

*Congregation*  
*Beth Am*  
*Israel*

ק"ק  
בית עם ישראל

*As I Recall the Synagogue:  
Reminiscences of Southwest  
Philadelphia  
from the 1940s to the 1960s*

שלום ראובן בן משה ופעסי לבית שולמן הלוי  
י"ז סיון תש"ס

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## F O R E W O R D

I am motivated to record these memories after reading the material that was donated to the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center by Rabbi Robert Tabak as recorded in the *Selected Acquisitions* section on page 5 of the PJAC Bulletin, Number 22, September 1986. These pages contain histories and recollections of the Congregation as recorded by Belle Rose and Lorraine Berliner Barol. I am grateful to Ms. Lily Schwartz, head archivist at the PJAC, who forwarded this material to me. I do not have before me any original material to check and corroborate facts here recorded nor do I know if these memories have any historic value. I do expect that readers will gain some insight as to why the dedication of the "products," as Rabbi Morris S. Goodblatt called the graduates of Beth Am Israel, to the Jewish people and Jewish education has extended over decades and beyond continents.

Before coming on aliyah in 1986, I donated a number of items to the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center that I had accumulated over the years detailing my and my family's relationship with Beth Am. This association, which began in the early 1940s, lasted nearly 40 years until 1980, the year of my parents' deaths. These memorabilia include membership directories, copies of the synagogue newspaper *The Beth Amity*, edited for many years by Belle Rose, photographs from various congregational dinners and events which include my late father Martin Bronstein, various Confirmation and Consecration programs, song sheets from the Hebrew School and correspondence exchanged between Rabbi Goodblatt and myself over the years. The following impressions that I record should be considered as such. The perspective of a child growing up in a particular neighborhood and synagogue is obviously very different from that of an adult. The forces that created the environment in which the congregation flourished in the Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood of my childhood and teenage years were well beyond the understanding of a youngster. Throughout these reminiscences, I mention the names of those people whom I remember, however there are names, which should be included, but which I cannot recall as the years have also taken their toll on me. For this I apologize. I have chosen to focus

on topics and present my memories of each. An additional caveat is that while the role of the synagogue was central to my family and to my life during these years, it certainly was not so for the majority of the Jews living in the neighborhood. In the same light, however, in comparing notes with contemporaries who grew up in other sections of Philadelphia at the same time, Beth Am did play a larger role in the community and did have a greater influence on its students than most other neighborhood congregations. I started writing this paper in 1996 and it has continued over such a long period for one particular reason: every time I feel that I am nearing completion, I remember another name or another fact that I feel I should include.

### **The Neighborhood**

Growing up in Southwest Philadelphia in the 1940s and 1950s and being a "product" of Congregation Beth Am Israel, formerly of 58th St. & Warrington Avenue, was a special privilege. I assume that similar papers could be written by others who grew up in the various vibrant Jewish neighborhoods that characterized Philadelphia in the decade following the end of World War II. The toll of years and other changes have reduced some of them to slums; their synagogues are now used for other purposes and the energetic Jewish life that went on in these neighborhoods is only a nostalgic memory. It is my hope to share some of the special flavor of the area and community whose focal point was Congregation Beth Am Israel.

The Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood I write of was bounded on the East by 52nd St., on the West by Cobbs Creek Park, on the North by Baltimore Avenue and on the South by Chester Avenue. Jews were concentrated between 55th St. and Cobbs Creek Park (east-west), Whitby and Springfield Avenues (north-south). On some of the streets, the residents were almost all Jews (for example, the street where my family lived - the 5600 block of Beaumont Avenue, the 5900 blocks of Belmar Terrace & Windsor, perhaps others, too) while other blocks were devoid of Jews. Houses on the 'main' streets (Florence and Warrington Avenues) for the most part were larger than those on the smaller side streets. The largest and finest houses in the immediate area were on the 5900 block of Warrington

Avenue but there was no particular block that was looked down upon. The area bounded by Springfield and Warrington Avenues and 55th and 56th Streets was known as "the new houses." These residences were constructed well after the other houses in the area - I think just after World War II on an area that had previously been a "Victory Garden." Most of the neighborhood's houses were built just before World War I, immediately after the war, or in the early 1920s. The lower level of corner houses was generally used for commercial purposes -- grocery stores, tailor/dry cleaner, butcher shops, medical offices etc. Not every house had a garage and not everyone owned a car. There were a large number of individual garages on the 5700 block of Beaumont Avenue that were owned by Beth Am. Many were torn down to make room for the school building in 1947 and the remainder were removed in the late 1950s to provide parking facilities for the synagogue. This area was subsequently named Pearson Park in honor of Jack Pearson, Beth Am's president for a number of years in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There was also a large garage at 57th and Pentridge Streets that was converted to an ACME market in the early 1950s.

Most of the Jewish children attended William C. Longstreth elementary school at 58th St. & Willows Avenue. Beth Am also drew students from Bryant, Lea and Mitchell Schools. There must have been other schools in the West Philadelphia area, too, but I do not recall their names. Most of us attended the same school and the same synagogue and, to a certain extent, we lived in sort of a 'shtetl,' or completely self-contained neighborhood. The furthest one had to go from the immediate neighborhood to meet our needs was to the public library at the junction of 58th St., Baltimore Avenue and Cobbs Creek Parkway. About eight blocks away, it was a short trolley car ride or a long walk. I believe the number of the streetcar that ran on 58th Street was the 46. This trolley line was the last double-ended wooden streetcar that operated in Philadelphia. From 58th Street, it turned left on Baltimore Avenue and right on 60th Street, which was the main shopping area of Jewish West Philadelphia. This was also the way to get to the Market Street El. When a bus replaced it, the screeching of the trolley as it came to its stop at 58th and Warrington Avenue no longer disturbed services at the synagogue. There

were many stores and medical offices on 58th Street between Whitby and Warrington Avenues, but Chester Avenue served as the neighborhood's main commercial street. The number 13 trolley car that ran from Center City to Yeadon had stops on Chester Avenue.

In the area where my family lived there were three Jewish owned corner grocery stores within a very short distance of each other: Widman's at 57th & Beaumont, Dolan's at 56th & Warrington and Besdin's at 57th & Warrington. On the corner of both 57th & Warrington (Breslau's) and 57th & Florence there were kosher butcher shops. The store on the southeast corner of 57th & Florence also had fish tanks visible from the sidewalk. Before holidays, we could watch live carp swimming in the water as we walked to school. The owner of the shop, Mr. (Isaac?) Sorkin sounded the shofar at the synagogue until his death. There were also local drug stores, Serlick's at 56th & Florence and Perelman's at 58th & Florence. Popular eating places and "hang outs" for teenagers were "Ed's Sugar Bowl" on the north-east corner of 56th & Beaumont and "Phil's" on the north-east corner of 57th & Beaumont. Phil's was operated by Phil Greenstein who lived above his business with his family. They were members of Beth Am. I do not recall Ed's last name or whether or not he belonged to the synagogue, but he was Jewish. Each had its own "crowd." My sister, Joyanna [now Mrs. Larry Horn of Broomall, PA], told me that a few years back there was a reunion of those who used to "hang out" at Phil's. A notice was put in the *Jewish Exponent* and there was a good response. Milk in our neighborhood was delivered by horse and wagon. The occasional banana man and the huckster also made his rounds on a horse and wagon. In addition to the regular trash collection day there was also an ash collection day for those who still had coal furnaces. This must have been before 1950.

In the early 1950s, while some new Jewish families moved into the area from South Philadelphia and the Parkside area, which was undergoing racial change, some of the more well to do families moved from Southwest Philadelphia. The vast majority of them maintained their affiliation with Beth Am. There were even complaints from the leadership of the various congregations in the areas where Beth Am members relocated. They resented the fact that the former residents of Southwest Philadelphia, who moved to 'new'

neighborhoods, maintained their active affiliation with Beth Am. It was stated on more than one occasion at United Synagogue board meetings that when Beth Am people move, they don't change their synagogue affiliation and therefore are really not part of their new neighborhoods and the synagogues in these new areas suffer. In the back of the membership directories the congregation published over the years there was a section titled "All Roads Lead to Beth Am." In it, each neighborhood in greater Philadelphia that had Beth Am members was listed along with the name of the member. In this way people could car pool to services or to any other synagogue activity. Most of the people who moved away had children of Hebrew School age, enrolled their children in the Hebrew Schools of Conservative synagogues in their new neighborhoods, but the majority of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremonies were still held at Beth Am.

#### **The Synagogue at 58th Street & Warrington Avenue**

The synagogue building was completed in 1927. If I recall correctly, the cornerstone had the year of the founding of the synagogue, 1926, and the year of construction, 1927, inscribed in both Hebrew and English. After the building was sold and I drove by, I noticed that the original cornerstone was still in place. I suggested that it be removed at the synagogue's expense for incorporation in Beth Am's future building. I do not know if this was done. In the early 1980s when I drove by, I saw that the old cornerstone was no longer there. Before the school building was constructed in 1948, classes were held in the downstairs ballroom of the synagogue. There were moveable wooden classroom partitions that were folded up to enable the Junior Congregation to conduct services. The Sukkah was on the second floor of the synagogue where the choir room was later located. This was directly above the rabbi's study, which was to the right of the pulpit. There was a roof that could be opened to the sky and the Sukkah was appropriately decorated. One of the local synagogue legends was that Hannah Manhoff, who for many years was in charge of decorating the Sukkah, in the early years, would go with volunteers to Cobbs Creek Park at night to cut branches to get

*schach* to cover the Sukkah. After the construction of the school building at 5720 Beaumont Avenue, the synagogue auditorium was remodeled and named in memory of Nathan Lish and in honor of his wife Juel who was still active in the 1950s. At about this time, the pulpit was completely redone in teak paneling. The Cutler Family donated it in memory of Lena and Hyman Cutler. The marble ark, which was really painted "grained" plaster, was replaced and a choir loft was built above the new teak ark. It turned out that there was not enough room for the choir members to use the loft comfortably and the room that was formerly used for the Sukkah was renovated to suit the choir. Before the choir loft was constructed, the choir occupied the front rows of the balcony. The choir was a non-professional group of women volunteers with soprano and alto voices. Accompanied by an organ, it participated in the late Friday night, Shavuot (for Confirmation) and High Holiday services. The cantor faced the congregation and there was direct eye contact between the cantor and the choir. This was lost after the renovations and to signal the choir the cantor used a push button system of lights.



**The Synagogue Interior**

**Wedding of Joyanna Bronstein & Larry Horn,  
September 1959**

After World War II, the Chapel was redone and named in memory of Harold M. Brody, a Beth Am member, who gave his life in the service of the country. His parents lived on the 5600 block of Beaumont Avenue and were regular worshippers at services. A Jewish War Veterans Post in the neighborhood also bore his name. Although many of its members were also affiliated with the synagogue, there was not especially close co-operation between the two. I seem to recall that there were conflicts over activities on Shabbat and the observance of kashrut. The Harold Brody Post eventually had its own building, the former Orthodox synagogue on Woodland Avenue.

The Windows - There were two large round stained glass or colored glass windows, one over the entrance to the synagogue and one over the ark. When the pulpit was redesigned and the choir loft was installed, the round window over the ark was no longer completely visible. In its middle were two lions standing along side the tablets of the Ten Commandments topped with a crown. [See page 5 for illustration] In the window over the entrance, there was a blue Magen David and in its middle was a visionary illustration of Jerusalem. There were also stained glass or colored glass windows on the sides of the building. These windows were divided into three sections, with the name of the Hebrew month and its zodiac sign in the middle panel. On the bottom of each of the three sections was the name of the person in whose name the window was dedicated. The Magen David theme was also worked into the plaster molding between the windows.

In the middle of the main sanctuary ceiling was a dome from which a large elaborate chandelier with many lights was suspended. On its bottom was a smaller hanging light with a Magen David. It was a very difficult and time-consuming task to lower the chandelier for cleaning and changing light bulbs.

It seems that an alternate system for gas lighting was also installed when the synagogue was built. On the steps leading to the balcony, one could still see the sconces that were meant for the gaslights. I do not know if these were ever used.

There were not enough seats in the main synagogue, including the balcony, for all the

members to attend High Holiday services. To accommodate them, an overflow service was held in the Lish Auditorium. During the 1950s and into the 1960s, Rabbi Shalom Segal, the Hillel Director at Temple University, officiated at these services. If someone was unaffiliated and wanted to "pop in for Yizkor on Yom Kippur," there was an open-door policy at the overflow service. This was not broadcast, but it was understood that nobody would be turned away. Conflicts arose when non-members demanded to be permitted to enter the main sanctuary and would then 'bad-mouth' the synagogue for being turned away. I do not know how often this happened but I recall my father being annoyed by these people. All the ushers for the High Holiday services were volunteers and many were members of the board of directors. Special arrangements were made for those who were post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah and were interested in attending a service more complete than those provided by the Youth Group Service. I do not know what the charge was, but a number of youngsters in this category attended the overflow service, too. As the demographics of the neighborhood changed, the overflow service changed. For the High Holidays of 1964 and 1965 the writer of these lines officiated at a combined overflow/youth service. A number of volunteers also aided in taking various parts in these services. An additional note on my officiating -- as my father, Martin Bronstein, was the financial secretary of the congregation, he and I felt that it would be inappropriate for me to accept any remuneration for services I rendered to the synagogue. I did not have a contract and nothing was stipulated verbally concerning an honorarium when I was asked to conduct these services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Accordingly, I returned the check that was mailed to me. However, the Board of the congregation and Rabbi Goodblatt had other ideas. As I had just entered the Jewish Theological Seminary as a rabbinical student in the fall of 1964, I was informed that the Board of the congregation decided to purchase a complete large format 20-volume set of the Talmud for me. Rabbi Goodblatt duly inscribed the set. At the risk of "tooting my own horn" the inscription in the first volume **ברכות** (Berakhot) of the 20 volume folio size edition reads as follows: "To Robert Bronstein a most deserving young man whose love of faith and

dedication to Beth Am Israel has made him an admired and exemplary Jewish personality," signed, "Morris S. Goodblatt, Rabbi and Edward N. Barol, President." Knowing that I would not accept remuneration or an honorarium in 1965, the congregation purchased a folio size Shulhan Arukh and a large size Tur, volumes essential for a rabbi's library. My High Holiday relationship with Beth Am concluded in 1965 and in years following until my ordination, I officiated at other congregations on the High Holidays. However, Beth Am Israel gave me my first opportunity to serve as an officiating rabbi.

When Jack Pearson became president in the late 1950s, many of his friends also joined Beth Am and became active in the congregation. This was a period of transition. The area of West Philadelphia south of Market Street started to change racially and it altered very rapidly. Within a few years, very few Jewish families remained in this formerly heavily Jewish area. It was clear that Beth Am's future would shortly be in question. In 1960, the West Philadelphia Jewish Community Center, at 63rd and Ludlow, closed its doors. Shortly thereafter, Beth El, at 58th and Walnut, merged with Temple Beth Hillel in Wynnewood and left the West Philadelphia area. Its stained glass windows were removed from their original location and incorporated into the Beth Hillel building. Sometime later, items from the former West Philadelphia Jewish Community Center were also transferred to Beth Hillel. In his presidential message on Kol Nidre night in 1960, Jack Pearson stated that he would not let happen to Beth Am what had happened to the West Philadelphia Jewish Community Center. It seems to me in retrospect that the closing of this fellow Conservative congregation, dedicated the same year as Beth Am, signaled that something had to be done soon to assure Beth Am's continued existence. There were a number of feelers put out over the years by suburban congregations interested in merging with Beth Am. For a while, there was a relationship with what was known as the University City Synagogue. Nothing came of this. By this time, I was an infrequent visitor, having spent the 1962/63 academic year in Israel and from 1964 I was studying at the Jewish Theological Seminary. I attended services at 58th and Warrington Avenue for the last time on Pesach 1970, shortly before my ordination and some six months before the congregation left the

neighborhood. When the synagogue was sold, it was as though a close relative of mine had died. The school building had been sold a few years previously to the Philadelphia School Board. One final note, some years later I took my children for a ride through my "old neighborhood." It had changed radically. Some of the houses were burned out and gray metal sheeting covered the gaping holes where there were once windows. We drove by the former synagogue building where I had spent many wonderful years. My son, Yisrael Bronstein, at the time around 8 years old, asked in a very puzzled tone, "Abba, the shul didn't have a cross on it when you were Bar Mitzvah, did it?" The cross no longer appears in the 1998 photograph.



**The Former Synagogue Building, October 1998  
Northeast Corner, 58<sup>th</sup> Street & Warrington  
Avenue**

**Rabbi Morris S. Goodblatt**

Beth Am Israel and Rabbi Goodblatt were synonymous. He often commented that he had a monogamous relationship with his wife Doris and with the congregation. Beth Am was the only congregation he served in his long career. If someone asked you what congregation your family belonged to and you answered Beth Am, the next phrase would be,

"Oh, Rabbi Goodblatt's synagogue." I recall in 1962 being interviewed by Maurice Jacobs in his office at 222 North 15th Street. I applied to the one-year program at Hebrew University and he was the person designated to interview the prospective participants from Philadelphia. Very early in our meeting, he asked me which congregation I attended. When I replied, "Beth Am," he spent the next part of the interview talking about our rabbi. He applauded the congregation's special achievements over the decades in furthering Jewish education. I was fortunate in that our family had a warm and much faceted relationship with the Goodblatt family. Beth Am was a family congregation and the Goodblatts set the example. Perhaps our special affinity had to do with my late father's deep involvement with the congregation that he served for many years as the financial secretary. At Beth Am, that was the person in charge of raising the funds to cover any budget deficits. My mother, Pearl Bronstein, attended Rabbi Goodblatt's study groups and for years was the chairman (the term used in those days) of the Jewish Family Living Committee of the Sisterhood. Much of what I would record would be autobiographical and I do not believe that it would be appropriate for this type of paper. A few notes, however, would be in order. The Goodblatts' son David and I were fellow students in the same first grade class at Longstreth elementary school; he was my roommate at the Jewish Theological Seminary and was best man at my wedding. Their older son, Jonathan and I frequently correspond and I was a witness at his wedding signing the *ketubah*. His wife, the former Ricki Hirsch, was a classmate of mine at Gratz College. They along with their daughter Yael stayed with us in our home in Jerusalem the Shabbat of Yael's bat mitzvah at Mevakshei Derekh Congregation in July 1990. Rabbi Goodblatt officiated at my wedding along with Rabbis Maurice Kliers of Chicago and Pinchos Chazin at Temple Sholom in December 1965. It turns out that he also officiated at the wedding of Rabbi Chazin and his wife Bea. We co-officiated at my grandfather Mayer Shulman's funeral in February 1971. One of Rabbi Goodblatt's last acts was installing me as rabbi of Congregation Agudath B'nai Israel in Lorain, Ohio, in November 1977. He, Mrs. Goodblatt and my family flew to Cleveland and spent the weekend with us. He was the

highlight of the installation ceremony on Friday night, spicing his message with a few of his famous humorous anecdotes. The brochure of my installation as rabbi as well as our correspondence leading up to his coming are to be found in the Beth Am archives collection in the PJAC.

He was the type of person who preferred compromise to confrontation, but he did not shy away from confrontation when he felt it necessary. Although the majority of the students in the elementary school were Jewish, Christmas was marked. In the eyes of the teachers, only two or three of whom were Jewish, it was probably an opportunity to enable the Jewish children to enjoy the festivities of the season. I think they felt it was a shame that their Jewish students did not celebrate Christmas. Many of us would not sing those songs that contained the words Jesus or Christ. Others would leave out these words and remain silent when they appeared in the text. There was no thought that these programs and assemblies were inappropriate for a public school. Pennsylvania law at the time mandated that ten verses of the Bible were to begin each day. One year, it was after I completed elementary school, Rabbi Goodblatt declared that anybody participating in the Christmas programs of the various area schools would no longer be eligible for Junior Congregation awards. This was quite a bombshell, as many of the parents still believed that "Christmas music is beautiful; that you do not have to believe in the words, and that Jews should not stick out."



**Rabbi Morris Goodblatt, September 1959**

Beth  
Am's rabbi  
was a superb  
preacher.  
His sermons  
were  
delivered  
without  
notes and  
lasted for  
20 minutes.  
He once  
mentioned  
that the  
clock that  
was on the  
front of the  
balcony was  
there to

remind him of the time. Engraved in gold letters in Hebrew in the wood above the ark was the phrase **בבית א-להים נהלך ברגש**, "In the house of God we walked with the throng," [Psalms 55:15]. Another inscription appeared either in the sanctuary or on one of the portable arks **דע לפני מי אתה עומד** "Know before whom you stand;" Rabbi Goodblatt said that the obvious meaning is that we worshippers stand before God. "However the rabbi must remember that he is also standing before the congregation." He felt strongly that the phrase to know before whom you are standing contained a message for the rabbi not to be overbearing with his congregation. A favorite story of his, and he had hundreds upon hundreds of anecdotes, concerned a New England preacher. For over 50 years, his sermons lasted exactly 17 minutes. One Sunday the preacher went well beyond that time. When he finally realized, he ended his sermon abruptly in mid-sentence. After services concluded, he told his congregants that every time he would get up to preach he would put a hard candy in his mouth. His sermon would be paced to the melting of the candy. "This morning," he said very dismayed, "a button came off my shirt and I put it in the same pocket as the candy. By accident, I put the button in my mouth and concluded the sermon when I realized my mistake."

A few times a year Rabbi Goodblatt would preach in Yiddish. I recall that it was on the second day of Sukkot and Pesah. Most of the regular daveners at Beth Am were born in

Eastern Europe and most of their children grew up in Yiddish speaking homes. The Yiddish sermons always brought out a few additional people and there were always those who made the special effort to attend to enjoy hearing a *Yiddishe vort*.

Over the years, he was deeply involved in the instruction of prospective converts to Judaism. Some of these people became active participants in Beth Am. I recall one couple in particular. He was on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania and moved into the area to be able to attend Rabbi Goodblatt's synagogue. They were deeply involved Jewishly and remained active members while they were in Philadelphia. The Academy for Jewish Studies, as the school run by the Conservative rabbis of Philadelphia for instructing prospective converts was called, was later named in his honor. He certainly was the right person at the right time in the right place.

### **The Religious School**

There is no question that the school, at that time called "The Religious School," of Beth Am Israel was unique. For Rabbi Goodblatt, it was his top priority. Most children entered first grade of Hebrew school when they were in 4th grade in public school. I do not recall anyone who attended the Beth Jacob Day School, the only day school in Philadelphia at that time. Previous to entering Hebrew school, one attended Sunday school. However, it was not called Sunday school at Beth Am, but Pre-Hebrew. To accommodate the large number of students, Sunday classes were held in two shifts -- 9:45 to 11:15 AM and 11:30 AM to 1:00 PM. When an assembly took place, besides special occasions there was usually one a month, it was held from 11:00 to 11:30. This minimized the amount of "lost time" from classroom instruction. Rabbi Goodblatt was the head of the school, but there was a principal -- in my day Harry L. Rosen, whom Edward S. Kornblatt succeeded. There was also a separate position of school administrator -- those whom I remember were Barney Glantz and Jonas Witman. Since I was a student, I do not know how the school was administered and what the division of responsibilities was between administrator, principal and rabbi. I do remember Rabbi Goodblatt telling me some years later that he was always in the school building when class was in session, except if he were out of town

or on other major congregational business. He emphasized to me the importance he felt for the rabbi to be present in the school even if he were not teaching. He would often be in the halls, smiling and greeting the children. He made it a point to try to know each child's name and he visited every class for a minute or two to greet the students. This was also an opportunity to assess the instructional climate in the school. In the pre-Hebrew program, there were clubs in addition to classes that met either during the first or second session. I recall the Arts & Crafts Club in 1950. Regular Hebrew school extended over a period of four years, after which there were two years of Hebrew High. Students in the Hebrew High had class both sessions on Sunday as well as two afternoons a week and were considered or considered themselves the elite. One Sunday session was devoted to regular Hebrew instruction in texts; the other session focused on history and current events. Often we would run to a corner grocery to grab a bagel during the 15 minute 'break' between sessions.

One of the special Beth Am features was the Consecration service. The students who entered first grade, interestingly the class years were never designated by their Hebrew names such as *kitah alef*, *bet* or *gimmel*, were honored at a special assembly held in the synagogue building. If an event took place in the synagogue and not in the Cutler Auditorium that was in the school building, you knew it was something very special. Parents and family were invited. The new students, dressed in their finest clothing, assembled on the pulpit. In a somewhat similar pattern to Simhat Torah, the Torah was taken from the ark and the section containing the Sh'ma was read. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the chairman of the School Committee, Mr. Sidney Lichtenstein, gave each entering student a new shining penny in a special envelope. He served in this position for many years and he, too, was often seen in the halls of the school. The metaphor was that just as the penny would increase in value if properly invested, our Hebrew education was a very serious investment and we would begin to see the first fruits of it upon graduating from Hebrew High School. We were told that when we graduated, we could trade in this penny for a silver dollar. Many of us did. We were also permitted to keep the penny and I still have both.

Among the special programs was an annual Model Seder. Hebrew High students played the role of the parents and the child who asked the Four Questions was from the entering class. My sister was given that part her first year of Hebrew School in 1949/1950 and was presented with a Haggadah. I do not recall how many students were on the stage or how they were chosen.



**The Former School Building, October 1998**

The school's principal for many years was Harry L. Rosen. He was an attorney and taught every day from 4 to 6 as well as on Sunday. He was the teacher of the two Hebrew High School classes. Each day we entered his class there would be a quotation in Hebrew from Jewish sources on the board. We were required to copy it down in a special hardcover notebook kept for this purpose and expected to learn the quote by heart. I still remember quite a few of the verses and think of him when I come across them in the prayerbook, the book of Psalms or the Mishnah. Mr. Rosen's wife, Sara, was the principal of the Har Zion nursery school. They lived at 5410 Lebanon Avenue in Wynnefield. The Rosens occasionally hosted gatherings of the Hebrew High School students in their home and would invite students along with their families for Shabbat dinner. I remember being surprised when we had a dairy Friday night Shabbat meal at their house. That was the first time I ever had a dairy meal for Shabbat. Before class, Mr.

Rosen could be seen smoking a pipe with a cigar in the bowl of the pipe. The method of instruction was *Ivrit b'Ivrit* -- Hebrew to Hebrew. We used the Pollack editions of the books of the Bible. Throughout the time I was a student in the school, only the Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew was used, even though by that time the other Hebrew schools of the Conservative movement used the Sefardi pronunciation. Interestingly for a Hebrew school, a number of the songs that we sang at assemblies were in English; that is, English translations of Hebrew or Yiddish holiday songs. I do not recall ever being taught a song in Yiddish except in Mr. Rosen's class, certainly not in the assembly of the entire school. When assemblies were held on weekdays, they would start at 5:30 PM and would end with dismissal to our homes.

When there were public school holidays such as Christmas vacation, Armistice Day (now Veteran's Day), Lincoln and Washington's Birthday (then separate days), Hebrew School classes were not canceled. If you attended class on Monday and Wednesday and one of those days coincided with a public school holiday, your Hebrew School class would meet from 10 AM to noon instead of from 4 PM to 6 PM. Nobody that I recall objected and I do not recall that attendance was any lower. The idea, well accepted by all involved as students or faculty at Beth Am at that time, was that the school came first.

Mrs. Elsie Chomsky, the well-known educator and in later years one of my teachers at Gratz College, would visit and observe classes at Beth Am on a regular basis. We were told to welcome "*Geveret Chomsky*" and some of our teachers led us to believe that she was there to compare the Beth Am students to students of other Hebrew Schools in the city. Little did we know that the real purpose of her visits was to evaluate the teacher. The quality of Beth Am's school was well known. Families affiliated with other synagogues in the area who wanted their children to have a more intensive Hebrew education enrolled them in Beth Am's Hebrew High. Examples that come to mind are the Metzgers (Larry) from the Yeadon Jewish Community Center and the Berkowitzes (Felice) from Lenas Hazedek. There may have been others.

Another feature at Beth Am was that its upper class students, those in Hebrew High, were utilized to help out in the school. If

children needed some extra help, tutoring was available for a modest fee from students of the upper classes. These tutors also provided a role model for the younger students. There was tremendous peer and synagogue pressure on those who completed the Hebrew High School program to continue studies at Gratz College. Beth Am students would go to Gratz during the year to take what we called "Gratz tests." Why they were not administered at Beth Am I don't know, but the trip to Gratz, then located at Broad and Mt. Vernon in the Rodeph Shalom complex, was awesome. I recall that the Gratz students would invite the Beth Am students to attend their annual play in the late spring. Since there were always Beth Am graduates involved at Gratz, many of us would attend, even though the Hebrew plays would be beyond our comprehension. When I graduated Hebrew High School in 1958, the vast majority of the students did enroll at Gratz College. We were so numerous; we practically constituted an entire class. There was attrition as time went on, but if a survey were taken, I am confident that it would show a very high percentage of Beth Am graduates studied at Gratz College. A number of generous congregants provided scholarships, so no Beth Am student would ever have to be concerned about the cost of tuition, the purchase of texts or safe transportation to and from classes at Gratz College.

The closing assembly of Hebrew School was also the date of graduation from Hebrew High School. The program was held in the synagogue in place of the regular Sunday sessions. As was typical of Beth Am, attendance was taken. It was also the time that students were recognized for their special contribution to the congregation. Books were awarded to those who read Torah during the year and there were other prizes for excellence in studies. There was never any expectation on the part of those who read Torah, sounded the shofar, helped make up the minyan or filled in where needed for remuneration. Involved students were more than eager to help where needed and were happy to be called upon. This may sound like an idealization of what was the reality, but it was certainly true of my contemporaries. There were always a few students who had perfect attendance records -- either in Hebrew School or in Junior Congregation. A major feature of the graduation program would be Sidney Lichtenstein presenting each graduate with a silver dollar in exchange for the new

penny that was received at Consecration. Diplomas were presented and a reception was held sponsored by the parents of the graduates and the synagogue. A formal picture, similar to that for Confirmation, was also taken, however, caps and gowns were not worn.

Hebrew School did not meet during the summer and I did not attend a Hebrew summer camp like Massad or Ramah. Through the urging of Mr. Rosen, a Hebrew tutor was engaged for me at our summer home in Atlantic City for the duration of the vacation. We met at least twice a week. The feeling was that it would be a shame to let the summer go by without working on Hebrew. I do not know if other students had to endure the same regimen but there were no complaints on my part. Even if I did object it would not have helped.

Edward Kornblatt, who succeeded Harry Rosen as principal, approached the graduates who were attending Gratz to teach and to assume other positions at Beth Am. I served as librarian from 1958 to 1962. Other teachers in this category were Judith Frank Wohlberg, Edward Weiss and the late Roberta Lubline Lusen. Some of the regular staff teachers were also products of Beth Am. Harriet Hoffman comes to mind. In a conversation with her some years ago she mentioned that when Mr. Rosen passed away, Rabbi Larry Geiger, also a Beth Am graduate, officiated at the funeral of our former teacher and principal. In attendance were many of his former students, the products of Beth Am.

My teachers at Beth Am's school were Sarah S. Brown, for first grade. A mature woman, her father was a fellow Litvak friend of my grandfather's and I would often be asked about him. After we learned the Hebrew alphabet, we would have 'speed tests' in the prayerbook. On one wall was a chart with each pupil's name. For each prayer recited properly there would be a gold star pasted next to the name. Some students had many stars and others very few. We would practice intensively and if you made a mistake in a word, your turn was up. The following year I had a Mr. Alten. From what I remember, he had fought in Israel's War of Independence. For the third and fourth grades, I had the same teacher, Mr. Bertram Hurwitz. He taught math at John Bartram High School and lived in Wynnefield. A very involved Jew and concerned teacher, he would invite the class and parents to his house to conduct our own 'class model

seder.' He felt that there was too little individual involvement in the large school Model Seder. He had a number of children who often came to class with him on Sunday mornings. One of his daughters married a Conservative rabbi and his son Victor is a professor of Biblical studies at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva.

### **The Junior Congregation**

Beth Am was famous for its Junior Congregation. I began to attend regularly in the 1940s, before the school building was constructed. If I remember correctly, Ivan Caine, also ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary and later rabbi at Society Hill Synagogue, was the president of group at that time. This Beth Am institution was so renowned that Rabbi Goodblatt mentioned to me that he would be invited to the Jewish Theological Seminary to lecture to the senior students in the Practical Theology class on role of the Junior Congregation. The Junior Congregation of Beth Am Israel had a national reputation. It is hard to figure out where to begin to give the feeling one had growing up in the "JC." I know that there was an advisor; for some years, it was Edward Kornblatt. There was membership that was separate from the Hebrew School. In the early 50s, it was 50 cents a child. There were even membership cards. You did not have to be a student in the Hebrew School to attend. Often there were rather young children who came with their older siblings and outside guests. I do not think that anybody brought his or her non-Jewish neighbors or classmates.

The Junior Congregation was very highly organized. There were officers who were elected annually by the membership as a whole. Children were divided, according to age, into small groups called 'units.' There were some 10-12 children per unit and each unit was assigned a number. There was a 'unit leader' who was post Bar or Bat Mitzvah. There was also a position called 'ulit' meaning 'unit leader in training.' Thus, there were always young people being trained to take positions of leadership in the future. Each child sat with his or her unit. There was a 3" by 5" card for each member of the unit and the unit leader would keep track of who was there. If someone were absent, the phone in his or her house would ring that afternoon, even though

it was Shabbat. It would be the unit leader or the 'ulit' wanting to know why that particular child was absent. If there were no answer, they would keep trying. There were excused and unexcused absences. I recall one of the area dentists complaining that children would not let their parents make appointments for them on Saturday morning during Junior Congregation time. A doctor's visit was excused, but an appointment with the dentist was not. On Sunday mornings, the Hebrew teacher would also take Junior Congregation attendance. Another position was 'book boy.' Upon entering the Lish Auditorium, each child was given a Junior Congregation Prayerbook. These boys, most were a year or two before Bar Mitzvah, had the responsibility of taking the prayerbooks from their shelves, distributing them to each child who entered, and after services, collecting them and putting them back where they belonged. Services started at 10:00 A.M. On those Sabbaths where there would be a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the Junior Congregation would join the adult service for Musaf. This was at 11:15 and just after the rabbi's sermon. We would march in very orderly fashion, youngest unit to the oldest, up the steps leading to the foyer of the sanctuary. We would enter on the right side and fill the seats. The first 10 rows were always reserved for the Junior Congregation. Difficulties were created when there were double Bar Mitzvahs in the 1950s. Often there would be more than 200 children in attendance and they would fill every available seat, sometimes even moving to the balcony. The director and officers of the Junior Congregation would walk in the outer aisle to maintain order. They would also encourage participation. Anyone who was a guest at Beth Am during those years could not help but be impressed by the large number of children. We would participate in the Musaf service, singing along with the cantor the prayers that most of us knew by heart. At the end of the service, all the children would march onto the pulpit one by one. Rabbi Goodblatt stood at his lectern and wished each child a 'Gut Shabbes/Shabbat Shalom.' This took some time, and those waiting for the rabbi at the Kiddush would sometimes become impatient. However, everyone knew that he was busy greeting the children and accepted it as a given. In place of the custom of throwing candy at the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, a different practice was followed at Beth Am. The family of the Bar or Bat

Mitzvah provided each member of the Junior Congregation with a candy Bar. After greeting the rabbi, you left the sanctuary using the steps that led to 58th Street. Before leaving the synagogue, you would be given a Hershey bar, Goldenberg peanut chew or some other similar candy bar. In later years when the merchants on 58th Street complained of the litter, a basket was placed at the exit where the children were required to deposit the candy bar wrappers.

On those very rare Sabbaths where there was not a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, Rabbi Goodblatt would visit during the Torah reading at the adult service, and tell a story to the Junior Congregation. This was always considered a very special treat.

The Torah was read at Junior Congregation. Boys who were Bar Mitzvah and who had read from the Torah at their Bar Mitzvah would often read at Junior Congregation. Reading the Torah at one's Bar Mitzvah was considered a difficult challenge and a special privilege. This will be covered in more detail in the section on Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

There were some Junior Congregation special events during the year. After Pesach, there was a competition between the members. As we sat in two large groups with an aisle between the two, it was easy to divide the Junior Congregation into two competing teams - the Blue team and the White team. The annual "Blue and White Days" had arrived. For the next month or so, there would be stiff competition between the two groups of the Junior Congregation. Points would be awarded for each child present and for the levels of participation. Points were deducted for noise or unruly behavior. Sometimes there were quizzes during services and points would be awarded for correct answers. Points were also awarded to the unit that had the highest level of participation that particular Shabbat. I do not recall what the members of the winning team received, but it was a very exciting time.

There was also a "date dance" in the late spring. One must remember that Junior Congregation members were children in elementary school. To be asked to the "date dance" was especially important. Girls were presented with corsages by their dates. Neighbors on our block would tell us how well we looked as we walked with our dates to the dance. I assume that this developed as a

parallel to the annual Confirmation Formal sponsored by the Bureau of Jewish Education for all the confirmands of the Philadelphia Conservative synagogues.

The Shabbat before Mother's Day was also important. Mothers who attend Junior Congregation as their child's guest would be presented with a flower.

There were also special events connected with the holidays. Since the Lish Auditorium, the regular meeting place for the Junior Congregation, was used on the High Holidays for the overflow service, for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur all activity was transferred to the Cutler Auditorium in the School Building. This also added to the festivity and solemnity of the days. On Sukkot, the Junior Congregation joined the adults for the Hoshanot, the procession carrying the Lulav and Etrog. In the 40s and 50s, the synagogue would purchase 3 or 4 sets of the Lulav and etrog; they were for the rabbi, cantor, and one or two of the senior gentlemen. However, the Lulavim were saved from year to year. Over time, there were a large number of dried Lulavim. On the first day of Sukkot, they would be distributed to the children who would march together with the adults in the procession. Although the Lulav was not kosher, as it was dried out, it was very exciting to be in the procession. On the second day of Sukkot, those who did not get a chance the first day would have their turn to join the procession. Starting in the late 1950s and by the early 1960s there were individual congregants who purchased Lulavim for their personal use. After services, there would be a Kiddush in the synagogue Sukkah "for the adults only." Even though the Sukkah in the schoolyard was large, there was not enough room to hold both the adults and the Junior Congregation children on the first two days of Sukkot. To compensate for this, during regular Hebrew School sessions the classes would come to the Sukkah individually. I remember receiving a hallah roll with raisins, a treat provided by the Sisterhood, and we would recite both the motzi and the blessing for eating in the Sukkah. Some years, Rabbi Goodblatt would speak to us and there were always women from the Sisterhood on hand.

Simhat Torah was also very distinctive. At night, there were separate services at different times for the adults and for the children. The children would participate in

each of the seven Hakafot waving the paper flags distributed by the synagogue. Upon leaving the synagogue at the end of services, red apples were distributed at the exit by the Sisterhood School Committee. This was in commemoration of the custom of placing the apple in the top of the stick of the flag. On Simhat Torah day, the children joined the adults before the Torah reading. The Torah would be read in two places: on the pulpit, by Dr. Solomon Grayzel the editor of the Jewish Publication Society and a close friend of Rabbi Goodblatt, and in the rabbi's study by post-Bar Mitzvah boys. Those boys who were already Bar Mitzvah would all have aliyot. They would be called three at a time until all had a chance to recite the blessings. For "Kol Ha'ni'arim" (when all the children were called up to the Torah) there was organized pandemonium. Four large woolen Talitot were tied together on bamboo poles to form an outsized Huppah that was held over the heads of the children. In my years there was never enough space for all the children to be on the pulpit at once, so there were two "Kol Ha'ni'arim" aliyot.

I do not recall any Jewish children ever attending classes at the elementary school on any of the Jewish holidays. If they would have, they would have been ostracized. At the Longstreth School, the few non-Jewish children who were in attendance on the Jewish holidays did not have regular classes, as at least 3/4 of the students were absent. Special mimeographed notes would be distributed on the second day of Yom Tov to the children bearing the signature of Rabbi Goodblatt. It stated that the bearer of the note was not in school because of a Jewish religious holiday and had attended synagogue services. These official excuse notes were accepted as though one's parents wrote them. Sometimes, if Junior Congregation services concluded before the elementary school would be dismissed for lunch, we would walk by the school, dressed up in our suits and ties, showing off, proud that we did not have to go to school that day.

At the end of the year, there was an annual Junior Congregation play. It was always on a Jewish theme and one of the acts was presented in Hebrew. I think that most of the plays were written by Edward Kornblatt, whose creativity was unmatched and greatly appreciated by all. One year the theme was the history of the synagogue. This was probably in 1957, the 30th anniversary of the

Congregation. Tickets would be sold and the performance would be packed.

### **Bar and Bat Mitzvah**

Very often in the early 1950s, there would be a double Bar Mitzvah on Shabbat. Synagogue policy was that arrangements for the date were allowed to be made only after the potential Bar/Bat Mitzvah reached their 12th birthday. There were no exceptions to this rule and because of the large number of children for a few years; the double Bar Mitzvah was almost the norm. I recall that when I went with my parents to the office to set the date for my Bar Mitzvah, the only dates available in October, the month I was born, would entail a double Bar Mitzvah. For whatever reason, I refused to have a double Bar Mitzvah and had to wait a month after my 13th birthday to be called to the Torah. For a large number of the youngsters, having a double Bar Mitzvah was just perfect. You only had to learn half of what the other students needed to learn. For others, it was something to be avoided at all costs.

From what I recall Bat Mitzvah was introduced in the late 1940s. Girls were taught to chant the Haftarah and recited the blessings over the Haftarah. Their father received the Maftir aliyah to the Torah. Girls also wore either a white or powder blue academic robe during the service. I don't remember which.

Most Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrants also participated in the late Friday night service. For this the Cantor prepared them. In the 1950s, the Cantor was Samuel Appel who lived in Yeadon and subsequently served in this capacity at the Yeadon Jewish Community Center Beth Tefilah and at Temple Israel in Upper Darby. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah would lead, along with the cantor, choir and congregation three stanzas of *Lekha Dodi*, chant Kiddush and possibly lead in *Yah Ribon* or *Tzur Mishelo* at the end of the service. On Shabbat morning, the pattern was rigidly set. The youngster recited the Haftarah, for some reason it was always abbreviated. Some boys, but never girls, were also trained to read the Torah portion. The school principal, Harry L. Rosen, taught the Torah Trupp (cantillation). Until the late 1940s or early 1950s, the Shamash of the synagogue was the usual Torah reader. It was suggested that some qualified

youngsters could be trained to learn to read the Torah; however, it was felt that it would not be possible for them to learn the entire portion. Usually, the first two aliyot were divided up into 6 parts and the 7th was read from the end of the weekly portion. Some boys learned only the Maftir portion at the end while others were trained to read the "full" abbreviated portion. These youngsters became the future Torah readers of the congregation. Towards the end of the Hebrew School year, Mr. Rosen would approach a few of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah 'crop' of that year and invite them to participate in the High Holiday services. The boys were given the Torah Readings and the girls were assigned the Haftarot. I do not know how the selection was made. The Rosh Hashanah after my Bar Mitzvah (5716/1955) I read Torah the first day of Rosh Hashanah at the main service. Although we wore white robes, I recall insisting that my parents buy me a new suit for the occasion. The following year, the students who had been at the main service the previous year, would recite the same sections at the overflow service in the Lish Auditorium; on the third year they would do the same at Junior Congregation and at the Youth Service. Post Bar Mitzvah boys were also trained to blow the shofar. For a number of years Barry Scheer did so. His predecessor was Jay Friedman. An example which showed the effectiveness of this training was related by Rabbi Goodblatt to the congregation one Yom Kippur. He had received a letter from a chaplain complimenting him in that a newly inducted soldier who was trained at Beth Am was able to sound the shofar and read the Rosh Hashanah Torah portion at services on the army base. The chaplain was Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins and the soldier was Jay Friedman.

The school had a person who was assigned to teach Bar/Bat Mitzvah children their Haftarot. If you attended Hebrew School on Monday and Wednesday, you would be assigned either Tuesday or Thursday for your Bar/Bat Mitzvah lessons. Mr. Rosen, the principal, also on occasion, was engaged to instruct the upcoming Bar Mitzvah. My father made such an arrangement for me. I would meet with him after classes on Sunday morning. Over the summer, we would meet every Monday morning for a lesson. As my family spent the summer in Atlantic City, I would return to Philadelphia with my father on Sunday night, have a lesson with Mr. Rosen Monday morning in the Hebrew School building, ride with him on the #13

trolley to Center City. During the ride, he would discuss various topics relating to Judaism and I greatly benefited from these impromptu conversations. He would go to his office and I would return to the seashore.

A number of those who were Bar Mitzvah quit attending Hebrew School right after the 'event.' Rabbi Goodblatt would often comment that in contrast to the boys, none of the girls ever 'quit' after Bat Mitzvah. With a few exceptions, I do not know how many of the boys who lived on our block, 5600 Beaumont Ave., continued their Hebrew education after Bar Mitzvah. The question, "When are you going to quit?" was one of the most frequently asked of the Bar Mitzvah boys. Rabbi Goodblatt fought a never-ending battle against this phenomenon. I remember hearing from some of the 'older' boys on our block that the Rabbi would call them in to meet with him before their Bar Mitzvah and try to persuade them to continue their Hebrew education. Whether or not it was true, one of the boys reported that the Rabbi had referred to the large number of 'drop outs' from our block as the 'Beaumont Avenue bums.' When a friend's mother who lived across the street asked me, "When are you going to quit?" I responded to her amazement, "Never!" She told me that it was a shame that my Bar Mitzvah was scheduled for November, since school tuition and synagogue membership fees had to be paid in full by then. Since my parents had already laid out all that money, she could understand that they would not let me quit since they would loose out on their 'investment.' It was so hard for some to believe that young people were enthusiastic about furthering their Jewish education.

### **Confirmation**

After Bar or Bat Mitzvah, some students did not continue on the Hebrew track and opted for Confirmation class. From some of the photographs taken in the early days of the Congregation, it appears that Confirmation was the ceremony for girls that was intended to take the place of Bar Mitzvah. Confirmation students met twice weekly but had Sundays free. Rabbi Goodblatt was one of the Confirmation teachers; he did not teach in the Hebrew High. I remember that Mrs. Lena Lang, the widow of Rabbi Leon Lang of Beth El at 58th & Walnut Streets, was also one of the

teachers. Since I was not in the Confirmation track, I do not recall the names of the other teachers. There was also a track called Modified Hebrew for those who did not intend to go on to Gratz College, but it met three times a week.

As Belle Rose wrote in her history of the Congregation, Confirmation was a very big event. Since the synagogue was so crowded on the first day of Shavuot for 'The Main Event,' special tickets were issued to enable the bearer to enter. The time of the regular Yom Tov service was moved up to be completed in time for 'The Main Event.' In later years, I remember leaving after the completion of services and not remaining for the Confirmation ceremony. Others who came just in time for Confirmation gladly took our seats. Arrangements were made with the Police Department and they posted temporary 'No Parking' signs on the entire 5700 block of Warrington Avenue to enable all who came for the Confirmation ceremony to have a place to park.

In the winter, there was a Confirmation Class Friday night. It began with a Shabbat dinner in the Cutler Auditorium followed by services in the synagogue. The members of the class marched in together down the center aisle for the Late Friday Night service. The students participated in a number of ways -- *Lekha Dodi*, Kiddush, and responsive readings. Unlike the Confirmation service, not all the students had assigned parts. I rushed through the part that I was given and was subsequently warned that unless words were clearly enunciated, it would be very difficult to find a part for me in the "real service." Each year a picture was taken of the Confirmands and was hung in the halls of the school building in chronological order.

For the Confirmation ceremony itself, girls wore white robes and boys black robes. At precisely 10:00 (or was it 10:30 AM?) on the first day of Shavuot with the organ on high volume, the choir singing Beethoven's rendition of Psalm 19, the members of the Confirmation class entered the sanctuary, proceeded down the center aisle, one at a time in perfect timing, and occupied their assigned places on the pulpit. About thirty-five people could fit onto the pulpit at one time and in some years the class would come up to the pulpit in two shifts. There was a special Confirmation program director and we rehearsed over and over again. The rehearsals were in

the time slot of the regular Confirmation class sessions. Since the Hebrew High school and the Confirmation class met on alternate days, it meant that those being Confirmed through the Hebrew High school track were in class twice a week and rehearsed twice a week. During those weeks, Friday was our only day not in the synagogue. As Shavuot comes in late May or early June, it was usually hot and the service was long. Yet, it does not seem that people complained. In the early 1950s, a cantata was introduced, in addition to the many speeches. In this way, everyone would have more than just a few lines to say. There were some families who had large receptions for their children either in their homes or at catering halls. For some of the girls who were not Bat Mitzvah, the Confirmation party was the substitute. There was a Confirmation formal dance that was sponsored by all the Conservative synagogues in the Philadelphia area at one of 'better' hotels in center city. For many, it was more important than their high school proms.

A highlight of the Confirmation year was the trip to New York. Leaving early on a Sunday morning, the first stop was the Jewish Theological Seminary of America at 3080 Broadway in New York's Morningside Heights. It was Rabbi Goodblatt's alma mater, Class of 1927, and the bastion of the Conservative movement. In our year, 1958, Maurice Corson greeted us. He was a Beth Am "product" studying for the rabbinate. Since Beth Am had the distinction of sending a fair number of students on to the rabbinate, being greeted and shown around by 'one of our own' made a very big impression on most of us. From the Seminary, it was on to the Jewish Museum on Fifth Avenue. The last stop on the trip was the Lower East Side. In my year, we had dinner at Ratner's Dairy Restaurant. I do not recall any complaints about the food, but all the courses arrived at the same time. The group also had time to walk around the neighborhood with comments from Rabbi Goodblatt as our tour guide. The trip was just before Pesach and was a very exciting event. The Goodblatts would invite the Confirmation class students to their house the evening before Pesach to participate in the "Search for the Hametz." It was assumed, I am sure correctly, that few if any of the students participated in a search for the Hametz ceremony in their own homes. This was a way to bring to life an important custom

that had been discarded by most of the congregants.

### **LTF**

These letters stood for Leaders Training Fellowship. This was an organization for High School age teenagers that was sponsored by the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary. One of the basic requirements for belonging to this group was that each member was required to engage in Jewish study for at least six hours a week. There was also a pre-LTF group that focused on Junior High School age youth. A number of synagogues had their own groups. Beth Am's group was also part of the only sub-region, the West Philadelphia Region of LTF. This group met on Shabbat afternoons at one of the three Conservative synagogues in the area -- West Philadelphia Jewish Community Center, Beth El or Beth Am. One Sunday night a month there would be a citywide meeting of all the groups at one of the synagogues. Beth Am had a fairly active, but small, LTF group. On Shabbat afternoons, we often had a speaker, discussed issues of the times and studied together. I was involved between 1958-1964. Beth Am once hosted a get together at the synagogue after a citywide Saturday night roller skating party at the Elmwood Skating Rink. That rink was located in a tough white neighborhood; it must have been some surprise to the 'regulars' at that rink to have over 100 Jewish kids as patrons. Its members, some of whom were Margie Steiner, Edward Weiss, Judy Frank Wohlberg, and I, ran the LTF group. Many of the LTF'ers also attended Camp Ramah in the Poconos. This organization, which no longer exists, did achieve its stated purpose, producing Jewish leaders for the next generation.

### **Sisterhood**

Undoubtedly, the most important synagogue organization was the Sisterhood. These women were ubiquitous. Every school function had sisterhood women helping. They provided treats to eat in the Sukkah, apples on Simhat Torah, dreidels on Hanukkah and bokser on Tu Bishvat. The sisterhood gift shop supplied all kinds of items. There was also a donor shop where women sold items to make their

quota for their donations to the congregation. This was located on the second floor of Bronstein Hall. There would be special hours before Mother's Day for children who might want to purchase a gift. There was a gift from sisterhood at every occasion: Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Hebrew School graduation, Confirmation and the list could go on and on. There were sisterhood liaisons to each class in the school. The Oneg Shabbat on Friday night was sisterhood sponsored, as were the flowers on the pulpit. In my experience in the rabbinate and in conversations with colleagues, I do not recall a sisterhood as active as Beth Am's. It probably was a sign of the times as very few women worked outside of their homes. There was an active sisterhood study group. Beth Am's sisterhood was a deeply involved member of the Philadelphia Branch of Women's League (now Women's League for Conservative Judaism). Among the presidents in my day were Anita Miller, Racine Cutler and Sylvia Gurwood. Other active women were Anne Greene, whose son Sidney was ordained by Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan Yeshiva (Yeshiva University) and Sylvia Chesick, who also served as a sisterhood president. Again, there were many others.

### **The Chapel**

As mentioned above, at some point in the mid to late 1940s the Chapel was renovated and named in memory of Harold M. Brody who lost his life during World War II. There was a morning minyan at 7:00 A.M., as well as Shabbat Minha (afternoon) service held in the Chapel. I do not recall whether there was a weekday Minha or Ma'ariv (evening) service. On Shabbat morning the Youth Group, which included those post Bar/Bat Mitzvah age youngsters not involved in Junior Congregation, used the Chapel for services. The Chapel seated about 40 people and had a separate gas-heating radiator. It also had an old style window air conditioner. Shabbat services were also held there during the summer when many congregants were away "at the shore" or at other vacation spots. To enter the Chapel one used the 58th Street door. Since it would create a security problem if left unattended and it had to be left unlocked to let worshippers in for services, a buzzer sounded every time the door was opened. One could see that door from the Chapel and would

know who entered. It worked fine throughout the week but created a problem for some younger members who were more fastidious of their observance of Shabbat. They would set off the buzzer if they came to services; something not permitted to be done on the Sabbath according to Jewish law.

There was also a Sunday Shaharit (morning) service at a later time. Because of a time conflict with the start of Hebrew School, I rarely attended that service. There were periodic breakfasts held after the Sunday morning service with guest speakers. They might have been monthly and were sponsored by the Men's Club (later known as the Brotherhood). The two people who coordinated the Chapel in the late 1950s and 1960s were two most dedicated brothers, Jules and Percy Savitz. They were both pharmacists and partners in a drug store on the northeast corner of 58th and Woodland Avenue, where they lived. They were always there with a most cheerful countenance. If there were a Sunday breakfast, Percy would be in charge. He had three sons; the youngest son Barry attended Hebrew School shortly after I completed my studies. Selig, who was older than we were, was a Hebrew educator in the Reform movement. During 1959 and 1960, when I was in 11th & 12th grade at Yeadon High School and already a student at Gratz College, the Savitzes mentioned that they could use some extra daveners at to bolster the morning minyan. Four of us became regulars -- Barry Scheer, Edward Weiss, Howard (his family name escapes me) and I. Since I had a driver's license, after the minyan I would drive them to John Bartram High School and be home in time to go to school. Jules Savitz, Percy's older brother, was the weekday chapel coordinator. He would bring milkshakes for us from the fountain of their drug store each morning. While the older men enjoyed their schnapps, herring and kichel, we polished off our milkshakes. The Savitz brothers were also on the Board of the synagogue. They were typical of the dedicated membership of Beth Am. The synagogue was not just a synagogue. It was like a family member and people derived great pleasure in doing whatever they could for it. Two additional people involved with the chapel services for many years to the mid 1950s were the brothers Morris and Dr. Joseph Schwartz. They were long time residents of the neighborhood, never married and lived together with their single sister on Warrington Avenue.

Dr. Joseph Schwartz was a dentist and he passed away much earlier.

#### **Executive Director - Sadie Moses**

Although this title did not officially exist at Beth Am, the congregation enjoyed the services of one of the most skilled, devoted and efficient executive directors of any congregation anywhere. This was Sadie Moses. Belle Rose dedicated her history of Beth Am to her memory, a very appropriate tribute. Sadie's parents had been members of Beth Am in the early days. Some youngsters even referred to the synagogue as "Aunt Sadie's Shul." The story is told that there were occasions when she paid some of the utility bills out of her own pocket so as not to incur late payment penalties. In the pre-computer days, Sadie knew everything. She was always in the office and always made sure that everything having to do with the synagogue was "just so." I do not know how easy it was working under her direction as the other office staff did change, but if Sadie were in charge of something, you knew that it would be more than perfect. She never liked to be singled out for praise and tried very hard to remain in the background. One year, much to her chagrin and against her vehement opposition, the Board of Directors unanimously voted to honor her at the synagogue's annual dinner. It was only a small token of appreciation for the woman held in esteem by all who ever had anything to do with Beth Am. Sadie insisted on being called by her first name even by the school children, something unheard of in those years. Rarely would she let you do anything for her, but she was always ready to help others. She would also present all new brides to whose weddings she was invited a set of brass candlesticks for Shabbat. After Rabbi Goodblatt, Sadie Moses was the dominant personality of Beth Am in my day. Also working in the synagogue office in the 1950s was Esther Gaffin.

#### **The Synagogue Board and Officers**

The men who served as president that I remember were Lou Marion, Iz Gayer, Harry Geiger, Jack Pearson, Marvin Kaufman, Edwin Gilberg and Edward Barol. Dr. James Goldfield, a dentist who was the first president, from 1927 to 1937, was honorary

president. Beth Am had a very active board of directors. A number of the men who became involved with the synagogue interested their friends in the congregation and some eventually served on the board. These new members, none of who were from the neighborhood, brought a wider scope to the congregation. There was a good camaraderie on the board and the synagogue continued to be a center of activity despite the radical racial changes in the area in the late 50s and early 60s. Other very active people on the board deserve special recognition. Leonard Cutler grew up in the congregation. He was the third generation of his family to be active in all aspects of the synagogue. Beth Am had a very elaborate Torah crown, which was donated by his grandparents in the early days of the congregation. Others, some of whom are still involved with the congregation, were Dave Berliner, Ed Caine, whose son Ivan was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, Murray Kaneff, Irwin [Irv] Frank, whose daughter Judith is married to Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Al Miller, Alvin Eckell, Morris Hoffman, whose daughter Harriet taught for many years in the school and was very active in the Gratz College Alumni Association and Paul Feldman. Isadore Lipschutz, Frank Rosen, Max Gilberg and Julius Gross were among the "senior statesmen" of Beth Am. A number of younger people, among them Norman Berkinsky, Larry Horn and Albert Lusen, were also brought in to serve on the board. Some, I understand, were also involved in the transition of the synagogue from Southwest Philadelphia to Narberth.

I would be remiss in not relating the role my late father, Martin Bronstein, played in the synagogue for nearly three decades. Sometime in the early 1950s, he assumed a more active role in the congregation. Iz Gayer, whom he had known when they were growing up, had urged him to "come around more frequently." My father, with his business organization skills, found a ready niche. Known as Marty to all, he was responsible for some innovations in the running of the synagogue. For a number of years he served as membership chairman. He was against providing any synagogue services to non-members who lived in the neighborhood. He felt that the synagogue had something to offer the Jews in the neighborhood on many different levels. He strongly believed that all the Jews who lived in the area and wanted to avail themselves of

its benefits should belong to the synagogue. From his 'business' standpoint, the synagogue had clients who should be served. It had no obligation to non-clients who did not help pay the bills. Among the advantages available 'to members only' were the services of Rabbi Goodblatt, attending the religious school, having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in the synagogue. He also tried to end the tendency of families dropping their memberships once their last child was Bar or Bat Mitzvah. His hard line standpoint was resented by a number of people both in and out of the synagogue who disagreed with his "the synagogue services are for members only" policy. Given the liberal membership policy with special arrangements made in utmost confidentiality for those whose finances might have made membership an unaffordable expense, he believed that the membership committee had eliminated the excuse, "I can't afford to belong to Beth Am." There were different priced memberships based on the location of the seats in the synagogue for the High Holidays. My father saw to it that the seats of those who paid reduced membership fees were randomly distributed throughout the synagogue. Your neighbor in the most expensive seat section could very well be someone paying a nominal membership. He instituted the membership directory that came out every two or three years. In it, all members were listed along with their occupation. It provided free advertising for the congregants. There were notices on the pages urging fellow synagogue members to patronize each other. My father followed his own guidelines scrupulously. When he needed a house painter, he called one listed in the directory. He then persuaded him to raise his membership category and increase his annual contribution to the synagogue. When he discovered that the gas station owner where he bought gas for years did not belong to the synagogue and lived in the neighborhood, he tried to sign him up as a member. The owner told him that he did not need the synagogue and refused to join. As a result, my father stopped patronizing that gas station. The membership directory did a great deal to keep Beth Am members in contact with each other as they moved from the immediate synagogue area.

Another change my father instituted was the "Silent Kol Nidre Appeal." Many people were disturbed by the auction-like atmosphere on Kol Nidre night when people would call out their pledges to the synagogue. As this was a

major fund raising 'event,' it could not be eliminated. My father devised the "Silent Kol Nidre Appeal." One summer, letters were sent to the membership asking them if they were also disturbed by what had been the traditional Kol Nidre Appeal. If they were, they could put an end to it by making their pledge before Yom Kippur. Depending on the response, the synagogue hoped to be able to eliminate the oral pledges on Kol Nidre night that interfered with the sanctity of the service. The office then sent out mailings listing the names of those congregants who had voted their confidence in the new system by making a pre-Kol Nidre pledge. Of course, no sum was listed next to the name. It was a success and continued for years. My father did not like to be in the limelight and shied away from public speaking. For many years, he chaired the annual campaign for the Jewish Theological Seminary, the institution where I was ordained in 1970. There would be annual breakfasts to kick off the campaigns. In March 1967, I was asked by the Seminary to give the address at the breakfast at which my father was honored. He also chaired the annual dinner of the congregation for a number of years. This was also a fund raising event, usually held in one of the hotels in Center City. It was also an opportunity to recognize those whose contributions made Beth Am the fine synagogue it was. My father refused to be an honoree.

After Rabbi Goodblatt retired, Rabbi Wernick left and the synagogue moved, my father no longer served on the board. He was of the opinion that it was time for a new generation to take over with new ideas in a new location. He did not sever his ties but what had been a daily involvement for many years ended.

When the synagogue building at 58th & Warrington Avenue was sold, the contents were stored in my father's warehouse until they were transferred to the new location.

### **Bronstein Hall**

Adjacent to the school building at 5720 Beaumont Avenue closer to 58<sup>th</sup> Street was a single row house. In either 1955 or 1956, my father provided the funds to have the building completely renovated to provide needed additional space for the synagogue. It was named in memory of my paternal grandparents

Sam Bronstein and Fannie Dimmerman Bronstein. Bronstein Hall was used for small meetings and had some classrooms. It also contained a small kitchen for refreshments after meetings. As previously mentioned, the Sisterhood donor shop was also there and it was the meeting place for LTF.

### **Rabbi Eugene Wernick**

Rabbi "Gene" Wernick was engaged as Beth Am's assistant or associate (I don't recall his exact title) in 1965. He was a newly ordained rabbi from the Jewish Theological Seminary. A New York native, he was married to a native Philadelphian, Meryom Beitchman. As I was already a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary and not exposed to the daily activities of the synagogue except through my father's comments, I cannot add much about his service to the congregation. He attended the daily minyanim and he and his wife were warmly welcomed by many of the "old timers" of the congregation. He also was enrolled in a doctoral program at Dropsie College. He and his wife were the first people in the neighborhood who put up a Sukkah on the tiny back porch of their rented home. He left the congregation after a few years. On a personal level, we became close during his tenure and I learned a great deal from him. He certainly complemented Rabbi Goodblatt at Beth Am. His wife, Meryom, died suddenly the year after he left. I recall that a very large number of Beth Am people came to the funeral, which took place in Philadelphia. As a postscript, their son Steven was ordained as a rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1990s. We met him and his wife while he was a rabbinical student and spending the year of study at the Seminary's center in Jerusalem.

### **The Cantors**

During my years of involvement with the congregation Samuel Appel, Malcolm James and Milton Shelow served as cantors. Cantor Appel, who served in the 1950s, organized what was known as "The Cantor's Club." This was an extra-curricular activity for students who had good voices and were musically inclined. Beth Am, in my days, never had a children's choir

and the Cantor's Club acted as such. Some of these young people would be utilized on the High Holidays as accompanying soloists during Samuel Appel's tenure.

### **Shamashim**

The daily minyan was the responsibility of the Shamash. For a while (in the late 1950s), this position was filled by a young Orthodox trained man, Harold Plonchik. He was a skilled Torah reader and could do all of the other functions expected of a qualified Shamash. In addition to training B'nai Mitzvah, he taught a few of us the correct chanting for *Pesukei D'zimra*, the introductory Psalms recited at the beginning of the Sabbath service. He and his wife would also invite youngsters as guests for Shabbat lunch. After a few years, he left and was later in the precious gem business in Japan. Other Shamashim whose names I remember were Mr. Cohen (in the 40s and early 50s), Mr. Gold and the last Shamash in my day Mr. Winson.

### **Gabai'im & Regular Daveners**

Beth Am had a number of elderly gentlemen some of whom were quite knowledgeable. I recall one time in the mid 1950s when Rabbi Goodblatt asked the regular Shabbat people to meet with him in his study at the conclusion of services. He raised the possibility of abbreviating the introductory part of the Shabbat morning service (*Pesukei D'zimra*) and starting services later than 9:00 A.M. There was strong opposition and humorously some of the men suggested that the rabbi come later and miss the part of the service he wanted to eliminate. These men could recite the Haftarah on sight and on occasion, some would read the Torah. Over the years, they also served as gabai'im, standing by the Torah as it was read. Their function was to correct the person reading the Torah if he had made any mistakes and to aid him if he was stuck on a word. These people, therefore, were required to have a good grasp of Hebrew. The *Gabai'im* I remember were Mr. Borrow, who also read the Megillah (scroll of Esther) at the adult service on Purim. Mr. Louis Schnabel & his wife Bertha - their daughter Rose married Rabbi Meyer Kramer who had a congregation in Northeast Philadelphia. In February 1998 at

the Rabbinical Assembly Convention, held that year in Jerusalem, Judy Frank Wohlberg told me that someone was looking for me because of my Beth Am connection. It turned out to be the Schnabel's grandson, Rabbi Dr. Doniel Z. Kramer, an Orthodox rabbi ordained by Yeshiva University in 1976. He is the Director of the Rabbinic Cabinet of United Jewish Appeal and is well known and well regarded in the states. He remembered very fondly his visits to his grandparents as well as the Junior Congregation of Beth Am. I remember him as a boy of 8 or 9 who would come and spend a Shabbat with his grandparents. Another of the Schnabel's four daughters, Miriam Rosen, lived in the neighborhood. She and her husband Louis were members of Beth Am and their children Marc and Susan were educated in the school and were involved in the Junior Congregation. There was Harry Mozenter, whose wife Sarah was a librarian at Dropsie College. Mr. Mozenter would read the Torah at the adult service on the night of Simhat Torah. For a number of years my maternal grandfather, Mayer Shulman, was a *gabbai*. Of him, I cannot say enough, but I readily admit to being biased. On occasion, one of these men would forget his glasses, and they would then borrow them from each other to enable them to recite the Haftarah. Louis Greenberg, a fellow Litvak of my grandfather, also was a *gabbai* in those years.

Two men were appointed as *gabbai*. If one were not there, a substitute would be asked to fill in. It was rare for us to know the first names of the people of this generation. Mr. Rapp, Mr. Holtz, Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Cohen, Mr. & Mrs. Bauman and Mr. Gelfand were among the regular Shabbat morning daveners. Mr. Rapp was blind but was in shul every Shabbat; I think he passed away in the mid 1950s. Mr. Holtz, a shoemaker, was the oldest man we knew. His shoe repair shop was in the same location as the Chinese laundry where Beth Am started in the 1920s. Mr. Holtz was in his eighties in the 1950s. Mr. Gelfand, who was Belle Rose's father, also attended the daily minyan and wore a large wool talit. Additional Shabbat people were Mr. & Mrs. Merowitz, whose son Morton received a degree from Dropsie College and served with the Bureau of Jewish Education in Buffalo. Mr. Samuel Pariser stood in the back of the synagogue and handed out prayerbooks to all who entered. I was told that in the early days of the congregation, his wife Sarah would

polish the pulpit silver. Shortly after Bar Mitzvah, a few of us were asked to assist him and that was considered a special privilege. He and his wife were at every service. There were also some women who were there every Shabbat, most seem to dress in black clothing -- Mrs. Samans (her grandson was one of the regulars at the daily minyan), Mrs. Brody (whose son Harold lost his life in the military during World War II), Mrs. Bivet, Judy Frank Wohlberg's grandmother, a Mrs. Lavner and a Mrs. Applebaum. There were also a few more women, whose faces I can clearly see, but whose names, unfortunately, I do not remember.

One of the greatest fears of all the Bar Mitzvah boys at Beth Am in my time were the people known as "the old men in the back." The first ten rows on the left side of the synagogue were reserved for the Bar Mitzvah family (there were 14 seats on each row), so the regulars, except for Mr. Holtz, sat beyond the tenth row. He sat about the fifth row from the front on the left side, window aisle. Everyone knew that these men would pick up any error made in the chanting. I recall being told by my contemporaries that I was lucky and had nothing to fear since one of 'the old men in the back' was my grandfather and I could expect special consideration.

### **Scouts**

Scouting was very popular and there were active Boy and Girl Scout troops. The Boy Scouts were troop 195. A room in the school building to the left of the stage in the Cutler Auditorium, donated by the Cutler Family in memory of their parents, held all the scouting equipment. Boy Scout leaders, in the early 1950s when I was in the scouts, were Gus Lesser and Bob Corson. Boy Scouts' meeting night was Tuesday and when the Milton Berle TV program soared in popularity, there was talk of changing the meeting night. I assume it was changed as I recall both being in scouts and watching the Milton Berle program. One Friday night service each year was held in honor of the scouts. The service would begin with the scout groups, all in uniform, marching down the center aisle of the synagogue with their respective flags. They would take their seats in the front rows of the sanctuary. This was one of the only organizations that included children of non-synagogue members. However, I do not recall a single non-Jewish member. The Boy Scout troop

was not particularly observant of Jewish practice, and this led to some conflict with Rabbi Goodblatt. In the summer, there was a two-week period when members of the troop who wished could attend Boy Scout camp at Treasure Island. The troop left on a Shabbat morning in a truck, but not from the area of the synagogue. The summer camp was not kosher and the troop from Beth Am did not bring its own provisions, The members of our troop took most of the parts in the religious services which were conducted by a student rabbi from Hebrew Union College on Friday night. I do not recall much about the Girl Scouts other than that my sister was a member and that they sold Girl Scout cookies.

### **Hadassah**

The Hadassah chapter that regularly met at Beth Am was the Baron Edmund D. Rothschild group. My mother, Pearl Bronstein, was a member and I recall that there were a number of activities centering on the traditional role of this women's Zionist organization.

### **Rabbis Who Were Beth Am Graduates**

There were many achievements of Beth Am and its school of which Rabbi Goodblatt was proud. Gratz College had more students per capita from Beth Am than from any other congregation. The one accomplishment that brought him the greatest satisfaction was the number of rabbis who had grown up and received their first formal Jewish education at Beth Am. Rabbi Goodblatt always took pride in the relatively large number of rabbis his congregation produced. He had a special affinity for those who were ordained by The Jewish Theological Seminary. To be honest, I believe that he was somewhat less enthusiastic about the two graduates who were ordained elsewhere. The first Beth Am graduate to be ordained as a rabbi was Jacob (Jack) Pressman. The congregation he served for most of his long career was Temple Beth Am of Los Angeles. When he arrived in Los Angeles, the congregation did not have a Hebrew name. The Hebrew name it chose was in tribute to the synagogue at 58th and Warrington Streets in Southwest Philadelphia. The next Beth Am produced rabbi to be ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary was Ivan Caine, followed

by Maurice Corson. As already mentioned, it was Rabbi Corson who showed our Confirmation Class around the Seminary during our class trip in 1958. Rabbis Martin Dyen and Larry Geiger were ordained shortly thereafter. Rabbi Goodblatt's son David was ordained in 1968 and I in 1970. Rabbi Sidney Greene was ordained at Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University and Rabbi Charles Familant at Hebrew Union College.

### **Relations with non-Jews**

The largest segment of non-Jewish students of the Longstreth elementary school were residents of The Baptist Orphanage, located in the square block bounded by 58th & 59th Sts. and Whitby & Thomas Avenues. The parents of some of these children served as church missionaries, some children came from broken homes while other residents were orphans. Relations were cordial but their schedules did not permit them to be invited to other children's homes. I do recall being invited to trade stamps with the director of the Home. There were a fair number of avid philatelists in our age group and we would exchange stamps. Word got to the head of the Home that I had a fairly large number of duplicates and that it was worthwhile to trade with me. There were some Catholic children who did not attend parochial school. Many, if not most of them, were Italian. All the students of the Longstreth elementary school were white. On Jewish holidays no regular schoolwork was done, as all the Jewish students were absent from class. I do not recall ever inviting non-Jewish classmates to attend synagogue services with us nor were we invited to attend church services. There were some synagogue-church activities centering on scouts. We would be invited by a church scout troop and we would invite church sponsored groups to join us at meetings. I do not think that this was more than once a year and did not include attending each other's religious services. There were also no inter-faith activities involving young people that I recollect. Beth Am had especially warm relations with the Berry Long Methodist church at 58th and Springfield Avenue. I recall that at either the ground breaking (in 1947) or at the dedication (1948) of the Hebrew School building the scout troop of that church participated in the program. The neighborhood

was working class and there were a few anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic acts that I still remember after more than fifty years. The Most Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic Church (known to all as MBS) was located at 56th and Chester Avenue. Its parochial school students and the public school students would cross each other's 'territory' on the way home for lunch. Often there would be pushing and shoving; the Catholic students doing both to the students of Longstreth all of whom they considered to be Jews even though that was not true. At the time, I did not know if anybody ever complained to the church's clergy about the almost daily confrontations. It later came to my attention that Rabbi Goodblatt made frequent, albeit unsuccessful, attempts to meet with the priest at MBS or his staff to discuss the harassment of the Beth Am students. One year the Sukkah of the synagogue was set on fire. It was located in the yard of the Hebrew school and was exposed on one side to the driveway that ran behind the houses on the 5700 block of Warrington Avenue. From then on, all the items placed in the Sukkah were treated with a fire retarding solution. The children were warned never to eat any of the hanging items as everything had been treated. Also, the Sukkah was taken down before the end of Sukkot to prevent vandalism. This was in the early 1950s. Across the street from the synagogue on the Southeast corner of 58<sup>th</sup> and Warrington was a luncheonette (Gouvis') where no Jew would enter. At one time Jews did operate a luncheonette at that location. We called the rough crowd that 'hung out' there the 'PX Gang.' To prevent harassment of people attending services, there were two policemen in a patrol car stationed in front of the synagogue whenever there were services at night. A number of the merchants on Chester Avenue were Jewish and affiliated with the synagogue. I recall hearing from more than one source that in the 1930s and early 1940s clergy from MBS told their congregants not to patronize any Jewish businesses in the area. I only recall one anti-Semitic comment in the years I attended Longstreth School. That was in 1954 and from a fellow safety patrol member, a non-Jew of Lithuanian origin. I duly reported him to the faculty advisor of the safety patrol. He was reprimanded and promised never to repeat what he had said.

### **Congregants I Remember**

Throughout this monograph, I have tried to record as many names as possible. Some whom I remember as being particularly active, participating members noted for their devotion to the synagogue were Lester Atlas, Claire and Louis Bachin, Anne and Louis Greene (the parents of Rabbi Sidney Greene). Anne Greene was in charge of the Sisterhood gift shop for as long as I can remember. Some of those who were educated at Beth Am Israel have made names for themselves in their respective fields of endeavor. Among them are Dr. Steven Goldstein, Dean of the School of Law at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Dr. Judith Seitz Rodin, the President of the University of Pennsylvania, Ellen Kaplan Savitz, Principal of the Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts, E. Temma (Shaeffer) Kingsley, who was in my Hebrew school class and is involved in early childhood Jewish Education. She has also served as President of the Forest Hills Jewish Center in Queens, New York. On a sad note, one of the boys I used to walk home with from Junior Congregation on Shabbat before moving to Yeadon in 1954 was Jay Paul. He was killed in Viet Nam in the 1960s and his name is engraved in the monument in Washington, D.C. Those I record are only those about whom I have heard in the past few years. I am sure that there are many others who are making their contributions to society who I knew growing up but about whom I have no information.

There were also a few families with three generations or more represented at Beth Am. In thinking back, it provided a strong feeling of security and stability for those of us who also had grandparents who were involved in the same synagogue as our parents. There were also a few people whose parents had grown up at Beth Am and whose grandparents were among the founders. The Rader and Cutler families come to mind.

### **Additional Thoughts & Comments**

As I record these thoughts, it may appear that there was nothing to criticize about Beth Am. This is certainly not my intention nor is it true. I felt that there could have been more of an emphasis on religious observance. I do not recall any special efforts to upgrade the level of religious observance in the home.

As kashrut (dietary laws) was observed in the homes of many of my friends, as a youngster I naively assumed that all the congregant's homes were kosher. Obviously, this was not the case. Yet, I do not recall the importance of kashrut being discussed in school. The same was true with Shabbat observance. It may be that these were not major issues at that time or that the policy was to try not to offend anyone.

One battle that most Conservative rabbis have is how to keep the people in the synagogue after the end of Yom Kippur to recite the Ma'ariv (evening) service. In many congregations, the sounding of the shofar is delayed until after Ma'ariv is recited. At Beth Am there was always a stampede after the sounding of the shofar and nothing was done to encourage people to remain for the evening service. Those who wished to participate would try to get as close to the pulpit as possible; but it was a lost cause. On Yom Kippur, there would be time between the conclusion of the Neilah service and the sounding of the shofar. During this five minute or so lull, Rabbi Goodblatt would share some of his humorous stories. I do not know of another rabbi who could get away with that. I never heard a congregant state that it was inappropriate either.

These thoughts, written, in Jerusalem are in tribute to an unforgettable congregation, which did so much for the Jewish people in a very modest way.

I always felt that Congregation Beth Am Israel had a very positive Jewish influence on thousands of people who passed through its doors during its years in Southwest Philadelphia. Those of us who spent part of our formative years within its walls and whose lives were influenced by Beth Am are grateful to the dedicated men and women who gave of their time and resources to create such a strong bastion of Jewish life in the area. Beth Am graduates always recall fondly those days when their synagogue was an important part of their lives. We all felt strongly that Beth Am was just like another member of our family. Hopefully, other congregations in the United States will set high goals. In this way, they may accomplish some of what Beth Am, its rabbi and board of directors achieved.

#### **Postscript**

As mentioned above, this paper has taken so long to complete since one thing always seems to lead to another. After completing the first draft, I sent copies to my sister Joyanna Horn, David and Jonathan Goodblatt, Edward Kornblatt and Marc Margolius, who has been the rabbi of Beth Am Israel for the past eleven years. Their comments have been most encouraging and helpful and their corrections even more beneficial. A short visit to Philadelphia in the beginning of March 2000 where our daughter Gilah was working on her master's degree proved to me once again that Beth Am Israel's graduates continue to strengthen Jewish life and commitment wherever they make their homes. A sundown Kabbalat Shabbat service at the Germantown Jewish Centre I attended was conducted by Michael Masch now connected with the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the School Board of Philadelphia. At the same service as well as the following morning, I also met Coleman Poses, also a product of Beth Am. He reminded me that both he and Michael studied with me informally and related some of the material we covered. This was nearly forty years ago. Later that week while attending the Minha and Ma'ariv services at B'nai Israel Ohev Zedek in the Northeast, I was introduced to Myron Anton also a Beth Am product. His aunt was the speech teacher at Longstreth Elementary School. Myron is an active member of this Orthodox synagogue in the northeast. At the same time, my close friend and colleague, Rabbi Hayim Horowitz mentioned to me that he had recently officiated at the funeral of Ms. Lily Schwartz, the head of the Philadelphia Jewish Archives at the Balch Institute. It was Lily who encouraged me to write this monograph. Her meticulousness obliged me to review the paper a number of times. For this I am most grateful. When I showed her an earlier version at a meeting with her at the Balch Institute in October 1998, she encouraged me to prepare an index that would make the paper far more useful to any future researcher. When I told her that I did not think that it would be a research tool, she encouraged me and I agreed to prepare an index. Her guidance will be sorely missed in the future. I am thankful for having known her and having benefited from her advice and friendship for some twenty-five years.

During the same visit, I met with Rabbi Marc Margolius who was most hospitable. His many efforts to try to restore Beth Am

Israel's reputation as a leading congregation in family education have already borne fruit. The present building is bursting at its seams and a new edifice is planned to accommodate all of the activities. A number of the items that I remember so well from the synagogue at 58<sup>th</sup> Street and Warrington Avenue are in the current building. Many fond memories came to mind seeing the old pulpit chairs, the lecterns, the Torah holders, the doors of the ark and the tribute plaque to the young men and women of the congregation who served in the armed forces during World War II. I spent some time with Racine and Leonard Cutler whose son Charles is active in the congregation. They also read this manuscript and their comments are also incorporated in the above text. Their grandchildren are now the fifth generation of Cutlers to be involved with Beth Am Israel.

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