

RABBI EDGAR E. SISKIN - Head Rabbi at NSCI 1947-1972

By Ellen (Katz) Block

This article briefly summarizes Rabbi Siskin's background and sets his 25 years as our rabbi within the framework of developments in society and at NSCI. He was an extremely intelligent, scholarly, and complex man and served our congregation during a time of great change in the U.S., our local community, and the congregation itself.



Following the termination of Rabbi Charles Shulman in 1947 over the “hot” issue of the time - Zionism - the NSCI Pulpit Committee embarked on a lengthy and thorough search for a new permanent rabbi. Having investigated and interviewed some 40 candidates, on November 28, 1947, the committee unanimously recommended to the Board of Trustees that Rabbi Edgar Elias Siskin be hired for our congregation. They described him as “41 years of age, a graduate of Hebrew Union College (class of 1929) with a PhD from Yale where he is an Associate Professor of Anthropology, 3 years military service as a Chaplain in the Marine Corps and Rabbi for the past 17 years of the venerable Reform Congregation (Mishkan Israel) in New Haven.”

Indeed, Edgar Siskin's background was accurately expressed by the committee, but encompassed so much more. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on September 14, 1907, young Edgar attended school and spent his childhood in Portsmouth, England, prior to moving with his family to the United States in 1921. A beautiful profile of Rabbi Siskin, well worth reading, entitled *The Road to Glencoe*, written in 1958 by NSCI congregant and professional author, Harry Bernard, in celebration of the tenth year of Rabbi Siskin's service at North Shore Congregation Israel, details important influences in young Edgar's life. First and foremost, was Edgar's strong positive relationship with his father, Hyman, who was primarily a cantor but also an orthodox rabbi. Hyman's passion for music – both liturgical and secular – were transmitted to his son who later not only used his musical knowledge as a cantor while serving as chaplain in the Marine Corps but also became a “cognoscenti” as Bernard puts it, of jazz, at one time even serving on the Board of Directors of the Newport Jazz Festival. Hyman, who had been born in Lithuania moved first to what is now Latvia, then to Scotland, and, a year after Edgar's birth, to England where he served the congregation at the prestigious orthodox Portsmouth Synagogue, founded in 1747. Edgar “grew up” in this synagogue, witnessing the “whole range of religious ceremonies, observances and customs as practiced by Jewry all the year round.” In addition to music, Hyman also gave his young son daily lessons in Hebrew. At first, Edgar attended public school, but he was then enrolled at The Portsmouth Grammar School, one of the finest schools in the south of England. Edgar's prodigious intelligence and his knowledge of Latin, French, chemistry, math, history, classics, and rhetoric were such that when he arrived in the U.S. with his family, he was able to skip several grades.

Having been told that there was demand for English clerics in America, Hyman, with his wife, Dora, Edgar, and Edgar's two younger sisters, arrived in the U.S. in January 1921. Opportunities did not immediately present themselves, so the family settled on Chicago's South Side. An opening was finally available at the Hebrew Protective Association in Joliet.

When Edgar began attending high school, first in Chicago, and then Joliet, the schools did not know in what grade to place him as he was so ahead of his fellow students despite his young age. He had been a good cricket player in England which he now converted to a love of baseball learning all the baseball

statistics of every player in the major leagues. Fellow students described him as a good athlete, a person with a sense of humor; he was well liked and graduated in June 1922, as the youngest student, age 14, ever to have graduated from Joliet Township High School. In England, Edgar had been considering a career in medicine but a chance meeting and, ultimately, a friendship between Hyman and Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon, the noted Reform Rabbi at Temple Mizpah on the North Side of Chicago, resulted in Edgar's studying with Rabbi Cohon for a year while also attending classes at Crane Junior College. The following year, Edgar entered an Advanced Class at Hebrew Union College while simultaneously continuing his studies at the University of Cincinnati. Descriptions of Edgar at this time were "great baseball player," "expert at ping-pong," "quick to laugh," part of a (semi-rebellious) and jaunty group. He was an excellent student known for his ability to elucidate complex theological issues and the person to whom fellow students turned to for counsel and advice.

Although he was ordained at the age of 21, Edgar's path was not clear even to himself and there were ambivalences underlying the way forward. By happenstance, an opening for a rabbi became available at one of the oldest Reform synagogues in the U.S., Congregation Mishkan Israel in New Haven, Connecticut where he was first sent as a visiting rabbi and then offered a permanent position. He stayed for 17 years during which time he also obtained a doctorate in Anthropology from Yale, mentored by no less than the revered anthropologist Edward Sapir, one of the most important figures in the development of anthropology and linguistics who himself had a deep interest in religion as a cultural force. This time in Edgar's life merged his interests in the American West (he published a major article on "The Impact of the Peyote Cult Upon Shamanism Among the Washo Indians, 1941), religion as a cultural issue and a topic which would intrigue him all his life - acculturation/assimilation. Another, later major publication was "The Impact of American Culture Upon the Jew" (1952).

When Edgar Siskin arrived, North Shore Congregation Israel, which consisted of 813 families, was the only Reform Jewish congregation between Chicago and Waukegan. It had its own building on Vernon Avenue in Glencoe. Weekly worship services were held at the Temple, but High Holiday services were held at New Trier High School due to lack of space at the Temple. Benjamin Landsman was our Cantor although he was not visible on the pulpit but "hidden" behind the dais. Religious school met on Saturday mornings and Sunday mornings. Hebrew classes were offered but there was no Hebrew School per se. The congregation used the Union Prayer Book.

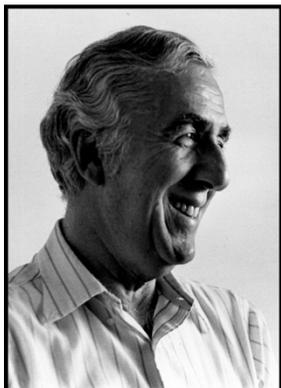
It is important to understand that Reform Judaism, initiated in 18th century Germany by Moses Mendelssohn and advanced by Isaac Mayer Wise, was started in response to both a need for internal changes that would make it easier for Jews to maintain their practice and a need to be more like their non-Jewish neighbors. Whereas in Orthodox Judaism, a certain level of ritual knowledge was expected and assumed for constituents, Reform Judaism "reformed" or even abandoned aspects of traditional Orthodox Judaism, which in some ways resulted in the understanding that the Rabbi would serve as the safeguard of those sacraments and practices that were deemed worth retaining. While we do not have at hand exactly how Rabbi Siskin saw his role in the congregation within the framework of Classical Reform Judaism, what is known is that he was clearly its religious leader, perhaps, because of this, being perceived by some as somewhat "above" his congregants. Participation in services, as we experience it at NSCI today, was not the norm. Most people with whom we spoke remember Edgar as being "remote" from his congregants, austere in demeanor and authoritative in his leadership. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the description put forth by Harry Bernard on the occasion of Rabbi Siskin's tenth anniversary at NSCI mentioned previously.

Some of Rabbi Siskin's seeming aloofness may have been due to a conflict between how he perceived Judaism should be practiced and what he observed taking place among the Temple membership. Jack Yehoshua Berger, an architect with a master's degree in Architectural History, writing in a blog published October 2, 2017 in *The Times of Israel*, describes his first encounter with Rabbi Siskin when he attended the Bar Mitzvahs at NSCI of friends from Camp Menomonee. "For some reason, I took an immediate dislike to the rabbi, Edgar Siskin. At that time in my life, rabbis in general were not high on my list of favorite people...Going to bar mitzvahs was worth it because of the extravagant parties. The services were pretty boring."

Many years later, spending an increasing amount of time in Jerusalem, Berger met Rabbi Siskin through a mutual acquaintance, and they stayed in friendly contact. He learned that Siskin had been disenchanted by the synagogue's lay leaders as well as by frustrating experiences with several of the congregants. Siskin recalled that many Jews at the "social summit on the Chicago North Shore belonged to the Reform temple, which they rarely attended and to the Jewish country club (Lake Shore) which they frequented faithfully, some would say religiously..." Recollecting a discussion with Rabbi Siskin in which the latter explained that when he studied anthropology at Yale, he was influenced by the noted anthropologist Alfred Kroeber on the role of acculturation in the unfolding of history, Berger describes Siskin's book, *American Jews, What Next?* as a must-read commentary on the future of American Jewry as grappling with that very issue of enculturation.

Siskin commented that in his first Bible class at NSCI, no one could identify Joshua, Moses' successor. The membership, he said, was "Jewishly illiterate." Additionally, there was too much drinking, poker playing for extravagant stakes and unseemly behavior. "They (members) were at once indulging their American day-dreams and discarding the millennial moral baggage of the Jew." The Jewish North Shore country clubs all served food forbidden by Jewish dietary laws, held Christmas and Easter parties and were open on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. One of Rabbi Siskin's greatest concerns was expressed thusly, "It is ironic that having flourished in a free society, Jews may be threatened, not by anti-Semitism, but by the inertia and indifference which are the consequences of acculturation." Assimilation had seemingly reached an unacceptable apex for Rabbi Siskin.

Berger again quotes words from Siskin's book regarding Yom Kippur. "Conservative Jews will pray less ardently, partly in English, with considerable emotional restraint. Most will probably fast. Reform Jews will pray decorously, almost wholly in English, going home during the noon prayer-break, often to watch baseball playoffs, returning to the synagogue for the Memorial Service. Comparatively few will fast." Siskin further commented "Like most Reform congregations, ours had stripped away most of the ritual integuments of Judaism." He said he rarely saw a Jewish book and certainly even less, a mezuzah on a front door. What a formidable task Siskin had to merge the ambition of his congregants to assimilate with their stated desire to maintain identification as Jews and to balance that struggle with his own more traditional and classical interpretation of Judaism.



It is important, however, to set the years of Rabbi Siskin's tenure at NSCI within the political, economic, cultural, and societal changes taking place during this period of U.S. history. In the 25 years of Edgar Siskin's service as our Rabbi (1947-1972), the United States moved from the aftermath of World War II through both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The 1950s were marked by a period of tremendous development – suburban housing, the glorification of a homemaker role for women, new cars, interstate highways, schools, the growth of consumer goods, the beginning of the Cold War, anti-Communism, McCarthyism and the stirrings of the Civil Rights Movement not least of which were the landmark, "Brown vs. the Board of Education" case in

1954 and the infamous refusal of Rosa Parks to give up her seat on the bus in 1955. There was an increase in military spending which fueled new technologies including computers. Unemployment and inflation were low; wages were high. Pop culture – Elizabeth Taylor, Marlon Brando, Elvis Presley, Chuck Barry, Buddy Holly - dominated the airwaves and movie screens. People had money to spend....and a record number of babies were born in the U.S. - about 4 million each year during the 50s.

The 1960s began with the election of John F. Kennedy as a charismatic leader for adventurous times and ambitious dreams. Radicalism grew among student activists and the Viet Nam War divided the nation. The Civil Rights struggle defined much of the 60s, and the assassinations of President Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were events in stark contrast to the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

NSCI was, of course, not immune to these changes presenting Rabbi Siskin with enormous challenges as our spiritual and moral leader. The “flight to the suburbs” and the dream of an idyllic suburban life resulted in a resounding increase in the membership of the congregation. By 1955, membership had increased to 1565 families; by 1960, it was nearly 2000. Activity at the temple was non-stop. The Men’s Club, Sisterhood, Couples Club, Youth Group, a Contemporary Club for older young adults, an Alumni group, a Seniors Group, and a PTA were all in full swing with various events and undertakings. Cantor Landsman began an adult choir. Men’s Club sponsored a bowling league as well as a golf tournament and an annual Father-child dinner and continued their educational and volunteer activities throughout the North Shore. Sisterhood opened a Book and Gift Shop, hosted and directed receptions and communal events, held fashion shows, and sponsored nationally recognized antique shows. Congregational Seder services were held. There were interfaith services and community Roundtable discussions with Jews and Christians as well as participation in a Glencoe community Thanksgiving service. The North Shore Forum, mentioned in a previous bulletin article, featuring such renown personages as Eleanor Roosevelt and Governor Adlai E. Stevenson as well as several more controversial figures. Friday night services were extended through the summer for the first time; double shift consecutive services (A-K and L-Z) were held during high holidays with 750 to 1000 people attending each service. There were dances, plays and on-going discussions about whether head coverings should be permitted in the sanctuary (it was not encouraged but it was decided that no one would be turned away for wearing a head covering) or whether card playing should be allowed at the Temple (the ultimate decision was that there should not be card playing as long as the Temple housed the synagogue). Dr. Siskin led the first Adult Bible Study class in early March 1952. Religious school attendance, which had expanded to include both kindergarten and post confirmation, grew from 650 students in 1949 to an enrollment of 1621 students in 1956 with 72 classes, 1 post-confirmation class and 1 Hebrew class, requiring “creative” use of classrooms as the number of students exceeded our available space. There were Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs but, more commonly, huge confirmation classes consisting upwards of 200 students.

In 1951-52, our facilities on Vernon Avenue were enlarged and revamped and this building program was almost immediately followed by new plans to expand again by purchasing the houses behind the synagogue. Ultimately, in 1961, the Lady Esther Estate on Sheridan Road owned by Syma Cohen Busiel, the co-founder of Lady Esther cosmetics, became available and the Board of Trustees decided to purchase that property and build an entirely new facility at our present location.

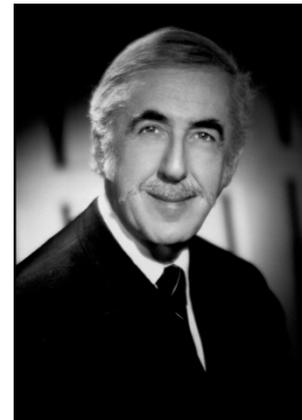
Amidst all the tremendous growth and the feverish activity that accompanied it, Rabbi Siskin was dealing with many important issues of the times, such as interfaith marriage, the place of ritual in Reform Judaism, the reintroduction of traditional symbols and customs, the inclusion of Jewish music during services and the significance of Hebrew as a unifying element in Jewish communities and its place in Reform ideology. Dr. Siskin was also pursuing his personal interests in music and anthropology and

playing an important and visible role in Reform Judaism, presiding, for example, over a session of the 69th Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1958 at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. He was at one time President of the Chicago Board of Rabbis and of the Chicago Association of Reform Rabbis.

Until 1957, Rabbi Siskin had been functioning without an assistant. The Board of Trustees finally decided someone was needed to help him and a motion was passed to hire an Assistant Rabbi who would serve for not more than 2 years. Subsequently, Rabbi Raymond Weiss began as Assistant Rabbi from 1957-1959, followed by a student rabbi, Stephen Arnold 1959-1960, Rabbi Robert Samuels from 1960-1962 and Rabbi Harold Kudan who, the rules having been changed, stayed for ten years, 1962-1972. All these influential and scholarly teachers went on to distinguished careers themselves.

Rabbi Siskin, however, was clearly the spiritual leader of the congregation and a significant presence in the community along with his wife, Lillian, and their three children – Jonathan, Joshua, and Sharon. Dr. Siskin's sermons covered a wide breadth of subject matter. On October 19th, 1951, he spoke on "The Mystery of the Dead Sea Scrolls" which had been discovered a mere four years before. On January 20, 1956, his topic was "Do You Live According to Your Means?" On February 8, 1957, his sermon was titled "Are Race Relations Improving in America Today?" In 1970, he was still sermonizing on a topic of great concern to him as he spoke of "What It Means to Be a Jew."

Crucially, that very subject of Jewish identification and its actual practice had arisen ten years previous when a developer in neighboring Deerfield planned construction of large new homes which would be available to African Americans. For a brief time, Deerfield was featured in the national news as an intense debate began about racial integration, property values, and the good faith of community officials and builders. Dr. Siskin spoke to this issue of discrimination *on which the congregation was very divided*, in a sermon on January 8, 1960, as being not only against national U.S. law but also the antithesis of a Judeo-Christian ethic. "Throughout our history (as Jews) we have known discrimination and oppression. How can we fail to support the victims of discrimination and oppression?" He was adamant that our religion demands justice and righteousness for all.



In 1972, having served 25 years as NSCI's spiritual leader, Rabbi Siskin retired from the pulpit though not without some controversy over who would become his successor. He remained as Rabbi Emeritus for some time, continuing to preach the High Holiday services, before subsequently making Aliyah to Israel and spending the rest of his life there. He died in 2001 at the age of 94 and is buried in Israel. Our NSCI Archives has some material, but the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati holds most of Rabbi Siskin's numerous scholarly writings, including published articles, correspondence, sermons, notes (of particular interest those on the Arab-Israel War in 1973), eulogies and prayers.

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