

## The Early Days

By Bob Kaplon

I will attempt to give a picture of Temple Sinai in the early days. Please understand that I was ten years old when Temple Sinai was formed, so some things I remember, some things I learned by asking questions of friends, and some I learned by reading old Temple newsletters. Temple Sinai was very important to my family. It was not uncommon for my Mom and Dad to have discussions about the Temple in the evenings and many things have stayed in my memory.

### The Temple's Birth

Temple Sinai began as an idea in the late 1951, and became a reality in 1952. In early 1952, six men drove to Plainfield to see its new reform Temple. I do not know the names of the men who made this trip. What we do know, from the first newsletter, is that the first president of the Temple and all the original officers were chosen by lottery. That is how Arthur Schwarz became the Temple's first President.

The first members were encouraged to be "charter members". The fee for that privilege was \$25. John Schwarz, Arthur Schwarz's son, believes (and I sort of remember, too) that there were less than twenty charter members. Among those charter members, some were Maidie and Mort Kaplon, Jerome and Rita Kaplon, Lewis and Mildred Lyon, Millicent and Fred Metzger, Maurice and Fan Siegel, Maurice and Judy Mayer, Arthur and Carolyn Schwarz, Eudice Shapiro, Dr. and Mrs. Irving Skeist, Martha and Ben Messing, Jean and Sheldon Ellowitch, Adele and Abe Bloomstein, and Emma and Harold Kreps.

We have the original letters to the Union with regard to the name "Temple Sinai". The name was selected from a list of names by a mail in a vote of the members of the congregation. How fitting a name, given that the City of Summit was called Turkey Hill in the 1700s, as it is the first mountain range west of NYC. My Dad was on the naming committee, too! The original dues for a family were \$75, plus \$3 for the Union. The Temple's original committees were as follows:

*Finance:* Fred Metzger, chair and Dr. Leonard Berman, Harold Kreps, Maurice Mayer, Henrietta Siegel, Joe Stamler, Matthew Ziegner. Executive Committee selected by lot: Arthur Schwarz, *President*; Maurice Mayer Mrs. Irving Skeist; Joe Stamler, *Vice Presidents*. Abe Bloomstein, *Treasurer*, Fan Siegel, *Secretary*; Eve Mautner, *Corresponding Secretary*. The balance of the executive committee was Shel Ellowitch, Oscar Rozett, Ira Rosenberg, Jack Behrman, Harold Kreps, Matthew Zeigner and all committee chairs to include Mrs. Maurice Mayer, *Religious School. Ritual Committee*, Eudice Shapiro. *Flower and Tribute*, Maidie Kaplon.

### Services

The first Temple newsletter states the inaugural service was held on March 7, 1952 at 8:30 pm. I believe that the 8:30 pm start time was selected so that the large number of our members who commuted to New York could eat and relax before services. The first service was led by Rabbi Daniel Davis, director of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues. With a few guest Rabbis in between, Rabbi Kloner soon served as our rabbi for a longer period of time. Rabbi Bial followed Rabbi Kloner in fall of 1954.

Friday night services were a family experience in those days. The late start time did not stop the complete family from attending. The community then was not much different than we are today. The masthead of the Temple's newsletter identified Temple Sinai as a "*Liberal Congregation for the Chatham, Summit, Madison, Millburn, New Providence, and Springfield Area*". From the very early days, women were allowed on the bema. Hats and gloves were the uniform of the day for ladies, and, of course, all men and boys wore a coat and tie. Somehow, even with these requirements, we all attended services almost every Friday night. A good portion of the service was in English, including many of the songs. I believe the first prayer book was the Union Prayer Book. Our Hebrew prayers and songs almost never changed so everyone could participate very quickly, even those not proficient in Hebrew.

Services were held at the Community Church on the corner of Waldron and Springfield Avenues. The Community Church was a Unitarian Church led by Dr. Jacob Trapp. Dr. Trapp was a true friend of Temple Sinai. For each service, the Church had to be converted to a synagogue. On Friday afternoons my father and I would move the portable Ark and Ten Commandments into their place, and lay out all the books for the congregation. One time the Ten Commandments fell from the top of the Ark and I just happened to be in the right place to catch them before they shattered.

To help convert the church to a synagogue, Mr. Del Duca, who owned the Stahl Del Duca flower shop, came and covered most of the Christian symbols with flowers. Yes, right from the beginning flowers and music were a part of Temple Sinai services. Stahl Del Duca remained the Temple's florist for many years, eventually becoming the florist of choice at 208 Summit Avenue. The Flower and Tribute Fund was run by my mother, Maidie Kaplon, for many years. A review of the financials shows that the Flower and Tribute fund was a constant source of cash for the Temple.

Lewis Lyon, my great uncle, was the head usher. I still picture him walking the aisles with his finger to his lips indicating quiet. The sanctuary was not a social hall. The organ began about 8 minutes before services, signaling that it was time to get in a spiritual mood. Sermons had a time limit. I remember that there were heated discussions about what the Rabbi's attire should be for Friday night services. Over time the Rabbi wore tallit but never a kippah. Every Friday night the Rabbi removed the Torah from the ark and read the weekly portion. He almost always related that week's parshah to the current day. The service always concluded with the benediction both preached by the Rabbi and sung by the choir.

This is how we learned what was written in the Torah. We had no Saturday morning services. Many of our early members came from the JCC in Summit (my grandfather, Abe Kaplon, was one of the founders of the JCC) or the other conservative synagogues in the area. B'nai Jeshurun was not in Livingston in the early 50's. Temple Sinai was considered very liberal in the Reform Jewish movement. I was told that it was not unusual for Temple Sinai to do things completely different from the way that the Union recommended that things be done. I do not remember Rabbi Bial ever wearing a kippah. It is very clear in the early newsletters and from my memory that Temple Sinai was formed to get away from many conservative and orthodox rituals.

From our very first Temple Sinai service in 1952, it was customary for the Rabbi and Cantor to exit the service first and stand at the door to greet all those that attended the service in a receiving line. Rabbi Bial always attended the Oneg where the congregation discussed his sermon and the Torah portion in depth. I remember my father not always agreeing with the Rabbi. This led Rabbi Bial to quote some of my father's views in one of his books. Rabbi Bial published twelve books. The royalties went to Temple Sinai, not to him. Many of you probably don't know that Rabbi Bial had a wonderful voice and was an expert not only in Jewish liturgy, but also with respect to opera.

The Oneg was held in a separate building behind the Church. The Oneg was always very formal. Women sat at each end of a long table and poured the coffee and tea from silver serving pieces. All the cakes and cookies were served on silver trays, on white paper doilies. "Healthy choices" were not an option and, yes, we used white table cloths and china—no plastic. Children were served punch from a punch bowl made with ginger ale and orange or lemon sherbet.

## **Early Celebrations**

The first High Holy Day services at the Temple took place in the fall of 1952 at the Unitarian Church. As the congregation grew, its services were moved to the annex of the Central Presbyterian Church across from the Summit Library. They remained there until 1958. Again, we called upon Mr. Del Duca to cover the crosses and other Christian things with flowers. One of our early Cantors, Norman Summer, later became the cantor to Temple B'nai Jeshurun in Livingston until he retired.

In 1952 Donald Schwarz, the son of our President, was the first student to be confirmed. His brother reports that he had a shortened study program that first year. My sister, Cookie Kaplon, and John Schwarz were the next group to be confirmed in May, 1953. They studied the full year. The next group was Aaron Messing and Kay Spitzer in May, 1955. We have many of the pictures of the confirmation classes. My sister, Ann, is in the 1956 picture and I am in the 1958 class photo. An article in one of the early newsletters discusses the importance of Confirmation in Reform Judaism over the Bar Mitzvah. Thus, many of us did not have a Bar Mitzvah, but most of us were confirmed.

The first young person to become a Bar Mitzvah was Michael Behrman on October 4, 1952, the second was Laurence Kamm on Oct 18th and the third was Aaron Messing. The first Bat Mitzvah was Ruth Marks on October 4, 1958. Aaron Messing remained an active part of Temple Sinai. Both he and his wife Virginia served on the Temple Board. Aaron recently passed in October 2016.

The first wedding was Ike Gross's daughter, Nancy, to Robert Dunn in the winter of 1953/1954 at the Unitarian Church. My sister Cookie Kaplon (Feinberg) was also married at Temple Sinai in 1960 at 208 Summit Avenue.

In the Temple's first year, we had a congregational Seder. The Seder was held at the YWCA (now called The Connection). My mom was chair of that event. She also made all the matzo balls, I am told. Again, the Seder was largely in English so everyone could participate. I remember big round tables and am sure most of the congregation was in attendance. I also believe that most of the food was prepared by the members of the congregation and not catered. We have donated to the Temple a copy of the Haggadah that was used in 1952. Some members of my family still use it today.

## **Other Activities**

From the first year, we had a Sunday religious school. The classes were initially held at the YMCA. The Y was a wonderful place for religious school because it was easy for my friends and me to find so many places to hide. Later we liked 208 Summit Avenue for the same reason. The old house had so many back stairwells and small empty rooms where we could hide.

Eudice Shapiro was the first chair of the Ritual Committee. In the early days, the Ritual Committee played a central role in the Temple's services. It was they – and not the clergy – who set the general tone of our services. Many conservative rituals were purposely left out of the Temple services. Robes, kippot, tallit, and service length all had to be approved by the Ritual Committee. In the early days, men did not wear tallit or kippot. Spare kippot and tallit were kept out of sight, but were available for visitors. Some members left the Temple because it was not conservative enough.

In many respects Eudice Shapiro was the matriarch of Temple Sinai during its early years. Eudice donated the piano to Temple Sinai when we moved to 208 Summit Avenue. Eventually my mother took over the Ritual Committee, while continuing her work on the Flower and Tribute Fund. She kept the job for years and when the time came, I remember, my Mom hand-picking Harry Gardner as her replacement in order to prevent the Ritual committee from rubber stamping what the Rabbi wanted. Mr. Gardner's wife, Dorothy, took over the role of remembrance. Mr. Gardner and his brother were officers in the NJ National Guard. That proved to be important to me, as Mr. Gardner helped me find an opening at the National Guard during the Vietnam conflict. Yes, I had real ammunition during the Newark riots in the late 60's

Mildred Lyon, my great aunt, was responsible for our Book of Life. It is interesting to read in the Book the names of the deceased's spouse, father, mother, and children as well as where they are buried. It also states when they were born as well as when they died. Mildred kept those records in a small notebook for at least 15 years. Our original Book of Life was donated by Millicent and Fred Metzger and her brother, Joe Stamler. Each page was handwritten and the book was stored near the sanctuary, under glass. In the 70s, the book was changed to the Jack Behrman Memorial, which hangs in our sanctuary to right of the bema. Each week a plaque is inserted and is lit for each individual who appears in the Book of Life and those

who have passed away after the Jack Behrman Memorial was established. The donation to be listed in the original book was \$100. Today, the donation to be listed in the Jack Behrman Memorial is \$300.

Jean Ellowich was the first chair of the Women's Association. The Temple has her early correspondence to the Union and many minutes from the meetings in the early days. The Board approved the Women's Association in February 1955. The Temple also has the cookbooks, one created in the 60s and another in the 80s, which the Women's Association sold to raise money. Like the Flower and Tribute Fund, the Women's Association was a constant source of funds to our Temple

### **The Move to 208 Summit Avenue**

In late 1955 the Temple's leadership decided that it was time to purchase its own building. The Temple's leadership chose the current property after looking at many pieces of property around the City of Summit because it was set back, and unless one looked closely, one would never know it was a place of worship. The house was purchased from the Meissen family, but it had previously been owned by Christy Todd Whitman's grandfather. The Temple paid about \$55,000 for the property and another \$10,000 for its alteration and took on a \$30,000 mortgage in May 1956 from Albert and Edith Meissen.

The original sanctuary at our present location was located where current lounge is currently located. I believe it could seat 98 people. Our original Community Church Ten Commandments and Ark were installed in that sanctuary. The original wicker chairs that we used in that sanctuary are on the third floor of the present building and we still have the original portable Ark. Initially, confirmation continued to take place at the Unitarian Church as our own space was not large enough. The religious school moved from the YMCA to our "new" building in 1957. The original Ten Commandments remain in use in our Religious School. I found them by accident when visiting Patti Kahn in her office. They are used to teach our younger students today.

The move to our new building facilitated several positive developments for the Temple, and the Temple flourished. The Men's Club was formed in 1959; one year after Temple Sinai joined the Interfaith Bowling League of Summit. The sanctuary and reception area were named "Lieberman Hall" in 1960. That same year other area churches and synagogues challenged Temple Sinai to a softball game. We had very little signage in the early years. The buildout for the sanctuary and Lieberman Hall was designed Ludlow and Jefferson, a local integrated Summit architectural firm. My father was co-chairman of this project.

It quickly became very apparent that our new home was not big enough. The sanctuary was too small and we lacked enough class rooms for the religious school. Another building fund was started to add an addition to the "Todd" house.

Mrs. Billets lived on the top floor of the building with her family for many years. They were immigrants from Latvia. She was our caretaker and everything else. She was a true friend to Temple Sinai. Her husband did most of the repairs to the "old house." The Temple became their extended family. Temple Sinai had some chances to buy additional property both behind the current building and on the left side of the building (Doctor Stevenson's home) but in both cases decided not to do so because the Temple did not want to get too big.

### **Torahs**

Temple Sinai currently has five Torahs.

The first was donated by the family of Eudice Shapiro in the memory of her husband Max. Max and his brother were the owners of one of the largest factoring companies which they sold to Manufactures Hanover Bank. The Torah's silver was dedicated on May, 30 1952. Our newsletter observed:

It is most unusual that a new and a modestly small Temple such as ours should be honored with so important a gift as the Torah silver given in memory of the late Mr. Max J. Shapiro by members of his

family. The ornaments were made by hand by Mr. William J Meyers, the well-known craftsman in gold and silver who is also responsible for making our beautiful Kiddush cup. The theme for the set is the olive branch with the explanation from Mr. Meyers that it was the dove that brought the olive branch to Noah after the deluge as a symbol of peace between God and man. We will leave the rest of the explanation to Rabbi Pilchik to give to us on the night of November 7<sup>th</sup>. Permission has been given to "The Union" to borrow the ornaments after the ceremonies, in order that they may be displayed in the window of the House of Living Judaism, on Fifth Avenue side of their building at the corner of 65<sup>th</sup> Street.

Another Torah was donated by Morris Messing in honor of his parents in 1957. Its silver was donated by Benjamin and Martha Messing in 1958. The newsletter marked this event by announcing:

At our final service for the year June 13<sup>th</sup> [1958], the beautiful Torah silver, presented by Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Messing, will be dedicated. The exquisite breastplate and crowns are the final work of the late William B Meyers, of Newark, who is recognized as one of the finest creative artists in silver in the history of American Judaism.

Our third Torah was donated by Bob and Shirley Max and is often referred to as the "small Torah" as it smaller than the others. Mr. Max was our seventh President. He recently sent me the following:

Shirley and I donated the small Torah to Temple Sinai in memory of Norman Scott Max, our 8 -year -old son who was killed in an accident. All the silver was created by sculptor Moshe Zabari a sculptor at the Jewish Museum in New York.

The fourth Torah was given to Temple Sinai by my mother and father, Maidie and Morton Kaplon, in memory of J. Jerome Kaplon, Mort's' brother, and sister-in-law Rita Kaplon, Morton Kaplon, who was the Temple's fourth President and instrumental in the selection of 208 Summit Avenue. It is the one with the modern design pattern. The Summit *Herald* reported:

The ritual silver was specially designed by Moshe Zabari, of the Jewish Museum of NYC, and it is being lent to the museum this summer for an exhibition of Jewish art.

The back story of our fifth Torah is unusual. It was found by a Temple member at a Unitarian Church in Boston in 1982. That church gave it to Temple Sinai that same year in celebration of the Temple's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This Torah is believed to have been made in Germany, and to have been about 200 years old when it was given to the Temple in 1982. Rabbi Shlomo Koenig spent three months repairing it, at a cost of \$10,000. Aaron and Virginia Messing found the silver pieces for this Torah in Brooklyn. This Torah's repair and silver were funded by donations from Temple members.

### **Kiddush Cup**

The Kiddush cup still in use today was donated by Max Heller, who was the father of Carolyn Schwarz (wife of Arthur Schwarz), in memory of his wife. The cup was from the same designer who created the silver for our first two Torahs, William J. Meyers.

### **Early Fundraising**

The treasurer reported that the Temple received the following non-cash gifts in its first year.

Dr. & Mrs. Morton Kaplon	Portable Ark
Dr. & Mrs. Morton Kaplon	Candle Sticks
Mr. & Mrs. Peter Mayer	Daily Prayer Books
Mr. & Mrs. Herbert Gorfinkle	Holiday Prayer Books

Mr. & Mrs. M. Siegel & Henrietta Siegel    All our office supplies  
Mrs. C.D. Kreps    Chanukah Menorah

It wouldn't surprise me if this list is incomplete. I remember my Mom telling me that in the early years when the Temple was in need of something, someone usually promptly stepped up to provide what was needed.

In the early years one of the ways that the Temple raised money was to produce events that would attract the wider community. These programs included:

1958	Chicago Opera Ballet	
1958	Micha Elman	
1959	Marion Anderson	Patron Ticket: \$10, Reg. Tickets \$5
1960	Micha Elman	
1961	Jan Pearce	
1972	A Week of Jewish Culture	Cooking; films; Isaac Bashevis Singer
1974	A Week of Jewish Culture	Headliner: Sam Levinson

### **Conclusion**

To see the changes over six decades has been interesting. Though time and tastes have moved on, I continue to admire much about the spirit and tone of early Temple Sinai. It is interesting to consider which changes have constituted progress.

While music is still a key to our current services, Hebrew is far more prevalent in our services than it was in the beginning. These days it's relatively exceptional for there to be flowers on the bema. Back then, we read our prayer book from left to right, not right to left. We almost always sang the same familiar melodies. Our founders' preference that men not wear yamikas remains the norm.

Some historic customs that were purposely left out of the service years ago have returned. Like years ago, women still play a key role within our Temple. Our dress code has moved toward casual attire. Financial issues were, are and will always be, a concern. Our name, location and commitment to liberal Judaism appear likely to remain the same. Everything else will continue to evolve.

As we think about the next 65 years I can only hope that some of us will consider joining me in contributing to the endowment fund started in May 1985 or think of making Temple Sinai part of their estate planning endeavors. We need to do what we can to lighten the burden that will fall on our current and future membership.