

PREVIEW EDITION - SELECTED CHAPTERS & EXCERPTS:

YOUNG ISRAEL AT 100:
AN AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THE
CHALLENGES OF ORTHODOX LIVING

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PUBLISHED IN HONOR OF THE
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF YOUNG ISRAEL
INTERNATIONAL YOUNG ISRAEL MOVEMENT
CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

RECOGNIZING 100 YEARS OF YOUNG ISRAEL

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2011 - 16 CHESHVAN, 5772
TERRACE ON THE PARK - FLUSHING, QUEENS, N.Y.

SHLOMO Z. MOSTOFSKY
PRESIDENT

RABBI PESACH LERNER
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

Dear Reader

November 10, 2011

Dear Reader,

This document is a sample of chapters from the forthcoming history of the first 100 years of the Young Israel movement. It is still very much a work in progress by a collaborative team of seasoned writers and publishing experts, each of whom brings his or her own style, talents and experiences to this ambitious project. Two of them, Yaakov Kornreich and Joel Saibel, have served as editors of *Young Israel Viewpoint*, and have been closely involved with the National Council and its branches, for decades. Deborah and Gerald Strober are Jewish communal and Zionist activists with long experience in Jewish journalism, who have worked in close cooperation with the Young Israel movement on several specific issues. Each member of the writing team was assigned specific sections of this work, which they wrote in their own style. Their work was then reviewed and edited by the entire team. However, no attempt was made to “blend” the styles or to eliminate some of the overlap and duplication in the narratives because the book is designed to serve as a historical reference as well as a narrative of the Young Israel story. As a result, each chapter was written to give the reader a complete picture of its subject, and to stand on its own when read independently of the rest of the book.

Each team member took on this ambitious research and writing project out of a deeply-felt belief that Young Israel’s dramatic history holds important lessons for the entire American Jewish community. When completed, before the end of this year, the history will be published in both hard-copy and digital editions.

These chapters represent only a preview of the complete book. As the writers prepare the final text, they ask for your assistance by making available to us any historic documents, facts and stories based on your personal knowledge, and photographs which would help us to tell the Young Israel story. In particular, we are interested in biographical material on the early leaders of the movement.

In researching this book, the publication team has poured over thousands of pages of documents, including meeting minutes, memoranda, letters, and publications dating from Young Israel’s earliest days. The writers have also interviewed individuals who have played key roles in the organization’s development.

We plan to make the source materials, both from Young Israel’s archives and those provided by readers, available on the National Council’s website.

We welcome your comments, suggestions and content contributions to this project. Please forward your materials, as soon as possible, to 100 Year History Project at the National Council of Young Israel office, 111 John Street, Suite 450, New York, NY 10038. If possible, we urge you to send us this historical material in digital format rather than hard copy. Text files should be in Word or pdf format, and scanned photograph files in jpg or pdf format. Please send the files to: yihistory@youngisrael.org.

We look forward to working with you to make this book a memorable testament to the life and work of our beloved movement.

Shlomo Z. Mostofsky, President

Rabbi Pesach Lerner, Executive Vice President

President's Message

President's Message

By Shlomo Z. Mostofsky

One of the very best things that I can say about Young Israel today is that we are still an Orthodox synagogue organization dedicated to inspiring and serving Jews of all ages, from many backgrounds and with different levels of Jewish observance, and uniting them in the service of the Torah and the Jewish people.

As Young Israel prepares to celebrate its 100th anniversary, I have often been asked: “What is the glue that has held this disparate movement together for a full century?”

At the same time, I inevitably hear concerns about how much Young Israel has changed since its early years, when it was led by visionary men and women, many from very humble backgrounds. They were inspired by the Young Israel idea to change their lives and build the foundation for the great American Orthodox communities that we have the privilege of living in today, and that we, now, take for granted.

Others comment that Young Israel today is less “modern” than it used to be, that it has been unduly influenced by outside factions.

I believe that this book is the best possible answer to all of these criticisms.

One of the most fascinating things about the research that went into the writing of this book is the wealth of archival material which has been uncovered. It reveals, in fascinating detail, exactly how Young Israel developed and evolved in response to the changing circumstances it faced as a movement, as individual synagogues, and as families, over the past century. By necessity, this book barely scratches the surface of all that material. I am sure that in the years to come, it will serve as a veritable trove of source material for Jewish historians seeking to gain a better understanding of how the American Orthodox community came to be what it is today.

For people like me who grew up in Young Israel families, those archives contain much more than just stories. They help to define our understanding of who we are and what our responsibilities are as Jews, both with respect to ourselves and our families, as well as to our community and the Jewish people. To me, the great early leaders of the Young Israel movement are much more than names out of a history book. I can remember having seen or met some of them, when they were older, and I was a still child growing up in my Young Israel branch. And there are vivid memories of events involving many of those names that were important in my life and to my family.

I am not alone. When we published a preview article from this book in the Summer, 2011 issue of *Viewpoint*, the response to it was tremendous. Many people like myself, who grew up in the Young Israel movement, told us how much they were affected by the personal stories of the pioneers of Young Israel, and the challenges to religious living that they confronted and overcame.

What has impressed me most, however, is how remarkably consistent the approach of the Young Israel movement has been to meeting the challenges it has faced over the past century. It might come as a surprise to those who criticize Young Israel today for having become too “extreme” that exactly the same accusation was hurled at it half-a-century ago for refusing to even consider allowing its branches to take down their *mechitzas*.

Those who claim that the spirit of independence of the Young Israel movement has been lost in recent years due to the growing influence over its practices and policies by the *Gedolim* and the *Roshei Yeshivos*, would also be surprised by the evidence in the archives. It reveals how often the early leaders of the movement turned to the *Gedolim* of earlier generations, such as Rav

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Aharon Kotler, Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, the Lubavitcher Rebbe and Rav Moshe Feinstein, both for practical advice and *psak halacha*, and how closely the Young Israel leaders actually followed their advice.

It is also interesting to note how often Young Israel leaders made direct appeals to the movement to support the cash-strapped yeshivas of their day, such as Yeshiva Torah Vodaath and Yeshiva University, at a time when Young Israel itself was struggling to find enough funds to support its own operations and programming initiatives.

As the President of National Council, I was fascinated to discover from the material in the archives that my predecessors of 60 and 80 years ago had to deal with many of the same kinds of internal challenges that I have had to confront over the past decade. There have always been individual branches that had to be cautioned, or even disciplined, because of their infractions against Young Israel's trademark synagogue standards, or their failure to keep up with their National Council dues payments. This is a reflection of the underlying tension that has always existed between the central authority of the National Council and the independence of the individual branches, and the constant struggle to find the right balance between the two.

More important, it has been reassuring to see the compelling evidence in the archives that, after a century of turmoil, accomplishment and change, the essential qualities of the movement remain intact. Young Israel has always been characterized by its singular devotion to Torah-true-Judaism, as exemplified by the *Shulchan Aruch*.

Our central contribution to American and world Jewry is that we have always understood how to apply Torah to the practical realities of our times, and thus manifest its validity and truth. And, while we must adapt our tactics and methods to the ever-changing Jewish condition, we do so with confidence because what we advocate and defend remains immutably the same. Our supreme loyalty is to G-d and His Torah.

Throughout the long history of Young Israel, its primary objective has been to mold Jewish lives in pursuit of the Jewish ideal—an ideal based on the written and oral Torah law. We believe today, as we did a century ago, that adherence to classic Jewish thought and traditional Jewish values remains the only path to Jewish perpetuity.

Young Israel's most essential priorities remain the same – promoting recognition of the sanctity of *Shabbos*, scrupulous observance of the laws of *Kashruth*, defending the security of the State of Israel and the welfare of our brethren living there, support for Jewish education and Torah study, both in our homes and synagogues and through our support for the yeshivas in the United States and in Israel. All of this is in support of our highest aim -- for Torah-true-Judaism to be practiced by all.

That has also been the underlying motivation for the most recent initiatives of the National Council during my years as President. For example, when Young Israel recognized that the contemporary Orthodox American Jewish community required an experience-based, in-service training program for both advanced rabbinical students and practicing pulpit rabbis, it established the Rabbinical Training Program.

The need to help make it possible for all Jews to practice Torah-true Judaism was also the driving force behind Young Israel's earlier landmark initiatives, such as the creation of Kosher Dining Clubs on colleges campuses; the establishment of an employment bureau to find jobs for *Shomer Shabbos* workers; political lobbying and advocacy to block the passage of anti-*Shechita* legislation; launching community-wide initiatives to build *mikvaos* and encourage their widespread use. And, of course, from its inception, Young Israel has supported the creation of a Jewish State in the historic Land of Israel, and fought to defend its security and right to exist.

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Years ago, one of my predecessors declared, "Young Israel is the organization that saved *Yiddishkeit* in America." He went on to say that: "We based our philosophy, not merely on the building of places of prayer, but rather on building worshipers. We have staked everything, not on the present, but on the future." I couldn't agree more.

Now, as we observe our 100th anniversary, we look forward to a new period of growth as we employ today's technology in the service of *Klal Yisrael*.

I conclude with words from the cover of the Fall, 1957 issue of *Viewpoint* that, I believe, best describe the past, present, and future responsibility of Young Israel: "*We dedicate ourselves to help young people see with their hearts that the ways of their fathers and their promised land are meant for them as well as us...that the old Torah and old Israel are for Young Israel...and that we have something good to preserve, something of which to be respectfully proud; to prove to all that what's good for the fathers is also good for the sons.*"

– Shlomo Mostofsky, November, 2011

American Jewry, Now and Then

AMERICAN JEWRY, NOW AND THEN

By Joel Saibel

AMERICAN JEWRY 2012

In the second decade of the 21st century, Orthodoxy is alive and well and flourishing in New York and in medium and smaller-size Jewish communities throughout North America and in Israel as well. Thanks in large measure to the courageous and pioneering initiatives of the dedicated members of Young Israel, and the unparalleled skill and commitment of its inspired leaders – both lay and professional – Orthodoxy clearly has become the fastest-growing movement of Judaism today. With Reform, which dominated the American Jewish scene a century ago, barely treading water, and the Conservative movement eroding precipitously, Orthodoxy has surged to the fore, both in terms of its growing number of adherents, and its profound impact in re-shaping the character of American Jewish life.

At the forefront of this surge – as it has been since its inception – is the National Council of Young Israel. The Young Israel has pioneered the concept of uncompromising Jewish religious revival in America, revolutionizing the contemporary American Orthodox synagogues, and creating a firm foundation for the explosive growth of strong Orthodox communities, religious schools and communal institutions today.

By its example – by its very existence alone – it has imbued Orthodoxy with new hope, and has been responsible for changes that Young Israel fought to institute and which have now become the norm in American Jewish life and activities. Today, because of the efforts of Young Israel and its leaders, no Orthodox Jew need fear losing his or her job because of Sabbath observance. The wearing of *yarmulkas* in schools, courtrooms and corporate boardrooms has become a commonly accepted practice. Proudly identifiable Orthodox Jews have achieved positions of prominence in the upper echelons of government, commerce and finance, and, more and more, top executive positions in Jewish federations and other secular Jewish communal organizations are being occupied by those who openly espouse their Orthodox Jewish faith.

Today, all American Orthodox Jews can live the dream which inspired the founders of the Young Israel movement a century ago. They attend the finest colleges, universities and *yeshivos*, proliferate in the professions and enjoy a comfortable suburban lifestyle – all while faithfully practicing the religion of their ancestors. And, according to every criterion of Jewish demographic studies, Orthodoxy is the only form of Judaism today to retain the commitment of the children and grandchildren of its adherents, thus insuring the continuity of Torah-true life and its eternal values for future generations.

America, too, has undergone profound changes in the last century. The world today is in a state of ferment. The last 100 years have been marked by the greatest transformation in the saga of civilization. What epochal events have transpired -- the most destructive war in history...the creation of weapons – unimaginable in the era of mass Jewish migration to America – that, in a brief instant, can obliterate mankind from the face of the Earth. And, on the positive side of the ledger, the century has been marked by far-reaching progress in the conquest of disease, man's successful penetration of space and previously undreamed of scientific and technological advances that have vastly improved the living standards of millions. The speed with which our age has moved forward staggers the imagination -- from the telephone to the internet; from a rudimentary automobile industry to passenger flights to the moon; from a band of hardy pioneers draining malarial swamps in the Turkish Province of Palestine to

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a proud and flourishing independent Jewish State of Israel that has made the words of the prophets of the Old Testament begin to come true; from “the war to end all wars,” to the world struggle against Islamofascism.

It has been a century of unparalleled tragedy and triumph for the Jewish people as well, including mass population migrations, the horror of the Holocaust, the dramatic rise of the State of Israel from the ashes of Europe, the rebirth of a nearly-lost Torah world in America and Israel, and the liberation of more than a million oppressed Soviet Jews.

It is as if mankind, after building up steam for thousands of years, has suddenly burst forth with all its creative energies.

If past history is any criterion, tomorrow's Jewish community will differ markedly from that of today. But, whether the change is evolutionary or revolutionary, it is the Young Israel movement – as it has done for a century – that will continue to play a vital role in preserving and enriching Orthodox Jewish life.

The bleak Jewish orphanages of yesteryear have disappeared. Today, the emphasis has shifted to individual attention and care by professionally trained social workers.

The settlement houses – so vital in assimilating the vast waves of Eastern European Jewish immigrants – have closed their doors. Their successors – today's Jewish community centers – offer meaningful leisure-time activities and group programs for young and old alike.

The one room *cheders* – which struggled to provide the bare minimum of Jewish knowledge to previous generations -- have evolved into a modern, progressive, community-wide educational network, successfully implementing an intensive program of maximum Jewish education for both boys and girls.

The dispensaries and nursing homes of old have evolved into outstanding geriatric centers, concerned with patient welfare and rehabilitation, as advances in medical knowledge have vastly extended our years of healthy, productive living.

The soup kitchens, food baskets and sewing circles that served the immigrant generation are gone. Their role today is being filled primarily by dynamic social service agencies, equipped to deal in depth with problems of conflicts in contemporary living, and to help us make the necessary adjustments in our lives.

But, though change is inevitable, one of the strongest strands that binds together the past, the present and the future of the Orthodox Jewish community is the National Council of Young Israel, a central dynamic force in perpetuating timeless, Torah-true ideals and principles in meeting the day-to-day challenges of Jewish living in the 21st century– and for many years to come.

Throughout its long and distinguished history, as the pioneer of Jewish religious revival in America, the watchword and the distinguishing characteristic of the Young Israel movement have been its adaptability and its innovative ability to respond to the pressing communal needs of the day.

From the outset the Young Israel movement did not confine itself to synagogue activism alone. In community after community, Young Israel became the mobilizing force behind virtually every aspect of Jewish communal life, and the central focus in the lives of all members of the family. Youth flocked to Young Israel to meet and interact with their peers in a wholesome Jewish environment. Women's League provided dynamic structure in which creative and dedicated Young Israel women could work side-by-side with Young Israel men to advance shared goals for the benefit of their community and Jews everywhere. Long before its observance came into vogue, Young Israel promoted the understanding and observance of the *mitzvah* of *Taharas Hamishpacha* by American Jews by distributing English language books on this subject, and by supporting the construction of *mikavos* throughout the country.

Before *yeshivos* and day schools proliferated, Young Israel branches, together with the National

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Council, conducted a broad range of ambitious and advanced educational programs that appealed to every age, gender and background. As a result, many American-raised Torah personalities, who today occupy key positions as yeshiva *rebbeim*, administrators, *Roshei Yeshiva*, authors and *poskim* were positively influenced by Young Israel in their formative years and continued to encourage and support its activities throughout their careers. Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook of Palestine said: “Young Israel is *mein Liebling* (my darling).” Rabbi Soloveitchik recalled that, when he first came to Boston, Young Israel was the only synagogue that would open its doors to him. The Young Israel movement fanned the dying embers of Jewish observance in America during the early years of the 20th century and laid the communal foundations for the later Torah institutions founded by the survivors of the Holocaust and the fast-growing and vibrantly Orthodox communities we have today. When Rabbi Aaron Kotler, the founder of the *kollel* movement in America, first came to these shores, he turned to Young Israel leadership for support, sensing that in Young Israel he would find acceptance of an in-depth Torah scholarship which he sought to instill in American Jewish youth.

After America entered World War II, Young Israel organized a large-scale program to provide kosher food and other essentials for Jewish observance to Jewish servicemen stationed around the world.

Renowned for its activism in behalf of Jews wherever they may be, the Young Israel movement has focused always on the well-being of the people and the land of Israel. During Israel’s War of Independence, the Young Israel movement’s Manhattan headquarters served as the collection point for arms that were clandestinely shipped to the Jewish freedom fighters when the U.S. Government had imposed an embargo on the shipment of these desperately needed weapons to the strife-ridden region.

Since that time, the Young Israel movement has come to the assistance of our brethren in Israel with whatever challenge they have faced.

Young Israel courageously speaks out when it believes that *halacha* is being violated or that the Torah is denigrated. In 1954, Young Israel protested outside the Israeli Consulate in New York in opposition to Israel's National Service law. In 1964, it supported the decision of Israel's Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Nissim not to meet with the Pope on his visit to Israel. The National Council's public stand against the Gaza disengagement and any proposals to divide Jerusalem is consistent with Young Israel's principled policies since its inception.

Through the years, Young Israel has been true to the vision of its founders – to create a movement dedicated to unadulterated Judaism, as set forth in the *Shulchan Aruch*, and as interpreted by our contemporary *Gedolim*. The Young Israel movement has also long advocated for a united Orthodox front that would consult with the Torah leader for direction, not only on purely *halachic* matters, but also on non-legal matters, including public policy issues. Indeed, the National Council Constitution codifies that the *Vaad Halacha* Committee of the Young Israel Council of Rabbis sets the organization's major *halachic* guidelines.

Young Israel conducts a training program for those wishing to enter the rabbinate. It offers a broad variety of special *shiurim* by telephone, in person and over the Internet, and publications for long-time rabbis as well as for those just beginning their pulpit careers.

The National Council's ongoing services to its member branches are legion. It assists branches with governance issues. The *Vaad Halacha* is always available to resolve disputes between branches. NCYI helps branches with zoning issues. Through its Endowment Fund, the Council provides interest-free loans to branches for capital improvements.

In the early years of the movement, Young Israel made heroic efforts to make up for the inadequate Jewish educational institutions of the era, with aggressive Torah education programs hosted on a rotating basis at the local branches, and, after World War II, at the Young Israel headquarters building in mid-Manhattan. After the establishment, with Young Israel’s support, of the nationwide

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network of Hebrew day schools, those programs were no longer necessary, but the National Council has continued to provide innovative Torah education publications and materials to enhance the experience of *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* in Young Israel synagogues.

Since its inception, whenever tragedy strikes, the National Council assists both Young Israel and non-Young Israel communities which have been devastated by natural or man-made disasters. For example, after both World War I and World War II, Young Israel conducted drives to bring relief to the Jews of Europe and the survivors of the Holocaust. In 2005, the National Council raised a significant amount of money to help the non-Young Israel Orthodox synagogue in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

The Council offers ongoing lectures and programming for all its branches. Each High Holiday season, the Council produces the “Awaken” video, which is shown in many branches. Besides organizing unique missions to Israel, NCYI enables persons with special needs to travel there to visit various *rabbonim* for *brochos* and to pray at our holy sites that otherwise would have been inaccessible to them.

NCYI has an Israel office at Heichal Shlomo, sharing a floor with the Council of Young Israel Rabbis of Israel.

Through the years, Young Israel has grown and matured, ever following the sacred vision of its founders – to create a movement dedicated to unadulterated Judaism, as set forth in the *Shulchan Aruch*, and as interpreted by our contemporary Torah leaders. While changing with its constituency, Young Israel has ever remained committed to the standards and morals that first made it synonymous with Torah-true Judaism – a commitment that has earned the movement the respect and admiration of both the Orthodox and the general community as well.

Today, Young Israel is a multi-generational grass roots movement, helping its members -- successful businessmen and professionals who function within the mainstream of American society -- maintain a religious home life by promoting the observance of *Shabbos*, *Taharas Hamishpocha* and *Kashrus*.

Unique among the dynamic forces in American Orthodox life today, the Young Israel movement seeks to unite all those who share Orthodoxy's core religious values, remaining open to Jews of all backgrounds who seek to participate in its programs and services.

Young Israel is justifiably proud of its heritage as the prototype of the contemporary American Orthodox synagogue that helped build the foundation for the dramatic renaissance of Orthodoxy in America after World War II. From the moment of its formation, Young Israel has been dedicated to the creation of Torah-living, both on the American scene and abroad. It has always spoken the truth courageously even when this truth was highly unpopular. Whenever Jewish interests were endangered, Young Israel raised its voice courageously, even when others in the community considered it the better part of valor to sit quietly or turn their backs. Its militancy is the result of the principled resolve of the founding fathers to cling, at all costs, to Judaism's spiritual heritage and not to permit this heritage to be despoiled by compromise or political expediency.

Today, Young Israel continues to epitomize its roots as the original Jewish outreach organization, functioning in Jewish communities large and small throughout North America. Designed specifically to appeal to Jews raised in the contemporary American milieu, it provides a variety of services in a warm and welcoming environment, attracting thousands of Jewish men and women of various backgrounds and previous affiliation. In the contemporary Young Israel synagogue, every Jew can find a meaningful expression of Jewish religious living in 21st century America.

In a world inured to suffering, Young Israel has educated its members to give to all worthy appeals and to derive a keen sense of satisfaction from so doing.

Since its inception, Young Israel has trained the next generation of Jewish leadership by offering

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ongoing classes, forums, debates and similar activities.

While in the forefront of efforts to develop and expand communal organizations and institutions, Young Israel remains ever vitally concerned with the welfare of every individual member of *Klal Yisrael*. Whether it is Jonathan Pollard, still languishing in prison for his actions to help safeguard the State of Israel, Israeli soldiers missing in action, or American Jewish youth who have become alienated from the Jewish heritage, or who are in danger of “falling through the cracks,” Young Israel reaches out with whatever help is appropriate to their given situation.

Over the past two decades, the National Council has been revitalized. Thanks to the efforts of Rabbi Pesach Lerner, its Executive Vice President, working closely with its National Presidents, Chaim Kaminetzky, the late Gerald Kaufman, and Stephen Z. Mostofsky, the National Council has rededicated itself to its original mission as an organization whose first priority is service to Young Israel branches and its members. After personally establishing ongoing contact between the National Council and the lay and rabbinic leaders of every Young Israel synagogue throughout the country, he rebuilt a two-way relationship of trust and support with the grassroots of the movement that has led to the formation of many new Young Israel programs and services. Under his distinguished leadership, the National Council has gained new respect throughout the community as the most representative and innovative force serving the entire spectrum of American Orthodox synagogues.

Faithfully maintaining the concept that the Torah transcends time and space, the Young Israel movement has manifested the beauty of cultural pluralism that enabled Orthodox Jews to fully observe the tenets of our faith without compromise, and yet become part of American culture. In short, Young Israel showed that the Torah without compromise could be observed – albeit with some difficulty – in America.

The Orthodox community of today flourishes and grows because Young Israel built the prototype of the authentic and effective American Orthodox synagogue with its outreach, warmth and compassion. It revealed the formula for halting the rapid decline of Orthodoxy, instilling in contemporary American Jews a deep commitment to Torah living, yeshiva education and support for Israel.

The Young Israel approach has withstood the test of time. Its unique amalgam of the American spirit and the Jewish heritage still strikes a resonant chord in the hearts of a broad spectrum of American Jewry.

As a movement, Young Israel remains committed to overcoming the challenges confronting American Jewry today. Not content to rest on its laurels as the most effective synagogue, youth and rabbinic service organization in the Orthodox Jewish community, Young Israel is eager to further broaden the scope of its activities to bring their benefits to the entire Orthodox community.

Inspired and guided by the principles upon which it was founded 100 years ago, and drawing upon a strong base of grassroots support, the Young Israel movement continues to apply its unique approach and proven expertise to successfully overcome the challenges that confront American and world Jewry today.

One hundred years ago, the picture was much bleaker. The landscape of American Jewry was tinged in a much more somber hue.

AMERICAN JEWRY 1912

As the 20th century dawned, Orthodox Jewry in America was in disarray – buffeted by the twin forces of alienation and assimilation, and propelled by the omnipresent need for economic survival. The sheer necessity of toiling six days a week in fetid garment district sweatshops just to put bread on table compelled thousands upon thousands of previously committed Jews to abandon their cherished observance of the Sabbath. At the same time, their children, succumbing to the siren lure of

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acculturation and Americanization, deserted the faith in droves for the chance to grab their rightful share of the great American dream. Torah Judaism, as lovingly practiced by our ancestors for millennia, was in full retreat.

This decline in the level of traditional Jewish observance did not begin in America. Almost a thousand years of anti-Semitic persecution and economic marginalization already had taken a tremendous toll on the Jewish communities in Europe. With the coming of the Enlightenment, the religious unity of European Jewry was further weakened by the influences of the Reform and Haskalah movements. Beset by endemic anti-Semitism, grinding poverty and constant hardships, the European Jewish community was beginning to crumble from these concerted internal attacks on its core spiritual and ideological values. These made the many attractions and freedoms of a new life in America all the more irresistible for European Jewish immigrants.

Between 1890 and 1914, a vast wave of Jewish immigration, predominantly from Eastern Europe, engulfed America's beckoning shores. Of the 2,500,000 souls who arrived here, some 2,000,000 settled in New York. At the turn of the century, 64,000 families were packed into 6,000 squalid tenement houses on Manhattan's Lower East Side, home to most of these impoverished Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants. This pulsing concentration of immigrant families from which sprang many political and communal leaders, constituted the core of an ephemeral new Jewish commonwealth in the Diaspora. Lured by tales of "streets paved with gold," the vast majority of these Jews had little to lose in coming to America, except perhaps their most precious possession – their Judaism.

Most abandoned their prior Orthodox observances soon after arriving from Europe, retaining only a nostalgic attachment to certain Orthodox traditions. The men shaved their beards, the women discarded their modest ways and dress, and focused on a new goal--rapid assimilation and setting their children on a path to materialistic success and acceptance in the American melting pot culture of the era. Many viewed their ancient Jewish heritage as a quaint anachronism to be discarded as an impediment to these new goals.

Neither the most pious, yeshiva-educated Jews, nor their rabbinic leaders participated in the great migrations in significant numbers. Presciently recognizing that, far from being a "golden land of economic opportunity," America, in reality, was the "golden land of assimilation," the rabbis, for the most part, vigorously preached against immigration. In 1894, the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the leading *halachic* authority of the times, issued an edict against mass migration to America. Believing that only in Poland could a Polish Jew live a proper religious life and raise his children "in Torah and piety," he demanded that his followers "prefer persecution in Europe to economic success in the United States." Impelled by repressive governmental policies and intensifying riots and pogroms, most Jews refused to heed this injunction and flooded the streets of America in droves.

For virtually all the new arrivals, the issue of keeping the Sabbath was the first and most formidable religious obstacle they had to face. Many found that the only jobs open to them were in the garment industry, working in miserable sweat shops, often under appalling conditions, for minimum wages.

But American industry at that time operated on a six-day-week. Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, was the only day of rest. Asking to take Saturday off for religious observance was impossible if you wanted to keep your job. Those who tried to keep *Shabbos* by not showing up for work were immediately fired, and blackballed, making it that much more difficult to find another job. Thus, as a result of pressing economic necessity, the overwhelming majority of these Jews – some 95 per-cent in all – were compelled to stop observing *Shabbos*. When that foundation of religious life collapsed, much of Jewish observance quickly followed. In family after family this pattern was repeated, until virtually all of those who arrived in America as observant Jews shed many of their religious practices soon after their arrival. Bereft of their familiar *shtetl* roots, and devoid of their outward symbols of Jewish

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distinctiveness, these formerly pious European Jews believed that the key to their future American success lay in rejecting their Jewish past.

In addition to all these outside pressures, the new immigrants were confronted by anger and resentment, sometimes bordering on hatred, from an unlikely source – their rich uptown brethren – the German Jews known as “Our Crowd,” who had come to America in the smaller migrations of the 1830s and 40s. Stating as itinerant peddlers, they quickly made their mark in department stores (Bloomingdale, Straus, Sanger); clothing manufacturing (Seligman), and banking and finance (Schiff, Lehman, Warburg, Kuhn, Loeb and Seligman).

Having dropped the basic mandates of Judaism even before emigrating, these “Uptown Jews” transplanted the tenets of the nascent German Reform Movement in their adopted homeland. In the guise of adapting to modernity and revitalizing American Jewish life, the American Reform temples made a mockery of ancient Jewish traditions of public prayer. Sermons were delivered in English, and organ music and choral singing, remarkably resembling the prayers in Protestant churches, were introduced. By 1880, 90 percent of the 200 synagogues in America were Reform. In its ideological doctrine articulated in the “Pittsburgh Platform” in 1885, the Reform movement abrogated the binding authority of all ritual laws “not adapted to the view and habits of modern civilization.”

Thus it was readily understandable that the uptown German Jews who had quickly become fully Americanized reacted with disdain toward the newly arrived poor, Yiddish-speaking, shabbily clad, religious, or recently religious, Jews from Eastern Europe. They worried that these downtrodden “poor relations” reflected badly on their more exalted status and feared that, despite the general religious tolerance prevailing in America, the “medieval Jews” would enhance anti-Semitism and exacerbate the social isolation and discrimination that were still rampant in early 20th century America.

So it was natural that the German Jews brought pressure on their Lower East Side “cousins” to quickly become Americanized. To expedite this process, the German Jews founded and headed a series of charitable communal organizations and institutions that would take the place of the synagogue as the preferred gathering-place of the newly-minted American-Jew. In rapid-fire order they created hospitals, orphan asylums, YMHAs, Jewish federations and the militantly secular/socialist labor unions all with one aim in mind – to purge the “medieval Jew,” and transform him, as rapidly as possible, into a “regular American.” And well they succeeded -- first with the parents, and almost immediately thereafter with their children.

THE BIRTH OF A YOUNG ISRAEL

In the early 20th century, three major conflicting influences competed for the allegiance of the young ghetto Jews on the Lower East Side of Manhattan – Orthodox Judaism, Americanism and Socialism. Regardless of the wishes of their parents, many of these young men and women left Judaism behind either out of ignorance of its true content or for the sake of expediency in striving for material success.

The new world of public school and the streets that these youngsters encountered often clashed violently with the Orthodox environment and attitudes of their home and *cheder*. Quickly learning English and adopting it as their first language, these young Jews quickly became imbued with American ideals of social equality and material success. Most public school teachers were Christian and their influence was substantial. Youngsters regarded their parents as “greenhorns” who could not understand the lures and blandishments of the street, and as something of an embarrassment. As a result the influence of Orthodoxy of their parents on these young Jews rapidly diminished.

Parents sought upward mobility for their children -- acceptance into American society, admission to colleges and universities and economic success as professionals were their primary aspirations. Attending public schools, learning English and blending into the American culture through

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sports, movies and other such activities was their main focus. The stereotypical Jewish joke about “my son, the doctor” and “my son, the lawyer” was a true manifestation of the American Dream for these immigrants from Eastern Europe. Their children were quick to comply, often excelling at school and voraciously partaking of the extra-curricular activities available in the public schools, as well as the programs and facilities sponsored by their wealthy uptown coreligionists.

For both these parents and their first-generation American children, Jewish education ranked low on their scale of priorities, and, in most cases, was rudimentary at best. Religious training was forced to take a back seat in competition with any activity that could improve their children’s chance for success. Boys joined the rough and tumble street life of the era, where they got a quick, practical education, picked up slang and learned American ways. They gradually stopped going to synagogue, gave up *cheder* at age 13, avoided Yiddish theaters, sought more sophisticated “uptown” amusement and dressed in the latest fashion. No longer could parents control their actions. The old world type *Landsmanschaft* synagogue had nothing to offer these Americanizing children who could not share their parents' nostalgia for the old country.

Much of the available Yiddish culture on the Lower East Side was anti-religious in nature as well. Socialist ideas had supplanted Judaism. Most proponents of the militantly secular Yiddish culture of the day sought to lure these young Jews away from their religious heritage with such outrageous practices as *Yom Kippur* balls and gala Friday night theater performances.

The third major influence of the ghetto was Socialism, which equally rejected both American and Jewish ideals. They followed the Marxian dictum that religion was “the opiate of the people,” and that American business institutions were designed to exploit the laboring class. Young Jewish men faced with this severe conflict of two competing interests had no true way to reconcile them. Something was needed to form the desired synthesis between the old and the new.

However, the lure of American culture, buttressed by the Jewish institutions of the day, such as the Educational Alliance and the Free Hebrew Schools, enabled the influence of Americanism to triumph over Socialism in the majority of Jewish youth. Unfortunately, in the overwhelming majority of cases, this competition resulted in allegiance to their Jewish religious heritage coming in a distant third, with dire consequences for the long term outlook for Orthodoxy in the American Jewish community.

Moreover, the ambiance of the existing Orthodox *shul-shteiblach* that proliferated on the Lower East Side of Manhattan was a significant deterrent to any young American-raised Jew who had any curiosity about his religious heritage. In these *shuls*, congregational prayer was frequently a *mélange* of tumult and disorder, and commercialism was rampant. Services were routinely interrupted so that *aliyos* and other honors could be auctioned off and sold to the highest bidder, robbing the “honor” of any real spiritual meaning, and debasing the prayers themselves. Because all sermons were delivered in Yiddish, their messages were lost on any English-speaking American-raised Jewish youth who happened to wander in--a mistake that they usually did not make twice. At these synagogues, they typically found themselves shut out entirely from participation in the services. As a result, they became completely turned off and alienated. Attending *shul* became a rare occurrence for these young people. Most would go only for the sake of family celebrations, for the High Holidays, or to stumble through the words of the *Kaddish* on a *Yahrzeit* in an awkward attempt to honor the memory of a departed father or mother. In addition, free thinking Socialist groups were issuing clarion calls to these vulnerable young Jews to join their ranks and abandon the traditions of the “old country.” Unfortunately, all too many of them did.

Though cultural strictures against intermarriage remained strong in this era and such deviations were extremely rare, virtually an entire generation of young American Jews grew up ignorant and alienated from Jewish belief and practices.

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It was against this background of massive dropouts from Orthodox Jewish life as it was then practiced that the first Young Israel group – the forerunner of today's vast international synagogue conglomerate – was formed. Its avowed purpose was to make traditional Judaism attractive to young American Jewish men and women and to intensify their Jewish identity and commitment. While 1912 has long been cited as the official date of the Young Israel movement's birth, the origins of Young Israel may be traced to a meeting that took place in October 1911 in the law offices of one of the most remarkable American Orthodox lay leaders of the 20th century, Benjamin Koenigsberg.

The event that precipitated this momentous decision was a Friday night lecture at Clinton Hall, in the heart of the Lower East Side, delivered by Rabbi Stephen Wise, the leader of the American Reform Movement, who was seeking to generate local support to establish a local branch of his Reform Free Synagogue. His spellbinding oratory mesmerized the young American-raised Jews in the audience who had never before heard Judaism discussed in English. But the kind of Judaism he preached to this audience bore little resemblance to the Judaism of their fathers, and adding insult to injury, Wise had the temerity to pass a collections plate during his presentation. This blatant violation of the Sabbath angered Koenigsberg, age 27, and two of his teenage friends, Joshua Horowitz and Max Grablowsky, who saw Wise's words and actions as a grave challenge to their religious heritage which they could not ignore. "We've got to do something about this," Horowitz told his friends, defining the Young Israel movement's fundamentally activist orientation.

This was one of the seeds that grew into the great tree of Young Israel. Dismayed by this open *chilul Shabbos*, Koenigsberg, Grablowsky and Horowitz initially turned to the President of the Jewish Kehila, Dr. Judah L. Magnes, who they knew shared their opposition to Wise's Reform philosophy. Along with several others who had attended the lecture, they met to determine how best to combat this flagrant assault on *halachic* Judaism. Other members of this founding group were Max and Bernard Oxenhandler, Moishe Krumbein, David B. Cohen, Louis L. Cohen and Moses Rosenthal.

Dr. Magnes had grown up in the Reform movement. He had served as spiritual leader of Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue in midtown Manhattan, the flagship of Reform Judaism, but was forced to resign his pulpit when he publicly spoke out against the planned marriage of the daughter of a temple trustee to a non-Jew.

He was a man of many contradictions. He was a man of peace, but waged war against the philosophies of Stephen Wise. In those hectic pre-World War I days, he was an outspoken pacifist, yet he was the founder of "Im Ain Ani Li Mi Li" (If I am not for myself, who will be?), which helped prepare self-defense for Jews against pogroms in Russia. He was an aristocrat, yet he spoke out in favor of the striking workers.

In his plans for a united Jewish *Kehilla* he was eager to include the Jews of the Lower East Side. Here was his opportunity. He was becoming more traditional, so he gave more than a compassionate ear to those pioneering protestors. He readily agreed to organize revival meetings and to obtain speakers, himself included, to deliver English lectures on Friday nights – anathema in those days when only lectures in Yiddish were permitted in most Orthodox synagogues -- that would attract young men and women back to Orthodoxy.

The original list of speakers consisted of Dr. Magnes, Prof. Israel Friedlander, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary and an officer of the Educational Alliance, Rabbi T.H. Hertz, later the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Rev. Dr. Jacob Kohn and Mordecai Kaplan, at a time when he was still considered to be an Orthodox rabbi. For many years, the Friday night lectures spread the basic idea of Young Israel – that Orthodox Judaism and modern Americanism could go hand in hand without conflict.

The group originally took the name Hebrew Circle. However, Dr. Magnes thought that it would be more effective for the group to have a name that would focus on the younger element it sought to

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attract. At a meeting on December 28, 1912, Joshua Horowitz said, "How about Young Israel?" and Magnes said, "That's it." The name stuck, but finding a location for these revolutionary lectures and housing for the speakers initially proved to be a bit more problematic.

After the first few meetings in the *Kehillah* building with Dr. Magnes, the intrepid pioneers met in the night-time office of Ben Koenigsberg in the rear of his Lower East Side apartment at 97 Attorney Street, to discuss and plan a revival project. They also met in the *Beth Midrosh* room of the *Pike Street Shul*, in the IMBA building at 311 East Broadway, and later in the basement of the Jewish Maternity Hospital at 270 East Broadway.

Since its inception, the Young Israel movement has been an instrument of service to the Jewish people everywhere. When Young Israel appeared on the American scene, its program was clear and its ideology easily expounded and readily accepted. Jewish youth found neither place nor pleasure in most contemporary Orthodox Synagogues. Sermons, lectures and classes in the English language were associated, in the public mind, with Reform Judaism. Disorder, crass commercialism, and lack of outward beauty repelled many young men and women from associating with Orthodox houses of worship. Moreover, they were offered no opportunity to participate in the life of the congregation. It was against these conditions that Young Israel rebelled. This revolt, which was unique for the times, precipitated a veritable revolution in traditional Judaism. For the fledgling movement rebelled, not by withdrawal, but by improvement, not by rejecting the content of traditional Jewish life, but by creating for this content a decorous and modern garb. Proclaiming unswerving loyalty to Jewish law and ceremonial, Young Israel created synagogues, organized classes, established youth clubs and set into motion a transformation that, in the subsequent opinion of many leaders of pre-World War II American Orthodoxy, saved Torah Judaism in this country.

From the outset, Young Israel made profound contributions to strengthen religious values in the United States and began to build the roots of an organization in Israel. It quickly established a precedent that became the model for other American Orthodox congregations. More and more synagogues engaged English-speaking Rabbis and made the English sermon and lecture part and parcel of their worship and program. That this proved to be a tremendous stimulus for the *yeshivos* in the United States has been largely overlooked. The Orthodox rabbinate became an attractive career for gifted young men. Today, there hardly is an Orthodox synagogue that does not embody those principles that Young Israel introduced years ago and that single-handedly revitalized American Orthodox Jewry.

Young Israel set a new standard of living for American Orthodox Jews. Businessmen making their luncheon or dinner appointments only in kosher restaurants; lawyers, physicians, engineers, accountants; teachers and college professors in whose working schedule the *Shabbos Kodesh* and the *Yom Tov* is kept inviolate; stenographers, clerks and other wage earners refusing to consider jobs necessitating work on the Sabbath; students in American colleges and universities and civil servants requesting substitute examinations--and getting them -- whenever such examinations are scheduled in conflict with their observance -- all this is part of the Young Israel revolution, proving what Young Israel has always proclaimed as the compatibility of Torah Judaism and Americanism.

The first Young Israel organization inaugurated the slogan: "Back to the Synagogue," and endeavored to make the synagogue a *mikdash me'at*. From its inception, Young Israel groups served as educational centers catering to all -- among the very few organizations of that era that sought to provide adults with a Jewish education. They adopted a Constitution that set forth the objectives of the organization as follows:

1. To arouse and intensify the Jewish consciousness of our young men and women whose Judaism is dormant;
2. To awaken Jewish young men and women in their duties and responsibilities as Jews;
3. To create a feeling of sympathy for the Jewish religion, Jewish life in the past and in the

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present, and Jewish ideals;

4. To strengthen the bonds of unity among all the divisions of the Jewish people;

To accomplish these aims, we propose:

1. To provide proper facilities for the dissemination of knowledge about the Jewish faith, Jewish history and literature, Jewish life and ideals; and

2. To undertake and engage in such practical work as will tend to strengthen the Jewish people and make Judaism a vital and living force.

One of the nascent Young Israel movement's first leaders was Moses Rosenthal, a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), which, in those days taught Torah-true Judaism. Rosenthal was urged by Dr. Magnes to serve as President of the Friday night lecture project, and gave him, as his first task, the job of finding a suitable place to hold the first lecture. Max was acquainted with many of the trustees of the Kalverier Pike Street *Shul* because his father owned a local book store which served as a provider for the *shul*. He therefore felt comfortable asking them for permission to use their *shul* for the event. At first, his request was denied, because it was then unprecedented to permit lectures in English in a *shul*. Finally, however, after much pleading and cajoling, the Kalverier officers grudgingly gave their consent, with the proviso that the lecture be repeated Saturday morning in Yiddish for the benefit of the members of the congregation. Even though Dr. Magnes knew little Yiddish, he agreed to the condition and became the first speaker, delivering the first Young Israel lecture on January 10, 1913.

Because Dr. Magnes was widely respected as a champion of the Jewish poor and oppressed, news of his lecture spread through the community like wildfire, and, according to the organizers, more than 5,000 persons tried to get into the *shul* to hear him. Mounted police were needed to restrain the vast throng from breaking down the gates to gain access to the *shul*. Dr. Magnes' eloquent address was a tremendous success. It made a profound impact, and marked the birth of what is today the world-wide Young Israel movement.

In reporting on the creation of the new group in January 1913, two Anglo-Jewish newspapers wrote: "The movement is not Orthodox or Reform. It is not Zionistic or Socialistic. It intends to awaken Jewish men and women to their responsibilities in whatever form these responsibilities are conceived." This unaffiliated stance gave the new Young Israel movement a universal appeal to modern, American youth who did not want to be associated with ghetto Judaism or partisan politics.

The leaders of the *Pike Street Shul* would lend their synagogue as a site for Young Israel Friday night lectures for only one month, and no more. So, in February 1913, Professor Friedlander sent Moses Rosenthal with a letter of introduction to the Educational Alliance to try to secure a room in their building for Young Israel meetings, but to no avail. None of the local synagogues were willing to donate light and heat for more than a month of lectures, so Young Israel had to be constantly on the move. Every four weeks they brought their message of Jewish revival to another section of the Lower East Side. The first year they traveled from the *Pike Street Shul* to the Rumanisher on Rivington Street; from Rivington Street to the Bialystoker on Willet Street, from Willet to the imposing *Eldridge Street Shool*.

Despite the efforts of Stephen Wise and others, neither Reform nor Conservatism ever achieved a lasting success on the East Side. The Orthodox community, however, was divided into what the younger element viewed as the cold Jews of the larger synagogues and the old-world Jews of the *shtibelech*. Most of the recognized Orthodox leaders of the day still viewed the Young Israel movement as a dangerous experiment, and were disturbed by the influence upon it of people like Magnes and Friedlander.

In its early days, when the lines between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism were still blurred, the Young Israel received support and guidance from the leaders of the Jewish Theological Seminary

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and found lecturers from its ranks. This collaboration with JTS figures lasted until the mid-1920s, when the Conservative movement moved further away from Orthodoxy. With the prodding of such dedicated leaders as Irving Bunim, Moses H. Hoenig, Hyman Goldstein, Charles Levine and Pinchas Ieson, and with the assistance of Dr. Bernard Revel, president of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Yeshiva, Young Israel made a clean break with the Conservative movement, and by then was firmly ensconced in the Orthodox camp. As a result, Young Israel received the approbation and support of such right-wing figures as Rabbi Eliezer Silver, president of the Agudath Harabanim, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneerson, and Rabbi Isaac Scher, dean of the Slabodka Yeshiva.

In one of his early lectures, Dr. Magnes told Young Israelites that it is in their power to build or destroy Judaism in America. They should seek inspiration in Torah, and emphasize Jewish history, Jewish tradition, the Hebrew language and Zionism, which are the essential sources of Judaism.

Responding to this clarion call, Young Israel expanded its programmatic activities. It merged with the model synagogue group, in which many of the same young people were involved, and quickly attracted a growing membership. It organized a mass meeting at the Educational Alliance at which Cyrus L. Sulzberger, vice-chairman of the *Kehillah*, presided, and joined with the Jewish Sabbath Association and several other organizations to form an employment agency that would provide positions for Sabbath observers. It took a stand on Sabbath observance and Zionism, and inaugurated social activities that gave the youth of that day a wholesome forum in which to mingle, form lasting friendships and find suitable *shidduchim*.

The original Young Israel Friday Night Forum continued for many years, with Mr. Koenigsberg holding the chairmanship, and providing home hospitality for the speakers, without interruption until 1948.

THE MODEL SYNAGOGUE

A second, partially overlapping group which helped to found the Young Israel movement consisted of teenage boys on the Lower East Side who were concerned with the deplorable conditions in the local synagogues. Their activities led to the formation of what was to become the prototype for the successful American Orthodox synagogue we know today. Its leaders were Saul Abramson, Moishe Krumbein, Max and Bernard Oxenhandler, Sam Rosenthal, Louis L. Cohen and Morris Horowitz, some of whom were already involved in the Young Israel Forum group. What they created presented a vivid contrast to the chaotic, all Yiddish-speaking *chevras* of their fathers in which they were not allowed to participate at all.

The origins of this type of congregation can be traced to 1908, when a group seeking to reorganize and improve the Jewish education system in New York City summoned Dr. Samson Benderly from Philadelphia. He introduced the *Ivrith B'Ivrith* system in the Downtown Talmud Torah, of which Ben Koenigsberg was already a director, eliminating instruction in Yiddish. Benderly also directed the music teacher, Gershon Efros, to instruct the boys in synagogue melodies. Itz Koenigsberg, one of Ben's younger brothers, was among Efros' students, and he eventually organized his friends into a boys' *minyan* at the *Talmud Torah* in 1910. The "older" founders of Young Israel frequently visited this *minyan* after attending services at their fathers' *chevra*. It was at this boys' *minyan* that these young pioneers practiced and perfected many of the melodies that later became some of the main attractions of Young Israel's sing-along prayer services.

Brothers Max and Bernard Oxenhandler, were among the founders of the Young Israel Synagogue group. Max sang in his father's synagogue's choir, and Bernie actually toured for a short time as a "wonder-child" cantor. They were invited to lead the services in the largest *Ashkenaz* synagogues – but not in their father's *shul*. Despite their acclaim as members of a choir, they had no other opportunity to showcase their liturgical talent. Then, on a long, hot Saturday afternoon in 1913,

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when Max, Bernie, and five other members of the boy's *minyan* (Saul Abramson, Moishe Krumbein, Sam Rosenthal, Louis L. Cohen and Morris Horowitz), were walking together on East Broadway, they were asked to help make a *minyan* in a storefront *shul* at 205 East Broadway. Afterward, when the *shul* elders asked the boys if they could come every *Shabbos* to help make the *minyan* they agreed, but only on condition that they be allowed to conduct the service every other week. The synagogue elders acquiesced. And so it was that Max Oxenhandler led the *davening* the first *Shabbos* and introduced the congregational singing of *Shema Yisroel*. The next time the boys led the *minyan*, more melodies were added to the repertoire, all of which they had learned at the *Talmud Torah*. The songs that were sung at that *minyan* and the manner in which services were conducted remain the hallmark of Young Israel to the present day. The bargain was kept, but by the third week the delighted leaders of the storefront synagogue at 205 East Broadway told the boys: "*Veist ir vus, yungeleit-nemt iber im gantzen!*" ("You know what, boys, why don't you take over the davening.") And take over they did. The number of Young Jews flocking to the East Broadway *shul* kept increasing and the girls of their circle also flocked to the services. Ida Skwirsky, Anna Swernolsky, Bertha Lebendiger and Augusta Koenigsberg (Ben's sister) were among the first girls to attend.

They remained at their storefront location for three months, and this unique synagogue soon became a popular attraction for East Side Youth. It was the only place they could go and still feel part of the congregation. But it then became clear that the *minyan* needed a larger venue to accommodate the youth who overflowed the storefront. With the help of Dr. Friedlander, the group received permission to move its *Shabbos* services a few doors away to the second floor of the Educational Alliance building at 195 East Broadway. The boys named it the Model Synagogue, and for the first few years, it operated independently of the Young Israel Friday Night Forum lectures, but the two groups included many of the same youth, and their goals closely complemented each other.

This was not the first attempt to create a youth-friendly traditional synagogue on the Lower East Side. As far back as 1901, the Jewish Endeavor Society had been formed by students of the Jewish Theological Seminary to provide the younger American generation on the Lower East Side with educational and cultural programs and dignified services, but, by 1909, the Society's efforts had ceased.

Soon after the relocation of the Model Synagogue to the Educational Alliance, an ambitious young lawyer named Rabbi Israel Odes became its President. To generate financial support for the Model Synagogue, he arranged for a historic mass meeting at the Norfolk Street *Beth Midrash Hagadol* and persuaded the prominent philanthropist Jacob Schiff to be the guest speaker.

Though the rally was called for a Sunday evening, by three o'clock in the afternoon Norfolk Street was already a solid mass of humanity. Inside the synagogue, people stood on top of each other, on the window sills and on the balcony railings to listen. His speech was short. Schiff said that even though he himself was brought up as a Reform Jew he knew that Judaism cannot survive without Orthodoxy, and was delighted that a group of young American Jews was interested in keeping alive the age-old traditions. To encourage them, Schiff announced, to thunderous applause, that he would double any amount raised at the meeting. Hundreds of the poverty-stricken Jews of the Lower East Side gave whatever they could afford on the spot, mostly in quarters and dimes. Others made pledges, requiring the young members of the Model Synagogue to go from house to house in pairs, in order to collect. Once members of the committee came to a tenement apartment to collect on a pledge and found an old lady sick in bed. When they hesitated to take the quarter she dug out from the knotted handkerchief under her pillow, she insisted, declaring that, "*A neder is heilig!*" ("A pledge is holy.")

Ironically, the financial security of the Model Synagogue was short-lived. The money collected at the Norfolk Street meeting, including Jacob Schiff's generous matching contribution, was placed for safe-keeping in Jarmulowsky's Bank on Canal Street. The bank had been founded in 1873 by Sender Jarmulowsky, a former *talmid* of the yeshiva at Volozhin, who made his fortune by financing the

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steerage passage of tens of thousands of Russian and Polish Jews to America. Holding the deposits of over 60,000 East European immigrants, Jarmulowsky built the largest Jewish-owned commercial bank on the Lower East Side. He was also one of American Jewry's first great Orthodox philanthropists. He was responsible for the erection of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, and contributed to the founding of both the Orthodox Union and the Jewish Theological Seminary. After his death, in 1912, the bank was taken over by his sons Louis and Meyer. Meyer promptly invested the bank's capital in real estate speculation, with the purchase of 37 buildings in Harlem (then still a Jewish neighborhood). However, when World War I broke out in Europe in July, 1914, it started a catastrophic bank run. Thousands of immigrants wanting to send money to their relatives in Europe stormed the bank, demanding their deposits, but with over \$1.75 million of its cash tied up in Harlem real estate, the bank was unable to meet the demands, and closed its doors. Those were the days before deposit insurance, so when the residents of the Lower East Side lost their life savings, so did the treasury of the Model Synagogue.

In 1917, strong differences arose between the founders of the Model Synagogue who objected to changes proposed by its president, Odes. When Odes decided to create his own *minyán* using the same Model Synagogue name, to avoid confusion, the originators of the *minyán* decided that they needed a new name. Since most of them already belonged to the Young Israel Forum, they selected the name of Young Israel Synagogue for their *minyán*, and elected Sam Rosenthal as their first President. The two Young Israel groups, one a Friday night forum, and the second a Shabbos *minyán*, initially functioned independently, but by January, 1918, Dr. Friedlander convinced them that it would be in their best interests to merge, under the name Young Israel Synagogue.

YOUNG ISRAEL'S GROWTH

Young Israel quickly recognized that it needed synagogues of its own to overcome the religious apathy prevalent among most Jewish youth. So, starting in 1915, congregations of young adults, replete with innovations designed to attract American-raised, English-speaking Jewish youth, were established on the Lower East Side and elsewhere throughout New York. These synagogues employed no rabbis or cantors. Their services featured English sermons and congregational singing. To enable even the poorest in the community to feel welcome, Young Israel discouraged all forms of commercialism, and forbade the acceptance of payment in return for *aliyas* or any other synagogue honor. The branches also sponsored English-language lectures and social events for the young adults who flocked to the branch synagogues, which most of the older generation Eastern European rabbis viewed as problematic accommodations to American society. The prayer services themselves were strictly Orthodox, and conducted with an impeccable standard of decorum that set it apart from the usual atmosphere of noisy conversation and disorder which was common to most other places of worship.

The lectures and prayer services became a springboard for more than a score of different cultural and social expressions of the Young Israel ideal. It became more than a synagogue. It developed into a great international movement designed to hold the allegiance or bring back a generation of American-raised Jewish youth to the altars of the unadulterated faith of our forefathers. Its goals were the same as those of the Young Israel we know today: the advancement and perpetuation of traditional Torah Judaism among the American Jewish youth; the fostering of a love for the Jewish people and the Jewish way of life; the spread of Jewish education; the creation of a deeper reverence for Israel's glorious past and a firm belief in its future. This was the beginning of an idea that captured the minds of generations of American Jewish youth and led them back to the ranks of Orthodox Judaism.

The Young Israel synagogue envisioned itself as much more than just a place for prayer services. In short order it became -- and continues to serve today -- as the fulcrum of a diversified movement, providing programs and services that address a plethora of social, educational and

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recreational, as well as religious needs, and providing a widely recognized gold standard for *halachic* synagogue standards. As stated in the preamble of the first Constitution of the National Council of Young Israel:

“The aims and purposes of the organization shall be to foster and maintain a program of spiritual, cultural, social and communal activities towards the development and perpetuation of traditional Torah-true Judaism; and to instill into American Jewish youth an understanding and appreciation of the high ethical and spiritual values of Judaism and demonstrate the compatibility of the ancient faith of Israel with good Americanism.”

One of the axiomatic principles of Young Israel has always been that one need not compromise on any principle of Judaism, or any law or custom, to be thoroughly compatible with the American *modus vivendi*.

Initially, the Young Israel movement benefitted greatly from Jewish leaders who may have had non-Orthodox affiliations, but who were nonetheless sympathetic and supportive of its Orthodox goals. We have already seen the important contributions made by Dr. Judah Magnes to the founding of the Young Israel movement. Similarly, the cooperation of Dr. Israel Friedlander, a professor of Bible at JTS and Columbia University, and a director of the Educational Alliance, helped to provide Young Israel with a convenient base of operations at the Educational Alliance building during its formative years. He became a devoted follower of the Young Israel movement and participated in its many functions. Though he lived in New Jersey, Dr. Friedlander spent many a *Shabbos* away from home so he could give the Friday night lecture. Tragically, Dr. Friedlander was killed in 1920 while on a volunteer aid mission to help Jewish war refugees in Europe. In 1922, Dr. Magnes left the Young Israel movement behind when he made *Aliyah* to become one of the founders of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, serving as its first chancellor and later as President.

Though they were a distinct minority, it was this intrepid band of dedicated and determined young Jews who wanted to remain Jewish, but felt that changes were necessary, who founded the Young Israel on the premise that only instituting modern and innovative methods would bring their brethren back to the fold.

Soon plans were formulated to aid City officials and Jewish leaders in enforcing the Sabbath and Kosher bills passed by the legislature in 1917. In addition, the fledgling Young Israel groups cooperated in a wide range of philanthropic and Zionist projects.

Two of the major early leaders of the Young Israel Synagogue were Rabbi Dr. David Stern and Harry Fromberg. Rabbi Stern was the spiritual and educational guide while Mr. Fromberg served as President for a number of years.

Young Israel and the Model Synagogue functioned as two independent organizations. Their aims were somewhat similar, but the programs chosen were different. Both groups were unique in that they were created by young people seeking to correct certain evils and to provide for their spiritual, educational and social needs.

The preamble of the Constitution of the Young Israel Organization provides a clear picture of what was being attempted. Its stated objectives were: “to arouse and intensify the Jewish consciousness of young men and women, to awaken them to their duties as Jews, to create a feeling of sympathy for Judaism and to strengthen the bonds of unity among the Jewish people.” To accomplish these aims, Young Israel would disseminate knowledge about the Jewish faith, its history, literature, life and ideals. Young Israel also would work to strengthen the Jewish people and make Judaism a vital living force. The new movement began to function under the leadership of the Young Israel Synagogue’s first president, Rabbi Moses Rosenthal.

These were noble sentiments, indeed. But the battle for the heart and soul of the fledgling movement was about to begin.

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One point of contention between the two groups early on was the extent of each person's Orthodoxy. Young Israel, in its early years, attracted many professionals with little religious background or convictions. They were interested mainly in dances and other social and cultural activities. The Model Synagogue members, who came mostly from Orthodox backgrounds, were primarily concerned with the improvement of the synagogue.

Both groups received little or no support from the established leaders and institutions of the community and were forced to rely on their own resources. Some of larger synagogues objected to the encroachments on their territory and many parents looked askance at some of their "revolutionary" activities.

Young Israel conducted public lectures, classes and a host of social, cultural and religious activities. Its message was that parents and children should end their differences. Its purpose was to awaken in young men and women an interest in things Jewish and a desire to study all that pertains to the religion – to revive all phases of religious, national, social and intellectual Jewish life through study groups, public lectures, literary meetings and forums – all open and free of charge.

Young Israel Synagogue was a response to the lack of decorum, commercialism and disorderly service in the Orthodox synagogues of that day. Its services were marked by proper decorum, dignified emotion, English sermons and congregational singing. They were truly inspiring and modern, but traditionally Jewish. Translated prayer books were used, but not a single part of the Orthodox prayer ritual was omitted.

Young Israel synagogues were forming in other parts of New York as well, and for a time, there were two groups using the name of Young Israel. In January, 1918, its leaders realized that true success in molding a complete Jew would result only through a combination of the educational program and the model synagogue. At the suggestion of Dr. Friedlander, the two groups merged into an organization called Young Israel Synagogues. The first branch of the newly formed organization is known today as the Young Israel of Manhattan. To alleviate the crisis in Jewish education and observance the merged Young Israel offered religious services, Friday night lectures, *Shabbos* and weekday classes, social functions, celebrations of Jewish Holidays and participation in Jewish communal activities.

The successful union of Young Israel and Young Israel synagogue was aided by the fact that some people were active in both organizations, which carried on similar educational and social activities.

The following philosophy was expounded by the Young Israel Synagogue in 1918: "The time has come when the man and woman in America must be taught to feel that he or she need not be deprived of innocent social pleasures so long as it is done in accord with Jewish rites and principles, and so it is the aim of the synagogue to make the young people feel that being Jews and Jewesses need not deprive them of their social activities and pleasure, and even go to the extent of providing for such wholesome social activities."

The first public function of the newly united organization was a Purim festival that fulfilled both religious and social needs. At the same time, the young women decided to launch a Sisterhood, which would work as part of the organization; 68 women from all parts of the city attended the opening meeting.

In February, 1918, a second branch of Young Israel Synagogue was opened in Williamsburg and called the Young Israel of Brooklyn.

The Young Israel Synagogue of Manhattan remained at the Educational Alliance until 1921 when the group purchased the old Hebrew Sheltering Immigrant Aid Society Building at 229 East Broadway for \$60,000. It immediately undertook a fundraising campaign to refurbish the building to include a synagogue, auditorium, classrooms and a gym, turning it into a multi-faceted YMHA, religious center and settlement house. Ensnconced in its new home, this Young Israel, affectionately

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known as “the mother branch” of the movement, reached out to the neighborhood and beyond to embrace all who sought identity with traditional Orthodox Judaism. By 1926 the Manhattan synagogue had 500 members.

The Young Israel of Flatbush was founded on December 6, 1921 by both younger and older members of the community. In March, 1922, services were instituted and more than 200 worshippers soon began to attend. It participated in Palestine activities, Jewish war relief and the support of hospitals and orphanages. Junior groups, involving boys and girls from 12-18 were organized. Occasionally, the older boys were permitted to lead the services.

By the middle of 1923, the membership rolls had swelled to 500. Classes for boys and girls were conducted throughout the weekend. Young Israel of Flatbush was the first branch to construct its own building. It was also one of the earliest branches to have young and old, as well as men and women in its leadership working together for the furtherance of Orthodoxy in their community and throughout America.

The Young Israel organizations in various neighborhoods across New York City conducted their work more or less independently until 1922, when the Council of Young Israel and the Young Israel Synagogue Organizations was formed to centralize the organization and to serve “as the authoritative body of the entire movement.” By 1924, all of the organizations were joined in the Council. The first annual meeting was held at the Young Israel of Brooklyn with 12 branches represented. Council President Hyman Goldstein, who held office from November 1922 to 1925, presided over the growth of the newly-formed multi-branch organization. By March of 1925, 12 branches, with a combined membership of more than 3,000, belonged to the Council. By October of that year, there were 18 constituent organizations.

In 1926, the Council issued charters to 17 Young Israel synagogues at its Annual Convention held in Far Rockaway. In 1928, 28 branches sent delegates to the Annual Convention. During this time, Orthodox synagogue standards were developed which were mandatory for all member branches of the Young Israel movement, and they have withstood the test of time until the present day.

A pioneer among the Jewish youth groups that proliferated during the 1920s, Young Israel made phenomenal progress during the first years of its existence by attracting many college-trained professional young men and women who perceived the possibility of living a rich and complete life in the spirit of traditional Judaism without having to renounce the fruits of Western culture. They thirsted for a higher spiritual truth – a thirst that was satisfied by Young Israel and its intellectually stimulating programs. Young Israel rapidly became the most effective instrument in turning Jewish youngsters away from the destabilizing influences of the contemporary environment and back to the faith of their ancestors. As the years passed, Young Israel's influence and contributions increased. It gradually revitalized American Jewish life and thought. Parents were shown how to make the synagogue more spiritually attractive to assimilated youth. Young Israel succeeded where others failed because it was a true youth movement – a holy mission inspired by youthful zeal.

In 1925, a central Employment Bureau for Sabbath Observers was established. A “Dollar Campaign” was launched by the Young Israel of Manhattan seeking funds to further renovate the old HIAS building. A new branch was founded in Harlem. Though it functioned for only 10 years, this branch produced some of the foremost activists in behalf of Mizrahi and the Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine.

A news article of the period gave the following picture of a typical Young Israel in action. “American young men, lay and professional, students and working men, conducted services, read the Torah, delivered sermons, and acted just as their parents and grandparents. They studied the Talmud, Jewish laws and Bible with commentaries. Many of them sacrificed high paying positions so as not to desecrate the Sabbath. Committees were organized to secure Sabbath-observing jobs for anyone who

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required them. The women were grouped together in a Sisterhood which strove to help the needy and participate in social welfare work.”

Young Israel at the time was the only organization to reach out to young adult Jews, ages 20-30. They were a lost generation, beyond the reach of existing Jewish educational endeavors, and largely ignored and disenfranchised by the general Jewish community.

By 1926, great strides had been taken in fulfilling Young Israel's mission to expose young Jews to Judaism. Its egalitarian open atmosphere became a magnet for attracting unaffiliated Jews from all walks of life to Judaism. Other groups attempted to grapple with the problem by yielding to the desires of youth and making concessions that led, ultimately to ultra-Reform. Young Israel understood the folly of this approach and recognized that only Orthodox Judaism could succeed. By 1926, the pioneer work of the founders had resulted in an organization of 5,000 members. On April 30, 1926, the Council was incorporated and given a charter by the New York State Legislature. In accordance with the charter, no organizations could henceforth adopt the name Young Israel without applying for a charter from the Council of Young Israel.

Some ideas, such as publishing a scholarly journal for leaders, founding schools and forming a publication society for the works of modern-Orthodox scholars, were implemented only briefly, but, despite growing pains, Young Israel was making concrete progress.

In 1926, President Moses H. Hoenig recognized the need for a “National Young Israel,” and worked assiduously to develop one. In his President's Message, he outlined the “dawn of a new era, with a broad cosmopolitan rather than a local perspective.” He proudly proclaimed that, to be a Young Israel, a synagogue had to prove that it could conduct services “in accordance with the principles of Orthodox Judaism.” He noted that Young Israels were “educational centers catering to all” and that there was “no field of Jewish endeavor in which Young Israel does not interest itself.” In addition, he indicated that Young Israel was involved in “Zionist and yeshiva work,” as well as “aid to the poor and needy.

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By Yaakov Kornreich

The strong and often lifelong identification of American-raised and acculturated Jews with Young Israel, both as a concept and as a community institution, has been the great source of the movement’s strength since its founding, and is still providing impetus as it enters its second century of service and activism.

As the Young Israel movement evolved over the years, many efforts have been made by observers of the Jewish scene to analyze the distinguishing characteristics of what has become known as the Young Israel Jew. However, most attempts to pin down the identity of the quintessential Young Israel Jew by associating him or her with a particular level of religious knowledge and observance or brand of religious ideology are both unfair and inaccurate.

The Young Israel Jew can be *Ashkenaz* or *Sephard*, *Chassidic* or *Misnagid*, a Jew of simple faith or deeply learned, a working class laborer or skilled professional.

The level of observance of any individual Young Israel Jew has always been a moving target, and is best viewed as a work in progress over a period of many years, and even generations.

The Young Israel Jew is more accurately defined by his or her unique attitude and approach to contemporary living, attempting to fashion a seamless integration of both Americanism and Jewish beliefs, to the extent possible. Their outlook is based upon the firm belief that the two are compatible, and that any apparent conflict between the Young Israel Jew’s loyalty to his country and his faith can and, indeed, must be resolved without requiring a betrayal of either.

It is also the ultimate response to the old accusation of our enemies that the Jew must always be suspect due to his dual loyalties. The Young Israel Jew’s elegantly simple answer to that classic canard is that his dual loyalties to a democratic America and to his faith, are, in fact, one and the same.

While the specific programs and methods of Young Israel have evolved over the years in response to changing times and community needs, its central mission and overall approach has remained remarkably consistent over the past century.

In a Young Israel publication produced in 1917, just five years after the initial group was formed, the pioneers who created its groundbreaking program of Friday night lectures identified “the ignorance of things Jewish that at present reigns supreme among our young men and women,” as the root cause of the problems facing the American Jewry of their day. This is how they addressed the problem:

“The Young Israel movement is neither polemic nor apologetic. It is a movement to awaken in our young men and women an interest in things Jewish, a desire to study and become acquainted with all that appertains to Judaism in its historic development. It is a movement to give our thoughtful men and women a proper knowledge and understanding of the true position of Israel among the nations, of the privileges and responsibilities involved in being a member of the Jewish people. In short, the aim of the Young Israel movement is to bring about a revival of Judaism in all its phases - religious, national, social, and intellectual.”

Implicit in this approach was recognition of the importance of Young Israel engaging young American Jews on their own terms, in their own language, which was English rather than Yiddish, and within the context of their primary aspiration, which was to achieve acceptance and success in the broader American society.

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Similarly, the original Young Israel model synagogue was designed to address those aspects of the European-style American Orthodox *shuls* of the day that alienated most young American Jews, including the lack of decorum, the “*shenodering*” (commercialization) and various obstacles to their active participation. By contrast, Young Israel services were “marked by proper decorum as well as dignified emotion, and the English sermon and congregational singing [that] lend such particular enchantment to the services that the entire congregation remains inspired and attentive until the last word of the services,” as described in the 1917 publication.

The aim of Young Israel from the outset has been to attract and hold the interest and allegiance of American Jews and present them with their authentic Jewish heritage in the most attractive way possible. In the years that followed, the leaders of Young Israel continued to create innovative solutions to any obstacles standing in the way of their religious observance, whether it was the need to find a job that would not require them to work on *Shabbos*, or kosher food while serving in the armed forces, or the right to take a civil service or college exam on a day other than the *Shabbos* or *Yom Tov* on which it was originally scheduled.

During the years of the Great Depression, the promotion of *Shmiras Shabbos* was a particularly difficult challenge because of the poor economic conditions and high rates of unemployment throughout the country. An added complication was the requirements of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal recovery program. Its “codes of fair competition” were intended to reduce “destructive competition” in the marketplace by setting minimum wages and maximum weekly hours of operation, as well as minimum prices. Businesses conforming to the codes proudly displayed the red, white and blue seal proclaiming their NRA membership and compliance with its rules. One of the code’s requirements was for local businesses to choose one day a week when all of them would be closed, and requiring them all to be open on the other six.

At that time in Boro Park, Brooklyn, religious Jews were still a small minority. This resulted in local merchants choosing Sunday as the day for all stores to be closed. This put tremendous competitive pressure on Jewish merchants in the community to remain open for business on *Shabbos*, while forcing them to close their doors on Sunday. The Young Israel of Boro Park was at the forefront of a community-wide effort launched in February, 1934, to form the Sabbath Observers Association of Boro Park. It recruited 126 local business owners who pledged to keep their stores closed on *Shabbos*. At the same time, the Association instituted a campaign to encourage local residents to patronize the local *Shomer Shabbos* stores. Young Israel members also lobbied NRA officials to change the terms of its code to allow *Shomer Shabbos* businesses to comply. The issue became moot in 1935 when the U.S. Supreme Court declared the NRA to be unconstitutional.

During the pre-World War II years, the Young Israel movement became an enthusiastic supporter of one of the primary goals of the budding national labor union movement -- the adoption by the business community of the standard 40-hour 5-day work week. This vastly expanded the job opportunities for workers wanting to be *Shomer Shabbos*.

Young Israel’s active political and social involvement in promoting these crucially important changes in the broader American culture was another expression of its fundamental goals and methods. Young Israel became a vigorous advocate for the changes necessary to enable its members to adopt an integrated lifestyle which combined full engagement with America’s broader cultural, professional, educational and economic life without the need to compromise their religious principles or hide their Jewish identity.

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Other segments of the American Orthodox community had rejected this approach. They see the conditions and attitudes of contemporary American society as fundamentally incompatible with a fully observant Jewish life. Their solution is to encourage Orthodox Jews to withdraw and try to isolate themselves and their children to the extent possible from contact with the surrounding culture. Not without good reason, they view large parts of the contemporary culture to be innately hostile to Torah values, and some extend that jaundiced view to the U.S. government and its laws as well.

Other contemporary American Orthodox Jews have dealt with this challenge with an approach called compartmentalization. They have tried to isolate their religious life from their career or business interactions with the larger American society. Instead of addressing the fundamental conflicts between a wholly religious and wholly secular lifestyle, they pretend that the two can coexist totally independent of one another without interacting to create irresolvable tensions and contradictions.

Philosophically, the Young Israel Jew rejects these separatist and compartmentalizing strategies as unsatisfactory and ultimately counterproductive and doomed to fail. These strategies are also incompatible with the Young Israel Jew’s self-image and goal, to live as a religious Jew simultaneously in harmony with the requirements of their faith and the realities of today’s modern society.

The goal of the Young Israel Jew always has been to fully integrate his or her American and Jewish values. A Young Israel Jew lives every aspect of his or her life in accordance with the belief that Americanism and Judaism are not only compatible, but complementary, and that being religious Jews makes all of us better Americans, and vice-versa.

The Young Israel movement’s programs and activities have always implemented and promoted this approach. For example, for many years, Young Israel actively encouraged the organization of Jewish Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops that would simultaneously instill them with pride in patriotic American and Jewish values.

In recent decades, scouting has lost much of its early pervasive influence over American youth culture, but during its heyday, Young Israel youth programs were closely identified with it.

Young Israel members are taught that they have a positive responsibility to show their loyalty to America out of the simple principle of *hakaras hatov*. America’s democratic system of government recognizes and actively protects every Jew’s rights to live a full and authentic Jewish way of life. Young Israel also teaches its members that they each have a responsibility to make their own contribution to American society by extending the influence of the Torah’s wisdom through the examples that we set by practicing our personal and communal Torah values.

At the same time, the Young Israel movement was always well aware of the threat posed to Jewish living by the militantly secular and anti-religious influences which have also enjoyed the freedoms of American society. In fact, Young Israel was created in 1912 precisely because its founders recognized that they were facing a dire threat to the future of American Jewry which was simply too great to ignore.

The Young Israel approach was based upon the conviction that, when presented properly, authentic Torah values and wisdom can win that battle by speaking to young Jews in their own language, and appealing to their personal aspirations on their own terms.

Instead of throwing up their hands in despair or counseling retreat and withdrawal, the founders of Young Israel chose to confront those threats and challenges head on. They

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recognized that by ignoring these threats and challenges, the rest of Orthodoxy was imperiling its future by alienating itself from American Jewish youth. They also knew that continued denial would lead, in the long run, to the disappearance of American Jewry as we know it.

To forestall this bleak scenario, the founders and leaders of the Young Israel movement went forth and did battle for the hearts and minds of American Jewish youth. This entailed far more than creating a Friday night lecture program and a more youth-friendly synagogue prayer service. Ultimately, to enable Young Israel Jews to simultaneously achieve economic success and acceptance in the larger American society while living authentic and fulfilled Jewish lives, they had to create entire Jewish communities, with the full range of services, programs and institutions required to raise Jewish families and meet the challenges of daily living, literally from cradle to grave.

In some cases, the individual Young Israel branch or the National Council would create the programs and services required by Young Israel Jews to live by the authentic Jewish religious principles.

As Young Israel communities grew and became more self-sufficient, local Young Israel lay and rabbinic leaders would typically foster the creation of independent communal institutions, such as yeshivas and *gemilas chassadim* organizations. These were typically led and enthusiastically supported by local Young Israel Jews who were not content to “make *Shabbos* for themselves.” Typically, their goal was to meet the Jewish needs of their entire local community. In the process, Young Israel branches and leaders laid the foundations for the development of some of today’s largest and strongest American Orthodox centers. Young Israel Jews have also been in the forefront of efforts to create and support leading Torah institutions and *chessed* programs in communities throughout the world, and particularly in Eretz Yisroel.

To better play this role, the Young Israel movement has always provided leadership training and opportunities to its members, typically starting in the early years of their youth, in order to prepare and motivate them to accept such larger communal responsibilities.

The same pattern has also held true at the national level. Young Israel Jews have long played a disproportionately large role in the lay leadership of other national Jewish organizations, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, including Torah Umesorah, the Orthodox Union and the Jewish War Veterans, to name just a few.

Over the past century, these activist Young Israel Jews have made many vital contributions to American Jewry on both the local and national levels. In addition to supporting Young Israel synagogues, they founded and led countless yeshivas, Hebrew Day schools and *mikvaos*, and influenced the policies of existing secular organizations to recognize and adopt many of Young Israel’s religious goals and priorities, such as support for Jewish education. Young Israel’s emphasis on communal responsibility and leadership quickly became one of the distinguishing characteristics of the movement. It has given every Young Israel member, regardless of their station in life or economic status, an opportunity to make their own unique contribution to *Klal Yisroel*.

The result of this conscious effort to inspire and develop committed, activist Young Israel Jews has been a success on two levels. On one level, Young Israel succeeded in capturing the allegiance of tens of thousands of young American Jews whose continued identification with the authentic Jewish heritage was very much in doubt. On a second level, it instilled confidence in Young Israel Jews that they could live their lives in full accordance with authentic Jewish values and religious practices while participating successfully in American society.

A true Young Israel Jew remains constantly informed, concerned and involved with the

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vital needs of fellow Jews around the world. They have always felt a personal need to come to the aid of the pioneers building a new Jewish homeland in the ancient land of Israel, the Jews of Europe doomed by the Holocaust, more than a million Soviet Jews imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain, and Jews who are in need or who are victims of persecution, at home or abroad.

Young Israel has always tried to offer something that would appeal strongly to every segment of its Jewish audience. Some would be encouraged to participate and gain inspiration from the Young Israel *davening*. For others it would be their first opportunity to delve into the world of Torah learning. In an era when most Jews did not have the benefit of a yeshiva education, Young Israel provided its members with innovative and effective *chinuch* programs to present the various aspects of the Torah heritage to men and women, young and old, who never had a formal Jewish education.

Young Israel was founded largely by young men and women who were still teenagers. Therefore, it has never made the mistake of underestimating the power of youthful enthusiasm. From their youngest years, boys and girls have always been offered the opportunity to gain leadership skills through their participation in Young Israel youth activities and sports, and by leading the *davening*.

Young Israel is the ultimate practitioner of American-style democracy in the Orthodox community. *Shul* leadership positions are reserved, by rule, for *Shomrei Shabbos*, as a tangible demonstration of their commitment to the movement’s core religious values, but there has never been a specific litmus test of observance required for basic membership or acceptance in Young Israel. Any Jew, regardless of background or prior affiliation, is always welcome in every Young Israel, no matter where they may be in their personal religious journey. Throughout its history, as a matter of principle, Young Israel has attempted to minimize any economic, social or language barriers to full participation by every Jew in its prayer services and programs.

It is the glory of the movement that any Jew can walk into any Young Israel synagogue, anywhere in the world, and be assured of a warm and caring greeting, and instant, full acceptance. Young Israel Jews do not tolerate us vs. them distinctions with regard to acceptance of fellow Jews, whatever their current level of religious observance. Every Jew is welcome to join the extended Young Israel family, and made to feel that, whenever they find themselves in a Young Israel synagogue, they are genuinely at home.

In the early decades of the movement, when the religious commitment of Young Israel members was virtually unique within American Jewry, that sense of bonding and comradeship was particularly strong.

During those years, the social life of most Young Israel Jews predominantly revolved around Young Israel social, cultural and educational programs because there were few other Jewish venues in which they could feel fully comfortable. Youth would prefer attending Young Israel-sponsored events, at first to see their Young Israel friends once again, and then to find a suitable, Jewishly-minded future mate. Once married, these young couples would continue to look forward to local, regional and national Young Israel programs and events as rare opportunities to meet others who shared the same Young Israel goals and values, both in their own community and from elsewhere around the country.

As children were born and raised within these families, the Young Israel connection would continue. When the time came for such families to move to a new home in a new community, they would automatically give preference to those where Young Israel branches were already in operation. If they felt compelled to move to a community without a Young Israel, they would typically initiate an effort to form a new branch. Thus, through the natural

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cycle of maturation and family growth, the cycle of Young Israel commitment would be repeated and reinforced, and the movement itself would be spread to communities wherever Jews would settle.

Here is a typical example: One day, more than 50 years ago, the non-religious father of a young Brooklyn Jewish family was shocked by his young daughter’s request that he start attending *shul* every *Shabbos* morning, like the fathers of her friends, rather than being at work. The father, then past the age of 30, took his daughter’s request to heart, and resolved to fulfill her wish, even though it meant changing his way of life.

Soon, the family moved near a Young Israel branch, where the father was warmly accepted as he was. He was made to feel welcome and at home, even though he knew very little at the time about his Jewish heritage. The rabbi and members of that Young Israel reached out to befriend and help him on his own personal religious journey. He became fully *Shomer Shabbos*. Eventually he and his wife became lay leaders of the branch, which also became a second home for their daughter and a younger son. At one point, the father was asked to represent his branch at a Young Israel delegate’s meeting, which led him to volunteer his time for various National Council programs. Eventually he became a respected national officer.

When the father would go to the National Council office to work on an upcoming dinner or convention, his young son would often come along to help out. As the years went by, the boy would also start going down to the National Council headquarters on his own to do volunteer work in the youth department office.

Decades passed, and that boy eventually became the President of the Young Israel branch where he had grown up. Meanwhile, the composition of the community had changed. The original Young Israel families were being displaced by Russian Jews. Growing up in their native Russia, they never had a formal Jewish education, but, as they married and settled down to raise families, some of them became interested in their Jewish heritage, for the sake of their children as well as themselves. The branch President saw the story of his own father being repeated 50 years later, in the spiritual journeys of these Russian Jews, with the help of Young Israel. They made their homes kosher, sent their children to yeshiva, became *Shomer Shabbos* and gradually took over various leadership roles in the *shul*. The process recently came full cycle when the Branch president took the leader of the Russian group with him to attend a National Council delegates’ meeting.

Times have changed. The daily demands of Jewish living upon all of us, especially in the larger American Orthodox centers, are much greater today than they were just a generation ago. Today our social calendars and mailboxes are crowded with the messages of numerous communal organizations and institutions competing for our time and support with Young Israel synagogues, while we generally have much less available free time or money to give, even to the most worthy causes. As a result, Young Israel may no longer be as central to the social life of most Young Israel Jews as it once was, but the Young Israel idea still plays an indispensable role in their spiritual makeup and motivations.

The open nature of the Young Israel movement is, ironically, one of the reasons why it has not always received the appreciation it deserves for its vital contributions to the American Orthodox community. Over the years, there have been those who have been critical of social activities which had been sponsored by Young Israel branches and youth groups, particularly mixed dancing, during the early decades of the movement. Mixed dances have been a thing of the past in the Young Israel movement for many years, but what is less-well-known is that mixed dances were also the subject of outspoken internal criticism even during Young Israel’s earliest

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decades. Articles which condemned mixed dancing as inappropriate for a religious organization, and which highlighted the *halachic* objections to the practice, were published in official Young Israel publications of the time.

While not a defense of the practice, Young Israel was hardly alone. It is a historic fact that mixed dances were commonly sponsored by many other American Orthodox synagogues of that era. It would also be fair to say that many nominally Orthodox Jews of that time, especially those who never had the benefit of a yeshiva education, were simply unaware of the basis for the *halachic* objections to mixed dancing.

At the time, the national Young Israel movement made a major effort to remedy that ignorance as well. It was a leading producer and distributor of English language material promoting Jewish family purity (*Taharat Hamishpacha*). It also actively supported the construction of *mikvaos* in Jewish communities across the country, and through its educational programs, actively encouraged their regular use.

Some longtime Young Israel members have said in recent years that the Young Israel movement, taken as a whole, has “moved too far to the right” or become, in the vernacular of our day, partially “black hat.”

In fact, these changes have not been sudden. Some of this perceived shift is the result of a general tightening of *halachic* standards and religious practices throughout today’s American Orthodox communities.

Within the Young Israel movement, this heightened level of observance is also due to the cumulative effects of decades of efforts by local Young Israel rabbis and lay leaders to teach and preach the principles of Torah-true Judaism to the members of their community, year-by-year and generation-by-generation. This has raised community-wide levels of Torah understanding and *mitzvah* observance to steadily higher levels.

Over the decades in many Young Israel families, there has been steady progression in the levels of Jewish knowledge and *halachic* observance. The observance of first generation Young Israel Jews who never had the benefit of a proper yeshiva education was often very uneven, reflecting a superficial Jewish knowledge lacking a clear understanding of many of the basic *mitzvos* and *halachos*.

Many were *Baalei Teshuva* whose first exposure to Young Israel ideals and Torah principles came when they were already young adults. Their practices should not be judged against the typical levels of *halachic* observance we see in the American Orthodox Jewish community today. Today’s higher communal standards are largely a result of 50 years of dedicated efforts by Young Israel rabbis and lay leaders, among many others, to provide day school and yeshiva educations for all of our community’s youth.

Young Israel’s *halachic* synagogue standards were always vigorously enforced by the officers and lay leaders of the National Council in order to create a solid foundation upon which to build a Torah-true community and national movement. However, it was left up to the local rabbi and lay leaders in every branch to work with their members on a one-to-one basis to raise their individual levels of observance, often starting from very low levels. This was a process which proceeded slowly, through years, decades and even succeeding generations, but as we can see clearly today, it ultimately achieved impressive results.

When the first generation Young Israel Jews sent their children to the local day school, which was often founded and supported through the efforts of the Young Israel branch, they started a process of steadily raising the levels of Torah knowledge and observance in our communities which continues to this day.

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That second generation of Young Israel Jews was much more Jewishly knowledgeable and committed than their parents. Decades later, the third generation of boys and girls in these Young Israel families would typically enjoy the benefits of a yeshiva education through high school. Their deeper understanding of the wisdom of Torah learning and *halacha* would be reflected in the greater intensity of their own daily religious lives.

As the average level of individual observance of members in a Young Israel branch rose generation by generation, the standards of the community as a whole would eventually reach a tipping point. There would come a time when the owners of local stores catering to a Jewish clientele, whether they were religious or not, would realize that voluntarily closing their establishments on *Shabbos* would be a good for their business, and usually at about the same time, the committee planning the annual *shul* dinner or Young Israel youth event would decide on its own that the time had finally come to eliminate mixed dancing from the program.

Today, as the fourth generation of the earliest Young Israel families reaches maturity, typically both the boys and the girls have taken a year off after graduating yeshiva high school for an intensive study of Torah at an Israeli yeshiva or seminary, before completing their educations. Some would choose to devote their entire lives to the study and teaching of Torah. Others would be inspired by their Young Israel ideals to settle permanently in *Eretz Yisroel* in order to lead a more spiritually fulfilling life. But even the least of today’s fourth generation of Young Israel Jews is typically far better educated and maintains a far higher level of personal religious observance than the Young Israel Jews who were their grandparents and great-grandparents.

Judging them by the depth of their Torah knowledge and their commitment to scrupulous observance and Torah living, many of today’s Young Israel Jews are virtually indistinguishable from their contemporaries hailing from the most religious of families.

Yet, the descendants of the early founders of Young Israel do have one clear advantage over their peers. They know, thanks to the living history of their own families, that their Young Israel-based Torah ideals have nothing to fear from the anti-religious and anti-Jewish elements of contemporary American culture. Their parents and grandparents were subjected to the challenges on secular college campuses, in the business and professional worlds, and in most other areas of American public life. Yet, they not only were able to successfully withstand those challenges, they were able to transmit their Young Israel ideals and devotion to *Yiddishkeit* to the next generation whose dedication to them would become even stronger than their own.

That is the true meaning of one of the early Biblical mottos of the Young Israel movement, “*v’hashiv lev avos al habanim, v’habanim al avosom*,” – “May the hearts of the parents return to their children, and those of the children to their parents.”

While they may be living, by choice, in religious communities, today’s Young Israel Jews are not afraid of the surrounding American society. They have taken the admonition of the *Mishnah*, “*Da ma l’hashiv l’apikores*” -- “Know how to answer the challenge of the heretic” – to heart. As a result, they do not feel the need to retreat behind the cultural walls of self-imposed Jewish ghettos, in order to be confident that the integrity of their Jewish faith will survive the challenges of our times intact and uncompromised.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice-president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, points out that during its first half-century, Young Israel was more successful in maintaining the allegiance of its youth than any other segment of the American Orthodox community. This is what motivated Hoenlein as a young man, the son of Holocaust survivors, to affiliate and to become active in Young Israel’s Intercollegiate Council,

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which then became the first vehicle in his long career of Jewish communal activism and leadership.

The Young Israel movement’s lay leaders have always turned to the recognized *Gedolim* and *Poskim* of their day for *Da’as Torah* to guide them in dealing with the most difficult and pressing community policy matters. Many of the *Gedolim* publicly recognized, in return, Young Israel’s vital role in creating the institutional foundation and supplying both the lay leaders and the legions loyal Young Israel Jews to follow them, which made the American Orthodox renaissance of our day possible.

Even its critics recognize that, without Young Israel’s efforts, much of the core of early and mid-20th century American Orthodoxy, including thousands of young American Jews and their descendants, would have inevitably become assimilated and lost to the Jewish people today. It is also an indisputable fact that without the dedication and self-sacrifice of tens of thousands of simple Young Israel Jews over the past century, many of the great American Orthodox centers of our day and their key Torah institutions would simply not exist as we know them.

Which raises the question, what is the role of the Young Israel Jew today? Is he or she as important to American Orthodoxy as in previous generations?

The challenges facing American Jewry are much different than they were 100 or 50 years ago. As Reform, Conservative and secular organizations have faltered, American Jewry as a whole is turning more towards Orthodoxy to provide its communal leadership, idealism and dedication going forward. This is a role for which the Young Israel Jew today is ideally suited, both by attitude and experience.

Because they can and do live in both worlds, Young Israel Jews have the credentials and positive Jewish attitudes needed to qualify for such communal leadership positions, even in secular Jewish organizations and communities. Once in this capacity, Young Israel Jews are then positioned to inject more of their authentic Torah values into the policies of the larger American Jewish community.

Specifically, our religious heritage enables us, as Orthodox Jews, to make more persuasive and compelling arguments for the defense of the State of Israel and its Jewish character as the current day realization of the birthright of the Jewish People as promise in the Bible. Our religious obligations also include the imperative to stand up and come to the rescue of all of our fellow Jews around the world who are the victims of discrimination. Finally, by becoming more active in the leadership of the larger American Jewish community, Young Israel Jews have the opportunity to re-introduce the beauty and wisdom of our Torah heritage to our secular and non-Orthodox Jewish brethren.

Within the so-called ultra-Orthodox community, the Young Israel Jew is also ideally poised to help formulate effective responses to challenges which have arisen due to the infiltration of negative influences from the surrounding American culture. For example, even in the most sheltered of Orthodox communities, it has proven to be virtually impossible to totally shut out the most pernicious influences transmitted over the Internet and through today’s pervasive media outlets. Their amoral and hedonistic messages have directly contributed to the growing numbers of failed marriages within the Orthodox community, as well as the alarming increase in the number of young Orthodox Jews at risk. Despite our best efforts, they have colored the pristine Torah values which we have tried to transmit to our children, and subconsciously influence almost every aspect of our own daily lives.

Precisely because Young Israel Jews have chosen to confront rather than withdraw from the challenges of today’s connected society, they are often in a better position to take the lead in

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finding new and effective ways for us, as a community and as individuals, to protect both ourselves and our children from these destructive influences.

These are just some of the vital roles that Young Israel Jews are ideally suited to fill. By virtue of their history, attitudes, training and beliefs, they are uniquely qualified to find the most effective responses to the spiritual challenges which contemporary American culture is hurling at the future of American Jewry as a whole, and the Orthodox community in particular. It is fair to say that if Young Israel Jews did not already exist, the Orthodox community today would be forced to find some way to re-invent them.

Soviet Jewry

Soviet Jewry
By Deborah Hart Strober & Gerald Strober

Since 1960, the National Council of Young Israel has engaged in advocacy on behalf of Soviet Jewry. In September of that year, Young Israel joined 16 other major American Jewish organizations in an appeal to secure equal rights for Soviet Jews. These groups expressed “deep sorrow and ever-mounting concern” over the situation of the Jewish population of the Soviet Union.

In the following decades, the National Council, through public demonstrations, private meetings, publications, and other activities would become a major pillar of the Soviet Jewry movement, proving to be a steadfast, highly effective advocate in the effort to enable Soviet Jews to freely practice their religion and to exercise the basic human right of freedom of emigration.

Young Israel’s particular concern at that time was the issue of religious rights. In 1963, a delegation led by the organization’s President, Rabbi David Hill, met with officials at the Soviet Embassy in Washington to discuss the supply of matzo in the Soviet Union, as well as plans for Young Israel’s leaders to go there in order to observe the matzo baking process.

Later that year, Rabbi Hill urged the Soviet Ambassador to the United States to intervene with his government to restore to Moscow Jews the right to be interred in a Jewish cemetery in accordance with Jewish burial rites. In a telegram to the Ambassador, Rabbi Hill observed that, “consecrated burial is one of the basic requirements of the Jewish religion.”

Rabbi Hill, a founder of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (NCSJ), served for many years as one of that organization’s most influential and respected leaders. He was also the driving force behind the NCSJ’s Operation Lifeline. Over the years, Young Israel, in addition to being an integral part of the NCSJ’s program, supported the efforts of the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry and other groups dedicated to securing free emigration and religious and cultural rights for the Soviet Jewish community.

In 1976, Young Israel leaders, along with a delegation of religious leaders and New York City officials, appeared at the entrance to the Soviet Mission to the United Nations with a wheelbarrow loaded with petitions signed by more than 100,000 Americans. During the 1980s, members of Young Israel branches in the New York metropolitan area formed a nucleus of support at annual rallies held outside the United Nations. In 1987, thousands of Young Israel congregants from throughout the United States traveled to Washington D.C., to participate in the massive Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jewry rally. And as hundreds of thousands of Jews arrived in Israel in the 1990s, Young Israel carefully monitored their absorption into Israeli society.

Jonathan Pollard

Jonathan Pollard
By Deborah Hart Strober & Gerald Strober

For almost 20 years, the National Council of Young Israel has been in the forefront of efforts to win the freedom of Jonathan Pollard, who is about to complete his 26th year of federal incarceration. Seldom in American history has an individual been given such an unjust and grossly disproportionate sentence and then subjected to an organized, campaign of innuendo, vituperation and outright slander.

The facts of the Pollard case are well known. In November 1985, Pollard, then a civilian analyst for the United States Navy, was arrested and then pled guilty to one count of providing classified information to a foreign nation—that nation, of course, being Israel.

Pollard, while undeniably guilty of a serious offense, as he himself has acknowledged on numerous occasions, did not engage in espionage on behalf of an enemy of the United States. Rather, troubled by what he perceived to be the United States government's failure to share previously agreed upon information with Israel, Pollard mistakenly took it upon himself to provide the Jewish State with access to important data.

Normally, someone who pleads guilty to the type of offense Pollard committed would be sentenced to a term not to exceed 10 years' imprisonment. Indeed, others who have pled guilty to similar offenses have received prison terms ranging from two to eight years.

Thus, the life sentence meted out to Pollard was incredibly excessive, especially when measured against those imposed upon several individuals who did engage in espionage on behalf of America's enemies, most notably the former Soviet Union.

Whatever one might conclude concerning Jonathan Pollard's decision to provide Israel with classified material—one he deeply regrets—objective-thinking people realize that in his case, the punishment not only did not fit the crime, but completely overwhelmed it.

That is why U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Stephen Williams, in dissenting from an opinion issued by two of his colleagues, stated that had he possessed the power to release Pollard on the grounds that the government at sentencing had committed a "fundamental miscarriage of justice" in going against a previous agreement with Pollard and insisting on a life sentence, he would have done so.

The excessive sentence imposed upon Pollard has also prompted calls for his release on humanitarian grounds by former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, former Attorney General Michael Mukasey, former Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey, former Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Dennis DeConcini, Dr. Lawrence Korb, who, in his capacity as an Assistant Secretary of Defense, was thoroughly conversant with the facts of the Pollard case, and so many others.

In Israel, President Shimon Peres; Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; all 113 Jewish members of the Knesset; the Chief Ashkenazic and Sephardic Rabbis; and most of that nation's citizens have added their voices to the cause of gaining Pollard's release.

From the inception of its activity in securing justice for Jonathan Pollard, the National Council of Young Israel has allocated resources, involved professional staff, and energized its congregations to activism in the Free Pollard effort. The organization's

Jonathan Pollard

Executive Vice-President, Rabbi Pesach Lerner, has led the national battle to obtain freedom for Pollard. He visits Pollard frequently, providing the prisoner with spiritual counsel, and often brings with him political, secular and religious leaders so that they will fully understand Pollard's plight.

Now, as the National Council of Young Israel commemorates its 100 years of activism, there exists sense of urgency regarding Jonathan Pollard's wellbeing. His years of incarceration, while neither having broken his spirit nor weakened his commitment to *Yiddishkeit*, have resulted in serious and, at times, life-threatening medical problems, including a kidney disorder, for which he underwent surgery only months ago. In addition, he suffers from chronic arthritic and digestive disorders, the latter condition the result of his determination to observe *kashruth* in the very forbidding environment of a federal prison.

As the National Council of Young Israel continues its efforts on Pollard's behalf, it is sobering to note that President Barack Obama, the one person with the absolute constitutional power to redress the injustice of this prisoner's sentence and return him to his wife and family, does not do so. In fact, at this juncture in his first term, he is unique among modern presidents in issuing the fewest commutations.

One can only hope that Mr. Obama will carefully review the facts of the Pollard case and then correctly conclude that this individual, who in good faith accepted a sentencing proffer from his government, then cooperated fully in the ensuing investigation, and has already served two decades more than demanded by his offense, be freed.

The National Council of Young Israel, along with its allies in the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, will not rest until Jonathan Pollard arrives as a free man in *Eretz Yisroel*.



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