

The Library | of the
BALTIMORE HEBREW COLLEGE

Presented by the

Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Fund



A History of Congregation Shearith Israel of Baltimore

On the Threshold of a Century

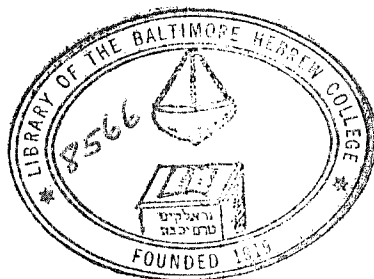
by

Arnold Blumberg
Towson State College

Respectfully Dedicated to the Memory of my Father

Dr. Louis Blumberg 1892-1955

276.6
B 625h



Acknowledgement

Nine decades is a short span in the story of a people which counts its existence in terms of millenia. When, however, a single congregation has not deviated from the traditions of its founding fathers for almost a century of service to G-d it becomes a circumstance of no mean proportion.

The Shearith Israel Congregation of Baltimore, Maryland is very fortunate to count as one of its loyal members Professor Arnold Blumberg, of the Towson State College. Dr. Blumberg undertook to record for posterity the history of our Congregation as a labor of love. The entire Congregation is indebted to him for this short dissertation.

We acknowledge with profound gratitude the valuable assistance of Mr. Harold Zalesch, Mr. Merrill B. Lehman, Sherwood Press, Lincoln Lithoplates, Inc., and an anonymous friend of the Congregation through whose combined efforts and beneficence this publication was made possible.

Herbert Birnbaum, Chairman
Ninetieth Anniversary Committee

Introduction

This history will be necessarily superficial and brief. It is not the writer's intention to offer an account of all the events which have shaped the course of Congregation Shearith Israel since its primitive beginnings in 1851 and its vital renewal in 1879. Instead, these pages are designed as a modest monument to those generations of devoted members who stubbornly and courageously held the congregation to the path traced by its founders. Perhaps in some future year a more complete account of this history may be published. It is to be hoped that the future writer may enjoy some small measure of guidance from the documentation of this work.

Writing the history of Congregation Shearith Israel presents challenges to the serious scholar. For a *Kehilla* which claims so long a life, there are amazingly few documentary records which survive from its origins. There are no congregational minutes older than 1928. Really complete minutes date only from 1937. It may be expected that future generations of this congregation will understand the vital necessity of guarding intact all of the congregational archives. The writer will consider his efforts a success if nothing else is accomplished through the publication of this history.

Precisely because there are so many gaps in the written record, this research has had to rest upon printed materials and the necessarily undependable testimony of witnesses to past events. If the reader of these words perceives error in anything which follows, the writer will be grateful if it is called to his attention.

Under the special set of circumstances described above, the writer has incurred a huge debt of gratitude to persons who generously offered their time and effort to improve this work. The contributions of some of them are specifically acknowledged in the footnotes of the text. Others deserve mention here.

This work would have been less complete than it is without the kind interest shown by Mr. Moses Adler, Mrs. Nathan Adler,

Miss Grace Blondheim, Dr. Rosie Bodenheimer, Mr. Alvin Cohn, Mrs. Jacob Cohn, Mr. Kurt Flamm, Mrs. Rita Flehinger, Mr. Milton Kaufman, Dr. and Mrs. Nelson B. Lasson, Mr. Merrill B. Lehman, Reverend Albert Leiter, Mrs. William Looban, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Marks, Mr. Bert Ney, Dr. Aaron Robinson, Mr. Leon B. Rubenstein, Mr. Louis Waxman, and Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Yaffe.

Rabbi Dr. Herbert Birnbaum and Professor Raymond Bloom shared generously of their own research findings in other areas of the history of Baltimore Jewry. Mr. Joseph Feld was kind enough to offer a copy of his B.A. Thesis at the Johns Hopkins University to the writer. This study provided the writer with important leads for the documentary base of the present work since it touched upon the origins of Baltimore's oldest congregations. Mr. Wolfgang H. Meyer, the very able and devoted Executive Secretary of the congregation lent the writer full access to the records in his charge. Mr. Reuben J. Robinson who was secretary of the McCulloh Street Congregation donated the rough drafts of that congregation's minutes, covering the years 1937-1953. The present writer has confided this valuable material to the care of Mr. Meyer for inclusion with the rest of the congregational archives.

Notwithstanding anything stated above, the writer assumes full responsibility for the statements made in this work. It is offered to the sympathetic and tolerant examination of all who are interested in Shearith Israel, at the threshold of a century.

ARNOLD BLUMBERG

8 Shevat 5730

January 15, 1970

Shearith Israel On the Threshold of a Century

The origins of Shearith Israel are bound up with the roots from which sprang all of Baltimore's oldest congregations. The arrival of Rabbi Abraham Rice from Germany in 1840 gave fresh impetus to orthodox Jewish Life in this city. His ministry during more than two decades, until his death in 1862, laid the foundations upon which the congregation, as we know it historically, was built.



Rabbi Abraham Rice

From 1851 to 1862 Rabbi Rice was active in founding and offering spiritual leadership to a small congregation located at Howard and Lexington Streets.¹ That tiny *kehillah*, calling itself

¹ Isidor Blum, "The Jews of Baltimore: A Historical Sketch," I. Blum (ed.), *The Jews of Baltimore*, Historical Review Publishing Co., Baltimore, 1910, pp. 11-13. An oral tradition maintains that Rabbi Rice had a wooden leg, a disability which barred him from receiving the recognition of the Bavarian Government as an officially certified rabbi. Thus the obscurantist bureaucracy of a German kingdom was responsible for the arrival of the first fully ordained rabbi in Baltimore and perhaps in the United States as well. The present writer is grateful to Professor Selig Adler, of the State University of New York at Buffalo, for this information.

appropriately Shearith Israel,² was ultimately to be one of the two synagogues which united to form the present congregation in 1879. Thus was born the ever fruitful controversy as to whether the congregational birthdate was in 1851 or in 1879.

Regardless of whether the microcosmic Shearith Israel of Howard Street may be justly described as the progenitor of the congregation bearing that name today, they are the warp and woof of one tradition. Under Rabbi Rice's leadership, Sabbath observance was maintained as a requirement for those seeking voting membership in the congregation. The unswerving orthodoxy of Shearith Israel is one hallmark of the *kehilla* derived in unbroken descent from the works of Rabbi Rice.

In 1879, the old Shearith Israel merged with another small minyan, located on Eutaw Street, to form a larger congregation. This union was expressly designed to create an organization strong enough to combat the growth of Reform.

The newly united body was fortunate enough to obtain a building at the corner of Greene and German Streets which had previously been a Methodist Episcopal church. The consecration of the new synagogue took place on Friday evening July 4, 1879. The *Baltimore Sun* offered a full description of the new building and its dedicatory ceremonies. Even the *mikva*, "formed of pure Carrara marble" and located at the rear of the building, received careful attention.³

The first president, Mr. Leipman Cotten served for only a short time. His successor Moses Strauss then entered upon a quarter century of service at the lay leadership of the congregation, until his death in 1905. Among the other outstanding early leaders of the new Shearith Israel were H. P. Cohn, Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, Joseph Grinsfelder, Jacob Gundersheimer, Simon Halle, Jacob Hecht, Joseph Bergman, Meier Plaut, Joseph Nussbaum, Isaac Miller, Leib Gutman, Moses Schloss, and the three brothers of the long-time president, Louis, Abraham, and Eliezer Strauss.

² *The Occident* (Philadelphia), XIII (February 1856), 525. A weekly Reform periodical in Cincinnati published the text of a resolution signed by one David Bamberger, secretary of Shearith Israel of Baltimore, thanking L. Herzberg and A. Rice, respectively president and recording secretary, for 3 years of service to the congregation. See *The Israelite* (Cincinnati), II (Oct. 26, 1855), 131.

³ *The Sun* (Baltimore), July 5, 1879. German Street has been Redwood Street since 1917.

Precisely because the congregation was absolutely determined to adhere to the German *Minhag*, the lay leadership refrained from inviting a full time rabbi to take its pulpit for the first thirteen years of Shearith Israel's life on Greene Street.⁴

Fearing any compromise either with the *Shulchan Aruch* or the traditions of German orthodoxy the officers of the congregation avoided commitments to leaders who might compromise one or the other. Only toward the end of 1892 did the congregational board write confidentially to Rabbi Dr. Azriel Hildesheimer, Dean of the Rabbiner-Seminar at Berlin, asking him to recommend a capable young rabbi. A similar letter was also sent to Rabbi Dr. Philip Hillel Klein who held a pulpit in New York, but who had already enjoyed a brilliant career in Germany, as well as in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire.

By happy coincidence, Rabbis Hildesheimer and Klein both nominated the same candidate. Their choice was Rabbi Dr. Schepschel Schaffer, a graduate of the Rabbiner-Seminar who had earned his Ph.D. at the Universities of Berlin and Leipzig. At the moment of this exchange of correspondence, Rabbi Schaffer, aged thirty, was disembarking at New York. He had come to the United States without prospects, hoping to find just such a position as Shearith Israel now opened to him.⁵

He was pleasantly surprised to find, therefore, that his arrival at New York was eagerly anticipated. His first weeks in the new city involved the excitement of correspondence with Mr. Ben Zion Rosenbaum representing the Shearith Israel Board of Trustees.⁶ Rosenbaum immediately became his ardent advocate and, at his initiative, Rabbi Schaffer was invited to Baltimore to deliver "a trial sermon" on December 3, 1892. Less than three weeks after his arrival in the United States, the young rabbi was offered the post

⁴ Rabbi Dr. Schepschel Schaffer, "Sketch of the History of the Shearith Israel Congregation," Blum, p. 62. Mr. Leipman (Levi) Cotten died in January 1881. The present writer is grateful to the management of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Cemetery for this information.

⁵ Israel Fine, *Rev. Dr. Schepschel Schaffer, Twenty-Five Years of Activity in the Cause of Orthodox Judaism 1893-1918*, Kohn and Pollock, Baltimore, 1918, pp. 14-15.

⁶ Mr. Rosenbaum served, unofficially, as cantor or reader. Wood's *Baltimore Directory* and Polk's *Baltimore City Street Directory* lists him in that office as early as 1885. Rosenbaum was born in 1852 at Zell, Bavaria. (Dr. Selig Adler to the present writer, December 2, 1969, letter in possession of the writer.)

at Shearith Israel ⁷ which he occupied until his retirement in 1928 and as Rabbi Emeritus ⁸ until his death on September 28, 1933 (Tishri 8, 5694).⁹

Dr. Schaffer was ideally suited for the career he had chosen. Although a native of Russian Kurland, he regarded German as his mother tongue and was thoroughly a product of a German education through his secular studies in that country.¹⁰ He had "learned" at various Lithuanian yeshivos and had received his rabbinical *semicha* at the hands of Rabbi Alexander Moses Lapidoth ¹¹ of Rossieny, Rabbi Abraham Diamant of Yurburg, and Rabbi Ze'eb Lehrman of Erzvilok. He had then journeyed to Kovno to obtain the same honor from the famed Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spector.¹² It would have been difficult to have found another rabbi who combined so perfectly the enthusiasm of the eastern European Jew with German devotion to the union of religious and secular scholarship in the tradition of Samson Raphael Hirsch. It is a tribute to Rabbi Schaffer's ability to win and keep the loyalty of his congregation that he was an early and an outspoken Zionist, though part of his congregation condemned Herzl's movement as irremediably secularist. It was always a proud recollection for Rabbi Schaffer that he represented American Jewry at the First and Fifth World Zionist Congresses in 1897 and 1901.¹³

At the moment of Rabbi Schaffer's permanent settlement in Baltimore in 1893, there were only some twelve to fifteen thousand Jews of German origin living in the city. There were only six congregations of any size to serve them. Of these, only Shearith Israel and Chizuk Emunah were orthodox.¹⁴ Of course, the newer

⁷ Fine, p. 18.

⁸ Congregational Minutes, February 26, 1928.

⁹ Necrology, *American Jewish Yearbook*, XXXVI (1934-1935), 285.

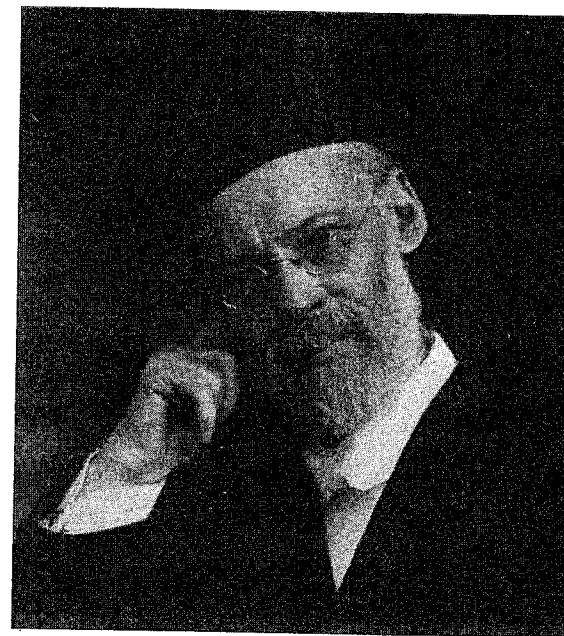
¹⁰ Schepschel Schaffer, "Autobiography of Rev. Dr. S. Schaffer," Blum, p. 59.

¹¹ Rabbi Lapidoth's daughter, Anna, married Rabbi Schaffer in Baltimore on March 19, 1893 in the presence of his new congregation (*ibid.*, p. 61). Mrs. Schaffer died in 1926.

¹² Fine, p. 14.

¹³ S. Schaffer, "Zionism," Blum, pp. 39-48.

¹⁴ One source makes the categorical statement that the total Jewish population of Baltimore was 12,000-15,000. See Fine, p. 19. That figure seems unrealistic however, and is probably corrected by a better contemporary account which lists 12,000-15,000 Jews of German parentage. See *Jewish Comment*, I (April 26, 1895), 4.



Rabbi Schepschel Schaffer

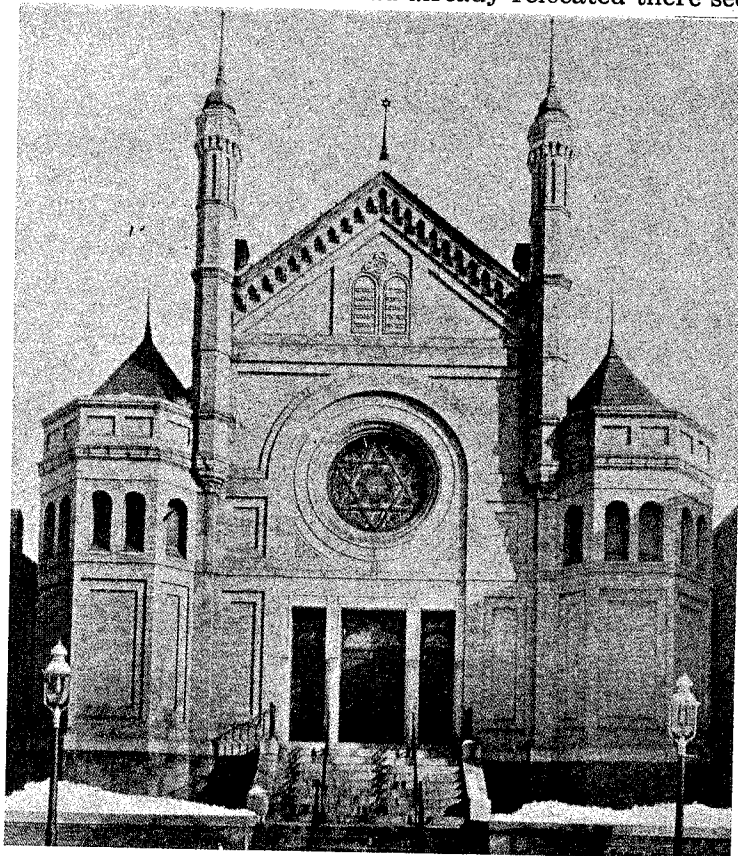
immigrants from Eastern Europe were rapidly building their own institutions in their own communities, "downtown." These were largely orthodox.

Rabbi Schaffer set to work placing his imprint upon the congregation in an indelible fashion. He offered a Gemorrah *Shiur* four times weekly and "learned" Mishnayos once a week during the summer and between mincha and maariv during the winter. With his interest in education he became chairman of the Board of Education which directed the Baltimore Talmud Torah.¹⁵ His efforts to establish a Yeshiva called "The Rabbinical Seminary of Baltimore," met failure. Nevertheless in 1913-1914 he was briefly Dean of his short-lived seminary which counted six students who met in the afternoons and evenings in the Beth Ha-Midrash of Shearith Israel to study with Rabbi Schaffer while attending Johns Hopkins University during the day.¹⁶

¹⁵ Fine, p. 20.

¹⁶ Fine, p. 25; *Jewish Comment*, XLII (December 5, 1913), 114-115. The seminary was legally incorporated in February 1914. See *Jewish Comment*, XLII (February 13, 1914), 227.

The changing character of the older neighborhoods in Baltimore had induced an alarmingly rapid movement northward of the families which had supported Shearith Israel since 1879. Faced with a challenge either to its existence or to its German *Minhag*, the congregational leadership made the decision to move to a new location. Moses Strauss who had led the congregation almost since its inception, was the most energetic defender of the idea that it was essential for the growth of the congregation that it should follow its membership to the new neighborhoods in the northwest. The fact that Chizuk Emunah had already relocated there seemed



Shearith Israel Synagogue McCulloh Street

to preclude the need for a second orthodox congregation in the same area. Nevertheless, the move was made.

On September 11-13, 1903 Shearith Israel celebrated three

days of dedicatory exercises at its new building on McCulloh near Bloom Street. These featured addresses by Rabbi Dr. Henry W. Schneeberger of neighboring orthodox Chizuk Emunah, Rabbi Dr. Philip Klein of New York, and the Rabbi and officers of Shearith Israel itself. A borrowed organ was used in the non-religious portions of the ceremonies on the two weekdays of the celebration. The official program for the occasion called for Sabbath morning services at 7:30 a.m.¹⁷

Unfortunately, Moses Strauss survived the move to the synagogue's new home by only two years. At his death in 1905, he was succeeded by his nephew Manes Strauss who remained president until his death in 1930.¹⁸

Shearith Israel's new building was fully described in the local Jewish Press. The architect, Louis Levi described his handiwork in these terms:

'The building is Oriental in design, and has been located upon the ground in such a manner as to give an abundance of air and ventilation on all sides. It is approached by handsome granite columns, with carved caps, double doors being in the center and single doors on either side. This leads into a well lighted vestibule, finished in quartered oak, having stairways with an easy rise at either end. Beautiful rose windows adorn the front and the wall space above the shrine. The entire main auditorium has been finished in cream white enamel, the ornamental parts of the shrine being accentuated in gold leaf, all combining to produce a dignified and rich effect. The basement contains a room for daily services, two classrooms and a study. It has been arranged with movable partitions, so that it can be converted into one large room for social gatherings, lectures, etc. The building is heated by steam and lighted by gas and electricity.'

¹⁷ The present writer is grateful to Mr. Benjamin Adler for the loan of copies of the dedicatory programs used in 1903 and 1925.

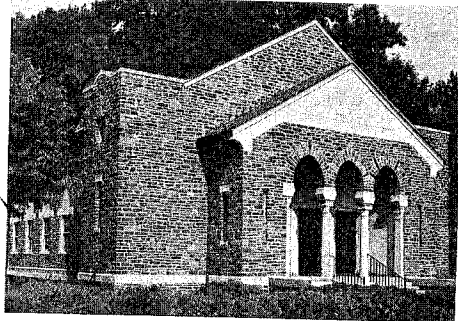
¹⁸ Della R. Adler, "The Synagogue that Said 'No!'," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, August 28, 1964, p. 29. Moses Strauss was born in 1830 at Bohnenfeld, Wurttemberg. Manes Strauss was born on Lag B'Omer 1873 and died on his 57th birthday on Lag B'Omer 1930 (letter from Dr. Selig Adler to the writer, December 2, 1969).

The ritual baths are said to be as fine as any in this country. The approximate cost of the building is \$40,000.¹⁹

The congregation thrived at its new location so that almost immediately consideration was given to plans for rebuilding or for making additions.²⁰ Perhaps because of the advent of World War I those plans were constantly deferred.

Ironically, however, the restoration of peace gave rise to concern for the congregation's future. Very gradually, the religious character of the neighborhood began to shift as increasing numbers of members moved even further toward the northwest.

Under the direction of President Manes Strauss, a committee was designated to seek a new location for the congregation. There was considerable support for a move to Forest Park, but the ultimate choice fell upon the congregation's present location at Glen and Park Heights Avenues.



*Shearith Israel Synagogue
Park Heights and Glen Avenues*

Even before the new "suburban branch" could be completed, services were begun in the neighborhood. On Erev Pesach, 5684 the first minyan assembled at the home of Sylvan Senker. For the greater part of the next year, Shabbos services were held at 3704 Menlo Drive, the home of Samuel H. Rauneker. The actual dedication of the new building took place on August 30, 1925.²¹

¹⁹ *Jewish Comment*, XXII (September 11, 1903), 14. Reverend Benno Hummel, who had served the congregation at its Chazan at the old location was present for the dedication of the new building as a member of the choir. Cantor Max Lieberman, originally of Brest Litovsk, Russia assumed his new office at the dedication of the building (*ibid.*, pp. 14-15).

²⁰ Fine, p. 25.

²¹ The present writer is grateful to Mr. Sol Rauneker and Dr. Selig Adler for this information.

Unlike the congregation's previous choice of a new building in 1903, that of 1925 did not imply abandonment of the older location. The parent building at McCulloh and Bloom Streets still served a vital and heavily Jewish neighborhood.²² The Glen Avenue branch, in a relatively thinly settled area, would continue to occupy a subsidiary role for many years. Unfortunately, the old and the new synagogues never reached a clear understanding as to their respective rights and responsibilities toward one another. This ambiguous relationship might have been avoided by a clear cut written settlement in 1925.

It was not until 1937 that a joint congregational meeting of the two branches of Shearith Israel rendered official what had been actual practice for twelve years. It was decided that each branch was to choose its own officers, and regulate the conditions of its own meetings. A joint chairman was to be chosen as a sort of unifying link between McCulloh Street and Glen Avenue. To the extent that it was possible, the rabbi of the congregation at Glen Avenue served both branches. Obviously this was difficult and ineffective. A bond of real unity was maintained only in that the branches each accepted a uniform system of dues and fees and agreed to admit only *Shomrei Shabbos* to membership.²³ To the very end of the existence of the McCulloh Street congregation, however, no satisfactory definition was set forth for such obvious

²² Repeated resolutions were passed by the Board and General membership meetings of the McCulloh Street Congregation, empowering the officers to seek a new location. The usual location mentioned was at Druid Hill Park. Interestingly enough, the intention of the McCulloh Street leadership, at first, was not simply to pour all the resources of the parent synagogue into the Glen Avenue branch. The original hope was to establish still another branch which could absorb the membership and assets of the older institution (McCulloh Street Congregation Minutes, July 12, 1939, May 21, 28, 1941, January 6, 1942, January 10, 1943).

²³ Minutes of a Joint Meeting of the Congregation, June 27, 1937. The present writer is informed that Cantor Alfred Davidman, who had succeeded E. Jaffe in 1911, continued to officiate at McCulloh Street. Rabbi Schaffer took up residence on Gist Avenue and served the Glen Avenue branch until his retirement. Abraham Chaseman succeeded Cantor Davidman. In the last period of the congregation's life on McCulloh Street, Reverend Simon Derdyk performed the functions of a Cantor, but was not officially designated by that title.

matters as the obligation of either branch to support the financial obligations of the other.²⁴

Thus, although from 1925 and onward Mr. Leon Strauss²⁵ held the office of Chairman of the Joint Board of the two congregations, the presidencies were held separately. Manes Strauss, under whose guidance the decision to open a Glen Avenue Branch had been made, continued to serve as president at McCulloh Street. Mr. Samuel Rauneker was elected to the presidency at Glen Avenue, enjoying re-election to that office until his death in 1946. At the next election in the Spring of 1947, his son Mr. Sol Rauneker was elected to the office his father had held for a full generation. He continued to lend distinction to the presidency until his departure for Cincinnati in 1958. At the main branch of the congregation on McCulloh Street, Manes Strauss was followed in the presidency by Emanuel Strauss, Morris Shafer, William Coplan, and Joseph Morton Lehman. Notable contributions were made to the congregation in its last years on McCulloh Street by Mr. Morris Siegel.²⁶

In 1928, after thirty-five years of service, Rabbi Schaffer was retired to the position of Rabbi Emeritus. A lifetime pension was voted by the Board. It was understood that he would continue to be responsible for kashrus supervision until the appointment of his successor.²⁷ As a new spiritual leader for the congregation had not

²⁴ As late as 1956, the issue was still undefined. The "suburban" branch while maintaining its freedom from any obligation to the McCulloh Street Congregation, offered a voluntary gift of five hundred dollars toward settlement of the mortgage at the older building. The condition was set, however, that upon the ultimate closure of the McCulloh Street Branch, all assets were to be awarded to the Glen Avenue Congregation (Minutes of the Board of the Glen Avenue Branch, March 24, July 15, 1956). As events finally transpired, the assets of the McCulloh Street congregation were applied toward several charities including the construction of the new Mikvah on Rogers Avenue in 1958. Mr. Reuben J. Robinson, who served as secretary of the McCulloh Street Congregation, informs the present writer that some of the congregational assets, including *Seforim* were given to the Glen Avenue Congregation.

²⁵ Leon Strauss, 1882-1948, was Manes Strauss's younger brother. Meyer Strauss, son of the first president and cousin of Leon and Manes Strauss, served as Chazan during the early years of the Glen Avenue Synagogue.

²⁶ Information offered to the writer by Mr. Sol Rauneker. The matter of Mr. Rauneker's official title remains vague. He may have been merely "*Gab-bai Rishon*" at Glen Avenue. The title "*President*" seems to have been used by his fellow congregants, however, without the matter being made an issue.

²⁷ Resolution of a membership meeting of Congregation Shearith Israel, February 26, 1928.

been found at the moment of Rabbi Schaffer's death in 1933, it might be said that through forty years, the *rav* of Shearith Israel set his mark upon the community. Even the debilitating illness which weakened him and sapped his energy in his last years cannot diminish the debt owed him by the community.

The crucial period of Rabbi Schaffer's partial retirement, marked the advent of a tragic era in Jewish history at large. The emergence of Nazism in Germany was immediately responsible for the initiation of a small but significant new immigration. Beginning as a trickle in 1933, the unhappy flow of victims fleeing their inhospitable homeland increased to impressive proportions until it ended with the disasters of 1940.

Notwithstanding the enormity of such a human tragedy, the new immigration was a source of great strength for Shearith Israel. For the first time since the establishment of the congregation, the decade of the thirties witnessed the arrival of new members and seatholders who regarded the German *Minhag* with affectionate familiarity.

Perhaps the happiest reinforcement for the congregation was in the person of Rabbi Simon Schwab. Born in Frankfurt on Main in 1909, he had received his education at the *Hirsch Realschule* in that city. Like his predecessor, he had learned in the great yeshivos of Eastern Europe, particularly those of Telshe and Mir, where he had earned *semicha*. His appointment to the leadership of Shearith Israel marked the beginning of a fruitful twenty-one years of service to this congregation terminated in 1958 by his acceptance of a New York pulpit.²⁸

The new rabbi faced severe problems from the very beginning. Still unfamiliar with the English language, he disciplined himself to use it in his sermons. Writing his lectures in German and translating them, sometimes with the help of friendly congregants, Rabbi Schwab made the painful adjustment to a new cultural and linguistic milieu. Even more difficult than that however,

²⁸ Rabbi Simon Schwab to present writer, October 17, 1969, letter in possession of the writer. Rabbi Zevi Tabory officiated at McCulloh Street 1941-1948 during Rabbi Schwab's tenure at Glen Avenue. At Rabbi Tabory's departure for New York, no Rabbi was in residence at McCulloh Street. For a brief period, one Rabbi Shkop also received a modest salary from the McCulloh Street Congregation, conducting Shiurim and delivering sermons (Minutes of McCulloh Street Congregation, September 4, 1943, April 19, 1945).

was the necessity of transmitting orthodox religious values to a congregation which now housed many seatholders who questioned the essential values of Shearith Israel. Voices were raised protesting the character of the *Mechitza*. Others demanded the right of non-Sabbath observers to become voting members of the congregation,²⁹ in spite of the fact that *Shmiras Shabbos* had been an unwritten requirement for voting membership since the days of



Rabbi Simon Schwab

Rabbi Rice. The picture was further clouded by the fact that the Brotherhood of the congregation had no objection to the election of officers who were barred as members of the congregation. In 1937, the year of Rabbi Schwab's arrival in Baltimore, the issue of voting membership for non-Sabbath Observers burst upon him like a dread thunderstorm. Implicit in the controversy was the threat of secession if the lucrative fund raising efforts of the Brotherhood were not rewarded with voting privileges in the *Kehilla* itself. The president of the brotherhood put the matter squarely before the new Rabbi with a request for his written opinion. The rabbi's reply stated in part:

With hearty thanks I want to confess that both the Sisterhood and Brotherhood of our Congregation have made many material sacrifices in order to support the Synagogue

²⁹ The present writer is indebted to Mr. Morris Levine, President of Shearith Israel, for an account of a conversation he had with Rabbi Schwab on this subject on November 9, 1969.

and to maintain its welfare. . . . Nevertheless, everyone realizes that we have to be on the lookout that at some future time some movement may occur to change the ideals and precepts of this orthodox Congregation, which have made it the model for orthodoxy in America. As a precaution against any change, the fathers who founded this Congregation established the unwritten law, of not taking those who are not Sabbath observers as voting members of this Shul, although according them all the other privileges that a voting member may possess. To make a distinction between religious and non-religious questions as far as voting is concerned is impossible, because every problem of any importance in a congregation is really a religious one. . . . It is hard for me to make such a decision, but I feel certain were you in my position you would come to the same conclusion. . . . Let me thank each and every one of you personally for what you are doing for me and the Congregation. I cherish the friendliest feelings toward everyone of you and place the highest value on the personal contacts that I have made with you. . . . I am heavyhearted as I write this. But you will appreciate that I cannot sacrifice old principles . . . on the altar of expediency. Our policy should remain for ever "Truth and Peace"; the truth of religion as the basis, peace and friendship as the goal of our common endeavors.³⁰

Immediately after the rabbi's formal reply to the Brotherhood, a joint meeting of the two congregations formally voted to reaffirm the Sabbath Observer's membership requirement.³¹

Predictably, the result was a loss in membership and revenue caused by the precipitate departure of the disaffected seatholders and members. At the Glen Avenue branch, the weekday minyanim which had been laboriously established as the neighborhood grew, were threatened by the departure of so many former worshippers.³² As late as 1939, the congregation still found it nec-

³⁰ Rabbi Simon Schwab to Joseph Meyerhoff, June 15, 1937, copy lent to the writer by Mr. Benjamin Adler. The present writer has made a few changes in spelling and sentence structure to suit American usage. The only other changes made are omissions indicated in the standard fashion.

³¹ Minutes of Joint Meeting, June 27, 1937.

³² Our present good neighbor, Congregation Beth Jacob owed much of its original impetus to this division of strength at Shearith Israel. Fortunately no scars remain today.

essary to engage four men at sixty cents per day in order to ensure a minyan for Mincha during the winter months.³³ By the end of Rabbi Schwab's tenure at Shearith Israel, however, he had the pleasure of presiding over a congregation whose minyanim were secure. Indeed, in 1957, the Board felt sufficiently certain about the morning minyanim to authorize a second Shacharis service at 7:30 to be continued as long as it did not threaten the earlier minyan.³⁴

In January 1957, a dinner was tendered to honor Rabbi Schwab on his twentieth anniversary with the congregation.³⁵ It was a cause of sincere regret to learn, at the end of that year, that Rabbi Schwab wished to accept a New York post and requested release from his responsibilities in Baltimore as of May 8, 1958.³⁶ The rabbi's departure was effected in a sincerely amicable atmosphere. He has continued to enjoy the warmest relationship with his many old friends in the congregation and with the synagogue itself.

The year 1958 featured three events which signalled the initiation of a new era for Shearith Israel. The departure of Rabbi Schwab for New York, the departure of President Sol Rauneker for Cincinnati, and the final closure of the McCulloh Street building set in motion several important new forces.

An amendment to the constitutional by-laws of the congregation limited the president of the congregation to three consecutive terms of one year each. Thus since 1958, Shearith Israel has profited from leadership given by Presidents Henry P. Cohn, Dr. Eugene Kaufmann, Alvin Cohn, Kurt Flamm, and Morris Levine.

In that year 1958, the Kehilla chose its fourth rabbi.³⁷ A com-

³³ Board Minutes, December 25, 1939.

³⁴ Board Minutes, May 15, 1957.

³⁵ Board Minutes, November 26, 1956.

³⁶ Board Minutes, December 24, 1957, April 23, March 23, May 3, 1958.

³⁷ Reference is made to Rabbis whose position with the congregation was official. In the several interim periods between the tenure of such Rabbis, other men were honored with the title of congregational spiritual leader. Little is known of them. Wood's *Baltimore Directory* lists Rev. Dr. M. Lilienthal as Rabbi in 1885-1886. Polk's *Baltimore City Street Directory* lists Rev. Moses Aaron Schreiber as Rabbi in 1889. Mr. Herman Mitnick of Baltimore, a great grandson of Reverend Schreiber, states that the latter was actually a chazan rather than a rav. Born in Liverpool, England, he resided in Baltimore for a relatively short period. He ultimately settled in New York and pursued a business career. For practical purposes, the officially elected Rabbis of Shearith Israel have been Abraham Rice, Schepschel Schaffer, Simon Schwab, and Mendel Feldman.

mittee headed first by Mr. Milton Lasson and ultimately by Dr. Eugene Kaufmann was formed at the direction of President Henry P. Cohn. Rabbi Schwab served as consultant.³⁸ On July 1, 1958 that committee formally recommended the appointment of Rabbi Mendel Feldman of Brooklyn, New York to the vacant post. A meeting of the congregation called for July 20, confirmed the decision of the committee and board.³⁹ The rabbi himself accepted the terms set by the congregation and met the officers and members of the board on July 29.⁴⁰



Rabbi Mendel Feldman

Rabbi Feldman's tenure at Shearith Israel has been a happy one for the congregation and, hopefully, for the rabbi as well. As the first American born rabbi to direct the spiritual life of Shearith Israel, Rabbi Feldman has taken special care to guard intact the German *Minhag* hallowed by departed generations. At the same time, as a product of *Yeshivas M'sivta Torah Va Daath* and as a *Lubavitcher* Chassid, he has opened the way to what has been termed "a marriage of the *minhagim*" in certain narrowly specified areas. Some of the members of the old Shearith Israel shake their heads at the increased liveliness of the seven *hakofos* on Simchas Torah. They are reassured, however, when the familiar

³⁸ Board Minutes, December 24, 1957, April 23, 1958. Chazan David Baum, who entered the service of the congregation in 1953 is a contemporary link to the era of Rabbi Schwab.

³⁹ Board Minutes, July 1, 1958.

⁴⁰ Board Minutes, July 29, 1958.

Piyutim are recited as in days of yore with the same South German *Niggunim*. Indeed, with the Roedelheim Machzor available in good English translation, a new generation has been introduced to that literary masterpiece which grew from a millenium of agony and glory in the German Diaspora.

Today, Shearith Israel has achieved a level of accomplishment beyond the dreams of its founders. The contributions of the synagogue can be read in the hundreds of Succos which rise so proudly within a ten block radius of the heartland at Glen Avenue. It can be read in the fact that the sons of this congregation become *Baalei Krias Ha-Torah*; as adequate evidence is given every Saturday at *Mincha*. It can be read in the fact that the Minyanim and the Shiurim of the congregation keep lights burning through the greater part of the day and night. It can be read in the fact that Shearith Israel is one of the few congregations which may boast as an evidence of strength that it has no Hebrew School; almost all of its children are enrolled in the Day Schools and Yeshivos.⁴¹

The smaller minyanim which now lend variety and spice to the orthodox life of the neighborhood exist because Shearith Israel pioneered in establishing the only environment in which they would survive.

At Shearith Israel the spirit of *Torah im Derech Eretz* breathes vital air. The dream of Samson Raphael Hirsch stands fulfilled in so many university educated men active in secular professions, who sit and "learn" in the shiurim of Shearith Israel.

This brief history closes on a note of vibrant hope. We await the next chapter beyond the threshold of a century.

⁴¹ A Hebrew School was maintained by the Congregation through the greater part of its history. Mr. Leon Rivkin, today an active member of the congregation, served as principal during the first seventeen years of the Glen Avenue branch's existence, 1925-1942. Rabbi Zevi Tabory and Rabbi Joshua Levy continued it for a short time thereafter. The school closed completely at the end of the Second World War despite efforts to keep it open. At its maximum enrollment, early in Mr. Rivkin's tenure, approximately 150-175 students were in attendance. Most of these were the children of residents of the neighborhood who did not belong to the congregation.

A Glossary of Hebrew Terms

Baalei Krias Ha-Torah: Literally "Masters of the reading of the Torah;" persons skilled in reading the unvocalized Hebrew of the Pentateuch using traditional melodic modes.

Beth Ha-Midrash: Literally, "A House of Study;" usually a room in a synagogue devoted to study. See *Shiur*.

Chassid (plural Chassidim): Orthodox Jews who derive their philosophy from the teachings of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov, 1700-1760. Placing emphasis upon joyous enthusiasm in worship, the Chassidim today are divided into numerous groups which maintain loyalty to *rebbe*s descended from dynasties stemming from the founding fathers of the movement. One of the largest and most influential follows the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Chazan or Cantor: Actually any male who leads congregational prayer. In common usage the term refers to the officially designated prayer leader.

Erev: Evening. As all Jewish holidays begin at sunset, the term is used to describe the opening of a holiday or the Sabbath; e.g. Erev Pesach.

Gabbai Rishon: The most important of the synagogue officials charged with supervising the conduct of services, choosing prayer leaders, and assigning honors.

Gemorrah: The portion of the Talmud codified at the end of the Fifth Century; a legal commentary.

Hakofos: Processional circuits made by male worshippers through the synagogue at certain services on the holidays of Succos and Simchas Torah.

Hirsch, Samson Raphael: A German Rabbi (1808-1888) who maintained that orthodox Judaism and western secular culture could coexist compatibly.

Kashrus: Jewish dietary laws.

Kehilla: An organized Jewish community.

Lag B'Omer: The thirty-third day of the fifty-day period between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot.

Mechitza: A means of separating male and female worshippers.

Mikva: A ritual bath essential to Jewish religious practice; literally a gathering (of water).

Mincha: The afternoon service.

Minhag: Religious custom elevated to the level of compulsory observance by centuries of practice.

Mishna (Mishnayos): The older portion of talmudic commentary codified in Palestine by R. Judah Ha-Nasi from 170 to 217.

Niggunim: Specific intonations or melodic modes used by skilled chazanim in certain congregations.

Piyutim: Prayers or poetic works inserted into the regular service. Not all of the piyutim are recited uniformly by orthodox Jews throughout the world.

Rav: Literally master or teacher. The variant term "Rabbi" denotes "my master" or "my teacher."

Seforim: Books.

Semicha: The technical term for rabbinical ordination.

Shabbos: The Sabbath, lasting from no less than eighteen minutes before sunset on Friday until the onset of darkness on Saturday night.

Shearith Israel: The name of the congregation may be translated as "Remnant of Israel."

Shiur: A study session devoted to a specific body of religious commentary.

Shmiras Shabbos: Sabbath observance.

Shomrei Shabbos: Sabbath observers.

Shul: Variouslly Schul and Schule; A Yiddish term for synagogue from the German word for school.

Shulchan Aruch: An authoritative guide to religious practice codified by Rabbi Joseph Karo published in 1565.

Torah im Derech Eretz: Literally, "religious Law with the Way of the Land;" more specifically an expression associated with Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh. See Hirsch.

Yeshivah: Any residential school devoted to orthodox Jewish studies for male students; usually defined narrowly as a rabbinical seminary.

SHEARITH ISRAEL CONGREGATION
Park Heights and Glen Avenues
Baltimore, Maryland 21215

Officers 1969-70 5730

Rabbi	Mendel Feldman
Cantor	David Baum
Sexton	Albert Leiter
President	Morris Levine
First Vice-president	Merrill B. Lehman
Second Vice-president	O. D. Taragin
Treasurer	Alvin Cohn
Secretary	Wolfgang Meyer

Directors

Josef S. Altmann	Carmi Schwartz
Abraham Bamberger	Hillel Soclof
Rabbi Dr. Herbert Birnbaum	M. Leo Storch
Dr. Joshua Greenspon	Harry Wolpert
Rainer Katzenstein	Bernard Yaffe

Sisterhood Officers

President	Mrs. Helman Berlin
Corresponding Secretary	Mrs. Eugene Kaufmann
Recording Secretary	Mrs. Albert Leiter
Financial Secretary	Mrs. Sidney Gasner
Treasurer	Mrs. Henry P. Cohn

The Congregation remembers with appreciation the many years of service rendered to the Kehilla by Reverend Moses Herman, now a resident of Israel.