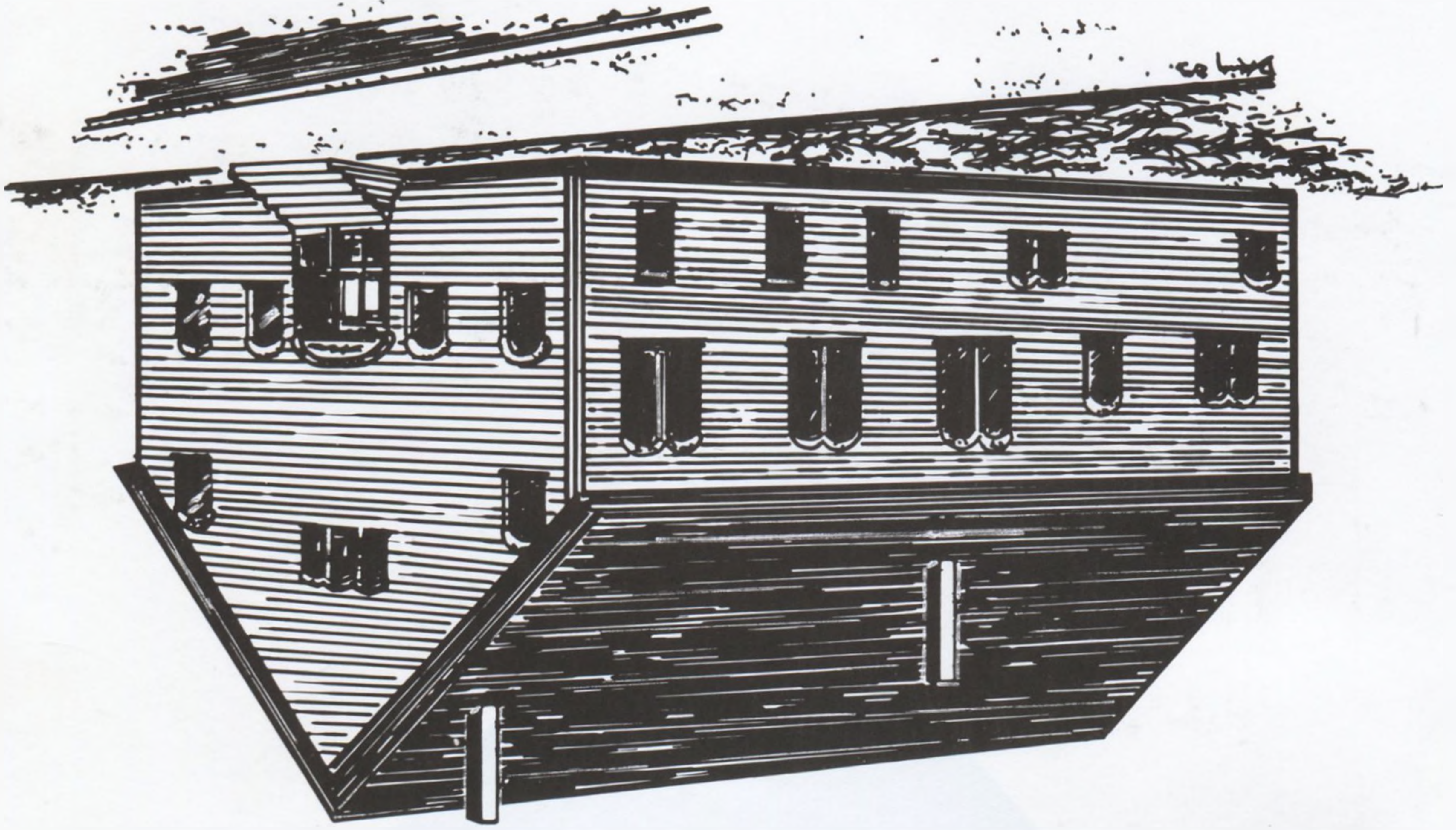


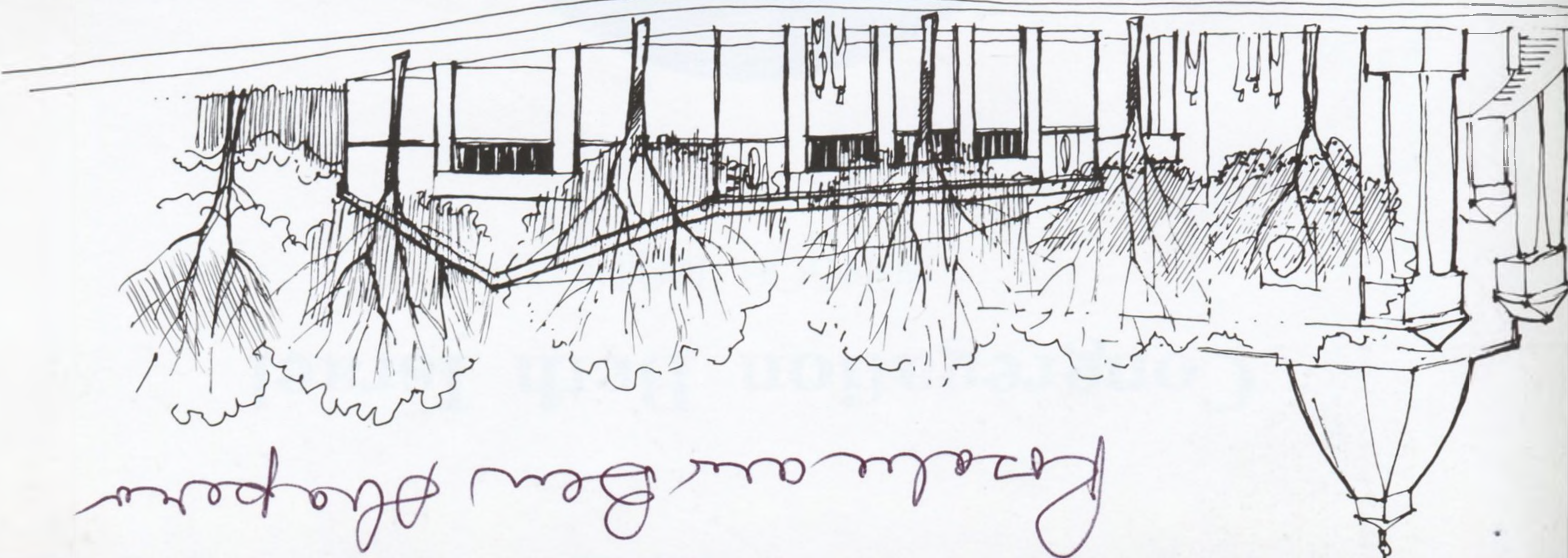


**CONGREGATION
BETH ISRAEL'S
CENTENNIAL HISTORY**





Over the years, the members of Congregation Beth Israel have placed great importance on having a place in which to pray. Our first shul on Center Street (bottom drawing) was dedicated in 1897 and was destroyed in the 1911 fire. Our current synagogue on York Street (at left) was dedicated in 1913 and has undergone many renovations over the past 75 years. Construction of a 4,000-square-foot addition (top drawing), a gift of Sidney and Helen Epstein of Bangor, is expected to begin in 1989.



Prayer in Ben Shapiro

Congregation Beth Israel

BANGOR, MAINE

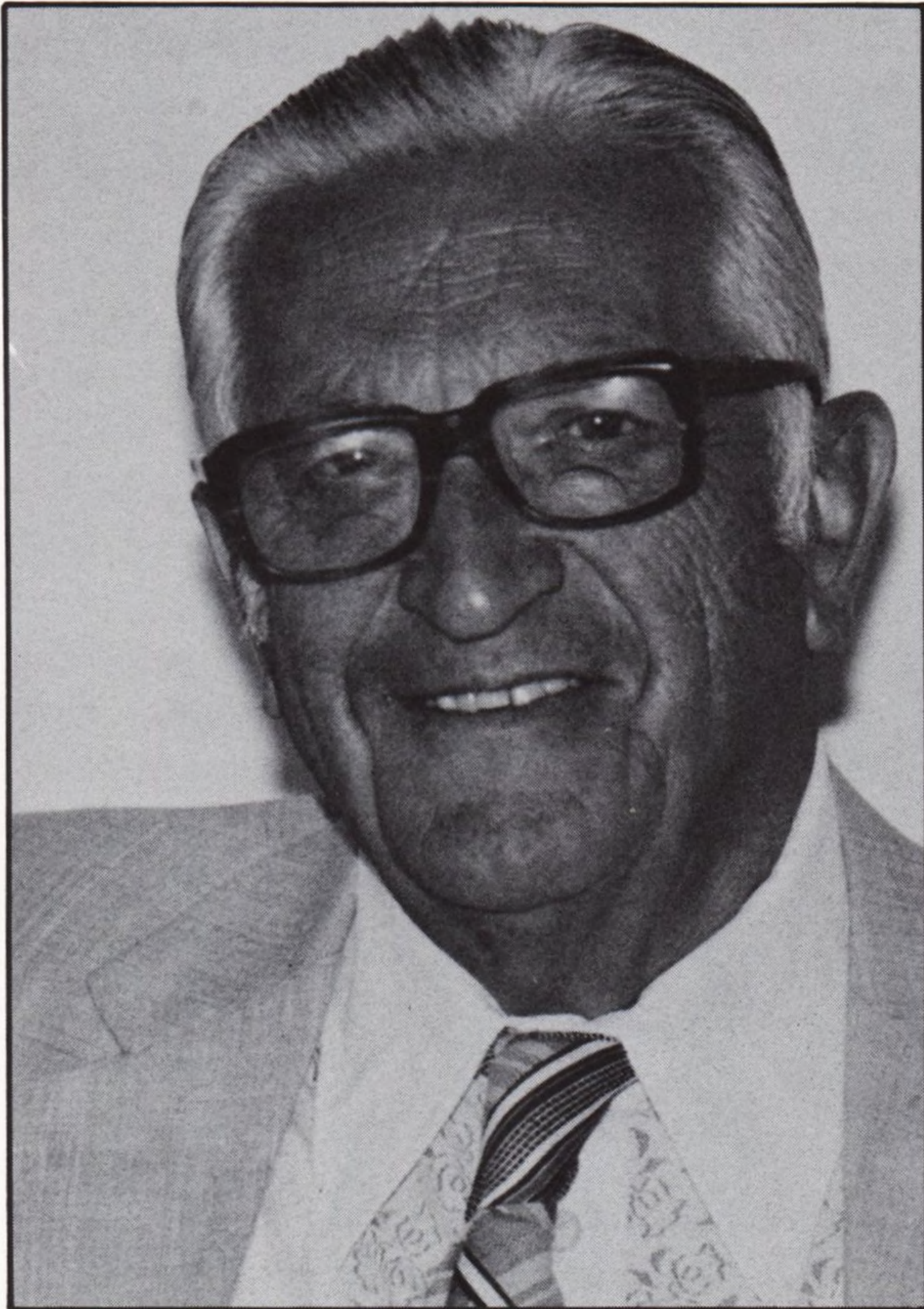


PRINTED FOR CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL

BY

BACON PRINTING & PAPER COMPANY, BANGOR, MAINE

Book Dedication



Harry Epstein



Paula Adelman

During this centennial year Congregation Beth Israel reviews its history and remembers the many people who have made synagogue life special. Among the many people who have faithfully served our congregation two members stand out in our minds — Paula Adelman and the late Harry Epstein.

Without their hard work throughout the years, our celebration might not have been so grand or meaningful. Their contributions have been above the call of duty and have touched upon every facet of Jewish life. We appreciate their dedication and service to our synagogue

For their work, friendship and loyalty, this book is dedicated to them.

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Centennial celebrations throughout the years have provided people with the opportunity to look back, evaluate and move ahead. Just as America did in 1876 on a 450-acre section of Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, Congregation Beth Israel took time in 1988 to celebrate its founding 100 years ago.

The members of Beth Israel celebrated the shul's centennial in grand style. Congregants put together a list of activities that would have pleased any group of people on any occasion. The fact that we celebrated this milestone in such an ambitious fashion is proof that synagogue life is alive and well at Beth Israel.

One hundred years of existence is certainly a triumph, but for the Jewish community in Bangor, Maine, it has special meaning. The shul members can look back with pride and look toward the future with the knowledge that the synagogue will continue to grow and be an important part of their lives. Rabbi Joseph Schonberger has often said that we must work hard now to ensure a positive future for our youth. Our centennial celebration gives us the chance to share our

past with our children and teach them the importance of the many contributions made during those 100 years. This is not a time, however, to be satisfied with our accomplishments. We must continue to build on this foundation to ensure a sturdy future for Bangor's Jewish community.

This book is a testament to all the men and women who have made this synagogue what it is today. Without the vision of a group of young men 100 years ago, we might not be celebrating this milestone. It is important that we carry on their vision and provide future generations with a bright tomorrow.

The year 1988 was not only important to the Jewish community of Bangor, but was a year for celebration worldwide. Not only was Beth Israel officially organized 100 years ago, the shul on York Street was built 75 years ago, the Jewish Community Center was established 50 years ago and the state of Israel was declared 40 years ago.

At this time I would like to extend congratulations to all those responsible for making this centennial year a success. I also would like to thank all those people involved with producing this centennial journal.

Special thanks go out to the people at Bacon Printing and Paper Co. of Bangor and especially Dwight King whose insights were helpful in producing this book.

I also would like to thank: Charles Campo, librarian at the Bangor Daily News, for his assistance in finding pictures and articles for use in this journal; free-lance writer John Ripley for his endless hours of writing and research; the staff at the Jewish Community Center; Henry H. Segal, editor and historian of the 75th anniversary publication, whose work was the basis for this year's journal; and President Norman Minsky for his advice and assistance throughout the entire process.

Happy 100th anniversary, Beth Israel.



James Adam Emple

—James Adam Emple
Editor, Centennial Book

A small hand in front of the eye can easily block even the most intense of sun rays from view. Similarly, if we picture God as that sunlight, we know that humans can create all sorts of simple and ingenious devices that interfere with the perception of God and diminish the warmth of His presence. Life is a complex mixture of joy and sadness, love and loneliness, courage and fear, light and darkness. In the midst of this complexity, the synagogue offers an environment that helps prevent the blocking of God from one's life. The synagogue helps Jews break through their artificial barriers to God, to enlighten and strengthen life.

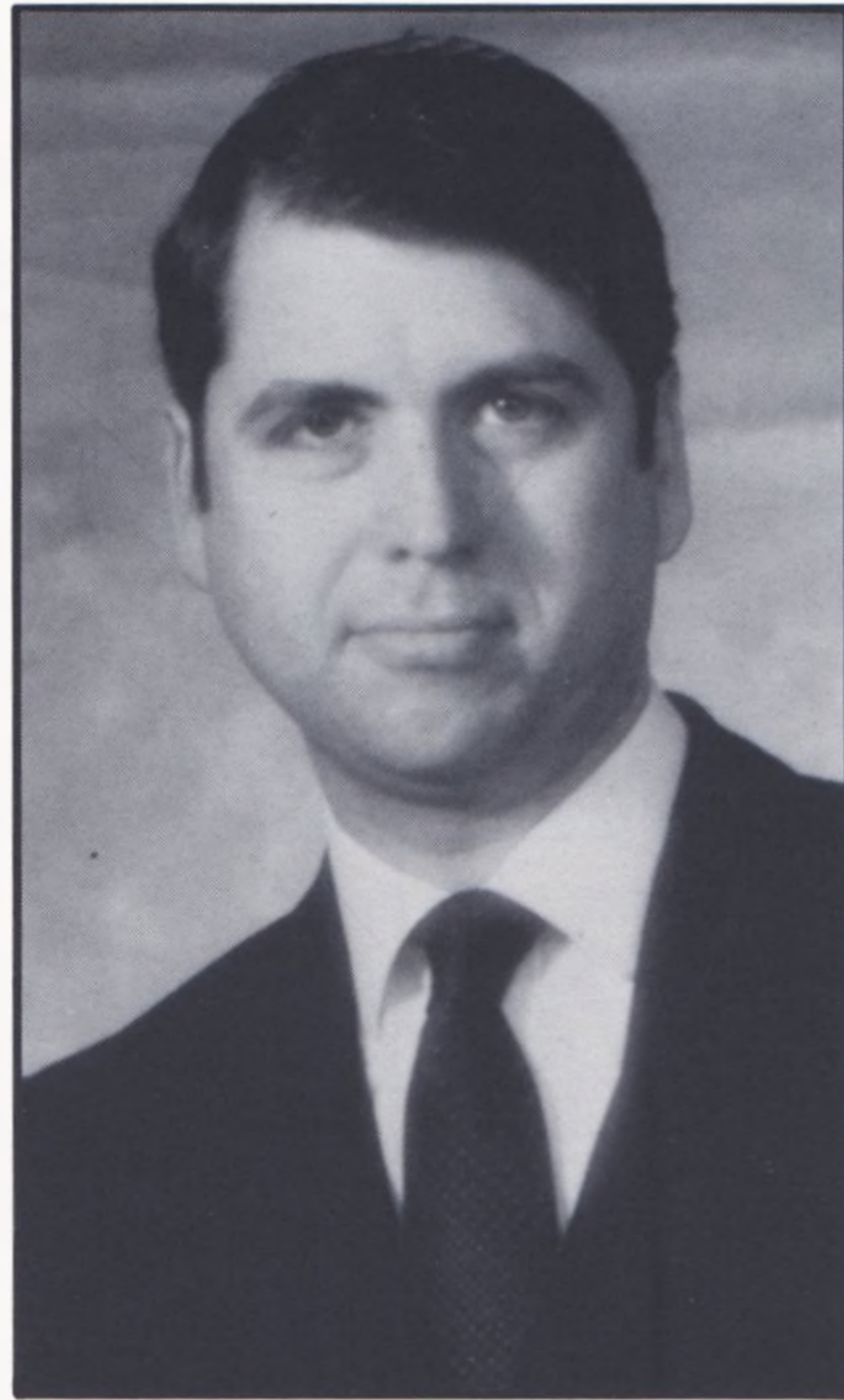
We marvel with gratitude at the leadership of Congregation Beth Israel for bringing the Jewish experience to Bangor in the first place, and then ensuring for the next 100 years that Jewish needs are met.

It is only when we step into the sanctuary at Beth Israel that we realize the great debt we owe and the depth of connection we have to our forebears. No other place captures the spirituality of this particular synthesis of human personalities, striving to grow as Americans and as Jews. In the sanctuary we find the blessing of a Jewish center of holiness that has withstood the test of the 19th and 20th centuries, the onslaught of Jewish indifference and division. Now, our responsibility to parents, ancestors, God and ourselves is to ensure that Beth Israel remains a clear, inspiring and empowering Jewish medium for the next century.

How can we accomplish this? From where will we derive our strength? Strength lies in our perspective as a Conservative congregation promoting balanced life. It is the dynamic Judaism of our greatest sages and saints. We model ourselves, with God's help, after their ethical sensitivity and nurturance of growth in themselves, their families and communities. Our Judaism is not narrowed and limited to the extremes of Jewish fundamentalism nor modern anti-traditionalism. Conservative Judaism best offers us the guidance for normal historical Jewish life, seeking to make life holy life.

How do we promote quality and ethical living? By participating in and maintaining the holiness of our sanctuary. Individuals and families in meditation and prayer in shul are the foundation for all of God's mitzvot. The synagogue is the place that best reminds us of and inspires us with God's animating presence. Empowered by God through the synagogue our families and children will be strong as Jews and hence grow as whole human beings. "Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." (Ex. 25:8)

Mazal tov to the families of Congregation Beth Israel who have nourished and nurtured the Jewish soul for 100 years. May we continue to be guided by God and His commandments throughout our second century.



Rabbi Joseph P. Schonberger

—Rabbi Joseph P. Schonberger

Congregation Beth Israel has existed for 100 years because of the commitment of men and women to the principles of the Jewish religion, and their willingness to express that commitment in the form of active participation in the religious activities of the synagogue.

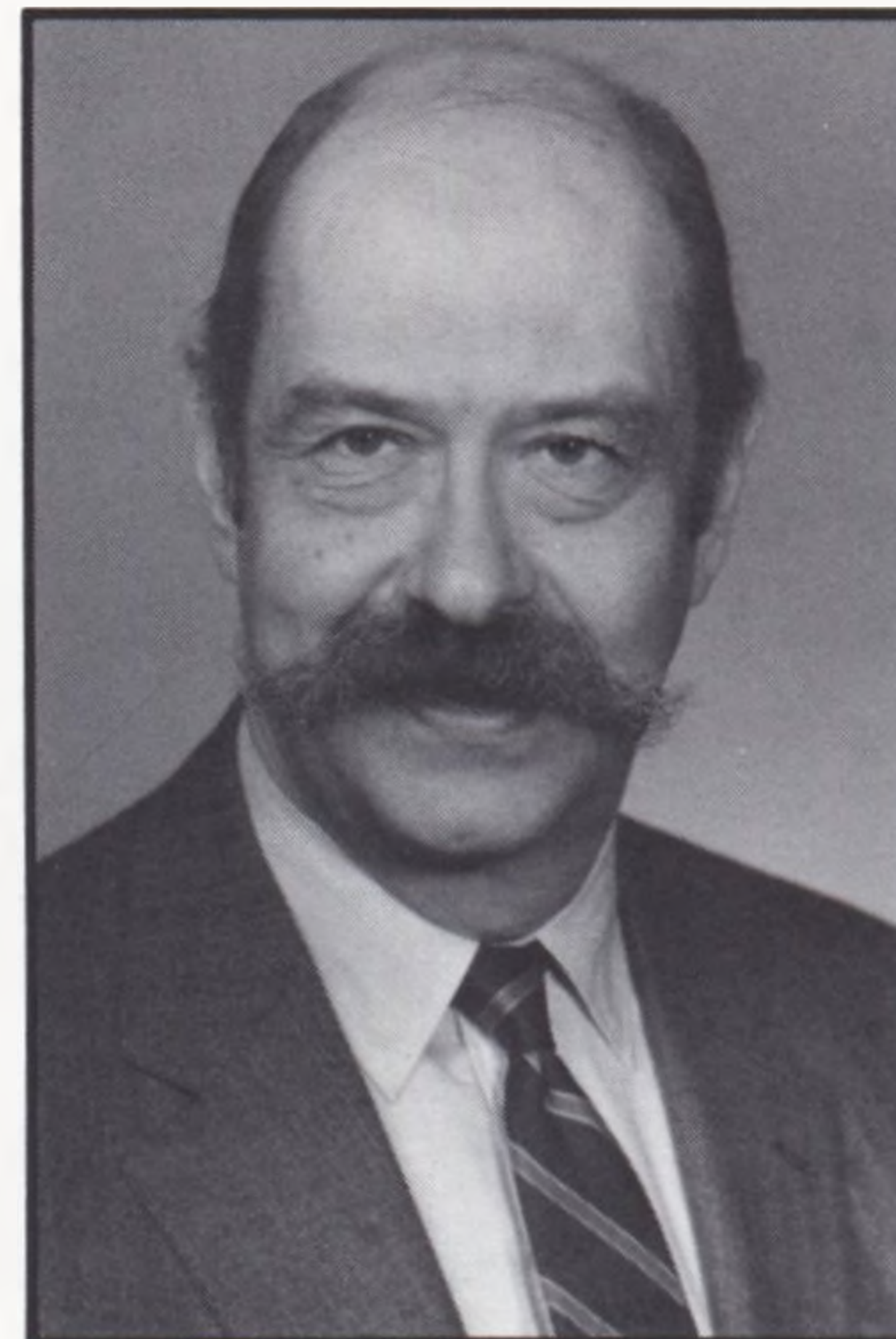
As we enter our second century, we should bear in mind that the synagogue will be here 100 years from now only if that commitment in the form of active participation in those religious activities is sustained.

The synagogue needs your help with its social and all other peripheral functions but these alone are not a force sufficient to guarantee our continued existence. We must remember that it is the religious principles and ideals of Judaism that form the cement which binds and sustains us — principles and ideals which we must demonstrate in our daily lives. We must inculcate these by education and example in future generations. We cannot pass along what we do not know or practice. As survivors of these past tumultuous 100 years of Jewish history, we have a special responsibility.

We have been privileged to have experienced an extraordinary year. We have just reason to be very proud to have accomplished so much so well. A great number of persons, whose names appear elsewhere in this publication, dedicated enormous time and ability, and to them many thanks are due.

On behalf of all the officers and directors, I send greetings.

—Norman Minsky
Beth Israel President



Norman Minsky

The many functions our congregation enjoyed throughout the centennial celebration were made possible because of the efforts of the Steering Committee with help from the Beth Israel Sisterhood.

The sisterhood members believed our centennial should be memorable and therefore gave all the financial support necessary to provide quality programs. We also thought our synagogue needed a little refurbishing and funded numerous projects and renovations during the past few years. In addition, the sisterhood had new carpet laid in the synagogue prior to the rededication.

Our financial support was made possible by several fund-raisers, including the annual rummage sales and biennial auctions.

The centennial celebration definitely brought out and revived a united Jewish feeling and community effort. It was rewarding to see so many people work to make the centennial celebration a great success.

If we wish to continue this synagogue spirit, it would be wonderful to see all the effort put forth for our centennial become a common occurrence.

— Patti Tableman
Sisterhood President
from 1986 to 1988



Patti Tableman

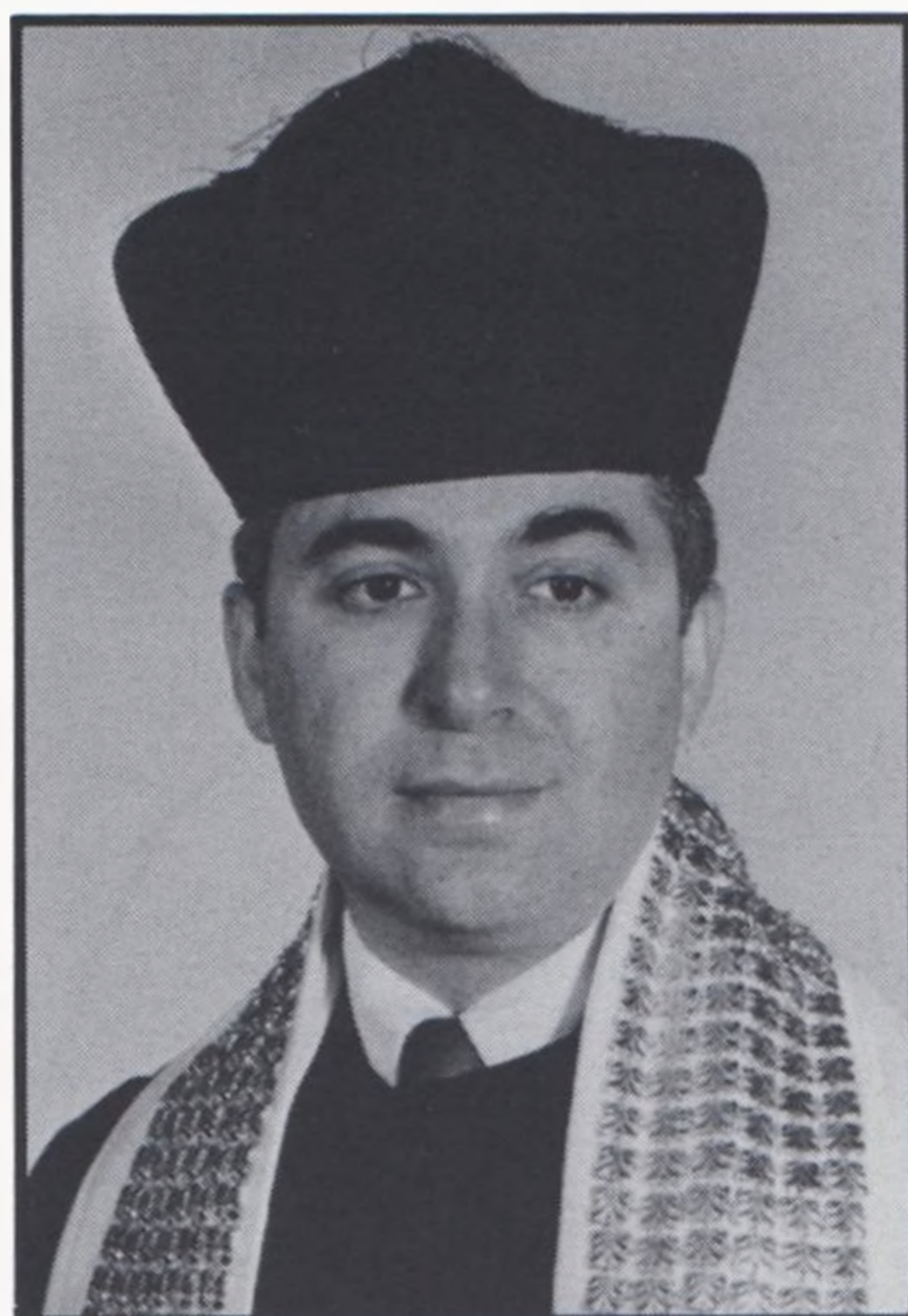
It is a feeling of great joy and exaltation that we celebrate the centennial of Congregation Beth Israel in the year 5748. It is indeed a moment of great thanksgiving as we offer prayers and songs of praise to the Almighty for having enabled us to reach this unique period. In the words of King David, "Ze Hayom Osah Hashem, Nogilah V'Nismicho Vo -this is the day which the Lord hath made; we will be glad and rejoice thereon." (Psalm 1 18:24)

Congregation Beth Israel for the past 100 years existed as a powerhouse which generated continuous spiritual energy to all who come to serve G-D from the heart and soul. It has served as a mighty lighthouse in the midst of darkness, beaming its light of love for G-D and for fellow man. During these past years, the congregation was blessed with dedicated spiritual leaders and members who served with enthusiasm and distinction.

In the coming 100 years, there continues to remain many tasks, duties and challenges that still confront us. Our Torah commands, "An everlasting fire shall be kept burning upon the altar it shall not go out." (Leviticus 6:5) Here then lies the charge upon us all, that the holy fires of Torah must be kept burning upon the altar. The fires of Torah faith must never be permitted to flicker or extinguish, but must be ever preserved for our children and future to come.

May the inspiration of this sacred event that we celebrate be with us for many years to come, and may Congregation Beth Israel be worthy of G-D's presence and blessings.

—Rabbi David Lapp



Rabbi David Lapp

On behalf of the Jewish Community Council, it is my pleasure to congratulate you and the entire membership of Congregation Beth Israel on the 100th anniversary year.

It is not often that a community such as Bangor, can celebrate the dedication and commitment demonstrated by the founders of Beth Israel. It takes special people in a special synagogue, filled with wonderful memories of people and events, to survive and prosper 100 years.

Pam, Ethan Louis and Leah Ethel, and I heartily express our warmest wishes on this wonderful simcha.

—William M. Cohen
JCC President

It is truly a pleasure to have the opportunity to extend to the Beth Israel Synagogue my warmest wishes on the occasion of its 100th anniversary.

An active and valuable member of the Greater Bangor community for a century, Beth Israel today has much to be proud of. It is my sincere hope that the synagogue and its members will continue to dedicate themselves to the spiritual needs and the welfare of their friends and neighbors for another hundred years and beyond.

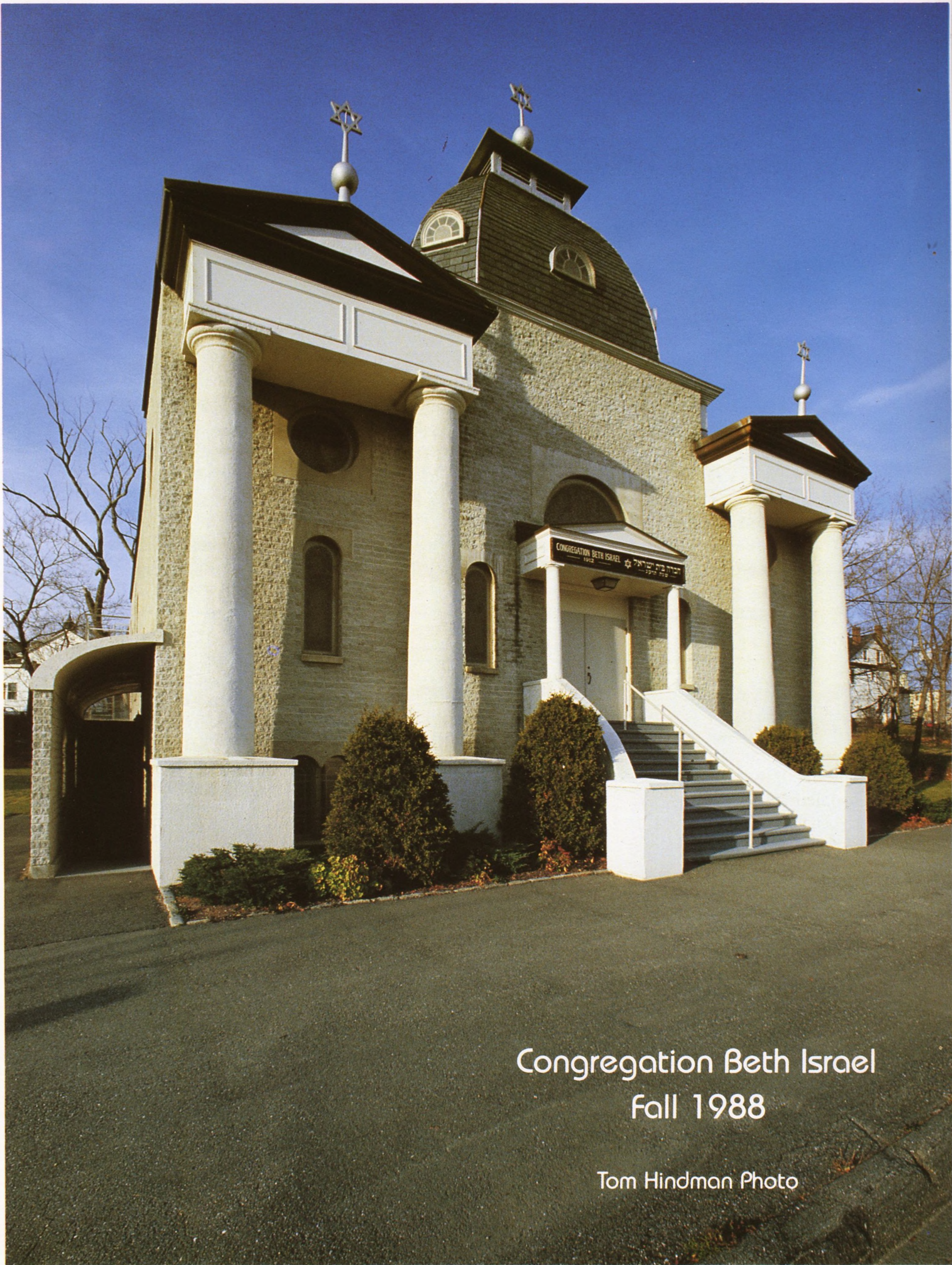
Again, best wishes and happy 100th anniversary.

—Gov. John R. McKernan

On behalf of the Bangor City Council, it is a pleasure to send you our sincerest congratulations on the 100th anniversary of Beth Israel Synagogue. We consider it our good fortune to have had the synagogue in our community for the past 100 years and look forward to it serving the needs of many residents of our city by continuing its commitment to caring.

Best wishes. You truly have something to celebrate.

—Marshall M. Frankel
City Council Chairman



Congregation Beth Israel
Fall 1988

Tom Hindman Photo

Introduction

The Beth Israel story records the existence of a handful of religious Jews who settled in Bangor more than 100 years ago in the days when this "Queen City" was a booming lumber port. It is a typical story of the growth of early Jewish settlements in America. The story begins when our forefathers banded together to establish a House of Worship — known as the Beth Israel Society. Here is recorded the story of the religious life of those of the Jewish faith, of their leadership in the social, commercial, and economic and political growth of Bangor. It is an inspirational recording of the courage, vision and firm religious convictions of the early settlers, and it is to memorialize their faith and spirit and the 100 years of progress that this story is told. The Beth Israel story has been written to provide future generations of Congregation Beth Israel with a tradition, with the incentive to build in this community from strength unto strength; to keep the fires of Judaism ever burning in this region.

We are incredibly fortunate to have many of the minutes of the congregation beginning with that historic meeting in 1888. These minutes with their unconscious humor and pathos, the meticulous attention to detail and the measured phraseology of that era, provide us with a vivid picture of our beginnings. No weighty historical tome could convey more strikingly (nor more delightfully) the struggles and aspirations of our founding fathers. Somerset Maugham, in a plea for reading the obscure authors of the past, very aptly has written: "It is a relief sometimes to look away from the bright sun of perfect achievement, and the writers who appealed to their age and not to posterity have by contrast a subtle charm."

The history of Congregation Beth Israel is in many respects the story of Bangor Jewry. Venerable and honored, the congregation has weathered and grown through all the vicissitudes of American life. Like the community itself, the synagogue has had its hard times. The flame of faith flickered more than once under the driving winds of circumstance, but the congregation and the city rallied to keep it burning with the fuel of dedication and hope.

The members of Beth Israel have never stood

apart from the community. They have provided leadership in many phases of both Jewish and general community life. The rabbis of Beth Israel have been no cloistered divines but have spoken forth frequently and brilliantly on the issues of the day, applying to these contemporary issues the truths of all times. Such men as Louis Plotkin, Moishe Zucker and Avraham Freedman have provided the kind of vigorous energy needed for the spiritual guidance of one of the state's finest Jewries.

From the beginning Beth Israel stood as the chief cornerstone of Bangor Jewry. From its family circle went forth offshoots to found other congregations and to promote those charitable and educational endeavors which with worship complete the cycle of Jewish communal life.

The older settlers, mostly Lithuanian Jews, and the newcomers from the more remote areas of the Russian Empire gradually learned to dissolve the superficial differences which tended to keep them apart. With the emergence of a unified Jewish community, new and creative Jewish energies were unleashed. The tide of Jewish regeneration swept new strength into Congregation Beth Israel. The congregation grew in numbers and activity.

It stands today after 100 years a vital center of Jewish faith and thought radiating its beneficent influence through its membership into the total community.

Many hands have worked under the roof of the synagogue. Many hearts were moved to respond generously to the appeals which were made from its pulpit for the relief of the handicapped in life, for aid to war sufferers and homeless refugees. Many happy voices echoed within its walls, and many anguished hearts found solace and comfort in its sanctuary. Many souls were kindled with renewed faith in God and man as they listened to the solemn ritual of its services and to the words spoken in the pulpit.

This, then is the story of Beth Israel — a story that has attained a singular depth when viewed through the perspective years. It is a story of that time, a simple, moving account of Jews putting down the roots of their faith in strange but friendly soil.

Forces Influencing Our History

One hundred years have elapsed since the official inception of Congregation Beth Israel. Seventy-five years have passed since the completion of the present synagogue. Judaism has been profoundly disturbed and cruelly tried in the seething cauldron of history from time immemorial to the present era. Jewry has known exalted dreams and bitter frustrations. In some measures our founders and loved ones also have suffered the ordeals that have been Israel's lot through the ages. They also have tasted the grapes of success and felt gratification in their efforts to establish a tabernacle to the service of God, both for themselves and for generations to follow.

The story of our congregation is part of the epic of the westward flight of Jews in search of freedom. These Jews brought to this continent along with their scars and memories of persecution their priceless baggage of ideals and practices. These have had their decided impact upon the ever-evolving American heritage, but their own way of life and culture were also profoundly influenced by what they found here.

The first permanent settlers in what is now these United States were 23 hardy souls who came in September 1654 to New Amsterdam, now New York City. They were permitted to make their homes in the new land on the condition that they would never permit their poor to become a burden to the general community. This order became an un failing ideal for American Jewry throughout its history.

However, facts about early Bangor Jews are scarce. The research efforts of Professor William Otis Sawtelle of Haverford, Pa., indicate that Jews from Spain and Portugal settled in the area prior to the Revolution and the name of Lowe or Levi is mentioned by historians. The American Historical Society has brought to our attention that "Susman Abrams (b. Hamburg, Germany) is known to have settled in the area during the period of the Revolutionary War. First he lived in Waldoboro and Thomaston, but later he moved to Union, where he conducted a tannery for many years."

Though there were a few scattered Jewish individuals of Sephardic descent in the Bangor area, there was no "community" of Jews until the early 1840s. As late as 1849, the Jewish population of Bangor was estimated to consist of 12 families.

When the first meeting of the group of Bangor



Jews who formed the Beth Israel Society was held in October 1884, Jews had been living in Bangor for at least 40 years. And Bangor itself had existed as a settlement for more than 100 years.

One reason why the Jewish community of Bangor is relatively younger than that of many other cities of the Eastern Seaboard is that the Portuguese Jews, who formed the earliest Jewish settlements in most American cities, did not venture farther north than Rhode Island. Even the Sephardic congregation which existed in Boston in the early 1800s contained only a few Portuguese Jews, and was composed principally of families of German and English descent. These families, upon settling in America, had affiliated themselves with Portuguese congregations because they were accustomed to the Sephardic ritual, rather than the Ashkenazic, as practiced in the congregations established by the German Jews.

Origins Of The Founders

Hostility toward Jews began to increase in Germany; the period of enlightenment and tolerance was, alas, brief. The brotherhood of man, so eloquently proclaimed by Goethe and Lessing and fervidly echoed by the Jews of the ghetto, was confined to a few choice spirits. Germans were seeking a scapegoat for their frustrations and for the ignominious defeats lately heaped upon them by Napoleon. The Jews were at hand as usual. Obsolete discriminatory laws were revived. Baptism was demanded as the price of admission to the army or to any profession. Only the eldest son in each Jewish family was permitted to marry. Jews were allowed to deal only in second-hand merchandise. Again, with a streak of clarity that flashes through the most warped brain, the Germans recognized the Jewish spirit as alien to provincialism, militarism and bigotry. The masses as well as the leaders became anxious to exercise the leaven of Jewish conscience and reasonableness from their midst.

So, from the Germanic States, Jews came to America, bringing few worldly goods, but much courage and hope. Most of them remained on the Atlantic Coast where the mass production industries, especially the clothing trade, greedily absorbed all newcomers. More intrepid spirits and those who preferred the smaller village communities to which they had been accustomed in Germany, pushed farther north.

Bangor, an important river port in this period became host to a group of these "Deitchuks" in the early 1840s. This period marks the beginning of a Jewish community in Bangor. Jews came at a time of economic expansion. New England merchants were sending their merchandise to the new Western cities of Chicago and Cleveland, St. Louis, Savannah, and Memphis, to be distributed through the local territory. To these new trade centers also went the Yankee lad, who previously was initiated in business through peddling. This left a vacuum in New England, which Jewish peddling filled. Arriving in New York from Germany, Austria and Poland, young Jews started in American life through itinerant trade. With the passing of the Yankee peddler, they came North, to settle in New England and the Bangor area.

Congregation Ahawas Achim, founded in 1849, was the first Jewish organization established in Bangor. This group rented a hall for religious services and purchased a tract of land for a cemetery. Their language and the language they taught to their children was German. It was not the destiny of these Jews to build a lasting house of worship, and by 1856 most had either moved away or became assimilated with their gentile neighbors.

The transfer of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Russian Empire involved its Jews, not only in a change of government but, what was much more serious, in a change of treatment. It inaugurated a period during which the Jews were seldom left in peace by the government. Thereafter they were subjected to oppression, until, after more than a century of tyranny and misrule, czarist Russia itself was brought to an end by the first World War.

The czars were, in the main, fanatical foes both of Judaism and the Jewish people, resolved to stamp out the one and either to annihilate the other or else by various so-called reforms to bring about their gradual amalgamation with the general population.

Soon after the signing of the Peace of Tilsit (1807), however, a peremptory order was issued to the local authorities to carry out the decree of expulsion—one-third of all those affected to be driven out of the villages in each of the next three years, and the total evacuation by the end of 1810.

Napoleonic invasion immediately affected the Jews in Lithuania. The Jews displayed a remarkable loyalty to the Russian cause and rendered whatever practical services they could to the Russian troops. All these endeavors of patriotism were brought to the cognizance of Alexander I, who acknowledged them with satisfaction and promised that, after the return of peace, he would take steps to ameliorate the position of the Jews. After his spectacular victories over Napoleon, he abandoned whatever liberal outlook he had hitherto cherished. His successors did little more to ease the lot of their Jewish subjects and it was from this atmosphere that the Jews sought to escape to seek the freedom of spirit as well as economic betterment.

The exodus of the Jews to the lands of liberty in the West, especially to America, had begun in the previous reign; but from the pogroms of 1881 it assumed ever growing dimensions and poured forth in different directions. These pogroms were designed to implement the formula which called for the emigration of a third of the Russian Jews; they were to all appearances accomplishing their purpose. Shortly after the first outbreaks, Jews in large numbers began streaming toward the borders. The government of Spain, we are told, eager to atone for the expulsion of 1492, offered to receive the fugitives, but despite their distress, the offer failed to attract them. The great majority looked west toward the fabulous land across the ocean where, as they knew, many of their people already had found refuge and new life.

In May 1882, when the violence had run its course, the czar's government replaced it with a "cold pogrom," which had the merit of lasting longer and producing fewer repercussions in the world outside. It took the form of the infamous "May Laws," which barred Jews from the villages in the Pale of Settlement and forced Jewish traders in the town to keep their shops closed on Sundays and Christian holidays. The congestion and destitution in the towns increased and the Jewish tradesmen who competed with non-Jews received a staggering blow.

Although there were some Polish Jews among the earlier immigrants, it was not until the 1880s that mass immigration from Eastern Europe started. The brutal persecutions of Russian and Polish Jews, the bloody pogroms, and the Russian "May Laws" drove whole communities en masse to America. Within 20 years this wave of Eastern European immigration made the German Jews a minority in New England, as elsewhere throughout the United States. In only two or three generations, Bangor was able to develop an integrated Jewish community, one that was able to overcome religious, economic and social rivalries which originally existed between the immigrants from the Baltic states and those from Poland.

It is with this setting that the curtain rises on the first act of the Beth Israel story.

The beginning of the influx of Jews in the early 1880s from Lithuania and Poland found a few German Jews already established in Bangor. However, it soon developed that the two groups of Jews had many differences—so many, that it seemed for a time that there were more points of issue than there were ideas and ideals in common. The language barrier was another handicap to mutual understanding. These

Litvaks regarded Yiddish as their national language; they referred to it as "Jewish," and believed that it was spoken by Jews everywhere. Imagine their consternation on arriving in Bangor to find that their fellow Jews, for the most part, spoke no Yiddish—only German and English. True, the more learned of both groups were familiar with the Hebrew of the Scriptures and rabbinic books, but as a medium of everyday communication, Hebrew had about as much practical value as speaking classical Latin to a shopkeeper in Naples.

During that period, the established Jewish charitable agencies established by these German Jews became inadequate for the problem of the new group, and as successive waves of terror-stricken and penniless Jews arrived, the Lithuanian Jews formed their own relief organizations. Mr. and Mrs. Israel Frank rendered inestimable services in sympathetic understanding as well as financial aid. It was the Franks who took the initiative in organizing the first benevolent aid society in the community.

Furthermore, there was an entirely different background of feeling about the place of Jewishness in daily life. To the German Jews, civil, business and religious activities fell into entirely separated spheres; to the Lithuanian Jews, coming from self-contained Jewish communities, Judaism was much more than a religion—it was a complete way of life that governed the individual's secular, as well as his religious, actions. Probably, the greatest source of discord was the size of the new group. In 1897, the Jewish community of Bangor numbered about 50 families of which less than five families were of the German-Jewish community. The older community felt itself engulfed. Inter-marriage and self-isolation finally wiped out the last vestige of the German entity.

The Founders Of Congregation Beth Israel

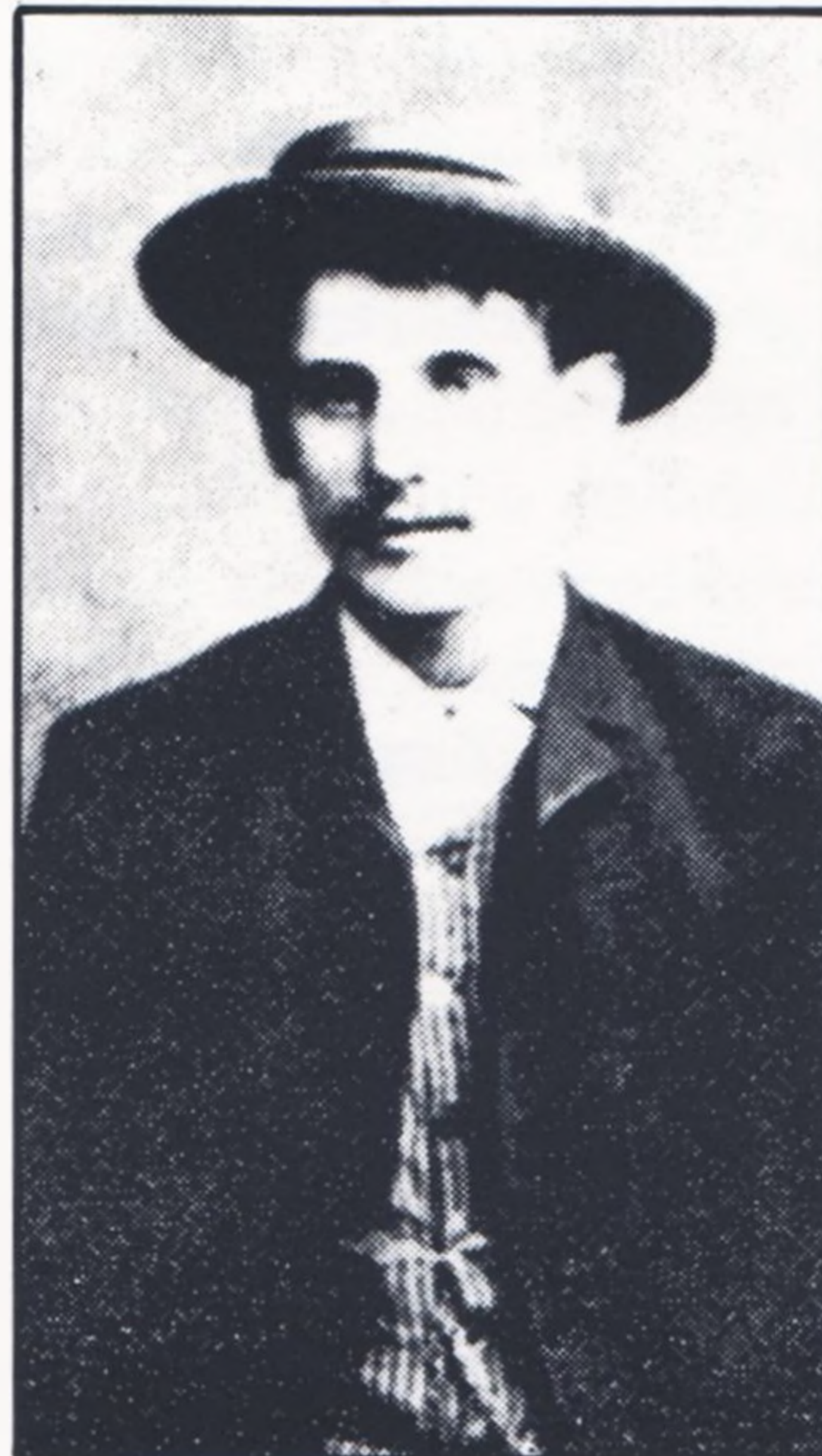
Maine in the early 1880s was quite different from the rest of the United States. Almost entirely concerned with the lumber trade and farming with barely a hint of industrialization, Maine was a generation behind the other sections of the country in its mode of life. It was a quiet, unhurried life, undisturbed by the noise of factory motors, unaffected by booms and depressions, isolated from America by an economy and a harsh winter climate that made for the retention of old Yankee customs and habits which other places were even then beginning to discard.

Into such a setting there had come a group of Jews from the small villages of the provinces of Kovno, Grodno and Vilna. They were the ordinary humble Jews, poor, and some of them not very learned in things Jewish, but all of them animated by a strong passion for preserving that Jewish life and those Jewish values they had cherished in the Old World. In the early years the few Jewish families in the city were like one family—there existed a neighborliness, an intimacy, a passion for mutual aid that were extraordinary.

Ezriel Lemke Allen, the first of Beth Israel's founding fathers, arrived in Bangor in 1882. A "Grodner landsman," Ike Wolper, was peddling in the Old Town area and induced Allen to leave Boston and seek his fortune in the more sparsely settled regions of Maine. These pioneers were followed by Jacob Altman, Harry Cohen and Israel Goldman. Joe Byer, who was to become a vigorous leader in the Jewish community found his way to the Allen abode and here the nucleus of Orthodoxy and Zionism was established. A short time was to transpire with the arrival of Joe Bernstein, Marks Goldman, Philip Hillson and Simon Kominsky. These men constituted the first congregational group that numbered the traditional minyan of 10.

They were lonely, uprooted, displaced persons of their day. Coming together, they sought to find among themselves something of the familiar and spiritually secure life they had once enjoyed. The beloved Jewish ritual and ceremony, the body of tradition and practice which they had known in Eastern Europe, were precious to them. Hence they kept their records in Yiddish and adopted the ritual of the Jewish communities from whence they had sprung.

With increasing numbers, Jewish life began to take on a communal aspect, with Lemke Allen and Joe



Lemke Allen



Joseph Bernstein

Bernstein playing leading roles as the observant Jews banded together for worship. Tradition holds that they held religious services in their respective homes until the group became numerous enough to require larger quarters. They had no hazan, nor even a shohet, at the outset. With the arrival of Morris Golden ritual practices became formalized, for he was a highly qualified mohel and shohet.

It should be stressed that although this group of Jews joined together for worship, and probably were augmented on special occasions and high holidays by their co-religionists, travelers and solitary Jews from nearby towns, they did not establish a congregation in any formal sense. Beth Israel grew out of this loose association, but its regular life as a congregation did not begin until 1888. The early Bangor minyan had no name, no rules or constitution, and no officers or clerical leader.

Gradually, however, a degree of formality did enter into the religious life of the Bangor community, even though they had no house of worship of their own. For the High Holy Days in 1884, Lemke Allen, Ike Wolper and Joe Bernstein, in a formal note, acknowledged that they had "borrowed and received a Scroll of the Law" from Ohabei Shalom of Boston. They borrowed it "in order to fulfill the biblical injunction 'The Book of the Law' shall not depart from thy

mouth,” and they promised “to return it without any excuse whatsoever.” It may be assumed that with a Sefer Torah on indefinite loan in Bangor, religious services became more regular.

The last 15 years of the 19th century and the first 20 years of the 20th century were a period of immigration, growth and adjustment to the economic environment and to the process of Americanization. Jewish fraternal lodges arose to fill the need for social integration and cultural adjustment to the new environment. The Independent Order of the Sons of Benjamin granted the local group a charter in 1884. This fraternal lodge helped the newcomer to adjust. The meetings brought the warmth of friendship so necessary to strangers. Assurance of a Jewish burial had been a primary concern of Jews for thousands of years. It was to provide for this — financially and religiously — that the lodge purchased a tract of land from the city of Bangor for \$45 to use as a Jewish cemetery. It was not until 1907 that Beth Israel purchased this tract from the Independent Order of the Sons of Benjamin for the sum of \$335.

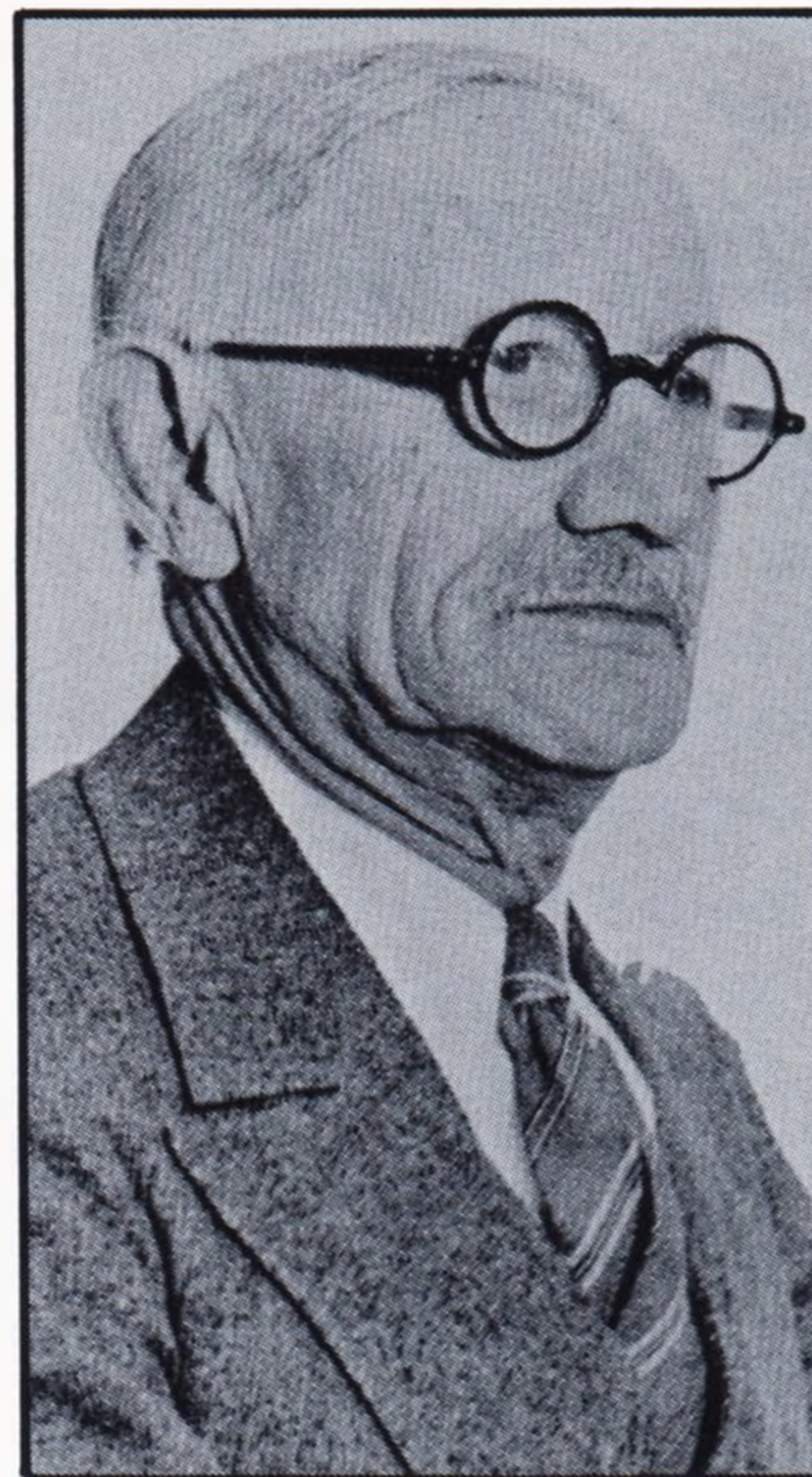
“Tekiah!” . . . when this first sound of the shofar was heard at the beginning of the High Holy Days in Bangor 100 years ago, it was more than the traditional call to prayer. The Tekiah heralded another beginning for the scant dozen Jewish families newly arrived in this great land — the formal organization of Beth Israel, the oldest active Jewish congregation in Maine.

The services of Rosh Hashana during the fall of 1888 were, of necessity, makeshift. There was no rabbi. There was no synagogue. Still these pioneers gathered together to usher in the New Year with a ceremony conducted by Joe Bernstein, a cultured and scholarly man.

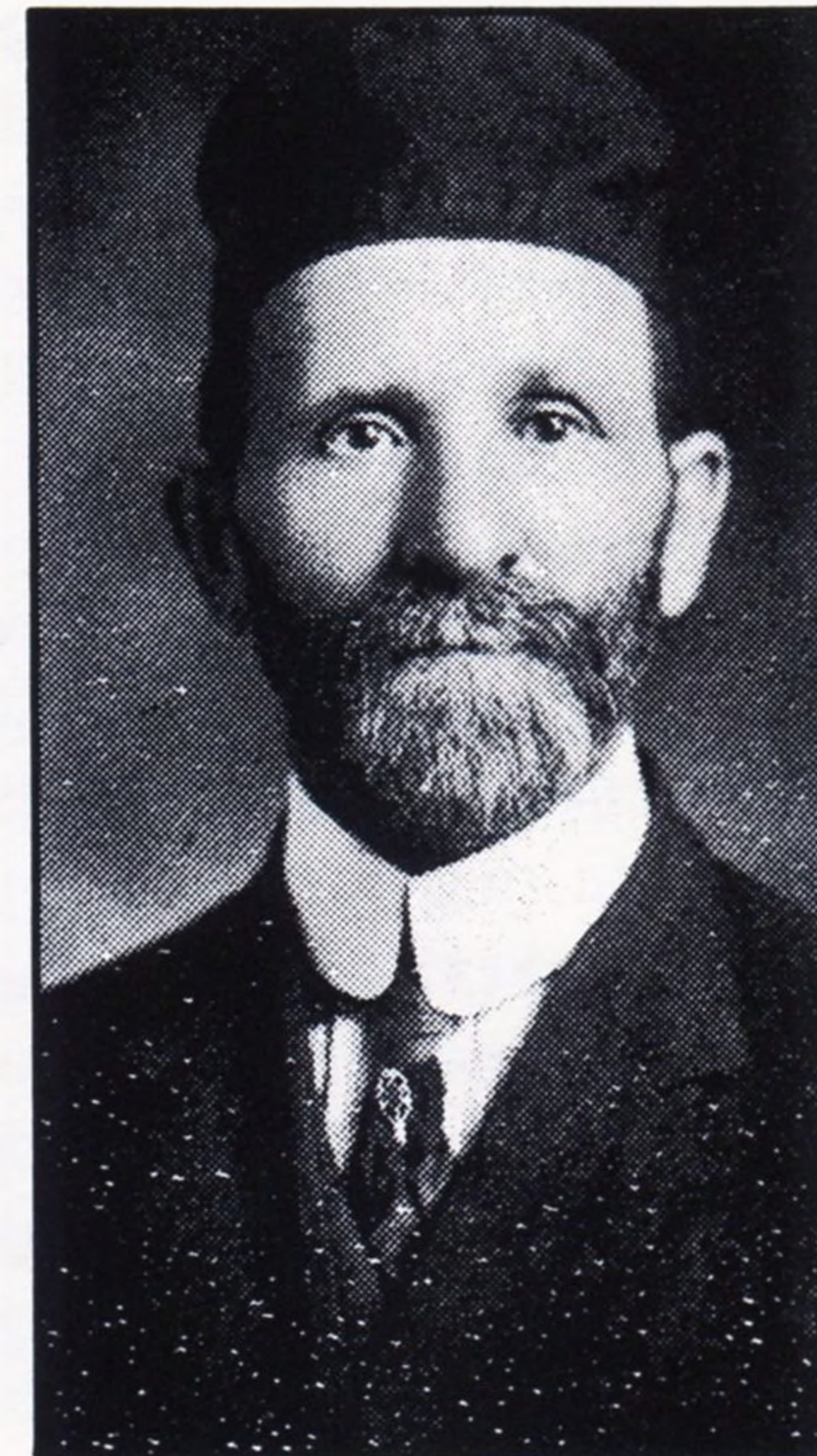
It was October 1888 that a group of young men formally created the Beth Israel Society. Attending the organizational meeting at the home of Lemke Allen on May Street, were: Joe Bernstein, Harry Cohen, Nathan Cohen, Jacob Altman, Israel Frank, Yechiel Cooperstach, Ike Wolper, Simon Kominsky, David Snyder, Ezra Sarhazy, Philip Hillson, Nathan Hillson, Marks Goldman, Israel Goldman, Joe Byer and Solomon Harris.

Marks Goldman acted as temporary presiding officer, and a committee of Joe Bernstein, Israel Goldman and Lemke Allen was named to rent a location in which services could be conducted. Services for the first year were to be held alternately in the homes of Joe Bernstein and Lemke Allen, while plans for a permanent synagogue were being made. Solomon Harris was the choice for the baal kora. The society then proceeded to elect Marks Goldman as its gabbai.

As the membership increased and the treasury



Israel Goldman



Philip Hillson

became more affluent a hall was rented on Exchange Street. When this location was no longer available Simon Kominsky offered the use of a large room at 13 Essex St.

At the next meeting, held in November, the committee had not yet found a suitable location and were instructed to look further.

It was decided that each member should pay a \$3 entrance fee until 25 members had been admitted, and that the dues should be \$3 per year payable in quarterly installments of 75 cents. By Nov. 16, the committee reported that it had rented a small hall on the second floor of the Granite Block on Park Street for \$10 per month. At this meeting Harry Cohen was named treasurer and Morris Golden was elected secretary. The name Congregation Beth Israel was officially adopted by the membership at one of the early meetings, but the minutes fail to mention by whom the name was suggested.

First, the congregation had to secure a Sefer Torah of its own. A New York congregation, to whom they first applied, seemed indisposed to comply with the request, so a committee of Joe Byer and Morris Golden was appointed to order a Holy Scroll so that the Torah on loan from Ohabei Shalom could be returned. The treasurer was ordered to reimburse Mr. Golden for his trip to Boston for the inspection and purchase of the Sefer Torah. The functions of Mr. Golden in the congregation were somewhat complex. He was appointed to alternate in reading the Torah; perform marriages, and serve as shohet and mohel.

Mr. Golden continued in this capacity for several years although the minutes relate he was often unable to collect his fee. Mr. Golden later resigned as baal kora and Solomon Harris officiated as reader until shortly before his demise in 1943.

The Jewish Peddler

Our founding fathers were a venturesome group and young in years — all in their 20s or early 30s. Unable to speak English and with little prospect of gainful occupation, these young Jews had no choice but to peddle small wares from a pack. They attracted attention and became the butt of much humor and satire in the 1880s. Their shrewd trading brought on suspicion, but the negative aspect of their career hardly prevented these young Jews from considering peddling a respectable means of earning a living.

For the newly arrived immigrants it was a quick and natural step into the American economy. Peddling required little or no investment, and the fertile field was open for the price of a peddler's license. The rural areas were in need of goods of every description and the Jewish peddler continued to furrow the field now partly deserted by the Yankee. Gradually he went from basket to pack, from peddling on foot to a horse and wagon. The towns in eastern and central Maine had their meeting points from which peddling forays into the back country were begun. In many areas many of these future shopkeepers were made welcome as they trudged wearily, with packs on their backs, yearning for a day of rest. The cycle of Yankee peddler was being completed and the heroic age of the Jewish peddler about to begin. Our founders operated with considerable success and as the profits increased their stocks were enlarged. They learned English slowly and became familiar with the customs of rural Maine. Lemke Allen was such a peddler and as his increased stock could no longer be carried on one back he stepped up the first rung on the ladder to success, symbolized by the purchase of a horse and cart. Another young immigrant, whose destiny was to be linked with that of Allen, was Ike Wolper. Wolper arrived in America a year before his friend. A fellow "Grodner," he helped Allen invest all of his limited capital in the small wares that bulged in a peddler's pack.

At the end of a year the original investment had grown to \$100. Heartened by this splendid return Allen headed for new routes, peddling overland and stopping at farmhouses by night, where for the standard charge of 25 cents he could obtain supper, lodging and breakfast. The rate was indeed low, for Lemke Allen subsisted wholly on fruits and vegetables. Allen peddled the countryside within a radius of 75 miles from the source of supply of goods. This enterprise was lucrative enough to enable him to eventually open a small clothing store on Exchange Street. This new firm became a center for peddlers' supplies and good free advice.

The business pursuits of Allen were typical of many of the early peddlers. Peddling was a difficult occupation under the rigorous climate of Maine. Local inhabitants have a saying that the area has three seasons — July, August and winter. The peddler filled the necessary economic need because the farms were scattered and the villages were far between. He brought the city to the hard-working farmer whose daily chores tied him to the soil.

Inadvertently, the peddlers created a strange concept of the Jew. Though the numbers of Jewish peddlers decreased as better means of transportation developed and as more general stores were opened, they left an indelible impression upon several generations of farmers and country people. As late as World War I many a country person still thought that a Jew, who had a beard, was a rabbi, even though he was a peddler. The reason for such identification lies in the fact that these Jewish peddlers were observant of the laws of kashrut, the Sabbath and the recitation of their daily prayers. They did not hesitate to practice these rituals when they stayed overnight or spent the Sabbath in the farmhouse.

A Look At The Founders

When Carlyle wrote "Happy are the people whose annals are blank in the history books," he emphasized the fact that the events that make history dramatic and interesting also bring sorrow and tragedy to the people concerned.

From this standpoint, the annals of Beth Israel are indeed blank, but to offset the dearth of historic drama the congregation can boast of a wealth of interesting characters, and the congregational history is enlivened by the account of the personalities and accomplishments of the members.

The minyan of 10 who organized the congregation 100 years ago were men of robust and colorful character. They were not only determined to prosper in a new country, and to combat the anti-Jewish prejudice that existed, but they also were willing to set themselves up against practically all the other Jews in their adopted community.

The fact that they created successful and lucrative businesses from very humble beginnings is evidence that they were men of indomitable enterprise and bold imagination. Though they ruled their families and business with patriarchal discipline — characteristically a "Litvak" trait — they were neither ascetics nor stuffed shirts, and they enjoyed the good things of life with lusty appetite.

It would be of great interest to write about each of the founders. Unfortunately, the facts are not available. Some of the founders no longer have any descendants among the present congregation. Others probably left Bangor and all that is known of the rest are dates of their birth and death from the cemetery records.

Of some, however, we do have accurate information and from the brief character sketches which follow, a pattern emerges which enables us to see the founders of the congregation as living human beings, rather than faded names on a dusty record.

Marks Goldman, the first gabbai, was born in Lithuania in 1862. He came to this country with Ezra Sarhazy and Yechiel Cooperstach and the three became friends and companions.

He was known as a strict disciplinarian, but had his moments of relaxation, particularly at weddings, at which the trio of Goldman, Cooperstach and Sarhazy consumed record amounts of liquid refreshment.

Grandchildren of Cooperstach relate that their grandfather ran a "private distilling business" and kept his boon companions well supplied with his product — which must have been one of merit, for Goldman lived to 89 and Sarhazy to 87.

Goldman served as gabbai from 1888 until 1897 and then moved to the Midwest. He was married twice and had eight children; three daughters by his first wife and three sons and two daughters by his second.

Ezriel Lemel Allen, affectionately known as "Lemke," was born in 1858 in a small town on the outskirts of Grodno. He arrived in the United States in 1882 and soon made his way to Bangor. Steamship records indicate that Mr. Allen booked passage to Bangor on the steamer Penobscot along with a "suitable stock of wares of all descriptions." All the pioneers had much in common. Most of them were all young

men, under 30. All but three were unmarried and all began their careers by peddling from town to town within a radius of 100 miles. In less than three years Lemke Allen was able to open a clothing store on Exchange Street. He had brought his wife, Julia, to the new land and here his first son was born. Arthur was the first offspring of the Beth Israel founders to be born in Bangor. He followed in the footsteps of his father and became a director when he was 21. He also served on the Building Committee in 1912. Lemke and Julia had four more children: Minnie, Sarah, Henry and Harry. Harry was a member of the Chevra Kadisha and was active in synagogue affairs.

Grandson Edward, son of Minnie, carried on the Lemke Allen tradition by serving on several committees and the board of directors. Edward also was active in civic and fraternal affairs.

Edward and Florence Allen had three children: Merrill, Max and Richard. Richard Allen still lives in Bangor, Merrill lives in Cape Elizabeth, and Max moved out of state. Florence, who is still a member of Congregation Beth Israel, has 11 grandchildren.

Israel Goldman was still in his teens when he came to America and helped organize the congregation. He was born in Grodno and was orphaned at a very early age. He engaged in a profitable peddling venture and later became associated with Hyman Lait in the "Yankee Clipper" door to door enterprise. He was a successful retail clothier and was known for his sharp wit. The story is told that when he bought a place of business in Washington County from a local financier, the former owner complained that he was selling only to get away from Jews who had begun to infiltrate into the area, and he didn't know where to move to be sure there wouldn't be any Jews around him. "That's easy," Goldman was supposed to have replied, "move to prison — you won't find any Jews there!"

Building Of The First Synagogue

Hazan Goldenkopf, when he arrived in Bangor in 1895, brought with him an additional Sefer Torah on loan from Temple Ohabei Shalom in Boston. He noted that the rented synagogue quarters in the Granite Block on Park Street were quite small, but it was the energetic laymen who actually stimulated the reorganization of the Beth Israel Society and the construction of the first synagogue on the lot at 114 Center St. Indirectly, too, the arrival in New York of a compatriot, the renowned preacher and Talmudic scholar Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna, spurred religious life by inspiring the communal leaders to organize themselves in a more definite manner. The outcome, a new synagogue and a congregation with formal rules and regulations, was of a national character rather than a purely local accomplishment. In 1897 the necessity for a new building became apparent. The minutes of the congregation record a memorandum signed by Max Cohen, Joseph Byer, Israel Goldman, Lemke Allen, Joe Bernstein, Harry Cohen, David Snyder and Simon Kominsky, as the board of directors, stating that they thereby formed themselves into a "congregation to be known and distinguished by the name of Congregation Beth Israel in the city of Bangor." Marks Goldman who had served as gabbai of the informal group known as the Beth Israel Society is no longer mentioned in the minutes. We must assume that he moved away as several itinerant peddlers already had done. Max Cohen, Harry Cohen and Simon Kominsky were immediately authorized to negotiate the purchase of the lot "not to exceed \$200."

These founders, drawing upon their experience with synagogal matters, recognized that at this juncture a formal organization had to be created. With Harry Cohen as acting presiding officer, a meeting was held at the home of Lemke Allen, to receive the report of the committee appointed to secure the site. Before that pressing business was presented, Cohen observed that, although it had been decided to buy a piece of ground, the congregation had no legal powers and their determinations were not binding on the members. To correct this situation he offered a resolution that those present should agree "that in order to promote our Holy Religion, and establish a proper congregation in this city," they form themselves into a legally constituted congregation, and bind themselves "one to the other that we will assist if required, to form a constitution, and strictly abide by same." The president was

instructed to consult with "lawyer Cook." Harry Cohen thereupon suggested that new officers be properly elected, and he forthwith divested himself of his own office. The other members of the committee followed suit. The people at the meeting proceeded to elect Max Cohen, president; Joe Byer, vice president; Morris N. Golden, secretary; and Harry Cohen, treasurer. At the same time two gabbaim were added to the officers: Simon Kominsky and Joe Bernstein, first and second gabbaim in the order named.

However, all did not proceed smoothly after the brave beginning. The Jews then in Bangor were far from affluent. The funds did not pour in overabundantly, although the membership subscribed nearly \$1,500. This sum reflected their ability and a genuine spiritual interest in the project, which as a start seemed to promise success. Almost as soon as the project had gotten under way, notice came from the owners of the Park Street building where the congregation was occupying a rented second-floor room, giving them notice to vacate immediately. The short notice compelled Max Cohen to apply for an extension, which in view of the positive building program, was granted.

The congregation was called together and informed that further funds were required before the Veazie National Bank would grant a mortgage loan. Max Cohen spurred efforts to raise \$1,000 within a few days. It was decided that, in order to secure the funds, the four cornerstones and the two doorposts would be sold to the highest bidder in return for synagogal honors, following the old Jewish custom. Simon Kominsky bought the first cornerstone for \$150, Harry Cohen the second for \$100, Max Cohen the third for \$85, and Morris Rosen the fourth for \$75. Israel Goldman bought the right-hand doorpost for \$50, and Joe Byer the left-hand doorpost for \$50. A total of \$510 was thus subscribed and the balance was raised by the general membership as part payment on seats.

At last the work on the building could proceed. On the west side of Center Street, about midway in the block from Cumberland Street to Garland Street, adjacent to the lot now occupied by the United Jewish Chapel, the first synagogue building in Maine began to rise. On Aug. 22, 1897, the cornerstones were laid with blessings asked for the generous men in whose names they were dedicated.