

Katherine Biggs-Craft

Hebrew School Studies in Saint John, 1898-2015

From the earliest days of their community, Jews in Saint John, New Brunswick, attended to their children's religious education. After arriving in the city in 1858, Alice (Mrs. Solomon H.) Hart opened her home in Saint John for religious education prior to the establishment of the city's first synagogue in 1898. Well-educated from her early years in England and once described as "an excellent Hebrew scholar," Hart founded the Daughters of Israel, an organization devoted the needs of the poor and new immigrants to the Jewish community. Once the needs for food, clothing, and housing were taken care of, the organization turned to the education of immigrant children. The Daughters of Israel devoted efforts to gathering the necessary materials and space and to giving the lessons themselves. The minute books from 1898 to 1947 offer a detailed look at the work these women undertook.¹



The Saint John New Brunswick Hebrew School, circa 1914 or 1917.
Source: Collections of the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum

In 1947, the Daughters of Israel merged with the sisterhood of Congregation Shaarei Zedek, a decision reflecting overlap in the membership and activities of the two organizations. The sisterhood maintained responsibility for the Hebrew school, providing books and supplies, teachers (particularly for the lower grades), and prizes for students at the school closing activities in June. Executive meeting minutes from September 21, 1961, describe how those prizes would be awarded: "The executive recommends that the following prizes be given at the Hebrew and Sunday School

closings: 1 – For the best attendance for each class; 2 – For the most perfect attendance for Junior Congregation; 3 – For the boy and girl who best exemplifies Jewish life; 4 – For the boy and girl who's made the most advancement in each class. Provided this recommendation is passed, a letter will be sent to the Board of Education notifying them that the Chairman of the Youth Committee is Mrs. E.R. Cohen, so that the above-mentioned prizes may be donated at the closing.”²

Sisterhood members supported special events, such as a mock seder held in 1942. Meeting minutes from March 17 describe how the sisterhood planned on carrying out the program: “Mr. Babb was planning a mock Seder for the Senior Students of the Talmud Torah and asked the Sisterhood to kindly provide refreshments. It was agreed to cooperate fully with Mr. Babb for the success of the service.” One month later, after Passover, the sisterhood reported: “The President, Mrs. Isaacs reported on the Mock Seder conducted by the Talmud Torah students under the able supervision of Mr. Babb, Mr. Boyaner as well as Mrs. Isaacs were present. Refreshments and drinks were served the children who enjoyed the whole occasion immensely. It is hoped the Seder will be an annual event.”³

Several meeting minutes note that sisterhood members visited the Hebrew school monthly to check on attendance, progress of students, and supplies. They also inspected the cleanliness of rooms and took steps to encourage attendance. According to the minutes of November 16, 1960: “A discussion took place regarding the Hebrew School and the lack of teachers and the mothers expressed concern. It was suggested that Sisterhood would like to resume their Hebrew School visiting and a letter be sent to the Board of Education advising them of same.”⁴

The women also presented gifts—usually a Bible—for bar mitzvah boys and, in the 1950s and 1960s, for girls marking either confirmation or bat mitzvahs. Although the minutes for the sisterhood become spotty after the mid-1980s (a reflection of the decreased number of members and their ability to keep up the activities of an earlier generation), the minutes from the 1930s to the 1970s offer insight into what was happening inside the classroom.

The reports of the Education Committee of Congregation Shaarei Zedek given at the synagogue's annual general meetings present a mix of information—from enrollment numbers, status of the teaching staff, requirements for the classroom, and sometimes express concern for lessons, student attendance, and community participation. The earliest reports in the archives date from 1961; the last from 2015.

One of the most detailed reports was shared at the annual meeting on December 10, 1961, by Murray Zides, chairman of the board of education. Zides's committee featured seven other members, two of them women. The report noted a total enrollment of seventy-four children and the hiring of two new teachers, Freda Kotler

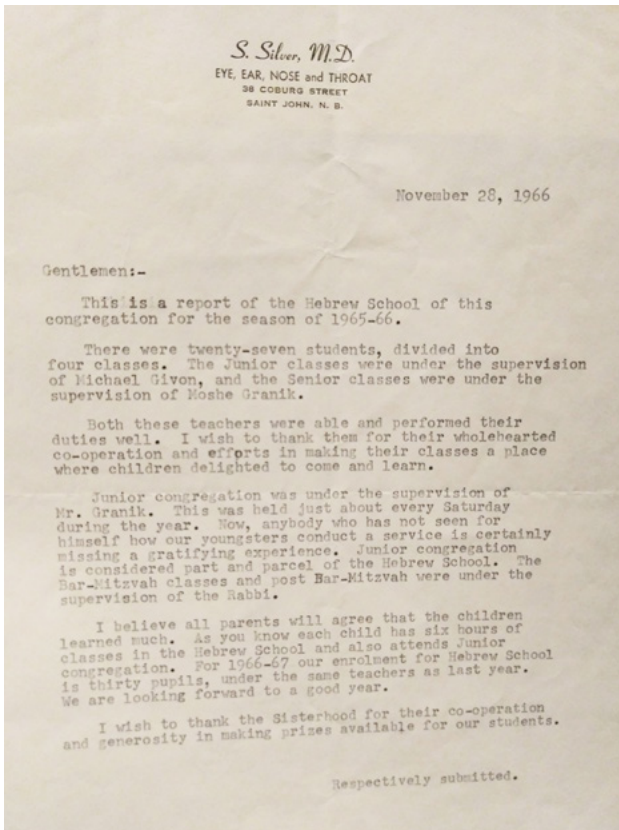
and her husband, Moshe Kotler. The new hires allowed the synagogue to establish a fifth class of senior students for bar mitzvah instruction. “Mrs. Kotler took over the supervision of the kindergarten class, with a program designed to teach something in Hebrew through songs, stories and games. She is also the teacher for the first two Hebrew School classes. Mr. Kotler teaches the third and fourth classes, with a heavy emphasis on Hebrew. Cantor Silverberg is responsible for the senior class, with religious training and Bar-Mitzvah preparation to the forefront.” Elsewhere in the report, Zides described the curriculum for individual classes. The community’s children were also expected to attend a junior congregation on Saturday mornings and could expect prizes at the end of the school year for the best attendance. Eager to increase parents’ interest in their children’s Jewish education, the committee planned to share regular reports and arrange for meetings with teachers.⁵

By 1964, two new teachers had been hired: Michael Givon and Moshe Granik. As education committee chair Samuel Silver noted in a 1964 report: “Good progress is being made by our children, and there is a spirit of harmony and cooperation in our Hebrew School.” Granik (1937–2016) taught at the school for more than forty years, retiring in 2010 when there were no children in the community left to teach. Two years after the school hired Givon and Granik, and with about thirty students enrolled in classes, Silver continued to present a positive view: “Junior Congregation was under the supervision of Mr. Granik. This was held just about every Saturday during the year. Now, anybody who had not seen for himself how our youngsters conduct a service is certainly missing a gratifying experience.” This aspect of the curriculum contributed significantly to the ability of the community’s boys to perform the prayers and readings at their bar mitzvahs.⁶

By 1969, the Education Committee had formed a parent–teacher association and acquired books for a new curriculum to teach the thirty–eight students now enrolled. A report from that year noted that a “Hanuka” play had been staged and a Purim play would be forthcoming. Dr. Joseph Arditti concluded the report by writing, “There is an excellent attendance to the Hebrew School and there are very few complaints from parents now. The teachers and the children are doing an excellent job.... For our small community I feel that the children are getting average and possibly, above average education in the Jewish history, custom and traditions and above all in our siddur and torah.”⁷

By 1976, enrollment had dropped to nine students and instructional time fell from five or six hours each week to only two. The school now considered plans to create a single class where all students met and learned together.

The 1980–1981 school year witnessed a more positive report. Thirteen students received up to four hours of instruction each week, and two of them were preparing for bat mitzvahs. Eight learned the trope for the Torah and Haftorah readings,



An Education Committee Report from late November 1966, on the letterhead of S. Silver M.D., Ear Nose and Throat Specialist, Saint John N.B. Source: Board of Congregation Shaarei Zedek, minute books, Saint John Jewish Historical Museum Fonds, New Brunswick Museum

an early introduction to help them understand the services and prepare for bar or bat mitzvahs in future years. “This early acquaintance with what otherwise appears mysterious to them in Schul seems to please them,” the report explained. Dan Elman concluded the report by expressing his “pride in all our children,” and adding that “although we lack quantity—we have a quality group.”⁸

In 1990, seventeen students attended Hebrew school classes, divided into two sections and led by a new teacher, Sidi Schaffer. The school’s main concern was its students’ failure to attend morning services.

The reports document more changes as the Saint John Jewish community declined further at the end of the 1990s and beyond. Classes were moved from weekdays to Sunday morning with children from no more than five families attending.

One of the last written reports in the files was dated 2011 which noted that Hebrew School classes had been discontinued. The children eligible for enrollment were by then recent immigrants from Israel and a different program was necessary to meet their needs.



A Saint John Hebrew school class, circa 2010.

Source: Collections of the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum

Congregation Shaarei Zedek newsletters kept members updated about the Hebrew school. In the 1950s and 1960s newsletters were produced monthly; by the 1980s two to four issues appeared each year. Aside from announcements for forthcoming bar mitzvah celebrations, the newsletter advised of the days and times classes were held, offered suggestions of how to prepare their children for class, and published invitations to special events.

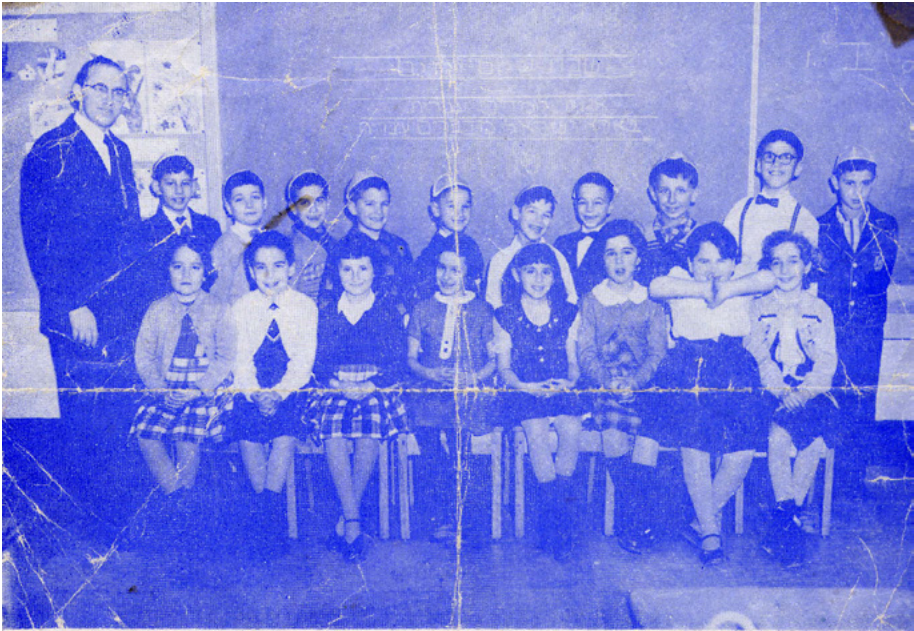
Here is one example from December 1956:

CHANUKAH IN THE HEBREW SCHOOL

Our Hebrew and Sunday School children have learned the story of Chanukah and the blessing over the Chanukah candles. Sisterhood is presenting each child with a dreidel and the oldest child in each family with a box of coloured Israeli candles.

On Saturday night, December 1, at 7:30 in the vestry of the Synagogue, Sisterhood is giving a latke party and entertainment to the children of our Hebrew School. Every child is asked to bring a gift of about 50 cents to the party.

On Sunday morning, December 2, at 11:00 a.m., both classes of our Sunday School will present a Chanukah program in the vestry of the Synagogue. Each child of this group is asked to bring a gift of about 25 cents to the party. Parents of the children are cordially invited to attend the Chanukah program.



OUR FIRST GRADE PUPILS, who were consecrated at a special consecration ceremony:
 (left to right) top row: Rabbi Ralph Carni, Principal; Paul Isaacs, Lorne Goldfeather,
 Mark Tobin, Clifford Karrel, Maxwell Cohen, Paul Selick, Lyle Isaacs, Gary Zatzman,
 Bruce Zides, Jacob Kashetsky.
 Front row: Deborah Guss, Monica Guss, Cathy Cohen, Miram Goldstein, Karen Shep-
 herd, Diane Koven, Marlene Fransblow and Cheryl Everett.

A Hebrew school class pictured in a 1950s newsletter. Source: Congregation Shaarei Zedek newsletters, Saint John Jewish Historical Museum Fonds, New Brunswick Museum

Another example, from October 1, 1967, reads as follows:

COME AND SEE OUR SUCCAH

On Sunday morning, Oct. 15, nine to twelve, our Hebrew School children will decorate the Succah. They are asked to bring pictures, cutouts, colourings, and fresh fruits and vegetables which depict the Festival of Harvest.

The newsletters also published lists of junior congregation officers and the mothers who provided supervision and support (for instance, bringing refreshments). Most mothers took this responsibility without complaint, as this note from the November 1973 bulletin suggests: "Though with no teacher in attendance, our children have done well thus far. No mother or Bar Mitzvah lad has disappointed us by refusing to help or failing to attend when promised."

A Saint John Hebrew school class, circa 1970. Source: Collections of the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum

Later editions of the congregation bulletins included letters to the congregation from the teacher and education chair. One missive from the September 2003 issue reads:

We are looking forward to a fruitful year, a year of learning and joy. It is good to have a place for our children to be together to experience their Jewishness and have a sense of community for our activities in both the school and the Synagogue.

As a teacher I am thankful and grateful for the community support, to the parents for volunteering their time for social events and to the Board for their support for supplying materials so that the children may learn the joys of the Hebrew language and the Jewish holidays.

The number of Jewish children in Saint John peaked at about one hundred in 1920, drawn from about two hundred families. There were thirty to fifty children through the 1950s and 1960s. As the population fell with the departure of its young people to larger cities, the number of children dropped dramatically, leaving only two students in 2010. Even so, the importance of Hebrew school and preparation for bar and bat mitzvahs retained its cultural importance.

The archives of the Saint John Jewish community also document educational programs held under the auspices of Young Judea, including debates and newsletters; Hadassah, including programs and educational booklets; Ezra Lodge Habonim and B'nai B'rith, both of which regularly included educational components into their



A Saint John Hebrew school class, circa 1970.

Source: Collections of the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum

meetings; and the Shomer Club, which included lectures as part of their programming. The Shomer Club was chartered in 1978 as a social organization for Jewish seniors in Saint John. Monthly meetings featured presentations by guest speakers on a variety of subjects.

Much can be learned about Jewish education in Saint John by reading through almost one hundred years of minute books (1899-1980) kept by the Daughters of Israel and Sisterhood Shaarei Zedek, almost fifty years of Congregation Shaarei Zedek Education Committee reports and from the bulletins sent to the congregation membership from the 1950s to the 2000s. Additional documentation from programs, invitations to events and simchas and newspaper coverage add a personal perspective to the stories to be told.⁹

Katherine Biggs-Craft is the executive director and curator of the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum. She holds a degree in history from the University of New Brunswick. Previous articles published in *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes* include “From the End to the Beginning: Archiving the History of a Small Jewish Community” 23 (2015): 144-150; “Documentation of the Holocaust in the Maritimes” 24 (2016): 182-186; and “The End of the “Golden Years”: Jewish Life in Saint John in the 1960s” 26 (2018): 204-210. She has also curated four online exhibits for Digital Museums Canada on the Jewish history of Saint John. The Saint John Jewish Historical Museum was established in 1986 to collect, preserve and share the history of the Jewish community of Saint John, New Brunswick.

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Sharon Myers, “Davis, Alice Catherine (Hart), accessed May 3, 2024, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/davis_alice_catharine_14F.html; Marcia Koven, *Weaving the Past into the Present* (Saint John: Saint John Jewish Historical Museum, 1989); Daughters of Israel minute books, Saint John Jewish Historical Museum Fonds [hereafter SJJHM], New Brunswick Museum.

2

Daughters of Israel Minute Books, SJJHM, NB Museum.

3

Rabbi A. Babb was the spiritual leader of the Saint John community from 1921 to 1947. Sisterhood Shaarei Zedek minutes, SJJHM.

4

Sisterhood Shaarei Zedek minutes, SJJHM.

5

Board of Congregation Shaarei Zedek, minute books, SJJHM.

6

Ibid.

7

Ibid.

8

Ibid.

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The archival collection of the Saint John Jewish Historical Society has been moved to the Archives and Library of the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John, NB. This organization is currently moving its entire collection to a new storage facility. Appointments are required for researchers and can be arranged by writing to archives@nmb-mnb.ca.