

Temple Israel Archives

Interview of Rabbi Raphael Grossman

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Rabbi Raphael Grossman

Page 1

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 1
RABBI GROSSMAN

INT: You said you liked challenges, when you first came to Baron Hirsch what did you see as the challenge in this community that inspired you?

RG: The communities in the South particularly represent a specific challenge and a very intense one for Orthodox Judaism. I think that, ah, people living in the large urban centers of the North and the West or along the east coast failed to understand that the

South has a unique history. That in many of these communities Reform Judaism came before Orthodox Judaism which is totally, ah, the dichotomy to everything that's happened everywhere else in this world. And in the South in general, affiliation with Orthodox synagogues, when I came here and to this day, is somewhere in the vicinity of one percent. When I say South I'm excluding southern Florida which is basically an extension of New York or Chicago and Baron Hirsch is an unusual synagogue with my opinion as it was then and I think the opinion has been substantiated, ah, that has not followed any statistical patterns known, not just in the South, but many parts of the world, other parts of America at least. Baron Hirsch is an old congregation that remains strong and remains faithful to its traditions, to its customs and to its, ah, founding ideology.

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

RG: The uniqueness of Baron Hirsch lies in a number of directions, and this impressed me when I first came here and something I personally have always been very much committed to and my commitment is grown rather than diminished. I feel more enthused about it. Baron Hirsch is an Orthodox congregation which is a very broad spectrum. It

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

services what others would call disparate communities, in other words, we have people here who are to the right of Orthodox, those to the center, and those to the left and, ah, those who are occasionally, occasional Jews in the sense of their practice and yet we have managed to this day to make each and everyone feel comfortable under one roof pursuing in various different ways the goals and objectives of this congregation. And its impact nationally, in fact internationally, has been an extraordinary one. We are highly respected all over the world. We have people coming to visit us from every part of the world and people always find this to be just very unique, very different, and I like to think it's a modality for other congregations which can do what we have done and what we continue to do and it's this challenge that inspires me. It's far more than just a matter of saying this is unique and let's keep it, it's far more than that. It's ideology, it's the philosophy, it's something which is, ah, very meaningful as I see it, profoundly so.

INT: How it is that you have accommodated, you know, what are some of the things that you have done that have accommodated this broad spectrum of Orthodox in your community and do you think, it's a two part question, and do you think it has anything to do with the way in which the Memphis community is configured?

RG: No I would not say it has anything to do with the way the Memphis community is configured. I would say this, that there are things that transcend ideological difference or shall we say, ah, ideological interests. Those things should really be common denominators for Jews everywhere. For instance, ah, caring, being concerned, being in empathy or sympathy, supporting, being warm and friendly, generous both emotional as well as shall we say financially, these are things that have virtually nothing to do with

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 3
RABBI GROSSMAN

ritual or religious ideology. These are fundamental tenets of Judaism. And intensifying a practice from this and preaching and teaching these ideas has had an enormous impact, that it draws, not only draws, but it's very compelling because whatever we do, if we have not established the fundamental principles that the Torah has clearly asserted to be overriding, the principle of love thy fellow as thyself, then we really haven't practiced Judaism at all. In addition to which we service various different spectrums of Jewish and personal interests. We have great deal of counseling here. Family counseling, personal counseling, and obviously that has no denominational or coloration, that is something which deals with need and concern. We offer some 21 different learning opportunities a week or you might call them classes and they focus on different interests. For example, on Sunday mornings we have a group that has been meeting for 20 years, it's an ever growing group, where I discuss world affairs from Jewish perspective mainly concerning Israel and its events which are constantly changing and constantly in need of explanation and elaboration, and what you might call an inside, ah, or an insider's view. We have Talmud classes. We have classes in Jewish belief and thought and ideology. We have classes for men, we have classes for women, we have classes for teens, that are not your typical classes. They deal with specific aspects of Jewish learning and study, ah, and so it goes. In addition to that, our services are exciting. They're very warm for people who have familiarized themselves with the readings of Hebrew and the meaning of the prayers to those who are totally strange to it, the services are very enthusiastic and the discussions at services are very interactive and this is part of the tradition of Baron Hirsch today, it's certainly, I think, the essence of it.

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

INT: Thank you. I guess the way I'd like you to do it if you can is to talk about the phases or the development of the synagogue over time?

RG: Baron Hirsch is a congregation which actually began as a result of a strange occurrence. There was a yellow fever epidemic in Memphis. There was a small group that had services somewhere in south Memphis in a home and, ah, when the epidemic struck, Congregation Beth Israel, which was the first congregation of this community, most of its members apparently left because of what was happening here and of course there was, there was surely no reason to blame them for doing it because this became a very economically depressed, ah, city at the time, but the Jews that remained, they were too poor to go anywhere else, were those who were part of the Orthodox minyan in the south part of Memphis and they turned over their cemetery. These people decided to call the cemetery Baron Hirsch. Now it's interesting here that no one knows, I discovered this and I find that few if any, ah, to my knowledge know and has published this or written this yet. How did the name Baron Hirsch come into being. Baron Maurice Hirsch

was a European tycoon with a very strange idea and that was that anti-Semitism could be solved by turning the Jew from being a urban merchant or peddler or whatever they were, in those days in Europe, into an agrarian. And, ah, he experimented it first in Argentina and, ah, the experiment, at least in its early years, was very successful, in fact, this is certainly how the genesis of Argentinean Jews or Jewry began. Then he came to the United States or shall I say, the Baron Hirsch Fund came to the United States, so they created an agricultural farming community in southern New Jersey, established

towns, Carmel, Normal and the area of Vineland and, ah, a small group came to Arkansas with Baron Hirsch Fund monies, and their purpose was to establish another

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 5
RABBI GROSSMAN

agricultural Jewish community perhaps a an independent, ah, village which would be primarily principally for Jews, that failed. A handful or less than a handful, to the best of my knowledge, were three or there were four who crossed the river from Arkansas-into Memphis. They knew the name Baron Hirsch and they were hoping that they might get some money if they called the cemetery, then the new synagogue meaning the minyan which is already in existence by his name, and they did not succeed in that. They got nothing for it. On the other hand the name stuck. They were incorporated as the Baron Hirsch Congregation and, ah, they did have one rabbi somewhere in the early 1900s, a Rabbi Lee Barcomb who was an old rabbi, when I met him, but I did meet him, he left here and went to New York and I remember him and I know, ah, a son and a grandson of his, but he was here only for a very short time. Their first rabbi came in the 1920s, I think although he was very young and he was only here for two years, he established a philosophy for Baron Hirsch. His name was Henry Raphael Gold, he was a very unusual person. The time he came here he must have been 20 or 21 at most. He was a passionate Zionist, in fact, his brother was the first to sign Israel's Declaration of Independence. He was a religious Zionist inspired by the teachings of the late Rabbi Tsviverst (?) Colisher(?) who lived in the middle of the 19th century and he was inspired by others such as Rabbi Cook, the first chief Rabbi of Israel and people like that, but he also had a great view of life and the world about him. Just to explain that, he left here to become a rabbi in New Orleans, Louisiana, where simultaneously he attended medical school and graduated. He then went to Dallas, Texas at Shearith Israel where he trained in psychiatry and then left the Rabbinate and came to New York and became one of this nation's leading psychiatrists, in fact, he was the head of The New York Analytic Institute at one time, but always remained very intensely committed to his Zionist philosophies and to his religious

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 6
RABBI GROSSMAN

philosophies. Ah, he's one of the few of the rabbis in my view who served Baron Hirsch over the years whose impact was indelible to this day. Baron

Hirsch became very Zionistic, very committed and very open as Rabbi Gold had told it in those years and his successors, ah, pretty much perpetuated this idea and I think it came to fore in its very greatest in the early years of Israel's founding where Baron Hirsch was completely dedicated to every aspect of Israel and it still permeates I think as the principal interest that brings all the congregants or members of this congregation together. And, ah, the synagogue did not really have a home until somewhere in the early 1900s and they purchased a church in downtown Memphis, not far from the river, on Washington,

corner Fourth Street. Subsequently, they built a building next door to it which became known as the Menorah Institute which is a school and, ah, an afternoon school was created and housed there although it was not part of Baron Hirsch, and to head this

school they brought a man by the name of Irving Angus. Now Dr. Irving Angus who is now deceased left here, but he became the singular most respected figure amongst Jewish historians specifically for the dark age period in history. His books are fundamental text and the students he touched were and are to this day very much in his mold. Then about 50 years ago another phenomenal occurrence took place here in Memphis something which was taking place all over the country and the first day school was established in Memphis. At the time it was called the Memphis Hebrew Academy and more recently its name was changed to the Margolin Hebrew Academy and it inspired its students and it brought a new level, if you will, a much higher level of

Orthodox commitment to the community and it gave Baron Hirsch something different in the sense that now many of its younger members were learned and had much more than basic literacy which is what their parents or their grandparents had as immigrants who

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 7
RABBI GROSSMAN

came to this country with very little Jewish scholarship and it created some fundamental changes within the community and it did impact on Baron Hirsch and , ah, the impact continues in different ways, but it certainly had a very positive impact.

INT: Can you say as simply as possible I know it's hard, we have a time limit on the video unfortunately, but this is fascinating, fascinating information. Can you talk about the interplay between Baron Hirsch between the Orthodox and the Reform community and how they have influenced one another over the years and how they continue to influence one another today ?

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

RG: The interplay between the two principal congregations in this community, Baron Hirsch and Temple [BACKGROUND DISCUSSION] ... The interaction between Baron Hirsch and Temple Israel, the two primary congregations in this city, um, was virtually non-existent for many, many years. Ah, I think part of the reason is that Baron Hirsch, typical of Orthodox congregations, is made up of eastern European Jews, its members came from different social backgrounds, different economic backgrounds, and the earlier years, ah, it was an immigrant population that identified itself with traditional Judaism which was Baron Hirsch, while Reform had very early beginnings when Isaac Mayer Wise came and brought the message of reform Judaism. It preceded eastern European immigration here in many significant numbers by 50 years and so, the twain rarely if ever met. I think what began to impact as change was (a), the establishment of the Jewish Federation which at the time was called The Memphis Jewish Welfare Fund,

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 8
RABBI GROSSMAN

(b) the phenomenon of a Jewish community center in Memphis which, ah, is somewhat more recent than in more other communities. Most communities were at least, so to speak, JCC business way before Memphis was, Memphis was late in that. And the more and the broader expectance the community center had in the community both by those in the traditional community and those in the reform community it began to close gaps. But there was time when young people in either congregation did not socialize with each other. Now, we're talking about transition that took place somewhere between 40 and 50 years ago when both communities started to come closer and the impact of mutual influence I think has been a very positive and very strong one because the two congregations have enjoyed, certainly in my time and considerably before it, a very pleasant relationship, never really a competitive relationship. We have different directions and different interests, but we found more and more of our people involved with people of the oldest congregation, the Reform congregation, in the Federation in efforts on behalf of Israel, in the Jewish Community Center and, ah, while there are more traditional Jews involved in the Center and Federation at one time and more of the reformed Jews involved in the home for the aged, all of that has changed where there is an equal number from both and the more recent occurrence, relatively speaking, of about 35 or 40 years ago of the establishment of the Conservative congregation in Memphis which also relates extremely well as well as the other Orthodox congregation which is about the same age as ours, the Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth. Ah, in the four congregations we have developed a great deal of homogeneity and a great deal of comradeship which I think if it is unique it's a blessing and if it's not unique I would be even happier.

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 9
RABBI GROSSMAN

INT: Thank you. When we started out this video one of the things that people thought or people told us was that the Memphis Jewish Community is unique in some way because of its southernness. Can you, I'm sure been down to the center, we're unique because we're southerners and we live among Jews because we were southerners. Can you say anything and I don't know what you think about this, about the uniqueness of Memphis?

RG: The southernness is terribly misunderstood. I do not agree with that at all. What makes Memphis unique is something entirely different. In German, there is a postulate that is sociologically very correct [SPEAKING GERMAN] "as Christianity goes Judaism goes", especially in a community shall we say, Greater Memphis today has over a million people, of which the vast majority are Evangelical in their Christianity, fundamentalists in their Christianity. Memphis is a very religious city which has its great, great merit and it presents its unique sociological problems as well. We are the most church-per-capita city in the United States and it definitely impacts on the Jewish community, it definitely impacts on the Jewish community and it probably has a positive effect as so far as the Orthodox in this community because shall we say not fundamentalists or because Orthodox Judaism is not fundamentalist, it's classic rabbinism, which is far from being fundamentalist, theologically speaking and scripturally speaking, but the impact of religion as being a rather important aspect of life which is not typical of many American cities or communities today not at all. Ah, most western cities are definitely secular in character or nature with the religious communities or institutions functioning within that secular framework. The secular in Memphis functions within the religious framework and thus, it lends itself to a religious commitment within the Jewish gestalt. It lends itself as

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 10
RABBI GROSSMAN

an example to people wanting to pray more even study more and practice religious beliefs to a more intensive form of spirituality that is typical elsewhere. One must also remember that the South has undergone radical change. The South is no longer the South . The Confederacy has died in spirit. What's left of what was the South is probably the, ah, environment of Mississippi and, ah, for whatever is left of it, Mississippi, sociologists do not consider Memphis a typical southern urban center. They do not consider it as part of Tennessee, in fact, sociologists long ago drew three different maps of Tennessee. East Tennessee which votes differently and which thinks differently; central Tennessee which is principally a Midwestern city such as Nashville, where Memphis has always been considered to be the sociological capital of Mississippi, and in that sense religion is not only pervasive but religion is dominant. And so it helps Judaism, but on the other hand it can have a very negative impact on the aspects of Jewish ethnicity and Jewish nationalism. And this is where I find Baron Hirsch to be spectacularly different and I thank God for each and every day because we have people in varying degrees of practice and observance in Memphis, but we have no varying degrees in Zionist commitment and passion for Israel and concern for Jews the world over. We are among the few congregations that has a holocaust committee which a holocaust survivors committee I might say, and for many years major holocaust programs highlighting the holocaust and doing whatever we could. There is a large, there are a large number of lecturers who come here from all different parts of the world and there's tremendous interest in what they have to say and what they have to share with us. So, in a sense this is a very urbane congregation, very cosmopolitan in its Jewish perspective and atypical of the general environment that this city provides.

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 11
RABBI GROSSMAN

INT: Now no one else has said this in this particular way, so I'm going to ask you Rabbi Grossman if you can take what you said about the secular environment within the religious and if you can condense all of what you said into about three sentences, just with the very highlights because I would really like and I think you would like to use this.

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

RG: In most communities, medicine which is critically significant important, lives within the framework of science and secularity, it doesn't in Memphis. Your principal health institutions are Baptist, Methodist and Roman Catholic. Ah, the entrepreneurship in this community is profoundly impacted by the religious dimensions of it. This for this reason there's no legalized gambling, river gambling, as there is in so many other states. It impacts on the Jews and I think the most positive impact is the intense family orientation that I hope will always remain in this community Family is still paramount which is not true in communities that live within a secular framework anymore.

INT: State, if that is the case, is Baron Hirsch currently or has been or how long has it been the largest [INAUDIBLE] congregation in the country and why here, why in Memphis, how is that so?

RG: Baron Hirsch is the largest Orthodox congregation in the United States and of course Memphis is a very small Jewish community that would seem to certainly contradict it, but the phenomenon is the result of two basic factors. Number one: excellent leadership. People who felt very committed and didn't want to change the

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 12
RABBI GROSSMAN

religious character of this synagogue, it's as simple as all that. The other is, ah, the ah, environment in this community is not hostile to tradition, in fact, it's very warm and welcoming to tradition and Baron Hirsch is a tradition, coupled tradition, excellent leadership, the proper environment you have a situation that is atypical to anywhere else. Usually you have multiple Orthodox synagogues, none of them very large, in fact, most of them very small, and most large Orthodox synagogues either cease to exist or affiliate with an entirely different stream of Judaism a non-Orthodox one. For the foreseeable future it defies imagination to believe that this synagogue will be anything but that.

INT: Let me ask you to start this way. In a condensed sense, if you can just review, how this synagogue, this congregation came into being as it was after the reform process was already in the community?

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

RG: Okay. The Reform congregation, Temple Israel was originally known as Congregation Beth Israel and in its founding days was Orthodox. When they determined

no longer to remain Orthodox and to become Reform, ah, two Orthodox synagogues emerged. First was one called Beth El Emeth, and the other was Baron Hirsch serving different geographic areas in the community and actually the beginnings of both congregations were very small. What impacted most in developing Baron Hirsch to an extraordinary growth did not take place until the late 1930s or the early 1940s and simple, the choice was in this community up until those years, if you wanted some religious education for your children your children have to attend the Sunday School at

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 13
RABBI GROSSMAN

the Reform congregation. One morning the Orthodox decided to have their own school and it was Baron Hirsch fortuitously that made that decision which brought hundreds of parents. Subsequently, this school enjoyed an enrollment of 650 children and coupled with parents and with grandparents it became the, ah, basis upon which a large congregation could be built and could be established. Then with the type of leadership they were fortunate in getting, the philosophy that the leadership came if, the rabbinic leadership, and the lay leadership that were very much synched, and I have travelled a great deal and I found very few synagogues who've enjoyed the caliber of lay leaders that this synagogue has had. People of means, but people of vision and people of dedication and people who in those years it was very unusual for people in communities such as this to have any concept of what Jewish life was elsewhere, a very provincial, but Baron Hirsch had some pretty sophisticated people who were not provincial and had a very good idea of Jewish life and made some choices and these choices were educated choices. They were not simply happenings. And what they chose was a very broad spectrum kind of Orthodoxy, a very open kind of Orthodoxy which it remains to this day.

INT: Great

RG: Yeah, one more. Are you ready?

INT: I'm ready.

RG: Earlier I mentioned the assimilation is very logical and rational in a world, in a new society for which Jews have no experience. In the sense to live in a free society,

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY BATCH 2, TAPE 4, PAGE 14
RABBI GROSSMAN

to live in an open society, to be free of the kinds of anti-Semitism we knew before, persecuted, physical, violent anti-Semitism and so the assimilation is very ready and the problems are beyond imagination and unprecedented in the annals of all Jewish years through experience. Assimilation was a trend that really occurred first in the South before any other part of the country. Southern Jews assimilated for whatever the reasons are and there are many, therefore, I see the challenge of having a viable and strange Orthodox community in a very, very assimilated society, Jewish society, is a critical one. Most, if not all, have decided, decided long ago, that it's hopeless. Now the South shall forever remain assimilated, take our losses, and go elsewhere and I find that to be unacceptable. We can succeed, we can be determined, reasonable, logical, commitment, stem the tides of the assimilation. We may not succeed entirely, but we have already enjoyed considerable success. We have seen people coming from parents and grandparents who've already abandoned their Judaism, turned to Judaism, and this is a phenomenon that I find extraordinary and exciting. And, ah, I think the great test in the South will be the test of survival. It's not that I see this as a competitive process, not at all. I feel that each Jewish institution makes a very strong and definite contribution and fulfills a need, but I feel that all of us must stop right within the exigencies and the critical aspects of, of being today. What we are facing today is not a need for status quo, but a need for creativity, inventiveness and strength and enough passion for what we believe in and with it we can overcome the statistical holocaust that American Jewry unfortunately faces. Just to tell you one distinctive feature at Baron Hirsch, nationally no more than 15% of American Jews have been to Israel. Baron Hirsch is about 88 or possibly 90% of our members have been to Israel. It defies any statistic or any community or congregation in the world other than Israel of course itself.