# THE EARLY YEARS OF THE TREE OF LIFE CONGREGATION.

THE Civil War had dragged on for three long years and was entering upon its fourth, exacting from the brave sons of Israel the same sacrifices as have been demanded by war from our youth and nation since its formation.

The oncoming Presidential election was to determine who would control our government for the next four years. Such was the picture confronting the parents of these brave boys and all those who remained at home, an unrest that compelled people to "take stock" of their material and spiritual resources.

Many were the brave sons of Israel who fought on both sides, loyal to the North and loyal to the South, both fighting for those principles which they so conscientiously believed to be the right. The Jewish soldiers who sleep forever in the Tree of Life Cemetery bear witness to Jewish participation in the great struggle. Even the rabbis took sides on the question of slavery. Rabbi Sabato Morais (founder of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America) preached and worked against slavery; Rabbi Morris J. Raphall, of New York, attempted to prove from the Bible that slavery was divinely ordained. Dr. Einhorn was forced

to leave Baltimore on account of his strong stand against slavery.

**GUSTAV GRAFNER**
**First President, 1864-1867**

The inner Jewish struggle, namely, the adaptation of Judaism to changed conditions, was already a problem in American Israel. Several of the Reform Rabbis from Germany were ministering to their German-Jewish brethren for many years. Rabbi Isaac M. Wise who had arrived in 1846, advocated through pulpit and pen, his ideas of Reform. In this early period most of the Reformers bent all their energies on changing the traditional Prayer Book, and there were as many prayer books as there were leaders of prominence.

In the midst of this unsettled era the Tree of Life Congregation was organized in June, 1864. According to the earliest records pertaining to the history of the Congregation "certain reforms had already been introduced into the Congregation Rodef Shalom, to which certain members strenuously objected, among them Gustav Grafner, an active leader in the Jewish community at that time. Their objections being overruled, they withdrew and called a meeting to organize a congregation along traditional lines."

Those who responded to the call to meet at the home of Mr. Grafner, 80 Second Avenue, were: A. Abrams, Julius Baum, H. Hershburg, Jacob Abrams, Julius Van Raalty, L. Walter, A. Levy, M. Crone, M. Goldstein, L. W. Miller, S. Levin, Joseph Peries, S. Aronson, S. Citron and M. Fink.

At this meeting Mr. Grafner was elected the first President of the newly formed congregation "Etz Hayyim" (Tree of Life). On Friday evening, July 8, 1864, the first services of the Tree of Life Congregation were held in the home of Mr. Grafner.

This small band of pioneers next concerned themselves with the matter of purchasing a plot of ground as a final resting place for the departed and on August 14, 1864, purchased a cemetery in Sharpsburg.

With the approach of the High Holy Days, it was necessary to secure a suitable place where services could be held, and accordingly, Lafayette Hall, located on the corner of Fourth Avenue and Wood Street, was rented for this purpose. Historically, this hall became famous as the birthplace of the Republican Party in February, 1856, and today the Columbia Bank Building occupies this same site.

Due to the rapid growth of the congregation, it was necessary to seek a permanent place of worship and in January, 1865, the committee in charge rented a hall at the corner of Market Street and Second Avenue, to be used as a Synagogue and Hebrew School.

But we must not imagine that the founders of the Tree of Life in its early days were given to the seriousness and sadness of life entirely; theirs was the privilege to show loyalty to Judaism in its joys, and in keeping with this spirit, and less than three years after the congregation was founded, the first Purim Ball was held.

On September 21, 1867, Benjamin Cohen was elected president. During this year his son, William H. Cohen, was Bar Mitzvah in the Synagogue, the first recorded instance of this ceremony in the Tree of Life.

The officers of the congregation then turned their attention to the problem of training its boys and girls. It was

felt that due regard to Hebrew education according to the "Law of God and Moses" was the next important step to be taken. On October 25, 1868, the first school directors were appointed, viz: Isaac Gelder, A. Aronson and I. Kann.

As early as 1870 the Tree of Life Congregation adopted a liberal policy in regard to membership and permitted members to pay "according to the blessing which the Lord thy God hath given thee," and every member, no matter what amount he paid, was given the same rights and privileges in the Synagogue. At the meeting on October 2, 1870, a discussion ensued concerning seat holders which eventually resulted in several of the congregation joining as the first full members of the Tree of Life.

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On September 29, 1872, Alexander Fink was duly elected President and this marked the beginning of a new chapter in Tree of Life history. Some of the older families in the City of Pittsburgh remember the Tree of Life as "Fink's Shul." This epithet, though not to be taken literally, tells a story. As a matter of fact, the history of the congregation from 1870 to 1892 is intimately identified with Alexander Fink. Organizations quite often receive their character and form from a dominating personality. Such was the case with the Tree of Life and its newly elected president. During the twenty years he served as president (until his death in 1892), the congregation took on definite form and character. Almost immediately following his election the first change took place with respect to salaried officers and henceforth there were to be two. Rev. A. Crone was

appointed Reader and Teacher, and Joseph M. Baer, as Sexton. It is interesting to note that when congregations in

**ALEXANDER FINK**
**President, 1872-1892**

America were changing salaried officers at very short intervals, these two men remained with the Synagogue for a

period of ten years.

It was in January, 1876, that improvements were made in the cemetery and a three room building was erected at a great expense partly subscribed to by many of the members. In order to secure funds to help defray the cost of this work, a meeting was called and plans were made to hold a Simchas Torah Ball. The secretary's report indicated twenty-eight members, eleven seat holders, and thirty-eight children enrolled in the Hebrew school at that time.

There was much agitation in the early 80's in the direction of acquiring a place for a Synagogue building, but it was several years later before the congregation changed its place of worship. A special committee was authorized to buy the property of the Lutheran Church at Fourth Avenue and Ross Street, for the sum of $10,000. After spending several thousand dollars on repairing the building to suit the needs of the congregation, the dedicatory services took place with great pomp and ceremony on March 25, 1883. Rev. Dr. F. DeSola Mendes of New York City, Rev. L. Mayer of Rodef Shalom, and the late Honorable Judge Josiah Cohen were the invited guests. The speakers emphasized the significance of adding one more place of worship, of strengthening the holy work of "altar building" in American Israel.

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As a rule, the office of Sexton is not of significance in the history of a Jewish congregation, but in 1884 an incident took place in the history of the Tree of Life which was destined to become an event of great joy fifty years later. It marked the entrance of Abraham Goldstein into the congre-

gation as Sexton and Hebrew teacher. His record during the past fifty years in the congregation has been one of great honor and it is with a feeling of great pride and joy that we are able at this time to honor him, an honor so justly deserved. There are hundreds of men in the community who are bound in everlasting gratitude to this grand old man for whatever Jewish training they received in their early youth. There is only one Mr. Goldstein, but many are the boys and girls who have gone forth from the Tree of Life religious school and in whose memories he shall be cherished forever.

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In March of this year, Rev. Crone tendered his resignation to the congregation, and in appreciation of his splendid services, he was elected an honorary member. Rev. A. Bernstein was chosen to fill the vacancy in the pulpit and served for two years. In March, 1886 it was decided to affiliate with The Jewish Theological Seminary Association the very year it was organized through the inspiration of Rabbi Sabato Morais, of Philadelphia, a prominent leader whose influence was growing continually for conservative Judaism.

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It was in the latter part of 1890 that a special meeting was called for the purpose of changing the seating arrngements to the present mode of family pews, but according to the records, it was not until some time later that the necessary two-thirds vote was secured. On January 1, 1893, by a vote of 27 to 3, it was officially approved and formally introduced into the synagogue.

On March 23, 1892, a special board meeting was called for the sad purpose of announcing the death of President Alexander Fink, and it was voted upon to hold the funeral services from the Synagogue with Rev. A. Salinger conducting the services, and Rev. L. Mayer of Rodef Shalom assisting. Friends from all walks of life, Jewish and non-Jewish, paid their respects to one who served the congregation so loyally and for such a long period.

At a meeting on September 18, 1892, Mr. H. H. Livingston was elected President, B. N. Jacobs, Vice-President, A. Abrams, Secretary, and C. Sunstein, Treasurer. A vote of thanks was extended to Marks Browarsky for the presentation of a Sefer Torah, and to Isaac Gelder for a mantel, and to B. Stern for his gift of silver to the congregation. These officers served until September, 1895, at which time B. N. Jacobs was elected President, and M. Arnfeld, Vice-President, and served until his death eight years later. C. Sunstein was re-elected Treasurer, and Meyer Fink was elected Secretary, a position he held for ten years, later becoming an honorary trustee.

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April 3, 1898, marked another chapter in Tree of Life history; hitherto the office of Minister had been filled by application when a vacancy occurred, but now the congregation sent to New York, and requested The Jewish Theological Seminary to send them a Rabbi. A young student, Michael Fried, about to graduate in a few months, was recommended, and upon arrival he was elected the first Rabbi of the Tree of Life. The congregation now took its place among the rep-

resentative institutions of its kind in America. Rabbi Fried took an active part in the community and its problems and gave liberally of his time to the consideration of Jewish problems in the city. The congregation had begun to make great strides forward and had been very actively engaged in welfare work when the untimely death of its president, B. N. Jacobs was announced. H. H. Livingston, who formerly served as president, was re-elected and continued in this office for nine years.

It was during this period of activity in the congregation that another event of importance in Tree of Life history occurred. The resignation of Rev. Alter was tendered and on April 13, 1902, the name of Rev. Joseph Levin was proposed. He was unanimously elected and now over thirty years have elapsed and Rev. Levin continues to serve our congregation with great dignity and honor. May he continue for many years to serve in chanting the songs of Israel.

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Time marches on. It was quite evident that the congregation had to seek other quarters. On December 31, 1905, the committee recommended the purchase of a lot on Craft Avenue, 100 feet by 150 feet for the sum of $16,000. This action met with approval and the president appointed a building committee to act in conjunction with the officers and trustees in erecting a new synagogue to cost $75,000.

The laying of the corner stone took place in June, 1906, without any special ceremony, due to the serious illness of Rabbi Fried. In the fall of that year, Rabbi Fried tendered his resignation to the congregation and was succeeded by his

friend and colleague Rabbi Rudolph I. Coffee, also of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, who was regularly installed into office November 1, 1906.

The present chapter in the history of the congregation began with the removal to the Craft Avenue building. The ceremony of leave taking from the old building was unusually impressive and began on March 22, 1907. Sermons were delivered by Rabbi Fried who had come from California for this occasion, and by Rabbi Coffee. The public dedication took place on Sunday, March 24, 1907, and among the invited speakers were Rev. Dr. J. Leonard Levy, Hon. Josiah Cohen, Professor "Uncle" John A. Brashear of Pittsburgh, Professor Joshua A. Joffe of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and Rabbi David H. Wittenberg of Toledo, Ohio.

The twenty-eight years in the Craft Avenue building have been years of steady progress and constant growth. In spite of the uncertainty and depressing conditions of recent times the congregation has been able to carry on and from a mere handful of members has grown to almost 300 family memberships. The religious school is yearly increasing its enrollment, which speaks well for that branch.

It is interesting to note that since the innovation of securing Rabbis from The Jewish Theological Seminary of America was instituted in 1898, but four Rabbis have occupied the pulpit these thirty-six years. That is a record that the Tree of Life Congregation can look upon with a just feeling of pride and satisfaction.

After Dr. Coffee left the Tree of Life for the West coast in 1915, he was succeeded by Rabbi Morris M. Mazure, who remained with the congregation till 1921. Rabbi Herman Hailperin came to the Tree of Life in 1922, and has been with us since that time. He has not only served as Rabbi of the Tree of Life for the longest period of years, but he has found time for a great many other activities. He is widely interested in all civic and inter-communal affairs, and the Tree of Life is especially fortunate in having such a spiritual leader in its midst.

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The year after the Tree of Life celebrated its Golden Anniversary, Rabbi Elias Solomon of New York, Vice-President of the United Synagogue of America, visited the Congregation on December 27, 1915, relative to the Congregation's affiliating with the United Synagogue. At the regular Board of Trustees meeting a motion was passed that the congregation became affiliated with the United Synagogue and it was approved at the regular meeting of the general membership, January 13th, 1916. We have been members since that time.

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The Browarsky Chapel was dedicated at the Tree of Life cemetery in Sharpsburg, Pa., in September, 1916, as a donation from Rose and Marks Browarsky.

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On February 27, 1923, the Board of Trustees passed a resolution whereby the Sisterhood was given representation

on the Board of Trustees of the congregation to take part in the deliberations of the board, but to have no vote.

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For the first time in the history of the congregation, its Rabbi was appointed to a position on the faculty of the University of Pittsburgh. This was in 1925 and 1926, when Rabbi Hailperin was an instructor at the University in the History and Philosophy departments.

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An outstanding Friday evening, was on April 8, 1927, designated as Alumni Night, when hundreds of our boys who at one time had been Bar Mitzvah here, gathered together. It proved a most impressive reunion. In December of the same year the congregation celebrated the Seventieth birthday of its Sexton and Teacher, Mr. Abraham Goldstein. A community reception for members and friends was held in his honor.

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The Memorial Hour Leaflet, containing the names of the departed in English was incorporated into the Yom Kippur Services in the year 1928, and has continued as a permanent practice.

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In 1929 a school bus was introduced to carry the children to and from Hebrew School and Sunday School from their homes, so that members and others from the Squirrel Hill district and elsewhere could avail themselves of our school facilities. This service continued for about three years.

Since 1930, an innovation at the Annual Memorial Services held in the cemetery in Sharpsburg, is the use of a loud speaker which is installed there each year. This enables the large numbers who gather there to hear this service and the Rabbi's sermon from any part of the cemetery grounds.

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In March, 1932, the congregation celebrated the Tenth Anniversary of Rabbi Hailperin's ministry at the Tree of Life, in recognition of his service and achievements as a spiritual leader, as well as civically, and in the field of education outside the Jewish pulpit. A brochure was issued to the members commemorating this important event and a public reception was held.

Also in this year, a special service for the children was inaugurated during the High Holidays in the social hall and is conducted by the children themselves.

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The year 1933 marked the completion by our Rabbi of many years of study and research in the field of Jewish and Christian intellectual relations and Rabbi Hailperin was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Pittsburgh, the highest academic award it is possible to receive.

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The past seventy years in the history of the Tree of Life have witnessed a great many changes. In short, it may be called an era of transition. Pittsburgh has lived through a remarkable period, growing from a small fort and trading post into the greatest industrial city in the world; at one

time enjoying unheard of prosperity, and during the past few years suffering and harder pressed than most other cities, due to a general and world wide business depression. Yet, through it all, this congregation has been able to carry on, thanks to its co-workers and members, and has helped to bolster up and give renewed hope to those who have had to face serious challenges and other difficulties in these distressing times. This congregation has remained steadfast to its original ideals, continuing in the spirit of traditional Judaism and has never swerved from this path. The Tree of Life Congregation has never sought to battle aggressively for partisanship in Judaism. It is more interested in our **common** Judaism and in those positive, historical values of our Tradition which are clear and plain for him who would learn to seek them out.

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