

DEDICATION OF BETH ISRAEL

Bangor Has the First Jewish Synagogue Erected in Maine.

SERMON BY RABBI LASKER

Impressive Ceremony in the New Church Sunday Afternoon

Sunday was a happy day for the Hebrews of Bangor. After years of constant work, economy and self denial the little handful of the sons of Abraham who eight years ago met for the first time to worship in their faith in Bangor in the house of one of their number, were able to consecrate to the God of their fathers a fine new house of public worship, spacious and well appointed; a place where they can come to renew their faith; where heart can be united to heart as hand to hand; where the widow can receive support, the orphan protection and the penitent come for supplication and prayer.

The dedication ceremonies of the substantial new structure which occupies a prominent site on Center Street, took place at 4 p.m.

The church was brilliant with the numerous and nicely arranged incandescent lights even to the altar lights and the ever-burning blue light in front of the ark. Everything in the interior is bright and shining in oil finish relieved by the handiwork of florist Beers in festoons of laurel, evergreen and holly with bouquets of lilies, chrysanthemums and cut flowers in profusion.

The congregation, now numbering nearly one hundred persons and a good attendance of the Gentiles including many prominent people of the city filled nearly every seat in

the house. Pullen's full orchestra was stationed in the gallery and played an opening selection and also during and after the services. The usual opening service of the church followed the processional being led by Rabbi Goldinkoff and escorting Rabbi Raphael Lasker of the church of Ohabei Shalom of Boston, one of the most distinguished rabbis of the church in New England.

After an invocation Rabbi Lasker announced the subject of his afternoon's discourse from the text: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bringeth tidings, good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation," Isa. 52-7. In the brief sermon that followed Rabbi Lasker held the closest attention of every hearer, Jew and Gentile as well. He is a man of grand personality, of magnificent physique and imposing dignity. A richly modulated voice and expression carries feeling with every sentence. His diction was elegant in its pure English, amazing in its simplicity yet conveying the fullest meaning even intensified when he repeated in the Hebrew tongue the words which meant so much to him, words of peace, happiness, salvation. In his opening he extended hearty congratulations, praise and thanks to the people of congregation Beth Israel for the almost wonderful fruition of their earnest efforts. He brought from his church in Boston, Ohabei Shelom, greetings of love and sympathy. In his sermon proper he followed the words of the prophet and continued the passage as three messages: First, a message of peace; second, a message of happiness; third, a message of salvation. Each he analyzed carefully and thoroughly

and besought his people to live in peace with all men; that happiness came not of wealth, not of position, not of knowledge but by the salvation of faith in the living God. He charged the people that as the chosen messengers of God, the bearers of the law forever, that they should bear in mind the education of their children in the principles of the faith, the ten commandments and the Pentateuch.

The sermon was orthodox and not out of place from any pulpit in the land and its soundness of its teachings.

The actual consecration was a simple but beautiful declaration delivered by the rabbi with uplifted hand consecrating the house to the only and living God.

After the sermon ended there was a selection by the orchestra and the benediction in the usual form of Christian churches in English and Hebrew.

The orchestra gave several numbers after the service.

From a Gentile's standpoint the services were differed but little from the ordinary Christian worship. The ceremony was impressive and decorous. The custom of the congregation as well as all connected with the service wearing their headgear seemed rather odd at first but was soon forgotten. The new church is practically completed lacking but a few of its furnishings including an elaborately carved ark of the covenant now being constructed.

The church is still in need of aid and it seems not a great remove from true charity to help a sect who in all sincerity are striving for a suitable place in which to worship in the faith of their fathers.

CHAPTER 4

The Formative Years

Whether or not Rabbi Lasker directly aided in the formation of Beth Israel, there is no question about the fact that he was often called upon as a "friend in need" in the early days. It was he who dedicated the first Synagogue on Center Street. It was he to whom the Congregation turned for advice and it was he who assisted the leaders of the Congregation in their search for a rabbi.

In the continuing search for a rabbi, the Congregation published notices in the leading Jewish journals of both America and Europe. Beth Israel was not alone in seeking a rabbi. Not only in America, but in Europe as well, congregations were looking for spiritual leaders who had been well indoctrinated. In explaining to Rabbi Seltzer that the Bangor post at \$1,000 a year was preferable to a New York pulpit at \$1200 a year because of lower living costs and "greater opportunities", Rabbi Lasker wrote:

"In my eyes, the congregation is honorable and generous, and you will have a good chance to live quite a satisfied life, especially since a sphere of activity is open before you which cannot be found in New York as far as extent and fruitfulness is concerned. Our Jews in America suffer, it is true, from a lack of general education, but indifference finds no name here, and basically they are able to be educated. "They do count amongst their membership a few baale bittim with Yeashivah backgrounds."

An invitation was extended and accepted, and Rabbi Seltzer was elected rabbi of Beth Israel in April, 1903 at a salary of \$1,000 per year. The choice was a most fortunate

one. Seltzer was a vigorous, dynamic young man of 35 when he came to Bangor, and proved to be one of those great personalities who shaped the destinies of Beth Israel.

Seltzer was a man of great erudition, combined with simple candor, that verged on the humble. He loathed pomp and pretense of any kind. He considered his gifts of intellect as a public trust. It was his duty to translate his knowledge into terms that the average housewife could readily understand. This remarkable ability to make the profoundest thoughts simple as the alphabet is evidenced in his "Shabbos Drosches" still remembered by our senior members.

When he accepted Beth Israel's invitation, although he was only 35 years old, he was a seasoned master of traditional Hebrew literature, an eager student of Philosophy and the secular classics. The vigorous content of the sermons as well as their weekly regularity attracted good sized audiences. We dare assume that then as now Jews attended the synagogue to drink in the wisdom of the rabbi more than they did to pray.

The building of the synagogue had been financed with notes, and when these came due, the Congregation was strained to the utmost to meet them. Rabbi Seltzer volunteered to have his salary reduced from \$20 to \$17 per week, with the understanding that it would be restored when times got better. Many of the members were in arrears on their dues and efforts to collect them met only rebuffs and insults that only a diplomat like Solomon Harris could counter.

ALLGEMAINNE ZEITUNG des JUDENTUMS
JAN. 2, 1898

In Bangor, Maine, wurde am 19. Dezember eine Synagoge eingeweiht. In Maine, wie in Neu-England überhaupt, haben sich erst seit dem russischen Exodus Gemeinden gebildet.

AMERICAN ISRAELITE
1897

FIRST SYNAGOG IN MAINE.

Bangor, Maine, Dec. 20.—The first Jewish house of worship in this state was dedicated here yesterday with the customary solemn services. The English portion of the ceremonies, including the dedication sermon, were delivered by Rabbi Raphael Lasker of Boston and the Hebrew portion by Rabbi Goldinkopf. The congregation numbers about 100 souls who were all present at the dedication as were many Christian visitors. The local press speaks very highly of Dr. Lasker's sermon.

THE JEWISH MESSENGER
SEPT. 3, 1897

BANGOR.

The corner stone of the synagogue being erected by the Beth Israel Society was laid Aug. 22d with appropriate ceremonies. Mr. Louis Goldberg, of Bangor, presided. Prayer was offered by Rabbi Goldenkop, and remarks were made by Hon. J. F. Snow and Mr. F. H. Parkhurst, of Bangor.

Hazan Goldenkopf, having served the congregation for nearly four years, expressed the desire to return to New York in the not too distant future. Although it was not openly discussed at the meetings of the congregation, the committee began to look around for a successor to him. The congregation was steadily growing and it was decided to call an ordained rabbi as its spiritual leader.

It is an interesting commentary upon the religious life of the young community to note that Goldenkopf, who had already served a New York congregation with distinction and who was an acknowledged leader, was not a rabbi in the European or modern sense. He was a highly qualified shohet and mohel as well as an excellent reader and cantor. He was respected by his congregants for his spirituality and eloquence. Reluctantly, Beth Israel accepted Goldenkopf's resignation and speedily re-engaged Morris Golden who had served Beth Israel in these capacities before the arrival of Goldenkopf. Mr. Golden had no desire to serve in an official capacity and urged the membership to seek the services of a full-time shohet so that he might return to his private affairs.

The need for funds to keep the synagogue going was always a dire problem. Having exhausted the charity of the local Jews and the out of town sources as well, the congregation turned to what had proved in other religious institutions to be the most practical way of raising money—a lottery. It is not recorded whether or not official permission for such a venture was ever granted. The committee in charge was appealing to the gambling instincts of the public. Later that year Simon Kominsky, Louis Goldberg, and E. H. Rosen were able to report that a "gold watch had been offered as a prize and the winner (no name is mentioned) turned the watch back to the synagogue." Mr.

Kominsky suggested that the watch be presented to Rabbi Seltzer and it was so voted. The turn of the lottery wheel marked the end of a temporary crisis.

A knotty problem arose and required immediate solution. An itinerant peddler died in a nearby town. He was not a member of the congregation, although a year before, fearing that he was about to die, he called in several Jews and recited the vidui, or confession of faith; and he had been married to a non-Jewess by a Christian minister. The question was: should he, or could he, be buried according to Jewish custom? One group in the congregation at first insisted upon a legal interpretation from a Boston rabbi as the congregation at that time did not have a rabbi of its own. But another group, somewhat more realistically, felt that an immediate decision would have to be made. After all, the corpse could not be kept unburied until an answer would be forthcoming. Consequently, the decision was left to a panel of experts, consisting of Rudman, Harris, and Philip Hillson. It was their judgment that this wayward Jew be buried in a corner of the cemetery, without ritual washing, without a shroud and without a ceremony.

Traditionally, Jews always took care of their co-religionists in trouble or need; the Jews of Bangor, even though their congregation was in financial difficulties, were determined to do what they could. In those days, a Jew in a strange city went straight to the synagogue for help. Hence, it was logical that the new society should have been organized by and in Congregation Beth Israel. There always had been a *tsedaka*, or synagogal charity fund, which used free-will offerings for the relief of the needy; but in 1898 the need was felt for a specialized branch of the fund. As a result the Ezrath Orechim, or Society for Destitute strangers—the first Bangor Jewish charit-

able organization, and the earliest one in the state of Maine whose records have survived—was created, with Israel Frank as its president and Philip Hillson its secretary, and Samuel E. Dennis its treasurer.

The financial problems of Beth Israel continued to be a source of worry to the leaders of the congregation, and the cause of serious friction between some of them. Those who had signed notes at the bank for the loan to build the shul were pressed by the creditors for payment. They appealed for help. One of the signatories even hired a lawyer to represent him against the congregation should the bank take legal action. The complicated arrangements that had to be made to meet payments falling due, the collection of subscription promises, the claims of men who had advanced money on the congregation's behalf—all the struggles of a young, and far from affluent, religious group—fill the minutes of Beth Israel. Yet, the difficulties did not discourage the Jews of Bangor. Squabble and scrape they might, but they were determined to care for their religious needs, and expand they would if that proved necessary.

The handful of men who formed the congregation in 1888 were confronted, as Jews, by three basic needs fundamental to their religion; circumcision for their sons; hallowed ground in which to bury their dead; and kosher meat, which equalled the other two needs in importance as far as these devout and strictly Orthodox Jews were concerned. And so the story of this congregation during its early years is replete with the constant struggle to obtain these services. A Reverend Kemer had been servicing the community but it was decided to send him to Boston "to be examined with regard to his capabilities to act as shohet." Mr. Kemer, perhaps motivated by prudence, refused to go, and the congregation was faced with the problem of finding a replacement.

And now began a long succession of reverend gentlemen, hired with high hopes, disappointing the membership after a few months or a year, to be followed by another and another. Time and time again the official minutes in faded handwriting tells of advertisements being placed in the Yiddish periodicals of the day, for "Hazan, Shohet, Mohel, a teacher being preferred." Either the congregation was fantastically unlucky in its selections, or the skills required were not to be found in one man. This search for a master-of-all religious functions continued to dog the congregation up to the 1920's.

Yet one cannot help but feel a secret sympathy for the reverend gentlemen in their difficult position. Take the case of the Rev. P who had been tendered a special vote of thanks for his "noble exertions" and assured that his own feelings "as a sincere Jew in advancing the cause of the Kehila will be sufficient stimulus for continuing the same." Six months later disillusionment set in and complaints were made by members of the "incapability of Mohel-shaft." A committee of three was set up to visit the alleged injured children and the committee formally reported, in full anatomical detail, the results of their inspection. The complaints were found to be justified, and the gentleman received his marching papers forthwith.

Other Shohetim had other troubles. A Mr. Rubenovitz had a charge of slander preferred against him by a member, and in return, one year later, he formally complained in writing that "Mr. Wolper had grossly insulted him in the public market." Then there was the case of a temporary shohet who was discharged "owing to him being no Mohel, also of his incapability of teaching on account of a defect in hearing." Perhaps the congregation was too hasty, for the following month a desperate telegram was sent to the Chief Rabbi Margolis of Boston:

"Situation is open. Have no meat. Send shohet at once." Signed: S. E. Rudman, Simon Kominsky.

There were social problems in those days, too. Take the case of the shohet, who was brought to Bangor from New York, at a cost of \$20. It seems that the reverend gentleman liked to relax his spirit with spirits. He was accused of conduct unbecoming to a shohet and placed on probation. He was requested to take an oath in the presence of a quorum of the board of directors, that while engaged by the congregation he would "never imbibe any alcoholic beverages except when prescribed by a physician for medical relief." But alas for human frailty! Six weeks later a complaint was made by Max Ginsberg that the shohet had violated his oath.

After its first decade, Beth Israel endured and survived many changes. Achieving stability and a degree of affluence, the congregation had been joined by a fresh group of newcomers drifting in from the Chassidic strongholds of Russia and Poland. The Ashkenazic or German ritual was firmly entrenched at Beth Israel. It was the ritual of the progenitors of the founding fathers. This change from the Sephardic ritual for these "Russishe" Jews concealed a tension among the members of the congregation, for those favoring the Spanish ritual could find no ground for mutual compromise. As is often the case, debate centered not so much around the profundities of faith as around its incidentals. A familiar gesture, a well-loved phrase, a simple melody—these were the divisive forces that brought discord to Beth Israel in 1902.

At the outset the Sephardim proposed not a separate synagogue, but only a separate service, retaining membership in Beth Israel. They seem, primarily, to have been asking a method of maintaining unity which would have allowed them a measure of autonomy and self-expression. Had Beth Israel accepted this plan, the Jewish com-

munity might have continued united, even when, at some time later, separate houses of worship were erected. Financial control and the administration of all necessary activities in the community would have remained centralized. We learn, however, from the minutes of Beth Israel that this compromise was not effected. The Sephardic group headed by Pinchos Striar sent its petition for a separate service to the board of directors. The request was rejected. The



PINCHOS STRIAR

opposition was led by Joseph Byer and Morris Rosen. Simon Kominsky and Nathan Ginsberg were the advocates of compromise. In addition, a petition signed by the majority of the Beth Israel membership, upheld the action of the board of directors in refusing to permit a separate service. The petitioners expressed their full and entire approbation of the conduct of the board, and asked them to continue to oppose any measure or proposition having a tendency to destroy the well-known and established rules and customs of the founding fathers.

The synagogue seems to have been permeated with the fear that if these newcomers were permitted a voice in determining the conduct of the congregation, they

would, sooner or later, abolish the established ritual and transform the synagogue into a Sephardic place of worship. To the older members, the very existence of the Ashkenazic ritual seemed to be at stake.

Immediate and decisive action had to be taken. Beth Israel, in desperation, decided on a plan which destroyed all possibility of reconciliation between the two groups and which made secession and the consequent disruption of the Jewish community inevitable. This decision of the board of directors had as its purpose the restriction of control to the dominant Ashkenazic membership, the majority group which favored the retention of the Ashkenazic ritual. Joe Byer argued that if the admission of newcomers was restricted, or, perhaps, if they were barred from membership unless they accepted the prevailing customs, there would be little opportunity for complications to arise in connection with any future attempt to change the mode of worship.

Following this decision of the board, a group of persons waiting for the usual automatic admission to membership were informed that they must apply to the board of directors for admission and that their applications would be placed before the investigating committee in regularly assembled meeting. At the meeting of the committee in July of 1902, only two out of the group of nine who had applied for admission were accepted.

Compromise was no longer possible and the "Russishe" group headed by Pinchos Striar seceded, taking with them enough families to constitute a minyan of their own. Thus was Congregation Beth Abraham Anshe Sfarad, the mother synagogue's first daughter, born. The reasons which were officially advanced for this decision were: A.) a desire to permit the Sephardim to worship according to their own customs; B.) the increase of the Jewish population, which necessitated the formation of another

synagogue; and C.) the distance at which many lived from the Center Street location. In a polite letter, they informed the Board of Directors of their intentions; they added that they would contribute a fair sum for the services of the Beth Israel shohet-mohel.

The Board did not manifest any great enthusiasm over the rift. A heated meeting indicates that the president, Harry Cohen, was instructed to advise the seceders that the services of a shohet-mohel would be provided for a fee to be determined at a meeting of representatives of both factions. The use of a Sepher Torah was offered until such time that the new synagogue could provide one of its own. Underlying these amenities was the feeling that the secession could have and should have been avoided.

Two years later, due to internal strife, Striar with a bare following was to return to Beth Israel disgruntled but far from disillusioned.

In time, however, the hatchet was buried; relations between the mother synagogue and her offspring began to improve. It is difficult, indeed, to determine where to place the blame. The Beth Abraham people had suggested the separate service as a solution for the problem of mixed groups. The Beth Israel leadership had opposed the plan on the ground that it placed the united Jewish community in danger of being rent in twain. The motives of both sides may have been noble; by their actions, nevertheless, they destroyed the very institution both sought to save—the united Jewish community of Bangor. Seven years later the recriminations of shohetim of both Beth Israel and Beth Abraham sparked a controversy that continued unabated for a decade.

Beth Israel, however, continued to be sovereign among the Jews of Bangor. The rise of the new congregation did not weaken its position and the community as a whole looked up to Beth Israel as the leading congregation in the region.