An Exploration of the Early Years of the Hebrew Educational Society of Brooklyn

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Summary

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* 5 chapters and a photo attachment section

* This thesis provides an analysis of the Hebrew Educational Society of Brooklyn. It looks at the HES and the neighborhood house of early 20th century America through a variety of different lenses.

* The goal of the thesis was to use the Hebrew Educational Society as a case study to explore pressing issues of Jewish concern.

* The thesis is divided into five chapters with an introduction, conclusion and an appendix with photographs. The first two chapters look directly at Brownsville and the HES. The following chapters look at the early years of the HES through the lens of selected rabbinical sources.

* The thesis includes information from both primary and secondary sources. Including various minutes, annual reports and other documents from the HES

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Introduction

This thesis started as a family project. It turned into a study of a dynamic Jewish Neighborhood House, The Hebrew Educational Society (HES) through a variety of different Jewish lenses, and subsequently, morphed into a way for me to think critically about different aspects of Jewish life, specifically community, neighborhood, and Jewish education that I hope will be central to my future rabbinate.

In March of 2009 a family friend took my grandmother, my parents, my girlfriend and me on a tour of Jewish Brownsville. He had grown up in Brownsville and had been a member of the Hebrew Educational Society. He told three generations of my family how he had been part of a group of school kids called the "block boys" that spent most of their time hanging out and causing typical boy trouble at the HES. He also told us that the "block" in the block boys was not just a name for the classic Brownsville street, but also connected to my great grandfather, Bernhard Bloch, who helped run and finance the Hebrew Educational Society for over a generation. In the 1920s, Bernhard Bloch specifically funded this group of boys at the Hebrew Educational Society.

My great grandfather died in 1945, just after his son, my grandfather, Jules, returned from a POW camp after being wounded while serving as a GI in World War II. Neither my grandmother nor my mother ever knew him. The family

lived on Rugby Road in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. Bernhard volunteered for a host of Jewish philanthropic agencies in Brooklyn and was a trustee of Temple Beth Emeth in Flatbush. He served as President of the Hebrew Educational Society from 1921-1924 and, at least according to the HES' minutes, served every single other function one could serve at the HES. His first mention in the HES minutes occurs in 1914. The final mention occurs one month before his death, in the minute log of 1945: "The president congratulated Mr. Bloch upon the return of his son Jules to this country."[1]

I had never heard of the Hebrew Educational Society before I began thinking about this project. I have spent the last several months absorbing all the information I could about Bernhard Bloch and the Hebrew Educational Society. I am now convinced that the HES was one of the most significant institutions in the history of Jewish New York. Reading through the minutes and annual reports of the Society, I can almost see my great-grandfather, dressed in a suit and tie, around the table discussing the important matters of the Society. At these meetings the HES board members were at the forefront of Brooklyn Jewry, developing and cultivating an organization that has impacted tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of Brooklyn Jews. The HES still functions in Canarsie today and serves not only the Jewish community but a diverse Brooklyn demographic including African-Americans, Latinos and Eastern Europeans.

[1] "1945 Minutes, Hebrew Educational Society" Papers of the Hebrew Educational Society, Brookly, NY (hereinafter HES Papers) (slide 83)

Bernhard Bloch's community consisted of the other board members of the HES, specifically the Bass and Bloom families, with whom my family is still remarkably close today. When we visited the current HES building in Canarsie, my grandmother knew many of the names from the HES "hall of fame." Bernhard also became the first President of the Brooklyn Lawyers Club of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and helped found the Zeta Beta Tau Fraternity while a student at City College.

One of the items that has most resonated with me through my research is how strong a Jewish connection the men, including Bernhard Bloch, felt in their philanthropic work with the Hebrew Educational Society. Most of them were proud Reform Jews, with strong German roots. Bernhard Bloch was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1878 and came to the United States as young child. They probably were poorly versed in Jewish texts and law, almost certainly did not keep kosher and spoke no Hebrew or Yiddish. Nevertheless, Judaism was their lifeblood. Judaism never felt like simply a religion or a culture; it was their being.

These men (and certainly the women, too) lived Judaism. Potentially without even being conscious of it, their actions modeled core Jewish values and mores. While the Hebrew Educational Society existed as a 20th Century neighborhood house in the United States, it also existed (and continues to exist) as part of a Jewish history that dates back thousands of years. To look at the Society only as function of a modern American Judaism does the entire institution a disservice.

This paper will first look at the neighborhood of Brownsville and the creation and function of the Hebrew Educational Society. It will explore Brownsville in the early part of the 20th Century and discuss the dynamics of the neighborhood that eventually became the most dense Jewish neighborhood in the world. It will look at some of the factors that led to the development of the Hebrew Educational Society and to the overall impact that the HES had on Brownsville and Brooklyn Jewry.

The second part of the thesis will be a little less traditional. It will examine the early decisions of the Hebrew Educational Society through the lens of select rabbinic texts. This section will attempt to fit the Hebrew Educational Society into its appropriate place in Jewish history, as a worthy heir to the rich Jewish institutions throughout history that functioned with Judaism as their core value. One of the remarkable aspects of the Hebrew Educational Society is how the actions of the early founders modeled Jewish values and, even in some instances, Jewish law.

In the chapters that focus on texts, the paper will first look at different sources that outline different priorities and challenges of Jewish community. The second textual section will investigate the role of tzedakah and giving in the early years of the Hebrew Educational Society. The third section will analyze the different rabbinic mandates on Jewish education and learning that were embodied at the

HES. Finally, there is an appendix attached of various photographs of the Hebrew Educational Society in Brownsville, some early photographs as well as a selection that documents the HES' building and neighborhood today.

The value of looking at the Hebrew Educational Society through the lens of these selected rabbinic texts is three fold. First, and on the most basic level, it brings these texts into the field of learning. I intend on utilizing the HES as a teaching tool in my rabbinate, and this project is a prototype for one of the styles of teaching I hope to use. It allows individuals who may not have encountered different texts from Jewish tradition to discover passages from the Talmud or Maimonides. In this manner, the HES can be used as a vehicle to promote greater exploration of Judaism into the passages, laws and teachings that over centuries have shaped Judaism. Certainly, the exposure to the rabbinic text in this project is only miniscule. Nevertheless, by placing the rabbinic passages and the HES history in dialogue, I situate both, within a larger and ever-unfolding Jewish narrative. This method of study acknowledges that Judaism never has existed in isolated moments; Judaism has always been ongoing, relevant and ever developing.

Second, individual examples illustrate larger principles. While the founders and early directors were probably not conscious of the rabbinic texts, they embodied the principles in them. Even if they could not articulate it, there was something at their Jewish core that propelled them to create such an organization. Certainly,

as will be discussed, some of their motivations were driven by self-interest. Nevertheless, the HES exists as a living testament to deeply engrained Jewish principles including care for the stranger/immigrant (*ger toshav*, remember you were a stranger in the land of Egypt) and the idea that all Israel is responsible for one another (*kol yisrael arevivm zeh ba-zeh.*) There is little doubt that if you had asked Bernhard Bloch, or one of the other early board members, they would acknowledge that their commitment to the HES stemmed from a visceral Jewish connection.

Finally, looking at these texts, along side information from the early years of the HES, can offer an opportunity for modern Jews to reflect on what it means to be Jewish today. It can challenge today's Jewish community to think about pressing concerns of contemporary Jewish life, including: responsibility to poor Jews, the underlying value of Jewish education, the current debate on immigration, or who is considered a member of one's own community. Through analysis one has the ability to discover ways to talk about current social problems or communal predicaments that face the Jewish community. By selecting a case study, like the HES, and analyzing it through the lens of rabbinic texts, we can reflect on larger social dilemmas in ways that were previously foreign. In a certain sense, this is the ultimate demonstration of informed choice, using different aspects of Judaism to guide or instruct as we propel a living vibrant religion forward.

While it may seem slightly anachronistic to put the actions of a twentieth century neighborhood house to the writings and decisions of historical rabbis, I believe that a thorough comparison of the two actually adds value not only to the HES but to the rabbinic texts as well. It does not dilute the power of the writings of the rabbis nor the motivations of the HES, rather it affords the opportunity for the two to converse in Jewish history and to demonstrate and elucidate the power and beauty of Judaism. During my rabbinical studies I have often been challenged to place myself in the *shiur* of a great medieval rabbi; I also like to envision myself in the smoke filled boardroom of the Hebrew Educational Society.

Chapter One: Brownsville and the Hebrew Educational Society:

When one thinks about the history of Jewish New York, chances are one's mind initially gravitates towards the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Stories of tenements and Yiddish and the *Daily Forward* paint a vivid picture of the Lower East Side's Jewish immigrant community. Classic movies and books like *Crossing Delancey, Hester Street* and *Call it Sleep* help bring the neighborhood to life. Even today, throughout the Lower East Side various institutions including the Tenement Museum, the Eldridge Street Synagogue and Katz's Delicatessen continue to cultivate the image of the bustling Jewish Lower East Side as the epicenter for Jewish New York.

Just six miles across the East River, the neighborhood of Brownsville, Brooklyn flourished as another center of Jewish life in New York. Though not as famous as the Lower East Side, it is equally important in conveying the life of Jewish New York in the early 20th Century. Brownsville was a dynamic Jewish community, rich with blue-collar immigrant stories, historic Jewish institutions, Jewish class dynamics and all of the nuance and excitement of the Lower East Side or any Jewish immigrant neighborhood in America.

At the heart of Jewish Brownsville, both geographically and metaphorically was the Hebrew Educational Society (HES). From the moment it opened its doors in

1899 to its departure from the neighborhood in 1965, the HES served as the pre-eminent Jewish institution in Brownsville, Brooklyn. The HES' rich history is documented in various minutes, annual reports, interviews, books, newspaper clippings, oral histories, photographs and other documents. It opened as the first neighborhood house in all of Brooklyn, was home to Brooklyn's first public library and reading room and the borough's first kindergarten. Today, the HES (now located in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn) continues to provide diverse services to the residents of Brooklyn.

The HES opened in 1899 slightly before the height of the mass Jewish immigration to Brownsville and one year after the borough of Brooklyn became part of the consolidated City of New York. Some of Brownsville's immigrants came directly from Eastern Europe, however, the majority of them arrived from dense Jewish neighborhoods in Manhattan, specifically the Lower East Side. For the most part, immigrant Jews from Manhattan felt that Brownsville was a step up from the Lower East Side, a neighborhood where families could have more space and freedom. The first wave of Jews began to migrate to Brownsville in the early 1880s and by 1905 the neighborhood contained 37,934 residents. Major infrastructure changes in the early 1900s, specifically the construction of the Manhattan (1909) and Williamsburg bridges (1903) and the expansion of the IRT subway system through Brooklyn, opened the flood gates for Jewish migration to Brooklyn.

By 1920, Brownsville had more than doubled its 1905 population to more than 100,000 people. The population continued to grow and by the beginning of World War II the neighborhood of Brownsville had the largest concentration of Jews in the city and the country. There are some estimates that the Jewish population of Brownsville reached 95 percent of the entire neighborhood.[2]

While Brownsville became the neighborhood in Brooklyn with the highest density of Jews, other neighborhoods also developed centralized Jewish populations in the early 1900s. Williamsburg, Borough Park and East New York all were centers of Jewish migration and significant hubs of Jewish life. According to the 1933 *American Jewish Year Book*, the Jewish population of Brooklyn increased by over 200,000 people between 1917 and 1927. On the eve of the Great Depression, nearly half of New York City's Jews lived in Brooklyn. By comparison, the Jewish population of Manhattan decreased from 1917 to 1927 by nearly 200,000 residents.[3] One early century account read: "It is doubtful if there is another section of the earth's surface that developed so quickly as Brownsville."[4]

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[2] Pritchett, Wendell (2002) *Brownsville, Brooklyn.* Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, p.10

[3] *American Jewish Year Book* (1933), American Jewish Committee, Jewish Publication Society of America. p.241

[4] Landesman, Alter F. (1969) *Brownsville.* New York. Bloch Publishing Company, Citing 1909 New York Herald

The neighborhood of Brownsville from the first Jewish settlement through the Great Depression remained remarkably poor. Most families lived in one of the common row tenements and most every adult who had employment worked in factories, sweatshops or various other blue-collar jobs. Few in Brownsville were ever able to climb out of the lower class. "A 1933 New York City Study found the median income of a Brownsville family to be $2,490, significantly lower than the recently developed middle-class areas of Brooklyn ($4,320) and the Bronx ($3,750)."[5]

Furthermore, Brownsville developed a reputation around the city as a poor squalid neighborhood. The neighborhood spawned higher delinquency rates than any other area in the borough and the community was plagued by poor infrastructure. Some of the infrastructure changes that assisted other areas of the city were absent in Brownsville. "Even as conditions improved the residents remained among the poorest Jews of the city, barely ahead of their cousins in the East Side and Williamsburg. Observers saw the neighborhood as provincial at best, criminal at worst, and some Brownsvillers preferred not to admit that they lived there. As Alfred Kazin put it, Brownsville was 'notoriously a place that measured all success by our skill in getting away from it.'"[6]

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[5] Pritchett, 32

[6] Soyer, Daniel. (2000) "Brownstone and Brownsville: Elite Philanthropists and Immigrants Constituents at the Hebrew Educational Society of Brooklyn, 1899-

There is no person who documents the plight of early Brownsville's Jewry more poetically than Kazin in his memoir *A Walker in the City.* Upon returning to Brownsville, Kazin reminisces on the poverty, through the lens of his own family, living in the heart of Brownsville:

> It puzzled me greatly when I came to read in books that Jews are a shrewd people particularly given to commerce and banking, for all the Jews I knew had managed to be an exception to that rule. I grew up with the belief that the natural condition of a Jew was to be a property-less worker like my painter father and my dressmaker mother and my dressmaker uncles and cousins in Brownsville – workers, kin to all the workers of the world, dependent entirely on the work of their hands.[7]

The leaders of the HES were cognizant of the poverty of the neighborhood. The 1914 HES President report directly mentioned the lack of wealth in neighborhood. The report noted, "most of the young men and women of Brownsville are poor and hard-working; their means do not permit them to seek social pleasures under the best conditions. The regular opportunities for amusement that are open to them are illy *(sic)* conducted and frequented by people on a low plane ..."[8] Throughout its history, the HES' directors always were aware of the fortunes of those in the surrounding neighborhood. The HES offered free or discounted programs to countless neighborhood residents. During the tumultuous financial

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1929" *American Jewish History.* Volume 88, number 2. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. p.185-186

[7] Kazin, Alfred (1951) *A Walker in the City.* New York. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt p. 38-39

[8] 1914 President Report, Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers (slide 39)

period at the heart of the Great Depression the HES board took the responsibility for most of the HES' financial burden.

While not every immigrant to Brownsville was Jewish, walking through the neighborhood's main arteries probably felt like an entirely Jewish experience. Yiddish dominated the neighborhood. Rabbi Alter Landesman, the superintendent of the HES, in his history on Brownsville notes: "Brownsville was a completely Jewish world; it came closest to the life of the small town or village, the European *shtetl* most of them had known."[9] Old photographs of Pitkin Avenue (one block from the HES) display signs in Yiddish and contain scores of uniquely Jewish stores (bakeries, butchers, clothing stores, etc…) specifically catering to the Jewish community. Because of its centrality as a commercial hub, many dubbed Pitkin Avenue, despite its less than glamorous vibe, the "Fifth Avenue of Brooklyn" and, because of the plethora of Jews in the neighborhood, Brownsville "The New Jerusalem."[10] In another play on Manhattan stereotypes, some people called Brownsville "Brooklyn's Lower East Side." The 1920s even brought Yiddish radio to Brownsville and a famous comic program starred a character called *Der Brownsviller Zeyde.* The grandson in the sketch became Hollywood

[9] Landesman, 95
[10] Pritchett, 30

icon Sidney Lument.[11]

Brownsville, and Brooklyn on the whole, not only contained an active Jewish street life, but also had scores of Jewish institutions and synagogues. In Brownsville, these institutions ranged from major organizations and societies like the HES to small basement synagogues. Samuel Abelow, in his 1937 book on Brooklyn Jewry, presented an *Institutional Map of Brooklyn Jewry* that lists 110 different organizations. Large clusters of the institutions listed in Abelow's map are centered in Brownsville.[12] Furthermore, Abelow failed to include scores of Jewish organizations and synagogues in Brownsville on his map.

Jewish life and Jewish organizations were ubiquitous in the neighborhood. "In less than two square miles there were eighty-three synagogues, several in 'impressive' buildings, but most in storefronts and basements, ten on Stone Avenue alone. There were also dozens of Hebrew and Yiddish schools stretching from Saratoga Avenue east to Sackman Street and Pitkin Avenue south to Riverdale."[13] All of the synagogues in Brownsville were Ashkenazi and they all

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[11] Sapoznik, Henry. (2002) "Brooklyn Yiddish Radio, 1925-46" *Jews of Brooklyn.* Ed. Ilana Abramovitch and Sean Galvin. Hanover and London, Brandeis University Press, University of Press of New England. p. 228

[12] Abelow, Samuel. (1937) *History of Brooklyn Jewry.* Brooklyn NY: Scheba Publishing Company. p. 164-165 Abelow taught at Julia Richman High School on the Upper East Side. The school my grandmother attended.

[13] Sorin, Gerald. (1990) The Nurturing Neighborhood: The Brownsville Boys Club and Jewish Community in Urban America 1940-1990. New York and London, New York University Press. p.15

followed Orthodox Jewish practice. According to the historian Deborah Dash Moore, the presence of so many synagogues contributed to "making the neighborhood into a visibly Jewish enclave." [14]

Despite the massive number of synagogues in Brownsville, synagogue attendance never became commonplace for the average Jew of the neighborhood. Synagogues regularly drew only a small segment of the Jewish population and most Jews in the neighborhood did not follow strict religious practices. Unlike the neighborhood house or YMHA, "Brownsville's synagogues served immigrant Jewish men almost exclusively." Other than Bar-Mitzvah preparation, the synagogue rarely offered religious instruction for children and the synagogue remained a location almost entirely devoted to worship. Statistics show that at most eight percent of Jewish Brownsville attended synagogue on a regular basis. The only occasions that the majority of Brownsville Jews actively attended synagogues were Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana.[15]

The religious practice of the majority of Brownsville's Jews (and certainly the members of the HES) can be best summed up in what Rabbi David Ellenson calls

[14] Moore, Deborah Dash. (1981) *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews.* New York. Columbia University Press. p.125
[15] Moore, 126-127

an "Eastern European folk piety."[16] The Eastern Europeans of Brownsville did not embrace the liberalism of German Reform Jews. They would have been shocked and appalled by the worship style of Reform Jews (including many of the HES board members) that included an organ, English prayer and abbreviated or altered liturgy. However, as foreign as Reform Judaism remained from the average Brownsville citizen, neither did he or she live a pre-America Orthodox Judaism. Most of the Jews of Brownsville wanted to live the American life as much as any immigrant. They were not Orthodox, but their religious inclinations were rooted in the tradition of Eastern Europe.

For this reason the Conservative movement, even though it never really established itself in Brownsville, had a remarkable impact on the HES. Rabbi Alter Landesman, a graduate of the physical and spiritual center of the movement, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, served as the superintendent of the HES for almost two generations. Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, a President, Chancellor and all around icon of the JTSA grew up in Brownsville, as did Rabbi David Aaronson a president of the Rabbinical Assembly. Furthermore, according to the HES minutes, many of the teachers at the HES religious schools were JTSA seminary students. Rabbi Landesman in his history of Brownsville lists over 45

[16] Ellenson, David. (2010) Lecture as President of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York.

Conservative graduates, who at one point lived in Brownsville.[17] As individuals moved out of the neighborhood, the Conservative movement, for many, filled the void between the archaic *shtetl* Orthodoxy of the old world and the 1880s German Reform.

Other than Orthodox *shuls,* Brownsville never cultivated a strong synagogue presence. The neighborhood's main Conservative synagogue, Temple Petach Tikvah opened in 1914. But, even that building was located on the outskirts of Brownsville, closer to Crown Heights.[18] The Conservative movement in Brooklyn began to thrive with the cultivation and creation of "The Synagogue Center" starting around the 1920s. As Jews left Brownsville for middle class neighborhoods, they created synagogue centers that would function not only as neighborhood centers, but also as synagogues and houses of Jewish learning. These centers began to flourish in the 1920s highlighted by the opening of, amongst others, the Brooklyn Jewish Center (1919), The East Midwood Jewish Center (1924), The Flatbush Jewish Center (1921), and The Park Slope Jewish Center (1925).

The Brooklyn Jewish Center in Crown Heights, of all the new synagogue centers, was closest to Brownsville. As Jews left Brownsville for new neighborhoods,

[17] Landesman, 260
[18] Moore, 128

many former Brownsville residents played a significant role in establishing the synagogue center as one of the staples of Jewish life. According to David Kaufman in his book *Shul With a Pool*: "Many of the founders of the Brooklyn Jewish Center had come from that nearby ghetto, often called the 'Jerusalem of America,' and the memory of its array of Jewish institutions would also influence the creation of the new synagogue-center." One of the institutions mentioned by Kaufman is the HES, "the leading Jewish community center" of Brownsville.[19]

Despite providing services to a constituency that did not follow strict Orthodox practice the HES followed an Orthodox Jewish calendar. Amongst a detailed list of rules and regulations for care of the building, the 1921 "House Rules" of the HES list the dates that the building was scheduled to close. The HES House Rule number seven reads: "The Institution shall be closed the following days and on the evening preceding when the day is a Hebrew holiday …

> Passover, four days;
> Shavuoth, two days;
> Fast of Ah (*sic*) –
> Rosh Hashanah – two days;
> Yom Kippur;
> Succoth, four days;
> Every Saturday of the year,
> except for devotional and
> religious purposes;[20]

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[19] Kaufman, David. (1999) *Shul With a Pool: The "Synagogue Center" in American Jewish History.* Hanover and London. Brandeis University Press. University Press of New England. p.249-250

[20] 1921 Hebrew Educational Society House Rules, HES papers (slide 7)

It is interesting to note the spelling and diction included in the House Rules. The word Jewish never occurs, holy days are called "Hebrew holidays," and the spelling of the holidays, specifically Shavuoth and Succoth, are written in an English form most likely never uttered on the streets of Brownsville. Being nearly 100 percent Eastern European, the average Brownsville Jew would have most likely used the Yiddish vocalization, *Shavuos* and *Succus.* Furthermore, both Passover and Fast of Av are described in English. The list avoids using the common Hebrew phrases, *Pesach* and *Tisha B'Av* for both holidays.

The Society was closed every Saturday except for religious purposes, but *Shabbat* or even the Sabbath is not mentioned in the list. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word Shabbat probably was not a major part of the lexicon for either group. In Brownsville, Friday evenings and Saturday would have been called *shabbes* using the Yiddish affect, while Reform Jews likely would have used only English terminology. Hebrew pronunciation, or even the language as a whole, did not overly impact early Brooklyn Jewry, except for specific prayers.

The list of holiday closures offers a window into the dual world of HES. On one hand, the specific list of days, notably two days of *hag,* cater to the "Eastern European folk piety" prevalent at the HES and in the surrounding neighborhood. It is likely that most Jewish institutions in the neighborhood, including even local

stores and shops, would have been closed on these days. On the other hand, the spelling and word choice in the list offers an insight into the Reform Jewish leadership who met to decide the house rules. Chances are these individuals neither observed two days of any "Hebrew holidays," nor commemorated the "Fast of Av." The secretary (quite possibly my great-grandfather) simply compiled the list according to the standard Jewish linguistic choices of German Reform Jews.

Reform Jews, by and large, did not live in Brownsville and the early Reform backers of the HES went to synagogue in other parts of the borough. While their support for the institution was tireless, most of the founders and early board members would have scoffed at the Eastern European Judaism practiced by the residents of Brownsville. Indeed most of them rarely ventured to the actual HES building. For example, Helen Heller recalled that she almost never went to the building, despite having a nearly five decade affiliation with the institution including both her father and husband serving, at various points, as the Society's President. The HES center simply was not part of her community. The majority of the board meetings in the 1920s were not held at the HES instead they were located at the elite Unity Club in Park Slope. Many of the presidents of the HES, including Bernhard Bloch, also served as president of the Unity Club.

In his article, *The Early Years of the Hebrew Educational Society*, Daniel Soyer

writes that the founders "favorite synagogues included Temple Israel and two Congregations Beth Elohim, one of which later merged with Temple Israel to form Union Temple, the other of which was also known as the Garfield Temple."[21] All of the "favorite" synagogues were Reform temples. Furthermore, many greats of the early Reform movement, including Judah Magnes, served on the board of the HES. On June 7, 1914 at the dedication of the new HES building, the final address in the dedication ceremony was delivered by, "Rev. Dr. Stephen S. Wise."[22]

The philanthropic commitment demonstrated by Brooklyn's German Reform Jews for the HES also existed towards other Jewish institutions in Brooklyn. Members of Brooklyn's Reform synagogues, (the ones listed above as well as Temple Emeth in Flatbush) "created various agencies of Jewish Philanthropy in Brooklyn, such as the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, The Jewish Hospital, the Brooklyn Federation of Charities, the Hebrew Educational Society, the Hebrew Free Loan Society and the Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society."[23] The overarching commitment to Jewish life from many of the early Reformers proved massive. Bernhard Bloch, along side his 30 years at the HES also served as the

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[21] Soyer, Daniel. (2002) "The Early Years of the Hebrew Educational Society of Brooklyn." *Jews of Brooklyn.* Ed. Ilana Abramovitch and Sean Galvin. Hanover and London, Brandeis University Press, University of Press of New England. p.41
[22] 1914 Annual Report, Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers, (slide 45)
[23] Galvin, Sean. (2002) "First Synagogues: Rabbi A. Stanley Dreyfus and Union Temple" *Jews of Brooklyn.* Ed. Ilana Abramovitch and Sean Galvin. Hanover and London, Brandeis University Press, University of Press of New England. p.30

first president of the Brooklyn Lawyer's Club of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and founded the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity.

The impact of Jewry in Brooklyn in the early 20th Century cannot be understated. Whether via the large Reform Temple surrounding Grand Army Plaza or the *shtetl* feel of Brownsville, Judaism pervaded the borough. By the 1940s, with the horrors of the Holocaust and establishment of the state of Israel gripping the Jewish world, Brooklyn was home to over 1,000,000 Jews making it "the largest Jewish community of any city in the history of the world."[24] By the force of both its members in Brownsville and its directors in Park Slope and Flatbush, The Hebrew Education Society played a significant part in contributing to the borough's Jewish nature.

[24] Kaufman, 248

Chapter Two: The Making of A Neighborhood House:

The initial idea for the establishment of the Hebrew Educational Society stemmed from the Lower East Side neighborhood house, specifically the Educational Alliance. In the same manner that Manhattan's "uptown Jews" cared for and funded immigrant organizations on the Lower East Side, the influx of Eastern European Jews to Brooklyn forced the hand of Brooklyn's Jewish elite. The initial financier of the HES was the Baron de Hirsch Fund, a philanthropic agency established in the 1890s, which recognized the crucial role wealthy powerful Jews could have assisting Jewish immigrants.

Baron de Hirsch himself was an extremely wealthy French Jew who devoted much of his resources towards supporting Russian Jewry. His initial philanthropic overture on behalf of Jews included an attempt to work with the Russian government to create schools and programs for Jews living in the Pale of Settlement in 1887. Consistent negative experiences with the Czar's government led Baron de Hirsch to "conclude that emigration was the only solution if the Russian Jews were not to be abandoned to their fate."[25] Baron de Hirsch ended up financing different Jewish communities, many of them agricultural based societies, in different parts of North and South America. The most famous of those societies is probably Woodbine, New Jersey, which was founded as an Eastern European Jewish agricultural society.

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[25] Joseph, Samuel. (1935) *History of the Baron De Hirsch Fund.* Printed for Baron De Hirsch Fund by the Jewish Publication Society. p. 11

Baron de Hirsch died in 1896, seven years after his fund had been set up in New York City to address the immigrant needs of Russian Jews in the United States. The Baron de Hirsch Fund assisted various immigrant groups and organizations across America, set up Jewish agricultural societies across the country and advocated for immigrant protections in Federal law, policies and legislation. "Throughout the country, the Fund paved the way for coordination of activities dealing with the immigrant for the combination of the leaders of the various immigrant groups of the United Sates, and for the creation of organized sentiment on behalf of the immigrant."[26] All told, the Baron de Hirsch Fund invested over 100 million dollars in philanthropic acts.[27]

As immigration to Brooklyn grew and neighborhoods became more and more crowded, a group of Brooklyn Jews felt they needed to respond to the squalid conditions of Jews living in Brownsville. Led by Abraham Abraham, a trustee of the Baron de Hirsch Fund and founder of the department store Abraham & Straus, a collection of Brooklyn Jews "met early in 1899 for the purposes of establishing educational activities in Brownsville under the auspices of the Fund." At that meeting A.S. Solomons the general agent of the Baron De Hirsch Fund agreed it would "be necessary to establish in Brownsville an organization similar to the

[26] Jospeh, 239
[27] Landesman, 174

Educational Alliance of New York in order to accomplish the educational, social and moral ends sought." [28]

The opening of the Hebrew Educational Society occurred later that year, in 1899, as the only educational settlement organized and developed by the Baron de Hirsch Fund. The first minutes of the HES note that origin of the Society began with "the purpose of taking definite action to establish educational schools in Brownsville under the auspices of the Baron de Hirsch Fund.'"[29] The Fund contributed over $4,000 a year to the HES until 1917, and by 1924 all appropriations to the HES from the Baron de Hirsch Fund ceased.[30]

Along with the Baron de Hirsch Fund, the first minute books of the new organization show that a majority of the early benefactors, though certainly not all of them, were from Brooklyn (although not from Brownsville). The early founders were primarily Jewish professionals, many with significant resources. Some of the earliest donors were members of New York's wealthiest and most prestigious Jewish families, including Simon Rothschild, Daniel, Murray and Isaac Guggenheim and Isidor and Nathan Straus.[31] Despite their prominence in Brooklyn, the borough's Jewish elite was cognizant of the wealthier more substantial Manhattan community. To a certain degree, the wealthy Brooklyn Jews had a complex about the organizational ability of established Manhattan

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[28] Joseph, 267
[29] 1899 Opening Minutes, Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers (slide 50)
[30] Joseph, 270
[31] Abelow, 316

Jewry in dealing with Eastern European Jews. Daniel Soyer in his article on the HES writes, "At the turn of the century, this small circle of well established American Jews felt anxious. First, they feared the influx of uncouth eastern Europeans would undermine their own hard-won respectability. Second, the Brooklynites nervously compared themselves with the much larger and wealthier community in Manhattan."[32]

The Brooklyn founders were worried about the abundance of poor immigrants. Not only because of the poverty of the immigrant but because of the threat to the status of America's established Jewish community. Some of the motivations for the creation of the HES were rooted in tempering the negative effect that the Jewish elite thought the numerous Eastern European immigrants would have on their standing in America. The established Jews of Brooklyn saw the poor of Jewish Brownsville as a danger to what they had already achieved in America. An 1899 HES report reads:

> Without reflecting upon anyone, the facts are patent that unless drastic measures are adopted and that too, without delay, the present fearful status of affairs in Brownsville will inevitably evolve into a scandal that will reflect not only injuriously upon its 15,000 or more residents, but inflict a lasting blight upon the fair fame of our people throughout the land and especially Greater New York, where it is our pride to claim that its position of Jew morally, commercially, and socially, makes him the equal to the best grade of American citizenship.[33]

[32] Soyer, 41
[33] Landesman 175

The underlying motivation of all of the activities at the Hebrew Educational Society, during its early years, was Americanization. These goals paralleled the goals of other neighborhood centers in New York, specifically the Educational Alliance. The HES so closely modeled itself after its Manhattan counterpart that visits to the HES by directors of the Educational Alliance were common during the early years of the HES. Presumably, these visits served as opportunities for guidance and advice from one immigrant neighborhood house to another. The institutions were so close that an early suggestion for the name of the HES was the Hebrew Educational Alliance of Brooklyn.[34] Even the American Jewish Yearbook noted that the HES performed "a function in this district (Brownsville) similar to that of the Educational Alliance on the Lower East Side in Manhattan."[35]

Charles Bernheimer, the superintendent of the HES from 1910 to 1918 and a trustee of the Baron De Hirsch Fund, came directly from the settlement house movement of the Lower East Side. Bernheimer had been the assistant headworker at the University Settlement before taking the job at the HES. Modeling the function of a settlement house, he moved into the HES building until he married. Bernheimer saw himself as a "neighborhood or community worker who should help to form opinion and promote action in civic progress.

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[34] Kaufman, 114

[35] *American Jewish Year Book* 1922, American Jewish Committee, Jewish Publication Society of America. p. 91

Accordingly he served as a member of the district school board and of the mayor's committee of censors for movies."[36]

The first activities at the Society, almost across the board, were geared towards the development of American citizens. Those activities included English classes, music classes, citizenship classes, cultural performances, lectures, and the opening of a kindergarten. The early years of the HES also saw the creation of Brooklyn's first public library, an HES gymnasium and a variety of social, educational and leisure clubs. The HES dedicated each and every activity towards guiding new Jewish immigrants into American life. Even the HES' dances "were given for the purpose of promoting sociability."[37] Following the model of the Lower East Side's community centers, "The society's leadership thus believed that the HES should concentrate its efforts on teaching the newcomers how to be Americans in the broadest sense. While its first responsibility was to instruct its clients in English and citizenship, in the long run its activities were to include anything that could impart to them something of middle-class, Anglo-American culture."[38]

Throughout the early minutes and annual reports of the Society, countless references are made to fostering that American ethos at the HES. The Society would bring in doctors and nurses to offer free examinations and lessons in

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[36] Soyer, 203
[37] 20th Anniversary Hebrew Educational Society Dinner Booklet, 1919, HES papers (slide 59)
[38] Soyer, 191-193

hygiene to the children using the building facilities. In one of the more remarkable early programs, the HES' Ladies Auxiliary club, a staple at the Society from the beginning, rented and furnished an apartment in the area "to teach the art of housekeeping," presumably this program was designed to show new immigrants the "proper," middle-class way to care for an apartment. In a similar elite Brooklyn mindset, the Auxiliary hosted monthly "mothers meetings" for the women of Brownsville that were followed with that most Anglo-American activity, social tea.[39] Perhaps the most revealing sign of the American philosophy espoused by the Society occurred in 1917 when the HES opened up its new building to give a reception for Brownsville's men drafted to the Army.

Despite the antipathy of many of the first German Jews for the Eastern European *shtetl* mentality, Yiddish, the lingua franca of immigrant Brownsville, was never absent from the HES. The founders of the HES likely saw Yiddish "as a badge of backwardness, separatism, and Jewish national feeling – all things they wanted to root out among the new immigrants." Yiddish went against the idea of Americanization that the HES espoused. Nevertheless, Yiddish was present in the center because it served as "a necessary medium through which to reach the surrounding community." [40] A variety of lectures, speeches, shows and classes were offered in Yiddish and, while the Society heavily promoted English, they never took the ultimate step of banning Yiddish.

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[39] Landesman, 182
[40] Soyer, 43

The HES ran almost entirely from funding from the Baron de Hirsch Fund, the Brooklyn Federation (founded in 1909, of which the HES was a charter member), and the generosity of wealthy Brooklyn donors. Membership dues and fees were charged for certain activities, but the HES remained mostly free for Brownsville residents. Within the first decades of the HES in Brownsville, yearly attendance reached upwards of 250,000 people. The income from fees never totaled more than a few hundred dollars in the early year, and when fees were charged for events, attendance declined dramatically.[41]

Throughout the copious minutes and annual reports, nobody ever referred to the HES as a business. Even during the lengthy process of purchasing the new HES building in 1913/1914, the ultimate goal was to serve Brownsville Jews. One annual report laid out the responsibilities as viewed by the directors succinctly. "The object of a business is to pay dividends, the object of a community center is to ennoble lives."[42] Certainly the board consisted of shrewd and savvy businessmen, who had achieved remarkable financial success in their careers, and who used that know-how in conducting the affairs of the HES. Nevertheless, as evident in the minutes, the founders did recognize their actions were greater than simply providing financial backing; rather, their contributions were a prime example of Jewish philanthropy

[41] Landesman, 181
[42] 1922 Superintendent Report, Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers (slide 14)

Even though the Society did not depart from its ultimate goal of Americanization, by the early 1920's the focus of the HES expanded. The HES became a community center. Largely due to America's restrictive immigration policy, by the 1920s the great wave of Eastern European immigration had subsided. Second generation Brownsville residents became the significant constituency of the HES. These individuals were more acculturated than their parents and, by the time Rabbi Alter Landesman was hired in 1922, the HES had largely transformed from an immigrant center in the model of a Lower East Side settlement house to a Jewish Community Center. The need to instill a sense of America in the new Jewish immigrant faded, while the desire to have a place to "disseminate and conserve the best of the Jewish heritage and to enhance its importance as a vitalizing force in the life of the Jew" became paramount.[43]

Even though it never took on the title formally, according to Rabbi Landesman, the Society functioned as a Jewish Community Center. In the early 1920s, the HES became a charter member of the Jewish Welfare Board whose "philosophy and program were greatly affected by the Jewish Center movement."[44] Rabbi Landesman certainly viewed the HES as serving a parallel function to Jewish Community Centers; he even wrote a booklet entitled: *The Present Role of A Jewish Community Center in A Metropolitan Neighborhood.*[45]

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[43] Landesman, 190
[44] Landesman, 189
[45] Landesman, 190

In the model of a Jewish Community Center, the HES saw itself as the primary location in Brownsville for both American and Jewish activity. In his dissertation on Brownsville Wendell Pritchett claims, "The Hebrew Educational Society was without question the most important institution in community of old Brownsville."[46] The HES did not exist as an organization geared for a specific gender or age nor did it limit who entered the doors of the Society's building. The HES delighted in the plethora of activity that existed in the Society. "The Hebrew Educational Society is ever ready to encourage any activity which offers an opportunity for self-expression and social development. The ever expanding sphere of its activities testifies to its desire to be the *Beth Aham(sic)* of Brownsville, a place where old and young may meet for common purpose."[47]

As the neighborhood continued to grow, so did programs and responsibilities of the Hebrew Educational Society. The Society constantly added more and more programs to respond to the demands of the neighborhood and the building flourished with activity. According to a 1919 twentieth anniversary celebration booklet, "There is something in the Institution that must appeal to every one. If one is not interested in one activity, there is some other activity that will attract him."[48]

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[46] Pritchett, 180

[47] 1924 Silver Jubilee Celebration, Hebrew Educational Society. HES papers (slide 69) italics in original

[48] 1919 Hebrew Educational Society, Twentieth Anniversary. HES papers (slide 59)

By the time Bernhard Bloch became President of the HES in 1922 a wide variety of activities and programs existed. There existed a College of Music complete with a music library as well as instruction in "theory, harmony and orchestration." Music recitals, concerts and lessons were commonplace for both adults and children. Physical education also proved paramount, with classes in different types of athletics and dance. There existed an HES gymnasium and HES basketball teams (see photo) traveled to different neighborhood houses around the City for competition. The Society started a vacation school, the neighborhood's first kindergarten, summer camps, and an old age club. The building even had a rooftop garden for growing simple vegetables. "Throughout the first half of the century ... the HES served as the clearinghouse for community activities and was by far the most active organization in the neighborhood."[49]

Club life also proved popular at the HES. A variety of focused clubs for all ages existed. The HES boasted that:

> Sixty different organizations meet weekly for educational, literary, athletic and social purposes. Dramatic Society. Declamation, Essay and Debating Contests. Social Room. Children's Game Room. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Headquarters of Scout Council of Brownsville. Community Social Events. Weekly Neighborhood or Club Dances. Sociables. Picnics and Excursions. [50]

Equally as prominent as clubs, events and social programs were the variety of religious and Jewish activities at the HES. There were classes at the HES in,

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[49] Pritchett,181-182

[50] 1924 Silver Jubilee Celebration, Hebrew Educational Society. HES papers (slide 70)

amongst other subjects, Jewish history, bible, Jewish literature, Jewish ceremonies, ethics and Jewish music. There existed a Hebrew School for over 400 children as well as a Saturday Sabbath School. The Society hosted religious gatherings for both American and Jewish holidays as well as different religious services on holidays and Shabbat.[51] On those days, the HES would only be open for "devotional or religious" purposes. Furthermore, the Society would host lectures in both English and Yiddish on various topics significant to the Jewish world. In December of 1924, Mordecai Kaplan received the largest audience at the HES that entire year for his lecture on *Judaism as a Civilization,* ten years before his famous book of the same name was published.[52]

The HES saw itself as one of the, if not *the*, primary Jewish organization in Brownsville. It believed it filled a different role than synagogues or schools, both because of its focus on Americanization but also because it provided different avenues to Jewish life. Synagogues did not reach the majority of the neighborhood population and schools only focused on education. To the directors, even the secular activities at the Society, ranging from sports to music to gardening, were considered Jewish, not because of their explicit content but because of the people who participated in them were Jewish. Brownsville was a Jewish neighborhood and the HES embodied, as Rabbi Landesman wrote in his booklet: "...the primary agency around which pulsates whatever general Jewish

[51] 1924 Silver Jubilee Celebration, Hebrew Educational Society. HES papers (slide 69)
[52] December, 1924 Minutes, Hebrew Educational Society, HES Papers

life there exists in these neighborhoods. It serves as a link to unite all Jews, young and old regardless of ideological differences. It gives the Jews an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging, and to participate in Jewish communal life."[53] In the abundant minutes and reports from the first three decades of the Society, there is no mention of non-Jews at the HES.

Furthermore, the Hebrew Educational Society hosted and assisted other Jewish organizations, agencies and events in and around Brownsville. The 1917 minutes note: "The Brownsville Hebrew Charities were given the use of the auditorium for the New Year Day and Atonement Holy Days."[54] By the year 1924 the HES was the home to eight Young Judaea clubs and the main offices of the Council for Jewish Women and the Big Brother/Big Sisters of Brooklyn. The Young Israel Synagogue of Brownsville used the HES as its headquarters for nearly 35 years and the HES took the initiative to create the Brooklyn Hebrew Society of the Deaf in 1928.[55] It is likely that scores of other Jewish groups, both big and small, used the facilities and resources of the Hebrew Educational Society. When Chaim Weitzman visited Brownsville to raise funds for Palestine, the HES nominated Bernhard Bloch as its representative to "receive" the future President of the State of Israel.

In a fitting twist, just as the HES was the first and one of the most significant Jewish institutions in Brownsville, it also proved to be the last Jewish institution

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[53] Landesman, 191
[54] 1917 Minutes Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers
[55] Landesman, 191

in the neighborhood. Beginning in the 1940s an exodus of Brownsville's Jewish population began and by the 1960s (when the HES moved to Canarsie) there were less than 5,000 Jews in Brownsville, down from 175,000 in the 1930s.[56]

As Jewish synagogues and institutions began to depart Brownsville in the 1950s and 1960s, the HES became even more central to Jewish life in the neighborhood. Just as the HES served as the hub of Jewish Brownsville life in the 1920s, it also served that role in the 1960s. Arnold Heller, a former President of the HES, wrote about the changing neighborhood:

> In 10 or 15 years Brownsville has changed from a predominantly Jewish area, supporting a community center Talmud torahs, Yeshivas, number of small congregations, Jewish shop keepers – a flourishing business area; to the one community center which supplies the cultural, religious and remaining vestige of Jewish communal life. The HES is an island surrounded by Pentecostals, Bodegas, Negro churches, etc.
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> The HES has taken on many new roles. No longer is it just for clubs and attended activities. Since there are no longer any branches of Jewish War Veterans, Hadassah, Bnai Brith and other such organizations that provided special services, HES is now serving the community for local Jewish needs. It is a source of information, a place to go for Yahrzeit (sic) information, counseling for marriage problems, family problems, etc.[57]

In 1965, the HES moved to Canarsie. The executive director of the HES in 1965 David Kleinstein summed up the move in the magazine of the Jewish Welfare Board: "What does a Jewish Community Center do when the neighborhood in which it has been located for 66 years has changed so radically that the entire

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[56] Sorin, 168

[57] Heller, Arnold. Untitled Statement at the Hebrew Educational Society. Date Unknown (approximately 1961)

Jewish population of the area has moved elsewhere? The answer is that it moves as soon as it can to the area where its services and programs are needed by its former members."[58] By the time the HES departed Brownsville, Canarsie had a population of 104,000, at least 75,000 of the residents were Jews.[59] The large Jewish population made Canarsie, just three miles from Brownsville, the ideal neighborhood for the HES' operation. The HES continues to function as a community center in Canarsie today.

From 1889 to 1965, no Jewish organization proved as ubiquitous in the neighborhood as the HES. New York City Mayor Abe Beame, a former board member of the HES, remarked at the Society's 75th anniversary gala: "We take pride in the fact that this is one of the largest Jewish community centers in the City which happens to have the world's largest Jewish population."[60] The Hebrew Educational Society serves as appropriate book ends to the short but rich history of Brownsville Jewry.

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[58] Pritchett, 172
[59] Pritchett, 193
[60] Beame, Mayor Abraham D. (1974) Remarks at the 75th Anniversary Celebration of the Hebrew Educational Society. Office of the Mayor, City of New York.

Chapter Three: Communal Responsiblity

דתני רב יוסף (שמות כ"ב) אם כסף תלוה את עמי את העני עמך, עמי ונכרי - עמי קודם, עני ועשיר - עני קודם, ענייך ועניי עירך - ענייך קודמין, עניי עירך ועניי עיר אחרת - עניי עירך קודמין.

R. Joseph learnt: If you lend money to any of my people that are poor with you: [this teaches, if the choice lies between] a Jew and a non-Jew, a Jew has preference; the poor or the rich the poor takes precedence; your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town, your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another town the poor of your own town have prior rights. (Bava Metzia 71a)

One of the staples of the early years of the Hebrew Educational Society was an overarching commitment to care for all members of the Brownsville community. The HES never saw itself as a niche organization designed to focus on a specific program or function. Rather, through their philanthropy, the directors saw themselves as providing for the entirety of the Jewish neighborhood. Through donating immense time, effort and money to the HES, they revealed various priorities for Jewish philanthropy. Furthermore, different discussions surrounding prioritization can be seen in the rich history of rabbinic texts that deal with giving and tzedakah.

The Talmud, in Bava Metzia above, provides a clear hierarchy for the giving of loans. A parallel hierarchy also exists in the discussion of giving *tzedakah.*[61]

[61] Mishneh Torah, Matanot Ananim 7:13 (Obviously, giving and lending are different actions. The rabbis do not treat lending and giving identically. Nevertheless, for the sake of brevity and clarity, this paper will often conflate the two. The larger point, concerning giving and the HES, should still be evident. There are many rich articles and books on Judaism and tzedakah that explore the difference between lending and giving further. Jacob Neusner's *Tzedakah,* cited in this paper, is one of them.)

Bava Metzia 71a provides three clear priorities with respect to giving and lending. First, a Jew receives priority over someone who is not Jewish. Second, a poor person receives priority over someone who is wealthy. Third, a member of one's own town receives priority over someone from a different town. Based on the Talmud's prioritization, the ideal recipient for tzedakah would be a poor Jewish individual, who lived in one's own town.

The Talmud, in these passages, acknowledges that the actions of lending and giving often require prioritization and that it is incumbent on an individual to make choices in his/her giving. Rabbinic texts serve as a guideline for such actions. The Shulchan Aruch, expands on the Bava Metzia passage, specifically discussing the hierarchy of giving:

> A person's own livelihood comes before anyone else and he has no duty to give until he has his own income. Next come his parents if they are poor, next his grown children, next his siblings, and next his extended family, next his neighbors, next the people of his town, and next the people of other towns. As well, the true residents of the town are the 'poor of the city' and they precede those poor who come to the city from another place.[62]

It is almost certain that the early directors and board members of the Hebrew Educational Society had no knowledge of rabbinic texts that offered a hierarchy for tzedakah. Nevertheless, much of the work and motivations for sustaining the HES parallel the levels of giving and lending as presented in the rabbinical texts.

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[62] Yoreh Deah, 251:3

While the HES did not exist as an institution focused on providing funds for tzedakah and never served as an immediate loan organization, its early days were uniquely focused on serving Jews over gentiles, the poor over the wealthy, and the local Brooklyn community over the larger public landscape.

The underlying goal of the center, and indeed much of the motivation for the HES' genesis, was rooted in the idea of well off Brooklyn Jews creating a place to serve Brooklyn's poor Jews. In response to the gross poverty and tenement culture of the neighborhood, in 1899 the Hebrew Educational Society became the first Jewish Neighborhood House in Brooklyn. The founders "saw that the section of Brooklyn, known as Brownsville was becoming one of the largest Jewish communities and that a Jewish social center was necessary to minister to its needs..... True to its motto, 'wherever a need, we stand ready to serve,' it (the HES) has encouraged every activity affecting the health, education and welfare of the community."[63] In creating a neighborhood house for the Jews of Brownsville, the early founders of the HES established a target population for their contributions. The agency directed funds uniquely towards Jewish, local, and poor people.

In the same manner that rabbinic guidelines on tzedakah emphasized the poor of one's own town, "... the poor of one's city receive priority over the poor of another city, ... You shall surely open your hand to your brother, the poor, and the

[63] 1924 Silver Jubilee Celebration, Hebrew Educational Society. HES papers (slide 66)

destitute in your land,"[64] the HES board concentrated their efforts on the poor of their own borough. Despite being modeled on, and having professional partnerships with neighborhood houses on the Lower East Side, the HES directors felt that they alone were responsible for the plight of Brooklyn Jews. While many of the early funds were allocated by Manhattan Jews (especially the Baron De Hirsch Fund,) it quickly became apparent that most of the responsibility for sustaining the HES, and Brooklyn Jews on the whole, would fall on established Brooklyn Jewry.

To that end, a 1911 Federation appeal highlights both the shifting neighborhood demographics and the changing relationship between Brooklyn and Manhattan Jewry: "Brooklyn has become a dumping ground for the poor and destitute of Manhattan Jewry, and Brooklyn with its population of *many poor* and *few rich* are unable to cope with the situation alone. We are told by some of our rich Manhattan neighbors that the River is the dividing line and the Brooklyn must share its burden alone."[65] Eventually, Brooklyn did share its burden alone, as the majority of the philanthropy that sustained the institution came from people living in Brooklyn.

Furthermore, the HES saw its service to the community reaching beyond the walls of the HES. After opening the new HES building in 1914, the HES became

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[64] Mishneh Torah Matanot Ananim 7:13
[65] Brooklyn Federation Report. 1911 "Through the Years." 186-187 (italics original)

"preoccupied not only with the programs and projects undertaken within the building, but also with the affairs of the neighborhood and of the community at large."[66] Brownsville was almost entirely Jewish and all the actions of the HES outside of the building's walls would benefit the neighborhood's Jewish community on the whole. Over the first three decades, the HES provided assistance to other institutions and causes including local unions and community groups. One of the early committees at the HES devoted itself to "local improvements." Amongst the committee's successes included getting streets paved and the construction of Brownsville's first public bath house.[67]

The HES also partnered with City organizations including the Department of Education, The Bureau of Sanitation and the Public Library to bring appropriate services to Brownsville. In one partnership with the Bureau of Public Health Education, the Hebrew Educational Society distributed the *Brownsville Chronicle* a "...little neighborhood journal, carrying messages of cleanliness, prevention and daily habit right into the households of the people."[68]

Following the rabbinic mandate, these partnerships epitomize the commitment demonstrated by the HES to provide for one's own community. The modern scholar Jacob Neusner in his book *Tzedakah* discusses the idea of communal

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[66] Landesman, 185
[67] 1935, 35th Anniversary Celebration Hebrew Educational Society. HES papers (slide 79)
[68] Survey Associates. (1916) *Charity Organization Society of the City of New York.* Volume 35 p. 71

support in looking at Mishneh Torah 7:13. Neusner emphasizes the role of an organization, like the HES, within the prioritization of communal responsibility. He notes that the neighborhood center ideal, as modeled in the HES, follows the hierarchy established in rabbinic texts. "The poor in your town stand for all the beneficiaries of Jewish organizational life, whether the young people in youth groups or old people in programs for the aged, or the schools, or the Jewish studies programs... The entire range of local services fall within the context of the present law: priority first for the people at home. They have nowhere else to turn."[69]

The Talmud elaborates on different responsibilities for individuals living in a community. The rabbis determine that the longer a person resides in a place the more they are obligated to contribute to the town. According to Bava Batra, "If a person resides in a town for thirty days, he becomes responsible for contributing to the soup kitchen; three months, to the charity box; six months, to the clothing fund; nine months, to the burial fund; and twelve months, for contributing to the repair of the town walls."[70] While the rabbinic mandate focused on specific individuals, as poor Jews began to flood to Brownsville, more and more welfare organizations, many paralleling the specific demands of the Talmud, were established.

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[69] Neusner, Jacob. (1982) *Tzedakah*. Chappaqua, NY. Rossel Books p.23
[70] Bava Batra, 8a (also Mishneh Torah, Matanot Anim 9:12)

The HES was one of the earliest Jewish communal organizations in Brownsville, but other organizations existed throughout the neighborhood to fulfill specific needs of those in Brownsville. Among the agencies in the neighborhood included a Ladies Free Loan Association, The Hebrew Free Loan Association, The Brownsville Relief Hebrew Charity and a *Malbish Arumim* society. Mirroring the mandate of Bava Batra, Brownsville also had a *Hesed Shel Emeth* Society, "... a free burial society for indigent poor who had, despite the interventions of yet another organization, the Society for the Aid of the Indigent Sick, succumbed."[71]

Non-organized tzedakah also existed in the neighborhood, often with poor residents simply giving what they were able. Carole Bell Ford in her book, *The Girls,* about the women of Brownsville notes: "Charitable organizations were particularly important to women who brought the old world custom of *gehen kleiben,* house-to-house collections to the neighborhood. It remained a common practice. All of these women recall *pushkes,* charity collection boxes, which were to be seen in Jewish homes from these early days onward."[72]

It is important to note, that in other sections of the Talmud, the rabbis take a different view on the parameters of who to support. Tractate Gittin relates that it is essential to support all poor individuals not just the Jewish poor. "Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish

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[71] Ford, Carole Bell. (2000) *The Girls: Jewish Women of Brownsville, Brooklyn.* Albany, NY. State University of New York Press. p.32
[72] Ford, 32

sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace."[73] In this verse the hierarchy of giving and lending is nullified and gentiles and Jews are to be cared for equally.

The differences in talmudic positions towards community, as seen in Gittin and Baba Metzia, serve as wonderful example to recognize that Jewish teachings and even Jewish values, at times, exist nearly 180 degrees from one another. In this way, having two statements in tension with one another, provides an opportunity to affirm that Jewish values are not monolithic and are subject to change depending on time, environment and circumstances. Indeed, many scholars emphasize that rabbinic texts often promote dissent and highlight minority positions. This is done to ensure that the Jewish conversation does not cease.

To be sure, the HES embodied values it perceived as Jewish that were opposite from or in conflict with teachings of Jewish texts. One example of this deals with the establishment and nurturing of a deaf population at the HES. Beginning in the 1920s, the HES created and nurtured programming, schools and worship for Brownsville's deaf Jewish population.[74] Since 1928, and until today, the Brooklyn Historical Society for the Deaf has been functioning at the Hebrew Educational Society. This desire to provide services for people who are deaf, likely, was rooted in a commitment to providing for those who were perceived to be in need.

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[73] Gittin, 61a

[74] 1928 Minutes, Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers

Despite this, and likely far from the minds of anybody at the HES, a person who is deaf is ascribed a lesser status in much of rabbinic discussion. A person who is deaf is denied the ability to fulfill many of the commandments and is seen as having the same knowledge as a drunk or a child.[75] While a further study on the treatment of people who are deaf in Jewish life would certainly be fascinating, this example simply illustrates a larger point, Jewish values and mores, be they in the Talmud or the neighborhood house, are never univocal. Even when different sections of rabbinic literature or the actions of the HES appear opposite from the teachings of other texts, we are invited into the useful tension that makes case study so rewarding.

Returning to the conversation on communal responsibility, The Jerusalem Talmud varies slightly from the Gittin passage in the Babylonian Talmud that stresses equal care for the Jewish and non-Jewish poor. The Jerusalem Talmud reads: "In a city where there are Gentiles and Jews, we establish Jewish and Gentile officials who will collect for charity from Gentiles and Jews."[76] In this manner, the HES fulfilled the charge of the Talmud. Brownsville functioned as a town almost entirely of Jews and the services of the Society were geared toward that community. There never existed any ban of non-Jews from the HES, however the agency's focus was centered on the Jewish population of Brownsville.

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[75] Abrams, Judith. (1998) Judaism and Disability: Portrayals in Ancient Texts from the Tanach through the Bavli. Washington, DC. Galludet University Press
[76] Jerusalem Talmud; Gittin, 47c

Later on, as the demography of the neighborhood changed to primarily black and Puerto Rican, the HES offered services for non-Jewish residents of Brownsville. By the mid-1950s the HES organized and hosted the Brownsville Health and Welfare Council, which functioned as a member organization for various different neighborhood constituencies. The Council advocated for better neighborhood services including street lighting and a neighborhood health center. Arnold Heller, a president of the HES, noted in a statement to the Board: "The HES, while a completely Jewish membership agency, is also cognizant of its civic responsibility.... At HES, where through the cooperation of the Board of Education, we have had English classes for foreign born, we now have English classes for Puerto Ricans through the assistance of the Puerto Rican Board of Trade."[77]

When the ultimate decision to move to Canarsie was made, Rabbi Alter Landesman, who had spent his entire adult life serving the Jews of Brownsville, framed the decision to move in light of care for the local community. Just as the Hebrew Educational Society would cater to the Jewish community in Canarsie, new groups would serve the Brownsville population. Rabbi Landesman wrote:

> The new non-Jewish groups that have moved into the section need social services as much as the older Jewish elements who are now leaving it. The Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn has taken over by purchase both Hebrew Educational Society buildings... and are using

[77] Heller, Arnold. Untitled Statement at the Hebrew Educational Society. Date Unknown (approximately 1961)

them as religious, recreational and educational centers for the population presently residing in the neighborhood.[78]

Responding to the needs of one's own community was always one of the underlying motivations for the Hebrew Educational Society. The decision to move to Canarsie, to support the Jews in that neighborhood, paralleled some of the initial motivations to set up the HES in 1899. The leaders of the organization saw a poor, Jewish neighborhood with a lack of services and dedicated themselves to filling that void. They were motivated to serve and care for the Jewish community in any way possible. In the 60 plus years in Brownsville and almost 50 in Canarsie they created a dynamic, lasting institution devoted to serving Brooklyn's Jewish community.

[78] Pritchett, 194

Chapter Four: Tzedakah

שמנה מעלות יש בצדקה זו למעלה מזו, מעלה גדולה שאין למעלה ממנה זה המחזיק ביד ישראל שמך ונותן לו מתנה או הלואה או עושה עמו שותפות או ממציא לו מלאכה כדי לחזק את ידו עד שלא יצטרך לבריות לשאול, ועל זה נאמר והחזקת בו גר ותושב וחי עמך כלומר החזק בו עד שלא יפול ויצטרך.

The highest degree (of tzedakah), exceeded by none, is that of the person who assists a poor person by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment – in a word, by putting him where he can dispense with other people's aid. With reference to such aid, it is said, "You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you" (Vayikra 25:35), which means strengthen him in such a manner that his falling into want is prevented. (Mishneh Torah Matanot Anim Chapter 10:7 AJWS Translation)

Maimonides's ladder of tzedakah is one of the most well know Jewish texts. His eight levels delineate a hierarchy of importance and values that guide Jewish giving practices. Throughout its history, Judaism clearly differentiated between the acts of giving tzedakah and giving charity. While tzedakah is often – and sometimes correctly - interpreted as charity, simply calling it charity mitigates the weight of tzedakah, which in Jewish practice is compulsory. Tzedakah is rooted in the Hebrew word *tzedek*, meaning justice, and unlike charity, which implies generosity of giving, tzedakah is the performance of a sacred responsibility.

The Hebrew Educational Society epitomized the highest levels of Jewish giving practices; the actions, programs, and motivations of the HES embodied the highest form of tzedakah. The organization never attempted to serve as a charitable warehouse for the Jews of Brownsville. Rather, the organization

existed to strengthen the Jewish community and the Jewish individual to a degree in which he or she could become a contributing member of society.

While specific aide organizations did exist in Brownsville, the HES did not run any immediate aide programs. There were no soup kitchens or food pantries nor did the HES sponsor immediate relief housing or health programs. Rather, the HES' programs were focused on calculated long-term betterment. The early society had vocational and manual programs that would teach trade skills that would allow individuals to become more employable. They also had branches of both a collection union and a penny provident bank (a savings program for neighborhood youth) that would allow both adults and children to save and invest money prudently. Furthermore, the 1914 HES President's report notes: "For this reason we have provided lectures to them in their native tongue on economic and social problems, and a bureau which aids them in obtaining their naturalization papers." [79]

The rabbis recognized the value of giving tzedakah and acknowledged the mitzvah of simply providing food or clothing. According to Maimonides, even one who gives less money than he should or one who gives begrudgingly still fulfills the Jewish obligation to give tzedakah.[80] However, Jewish texts also emphasize that actions that provide a long-term benefit for an individual, such as lending money or creating business ventures, have a higher value than simple

[79] 1914 President Report Hebrew Educational Socety, HES papers (slide 38)
[80] Mishneh Torah, Matanot Anim 10:7

giving. According to the Talmud in tractate Shabbat: "The person who lends money (to a poor person) is greater than the person who gives charity; and he who forms a partnership is greater than all."[81]

Furthermore, the Talmud also notes that even words can be worth more than a simple donation of money. "R. Isaac said: Anyone who gives a coin to a poor man is blessed with six blessings, but one who encourages him with words is blessed with eleven."[82] A later rabbinic commentary, the *Sefer Ha Chinuch*, echoes the sentiment of the Talmud by noting: "The mitzvah is to lend money to the poor, as much as you are capable according to the need in order that this person will be relieved and to ease their sighing. This mitzvah of lending is stronger and more obligatory than the mitzvah to give charity."[83]

Following the model that lending has greater value than a simple donation, the ventures of the HES would adhere to many of the principles of tzedakah as outlined in the Talmud. The HES did not serve as place for emergency relief, rather it served as place for poorer individuals to develop life skills designed to fully lift them out of poverty. Furthermore, the HES functioned as a location where extra classes, lessons and lectures could serve as encouraging words to allow an individual the necessary means to better himself.

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[81] Shabbat 61a
[82] Baba Batra 9b
[83] Sefer Ha Chinuch, Mitzvah 66

Even the leisure activities of the Society were seen as an extension of the communal responsibility of tzedakah. The HES saw a parallel between an individual's leisure life and his or her ability to find a job. Rabbi Alter Landesman believed that a person who felt as if he or she was a part of a community would be better prepared for employment. "The individual who loses his introspective attitude and becomes part of a class or a group, is in a much better frame of mind to interview an employer than when he comes more timidly direct from solitary room or home."[84] If, as Maimonides' ladder asserts, providing a person an opportunity to support oneself so he can be self-sufficient is the highest level of tzedakah, then the HES embodied that on almost every level – even recognizing the power of a gymnasium and music classes in that process. Rabbi Landesman addressed the board of the HES in 1931 during the heart of the Depression:

> In these trying times through which we are passing, there are many people that question whether there is any obligation resting on the community to provide for the normal human being who is not mentally, physically, spiritually or socially handicapped. To the members of our board, who because of their affiliation and active interest in such an institution as the Hebrew Educational Society represents, the Superintendent feels that it is unnecessary to point out the fallacy of such thinking.[85]

Along with varying levels of tzedakah, Jewish texts also discuss different responsibilities and nuances of giving. For instance, rabbinic texts mandate that all persons are required to give tzedakah; even recipients of tzedakah are required

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[84] 1931 Superintendent Report Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers (slide 21)

[85] 1931 Superintendent Report Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers (slide 21)

to give tzedakah. The Talmud in Gittin 7b notes: "Even a poor person who receives tzedakah must give from what he receives."[86] This mentality highlights the notion that tzedakah cannot be viewed as optional and that all are mandated to contribute. While it did not force tzedakah on individuals, the HES embodied this rabbinic charge, by creating different pathways for the giving of tzedakah within the institution. The Society had numerous volunteer opportunities to donate skills and time as well as different drives to contribute financially to organizations including "United Jewish Appeal and other tzedakah efforts."[87]

Maimonides, along with emphasizing the value of giving tzedakah, also noted the inherent merit people receive from giving. Mishneh Torah instructs: "A person has never become poor from giving tzedakah and there is no bad aspect to it, and tzedakah has never brought harm as it says, and the act of tzedakah is peaceful."[88] The HES also committed to giving tzedakah for causes outside of their community. In the early 1920s, a campaign existed among the schools at the HES to raise money for *Keren Hayesod*, (The United Palestine Appeal). The March 1923 minutes speak proudly of the efforts of the school children; "They succeeded in collecting thirty dollars which they presented to the *Keren Hayesod* at the Weitzman reception which was held in Brownsville. Thus do our children

[86] Gittin 7b
[87] Landesman, 198
[88] Mishneh Torah, Matanot Anim 10:2

learn the art of giving."[89] The fact that the HES promoted the value of giving as linked to efforts to secure a state in Palestine is especially significant. Not only is it representative of the Zionist presence in 1920s Brownsville, but it also embraces the Talmud's charge that "all Israel are responsible for one another."[90]

Certainly not every member of the HES required tzedakah. Despite the remarkably poor demographics of Brownsville, there were some individuals at the HES who did not rely on the HES for tzedakah. Even though most of the programming was subsidized, fees and memberships were collected from those who could afford to pay. These fees helped finance the religious school, the gymnasium, the summer camp and other programs. The HES never became an organization only for poor people; it existed as a staple of the Brownsville community for all Jews regardless of wealth.

In this manner, the HES followed the teachings of another section of the Talmud that differentiates between acts of kindness and acts of tzedakah. The Talmud stresses that acts of kindness (*gemilut chasidim*) are in certain instances worthier than tzedakah, because all individuals can benefit from acts of kindness – not just poor ones. At the HES, individuals of all ages were beneficiaries of the acts of kindness that occurred at the Society. Ranging from lectures, to senior clubs, to nursery schools, to basketball teams the HES never functioned as a gathering

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[89] 1923 Hebrew Educational Society Minutes, HES papers. - Chaim Weitzman came to Brownsville in 1923 to raise money for Palestine. Bernhard Bloch was the representative to greet him during his visit.
[90] Shavuot 39a

house for the poor. Moreover, by recognizing the inherent value of *gemilut chasidim,* support to the HES could be made not just via funds but also through volunteerism and other forms of service. Tractate Sukkah 49b reads: "Our Sages taught: *gemilut chasidim* (acts of loving kindness) is greater than tzedakah in three ways: Acts of tzedakah involve only one's money – *gemilut chasadim* can involve both money or one's personal service. Tzedakah can be given only to the poor – *gemilut chasadim* can be done both for the rich and for the poor..."[91]

Following this example, the fact that the 1931 minutes of the HES stress the "art of giving" is noteworthy. The HES helped create a culture of *gemilut chasidim* and tzedakah, volunteerism and giving, which influenced many of the individuals who attended the Society in its first decades. The HES committed itself to shaping lives and providing means for its members to develop as citizens and rise out of poverty. In subsequent generations many HES alumni responded by giving back to the HES and other worthy organizations, either through time or philanthropy. This commitment ensured that the HES would continue to serve its mission to later generations. One area where this proved most evident occurred with the creation of the HES Alumni Association in the 1920s.

In 1931 Dr. Isidore Kayfetz, an HES alumnus, authored an editorial in the *Kings County Observer* about the HES Alumni Association.

[91] Sukkah 49b

> When they were boys, they all lived in Brownsville, then a small provincial community. Their parents were poor, their homes were bare, cheerless and often miserable. There was only one community center where these boys could meet, form friendships, develop their dormant social instincts, exercise and strengthen their powers, physical mental and moral, and that place was the Hebrew Education Society....
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> These 'Old Timers' spoke with profound envy of their youthful reminiscences, the friendships, associations the inspirations and guidance provided by the Hebrew Educational Society that formed their characters – Each one felt that he owed the institution a great moral debt. Each one pledged himself to do everything in his power to pay this obligation by taking an interest in the work of this noble institution....[92]

The pattern of individuals who were raised at the HES later becoming financiers or volunteers of the Society, also existed outside of the Alumni Association. As the HES constituency moved to second generation Americans and as original board members died or left the organization, former members of the HES, including those who had pulled themselves out of poverty, returned to assist the Society. By the 1930s and 1940s, board members varied between descendants of the German founders and Eastern European immigrants.

While no specific percentages are given, Daniel Soyer notes, "the leading congregation for HES directors was now the Brooklyn Jewish Center an elite Conservative synagogue founded in Crown Heights in 1918."[93] Samuel Telsey, raised in Brownsville, became The HES' president in 1941, 40 years after he

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[92] The Alumni Association of the Hebrew Educational Society (undated), HES papers (slide 34)
[93] Soyer, 43

taught in the Sabbath School. "Telsey's successor in 1945, Nat Bass, was the first who had been 'one of the boys' who had grown up under the influence of the Hebrew Educational Society."[94] Fifteen years earlier, Bernhard Bloch had nominated Nat Bass of 1363 East 24th Street in Brooklyn to serve on the board.[95] Countless others who attended the HES in the early years later volunteered for, contributed to or financed the institution.

In the same manner that the HES promoted and advanced a recurring style of tzedakah and philanthropy, classic Jewish texts also recognize the cyclical nature of tzedakah. In the Talmud, tzedakah is considered the ultimate mitzvah, more important than all the others put together.[96] One of the reasons that the rabbis emphasize tzedakah is in recognition that poverty has the ability to make revolutions and misfortune could fall upon subsequent generations of one's own family.

Tractate Shabbat contains an interesting passage about *gal-gal*, a cyclical force that surrounds the world. The Talmud reads: R. Hiyya said to his wife: 'When a poor man comes, be quick to offer him bread, so that others may be quick to offer it to your children.' She said, 'You are cursing them (our children)' He replied, 'It is written in the Torah: 'because of (*biglal*) this thing', as the School of R. Ishmael

[94] Soyer, 206
[95] December 1930, Hebrew Educational Society Minutes, HES papers
[96] Bava Batra, 9a

taught: It is a wheel (*gal-gal*) that revolves in the world.'"[97] Even though this example takes a pessimistic tone on the plight of future generations, it does highlight the notion of responsibility for other generations.

The HES members who later supported the organization acted in recognition of this cyclical nature, and just as others provided on their behalf, they too acted on behalf of subsequent generations. They embodied an earlier teaching from the same section of tractate Shabbat in which R. Shimon ben Elazar instructs: "Do (tzedakah) while you find who to give to and have what to give and while it is in your power."[98] Following this example, Rabbi Landesman noted the significant contribution of many alumni, who gave what they had and when it was in their power. The Hebrew Educational Society's "faith in the continued value of its work comes in some measure from the large number of alumni who have grown up in Brownsville and have since spread over the country. Many of them have made valuable contributions in various fields of endeavor. Many of them have repaid the community manifold for what they have received."[99]

Despite the remarkable commitment to tzedakah that those at the HES demonstrated, it is important to note that some of the original motivations for sustaining the HES were also self-serving. One of the early leaders of the HES Women's Auxiliary noted: "If we do not take care of these unfortunate

[97] Shabbat 151b,
[98] Shabbat 151b
[99] Landesman, 200

immigrants, if we do not try to uplift them, then as sure as fate our own children, or children's children, will pay the penalty."[100] Certainly the German founders envisioned the society molding Brownsville Jews in a manner geared towards socializing and Americanizing the new immigrant. They believed they knew what was best for the neighborhood Jew and they viewed their altruism through this lens.

After the first two decades this mentality faded from the leadership of the Society. By the 1920s, a shift away from the Americanization and socialization nature of the HES had occurred. The HES no longer uniquely focused on the acculturation of the immigrant, but also centered on creating a vibrant Jewish neighborhood center for the poor Brownsville Jews. There were several reasons for this change, including the change of immigration laws by the United States that stopped the mass Easter European immigration to the United States; the rise in prominence of second generation Brownsville Jews, many of whom were reared at the HES, in the teaching and leadership roles at the Society; the decreased financial presence of the Baron de Hirsch Fund at the HES;[101] and, finally, the hiring of Rabbi Alter Landesman as Superintendent of the HES in 1922, who noted the institutional culture shift by saying, "the new emphasis (of the HES) was to work with people rather than for people." [102]

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[100] Soyer, 191
[101] Joseph, 270
[102] Landesman, 190

By the 1920s this dual American and Jewish commitment resonated throughout the institution. All HES activities

> aimed to foster a true devotion to ideals of American democracy, to train the young Jew in the faith of his fathers, to satisfy the needs of social and physical recreation under the cheerful influence of a good environment, to offer numerous opportunities for intellectual improvement, and to promote the best interest of the great Jewish family in whose midst it dwells, so that the Jewish name may be preserved with dignity and honor.[103]

Throughout its existence in Brownsville, the HES desired to foster a better and fuller life for the poor Jews of the neighborhood. The Society's original quest for Americanization and socialization should read as a desire to provide avenues for Jews to succeed. The individuals who donated time and money to the HES were motivated by an inherent responsibility to the poor Jews in their community. They believed that they played a part in creating an institution that enabled a better life for poor Jews of Brownsville. They were propelled by their Judaism to provide for others. The 1914 annual report notes, "Most of all we seek to foster the Jewish consciousness. We are Jews, and nothing that is Jewish is alien to us."[104] This push modeled the ultimate level of tzedakah, where the poor no longer depended on the services of the organization. The HES epitomized the verse in Leviticus that Maimonides cites in Mishneh Torah: "With reference to such aid, it is said, 'You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you.'"[105]

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[103] Soyer, 204
[104] 1914 Hebrew Educational Society Annual Report, HES papers (slide 41)
[105] Mishen Torah, Matanot Anim 10:7

Chapter Five: Jewish Education

ב. כשם שחייב אדם ללמד את בנו כך הוא חייב ללמד את בן בנו שנאמר והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך ולא בנו ובן בנו בלבד אלא מצוה על כל חכם וחכם מישראל ללמד את כל התלמידים אף על פי שאינן בניו

Just as a person is obligated to teach his child, so, too is he obligated to teach his grandchildren, as Deuteronomy 4:9 commands: "And you shall teach them to your sons and your grandsons." Furthermore (this claim is not confined) to one's children and grandchildren alone. Rather it is a mitzvah for each and every wise man to teach all students, even though they are not his children ..." (Mishneh Torah, Talmud Torah 1:2)

The commitment to education and learning has always been one of the central tenants of Judaism. Education, in a variety of different forms, existed as one of the driving forces of the HES from the minute the Society opened in 1899. The tireless commitment to education is one of the primary factors connecting the neighborhood house movement to different eras of Jewish history, each rooted in the sacred words of Deuteronomy chapter 6, "you shall teach them faithfully to your children."

Countless rabbinic texts highlight the importance of Torah learning. The study of Torah is one of the highest commandments of Judaism. Throughout Jewish history communities and towns would dedicate funds and resources towards the study of Torah. Indeed, across medieval Europe, certain communities became known specifically for their scholarship. Even though it should probably be interpreted figuratively, according to the law, a town that does not commit itself towards education deserved to be annihilated. "If a village does not have children who study Torah, its populace is placed under a ban of ostracism until

they employ teachers for the children. If they do not employ teachers, the village (deserves to be) destroyed, since the world exists only by virtue of the breath coming from the mouths of children who study Torah."[106]

The value of Torah learning in rabbinic texts cannot be understated. Tractate Shabbat of the Talmud notes that Torah classes for children are not even canceled to build the Temple in Jerusalem.[107] Much of *Pirkei Avot* (the ethics of the ancestors) is focused on the need for study, including in 2:4 where Hillel says: "Do not say I will study when I have the time, because you may never have it."[108] Consistently, throughout rabbinic texts, one who makes time to study is praised while one who negates study is shunned.

Certainly, the Hebrew Educational Society had a broader scope to the institution than simply study and learning. It existed as a neighborhood center devoted to a variety of projects and programs beyond learning. The various activities mentioned in the 1922 superintendent's report include: gymnasium, worship, scouting, arts/crafts, dancing, social work and a variety of other programming. There is no doubt that for some, the HES existed without any educational framework.

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[106] Mishneh Torah, Talmud Torah 2:1
[107] Shabbat 119b
[108] Pireki Avot 2:4

Nevertheless, educational programming and opportunities were central and omnipresent at the HES. The original motivations of the Society were to serve as "an educational center for the adjustment of the immigrant to the New World." The name of the Society itself highlights the underlying goal of the institution, with activities focused "on the education and Americanization of the immigrant."[109] Similar institutions with parallel focuses including the Educational Alliance (Manhattan), the Hartford Hebrew Association, and The Hebrew Education Society (Philadelphia) existed in most major American cities.

The founders emphasized education as the appropriate gateway for the new immigrant. The Society focused on a two-pronged approach towards education. First and foremost, much of the instruction centered on being American; English classes were offered as well as lessons in citizenship and Americanization. Other courses in regents, sewing, and manual training were offered with the express purpose to "cultivate the traits and virtues that tend to make men and women worthy members of the community."[110] Even the music and physical education programs that were run out of the Society were rooted in this idea, Americanization through education.

On the other hand education took on a uniquely Jewish focus. The HES housed both a Sabbath School and weekday religious school. The Society offered lectures and courses on various Jewish topics including "elementary Hebrew,

[109] Landesman, 179
[110] 1919 Hebrew Educational Society Dinner Booklet, HES papers (slide 59)

advanced Hebrew, Talmud, Bible reading, fundamentals of Judaism, customs and contributions to civilization, and great movements of history." These programs were the hub of Jewish life at the HES and attracted thousands of people.[111] According to the 1923 "estimated budget" more funds were directed to educational activities and programming than any other aspect of the HES, except for building and house upkeep.[112]

The Hebrew Educational Society also tirelessly worked to advance educational opportunities outside of the institution's walls. Beginning in 1902, the New York City Board of Education rented space from the HES to create a new kindergarten in the neighborhood. The HES opened the first nursery school in Brownsville and advocated politically for the construction of a new public high school in the neighborhood. Based on a perceived community need, one of the earliest programs at the HES included the opening of a neighborhood library, which eventually became the Brooklyn Public Library's Brownsville branch. An 1908 article by the head Brownsville librarian reads: "Some three years ago the Brooklyn Public Library established a branch in Brownsville, the Ghetto district of Brooklyn, N.Y. by taking over a small library that had been maintained by the Hebrew Educational Society.... The library is interesting therefore, not for the

[111] Abelow, 313
[112] 1923 Hebrew Educational Society Estimated Budget, HES papers (slide 12)

work it has yet been able to do, but for its unique district and peculiar clientele."[113]

The fact that early funds from the Hebrew Educational Society went towards donating books and creating a library has precedent in rabbinic texts. Rabbinic literature is filled with lengthy discussions about the appropriate usage of tzedakah monies. There are many different disputes about how tithed *(maaser)* money can and cannot be used. One of the debates centers on whether money allocated for tzedakah can be used in a manner that is not directly given to the poor. Some rabbis maintain that *maaser* can only be used for direct giving to the poor. Rabbi Moses Isserles writes: "One cannot use his *maaser* for a *mitzvah* like buying candles for the synagogue or for any other *mitzvah;* he must only give it to the poor."[114]

However, there are other rulings that determine it is appropriate to use tzedakah for other activities including the giving and lending of books. In these instances, the action of the Hebrew Educational Society in creating a library as an act of tzedakah would certainly follow rabbinic doctrine. Rabbi Menachem Ha'me'ili responded to the same question as Isserles and answered:

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[113] Solis-Cohen, Leon. (1908) "Library Work in the Brooklyn Ghetto." *The Library Journal* Volume 33 Number 12 p. 485 (According to the Brooklyn Public Library, the Brownsville branch opened in 1905 with a donation of 7,000 books from the HES)

[114] *Yoreh De'ah* 249:1 according to *Minhagei Maharil*

> About your question whether you can buy books from (money which you have set aside) for *maaser,* this is what I usually rule when people ask: Any *mitzvah* which he has the opportunity to do... as well as to buy books in order to study from them and to lend them to others to learn from them - if he does not have the means and he would not do that *mitzvah*, he can use the *maaser.*[115]

The HES library proved to be one of the most significant functions of the early years of the HES. It was so important that "among the first paid employees of the society was the librarian, Miss Minnie Shomer."[116] The emphasis on creating appropriate space for study and learning, especially through the vehicle of the early library, demonstrates the use of tzedakah for educational endeavors.

From the very beginning, the Hebrew Educational Society stressed an unending commitment to providing the neighborhood's children with appropriate access to education and learning. The leaders of the early organization always recognized the importance of providing for poor children. Even during the Great Depression, the HES remained tirelessly committed to the educational programs and classes it offered. Rabbi Landesman addressed the board of the HES on New Years Day in 1931: "It is true that all of us are taxed, now more than ever before to feed the hungry, and to care for the sick, the weak and the aged, yet we must

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[115] Rabbi Menachem Ha'me'ili of Meerseberg No. 459, in *Drisha* on *Yoreh De'ah.* 249

[116] Landesman, 179

realize that at no time was it more necessary than now for community centers to do their part at this emergency time sustaining the morale of young people."[117]

Rabbi Landesman's warning against the hard times of the era detracting from the commitment to young people echoes different Jewish sources. The Babylonian Talmud, in tractate Nedarim, cautions Jewish leaders on neglecting the children of the poor, because according to the Talmud, "for from them will come forth Torah."[118] The Shulchan Aruch ascribes providing options for the poor to study torah as one of the highest level of Jewish giving, even higher than contributing to a synagogue. In more than one instance, the text stresses communal responsibility in providing appropriate venues for poor children to study. "There is an opinion that states that the commandment to support the synagogue is preferable to the commandment concerning tzedakah, and the commandments of tzedakah for children to study Torah or for poor who are infirm is preferable to the commandment to support the synagogue.[119]

In his address to the directors of the Hebrew Educational Society, during the midst of the Great Depression, Rabbi Landesman linked the tough times of the early 1930s to the unwavering commitment demonstrated by Jewish communities throughout history to provide avenues for torah study. He elaborated on the role of the HES during the financial crisis with a series of rhetorical questions. "And

[117] 1931 Superintendent Report Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers (slide 21)
[118] Nedarim, 81a
[119] Yoreh Deah, 217

what of the children who are innocent of all these economic cycles? ... Shall we fail them now and then reap in years to come a crop of delinquents or other types of mentally, spiritually, socially crippled individuals?" Rabbi Landesman answered his own questions by demonstrating that Jews and certainly the ones of Brownsville had always provided for their institutes of Jewish education.

> "To the masses of the Jewish people, such a question never occurred. In the midst of the greatest poverty every sacrifice was made to send the child to the Talmud Torah, and to maintain all institutions dedicated to the higher aims of life. And to the credit of these people, it must be stated that even with the changes which have taken place in their lives under the influence of the American environment, they still cling to these principles.[120]

The underlying principle, as demonstrated by the HES' commitment to learning and education, is that providing for and educating children took on a communal responsibility. The fact that the HES contributed its efforts and money to education speaks to the immense value of Jewish learning. To that degree the HES modeled the charges of the Rabbis. Throughout the great story of the Jewish people, Jewish education always proved paramount – from the words of Hillel to the streets of Brownsville. Certainly the medieval rabbis had a different definition of what constituted Jewish study than the Jews of the neighborhood house. Nevertheless, they both recognized the power and significance of Jewish education in maintaining a community, molding a better Jewish community for the future, and providing meaning in people's lives.

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[120] 1931 Superintendent Report Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers (slide 21)

Rabbi Landesman addressed the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative movement in 1932. In the address he never mentioned the Hebrew Educational Society. However, his words could serve has a testament to the central role of Jewish education throughout the scope of Jewish history.

> As Jews we certainly cannot afford to see our problems of economic distress in a perspective so lop-sided as to contain no real place for the future. We cannot permit Jewish education which alone can make Jewish life significant in the present and give it hope for the future to become the victim. It is the primary need in Jewish life. We must not allow our achievements in modernizing schools, in gaining better teachers, methods, and supervision to be lost. And because the appreciation of the fundamental nature of this problem is not reached through simple emotion it presents a great challenge to the community.[121]

[121] Landesman, Alter F. (1931) *Lessons We Can Learn From the Economic Crisis.* Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly p.197

Conclusion:

The HES spent 66 years in Brownsville before departing for Canarsie in 1965. It was one of the first Jewish organizations to move into the neighborhood and the last to leave. During that time, Brownsville rose from a sleepy little outpost in Brooklyn to the densest Jewish neighborhood in the world. By the mid 1960s Brownsville's Jewish population was almost negligible as the neighborhood demographics shifted to nearly entirely black and Puerto Rican. To a certain degree the HES, in Brownsville, existed as a character in the unfolding drama of American Jewry. Ranging from Eastern European immigration to the Great Depression and from the settlement house movement to Jewish migration out of urban areas, the HES played an active role in the most significant changes in American Jewry of the first half of the 20th Century.

As a case study, the HES is rich with connections to various rabbinic texts and discussions that have helped shape Judaism. Looking at the early years of the Hebrew Educational Society through the lens of selected rabbinic texts allows the rabbis of previous millennia and the members of the HES to interact in the rolling conversation that is Judaism. By bringing them into dialogue with one another, they demonstrate how shared Jewish mores are lived throughout history. They offer insights into what Jewish communities valued, how they interacted with their own and what each community needed to live and be Jewish.

On the occasion of its centennial celebration in 1999, the HES published a journal to honor the institution. A section of that journal offered a tribute to previous generations that had helped sustained the HES for a century. However, the HES story did not begin with a neighborhood house in Brownsville; rather, it is rooted in the entirety of Jewish history. The journal reads, "The Torah lists long life as the reward for the fulfillment of several mitzvot. To honor one's parents is a primary path to achieving long life. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to fulfill this commandment by honoring those parents, teachers and communal leaders who have assisted the HES and Brooklyn's Jewish community over the years."[122]

This project can serve as model for greater Jewish learning and for deeper exploration of Jewish values and texts. It allows one the ability to think differently about the pressing concerns of the Jewish world and raises large questions about the state of modern day Judaism. Do we have the same responsibility to poor Jews in our towns as we do to poor Jews in other parts of the world? Do we prioritize giving to Jewish non-profits as opposed to non-profits with out a Jewish mandate? When we emphasize the importance of Jewish education, what subjects or activities are we including?

These questions speak to who I hope to be as a rabbi. The Jewish conversation on community, social justice and education are ones that remain central to the Jewish world. Hopefully, engaging with the HES and selected rabbinical texts can

[122] 1999 Centennial Celebration Hebrew Educational Society, HES papers (slide 26)

stimulate a larger debate on who we are and what we stand for. A metaphor that I am constantly drawn to sees Judaism as a continuous story. Each chapter of that story is unique and separate, but as with any good book, they are unable to stand alone. Every page is conscious of the sections before it, while at the same time, yearning for future narratives. It is incumbent on all subsequent generations to continue to write chapters in the story.

Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been completed without the help of many different individuals. First and foremost, a massive thank you goes out to everyone that has ever worked, volunteered or been a member of the Hebrew Educational Society. Your dedication to service and justice is extraordinary. Thanks especially to Mark Arje, the executive director of the HES, for allowing me access to the Society's early records.

I am grateful for the hard work of devoted librarians at the Brooklyn Historical Society, the American Jewish Historical Society, the Jewish Theological Seminary and, especially, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Your willingness to kindly guide and assist is greatly appreciated. My wonderful classmates and I procrastinated greatly while you all turned a blind eye.

I appreciate the devoted work of the many terrific faculty members at HUC-JIR who assisted me during my research and writing. Specifically my thesis advisor, Dr. Jonathan Krasner, who nudged, challenged and kindly pushed me towards achievement. It was in his class that I first encountered Kazin's *A Walker in the City*. I am impressed by Dr. Krasner's knowledge of American Jewish History, but am more struck by how he embraces the sacred elements of American Jewry and brings them to life.

My family, by both blood and lore, and friends were great helps to me while writing this thesis. I view this entire project as part of our unfolding family narrative. I have always admired Jay and Jo Ann Kranis, who took three generations of my family on a tour of Brownsville and the HES. Helen Heller, proved to be a wonderful help and terrific storyteller, not only did our visits come with coffee and cake but also spectacular information about the neighborhood, the HES and our family. Her kindness is always appreciated. Jake and Ethan are the best brothers around – caring, thoughtful, silly and wonderful sports fans. They would have been stars on any HES basketball team.

Thanks to my grandmother Audrey for being one of the guiding forces behind this project and instilling a love of all things New York in me. A colossal thank you to my folks, Wendy and Jim, for all the help with reading and discussing the thesis. More important, however, for demonstrating what a caring, vibrant and committed Jewish family looks like. Erin, thanks for your consistent support and love. You constantly make my life a delight! Who would have thought Brownsville would have played such a big part in our future together?

Sources and Bibliography

Other than the Hebrew Educational Society, I relied on two institutions for primary source material: The American Jewish Historical Society and the Brooklyn Historical Society. The Hebrew Educational Society has wonderful archives dating back to 1899. I have attached (in pdf version) photos of most of the Hebrew Educational Society primary sources that I used. These photos cannot be used, for any reason, without consulting the Hebrew Educational Society.

Helen Heller lent me the speeches of Arnold Heller and Mayor Abraham Beame, as well as some of the photos at the end of the document. Erin Gleeson took the modern photographs of Brownsville and the Hebrew Educational Society. Other photographs are part of the Hebrew Educational Society's archives. I relied on the Schechter Institute Responsa page (http://www.schechter.edu/responsaByDate.aspx) and the American Jewish World Service resource page (http://www.on1foot.org/) for most of the Hebrew and Aramaic texts.

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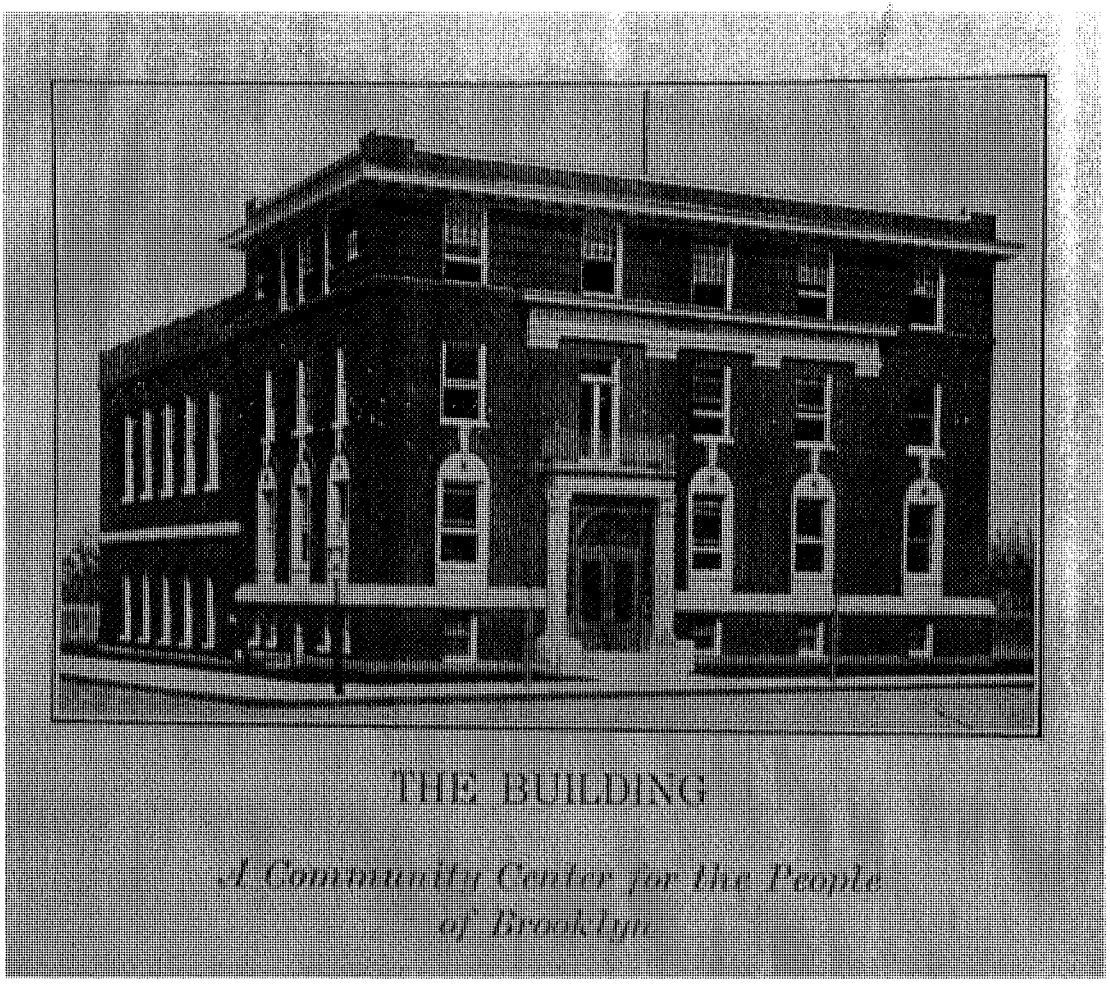
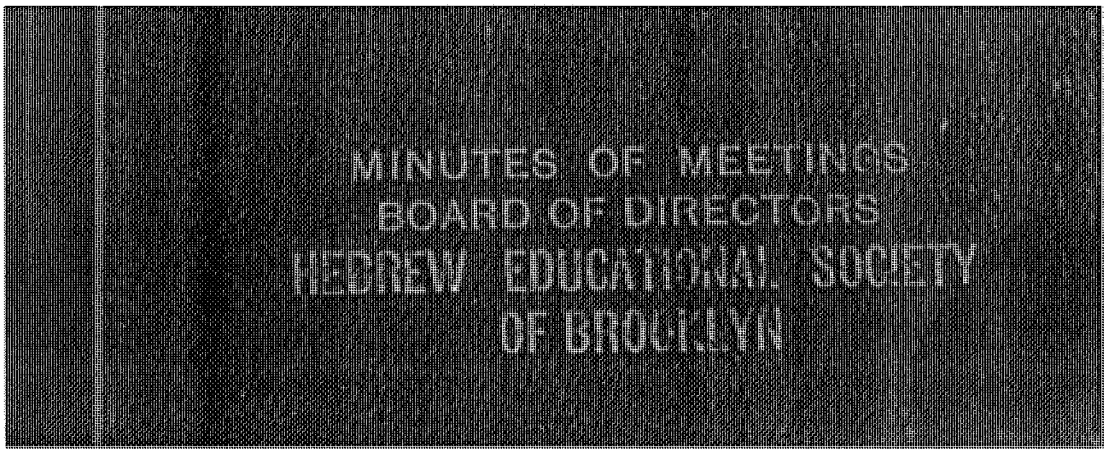
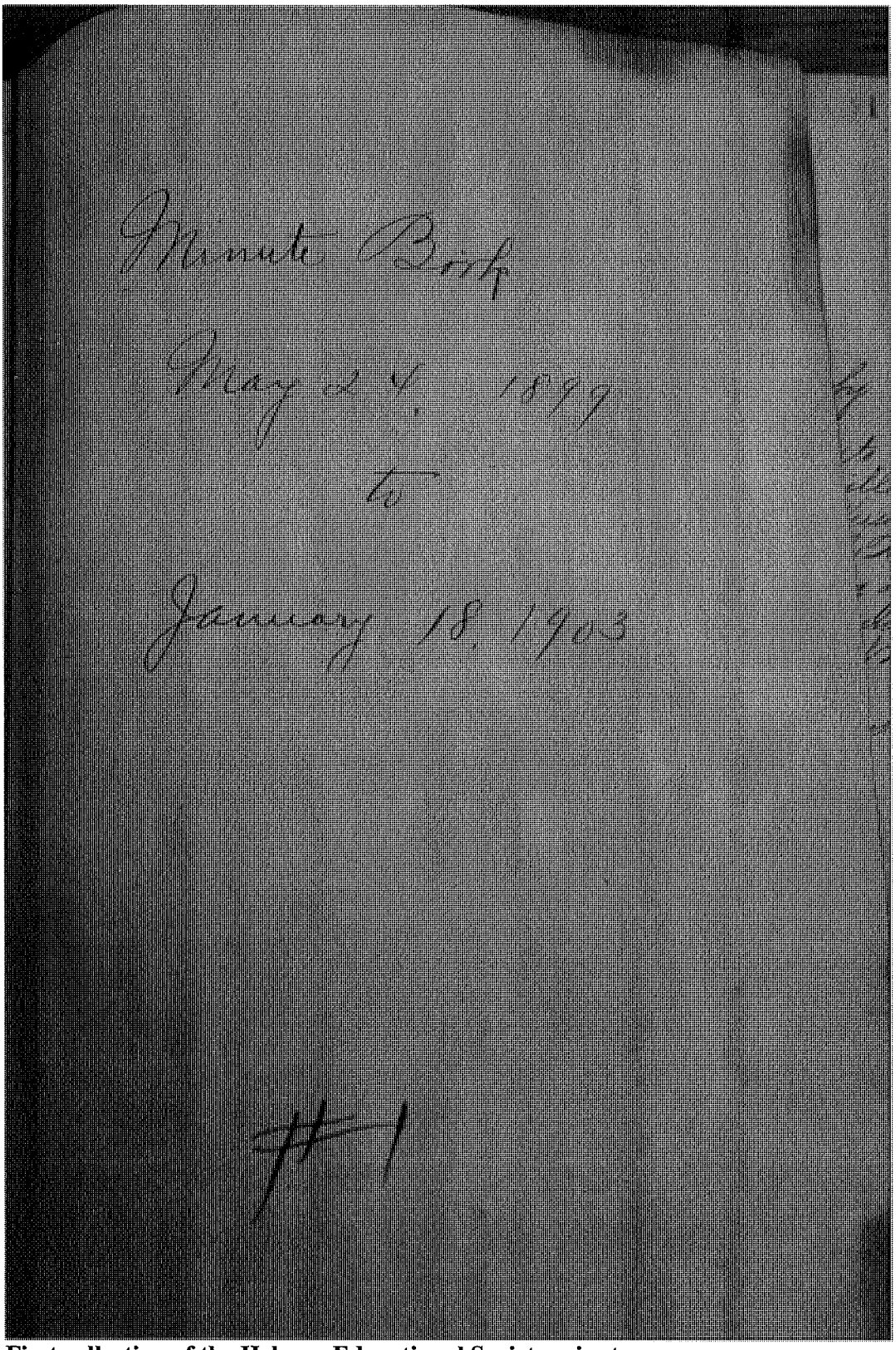


Photograph of the Hebrew Educational Society building. Corner of Sutter and Hopkinson Streets in Brownsville. (Photo date approximately 1915)

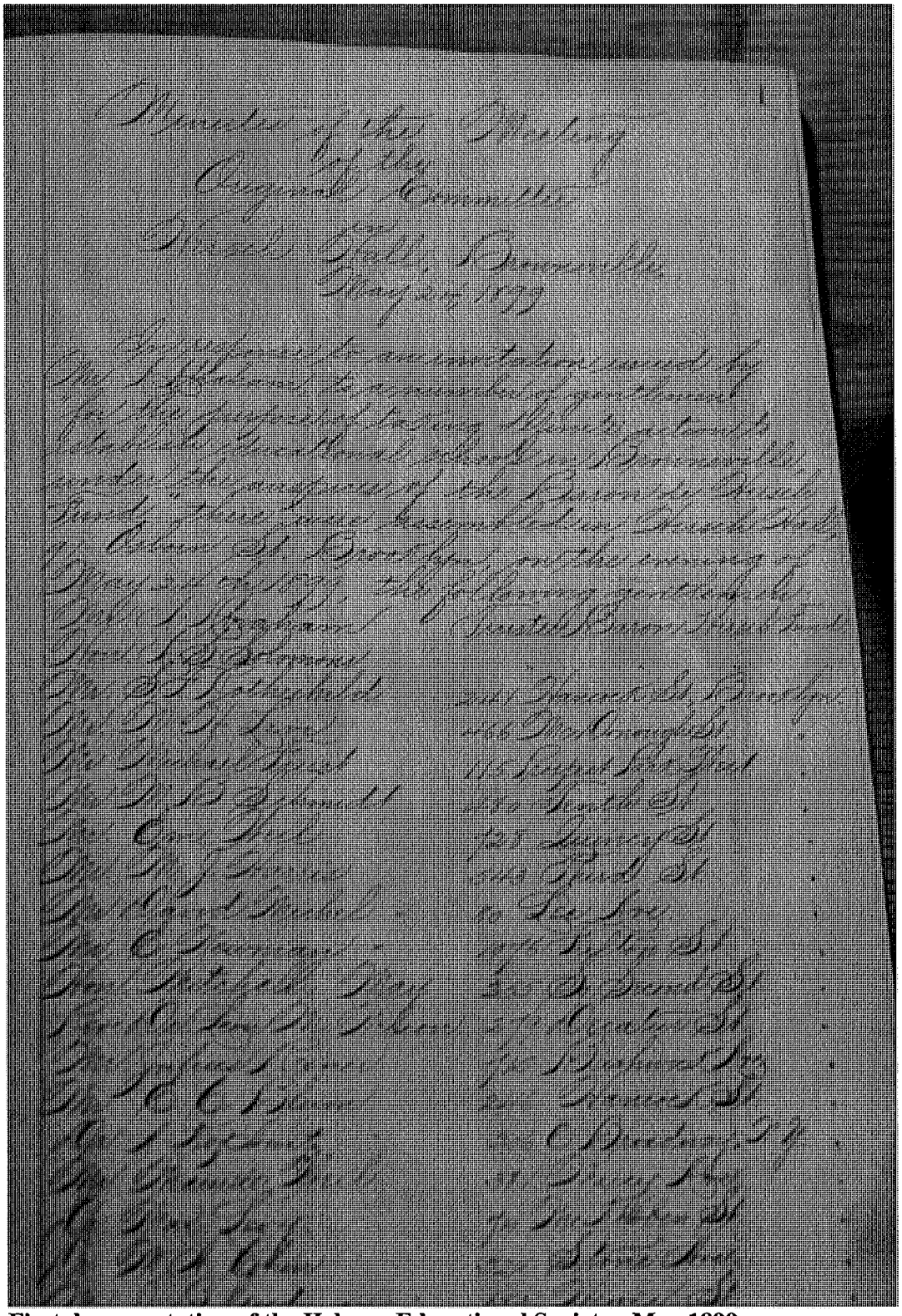
Current photograph of the former Hebrew Educational Society building. Notice the addition on the back of the building. The Building is currently serving as a school sponsored by a local Brownsville church.



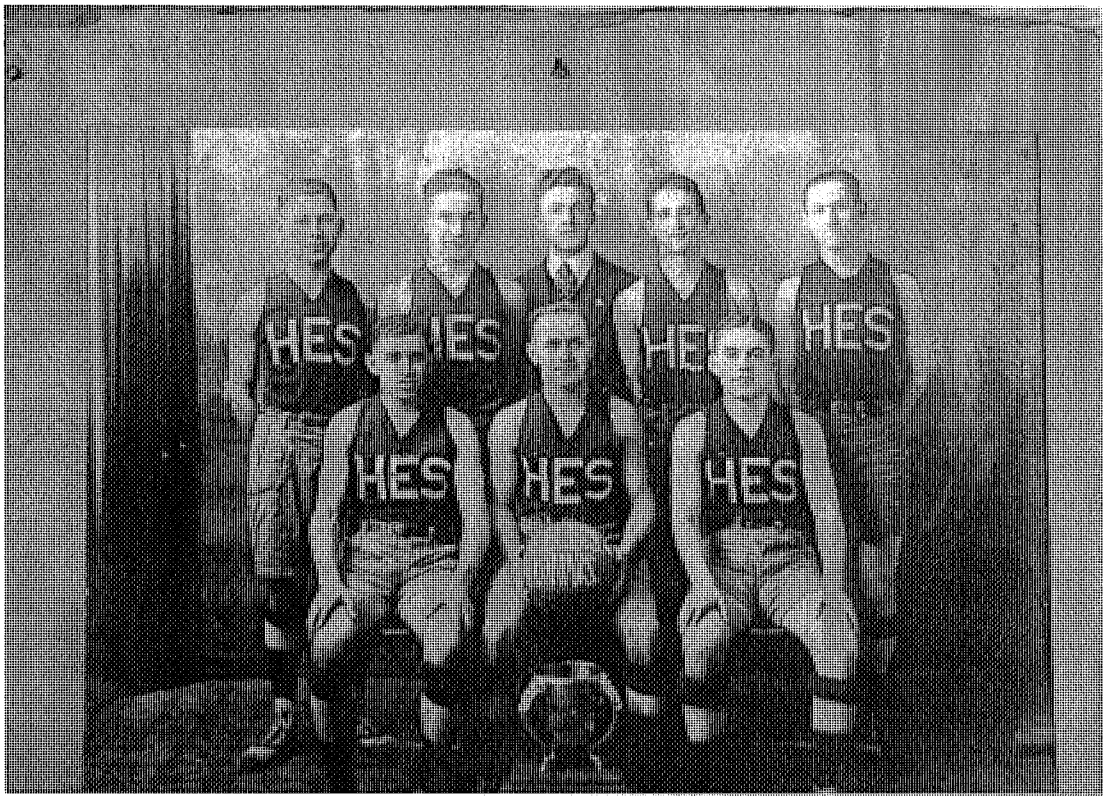
Minute Book for the Hebrew Educational Society



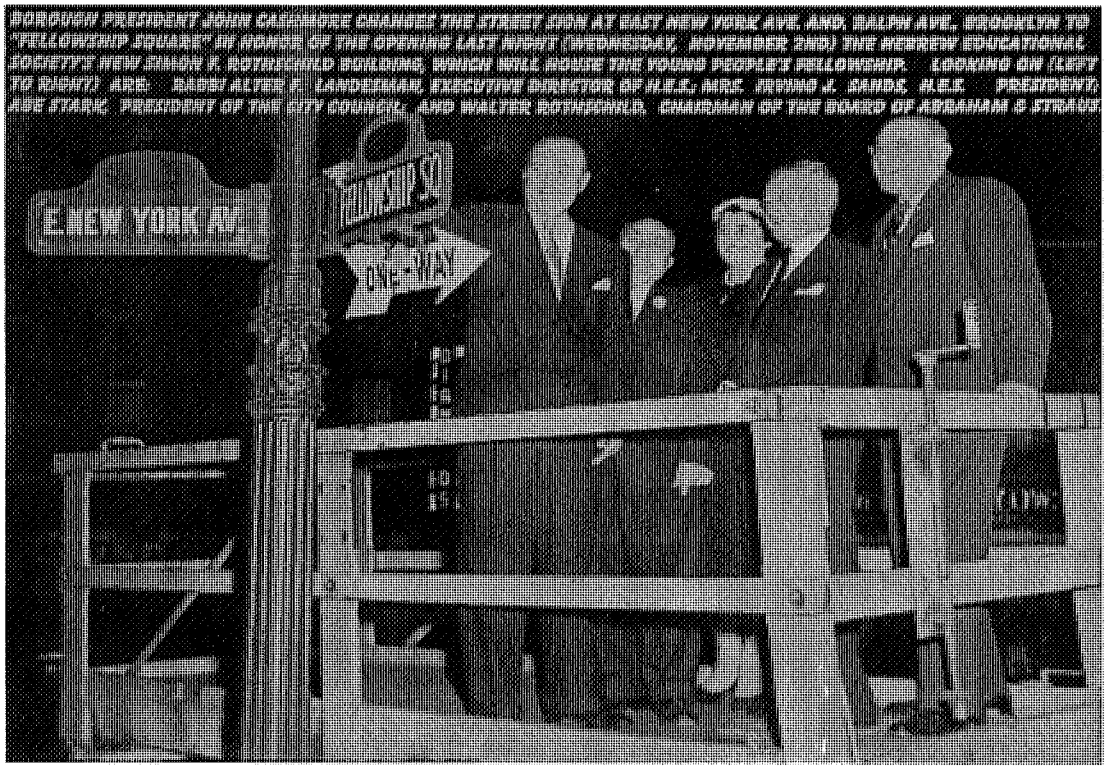
First collection of the Hebrew Educational Society minutes

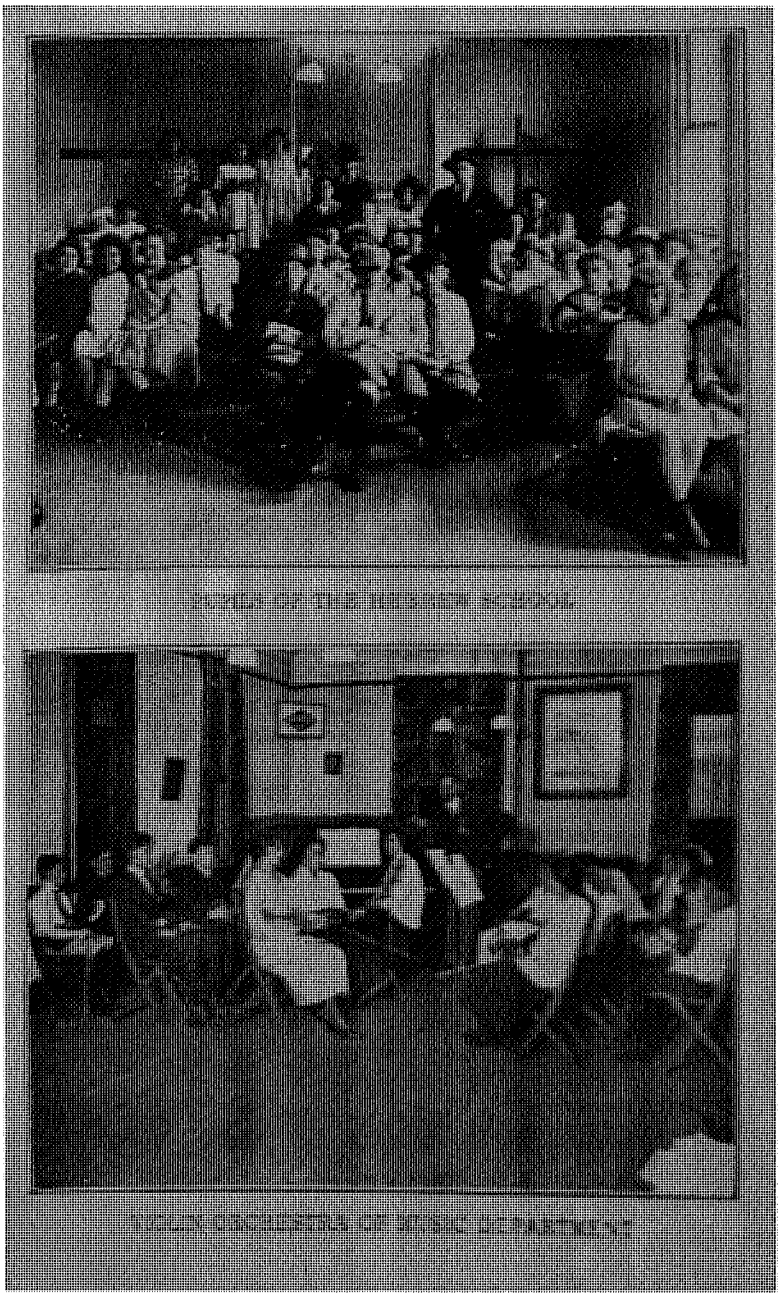


First documentation of the Hebrew Educational Society. May 1899

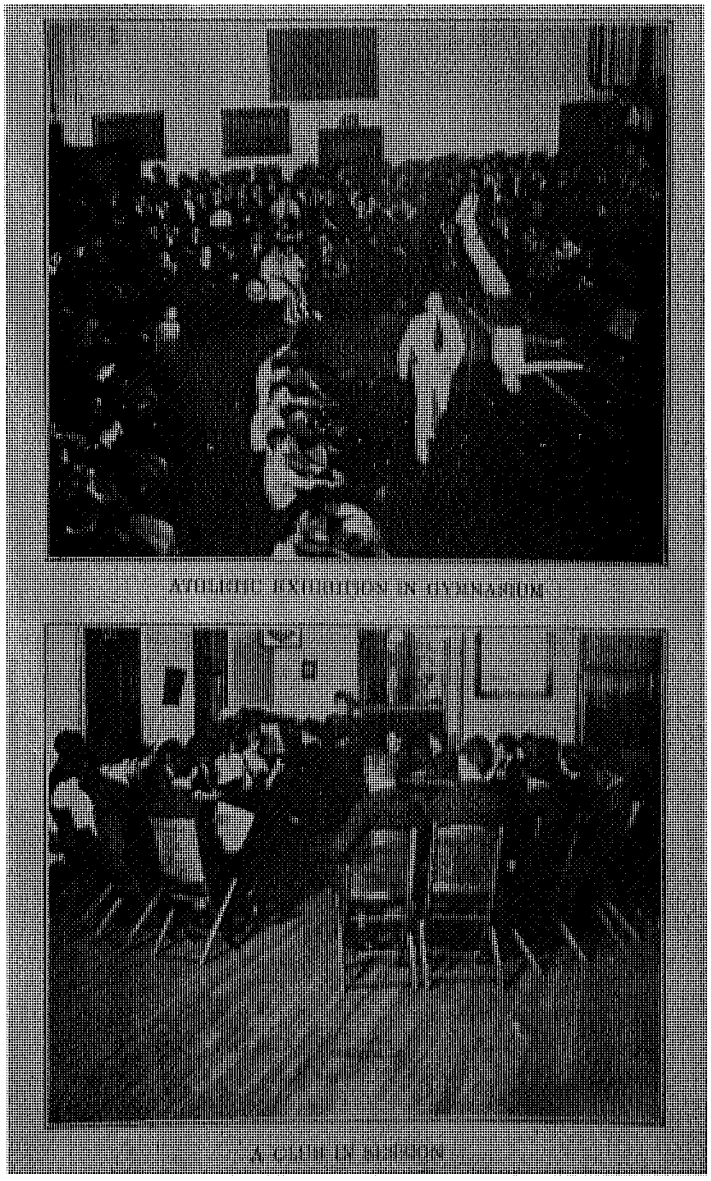


Undated photograph of the Hebrew Educational Society Basketball Team

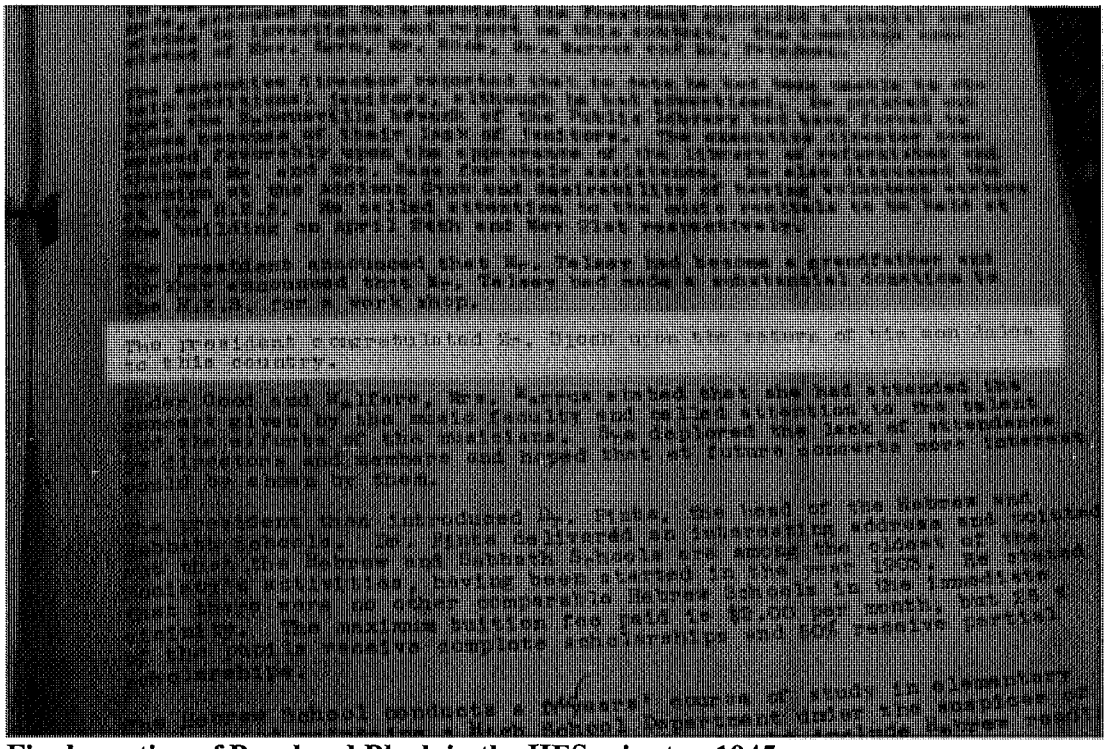




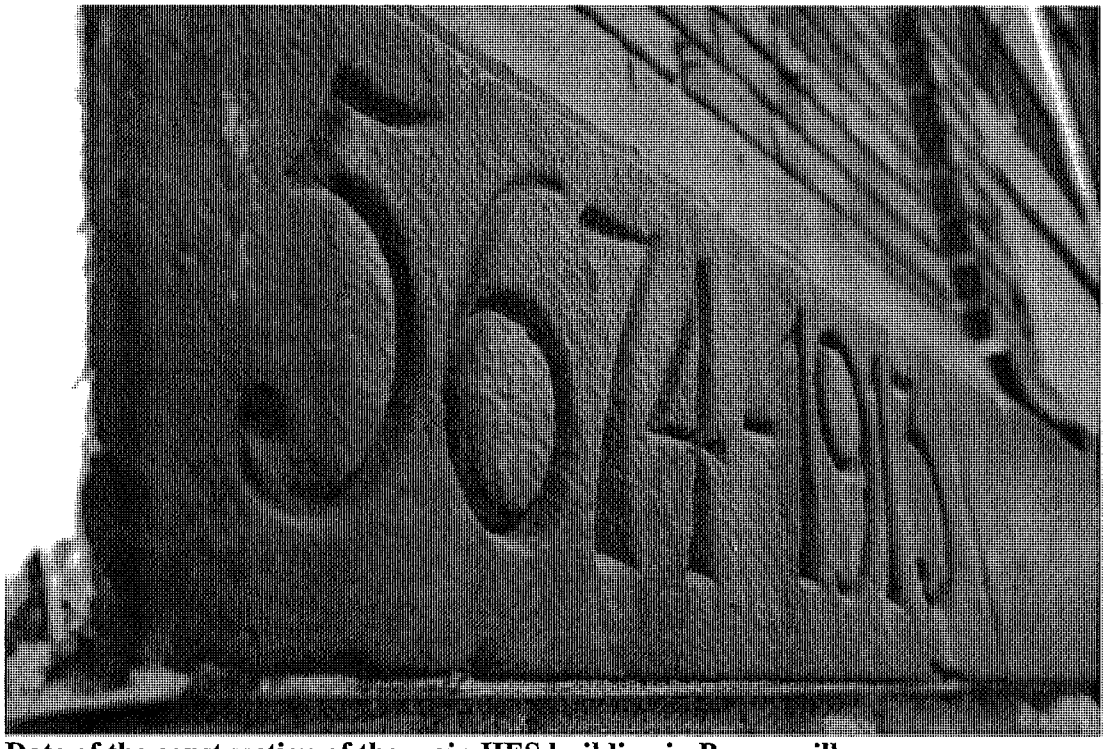
Photographs of the Hebrew Educational Society programs circa 1924



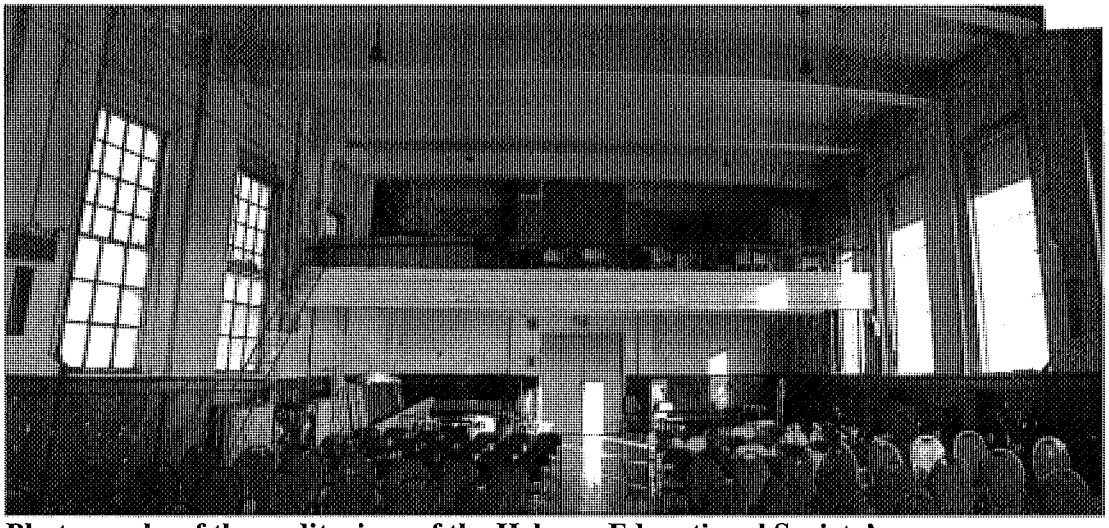
Photographs of the Hebrew Educational Society programs circa 1924



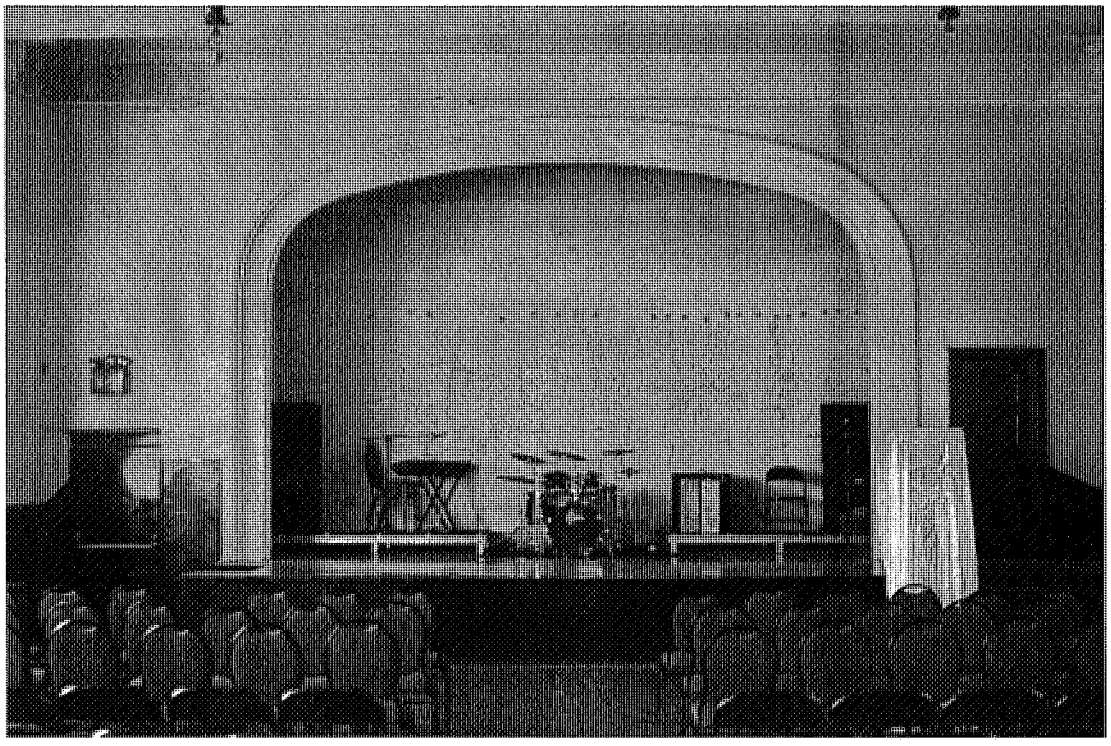
Final mention of Bernhard Bloch in the HES minutes, 1945.



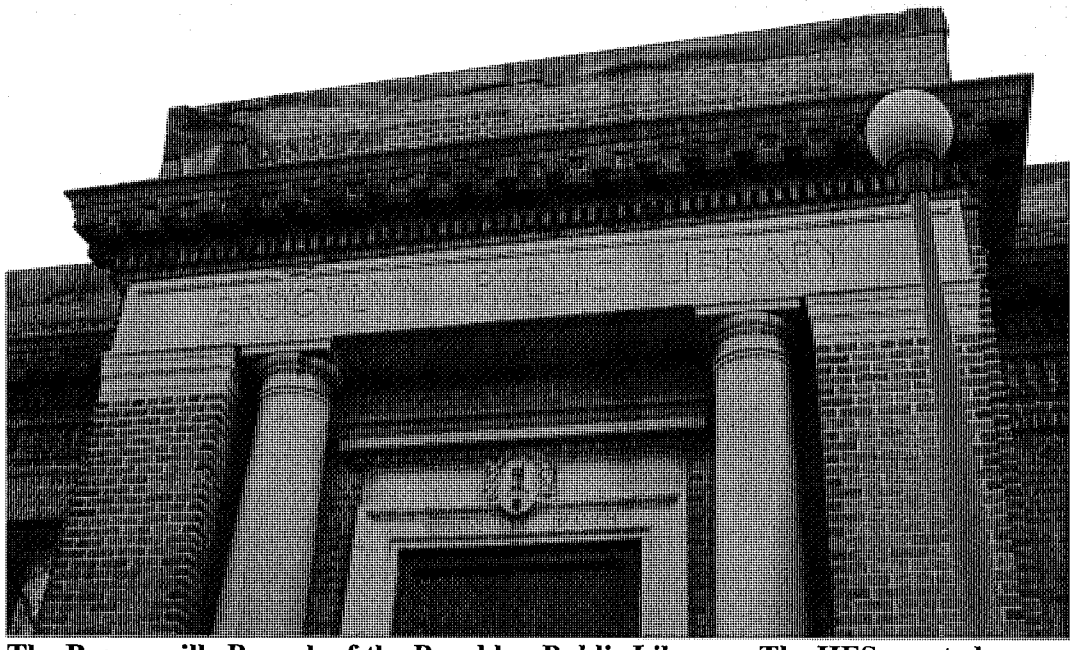
Date of the construction of the main HES building in Brownsville



Photographs of the auditorium of the Hebrew Educational Society's Brownsville Building. The HES left Brownsville in 1965.

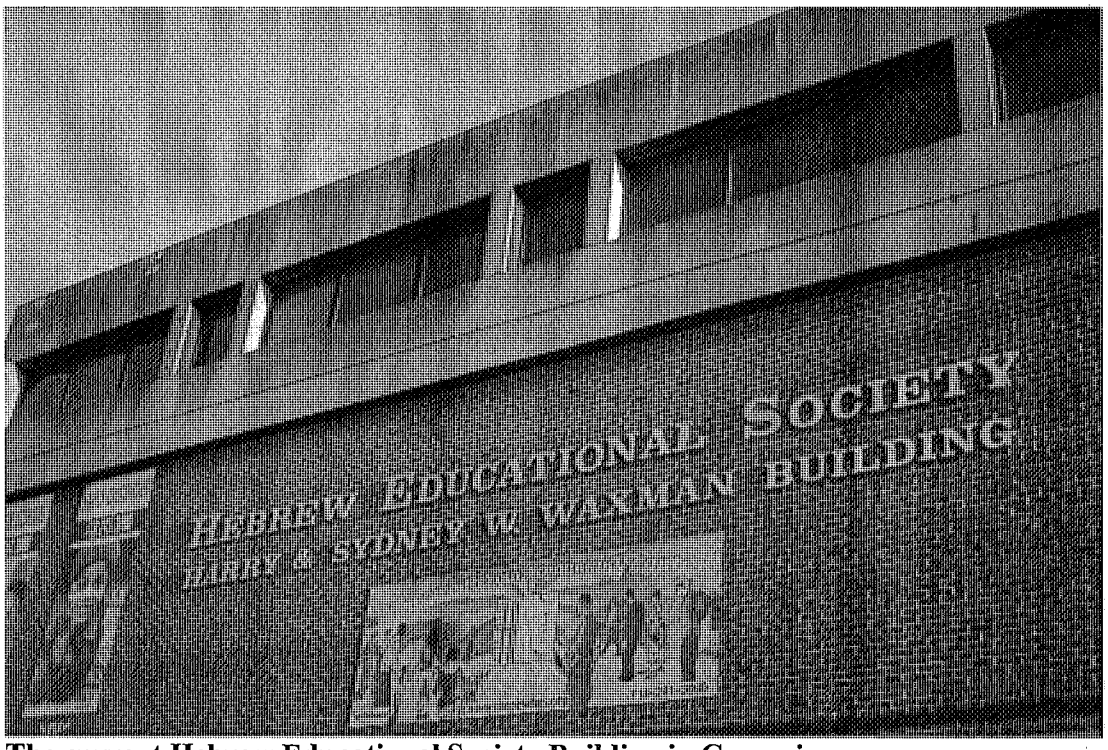


Half a block from the old HES building. The former Hebrew Ladies Day Nursery. Now Bethany Gospel Chapel.

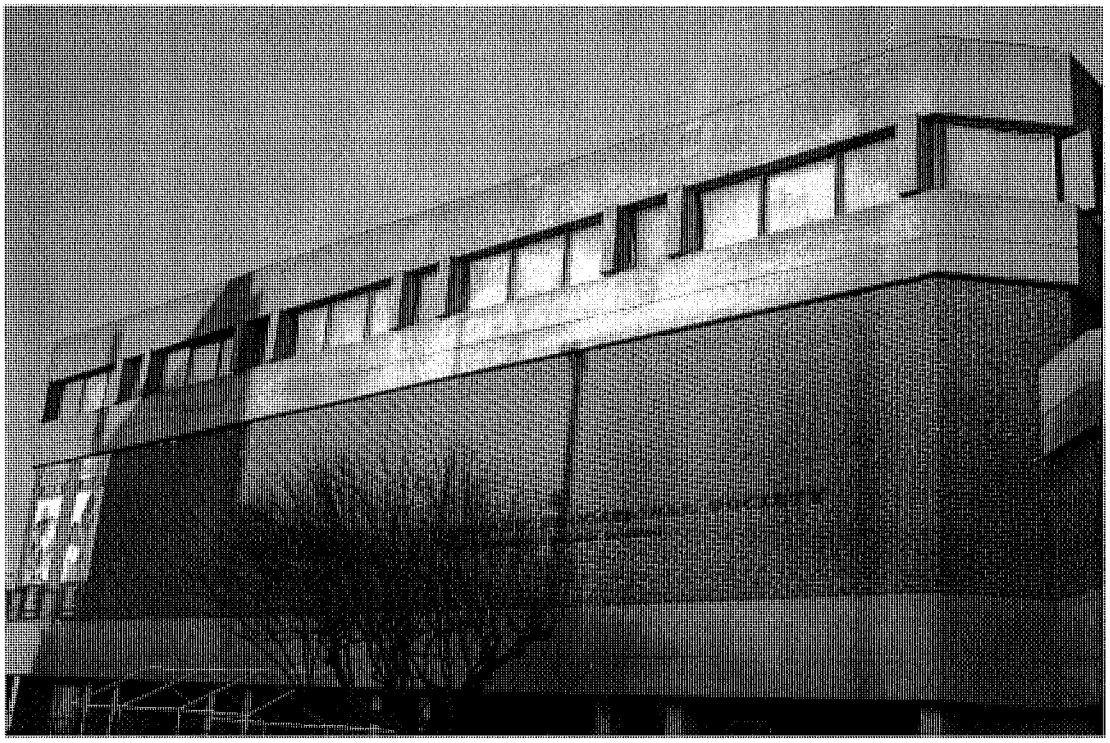


The Brownsville Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. The HES created the first library in the neighborhood. The current building is next to the original HES location

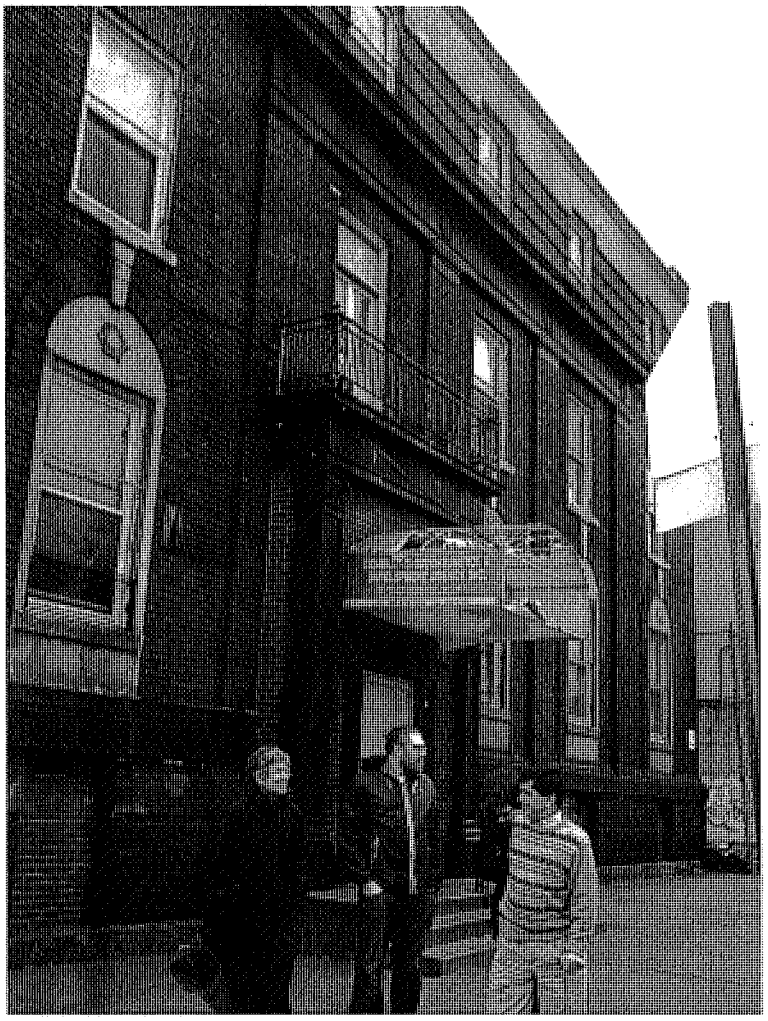
The HES was instrumental in the creation of Betsy Head Playground in Brownsville



The current Hebrew Educational Society Building in Canarsie



The current Hebrew Educational Society Building in Canarsie



Visiting Brownsville and the HES with Wendy Bloch (granddaughter of Bernhard Bloch) and Jay Kranis (original "block boy") March, 2010