

A Temple on Delaware

By Chana R. Kotzin, Ph.D., Director, Buffalo Jewish Archives Project

As the largest collection organized by the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, under the auspices of the Bureau of Jewish Education, through funding obtained by the Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies, the Temple Beth Zion collection contains a myriad of materials from an extensive Sisterhood archives, to school materials, architectural renderings and plans for both Delaware temple sites as well as photographs (some of which are online through NY Heritage), and a range of significant materials relating to the development of Reform Judaism in America. As with Temple Beth El, this article is the first of three that describes aspects of this synagogue's history and its significant research possibilities.

Like many older Reform Jewish communities, Beth Zion, as it was in 1850, began as an Orthodox synagogue when a small breakaway group split away from Temple Beth El - the first synagogue founded in Buffalo in 1847. (The Temple Beth El archives are also available for research at the University at Buffalo). While the new Beth Zion retained a self-identification with Orthodoxy, this dominantly German-Jewish congregation gradually changed orientation so that by 1863, it had aligned with Reform Judaism, and in 1864, formerly incorporated as a Reform congregation. Temple Beth Zion-- as it was now known-- bought its first building - the former Methodist Episcopal Church - on Niagara Street, which was remodeled and dedicated on May 26, 1865. At this bilingual German-English service, Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, the leader of the Reform



Movement, addressed the congregation in English, while Rabbi Isaac N. Cohen, the congregational Rabbi, gave a sermon in German. Fragile, but fascinating minute books and ledgers survive from this earliest period. Indeed, despite a fire in 1961, Temple Beth Zion has a significant

cache of early materials, and these are the oldest dating back to the beginning of the Temple's Reform origins.

In 1866, Temple Beth Zion hired Rabbi Samson Falk. Under his leadership, the congregation joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and he became active in broader Buffalo community affairs. Within a decade, Rabbi Falk also became the first historian of Jewish Buffalo, presenting a paper, "A History of the Israelites in Buffalo" to the Buffalo Historical Society in 1876, where he also served on the Board of Managers. This first chronology of Jewish life in Buffalo was written just before a significant expansion of the Buffalo Jewish community and highlighted a confident community connected by inter-family ties, participating in cultural and financial institutions within the broader city community.

Following the death of Rabbi Falk, Rabbi Israel Aaron was appointed in 1887 just after the sale of the Niagara Street temple and when the broader Jewish community was undergoing demographic change as incoming Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe enlarged the existing Jewish community to over 10,000 by 1899. Interestingly, Temple Beth Zion became a central part of this transitioning community - not as a place of worship - as new shuls founded by the new immigrants themselves served those needs - but rather through the creation of Zion House, a settlement style house run by the Sisterhood of

Zion from 1891. This settlement house provided English lessons, other services and activities for children and adults as well as providing an alternative space to missionary organizations that sprang up in the neighborhood. Zion house was a precursor to the Jewish Community Building that eventually became the Jewish Community Centers we know today.

Temple Beth Zion celebrated a pivotal moment in its history in 1890. The dedication of its first purpose built temple at 599 Delaware Avenue was a Buffalo-wide affair. Edward A. Kent and William Kent were the commissioned architects, with Edward Kent taking the lead in designing a Byzantine revival building. Fashioned from Medina sandstone and topped with a large copper-covered dome, the temple and sanctuary are still remembered with love. The architectural renderings, alternative designs and expansion plans are all to be found in the collection, and recall a time when Temple Beth Zion put its first congregational stamp on Delaware Avenue.

Under Rabbi Louis J. Kopald who succeeded Rabbi Aaron after his unexpected death, the Temple continued to grow. By the 1920s, Temple Beth Zion had a Women's Temple Society, a Men's Club and a Young People's Society. As Rabbi Kopald's health failed, however, Temple Beth Zion appointed a new rabbi who was already assisting intermittently. Rabbi Dr. Joseph L. Fink, then a young rabbi, proved a perfect match and served the congregation for the next 34 years from 1926. During his time, the synagogue expanded further, adding a rabbi's study, kitchen, more classrooms and a library. In addition, Rabbi Dr. Fink became a leading religious figure known nationally as well as locally, and far beyond the Jewish community. Heard regularly on the radio through the Humanitarian Hour that aired through WBEN from 1930 to 1956, copies of these speeches are to be found within a series relating to Rabbi Dr. Joseph Fink in the collection. Topics range over world affairs, politics and ethics at critical junctures of national and international history.

To explore these materials and more, please check the BJE website at www.bjebuffalo.org/jbap and click on the Temple Beth Zion link to plan your trip to the University at Buffalo archives. You can also contact Chana Kotzin at archivesproject@bjebuffalo.org or call 716-204-5380 for more information.



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