

## Chapter 8 Religious School

*Take a long walk. Read a good book.  
Make a new friend.*

—Rabbi Robert J. Schur's annual advice  
to students

*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he  
is old, he will not depart from it*

—Proverbs 22:6

The Temple filled with teachers on December 29, 2000, yet the day of the week was not Sunday. No faculty meeting or training seminars were scheduled. The educators had gathered for the funeral of their mentor—Lilaine Goldman, 87, a teacher's teacher, a pedagogue who had transformed scores of altruistic, untrained teen-agers and adults into teachers imbued with the biblical mission of teaching Judaism "diligently unto thy children."

Here was Livia Levine, the Holocaust survivor who had yearned to be a teacher until the war interrupted her education. "I thought I would have to give up this dream," she recalled. "Lil Goldman gave me the opportunity to help out in Sunday School. I came in as a substitute and stayed for 28 years."

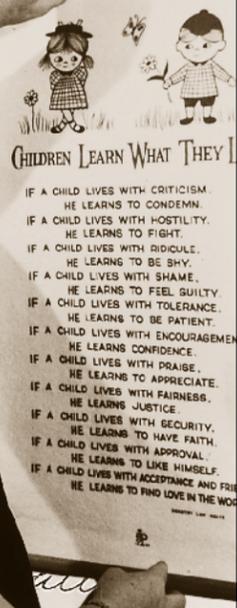
Here was Edie Yentis, a psychotherapist who was surprised when Lil Goldman encouraged her to begin teaching Religious School. "I was a new Jew, a convert to Judaism." Yentis became a long-term faculty member, a popular teacher who built a strong rapport with high school students. "With Lil Goldman, you taught and you learned."

Also paying respects were Rita and Ted Hoffman, whom Goldman had nurtured as classroom teachers. Rita Hoffman taught kindergarten, and Ted Hoffman taught the teens. "Lil was the ignition," said Ted Hoffman, an aeronautical engineer who began teaching Religious School in 1963 when he moved to Fort Worth from Chicago. "She started me on

the whole idea of working with youth. I haven't stopped."

Lil Goldman, Beth-El's Religious School educator from 1959 to 1976, nurtured the gift of teaching in adults and the yen for learning in thousands of children. She not only elevated Beth-El's curriculum to a plane parallel with that of the public schools, she was founding director of Fort Worth's oldest nursery school, which carries her name and at the millennium was operated by the Jewish community as a whole. A pioneer in early childhood education, Goldman created Camp Shalom, a summer day camp in operation since 1953 and by 2002 under the purview of the Jewish Federation of Fort Worth and Tarrant County.

*Are you remembering the love  
we felt for our Sunday School  
teachers, Sarah Cant and Ida Braun?  
The mark they started has been  
carried down thru the years. Dorothy  
Rosenstein, Dorothy Rosen, Matilda  
Shanblum have been among the  
devoted workers in our  
school, and that is why we  
service to our Community  
today. It is thru  
the future. As  
on the pages of the  
with real gratitude  
who have seen  
All these  
many more, a  
vivid this en  
"race of Land  
well in the pa  
to show you a*



LILAINE GOLDMAN inspired students and teachers. The background letter, by Tobia Miller Ellman, recounts memories from the earliest years of Beth-El's Religious School. (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Collection, UTA Libraries)

The morning of Goldman's funeral, dozens of part-time, full-time, and sometime educators who had taught under her direction embraced, reminisced, and spoke of her legacy.

Goldman's longest-serving successor at Beth-El, the talented Ellen Mack, had built on that legacy. Mack, Beth-El's Religious School educator from 1978 to 1992, had elevated the school another rung, turning it into a model among Reform congregations and a pilot site for a new UAHC curriculum. Under Mack, students probed controversial topics such as cults and addictions; they

politic among the board, and the twinkle in her eye to communicate with the students.

Before Goldman's takeover, the Religious School was a loosely coordinated effort. Well-intentioned congregants, some with educational credentials, most without, managed the school, taking on the title of Religious School superintendent. Selflessly, these untrained administrators did their best. The curriculum came straight from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), which sent out teaching guidelines. "We took whatever the UAHC sent," recalled Corrine Jacobson,

### Religious School Superintendents

Matilda Shanblum	circa 1910–20s
Mrs. Louis Wolffson	1920s
Lilli Bogen Morris	1929
Dorothy Rosen	circa 1930s
Dorothy Rosenstein	circa 1930s–40s
Evelyn Weltman	1940s
Julia Lesser	1940s; 1950s
Esther Ferstenfeld	1955–57
Corrine Jacobson	1957–59

explored the plight of the homeless; they opened Beth-El Books, a synagogue store selling Jewish books and tapes. The school radiated energy. That was the second heyday of the Religious School.

The first heyday was under Goldman.

When Goldman moved into Beth-El's makeshift principal's office in a corner of the chapel in 1959, the school was on split sessions. The building was so crowded that one class met in the powder room leading to the ladies' lavatory. Another class convened in a stairwell. The post-war baby boom had more than doubled enrollment to 225 students.

An education wing was on the drawing board, set for completion in 1961. Rabbi Schur needed a professional to help plan and run the proposed new addition. Goldman, a master's degree graduate of New York's Banks Street School of Early Childhood Development, had the credentials. She had the experience to work with the architect, the assertiveness to

### Religious School Directors

Lilaine Goldman	1959–76
Lil Goldman & Bill Boardman	1976–77
Jacque Steinberger	1977–79
Ellen F. Mack	1979–93
Alexandria Shuval	1993–95
Felice Ross	1995–96
Claudia Rivera	1996–97
Loretta Causey, Laurie Jones & Faye Slater	1997–2000
Loretta Causey	2000–

superintendent during the two years preceding Goldman's appointment. "I kept track of attendance, of registration, of *tzedakah* money, and I found substitute teachers. We didn't do anything creative. We didn't develop anything like Lilaine did."

Beth-El's Religious School lagged far behind others in the Reform movement. The Temple's previous rabbi, Milton Rosenbaum, had been appalled at the outdated textbooks. Before Rosenbaum, interim wartime Rabbi Eugene Lipman had called the Religious School "rotten" and described the classrooms as "filthy." The Depression years and the rapid turnover of rabbis during World War II had contributed to the Religious School's neglect. Yet, historically, providing children with a Jewish education had been a priority.

Efforts to organize a Jewish Religious School in Fort Worth predated the creation of Beth-El Congregation and Ahavath Sholom. A circuit-riding rabbi, visiting Fort Worth in 1878, had established a

Religious School, but it dissolved within a year. At the turn of the century, 50 Jewish youngsters enrolled in a short-lived Reform Sunday School that offered instruction by two women—public-school teachers Sarah Carb and Bessie Brown—and three men, future Temple founders Henry Gernsbacher, Theodore Mack, and Isidore Carb.

When Beth-El's second rabbi, Joseph Jasin, arrived in Fort Worth in 1904, he reorganized the Sabbath School—so called because it convened on

Saturday mornings. Many of the faculty were volunteers from the local section of the National Council of Jewish Women. Jasin began Beth-El's first Confirmation class, enrolling three boys and six girls, one of the them from Ahavath Sholom. The girl from Ahavath Sholom was Jennie Levenson. Her younger sister, Rose, enrolled in another Beth-El Religious School class. Many Shul members began to place their daughters in Beth-El's Sabbath School, where the curriculum was more New World than Old World. At Ahavath Sholom, the Religious

“She had all the parents trembling. . .”

Consecration, the ceremony that initiates youngsters into Jewish learning, has its origins in the Middle Ages. Boys embarking on the study of Hebrew went to the synagogue to receive a slate on which was written the *alef bet*.<sup>35</sup> Reform Judaism revived and expanded the custom. During the Consecration ceremony, children beginning their Jewish education receive miniature Torah scrolls and a blessing from the rabbi. Only Reform Jews observe this group rite of passage.

How important is this ceremony that coincides with Simchat Torah, the festival heralding the end and the beginning of the Torah reading cycle? Legendary first-grade teacher Amelia Rosenstein—who taught under six rabbis, from Samuel Soskin to Robert Schur—believed it to be paramount. In earnest, she prepared first-graders for Consecration.

Margot and Paul Schwartz recall the year

Rosenstein assigned their first-grade son, Richard, to recite the 23rd Psalm during the Consecration service. When they protested that their child was just learning to read and could not master such a difficult biblical passage,

AMELIA ROSENSTEIN and Rabbi Milton Rosenbaum, back row, with the Consecration Class of 1953.

Front row, left to right: Ricky Slatkin, Lolly Geller, Susan Cohen, Rene Schwartz, Marcia Rosenthal, Kim Gottlieb, Nan Cohen, Carol Goldman.

Second row: Francis Ginsburg, Bobby Archenhold, Ed Bond, Linda Wisch, Adele Echt, Gary Steinberger.

Third row: Susan Ellman, Nina Propper, David Mayer, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Joan



Rosenstein responded: “Then you read it to him until he has it memorized.” They did.

“She had all the parents trembling,” Margot Schwartz recalled.

Rosenstein's most elaborate Sunday School tradition was the Sabbath Table Program. Children rehearsed and rehearsed the blessings for candles, wine, and challah, internalizing the sanctity of the seventh day. *Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy*. Keeping it holy entailed setting a table with fine linen, china, silver, crystal, flowers, a *kiddush cup*, and candlesticks. The Sabbath Table unit culminated when mothers were summoned to bring tableware from home for a Sunday morning model Sabbath Table demonstration.

Rather than bring her best china and silver, Margot Schwartz brought everyday dinner dishes. Rosenstein publicly chastised her for setting such a plebian example.

Rosenstein believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible, from the garden of Eden to the burning bush. When nationally noted scholar Rabbi Eugene Borowitz spoke at Beth-El, Rosenstein was not impressed. The reason? Borowitz told the congregation that when Moses parted the Red Sea, he must have known it was low tide. Blasphemy!

Rosenstein performed many “miracles.” She was the mainstay at the National Council of Jewish Women's Americanization School. There she taught immigrants of all creeds to read English and to pass their naturalization tests. Thanks to Amelia Rosenstein's instruction and encouragement, hundreds of immigrants became United States citizens and countless first-graders learned how to welcome the Sabbath.

School was an after-school *cheder* that taught Jewish youngsters to read Hebrew from the *siddur*, the Torah, and the prophets in preparation for bar mitzvah.

At the Temple, religious education focused on contemporary socialization rather than ancient customs. The goal at Beth-El, and in the Reform Movement as a whole, was to absorb Jewish values and to shape American Jewish children into good citizens.<sup>34</sup> Classes were taught in English, with scant attention paid the *alef bet* except for learning the *Shema* and *Ein Kelohenu*, the rousing closing hymn. Students studied English translations of biblical verses (such as the Ten Commandments) and memorized commentaries (such as Maimonides' articles of faith and levels of charity). Such texts stressed ethics for daily living. Similar Religious Schools at Reform congregations in Galveston and Beaumont also drew children from Orthodox shuls.

Teaching methods were far different a century ago. Lessons were learned more by rote than reasoning. Discussion was discouraged; memorization encouraged. Children were preferably seen and not heard. Pageantry was emphasized, with floral offerings at *Shavuot* and harvest baskets at *Sukkot*. Confirmation students, generally age 13 or 14, enrolled in the first class; the age group following them was called the second class, and so on.

When Beth-El's third rabbi, George Zepin, arrived in the autumn of 1908, the congregation had just constructed its first building, a two-story synagogue at 601 Taylor Street with upstairs classrooms heated by a wood-burning stove. The Sabbath School's 40 students traipsed upstairs for classes at 9:30 a.m., then downstairs at 10:30 a.m. to the sanctuary for a half-hour children's service. The class schedule, typical of Reform Sabbath Schools of that era, lengthened over the next decade, expanding to 90 minutes.

Department, the schoolhouse term for discipline and behavior, was always a problem. Youngsters who attended public school Monday through Friday had little desire to sit still during weekend classes. Marion Weil, who dropped out of the Confirmation class, got in trouble in 1920 for a range of mischievous behavior—from hiding in the empty ark when the second Temple was under construction to playfully knocking down pews not yet fastened to the sanctuary floor. He was not the only prankster.



**1925 STUDENTS** and faculty (above) gather on the Broadway Temple's front steps. The student body poses (at right) for a group portrait in the spring of 2000.



Beth-El's new Temple at Broadway and Galveston streets, completed in the autumn of 1920, had a basement stage, ideal for student assemblies. During Hanukah in 1925, eight kindergarteners—Jane Gernsbacher, Jeanette Ginsberg, Bernice Gressman, Helen Klar, Charlotte Miller, Janice Nicolson, Mildred Roddy, and Elaine Zimmerman—dressed in tutus to perform the "Dance of the Candles." The holiday assembly continued with tableaux—still-life scenes in which costumed children portrayed "The Spirit of Hanukah" and a "Family Before a Menorah."

Between the World Wars, the

Religious School "adopted" a war orphan, sending money to a Czechoslovakian girl named Mania Rejman. In a thank you note, transmitted and translated by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the girl told her "dear providers" that their gift had paid for "warm clothing and linen" and a doctor's appointment. "I feel all right and do not have any want," she wrote in 1923.

About this time, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) adopted a new Religious School curriculum. To implement it, Rabbi Harry Merfeld told the board he needed to attach "slates" to student desks and pews. The board approved a \$125 expenditure.

Cecile Friedman Ritzwoller attended Religious School during those years, but she scarcely recalls the new curriculum. "We learned about holidays and the Abraham



**1925 FACULTY** pose with Rabbi Harry Merfeld (at left) on a wintry day. Below, the teaching team of Loretta Causey, Laurie Friedson Jones, and Fay Slater coordinated the Religious School in the last years of the century.



**THE LITTLEST ANGELS** in the Religious School (left) performed on the Social Hall stage in January 1921.

Left to right: Jo Rae Schwartzberg, Elaine Fox, Consuela Toomin, Danna Mehl Levy, Helen Ann Carb Hurst, Cecile Friedman Ritzwoller, Dolly Klar Lipshitz, Maurine Block, Ruth Simon, Carolyn Kruckman, Max Morris (kneeling), Tobia Miller Ellman, Regina Colton Port, Julia Shanblum Lesser, Charlotte Max Goldman, Ruth Brown,



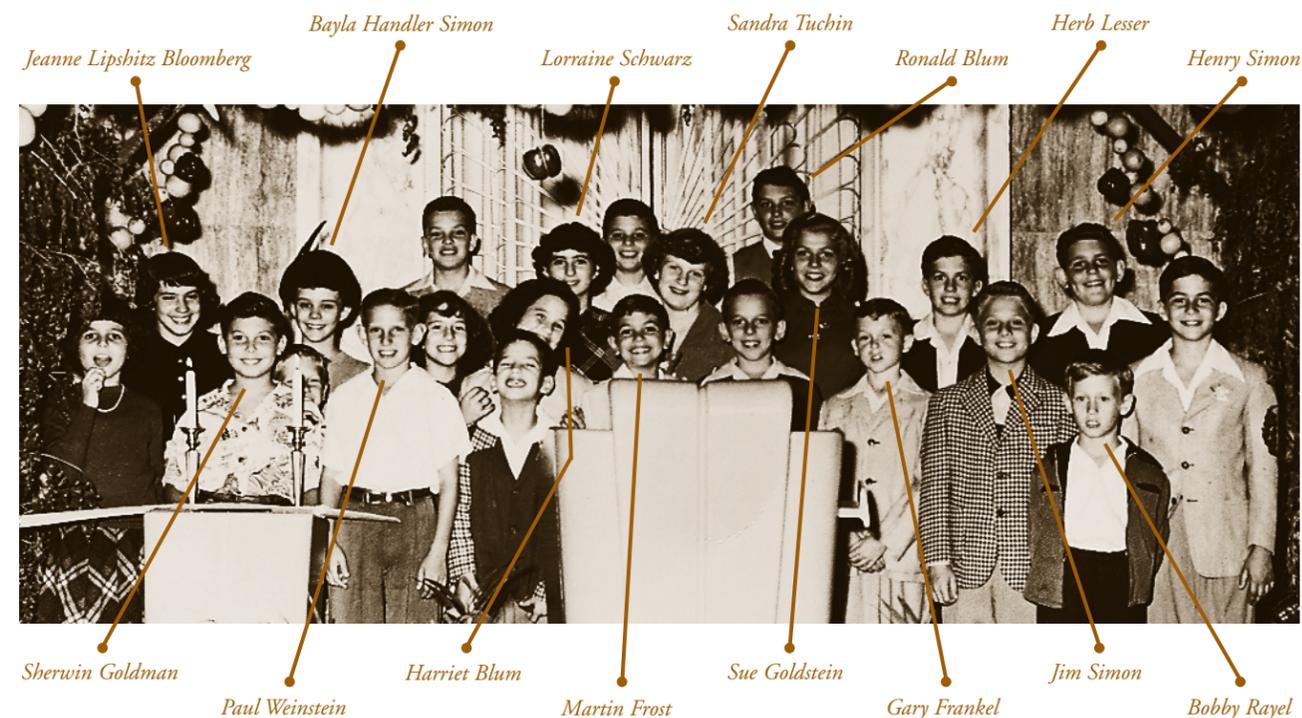
Elaine Fox, Consuela Toomin, Danna Mehl Levy, Helen Ann Carb Hurst, Cecile Friedman Ritzwoller, Dolly Klar Lipshitz, Maurine Block, Ruth Simon, Carolyn Kruckman, Max Morris (kneeling), Tobia Miller Ellman, Regina Colton Port, Julia Shanblum Lesser, Charlotte Max Goldman, Ruth Brown,

and Isaac stories," she said. Her clearest memory involves the rabbi's aborted attempt to split up her large, sociable class by age, separating her from her lifelong friend Danna Mehl Levy. Ritzwoller protested by dropping out until the rabbi bowed to student pressure and put all 16 students back together. Much later, when she married David Ritzwoller and moved to Oklahoma City, she taught Sunday School in her new community.

Beth-El's Religious School continued to attract daughters of Orthodox families. Among them was Joy Goldstein Spiegel whose "old world father" was the High Holy Days *chazzan* at Ahavath Sholom. During the mid-1940s, she and her girlfriend Honey Schwartz Brenner pleaded with their adult brothers to join Beth-El and enroll them in its Religious School. They did. "We wanted to leave the synagogue with the old men and their long beards and *tallises*," Spiegel recalled. "We wanted to be at Beth-El. That's where the action was. That was where all the kids were." Part of Beth-El's

the melting-pot theory, less convinced that America was Zion. Adolf Hitler's rise to power eroded the insular self-confidence and self-assuredness of American Reform Jewry. It was time to teach the younger generation of American Jews that Judaism was more than a denomination, more than a Jewish church that met once a week for services. Reform leaders began promoting a curriculum that explained Judaism as a way of life, a religion encompassing customs, rituals, roots, and brethren stretching around the globe.

Rabbi Milton Rosenbaum, who served at Beth-El from 1949–56, worked with the Religious School committee chairwoman, Lila Letwin Tuchin, to introduce Hebrew classes, albeit on a voluntary basis. The first bar mitzvah boy, in 1954, was Sherwin Goldman, whose father Mickey Goldman had dual membership in the Temple and the Shul. The boy's bar mitzvah was a controversial innovation. "People said, 'We don't do that. We're Reform,'" recalled Sherwin's sister Carol Minker.



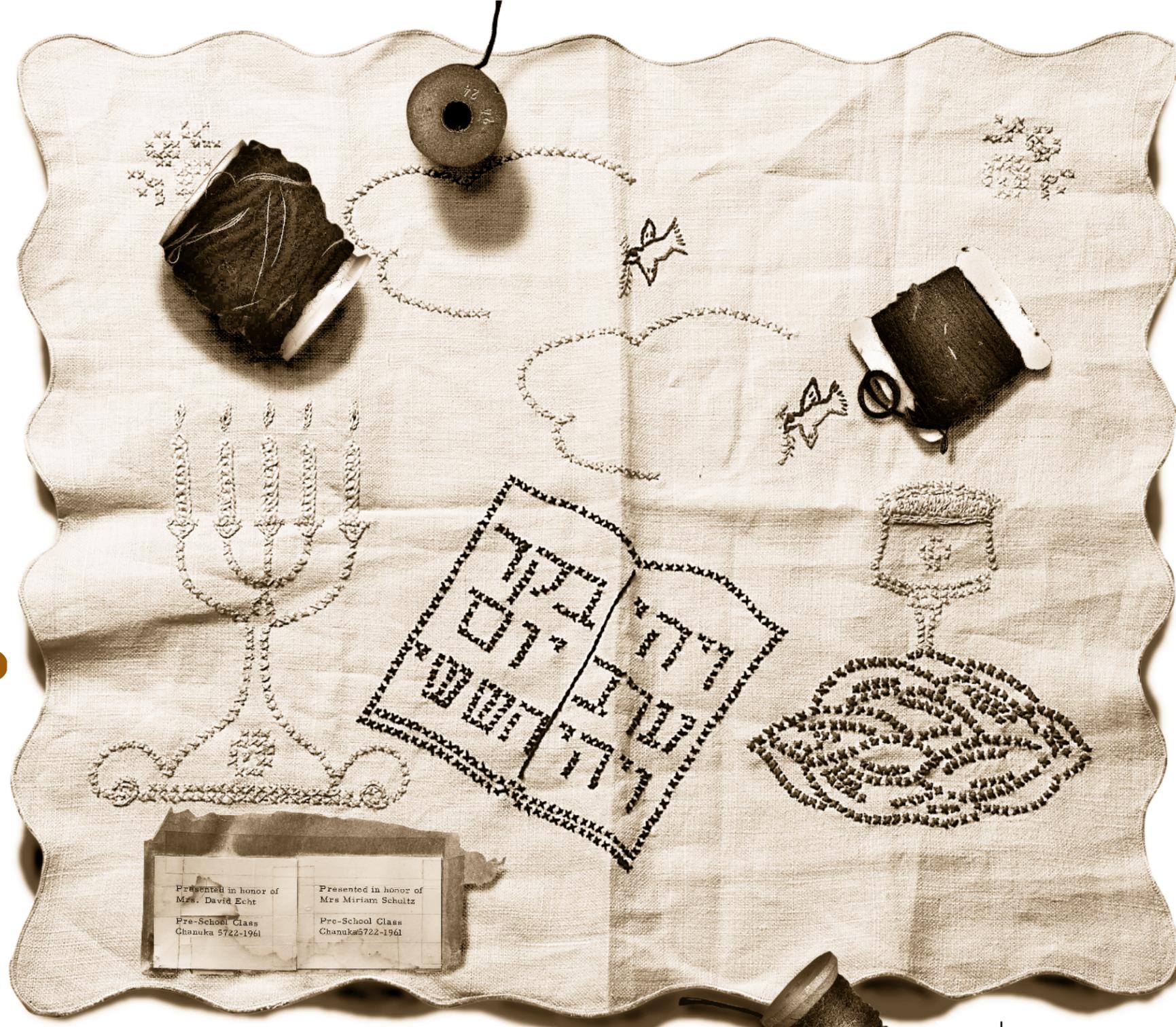
draw was the handsome, clean-shaven rabbi, Samuel Soskin. Brenner used to drive by his house on Willing Avenue in hopes of catching a glimpse. The Confirmation teacher at Beth-El was Jenny Moses Winkler, who had also transferred to Beth-El from Ahavath Sholom, the congregation where she had grown up.

Far more than the classroom lessons, Joy Spiegel remembers the social aspects of attending Sabbath School at Beth-El. "There was no real connection with who we were as Jews," she remarked. "Nobody gave us the meat and the bread of it."

With war raging in Europe, students wanted more substance. So did national Jewish leaders. The Reform movement was becoming less comfortable with

The young man had to petition the board, explaining why he wanted the ceremony. When it was held, there was no announcement in the *Beth-El Bulletin*, no invitations mailed, and no party thereafter—just a simple *oneg Shabbat* with home-cooked desserts provided by his Aunt Mary. Others slowly followed Goldman's example, with a second bar mitzvah in 1954 and three in 1955, including the February 7 ceremony for Martin Frost, a future U. S. congressman.

Change was afoot in this far corner of the Diaspora. Children were learning things unfamiliar to their parents. Rabbi Rosenbaum, ahead of his time, initiated open houses, where parents met the Religious



**THIS CHALLAH COVER**, lovingly embroidered with Sabbath symbols and doves of peace, was presented to pre-school teachers Ceil Echt and Miriam Schultz as a Hanukah gift in 1961.

School faculty. To discourage Christmas trees in Jewish homes, he launched a Hanukah home decorating contest. Each innovation provoked factionalism, making change all the harder.

It would take the 1956 arrival of Rabbi Robert Schur, who proved to be a better consensus-builder, and the 1959 hiring of professional educator Lil Goldman to

move the Religious School forward in its thinking and teaching.

The new Religious School director understood trends in education and psychology. For adolescents, she introduced a social ethics course called "Meeting Life's Problems" and hired Bernice Meyerson to teach it. She added a year to the Religious School

curriculum, moving Confirmation from the ninth to the 10th grade, as the UAHC had long recommended. Faculty meetings featured guest speakers

Goldman managed to pry \$1,000 from the Temple board in 1963 to raise teacher salaries. Base salaries for teachers rose from around \$2 to \$5 per session. Faculty members with teaching degrees earned \$7. Those with the most seniority earned \$8. While the pay levels remained relatively low, the increase was a vote of confidence in the school. Lil Goldman's staff and her reputation grew.

"Our standards have been raised and we are operating our school as an educational institution," Goldman wrote in the autumn of 1963. "We have reached a new threshold of learning."

Hebrew, a controversial innovation under Rosenbaum, became more palatable under Goldman. She scheduled optional, 45-minute Hebrew classes on Monday afternoons, at no additional charge except for textbooks. In typewritten letters promoting the class to sixth-graders, she described the teacher, Meyer Sankary, as a "very popular instructor." She emphasized that Hebrew classes were a "pre-requisite for bar mitzvah . . . (although) bar mitzvah is optional." More than half of Beth-El's sixth-graders enrolled.

Goldman encouraged girls to sign up for Hebrew lessons, although it took more than a decade to persuade Rabbi Schur to permit a bat mitzvah. "Rabbi Schur wouldn't allow it," recalled longtime congregant Loesje Blumberg. The student who broke that gender barrier was Tami Hoffman Jara, daughter of Religious School teachers Rita and

Ted Hoffman. Because she had mastered the prayers so well, and because her parents were stalwarts on the faculty, Rabbi Schur relented, allowing her the coming-of-age ceremony in May 1972. He called it a *bas Torah*, Hebrew for daughter of the Torah. Jara remembers how much she enjoyed the weeks of private tutoring with Rabbi Schur leading up to the

ceremony and how special it was to hold the *yad*, the silver Torah pointer, as she read from the sacred scroll. She remembers wearing a blue-and-white checked dress and getting her hair done at the home of congregant Adele Echt Niger, a professional beautician. "I used to joke that there should have been a plaque up there for me and this milestone," she recalled. A second girl, Robin Cooper, crossed the gender line to the *bimah* with a *bas Torah* in May of 1973. These two girls had proved to the rabbi and the congregation that their level of learning was equivalent to the boys'. Change had come gradually, but it had come, signaled by the announcement in the *Beth-El Bulletin* that on Friday evening, April 19, 1974, Jill Pearlman would celebrate her *bas mitzvah*. The rabbi had relented and allowed use of the more common term for the ceremony. Robin Blumberg followed in 1975. (*Bas* is the Ashkenazic pronunciation of the word daughter; *bat* is the Sephardic or Israeli pronunciation that soon came into vogue.)

Hebrew was becoming well integrated into the Religious School curriculum. Since 1962, third-graders had begun using the *Alef Bet Activity Fun Book*. Mid-week Hebrew had expanded in 1963 to include fifth-graders, who were encouraged to purchase a \$3 set of phonograph records called, *Hebrew, the Audio-Lingual Way*. A Modern Conversational Hebrew class was instituted for post-bar and bat mitzvah students. Hebrew lessons were in demand. Lil Goldman had gradually accustomed the congregation to Hebrew and to bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies.

Lil Goldman retired as Beth-El's Religious School educator in 1976. She remained one more year as director of the lower grades. She continued her work at the Jewish Community Center's pre-school and on educational boards throughout the county. The Religious School that Goldman retired from in 1977 was far different from the one she had transformed starting in 1959. And it is far different today.

#### Then and Now

One hundred years ago, just about every Jewish child in Fort Worth lived within walking distance of the Temple. By the millennium, Beth-El's students were scattered in nine public school districts and four private schools. A preponderance lived in two southwest Fort Worth ZIP codes—76109 and 76132.

A century ago, the Religious School enrolled 30 to 40 youngsters. Attendance peaked with 251 pupils

**TAMI HOFFMAN** broke the gender barrier with her 1972 *bas Torah*.



