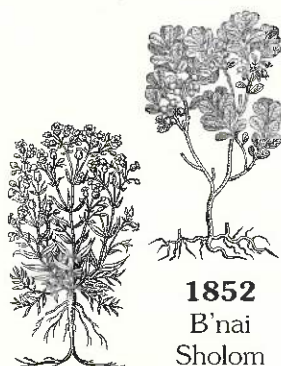


THE STORY OF K.A.M. ISAIAH ISRAEL
Honoring Chicago's Oldest Congregation
During its Sesquicentennial (1847 - 1997)

Issue No. 1
1847 - 1857



1847
Kehilath
Anshe
Ma'arav



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Chapter 1: In The Beginning

The 1840s were a busy decade in Chicago. Rapid growth had allowed the city to incorporate as a town in 1833 and reincorporate as a city in 1837. The *Chicago Tribune* published its first edition in 1847. The Chicago Board of Trade opened in 1848, the same year the first railroad train left Chicago, traveling all the way to Oak Park. As plank roads were built to the west of Chicago and railroads to the east, the agricultural products and natural resources of the Midwest and West began moving in and out of Chicago. The city's successes were not diminished by the problems of rapid growth. Epidemic disease was prevalent, especially cholera, but not until 1869, with the opening of the historic Water Tower and Pumping Station at Michigan and Chicago Avenues, would clean drinking water become readily available.

The first Jewish Chicagoans settled in Chicago in 1841 and found their place in the growing city as peddlers, dry goods purveyors, and grocers. Lake Street, parallel to the riverside South Water Street (today's Wacker Drive) had become the city's primary retail street. So it was logical for Levi Rosenfeld and Jacob Rosenberg, business associates and later brothers-in-law, to open their dry goods business at the southwest corner of Wells and Lake streets.

By 1845, the Jewish community had grown sufficiently to form a minyan. In a room above a store on Wells Street, Yom Kippur services were held for the first time in the State of Illinois. 1845 also saw the establishment of the first organized Jewish entity in Chicago, the "Jewish Burial Ground Society", which was formed to meet an immediate need of the nascent community. The society purchased an acre of land at North Avenue near the lake and adjacent to the municipal cemetery, later the site of Lincoln Park. (Both cemeteries were closed and the interred relocated during the late 1850s.)

KAM is Founded

In 1846, Yom Kippur services were again held, this time above the Rosenfeld and Rosenberg store. The following year, on November 3, 1847, some twenty Jewish residents gathered in the Rosenfeld and Rosenberg store to organize a congregation which they named "Kehilath Anshe Ma'arav," the Congregation of the Men of the West. The Jewish Burial Ground Society turned over its property to the new congregation and ceased to exist as a separate entity. Thus began KAM, the first Jewish congregation in the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, and the Midwest.

The impetus to form a congregation came in part from the six Kohn brothers, whose mother Dila Hirsch Kohn, had settled in Chicago the previous spring. As a

devout adherent to the laws of kashrut, she would eat no meat because there was no shochet in the city. The brothers feared her health would suffer under a meatless diet. Following the establishment of the new congregation, her son Abraham traveled to New York where he met Rev. Ignatz Kunreuther (Rabbis were often called "Reverends" at that time). Rev. Kunreuther had come to the United States, as did most of the early Jewish residents of Chicago, from Germany, and primarily from Bavaria and the Rhineland. On Kohn's recommendation, the congregation hired Rev. Kunreuther as rabbi and shochet. Soon Mrs. Kohn was able to eat meat again, but its nutritious benefits did not protect her from Chicago's frequent cholera epidemics. She died in 1849.

Chicago was changing and growing. By 1849, the room over the store was too small for the congregation. A parcel of land on Clark Street between Adams and Quincy streets, a site now part of the Federal Center plaza, was leased for five years. A wood synagogue was constructed and dedicated during Friday evening services on June 13, 1851. A large crowd attended, and Rev. S. M. Issacs of New York delivered a sermon in English, rather than the German generally used within the congregation. Reporters from local newspapers observed the service, and a reporter from *The Daily Democrat* wrote with enthusiasm that:

No person that has made up his mind to be prejudiced against the Jews ought to have heard such a sermon preached. It was very captivating, and contained as much of real religion as any sermon we have ever heard preached. We never could have believed that one of these old Jews we have heard denounced so much could have taught so much liberality towards other denominations....The Jewish ladies cannot be beaten in decorating a place of worship. The flowers,

leaves and bushes were woven into the most beautiful drapery that Chicago ever saw before.

KAM saw its first bar mitzvahs during 1851. Two years later, in need of additional space for classes, the synagogue structure was relocated to Adams and Wells streets, a not-uncommon occurrence in nineteenth-century Chicago, and placed over a new basement that increased the size of the building.

Conflict Over Reform



A photograph of Chicago in 1854 when K.A.M. was only seven years old and B'nai Shalom only two.

The congregation continued to grow, but as the Jewish population of Chicago increased, a single synagogue could no longer meet its needs. The first stirrings of the Reform movement had reached Chicago. Rev. Kunreuther did not support the new ideas, such as singing in English and use of an organ, and decided to retire in 1853 rather than deal with impending contentiousness.

In 1857, however, agitation for further reform ultimately divided KAM into "the conservative and the reform parties, to stand in more determined antagonism against each other," according to a fiftieth anniversary history of the congregation, published in 1897. This history explains that the congregation was founded on "a basis of rational conservatism," but that the "effervescent spirits of the newer members of the congregation considered this tenacious tendency of cautious conservatism much too slow....[T]he two elements of the congregation could not amalgamate, they could not agree on a compromise. This was detrimental to peace and harmony."

In September of 1857, the congregation's annual election of officers was a struggle between the contending factions of reform and conservatism. According to the 1897 history, prior to the election, the unpaid dues of many members were suddenly

paid in order to gain votes. "The fight was hard and bitter, for, in those days, the Jews took a warm interest in their religion and in the affairs of their religious institutions." The author of the 1897 history, while dismayed by the story of strife, nevertheless recognized the meaningful involvement of the congregants in the issues confronting their faith.

The reformers won the election for president, but the congregation remained divided. Much more controversy would follow in the next few years.

Cultural Conflict Leads to a Second Congregation

The matter of reform was not the only issue beginning to divide Chicago Jewry. The rapid increase in German immigration to the United States after 1848 brought to the city Jews from parts of the German empire other than Bavaria. Accustomed to the Eastern European style of worship, many felt uncomfortable in the very Germanic KAM. As a result, in 1852 eleven Jewish men, primarily from Prussian Poland, formed a new congregation, Kehilath B'Nai Sholom. The congregation met at Clark and Washington in a room above Sol Harris' clothing store.

In 1952, in his centennial history of Temple Isaiah Israel, of which B'nai Sholom was the founding congregation, Rabbi Morton Berman said there were two reasons for its founding:

The first was that the founders who had come principally from Prussian Poland (Posen) were not welcome in the German or "Bayericche" Kehilath Anshe Maarav. Dr. Isaac Mayer Wise decried in 1856 the split in the community between German and Polish Jews on the fiftieth anniversary of B'nai Sholom's founding. Dr. Emil G. Hirsch reminded readers of his Reform Advocate that the inhospitality of the "Bavarians" toward the "Bollacks" prompted its organization. The second reason for the new congregation lay in the preference of its founders for the familiar

Minhag Poland over the Minhag Ashkenaz of Kehilath Anshe Maarav.

For its first two years B'Nai Sholom did not have a rabbi. At that time, however, the laity was sufficiently well-versed in custom and ritual that the services of a rabbi weren't essential. In 1854 B'Nai Sholom obtained the volunteer services of Rev. Meirs who performed both the duties of reader and of a shochet, or ritual slaughterer.

By 1855, B'Nai Sholom had doubled its membership to 40. Its first paid rabbi, Rev. Samuel Loewenthal, arrived that year. Meanwhile, members of B'Nai Sholom were gaining prominence in the general community. The March 28, 1856 edition of *The Israelite* (the newspaper published by Reform leader Isaac Mayer Wise in Cincinnati) contained this short article about B'Nai Sholom's first president:



KAM seeks a new religious school director in 1856 who is to double as the cantor.

We are pleased to learn from [Chicago], that at the last charter election, March 4, our esteemed friend Henry Greenbaum, Esq., was elected Alderman [of the 6th Ward], notwithstanding the strong Know Nothing opposition he encountered. This fact speaks well of the good understanding existing in this city between our brethren and their fellow citizens.

Although Greenbaum served only one term, he was the chairman of the City Council's perennially powerful Finance Committee.

The first decade for KAM and B'nai Sholom was one of success and strife. The founders were faced with financial and spiritual issues: maintaining a building and running a religious school, hiring rabbis and collecting unpaid dues, how to worship and when to accommodate change. Struggles that sound all too familiar one hundred fifty years later. — Joan Pomeranc

Isaac Mayer Wise Visits KAM

During the last week of July, 1856, KAM hosted what amounted to its first "scholar-in-residence" when Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise came for a visit to Chicago as part of his grand summer tour of the "western" United States. From his base in Cincinnati, Wise led the Reform movement in the United States. Famous throughout the country to Jews and non-Jews alike, Wise's tireless devotion to building Reform institutions gave rise to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Hebrew Union College and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Wise reported on his trip to Chicago in a letter he wrote to his own publication *The Israelite*, which appeared in its August 8, 1856 edition. Here are some intriguing excerpts from that letter:

This Chicago, a miniature New York, is the panorama of life, motion, business, progress, improvement, enterprise, and energy, as there is most likely no second place in the Union

That evening [a Friday] I attended divine service in the Synagogue of the Kehilah 'Anshe Maarib [sic]. This is a neat little building, situated on the corner of two wide and very popular streets, nearly in the center of the city. The attendance is very good, and the service in the oldest style; but the desire for improvement loudly speaks, and makes itself heard and felt...

I preached in the morning [a Saturday] to a very full house. I commented on the threefold character of Judaism, individual, national and universal, showing that Judaism must make the man happy, must unite Israel in one great body

and render itself universal to the final redemption of all mankind. I could see that this basis of my reform scheme was received with much satisfaction. People here and almost everywhere are tired of the pretensions and dictates of conservative men who rarely practice what they wish to impose on others; yet they so much dread the notions and pervert conceptions of ultraism and radicalism; they are so thoroughly convinced, that these isms lead directly to the abolition of Judaism, that they prefer the most ultra orthodox practices to the nullification of the radicals. It is therefore, that the voice of moderate reform based upon history and national law is welcome everywhere, and greeted enthusiastically as the voice of the age

The Hebrew school under the care of the Rev. Mr. Schneitacker is a flourishing and well attended institute. This school is supported by the congregation, and every child, poor as rich, finds in it an excellent opportunity to receive a thorough English education and instruction in the Hebrew, Catechism, Bible &c., and also in the German language. ...

Remarkable and promising, nay, I ought say characteristic is the zeal and enthusiasm of the young Israelites of this city on behalf of Judaism, reform, union and education. ...A promising and blessed future is in store for this congregation. Here Judaism will flourish and celebrate its triumphs over stagnating conservatism and benumbing stability, over radical corruption and indifferent frost, dead and deadening in their nature and effect.

1847	1848	1849	1850	1851
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The advent of the sewing machine brings about the ready-to-wear clothing industry • U.S. declares war on Mexico. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zachary Taylor (Whig) elected 12th President of the U.S. • Seneca Falls Convention begins U.S. Women's Rights Movement. Ernestine Potovsky, first prominent Jewish feminist, speaks. • Karl Marx and Frederick Engels publish <i>The Communist Manifesto</i>. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Millard Fillmore (Whig) becomes President of the U.S. after Taylor's • Controversy in Albany, N.Y. between Isaac Mayer Wise's Reform followers and traditionalists leads to violence at Rosh Hashanah services. • Though they don't prospect for gold, Jews establish shops in virtually every Gold Rush trading town and post. 	

Wise was, of course, right in his perception that KAM had a “promising and blessed future.” But his comments about the need for reform in Jewish life and the problems with orthodox Judaism presaged a

tumultuous and difficult period which KAM would undergo, beginning within a few month’s of Rabbi Wise’s visit.

The Swiss Treaty - The More Things Change ...

For the last year much attention has been given by the Chicago Jewish community, and American Jewry in general, to the role of the Swiss government and the Swiss banks during World War II and the 52 years since the end of the war with respect to the handling of money which was deposited in Swiss banks by Holocaust victims and their families. Leaders of the Chicago Jewish community have been vocal in their calls for action to redress this problem.

As it turns out, this is not the first time that Chicago Jewry has been mobilized to respond to dubious, or worse, conduct of the Swiss government. For that one has to return to the 1850s. At that time, the Swiss constitution contained apartheid-like provisions for Swiss Jews. When a commercial treaty was negotiated by American and Swiss diplomats in the early 1850s, the treaty explicitly provided that American Jews would be subject to the same discrimination as Swiss Jews while they were in Switzerland. When the treaty was first submitted to the United States Senate for ratification in 1851, President Millard Fillmore opposed ratification because of the inclusion of that clause and so the treaty was not ratified then. However, four years later, President Franklin Pierce supported ratification despite the inclusion of the clause. In November 1855, the Senate ratified the treaty.

In 1857 two American Jewish citizens, one from New York and one from Boston, were expelled from Switzerland pursuant to the terms of the treaty. This enraged organized American Jewry. In the August 7, 1857 issue of *The Israelite* Isaac Mayer Wise wrote:

Israelites, Freeman and Citizens! Let not the disgrace of the treaty between the United States and Switzerland remain upon the history of our country.... [G]ive utterance to you sentiments, resolve upon a proper course of action against the mean and illegal instrument made in violation of the constitution of the United States. ... Slaves and cowards only will submit to such an outrage; we are men, and must be treated as such.

The fight in Chicago was led by KAM’s immediate past president, Abraham Kohn, its then current president, Samuel Cole, and its future president, M. M. Gerstley. In the very next issue of *The Israelite*, a letter from Abraham Kohn was published, which read in part:

The subject [of the treaty] has been taken hold of by the press of this city...We have made up our

1852	1853	1854	1855	1856
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Franklin Pierce (Dem.) elected 14th President of the U.S. • Benjamin Disraeli becomes Britain’s chancellor of the exchequer. • Judah P. Benjamin (LA) is elected to the U.S. Senate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russian educator Abraham Mapu writes <i>Ahvat Zion</i> (<i>The Love of Zion</i>), the first Hebrew novel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kansas-Nebraska Act permits settlers to decide on slavery status of new territories. • Isaac Mayer Wise becomes rabbi of Congregation B’nai Yeshurun in Cincinnati and subsequently begins publishing the <i>Israelite</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> James Buchanan (Dem.) elected 15th President of the U.S. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rabbi Sabato Morais of Philadelphia’s Congregation Mikvah Israel denounces slavery from his pulpit.

קהלת אנשי מערב

Know all Men by these Presents, That Mr. M. M. Gerstley
his wife and children, he being a member
of the Congregation

KEHILATH ANSHE MAYRIV,

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

is entitled to the Seat No. thirteen in the Synagogue, and to the Seat No. thirteen in the Ladies' Hall of the same, said numbers commencing from the East side thereof, under the following conditions:

1. That the said M. M. Gerstley shall pay, or cause to be paid all the ordinary or extraordinary taxes to this Congregation, which shall be assessed against him or her, according to the provisions of the Constitution and By-Laws of this Congregation, and that these Seats be subject to such rules and regulations in regard to the holding of the same by Orphan Children of members, as shall be adopted hereafter.

2 That said described Seats shall not be sold to any one but a member of this Congregation, neither until the seller shall have paid all his taxes or dues to the Congregation.

3. No sale of any Seat shall be considered valid unless notice has been given to the President of said transaction, and if the seller has paid all his dues or taxes, said sale shall be recorded in the Book by the Secretary, and the transfer be copied on these Presents.

4. The **KEHILATH ANSHE MAYRIV** reserves to itself the right to sell the Synagogue and the Lot on which the same stands, if necessary, and so decided by a constitutional vote of its members, and providing further, that each member shall be the holder of the above described seats in any new Synagogue bought or erected by this Congregation, subject to all taxes or contributions assessed against the same by a constitutional vote of its members. These Presents are a correct copy of the Records adopted at a meeting of this Congregation, on the 6th day of January, 5616. 1856.

SIGNED,

M. M. Gerstley
Sec'y.

A. Kohn
Pres't.

M.M. Gerstley's purchase of his temple seats in 1856 is also emblematic of a passing of the guard. Abraham Kohn, who was a founder of KAM, would soon reduce his leadership role, while Gerstley would become president in 1861 and serve until 1890, a record unsurpassed in the history of the congregation.

minds to see our Senator, Mr. [Stephen A.] Douglas, about the subject-After the conversation with Mr. D. we shall write you the result. ...I only wish that every Israelite in the United States would feel the wrong done to us as citizens of this Republic, and demand justice at the proper quarters.

In the August 21, 1857 issue of *The Israelite* Mr. Kohn reported that the delegation had met with Senator Douglas and that he had urged them to prepare a petition to President James Buchanan asking him to take strong action to get the offending clause removed from the treaty. Kohn and company also

lobbied the Chicago newspapers and obtained editorial support for their position. For example, in calling for action by the Buchanan Administration on the treaty, the *Chicago Daily Journal* said that it is, "one of the fundamental principles of our republican government, that no man or set of men shall be proscribed politically or in any other respect on account of their religious faith."

Jewish leaders throughout the country discussed the various courses of action available. In early October, Isaac Mayer Wise recommended that each city send delegates to a convention to be held in Baltimore on October 28 and 29, 1857 to discuss the treaty and prepare for a meeting with President Buchanan shortly thereafter. M. M. Gerstley represented Chicago Jewry at the convention. He was also one of the seven convention delegates, including Isaac Mayer Wise, who met with President Buchanan at the White House on October 31, 1857 (three days before the 10th anniversary of KAM).

President Buchanan said that he felt that the offending clause was "violative of constitutional principles". He promised that his Secretary of State would take swift action to reach a "settlement" with the Swiss. However, as was the case with so many issues which confronted the Buchanan Administration, it was left to Buchanan's successor, Abraham Lincoln, to make meaningful headway on the problem. In early March, 1861, almost immediately after he took office, Lincoln took time away from his efforts to keep Fort Sumter properly supplied, to appoint a Jew, Mr. Bernays, as United States Consul to Switzerland. This appointment had the appropriate effect on the Swiss. Nonetheless, the matter was not fully cured until 1874 when the Swiss adopted a new constitution which provided religious freedom for all Swiss citizens.

In the "history repeats itself" category, President Ronald Reagan took a page out of Lincoln's book. In 1986, when the white South African government was still entrenched in its determination to continue its apartheid policies, Reagan appointed an African American as the U.S. Ambassador to South Africa.

It is also interesting to wonder whether the Swiss attitude toward Jews was changed when the new Swiss constitution was adopted in 1874. The events of World War II Switzerland, which have only recently come fully to light, would indicate that it is much easier to amend the constitution than to change the hearts and souls of the people.

Next Issue:

In the late 1850s, secession and civil war come to KAM.

In 1861, the rest of the country follows suit.