

# American Synagogues: The Lessons of the Names

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The number of Jewish congregations in America runs into the thousands. A complete list is unobtainable because countless names, particularly those of small Orthodox congregations, appear in no printed record. It was possible to compile, from a variety of sources, a list of 1,688 congregations — a list remarkable both for its diversities and for its repetitions. In various instances, the identical name labels more than one congregation. Three hundred and two congregations carry the name "Israel," 152 the name "Bethel," and ninety-two the name "Emanuel." Not a few of the congregations bear not one name but two, a Hebrew name and an English name, the English usually indicating the street on which the house of worship is located.

There are congregations whose names hold the word "Conservative," and those whose names include the word "Reform." That divergence in Jewish life is so significant that it has to be kept in view. Curious, for Conservative congregations, is the frequent use of the word "Temple," which was originally a Reform innovation. Still more emphatic is the divergence proclaimed by such titles as "Progressive Synagogue," "Liberal Synagogue," and "New Thought Synagogue." Those which are oriented toward the future thus differentiate themselves from those that incline toward the past. A number of congregations have copied the name "Free Synagogue" from that of Stephen S. Wise in New York City. "Free" meant originally that the rabbi was not to be fettered — Dr. Wise called it "muzzled" — by the temple board. Dr. Wise founded the Free Synagogue soon after he had scornfully rejected

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a call to New York's Temple Emanu-El. The call had hinted that the board of the temple reserved the right to exercise some control over the rabbi's utterances.

In various ways the names of congregations reflect prevailing trends. An illustration is the present use of the word "Jewish" where an earlier generation would have said "Hebrew." No longer does "Hebrew" function as a euphemism. Jews no longer find "Hebrew" less embarrassing than "Jew" or "Jewish," nor do non-Jews find "Hebrew" more polite. While the word "Hebrew" still persists in the names of congregations, the word "Jewish" appears many times as often. As the prestige of the Jew in America grows, "Jew" and "Jewish" mount in the scale of dignity.

#### GERIATRICS AND GEOGRAPHY

Thanks to the discoveries of medicine, one of our problems has gotten to be that of the aged. We think of this when we are told about a "Senior Citizens Congregation" at Miami Beach, Florida.

It further catches our attention that some congregations have names indicating a jurisdiction not, as usual, confined to a city, but one extending over a larger area. Examples are: "Temple Beth Sholom of Orange County" at Santa Anna, California; "Peninsula Temple Sholom" at Burlingame, California; "Sholom of East Gabriel Valley" at Covina, California; "Beth Sholom of Anne Arundel County" at Glen Burnie, Maryland; "Beth Am of the South Shore" at Hingham, Massachusetts; "Ventura County Jewish Council" at Ventura, California; "Central Synagogue of Nassau County" at Rockville Centre, New York; and "Free Synagogue of Westchester" at Mount Vernon, New York. At Ishpeming, Michigan, Temple Beth Sholom is called a Temple Center in the geographical sense that, standing at the outskirts of Ishpeming, it also serves the neighboring towns of Marquette and Negaunee. Such names suggest that the automobile, commonly regarded as centrifugal in religion, sometimes becomes centripetal. The automobile, which often keeps people away from worship, can do the opposite and bring them to worship.

Consider, too, the name "Actors Temple." Such a congregation

is to be found in New York City. We have long known the extensiveness of Jewish participation in the work of the stage, but we think of the actor as someone remote from religion; of the things with which we associate the actor, religion is the last and the least. The mere existence of an "Actors Temple" is surprising, whatever may be the frequency with which thespians make use of that facility.

A synagogue in New York City bears the name "Millinery Center Synagogue." Is this, perhaps, like Cincinnati's "Downtown Vaad Synagogue," a house of worship located in the business district near the places where Jews pursue a particular calling? Such a synagogue might indeed be welcomed by those punctilious about being present in a group of at least ten males when reciting the prayer which commemorates their dead.

A large number of Jewish places of worship go by the name of "Center," such as "Jewish Center," "Jewish Community Center," and the like. There are a hundred such in the State of New York alone. That word "Center" highlights a trend. It signalizes the many nondevotional features which have entered into congregational programs. The edifice used for worship is used also for lectures, dances, parties, club meetings, athletic events, theatricals, and even for swimming. "A *Schul mit* a pool" is a timeworn jest. The preponderance of recreational items in the schedules of many Jewish congregations has provoked some adverse comment, particularly from rabbis. Ever so often we hear of or read denunciations of the tendency to pack the synagogue with nonreligious activities. Dances, as a rule, draw a large attendance when religious services do not. Hayrides are popular with the young when Hebrew classes are not.

The debate brings to mind the story about the two Jewish savants in Eastern Europe who were out walking together one morning several decades ago. The savants came upon a Jew wearing skullcap, prayer shawl, and phylacteries, and reciting the early prayer. Such sights were not infrequent; when the hour for prayer arrived, the Jew would pause and recite the prayer wherever he might chance to be, even on the street, in the shop, or in the railway coach. The savants noticed that the Jew, while reciting the prayer, was at the same time loading his wagon preparatory for the day's peddling.

One of the savants exclaimed: "What a materialistic people are the Jews! Even when they engage in prayer, they ply their occupation!"

His companion rejoined: "What a spiritually minded people are the Jews! Even when they ply their occupations, they engage in prayer!"

Similarly, shall we say: "How regrettable that these Jewish centers dilute worship with such an array of activities which have nothing to do with worship!"? Or shall we say: "How gratifying that, where recreational activities take place, worship also takes place!"?

Another trend is mirrored in the name "Beth Am" borne by twenty-three of our congregations. The phrase, meaning "House of the People," is common today in the State of Israel. That name for a congregation probably connotes the Jewish nationalistic revival.

#### THE ALTARS OF BETH-EL

We have observed that 152 congregations are called "Beth-El" and ninety-two are called "Emanu-El." This involves a paradox. Why should a Jewish house of worship be named after a place which, more than once in the Bible, receives unfavorable mention? Beth-el was stigmatized by the prophets. It was a place at which worship was offered a golden calf (I Kings 12:29; 13:4; II Kings 10:29). The prophet Amos quotes God as saying: "I will punish the altars of Beth-el [3:14] . . . seek not Beth-el . . . Beth-el shall come to nought" (5:5). The pilgrimages to the shrine at Beth-el were, according to Amos, not acts of sacredness, but acts of transgression (4:4). The prophet Hosea disdainfully calls that locale of calf worship not "Beth-el" ("House of God"), but "Beth-aven" ("House of worthlessness") (4:15; 5:8; 10:5). The prophet Jeremiah reports that "the house of Israel was ashamed of Beth-el their confidence" (48:13).

The name "Emanu-El," too, receives a sinister implication. "Emanu-El" is the Greek spelling of the Hebrew words "Immanu-El," which mean "God is with us." "Immanu-El" is uttered, in the Bible, only by the prophet Isaiah. Protesting against an alliance

between his country, Judah, and the Assyrians, Isaiah predicted that the Assyrian allies would drive off certain armies by which Judah was being invaded, but that, after the invasion had been stopped, the Assyrians would not go home. They would remain and subjugate Judah to the Assyrian power.

Once the Assyrians had halted the invasion, the people of Judah would, full of gratitude, exclaim: "Immanu-El," "God is with us." Newborn children would be named "Immanu-El" (Isaiah 7:14). But how inappropriate! Rescue would not, by any means, have been attained. The country would simply have fallen into the clutches of the Assyrian helpers. Isaiah speaks of the Assyrians as a river which shall "sweep through Judah . . . shall reach even to the neck" and "shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanu-El" (8:8). What an irony in that name!

To be sure, the unfavorable implications of these names could hardly have been known to the rank and file of today's Jewish people. Few were sufficiently acquainted with the Bible to be aware of what the prophets said about Beth-el or of what Isaiah thought of Emanu-el. No reproach, moreover, attaches to Beth-el in the story of Jacob's dream, a story often rehearsed in the Sunday schools. That story may have made "Beth-el" popular. But how account for the introduction of the name "Emanu-El"? It has been suggested that "Emanu-El" derived from the influence of the Christian environment. With Christians the name "Emanuel" is momentous. Christians took "Emanuel" to be identical with "Jesus." They believed that, when Isaiah pronounced the name "Emanuel," he was predicting the nativity which was to occur 732 years later. Why Jews should have given their congregations a name which Christians equated with Jesus is hard to explain. The explanation of "Emanu-El" will have to be sought elsewhere. It happens not seldom that Jewish people welcome a Hebrew word or phrase regardless of what that word or phrase may mean. The word or phrase is acceptable just so long as it is Hebrew, no matter how inappropriate it may be for the context within which it gets placed.

There is, however, one congregation about the Christian origin of whose name there can be no doubt. This is the congregation whose

house of assembly in New York City is called "The Center of Jewish Science." "Jewish Science" is the counterpart of "Christian Science."

Christian Science was attracting Jews in considerable numbers. The faith healing claimed by Christian Science lured many whom medicine had failed to help. A grain of truth may lurk in the witticism that a certain Christian Science church had so many Jews among its members that non-Jews refused to join. The late Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, the founder of Jewish Science, sought to neutralize that fascination by offering religio-therapy under Jewish auspices. Intellectually Rabbi Lichtenstein was markedly superior to Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. Before entering upon his venture, Rabbi Lichtenstein took a graduate course in psychology at Columbia University. Since the death of Rabbi Lichtenstein, his project has been continued by his widow.

We must not fail to draw a sharp distinction between "Jewish Science" and "The Science of Judaism," if we may thus translate the German *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*. The difference between the two is antipodal. *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* stands for scholarly research in Jewish history and literature, demands rigid adherence to scientific method, and is, by a whole world, removed from the credulities of faith healing.

The frequency of names containing the word "Sinai" — their number is forty-six — can possibly be accounted for by the familiar references to Mount Sinai at Sunday school and perhaps also by the association of Sinai with confirmation, the most popular of modern Jewish rituals. The name which occurs more frequently than any other is, however, the name "Israel" — 302 instances. The hesitation which once existed about "Jew" and "Jewish" may, in part, account for this. Hardly could the predilection for the name have been motivated by the explanation of the name in Genesis 32:29, which tells how, one harrowing night, Jacob wrestled with God and won the contest, whence God changed his name from Jacob ("the crafty") to Israel ("the divine struggler"). That would not account for the present-day favoritism shown that name; too scant is the number of those who have heard or read the amazing story.

## DO NOT BLAME ME!

A noticeable aspect of our list is the rarity of congregations named after any of the prophets. Until comparatively recent years one congregation stood alone in that regard — Congregation Isaiah in Chicago. A merger afterward altered the name into Isaiah-Israel. Subsequently, the name Isaiah was adopted by three other Jewish abodes of worship — a Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles; one in Forest Hills, New York; and one in Lexington, Massachusetts. Aside from these four congregations honoring the name of Isaiah, there is a recently formed Congregation Micah in Denver, Colorado, and a newly organized Congregation Jeremiah in Winnetka, Illinois.

Perhaps, for a religious institution, the name of a prophet is inappropriate, because some of the prophets opposed religion of the institutionalized kind — some, but not all. Ezekiel was not anti-institutional, nor was Haggai. Besides, how extremely few are the people even in the rabbinate, who realize the intensity of the opposition to the ancient sacrificial cult on the part of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the author of the celebrated passage in the Book of Micah about doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly!

The following incident may be worth recounting. After a Friday evening service at a temple, a small group of people, closely identified with the temple, proceeded to the home of the president of the temple for conversation and refreshments. The group consisted of the incumbent rabbi, of a visiting rabbi who had preached that evening, of the secretary of the congregation and his wife, and perhaps of a few others, including, of course, the host and the hostess. The conversation glided into the subject of the prophets. The visiting rabbi quoted from Isaiah 1:11-17:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me?  
Saieth the Lord. . . .

New moon and sabbath, the holding of convocations I cannot  
endure. . . .

Your new moons and your appointed seasons

My soul hateth;

They are a burden unto Me. . . .

And when ye spread forth your hands [in prayer],  
I will hide Mine eyes from you;  
Yea, when ye make many prayers,  
I will not hear. . . .  
Wash you, make you clean,  
Put away the evil of your doings  
From before Mine eyes. . . .  
Seek justice, relieve the oppressed. . . .

The quotation threw the hostess into a state of dismay. She was a woman fervently dedicated to her temple. When she heard the words of Isaiah, she gasped: "According to that, we ought to have no temple at all!"

The quoter pleaded: "Do not blame me. I never told Isaiah to speak in that manner."

When the guests took their departure, the hostess refused to shake hands with the quoter or even to bid him good night. Frequent in her attendance at religious services, she must have heard the passage from Isaiah many times before. She must have heard similarly upsetting utterances of Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Jeremiah. But amid the formalities of public worship, the meaning had never struck home. Those words had to be spoken in an easygoing conversation over refreshments in her living room. A widely known Bible scholar, now deceased, used to remark that some of the grandest passages of the Bible stand there because they were misunderstood. Had they been understood, they would have been excluded from the sacred collection.

The anti-institutionalism of certain prophets will thus hardly account for the rarity of the prophets' names among the names of congregations. Let us venture a guess: Children do not remain in Sunday school long enough to hear about the prophets, much less to learn about the prophets. The same might apply to names from the Talmud. The chief talmudic name to greet us is that of Hillel. Eleven of our congregations honor that talmudic celebrity. The only other talmudic figure to receive any mention is Akiba, and that occurs nowhere except with Temple Akiba in Culver City, California.

## JERUSALEM THE ABSENT

A number of congregations are named after notables of modern times: Baron Maurice de Hirsch, Leo Baeck, Theodor Herzl, Haym Salomon, Judah Touro, Isaac M. Wise, and Stephen S. Wise. No fewer than four are named after Sir Moses Montefiore.\*

Our list includes also such names as Temple Albert, Temple Miriam, Temple Aaron, and the Louis Feinberg Synagogue, names of local personalities honored in the annals of their respective congregations.

We are unable to explain the total absence of the word "Jerusalem" from our nomenclature, although "Zion," the poetic equivalent of "Jerusalem," appears no fewer than eighteen times.

\* Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a noted philanthropist, was born in 1831 in Germany, and died in 1896 in Hungary. His vast philanthropies were devoted chiefly, although not exclusively, to the occupational rehabilitation and training of underprivileged Jews in various parts of the world.

Leo Baeck, born in 1873 in Germany, died in 1956 in London. The leading rabbi of Berlin, he became the outstanding Jewish figure in Germany at the time of the Hitler persecutions and barely escaped death in a concentration camp.

Theodor Herzl, born in 1860 in Hungary, died in Vienna in 1904. A noted journalist and author, he was the initiator of the world Zionist organization.

Haym Salomon, born in 1740 in Poland, died in Philadelphia in 1785. Salomon was a Jewish hero of the American revolution, and helped secure money to further the cause of the American colonists.

Judah Touro, born in 1775 in Newport, Rhode Island, died in 1854 in New Orleans. Touro was an enterprising merchant and a large-scale philanthropist, bestowing his largess on a broad variety of causes, non-Jewish as well as Jewish. Among his noted beneficences was a huge contribution to the fund for the rearing of Bunker Hill Monument.

Isaac Mayer Wise, born in 1819 in Bohemia, died in 1900 in Cincinnati. He was the famed rabbi of the Plum Street Temple (Bene Yeshurun Congregation) in Cincinnati. The pioneer organizer for Reform Judaism in America, he founded the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Hebrew Union College, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Stephen Samuel Wise, born in 1874 in Hungary, died in 1949 in New York City. Wise was the founder and the celebrated rabbi of the Free Synagogue in New York City and also the founder of the American Jewish Congress and of the rabbinic training school known as the Jewish Institute of Religion. He was an orator of unsurpassed eloquence, a noted Zionist, and a leader of the first rank in a multitude of civic and philanthropic endeavors.

Sir Moses Montefiore was born in 1784 in Italy of British parents. He died in England in 1885 at the age of more than one hundred. Montefiore was, for a large part of the nineteenth century, England's foremost Jew. His prodigious philanthropies were bestowed regardless of creed. On more than one occasion he intervened to rescue Jewish people exposed to persecution in foreign lands.

Some of the names possess charm. Examples are: "Synagogue of the Hills" at Rapid City, South Dakota; "Temple on the Heights" at Cleveland Heights, Ohio; "Valley Temple" at Cincinnati; "Village Temple" in New York City. Particularly with the Hebrew names are the touches of beauty in evidence: "Tree of Life," "Gates of Prayer," "Gates of Heaven," "Covenant of Peace," "Pursuer of Peace," "Flag of Israel," "Way of Pleasantness." The temple at Chattanooga, Tennessee, is "Temple Mizpah." "Mizpah" means "Lookout." How apt for a temple near the base of Lookout Mountain! The temple at Toronto, Canada, has the name "Holy Blossom." This name happens to be inadvertent. The name is said to have originated with a congregation of Jewish youth which went by a Hebrew appellation that means "Holy Fledglings." The Hebrew word for "fledglings" resembles the Hebrew word for "blossom." The congregation, taking its name from that of the youth congregation, mistranslated. "Holy Blossom" was the charming result.

#### THERE WAS NO PEACE

The names of most of our congregations are Hebrew. Those Hebrew names, consisting usually of words or phrases taken from the Bible, are, like many of the English names, aglow with idealism. The Hebrew names often derive from such biblical exemplars as Abraham, Jacob, David, Samuel, Moses, Solomon, and Mordecai. These names of congregations read "Sons of Abraham," "Sons of Isaac," "Love of Isaac," "Sons of Jacob," "House of Jacob," "Sons of Judah," "House of Moses," "Sons of Aaron," "Sons of Joshua," "House of Samuel," "Sons of David," and "House of Mordecai." Also invoked are the Hebrew terms for Light, Service, Learning, Prayer, Friendship, Brotherhood, Kindness, Righteousness, Diligence, Glory, Help, Hope, Holiness, and Peace. The Hebrew word for "peace," *shalom*, occurs 144 times. According to a somewhat cynical explanation, the frequency of that word could intimate the lack of peace in the schisms with which new congregations were sometimes started; like the Latin quip about the person named "Light," in Latin "Lucus." The quip runs:

"*Lucus a non lucendo*," " 'Light' because not giving light." Similar is the supposition that congregations were, in some word-combination or other, named *Shalom*, "Peace," because there was no peace. A friendlier explanation would be that the frequency of the word *Shalom*, in the names of congregations, is due to the word's familiarity. It is a word often heard in Jewish conversation, particularly among the immigrant Jews by whom most of our congregations were founded.

There are English names with an idealistic turn, such as "Temple Concord" at Binghamton, New York; "Society of Concord" at Syracuse, New York; "Hebrew Friendship Congregation" at Harrisonburg, Virginia; "Brotherhood Synagogue" in New York City; "Woodbine Brotherhood Synagogue" at Woodbine, New Jersey. The "Hebrew Benevolent Congregation" in Atlanta, Georgia, bears that name because the congregation grew out of an organization devoted to charity. In Cincinnati, Ohio, "Congregation New Hope" consists of people who were fugitives from Hitler.

Attention may be called to the tendency which once existed, the tendency to choose for congregations names of Messianic import, that is to say, names whose biblical context voices hope for Jewish national restoration or for a golden age to come. Examples are those names which, translated from the Hebrew, mean "Remnant of Israel," "Remnant of Judah," "Hope of Israel," "Door of Hope," "Holy Seed," and perhaps others.

Proclamations of ideals constitute, by and large, the essence of the names borne by our congregations. When the names are Hebrew, those names may have been understood by very few layfolk. Even where the name is English, the name may seldom enter into people's thoughts. The attendance at services may be sparse, listless, and unappreciative. Yet there is about a congregation something which towers. People can, in some subtle way, be affected by an outlook of which they are rarely conscious. Places of worship can announce to the world aspirations which their supporters are too busy to ponder. In their names, congregations possess vehicles for such ideals.