

SISTERHOOD TEMPLE BETH EL, UTICA, NEW YORK
70TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION (1989)
BY LOIS SILVERMAN

The 1900's. It was the beginning of a new century. Certainly it was the best of times and the worst of times. In Europe there were pogroms, anti-Semitism, hunger, and uncertainty about the future; in America, there was hope.

So they came to Utica at the turn of the century. Jews from Russia, Austria-Hungary, Poland. And they settle around Washington Street in the 2nd Ward. Most were Orthodox Jews in the old country. But all were interested in making a living, in making a better life for their children and, of course, in making themselves and their families Americans.

Orthodox congregations started in Utica, but some people became uncomfortable with the Orthodoxy of their past. The immigrants could not reconcile the beliefs of Orthodoxy which they equated with their old lives in Europe with the realities of America. Further a growing native-born Jewish generation was restive, dissatisfied with the uncompromising Orthodoxy of their parents. They felt keenly the desirability of harmonizing Jewish tradition with the demand of modern life.

At first there seemed no viable alternative to Orthodox Judaism except Reform Judaism. The Jews of Utica tried to form a Reform congregation in 1903, but this first attempt at change, Reform Temple Beth El, failed. Perhaps the changes were too extreme. Perhaps to most Jews in Utica at the time Reform Judaism did not seem like Judaism at all.

The second attempt at change lasted from 1909 to 1911 and was Conservative Temple Beth El. Conservative Judaism was growing in America as an alternative to Reform Judaism on one hand and Orthodoxy on the other. Utica hired Rabbi Louis J. Haas, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, to head the congregation. In its two years of existence, Temple Beth El initiated changes some thought revolutionary: it established the modern Hebrew School for boys and girls, and it introduced Friday evening services. But the time wasn't right yet for Conservative Judaism in Utica.

But the right time wasn't long in coming. It was 1918. World War I had just ended. The door to unlimited immigration into America was closing. Women's Suffrage was the law of the land. After the High Holy Day Services of September, 1918, Julius Rothstein, a well-know realtor, and Jacob A. Goldstone, a prominent lawyer, went door-to-door to get contributions for a new non-Orthodox synagogue. They secured 52 subscribers for a total of \$4,850. This stimulate a meeting of 80 people on June 11, 1919, to organize a Conservative synagogue which they named Temple Beth El. Eight more members soon joined, and these 88 become the Temple's charter members. These members included Flora Glick, Minnie Krohn, Etta Routstone and Amelia Shacofsky. As one of the members of this new congregation stated:

Temple Beth El came into being because of men and women who wanted to be honest as Jews--to practice Torah in an honest way, without pretending to be something they were not. Each Jew, and each group of Jews is entitled to his own conception of God, in which he can wholeheartedly believe: God must be our God, as well as the God of our Ancestors. And that's why Beth El was begun--to worship God in an honest way, according to our conception of how best to make Judaism function in a 20th century setting--and to help meet the problems of this new age.

The new synagogue started life auspiciously with an addition gift of \$1,500--a legacy from the former Temple Beth El. Some of the leaders of the community like Barney Abelson and Myron S. Liberman, who were prominent in encouraging the Reform synagogue in 1903, wholeheartedly supported the Conservative Temple Beth El but kept themselves in the background so as not to prejudice the

existence of the new institution. With contributions from additional charter members, a total of \$6,700 was obtained. The first Welsh Methodist Church at Hopper and Union Streets was purchased on July 11, 1919. The first elected officers were Jacob A. Goldstone, Pres; Julius Tumposky, Secretary and David L. Cohen Treasurer.

Rabbi Reuben Kaufman of Worcester, Massachusetts, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary was the first rabbi with Simcha Copland, the first cantor. Services were conducted in Hebrew with English with the assistance of a female choir of ten voices. Among the voices of this first choir was that of Rose Krohngold. Tradition has it that Jacob A. Goldstone and David L. Cohen strictly supervised the decorum. Talking during the services was forbidden and all had to rise and sit for the Shemoneh 'Esre at the same time.

Rabbi Kaufman organized a Sunday School and the first Confirmation service was held on Shavuot, May 18, 1920. The Men's Club soon formed and held regular meeting. Rabbi Kaufman organized and led the Jewish Relief Campaign. With the help of his congregation and a committee of prominent Christians he raised the then huge sum of \$59,000. He was active in the United Synagogue and attended its annual conventions. In 1925 he left Utica for Temple Emanuel, Paterson, NJ.

One of Rabbi Reuben Kaufman's most far-reaching effects occurred in 1919. It was then that he realized that a Temple without an organized women's group was only half a Temple. So before the High Holydays in 1919, he called together 38 women who became the charter members of the Ladies' Auxiliary of Temple Beth El. The first president was Mrs. David L. Cohen. In 1921, the Ladies' Auxiliary of Temple Beth El affiliated with the Women's League of the United Synagogue. The first delegate from Utica to the 1922 National Convention of Women's League in Pittsburgh, was Mrs. Reuben Kaufman. Mrs. David L. Cohen was elected national treasurer of the Women's League in 1923. The Ladies' Auxiliary of Temple Beth El later changed its name to the Sisterhood of Temple Beth El. The organization's name was changed but not its basic purpose--to serve Temple Beth El.

One of the main functions of the Sisterhood was to develop and enhance congregation life. The Auxiliary provided a kosher kitchen. It was a complete kitchen established with the little sums raised with the usual bake sales and auctions. Of course, as complete as it was, the Sisterhood's new pots cooked for quite a while on an old stove that Minnie Krohn donated to the Temple.

The Sisterhood in the kitchen served the first supper for the newly organized Men's Club in 1922. In 1925, the Sisterhood took charge of the first luncheon of the first State Conference held by the Council of Jewish Women in Utica.

Of course, even in those days, you couldn't keep the Sisterhood in the kitchen all the time. The Sisterhood sponsored the first community Seder in 1926. It purchased Bibles to present as gifts to the confirmants.

It was about the same time, around 1922, when the ladies started making jokes about "going intellectual" as the Sisterhood began devoting 15 minutes of each meeting to current Jewish affairs. Who would have thought then that those informal discussions would have lead to the nationally recognized programs our Sisterhood soon had and still has today?

But times change. During the middle 20's, due to their improved economic situation, the Jews started to move out of the Jewish "ghetto" of the Second Ward into the southern section of the city around Corn Hill. Therefore its leaders decided to move the Temple closer to its members and into bigger quarters to accommodate its steady and constant growth. Someone wrote about this time:

Perhaps the Building Committee decided to build the new temple on Genesee Street because it was the main street then and would continue to be the main street. The temple should be on the main street, not on a side street, not stuck away in a corner, but on the street where traffic was heaviest; where people could see us every day; and as people passed by they could look and say to themselves 'Here is a Jewish synagogue. Here is Beth El, a house of God.' It's a symbol of something important that our city needs--that all cities need. a symbol of peace, brotherhood, justice and a better world.

On June 30, 1929, the honor of laying the cornerstone was given to Myron S. Liberman, one of the men who initiated the Temple. A box containing the historic records was placed in the cornerstone. Julius Tumposky, the second Temple President deposited the history of the synagogue. Mrs. Lena Cone Galinsky, President of the Sisterhood, inserted the history of the Sisterhood. Solomon Jacobson, Director of the Religious School placed the roster of the school children in the box. The ceremony was completed with Joseph Sonneborn, Chairman of the Building Committee, depositing a list of members and contributors to the building fund.

The new building cost \$205,000 which was rather an impressive sum for so small a community in those days. It was built with a seating capacity of 650 and a convertible auditorium-gymnasium that could seat up to 700. Other facilities of the building consisted of 7 classrooms; a chapel; a library; a kitchen; offices for the rabbi, the secretary and the cantor. The building also contained other facilities including a cloakroom, showers, and a Sisterhood lounge (where the present Temple Board Room is).

On Oct. 29, 1929, 4 months after the laying of the cornerstone, the terrible stock market crash occurred. The affluent members saw their wealth disappear. Some members could not pay their pledges. The task before the leadership of Temple Beth El was two fold: the loss of pledged revenue had to be made up somehow and Temple Beth El had to continue functioning as a strong religious, educational and social institution despite the depression.

A new program toward that end was instituted with the Sisterhood in the forefront. In November, 1930, the Sisterhood undertook the sponsorship of many cultural programs. It established the Book Review Club, thus stimulating interest in good books of Jewish and general interest. Sisterhood also took over the maintenance and operation of the Temple's library. Sisterhood instituted adult classes in Hebrew for women in 1932 as well a Child Study Group and an Oneg Shabat Study Circle. The Annual Lecture Series--the forerunner of the Kallah--and the Monthly Temple Lecture Series--the forerunner of the Weitzman Lecture Series--were started in 1936 by the Sisterhood. Sisterhood sponsored series brought into the Temple such internationally known speakers as Max Artz, Maurice Samuels, Rabbi Milton Steinberg, Dr. Robert Gordis, Dr. Simon Greenberg, Dr. Abram L Sachar, Ludwig Lewisohn, Dr. Abraham Neuman, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and many others.

Sisterhood was in the forefront of the new brotherhood movement. In addition to sponsoring, organizing, and preparing a community seder, Sisterhood reached out to the non-Jewish community in many ways. In 1925 the Sisterhood was well represented in the Community Chest (now the United Way) campaign. In January 30, 1939, Sisterhood invited the members of the Lutheran Church to the musical pageant, "My Country Tis," written by Althea Osber Silverman, a former Utican. Miss Sara Freedman of Temple Beth El and Mrs. E.H. Hitzelberger of the Church of the Redeemer jointly directed the pageant in which the members of various racial groups took part.

In the early 1930's when the Hebrew School of Temple Beth El finally met in the Temple building itself the Sisterhood started giving parties for the children at the time of the major holidays--Rosh Hashanah, Hanukah, Purim, Passover, and Shavuot. These parties helped make the learning process more enjoyable and meaningful for the students.

In 1930 Sisterhood organized the first of what was for many years the highlight of the Temple's, if not the Jewish Community's, Social Year--the Thanksgiving Ball. It was a formal dance. Since our Temple's basement served also as a gym, the dance was held outside the Temple at the most elegant ball rooms in Utica--at the Hotel Utica, the Hotel Hamilton, the newly redecorated Twin Ponds. It was a purely social event with no food served. People would hold pre-ball parties at their homes and come to the dance when it began at around nine o'clock. From the First Thanksgiving Ball in 1930, Sisterhood raised \$22 which it gave to the Temple to help alleviate its financial problems.

During the succeeding years, the Sisterhood aided the synagogue financially by conducting large social events such as the Thanksgiving Eve Dance, the Purim Masquerades, and the Spring Dance. The women of the Sisterhood labored conducting auctions, white elephant sales, bake sales, and all types of fund-raisers.

The Sisterhood contributed more than \$25,000 to the coffers of the temple during the most trying years, 1930-1945. Rabbi S. Joshua Kohn wrote in his book about the Jewish Community of Utica: "It may justly be recorded that the Sisterhood was not only an integral part of the synagogue during the most difficult years of 1930-1945, but was the dynamic force in the social and cultural life of the Temple's program as well as the major force in its financial stability."

It was during this time that Sisterhood took an active role in community, state, and national organizations as well as the temple. In 1933, Mrs. Herman Sonneborn was the first Sisterhood president to be elected to the Board of Trustees of the Temple Beth El. And when the Jewish Community Council was organized, the Sisterhood joined immediately.

During World War II, Sisterhood women volunteered to help the Red Cross and were aides (Gray Ladies) for Rhodes General Hospital (located on Burrstone Rd). They manned the USO booth at the Utica train station. They also sent packages once a month to Jewish servicemen in the Philippines through Chaplin Rabbi Morris Adler's Jewish Welfare Board project.

In the 40's our Sisterhood's Past President Rita Markson became President of NY State Branch of Women's League for Conservative Judaism. Later Nettie Schwartz also became Branch President and a National Vice-President. In subsequent years among those who were active in Branch were Bert Resnikoff as vice-president, Rita Manning as secretary, and presently Lois Silverman, as vice-president and National Board and National Committee member thus continuing Temple Beth El Sisterhood's role of leadership. Further the Branch Conferences held in Utica were always considered among the best ever held in NY State.

From 1948, Sisterhood has been a strong supporter of the State of Israel. During Israel's many wars, Sisterhood was there doing and giving. In fact every year whether in peace or war, Sisterhood has given funds directly to Israel and to the emerging Conservative movement there.

From its founding over 40 years ago, Sisterhood has supported Women's League for Conservative Judaism's Torah Fund/Residence Hall campaign, making its quota of donations almost every year.

During the fifties, Sisterhood became active in supporting the newly founded Camp Ramah program. In the 40 years of Camp Ramah's existence, more than a hundred Temple Beth El children have attended the camp thanks to help from a Sisterhood campership.

In the fifties Sisterhood continued to lead as the Temple maintained its role as a social institution. Sisterhood ran theater parties to see films at the Oneida Square movies theater as well as continuing its Thanksgiving Dance.

In the sixties, the thirty-year-old Temple building needed remodeling. And the Sisterhood was there to do whatever was asked of them. As they had done thirty years before when the building was being built, the women of the Sisterhood raised funds for the remodeling by laboring long hours conducting auctions, white elephant sales, bake sales, and all types of fund-raisers.

Into the seventies and eighties the Sisterhood was always there to help. It restocked the Temple's supply of silverware as well as pots and pans during the late 70's and early 80's.

During this time, Sisterhood also assumed the sponsorship of the Temple's Israel Scholarship for high school students.

It is more than a half truth when someone jokingly says: when the Temple needs something and doesn't have the funds or the workers, call Sisterhood for its members are always there.

And yet even though it does so much work in and out of Temple, Sisterhood's image of ladies in white gloves and hats working only in the kitchen and in fund-raising for the Temple is a lingering false stereotype. In the 70's and 80's the Sisterhood has confronted and met many changes and many challenges to its very existence. But Sisterhood has endured because there are still women who feel that the work of Sisterhood is worth continuing. Creative thinking by these dedicated and energetic women has allowed Sisterhood to overcome the hard times so it can look hopefully toward the future.

What does the future hold for Sisterhood? No one knows. We can only enter the future remembering the legacy of the past. And what is this legacy?

One of our early members said it best:

“Somehow the people who worked together in the Sisterhood young and old alike are the most important part of it all. Without the people who gave so much of themselves, the work, the struggle, and even the goals--no matter how important these goals were--would all be quite meaningless.”

Sisterhood was started and exists today to teach Torah and to enhance Beth El (God's house), and to support the Conservative movement which guides us toward positive Jewish living.