

M'VAKEIR CHOLIM  
On the 170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
November 18, 2016

Shabbat shalom!

Or as they used to say when everyone in our congregation spoke German, *a guten shabbos!*

I would like to thank Montgomery historian Mary Ann Neeley for inspiring this sermon. She spoke here a couple of weeks ago about some of the early Jews in Montgomery, prompting me to read up on our own early history. In doing so I came across a monograph on our early history by Leopole Young. This manuscript had been part of a time capsule that our leadership had placed into the cornerstone of our second building, on Sayer and Clayton Streets, in 1901, and opened again when we moved to our current building here more than 50 years ago. Aside from finding it interesting, when I discovered that our 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Jewish organization here in Montgomery is *this week*, I decided to share some of these stories with you. In any event, who doesn't like to celebrate an anniversary, especially when we have some cake and champagne? Herewith therefore some tidbits of our past, and I hope you find this as interesting as I have.

American Jewry had been primarily Sephardic in its early years, until the great influx began from German-speaking lands in Western Europe in the 1840's – a period that saw waves of revolution and counter-revolution from the end of the Napoleonic era right through the 1870's. By the mid-1840's Jews, mostly itinerant merchants, had begun to settle in the south. The first to settle in Montgomery was Jacob Sacerdote, who had a restaurant at the corner of Montgomery Street and Court Square. Other early settlers were Henry Isaac, who opened a small general store; Joseph Young, Josiah Weil, and two brothers named Gans.

Mary Ann Neeley described Abraham Mordecai as the first Jew, but when he settled these parts he lived 18 miles east of here, and since his mother turns out not to have been Jewish, technically he wasn't the first Jew at all.

It was in the home of Freedman Gans that the first services were held – and also the first circumcision, apparently – even before November 17, 1846 when this group and a few others agreed to form a society – the Chevra Mevaker Cholim, literally the “Society for Visiting the Sick. Other early members were Kraus, Meyer, Lehman, Gerson, Cellner, Eberhardt, Schloss and Kohn, and when they started to hold services in a rented hall –

Lyceum Hall in the Pond Building, on the corner of Dexter and Perry – Jews came from a 100-mile radius to attend, and also many Christians who were curious to see what the Hebrews were doing.

By 1849 there were enough Jews to form a congregation. On June 3 that year they called themselves Kahl Montgomery (the Community of Montgomery) and named Josiah Weil as president, with 30 members in all; their charter was approved by the city in 1852, which is the official date our congregation observes for its anniversaries.

We have a copy of our first Constitution. I would like to share with you some of its provisions:

First, attendance at certain functions was mandatory, including at services. The Constitution listed fines for violation as follows:

For non-attendance at the annual meeting, on a range from \$0.50 to \$1.00  
[Sickness or absence from the city on business were the only acceptable excuses; “absence on pleasure, as hunting and such, will not be taken as an excuse”].

Disturbing the annual meeting, on a range from \$0.50 to \$1.00.

Leaving the Annual meeting before adjournment, 50 cents.

Opening a place of business on the New Year and Day of Atonement, on a range of \$2.00 to \$20.00 or expulsion from membership.

Any member in arrears for three months would be sued in a Court of Justice.

And: the Constitution required anyone speaking at the annual meeting to do so in German.

Of course the new congregation needed a building. For seed money they turned to the greatest Jewish philanthropist of the age, Judah Touro of New Orleans, who gave the group \$2,000; they built their first building on the corner of Catoma and Church Streets, buying the property for \$2,500 and spending another \$12,000 for the building itself.

When another \$180 was needed for new carpeting, the women – calling themselves the “Ladies Chevra,” formed the first Sisterhood and made the donation – the first in a long and impressive list of projects supported by our women.

The dedication was finally held on Shabbat, March 8, 1862. Though founded Orthodox and observing traditional practices well into the 1870's, it was at that same service that a choir with organ participated in the service, the first innovation from established traditional customs.

The school was also established that year, on October 12, 1862, combining secular and Jewish education within one program – Montgomery's first Jewish Day school.

In the years that followed, our minutes show a succession of readers, ministers, teachers and rabbis. One fine gentleman named Rosenberger was rabbi, teacher, Chazan and schochet, all at the same time.

Another rabbi, James Gutheim, was a fiery Confederate patriot who refused to take the oath of loyalty to the federal government; still another was Adolph Moses who had fought as a Red Shirt under Garibaldi in the Italian liberation war.

Adolph Moses left Montgomery, by the way, to replace a rabbi in Mobile named Abraham Jaeger, because Jaeger, while still in the pulpit there, converted to Christianity and became a Southern Baptist. Jaeger explained his decision in a book and sent a copy to Rabbi Kaufman Kohler, one of the leading American rabbis and scholars; Kohler wrote back to Jaeger: "I knew when you became a Christian that you had lost your heart; now, after reading this book, I am convinced that you have also lost your mind."

And then there was Rabbi E. B. M. Browne – "Encyclopedia" Browne, called to our pulpit in 1869. He was so-called because of his extensive list of degrees, including medical doctor and lawyer. Browne was privately ordained by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who later founded the institutions of Reform Judaism, and Browne was likely the very first rabbi ordained in the United States, rather than being a rabbinic import from Europe.

Browne's resume was amazing – aside from being a rabbi and attorney, he was also a journalist and political activist; equally an authority on the Talmud and on early Christianity, and said to be even wittier than Mark Twain. He founded the south's first Jewish-interest newspaper, delivered opening prayers in both houses of Congress, served as honorary pall bearer for President Grant; helped Benjamin Harrison win the presidency, and bullied presidents McKinley, Teddy Roosevelt and Taft to establish a Jewish chaplaincy in the US military; he was honored by Sultan Abdul Hamid of the Ottoman Empire, and discussed Europe's "Jewish problem" with Pope Leo XIII. But his career ended in failure when he was falsely accused by a congregation of embezzling funds; after that he could only get work tutoring bar mitzvah students.

Our congregation followed the Orthodox custom of separate seating for men and women until 1873 when a plan was approved to put family pews in place for the members, now numbering 90 families. The following year, in July of 1874, the Reform ritual of Temple Emanuel in New York was adopted, with the proviso that hats still had to be worn during worship. More than half the officers then resigned, according to the minutes, “for satisfactory reasons.” It was in 1873 that we became charter members of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the national body of Reform congregations, and we changed our name to Temple Beth Or.

We were a young congregation in the 1870’s – with a membership in the range of 80-90 families, the religious school had as many as 137 kids enrolled, with an average attendance of 122, over 90%.

In the 1880’s the congregation experimented with a Jewish Food Festival for the first time, only they called it a Fair, which made \$3,450. In today’s dollars that would be over \$175,000.

As the congregation grew in the 1890’s, it began to look more like the congregation we have today. Ordained rabbis were engaged rather than readers, and received the exalted compensation of \$2,500 per year – and for a number of years the congregation maintained a parsonage where the rabbi could live. Temple Beth Or was able to start paying its religious school teachers, and even made charitable contributions, including as far away as an orphanage in Cleveland. One donation, \$10, was actually sent to a rabbi in St. Petersburg in Russia for, according to the minutes, “his successful efforts relative to the “Sh’chita” in Europe....” One thing the Temple had in the 1890’s that we don’t have now, however, was a professional cantor, by the name of Heilpern.

It was in the 1890’s that we also arranged the first joint Thanksgiving service – we invited a number of downtown churches to join the temple in 1899, including the First Baptist Church. We must have had a good relationship with First Baptist, because when we dedicated our second building two years later, it was their minister, Charles Stakely, who gave the invocation. Also participating in that dedication was the Grand Lodge of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Alabama.

All these many years later, we still benefit from the legacy of our founders and forebears. We have a long history of great leadership, a good balance of stability and the ability to innovate and change, members who have been involved in every aspect of our larger community, well out of proportion to our numbers, and newer members who give us a real basis on which to build our future. I am proud to serve this historic congregation, and am glad we have this opportunity to celebrate and rededicate together.