

Temple Beth-El



Ithaca, New York

BEING JEWISH IN ITHACA

Rabbi Glass and I have been working on a "history" of Temple Beth-El and the Jewish community in Ithaca for the past several months. I thought the 90th anniversary would be a good time to explore the records in Kroch Library at Cornell, which houses the archives of TBE, and to interview a number (8) of people recommended by Rabbi Glass. Since we already have good chronological histories of the Temple by Rabbi Aber's widow, Hanna Aber Morus, and the wonderful pictorial history by Matt Braun (in the social hall) I thought that I would focus on the experience of being Jewish in Ithaca and, specifically, at Temple Beth-El. This brief piece is but a taste of a longer reflection that I plan to offer in two lectures this fall and in a longer written history.

First, I want to offer a few words about chronology. Thanks to the research of Hanna Aber Morus we know that the earliest presence of Jews dates back to 1804 when a Mr. Isaacs owned a store. We don't hear about Jews again in Ithaca until the 1850s and 1860s when a number of Jewish-owned stores advertise in the Ithaca Journal. The old City Cemetery also bears witness to the existence of Jews in Ithaca. According to Anne Kramer, the wife of Sam Kramer (Sam was the first Bar Mitzvah in Temple Beth-El), the first person to be buried in the old Jewish section of the City Cemetery was Morris Lubliner, a German Jew. He died in April, 1856. The next two burials were in December 1856, of Caroline Cohen, who had died in childbirth, and her fifteen-day-old infant son, Isaac.

In the mid-1800s Polish and German Jews, especially, contributed to the growing number of Jews in the United States, in general, and in Ithaca. The number of Jews in Ithaca, however, remained small- no more than 20 Jewish families, Hanna Aber Morus estimates - until the turn of the twentieth century. That population would swell with the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe from the 1880's to the mid 1920's. And it will be these immigrants who formed the first congregation in Ithaca, Chevra Kadisha, in 1906. But it won't be until 1924 that Temple Beth-El was organized and not until 1929 that a building to house it was completed. I'll say more about this later, but here I want to emphasize that my contribution to the history of Temple Beth-El will go only until about 1980, a few years after the arrival of Rabbi Glass, with the significant shift for the role of women in the service.

Where did early members of Temple Beth-El come from? Based on my reading of obituaries, other documents at the Kroch library and interviews prior to World War II most members were either immigrants from Eastern Europe or, perhaps more surprisingly, from New York City, Rochester, or Syracuse. Like many small towns with Jewish communities, peddlers and small businessmen made their way to Ithaca from larger cities in New York State in the middle and late 19th century and early twentieth century. This was the case, for example, with the Dobrin family, the Rothschilds, owners of the Rothschild Department Store (the original Ithaca Rothschild was a Jew from Eastern Europe); and Isadore Altschuler, the manager of the Bool Floral Company. After WWII,

Ithaca and Temple Beth-El included survivors from Nazi Germany, Poland, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, as well as new Jewish faculty coming to Cornell and more merchants from New York City, Rochester, and Syracuse.

Indeed, from the 1950s to the 1970s stores owned by Jewish merchants, such as the Irv Lewis clothing store; Altman and Green jewelers, managed and later owned by Frank Hammer; Maurice and Leonard Kassman pharmacies; Cramer Jewelers; Kramer Auto Supply; and many more that dominated downtown Ithaca and other merchant venues. And, of course, we need to include other Jewish professionals: physicians, such as Dr. David Abisch (an émigré from Nazi Germany and the father of Rita Melen) and Noah Kassman; and lawyers, such as Louis Thaler. Needless to say, fulfilling their Jewish identity was only part of what they sought. These men also wanted to feel part of the greater community. Therefore, they joined with their fellow businessmen and professionals at the Yacht Club and Country Club, once those establishments began accepting Jews as members after World War II, as well as the Elks, the Masons, the Chamber of Commerce, and Rotary. For those who were merchants, business was essential to their lives. Very few were observant enough to close their businesses on the Sabbath, though past Ithaca Journal issues and interviews reveal that some stores did close on the High Holidays.

But if those merchant congregants did not rigorously practice their Judaism, ethnic Jewish identification was important to them. Temple bulletins from those years reveal an active involvement in the Daniel Rothschild local B'nai B'rith chapter, the Zionist Organization of America, adult learning groups, and especially (more on this later) Hadassah and the Temple Sisterhood.

The children and teenagers were served by a sometimes-active Young Judaea chapter, B'nai B'rith Youth, and especially United Synagogue Youth (USY), much enriched and enlivened by our former member Arnie Hammer. Of course, parents also sent their children to the religious school, and many of my interviewees had fond memories of the school, where either they or their children attended, if for no other reason than those children befriended other Jewish children.

Friendships also mark the degree of ethnic Jewish identification among our earlier congregants. Almost all the people I spoke with said that their closest friendships were with other Jews. It was interesting to see also how many belonged to the Elks and local Masonic lodge. These were hardly "Jewish" organizations, but Jews would find other Jews there they could relate to.

As in other small Jewish communities, many Jews felt different from the majority population. This feeling of "otherness" was reflected in part by their bonding with other Jews, whether at the Temple or in organizations where other Jews could be found. Many of the interviewees expressed this sense of being different surfacing as they or their children mingled with mostly gentiles in school or in extra-curricular activities. Certainly, they made friendships, sometimes close ones, with their non-Jewish classmates and found close Jewish friends at religious school. Still, I can't help but suspect that many young people left

Ithaca not only because they went away to college and gained better occupational opportunities in a larger city but because larger cities had more Jews in them. I believe that this view comes both from the young people themselves and even from their parents who otherwise might want their children to live close by them.

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that Ithaca has been a hostile environment to Jews. On the contrary, most Jews have felt accepted and even welcomed. Overt anti-Semitism has been rare, but it has existed. Aside from personal snubs, older members remember when the Country Club and Yacht Club were closed to them. One interviewee also remembers that her parents were refused a home rental in the early 1940s because they were Jews. The most notorious episode of anti-Semitism occurred in 1982 when both the Temple and Rabbi Glass's house were desecrated with anti-Semitic slogans. But Rabbi Glass was moved by the rallying of Christian leaders to protest these desecrations, demanding police protection and offering to help in any way they could.

Rabbi Morris Goldfarb, the head of Cornell Hillel for many years, and Rabbi Glass were and have been actively involved with interfaith activities in Ithaca. Rabbi Glass has counted several good friends over the years with many of the ministers of local congregations. But good relations with the gentile community go back to the beginning of the founding of Temple Beth-El. If Isador Rucker, one of the early leaders in the Temple, was the prime mover for building Temple Beth-El he was joined by Christian Ithacans like Livingston Farrand, the president of Cornell University, Robert H. Treman, and William Boyd, the vice-president of the First National Bank of Ithaca. In addition, many gentiles helped raise funds for the Temple building not only locally but by writing congregations in other parts of New York State for support. Gentile ministers, mayors, and college presidents have also participated at the inauguration of new rabbis and sent their good wishes for the High Holidays. Since we had no rabbi at the time, even our first Torah in Temple Beth-El was inaugurated by Professor Nathaniel Schmidt, a Swedish born pacifist who was a professor of Semitic Studies and Hebrew bible at Cornell.

Cornell University and Ithaca College are very important to the congregation today. Not only is our membership enhanced by these faculty but the programs on Jewish themes brought by Cornell and Ithaca College draw congregants and enrich our cultural and intellectual lives. As early as 1874, New York City banker Joseph Seligman endowed a chair in Hebrew and Oriental Languages and History, and Cornell brought Felix Adler to fill the chair. Temple Beth-El's connection with Cornell Hillel has been particularly strong. In 1929 Rabbi Isador Hoffman was appointed to serve both Cornell's Hillel and Temple Beth-El. Hillel and Temple Beth-El continued to have strong connections as Hillel offered interesting programs for members of the Ithaca Jewish community, and students from Cornell attended High Holiday services at Cornell. More recently, in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s Rabbi Morris Goldfarb served as an important link between the university and our congregation. He belonged to our congregation and occasionally led services. But Cornell was not always hospitable to Jews. Before World War II there were very few Jewish faculty

members and, in fact, like many other elite universities Cornell had a quota on the number of Jewish students and faculty. This would only change in the 1950s.

Not surprisingly, the Jewish community in Ithaca has experienced organizational conflict from the inception of the first congregation. In 1906 seventeen men organized the first congregation in Ithaca at the home of Isador Rocker, a prominent tailor, to organize that congregation, Chevra Kadisha. Its character was variously described as “modern” and “liberal.” Alas, its modern, but not really Reformed, position on ritual met with opposition from more traditional Jews, who formed a competing congregation in 1921 called Agudas Achim. The latter only lasted until 1924, since there were only about fifty Jewish families in both congregations. The two congregations then merged at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Urband and were renamed Temple Beth-El (Mr. Urband became the first president). But the identity of the more traditional Agudas Achim would not totally disappear.

The continuing presence of Agudas was made evident in the struggle over who controlled the Jewish cemetery plots in the old City Cemetery and the newer plots at Lakeside Cemetery. (And the Kroch Library contains Board minutes of Agudas until 1941.) The newly formed congregation believed that with the legal merger of the two prior congregations into Temple Beth-El the latter had been given the legal rights to the cemetery plots. But on March 30, 1932 Aguda Achim sued Temple Beth-El over the plots. Representing Agudas Achim, Abraham Spolansky was the plaintiff and Dr. Phillip Sainburg, the president of Temple Beth El, was the defendant. No doubt, the conflict was as much about “traditional” versus “modern” Jewish values and practices as it was about who legally controlled the cemetery plots. The trial ended with a promised future decision. But I found no legal document until 1961 that turned over the cemetery plots to Temple Beth-El. By that time, there were only a few families from Agudas left. The rest had died or left Ithaca.

The transition for the role of women in Temple services also became a source of conflict but one that was relatively calm. Women had always played a very important role in Temple Beth-El. From the earliest minutes of the “Women’s Auxiliary” to the long entries from the Temple Sisterhood and Hadassah in the 1960s and early 1970s in the Temple bulletins it is obvious that Temple Beth-El depended heavily on the financial and activist contributions of women. But until the end of the 1970s women were not counted in the minyan nor allowed to have an aliya.

Fortunately, two developments converged in the 1970s. As Rachel Siegel pointed out in her eloquent and heartfelt contribution to the Temple Memory Book, the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly ruled that Jewish women could be counted in a minyan if the congregational rabbi approved. And in 1976 a new rabbi, Scott Glass, came to Temple Beth -El. In my discussions with Rabbi Glass he acknowledged that the “women’s issue” was not a burning one for him when he arrived. But it clearly was to some women in the congregation. Therefore, at the end of 1977 he assembled a committee to study the issue from the perspective of Halacha, what other Conservative congregations were doing, and

what the feelings in this congregation were. While the majority of the congregation did not seem to care strongly one way or the other, there were some who did feel strongly on whether women would have an equal role in the service.

On August 8, 1978, Rabbi Glass reported to the Temple Board and to the congregation a Solomon-like compromise. Women would be counted in the congregational minyan, unless they didn't want to be counted, and there would be a deliberate and slow implementation of women being offered aliyot. This is not the place to go into the halachic and practical reasoning of the Rabbi and the Temple committee, nor is it the place to go into the ins and outs of the compromise. But within a few years women would have equal rights in the service. As Rabbi Glass tells it, this development was made easier by the fact that Sue Hecht had been accompanying her husband Jaime on the Bima for an aliya for many years, and by the Rabbi being hospitalized for a life-threatening illness. In the meantime, the congregation became more concerned with the health of Rabbi Glass than the "women's issue" (actually two separate issues), and had a few months to accommodate to the new reality. In the end, very few members left the Temple, a few more objected but stayed, and most of the congregation gradually became used to the new reality. Perhaps the final seal on women's equality came when Carrie Regenstein became the first woman president (P.A. Rubenstein had served earlier as co-president) of the Temple Beth El Board of Trustees in 1992.

In conclusion, I want to thank all those who sent in memories for the Memory Book, and those I interviewed: Stuart Lewis, David Rogachefsky, Rita Abisch Melen, Helen Snyder Cogan, Arnie Hammer, Larry Baum, Rachel Siegel, and, of course, Rabbi Scott Glass, for whose leadership and guidance all my interviewees have been most grateful. I also want to thank those who have written histories of Temple Beth El and the Jewish community, including Hanna Aber Morus, Matt Braun, Anita Shafer Goodstein, and Anne Kramer. Finally, I extend my thanks to the librarians at the Kroch Library's Temple collection at Cornell University for all their help and to my wife, Linda Myers for helping me to edit this essay. (And I am still looking for corrections and more information, so please get in touch with me.)

Sandy Gutman

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