that the Rabbi is to be chosen with a view to his being their leader as well as the religious leader of the older folks. Only then will the choice of a Rabbi be of any concern to them.

Whether the "elders" gave serious consideration to this critique cannot be determined. At any rate, Rabbi Aaron Greenbaum was selected to succeed Rabbi Lewittes and he arrived in Portland in August 1942. Mrs. Greenbaum was the daughter of the celebrated Rabbi Menachem M. Kasher, author of the encyclopedic *Torah Shlemah*, a compendium of biblical commentaries. Like his predecessor, Rabbi Greenbaum had the responsibility of serving the three Orthodox congregations at a time when a schism among Portland Jewry was gathering momentum. On the one hand, at least half of the Jewish population was residing in the Woodfords section, removed from the former Jewish center. On the other, interest in Orthodoxy was waning among an increasing number of Jews.

The shift of population to Woodfords resulted in a gradual decline in Hebrew school enrollment. Many families, now living in suburbia, refused to allow their children to travel the distance to the Portland Hebrew School. Sensing the critical situation, the Hebrew school opened a makeshift branch at 412 Deering Avenue in 1941. During the next year classes for Woodfords children were

held in the home of Leo Golodetz, conducted by Hyman Norkin of the Hebrew school staff. Sometimes Lipa Bendow, principal of the Hebrew school, engaged in the Woodfords endeavor, often going to several homes throughout the week. Unfortunately, this effort produced no lasting results. In 1941, the total enrollment of the Hebrew school was only one hundred.

Throughout the 1940's, Portland Jewry attempted to come to grips with the new situation in their religious and educational life, occasioned by the dispersal of population.¹

In an article appearing in the *Center Bulletin*, on October 13, 1944, Rabbi Aaron Greenbaum summed up the situation in the field of Jewish education as follows:

For the last few years, the state of the Hebrew School has been a source of great irritation and concern. We have been struggling with many difficulties of an inner and outer character. Criticism is rampant. Complaint is on every lip. To date it served, in not a few instances, as a palliative soothing the conscience of parents who did not send their children to school for many other reasons. It also resulted in the deplorable decline of the position of our school in the community.

What some of the complaints were, may be inferred from the new steps contemplated by the Hebrew school, according to Rabbi Greenbaum. These included, renovation of the school building, plans for a Woodfords branch of the school, and acquisition of a bus to facilitate transportation of children from outlying areas. Furthermore, he pointed out, a commission of educational experts would be brought to Portland to analyze the school's program and make further recommendations for improvement.

In November, 1944, Dr. Jacob I. Hartstein, Professor of Education at Yeshiva College in New York City, conducted a survey. In his report, published in the *Center Bulletin*, April 6, 1945, Dr. Hartstein dealt at length with the suggestion of a Woodfords branch, as follows:

The surveyor feels that the desire for a school in Woodfords to a large degree expresses all-round dissatisfaction with the present school to the point of not even dreaming that a school associated with the old district and the present conditions can possibly be made to embody the best in religious education, which the parents of Woodfords are so solicitous

of. There are many disadvantages to subdividing a small school. . . Should the findings of the surveyor's studies indicate the advisability of one, rather than two schools, it would become necessary to consider its location and possibility of the school's providing transportation.

Any Central School, or for that matter even a new sectional school, should be housed in an appropriate school building and properly furnished, and having all the modern appurtenances.

Although the surveyor's report did not encourage establishment of a Woodfords branch, it did underscore the need for a centrally located school building. On the one hand, the surveyor emphasized principally improvement of curriculum and teaching personnel as a solution. At the same time, he implied the need for a building that would be more conveniently located. But the Portland Hebrew School continued to carry on its work on Pearl Street and apparently tabled any plans for a new school in Woodfords.

From the time of his arrival, Rabbi Greenbaum worked vigorously to preserve the strength of Orthodoxy through varied educational activities, some of which are referred to in the following chapter. Nonetheless, the tide against Orthodoxy gained momentum. Finally, in 1947, when Rabbi Greenbaum left Portland, the new force reached a stage of maturity and emerged as a new congregation affiliated with the Conservative movement.

Late in 1947, Rabbi Morris Bekritsky was brought to Portland to serve the Orthodox community. Almost immediately he urged Congregations Etz Chaim and Shaarey Tphiloh to erect an Orthodox synagogue in Woodfords to prevent the inevitable loss of its members to the new, conveniently located Conservative congregation. This project, however, was not seriously considered then, and as a result the Jews in the Woodfords section became increasingly identified with the new Conservative movement.

On July 30, 1947, a mass meeting was held in the Jewish Community Center to consider the feasibility of organizing a Conservative congregation. A week earlier a letter signed by "Committee", had been sent to all Jewish families, announcing the purpose of the gathering and inviting all sympathetic persons. About one hundred men and women attended the meeting and Louis Bernstein acted as chairman. Although there was a favorable response to the idea of a new congregation, not many were willing to assume leadership of the movement.

During the following month, Rabbi Morris Dembowitz, repre-

sending the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, addressed another mass meeting at the Center and outlined the program of the Conservative movement. There was no agreement among the audience on all matters, but a decision was made to proceed with the organization of a Conservative congregation and to hold High Holiday services at Frye Hall. The new group assumed the name Temple Beth El and the following officers were elected: Benjamin Lazarus, president; Harold K. Halpert, vice-president; Irving Stein, treasurer; and Arnold Potter, secretary.²

The Temple Beth El Sisterhood was organized on November 22, 1947 with Mrs. Carl Zolov, chairman of the Steering Committee. Mrs. Lewis Bernstein was elected first president in June, 1948. Serving with her were Mrs. Myer Sacknoff, 1st vice-president; Mrs. Benjamin Finn, 2nd vice-president; Mrs. Philip Bornstein, treasurer; Mrs. Maurice B. Kane, recording secretary; and Mrs. Newell Potter, corresponding secretary.³

At the first High Holiday services, with no segregation of men and women, Rabbi Ephraim I. Bennett officiated as guest rabbi. Shortly thereafter, Temple Beth El rented space at 509 Forest Avenue and held regular Friday evening services, with Alfred Goldman as cantor. Visiting rabbis were sent by the Jewish Theological Seminary until Rabbi Bennett was elected as permanent rabbi. He settled in Portland in August 1948. For the next two years, Temple Beth El was at 520 Forest Avenue, in a building which was granted rent-free by Lewis Bernstein. Meanwhile plans for a permanent temple building were formulated and at a banquet on October 6, 1948, \$100,000 was pledged. The ultimate cost of the structure was close to \$250,000.

Ground breaking ceremonies for Temple Beth El were held on Sunday, September 11, 1949, and in the fall of 1950, the temple although not yet completed, was opened for the High Holiday Services. It consisted of a synagogue, a social hall, a small chapel and four classrooms in the Hebrew school wing. The Hebrew school had been organized in April 1949, when the board of directors of Temple Beth El voted to establish a three-day-a-week congregational school. Dr. Benjamin Zolov was the first school committee chairman.³ Sixty children, more than half of them girls, were enrolled for the fall term of 1949. Ernest Braun was engaged as a teacher under the supervision of Rabbi Bennett. In 1950 the enrollment was doubled and Joel Corn was added to the faculty. By the fall of 1953 the Hebrew school had two hundred and five students in five grades and two high school classes. Rabbi Bennett left Portland in March 1953 and was succeeded by Rabbi

Mordecai S. Chertoff.

These rapid forward strides of Temple Beth El challenged the Orthodox movement and Beth El emerged as the second largest congregation. In 1954 it had a membership of about three hundred and twenty-five families, compared with Shaarey Tphiloh's membership of three hundred and fifty. However, many of Shaarey Tphiloh's members also were members of Temple Beth El. Nearly one third of the pupils in Temple Beth El Hebrew School came from families otherwise not affiliated with the Temple. In many cases enrollment of children in Temple Beth El Hebrew School led to the eventual affiliation of their parents with the congregation.

To conserve the strength of the Orthodox community, Rabbi Bekritsky urged formation of an Orthodox Kehillah in 1952. As envisaged in this plan, the three Orthodox synagogues, the Portland Hebrew School and the Vaad Hoir would pool their resources. As a unified, organic community, the Orthodox Kehillah could then undertake new projects efficiently. One proposed project was establishment of an Orthodox synagogue in Woodfords and another was creation of a new Orthodox Hebrew school there. The plan for the Kehillah was still-born, however, for the synagogues did not relish the idea of surrendering their independence.

For Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh this period marked the completion of its first fifty years of existence. In June, 1954 a three-day Golden Jubilee celebration was held under the chairmanship of Arthur M. Waterman. Prominent state and city officials, including Governor Burton M. Cross, participated in the program. A concert presented by the world-renowned Cantor Moshe Kussevitsky and attended by more than one thousand persons, climaxed the Jubilee.⁴

As a separate undertaking for the revival of Orthodoxy, Portland Hebrew School made plans early in 1953 to move to the Woodfords section. Since the rise of Temple Beth El Hebrew School, the enrollment in Portland Hebrew School had steadily diminished. In 1954 less than fifty children were attending the school. In order to counteract this progressive decline, directors of the Portland Hebrew School voted to erect a modern school and synagogue on Noyes Street in the heart of Woodfords and to dispose of the old building. In the spring of 1954, a campaign for \$189,000 was initiated under the general chairmanship of Bertram H. Silverman and honorary chairmanship of William Goodman and Abraham S. Levey. Ground breaking ceremonies took place on December 19, 1954 with addresses by Portland City

Council chairman, Ben Wilson, and Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Harrison Lyseth. The building is scheduled to be ready for occupancy in the fall of 1955, thus opening a new chapter in the expansion of Judaism in Greater Portland. Establishment of a Portland Hebrew Day School has also enhanced prospects of an Orthodox revival and will be considered briefly in the following chapter. It is too soon to assess accurately the impact that the new Portland Hebrew School will have on the community. It does appear evident, however, that the old Jewish community, geographically speaking, will be but a relic within another decade or two. With the increasing movement of Jews to new sections of the city, signs are already evident that the old synagogues will soon want for regular worshippers.

The future, as we view it now, lies in Woodfords and it is likely that Portland Jewry, both Orthodox and Conservative, will be strongly organized there within a few years. We are now on the threshold of a new era for Portland Jewry.

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER XIV

¹The dispersal of population was only one cause of the defection. Another was the inability of a section of Portland Jewry to acclimate itself to the Orthodox pattern, due to lack of Hebraic education or lack of interest in traditional Judaism. Until the early 1940's, for example, Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh did not look with favor upon the use of English-Hebrew prayer books. Only through the stubborn insistence of I. Edward Cohen, President of the Congregation in the mid-forties, were bi-lingual *Machzorim* purchased. But this concession did not obviate the impatience of many Jews with long services or their lack of identification with many synagogue practices.

²Succeeding presidents of Temple Beth El were James Stein, Edward J. Berman and Edward D. Sacknoff.

The original directors and associate directors of Temple Beth El were Edward J. Berman, Lewis Bernstein, Louis Bernstein, Dr. David Berlowitz, Dr. B. James Cohen, David Ebenstein, Mrs. Julius Elowitch, Mrs. Michael Field, Benjamin E. Finn, Mrs. Norman I. Godfrey, Mrs. David J. Lavin, Benjamin Lewis, Mrs. Maurice H. Packet, Jacob H. Potter, Myer H. Sacknoff, Irving E. Small, James Stein, Sidney W. Wernick, Lester M. Willis, Dr. Benjamin Zolov, Carl P. Zolov.

³Lewis H. Kriger and Gerald Slosberg succeeded him as chairmen of the school committee.

⁴Daily chairmen and programs were as follows: Jacob Citrin, Reconsecration Sabbath, June 12; Harry Weisberg, Dedication Day, June 13; I. Edward Cohen, Open House, June 14.

CHAPTER XV

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WELFARE

During World War II, destruction of Jewish communities and cultural strongpoints in Europe produced a reflex action in America, leading to a renewed interest in Jewish history and cultural values. It is one of the ironies of contemporary history that Nazism served as a rejuvenator of Judaism wherever it did not act as its grave-digger. Thus we note, as a result of the deepening European Jewish crisis during the war, a remarkable awakening among American Jews to long-neglected values of their heritage.

In Portland, during the early 1940's, grave was concern expressed over the lagging interest in the Jewish education of children and the lamentable fact that a large section of the young population was receiving no Jewish instruction at all. This was attributed not only to the dispersal of population into sections somewhat removed from the Portland Hebrew School but principally to lack of parental interest.

We have noted that efforts were made by the Portland Hebrew School in the early 1940's to establish a Woodfords branch. With the emergence of Temple Beth El Hebrew School in 1949, the geographical hurdle was overcome and the rapid increase in the student population of the Temple school may be partly attributed to its favorable location.

But education for children was only part of the problem; the increasing need for an organized community program of adult studies made itself felt. To this end, Rabbi Aaron Greenbaum urged formation of a Portland Council of Jewish Education, which came into existence in November 1943. With Dr. Benjamin Zolov as president, the Council prepared a comprehensive program of adult Jewish studies. The Vaad Hoir displayed immediate interest and granted funds to maintain its activities. Among the first projects of the Council were classes in Bible, the history of Zionism, Jewish law, Hebrew language and a Hebrew speaking circle. The last group met twice a week for the study of *Tehillim*, the Book of Psalms. The Council's program continued for three years until it was absorbed by the Jewish Community Center.

In November 1946, the Jewish Community Center sponsored