

CHAPTER VI

SHAAREY TPHILOH AND BEYOND

The steady increase in the Jewish population, beginning in the 1880's, became even more marked after the turn of the century. By 1907 there were about fifteen hundred Jews in Portland compared with seven hundred for Bangor and two hundred and fifty for Lewiston-Auburn. In 1912 there were at least two thousand Jews in Portland. The small synagogues of the existing congregations were inadequate to accommodate the growing community. This situation, combined with a mounting desire for congregational unity, gave impetus to a movement for a large community synagogue. In 1904 construction of the new synagogue was under way.

Those who lived through that period still recall the enthusiasm, devotion and selflessness which pervaded the entire community. Men and boys carried bricks by hand or by cart. Individuals contributed their skills. The entire community mobilized to raise money or to assist in the actual building of the house of worship. It was truly an enterprise wrought with the sweat, tears and funds of Portland Jewry. In this manner the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue (Gates of Prayer) was erected on Newbury Street. By the fall of 1904, although the structure was not yet completed, its gates were opened to an initial membership of approximately one hundred families.

Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh was in effect a merger of the two larger Orthodox congregations and thus embraced most of the Jews of Portland. Congregation Beth Judah continued to exist separately for several years, but played only a minor role in the development of Portland Jewry.

In September 1904, Philip Silverman presented the key that opened the doors of Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue to inaugurate the High Holiday season and a new chapter in the religious life of Portland Jewry. On November 13, 1904, a constitution and by-laws for the new congregation were adopted unanimously by its directors. Bernard L. Shalit was elected president; Benjamin Snider, vice-president; Samuel Rosenberg, treasurer; and Nathan Stein, secretary.² Although the constitution provided that "pro-

cedings at meetings shall be in both the English and Jargon language," the favored medium was Yiddish, the "Jargon Language."³

The early history of Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh is intimately connected with the name of Rabbi Chaim Shohet, a distinguished Talmudic scholar who served Portland Jewry until his death in 1921. His reputation for learning in Europe and America enhanced not only his own prestige but that of the community he served. Under his guidance Shaarey Tphiloh emerged not only as an impressive house of worship but as a genuine Jewish house of study. Among the leaders of the Talmudic study groups through the years were Abraham J. Bernstein, Michael Rubinsky and Joseph Modes. Abraham J. Bernstein was principally associated with the Chevra Mishnayot, the Mishna study group, and Michael Rubinsky with the Chevra Shas for the study of the Gemara. Joseph Modes also served for many years as a teacher in the Portland Hebrew School.⁴

As the principal religious group in the Portland Jewish community, Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh also played a leading role in supervising ritual requirements. The supply of kosher meat was the responsibility of its Vaad Ha-Schechita which was incorporated on January 6, 1906 in order to carry out the "enforcement of the rules and laws of the Jewish religion in regard to the preparation of meat used for food by the Jewish people of said Portland." At that time Jacob Rosenberg was president; Samuel Davis, treasurer; and Moses Brown, secretary.⁵

The Vaad Ha-Schechita had been organized several years before the founding of Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh and was well organized by the time it came under its new jurisdiction. Its first recorded meeting was held in October 1901, in a Hebrew school on Chatham Street, with Isaac Santosky presiding.

The minutes of its first meeting reveal the problems confronting the Vaad, dealing often with relations between the butchers and the *shochtim* (slaughterers). We read that "the butcher, Max Levy, complained that he could not pay \$5.75 weekly for the *shochtim*. In the first place it didn't pay him to do so. Secondly, the other butcher slaughtered more meat and did not pay enough." Furthermore, "Max Levy complained that it is too difficult to get hold of the *shochtim* when he needs them." On the other hand, "the *shochtim* complained that they are working too hard and want more money."

The Vaad was responsible for hiring *shochtim*, certification of butchers and regulation of kosher meat prices. All such problems

had to be handled delicately. On November 16, 1903, the Vaad Ha-Sechita held a meeting concerned with important organizational matters affecting its three chief functions. We reproduce below an excerpt from the minutes of that meeting; for it presents a concrete picture of the period's community organization and standard of living.

Michael E. Rubinsky made a motion, seconded by Louis H. Rose, that a *mashgiach* be appointed to supervise Kashruth. The chairman brought it to a vote and it was voted to elect a *mashgiach* at a salary of five dollars a week. Mr. Rubinsky recommended as *mashgiach* Moshe Isaac Kaslovsky. Philip Silverman recommended Judah Leib Schneider. Samuel Davis recommended that a secret ballot be cast. Kaslovsky was elected by a majority of two votes. After long debate it was unanimously voted that no more than three butchers be allowed in Portland. It was also voted by a large majority that the butchers deposit fifty dollars as security and sign an agreement that they will abide by all the rules and regulations of the Vaad and in the event they breach the contract, the deposit be forfeited to the treasury of the Vaad. It was also voted that the price of meat be no more or less than 12c per pound, prices to hold till the first day of June, 1904. Two applications for butchers were received, namely from Joseph Kriger, and Pilot and from Judah Leib Schneider. After long debate, it was voted to hold a secret ballot. Kriger and Pilot were elected by a majority of nine.

In subsequent meetings the Vaad spelled out in greater detail regulations governing business hours of butcher shops and the handling of meat and fowl to conform to laws of ritual slaughtering. The prevailing religious climate endowed the Vaad with a measure of authority which enabled it to exercise a powerful influence in Jewish community life.

As the leading Jewish religious institution, Shaarey Tphiloh also had responsibility for proper ritual burial. Traditionally, the function has been carried out in Jewish communities by a burial society called Chevra Kadisha, associated with the synagogue.

A previous chapter has indicated how Portland Lodge, B'nai B'rith acquired the first burial ground and organized its own Chevra Kadisha. After the lodge dissolved, this society presumably carried on with its task, at least for former lodge members. In

1889 another burial society was organized, and it is referred to today as the "old Chevra Kadisha." Isaac Santosky served as its president for many years. Records of this organization unfortunately are not at hand to detail how the Jewish community directed performance of ritual burial between 1889 and 1917.

In 1917 the present Chevra Kadisha came into existence, it seems, in answer to a need not attended to by the older society. The latter evidently served only Sabbath observers. With the passing of time, as more members of the community became ineligible for its services through non-observance of the Sabbath, a hardship was imposed upon many families. The new society performed its services for all Jews, regardless of the degree of their piety.

The earliest remembered Jewish undertakers were Shiah Berman, Zissel Boxstein and Bennett Goffin. Following Bennett Goffin's death in 1938, Hyman Boxstein succeeded to the post, assisted by Joseph Berenson.

Although founded in the summer of 1917, the present Chevra Kadisha was not incorporated under the laws of the State of Maine until May 14, 1941.⁶ The organization's purpose, as noted in a Hebrew preface to its records, was "to do the holy work of burial and whatever is necessary for the dead." Its first ordinance established that "the Chevra Kadisha shall be under the jurisdiction of the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue." Strict regulations were laid down governing admission of members to the society and proper performance of duties. Once a year, during December, it is the custom for all members of the society to recite penitential prayers in the synagogue and to fast. They then go to the burial ground where they read the afternoon prayer service and selected verses from the Torah.

In 1942 the Chevra Kadisha purchased its funeral home at 15 Locust Street with the assistance of Samuel Seiger and Hyman Boxstein. Aaron Davidson supervises the building's maintenance and repairs.

Shortly after the rise of Shaarey Tphiloh, a special effort was made to develop a central community Hebrew school. Heretofore, elementary Jewish education was imparted in small congregational schools or by private tutors, some of them itinerant teachers. This uneven situation was felt to be unsatisfactory and, after much communal discussion, the present Portland Hebrew School was organized.

On May 7, 1908, sixteen communal leaders applied for the incorporation of the Portland Hebrew School "as an educational, charitable and religious association."⁸ The purposes of the school

were outlined as follows:

1. To teach and enlighten its members, their children and others concerning the Hebrew language, the history of its people and educate them generally.
2. To assist and befriend people of Hebrew extraction and be of service to them along charitable lines.
3. To promulgate the doctrines of the Hebrew religion.
4. To do any and all acts and things to promote education, charity and religion.

On May 26, 1908, the signers of the charter met at Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue and elected the first officers and directors of the Portland Hebrew School. Joseph S. Bernstein was elected president; Max Robinson, vice-president; Michael Rubinsky, treasurer; and Isaac Weisberg, secretary.⁹ Among the early teachers were Isaac Weisberg and Harris L. Selig. Mr. Selig also served as the school's first principal.

For ten years, the Portland Hebrew School was opposite the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue on Newbury Street. Its building on Pearl Street was acquired in 1919 at a cost of \$11,500. The building, which had belonged to Hyman Finkelman, had been the subject of prolonged negotiations. Finally, a mid-summer midnight visit to the home of Mr. Finkelman was made by a committee consisting of Abraham S. Levey, Samuel Seiger and Hyman Bernstein. Mr. Finkelman, roused from his sleep, was informed that the committee wished to close the deal for the building and would deposit one hundred dollars. The one hundred dollar deposit was borrowed from Mr. Bernstein for, as Mr. Levey recalled, he was the only one present who carried that much money. Later, a cash payment of \$4,000, derived from proceeds of the Jewish Welfare Board campaign of 1918, secured the purchase. The Portland Hebrew School then launched a campaign for \$12,000, for the remainder of the principal and needed repairs. In a whirlwind drive, sparked by a mass meeting led by Jacob H. Berman, a total of \$20,000 was raised.

After a thorough remodeling the building was ready for occupancy the following year. The inauguration of the school was celebrated with impressive ceremonies, culminating in an elaborate parade from the old building to the new premises. This structure, comprising eight classrooms and a large auditorium, was indispensable for the steadily increasing number of students. The peak attendance was reached in 1928, with two hundred sixty-five students taught by a faculty of five teachers and a principal.¹⁰

When the Portland Hebrew School was still on Newbury Street, a women's auxiliary was formed, but there are no written records of the organization before 1919. At that time several women were serving on the school's board of directors. These included Sarah (Mrs. A. J.) Bernstein, Molly (Mrs. Jacob) Press, Theresa (Mrs. Joseph S.) Bernstein, Esther Shilling and Leah (Mrs. Philip) Silverman. The auxiliary's principal efforts were directed toward paying off the school's mortgage. This was accomplished in 1928. At that time, Mrs. Abraham J. Bernstein was president; Mrs. Lazarus Abrahamson, vice-president; Mrs. Philip Abrahamson, treasurer; and Mrs. Joseph S. Bernstein, secretary.¹¹

Shortly before the acquisition of the new Portland Hebrew School building, another synagogue was erected — the Beth H-Knesseth Anshe Sfaard, a Chassidic congregation. For at least a decade before the erection of this synagogue, a small number of Chassidim had settled in Portland. Desiring a place to worship in accordance with their Sephardic ritual, they first acquired the premises on Fore Street that formerly served as "Abrams' *shul*." After a few years they used facilities of the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue, where they gathered in a separate *minyán*.

About 1912 the Chassidim began to formulate plans for their own synagogue which was completed in 1916, due chiefly to efforts of Abraham Seigal, Abraham Isenman and David Finkelman. The sisterhood of the new synagogue was founded in 1916 by Mrs. Bernard Cope, who also served as its first president.

The year marking erection of the Anshe Sfaard Synagogue also witnessed the birth of another religious movement known as the Modern Synagogue Society. This was the first effort to establish a liberal congregation in Portland. The society turned for assistance to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the rabbinical school of the conservative movement. Among the society's early protagonists were Dr. Elias Caplan, Dr. John L. Davis, Jacob Rosenberg and David Beckelman.

Services of the Modern Synagogue Society, which were held in the Y.M.H.A. hall, departed from Orthodoxy in several respects. The number of prayers were reduced, many were in English, and separation of the sexes during worship was abandoned. In 1918, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan came from New York City to assist in giving ideological direction. Shortly thereafter, the congregation adopted the name Temple Israel and acquired the services of a permanent rabbi.

In 1919, with Jacob Rosenberg as president and David Beckelman as secretary of Temple Israel, Rabbi Rudolph Lupo was

called as leader. Having just been ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Lupo was faced with difficulties in his first post almost from the start. Members were divided among themselves on basic ideological questions. Some even desired a more radical break with Orthodoxy in favor of the Reform movement. Rabbi Lupo was faced with the difficult task of reconciling divergent views on basic questions of congregational policy and the future orientation of the congregation.

A complicating factor that reacted unfavorably against Temple Israel was the staunch opposition on the part of the Orthodox forces who comprised the overwhelming majority of Portland Jewry. Rabbi David Essrig, who came to Shaarey Tphiloh in 1919, did not wish to associate with Rabbi Lupo in any community gathering and refused to speak with him. The bitterness felt on both sides often led to embarrassing situations. On one occasion, when a public meeting was planned in connection with the purchase of the new building for the Portland Hebrew School, Rabbi Essrig issued an ultimatum that he would not attend if Rabbi Lupo was invited. The feud of the rabbis added more heat to already raging fires.

The internal dissensions in Temple Israel proved too great a hurdle for Rabbi Lupo. Pressures resulted in a shortening of tempers and on several occasions there were bitter recriminations between rabbi and congregation. As a result of this increasing friction, Rabbi Lupo left Portland and shortly thereafter Temple Israel was dissolved.

The year 1919 was a critical one for Portland Jewry, for it witnessed not only the demise of Temple Israel but also a schism in Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh. The latter resulted from several disputes involving personalities, in which Rabbi Chaim Shohet was alleged by some to have been insulted and shabbily treated by others. The upshot of these disputes was the secession of part of the congregation and creation of a new congregation with Rabbi Shohet as spiritual leader. This inaugurated a new period in Portland's religious life, which will be discussed in Chapter IX.

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER VI

¹Population figures from *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 16, p. 365

²Succeeding presidents were Isaac Santosky, Jacob Rodman, Joseph Mack, Julius Comeras, Morris H. Sacknoff, Hyman Bernstein, Abraham A. Greenberg, Phineas Grunes, Philip Abrahamson, I. Edward Cohen and Irving Rothstein.

³The first board of directors consisted of Bernard Berenson, Abraham J. Bernstein, Samuel Bernstein, Elias Caplan, Israel Davis, Samuel Davis, Joseph Mack, Harris Matson, Louis Matson, Julius Press, Joseph Resnikowitz, Abraham Robinson, Max Robinson, Jacob Rosenberg, Samuel Rosenberg, Michael Rubinsky, Morris Sacknoff, Isaac Santosky, Bernard L. Shalit, David Shwartz, Nathan Silverman, Philip Silverman, Benjamin Snider, Nathan Stein and Louis Weinstein.

⁴Michael Rubinsky first undertook leadership of the Chevra Shas in 1908, as a memorial to his then recently deceased father. This entailed conducting the daily study of the Talmud. When about twelve years later Congregation Etz Chaim was formed, Mr. Rubinsky continued his leadership of the Chevra in that synagogue. Joseph Modes then assumed direction of the Chevra in Shaarey Tphiloh.

⁵Its charter directors were Shiah Berman, Abraham J. Bernstein, Joseph S. Bernstein, Moses Brown, Samuel Davis, Bernard Goffin, Marcus Goldblatt, Joseph Mack, Jacob Rosenberg, Philip Silverman, Pesach Tabachnick, Joseph H. Wolf and Louis Zaltzman.

⁶The articles of incorporation list the following officers: Morris Crasnick, president; Morris Matluck, vice-president; Rev. Harry Simansky, secretary; Hyman Boxstein, treasurer. The directors were Rabbi Mendel Lewittes, Philip Abrahamson, Joseph Berenson, Abraham A. Greenberg, Gimpel Lerman, Harry Levy, Joseph Mack, William Goodman, Jacob Rodman, Morris Sacknoff and Samuel Seiger.

⁷In addition to Morris Crasnick the following have served as presidents of the society: Julius Comeras, Herzl Levi, Morris Matluck and Hyman Boxstein.

⁸The applicants were Joseph S. Bernstein, Marks Bernstein, Morris Crasnick, David Davidson, Joseph Mack, Abraham Robinson, D. Robinson, Max Robinson, Jacob Rosenberg, Michael Rubinsky, Morris Sacknoff, Harris L. Selig, Philip Shilling, D. Silverman, Isaac Weisberg and Peter Weiss.

⁹Succeeding presidents of the Portland Hebrew School were Abraham Herman, Abraham Seigal, Abraham A. Greenberg, Dr. John Davis, Samuel Sacknoff, Oscar Tabachnick, Dr. Solomon Golodetz, Charles Cohen, Saul H. Sheriff, Julius Greenstein and Dr. Daniel Kornetsky.

The first board of directors consisted of Joseph S. Bernstein, Max Bernstein, David Davidson, Bernard Goffin, Abraham Isenman, Morris Kravitz, Joseph Mack, Eli Perry, D. Robinson, Max Robinson, Michael Rubinsky, Michael Sacknoff, Philip Shilling, Philip Silverman and Isaac Weisberg.

¹⁰The officers of the Portland Hebrew School in 1919, when the new building was acquired, were Abbe Herman, president; Abraham A. Greenberg, vice-president; Robert Epstein, financial secretary; and Nathan Sapoll, treasurer. The key to the school was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Abbe Herman.

The Building Committee included Abraham Seigal, chairman; Max Oransky, Abraham S. Levey and Frank Feldman, treasurer.

¹¹Succeeding presidents of the Portland Hebrew School Auxiliary included Mrs. Benjamin Gordon, Mrs. Milton Burke, Mrs. Ralph Ross, Mrs. Abraham Simonds, Mrs. Louis Gordon, Mrs. Benjamin Glick and Mrs. Carl Miller.