



Roots – Beth Am Version

By Efrem Potts, Shabbat Hanukkah, December 19, 1987

When [Beth Am President] Bob Hillman asked me to speak this morning on the origins and history of Beth Am, I thought that it would be a simple task because all I had to do was organize what I had lived and talk about it. Wrong! It wasn't that easy, and I hadn't lived a great deal of it. When it comes to origins, in terms of synagogue genealogy, Beth Am is a third-generation congregation. To explain, let me drop back about a century-and-a-half and give you a whirlwind trip through the pertinent history of the Baltimore Jewish community:

Prior to the 1820s, Maryland had the reputation of being less hospitable to Jews than the neighboring states. In 1825, Maryland's Jewish population numbered only 150 individuals. There was no Jewish congregation, much less a synagogue in Maryland. Baltimore Hebrew, Maryland's first congregation, wasn't chartered until 1830. Today, it is the third oldest congregation in the country.

By the early 1840s, Maryland's Jewish population had grown to over 100 families, and in 1842, a dissident group left Baltimore Hebrew to form Har Sinai Congregation, now the oldest continually operating congregation founded as a Reform congregation in the country.

As the 1850s rolled around, Baltimore Hebrew had become known as the stronghold of orthodoxy in the city. In 1853, a second dissident group broke away to form Oheb Shalom. By this time, Baltimore Hebrew had built the Lloyd Street shul and Har Sinai was located on nearby High Street. In 1859, Oheb Shalom acquired a building on Hanover Street and brought Benjamin Szold to America as its first permanent Rabbi. A scholar in his own right, he was the father of Henrietta Szold [founder of Hadassah] and grandfather to our own [member] Jastrow Levin.

Baltimore Hebrew was slow to change. However, it did initiate confirmation for girls in 1853; the reading of the haftorah in the vernacular, which to them was German, in 1866; voted to remove the mechitzah, the screen between the men's section and the women's section; and then, in late 1870, [a] change to a mixed choir. The mixed choir must have been "the straw that broke the camel's back." Again there was a defection. Only this time it wasn't because they didn't change enough, but because they changed too much. Within two months, a group resigned that included three members of the Friedenwald family and M.S. Levy. That group founded Chizuk Amuno in 1871. Included among





Beth Am members today are descendants of those dissidents, M.S. Levy's grandson, Lester Levy; his great-granddaughter Ellen Patz; a great-grandson, Alfred Moses; and a great-great-grandson, Dr. David Patz. Representing the Friedenwald family, we have Fred Straus.

When Chizuk Amuno was built in 1875, it was the building at Lloyd and Lombard that is today B'nai Israel, and that will be rededicated tomorrow as the oldest synagogue in continuous use in Baltimore. By 1890, the established Jewish community had begun to move uptown, so that by 1895 Baltimore Hebrew and its three offspring had all moved to what I will call Greater Bolton Hill, with Chizuk Amuno moving to McCulloh and Mosher.... The center of the Jewish establishment continued to move north, so the congregation of Sabbath observers, as Chizuk Amuno was, had to move with them. In 1921, this land at Eutaw Place and Chauncey Avenue was acquired. The first Rosh Hashanah service was held here in September 1922, and the building was formally dedicated that December. All the congregations were again comfortably settled, but the Jewish community continued to move northwestward.

By the mid-1950s, all four congregations had either obtained or were searching for suburban locations. Chizuk Amuno acquired the land on Stevenson Road. The groundbreaking ceremony for their first building took place in 1958. And by late fall of 1961, their Stevenson Road sanctuary was complete and the main service was transferred there.

Of course, it was Chizuk Amuno's intention to close this building and offer it on the market as they had with their two previous locations. However, a group of us, that included Bill Schimmel, Jastrow Levin and myself (there were many, many more) prevailed and the Chizuk Amuno board agreed to continue to operate this synagogue as long as it did not run a deficit.

Each year, beginning in 1962, Dr. [Louis] Kaplan [president emeritus of Baltimore Hebrew College and Efrem Potts' father-in-law] agreed to officiate on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. From Yom Kippur to Rosh Hashanah, Hazzan Weisgal, who became Chizuk Amuno's cantor in 1921, and who participated in the building fund campaign for this building and was its only Hazzan for over 50 years, assured the continuity of daily and weekly services. For several years, Chizuk Amuno provided an assistant rabbi who officiated here weekly. Then his successor was assigned here once a month; then only on Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot; then not at all. To fill the gaps, Bill Schimmel and I shared





the pulpit. For years I would say to Dr. Kaplan after our regular Friday night family dinner, “What should I talk about tomorrow?” After a short lesson on the weekly Torah portion, he had provided me with enough of an idea so that by the time I got here on Saturday morning, I had developed an eight-to-ten minute message on the Sedrah. Some of those messages were pretty good, and some pretty not so good.

And except for Dr. Kaplan officiating with Hazzan Weisgal on the first day of a holiday, in addition to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, so it went until 1974. Then, in the fall of 1974, Chizuk Amuno announced that it didn’t want to be in the branch-shul business anymore. Between Yom Kippur and Hanukkah, a miraculously short gestation period, and with the help and blessing of Chizuk Amuno, Beth Am was born.

Let me just take a moment to review Chizuk Amuno’s support of our endeavor. You’ve all heard the saying, “Two Jews, three opinions.” As a consequence of that semi-truism, most new shuls arise from disagreement. My recounting to you several minutes back of divergence in the Baltimore Jewish community during the 19th century where four congregations evolved from one is evidence of that. But that was *not* the case between Chizuk Amuno and Beth Am. Dr. Samuel Rochberg, Chizuk Amuno’s president at the time, who accepted our invitation to join us this morning, made the announcement of Chizuk Amuno’s intentions on Yom Kippur in 1974 [to close the in-town shul]. The very next day the Chizuk Amuno Eutaw Place committee that included Bill Schimmel and myself met to discuss the future of this *very special* synagogue. By the time Chizuk Amuno’s regular October board meeting was held on the 28th, its executive committee and a committee representing our interests had agreed on terms and conditions. Not only were we given a year’s option to arrange for the purchase of the building, but the option price was roughly half the fair market value. Further, Chizuk Amuno agreed, and I quote from their resolution, “to lend whatever assistance, clerical, supervisory, etc. that was needed during that year.” But that was not all. When the final negotiations were concluded, Chizuk Amuno agreed to accept even less than originally agreed, and to include all the prayer books, humashim, and two of the Sefrei Torah with the transaction. In addition, they left in our ark, on permanent loan, the Torah in the unique and beautiful oriental torah case that was presented to Chizuk Amuno in the 1920s by Mr. Julius Levy, a son of M.S. Levy. We truly had Chizuk Amuno’s help and blessing and became, I believe, Maryland’s first genuine third-generation congregation.

Beth Am’s first organizational meeting was held November 4, 1974 in the Potts’ living room, and while there seems to be no minutes from that meeting, one thing remains





quite clear to those that were there: that the discussion relating to the selection of a name was quickly settled when Etta Kaplan [Dr. Kaplan's wife] suggested "Beth Am, the House of the People."

At Beth Am's first service, one of the tenets of the Beth Am philosophy we felt essential to our success was that we would be a do-it-yourself congregation. Another basic goal was to organize a congregation that would respond to the needs of a modern, active, interested, involved, young American Jewish family that was being turned off by the "diseases of success" of large institutions—indifference, lack of warmth, and inflexibility of large institutions; and, finally, that we had no desire to destroy tradition, but rather to enhance it so as to enrich the Jewish experience of our members. While external pressures on people's lives have, over the years, affected our ability to continue to be a "do-it-yourself" shul, I hope our leadership hasn't given up on the other goals. These, of course, are ongoing dynamic goals that must be continually strived for. They are moving targets so that it is necessary that we continually adjust our sights to fulfill our reason for existence.

We had two major organizational tasks the first year and we deliberately did not link the two together. One was a membership goal of 200. The second was a separate capital fund goal sufficient to exercise our purchase option with Chizuk Amuno, but with no individual contributing more than \$1,000. By the time of our first general membership meeting in June, 1975, we had 150 members and were about half-way to our capital fund goal. Shortly after that meeting, the late I.C. Rosenthal made us an offer that we just couldn't refuse. His offer had two parts: 1.) to contribute the balance of the funds needed to consummate the purchase, and 2.) to let him attempt to renegotiate the agreement with Chizuk Amuno. He fulfilled his offer on both counts and we went to settlement Erev Rosh Hashanah, 1975. I still recall the pleasure I felt when, as Beth Am's president, I made the announcement of the first day Rosh Hashanah that, as of the day before, we owned our own home, free and clear.

Beth Am was on its way...



Board of Directors
Chizuk Amuno Congregation
Stevenson, Maryland 21208

Gentlemen:

We, whose names are appended to this communication, have a great and continuing personal attachment to and affection for the Eutaw Place Synagogue of the Chizuk Amuno Congregation. We have been and are now very much disturbed regarding the consideration being given by your Board to closing Eutaw Place. Most of us have been closely affiliated with and have attended there for a large part, if not all, of our lives. We have given considerable thought to the issues involved, not only from the point of view of some Board members, but also as to other pertinent matters of a practical, ethical and spiritual nature. We sincerely cherish our affiliation with Chizuk Amuno and greatly desire that it continue.

A delegation from Eutaw Place met a few weeks ago with a Special Committee of your Board. The following basic conclusions were then reached:

1. Eutaw Place has been financially self-sustaining.
2. Eutaw Place now requires and may require certain repairs and improvements at an aggregate cost of approximately \$15,000.
3. Approximately 800 fellow Jews attended services at Eutaw Place on the recent High Holy Days.
4. A substantial number of new members have enrolled at Eutaw Place.
5. The operation of Eutaw Place should be continued.

We, who are dedicated to the continuance of the Eutaw Place Synagogue and who prefer to attend services there feel that you are properly entitled to a specific commitment on our part if you approve such continued operation. Eutaw Place is not, to any extent, competing with Stevenson. We are convinced that there is a vital present and future need for Eutaw Place for the best interests of the Congregation as a whole, our people and our faith. There is no other similar inner-city synagogue or which has so broad an appeal to many of our fellow Jews. A large and growing number of our people live in the area, in Bolton Hill and in the inner-city. It is accessible and available to college students, young Jews generally and others who are unaffiliated with any congregation and who have a real need for it.

We are of the firm belief that no valid reasons for abandoning Eutaw Place have been advanced, particularly in view of our commitment to you, which is as follows:

- A. We will raise the sum of \$15,000. within a reasonable time to be expended on the Eutaw Place Synagogue for necessary building maintenance and repairs, as required.
- B. There will be no financial obligations upon Chizuk Amuno Congregation (Stevenson) and Eutaw Place will be self-sustaining.

We understand that, if you accept our proposal, the operation of Eutaw Place will continue in the future subject to further action on your part only, if and when, we fail to perform our above assurances.

The frequent rumors as to the possible closing of Eutaw Place have had and now have a very damaging effect in obtaining and retaining members at Eutaw Place. We feel that fully terminating the indecision which has existed until now will, in the years ahead, have a very beneficial effect there.

This proposal is made in complete good faith and we are confident that it will be carried out if the Board approves our request and affords us the opportunity to do so. We have every desire to remain identified with and a recognized part of the Chizuk Amuno family and congregation which also means so much to us.