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Preserving Baltimore's First Synagogue (Part II)

By: Dr. Yitzchok Levine

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Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Building

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); Sep 1971-Jun 1972; 61, 1-4; AJHS Journal page 343. The article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>.

Last month we dealt with the building of the Lloyd Street Synagogue, the first synagogue to be built in Maryland. This

month we look at how the building became a church, then again an Orthodox Synagogue, and finally a historic site.

Reform Affects the Synagogue

Membership in the synagogue continued to increase, and in 1860 the original structure was enlarged by a 30-foot extension on its eastern end. However, increased membership proved to be both a blessing and a curse. It attracted some who had been influenced by the Reform movement. At first these people demanded some minor innovations but as time went on they pushed for more and more change. There were constant conflicts and dissensions.

Rabbi Rice refused to compromise when it came to halacha. He viewed minor attempts to introduce ritual changes as the first steps toward a total break with Orthodoxy. In 1849 things got so bad that, much to the shock of many synagogue members, Rabbi Rice resigned as spiritual leader of the congregation. When in 1862 the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation found itself without a rabbi, Rav Rice was asked to again become its spiritual leader. He agreed but did not serve for long, as he passed away on October 29, 1862.

The congregation was now spiraling toward Reform. In 1871 a number of the more religious members left and formed Chizuk Amuno Congregation with the goal of preserving Orthodox observance. (Details of the history of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation's change from Orthodox to Reform are described in detail in "Lost To Orthodoxy: The Fate of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation," front page essay, The Jewish Press, July 22, 2011.)

On February 3, 1889 the synagogue that had once been the centerpiece of traditional Judaism in Baltimore was sold for \$12,000 to the newly organized Lithuanian Roman Catholic Parish and became

the Church of St. John the Baptist.

Once Again a Synagogue

The building on Lloyd Street that originally housed the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation was used as a church until 1905. In that year it once again became home to an Orthodox Jewish congregation – Congregation Shomrei Mishmeres HaKodesh (Guardians of the Sacred Heritage). Its members consisted primarily of observant immigrants from Russia and the Ukraine, many of whom were from a chassidic background.

In 1908 Rav Avraham Nachman Schwartz became the congregation's rav; he would served in that position for 29 years. Rav Schwartz was a Talmudic scholar of great renown and became known as Chief Rabbi of the Russian Jews." He was instrumental in the founding of the Baltimore Hebrew Parochial School which eventually was renamed the Talmudical Academy of Baltimore. This was the first day school established in America outside of New York City.

The Lloyd Street Synagogue was again a bastion of Torah. For over 50 years Shomrei Mishmeres HaKodesh occupied a prominent position within the Baltimore Jewish Community and was known as the "the leading synagogue in East Baltimore."

Saved from Destruction

After World War II, most of East Baltimore's Jews moved to other neighborhoods and by 1958 the few elderly Jews left were unable to keep the congregation together. The building itself had deteriorated considerably, and a movement was initiated to sell the building to commercial buyers or to tear it down and turn the ground into a parking lot. It looked like the first synagogue in Maryland would soon be no more.

"It was at this time that Wilbur H. Hunter, Jr., Director of the Peale Museum of Maryland, was commissioned by the Historic American Buildings Survey of the United States National Park Service to prepare reports on thirteen historic buildings in the Baltimore area, one of which was the Lloyd Street Synagogue.

"Mr. Hunter brought the historic and architectural significance of the Lloyd Street Synagogue to the attention of the National Park Service, and the Baltimore Jewish community. In a series of public lectures, he addressed Jewish groups on the importance of the first synagogue of Maryland and the urgent need to save it from disintegration.

"At the same time that the Lloyd Street Synagogue situation was being discussed, Dr. Isaac Fein was also trying to interest leaders of the community in founding a Jewish Historical Society of Maryland to collect records and papers of important early institutions and organizations before they were lost or destroyed. The group of community leaders which met considered, simultaneously, both subjects, and at that meeting organized the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland and turned over to that organization, in addition to the objectives outlined by Dr. Fein, the consideration of the acquisition of the Lloyd Street Synagogue."

On July 23, 1968 the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland purchased the Lloyd Street Synagogue building. There were a number of conditions the board of Shomrei Mishmeres insisted upon as part of the purchase agreement. These included the stipulation that the building be kept closed on Shabbos and *Yom Tov* and never be used as a place of worship. These conditions were imposed to make sure the building would never be used for any purposes that were not in strict accord with the Orthodox traditions of the congregation.

“[Synagogue] repairs involved a new roof and the bracing of supporting timbers, some of which had to be replaced. The walls were shored up and repainted so that no trace of the cracks was visible. The concrete pillars had to be completely restored and the beautiful old brick of the exteriors of the building was sandblasted and repaired. The interior was likewise redecorated and refurbished; even the stained-glass window with the Star of David design, which had been broken, was restored from shards of the broken glass and remaining lead molding. The pews on the main floor and the balcony, dating from 1845, were still in good enough condition to be retained.”

A replica of the ark was reconstructed as part of the renovation of the *beis hamedrash*. (A special area on this level is set aside to serve as a museum.)

“It took more than five years of diligent work by a group of dedicated men and women to bring this project to fruition. The total cost, including the purchase of the property and the other expenditures, amounted to \$95,508, all of which was contributed by generous and civic-minded members of the Jewish community of Baltimore.

“On April 15, 1965, the City of Baltimore presented the Jewish community with a Bronze Plaque, which was affixed to the wall at the southwest corner of the Lloyd Street Synagogue. Special dedication ceremonies were held in honor of this occasion with Mayor Theodore R. McKeldin, representing the City of Baltimore, and Professor Jacob R. Marcus of Cincinnati, Ohio, representing the American Jewish Historical Society.”

In 2008, the Jewish Museum began an ambitious \$1 million restoration project with the help of the prestigious Save America's Treasure's Program. The work modernized the physical plant of the building, restored it to its 1864 appearance and created a multimedia exhibit, *The Building Speaks*, to interpret this rich history.

The Lloyd Street Synagogue now stands as a proud and sacred monument to the Jewish religious history of Maryland.

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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