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The History of Jewish Education in New Orleans

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DIGEST

New Orleans, Louisiana has one of the nation's oldest Jewish populations. Like most ante-bellum Southern Jewish communities, its Jews were more concerned with assimilating and finding acceptance into non-Jewish circles, than forming their own Jewish community and institutions. Consequently, New Orleans' Jewry in the nineteenth century was characterized by religious apathy and a high rate of intermarriage.

During the later half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, the New Orleans Jewish community established numerous Jewish educational institutions, which one after the other ended in failure. It was through these attempts, however, that community leaders realized that such endeavors could unify different factions of the city's Jewry. This thesis focuses on the history of the New Orleans Jewish community and its educational institutions from the mid-nineteenth century until the present.

Chapter one begins with an overview of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of New Orleans Jewish history and the struggles that its people faced in forging a community. The chapter continues with a history of Jewish education and the Americanization of the Talmud Torah. An early history of New Orleans Jewry concludes this chapter.

Chapter two covers the history of Jewish education in New Orleans from its beginnings in the mid-1800s through the end of the century. This includes a description of congregational Sunday schools, as well as the school of the Hebrew Educational Society. The chapter also presents the problem of assimilation and religious apathy in New Orleans during the nineteenth century.

Chapter three chronicles numerous attempts at creating a Jewish community school in New Orleans during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It follows with an early history of Communal Hebrew School, its leadership, and its programs. Also included is a biography of the school's founder, Ephraim E. Lisitzky, and a description of his vision for the New Orleans Jewish community.

Chapter four covers the period between the 1930s and the 1960s. It cites how trends such as Zionism, suburbanization, and the creation of Jewish centers influenced and changed Communal Hebrew School. This chapter also includes a history of the Menorah Institute of Congregation Beth Israel and the relationship between these two schools.

Chapter five concludes the thesis with a description of the impact that Communal Hebrew School had upon the community. This chapter evaluates changes in the community's demographics over the twentieth century. A brief history from the 1970s through the present concludes this chapter.

To my own teacher and rabbi,
Michal,
and my most precious student,
Aviv Shafir

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I am ever so grateful to Dr. Karla Goldman for her careful reading of this text and for her valuable suggestions on improving its quality. Her tireless efforts and enthusiasm in guiding me through this project will always serve as an inspiration for me to strive for perfection.

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I wish to thank Mrs. Joseph Cohen for taking the time to reminisce on her studies and experiences at Communal Hebrew School. Her dedication to and love for the Jewish community of New Orleans are living proof of the success of Ephraim E. Lisitzky's dream.

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I owe special thanks to my dear parents, who have been a constant inspiration to me throughout life. During my study, they were always waiting to assist me with research and support and to make suggestions on where to go for the right answers.

And to my wife, Michal, and daughter, Aviv... Words cannot express my thanks for your endless support and dedication to me during this lengthy process. God has blessed me with the most precious gift of family.

אני אוהב אתכן בכל לבי!

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Chapter 1
New Orleans, An Anomaly in the South

I. Introduction

The New Orleans Jewish community is an anomaly in Southern Jewish life. It is characterized today by a high rate of synagogue affiliation and exemplary Jewish institutional life. While other comparable Southern Jewish communities such as Natchez and Vicksburg, Mississippi were virtually decimated by the trials of antisemitism, intermarriage, and assimilation during the first half of the twentieth century, the New Orleans Jewish community challenged its demographic destiny by uniting denominations and institutions into a solid Jewish community.[1]

Because the nineteenth-century New Orleans Jewish community lacked the kind of formal cohesion that would lead naturally to such an outcome, many historians have offered theories as to what caused the community to develop in the twentieth century.[2] In this thesis I will suggest that the New Orleans Jewish community expanded and united in the twentieth century through its efforts in establishing a communal Jewish educational institution. This thesis will explore the history of New Orleans Jewish education beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and examine the impact

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[1]Leonard Reissman, "The New Orleans Jewish Community," in *Jews in the South*, edited by Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1973), 288-291.
[2]Elliott Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana 1840-1875* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1988), 5-30; Bertram W. Korn, *The Early Jews of New Orleans* (Waltham: American Jewish Historical Society, 1969), 245-258 offer two such theories.

that the educational institutions and their leaders have had on communal unity throughout the twentieth century.

New Orleans in the nineteenth century was well known for its Jewish leadership and philanthropy. Yet even renowned figures like Judah Touro, Gershom Kursheedt, and Rabbi James Gutheim were unable to bring centralized Jewish unity to the city. Since the Jews of New Orleans enjoyed acceptance into nearly all government and social organizations, Jewish unity was undermined by assimilation. During this time, Jewish leaders faced communal religious apathy and a high rate of intermarriage, two factors which inhibited the formation of Jewish communal life.[3]

Educational institutions arose out of the desire for organized Jewish life in New Orleans. In 1866, the school of the Hebrew Educational Society was founded through the efforts of Rabbi Gutheim.[4] This school, which was not limited to Jewish students, combined secular education with the instruction of Hebrew language and religion.[5] In addition, synagogues and temples formed Sunday Schools to educate their youth.[6] In 1902, the Hebrew Public School was also established to educate children from the city's three Orthodox synagogues.[7] Amidst the founding of these independent educational institutions, the Jewish community of New Orleans remained denominational, localized, and divided. This fragmentation was reflected in the city's many different schools for Jewish education. Every school served a limited segment of the Jewish population. No one

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[3]Korn, *Early Jews*, 209-233.
[4]Max Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir of Temple Sinai, 1872-1922* (New Orleans: American Printing Co., Ltd., 1922), 40.
[5]Works Projects Administration, *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives of Louisiana* (University: The Department of Archives, Louisiana State University, 1941), 99.
[6]Temple Sinai's religious school was already in existence in 1887. Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir*, 90.
[7]"Hebrew Public School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 28 November, 1902, 10.

educational institution or venue could draw upon the support or participation of a united community.

But between 1910 and 1916, a group of Orthodox leaders contemplated the creation of an educational institution which would change the overall nature of the New Orleans Jewish community. This group's efforts did not crystallize until the end of the decade when a charter was obtained and Ephraim E. Lisitzky was hired as principal. On April 10, 1918, Communal Hebrew School was officially established.[8] Its name alluded to the intent of this educational institution. In a city where Judaism had been characterized by apathy and division for over a century and a half, Communal Hebrew School sought to unite New Orleans Jewry into one community. As early as 1925, the school boasted its independence from the control of any particular congregation and provided education to all Jewish children, both Orthodox and Reform.[9]

Within the first few years of Lisitzky's leadership, this Hebrew school had already gained international recognition. Dr. A. N. Franzblau, Director of the Hebrew Union College school for Jewish teachers, was quoted in 1925 saying, "It was in many respects a revelation to find in the midst of a small Jewish community such an excellent and admirably conducted school." Other faculty of the Hebrew Union College, as well as international Jewish leaders such as Chaim Weizman and Dr. M. Waxman (of the Mizrachi Institute), similarly extolled this Jewish educational institution of New Orleans.[10] Not only had Communal Hebrew School emerged as an exemplary academic institution, but more importantly it set

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[8]Original charter of Communal Hebrew School, 10 April 1918, Communal Hebrew School Manuscript Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

[9]*A Jewish Institution in New Orleans which ranks with the best in the United States: Its work and its Fame* (New Orleans: Communal Hebrew School, c.1925), 3.

[10] *A Jewish Institution*, 11.

New Orleans apart from other Jewish communities in the South by fighting the forces of assimilation through providing students with a love for Jewish education and community.

The leaders and graduates of Communal Hebrew School were instrumental in bringing cohesion to the New Orleans Jewish community. Lisitzky, best known as an American Hebrew poet, wrote in his autobiography, "The basic objective of any teacher is to help his pupils to acquire a spiritual wholeness. A Hebrew teacher must strive to impart, in addition to this spiritual wholeness, a Jewish outlook that is integrated and harmonious."[11] For over forty years as principal of the school, Lisitzky inspired a vision of Jewish and spiritual wholeness which united the Jewish youth of New Orleans through *Talmud Torah*. His unending efforts in the classroom as well as his remarkable interpersonal skills led him to become a central leader of the New Orleans Jewish community. Other key figures in the city also supported and worked for the school. One of them, Max Heller, the great Zionist and Reform rabbi from Temple Sinai, served as Honorary President during the school's early years.[12] It was probably his strong love of Zionism that brought Max Heller together with Lisitzky in the pursuit for Jewish communal unity. And there have been hundreds of graduates from Communal Hebrew School who went on to work as teachers, lay leaders, and Jewish professionals in the New Orleans Jewish community. These inheritors of Lisitzky's vision have been working in Jewish agencies and institutions throughout the twentieth century to bring about unity between denominations and congregations.

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[11]Ephraim E. Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents* (New York: Block Publishing Company, 1959), 296.
[12]*A Jewish Institution*, 15.

Over the years, under Lisitzky's leadership and beyond, Communal Hebrew School has grown to be the central educational institution of the New Orleans Jewish community. With the goals of both Americanization and preservation of the Jewish home, the school has worked toward combating the pressures of assimilation that are so prevalent in the South.[13] The Hebrew school has evolved and expanded enormously since its official founding in 1918. It currently hosts a community Hebrew school, a nursery school, community adult educational planning, and a teacher's resource center, as well as an institute which educates and sends high school students to Israel.[14]

II. Jewish Education and the American Talmud Torah: Origins and Changes

Throughout history, the writings of the sacred Hebrew texts have imparted the importance of religious education for the Jewish people. Beginning with the Torah itself, Judaism embraced the obligation for learning with God's commandment, "You shall teach them to your children."[15] The sages of the Talmud and Mishnah believed that the study of Torah was even the basis for existence, claiming, "The world endures because of three activities: study of Torah, divine worship, and deeds of loving-kindness."[16] They went so far as to rank Torah study above all other mitzvot, by writing, "The study of Torah ranks above the building of

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[13]Ibid., 5.
[14]Letter from Communal Hebrew School to the New Orleans Community, 1997, New Orleans, in possession of author.
[15]Deuteronomy 11:19, translated by author.
[16]Avot 1:2, translated by William G. Braude in *The Book of Legends*, edited by Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky (New York: Schocken Books, 1992).

the Temple... honoring father and mother... [and even] above the saving of lives."[17] The Midrash too prescribes education for children, saying, "When a child begins to speak, his father should speak to him in the sacred tongue and teach him Torah; if he does not speak to him in the sacred tongue and does not teach him Torah, it is as though he were burying him."[18]

After the destruction of the second Temple in 67 C.E. and the dispersion, the study of Torah became a means of coherence for Jews throughout the world. Education since then has been a means of survival. Louis Finkelstein, former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, observed that, "The survival of Jews and Judaism is in a large measure due to the continuous emphasis throughout Jewish history upon education or the transmission of ideas and practices from old to young and from one generation to another."[19] Therefore in every generation, Jewish people throughout the Diaspora have passed on Jewish teachings to their children as a way of remaining part of *C'lal Yisrael.*

Formal Jewish education began in the home with the father teaching his children the tenets of Judaism. As early as the Mishnaic Period, academies were also established for higher Jewish learning. But the institution known as the Talmud Torah did not crystallize until the Middle Ages. From this period on, hardly a community was without a *Hebra Talmud Torah* (or Talmud Torah Society) set up to maintain a Talmud Torah or Free School for Hebrew and Biblical training. Edward Orentlicher's history of the Talmud Torah in America noted that, "These Talmud Torahs were

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[17]Megilla 16b; Eruvin 63b; Avot 6:6, translated by William G. Braude in *The Book of Legends.*
[18]Sifre Deuteronomy 46, translated by William G. Braude in *The Book of Legends.*
[19]*The Jews, Their History, Culture and Religion,* vol. III, ed. Louis Finkelstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960) 896, quoted in Edward Orentlicher, *The Talmud Torah in America, Its Structure, Philosophy and Decline (1860-1960)* (Ph.D. diss., Dropsie College, 1962), 13-14.

specifically established for the free education of poor and orphaned boys with the purpose of preparing them to lead religious lives and to prepare those excelling in their studies for entry into a Yeshiva." The Talmud Torah has been traced as far back as 1290 to an early institution run by Rabbi Asher ben Jehiel in Toledo, Spain. Since then, the community-supported Talmud Torah made its way into Jewish communities all throughout Europe.[20]

The American Talmud Torah began to evolve almost as soon as it was introduced in the New World. The first traces of this institution began in 1731 in New York at Congregation Shearith Israel. This pioneer American *yeshiva* was supported by the community and taught poor children gratuitously. It was an all-day parochial school which combined both Jewish and secular studies. However in 1842, this New York Jewish school changed drastically as public schools in New York were established. For the first time, a Jewish school gave up secular studies during the morning hours and became an afternoon school which supplemented secular education.[21]

In the 1840s, German Jews began to establish all-day schools in almost every city in the United States. Many of these schools were associated with synagogues.[22] There were successful German schools in Cincinnati, Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Chicago. In many of these communities also, the all-day Jewish schools soon evolved into afternoon Jewish schools as public school systems were established. Although advocates of all-day schools, such as Isaac Leeser and his followers,

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[20]Edward Orentlicher, *The Talmud Torah in America*, 15-27.
[21]Ibid., 41-43.
[22]Judah Pilch, ed., *The History of Jewish Education in America* (New York: American Association for Jewish Education, 1959), 32.

promoted the need to separate Jewish children from "the danger of [public] schools where there was a Christian majority," Jewish parochial schools lost many of their students to public schools. By the 1860s, most of the all-day German schools either became afternoon schools or shut down.[23]

As large numbers of German Jews arrived into the United States during the 1840s and 1850s, they brought with them new ideas for more enlightened forms of education. Soon the afternoon supplementary religious schools were overshadowed by Sunday schools, which allowed more time for other activities during the week. The American Jewish Sunday school was based on a model established in 1838 by Rebecca Gratz and her female colleagues in Philadelphia.[24] These Sunday schools became congregational endeavors, exclusively serving students from their own synagogue. And by 1914, the majority of the German Jewish schools met only on Sundays.[25] Historian Judah Pilch noted, "The decline and disappearance of the all-day German and Polish Jewish schools left a great void in the Jewish community." According to Pilch, little could be taught in the two or three hours each week at Sunday schools; the Hebrew language was virtually erased from their curricula.[26]

In the years after 1890, a new trend emerged in American Jewish education. The Russian Jewish immigrants, who arrived in the United States in the nineties, did not have access to the German Sunday schools to educate their children. Therefore, these new immigrants established schools of their own which they called Talmud Torahs. Their schools were

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[23]Lloyd P. Gartner, "Temples of Liberty Unpolluted: American Jews and Public Schools, 1840-1875," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus* ed. Bertram Wallace Korn (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1976), 166-168.
[24]Judah Pilch, ed., *The History of Jewish Education in America*, 35.
[25]Edward Orentlicher, *The Talmud Torah in America*, 41-44.
[26]Judah Pilch, ed., *The History of Jewish Education in America*, 35.

modeled after the first Eastern European Talmud Torah in America organized by the Machzikei Talmud Torah Society in 1883. These new Talmud Torahs introduced the idea to American Jewry that Jewish education should be a communal endeavor. As opposed to earlier communal Jewish schools in America, which were "communal" only in the sense that they were supported by the Jewish community to provide education for poor children free of charge, these new schools redefined the title "communal." The new communal Talmud Torahs were not associated with any one synagogue or denomination, thus they brought cohesion to many different factions of the Jewish community. They also were for the most part run by laymen.[27] Isaac Berkson, a historian of New York's Jewish community, explained that, "The communal Jewish school or the Talmud Torah now became the central agency of the community..."[28] Rather than having many independent schools being funded by the Jewish community, these Talmud Torahs combined the resources and funds from many different factions of the community into one community-supported educational endeavor. And historian David Kaufman further commented, "In the course of its Americanization the Talmud Torah was reinvented as a Jewish center."[29] Not only did these schools educate the city's Jewish students, but they also functioned to serve their recreational and social needs. Congregational Sunday schools did remain; however, they were dominated primarily by Jews of German descent.

As these new American Talmud Torahs evolved into non-denominational community institutions, strong influences of the Eastern

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[27]Edward Orentlicher, *The Talmud Torah in America*, 45-46.
[28]Isaac Berkson, *Survey of Jewish Education in New York City* (New York: Committee of Jewish Education, 1936), 102.
[29]David Kaufman, "'Shul with a Pool': The Synagogue-Center in American Jewish Life, 1875-1925" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1993), 259.

European *Haskalah* (or enlightenment) and Zionism from their Russian founders also shaped these institutions. Orentlicher claimed that the enlightened laymen of the new American Talmud Torahs "brought with them to this country the idea of a synthesis of 'modernism' and traditionalism." This synthesis included an "emphasis on religious literary subject matter" such as medieval and modern Hebrew poetry and thought and the introduction of new teaching methods. Many of the early teachers of these Talmud Torahs were Hebrew writers, grammarians, and scholars, who first introduced Zionism into American Jewish culture. These zealous Zionists hoped that Hebrew would become a spoken language and that Hebrew literature would become an integral part of Jewish education. For the Talmud Torahs, this brought the introduction of the new *Ivrit B'Ivrit* teaching method, or the natural method, that originated in the Heder Metukan in Eastern Europe. *Ivrit B'Ivrit*, introduced in American Talmud Torahs in 1915, promoted a conversational style instruction, with Hebrew and other subjects being taught exclusively in Hebrew.[30] Teaching *Ivrit B'Ivrit*, however, did not change the overall goal of these Jewish schools. The new American Talmud Torah, according to one 1916 observer, was created primarily "to train American Jewish children to be Jews, imbued with Jewish ideals and aspirations and to lead Jewish lives."[31]

Yet the most profound change in these new American Talmud Torahs came from the influence of the American public school system. Not only did the Talmud Torah adopt current educational methods from the public schools around them and provide education for rich and poor children alike; but these Jewish school's, like their American secular counterparts,

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[30]Edward Orentlicher, *The Talmud Torah in America*, 49-57, 142.
[31]Julius Greenstone, "The Talmud Torah in America," *Jewish Teacher*, vol. I (1916): 32.

also opened their doors to girls.[32] This was a great break from the past as traditionally Judaism only required formal education for Jewish boys. Influenced by American educational models and values, Talmud Torahs in America redefined the scope of traditional Jewish learning.

In the beginning, the new American Talmud Torah's curriculum was based on the European Talmud Torah's curriculum. The European curriculum included the Hebrew alphabet, prayerbook reading, Bible studies, Hebrew grammar, Jewish traditions and ceremonies, and some Jewish law. However, new Jewish American trends, such as concerns for *Bar Mitzvah*, Hebrew, and Zionistic studies, played a strong role in influencing the American Talmud Torah to modernize its curriculum. Primarily, parents were concerned that their children receive more *Bar Mitzvah* and ritual training; therefore studies were changed to focus on preparing students for their *B'nai Mitzvah*. Also, some Talmud Torahs began pushing advanced students to learn to translate Biblical passages and supplement their studies with Biblical commentaries. Jewish history, as well as Zionistic studies, also became an integral part of these new curricula.[33]

As mentioned earlier, the American Talmud Torah slowly developed into an afternoon school to supplement secular education. Classes were usually held every afternoon, except Fridays, and on Sunday mornings. During the summer, students also typically studied four hours each day. As opposed to the Talmud Torahs of Europe, these American schools supplemented their studies with recreational activities and free time. Many of these Talmud Torahs included extra-curricular activities in their daily

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[32]Edward Orentlicher, *The Talmud Torah in America,* 66.
[33]Ibid, 130-133.

programs, including arts and crafts, student organizations, Jewish holiday celebrations, *Shabbat* services, a school paper, and participation in local events.[34]

From the establishment of the New World's first Jewish educational institution in 1731, Jewish education in America evolved drastically from its European foundations. Over the past 250 years, the institution which came to be known as the American Talmud Torah, developed into a communal afternoon school. It was not affiliated with any one congregation, supplemented secular education, and became a place where Jewish culture and study converged. From the late nineteenth century through the early 1930s, Talmud Torahs emerged in most major cities in America.

III. Early History of the New Orleans Jewish Community

New Orleans was founded in 1718. Although some historians have regarded a number of the original settlers as Jewish on the basis of their names, Bertram Korn claims that Jews probably did not settle in Louisiana until the mid-eighteenth century.[35] In March of 1724, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, the governor of Louisiana, issued the *Code Noir* (or the "Black Code") which expelled Jews from the colony. Therefore, Louisiana was prevented from accommodating an openly Jewish population in its early days.[36]

Isaac Rodriguez Monsanto, a Caribbean trader, was the first documented Jew in New Orleans. Korn claims that he established himself

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[34]Ibid., 80, 136.
[35]Korn, *Early Jews*, 3.
[36]Max Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir*, 1.

in New Orleans by October of 1758. Although it is unclear whether he intended to make New Orleans his permanent residence, Monsanto transferred his business operations from Caraçao to New Orleans and set up a household at that time.[37]

The first permanent Jewish population of New Orleans appeared during the time that Louisiana was controlled by the United States after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Economic opportunities drew these Jews, who were mostly single men from Portuguese or German/French backgrounds, to New Orleans. Many of these early settlers made great contributions to the city's growth and prosperity. However before 1815, Judaism was not very important to these pioneer Jews. This is evident from the fact that they came to a community without a *shochet* (a man trained in the Jewish ritual slaughter of animals) or other Jews to form a *minyan* (the minimum number of Jewish males needed to pray as a community). Bobbie Malone notes that at least half of these early Jewish settlers intermarried and allowed their children to be raised as Catholics. This religious apathy of New Orleans Jews was already known throughout the country as early as 1807. A letter from Philadelphian Rebecca Gratz to her brother Joseph, reveals just how well-known this apathy was:

> At New Orleans, there are many who call themselves Jews, or at least whose parentage being known are obliged to acknowledge themselves such, but who neglect those duties which would make that title honorable and then respected.[38]

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[37]Korn, *Early Jews*, 9-10.

[38]Korn, *Early Jews*, 74-156; Bobbie Malone, "New Orleans Uptown Jewish Immigrants: The Community of Congregation Gates of Prayer, 1850-1860," in *Louisiana History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Historical Association, 1992), 242.

The Jewish community in New Orleans began taking shape in the 1820s. The first Jewish institution was established in 1828 primarily through the efforts of Jacob S. Solis. Solis, a religious Jew, came to New Orleans via New York and Philadelphia in 1826 to open a store.[39] According to Korn, when Solis arrived in New Orleans, he was appalled that he could not purchase *matzah* for Passover anywhere in the city. Being trained in all areas of traditional Judaism, he began making *matzas* on his own for the community. Through this endeavor, Solis discovered that other local Jews were also seeking religious institutional life. So he became determined to found the first synagogue in New Orleans.[40] On March 25, 1828, Congregation Shanarai-Chasset (or Gates of Mercy) was incorporated and Solis' name appeared on its charter. The congregation was originally composed of German and Portuguese Jews, but worship changed over completely to the German rite during the late 1830s.[41]

During the 1840s, Isaac Leeser, the cantor and minister of Congregation Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia, was probably the greatest single influence on American Jewry through his writings. Leeser not only helped Rebecca Gratz create the first Sunday school in America, but he also published numerous prayerbook translations and a national Jewish monthly journal titled *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate.* According to Bertram Korn, Leeser's most influential message to American Jewry was his constant promotion of the idea "that a large number of educational and

[39]Korn claimed that he came to New Orleans because of the booming economic conditions prevailing there.
[40]Korn, *Early Jews*, 192-194.
[41]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 19; Korn, *Early Jews*, 248. There are different variations of the spelling of the name of Congregation "Shanarai-Chasset". I have chosen to follow Korn's spelling.

other institutions had to be developed if American Jews were to remain Jews in any meaningful sense."[42]

New Orleans, was one community that was particularly influenced by Leeser and his writings. *The Occident* brought news from the rest of America's Jewish communities to this isolated community in the South. During *The Occident's* first year of publication, New Orleaneans were already among the subscribers to the journal because of a local Jewish leader named Gershom Kursheedt. Kursheedt, a disciple of Leeser, moved to New Orleans in the late 1830s. He had grown up in New York City, where his father taught him a love for Jewish learning and Jewish causes, and there he began his correspondence with Isaac Leeser. From his first days in New Orleans, Kursheedt began distributing and selling Leeser's writings and prayerbooks, and he also became very active in establishing local Jewish institutions.[43]

On March 17, 1844, the Hebrew Benevolent Society of New Orleans was established with Gershom Kursheedt as president.[44] This was the first organization established by the New Orleans Jewish community which was not a synagogue. The organization was "from its incipiency wedded to Jewish charity in the full acceptance of the term." One of the society's most famous promoters was Judah Touro. Although Touro was an otherwise secular philanthropist, Gershom Kursheedt had a remarkable influence over him in promoting Jewish causes such as this organization.[45]

Kursheedt also founded a second synagogue in New Orleans, Nefutzoth Yehudah (or Dispersed of Judah). Kursheedt joined Congregation

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[42]Korn *Early Jews*, 246.
[43]Ibid., 247-248.
[44]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 85.
[45]*The Israelites of Louisiana: Their Religious Civic, Charitable, and Patriotic Life* (New Orleans: W. E. Myers, 1904), 44.

Shanarai-Chasset when he first came to New Orleans. However, for several years he had been upset with the fact that the group completely gave up Sephardic rituals due to an influx of German Jews in the 1830s. Therefore after the High Holy Days of 1845, he led a group of forty men in forming Congregation Nefutzoth Yehudah. Judah Touro was persuaded by Kursheedt to accept financial responsibility for this new congregation.[46] Their charter was approved on June 11, 1847 and Kursheedt was elected president.[47] Nefutzoth Yehudah was often referred to as the Portuguese synagogue and the other synagogue, Shanarai-Chasset, as the German synagogue.

Between 1830 and 1860, a large influx of *Ashkenazic* Jews immigrated to Louisiana from France and some of the German states, Bavaria and those along the Rhine. During these years, statistics show that New Orleans consistently received the second largest number of immigrants to the United States, after New York. This influx tapered off with the Civil War. Elliott Ashkenazi wrote that in 1860, Louisiana had about 8000 Jews, over five percent of the total Jewish population in America and the largest Jewish population in the South. Ashkenazi also claimed that approximately 4000 to 5000 of these Jews were living in New Orleans.[48] I believe that this figure is exaggerated, as the Jewish population in the city was closer to 2000.[49]

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[46]Korn *Early Jews*, 248. Korn also believes that the synagogue was named Dispersed of *Judah* after Judah Touro.

[47]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 20.

[48]Elliott Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana 1840-1875*, 6-11; Bobbie Malone, "New Orleans Uptown Jewish Immigrants", 242. After comparing this estimate with that of other historians, I believe that this estimate of Jews in New Orleans is exaggerated.

[49]Samuel Proctor, "Jewish Life in New Orleans, 1718-1860," Louisiana Historical Quarterly (April 1957), 121. Proctor estimated the Jewish population of New Orleans in 1842 as being between 800 to 2000 individuals.

More Jewish congregations had to be established during this period to serve the city's growing Jewish population. As one group of Jewish immigrants settled in Lafayette City (which is today known as Uptown), the city's first suburb, a third congregation was established. This new congregation solved the distance problem for Jewish residents in this suburb who could not travel on Sabbath and Holy Days to the other two congregations downtown.[50] Their congregation began with a *minyan* of twenty-six men from Lafayette City in the late 1840s. On March 19, 1850, these men signed a charter formally establishing their synagogue, Congregation Shaarai Tefillah (known today by the English equivalent, Gates of Prayer).[51] Throughout the nineteenth century, this congregation was often referred to as the Jackson Avenue Synagogue.

Due to two fatal epidemics of yellow fever in 1847 and again in 1853, the Hebrew Benevolent Society, led by Reverend James K. Gutheim and Joseph Magner, was forced to establish another institution. After these two tragic epidemics, the New Orleans Jewish community was left with a large population of widows and orphans. The leaders of the Hebrew Benevolent Society realized that the burdens of these epidemics were becoming too great for their organization to support alone. Therefore, Gutheim, Magner, and other leaders of the community came together on November 25, 1854 to establish an institution and a home for poor widows and orphans. The following March, a charter was signed by a group of seventeen individuals who called their organization the "Association for the

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[50]Lafayette City was two miles away from the other congregations downtown. Although there was a streetcar running between this suburb and downtown, it was forbidden for Jews to ride to synagogue on Sabbaths and Holy Days.

[51]Bobbie Malone, Bobbie Malone, "New Orleans Uptown Jewish Immigrants", 244; W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 24.

Relief of Jewish Widows and Orphans." Gershom Kursheedt was elected Chairman of the group.[52]

On May 8, 1855, a lot was purchased by the society on the corner of Jackson and Chippewa streets. The Jewish Orphans Home of New Orleans was dedicated on January 8, 1856 and officially opened on February 1. This institution was the first Israelite orphanage established in the United States.[53] The community effort in establishing the Home was a great accomplishment for the Jews of New Orleans. It symbolized a coming together of Jewish leaders which could benefit local Jews in need, regardless of their affiliation or status. Their effort was an indication that the establishment of Jewish institutions was one answer to the New Orleans Jewish community's desire for unity. But, the institution itself only served the city's orphan and widow population.

As a large number of German and French Jewish immigrants made their way into New Orleans throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, its Jewish community began growing in scope and numbers. Institutions and synagogues were being formed by strong Jewish leaders and philanthropists. However, despite all the new institutions that emerged throughout that period, the many factions of New Orleans Jewry still remained isolated. The Jewish community of the mid to late nineteenth century was lacking something that would unite its diverse people. Unlike other cities which were bound together by Jewish community councils or

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[52]Joseph Magner, *The Story of the Jewish Orphans Home of New Orleans* (New Orleans: I. G. Hauser, 1906), 5-7.
[53]Ibid., 10-13; W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 92.

bureaus, New Orleans remained a conglomerate of different Jewish institutions and synagogues in this period.[54]

But as the nineteenth century came to a close, the New Orleans Jewish community slowly began to change. As new desire for Jewish communal life emerged, the community slowly began taking shape. Although it is unclear how this trend originated, historians have offered theories as to what brought about this new hunger for community cohesion in New Orleans. Two historians in particular, Bertram Korn and Elliott Ashkenazi, have written books explaining their own thoughts on this trend.

Any study of the history of New Orleans Jewry must begin with Bertram Korn's *The Early Jews of New Orleans*. To date, this is the most accurate and complete account of the city's Jewish community up until the middle of the nineteenth century. Korn described this period as a time of preparation for the establishment of a solid Jewish community. He attributed the beginning of Jewish communal feelings to two men; Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia and Gershom Kursheedt of New Orleans. Korn explained that Leeser's *The Occident*, during the early 1840s, "aroused a feeling of urgency among those who had previously been utterly indifferent of anything Jewish." Korn believed that Leeser's reports and writings pushed the Jewish community of New Orleans to form its own communal institutions.[55]

The second leader to promote Jewish community in New Orleans was Gershom Kursheedt. Korn credited Kursheedt with founding numerous organizations and institutions, and no less significantly, with persuading

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[54]By the late nineteenth century, the Jewish institutions in New Orleans were the Touro Infirmary (1868), the Julius Weis Home for the Aged (1899), The Jewish Orphans Home (1855), and four synagogues, Touro Synagogue, Temple Sinai, Congregation Gates of Prayer, and Congregation Chevra Thilim.
[55]Korn *Early Jews*, quote on page 246.

Judah Touro to support local Jewish causes. According to Korn, Judah Touro had no interest in Judaism before his friendship with Kursheedt. Touro never became an active member of the Jewish community, but because of his association with Kursheedt, he willed money for the establishment of Touro Infirmary (established as a Jewish hospital), the Hebrew Benevolent Society, The Jewish Orphans Home of New Orleans, and also to maintain Congregations Shanarai-Chassed and Nefutzoth Yehudah.[56] Therefore, according to Bertram Korn, the Jews of New Orleans were prepared to unite because of the financial support of Judah Touro and the energy and enthusiasm of Gershom Kursheedt.

Elliott Ashkenazi in his book *The Business of Jews in Louisiana, 1850-1875*, continued the chronology started by Korn. Although his account is not a running history of the Jews of New Orleans, he included information of vital importance to the historiography of New Orleans Jewry and the understanding of the formation of its Jewish community. Ashkenazi's introduction provides the reader with his theory of why the Jews of New Orleans would seek communal unity at the end of the nineteenth century. He explained that as the immigrants came to New Orleans as itinerant peddlers in the nineteenth century, they had little desire to unite as a Jewish community at first. Part of this lack of desire stemmed from their assimilated French backgrounds. However, the situation in New Orleans in the middle to late 1800s "helped foster a communal feeling among the Jews in ways that were not evident before." During this period, local Jewry was influenced by economic survival during the Civil War years and a lack of new immigrants during the first years after the war. Ashkenazi concluded by explaining that like many other communities in the South, the Jews of

[56]Ibid.

New Orleans began to look inward during the late 1800s and began establishing new Jewish institutions to promote a Jewish presence.[57]

Korn and Ashkenazi projected later trends based on their studies of these earlier periods, but they did not document the ways in which the New Orleans Jewish community actually developed. Thus the period between 1875 and the present has been overlooked by these scholars. A third work by Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860-1929*, does focus on the latter period of New Orleans' Jewish history. Yet her book does not attempt to offer an overall picture of the New Orleans Jewish community. Her study of Heller focuses his impact upon American Reform Jewry as a whole.[58]

As mentioned, much has been written on the individuals and organizations of the New Orleans Jewish community, however nothing has been written on the overall nature of its Jewish community in the twentieth century. Hence, no focus has concentrated upon the relations and tensions between the Orthodox and Reform communities and the extent of assimilation in the city during this period. Also, while much has been written on other local Jewish institutions and personalities, it is surprising that nothing substantial has been written about the city's exemplary communal educational institution, Communal Hebrew School, and its leader, Ephraim Lisitzky. Therefore, it is my goal in thesis to give the reader an idea of the struggles and successes that the Jews in New Orleans encountered in the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century while forging their Jewish community.

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[57]Elliott Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana 1840-1875*, quote on page 30.
[58]Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860-1929* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1997).

Chapter 2
Nineteenth Century Struggles:
Jewish Education Comes to New Orleans

As the New Orleans Jewish community grew during the early to middle nineteenth century, formal educational institutions were slow to develop. Although other German Jewish communities throughout the rest of the country were establishing all-day and afternoon Hebrew schools for their youth during the 1840s, the first Jewish schools in New Orleans came almost a decade later. These efforts, however, occurred largely within the context of the synagogue. As opposed to other American cities which utilized joint community efforts to educate their youth, early attempts in New Orleans were localized and independent.

I

During the very early years of the New Orleans Jewish community, Jewish education was not a high priority. When a Jewish educator named George Washington Harby came to New Orleans from Charleston, South Carolina in 1828, he was not recruited by the existing Jewish community to teach their children. He did, however, open a private school shortly after his arrival, serving as headmaster and senior teacher. Although the community had its first Jewish educator, his school's curriculum included neither Hebrew nor Judaic studies.[1]

[1]Bertram W. Korn, *The Early Jews of New Orleans* (Waltham: American Historical Society, 1969), 183.

The first real push to bring a formal Jewish educational institution to New Orleans probably did not occur until the mid-nineteenth century. *The Occident* reported in 1845 some attempts in New Orleans to establish a school for religious instruction.[2] But these efforts were put on hold, apparently because of dissension within the city's only synagogue (Shanarai-Chasset). As members of different origins found it difficult to agree upon one *minhag* for prayer, a number of congregants broke off from this German synagogue to form a second one that would pray in the Portuguese ritual (Nefutzoth Yehudah or Dispersed of Judah).[3] The division in opinion between Jewish lay leaders in the forties delayed the founding of a Jewish educational institution for another couple of years.

By December of 1850, the efforts of the New Orleans Jewish community paid off as a Sunday school was organized by Congregation Nefutzoth Yehudah. As noted in chapter one, Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia was a strong advocate for the founding of educational and other communal institutions in American Jewish communities. His frequent articles promoting the importance of Hebrew and Sunday schools in *The Occident* probably led to the establishment of this school. Contrary to traditional Jewish institutional structures at the time, not only was the superintendent of this school a woman, but the elected board was also comprised solely of women. The superintendent, Mrs. Benjamin Florence, was the sister of Gershom Kursheedt, the founder of the congregation. The school enrolled both male and female students from both of the synagogues, but was run under the direction of lay leaders from Nefutzoth Yehudah. Reverend Moses N. Nathan, minister of this synagogue, was also involved in the

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[2]News Items, *The Occident*, July 1845, vol. III, no. 4, p. 211.
[3]Ibid., November 1845, vol. III, no. 8, p. 416. The founding of Congregation Nefutzoth Yehudah is described in Chapter one.

activities of the school. Books for New Orleans' premier Sunday school were furnished by Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia.[4]

As *The Occident* printed reports that the first year of Nefutzoth Yehudah's Sunday school was a success with great improvements in the Hebrew reading and religious knowledge of the students, a second Sunday school was established in 1852 at Congregation Shanarai-Chasset under the superintendence of Rabbi James K. Gutheim. Within the first year and a half, Nefutzoth Yehudah had moved to religious school instruction three times a week, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, as well as Sunday mornings, because of a need for more religious instruction. As opposed to the trend in the rest of the country towards decreasing the hours and days of religious schools, Congregation Nefutzoth Yehudah expanded its Sunday school program. Reverend Nathan had since taken charge as superintendent of the school and employed three paid assistants, Reverend Dr. Kohlmeyer, Miss Hart, and Mr. Jones. With these changes, the school was no longer run by a majority of women.[5]

But a need for even more intense Jewish education developed within the first few years of success in these two religious schools. In 1859, a committee was formed at Congregation Shanarai-Chasset "to establish a proper [all day] school, in which all the branches of sound Hebrew and general education shall be taught."[6] Although available records fail to indicate whether this school ever actually crystallized, a more lasting attempt to improve Jewish education in New Orleans was formally initiated

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[4]Ibid., 8:9 (December 1850), 480. Isaac Leeser was the editor of *The Occident*, the Jewish newspaper most frequently read by the New Orleans Jewish community at this time. Leeser helped found the first Sunday school in 1838 and founded the Hebrew Educational Society of Philadelphia in 1851. He was also a close personal friend of Gershom Kursheedt.

[5]Ibid., 10:2 (May 1852) 109.

[6]Ibid., 17:24 (8 September, 1859), 144.

on October 14, 1866, just after the Civil War. On that date, a group of 100 individuals met in the hall of the Deutsche Company in the French Quarter. This meeting was reported in the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* as a "Project for the Establishment of Schools and a College of Israelites." Among those in attendance were Rabbi James K. Gutheim, who was chosen as chairman at this meeting, Joseph Kohn, chosen as secretary, and Reverend Henry S. Jacobs, who would later become president of the group.[7]

A preliminary meeting of this group had been held three weeks prior to the October meeting with thirty individuals in attendance. Rabbi Gutheim opened that meeting with a speech that emphasized the need for Jewish schools and a higher seminary of learning in New Orleans. He addressed the importance of future generations of Jews being instructed in their faith and history, as well as in literature and science. He indicated that the education given in the public schools was "sufficient for ordinary civil purposes, but, with the Jewish population, there was great need of education in religion, and in the Hebrew language and history."[8]

At the historic meeting in October at the Deutche Company, the organizers presented a charter and constitution for the proposed Hebrew Educational Society of New Orleans. The group was named after the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia founded in 1851. It can be assumed that this new group modeled their society after the Philadelphia predecessor.[9] The charter identified the group's purpose as

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[7]"Project for the Establishment of Schools and a College of Israelites," *The Israelite*, 26 October, 1866, 5.
[8]Ibid.
[9]New Orleans had very close ties to the Philadelphia community through Isaac Leeser's *The Occident*.

> the establishment of a school or schools within the limits of the city of New Orleans, in which are to be taught the elementary branches of education, together with the sciences and modern and ancient languages; always in combination, with instructions in the Hebrew language, literature and religion. And it shall also be lawful for the corporation to establish, whenever their funds will permit the same to be done, a superior seminary of learning, within the limits of this State, the faculty of which seminary shall have power to furnish its graduates and others the usual degrees of bachelor of arts, master of arts and doctor of laws and divinity...[10]

With high hopes of establishing these exceptional Jewish educational institutions to New Orleans, the 100 members in attendance of the newly formed Hebrew Educational Society adopted the charter and constitution. The board set dues at six dollars annually, plus a five dollar initiation fee. There was also a motion to print and distribute 1000 copies of the newly adopted charter and constitution among the Israelites of the city.[11]

Within the next few months, publicity for the society brought about 204 subscribed members to the society. The New Orleans correspondent for *The Israelite* referred to these members as "the most intelligent, influential, and wealthy Jews of the city." At a meeting near the end of 1866, the society officially chose a board consisting of Henry S. Jacobs as president, S. Kahn and Joseph Simon as vice presidents, A. Beer as treasurer, and Joseph Kohn as secretary. Rabbi Gutheim, who was now the minister of Shanarai-Chasset, was elected superintendent of the society.[12]

From the fact that throngs of New Orleans Jews quickly subscribed to the Hebrew Educational Society in 1866, one should take notice of the sense

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[10]Ibid.
[11]Ibid.
[12]"The Hebrew Educational Society," *The Israelite*, 21 December, 1866, 5.

of urgency that Jews in New Orleans were feeling to establish Jewish communal life. In the 1860s, the Jewish population of New Orleans was estimated around 2000.[13] Because over 200 Jews showed up at this one meeting and became members, nearly ten percent of the total Jewish population of the city, indicates great interest in the establishment of centralized institutional life. Although the Hebrew Educational Society itself would be successful, other communal institutions were slow to develop in this period. An article in *The Israelite* in 1867 enumerated numerous problems that the Crescent City was facing at this time. It emphasized that the heat of the summer, leftover problems from the Civil War, heavy rains, and caterpillars eating the crops were all affecting the economy of the city.[14] Moreover, in the previous twenty year period, New Orleans had periodically faced tragic epidemics of yellow fever which wiped out thousands of people at a time. It seems as if these factors played a large role in slowing down the progress of the New Orleans Jewish community as a whole.

Yet despite all the hardships, the leaders of the Hebrew Educational Society pressed forward with their plans for a Jewish institution in New Orleans. On March 4, 1867, the first full-time school of the Hebrew Educational Society of New Orleans was opened. It began operating out of a rented house on Julia Street. The school boasted over a hundred students in its first few months, one fourth of whom were taught gratuitously. The small rented space quickly proved to be an unsuitable setting for a school.

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[13]Samuel Proctor, "Jewish Life in New Orleans, 1718-1860," Louisiana Historical Quarterly (April 1957), 121. Proctor estimated the Jewish population of New Orleans in 1842 as being between 800 to 2000 individuals. However, Elliott Ashkenazi estimated nearly 4000 to 5000 Jews living in New Orleans in the 1860s. Elliott Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana 1840-1875* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1988), 5-30. I believe that an estimate of 2000 seems more appropriate.
[14]Correspondence, *The Israelite*, 26 July, 1867, 6.

Therefore the directors began searching for a more permanent location that would be capable of expansion. Soon after the school opened, the board purchased a lot 91 by 165 feet, located at 1532 Calliope Street, for $10,500. They proposed building a structure on this site for $25,000 of which they had already acquired $18,000.[15]

But that summer, the community again was stricken with another round of yellow fever which cut deeply into their economic resources. In a letter to the editor of *The Israelite*, a correspondent wrote:

> The fearful epidemic, which has been so severe on this community during the past summer, calling away to another world some beloved one from almost every Jewish hearth, creating widows and orphans, and even blotting out whole families, left sad traces in its wake, which it will require a long period of time to efface. ...It has affected the community at large in a still more striking manner. ...Our Societies and public institutions will naturally suffer.

The correspondent also mentioned that the Hebrew Educational Society suffered economically from that epidemic. Yet, the writer noted that the board worked assiduously that summer raising money in order to reopen its doors that September. He mentioned that monetary support came from as far as New York and Liverpool.[16]

Nearly one year after opening, the all-day school of the Hebrew Educational Society of New Orleans had 133 pupils, five teachers, and a budget of $7700. The society itself now counted 256 members and subscribed $21,823 to a building fund. In his report before the society's

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[15]Ibid; Works Projects Administration, *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives of Louisiana* (University: The Department of Archives, Louisiana State University, 1941), 98-99.
[16]Letter to the Editor, *The Israelite*, 6 December, 1867, 5.

board, Rabbi Gutheim spoke of the goal of his curriculum as, "a grammatical instruction in the Hebrew-- not a superficial and necessarily imperfect knowledge of Hebrew reading-- it is of utmost importance to the Jewish community. To furnish such systematic instruction in the sacred tongue, in connection with a liberal education, is our primary object..."[17]

On May 20, 1868, the laying of the cornerstone of the new school took place on Calliope Street, between Camp and St. Charles. The cornerstone contained constitutions of most of the city's Jewish institutions, the first annual report of the Hebrew Educational Society, and a local newspaper dated May 20. Opening remarks were made by Reverend Henry S. Jacobs and the main oration was given by Rabbi Gutheim. In his speech, he made the claim that the building of their institution "was a duty that they owed to God, who had preserved the people through the centuries." The society had also added a principal, Mr. W.F. Meade, to the faculty, who was also present at the laying of the cornerstone ceremony.[18]

The final cost of the building was $32,603.31 and was probably completed on October 1, 1868.[19] The structure itself was two stories high and was elevated to house a playground beneath it. Each floor of the building contained four large classrooms and one or two smaller rooms, plus the principal's room on the second floor. The school was furnished with modern school furniture and its walls were decorated with Hebrew, German, and English inscriptions. One such inscription read: "Education is a parent's noblest legacy."[20]

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[17]Theological Department, *The Israelite*, 21 February, 1868, 1.
[18]"A Gala Day for the Hebrew Educational Society of New Orleans," *The Israelite*, 29 May, 1868.
[19]Domestic News, *The Israelite*, 14 August, 1868, 2; Ibid., 23 April, 1869, 4.
[20]Letter to the Editor, *The Israelite*, 1 July, 1873, 2.

For the next few years, the school of the Hebrew Educational Society grew steadily, gaining more students and teachers. Average tuition for paid students at the time was around forty-five dollars. But beginning in 1870, the society began to incur a debt which would eventually lead to its demise.[21] Nevertheless, the school continued to expand its size and programming. By 1873, the school began examining all students annually for a period of four days at the beginning of the summer. Reports from these examination periods give us some insight as to the curriculum of the school. The first day of testing was in Hebrew and German languages. Both of these subjects were taught by the same teachers, Dr. Herman Baar, formerly of the Liverpool congregation, and his assistant, Mr. M. Altrino. Girls and boys were divided into separate classes. There were five classes studying Hebrew and three classes studying German. A letter in *The Israelite* maintained that the Hebrew level of the students was generally very high. The fact that teaching German was still important to Jews in New Orleans says that the community as a whole was slow to give up its strong heritage.[22] As stated in the first chapter, the majority of immigrants to New Orleans came from central Europe, especially the Alsace-Lorraine area.[23] Just like most Central European Jews in America, the New Orleaneans were adamant about maintaining their German cultural background as they settled in the United States. Michael A. Meyer, a historian for the Reform movement, explains that for these immigrants who grew up with German and Reform Judaism as an integral part of their heritage, it was not so easy to give up their German roots. Meyer writes, "While by necessity they learned to use English in business and on the

[21]Ibid., 6 May, 1870, 2. The deficit in 1870 was already $4500.
[22]Letter to the Editor, *The Israelite*, 1 July 1873, 5.
[23]Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews*, 6.

streets, they chose to preserve German in the home and, no less than Hebrew, as the sacred language of the synagogue."[24] Their strong ties to the German world would also show up in their bringing of reforms to their synagogues within the next decade.

The second day of testing was in the primary and secondary departments of English. The third and forth days covered the female and male grammar departments respectively. Other subjects that the students were tested on during these four days were arithmetic, algebra, United States and ancient histories, rhetoric, geography, and Latin. Reports about the school also indicated that gentiles now made up some of the nearly 200 pupils attending the school. The correspondent to *The Israelite* reported that the school was non-sectarian in every respect except for its name.[25] The Society's charter also stipulated that, "no pupil shall be compelled to participate in religious instruction."[26]

II

As the Hebrew Educational Society continued to advance, four other local educational institutions were also faring well. By 1873, the newly-formed Temple Sinai, New Orleans' first Reform temple, had already established a Sunday school. Rabbi Gutheim, who was hired as rabbi of Temple Sinai after working for a few years in New York, confirmed a class of fifteen students at Shavuot services that June and another twenty-

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[24]Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity, A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1988), 252-253.
[25]Letter to the Editor, *The Israelite*, 1 July 1873, 5.
[26]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 99.

one the following year.[27] The Sinai school enrolled 142 students, of which the majority were girls, and employed six teachers in 1874.[28]

Congregation Nefutzoth Yehudah's Sunday school was still active under the leadership of Reverend Henry S. Jacobs as superintendent and David Davidson and L.A. Levi as directors. In 1874, their school employed eight female teachers and enrolled about eighty or ninety students. This number included students from Nefutzoth Yehudah as well as students from other congregations. Bible history and religion were among the subjects taught in catechism style at this Sunday school.[29]

Gates of Prayer's Sunday school was run under the supervision of Mr. J. Lichtentag and Reverend Marx Moses. Lichtentag was the primary teacher of Hebrew and German. The son of a German rabbi, he was born, raised, and educated in Breslau, Prussia, and was recruited to teach for the congregation after temporarily settling in Mobile, Alabama. Lichtentag also served as *Bar Mitzvah* tutor for the congregation.[30]

The city's fourth educational institution was located in the Jewish Orphans Home of New Orleans. Although The Home was opened in 1856, it is uncertain when its school began. Miss Julia Hart served as instructress of secular studies and Mr. L. Shoenberg served as superintendent of the school. Mr. Shoenberg also instructed the students in Hebrew and religious duties. The school room located in The Home could accommodate forty to fifty pupils. Upon examination in the summer of 1873, it was reported that the school's "pupils were in excellent training, and thoroughly proficient in

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[27]In 1868, Rabbi Gutheim accepted a position as English Lecturer of Temple Emanuel of New York and did not return to New Orleans until 1871 as rabbi of Temple Sinai.
[28]Letter to the Editor, *The Israelite*, 20 June, 1873, 5; "New Orleans Letter," *The Israelite*, 10 April, 1874, 6.
[29]Ibid.
[30]"Crescent City News," *The Israelite*, 16 January, 1874, 2.

the studies in which they were examined." These subjects included reading, grammar, geography, history, and Hebrew.[31]

As far as the religious school of Shanarai-Chasset, *The Occident* reported in 1859 that it probably failed in the mid-1850s.[32] Children from this congregation, who did not attend the all-day school of the Hebrew Educational Society, probably were educated at the Sunday school of Nefutzoth Yehudah.

In the early 1870s, New Orleans Jewry was experiencing a taste of communal unity for the first time in their history. Not only did the community boast three major synagogues, but it also sustained a Jewish Orphans Home and the successful school of the Hebrew Educational Society. At this point it seemed as if this community was breaking away from its past history of Jewish apathy. However, the community still faced challenges in the upcoming decades which would test its devotion and loyalty to the cause.

III

In 1875, the New Orleans Jewish community again found itself in a poor state financially. A correspondent to *The Israelite* began a letter to the editor as follows:

> Our city is not in a very prosperous condition; her commerce has slackened, her finances weakened, under the degenerating influences of bad government, poor crops, and other local

[31]Ibid., 1 August, 1873, 6.
[32]News Items, *The Occident*, 8 September, 1859, vol. XVII, no. 24, p. 144.

> troubles. Yet notwithstanding these sad facts, our Jewish people are as energetic as ever.[33]

The school of the Hebrew Educational Society was also affected by the financial situation of the city. It was reported that the school was on the verge of closing due to a lack of proper patronage. However, the society had elected a new president a year earlier, Mr. Julius Weis, who embodied the energy described in the letter to the editor. As president, he used his influence and means to help sustain and revive the dying school.[34]

Yet despite Weis' efforts, it is apparent that the school was still in need of serious support. Another letter was printed in *The Israelite* that year addressing the New Orleans Jewish community and its loss of interest in their educational institution. The letter complained:

> Look at the beautiful temples and synagogues and other institutions, societies and lodges, they are all upheld, and the Hebrew School, which is the beginning of the synagogue is neglected... It should be a pride for the Israelites of New Orleans to have an ornament like this of their own.

The letter continued as a plea for more active and wealthy members, as well as other community leaders, to take part in sustaining the school.[35]

The school of the Hebrew Educational Society did survive for a short while longer. In fact, it seemed to the board as if the energy of its members would carry the school well into the next century. In 1875 it had hired a new principal, Mr. Ulrich Bettison, and elected a new

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[33]Letter to the Editor, *The Israelite*, 25 June, 1875, 6.
[34]New Orleans Letter, *The Israelite*, 20 August, 1875, 6.
[35]Ibid.

superintendent, Reverend I. L. Leucht. After the closing exercises of the school in the summer of 1877, *The Israelite* correspondent wrote, "With such men at the head of an institution as comprise this board continued success is inevitable."[36]

The new leadership, however, was not strong enough and the ominous financial situation forced the school to close its doors permanently in 1881. In his autobiography, Julius Weis wrote that when he first accepted presidency of the society in 1874, the school had already incurred a floating debt of $4000 and a mortgage debt of $18,000. Within the first few years he was able to pay off the floating debt and settle with the mortgage creditors. But in 1881, the school suffered another hard hit which only added to its troubles. Dr. Baar, who was head of the corps of teachers at the school at this time, resigned his position to accept a job with the Jewish Orphans' Asylum in New York City. Although Weis did not specifically address the reason for Baar's departure, it seems evident that his reason was financial.[37]

With Baar's resignation, the society set out to find a replacement. Their efforts, however, were unsuccessful. As a result, Weis reported that in 1881 the school was sold. After paying off all debts, the society was left with $4000. This money was divided equally and donated to the Jewish Orphans Home of New Orleans and the Touro Infirmary.[38]

The building, that once stood as the school of the Hebrew Educational Society, eventually became part of the New Orleans public school system. Although the structure was torn down in 1891, the builders of its

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[36]New Orleans Letter, *The Israelite*, 6 July, 1877.
[37]Julius Weis, *Autobiography of Julius Weis* (New Orleans: Press of Goldman's Printing Office, 1908), 24-25, Small Collections 12858, The American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati.
[38]Ibid.

replacement added inlaid bricks of contrasting colors on its front to form the initials, "H.E.S."[39] That structure which displayed the last physical traces of this nineteenth century Jewish educational institution was demolished some time after 1941.

Although the Hebrew Educational Society's endeavor failed after only fourteen years, one must note what an historic accomplishment this institution was for the Jewish Community of New Orleans. Not only did the society's efforts bring about almost a decade and a half of communal unity, but the school also exhibited the community's intense desire for religious education of their youth. This school demonstrated to New Orleans Jewry that an educational institution has the ability to bring cohesion to a community.

As mentioned in chapter one, the German immigrant Jewish day schools of the mid-nineteenth century closed in most cities by the early 1870s as public school systems developed.[40] The school of the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia, for example, which has been regarded as one of the most successful educational institutions of the nineteenth century, lasted from 1851 through 1872.[41] In comparison to this renowned Philadelphia institution, the school of the Hebrew Educational Society of New Orleans should be praised for surviving throughout the 1870s for fourteen years, despite the hard times that the community was facing.

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[39]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 100.
[40]Lloyd P. Gartner, "Temples of Liberty Unpolluted: American Jews and Public Schools, 1840-1875," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus* ed. Bertram Wallace Korn (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1976), 165-166.
[41]Judah Pilch, *The History of Jewish Education in America* (New York: American Association for Jewish Education, 1959), 34.

IV

With the closing of the school of the Hebrew Educational Society in 1881, hopes for bringing communal unity to New Orleans Jewry were postponed. The period from 1875 until the turn of the century was one of slow internal change and individual institutional growth. Although Ashkenazi and Korn both claimed that this period approaching the late 1800s was ripe for communal cohesion and expansion, Jewish organizational growth did not actually materialize until the end of the century and into the beginning of the twentieth century. Between 1875 and 1900, only one new synagogue was established, Chevra Thilim in 1887. Yet at the end of this twenty-five year period, a new drive for communal unity was born through the efforts of a group of individuals trying to secure a permanent home for the newly established Young Men's Hebrew Association of New Orleans. Perhaps it was these slow internal changes that took place during the last quarter of the nineteenth century that harbored a resurgence of energy for communal unity that would continue into the beginning of the twentieth century.

In order to get a full picture of what was going on internally in the community during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, we must turn from the chronological documenting of the history of Jewish education in New Orleans. Bobbie Malone, in her article on the history of Congregation Gates of Prayer, discussed the extent of assimilation in New Orleans around the time of the Civil War. She estimated that only ten percent of the Jewish community in the ante-bellum period affiliated with congregations. This was largely due to the fact that the new immigrants had to worry about economic survival and therefore had to give up

traditional practices because of long workdays and the need to work on Saturdays. Additionally, many of the early Jews of New Orleans grew so accustomed to assimilation, that when the congregations were established, synagogue affiliation seemed unnecessary.[42]

The beginning of the conflict between Orthodoxy and Reform in New Orleans seemed to have begun around 1861 with the coming of Dr. Bernard Illowy as spiritual leader to Shanarai-Chasset. Described as a "champion of Orthodoxy," his arrival brought immediate controversy into the community. The strife began three days after his coming to New Orleans when he was invited to a congregant's home for dinner. As the host served Muscovy duck for the main course, Illowy protested that this type of fowl was not kosher. The response from the host was that Muscovy ducks were surely kosher, for this had been the long-standing *minhag* of the New Orleans community and that their previous leader, Rabbi Gutheim, had proclaimed it kosher.[43]

After several more episodes with congregants, Dr. Illowy wrote in a letter about the New Orleans Jewish community that they "can no longer remain on friendly terms with the old Judaism... they must have a new Judaism which the rabbi must reshape to their taste." Just four years after his arrival as head of Shanarai-Chasset, Illowy resigned in 1865. Rabbi Gutheim once again returned to this controversial synagogue as he was chosen as Illowy's successor.[44]

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[42]Bobbie Malone, "New Orleans Uptown Jewish Immigrants: The Community of Congregation Gates of Prayer, 1850-1860," in *Louisiana History* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana Historical Association, 1992), 249.
[43]Max Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir of Temple Sinai, 1872-1922* (New Orleans: American Printing Co., Ltd., 1922) 43-44.
[44]Ibid., 45. Although Gutheim was hired in 1865 to serve as rabbi of *Shanarai-Chasset*, he left in 1868, to accept a position as English Lecturer of Temple Emanuel of New York.

Although rumors of a Reform congregation being started in New Orleans circulated within the city in 1854 and again in 1864, the first true Reform Congregation did not appear until 1872 with the consecration of Temple Sinai on November 13. After a four year stay in New York at Temple Emanuel, Rabbi Gutheim was called to return to New Orleans as spiritual leader of the new Reform congregation. This temple that was started under Reform principles, included in its edifice an organ imported from Cincinnati costing $6200. By 1873, the Ritual Committee of the temple was already working to make sure congregants did not wear head coverings and even printed a card asking visitors to uncover their heads upon entrance. Temple Sinai joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (U.A.H.C.) on July 28, 1877.[45]

As the community was exposed to the Reform movement in the 1870s, other congregations began to look with a watchful eye toward the reforms going on at Temple Sinai. In June of 1875, Reverend Moses of Gates of Prayer made public his desire to affiliate with the Reform movement at a confirmation service. In his sermon, he spoke of the benefits of joining the U.A.H.C. and supporting the rabbinical college it sponsored.[46]

In 1877, Reverend Moses again recommended that the board affiliate with the U.A.H.C., but the motion was tabled. Meanwhile, many reforms were already taking place in the congregation. First of all, a Gentile vocalist was hired to sing in the temple's choir. Other reforms included the adoption of family pews and Isaac Mayer Wise's prayerbook, *Minhag America*.[47] Although Reverend Moses' numerous attempts did bring about

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[45]Ibid., 57-65.
[46]Correspondence, *The Israelite*, 25 June, 1875, 6.
[47]New Orleans Letter, *The Israelite*, 19 January, 1877, 5.

congregational reforms, Gates of Prayer did not officially affiliate with the Reform movement until just before World War I.[48]

As mentioned in chapter one, members of the New Orleans Jewish Community in the nineteenth century enjoyed complete acceptance into nearly all social and government organizations. This assimilation was probably the principal factor that slowed down the process of uniting the city's Jewish community. Because Jews were fitting in to all social circles, they felt no pressure to create a uniquely Jewish social life of their own. As the first and second generation Americans were toying with the idea of fitting into prestigious social circles and breaking down barriers between Jews and Gentiles, they were also breaking down the walls of their individualist pride as Jews. Not only were more and more intermarriages taking place, but Jews were also frequently participating in distinctly Christian practices.

Mardi Gras, the Roman Catholic religious celebration that precedes the sacred period of Lent, was the ticket to assimilation for many Jews in New Orleans. It was a time for many to hide their Judaism behind masks and costumes and celebrate with the Catholics. Ironically, Jews became central to these Catholic practices as they were being chosen as kings and queens of the social balls that accompanied the yearly festivities. Stuart Landry, a New Orleans historian, identifies Louis J. Salomon, a Jew, as the first king of the Carnival Club Rex in 1872.[49] Also in 1877, another Jew, Miss Edith Labatt, was selected Queen of the Carnival season.[50]

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[48]Malone, "New Orleans Uptown Jewish Immigrants", 264.
[49]Stuart O. Landry, *History of the Boston Club* (New Orleans, 1938), 220-249, quoted in Korn, *Early Jews*, 228, 334.
[50]New Orleans Letter, *The Israelite*, 9 March, 1877, 6.

Even well into the twentieth century, Jews played a pivotal role in Mardi Gras and other aspects of the secular community's social life. When the Young Men's Hebrew Association expanded its quarters in 1919, its building named the Athenaeum, was the scene of most of the city's Carnival balls and home of the New Orleans Philharmonic symphony. This building remained the center of social and cultural life until the Municipal Auditorium was built in 1930.[51]

But involvement in the Mardi Gras social life was not a new phenomenon for Jews in New Orleans. As early as 1808, a Jew named Maurice Barnett was a member of "la Société du banquou", probably a social eating club affiliated with Mardi Gras.[52] Also, many of the biggest names in Jewish circles were members and officers of the social organizations of New Orleans. Judah P. Benjamin, Isaac and Samuel Delgado, Julius Weis, and many others were members of the Boston and Pickwick Clubs, which were closely associated with Mardi Gras.[53] Ironically, today these two clubs forbid membership of Jews into their social organizations.

What is most interesting about Jewish assimilation and affiliation into the non-Jewish social life of New Orleans was the fact that these Jews were not ashamed to expose it to the rest of the nation. Article after article in the correspondence section of *The Israelite* during the 1870s, 1880s, and beyond, mentioned the pride Jews took in the carnival season. One particular article concluded with the words, "Jew and Gentile together partake of the festive spirit. May it so continue forever!" After explaining that throughout history Jews adopted many customs from their neighbors,

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[51]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 103.
[52]Korn, *Early Jews*, 107.
[53]Ibid., 228.

so too did the Jews of New Orleans adopt these carnival rituals. It was as if they were boasting to the rest of the country that their Jewish cultural life was being enhanced by Christian practices around them.[54]

V

On September 2, 1881, Congregations Nefutzoth Yehudah and Shanarai-Chasset amalgamated because of financial problems in both congregations. The new congregation became known as Touro synagogue, named after Judah Touro who was the major benefactor of Shanarai-Chasset.[55] Two years earlier, one of the congregations affiliated with the U.A.H.C., and after their merger, Touro Synagogue remained a Reform congregation.[56] Because the major congregations in New Orleans affiliated with the Reform movement, the new Eastern European immigrants arrived in a city without an Orthodox *minyan*.[57] Therefore in 1885, when a group of Polish Jews immigrated to New Orleans, they established an Orthodox congregation. This new synagogue, Congregation Chevra Thilim, was incorporated on July 27, 1887. The aims of this newly established congregation, according to their charter, were "to worship God according to Polish Jewish ritual, the establishment of a cemetery for burial of members and their families... and the practices of charity."[58]

As the twentieth century approached, the Jews of New Orleans were divided into three Reform congregations and one Orthodox congregation.

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[54]"Mardi Gras," *The Israelite*, 7 February, 1913, 14.
[55]The congregation was named after Judah Touro before his death. Touro died in 1854.
[56]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 22. It is unclear which of the two congregations affiliated with the U.A.H.C.
[57]Although Gates of Prayer had not formally affiliated with the Reform movement, its practices were certainly more Reform than Orthodox.
[58]Ibid., 42.

Although the Jews were enjoying integration into the non-Jewish social community around them, as they began returning to their faith through synagogue life in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a new hope for communal unity emerged. Not only had the financial situation improved in New Orleans, but also the last major yellow fever outbreak occurred in 1878. The size of the community also seemed to be fairly stable as New Orleans did not experience a great influx of Eastern European immigrants after the Civil War. With all these factors in place, the Jews of New Orleans began to search for ways to identify themselves as a united community.

As alluded to earlier, the first attempt to centralize the Jewish community took place in the establishment of the Young Men's Hebrew Association (Y.M.H.A.). Although efforts for this organization began in the early-1880's, the institution was not officially established until December 18, 1891.[59] A platform for this organization was drafted by Mr. Sidney H. March stating that its objectives were

> the improvement of the intellectual, moral, social, and physical condition of its members; the establishment of a Jewish unity broader than congregational lines or the limitation of wealth and society, and the general promotion of the interest and progress of the Hebrew community of New Orleans.[60]

Although an effort was made towards Jewish communal unity in New Orleans, it was impeded for another five years because of an act of nature. During its first year, the home of the Y.M.H.A. was destroyed by fire and

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[59]Ibid., 103.
[60]Leo Shpall, *The Jews in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Steeg Printing and Publishing Co., 1936), 27; *The Israelites of Louisiana* (New Orleans: W.E. Myers, 1905), 73.

was not rebuilt until November of 1896. The new institution included reading rooms, classrooms, a library, a gymnasium, a theater, and other facilities to host social, literary, and musical entertainment for both youth and seniors.[61]

Although the Y.M.H.A. did stimulate interest for Jewish unity in New Orleans, this institution was not the answer to the community's need. As the nineteenth century came to a close, the Jews of New Orleans were still searching for an answer to their desire for community. Although their children were being educated by their individual congregational Sunday schools, parents were beginning to realize that their one and two day a week schools did not offer enough education to nurture a flourishing and informed Jewish community throughout the next century. Looking back at the continuity that the school of the Hebrew Educational Society brought to the city's Jewry in the 1870s, some lay leaders pondered the possibility of creating a new Jewish educational institution for the city. The answer to the community's inquiries and desires came within the first two decades of the twentieth century, through the founding of several religious educational institutions.

[61]Shpall, *The Jews in Louisiana*, 27-28.

Chapter 3
The Push for a Talmud Torah in the Twentieth Century

At the turn of the century, the New Orleans Jewish community expressed a new desire for communal unity through the founding of new institutions. After nearly a century of enjoying complete acceptance into secular circles, the Jews of New Orleans began searching for ways to bring about cohesion among their co-religionists. Although some hoped that an educational institution might lead the way to this goal, the city's history of unsuccessful schools dampened community enthusiasm over this prospect. However, there were supporters of this idea who never gave up on their efforts. Throughout the first twenty years of the twentieth century, these individuals experimented with multiple attempts to create the perfect Jewish educational institution. It was the persistence of these leaders that led to the successful introduction of a communal Jewish school in 1918. An examination of their efforts through the early years of the twentieth century reveals the vision behind their struggles and the obstacles that they had to overcome.

I

After the closing of the Hebrew Educational Society's school in the early 1880s, the Jewish community of New Orleans was forced to depend on congregational religious schools for their children's religious education. As a result, the Sunday schools and religious schools of the individual congregations grew rapidly and their curricula improved significantly.

Confirmation examinations and exercises gained a new importance and became a central part of synagogue life in the New Orleans community around the turn of the century.

The Jewish Ledger, the New Orleans Jewish weekly newspaper which began publishing in 1895, documented that students began preparations for religious school testing well in advance of the actual exercises. They were taught in catechism style the creeds and prayers required for confirmation.[1] At Congregation Gates of Prayer, the students were required to become proficient in Hebrew grammar, reading, and translation for testing day.[2] Since its founding in the early 1870s, Gates of Prayer's religious school had transformed from a weekly Sunday school to a religious school which met three times a week for a total of seven hours.[3]

Hebrew was also central to the curriculum of the school of The Jewish Orphans Home at the beginning of the twentieth century. At their annual examination ceremony, students were expected to parse Hebrew verbs and translate sentences into Hebrew in written and oral form. Biblical history also made up a large part of the curriculum.[4]

As The Home was thoroughly preparing its orphans in religious studies, its board became concerned with making sure its children were also prepared for the future workplace. In 1900, they issued a plea in *The Jewish Ledger* to the New Orleans Jewish community. The institution's leaders stated their hope for a benefactor to endow the building of a proposed manual training school as an annex to The Home.[5] On May 3, 1902, Rabbi Isaac L. Leucht, first vice-president of the Jewish Orphans

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[1]"Confirmand Exercises," *The Jewish Ledger*, 6 May, 1898, 2.
[2]"Examinations," *The Jewish Ledger*, 4 July 1895, 10.
[3]"Annual Exercises," *The Jewish Ledger*, 3 June, 1898, 5.
[4]"Proficiency in Hebrew," *The Jewish Ledger*, 21 April, 1899, 2.
[5]"For a Manual School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 12 January, 1900, 2.

Home received a positive response from Isidore Newman which indicated his willingness to:

> offer to you the money requisite to erect such a building [a training school for boys and girls] and hope that Providence may spare you to see this building completed, and enable the boys and girls of our city to derive full benefit of your labor.[6]

Isidore Newman, the benefactor of The Home's manual training school, immigrated to America from Kaiserlautern, Germany in 1852 at the age of fourteen. After working for several years in a general merchandise store and in the cotton business, he founded a banking and brokerage firm known as Isidore Newman and Son of New York and New Orleans. Through the fortune he amassed from his firm, Newman became a benefactor of numerous Jewish and Christian charities throughout Louisiana.[7] But it was his generosity of donating $40,000 to The Jewish Orphans Home that brought a new educational institution to New Orleans at the turn of the century.[8]

The Isidore Newman Manual Training School was opened on October 3, 1904. It was located on Peters Avenue, a block and a half off of St. Charles Avenue.[9] With his gift, Newman stipulated that besides funding the inmates of The Jewish Orphans Home, the school should also be open to a number of poor children, regardless of their religious belief. Thus the school became non-sectarian.[10]

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[6]"Manual Training School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 9 May, 1902, 2.
[7]Leo Shpall, *The Jews in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Steeg Printing and Publishing Co., 1936), 43.
[8]Julian B. Feibelman, *A Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community* (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1941), 91.
[9]This is the same location where the Isidore Newman Preparatory School stands today.
[10]"Inauguration of the Isidore Newman Manual Training School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 20 September, 1904, 8-9.

The objective of the Manual Training School was, "to educate the hand and so to train the mental faculties, that hand and brain may work in unison toward the accomplishment of good work in a given line of manual endeavor." The school offered training in fine arts, manual training, domestic arts, household management, music, and mechanical drawing. Direction of the institution was undertaken by the Association for the Relief of Jewish Widows and Orphans. Its board hired Mr. James Edwin Addicott as the training school's first principal. Although the school did not include religious studies in its curriculum, it became a pride of the New Orleans Jewish community.[11] The energy and enthusiasm that went into the founding of this institution indicates the new community-building spirit that was present in the New Orleans Jewish community at the turn of the century. This endeavor was a major achievement for New Orleans in that its Jews realized that their community was suddenly strengthened as they worked together on this educational project.

At the school's dedication ceremony on January 8, 1905, "everybody worthy of a place in the progressive education of this community was present." The celebrated event represented a coming together of Jewish and non-Jewish community leaders. Among those present from the Jewish community were Rabbi Max Heller of Temple Sinai and Rabbi Leucht, who each gave speeches, as well as members of the Southern Rabbinical Association.[12] The Manual Training School was the first New Orleans institution in the twentieth century that showed promise for communal unity as its dedication ceremony brought together leaders of different synagogues in New Orleans and in the South.

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[11]Ibid.

[12]"The Golden Jubilee, Isidore Newman Manual Training School Dedicated," *The Jewish Ledger*, 13 January, 1905, 1.

II

A number of attempts to create new religious educational institutions arose in New Orleans' Orthodox community during the early years of the twentieth century. As early as 1898, *The Jewish Ledger* mentioned rumors that a Talmud Torah was going to be opened by a number of *Chasidic Morenus* and Talmudic scholars in New Orleans.[13] By the summer of 1901, the Talmud Torah was no longer just a rumor. A group of eighty members of a society known as Chevra Talmud Torah met weekly to plan the opening of their school on October 1. The society was made up of individuals from one of the city's Orthodox congregations, yet they declared that their school would be open to any child who desired to study Hebrew. There is no evidence, however, that any Reform Jews in New Orleans ever participated in this society's work.[14]

As the plans of Chevra Talmud Torah were made public, a small charitable group founded in 1895 became interested in their endeavor. The group known as Chevra Somech Nophlim was an organization of Orthodox philanthropists which not only assisted fellow Jews financially, but also provided pastoral duties for the community. The members of this association also formed a small local *minyan*.[15] Somech Nophlim made a pledge in the summer of 1901 to dedicate their High Holy Day revenues to Chevra Talmud Torah to aid in their founding of a school which would be free of charge to all students.[16]

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[13]Local Notes, *The Jewish Ledger*, 26 August, 1898, 10.
[14]"Talmud Torah," *The Jewish Ledger*, 14 June, 1901, 2.
[15]*The Israelites of Louisiana: Their Religious Civic, Charitable, and Patriotic Life* (New Orleans: W. E. Myers, 1904), 61.
[16]Somech Nophlim, *The Jewish Ledger*, 26 July 1901, 2.

But when another synagogue, Congregation Chevra Thilim became involved in Chevra Talmud Torah's proceedings, the project for opening a free school that fall was delayed. On September 29, 1901, a group of over 200 men from Chevra Talmud Torah, Chevra Thilim, and Somech Nophlim met in the Pythian Castle Hall to discuss plans for the school. At that meeting, Mr. S. Marcus stood up and made a suggestion which changed the course of discussion of the school's creation efforts. He proposed that the group first form a united synagogue of the New Orleans Orthodox Jewish community. Once a unified Orthodox community was created, then they would be in a better position to establish and support a Talmud Torah. The proposition was almost unanimously accepted with only two dissenting votes. Within a few minutes, over $1000 was pledged for the establishment of a united Orthodox community and a committee was selected to take action on the plan.[17]

But the Talmud Torah opened before the founding of a united Orthodox community, despite the group's decision at the September 1901 meeting. On July 20, 1902, the Talmud Torah was officially opened on the third floor of Congregation Somech Nophlim at 510 Carondelet Street. Mr. I. Levin, who had studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary, became the teacher of the school. Its curriculum included both secular and religious studies. School was in session weekdays, except Tuesdays, from nine to twelve, and on Saturdays from two to five.[18] The school was a joint effort of the entire New Orleans Orthodox Jewish community. It was not only supported by the Chevra Talmud Torah society, but also by funds

[17]"Orthodox Israelites United to Establish a Synagogue," *The Jewish Ledger*, 4 October, 1901, 3.
[18]"Talmud-Torah School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 25 July 1902, 4.

from the sale of High Holy Day seats in Congregations Somech Nophlim and Chevra Thilim.[19]

Through the New Orleans Jewish community's earlier attempts to establish all-day religious schools, they learned that funding was the principal issue marking a school's survival. They also discovered that finding enough suitable teachers in a relatively small and uneducated Jewish community was no simple task. So with their founding of this new communal Talmud Torah, they pooled their resources together in the hope of creating a successful educational institution which was supported by all Orthodox members of the community. Despite the society's earlier attempts to open their school to all members of the community, ideological differences between its Orthodox founders and Reform Jews in the community kept this school from becoming a non-denominational institution.

Only four months after the school began operation, the three Orthodox synagogues in New Orleans, Anshe Sfard, Chevra Thilim, and Somech Nophlim, merged into an Orthodox union with Rabbi S. Glazer as minister. The newly formed union reorganized their Talmud Torah and named it the Hebrew Public School. With its restructuring, class schedules were changed so that students were allowed to attend regular public school during the day. Judah Pilch, in his *History of Jewish Education in America*, explains that this new schedule, which transformed the Talmud Torah into an afternoon supplementary school, was also the trend in other American cities during the 1870s. Classes at the Hebrew Public School took place from three until seven on weekdays, from one until four on Saturdays, and from nine until twelve on Sundays. The school's leaders

[19]"For the Talmud Torah," *The Jewish Ledger*, 19 September, 1902, 3.

felt that by changing the hours of the school, students could benefit from the secular studies taught in the city's public schools.[20]

Despite the Hebrew Public School's time changes, its religious curriculum remained the same. Its curriculum encompassed a six year program which included: "Jewish history, chronology, ritual laws, sanitation, ceremonial laws, and tuition in Hebrew so as to be able to read and write the 'holy language' correctly; [and the] ability to translate the Pentateuch into the vernacular." Rabbi Glazer became principal of the school and he was assisted by three other teachers. Daily attendance averaged nearly seventy-five students. Both boys and girls were enrolled in this Orthodox institution; although it is unclear whether they studied in the same or separate classrooms.[21]

The uniting of the Orthodox synagogues in New Orleans and their founding of a Talmud Torah might have hardened denominational lines in New Orleans. The Orthodox leaders of the new school, however, stressed that their institution was open to all members of the Jewish community. Although there are no records that mention any students besides Orthodox as having attended the school, the Reform community did support this group's actions. At the school's opening day ceremony in 1902, Rabbi Max Heller of Temple Sinai "spoke of the benefit to be derived by orthodoxy in this city by such measures as a Hebrew Public School."[22] Two years later,

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[20]"Hebrew Public School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 28 November, 1902, 10; Works Projects Administration, *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives of Louisiana* (University: The Department of Archives, Louisiana State University, 1941), 52; Judah Pilch, ed., *The History of Jewish Education in America* (New York: American Association for Jewish Education, 1959), 34. Congregation Anshe Sfard was founded in 1900 by Russian, Polish, and Galacian Jews. W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 52.

[21]"Hebrew Public School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 12 December, 1902, 5; "Hebrew Public School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 28 November, 1902, 10.

[22]"Hebrew Public School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 28 November, 1902, 10; The First Session," *The Jewish Ledger*, 10 July, 1903, 10; "A Separate, Yet United People," *The Jewish Ledger*, 18 December, 1902, 3. This article mentions the interest that the non-Orthodox Israelites took in the merger of the Orthodox community, but fails to mention reasons why.

both Rabbis Heller and Leucht wrote letters endorsing the Orthodox union's building of a synagogue. Heller observed that "it is as much the duty of Reform Jews to come to the assistance of their Orthodox brethren, as it is that of the strong to assist the weak, of the rich to aid the poor. In Judaism, we are all pledged to stand by one another." Leucht similarly expressed his hope that the Orthodox union would "receive the earnest support of all, whether Orthodox or Reform. The true, liberal minded man, will help his brother to seek God according to his own light."[23] Even though New Orleans' Reform and Orthodox communities shared such a supportive relationship, in the early years of the twentieth century they still remained socially separate communities. But these early efforts by Reform leaders laid the groundwork for a partnership in education that would occur in the 1920s.

In the midst of a renewal of energy in the Orthodox community, a small committee of men met and founded a new synagogue called Beth Israel on October 25, 1903.[24] This Orthodox congregation was founded as a consolidation of several smaller *minyans*.[25] With plans under way for this new synagogue, the 110 members of Chevra Somech Nophlim decided to disband as a congregation and merge with Beth Israel. The organization called Somech Nophlim did, however, retain its identity as a charity organization.[26] A little over one year later, Beth Israel secured a building for their synagogue on 1616 Carondelet Street. Thus in 1903, there were six congregations in New Orleans, three Reform and three Orthodox.[27]

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[23]"Orthodox Synagog Endorsed," *The Jewish Ledger*, 17 February, 1905, 18.
[24]Congregation Beth Israel became part of the Orthodox union.
[25]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 26.
[26]"Somech Nophlim," *The Jewish Ledger*, 8 September, 1905, 1.
[27]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 26. As Beth Israel and Somech Nophlim merged, the united synagogue Beth Israel became the sixth active synagogue in New Orleans.

After the merger, the Hebrew Public School was housed in the basement of Congregation Beth Israel. That space consisted of three rooms and an assembly hall for the school.[28] Although the school was located on Beth Israel's premises, it retained its status as a joint effort of all New Orleans' Orthodox congregations.

At the dedication ceremony of Beth Israel on April 1, 1906, the Reform leaders again showed support for the endeavors of the Orthodox community. Rabbi Heller preached the dedicatory sermon saying that, "the reformed Jews are not disposed, and have never been disposed, to ignore their brethren of the orthodoxy." Reverend Julius Braunfeld, the cantor of Temple Sinai, also showed his support for the Orthodox community as he chanted "*Mizmor Shir Chanukas* " while the new synagogue's *Ner Tamid* was lit.[29]

In the early part of 1909, the Hebrew Public School stopped advertising in *The Jewish Ledger*. Although no records of the school remain which document its failure, the Hebrew Public School probably closed shortly afterwards. *The Inventory of Church and Synagogue Archives of Louisiana* mentions that the school continued to run halfway through 1910 at Beth Israel, although this too was not officially documented.[30] Although this school closed in 1909, the desire for a religious educational institution which would serve the community still remained strong. The individual attempts by the Orthodox congregations during the next few years to establish new communal schools became the seeds that eventually bloomed into the vision of an educational institution that would unite the entire Jewish community.

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[28]"Synagog Beth Israel," *The Jewish Ledger*, 8 September, 1905, 3.
[29]"Dedication of Synagog Beth Israel," *The Jewish Ledger*, 6 April, 1906, 3.
[30]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 119.

III

Between 1910 and 1916, two of the Orthodox congregations in New Orleans attempted to start their own Hebrew schools which would compete to serve the entire Orthodox community. Congregation Beth Israel emphasized the importance of organizing a school which was "up-to-date" with only qualified teachers who were thoroughly familiar with the English language. Some of the founders of this school were previously affiliated with the Hebrew Public School.[31] This school, referred to as the "New Hebrew School," was founded in 1912 and employed Rabbi B. Meyerovitz as principal.[32]

Congregation Chevra Thilim simultaneously opened its own Talmud Torah on May 1 of that same year. This school's mission was to "impart to the children a thorough knowledge of Hebrew and bring them up in the practice of strict Orthodoxy." Rabbi M. H. Goldberg was engaged as principal.[33]

After a couple years of failed efforts, leaders from both of these schools began to look toward a future which would drastically change the overall nature of the New Orleans Jewish community. These individuals envisioned uniting all of the Hebrew schools in the city into one community-wide modern Talmud Torah. Although their efforts did not completely materialize until 1918, the next few years became a time of trial and error in which they worked to perfect their vision.

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[31]"A Modern Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 1 July, 1910, 7.
[32]"Congregation Beth Israel," *The Jewish Ledger*, 23 February, 1912, 9.
[33]"Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 26 April, 1912, 7.

Although there is no documented evidence as to what brought these Orthodox leaders to their decision to form a communal Hebrew school, a couple of factors seem to have led to this novel concept. First of all, the New Orleans Jewish community was not typical of the rest of the country. Unlike traditional community dynamics, Orthodox and Reform Jewish leaders in New Orleans showed great respect and support for each other's endeavors. Communal schools were being established in other cities, even though their Orthodox and Reform communities were not as close knit. How much the more so leaders in New Orleans believed that their own community could benefit from a communal educational institution which might bring its denominations even closer.

Secondly, the idea of reforming Jewish education was prevalent among Jewish leaders in the South in the 1910s. On April 7, 1916, an essay was printed in *The Jewish Ledger* entitled "The Problem of Jewish Education." The author, Rabbi David Marx, sought to create an organization made up of Jewish educators from the South. In his essay, Marx pointed out that in the religious schools, "there pervades... ...an anarchy under which 'every school or school superintendent does that which is right in his own eyes.'" He alluded to the fact that schools needed to come up with complete curricula which would not only look toward the future of the students, but would also take into account ways to maintain the religious schools in keeping with the modern advances of their secular counterparts.[34] As "reforming" the religious schools became the watchword of the day, Jewish leaders in New Orleans were most likely influenced by this essay and this trend.

[34]"The Problem of Jewish Education," *The Jewish Ledger*, 7 April, 1916, 3-4.

And finally, as each of the Orthodox Hebrew schools failed because of financial difficulties and space issues within their own institutions, they realized that support for a successful school should be enlisted from the entire community. With these three dynamics influencing the future of Jewish education in the city, plans for a communal Hebrew school were announced in *The Jewish Ledger* on August 4, 1916. In this article, the following plea was addressed to the Jews of New Orleans by a committee of twelve men headed by Harry Singer:

> ...In many cities there are magnificent Talmud Torahs which are the just pride of the respective communities and which demonstrate clearly that it is possible in this country to give Jewish children a true and thorough Jewish education.
>
> What about New Orleans? What has been done for the Jewish education of our children in this city, where we have three Orthodox and three Reform congregations and houses of worship?

Although the concept of the Talmud Torah was not a new one, the idea of making it a communal endeavor was a new development. By writing this letter, Singer hoped that New Orleans' Jewry would understand the importance of a religious school established by joint communal efforts. So these twelve men informed the community in their letter that they had recently established "a general and communal Hebrew School which shall not be dependent on nor connected with any one congregation or organization, but which shall be maintained by the entire Jewish community and, in return, serve the entire Jewish community."[35]

[35]"Talmud Torah to be Established," *The Jewish Ledger*, 4 August, 1916, 9.

The idea of a community Talmud Torah developed in New Orleans well before its time. In his description of Talmud Torahs in America, Judah Pilch writes, "It was during the twenties that the idea of Jewish community responsibility for Jewish education began to take root in several of the larger Jewish population centers in the United States." While great Jewish thinkers such as Israel Friedlander and Mordechai Kaplan would influence other Jewish communities in understanding that Jewish education is a communal responsibility, leaders in New Orleans came to this conclusion on their own.[36]

On November 6, 1916 the Jewish Communal School was officially opened.[37] It began operating as a joint venture between the Orthodox congregations of the city and the Y.M.H.A.[38] Its board originally consisted of a number of Orthodox lay leaders plus Rabbi Goldberg of Chevra Thilim and Rabbi Meyerovitz of Beth Israel.[39] Classes were held daily from three thirty to six thirty, Sunday through Friday in the Y.M.H.A. building.[40] Although the title of the school implied that students came from all denominations, it is more likely that the school consisted solely of Orthodox children in its first few years.

Like all previous educational institutions in New Orleans, the Jewish Communal School struggled to survive during its early years. In November 1917, the officers and directors of the school began a process of reorganization in order to save the failing institution. Dr. Mendel Silber, Professor of Education and Director of the Teachers' Institute of the State University of New Mexico, was hired to take charge of the school and help

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[36]Judah Pilch, ed., *The History of Jewish Education in America* , 76.
[37]"Free Hebrew School in New Orleans," *The American Hebrew*, 17 November, 1916, 50.
[38]"The Communal School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 3 November, 1916, 3.
[39]"Talmud Torah to be Established," *The Jewish Ledger*, 4 August, 1916, 9.
[40]"Jewish Communal School Re-Organized," *The Jewish Ledger*, 2 November, 1917, 5.

in its restructuring.[41] Silber's presence did bring new life to the school. Although it is unclear what his initial changes were, within three weeks enrollment in the Jewish Communal School nearly doubled from eighty-two to one hundred and fifty students.[42] By March of 1918, space became an issue for the school. At that time Mr. Sam Bonart, the new president of the Y.M.H.A., personally donated $2500 to buy and remodel a house located directly behind the Y.M.H.A (1628 Clio Street) to accommodate the school's sharp growth in enrollment.[43]

On March 18, 1918, the Jewish Communal School was officially dedicated on the premises of the Y.M.H.A. with Rabbis Goldberg, Heller, and Meyerovitz in attendance.[44] Within one month the school was renamed Communal Hebrew School and it was officially incorporated on April 10, 1918. In its charter, the eight members of the Board of Directors stated the purpose of their society in Article II:

> to promote and encourage the study of the Hebrew language and religion, and for that purpose to establish schools where such language shall be taught.[45]

Children from Reform and Orthodox congregations alike studied side by side at this historic Talmud Torah. The community anxiously awaited this institution because only one of the local congregations offered weekday

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[41]Ibid.
[42]"Jewish Education," *The Jewish Ledger*, 16 November, 1917, 5.
[43]Untitled document describing Communal Hebrew School's history, 1937, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans; "School Rooms to be Dedicated," *The Jewish Ledger*, 1 March, 1918, 9. Other accounts say that the location of the school was in the basement of the Y.M.H.A. I believe that the school was located in a house behind the Y.M.H.A.
[44]"School Dedication," *The Jewish Ledger*, 8 March, 1918, 9.
[45]Original Charter of the Communal Hebrew School, 10 April, 1918, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

supplementary Hebrew education for its students.[46] An article in *The Jewish Ledger* explained just how liberal the school's teachers were, reporting, "The question of whether Jewish education should be religious, secular or cultural never arose." It continued, "The religion, culture and secularism of Judaism was always presented to the student as being so interwoven that its various facets could not exist as separate entities... No child was ever asked which of the 613 precepts he practices and which he does not."[47] Because of the school's liberal philosophy, students never felt isolated because of their liberal or stringent religious practices.

By 1920, the Hebrew school began receiving funds from the Jewish Charitable and Educational Federation which added to its financial stability.[48] This Federation was established in 1913 "to collect funds for the maintenance of the various Jewish institutions and organization; to eliminate indiscriminate and unauthorized forms of solicitation..."[49] These funds from the Federation were also significant in that they represented community-wide support for the school. Besides the funds from the Federation, the school was supported solely by membership payments; no tuition was charged for students.[50]

IV

In September 1920, the New Orleans Jewish Community was formally introduced to Mr. Ephraim E. Lisitzky by *The Jewish Ledger*. The paper

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[46]Congregation Gates of Prayer began offering weekday religious schooling in the late 1800s as noted earlier.
[47]"A Labor of Love," *The Jewish Ledger*, 19 September, 1958, 34.
[48]"Our Jewish Community," *The Jewish Ledger*, 16 April, 1920, 2.
[49]Shpall, *The Jews in Louisiana*, 28.
[50]"Our Communal Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 10 April, 1925, 1.

reported that Lisitzky would be teaching upcoming classes in elementary and advanced Hebrew at the Y.M.H.A sponsored by the New Orleans District Committee of the Zionist Organization of America.[51] Although this poor newcomer to New Orleans was practically unknown at the time, within the next few decades he would become one of the greatest Jewish leaders of New Orleans in the twentieth century. It would be his vision as head of the Communal Hebrew School that would unite the New Orleans Jewish community.

Ephraim E. Lisitzky arrived in New Orleans almost penniless in 1918. He came to the city in his thirties after eighteen years of unsuccessful wandering through America and Canada in search of a vocation. Born in Minsk in 1885, Lisitzky's mother died when he was of pre-school age. Shortly after the death of his newborn sibling, his mother died from stress. Not long after this tragedy, Lisitzky suffered another misfortune as he was deserted by his father who lost the family's money to a gang of Jewish blackmailers. So Lisitzky moved to Slutzk and began his study of Torah and Talmud at a *cheder* and eventually moved on to a *yeshiva* where he became a star student of Talmud. Although his plan was to become a rabbi, his dream was deferred when his father sent him tickets to come to Boston at the age of fifteen.[52]

When Lisitzky moved to America in 1900, he began studying again in a *yeshiva*. But as money became an issue for the young student, he gave up his schooling to work as a *shochet* and a Hebrew tutor. A few years later, when he was working in Auburn, New York, a great new influence came into his life. At the same time that Lisitzky was struggling with his faith

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[51]"Courses in Hebrew," *The Jewish Ledger*, 24 September, 1920, 12.
[52]Ephraim E. Lisitzky, *In the Grips of Crosscurrents* (New York: Block Publishing Company, 1959).

faith and rejecting his Orthodoxy, he was exposed to Zionism by a friend of his father. Through his involvement in the Jewish labor Zionist movement, Lisitzky began a lifelong interest and love for the writing of Hebrew literature.[53]

Ephraim E. Lisitzky[54]
Principal and Superintendent of Communal Hebrew School, 1918-1950

[53]Ibid.
[54]Ibid.

But money once again became an issue for Ephraim Lisitzky. Depressed and nearly suicidal because of his life of struggle and hardships, he sought a career that would make him happy. Through his searching, Lisitzky found that teaching was the answer for him to bring his love for Zionism and Hebrew literature into his career in America. In his autobiography, he wrote, "Much laborious effort and deep probing went into the search for a suitable life goal, but at last I found it-- the vocation of a Hebrew teacher in America."[55] Moshe Meyerovich, in a Hebrew essay about Lisitzky, explained, "His [Lisitzky's] first and most important role was to recognize and perceive education as the intersection of social and national [Zionistic] values."[56] And so fate brought him to New Orleans at a time of new prosperity and hope in the community's educational realm.[57] Although it is not documented when Lisitzky actually took over the role of Principal of Communal Hebrew School, various accounts point to 1918, the year of his arrival in New Orleans.

V

Despite Communal Hebrew School's initial success, the early years of the school were not free of problems. Before the school began receiving funds from the Jewish Charitable and Educational Federation in 1920, money was a serious issue for the institution. Abraham Slabot, president of Communal Hebrew School in 1937, once wrote in *The Jewish Ledger*, "Seeking only the necessities for himself and for the school Dr. Lisitzky

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[55]Ibid.F

[56]משה מאירוביץ, "לדמותו החנוכית של אפרים ליסיצקי", *שבילי החנוך* (1972), 237. This is my own translation.

[57]Ephraim E. Lisitzky, *In the Grips of Crosscurrents*

began the implementation of this program in a building that seemed not to collapse just to prove the Talmudic teachings, 'A house where Torah is studied at night will not be ruined.'"[58]

In 1925, *The Jewish Ledger* reported unfavorable news about Communal Hebrew School. The weekly periodical reported a faction of the Orthodox community was having trouble accepting the idea of a community-wide Talmud Torah. Just as the school began to prosper in the early twenties, some rumblings about this issue took place in the community which led to a series of editorial crossfire articles.

The dispute began as Congregation Beth Israel, the largest Orthodox synagogue in New Orleans, dedicated a new synagogue in 1924 and hired Rabbi Henry Raphel Gold the following year.[59] Within weeks of his arrival in New Orleans, Rabbi Gold set out to convince his congregation that support for and attendance of Communal Hebrew School was not in the best interest of Orthodox Jews. The new rabbi disliked the fact that the Orthodox element of the city cooperated with the Reform community in supporting the school.[60]

After realizing that they could not separate the Reform community from the school, the rabbi and members of Congregation Beth Israel immediately began working on establishing their own Talmud Torah for their students. In this effort, the rabbi and his followers openly publicized their dislike for Communal Hebrew School. Their acts led Leon Palter, Acting President of Communal Hebrew School, to submit the following letter of complaint to the editor of *The Jewish Ledger* on May 29, 1925:

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[58]"A Labor of Love," *The Jewish Ledger*, 19 September, 1958, 1.
[59]"Beth Israel Has New Rabbi," *The Jewish Ledger*, 16 January, 1925, 10.
[60]"Beth Israel Protests," *The Jewish Ledger*, 5 June, 1925, 1-2.

It has come to the notice of the officers of the Communal Hebrew School that false charges are being made against the Communal Hebrew School of this city by persons, who, for reasons of their own, are trying to establish another school in competition to ours. The charges made by these persons are to the effect that traditional Judaism is not being taught in our school and that the school is not being conducted in the Jewish spirit. These charges we wish to deny emphatically and protest against them.

The facts in the case are simply these: A few individuals of Beth Israel Congregation, with their new rabbi as spokesman, had been trying to gain complete control of our school and to change its organization, its curriculum and its teaching staff. What they object to mainly is the co-operation and support of the Reform element in the community. Having failed in the attempt to gain control of the school, they have started a movement for the erection of a school of their own and are attempting to discredit our school and to undermine it by circulating utterly false charges against it. The more intelligent membership of Beth Israel itself does not in the least approve of all this, so that the movement is not even sponsored by the Beth Israel Congregation, as such, but merely by a few individuals and the rabbi of that congregation.

We feel that the Jewish community of New Orleans should be acquainted with these facts for the sake of Jewish education and the cause of Judaism.[61]

Palter's reaction to Beth Israel's accusations and actions brought internal strife into the congregation. One week after this letter was printed in *The Jewish Ledger*, the Board of Directors of Congregation Beth Israel

[61]"An Attempt to Injure the Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 29 May, 1925, 1.

responded to try and save their congregation from embarrassment. However, their response was just a quick fix and a cover-up for their wrongdoing. The editor of *The Jewish Ledger* at this time was Dr. Mendel Silber who, as mentioned earlier, was hired by Communal Hebrew School in 1917 to restructure and head the school. After moving on from that position, he obviously kept the school and its goal close to his heart as he scornfully analyzed Beth Israel's response. In his editorial, Silber emphasized to the community that Beth Israel and their new rabbi were threatening to break up the work that Communal Hebrew School had done for the New Orleans Jewish Community.[62]

In response to Palter's letter, the Board of Beth Israel printed a protest that was passed at a board meeting on June 1, 1925. The protest made the following summarized points: (1) Mr. Palter's letter questioned Beth Israel's right to educate their children on their own. (2) Mr. Palter's letter also incorrectly insinuated that the members of Beth Israel who decided to establish their own school were morally against Reform Jews. (3) Their new rabbi was portrayed unfairly as he was a big supporter of communal unity. (4) The proposal to build their own school was a unanimous decision of the congregation and not just that of a few members. (5) Their new rabbi would still support the "Clio Street Hebrew School." These five points were followed by a claim that Mr. Palter's letter misinterpreted the facts and presented unjust charges against their congregation.[63]

The editor followed Beth Israel's response with the following criticism, "Analyzing this resolution, it will be found that the Board of Directors did not succeed in making things better. If anything, they made them worse."

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[62]"Beth Israel Protests," *The Jewish Ledger*, 5 June, 1925, 1-2. Dr. Mendel Silber was an honorary member of the Communal Hebrew School board in 1925.
[63]Ibid., 1.

Silber pointed out that the members of Beth Israel misread Palter's letter and did not even address his most critical point in their protest: that Communal Hebrew School objected to the charge that traditional Judaism was not being taught in their school. Furthermore, he wrote that this meeting of Beth Israel's board was held in "secret" without those who attempted to injure Communal Hebrew School present. Silber went on to explain that when Rabbi Gold first came to New Orleans, he immediately became convinced that traditional Judaism was not being taught at Communal Hebrew School after spending less than an hour there. The editor also attacked Beth Israel for referring to Communal Hebrew School as the "Clio Street Hebrew School" claiming that it was "an attempt to rob it of its character and function as a 'Communal' institution."[64]

Finally, the editor printed a letter by S. Mintz and H. Bratman, officers of Communal Hebrew School's board. Their letter supported Mr. Palter's attack on Rabbi Gold. In it, they wrote, "In our presence Rabbi Gold said to the effect: We object to the Reform Jews having anything to do with the school; you should never have invited the Reform rabbis to any of our meetings. The Reform Jews do not believe as we do, ...and we do not want them to have anything to do with our school."[65]

Although Beth Israel and its new rabbi threatened to injure the reputation of Communal Hebrew School in 1925, this whole episode seemed to have little effect on the school and its members. If anything, the dispute itself showed what a large impact the school had made on the Jewish community of New Orleans during its first seven years of existence. The other two Orthodox congregations in New Orleans continued to

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[64]Ibid., 1-2.
[65]Ibid., 2.

support Communal Hebrew School and its services. But, this episode paved the way for Beth Israel to establish a second Talmud Torah in New Orleans on May 30, 1926, the Menorah Institute, which would only be open to Orthodox students. Still, a few members of Congregation Beth Israel did continue to support Communal Hebrew School even after the founding of their own congregation's school.[66]

VI

Because of the incident between Communal Hebrew School and Congregation Beth Israel, the school began to promote itself more frequently in *The Jewish Ledger* and through other marketing media. In the promotions, a clear vision statement of the school was presented. A pamphlet released by the school for prospective students explained, "The underlying idea of the School is to employ the Hebrew language and Hebrew literature in order to awaken in the young enthusiastic loyalty for Jewish faith and Jewish people. The children learn to love the language of our Bible and our Prayerbook and thus to enter into the innermost soul-life of Israel."[67] This vision targeted parents who were seeking a Jewish education for their children based on *Torah Lishmah* (the study of Torah for its own sake), rather than study based on religious obligation.

As Communal Hebrew School became more and more popular, its enrollment reached nearly 200 students. In June of 1925, the board of Communal Hebrew School once again set out searching for more adequate quarters for the school. On June 16, a building and lot were purchased on

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[66]"Only One Communal Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 12 February, 1926, 2.
[67]*A Jewish Institution in New Orleans which ranks with the best in the United States: Its work and its Fame* (New Orleans: Communal Hebrew School, c.1925), 4.

Carondelet and Josephine streets for $27,000. The lot measured 105 x 130 feet. Plans were made to begin renovations that August for the school's new building.[68]

Communal Hebrew School, 1925[69]
1630 Josephine Street

On Sunday, November 8, 1925 at 3:30 in the afternoon, the new location of Communal Hebrew School was dedicated. Its building consisted of five spacious classrooms, a library, a secretary's office, a spacious junior synagogue, and an assembly room.[70] During the week prior to this event, *The Jewish Ledger* reported that the school's opening "will usher in a new epoch of Hebrew education for the Jewish children of this city. With

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[68]"A New Home for Communal Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 26 June, 1925, 4.
[69]Photocopy of a picture obtained from Communal Hebrew School.
[70]"Communal Hebrew School to be Dedicated," *The Jewish Ledger*, 16 October, 1925, 5.

the added and adequate facilities that the new building will afford, the Communal Hebrew School of New Orleans will be unsurpassed as an institution for the teaching of the Hebrew language and literature."[71] In an article written in a Hebrew education periodical, scholar Moshe Meyerovich explained Ephraim Lisitzky's philosophy on how to create a strong faculty for Communal Hebrew School, "It is not the quality of the Jewish child which affects Hebrew education in America, rather the disrespect which unfair parents and teachers show against [the child]. There need to be inspirational teachers who most importantly need to possess a pioneering spirit."[72] Lisitzky spent his first seven years at Communal Hebrew School finding pioneering and inspirational teachers as faculty. In 1925, the school employed four other teachers to aid Lisitzky. Aaron Shimon Shpall was hired as Assistant Principal. He had served as a principal of the Government Gymnasium in Kremenicz, Volhynia prior to this position. Aaron Shpall spoke Hebrew in his house and was a frequent contributor to the Hebrew press of America and Europe. The three other teachers who were part of the 1925 faculty were Rose Brenner, A. F. Finegold, and Leo Shpall. Brenner, a New Orleans native, was herself a graduate of Communal Hebrew School. Finegold, who was born in Palestine, taught in Birmingham, Alabama before coming to New Orleans. And Leo Shpall, a Bachelor of Arts graduate from Tulane, was Aaron Shpall's son. After leaving the school in the mid-1930s, Leo Shpall went on to become principal of a Hebrew school in New York and began a

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[71] "The Hebrew School Dedication," *The Jewish Ledger*, November 6, 1925, 1.

[72] משה מאירוביץ, "לדמותו החנוכית של אפרים ליסיצקי", *שבילי החנוך* (1972), 239. This is my own translation.

writing career for Hebrew, Yiddish, and English periodicals such as *The American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, *Yivo Bletter*, and *Hadoar*.[73]

In his report at the 1927 annual meeting of the Communal Hebrew School, Lisitzky expressed his goals for the future of the education in New Orleans. He stated that "inasmuch as America was the greatest physical center of Jewry so it must become the spiritual center as well, and that only by means of a thorough Hebrew education, delving deep into Jewish traditions and ideals, imbibing the true Jewish spirit as expressed in the Bible and Books of the Prophets, could this be achieved."[74]

At the 1902 Zionist Congress, Ahad Ha'am launched a new system for improving Jewish schools. He suggested that Hebrew should be taught in Hebrew rather than the vernacular. Samson Benderly, a native of Palestine, initiated this process into American education the following year in a Baltimore Hebrew School. When Ephraim Lisitzky came to Communal Hebrew School in 1918, he brought this new Zionistic trend with him to New Orleans. All classes and subjects were thereafter taught in "Hebrew as a living language" by Lisitzky and his faculty.[75]

The basic curricula of Communal Hebrew School consisted of elementary, high school, and collegiate departments. The elementary department was a six year program which taught Hebrew reading, grammar, spelling, conversation, literature, and composition. It also included Hebrew Bible study, Jewish History, and Jewish Ethics. The high school program was a four year course which taught Hebrew literature,

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[73]Ibid., 3-4; "Communal Hebrew School Reopened," *The Jewish Ledger*, 1 October, 1926, 3; "Communal Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 5 August, 1927, 11; Excerpt from *The American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 1964, Leo Shpall - Biographies File, The American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati.
[74]"Communal Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 5 August, 1927, 11.
[75]David Kaufman, "'Shul with a Pool': The Synagogue-Center in American Jewish Life, 1875-1925" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1993), 269-271.

grammar, and rhetoric, as well as Hebrew Prophets, Jewish History, Talmud and Aggadah. The collegiate department of the school trained advanced students for the teaching profession. Weekday classes were held from three in the afternoon until eight in the evening. Students were also required to attend Junior congregation, which began in 1921, on *Shabbat* and holidays. These traditional services, which were held at Communal Hebrew School's junior synagogue, required students to read from the Torah and preach sermons.[76]

Outside of the school's basic curriculum, Lisitzky also set up a number of successful extracurricular activities. There were three Young Judaean clubs which had a membership of 175 children. The groups met twice a month and were devoted to the study of Jewish history, the history of Zionism, and current events.[77] In his 1926 article "On Jewish Education in New Orleans," written for an international Hebrew education periodical, Aaron Shpall commented on Zionism and Young Judaea in New Orleans. He wrote, "Thanks to this school, the city of New Orleans became a spiritual, Zionistic center of the cities in the South. Requests from many cities come to this institution asking [us] to send speakers and communal workers connected to [our] local Young Judaea in order to establish branches in their cities. These requests are fulfilled as much as possible and they indeed bring much needed results for the revival of our people."[78] Also, a number of Hebrew evening courses were available to local college students and professionals in Hebrew, Bible, and Ethics.[79]

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[76]"A New Home for Communal Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 26 June, 1925, 3; "Orthodox Junior Congregation," *The Jewish Ledger*, 18 November, 1927, 9.
[77]Ibid.
[78]Aaron Shimon Shpall, "על חנוך עברי בניו אורליאנס", *שבילי החנוך* (1926), 67. This is my own translation.
[79]"An Attempt to Injure the Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 29 May, 1925, 2.

Communal Hebrew School was a unique Jewish institution in that it broke away from traditional Jewish educational models by teaching both boys and girls together. Before Lisitzky came to New Orleans, "giving girls a Jewish education was never given serious consideration." As *The Jewish Ledger* later reported, "It was believed that girls could learn the duties and responsibilities of a Jewish wife and mother from the home and that any other knowledge they acquired was superfluous."[80] Rosalie Cohen, a woman who began studying at the school at eight years old in 1918, commented on the way Communal Hebrew School taught children, saying, "boys and girls were not isolated." She continued, "Actually, there was no separation of sexes at all. Lisitzky never made a distinction between boys and girls. In services there was no *mechitza* and both boys and girls participated in the weekly junior congregation services."[81] Like many other Talmud Torahs which began experimenting with teaching boys and girls together, Communal Hebrew School adopted this trend from its inception.[82]

What was most unique about Communal Hebrew School was the relationship between Ephraim Lisitzky and his students. Lisitzky was long known as "Moreh" to his student and to the New Orleans Jewish community. Although Label Katz, a former student of the school and international president of B'nai B'rith, once commented, "'Moreh' did not compliment his students very often," Lisitzky's affection for his students was obvious.[83] In an article printed in *The Jewish Ledger* in 1958, the writer described this individualized care. He wrote that Lisitzky "had to

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[80]"A Labor of Love," *The Jewish Ledger*, 19 September, 1958, 1.
[81]Rosalie Cohen, phone interview by author, 3 December, 1997.
[82]Edward Orentlicher, *The Talmud Torah in America, Its Structure, Philosophy and Decline (1860-1960)* (Ph.D. diss., Dropsie College, 1962), 66.
[83]"Dr. Lisitzky Lauded At Hebrew School Dinner," *The Jewish Ledger*, 13 April, 1961, 1.

probe into the soul of each student individually and find the responsive cord. It was not simply a matter of imparting knowledge. The far more important task was to implant in the soul of the child a love for Torah in its broadest connotation... It was in this field that Dr. Lisitzky excelled."[84] And that love for his students did not end with graduation from the school. Rosalie Cohen remarked, "'Moreh' remained my teacher for the rest of my life."[85]

Communal Hebrew School also received national and international recognition in the 1920s for being an outstanding Jewish educational institution. Hebrew and Yiddish journals, such as *Der Amerikaner*, *Hapoel Hazair*, and *The Jewish Daily News* all printed articles in their periodicals about the achievements of the New Orleans Jewish educational institution. *Der Amerikaner* "praised New Orleans as a harmonious community which in its communal school, wisely solves a difficult problem."[86]

Over Lisitzky's first seven years as head of the school, the school also received praises from American and world Jewish leaders from other institutions and organizations who visited this experiment in the South. From Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Professors Samuel S. Cohon, A. L. Idelsohn, Henry Slonimsky, and Emanuel Gamoran all expressed their admiration for the school upon their visits, as well as Dr. M. Waxman of the Mizrachi Institute. And even Dr. Chaim Weizman, President of the Zionist World Organization, paid a visit to Lisitzky's school in New Orleans.[87]

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[84]"A Labor of Love," *The Jewish Ledger*, 19 September, 1958, 33.
[85]Rosalie Cohen, phone interview by author, 3 December, 1997.
[86]*A Jewish Institution*, 13.
[87]Ibid., 10.

But the real fruits of Lisitzky's labor came forth as the school regularly produced scholars who graduated and continued their studies in seminary for the rabbinate. Two particular students who after graduation attended Chicago Hebrew Theological Seminary, Mr. Leo Brener and Mr. Marlin, made such an impact on the seminary that Rector Rabbi J. Greenberg wrote a letter praising Lisitzky for his fine work. The letter said, "You are, indeed, to be envied for having reared such splendid pupils for the Law. Among the pupils sent here from the best schools, they are without exaggeration, the best prepared."[88] Two other graduates, Lazar Brener and Leon Hershberg, also entered this seminary in Chicago within the next few years.[89]

VII

After a decade of growth and prosperity for Communal Hebrew School, the school experienced a series of setbacks which slowed down its growth as the twenties came to an end. As America began feeling the economic trials of the Great Depression, so too did this educational institution. When the members felt the school could no longer continue due to the financial burden, the board made an appeal to the New Orleans community a couple of days before their annual meeting on November 16, 1930. They submitted a plea in *The Jewish Ledger* asking the community "in this hour of emergency ...as its staunch supporter to come to this important meeting, and by your presence infuse that moral force which in

[88]Ibid., 14.
[89]"Annual Meeting of the Communal Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 3 August, 1928, 14.

spite of financial difficulties encountered stimulates enthusiasm and activity."[90]

At that annual meeting, it was reported that the enrollment of the school had dropped to 140 pupils.[91] During the meeting, Ephraim Lisitzky stood up before the board and used his extraordinary eloquence to make one of the most emotional and inspiring speeches of his career. He began his plea before the board comparing himself to the prophet Jeremiah because he was "consumed within the marrow of [his] bones by fiery words that cry out for utterance and cannot be suppressed." He placed the responsibility of the fate of Communal Hebrew School on the board saying, "The verdict that you will issue tonight will seal the destiny of this School."[92]

After ten minutes of painting a morbid picture of American Jewry and the seriousness of the financial situation of the school, Lisitzky offered the board members a solution:

> ...Hebrew education, an education that strikes roots in depths of Hebrew scholarship, saps the vital creations of former generations, assimilates them in the souls of our youth in order that they should be stimulated to further creations of spiritual values, to be stirred-up again in depth of Hebrew scholarship for future generations. Hebrew education will generate and inspire Jewish loyalty and a Jewish consciousness conducive to an attachment to the Jewish people and its spiritual, social and economic problems.
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> This, Gentlemen of the Jury, is the only effective solution of the problem of saving American Jewry from spiritual extermination. And I do not hesitate to say to you: solve the

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90"Communal Hebrew School Meeting," *The Jewish Ledger*, 14 November, 1930, 12.
91"Hebrew School Selects Officers," *The Jewish Ledger*, 21 November 1930, 10.
92"Hebrew Education," *The Jewish Ledger*, 28 November, 1930, 8.

problem today. God knows if it will not be too late tomorrow.[93]

In his plea, Lisitzky further compared his situation to Rabbi Yochanan who, before the destruction of Jerusalem, begged the Roman emperor to let him establish a house of learning in Yavneh. Lisitzky's sermon warned that without Communal Hebrew School bringing Hebrew education to the city's future leaders, the New Orleans Jewish community was in jeopardy of failure. It was because of this eloquent and passionate oration that the board and members of the school gave generously enough to save the struggling institution.[94]

Although Communal Hebrew School's financial problems were solved, the school also suffered two losses in the late twenties and early thirties with the deaths of two prominent figures in its leadership. In the spring of 1929, Rabbi Max Heller, Rabbi of Temple Sinai and the Honorary President of Communal Hebrew School, died.

In the eulogy for Max Heller delivered by Ephraim Lisitzky at the memorial service on April 7, 1929, Lisitzky stated, "Alas, that more than any other institution, the Communal Hebrew School has now become orphaned, deserted-- orphaned and deserted it cries out, while lamenting his death, 'Whence shall come my help?'" For eleven years, while serving as honorary president, Heller and Lisitzky worked side by side in building up and perfecting this modern and acclaimed school. It was Heller's dedication to Zionism and his deep interest in Hebrew literature that brought him and Lisitzky together. In the eulogy, Lisitzky also described Heller's dedication to Communal Hebrew School:

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[93]Ibid.
[94]Ibid., 15.

> Throughout the years of my service, Dr. Max Heller was the guardian spirit of that school. It is due to his support so generously given at all times, that we succeeded in reorganizing it, in converting it from a ghetto-chaotic "cheder" into a modern institution of Hebrew learning, "a successful nursery of Jewish faith and loyalty", as he so eloquently defined it, and made it the property of New Orleans-- a unifying factor, a common denominator, a bridge thrown across divisions. ...Without him we would have failed.[95]

With Heller's death, the greatest leader in uniting the Reform and Orthodox communities of New Orleans was lost. He was the leader who brought the Reform community into the school in its early years. When the Orthodox community founded the school in 1916, Heller was the link that made this institution a communal one by uniting Reform and Orthodox leadership together. As Bobbie Malone in her biography of Heller points out, "He noted that, especially in the South, a smaller Jewish population made it imperative for Reform and Orthodox to support each other." She further wrote that Heller "held up Zionism as one important means for achieving unity."[96] Communal Hebrew School, with Lisitzky as its principal, embodied this strict devotion to Zionism in which Max Heller believed.

Besides his dedication to the Reform movement, Heller also maintained a close relationship with the Orthodox community and its leadership in New Orleans. Lisitzky described this connection in Heller's eulogy:

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[95]"Dr. Max Heller," *The Jewish Ledger*, 19 April, 1929, 6.
[96]Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860-1929* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1997), 124-125

> His relationship to them [Orthodox Jews] was brotherly. He partook of their joys and woes, prayed with them, on suitable occasions, in their synagogues, contributed graciously both, of his money and time and influence, to their institutions and made them feel that he was one of them.

Lisitzky also remarked that Heller "saw with horror the decay of Judaism, reform and orthodox alike, in America."[97] Not only did Heller show respect for the Orthodox community of New Orleans, but the Orthodox also showed their gratitude and respect for Heller and the Reform community. In 1914, when Heller and his wife celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, Congregation Beth Israel presented the couple with a silver basket filled with white roses. In explaining this touching gift in his *Jubilee Souvenir of Temple Sinai*, Heller wrote that this was "probably the first time, at least in this country, that an orthodox congregation gave official recognition to the family festival of a Reform rabbi."[98] Without Max Heller's involvement in the school, the Orthodox and Reform communities would never have united for the purpose of improving Jewish education in New Orleans.

On August 30, 1935, Communal Hebrew School suffered another tragic loss as Aaron Shpall died of a heart attack. In 1923, A. Shpall was hired by the school as Assistant Principal. As mentioned earlier, besides his work at the school, Aaron Shpall was a prolific writer and contributor to many Jewish magazines in the United States and Europe. It was through

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[97]"Dr. Max Heller," *The Jewish Ledger*, 19 April, 1929, 6.
[98]Max Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir of Temple Sinai, 1872-1922* (New Orleans: American Printing Co., Ltd., 1922), 115-116.

many of his writings to these periodicals that Communal Hebrew School gained much of its international recognition.[99]

Yet despite the economic hardships and personal losses of Communal Hebrew School in the 1920s and 1930s, Ephraim E. Lisitzky was able to keep the school flourishing and growing. Although the school faced one bout with Congregation Beth Israel's competing Talmud Torah and succeeded, that was not the last battle between the two schools. Lisitzky knew all too well that a rival weekly supplementary school threatened his institution's goal of transcending religious differences. Soon the issue that Lisitzky would have to face was the possibility of amalgamating the two schools in order to bring complete unity to the New Orleans Jewish community.

[99]Obituary, *The Jewish Ledger*, 6 September, 1935, 8.

Chapter 4
The Growth and Struggles of Communal Jewish Education in New Orleans

While the late 1920s and early 1930s were characterized by a struggle for Communal Hebrew School's survival, the thirties represented a time for its leadership to revitalize their institution to prepare for a new generation of students. The leaders of the school were also constantly forced to keep a close eye on its competitor, the Menorah Institute of Congregation Beth Israel. That rival school posed a threat to Communal Hebrew School's status as the community weekday Hebrew school of New Orleans and thus its right to financial support from the general community. As funding from the Jewish Welfare Fund came into question for these schools, Communal Hebrew School initiated numerous efforts to merge both schools to bring all factions of the community together in order to share their resources.

Throughout the twentieth century, Communal Hebrew School kept up with the great changes and trends that were facing American Judaism. Its Zionistic curriculum was strengthened with the founding of the State of Israel and a change of location in the fifties gave the school an opportunity to serve the community as a Jewish center. The 1950s, however, also brought the end of era with the retirement of Ephraim E. Lisitzky as Principal of Communal Hebrew School.

I

During the late 1920s, the Menorah Institute of Congregation Beth Israel expanded and became known as the second Talmud Torah in New Orleans. Rabbi Raphael Gold founded this school in 1926 because he believed that Orthodox values and traditions could not be taught in a setting like Communal Hebrew School where Orthodox and Reform children studied together.[1] A 1928 Menorah Institute yearbook boasted that the school's aim was "to become another 'lighthouse' to the community at large. It will also be a 'Spiritual bridge' spanning that gulf between older and younger generations in the Jewish home brought about by the lack of Jewish knowledge, and failure to appreciate the vast common ground of Judaism and Americanism." This mission statement was followed by a listing of the school's three aims, "(1) to intensify the loyalty to traditional Judaism, (2) to foster the higher standards of American citizenship, [and] (3) to deepen our youth's consciousness of the historic continuity of Israel."[2]

The Menorah Institute was originally located at 1629 Euterpe Street, approximately less than a mile away from Communal Hebrew School, in the heart of New Orleans' Jewish community.[3] Its building was 60 x 160 feet and was attached to Congregation Beth Israel. The structure included a chapel, four large classrooms, a kindergarten, a library, a rabbi's study with a reception room, an auditorium with a stage and dressing rooms, a kitchen, a *mikveh*, meeting rooms, and a roof garden.[4]

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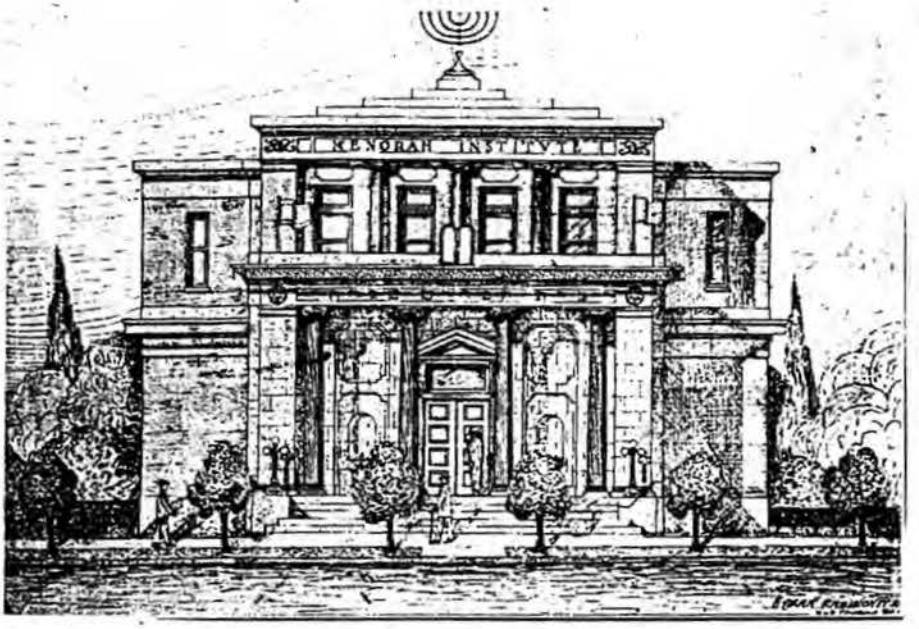
[1]"Menorah Talmud Torah to Observe 25th Anniversary," *The Jewish Ledger*, 26 January, 1951, 5.
[2]*Menorah Sparks* (New Orleans: The Menorah Institute, 1928), 26.
[3]W.P.A., *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives*, 131.
[4]*Menorah Sparks* (New Orleans: The Menorah Institute, 1928), 25.



The Menorah Institute, 1928[5]

Approximately 100 children from Beth Israel were enrolled in the institute's Talmud Torah (weekday supplementary Hebrew school) in the 1927-1928 school year. Its faculty consisted of five teachers: Rabbi Gold, Israel Chodos, Nissan Axelrod, Joshua Bach, and Esther Berenson. The post-graduate (for training teachers) faculty also employed Mrs. Chodos and Rae Abrams. Extracurricular activities of the Menorah Institute included a Young Judaea group and a glee club.[6]

In 1928, the board of the Menorah Institute officially adopted curricula for its Hebrew, Sunday, and post-graduate schools. Requirements for the Hebrew school included translation and knowledge of the *Tanach*, *Siddur*, and *Pirke Avot*, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew composition skills. The Sunday school focused upon studies in History, Hebrew reading, and

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[5]*Menorah Sparks* (New Orleans: The Menorah Institute, 1928), 2.
[6]Ibid., 22-23.

principles of Judaism. Requirements for the post-graduate school included a knowledge of the Prophets, Talmud, Hebrew literature, advanced Hebrew grammar, Jewish history, Jewish thought, and education courses.[7]

From its inception, The Menorah Institute never strove to be a communal institution. On the contrary, it was founded for the purpose of separating individuals who chose to practice strict Orthodoxy. As compared to Communal Hebrew School, the Menorah Institute's teaching philosophy was based on dedication to *halacha* and ritual. Communal Hebrew School, on the other hand, sought to promote a love for Jewish learning and for *C'lal Yisrael.*

On January 6, 1937, three leaders from the Menorah Institute approached the board of the Jewish Welfare Fund of New Orleans requesting that its institution be included in its 1937 budget allocations. After the Menorah Institute leaders left this meeting, the board discussed their request at length. They concluded that "whatever may be the technical organization of the Menorah Hebrew School, it apparently is in practice still too closely identified with Beth Israel Congregation to justify the Fund treating it as an independent organization." Apparently, the Fund believed that their mission was to only support institutions that would benefit the entire community. The Menorah Institute, which only serviced one congregation, was in direct opposition to the Fund's philosophy. Therefore, the Jewish Welfare Fund board sent a response to the school's leaders stating the Fund's decision against allocating money to their institution. The Jewish Welfare Fund's desire to support institutions which served the entire community was reinforced by their offer to assist "any efforts at a merger between the Communal Hebrew School and the

[7]Ibid., 26.

Menorah Hebrew School."[8] In 1929, Communal Hebrew School had approached the Menorah Institute suggesting that the two schools be consolidated. Members of Congregation Beth Israel, however, refused the offer at that time.[9]

The Jewish Welfare Fund Board's decision prompted new efforts for a merger between Communal Hebrew School and the Menorah Institute. Although the Fund suggested the desirability of a merger, its officers did not take the initiative in this venture.[10] After the 1937 winter meetings of the Jewish Welfare Fund, Communal Hebrew School once again offered to initiate talks for the merger. Its board wrote a letter to the Jewish Welfare Fund stating that they would appoint a committee of three members to meet with a committee from the Menorah Institute and the Jewish Welfare Fund Board about a merger.[11] Beth Israel accepted this initial overture and appointed a committee of five to negotiate the deal.[12]

Four conditions emerged from the negotiations of these committees. The first condition was that the new school "would be under the control of the entire community" and "that the governing board should be composed of representatives appointed by the Jewish Welfare Fund and the six Jewish congregations of New Orleans." Also, they agreed that classes would be conducted in both schools until a more central location could be found. Third, they agreed Ephraim E. Lisitzky would be superintendent of the new school and that Rabbi Uri Miller (Beth Israel's new rabbi) would be

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[8]Minutes of the Meeting of the Jewish Welfare Fund of New Orleans, 6 January, 1937, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.
[9]"Annual Message of Retiring President, M. Bratman," *The Jewish Ledger*, 15 November, 1929, 12.
[10]Ibid., 3 February, 1937.
[11]Minutes of the Meeting of the Jewish Welfare Fund of New Orleans, 13 May, 1937, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.
[12]Letter from Isaac S. Heller to Mr. Mayer Israel, President of the Jewish Welfare Fund, 30 August, 1937, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

the chairman of the Board of Education. And finally, they decided that the curriculum of the school would be determined by both Rabbi Miller and Lisitzky.[13]

On the eve of this historic merger, Ellis C. Irwin, president of Beth Israel, sent a letter to Isaac Heller, Chairman of the Committee on the Hebrew School Merger. The letter stated that their congregation had recently run into serious financial difficulties.[14] Because of their financial situation, Irwin explained that Beth Israel needed to postpone the merger until the congregation could stabilize its finances. But, according to Isaac Heller's report back to the president of the Jewish Welfare Fund, the true reason that Beth Israel pulled out of the negotiations was not financial, but rather that "certain members of the Menorah Institute had expressed dissatisfaction over the fact that the Institute had not been represented [fairly] in the negotiations."[15] With Heller's report to the Fund, efforts to consolidate the two institutions in the 1930s ended.

After the failure of the merger, a special committee of the Jewish Welfare Fund was set up to investigate the educational needs of the community and the budgetary needs of Communal Hebrew School. After this committee's report in December 1938, the Jewish Welfare Fund resolved to continue to support Communal Hebrew School financially.[16] Their decision was based on the fact that "since the inception of the School its Board of Directors has had representation from the various Jewish

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[13]Ibid.

[14]Letter from Ellis C. Irwin to Isaac S. Heller, 19 August, 1937, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

[15]Letter from Isaac S. Heller to Mr. Mayer Israel, President of the Jewish Welfare Fund, 30 August, 1937, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

[16]Minutes of the Meeting of the Jewish Welfare Fund of New Orleans, 8 December, 1938, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

elements in the community irrespective of congregational affiliation."[17] In 1938, Communal Hebrew School received $6500 from the Jewish Welfare Fund. This figure was the Fund's second largest allocation, second only to that designated for the United Palestine Fund.[18] The question of the failed merger between the two schools in 1937 was also addressed at the December 1938 Fund meeting. The committee concluded that "differences in view points, educational goals and policies... ...seem to make such a merger infeasible." They continued, "while the Communal Hebrew School is, as the name indicates, an institution of community wide interest and relationships, the Menorah Institute is closely identified with one Congregation." Therefore the Jewish Welfare Fund finalized their decision not to allocate funds to the Menorah Institute.[19]

Even though Communal Hebrew School seemed to have won this first battle between the competing Talmud Torahs of New Orleans receiving financial support from the Jewish Welfare Fund, the school still suffered because of its competitor. Lisitzky's school was established with the goal of becoming the central educational institution of New Orleans, uniting both Reform and Orthodox communities. However, with two separate schools running simultaneously, Communal Hebrew School could not complete its goal of bringing complete harmony between all factions of New Orleans Jewry.

Yet, perhaps because of the competition between the two Talmud Torahs, standards for education in New Orleans were extremely high.

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[17]Report of the Special Committee on Communal Hebrew School, December 8, 1938, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection.
[18]Budget Allocations of the Jewish Welfare Fund of New Orleans, 1938-1944, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection.
[19]Report of the Special Committee on Communal Hebrew School, December 8, 1938, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection.

With a second Talmud Torah taking over 100 students away from Communal Hebrew School, Lisitzky was constantly forced to stay on his toes in order to keep enrollment numbers high in his school.

II

After two decades of prosperity as an academic institution, leaders of the school received feedback from the community on their successes and accomplishments. On March 1, 1939, Communal Hebrew School celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a reception banquet held at the Jung Hotel in New Orleans.[20] The guest speaker at the affair was Rabbi Solomon Goldman of Chicago, president of the Zionist Organization of America and close personal friend of Ephraim E. Lisitzky.[21] An anniversary book, which included letters of praise from local rabbis and lay leaders, was printed for the banquet. From these letters we can see some of the impact that Lisitzky's school had on the Jewish community of New Orleans. In his letter, Rabbi Maurvin Elefant of Congregation Anshe Sfard (Orthodox) called the school "a tree of life for those who cherish it" and "the Jewish center of life for us in the community." Rabbi Nathaniel Share of Gates of Prayer (Reform) wrote that, "its influence is to be noted in those young men and women, trained in its classrooms and imbued with a love of the Hebrew language and Jewish tradition, who are already beginning to play a part in community life and some of whom, in all likelihood, are destined for ultimate leadership." And Rabbi Julian Feibelman of Temple Sinai (Reform) compared the school to a "well of

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[20]"Hebrew School Will Celebrate 20th Year," *The Jewish Ledger*, 17 February, 1939, 8.
[21]"Hebrew School Marks Birthday," *The Times-Picayune*, The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

living waters in our midst" from which the community's thirst can be quenched.[22] Festivities during the week prior to the anniversary banquet included an open house held at the school on February 26 and an alumni meeting on February 27 at Touro Synagogue.[23]

These letters from various local rabbis indicated the New Orleans Jewish community's high regard for Lisitzky's endeavor. Jewish leaders in New Orleans took such pride in their institution which specialized in teaching advanced Jewish studies to all factions of the community. Communal Hebrew School was teaching a love for the Hebrew language and literature well before this trend became popular in other Southern communities.[24] In its first twenty years, this Talmud Torah educated and prepared hundreds of Jewish students for leadership positions in the local Jewish community after graduation.

Although the New Orleans Jewish community and its Hebrew school enjoyed prosperity during the late 1930s, the Jewish world at large was on the verge of facing the atrocities of World War II and the genocide of the Jewish people in Europe. Communications about the school and its proceedings in the early 1940s were overshadowed in the city's Jewish newspaper by reports of the atrocities in Nazi Germany. Although Europe's Jewry was being destroyed physically and spiritually, Communal Hebrew School's leadership did not let the dismal feelings of the Jewish world take their toll on its institution. During the mid-forties, Communal

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[22]Letters from Rabbis Maurvin Elefant, Julian Feibelman, and Nathaniel Share, 1939, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

[23]"Hebrew School Marks Birthday," *The Times-Picayune*, The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

[24]Atlanta, for example, had an institution under the auspices of the Jewish Educational Alliance. Although their establishment included a Hebrew School, its emphasis was more on Americanizing its students than teaching a love of Jewish language and literature. Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers within the Gate City, The Jews of Atlanta • 1845-1915* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978), 136-137.

Hebrew School's weekday Hebrew school enrollment maintained nearly 150 pupils. This number consisted of approximately fifty students from Reform congregations and about one hundred students from Orthodox congregations.[25] In 1938, the Jewish population of New Orleans was 6472 individuals, of which 1270 were between five and nineteen years old.[26] The school also employed nine teachers between its daily and Sunday school teaching staffs.[27]

As Communal Hebrew School entered its third decade, new Jewish trends were emerging in America. With the end of World War II, as visions of the founding of the State of Israel as a haven for Jewish refugees moved towards reality, Zionistic hopes were renewed for many Americans. This Zionistic excitement extended to the New Orleans Jewish community. Ephraim E. Lisitzky, who had been a passionate Zionist since his early days in America, was at the center of this movement in New Orleans during the 1940s. Rosalie Cohen, a former student and supporter of the school since its early years, explained that Lisitzky's strong Zionistic curriculum combined with Rabbi Max Heller's love of Zionism, brought early Zionistic feelings into the Reform community of New Orleans. She continued, "As the world situation changed, it made it even easier for Reformers in New Orleans to become Zionists."[28] Although the school had included Zionism in its curriculum since its founding, in 1944 a more intense emphasis on Zionism was incorporated into the studies. This

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[25]Enrollment Records of Communal Hebrew School for 1944-1945 and 1945-1946, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.
[26]Julian B. Feibelman, *A Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community*, (Philadelphia, 1941), 4
[27]Enrollment Records of Communal Hebrew School for 1944-1945 and 1945-1946, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.
[28]Rosalie Cohen, phone interview by author, 3 December, 1997.

included the introduction of *Artzanu*, a new textbook which taught about modern Palestine, into the history curriculum of the Hebrew school.[29]

The general curriculum of Communal Hebrew School also expanded in the 1940s. Besides the additional emphasis on Zionism, Liturgy, Torah and Haftarah reading, singing, and studies in Jewish movements were added. Lisitzky and his staff of teachers continued to teach classes solely in Hebrew.[30]

In Lisitzky's speech at the annual meeting of Communal Hebrew School in 1948, he stressed the importance of community involvement in the school's endeavors by explaining that Hebrew education could only be an effective force when "established on a community-wide basis." He believed that with the founding of the State of Israel, political Zionism would disappear completely and thus Jews would feel a huge loss. So Lisitzky pointed out in his speech that since political Zionism ended with the establishment of the State of Israel, the only force strong enough to overcome the gap created is Hebrew education. Long after the world would forget about Zionism, Lisitzky envisioned that Jewish education would endure and therefore education should take the place of political Zionism.[31] In a ceremony honoring Lisitzky's commitment to the school one month later, Lisitzky once again spoke of his goal of promoting Jewish and Hebrew literacy in New Orleans. He concluded his remarks with the wish that his school would continue to produce "new poets and new readers in the future."[32]

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[29]"Zionism in Communal Classes," *The Jewish Ledger*, 16 June, 1944, 8.
[30]Enrollment Records of Communal Hebrew School for 1944-1945 and 1945-1946, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.
[31]"Dave Herman Elected Hebrew School President," *The Jewish Ledger*, 12 November, 1948, 4.
[32]"Hebrew School Honors Its Founder," *The Jewish Ledger*, 17 December, 1948, 11.

III

Not only was Lisitzky well known as a great Jewish educator in New Orleans, but he was also gaining national and international fame as an American Hebrew poet. His growing prominence as a poet in the 1940s helped to further promote Communal Hebrew School's reputation in the wider Jewish world. In 1947, the Histadruth Ivrith of America published Lisitzky's fourth book of poetry in honor of his forty years of contributions to Hebrew literature.[33] One year after this book entitled *Man on Earth* was published, he was called to New York to receive the Louis Lamed Award "for the year's most outstanding contribution to Hebrew literature."[34] At that time, Lisitzky was also working on his autobiography written in Hebrew, *Aleh Toldoth Adam.*[35]

In 1948, Lisitzky received a letter from the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York informing him that the school would be conferring upon him an honorary degree of Doctor in Hebrew Letters. The letter stated that the members of the Faculty and Board of Directors wished

> to express their high regard for you as one who has devoted himself during his lifetime not merely to creative work in the field of modern Hebrew poetry but especially as one who has labored most selflessly in the field of Jewish education and in a Jewish community far removed from the centers of Jewish life in this country. You have raised a generation of devoted Jews in your community and have set an inspiring example to all of us as a teacher in Israel.[36]

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[33]"New Orleans Poet Honored," *The Jewish Ledger*, 4 July, 1947, 1.
[34]"New Orleans Hebrew Poet Receives Literary Award," *The Jewish Ledger*, 12 November, 1948, 1. This is the English translation of the Hebrew title.
[35]"New Orleans Poet Honored," *The Jewish Ledger*, 4 July, 1947, 1.
[36]"Honorary Degree to be Conferred on New Orleans Poet," *The Jewish Ledger*, 13 May, 1949, 1.

At the Seminary's graduation exercises on June 12, 1949, Lisitzky's sponsors, Mr. Louis M. Rabinowitz and Professor Hillel Bavli, presented him with the honorary doctorate degree. Their speech boasted his great accomplishments in Hebrew literature and Jewish Education. They explained that for more than four decades Lisitzky had "been like a river that flows on with ever-sustained vigour, enriching the pages of Hebrew periodicals throughout the world and adding volume to the steadily growing resources of American Hebrew literature." They concluded by praising his work as Jewish educator saying, "your extraordinary and fruitful devotion to the Hebrew muse was matched by the constancy of your faithfulness to the Jewish Education of the children"[37]

In 1950, Lisitzky's fame was heightened in Israel with the publication of his autobiography. That Passover, Lisitzky traveled to Tel Aviv for a tribute in his honor by Israeli poets and writers. *Aleh Toldoth Adam* was published in Israel by the Bialik Foundation which was funded by the Jewish Agency. Israeli critics praised the autobiography, which took Lisitzky seven years to write, writing, "human and Jewish contents are merged and fashioned into a Hebrew classic." Lisitzky had previously gained fame in Israel for his translations of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest* into Hebrew.[38]

Ephraim Lisitzky and Communal Hebrew School became well known throughout the Jewish world during the 1940s. Lisitzky's serious approach to Hebrew language and literature was well known in communities far beyond New Orleans. His travels also enabled Lisitzky to bring knowledge

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[37]Speech written by Mr. Louis H. Rabinowitz and Professor Hillel Bavli read at the Jewish Theological Seminary on June 12, 1949, Ephraim E. Lisitzky papers, The American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati.
[38]"Israeli Authors to Fete N.O. Hebrew Poet," *The Jewish Ledger*, 24 March, 1950, 1.

and experiences from the rest of the Jewish world back to his students in New Orleans.

IV

While the 1920s through the 1940s were the heyday of Talmud Torahs in America, the 1950s saw an overall decline in enrollment as Jewish populations in cities began to suburbanize and Jews increasingly saw Jewish education as a service associated with their own synagogues. Judah Pilch noted that in the 1950s the Talmud Torah's

> attempt to serve as an inter-denominational institution, community-centered and *Klal Yisrael*-oriented, was no longer appreciated by the rank and file who found the synagogue school program more in consonance with their own views as to the aims of Jewish education. [Also] ...having little or no support from national organizations, not even from the Zionist groups whose cause it once fostered, its decline became an accepted fact.[39]

Although Communal Hebrew School felt some of these effects in a slowly declining enrollment, overall the school continued to fare well throughout the fifties. Its success should be attributed to the work of its long-time superintendent. As Ephraim Lisitzky prepared to enter his fourth decade serving as superintendent and began looking toward retirement, he set out to make arrangements for the future of his Talmud Torah. In the late 1940s, Lisitzky outlined a plan to reshape the future

[39]Judah Pilch, ed., *A History of Jewish Education in America* (New York: American Association for Jewish Education, 1959), 130.

organization and administration of Communal Hebrew School to ensure its survival through the second half of the century. He submitted a memorandum on the future of the school to the Board of Directors of Communal Hebrew School providing three alternatives for implementation prior to his retirement.[40]

The first alternative Lisitzky called "Status Quo." In this plan, he stated that the daily operation of the school would remain the same after his retirement with the hiring of a new superintendent. He claimed that the problem with this plan was that any new superintendent must be paid a salary double that received by Lisitzky. Lisitzky was working at a well below average salary because the school was a "labor of love" for him. However, the superintendent knew that the board would not succeed in finding a suitable replacement if the school offered the same modest salary. A more appropriate salary would, however, increase the deficit of the school which was already suffering a decrease in enrollment. Lisitzky attributed the enrollment problem to general and local causes. For the general causes, he referred to the overall decline in enrollment of all Hebrew schools in America. He explained that many second and third generation Jews preferred to send their children to Sunday schools which met once a week because it required less time commitment. Lisitzky cited three local causes for decline. He pointed to transportation being an issue as some of the Jewish community moved out to the suburbs, the competition from the Menorah Institute, and the fact that only a small

[40]"Memorandum on the Future Organization and Administration of the Communal Hebrew School Submitted by Superintendent E.E. Lisitzky," Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

element of Jews in the city remained devoted to the importance of an intense Jewish education.[41]

He called his second plan "Consolidation." This plan entailed an another attempt to consolidate the Menorah Institute and Communal Hebrew School. Although the merger would produce an increase in enrollment and an increased source of income, Lisitzky identified two major problems to this solution. All previous attempts at merger, he pointed out, ended in failure. In addition, he warned that the consolidation would "lower considerably the high standard of our school."[42]

Lisitzky's third plan was called "Coordination." This alternative proposed that the three Orthodox congregations, Anshe Sfard, Beth Israel, and Chevra Thilim, coordinate their own elementary Hebrew schools. Communal Hebrew School would assist them in formulating curricula, finding teachers, and recruiting students. Upon completion of these elementary Hebrew schools, students would attend an advanced Hebrew school on the premises of Communal Hebrew School. The difficulties with this plan, according to Lisitzky, would be persuading the congregations to accept this proposal and the possibility that students would not want to continue their education after their elementary graduation.[43]

In September of 1950, when Ephraim E. Lisitzky formally announced his retirement in *The Jewish Ledger*, future plans for the Hebrew School were temporarily put on hold. After thirty-two years of dedication to Communal Hebrew School, Lisitzky officially retired as Superintendent at the age of sixty-five and assumed the newly created post of Professor Emeritus and Dean of the Faculty. In this new role, Lisitzky could

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[41]Ibid.
[42]Ibid.
[43]Ibid.

continue to teach, devote more time to his literary career, and also make plans for the future of Communal Hebrew School.[44]

Dr. Joseph B. Sussman of Albany, New York had already been elected Superintendent of Communal Hebrew School by the Board of Directors in August 1950. Sussman previously held the role as Principal of the Hebrew school in Albany. Sussman had authored "Halluchon", a visual method of instruction in Hebrew grammar, as well as several other text books.[45]

V

As Communal Hebrew School adapted Lisitzky's "Status Quo" plan after his retirement, Lisitzky and Sussman worked together in the early fifties to address the school's budgetary problems and to battle the enrollment decline.[46] They approached this task by instituting four major changes in the school. Thus the 1950s became a period of evolution for Communal Hebrew School which produced significant and lasting improvements.

The first change was a decision in 1950 to move the school to a cheaper structure and a more centrally located area of New Orleans. David L. Herman, President of Communal Hebrew School, announced that, "the center of Jewish population has shifted. We were required to find a more central location than the one on Josephine Street. The transportation of children to and from their homes became a greater problem day by day and we felt called upon to provide better, more central and safer

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[44]"Dr. Lisitzky To Retire as Head of Hebrew School," *The Jewish Ledger*, 1 September, 1950, 1, 3.
[45]Ibid.
[46] By the end of the 1940s, enrollment in the school had dropped to nearly seventy-five students. School Building to be Dedicated: Ceremony at Communal Hebrew Institute Set," *The Times-Picayune*, 14 May, 1954, Scrapbook Files, The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

accommodations."[47] On December 21, 1950, Communal Hebrew School took title to a building located at 4307 South Miro Street. This building was located in the center of where the majority of Jews lived in New Orleans in the early fifties.[48] Even though there were Jews living in other suburbs of New Orleans, the city's small size still made Communal Hebrew School's new central location accessible to Jews living in all areas. Plans were immediately set to move the school in the spring of 1951.[49]

Communal Hebrew School's Third Structure
4307 South Miro Street[50]

The new building, formerly the Sam Barth school, was a one-story converted house. The property measured 110 x 120 feet, which was slightly smaller than its previous location. After renovations, the structure

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[47]"Hebrew School Building to be Dedicated Sunday," *The Jewish Ledger*, 6 April, 1951, 1.
[48]Alvin Chenkin, "The Jewish Population of New Orleans, Louisiana - 1953: A Demographic Study" (New York: Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, 1953), X.
[49]"Communal Hebrew School To Move to Uptown Site," *The Jewish Ledger*, 22 December, 1950,1.
[50]Picture taken in 1998 of the building which once stood as Communal Hebrew School's third location.

included three classrooms, an office, a nursery school, a small synagogue for the Junior congregation, and a playground. The unique feature of this building was it included a large, mosaic tiled swimming pool enclosed in the building. The pool and playground would serve to attract students to the school year-round to swim and play and would also change the overall nature of the educational institution.[51] Communal Hebrew School in the 1950s, with its pool, playground, and various extra-curricular activities, became a Jewish center in an effort to restore its falling enrollment numbers.

On April 8, 1951, Communal Hebrew School moved to its new location on the corner of South Miro and General Pershing Street. At the dedication ceremony, Rabbi Mendel Silber spoke on behalf of the New Orleans Rabbinical Council saying that students of this school "will be free of doubts that are so prevalent today and will possess a sound knowledge of Judaism." Also in attendance at the event were Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison and juvenile court Judge Anna Veters Levy representing Governor Earl K. Long, who at the last minute could not attend. Both Sussman and Lisitzky made speeches at the ceremony. Lisitzky's speech focused upon the physical structure of the new school. In reaction to those who saw the school as a smaller and thus diminished version of Communal Hebrew school, a writer for *The Jewish Ledger* reported that Lisitzky compared the new structure with the Second Temple, saying, "Those who remember the first temple in Jerusalem, in the days of Ezra the Scribe, wept because it lacked the splendor and beauty of the first temple." Although the new school was physically smaller than the previous one,

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[51] "History and Location", Brochure Released by Communal Hebrew School in the 1950s, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans; "Communal Hebrew School To Move to Uptown Site," *The Jewish Ledger*, 22 December, 1950,1.

Lisitzky believed it would be just as successful. The article continued, "Dr. Lisitzky enumerated the great and lasting contributions made by the Jews during the days of the second temple, both to Judaism and mankind..."[52]

The second change instituted by Communal Hebrew School was the decision in 1951 to charge a modest tuition (around fifty-five dollars) for its students. Although the school was still supported heavily by the Jewish Welfare Fund, it incurred greater financial responsibilities with its change of location and the hiring of a new superintendent. Tuition the year following this new decision made up forty percent of its operating budget of $28,000. The school received over $10,000 from the Jewish Welfare Fund and nearly $5500 from other donors and the Mother's Club combined. Although Communal Hebrew School was charging a nominal tuition in the fifties, if a parent could not afford to pay his or her children's way, the board would accept that student without charge.[53]

These structural and financial changes were followed by two curriculum changes in the 1950s. In a report issued by the new superintendent, Joseph Sussman, he explained that the curriculum of the school had been reworked so that students would graduate from the six-year elementary program at about the same time as their *Bar Mitzvah.* Although this new program would be well received by parents and students alike, it was a drastic change from Lisitzky's original goal of providing intensive Jewish and Hebrew studies for students all the way through college. Lisitzky's program consisted of an elementary, a high school, and a collegiate department. Sussman's new curriculum completely excluded

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[52]"Hebrew School Officially Opens New Quarters," *The Jewish Ledger*, 13 April, 1951, 3.
[53]"Hebrew School Building to be Dedicated Sunday," *The Jewish Ledger*, 6 April, 1951, 1; Budgetary Notes for Communal Hebrew School, 1938-1952, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

post-*Bar Mitzvah* students from the school. This structure is still in place at Communal Hebrew School today. Also, classes were no longer taught solely in Hebrew during Sussman's tenure at the school. Under Sussman's leadership, students were still required to study four afternoons a week, in addition to their Sunday school studies.[54] Today, children are only required to study only one or two afternoons a week.

The new six-year curriculum initiated by Sussman in the 1950s was a far cry from Lisitzky's original intensive seven and eight year elementary curriculum. As mentioned, the most drastic change was that the mode of teaching was no longer *Ivrit B'Ivrit* (Hebrew taught in Hebrew). Hebrew literature was also removed from the school's course of studies. Sussman's curriculum focused just upon basic Hebrew skills, such as reading and writing, and basic religious skills, such as liturgy, Bible, *halacha* (laws), and the holidays. Curricula of the time seem to indicate that teachers at Communal Hebrew School in the 1950s focused upon basic religious studies and avoided teaching Hebrew literature and Zionism, which were so central to Lisitzky's program.[55]

Sussman's report concluded with plans for a closer cooperation between Communal Hebrew School and local synagogues. This cooperation he suggested would include a *Bar Mitzvah* preparatory class open to students from all congregations.[56] Within a year, Communal Hebrew School's *Bar Mitzvah* preparatory class was such a success that Orthodox congregations in New Orleans also began looking to the school for *Bat Mitzvah* training for their female students. The *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony began in America

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[54]"Communal Hebrew School Resumes Regular Studies," *The Jewish Ledger*, 27 April, 1951, 10.
[55]Two type-written curricula outlines obtained from the Communal Hebrew School collection, n.d., Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.
[56]Ibid.

when Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan invited his twelve year old daughter Judith up to the *bimah* to chant the blessings before and after the Torah in 1922. Traditionally, girls made a transition to adulthood automatically at twelve years old. There was no prescribed rite or parallel to the *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony for young girls. During the 1940s, however, this novel and controversial ceremony slowly made its way into many Conservative congregations all across America. In the 1950s, the *Bat Mitzvah* also became a ritual in nearly thirty-five percent of Reform temples.[57] Because New Orleans did not have a Conservative congregation until the 1960s, the city's Orthodox congregations, which were more progressive than other Orthodox congregations in America, began experimenting with this rite in the 1940s. The *Bat Mitzvah* was first introduced at Congregation Beth Israel in March of 1941 by Rabbi Uri Miller. Miller, unlike his predecessor, was liberal and open to progressive innovations.[58] The success of this historic *Bat Mitzvah* in 1941 led other Orthodox parents in New Orleans to seek *Bat Mitzvah* tutoring for their daughters as well. Because of the new demand, Communal Hebrew School expanded its *B'nai Mitzvah* program to girls in the early 1950s. The preparatory class was essential to the school's growth in that it increased the enrollment of girls in the school. Its competitor, the Menorah Institute, did not offer such a program in its curriculum. Within the first year, two girls completed Communal Hebrew School's *Bat Mitzvah* preparatory class becoming *B'not Mitzvah* in March of 1952 at their respective Orthodox congregations.[59]

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[57] *Jewish Women in America, An Historical Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Bat Mitzvah."
[58] "Bas Mitzvah," *The Jewish Ledger*, 4 April, 1941, 1
[59] "Hebrew School to Hold Bas Mitzvah Ceremonies," *The Jewish Ledger*, 14 March, 1952, 5.

VI

Before Communal Hebrew School moved to 4307 South Miro in 1951, the school's enrollment had dropped to nearly seventy-five students.[60] Yet by the beginning of the following academic school year, mainly because of the school's relocation, daily attendance rebounded and nearly doubled.[61] With this sharp growth in enrollment, the school's new edifice became inadequate. In November of 1953, Communal Hebrew School received a gift from Louis Rosenson in memory of his late wife to build a second building consisting of three classrooms and an office. The Celia Rosenson Memorial Building was to be built adjacent to the school's present structure. Paradoxically, Mr. Rosenson donated the building to Communal Hebrew School despite the fact that three generations of his family were members of and held offices in Congregation Beth Israel. Yet he decided to donate the building to Communal Hebrew School because of the school's poor financial situation. He expressed hopes that both schools would eventually merge and his "gift would ultimately result in unified Jewish education in New Orleans." Mr. Rosenson's gift started a chain reaction of donors, including a gift by Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Goldblum to rebuild the school's auditorium in memory of their son, Leon, and a gift by Charles Tolmas to build the Chaim Weizman Memorial Library. On May 16, 1954, Communal Hebrew School dedicated the Celia Rosenson Memorial Building.[62]

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[60]"School Building to be Dedicated: Ceremony at Communal Hebrew Institute Set," *The Times-Picayune*, 14 May, 1954, Scrapbook Files, The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.
[61]"History and Location," Brochure Released by Communal Hebrew School in the 1950s, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans; "Communal Hebrew School To Move to Uptown Site," *The Jewish Ledger*, 22 December, 1950,1.
[62]"Rosenson Gift to Hebrew School Announced Sunday," *The Jewish Ledger*, 27 November, 1953, 1, 6; "Hebrew School Dedicates Rosenson Memorial Bldg.," *The Jewish Ledger*, 21 May, 1954, 5.

During the next few years, Communal Hebrew School experienced more growth in enrollment from the new changes incorporated into the school as enrollment nearly reached 200 students in 1955.[63] Although it seemed as if Mr. Sussman was making great strides for the future of Communal Hebrew School as superintendent, in 1957 *The Jewish Ledger* reported Joseph Sussman's retirement from the position. Harry Herman, president of the school, stated that Sussman was "relieved of his duties, at his own request, so that he may devote more time to teaching. He will remain here as a member of the faculty." *The Jewish Ledger* continued that Mr. Ehud Goldberg, former director of the Bureau of Jewish Education in Des Moines, Iowa and a native of Israel, was named the third superintendent of Communal Hebrew School.[64]

Although Sussman's retirement was reported to be the result of a mutual agreement between Sussman and Communal Hebrew School, there were a lot of inside politics and personality issues that led to Sussman's demotion. At one point after his position change, Sussman wrote a letter to members of the Hebrew school attempting to clear his own name while undermining Mr. Herman's reputation. Whatever the case, Sussman did not prove to be a successful inheritor of Lisitzky's vision for Communal Hebrew School. After a leader of great fame like Lisitzky, it was hard for any subsequent superintendent to bring the same level of cultural and scholarly resources to the school. As far as Sussman's situation, all of his attempts to injure the school's reputation failed and the school and its board emerged unharmed by this episode.[65] However, Sussman's actions led to

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[63]"Samuel Rosen Named Hebrew School President," *The Jewish Ledger*, 25 November, 1955, 2.
[64]"Communal Hebrew School Names Superintendent," *The Jewish Ledger*, 16 August, 1957, 1.
[65]Dr. Sussman's letters can be found in the Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection at the Howard-Tilton Library in New Orleans. I have not included the details of this incident as some of the files were originally labeled "confidential" by the board of the school.

his departure from Communal Hebrew School. In 1958, *The Jewish Ledger* reported that he had been hired as a teacher at the Menorah Institute.[66]

VII

In the beginning of 1958, the Jewish Welfare Fund of New Orleans once again set out to push for a merger between Communal Hebrew School and the Menorah Institute. Because leaders of the two schools failed to negotiate a consolidation through their own previous attempts, the Jewish Welfare Fund's directors decided to take the matter into their own hands. In order to entice Congregation Beth Israel into the talks, the board sent a letter to Beth Israel inviting them to a special meeting of the Jewish Welfare Fund without representatives from Communal Hebrew School. On April 29, 1958, that meeting took place to "explore the possibility of raising the standards of Jewish education in New Orleans." At the meeting, Rabbi Weisfeld of Beth Israel informed the committee that his congregation was divided on the issue of consolidating the two schools because many were uncertain of the advantages for their congregation of this action.[67]

After the April meeting, the Jewish Welfare Fund established a committee to investigate two questions in regard to the proposed merger. (1) What are the disadvantages of amalgamation? and (2) what problems would preclude such amalgamation? The committee also requested that

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[66]"Menorah Adds Teacher to Staff; School Year Set," *The Jewish Ledger*, 18 July, 1958, 5.
[67]Minutes from the Jewish Welfare Fund Committee on Communal Hebrew School-Menorah Institute, April 29, 1958, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

both schools draw up a specific list of minimum conditions for the merger, as well as those things on which there could be some flexibility.[68]

After over a year of committee meetings and investigation, the merger deal failed again. Although Communal Hebrew School did follow through in submitting their version of conditions for the proposed unification, Beth Israel once again backed out, bringing the plan's downfall. In his letter of resignation as chairman of the Jewish Welfare Fund's special committee, A. B. Kupperman wrote, "It appeared that the time was not right for pushing a program of merger." He continued, "at the Congregation, present administrative conditions are not encouraging to further negotiation." Kupperman did not go into specifics as to what those conditions were. He did, however, conclude by informing the Jewish Welfare Fund that pursuing this matter was only a waste of funds and advised that their attempts be terminated at once.[69]

The Jewish Welfare Fund's effort to unify the two schools lies in the fact that throughout the community's thirty-five year history of having two Talmud Torahs, they constantly realized that a merger between the schools would have been the key to improving the already high standards of Jewish education for New Orleans and bringing cohesion to the community. But, politics and pride kept this vision from becoming reality. The matter was not discussed again until the Menorah Institute experienced financial difficulties and diminishing support in the mid-1970s. Yet as mentioned

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[68]Ibid.

[69]Letter from Mr. A.B. Kupperman to the Jewish Welfare Board of New Orleans, June 10, 1959, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans; "Conditions for Unification of Communal Hebrew School and Menorah Institute (as submitted by a committee of the Communal Hebrew School)," n.d., Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, New Orleans.

earlier, the fact that the two schools did not merge earlier raised the two schools' standards because of the competition factor.

VIII

The beginning of the 1958 academic year brought about the biggest change in the history of Communal Hebrew School. For the first time in forty years, the Talmud Torah began a school year without Ephraim E. Lisitzky as an administrator or teacher. As Abraham Slabot reported on the front page of the *Rosh HaShana* edition of *The Jewish Ledger*, with Lisitzky's retirement "5718 brought to a close an era of Jewish education in New Orleans."[70]

With the announcement of Lisitzky's retirement at the age of 74, members of the school immediately began planning a testimonial dinner in honor of Ephraim Lisitzky. The affair was held on April 12, 1959, in the Century Room of the Monteleone Hotel. The testimonial was sponsored by almost every synagogue and Jewish organization in New Orleans, signifying the huge impact that Lisitzky had on the Jewish community as a whole. Those organizations which sponsored the event were: Anshe Sfard, Beth Israel, B'nai B'rith, Brandeis Women, Chevra Thilim, Communal Hebrew School, Gates of Prayer, Hadassah, the Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Federation, the Jewish Welfare Fund, National Council of Jewish Women, the Rabbinical Council, Temple Sinai, Touro Synagogue, and the Zionist Council of New Orleans.[71]

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[70]"A Labor of Love," *The Jewish Ledger*, 19 September, 1958, 1.
[71]"Jewish Community to Honor Dr. Lisitzky," *The Jewish Ledger*, 27 March, 1959, 1, 6.

Dr. Solomon Grayzel of Philadelphia, editor of the Jewish Publication Society of America, delivered the key note speech that evening. He said, "The greatness of Dr. Ephraim E. Lisitzky lies in his ability to articulate Judaism both as a teacher and as a poet." After addressing the subject of maintaining a Jewish spirit in the American environment, Grayzel remarked that Lisitzky "has succeeded in articulating American Judaism as evidenced by the large number of his former students that are in the audience and by the love and devotion they express towards him personally and to the Judaism that he instilled in them." Addressing his great contributions to American Hebrew literature, the speaker continued, "Dr. Lisitzky has further articulated his American Judaism by describing in the holy language of the Bible the American scene thereby making it a part and parcel of the American Jewish personality."[72]

The testimonial dinner also marked the release of Lisitzky's autobiography, *In the Grips of Cross-Currents*, which had been translated into English from its original Hebrew. This was Lisitzky's first book published in English. Although this book was Lisitzky's autobiography, it did not include the story of the second half of his life and his experiences and accomplishments in New Orleans. Also, a bound volume of tributes from local, national, and international leaders, educators, and writers was presented to Dr. Lisitzky at the affair. The volume even included a letter congratulating Lisitzky from David ben Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel, and a letter from Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Teplow of Boston stating that a scholarship had been established in his name at the Hebrew Teacher's College in Boston.[73]

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[72]"N.O. Teacher, Scholar and Poet Honored Sunday," *The Jewish Ledger*, 17 April, 1959, 1, 6.
[73]Ibid.

On March 8, 1960, Lisitzky's achievements were once again recognized when he was awarded another honorary degree at the Founders' Day Service of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's New York school. Dr. Nelson Glueck, President of the College, conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Hebrew Letters, honoris causa. The faculty and board of directors voted to award him this degree "in recognition of his work in the field of Hebrew education and as an eminent Hebrew poet."[74]

IX

On Monday, June 25, 1962, Ephraim E. Lisitzky succumbed to several years of battling with illness, dying at the age of 77.[75] After Lisitzky's death, Communal Hebrew School was left to continue the work of its founder without him. Yet, Lisitzky's influence on New Orleans over the preceding forty-four years was so strong that after his death the school survived and prospered primarily because of its long-time association with his name.

Lisitzky's achievements also lived on well after his death in the sense that almost every Jewish organization in New Orleans was in some way or another influenced by his work in the community. The most valuable treasure that Lisitzky left behind was the multitude of Jewish leaders and scholars who graduated from Communal Hebrew School. As Leo Shpall described Lisitzky's influence in an editorial biography after his death, "Like the prophet Elisha of old, Lisitzky, so to speak, put his mouth upon

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[74]"HUC to Confer Honorary Degree on Lisitzky," *The Jewish Ledger*, 29 January, 1960, 5.
[75]"Ephraim Lisitzky, Hebrew Poet, Translator, and Educator, Dies," *The New York Times, 27 June, 1962*, Ephraim E. Lisitzky papers, Cincinnati.

the mouth of his pupils and breathed into them of his inspiration, of his love for Jewish learning and of his love for Jewish tradition.[76]

The maturation of a community cannot be described simply through a chronological documentation of its daily history. A study of changes in demographics and attitudes, along with a look at the successes of its people, help bring that story alive. Ephraim Lisitzky's impact on the development of the New Orleans Jewish community during the forty-four years he lived there must be explored in order to complete this story.

[76]Leo Shpall, "Ephraim E. Lisitzky, ע"ה." *Jewish Education* 33 (Fall 1962): 6.

Chapter 5

A Jewish Community's Evolution

In 1957, a Jewish scholar from New York was visiting in Houston, Texas with a group of Jewish men and women. As they engaged in conversation, the scholar noticed that although these people were highly educated individuals, they appeared to be "Jewishly ignorant." Among this group of people, however, there was one man who was fluent in Hebrew and who demonstrated extensive knowledge of Jewish texts and history. Assuming that this *talmid hacham* (educated student) was from New York because of his Jewish knowledge, the scholar was surprised to find out that this man had actually grown up and been educated in New Orleans. As the two men engaged in conversation, the New Orleanean began telling the New York scholar about Communal Hebrew School and his teacher Ephraim Lisitzky.[1]

Intrigued by this meeting in Houston, Allan G. Field, the scholar from New York, became interested in Communal Hebrew School and its leader, Lisitzky. He was astonished that a community in the South could raise such fine Jewish scholars. So Field took a trip to New Orleans and spent some time at the school to find out more about it. Upon his visit to the city, he found the Talmud Torah to be just as remarkable as the New Orleanean had described. Field wrote about the school that "over a period of almost forty years, the *Moreh* [Lisitzky] transformed the Jewish *midbar* [desert] he found into a vineyard of blossoming Jewishness."[2]

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[1]Allan G. Field, "*Halutziut* In New Orleans," *The Jewish Spectator* (June 1957): 25-26.
[2]Ibid.

During his visit to Communal Hebrew School, Field was most impressed by Lisitzky's *Halutzit* (pioneering) spirit. Field had known of Ephraim Lisitzky's poetry well before his visit to New Orleans, but he never knew that this poet lived in the South. After his visit to New Orleans, Field wrote an essay in *The Jewish Spectator* commenting on the impact that Lisitzky had made upon the New Orleans Jewish community. "Even today, after his retirement," Field observed, "the *Moreh* is still molding the community. His mere presence in New Orleans serves as a stimulus and an example." Quoting a member of the New Orleans Jewish community, Field continued, "'over the years, Lisitzky surely produced two hundred first-rate graduates, who are active in Jewish life-- some as rabbis, teachers, Jewish communal workers, and the large majority as lay leaders.'" Field concluded his essay saying, "If there were more *Halutzim* of this type, the wastelands of American Jewry could be transformed into orchards as that famous Zionist propaganda slogan puts it."[3]

Field's observations of Communal Hebrew School's and Lisitzky's impact on the New Orleans Jewish community are quite accurate. The dynamics of New Orleans Jewry changed drastically as a result of Communal Hebrew School. The school produced numerous leaders who served the New Orleans community, as well as others who went on to make an impact on other American communities and the nation as a whole. The goal of this chapter is to understand the ways in which Communal Hebrew School changed the New Orleans Jewish community and to evaluate the impact of these changes. This chapter will also conclude the story of the historic Talmud Torah in New Orleans and explore its path and goals for the future.

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[3]Ibid.

I

One way to gauge the impact of Communal Hebrew School (and secondarily of its competitor, the Menorah Institute) on the New Orleans Jewish community over the years is to look at some of the demographics of the community.[4] These trends emerge in three comprehensive studies of the New Orleans Jewish community. The first was conducted by Rabbi Julian Feibelman in 1938, followed by a 1947 study conducted by the Jewish Federation, and a third completed in 1958 by Leonard Reissman. Other statistics and facts included in this comparison have been extrapolated from various minutes, studies, and writings found in the archives of the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library in New Orleans and the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati.

As the city's population grew significantly in the twentieth century, the Jewish population of New Orleans between 1914 and 1958 also grew proportionately, averaging between 1.2% and 1.4% of the total population of the city. In 1914, a few years before Communal Hebrew School was organized, the Jewish population was approximately 4000.[5] By 1938, Feibelman noted that the Jewish population had risen to 6472.[6] In 1947, the Jewish Federation study estimated the population to be around 7500.[7]

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[4]As noted in chapter four, the Menorah Institute began in 1926.

[5]Raymond Termini, "The Jewish Community of New Orleans Between 1890 and 1914" (History Paper, January 8, 1964), The American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. Although the 1914-1915 American Jewish Year Book claims that the Jewish population was closer to 7500, Termini makes an argument that the numbers reported to the year book are exaggerated. This point is also argued in Feibelman's 1938 study. In examining the Jewish population estimates in New Orleans for the time period, I take Termini's population estimate to be the most accurate for 1914.

[6]Julian B. Feibelman, "A Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1941), 3.

[7]"A Survey of Recreation (Group Work) and Informal Education in the Jewish Community of New Orleans, Louisiana" (New York: The Jewish Federation and the Y.M. and Y.W.H.A., 1947), 7.

And Reissman estimated the Jewish population of New Orleans in 1958 to be close to 9500.[8] These numbers are presented to give the reader some idea of the overall Jewish population at each period discussed in the following data.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Jews in New Orleans chose to affiliate with Orthodox and Reform congregations. There were no Conservative congregations in New Orleans until 1960. The demographic studies of the community show that through 1958, between fifty-eight percent and sixty-six percent of the affiliated Jews in New Orleans were members of Reform congregations and between twenty-five percent and thirty-five percent of affiliated Jews were members of Orthodox congregations.[9] In a 1953 study of the New Orleans Jewish Community, Alvin Chenkin discovered that approximately seventy-five percent of the Jewish population was affiliated with at least one congregation.[10] Other studies throughout the twentieth century also made similar claims that three-fourths of the Jewish community was affiliated with congregations in New Orleans.[11]

The absence of a Conservative congregation in New Orleans highlights the difference between this community's religious patterns and those prevailing in most other American cities. During the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, New Orleans' Jewish population was primarily of French and German backgrounds. Reform congregations, for the most part, met these liberal Jews' needs. As a large influx of Eastern European

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[8]Leonard Reissman, "Profile of a Community: A Sociological Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community" (New Orleans: Jewish Welfare Fund, 1958), 11.
[9]Feibelman, 129; "A Survey of Recreation (Group Work) and Informal Education" 7-8; Reissman, 67.
[10]Alvin Chenkin, "The Jewish Population of New Orleans, Louisiana - 1953: A Demographic Study" (New York: Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, 1953), XI.
[11]Reissman also alludes to twenty-five percent of the community as not being affiliated with a congregation. Reissman, 117.

Jews immigrated to New Orleans beginning in the 1880s, they founded three Orthodox congregations to meet their needs. But, not all of these Eastern European Jews classified themselves as Orthodox, and not all of the early settlers of New Orleans considered themselves Reform. There was certainly a gap created in-between, which could have been accommodated by a Conservative congregation. As Marshall Sklare pointed out in *Conservative Judaism, An American Religious Movement*, the Reform's procedures "represented too great a transition for many Eastern European Jews." In other cities, "The failure of adequate adaptation on the part of the traditionalists helped create the pressures which resulted in the development of Conservatism."[12] Perhaps it was this same gap between the strict Orthodox and the liberal Reform in New Orleans that inspired a need for continuity between the city's Jewish factions. An institution where Reform and Orthodox children studied together may have been an effort to bridge the wide gap between the Reform and Orthodox communities in the city. Communal Hebrew School's success in providing children from non-traditional homes the same knowledge of traditions as its Orthodox students, in turn, could be viewed as the reason why Conservative Judaism developed late in the New Orleans Jewish community.

Overall the New Orleans Jewish community was very supportive of Jewish educational institutions. In 1938, over 722 students from Orthodox and Reform synagogues were enrolled in Sunday schools in New Orleans. This represented almost fifty-seven percent of the city's Jewish children between the ages of five and nineteen years old. Also, there were 218 students enrolled in weekday Hebrew schools in 1938. This was over

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[12]Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism, An American Religious Movement*, (New York: Shocken Books, 1972), 43, 74.

seventeen percent of the children eligible for the Talmud Torahs at that time. It is important to note that these figures show an increase in enrollment in the community's weekday Hebrew schools and a decrease in enrollment in the Sunday schools during the thirties. Feibelman found that of the adults over twenty years of age in New Orleans in 1938, sixty-four percent had attended one of the Sunday schools and fifteen percent had attended one of the weekday Hebrew schools. These numbers show a two percent increase in students enrolled in the Talmud Torahs in 1938 (as compared to their parents' generation) versus a seven percent decrease in students in the Sunday schools.[13] The percentage of students in Sunday schools rose again in the 1950s. In 1953, when American Sunday schools were experiencing a boom in enrollment as Jews moved to the suburbs, enrollment in New Orleans' Sunday schools rose to nearly seventy-one percent.[14] This percentage continued to rise throughout the decade as shown by Reissman's study which reported that by 1958 almost eighty percent of the city's Jewish children were enrolled in Sunday schools.[15] In the forties and fifties, the weekday Hebrew schools also saw an increase in student enrollment. A study from 1953 reported that twenty-eight percent of the entire community had attended a weekday Hebrew school. This figure indicates that by the 1950s, weekday Hebrew schools had educated just under one-third of the Jews in New Orleans. Also in 1953, after Communal Hebrew School's move to its South Miro location, nearly twenty-one percent of the city's Jewish children of school age were

[13]Feibelman, 25-27. In 1938, there were only four congregations which had their own Sunday school in New Orleans: Temple Sinai (Reform), Touro Synagogue (Reform), Gates of Prayer (Reform), and Beth Israel (Orthodox). Communal Hebrew School served the other congregations with its small Sunday school program.
[14]Chenkin, XXXV.
[15]Reissman, 142.

enrolled at either Communal Hebrew School or the Menorah Institute.[16] Yet by 1958, these schools experienced a loss of students to the Sunday schools and the proportion of students enrolled in a weekday Hebrew school dropped to under nineteen percent.[17]

Although Communal Hebrew School was considered the largest weekday Hebrew school in New Orleans, its competitor the Menorah Institute also boasted high enrollment numbers. In 1937, Communal Hebrew school had 150 students, while in 1938 the Menorah Institute had 112 students.[18] And in 1947, Communal Hebrew School had 134 students enrolled as compared to the Menorah Institute's 108 students.[19] Overall between 1917 and 1955, Communal Hebrew School maintained an enrollment between 134 and 200 students.[20] The Menorah Institute's numbers remained fairly steady just above the one hundred mark throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties.

As mentioned previously, Communal Hebrew School was a unique Talmud Torah in that it enrolled students from any denomination. Rosalie Cohen, a member of the second graduating class of the school, claimed that very few of the students in the first few years of the school came from Reform congregations.[21] Yet during the thirties and forties, the school boasted a fairly large percentage of Reform students. In the forties, records show that close to thirty-seven percent of the school's weekday Hebrew students came from Reform congregations. Each of the three

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[16]Chenkin, XXXV.
[17]Reissman, 142.
[18]Feibelman, 139; Typewritten notes about Communal Hebrew School, 1937, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans.
[19]A Survey of Recreation (Group Work) and Informal Education", 36.
[20]Except for a year or two before Communal Hebrew School moved to its South Miro location when enrollment fell to nearly seventy-five students because of a residential population shift in the Jewish community.
[21]Rosalie Cohen, phone interview by author, 3 December, 1997.

Reform temples sent at least twelve students. Although it is unclear how many of these students attended the Talmud Torah full time (every afternoon), these Reform children studied at least once a week at Communal Hebrew School.[22] Reissman's 1958 study also reported that over half of the students who attended the weekday Hebrew schools in New Orleans also attended one of the Sunday schools. This statistic points to the fact that a substantial minority of Communal Hebrew School in the late fifties was still made up of children from Reform congregations (as discussed in the footnote below).[23] The Menorah Institute, however, did not teach any Reform children.

These demographics point to the growth of the weekday Hebrew school movement (and especially Communal Hebrew School) in New Orleans between 1918 and the mid-1950s. This growth peaked and began its decline around the time that Lisitzky officially retired from all of his responsibilities to the school in 1958. One should also take note that Reform children gradually became more involved in studies at the school throughout the thirties and forties.[24] Thus the sustained vitality of Communal Hebrew School as a community-supported school brought together both Orthodox and Reform circles in supporting it and in creating a non-denominational community of children. In addition, the quality of Jewish community life in New Orleans from 1918 through the mid-1950s was inevitably shaped by the fact that twenty percent of its people had at

[22]Enrollment Records of Communal Hebrew School for 1944-1945 and 1945-1946, Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection.

[23]Reissman, 142. This takes into account that Beth Israel was the only Orthodox congregation which had a Sunday school and that a few Orthodox children from the other two congregations may have attended Sunday school at Communal Hebrew School. Also, not all weekday Hebrew students of the Menorah Institute attended Sunday school. Therefore, a sizable number of students at Communal Hebrew School must have come from Reform congregations.

[24]Although it is unclear if Reform participation continued to increase after the forties.

one time been engaged in a program that demanded serious Hebrew and Jewish literacy skills, according to these studies.

II

Another approach to understanding the success and impact of Communal Hebrew School on the New Orleans Jewish community's cohesion is to examine the work of its graduates inside and outside of the community. Records of the school show that after graduation, six graduates went on to be ordained as rabbis from the Theological Seminary of Chicago.[25] Also, at least two students, Morton Kaufman and Israel Grishman, were ordained from the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York after their graduation from Communal Hebrew School. Additionally, numerous graduates were reported to have gone on to become principals and Jewish educators in Jewish schools in Atlanta, Chicago, and New York. Many other alumni went on to teach in the local Sunday schools as well as at Communal Hebrew School and the Menorah Institute. Local organizations such as B'nai B'rith, Hadassah, the Jewish Welfare Fund, Young Judaea, the Y.M.H.A., and the New Orleans Zionist Organization were led by scores of graduates of the school as well. And another graduate, Label A. Katz, even went on to become international president of B'nai B'rith in the early 1960s.[26]

It is also crucial to examine attitudes of the New Orleans Jewish community in the forties and fifties to understand how they had evolved since the school's beginnings in the 1910s. As noted in chapters two and

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[25]Some of these students are mentioned in chapter three, part VI

[26]Typewritten document listing the success of some students from Communal Hebrew School, n.d., Communal Hebrew School Manuscripts Collection.

three, New Orleans Jews were characterized by hopes for assimilation and complete acceptance into secular life. By the early twentieth century, the Jews of New Orleans were proud of the fact that they were being accepted into almost every political and social circle in the city.[27] In this era, only the Orthodox community felt the need for more intensive Jewish and Hebrew education for their children, while Reform families found Sunday schools to be sufficient for their children. However according to Reissman's study, over the first half of the twentieth century, the attitudes and dynamics of the Jewish community changed.

In a chapter entitled "JEWISH IDENTIFICATIONS," Reissman found that over seventy-two percent of the New Orleans Jewish community in 1958 believed that "Jewish people have a strong obligation to continue the Jewish way of life regardless of what other groups in the community might think." He identified this fact as meaning the "obligation by the Jew to maintain his distinct way of life." As compared to the community attitudes at the turn of the century, this was a far cry from the hope of complete acceptance and desire for assimilation.[28] This attitude change may be linked to the impact of strong Jewish education on a majority of the community.

Reissman also found that over sixty percent of the Jewish community believed that the most important thing for their children to learn in general had to do with Jewish religion, culture, or civic and welfare activities of the Jewish people. According to the study, the answers given to this survey question highlighted the prevalent belief in supplementing traditional

[27]This was evident in the Jewish participation and creation of Mardi Gras social balls and also by the fact that the Athenaeum was for many years the center of cultural and social life in New Orleans (secular and Jewish) from 1905 to 1930.
[28]Reissman, 119.

Jewish learning with Jewish literature and Zionism. Communal Hebrew School introduced these innovations in Jewish education to the New Orleans community from the beginning. Although this study gives no definitive proof that the Talmud Torahs led to such strong support for Jewish education, it does establish that Jewish education was a high priority for the majority of the New Orleans Jewish community in 1958. This is very different from attitudes at the turn of the century when Jewish education was only a priority of the Orthodox community.[29]

III

In 1946, Judah Pilch submitted an article to the periodical *Jewish Education* entitled "Is the Talmud Torah Doomed?" His article began, "That the Talmud Torah is struggling for its very existence is a generally accepted fact." He continued that in comparison to the heyday of the Talmud Torahs in the 1920s, these schools in 1946 struggled with drastic declines in enrollment which resulted in the division of students into unsuitable classes, watered-down curricula which catered to *B'nai Mitzvah*, and minimal school life and extra-curricular activities. Although Communal Hebrew School suffered an enrollment decline in the late forties, the school transcended the fate of other Talmud Torahs in America and reclaimed its high status in the fifties.[30]

Pilch outlined in his essay six trends which he believed led to the decline of American Talmud Torahs. Communal Hebrew School, throughout the forties and fifties worked to confront many of these

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[29]Ibid., 103.
[30]Judah Pilch, "Is the Talmud Torah Doomed?" *Jewish Education* 20, no. 6 (1946): 21.

negative trends and made necessary adjustments in order to battle the stigma of the failing Talmud Torah. Although many of these changes resulted in a school quite different from its origins in the twenties, overall these modifications paved the way for Communal Hebrew School's survival throughout the twentieth century.[31]

The first trend cited by Pilch was "the new type of parent." He explained that the Jewish parent of the 1940s was no longer the immigrant type. These acculturated Americans did not know of the "religio-cultural stimulus of European settings" where Jewish learning was looked upon as favorable and crucial. Sending children to school to become a *Talmid Hacham* was overshadowed in the forties by the new culture of America. That culture, according to Pilch, was to send children to schools so they would fit into the general scheme of Jewish life in America: to become *B'nai Mitzvah*, to read Hebrew, and to learn a little Jewish history.[32] Ephraim Lisitzky challenged this trend well before it could reach New Orleans. From the beginning, he established a culture in New Orleans that valued *Torah Lishmah*, the study of Torah for its own sake. Students remained in Communal Hebrew School through high school because of the love that they developed for the language and Judaism, and not simply to become *B'nai Mitzvah*.

Pilch next referred to "economic changes" as leading to the demise of the Talmud Torah. He claimed that the higher financial status of American Jews had a profound impact on their world outlook. As parents began looking toward other secular and cultural venues in which their children

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[31]Ibid., 21-26. Pilch actually outlines nine trends, one of which does not apply at all to Communal Hebrew School ("Decline of Yiddish"), and two others that are given as a preface ("size of families" and "age trends of population").
[32]Ibid., 22.

could take part, such as music, sports, and dancing, they avoided Jewish schooling and regarded it as unimportant.[33] Lisitzky understood this trend in the early fifties as Communal Hebrew School relocated. As mentioned in chapter four, the school became a cultural center which promoted its swimming pool, playground, and various other extra-curricular activities in order to entice a new generation of students.

"Changes in Jewish population areas" also put a large strain on Talmud Torahs, according to Pilch. As families began moving to the suburbs, distinctly Jewish neighborhoods, which typically included a kosher butcher, a synagogue, the Yiddish press, etc., became a phenomenon of the past.[34] New Orleans, like most cities, became suburbanized in the middle of the twentieth century; yet, its situation was quite unique. The city is sorrounded by Lake Pontchartrain on one side and the Mississippi River on all other sides. With these given geographics, New Orleans did not have much room to expand. So even with new suburbs being created, distance between them was not great. Communal Hebrew School relocated in 1951 to a densely populated Jewish area referred to as "Uptown" in response to the Jewish population shift of New Orleans. Over fifty percent of the Jewish community lived Uptown in 1953, according to Alvin Chenkin. The rest of the community was living in the Lakefront, Metairie, and central areas of New Orleans.[35] The move restored the school's falling enrollment, but over forty-nine percent of the Jewish children living in areas besides Uptown were thus forced to commute to the school.[36]

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[33]Ibid., 23.
[34]Ibid., 23.
[35]Chenkin, X.
[36]The Lakefront, Metairie, and central areas are approximately ten minutes from the school by car.

Eventually, Communal Hebrew School resolved this problem by providing subsidized transportation to and from the school from these outlying areas.

The fourth trend Pilch identified was changes in "school lay leadership." As compared to the leadership of the past, the immigrant parent or lay leader of the 1940s no longer had a strong knowledge of the subject matter being taught in the Talmud Torahs. Therefore, when it came to evaluating the effectiveness of the teachers, few of the lay leaders knew enough Hebrew or Jewish texts to make suggestions. Pilch claimed that since parents were unfamiliar with this material themselves, it was hard to convince them of the benefits of intensive religious training in modern America.[37] The spirit that Ephraim Lisitzky imbued in his students, typified by the love of the Hebrew language and culture, was a powerful force in attracting students to Communal Hebrew School. Knowledge of the distinguished teaching and learning that was taking place in the school was spread by word of mouth by both students and parents. Therefore, even if the parents were not educated Jewishly, it was not a problem in New Orleans to convince them to send their children to the weekday Hebrew school. Also, much of the school's lay leadership and board members was comprised of alumni of the school itself. Therefore, Pilch's claim about "school lay leadership" did not, for the most part, affect Communal Hebrew school.

Pilch cited the "general American scene" as the fifth factor influencing the Talmud Torahs' decline. Whereas at the turn of the century new immigrants were looking for places to help them acculturate and Americanize, the Jewish American of the 1940s was "already the product of amalgamation and assimilation, and in general, live[d] the same life as

[37]Judah Pilch, "Is the Talmud Torah Doomed?" *Jewish Education* 20, no. 6 (1946): 24.

his non-Jewish neighbors." In the twenties and thirties, the element of nationalism played an important role in the development of the American Talmud Torahs. Twenty to thirty years later, that element lost its significance, claimed Pilch.[38] However, the decline of Communal Hebrew School took place in the late 1940s, when new nationalistic hopes were at their peak for Judaism. The school, which had long been an advocate for Zionism, continued as a center of Zionistic activities and education with Lisitzky at its forefront. Whereas the general American scene may have affected other schools around the country, I believe that the establishment of the State of Israel may have worked in favor of Communal Hebrew School. As nationalistic hopes were renewed in the late forties, more attention was brought back to this particular Talmud Torah.

The last factor that Pilch presented as a challenge to the Talmud Torahs of the 1940s was the "American ultra-Orthodoxy." Pilch observed a new type of American Orthodoxy arising in the 1940s which was antagonistic to a Hebraic curriculum that did not stress the importance of the *mitzvot* as crucial for Jewish living.[39] Because immigration tapered off in New Orleans around 1914, the community never witnessed an influx of this new ultra-Orthodox group.[40] Also, because New Orleans did not have a Conservative community yet, the Orthodox community tended to be more moderate. Therefore American ultra-Orthodoxy did not affect the New Orleans Hebrew school. Also, the Orthodox community of New Orleans itself founded this style of teaching in Communal Hebrew School, so Orthodox leaders would be less likely to oppose it. Yet, some did object to

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[38]Ibid., 24-25.
[39]Ibid., 25.
[40]Raymond Termini, "The Jewish Community of New Orleans Between 1890 and 1914" (History Paper, January 8, 1964), The American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati.

Reform and Orthodox students studying together, so they sent their children to the Menorah Institute of Beth Israel.

Communal Hebrew School successfully survived this ominous period which marked the demise of American Talmud Torahs nationwide. Not only were Lisitzky and the rest of the school's leadership aware of the trends that were facing the weekday Hebrew school movement, but they were also ready to attack those pressures head-on. In my research on the American Talmud Torah, I did not come across a single mention of Communal Hebrew School as being an exception to the failure of these schools in America. New Orleans was overlooked by all major comparative studies of educational institutions throughout the twentieth century, probably because the school had no connection with the major centers of Judaism in America.

IV

Although this thesis only records the history of Jewish education in New Orleans until the death of Ephraim E. Lisitzky, it would not be complete without briefly touching upon the legacy this great educational pioneer left behind. After Lisitzky's death in 1962, Communal Hebrew School learned to survive and prosper without its founder. The institution evolved from a daily Talmud Torah which taught intensive Hebrew and Jewish education while helping Americanize its students, into a one- and two-day-a-week center of Jewish learning for elementary and junior high students in New Orleans. When the Menorah Institute of Congregation Beth Israel finally merged with Communal Hebrew School in 1975, this community institution educated students from every synagogue in the

city.[41] Communal Hebrew School also took on the status of becoming what many other communities refer to as a bureau of Jewish education.

Although Communal Hebrew School never became the sole institution for educating every Jewish student in the New Orleans' religious schools, it did however remain non-denominational so that students from every synagogue could attend. In this sense, the school became a unifying institution for Jews from every background in the city. This concept of unity through Jewish education, which was born in the New Orleans Jewish community, lived on in New Orleans long after it died in other cities in America.

Ephraim Lisitzky never lived to see his dream of Communal Hebrew School serving all New Orleans congregations as the only community afternoon Hebrew school. It was almost fifteen years after he died, when the Menorah Institute faced serious financial problems and a lack of support by its members, that his dream became reality. With no other conceivable options, Beth Israel voted to merge with Communal Hebrew School in 1975.

The failure of the Menorah Institute was not a gradual and foreseeable occurrence. In the 1972-1973 school year, the institution still enrolled 110 students in its three day per week program and had fourteen children in its nursery school. However, the school was facing problems with finding proper teaching staff and had also incurred a $4500 deficit in its budget.[42]

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[41]During the 1970s and 1980s, Communal Hebrew School educated a majority of Orthodox and Conservative students (around sixty-five to eighty percent) and a minority of Reform and unaffiliated students. As mentioned later, the school became dominated by Reform students in the nineties. As estimated by Ms. Rachelle Stein, Communal Hebrew School secretary, phone interview by author, 8 December, 1997.

[42]Minutes of the Youth Education Committee of Beth Israel Congregation, 1972, New Orleans.

By November 1974, the Youth Education Committee of the congregation presented a report to the board stating that enrollment figures for that school year had dropped well below projections. For the 1974-1975 school year, there were only ten students enrolled in the three day per week Talmud Torah program. The committee blamed the decline on Lakeshore Hebrew Day School, which was established a few years earlier, as well as other unidentified reasons. Parents of the Menorah Institute's weekday students had already been informed that a merger with Communal Hebrew School would take place.[43] For students of the school, the merger simply meant that the original high standards on which their school was founded would be restored and that they would study in Communal Hebrew School's building.

At the board meeting of Congregation Beth Israel on November 6, 1974, a motion was passed stating:

> That the Congregation discontinue the three day per week Talmud Torah program, while retaining the Sunday School, to be effective as rapidly as possible.
>
> It was further moved that the Youth Education Committee continue its negotiations with Communal Hebrew School with the view towards possible merger and that negotiations be started regarding a satisfactory arrangement with the present teachers of Talmud Torah.[44]

[43]Report of Youth Activities Committee to the Beth Israel Board Meeting on November 6, 1974, New Orleans. Lakeshore Hebrew Day School was established in the early 1970s, however it never drew impressive enrollment figures. Although the school survived well into the 1990s, it was not considered a successful institution of the New Orleans Jewish community.

[44]Minutes of a meeting of the Board of Directors of Beth Israel Congregation held on November 6, 1974, New Orleans.

By January 27, 1975, the merger was still not final. The eleven students who remained in the Talmud Torah were being taught by one teacher three times each week.[45] Although it was never officially noted in Beth Israel's Board minutes, the two schools did merge for the 1975-1976 school year, thus completing Lisitzky's efforts which began forty years earlier.

For the past two decades, Communal Hebrew School has continued to serve the entire Jewish community of New Orleans. During these years, the school has evolved into a true center of Jewish learning in New Orleans. Currently, educators from Gates of Prayer and Touro Synagogue, two Reform congregations, work side-by-side with the principal of Communal Hebrew School to formulate a Hebrew curriculum designed for students from all denominations. The majority of students in the Hebrew school are Reform (seventy-one percent), followed by Conservative (twenty percent), and then Orthodox (five percent) and unaffiliated (four percent).[46]

Communal Hebrew School, at its present Metairie location (6121 West Esplanade Avenue), continues to educate students from the nursery years through high school (high school students in the Israel program) from every congregation in the city. The goal of its nursery school is to provide children with a "rich understanding of Judaism and Jewish values." The Hebrew school is designed to teach the "Hebrew language, reading and comprehension, prayer, and Bible through creative learning activities and 'hands on' experiences." The school has also recently introduced a high school in Israel program which is associated with The Alexander Muss High School in Israel. Students from the New Orleans community spend

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[45]Minutes of a meeting of the Board of Directors of Beth Israel Congregation held on January 27, 1975.
[46]Ms. Rachelle Stein, Communal Hebrew School secretary, phone interview by author, 8 December, 1997.

time in Israel with other teenagers from the United States, while also earning academic credit. This program, which is clearly in line with Lisitzky's vision, aims at making New Orleans teens return feeling "more a part of their Jewish heritage, their synagogues and temples and their Jewish community."[47]

Besides its youth education programs, Communal Hebrew School houses the Moses E. Brenner Library and Educational Resource Center. This center serves as a bureau of Jewish education to the New Orleans Jewish community, providing educational materials and curricula for teachers, students, organizations, youth groups, and synagogues. For the past few years, the school has also been awarded a grant from the Jewish Endowment Fund of New Orleans to host the Community-Wide Teacher Development Workshop which is a project connected with local synagogues and temples.[48]

Since Lisitzky's death in 1962, Communal Hebrew School's demographics and curricula have changed significantly. Yet, it continues to promote the vision of communal unity upon which Ephraim E. Lisitzky founded it. The school still boasts its commitment to continuity of the Jewish people and its dedication to providing quality Jewish education for its children. Today, Communal Hebrew School remains the pride of the New Orleans Jewish community.

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[47]Letter from Communal Hebrew School to the New Orleans community, 1997, New Orleans, in possession of author.
[48]Ibid; Ms. Rachelle Stein, Communal Hebrew School secretary, phone interview by author, 10 December, 1997.

Conclusion

Over a period of close to 150 years, Jewish leaders in New Orleans discovered that Jewish education is the key to bringing unity among differing factions of the community. They learned that through teaching the foundations of Judaism and Jewish culture, a community can transcend denominational lines and promote respect for diverse beliefs and practices. During the community's experiment to create the perfect central educational institution, division lines were erased, religious apathy diminished, and a unified community feeling emerged.

The process of designing the perfect community school was not an easy task for those who envisioned it. Their work was the product of almost seventy years of attempts and failures. There was always a new leader who was ready to pick up where his predecessors left off and start anew. And when the institution was finally established in 1918, its leaders never relinquished that pioneering spirit. For over eighty years they confronted the challenges that stood in their way in order to keep their dream of Jewish communal unity alive.

Communal Hebrew School of New Orleans never became the sole educational institution of the Jewish community. Yet over its eighty year history, it has combined resources with all major Jewish educational establishments in New Orleans and developed a curriculum to supplement congregational Sunday schools. It fulfilled the dream of its founder, Ephraim E. Lisitzky, by promoting respect and support between all elements of the community.

The educational institution the New Orleans Jewish community forged was not a unique endeavor; other cities in America maintained their own communal Talmud Torahs. Many of these schools also brought students from different factions of the community together to study in a community supported establishment. But, Communal Hebrew School did more than just unite diverse students together for religious study. It nurtured hundreds of Jewish leaders with Ephraim E. Lisitzky's philosophy that Jewish learning should be the common denominator for all Jewish people, no matter what their beliefs and practices may be. It demonstrated that the study of Torah is more powerful than the divisions that Jews have placed between themselves. It fostered over four generations of Jews who committed themselves to Judaism and passed on their love of the Jewish heritage to their children. And most importantly, it survived the pressures that destroyed other American Talmud Torahs and to this day continues educating the New Orleans Jewish community with many of the methods that Lisitzky instituted in 1918.

Appendix A

Ephraim E. Lisitzky (top row, second from left),
Leo Shpall (top row, second from right),
and students, no date[1]

[1]Photocopy of a picture obtained from Zolly Levin of New Orleans.

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