

IT WAS 1853. Franklin Pierce was President and the Civil War was yet a decade away. Newark, then a city of 48,000, had been founded in 1666 as a place of religious freedom. Louis Trier, Newark's first known Jewish settler, had arrived only nine years earlier. B'nai Jeshurun, its first congregation was five years old. By 1853 there were merely 200 Jews in the city, but with diverse needs. The relatively small, community had a mix of Germans, part of the 1850's immigration and a smaller, largely Polish, number who were generally less affluent. The dominant Eastern European immigration was yet to come. The backgrounds, languages and religious practices of these early settlers diverged. Uncomfortable with the German oriented liturgy of B'nai Jeshurun, a group of Polish Jews assembled in the Bank Street home of the generous merchant Abraham Newman to form Congregation B'nai Abraham, a synagogue more closely aligned with their traditions. The documents of incorporation, filed two years later, would carry the name "Son's of Abraham" in his honor. By the 1940s, when B'nai Abraham already occupied its majestic home on Clinton Avenue, Newark's Jewish community alone will have grown to over 50,000 with 40 synagogues to serve its needs.



Prince Street before World War I

A 150 Year History



Market Street 1853

IN THE EARLY years Jewish life in the city was concentrated in a few blocks of the downtown area. In many ways, it mirrored life across the Hudson - Prince Street with its hustle and bustle of peddlers was hard to distinguish from Orchard Street on the Lower East Side. The fledgling Congregation, often on the brink of financial collapse, would move frequently, but always within the immediate area. Reflecting the desperate shortage of rabbis in the country (the United States had not rabbinical school until 1875) and not inconsequentially its own lack of stability, B'nai Abraham was served by at least fourteen spiritual leaders in its first forty-nine years. Most of them were not institutionally ordained. With the maturing of the American Jewish Community, and perhaps as a sign that the Congregation had found its voice and purpose, only three men would occupy its pulpit for most of the Century that followed. Each had a long tenure and each made a unique contribution to the institution. During its 150 years, B'nai Abraham's members would witness wars in which its children would die, a Holocaust which decimated European Jewry, the founding of a Jewish State and its continuing fight for survival, racial strife that would claim its beloved Newark as one of its casualties and periods of both great financial prosperity and depression that would impact upon its fortunes. From its start, as a breakaway from the then only established Jewish institution, B'nai Abraham has taken an independent path molding its own approach to synagogue life.



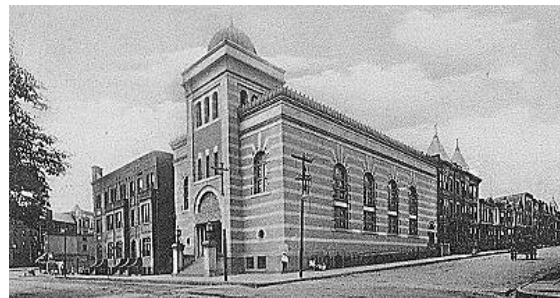
Rabbi Isidore Kalisch



Washington Street
Synagogue 1884

WHAT IT WAS in the early years is not that easy to define. Clearly, its initial thrust was more traditional than the congregation from which it split in 1853. Some sources describe its liturgy as "Orthodox," but certainly not by today's standards. Indeed history points in another direction. As early as 1870, Isidor Kalisch, one of the only ordained rabbis to serve in the first half century assumed the pulpit. He was a renowned scholar, the author of many books. Most significantly, Kalisch was a major figure in the early Reform Movement, and while credit is usually given to Isaac Meyer Wise, was in fact the principal editor of the *Minhag America*, the prayer book widely used in Reform synagogues in those days. It is true that Kalisch ultimately left because of opposition to his "too liberal" views, but his background was well established beforehand. The fact that he was hired tells the story and when he returned to Newark a few years later to devote himself to scholarship, he continued to preach on the holidays and teach the children of members. His son became a Justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court. In breaking away in 1853, the founders were rejecting the Germanic orientation of B'nai Jeshurun, but as late as 1884, Moritz Berla, who would serve as president for twenty-five years, delivered a speech in German at the dedication of their first real building at 226 Washington Street and German was taught in its school. Shortly after the turn of the Century they recruited B'nai Jeshurun's assistant rabbi to serve as their spiritual leader. Throughout the 20th Century and into the 21st they have been led by progressive rabbis trained in the liberal tradition.

WHILE THERE WERE only 200 Jews in Newark at the founding, thousands more would be flocking to the city over the next years. B'nai Abraham's swelling congregation and the strong leadership of Berla provided stability and the need for a permanent synagogue. The Washington Street building which they leased was the response, but within thirteen years it would prove too small. In 1897, B'nai Abraham moved into a beautiful new synagogue which they had erected on the corner of High Street and 13th Avenue. It was the first building constructed specifically for their use with a 900 seat Sanctuary. High Street represented the real beginning of Temple B'nai Abraham as we know it today. The move was engineered by a group of dedicated lay leaders, most notably William S. (Daddy) Rich. It was in a planning meeting for the new edifice in Rich's home in 1895 that the idea for The Lady Judith Montefiore Society, now known as Sisterhood, was born. The Men's Club would be formed almost two decades later in 1913.



High Street Synagogue 1897

Confirmation on High Street (date unknown)

TWO MORE MEN would occupy the pulpit in the first five years on High Street, but in 1902 Julius Silberfeld was invited to become B'nai Abraham's rabbi. He would serve for thirty-seven very important years. Silberfeld, born in Austria and brought to America by his father Cantor Joseph Silberfeld had a love for music. He probably began his career by following in his father's footsteps eventually moving from cantor to rabbi. Many of B'nai Abraham's early leaders had acted both in both capacities. Silberfeld had previously served Temple Beth El in Jersey City and was B'nai Jeshurun's assistant rabbi when recruited for the job. A formal and elegant figure with the penchant for bow ties and black suits, he lent immediate stature to his new post. He was not a great orator, but was a man of unquestioned vision. In a piece written for the 75th Jubilee, he reminisced: "It was in 1902 that the writer was called to the pulpit of B'nai Abraham, and immediately set to work, with the assistance of the leaders of the congregation, to make Temple B'nai Abraham one of the most outstanding, one of the most progressive, one of the most forward-looking Jewish congregations in this country. In order to accomplish this result, it was necessary to make the synagogue function in a three-fold capacity, as visioned by the ancient Jewish sages: It must be a House of Prayer, a School, and a Social Center. This was the ideal to be striven for, this was the goal to be reached."



Rabbi Julius Silberfeld

OVER THE FOLLOWING years, Silberfeld became a popular figure who would translate that early vision into a reality. Under him the congregation would outgrow its High Street building and in 1924, it moved into an immense structure "uptown" on the corner of Clinton Avenue and South 10th Street. It would be the largest synagogue building in New Jersey with a 2,000 seat Sanctuary. Perhaps equally important was the fulfillment of Silberfeld's vision of the three-fold mission of a synagogue. A social center wing housed the large Gertrude Aronson Hall and a gym on the ground floor with a full sized swimming pool below. Upstairs was a school facility with a dozen classrooms and the rabbi's study. Just to put it in perspective relative to our own times, the entire administrative staff for the congregation was housed in a small room off one of the landings leading to the second floor. In later years, Hannah Jacobson the legendary controller would manage the administrative affairs of the entire congregation in this tiny office with the help of a single assistant.



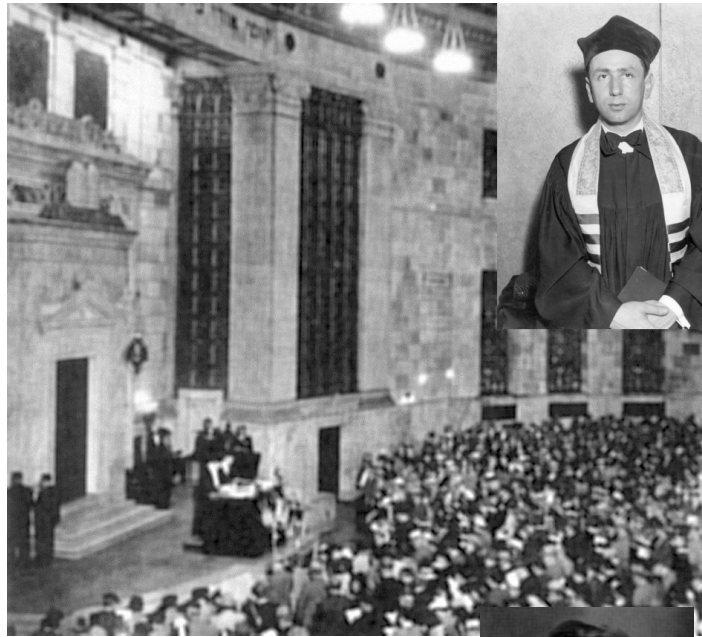
Clinton Avenue Synagogue



Sanctuary Interior

THE NEW BUILDING represented a real stretch for a congregation that had known so much struggle in its past. But it also represented a statement of where it had come and the place it was taking in the leadership of Essex Country Jewry. What followed a few years later was beyond anyone's control. The great Depression that began with the Stock Market collapse in 1929 wiped out the fortunes of many major contributors with yet unpaid pledges. These were dark days for America and, despite palatial surroundings, for Temple B'nai Abraham. With tenacity they held on through the next ten years, but not without difficulty. A 1935 newspaper clip quoting Michael A. Stavitsky, the then finance chairman, boasts of an operating surplus. In fact, the congregation's financial situation remained precarious and in the summer of 1939 Stavitsky and other leaders asked Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, president of the Jewish Institute of Religion to help them find a new spiritual leader.

The choice of Dr. Joachim Prinz, who just two years before had escaped Nazi Germany, to assume the pulpit was another bold step in the congregation's history. Prinz, a graduate of the Breslau Seminary established the year after B'nai Abraham was born, had served the Jewish Community of Berlin and was an early voice warning of the lethal potential of Hitler's regime. Thousands responded to his calls by emigrating to Palestine or other countries and were thus saved from the gas chambers. An early Zionist, Prinz had befriended Wise at international conferences and one day would succeed him as president of the American Jewish Congress. He was particularly known as one of the great orators of his time and for his informality as a person, both characteristics contrasting from his predecessor. But there were also significant similarities. Silberfeld, too, had been an early Zionist and, most importantly, a progressive visionary. His prayer book had introduced English into the services and his love for music was responsible for bringing Abraham Shapiro, one of the great cantors of his day to the Temple. Prinz would build upon these foundations.



Dr. Joachim Prinz' Installation
(inset: Rabbi's installation photo)



Confirmation 1940



Cantor
Abraham Shapiro

IN 1939 TEMPLE B'nai Abraham's membership had dwindled and its deficit had grown. Operating funds were so tight that staff members salaries were often not paid on time. A huge mortgage remained. The lay leadership under Stavitsky's guidance undertook the task of righting the financial woes. Dr. Prinz played an active role in helping to raise funds and most importantly in building a Temple program that would attract new members and new support. Together with Shapiro he constructed a liturgical framework with a distinctive B'nai Abraham stamp. The soaring space lent itself to majestic services with music expressly composed for the Temple by Max Helfman its renowned the music director. Dr. Prinz' oratory, to which the huge Sanctuary lent itself, drew large audiences. What attracted people was not merely his great talent as a speaker, but as in Berlin during the years before, his focus on the issues of the day. Preaching about current events in a religious context was new to the American pulpit and while colleagues across the country were beginning to do so as well, the character of his sermons had a special resonance.



The Ner Tamid, hung in Newark, would be brought to a new home in Livingston.

BUT SERMONS WERE not the whole story. From the first day, Dr. Prinz devoted most of his energy to building an educational program for young and old. The Hebrew School was overhauled and would now meet three days a week. An innovative Institute of Adult Education was established, meeting on Tuesday evenings called "Institute Night." A new faculty was hired to teach the children and a distinguished group of scholars invited to teach Institute courses. Prinz, himself, taught art history a field in which he had considerable expertise. He also devoted considerable time to becoming acquainted with his new congregation. Through active interaction and counseling, officiating at life cycle events, regular hospital visits and his innate accessibility he soon befriended young and old alike. The combined efforts of rabbi and lay leadership transformed B'nai Abraham into a vibrant congregation with nearly one thousand families. In short order, the financial situation improved and the mortgage was retired.

AS THE COMMUNITY grew and, in the post war years, became increasingly more affluent, many Jews began to move out of the city and into the surrounding suburbs. By the late 1950s and early 60s a large percentage of the membership had moved to the Oranges. The Temple acquired a piece of property across the street and made a parking lot to accommodate their needs. At first, children who lived in the suburbs were transported to Newark for Hebrew School, but as their numbers grew that became problematic. To address this situation, the congregation acquired a mansion on Wyoming Avenue in South Orange and the Suburban House became the first step toward relocation. Initially, the dual locations worked well, but as more members moved (some of them leaving for suburban centered congregations) and racial tensions in Newark grew, the need for a more permanent solution became increasingly evident. It was not an easy decision to leave this beautiful home, a building that everyone knew could not and would not be duplicated.



South Orange Suburban House

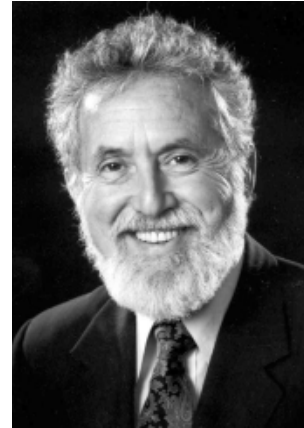
TIMES HAD ALSO changed and with them the needs of a modern congregation. As beautiful as the sanctuary was on Clinton Avenue, it was ill suited to the more intimate services and activities that were certain to prevail in the years ahead. Dr. Prinz, his associate Rabbi Barry Friedman and the Temple leadership consciously determined to build the Temple B'nai Abraham of tomorrow not to replicate the past. It would be set on a beautiful tract of land in Livingston and would be surrounded by nature. One of the major decisions was to have clear glass windows so that worshipers would remain in touch with the world outside. The Sanctuary again had a beautiful high, albeit contemporary, ceiling, but had far fewer permanent seats than in Newark. While a movable wall permitted expansion on the High Holy Days and for other special occasions, it lent itself to less formal services with greater intimacy and more



Dr. Prinz with Rabbi Barry Friedman conduct services in Livingston

DR. PRINZ RETIRED in 1977. Barry R. Friedman, ordained at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, became B'nai Abraham's first American born senior rabbi. Growing up in Philadelphia, he was also the first with Eastern European roots. Prinz, Silberfeld and even Kalisch were German born. Friedman's association with the Temple began in the early 1960s when he became its Youth Director. During that period he entered rabbinical school and after his ordination served as assistant rabbi at The Fairmont Temple in Cleveland, coincidentally one of the congregations led by Isidor Kalisch early in his career. Friedman returned to B'nai Abraham to work alongside Dr. Prinz in 1968 becoming senior rabbi nine years later.

IT WAS LEFT to Rabbi Friedman to truly bring B'nai Abraham into this new era, an institution of the suburbs rather than of the city. Having served in both locations he provided a bridge between the two, but brought to the task his own personality and talents. Like both of his predecessors, Friedman was a lifelong Zionist. He grew up in its youth movements, particularly in Young Judea for whom he had worked before joining the Temple staff. Throughout his tenure, he maintained close ties with friends in Israel and helped forge an even closer link between the Congregation and the Jewish State. He also brought his love for the traditions of his Eastern European heritage and his youthful experiences at the feet of a rebbe in his native Philadelphia. While a liberal rabbi himself, these warm reminiscences often were reflected in his sermons. Friedman continued in B'nai Abraham's tradition of fostering contemporary Jewish music. Starting with bringing Gershon Kingsley's *Sabbath for Today* service while still in Newark, he promoted regular special Friday night musical services throughout his tenure.



Rabbi Barry R. Friedman



Rabbi Clifford M. Kulwin

WHEN THE LAST of the three 20th Century spiritual leaders retired in 1999, he was succeeded by the current rabbi, Clifford M. Kulwin. A son of the Mid-West and, like his predecessor, ordained at the HUC-JIR, Kulwin began his rabbinical career serving a congregation in Brazil. He spent the intervening years as an executive of the World Union of Progressive Judaism traveling the globe and working with diverse Jewish communities. He built strong relationships with their leaders and has been informed by their diversity while being struck by their commonality which includes strong ties with Israel. Rabbi Kulwin came to B'nai Abraham at a crucial time. The bridge between Livingston and Newark, the past and the present, had been made. The future of B'nai Abraham lay ahead, and it was clear that, without abandoning a glorious tradition, it was a time ripe for transformation. Kulwin represents a new generation of American Rabbis who are forging a liberal and progressive approach appropriate to its age. It is a progressive Judaism that doesn't reject past practice merely because it is of yesterday nor does it blindly adhere to traditions simply because things were always done that way. B'nai Abraham has consistently sought its own way in its own time. The B'nai Abraham that will be is emerging in that context. It's not a static tomorrow, nor is it groundless. It is a dynamic living tomorrow which builds upon a proud 150 years.



Livingston Synagogue



Cantor Lee Coopersmith

INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY, OF necessity, dwells upon the great moments, the bricks and mortar and the accomplishments of the few. Turning points, the houses of worship, and the rabbis who have served are the easiest to remember. In truth, great institutions are the work of many hands, most importantly the women, men and children who make up its membership and who give vibrancy to its being. Lay leaders, too many to recall, too many forgotten in the flow of history, have ultimately provided the pillars upon which B'nai Abraham has been built in these 150 years: benefactors like Abraham Neuman, who provided a home in which to worship and the first Torah scroll from which to learn; Lesser Marks, Isaac Cohen, Isaac Solomons and Abraham Winters, who signed the certificate of incorporation; Moritz Berla, Daddy Rich, and in our own day, I. Samuel Sadowick, who spearheaded the building of its homes; Michael Stavitsky, who brought the Congregation back to solvency during a decade as President, and people like Leo Brody, Norman Feldman and Sam Gittlin who managed the final days in Newark; the new generation of leaders like Martin Kalishman, Peter Klein, Joel Rogoff, Marilyn Rosenbaum, Ira Starr, and Merle Kalishman solidified the institution in its new home. There are so many others.



William S. Rich



Michael A. Stavitsky



Leo Brody



Norman Feldman



A. Sam Gittlin



I. Samuel Sadowick

BUILDING FOR THE future continues and, as B'nai Abraham embarks on its next 150 years, it does so in a newly enlarged home in Livingston. The updated building symbolizes the energy of a new generation and responds to its needs with more classrooms and learning facilities, more space for activities and a more efficient administrative suite. It culminates the term of its current President, Sandra L. Greenberg. It represents just one of her many contributions as she takes her place in the chain of B'nai Abraham's history. At her side in that endeavor has been her life's partner Stephen Greenberg, who spearheaded The Campaign for the Future -- a future that would not be the same without either one of them.



Celebrating 80th Anniversary 1933