Interviews: Aaron Solomon

Interviewer: Dennis B. Klein

Date(s) of interview: July 22, 29, and August 5, 1976 (3 times)

Setting (place of interview, people present, impressions)

Away from the mummified worship of Bingo, Rabbi Solomon and I met three times in his office. Duplicate tapes were made during each of the three sessions, one for the project and one for Rabbi Solomon. Solomon was quite willing to illustrate the achievements as well as the problems that characterized the local community over the years.

Background of interviewee

Rabbi Solomon was born in Jerusalem in 1904, where he remained until after the first World War. He joined his family in America in the early 1920s, first in NYC, then in New England, and finally settled in Rochester (1926). At this time, he served as Rabbi of Beth Jehuda (Joseph) Center; then he became cantor at Beth-El (1927-1946), Rabbi and Cantor at Beth Israel (1946-1957), and Rabbi at Beth David (1957 to the present).

Interview abstract

The interview offers insights into the life of the community, and especially synagogue and rabbinical life. Interesting viewpoints on the Rochester Board of Rabbis, Jewish education, and ritual observance. Also noteworthy are his comments on the immigrant experience and the German-Jews in Rochester. The themes of religiosity indifference recur throughout the tapes. Rabbi Solomon's experiences in aspects of the Rochester community (Police chaplain, B'nai B'rith, community relations, etc.) elucidate a broad spectrum of the local area.

Interview index (corresponding to tape numbers, sides of tape, and cassette recorder numbers)

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_Anti-Semitism **

Interview loc-
a) corresponding to tape numbers, sides of tape, and cassette recorder nos.
b) including references to others in the Rochester community

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Q. This is Dennis Klein talking with Rabbi Aaron Solomon at his office at Temple Beth David. And today's date is July 22, 1976, Tape No. 1, Side A. I thought we would begin, Rabbi Solomon, really with a kind of a background, your background, so we get to really know who you are, if you don't mind?

A. Well, perhaps we can. I was born in the City of Jerusalem, Old City of Jerusalem, and...

Q. In what... in what year?

A. Well, in December 15, 1904.

Q. OK.

A. And we lived in the Old City of Jerusalem, and I was probably the third generation born in Jerusalem because my father was born there so was one of my grandfathers.

Q. Was born in Jerusalem?

A. Was born in Jerusalem.

Q. I see.

A. But, he was my father's father, and apparently he was a bit adventurous in those days and couldn't see himself confined. So he picked... picked himself up and went to Paris, France first, I think, for a little while. And then he came to the United States of America in 1890 and became a citizen. He lived in Salem, Massachusetts.

Q. I see.

A. Became a citizen. And I believe it was in 1910 that my father arrived here, and of course he went to his father in Salem. And just before the start of the First World War, in the summer of 1914, my father came back to Jerusalem
A. (Continued) with the intention of bringing all of us to the States.

Q. OK.

A. And he . . . and, of course, the war broke out and there was nothing to do. So we remained in Jerusalem until the United States entered the war on the side of the allies, so we became enemies of . . . of Turkey.

Q. Right.

A. And as American citizens we were all . . . we were all picked up as enemies of the State or whatever it was. And we were sent to the City of Damascus with the intention of sending . . . sending us on probably ultimately to Turkey. But then evidently they lacked the . . . the transportation vehicles, whatever it was, and we remained in Damascus until after the First World War. We were returned to Jerusalem in 1918.

Q. OK.

A. And I followed the traditional pattern then and studied in the yeshivas as a . . . as a youngster, and later went to the Hebrew Teachers Seminary in Jerusalem, which was called Yellin Seminary named for the man who apparently started the school. And I came to the United States in . . . as an American citizen or as the son of an American citizen and the grandson of an American citizen in July of 1923.

Q. OK.

A. And then I attended NYU and some other schools and then the . . . the Dean of one of the yeshivas that I went to in Jerusalem was visiting here in . . . in the United States. And so I . . . I sat for examinations and was ordained by him because he was my traditional smacha. Now I came to Rochester in October, 1926. And here I have a copy of the original Western Union telegram that brought me to Rochester. It's addressed to Rabbi Aaron Solomon, 119 Massasoit Street, Springfield, Massachusetts. That's where my wife and family lived.
A. (Continued) And here is the telegram. "Your name was suggested by Rabbis Grossman and Haddas as a prospect for our school, both for yourself and wife. Wire me 182 Chadam Street if interested. Come at once for interview, expenses paid. Hyman Kolko, President, Beth Jehuda Center." And, of course, Beth Jehuda Center later became better known as Beth Joseph Center, and it's still known by that name. And, of course, we know it's located on, I believe it's 1150, St. Paul Street.

Q. OK.

A. Then I stayed there, I believe, a little less than a year when the cantor of Temple Beth El, Charles Bender was his name, was leaving Beth El to go to Montreal. He took a congregation there as a rabbi. And so the position of cantor became available at Beth El. So, Rabbi Jacob Mincken, who was a friend of mine, and Cantor Bender called me and we met. And they thought it would be a good... a good position for me. I was interested in music and I... I was going to take up some operatic work at Eastman School of Music. So, I... I thought it might be a good thing, and I became the cantor there... my memory serves correctly, in the summer before the holidays, I think it was 1927.

Q. OK.

A. I'm not too sure of the date, but I think that's when it was. And I stayed there... I stayed with the congregation at 150 Park Avenue, which is one reason why I... my registration number in the car has been 150 all these many, many years. I still have the same number, M-150. 150 Park Avenue was the address of Temple Beth El in those days. Stayed with that congregation until 1946, I believe it was, when I left and shortly thereafter became the rabbi of B'nai Israel, Congregation B'nai Israel, at 692 Joseph Avenue.

Stayed there for nine years, better than nine years, and came to Temple Beth
A. (Continued) David in end of July, 1955. And I thank G-d I have been here ever since, and I've found the work here, of course, it was a young congregation. The congregation was just a year, year and a half old, I found the work very challenging and very satisfying. The fact that we are here in this very beautiful study in this very fine building, I think, bears witness to the fact that we have made progress at the congregation, physically and educationally, spiritually and every other way. Well, now you may have some particular questions to ask.

Q. Well, that's a very concise biographical sketch. I mean it's one of the best that I've heard.

A. Thank you.

Q. And we can have a base. . . a lot of questions that I have, 'cause you've been involved in a number of things.

A. Yes.

Q. I'd like to go all the way back. I'd like to go all the way back to Jerusalem to begin with, even though we're concerned about Rochester I think that. . .

A. Right.

Q. I think this is warranted. Myself, I really don't know much about the situation in Jerusalem before . . . well, before political Zionism. And, of course, since political Zionism with. . . with Herzl, et cetera, there has been a great deal of interest in American Jewry about the State of Israel. But before Zionism my knowledge of the situation in Jerusalem is very, very vague. And yet your. . . your family had been living there.

A. Right. Jerusalem had a very religious, naturally, a very religious Jewish community. We all lived together in the old Old City. I remember one of the streets in that complex was called in Arabic Harta Yelhud, which means Jew Street, because there weren't any other people but Jews. Still, our
A. (Continued) neighbors far. . . a bit farther away were. . . were Arab. And I can tell you that we lived in friendship with the Arabs. There was no problem. We were friends. I remember as a child. . . Of course, in Israel Pesach. . . let's say Pesach is celebrated seven days, not eight like we do here. And I remember on the seventh day in the afternoon Arab neighbors would bring freshly baked Arab bread and butter and honey and fresh fruit, most of the things that we did not have all during Pesach. Because in those days the diet consisted only of. . . of fleschig items, meat things. And they knew, of course, so they'd bring it to us in the late afternoon. And, of course, right after mar we would have it. And the relationship in those days was so very friendly. We lived right in the midst and surrounded by Arabs. And we. . . I remember, for example, around Passover time the Arabs created a. . . a holiday of their own apparently to combat Easter and Pesach which brought a lot of Jews and Christians to the Holy City. So they came up with a new holiday, as far as I know — I never did any research on it, called Nebbe Musach, which means the Prophet Moses. And, what was it all about? Even though the Torah, our Torah, says that no one knows precisely where the great law giver was. . . was buried, they say that they know precisely where. And around that time of year they'd gather from Havran and Bethlehem and all the surrounding communities around Jerusalem, meet in Jerusalem, and proceed as a huge body from the Mosque of Uma to Nebbe Musach. Of course, we know the location, that is we know that it was in. . . around Jericho in the mountains of Moab, and so they would proceed there. Now, Arabs in their true style would become very emotional with swords and all those things, and I remember as a youngster mingling among, never was afraid, never was afraid that an Arab might stab me or hurt me. You see, we were. . . we were friends and knew each other, second and third generation Jews and Arabs.
A. (Continued) The problem, obviously, came in following the First World War when the British came out with the Balfour Declaration promising to build or assist in the building of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. And, of course, that created a strong Arab feeling. And I know... know for a fact that the British did a lot to divide the community and conquer, which is of course the old... the old Roman method, divide and conquer. And so what they did on the... on the one hand build a strong Jewish nationalism, and on the other hand build a strong Arab nationalism and let the two get at each other's throats, and then they'd come in. So I remember even... I already at that time was a student of the Hebrew Teachers Seminary in Jerusalem, being involved in ooks, scrapes, with... with the British soldiers, who incidentally called us nitim. The British soldiers, nitim is the way they pronounced it. And it... it was very difficult in those days. And I remember the first pogrom in Jerusalem. The...

Q. When was this?

A. That was in, I believe, in... in... I think somewhere around 1921, it's so far back I... I'm not too clear. And I recall the late Zev Jabotinski organizing the Haggannah, the self-defense group, that saved many Jewish lives. But the Arabs actually leaving their mosque, I don't remember whatever day it was, came out and began attacking Jews wherever they caught them. And that was the beginning. And, of course, there were riots, pogroms, after that. And the British, as we all know, it was the British that organized the Arab League that played such a tremendous part now in trying to organize and the Arab states and... and have some unity of purpose there. And so life generally was not too easy. Of course, I remember Jerusalem under the Turks. And the Turks were very difficult masters. Arabs did not dare lift their heads because they didn't know what to expect. No... no Jews for
A. (Continued) that matter. Anybody suspected of... of disloyalty to the Turkish government was executed. Now I remember leaving the City of Damascus going to school there, one incident there... Of course, Syria being under French influence at that time the school that I attended the spoken language was French. French. And it was a nice synagogue, no Ashkenazic group but there was a Sephardic congregation, Sephardic community and in... in 1917, 1918 there were many German soldiers in... in Damascus. And... and so I remember the... the Turks pretty well. They were very, very tough masters. But, the Arabs began to make trouble when Britain evidently... Of course, it's one of a kind... I remember when the Arabs attacked us the first time. They used to come out openly and yell and say the brettadian, means the government is with us. And they knew full well that... that they did not need to worry about... about the government. And that would last two or three or four days or whatever it was, and then when the government felt that the Arabs had enough fun and done enough damage then they'd come in and stop it. And so it... conditions there became very difficult, and my father was anxious to come back to America anyway. And so it was in 1923 that we came to New York City as... as I say, my father already was an American citizen, and so was my grandfather. So we arrived in the port of New York, I think it was July first. I remember wondering what all the excitement was. Four days later on the fourth of July, of course, I found out later what it was all about. That was my first fourth of July, I was very confused. Never saw the fourth of July, shootings and all that. But...

Q. You thought you were going from one land of trouble to another.

A. No, no we knew... we knew. And I was very... from the moment I came to these States the different... I have loved America. In fact last evening
A. (Continued) I was a police chaplain. I gave the invocation at the banquet held at the Holiday Inn, as I told you before, and there were police chiefs, our Police Department of Rochester was host to all the police chiefs of the State of New York. And I, in my prayer, I wish I had a copy of it here and if you're interested I'll be glad to give it to you, I spoke of America and how we take America too often for granted. And I said what a privilege it is to live in America and to work in America and to help renew and improve America whatever, wherever, and whenever possible. And I've loved America. As a matter of fact on my trip to Israel a few years ago, and I came back I actually kissed the soil of the United States of America.

Q. You have that contrast. You've lived in...

A. Yes, yes.

Q. My generation does not have that, and we are less and less becoming an immigrant nation as it has been built.

A. It... we... as I say, we take America for granted unfortunately. And, of course, the only way you can tell what America is and what it... and what it means to all citizens, not only to Jews but to Jews because we are Jews. It... if you compare it with another country, Jews who came from Russia and from Poland, they know. And I know it from Jerusalem. Any little two-by-four official could stop you, where are you going? What are you... what are you doing? This that and the other thing. Here we enjoy actually such freedom, such blessings that are... that are just are never heard of anywhere in the world.

Q. When there was all this youthful criticism of America during the sixties, you must have been a little hurt by that?

A. Well, it... it... I don't know if I was hurt, it just broke my heart.
A. (Continued) Knowing... I know that America is... is not the perfect society, but it is the most perfect... the most livable and the most lovable. I said last night that... that our, the American people, are the most... the most generous people, the kindest people in the world. And I've been around some, and so I have a way of... of comparing the two. And I... I... I know that really we Jews ought to support America in every way that's possible. And help... help make it the... the perfect place. I mean, if that is at all possible.

Q. Right. Or at least a better place.

A. A better place.

Q. That's a very encouraging statement about America. We don't hear that too much these days, you know, there is so much criticism. And I do think there should be dissent, I mean that's part of the American tradition.

A. Oh, yes. Of course there should be. But, like children of one unit, one family. When I say G-d bless America that's precisely what I mean, G-d bless America.

Q. That's good because that... that becomes a cliche, and you give it the passion that it once had. For sure.

A. Thank you.

Q. You said your grandfather was the first to...

A. Leave. Apparently he... he already in his time, what is it? It would be about 86 years ago, about 90... 86, 90 years ago. He apparently felt much too confined. It was such a close community that everybody had to do precisely what everybody else did in order to be accepted. Well, apparently he felt too confined. And he simply had to... he felt that he had to get out. And, of course, once he saw France then he knew that Jerusalem would not... could not be his home anymore. He visited but he never settled...
A. (Continued) never came back to live there.

Q. Paris at the time was the capital, cultural capital of the world.

A. World. And he loved the United States even as... as I do. And as my father did, too. And he lived in Salem, made a name for himself, was in business, had a store of one kind or another. When my father came to Salem in 1910 they pleaded with him to accept a pulpit in the community that was available then, but he did not... he wasn't interested in... In fact, he came here, he wasn't sure at that time that he wanted to bring his family, that was in 1914... in 1910. So he came here as a representative of the girls orphans home of Jerusalem. I forgot just what... In Hebrew it's called Beth Hatomota Chalia I believe. And he came as their representative and for four years he went from one end to the other collecting funds for these girls. That institution is still in existence in Jerusalem today, and they're doing a marvelous job for the girls in their care.

Q. What was your father's vocation in Jerusalem?

A. Well, in Jerusalem he studied in yeshiva like all men did after he got married and started a family. He still was a student, studied in the yeshiva, never being... never being interested in... in the rabbinate as a profession. As a Jew, and particularly in Jerusalem, they studied Torah and... and there was no such thing as having completed. But before coming to the United States, not knowing what he would be doing here, he... he was given smaha, ordained by the yeshiva where he had studied. And that's what young people did. Now you might ask how did people live there? People were very, very poor and each fraction of the community had a coliel. Let's say if Jews... if there were Jews there from Russia or Poland or Lithuania, whatever group, they would... there was a coliel. They sent out representatives all over the world to collect money for their own groups. And the men would sit and study
A. (Continued) Torah and get an allocation, monthly allocation. If a child was born then they raised it. And the men would study Torah and the women were busy with raising the family.

Q. They would get allocations?

A. Yes, oh yes. They would get... otherwise they couldn't... matter of fact they... there are yeshivas in... in Israel today, and certainly in Jerusalem, where... where things haven't changed at all, where men continue to study. I remember as a very young man, a young... young man with a considerable family coming to the Rosha Yeshiva, what we would call the Dean of students, would come to him and complain that he just isn't able to make ends meet with whatever he was getting. And apparently the... he had had complaints from a number of other men and that particular time he thrown out and said, verem sahom kinder. In other words, why have so many children? Obviously he never meant it. He never meant it, but it was... he was unhappy, tells him... why do you have so many children?

Q. OK.

A. Poverty, unbelievable poverty. But, you... I don't know, maybe we were happier, certainly we were happy, general pattern and everybody had to fit into that pattern. Of course, I remember living so close to the CotelLamaravis, that's the western wall. I remember every Friday evening, every Shabbat morning, my father and I and brothers would... would go for services at the Cotel. And, believe me, the Arab neighbors weren't too happy.

Q. They weren't happy?

A. They weren't too happy because the area was so confining. It's not like today where they built a regular square. It was a tiny little street, and the Jews started to come. And, of course, they felt a little bit too squeezed in that area. Let's say...
Q. Trampled.
A. Yea. They'd go through the... an Arab on a donkey would go through, people were standing and praying. And so, obviously, we were in their way even as they were in our way.
Q. Yea, yea.
A. It was in a friendly way. There was no actual opposition. But, we would go there. And, of course, that was the Cotel and I recall very distinctly here we are in the three weeks now and tschaviav will be observed very soon. And I remember as a youngster the way we observed tschaviav. At the Cotel sitting on the... on... on the floor with candles around and the cries. And we'd really crying for the destroyed temple because here it was. Just...
Q. Right.
A. Just a piece of wall left of what once was the glory of the Beth Amegdasch.
Q. I've been there myself and it's...
A. So you know, it's a tremendous... tremendous... And we were there some years back. Maybe... was it '69? 1969. I'll bet there were over 100,000 men, women, and children at the Cotel on tschaviav.
Q. Yea, incredible.
A. Nobody can, again, appreciate what we have now more than... than those of us who lived and know what we had, how little we had, and thank G-d how much more we have now. It's home.
Q. Yea.
A. It's home. It's interesting that some of our children who spend summers there, they come back and they tell me that they get off the El Al plane and they kiss the soil. They feel so much, much at home.
Q. I'll tell you that that's an incredible... as you describe that it's something that I think not with many people in my generation today, again,
Q. (Continued) because of the lack of contrast, you see?
A. We...as I say we prayed for it and worked for it, particularly in the past century, for 1900 years to have it. What a pity that the world seems to begrudge it to us instead of...of being happy with us for what we have.
Q. Yea. There's a lot of animosity towards the...towards the...towards the State.
A. It...it's...it's a pity because Jews beginning with the days of Abraham know what hate is. Unfortunately, of course, hate. Of course, let's hate. Because all...all Jews have tried to do, whether through Torah and every other way, was to try to improve this world in which we live. And why there should be anti-Jewish feelings, of course, that's one of the problems that one of the leaders said during...in the past century, it's a case of, I believe, at ulam le am ulam, eternal hate to an eternal peace. Unfortunate. Unfortunate.
Q. Well, let me ask you how many brothers and sisters you have?
A. Well, now if you remember what I said just a few minutes ago you know. We were a family of eight children, four boys and four girls. And I have a younger brother, Yitzak, who is a rabbi in Philadelphia. He's been rabbi there for 35 years. And his son is a rabbi not far from...from Philadelphia. But unlike his father who graduated from Yeshiva University, or at that time Yeshiva College, his son decided that he wanted to be a rabbi but not an Orthodox rabbi. He went to the Jewish Theological Seminary and he is doing a tremendous job as a Conservative rabbi in Pennsylvania.
Q. Great. Good.
A. You'll also be interested to know that a grandson of mine, David, has apparently decided that he wants to go into the rabbinate. And so he's now a student at Nair Israel in Baltimore, and he loves it. He's very happy, very
A. (Continued) happy there.

Q. So, it's... the whole family or much of the family seems to be involved.
A. Yes. Yes.

Q. Did you, yourself, feel confined? You mentioned that your grandfather felt confined in Jerusalem. Was this your feeling?
A. Apparently so. And I know it because while continuing my studies in the yeshiva on a part-time basis, I went to the Teachers Seminary, which at that time... which was in the newer section of the City of Jerusalem. And coming from the old section where we lived, and what we called Jewish ali montycah.

They said what's it going? You becoming a goye going to Yellin Seminary, what's he gonna become? A Hebrew teacher? And so apparently I must have had some such feelings as my grandfather before me had, and I was very happy.

I used to love to go horseback riding, which was also unheard of in the Old City of Jerusalem. I used to love to play football, or soccer as we call it here. And basketball, kadusah, and all these things that younger brothers of mine, my younger brothers,... Yitzak, would never dream of doing. But this... this would be called beto Torah, wasting time away from Torah.

But I... I loved it and I enjoyed it. I was even a Boy Scout.

Q. Oh?
A. Yea. Yea, we had a troop there and we were known as Sophim, and I was a tofer in those days and always think back. And to this day when people ask me for this, that or the other thing that they need, and... and I happen to have, I would say you know why? Because I was a Scout, Boy Scout, the motto is 'Be prepared.' And, incidentally, we worked... we... very well with the Arab scouts in those days. There was really no animosity.

Q. But there weren't Arabs and Jews in the same...?
A. No, not in the same troop, no. They had their own troop. We had our own troop.
And yet we would meet and play and have a game.

That's part of Boy Scouts.

Yea, sure.

Right.

And this is the way I grew up. I don't remember any Arab hostility until, as I say, after the First World War when...

As you describe the process of going from the old to the new city it reminds me of the autobiography of Solomon Mimran, his thrill with the... the... Yes.

... western world and his, you know, search for... for new forms of life.

Yes. Now... in... in those days, particularly the years immediately preceding the First World War, there were some secular schools. There were two kinds. There were schools sponsored by German Jews, they called them lemmer schools. And there were also schools or... I knew at least of one school in Jerusalem and there may have been schools similar to it elsewhere, sponsored by French Jews. They called them aliya schools. And, of course, there the language was... was French. In the German schools the language was... they spoke Hebrew too. But, of course, German was... was taught, spoken and... and the school that I went to, the seminary, of course was strictly Hebrew, strictly Hebrew. The only foreign language we learned was Arabic. We had a sheikh come in and teach us Arabic. We lived among the Arabs so we were taught Arabic as a language, as a literature. And, unfortunately, we didn't take it too seriously and I wish we had. But, this was the only so-called foreign language to come in.

Your background is quite strictly Jewish? Quite strictly.

Yes, yes.

There was no... I was mentioning Maimon, but of course you got away...
Q. (Continued) generally from . . .

A. Yes, but you see at the seminary already there we received a . . . a general education. And, of course, from there later one went to Hebrew University. But in my days there was no Hebrew University.

Q. Right.

A. No Hebrew University.

Q. That's right.

A. And so the best you could do if you wanted . . . first of all when you graduated from Beth Sefel Mohim, which was the Hebrew Teachers Seminary, you became a teacher. But if you wanted to continue your education you went to Europe. I knew one man who went on to Beirut and studied medicine in the American College, then came back to Jerusalem and practiced medicine for many years. His name was Dr. Naimon as I remember.

Q. Ah, that's interesting.

A. Yea.

Q. Well, it seems to me that the . . . that if they were trained as physicians they would have to go outside of Israel for that.

A. Yes, not only. . . although if I remember correctly they. . . they. . . in . . . In Jerusalem they allowed law clerks, that is to say, a man followed a lawyer or studied in law office until he qualified and became a lawyer. And the same thing with medicine. I'm pretty sure there was some, although there was some physicians trained in Germany and non-Jews. But, in order to get a higher education you had to leave Jerusalem. You had to leave Israel. There were no universities. Of course, today you have as some would have it too many universities in Israel, too extensive and too costly to build and to. . . to maintain. But in those days there wasn't a single higher. . .

Q. I would imagine in those days the temptation to go to Europe was all the
Q. (Continued) greater because of the . . .
A. Yea.

Q. . . . opportunities for higher education.
A. Right. And there always were some men who went there, some of the leaders. Zionist leaders and others, of course, received their education in European universities. Of course, of course.

Q. Why did your father come to Salem, Massachusetts?
A. Well, obviously he came to Salem because his father was living in Salem . . .
Q. Well, then. . .
A. But he came to the United States because it was a question of making a livelihood. The family grew, I believe, when he left in 1910 four of us children were already born. And it became very difficult to make a living, and he . . . and having had a father in . . . in America, and a father who probably encouraged him, so he came in 1910 primarily to make a living, and also at the same time to do some good for . . . for Jerusalem. As I say, in his case to collect funds for the orphan home for girls in Jerusalem.

Q. But the primary reason you would say was economic?
A. Yes, indeed. Of course.

Q. Yea. OK. So it was your grandfather that . . . who first settled in Salem, Massachusetts?
A. Yea, oh, yes.

Q. Now why did he, is my question; choose?
A. How he came to Salem I don't know. But, I never asked him because when I met him he already was not a young man. And he already had reverses in business, and there wasn't much opportunity to sit . . . Now he lived . . . he settled. . . he left Salem in a difficult time for him before the Depression and he lived on the east side on a fifth floor walk-up. I lived with him just
Interview with Rabbi Aaron Solomon

A. (Continued) ... a short time while going to NYU. And I . . . we never were able to sit down and discuss it. I don't know the reason why we didn't. So I don't know how he came to Salem, whether he knew somebody or how he came there, but he was very happy there. He stayed until, as I say, reverses came. He met reverses and then he, at my father's suggestion already, he came to . . . to New York. It may have been in 1926 or whenever it was.

Q. OK. Now before we leave your . . . your family . . .

A. Right.

Q. Let's get their names. I don't think we ever . . .

A. OK. My own, children, or . . . ?

Q. Well, first your grandfather and mother and your parents then follow through that way.

A. OK. My . . . my grandfather's name was Isodore, Isaac is what they called him as a youngster. And he it was who came to America first. My grandmother's name was Haiasara. And my maternal grandfather's name was Mashe Naftoli, and his father came to Israel from Bialystock. My grandmother, on my mother's side, I never knew because she died when my mother was only twelve years old. In fact, there was a child, a little girl left, who was about two. So my mother raised her, in those days girls didn't go to school, so my mother raised that little sister of hers as if she were her own mother. And my father's name is . . . he passed away just a few months ago, his name was Mayer Ishaiah. And, of course, in English name or civil name was Mayer, m-a-y-e-r, Rabbi Mayer Solomon. And my mother's name was Zeitsel, her maiden name was Flinker. Interestingly enough, part of that family, the Flinker family, that would be my grandfather's brother who left Jerusalem and came to America, I don't know too much about that side of the family, his children later assumed
A. (Continued) the name Flynn, from Flinker. They made it Flynn to Americanize it.

Q. Right, yea.

A. And they did well and were happy all through America. My wife's name is Esther Rebecca. And if I may be permitted to say it, she is a rabbitsa par excellence in every way, wife, mother. If King Solomon didn't find one in a thousand, or if he did find one in a thousand, I must say that I did too. And I'm very grateful. We had five children. The oldest was Judas Ziona, of course he was my first child. And I still remember it. Zion, I named him Ziona, Jehudit Ziona. That was long before anyone thought that Zionism could be equated with racism, so I named him Ziona. And she was born in Massachusetts. For her first child my wife decided to go to her mother and have the baby there. Unfortunately one of the tragedies, she died in Rochester as a young... a young woman, 32, 33 years old and left three children. Our second child is s son, Josef, spelled the German way, j-o-s-e-f. And he's a scientist, and he is an associate professor in a college in New Jersey near his place of residence. He lives in Moorstown, New Jersey. Our third child is Naomie, Naomie Anne. She is married to Dr. Murray Cowen. He's a... a psychiatrist now living and doing research for the State of...
Q. This is Dennis Klein talking with Rabbi Solomon in his office. This is Tape No. 1, Side B. We went through... 

A. Right, I said it... I don't know if... if we had enough tape there to tell you about Jonathan, that he's a practicing psychiatrist in Newport News, Virginia. Now, how did he get to Newport News? He spent two years in the service, incidentally so did son number one, Josef, spend four years plus in the Army, and so did son number two, David, in fact he died in uniform. And Jonathan he was in service. And he was stationed in Newport News, and he and his darling wife, Sandra, loved the climate there. And they settled there, and they're very happy.

Q. And that's your fifth child?

A. And this is my fifth, yes. Now, of course, we have only three children.

Q. If I can pick up on a detail?

A. Yes?

Q. Why did you spell Josef with an 'f'?

A. Well, it is perhaps because I wanted it spelled like the German would spell it maybe under the influence of a great Franz Josef, who as a youngster I remember having heard all kinds of lovely things about Franz Josef. He was the Emperor of...

Q. The Austrian...

A. Austrian...

Q. Hapsburgh...

A. Hapsburgh, right. And he was very good to Jews and I thought I would spell his name. And also perhaps I thought it would be a little bit more
A. (Continued) distinctive.

Q. Yea.

A. He spelled it... and he's never felt uncomfortable about it as far as I know.

Q. Yea. Well, it's true that Franz Josef was...

A. A great friend of the Jews. At least this is what I remembered about him. Jews who would come to Jerusalem from Austria or Hungary or wherever speaking very, very...

Q. Highly of him.

A. ... highly of... of him as a friend to Jews.

Q. It just strikes me as being opposed, perhaps, to your strong feelings about America. One would think with such strong feelings you would spell it with the American...

A. Well, actually the Josef being a Hebrew name, so I spell it in Hebrew... J-e-h-u-d-a, there's only two... there's only one way to spell it. But, it's true that the Bible spells it J-o-s-e-p-h, but I also have a German Bible, still have on my desk, and... and read the Bible in German. And, of course, there Josef is spelled with an 'f.'

Q. Do you know the Philipson Bible, the German-Hebrew Philipson...?

A. No, I don't have... I have one that was translated after the translation of Martin Luther, it says it in...

Q. Oh.

A. Yes, the German translation. I still have that. And it may be that I was unknowingly, unconsciously influenced by the use of 'f' spelled in the German...

Q. Very interesting.

A. ... translation.
Q. Studying Freud so much I thought there was something to that. OK. You came then to ... yourself to America in 1923?
A. Right, right.
Q. And originally in New York City?
A. Yes.
Q. Not Salem?
A. No.
Q. You went to New York?
A. No, went to New York because I thought perhaps, and my father thought, I had some relatives there. As I said one of the relatives was the ... on my mother's side, the Flinkers, so the idea was that New York had the yeshiva, had universities there. My father thought I'd have a much greater opportunity in New York. And, again, with ... with family, which ... which I was. It's very interesting as I think back to 1923. I went to live with the principal of one of the schools in Browsville. I don't remember the number. Where I had no choice, I did garden for them and other things, lived with them. I had no choice, I had to speak English. And I had to learn the English language well 'cause while they knew some German, that I could speak with ... but, they insisted that I speak English, and that's what we did. And if I ... I do not have too much of ... of an accent, perhaps of course, I began right away not on the east side, but rather lived in Browsville. But, lived with the principal of the school there where the spoken language was English.
Q. So that's where you learned your English language?
A. Oh, yes. Yea, yea. Of course I had some of it in Jerusalem, couldn't help pick some of it up living from 1918 to 1923, a few years, under the British. So, obviously, I had some. And also in the schools then naturally they started to teach English under the influence of the ... of the British.
Q. And you were in New York not very long? Not for very long?
A. No. No. Just two years. And there for a brief period I was invited to teach Hebrew in a Hebrew school in New Briton, Connecticut. That's where I met my wife, who also taught Hebrew in the same school. Right. She came from Springfield, Mass. which was just very close by. And that's where we met.

Q. OK. And from there you came to Rochester?
A. Well, no. From there I went back to Springfield and attended college there and then, as I said, in October of 1926 came to Rochester.

Q. I see. And you . . . you received your simcag at the . . .
A. Smaha from yeshivote. . . in fact, I have smaha from two yeshivote that I studied with. Yeshivote Mayahse Arim. And Yeshivote Yatz Chaim. Both in the City of Jerusalem.

Q. I see.
A. Yatz Chaim I received smaha later.

Q. OK.
A. OK. Maybe we can continue . . .

Q. OK. That's fine.
A. 'Cause I . . .

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B (Interview I)
Q. This is Dennis Klein. We're talking with Rabbi Aaron Solomon. Today's date is July 29, 1976. We are meeting in Rabbi Solomon's office at Beth David. And we are on Tape No. 2, Side A. I thought we would continue just a little bit more, however, with ... with this issue of the organization of rabbis in Rochester.

A. One of the things we did, I have here a folder marked proclamation. We, to encourage our respective congregations to do a little bit more than they might otherwise, we issued proclamations preceding the Welfare Fund campaign in the City of Rochester. I have one that we had in the Jewish Ledger. And it's still called council our group. It's called under the heading of "Council Issues Proclamation on Israel Independence Rally" for example. There was done in 1957, May 10, that's the date that it ... that it carries, this article. Well, I refer to here the Board of Rabbis last year, for example, I had one that the Jewish Welfare Fund or the Rochester Community Council or what is now called Federation sent out new greetings. And we had all the rabbis included, all the members of our group, Rochester Board of Rabbis. And, of course, I was their President at that time as I still am, head of all the rabbis. Very interesting to go back to these proclamations and see how many rabbis were here that are no longer here. Even from last year's group we have lost Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins as far as Beth El is concerned. Rabbi Zvi Ettinger, who is no longer in the community. Joseph H. Levine, who is here and of course we're also losing Rabbi David Spitz who has left Temple Emanuel. In one year there's already have ... we have three members who are no longer there. As I look back at some of the others ... We have
A. (Continued) Rabbi Herbert Braunstein, of course, who is no longer here. 
Rabbi David Zvi Benami, who was rabbi at Emanuel. Who even remembers that he 
was here? But I see his name on... on one of the proclamations. Rabbi 
Henry Hoschander. There was a Rabbi Bernard Levine. Rabbi Menachem Rabb, 
all these rabbis who were here. And so what we did, we have tried to stir 
our people, whenever that... particularly if there was an emergency, we've 
issued a proclamation. We issued one proclamation had to do with appealing 
to... to parents to keep their children out from the public schools on 
the Jewish holydays. Alas, they don't do it. But, we appeal to them. And 
generally we're... we have... there is in the need of rabbinic counseling 
and so on, we are here... here to do it. Do you have any questions?

Q. Yes, I do have one.

A. Yes.

Q. On specifically about this... this Board of Rabbis. I'm a little vague about 
how again it... it was started. You mentioned Rabbi Abraham Solomon who 
is not a rabbi.

A. No, he's not.

Q. That was...

A. I'm not... I'm not going to... I don't want to be put in a position of 
... of prejudging his... his case. All I'm saying is that he's not a member, 
nor has he ever been a member of Rochester Board of Rabbis.

Q. All right. But that's how the Board of Rabbis started was the fact that 
there were these chaplaincies that were open and that there was a kind of a 
unorganized way of approach.

A. Yes.

Q. And the impulse behind organization was to... so to prevent chaos, prevent 
this kind of...
A. Yes, right.

So, what happened to rabbis who qualified met and established the Rochester... the Council of Rabbis.

Q. Was this... did this exclude some people in the area from, therefore, the privileges of...?

A. Well, as a matter of fact, anyone who was not a member at that time of the Board of Rabbis or of the nationally recognized rabbinic bodies did not attend.

Q. So people were effected by this decision?

A. Yes they were. As a matter of fact, I was because up to that... to that time I... I... for so many years in the capacity of cantor and teacher at Beth El that my rabbinic certificate was sitting in... on a shelf somewhere of... of no interest to me. Then, when they came to organize... when I came to... to... to B'nai Israel I showed them my certification and satisfied the congregation, so there I was. Then when I received this letter, they said hey you can't... you can't even join it. Then immediately I joined a national body on the basis of my certification. I joined what is called Hegud Hava Ranim, and better known by its English name as Rabbinical Alliance. In fact shortly a year or two after I joined I was even elected a member of the Board of... of the... member of the Board of Trustees of the group. So I joined that. I still have my... the... that particular year I think they published a list of all the rabbis, and of course I have it. And then the next step was to join the Board of Rabbis. I mean you had to be a member of the Board. So, I joined it and then I was invited to...

Q. So as far as you personally were concerned...

A. I immediately was effected by it.

Q. Now were there other people in the area that could not go through these processes? You had a fairly easy time of it after all...
A. Yes.
Q. Because you had your.
A. Yes.
Q. Certification as a rabbi.
A. And to mention my. I don't know the.
Q. What would create this kind of animosity? That's the. the. the. the basis of this question. Was there a reaction to this? Were there claims of you are organizing against me? That type of thing?
A. No, it would seem to me that again if we're going to. if we're gonna raise the. the standard and the dignity of the local rabbinate anyone who truly qualifies could apply and join in these organizations and then say come to the Rabbinical Council of Rochester and say I would like to join. And in a minute, all they had to say was I'm a member of the Board of Rabbis and whatever other group. Even the New York Board of Rabbis in itself would have been sufficient, and he would come in with.
Q. Did anybody for whatever reason refuse to do that?
A. No one has done it and I don't know if there were others at the time. Of course, the best known example is Abraham Solomon of Temple Beth El.
Q. Did he go through the process of.?
A. What he did I don't know. All I know is he has never applied.
Q. No?
A. And therefore if he had we would have asked him, are you a member, and for sure he's not, he never was, never even attempted to join any of any rabbinical group.
Q. So that excludes him from some of the privileges, some of the.?
A. Well, it excludes him. Of course, he's holding onto the chaplaincy because nobody's gonna take it from him. As a matter of fact, he even acts as a rabbi
A. (Continued) in the Jewish Home & Infirmary, which is very unfortunate, we think. We would rather... because since there is a rabbi at Beth Joseph Center next door, that rabbi could go in and visit the Jewish patients and do things for them on Shabbas and Yom Tov and every other time. He's right next door. Instead of having somebody coming from who knows where, you see? So, but all... all we know is that anyone who comes to Rochester now... say there's a new rabbi at Temple Beth Hamedresh Hachodosh, very new, he just came. He has... he is not yet a member. We're gonna have a meeting at which I will, the president, will propose him... maybe some other rabbi, will propose him for membership. Now wait a minute, I'm thinking of somebody else. There was a man here in Rochester, David Barzel, who came to Rochester on behalf of Jewish National Fund. Well, he's a good balcrea and maybe a good baltifila. Beth Hamedresh Hachodosh needed somebody, they had no rabbi. And so he was appointed as baltifila, blow the shofar, whatever else he did and I'm sure he did... did very well. One day, we don't know, he comes back... went to Jerusalem, comes back, he's a rabbi. At that time the president of our group was Rabbi Jacob Chiger. So he spoke to Rabbi Chiger, the president, and he wanted to join. The first question he asked, before he even proposed his name to the Board, are you? In other words, we don't care what your certification is, let them assess it.

Q. The national board?

A. The national board. Are you a member of the national board? No. Then I'm sorry, you cannot join and he never did join because he has since that time...

Q. Why wouldn't he go to the New York board and say I want to join your board like you did? Then come back and...?

A. Well, I cannot tell you. I suspect, and I... I imagine you can suspect as well, that he simply knew that he wouldn't qualify and be accepted.
Q. Of the national...?
A. On the national level.
Q. I see.
A. Or the state level.
Q. I thought all you needed was certification of... of rabbinical training and...?
A. True. But, if you have certification from an institution...
Q. Yea, yea. Oh, all right. And so...
A. It's one thing if you had it from an individual...
Q. Yes.
A. As Abraham Solomon has a certificate from an individual rabbi. But that...
But that will raise serious questions.
Q. That's certification...
A. They may want... they may want to tell him, OK, sit down for an examination. They may. Well, they too want to keep the dignity and the high standards of the... of the group. And they're not gonna accept anybody unless they felt he was qualified. So if you come from a yeshiva, whether it's Yeshiva University or any of the recognized yeshivas, there'd be no question. You're a member and that's it. If... if the old rabbis have given you smaha and set their names to your smaha, what's the question? But when a man brings a... a... a smaha from an individual rabbi then a question may be raised.
Q. Let me ask you a rude question here, and it's partly out of ignorance. But, is there any religious or legal basis for institutional certification over individual certification? What makes the institution prior to an individual's...
A. The individual may be completely unknown to anybody. The individual rabbi may
A. (Continued) himself not have valid certification.

Q. That's right. That's true.

A. So if it were smaha from a recognized rabbi, let's say the saintly Rabbi Moseh Feinstein. Well, of course, there'd be no question. Smaha from a Moshe... Moshe wouldn't give it to anybody who doesn't qualify. Suppose he brings it from who know from who?

Q. Yea.

A. Nobody ever heard of him.

Q. Right. I guess now the concept or the notion of rabbi, at least in... in... well, in Europe, was you know anybody who was well learned, somebody who was recognized by the community. And, you know, they didn't look for any formal certification. Am I right or am I wrong about that?

A. No. I think you're wrong. I think they... any... any man who was called to the rabbinate of a community, even of a small community, was recognized as a scholar, was recognized as a man of... of exceptional ability and conduct and all that. And they would not... I mean how could... they would not appoint... You see, what happens is this, particularly you refer to Europe, a rabbi there was constantly involved in what was called questions and answers, chailas and chuvoth, responses. And so what happened there, he had to be in order to rule on... on... on matters kosher or not, matters Jewishly proper or improper he had to have the authority. And the authority was his smaha. And the greater... the rabbi that ordained him, that gave him smaha, the greater, the better, he was recognized.

Q. So the issue is really the origin of smaha, the origin...

A. And the origin of smaha according to our tradition begins with the first rabbi, who was none other than Moshe Rabanu and that's how we've known our history. Not the mensa peta, you see? Not even the law giver. Moshe Rabanu,
Interview with Rabbi Aaron Solomon

A. (Continued) our teacher Moshe, and he was the first rabbi. And then he ordained Joshua and then from generation to generation. Of course, later on in Israel we had smaha given by these great, great rabbis. Unfortunately, we don't have it. As a matter of fact, in the Tanaitic times Rabbi Akiva, it would be a Rabbi Akiva that would ordain a man and give him smaha. And that... and that student of his had to conform to tremendously high levels to qualify for smaha.

Q. Right.

A. They would study perhaps a lifetime sometimes before they would get smaha. Incidentally, yeshivote in Israel today as indeed in your yeshivote in Europe men would sit and study a lifetime and never even get smaha. They would probably... probably qualify for smaha maybe ten times over, probably knowing the... the Talmud and the... and the post Talmudic literature inside out. And yet probably knew it by heart, never felt a need for smaha. And never... never got it. And as I say even today I know many scholars, some even in my family, they used to study Torah that's all, that is the purpose, that is the object of life on earth. And, of course, they would go to their rabbis, go to the head of the yeshiva, Roshe Hai Yeshiva, if they contemplated becoming...

Q. For recognition.

A. For recognition. And they would go to a community and want the office. Rabbis... then of course they would have to... and they would qualify in a minute of course. They would get... they would get in a minute...

But the idea is to make sure that the smahas that a man got is valid.

Q. Right.

A. That he measured up.

Q. There is a parallel issue in... in the Episcopal Church today, is there not?
A. Yes.

Q. About the ordination of...
A. Yes.

Q. ... women.
A. Yea.

Q. And who really has the authority, is it the institutional church? Or is it the individual priest?
A. You see, in the essence of the Father, which is part of the Talmud, we have this tradition. Moshe kibel Torum henach. Moshe received the Torah from Sinai. And then he handed it down to Joshua. Joshua to the elders. And they, in turn, to the men of the great synagogue and so on and on to this very day. An attempt has been made, I believe, by none other than the great chief rabbi of Israel today, Schoma Gurin, to revive the old smaha. In other words, that men should really appear before great bodies before being recognized as worthy of... of degree. Of course, that would effect only Orthodox rabbis because of... As a matter of fact you may be interested again to digress that here there was a rabbi in Rochester for three years, Rabbi Zvi Ettinger, I mentioned his name before. He was rabbi of Beth Sholom synagogue on Monroe Avenue. Well, they got into a hassle and they are now trying to prove after having him as a rabbi for three years, and he's certified. Incidentally he has smaha by a... from a... from a recognized rabbinical academy, from a yeshiva. They're now... as a matter of fact, I talked with his... somebody... one of his friends who told me that it is in the hands of a copy of his smaha, of his ordination, plus a letter from his yeshiva, is in the hands of a Christian judge who will have to sit in judgment and say whether that smaha is valid or not. They're gonna prove for what reasons I don't know. But, it's a matter of record.
Q. Right.

A. You see?

Q. Mmm-hmm.

A. This... they would never dare challenge it, let's say if a man had... was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, or by the Hebrew Union College, they wouldn't dare. But when it's by yeshiva they're gonna say that... they're gonna challenge it. So, there is... it's very important problem. And in effect we, at the Board of Rabbis, felt that why should we put ourselves in a position where we had to perhaps even embarrass a man by saying, you know, you don't qualify, your smaha is not... is a phony, not bona fide. We say to him you apply...

Q. Right.

A. ... where they'll judge it, and they're better in a position to judge it. And then if they say OK, then fine.

Q. I would assume that this is still a controversial issue for many rabbis?

A. I don't know. Well, we haven't had much flack in Rochester because, again, everybody who qualifies is a member, everybody who did qualify was a member of our Board of Rabbis.

Q. Right.

A. Incidentally our president of the Rochester Board of Rabbis way back in 1957 and G-d willing I will be through a good part of 1977. Again, because we have elections for a year and then we elect... re-elect them for another year. And this is my second term in office now.

Q. Would you say that the president of this board is really kind of the chief rabbi of Rochester?

A. I'll say last week our Rochester... Rochester Police Department was host to all the police chiefs of the State of New York, and I've been a... a
A. (Continued) chaplain, the Jewish chaplain, with the local . . . I don't remember if I referred to it in our first conversation or not. . .

Q. After the tape we talked about it.

A. I did? Oh, yes. But may be of interest giving you some of my experiences as chaplain in . . . in many hospitals. I still am.

Q. Yea.

A. And so in answer to your question, I was asked to give the benediction. Incidentally, I wore my uniform, police uniform, with the honorary status of major. And, of course, wearing my yamulke and the police uniform it must. . . be. . . must be . . .

Q. Contrast.

A. A real. . . a real contrast. Now, in answer to your question, next to whom did I sit? Next to Bishop Hogan. So maybe they think that it. . . well, actually it really is not. When there. . . when I address non-Jewish groups, and I'm sure I've done my share of it, the question often arises is there. . . why is there not a chief rabbi? I say well because every rabbi is sure that he's the chief. And I say it in jest. We don't have. . . since we don't have it on a national level, how would we have it. . .?

Q. Of course we can compare again America to the European tradition that did have chief. . .?

A. Yea, they did. Yea. And then rabbis themselves would recognize the great scholar and they would voluntarily look up to him for direction, for answers that they were unable to find. And so they. . . he was the ovdet dean. He was the chief rabbi. Of course, they have one in England right now.

Q. Yes, that's right.

A. They have two in Israel, one Ashkenazic schamugura and they also have a Sephardic chief rabbi.
Q. But it also seems to me that isn't the American way?
A. No, no. I suppose we're less pompous. And G-d bless America. Believe me, G-d bless America. We're less pompous and we believe that we... we... we're all good and we all have a weak point and whatever else. And we regard and should regard a person, man or woman, on the basis of... of the kind of a person he or she is. That is a person on the basis of culture, education and... and position in the community.

Q. It's a more leveling kind of...?
A. Yes, of course. Right. Now I'm thinking I'm tired and maybe we could... we could have it once more and then this would probably cover...

Q. Yea.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A       (Interview II)
Interview with RABBI AARON SOLOMON
July 29, 1976
By Dennis Klein

Interview II
Tape 1
Side B

Blank side. However, on the interviewer's log of the interview it is indicated that there should be a full side of tape. This should be investigated further if possible.
Q. This is Dennis Klein. We're talking with Rabbi Aaron Solomon at Temple Beth David. Today is August 5, 1976. We are on Tape No. 3, Side A. Rabbi, I thought we would begin with a discussion of your impressions of observance in Jewish religion over the years. And specifically you've had experiences as a moyal and this, of course, has bearing on this issue I'm sure.

A. Right. I thought perhaps... I'd like to refer back for a minute or two. We were... I think we mentioned the fact how hunky-dorey, how lovely, everything has been in Rochester the past hundred years or fifty years. I'm not sure that that is the case. As a matter of fact a thought came to me that even our Rochester Board of Rabbis I kept referring to last session we had, that it was originally started as Council, Rabbinical Council of Rochester. Well, how did this... how did this change come about? They don't remember that at one time in... in the history of Rochester rabbinate, the rabbis of the Orthodox congregations attempted to secede from the Rochester... first of all from the Council. First of all they... they said that the... the word council belongs to them because some of them were members of the Rochester... no not Rochester... it was called the Rabbinical Council of America, RCA, so they were members of it, so they had the Council in that name. So we changed it to Rochester Board of Rabbis. And then they threatened to secede from us, I don't remember whatever the reason was, and fortunately we prevailed upon them to remain and they have remained to this day. Whether they have their heart in it or not I don't know. But I know that they do have a so-called Rabbinical Council of their own consisting presently of three rabbis, rabbis of the three Orthodox congregations now with rabbis. Also I wanted to speak
A. (Continued) perhaps for a few minutes on Jewish education in Rochester. Because when I came to Rochester over fifty years ago the community center of Jewish education, of course, was the Talmud Torah on Baden Street. I don't know if you've had occasion to speak with somebody about it?

Q. I've heard about that.

A. There was the center of Jewish education because Jewish people lived all around it in the parallel streets, in the side streets, and it was very convenient for children to go there. I remember my first visit there, walking into one class and another and still another. And I recall that I'd walk into one class and they were studying the Book of Isaiah in the original, with the commentaries and all and it was delightful to... to hear so many young men, probably girls too I don't remember, learning the prophets in the original. And Isaiah, of course, is not a... exactly an easy... an easy prophet as far as the language is concerned. Another I'd go into they'd sit and study Talmud, which is not the case in Rochester today. And so I must say that Jewish education has been going... rolling downhill, and what we have in Rochester, at least as I see it, is... are schools where we prepare them for Bar Mitzvah. And I say you take away Bar Mitzvah as many rabbis, including one of the saintly rabbis of our time Rabbi Moseh Feinstein of New York, who suggested perhaps that it ought to be eliminated altogether. My guess is that there'd be no... no... no schools, no congregational schools. The only school where children are getting more than a minimum would be, of course, the Hillel School.

Q. Right.

A. I thought it worthy of mentioning. Now, from the point of view of...

Q. Well, wait. Let me ask you...

A. Yea, go ahead, sure.
Q. What about the yeshiva that was recently formed?
A. Well, the yeshiva is still new. And it's good, no question about it. And that is going to be, perhaps, the high school where some of the boys and girls, maybe girls now I don't know, certainly some of the boys will continue their religious education when they get out of Hillel School, when they graduate from Hillel.
Q. Right.
A. But it's still a new place. It's essentially a Talmudic school, and with high school, and there's no question that... that there was need of it in Rochester. And I expect that it will expand, and that's an excellent addition to the Hillel School. When I speak of Jewish education, obviously, I'm referring to the congregational schools.
Q. OK. So that's...
A. Yea.
Q. ... a very small minority that...
A. Yea. Well, I don't know. Numerically I would guess that most of the children go to the congregational schools.
Q. Right.
A. You see? It... it's the minority that goes to Hillel.
Q. That's right. That's right.
A. It's the minority that goes to the Upstate Academy.
Q. So speaking of the majority then education has seemed to be...?
A. I would think so, at least from my observation.
Q. ... the congregational schools.
A. And what we have today are... are Bar Mitzvah schools.
Q. Right.
A. And now also Bat Mitzvah schools.
Q. So... so how is that going downhill within the congregational schools?
A. It... it... it doesn't make much difference as far as the congregation is concerned. The parents' interest is to have the boy Bar Mitzvah and the girl Bat Mitzvah and this is it. And alas the week after or certainly not more than a few weeks after you're all through with the child and the parent and you don't see them anymore. It's a form of graduation which Bar Mitzvah is just opposite. It's the... it's the commencement.
Q. That's right.
A. When a youngster becomes of age and becomes a man of duty, or as we would say now a young woman of duty. They graduate and then they're all through.
Q. Hasn't this always been the case more or less though in...?
A. It couldn't have been the case because the parents themselves were observant, and who kept an interest in Jewish scholarship. And wanted to see their children continue the tradition, and so it could not have been so bad. But, of course, there for a long time we had in Rochester what we call a lost generation, boys and girls who received no education at all, not religious and not even Yiddish. In other words, a Yiddish folk shul in Rochester for many years.
Q. Yea.
A. And some... some went to neither. And today, as I say, the problem is that children largely do not continue their education and while in school, it seems to me, there's only one big goal to look forward to. And that begins when they reach age twelve and then they come to the rabbi or whoever is in charge of the so-called skills class. And that's when you begin to drum and teach the boy and the girl to chant the HavTorah, which they learn, and... and that's the extent of the Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah ritual.
Q. What about going on to confirmation?
A. We have discontinued confirmation years ago. We, in the Conservative movement, actually... the Orthodox synagogue should not have had it at all, but they did have it. As a matter of record, Beth Joseph Center had it for many years when the rabbi was there. But, in our own movement, in the Conservative movement, there... the realization has come to most men close to the movement that... that confirmation was definitely not a Jewish ritual. The Bar Mitzvah, yes; Bat Mitzvah, yes. And so the attempt has been made to have children continue in the... in the so-called Hebrew high school. We had a branch here in our own town, which incidentally I understand is being closed and transferred to another temple up in Brighton where there are more children attending.

Q. What about... how did that reflect in your experiences as a moyla? When did you... when did you begin? Or how did you get started?

A. Well, I became interested in ritual circumcision, or as we call it barik mela, perhaps forty years ago. And the reason for it was that so many younger obstetricians at that time were not pleased with the moylem in the community. The moylem then were first of all schokdit, were slaughtered for the kosher kitchen. And apparently the feeling was well if you can handle a knife to take care of a chicken or whatever you ought to be able to handle a knife and take care of circumcision a baby. But apparently they had no concept of what doctors felt should be done over and above the ritual aspect of it. They wanted moylem to know more about the anatomy of things. To know what it was that he was doing and... and apparently it was very difficult to reach the moylem. If they would, for example, tell him, oh, he must scrub. It was the rule then for ten minutes... ten minutes begrudgingly maybe the moyla would scrub. And then he'd drop something on the floor and pick it up. And the doctor would say to him go back and scrub again. And, of course,
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A. (Continued) there was a feeling of annoyance. And so first one and then another obstetrician came to me in just forty years ago, in 1936, suggesting do I know of somebody who might be interested? Would I myself be interested in ritual circumcision? And it was both first the late Dr. Jacob Epstein and Dr. Abraham Tattlebaum who is now a resident of somewhere in Florida. I don't know just where. And these two doctors worked with me to teach me and to show me and to help me. And then I went to the City of Philadelphia. There is a hospital there called the Jewish Hospital of Philadelphia and they conducted at that time, I don't know if they still do, a course of a... instruction in ritual circumcision and I spent there a couple of summers, the summer of '37 and '38. And in '38 after performing a few circumcisions in the presence of the rabbis and the doctors I was given the certificate which I have in front of me. And I showed you, dated July, 1938.

Q. Right. This is from the Jewish Hospital in Philadelphia.

A. Jewish Hospital in Philadelphia. Now at that time... Of course, now I must tell you, that the New York Board of Rabbis have schools of learning, a much better school even than the one that I went to because this is under the aegis not of one hospital or one or two rabbis, this is conducted by the New York Board of Rabbis as one of the functions, one of the services to the Jewish community in Philadelphia and the surrounding towns. And so they have a very fine school, and men graduate and are certified and perform. There, of course, the great tragedy is that again I can only express an opinion from where I'm sitting. And to me certainly in Rochester the ritual circumcision is one of the... one of the many rituals that has fallen by the wayside in that the average Jewish couple when they have a son born to them may think in terms of having the boy circumcised for hygienic reasons or whatever, but to have the ritual, to have a mohel and to have a rabbi, and to have it done
A. (Continued) according to Jewish law, this is unfortunately not the case at all. There if, of course, a general... another rabbi in the community who came much later than I and who began to ritual circumcisions also after he was here a number of years, and he and I got together and we put two and two together and combined records and realized what a small percentage of ritual circumcisions are being performed in the... in the community. At first I thought that he had most of them and I had just a few, and he thought the same thing. That I, because I was the older moyl here that I had it. And then we got together and realized that wasn't the case at all. And so we have circumcision today, it must come from a traditional home where an attempt is made to keep Jewish life, and this is just one of the rituals that they feel have to be done. And, of course, this is the way we initiate our children into the covenant. And that's why it's called brit milah, the covenant of circumcision or the covenant of Father Abraham. And, of course, we do it on the eighth day whenever possible. Let's say if... if the child is in good health and the doctor gives us the green light. Otherwise we wait until... which is given in Jewish law, until the baby's physically ready to have the bris done.

Q. Now you said that this... this ritual is not being observed anymore or very little. Had this begun to decline at some point in your experience?

A. Right. Well, I don't know just when but it certainly has declined. Well, for one thing perhaps there aren't... there certainly aren't as many children born in Rochester as there were let's say twenty-five years ago. But, given the... that aspect of the problem I... I still feel that... that ritual circumcision as such is not... is no longer the necessity that it was. And what's very interesting about it is that parents are not... no longer ashamed or embarrassed about it, nor grandparents. And so I think
A. (Continued) it... the grandfather or grandmother come to me and say would I say a blessing for the baby from the pulpit? And I say what about the little boy's bris? Well, he was already circumcised. He had no bris. But the important thing is to have the rabbi recite a blessing from the pulpit.

Q. How would you respond to that?

A. Well, I respond... or I give 'em a certificate and said it cannot be done, we can bless the baby and wish the baby all the good in the world, but it cannot be part of the ritual because there is no such ritual. The ritual is performed at the time and place of the... of the bris, but I cannot read the ritual here in the synagogue. And... and I have... and have the baby circumcised. Incidentally, as I said before the baby should have the bris on the eighth day. I suppose the doctor did it in the labor... in the delivery room right following birth.

Q. Right.

A. Well, this is not according... according to ritual. Our Torah says that it be done on the eighth day.

Q. Give me an idea. In 1938 did you have a lot of people or a few people request the ritual circumcision?

A. Now, there may have been there at least for some years perhaps two shokdym who were doing ritual circumcision. And... and... and I did them. So, I have no way of knowing just how many were done. But, I would say it was a common thing for me to have, let's say, two and three ritual circumcisions a week. You see? And gradually I realized that the thing was dropping maybe to the point of one a week, and then maybe two a month. And now there isn't even one a month. I don't know exactly what we have. Maybe...

Q. How many would you have a year?

A. Maybe... maybe I would have ten or twelve a year.
Q. That's something.
A. And you know what's very interesting to me is that the young people, young couples, let's say at ... in Ithaca, those who are at Cornell University or Ithaca College or wherever, it's strange that they still demand a moyl and want the ritual done.
Q. Why is that strange?
A. I don't know. I think it's strange because you would think that these young couples, being away from a center of Jewish life, after all Ithaca is a small community. And yet they insist that there be a moyl and they get the moyl wherever they can, Syracuse, Rochester, wherever they get a moyl. They want the moyl at the time of the bris. And ... and very often they will even call months before the birth of a child and say my wife and I expect a baby in a few months. Will you be able to do it? Are you doing it? And if not will you suggest somebody else? They're interested in the ritual. Is it perhaps because there are very few rituals left on the campus or near the campus? I don't know. But, it's ... it's a matter of record.
Q. Maybe they miss ... maybe they miss other forms of ... 
A. It's a matter of record. Or maybe they come under the influence of the campus rabbi. I don't know. But, all I can tell you is that there are I would say more out of town ritual circumcisions performed by me than in the City of Rochester. And I'm thinking of all the surrounding towns. So if I have about twelve or so a year there'll be perhaps roughly at least half of them ...
Q. Outside of Rochester. 
A. ... would be outside of Rochester.
Q. That's something. So that it virtually ... it's virtually ... it has virtually ...
A. Yea, yea. It is no longer a necessity in Jewish life as far as young couples
A. (Continued) are concerned. And grandparents, unfortunately, very unwillingly have to say amen and that's it. They accept it and make... make the most of it.

Q. Well that's. ... that's a rapid decline. I didn't think it would be that...

A. Well, you know, it's been unfortunate because this was... this is the last fort, the last citadel. With this gone what is left of Jewish life, let's say, in our community? The average Jew does not observe Shabbat. He does not observe Yom Tov. He doesn't even have his children observe Yom Tov, children who go to the religious schools. They go to school just as if it were an ordinary day. Now, I don't know just where... what the percentage is but so many of them do not even keep kosher home. So what is left of Jewish life?

Q. Well, what is left is that they go to temple on Yom Kippur, on Rosh Hashanah. They go... they, you know, eat matzoh during the Passover.

A. Yea, because matzoh you can eat all year. But, the point is if this is Jewish life, what is it going to be like ten years from now? Or five years from now?

Q. You think it's getting worse?

A. Unless the... somehow, some way the trend can be turned around.

Q. One of the problems, of course, with education is that with... with students going to school during the day it's very difficult to ask a child to continue schooling after that daytime, you know, secular education.

A. Yes, yes. Yet, we ask children to go to music schools, to dance schools, and learn all kinds of things. And parents are sure that these things are very important, and they are important in themselves. And yet... ... but there's no question that before Bar Mitzvah and before Bat Mitzvah parents send the children, and children do come. The problem is what happens after the Bar
A. (Continued) and Bat Mitzvah as I indicated before. As long as the Bar Mitzvah ritual exists of necessity there will be. . . there will be Hebrew schools and there will be Hebrew teachers, and we will be spending a lot of money on Jewish education.

Q. Do you think that this ritual is ever in danger of neglect? The Bar Mitzvah and the Bat Mitzvah?

A. Well, there certainly are a great many people who are very much disturbed by it because we realize more and more, as I said, Bar Mitzvah has become an end in itself. And it isn't. It's not. . . never meant to be. And if it is . . . well, actually you know, a Jewish youngster, a boy, when he reaches the age of thirteen years and one day he's automatically Bar Mitzvah. You include him in a minion, call him to the Torah if he knows the brahus. So, one becomes a Bar Mitzvah you might say automatically by virtue of. . . of the years, the thirteen years and a day.

Q. Right.

A. But, it has . . . it has probably assumed social proportions completely out of place with reality. As a matter of fact you know, some years ago I remember reading somewhere, in a periodical, that children in California. . . they had. . . they had a couple that was doing it complet. Taking the child, I suppose, at twelve and getting a teacher and preparing him, they had their own hole, and they prepared the. . . and got everything, the flowers and the musicians and the dancers and whatever you want, did it all complet. This is not the intent of Bar Mitzvah. This was never meant to be. OK. To make a social, family gathering of it and invite friends, that's beautiful. But, not to the point where a child is all dressed up, you know, in what I call a monkey suit. And then he sees all the money, thousands of dollars, spent on him. We had in the case of one boy who was Bar Mitzvah, his family spent a thousand dollars
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A. (Continued) on the flowers alone. And they, themselves, bragged about it. And then when all this is done what is left for the boy? What is he supposed to. . . he reads actually the. . . the highest plane there is. And so this is what I mean when I say it's gotten out of hand.

Q. Been perverted.

A. Yes, yes, yes.

Q. It's been perverted. The whole approach to it.

A. And there's no question that perhaps a trend back will take place.

Q. Yea, well I know that in my own observations of Jewish life there does seem to be kind of a revival. There does seem to be kind of a return to Judaism, if not the religion well at least the culture. You know, there is that kind of argument. That the nostalgia, the Leo Rostins, the Yiddish culture, the Fiddler on the Roof type of, you know, and that seems to be maybe one direction.

A. Yes, but there's a question that the conscientious Jew, the understanding, the truly cultured Jew, will most likely be coming from the all day schools. And this is why not only Orthodox congregations are interested in and have their schools of their own, but the Conservative movement, we have our own schools named for the late Solomon Schecter. And also the Reform movement has all day schools because they, too, realize the importance of it. I've said it many times and I'm sure others have said it, our religion, our way of life, Judaism will survive differences, it always has, but it . . . it's doubtful it can survive indifference. When nobody cares, if you don't care what chance is there for survival? And so out of the graduates of the all day schools, no matter what shade, will come the leaders and the teachers and the rabbis.

Q. Let me change the subject for a moment now, of course we can come back to this. But, we were talking after the session, last session, about your observations on the German Jewish, Eastern European Jewish relations in Rochester. This
Q. (Continued) would have to be, of course, during the twenties, the thirties. And it isn't so much now where there are distinctions, but there certainly were during these years. And you mentioned specifically about the Jewish Welfare Fund drives. You were telling me the story of that you were invited to... with other Conservative, Orthodox rabbis to an essentially Reform meeting. And they didn't serve kosher food, for example, and you felt this was wrong, and you felt the tension. And perhaps there was tension.

A. Well, it... it... it's a matter of historic record, I'm sure, that the German Jews controlled Jewish life in Rochester. They organized the early, early groups and due to the fact that most of the wealthy Jewish families were members of... of the Reform temple in the community they ran the show, as we would say. And it's... it's also people who knew the late Rabbi Landsberg, who was rabbi for many years at Temple B'rith Kodesh, know that he was a typical German Jew who looked way down upon the ost Jude, the East European Jew. And there was very, very little fraternizing or socializing between the East German Jew... the East European Jew and the German Jew, for obvious reasons. They were socially not on the same level. And nor were they religiously on the same level. The prayer book used there was one that went from left to right, very few, very few Hebrew lines or paragraphs. And there was... there wasn't much of a relationship. Except they felt that they had to act as the instrument, well to perhaps bring whatever relief they could to these poor arrivals to the community. And then also to Americanize them. And as you know they preferred the use of the word Hebrew to Jewish. And so it was Hebrew Union College.

Q. Right.

A. And in Rochester Hebrew Charities is what they called it.

Q. Isn't Hebrew Union College Jewish Theological...?
A. No, no, no. Jewish. No. Jewish Institute of Religion. Which was also... which was also a Reform seminary started by the late Stephen Wise.

Q. I see.

A. So it was a case of probably two schools having problem, perhaps even financial problems who decided it would in the interest of the movement to merge, which they did.

Q. But both the word Hebrew and the word Jewish...?

A. But Jewish people started many years later, it was started by Rabbi Stephen Wise. At the time I think even Rabbi Bernstein was the... in the first graduating class of... of... of... of Hebrew... of Wise's seminary. And, of course... And he was a... a very warm Jew, a very hard working Jew for... for Israel, for Palestine. He was a Zionist. And so naturally he would use the word Jewish Institute of Religion. But I'm going back to 1875, I believe, there was the Hebrew Union College.

Q. I see. OK.

A. And the same German Jews, I mean, Jews from Germany... They organized things in Rochester it was Hebrew Charities, not Jewish Charities at all.

Q. OK. Because Jewish refers to an Eastern European cultural image?

A. Yea, perhaps this was one way to try to hide one's... under the term Hebrew or Hebrew, Jew, Israeliite, it refers to the same person by different names due to different historic periods in... in our long story.

Q. I know that European was... some European Jews would rather call themselves the Isralidisher rather than...

A. Yea, Isralidisher.

Q. ... Judisher.

A. Now you see when our seminary was contemplated and when it was organized and established, they advisedly used the word Jewish Theological Seminary, not
A. (Continued) Hebrew, Jewish, you see? Because if anything to differentiate from the Hebrew. We were... we were not known as Hebrews for hundreds of years in the world. We were known as Jews, and so why not use the term Jewish? And that's what they used. And... but, of course, you see as the East European Jew made his... his mark in the world they organized, as I showed you now in 1917 apparently organized Temple Beth El. And who were the organizers there? Not German Jews to the best of my knowledge. They were all East European Jews. The Frankel family, the Jaffey family, the Rosenfeld family. They were all... that I knew personally. They were all East European Jews, but by that time, by 1917 came, they had already established themselves and wanted to conserve the... the traditions but still to modernize certain things, have some English in the service, certainly the sermon should be given in... in the vernacular and so on and so forth. And so they organized Temple Beth El in 1917. Who were they? Again, they were East European Jews.

Q. OK.

A. So now what happens is this, to come back to your question. And so in those days, therefore, when there was a community function who... who did the planning? The German Jews. And so they would have... they would have a community function with non-kosher meal. And obviously if this irked not only Orthodox rabbis, but it also irked Jews who wanted to keep kosher and could not partake of non-kosher food. And that was done as a community function, Welfare Fund drive. These things. And they served, and there was no embarrassment about it. They went ahead and did. And so as the two elements merged and learned to know each other and to respect each other, the question was asked why not have it kosher? Because those who don't believe in kosher can or may eat kosher meal.

Q. That's right.
A. But those who did not were denied and therefore that was not fair to that element in the community, and the leadership began to realize it. And needless to say now it's beautiful.

Q. Yea. I would assume that part of this leadership, perhaps a major figure here is Rabbi Bernstein?

A. Well, I've mentioned his name more than once. And he's a man worthy of respect and... and adulation and everything else. Yes, he played an important part in that. He realized, for the same reason, OK you don't want... so, you eat whatever you want to eat but for the benefit of the community and there were Orthodox people. Of course, years ago there were even more than today, Jews who kept the tradition. And they were very much embarrassed and denied... denied their... their part in... in the... in the work of... of the Welfare... that's what it was, the Welfare Fund.

Q. Right.

A. Drive or whatever it was. But, of course, again as you come back to Beth El as Beth El grew, there now for a long time any function that's taken place is either at Beth El or at B'rith Kodesh, as I say because they are on the same level socially. There's... if I understand it correctly, and though for that point I think we've come a long way. And I think we have a better community. Of course, we've grown numerically too from those days.

Q. Yes. You mentioned that the German Jews were... felt as if they had the responsibility to Americanize the Eastern European contingent of the Jewish community. To me that sounds like an assimilation, that they were trying to assimilate?

A. Well, I don't know if that's what it is or if it was a form of patronization. That is to say they would be embarrassed, wouldn't they? Obviously, they thought they would be embarrassed if a Jew did not, let's say, speak correct
A. (Continued) English or his dress wasn't just so, or his manners were not what they thought were in keeping with the American theme.

Q. Could you... do you recall any incidents or circumstances that could illustrate this kind of interaction?

A. I don't...

Q. How would that happen? I mean a lot of the Eastern European Jews that I've talked with this summer, they... they really haven't had a whole lot of contact with the German Jewish community. I mean every once in a while they would go to a sewing class at B'rith Kodesh or something like this, but really not... not a significant form of contact. How would the two communities then interact? In what ways? How would they be... why would they be embarrassed? They're on the other side of the tracks, they're down on Joseph Avenue, we're over here. Why should there be this embarrassment?

A. Well, if my estimate is correct the Jews began to be active in the community, in business on Main Street and wherever else. They would attend the theatre, attend a movie. And so there would be reason why somebody might think well it's embarrassing to see the Jew, let's say, with a... with side curls. Or a Jew with... with the European... European dress. And but they would think ill mannered and so on and so forth. And so they were interested in... in let's say raising the quality of American life as far as the Jewish immigrants were concerned. And that wasn't true only of Rochester. That was true everywhere.

Q. In fact, it was... of course, this goes back, you know, to the European tradition what was... which was, I think, much more tense.

A. And... and should we perhaps even add that the German Jews may well have had... certainly some of the leaders there may have had a sense of responsibility. Look, these are our brothers. True, they're from East
A. (Continued) Europe, but they're our brothers. I would like to feel that certainly some of them had that feeling. Look if we are not gonna help them, who will?

Q. So that's the other side of the coin?

A. I would think so, definitely. That's the other side of the coin.

Q. Yea, in fact in the building of the JY it would seem to me that that would be an example of the kind of philanthropy to try to provide some help for... and a center.

A. Of course, I recall the old JY. The old JY, which was a converted home.

Q. On Franklin Street?

A. Now where was... across the street from the... probably. Near... near the Post Office. It was in the same location where they were.

Q. Yea.

A. I remember even teaching classes there perhaps in 1927. '28. '29. Teaching Hebrew and Bible and whatever else to adults. So I remember that place. And then, of course, I remember when they built the JYMSWA. And I remember how many years that building was boarded because... because of the Depression years and people just didn't have the money.

Q. To interrupt the...

A. And now of course then they went out on the second or third campaign for funds until finally they raised the money. And then it served a very wonderful purpose. The JY.

Q. And that's an example, is it not, of German Jewish, Eastern European Jewish...?

A. Yes, Let's face it, some of these German Jews and East European Jews began to meet at the club, at the club. The Irondequoit Club, you know?

Q. Oh, oh, the...

A. Yea, socially. I mean, as they came up in the world financially, they came up
A. (Continued) socially and they began to have contacts and realized, look, after all we really are one and the same tribe.

Q. You know originally though the Irondequoit Country Club was strictly German Jewish and they would not accept...

A. Yea. They came into being because those German Jews were not welcome in the city club, that's why they had to have a club of their own.

Q. Yea, that... that's an interesting point.

A. They were not accepted, and so they simply turned around after they had their place and returned the coin to their fellow Jews until the East European Jew made his mark in the community.

Q. Yea.

A. And then they were only too glad to accept him. And so they... there was an interaction there by virtue of... of the years, what the years have done to the... to the people, to the newcomers in Rochester. And also the fact is that... that bridges were thrown across. In fact, even Germans that came, that were there only for charitable purposes, Hebrew Charities, they helped many newcomers to the community. And them found them to be decent, good human beings. And so that little by little they learned to appreciate one another, and so the specific line of demarcation was gradually erased by virtue of that.

Q. From my experiences this summer talking with other Jews this... this change happened, I believe, in the late twenties and the thirties and since the thirties, of course, the line of demarcation almost completely disappears.

A. Yes, yes. Little by little you know Jewish Bureau of Education came into being, to which the Reform schools belonged, as well as the others. And so of course today there's a much better relationship.

Q. You... you've been in the Joseph Avenue area between 1946 and 1955?
Q. Now during this period, of course, there had been other changes going on.

A. Yes. The changes there, of course, became evident as more and more of the old time families or their children moved away. First to Monroe Avenue and of course now it's Brighton. Everybody who is somebody feels, as I mention it, has to live in Brighton. And so gradually. And of course, as families left their homes the minority groups moved in. And as they moved in, of course, the character of the neighborhood changed completely to the point where today you have a synagogue, I believe, where I served as rabbi. I believe I mentioned there were... there was so much activity. The Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and a men's club and weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. Today if they land a minion I'm told simply because the neighborhood is so much changed. And so today Jews will join, let's say, B'rith Kodesh. Who are most of the members of B'rith Kodesh? Children if not... and grandchildren of East European Jews.

Q. I see. Because of their moving out.

A. Yea, but of course they moved out. And also because of their socializing and because of learning to respect one another for what they really are, they now... they chose... they'll join any congregation because primarily for social reasons or maybe occasionally somebody will want a religion that's a little bit easier, and so they'll join B'rith Kodesh or they'll join Beth El other than an Orthodox congregation. I don't know. Certainly the average couple that comes to us over here, I am not so sure that they're interested in us ideologically, although some of the more discerning people will say what kind of a congregation is it? Want to know a little bit more, come and meet the rabbi before they will apply, and meet perhaps the teachers and some of the leaders, the lay leaders. But, the average family will join
A. (Continued) where their friends belong.

Q. In a sense though doesn't that mean that, assuming that the Eastern European Jews were more Orthodox in their observance, does that mean that when they move up socially, move out to Brighton and there's the Reform temple, B'rith Kodesh, and they join a Reform synagogue, that trend then from Orthodox to Reform seems very high?

A. Yea, well as a matter of fact let me say, to go back to B'nai Israel, my former congregation.

Q. Right.

A. It's an Orthodox congregation, and there was a family, I won't mention the name, and they were Galatiana. That's what they used to call the synagogue, the Galatiana Shul, those that came from Galatia. And there was one young man I'm thinking of, a son of...
A. All right, I think that would be very fair.

Q. Sure. This is Dennis Klein. We're talking with Rabbi Aaron Solomon, August 5, 1976. This is Tape No. 3, Side B. And there's not really too much more, Rabbi, except you were talking a little bit about the B'nai B'rith.

A. I happened to mention B'nai B'rith and I sort of... I said it was a curiosity, wasn't it, that to the best of my knowledge there isn't a single rabbi in the community who belongs, who's a member of any of the chapters of B'nai B'rith.

Q. Today.

A. Today.

Q. Yea.

A. And to the best of my knowledge no one ever did before. I did. I joined it many years ago.

Q. When did you join it?

A. I guess probably in the mid-forties. And I joined because friends said, rabbi, it would be nice to join. And became a member, and then I was shocked. And at that time already I came to shortly thereafter I came to B'nai Israel as a rabbi, and here I am an Orthodox rabbi invited to B'nai B'rith, an annual... annual dinner. At that time they had it in the Hotel... what do they call it? Seneca. Hotel Seneca, that's on... on Clinton. Clinton near Main Street in Rochester. They have these... what's it? Seneca Towers or the bank or whatever it is. Anyway it was right near the B. Forman Company.

Q. Yea, right.

A. That was the hotel. And I remember coming into a huge ballroom with hundreds,
Interview with Rabbi Aaron Solomon

A. (Continued) maybe five hundred people. And you sit down to eat and it's a non-kosher meal. And as I recall it happened again and again. And then I recall writing a letter to the... to the lodge, that's what it's called, of which I was a member, or the chapter. And...

Q. Lodge is what they call it.

A. Lodge is. So I was a member of that lodge, and so I wrote to them and I said, look, it's embarrassing to me, an Orthodox rabbi, to sit in on it with Jews who go and say B'nai B'rith, House of the Covenant?

Q. Right.

A. Sons of the Covenant. Whatever you do at home in your own kitchen, your own temple, nobody can...

Q. That's one thing.

A. But this you're doing under the banner of Sons of the Covenant. And I never... I don't even know if it was ever discussed. And I never received an answer. So I talked with some of the leaders privately, and they continued doing it. So, I sent in a note of resignation, and that's it. Some years later again a friend said, Rabbi, I'd like you to join because these are the things that... It's possible that I was a member... I don't... the first time I joined B'nai B'rith, maybe even long before that, long before the forties, maybe in the thirties. I don't remember. I'm a little bit...

Q. But this might have happened in the thirties?

A. I don't remember. Then when I was asked to join again and I said, look, I had to resign because of this problem. Well, it's gonna be different now. So I joined it again. And again the same story. I'd get bulletins that would advertise ox tails and all kinds of trofe food. I was just ashamed. I was really embarrassed. And I had to resign again. To the best of my knowledge they still do not subscribe.
Q. Well, you were probably the only Orthodox even... I would even say...
A. Rabbi.
Q. Well, not even rabbi, I would say...
A. Orthodox Jew?
Q. Orthodox Jew. I mean it's a very Reform Jewish...
A. All right, but it's very possible that there were Orthodox Jews belonging who felt, well look, what can we do about it? We can do nothing. OK. They, themselves, would not attend those non-kosher functions but if they felt that they still wanted to be members of B'nai B'rith then they were. They are. And it's unfortunate if they haven't changed the policy, and I don't think they have or else somebody would have asked me to rejoin again, and I would 'cause I believe that they... they represent an idea, they represent something very valuable. Perhaps there's no other organization does, no other Jewish organization does. And I would like to belong, but of course I can't. When it comes to what people do in their homes, if we want we can say that's their business. But, what we do as Jews under the banner of Jewish organization I think...
Q. B'nai B'rith.
A. ... what ought to be done in the spirit and in the tradition of our people, and I think our Christian neighbors would have a lot more respect for us if we do it and when we do it.
Q. The B'nai B'rith itself is really not a very religious organization.
A. OK. It... It need not be necessarily religious, but still there are... what makes them Jewish? Then I want to know what is it? Persecution? Do you have to have an anti-defamation and worry about Spiro Agnew?
Q. Right.
A. That... that crook. Is that... what... what makes them Jews if they
A. (Continued) don't keep Shabbas and they don't keep Yom Tov and they
don't keep kashruth, what is it they keep?

Q. Well, I would think they would answer by saying that they believe in Jewish
prophecy and that there is a sense of humanitarianism, you know, and...

A. Well, that's beautiful but we know, so do the Christians, so do the Christians
believe in ... in the ethical teachings of our prophets and in all that's
good in ... in the world, no matter under what label. We all subscribe to it.
And so perhaps as I say there ought to be some ... some identification mark
when we do things as a Jewish group. And let our membership know that this
is ... this is ... this is what is involved in our Jewish way of life, and
this is the way it should be done in the hope that it would set an example.
But we set the wrong kind of example if we only serve ox tails and ... and
lobsters and whatever else that our ... that are against the Jewish tradition.

Q. You mentioned to me the names of Al Hart, Jake Hollander and those who
worked for Jewish Children's Home. You knew them personally, I assume.

A. Yes, very much so. As a matter of fact, our first home in Rochester was
directly across the street from the Jewish Children's Home on Gorham Street.

Q. Your first home?

A. My first home, that's ours meaning my family's, our personal home, directly
across. And the late Jacob Hollander was a landsman of mine and also distantly
related. Our relationship over four decades, more than four decades, as a
matter of fact before you arrived I ... I called his son, Morton's home to
as if he were home. He wasn't, he had gone to the synagogue. But ... so our
relationship was very, very close, very friendly. It was a father and son
relationship. The kind of relationship I ... I spoke of, I believe, that I
enjoyed with the late Rabbi Solomon Sadowsky, a blessed memory, or the late
Rabbi Godin, a blessed memory. It was a very wonderful feeling just to know
A. (Continued) that they were there whenever I needed them. Or when I did not need them. It was a wonderful thing. Reverend Hollander, Jacob Hollander, was brought to Rochester as you probably have found out to lead ... to be the director of the Jewish Children's Home. And he and his wife, I remember, were dedicated to those children just like true mothers and fathers. I remember, so does my wife, remember walking to the home, seeing since we lived across the street, and find Mr. Hollander with a little child on his knee, coaxing it to eat and loving it and teaching it. And, of course, Mr. Hollander was such a great influence on the children, and they had so much to give. They had their own little synagogue, incidentally, the last synagogue I had was one that Alfred Hart gave, and I was there at the dedication, and I don't remember when it was. Probably forty ... forty some years ago I would guess. That ... of course, that's been in disuse. The Children's Home has been disbanded as you know. So I knew him. And the late Alfred Hart, I still have a book of essays that he wrote and aphorisms and witticisms that he wrote. I have one of the original copies. I don't remember how many he published, one or two hundred, and I have one of those numbers. He was a great ... he was truly a great man. He was a humanitarian. Very interesting about him. Even though he was born in the ... in a Reform ... to a Reform family, he was raised I believe at Temple B'rith Kodesh, he ... when I met him he was already very active at Temple Beth El. He used to come to services every morning and stand throughout the service right near the Aron Hachosh. Shabbat he used to come and walk from his home, I believe it was 1200 East Avenue, walk to the synagogue and bring his family with ... with him. He was truly a ... a wonderful example of an observant, upstanding, ethical Jew. He was a great inspiration.

What a ... what a tragedy for the family and for the community that he died
A. (Continued) just forty years ago, if I remember correctly. He died in New York City on a trip. He went with his wife for a little rest, I believe it was after the holidays in 1936, in October, if memory serves me. And he died of a heart attack in the hotel I believe. But he certainly was a man that we all looked up to, I'm sure, the Orthodox and the... the Reform and the Conservative. He was very charitable.

Q. Well he was responsible really for getting the Children's Home off to a start?

A. Yes. He was so charitable. Let me tell you one of the things he did. Twice a year, I think on Thanksgiving... that is preceding Thanksgiving and preceding the Christian holiday, Christmas, he would send out hundreds of five dollar checks to non-customers, to poor people. And this done out of a great feeling of love for those people. And... and, of course, some people said why not? Why not? He could afford it. But there were people that had a lot more money perhaps than he did.

Q. Yea.

A. Jews and Christians. And they didn't think of doing it. Alfred Hart did it because that was part of Alfred Hart. Just like his name, he had a tremendous, tremendous heart. Loved G-d, and he loved his fellow... his fellow men, loved the synagogue, loved the Jewish Home, loved the Jewish tradition and the Jewish way of life. I... we often speak of him awfully, and very often think of him very, very affectionately. Oh, you'll have to erase that, huh? Hello... (Note: answers telephone.)

Q. We're on tape again.

A. OK. Now what else did we... *

Q. All right. Good. That was actually a good story. We should have put that on tape about the chicken, kosher chicken.
A. OK.

Q. But that's OK. We can go on. In fact, I'll get into a morbid subject really.

A. Yes.

Q. With the bombing of the Beth David Synagogue itself. This happened three years ago?

A. With the what? With the bombing. Well, it was fire bombed, yes. Not quite three years ago. There were bombings of Beth Sholom and Light of Israel on Norton Street. And now we know, I believe, who did it. It was part of the Mafia.

Q. Oh, I didn't... 

A. Yes. Oh, in fact, they've found the people that did that. Yes. Why it was done we don't know except maybe they just had to create excitement in the community. Our temple was... was fire bombed just about a year ago, I believe it was a year ago in April.

Q. Oh... Oh, I...

A. Because... see, we had moved out of there, I believe, about seven years ago and there was an empty building standing. We boarded it and every once in a while the children from the neighborhood would break the windows, break the doors, get in there and do all kinds of things. And it was standing as an eyesore. And we had people that wanted to buy it. As a matter of fact, Sergeant and Greenleaf wanted to purchase the building for a fair amount of money and wanted to use the... modernize the building and use it as an expert locksmith school or whatever it was. Some very, very confidential work. And other things in the neighborhood, the neighbors... and we needed a... a change of zoning. So the neighbors got together, hired a lawyer, and came down and raised a big fuss, they don't want it, too much activity. So no matter, whoever wanted to buy it, a change was necessary.
A. (Continued) Because this is strictly residential and whoever was going
to buy was a doctor's office, or whatever it was, we had to have a change in
the zoning. And then the neighbors didn't allow it. They wanted us to
tear the building down, but of course that was a big thing so we let it stand.
And insurance companies would not carry too much insurance on it because it
was an empty building. And I think it was a year ago April when we happened
to be in Buffalo, the women had a conference I think, and I went with them.
My darling aunt came back, drove down, there we see half the building is gone.
Then we... we quickly went to the temple and asked the secretary what
happened. So she told us that the night before it was fire bombed. And
actually there was a... it was one of the greatest favor he did us, the
young man. Apparently he wasn't in his right mind, he fire bombed a few
letter boxes and other things.

Q. Oh, I see.

A. In the neighborhood. I don't think it was anything done because of anti-
Jewish feelings. I think it was just off... off his mind, and this is one
of the things he did. And it was a tremendous fire. And I say he did us a
great favor because ultimately we would have lost the building because they
put us... the town put us on the tax roles to the tune of, I don't know, well
over two thousand dollars a year. And two years ago we had to pay them, and
eventually we probably would have lost the property altogether. So he did us
a great favor. And we got a little money, not a lot because it was... a
little money from the insurance.

Q. They probably suspect motives though behind this fire bombing of the...?

A. Well, they... they know who did it so this was... they can't blame...
they found the fellow because he, you know, the government was after him,
the federal government 'cause he fire bombed the letter boxes.
Q. Oh, that's right. That's right. So you moved out of that building before any of this?
A. Oh, years before that happened.
Q. OK.
A. It was empty. Yea.
Q. Yea.
A. And so we sold the lot just some months ago and we're out of it completely.
Q. Now you mentioned that you didn't think there was any anti-Jewish feelings involved?
A. Yea.
Q. Let me ask you that question broadly. Do you ... have you observed anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic sentiment in Rochester in the last fifty years?
A. Well, I suppose ... 
Q. Incidents. ... have there been ... ?
A. Yes, there have been some manifestations, but considering the tradition into which our neighbors are born, frankly Christianity that's based on Jews having supposedly crucified their Lord, and so the more fundamental the Christian is perhaps the more ill feeling or let's say unfriendly feeling of Jews. But I believe, certainly in the course of fifty years I've been here, we've had very little of it. And by in large it's a good community in which to live, a good city. The Town of Irondequoit here, I believe I mentioned already, the West Irondequoit Ministers Association. And we have a good, clean relationship. Priests and rabbis and the ministers of the town. So much so that last Thanksgiving our congregation hosted a Thanksgiving service. We had hundreds of people here.
Q. Interfaith?
A. An interfaith and there were priests here. There was one ... one monsignor
A. (Continued) In fact in their garbs and when I gave them a yamulke there wasn't a question about it. They went right into the synagogue, sat in the pulpit. In their uniforms, in their... in their priestly gowns and the yamulke on top.

Q. And the yamulke. That's something, very nice though in fact.

A. Yes, it is, wonderful. And we meet right in this office once a year. Our temple invites the association to lunch and they already know in advance, you know what I mean, call Cotts Kosher and whatever and cold drinks or tea because they know. So we will sit here maybe for an hour before... before the meeting starts. And we have an opportunity to discuss Israel, for example, that they apparently don't understand. They don't know what Israel means to us Jews, what the word Zion means to Jews. So we sit and discuss it in such a friendly atmosphere, questions, answers given. And I think it's good. And some of it I know, I know rubs off on our respective congregations. Jewish congregations as well, because we get to know each other better and what we really are. This Monsignor Richard Harris, who has a church down the boulevard, and I are so close and so friendly. I can't tell you how excellent relationship, good, good neighbors.

Q. It's a very instructive thing for the community at large?

A. Yes, it is. And very few communities have it. We meet regularly except during the summer. We have... we meet every month, and we discuss and we have officers and... As a matter of fact I was President of that group once, and this past year Rabbi David Spits, formerly of Temple Emanuel, he was the President. And they got him, he wasn't here more than... more than a few months when I brought him to a meeting and they were so glad to see another rabbi there that a year ago in June they nominated and elected him to be the leader of the West Irondequoit Ministers Association.
Q. You were the only rabbi at that point?
A. Yea. Yea because there for a while there was no rabbi, or the rabbi who was there did not want to participate in our meetings. As a matter of fact he didn't, this Rabbi Herman, Robert Herman, he did not care to participate. And his name actually was not Bob, we called him Bob. I forgot what his first name was. Anyway, but he... he did not want, I don't know what, principally he did not want to attend meetings, he did not want to be a member. But Rabbi Spitz came and I told him about it, he said yes of course he would be. And then he attended a few times and sure enough he was elected to president.

Q. That illustrates the good feeling, the good...
A. Oh, yes, this is right. One of the greatest things, I think there ought to be more and more and more of it because there are so many things that we can do jointly as a community. Now as a matter of fact here in the City of Rochester on the Fourth of July we had a Bicentennial celebration. And I as a current President of the Board of Rabbis was asked to participate, and we did. And it was a... the Bishop, Bishop Hogan...

Q. Right.
A. ... was there. And. ...and other clergymen, and it was such a wonderful feeling to... here we are. OK, in a church. I would rather let's say it were elsewhere. But to certain... today you had it in a church because they arranged it, and to know that here we are, all of us, loving America, all of us saying G-d bless America on its Bicentennial. Good feeling. I'm for it 100%. Oh, yes. I don't think there ever was... I don't... I'm not an historian and so... but I just and based on the little history that I've read I don't think there ever was a place anywhere in the world, Jews and Christians could live and some do live closely and... and friendly and cooperating with one another as we have in the United States of America.
Q. Marvelous. That's a great place to put an end.
A. OK. Good.
Q. So thank you very much.
A. May I... may I express my gratitude to you, you came here I know... I'm sure it wasn't easy for you, you had work to do. And our three sessions we had together, so I do want to thank you for it and tell you how much I've enjoyed it.
Q. Enjoyable...
A. And to thank you especially for making it possible for me to also have a regular discussion...
Q. You've given a lot of good stuff to think about.
A. Thank you very much. In the course of your work on it if there's anything more I can do, G-d willing, I'll be glad to do it.
Q. OK. You do have material I see that's...
A. Oh, yea. All kinds. These are things... I just have to find it and pick it... pick it out. You may want some of this.
Q. Excellent. Very good. And very nice, thank you.
A. OK.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B (Interview III)