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A History of Temple Israel Akron: 1911-1944

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ABSTRACT

This thesis surveys the history of Temple Israel in Akron, Ohio from 1910 until 1944. The years in question begin with the first building of the first synagogue building dedicated explicitly to the practice of Reform Judaism in the city. This thesis is rooted in the tenures of three of the congregation's rabbis. Chapter one spans the tenures of Rabbis Louis D. Gross and Abraham Cronbach, while chapters two and three covers Rabbi David Alexander's leadership. While the overall thesis is divided by rabbinic period, the thesis makes significant use of the Board of Trustees minutes from this time period to root the survey in the efforts of the lay leadership. Through assessing the work of the rabbis and the lay leaders endeavors to build and strengthen the Reform community in Akron.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Chapter 1.....	14
Chapter 2.....	49
Chapter 3.....	73
Conclusion.....	98
Bibliography.....	104

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Introduction

The city of Akron, Ohio sits at a crossroads that connects the major metropolitan centers of Cleveland to the north, and Columbus and Cincinnati to the south. These urban centers have sizable Jewish populations, some of which are among the oldest Jewish communities west of the Alleghenies. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Akron ranks as the fifth largest city in Ohio.¹ Akron began to attract settlers in the late 1820s and early 1830s once work on the Ohio & Erie Canals began in earnest. Workers and their families began to flock to Akron with hopes of earning a wage building the canal or providing the mercantile infrastructure that was necessary to support this challenging project. Following its completion, the Ohio & Erie Canal connected Akron with the Cuyahoga and Ohio Rivers, and beyond. The Canal allowed goods to move across the region, and it brought even more new settlers to the young city. The first Jewish families headed by Isaac Levi and Cauffman Koch found their way to Akron by 1855.² They were followed by other Jewish families throughout the latter years of the century. Jewish immigrants from central Europe followed the Levi and Koch families to Akron and set up various merchant businesses. This small group of Jewish pioneer settlers established the Akron Hebrew Congregation in 1865, the parent congregation to Temple Israel.

¹ United States Census Bureau,

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/akroncityohio,OH/POP060210> (accessed February 11, 2022).

² Temple Israel (Akron, Ohio). *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Akron, 1964), 3.

In 1870, Benjamin Franklin Goodrich established the first rubber manufacturing plant in Akron. Having been a student at what is now Case Western Reserve University, Goodrich was familiar with the region. Akron possessed the natural resources that were indispensable to the manufacture of rubber: cheap labor, abundant water, and excellent transportation options, which included numerous railroad lines and the benefit of the Ohio & Erie Canal. By the early years of the twentieth century, Akron had become known as the “Rubber Capital of the World.”³ This great industrial growth called businessmen and every variety of professionals to expand the city’s infrastructure and boost its growth. Akron quickly became one of Ohio’s major metropolitan centers. The Jewish community grew and flourished during the early decades of the twentieth century as Eastern European immigrants settled in Akron to take advantage of the opportunities that resulted from its booming economy. At one point, Temple Israel’s membership was in the hundreds, while the city was home to multiple Orthodox synagogues.

The purpose of this thesis is to reconstruct the history of Temple Israel Akron from 1910, when the first permanent location for the congregation was established at Merriman Road, through the retirement of Temple Israel’s longtime Senior Rabbi David Alexander in 1944. Temple Israel’s lay and rabbinic leadership weathered many storms but was able to build a strong community that left a lasting mark on the larger Akron landscape. Communities like Temple Israel are crucial to understanding the American Jewish experience outside of the major urban centers in America. This period—which incorporates both the rise and decline of Akron’s economic might—is a significantly understudied period in the history of the Akron Jewish

³ Steve Love, David Giffels, and Debbie Van Tassel, *Wheels of Fortune: The Story of Rubber in Akron* (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 1999).

community, more generally, and the history of Temple Israel, in particular. The thesis draws upon the congregation's Board of Trustees meeting minutes across the decades, as well as rabbinic sermons and other archival material held by The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives. The meeting minutes as historical record are crucial to understanding the development of ideas and events in the Temple's history in real time. They also record the debates around decisions made or abandoned. Through the study of Akron-area newspapers—*The Akron Jewish News* and *The Akron Beacon Journal*, in particular—the thesis places the history of the congregation within the larger context of the Akron community. The more than thirty-year period was a time of significant national and international turmoil that deeply affected the Akron community. This project traces the history of the congregation and the significant identity and community-building questions that Temple Israel faced throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Temple Israel's history is a microcosm of the greater history of the Reform Movement in America. We often tell the story of Reform through the eyes of the large synagogue centers and important people who helped shape the Movement. This thesis strives to examine the history of American Reform Judaism through the lens of a small, lesser-known Jewish community. Temple Israel Akron is my home synagogue and I wanted to learn more about the history of this community and its place in the large context of the American Jewish experience.

Review of literature

Relatively little has been written about the history of the Jewish community in Akron, and almost nothing has been published on the history of Temple Israel, the city's oldest Jewish congregation. The anniversary histories that have been written offer readers a narrow and

oftentimes triumphalist perspective. Such histories have been published by the congregation for most milestone anniversaries. Temple Israel members have often drafted histories of the congregation written by and for its members. The most important was *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* the anniversary book written ahead of the temple's 100th anniversary in 1964. This work constitutes the most comprehensive history of Temple Israel written in the twentieth-century.⁴ When it was time for Temple Israel to celebrate 150 years, it did so in a new building and in a new area of Akron.⁵

The scholarly work that does exist is focused on the wider Jewish community in Akron. Helga Eugenie Kaplan, for example, studied the entire Akron Jewish community in her dissertation titled "Century of Adjustment: A History of the Akron Jewish Community, 1865–1975." She analyzed the immigrant Jewish community and the pressures it faced in adjusting to American life. In her dissertation, she traced settlement patterns in the city and compared Akron trends to national trends in American Jewish life. Additionally, Leslie Flaksman's master's thesis analyzed the social factors that determined membership to the Jewish Center in Akron from its earliest organizational starting point in 1917 through the summer of 1950.⁶ Flaksman's work was intended to guide the future of the institution.

There is a diverse and growing body of research on the Jewish communities of the Ohio Valley and greater Midwest region. *In A History of Jewish Youngstown and the Steel Valley*

⁴ Temple Israel (Akron, Ohio), *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Akron, 1964).

⁵ Temple Israel (Akron, Ohio), *Temple Israel: 150 Years* (Akron, 2015).

⁶ Leslie Flaksman, "Social Factors Affecting Membership in a Jewish Center," master's thesis, Boston University, 1956.

historians present the rise of the synagogue which stood as the central institution of the Youngstown Jewish community.⁷ This seminal history of the city's Jewish community shows the organic evolution of Jewish organizational life in Youngstown as Jews continued to settle in the city. Youngstown's Jewish history is an important analog to that of Akron because the two communities are so strikingly similar. Secular German Jews were the first to settle in Youngstown, as they did in Akron, which fostered the establishment of a Reform synagogue as the first Jewish house of prayer in both cities. Additionally, the Reform synagogues in Akron and Youngstown had a relationship. Their Sisterhoods and educators would participate in regional gatherings together, and the communities were known to each other. The history of Youngstown is integral to Akron's Jewish story because of this shared past.

The two largest Jewish communities in close proximity to Akron are Cleveland and Columbus and both have extensive historical records and scholarly evaluations. Sean Martin and John K. Grabowski recently edited a compendium of essays that thematically analyzed the Jewish community in Cleveland throughout the twentieth century. The most important analyses in *Cleveland Jews* are the chapters regarding philanthropy and Abba Hillel Silver.⁸ Temple Israel

⁷ Thomas G Welsh, Joshua Foster, Gordon F Morgan, and Mahoning Valley Historical Society, *A History of Jewish Youngstown and the Steel Valley* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2017).

⁸ David C. Hammack, "Jewish Philanthropy in Cleveland to 1990," in *Cleveland Jews and the Making of a Midwestern Community*, ed. Sean Martin and John K. Grabowski (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 35-57; Zohar Segev, "Abba Hillel Silver as a Community Leader and International Politician in Cleveland, 1940-1950," in *Cleveland Jews and the Making*

members frequently united with Cleveland Jews on philanthropic endeavors, and often Abba Hillel Silver was the key link between the two communities on such causes. Marc Lee Raphael authored the comprehensive history of the Jews in Ohio's capital city from its establishment through 1975.⁹ His work tells the story of the Jewish community through the lens of all the Jewish communal organizations. Together these works shed light on the greater context of Ohio Jewish communities, of which Akron was an important contributor.

A review of the literature which documents the stories of small Jewish communities geographically farther from Akron can offer additional insights into the region. Amy Hill Shevitz contributes an important study of Jews who settled in the Ohio River region. She looks at the Jewish experience on a regional level and tells the stories of not just the Jews in Southern Ohio communities but along both sides of the river in the surrounding states. She focuses on twenty-four communities that make up this region, and shows that "the Jewish experience and the regional experience reflected and at times reinforced each other in the Ohio River Valley."¹⁰ Shevitz's work provides important background for this study. Akron's auxiliary organizations and rabbis were incredibly active in the greater Ohio Jewish community, so at points these communities did cross paths. Another important work *Jewish Life in the Industrial Promised*

of a Midwestern Community, ed. Sean Martin and John K. Grabowski (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 102-121.

⁹ Marc Lee Raphael, *Jews and Judaism in a Midwestern Community, Columbus, Ohio, 1840–1975* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1979).

¹⁰ Amy Hill Shevitz, *Jewish Communities on the Ohio River: A History*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007. 4.

Land reconstructs the history of Flint, Michigan's Jewish community. Flint was not a community that Akron Jews often interacted with, but their histories are pointedly similar. Flint was built on the auto industry out of its proximity to Detroit, Michigan, and Akron was connected to Detroit through the Rubber industry. Flint is described as a "secondary migration" point for the Jews, meaning Jews often settled somewhere else before they found their way to Flint.¹¹ Temple Israel's members often followed the same pattern. Flint's Reform congregation was distinctly tied to the automobile economy just as Akron Jews were dependent on the vicissitudes of the rubber industry. This thesis seeks to serve to expand our historical understanding of Jewish life in smaller Jewish communities shaped by the economic ebb and flow of one dominant industry. In this way, Akron becomes an analog for cities like Flint, Michigan as well as Youngstown, Toledo, and Dayton Ohio.

Outline of Chapters

The first chapter of this thesis traces Akron Hebrew Congregation's purchase and development of the plot at 133 Merriman Road. The chapter documents the major steps in this process from the purchase of the land to funding the building project. It also traces the movement of the community from the High Street Temple building through its months of homelessness prior to moving to Merriman Road. This chapter assesses the tenures of Rabbi Louis D. Gross and Abraham Cronbach. Temple Israel's history is greatly tied to the rabbinic personalities that served the congregation. During the first decade its new home Temple Israel experienced

¹¹ Nora Helen Faires and Nancy Hanflik, *Jewish Life in the Industrial Promised Land, 1855–2005* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 15.

turbulence which was directly tied to the turnover in rabbinic leadership. The expansion and growth that characterized Rabbi Gross's time in the pulpit turned to instability and dissension under Rabbi Cronbach's brief tenure. This chapter seeks to understand the struggles of community building, the opportunities, and the challenges that came to fruition with the opening of the Merriman Road building. After the first few years in the congregation's new home, the challenges of maintaining membership and building upkeep quickly became evident.

The second and third chapters span the tenure of Rabbi David Alexander, the longest-serving rabbi in the history of Temple Israel. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the subsequent events that led to the onset of the Great Depression marked the midpoint of Rabbi Alexander's tenure in Temple Israel's pulpit. The aftereffects of the Great Depression proved challenging for the members of Temple Israel. The congregation had to significantly alter its *modus operandi*. Additionally, the opening of the Akron Jewish Center occurred in 1929, and this meant that the temple no longer served as the main gathering place for the Jewish community of Akron. This development changed the temple's role in the community.

The second chapter also assesses the major interests of the community from 1919 to 1929, significant years of growth for Temple Israel. Chapter Two takes an in-depth look at Rabbi Alexander's efforts to build communal relationships in Akron. This chapter also documents the growth of the Temple Israel Sisterhood during these same years. As was the case in congregations throughout America, Temple Israel's Sisterhood became extremely influential in the life of the congregation and in the general community.

The second chapter also assesses how Temple Israel thought about its responsibilities towards the Jewish youth of the community even as it continued to face severe financial

constraints. In spite of the congregation's perennial fiscal woes, this chapter documents the temple's noteworthy efforts to enhance its educational and social offerings to the community.

The third chapter covers the final years of Rabbi Alexander's tenure in Temple Israel's pulpit. These years were characterized by severe economic hardship, and the temple's leadership had no alternative but to institute an austerity budget. The temple's board of trustees had no alternative but to redesign its approach to dues payment in order to retain membership and, simultaneously, create a financially sustainable synagogue.

The Conclusion offers a summary of the preceding chapters and summarizes the important understandings that have come to light. In addition, the Conclusion will suggest further areas of research into Temple Israel's history with an eye toward further enhancing our understanding of the community-building efforts that occupied the congregation's attention during these years. It will offer a reflection on the lessons of Temple Israel's history which are timeless and can help guide future leaders in Akron and beyond.

Temple Israel's history is a case study of a Jewish community located in a smaller urban center that relied heavily on the well-being of one major industry, the Akron rubber companies. The issues that shaped the history of Temple Israel of Akron enhance our understanding of an important facet of Jewish life in the American nation.

Chapter 1: Becoming Temple Israel, 1910–1919

After forty-five years in existence, Akron Hebrew Congregation, soon to become Temple Israel, was ready to take a historic step by constructing the first synagogue building in Akron originally used for that purpose. Temple Israel Center would be the first of its kind in the city. The growing Reform congregation lacked sufficient space for educational purposes, and the congregation outgrew the sanctuary space. The pews could no longer comfortably seat the congregation which topped over 100 members by 1910.¹² Similarly, the main hall could no longer hold the choir that would only increase in importance over the coming years. All these internal pressures forced them to seek out a new physical space for the spiritual home of the Akron Hebrew Congregation. The construction of the synagogue building gave the community solid ground physically, but beyond that, it held substantial symbolic meaning. The brick-and-mortar building meant that Akron Hebrew Congregation was the premier Jewish institution in the city; it had erected a grand home its congregants could be proud of. The congregation's

¹² The Akron Jewish community as a whole totaled 1,200 individuals in 1912 according to Jacob Rader Marcus' population study. Helga Eugenie Kaplan's study of Akron Jewry names two Orthodox synagogues which existed during the first decade of the twentieth century, Anshe Emeth (the first Orthodox Synagogue in Akron) and Orthodox Hebrew Congregation. This number swelled to almost a dozen Jewish congregations over the next twenty years.

Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585–1984* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990), 171; Helga Eugenie Kaplan, "Century of Adjustment: A History of the Akron Jewish Community, 1865–1975," doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, 1978, 135–136.

leadership also came to understand during these years that stable rabbinic leadership was vital to the Reform community's survival in the city. This learning resulted from the quick turnover of rabbis during this period. Rabbi Louis Gross after serving only nine years in Akron made way for Rabbi Abraham Cronbach who served only two years in Akron. This chapter follows the overarching tenures of these two rabbinic figures as a time in Temple Israel's history. Finally, the building project cost the congregation a substantial amount and it was during these years that the trustees learned to live with significant debt hanging over their heads. Once the flare and excitement wore off following the dedication of the building the excitement was overshadowed by more significant mundane problems. These learnings would prove to help the congregation steer through the war years.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Akron was the rubber powerhouse that the world looked towards. Akron was home to the Big Three rubber companies that supplied two-thirds of the world's rubber.¹³ The city sprawl was growing greater every year as the rubber companies began to eat up property on Akron's Eastside, stretching all the way to the central city. The Jewish community tended towards the west side of town, where the land was purchased for the Temple building. The whole Jewish community claimed the west side of Akron as its unofficial home. The organic settlement occurred along roughly the same latitude. The established German Jewish community settled near the northern end of the west side. The newer,

¹³ John A. Tully, *Labor in Akron, 1825–1945* (Akron, OH: The Akron University Press, 2020), 71–73.

Yiddish-speaking immigrants who settled in Akron congregated in the southwestern region of the city.¹⁴ Temple Israel was established as the northern focal point of the Jewish community.

Establishing the Temple Israel Center, 1910–1912

Under the leadership of Rabbi Louis D. Gross, the Akron Hebrew Congregation purchased land on Merriman Street in late 1910. Rabbi Gross was a native of Chicago, Illinois, and was an alumnus of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. Akron Hebrew Congregation was the first pulpit of his career.¹⁵ Rabbi Gross was the fifth rabbi of the Akron Hebrew Congregation. These years reflect a period of excitement for the community as they prepared to move into a new spiritual home and build a new identity around the name “Temple Israel.” However, evidence also points to periods of stress and uncertainty during the period of construction when the congregation was without a home and the overall financial burden of the project.

The property cost the community \$3,000.¹⁶ The desire to erect a building for the growing congregation had been contemplated by community leadership for a number of years. Temple leaders chose the location because of the trend, evident by 1910, that the

¹⁴ Kaplan, *A Century*, 325–326.

¹⁵ “Rabbi Louis Gross of Union Temple,” *The New York Times* (2 January 1964): 27. Rabbi Gross was not the first Rabbi to lead Temple Israel who attended the Hebrew Union College. His immediate predecessor, Rabbi Isidor E. Philo, was ordained in Cincinnati.

¹⁶ Temple Israel (Akron, Ohio). *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Akron, 1964), 20.

Jewish community was moving out of the city center and pushing westward.¹⁷ The new Temple building was the first of the Jewish communal buildings to make the move to West Hill on Merriman Road.

It was under these conditions that in late December 1910, Rabbi Gross led the community in its final Shabbat in the High Street Temple location. The community celebrated with special addresses made by congregational leadership, bidding farewell to the building that served the congregation for the greatest length of time in its young history. Louis Loeb reviewed the previous twenty-five years of the congregation, while Morris Krohngold gave a preview of building plans for the Merriman Road location. Both board members would become major leaders of the congregation in the years ahead. Loeb and Krohngold addressed the congregation on the financial strains of the project, and the enthusiastic membership engagement—two themes that would dominate the congregation’s concerns throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. The final addresses in the High Street Temple stressed the needs of the community. They pleaded for both increased funds (encouraging both timely dues payment and increased pledges to the synagogue) and more frequent participation of members in events.

The weekend celebration concluded with a special ceremony orchestrated by the children of the congregation. At this ceremony, Rabbi Gross announced the winner of a contest in which children were asked to submit ideas for the new name of the Akron Hebrew Congregation. Rabbi

¹⁷ Kaplan, “Century of Adjustment,” 326.

Gross and the Board of Trustees selected Temple Israel as the new name. Sylvia Whitelaw submitted the winning entry.¹⁸

In the summer of 1911, members of Temple Israel gathered at the plot on Merriman Road for the cornerstone-laying ceremony. The *Akron Beacon Journal* reported on the historic event. The Merriman Road building was pivotal for the Akron Jewish community and the greater secular community as well. The building held symbolic significance for the Jewish community as the first sizable dwelling for the Jewish community. This also put the Reform community in line with the churches of Akron, and the faith communities developed strong relationships in the coming years. The Jewish community of Akron had been subsisting, if not steadily increasing in size since the first Jews arrived in 1865. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the Jewish community in Akron had begun to witness the effects of the Eastern European migration to America. Akron's Jewish community became religiously diverse, and the first synagogues of other denominations were opened in Akron.¹⁹

The foundation stone of the Merriman Road Temple building was laid on July 2, 1911. The event was organized by the Akron chapter of the Freemasons, which had a

¹⁸ "Temple Of Israel," *Akron Beacon Journal* (3 January 1911): 10.

¹⁹ Additional Jewish congregations to be established in Akron were: Anshe Emeth established in 1885 later became United Modern Orthodox. By the printing of the 1928 City Directory Sons of Peace, New Hebrew Congregation, Ahavas Zedek, Anshe Sfard and Beth Jacob were all established Orthodox synagogues. The only synagogue in the city affiliated with the Conservative movement, Beth El, was established in 1945.

Kaplan, "Century of Adjustment," 135-136, 165.

productive working and social relationship with many leading members of the community and Rabbi Gross. The event attracted citywide coverage and the attendance of over 400 people—well over triple the membership roll of the congregation at the time. The *Akron Beacon Journal* covered the event and reported that the majority of the remarks and prayers were made “in the English tongue,” all except a few Hebrew words.²⁰ The moment was exciting for the community, a major moment in its history. Yet it also marked a period of homelessness for Akron’s original Jewish community. The Temple Israel community used the Music Hall building in the city center for regular worship during the fall and winter months. Rabbi Gross often met with congregants in his home.

Later that year, Rabbi Gross addressed the congregation from the stage of Music Hall regarding the sale of the former High Street Temple building. Gross’ Shabbat sermon, “The Social Settlement Idea in Akron,” expressed great relief when the sale of the building was announced.²¹ The community expected the High Street Temple building’s fate to “perish and make way for the onward march of industry.” Rabbi Gross and the community expected this as the worst outcome for their former home. Instead, the building would be converted into a settlement house, a purpose which Gross went on in his sermon to describe as much holier than a house of worship since the settlement house movement sought to provide resources and community for recent immigrants. According to Gross, if a building could no longer be a house of worship then it should serve those most in need, just as the High Street Temple was destined to do.

²⁰ “Cornerstone of New Jewish Church Laid,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (2 July 1911): 4.

²¹ “Rabbi Louis Gross is Heard by Large Audience,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (28 Oct 1911): 3.

Rabbi Gross and the Temple Israel lay leadership together were able to address the needs of the Jewish community despite not having the spiritual center of a brick-and-mortar building. The community was also able to grow during this period because of the efforts of the leadership, in particular the esteemed Rabbi Gross. The Board of Trustees commented in their final meeting of the 1911 calendar year that the community had “just passed through a very successful year.”²² The minutes defined success as a notable increase in membership. This happened through the “efforts of our Rabbi.”²³ The congregation would only continue to grow under Rabbi Gross’ leadership as a leading Jewish organization in the city, and as an important contributor to civic life in Akron.

Building a Community on Merriman Road, 1912–1917: Achievements and Setbacks

The last five years of Rabbi Gross’ tenure in Akron were spent in the new Temple Center on Merriman Road. The space afforded Rabbi Gross, the leadership, and Temple members a sense of comfort and stability. Although financial and membership concerns persisted during these years, the sense of stability that the physical space provided meant that the congregation could focus on other issues such as music during worship or social issues of the day.

First, though, construction of the Merriman Road building needed to be finished. The first Board of Trustees meeting of 1912 came on the heels of the first Shabbat service in the new building. The chairman of the Building Committee, Nathan Berk (1870-

²² Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 8 October 1911, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²³ Ibid.

1929)²⁴, reported on the progress made to the new space. The building was nearing completion, which made some spaces usable, although the sanctuary would not be completed for some months into the year. Berk's report illuminates significant financial concerns, a tension that would follow the community over the next decades, despite the growth in size and rise in the caliber of Jewish life in Akron. Berk advised Temple leadership to maintain a regular payment schedule to keep the interest on the loans at bay.²⁵ Berk's remarks were preemptive, in hopes of guiding the congregation to keep its finances under control in order to avoid financial problems later.

Later in that same Board meeting, executives were faced with a significant dilemma. The Board received a request from the Reform Congregation in Canton, Ohio. The letter invited "Rabbi Gross to take charge of their congregation Sabbath School every Sunday afternoon and evening, exclusive of all important holidays."²⁶ He had built a name for himself as an impressive leader during the few years he had been at Temple Israel; this request was a clear endorsement of the rabbi. After some discussion, the Trustees permitted Rabbi Gross to enter into a working relationship with the community in Canton.²⁷ The response from the Board reinforced competing

²⁴ https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/79971358/nathan-m_-berk

²⁵ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 7 January 1912, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF- 887, AJA.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Canton, Ohio is located 25 miles southeast of Akron. The city was founded in 1805, only two years after Ohio was granted statehood. The city grew as the steel industry developed also developed and not long after a handful of Jews established a community in Canton. As long as

tensions within the community at the time. Funds were limited during the building project, and it was clear how much they valued Rabbi Gross. As indicated in meeting minutes, Temple leadership agonized over offering him a raise. The Trustees approved the partnership and responded to Rabbi Gross in a letter, which read, in part:

After due deliberation with Representatives of The Canton Congregation, we entered into a contract granting Rabbi Gross the privilege to carry out the work and wishes of the Canton Congregation... We trust that you will sanction our work to help rear another congregation which is bearing good fruits already in so far that they have joined The Union of American Hebrew Congregations.²⁸

The Jews of Akron, especially those in Temple Israel leadership, deeply valued Reform. The Board acted out of a greater commitment and respect for Jewish tradition and Reform. They understood their actions as not only beneficial to their esteemed rabbi but also an important contribution to Reform Judaism.

Over the next weeks, the building committee, and the committee in charge of arranging the dedication ceremony worked tirelessly to finalize Merriman Road.²⁹ The pews were installed in the chapel, a janitor was hired, and other small details were put into place to make the building

the congregations have existed there has been a friendship between the two organizations.

<<https://templeisraelcanton.org/our-history/>>

²⁸ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 7 January 1912, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²⁹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 7 April 1912, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

functional. The Dedication Ceremony committee was assembled and decided on, in conjunction with the Board of Trustees, as well as the date for the historic celebration. Gross took it upon himself to engage a choir and organist without the approval of the board. The fee for this addition is documented at \$600; the move was met with sanction from the board.³⁰ There is no evidence, however, that tension lasted long between the Temple leadership and Gross.

The dedication of Temple Israel's spiritual home at the corner of Merriman Road and Marshall Avenue in West Hill took place the weekend of May 3, 1912. The *Beacon Journal* reported that the Friday night ceremony involved many out-of-town guests to help the community celebrate. The community marked the event with an eye towards Jewish rituals. Temple Leaders deposited Torah scrolls into the ark, and the community watched as the new perpetual light was symbolically lit.³¹ Rabbi Gross shared the pulpit that evening with his father Reverend Aaron Grodsky (1857-1934), the Cantor at the Reading Road Temple in Cincinnati.³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Impressive Ceremonies Mark the Opening of Beautiful New Temple," *Akron Beacon Journal* (4 May 1912): 3.

The perpetual light which was used in the High Street building was donated in the fall of 1912 to the Jewish community of Canton. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 6 October 1912, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

³² "Father and Son in One Pulpit," *Akron Beacon Journal* (2 May 1912): 5.

Dr. Aaron Grodsky emigrated from Poland to the United States around 17 years old. Rabbi Louis D. Gross was one of his eight sons. Cantor Grodsky served as a dentist in Cincinnati alongside his work as Cantor at Reading Road Temple. "Aaron G. Gross Buried in Brooklyn," *Jewish*

Other Rabbis and honored guests came from across the city and state to mark this ceremony with the Jews of Akron. Dr. Kaufmann Kohler, President of Hebrew Union College, and Dr. Louis Grossman of Plum Street Temple came from Cincinnati for the occasion. Rabbi David Alexander from Toledo preached at the Saturday morning celebration.³³ This was the first time that Rabbi Alexander met the Akron Jewish community, though it would not be his last time in the city or preaching from the Merriman Road pulpit.

In the years following the dedication of the new building, the community established its place in Akron life. Under Gross' leadership, the congregation became a pillar in Akron civil society. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, Akron was one of the fastest growing cities in the world. From 1910 to 1920 alone, the city population ballooned from 70,000 inhabitants to 208,000.³⁴ This rapid expansion of the city was caused by the ever-growing demand for rubber. With this significant increase came not only more Jews but also rapid and sporadic growth within the city. Temple Israel, under the direction of Rabbi Gross, became knowledgeable and engaged in matters of social concern. In late October 1912, the faith communities of Akron dedicated a weekend for clergy to preach on tuberculosis. That Friday evening, Rabbi Gross preached on the stigma surrounding the disease and means

Daily Bulletin (16 April 1934): 7; "Aaron G. Gross, 77, Dies; Father of Brooklyn Rabbi."

Brooklyn Daily Eagle (15 April 1934): 15.

³³ "Impressive Ceremonies Mark the Opening of Beautiful New Temple," *Akron Beacon Journal* (4 May 1912): 3.

³⁴ Tully, *Labor in Akron*, 129.

of prevention.³⁵ Temple Israel was one of many religious communities that dedicated their worship services to the subject that weekend.

Prior to World War I, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) had no official agenda when it came to questions of social issues, but it was a growing tension among younger rabbis, of whom Rabbi Gross was one.³⁶ Rabbi Gross often discussed the perils of Akron society from the pulpit. He challenged his congregants to think of their lives and the community which occupied the space outside of the walls of the synagogue. Rabbi Gross compelled congregants to think as Americans within the confines of their Jewish space. In the fall of 1912, he preached on the Social Evil, which attracted a large audience from the general public.³⁷ Rabbi Gross also invited prominent guests from the Akron community to educate the congregation on the social problems of the day. He dedicated one Shabbat in early May 1913 to the issue of settlement work in the city. John Huntoon, a leader in

³⁵ “Tuberculosis Day Will Be Observed,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (22 October 1912): 2.

³⁶ Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 288–289. The CCAR adopted its first broad statement on social issues in 1918. See Ronald B Gittelsohn, “The Conference Stance on Social Justice and Civil Rights” in Bertram W. Korn (ed.) *Retrospect and Prospect: Essays in Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (New York: CCAR Press, 1965): 88-89.

³⁷ “Special Address at Temple Israel,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (22 November 1912): 7.

the settlement house movement in Akron, was invited to the pulpit to share thoughts on his work.³⁸

Internally, the congregation continued to face financial pressures. At the 1913 annual congregational meeting, President Louis Loeb articulated a positive outlook towards the future following an extraordinarily promising year. The board recommended the reelection of Rabbi Gross, and the year that passed was described to the congregation as “one of the most encouraging and inspiring years in Temple Israel’s history.”³⁹ Membership had passed the 100 persons mark. Meanwhile, the Ladies of Temple Society continued to hold dinners with prominent speakers, and interest in the group was steadily growing as was their importance to the Temple itself.⁴⁰ However, as 1913 continued the congregation began to feel some strains, and the Executive Board spent a great deal of energy discussing finances. Many congregants fell into late payments and leadership took this problem head on. In July 1913 a motion passed which gave the Executive Board “full power to deal with members in arrears as they deem fit.”⁴¹ A rating

³⁸ “Announcement,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (29 April 1913): 6. On Huntoon, see Tammy L. Troup, “Building East Akron: The Local Vision of F. A. Seiberling and the City Of Akron,” Masters Thesis, Youngstown State University, 2008.

³⁹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, January 1913, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 6 July 1913, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

system was later implemented in order to categorize members who were up to date with their payments, it made record keeping easier, but it did not completely solve their money problems.⁴²

The continued growth of the congregation filtered down to other areas of Temple Israel life. The religious school felt added stress with the increased size. Classrooms were filled to capacity, and teachers were overburdened. At the start of the school year that October Temple Israel recorded approximately 150 students enrolled in the Sunday School.⁴³ Also around that time, the House Committee reported that the roof leaked above a few of the classrooms and would need immediate repairs.⁴⁴ Dues became an even more pressing issue when the leadership moved from paying off the new building to affording regular maintenance. This upsurge in the temple's financial challenges was most likely the result of the economic downturn that engulfed Akron during these same years. In the fall of 1913, the stock markets experienced a short slump. This hit the Akron Rubber industry hard, sending ripple effects across other industries and businesses in the city.⁴⁵

⁴² Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 6 April 1913, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

⁴³ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 5 October 1913, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

⁴⁴ Ibid. The Executive board went to extreme lengths to save money during this time. During the 14 May 1914 Board meeting "the secretary was instructed to communicate to Rabbi Gross and inform him that hereafter he shall discontinue the use of the electric stove in his study on account of its excessive cost."

⁴⁵ Tully, *Labor in Akron*, 128.

No doubt this affected the disposable income of laborers and business owners who belonged to the temple. However, this did not temper the Trustees' determination to increase the offerings to the community. For the school year which began that fall, three teachers were hired for the Sunday School; until this point the teachers had been volunteers.⁴⁶ It was thought that having paid educators would help attract new members to the congregation who wanted a solid Jewish education for their children. However, from this point on teachers' salaries became a significant point of concern for the Temple finances.

Towards the end of 1914, the Executive Board began to venture to extreme lengths to secure the financial future of the congregation. The first measure of punishment was recorded for members who neglected their dues. Delinquent members would not be allowed to enter the synagogue for the holidays or their children granted access to the Sunday School. A special meeting was called solely to discuss ideas that would cut the costs of the congregation.⁴⁷ The Executive Board even went so far as to solicit loans of one hundred dollars from members of the congregations.⁴⁸ A great deal of the promise and growth that Temple Israel had charted since moving into the Merriman Road building began to be overshadowed by the more pressing and mundane fiduciary problems that preoccupied the temple's leadership.

⁴⁶ Temple Israel, *Yesterday*, 21.

⁴⁷ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 11 October 1914, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Rabbi Gross' supreme leadership was recognized well beyond the city borders or the confines of Summit County. His reputation had become known far and wide across the region. He had made great strides for the congregation and continued to make a name for himself as an orator and a leader of the Jews and the greater Akron community. In October 1913 Rabbi Gross led the congregation in services for the conclusion of Sukkot. His address that evening was titled "Mendel Beillis and the Blood Accusation."⁴⁹ Rabbi Gross attracted enough interest on the subject from the Jewish community and the general public that he spoke again that Friday on the trial. Gross' lecture traced the myth of ritual murder throughout Jewish history. He confronted the issue head-on saying the trial was an effort to slander twelve million people scattered across the world.⁵⁰ Rabbi Gross was incensed over the issue. Through his efforts, he organized a mass meeting of Akron citizens early the following week. Seven hundred Akronites of all faith traditions gathered to call attention to the persecution of Jews.⁵¹ Rabbi Gross represented an active Jewish tradition that spoke for all Jewish citizens of Akron.

⁴⁹ Menahem Mendel Beilis (1874-1934) was a Russian Jew accused of ritual murder in Kyiv. His innocence was proven in a famous court trial that captured the attention of the world. The "Beilis trial" is frequently referred to as the "Beilis affair". See Albert S. Lindemann, *The Jew Accused: Three Anti-Semitic Affairs (Dreyfus, Beilis, Frank), 1894-1915*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

⁵⁰ "Rabbi L. D. Gross Delivers an Address on Atrocities in Russia," *Akron Beacon Journal* (25 October 1913): 7.

⁵¹ "Protest Entered Against Russia at Mass Meeting," *Akron Beacon Journal* (27 October 1913): 1.

The effects of the great wave of Eastern European immigration which began in 1875 were increasingly impacting Akron in the second decade of the twentieth century. By that time, the Jewish population in Akron had become not only religiously diverse but economically diverse as well. Originally the Jewish community in Akron was defined by the many business owners and skilled craftsmen, which characterized the German Jews who immigrated to America and established the community in Akron almost fifty years before. During this period, however, Jews in ever-increasing numbers were taking jobs as unskilled laborers. This was a result of Akron's rubber industry which attracted many immigrants to such roles. These immigrants spoke little English and needed a great deal of assistance to acclimate to the country and to Akron. Akron moved towards establishing a Federation of Jewish Charities in an effort to streamline assistance to new immigrants – an effort that was similar to those initiated in other cities across the country.⁵² Rabbi Gross was one of the leading Jewish figures involved in the establishment of the Federation in January 1914. This move was significant in Akron's history. Rabbi Gross commented on the milestone "this is considered the greatest step was ever taken by the Jewish people of Akron."⁵³ The federation would help acclimate Jews to Akron, teach them English and provide free loans. Rabbi Gross not only sat on the Federation's leadership committee and offered guidance this new joint venture in the Jewish community; Temple Israel was also the site of many Jewish community meetings during this critical period.

⁵² Herman D. Stein, "Jewish Social Work in the United States," in *The Characteristics of American Jews* (New York: Jewish Education Committee Press, 1965), 159-166.

⁵³"Aid for Jews Planned at a Mass Meeting," *Akron Beacon Journal* (15 January 1914): 1.

By 1914, Rabbi Gross was being courted by at least two other congregations—one in Paterson, NJ and the other in Wheeling, West Virginia. He declined job offers at both to the great relief of the Temple Israel leadership. The newly-established *Akron Evening Times* ran an article that stated that Rabbi Louis Gross would remain in Akron for the foreseeable future.⁵⁴ It was only his fifth year in the Rubber City and already Rabbi Gross had made an impression well beyond Merriman Road and Akron.

In the midst of internal financial concerns and external geopolitical concerns, Temple Israel continued to provide spiritually and socially for the community. The year 1915 marked the jubilee anniversary of the congregation's establishment. The Board of Trustees was eager to celebrate this important occasion in the Merriman Road building. A committee was formed by the executive board in March to plan the event.⁵⁵ At a special board meeting it was announced that one of the most active and dedicated members of Temple Israel from its earliest days (although not one of the men who founded the community) Vice President of the congregation Abraham Polsky had passed away. It was decided that a memorial fund would be established to honor his memory and, concomitantly, promote the 50th anniversary celebration.⁵⁶ A save the date was sent to the Akron community via the *Beacon Journal* at which point it was also announced that Rabbi David Philipson of Cincinnati would be speaking at the celebration.⁵⁷ The

⁵⁴ "To Remain in Akron," *Akron Evening Times* (5 February 1914): 14.

⁵⁵ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 7 March 1915, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Leading Rabbi to Aid Celebration," *Akron Beacon Journal* (17 March 1915): 14.

banquet and weekend celebration would be a wonderful milestone for Akron and the Jewish community.

In late April 1915 the celebration took place, and many honored guests were invited to join the Temple Israel community in their home on Merriman Road. In preparation for the weekend the *Akron Evening Times* printed a history of Akron Hebrew Congregation. “Since then [the founding of Akron] it has grown into a thriving manufacturing city and the Jewish congregation has kept pace. The new Temple Israel... is a monument to its growth.”⁵⁸ The Temple building and all of the festivities were a tribute to the Jewish community in Akron, and the Reform roots which were at the heart of Akron Jewry, a major milestone for all who were involved. Rabbi Phillipson of Cincinnati gave the anniversary address on Friday April 24, 1915, during the Shabbat celebration, and spoke to these same themes. He recognized this milestone for not just for the Jewish community but the secular Akron community as well. Rabbi Phillipson delivered an address on the history of the Reform movement. His instruction to the community at such a moment was to understand that Reform Judaism is “essentially the faith of the young man... That the Jew today must meet the changing conditions of the countries where he lives, in America, where he has become an integral part of the nation old customs must give way to newer.”⁵⁹

The weekend concluded with a banquet that had over four hundred people in attendance. The banquet was a celebration of Temple Israel in the present moment. The evening had toasts and speeches from the finest leaders Temple Israel had to offer and a

⁵⁸ “Jews Will Celebrate This Week,” *Akron Evening Times* (20 April 1915): 3.

⁵⁹ “Celebrate Founding of Temple,” *Akron Evening Times* (24 April 1915): 1.

presentation from the Sunday School children. Rabbi Gross served as toastmaster and remarked that he expected the congregation to “grow and grow until it becomes one of the most powerful organizations of its kind in the state.”⁶⁰ Dedicated member, Henry Fuerst, spoke about the need for young people to be committed to the Temple.

Our city will continue to grow and with its growth we must increase our membership and our activities... but in order to prosper and attain that goal for which we are striving, we must put our shoulders to the wheel and work in absolute harmony with one another, for a house divided against itself cannot stand and so in order to accomplish the most good we must all pull together.... In conclusion. Let us resolve to work for the upbuilding of our congregation, so that our young men and women of the future may stand upon the foundation which we have built for them so that we can say Reform Judaism in Akron has been a success.⁶¹

Rabbi Gross and Henry Fuerst both predicted a future for Temple Israel that was much brighter than the congregation had already seen.

The excitement around the 50th celebration that spring did not drastically alter the congregation in any way, particularly with regard to its financial health. At the annual meeting later that fall President Frank helped the congregation relive the energy and excitement from the anniversary celebration. However, the same speech reminded congregants of the financial trouble that the congregation was facing despite having processed some dozen applications for

⁶⁰ “Banquet is Enjoyed by Akron Jews,” *Akron Evening Times* (27 April 1915): 1 & 14.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

membership from new members.⁶² The crux of the problem seemed to be certain members refusing to pay their dues. By year's end, the Executive Board discussed additional avenues to raise the funds necessary to cover the costs of the synagogue. One idea was to hire a collector to work on behalf of the congregation.⁶³ It took another half year for the congregation to land on a suitable, though temporary, solution. It was decided to meet the increasing financial needs of the congregation by raising dues on certain individuals who were not paying "their just share towards defraying the expenses of the congregation."⁶⁴

It was in the months that followed the 50th-anniversary celebration that the Ladies of Temple Society gained momentum in their work. The women increased their efforts to bring women together mostly in the social hall of Temple Israel. They built community amongst themselves, but most importantly they provided regularity to Temple offerings. The Ladies of Temple society was the most consistent programming body within the synagogue. They hosted monthly meetings focused on Temple business at a minimum, but most months hosted other social events. The group held dances for secular holidays, such as the 1915 Halloween dance and

⁶² Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 28 October 1915, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

⁶³ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 10 February & 16 March 1916, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

⁶⁴ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 3 August 1916, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

Temple's first rummage sale that winter.⁶⁵ Since the group had been meeting regularly, following the first of the new year, the group's gatherings took on a civic dimension. The first advertised sewing event was held on January 7, 1916.⁶⁶ The group regularly hosted sewing parties to benefit the Red Cross until the end of the war period.

The Great War that had been raging in Europe since 1914 came increasingly to the forefront of the Jewish community's mind, and not just the women of the Ladies' Society. The Jewish Relief Movement gained traction across the country. The movement united workers with the purpose of bringing immediate relief to those who were suffering.⁶⁷ Rabbis were encouraged by the Central Committee for the Relief of Jews to preach relief sermons, while Jews were encouraged to volunteer for the efforts.⁶⁸ The Shabbat ignited Akron Jews to aid in the war effort from the Homefront. The efforts began as small-scale projects by auxiliaries, such as the Ladies Temple Society. It took Akron's Federation of Jewish Charities time to organize the major push that would come some months later. In March of 1917, Akron Jews participated in the organized nationwide effort to raise ten million dollars.⁶⁹ The Akron Jewish community came together in

⁶⁵ "Church Notes," *Akron Evening Times* (22 October 1915): 4; "Club Notes," *Akron Beacon Journal* (5 November 1915): 4.

⁶⁶ "Ladies Sew," *Akron Beacon Journal* (7 January 1916): 5.

⁶⁷ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 211.

⁶⁸ "Action is Urged in Jewish Relief," *Akron Beacon Journal* (14 January 1916): 8. The Central Committee was the branch of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee founded at the beginning of the Great War in order to help the Jewish communities in Europe.

⁶⁹ "Akron Jews Seek to Aid Brethren," *Akron Beacon Journal* (22 March 1917): 1.

support of this worthy cause and provided relief to Jews who found themselves in the crosshairs of the international conflict.

Rabbi Gross was often courted during his time in Akron. His deliberate work growing the synagogue, and exemplary work in the greater Akron community made Rabbi Gross a much sought after figure in congregations around the region. Following multiple job offers during his 8 years as the Rabbi at Temple Israel, Rabbi Gross left Akron, the first pulpit position of his career. Temple Israel had grown significantly in number and in the depth of its religious community because of Rabbi Gross' leadership.

Rabbi Abraham Cronbach's Tenure, 1917–1919

Rabbi Louis Gross stepped down in June of 1917 to succeed Abba Hillel Silver (1893-1963) in the pulpit in of Congregation Leshem Shomayim (the Eoff St. Temple) in Wheeling, West Virginia. Replacing Gross quickly became a top priority for the Temple. Even in the middle of summer, Temple leadership was keenly aware that the holidays were fast approaching, and the Board of Trustees wasted no time in conducting a search for a new rabbinic leader. At the July board meeting, President Louis Loeb took charge of the search. The minutes from that meeting detail: "The secretary was instructed to write to several rabbis recommended by Rabbi Gross to solicit correspondence with them, also to Dr. Louis Grossmann of Cincinnati stating to them the situation asking him to recommend a suitable rabbi."⁷⁰ The community sought all the help they could gather, as this leadership had never gone through a rabbinic placement search, and the

⁷⁰ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 8 July 1919, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

community itself had not required a new rabbi in over a decade. A number of rabbis were asked to serve Temple Israel's needs on a temporary basis while the search was underway. Only referred to in the board minutes as 'Rabbi Jacobs' was secured for several services during the summer months.⁷¹ It is unclear how he found Temple Israel, or how Temple Israel found Rabbi Jacobs. Likely he could have been a rabbi from the Cleveland area because of the growing relationship between Cleveland and Akron Jews during this period. During the summer of 1916, the temple's leadership announced that the congregation had retained Rabbi Abraham Cronbach (1882-1965) for the High Holiday services, so they would not be without a rabbi.⁷² This was not for a permanent position, although by the High Holy Day season of 1919 Temple Israel was still without a permanent rabbi.⁷³

By the early summer of 1917, the congregation had grown by about 30 families.⁷⁴ The substantial increase meant that even a few weeks without a rabbi would be difficult for the community to withstand. The final years of World War I coincided with a time of great fluctuation and inconsistency at Temple Israel. The transition between rabbinic leadership

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Cronbach later became a professor at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. An ardent pacifist and social liberal, Cronbach often attracted attention (both negative and positive) throughout his career. See Robert Alan Seigel. "A Biography of Abraham Cronbach." Master's Thesis. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1965.

⁷⁴ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 1 July 1917, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

offered its own unique challenges because Rabbi Cronbach served the community before he was contracted for an extended period of time. Rabbi Cronbach also challenged Temple Israel members by preaching politics regularly from the pulpit. Cronbach exemplified an emerging understanding of Judaism which demanded practical implications and commentary on American life. However, the Temple Israel community was not ready to embrace this emerging Judaism since Rabbi Cronbach's preaching was not always welcomed. These years reflect a community where the synagogue's leadership and wider membership were not in sync with the rabbinic leadership. These factors demonstrate that the years of Rabbi Cronbach's tenure served as transition years between two influential and strong rabbis in Temple Israel's history.

Rabbi Abraham Cronbach conducted the worship services for the Holidays. In his autobiography, he mentioned something that followed him throughout his pulpit career was the tension of how precisely to speak his mind, and when he should hold his views back. This was especially hard during the war since Rabbi Cronbach was an avid pacifist.⁷⁵ His holiday sermons that year were less political than some of his later sermons. What caught the attention of the Jewish and the greater Akron community was the subject of Cronbach's sermon on Shabbat Shuvah (the sabbath that falls in between Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement). Ahead of that particular sabbath service, the *Beacon Journal* advertised the service of the new rabbi. In the section of religious services, they advertised that "[Cronbach] will have an unusual address tonight at temple. He will speak on his impressions of Akron and will

⁷⁵ Cronbach Autobiography, 62–63.

make a number of pertinent suggestions.”⁷⁶ This “unusual address” addressed one of the major flaws he witnessed in Akron which was the great amount of intoxication. At that time, many members of the congregation “dealt in liquor and that some of [them] were influential” in the synagogue.⁷⁷ This description highlights the tension he would feel often throughout his 24 months in Akron and beyond—the tension between what a rabbi should speak about, how much a rabbi should share, on the pulpit. This tension became more prevalent as Cronbach’s short-lived relationship with Temple Israel passed. However, despite this colorful first encounter with the Temple Israel community, Cronbach was offered the position.

The Temple Israel community was eager to transition Rabbi Cronbach into the role of the Rabbi of Akron. The Jewish community of the city had swelled to somewhere around 2,500 individuals by the beginning of his tenure.⁷⁸ Members of Temple Israel had grown accustomed over the last decade to their rabbi playing an active role in the affairs of the greater city, and they expected nothing less from Rabbi Cronbach. He and his wife, Rose, were welcomed into the city with a reception that drew Akronites from the other synagogues and from the secular civic realm.⁷⁹ According to contemporary newspaper reports and Temple board meetings, it seems evident that Rabbi Cronbach quickly embraced his role in Akron. His sermons were often covered by the local press, and many issues faced Temple Israel which demanded Rabbi Cronbach’s diligent work right away.

⁷⁶ “Christian Church vs Labor Question,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (27 September 1919): 5.

⁷⁷ Cronbach Autobiography, 62–63.

⁷⁸ Kaplan, “Century of Adjustment,” 88.

⁷⁹ “Reception,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (12 October 1917): 6.

The women of Temple Israel continued their regular schedule of sewing events to benefit the work of the Red Cross. The women's group took steps to make this work a permanent fixture in the Akron community. Under the title of Temple Israel, the women formed an auxiliary group to the Red Cross.⁸⁰ Rabbi Cronbach also challenged Temple Israel congregants to understand the Red Cross' place in American life, especially during the War years. Rabbi Cronbach delivered a short sermon in early 1918 on the topic of the Red Cross. "In bewildering times of war, the Red Cross resembles a familiar friend...one of the few agencies that can speak the same language to-day that it spoke in the happier days of peace."⁸¹ Cronbach, like many others during these years, was disturbed by the loss of human life during war. He was particularly distressed by the fact that in World War I Jews were killing other Jews. Cronbach's intention seems to call on the universal message of the Red Cross, which he characterized as "mercy."⁸² This seems to be an initial inclining towards his emphasis on the concept of Prophetic Idealism,⁸³ The idealism contained within the teaching of the Hebrew prophets were, in Cronbach's thought, central teachings for Reform Jewry. Cronbach concluded his remarks by observing that the Red Cross "causes [us] to stop asking 'why all this suffering?' To the contrary, the organization compels people to start engaging with a much healthier query

⁸⁰ "Red Cross Sewing," *Akron Beacon Journal* (22 October 1917): 6.

⁸¹ Sermon delivered by Cronbach, "The Red Cross, 1918," Abraham Cronbach Papers, MS 9/box 1/folder 4, AJA.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 287-288.

‘How to relieve this suffering?’ The Red Cross provides the answer not in the feeble form of words but in the mighty form of deeds.”⁸⁴ Cronbach’s words illuminate a growing tension that Reform communities felt in the early 20th century, the relationship between words and actions. American culture during the years of The Great War coaxed a patriotism of service on behalf of those in uniform and the greater good. It is not known if Cronbach was speaking to this form of service or his deep commitment to pacifism.

The lay leadership of the Women’s group, the efforts of the Board of Trustees, and now the efforts of Rabbi Cronbach together brought the war efforts to the forefront of the community’s mind. The Women’s group had been working diligently for the Red Cross since the group was first organized at Temple Israel in 1916. By the first quarter of 1918, the Women’s Auxiliary to the Red Cross boasted with pride that the group had sent 1,048 units of supplies to the Red Cross.⁸⁵ The war was an unfortunate fact of life that Akronites, like Americans in general, could not escape during the Cronbach. No matter how much of a Pacifist Rabbi Cronbach was, the people in the pews of Temple Israel demonstrated their patriotism time and again that year.

Rabbi Cronbach and Temple Israel honored the Jewish soldiers from Akron who served their country. All who had sons fighting overseas were invited to attend a Memorial Day address at Shabbat services that weekend. This first documented recognition of a Memorial Day by Temple Israel in 1918 would later grow into a large-scale communal ceremony including many

⁸⁴ Cronbach, "The Red Cross."

⁸⁵ "News from the Red Cross," *Akron Beacon Journal* (12 March 1918): 4.

different faith communities.⁸⁶ In 1918, however, Rabbi Cronbach addressed those in the Temple Israel community who were affected. “There is no worthier way of honoring our soldiers than that of applying ourselves in their name to the task of making unemployment in this country forever impossible. Unemployment is simply one of the man diseases of our selfish money mad industrial system.”⁸⁷

After two important years for Temple Israel’s history, Rabbi Cronbach’s departure manifested over the course of several months beginning in the spring of 1918. The series of events was put into motion with a sermon he delivered one Shabbat in late April. The sermon was titled *Bolshevism – Bane or Blessing?* The same title later served as the chapter name in his autobiography dedicated to his short time in Akron. This sermon was a turning point for his time in Akron. Although Cronbach served out the remainder of the Jewish calendar that year with Temple Israel, he later would point to this sermon as the factor which sealed his fate. It was clear that he would have to resign from

⁸⁶ The notion of a national Memorial Day is typically traced back to the custom of honoring the Civil War dead. The first national commemoration took place on May 30, 1868, and was often referred to as Decoration Day because the families of soldiers who lost their lives in war adorned the graves of their loved ones with flowers, wreaths and flags. See Richard Gardiner and Daniel Bellware, *The Genesis of the Memorial Day Holiday in America* (Columbus, Georgia: Columbus State University, 2014).

⁸⁷ “Memorial Day Review,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (31 May 1918): 6.

the congregation.⁸⁸ More than the text of the sermon, it was his actions that caused his demise and eventual resignation from the pulpit of Temple Israel.

The sermon sought to add nuance and challenge its audience to *think* rather than write off the Bolshevik movement altogether because of societal pressures. Cronbach offered that he did not know enough about the ideology to attack or defend it. Instead, he reminded the community that the more important things in life are much older than Bolshevism. These are “love of humanity... freedom of speech... sacredness of truth...”⁸⁹ The emphasis in the sermon is on the things that unite humanity, and those must overshadow all else. During the latter years of World War 1, the Bolshevik project was surely on the minds of most adults, either with harsh criticism and skepticism or with sympathetic ears. The War exposed harsh class divides in society. Cronbach used the subject as a moment to teach his congregants about civility in the public discourse, instead of a purely political address. He taught that when in fervent debate with someone who has an opposing viewpoint, one must prove the other side wrong. To prove “means to argue and to reason. And there can be no arguing and reasoning [without] love of humanity, freedom of speech and respect for truth.”⁹⁰ The sermon that evening was a pragmatic approach to the revolutionary movement. Cronbach pointed out the negative aspects of the ideology but also

⁸⁸ Abraham Cronbach, "Autobiography," *American Jewish Archives* 11, no. 1 (April, 1959): 63–65.

⁸⁹ Sermon: Bolshevism – Bane or Blessing?, 25 April 1919, Abraham Cronbach Papers, MS 9/box/folder 4, AJA.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

offered critique for the false rumors many believed about Bolshevism. In the end, it was the three principles, which were divine in Cronbach's opinion, that he wanted the congregation to remember. The triad outweighs every opinion and every policy; these three factors are what each congregant should value more than anything. In Cronbach's view, humanity, freedom of speech, and truth were the core values that all the members of Temple Israel should embrace both as Americans and as Jews.

Following the sermon, a young man, who was new to the community, approached Cronbach and asked to address the community on the topic of Bolshevism. The man was granted permission to speak to the congregation. Based on the account in Cronbach's own words, the man had a thick foreign accent and he "praised [Bolshevism] and apparently recommended adoption of [it] by America."⁹¹ Following this incident, Cronbach was censured by the Board of Trustees. Not for the sermon only, but for his poor judgment and lack of leadership regarding this incident that followed. Years later, in reflecting on these events, Cronbach recalled that the censures he received were "so severe that I decided not only to resign from the Akron pulpit but to abandon the pulpit entirely."⁹²

Rabbi Cronbach remained with Temple Israel through the High Holy Day season of 1919, and ultimately left Akron in October of that year. He delivered teachings and facilitated worship services, all with the censure weighing him down. Cronbach took on anti-Semitism and Jewish unity in an untitled sermon he delivered in the summer of that

⁹¹ Abraham Cronbach, "Autobiography," 64.

⁹² Ibid.

year. Cronbach spoke in vague details about the Jewish protests in Washington occurring at the time. He read these protests into the greater context of Jewish history, that wherever the Jew goes, there is Jew-hatred. “Languages change, governments change, industries change, religions change but the abusing of the Jew seems to be the one thing in history that abides.”⁹³ It is unclear exactly what event in history Cronbach was concerned with, possibly the pogroms in Kiev that summer, or the numerous Jewish communities destroyed along the frontlines of the war.

It was from this context that Cronbach addressed the greater purpose of Jewish peoplehood, which is the quest for Justice. “We Jews are asking for no special favors. We Jews demand justice for every human being in the world. Because, in this instance, it is Jews who have been plundered and murdered.”⁹⁴ He offered these words in a similar vein to previously analyzed sermons. It is clear that justice work, as the calling of the Jewish people and Reform Movement, was very much at the core of Cronbach’s religious ideology. Despite the censure and Cronbach’s inkling against publicly critiquing American policy, he addressed particular shortcomings of American society in this light. Cronbach acknowledged lynchings, bombings, and even the Espionage Law as particular moral failures.⁹⁵ While Cronbach occupied Temple Israel’s pulpit, the congregants were constantly enjoined to embrace the universal message of Judaism.

⁹³ Untitled sermon delivered by Cronbach, June 1919, Abraham Cronbach Papers, MS-9/box/folder 4, AJA.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 2.

Cronbach concluded his sermon with words spoken to all Jews. These words make it clear that the greater Jewish community lacked unity, and this was a great stumbling block to the work that could be done on behalf of justice. Cronbach wrote:

The Jew must be just to one another, remembering how our religion teaches ‘Justice, justice shalt thou pursue.’ Reform Jews should be just to Orthodox Jews and Orthodox Jews should be just to Reform Jews. One side should not bring against the other side charges that are untrue... We Jews ought to drop our quarrels amongst one another. When you are just, you do not quarrel. It is God’s way to bring good out of bad.⁹⁶

This is one of the few times Cronbach quoted a Biblical text in the sermons he delivered at Temple Israel. What is more notable in the above excerpt is his language that spoke both to Reform and Orthodox Jews. Classical Reform Judaism flourished in the early years of the twentieth century. As the movement grew in membership and in the influence of its centralized institutions, other corners of the American Jewish community took notice. The Orthodox community formed their own union no less than three decades earlier.⁹⁷ This development, combined with creation of the American Jewish Committee in 1906, triggered fear among some in the Reform Movement as to the viability of their own union.⁹⁸ By the eve of the First World

⁹⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁹⁷ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 283.

⁹⁸ Jonathan D. Sarna. *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), 208–210.

War, American Jewry had many streams even within established denominations. Cronbach preached what he believed would be the path forward, through all the Jewish hate in the world that was only increasing by the day. That path was through brotherhood.

Rabbi Cronbach's short time spent at Temple Israel in Akron played a significant role in his career, as well as in the history of the congregation. Both his hiring and firing from the community were marked by Cronbach's eagerness to speak his mind. This quality was also useful in challenging congregants to understand their American and Jewish values in a clearer way. The years of the war were challenging to the soul of humanity. Rabbi Cronbach is remembered in Akron as a rabbi who believed he had something to say about the state of the world. His brief, yet noteworthy tenure was an important bridge for the congregation between the strong rabbinic figures who would bookend Rabbi Abraham Cronbach at Temple Israel in Akron.

Conclusion

The 1910s were years of growth for the Reform Jews in Akron. They solidified their standing in Akron as a permanent and essential institution in the community. The members were able to further develop an understanding of their community during these years. With the dedication of the synagogue building on Merriman Road, the community reimagined itself with the name Temple Israel. There the leadership faced growing pains as they navigated financial hardships and other membership concerns. Temple Israel members also gained a greater understanding of what they sought in a spiritual leader. Rabbi Louis D. Gross provided Temple Israel with strong leadership both within the Temple Israel community and in a greater Akron civic and faith community. Rabbi Cronbach introduced a strong pulpit presence and an outspoken personality

when it came to subjects of moral conscience. As Temple Israel members looked for their next spiritual leader to guide them through the post-World War I period, they sought a dedicated individual who could foster a sense of stability in the synagogue. Someone who could bring together the best qualities of both recent rabbis in the community and lead them through the next decades building a stronger Reform community in Akron.

Chapter 2: Temple Israel Under Rabbi David Alexander, 1919–1929

At the annual meeting of 1919, President I. J. Frank ended his address with the first appearance of Temple Israel's motto: "keeping the doors ever open."⁹⁹ The sentiment seemed to be a rallying cry to the congregation. A phrase that looked back on the struggles the community had overcome during the early years on Merriman Road with an aura of optimism for the future under the direction of their new rabbi, David Alexander, who would lead them for the next twenty-five years. Little did leadership know that the motto served as a test to Temple Israel's congregation again and again over the subsequent years with its many challenges.

The next ten years, until the opening of the first Jewish Center in Akron, was a time of growth for the Reform community of Akron.¹⁰⁰ Their numbers rose steadily, but more notably, the auxiliary organizations of Temple Israel – particularly those focused on women and youth – were strengthened. Congregational leadership was in the best possible position for years to come.

⁹⁹ Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 19 November 1919, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁰⁰ The Akron Jewish Center was the precursor to the contemporary Jewish Community Center in Akron. The goal of the center was to create a space where all Jewish people in the community could come together. The vision which drove the Jewish Center was to be a synagogue and more. Ahead of its opening the Center's Board of Trustees defined the mission of such an institution would be "that said Center building, when erected, shall at all times be maintained for all Jewish people of the City of Akron and a place where all Jewish interests and activities may be housed." Leslie Flaksman, "Social Factors Affecting Membership in a Jewish Center." Master's Thesis, Boston University, 1956.

They had the enthusiasm of a new rabbi to guide them, and they were just as dedicated as they were in the days following the opening of the new Temple center almost a decade earlier. Yet this optimism was constantly tempered by the congregation's circumstances. Institutional management and membership retention were concerns that persistently vexed the synagogue's trustees. The Temple's leadership often struggled with these very same challenges throughout its history. Also, at times, the executive board struggled to articulate Temple Israel's purpose to its members.

Following the ceasefire in Europe and what looked like lasting peace, Akron rubber companies, which directed the forces at play across the city, experienced a brief economic slump in 1921, that lasted for slightly over a year.¹⁰¹ Akron Rubber bounced back quickly during the "Roaring Twenties." However, the decade was challenging socially for Jews as the Klan's influence grew across the country. For the Jews in Akron, in particular, the Klan posed a particularly significant problem. The industry in Akron attracted not only immigrants hailing from across the globe but from various southern and rural regions in America as well. This influx of 100,000 white Americans from Appalachia by the start of the 1920s forced American-born and immigrant populations to meet.¹⁰² At times, this caused issues for the congregation while at

¹⁰¹ John A. Tully, *Labor in Akron, 1825–1945* (Akron, Ohio: The Akron University Press, 2020), 71–73.

¹⁰² Ibid., 153. For a focused historical study of the KKK in Akron, Ohio, see John Lee Maples, "The Akron, Ohio Ku Klux Klan, 1921-1928," Masters Thesis, University of Akron, 1974. This thesis is downloadable at this site:

<https://www.akronlibrary.org/images/Divisions/SpecCol/images/KKK-in-Akron-thesis.pdf>

others it posed an opportunity for members to engage with the greater Akron community for the betterment of the city.

Rabbi David Alexander (1878-1950)

David Alexander was born and bred in Brooklyn, New York. He moved to Cincinnati as a teenager to study at the Hebrew Union College. Upon completing his rabbinical studies in 1901 at the age of 22, Alexander became the rabbi of Temple Israel of Paducah. In 1905, he moved to Toledo, Ohio, where he remained until assuming the pulpit of Temple Israel in Akron in 1919.¹⁰³ Rabbi Alexander first met the Temple Israel community through his work with the statewide B'nai B'rith organization and other outlets that connected Ohio Jewry in the early twentieth century. His hiring brought great enthusiasm to the congregation from the beginning because of the knowledge Temple Israel had of Rabbi Alexander. Having had three rabbis before the conclusion of the first two decades of the twentieth century was challenging for Temple Israel. They sought a rabbi who would build a deep relationship with the community and would offer members stability. This is what the community hoped to find in their next rabbi.

Rabbi Alexander and his wife arrived in Akron from Toledo after the High Holiday season of 1919. He preached his initial sermon on the Shabbat evening of November 7, 1919. Following a few years of great change within the community and the city, Temple Israel leadership was eager to begin what they hoped would be a period of stability and growth for the community. These hopes were placed firmly on the shoulders of Rabbi Alexander. At his installation service later that month, both he and the congregation spoke of the mutual feeling of respect and trust that was to govern the relationship. In his inaugural sermon, Alexander called

¹⁰³ On Alexander, see CCAR Yearbook (vol. LX), 1950: 267-8.

for “continuance of harmony and a united purpose in mind upward and forward to the end that the members of the congregation would remain loyal citizens and good Jews.”¹⁰⁴

At the annual meeting in November 1919, only a few weeks after the installation of the new rabbi, Temple Israel President I. J. Frank spoke with great optimism of the years to come:

In a religious way, you have elected to fill the pulpit one of the best Rabbis in the country, a man who can and will represent the Jewish community with that command of respect that will place the entire local Jewry on a larger platform, and they will be received in a different light than heretofore. It is necessary that you lend to him the assistance he requires and helps him in every respect... It behooves all of us to come to Temple Friday evenings and in this way show our appreciation toward our Rabbi and toward our religion.¹⁰⁵

Rabbi Alexander brought renewed enthusiasm to the congregation. He commanded respect from the community because they were aware of his record of leadership in neighboring Toledo. Even in this incredibly hopeful moment, Temple Israel’s problems persisted. Frank included in his letter a plea for congregants to support the congregation with their attendance at worship services and other Temple gatherings.

Rabbi Alexander hit the ground running. Now that the Great War had come to an end raising funds for the Jewish communities of Europe to combat hunger and rebuild following the war became a high priority for American Jewry. Akron’s goal was to raise \$69,000 as its

¹⁰⁴ “Install Rabbi at Israel Temple,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (15 November 1919): 20.

¹⁰⁵ Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 19 November 1919, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

contribution to the Joint Distribution Committee's greater goal of raising \$65 million from American Jewish communities.¹⁰⁶ This sizeable sum speaks to the philanthropic largesse for a community that was home to approximately 2,000 Jews in 1918.¹⁰⁷ Rabbi Alexander served as chairman of a city-wide meeting on 28 December 1919 in support of the war relief efforts and to drive philanthropy efforts. The keynote speaker, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, drew a large crowd and filled the Armory building. Silver spent time in war-torn Europe and spoke of mass starvation and destruction. The series of events in Akron during the final days of 1919 helped the community fulfill their fundraising quota, but also solidified Rabbi Alexander's position as a leader in the community.

Social and philanthropic causes were a driving force behind Rabbi Alexander and other Temple members' work over the next few years. Rabbi Alexander immediately got involved

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), 210–212; “Opening of \$69,000 Jewish Campaign,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (27 December 1919): 1.

¹⁰⁷ Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585–1984* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990), 171. If 100% of Akron's 2,000 Jews participated in this fundraising campaign, which is doubtful, each person would have had to donate \$34.50 to meet their goal. However, in 1919, \$34.50 was the equivalent of approximately \$550.00 in today's money. This was a sizable amount for any one individual to donate. In fact, \$34 was more than some members' dues responsibilities at this time. To reach Akron's goal of \$65,000 many would have had to donate well over \$34.50.

with the newly named Jewish Social Service Federation of Akron.¹⁰⁸ At the first meeting of the new year when the organization became the Jewish Social Federation, the incoming president and dedicated Temple Israel member, Maurice Krohngold, offered a vision of “Jew and Gentile getting together... learning to understand one another, growing more tolerant... The war has not taught us but recalled to our minds that it must be social justice that can wield us all together into an everlasting brotherhood.”¹⁰⁹ Krohngold spoke of the social concerns that would define the work of Rabbi Alexander, Temple leaders, and by extension the greater Reform community in Akron—that of justice and strong relationships with the larger faith community in Akron.

Rabbi Alexander expanded the impact of the synagogue through various speaking and educational events. In November 1920 he had his first documented collaboration with the Akron Real Estate Board. He spoke at the organization’s regular weekly meeting on the topic “The Future of Akron.” Additionally, he offered a lecture series in the fall of 1921 at the YWCA on biblical literature. Rabbi Alexander often addressed the Civitan Club¹¹⁰ on issues of citizenship and thoughts on the future. Rabbi Alexander also built a name for himself during this period as someone who tackled tough issues. In the spring of 1921, he invited Edwin Gustav Pipp (1864-

¹⁰⁸ “Jewish Federation Favors Peace Chest,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (26 January 1920): 15.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Civitan International is an association of volunteer community service clubs that seek “to build good citizenship” by serving the needs of individuals and the community. The first Civitan chapter was established in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1917. Ten years later, more than 100 chapters had been founded. The Akron chapter was founded in 1923. See <https://civitan.org/>

1935),¹¹¹ former editor of the *Dearborn Independent*, to speak at Temple Israel. Pipp spoke about his disagreements with Henry Ford on the content of the antisemitic articles included in the paper. The lecture was free and open to the public. Although follow-up from the event is not recorded, it undoubtedly attracted a large audience after it was publicized for weeks prior.

Rabbi Alexander also built strong interfaith relationships with local church leaders and communities. Beginning in late January 1928 the Temple and rabbi were included in the “Support a Church” effort of the *Akron Beacon Journal*.¹¹² The full-page flyer ran at the expense of “leading businessmen and progressive citizens.”¹¹³ The page contained over a dozen churches in the city, of which Temple Israel was the only Jewish house of worship advertised.¹¹⁴ The listing of each organization contained highlights of upcoming services and other essential information like contact information and clergy details. This ad is significant for two reasons: the first is for the length of time the advertisement ran in the *Beacon Journal*—it ran with a very limited interruption for about a decade. The second is what the ad communicates about life during this period: There was a concerted effort among people of faith to support their houses of worship. People were left with massive fundamental questions about humanity following World War I and faith institutions did offer purpose, meaning, and answers to those questions.

¹¹¹ On Pipp, see <https://pipp.net/pipp-family-geneology/edwin-gustav-pipp-1864-1935/>

¹¹² “Go To Your Church Tomorrow,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (07 Jan 1928): 15.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ This is significant to note because in the same year Helga Kaplan’s research found a total of six Orthodox institutions in the city none of which were featured in this ad.

However, with the horrors of the Great War still fresh, some were left unfulfilled by those answers.¹¹⁵

Rabbi Alexander established himself as a reliable orator and a formidable mind on the issues of the day both globally and close to home. His work in the interfaith community was evident in more than just words on a page that ran in a newspaper. He was ready to celebrate, mourn, and teach with his colleagues in the field from churches across the city. In February 1929 he was invited to speak at the Wooster Avenue Church at its father and son banquet. He offered an important lesson for all those in attendance, “City life has pulled father and son apart. We have lost the simple home life of another generation. Today father goes to his clubs or takes his clubs with him to the golf course, or goes away alone in his automobile, and son is left to do about as he pleases.”¹¹⁶ The plea in his address called for greater unity. The lesson applied to all no matter their race, creed, or religion. But Alexander’s petition hinged on a change in reality that all across the city experienced because of the changing time.

Temple Israel Sisterhood

In its first major undertaking of the 1920s Temple Israel embarked on a project to rewrite its constitution. The final document outlined the various degrees of membership that were instituted previously in the community and their corresponding dues. The constitution maintained various

¹¹⁵ For a larger analysis of the role religion played in the decades following the Great War see Erica J. Ryan, *When the World Broke in Two: The Roaring Twenties and the Dawn of America's Culture Wars*. (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2018).

¹¹⁶ “Rabbi Alexander Deplores Lack of Real Fellowship,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, (29 February 1929): 34

policies regarding the structure of the Executive Officers and their duties and responsibilities. The most significant modernization found in the new constitution was an amendment passed in October 1920. The amendment updated the terms of membership, stating explicitly that both men and women “of the Jewish faith [were] eligible for membership and have the same rights.”¹¹⁷ Women had thus far played a vital role in Temple Israel, and with this amendment Temple Israel was fully recognizing that role. The Schwesterbund and Ladies’ Temple Society (which became the Temple Israel Sisterhood during this time) continuously worked hard for the betterment of the synagogue. They were influential in retaining teachers for the Religious School and providing funds for the choir, and the women’s groups led Temple Israel’s War response efforts. The Sisterhood had organized every annual congregational meeting for the last decade and would continue this tradition into the future. It was a logical step for the constitution to recognize the women in the community as eligible and dedicated members in their own right.

The sisterhood grew significantly and took on increasingly more responsibility during these years. They did so alongside the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) which helped organize and promote Judaism within the ranks of the member organizations.¹¹⁸ This strong centralized organization could speak to why the Temple Israel Sisterhood was incredibly successful at a time when the Temple at large struggled. The women in the sisterhood were able

¹¹⁷ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 31 October 1920, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹¹⁸ Jonathan D. Sarna, “The NFTS National Committee on Religion, 1913–1933,” in *Sisterhood: A Centennial History of Women of Reform Judaism*, ed. Caroline B. Balin, Dana Herman, Jonathan D. Sarna & Gary P. Zola (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 2013), 49–51.

to come together for the greater benefit of the Temple. The Sisterhood supported the work of the Temple, and it was able to pick up some of the balls dropped by Temple leadership. For example, when the carpet in the social hall was damaged because of plumbing issues the Sisterhood was able to cover those unexpected costs for the congregation.¹¹⁹ The Sisterhood often filled the role of providing the financial assistance that the congregation at large needed for various projects.

One of the largest undertakings by the Sisterhood helped give them the leverage they had in the community to retain this role in the community. During the holiday season of 1926, the Sisterhood led the charge on hosting a holiday bazaar at Temple Israel. Temple Israel's bazaar was one of many holiday markets in the city that year, all at different houses of worship, and all of them led by women's organizations.¹²⁰ What made this effort unique was that the Sisterhood was able to drive the effort with other Jewish women's organizations in the city. The proceeds from the bazaar benefited the Akron Jewish Center which was in its early stages of formation at this time.¹²¹ The event is a clear representation of the energy the Sisterhood had despite all the greater challenges in the congregation.

The Sisterhood was also heavily involved in promoting Judaism within the Temple Israel community. Two long-term programs conducted by the sisterhood offer a window into the Sisterhood's work that went beyond assisting the congregation to survive monetarily. The first

¹¹⁹ Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 3 December 1924, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹²⁰ "Social Events," *Akron Beacon Journal* (2 Dec 1926): 6.

¹²¹ Ibid.

was the ongoing Jewish education which happened at the regular Sisterhood meetings. Rabbi Alexander would lead a discussion on “Jewish current events.”¹²² The Sisterhood invited other notable individuals as well to speak at their meetings.¹²³ These meetings impacted mostly the women of Temple Israel who were involved in the Sisterhood; however, other programs also benefited the larger congregation. The second program initiated by the Sisterhood was a Bible Series. Started in 1929, The series was hosted on a rotating basis at the homes of members of the sisterhood.¹²⁴ There is no evidence that this was exclusively for Sisterhood members, in fact, later advertisements show male members of Temple Israel hosting the series. This is in line with the efforts of the NFTS to assist in the revitalization of Jewish practice within the synagogue.¹²⁵ The Sisterhood was integral to all areas of the Synagogue, including the intellectual and religious growth of Temple Israel members.

¹²² “Churches,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (13 March 1922): 6.

¹²³ “Elect Officers Tuesday,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (13 May 1925): 13. A teacher from Toledo was invited to speak at the meeting of the Sisterhood on the topic of “What to Read and How to Read.” Other such local and regional speakers were invited to Sisterhood meetings on a regular basis.

¹²⁴ “Churches,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (10 January 1929): 6.

¹²⁵ Sarna, “The NFTS National Committee on Religion, 1913–1933,” 63. The program had varying levels of success across the country. Temple Israel continued to offer a Bible Study at various Temple Israel members’ homes through the remainder of Rabbi Alexander’s tenure. Although into the late 1930s Bible Study advertisements in the *Beacon Journal* point to irregular meetings.

Temple Israel's Youth

Temple Israel further developed its commitment to and practice of Reform Judaism during this time. Rabbi Alexander established a class for high school students for continued learning of Judaism. The endeavor is thought to be the first effort made by any Jewish institution in the city to provide a Jewish education to High School aged children. By the congregation's annual meeting at the end of 1921, the program was deemed a success.¹²⁶ By 1924, the Sunday School was on a great upswing with more students attending over previous years, and the teachers in the school were more "enthusiastic" than in previous years.¹²⁷ In the latter years of the decade, Rabbi Alexander also established Boy Scout troop number two, yet another effort to build relationships with the youth in the community. Under Rabbi Alexander's direction, a co-ed Junior Congregation was created.¹²⁸ The Junior Congregation allowed younger people to hold similar events to what the Sisterhood and later the Brotherhood would offer. The Junior Congregation often advertised dinners at Temple, and its other staple program was holiday entertainment (in the form of plays). The three outlets for young people—the Sunday School, Boy Scout Troop two, and the Junior congregation—offered children many opportunities to participate in the Temple Israel community. These efforts were the foundation for the community. It was during these years that Temple Israel made strides in its offerings for young

¹²⁶ Annual Report of the Board of Trustee, 30 October 1921, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹²⁷ Annual Congregational Meeting, 14 December 1924, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹²⁸ *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, 21.

people. Through these three formal outlets, Temple Israel that a strong foundation upon which they would expand and deepen the youth community within the greater Temple Israel community.

As Reform Judaism and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) grew through the first half of the twentieth century, the movement emphasized the importance of Jewish education as integral to the health of the synagogue and to the future of the community.¹²⁹ Temple Israel had abandoned the Saturday Sabbath School model before they relocated to the Merriman Road location in favor of a religious school that met on Sunday mornings. Rabbi Alexander's passion seemed to be education. His earliest meetings with the Reform community in Akron were through statewide Jewish education meetings. And during his time as Senior Rabbi, he often gave the Executive Board updates on the Religious School and oversaw the hiring of and firing of teachers.

Rabbi Alexander's work to benefit the educational development of Temple Israel's young people also made an impact on adults as well. He served as an example and role model and began to change the culture within Temple Israel. In November 1921, the Executive Board approved the funds to purchase 100 copies of the Revised Union Prayer Book.¹³⁰ These copies were purchased as additional prayer books to increase the number of volumes the synagogue had on hand. And less than two years later the treasurer was authorized to purchase some 300

¹²⁹ Jacob Rader Marcus, *The American Jew, 1585–1990: A History* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1995), 125–132.

¹³⁰ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 15 November 1921, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

additional copies of the prayer book to sell to members and keep the extras on hand.¹³¹ Temple Israel leadership made these strides because of the deep commitment to their members to be a spiritual home and place for all to gather. These community-building efforts solidified Temple's place in the Jewish landscape of Akron as a leader well past the excitement of their new building opening.

Building & Financial Woes

Despite the spiritual and organizational growth of Temple Israel in this decade, its building and financial woes persisted. Unlike the problems the congregation faced later in the century, which were the result of external conditions, the 1920s were challenging for Temple Israel because of internal stressors. The congregation was growing and yet the increased number of members did not provide financial relief. The trustees could not get ahead of bills and other problems that required a steady flow of funds. They could not establish a system that stabilized the amount of dues that members needed to pay and a method to collect those dues.

Not long into the second decade of the twentieth century, the Temple Israel community increasingly felt the pressures of its growing congregational size. The auditorium and sanctuary spaces were too small to meet their needs. Beginning in late 1921 a campaign to expand the building was led by the trustees. The first step was to investigate the surrounding property. Although there is a discrepancy in the number of Jews in Akron during this period, Temple records show that the community did in fact push the limits of the Merriman Road building during this time. The 1921 annual report stated that the community had 219 members, with

¹³¹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 16 August 1923, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

twenty new members added to the rolls. This number reflects the families in the congregation and not the total number of people associated with the congregation. Later in that same report, the Trustees were proud to report that the Sunday School had 221 students enrolled and that the school “is considerably handicapped by the small quarters.”¹³² These conditions called the leadership to investigate the possibility of adding an addition to the building.

Discussions began in late 1921 with members of the executive committee who organized a formal appraisal of the Merriman Road building and the property which the community owned. A letter from C. Lee Briggs (1869-1948),¹³³ a local contractor, was included in the documentation from the November 1921 meeting. The letter included the appraisal which determined the value of all of Temple Israel’s assets amounted to \$80,850. The next steps in the quest to construct an addition for the building took some time to play out; the slow pace was in part due to the economic slump in 1921.¹³⁴ The city’s rubber industry was always greatly impacted by what the economic markets were doing, and those effects reverberated across the city. Temple Israel was not immune to these trends. The slump in the markets led to a decrease in revenue for the Temple because members lacked the capital to keep up to date with their dues. In

¹³² Annual Report of the Board of Trustees, 30 October 1921, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹³³ On Briggs, see

https://www.google.com/books/edition/History_of_the_Western_Reserve/L5GPjobXdWoC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=C.+Lee+Briggs&pg=PA1493&printsec=frontcover; and <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/9KLR-LC5/clifford-lee-briggs-1869-1948>.

¹³⁴ Tully, *Labor in Akron*, 144.

the hopes to keep cash flowing through the Temple's treasury a clerk was hired to try and collect all of the dues owed to the synagogue, and to do so in a timely manner.¹³⁵

It was a somewhat uncertain time for the congregation. One way congregants chose to face such pressures was by reelecting Louis Loeb to the office of president. He was called backed to the role after briefly serving in early 1915. Loeb was a trusted leader in the community, so much so that when he was elected at the 57th annual congregational meeting of 1922, he remained Temple Israel's president for well over a decade.¹³⁶ His opening statement at the congregational meeting that year read "Our congregational year has been an exceedingly busy one in spite of the fact that due to business depressions and other causes we have lost a good many of our members."¹³⁷

The Executive Committee continued to lead the charge on the expansion project. Following the appraisal of the property, it was determined that the congregation needed to purchase the surrounding property in order to physically expand. By the 1920s the well-established residential trend of Jewish families living on West Hill took hold. West Hill was the

¹³⁵ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 12 January 1922, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA, Cincinnati, Ohio. These minutes detail an incentive program that the clerk took part in. The clerk was incentivized to collect dues from the members with a 5% commission of all the money raised on behalf of the congregation. There is no clear evidence if this program was successful or not.

¹³⁶ *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, 22.

¹³⁷ Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 5 November 1922, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

area of Akron which sat west of the downtown city center and to the northwest of the major industrial center of the city – namely, the rubber plants. The area had become the center for the Jewish community. Temple Israel sat on the most northern end of the area where Jews settled on West Hill. Almost all the major figures within the Temple Israel community during this time lived on West Hill. Some of these individuals include Henry Feurst, J.H Vineberg, and President Louis Loeb, additionally, Rabbi and Mrs. Alexander’s home was located on West Hill not far from the synagogue.¹³⁸ It was because of this trend that Temple leadership decided to continue investing in the community neighborhood. As the Merriman Road building was barely ten years old, the next step was the purchase of additional lots adjacent to the synagogue building.

The executive board was given the green light to scout out surrounding lots by the annual meeting of 1922. Their power was secured by the board at the annual meeting when the congregation resolved to grant them “full power to act with reference to the purchase of the lot on Weber Avenue in the rear of the Temple, and that if the Board in its judgment deems it necessary to purchase said lot, that it do so for and on behalf of The Akron Hebrew Congregation.”¹³⁹ The project took quite a bit of time to complete because of lingering issues with revenue for the congregation due to the economic slump that hit Akron in 1923.¹⁴⁰ The project also stalled because internally, members had difficulty organizing themselves around this project. It was not until late summer of 1923 that the land was purchased for the expansion project. Around the same time, the congregation retained the firm Bliss Local Architects to plan

¹³⁸ Kaplan, “Century of Adjustments,” 328.

¹³⁹ Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 5 November 1922, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁴⁰ Tully, *Labor in Akron*, 143-145

the project. At the October Board of Trustees meeting, the firm presented its plans to the congregational leadership. The addition to the building would grant the Sunday School half a dozen additional classrooms—its own dedicated wing in the building, an office for the Janitor, and a gymnasium.¹⁴¹ A building committee was organized to present the plans to the congregation at large during the annual meeting at the close of 1923.¹⁴²

In the president's address and in committee reports, the expansion project was the exciting highlight for the congregation's future even though the debt it incurred from the first building project hampered the community's ability to grow consistently during this period. The congregation gave approval to the building committee to move forward with the plans under the condition that "sixty percent of the total cost be raised before the building was started."¹⁴³ This condition helped the community significantly as it allowed the community to move through the rest of the 1920s without a major debt.

The Roaring Twenties came to Akron as the economic slump of 1921 came to an end and industry bounced back. But the latter years began with a feeling of sadness in the pews of Temple Israel as the last living charter member, David Leopold, of the original Akron Hebrew

¹⁴¹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 26 October 1923, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁴² Ibid; Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 4 November 1923, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁴³ Ibid

Congregation, died.¹⁴⁴ Although Leopold was no longer living in Akron at the time of his passing, he was buried in the Jewish section of Rose Hill Cemetery and Rabbi Alexander officiated at the funeral. The next chapter of Temple Israel's story had truly begun with his passing. This was a loss the congregation felt keenly. The resolution of condolences was distributed to the wider Jewish community so that the entire community could mourn his passing. Although the Jewish community in Akron had grown considerably by this point, it points to the symbolic role Temple Israel still retained in the community. The last living among the first Jews in Akron had died, and it touched all Jews in Akron.

The financial affairs of the congregation did not improve during the latter half of the decade. The treasurer and membership committee held out hope each year that the community would gain the upper hand over its finances. They went into the busy event season in the fall of 1924 with a clear plan to fund the congregation, and with the exact funds needed to do so. It was determined after a deep dive into the financial state of the congregation that summer that an additional sum of \$2,500 would be needed to meet the planned expenses of the congregation and to put the community in a better situation. In order to raise this amount, it was decided that dues would increase for certain members in the community.¹⁴⁵ These members were presumably the most dedicated to Temple Israel and those in a sound personal financial situation. Those most

¹⁴⁴ Resolutions of Condolences, included in the Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 30 January 1924, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁴⁵ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 28 July 1924, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes [microform] MF-887, AJA.

likely to pay the increase were subject to it, so the committee would not have to dedicate extra resources to obtaining payment from those least likely to comply.

There was no membership increase in 1924. The congregation's secretary, Henry Fuerst, reported that there was a feeling of “indifference” toward the congregation. The most worrisome statement in Fuerst’s report was that out of the 210 members on the rolls more than 25% of the annual expenses of the synagogue were paid by merely ten families.¹⁴⁶ While Fuerst’s words attempt to appeal to the rational mind in the congregation, Loeb’s presidential address sought to speak to the hearts of his fellow congregants that year. He assessed all the different kinds of communal Jews—those who were dedicated to philanthropy or those who he labeled as “death Jews,” the ones who make their presence known only in times of mourning. But he offered that “real Jews” are the outstanding kind of Jew by which he meant that “real Jews look at life and say, ‘everything that is Jewish interests us.’”¹⁴⁷ It was with these words that he encouraged members to be interested—all things Jewish all things that were going on in their synagogue in an effort to increase active participation by members of Temple Israel.

It is possible that Loeb’s words did make an impact on some in the community. There was much excitement a few months later as Temple Israel’s sixtieth anniversary approached. The event would be the first major celebration without any charter members in attendance. The loss in conjunction with the anniversary reminded the congregation implicitly of their role in Temple Israel’s story. It was no longer about retaining a congregation that meant something very specific to its founders. Temple Israel was a pillar of Akron’s Jewish community; its purpose was to

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

provide and to guide the community through life as Jews in the Rubber City. Rabbi Alexander was given the responsibility of forming a committee and assisting them to plan this milestone event. The congregation held its celebration in late April 1925. The celebration took place over the course of an entire weekend with the culminating event, as was the tradition by the mid-1920s, with a large and elegant banquet on Saturday evening. Temple Israel's former rabbi, Abraham Cronbach, was invited to address the congregation at this milestone moment.¹⁴⁸

On the heels of this internal debate, the Executive Committee engaged in various efforts throughout the latter half of the 1920s to have a high level of participation by the congregants. At the board meeting of May 1927, the committee entertained its first documented formal “complaints” lodged by members who were encouraging the Temple’s leadership to reduce the

¹⁴⁸ “Temple Israel Holds 60th Anniversary,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (27 Apr 1925): 18. It is interesting to note that Rabbi Cronbach did return to the pulpit of Temple Israel following his tense departure less than a decade prior. It is also interesting to speculate why Rabbi Cronbach as opposed to Rabbi Louis Gross who arguably had a better relationship with the congregation when he departed for Wheeling, WV in 1917. Temple Israel throughout its history prides itself on having a strong relationship with all of the Jewish institutions in the region. Great rabbis and Jewish leaders were often invited to speak from the pulpit of Merriman Road. This was not the first time a professor from HUC was invited to the synagogue. Although no explicit reason is given for the Trustees’ move to invite Rabbi Cronbach to speak at the celebration, it seems that the Temple took pride in the fact that Cronbach was now at HUC and had fostered a reputation as a reputable thinker and provocative thinker.

dues for general membership.¹⁴⁹ Congregational dues during this period garnered significant attention from the board. Many congregants went on record voicing their thoughts on the subject.¹⁵⁰

It appears that the momentum behind the efforts to construct an addition to the Temple building on Merriman Road stalled roughly around the time that Louis Loeb was reinstated as president. The Board did receive a strongly worded complaint in the form of a letter from one congregant. The author's name was either redacted at the original time of receiving the letter or it has since been lost. Nonetheless, the contents of the letter are noteworthy. The author was furious at the idea of moving ahead with the expansion project:

It seems to me that it would be a wasteful expenditure of money to erect any additions to the Temple... I fully realize and agree with you that our Sunday

¹⁴⁹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 24 May 1927, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA; Daniel Judson. *Pennies for Heaven: The History of American Synagogues and Money* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 147–148.

This “fair share” system preceded synagogues stipulating one uniform fee for dues-paying members. The “fair share” allowed members to remain involved during the hardest economic times. Although it was already clear from this time that the idea of uniform dues would be eagerly supported by the Executive Board. The majority of meeting minutes are dedicated to negotiating dues concerns and frequently left no space for Temple Israel's leaders to discuss other matters.

¹⁵⁰ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 27 May 1926, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

School quarters are inadequate... means can be provided, whereby the Sunday School space can be secured in the present Temple... For the reasons outlined above I personally would oppose the erection of any additions to the present building on Merriman Road.¹⁵¹

The letter was included with the Board meeting minutes. The expansion idea was clearly a polarizing endeavor regardless of the apparent agreement that the temple's space was inadequate. The level of concern was clearly high enough that the project was put on the backburner.

Conclusion

The decade (1919-1929) marked progress within the Temple Israel community. The congregants, leadership, and rabbi all felt the influences of the changing times and adapted their work to the new age. In many ways, it was a hopeful time for Temple Israel. After the excitement and fluctuation of the first decade on Merriman Road, the community wanted to thrive in their new home with a rabbi and leadership they trusted to guide them. This hope was accompanied by challenges within the community. Membership dues became a perpetual issue, with no clear strategy for how to balance the Executive Board's concern over adequate funding with members' lack of willingness to pay. Additionally, the beautiful new Merriman Road building did not accurately serve the congregation's needs. Again, there was no clear remedy for this problem. In one of his final addresses to the congregation that decade, President Louis Loeb may have said it best. He lovingly challenged the congregation at the annual meeting that year "you can't go

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

wrong with Temple. Try it.”¹⁵² His words would live in the minds of congregants over the coming years. This resilience and trust they had found in Rabbi Alexander would be tested by the Depression, greater community opportunities offered by the Jewish Center, and the challenges with the onset of World War II.

¹⁵² Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 15 December 1928, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA. It was also announced at the congregational meeting that Rabbi Alexander had been reelected for a five-year contract.

Chapter 3: Temple Israel under Rabbi Alexander, 1929–1944

The Executive Committee and Rabbi David Alexander of Temple Israel were forced to dramatically alter their work into the 1930s and 1940s because of changing economic, social, and geopolitical factors. With the economic crash of 1929, the city faced enormous pressures as the rubber industry's stagnation slowed the movement of money in the city. This posed an existential threat to Temple Israel. The financial turmoil threatened Temple Israel to fall short of fulfilling its mission *to keep the doors ever opened*. As the financial situation of the congregation recovered and stabilized during the war years, leadership had renewed cause for a mixture of hope and concern. They faced financial pressures caused by external forces, but this period also contains the early roots of the financial pressures brought on by the changing nature of the American Jew.

There were times during the Depression when the congregation did not pay Rabbi Alexander's salary and when his long-term position was in doubt. Through it all, though, he remained committed to his position and his passions within the greater Akron community. The *Akron Beacon Journal* described him as “a keen-witted intellectual [who] occupies an important place in Akron civic as well as religious life... Rabbi Alexander upholds in Akron the fine reputation of the rabbinate for scholarly attainment and enlightened public service.”¹⁵³ He continued to dutifully fulfill his responsibilities as rabbi and community leader until the last days of his pulpit in 1944.

¹⁵³ “Takes Active Part in Akron Affairs,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (4 May 1934): 11.

Years of Hardship, 1929–1934

The year 1929 began on an incredibly high note for Temple Israel. It marked many wonderful anniversaries for the community, and they were honored in great celebration. The congregation chose to mark the 25th wedding anniversary of their beloved rabbi and his wife with a large banquet.¹⁵⁴ President Louis Loeb was given the honor and responsibility of acquiring a suitable gift for the couple. In the report at the close of the fiscal year in October 1929, it is documented that Loeb spent \$51.50 on the gift.¹⁵⁵ The sum is equal to almost \$800 today.¹⁵⁶ The gift, although unclear as to exactly what was purchased for the Alexanders, is a marker of the congregation's standing. Despite constant concerns from the Executive Board about the state of the finances and those families who missed dues payments, the congregation the desire to show a generous expression of its affection for its dedicated spiritual leader. It embodied a kind of flexibility the congregation had at that time. Despite the continued calls to pay dues with urgency and almost a sense of desperation, Temple Israel was not broke. The Board was continually

¹⁵⁴ Minutes of Board of Trustees, 20 May 1929, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁵⁵ Fiscal Report 1929, 31 October 1929, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA. The financial report of that year goes on to show that perhaps Temple Israel was in its best financial position of the century. Membership growth had picked up the pace, and the percentage of members paying their dues had also increased. Temple Israel reported an income of \$15,348.05 up by almost two thousand dollars over the 1928 fiscal year. The congregation's expenses decreased from \$14,139.61 in 1928 to \$13,656.99 in 1929, which enabled the congregation to have more fungible money on hand.

¹⁵⁶ < <https://www.dollartimes.com/inflation/inflation.php?amount=52&year=1929> >

prudent with the small sum in the bank account, and always vigilant in adding to the account. But they had some extra funds for times such as these when they sought to honor Rabbi and Mrs. Alexander. The anniversary gift was one of the last recorded purchases that the congregation made with ease for many years to come.

In the final weeks before the economic crash of late October 1929, the congregation made investments in the synagogue that would benefit the community. In early October 175 new chairs were purchased for the benefit of the Sunday School.¹⁵⁷ The school had not grown by that many students over the previous year, so it can be assumed that the chairs were an update to the current chairs in the building. Rabbi Alexander was also given approval by the committee to add another teacher to the faculty of the Religious School. Neither were exuberant costs; however, it was money from the surplus that was gone which could have presumably been used to defray the deficit that would arise in the coming months.

The Stock Market crash of October 29, 1929 quickly made its impact felt in Akron. Unemployment rates across the country skyrocketed and Akron was no different. The synagogue, however, did not instantly feel the force of such pressures. Rather there was a sense of optimism during the early days, and the first few years Temple Israel leadership put up a significant fight against the economic forces.¹⁵⁸ It would take a few more months until the congregation fully felt the weight of the economic calamity. The closing weeks of 1929 allowed

¹⁵⁷ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 2 October 1929, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁵⁸ Robert S McElvaine. *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*. (New York: Times Books, 1993).

Temple Israel some time to care for the community and bring members together, without the incredible pressures of financial ruin. On 1st November Temple Israel honored Rabbi Alexander for the second time that year. They threw a large reception for members in honor of his tenth anniversary in Akron. Even at a time of such great uncertainty Temple Israel's members still longed for community and 150 people gathered for this joyous occasion.¹⁵⁹ The *Beacon Journal* dubbed him "one of the most progressive of Akron's clergymen,"¹⁶⁰ a title he certainly earned over the course of his last decade in the rabbinate. Rabbi Alexander's dedication to the synagogue would surely be tested in the coming months, but his devotion to "the social and civic betterment of the city"¹⁶¹ remained strong.

Temple Israel continued in the same manner well into the next calendar year. The leadership of the congregation was able to remain focused on the needs of the synagogue before they became completely consumed with finances and economic survival. During the 1930 calendar year board meetings contained a vague detail that a trustee "reported on Rose Hill Cemetery" at each meeting.¹⁶² The board received regular reports on negotiations that were taking place with Rose Hill Cemetery. Following regular reports on these negotiations, the board called a special meeting of the congregation. In late September of 1930, the board sought to gain the

¹⁵⁹ "Alexander Celebrates Tenth Anniversary," *Akron Beacon Journal* (2 November 1929): 27.

¹⁶⁰ "Rabbi Alexander Will Be Honored by Congregation," *Akron Beacon Journal* (1 November 1929): 29.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Minutes of the Board of Trustees, April 1930 & 22 September 1930, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

congregation's approval to enter into a contract with the Rose Hill Cemetery.¹⁶³ Temple Israel had retained its own section of Rose Hill Cemetery for its congregational use.¹⁶⁴ The matter was approved at the special meeting, and for the first time Temple Israel secured burial plots that would be dedicated for use by its members. The congregation now had the autonomy to provide services for an important life-cycle component of Jewish identity. This was an important milestone for the congregation as it marked a sense of growth and permanence. Even when the world faced incredibly challenging times the leaders still had to care for the Jewish needs of members and the purchase of burial land.

It was with the annual meeting in December 1930 that the congregation's focus shifted drastically to articulate the pressures within the synagogue that its members were feeling in their secular lives. In his secretary's report, Henry Feurst, noted for the first time that "the congregation was not immune to the pressures of the economy."¹⁶⁵ Feurst endeavored to make it clear to his fellow congregants that their money mattered to the greater sustainability of the Temple. His savvy attitude and guidance in the early years of the Depression encouraged

¹⁶³ A Special Meeting of The Akron Hebrew Congregation, 29 September 1930, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁶⁴ Up until that point the congregation had been using Akron Rural Cemetery on a case-by-case basis. Apart from the cemetery governed by the Orthodox Association in Akron, no cemetery existed which was dedicated for use by non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.

Kaplan, *Century of Adjustments*, 172–173.

¹⁶⁵ Annual Meeting of the Hebrew Congregation, 21 December 1930, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

members when times were dark, and he would later be elected president.¹⁶⁶ He chastised the members in attendance and painted a bleak picture of current dues-paying trends within the rolls of the membership. The trend was that people paid their dues at the holidays because they were afraid they would not be seated, “but they must realize that the congregation has financial obligations every month, bills to meet.”¹⁶⁷ On behalf of the Board of Trustees, Feurst met these cries of anguish with a clear policy that would direct the Board’s decisions moving forward. The policy stated:

The officers of your congregation will not under any circumstances suspend a member from membership who is known to them to be unable to pay, but if the member keeps silent and merely permits his dues to become delinquent and does not pay, make no response to any notices or requests for payment, then there is nothing left for your officers to do but to suspend that member from membership.¹⁶⁸

Temple leadership did not want to turn individuals away from the community during this time of hardship. Securing full payment of dues was still of utmost concern, but in the end, nothing would overshadow Temple Israel’s mission to provide for its members through the hardest times in their lives.

¹⁶⁶ Henry Feurst served as Temple Israel’s Board of Trustees President from 1933–1936.

¹⁶⁷ Annual Meeting of the Hebrew Congregation, 21 December 1930, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

American Jewish historian, Jonathan D. Sarna, describes Jews during the Depression years as “relying on ties of faith and kinship to carry them through the hard times.”¹⁶⁹ Temple Israel’s Jews certainly held on to their relationships with one another to give them guidance. At the suggestion of Rabbi Alexander, the idea was pitched to first the Executive Board and later at the congregational meeting of 1930 to establish a Brotherhood in the community. President Louis Loeb supported the idea and urged others to do the same: “we should all co-operate with him in the fullest extent which will without a doubt ultimately increase our own interest in the congregation’s affairs”¹⁷⁰ The Brotherhood is mentioned in subsequent board meetings and brotherhood events were advertised in the *Akron Beacon Journal*.¹⁷¹ Even though the

¹⁶⁹ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 257.

¹⁷⁰ Annual Meeting of the Hebrew Congregation, 21 December 1930, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA. It was approved either at the congregational meeting that year or early on in 1931 to establish the organization.

¹⁷¹ It is unclear what exactly caused the delay, although the circumstances in the early 1930s offer many answers. The Brotherhood was not actually formed until some point during the 1932 calendar year. At the annual meeting, which was called in January 1933, the Secretary’s report that year states that one of the successes of the past year was the formation of the Brotherhood and the subsequent election of its officers. Despite this delay, the report still echoes Rabbi Alexander’s call that even some years later “the Board believes its is a worthy organization.” Annual Meeting of the Hebrew Congregation, 15 January 1933, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

organization did not gain immediate traction and success as did the Sisterhood a number of years earlier, it is still significant that Temple Israel expanded its activities during these years.

Regular pursuits continued during this time, including regular worship services and school for Temple Israel's children. Even the Sisterhood continued to offer regular programming.¹⁷² The board, however, must have felt conflicted. On the one hand, the board's actions convey a clear desire to keep the community as active and involved as possible. On the other hand, the board struggled "to keep its doors open" in the face of the ever-mounting pressures of meeting its financial commitments. Ahead of the fall 1931 opening of the Temple's Religious School, the Executive Committee instituted a policy to keep students and their teachers in the classrooms. From the description in the meeting minutes, the Board delivered a list to Rabbi Alexander ahead of each Sunday morning. This list contained the names of each student whose family was in good financial standing with the congregation ahead of that week of school.¹⁷³ This allowed the Executive Board to embrace their promises from December 1930, namely, that if a congregant could not meet the financial expectations for Temple Israel

¹⁷² During the Sisterhood's busiest season in the early 1920s the organization would advertise around three community events per month in the *Akron Beacon Journal* with a "regular meeting" offered once a month (except for the summer months). During the years 1932 and 1933, the sisterhood convened roughly once a quarter.

¹⁷³ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 30 July 1930, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA. The minutes from this era do not give any information about what happened to those students whose families were not in good financial standing with the congregation.

membership, providing they had the financial need (as most did), and the family disclosed this information to the Executive Board, a remedy would be found. The idea must have been encouraging to parents because it was implemented ahead of the 1932 school year as well.¹⁷⁴ This policy had multiple outcomes beneficial to the longevity of the Sunday School. It enabled Jews to remain connected at a time when disassociation was high among Jews and organized religion.¹⁷⁵ The policy held symbolic significance that just as the synagogue never closed its doors, the doors of the Sunday School never shut either.

A closer look at the details of the finances of Temple Israel over the course of the Depression paints an incredibly bleak picture despite the best efforts of the Board of Trustees. By 1931, Temple Israel really had to start making changes to meet the moment. The financial state of the congregation was grim. For the first time in those early months, they were not able to allocate funds that were previously designated in the budget for certain items. Until this point, the congregation had subsisted by employing one key strategy—trimming superfluous spending and halting all purchases that were not necessary. The choir went from close to a dozen members down to merely two voices. The faculty of the Sunday School saw a reduction of their salaries, and on several occasions the school's faculty was forced to eliminate a teacher or two.¹⁷⁶ The

¹⁷⁴ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, September 1932, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁷⁵ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 255-258.

¹⁷⁶ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, October 1931, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

Board eventually took out a loan from the bank.¹⁷⁷ The treasurer ceased reporting who owed what amounts of money during these years. Instead, the reports shifted to account for the income owed to the congregation in three distinct categories: (a) anticipated revenue that was “absolutely worthless,” (b) “doubtful,” and finally (c) “good.” At the conclusion of 1932, these three categories totaled \$5820 of which only \$1074 was marked in the “good” category.¹⁷⁸

Rabbi Alexander’s position was also in question during this difficult period. Temple Israel never took Rabbi Alexander for granted during his tenure; he was understood as integral to the community. For those managing Temple Israel’s future during these years they understood that there was no future for Temple Israel without their rabbi. Some congregations across the country chose to sever ties with their rabbinic presence during these years of hardship in hopes of managing financial obligations on a limited budget.¹⁷⁹ In the late summer of 1932, it was determined by the Board that the best course of action was to notify Rabbi Alexander that he would be receiving a \$900 pay cut.¹⁸⁰ They justified their actions as only a temporary measure

¹⁷⁷ Financial Report Year Ending October 31, 1931, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁷⁸ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 16 December 1932, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁷⁹ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 307.

¹⁸⁰ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 30 July 1931, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA. At the beginning of 1931, Rabbi Alexander’s salary was \$8,625. This was about a 10.5% reduction. It is also worth noting that \$900 has the purchasing power of \$18,500 today.

until the situation improved. At the closing Board of Trustees meeting for that calendar year, a letter was read from Rabbi Alexander to the Board stating that he had not received a salary since October 24th.¹⁸¹ The Rabbi had gone eight weeks without payment. The fiscal report of that year reported that at the time of his last payment, the rabbi's salary was \$3500 in arrears and the janitor's salary was \$100 in arrears. Although Temple Israel was at times significantly behind schedule in paying Rabbi Alexander, the two parties never formally broke ties with one another.

Rabbi Alexander continued to focus on congregational matters separate from the financial woes of Temple Israel. The semi-regular Sisterhood meetings publicized during these years in the *Akron Beacon Journal* almost exclusively utilized Rabbi Alexander as the guest speaker presumably because he was local, free for the Sisterhood to engage, and was well respected as their rabbi. He also busied himself responding to the problems facing global Jewry. In March 1933 a rally was held at the Jewish Center that attracted more than 15,000 individuals. Rabbi Alexander and other community rabbis spoke at the demonstration. He told the crowd that German Jews "have been called enemies in the country they have inhabited and revered for centuries."¹⁸² Rabbi Alexander was a reputable orator and the coverage of the rally described the audience listening to him "attentively, breathless and sad."¹⁸³

Things continued to worsen to the point where the following year concluded with a special Executive Committee meeting to determine the future of Rabbi Alexander's position. His

¹⁸¹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 16 December 1932, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁸² "Speakers ask for Tolerance," *Akron Beacon Journal* (29 March 1933): 1-2.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

contract was set to expire in November of 1934, although over a year out the date made board members incredibly anxious. It was decided in the special session and announced to the Congregation at large that:

Rabbi Alexander agreed with the Board that under present circumstances it was probably unwise to enter into a long-term contract with him, and with his consent it was moved seconded and carried that the Board recommends to the Congregation at its annual meeting, the re-election of Rabbi Alexander for a period of one year, commencing November 1st, 1934, at a salary of \$4200.00 per year.¹⁸⁴

This was a low point for Temple Israel as well as for Akron. Akron, being a one-industry town, officially declared itself bankrupt in the Spring of 1933.¹⁸⁵ More than a dozen years earlier, the treasurer's report noted that Rabbi Alexander's salary was \$4500.¹⁸⁶ No matter how many times Temple Israel's presidents addressed the congregation from the annual meeting and preached on Rabbi Alexander's behalf—his positive contributions to the city, his accomplished rabbinical talents—the congregation was still unable to offer Rabbi Alexander a suitable salary in line with his qualifications as one of the most proficient and respected rabbis the community had ever engaged.

¹⁸⁴ Annual Meeting of the Hebrew Congregation, 11 December 1933, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁸⁵ Tully, *Labor in Akron*, 159.

¹⁸⁶ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 22 August 1922, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

By 1934, money began to move more freely in the city and the tides were slowly turning after four years of economic decline following the 1929 crash. It was with much better spirits that Temple Israel members gathered a year later with much happier news to report. Rabbi Alexander was re-elected for a five-year term and was granted a raise over the course of the tenure, though the amount was specified.¹⁸⁷ The Depression years in Akron stalled Temple Israel's growth as it had Jewish organizations across the city and the country. The community was fortunate to come through the events of the last five years with the Merriman Road building intact and their relationship with their rabbi on the mend.

Responding to the Depression, 1935–1944

In the years leading up to the outbreak of World War II, Temple Israel's leadership sought to be a light for its members in an ever-changing and increasingly distressing world. The synagogue managed to avoid the trauma of near closure and loss of all paid staff members by focusing efforts on fiscal survival and, also, keeping the community together. Anniversary celebrations and annual meeting dinners continued to occur throughout these years. The temple's leadership charged forward with community-building goals while simultaneously facing the major changes that were occurring in Akron, in America, and throughout the world. This period concluded with the retirement of Rabbi Alexander in 1944, and the board sought to prepare its membership for this change in rabbinical leadership

¹⁸⁷ 69th Annual Meeting of the Hebrew Congregation, 6 January 1934, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

Temple Israel began to dig itself out of its financial hole as the economy in Akron slowly and incrementally improved. Circumstances by no means corrected themselves overnight. Rather the congregation experienced a gradual change, which over the next few years affected the attitude of the Executive Committee. The number of congregants who were disaffiliating with Temple Israel began to decrease. In the Board of Trustees' minutes from all of 1935, for example, about two dozen family names were listed as having canceled their memberships—a far cry from 1931 when it was reported that as many members disassociated with Temple Israel in one meeting alone.¹⁸⁸ Still, it was an issue. The membership turmoil continued for years to come. For the coming decade, Temple Israel's Board of Trustees minutes clearly document the congregation's flexibility in prioritizing membership retention over the full payment of dues. In cases where families could not meet their dues payments, reduction of dues was permitted instead of allowing the family to resign from the congregation. "Reductions" appeared as a dedicated section in the minutes of almost every board meeting.¹⁸⁹ The secretary would document the name of the member or the family, what their dues were and what they would pay following approval from the board. This strategy of individually assessing dues for each member became a formal policy recommendation of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations when it published its handbook on *Financial Security for Your Synagogue* in 1936.¹⁹⁰ The roots of

¹⁸⁸ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, October 1931 and 1935, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁸⁹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 29 March 1935, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁹⁰ Judson, *Pennies for Heaven*, 160.

Temple Israel embracing this course of action stretch back to the promises the Board made at the 1930 annual meeting. Synagogue leadership prioritized membership retention and Temple Israel's board embraced this approach many years before it became the official policy recommended by the greater Reform movement.

During this same period, the Board seemed to be more proactive over previous years when it came to raising funds for the congregation. The Board of Trustees held a special meeting in the fall of 1935 with the sole purpose of discussing "ways and means of raising money" for the congregation.¹⁹¹ The minutes from this meeting record a terrific brainstorming session. Specific ideas were offered, and some looked promising to the board. The board considered hosting an auction with big-ticket items like an electric radio to be auctioned off. Some on the committee proposed bringing in an artist or traveling play to perform and raise money from ticket sales.¹⁹² Neither option was ever mentioned again, and there is no record of advertisements for such events in the *Akron Beacon Journal*. At this same meeting, the committee again encouraged the Brotherhood's reestablishment.¹⁹³ At some point the organization had fallen apart again; however, the details of the brotherhood's breakdown is not well documented. The Board was determined to assist the men of Temple Israel as much as possible to remain committed to the congregation's activities. It is likely that the rabbi and the temple's leadership

¹⁹¹ A Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees, 4 October 1935, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

were hoping that a thriving brother would be as beneficial to the congregation both financially and organizationally—as was the Sisterhood.

In December 1935, Temple Israel marked its 70th anniversary with a banquet, the annual congregational meeting, and other festivities. President Henry Feurst opened his speech by noting that the previous year had brought both joy and sorrow to Temple Israel. One of the great joys was the current celebration of the 70th anniversary of the congregation's founding. This anniversary was a happy and fitting way to conclude the year after a number of difficult years during the Depression.¹⁹⁴ Feurst even noted that “[living] within our income,” was in itself a joy to be celebrated.¹⁹⁵ In spite of Feurst's optimistic presentation, the congregation's annual budget was still not balanced. The meeting minutes noted that Rabbi Alexander was still receiving “less than one-half what he had at one time received,” and that the congregation was still \$1725 behind in payments. The sorrows Feurst spoke of were the number of members who passed away over the course of the year.

The President's address included other more mundane concerns of community building, a sign that the tides were slowly beginning to turn in the synagogue and American Jewry. For example, Feurst offered his thanks to a Mrs. Meyer who arranged the seating at the High Holidays. “She has an arduous task to perform,” he remarked. “She has no favorites to reward or no enemies to punish as some of our members would try to believe.”¹⁹⁶ The seating assignments

¹⁹⁴ President's Letter 70th Annual Meeting, 8 December 1935, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

had become a fact of life for Temple Israel members during the holidays as it had for other congregations across the country.¹⁹⁷ Temple Israel like many congregations across the country had assigned seats first during the High Holidays as a means of fundraising. The practice morphed into a tool for tracking membership status during this time, it ensured that individuals were contributing financially each year to Temple Israel's overall wellbeing.

The concluding point in Feurst's first and last presidential address directed the congregation towards the future, to imagine what Temple could do in the future. He offered a strong and poignant closing thought: "Temple should not only be a place of worship, but a place of learning and of forming social contacts, and if ever we needed the synagogue, we need it now." The years of suffering and uncertainty were not behind Temple Israel and its members, but it was still important for its leadership to navigate a positive way forward. Similar sentiments were voiced by the next president, Albert Bauxman, though they were directed mostly to the youth of the congregation and their parents: "I think our most important duty is to encourage children to regard the Temple as a center for activity, therein lies our hope for the future of Jewry."¹⁹⁸ It was during the years after the Depression that Temple Israel saw growth in its offerings to the youth in the community, a response, presumably, to the changing organizational affiliations of the Akron Jewish community as the Jewish Center drew more members.

¹⁹⁷ Judson, *Pennies for Heaven*, 142–144.

¹⁹⁸ Annual Meeting of the year 1936, 27 January 1937, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

Synagogues in America experienced a building boom in the twenties, and the Depression caused all such projects to cease.¹⁹⁹ As the country slowly began to recover in the mid-to-late thirties some of those projects resumed. Many synagogue structures had been neglected over the years and were in desperate need of repair. In 1936, with a new board of trustees and more money in the bank, it was time to care for the physical building of Temple Israel. The kitchen and the social hall were the first priority²⁰⁰ followed by added “decorations” to the common areas and light fixtures in some of the rooms. Other additions to the temple building were discussed as well. These funds came partly from contributions of the Sisterhood.²⁰¹ This was a sign that the leadership felt it could reinvest in the building.

As Temple Israel climbed out of the financial crisis, its optimism was met by lingering anxiety surrounding the deterioration of the physical space and the loan on the building. An incident report was filed by the janitor detailing how he entered the building one day to find a flood in one of the classrooms. After an assessment, it was determined that the roof was in desperate need of repair.²⁰² This presented the congregation with an unexpected and hefty expenditure. The second was the ongoing and unpaid loan the congregation took out during the worst days of the financial crisis. At the 1937 annual meeting, the treasurer proposed a one-time

¹⁹⁹ Judson, *Pennies for Heaven*, 137-138.

²⁰⁰ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 20 May 1936, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 26 May 1938, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

donation of \$25 by each member to help pay off the \$5200 sum owed. The idea was discussed but ultimately tabled.²⁰³ The loan burdened the community for years to come.

Despite these concerns, the feeling of cautious financial freedom persisted. A motion was unanimously carried at the final board meeting of 1936 that Rabbi Alexander's salary would increase to \$6,000, still about \$2,000 less than he received from the congregation in the early months of 1929.²⁰⁴ The Board of Trustees knew it was an ambitious target since the Sisterhood was still contributing a great deal to the operating budget of Temple Israel. Nevertheless, it wanted to restore a piece of the sacred partnership between Rabbi Alexander and the congregation. The congregation also hoped to add an additional staff member, someone to work alongside Rabbi Alexander. The idea to hire a Social Director was presented at a Board of Trustees meeting in 1937, "to direct social and educational activities. To grow our membership and be available to all persons... Such a person shall preferably be a rabbi or one who has had religious training. Such a person when employed shall be under the direct supervision of Rabbi Alexander."²⁰⁵ Even though the idea gained traction in the meeting the idea never came to fruition. Still, it served as another example of ways in which the congregation was investing—or at least thinking of investing—in its long-term future.

²⁰³ Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 14 November 1937, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²⁰⁴ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 7 December 1936, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²⁰⁵ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 9 September 1937, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

On the important topic of membership, Rabbi Alexander addressed the concerns of the Executive Board in writing. In a 1939 article that appeared in the *Akron Center News*, he wrote the following:

In the past Israel lived by its synagogues now Israel can function at its highest only when the ideas and ideals for which they stand are taken seriously to heart and uninterruptedly fostered. It is a conviction with me that our Jewish life would be made stronger in every way if our synagogues occupied the place that they should be in our minds and our hearts.²⁰⁶

Rabbi Alexander used a city-wide pulpit to reach the Jews of Akron and encourage their support. The appeal came at a time of changing attitudes—life was getting easier and circumstances less dire so, as the argument went, people should make their way back to synagogues and communal life. The fact that he addressed the city-wide Jewish community reflects the changing nature of American Jewry; his appeal to affiliate was largely directed at second and third-generation Jews. In this article, Rabbi Alexander is also responding to a changing understanding of religious denominations in the Jewish community. Despite the root causes of slower rates of affiliation among Akron Jews, Rabbi Alexander continued to promote synagogue affiliation in Akron for as long as he held a leadership position.

²⁰⁶ “In Passing,” *Akron Center News* (31 March 1939): 3. Rabbi Alexander often spoke in Akron on this theme. At a small meeting of Methodist churches in January 1932 Rabbi Alexander said “the average man would say that our greatest need is the return of prosperity... But the need is more fundamental. We need faith and optimism and a real spirit of brotherhood.” “Return of Religion Needed, Says Rabbi,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (28 January 1932): 20.

The Board of Trustees was eager to discuss renewing Rabbi Alexander's contract because of their deep respect and appreciation for their rabbi. At a regular Board of Trustees meeting in late 1939, it was proposed that Rabbi Alexander should either be re-elected for an additional three-year term, or he should be elected as Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Israel.²⁰⁷ A committee was formed with the purpose of discussing this proposal and other options with Rabbi Alexander to come to a suitable resolution. At a special committee meeting with Rabbi Alexander, he was vocal about his wishes to remain the Senior Rabbi of Temple Israel and acknowledged that he had the best wishes for Akron Jewry in his heart.²⁰⁸

The proposal for Rabbi Alexander's contract renewal was brought to the full membership of the congregation at the annual meeting that year. It was decided that his contract would be renewed for an additional three-year term and after that, he would fulfill the role of rabbi emeritus, a first for the temple. However, it seems that the lay leadership was not yet ready to include Alexander's emeritus status in the contract since the clause concerning the retirement position was deleted.²⁰⁹ President Ben Marks went on in that meeting to articulate his vision for Temple Israel's future. He promised members that in "the coming year our Rabbi and the Trustees will exert every effort to make the Temple play the role that it should in this world

²⁰⁷ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 13 November, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²⁰⁸ Special Committee Meeting, 30 November 1939, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²⁰⁹ Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 3 December 1939, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

emergency.”²¹⁰ World War II had engulfed the world in such tensions by this point, and the president wanted to reassure congregants that Temple Israel would weather these challenges. His statement may be a clue as to why Rabbi Alexander was not granted his emeritus status immediately. Fear was increasing around the world and temple members did not want to have to face those challenges without their trusted and familiar leader. It is also possible that the laity’s hesitation to specify the rabbi’s retirement circumstances is a result of the financial hardship people were still processing from the Depression years. Either way or for some other reason, Rabbi Alexander had to wait to receive his emeritus contract.

Membership was of top concern for the leadership of Temple Israel during the years of World War II. The membership concerns, however, were different than they were in the early 1930s. The motivation to grow membership seemed to be less out of an existential threat and more of a desire to strengthen the community—both the Reform community of Temple Israel and the greater Akron Jewish community. The Board focused its attention on membership drives and various ads were put in the newspapers from time to time. The idea that received a significant amount of debate was the idea to find and hire an Assistant Rabbi to assist with membership.²¹¹ It is unclear why the idea stalled. It had the best of intentions for the congregation, but Temple Israel never moved forward with its plans to hire an assistant rabbi.

The motivation to hire an additional rabbi to assist in the daily tasks of the congregation and to help grow membership is reflected in the trend among members of Jewish organizations

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 22 March 1940, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

during the interwar and wartime years. Membership concerns for Temple Israel no longer came from a place of financial concern, rather it was about making the synagogue community appealing to a Jewish person who was different in spirit than their immigrant ancestors. Jewish organizations struggled to attract and retain their members who connected with Judaism differently. The interwar years saw great competition among Jewish institutions that were devoted to religion, such as Temple Israel, contrasted with other “nominally Jewish” organizations.²¹² The Jewish Center is one example of an Akron institution that fell into the latter category. Rabbi Alexander advocated for strong community relations based on his frequent presence at the Center for community-wide lectures and gatherings. However, this did not stop some Akron Jews from falling prey to the trend and exclusively joining the Center, as opposed to synagogues. This national trend was present in Akron and made the Executive Board quite nervous, hence the proposal to hire a second rabbi.

It is a strong possibility that certain proposals failed because of conversations that ensued between members who were not privy to the discussions of the Executive Board. The idea may not have been the soundest financially for the congregation, and it may have taken strong lobbying for all the trustees to understand that. In July 1940, the Board of Trustees established a committee separate from the financial or dues committees with the sole purpose of relieving the

²¹² Jeffrey S Gurock. “American Judaism Between the Two World Wars,” in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 99.

weight of the bank loan from the shoulders of the congregation.²¹³ Former president Albert Buxbaum was selected to chair the committee. By the 75th annual meeting that fall, Buxbaum had some good news to report. Progress had been made against the loan, and most of the funds raised were in cash (as opposed to pledges). The news was met with applause.²¹⁴ However, it took much more than an unrecorded amount of cash pledges and some cheers from the congregation to pay off the loan. Exactly a year later at the Trustees' December 1941 meeting, the report showed that \$1,775.97 was still outstanding on the loan from First Central Bank.²¹⁵ The amount inspired the board to work hard and quickly to secure the money to pay off that comparatively small amount. A Dr. Beyer pledged \$800 towards the total on the condition that the total would be then paid off by contributions from members at large. His donation helped the congregation get out from underneath the weight of this debt. The treasurer contributed \$600 from the cash on hand, and less than \$400 remained against the total owed, and it was funded by members at large.²¹⁶ The board was able to deliver good news to the congregation at the annual meeting that year that Temple Israel had finally paid their debt to First Central Banks.

²¹³ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 3 July 1940, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²¹⁴ 75th Annual Meeting of the Congregation, 1 December 1940, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²¹⁵ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 01 December 1940, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

During multiple Board meetings in 1942 Rabbi Alexander's employment status was discussed time and again.²¹⁷ At the 1942 annual meeting, the secretary's report updated the community of Rabbi Alexander's extension of a one-year contract commencing in fall 1943. At the end of the contract, Rabbi Alexander would enter retirement as the first Rabbi Emeritus in the community. Temple Israel marked this historic event with a celebration for Rabbi and Mrs. Alexander.²¹⁸ It was a major milestone for the congregation, and they marked the end of the period with 300 members, which filled the social hall to capacity, celebrating an incredible tenure with the congregation.

Conclusion

When Rabbi Alexander became the first Rabbi Emeritus in Temple Israel's history, his tenure spanned twenty-five years and was the longest tenure of any rabbi up to that point. He was a loyal and impressive rabbi as he helped further Temple Israel's standing in Akron by building meaningful relationships with organizations across the city. The latter years of his career were tumultuous as his position was constantly threatened because of the financial situation of the congregation. Temple Israel leadership responded to the constantly changing state of the world as best they could. They succeeded in keeping the congregation afloat during these years but only just barely at times.

²¹⁷ Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 21 Oct, 2 November and 15 November 1942, Temple Israel Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, MF-887, AJA.

²¹⁸ "Rabbi David Alexander Feted by Congregation," *Akron Beacon Journal* (30 October 1944):

Conclusion

Temple Israel's history spans the entire history of the Akron Jewish community. To understand, then, the story of the Jews in the Rubber City, one must understand the struggles and triumphs of Temple Israel. Writing a history of Temple Israel can help us better understand the lives of Jews in a small midwestern town and can serve as a model for studying other small-town congregations in the middle of the country. Critical examination of these roughly forty-five years of Temple Israel will enhance future histories of Akron and its Jewish community.

Chapter One begins by examining the specific changes the community went through to further solidify their significant place in the Akron Jewish community. These main factors were vacating the High Street Temple building and purchasing a plot of land and building a new structure on Merriman Road. The community also changed its name to Temple Israel during this time. These developments allowed the Reform Jews of Akron to reinterpret their identity as the Jews who fostered a progressive Jewish religious community in the city. Temple Israel is the remnant of the original group of Jews who settled in Akron and this process of identity building in the 1910s allowed members to reinterpret who they were and what role Temple Israel played in the wider Jewish community. It was a major milestone for the community to complete the beautiful Merriman Road building. This chapter tracks the concerns of the Board of Trustees as they financed the move and development of the property, as well as the financial and membership concerns which resulted from the move.

Additionally, Chapter One follows the tenures of Rabbis Louis D. Gross and Abraham Cronbach. Some of the first rabbinic leaders of Temple Israel were graduates of Hebrew Union College, and this played an important part in the reforming of the synagogue. Rabbi Gross

offered the community strong leadership during the first few years on Merriman Road. Rabbi Gross and lay leaders worked in partnership to expand the program of the synagogue to provide as much as possible spiritually, religiously, and socially for the congregants. During this time there was increased attention given to the state of Jewish education in the synagogue, one example of Temple Israel's lay and rabbinic leadership expanding their efforts to deepen what Temple Israel could offer its members. The community finally had ample room to educate its youth in the new building which resulted in the hiring of Temple's first paid teachers. The early women's auxiliary group, known during these years as the Ladies Temple Society, began to organize significantly during this period and would soon become the mainstay of the community. The women of Temple Israel grew in influence as they organized during the years when World War I was raging in Europe. The auxiliary – now known as Sisterhood – worked diligently to provide support for Akron-area Jewish soldiers who were serving in the American Expeditionary Forces at home and abroad.

Rabbi Abraham Cronbach held the post of Temple Israel's rabbi for only twenty-four months, but the months were eventful, nonetheless. Rabbi Cronbach's two years in Akron were well documented in his rabbinic sermons. In fact, Rabbi Cronbach's tenure possessed the most records through sermons of any of the rabbis in the entire scope of this thesis. Rabbi Cronbach planted the earliest seeds of activism in members of the Temple Israel community. Although his mingling of politics and the pulpit was not always well received by members, he challenged the community by often speaking his mind. The final years covered in this chapter were tumultuous because of the quick succession of rabbis in and out of the community. This turnover inadvertently helped Temple Israel lay leaders understand that what they truly sought from their rabbi and their congregation was stability.

Chapter Two begins with the hiring of Rabbi David Alexander, the rabbi who would serve the congregation for the remainder of the scope of this thesis—until his retirement in 1944. The second chapter focuses on the first years of his tenure and traces those years thematically. It begins by tracking Rabbi Alexander's communal work from 1919–1929. He continued Rabbi Cronbach's legacy by bringing Temple Israel members into conversations about contemporary social issues, although he did so in a milder manner. Rabbi Alexander would often invite guest speakers to share the pulpit of Temple Israel and lecture on various subjects of concern. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of nearby Cleveland, for example, was a regular guest of the community's who spoke on the conditions of Jews in Europe. Rabbi Alexander was also an important relationship builder with faith communities and important civic institutions in Akron. Rabbi Alexander fulfilled the leadership role that his members valued in their rabbi. He was loyal and dedicated to his people through the best and worst circumstances, and he was a fine speaker and visionary, which made him often sought after to speak and teach at local organizations. Rabbi Alexander built a name for himself and Akron and a deep sacred relationship with his congregants. Both qualities proved to help him, and Temple Israel survive the most challenging years which came with the Depression.

The chapter goes on to assess the work of the Sisterhood during this period. The women of Temple Israel built relationships with other Ohio and regional congregational Sisterhoods and became involved at the national level. This chapter also focuses on one subset of Temple Israel membership that was of great concern to the Sisterhood, the Temple Israel youth. During these years the Sunday school grew, and children became more active in congregational life. Rabbi Alexander established a Boy Scout Troop and a “Junior Congregation” at the Temple to give the young people a place to feel included in the congregation.

The final topic of the chapter is that of the financial standing of the congregation during these years. The optimism during these years was often tempered by the executive board's cautious outlook on the financial situation. This section relies heavily on the use of the meeting minutes from the Board of Trustees. The financial assessment of this decade in Temple Israel's history was placed into greater context with the postwar economy of the Rubber City, namely the recession that hit Akron. In the face of this gloomy economic situation, Temple Israel Trustees still remained positive during these years. The chapter traces the attempt to expand the Temple Israel building as the congregation continued to steadily grow. However, the project never moved forward because the optimism was tempered by the fact that the congregation did not have the funds on hand.

Chapter Three begins in 1929, a dual watershed moment for Akron Jewry. The Depression years hit Akron hard and caused Temple Israel to constantly readjust and fight for its survival. The date also marked the opening of the Jewish Center in Akron, another watershed moment for the community. Temple Israel was no longer the center for Jewish programming in Akron. The trustees had to attract members while competing with the Jewish Center for the same individuals. The economic hardship created great doubt among Lay Leaders who were sensitive to the financial goings-on of the community. It is significant that Rabbi Alexander never lost his job during these years, although at various points the congregation was months behind on his salary and he endured many pay cuts. The chapter focuses a great deal on the temple leaders' efforts to navigate the Depression inside the synagogue while working as creatively as possible on strategies to maintain and even increase membership in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Much of Temple Israel's history remains to be studied. This survey covers only the first thirty-five years in the Merriman Road building. However, the synagogue remained in that

building until the second decade of the twenty-first century. Much of that story is left to be told. Additionally, there are broader questions about how the larger Akron Jewish community struggled with postwar issues in the wake of the Holocaust and the concomitant rise of the State of Israel. The congregation had to answer these questions without the rabbinic figure who was most familiar to it, Rabbi Alexander. Another worthwhile academic pursuit would be to address the tenure of the next significant Rabbi at Temple Israel, Rabbi Morton M. Applebaum (1911–2001) who served the congregation from 1953 to 1979. Applebaum served the congregation when it had the greatest number of members in its entire history. He built a solid reputation as a prolific speaker, and as a beloved rabbi of the congregation.

Personal Reflections

It is my hope that this thesis will spark others to study synagogues of similar sizes across the United States. The study of history is, in a basic sense, the process of retelling the story of *people* who lived in certain times and in certain places. By telling the story of American Jews who lived in smaller urban communities that were fundamentally different from those of major metropolitan centers such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago—large communities that are often incorrectly thought to be commensurate with the American Jewish experience—we gain a more complete appreciation for the complex nature of Jewish life in America.

Additionally, it is hoped that the reconstruction of this history will benefit today's Jewish community in Akron. The story of their forebears should encourage Akron Jews to learn more about their congregation's history – the rabbis and lay leaders who dedicated themselves to upbuilding the community. Only some of those devoted workers have been detailed in this work; others that deserve mention unfortunately are beyond the scope of this project.

In the summer of 2015, the Merriman Road building closed and it is no longer used by Temple Israel. The building remained in Temple Israel's possession until December of 2021, when it finally sold the property. The congregation's final parting from this building makes the history of the events that took place in the space all the more important to preserve and record. With the Merriman Road building no longer a burden on the synagogue's finances, it can now reflect on the highs and lows of its history in the building. They can glean lessons of leadership and dedication to a worthy cause from the earlier trailblazers of their very own community.

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