THE EARLY HISTORY OF TEMPLE SHALOM

MILTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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Milton is a small suburban town located just south of Boston, Massachusetts. By 1940 it had a population of about 20,000 and there were twelve churches of different denomination in the town. Milton had been founded in 1662, and from that time until 1940 not a single Jew who can be accounted for, lived in Milton. In the early 1940's a few Jews finally moved to Milton from more urban areas such as Chelsea, Roxbury, Dorchester, and the South End. They moved to Milton for the same reasons that most people moved to the suburbs. Their income had risen so that now they wished to live in less congested areas with larger homes and better educational and recreational facilities where they could give their families a more fulfilling life. This was before the wholesale trek of people to the suburbs in the early fifties.

Jews have always felt more secure when they lived together. The first Jews who moved to Milton felt as if they were strangers in a foreign land. Late in 1943, several Jewish men got together and decided to invite all the Jews who had moved to Milton to meet occasionally as a club since they shared a common heritage. About thirty men assembled and formed the Milton Hebrew Men's Club. At the beginning it was just a social group that would meet once a month to discuss things of interest.

These people were not religiously inclined in the beginning, but by the middle of 1944 they had already planned to have their first services for the High Holy Days of 1944. They rented the building at the corner of Blue Hills Parkway and Blue Hill Avenue and sold tickets for five dollars a person. No figures are available on attendance at their first services, but they were also attended by non-members of the Milton Hebrew Men's Club. For the next four years' High Holy Day Services were held at this location and also at the Unitarian Church and the Knights of Columbus Hall. Although they were not officially affiliated with any denomination they used Conservative prayerbooks. With the addition of services, they lost no more than a handful of members who had no inclination towards the religious side of being Jewish.

Meeting monthly at different members' homes and places around town such as the Kidder Branch Public Library, they decided that they should be more than just a group of men who got together monthly to discuss common interests and hold High Holy Day Services. They started meeting more frequently as they discussed what direction the Milton Hebrew Men's Club should take. They split part of their group into a planning board which met and decided to recommend that a corporation be formed called the Milton Hebrew Center which would further their activities through a Jewish Community Center, Temple, Hebrew School, or whatever else the people want. Twenty-two members attended the planning board meeting, or about two-thirds of the club's total membership. At a later meeting without a vote but "after thoughtful deliberation, the general opinion was that a state charter should be taken out for a Temple organization whose function would include all activities necessary and beneficial to the Jewish people in the town." After these meetings, four or five members quit. "As long as it was a social club they were interested... and when we pinpointed our movements towards a Temple they dropped out." recalled Maurice Birnbaum, a charter member of the yet to be started Milton Hebrew Center.

Before drawing up their own charter they studied charters of established congregations such as Congregation Kahillath Israel of Brookline, Temple Emanuel of Lawrence, Tefirath Israel of Malden, Ahavath Shalom Congregation Inc., and Mishkan Tefila of Roxbury. The purpose of the Milton Hebrew Center as written in their charter and constitution was to conduct religious services, present activities in furtherance of the Hebrew faith, and to foster principles of Americanism. The Milton Hebrew Center was officially incorporated by the state on December 27, 1944 with thirty-five charter members.

For the next few years after incorporation, the Milton Hebrew Center was mainly a group of people working towards obtaining a building. Shortly afterwards the wives of the members of the Milton Hebrew Men's Club formed their own group, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Milton Hebrew Center. The Milton Hebrew Men's Club was really the leadership of
the Milton Hebrew Center now. They spent much time planning their future. Fundraising letters went out to all members and prospective members. The thrust of the letter was that they wanted to raise funds in order to acquire a building. Special emphasis was put on raising funds to help their children and the letter read "so that our children, especially will have a place to congregate and be instructed in religious and educational activities." It went on to state that average contributions were between $100 and $200.

By the end of 1946, forty-nine families were affiliated with the Milton Hebrew Center. No more mention is made anymore of the Milton Hebrew Men's Club, just the Milton Hebrew Center and Ladies Auxiliary. A typical meeting would consist of a business meeting, a speaker, refreshments, and Mah Jong for the ladies. It seemed from the wording of the various flyers that the men were chauvinistic in their attitudes. This was probably in keeping with the prevalent Jewish attitude of the forties that the women took care of establishing a Jewish home and tending the children while the men took care of the serious business of establishing and running a synagogue. Sometime later there was a meeting of the Men's Club or the Men in the Milton Hebrew Center in December of 1947 to vote on the purchase of land. No record of the vote is available but shortly thereafter dumpland was purchased for about $3000. The site on the corner of Blue Hill Avenue and Decker Street was to be the location for the building of the Milton Hebrew Center. It is not clear exactly when it began but by 1947 there was also a Center Youth Club in addition to the Men's Club and Ladies' Auxiliary, probably with no more than twenty-five members.

In 1948, about a year before they actually built their first structure, the Milton Hebrew Center bought a house on Pagoda Circle (actually they only made a downpayment which quickly proved unsuitable for their activities. Shortly after they rejected the use of this house, they decided to build their Center on the tract of land they had bought. In February of 1949 they approved plans to erect a building on the Blue Hill Avenue site. The building was finished for High Holy Day Services in 1949 and was dedicated on September 11, 1949 as the Milton Hebrew Center, although by now people were calling it Temple Shalom. Nobody knows exactly where the name came from but the name was used in all publicity and notices. The dedication of the first Temple in Milton's history was a big event and was attended by members of state and local government, as well as the area's Jewish community.

Before the Temple was built though, there was a big hassle that Mr. Birnbach related to me:

After obtaining a building permit and while concrete was being poured the town got an injunction on the claim that it was going to be a social group and that we were going to put in athletics and a bowling alley...it was just an anti-semitic trend. (It was) partly Abe Greenberg's fault because of the way he worded the application for the permit. He indicated that it was for social purposes instead of stating that it was an institution for religious purposes. (He) gave some people the idea that it was more. (They) had a public hearing at Town Hall. Ben Finke (first president of Men's Club) testified and Rabbi Herman Rabinovitz representing the rabbis of Greater Boston also spoke. A young priest from St. Mary's spoke favorably and a couple in back remarked, "he's a young fellow, he doesn't know yet." They all looked for people with great big horns.

The injunction was dropped.

The possibility that it was anti-semitism grew more out of the fact of never having any contact with Jews and a fear of the unknown rather than a deep and ingrown hatred of them. Despite this incident, the town had sold the land to the Milton Hebrew Center very cheaply and later was to do so again.
The first structure was by no means a magnificent edifice. It consisted of one small hall built of concrete and plaster. The Milton Hebrew Center was very plain looking inside without much decoration. Members of the Hebrew Center did a lot of work on the interior of the building including all the painting and other odds and ends. The whole building was finished at a cost of about $30,000, hardly a princely sum even for those days.\textsuperscript{16} When the Temple was finished there were approximately sixty families belonging to the Milton Hebrew Center.

After the completion of the building, Temple activities really got into full swing. Services were now held every Friday night and Saturday in addition to the High Holy Days. Services were led at this time by Maurice Birnback, a charter member, as the Temple had no professional staff. They used the Silverman prayerbook that was used by the Conservative Movement. Soon afterwards they hired Mr. Sydney Davidoff to organize and to direct a choir for services. A small portable organ was bought to accompany the choir. Members wore choir robes as they sang in front of the congregation. The choir had no more than a dozen members at its inception. There was a small uproar by the more orthodox members of the congregation when the choir and organ were incorporated into the services, but they were a minority and the dissidence subsided quickly.

A Hebrew School program was started almost immediately after the dedication of the Temple. The first Hebrew School classes were held each Sunday for two hours. There was one teacher and thirty-five students enrolled in the first class.\textsuperscript{17} Not much could be taught in a two hour weekly session but the teacher tried to cover customs and ceremonies and Jewish history. The Hebrew School and the Temple were to grow rapidly over the next decade.

In March 1950, the Temple was given its first Torah by the Jewish Benevolent Association of Boston. By now the Temple had a variety of activities running in its small building; a men's organization, women's organization, and a youth club but it did not yet have a totally secure feeling. In a letter thanking the Benevolent Association, they mentioned "that should if for any unforeseen reason it becomes necessary for this Temple to discontinue holding services, this Torah will be returned to you."\textsuperscript{18} This letter showed that although the new Temple seemed to thrive it was not on totally secure ground. The fear of failure of the congregation was unfounded as it turned out.

1951 was an important year for Temple Shalom. Until now services were led either by a congregant or guest rabbi or cantor. In May of 1951, Temple Shalom hired Irving Kischel as its first cantor. He had graduated the Israel Salanter Yeshiva in New York and had studied under many well known cantors. His duties were to conduct services, read Torah, direct the Hebrew School program, and lead the choral group. For all of this he was paid a whopping salary of $4000 a year.\textsuperscript{19} It might seem strange that they hired a cantor before hiring a rabbi but as a congregant put it bluntly, "It was more important."\textsuperscript{20} That we have a cantor. A service could be conducted without a rabbi but a service with music sounded much better and added an air of decorum. The service with an organ, choir, and the addition of a cantor made for a very decorous service indeed.

In the fifties the Temple grew very rapidly. By the end of 1951, the Temple membership had already grown to 140 members.\textsuperscript{21} The leadership foresaw that with many Jews now flocking to the suburbs, the present building would quickly prove inadequate. They started another building fund to enlarge the Temple. A variety show was presented at Milton High School in May 1952 to raise money to enlarge the Temple.\textsuperscript{22} Construction to enlarge the Temple was begun in early 1953 and was finished late in 1953. The addition to the Temple cost about $100,000 plus an additional $12,000 for the additional land which was bought from the Town of Milton. The land was valued at about $45,000.\textsuperscript{23} It seems that Temple Shalom was sold the land so cheaply by the town as a way of making amends for giving the Temple trouble earlier with the injunction against their building permit. A dedication
ceremony was held in January 1954. Because of the heavy financial burden to the membership that the new building added, the Temple did not hire a rabbi to assist the cantor in High Holy Day Services as was the usual practice. Daily services were begun in January 1953. They were conducted at 7 A.M. and 7 P.M. Occasionally they had trouble getting a Minyan of ten men.

Another big step was taken in the history of the Temple when in June 1954 they hired Jacob Hochman as their first rabbi for a salary of $7000. He was formally installed in December of that year. Rabbi Hochman was ordained at The Jewish Theological Seminary in 1938 and had served as an Army chaplain for three years in addition to serving at various other congregations. Also, in October of that year the congregation received a gift of seven Torahs from Congregation Anshei Sfard of Roxbury.

Although the addition was finished barely a year before, another fundraising drive was begun again in September 1954. The Temple had already grown to over 300 members and there were over 200 children in the Hebrew School. The expanded Temple was becoming too small almost before it was finished.

As letters between the Temple and Rabbi Albert Gordon of Temple Emanuel in Newton attest, Temple Shalom was being actively courted by Rabbi Gordon to join the United Synagogue and the Conservative movement. The members of the Temple were naturally inclined to join the Conservative Movement but after Rabbi Gordon canceled his acceptance of an invitation to Rabbi Hochman's installation, the leaders of the Temple hesitated in joining the United Synagogue. In October 1955, Temple Shalom became officially affiliated with the United Synagogue of America. Also as Rabbi Gordon wrote in his book Jews in Suburbia, "the first synagogue in town, especially in the suburbs, tends to be conservative." Temple Shalom follows the statement of one leader of a conservative congregation who said:

We asked our organizers what kind of synagogue they wanted. Some thought it ought to be Reform; others wanted an Orthodox synagogue, and a great number wanted the Conservative. We figured that the Conservative was 'middle of the road' and would not offend any group in the community. So we called it a Conservative congregation.

The next few years were years of further growth. Every aspect of the Temple family increased. By the end of 1957 the Temple had 500 members. The Hebrew School had 325 children and was to expand in 1958 to include a five day a week class to prepare children for further study after Hebrew School graduation. The Women's Auxiliary had become associated with the National Women's League of Conservative Judaism and had changed its name to Sisterhood. The Temple Shalom youth program now had hundreds of children in it. The Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Jewish War Veterans, Hadassah, and many other groups now used the Temple as their meeting place.

In 1957, two important events took place. After many years of calling the Milton Hebrew Center, "Temple Shalom," its name was officially changed to Temple Shalom. Also a petition was presented to the town by a newly formed Orthodox congregation, to change the Milton voting day from Saturday to Tuesday because of the Jewish Sabbath. A special Town Meeting was held on May 27th. The rabbi of the Orthodox congregation spoke along with Rabbi Hochman and a Reverend Walter C. Ziegler. All three spoke in favor of a resolution to extend the voting three hours until 8 P.M. to allow observant Jews to vote. The resolution passed by a two-thirds vote with the large amount of 65 town meeting members absent. Voting day and hours had been the same for over 200 years and town residents did not like the idea of newcomers trying to change the status quo. Extending the voting hours satisfied everyone involved. A large percentage of town meeting members did not attend the meeting because they did not want their voting tradition changed at all.
The last stage of Temple Shalom's expansion program started in October 1958. A magnificent addition was begun which was to cost in excess of $250,000. By 1959, the Temple had 570 members. The final addition was finished and dedicated in May 1960. It was a far cry from the small structure that was built in 1949. The Temple had started with but 35 members and now had almost 600 families. What had started as a monthly social group for new Jews in suburbia was now just short of a huge Jewish community center. A Hebrew School that had started as a one day a week school was now a program with over 300 children that met five days a week, including an intensive program for those capable enough. What had started with no staff now had a rabbi, cantor, sexton, choral director, janitors, and office workers. The members of the Milton Hebrew Men's Club could never have dreamt that the simple program that they had started seventeen years earlier would become this.
FOOTNOTES

1 Interview with Maurice Birnbach
2 Flyer dated December 19, 1944
3 Flyer dated June 5, 1945
4 Flyer dated December 19, 1944
5 Flyer dated October 19, 1944
6 Flyer dated November 2, 1944
7 Interview with Maurice Birnbach
8 Constitution of Milton Hebrew Center
9 Milton Hebrew Center Charter from Commonwealth of Massachusetts
10 Letter from Temple dated April 21, 1945 to Mr. Birnbach
11 Flyer dated January 3, 1946
12 Flyer dated November 23, 1947
13 The Jewish Advocate, March 3, 1949, Page 5
14 Dedication program dated September 11, 1949
15 Interview with Maurice Birnbach
16 Conversation with Murray Cole
17 Temple Shalom Bulletin February 1955, Page 3
18 Letter from Temple to Jewish Benevolent Association of Boston dated February 20, 1950
19 Copy of cantor's original contract
20 Interview with Maurice Birnbach
21 Temple Shalom Bulletin February 1955, Page 3
22 Variety Show program dated May 20, 1952
23 Conversation with Murray Cole
24 Dedication program dated January 24, 1954
25 Flyer dated September 1953
26 Copy of rabbi's original contract
27 Installation program dated December 5, 1954
28 The Boston Globe, Monday October 18, 1954, Page 23
29 Charter from United Synagogue of America
30 Albert Gordon, Jews in Suburbia, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1959) Page 97
31 Annual Town Report of the Town of Milton 1957, Page 227
32 Temple Shalom Bulletin March 1959, Page 2
33 Temple Shalom Bulletin May 1960, Page 1
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Interview with Maurice Birnbach: Charter member and past president of the Milton Hebrew Center

Conversation with Murray Cole: former chairman of the Milton Hebrew Center planning board

The personal records of Maurice Birnbach that he has saved over the years. Because of the use of these files, I was unable to give complete footnotes.