

*KEHILATH JESHURUN —
SEVENTY-FIVE YESTERYEARS*

THE SAGA OF AN AMERICAN JEWISH FAMILY

Following are excerpts from the Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun's Diamond Jubilee Journal, published in 1947 to commemorate 75 years of the synagogue's existence (1872-1947). This is the synagogue the Baum, Webster and Crohn families worshipped in, and is mentioned numerous times as a part of their everyday life. The journal is an excellent means of placing our family in the context of New York City's Jewish Community of 1870. (EK)

THE WORLD INTO WHICH KEHILATH JESHURUN WAS BORN

A Historical Sketch of the Kehilath Jeshurun Synagogue

By Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein

"These are the generations of..." Thus is the narration of an event or the biography of a person begun in the Bible. For a composite description of an epoch it is not sufficient to set down a series of dates, however correct. That would be chronology but not history. For a full length portrait of a personality it is not enough to give a genealogical record. That would be a vita not a biography.

The Bible apparently senses that. When seeking to give a full length portrait of an outstanding personality it invariably glimpses backwards to the ancestors that produced him and forward towards his contemporaries and the generation of which he is a part. When evaluating an event it seeks to present the entire web or pattern of occurrences and happenings in which that event is related. These are the generations, is the way the Bible puts it. An event is not a solitary phenomenon. A human being is not an isolated creature.

What is true of a person or an event is equally true of an institution. An institution is not born in a vacuum; nor is it created ex nihilo. It is the product of the times, a result of the dynamic forces of life, an answer to the needs of men, a response to the cravings and motivations of their souls.

Is it not correct, therefore, to begin the narrative of seventy-five years of a congregation's existence by saying: "These are the generations of Kehilath Jeshurun"?

THE WORLD INTO WHICH KEHILATH JESHURUN WAS BORN

The 1870s were exciting years for America. Ulysses S. Grant climaxed a successful military career by a dubiously successful presidency. The standard of political ethics was pitifully low. The Gold Conspiracy, the Whiskey Ring, the Belknap Scandal – what a haven for a Winchell or a Pearson, had they been there.

In the fall of 1872, when Kehilath Jeshurun was holding its first High Holiday services, there broke upon the country the infamous Credit Mobilier scandal involving the vice-president of the United States,

among other government officials. Horace Greeley, nominated to wipe away a nation's shame, went down to overwhelming defeat in November of that year. Disturbed but undaunted by the defeat of their fellow New Yorker, a minyan (ten men) of pious Jews under the name of Anshe Jeshurun of Yorkville was holding divine services that fall at the home of one of their number.

In New York City the ethical climate was a good deal brighter. By 1872, due in no small measure to the unyielding efforts of The New York Times and the clever as well as striking cartoons of Thomas Nast in Harper's weekly, the Tweed Ring had been unseated and a wicked gang of unscrupulous officials were destroyed. The inhabitants of the fast growing city were breathing more freely and could gaily picnic on a Sunday in Jones' Woods in the East 60s. In the summertime the men in colorful swallow-tailed dress coats and bright toppers, the women in hoop skirts and bonnets, could ride the horse-drawn streetcar on Third Avenue all the way up to 63rd Street. Their bright Sunday clothes would hardly be soiled for the Third Avenue elevated with its choo-choo engines, belching smoke and soot, had not begun to run.

The recreational inclinations of the population did not always take the uptown trend. Sometimes the country folk of Yorkville went downtown as far as the Battery where immigrants from the old country would come to Castle Garden. For outdoor fun, there was Parupa Hall, destined one day to become a Federal Post Office, but not before it provided accommodations for several successive High Holiday services for the Anshe Jeshurun of Yorkville Synagogue.

The Old World across the sea was astir and its stirrings were articulated in the headlines of the press of the day. Europe was at its old game. A blood and iron Chancellor was leading the Prussian hosts. The familiar tread of the invader's boots was heard on the soil of France. The Franco-Prussian War was in progress, forerunner of two greater wars that would embroil the entire Old World and involve the new. Prussian militarism was preparing the ground for German anti-Semitism.

THE JEWISH LITTLE OLD NEW YORK

The population of New York City in 1870 was 1,000,000 and the Jewish population was between 60,000 and 75,000. Most of them came from Germany between 1830 and 1860. A good number were of Polish origin, while others were native Jews of the old Spanish-Portuguese stock with a sprinkling of Jews from England, Holland, France, Hungary and Russia. In 1870 some 1000 Russian Jews arrived in New York and most of them remained in the city.

New York City at the time extended from the Battery to Harlem. The

Jewish population was concentrated in two sections. One of these was the Lower East Side and extended from East Broadway to about Fifth Street; the other was on the West Side and extended from about Fifth Avenue and 20th Street to Eighth Avenue and 50th. Here lived the wealthier Jews who were shortly to continue their march further uptown. Smaller Jewish sections existed in other parts of the city. One was adjacent to the present-day Chinatown. Another was in Harlem, while a third was in Yorkville, the East Side of New York from about 70th Street to 90th Street.

There were some thirty-odd synagogues in New York City at that time. The richest of those was Emanu-El with an imposing edifice on Fifth Avenue at 43rd Street. Next to it in importance and affluence was Adath Jeshurun, later known as Temple Beth El on West 39th Street. Both of these were Reform houses of worship. The leading Orthodox congregation of that time was Shaare Tefilah, today known as the West End Synagogue, and which was then located on West 44th Street near Broadway. Of perhaps equal importance was Shearith Israel, the oldest synagogue in the city and the staunchest advocate of traditional Judaism (it is commonly referred to as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue).

The trend of all synagogues, institutions, and of the Jewish population as a whole was constantly uptown. The Central Synagogue was in the process of moving from the Lower East Side to a new building on Lexington Avenue and 56th Street. Mount Sinai, originally called Jews' Hospital was building its second structure on 62nd Street and Lexington Avenue. The hospital, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum and the small Home for Aged and Infirm Hebrews on West 70th Street constituted the sum total of organized Jewish welfare work in the city.

Traditional Judaism was not faring too well. There was a laxity in religious observance. The sale of kosher meat was unsupervised and unregulated. Reform and semi-Reform Judaism were influencing the rituals of the older congregations. Assimilation was on the march. Inter-marriage had claimed most of the descendants of the seventeenth-century Jews and the descendants of the eighteenth-century Jews were slowly meeting the same fate. Even those who arrived in the nineteenth century were severing their ties with the synagogue, and were maintaining only a social contact with their people.

A wide gulf existed between the uptown, richer and Americanized Jews, and the poorer immigrants on the Lower East Side. No attempt was made to bridge this gulf. The concept of a Jewish community did not yet exist, and each synagogue or society was a law unto itself.

Jewish education was in a deplorable state. A child generally

received some instruction in reading the prayer book but hardly more. Some six or seven Sunday Schools attached to Reform, Orthodox and Conservative congregations existed in 1870. The curriculum of instruction was meager and consisted of some biblical history and religious instruction. The Jewish Little Old New York was Jewishly very little indeed.

THE FIRST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS WERE THE HARDEST

There is no record of how many attended the High Holiday Day services conducted by a group of Yorkville Jews in 1872. The number could not have been very large because very few Jewish families inhabited this part of the city at that time. It is known that in the fall of that year a small group met to form a 'chevra (society) for divine worship'. The group consisted of Abbe Baum, Jacob Hecht, Frank Goldman, T. Crohn, Jacob Webster and M. Levy. Anshe Jeshurun of Yorkville was adopted as the congregation's name.

The first High Holiday service was held in Parupa Hall. Abbe Baum acted as the volunteer cantor, and for about a year the Sabbath services were held regularly at his home. They subsequently met at the homes of various members, then rented a room above a beer garden at 162 East 86th Street. The congregation bought a burial ground at Union Field Cemetery (where the first generation of our family are known to have been buried). The first synagogue structure was built at 127 East 82nd Street and opened its doors in 1884.

*The journal article includes photographs of the first six presidents of the congregation, including Abbe Baum and Theodore Crohn. The cornerstone for the present building on East 85h Street was laid on May 4th, 1902. Photographs of the event that were reproduced in the Diamond Jubilee Journal include pictures of synagogue officers, among them **Jacob Webster, Dr. Joseph Baum, Theodore Crohn, David Baum and Bernard Webster.***