

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 14_)

Benjamin (Yissachar Dov) Koenigsberg (1884 – 1975)

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Note: All quotations are from the Yeshiva University Libraries' **An Inventory to the Benjamin and Pearl Koenigsberg Papers, 1890-1998** at <http://libfindaids.yu.edu:8082/xtf/view?docId=ead/koenigsberg/koenigsberg.xml;query=:brand=default>

Benjamin Koenigsberg, a prominent New York lawyer, was one of the foremost Orthodox leaders in all phases of Jewish communal affairs during the first half of the 20th century. He exerted profound influence in the areas of synagogue organization, Shabbos, kashrus, and taharas hamishpacha observance and in Jewish education.

“Benjamin Koenigsberg, the son of Israel and Esther F. (Aftergut) Koenigsberg, was born June 3, 1884 in Limanow, Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He emigrated to America with his parents in 1889 and settled on the Lower East Side of New York. Koenigsberg attended local public schools and graduated from P.S. 160 in 1899. For his Hebrew education, he attended the Yeshiva Etz Chaim on 1 Canal Street, the forerunner of Yeshiva University. He passed a City College of New York entrance exam in 1899, enabling him to enter the school without having attended high school. At the age of 20, Benjamin Koenigsberg graduated from the New York University School of Law (1904) and he began practicing law the following year. By 1908, he maintained an office at 93-99 Nassau Street, an office he was to keep for more than fifty years. A lifelong resident of the Lower East Side, Koenigsberg married Pearl Friedman (1887-1976), the daughter of Louis and Miriam Friedman, on November 19, 1909 and they raised ten children in their home at 400 East Houston Street, where they resided from 1909 until 1949. At that date, the city condemned their property for street improvements and they moved to the Hillman Cooperative Houses at 500 C Grand Street.

“In the first decade of the twentieth century, when Koenigsberg began his legal career, few Jews worked as lawyers or doctors, the professions that were to become so popular for upwardly mobile sons of Eastern European immigrant Jews. The vast majority of New York's Jews earned their livelihoods as peddlers or in the needle trades. Most of the orthodox Jews with whom Koenigsberg shared membership on the boards of directors of various schools, congregations, and charitable institutions, were rabbis or educators. His own career set an example of a successful self-employed professional who maintained an observant Orthodox Jewish lifestyle. One of his lifelong goals was to pass Sabbath

observance legislation that would help strictly observant Jews find employment in their chosen fields.

“Benjamin Koenigsberg was an active member of the New York Kehillah, (founded by Dr. Judah L. Magnes in 1909) and served on various committees that aimed to regulate kashruth enforcement. He joined the Committee of 100 Baale-Battim (religious laymen) upon its formation in 1915, and worked as secretary of United Orthodox Jewry in 1918. In addition he undertook several legal investigations at Dr. Magnes’s request.

“A tireless communal worker, Benjamin Koenigsberg spent 5-6 nights per week engaged in volunteer work on behalf of the Jewish community. He joked that he spent all but five hours of the day (from 1-6 a.m.) on such efforts but could not verify that he actually slept during those off hours. He entered into communal work immediately upon opening his law practice, becoming a director of the Downtown Talmud Torah in 1905 and a founder and later president of the Hebrew League (Adath B'nei Israel) in 1907. In 1911, he helped organize what later, in 1913, became the first Young Israel, the Young Israel Synagogue of Manhattan, and he served as its president from 1930 to 1933. Koenigsberg helped Rabbi Meir Bar Ilan (Berlin) establish the Mizrachi in 1913, an organization that evolved into the Religious Zionists of America-Hapoel Hamizrachi. In 1918, he served as a delegate from the first New York district to the initial meeting of the American Jewish Congress. He was senior vice-president and chairman of the Board of Hebrew Education of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School from 1923 onward. Koenigsberg also served as senior vice-president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and as chairman of its membership committee. He was the director of the Hebrew Teachers Training School for Girls from 1930 and the president of the American section of the international organization, the Colel Hibath Jerusalem (Society for the Devotees of Jerusalem). Koenigsberg was a member of the Board of Governors of the Bialystoker Synagogue and a member and eventual president of the Sienewer Congregation Anshe Sfarad. Among his local secular affiliations, he was a senior vice-president of the East Side Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Manhattan Borough President's planning board for district three. In the 1930s, business and communal associates of his considered him for a vacancy on the magistrates courts. During World War II Koenigsberg served as a member of the draft board for the Lower East Side. Professionally, he was a lifetime member of the New York County Lawyers Association.

“Koenigsberg found particular interest in the way in which modern science substantiated biblical passages in the Old Testament. A firm believer in the medicinal value, as well as the religious importance, of the mikvah (ritual bath), Koenigsberg collected various state and city health reports that demonstrated lower rates of certain diseases among Jewish women, and he promoted Dr. David I. Macht's work on the alleviation of menstrual toxins by use of the mikvah. Koenigsberg also founded a mikvah, known as the Downtown Women's Club, on the Lower East Side at 311-313 East Broadway.”

The Young Israel Movement

“The origins of Young Israel date to 1911. Benjamin Koenigsberg and several other young orthodox men and women of the Lower East Side met in his office at 97 Attorney Street to formulate a plan on how to halt what they perceived to be the abandonment of Torah. In 1912 the group visited Dr. Judah Magnes, the founder and director of the New York Kehillah, who had recently left the Reform pulpit at Temple Emanuel. Dr. Magnes threw his support behind this group, now named Young Israel, and he delivered the first in a series of Friday night lectures on Jewish themes on January 10, 1913 before a crowd of more than 1,000 people at the Kalvarier Shul on Pike Street. Koenigsberg became the driving force behind this annual series of Friday night Young Israel lectures in 1917, and administering this series from 1917 to 1945. The roster of lecturers included Jewish religious and educational leaders like Dr. Israel Friedlaender, Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein, Dr. Henry S. Morais, Dr. David I. Macht, Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein, Gedaliah Bublick, Rabbi David Miller, Dr. Boaz Cohen, and Judge Irving Lehman.”

In 1913 a public statement issued by Young Israel expressing its goals and aspirations, and Koenigsberg played a key role in drafting this statement. He was also involved in Young Israel’s work on behalf of Zionist causes.

In 1962, the Young Israel Synagogue of Manhattan honored Benjamin Koenigsberg for his 50 years of service, publishing a special celebratory issue of the *Young Israel Reporter*.

The Downtown Talmud Torah

“Organized in 1892 by immigrants from Austria, the First Austrian Talmud Torah offered instruction in religion, Jewish history, and ethics to poor boys living on the Lower East Side of New York. A native of Galicia, Benjamin Koenigsberg joined some of his fellow congregants in the First Galician Duckler Mogen Abraham Synagogue of 87 Attorney Street in playing leadership roles in the Talmud Torah. Indeed, the synagogue housed the Talmud Torah in its first years. William Fischman, a notable cloak manufacturer and a leader in New York's garment industry, was the principal financial backer of the Talmud Torah and served as its president from 1902 into the middle of the century. Benjamin Koenigsberg became a member of the Board of Directors of the Talmud Torah in 1905.

“After changing its name to the Downtown Talmud Torah in 1910, in order to attract a broader clientele, the school moved in 1911 from its dilapidated building at 77 Sheriff Street to a newly-constructed, modern, four-story brick building at 394-396 East Houston Street.

“The Downtown Talmud Torah's annual report for 1912, written in Yiddish by William Fischman, offers valuable insights into Jewish education in New York City and the obstacles that a Talmud Torah faced in overcoming the poverty of the Lower East Side. The Downtown Talmud Torah claimed that it was the first such institution in New York City to construct its own building and that its teachers were professionals who applied the

most current pedagogical methods. By 1911, the school taught as many as 1,100 pupils and had to turn away hundreds more due to a lack of space. Although the school now charged tuition many, if not most, students continued to attend free of charge because of their poor financial status.

“The Downtown Talmud Torah acted as a neighborhood magnet for Jewish educational and cultural activities, offering Hebrew classes for adults and for those college students planning to become Hebrew teachers. In addition, it operated a girls division through the Bureau of Jewish Education, and about 400 girls studied Jewish history, laws, customs, music, and Hebrew. The wide variety of activities in the Talmud Torah kept its doors open from 9 A.M. until late at night.

“Between 1960 and 1970 enrollment at the Downtown Talmud Torah shrunk precipitously because of the increasing popularity of the Jewish all-day school and the changing character of the neighborhood, which saw a sharp decline in its Jewish population. Despite the dwindling Jewish population of the Lower East Side, Koenigsberg believed strongly in its viability. Max Stern, the president of the Downtown Talmud Torah in 1967 and the chief officer of Hartz Mountain Industries, corresponded with Koenigsberg on this point and on the future of the Talmud Torah. After the Downtown Talmud Torah sold its building to the Beth Jacob School in 1970 for \$207,500, it ceased to function.”

Koenigsberg stopped practicing law at the age of 87 and he died May 20, 1975. He was buried in Israel.

