

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 14)

Harry Fischel (1865 – 1948)

Orthodox Jewish Philanthropist Par Excellence - I

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*Note: Most of the information in this article is based upon **Forty Years of Struggle for a Principle, the Biography of Harry Fischel** (referred to as **B**), and **Continuation of Biography of Harry Fischel, 1928 – 1941**(referred to as **UB**.)*

The article **The Harry Fischel Story (1865 – 1948): Becoming a Multimillionaire While Remaining True to Orthodoxy** that appeared in the Jewish Press on April 28 dealt with the early life of Mr. Fischel. It sketched his amazing rags to riches story. Indeed, Mr. Fischel had arrived in America from Russia in 1885 with only sixty cents in his pocket and the clothes on his back. In a little more than thirteen years he went from dire poverty to affluence, becoming a multimillionaire at a time when even a millionaire was no where near as common as it is today.

There is much more to the story of Mr. Fischel than just amazing financial success. He remained an Observant Jew all of his life and utilized his wealth and position to do his utmost to foster Jewish causes, particularly Orthodox Jewish causes. In this article we recount some of his philanthropic endeavors. The next **Glimpses** article will deal with his key role in the founding of Yeshiva College, his support of Eretz Yisroel and the founding of the Harry Fischel Institute for Research in Talmud.

Endeavors on Behalf of Basic Jewish Education

On July 18, 1931 Harry Fischel delivered a “report” to his family. He wrote, “I have given the best part of my life for the benefit of religious education. I have contributed large sums of money for this purpose, in America, Europe and Palestine.” (UB page 17.) However, money was not the only thing that Mr. Fischel gave to support Jewish education and other Jewish causes; he gave unstintingly of his time and wisdom.

The first Ashkenazic yeshiva established in America, *Etz Chaim*, a *cheder*-style elementary school, was founded on Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1886. In

1889 Mr. Fischel became a director of the yeshiva. When the yeshiva was forced to vacate its premises, it was Mr. Fischel's expertise in real estate that led to the institution finding a new home. Not only did he find a place for the yeshiva's relocation, but it was he who made the initial \$500 payment on the new property.

In 1892 Mr. Fischel became a director of *Machzikay* Talmud Torah, the oldest Talmud Torah in New York. In 1894, after becoming the institution's vice president, he made what was considered by many a revolutionary proposal, "that the Talmud Torah open a school for girls to be under the direction of a young woman teacher who had lately come to this country from Palestine. The idea was at first bitterly opposed. No one had previously conceived of religious classes except for boys." (B page 88) Mr. Fischel prevailed, and the result was that applications for girls soon exceeded the school's facilities.

As Lower East Side Jews became more affluent, they began to move "uptown," which led to the founding of the Uptown Talmud Torah on East 111th Street. For a number of years this institution was poorly run and in severe financial straits. Mr. Fischel felt the need to devote himself to reorganizing the school. Shortly after he became its president, he introduced educational reforms that both increased enrollment and solved the chronic financial problems of the school.

Mr. Fischel noted that the wealthiest Jews, who did not live in close proximity to the Uptown Talmud Torah, often did not send their children to this school. In fact, many of these very affluent Jews provided no religious education for their children. He felt it was imperative that every Jewish child receive an Orthodox Jewish religious education. This led him to propose the opening of a branch of the Uptown Talmud Torah in the neighborhood where the wealthiest Jews lived. Thus, in 1913 the West Side Annex of the Uptown Talmud Torah came into being.

The Harlem Uptown Talmud Torah and its Annex became a "huge and virtually unprecedented" success, educating thousands of boys and girls. "This facility boasted an enrollment that fluctuated over the years, from 1,800 to 2,800 students." In 1916 Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein, a rabbinic leader and son-in-law of Mr. Fischel, called these Harlem schools "the most important Jewish educational institution in America." (The Maverick Rabbi by Aaron I. Reichel, Donning Publishers, 1986, page 110.)

HIAS and Beth Israel Hospital

In 1890, at the beginning of his early business successes, Harry Fischel became treasurer of the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), known at that time as the *Hachnosas Orchim*. Given the difficulties he underwent as a new immigrant to the US, it is no surprise that he became involved with this organization. In 1919 he played a crucial role in the relocation of HIAS to its new home in the former Astor Library. Rather than make a large profit for himself on

this property, Mr. Fischel purchased it in the name of HIAS. “The work of transforming the Astor Library building into the home for immigrants was commenced by Mr. Fischel in March 1920 and from that time until the middle of 1921 he devoted practically his entire time to this undertaking.” (B page 212)

In 1889 Mr. Fischel began what was to become a longtime association with Beth Israel Hospital. He played a key role when the hospital built a new building on the Lower East Side. He was, of course, also involved when the hospital built a larger facility on Livingston Place, between 16th and 17th Streets. “Mr. Fischel has always emphasized the religious side of Beth Israel Hospital. The observance of Jewish dietary laws helps greatly in the return to health of the patients, according to Mr. Fischel.” (The November 3, 1922 American Hebrew newspaper. Quoted in B page 280.) Over the years his donations to this institution totaled \$75,000. (UB, Preface)

The First Succah on Park Avenue

Harry Fischel, from the time that he first owned a home of his own, made sure that it had a *Succah*. One should keep in mind that most people were negligent in fulfilling the *Mitzvah* of *Succah* during the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries. Very few had their own *Succah*. In 1925 Mr. Fischel demonstrated how far his commitment to this *Mitzvah* went when he built a 14 story apartment building on the southwest corner of Park Avenue and 80th Street. In order to be able to have a *Succah*, he “omitted one room on each floor of the twelve floors of the structure above his own apartment on the second floor, entailing a loss in rentals of about \$12,000 a year.” (B page 370) Clearly, for Mr. Fischel, Judaism took precedence over financial gain.

The recollection of Mr. Fischel’s extraordinary philanthropic activities will be continued in the next Glimpses column.