

## **Uptown and Traditional: A New Take on Baltimore's German Jewish Community**

by Jessica Elfenbein

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Over generations of American Jewish history, scholars have delineated the differences between the relatively few earlier arriving German Jews and the many later arriving Eastern European Jews, portraying the former as quickly acculturated, economically successful, and religiously reformed. By focusing on the nineteenth century “as a time when Jews in their new American home eagerly shed the restraints of the past and rushed into innovation of both public rites and private codes of behavior,” historians have “worked on the assumption that *reform* (lower case) meant the same as *Reform* (upper case) and that change involved an all-or-nothing formula.” That flawed interpretation goes on to argue that had it not been for the eastern European influx after 1880, “normative Judaism would have disappeared from America.” The historians’ point of view, combined with their choice of subjects – “the lives of Reform rabbis, the rise of Reform congregations and Reform’s institutional triumphs” -- helped to skew our understanding of the religious experience of German Jewry in America, such that experiences of traditional Jews have been largely overlooked.<sup>1</sup> The result is that the intra-group differences of the German Jews have been nearly erased and forgotten while the popular image of Uptown Jews versus Downtown Jews lives on.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 119 and 123. Diner has argued that because many historians of American Jewry are the children and grandchildren of Eastern European immigrants, they distorted the experience of earlier American Jews.

<sup>2</sup> One notable exception is Murray Friedman, ed., *When Philadelphia Was the Capital of Jewish America* (Philadelphia: The Balch Institute Press, 1993), in which a series of eleven articles focus largely on the

In fact, the religious experience of German Jews who arrived in the United States in the period before 1880 was *not* monolithic. Notable and important intra-group differences developed, especially in the area of religious practice. Despite popular belief to the contrary, not all German Jews quickly (or ever) embraced Reform. An important minority, in Baltimore and elsewhere, rebuffed efforts at progressive change and continued to practice as traditional Jews.

For example, of the six synagogues German Jews created by 1879 in Baltimore, two – Chizuk Amuno and Shearith Israel -- were explicitly traditional in their religious practice.<sup>3</sup> Of the other four, only Har Sinai began as Reform. Those who chose to affiliate at the traditional synagogues presumably embraced traditional Judaism.<sup>4</sup> And, theoretically, if from 1879 on, two of six congregations (albeit smaller than their Reform brethren) were deliberately and purposefully traditional, then perhaps a quarter or so of Baltimore’s German speaking Jews preferred traditional practice to the reforms of Reform.<sup>5</sup>

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experience of mostly German Jews who stayed traditional even as the Reform movement was taking hold strongly in many American cities.

<sup>3</sup> When Isaac Mayer Wise visited Baltimore in 1864, there were four synagogues: Baltimore Hebrew; Hebrew Friendship (Oheb Israel), Har Sinai, and Oheb Shalom. By 1879, two more had been added: Chizuk Amuno and Shearith Israel, both of which were founded to be traditional. Isaac M. Fein, *The Making of an American Jewish Community: The History of Baltimore Jewry from 1773 to 1920* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971) 108-110.

<sup>4</sup> Of 533 Jewish congregations in existence in the United States in 1890, only 217 were Reform. The other 316 “adhered to the Orthodox service.” But, many of the Orthodox congregations were “small, poor, and transitory.” The Conservative movement only formally began with the creation of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1902 and the founding of United Synagogue of America in 1913. Henry L. Feingold, *Zion in America: The Jewish Experience from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Revised Edition 1981), 181-183.

<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to find precise membership numbers for the six congregations in the period under study. Isaac Fein reports membership numbers for the 1860s (before the establishment of either Chizuk Amuno or Shearith Israel) as follows: Eden Street Shul, 180 members; Baltimore Hebrew, 150 members; Oheb Shalom, 105 members; Har Sinai, 85 members. They were likely larger than the traditional congregations. Fein says ‘by 1880 the major congregations in the city were Reform. The newly established Chizuk Amuno...was the main Orthodox synagogue. There were several others, but only small ones.’ In 1895, when Chizuk Amuno relocated uptown, its membership was 37. Fein, *The Making of an American Jewish*

The reality of this group’s experience flies in the face of common historical treatment. The years from 1880 through 1920 are often (though erroneously) recalled as being comprised of two distinct Jewish communities: the Uptown Jews, those of German descent who are presented as unfailingly successful economically, easily acculturated, and reform in their religious practice (or, “a homogeneous group sharing their Germanness, their affluence, their Reform Judaism, and their striving for acceptance in America”); and the Downtown Jews, those of Eastern European descent who were outsiders to the American experience, spoke heavily accented English, and upheld traditional religious practices. Historians (the majority of whom descend from Eastern European immigrants) describe this group as “more interesting, more Jewish, and more willing to confront and criticize the demands of mainstream American culture.”<sup>6</sup>

Eleanor Kohn, whose family founded Hochschild Kohn department store, and Lester Levy, whose family owned M.S. Levy and Company (one of the nation’s largest straw hat manufacturers), both came from families who arrived as part of the German speaking migration, yet their forebears’ experiences directly challenges the conventional wisdom regarding the religious practice of German Jews. Their grandparents’ religious lives afford us the opportunity to explore four German Jewish families: the Strausses -- Eleanor’s mother’s family (and the subject of the *New York Times* article); the Kohns -- her father’s family; the Sterns -- Lester’s mother’s family; and the Levy’s -- Lester’s father’s people. All four families migrated to the United States from German speaking places, arriving before 1870. The Sterns settled in Philadelphia. The other three families

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*Community*, 109-110 117-118; and Jan Bernhardt Schein, *On Three Pillars* (Baltimore:Chizuk Amuno Congregation, 2000) 164.

<sup>6</sup> Diner, *A Time for Gathering*, 1-2.

became Baltimoreans.<sup>7</sup> The Kohns and the Sterns affiliated with Reform congregations, while the Strausses and the Levys remained traditional -- observing the Sabbath, and keeping kosher both in the house and outside. And, there was 'intermarriage.' The orthodox Clara Strauss married the ultra-Reform Benno Kohn; the Reform Beatrice Stern married the traditional William Levy. And for both couples, traditional Judaism triumphed. Clara Strauss and Benno Kohn worshipped at Baltimore's traditional Shearith Israel congregation, founded by her father. Beatrice Stern and William Levy affiliated with the city's traditional Chizuk Amuno congregation, where his family had been among the earliest members.

Taken together, their stories provide a meaningful lens through which to reexamine the German Jewish experience. Though two of the four families embraced Reform, the other two, though economically successful and socially prominent, remained actively committed to traditional Judaism. While it would be easier if we could explain the religious experience of the Levys and Strausses as anomalous and peculiar, such an explanation would be wrong. Though not in the religious majority among German Jews, these families were, in fact, part of a sizeable and important minority, the experience of which has, to date, been all but ignored.

This paper seeks to describe a fuller (and more accurate) range of religious experiences had by second migration German Jewish Baltimoreans in the period from the 1880s to the 1950s. A special effort will be made to restore the experience of those traditional (but long ignored) Jews like the Levys and Strausses to the historical record. While there were real and abiding differences in religious practice within the community of German Jews in Baltimore, they strained, but never ripped, the community's social

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<sup>7</sup> The Sterns were the first Jews to settle in the State of Delaware before moving to Philadelphia.

fabric. And, the differences were, apparently, far from insurmountable. Keep in mind again the intermarriages of the Strauses and the Kohns, the Sterns and the Levys. Keep in mind, too, that in both of these cases traditional Judaism triumphed over Reform.

Soon after arriving in Baltimore in 1866, Michael Simon and Betsy Levy became members of Lloyd Street's Baltimore Hebrew Congregation (BHC), which then followed the orthodox ritual. Remembered by their grandchildren as pious Jews who observed the Sabbath and holidays "with love and with understanding of the meaning and significance," the Levys kept Kosher both in their home and outside, "where their observance entailed inconvenience or difficulty." A grandson wrote:

In act and thought, in form and spirit, Michael and Betsy Levy lived the ideal Jewish life. They did not, however, regard the Jewish life as something esoteric, which had to be reconciled with American life through compromise, but as the embodiment of living ideals, which they could make a part of their being without shutting themselves off from the world around them. For they were Americans, as well as Jews, and were thoroughly imbued with all that was best in the culture of their adopted land.

As "Jew and Jewess" and "loyal members of the house of Israel," Michael and Betsy Levy's religious identity was enormously important. They subscribed to the "religious doctrines of traditional Judaism, and their never wavering faith was supplemented by a scrupulous observance of Jewish law and custom."<sup>8</sup>

Given that commitment, it is not surprising that Michael Levy was part of the 1870 schism in which, in response to a proposal at BHC for a mixed-gender choir (a notion that was anathema to those who favored traditional practice), a dozen men resigned and founded the traditional Chizuk Amuno congregation. Although not a

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<sup>8</sup> Herbert Moses, *In Memoriam: Michael Simon Levy and Betsy Levy* (Baltimore: Lord Baltimore Press, 1912), 19 & 29.

founder, Michael Levy joined in early 1872.<sup>9</sup> Congregations like Chizuk Amuno were, according to Leon Jick, part of the “handful of congregations in America in which substantial reforms had not been introduced and in which an accelerating program of radical revision was not in process” by 1870.<sup>10</sup>

Though the Levys would stay involved with Chizuk Amuno for generations, they were also engaged with other Jewish congregations both in and out of Baltimore. For years, Michael and Betsy Levy summered at Sharon Springs, New York. There, in 1904, Michael Levy helped found the synagogue to which he gave generous gifts and for which he served as president from 1907 until his death in 1911, overlapping with his leadership of Baltimore’s Chizuk Amuno. Levy family vacations were not limited to Sharon Springs. Like many Jewish Baltimoreans, the Levys also summered in Atlantic City, New Jersey. After Betsy Levy’s death in 1906, Michael memorialized her with a perpetual light at Atlantic City’s Congregation Rodef Shalom.<sup>11</sup>

Betsy and Michael Levy’s ten children proved another impetus for synagogue involvement and financial support. For example, when their son, Jacob, died in 1899, the Levys made a gift to South Baltimore’s Congregation Rodfe Zadek to purchase an eternal light in his memory. And, when their daughter Rachel moved to Richmond, Virginia, her father visited and attended services at Congregation Keneseth Israel to observe yartzheit. “Noticing that the tablets on which were inscribed the first words of the Ten Commandments were not so good as might be desired, he gave the congregation the

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<sup>9</sup> Chizuk Amuno had 23 founding members of which four were Friedenwalds (Jonas, Joseph, Isaac and Moses). Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 9 & 19; and Moses, *In Memoriam*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Jick, *Jews in the Synagogue*, 259.

<sup>11</sup> Moses, *In Memoriam*, 21.

money to purchase better ones.” M.S. Levy was also responsible for preventing the foreclosure of Baltimore’s Congregation Beth Yaakov’s mortgage in 1908.<sup>12</sup>

Supporting Jewish learning was important to Michael and Betsy Levy and their children. Betsy’s will left bequests to a range of Jewish charities, including the Baltimore Talmud Torah Society and Chizuk Amuno.<sup>13</sup> M.S. Levy included in his generous bequest to Chizuk Amuno \$10,000 to endow a fund to support three scholars who studied Talmud daily.<sup>14</sup>

William’s younger brother and partner, Julius Levy, though lapsed in some Jewish practices himself, generously supported Jewish education across strict denominational lines. At his death in 1926, he bequeathed \$25,000 to reduce Chizuk Amuno’s mortgage. In addition, he gave \$10,000 to each of five Jewish schools: Baltimore Talmud Torah Society; Baltimore Hebrew College (of which he was a founder); New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary (the rabbinical seminary for the Conservative movement); the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of New York (RIETS- the predecessor of Yeshiva University); and Hebrew University at Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup>

William Levy, the Levys oldest son and one of the two who took over the straw hat business, married Beatrice Stern, a Philadelphia native and the daughter of Morris Stern, a ‘48er, who was born in Bavaria in 1831 and came to the United States after the

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<sup>12</sup> Moses, *In Memoriam*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> *News American*, 21 August 1908. Betsy Levy’s will left a total of \$3,250 to non-family members. Of this amount, \$1,000 went to Federated Jewish Charities; \$500 each to the Hebrew Children’s Shelter and Protective Association; the Hebrew Friendly Inn and Aged Home; and Chizuk Amuno; and \$250 each to the Hebrew Ladies’ Sewing Society; Baltimore Talmud Torah Society; and the Jewish Maternity Association of Philadelphia.

<sup>14</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 119.

<sup>15</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 166; and *Baltimore Sun*, 15 December 1926.

German revolution.<sup>16</sup> The first Jew in the State of Delaware, Morris Stern moved to Philadelphia in 1855 and was a charter member of Keneseth Israel, a Reform congregation. He married New Yorker Matilda Bamberger in 1856. Together they had eight children. Son Morris Stern was active in Jewish affairs. His contacts with the rabbinical leaders of the Reform movement were his greatest pleasure. In 1889, protesting the institution of Sunday services, he left Keneseth Israel and joined Rodeph Shalom instead.<sup>17</sup>

Though raised a Reform Jew, once married and in Baltimore, Beatrice Stern Levy joined her husband and his family at the traditional Chizuk Amuno congregation where she took an active role. Though her husband's tenure as congregational president lasted only a year, Beatrice Stern Levy was a longtime Sisterhood president. She felt strongly about the role of women as transmitters of Judaism, asking fellow Sisterhood members: "Do we make of our homes sanctuaries, where our children imbibe the ethics and ceremonies so dear to us as Mothers in Israel? Do we attend divine Services every Sabbath, so that by our presence in this beautiful House of God we inspire our children, that they, too, will feel it incumbent on them to worship with us?"<sup>18</sup>

William Levy, meanwhile, developed a national profile in Jewish life. A huge supporter of Jewish causes in Baltimore and around the world, William and his brother Julius were key players in the amalgamation of Baltimore's German Jewish and Eastern

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<sup>16</sup> The Sterns and the Levys were twice related. William Levy married Beatrice Stern and William's sister Debbie married Beatrice's brother Eugene. Alfred H. Moses, "My Father," *Memoir of Leslie William Moses, 1887-1979* (Portland, ME: Privately Printed, 1988) 56.

<sup>17</sup> Undated, unattributed article in Levy Collection, Box 23, File 770, JMM.

Beatrice Stern Levy's brother, Horace Stern, became the first Jewish member of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. He served as chief justice from 1952 to 1957. He continued to be a member of Congregation Keneseth Israel and was active in the American Jewish Committee. Murray Friedman (ed.), *Jewish Life in Philadelphia, 1830-1940* ( Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1983) 299; Friedman, *When Philadelphia Was the Capital of Jewish America*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 152-153.

European charities into the Associated Jewish Charities in the early 1920s. At his death in 1931, an obituary in the *Forward* reported (in Yiddish), “William Levy was to Baltimore what Dr. L.K. Frankel was to New York Jewry.”<sup>19</sup> Like his parents and his siblings, William Levy supported Jewish higher education, bequeathing \$20,000 to the Jewish Theological Seminary.<sup>20</sup>

After her husband’s death, Beatrice Stern Levy continued to embrace Chizuk Amuno’s traditional practices, yet her early training as a Reform Jew contributed to her “progressive” religious views. Beatrice Levy believed in egalitarianism. Disturbed that women did not sit on the synagogue’s board, she repeatedly requested that two Sisterhood members be appointed. After consulting with other Jewish experts, in 1943 the rabbi allowed the Sisterhood and Brotherhood presidents to serve as ex-officio members, but decreed that women were to “abstain from voting, especially on all purely religious matters.” Beatrice Stern Levy was only partially satisfied. She wanted women to have full voting rights.<sup>21</sup>

Long interested in seeing Chizuk Amuno adopt mixed seating, in the late 1940s, Beatrice Stern Levy “penned her own thought in a convincing argument and rose in the

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<sup>19</sup> *Forward*, 2 August 1931. Lee K. Frankel, a Philadelphia native, earned a Ph.D. in Chemistry before turning his attention to public health and social welfare concerns. From 1899 to 1908 he served as manager of New York’s United Hebrew Charities. He then went on to an illustrious career with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, and until his death in 1931, directed the landmark health promotion and welfare work of that company.

[http://72.14.207.104/search?q=cache:5\\_YW\\_9E2n1AJ:www.casact.org/pubs/proceed/proceed31/31239.pdf+%22lee+k.+frankel%22&hl=en&ie=UTF-8](http://72.14.207.104/search?q=cache:5_YW_9E2n1AJ:www.casact.org/pubs/proceed/proceed31/31239.pdf+%22lee+k.+frankel%22&hl=en&ie=UTF-8).

<sup>20</sup> *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 10 December 1931.

Julius Levy, William’s brother and business partner, though lapsed in some Jewish practices, generously supported Jewish education across strict denominational lines. At his death in 1926, he bequeathed \$25,000 to reduce Chizuk Amuno’s mortgage. In addition, he gave \$10,000 to each of five Jewish schools: Baltimore Talmud Torah Society; Baltimore Hebrew College (of which he was a founder); New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary (the rabbinical seminary for the Conservative movement); the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of New York (RIETS- the predecessor of Yeshiva University); and Hebrew University at Jerusalem. Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 166; and *Baltimore Sun*, 15 December 1926.

<sup>21</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 195 and 196.

midst of the congregation to express her view urging that mixed pews shall henceforth be allowed. According to Chizuk Amuno's Rabbi Israel M. Goldman, "[h]er presence and her message helped the congregation make this important step forward." Her role was critical: she "helped to weight the sentiments of the members of the congregation" in what was called the "most acrimonious dispute in the history of the Congregation."<sup>22</sup>

Like her husband, Beatrice Stern Levy was interested in the work of the Jewish Theological Seminary. She raised money for the Seminary's Mathilde Schechter Residence Hall for Women where a room was designated the "Beatrice Stern Levy Baltimore Women's Room" in 1960.<sup>23</sup>

Eleanor Kohn Levy's parents, Benno Kohn and Clara Strauss, were an even more extreme "intermarriage." Her father was a Reform Jew whose family affiliated at Har Sinai Congregation, the first congregation in America organized in 1842 as a "self-declared reform body" where, like Philadelphia's Keneseth Israel, Sabbath services were held on Sundays!<sup>24</sup> His parents, Bernhard Kohn and Mathilde Lauer, emigrated from Germany and remained in touch with family there.<sup>25</sup> We know less about this family than we do the others. We know Mathilde Lauer Kohn was institutionalized at the Mt. Hope asylum, a fact withheld from her grandchildren who thought she was dead.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Euology by Rabbi Israel M. Goldman, 3 August 1966; and Chizuk Amuno Sisterhood Newsletter, 10 September 1960, Levy Collection, MS 127, Box 3, Files 57 & 58; and Schein, 205.

<sup>23</sup> Levy Collection, Box 23, File 734, JMM.

<sup>24</sup> Oral History of Eleanor Kohn Levy, 12 November 1991, Associated Collection, Box 16, 1996.164, JMM; Martin Kohn's Family Memories, as distributed by Liz Moser, November 1992, Levy Collection, Box 26, File 783, JMM; and Jick, *Jews in the Synagogue*, 130.

<sup>25</sup> Mathilde Lauer had a brother who remained in Germany with his two sons and a daughter. The daughter married a man whose last name was Baneman and had five children. During the 1930s, the Kohns worked hard to bring the Baneman descendants to the United States, succeeding in helping 17 of them. Martin Kohn's Family Memories, as distributed by Liz Moser, November 1992, Levy Collection, Box 26, File 783, JMM.

<sup>26</sup> Her existence became known to her grandchildren only after Benno Kohn's death, when Frank Schuman, the family's chauffeur, told Martin Kohn that for years he had driven his father and uncle on alternate

Clara Strauss was a daughter of Moses and Caroline Strauss. In 1879, her father helped found Shearith Israel from the merger of two smaller congregations with the belief that “forming a stronger body ... would be more able to resist the influences of Reform.” Moses Strauss was the first president of the congregation, serving for 26 years until his death in 1905.<sup>27</sup> During Strauss’ tenure, Shearith Israel called the Zionist Schepsel Schaffer from Germany to be the congregation’s first rabbi.<sup>28</sup> He arrived in 1893.

In 1903, the congregation was the last of the city’s five extant German synagogues to relocate to the fashionable Eutaw Place neighborhood. Shearith Israel’s new building on McCulloh Street near Bloom Street featured a mikvah (ritual bath) and was part of a major demographic shift in which the new synagogue buildings were “stately stone structures intended to be permanent fixtures in the new neighborhood.” Together the five synagogues marked Eutaw Place as a “Jewish neighborhood.”<sup>29</sup>

Moses and Caroline Strauss had six children, five daughters (Sophie, Katy, Jennie, Theresa and Clara), and a son (Meyer). While all of their daughters married Jews, not a single one married an observant man. In contrast, son Meyer married the very observant Julia Friedenwald, the daughter of Harry Friedenwald, and granddaughter of Aaron Friedenwald, founders of Chizuk Amuno and major Baltimore Zionists.<sup>30</sup>

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weeks to visit her. Martin Kohn’s Family Memories, as distributed by Liz Moser, 4 November 1992, Levy Collection, Box 26, File 783, JMM.

<sup>27</sup> Rev. Dr. S. Schaffer, “Sketch of the History of the Shearith Israel Congregation,” in Isadore Blum, 1910, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Schaffer’s son married a Hutzler. Author’s phone interview with Alfred Moses, July 2004. In 1897, Schaffer was the only Baltimorean delegate to the first Zionist Congress in Basel. His reports about the gathering attracted a great deal of notice, allowing Baltimore’s Zion Association to grow to become America’s largest Zionist group. Fein, *The Making of an American Jewish Community*, 195.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold Blumberg, *A History of Congregation Shearith Israel on the Threshold of a Century, 1969?*, Vertical File, JMM; and “Notes on Cornerstones of Community: The Historic Synagogues of Maryland, 1845-1945 (Baltimore: Jewish Museum of MD, 200\_?), 31.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Kohn’s Family Memories, as distributed by Liz Moser, November 1992, Levy Collection, Box 26, File 783, JMM.

Shearith Israel remained central throughout Clara Strauss Kohn's life. Rather than assuming her husband's religious identity as Beatrice Stern Levy had done, Benno Kohn instead ratcheted up *his* religious involvement, embracing traditional Judaism. After his death, a commentator proclaimed: "His home exhaled a Jewish spirit that gained its finest beauty from the manner in which he yielded to and *assisted the devout wife and mother in maintaining the religious spirit she desired.*"<sup>31</sup> Clara Strauss Kohn was orthodox when she married Benno Kohn and "persisted in her observance." With her husband's "consent and support," Clara maintained a kosher house ... observed the Sabbath, ate kosher outside as well as inside." Clara and Benno Kohn's four children -- sons Martin and Bernard and daughters Eleanor and Carrie -- were raised "orthodox and observant."<sup>32</sup>

In 1910, when the Kohn family moved to Mount Washington, an early suburb, Clara walked four miles each way to Shearith Israel downtown. When, in 1925, the synagogue opened a satellite site at Glen Avenue much nearer to her new home, she shifted her attention there: "in her white dress, she sat in the front row upstairs."<sup>33</sup>

Despite the fact that within the Stern-Levy and Strauss-Kohn families each couple had a member raised as a Reform Jew, traditional Judaism triumphed in the homes and lives of Beatrice Stern Levy and William Levy and Clara Strauss Kohn and Benno Kohn. In the case of the Levys, much of their synagogue activity centered on Chizuk Amuno where, like two generations of Levys before them, these Levys took on leadership roles.

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<sup>31</sup> Edward L. Israel, "Benno Kohn," Privately Printed, 1929, Levy Collection, Box 25, File 828, JMM. Emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Kohn's Family Memories, as distributed by Liz Moser, 6, November 1992, Levy Collection, Box 26, File 783, JMM.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Kohn's Family Memories, as distributed by Liz Moser, 6, November 1992, Levy Collection, Box 26, File 783, JMM.

In the case of the Kohns, synagogue life was entirely focused on Shearith Israel, first in its downtown location and later in its Upper Park Heights satellite. Understanding the histories of these congregations is important not only to the story of these families, but indeed, to the largely overlooked story of German Jews in America who opted to remain traditional in their religious practices.

For its first five years, the members of Chizuk Amuno worshipped in Exeter Hall near Fayette Street in East Baltimore. In the mid 1870s the congregation built a building (B'nai Israel) on Lloyd Street, just down the block from BHC. During these years, Michael Levy began his years of service to the congregation, serving on the book and school committees where he butted heads with Rabbi Henry W. Schneeberger (the congregation's first rabbi and "the first American born, university-trained, ordained rabbi in the United States") on the issue of instruction in German. The rabbi wanted Judaic studies given in Hebrew or English, a term acceptable to the school commissioners. But, like every German immigrant congregation, the commissioners wanted twice weekly German language instruction as well because German was also the first language of many members. Though this desire was common among German immigrant congregations, Rabbi Schneeberger "vehemently disagreed." After a year's postponement, German language instruction finally began in 1878. Ironically, interest in German soon waned. German language was dropped as a religious school requirement in 1886 and totally abandoned two years later.<sup>34</sup>

Schneeberger's unwillingness to embrace German language instruction may have reflected the fact that Chizuk Amuno, more than the other congregations founded by German speaking Jews, was relatively welcoming to newly arrived co-religionists from

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<sup>34</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 47-49; and Jick, *Jews in the Synagogue*, 94.



builder.<sup>38</sup> Michael Levy served as Chizuk Amuno's vice president in 1894 and then, from 1902 (following the death of Aaron Friedenwald) until his own death nine years later, he was the synagogue's president.<sup>39</sup>

When Chizuk Amuno moved uptown, its membership was only 30, its lowest point in two decades. It was in a precarious state both religiously and financially. The dearth of members forced the board to pay men to attend minyan. Fortunately for the congregation, the growth of the Jewish population in the Eutaw Place neighborhood was rapid (one hundred new members joined Chizuk Amuno within its first decade there), allowing the setbacks to be short-lived. Many of those who joined the congregation were families of Eastern European descent that had "achieved financial stability" and moved from the East Baltimore Jewish ghetto, choosing to settle "uptown" instead.<sup>40</sup>

Lady Levys also led Chizuk Amuno. When the congregation moved uptown in 1895, Betsy Levy, her daughter-in-law Mrs. Jacob Levy, and Birdie Friedenwald, together with the Ladies' Auxiliary Society (which Betsy Levy led for six years), gave the new building a "perpetual light, two handsome candelabra, cushions, carpets, curtains for the shrine, decorations for the reading desk and two handsome platform chairs." These women's efforts on behalf of their synagogue were typical. According to Hasia Diner, the synagogue's holy objects – Torah covers, binders, curtains – were "either made by the wives of members or purchased with money the women raised." Under Betsy Levy's leadership, the Ladies' Auxiliary Society not only decorated the new building, it maintained its own investment account. In 1902, Betsy Levy led this group to

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<sup>38</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 94-95.

<sup>39</sup> Moses, *In Memoriam*, 20 & 22; and Isador Blum, *The Jews of Baltimore* (Baltimore: Historical Review Publishing Co., 1910), 67.

<sup>40</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 133 & 164.

donate \$5,000 worth of railway bonds to the congregation to be cashed in and used to reduce the mortgage on the building.<sup>41</sup>

In 1909, Lester Levy became a Bar Mitzvah at Chizuk Amuno. In honor of that event, his parents, Beatrice and William Levy, contributed ice cream and cakes to the children at the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. A party at the Maryland Theater on Franklin Street followed lunch for invited guests. There the children had reserved seats at the home of the “finest vaudeville acts in the city.” After the show, the Bar Mitzvah party went to Doebreiner’s, a renowned ice cream and cake shop that “formed a part of the Bar Mitzvah ritual for many years, almost as important as (some thought more important than) the religious ceremony itself.”<sup>42</sup>

Leadership of Chizuk Amuno continued with the next generations, too. Michael and Betsy’s son (and Lester’s father), William Levy, was a member of the Board of Directors and, with Friedenwald, represented the congregation at the organizing meeting of the United Synagogue of America, the group that created Conservative Judaism. Lester Levy described his father William as “a religious man. People looked on him as an Orthodox Jew.” Recognizing the changing nature of orthodoxy, in 1983 Lester wrote, “by today’s standards he would more likely have been dubbed a conservative.” During his childhood years at 2352 Eutaw Place, Lester and his father walked to Sabbath services at Chizuk Amuno, a mile away at McCulloh and Mosher Streets.<sup>43</sup> In February 1913, Levy and Harry Friedenwald, together with representatives of twenty-two other congregations from around the country met “seeking a course between traditional

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<sup>41</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 95-96; and 114; and Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering*, 120.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Hebrew Orphan Asylum to Mr & Mrs. Levy, 31 October 1909, Levy Collection, JMM; and Lester Stern Levy, *Memoirs*, 5 October 1983, Levy Collection, MS 127, Box 4, JMM.

<sup>43</sup> Lester Stern Levy, *Memoirs*, 5 October 1983, MS 127, Box 4, JMM.

practices and moderate innovations in congregational life.” Both men, together with their rabbi, were named to committees of the nascent United Synagogue of America.<sup>44</sup>

Then, in the early 1920s when the congregation decided to move further uptown to a more fashionable address just south of Druid Hill Park, it was Mrs. Ralph Ephraim, a daughter of Betsy and Michael Levy, who headed the apron booth at a three day fundraising event at Carlin’s Hall on Reisterstown Road at which the women raised \$10,000 for the new building.<sup>45</sup> Mrs. Ephraim’s brother, William Levy, was the congregation’s president when the decision to relocate was made. Like his father, Levy secured architect Joseph Evans Sperry for the project, seeing to it that Sperry was selected to design the new building in a Romanesque-Byzantine style<sup>46</sup>

From the beginning, plans for the Eutaw Place property featured a school building separate from the main synagogue. But, during William Levy’s extended absence from town, other congregational leaders determined that the synagogue’s financial resources were too meager for a separate school building. They decided to integrate the classroom space into the synagogue building instead. Without consulting Levy, the committees sold off half of the land. So great was Levy’s disappointment that he resigned from the presidency at the end of a one-year term!<sup>47</sup>

Despite disappointment with the sale of the lot, the Levy family did not disengage from Chizuk Amuno or from the issue of the school building. Shortly after the sale of the

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<sup>44</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 122-123.

<sup>45</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 129 & 147

<sup>46</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 145.

<sup>47</sup> Jewish Welfare Board, *Study of the Recreational, Social and Cultural Resources of the Jewish Community of Baltimore* (New York City: June 1925), 38, Associated Collection, Box 10, 1995.98.50, JMM; and Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 148.

Milton Fleisher followed William Levy as president. The president of his family’s successful Liberty Manufacturing Company (specializing in nightgowns), Fleisher served as president for 31 years, earning him the title “Dean of Synagogue Presidents.” Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 151-152.

land, an effort to buy a second building at Linden and Chauncey Avenues was tempered by the board's decision not to commit to a new building unless half of the money was in hand. Beatrice Stern Levy, Sisterhood president during the year of her husband's congregational presidency, had her group raising money for the new school. Her daughter, Selma Levy Oppenheimer, remembered: "Mama was the one who proposed starting a building fund for the new school with moneys realized from card parties and bazaars."<sup>48</sup> William's brother, Julius Levy, meanwhile, offered to pay fifteen percent of the total cost of building a school center or the full expense of converting existing vestry rooms in the new building into additional classrooms. The board accepted the second option and two more classrooms were built.<sup>49</sup> The Sperry-designed Eutaw Place building then featured a sanctuary with seating for 1,200 and seven classrooms, evidence of the congregation's swift growth.

Meanwhile, difficulties selling the McCulloh Street building tightened the congregation's financial situation. Eventually, the building was sold to the Metropolitan Baptist Church in a rocky transaction in which delinquent payments caused the Chizuk Amuno board periodically to delay paying interest to holders of their 6% Gold Second Mortgage Bond coupons. Understanding the congregation's plight, some bond owners returned bonds to the synagogue as gifts. Julius Levy made a major contribution when he gave \$6,000 worth of Gold Bonds in 1924.<sup>50</sup>

Julius Levy's religious life was more complicated than that of his parents or siblings. Where the others went to synagogue regularly, Julius clearly supported Chizuk

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<sup>48</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 153.

<sup>49</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 155.

<sup>50</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 164 & 170. The Great Depression caused the congregation more financial uncertainty. A call for cash in May 1932 motivated Ralph L. Ephraim to give \$100, but he was the only Levy to respond.

Amuno, but on Saturdays was often found eating oysters at the Rennert Hotel rather than at worship services. He never took a synagogue leadership role, but did chair the Maryland Jewish Relief Committee and worked to “rescue destitute people of Eastern and Southern Europe, without regard to sect, who suffered poverty and starvation during and after” World War I.<sup>51</sup> He was also a founder of Baltimore Hebrew College. Levy collected Asian art which formed a base for the Baltimore Museum of Art’s collection. Less well known is his Judaica collection. His charity “recognized no class, creed or race,” something the synagogue bulletin claims was made possible by “his very Jewishness”<sup>52</sup>

Leslie Moses, another Levy family member, was also involved in Chizuk Amuno’s affairs in this period. In 1920, Moses (a grandson of Betsy and Michael Levy and a partner in M.S. Levy and Sons) traveled to New York City on behalf of the synagogue to interview Abba Josef Weisgal for the position of chazzan or cantor. He listened to the cantor sing for more than an hour and then brokered a deal with the cantor’s brother that brought Weisgal to Baltimore where he served the congregation for more than fifty years. Moses also reorganized Brotherhood and was elected its first president in 1927.<sup>53</sup> Meantime, Moses’ uncle, William Levy, worked to make Chizuk Amuno more accessible, suggesting in 1928 that more prayers be recited in English.<sup>54</sup>

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The Levy family’s interest in Jewish education and support for the Jewish Theological Seminary was abiding. In 1923, for example, William Levy called a conference in Baltimore at the Phoenix Club<sup>55</sup> “in the interest of the Jewish Theological

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<sup>51</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, 23 November 1926.

<sup>52</sup> *The Bulletin*, published by Chizuk Amuno’s Young Peoples League, 26 Nov. 1926, Vol. 6, No. 3, JMM.

<sup>53</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 143-144; and 161.

<sup>54</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 166-167.

<sup>55</sup> Established in 1866, the Phoenix Club was “the meeting place of Baltimore’s wealthy Jews.” Fein, *The Making of an American Jewish Community*, 159.

Seminary of America, and the general welfare of Judaism in this country.” The goal of the meeting was to appoint committees and organize to raise Baltimore’s quota of \$50,000 in a national campaign to create a one million dollar endowment for the seminary. William Levy invited delegates from all of the city’s Jewish congregations. The “small but representative gathering of leaders” that attended “exhibited the most intense interest and enthusiasm.”<sup>56</sup>

As the keynote speaker, William Levy discussed American Jews’ indifference “to spiritualism and Jewish learning.” He proclaimed that it was “‘high time’ that the Jews of America turn their attention to the task of keeping alive the interest in our faith.” In addition to saving their brethren around the world from persecution, Levy believed that Jewish learning would also “cause our Gentile fellow citizens to appreciate our rights to full citizenship,” thus allowing the United States to set an example for the rest of the world.<sup>57</sup>

Cyrus Adler spoke after Levy.<sup>58</sup> He argued that, because the European centers of Jewish learning were being destroyed, “either by persecution or emigration of the Jews, or because of a tendency to drift into the study of other subjects,” if American Jews did not carry on Jewish learning, the future of world Jewry would be imperiled. Though Adler lauded American Jews for having supported “bodily and spiritually” the Jews of

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<sup>56</sup> Jewish Theological Seminary, Levy Collection, Box 21, File 709, 1, JMM.

<sup>57</sup> Jewish Theological Seminary, Levy Collection, Box 21, File 709, 1, JMM.

<sup>58</sup> Cyrus Adler helped found and lead the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Historical Society, the Jewish Publication Society, and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Born in Arkansas in 1863, he moved to Philadelphia at age 6. He then lived in Baltimore and Washington, DC from 1883 to 1908. In Baltimore, he was a student at The Johns Hopkins University. In Washington, DC, he became the assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. While in Baltimore he often visited with the Friedenwalds, worshipping with them at Chizuk Amuno and eventually marrying Racie Friedenwald. He also spent a great deal of time at the home of Oheb Shalom’s Rabbi Benjamin Szold. Cyrus Adler, *I Have Considered the Days* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1941) and Ira Robinson, “Cyrus Adler, The Philadelphian,” in Murray Friedman, *When Philadelphia Was the Capital of Jewish*, 92-103.

Europe, he was concerned that in the process they had “taken little care of their own spiritual needs.” The result was a need for American Jews “to do something for ourselves. Our rabbis must be our teachers and in order to equip our rabbis, we must have properly supported institutions and endowments.”<sup>59</sup>

Julius Levy responded to the comments of Cyrus Adler and his brother, William. He scolded American Jewry for its lack of interest in religion and Jewish learning, saying, “not interest in Judaism, but pride of race makes us the philanthropists for which we are accredited. The Jew of this country cares little for Judaism because of his lack of education in Judaism. It is not philanthropy to contribute. It is duty.”<sup>60</sup> Putting their own money where their mouths were, brothers Julius and William Levy each offered a one thousand dollar match for every nine thousand dollars raised in Baltimore.<sup>61</sup>

Despite their own interest in Jewish education and the fact that, in the twentieth century’s early years, Chizuk Amuno was the center of Baltimore’s Zionist efforts, the Levy family was not much involved in Zionism. Through their longstanding friendship with the Friedenwald family and Clara Strauss Kohn’s involvement at Shearith Israel with Rabbi Schaffer, the Levys were likely aware of some of the Baltimore community’s Zionist activities.<sup>62</sup> Harry Friedenwald, like his father, Aaron, was active in the Zionist Organization of America (previously the Federation of American Zionists) and maintained correspondence with Zionist leaders including Chaim Weitzman, Louis

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<sup>59</sup> Jewish Theological Seminary, Levy Collection, Box 21, File 709, 2, JMM.

<sup>60</sup> Jewish Theological Seminary, Levy Collection, Box 21, File 709, 2, JMM.

<sup>61</sup> Jewish Theological Seminary, Levy Collection, Box 21, File 709, 3 JMM.

<sup>62</sup> In the 1920s Leslie Moses traveled to Egypt and Palestine. His experience persuaded him that “Jews and Arabs could live harmoniously together under the general protection of Great Britain and led him to oppose Zionist notions of a Jewish state until Hitlerism dispelled any illusions...” He supported Hebrew University and Hadassah Hospital, but no explicitly Zionist organizations. In response to his wife’s enthusiastic response to her own trip to Israel, in the 1960s Leslie Moses went to see for himself. Amalie Moses Kass, “Daddy,” *Memoir of Leslie William Moses, 1887-1979* (Portland, ME: Privately Printed, 1988) 18-19.

Brandeis and Judah Magnes. In 1935, Harry and his daughter, Julia Friedenwald Strauss (sister-in-law of Benno and Clara Strauss Kohn), traveled to Palestine and visited with Henrietta Szold.<sup>63</sup>

At the synagogue, Lester Levy met Harry Friedenwald's son, Jonas, "a boy who became [his] closest friend one with whom our high school and college years were interwoven."<sup>64</sup> Perhaps as a result of that friendship, Lester Levy was more Zionist than his forebears. Like his father, William, and his uncle, Julius, Lester Levy volunteered time to the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he served on the board. Unlike them, he also served on the board of the American Friends of Hebrew University.<sup>65</sup>

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Though the Levys did not embrace Zionism pre-World War II, they actively supported efforts to aid German refugees arriving in Baltimore. Eleanor Kohn Levy and her brother Martin B. Kohn were both centrally involved.<sup>66</sup> Martin Kohn organized the Jewish Welfare Fund to channel help overseas. From 1943 to 1945, "the most heartbreaking years of that decade," with "supreme faith and courage," Kohn served as president of the Jewish Welfare Fund, an organization that he had founded to channel

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<sup>63</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 124; 174-175. In addition to her interest in Zionism, Strauss was also interested in Szold's plan to save the children of Nazi Germany. Within the year, Julia and her husband, Meyer Strauss, adopted two teenage brothers from Chemnitz, Germany name Siegried and Manfred. More than 40 years later, Sigi Strauss would become Chizuk Amuno's fifteenth president.

<sup>64</sup> Lester Stern Levy, *Memoirs*, 5 October 1983, MS 127, Box 4, JMM.

<sup>65</sup> In Memoriam: Lester S. Levy, Associated Jewish Charities advertisement, *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 22 September 1989.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Kohn and his wife, Rosa Rosenthal, were related. Their grandfathers, Moses and Abraham Strauss, were brothers and partners in a successful dry goods business on Hopkins Place that burned in the fire of 1904 and was rebuilt. Their grandfathers were also founders of Shearith Israel.

help overseas. He continued on the board through the years of immigration to Palestine and the rebirth of the State of Israel in 1948.<sup>67</sup>

Chizuk Amuno, too, worked to support the refugees, committing to welcome refugee children for free “as long as space permits.” During the High Holy Day services of 1938 “several additional rows of seats were placed in the synagogue to accommodate the needs of the refugees.” Although the synagogue’s board disapproved of religious services with German overtones, they did permit Rabbi Coblenz to deliver lectures in German, the announcement of which were made in the *Jewish Times*. These well-attended lectures continued for several years.<sup>68</sup>

Despite its affiliation with the Jewish Theological Seminary and United Synagogue of America (the standard bearers for Conservative Jewry), by 1947 Chizuk Amuno was one of only four (of approximately 400) similarly affiliated congregations that maintained separate seating for men and women, the “most commonly accepted yardstick for differentiating Conservatism from Orthodoxy.”<sup>69</sup> The founding that year of Baltimore’s Beth El as a Conservative synagogue with mixed seating that immediately affiliated with the United Synagogue of America spurred Chizuk Amuno to seriously consider mixed seating, a major change from its 75 years as a traditional congregation. Though Chizuk Amuno had been intimately involved with the Conservative movement since the movement’s inception, the synagogue advertised itself as “orthodox” even as its board repeatedly rebuffed invitations from the Council of Orthodox Rabbis to join their association.

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<sup>67</sup> Board of Directors Meeting, The Associated, Memorial Tribute to Martin B. Kohn, 28 January 1992, Levy Collection, Box 26, File 866, JMM.

<sup>68</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 176.

<sup>69</sup> Sklare quoted in Schein, *On Three Pillars* 205-208.

When a formal discussion of mixed or family seating was held, Beatrice Stern Levy and Isaac Potts (who married Julia Friedenwald Strauss after they had each been widowed) spoke for the majority in favor of the change, which was ratified with a vote of 284 to 20 in favor of mixed seating. In light of the change, the congregation's board removed Chizuk Amuno from Orthodox listings and relocated it under the heading "Conservative." Liturgical changes soon followed. In 1949, nearly 80 years after the founding of Chizuk Amuno as a protest against the mixed choir at Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, a mixed choir was begun at Chizuk Amuno. Three years later, Bat Mitzvahs for girls were approved.<sup>70</sup>

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Expanding residential zones and synagogue relocation changed the Levys' relationship to Chizuk Amuno. When Lester and Eleanor Levy moved to Mount Washington in 1924 as a young family, they moved to an area that was then bereft of any formal Jewish communal life. Unlike their own parents, both sets of which featured one traditional Jew and one Reform Jew, in their own marriage Eleanor and Lester entered as traditional Jews. The difference was synagogue affiliation. Lester's family had long been members of Chizuk Amuno. Eleanor descended from the founder of Shearith Israel, where she had been raised. As traditional Jews, they observed the Sabbath and kept a kosher home. They maintained kashrut both in their home and, like their traditional forebears, outside of it as well. On their lengthy European honeymoon in 1922, Eleanor wrote to her parents that in Rome they "tried a good Kosher restaurant for lunch. Meat tasted quite good for a change and the food looked clean."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Schein, *On Three Pillars*, 212, 214, 234 and 246.

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Eleanor Kohn Levy to her parents, 24 December 1922, Levy Collection, JMM.

In 1925, Shearith Israel (the ancestral congregation of Eleanor Kohn Levy's mother, Clara Strauss Kohn) became the first (and for years, only) congregation to fill the void of organized Jewish life in the new northwest suburbs when it opened a branch at Glen and Park Heights Avenues. That location became the Sabbath worship place of choice for increasing numbers of traditional Jews newly arriving in the farthest reaches of northwest Baltimore.

At the same time, Chizuk Amuno, too, was relocating to its new home on Eutaw Place and Chauncey Avenue in the fashionable Druid Park neighborhood. In its new locale, congregational membership numbered 200 male members, there were 325 Sisterhood members, the Young People's League had 300 members, Hebrew school enrolled 260 pupils, with an additional 100 students enrolled on Sunday mornings only. In 1925 there were 67,500 Jews in Baltimore, about eight percent of the city's population. Of those, 10,000 or so adult men were members and seatholders of Jewish congregations, a number which included some duplications, like Lester Levy, who was a member at Chizuk Amuno and a seatholder at Shearith Israel.<sup>72</sup>

Despite having witnessed her father, Benno Kohn (the Reform Har Sinai congregant), adapt to, and embrace, her mother's Orthodox religious traditions through their long affiliation at Shearith Israel, Eleanor Kohn Levy claimed that in religious affairs, "a wife has to cling to her husband." Thus, in an oral history, Eleanor reported

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<sup>72</sup> Jewish Welfare Board, *Study of the Recreational, Social and Cultural Resources of the Jewish Community of Baltimore* (New York City: June 1925), 1, Associated Collection, Box 10, 1995.98.50, JMM.

Leslie Moses' son, Alfred, also remembers Chizuk Amuno as "the family synagogue all of Dad's life. In the 1930s [before the Moses' move to Bancroft Road in northwest Baltimore in the fall of 1933] ... there was an evident union between family and synagogue. Sitting in a long row to one side slightly elevated from the men's section were the "aunts" – Gigi [Rose Levy Moses], her sisters and sisters-in-law joined by the second and third generation of family women. In an equally long row were the men of the family." H. Moses, "My Father," *Memoir of Leslie William Moses*, 54

that she “went to the synagogue that Lester attended.”<sup>73</sup> Here, though, there is irony. Although the Levys did, in fact, always maintain their affiliation at Chizuk Amuno, they attended Shearith Israel at Glen Avenue weekly for more than thirty years. A cousin remembered the role that Shearith Israel played for the Levy-Kohn family. “It was very reassuring to peer down from the balcony at Shearith Israel and see [Lester] in the bunch below with Pop [Leslie Moses] and Herbert [Moses] and to look forward to the walk back up Park Heights Avenue.”<sup>74</sup>

Lester began what would become a decades-long tradition of worshipping at Shearith Israel Glen Avenue on Saturday mornings while still retaining his membership at Chizuk Amuno, at which he not only had deep and abiding family ties, but also a full membership. The even more traditional Shearith Israel allowed those who did not fully observe the Sabbath to be seat holders but not to be full members. Although Lester was Sabbath observant, the fact that his business operated on Saturday did not qualify him as Sabbath observant in the eyes of Shearith Israel and thus eliminated the possibility of his election to membership.

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<sup>73</sup> Oral History of Eleanor Kohn Levy, 12 November 1991, Associated Collection, Box 16, 1996.164, JMM.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Amalie M. Kass to Eleanor Levy, 20 September 1989, Levy Collection, JMM. Another wrinkle involving Chizuk Amuno and the Levy family occurred in the years after 1961 when the congregation moved most of its activities to Stevenson from Eutaw Place. In the post World War II period, with suburbanization sweeping the nation, the board of Chizuk Amuno began to explore its options. In 1952 the board presented its first plan for relocation out of the city. Later that year suburban services were held under the synagogue’s auspices at the Pikesville Armory. Meanwhile, the congregation worked with the University of Baltimore to lease space for religious school on Enslow Road in Mount Washington. In 1956 the groundbreaking for Chizuk Amuno’s new suburban synagogue center in Stevenson was held. Julia Friedenwald Strauss, the only member of the Friedenwald family still involved with the congregation, participated. Chizuk Amuno opened in Stevenson in 1961. Beatrice Stern Levy kindled the Ner Tamid (eternal light). Schein, 249, 250, 258 and 268.

The Levys were loyal to the old building as well as loyal to the congregation. Not surprisingly, then, when the independent congregation, Beth Am, was created in the former Chizuk Amuno building at Chauncey Avenue and Eutaw Place, members of the Levy family joined it, too. Several are Beth Am congregants today.

Lester Levy was not alone in that exclusion. By 1937, together with his cousin and business partner Leslie Moses, and his brother-in-law Martin Kohn, all three had been excluded from full membership by a synagogue provision that denied those with businesses open on Saturday full membership and relegated them to the status of “seat holders.”<sup>75</sup> So, perhaps to soften the sting of that rejection or perhaps to pay homage to his forebears, Lester Levy publicly promoted himself as a “devoted member of Chizuk Amuno Congregation.”<sup>76</sup> In 1946, on the occasion of Chizuk Amuno’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Lester Levy acted as toastmaster.<sup>77</sup>

An extant early-1920s synagogue document explains much about Shearith Isreal’s intentions in moving to the new northwest suburbs. Like many other congregations confronted by the realization that growing numbers of their congregants were moving to new streetcar suburbs, Shearith Israel considered a move to Forest Park. Unlike all of the rest, however, they decided on Upper Park Heights instead. By opening the new branch while continuing to operate their Eutaw Place building, the leadership determined that those who remained in town would “have the use and benefit of the Synagogue as heretofore.” For those moving to the suburbs, the congregation wanted to “provide a house of worship for the number of loyal members and attendants (though not members

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<sup>75</sup> Arnold Blumberg, *A History of Congregation Shearith Israel on the Threshold of a Century*, 1969?, 9, Vertical File, JMM.

Another intermarriage occurred when Leslie Moses married Helene Lobe. She was raised as a Reform Jew and continued to be one in her marriage, living long enough to celebrate an eighty year run as a member of Congregation Oheb Shalom! *Baltimore Sun*, 19 July 1997.

According to their son, Alfred Moses, neither Leslie nor Helene Moses knew German. Nor did they know Hebrew, though Herbert Moses, his uncle, was fluent in Hebrew, and Lester Levy, his father’s cousin, had a good command of prayerbook Hebrew. Author’s Interview with Alfred Moses, July 2004.

<sup>76</sup> “In Memoriam: Lester S. Levy,” Associated Jewish Charities advertisement, *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 22 September 1989.

In 1930, on the occasion of the birth of his third child, Ruth Mathilde, Lester Levy gave a \$500 bond to Chizuk Amuno. There is no evidence to suggest he did anything at Shearith Israel though he had been worshipping there for five years. Letter from Chizuk Amuno to Lester S. Levy, 3 August 1930, Levy Collection, JMM.

<sup>77</sup> Schein, 204.

but just as well appreciated) who are about to remove in the near future, and who deeply regret to sever their relations with the Congregation, and to whom, by the way, the Congregation owes something for their loyalty. These men may before long prove the pioneer of a great Jewish development and may even prepare all religious comforts for many of us who may follow them.”<sup>78</sup>

In 1924, the congregation began holding services in the new neighborhood to which increasing numbers of congregants were moving.<sup>79</sup> First, Sabbath services were held at the home of a congregant, but growing attendance necessitated the temporary use of a new, vacant cottage for the holidays in the autumn.<sup>80</sup> Clara and Benno Strauss, who had been living in Mt. Washington since 1909, were true Jewish pioneers in Mount Washington. With the opening of the Glen Avenue building, Clara Strauss Kohn’s weekly walk to Sabbath services was halved to under two miles each way.

Not only did Shearith Israel want to accommodate its own members who were moving to the suburbs, it also wanted to provide an antidote to more liberal Jewish interests that were also beginning to see the northwest suburbs as fertile ground:

The locality in question, while rapidly growing almost entirely Jewish, unfortunately, possesses rather little Jewishness and whatever little is being done is in that direction of the modern kind, in which the proportion of Jewishness about equals the percentage of “kick” permitted under the Volsted laws. But this unfortunate condition is absolutely the result of ignorance and could be overcome by enlightenment, and therefore it is the duty of the Shearith Israel, the leader and example of Judaism, to place itself in the midst of the dark ignorance and banish it by the light of the Torah. The Shearith Israel should occupy the position of the lighthouse on the ocean, throwing out in the darkness of night brilliant lights,

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<sup>78</sup> Unattributed, undated (c.1923) document in JMM’s Shearith Israel file, 5-6.

<sup>79</sup> Among Shearith Israel members who, in 1924, had recently moved near the synagogue were the families of Mendel Waxman, J. Morganstein, Getzel Levinson, Nathan Adler, and Oscar Strauss. “Shearith Israel Congregation Suburban Synagogue,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 5 September 1924, 17

<sup>80</sup> Arnold Blumberg, *A History of Congregation Shearith Israel on the Threshold of a Century*, 1969?, 8, Vertical File, JMM; and “Shearith Israel Congregation Suburban Synagogue,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 5 September 1924, 17.

indicating to the sailing vessels the danger points and guiding them on safe lines.<sup>81</sup>

Given the Jewish migration to the neighborhood, “the entire structure will satisfy the increasingly large community which has been moving to the Park Heights Section.”<sup>82</sup> It was the goal of the synagogue that the “young branch” it planted “in the desert” would “grow into a vineyard and how appropriately will apply the words of the prophet, “like grapes in the wilderness have I found Israel.”<sup>83</sup>

Plans for the new stone building (“one of the simplest of structures, but ... in delightful harmony with the surrounding country”) included not only a sanctuary, but a “Talmud Torah and Community Center,” from which “the blazing lights of the Torah will guide the young by affording them religious and educational training as well as social and modern activities.” It featured “extremely commodious” school rooms to facilitate a Hebrew School with “attractive playgrounds” on the large adjacent lot. To accommodate ladies, a meeting room was constructed, and an Assembly Hall was designed to serve as a “Jewish Centre.” Smith and May designed the building and Thomas W. Hicks and Sons built it.<sup>84</sup>

Shearith Israel’s decision to build a “Jewish Centre” is consistent with the popular synagogue-center movement that, by 1925, had “become the leading trend in modern Jewish life,” at which time a “national “Jewish Center” movement was in full swing.” The synagogue-center, “originally and quintessentially” American, was “the first synagogue type without precedent in the European past.” Shearith Israel’s goal,

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<sup>81</sup> Unattributed, undated (c.1923) document in JMM’s Shearith Israel file, 5-6.

<sup>82</sup> “Shearith Israel Congregation Suburban Synagogue,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 5 September 1924, 17; and “Dedication of New Synagogue,” 24 July 1925, 13.

<sup>83</sup> Unattributed, undated (c.1923) document in JMM’s Shearith Israel file, 5-6.

<sup>84</sup> Unattributed, undated (c.1923) document in JMM’s Shearith Israel file, 5-6.



commitment to traditional Judaism because it was at the core of who and what they were. The brand of traditionalism practiced by the Levys and the Strausses also shatter the neat categories of German vs. Eastern European; Uptown vs. Downtown. These were Jews who, while traditional in their own practice, welcomed other Jews. The evidence of their openness may be glimpsed in a number of ways, from the intermarriages of Clara Strauss and Benno Kohn, Beatrice Stern and William Levy, and Helen Loeb and Leslie Moses, to the commitments which the Levys, Kohns and others made to pan Jewish causes – local, national and international organizations that served any Jew.

Until now their story has remained invisible. Like much good history, the fact of their religious lives as traditional Jews adds subtlety while calling into question the adequacy and veracity of “bright line” divides and distinctions.