

Temple Beth El: Remembering Samuel Luskin

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A few months ago, the papers of Temple Beth El were made available for research at the University at Buffalo, and a guide can be accessed on the Bureau of Jewish Education website (www.bjebuffalo.org/jbap). In last month's issue of the JJWNY, I gave an overview of Temple Beth El, which was founded in May 1847, and I briefly traced its various homes, as well as the highlights of the collection. In 2008, Temple Beth El merged with Temple Shaarey Zedek to form Temple Beth Tzedek, which will be on the move again in 2017.

One of the special aspects of the Beth El records was a significant series of musical and compositional materials created by Samuel Luskin. He was born in Russia in 1882 to Leon and Fannie Luskin, and the family fled Russia in the 1900s in response to state-sponsored anti-Semitism. By 1906, Samuel Luskin had settled in Buffalo, and married Celia Bransburg- also a Russian immigrant- in 1911. They had two sons, Leo and Harold. Trained as a musician in Russia where he taught violin, Luskin continued his study of the violin in Buffalo with Julius Singer. Luskin was appointed Musical Director at Temple Beth El in 1911, and from 1914 until 1957 he served as choirmaster as well as an instructor in the Hebrew School, where he tutored B'nei mitzvah students for over forty years.

A musician who played violin, French horn, trumpet, flute and the piano, he also composed music for voice and organ and was a prolific music arranger. With Harry Hart Kaufman, a Temple Beth El cantor, he composed a liturgical service, *Manginot Beth El*, which was published in 1945. Founder of the Buffalo Jewish Choral Society, he served as its director for 16 years from 1929 to 1945. Many of his arrangements for Beth El are included in the Temple Beth El holdings. However, many more compositions and arrangements were maintained within the Buffalo Jewish Choral Society library, whose holdings were donated after his death to the Buffalo Central Library, and absorbed into their general collection of



Temple Beth El Religious School faculty, 1940s. Samuel Luskin on far right.

musical scores.

Within the Temple Beth El collection, Samuel Luskin's musical scores were originally bound in three ring binders, but were found stacked in foot high piles, having been removed from these binders at one stage and then separated again, probably as a result of water damage in the archives that necessitated moving materials into temporary holding zones which eventually became permanent. The unique organizational system devised by Samuel Luskin at this point became disrupted, but with the help of a University at Buffalo archives intern, Gabrielle Carlo, now archivist at the

Albright Knox Art Gallery, who was also trained in music, the separated sheets of Samuel Luskin were reunited with their subsections and arranged according to the title of the hymn or folk tune, or to a numbering system devised by Samuel Luskin.

Different musical keys, and different voice versions, and other copies with additional markings made by Samuel Luskin were all saved. Samuel Luskin's musical scores were also used by various Temple Beth El choirs, the Buffalo Jewish Choral Society as well as Cantor Gerald DeBruin, and often carry multiple markings. The musical collections

contain his composition book, and selections of music he used of the great liturgical composers and cantors. The musical legacy and interests of both Samuel Luskin and Temple Beth El are now accessible to all and provide the opportunity for further study. One folder of materials, for example, includes correspondence with Esther Zweig, Yiddish translator and musical lyricist, and this exchange illustrates, not only his work as a composer, but also his musical connections outside of Buffalo within the Yiddish speaking world.

In addition to musical scores, however, Samuel Luskin's records also included a range of bar mitzvah materials. Luskin taught for decades, and a set of Torah portions which he readied for use by individual students was compiled into binders and given as a "Gift of Mrs. Morris Steinhorn, in honor of her grandson James Steinhorn's bar mitzvah."

These volumes and other separated speeches provides a window into this period, and to hundreds of Beth El students, whose names were recorded next to their portions. At the age of 75 in 1957, Samuel Luskin was honored by Temple Beth El for serving 45 years as musical director with a special performance by the Buffalo Jewish Choral Society, directed by Allen Sigel. Just two years later in July 1959, Samuel Luskin died and was buried at Temple Beth El Cemetery, Pine Hill in Buffalo, NY.

To learn more about the Temple Beth El collection and other papers, you can contact Chana Kotzin at archivesproject@bjebuffalo.org, or call 716-204-5388. Many more collection guides are on the Bureau of Jewish Education website at www.bjebuffalo.org/jbap.

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