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Preserving Baltimore's First Synagogue (Part I)

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Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from "The Lloyd Street Synagogue of Baltimore: A National Shrine" by Israel Tabak, American Jewish Historical Quarterly (1961-1978); Sept. 1971-June 1972; 61, 1-4; AJHS Journal page 343. The article is available at www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm.

While it is not known precisely when Jews first settled in Baltimore, we do know that five Jewish men and their families settled there during the 1770s. However, it was not until the autumn of 1829 that Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, whose Hebrew name was Nidchei Yisroel (Dispersed of Israel), was founded. This was the only Jewish congregation in the state of Maryland at the time, and it was referred to by many as the "Stadt Shul."

The original 29 members of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation met in a room over a grocery store located on Bond and Fleet Streets (now Eastern Avenue). By 1835 the congregation occupied a one-story building on High Street and membership had increased to 55. In 1837 the congregation acquired a three-story building on Harrison Street near Etna Lane where it worshipped until 1845 when it built its new synagogue on Lloyd Street.

Rabbi Abraham Rice

Readers of this column likely are familiar with the life of Rabbi Abraham Rice from the articles "Abraham Rice: First Rabbi in America" (November 6, 2009) and "The First Rabbi in America, Part II," December 4, 2009. Rabbi Rice, the first ordained Orthodox rabbi to settle permanently in America, became the spiritual leader of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation in 1840.

Rabbi Rice was known for his piety and upright character and for a number of years he was probably the only person in America qualified to *pasken sheilas*. He became one of Orthodoxy's foremost spokesmen at a time when it was under attack from the Reform movement.

"Abraham Rice's place in the history of American Judaism is secure. The courage and dauntlessness with which he defended the principles of historic Judaism give him a unique place among the pioneers of Orthodoxy in America. His consistent and uncompromising stand in matters of Jewish theology was the strongest factor in stemming the tide of Reform. His devotion to the study of Torah and his depth of talmudic learning made it possible for [halachic] Judaism to gain a foothold on American soil, where for centuries Jewish life was spiritually barren and Torahless. His dedication to Jewish education and his personal instruction of many a youth in this community were responsible for a new generation of enlightened laymen to be raised up who changed the entire physiognomy and religious climate of the Jewish community of Baltimore." ("Rabbi Abraham Rice of Baltimore, Pioneer of Orthodox Judaism in America" by Israel Tabak, Tradition, 7, 1965, page 119.)

The Lloyd Street Synagogue

Within a few years of Rabbi Rice's arrival the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation was able to build the Lloyd Street Synagogue, the first Jewish house of worship to be built in Maryland and the third oldest surviving synagogue in the United States.

"There is no doubt that Rabbi Rice was the prime factor in the growth and consolidation of the congregation. It was under his guidance that the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation was able to build its own sanctuary befitting a Jewish community of stature and dignity. The architect commissioned to design the new synagogue was Robert Carey Long, Jr., who achieved renown for the several houses of worship he built in Baltimore at the time. In 1842, Long built the Alphonsus Roman Catholic Church; in 1843, St. Peter's Catholic Church; and the following year, Mt. Calvary Episcopal Church and the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church. The Jewish community was sufficiently affluent to afford the services of such an eminent architect, and the Lloyd Street Synagogue was completed and dedicated in 1845."

The synagogue building was built of brick and was sixty feet wide by seventy-five feet deep. It cost about \$20,000.

The synagogue contained what was then a most innovative feature – a "Shield of David" that was conspicuously set in the main window of the synagogue above the Holy Ark, in the eastern wall, which everyone faced in prayer.

Isaac Lesser, *chazzan* of Congregation Mikve Israel of Philadelphia, wrote the following description of the synagogue after attending the dedication ceremonies on Shabbos *Parshas Vayelech* (September 26-27, 1845):

"We will merely state for the information of our readers who doubtlessly feel an interest in the completion of the first house ever erected especially for our worship in Maryland, that its Eastern Front is ornamental with a Doric portico, through which is the entrance into the main building. A flight of steps on each side leads into the gallery which runs along the west, north and south sides. The main body is divided into two aisles, furnished with pews, in place of open seats, which struck us as something unusual in our Synagogues. There is no platform or Teba (Almemar) but merely a reading desk placed close in front of the Ark. This, a decided defect, is owing doubtlessly to the narrowness of the building, a fault which we fear will not be easily remedied.

"The windows also, of which we think there are four on each side, have orange-colored glass which reflects a pleasant and subdued light, and precludes the necessity of blinds, always more or less inappropriate in a place of worship. The usual seats for the officers of the Synagogue consist of two handsome sofas, in perfect keeping with the other arrangements. The center aisle is carpeted, as are also the steps leading to, and the space in front of the Ark. The ceiling is quite plain and well calculated to convey the sound without fatiguing the speaker or reader too much, a fault often discoverable in public buildings. There are, we believe, two hundred and eighty numbered seats down stairs, of which all but eleven were rented the Sunday following the consecration. In the basement are two good school rooms, and a large hall filled up as a temporary Synagogue to be used as occasion may require."

The basement also housed a *mikveh* and an oven for the baking of *matzah*.

Next month: How the building became a church, then once again an Orthodox synagogue, and finally a historic site.

About the Author: *Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. Glimpses Into American Jewish History appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.*

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