

The dispatch from St. Paul in the July 1856 issue of the *Israelite* was only a few lines long. It noted that “Our brethren of this Far West city have united in a congregation, on the principal of Israel.”

A month later, the *Israelite's* St. Paul correspondent reported that “there are but eight Jewish families and some young men of our persuasion in this new city in the Far West. Still they organized a congregation and elected a Hazan, Mr. Lion of Cleveland.”

The correspondent incorrectly identified the congregation as the “Mount Sinai Hebrew Association of St. Paul.” In fact, the congregation was called Har Zion or Mount Zion.

The establishment of Mount Zion Hebrew Association would mark the beginning of organized Jewish life in Minnesota, one year before the frontier territory achieved statehood in 1857.

As the new state experienced explosive growth in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Jewish communities would take root all across Minnesota--- in the boom town of Minneapolis, in the iron mining region near the port city of Duluth and in the small out-state farming centers like Albert Lea and Mankato.

Sadly enough, organized Jewish life has pretty much faded away in Minnesota's small rural towns, but active, vital Jewish communities are flourishing today in Duluth to the north, in Rochester to the south, and in the state's dominant center, the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, where the vast majority of Minnesota's roughly 50,000 Jews now live.

Today, this metropolitan region of 2.6 million is unique because it is anchored by two central cities of almost equal size. While they may be known as the Minnesota Twins, the two cities, separated mainly by the Mississippi River, are anything but identical. Each has its own distinct character and personality.

The appearance of the two cities points up their differences. Minneapolis' skyline is filled with architecturally impressive skyscrapers, giving it the look of other western big cities like Denver and Seattle. St. Paul has something of a European feel, with a skyline dominated by the twin domes of the Catholic Cathedral and the Minnesota State Capitol, each on its own hill overlooking the downtown area.

Like the broader communities in which they live, the Jews of Minneapolis and St. Paul have maintained their own separate identities and their own institutions, whose roots extend back for nearly 150 years.

Early years in St. Paul

Mount Zion, Minnesota's oldest Jewish congregation, followed traditional practices and rituals when it was organized in 1856. But that would change over the next 25 years. By 1878, Mount Zion would identify itself as Reform and join the newly organized Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

In his book, *The Jews in Minnesota: The First Seventy Five Years*, Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut described how the changes at Mount Zion were incremental, at least in the early years. “In 1874, the great religious debate concerned nothing more earth-shaking than a possible one-hour recess on Yom Kippur,” reported Rabbi Plaut, who served as Mount Zion’s spiritual leader from 1948 to 1961.

During the next decade change would gain momentum as Jewish life in St. Paul underwent a dramatic transformation. On July 14, 1882, two hundred impoverished Eastern European Jewish refugees, fleeing Czarist persecution, arrived unexpectedly at the St. Paul train depot. Rabbi Plaut described the tumultuous scene: “Here they were—on the eve of the Sabbath, without food, without money and many cases without hardly enough clothing to take care of the bare necessities.”

Immediately, the men and women of Mount Zion sprung into action, delivering food to the refugees and raising funds to help them settle in their new American home.

While the established Jewish leaders of St. Paul, mainly German in origin, reached out to the new arrivals, the sudden influx had an unsettling impact. Soon the first immigrant wave would be followed by ever-larger ones, swelling the Jewish population and overwhelming the existing largely German-Jewish community.

In the 1880s, many of the new arrivals settled on the Mississippi river flats, in an area known as the West Side. There, the Eastern European immigrants established their own institutions, recreating, as best they could, the Jewish life they had known in the Old World.

The Minneapolis North Side:

Fifteen miles away, in fast growing Minneapolis, another Jewish community, comprised mainly of Eastern European immigrants, was taking shape on that city’s North Side.

Initially Orthodox but later increasingly Conservative with the founding of Beth El Synagogue in 1921, the North Side was the center of Jewish life in Minneapolis up through the 1950s. At its high point, with a Jewish population of about 10,000, this Minneapolis district had its own commercial strip along Plymouth Avenue and its own network of community agencies including the highly acclaimed Talmud Torah of Minneapolis and the Emmanuel Cohen Center, the predecessor of the modern-day Sabes Jewish Community Center.

The mid-century marked the turning point for the North side as it did for urban Jewish communities all across the country. Soon Jews began leaving the old neighborhoods as the post World War II exodus to suburbia gained momentum. That exodus was intensified in Minneapolis by the 1967 race riot that looted and burned several Jewish-owned shops on Plymouth Avenue

Today, only a handful of Jewish families are left on the North Side, which now has a large African-American population. The shops lining Plymouth Avenue are gone, but several synagogues have been transformed into predominantly black churches.

In 2000, long-time Minneapolis residents were able to record their recollections of north side life in a video produced by the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest entitled "We knew who we were, memories of the Minneapolis Jewish North Side."

The Reform movement comes to the South Side

While the North Side may have had the largest Jewish community in Minneapolis at one time, Jewish families were scattered through the ring of neighborhoods surrounding downtown on the south and west side around the turn of the century. One small enclave on Franklin Avenue, consisting mainly of Rumanian Jews, established Adath Jeshuran Synagogue, which would become the first Conservative congregation in Minnesota in 1907.

In 1878, a group of 23 Jewish men rented a hall on Nicollet and Washington Streets, near the downtown riverfront, where they could hold Friday night services. The twenty three would form the city's first Jewish congregation, Shaarai Tov, the Gates of Goodness. This new congregation, traditional at first, would move into the Reform movement during its early years. In 1888, Shaarai Tov relocated to its own building, a Moorish-style frame structure at 10th Street and 5th Avenue. When it burned down in 1902, it was replaced with a new stone synagogue.

The new century brought new leadership to the young congregation. In 1901, Rabbi Samuel Deinard moved to Minneapolis from Terre Haute Indiana to become Shaarai Tov's new rabbi. Though small in stature, Rabbi Deinard soon became a towering figure in the Minneapolis Jewish community.

Today, he is best remembered for his efforts to overcome the religious, social and cultural divisions within the American Jewry during the early decades of the Twentieth Century. A Reform rabbi of Eastern European descent, fluent in English, German and Yiddish, Deinard was able to help heal the breach that separated the acculturated members of his own congregation from the more insular Eastern European immigrants who were still largely Orthodox. Though his own temple observed only one day of Rosh Hashanah, Dr. Deinard would regularly attend an Orthodox synagogue on the second day, often accepting an invitation to address the congregation.

In 1912, Rabbi Deinard established the *American Jewish World*, a weekly newspaper for the Jewish communities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Today, more than 90 years later, The *Jewish World* is still being published for the Twin Cities Jewish communities

In 1920, Shaarai Tov changed its name to Temple Israel. Then, the next year, when he was only 48, Rabbi Deinard died suddenly on Yom Kippur morning. "The entire Jewish community is grief-stricken at the sad tidings," the *Jewish World* reported.

Rabbi Albert Minda, Rabbi Deinard's successor, became Temple Israel's longest serving rabbi, holding that post from 1921 until his retirement in 1963. During his tenure, the congregation would build an impressive new classical-styled temple in South Minneapolis in 1928. His successor, Rabbi Max Shapiro, the Temple's current Rabbi Emeritus, introduced several important innovations including Torah readings at Friday night services and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs.

Today, Temple Israel, the largest Jewish congregation in the Minnesota, still occupies its historic 1928 building near Lake of the Isles.

The Capital of Anti-Semitism

In the decades following the World War 1, many Jewish immigrant families, as they prospered, began moving out from the crowded, poorer North Side precincts around Lyndale Avenue to the more affluent Homewood neighborhood to the west. Some moved across town to the lake district in South Minneapolis, where they would affiliate with Temple Israel.

While affluence brought a more comfortable lifestyle, Jews often had to deal with a darker side of day-to-day life in Minneapolis, a pernicious strain of anti-Semitism that infected many institutions in the broader community.

Anti-Semitism was the city's nasty secret until a crusading journalist brought it out in the open. In 1946, Carey McWilliams, writing in the magazine *Common Ground* called Minneapolis "the capital of anti-Semitism in the United States."

McWilliams described what he called the "iron curtain" that separated Jews from non-Jews in Minnesota's largest city. "So far as I know, Minneapolis is the only city in America in which Jews as a matter of practice and custom are ineligible for membership in the local Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions or Toastmasters. Even the Automobile Club refuses to accept Jews," McWilliams reported.

The *Common Ground*'s writer went on to discuss the discrimination faced by Jews in employment, where city's larger corporations had a policy of not interviewing Jewish job applicants, and in housing, where certain neighborhoods were quietly and informally designated for "gentiles only."

McWilliams only had to look across the river to St. Paul to find substantially less anti-Semitism. "There, the Jewish community was relatively free of the odious social restrictions and limitations," McWilliams wrote. In St. Paul, Jews were part of the economic stream and held leadership roles in organizations such as the Red Cross and the Community Chest. In St. Paul, Jewish doctors served on the staff of the local hospitals; In Minneapolis they were denied these privileges.

Some observers, including McWilliams, attributed these differences to the differing ethnic and socio-economic complexions of the two cities. In the Minneapolis, the major

engines of the local economy were tightly controlled by an interrelated group of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant families from New England. But such was the case in St. Paul, at least not to the same degree. There, the largely German and Irish Catholic community was somewhat more accepting of Jews than the WASPs and Scandinavians who predominated in Minneapolis. In St. Paul, moreover, the Jewish community, with its more acculturated German origins, had a longer history of civic involvement than did its counterpart in Minneapolis.

Growing up in rural Minnesota.

Unlike their relatives who lived in Minneapolis, the Jews in small out-state towns experienced little or no anti-Semitism in the pre-war years. Up through the 1950's, almost every market center of any size in Minnesota had had a Jewish family or two that ran the local clothing store. Many of these families were highly respected leaders of their local secular community.

Allen Saeks, a former president of the Jewish Community Relations Council, grew up in Bemidji, a Northern Minnesota town of about 10,000. There, three separate Jewish families, including his own, ran competing stores. "None of them spoke to each other" he recalled. Saeks remembers being fully accepted by his non-Jewish classmates during his school years: "I was involved in a lot of school activities, and being Jewish never seemed to be an issue."

Rhoda Mains was born and raised in Worthington, a Southwestern Minnesota town of about 11,000. "I never experienced any anti-Semitism growing up," Mains recalled. "I knew I was different being Jewish, but it wasn't anything negative. My Dad was involved in the broader community and was very well regarded by everyone in town. I guess it rubbed off on the rest of us."

Moving into the mainstream

Anti-Semitism, at least in its more overt institutional form, has pretty much faded away in Minnesota in more recent years although the JCRC had had to contend with isolated outbreaks around the state. Today, Jews are no longer denied access to certain Twin Cities neighborhoods as they once were, and overt employment discrimination is largely a thing of the past.

In recent years, Jews have played a major role in Minnesota politics, far in excess of their small political base within the state. While control of one of the state's two U.S. Senate seats has flipped back forth between the two major parties over the last 25 years, a Jew has held that seat continuously since 1978. The current Jewish incumbent, Republican Norm Coleman, was elected in 2002 following the death of Democrat Paul Wellstone in a plane crash only days before the general election. Earlier in his career, the Brooklyn-born Coleman, a former St. Paul mayor, was the chair of the local chapter of the Jewish National Fund.

Today, Jews are represented on county boards and city councils through the Twin Cities and hold nine seats in the Minnesota Legislature. The nine include first term Representative Fred Hornstein, who is married to Temple Israel's senior rabbi, Marcia Zimmerman

The contemporary scene

In these early years of the twenty first century, the centers of organized Minneapolis Jewish life are now mainly located in the city's western suburbs. One focal point is the recently expanded Barry Family Campus in St. Louis Park, which now houses the Sabes Jewish Community Center, the Talmud Torah of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Jewish Day School and the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Northwest. St. Louis Park is also the center of a growing Orthodox community with its own Eruv.

St. Paul has its own Jewish Community Center in the traditionally Jewish neighborhood of Highland Park, the home of an Orthodox Lubavitch community and the city's largest Conservative synagogue, Temple of Aaron. In recent years, many St. Paul families have moved out to suburban Mendota Heights, where the Conservative Beth Jacob Synagogue is located.

While the Minneapolis and St. Paul Jewish communities each maintain their own federations, the two organizations now share a common Web site. Other local institutions which cut across community boundaries include the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas and the Sholom Community Alliance, which maintain senior housing and senior care facilities at several locations in the Twin Cities. Community members in both cities and throughout the state participate in Jewish Community Action, a leading advocate for affordable housing and community reinvestment.

While more precise demographics will await an upcoming Jewish census, the two Jewish communities are estimated to have a combined population of about 45,000, with Minneapolis and its suburbs containing about two thirds of that number. The population count is expected to increase significantly over an earlier census conducted in the 1992, in part because of a recent influx of Russian Jews.

“Our communities are just about the right size,” said Joshua Fogelson, Executive Director of the Minneapolis Federation for Jewish Service. “They are large enough to have a critical mass that supports a rich and varied range of services and programs, but small enough for the individual to feel that he or she can play an important role.”

“In terms of congregational affiliation rates, we are about average for the country as whole. But we are substantially above average in terms of per capital contribution rates to Jewish causes. In fact, we have one of the highest per capita giving rates of any community in the country,” he said.

The Federation's director knows that Twin Cities Jews, like their counterparts all over the country, are intermarrying at a significant rate and facing assimilationist pressures. "But I see that as an opportunity and a challenge rather than as a threat. Here in Minnesota, we are making strong efforts to bring inter-faith couples into our community," Fogelson said.

"If I looked around and saw that our synagogues were empty, I would be more concerned. But they are not empty. More often than not they are full," he added.

Seats and pews are often filled for Shabbat and holiday services at the Twin Cities' four Reform synagogues. The four include Mount Zion and Temple Israel, both with long, rich histories, and the new-generation congregations of Bet Shalom and Shir Tikvah both founded in the 1980s. Today, the four have a combined membership of about 3,800 families.

All four are in the mainstream of the current Reform movement to incorporate more traditional practices and rituals into the religious life of the congregation. "Fifty years ago, if you came here for a service, wearing a kippah, you would be asked to take it off, Rabbi Adam Spilker of Mount Zion explained. "Now, at least half of our members regularly wear a kippah and a tallit when they worship here."

"The pendulum has clearly swung in our movement, "according Rabbi Stacy Offner of Shir Tikvah. "In the beginning of Reform in this country, we knew what it meant to be a Jew, and we were trying to figure out what it meant to be an American. Now, we know what it means to be an American, and we are striving to understand more fully what it means to be a Jew."

The senior rabbis of the four congregations share a strong common bond and often collaborate on projects and programs. In addition to Rabbis Spilker and Offer, they include Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman from Temple Israel and Rabbi Norman Cohen from Bet Shalom. "We are very collegial," Rabbi Zimmerman said. "We are contemporaries in very general terms, and while we did not attend the seminary together, we have had common teachers and mentors, and that has helped to give us a common outlook."

This past year, the four rabbis collaborated on a lecture series on Jewish ethics, with the series rotating between the four synagogues.

"As individual congregations we still have our own way of doing things and our own outlooks," Rabbi Offer added. "But we are much more similar than we are different. The Biennial helps remind us of that similarity."