

Temple Israel Archives

Interview of Rabbi Harry Danziger

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Rabbi Harry Danziger

Page 1

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 15
RABBI DANZIGER

[NEW INTERVIEW]

INT: So Rabbi Danziger, first thing I'd like to ask you about is to tell us something about the history of Temple Israel from its inception to the present and in basic large chunks?

RD: Temple Israel was founded in 1853 by a group of then German immigrant Jews who came in the immigration after the failed revolutions in 1848 in central Europe. It was the first congregation founded in Memphis and it was then an Orthodox congregation, which was the only style available, but very shortly under the second rabbi, Rabbi Tuska, Temple Israel became reformed and was actually a charter member of the Reform movement in North America, The Union of American Hebrew Congregations. It remained what was called a classical Reform congregation until perhaps the late 1960s, early 1970s some would say, my, my becoming senior rabbi. It has moved a number of times and our present sanctuary replaced one that we were in for 60 years from 1916 to 1976 and we've been in this sanctuary now for 22 years .

INT: Can you touch on some of the highlights of the development of the congregation and some of the things that the congregation has done and is doing now that are special to you?

RD: Some of the things we're very proud of, of course, this congregation has a long history in social justice. In days past, social justice often meant speaking out on the

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 16
RABBI DANZIGER

issues of the day and that's still important, but we have a great deal of hands-on social justice. We just raised sufficient money at the High Holy Days to provide 120,000 pounds of food divided between the Memphis Food Bank and The National Jewish Response to Hunger, MAZON; we have some 150 or so volunteers in what's called God's Unfinished Business, who visit the sick, comfort the bereaved, give people rides for doctors, bring food to people who have had recent deaths or been in the hospital and generally offer help in life's crisis. We have a growing Jewish studies program, we've gone from 0 to 50 people on Shabbat morning, in Torah study every Shabbat and it's still growing. The Temple's changes in that respect have probably been to retain a view to the outside world, but to become increasingly concerned with the inner world, both the inner world of the Temple member and our Judaism, and the inner world of the person. I should tell you that the congregation has grown and . . .

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

RD: The congregation has grown since it moved to this location and its Jewish community that is relatively flat in growth we've grown from 1,350 to 1,850 families in 22 years.

INT: My mother is a member of Temple Israel and she knew nothing of [INAUDIBLE] bar mitzvah since she was growing up. So could you talk a little bit about how the sort of perceptions over the years and why do you think that is?

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 17
RABBI DANZIGER

RD: The agenda of the early Jews that came to this country, particularly those who came to the South and those who were reformed, the agenda was to become American but becoming American had to do with what the perception of American was. American was to be like our Protestant neighbors primarily, therefore, Jewish worship services in the Reform movement, customs and ceremonies were tailored in some way either to be like the church or to be something our neighbors would "understand." That has entirely changed and the assumption today is to be who and what you are and to be secure in it

so that the introduction of more Hebrew, of Jewish expressions as opposed to not Jewish expressions, of Jewish ceremonies that have a life of their own is a natural evolution in a developing reform Judaism. Now, how can I say that easier. The watershed is 1967. When Israel won the six day war and at the same time black Americans were doing away with the assumption that the standard American was white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, Jews became aware of the fact that it was okay to be visibly Jewish and we began to readopt and adapt things that were part of our heritage instead of assuming that we had to take on a protective coloring. Having said that, I want to note that wonderful things were done in the period of classical Reform and that we had to go through the period of Americanization, but we have moved simply from a period where we said, "we know we're Jewish but we are American" to a period now where we say "we know we're American, now we have to be sure we remain Jewish."

INT: When we took on this project, we took it on from, of course, the community of the German Jews and our parents' generation and one of the things that they feel very strongly is that the Memphis Jewish Community is unique because it is a southern community, and because it is Memphis. Can you talk a little bit about whether you feel

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 18
RABBI DANZIGER

that's true or not and you'll have to put that into a sentence and if so, how and if not, how?

RD: I think Memphis is unique as a Jewish community in a couple of ways. It's about as large as a Jewish community can get and still be face-to-face. People know each other across all the lines. That wasn't always true because when the break which is known as Orthodox and Reform, but was really eastern European and German, when that break existed it was a social break in which some people just didn't relate or want to relate to each other, today that's changed. Memphis is unique also as a southern Jewish community in that the southern gentility, the southern care for feelings, the southern care for how we treat each other pervades the Jewish community. Now Jews are noted for being, um, quick to love each other, care for each other, take care of each other, but also to fight with each other. In Memphis we fight very gently when we fight both within our communities and between communities because we're southern and it's a blessing.

INT: There has been I know a lot of influx because of methods changing there's been a lot of influx of Jews from other parts of the country. I guess international
[INAUDIBLE]

RD: They didn't bring very many.

INT: They didn't bring very many.

RD: The Jews in New York didn't want to come here literally.

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 19
RABBI DANZIGER

INT: But there has been influx ..

RG: Actually, that can be an question and an answer right there what he just said, why don't you ask that as a question about the Jews in New York didn't want to come here.

INT: There's been an influx of Jews from other parts of the country, it was clear when we filmed [INAUDIBLE] and the woman who's going to Florida her replacement was a man from New York I believe and I can't remember his name, but anyway, how has that changed the gentility and the fighting or do those people who come here become absorbed into this way of being?

RD: I think people who come from other parts of the country and we have many of them in our congregation, um , become acclimated to the, the Memphis way of doing

things and are very grateful or it. I say this with some sense of regionalism and I apologize for it, I think to come to a place where people aren't worried about their space and where people do have the leisure if nothing else, there's a sense of the leisure to treat people well, comes as a pleasant surprise and people adopt it easily.

When I look at the

leadership of our congregation, over a period of years, many of them didn't come from Memphis, didn't come from the South , but we preserve that sense of treating each other well even when we have to deal with real issues.

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 20
RABBI DANZIGER

INT: Now could you talk about some of the real issues that the Jewish community does have to deal with?

RD: Well I think one of the issues the Jewish community has to deal with is one that has surfaced as partly a result of security and that is a different kind of conflict between Orthodox and non Orthodox and I use the term non Orthodox as opposed to Orthodox and Reform Contemporary Orthodoxy in some circles, starting in Israel, flexes a great deal of muscle given the fact that Israel gives governmental power to Orthodoxy, to that extent that, that creates conflicts within the American Jewish community and it filters its way to Memphis. Perhaps another concern Memphis Jewry has, though it's not conscious, we're over organized. For a congreg... for a community of 9,000 people or so we have almost all the organizations that an Atlanta or a Houston or Dallas would have and we're probably over organized and over programmed and over the years that's going to have to shake out in some way.

INT: Can you say a little bit more about that?

RD: Yeah I think there's just too much competition for the, the organizational, forget the dollars, but the organizational time and energy of that core of people within 9,000 who invariably, not all of them, are going to be active, that core of people who find themselves running from one meeting to another, one dinner to another, one program to another and we're going to have to begin to look at how not to duplicate, how to work together and how to say some things have outlived their usefulness.

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 21
RABBI GROSSMAN/

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

INT: Would you talk a little bit about the changing sociological makeup of Temple Israel?

RD: When I came to the Temple Israel I would say that [CLEARS THROAT] it was made up primarily of people from this area. The assumption was everyone was related to somebody and there are many people who will say to you, "back then I knew everyone when I walked into Temple." It wasn't true. There were 1,350 families, but they, it was their perception. Today the perception is very clear that people have come from all over. That people come from different backgrounds, they are German and Eastern European and some not Jewish originally in, in a significant number. There are people who came from the Mid-South and there are people who came from the Mid-East and everywhere in between and when I came to Temple Israel the leadership of the congregation was perceived as, generally speaking, business people who were at the top of their organization and many of them self-made. Today it's much more likely that they belong to much larger organizations or are professionals and you don't have that sense of the self-made top of the line of a family business or something like that. That's been a major change.

INT: Can you talk about the change in women's lives and how that affected Temple Israel?

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 22
RABBI DANZIGER

RD: When I, Temple Israel has always had a strong Sisterhood and continues to have a strong Sisterhood, now women of Reform Judaism, but as an example of change today, more of their meetings take place at night than in the afternoon. When I came here a Sisterhood luncheon was a social opportunity to go out leisurely with your friends for a program and a meeting because all of you had the time and you had the help at home. Today the Sisterhood or WRJ Meeting is at night, it's focused, the activities are focused based on the assumption that a great many of the women have other careers and other jobs and other things they do during the day and the absence of the household help that was once almost taken for granted.

INT: If you could address the relationship between the Reform and Orthodox communities. You said something about how it used to be, can you say when that changed and how it is now and how you see it developing in the future?

RD: In Memphis the relationship between the Orthodox and the Reform communities has to be taken in two parts. Institutionally we work together on occasion, we have cordial relationships by and large, but we don't have much contact with each other. Now, part of that may be, and I attribute a part of it to the fact that we are so large, Temple Israel is more than half the affiliated Jewish community in itself, that sometimes it's very difficult to, to find the things to do together. Beyond that we do have our separate agendas and then there's a community agenda on which we work together. In the lay community forgetting the institutions I think there's a great deal more working together because they come together not as Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, but they come together as a Jewish Community Center or Federation with people who have particular commitments

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 23
/RABBI DANZIGER

to those institutions, but Orthodox and Reform as synagogues, as I say, I think our relationships are cordial, but not constant.

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

RD: There's been a change in the Orthodox community just within the past I would say three years. For many, many years Memphis was two Orthodox congregations, one Conservative, and one Reform. In the last few years the Chabad or Lubovich-Hassidim have come in, made a significant visible place, I don't know how many people are involved, and became seen more or less officially as the fifth congregation. Now a sixth Orthodox congregation has emerged which I think is to the right of the existing ones and it is getting an official place. So, we have the irony in my eyes of the Orthodox community suddenly becoming divided, while I won't say fragmented, but divided into twice as many institutions as it was just three years or four years ago.

INT [INAUDIBLE]

RD: I think within Orthodoxy, and I'm not an expert and I don't pretend to be, um, I think within Orthodoxy today the, the distinction between modernness Orthodoxy and those Orthodoxy further to the right is becoming more and more visible and more and more incapable of being resolved. Again, because Israel is dominated by the very right wing Orthodox with government sanction that allows the right wing in American Orthodoxy to exercise greater influence than perhaps its numbers would normally suggest.

MEMPIDS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 24
RABBI DANZIGER

INT: One question that is concerning everyone is the [INAUDIBLE] numbers of Jews active and affiliated and the worry that Judaism will disappear in this country. Would you talk about your perception of that and what you are doing and your congregation is doing and what methods are you doing to combat that?

RD: Well I'm an optimist I, I take very seriously the term that we are the ever dying people and that's what is often the gloom and doom. What are we doing? One of the things that is, is of significant concern in Jewish life is intermarriage. It can be dealt with in a number of ways. Our way of dealing with it is, in the Reform movement and the Temple Israel, is to try to make those couples welcome and hopefully to create a new Jewish family as a result of intermarriage. Since I don't believe that, I believe that once the die has been cast and the couple is getting married the question is then outcomes from a Jewish point of view. Secondly, we're trying to intensify the Judaism of our people. The move to a more focused and rich Jewish content in Reform Judaism whether in the religious school, in the Hebrew school, in the high school, in retreats, in camping all of those I think are attempts to deepen the Judaism of the Jews we have. There are no studies that tell us exactly what will work, but we do understand that the Jew who goes out into this world where there are multitude of possibilities takes with him or her the Judaism that we can give them to the extent that we can give them a rich, secure, warm Judaism, hopefully they will remain Jews.

INT: [INAUDIBLE].

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 25
RABBI DANZIGER

don't know who first coined the term ever dying people, but I do know that there is a consistent, ah, series of predictions that the Jews will disappear. Everyone thought in the 1930s that those Jews who were the classical Reform, who were so non-traditional and so forth would disappear, well we didn't. There was a creative sense of what it meant to be Jewish and we've created a new Judaism for the next decade and the next generation. So, I'm a great believer because Reform Judaism itself teaches that Judaism is evolutionary and developmental and it responds to new circumstances. Whatever the old Judaism is may not survive in any given period, but Judaism and Jews will survive.

Now, if you wanted a really long answer, Professor Jonathan Sarna who lives in Boston, teaches at Brandeis, has taught about the four great discontinuities in American life which Jews have to deal with and he talks about how our, our genius has been or at

least our blessing has been that when we live in ages with discontinuity we find new

ways to be Jews because the old ways don't work, but that's not new.

INT: We've asked several people this about the basis of Judaism when you think about the tenets of Judaism foundation. What would you bring out as the strengths that are in the Memphis Jewish Community you know if that makes sense to you.

RD: My model for Judaism in the broadest sense is a faith family. It is first and foremost a family. It's people who find themselves related to each other and have the sense of being a family. That means in a family you can disagree, you can have vast differences in ideology and practice, but you're still a family. The Memphis Jewish Community retains that is going to be one of the issues for the future is to retain that sense of family. The faith part of it means that we all share a common religious heritage and many

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 26
RABBI DANZIGER

common memories but how we express them in our lives will be different. The more rich alternatives we have for expressing them the better it will be for the survival of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith because no one monolithic way will be the answer for everyone.

INT: Is there a passage of scripture or is there something that you can quote or something you can pick up that almost gives permission or gives that kind of hope, do you understand what I meant ?

RD: Yes I do. It's actually a Midrash on a passage. When Ishmael, the first son of Abraham, is about to die in the desert God intends to save him with the miraculous well. God's angels say to him "don't save him because someday the Ishmaelites will oppress your people. And God says, "has he done anything now" and they say, "no." He says, "well I have to deal with him, the Hebrew and the p ... the Torah [SPEAKING HEBREW] "where he is now". I believe that the strength of Judaism is to deal with what we do, how we are, where we are now. We have to look at the past to see what tools we have but we have to deal with ourselves, with in our circumstances, where we are now and I believe that permission is there in Judaism. [COUGHS]]

INT: [INAUDIBLE]

RD: One of the uniquenesses of Memphis as a Jewish community and certainly of Temple Israel as we encounter it, is that we are the, such a large fish in such a very small pool and pond. From Memphis you have to go 125 miles to find another full-time

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 27
RABBI DANZIGER

rabbi. From Memphis you have to go three or four hundred miles to find a congregation anywhere near the size of Temple Israel or Baron Hirsch. We are unlike most of the Jewish concentrations of population in the country because we are an island in the midst of an almost Jew free ocean surrounding us.

RD: One of the ways it makes a tremendous difference is here at Temple Israel we're one of the 15 largest congregations in the United States in Reform Judaism. All the other 14 are in communities and areas much richer in Jewish resources and other possibilities. Here we have to do it ourselves because we're in a relatively small community and in an area where there are so few Jews, that's very different from being in Boston, Baltimore, San Francisco, Chicago and New York.

INT: [INAUDIBLE] work harder?

RD: It makes it work harder, it also means some things you can't do and you can't compare yourself. Occasionally somebody says, this is what they do

in Atlanta, this is what they do in Dallas and I say, you know, Atlanta's got 60,000 Jews minimum, Dallas probably has 40,000, we have 10,000 maybe.

INT: [INAUDIBLE]

RD: My perception of anti-Semitism in Memphis is that it's certainly there, it's certainly real, but it becomes a very little factor in the life of the Jewish community. When I listen to teenagers tell us about anti-Semitic incidents, they're words. Anti-Semitism, to be

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 28
RABBI DANZIGER

meaningful I think raises to level of acts. There are very few anti-Semitic acts in Memphis and I think in Memphis the culture is you just aren't an anti-Semite, you just don't talk that way, you just don't do those things even if somehow you may feel them.

INT: What is it that creates that atmosphere?

RD: I can't honestly explain why it's there, but I think one reason is that the Jewish community in Memphis is not perceived as a community by others, they're not perceived in a, as a community that is their enemy or their problem. In larger communities sometimes the ethnic, the, the conflict between different ethnic groups expresses itself in anti-Semitism. If the Jewish community is pitted against the black, the Irish, the Italian, whatever it happens to be. In Memphis, in fairness, we have been very fortunate that the black and Jewish communities have not had some of the same problems that they've had in other parts of the country because that's probably the best where it's most ripe.

RD: I think in Memphis one of the things in the Jewish community is there is some disillusionment with the black community . The heyday of black-Jewish relations in Memphis, although it was not a conscious thing then, the heyday was Jews as white people who stood up for blacks who in many ways couldn't stand up for themselves. To the extent that blacks now feel the desire, the need, and hopefully the strength to stand up for themselves they're a little more skeptical of having to have white champions. The other part of it is that there are black leaders in Memphis, but most of nationally, who like to pit blacks against Jews because I think as Henry Lewis Gates said, it sharpens their strength if they can say it's us against the world and to the extent that Jews have

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 29
RABBI DANZIGER

been the friends of blacks that demolishes that myth and so they try to drive a wedge between the two.

INT: Do you think that wedge was successful?

RD: I don't think. [CLEARS THROAT] I don't think. I don't think that wedge has been successful in Memphis [CLEARS THROAT] in sufficient amount to damage the relationship. It certainly exists in some quarters.

INT: How do blacks see Jews [INAUDIBLE]?

RD: You would find a disproportion in a number of Jews still active in the NAACP and the Urban League, in the National Civil Rights Museum and so on so that blacks and Jews still work together on a leader-leader basis, ah, it may be harder in the grassroots quite frankly.

[END OF TAPE 4]