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 a national institution, while three (Philo, Grey, and Brachman) were not. Ten were Zionists—some zealously, most passively so. Many functioned as “doctor” rather than “rabbi,” although only two (Fox and Grey) earned a Ph.D. Three of our rabbis (Merfeld, Mecklenburger, and Schur) were interred in Fort Worth.

Each rabbi shared life-cycle events with the 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.

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Rabbi Zepin 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,” George Zepin (1876–1963) was the circuit-riding rabbi who had reuscitated 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 wandered 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 committeee.

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 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, way out of the 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 lulav and etrog shipped from Jerusalem for Sukkot. When the Temple was billed 15 cents for a religious booklet, the rabbi paid with postage stamps.

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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 co-founder 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.

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 lulav and etrog shipped from Jerusalem for Sukkot. When the Temple was billed 15 cents for a religious booklet, the rabbi paid with postage stamps.

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The Temple president received threatening calls. 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 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.”

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Rabbi George Zepin, back row center, inscribed the Bible to Rose Levenson, second girl from right.
Sam Sokin (1905–1970) arrived in Fort Worth when Adolf Hitler was rising to power in Germany. Sokin wanted 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 1918, he coordinated an interfaith service at Beth-El, during which worshipers prayed that German persecution of Jews would cease and that 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, I would stand before the judgment bar of my own conscience and alter these intolerable conditions.”

Liberal and idealistic, Sokin was among the founders in 1943 of Fort Worth’s Planned Parenthood chapter, controversial then for its advocacy of birth control. Sokin’s sermons tended to be political—too political for congregants like builder Harry B. Friedman, who preferred his rabbi’s spiritual messages and described Sokin as “a damned socialist.”24 Yet Sokin’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 own man,” recalled future President Jimmy Carter. “Spiegel. Women adored Rabbi Sokin—every woman except his wife, Dorothy. She detested the role of rebbetzin. A feminist before her time, she rode a motorcycle. ‘Rabbinical sermons should be full of talk of Sokin’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 Sokin 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 Sokin to move into their home on Colonial Parkway, which he occupied for several months. More misfortune befell Sokin’s rabbinate. On August 28, 1946, a three-alarm fire gutted the Temple. Sokin 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 before it are a great help for a [Fort Worth Reform] rabbi.”

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 the 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 Sokin 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 taught 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 is the fulfillment of an old dream of
Milton Rosenbaum, homes more affordable. Yet the Temple board, ever position. Post-war housing shortages had sent rents sky-high, and the rabbi would have a house “consonant with his community.”

Ernest Szrulovics Grey, September, 1944–December, 1945

The congregation was displeased about losing a second rabbi to the war effort. Before becoming a congregational rabbi, Henry Landman began corresponding with Hebrew Union College in January 1944, insisting that when Landman 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 Landman urged that he be hired. A short time later, however, the congregation got wind of another rabbi, Hungarian refugee Ernest (Ernó) Szrulovics Grey. The rabbi had emigrated from Hungary in 1939. His immigration papers gave his name as Dr. Ernest Szrulovics. He attended Hebrew Union College, 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 traditional Ark, and the Temple office donated a down payment. For the next year, they set a goal of $325. The college sent a candidate to audition, and they were one of them. The college sent a candidate to audition, and Landman wanted one of them. The college sent a candidate to audition, and Landman urged that he be hired. A short time later, however, the congregation got wind of another rabbi, Hungarian refugee Ernest (Ernó) Szrulovics Grey. The rabbi had emigrated from Hungary in 1939. His immigration papers gave his name as Dr. Ernest Szrulovics. He attended Hebrew Union College, 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.

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 Gruhaut 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 and Edward Witter and Mailllyn 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. Horowitz, officers at Beth-El, signed an affidavit attesting to his moral character. When Rabbi Soskin returned from active duty January 1, 1946, Grey returned to the Corsicana pulpit, where he served one year. The Beth-El Archives has no information on his subsequent years.

Abraham J. Brachman, 1950–1956

Abraham “AJ” Brachman (1900-1976) symbolizes the cooperation, goodwill, 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 lifelong, lofty goal of becoming a rabbi. He received his ordination, or semicha, 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 rabbinic 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 room he recruited Rabbi Brachman to lead Friday evening services throughout the summer at Beth-El. The experiment was a success, with attendance averaging 30 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,” 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 $300 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 ideas. While I 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 filed in 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. . . . He 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.

Rabbi Robert J. Schur’s name, his prophetically cadent, and his far-reaching deeds became synonymous with Beth-El Congregation. During three decades as Beth-El’s rabbi, Schur artificed the needs of Jews, of youth, and of minorities from African-American to handicapped children. He was politico astute, developing access to powerful Congressman Jim Wright and a host of local legislators. He was poetics sensitive, penning so many special-occassion invocations that his prayers were published in a 34-page booklet that became a collector’s item. In 1960, he attended the White House Conference for Children as a delegate with a Texas gubernatorial committee. In 1965, he was among 600 blacks and whites who marched on City Hall in support of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. It was Fort Worth’s first civil-rights demonstration. “Robert Schur didn’t seem to care what the consequences were,” recalled one of the black ministers who organized the rally. “He felt that what he was doing was right in the sight of God.” Ten years before, when the UAHC had invited King to address its biennial convention, southern congregations registered a protest. Sheveport, Louisiana’s B’nai Zion Congregation wrote Fort Worth Temple President Manny Rosenthal asking Beth-El to join the dissenters. The Board refused, and, on November 4, 1963, gave Rabbi Schur “a vote of confidence relative to his past activities and positions regarding the integration question.”

Another came on the rabbi’s 10th anniversary in Fort Worth. During a celebratory banquet, the congregation presented the rabbi and his wife, Rolly, with a comical set of plastic keys, symbolizing the 1967 Buick Skylark they would soon receive in appreciation for his services. For Schur’s 20th anniversary at Beth-El, three donors (Sol Brachman, Manny Rosenthal, and Martin Siegel) paid off the Temple’s $4,500 debt. Along the way, the Temple trustees found a way to make the down payment for a parsonage in Tanglewood for “Rabbi and Rolly” as the Schurs were affectionately called.

Praised as a “Renaissance rabbi,” an “articulate conscience of the community,” and one of Fort Worth’s “most active civic pathfinders,” Rabbi Schur helped conceive the idea of a diagnostic facility for handicapped children, which became Fort Worth’s highly regarded Tarrant County Congregation Children’s Medical Center. Schur served on boards for the Fort Worth Symphony and the Fort Worth Boys Choir and spoke at the Amos Canteen Museum about the art of Ben Shahn. When President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, the rabbi channeled the community’s grief into a memorial service at the Tarrant County Convention Center. Schur’s humanity extended to his littlest congregants. Learning that a brother and sister had witnessed the death of their dog, he called them into his study for grief counseling. “When Rabbi Schur put his hands on a child’s head, the child felt love,” recalled Margot Schwartz.

Ironically, Schur’s close connection with youth introduced a rift into the relationship between Beth-El and Ahavath Shalom. Schur was dean of the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) Leadership Training Institute. Fort Worth World had established a NFTY chapter for its Reform Jewish teens. Instead, Jewish adolescents had joined B’nai B’rith youth groups that welcomed youngsters across Jewish denominational lines.

Rabbi Schur, having grown up in NFTY, spearheaded creation of a Fort Worth chapter called Fort Worth Federation of Temple Youth (FWTFY). In May 1957, Mecklenburger was installed on the temple’s board. Schur explained that he did not want to “prostitute” youth from the Orthodox congregation and therefore wanted only “youth from our own congregation to attend.” FWTFY’s exclusion of Orthodox teens was a rare instance in Fort Worth of Jews from one denomination rejecting the other. The exclusiveness of FWTFY membership and the magnetism of the new rabbi began driving a wedge within the Jewish community.

Rabbi Schur also discouraged dual memberships at the Temple, saying there was a line separating the denominations. He expressed annoyance when congregants spent the first day of Rosh Hashanah worshiping at the Temple and the second day, when Beth-El had no service, davening at the Shul. Dual memberships declined, and so did shared events. During the late 1970s and 1980s, Rabbi Schur’s short-term memory began slipping, gradually at first, then uncomfortably so. During services, he repeated a prayer, unaware it had already been read. The medical diagnosis was Alzheimer’s disease. In keeping with his candid nature, the rabbi publicly discussed his ailment. As Alzheimer’s robbed him of memory, his openness reminded the community of the articulate way he had shed light on social issues. Schur became rabbi emeritus in 1986 and in 1988 moved into a permanent care facility. He died February 5, 1994.

Ralph D. Mecklenburger, 1984–

The congregation deserves praise for the sensitive way it handled Rabbi Schur’s decline. In 1984, Ralph Mecklenburger, 37, was hired with the understanding that he was nominally second-in-command to the ailing rabbi. If things worked out, Mecklenburger would replace Schur in two years when Schur reached retirement age. “The intent was for me to take over, but to maintain Bob’s dignity in the process.” Patience and a smooth transition marked Mecklenburger’s initial years at Beth-El as he worked alongside a fading icon. Politically, the new rabbi was as liberal as the old. He expanded the civil-rights agenda to encompass feminism and gay rights. He easily assumed the civic mantle, helping the United Way set priorities and the school district negotiate a magnet school controversy. From the pulpit, he delivered masterful eulogies as well as stimulating sermons relating Biblical events to current events. Schur introduced Mecklenburger to his closest colleagues, a liberal ministerial clique called the Cattle Country Clergy. Mecklenburger fit comfortably into the mix that included clergyman Nehemiah Davis of Mount Pisgah Baptist Church, Robert Pennybacker at University Christian, Terry Boggs at St. Matthew’s Lutheran, Barry Bailey at First United Methodist, and Warner Bailey at Ridgelea Presbyterian. Mecklenburger also followed Schur as an adjunct faculty member at TCU’s Brite Divinity School.

Regrettably, the new rabbi differed from the old rabbi. Mecklenburger was less classically Reform, quite inclined to bridge differences with neighboring Ahavath Shalom and emphasize what the denominations had in common. The new rabbi wore a tallit over his rabbinic robe. He did not wear a yarmulke but, unlike Rabbi Schur, was not offended by those who chose to do so at the Temple. Rabbi Schur would not perform intermarriages. He required non-Jewish partners to convert offspring as Jews and if they or their families were Temple members. Schur would not allow a non-Jewish parent to sit on the bimah for a child’s bar or bat mitzvah. Mecklenburger did, reasoning that the congregation had second-class members.

The initial push for sending students to Israel through a community scholarship program (which has since expanded) came from Mecklenburger. So too did the creation of the Tarrant County Jewish University, a curriculum of non-credit classes utilizing scholars within our midst. He served with energy and patience on the building committee and delighted in the fact that the B’nai Jeshurun synagogue was less than a mile from his home.

Early in his tenure, Mecklenburger suggested bringing a cantor to Beth-El for a weekend. The Temple board’s reaction was, “Reform Jews don’t do that.” Today there is a widely shared hunger for cantorial music, increased chanting of Torah portions, guest cantors during the High Holy Days, and a “Cantor” sign on an office door in the Temple’s administrative wing. “No one remembers that this was ever controversial,” the rabbi remarked. In a similar vein, the board once declined to spend endowment funds to commission a ketubah, a Jewish marriage certificate, reasoning again that “Reform Jews don’t do that.” Mecklenburger solicited a donation and commissioned Later, the first exhibit in the new Temple’s boardroom featured ketubot, and no one regarded it as a return to Orthodoxy.

Reflecting on his first 18 years at Beth-El, the rabbi observed: “I have very gradually led the congregation into the mainstream of contemporary Reform Judaism, which is more welcoming or warm to tradition.” Amen.