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Article Summary: In 1825 there were only about six functioning Jewish congregations in the United States. By mid-century the number had increased to fifty. Plans for the first known Jewish services in Nebraska were announced in an Omaha newspaper on September 29, 1867. In 1868, a Hebrew congregation was formed in Council Bluffs. But it was not until 1871 the Omaha Jews formally organized both a religious congregation and a burial society.

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Names: Mr Rosenthal, Isaac M Frank, Samuel M Levy, Max Abrahams, Meyer Hellman, J A Hart, M Goldsmith, J C Rosenfeld, Emmanuel Simon, N Rosenthal, Bernard Gladstone, Samuel Jacobs, Alexander Rosenspitz, Mr Hertzmann, Elias Eppstein, Isaac M Wise, Isaac Oberfelder, Morris Adamsky, Abraham Bernstein, Jacob Meyer, Edward Rosewater, Isaac M Wise, David Stern, Simeon Bloom, H Saft, Alexander Rosenspitz, George E Harfield, Julius Meyer, George E Harfield, Joseph Oberfelder, Dr Harfield, N I Benson, Moses Montefiore, Mrs Meyer Hellman, Ferdinand Adler, Emmanuel Simon, William Rosenau, Samuel Katz, John Merritt, Addie Gladstone, Leo Franklin, Abram Simon, Frederick Cohn

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Photographs / Images: Isaac Oberfelder and Meyer Hellman, early presidents of congregation of Temple Israel; Temple Israel built in 1884 at 23rd and Harney Streets, Omaha; Temple Israel at Park Avenue and Jackson Streets, Omaha, dedicated in 1908; Temple Israel confirmation certificate, Addie Gladstone, 1871

THE FIRST SYNAGOGUE IN NEBRASKA: THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE CONGREGATION OF ISRAEL OF OMAHA

By Carol Gendler

The settlement of Nebraska, which began when passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act designated Nebraska as a territory in 1854, coincided with a dramatic increase in the Jewish population of the United States. Though the number of Jews had risen between 1820 and 1850 from about 4,000 to some 50,000, the next decade found an additional 100,000 Jewish arrivals. Political unrest in Europe was mainly responsible for the surge in Jewish emigration. Revolutions in Germany, Austria, and Italy caused large numbers of disenchanting "forty-eighters" to make their way to America. Between 1850 and 1860 almost two million immigrants arrived in the United States from Europe. About 5 per cent of these were Jews, many of them young, strong, and eager to assert their independence in the new world.¹

Many immigrant Jews became peddlers, trudging out from the eastern seaboard hawking their wares and seeking their fortunes as part of the general westward migration. The immigrant who began his business career as a peddler often found that he could turn in his pack for a store and find success as an entrepreneur in a frontier town. As new communities were established, retail and wholesale outlets were in demand. The town that had a need for his services often became the home of such a wanderer, Jew and Christian alike. Many of the Jewish communities in the west were started by these peddlers recently arrived from Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Hungary, and western Poland.²

In 1825 there were only about six functioning Jewish congregations in the United States. By mid-century the number had increased to fifty as new communities were founded and synagogues organized.³ An Omaha newspaper in 1866 listed ten

organized denominations. Although there is no other evidence of the existence of Jewish services at this early date, the article included the Israelites among these established religious groups on the Nebraska frontier.⁴

Plans for the first known Jewish services in Nebraska were announced in an Omaha newspaper on September 29, 1867: "Israelites' New Years' Day comes on Monday, September 30th (tomorrow.) There will be prayer by Mr. Rosenthal at his house, at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. All brothers are earnestly solicited to take part in this festival, and help the organization of a synagogue in Omaha."⁵ There were twenty Jews present at these Rosh Hashanah services, and a similar number at the Yom Kippur observance the following week. Prayers were read both in Hebrew and in German. The *Daily Herald* noted that several Omaha Jews were out of town during the holy days, perhaps to attend more formal services elsewhere. The editor wished the Jews "a successful completion of their project to establish a Synagogue in Omaha."⁶

A year later, in September, 1868, the following notice was printed in an Omaha daily paper: "Khela B'ni Israel:—To the Israelites of Council Bluffs and others: We are pleased to inform you that we have founded a Hebrew congregation called "B'ni Israel," and extend to you our cordial invitation to attend our Divine Services on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur at Masonic Hall, Pioneer Block."⁷ This notice was signed by Isaac M. Frank, president of the congregation, and by Samuel M. Levy, the secretary.⁸

During the early years services were apparently held only on the high holidays, and until 1871 the congregation remained rather loosely structured. In August of 1869 a group of eleven men met in a private home to reorganize the Omaha Jewish community for the conduct of religious services for that year. Frank remained president and services were again held at Masonic Hall.⁹ Max Abrahams, who had come to Omaha with his father shortly after the Civil War, served as reader for the services.¹⁰

In 1871 Omaha Jews formally organized both a religious congregation and a burial society. On January 8, 1871, a meeting was held at which thirty Jews formed the Congregation of Israel. Officers were elected and a drive was organized to raise funds for purchase of land on which to build a synagogue.¹¹ At monthly meetings of the synagogue members, plans for the future went

ahead and by March \$1,000 had been pledged toward the building fund. Meyer Hellman, president of the congregation, traveled east to solicit further contributions. In May a committee was selected to choose land for the construction of a temple.¹²

The B'nai Israel Burial Society was organized in the same year by a group of men almost identical with that which had shortly before organized the Congregation of Israel. The preamble to its constitution stated:

Whereas, The hand of providence is held over our nation as Israclites, we are prompted by a sense of duty, and to promote our interests and material assistance for the welfare, happiness and protection to each other. . .

Therefore, We, the undersigned, do associate ourselves to provide in time of health, for each other in time of need, to which the human frame is liable, and to pay the last duty and homage in that which all living men must fall, and being creatures while life shall be granted to us, we have formed ourselves into a body corporate, by the name and style of the Society B'nai Israel of Omaha, in the county of Douglas, state of Nebraska.¹³

The original officers of the society were J. A. Hart, President; M. Goldsmith, vice president; J. C. Rosenfeld, secretary; and Emmanuel Simon, treasurer. Trustees were N. Rosenthal, Bernard Gladstone, and Samuel Jacobs.¹⁴ In July of 1871 the B'nai Israel Society purchased property at 42nd and Redick streets in Omaha for \$300 for use as Pleasant Hill Cemetery, the first Jewish burial ground in Nebraska.¹⁵ Before long the maintenance of two separate organizations became burdensome and the cemetery was deeded to the Congregation of Israel.¹⁶

For a time in the summer and fall of 1871, the Congregation of Israel was served by the Reverend Alexander Rosenspitz, who came to Omaha from Jefferson, Texas. He delivered a lecture, "On Human Dignity," on a Sunday afternoon to which both Jews and non-Jews were invited.¹⁷ On September 16, 1871, at ceremonies which took place at Rosh Hashanah services and which had undoubtedly awaited arrival of a rabbi, seven young members of the Jewish community received certificates of confirmation signed by Rosenspitz.¹⁸ This was the first indication of any formal religious instruction for the Jewish young people of Omaha. High holiday services were again held at Masonic Hall in 1871, presumably conducted by Rosenspitz.¹⁹ A grand ball sponsored by the Congregation of Israel of Max Meyer's music hall in October in 1871 gives further evidence of the viability of the Jewish community.²⁰

The following year, in July of 1872, the four young ladies who had been confirmed by Rosenspitz organized a Hebrew Sun-

day school. Although it was short-lived, it was the first of its kind known to exist in Nebraska. There were only four pupils, and it would be several years before Jewish education could be provided for Omaha children on a continuing basis.²¹ Having conducted an apparently successful fund raising campaign, the Congregation of Israel in 1873 purchased a lot on Cass between 16th and 17th streets for \$1,000. This property was never utilized by the congregation and was sold two years later for \$950.²²

High holiday services in 1873 and 1874 were conducted by a Mr. Hertzmann of Council Bluffs in Meyer's music hall, and most Jewish merchants closed their stores in observance of the holy days.²³ In November of 1873 the Congregation of Israel filed articles of incorporation with the Douglas County clerk.²⁴ For the next several years the Congregation of Israel held high holiday services in various public halls, but so far as is known there was little organized religious life during the remainder of the year. Meetings were held to discuss the purchase of another piece of property and the building of a synagogue, but no results were evident.²⁵

Early in 1877 the Jewish community of Omaha was host to Rabbi Elias Eppstein of Congregation B'ne Jeshurun in Milwaukee, whose visit was sponsored by Keshet Shel Barzel, a Jewish fraternal lodge that had been organized in Omaha two years earlier.²⁶ Eppstein's suggestions for organization of a Sunday school in Omaha were well received by Jewish citizens. Books were ordered and classes were soon in existence.²⁷ Within seven years there were sixty students enrolled and the Congregation of Israel Sunday school remained the largest of its kind in Omaha for many years.²⁸

Although the Congregation of Israel leaned towards the tenets of Reform Judaism advocated by Rabbi Isaac M. Wise of Cincinnati, its membership necessarily comprised many factions with a diversity of religious practices, a situation which precluded strict application of reform principles.²⁹ The Congregation of Israel did not officially affiliate with the reform movement until 1889, and at least through the early 1880's an attempt was made to accommodate the religious services to all who attended. Dissent was inevitable, and in 1876 there took place in the congregation a major incident which received considerable publicity.

At this time the congregation, in accordance with its attempt to conciliate all factions, observed two days of Rosh Hashanah, while



Isaac Oberfelder (left) and Meyer Hellman, early presidents of the congregation of Temple Israel. (From Suzanne Somberg and Silvia Roffman. Consider the Years, 1871-1971[Omaha, 1971])

reform custom required the observance of but one day. In the absence of a rabbi, reader for the services was Morris Adamsky, a shoemaker who professed to be a reform Jew. Adamsky was assisted in his duties by a peddler named Forman. Services on the first day of Rosh Hashanah were uneventful. On the second day, however, before coming to Peyke's Hall at Twelfth and Farnam where the services were held, Adamsky "opened his shop as usual and began business the same as on any other secular day."³⁰ When the more pious members of the organization learned that Adamsky had gone to work on a holy day, they regarded his action as "a grave breach of the Mosaic law. . .and they were in a state of great indignation that Adamsky should profess to be a good Israelite and yet openly violate the religious law."³¹ Two other members of the congregation, Abraham Bernstein and Jacob Meyer, determined that Adamsky was not qualified to lead the congregation in prayer. A skirmish ensued, and both Adamsky and Forman were forcibly driven from the hall. According to a local paper, the reform Jews "came out of it with only a few physical bruises and a greatly damaged peace of mind."³²

In an interview with a reporter following the incident, Adamsky insisted that the congregation was reform, while Meyer claimed

that it was an orthodox synagogue. Meyer and Bernstein were arrested for disturbing the peace and fined \$3.00 each plus costs in police court. They also received an additional fine of \$1.00 each for the use of "boisterous language." A complaint filed by Adamsky against Bernstein "for making threats against him" was dismissed for insufficient evidence.³³ There the matter rested, at least publicly. Dissension in the congregation apparently continued, however, until the mid-1880's, by which time the arrival of sufficient numbers of Jews from eastern Europe permitted organization of orthodox congregations with which the more traditionally observant members of the Congregation of Israel could then affiliate.

Perhaps one of the most interesting facets of this factional dispute was the treatment accorded it by the three daily Omaha newspapers. The *Daily Herald* covered the affair in full, but the report was preceded by a lengthy explanation of the religious and social differences among Jews, in effect, an apologia. The writer explained:

The idea, however, that the disputes and bickerings of some of the more ignorant and unpleasant members of the congregation need reflect upon the many intelligent men of education and high social position of the same synagogue is wholly without reason, and the reader will readily comprehend that the difficulty occurred among the lower class of society and is probably more personal than religious in its origin.³⁴

Thus the editor attempted to defend those Jews he considered more acceptable socially than the orthodox members. The paper went further and in a separate notice informed the public that the Jacob Meyer who had been involved in the dispute was totally unrelated to the prominent and reputable Jewish citizen, Max Meyer.³⁵

The *Daily Republican* carried no report of the dispute whatsoever, with the exception of this brief notice:

The facts about the unpleasantness at the Hebrew service on Wednesday were suppressed in *The Republican* at the earnest request of leading Jewish citizens. No good could be accomplished by such publication, and it would work injury to many, therefore we willingly consented not to publish the particulars in our possession. The *Herald*, however, did not look at the matter in the same light.³⁶

The *Bee*, whose editor, Edward Rosewater, was a Jew, carried only notice of the impending court actions against the participants.³⁷ Presumably the *Bee*, too, had been requested by "leading Jewish citizens" to suppress the incident. Actually, reports of disputes such as this can be found in the records of many similar congregations. These were serious and sensitive issues that often were resolved in civil courts. By and large the

arrival of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe aided the development of reform Judaism in the United States. These immigrants formed a distinct community and organized their own congregations or "minyanim" based on the national origin of the congregants.³⁸ Those orthodox Jews who were earlier arrivals were absorbed into these traditional congregations, thus enabling the Congregation of Israel to adopt reform practices.

The leaders of the Congregation of Israel were undoubtedly influenced by the ideas of Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, who visited Omaha in the course of a western journey in the summer of 1877.³⁹ Rabbi Wise was interested primarily in the modernization of religious services and in the unification of congregations that adhered to these modern practices. In 1857 he published the first edition of *Minhag America*, an updated Hebrew prayerbook he hoped would be used uniformly in all congregations. In 1873 Rabbi Wise founded the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, an umbrella organization with which modernized synagogues could affiliate. Two years later Wise founded in Cincinnati the Hebrew Union College, the first successful attempt at advanced Jewish education in the United States.⁴⁰

Thus influenced by Rabbi Wise and with an enlarging Jewish community, and perhaps also in hopes of further conciliating the various factions represented within the congregation, the Congregation of Israel began in 1878 to seek its first permanent rabbi. It was the desire of the members that regular weekly services be inaugurated in addition to the high holy day observances to which public religious worship had previously been limited.⁴¹

In March of 1878 the Rev. David Stern of Virginia was engaged by the Congregation of Israel.⁴² Stern was said to be a man of "considerable education and liberal views," and as a result he appealed more to the reform elements than he did to those who upheld the tenets of traditional Judaism.⁴³ Though Stern remained in Omaha only a few months, regular Friday evening and Saturday morning services were inaugurated during his tenure and the Sunday school continued to operate.⁴⁴ The twenty families that comprised the congregation at this time, however, apparently found that they could not afford the support of a religious leader, and Stern left Omaha in early fall of the same year. Services for the next three years were conducted by

laymen and the sermons at the high holiday services were delivered by Simeon Bloom, a local attorney.⁴⁵

In February of 1879 the congregation took a major step toward the establishment of a permanent location by purchasing a lot at Twenty-third and Harney streets for \$1,400.⁴⁶ Until a temple was built in 1884, weekly and holiday services were held in various public halls and in the Unitarian Church.⁴⁷ The high holiday services conducted by the Congregation of Israel in 1879, which were attended by some 175 people, provoked some curious discussion in the local press. Notices announcing that the services would be held at the church included an invitation that strangers and the public would be "cordially welcomed."⁴⁸ A subsequent article in the *Evening Bee*, signed "G," included this description:

Public service was rendered in the old Hebraic language; and a somewhat talented young man in a straw hat presided at the organ. Time was, when this essentially Christian instrument was prohibited in the Jewish church, but progressive ideas have wrought innovations. . . .

A congregation whose ancestors have for nearly 2,000 years denied that Christ was God,—worshipping the Unitarian God of the Jew in the Unitarian church of the Christian, presents to America in the 19th century, an illustration of the old adage "Extremes meet."⁴⁹

A rejoinder, signed "Israelite," was printed in the *Bee* the following day. "Israelite" referred to the "malice and ignorance" demonstrated by "G" which, he wrote, must signify "goose." He added that the holding of Jewish services in a Unitarian church indicated an "advancement of mankind toward that enlightenment which shall one day unite Christian, Jew, Mahammedan [*sic*] and heathen in one common religion." "Israelite" further explained that "the Jewish church throughout the world ever opens its doors to welcome strangers, and ours is no exception."⁵⁰

A later notice announced that Jewish religious services would again be held at the church "through the courtesy of members of the Unitarian church."⁵¹ Perhaps inspired by the *Bee* article, the *Daily Republican* remarked that "whatever may be said of the Jewish people, they have since time immemorial maintained a separate and distinct part, both in religion and politics, thus confirming the prophecy that the Jewish people would be and continue to be a separate and distinct people."⁵² Announcements of Congregation of Israel services continued to invite public attendance, though no further comments were made by the *Bee*. Prayer services were conducted in Hebrew, with lectures in English. The *Bee* subsequently softened its tone and in 1880 went



Temple Israel built in 1884 at 23rd and Harney Streets, Omaha (above). Temple Israel, dedicated in 1908, was located at Park Avenue and Jackson Streets. (Courtesy of Temple Israel)



so far as to congratulate the lecturer, Simeon Bloom, "on his eloquent contribution to the observance of Yom Kippur in Omaha."⁵³

In the fall of 1883, as the congregation made plans for the erection of the first synagogue in Nebraska, it adopted a constitution which made a decided attempt to conciliate both the reform and orthodox Jews within its structure. The new constitution stated in the most general terms that the congregation was organized "for the purpose of perpetuating the cause of Judaism, in all its essential purity, and that we may cherish and promote its great and fundamental principle—the rock upon which our undying faith is founded—the belief in, and the worship of one God."⁵⁴

At high holiday services in 1883 the congregation heard the Rev. H. Saft, who was shortly afterwards engaged as spiritual leader.⁵⁵ In his initial sermon as rabbi of the congregation, he made clear his awareness of the difficulties he faced in uniting the opposing factions.⁵⁶ Rabbi Saft's tenure was short, however, as he proved within a year to be too conservative for the reform Jews who "largely controlled the affairs" of the congregation.⁵⁷

By June of 1884 construction was underway of a temple building on the property at 23rd and Harney streets. At this time the congregation had a membership of forty-five families, with sixty children in attendance at Sunday school.⁵⁸ The temple was dedicated in ceremonies on September 18, 1884. The brick and frame building was of Moorish architecture, with three pairs of stained glass windows on each side and a seating capacity of three hundred.⁵⁹ Dedication ceremonies were presided over by the Rev. Alexander Rosenspitz, who had served the congregation in its infancy in 1871, and by the newly elected Rabbi George E. Harfield. There were some two hundred in attendance, and a choir directed by Julius Meyer, including both Jews and non-Jews, participated in the service.⁶⁰

Since orthodox services were now regularly held in Omaha, the manner of worship in the new temple could and did reflect the adoption of a number of the practices of Reform Judaism. In addition to use of an organ, men and women were permitted to sit together, and some of the men worshipped hatless.⁶¹ Dr. George E. Harfield, who had received his education in London and had most recently served the St. John's Street Temple in Cincinnati, was engaged as rabbi of the congregation in September of 1884, just prior to the dedication of the new temple. Dr. Harfield, age 28,

received a monthly salary of \$125.⁶² During his eight months of service to the temple, he found it necessary to supplement his income by offering private lessons in French and German.⁶³

A number of programs were inaugurated at the Congregation of Israel during Dr. Harfield's brief tenure. The Congregation of Israel Sabbath School Society was organized to give public dramatic and literary presentations. The young people of the congregation presented "Queen Esther" at a Purim celebration in March of 1885 and a children's Purim banquet, which became a tradition of the temple, was inaugurated.⁶⁴ At services in the spring of 1885, Joseph Oberfelder, son of congregation president Isaac Oberfelder, became the first young man known to observe his bar mitzvah in the new temple building.⁶⁵

Despite the fact that Dr. Harfield was reelected in March of 1885 to serve another year, problems soon arose. The officers of the Congregation of Israel deemed the "action of Reverend Dr. Harfield in the Sunday School and language used by him from the pulpit, as unbecoming a clergyman and moved that . . . Harfield be requested to resign at once."⁶⁶ Dr. Harfield, who refused to tender his resignation until accorded a trial, was ordered not to officiate at subsequent temple services. At a special meeting of the congregation, three Sunday school pupils testified that Harfield had slapped them, and three members of the congregation affirmed that the rabbi had used improper language. The congregation, by unanimous vote, found him guilty of both charges. Despite the rabbi's demand for three months' salary, he was paid \$200 in severance pay and dismissed.⁶⁷

After interviewing and listening to sermons by several rabbis, the Congregation of Israel engaged a new spiritual leader.⁶⁸ Rabbi N. I. Benson of Owensburg, Kentucky, was elected as of September 1, 1885 at an annual salary of \$1,500.⁶⁹ Shortly after the high holiday services Rabbi Benson presided at a special memorial service for Sir Moses Montefiore, English philanthropist. Similar services were held in synagogues all over the United States. The program, which attracted an overflow crowd of both Jews and gentiles, featured addresses by a minister, a senator, Edward Rosewater, and the rabbi.⁷⁰

During Benson's four years with the congregation, he was responsible for the organization of the Ladies' Sewing Society, under whose auspices a group of women, initially presided over by Mrs. Meyer Hellman, met weekly to sew clothing for the needy.⁷¹ This group represented the first organized Jewish women's charity

in Omaha. On June 9, 1886, the first confirmation ceremony took place in the new temple with ten young people included in the class.⁷²

By 1886 the congregation of Israel boasted over one hundred members, and although there was talk of building a new and larger synagogue, repairs were made instead to the existing building, which was enlarged in 1887.⁷³ Rabbi Benson, as the only Jewish spiritual leader within a large area, traveled widely to perform religious functions and to give lectures in various parts of the state.⁷⁴ Late in 1886 Benson inaugurated a series of monthly Sunday afternoon lectures in order that those who were unable to attend the regular Friday evening and Saturday morning services would have the benefit of his religious leadership.⁷⁵

In the fall of 1887, the congregation found it necessary to raise funds for the purchase of land adjacent to Pleasant Hill Cemetery. It had become imperative to erect a caretaker's building to prevent further acts of vandalism as had been occurring on the cemetery grounds. Under the leadership of Rabbi Benson, Ferdinand Adler, Meyer Hellman, and Emmanuel Simon, \$1,100 was collected for this purpose.⁷⁶ In the fall of 1888, the first Hebrew Charity Fair was held and \$4,000 was raised for the support of the congregation, which at that time was beginning to experience financial difficulties.⁷⁷

The Congregation of Israel affiliated officially with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the fount of Reform Judaism in the United States, in March of 1889. A new constitution indicated that worship would be according to *Minhag America*, the prayer book published by Rabbi Isaac M. Wise.⁷⁸ Although the circumstances are not clear, it is likely that this action on the part of the membership contributed to the decision of Rabbi Benson to resign his position with the congregation in April of that year.⁷⁹ It was Benson's announced intention to study law and until such time as he was able to enter law practice, he expected to serve some of the small orthodox congregations which had developed in the 1880's and to organize a Hebrew school for the children of the orthodox Jews.⁸⁰

Within a few months of his departure from the Congregation of Israel, Rabbi Benson apparently incurred the enmity of his former congregants by briefly becoming rabbi of Congregation Bene Jeshurun in Lincoln. In this position Benson was able to perform marriage ceremonies and other religious functions, the

remuneration for which would otherwise have gone to his successor in Omaha. Since the Congregation of Israel was in need of additional income at this time, its board of directors appealed to the Lincoln synagogue to cooperate with them in this matter and dismiss Rabbi Benson from their service.⁸¹

Rabbi William Rosenau, the first graduate of Hebrew Union College to serve the Congregation of Israel, succeeded Rabbi Benson in September, 1889. Shortly before Rabbi Rosenau took office, fifty-six members of the congregation petitioned the board of directors requesting that the new rabbi wear a skull cap and tallit, or prayer shawl, while conducting services.⁸² A motion to this effect was passed by the congregation, but subsequently it was decided that since Rosenau had been engaged under no such conditions, he should be permitted to conduct the service in accordance with his own beliefs and practices until a "full expression by all the members" was heard. It soon became evident that the wearing of the garments of traditional Judaism was not in accordance with Rosenau's beliefs, and the matter was dropped.⁸³ This was apparently the final attempt on the part of those temple members who preferred a more traditional practice of Judaism to impose their views. From then on it was the practice of the congregation to discard the cap and prayer shawl.

Rabbi Rosenau remained in Omaha until 1892, when he resigned to become spiritual leader of Temple Oheb Shalom in Baltimore, a congregation of some three hundred families.⁸⁴ Under his leadership in Omaha, the Congregation of Israel organized the Literary and Congregational Entertainment Society, called L.A.C.E., in order to further the knowledge of Jewish literature and history among the congregants, who Rosenau said suffered from "religious indifference."⁸⁵ During Rosenau's tenure the scope of the Sunday school was enlarged and clarified and students were required to spend two hours weekly studying Jewish history, the principles of Judaism, and Hebrew.⁸⁶

In 1891 in response to a need for a larger building, Rabbi Rosenau and the president and vice president of the congregation, Samuel Katz and John Merritt, canvassed the city and succeeded in raising \$3,600 in donations. The temple building did not nearly accommodate the membership of 117 families, and some thirty more were desirous of affiliation with the congregation. The intention was to move the original building and raise the



Temple Israel confirmation certificate, 1871. (Courtesy of Temple Israel)

foundation, and to build an addition in front of the original structure. It was the plan of the officers of the congregation that every fourth pew in the enlarged building be reserved for strangers and those unable to pay.⁸⁷ These arrangements, however were never realized, presumably because business conditions worsened to a considerable extent during the early 1890's and members were hard pressed even to pay their dues. By 1896 the temple roster had shrunk to eighty-four members, a decrease of twenty-nine from the previous year.⁸⁸ The need for a new building was no longer so great.

Rabbi Leo Franklin, a 22-year-old graduate of Hebrew Union College, was chosen to succeed Rabbi Rosenau as of September 1, 1892.⁸⁹ Shortly after Rabbi Franklin's assumption of the pulpit, and seemingly at his request, the congregation decided to adopt the Union Prayer Book and the accompanying ritual that had recently been formulated by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, an organization of Reform rabbis established by Rabbi Wise.⁹⁰ Rabbi Franklin remained in Omaha for six years, then resigned to become rabbi of Temple Beth El in Detroit.⁹¹ During his Omaha years he was active in a number of local educational and charitable organizations, and the temple building fund was considerably augmented.⁹²

Abram Simon, a native of Nashville, Tennessee, and a graduate of Hebrew Union College who came to Omaha from a temple in Sacramento, California, was installed as rabbi of the Congregation of Israel on April 28, 1899.⁹³ The financial condition of the congregation was considerably improved by the time of Rabbi Simon's arrival and by 1901 his salary had twice been increased.⁹⁴ Under Rabbi Simon, the Sunday school was enlarged to an attendance of 170, opportunities for the study of Jewish literature and Bible were enhanced, the building fund was bolstered, and the Congregation of Israel Sisterhood was organized.⁹⁵

Rabbi Frederick Cohn of Fort Wayne, Indiana, who would remain with the Congregation of Israel for over thirty years, assumed his duties in March of 1904.⁹⁶ Under Rabbi Cohn the temple membership grew considerably and a new building, known as Temple Israel, was dedicated at Park Avenue and Jackson streets in 1908.⁹⁷ This property was sold to St. John's Greek Orthodox Church when the new Temple Israel at 70th and Cass streets was occupied in 1954.⁹⁸

In this way organized Jewish congregational life had its start in Omaha. It began as a small and struggling effort to provide for the religious requirements of a group of pioneer Jews. Now, more than a century later, it has survived such varied challenges as that of internal dissension, financial insecurity, and a destructive tornado to become a strong and influential representative of American Reform Judaism serving more than six hundred families.

NOTES

(Unless otherwise noted all newspapers cited were published in Omaha.)

1. Rufus Lears (Israel Goldberg), *The Jews in America: A History* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1954), 64-65; Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 23.

2. Glazer, *American Judaism*, 23-24; Oscar Handlin, *Adventure in Freedom* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1954), 53.

3. Glazer, *American Judaism*, 24.

4. *Weekly Herald*, July 13, 1866.

5. *Daily Herald*, September 29, 1867. Jewish services can take place in any room set aside for that purpose. Traditional public Jewish worship requires a *minyan* or quorum of ten adult males and thereby qualifies as a religious community. Further, a synagogue or congregation does not require the services of a rabbi. Any knowledgeable layman can conduct a Jewish service.

6. *Daily Herald*, October 1, 8, 1867. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year. Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Rosenthal owned a restaurant on Farnam Street (*Collins' Omaha Directory*, 1868-1869, 155).

7. *Daily Herald*, September 12, 1868. "B'ni" might have been a misprint. "B'nai Israel" is translated as Sons of Israel. The *Occident*, XXVI (October, 1868), 333, also noted the formation of a Jewish congregation in Omaha.

8. *Daily Herald*, September 12, October 2, 1868. Both Frank and Levy were in the clothing business.

9. *Sunday Bee*, May 17, 1908. The eleven included, besides Frank: Bernard Gladstone, Emmanuel Simon, Max Meyer, Simon Lehman, Meyer Hellman, Aaron Cahn, David Davidson, Morris Elgutter, Lewis Brash, and Meyer Goldsmith.

10. *Morning Bee*, February 16, 1890; Ella Fleishman Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska: General Survey" (unpublished typescript, 1927), 40; questionnaire returned by Milton R. Abrahams; James W. Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska* (New York: Munsell and Co., 1894), 337. The *Bee* and Savage and Bell erroneously refer to Abrahams as "L. Abrahams."

11. *American Israelite*, XVII (February 3, 1871), 7. Officers were Meyer Hellman, president; Meyer Goldsmith, vice president; Lewis Brash, treasurer; A. S. Brown, secretary. The minute books of the Congregation of Israel, which have been deposited at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, date from 1883. Few official records remain from the period prior to that time.

12. *Daily Herald*, May 10, 1871.

13. *World-Herald*, November 13, 1921.

14. *Ibid.* The original membership list included the following names: J. H. Hart, M. Goldsmith, Abraham Adamsky, B. Gladstone, J. Newman, S. Rothschild, J. M. Abrahams, L. Schwartz, Jacob Rosenthal, Samuel Friedlander, S. Reichenberg, Ph. Gottheimer, E. Bundschup, Abraham Israel, Albert Abel, P. Hart, Samuel F. May, S. Lehman, M. Hellman, A. S. Brown, Aaron Cahn, M. Freidenheim, Daniel Bernstein, Julius Rich, M. Goldstein, B. Goldstein, M. Klein, Morris Greenbaum, S. Brown, N. Rosenthal, and Jacob

Phillips. Hart, the president, moved to St. Louis in August of 1871 (*Daily Herald*, August 31, 1871).

15. Douglas County, Nebraska, Deed Records, Book 11, 306-307.

16. *Sunday Bee*, May 17, 1908; Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," 40.

17. *Daily Herald*, July 23, 1871. Rosenspitz was not designated a rabbi because he lacked official rabbinical sanction.

18. The seven were Esther Jacobs, Emmanuel Cohn [Cahn], Eva Rawitzer, Bertha Rinehart, Albert Cahn, Charles Rosenthal, and Addie Gladstone (Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," 40; *World-Herald*, November 13, 1921; Congregation of Israel Confirmation Certificate, September 16, 1871). It is now known whether Rosenspitz was actually retained by the congregation or if he was merely a visiting rabbi. There is no further record of his service to the congregation.

19. *Daily Herald*, September 14, 1871.

20. *Daily Herald*, October 4, 1871.

21. Addie Gladstone Record Book, 1872, American Jewish Archives. The pupils were Sarah Jacobs, Charles Elgutter, Victor and Max Gladstone.

22. *Evening Bee*, September 6, 1873, November 27, 1875; Savage and Bell, *History of Omaha*, 337.

23. *Daily Republican*, September 23, 1873; September 13, 22, 1874. The nature of Reverend Hertzmann's relationship to the Jewish communities of Omaha and Council Bluffs is not known. Like Rosenspitz, his incumbency appears to have been temporary.

24. Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, A251. A. S. Brown was listed as clerk. Trustees were Morris Elgutter, Bernard Gladstone, Max Meyer, Jacob Newman, and William Rawitzer.

25. *Evening Bee*, October 9, 11, 1875; April 8, 1876. Officers for 1876 and 1877 were Meyer Goldsmith, president; Lewis Brash, vice president; Max Meyer, treasurer; A. S. Brown, secretary (*Evening Bee*, September 18, 1876; *Daily Republican*, January 3, 1877). The membership of the congregation at this time comprised about twenty-five families (*Daily Republican*, January 3, 1877).

26. *Evening Bee*, February 28, 1877; Louis J. Swichkow and Lloyd P. Gartner, *The History of Jews of Milwaukee* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), 45-46.

27. *Daily Herald*, March 7, 1877; *Evening Bee*, March 6, 1877; *Daily Republican*, March 7, 1877.

28. *Evening Bee*, June 14, 1884.

29. *Daily Herald*, March 9, 1871. Issues such as use of an organ and mixed choirs of Jews and non-Jews and/or men and women, the proportion of Hebrew used in the reading of the service as against the English or German translation, and that of family pews arose often. Traditional Jewish practice prohibited use of instrumental music and permitted choirs only of Jewish males. Further, the women were usually segregated in an upstairs balcony.

30. *Daily Herald*, September 21, 1876.

31. *Ibid.* Adamsky was sometimes spelled Adamski. Meyer was referred to as Myers, Meyer, and Myer. 32. *Ibid.* 33. *Ibid.* 34. *Ibid.*

35. *Daily Herald*, September 22, 1876.

36. *Daily Republican*, September 22, 1876.

37. *Evening Bee*, September 22, 1876.

38. A "minyan" (plural: "minyanim") is literally translated as "member." A minyan, or group of ten adult males, is required for traditional public Jewish worship.

39. *Daily Herald*, August 19, 1877; *Daily Republican*, August 26, 1877.

40. Glazer, *American Judaism*, 36-39.

41. *Evening Bee*, March 11, 1878.

42. All earlier sources date Stern's arrival as 1875, an error which apparently originated in the *Bee* history of the Congregation of Israel published in the newspaper on February 16, 1890. Later writers used this article as the source of their information.

43. Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," 41; *Morning Bee*, February 16, 1890; *Daily Republican*, March 12, 1878.

44. *Evening Bee*, March 15, 1878; *Daily Herald*, March 16, 1878; *Morning Bee*, February 16, 1890. Services at this time were held in Knights of Pythias Hall.
45. *Morning Bee*, February 16, 1890; *Daily Herald*, October 6, 1878; September 27, 1879. September 15, 1880. Stern returned to Omaha from his post in Peoria, Illinois, to lecture in July of 1880 (*Daily Republican*, July 11, 1880).
46. *Daily Republican*, February 15, 1879; *Evening Bee*, February 15, 1879. The deed for this property was transferred by Meyer Hellman and wife to the Congregation of Israel on April 12, 1884 (Douglas County, Nebraska, Deed Records, Book 52, 489).
47. *Daily Herald*, September 22, 1879; *Daily Republican*, September 24, 1881, November 24, 1883.
48. *Daily Herald*, September 17, 27, 1879; *Evening Bee*, September 17, 1879.
49. *Evening Bee*, September 18, 1879. Edward Rosewater, *Bee* editor, never became a member of the Congregation of Israel or of any other synagogue and apparently was not in sympathy with the practices of the congregation. The fact that Rosewater would sanction the publication of this rather derogatory article would seem to substantiate this view.
50. *Evening Bee*, September 19, 1879.
51. *Evening Bee*, September 26, 1879.
52. *Daily Republican*, September 27, 1879.
53. *Evening Bee*, September 14, 16, 1880.
54. *World-Herald*, November 13, 1921. Forty five names were signed as follows: Isaac Oberfelder, Isaac Rubin, Louis Ruben, Leon Kopald, Julius Rothholz, D. A. Saly, C. Shaw, M. Elgutter, J. Harris, J. Merritt, M. Goldsmith, Moritz Meyer, Ferdinand Adler, A. Heller, Sol Prince, E. Klein, Ph. Gottheimer, M. Hellman, William M. Grunebaum, Jacob Jaskalek, H. Phillips, E. Simon, A. Goldman, H. Spigle, S. Jacobs, B. Newman, J. Rosenfeld, L. Kalish, Lewis Brash, B. Kellner, Harry Sincere, Isaac Levi, Joseph Rosenstein, C. Schlank, H. Kalish, J. Brown, M. Rypinski, A. H. Gladstone, Julius Pepperberg, Samuel Katz, Isaac Schiff, Simon Oberfelder, John A. Freyhan, A. Jacobson, and J. L. Brandeis.
55. *Daily Republican*, October 10, 1883; *Evening Bee*, November 24, 1883.
56. *Daily Herald*, November 25, 1883.
57. *Morning Bee*, February 16, 1890.
58. *Evening Bee*, June 14, 1884.
59. *Evening Bee*, September 6, 1884; *Morning Bee*, September 19, 1884.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Evening Bee*, September 29, 1884. Orthodox Jews at prayer unflinching cover their heads and wear a "tallit" or prayer shawl on the Sabbath and holidays. This article also noted that there were at this time an estimated 1,200 Jews in Omaha, and that the Congregation of Israel included "the bulk in numbers, wealth and education."
62. Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, September 21, 1884, October 5, 1884; *Daily Republican*, December 30, 1884.
63. *Evening Bee*, November 7, 1884.
64. *Daily Republican*, December 30, 1884, February 26, 1885. Purim, the feast of lots, is a minor Jewish festival commemorating the story of the Book of Esther.
65. *Evening Bee*, March 27, 1885. Bar mitzvah is translated literally as "son of the commandment." A Jewish boy at age 13 is called to read the Torah and is thereafter considered an adult member of the congregation, at least in a ritual sense.
66. Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, April 5, 1885.
67. *Ibid.*, April 12, 1885, May 5, 1885.
68. *Evening Bee*, June 26, 27, 30, 1885.
69. *Evening Bee*, July 10, 20, 1885; Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, July 9, 1885. Benson's salary was raised to \$2,400 in 1887 (*Evening Bee*, April 4, 1887).
70. *Evening Bee*, September 30, October 5, 1885. This was one of Edward Rosewater's few public associations with the Jewish community.
71. *Evening Bee*, October 22, 26, 1886.
72. *Evening Bee*, May 27, June 3, 1886.
73. *Evening Bee*, October 1, 1886, February 7, 1887; *Morning Bee*, August 26, 1887.

74. *Daily Republican*, November 19, 1886; *Evening Bee*, November 19, 29, 1886.
75. *Daily Republican*, November 23, 1886.
76. *American Israelite*, XXXIV (April 27, 1888), 8; *Evening Bee*, September 27, 1887.
77. *Evening Bee*, October 16 and 22, 1888; Congregation of Israel, Treasurer's Report, September 1, 1889.
78. Letter to Max Meyer from Lipman Levy, secretary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, March 23, 1889; *Constitution of the Congregation of Israel, Omaha, Nebraska*, March 3, 1889. Membership fees at this time were \$25 for families and \$12 for single men, with annual dues at the same rates. Members were required to purchase a pew in the temple. Non-members were allowed to rent pews.
79. Letter to Board of Directors, Congregation of Israel, from N. I. Benson, April 1, 1889, in Congregation of Israel Collection, American Jewish Archives.
80. *Morning Bee*, May 15, 1889. This would seem to be further indication that Benson did not wish to serve a congregation that was officially affiliated with the reform movement. Benson became a member of the Douglas County Bar in 1892 (Savage and Bell, *History of Omaha*, 227).
81. Letter to Congregation Bene Yeshurun, Lincoln, Nebraska, from Congregation of Israel, October 29, 1889, in Congregation of Israel, Minute Book, 1889-1908.
82. Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, August 11, 1889.
83. Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, September 6, 1889.
84. Letter to Board of Directors, Congregation of Israel, from William Rosenau, March 10, 1892, in Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908; *Morning Bee*, March 8, 1892. Rabbi Rosenau married Mabel Hellman, daughter of Meyer Hellman (letter from Blanche Hellman Sachs, July 17, 1965). Rosenau later served on the Baltimore Board of Education, and as an associate professor at Johns Hopkins University. He was also elected president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (*World-Herald*, November 19, 1921).
85. *Evening Bee*, November 19, 1889.
86. "Rules and Regulations" of Sabbath School, in Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908.
87. *Morning Bee*, May 28, June 1, 1891; Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908, May 31, 1891.
88. *Ibid.*, July 5, 1891; Congregation of Israel, Budget Report, September 1, 1896.
89. *Morning Bee*, July 17, 1892; Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908, July 7, 1892. Rabbi Franklin's starting salary was \$2,000 per year.
90. *Ibid.*, November 20, 1892.
91. *Ibid.*, December 9, 1898. Lean financial conditions prevented the Congregation of Israel from raising Rabbi Franklin's salary above \$2,400 during his service in Omaha (*Morning Bee*, March 2, 1896).
92. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1898, January 21, 1899. Rabbi Franklin married a former Omaha girl, Hattie Oberfelder, in 1896 (*World-Herald*, July 19, 1896). He served eventually as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and originated the unassigned pew system in reform temples (*World-Herald*, November 19, 1921).
93. *Morning Bee*, April 21, 1899.
94. *Morning Bee*, March 5, 1901.
95. *Daily News*, December 9, 16, 1899; *Morning Bee*, November 23, 1900 and March 3, 1901; *World-Herald*, November 13, 1921. Simon became rabbi of Temple Adah Israel in Washington, D.C. and served as president of the Board of Education in Washington (*Morning Bee*, November 30, 1903, December 8, 1903; *World-Herald*, November 19, 1921).
96. *Morning Bee*, March 2, 1904. Rabbi Cohn was born in East Attleboro, Massachusetts, in 1873, was graduated from the University of Cincinnati and ordained at Hebrew Union College in 1896. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska in 1907. Rabbi Cohn was active in Omaha charities and civic affairs.
97. *Sunday Bee*, May 24, 1908. The building at 23rd and Harney was sold for use as a garage (*Morning Bee*, February 11, 1908).
98. Douglas County, Nebraska, Deed Records, Book 932, 147.