

# Temple Israel Archives

## Interview of Larry Wruble

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00:19 Development of the Orthodox Day School, now called the Mogolin (?) Hebrew Academy. That school was initiated in 1948, and if you recall, it was in the decade of the '40s. Actually, the decade of the '30s when everybody predicted that Orthodox Judaism would disappear. That was also the time of the Holocaust, when all the great learned men from the eshivas (?) all over Europe were transplanted to the United States, and the development of the day school began. And, it is the day school movement that has caused this revitalization of Orthodox Judaism, to the point where now, it is growing at a a, in a very rapid rate, and one is seeing a metamorphosis and the demography of of the Jewish population, in the United States. In Memphis, in 1948, a group of people got together, banded together, to do something that was very unpopular at the time. They were unpopular in all segments of the Jewish community, including the Orthodox community. And, they began the day school. [They started with a kindergarten and a first grade. They had nineteen children in each of those classes and that has grown and it is now, has now recently, had its fiftieth anniversary. The school now has about 250-260 children, it goes from Pre-K, all the way through high school. In addition, there is what we call a base medrish (?), where boys learn and we bring in people from Israel to help them learn. This is a Kolor (?) in Memphis. There are four Orthodox congregations. So, Memphis is a very vital core community. And, at the core, of that community, is the educational system, the all day school, both under-graduate, well actually the pre-high school and the high school.]

01:16

There's a very good relationship in Memphis, between the various segments. The Rabbi speak, there are different programs that are held jointly by all the synagogues. For instance, there's a music program that is done jointly, by Temple Israel and Barron

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Hirsch. So, that in Memphis I think there is a very good relationship, between all the denominations. I think there's, there's also some mutual respect, for each. Clearly there are unbridgeable differences, as we know there are in segments, in Judaism, but there is still the type of respect and tolerance for other people's beliefs and feelings.

I can't speak for a lot of different communities because I haven't visited them. But, we clearly know now that with the problems emanating from Israel, with the problems in conversion, there certainly have been divisions in the various segments of the Jewish population. Those divisions have not surfaced yet, in Memphis.

The crossroads centers around the issue of pluralism. Basically pluralism means that there are different segments of the Jewish community that have differing opinions, and the question is, how does one address the needs of each one of those. Presently, in Israel, as you well know, there is a problem with the fact that reform and conservative conversions are not are not deemed legal or recognized in, in the state of Israel. And, at the present time, there is a commission that is dealing with that. Presently, they're at an impasse and that has caused great division, especially with American Jews. One of the problems of course is, how each of the communities deals with that. In Memphis, we have had discussions with it and we're doing everything we can to bridge some of those differences, albeit it's sometimes not not easy, but we recognize that every Jew is important and that every Jew is, is Jewish and recognizable, so even though we have differences in belief. I can promise you that in Memphis, everything is being done to recognize everyone's needs and to deal with them, and to satisfy them.

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5:48

I came to Memphis because this is where I was accepted in medical school. I was, I graduated the University of Miami, at that time there was no medical school in the State of Florida, and many of us went to other states. (Clears Throat) I was accepted here, came here in 1955, married in 1958 and then left for my graduate training and then returned full time, at the University, in 1963. That was four years before the six day (Clears Throat), before the six day war. And, clearly that was a major change in my life, as well as the life of every Jew. Since that time, [I've seen the effects of the 1967 war on the city of Memphis and how it has allowed for a much greater identification with the State of Israel and with things Jewish. Especially in the, in the Orthodox community, but there have been increasing identify even in the other segments of the Jewish population. Clearly, since that time, we've had more involvement, vis-...-vis, the State of Israel, we've had more involvement with increasing education in Memphis and there's a tremendous dynamism about our involvement, primarily because of the day school and because of the State of Israel. For instance, during the last several months, we've had major dignitaries from Israel visiting this synagogue, which of course, as you know, is the largest Orthodox synagogue, in the country, with a Rabbi who just retired as the President of the Rabbinical Council of America. So, it's kind of a hot spot for Judaism in the United States and we cherish that, that hot spot identity.]

(Stutter) Part of that, part of that growth, has been a growth in, in synagogue construction, synagogue involvement, synagogue membership. For instance, [from my home, which is simply two doors from this synagogue, I can walk to three other ninyunum (?), or three other congregations. You can't say that in any other city of similar population, in the United States, as far as I know. If one looks at cities, around



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Memphis, such as Louisville, Nashville, Birmingham, New Orleans, Dallas, Houston -  
Memphis sits alone, with the with the depth and involvement of Torah Judaism,  
observing Judaism. And, if one looks at what's happening in in the world, there's a shift  
to the right and that's what's happening. And, Memphis just mirrors what's happening,  
all over the world, perhaps even more so.

08:45

The Jewish community has always been involved, not just with our own, but but with  
others, as you just indicated. There are many different groups that are supported by the  
Jewish community, as something called, "<sup>Shelby</sup> ~~Shelby~~ Be United Neighbors". There's a a lot of  
hospital involvement, there are there are many groups, all of which I can't think of, at the  
moment that, that formed the basis of whatever law? just we, we can we can mount. I  
don't think, I think if one looks in the history of the Jewish people, that certainly we're  
forced to take care of our self first, because of all the problems beset by the Jewish  
population. Nonetheless, we never forget that we're supposed to be a light unto other  
nations and in order to do that, one has to give, support, be involved, and essentially, do  
as much as we can.

10:30

Barron Hirsch, the man, Barron, the Hirsch, was a European and was concerned about  
what was happening to Jews, in Europe. He was not a Zionist, he was not a religious  
man. And, he had a lot of money that he wanted to donate, to help the Jewish people.  
And, the mechanism he used was to give money to develop settlements of Jews who  
would probably function as farmers in an agrarian kind of manner. He started such a  
settlement in Argentina, a few other places in the world. And, apparently some people in  
Arkansas, attempted to get some money from Barron Hirsch to start a settlement there.

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They never got it and wound up moving over here to the Temple that was downtown and I don't remember all the names. But, I think at that time, it may even have been a reformed Temple. Ultimately, there was split and again, in an attempt to get some money, they named the synagogue, Barron Hirsch, hoping that he would give them some money. Unfortunately, they never did get any money but the name remained and has continued to remain, since that time. [The first Barron Hirsch was downtown, on Fourth Street. In approximately 1950 or '51, it moved to the middle of the city, in Volentine (?), in a magnificent structure. And, only in the last ten years, because changing population, demography, it was moved, it was moved here, which is certainly the center of the Jewish population of Memphis. And, now as I indicated, is probably the largest Orthodox synagogue, in the country. And, that too is amazing, in Memphis, Tennessee. I mean, after all, who would expect that, in a small Bible-belt town, like Memphis.

12:42

But, it's not just large in size, it's large in vibrancy. We have probably 350 people every Shabbat. ] Every Friday night, there are probably a hundred people. This entire synagogue is alive, all through Shabuoth, with hundreds of children. We have Torah programs for them and it is bound very closely to the Academy and the Eshiva (?). So it's, these aren't just structures. In fact, we probably send more people on Aliat (?) to Israel, than almost any city in the country, from a town that has barely 10,000 Jews - that's amazing, amazing.

13:20

Well, as you in the last ten years, there have been a significant immigration, out of Russia and both to the United States and to Israel. Memphis, like other cities, accepted our portion of that population and they've done very well here. All temples and synagogues

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have accepted them as membership, early on there was no dues that was required of any of these individuals. They were taken into the day school quite freely and many of them have really become part of the different segments of the Jewish population. Clearly, most of these people came without much "religion". Some of them have become very religious, others have remained as secular, as they were, when they were in Russia. There's just a spectrum of involvement. But, I think if one asks many of the Russian people, in Memphis, I think they would tell you that they have had an excellent experience. My family met a plane <sup>is</sup> fifty years ago, a mother, her two sons and her mother and father were on that plane. They're now my family, they're now my family and have been for the whole fifty years. And, I'm just one example of many such happenings, in the city of Memphis. They've been taken in beautifully because they're wonderful people and they form part of, a population now of our Jewish community.

I think again, that question is best given to Rabbi Grossman, because he has looked into the history of Jews in the State of Tennessee. But, to indicate that at that time, there was a dramatic sense of the need for assimilation, one simply has to look (Interviewer's Voice in Background), (stutter) one simply has to look at, where the Jews came from, most of them were coming from Germany, where assimilation had already begun. Moses Miamomiades (?) had begun the assimilatory process and many of the early people coming to the States were German Jews and assimilation was part of, a part of that movement. But, clearly that has even worsened at the present time. All one has to do is, read all of the latest statistics to see that we're in a, in an assimilatory free fall. Jews are assimilating at a fall more rapid rate today, than they did, 20, 30, or a 100 years ago. Now is when we're having the problem, not so much then, because then there were other



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ways of immigration, from Eastern Europe, that came just at the turn of the century, that changed everything. And, as I indicated before, the growth of the day school movement in the '40's, again changed and turned everything to the right. Now unfortunately, you have a dichotomy. You have a smaller group moving furtherly to the right, but a much larger group, moving towards the left and out of Judaism. And, it isn't that they're just becoming less observant, they're becoming nothing. There's no religion. It's not that they are apostating to Christianity or to some other religion, they're simply not involved with religion, at all.

18:20

What about the future. If I had to simply review what is being written, I would say, I would be very depressed and pessimistic about the future, because every single study shows assimilation continuing to rise. There was a study reported by a man, by the name of Bergman, in 1976, he was part of the Harvard population study. And, he predicted that by the year 2076, a 100 years later, from the time that that study was concluded, that the best case scenario is that there would be 900,000 Jews in the United States, a worse case about 11 or 12,000, if present rates of assimilation continued. Unfortunately, they did a 50 year follow up in 1991, and if anything, it was growing more rapidly than they had even predicted. If you put that kind of study, together with the Cosmus (?)

[ Study of 1991, and all of the data that keeps coming out, year after year, one has to feel sorry for the future and glum, about what the future holds for American Judaism. What can change it? I fervently believe the day school movement can change it, because again, if one looks at data, one finds that children who go to twelve years of an Orthodox day school, don't lose the faith, continue and have a strong relationship with Israel, don't intermarry and will perpetuate the religion. Unfortunately, a small percentage of people

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are in all day schools, but quite clearly, both a reform and conservative movement have recognized this and have started their day school movements, as well. And, hopefully in the future, the day school movement can change the trend, but to be honest, I don't have a lot of hope in it, because I don't see people putting up the kind of money it would take to really develop the type of educational system that is required, to change the balance, in what is now preceding, as far as assimilation is concerned.

I strongly feel that there is still a lot of Anti-Semitism sub-rosa, it's subliminal. We don't see a lot of overt Anti-Semitism in Memphis, as we did, when I arrived here, 35 years ago. At that time, I could join most non-Jewish country clubs. That's not the case anymore. Although there may be one or so that I might not be welcome, in which I might not be welcome. On the other hand, for violent Anti-Semitic attacks - yes, we have seen some. But, they're no where near the number that we had seen previously. Does that allow us to be complacent? No, it does not. We recognize that there are still problems and we're forever vigilant in regard to that, to that problem. But, I don't think we see as much as we did and I think those are, that's data that's been going out by the ADL, although it's not a significant decrease. One can look around and find that there are problems all over the country and hate groups are forever surfacing. I think Jews have to remember that really nothing changes. History repeats itself and I, I'm always <sup>wow</sup> weary of it.

I think in Memphis, that we have had a better than decent relationship with the African-American community. We have supported black legislators and they've been very supportive of us. We have had conferences together. I personally have been involved



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with with some of these meetings and we have an excellent dialogue. (Clears Throat) I think that, in the past ten years, there has been a problem throughout the country in black Jewish relationships, but I think that's changing. I think the discussions, aside from Minister Farrakhan, I think that some of the discussions that are being held have been very fruitful and I'm very optimistic about that, not only nationally, but in Memphis, as well.

[END OF TAPE]