

Chapter 4

Beth-El's Dozen Rabbis

A leader of peoples, a prince and commander.
—Isaiah 55:4

Beth-El has rarely been without a rabbi. During its first century, the congregation has been home to an even dozen.

Two of the earliest (Joseph Jasin and George Zepin) stayed just a few years, yet helped forge a lasting congregation. Four rabbis (Solomon Philo, Eugene Lipman, Ernest S. Grey, and A. J. Brachman) were short-term or interim leaders. Five of the rabbis (George Fox, Harry Merfeld, Samuel Soskin, Milton Rosenbaum, and Robert Schur) remained from seven years to three decades, leaving imprints on congregation and community. Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger began serving in 1984. The tenure of Beth-El's rabbis indicates a high degree of consensus and stability.

Six of Beth-El's rabbis were foreign-born (Philo, Jasin, Zepin, Fox, Grey, and Brachman). Nine were ordained at Hebrew Union College, while three (Philo, Grey, and Brachman) were not. Ten were Zionists—some zealously, most passively so. Many functioned as circuit-riding rabbis, serving congregations in Amarillo, Odessa, Wichita Falls, and Ardmore, Oklahoma, sometimes under contract. Many were addressed as “doctor” rather than “rabbi,” although only two (Fox and Grey) had earned a Ph.D. Three of our rabbis (Merfeld, Brachman, and Schur) are interred in Fort Worth.

Each rabbi shared life-cycle events with the congregation. For Harry and Amy Merfeld, the milestone was the birth of their son Charles Theodore in 1924 and the designation of Polly Mack as his godmother. George Fox shared happiness and sorrow. His marriage to local girl Hortense Lewis was followed by the birth of two children and the death of their eldest, Samson, who is buried in Emanuel Hebrew Rest. Samuel Soskin endured a divorce. Ernest Grey became a naturalized American, with two congregants vouching for his character. Ralph and Ann Mecklenburger arrived with two young children, whom the congregation watched grow to bar and bat mitzvah age and beyond. Each rabbi had his share of disagreements with the board. Fox was told to quit officiating at the “burial or marriage of Jews who are not members of Temple Beth-El.” Merfeld was rapped for spending more time at the Fort Worth Little Theater than at the Temple. Soskin,

whose background was Orthodox, instructed congregants to celebrate one day of each Jewish holiday, while he observed two, which did not sit well with many classically Reform Jews. Rosenbaum was rebuffed when he urged the board to buy, rather than rent, a house for the rabbi. Rosenbaum, and initially Schur, were barred from board meetings, except by invitation.

In a city like Fort Worth, where Jews constitute fewer than 1% of the populace, the Reform rabbi serves as ambassador to the rest of the community, a civic figure and ethnic envoy explaining who we are and where we stand. Fox was the first rabbi invited to join the Tarrant County General Pastors Association. Lipman created a 300-voice interfaith choir. Schur was the city's first white clergyman to march for civil rights. Mecklenburger sponsored the first openly gay man to apply for membership in the downtown Rotary. (The applicant was rejected.)

Beth-El's rabbi has an intrafaith role, bridging differences between the city's two synagogues, referred to in the vernacular as “the Temple” and “the Shul.” Relations between the two were warm during the congregation's first five decades, especially during World War II, when one rabbi served both congregations. The intrafaith component chilled during Rabbi Schur's years and has thawed since the 1984 arrival of Rabbi Mecklenburger.

Solomon Philo, September–December 1902

Our first rabbi, Solomon Philo (1842–1923), traversed the path between Temple and Shul with agility. After a stormy few months at Beth-El, he moved to the pulpit at Ahavath Sholom for a while. That was his pattern: an itinerant rabbi who had trouble keeping a pulpit.

Philo was born in Prussia, and his original surname was Lieber, German for “dear.” He hellenized the name to Philo, the Greek word for “love.” In addition to having rabbinic credentials, he was a musician and Shakespearean actor who had lived in Poland, Wales, Canada, California, and New Jersey. In 1901, he apparently answered an ad for a rabbi placed by the United Hebrew Congregation of Gainesville, Texas. Initially well received in North Texas, Philo revived the Gainesville congregation's Religious School and produced a Hanukkah pageant replete with singing and dramatic readings. The *Southwest Jewish Sentiment*, a Jewish weekly, reported that he delivered impressive eulogies.

On September 21, 1902, when Beth-El's founding fathers gathered to organize their own congregation,

Philo was invited as consultant. With his waxed mustache, tailored frock coat, and slight British accent, the rabbi made a positive first impression. He was hired on “approbation” [sic] at a salary of \$100 a month through the end of the year. He took responsibility for hand-carrying a borrowed Torah from Dallas's Temple Emanu-El to Fort Worth for our first High Holy Days services.

After the High Holy Days, matters deteriorated. Rabbi Philo turned quarrelsome and meddlesome. Attendance dropped. Enthusiasm waned. The American

Jewish Yearbook reports that he served part of the following year down the street at Ahavath Sholom. The next published reference to Rabbi Philo is his 1923 obituary—a paragraph in *The New York Times* stating that he spent his final decades assisting at Brooklyn and Coney Island congregations. Philo instilled the rabbinic tradition in his son Isadore, the longtime Reform rabbi in Youngstown, Ohio, and in a great-grandson, Jonathan Philo Kendall, who in 2002 was rabbi at Congregation Beit HaYam in Stuart, Florida.¹⁶

Joseph Jasin, 1904-1908



FIRST CONFIRMATION CLASS, 1905 Rabbi Joseph Jasin is second from the left.

underwrite Beth-El's first building.

When the Galveston Movement, which brought

Eastern European Jews to America via the Texas Gulf Coast, began in 1907, the rabbi served on the local advisory board along with congregants Henry Gernsbacher, Sam Neumegen, Felix P. Bath, U. M. Simon, and six men from the Shul.

In Fort Worth, Jasin's passion for Zionism made him a frequent speaker at the Hebrew Institute, a Jewish community center constructed by Ahavath Sholom and located next door to the Shul. From 1906 to 1908, Jasin coedited a Waco news-

paper called *Jewish Hope*, and in 1907 he was elected president of the Texas Zionist Association.

Jasin caught the attention of Rabbi Max Heller, a major figure in the Reform rabbinate, who suggested he apply for a position in New Orleans. Jasin responded: “After having lived here [in Fort Worth] three years and having gained a world of good friends and the confidence of the community in general . . . I can barely make ends meet on \$1,500 a year.”¹⁷ Still, he remained in Texas until 1908, when he was drafted to New York to succeed Rabbi Judah L. Magness as secretary of the Federation of American Zionists, the forerunner of the Zionist Organization of America.

Zionism, during that period, seemed an impossible dream and was denounced by all but five American Reform rabbis. “We were subjected to ridicule,” Jasin wrote. On the other hand, fellow Zionists who practiced Orthodox and Conservative Judaism called him a “turn-coat” for following Reform. “I came under suspicion by

It took Beth-El's congregants a long while to recover from Rabbi Philo's divisive stay. More than a year after his departure, the local section of the National Council of Jewish Women contacted the Reform movement's leaders for help. The movement sent circuit-riding Rabbi George Zepin, who conducted services twice and gave Beth-El a second wind. Zepin arranged for Fort Worth to receive a full-time rabbi from the next graduating class of Hebrew Union College.

Rabbi Joseph Jasin (1883–1968) arrived in Fort Worth in August 1904. The newly ordained rabbi, with his smooth skin and earnest expression, looked as young as the Gernsbacher boys in Beth-El's first confirmation class.

A native of Brest Litovsk, Poland, Jasin had grown up in Cincinnati, influenced by the Zionist leanings of his immigrant parents and the modern currents of Reform Judaism. He wrote poetry, composed music, and dreamed of *tikun olam*, improving the world. At Beth-El, he invigorated the religious school. Congregation membership doubled from 30 to 60 families. He encouraged the ladies to dream of a home for the congregation and backed their decision to launch a Temple sinking fund to

rank and file Zionists because I was a Reform rabbi," he wrote, and by New Yorkers in general "because I was a callow youth from far off 'provincial' Texas." Jasin spent two years with the Zionist organization in New York and is credited with cofounding the Jewish National Fund. His successor there was Henrietta Szold, who later founded Hadassah.¹⁸

Rabbi Jasin went on to pulpits in Niagara Falls and Schenectady, New York; Pine Bluff, Arkansas; Miami, Florida; and Pasadena, California, where he established a prison chaplaincy and developed an interest in parapsychology. He remained an organizer, editor, and innovator throughout his career.

George Zepin, 1908–1910

Described in a news account as "a very suave man, . . . passionately proud of his race,"¹⁹ George Zepin (1878–1963) was the circuit-riding rabbi who had resuscitated Beth-El in 1904. He apparently enjoyed Fort Worth, because he returned in 1908 to replace Rabbi Jasin. The community was overjoyed.

Born near Kiev, Russia, Zepin immigrated to the United States with his family when he was four, settling in Cincinnati. He received his ordination from Hebrew Union College in 1900.

During his first decade as a man of the cloth, Zepin wavered between serving as a congregational leader and serving as an agency rabbi. Initially, he took a pulpit in Kalamazoo, Michigan, then a job with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) as a circuit rabbi or scout helping start-up congregations. Next, he became superintendent of Jewish Social Agencies of Chicago. Upon his Fort Worth arrival, he was elected corresponding secretary of the Galveston immigrant committee. The movement's New York organizers were pleased, counting on his diplomatic skills to resolve their conflicts with the local community. The city of Fort Worth tapped Zepin for civic work, appointing him its commissioner of charities.

Ultimately, Zepin yearned for a larger sphere. After two years in Fort Worth, he accepted a post as secretary of the UAHC in Cincinnati. Good shepherd that he was, he found his own replacement, Rabbi G. George Fox.

Zepin's later activities also touched the congregation. He was instrumental in creating the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods

CONFIRMATION CLASS of 1909. Rabbi George Zepin, back row center, inscribed the Bible to Rose Levenson, second girl from right.



and encouraged Beth-El's women to form the first Sisterhood affiliate in Texas. In 1923, he helped organize the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, serving as executive secretary. Unfortunately, his ties to Beth-El were no longer fresh enough to spark an affiliation.

As the nation began working its way out of the Depression, Reform movement leaders urged a change in focus, from small-town Jewry to urban congregations in cities with massive Jewish populations. This seemed the only way to expand the movement. Zepin resisted these changes, and the UAHC retired him in 1941.²⁰

G. George Fox, 1910–1922

Rabbi Gresham George Fox (1884–1960) arrived in Fort Worth February 1, 1910, and soon startled the community. He placed a notice in the newspaper stating that he would give a sermon entitled, "Lincoln's Contribution to

the Nation." Confederate sentiments ran deep in Fort Worth. The Temple president received threatening calls. Fox held firm.

Fox enjoyed making a splash and making a

point. At a Liberty Bond luncheon, he refused to deliver his report until African-American volunteers were ushered into the banquet hall to dine with the others. As a graduate of the University of Chicago, he helped organize a Cowtown alumni chapter until he realized that a black alumnus, Dr. Wendell Terrell, was to be excluded. Fox opposed a segregated chapter, and the effort disintegrated.²¹

Following in Rabbi Zepin's shoes, Fox headed the city's charity commission. One disadvantaged group he

deemed ineligible for charity included some of his own co-religionists. These were women of ill repute. To the Jewish community's embarrassment, some of the East European refugees arriving in Texas through the Galveston Immigration Plan went to work in the brothels and "cribs" within Hell's Half Acre. Because the rabbi was friendly with the police commissioner and the mayor, he used his political clout to have the Jewish harlots jailed on disorderly conduct charges. Eighteen of the young women were deported to Europe. Two, according to the rabbi's memoir, "married their pimps" and remained. Ministers crusading to clean up Hell's Half Acre asked the rabbi why he rounded up only Jewish prostitutes. "I looked out for my own," he wrote in his memoir. "They could look out for their own."

Among Fox's long-ranging achievements was his push to construct Beth-El's second Temple, completed in 1920 and occupied for 80 years. Fox was also cofounder and editor of *The Jewish Monitor*, a newsy weekly that circulated throughout Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma. After Fox left Texas in 1922 for Chicago's larger, more dynamic South Shore Congregation, the *Monitor* remained in circulation another decade.²²

on. ner. 2 2 2 Fox-Lewis. The marriage of Miss Hortense Lewis and Rabbi George Fox was solemnized Sunday afternoon at 5:30 o'clock at the Temple Beth-El, on Taylor street, in the presence of a large number of friends. The altar was decorated with quantities of palms and potted plants and at either side were stationed tall candelabra holding lighted tapers. The ceremony was performed by Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston, Rabbi Leonard Rothstein of Alexandria, La., and Rabbi Bloomenthal and was most impressive. The ushers were Messrs. Jake Gernsbacher, Nathan Gens, Louis Cohen, Meredith Carb, James Weitman, Will Friedman, Simon Zese of Dallas, Joe Colton, Morris Alexander and Arthur Lewis. Previous to the entrance of the bride party Mrs. Dan Brown sang "O Perfect Love," accompanied by Mr. Marsh, the music being his own composition, and the wedding march was played by Miss Hazel Brann. The bride's attendants were Miss Lillian Lewis, maid of honor, Mrs. C. Lowenstein of Waco, grandmother of the bride, matron of honor, and her mother, Mrs. Nettie Stiefel, who gave her away. Mr. Felix P. Bath was best man and Messrs. Sam Levy, Ben Levy and Dan Levy were the bridegroom's other attendants. The maid of honor was attired in



HORTENSE LEWIS AND RABBI G. GEORGE FOX announced their wedding in the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Nov. 27, 1910.

Harry A. Merfeld, 1922–1936

Hard times stalked Harry Merfeld (1887–1961). He arrived at Beth-El when the congregation was saddled with debt—\$78,500 in second mortgage bonds. He remained into the Great Depression, helpless as the congregation dwindled from 125 to under 100 families. Beth-El's janitor contracted tuberculosis, leaving the rabbi to empty the trash. Merfeld had to borrow his monthly salary from the bank and was charged interest on the loan. When the Temple secretary quit, the rabbi paid the bills, signing checks with a "flourish of purple ink." He saved every receipt and left behind an alphabetical file of bills documenting such religious expenses as \$10 to pay the High Holy Days trumpet player and \$6 for a *lulov* and *etrog* shipped from Jerusalem for *Sukkot*. When the Temple was billed 15 cents for a religious booklet, the rabbi paid with postage stamps.

Newspaper articles portray Merfeld

Rabbi Merfeld Quits for Hollywood Post

Harry Merfeld, rabbi of Temple Beth-El for 14 years and long active in civic affairs, resigned Tuesday night to become rabbi of Temple Israel of Hollywood.

He will assume his new duties on Sept. 1.

Rabbi Merfeld, a native of Baltimore, came here from Temple D'Nai Israel at Monroe, La.

He was educated at the University of Maryland and the Baltimore City College. He received his B. A. and M. A. from the University of California and his theological training from the Hebrew Union College at Cincinnati.

His residence in Fort Worth has been a director of the Community Chest, president of the Fort Worth Rotary Club, and a director of the Social Agencies and Jewish Charities. His reason for leaving is that he served as business manager of the Fort Worth Lit-

New Duties



RABBI MERFELD.



RABBI FOX WAS founding editor of *The Jewish Monitor*. Rabbi

as a likeable bon vivant, a 33rd degree Mason who counted among his friends community figures such as William Bryce, for whom a street is named; Ben E. Keith, whose beer and fine-foods business still flourished in 2002; Congressman Fritz Lanham, and local department store magnates William Monnig and Marvin Leonard.²³ Among Merfeld's colleagues was a priest who had access to sacramental wine and sometimes invited the rabbi for a drink, according to Marion Weil, whom the rabbi invited along.

Merfeld had a law degree from Johns Hopkins University and a flair for the stage, adding to his image and popularity. His home away from home and Temple was the Fort Worth Little Theater, where he was business manager and building committee chairman. In his Little Theater office, he held court, smoking cigars, gesturing with animation, and reading current issues of *Time*, *Literary Digest*, *Saturday Evening Post* and

Harper's. This pleasurable domain was not to last. In December 1933, Beth-El's trustees passed a motion telling "Dr. Merfeld [that he] . . . was giving too much time to the Little Theater and it was the wish . . . of the Board that he move his office to the Temple and have regular office hours in the Temple each day."

Three years later, Merfeld was called to Hollywood's Temple Israel. After three years in California, he went to work for the USO-Jewish Welfare Board in Brownwood, Texas. He later had pulpits in Panama and Alabama. Merfeld never retired. At age 72, he took his last pulpit at Corsicana's Temple Beth-El. The Corsicana congregation could not afford a rabbi at the time, but a benefactor from Fort Worth quietly supplemented the rabbi's paycheck. When Merfeld died in 1961, Rabbi Schur delivered the eulogy. Merfeld and his wife, Amy, are buried in the Beth-El section of Greenwood Cemetery.

Samuel D. Soskin (1936-1943, 1946-1949)

Sam Soskin (1905-1970) arrived in Fort Worth when Adolf Hitler was rising to power in Germany. Soskin warned the community about the menace abroad and likened the Nazis' early restrictions against Jews to America's Jim Crow laws. The Cleveland-born rabbi allied with local ministers, white and black. In 1938, he coordinated an interfaith service at Beth-El, during which worshipers prayed that German persecution of Jews would cease and that Americans would show more tolerance toward minorities.

At another interfaith service, he told his audience: "If I were a Christian, I would search deep within my own soul to discover why the bitter and explosive problem of anti-Semitism still plagues mankind. . . . If I belonged to a club which refused to admit Jews; if I lived at [an apartment] which refused to rent to Jews; if I owned a business which refused to employ Jews; if I would stand before the judgment bar of my own conscience and alter these intolerable conditions."

Liberal and idealistic, Soskin was among the founders in 1943 of Fort Worth's Planned Parenthood



THE 25th ANNIVERSARY of the Broadway building was celebrated with a banquet, Dec. 2, 1945.

Speakers, seated, left to right: Harry Lederman, oldest living Temple founder; W. J. Marsh, organist for 25 years; Rabbi George Fox, visiting from Chicago; Henry Landman, Beth-El president.

Standing: interim Rabbi Ernest S. Grey, who served until Samuel Soskin, in Navy lieutenant's uniform, was discharged from the chaplaincy. Letters are from Jewish soldiers who corresponded with USO Representative Regina Gernsbacher.

chapter, controversial then for its advocacy of birth control. Soskin's sermons tended to be political—too political for congregants like builder Harry B. Friedman, who preferred Rabbi Merfeld's spiritual messages and described Soskin as "a damned socialist."²⁴ Yet Soskin's words were relished by Sol Brachman, an oilman who read *The New Republic*. Few were surprised, 18 months after Pearl Harbor, when the rabbi joined the chaplaincy and took a leave of absence to serve in the U.S. Navy.

The rabbi cut a handsome figure in uniform. "He was our heartthrob," recalled future Sisterhood President Joy Spiegel. Women adored Rabbi Soskin—every woman except his wife, Dorothy. She detested the role of *rebbetsin*. A feminist before her time, she rode a motorcycle. "Rabbinical gossip" teemed with talk of Soskin's "family difficulties," according to interim Rabbi Eugene Lipman. In a letter to the president of Hebrew Union College, Lipman wrote, "A tremendous job needs doing in the [Fort Worth] community, and Sam can do it, if Dorothy will let him."²⁵

When Soskin returned to Fort Worth after WWII, he and Dorothy tried to resolve their differences. She

ultimately divorced him and converted to Catholicism. Beth-El sympathetically stood by its rabbi. Sol and Etta Brachman invited Soskin to move into their home on Colonial Parkway, which he did for several months.

More misfortune befell Soskin's rabbinate. On August 28, 1946, a three-alarm fire gutted the Temple. Soskin was tested throughout his adult years with ailments from back pain to Parkinson's disease. He saw religion as the balm for despair and minimized his personal problems in the face of larger concerns. "A world lies prostrate in the dust. . . . Starvation dims the luster of human dreams. . . . Now is the time for the emergence of spiritual forces which alone can save civilization," he preached.²⁶

Soskin, who later headed the CCAR's Commission of Justice and Peace, departed Beth-El in 1949 for the pulpit at Brooklyn's Congregation Beth Emeth. He left behind an appreciative congregation, judging from the minutes of April 1944, which state: "The rabbi's resignation is accepted with regret." In New York, Soskin remarried, enjoyed a successful second marriage, and maintained ties with many of his Fort Worth congregants.

Eugene Lipman, September, 1943- June, 1944

Eugene Lipman (1919-1994) served at Beth-El only 10 months, time enough to make some candid observations in letters to Dr. Julian Morgenstern, president of Hebrew Union College. He wrote that Beth-El's religious school curriculum was "rotten," the teachers underpaid, and classrooms "considerably" filthy. "With shaking knees," he went to the board demanding "decent salaries" for teachers. The Religious School was not the only thing at Beth-El that appalled the 24-year-old rabbi. "The people saw the Torah only on holidays." The sacred parchment scroll was not removed from the ark on Friday nights, and there was no Sabbath morning worship. Lipman added a Torah service to the Friday evening service, and it has remained part of the Temple's Sabbath ritual.²⁷

Lipman became a close friend of Ahavath Sholom's Rabbi Philip Graubart and observed that Beth-El had numerous congregants with traditional Jewish upbringings. There was a great deal of overlap in membership between the Temple and the Shul and a great deal of cooperation. Sizing up the "composite character of the community," Lipman wrote his mentor, "A certain knowledge of orthodoxy and closeness to it are a great help for a [Fort Worth Reform] rabbi."

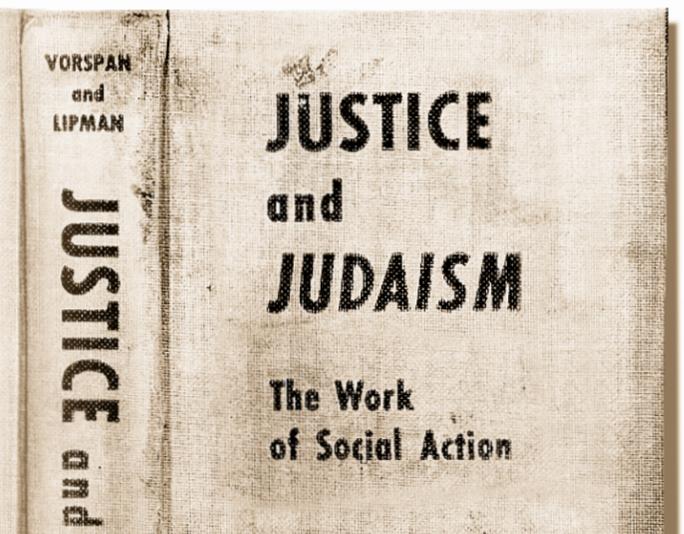
Newly ordained, Lipman wanted desperately to serve as a military chaplain. To join the chaplaincy, a year's pastoral experience was required. He came to Fort Worth to put in his qualifying time. Yet he was not idle. On alternate Sunday mornings, he broadcast a

local radio program, *Israel Speaks*, over WBAP. He took over for Soskin as part-time rabbi at Ardmore's Temple Beth-El and as civilian chaplain for Army training units in Stephenville, Brownwood, and Fort Worth. In his free time, he took flying lessons at the Municipal Airport, now Meacham Field.

Lipman's most satisfying accomplishment in Fort Worth was leading the National Brotherhood Week Committee. To mark the occasion, he produced an Interfaith Concert of Sacred Music on February 22, 1944, at the Will Rogers Memorial Auditorium. The event brought together choirs from 32 Protestant churches, seven Catholic institutions, and the two synagogues. "The chorus of 300 voices have agreed to constitute themselves a permanent oratorio chorus—something Fort Worth people have wanted for years," Lipman wrote. "It's the fulfillment of an old dream of

INTERIM RABBI EUGENE

Lipman became a well-known writer and social activist.



mine, and I'm pleased as punch about it." 28

A perceptive and proactive rabbi, Lipman became well-known in the field of Jewish refugee work. During his service as U.S. Army chaplain with Headquarters XXII Corps in Europe, he became a crusader on behalf of the war's displaced persons. He served as liaison officer between the Army and the Jewish Agency for Palestine, aiding the flight of Jews from Eastern Europe through Czechoslovakia. Later, he served as a chaplain in

Ernest Szrulyovics Grey, September, 1944–December, 1945

The congregation was displeased about losing a second rabbi to the war effort. Beth-El President Henry Landman began corresponding with Hebrew Union College in January 1944, insisting that when Lipman joined the armed forces, the college should furnish an immediate replacement. Fewer than a dozen Reform rabbis were to be ordained that year. Landman wanted one of them.

The college sent a candidate to audition, and Lipman urged that he be hired. A short time later, however, the congregation got wind of another rabbi, Hungarian refugee Ernest (Erno) Szrulyovics Grey. The rabbi had emigrated from Hungary in 1939. His immigration papers gave his name as Dr. Ernest Szrulyovics. He attended El Paso's College of Mines, joined El Paso's Temple Mount Sinai, and in 1943 began officiating as rabbi at Corsicana's Temple Beth-El. Henry Landman invited him to Fort Worth for a weekend audition on the pulpit, and Rabbi Grey was hired.

Milton Rosenbaum, 1949–1956

Milton Rosenbaum's first innovation was audible. On Rosh Hashanah, a shofar was sounded rather than the customary coronet, trumpet, or trombone. Traditional rituals became part of the new order.

Because Rosenbaum and his wife, Thelma, were newcomers, the ongoing custom of a Rosh Hashanah reception honoring the rabbinical couple began. The Rosenbaums enjoyed the function so much that in 1952 and 1953 they turned the affair into an open house at their residence at 3008 Greene Street in the Texas Christian University neighborhood.

They would have hosted a third annual open house, but in the fall of 1954 the Rosenbaums were in the midst of moving to 2016 Windsor Place in Forest Park and could not entertain. Besides, their living quarters had become a flash point. The rabbi rented housing and resented it. He argued, unsuccessfully, that the Temple should invest in a house for its spiritual leader and apply his monthly \$125 parsonage allowance to a mortgage rather than rent. The congregation would build equity, and the rabbi would have a house "consonant with his position." Post-war housing shortages had sent rents skyrocketing, fueling a construction boom that made new homes more affordable. Yet the Temple board, ever

Korea. He was founding director in 1961 of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, a hub for Jewish social action and legislative activity. He served as spiritual leader at Temple Sinai in Washington, D.C., and president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Fort Worth was fortunate to have had Eugene Lipman's career and charisma intersect with our community.

Gentle, soft-spoken, and knowledgeable, Grey remained in Fort Worth 15 months. He was the only rabbi in town, for Ahavath Sholom's Rabbi Philip Graubart had also joined the chaplaincy. If there was a marriage or a burial within the Jewish community, the interim rabbi officiated. Among the marriages he blessed were Pauline Landman to Ed Wittenberg and Madlyn Brachman to Lou Barnett.

Grey received his U.S. citizenship papers in June 1945 during ceremonies downtown at the federal courthouse. Raymond Cohn and I. E. Horwitz, officers at Beth-El, signed an affidavit attesting to his moral character. When Rabbi Soskin returned from active duty January 1, 1946, Rabbi Grey returned to the Corsicana pulpit, where he served one year. The Beth-El Archives has no information on his subsequent years.

strapped for funds, was "not in a position to make any investment" no matter how sound. Temple President Herb Tuchin sided with the rabbi but could not find a financial angel to donate a down payment.

The population was increasing across Fort Worth. General Dynamics expanded its work force. Many former servicemen — among them Seymour Spiegel and Phil Ackin — returned to Texas where they had been stationed during wartime. During Rosenbaum's first six years at Beth-El, Religious School enrollment jumped from 119 students to 213. Every available square foot — including Sisterhood's sewing room — was converted to classroom use, yet Friday night service attendance remained static, averaging 76.

Rosenbaum, an Army chaplain who served in the Pacific, built a special rapport with students, pushing for tangible religious experiences. For *Succot*, he arranged for construction on the *bimah* of a mammoth *sukkah*, "large enough for our children to stand under . . . and . . . capture . . . the beauty of that ancient festival."

Another innovation was a "miniature welfare federation" so that students could decide where to distribute the pennies, nickels, and dimes they deposited weekly in the Jewish National Fund box. "This acquaint-



TEMPLE PRESIDENT Ben Ellman, in tuxedo, at a farewell dinner, July 1956, for Rabbi Milton and Thelma Rosenbaum.

ed our children with some of the philanthropic problems facing us and some of the agencies . . . which . . . meet these problems," the rabbi explained. The first year the *tzedakah* council met, students had \$264.73 to allocate. For the next year, they set a goal of \$325.

Among Rosenbaum's boldest moves was re-introduction of bar mitzvahs. Two were celebrated in 1954. "They were the first for many years," the rabbi wrote. Five more occurred in 1955.

Abraham J. Brachman, 1950–1956

Abraham "A.J." Brachman (1900-1976) symbolizes the cooperation, good will, and commingling between Temple Beth-El and neighboring Congregation Ahavath Sholom. A two-time president of the Shul, Brachman was an oilman who at age 45 returned to school to fulfill his longtime, lofty goal of becoming a rabbi. He received his ordination, or *sme'cha* in 1947 from Rabbi Stephen S. Wise at New York's Jewish Institute of Religion, which later merged with Hebrew Union College.

Brachman was both independently wealthy and an independent thinker. After one job interview, he became exasperated with the questions and demands of the rabbinic selection committee and decided against becoming a congregational rabbi. Instead, he pursued independent study. The rabbinate became his avocation. He loved being drafted to the pulpit and led High Holy Days services for overflow crowds at Ahavath Sholom. "His faithful followers were stimulated, mystified, and aggravated by him," wrote a colleague. "They were also devoted."

In those days before air conditioning, most Reform synagogues across the South and Southwest adjourned for the summer. Rabbis left town for cooler climes. Rabbi Rosenbaum, bent on building the Sabbath worship habit, recruited Rabbi Brachman to lead Friday evening services throughout the summer at Beth-El. The experiment was a success, with attendance averaging 30

The Temple buzzed with activity, but there were signs of discord. The parsonage flap was revisited annually, rankling the board. The rabbi's move toward tradition displeased a large faction of congregants who felt Rosenbaum had strayed too far from the classical Reform Judaism they had been raised with.

Rosenbaum must have known he was on the way out in the spring of 1956, because he did something that touched off a tempest at the Temple. He was among 1,200 rabbis to sign a petition denouncing the American Council for Judaism, an anti-Zionist organization. The petition called the council "reprehensible" and "contemptible" because it accused American Zionists of "dual loyalty" and condemned financial aid to Israel.²⁹ Rosenbaum's signature on the national petition evoked a protest letter from congregant Leo Karren on behalf of the Council's 27-member local chapter. "We resent in no uncertain terms the charge that the council is neither American or Jewish in spirit or in concept," Karren wrote. "We feel that this stepping-out of the pulpit by our rabbi is intemperate [and deserves] . . . a full airing." Six days later, Rabbi Rosenbaum resigned to accept the pulpit at Temple Emanu-El in suburban Detroit, where he remained until his death in March, 2000.

to 40 people, including the rabbi's wife, Sarah, who sang in the volunteer choir. "Despite weeks when the thermometer rose to 105 degrees each day, services were relatively well attended and received." Rabbi Brachman initially refused any remuneration. In 1952, when his brother Sol Brachman was Beth-El's president, the rabbi signed a contract to be paid \$50 per Friday evening service and \$100 per High Holy Days service. In 1956, after Rabbi Rosenbaum left Beth-El, Rabbi Brachman signed a five-month contract at a \$3000 salary.

When Rabbi Robert J. Schur came to Beth-El as full-time rabbi in December, 1956, he and the interim rabbi began a tense relationship. In Schur's words, "[There were] significant differences between us — in temperament, style, and . . . ideology. While A. J. was active, there was always a sort of tension, — I think he delighted in generating it. . . . There was hostility, resentment, and outright rejection by some who simply couldn't understand or relate to him. . . . He filled in here and there and was available to counsel, teach, and serve those who needed him — including me. . . . He did not depend on the congregation — nor they on him — but each benefited by having the other in a unique association. . . . His place never was and never will be filled by any other person."³⁰

Rabbis



Rabbi Solomon Philo, 1902



Rabbi Joseph Jasin,
1904-08



Rabbi George Zepin, 1908-10

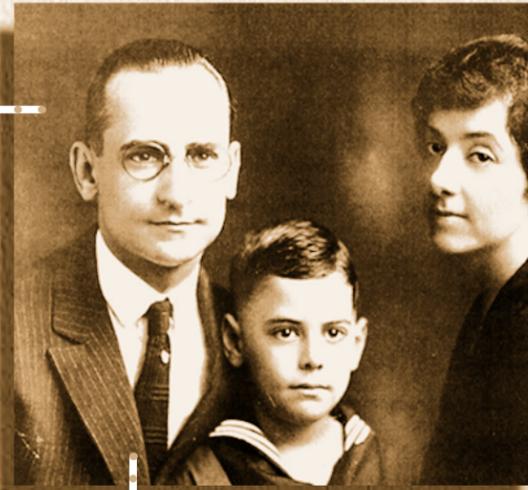
Rabbi G. George
Fox and family,
1910-22



Rabbi Samuel D. Soskin,
1936-43, 1946-49



Rabbi Harry A. Merfeld
and family, 1922-36



Rabbi Milton Rosenbaum,
1949-56

Rabbi Ernest S. Grey,
Interim 1944-45



Rabbi
Eugene Lipman,
Interim 1943-44



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Rabbi Abraham J. Brachman,
Interim 1950-56

Rabbi Robert J. Schur,
1956-86,
emeritus 1986-94



Rabbi Ralph D. Mecklenburger, 1984-

