

# Chapter 1

## In the Beginning. . .

*Though your beginning be small, . . .  
you will grow very great.*  
—Job 8:7

*Congregation, . . . the meeting place  
where public religious life begins.*  
—James P. Wind and James W. Lewis,  
*American  
Congregations*

1

Jack White Photo Collection, UTA Libraries



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Fort Worth Public Library

Now and then. To contrast the congregation's present with its past is to travel back in time, back to the future. One hundred years ago, Beth-El Congregation began with modernity in mind. Instead, it has moved toward the trappings of tradition, albeit with contemporary twists.

When Beth-El was chartered in 1902, its 43 founders sought to move in a new direction, to "worship on the reform plan," to embrace a modern 20th-century style of worship minus tradition, minus yarmulkes, prayer shawls, and the mumbo jumbo of unintelligible Hebrew. These modern thinkers discarded "superstitious" customs such as getting married under a *chuppah* or smashing a glass at a wedding. They rejected praying

and swaying and *davening* at one's own pace. They disdained parading around the sanctuary with the Torah scrolls aloft. To "worship on the reform plan" meant decorum. It implied a Protestant model of worship with congregants responding in English and listening to an organ and a choir rather than chanting in an ancient tongue. It meant replacing the shofar with a trumpet. Worshipping "on the reform plan" entailed reading from a prayer book that made no mention of Zion. To these congregants, America was their Promised Land, and Fort Worth was where they had staked their claim.

Beth-El Congregation's 43 charter members were not newcomers to America nor to the region. Indeed, four of them were native Texans. (One of them, attorney Max K. Mayer, 35, was the first Jew born in

FORT WORTH



MAX K. MAYER (1877–1955), the first Jew born in Fort Worth, is pictured against a backdrop of the city in the late 19th century. August's haberdashery, far left, owned by brothers Alphonse and Larry August, was at the corner of Seventh and Main on the ground floor of the Worth Hotel building. Mose Rosenthal's furniture store, inset upper right, was at Second and Throckmorton. The furniture store's interior is pictured at left. Buildings along top margin include, second from right, Casey & Swasey, wholesale liquor and cigars, owned by Sam Levy, Beth-El's first president. Fort Worth National Bank is shown close up, above, with traveling salesmen parked in front.

Fort Worth; two of them, the Gernsbacher brothers, Aaron, 17, and Jake, 20, had been born in Weatherford, and another charter member, furniture and casket dealer Mose Rosenthal, 34, hailed from the East Texas town of Greenville.) Another seven of the founders were born and reared elsewhere in Dixie, mainly in and around Memphis and New Orleans. At least 14 of the charter congregants were foreign born—13 from German-speaking regions. Although originally from Europe, they had left the Continent in their youth and lived and worked in the United States most of their lives. America was home. Three of the Temple founders had fought in the Civil War—one for the Confederacy (Phillip W. Greenwall) and two for the Union (Simon Gabert and Joseph Mayer). Three were native Midwesterners—the Mayer brothers from Indiana and Theodore (Theo) Mack, the city's first Jewish lawyer, who was from Cincinnati. Most of the founders had done business together, played cards together, or fraternized and socialized with one another in Fort Worth for the previous two decades.

Why, then, in the autumn of 1902, did they coalesce into a congregation? Why not 30 years earlier, like Reform Jews in nearby Dallas, or five years before like the Jews at Gainesville's United Hebrew Congregation 60 miles away? Why hadn't they created a Reform congregation a decade earlier in 1892 when a group of Orthodox Jews, mostly immigrants with Polish and Russian accents, had formed a local congregation called Ahavath Sholom, Hebrew for "love of peace?" Why hadn't these 43 men joined that Fort Worth congregation? One of them had joined: Louis Weltman, the grandson of a rabbi. Why hadn't the others? Because Ahavath Sholom's organizers had formed a Shul, a traditional congregation modeled after institutions left behind in the shtetls of Eastern Europe. A Shul was an uncomfortable space for most of Fort Worth's native-born and naturalized American Jews, particularly those with German backgrounds. They were too assimilated into the Texas mainstream to feel at ease in an institution where women sat in the balcony, prayers were chanted in Hebrew, and board minutes were written in Yiddish. At Ahavath Sholom, the prayer book, a *siddur*, was read from right to left and was used twice daily for the morning and evening minyan. The 43 Jewish men who preferred to worship according to "the reform plan" wanted a more American institution. Religion to them was of secondary or tertiary importance. Worship was reserved for the High Holy Days and perhaps a Sabbath or two.

Yet these Reform Jews, the 43 founders of Beth-El Congregation, were well acquainted with their co-religionists who worshiped at Ahavath Sholom. The entire Jewish community shared a cemetery, Emanuel Hebrew Rest. Located on South Main Street two miles beyond the railroad depot, the cemetery was on an acre of land given "to the Israelites of the city" in 1879 by civic leader John Peter Smith. By 1881, a cluster of Jewish men had formed a burial society, but it was short-lived. The

be done by a printing and lithographing company's establishment, and it was to the members of the printing and pressmen's fraternity that he tendered the event. It was highly appreciated by those fortunate enough to be present.

The followers of the Jewish religious faith in Fort Worth are on the eve of organizing and establishing a congregation in this city. On last Sunday evening a number of the most substantial Hebrews met at the residence of Mr. I. Carb and discussed preliminary action. Among those present beside the host, Mr. Carb, were Messrs. Joe Meyer, H. Brann, Oscar Seligman, E. Gabert, M. Cohen, Isenbaum, Goldstein, and many others. A committee was appointed to communicate with a rabbi, another to canvass the securing of a synagogue. Soon another meeting will be held to further the business.

Yesterday petition for divorce was entered by A. J. Rheulander from Cora

Fort Worth Gazette, Aug. 12, 1890

GO TO

**Gernsbacher Bros.**

509 Houston St.

CHINA  
CUT GLASS

cemetery was left largely untended until 1896, when a group of women, led by widowed matriarch Babette Carb, reorganized the Emanuel Hebrew Association.

The entire Jewish community also staged annual Purim celebrations—festive masquerade balls to which the public and the press were invited. Mayor B. B. Paddock attended the 1896 Purim Ball, indicating the prestige of the party as well as the Jewish community's early involvement in the fabric of the town.<sup>2</sup>

B'nai B'rith, the Jewish fraternal lodge, was also written up in the local newspapers and supported by a cross section of the Jewish community. The first B'nai B'rith lodge, launched in 1876, the year the railroad reached Fort Worth, raised money for yellow fever victims elsewhere in the South. But the lodge disintegrated when the city's fortunes plummeted in the 1880s. Another B'nai B'rith lodge, this one launched in 1901, again drew from a cross section of the Jewish population, and this chapter lasted. The cemetery, the Purim balls, and the broad representation in B'nai B'rith show that Jews worked and partied together and had a presence in the town. Fort Worth's early Reform Jews may not have been prone to pray, but they did not hide their

Jewish identity.

Not that a few stalwarts had not tried to organize them. Aborted attempts to launch Reform Jewish institutions had begun as early as 1876, to little avail. The reactions among pioneer Jewish settlers had ranged from "cold indifference" to derision. "Fort Worth Jews were beyond redemption," wrote schoolteacher Flora Weltman Schiff, daughter of a pioneer Jewish saloon keeper. "The very mention of services would subject one to ridicule."<sup>3</sup>

The rest of Fort Worth was not too keen on religion, either. By the close of the 19th century, this city of 26,000 residents, including 600 Jews, had but 15 churches.<sup>4</sup> There were far more saloons, gambling dens, and brothels.

Founded in 1849 as a frontier military post, Fort Worth was a less-than-respectable town during its first five decades. It was best known for Hell's Half Acre, the blocks of bars and bawdyhouses that harbored outlaws like Butch Cassidy. The Acre had first flourished during

the Chisholm Trail days of the 1870s, when Fort Worth touted itself as the last watering stop south of Indian Territory. As the cattle-driving era came to an end in the 1880s, Fort Worth's image (and its nickname) as "Cowtown" remained, luring the restless while deterring families in search of refinement.

"In Jewish circles, . . . such was the reputation of Fort Worth throughout the State of Texas . . . the mere mention of the name . . . would suggest the abandonment of all hope for the Jews of that City," wrote local historian Flora Schiff. Others concurred: Charles Wessolowsky, a journalist and B'nai B'rith regional representative who visited the city in 1879, criticized the "lack of zeal among [Jewish] parents, who [were] not very much disposed to take great interest in the education of their children in . . . moral and religious teaching."<sup>5</sup> His reference was to a Sabbath School, begun earlier that year with the blessing of a visiting Galveston rabbi, Abraham Blum. Three women, working

ARMOUR AND SWIFT, two giant packinghouse companies, located plants in the Stockyards, spurring changes in Fort Worth and in the Jewish community. Photo, circa 1905.



North Fort Worth Historical Society.



with self-appointed Principal Joseph Mayer, had begun teaching Judaism to 32 Jewish children, but the endeavor soon fizzled.<sup>6</sup>

In 1900 there was another effort to launch a Jewish Religious School. This time, Miss Sarah Carb, principal of the North Fort Worth Kindergarten School, served as superintendent. Fifty pupils enrolled. The school proved to be the stimulus for further organizing. An article in the *American Israelite*, datelined Fort Worth, reported that "a movement is on foot in Jewish circles here . . . to discuss ways and means . . . to organize a congregation under the American or Reformed ritual."<sup>7</sup> The *American Israelite* reported that Sarah Carb's uncle, Isidore Carb, had called a meeting in his Houston Street office to organize a synagogue. Working in concert with him were David Brown, an ice manufacturer with three daughters, and Herman Brann, a liquor store retailer with a teen-age son. Again,

THIS UNION PRAYER BOOK, published in 1895 by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, belonged to Harold Schiff, grandson of Temple founder Louis Weltman.



STATE OF TEXAS.  
 JOHN G. TOD, SECRETARY OF STATE,  
 DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

AUSTIN, 10/15 1902.

GEO. T. KEEBLE, CHIEF CLERK.

Mr J Carb  
 Berk North  
 Texas.

Dear Sir

I am directed by the Secretary of State to advise you that the charter of *Beth El Congregation* was filed on 10/15 and to hand you herewith a certified copy of the same, together with Franchise Tax Receipt expiring on the 1st day of May next (see P. S.) for said Corporation, both of which I trust will reach you in due course.

Yours truly,

GEO. T. KEEBLE, busi-  
 Chief Clerk.

JOTTINGS.

The Reform Jews of Fort Worth, Texas, have formed a congregation and hope to build a temple in the near future.

American Israelite

would create thousands of jobs and transform Fort Worth from a "rest stop" on the cattle trail into a regional economic capital, a magnet for retailers, bankers, and spin-off industries. The city was coming of age. Fort Worth had moved well beyond frontier status and was courting respectability. Institutions began changing and stabilizing. As the city climbed toward its next phase of development, so, too, did the Reform Jewish community with the creation of Beth-El Congregation.

Twenty years before, most of Beth-El's future congregants had scoffed at the notion of a synagogue. Fort Worth was still a backwater town then, a lawless county seat where drunken cowboys fired random shots into the air. As the city embraced business and respectability, religious institutions became more esteemed. Already in 1900, Chamber of Commerce boasted that three new churches were under construction, a fact that might have been ignored or overlooked a decade before.

Moreover, as did most western cities, Fort Worth welcomed different churches and denominations. Diverse houses of worship were proof of the pluralism and democracy that America embodied. For Jews of that era, Reform Temples nationwide were not only "a bond to Judaism" but also "portals to America."<sup>9</sup> Modeled after Protestant churches—with an English-language service and a spiritual leader dressed in a frock coat—Reform Jewish congregations seemed to parallel typical American religious institutions. The history of Beth-El Congregation is intertwined with the history of Fort Worth. When Fort Worth's Reform Jews finally chartered a congregation in the fall of 1902, their endeavor was indicative of a stable community seeking growth, prosperity, and respectability. 🌟

attempts to launch a Reform Temple faltered. So did the religious school. Still another effort was announced 11 months later in the *Southwest Jewish Sentiment*, which reported that Fort Worth's "Jewish Sunday School" had been "reorganized." This time the faculty consisted of three women (Elfrieda Brann, Sarah Carb, and Mrs. L. E. Cohn) and three men (Henry Gernsbacher, Isidore Carb, and Theodore Mack).<sup>8</sup> The movement to establish a Reform Sabbath School and Temple met with repeated failure, yet each time, the effort gained adherents.

In the early autumn of 1902, the unaffiliated Jews tried once again to charter a Reform Temple. This time their efforts proved enduring. Why? The timing was propitious. Until then, Fort Worth had been content to be little more than a rowdy town west of cosmopolitan Dallas. The town relished its reputation as rugged and wide open, a cow town with a mercurial past and an uncertain financial future. Now, in the summer of 1902, economic optimism stirred within the city. Business leaders and city commissioners had persuaded both Swift and Armour, the giant Chicago meat-packing companies, as well as two smaller processing firms, to invest \$10 million in regional plants. These packinghouses