

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Mr. and Mrs. Max B. Epstein

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

Our World In Turmoil

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

CHAPTER 9

Dedication To The Nation's Cause

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Had such a fusion taken place, the rabbi engaged

would undoubtedly have been Rabbi Zucker. No mention is made in the records of the intentions of the leaders with respect to the position of rabbi. Needless to say, the negotiations were instituted and carried on behind the scenes; whatever the lay leaders had in mind, Rabbi Zucker was probably completely ignorant of it. Striar, Epstein and other leaders of the movement called together the trustees of Beth Abraham, Toldoth Yitzchak, and Beth Israel and placed the proposition before them. Beth Abraham and Toldoth Yitzchak showed little interest in the plan and soon withdrew from all discussion. The first difficulty, the refusal of Beth Abraham to give up its synagogue building even for a limited period, sounded the death knell for further negotiation.

In 1947 Rabbi Zucker asked the congregation to permit him to retire from his rabbinical duties in order to accept a teaching post at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Beth Israel struggled in its attempts to find a spiritual guide with the wisdom to weld the factions already appearing on the horizon.

The ministry of Rabbi Zucker extended over a period which included dark days and trying years for the congregation, the Jewish people, the nation and the world. But it also included many noble victories as well. It was a goodly heritage which he transmitted to his successor, Rabbi Avraham Freedman, who assumed the leadership of the congregation in 1949.

Meanwhile, Jews in Palestine moved forward to fulfill the fond dream of a Jewish state. It was not to be realized until much Jewish blood had been shed. Here at home Jews gave, as they never had given before, to make that state possible and to build it as a secure home for the thousands who were coming into Israel. On May 14, 1948, the state of Israel was proclaimed and Jews rejoiced everywhere. In a measure it was almost a personal triumph for Beth Israel's Zionist pioneer Myer Minsky.

The years between 1912 and 1949 were years of creative adjustment to the tumultuous changes — many of them tragic, many of them hopeful — which had been wrought in the life of the world and of the Jewish people. Beth Israel like every sensitive instrument of the spirit in modern times, had been marked by the consequences of the wars which had shaken the world, by the tragedy which overwhelmed the Jewish people in Europe and by the various cynical philosophies which encouraged indifference and even hostility to organized religion.

These ups and downs of world history, these peaks of hopes and nadirs of despair, are reflected on microscopic scale in the ups and downs of the congregation's history — the prosperous first decade of the 20th century and the raising of the mortgage on the



Cantor Zelig David stands with members of the Beth Israel Choir about 1930. The members were: (left to right) Irving Emple, Sidney Chason, Bernard Weisberg, David Rapaport, Harold Chason, Murray Raben, Edward Weisberg and Teddy Goldberg.

synagogue; the trials and turmoil of World War I; the renewed prosperity of the '20s; the plunge into the Great Depression; the recovery and the new hopes shattered by the second World War; the period of the postwar progress against an ominous background of an uneasy peace and a Cold War . . . thus history traveled a rugged and uneven course.

But Beth Israel also has been uplifted by and has played its part in the great creative enterprises through which the Jewish spirit made its response to the challenge of our time. There has been no major venture in Jewish life which has failed to evoke warm response from the faithful membership of the congregation, and much of the dynamic personal leadership which these movements required was recruited from among the Beth Israel membership. The great charitable ventures following each of the world wars, the Zionist dream, now in the first stages of fulfillment in the state of Israel, the great galaxy of service agencies linked together in the Jewish Community Council, the movement to establish genuine good will and mutual brotherliness between the various denominational groups of the community — all of these and a host of other redemptive activities found that Congregation Beth Israel had prepared the hearts and minds of its members to be generous, imaginative and enthusiastic in their response.

CHAPTER 10

The Move Toward Conservatism

World War II had ended. The period of the "leaders" had ended. The men who had held the reins of synagogue leadership for decades were passing to their reward one by one, and there were few to replace them. But a new impasse loomed. The postwar years, 1945 to 1950, were years of drastic change at Beth Israel. The new generation had gradually begun to separate itself from the strict ritualism of the past. Perhaps the most serious problem confronting Beth Israel was to crystallize religious policy with respect to the various ideologies in Jewish thought and practice.

"Shevorim!" . . . Congregation Beth Israel again was called to action by the sound of the Shofar in the fall of 1948. The quick and impatient melody of the Shevorim was heard, and it pierced, like knife thrusts, to the core of the spirit.

The Shevorim, symbolic of the growing-up years, pointed to a period marked by ideological conflicts. There were some in the congregation who favored Orthodoxy, and others who favored moderate Conservatism. Heretofore, the congregation was passive in the extreme. It was prayed at, preached at, sung at, invoked, blessed and dismissed.

The pattern of Jewish living was changing and the native Jewish generation was restive and dissatisfied with the uncompromising Orthodoxy of their parents. This new generation of American born Jews preferred to battle the turbulent currents of religious controversy rather than to drift with the tide of tradition. They felt keenly the desirability of harmonizing Jewish tradition with the demands of modern life. The "old shul" never made any changes down through the years in its activities — certainly not in the religious service. Even the physical structure of the synagogue remained the same except for a few minor alterations.

A native movement among a small group of Beth Israel members advocated adoption of the Conservative platform as early as the 1920s; it soon lost its momentum and was revived only when Myer Segal came upon the scene in 1927. This movement from the outset was, of an external nature. There was no attempt to foist the philosophy of Conservatism upon the existing synagogue. This new religious congregation was named Beth El and elected Myer Segal as its first president. Services were conducted at the old Talmud Torah building on State Street, and in 1935, Rabbi Harry Zwelling, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York was called to occupy the pulpit.

Services were conducted in Hebrew with English readings. Men and women were permitted to sit together and the services were enhanced by a mixed choir.

This "rebellion" was later to become the focus of attraction to many of our religious minded Jews who could accept neither the rigid Orthodoxy transplanted from Europe, nor the radical theories of American Reform Judaism. Beth El was founded on the conviction that traditional Judaism can function as a vital spiritual force in this country in complete harmony with the best in our American culture. Twenty years would elapse before Beth Israel would institute these innovations and its membership reunited in a common purpose.

The situation reached the boiling point in 1948. Naturally in a congregation consisting of the old and the young, there arose a dissatisfaction with the status quo and a clamor arose for a change in the ritual.

Specifically, should women be permitted to sit with men? Should there be a use of the vernacular in the traditional service? These questions became topics of heated debate. The traditionalists, and there were many of the elders who had strong feelings for the time-honored services, fought against the "reformers." And the answers that came from the senior members nearly split the congregation into islands of Orthodoxy and Conservatism, and stirred the kind of bitter and passionate espousal of one side or the other that only religious controversy can create. To the modern Jews, the religious philosophy of Judaism was a living vital issue — something that requires vigorous action, not merely nicely turned phrases. This new element was dissatisfied with rigid Orthodoxy, but was unwilling to go as far as Reform. This was the beginning of a bitter feud between the advocates of change and James Gimpel Striar. His father had fought as unrelentingly 60 years ago. Striar was an exponent of the traditional Orthodox service and warned against the changes which would impair the essence and purity of the Jewish religion. He struck out against these new proposals when he admonished the membership with the charge: "Reformers create schisms and promote division besides impairing the unity of our faith." He and his family left the congregation and worshipped elsewhere rather than see the shibboleths of their faith changed. They did, however, retain their membership in the congregation. And so the battle raged on