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A
BRIEF
LOOK

into the Past and Future
of the

**MIKVEH ISRAEL
RELIGIOUS SCHOOL**

**The World Rests on the Hands
of School Children**

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Hebrew worship came early to Philadelphia, residing in private devotions of Jews attracted to the Quaker City which barred religious persecution forever. In 1740 public worship began in a house on Sterling Alley. On February 22, 1773, -- of which our first Archives Day is the 185th Anniversary -- a resolution to collect money for the support of worship was adopted by a meeting and the dream of building a synagogue took shape. Eight years later Jacob Henry was to write that the Messiah was like to come first. Not the Messiah but the American Revolution gave reality to that dream. Jewish fugitives from British Occupation in New York, Savannah and Charleston arrived in Philadelphia to join Jews from Lancaster, Easton and Richmond. The larger quarters then required for worship were found in a house on Cherry Alley. In 1782 this had to be left and on September 13th of the same year the Congregation by then "known and distinguished by the name of Mikve Israel" dedicated its first Synagogue on Cherry Street.

Although the first two Jews in Philadelphia bear Spanish names, and the first service may have been according to the sefardic ritual, these early services might, on the other hand, have been ashkenazic as the majority of worshippers came from lands where that rite was used, notably Austria, Poland and the Rhineland. All that is certainly known is that worship in the Colonial synagogues from which the Revolutionary fugitives came was sefardic, -- that Spanish and Portuguese rite having been brought to New Amsterdam in 1653 by Jews fleeing the Inquisition about to be established in their native Brazil by its conqueror, Portugal. This Mikve-Israel adopted.

Our sages say that prayer, study, and benevolence are the supports of Society and that taken together these three constitute worship. They have also declared that whereas a synagogue can be transformed into a school, a school cannot be made into a synagogue since that would be a step downward, inasmuch, as from the time of Moses, Israel has had a mandate to teach children diligently and a school has thus become every community's holy of holies. It is not surprising, therefore, that four years after the Synagogue was built, Mikve Israel planned for a "small building" back of it, "for the use of the Minister and for a school".

Also 50 years without a school house does not imply that children were untaught. The Mosaic mandate rests primarily on parents whose agents, teachers and schools are considered. Parental instruction and attendance at worship remain effective tools in Judaism and cannot be replaced by teacher or school. These tools in the early days of Mikveh Israel were supplemented by lessons in Hebrew and in Religion given by the Minister, aided by the Shammas. This had to suffice from 1780 when Gershom Mendes Seixas of the Shearith Israel Congregation of New York arrived in Philadelphia and became our first Minister through the time of our 4th Minister Abraham Israel Keys, who died in 1828.

In 1829 Isaac Leeser of West phalia in Germany who, while a lad in Richmond, Virginia, had become a lover of the sefardic ritual, was called to Mikve Israel as hazan. He deplored the fact that public worship in the American Synagogue did not include public instruction and he succeeded in making preaching a regular part of the Philadelphia services.

He also appealed to the Congregation to open a school for secular and religious teaching, particularly as the Public Schools were then far from good. His pleas failing he betook himself to the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, relying on "the intelligent ladies, "to utilize Sunday, a day of enforced leisure to open a "nursery of piety". They responded eagerly. Thus on February 6, 1838 at the home of Mrs. Abraham Hart, the corner stone was laid for what "the ladies" hoped would become their "sweetest memorial", a religious school where the rising generation would learn to prepare the soil and sow grain for future harvests.

Limitations of space preclude describing that harvest which embraced not the school alone, but the Hebrew Sunday School Society which to this writing maintains and aids religious schools; the Hebrew Education Society, which Leeser established for general education with the aid of the entire Jewish community; the Maimondes College -- a shortlived Seminary for ministers and a forerunner of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, which Leeser's successor, Sabato Morais founded in New York; the Jewish Publication Society; outgrowth of the publishing society which Leeser inspired, so that textbooks might be furnished the schools and nurture provided for the Jewish spirit.

Not least in that harvest is Gratz College for the training of teachers of Hebrew and Religion. In 1856 Hyman Gratz, a brother of Rebecca, the first principal of the Sunday School, established a trust fund to be vested in Mikve Israel for that purpose. The College which bears his name did not materialize until 1895. At one time the religious school of the Congregation was part of the School of Observation and Practice of this College.

The Mikveh Israel Religious School which moved to its present location, Cheltenham and Mountain Avenues, in December 1955, in order to serve the younger families who live in that neighborhood, is concerned with rearing children who will be imbued with a love for Judaism and for the traditions of Mikveh Israel. The School meets three times a week. Its curriculum covers Jewish History, Religion and Customs and a study of the Hebrew Language which study serves to open the complete treasury of the Jewish Spirit.

It is altogether fitting, therefore, that the Parent and Teachers Association of the School should have sponsored and organized the first Archives Day of the Congregation. It is equally fitting that the project itself should have emanated from those projects through which the children, during their Assemblies, have shown the place which Mikveh Israel and its members have enjoyed in the American scene through service to city, state and nation. The children's role in Archives Day is in serving as guides and aides in interpreting the material on exhibition.

The School welcomes new pupils. The Synagogue welcomes new members, parents and non-parents. It is through such growth that Mikve Israel can add to it, two centuries of contributions to Judaism and Jewish life. It is through such growth also that it can continue to minister to the well-being of the community which can best be measured, only, sages tell us, through education. That measure has been well described in the age-old adage; "No place merits a single dwelling of the sons of Israel that does not maintain instruction for its little ones."