

## **\*Chapter Four\***

### **Geographic and Religious Transition: Temple Beth El and the Development of a Conservative Institution, 1929-1950**

It is clear that by 1929, Orthodoxy had established itself as the only institutionalized form of Judaism in Portland. Conservative Judaism had failed to impose its interpretation of acceptable religious change onto the community. However, much would change in the Portland Jewish community over the next twenty years, and by 1947, Portland Jews resoundingly endorsed the formation of Conservative Congregation Beth El. What forces brought Conservative Judaism to Portland after it had been so forcefully rejected in 1929? The answer to this question lies in the critical changes that the Portland Jewish community underwent in the subsequent eighteen years.

This transition period, 1929-1947, severely challenged the strength of the immigrant culture that had endorsed Orthodoxy, and also convinced the community that further religious change was acceptable. Geographic relocation dispersed the population to the suburbs and created a need for a new institution. In addition, much of Portland Jewry had drifted away from any form of religious practice, and the situation reached crisis proportions by the 1940s. Hebrew school enrollment had dwindled, and there was little religious participation among the younger generations of Portland Jews. These factors combined to make institutional change practical and necessary. Thus, to understand the formation of Temple Beth El, one must understand the changes that occurred during this transitional period and how those changes increased the base of support for a Conservative congregation.

The transitional period in question begins in 1929 with the rejection of Conservative Judaism, and ends in 1947 with overwhelming support for the creation of a

new Conservative temple. Clearly much changed over these eighteen years, but the period begins with the very familiar picture of entrenched Orthodoxy. Conservative forces spent the years 1913-1929 trying to convince Portland's Jewish community to adopt this religious movement to no avail. Thus, after resisting this challenge, by 1929 the Orthodox regime was stronger than ever. The three Orthodox institutions (Shaarey Tphiloh, Etz Chaim, and Anshe Sfaard) had formed the Vaad Hoir, an organization that controlled most of the community's resources. The Vaad hired one rabbi that was shared among the three shuls, and Orthodoxy without religious reforms was again the only institutionally sanctioned form of Judaism. In addition, there was no room for variation within Orthodoxy because although there were three separate institutions, each was under the control of the Vaad Hoir and shared the same rabbi.

The Conservative group appeared to have recognized its defeat at institutionalizing their movement, and had resigned itself to meeting informally throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Several Jews, including David Beckelman, a former member of Temple Israel and Etz Chaim, met informally at the home of Lewis Bernstein in the Woodfords section of Portland. Beckelman died in 1940 at the age of 52 and had been attending these meetings for several years before his death. These meetings occurred somewhat regularly, and those who met still held the dream of someday creating a Conservative Temple.<sup>1</sup> However, this dream was most certainly only in the back of their minds. The rejection by the traditional Orthodox faction was clear, and until the Orthodox control was weakened and a greater base of support was developed for their movement, the prospects for creating a Conservative institution were bleak. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Beckelman Berenson, interview by Marlene Cohen. Portland, Me., 28 February 2000.

these Jews continued to meet informally until they had gained the legitimacy that they would need to form their own institution.

This legitimacy would come as changes occurred within Portland's Jewish community. Throughout this period, a growing migration to the suburbs and a religious crisis helped to break down the strong Orthodox community that asserted itself with the creation of the Vaad Hoir. In this regard, Portland's Jewish community began exhibiting characteristics very similar to those in other cities and towns across America. Conservative Judaism throughout America experienced a large increase in popularity throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and as Portland began to exhibit many of the features that led to the proliferation of Conservative Temples throughout America, the Orthodox structures began to lose their hold on the community. To understand this shift, we will turn to two of the most important changes to affect Portland's Jews in the 1940s: religious crisis and suburbanization.

The religious crisis in Portland can be traced to a period prior to 1929. In Portland, as in most places in America, religious observance outside of the synagogue was declining. Whereas at the turn of the century most of Portland's Jewish men attended shul regularly, by the 1930s and 1940s norms had changed. Many Jews began to disassociate themselves with religion, and those who remained connected worshipped much less frequently. Konnilyn Feig's oral history project focuses heavily on the actual practices of the Jews of this community, and most do not seem to reflect the Orthodox institutions they had so adamantly retained. Therefore it is critical to make a distinction between the maintenance of Orthodox institutions and the practices of the Jewish community. While the institutional framework was entirely Orthodox, the practices of

the members of these shuls were very often not consistently traditional. The oral history gives many examples of families who did not keep kosher or women who did not wear wigs, or families that went to shul only on holidays if at all. Often times, these Jews were from the second generation of immigrant families, and while not Orthodox in practice, these Jews remained loyal to the institutions of their parents. In addition, there was a very large sector of Portland Jewry that did not affiliate with any religious institution at all.<sup>2</sup>

In the early years of the century, however, the developing religious disaffiliation had not yet reached crisis proportions. Then, in the 1930s, a number of groups within the Portland Jewish community became dissatisfied with the institutional order. One of those factions was the Jewish youth of Portland, and the creation of a local branch of Young Israel in 1931 Portland helped to unite this group. Young Israel was a national movement that began in New York in 1913, with the goal of bringing “about a revival of Judaism among the thousands of Jews and Jewesses... whose Judaism is at present dormant.”<sup>3</sup> It sought to do this by adding decorum to the service, while maintaining the strict standards of Orthodoxy so that it could maintain its credibility with the elders of the community.

In Portland, Young Israel gained a great deal of support, yet it still created friction with the community’s old-guard leaders. I. Edward Cohen founded the Young Israel

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<sup>2</sup> Oral History Project in general. Specifically, this last claim can be made because the goals of men like Louis Bernstein, in creating the temple, was to pick up members who the other institutions had “lost and were out on the golf course on the High Holidays when they should be in synagogue; and we are bringing them back to a house of worship.” This idea will be examined later when examining the actual creation of Beth El. In addition, Arnold Potter claimed that in 1947-49, there were 900 families and only 400 were affiliated. The AJYB lists 3,300 Jews in Portland in 1948. Therefore, one can quite safely defend the assertion that there was a large sector of Portland Jewry not affiliated with one of the religious institutions.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Gurock, “The Orthodox Synagogue”, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 56; Jeffrey Gurock, “Overview: The Synagogue in America- A Historical Typology”, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19.

Club in Portland, and under the auspices of this organization, daily and Sabbath services were held at both Shaarey Tphiloh and Etz Chaim. In addition, the Sunday morning minyan breakfast was introduced, and the services acquired a reputation for decorum and congregational participation. Young Israel also sponsored athletic teams as a means of encouraging Jewish youth to participate in the Young Israel services. Rabbi Mendell



**Figure 4-1. Rabbi Mendell Lewittes. Photo from JCC.**

Lewittes arrived in Portland in 1936, helping Young Israel to gain popularity. Lewittes was a favorite of the younger generation. He held late Friday night services and often played in athletic contests with the children. Such conduct and practices were not expected of a traditional rabbi in Portland, and because of this, Lewittes may have been seen by the older generation as trying to impose unnecessary change onto Portland's Jewish community.

By 1942, Lewittes had left Portland, and Young Israel soon dissolved. Of course, the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941, and the loss of the young men of the community to the war effort must have played a large role in the decline of Young Israel. However, it is also likely that Lewittes' departure for a congregation in Dorchester, MA may have played a role in its decline. Lewittes was an advocate for change, and while this new modern Orthodox voice was heard for a short period of time, the end of Young Israel and Mendell Lewittes' time in Portland only served to reinforce the voice of the traditional Orthodox faction.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Band, *Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development*, (Portland: Jewish Historical Society, 1955), 49-50; Edward Sacknoff, interview by author, Portland, Me., 29 February 2000. Sacknoff, whose father Morris was the longtime president of Shaarey Tphiloh, claimed that the younger generation banded together to bring Lewittes and that his late Friday services featured mixed-seating.

However, it still seems to have united this new group that was dissatisfied with the Orthodox way of life. Despite Lewittes' departure, there is evidence that Young Israel still existed as late as 1945. That year, an article appeared in the *Center Bulletin* urging individuals to attend Young Israel's weekly Sabbath services. These services consisted of "responsive singing in which all members participate, thus making everyone feel that he or she is actively engaged in heartfelt prayer... All efforts are being extended to provide a modern and most enjoyable Sabbath service for all."<sup>5</sup>

When Lewittes left Portland in January 1942, the Vaad Hoir began to search for a new rabbi. However, this search was complicated because of the development of this new faction in Portland Jewish life. There was a greater number of Jews who had become disenfranchised with the Orthodox regime, and while these individuals were not supporters of the Conservative cause, they took a stand against the traditional Orthodox faction that controlled religious life. An editorial printed in the Jewish Community Center *Center Bulletin* dated February 27, 1942 claimed to represent the view of the younger groups.

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 these 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

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<sup>5</sup> Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 9 November 1945.

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 interests 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 in 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 rekindle 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 concern to them.<sup>6</sup>

This editorial emphasizes several points. Most importantly, it identifies a distinct element of Portland Jews who had become dissatisfied with the religious institutions of their community. These individuals, mostly the younger generation of the Portland Jewish community, certainly felt increasingly alienated from religion and from the affairs and decisions of the community. They saw the community that the elders had developed as a community in which their views were not welcome. Despite the three Orthodox synagogues, the community hired only one rabbi under the auspices of the Vaad Hoir. Therefore, there was no room for variation within an Orthodox framework in Portland, and it became difficult for those in favor of a liberal Orthodoxy to coexist with the traditionalists. This sentiment created a large section of the community that united in their common feelings against the control of the Orthodox institutions. Despite the pleas of the younger generation, the elders of the community hired Rabbi Aaron Greenbaum to

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<sup>6</sup> This editorial first appeared in the Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 27 February 1942. It was later reprinted in Band, 82-83.

serve as community rabbi at the three shuls. Rabbi Greenbaum worked to keep Orthodoxy's stronghold through various programs including an adult education program.<sup>7</sup>

While the 1942 editorial clearly indicated a schism within the community, it was not yet of crisis proportions. However, that soon changed, as the decline in affiliation among the youth was paralleled by a decline in enrollment of the Hebrew School. This decline was attributed to the rise in numbers of Jews who were moving to the suburban Woodfords section of the city, and community leaders looked for new ways to reach these children. In November 1944, Dr. Jacob I. Harstein, a professor of education at Yeshiva College, found that the low enrollment in Portland was due to "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..."<sup>8</sup> The response of the Hebrew School was an attempt to convince the community that despite its affiliation with the Orthodox community, the school featured a progressive curriculum. In the September 28, 1945 edition of the *Center Bulletin*, Reuben Resnick, the director of the Hebrew School urged parents to give their children "The benefit of the school's new program." The article continues, "The Portland Hebrew School this year is introducing new and modern methods of instruction. 'We must view Jewish education on the basis of our present living', [Resnick] said, 'therefore we are endeavoring to create interesting experiences for the Jewish child in a Jewish school.'"<sup>9</sup> In spite of these appeals, enrollment did not increase dramatically. In 1944, sixty pupils enrolled in the Portland Hebrew School. The

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<sup>7</sup> Band. 89.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 19 October 1945, 6 April 1945; Band, 83-85.



new philosophy increased enrollment to 91 for 1945, and by 1948 the enrollment had dipped slightly to 85. However, this was in a community of 3,300 Jews!

The reason for low enrollment may have been that the school's curriculum was not consistent with the reasons that parents sent their children to Hebrew School. Parents of Portland's Jewish youth, when asked to rank the subjects of primary importance in Jewish education in 1948, responded quite interestingly. Ninety-seven percent of respondents suggested that Bar Mitzvah preparation was of primary importance. Ninety-six percent felt the same way about Jewish holidays and festivals, and 91% and 90% respectively for modern Jewish history and current Jewish events. A reading knowledge of prayers ranked fifth, and study of Talmud and bible ranked only 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> respectively. Speaking knowledge of Hebrew ranked twentieth, despite the school's heavy emphasis on Hebrew texts.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the Hebrew school's agenda was not shared by its constituency. Likely in response to the dwindling interest in the community Hebrew School, the Jewish Community Center reopened its Sunday School in October 1945. This school was more secular and met only once per week. It focused on Bible stories, holidays, customs, and ceremonies. In 1948, this separate school had an enrollment of only 52 children, 35 of whom were girls. Despite these attempts to raise enrollment, neither Hebrew Schools could capture the attention of the Portland Jewish community.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander S. Kohanski, *Survey of Jewish Education Portland, Maine*, (Jewish Federation of Portland, 1948), 14-15, 23-24. Kohanski report, 14-15, 23-24; Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count A People: American Jewish Population Data 1585-1984*, (New York: University Press of America, 1990), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Center bulletin, 10/26/45, Kohanski report described JCC school curriculum in 1948. The school had first opened in 1942- there is no mention of its activity in 1943 or 1944, yet the bulletin says that the school was reopening in 1945.

Therefore, the religious crisis was quite visible by 1945. Not only were there many unaffiliated Jews, but affiliated Jews were quite worried about their children's level of identification with Judaism. To address the problem, local institutions attempted to update and modernize. Young Israel conducted decorous, youth-oriented services, and the Portland Hebrew School introduced new teaching methods while the Jewish Community Center Sunday School offered courses once per week to try to reintroduce many of the youth to Judaism. This was a crisis of major proportions, as despite the Orthodox affiliation of Portland's religious institutions, many members of the community no longer identified with their synagogues. The mere existence of Portland's Orthodox religious community began to be threatened by a lack of interest.

However, pressures to re-affiliate with religion were present throughout American Jewry at this time, especially in the years following World War II. The Nazi Holocaust heightened Jewish awareness across America, and many who were unaffiliated sought new methods by which they could identify with Judaism. Gilbert Rosenthal describes this desire for identification.

World War II changed the patterns of thinking and acting of the post-World War I generation of Jews. The Holocaust shook American Jewry to its very foundations. Gone was the great thrust to be Americans. Gone was much of the old alienation. Gone was the desire to run away from Judaism. Gone, too, perhaps was the sense of complacency that proclaimed, "It can't happen here." Jews became Jews again- reluctantly perhaps, but nonetheless positively. Synagogues burgeoned; Jewish suburbs grew; Jewish education was enriched and Day Schools proliferated; Reform and Conservative Jewry expanded phenomenally; Orthodox streamlined its operation and became credible and even fashionable. The American Jew felt a greater Jewish identification; he needed to *belong* even if he felt no need to *believe*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gilbert S. Rosenthal, *Four Paths to One G-d: Today's Jew and His Religion* (New York: Bloch, 1973), 5, Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1998), 140.

This identification was fostered for many in Portland through the Jewish Community Center. Formed in 1937, the JCC provided a forum whereby this Jewish identification could occur, although this was a secular organization. However, this connection to secular Jewish life was not enough for many Jews. Portland's Jews, like Jews across America, sought to re-identify with their religious heritage, and it was this urge that led to the creation of a Conservative congregation.

The re-emergence of an interest in Judaism, while partially a response to the war, was also closely attributed to the increasing suburbanization that occurred throughout America. This suburbanization was also present in Portland. Band estimates that by 1942, about half of the Jewish population was residing in the Woodfords section of the city. The Kohanski Education Report of 1948 also found that 52% of the child population of Portland Jewry resided in the Woodfords section.<sup>13</sup> With this move to the suburbs, Portland Jews began to break their ties to the Orthodox community that was located downtown. They were no longer living close to the synagogues or the ethnic community that had developed. It became practical to build a new institution in Woodfords, although many Jews welcomed the opportunity to break with the old community and redefine their community in the suburbs.

Jack Wertheimer, in *The Conservative Synagogue*, demonstrates that across America, United Synagogue affiliation skyrocketed from 350 congregations in 1945 to 800 congregations by 1965, and that these new affiliates were generally located in the suburbs. Wertheimer then asks why these new institutions chose to align with the Conservative movement. Several of his answers seem applicable in the case of Portland.

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<sup>13</sup> Band, 83., Kohanski, 1. The Woodfords section of Portland begins in the upper-left corner of the map on page vii, outside of Portland's city limits as represented in this 1896 map.

One reason he argues is that Jews who had previously been affiliated with Orthodox institutions were no longer satisfied with Orthodoxy. This certainly appears to be the case in Portland. Wertheimer further offers another convincing argument. He claims that these Jews who were moving to the suburbs were forced to:

sever their ties to the ethnic communities that had sustained them in urban areas. Having been raised in densely populated Jewish enclaves where identification with Jewishness, if not necessarily Judaism, was taken for granted, they now found themselves in far more integrated neighborhoods that provided no natural outlet for Jewish identification.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, as these Jews sought new ways of identifying as Jews, the Conservative synagogue, with its multitude of programming, youth activities, and progressive religious services became increasingly appealing. Marshall Sklare agrees with this notion, arguing that:

Suburbanization brought with it the problem of the maintenance of identity, and it was to the synagogue that the new Jewish suburbanite tended to look for identity-maintenance. The result was that the synagogue emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as the crucial institution in Jewish life. And Conservatism exemplified that which was most appealing to the suburban Jew.<sup>15</sup>

Thus in Portland, as elsewhere across America, the Conservative movement took on new momentum.

Part of the Conservative agenda that was appealing to the suburban Jew was the concept of family seating. American suburban life stressed the family unit, and this aspect of Conservative Judaism brought American ideals in line with religious practice. Family seating also elevated the role of women in the Conservative Temple. Women felt marginalized in the Orthodox service partly because of their segregation in the women's galleries. According to Jonathan Sarna:

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<sup>14</sup> Jack Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue", *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 124-5.

<sup>15</sup> Wertheimer, *Conservative Synagogue*, 124-126. Sklare, *Conservative Judaism*, 256.

Gallery seating for women was not what they had in mind. It violated the American norm of family seating. It ran counter to modern views on the position of women. And it proved dysfunctional to synagogue life, since in America, Jewish women played an increasingly important part in all religious activities, and felt discriminated against by the gallery.<sup>16</sup>

Because women in Portland were not satisfied with their place in the Orthodox community, they took an active interest in Conservative Judaism. Louis Bernstein, one of the founders of Conservative Judaism in Portland, recalled that the Conservative group “was really sparked by women... Mrs. Elias Caplan, Mrs. Frances Elowitch... Ruby Packard... They wanted a Conservative movement and they asked me to get a group together, which we did.”<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, Conservative Judaism had a wide range of appeal to the suburban Jew in 1940s and 1950s America. In addition to elevating the role of women, family seating also stressed the new family identities in the suburbs. The shift to suburbia was not simply a geographical split, but also indicated a break with the older generation and the older institutions, allowing Jews to re-create their Jewish identities without these influences. Conservative Judaism gained popularity in the suburbs because of its compatibility with suburban American life, but it also gained popularity because of its focus on Jewish education and youth activities. For these reasons, parents of the baby boom generation affiliated with Conservative institutions to help their children create a Jewish identity. The desire of these parents to foster a Jewish identity within their children can be understood from a brochure for a synagogue in Levittown, NY.

Most of our people have had little previous contact with synagogue life, having heretofore regarded the synagogue as the province of their elders. Many have not

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Sarna, “The Debate Over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue”, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 379.

<sup>17</sup> Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Louis Bernstein, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September, 1977. Louis Bernstein should not be confused with Lewis Bernstein, who was also involved with the effort to start a Conservative institution in Portland.

seen the inside of a 'shule' since their Bar Mitzvah. Now, however, they feel it is time that they 'grow up'... The responsibilities of parenthood have led many to rethink their position with regard to the Jewish heritage which they now seek to maintain in order to be able to transmit it to their children.<sup>18</sup>

The Jews of Portland were also similar to these national trends with their desire for better Jewish education and youth programs. It was quite widely understood that many members of Conservative institutions joined simply so that their children could begin attending religious schools. According to a 1950 survey, 40% of schools did not even charge tuition, but instead financed the schools through membership, thereby increasing their numbers. Jewish education was in need of improvement nationally, as in Portland, and the Conservative movement capitalized on this idea.<sup>19</sup>

These national trends brought a rather diverse group of individuals together in 1947 to create a Conservative synagogue in Portland. This group included not only parents who wanted better Jewish education for their children, but also women advocating family seating, and youth urging a greater emphasis on youth programming. Suburban families who sought to re-connect to Judaism also joined individuals who had recently moved to Portland, as well as those who had identified as Conservative since the days of Temple Israel. On July 23, 1947, a letter was mailed to members of the community inviting them to a meeting on July 30<sup>th</sup> at the Jewish Community Center to discuss the possibility of creating a Conservative temple. The letter, signed only "The Committee", is reprinted below.

Dear Friends,

The Jewish Community of Portland has for many years felt the need of a Conservative Synagogue.

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<sup>18</sup> Wertheimer, *Conservative Synagogue*, 126.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 127.

For this purpose, a meeting will be held on Wednesday evening, July 30<sup>th</sup> at 8 o'clock at the Portland Jewish Community Center. Mr. Louis Bernstein will preside.

We are undertaking to call this meeting to ascertain:

1. Are you interested in this movement?
2. Shall services be held this Fall on the High Holy Days at the Cameo Theatre, the use of which has been generously offered to us by the owners?

Your attendance will definitely establish your interest and your absence will be construed as a negative vote on this important situation confronting Portland Jewry.

There will be no solicitation of funds at this meeting.

Sincerely yours,

*The Committee*

This meeting served as a means by which all of the groups dissatisfied with Orthodoxy were able to come together. Over one hundred men and women attended and the group decided that there was sufficient interest to proceed in organizing High Holiday services for the fall. The group elected Benjamin Lazarus as its first president, and immediately began planning.<sup>20</sup>

However, this group was quite heterogeneous in their reasons for supporting the creation of a Conservative synagogue. In August 1947, Rabbi Morris V. Dembowitz arrived in Portland representing the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Dembowitz was the director of the New England region, and when he spoke on the ideals and practices of Conservative Judaism, "It was obvious that no concepts of the principles motivating Conservative Judaism were common to the whole group." Clearly the Jews at this meeting were of quite diverse background and were supporting Conservative Judaism for very different reasons. Yet, "The faith of this group and its desire to explore the possibilities of the Conservative approach were undimmed." A large group of Jews

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<sup>20</sup> All information in this paragraph and below, except when explicitly stated, comes from the TBE dedication book, "Our Temple History" section, written in 1950.

in Portland were ready to reject the Orthodox control of their community and they were willing to align with the United Synagogue in order to do this.<sup>21</sup>

Plans were finalized in August for the coming High Holiday services, and the group named itself Congregation Beth El. On September 14, 1947, the group held their first services in Frye Hall on Spring Street. Rabbi Ephriam Bennett was called to act as guest rabbi, and Sylvan Ginsburg served as cantor. The services were described as consisting of “beauty and dignity, simplicity and sincerity... No one can forget the impact of solemnity effected by the guest rabbi... nor can one fail to remember the tasteful floral decorations, the unaffected chanting of [the] cantor... and the wholehearted participation of the congregation in the services.”<sup>22</sup> These services were a mix of old and new; familiar and unfamiliar, and most distinctively, families sat together. At Friday evening services between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Shabbat Shuvah, it was decided to continue the efforts of Congregation Beth El on a permanent basis.

However, the Orthodox community mounted one final attempt to retain its hold on the Portland Jewish community. With the departure of Rabbi Greenbaum, Rabbi Morris Bekritsky was hired to serve as Rabbi of Etz Chaim and Shaarey Tphiloh. Bekritsky had come from a congregation in Utica, NY that had converted to Conservatism, so he was acutely aware of the burgeoning Conservative faction.<sup>23</sup> In Bekritsky’s first month in Portland, he held a joint board meeting between the directors of the two shuls on January 18, 1947. At this meeting, Rabbi Bekritsky:

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<sup>21</sup> TBE dedication book, “Our Temple History”. Dembowitz’s title was obtained through his rabbinical school fine at the Ratner Center.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Band. 85; Minutes of Shaarey Tphiloh; Bruce Bekritsky, interview by author, Providence, Ri., 10 November 1999.



Expressed his disappointment in the lack of militancy on the part of the Directors in dealing with the conservative movement spreading in the city. He stated that he had been prepared since his coming here to meet this challenge, but the Directors have been apathetic. He claimed that if unchecked, the conservative movement will continue to grow and will dominate the entire religious life of the community. He insisted that action be taken immediately and that the Directors recognize the potential threat.

He made three proposals:

1: To appoint a committee to meet with some of the conservative leaders and discuss the whole problem.

2: If necessary, he would be willing to conduct Friday Night Services at Beth El and would do away with their possibly hiring a conservative Rabbi which would have the effect of keeping the community intact.

3: If the above two proposals did not work out, it would require further strategic planning even to the extent of having the Vaad Hoir build a new synagogue for the entire community in the Woodfords area under its supervision.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this attempt to keep Beth El in the Orthodox camp, the forces were too strong and the members of Beth El desired a more definitive break from the Orthodox community than Rabbi Bekritsky offered. Therefore, Temple Beth El decided to join the Conservative movement and went forward in planning the growth of this new movement in the city.

Soon, a temporary synagogue was set up at 509 Forest Avenue. On November 14, Friday night services were held with temporary Cantor Alfred Goldman, and the Seminary sent a different rabbi each week. Attendance was strong throughout the year, and the women's auxiliary of Beth El was formed on November 19<sup>th</sup>. In August 1948, Rabbi Ephriam Bennett arrived in Portland with his family, having been engaged as Temple Beth El's first permanent rabbi. High Holiday services were again held at 509 Forest Avenue, and weekly service attendance increased dramatically. In addition, the Rabbi introduced Friday night educational forums after services, and attendance at Saturday morning children's services was also popular. The formal installation of Rabbi

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<sup>24</sup> Shaarey Tphiloh minutes, 18 January 1948.

Bennett occurred on December 3-4, 1948, and the growth of the Temple forced its move to 520 Forest Avenue. This property, donated by Lewis Bernstein, was loaned to the congregation with the stipulation that the group seek a permanent building as soon as possible.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 4-2. Rabbi Ephriam Bennett. Photo courtesy Temple Beth El.**

In August of 1949, Rabbi Bennett and the board of directors agreed to extend his contract for an additional year. High Holiday services in 1949 were held in the Woodfords Congregational Church, which was donated for this purpose. In September, the Temple Beth El Hebrew School opened with an immediate enrollment of 57 children. Enrollment doubled for the following year, and youth activities included services, plays, pageants and parties. The Temple in 1950 claimed that “The young people in general came to feel that the Temple was a much theirs as their parents’”.<sup>26</sup>

On Sunday September 11, 1949, groundbreaking ceremonies were held for a new temple building on land between Devonshire Street, Deering Avenue, and Wadsworth Street in the Woodfords section of Portland. Fund raising programs were developed, and membership increased from about 70 families in 1947 to 206 by the end of 1949. Despite the unfinished state of the building, the 1950 High Holiday services were held there. The rapid growth of Temple Beth El was astounding. The original founders had established the Temple primarily to attract members who were not actively involved in religion.

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<sup>25</sup> TBE dedication book, “Our Temple History.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Louis Bernstein summarized that his goal in helping to create the Temple was not to take Jews from the Orthodox institutions, but rather to attract Jews who were not otherwise affiliated. Bernstein wanted to pick up the members that the Orthodox institutions “have lost and are out on the golf course on the High Holidays when they should be in the synagogue.” He continued, “We are bringing them back to a house of worship. It will be the happiest day of my life when you can take them from us, and bring them back into your place.”<sup>27</sup> In reality, however, Temple Beth El did take many members away from Portland’s orthodox institutions, although many who affiliated with Temple Beth El also retained their membership with their Orthodox synagogue. Etz Chaim appears to have been particularly hard hit, although statistics are not available. Daniel Epstein says that the difference was extremely noticeable. “It was a general exodus. One year there were over 300 people at services [at Etz Chaim], and the first year [Temple Beth El] opened up, it went down to about 75.”<sup>28</sup> Temple Beth El thus drew its members from several sources and managed to unite those sources to support Conservative Judaism in Portland.

Why then was it that these groups endorsed Conservative Judaism in 1947 after rejecting it so strongly in 1929? Most obviously, the old Orthodox framework of the community had begun to break down. While this breakdown helped to create the many categories of Jews who were dissatisfied with Orthodoxy, it was the multiplicity of these groups that were dissatisfied that allowed a real challenge to be posed to the Orthodox community. These sections of Portland’s Jewish community were either dissatisfied or alienated by the existing structures, and were thus not as opposed to creating something

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<sup>27</sup> Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Louis Bernstein, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September 1977.

<sup>28</sup> 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.

new. The young people of the community could not identify with the religious structures present. Younger children did not attend Hebrew School, nor were older children and young adults attending services. These individuals did not feel a part of the Orthodox community, and it was the process of suburbanization that gave this group an opportunity to create a new community around their needs. Parents who wanted their children to be introduced to a better notion of Judaism also began to break with the old community that would not legitimize the religious changes they wanted to make. These individuals created a new leadership structure that gave to power to Jews who had previously had little voice in the community.

In addition to family seating, the increased prominence of women in the Conservative service also appealed to suburban Jews. Many women were no longer willing to be relegated to the upper galleries, and the opportunity to sit with their families was appealing. Jews living in Woodfords also wanted a synagogue in their neighborhood. In addition, an inflow of immigration to Portland accounted for a newer population of Jews who were already familiar with Reform or Conservative practices and who did not want to live under the structures of the traditional Orthodox community.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the faction of Jews who, since Temple Israel, had tried to create a Conservative institution were more than willing to lend their support to this cause. This had been a goal of theirs for 35 years, and the growing resentment toward Orthodoxy finally provided these Jews with legitimacy in their movement.

This legitimacy developed as Portland's community lost the homogeneity and cohesiveness that had characterized it since the end of the nineteenth century. The

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<sup>29</sup> Band, 111.

migration to the suburbs created an opportunity for a new community to develop with new institutions and new leadership. Those with views different from the majority now had the opportunity to help define this community, whereas before, their ideas could find no outlet. Religious crisis combined with suburbanization to create a need within Portland's Jewish community for a Conservative institution, and this need was filled by the diverse group of individuals who attended the first meetings in support of this new temple. Portland's Jews finally established a synagogue that reflected their desire for change. It had taken seventy years for an alternative to Orthodoxy to gain legitimacy within the community, and the creation of Beth El dawned a new era in the religious life of the Portland Jewish community.