

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)

The Early History of the Young Israel Movement Part I

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Introduction

We are all familiar with the Young Israel Movement. “Today the National Council of Young Israel provides professional advice and cost-saving initiatives to 135 Young Israel synagogues (and beyond), advocates for the interests and views of our 25,000 member families, trains aspiring rabbis, supports rabbis in the field with biweekly question and answer sessions, aides communities in rabbinic searches and relations, coordinates informative Gabbai2Gabbai conference calls, provides exciting Parsha Nation curriculum for synagogue youth groups, runs inspiring Achva Summer Teen Experiences, shares best practices through monthly e-publications Shul Solutions and The Practical Pulpit, runs a three division basketball league in the New York metropolitan area, and serves as the sponsor of four senior centers at Young Israel synagogues which feed, educate and recreate the generation that made Young Israel great.

“Young Israel was born in 1912, when the primary aspirations of most American-born Jews were economic success and acceptance in American society. Jewish education was very low on their list of priorities, and as a result, was usually rudimentary, at best. Orthodox synagogues were exclusively Yiddish-speaking and permeated by an Eastern European atmosphere. American-raised Jewish youth who wandered into these synagogues typically found themselves shut out completely. It is not surprising that the Jewish youth of that era generally avoided the synagogue, attending only when expected by family custom. Although intermarriage was relatively rare, the distance between young Jewish hearts and minds and Jewish belief and practice was almost huge.”¹

“The origins of Young Israel may be traced to a meeting that took place in October 1911 in the law offices of one of the most remarkable American Orthodox lay leaders of the 20th century, Benjamin Koenigsberg (See [Benjamin Koenigsberg, 20th Century Jewish Leader](#)” Glimpses Into American Jewish History **The Jewish Press**, April 5, 2017.) The event that precipitated this momentous turning point was a Friday night lecture at Clinton Hall, in the heart of the Lower East Side of New York, delivered by Rabbi Stephen Wise, the leader of the American Reform Movement. He was seeking to generate grass-roots support to establish a local branch of his Reform Free Synagogue. His spellbinding oratory mesmerized the young American-raised Jews in the audience who had never before heard Judaism discussed in English. But the kind of Judaism he preached bore little resemblance to the Judaism of their fathers, and adding insult to injury, Wise had the temerity to pass a collection plate during his presentation. This blatant violation of *Shabbos* angered Koenigsberg, age 27, and two of his teenage friends, Joshua Horowitz and Max Grablowsky, who saw Wise’s words and actions as a grave challenge to their

religious heritage which they could not ignore. 'We've got to do something about this,' Horowitz told his friends, defining the Young Israel movement's fundamentally activist orientation.

"Dismayed by this open *chilul Shabbos*, Koenigsberg, Grablowsky and Horowitz initially turned to the President of the Jewish Kehila, Dr. Judah L. Magnes, who they knew shared their opposition to Wise's Reform philosophy. Along with several others who had attended the lecture, they met to determine how best to combat this flagrant assault on *halachic* Judaism. Other members of this founding group were Max and Bernard Oxenhandler, Moishe Krumbein, David B. Cohen, Louis L. Cohen and Moses Rosenthal." ²

Not Initially Affiliated with Orthodoxy³

In January, 1913, several Jewish newspapers in New York hailed the formation of a new Jewish youth group, Young Israel. The new group consisted of upwardly mobile college age young adults. The avowed purpose of this new movement was 'to combat local religious indifference and the neglect of the religious education of Jewish youth.' Both the **American Hebrew** and the **Hebrew Standard** printed the following statement of one of the Young Israel leaders.

Young Israel - This is an organization composed of a number of young Jews and Jewesses living on the lower East Side of New York. There are thousands of young Jews and Jewesses in this city unaffiliated with any Jewish organization. The name 'Young Israel' expresses the object of the movement. It is an appeal to the young men and women of the House of Israel to strengthen their Judaism. It is an attempt to bring about a revival of Judaism among the thousands of young Jews and Jewesses of this city whose Judaism is at the present time dormant. The appeal is to all Jewish young men and women, whatever be their views of Judaism, whatever be their social or economic status. The movement is not Orthodox or Reform. It is not Zionistic or Socialistic. It intends to awaken Jewish young men and women to their responsibilities as Jews, in whatever form these responsibilities are conceived. Young Israel believes in the old Jewish doctrine: all Israel are brothers. We are convinced that through a broad, earnest appeal to the Jewish spirit of our young men and women, the Jewish people will be strengthened and Judaism made a living force. Although this movement has been contemplated for some time, he continued, we feel that this is a particularly opportune moment for its inauguration, because of the large amount of vice and crime recently revealed which, insofar as it affects the Jew, we feel is due in large part to a weakening of the Jewish spirit. Young Israel is convinced that by means of a living Judaism, not only the Jewish community, but the State as well, will be benefited.

The prevention of vice and crime was certainly not the sole reason for launching the Young Israel movement. Young Israel leaders could certainly have produced a considerably longer list of reasons for the creation of a movement devoted to furthering religious education.

By the time Young Israel was founded in 1913 (it was actually 1912.), over a generation had passed since immigrants from Eastern Europe had started streaming to this country in 1881. Some of the European immigrants had tried to transplant their old world traditions to American soil, in the form of the Landsmanschaft synagogue. These

synagogues helped ease the immigrants adjustment to America by creating a setting where the prayer ritual and Yiddish accent native to the old home town in Europe could be heard, and immigrants could share their problems and realize that they were not alone in having trouble finding or whose children were Americanizing rapidly. This type of institution, however, had nothing to offer these Amerikanizing children who could not share in their parents nostalgia for the old country. Even if the American youngster was interested in Judaism, the Landsmanschaft synagogue had little to offer. Young people were not given the opportunity to participate actively in the services, which were lengthy, held in unattractive rooms, and characterized by disorder, schnoddering, and Yiddish sermons on obscure topics in Gemara and Midrash. And on Friday nights the dance halls, the theater, or a Socialist speaker were certainly more attractive than the prayer house. In order to combat both religious ignorance and indifference to Jewish matters and the attractions of the other activities which took place in the city on Friday evenings, Young Israel announced its first activity: a lecture series on Judaism which was to take place Friday evenings in different synagogues on the Lower East Side. The importance of this venture can be determined from the fact that the organization received the active support of prominent members of the community, such as Dr. Judah Magnes, then head of the Kehillah, who delivered the first lecture for the new organization and provided it with the list of speakers for the other lectures. Dr. Magnes was also credited with helping the new group select its name, Young Israel, although there is some controversy over the origin and significance of the name. One explanation of the name was that it was modeled after the Young Turks, 'since the newly organized group revolted, so to speak. Its intention was not to undermine but to add a little finesse and militancy to Jewish communal behavior.' The other, more straightforward, explanation was that the name Young Israel meant what it said; an organization of young people devoted to Judaism.

To be continued.

¹ **Young Israel: Past, Present and Future**, <http://www.youngisrael.org/general-write-up.html>

² **Young Israel at 100**, An American Response to the Challenges of Orthodox Living, 1912 – 1012 National Council of Young Israel 2012

³ This entire section is taken from **The Early History of the Young Israel Movement** by Shulamith Berger, Fall 1982 Yivo 2446x.