

CHAPTER 3

BETH ISRAEL IN BOOM AND DEPRESSION

By Stanley Schwartz



WORLD WAR I CHANGED SAN DIEGO

in a fundamental way: the city became a military town. The Panama-California Exposition of 1915–1916 in Balboa Park was partly responsible for this development. Among the visitors to the Exposition, which commemorated the opening of the Panama Canal, was Franklin D. Roosevelt, then assistant secretary of the Navy. Roosevelt encouraged the Navy to step up its use of San Diego's protected harbor. He also encouraged San Diego to make permanent the temporary structures built for the Exposition. In fact, these buildings in Balboa Park were next used by the military during the war.

After the war, San Diego became the home base of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. The city expanded its port, developed an airfield on Coronado Island, and created a submarine base. The Marine Corps Recruit Depot and the Naval Training Center were established on Loma Portal.

At the same time, the influenza epidemic of 1918 hit San Diego very hard. There were 4,392 recorded cases of the flu and 324 deaths in a population of 70,000.^{lxvi} One of the patriarchs of the San Diego Jewish community, Simon Levi, died in 1918.

San Diego had never had a strong manufacturing base, and it remained weak. San Diego's railroad linkage to the east also remained problematic. However, real estate speculation was rekindled, and Tijuana became the playground of Hollywood. The population of San Diego continued to grow.^{lxvii}

Jewish life in San Diego matured. The Jewish community was small, and members of the two synagogues, Beth Israel and Tifereth Israel, knew and socialized with one another. Although the Home of Peace Jewish Cemetery belonged to Beth Israel, it was operated jointly by a Home of Peace Cemetery Association. Some of Tifereth Israel's members sent their children to Beth Israel's religious school. Beth Israel's rabbis spoke on occasion at Tifereth Israel.

While Beth Israel was the largest Jewish institution in

San Diego, it was still quite small compared to established temples in other cities. This meant that there were frequent rabbinic transitions as the congregation's rabbis were attracted elsewhere. In July 1919, Rabbi Alexander Segel resigned after only eight months' service. The congregation was without a rabbi for a year between the High Holy Days of 1919 and 1920.

BEECH STREET TEMPLE EXPANDS

Rabbi Jerome H. Bayer of San Francisco conducted Rosh Hashanah services in September 1920. In October, Rabbi Ernest R. Trattner was engaged at a salary of \$200 a month, an all-time high salary for the congregation. He was installed in an impressive ceremony on November 5, 1920, when he was about 22 years old.

The inspiring leadership of Rabbi Trattner combined with a membership drive proved to be such great stimulus that by April 1921, the Beech Street Temple was no longer large enough to accommodate the regular Friday evening worshippers. It became necessary, at a cost of \$1,500, to expand the loft into a balcony of considerable size. The congregation launched a campaign to retire the debt incurred in this project.

Despite an increase in salary to \$250 a month, Rabbi Trattner moved to Temple Emanuel in Los Angeles a year later, where he remained at least through 1947. He was the author of several books: *As Jews See Jesus* (1931), *Architects of Ideas* (1938), and *Understanding the Talmud* (1955).

With the congregation growing and the economic picture brighter, Beth Israel began the search for a new rabbi. Rabbi Maxwell H. Dubin, newly married, came with his wife for their first visit to California. He conducted his first service at Beth Israel on November 4, 1921. In the summer of 1922, the congregation offered Rabbi Dubin a two-year contract at \$300 a month. He accepted a second two-year contract, with an increase in salary to \$350 a month.

In the summer of 1925, however, Rabbi Dubin

decided to study law, and he was retained on a part-time basis at \$200 a month. In November, he resigned to devote himself full time to the study of law. Rabbi Dubin went on to become a prolific author of books on Judaism and the rabbi of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles. In later years he was a frequent visitor to San Diego to see his daughter, Maxine Kleinberg, who, with her husband Morton, remains a member of Beth Israel.

Rabbi Jacob K. Levin was elected with a two-year contract to succeed Rabbi Dubin.

Steadily improving its physical facilities, the congregation purchased an organ for \$1,000. Also, Leo Schiller, Max Streicher and Nathan Baranov organized the Temple Brotherhood in February 1923.

BETH ISRAEL MOVES TO THIRD AND LAUREL

When its membership outgrew the Beech Street Temple, Beth Israel prepared to move to a new location. Directors Adolph Levi, Samuel I. Fox and Ed H. Samisch were given authority on November 21, 1923, to purchase property at the northwest corner of Third Avenue and Laurel Street, a short distance from Balboa Park, at a price not to exceed \$12,000.

The site of the congregation's new home was in Banker's Hill, the area directly north of downtown. With its bluff-top location overlooking deep canyons and intersected by three electric streetcar lines, Banker's Hill was a prestigious location.

Fox and Levi led the fundraising for the new synagogue. The congregation paid \$11,000 for the property, of which \$8,500 came from the temple's building fund. The remainder was borrowed from a bank.

In August 1925, the congregation awarded a contract to M. Trepte and Son for \$69,300 to build the new temple. In early 1926, Beth Israel sold the Second and Beech property to H. N. Durflinger for \$20,000. The new temple, designed by William H. Wheeler in the Moorish style with a domed sanctuary, and an adjoining temple center, was dedicated on May 14, 1926. The total cost was \$100,000 with indebtedness on the new building totalling \$25,000.

During the dedication, the congregation's president, Adolph Levi, lit the *ner tamid*, eternal light, and Vice President Samuel I. Fox lit the menorah. Rabbi Jacob K. Levin gave a dedicatory sermon during the Sabbath service. Major Samuel Frankenberger, chair of the

building committee, then presented the building to the members of the congregation, and a key to the temple was given to President Levi. Also participating in the ceremonies were Reverend Frank Linder, minister of the nearby First Methodist Church, Rabbi Edgar F. Magnin of Los Angeles, and Mayor John Bacon.

OUR PRIDE IS TEMPERED

Up to this time, membership in Beth Israel was a function of how many Jews lived in San Diego, which in turn reflected the ups and downs of overall population in the city. However, this was changing as other Jewish congregations were formed and some Jews chose not to affiliate with a synagogue.

In his annual report in January 1927, Rabbi Levin noted that the handsome new temple structure was "brought to fulfillment by less than 60 Jewish families of this city. At the same time, our pride is tempered somewhat by the thought that 60 families were left to perform a public duty to their God, their religion and their people, out of a total of presumably 400 to 500 families, at a conservative estimate, of Jewish origin and faith in this city."^{lxviii} Non-affiliation remains a challenge for Beth Israel, as well as for other synagogues and the greater Jewish community, to the present day.

In 1926, Samuel I. Fox became president of Beth Israel. Adolph Levi, past president, now in his late 60s, resigned from the board of directors and was succeeded on the board by Henry Weinberger.

Rabbi Levin was elected to a second two-year term, from 1928 to 1930, after which he let his contract expire. Rabbi H. Cerf Straus succeeded Rabbi Levin in the first year of the Great Depression, on a one-year contract at \$300 a month, followed by a two-year contract at \$350 a month. As hard times were universal, a wave of dues reductions swept through the congregation, resulting in a financial crisis for the temple. The economic circumstances became so serious that in his annual report in January 1932, Rabbi Straus pointed to the unthinkable possibility that the temple might have to be closed.^{lxix} The rabbi's next contract was for one year at a salary of \$250 a month.

The Race Relations Society, meeting at the Mexican Presbyterian Church on 30th Street, invited Rabbi Straus to lecture on the danger posed by such local Nazi sympathizers as the Ku Klux Klan and the Silver Legion. "Hitler is not content to keep his ideas in his own

The Historic Temple at Third and Laurel

By Stanley and Laurel Schwartz

ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2000, Temple Beth Israel on Third and Laurel was determined to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for three reasons: its architect, its style of architecture, and the important cultural and social events that took place there.

Architect William H. Wheeler designed the synagogue. A Renaissance man, Wheeler supported himself by singing at the Tivoli Opera House in the evenings while attending structural engineering courses at the University of California, Berkeley. He was also known to compete as a prizefighter.

Wheeler was a prolific architect in San Diego and elsewhere. Among his most notable buildings are the Balboa Theatre at Horton Plaza, recently restored and in use, and also on the National Register of Historic Places; the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Old Town, a vital part of the local parish; the All Saints Episcopal Church in Hillcrest; the Klauber-Wangenheim Building in downtown San Diego; and the Governor's Palace in Mexicali.

The architectural style of the temple was Byzantine or Moorish, the trend at that time in American synagogue architecture. This style also fit in with nearby buildings in Balboa Park, which manifested Moorish influence and Spanish heritage. Throughout the synagogue was Byzantine or Moorish decoration. The domed cupola reflected Byzantine and Islamic influences, as did the exterior of the building that contained the social hall.

Many important cultural and social events took place in Temple Beth Israel. Besides serving as a place of worship, the synagogue, from its opening in 1926 until 1950, served as the center of Jewish life in San Diego. Jews from all over San Diego attended dances and social events there. If something important happened in the world involving Jews, the community – regardless of synagogue affiliation – gathered at Beth Israel's temple center.

On April 18, 1926, one month before the synagogue's formal dedication, the congregation invited officials from the Distribution Committee

of the United Jewish Relief Program to speak. These officials related that the situation in Europe was grave: thousands of Jews were in danger of starvation due to crop failures and rising anti-Semitism. The San Diego Jewish community rose to the challenge and raised funds to help their fellow Jews.

What would later become the Jewish Federation of San Diego County was founded at a meeting at the temple. In 1934, one of Beth Israel's directors, Jacob Weinberger, played a key role in organizing the local chapter of the United Jewish Relief Fund. A tireless organizer and fundraiser, Judge Weinberger served as the Relief Fund's first president. During the late 1940s, the temple center hosted a number of keynote speakers on behalf of the local United Jewish Relief Fund.

In those days, a visit from someone across the globe, especially an important diplomat or soldier, was not a common occurrence. In early 1948, James G. McDonald, former chairman of President Roosevelt's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, spoke before an audience of 500 people. An internationally recognized authority on Palestine, McDonald later was appointed special representative to the Israeli government. That same year, during the War of Independence, members of the Israeli Goodwill Youth Delegation spoke at the temple center under the auspices of the United Jewish Fund.

Throughout the years, prominent speakers came to Third and Laurel, where important events were held.



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country, but they are being spread all over the world and even here in San Diego," Straus told the group. "They are against any race except the Aryan, yet there is no race of that name, which merely signifies a language..."^{lxx}

On a brighter note, in 1931, San Diego hosted a distinguished visitor who was feted by the Jewish community. Albert Einstein dropped by the city on his

trip to the western United States. A student from Beth Israel's religious school, Ruth Levi, granddaughter of Adolph and Eleanora Levi, was chosen to present a plaque from the San Diego Jewish community to Einstein at a ceremony held at the Balboa Park Organ Pavilion. The ceremony was broadcast nationwide.

Samuel Fox and the Great Depression

By Stanley Schwartz

BORN IN 1862 IN HUNGARY, Samuel Fox came to the United States in 1880, at the age of 18. He lived in New York for four years and then traveled to San Francisco, where he worked for a large clothing house, Raphael and Son. Shortly afterward, Fox migrated south to Los Angeles, and then in 1886 to San Diego, where he felt he had greater business opportunities.

When Fox arrived in San Diego, the town's population numbered 9,000. Fox soon opened a real estate business because low prices had stimulated a great land boom. Ten years later, his office had grown to one of the largest real estate establishments in the city.

In 1888, Fox helped raise funds and select the site for Beth Israel's first home. As Fox's reputation as a capable entrepreneur grew, he courted Pauline Kuhn, whom he married in 1893. His wife's brother, Isaac Kuhn, had gained prominence as a Jewish businessman through his founding of Lion Clothing Store. In 1899, when Isaac Kuhn died, Fox assumed control of the store. Lion Clothing

Store exclusively merchandised men's clothing. Lacking significant competition, the store developed a large clientele and expanded.

During the congregation's early years, Fox, along with the Levi brothers, Simon and Adolph, helped keep the congregation alive. In 1923, Fox and Adolph Levi purchased the property at Third and Laurel for Beth Israel's second home. Samuel Fox served as the fifth president of Beth Israel from 1926 to 1939.^{lxxi}

Fox's expansion of Lion Clothing Store was not jeopardized by the 1929 stock market crash and the subsequent Depression, since the tourist trade, the fishing industry and the U.S. Navy payroll softened the crash's impact on the San Diego economy. As the Depression deepened, Fox was one of the experienced businessmen who assumed control over civic organizations to alleviate hardships in San Diego. When the Depression reached its low point locally, in 1934, the city's business leaders laid plans to host an international exposition to help stimulate the economy. The 1935 Exposition in Balboa Park, which Fox helped organize, drew many tourists to San Diego. He served as its vice president and was also a member of its executive committee.

RABBI MOISE BERGMAN BEGINS DISTINGUISHED CAREER

Rabbi Straus resigned in May 1934. Rabbi Moise Bergman succeeded Rabbi Straus and began a 12-year term of distinguished leadership of the congregation with the High Holy Days of 1934. Life Member Matthew Strauss recalls being very connected with the temple during his youth as his mother was Rabbi Bergman's secretary.

Money was still very tight in 1935 when President

Samuel Fox had to ask for contributions to restore the roof and skylights and waterproof the walls to keep out the rain, at a cost of \$3,500. In a letter to members, Nathan F. Baranov, chairman of the Mortgage Redemption Campaign and the Community Center Remodeling Fund, reported a mortgage of \$18,000 due the same year and the need for remodeling the community center to accommodate the many rapidly growing organizations using that facility. At this time and for many years after, the temple center was the hub of

Jewish life in San Diego. The temple mortgage had to be renewed after the committee reduced it to \$15,500. In 1938, the temple and the temple center were repainted, as were several classrooms.

In the summer of 1939, Samuel I. Fox died and Henry Weinberger was elected president. Ed Samisch, the temple's loyal and efficient secretary, passed away in 1940 after many years of service. Anna H. Bresler succeeded him. In 1941, a plan was launched to wipe out the temple's remaining mortgage, and by the end of 1942, the mortgage had been reduced to \$8,500.



Beth Israel's second temple on Third and Laurel was designed in the Moorish style with a domed sanctuary and an adjoining temple center. While this was the trend at that time in American synagogue architecture, the style also fit in with nearby buildings in Balboa Park.

Beth Israel During the Great Depression

By Lawrence Krause

THE GREAT DEPRESSION was the largest economic reversal ever suffered by the United States. Real output declined by more than half between 1929 and 1932. The Great Depression came late to California because the state's economy was diversified into agricultural, industrial, entertainment, tourism and service sectors. Of greatest importance to San Diego was the continued large presence of the military.

However, the real estate speculation of the Roaring Twenties went into reverse and the city suffered. The end of the Depression came to San Diego in 1935, when Consolidated Aircraft moved its headquarters to the city from Buffalo, New York. Consolidated Aircraft joined Ryan Aeronautical near Lindbergh Field. Ryan Airlines was the builder of the "Spirit of St. Louis," the plane that Charles Lindbergh flew in his historic flight over the Atlantic. San Diego became a leading center for aircraft building, which had important consequences in later years.

Rabbi H. Cerf Straus and the *Southern Israelite*

By Stanley Schwartz

BORN AND RAISED IN DENVER, Colorado, Rabbi H. Cerf Straus studied at Hebrew Union College and had pulpits in Canton, Ohio; Augusta, Georgia; San Diego, California; and Alexandria, Louisiana. As a Navy chaplain during World War II, Rabbi Straus saw active duty in the Pacific war theater. He was at Pearl Harbor in 1941.

While spiritual leader in Augusta, Georgia,

Rabbi Straus started the *Southern Israelite* as a temple bulletin in 1925. Edited by Rabbi Straus, the bulletin met with such wide approval that he received many requests to convert it into a monthly publication of statewide interest. Acceding to the wishes of his readers, Rabbi Straus turned his bulletin into a monthly newspaper, devoted purely to Jewish social and organizational news. In 1929, Rabbi Straus sold the newspaper and it was moved to Atlanta. In 1987, the *Southern Israelite* became the *Atlanta Jewish Times*; it continues as a weekly publication.



