

# Pittsburgh Hebrew School is Pioneer Talmud Torah

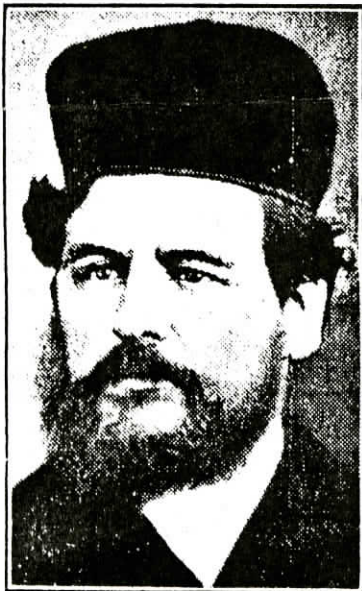
*Organized Nearly Forty Years Ago by Rabbi M. S. Sivitz, Institution Has Notable Record in Providing Religious Instruction for Thousands of Children*

By **JOSEPH M. KELSKAY**

Secretary, Pittsburgh Hebrew School

There are no reliable records of the existence of a Talmud Torah in Pittsburgh previous to 1880, although there were a few scattered teachers who held their chadorem in their homes. It has been ascertained that the first attempt towards establishing a Hebrew school occurred in 1885. In that year a young rabbi was called here from Baltimore to take charge of the Shara Torah Congregation and his influence and endeavors were destined to play an important part in the progress of orthodox Judaism in Pittsburgh.

This promising young communal leader was Rabbi M. S. Sivitz, and he had been in America but two years, coming to this land of opportunity after a



Rabbi M. S. Sivitz

brilliant Yeshiva career in Lithuania.

In those days the Jews in Pittsburgh were comparatively few in number, most of them settled within the confines of five or six blocks from the present site of the Court House. While there were then a few established places of worship to satisfy the spiritual needs of the elder members of the community, the youth in general was neglected as regards religious instruction. Those who were desirous to imbibe Jewish lore, elementary or otherwise, did so in a haphazard manner under the guidance of a patriarch or some other elder in the family. Others willingly or through persuasion were sent to

private teachers or the malamud would visit their homes a few hours a week. Many are the tales recounted of the sternness of discipline that characterized the methods of imparting knowledge by the malamuden of the days gone by.

From the beginning Rabbi Sivitz gained the affection of his congregation and of the Jews in general. Recognized as a brilliant scholar, he was also an ardent worker for the cause of orthodox Judaism. It is related that when he came here he immediately concentrated his efforts towards organizing the few drifting activities pertaining to Jewish welfare work. He realized his task lay not so much in keeping the older generation from drifting away from Jewish ideals. Most of them, in fact, had left their Old World cities and villages already imbued with the spirit and tradition of orthodox Judaism. But it was the welfare of the youth that gave him no little concern during the first year of his advent here. God granting him health and strength, Rabbi Sivitz was cognizant of the fact that his future responsibility for the perpetuation of our holy faith would have to be shared with many of the then young generation.

Accordingly, summoning a handful of earnest and enthusiastic men, late in the year of 1885 he discussed with them the dire consequences that would befall future orthodox Judaism locally should the disorganized and chaotic conditions be permitted to continue. He proposed the alternative in the way of a movement to organize and establish a community school. From this little meeting of the rabbi and a select group of his friends and co-workers originated the idea of establishing a Talmud Torah. The proposal met with instantaneous favor from all classes of Jews. The well-to-do and the poor, those who were concerned in affairs Jewish and those who were more or less apathetic, all joined in the work to make the first Talmud Torah in Pittsburgh a living institution. It was an epoch-marking event in the religious life of local orthodox Judaism.

A temporary organization was immediately effected, which in-

cluded Rabbi Sivitz as principal, M. Levitsky, president, and Gedalia Gudinsky, vice-president. They were ably assisted by a board of directors who comprised the leading Jews of the community. As was to be expected the Talmud Torah began to draw many children from the private chadorem and the malamudem in turn were brought into the fold of the teaching staff. Among the teachers, old-timers recall are S. Gulande, M. Broida, D. Blumenthal, and Reuben Rabinovitz. Mr. Gulande has taught at the Talmud Torah from its inception to the present day and is one of its efficient teachers. Mr. Broida is at present located in Baltimore.

As mentioned above, the center of the Jewish population in the 80's was around the vicinity of the Court House, and thus it was necessary to seek quarters for the school within that area. Three rooms in a modest little frame building on Wylie Avenue, near Tunnel Street, were leased. This building has long since passed out of existence and had made way for the present structure of the old power house, which is used now for other purposes. The rooms were comfortably large and long benches were arranged across each room with equally long but narrow tables to serve as desks.

The original enrollment numbered about 100 pupils and in many instances three or four children of a family attended. Most of the youths were children of well-to-do parents and hence for the time being their tuition fees enabled the school to meet the necessary expenses of rent, light, heat, and the salaries for teachers. Ten dollars a week was then considered good remuneration for a teacher. He had to seek little odd and end employment in other directions when not teaching to sustain him and his family.

The school hours were usually from 4 P. M. to 7 P. M. and during the summer months, when the public schools were closed, sessions also were held in the morning. Therefore, it is obvious that much time could be devoted to teaching and the pupils applied themselves to their lessons with little else to divert their attention, in contrast with the conditions that beset the youth of today. Moreover, the subjects then taught embraced a wide scope, beginning with the alphabet, followed by intermediate branches of learning like Sidur translations and the study of the Pentateuch and Gomorah instruction for those able and diligent enough to pursue it. All pupils were taught writing.

The teachers were usually well versed in a long range of Hebrew learning and a few of them schoiars of high ability and all

of them products of the old world system of imparting knowledge. Even the most rudimentary principles of pedagogy were unknown to them. Many an elder of today might recall the sing-song drill he went through and the eagle-eyed malamud with his ever-ready leathern thong to pounce upon the laggard and the mischief maker.

Now with suitable quarters provided, an efficient teaching corps, and a rapidly increasing Jewish population sending in pupils, prospects appeared auspicious and promising at least for the immediate future. Early in 1888, however, clouds began to gather which foreboded trouble ahead and threatened to undo all the labor that energy and perseverance wrought in the past three years. A critical period in the early life of the Talmud Torah was at hand, but out of the situation a policy was necessitated that has been incorporated to the present day.

Just at this time the country was experiencing one of its oft-recurring panics. Immigrants, however, were pouring into the city in steady numbers and nearly all of them came with little or no means. Nevertheless, their love for religious instruction for their children was not dimmed. Very soon the Talmud Torah was faced with the problem of not only caring for the children of the impoverished strangers; but the prevailing economic conditions were gradually cutting off its sole means of support. Parents who heretofore contributed well for their children's instruction reduced their allowances, while most of them paid a nominal sum or nothing. The old saying that when a family is in a pinch the sum allowed for the children's religious instruction is usually the first item in the family budget to be curtailed, seemed to be applicable at that time.

Consequently the Talmud Torah found itself in a precarious financial condition and Rabbi Sivitz and a few of his faithful friends were forced to seek other quarters for the school. A few rooms were secured in a building located on Fifth Avenue near Chatham Street and an effort was made to hold all the classes there. But the rooms proved too small for the comfort of the growing school which at this period numbered over 200 children. The situation seemed greatly relieved by renting additional quarters in a building on Washington Street, above Wylie Avenue. Thus it can be seen that while the Talmud Torah was becoming an important function in the community, it lacked the necessary means and conveniences to adequately care for its growing needs.

At this time a change in

administration also occurred. Rabbi Sivitz remained as principal. Ezekiel Stein and Samuel Cooper became president and vice-president, respectively, until they were succeeded in 1892 by M. Wise and L. Rappaport.

The teaching personnel consisted of besides Mr. Gulande, Isaac Rabinovitz, who was the son of Reuben Rabinovitz, Michal Cadison, and Morris Sachs.

At this juncture Rabbi Sivitz realized that new conditions called for a change in the policy in regard to the maintenance of the Talmud Torah. From this time on the school became the concern of the entire community. He made an inspiring appeal to all classes of orthodox Jews to contribute a nominal sum so that no child should be deprived of the benefits of religious instruction because of inability to pay.

Once more the local Jews proved their loyalty to the rabbi in his endeavors to keep aflame the torch of Judaism with a ready response in the way of weekly donations. From the foregoing it can be surmised that those who were guiding the destinies of the school were looking forward to uniting the scattered classrooms into one building. A move in that direction became more and more apparent with the shifting of the Jewish population from its narrow confines about the Court House to the Hill district. In consequence, beginning with 1894 and for six years following, the Talmud Torah was situated in a new environment, adequate in regard to the housing of the pupils and central as to location. At first classes were held in a building at 1210 Franklin Street, now Epiphany Street, and from 1897 to 1900 in a building in Colwell Street on the site of the former Dispatch Building. During these years many prominent orthodox Jews were affiliated with Rabbi Sivitz in behalf of the school and among them were Max Rosenberg, I. Raffel, Max Goldberg, David Sachs, I. Novack, I. Goorin, Simon Himmelblau, Max Sobel, Jacob Bernstein, Jacob Malachofsky, Israel Lefkofsky, Henry Stein, B. S. Leinberg, Samuel Silverblatt and B. Turrets.

These men worked indefatigably hard with the rabbi through those trying days of the Talmud Torah. Besides they were men of wide vision and restless energy. They had seen how the young institution went from one place and then to another during the past 12 years, limited in funds, but never halting in its sacred mission to the community. Hence, when Rabbi Sivitz one day gathered together a flock of his faithful friends and agitated the

necessity for a building that Talmud Torah could call its own he obtained ready response and co-operation.

The movement for the establishment of a permanent home for the Talmud Torah began in 1899. Agitation was sufficient strong to draw the support and interest of many well-to-do Jews who appreciated the value of it. Sufficient funds were obtained to make the beginning in the purchase of the three story building at 137 Crawford Street. In less than three months the building was completely overhauled, spacious five rooms were furnished with regulation school desks and every possible comfort provided for the pupils.

At the time of the dedication of the building Henry Stein was president; Israel Lefkofsky vice-president; Gershon Kravover, secretary, and Max Goldberg, treasurer. Mr. Lefkofsky became president in 1900 and has been the incumbent ever since. Mr. I. Novak was vice-president until the time of his death a few years ago.

It is an indisputable fact that outside of Rabbi Sivitz no man connected with the Talmud Torah during nearly forty years of its existence has given more of his time and energy than has Mr. Lefkofsky. Of a pleasant disposition, kind and sympathetic, the welfare of the Talmud Torah is a fervid religion with him. Much that the institution has already accomplished and what it hopes to achieve in the future is due to his untiring efforts. Also mention might be made of the long and honorable service as secretary of Mr. Kravover, who passed away in 1924. He was succeeded by the present secretary, Joseph M. Kelskay.

Since its advent in its present quarters, two faithful teachers have passed away, Michael Cadison and Isaac Rabinovitz. Both were able and learned instructors and left behind many tender memories often recalled by former pupils.

Of the present staff of teachers, Mr. Gulande is the surviving veteran. He has seen the school grow from its original enrollment of 100 to the present day, when nearly 500 regular and special students are under instruction in the two terms that make up the school year. In addition to Mr. Gulande are Borach Jaffe, a well known Talmudist; Abraham Simon, instructor in intermediate branches, and R. Rabinovitz, who has charge of the first year classes.

Today the Talmud Torah, after a notable career of nearly 40 years, and experiencing the success and trials that befall all living institutions, can with pride claim for itself the appellation of Pittsburgh's pioneer Hebrew School. While adhering

strictly to the teachings and traditions of the orthodox faith, it has nevertheless kept pace with the advanced methods of administration and instruction. No longer are the pupils subjected to the sing-song, monotonous drill; instead every pupil is given individual instruction and knowledge is imparted in a manner readily understood. Importance is also laid to inculcating a love for the traditions of Judaism, the observance of the Sabbath and the holy days and the significance of the mazuzah, zizith and tephilim.

The Talmud Torah is always grateful of the efforts and benefactions of its many deceased friends and co-workers. As a tribute to their memories, memorial tablets have been erected within the building upon which hundreds of names already have been inscribed. Records are also kept of their Yahrzeits and notices mailed to surviving members of their families at the appropriate time. This sacred service is in charge of Mr. Simon Schugar, a pioneer resident of the Jewish community, who has been connected with the Talmud Torah for many years.

Since its inception the Talmud Torah building has served as a place of worship during the Sabbath and holy days. The rooms are spacious and well ventilated and all facilities are provided to conduct the services. A capable cantor is usually supplied. These services are growing in popularity and are attended by many who desire to avoid the overcrowded conditions in the synagogues.

No little measure of support given to the Talmud Torah has come from the Jews of the cities and towns outside of Pittsburgh. Among the dues-paying members and donors are many from Western Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. They are imbued with the spirit that professes the perpetuation of our holy faith knows no geographical limitations and are always willing to support the school to the best of their means. Mr. A. Golanty, the financial agent, is

in charge of the out-of-town collections.

Twelve years ago the Daughters of Jacob auxiliary was organized to assist the Talmud Torah in its work for orthodox Judaism. The members hold regular meetings and several social affairs during the year. The officers are Mrs. Sarah Lanson, president; Mrs. Kassel Goldstein, vice-president, and Miss Ida Rubenstein, secretary.