

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)

The Early History of the Young Israel Movement Part II

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Note: All quotations are from **The Early History of the Young Israel Movement** by Shulamith Berger, Fall 1982 Yivo 2446x.

In last month's column we outlined how the formation of the Young Israel Movement was a response to the anti-religious atmosphere that permeated the Lower East Side in the early 1900s. Reform, socialism, public school education, assimilation, and a host of other non-religious influences were prevalent. In this column we continue to explore how the Young Israel Movement developed.

(When reading the references below to people affiliated either the Jewish Theological Seminary or even the Reform movement, it should be kept in mind that the dividing lines between them and Orthodoxy were often blurred in the early part of the 20th Century.)

While some viewed the newly formed Young Israel Movement as a most positive step toward keeping youth Orthodox, "not everyone on the Lower East Side felt the *same* way. The use of English, almost unheard of at the time, and the fact that some of the speakers (at the Friday night lectures) were associated with the Jewish Theological Seminary or the Reform movement aroused suspicion in the eyes of the parents, who looked askance at the new organization, and in the eyes of the synagogues, which allowed the use of their facilities only with great reluctance. In order to alleviate suspicion, some of the speakers lectured to the Young Israel group on Friday nights in English and either repeated the lecture or gave a different one for the congregation the following morning in Yiddish.

"In addition to Dr. Judah Magnes and Dr. Joseph H. Hertz, Prof. Israel Friedlaender of the Jewish Theological Seminary was among the early Young Israel speakers. He soon became very involved in the organization and in February, 1913, sent Moses Rosenthal, president of the Young Israel, with a letter of introduction to the Educational Alliance to try to secure room in their building for Young Israel meetings. Prof. Friedlaender gave numerous lectures to the Young Israel group, gave advice, met with their committees, and helped ease tensions which arose in the group.

"Prof. Mordecai Kaplan of the Seminary's Teachers Institute was also among Young Israel's early lecturers. Those who were affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary and involved with the Young Israel movement tried to interest their students in the movement as well. Moses Rosenthal, the organizer and first president of Young Israel, graduated from JTS in 1914. Samuel Sachs, Young Israel's second president, graduated from JTS a year later, and the JTS Student

Annuals for 1914 and 1915 have several students who listed Young Israel as part of their extra-curricular activities. The reports of the Morais- Blumenthal Society in the JTS Student Annuals for 1914 and 1915 list Young Israel as one of the organizations which tries 'to reclaim the many young men and women who have drifted from Judaism' which has been founded or aided by members of the society. The involvement of Seminary students in Young Israel and later in Young Israel Synagogue extended at least through 1920 - an indication that through this time period the lines between Orthodoxy and Conservatism were not clearly drawn.

"Young Israel aroused great interest from its inception. Its lectures were immediately successful. On the very first evening, Dr. Magnes lectured to about a thousand people, according to reports in the local Jewish newspapers. Even if the figure is exaggerated, it indicates the interest in the announcement of a movement of this type."

Young Israel was self-supporting lay organization of young, independent Jews that attempted "to arouse and intensify Jewish consciousness of our young men and women, and thus to close up the gap now existing between young and old." Young Israel's character as a lay group, with a number of theological students, its Lower East Side location, at which some of these students lived, rather than a base at a university campus, where students felt obligated to tone down overt forms of Jewishness, allowed Young Israel to grow away from its original conception of itself as an educational group towards an image of itself as a religious oriented group, centered around the synagogue. Young Israel began to change its image early in its development.

"Young Israel expanded its range of activities during 1913 and 1914. It took stands on Sabbath observance and Zionism, and inaugurated some social activities. In May, 1913, Young Israel held a mass meeting at the Educational Alliance at which Mr. Cyrus L. Sulzberger, vice-chairman of the Kehillah presided. In July, Young Israel joined with the Jewish Sabbath Association and several other organizations to form an employment agency which would provide positions for Sabbath observers. The positions ranged from 'errand boy to manager.' Naturally Young Israel continued its successful lecture series, and added new speakers as well.

"In 1915, some of the members of Young Israel joined together to form a 'Model Synagogue.' At the time, the synagogue was not officially part of the Young Israel movement, although the name was soon changed from Model Synagogue to Young Israel Synagogue. The synagogue conducted services in the Educational Alliance building. The services were characterized by English sermons, congregational singing, and lack of commercialism and disorder. The services *were* conducted by the young people themselves.

"For several years following the inception of the Young Israel Synagogue, Young Israel and Young Israel Synagogue continued their activities as separate groups." However, in 1918 the two groups merged and formed what was called the Young Israel Synagogue. The organization was to fulfill both the religious and social needs of young Jews. Its first public function was a Purim Festival that featured choral entertainment, inspirational addresses, and refreshments. Among the guests was Professor Friedlaender, Dr. Solomon T. Horowitz, and Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein of the Institutional Synagogue.

An article that appeared in the **Jewish Forum** in 1926 written by Irving Bunim entitled “A Father’s Appreciation of Young Israel” described the positive effects that the Young Israel Movement could have on the Jewish youth. The article described “the attempts of a religious man to raise his son as an Orthodox Jew. He had sent his son to a yeshivah elementary school. His son then begged to attend a public high school, and soon started to drift away from Orthodoxy. He put on his tefillin reluctantly, arrived at services so late that it would have been better if he had not come altogether, and attended the theater on Saturday afternoon after telling his father that he had purchased his ticket on Friday. Then one day his old friends from the yeshiva came and took him to Young Israel, where he met friends of ‘his own type, college men and women, and it was there he began to feel the beauties of Jewish life. Young Israel showed him an enlightened Judaism, modern and attractive, yet retaining its genuine unadulterated traditional orthodoxy.

“In recognition of such success stories, prominent members of the Jewish community expressed their support for Young Israel. Rabbi Leo Jung said that he regarded Young Israel as ‘one of the most potent factors in the revival of Judaism in the country. Young Israel to me represents the conscious revolt of the loyal Jewish youth both against the negligent orthodox and the active semi-reformed generation.’ Harry Fischel, the active philanthropist, praised Young Israel and declared that, ‘it is the sacred duty of every good orthodox Jew to help with both money and with his cooperation in the extension of Young Israel.’ Nathan Lamport, president of Yeshiva College, added his voice to the chorus of praise, and said that, ‘My fondest hope is that someday, in the very near future, Young Israel will take over the leadership of the Yeshiva College in America.’ Other leading figures in the American Jewish community, such as Dr. Bernard Revel, Rabbi Drachman, Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein, and Rabbi Noses Z. Margolies, also endorsed Young Israel.

By this time, Young Israel had clearly identified with what was emerging as the Orthodox camp in America, and received support from more obviously right-wing figures as well. “Rabbi Eliezer Silver, president of the Agudath Harabbanim, greeted Young Israel at the convention it held in 1930. The Lubavitcher Rebbe at the time, Joseph Isaac Schneerson, sent his blessings to Young Israel and hoped that it would be successful. Rabbi Isaac Scher, dean of the Slabodka Yeshiva, encouraged Young Israel to continue its work.”

What had started as a reaction by a few young men to the anti-religious atmosphere on the Lower East Side had grown into a force for the preservation of a dynamic Orthodoxy that continues to this day.