

TEMPLE BETH-ISRAEL 1921-1981

BY ELEANOR F. HORVITZ

This is the story of how one Temple ministered to the spiritual and social needs of its Congregation during its sixty years of existence. The origins of the first Conservative Temple in Rhode Island are described by Benton Rosen in a paper published in the *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*.¹ Legally chartered as the Providence Conservative Synagogue, it has always been known as Temple Beth-Israel. Its first New Year services were held on the evening of October 2, 1921. On February 28, 1981 the City of Providence purchased the synagogue building as a site for a neighborhood center. Thus, Temple Beth-Israel, Synagogue and Congregation, came to an end. The Congregation with its remaining members merged with that of the Conservative Congregation of Temple Beth Torah in Cranston. The joint Congregation assumed the new name of Temple Torat Yisrael.

A temple or synagogue is a many-faceted institution. The dictionary defines a synagogue as a building or place used by Jews for worship and religious study. The building at 155 Niagara Street, Providence, originally renovated from a German beer hall, met the physical requirements of a synagogue. But a temple is much more than a building for worship. The components of Temple Beth-Israel were diverse — a religious school, rabbis and many cantors, choir, Sisterhood, Brotherhood, and Daughterhood with their many activities, both cultural and fund-raising. Many clubs met in its building, such as the Boy Scouts, Young Judea, Masada, and United Synagogue Youth. Its many activities required leaders, workers, and the cooperation of the entire Congregation. It emerges as a group of very dedicated, loyal, and hard-working men and women largely from the same neighborhood. They survived three fires, World War II, and difficult economic times to worship together for sixty years.

THE FIRST DECADE — RABBI HURWITZ

Rabbi B. Leon Hurwitz, although not as yet ordained, assumed his duties as Rabbi of the Congregation in October of 1921. *The Providence Journal* of October 7, 1921 mentioned Rabbi Hurwitz in an article about *Sukkot**: "The Providence Conservative Tabernacle (modern Orthodox) begins this evening its three-day observance of the Succoth or Feast of Tabernacles, with a special service. Rabbi B. Leon Hurwitz will preach on 'The Succoth Message'. One of the picturesque features of this festival will be the great tent erected on the grounds of the temple at Niagara Street and Atlantic

*Festival of Tabernacles. Also rendered Succoth.

Avenue, to which members of the congregation will repair before the services have ended to enjoy refreshments and a musical programme. This tent is furnished with elaborate decorations and is hung with all varieties of fruits, boughs, leaves, and other foliage. The Succoth feast is under the auspices of the Temple Sisterhood. General services will be conducted by Rabbi Hurwitz and Joshua Bell."

Rabbi Hurwitz taught in the Sunday School. One of his students² remembered him as a round-faced man with a little mustache, who would clap his hands to bring the class to order. She still had memories of the smell of beer which continued to pervade the classroom located in the building's dank basement.

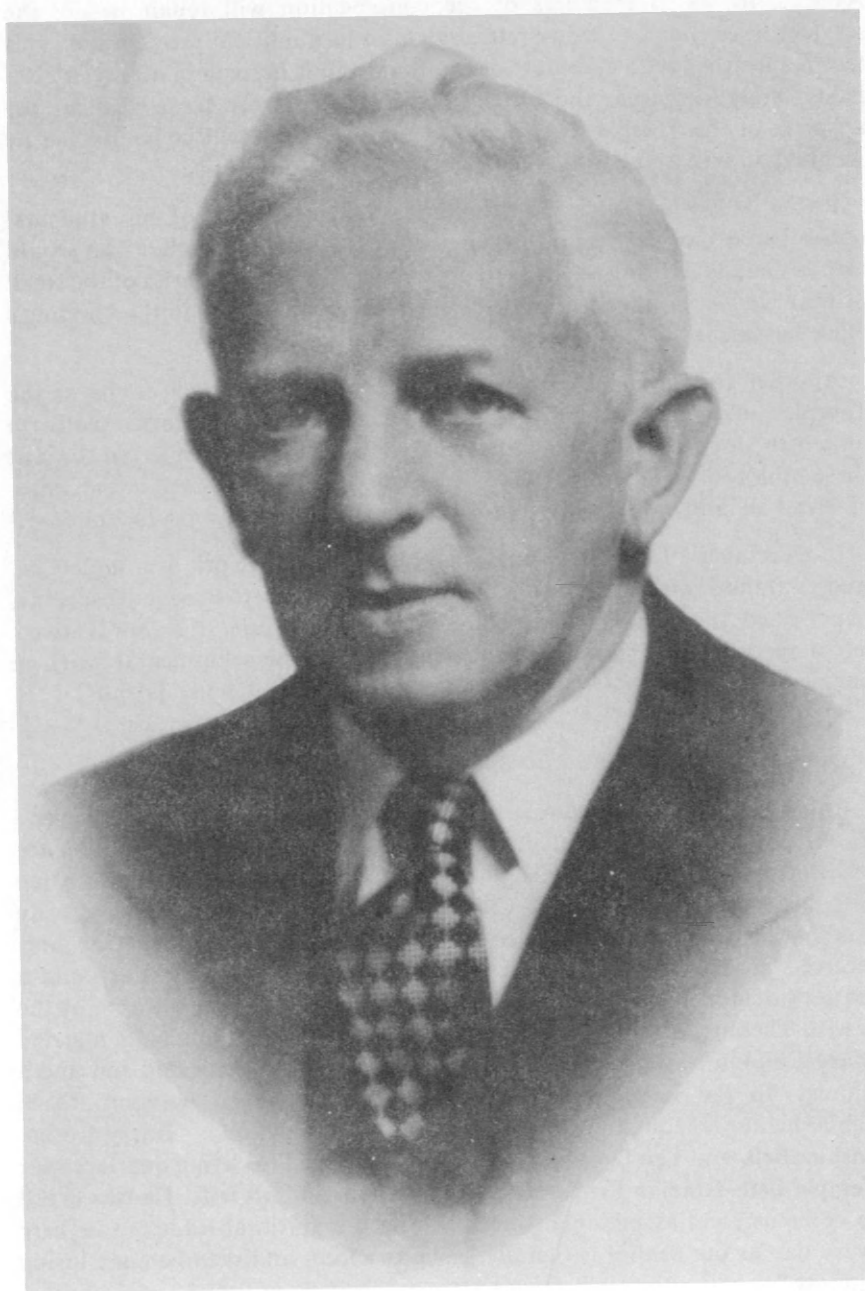
Another former member of the Congregation had recollections of the Temple's first year. Around the perimeter of the hall was a raised platform on which stood the old beer tables and chairs. Everyone preferred to sit at these tables for the services, while those who lost out had to sit in the center of the hall and cope with folding chairs that were prone to collapse.³

In December 1922, Rabbi Hurwitz returned to New York to complete his studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary. According to Benton Rosen, in a paper titled "Temple Beth-Israel Finds a Spiritual Leader,"⁴ Rabbi Hurwitz left a record of "remarkable organizational and developmental work in behalf of the pioneer Conservative congregation in Rhode Island."

RABBI MORRIS SHUSSHEIM ASSUMES LEADERSHIP

Rabbi Morris Schussheim of Columbus, Ohio was selected to replace Rabbi Hurwitz. His arrival in Providence was noted in *The Providence Journal* of December 26, 1922. Born in Austria in 1895, the Rabbi came with his mother to New York City in 1902, where his father had already established himself. He attended public schools in New York City and received his bachelor's degree from the City College of New York and a master's degree from Columbia University. He was ordained a Rabbi by the Jewish Theological Society of America. In 1921 Rabbi Schussheim married Mary Chipkin of New York, who, like himself, was a dedicated Jew and a Zionist. In the Rosen paper appear letters exchanged between Rabbi Schussheim and founding members of the Congregation — Harry Rosen, Joshua Bell, and Leo Grossman. The latter arranged for living quarters near Temple Beth-Israel in Providence for the Rabbi and his wife. He was urged to come as soon as possible, since "We need a spiritual leader to be here every day as our school is literally going to pieces and members are losing interest."

By the time Rabbi Schussheim arrived enough money had been raised to



Rabbi Morris Schussheim, D.D. 1895-1970



Temple Beth-Israel Religious School students, 1922.

purchase the Temple building, which had previously been rented. Plans were made for extensive renovations.⁵ A broad expansion of Temple activities was begun.

Frieda Rosenberg was one of sixteen students in Rabbi Schussheim's first confirmation class in 1923. The girls, she recalled, wore long white dresses, carried bouquets of white roses, and "looked more like brides than confirmands".

The Hebrew School was enlarged. Barnet Hurvich in 1924 became the first teacher. In 1925 he was replaced by Morris Shoham, who remained at the Temple until 1946. The bar mitzvah students *davened** together every Sunday morning under Shoham's tutelage. Pearl and Samuel Ernstof introduced the serving of breakfast to the boys of the bar mitzvah brotherhood. Under Mrs. Ernstof's direction breakfast was served to this group for 25 years. This custom, which they originated, spread to other synagogues throughout the country.⁶ Morris Shoham also served as director of the Junior Congregation service. He exerted a strong influence

*Prayed (Yiddish)

on his students in the religious school and he took a personal interest in congregational matters as well.⁷

As the Temple grew there were many changes and innovations. A constant, however, was the ongoing financial problems — meeting mortgage payments, salaries, and other expenses of the Temple. In the early days there were no “big givers”, and expenses of necessity were kept modest. The Congregation met its bills with a series of drives and fund-raising activities.⁸

Study groups for women and a men’s club were organized. A temple library was established with the proceeds of a religious school bazaar directed by Mrs. Schussheim. A choir was organized under the direction of Jonas Goldenberg, who volunteered his services. Goldenberg had sung with a boys’ choir in Europe and had had an extensive musical training.

Joseph Schlossberg served as cantor in the years 1922-1929 and 1934-1949. Son of a famous cantor, he taught the choir the Hebrew words by transliterating them into English and also taught them scores from his own memory to sing without written music. In later years he occasionally filled in as cantor when called upon.

In February of 1929 Rabbi Schussheim resigned as spiritual leader of the Congregation and moved to Palestine with his family. He was succeeded by Rabbi Jacob Sonderling.

RABBI JACOB SONDERLING BECOMES SPIRITUAL LEADER

According to Rabbi Jacob Sonderling’s son, Paul,⁹ his father had left Germany in 1923 because he felt that German Jewry had become dormant and that there was no one influential enough at the time to revitalize the German Jewish community. He considered America to be the key to the future of world Jewry. Members of the Congregation during his two years as Rabbi recalled him as a colorful man.

Several women congregants described him as handsome and dramatic — like an actor. One woman even likened him to her impression of what God must look like, with his long white flowing beard. The Rabbi was well known before his coming to Providence. He had made visits on behalf of the World Zionist Organization and had spoken to Zionist audiences in Providence prior to his taking the rabbinical post.¹⁰ Providence was one of the most active Zionist cities in the United States. The ten thousand dollars annual salary which he demanded was unprecedented at the time, particularly for a small new congregation. However, the money was raised.

He was described thus by Max Nussbaum in the 1965 Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis:¹¹ “He was the most colorful rabbi I



Rabbi Jacob Sonderling 1878-1964

have ever known. The long, black, and later white beard — famous on two continents — gave him the appearance of an ancient Patriarch. He called attention to himself by his mere presence. . . . He was a fascinating combination of extreme elements; of East and West; of Orthodoxy and Reform. . . . He was born in Lipny in German Silesia, which is on the East-West frontier (now part of Poland). He had a Hungarian mother and a Galician father, and both were from Chassidic stock. A Zionist from his early youth — Theodore Herzl called him 'My fighting Rabbi'." According to Nussbaum, "He was called in 1908 to the pulpit of the Hamburg Temple, the cradle of Reform Judaism. He held that position until his migration to the United States. During WWI he was the Chief Jewish Chaplain on the Eastern German Front and a member of Hindenburg's General staff." Nussbaum considered Sonderling "a teacher of teachers and a Rabbi of Rabbis; a man who brought drama to religion, Chassidism to Reform, Zionism to American Jewry, and kindness to his fellowman. He represented the totality of our Jewish heritage at its very best."

Rabbi Sonderling during his short stay at Temple Beth-Israel left a musical legacy. He was greatly interested in the role of music in the service. He was responsible for bringing Igor Greenberg (he later changed his name to Gorin) as Cantor for the High Holy Days of 1930. An interesting story is told about Gorin:¹² "Rabbi Sonderling traveled to Europe every summer. On one occasion he brought back a baritone hazzan (cantor). A reception for him was held at the Temple. One of the women members asked him if he knew a certain person in his home town. He said she was his mother. She said she was her sister, and that was how an aunt and her nephew came to meet. The pandemonium that broke out in the vestry that night was unimaginable". Igor Gorin went on to become a noted concert and motion picture singer. Rabbi Sonderling was also responsible for the installation of an organ — the first in a Conservative Temple.¹³ Rabbi Sonderling went from Temple Beth-Israel to Hollywood, where he became the movie stars' Rabbi, converting many famous non-Jews to Judaism.

RABBI MAURICE MAZUR COMPLETES THE FIRST DECADE

In 1931 Rabbi Maurice Mazur replaced Rabbi Sonderling. In that same year the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Temple was celebrated. Rabbi Mazur was the opposite in every way to his predecessor. He was a bachelor who kept to himself, a man well versed in English literature and poetry, but not a social person who could communicate easily with his congregation.¹⁴



Temple Beth-Israel confirmation class, c. 1928-1929.

THE SISTERHOOD

The Sisterhood was organized shortly after the establishment of the Temple. Its members were hard-working and dedicated. During the period of the Great Depression, the Temple, like all institutions and businesses of the time, experienced deep financial difficulties. The burden of the mortgage was taken over by the Sisterhood in 1933 during the presidency of Mrs. Leo Weiner. In the ensuing ten years the Sisterhood met the regular interest payments and reduced the principal of the mortgage by almost six thousand dollars. This very important obligation which the Sisterhood had assumed was characteristic of the vital role women played in the history of the Temple.

A dinner-dance under the sponsorship of the Sisterhood was held annually, usually in the old Narragansett Hotel. This was considered to be *the* social event of the Jewish community, according to some of the participants. While the entire membership joined in making this affair a financial and social success, the competence of the chairpersons was often mentioned. The program book distributed at the affair contained many advertisements and produced substantial revenue.

Edythe Jay in the *Rhode Island Jewish Herald* of December 12, 1941 described one such affair held at the Narragansett Hotel on December 9: "Temple Beth-Israel's annual dinner-dance was held in the Crystal Ballroom . . . the setting is admittedly familiar, as are the people about whom we're writing, but there's something different." It was two days after President Roosevelt's announcement that the United States had entered the war. The colorful gowns and gay atmosphere belied the dire events of recent days.

Despite the considerable effort devoted to the dinner-dance, many other activities engaged the women. They always realized maximum profit since they themselves prepared the refreshments served at bridge affairs and other fund-raising events. An example of their energy and devotion was their total preparation of a chicken dinner for the 135 members of the Men's Club.¹⁵ Whists or bridges held on the lawns of their summer cottages to raise money for the Temple were common.

Tillie Kenner, an early Sisterhood member, described the women's involvement in Good Brotherhood Week, initiated by Rabbi Schussheim: "Pearl Ernstof and I were the co-chairmen of the first affair. It was held in the vestry and about 250 persons attended. The vestry had not yet been remodeled. We bought crepe paper in blue and white, and I climbed a ladder to decorate the ugly-looking poles. The ministers of the four nearby denominational churches were invited, together with some of their parishioners. The guests were first shown the sanctuary, after which they met



Rabbi Schussheim and Cantor Israel Breitbart at Sukkot ceremony, c. 1934.

in the vestry, where Rabbi Schussheim who was still officiating at the time spoke on good brotherhood and what it means. The refreshments, pastries and sandwiches made by our members, were highly praised.”¹⁶

RABBI SCHUSSHEIM RETURNS

A strong movement was started to bring Rabbi Schussheim back to Temple Beth-Israel. In the interim between his leaving the Congregation in 1929 and his return in 1933, the Rabbi, an ardent Zionist, had traveled with his family for a year of study in Palestine. He had also served for three years as the spiritual leader of the Bay Ridge Jewish Center in Brooklyn, New York.¹⁷ Congregant Samuel Ernstof, being very ill, had in 1932 requested that, if he died, Rabbi Schussheim be requested to deliver the eulogy at his funeral. He and the Rabbi had had a very close relationship. Upon Ernstof's death, the Rabbi came from New York to officiate. Ernstof was the first congregant to have had his funeral in the Temple. A year later, in 1933, Rabbi Schussheim also officiated at the unveiling ceremony. His eloquent sermons so impressed the Congregation that they prevailed upon him to return to Temple Beth-Israel.

THE FIRE OF 1941

Disaster struck when a great fire broke out in the Temple on June 1, 1941, the first day of Shavuot*, while the Congregation was preparing for Confirmation exercises. Confirmation Services were hastily transferred to the Jewish War Veterans Hall. The conflagration completely ruined the interior. The Temple could not be used for nearly a year while repairs were in progress.

The Congregation expressed gratitude to the Jewish War Veterans of Providence, who had generously provided quarters until the Temple could be rebuilt. The Westminster Unitarian Church and its minister, the Reverend Richard W. Seebode, were among those who came to the aid of the Congregation in its adversity. They devoted a whole Sunday collection to the Rebuilding Fund.

The fire was of such magnitude that *The (Providence) Evening Bulletin* of June 2, 1941 devoted two columns to the story: “Temple Beth-Israel today moved into temporary quarters and went ahead with plans for its 20th anniversary after its building on Niagara Street was practically destroyed in a spectacular two-alarm fire early yesterday morning . . . The fire was discovered just after 4:00 o'clock by James Cook, a passing milkman, who saw flames glowing in the windows . . . Fire Chief Thomas H. Cotter, who

*Feast of Weeks, which occurs 7 weeks after the Sabbath of Passover.

directed firemen at the blaze, said today no evidence had been found as to the cause of the fire. He said it apparently started in the kitchen and had burned up through the entire structure. Rabbi Schussheim, told of the fire by the caretaker, Jacob Reich, fought his way through dense smoke to the altar and saved the five golden Torahs containing the sacred Scriptures, the most holy object in the Temple . . . When firemen responded to this alarm they found the interior full of dense smoke and already a mass of flames. Soon after 4:30 o'clock a section of the roof caved in at intervals . . . The fire practically destroyed the auditorium on the second floor, class rooms, the Rabbi's study, and a prayer room on the first floor."

The fire practically razed the Temple. Coming as it did at a time of ever-increasing government restrictions due to the war and shortages of building materials, it was a difficult task to rebuild.

However, a building committee was soon appointed by the president, Jacob Licht, with Dr. Ilie Berger as chairman. At the next annual meeting Ira S. Galkin was elected president of the Temple. There had been criticism of the building committee by some members who felt the committee had overextended financially and that money expended could never be raised. The building committee itself was optimistic, and many of them actually appeared on the premises each day to see for themselves that no detail of construction was overlooked. The architectural style was considerably altered, new equipment was installed throughout, the sanctuary was remodeled, and stained glass windows were installed.

The building committee did in fact achieve its goal, and on May 17, 1942 the new Temple was dedicated. The dedication exercises included greetings by Governor J. Howard McGrath, Mayor Dennis J. Roberts, and United States Senator Theodore Francis Green. Professor Louis Finkelstein, President of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, gave what was described as an inspiring address. Rabbi William G. Braude of Temple Beth-El delivered the invocation, and Rabbi Israel M. Goldman of Temple Emanuel brought the greetings of his congregation. The service was conducted by Rabbi Schussheim, while Cantor Joseph Schlossberg and the Temple choir provided the musical accompaniment with Mrs. Barney Kenner as soloist.¹⁸

THE WAR YEARS

During the years of World War II, Temple Beth-Israel was extremely active.¹⁹ Under the direction of Mary Schussheim a USO unit was established at the Temple. Only the City of Providence USO was larger. The Daughtershood held weekly supper dances in the canteen. During Jewish Holy Days servicemen were invited to the homes of members. For the

servicemen food was always important. For the privilege of being hostess one had to make a donation. An anniversary could be the pretext for a contribution. One member provided a bus outing to Newport. One group specialized in knitting for the servicemen.²⁰

Thousands of servicemen were thus entertained, fed, and remembered on Jewish holidays with gift packages. Leviton Manufacturing Company offered its facilities to the men of the Congregation, who wrapped gifts for the servicemen, weighed the packages, and took care of the mailing.²¹

A Red Cross unit, the largest in the state, was established at the Temple with the cooperation of the entire Sisterhood in a three-shift work group. They made bandages and provided other medical necessities for the war effort. Thousands of garments and tens of thousands of bandages were provided. There was also a first-aid training course for the Daughterhood in anticipation of emergency needs. This was considered a high point of achievement in the Temple's public service.

A Temple bulletin early in 1943 announced that men in uniform of the Armed Forces of the United States would be welcome at the services as guests of the Temple. Rabbi Schussheim's New Year message contained these eloquent words: "In these desperate days when humanity, liberty, and truth are fighting for existence we may well turn our attention to religion and the institutions which it has produced and look to them for salvation. Undoubtedly guns, hatred, and murder will not give us a happier world. Let us give religion a chance."

THE MORTGAGE BURNING

The interval between the Temple fire in June of 1941 and the burning of the mortgage was a little more than two years. After the dedication of the new building a Mortgage Fund Committee was formed under the joint chairmanship of Leo Grossman and Leo Bojar. They finally accomplished this goal after laboring for more than two decades. The souvenir journal commemorating the mortgage burning contained this message: "The import of this mortgage burning event, celebrated at a time of world strife and upheaval, is as a result all the more significant to us. In vivid contrast to the destruction of all Houses of Worship in enemy-dominated lands, there is enacted in our great and free nation the spectacle of not only a rebuilding of a free House of Worship, but a liberation of all its financial obligations — a combination of acts which thereby further entrenches the roots of our Synagogue."

The weekend of January 28, 1944 was devoted to commemorating this significant event in the Temple's history. At the Sabbath Eve service,

Captain Max J. Routtenberg, Chaplain at Camp Miles Standish, read the sermon, joined by Rabbi Schussheim, Cantor Schlossberg, and the choir. A mortgage burying ceremony was held on Sunday afternoon, January 30 with the participation of Rabbi Israel M. Goldman of Temple Emanuel; Dr. Max Arzt, Professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary; Cantor Schlossberg; the Temple Choir; and officers and past presidents of the Temple and Sisterhood. An address was delivered by Rabbi Schussheim. This was followed by a dinner celebration and a musical program. Dr. Ilie Berger served as chairman and President Ira S. Galkin as toastmaster.

AFTERMATH — WORLD WAR II

At the close of World War II during the High Holy Days of 1945 Rabbi Schussheim said: "Our prayers have been answered and the war with its awful story of suffering is over. Soon our boys will be home. Reconversion and reconstruction will be the order of the day. In this task, religion must play a major role . . . In all these activities the Synagogue will be central."

The Congregation continued to aid Jews emigrating from Europe as they had the first arrivals who had escaped Hitler's grasp. Free membership was provided for the refugees, and Hebrew school was offered to their children without charge. Ira Galkin had served as president of the Temple during a period which included a fire and a war, and continued to serve until 1949, when he was succeeded by Coleman B. Zimmerman. The Temple now directed its efforts to reorganizing the religious and educational program. At the High Holy Days of 1949 Rabbi Schussheim announced plans for a permanent building program and a revitalized school. The seating capacity of the Temple would be increased, thus eliminating the inconvenience of "wings" at the rear of the Synagogue sanctuary. The plans also provided for better classroom and assembly facilities. The Hebrew and religious school building and planning committee was under the leadership of Robert Fein as chairman. By Yom Kippur of 1950 President Zimmerman could refer to the new Hebrew School as a reality. During the year, Benjamin Premack, choir director of the Temple, announced the formation of a Junior Choral Society.

Irving Brodsky became president in 1951. There were social and cultural activities for all groups of the Congregation, with such innovations as dancing classes for students from fourth grade through high school, men's Bible classes, and in 1952 the organization of a Temple Beth-Israel chapter of the United Synagogue Youth.

A special meeting of the board of trustees was called on January 20, 1952 by the president, Irving Brodsky, to consider the damage suffered by a fire in the lower vestry. An insurance committee with Joseph Schlossberg as

chairman was established. The loss of desks, equipment, and books was noted. It was felt that services could be conducted in the Temple proper without too much inconvenience. Hebrew classes could also be conducted in the Temple, while Sunday school classes could be held at either the Sackett Street or Lexington Avenue public schools. Also to be investigated was the cost of building a new structure fronting on Atlantic Avenue in addition to repairing the damage. At the April 29 board meeting it was voted to accept plans to construct a building 72' x 100' x 16' which would be attached to the present building. It would front on Atlantic Avenue and could seat 736. A new kitchen would also be added. The lower vestry would be completely repaired. Insurance monies to cover the loss and damage from the fire, as well as building campaign monies to be raised, would cover the cost of construction. The completion date was set for the High Holy Days of 1952. The formal opening of the Sunday school was set for October 19 in new classrooms with new equipment. The Men's Club planned to hold its open meeting and dinner in the new Temple auditorium, where the Rabbi welcomed some 75 new families to the Congregation.

Marshall Marcus succeeded Irving Brodsky as president in 1954. It was reported in September 1954 that 184 pupils were enrolled in the Sunday School and 45 in the Hebrew Department. The faculty consisted of ten teachers, including Cantor Schwartzman. The Hebrew students attended school three days a week in accordance with the policy of the United Synagogue of America.

In November of 1954 Rabbi Schussheim noted in a letter to the Congregation that Temple Beth-Israel had been singularly honored by being chosen as the site for the convention of the New England branch of the United Synagogue Youth of America. This choice, he felt, was a tribute to the strength and prestige of the Temple youth group. The development of youth activities in the Temple had always been a prime objective.

In 1955 it was decided that the students would be required to purchase their textbooks. At about the same time a Parent-Teacher Association was established. A report on the religious school emphasized that the classroom facilities continued to be inadequate.

According to a report of the membership committee in October 1955, the Congregation then had 369 members, 228 members seated in the main Temple and 141 in the auditorium. How active the Congregation was at this time can be appreciated from listings in the Temple bulletin for a typical week (January 27 — February 3, 1956). A "Land of Milk and Honey" service chanted by Cantor Schwartzman and the Temple Choir Sunday night at the Temple provided a cultural, social, and organizational get-together to hear Rabbi Gershon Cohen, Librarian of the Jewish Theological

Seminary. Sunday morning at ten o'clock the men met for the "3 C's": Culture, Companionship, Congregation — for prayer, sociability, and study. There were notices for the Men's Club Bowling League, the United Synagogue Youth, and the Sisterhood. Contributions to the Flower Prayer Book, Organ, Torah, and Simcha* Funds were listed. Bat mitzvah's** had recently been initiated by the Congregation. In 1956 for the third time a group of girls was to be consecrated in a bat mitzvah service. It was announced that an integrated school program had raised the standards for confirmation. A confirmand had to be at least sixteen years old.

The highlight of the year 1956 was an Anniversary Testimonial Dinner held at the Sheraton Biltmore Hotel on November 11 in honor of Rabbi Schussheim. It celebrated jointly the 35th anniversary of his ordination and of the founding of Temple Beth-Israel. Ira Galkin was general chairman of the affair. A souvenir program was distributed at the dinner. The invocation was delivered by Rabbi Sidney Ballon, and grace was said by Rabbi Eli A. Bohnen. Anniversary greetings were extended by Mayor Walter H. Reynolds, Governor Dennis J. Roberts, Henry Hassenfeld, Irving Brodsky, Rabbi William G. Braude, and other dignitaries.

Rabbi Schussheim was described in generous terms: "He has never ceased to relate the traditions of the past to the prospects of the future by means of education. As an instructor at the Seminary College of Jewish studies from 1930-34, as leader of student Menorah groups at Brown University and the University of Rhode Island, as an organizer and instructor at the School for the Jewish Woman in Providence, he has been a tremendous influence in developing an appreciation of Jewish education and culture. As President of the Providence Chapter, Zionist Organization of America, he made a major contribution to the life of Jewry the world over, and as President of the Rabbinical Association of Rhode Island, he gained respect for the synagogue in community affairs. His courses of instruction at the Rhode Island Council of Churches school and the Attleboro Council of Churches school and his series of television programs have done much to eliminate discrimination and to erect mutual understanding among Jews and non-Jews alike. As chaplain for the State Institutions he has helped many toward rehabilitation." Rabbi Schussheim was portrayed as a rabbi's rabbi.

There was also a tribute to President Marshall B. Marcus, who was the second generation of his family devoted to the Temple. It was during his administration that an electronic organ had been installed.

At the board meeting of May 15, 1957 President Marcus expressed the view that a synagogue cannot survive merely through religious services.

*A happy occasion, a celebration.

**Ceremony for girls similar to the bar mitzvah for boys.

"There is", he added, "an organizational side of a synagogue that must be carefully tended". In addition to diverse cultural, social, and fund-raising concerns, Temple Beth-Israel had many others, as expressed in its committee structure: Religious and Ritual, House and Property, Cemetery, School, Membership, High Holy Days, Finance, Social and Education, Overflow Service, Ushers, and Board of Trustees group to assist Sisterhood with the annual Dance Program.

Common to spiritual leaders of all religious groups is the distress over poor attendance at services. Temple Beth-Israel was no exception. Frequent exhortations by the rabbi and president to attend services appeared in the Temple bulletin. Possible improvements to the Temple building and regulations governing the various committees were under continuous review.

THE NEW BUILDING FUND

At the annual meeting of May 25, 1959 the comptroller of the Temple reported a financial loss. Total expenses for running the Temple were \$34,772.80, while income was \$34,676.80. The school income was \$5,122.50 compared to expenses of \$8,676.80. Eighty-one children attended the Hebrew school, and 92 were enrolled in the Sunday school. President Leo Grossman reported that the Temple was doing the work that was required of it and that members of the Temple had done much for the Jewish children, many of whom had become leaders in the community. However, there was need for additional classrooms and a new sanctuary. In spite of the unfavorable financial statement it was recommended that a building fund be started and that a new sanctuary be built at a cost of about \$150,000. Building construction would not commence until a sum of \$50,000 to \$75,000 was raised. A special fund was set up designated as the Temple Beth-Israel New Building Fund. Little was heard of the matter until a special meeting of the Board of Directors on June 28, 1960. A committee was then established to consult professional fund raisers as to the potential amount that could be solicited from their Congregation. It was instructed to bring in a preliminary sketch and an approximate cost estimate. Authorization was given for expenditures not to exceed \$2500 for preparation of preliminary plans and specifications.

New building plans were announced in lavish prose in the September 1960 bulletin: "Picture in your mind's eye a new Sanctuary, larger than the one we now use, on street level with no stairs to climb, air-conditioned and modern in every way. Envision, as part of this Sanctuary, a new up-to-the-minute auditorium. Such an edifice, added to our present Temple, would accord Beth-Israel a modern home with every desirable facility for a

growing and very active Congregation . . . A new Sanctuary for Temple Beth-Israel is not a dream. It is a challenge. Your committee is a dedicated group and is sure to present plans to make this dream a reality. It prays that the Congregation will accept the challenge to build. It hopes that with God's help, actual construction will have started before another New Year is with us." The year had begun with a recommendation that more women be appointed to the Board of Directors and ended with an announcement that Rabbi Morris Schussheim would retire as of December 31, 1961.

A life pension satisfactory to the Rabbi was set up as well as a pension to be paid to Mrs. Schussheim should she survive her husband. A dinner in tribute to Rabbi and Mrs. Schussheim was held at the Colony Motor Hotel on December 10, 1961. Joseph Galkin, Director of the General Jewish Committee, eulogized the rabbi, who had been with the Temple for almost 40 years. He referred to his many achievements — his membership on the board of the Conference of Christians and Jews, his lectures to hundreds of Christians in the Attleboro Council of Churches on the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures. He told of how the Rabbi had reached many thousands of radio and television listeners in his weekly broadcasts on the Book of Books. The Rabbinical Seminary had bestowed upon him the degree of Doctor of Divinity, and he had received a Doctor of Education degree from Rhode Island College. His greatest service had been to his Congregation, where he maintained close contact with the hopes and experiences of his congregants. The children were especially close to his heart, said Joseph Galkin, and he watched their development with the keenest interest. He taught Judaism and expounded its principles in hundreds of sermons from the pulpit and addresses to various convocations.

In attendance at the dinner were Governor John A. Notte, Jr., United States Senator John O. Pastore, and the then former Governor Dennis J. Roberts. At a candlelight ceremony several members of the Congregation spoke of the Rabbi's many concerns with community service, his colleagues, and Jewish marriage.

While a search for a successor was in progress, Rabbi Saul Leeman of the Cranston Jewish Center, head of the Rabbinical Association of Rhode Island, agreed to look after the rabbinical needs of the Congregation.

RABBI ROBERT LAYMAN

At a special Congregational meeting on April 8, 1962 Rabbi Robert Layman of Highland Park, New Jersey was unanimously elected the new Rabbi of Temple Beth-Israel. Thirty years old, married and father of two sons, he was a graduate of Temple University and Gratz College, and had received a Master of Hebrew Literature from the Jewish Theological

Seminary, where he was also ordained a rabbi. He would leave his post as Rabbi of Temple Beth El, Edison, New Jersey to assume the Temple Beth-Israel rabbinate. Rabbi Layman assumed his new position during September, but formal installation did not take place until November 4, 1962. Installed as the new cantor was Arthur Yolkoff. All rabbis in Rhode Island were invited to attend the installation. Rabbi William G. Braude was the principal speaker, and Rabbi Saul Leeman was the installing rabbi. A musical program and reception followed the installation ceremonies. The processional, in which Rabbi Layman and Cantor Yolkoff were conducted to the pulpit, consisted of eleven rabbis, the past presidents of the Congregation, and its officers and trustees. The installation ceremonies were praised extravagantly in the Temple bulletin of November 8, 1962: "What a wonderful, inspiring never-to-be-forgotten evening!. Surely another sign that Temple Beth-Israel has entered into a new era of greater, more effective progress in its mission of Service to God."

Rabbi Layman's tenure was brief. In the Temple bulletin of June 5, 1964 it was noted that "for plausible personal reasons Rabbi Layman will not renew his contract with Temple Beth-Israel." In July of 1964 Rabbi Jacob Handler, who occupied a pulpit in Manchester, New Hampshire, was engaged by the Congregation for an unprecedented four-year term.

RABBI JACOB HANDLER

Formal installation of Rabbi Handler took place on November 15, 1964. Rabbi Handler's educational background included a bachelor's degree from Vermont Teachers College, a Master of Arts in Government degree from the University of New Hampshire, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Burton College. He was ordained a rabbi at Yeshiva University and had served as a rabbi since 1941. An escort of honor included Rabbis Bohnen, Braude, Krauss, Rubell, and Leeman. The president and past presidents and Board of Trustees of the Temple also participated.

Rabbi Handler chose to come to Providence so that his two daughters might be educated at the Providence Hebrew Day School. He expressed his concerns about serving the Congregation at Temple Beth-Israel: "When I came to the Temple, I realized that it had a glorious background, but a very grim future. The first year I was here I was a substitute teacher in political science. I taught in all the schools. I became a teacher at the Rhode Island Junior College (later the Community College of R. I.) the first year it started, teaching political science. I am one of the few who has received this particular award — Phi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honor Society, which I received in 1963."

In addition to his rabbinical duties and his teaching, Rabbi Handler



Rabbi Jacob Handler 1914-

became Jewish chaplain for the Rhode Island State Institutions. He replaced Rabbi Charles Rubell of Temple Beth Sholom, who had died. He conducted services in the Sidney Goldstein Chapel and also met with the families of the men and women who were in the State Institutions.

Rabbi Handler became very interested in the Boy Scouts and was chaplain for the National Jamboree on four occasions. He received the St. George award from the Boy Scouts, an unusual honor for a Rabbi. He was also involved with the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

On June 14, 1965, at what was expected to be a routine board meeting, Ira Galkin disclosed that he had received a telephone call from the president of the Cranston Jewish Community Center. He inquired as to whether the Board of Temple Beth-Israel would be receptive to exploring and holding discussions on the possibility of a merger of the two congregations. The surprise request caused much dismay, but President Yanover decided that he would appoint a committee to meet with the Cranston officials. Further discussion of the building and renovation plans were deferred.

However, by the November board meeting discussion about expanding the present building had revived. The Sisterhood had donated \$5,000 for the renovation of the downstairs area of the Temple. Simultaneous talks with the Cranston Center had been in progress, but negotiations eventually collapsed. By December much enthusiasm for a new building had been generated, and the board authorized the president to commission an architect to draw plans and specifications for an auditorium building in the rear of the Temple, the cost not to exceed \$75,000.

At the annual meeting of June 12, 1966, 80 per cent of those in attendance voted to proceed with the building plan. The addition to the present building was not to cost more than \$90,000, and each family was to be assessed \$150 to finance the addition. The *Rhode Island Herald*²² carried pictures of the leaders of the campaign: Rabbi Jacob Handler, Leonard Sholes, Temple president; Charles Coken, special gifts chairman; Leo Grossman, initial gifts chairman; and David Yanover, building chairman. According to the article initial pledges of \$50,000 had already been received. The new social hall to be erected on the Atlantic Avenue side of the Temple would measure 50 by 70 feet and accomodate 250 to 300 persons for a dinner. The new kitchen, 18 by 30 feet, would be fully equipped. The addition would contain a lobby, a coat room, men's and women's lavatories, a woman's lounge, and a bride's room. In September Fay Schachter, president of Sisterhood, presented a check for \$20,000 from her organization. Ground was broken on December 4, 1966, and completion of the hall was expected by June of 1967.

Temple board and Congregation minutes of the period indicate that

construction proceeded according to schedule. Coleman Zimmerman, chairman of the Dedication Committee for the new social hall, announced the following events: June 25, 1967 — open house, refreshments, and guided tours. The program for that day included a musical program by cantor Ivan Perlman of Temple Emanuel and the Melody Belles consisting of thirty blended voices. The affair would begin at 7:30 P.M. with a champagne cocktail party; speeches would be limited. A three-day formal dedication in September included Friday evening services on September 16, followed by a formal dinner-dance on the 17th and the dedication on the 18th.

TEMPLE BETH-ISRAEL'S THIRD FIRE

The festive atmosphere surrounding the new construction was short-lived, for on March 26, 1968 — six months after the dedication — Temple Beth-Israel was victim of its third fire. "Fire inspectors investigating blazes that heavily damaged a synagogue in Providence yesterday said today there was nothing to indicate incendiary origin," according to a newspaper account.²³ It reported that the Temple had lost its roof and that there was heavy smoke, fire, and water damage in other parts of the 2½ story structure. The only section of the synagogue to escape heavy damage was the new social hall. Valuable prayer books, Torahs, and other religious articles were carried to safety by members of the Congregation. The fire began on the second floor at the rear of the building, and was discovered at 3:45 P.M. when some twelve students attending a Hebrew class smelled smoke. They escaped without injury.

The *Rhode Island Herald* of March 29 reported that, despite the extensive damage, 6 p.m. services were held on the 27th. From 4 p.m. on the 26th to 3 a.m. on the 27th, "the members had watched their Temple burn. They were saddened, they were unhappy, but they were not disheartened. The smell of burning was everywhere. The roof was gone and the seven stained glass windows which had been installed when the Temple was rededicated were completely broken out." A reporter who had visited the Temple and interviewed its members was impressed most by the help that came from quite unexpected sources — the check from a non-Jewish neighbor, and the teenage boy who came to help put out the wet prayerbooks to dry in the sun. The greatest and most irreplaceable loss was the stained glass windows, which had been designed under the direction of Rabbi Schussheim.

Many offers of assistance poured into the Temple office. Among them was a letter from Reverend Roscoe C. Robinson of the Calvary Baptist Church nearby in South Providence: "We also as a church can realize what a major problem this presents to your congregation. All of us feel so deeply

sorry, and yet we do not know exactly what to do to be of help, except we do offer your our love and support, and also make available to you in any way that we can be helpful the facilities of our building . . . I have talked with other protestant clergymen in the area, and I know that you should feel perfectly free to approach any of our churches about any way in which we can be of help."

The Congregation lost no time in planning for restoration of the damage caused by this third fire in its history. In his acceptance speech at the annual meeting of June 27, 1968 Leonard J. Sholes, president, remarked: "The greatest strength of Temple Beth-Israel is the strength of continuity, the chain that binds us to the past and leads us to the future. Our cooperation, our common effort yesterday and today have resulted in splended accomplishments. Once in June of 1941 and again in January 1953 fires damaged our Temple. Each time the Congregation with unfaltering spirit and tireless effort remodeled and rebuilt a bigger and more beautiful structure. In March of this year Temple Beth-Israel again was badly damaged by fire. This catastrophe did not interrupt our religious services. Our Temple life is so vital, so sure of its faith in itself that it was able to carry on all of its activities and all of its meetings. We took the disaster in our stride."

President Sholes in the June 1969 Temple bulletin announced the dates for the dedication of the sanctuary as September 5-7, 1969. The announcement of these dates proved to be premature. Unfortunately construction did not progress as smoothly as it had in 1967. Delays on the part of the contractor and other problems postponed the completion of the construction. Julian Greene, chairman of the building committee, reported that the lower level would be completed in its entirety by October 24 and the sanctuary within thirty days thereafter. However, he hesitated to suggest a dedication date in view of the many problems encountered.

At the annual meeting of June 25, 1970 the building committee reported that the Temple building was about 99 per cent completed. A new interior was constructed within the old exterior walls, with new classrooms, Temple office, rabbi's study, cantor's room, directors' room, and chapel. A parking lot was provided, enclosed by a six-foot fence with an entrance leading directly from the lot to the Temple. The pulpit, which had not been included in the original contract, was a gift from the Sisterhood purchased at a cost of \$6,000. In view of the progress that had been made, the dedication committee was able to announce elaborate plans for a weekend celebration for September 18-20. On Friday, September 18 a guest rabbi would deliver the sermon. On Saturday a gala dinner dance would be held followed by the formal dedication on Sunday. By the end of August the plans were formulated. Eight living past presidents — Louis Backman, Jacob Licht, Ira

Galkin, Coleman Zimmerman, Irving Brodsky, Charles Coken, David Yanover, and Leonard Sholes were to be honored and presented with plaques. A musical program was planned for the evening, and Rabbi Samuel Kenner would be guest speaker. At Sunday's rededication the five men who rescued the Torahs from the fire (Norton Rappaport, Alfred Weinstock, Sidney Granoff, Samuel Granoff, Frederick Spigel, and Alan M. Kritz) would return them to the Ark. Governor Frank Licht, Senator John O. Pastore, Mayor Joseph Doorley, and Congressman Robert Tiernan would be seated on the pulpit. All of the Rhode Island rabbis and cantors were invited to be in the procession. Governor Licht after many years was returning to Temple Beth-Israel to be the principal speaker where he had once been a confirmand²⁴.

The former Niagara Street entrance was now closed. The sanctuary was turned around, and the former Atlantic Avenue entrance to the social hall was converted into a lobby leading to both structures, with the social hall situated to the left and a broad open stairway on the right leading to the new sanctuary at the upper level. At street level was a chapel for daily services, six classrooms for the nearly one hundred pupils in the religious school, studies for Rabbi Jacob Handler and Cantor Karl S. Kritz, the Temple offices, and a board of trustees' room.

Seating six hundred, the new sanctuary had been made more spacious by building it on the second level and including the third. A screen of blue and gold shielded the choir and organist, who were to the left of the pulpit area. Closed circuit television linked the cantor's reading desk with the organist at the console of a two-manual Conn electronic organ. New pews were finished in a brown mahogany color with gold seat cushions. Blue carpet covered the pulpit floor and the center aisle.

RABBI MORRIS SCHUSSHEIM DIES

On October 13, 1970 word reached the Congregation that Rabbi Schussheim had died the day before in Oakland, California, where he had lived since retiring in 1961. The Rabbi, who had served them for thirty-five years, had recently been honored on the 50th anniversary of his ordination.²⁵ Under his leadership the Congregation had grown from a few dozen families to several hundred. Its Hebrew school was enlarged, and the Sunday school was reorganized. Study groups for women were initiated, the choir was expanded, and the Temple library was established.

Rabbi Sidney Ballon delivered the eulogy on October 14 at Temple Beth-Israel, where the funeral services were held. Rabbi Ballon recalled that as a boy of ten in Temple Beth-Israel's Sunday school he had had his first meeting with Rabbi Schussheim. After Rabbi Ballon had been ordained, he

referred to Rabbi Schussheim as a rabbi's rabbi: "He radiated spirituality, gentleness and dignity. He was a counselor *par excellence*, who could understand the problems and feelings of other people and comfort them with his compassion and empathy Rabbi Schussheim was a man of great faith and humility."

Toward the end of 1970 the new social hall was designated the Ira and Anna Galkin Social Hall, in recognition of their generous financial support of the Temple and the time and energy which they had devoted to Temple Beth-Israel during their many years as members.

1970 — THE FIRST HALF OF THE DECADE

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Temple — its Jubilee year — a special service was held on Friday, December 17, 1971 with Rabbi Samuel Kenner, regional director of the New England Region, United Synagogue of America, as guest speaker. Cantor Karl Kritz and the choir presented a musical program. A Jubilee service was also held on Saturday morning. The weekend culminated in a dinner-dance on Sunday, December 19. As a high point of the celebration, the Congregation sponsored a pilgrimage to Israel under Rabbi Handler's direction. The tour, held in the spring of 1972, was a considerable success, according to participants.

Reports of damage to the building by neighborhood vandals had been frequent, but by 1972 an escalation of the damage was cause for serious concern. Fred I. Kelman, house committee chairman, reported: "We are experiencing much mischievous damage; broken windows by rocks thrown into our sanctuary; the fence, which had been damaged, was repaired, but again 25 pickets were broken. Screens have been damaged. The neighborhood boys use our parking lot for ballgames."

The year 1973 generally was uneventful, but problems continued. President Samuel Tippe in his message to the membership expressed appreciation to Fred Kelman for the superlative restoration of one of the stained glass memorial windows, which had been damaged in the fire. According to Rabbi Handler,²⁶ the pieces of stained glass which had been salvaged from the broken windows were put into one large window representing them all. President Tippe emphasized the depressed state of the Temple's finances and urged payment of dues and arrears to the building fund and the tuition accounts. Again he urged the need for new members. The Congregation apparently responded, for in the next month's bulletin it was reported that 25 new members had joined the Temple. Tippe also congratulated the Sisterhood for its very successful donor dinner, and observed that, "There is no question in my mind that the Sisterhood is the backbone of our Temple."

Because of the problems caused by break-ins in spite of new locks installed at a cost of \$300, a plan for installation of an alarm system was presented to the board. At the annual meeting of June 15, 1975 the Sisterhood reported an unprecedented gift to the Temple of \$9,500 for the year 1974-75. Of this sum \$5,000 was earmarked for paying off the mortgage and support of the religious school. Some \$1,200 of the total had been realized from advertisements solicited for a Sisterhood booklet.

MORTGAGE BURNING WEEKEND II

As in 1944, Temple Beth-Israel once again set aside a weekend, November 28-30, 1975, for a gala celebration. The service of Friday, November 28 featured a cantata for Hanukkah by the choir and Cantor. A dinner-dance catered by Louis' Kosher Catering was held on November 29, and on Sunday the actual burning of the mortgage was carried out. State and local dignitaries, as well as a bank official, were invited. Following the program, a champagne reception was held in the Anna and Ira Galkin Social Hall of the Temple.²⁷

In 1976 the Temple changed its "Man of the Year" award to "Person of the Year Award." The "Man of the Year Award" had been given for the first time to Solomon E. Selinker in November 1974 for being "Most instrumental in the planning of the Temple's services and providing inspiration and leadership in the raising of thousands of dollars for the Temple and its activities".

Another first for the Congregation occurred in 1977 when three women (Mrs. Aaron Cohen, Mrs. Jack Crovitz, and Mrs. Aaron Bromson) were honored by being called to the pulpit (*aliyyah**).

ECUMENISM

Very early in the Temple's history the Sisterhood participated in the Temple's observance of Brotherhood Week. On several occasions Rabbis Schussheim and Handler had participated in services and meetings with representatives of other faiths. In December of 1972,²⁸ at the first service of its kind in Rhode Island, the Most Reverend Louis E. Gelineau, Roman Catholic Bishop of Providence, shared the pulpit of Temple Beth-Israel with the Right Reverend Frederick H. Belden, Episcopal Bishop of Rhode Island, and Rabbi Jacob Handler. The idea for such a service had originated with Rabbi Handler. "The idea came to me", he said, "while we three clergymen were blessing the fleet in Galilee (Rhode Island). It occurred to

*A "calling up" to read the Scroll of the Law in the synagogue during worship, an honor exclusively for males since ancient times.

me that if we could bless the sea together, why couldn't we stand right here before the Congregation and pray together?"

On another occasion, according to a newspaper report of December 13, 1974, Rabbi Handler officiated at a Hanukkah celebration held by the Tenants Association of the Joseph T. Carroll Tower Housing for the Elderly on Smith Street in Providence. He was assisted in the interfaith observance by the Reverend Jude McGeough of St. Patrick's Church. Also participating was Thomas Twitchell of the United Presbyterian Church.

A third ecumenical service, sponsored by the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission and Providence Lodge No. 14 of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, was held at the Temple on February 25, 1977. Religious leaders who participated included the Most Reverend Kenneth Angell, auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Rhode Island; the Right Reverend Frederick H. Belden, Episcopal Bishop of Rhode Island; Reverend Robert L. Carter, president of the Ministers Alliance; and Rabbi Jacob Handler.²⁹

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

As early as October 1977 Samuel Tippe reported at a board meeting that he had taken it upon himself to look around for a new location for Temple Beth-Israel. He felt, as did many of the members of the Congregation, that as long as the Temple remained in its present location membership would continue to decrease. Relocation was necessary, he felt. Rabbi Handler³⁰ recalled how divided the Congregation had been over the subject of whether or not to relocate. In retrospect, those who had voted to stay did not realize that the time had come for the move. The Rabbi himself envisioned using the Chateau de Ville, a restaurant complex at the Warwick Mall, a shopping mall, as an ideal location for a temple and community center.

The president, Carl Lefkowitz, in the Temple bulletin of September 1977 expressed his dismay at the fact that only a handful of people actively participated in the planning and operation of Temple activities. The Sisterhood had problems attracting women to take positions of leadership. It was difficult to gather enough men for the daily *minyan**. Rabbi Handler in fact held *Yiskor*** services very early in the morning to attract men from other congregations which did not hold services at that hour.

Another deterrent to attracting large attendance at services was the increasing amount of vandalism to automobiles parked near the Temple for services and for social events and meetings. To alleviate this problem the parking lot on Niagara Street was well lighted and patrolled.

*Ten adult males, the minimum required for communal prayer.

**Memorial prayer service for the dead.



Last confirmation class of Temple Beth-Israel, 1981. Front row, left to right: Ronda Minkin, Laura Jacobs, and Lisa Stone, confirmands; and Rabbi Jacob Handler. Back row, left to right: Ruth Fink, president of Sisterhood, and Ruth Ross, chairman of the school committee.

There was much discussion among board members regarding available alternatives to assure the Temple's future. In April of 1978 a committee was formed to study the feasibility of selling the building and relocating elsewhere or of merging with another temple. At the annual meeting Samuel Tippe, chairman of the building or merging committee, reported that a group called the Elmwood Group Commission had visited the Temple and found the buildings attractive. There was also the possibility that the federal government might seek a site for a senior citizen facility. However, by the annual meeting of July 1979 there had been no definite offer to buy the building. With no commitment from a buyer, the Temple continued to operate. Since the nominating committee reported that they could get no one to take over as officers of the Temple, Carl Lefkowitz consented to continue as president with the same officers and board.

The Sisterhood was able to report that, with even fewer meetings and fund-raising projects, they had managed to maintain all of their traditional commitments. Their *sukkah** was considered to be exceptionally beautiful that year. Their model *seder*** had been a success, as was their spring

*A temporary structure, roof covered with vegetation to celebrate the Harvest Festival (Festival of Tabernacles).

**Passover ritual.

donor dinner. The religious school annual report also indicated a successful year, although only 39 children were enrolled in the school, a decrease of 8 students from the previous year. Realizing that they were a Temple in transition, the chairman of the religious school committee, in his report questioned whether there would be enough students to carry on a viable program in the coming year. The chairman of the youth committee was more optimistic. The United Synagogue Youth had been very active during the year. Twenty-four students had engaged in almost thirty activities. He concluded that "As long as there is a Temple Beth-Israel, there will be youth, and as long as there is youth, there will be a Temple Beth-Israel."

By October of 1979 Fred I. Kelman, house committee chairman, reported that in the past month the Temple had been broken into three times, causing much damage. The situation was so bad, he felt, that if they were to stay in their present location they would need a security system.

In December 1979 an offer was tendered by the Concerned People of Elmwood to purchase the Temple building for \$225,000. This would include contents with the exception of the pews and all religious articles. The executive board recommended that the Congregation accept the offer. With the sale of the building, there would be three options open to the Congregation: (1) merge with another congregation, (2) purchase an existing building and relocate, or (3) purchase land elsewhere and build a new Temple.

As months passed and no deposit had been received from the group which had made the offer, the Temple's status was still in a state of flux. Vandalism continued at an even greater rate. Fences were cut, and graffiti were painted on the building. So many windows were broken that finally those in the social hall were boarded up to prevent further breakage. The silver owned by the Temple was put in storage at a bank for safekeeping. However, the religious school was still in operation, as were the youth groups, the United Synagogue Youth (U.S.Y.), and Kadima.* It was becoming more and more difficult to hold regular Friday night services because of poor attendance, although members did attend Saturday morning services in greater numbers. Rabbi Handler recalled that in those difficult days he would hold Friday night services for as few as eight members.

The City of Providence contemplated purchasing the Temple to use as a center for community services. Two appraisers from the Mayor's office set a net price of \$225,000 for the building. At a special congregational meeting

*Kadima, founded in 1903, endeavored to bridge the gap between traditional Zionism and local community problems.

on October 26, 1980 the terms offered by the city were presented. The city would provide relocation expenses, but asked for possession in time to hold a dedication on July 1, 1981. The voting was recorded as 108 to sell and 11 not to sell. At the conclusion of the meeting Rabbi Handler congratulated Solomon E. Selinker, president of the Congregation, for the excellent manner in which he had conducted the meeting. He also thanked the majority and minority, both of whom had in their hearts voted for what they had considered to be the best interests of the Congregation. He predicted that selling the building would not be the last chapter in the story of Temple Beth-Israel and hoped that the Temple family would have good days ahead.

The sale of the Temple to the city was reported in the press:³¹

Temple Beth-Israel at Niagara Street and Atlantic Avenue, the oldest Conservative Synagogue in southern New England, was sold yesterday to the City of Providence for \$225,000. The city will convert the Temple into a neighborhood center for Elmwood residents. The city obtained financing from the federal government through the Mayor's office of Community Development. Rabbi Jacob Handler said that the Congregation, whose membership has declined in recent years, will decide in two weeks whether to merge with Temple Beth Torah in Cranston or Temple Beth Am in Warwick. The Congregation bought the building from the old German Social Club for \$18,000 in 1921. Mayor Vincent A. Cianci, Jr. yesterday held a news conference at the Temple and signed the purchase agreement. Under the agreement the city will take over the building on July 1. According to Stephen J. O'Rourke, deputy director of the Community Development Office, the city will operate a senior citizens and youth counseling center at the Temple. Other MOCD financed social service programs for the Elmwood section will also be located there.

1981 — THE FINAL YEAR OF TEMPLE BETH-ISRAEL

Four Congregations approached Temple Beth-Israel with offers to merge — Temple Beth Torah, Cranston; Temple Beth Am, Warwick; Temple Sinai, Cranston; and Temple Emanuel, Providence. Temple Sinai's offer was considered to be a good one, but, since it was a Reform congregation and not a member of the United Synagogue, it was not taken seriously. Other alternatives, such as finding an available church building or buying land, were discussed.

The proposals were presented at a special meeting of the Congregation on February 22. In the ensuing discussion Temple Emanuel's offer was declined because Emanuel did not wish to incorporate the name Beth-Israel. That left the choice, if there were to be a merger, between Temple Beth Am and Temple Beth Torah. That evening a vote was taken on whether to build, buy, or lease. Forty-seven voted to build, 51 voted against building, and 2 were undecided. It was decided to meet on March 15 for the purpose of selecting a congregation with which to merge. At that meeting the Congregation voted to merge with Temple Beth Torah in Cranston.

On April 2, 1981 President Solomon E. Selinker addressed a letter to all congregants reporting the terms of the merger:

We are about to embark on the steps needed to close Temple Beth-Israel and to open as part of the combined Temple Beth Torah-Temple Beth-Israel. To date our committees have agreed on the following points:

All memorial plaques and other designated religious articles are to be housed in appropriate locations in the merged synagogue buildings.

All past presidents of Temple Beth-Israel will become permanent members of the combined Beth Torah-Beth Israel Board of Trustees. In addition, nine Beth Israel Board members will be appointed to serve on the combined board.

Appropriate representation will be extended to Beth-Israel members on the finance and religious committees.

For the High Holy Days, a renovated downstairs Synagogue will be prepared and an additional Rabbi and Cantor would conduct the services. In keeping with the regular procedure of Temple Beth Torah, all seats would be occupied on a first come, first seated basis with no preference to either group.

Dues structure for Beth-Israel members would be: (a) Year one, of the merged Temple all dues waved for Beth-Israel members in good standing; (b) years 2, 3 and 4, Temple Beth-Israel members would pay 50% of Beth-Israel 1980-1981 dues; (c) years 5 and 6, Temple Beth-Israel members would pay full 1980-81 Temple Beth-Israel dues; and (d) after the sixth year all combined Beth Torah-Beth Israel members would be on the same dues basis.

Merged Temple Beth-Israel members shall at no time be obligated to pay to a building fund of the merged temple.

A joint Temple Beth Torah-Beth Israel committee will supervise the disposition of the Temple Beth-Israel assets after the above points and other points to be discussed will finally be resolved.

A further notice was sent to the congregants by President Selinker on June 15, enumerating several additional points of agreement. The name of the merged temple was changed to Temple Torat Yisrael, which would incorporate both temple names. All of the funds of Temple Beth-Israel would be put in escrow and turned over to the merged Temple on July 1.

The congregants had now voted to merge with Temple Beth Torah. The legal work was completed. Further details were settled, such as the agreement between Beth Torah and Beth-Israel to use the latter's lecturns, some of its pews, and its Torahs. "When we merged", recalled Rabbi Handler, "I myself brought the six Torahs to Temple Beth Torah. I put them in the ark in a nice traditional manner, knowing that the Torahs were finding a beautiful place. I presented them to Rabbi Zelermyer. We gave them our excellent library. We gave them the endowment money that was left, plus cash from the sale and our original charter. We gave them the organ that had so enriched our Temple."³²

The Sisterhood perpetuated the name of Sisterhood of Temple Beth-Israel by establishing endowment funds at the Solomon Schechter Day



Temple Torat Yisrael
(photo from reproduction print)

School and the Providence Hebrew Day School. Rabbi Jacob Handler was named Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Beth-Israel. The active past presidents received *tallits** as gifts.

Closing activities were scheduled for the weekend of June 26-28, 1981. Everyone attending the Friday night and Saturday morning services was honored with an *aliyyah*. Sunday morning services were held on June 28 followed by the transportation of the Torahs to Beth Torah with appropriate religious ceremonies. A banquet was held on Sunday evening. Ruth Fink, who had been president of Sisterhood for ten years, spoke briefly:

Being president meant maintaining the dignity of our Temple as our founders would have wanted us to. It meant observing our holidays and festivals, fulfilling our commitment to the Jewish Theological Seminary, and working harmoniously for the good of our Temple. Our Sisterhood accomplished these goals, the work became a labor of love, and lasting friendships were made . . . In this spirit let us go to Temple Torat Yisrael with *mazel*** and *nachai**** to our new house of worship.

How did the members feel as they worshiped in the familiar Sanctum for the last time? What made this Temple so special to its congregants in the sixty years of its existence? Several devoted members were asked these questions. Their answers appear in Appendix I.

As the story of Temple Beth-Israel unfolded, it appeared inevitable that the familiar structure on Niagara Street and Atlantic Avenue could no longer serve as a house of worship for its congregants. Many of the early members had moved to the East Side of Providence. Some for a while retained dual membership in Temples Emanuel and Beth-Israel, but most eventually dropped their membership in the latter. Younger families moved to the suburbs and joined the newer synagogues established in Cranston and Warwick. With the loss of the younger families, and especially their children, there was loss of continuity. As attendance at the religious school declined, leadership of necessity remained in the hands of the older members.

The largest single factor in precipitating the move was the change in the immediate neighborhood of the Temple. Other ethnic groups with other religious needs gradually moved into the neighborhood, displacing the Jewish families. The Temple building became the target of vandalism.

*Prayer Shawls.

**Luck.

***Proud pleasure.

Former congregants of Temple Beth-Israel now worship together at a new location. Many of those who founded Temple Beth-Israel, as well as the many others who worshipped there during its sixty years of existence, have died. Many are buried close to one another in lots purchased through the Temple located in the western section of Lincoln Park Cemetery, although it is not specifically designated as Temple Beth-Israel's section. It is a source of satisfaction to many, as Rabbi Handler has observed, that the building was taken over for community service. "That is the best fate for a Temple structure no longer used for prayer," he said. It will be used by school children, by the elderly, and for educational purposes. It serves the neighborhood in which it is located as it did during its long history as a house of worship.

For its devoted congregants Temple Beth-Israel is now but a memory. For a new generation it is a part of history.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their invaluable assistance in compiling the history of Temple Beth-Israel I am grateful to the following men and women:

William Bojar — telephone interview September 19, 1983
 Charles Coken — telephone interview September 28, 1983
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 Claire Ernstoff — interviews on August 1, 1983 and September 23, 1983
 Ruth Fink — telephone interview September 27, 1983 and pictures and reminiscences which she shared in October 1983
 Leo Greene — telephone interview July 24, 1983
 Bella Goldenberg Halpert — telephone interview August 25, 1983
 Rabbi Jacob Handler — interview October 4, 1983
 Laura Leichter Katzman — interview September 23, 1983
 Fred I. Kelman - for donation of pictures
 Tillie Saunders Kenner — interview July 20, 1983
 Jacob Leichter — interview September 25, 1983
 Jacob Licht — telephone interview August 25, 1983
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 Jeannette Shoham Resnik — interview August 23, 1983
 Frieda Rosenberg — interview September 23, 1983
 Harry Schlossberg — telephone interview September 19, 1983
 Mary Schussheim — letters dated August 3, 1983 and October 7, 1983
 Miriam Bell Smith — interview September 15, 1983

APPENDIX I

Temple members' comments:

We were a young Congregation. The steep stairs, an obstacle during the latter part of the Temple's existence, caused no hardship. I think of the young men, all members of Orthodox synagogues, who, because their wives and children could not sit with them, started this Conservative Temple. We were a homogeneous Congregation, all from the same area, and we could walk to services.³³

* * *

It was a feeling that it was *our* Temple — there was so much devotion, and many times when I worked there I would get upset and think of leaving; and then, when I thought of them individually, all those wonderful, devoted members — I stayed on.³⁴

* * *

We had many good businessmen as members, and it was their foresight and ambition, as well as the hard work of the Sisterhood, that raised the money to keep our Temple going.³⁵

* * *

Yes, there were many misgivings about fixing up the Temple after the last fire. Some thought it was too much money. Others did not want to merge, for they thought we would lose our prestige and identity.³⁶

* * *

I wonder if you realize, when you speak of writing about Temple Beth-Israel, that, as far as I am concerned, one cannot separate Temple Beth-Israel from Rabbi Schussheim. To me, they are synonymous.³⁷

* * *

We were a "Temple of love". When we had 300 families, everyone knew everyone else. There was a continuity of generations through bar mitzvahs, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. We always raised money with dignity. There was a warmth, a closeness. We ended with much love and much sadness.³⁸

We had a feeling of belonging — like a fraternity. We had a number of marriages among the congregants, making for more intimacy. There was always good cooperation except for the division at the end, with uncertainty about whether to merge with another synagogue or relocate. I would say it was a happy sort of departure, yet emotional with tears, a party attended by the leaders of the other congregations. We maintained our identity to the end.³⁹

* * *

I remember the good years of the Temple when all was running smoothly; families were close; Temple was buzzing with social groups, such as bandage rolling groups; the school rang with the voices of children. And then came the “other” years, when the Temple was not in the “right place” and when members, said, I can’t let my child walk there or I can’t drive there. The break-ins commenced. The classes became smaller, and many members moved into other neighborhoods. There was no alternative to the one taken by the Congregation. It is sad. Everyone remembers his or her “first” Conservative home, whether spiritual or family.⁴⁰

* * *

I would say that while we struggled with financial problems and occasional intrusions into our personal life through the years at Temple Beth-Israel, and there were often frustrations and difficult times with individuals, my husband and I loved the Congregation as a whole. We also, in fairness, would say that we had many happy and satisfying experiences. There were a number of individuals in the Congregation and in the community with whom very strong bonds were established and who were made to feel part of our family as we felt part of theirs.

I believe that Rabbi Schussheim’s association with the membership of his Congregation was on an unusually personal and intimate basis. As you know, he was a very spiritual person and very much concerned with the welfare of his congregants, his community, and the world around him. He tried to be helpful to all. He gave of himself unsparingly to any person or cause when called upon.⁴¹

APPENDIX II

PRESIDENTS OF TEMPLE BETH-ISRAEL

Benjamin N. Kane	1921-1922
Louis J. Bachman Harry R. Rosen Henry Hassenfeld Dr. Ilie Berger Max Rosen Morris Chusmir Jacob Licht	Served between 1922-1942
Ira Galkin	1942-1950
Coleman Zimmerman	1950-1951
Irving Brodsky	1951-1953
Marshall Marcus	1954-1956
Leo Grossman	1958-1959
Charles Greenstein	1959-1960
Charles Coken	1961-1964
David Yanover	1964-1966
Leonard J. Sholes	1966-1969; 1971-1972
Leo Greene	1969-1971; 1981
Samuel Tippe	1972-1976
Carl Lefkowitz	1977-1980
Solomon Selinker	1980 (1981 shared presidency with Leo Greene)

RABBIS OF TEMPLE BETH-ISRAEL

Rabbi B. Leon Hurwitz	1921-1922
Rabbi Morris Schussheim	1923-1929
Rabbi Jacob Sonderling	1929-1931
Rabbi Maurice Mazur	1931
Rabbi Morris Schussheim	1933-1961 (Retired)
Rabbi Robert Layman	1962
Rabbi Jacob Handler	1964-1981 (merger-retired)

CANTORS OF TEMPLE BETH-ISRAEL

Joseph Schlossberg	1922-1929 and intermittently until 1934
Igor Greenberg (Gorin)	1930
Igor Greenberg (Gorin)	1933
Israel Breitbart	1934
Louis Blumenthal	year or years unknown
Seymour Schwartzkopf	1954-1956
Saul Ragilsky	1957
Irwin Tabitsky	1959-1961
Arthur Yolkoff	1962-1964
Karl Kritz	1964-1975
Raoul Shorr	1976-1977

For several years there were visiting cantors for High Holy Days only.

PRESIDENTS — SISTERHOOD TEMPLE BETH-ISRAEL

Etta Fredberg*	1921-1923
Frances Gershman*	1923-1924
Ida Levinson*	1924-1925
Esther Kane*	1925-1932
Pauline Weiner*	1932-1935
Sophie Singer	1935-1937
Ethel Taber	1937-1940
Nettie Cohen*	1940-1944
Anne Kovitch	1944-1946
Mae Arnoff	1946-1947
Beatrice Katz	1948
Alice Regensteiner	1948-1949
Gertrude Klemer	1949-1951
Bertha Miller	1951-1952
Bessie Bromson	1952-1953
Selma Solomon	1953-1954
Gladys Yanover	1954-1956
Anne Sholes	1956-1958
Rita Richman	1958-1959
Claire Beck	1959-1960
Pauline Poulton*	1960-1962
Celia Bochner	1962-1964
Faye Shachter	1964-1969
Charlotte Goldberg	1969-1971
Ruth Fink	1971- until merger

*Deceased

NOTES

- ¹Rosen, Benton: The Providence Conservative Synagogue — Temple Beth-Israel, *RIJHN* 5:81-99, No. 1, November 1967
- ²Interview with Laura Leichter Katzman, September 18, 1973.
- ³Interview with Frieda Ernstof Rosenberg, September 23, 1983.
- ⁴Rosen, Benton: Temple Beth-Israel finds a Spiritual Leader, *RIJHN* 5:428-435, No. 4, November 1970.
- ⁵35th Anniversary Celebration Program book, November 11, 1956.
- ⁶Interview with Claire Ernstof, August 1, 1983.
- ⁷25th Anniversary Program book, May 12, 1946.
- ⁸Telephone interview with Harry Schlossberg, September 19, 1983.
- ⁹Letter from Paul Sonderling to Benton Rosen, June 2, 1967.
- ¹⁰Interview with Jeannette Shoham Resnik, August 23, 1983.
- ¹¹Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook, Volume LXXV, 1965, Page 158.
- ¹²Interview with Miriam Bell Smith, September 15, 1983.
- ¹³Telephone interview with Belle Goldenberg Halpert, August 25, 1983.
- ¹⁴See No. 10.
- ¹⁵Interview with Claire Ernstof, Laura Katzman, Frieda Rosenberg, September 23, 1983.
- ¹⁶Interview with Tillie Saunders Kenner, July 28, 1963.
- ¹⁷Souvenir Journal Commemorating the Mortgage Burning of Temple Beth-Israel, January 30, 1944.
- ¹⁸*Evening Bulletin*, (Providence) October 13, 1970.
- ¹⁹Letter to Benton Rosen from Morris and Mary Schussheim, September 12, 1967.
- ²⁰See No. 15.
- ²¹See No. 16.
- ²²*Rhode Island Herald*, July 1966.
- ²³*Evening Bulletin*, March 27, 1968.
- ²⁴*Providence Journal*, September 19, 1970.
- ²⁵*Evening Bulletin*, October 30, 1970.
- ²⁶Interview with Rabbi Jacob Handler, October 4, 1983.
- ²⁷*Providence Journal*, November 20, 1975.
- ²⁸*Providence Journal-Bulletin*, December 16, 1972.
- ²⁹*Rhode Island Herald*, February 11, 1977.
- ³⁰See No. 25.
- ³¹*Providence Journal-Bulletin*, February 28, 1981.
- ³²See No. 25.
- ³³See No. 14.
- ³⁴See No. 9.
- ³⁵See No. 15.
- ³⁶Telephone interview with Leo Greene, July 24, 1983.
- ³⁷Letter from Mary Schussheim (Mrs. Morris) re her husband, August 3, 1983.
- ³⁸Telephone interview with Ruth Fink, September 27, 1983.
- ³⁹See No. 25.
- ⁴⁰Letter from Natalie Crovitz dated October 12, 1983.
- ⁴¹Letter from Mary Schussheim dated October 7, 1983.

REDEDICATION CENTENNIAL

1883



1983

TOURO SYNAGOGUE

MAY 22, 1983 - 10 SIVAN 5743

PROGRAM

INVOCATION

RABBI DR. THEODORE LEWIS *Congregation Jeshuat Israel*

WELCOME

JAMES K. HERSTOFF, M.D. *President*
Congregation Jeshuat Israel

GREETINGS

HIS EXCELLENCY J. JOSEPH GARRAHY *Governor*
State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

GREETINGS

HONORABLE PAUL L. GAINES *Mayor*
City of Newport

GREETINGS

AARON J. SLOM *President*
Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue

REMARKS

BERNARD KUSINITZ *Historian*
Congregation Jeshuat Israel

GUEST SPEAKER

DR. ARTHUR A. CHIEL, RABBI *Congregation B'nai Jacob*

BENEDICTION

RABBI ELY KATZ *Cantor*
Congregation Jeshuat Israel

NEWPORT SYNAGOGUE, A REWARDING LEGACY*

BY RABBI ARTHUR A. CHIEL

"Ve'assu li mikdash, ve'shakhanti be'tokham . . .

And let them make Me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell in their midst."
(Exodus 25:8)

These were the words spoken to our Israelite ancestors some thirty-two hundred years ago. They were then wanderers in the Sinai desert, but they were beginning to take their earliest steps onto the stage of history. A short while earlier they had attained their independence. Indelibly imprinted in their collective consciousness was the remembrance of those harrowing centuries of enslavement in Egypt. Surrounded in the desert by unknown foes, uncertain where their food and water would come from tomorrow, unaware of what dangers lay ahead, they were commanded to build a sanctuary. And they were to set this sanctuary at the very center of their encampment as the symbol of its importance. This sanctuary was to be a perpetual extension of the bond that had been forged, recently, at Sinai Mount, between God and Israel. And from that time three millenia ago to this, wherever Jews have settled they have established a Tabernacle.

Two hundred and twenty years ago, in 1763, this Tabernacle of Congregation Jeshuat Israel was formally dedicated. Designed by Peter Harrison, "the prince of colonial amateur architects," it was a synagogue long in the making, for Jewish settlement here in Newport dates back to 1658, some two decades after the remarkable exponent of religious liberty, Roger Williams, established Rhode Island and Providence Plantations as a colony with an open-door policy for all religions.

We would be derelict if we did not dwell, even if briefly, on the extraordinary pioneering contribution of this man to the religious weal of all of us. Banished in 1635 from Massachusetts for his radical convictions about religious and political freedom, Roger Williams was determined that such liberty be granted in his new place of settlement.

The doyen of American Jewish history, Professor Jacob R. Marcus, has put it well when he writes: "Providence and Boston are scarcely forty miles apart, but that is no measure of the spiritual and political distance between the Rhode Island colony and Puritan-dominated New England. How widely

*Delivered at the Rededication Centennial of Touro Synagogue, Newport, Rhode Island on May 22, 1983, Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the modern Congregation Jeshuat Israel. Rabbi Chiel was spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai Jacob of Woodbridge, Connecticut. Rabbi Chiel died suddenly on August 27, 1983 in his 63rd year.

separated in outlook these settlements were is thrown into relief by contrasting their attitudes towards nonconformists.”

During his mission to England in 1644, to negotiate for Rhode Island her first charter, Roger Williams wrote and published his lengthy tract *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause and Conscience*. In this prophet-like work, Williams set forth his principles of liberty of conscience and separation of church and state. In it he asserted explicitly:

I acknowledge that to molest any person, Jew or Gentile, for either professing doctrine, or practicing worship merely religious or spirituall (*sic*), is to persecute him, and such a person (what ever his doctrine or practice be true or false) suffereth persecution for conscience.

Returned to England, in 1652, to have Rhode Island's charter confirmed by the Cromwell government, Roger Williams published a pamphlet *The Hireling Ministry* wherein he opposed a state church and state support of the clergy as “a covenant with Hell.” In this work Williams was equally forthright when he wrote:

I desire not that liberty to my selfe which I could not freely and impartially weigh out to all the consciences of the world beside. And therefore I doe humbly conceive that it is the will of the most high, and the expresse and absolute duty of the civill powers to proclaim an absolute freedom . . . in all the world . . . that each person may freely enjoy what worship their soul desireth.

In response to his fellow Rhode Islanders who charged that his radical ideas were destructive of the colony's civil-peace, Roger Williams countered with his now well known parable of the ship at sea:

It has fallen out sometimes that both Papists and Protestants, Jews and Turks, may be embarked on one ship; upon which supposal I affirm, that all the liberty of conscience, that ever I pleased for, turns upon two hinges — that none of the Papists, Protestants, Jews, or Turks, be forced to come to the ship's prayers or worship, nor be compelled from their own particular prayer or worship, if they practice any . . . notwithstanding this liberty, the commander of this ship ought to command that justice, peace and sobriety be kept and practiced both among the seamen and all the passengers.

Thus did Roger Williams, who died in 1683, prepare the haven of American religious liberty where, for the first time, Jews could enter on the basis of religious equality.

The growth of the colonial Jewish community was slow. Among the few families who came to Newport, worship was conducted in one Jewish home or another. But a cemetery was early acquired. In an archival deed of 1677 there is the stipulation that a fence shall be built around the burial ground and

if it should so Fall out that ye Jews should all Depart the Island Again so as that there shall be none left to keep up and Maintain this Fence as aforesaid then the Said Land shall Return Again to the said Nathaniel Dickens.

Because of the location of the cemetery, the road passing by it came to be known as *Jews' Street* and it is so designated on Mumford's 1712 map of Newport. We shall return to the Newport Cemetery.

At last, in 1758, one century after their arrival on the Newport scene, were there a large enough number of Jews to proceed with the engagement of a full-time clergyman, Hazzan Isaac Touro, and concurrently to move ahead with the construction of a synagogue. Newport, at this time, was at the height of its commercial prosperity.

In June 1759, Jacob Rodriguez Rivera, Moses Levy, and Isaac Hart, acting on behalf of Congregation Jeshuat Israel, acquired from Ebenezer Allen, title to "one certain parcel or lot of land situated, lying and being in the township of Newport." Four years later, in December 1763 at Hanukkah, the Festival of Rededication, was this lovely Georgian structure, designed by the gifted architect Peter Harrison, consecrated.

In his diary entry Friday, December 2, 1763, the Rev. Ezra Stiles, who had been present at the ceremony, wrote

In the afternoon was the dedication of the new synagogue in this town. It began by a handsome procession in which were carried the Books of Law, to be deposited in the Ark. Several portions of Scripture and of their service with a prayer for the royal family were read and finely sung by the priests and the people. There were present many gentlemen and ladies. The order and the decorum, the harmony and the solemnity of the musick, together with a handsome assembly of people, in an edifice the most perfect of the temple kind perhaps in America, and splendidly illuminated, could not but raise in the mind a faint idea of the majesty and grandeur of the ancient Jewish worship mentioned in the Scripture.

From Ezra Stiles's excellent diaries we learn that Newport now attracted learned visiting rabbis from the Holy Land and Europe, six in all, between

1759 and 1775. He established intensive dialogue with each of the rabbis and was impressed by their education. But Stiles developed his strongest affinity for Rabbi Haim Isaac Carigal, with whom he met frequently through April and May 1773.

On the first of the two-day Shavuot services, May 28, 1773, Congregation Jeshuat Israel invited town and colony officials to attend worship that they might hear Rabbi Carigal preach. Ezra Stiles took careful notes of the content and manner of Rabbi Carigal's preaching. The rabbi's sermon ran forty-seven minutes and was delivered in Spanish (Ladino) interspersed with Hebrew. According to Stiles, Carigal's "oratory, elocution and gestures were fine and oriental. It was very animated."

Stiles noted further that it was the intent of the Newport congregation to print the Carigal sermon in English translation. It was indeed published and put on sale on July 18, 1773, three days before Rabbi Carigal sailed for Surinam.

It is the basic theme of the Carigal sermon that, while everywhere on earth humans have busied themselves with work and toil to gain their daily bread, yet humanity cannot live by bread alone.

There are the contemporary thinkers, Carigal asserts, who believe that they can invent new religions better than the old (he has here in mind the Deists of the day). Yet, believes Carigal, the Law of the Lord need not be improved upon for it is perfect, "In the precepts of the Decalogue is exhibited an epitome of the divine Law."

As for the sufferings and calamities that have too often befallen Jewry, these have come about because Israel fell away from the high standards which the Law of God had prescribed for them. But Carigal exhorts them not to despair. Calamities and sufferings were not evidence of being forsaken by God. Adversity and God's judgments were the common lot of all nations mighty and weak alike.

Israel has but to acknowledge that they have erred, to do repentance, and, in turn, God will forgive. For "the justice of God is always united with His mercy and goodness," and He is ever ready to be moved by the contrite heart.

Rabbi Carigal ends his sermon with a short prayer supplicating that Divine favor be granted to "enlighten the eyes of our understanding to dissolve the thick clouds of our ignorance."

The Holy Land rabbi reciprocated Rev. Stiles's attendance at his Shavuot preaching by a visit to Stiles's church on Sunday, June 27, 1773. Carigal

came in the company of two Newport Jewish lay-leaders. As for the content of Stiles's sermon on that occasion, he said:

The seed of Jacob are a favorite people of the most High and the subjects of the peculiar care of Heaven, and of most marvelous Dispensations. That notwithstanding God's chastisements of their Iniquity and Imperfections in Calamities, Captivities and Dispersions; yet God hath not forgotten his Covenant with Abraham and his posterity. . . .

In this synagogue and in Newport was it, then, that there could uniquely take place a coming together of Jew and Christian, Christian and Jew, with a mutuality of regard.

A mere two years later, after this coming together to hear the brotherly preachments of rabbi and minister, Newport's equanimity was shattered by the outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775. When the British occupied Newport in December 1776, the majority of the Jewish population, along with several thousand other Newporters, fled their beloved seaport town. Hazzan Isaac Touro, who had served this congregation since 1759, took his sad leave, together with his wife Reyna, their two young sons Abraham and Judah, and their daughter, Rebecca. The Touroes went to Kingston, Jamaica, where Hazzan Touro officiated until his death in 1784.

The Newport Jewish community experienced a modest revival following the Revolution. However, it was destined that during this period history should record the ringing and memorable expression on religious liberty and human equality in letters exchanged in 1790 between this congregation's Parnass Moses Seixas and President George Washington: "To bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

After President Washington's historic visit of 1790 the Jewish community continued to decline. By 1800 the portals of this beautiful sanctuary were closed. The Torah Scrolls and sacred ritual objects were taken to New York for safe-keeping with America's mother synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel.

As the Newport Jewish community faded out of existence, a kindly Newport Christian, Stephen Gould, and after him his descendants, cared for the synagogue and cemetery. In his journal, Gould wrote on May 5, 1816, "Widow Rivera, aged 96, sailed for New York." In another entry, on October 5, 1822, Gould recorded sadly that "Moses Lopez, the last Jew, left Newport for New York." The Jewish community of 164 years duration had seemingly come to an end.

In the summer of 1852, thirty years after the departure of this community's

"last Jew," the great American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow came with his family to vacation here in beautiful Newport. On the third day after his arrival, he came upon the Jewish cemetery. As he relates it in his journal for July 9, 1852:

Went this morning into the Jewish Burying Ground, with Mr. Gould the Tailor, a polite old gentleman, who keeps the key. There are but a few graves; nearly all low tomb-stone of marble; with Hebrew inscriptions and a few words added in English or Portuguese.

On leaving Newport in early autumn 1852, and at Longfellow's return to his Cambridge home, the thought of its Jewish cemetery continued to haunt the poet. Longfellow's working journal reveals that he wrote his first lines of "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport" on November 6, 1852. As a biographer of Longfellow points out "it was one of the poems over which Longfellow had labored longest in revision."

The wide divergence between the final poem (which appeared in print July 1854 in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*) and the four manuscript drafts which have remained among the Longfellow papers reveal the poet's perplexity regarding the ultimate destiny of the Jew. His final and published version concludes on too pessimistic a note:

But ah! what once has been shall be no more!
The groaning earth in travail and pain
Brings forth its races, but does not restore,
And the dead nations never rise again.

Longfellow's prophecy about the Hebrews as now "a Legend of the Dead" was premature, if not exaggerated.

In the very same year that Longfellow's elegy on Jewry appeared, Judah Touro in far-off New Orleans left a trust to pay for the upkeep of Newport synagogue and cemetery and also "for the purpose of paying for the salary of a Reader or Minister to officiate in the Jewish synagogue of Newport . . ." Touro proved right; Longfellow proved wrong.

Newport's synagogue was soon to reopen for services during the summers of the late 1850s and into the 1860s for Jews who came from other American cities to vacation here.

And then there began the mass exodus of East European Jewry in the 1870s and early 1880s. These were the men, women, and children who fled the Czarist pogroms. Newport synagogue was there for their religious renewal. Congregation Shearith Israel returned to the Newport synagogue its Torah Scrolls, and the Reverend Abraham Pereira Mendes was appointed the rabbi

of the resurrected congregation. On Friday, May 25, 1883, the Touro Synagogue was reconsecrated with a service like unto that of this historic day.

If license can be taken, Longfellow's epitaphal sixth stanza of "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport" should, today, be emended to read:

Open are the portals of their Synagogue,
Anew Psalms of David now the silence break,
Again a Rabbi reads the ancient Decalogue,
In the grand dialect the Prophets spake.