

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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## Discovery of Nineteenth Century Burial Record Inspires Research on History of Cemeteries

By Lynn Mirvis

Some years ago while searching for Purim decorations in a storage room at Anshei Sphard Beth El Emeth on Yates Road, I saw on a shelf a large, worn ledger with a cover in a combed design of the type seen only on antique books or in fancy European stationery stores. On the cover of this aging book, hand-written in bold inked letters, was its title: Burial Record of the Congregation Beth El Emeth. The pages were in quite good condition, and I gave it to Michael Joffre, at that time the Executive Director of the synagogue, for safe-keeping. I didn't take time to look through the book, but every few years I asked how it was faring, and long-time secretary Annie Prager assured me that she had stored it in a safe place.

I didn't give much thought to this old burial record until I read the article in a recent issue of the Historical Society's newsletter about the numerous deaths during the devastating yellow fever epidemic in Memphis. I went

to the shul, asked to see the ledger, and immediately realized that this was a record of the deaths of people from our second oldest congregation, all hand-written in beautiful calligraphy. Many of them were victims of the yellow fever epidemics of 1873 and 1878. There were familiar

names such as Steinberg, Meyer, and Levy; nameless children identified only by the names of their parents; well known names such as Peres and Rabbi Ferdinand Sarner. Beside each name was recorded the year of death, with the month in English and the Hebrew month in Hebrew letters.

The discovery of this book has raised more questions than it has provided answers to the facts surrounding its origin.

How did it manage to escape being thrown out after all these years? Who could have brought it to Anshei Sphard Beth El Emeth? Where are the graves of the persons whose names are inscribed within its pages?

*Please see Record, Page 3*



*Hand-written inscription on cover of old Beth El Emeth burial record*



## President's Message . . . .



Max Notowitz

My son, Josh, lives in Baltimore, MD, where he has been living for almost twenty years since completing graduate school at Indiana University. Over this period of time he has developed more and more interest in Jewish studies, especially lectures offered by rabbis on Mishnah and Gemara. Both my wife, Fannie, and I have visited him in Baltimore, and he has visited us in Memphis, but our more frequent visits are on the phone. We bring him up to date on what's going on in Memphis, family news, friends, and other things of interest to him and he shares with us the life he leads in Baltimore. In some of our long telephone conversations, he shares with us the various lectures he has attended.

One such conversation took place some time ago and I took a particular interest in it. Josh started quoting from a rabbi's talk: "Two are holding on to a garment. This one says, 'I found it,' and the other says, 'I found it.' This one says, 'All of it is mine,' and the other says, 'All of it is mine.'"

Before he had a chance to finish the statements, I interrupted him by saying, "That's the beginning of the tractate in Bava Metzia." When he asked me where I learned that, I told him that when I attended Talmud Torah at age nine or ten, I had to memorize the first six pages of Bava Metzia and now, sixty years later, I still remember some of it.

I wished I could have seen the expression on his face at that moment. Although it was over sixty years later, the Mishnah and Gemara had not changed, and Jews all over the world still study it. I had to admit that I was probably too young when I studied Bava Metzia and would have gotten more out of it at an older age. However, one is never too young to start studying nor too old, and it speaks well for both the teacher and the student when something learned sixty years earlier is still remembered.

Through its programs, the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South provides excellent opportunities for keeping our history alive for ourselves and for generations to come. Our next program, which will be co-sponsored by the Bornblum Judaic Studies Department of the University of Memphis, will take place on Thursday, February 6, 2003, at 7:30 p.m. at the Fogelman Executive Center. The presentation will be by Steve Aschheim, Professor of History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His topic will be "Rethinking Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust." Some of Professor Aschheim's works include *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany* and *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*.

I personally look forward to this presentation and feel certain that it will be an outstanding program.

Max

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## Dr. Steve Aschheim

Professor of History,  
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will speak on

## "Rethinking Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust"

Thursday, February 6, 2003

7:30 p.m.

Fogelman Executive Center

Co-sponsored by  
Bornblum Judaic Studies Department  
University of Memphis

### WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS

#### Student Members:

Amy Feibelman  
Seth Feibelman



In the front of the book is a hand-written introduction signed "Abraham Boschwitz, Gabay of Beth Hayim, Memphis, May 13th, 1877." He tells of the importance of giving honor to the dead, in Jewish tradition a mitzvah akin to feeding the hungry and clothing the poor. Abraham Boschwitz's words, titled "A Short History of the Old Record," are as follows:

*In transferring the Old Record in this Book, I have after a large amount of Labour succeeded in getting this Record in such a shape that my Successor's hereafter may be able to discover the Name, Number, and Section in which our Departed lies buried [sic].*

*Its reason why the Record has not been kept in a more proper manner I can only account for Negligence, or the lack of interest in this Noble work, as my Successor's will find that some of the Gabais Beth Hayim omitted in recording the month date, and years in which our Deceased died or where Buried, in some cases they will find that the initial of the given name is not recorded, and in Section 1st from Number 123 to 126 and from Number 129 to 133, in which graves the Remains of children lies buried, not one name, or day of Burial can be Traced.*

*Abraham Boschwitz  
Gabay Beth Hayim  
Memphis May 13<sup>th</sup> 1877*

*All this is an outrage on the Community who mourn the loss of beloved Relative or Friend, who some day may wish to visit the graves of their departed for some noble purpose, must be told [sic] that such Name has never been recorded, that the date of Burial has been omitted, that the initial of the given Name has never been entered, thus such actions is robbing the Living of its consolation and depriving the Dead of their Kadish and Tombstone.*

*The Parties to my recollection that have held this worthy Office at different periods are Mrs Sclager, Schonfield, Bloomenthal, Feltman, and Heiliger, two of those Parties now sleep the sleep that knows no waking, the Spirit of M.G. Schonfield departed on the 10th day of February 1874, and his Remains lies buried in Section 2nd, number 39, Mr. Isaac S. Heiliger (Peace to his ashes) whose noble deeds, will never fade from the memory of those that have witnessed the frightful Scourge of 1873, when the contagious disease swept thousands of Souls in to Eternity, the late Mr. Isaac Heiliger Night and day could be seen at his post ever ready to lend his Kind service and to perform his regular task among the Sick and Dying, until he himself contracted the disease and fell victim to the relentless fury in the 25th day of October 1873, the cold hand of death wafted his noble Spirit to that Eternal Throne to face his Maker, his Remains lies buried in Section 2nd Number 34.*

*After the death of Isaac S. Heiliger, I succeeded him in the Office as Gabay Beth Hayim and have kept the same ever since to the best of my ability, and trust that my Successors, will make it their aim always to keep a true Record—in the highest wish of*

*Abraham Boschwitz  
Gabay Beth Hayim  
Memphis May 13th 1877*

*Please see Record, Page 4*



One-hundred sixty names are recorded in the first section and in the second section there are one-hundred names. At name 67 the handwriting changes, and Abraham Boschwitz's name is recorded: died March 8, 1878 in Memphis.

Scholes' Directory—City of Memphis 1877 lists six cemeteries in Memphis, including Calvary, Elmwood, St. Peter's and Winchester. One Jewish cemetery is listed under Hebrew—"North side Bass Avenue near Dunlap. This property was donated by Joseph I. Andrews, in trust to the members of Congregation of the Children of Israel. Office 197 Main. A.E. Frankland, warden; A. Trotter, colored, sexton." The other Jewish cemetery is listed as Beth-El-Emeth. "Situated south side of Central Avenue, north of Cane Creek. Cemetery grounds granted and all burial expenses defrayed by the Congregation in favor of all Israelites unable to pay for same. Office 90 Exchange: M. Israel, warden. Trustees: A. Boschwitz, A. Ensel, S. Morris." Maps show Cane Creek to be located where the Baron Hirsch

cemetery is today.

Many of the graves which are recorded in the old Beth El Emeth ledger can be found today within the Baron Hirsch cemetery. Conflicting stories surround the early history of the Baron Hirsch cemetery, and the above-mentioned cemetery property, which was originally owned by Beth El Emeth, became the center of an extended controversy. Sam Shankman states in his book *Baron Hirsch Congregation: From Ur to Memphis*, "The records of Shelby County show that the tract of 5.07 acres was bought by the Beth El Emeth Congregation from H. Blake in 1864, and nineteen years later Beth El Emeth ceased to exist."

Although it appeared that the original Beth El Emeth Congregation was wiped out by the Yellow Fever Epidemic, it did, in fact, maintain a presence in the Memphis Jewish community. Two members of the congregation remained, the Franklin brothers.

Left without a place of worship, the brothers exchanged the Beth El Emeth cemetery tract for two pews at Children of Israel Congregation, also known as B'nai Israel and now Temple Israel. When Yellow Fever subsided, some of the older Beth El Emeth members, who had evidently fled the city, returned and organized the Baron Hirsch Benevolent Society. They demanded their cemetery and after two years of litigation it was given back to Baron Hirsch.

According to Sam Shankman, "Through some verbal agreement with the Children of Israel Congregation, the Baron Hirsch Benevolent Society used this cemetery for over twenty years. The cemetery evidently was partly owned by the group which later incorporated into the Baron Hirsch Benevolent Society, and it was later found that the Franklin brothers had no legal right to give it to B'nai Israel." Shankman adds, "the records show that on October 15, 1909, Baron Hirsch Benevolent Society



Tombstone of I. S. Heiliger, died October 25, 1873



Baron Hirsch Cemetery

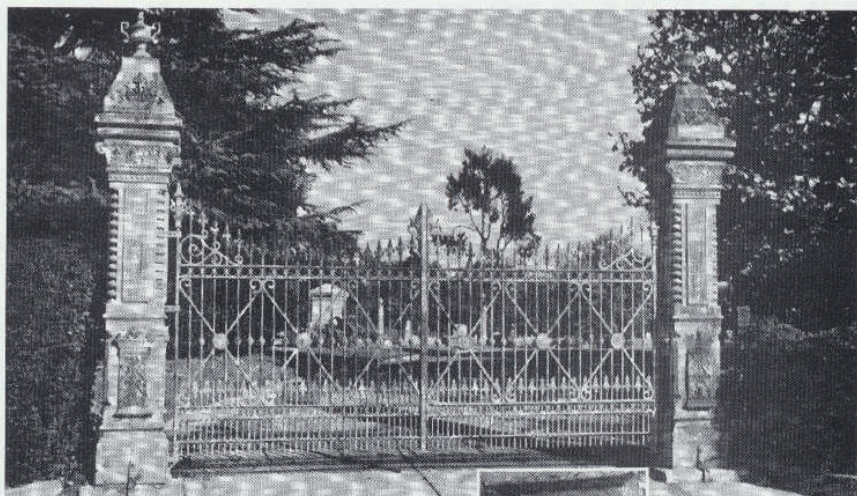


paid the Children of Israel Congregation the amount of \$500 for its claim and secured title to the property."

Rabbi James Wax tells a slightly different version of the story in his booklet *Our First Century*, a history of Temple Israel. He writes, "The Congregation, which had acquired the Beth El Emeth Cemetery in 1882, had for a number of years been leasing it to the Baron Hirsch Congregation. There were, however, many problems in connection with the leasing of the cemetery and in 1900 it was sold to Baron Hirsch Congregation for \$1000."

In *A Biblical People in the Bible Belt*, Selma Lewis relates the origins of the Temple Israel cemetery, which can be dated from 1847 when Joseph I. Andrews purchased a plot of ground in Memphis for burial purposes. The land, on Bass Avenue, now Jefferson, was bought from Marcus Winchester, mayor of the city and brother of James Winchester, the founder of Memphis. It was reported that Andrews paid "one eagle," a term for a ten dollar gold piece. Joseph Andrews' brother, Samuel E. Andrews, was the first to be buried in this cemetery.

When the congregation outgrew the Bass Avenue cemetery, a new one was purchased. Rabbi Wax's commentary in *Our First Century* continues: "The new cemetery consisted of a ten-acre plot on Hernando Road. The Congregation paid \$1750 for the land and spent almost \$2000 to improve it. In October, 1885, the burial grounds were solemnly consecrated. A mortuary chapel (later removed) was subsequently erected at a cost of \$1800. In 1906, all bodies in the Bass Avenue Cemetery were disinterred and buried in the new cemetery."



Temple Israel Cemetery

#### Some burial costs at the turn of the century:

##### Coffins:

Children under 1 year...	\$4.00
1 yr. to 5 years.....	6.00
5 yrs. to 10 years.....	7.00
10 yrs. and adult.....	\$10.50
Hearse for either children or adults.....	5.00
Hacks, each.....	4.00

Thus the history of the Beth El Emeth, Baron Hirsch, and Temple Israel cemeteries is intertwined. Although some of this history is gone forever, Abraham Boschwitz's wish that his successors "will make it their aim always to keep a true record" is now being fulfilled.

##### Editor's note:

*Abraham Boschwitz, who died on March 9, 1878, was the great-great-grandfather of Memphian Buck Boshwit. His death is recorded in the old Beth El Emeth burial record; however, according to current burial records of Temple Israel, his body is now interred in the Temple Israel cemetery.*



Cemetery Chapel

## Save the Dates!

**SJHS  
Conference**

**Oct. 31-Nov. 2**

**in Memphis**

**Watch for  
more information!**



# Rabbi Lawrence S. Zierler is New Senior Rabbi at Baron Hirsch

Rabbi Lawrence S. Zierler is the new senior rabbi of Baron Hirsch Congregation. He succeeds Rabbi Rafael Grossman, who retired after 28 years as senior rabbi at Baron Hirsch.

Rabbi Zierler was born in Sarnia, a Canadian city of about 70,000 people an hour north of Detroit. When he was ten years old, his family moved to Toronto. "There weren't many Jews in Sarnia, and my father wanted us to have a Jewish education," said Zierler, adding, "I'm the only rabbi ever to come from Sarnia."

Zierler was educated for the rabbinate at Yeshiva University in New York. He holds two master's degrees, one in bioethics, another in counseling. He is also an avid student of the history of Jewish congregations and communities. He was senior rabbi for three years at a synagogue in Portland, Maine, and then for more than eight years at a synagogue in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

Before coming to Baron Hirsch, he served as a director of the Jewish Community Center of Cleveland and led its Center for Jewish Life and Learning. In Cleveland he was known for his unswerving support for Israel and for his courageous support for interdenominational and

interfaith relations. During his first visit to Memphis, he attended an Israeli solidarity rally. Speakers included Rabbi Micah Greenstein of Temple Israel, Rev. Adrian Rogers of Bellevue Baptist Church, and U.S. Representative Harold Ford Jr.

"I could not help but be amazed by the generosity of spirit, the expansiveness of heart that I witnessed that day," Zierler said. "I saw the synagogue as a community center where the walls between us come down."

Baron Hirsch Synagogue, named for the well known Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch, was founded by a group of Eastern European immigrants, some of whom had come to Memphis from Galicia by way of Galveston, Texas. The congregation obtained its first permanent place of worship in 1890. Two years later, in 1892, a church at the corner of Fourth and Washington Street became the Baron Hirsch Synagogue. In 1955, the Congregation laid the cornerstone for a new building on Vollintine Avenue, which it occupied for 30 years before moving to its present location on Yates. Baron Hirsch is the largest Orthodox congregation in the United States.

## Abe Schwab, Founding Member of JHS of Memphis and Mid-South

Abram Joseph 'Abe' Schwab, a founding member and former officer of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South, died at his home on November 21, 2002. He was 79.

Abe Schwab was the grandson of Abraham Schwab, founder of A. Schwab's, the general merchandise store that has been an institution on Beale Street since 1876. Abraham Schwab came to the United States from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France. After Abraham's death in 1923, his three sons, Sam, Elias, and Leo ran the store. When the last of the sons died in 1978, Abe Schwab took over the management, and now Abe's son, Elliot A. Schwab, is the fourth-generation manager.

"The store was his life," Elliot said of his father. "Even when he was sick he wanted to get back to the store." Even when his father couldn't get to the store, he was concerned about the way it was being managed. When Elliot would ask what he was doing wrong, his father would reply, "Well, you're just not doing it right."

A. Schwab's began as a haberdashery for men, but over the years it has evolved to become an emporium selling items such as oversized overalls, long underwear, and potions for casting spells, along with hats, blues tapes, iron skillet, cowbells, candy, washboards, washtubs, and assorted Elvis souvenirs. The store's motto is: "If you can't find it at Schwab's, you're better off without it."

Abe Schwab was in the Army Signal Corps during World War II and was stationed in India. He was one of the original volunteers who worked to save the Orpheum theater and for almost twenty years could be seen at the front door, smiling, greeting patrons, and tearing tickets.

Schwab was a member of Temple Israel and was the widower of Gertrude V. Schwab. He leaves four children: two daughters, Beverly Jo Schwab of Memphis and Susan S. Keslensky of Atlanta, and two sons, Elliot and Herbert B. Schwab of Sugar Land, Texas.



# Two Mississippi Brothers Leave \$10 Million To Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati

One of the largest gifts ever made to the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) has come from two brothers, Cecil and Gus Herrman, who grew up in Lexington, Mississippi.

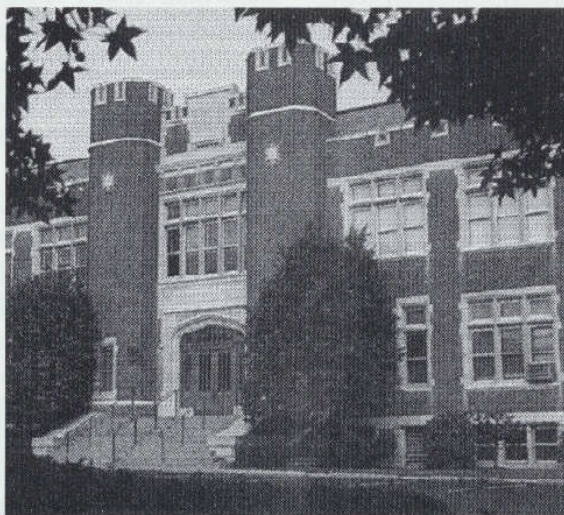
The brothers' \$10 million bequest was announced in October at the inauguration of Rabbi David Ellenson as the new president of HUC.

According to relatives, this generous gift was inspired by an off-hand remark made more than 50 years ago by the late rabbi of Temple Israel, James A. Wax, when he was still a student at HUC. Like the congregations in many other small Jewish communities, the members of Congregation Beth El in Lexington always relied on student rabbis to conduct High Holiday services. At the time, Wax was serving in Lexington, a town of fewer than 3000 with about 60 Jews.

The gift is "a remarkable story," said Macy B. Hart, director of the Jackson, Mississippi-based Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, motivated "by the fact that there was a rabbi in that small town [for the High Holidays] provided by HUC."

Robert Berman, a cousin of the Herrmans, said the comment that led to the bequests probably occurred at the home of his grandparents, Julia and Morris Lewis, over dinner. When the Herrman brothers expressed their appreciation to Wax for coming to Lexington, Wax replied, "If you ever amount to much, you should give some money

to the college, because it takes a lot to educate those boys," referring to student rabbis like himself.



*Cecil W. Herrman Learning Center at HUC*

Apparently Wax's advice was taken to heart. The Herrman brothers were neither business owners nor industrialists; they simply saved their money over the years. Neither brother married, but they traveled the world together. Cecil eventually moved to Memphis, where he and Rabbi Wax remained friends, and Gus lived in New Orleans and Houston. When Cecil Herrman died in the early 1990's, he left his \$3.3 million estate to HUC and when his brother Gus died last year, he left the school \$6.7 million.

The Hebrew Union College was founded in 1875 by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise as a school to train Reform rabbis. It was the first institution of higher Jewish learning in the western hemisphere and today is comprised of four centers of learning: Cincinnati, New York, Los Angeles, and

Jerusalem. HUC now has 2516 rabbinic alumni, including, since the ordination of the first woman rabbi in America in 1972, 344 women.

Jean Rosensaft, national director of public affairs for the school, called the Herrman brothers' bequests a "great act of philanthropy." Even today, student rabbis "provide a lifeline" to small congregations during the High Holidays. Macy Hart said the brothers' decision shows how important it is to provide services and cultivate small, isolated Jewish communities. Hart said he would like to see the school use a portion of the brothers' bequest to establish a rabbinic chair that would serve the six-state area

"that was so important to Gus"—Arkansas, where his family was from; Alabama, because he was a University of Alabama graduate; his native Mississippi; Tennessee, where his brother lived; and Louisiana and Texas, where he lived.

Berman, meanwhile wants to see a documentary made about Lexington and the Herrmans to show how small-town Jewish life can have an effect far beyond its numbers. The film would also pay tribute, he said, to "the Jewish community of Lexington, which has maintained its Jewish identity and respect and dedication to the faith of Israel in a predominately Christian area."

*Some of this information was taken from an article by Larry Brook in "Deep South Jewish Voice."*



# Jonathan D. Sarna appointed historian for new National Museum of American Jewish History

From an Article in the "Brandeis Reporter"

Jonathan D. Sarna, a featured speaker at the recent Annual Conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society in Shreveport, has been appointed historian for the new National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia.

Whenever and wherever there is an effort to illuminate American Jewish history, chances are Jonathan Sarna will be there — either at the forefront leading the project, or deeply involved in some way. This was true of his book, *The American Jewish Experience*, which became an essential text for scholars and non-scholars alike, and his *Jews of Boston*, a highly successful volume of local history, which was turned into a television documentary. And now, Sarna, the Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, is helping to see another important project to fruition: the building of the new National Museum of American Jewish History.

The \$100-million dollar structure will be located on Independence Mall, the nation's cradle of liberty, and is slated to open in 2006. The design is luminous in glass and stone, emblematic of notions of freedom, eternal presence, and the idea of a Jewish community that has grown inseparable from American life as a whole. Sarna

is serving as historian on the project, to which he brings more than 25 years of Jewish scholarship.

Said Sarna: "As American Jewry approaches its 350th anniversary on the soil of North America, it is especially appropriate to have a museum dedicated to the portrayal of Jewish history from Colonial times to the present so that Jews and non-Jews alike can study this history and learn to appreciate its significance."

Jonathan D. Sarna is the pre-eminent authority on Judaism in the Americas. He has edited or co-edited 20 books, including *The American Jewish Experience*, a reader; *People Walk On Their Heads*, a volume dealing with Jewish immigrant life in New York; *Jacksonian Jew*, a biography of Mordecai Noah; *JPS*, a cultural history of the Jewish Publication Society; and, with Ellen Smith, *The Jews of Boston*, an illustrated scholarly history of that community. His most recent books are entitled *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience*; *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives*; and *Jews and the American Public Square*. Professor Sarna is now completing a new interpretive history of American Judaism to be published by Yale University Press.



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