

POST-WORLD WAR II DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH EDUCATION IN HALIFAX

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By the time World War II ended and the State of Israel had been established in 1948, Ashkenazi Jews had been immigrating in large numbers to North America for over a century. The first Jewish community established in Canada was in Halifax, Nova Scotia in the 1750s. After France ceded its Canadian colonies to England in 1763, the open practice of Judaism was more tolerated, and the community expanded.¹ Unfortunately, because of assimilation and lack of economic opportunity due to closed trade routes, Halifax Jews all but disappeared by 1820 with no record of habitation until the end of the 19th century.² The resurgence of the Halifax Jewish community came with the establishment of the Baron de Hirsch congregation in 1890. Mass Ashkenazi immigration from Europe during and after WWII required Haligonian Jews to swiftly reorganize and strengthen their Jewish education system to accommodate the newcomers.³ This essay will briefly explain the growth of the Baron de Hirsch congregation's Talmud Torah and its subsequent schools and will include personal accounts of members' experience in the mid-20th century. Haligonian Jews' tenacity and commitment to their religion was put to the test by the influx of immigrants, and the success of the Talmud Torah's intergenerational education is indicative of Jews' dedication to the religious scholarship of their youth.

Halifax's first step in building a successful Jewish education system was to establish a sense of permanence within the community. For many European Jewish immigrants, Halifax was the first accessible contact point in North America. Faced with dispirited yet hopeful immigrants, Haligonian Jews took it upon themselves to rekindle the Jewish light that had been stamped out by oppression, pogroms, and the Holocaust. Halifax is a small city, and the even smaller Jewish

¹ Ancil, Pierre. 2013. "Jews and New France." In *Canada's Jews: In Time, Space and Spirit*, edited by Ira Robinson, 13-20. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press.

² Jacobson, Maxine. 2013. "Struggles and Successes: The Beginnings of Jewish Life in Canada in the Eighteenth Century." In *Canada's Jews: In Time, Space and Spirit*, edited by Ira Robinson, 21-28. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press.

³ "Our History," Beth Israel Synagogue, accessed September 13, 2020, <http://thebethisrael.com/about/history/>.

community's resources were challenged with these new arrivals.⁴ My grandmother, Annalee Cohen, at the age of 2, was among these immigrants. She came to Halifax with her family to escape the war and found a welcoming community waiting for her. Work began immediately to give immigrants a sense of permanence and belonging in their new community. In 1946, the Baron de Hirsch congregation acquired a building on Quinpool Road, which would be used temporarily for the Talmud Torah and as a community gathering place.⁵ Talmud Torah dates to late medieval/early modern Europe and is defined as "an elementary school under Jewish auspices that places special emphasis on religious education."⁶ In the late '40s- early '50s, Halifax still lacked a permanent davening space for the congregation, and services were held in empty warehouses and people's homes. In 1957, the congregation bought the Beth Israel Synagogue Building, the new residence of the Baron de Hirsch congregation.⁷ Acquisition of this building provided a new "lease on life" for the congregants, as they finally had stability in their place of education.⁸ The building on Quinpool Road remained the location for Talmud Torah, and my grandmother tells me that it was affectionately called "the youth hostel" by its students.⁹

Once the Talmud Torah school was permanently established as the headquarters for Jewish learning in Halifax, rabbis and teachers sought to educate students on Jewish community, history, and pride of identity. Staying true to its founding purpose, the Halifax Talmud Torah taught children how to lead services, perform holiday rituals, act like a mensch (a selfless person of integrity and honor), and feel a connection to modern Jews in Canada and elsewhere.¹⁰ As in any Jewish community, the ultimate goal of Halifax's Jewish education program was to increase

⁴ *Simcha 100 Baron de Hirsch Congregation*, 1990.

⁵ *Simcha 100 Baron de Hirsch Congregation*.

⁶ "Talmud Torah | Judaism," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Talmud-Torah>.

⁷ "Talmud Torah," Beth Israel Synagogue, accessed September 13, 2020, <http://thebethisrael.com/jewish-learning/talmudtorah/>.

⁸ "Talmud Torah."

⁹ Annalee Cohen, September 13, 2020.

¹⁰ "Talmud Torah."

cohesion between Jewish communities in the diaspora and Israel. My dad, Jamie Cohen, grew up in Halifax, and he remembers going to Baron de Hirsch Talmud Torah three times a week from first grade until his bar mitzvah (from 1977 to 1984). "By the time we got through it," he told me, "we could manage in a synagogue and carry on. [We] knew all the prayers, so learning the Bar Mitzvah was [an] add on, but it wasn't super difficult because we'd been taught pretty well."¹¹ My dad would never admit to his Hebrew schooling transforming his life, but his experiences demonstrate a victory on the part of the Talmud Torah's goals. If my dad is any representation of the students who attended Talmud Torah as a kid, the rabbis were successful in their teaching.

Not only did the Baron de Hirsch congregation have a Talmud Torah for their elementary students, but in the late '50s- early '60s the congregation developed further education for adolescents and adults. In the October 19, 1966 edition of the synagogue's newsletter, leaders of the congregation wrote, "It is our fervent hope that this year will witness the dawn of a sincere and committed quest for Jewish knowledge and ideas in our Congregation."¹² To achieve this goal, the congregation would begin its Adult Education program the following week. This program was open to anyone and focused on teaching Hebrew language and the Jewish perspective of living in Canada and around the world.¹³ Members of the Baron de Hirsch congregation realized that while their children were getting educated, older adults may have missed out on such an opportunity before immigrating. This program allowed for modern Jewish knowledge to be spread across all age groups. Furthermore, the post-Talmud Torah adolescent program, Judaism for Young Adults, continued the education elementary students had begun.¹⁴ This program was open to all teenagers who were interested in "the thought-provoking course[s]" offered by the congregation.¹⁵ These efforts to encourage the continuation of Jewish education after Bar/Bat

¹¹ Jamie Cohen, September 18, 2020.

¹² "Beth Israel Newsletter and Photos," October 19, 1966.

¹³ "Beth Israel Newsletter and Photos."

¹⁴ "Beth Israel Newsletter and Photos."

¹⁵ "Beth Israel Newsletter and Photos."

Mitzvah age show how the newly reestablished Halifax community expanded the reach of Jewish knowledge.

Despite apparent successes of the Halifax Talmud Torah and its subsequent programs, the congregations' schools had issues with modernization. In the mid-20th century, traditional Orthodox practices were unproblematic for observant Jews as long as they spread Jewish knowledge. The Baron de Hirsch congregation had been founded as Orthodox; thus, the focus of its schooling was on boys. Males could lead the service and have a Bar Mitzvah, while females only "learn[ed] to participate in the service well" and had "a Bat-Torah celebration."¹⁶ From my modern perspective, the success of the Baron de Hirsch Talmud Torah teachings perpetuated archaic sexism present in Orthodox Jewish observance. While the rabbis believed this method to be a successful fulfilment of their educational goals, they left out half of the community's population who could have actively and impressively lead services. Additionally, as children from the first generation of immigrants grew up, they moved away, decreasing the number of members in the Halifax Jewish community. More profitable opportunities arose for Jews elsewhere in Canada, and Halifax has steadily been returning to its original small size.¹⁷

Although the shrinking of the Jewish community seems to indicate that the Talmud Torah school failed, I argue that if the emigrants from Halifax raise their children Jewish and continue their education, the school's goal of the perpetuation and further spread of Jewish knowledge is met. Jews who moved out of Halifax increased the size of the diaspora and could bring the rich knowledge they acquired as children to their new communities. Halifax's Jewish community has thus remained the origin point for the spread of Judaism across Canada. It began as the first

¹⁶ "Talmud Torah."

¹⁷ Cohen, interview, September 13, 2020.

community in the country, and now, thanks to the development of its Jewish schooling, Judaic teachings will spread exponentially outward.



Captioned:

"Dr. Steinberger addressing the Children at the Beth Israel Synagogue. December 12, 1967."

Baron de Hirsch Congregation Archives (scans)

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