

**Temple Israel Archives**  
**Interview of Herschel Feibelman**  
**January 29, 2004**

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This is Harriet Stern and I have the pleasure of talking with Herschel Feibelman about the religious school. This is January 29, 2004.

Harriet: I'm just interested in knowing some of the history of the religious school at Temple Israel.

Herschel: I think it's safe to say that the Temple Israel religious school is the oldest institution of learning in the English language—the manner of the study of Judaism for children in Memphis—by a great number of years. I base my conclusion on the fact that even in my years, from 1924 until the present time with the religious school, there were people who had little or no affiliation with Temple Israel whose children went to religious school. I have in mind Ruby Bilsky (her maiden name was Kabakoff). Then I think that would be true of Norman Shapiro and others. My family were not members of Temple Israel. My father and mother were traditional Jews, and from the time when the B'nai B'rith Home on Tucker was established in 1928 or '29, my father was a member of what, in effect, was a congregation there. I think one of the most interesting things that I find I can discuss when I go to the Memphis Jewish Home now is that I was the only boy who ever became a Bar Mitzvah in the B'nai B'rith Home.

The religious school functioned primarily because of the talent of the people who participated. Even now, 80 years from the time when I first came into that building and was taken by the hand by Miss Beulah Vosse, I can remember the people who appear to me as the most vital part of the congregation. There was a man named David Asher Levy and Melvin and Leon Stemberger. They would come every Sunday morning. And even though I never saw them teaching or participating in programs, their presence there gave the children and children like me a belief that there was something important about this institution.

The teachers were older than the teachers we have now. I think it's no longer politically acceptable to refer to people as 'old maids'. I don't know exactly what the euphemism is, but I guess you would say, single ladies who "never scored" or something like that, but there were a number of them who were members of the faculty. There were what we

called the "Samfield girls". Those were the two daughters of Rabbi Samfield, who survived him by many years and who taught, and there was Amy Halle, who really deserves to be remembered. She taught the Confirmation class for at least a whole generation. And there was a woman named Sophie Ollie Fink, who was a teacher at one of the public schools. Mrs. Gatlin was married. She also was a member of the faculty. And all these people were dedicated. It wasn't the \$2.00 per Sunday that they got for coming. It was the fact that they thought this was a worthwhile activity.

Interestingly enough, the Confirmation classes in number, in the years I'd say 1928 to 1935, equaled the Confirmation class numbers we have now. And there are reasons for that, and I think there ought to be a poll. And I think that it would be interesting to know whether it is because people in the Jewish community have fewer children now or whether there is a diminished interest, whether the Bar or Bat Mitzvah program has substituted, so to speak, whatever.

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There were formalities about the Religious School which I don't think we have now. The structure of the building, in my years on Poplar and Montgomery, was such that what we later called the Ettelson Auditorium was called the vestry! And it was centrally located, so that all of the classrooms opened out to this, both on the first and second floor. As I recall, every Sunday there was some kind of group program in the vestry.

I want to tell you that I have pondered the issue of books since you and I arranged this interview. There was a red book, a hymnal, that also had in the back part, a service. It would be a siddur. And there were songs that were sung. And these songs, even after, I'd say fourscore years, are still a part of my life. I remember so very well, a woman named Miss Guse (?), and she would come and lead us in singing. And there was a song, "The Voice Within" - of course, the voice of conscience. And it would go:

(Singing) "The still, small voice that speaks  
within I hear it when at play.  
I speak the loud and angry  
voice That drives my friend  
away.

The voice within, the voice  
within Oh, may I have a care,  
It speaks to warn for ev'ry sin  
And God has placed it there." •

I believe that learning that simple hymn did as much as anything that I ever got by way of theological context to acquaint me with the role of conscience. And it still gives a sermon, I believe, to do the right thing.

Confirmation was the culmination of the Religious School focus. Initially, under Rabbi Samfield, I believe Confirmation took place at the age of 13 or 14 years. And then it was advanced another year. And then in the year 1947 or 8, I think we advanced it another year. The classes were of a number that made it available for the teachers to concentrate on whatever was the lesson that day.

In those days, and until the early '60s, maybe the mid-'60s in the religious school, which was a ... .. institution, there were books. There were Sunday School books. I remember once I met a Mrs. Gamoran. (I think that was her name.) She was the wife of a rabbi. They were both fairly skilled at writing books. Some of the books were, I would say, pedestrian. Some of the ones dealing with the prophets were really nothing more, I would say, than could be obtained from a good encyclopedia. On the other hand, there were some of the books which were so comprehensive, even for the ages of children going to the religious school that I think they should be a part of our study now. One particular one was "Pathways Through the Bible" and it had the purpose of presenting some of the Scriptures, leaving out the 'begats' and leaving out some geographical matters, so that the essence of all parts of the Bible were emphasized.

I was not in favor of the elimination of the books. At that time I was chairman of the Religious Education Committee and there was no fight about it.

It was evolutionary rather than something that just happened all at once. Rabbi Robert Blinder, who was one of Rabbi Wax's associates, saw inadequacies in the books and he set about writing his own and binding them. And that stirred up the wrath of Henry Lewis, our Executive Director, because frequently he would call me and say, "Herschel, what is this man is doing?" And after the first time .....

because Blinder was exceeding the religious school budget by a large amount by having these booklets printed and bound locally.

The idea in eliminating the books was almost an acquiescence to the fact that the families were not participating. That, to me, was the first indication of the most serious problem we have in the religious school today. When I would bring home my Sunday school books, there was no question whatever that I was going to prepare them. Now I ought to add, without being too much autobiographical that that was not the case in secondary school. I very seldom brought home books from school and my mother never really asked me whether I had homework. But when it came to Religious School, I must have read that portion assigned.

There were really sequential areas in the education. First the holidays. The children in the lower grades became familiar with the holidays and celebrations. Then there were what you might call heroes. In the manner in which Mrs. Gamoran presented it, the children became acquainted with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, and whether they were being taught theology or history, someone else can tell you, but what it did was acquaint them so that at a later time and when their education was enlarged, they would be able to recall and have some

familiarity with them. Then, in the upper grades, as would call them, we got into the subject of ethics, the Prophetic idea. One of the best textbooks I've ever seen was by Rabbi Roland Gittelson, who was a very well known rabbi in Boston. And his

writing and text had such clarity and lucidity that even now, when I feel that I want to get a simple perspective on some ethical question, I guess that would be as good as I could do.

Harriet, there was a time when the Religious School Committee was probably the most important committee at Temple Israel. Now, I'm not speaking about ....., I want to make that much clear. I'm sure there was much of importance in the Budget Committee and in the Administrative Committee and the Maintenance Committee and so on. But, I had the feeling as I was growing up, that if I were ever Chairman of the Religious School Committee, that would be more important and more nearly a vital role than being President of the Temple. Now I had the good fortune to serve in that role for either eleven or twelve years. I became disqualified, simply because we ran out of children. One of the requirements for being on the Religious School Committee was to have a child in the Religious School. Of course there was nothing I could do about it. Nathan was confirmed and went on, and that was the end of my qualification.

But we met four times a year. We had an attendance at that meeting much, much better than the Board of Trustees had. Sometimes, even, I would not even call the roll. I would just look around. There would be fifteen to twenty people,

and I'd know they'd be there. Some of my predecessors, Julius Frank and Sylvia Kremer, would testify ..... They would ..... We would have a discussion of the role of the religious school, which I would call Judaism ..... There were some people who had the concept that Judaism was ethical monotheism and we ought to emphasize the "ethical" in the monotheism. And then there were people who favored ritual. No one had the temerity to bring up the fact that we called ourselves 'The Union of American Hebrew Congregations', but there wasn't one minute out of the whole number of years that a child was in the religious school that.....

I can't truly take you to the point where such participation dissipated in the religious school. I just know that it is now functioning right not. It may be that at a time we did not have professional religious school leaders and we assumed that the Assistant Rabbi would have that as part of his responsibilities. Maybe that was it. I'm not sure. I really wish that there was a way that we could have a lay evaluation of the program ongoing, so that we wouldn't be confronted sometimes with the practice as in the case of public schools, that children are graduating when they can't pass a simple examination, in which is revealed that they haven't learned anything. They simply have had the experience of going through school.

I had many experiences as Chairman of the Religious School Committee. I don't say that I prevailed every time, but at the meetings, everybody was equal. That applied to Rabbi Wax, and his assistants as they came. They gave their opinions and everybody else did. Now, they were a little bit more equal than others, you know that, in the role that they played. But we had issues that would come up and some of them went from year to year.

My greatest defeat, as you might say, and even now I can recall the disappointment and the frustration with the Christmas issue and the Christmas holidays. When I became Chairman of the Religious School Committee, we had a 39 weeks session, not 34, not 42, 39. If the weather was inclement, of course we had agreed to let everyone stay home. I felt that there was a quantity of time required for the quality of learning, and everybody went along with it. But increasingly, I found that I had lost my support. And when the rabbis decided it would be feasible to have what they termed a "mid-term holiday", and the kids were smart enough to know it was vacation, and that became part of the It seems to me - and I don't want to get all out of shape over it-, but how ironic it is that the Christians go to school on the Christmas holidays and Jews don't - and, believe me, I tried my best to persuade people on that point. I don't know how many classes we had to miss. I think one time, what with the Purim Carnival and a few other things, we were down to about 31 or 32 weeks or or something like that. I think that anyone, whether a teacher or a student who has ever dealt in education knows you have to be there. A person who is in an institution of learning in America can't derive the benefits unless he's there and has that experience.

Well, with all, it was a wonderful chapter in my life. I think besides the feeling I have for my family and my profession that my time with the religious school was the most important part of my life. I dealt with people whom I remember as if I had been

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with them yesterday. Ruth Rosenthal, Elsie Schultz, Bea Fried and so on; these were people who came every Sunday with a determination that they were going to make Judaism meaningful to these children. I think we have that kind of faculty now. Shirley was on the faculty later and was one of the few people, I think, who taught into her seventies. And maybe a younger faculty is more in tune with the order of the day now. They might be up there.

Dr. Ettelson was more involved with the Religious School than any senior rabbi we ever had or will have. He wrote lesson plans for the teachers. He was intimately familiar with all of the books. He wrote the Confirmation speeches. He was on the bimah every first Saturday of the month and there was a Children's Service. And we were expected to come.

I wish our friend Abraham Furchgott were still alive ..... And my mother never knew whether they took up a collection on Saturday as they did on Sunday. I used to bring a nickel for the collection they took up on Sunday morning. You know they had a collection they took up for whatever charitable purpose. But Mama would give me a nickel on Saturday morning, and I guess it was dishonest, but ... and it ended up in a place called United Bakery. And this was a man who could make donuts. I think he is probably in the Pantheon right now making donuts for the gods. And I would come home with powdered sugar all over, you know, all over the sides of my face, and Mama never, really never, figured out just exactly the devious nature of our doings.

The Religious School grew remarkably. When Joseph Newburger died in the mid '20s, he left a sum of money when he died, you've heard about the Newburger Annex. That was on the East part of the building and there were some religious school rooms, but they were very seldom used. And finally they contained offices, an administrative area and the rabbis' offices and the kitchen. In 1946 or 47, it was evident that we were going to have to replace the Religious School building, and so we built a new building, thinking that it would serve at least for a whole generation.

That was a great miscalculation. I'll give you an idea. When I came home from the service, I'd say that there were probably somewhere between 350 and 400 children in the Religious School. ....Our daughter Harriet, who was born in 1947, so you'll have to add 14, 15 years to that, was in what we called "the trombone class" of '76. And the next year, our daughter Maxine, was confirmed in the Class of '81. The present Confirmation Class is, somewhere, I think, between 28 and 35. And somebody who deals with demography will have to tell you the reasons for that, and there are many, I am sure.

Now the most interesting thing, I think you're going to have if you are writing the history of the congregation is how we dealt with the increase in members.

We used every place in the Temple. We used the balcony and the sanctuary for classes, and I remember one time, it was in the wintertime and I had classes set up in the foyer of the sanctuary facing Montgomery Street. Finally it became

evident that we just couldn't do the job. You just can't ask teachers to come and have a class of 30 children all pushed together in a room that was intended to serve 18 to 20. And so we looked around to see what to do.

And we found that this was not an unusual thing. The "baby boomers" were here and we had to deal with it! Now, some communities almost in the draconian fashion, said, "We're going to have a congregation and we're going to have a religious school. And the children are going to come after school in the afternoon." I think that was the most typical program that you could have adopted. We didn't.

Then there was what was called "the vertical solution". And that program was to get them out and get another group in. And that would have been possible because we would have been using the rooms twice. But it was difficult. It was difficult to ask a teacher to commit that much time and that much stress. And it was difficult also on the families.

Finally, with the support of Rabbi Wax and especially S.L. Kopald, Jr., the President, I offered a solution. And that was a full program for the upper grades on Sunday and some of the lower grades on Saturday. Those people in the lower grades on Sunday were there only because they had a brother or a sister in the upper grades and there would be less inconvenience for the families to have to come two days. I had no idea when I offered this what the reaction would be. I think I am going to tell you - having lived more than half of the life of this congregation -that this issue became the most divisive matter that Temple Israel ever had. That includes when Murray and I dealt with the cemetery. That includes a new building. That includes every dues increase. That includes electing new rabbis. That includes changes in rituals. That includes rabbis wearing yarmulkes and so forth. I would say that the issue of two days of religious school became the most volatile and striking issue, to the degree... to the degree... that some of the families, not many- maybe 9 or 8 or 10- employed a young woman to come and teach them in their homes. And they would have a class in somebody's living room. You can imagine. You're sitting in a living room now. You can imagine 10 or 12 children sitting in a living room. It was not a very convenient thing, as far as I was concerned. But it gave rise to one episode that provided some comic relief.

The numbers in the households became inconvenient. So someone suggested that they find another place to meet. And they found what was then called The First National Bank at Poplar Street and Prescott would allow them to use their auditorium- which was a reasonable turn of events. What makes this story so precious to me was that one of the teachers at East High, one Monday morning, asked what had happened the day before. And she picked one row. And one child got up and he said, "I went to Sunday School at Second Presbyterian." And the next child got up and he said, "I went to Sunday School at Christ Methodist." And the third child got up and said, "I went to Sunday School at the First Tennessee Bank." And I have often thought, "What a wonderful anecdote that teacher picked up in that episode.

Harriet, a consequence of this two- day operation was justice. Now, something you know very well- and your husband, as far as I'm concerned, is

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one of the heroes of the whole idea of compatibility in public schools- and the word 'busing' was a terrible word to use for a while in regard to the public schools- busing in, busing out. Well, the way we got the busing was the fact that it was really difficult for some people to come two days. And I had some help from some people and so we had some pickup stations, like there would be some stops at Poplar and Goodlett and another at Poplar and Perkins, and they would make a circuit both ways.

Now Baron Hirsch, which was located at Evergreen and Vollintine at that time decided they would do the same thing. And so on Sunday mornings, you would see a bus from Baron Hirsch going its rounds and a bus from Temple Israel. And it was inevitable that some kid - and I've often wondered on the basis of who looked Jewish - would get on the wrong bus. And one time a kid from Baron Hirsch came up to the group on the corner and got on the bus with them. And he came to Temple Israel. Now my role at that time was to help Sylvia Kremer and the people who maintained order at the beginning of the religious school session, and I saw this boy about 10 or 11 years old, and he was obviously in a place he had never been before, and he was kind of whirling around, and I realized what had happened and I called Dr. Harold Cohen, who was my counterpart at Baron Hirsch, and I said, "We've got one of yours here," and he chuckled, and one of my parents took him over there, and we had an agreement, and neither one or us was going to capitalize on the mistake in identity in either of the people or the place. I wondered how that would be if you applied that to political affiliation.

But, at any rate, finally it was resolved. And the way it was resolved was the acknowledgement in our community... that the people who were dealing with the program of religious education certainly deserved better. And the ..... which is part of cooperating for the larger good. Now there were one or two disappointments. There was a girl in Jef's class and they had to go on Saturday and Sunday for Confirmation. She was not content. I know her now. I knew her fairly well. I knew her mother fairly well, and she was not content because her mother thought it was more important to ..... than to come to Confirmation Class. That was a question of values. And it was not incumbent upon me to say anything about it.

Somewhere along the way- and I think it was good judgment- it was determined that we ought to have some professional leads to the NATJE, the National Association of Teachers of Jewish Educators - something like that which was already then a part of the Jewish national scene- beginning to develop curricula- and who were themselves more educated than some of the superficial abilities that we had. So we hired a religious school director, a person by the name of Lawrence Meyer and then later, Harvey Kaye. .... . He was the religious school director serving in the mid.....I don't think that Harvey or Lawrence Meyers had much ..... They couldn't have had, because if they were doing the same thing, it would not have the same impact.

There was a hiatus of some first few months after Harvey left and Barbara Mansberg became the director, and she had the teachers being prepared.....If I were to evaluate Barbara, I would say that she made a great contribution in that

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she made children feel comfortable to be Jews. And that can be very important. John Kerry had a Jewish grandfather, but he didn't have a grandfather who was a Jew. You can't say it that way. When you talk about qualifications of Jewish people, I think it was the first Jewish person to be on the national scene, and even today, I think that people are very cautious about saying, "Are you a Jew?" And this episode with this new movie, for heaven's sake, is going to accentuate the difficulty. (Mel Gibson's "The Passion of Christ"). She made a child ..... and that to me is very important. If you are going to love your neighbor as yourself, you can't despise yourself.

I want to say one more thing: the worship experience is very important, because even though on Saturday morning in our Torah study group, there is the benefit of an exchange of views, there is not the feeling of consolation (?) that religion should provide. And I worry now about the so-called worship experience. If I were going to say that I wanted to be remembered for any contribution in my more than fifty years that I was in the religious school, it would be for my role in the religious experience. I had to fight all week long to find a way to get in touch that would be suitable. You know, you can't just stand up before a group of kids and say, "Now this morning we're going to talk about hope." You have to sneak up.

When I was talking about the Psalms, I started out asking, "How many of you ever heard of a man named James Coleman?" And nobody raised their hand. ....she should be remembered because she inspired the composition of the song.

And that had to do with conscience and hope and cheating on exams and everything else. And I think that the children now are experiencing something by way of ....you and May Lynn ..... and the other thing is that we have a number of children experiencing Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and this is affecting their continuing their education in the other grades. The attendance at religious school was tremendous. Sylvia (Kremer) and I used to talk about it; we had 90 or 95% attendance every Sunday morning. And when we had a meeting of the parents, there were 115%! Now if you have a meeting of the parents and you get 50%, you're doing well. So these are things about which I have concerns, but times are "past Levi" in this and there are people who are sufficiently interested who have the necessary ..... One more thing, one more thing: ....you could lift the top and it was a "This is your life, Herschel Feibelman, and I could put in more things that had happened to me, more medals and some awards that I've had and so forth. And in that cabinet is a book which I consider one of my really prized possessions because it is a prayerbook for the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. It was put together by Barbara and Julie Dinner, and on the second page of this book there is a paragraph dedicating this book to me. ...

representing land developers, maybe sneaking something on a short putt, you know. It's wonderful as I think of standing before the Throne of Judgment, and

they ask. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" and I might remark something about this book.

I appreciate your having called on me for this, and I thank you.

(Responding to additional questions): What happened was that the B'nai B'rith Home on Tucker ....I don't remember exactly, but you walked in and if you turned sharply to your right and there was a chapel. And the chapel was large enough to accommodate maybe 45, 50 people. And that was fairly far out. And I would ride a streetcar in or something like that. People who lived in the neighborhood would daven. Nothing for children. I make the point that the average age in the Jewish Home then was probably somewhere near 60. And these people were able to come to services and there were people in the community who were taken to conducting the services. I and my friends conducted services there for 28 years. Now they have a chapel, but because of the infirmities, .....

I have to say this, .....and it's true of an individual or a personality... when they first started walking the Torah around the Temple,.... Rabbi Danziger.....but it was nothing for me. Because at the B'nai B'rith home, I was the only child and that went there on Saturday morning and they would let me dress the Torah and I would carry it to the people that kissed the Torah, and they would kiss it and kiss

me! So it generated a whole lot of happy nostalgia for me.

I'll say yes, but I'll qualify that. The 'traditional' if you want to call it that ....

The Junior Congregation began about '48 or '49.....