

first Jew to hold political office in Portland. The Common Council, the lower chamber, and the Board of Aldermen, the upper chamber, comprised the legislature of Portland. In later years, several Jews served in both the Common Council and the Board of Aldermen, as well as the State Legislature.

Although a few Jews managed to succeed financially by the turn of the century, the Jews as a group were not a significant element in Portland business life. Only gradually, thereafter, did they become established in important areas of economic life and exert an influence on the city's development.

Internally, the Jewish community was a network of religious, fraternal and charitable organizations which embraced the entire Jewish population. Three Orthodox congregations were in existence, each one striving for leadership. How they came into being will be treated in the following chapter.

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#### REFERENCES IN CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>To Dwell in Safety, Mark Wischnitzer, 1949, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup>In his *Handbook of Portland*, 1888, John Hull writes: "The Jews in this city number more than 60 families."

<sup>3</sup>Representative Businessmen of Portland, George Bacon, 1891.

## CHAPTER V

### RELIGIOUS AND EDUCATIONAL LIFE

The Jewish community of Portland was founded as a religious settlement. The primary interest of the pioneers was to establish a community that would satisfy their need for worship, religious study and ritual observance. Even the so-called secular organizations had to satisfy certain religious wants. Thus we have seen that the principal aim and accomplishment of Portland Lodge I.O.B.B. was the purchase and supervision of a burial ground for Jews. When this need was fully satisfied, there was little left for Portland Lodge to do.

The earliest settlers and those who followed brought to Portland the tradition of East European Orthodox Judaism which took root here and flourished. With the exception of a brief period during the first World War, Orthodoxy prevailed as the only form of Jewish religious life until 1947. In that year Congregation Beth El was formed and affiliated with the conservative movement thus marking the end of the long period of Orthodox uniformity.

Until the advent of Congregation Beth El, Portland Jewry was probably unique in America for having withstood, for so long a time, the tendency toward differentiation that prevailed in nearly every community. Thus, from the earliest days, the Orthodox Jewish community of Portland was referred to as "the Jerusalem of America" by other Jewish communities. And just as Jerusalem, even in romantic retrospect, was not free from intra-community differences, there was hardly a time when Portland was completely unified, even in its religious life.

Until the early 1880's, there was no synagogue. For purposes of prayer and religious study the worshipers met in the homes of several learned Jews. In time two distinct groups emerged, depending on their place of worship. One centered around Barnard Aaronson and the other around Jacob and Isaac Judelsohn. Although at the start the difference was only residential, it later became somewhat ideological. The congregation of Barnard Aaronson was aligned somewhat with "modernism," so the latter congregation regarded itself as truly "traditional." Then when

Barnard Aaronson and his brother-in-law, Joseph H. Wolf, formed their group officially as Congregation Sharith Israel, the Judelsohn group remained apart and later formed Congregation Beth Judah. Both congregations were formally organized in 1883.

Congregation Sharith Israel, in its earliest years, met at 261½ Middle Street over a store. Barnard Aaronson served as president of the congregation until 1889 and S. Rosenberg was the vice-president. For two years it managed its affairs without the services of a permanent rabbi. Then in 1885 it secured Rev. Israel Levine, a typical small town rabbi. In addition to performing regular rabbinical functions he also served as *shochet* and Hebrew teacher. On one occasion he had a seat of honor at an important civic function, the Centennial Celebration of the City of Portland.

On July 4, 1886 Portland celebrated its 100th anniversary under that name. The observance took the form of parades, feasting, merry-making and oratory, since the date coincided with Independence Day. Representing the Jews, Rev. Israel Levine, Barnard Aaronson and Joseph H. Wolf were seated on the dais before the City Hall, together with the other civic and religious dignitaries. Mr. Aaronson spoke for the Jewish community. We reproduce a portion of his address because of the light it casts on Jewish origins in Portland and the outlook of the earliest settlers:

I beg to thank the committee on Sunday Services for extending an invitation to our church to participate in an historical discourse pertaining to the rise and progress of religion during the past century in the City of Portland. As president of the Hebrew Congregation, Sharith Israel, as a devout follower of the faith, and a citizen of our city for the past twenty years, I hope the observations I here note may be of some value in the records of the future and awaken some interest in the present amongst those who have not watched closely the movements of Judaism in their midst. A quarter of a century ago there was no representative of the Jewish Church in your city. In 1866 or 1867, several families pitched their tents here, and by frugal habits, honest efforts and application to their various vocations soon succeeded in becoming some of our most important citizens.

The form of religion is Orthodox, and yet thoroughly in thought and action. As a class, the Portland "Sons of Israel" compare more than favorably with the Hebrews of other cities. . . Our synagogue at present, while not elaborate, is

impressive, and on Saturday morning our Sabbath service is conducted by a competent rabbi, and the Word of God is uttered and re-echoed by willing and earnest mouths. . . We number some sixty families, and over the major portion being of the middle or poorer class, yet content with their lot, and always ready and willing to lend a helping hand to the old or infirm, the struggling or the unfortunate. May the next "centennial celebration" show as much marked progress as the present has over the past, and may our children be proud of the efforts of their fathers and say: "In the past we live".<sup>1</sup>

Congregation Beth Judah was located at 36 Deer Street in the building where Jacob Judelsohn resided. It was the smaller of the two congregations and until 1901 had no rabbi. Isaac Judelsohn often served as its *chazzan* (cantor) although it was not his official position.

In 1890 Sharith Israel brought to Portland Rabbi Hyman M. Lasker who served for five years. Rabbi Lasker was born in Lomzha, Poland, and educated at the yeshiva in Kovno where he received his rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Israel Elchanan Spector, one of the leading rabbis of Russia. Rabbi Lasker came to America in the late 1880's, having already acquired a reputation in Europe for scholarship. During his stay he organized Talmudic study groups in Sharith Israel, placing them on a firm foundation so that in later years they produced their own leaders, among them Michael Rubinsky, Abraham J. Bernstein and Joseph Modes.

When Rabbi Lasker received a call from Buffalo, New York, he was replaced by Rabbi A. Sharshafsky, of whom little is now known except that he served from 1895 to 1897. In that year Nathan Druker was president of Sharith Israel. This fact is noted because, by strange coincidence, the new rabbi who arrived in that year was named Lazarus Druker. Rabbi Druker was not a properly ordained rabbi although he used the title. He was typical of many new arrivals from Europe who had studied in *yeshivot* and were skilled in ritual slaughtering, and as a result appropriated the title of "rabbi." His background, however, was satisfactory and he ably performed the requisite functions of his office.

During the 1890's, Isaac Abrams, one of the early settlers, purchased a building on Fore Street for a new congregation, Beth Hamidrash Hagodol, but commonly referred to as "Abram's *shul*." It soon acquired a following as large as the other congregations

and even maintained a separate Hebrew School. When its members later united with those of Sharith Israel to form Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh, the Fore Street building was used for several years by a small Chassidic group.

By 1900 Portland Jewry could boast of a population of eighty families and three religious congregations. A hard core of early settlers was firmly entrenched and had achieved a favorable financial status. Already in 1890 Joseph H. Wolf had acquired the reputation of being a rich man and he demonstrated this by contributing handsomely to a fund for a new synagogue building for Sharith Israel. The new building was erected at rear 79 Middle Street and served as Portland's leading house of worship until Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue rose on Newbury Street in 1904.

Sharith Israel inaugurated the new century with a new president, Israel Davis, and a new rabbi, Solomon David Ha-Kohen Sprince. Like Rabbi Lasker, Rabbi Sprince had studied with leading rabbis of Russia and Poland. After serving in several Polish communities, he moved to Paris in 1889 to become rabbi of a Montmartre congregation. There he became a close friend of Zadoc Kahn, Grand Rabbi of France, and was closely associated with the new Zionist movement. Shortly after his arrival in America, he accepted the rabbinical post in Portland after hearing it described as the veritable "Jerusalem of America."

In 1901 Congregation Beth Judah acquired its first rabbi, Jacob Feinstein, and as a distinction, Rabbi Sprince was referred to as the Chief Rabbi of Portland. This title he bore for only a brief period, for in 1902 he left for a rabbinate in Montreal, Canada. His leaving coincided with a period of unrest, for many of the leaders were disturbed over the lack of unity in Portland's religious life. The multiplicity of congregations for a community so small was deemed a waste of energy and resources, and attempts were made to form a single large congregation. This aim was achieved in 1904 and marks the beginning of a new period in the history of Portland Jewry.

### EARLY JEWISH EDUCATION

The education of the young has always been regarded among Jews as a primary obligation. This was underscored in the rabbinical literature as well as the tradition of the people. And in the Talmud we find the significance of education emphasized in proverbial sayings such as, "Jerusalem was destroyed because the instruction of the young was neglected." Furthermore, it is said: "The world is saved by the breath of school children. Even to

rebuild the Temple, the schools must not be closed." The early Jews of Portland were as responsive to this call as were Jews all over the world from time immemorial.

The first elementary Hebrew school, or *cheder*, was organized in 1884 at 34 Deer Street by Shiah Berman, its first president, Isaac Santosky, Jacob Judelsohn and Isaac Judelsohn. It started with six pupils and one teacher and was called the Portland Hebrew School. There is no lineal relationship between that school and the present school of the same name.

Jewish education also was offered in the small congregational schools of Beth Hamidrash Hagodol and Sharith Israel. Private teachers also gave lessons but the schools were able to establish an organized curriculum which led the students beyond the field of elementary reading and writing skills into the study of the Bible and the Talmud. The students attended classes all year, starting at age five or six and continuing often into their late teens. Bar Mitzvah, at age thirteen, was not the terminal point, but rather the start of a period of more intensive learning. This approach to Jewish education was possible only in a community where Jewish values were held in high esteem.

Although Portland was regarded as a "Jerusalem", not all the Jews were completely observant. There were some who violated the Sabbath or who were not punctilious in other observances, but they were the exception. They violated the mores of the community but felt uncomfortable in the prevailing religious climate when activities became public knowledge. Even as late as the 1930's the religious climate of Portland, the objective censor, was determined by Orthodoxy. And, in spite of a gradually increasing defection in the ranks, Portland regarded itself for all practical purposes as an Orthodox community.

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### REFERENCE IN CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup>Centennial Celebration, Portland City Council, 1886, pp. 144-145.