

BETH EL 1930-1968

There is a story about a pious Jew who was the only survivor of a shipwreck and found himself washed ashore on a remote, uninhabited island. Being resourceful as well as pious, and feeling somewhat like a new Adam in a new Eden he set about making a new life for himself. Finally, many months later, a ship came to explore the island and found a man. Proudly this Adam showed off his Gan, a Gan without Eve or Serpent and with coconut instead of apple trees.

"This," he said leading the party to a crude, rustic building, "is my synagogue. I built it before I built my house. And over there," pointing to a similar structure in the distance, "is the other synagogue."

"But why, in heaven's name," exclaimed one visitor, "do you need two synagogues, when you don't even have a minyon for one?"

"Oh, that one over there," explained our new Adam, "is the one I don't go to!"

Beth El, of course, did not come into being because some early Phoenix Jews wanted a synagogue of which they could say, "That's the one we don't go to!" But . . .

In the beginning there was the minyon. There was, indeed, a time when there were not ten Jews in Phoenix and no amount of searching in the streets for the "tenth man" would have yielded him. But the story of Beth El, as the story of any of the six congregations that serve the Jewish community in Greater Phoenix today, has its genesis in the beginning of Jewish religious life here. Let us, therefore, begin with the minyon.

The first recorded act on behalf of Jewish life — or death — in Arizona, was performed by Michael Wormser, who came to the territory in 1865 and who later gave five acres of land for a Jewish burial ground, that which is now Beth Israel cemetery.

Even before Arizona achieved statehood the then handful of Phoenix Jews met for the High Holy Day services. They were led by lay officiants, among them one Harry Friedman, a bachelor who sold jewelry and saddles, rode horses and dealt in cattle, almost a prototype of the "Yiddisher Cowboy" celebrated in a popular song of the period. But he cared about his Jewishness and did what he could to help it establish roots in the arid soil of the Arizona Territory. Then, in 1912, the territory became a state and the Jews of Phoenix became a somewhat structured community. Still served by lay leaders, they met more frequently, first in one another's homes, then in halls about town and in the school administration building. The same year children's classes for religious in-

struction were established through the efforts of Barnett Marks and the roots began to spread and deepen.

The new state, the desert-bound, sun-baked town and the Jewish community grew together and flourished like "the green palm tree." In 1915 there were enough children for a Chanukah program. Five years later the B'nai B'rith was already a force in the city and, at a dinner honoring the District Grand President, a drive was initiated to raise funds for a synagogue. To pursue this objective and bring it to fruition, the Phoenix Hebrew Center Association was organized.

In the meantime, still using the best available, if rather bleak, meeting halls, Congregation Beth Israel was established. The Jewish religious community was still ONE when, in the spring of 1921, Rabbi Zielonka came up from El Paso to preside over the dedication of the first synagogue, temple, schule — call it what you will. Its purpose was unmistakable and its congregants joyful in its presence. A modest building, it stood on the northwest corner of Second Street and Culver, its conjoining streets dusty in the heat, ankle-deep in mud after a rain. But it stood firmly and proudly gleaming white and almost every Phoenix Jew could say, if we may paraphrase Shakespeare, ". . . a humble structure, but mine own . . ."

The ritual of Beth Israel, in those early years, was of necessity, designed to meet the backgrounds and preferences of a widely diversified pattern of Jewish practice: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform and a little hyphenation in between.

When, in 1927, Rabbi Y. Dow of Tucson was engaged to serve the community as Shochet and Mohel, these differences were brought into sharp focus. No one, at the time, questioned the importance of a Mohel, but not everyone required the services of a shochet. But even before this became a controversial issue, small rents had begun to appear in the Congregation's religious fabric. Not indefinitely could the threads of such disparate views as those held by the various congregants be woven into one whole religious cloth. The question of supporting a shochet was merely a well-defined issue on which the tenuous fabric of unity was finally torn asunder.

In June, 1930, the stand was taken. A new congregation was formed, its orientation Conservative-Orthodox. The first meeting took place in the rear of the late Abraham Goodman's store at Second and Jefferson Streets. Only a year before, some of the men at this meeting had been on Beth Israel's Board of Directors; soon they would become leaders of Beth El, the new congregation



and Hebrew School officially chartered by the State of Arizona.

Sol Kartus was Beth El's first president. The first concern of his administration was to find a place to worship — a place that the new congregants could call their own. A building at Fourth and Fillmore Streets was found and purchased. It had been a Protestant Church and was, in later years, to be a wholesale flower business, then a theatre and later a house of Puppetry. But for 19 years, remodeled, refurbished and sanctified, it was to serve the needs of the new congregation. A man who was destined to leave an indelible imprint on the Phoenix community, presented the first sefer-torah to Beth El. His name was Hyman Kivel. Today the Kivel Nursing Home is an eloquent testimonial to his generous spirit. So now Beth El had its synagogue and its Tree of Life and in 1931 Rabbi Dow became its first spiritual leader and teacher. Five years later a fire destroyed Temple Beth Israel and once again the two congregations were, in a sense, as one, when the synagogue membership offered its facilities to the Temple membership and the offer was accepted.

1939 was a significant year for Beth El. The Rabbi Nathan A. Barack became the congregation's first ordained rabbi; Morris Meckler became its 8th president; and with the two there began to take shape the dream of a new and more adequate house of worship and teaching facility. The paid up membership that year was — 12! One might say it took chutzpah to talk about a new building with only a dozen — not even a baker's dozen — paid-up members on the rolls! But perhaps it is closer to the truth to say it took vision and faith.

In 1940 were inaugurated separate Orthodox and Conservative services for the High Holy Days,

an arrangement that met with the approval of both factions and opened the way for new members into the congregation. Another factor in the memberships growth was the contribution of Cecil and Philip Newmark whose voices enriched the Friday night and High Holy Day services for many years.

In 1941 Vaad Hakashruth was organized. The same year President Meckler declared the time auspicious for a fund-drive to pay off Beth El's mortgage and he started the campaign with his own contribution. Before a year had passed the goal was achieved; the mortgage was burned and undivided attention could be given to the drive for a new building fund. This became the congregation's most serious and single-minded concerns in 1943.

In 1947 the president appointed a building committee including the late Max Reiter, Joe Gross, Sam Smith, Sam Joseph, and Harry Zeitlin. These men, together with countless others on the various committees, did their work magnificently.

In 1951, 12 years after he had been installed as the 8th president of Beth El Congregation, Morris Meckler was still "the chief." He had vowed to serve as long as he could be of use, until the new synagogue was completed. Now, on March 4th, 1951 he saw the fulfillment of the dream in the dedication of the new sanctuary at 3rd Avenue and McDowell. Rabbi Harry Z. Schechtman led the congregation now, and the membership which was 12 when the dream took shape had grown to 416. It was time for new dreams — and new dreamers.

Ten years later the ceremony installing the new officers honored all the past presidents. Using "Memories" as a theme, a tribute was paid to the men who had started a new congregation in the



back of a little clothing store and to those who had followed them. Either O'lov Hasholom, in absentia or in person, they were presented to the congregation and their trials and achievements recalled in song and story.

The first three presidents, Sol Kartus, Abraham Goodman, and B. Berger were no longer living. The fourth, William Gerstman, was absent. After them came Eli Grousky, 1935-36, whose term of office witnessed such hard times that there was not even enough money to pay Rabbi Dow. After him came Harry Zeitlin, 1936-38. His was the joy of seeing threatened foreclosure turned into refinancing and new hope. Abe Primock, 1938-39 was another absentee. Morris Meckler followed him as president, 1939-52. His long term of office has already been well reviewed.

Sam Schurgin was president in 1952-53. Under his guidance membership almost doubled and an \$8,000 indebtedness was paid off. Sam Smith, 1953-55, had the great satisfaction of seeing the synagogue's \$15,000 mortgage go up in flames. Jerome Smith held the office next, 1955-57, his administration high-lighted by the growth of the Hebrew School from an enrollment of 80 to 275 while the staff was increased from 4 to 9. It was during his term, too, that Rabbi Carol Klein became spiritual leader of Beth El.

Robert Schubert, whose recent and untimely death we mourn, was president during 1957-58 and again in 1960-61. Over the years even before and after he held that high office his service to the congregation was unstinting and generous. But everyone who attended services at 3rd Avenue and McDowell during his administration recalls gratefully the comfort he brought to the worshipers with the installation of refrigeration.

But the event of his administration that was

proved truly a blessing for Beth El was the arrival of Zachary Merrin to become Director of our Religious School. Both he and his wife, Jacqueline, have served our young people with scholarship and such dedication as has been an inspiration to us all.

Mr. Schubert was followed by Hy Dreiseszun, 1958-59. If ever a man was drafted for office, he was that man, happily for the congregation. During his term Cantor Harold Green joined the Beth El family and organized an outstanding choir. Howard Tocker came next, 1959-60. The daily Gan was established during his presidency and at the end of his term of office — Beth El was solvent! These were the men whose years of service were recalled in musical memories in 1961. At the



same time the new officers and board members were installed.

The new president was Saul Abromovitz, 1961-62. In an early message which appeared in the "Echo," after commending Sam Schurgin and his ritual committee, he wrote: ". . . I keep wondering how we can fix that leak in the basement when it rains!" But more dramatic events than the problem of a leak in the basement were to take place. Rabbi Carol Klein left Beth El to establish a conservative congregation in Mexico City and to take over the pulpit came Rabbi Moshe Tutnauer with his Margery — now our Margie, for no Rebbitzen has ever become a more integral part of the Beth El family than Mrs. Moshe Tutnauer. And with their coming the new dream took shape. Rabbi Tutnauer was installed on March 4th, 1962. That same year occurred the other dramatic facet of Saul Abromovitz's presidency: the fund-raising drive for a new school building to replace the happily outgrown class rooms at Third Avenue and McDowell. Before he left office, 8 acres at 10th Avenue and Myrtle had been bought and paid for. Later, when under Harry Smith's presidency, the decision was reached to proceed with the building of a new sanctuary, an additional 3 acres were purchased. It is not recorded whether the president ever found out how to stop the leak in the synagogue basement.

Norman Fuchs, president from 1962-64, inherited the excitement of bringing the school building drive to a successful conclusion. In January, 1963 Joe Gross, once more cast in his old starring role as a building committee chairman, announced the selection of Max Kaufman as architect for the religious school structure. Five months later groundbreaking ceremonies were held. They were "off and running."

In the meantime, under the leadership of Rabbi and Mrs. Tutnauer, new and broadened study programs for youth and adult groups were established. And a new Cantor, Rev. Raphael P. Sandlow came to Beth El.

On October 6, 1963, the doors of the new school building opened to admit 45 students in pre-school classes and 254 students for regular week-day classes. Under Zachary and Jacqueline Merrin's leadership, our school had earned a reputation for excellence that went beyond the limits of our city and our state. And how we could take pride in our physical plant as well.

Yale Simons served as president during 1964-65. During the High Holy Days it had become necessary to hold services in quarters larger than our synagogue afforded. This year the "Arizona Convention Center," better known as the "Star Theatre" was converted into a place of worship and was to serve us in that capacity during Rosh Hashanah

and Yom Kipper until our own new sanctuary was completed.

Harry Smith took over the presidency from 1965-68, during the exciting days of bringing reality out of the new dream, the dream of a new sanctuary. In March of 1965 he announced that the building at 3rd Avenue and McDowell had been sold. For many of those who remembered the years of "blood, sweat, and tears" that went into its construction, there was the pain of loss of an old friend. But they turned quickly to help make the new synagogue a reality and shared again in the joy of a common goal. President Smith now appointed an augmented Building Committee with Albert Zeitlin as its chairman. The committee was charged with the responsibility of selecting an architect and seeing the project through to its completion.

In March, 1965 a dramatic event happened in Montgomery, Alabama, but it concerned and touched us as closely as though it had been in our own city. From the time of his assumption of the spiritual leadership of Beth El Rabbi Tutnauer had brought to us a sharper and clearer vision of the social justice and brotherhood of man that Torah has made a living part of Judaism. Now, when an appeal went forth to men of good will to join in a peaceful march in that Southern city to dramatize the need for Civil Rights legislation, both Rabbi and Mr. Merrin answered the call and joined the march. Perhaps there were members of Beth El who did not wholly approve of this action, but none could fail to admire and respect the courage and integrity of these two men and we all stood taller for what they did.

In February, 1966 the Beth El family was enriched by the arrival of Cantor Errol Helfman and





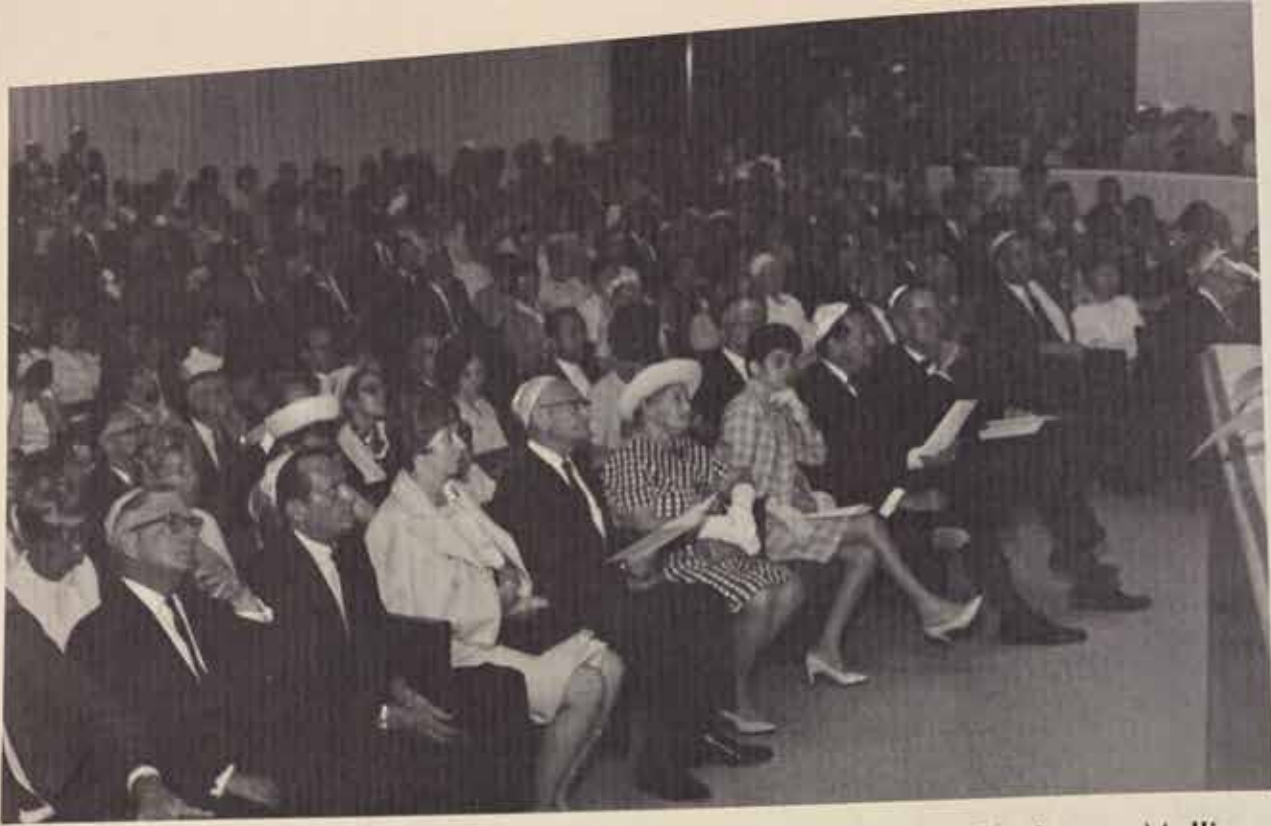
daughter of the late Robert Schubert and Mrs. Schubert.

Like Morris Meckler before him, Harry Smith carried on as president until the dream was fulfilled. Now there is a new president, Albert Zeitlin, who, as chairman of the Building Committee brought Beth El's most ambitious project to a successful conclusion. His, too, was the well-earned joy of presiding over a memorable Dedication Week-end. With Ruth and Jacob Alpert as General Chairmen and Shirley and Ted Smith as

Chairmen of The Eternal Light Ball the three-day dedication festivities began with a beautiful service on Friday evening, May 3rd. A special Kiddush followed the Saturday morning Sabbath service. That night our United Synagogue Youth sponsored a dance to which all Jewish young people of the city were invited.

Sunday climaxed the series of events. The morning was one that filled us all with both pride and humility. The Processional in which the past presidents carried our Sefar Torahs to the Ark; the





beautiful music offered by Cantor Helfman and an augmented choir which lent its magic to the shining hours; the moving words of our Rabbi in his introduction of the principal speakers; and, finally the profound dedicatory address delivered by Dr. Chaim Potok, scholar, rabbi, and author.

Sunday night was the purely festive finish to the events of the week-end. It was a time for dancing and dining, of fellowship and joy; a time for saying, each in his own heart, thank you, dear G-D, for all our blessings.

Many names appear in the pages of this chronicle — names of men whose years of devoted service brought our congregation to its present stature. As many, or more, could be listed, were there space enough: names like Oseran, Drey,

Mendelsohn, Fineberg, Mallin and countless others. They all dreamed dreams and worked to make them realities. Now new men, younger men, have come to join them and even to move beyond them, and this is as it should be. New generations, new workers, new dreams.

We have achieved a high esthetic level in our new synagogue; should we not now devote ourselves to achieving an even high level of spiritual fulfillment? "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick," we read in Proverbs. "But when the desire cometh it is a Tree of Life." If we nurture the tree with all that is best in us, perhaps it may one day be said of us, "One generation shall laud thy good works to another."

Brenda Weisberg Meckle

