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HISTORY  
OF  
EARLY JEWISH COMMUNITY  
OF  
BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA

BY

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*A Tercentenary Project*

## *PREFACE*

The next few pages constitute a modest attempt to tell the story of the beginning of Bethlehem's Jewish community, concentrating on the early settlers and the inception of organized Jewish life in what is known today as Bethlehem and ending with the erection of the first permanent synagogue building in 1897. This project cannot be compared with books written on the history of some of the leading Jewish communities in the United States. Rabbi Joshua Trachtenberg's "Consider the Years — the Story of the Jewish Community of Easton" is a noted example. Such a volume requires years of research, checking of information and other laborious preparations. Perhaps, the future will produce such a scholarly work.

It was the forthcoming local celebration of the American Jewish Tercentenary which directed our attention to the question: "How old is Bethlehem's Jewish community? Who were some of its founders?" It was with this in mind that I seized upon the historic occasion of the Tercentenary to undertake this project. My task was complicated by the total absence of any congregational records prior to the founding of our present Community Center in 1925. I included only information which was authenticated by court records, U. S. census, city directories, newspapers and periodicals, etc. I am indebted to Rabbi Isidore Meyer, librarian of The American Jewish Historical Society, Bishop F. H. Gapp of the Moravian Archives, Miss Harriet T. Root, of the local Public Library, Mr. Guy Stroh of the Globe-Times, and Rabbi Joshua Trachtenberg of Teaneck, N. J. for their cooperation.

I received invaluable assistance from Mr. Milton Riskin, whose own research provided me with vital information, and Mr. Morris Mindlin, who helped with technical details. My sincerest appreciation to all others who contributed important data and photographs. The enthusiastic efforts of those who aided in this undertaking and the awakening of interest and pride in our past were highly gratifying.

## GENERAL HISTORY OF BETHLEHEM

No history of any Jewish community can state with certainty the date of the arrival of the first Jew. The same is true in the case of Bethlehem. It is possible that a member of our faith lived in what is now known as Bethlehem, prior to the arrival of the Moravians in 1742. A certain Isaac Martens Ysselsteyn settled on a farm in the area now occupied by the Union Station and the Bethlehem Steel Company. He came from Holland and married Rachel Bogert or Bamgart. Bishop Levering, in his "History of Bethlehem", published in 1898, refers to Ysselsteyn as "friend". Such reference indicates that he was not a Moravian, else he would be referred to as "brother."

The fact that the Ysselsteys carried the Biblical names, Isaac and Rachel, has been cause for speculation that they were of Jewish origin. The Embassy of the Netherlands in Washington informed me that the name, Rachel, is not common among Dutch Christians, while some, though not many, do carry the name Isaac. Consequently a strong possibility exists that the Ysselsteys were of Jewish birth. We know that Isaac Ysselsteyn died soon after the arrival of the Moravians and that a Moravian minister officiated at the funeral service. His widow and four of his five daughters married Moravians. However, throughout the many references to the Ysselsteyn family, there is no indication of their religious persuasion.

In any case, no member of the Jewish faith or any non-Moravian denomination resided in Bethlehem during the first century following its founding. Throughout the period between 1742 and 1845, the Moravian congregation and the Town of Bethlehem were identical. Bethlehem was founded by Count Zinzendorf on Christmas Eve of 1742. Although the Count was Lutheran, he took a great interest in the plight of the Moravians, who were victims of the religious persecution of the 18th century in Europe. The student of history will remember that following the religious wars, the Peace Treaty of Westphalia recognized only three denominations: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and the Reformed. There was no provision for religious freedom for other groups.

To help the Moravians, Count Zinzendorf established Bethlehem as a communal church society, limited to members of the Moravian group. A peculiar system "the Economy" was introduced. The inhabitants of Bethlehem and Nazareth formed an exclusive association in which a "communism" not of goods, but of labor prevailed. Such a "communism" was not binding

upon the settlers, but made participation therein dependent on the voluntary agreement of each individual. Residents, having property of their own retained full control of it and were not required to sacrifice it in any way. All members of the association merely gave their time and the work of their hands. In return, they received the necessities of life. The "Economy" system existed for twenty years only and was abolished by mutual consent in 1762. However, the Moravian Church, through its control over the land, known as the lease-system, continued to restrict settlement thereon only to members of their faith. Consequently, no non-Moravians were able to gain a foothold in this area. The Moravian settlement was located on what is now the north side of Bethlehem, while the south side was not inhabited except for a few isolated farms.

It was not until 1845 that Bethlehem was incorporated as a village, and thus opened to non-Moravians. Soon thereafter, other Protestants and Roman Catholics settled here. It was very natural that, in view of the traditional associations, a Lutheran church should be the first to organize a congregation in Moravian Bethlehem. Later, Reformed, Methodist, and the Roman Catholic churches were opened. Most newcomers settled on the south side of the Lehigh River in a village then called Augusta, incorporated in 1865 as the Borough of South Bethlehem.

### **German Jewish Settlers**

It was during the '50s or early '60s that Jewish settlers arrived in the Bethlehems. Like most Jewish immigrants of that period, they came from Germany. The first member of the Jewish faith, of whom we know, lived in North Bethlehem in 1864. His name was Isaac Heiman, born September 25, 1825 at Milheim, Baden, and was a resident of Alsace-Lorraine, which at that time belonged to France, but following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, was ceded to Germany. He is known to have arrived in America in 1864, and was a merchant tailor. Mr. Heiman's residence in Bethlehem was short-lived, as he died October 17, 1875, and was buried in the Hebrew Cemetery in Easton. His widow, who was also his niece, the former Julia Heiman, married Dr. M. L. Yobst of Bethlehem in 1876. The only relative living in the Bethlehem area today is a grand-niece, Mrs. Harold Refowich.

Another early settler was Jacob Heiman, probably related to Isaac Heiman. He too was a resident of North Bethlehem; the date of his arrival is not known. He married Miss Dennie Weichselbaum of Philadelphia on October 11, 1874.

Among the earliest Jewish inhabitants in Bethlehem were Ferdinand Reis and Adolph Reis, who operated a men's clothing store, located at 73 S. Main St. The business carried the name F. Reis and Co. and was owned by the Reis brothers from 1873 to 1877. In 1877 they sold the store to their brother, Lewis Reis, who had arrived in the United States in 1872, having settled in Catasauqua. Lewis Reis now moved to Bethlehem and on June 4, 1877, applied for naturalization papers. He married Miss Tillie Friedman of Philadelphia on March 13, 1889, in Philadelphia. His sons Louis F. and Morton are residents of Bethlehem today. Ferdinand Reis and Adolph Reis returned to Germany in 1877.

Judah Salomon, who owned a men's store selling hats, caps and clothing, located at 111 S. Main St., Bethlehem, is mentioned for the first time in the 1883 city directory. However, he probably arrived in this city during the '70s. The minute book of Temple Covenant of Peace in Easton, reports that on August 16, 1881, Judah Salomon of Bethlehem, was permitted to bury his child in the Easton Hebrew Cemetery. Mr. Salomon was born in Germany in 1836; his wife, Alice in 1845. In 1890, he had two unmarried children, Isadore, age 8, and Harry, age 7. Young Harry died on December 18, 1890, and was one of the first ones to be buried on the Brith Sholom Cemetery in Salisbury Township, now Fountain Hill. Mr. Salomon's oldest daughter, Sarah Salomon, was married June 8, 1884 in Bethlehem, to Mr. Isaac Samuels of New York City.

It is noteworthy that the early settlers, who were German Jews, resided and operated their businesses on the north side, then known as the Borough of Bethlehem.

One German Jew, Isaac Price, however, settled on the south side. He married Miss Frances Salomon, youngest daughter of Judah Salomon, on January 2, 1887. The marriage ceremony was performed in Bethlehem by Rev. Gross of Allentown. Isaac Price is mentioned for the first time in the 1885 city directory. He and his brother, Adolph Price, operated the "I. Price and Bros." store at the corner of 3rd and Spruce Streets. The 1890 U. S. Census no longer lists Adolph Price, and gives us more information on Isaac Price. He was born in 1861; his wife, Frances, in 1867, and at Census time they had two children, Berton, age 2, and Alfred, age 1. His store, which is referred to as the "Leading Clothier", was now called merely "I. Price", and was located at 3rd St. near Elm. Isaac Price died on September 20, 1898, and was buried on our cemetery. His tombstone indicates that he was a Kohen (descendant of the Priests). No survivors of the Salomon and Price families can be traced at the present time.

These were the only German Jews, who came to Bethlehem in the 19th century of whom we know. There may have been a few others.

## Immigrants From Eastern Europe

The last two decades of the 19th century saw a huge wave of immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe, and the Bethlehems were no exception. The forerunners of the present Bethlehem Steel Co. imported Hungarian laborers at that time, and that fact encouraged Hungarian Jews to move here and to establish rooming houses and hotels. The general exodus of Jews from Russia, which began in the '80s, brought a number of Lithuanians to our community. Most new-comers settled in South Bethlehem. In addition to the cultural and social wall which separated the German Jew from the East European, there was the Lehigh River which served as a physical line of demarcation between the "Deutsche" on the north side and the Hungarians and the "Litvaks" on the south side. Many of the Russian and Hungarian Jews started out as peddlers and dealers in second hand clothing, trading with the steel workers and the students residing in fraternity houses. Others operated grocery stores and hotels.

The first East European Jew to arrive in Bethlehem was Mr. Lewis Levy. He peddled in Bethlehem probably as early as the '70s, lived in South Bethlehem off and on, and finally settled here in 1887. He is listed in the 1890 Census, age 35, and at that time had four children, residing at 433 Wyandotte Street. Mr. Levy was instrumental in the forming of the first congregation in 1889. His son, Harry Levy, is still a resident of this city.

Among the early settlers from Eastern Europe was Mr. Abraham Refowich who reportedly came to South Bethlehem from Russia in 1884. He was listed in the 1888 city directory as a clothier, his place of business being at 3rd St. and Northampton Ave., his residence at 14 W. 3rd St. He is survived locally by his sons William and Harold.

A Mr. Levi Refowich is listed in the same directory as a business partner of Abraham, and resided at 12 W. 3rd St. The 1893 directory no longer lists Levi, but had in its place Israel Refowich as Abraham's business partner, his home being in Brooklyn, New York. Levi and Israel were uncles of Abraham Refowich.

The following are the names of some of the families who came to Bethlehem from Lithuania during the late '80s or the early '90s:

Abraham Philip (later Phillips). His children Jacob, Sol J., Lawrence, Maurice, Mrs. Sol Berman, Rose and Helen are residents of the city today. He took an active part in the early life of the Jewish community.

Nathan Koplín (later Kaplín), who was instrumental in the building of the first synagogue, was the father of Mrs. Morris Glazier, Mrs. Abe Glaser and Mr. Isaac Kaplín.

Lewis Marcus, the father of Mesdames Tessie Levine, William Sigmon, Tillie Brown, Messrs. Jacob and Al Marcus, came to Bethlehem after spending a few years in Scranton. He served the congregation in many capacities.

Harris Sofransky, born in 1862, arrived here sometime before 1890. His son, Abraham, was the father of Mrs. Harold Refowich.

Among the Lithuanian settlers were Louis Phillips and his son-in-law Abraham Silbert. Mr. Silbert was the father of Mesdames Sam Kessler, Max Cornfeld and Jack Taub. Other grandchildren of Louis Phillips are Mesdames Ted Berman and William Subkow and Mr. Max Cornfeld.

Harris Coleman's home is listed in 1893, at 917 Philadelphia Road. His children living in this area are Mrs. Chase Werner, Joseph, Isadore and Ben Coleman.

Mathias Coleman resided here for a few years before moving to Allentown. He was the father of Mrs. Oscar Brisker.

Among the immigrants from Hungary was the Friedman family (spelled Freedman in the 1890 U. S. Census). The oldest brother, Adolph, lived on Fourth Street operating "Friedman's Hotel" at 429 E. Third Street. He moved to Catasauqua during the early '90s, but later served as president of the Bethlehem congregation at the time of the cornerstone-laying for the *first permanent synagogue building, as will be mentioned later*. David, Jacob and Joseph Friedman were younger brothers of Adolph. The Friedman brothers were among the most active members of the congregation. Joseph Friedman was the father of Jack and Emanuel Friedman of this city.

John Frankel, another Hungarian, was the father of Samuel, Israel, Louis, Solomon, Jacob, Emma and Mrs. Roe Spitz.

Even the Irish did not forget Bethlehem. Aaron Cristol came to our community from Ireland. He is survived by his son Nathan.

### **Other Early Settlers**

Solomon Brown, a Philadelphia Road resident and owner of a grocery store. As will be mentioned later, the first religious services following the founding of the congregation were held in Mr. Brown's home. He probably moved from Bethlehem soon thereafter, as his name is not mentioned again.

Herman Weisenberger, born 1847, operated a grocery store in 1890 at 232 Third Street and was the father of seven children.

H. Abrahamson is listed in the 1890 census as the owner of a five and ten cent store at 114½ Third Street, South Bethlehem, with a branch store on Broad Street.

M. S. Gilles, born 1838, father of four children, lived in 1890 on the Philadelphia Road. The same census also lists a Jacob Gilles on the Philadelphia Road.

Isaac Bricker, born 1866, a merchant, lived in North Bethlehem.

W. Reichman is listed in the 1890 directory as residing on the Philadelphia Road. He was a trustee of the first congregation founded in 1889. According to the census, he operated a hosiery mill, but is not mentioned in subsequent city directories.

Albert Butner was one of the earlier Hungarian Jews to settle here. He married Miss Martha Levitzky of New York in 1890. His brother Simon, operated LaPierre Hotel on the corner of 2nd and Locust Sts.

Charles Schiff and his brother Harry Schiff arrived here in 1890. Charles Schiff is survived by his widow, and sons Isadore and Henry.

Among the early settlers who were buried on the old Brith Sholom Cemetery were: Salomon Strauss who died in 1926 at the age of 65; Michael M. Weissfelt, born 1855 and died 1909; and Joseph Schmerin who passed away in 1916 at the age of 55.

The religious life of the newly created community was greatly enhanced by the arrival of Rev. Isaac Gershon Resc (later Reis) who served as Shochet (ritual slaughterer). Mr. David Reis of this city is his son. Rev. Reis' brother-in-law, Menachem Mendel Alstadt, settled here in the early '90s. He attained the distinction of raising two sons who became ordained rabbis.

It is interesting to note that the first Jewish residents of South Bethlehem resided in the Third Street and the Philadelphia Road areas. The latter was often referred to as the "Bergel" (The Hill).

The names of others who guided the affairs of the early Jewish community of the Bethlehems will be mentioned in the next few pages. Some of those men have no survivors in this area, nor are they listed in the U. S. Census or city directories. I would like to reiterate that I do not consider the names covered by this brief history a complete list of the early Jewish settlers. As stated in the introduction, my sources of information were limited to official records and to information volunteered to me by residents of this city.



## **Congregation Organized**

We were unable to determine when the first Jewish religious services took place in Bethlehem. It is probable that a Minyon was held as soon as the Jewish population included ten male adults (in the early '80s). Serious attempts to organize a Jewish congregation were made during the 1886-1888 period, which saw the arrival of several East European Jews. Finally, the first Jewish congregation was formed on June 17, 1889. The event was reported in the "Daily Times" of Bethlehem on Tuesday, July 30, 1889 under the headline, "New Jewish Congregation Organized After Several Attempts." A photostatic reproduction of that newspaper item appears in the pictorial section of the publication. The announcement stated that services would be held on Friday evenings and Saturdays at the residence of Mr. Solomon Brown on Philadelphia Road (now Wyandotte Street) and that Rabbi M. Finkestein, formerly of Easton, would conduct services. According to "The Times", the congregation included every Jewish family in South Bethlehem. A number of German Jewish families, who resided in North Bethlehem, probably never affiliated with the new congregation, which was predominantly East European in character. As will be noted later, however, Isaac Price, although a German Jew, participated actively in the affairs of the congregation. Mr. Price was a South Bethlehem resident.

The officers of the congregation, as listed in "The Times", were Joseph Morris, President; H. Cohn, Vice-President; Isaac Price, Treasurer; Solomon Brown, Secretary; Lewis Levy and W. Reichman, Trustees. The newspaper report stated that Attorney John Kline had been retained by the congregation for the purpose of applying for a charter. Plans for the erection of a synagogue and the purchase of a cemetery were under consideration. In a talk to a reporter, several of the officers said that "the congregation desired the good will of the people of the town. An appeal for funds to assist in the purchase of ground for a cemetery will shortly be made, and the committee, the officers hope, will be liberally received."

The origin of the aforementioned Rabbi Finkestein, who served as the first rabbi in the history of Bethlehem, is a bit obscure. "The Times" refers to him as "formerly of Easton." There is no reference to him in Rabbi Trachtenberg's history of Easton Jewry. On the other hand, "The Jewish Messenger", an Anglo-Jewish Weekly published in New York, in its August 2, 1889 edition, reporting the founding of the first Jewish congregation in South Bethlehem describes Rabbi M. Finkestein as a former Philadelphian.

The congregation adopted the name Brith Sholom (spelled in many documents Breeth Sholam) and was chartered by the Court of Common Pleas of Northampton County on December 22, 1890. The following were the incorporators: Isaac Price, Abraham Levin, H. Abrahamson, Lewis Levy, Adolph Friedman, Herman Weisenberger, Isaac Bricker and Max Baronovski. The following were listed as trustees: Louis Marcus, Nathan Edelman, Lewis Levy, Abraham Levin, Henry Abrahamson, Solomon Brown and David Friedman. The founding of the congregation, according to the charter, was "for the purpose of the worship of Almighty God, according to the faith, doctrines, discipline and usages of the Jewish Church."

It seems that some difficulties must have developed among the founders of the new congregation, for on February 1, 1892, or 14 months later, a second congregation was chartered by the same court. The name of the new group was "Congregation Talmud Torah." The incorporators were Adolph Friedman, J. Greenbaum, M. S. Gilles, Nathan Koplín, B. Gilles, N. Edelman, Harris Sofransky and L. Olsvassy. The following were elected officers: Abraham Phillips, President; Harris Sofransky, Vice-President; M. S. Gilles, Secretary; N. Edelman, Treasurer; N. Koplín, Trustee; and L. Olsvassey, Trustee.

There is no reference to where the Congregation Talmud Torah met. However, it is established that in 1892 the approximately twenty-five Jewish families of the Bethlehems were divided into two congregations. "The Daily Times" Sesqui-Centennial edition of June, 1892 notes, "In addition to the various Christian Churches, there are two Jewish congregations in South Bethlehem. The Talmud Torah is now erecting a handsome synagogue." However, Talmud Torah's plan remained a dream. By 1893, the differences between the two congregations were evidently settled, and once again, the Bethlehems had one united synagogue known as the "Brith Sholom Talmud Torah Congregation", retaining that name until 1925, when the Brith Sholom Community Center was founded. According to the 1893-94 Bethlehem Directory, the congregation met in Soyer's Hall, 123 E. Third Street, with the Rev. J. Zadicoff as its rabbi. I have reason to assume that early rabbis of the Brith Sholom Talmud Torah Congregation were merely teachers and Shochetim (ritual slaughterers) rather than ordained rabbis. The practice of engaging such men, who fulfilled the more immediate ritual needs of the community, and referring to them as "rabbis" was not uncommon in the early days of many a small Jewish Community.

A Jewish cemetery was established during the early days of the congregation. The death of an out-of-town peddler of the Jewish faith in a railway accident necessitated the purchase of a cemetery lot in late 1889 or early 1890.

Mr. Abraham Refowich was instrumental in the establishment of the Jewish Cemetery. The deed to the Brith Sholom Congregation for the cemetery plot was not registered in the Lehigh County Recorder's office until May 23, 1893. According to the deed the land was sold by Adolph and Fannie Friedman to the congregation for \$32.00.

The congregation changed its location once more as evidenced by the 1895-96 Bethlehem Directory, which listed its address as "Philadelphia Road." In 1897, prior to the congregation moving into its first permanent house of worship, services were held for a short time at 327 Broadway, with Rabbi Resc as its spiritual leader.

### **First Permanent Synagogue**

Throughout the last decade of the century, the need for a synagogue building, sufficient to house the activities of the growing community, became increasingly pressing. One of the first steps taken by the congregation soon after the merger in 1893 was the purchase of a lot of land situated at the northwest corner of Walnut and Wood Streets (now Summit and Carlton). The land was bought from a certain Jeremiah S. Hess for \$650.00. The deed was recorded in the Recorder's office at the Northampton Court House on May 27, 1893.

The actual execution of the plan for the erection of a permanent synagogue was not carried out until early in 1897. Mr. William Danzer was engaged as contractor, and the cost of the building was estimated at \$6500.00.

The new synagogue was a handsome brick structure, 46 by 31 feet and almost 30 feet in height, surmounted by two domes. The main entrance was on Wood Street (now Carlton Avenue), the cornerstone being on that street near the Walnut Street corner. The stone bore the inscription "Brith Sholom Talmud Torah 1897." "The Globe" in an advance announcement of the cornerstone laying ceremony states that "in the basement will be one school-room, three dwelling rooms, two bathrooms and a large basin used in the ceremonial of the Hebrews." The latter evidently refers to the traditional ritualarium (Mikveh). The synagogue had a large gallery on three sides, occupied by women during religious services.

The following is an excerpt from the "American Israelite", a weekly published by Rabbi Isaac Meir Wise in Cincinnati, edition of July 29, 1897: "The South Bethlehem Congregation is composed of recent immigrants and strictly Orthodox". The Jewish population of the Bethlehems, at the time of the erection of the first permanent synagogue building, totalled fifty families, only 28 being members in "good standing". In view of a general depression which prevailed in 1897, the project undertaken by the handful of Jews was widely considered "courageous."

At last, progress on the building had sufficiently advanced and the cornerstone laying rites were set for Sunday afternoon, July 18, 1897, at 5 o'clock.

The event was hailed as one of historic significance. "The Globe" announced the forthcoming event under the headline "New Hebrew Synagogue Cornerstone to be Laid Tomorrow". The Committee on arrangements consisted of Herman Weisenberger, Lewis Marcus, Harris Sofransky, Nathan Koplin, Adolph Friedman and Lewis Levy. Mr. Adolph Friedman, the congregation's president, was to preside at the ceremonies.

The report on the ceremony as it appeared in the "Bethlehem Times" is included in the pictorial section of this publication. A more detailed description was printed in "The Globe", Monday, July 19, 1897. The report contains many details of the proceedings and is of great interest. Under the frontpage headline "New Hebrew Synagogue Cornerstone Laid Yesterday Afternoon", the lengthy article said in part:

"The spirit of tolerance in religious matters which characterizes this century was strikingly illustrated yesterday afternoon, when a Lutheran and a Reformed clergyman made addresses at the cornerstone laying of the new synagogue of the Brith Sholom congregation organized a few years ago by local Hebrews. The anti-semitic propaganda of recent years has evidently not affected the Bethlehems for the large audience at the ceremonies yesterday afternoon was composed of Christians as well as Jews.

"The sky was cloudy and threatening all afternoon and doubtless kept many away, who would otherwise have witnessed the cornerstone laying, nevertheless, the crowd which had gathered at the northwest corner of Walnut and Wood Streets, the site of the synagogue, counted several hundred people from the Bethlehems, Allentown, Catasauqua and Easton.

"It was a picturesque scene, the people crowding around the foundation, boys sitting upon the four walls of the incomplete building in which were gathered the congregation, and the guests of honor including many citizens of prominence, among which were Charles Groman, W. F. Bloon, Wm. Danzer, Fred Eifert, Edwin Seifert, Henry Ziegenfuss, William Wanamaker, Charles Reinbott, Thomas O'Brian, Alexander Worsley and A. L. Wackert.

"On the platform sat Rabbi C. H. Herschler, Rev. W. F. Schaener, Rev. David Scheirer, Rev. N. Z. Snyder, Adolph and David Friedman, Lewis Levy, and Nathan Koplin.

"In the audience were Rev. Boyer and members of perhaps every congregation in the Bethlehems.

"A policeman kept the crowd from pouring into the building. The absence of Hebrew women was especially noticeable, only two or three attending the ceremonies.

"Owing to a heavy cold, Adolph Friedman of Catsauqua, the president of the congregation, did not preside and in his place, his brother, David Friedman, was the master of ceremonies. He bid a hearty welcome to all and asked for peace and order during the ceremonies.

"He introduced Rabbi C. H. Herschler, of Philadelphia, as the speaker of the occasion. The Rabbi made an eloquent sermon in German, quoting many texts in Hebrew, which sounded very musical as did also his excellent High German.

"He had chosen as his text, Psalms 118: 22-25, "The stone which the builders refused has become the headstone of the corner, etc".

"The walls, windows, doors, material, do not make God's house, but the congregation worshipping Him make it such; the walls are not Holy if the congregation does not hallow God in its heart.

"The cornerstone laying today is significant in more than one sense. I see here natives of Russia, of Germany, of other nations, and verily they have come from the East and the West, the North and the South, to honor the Lord.

"Dear Friends, let unity and peace dwell among you. Peace buildeth a people, strife hath been the downfall of our nation.

"We must give our children a Hebrew as well as a worldly education so that they may become good citizens and the cornerstone of the house of Judah.

"The Rabbi was loudly applauded, and was followed by Rev. N. Z. Snyder, formerly pastor of the First Reformed Church.

"He said that some people get experience early in life, while to others, it comes late in life. For him and Rev. Schaener, this was a unique experience and it came rather late in life. We need not make an apology for being present at this cornerstone laying.

"If these brethren had not known that we were Christians, it might be different. We confess ourselves Christians with honest convictions, but today, we stand upon a broader platform than denominationalism, viz, the universal brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. We welcome our Jewish brethren, and rejoice that they are erecting a house of worship, so as to train their children in the fear, nurture and admonition of the Lord.

"I have ten thousand times more respect for a Hebrew honest in his convictions, than for a man who professes to be a Christian and compromises with the world.

"I honor any conscientious, sincere, devout man who keeps the law of God. In Abraham's seed, the earth was blessed and we ask that God bless Abraham's children in their undertaking.

"The day is gone when we took each other by the throat, and said "Believe as I do, or be damned!" The fire and fagot is not in place anymore.

"Rev. Snyder concluded with wishing prosperity, peace and God speed to the congregation in its work.

"Mr. David Friedman was the next speaker. After a few introductory remarks in English, he made an address in German that proved him to be quite an orator. He quoted Hebrew texts frequently and received enthusiastic applause when finished.

"He said that speech and deed were two different matters. Many say much and mean little, while some who make but few words mean a great deal.

"He told of Jacob's dream when he saw a ladder reaching into Heaven.

"Thus, he said, it seems a dream to this congregation that with only twenty-eight members in full standing, they are now laying the cornerstone for a synagogue. We are a chain of twenty-eight links, of which some may not be as strong as the others. There may be at times, differences of opinion, and there seemed a time when one link in the chain threatened to break the whole chain. This one link was a hindrance to the work and on its account, many refused to give money toward the synagogue, saying that they could not help, neither would they harm the work. Business and religion will not mix, as proved by this weak link. Mr. Friedman then told the story of Bileam's ass, drawing from it the lesson that the promise to harm the work of the Lord was meaningless, for the angel of the Lord with flaming sword would prevent harm to them as he did to Bileam, who had gone out to curse the people of God and was rebuked by his ass.

"We are morally bound, Jews and non-Jews, to go hand in hand. We hope to finish as we have begun.

"Mr. Friedman happily expressed the thanks of the congregation to all those who had helped them or encouraged them in their work.

"The cornerstone was then laid by Nathan Kaplin and Lewis Levy, who each had contributed \$125.00 to the building fund in order to be granted the honor. They took the copper box, containing books, papers, and documents standing on a small table in front of the speakers and amid the applause of their fellow members, placed it in the cornerstone, thus concluding the day's ceremonies.

"A reception and feast, attended with enthusiastic merry-making, was held afterwards at the home of Louis Levy, Wyandotte Street."

An editorial on the cornerstone-laying ceremony was published by "The Globe" on Tuesday, July 20, 1897. It read in part:

"It seems to us that the Israelites to the present day bear the mark of being God's chosen people. Scattered over the face of the earth, they have maintained their national individuality and their religious peculiarity. They have prospered under the most adverse circumstances; they are greater in number than they were in the time of Moses or the days of Christ; there are more Jewish synagogues today than there were in the time of Solomon. Who knows what role they are destined to play in the future of the world? Perhaps a Moses will gather the scattered tribes of chosen people and lead them back to Palestine to await the literal fulfillment of the promises recorded in the Bible and in the Talmud".

This prediction sounds almost prophetic. It was written on July 20, 1897, only a few days before a man, undoubtedly unknown to the editorial writer of the Bethlehem paper, Theodore Herzl opened the First World Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, thereby setting in motion the machinery leading to the rebirth of the State of Israel fifty years later.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, with the erection of the Synagogue, ends the story of the beginning of Jewish life in Bethlehem. Since 1897, the world and the Jewish people have undergone monumental changes. North and South Bethlehem have merged, and the city has become one of the world's industrial centers. The Jewish community has increased in numbers and scope of activities, culminating in the founding of the Community Center and the various Jewish organizations.

All that we are and ever hope to be, we owe to those brave men and women who came to this community during the second half of the nineteenth century and labored so faithfully in the vineyard of the Lord.

May their courage and foresight serve as a shining example to future generations.