



Organized, National American Jewry's future..?

By Jerry Klinger

History is a story. It is a story of people like you and me that took place a long time ago. Each story has a story within it. Sometimes it is called the backstory. Sometimes it opens a journey to help us understand our todays from our yesterdays. All that is needed is curiosity and a question...

Temple Aaron, Trinidad, Colorado was founded in 1889. The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation (JASHP) was privileged to be a part of its recent 130th anniversary celebration. JASHP donated to Temple Aaron a large, historical interpretive highway style marker that was placed proudly by the community in the front of the Temple.

<http://www.sdjewishworld.com/2019/07/08/trinidad-colorado-celebrates-temple-aaron/>

The Temple Aaron community included seven words in the text – “and sponsored an early B’nai B’rith chapter” that began a journey, a backstory to modern Jewish America.

The American Jewish experience was and is very rare in the thousands of years of Jewish Diaspora life. American Jews are welcomed to be part of the American story not just tolerated bystanders.

George Washington was the first president of the United States. He wrote, in his famous letter to the Newport Jewish Congregation, what is expected of Jews in America.

“For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.”

Jews were free to be Jews in America. They were free to be Jewish Americans. Or, if they chose, they did not have to be Jewish at all. The human condition does not want to be the “other”, the outsider. The human condition wants to be one with their neighbors. Jews are no different, but, we still wanted to be Jews.

Modern Freemasonry evolved from four founding chapters in London about 1717. As the years passed, Freemasonry accepted members from every ethnic group, religion, class and culture. Its central tenet was Brotherhood. Idealistically, Freemasonry recognizes all people are created by God. Freemasons accept different paths to God. A central tenet of Freemasonry is a belief in a Supreme being.

Freemasons judge each other as individuals, measured on their own merits, and not their race, national origin, religion, social status or wealth. Masonry was a major part of early American life. It provided a Fraternal universalism and mutual aid Brotherhood as part of American commonality. Jews were mostly welcome.

Sam Jaffa was one of the first Jewish settlers of Trinidad. In 1883, his newly born son was brought into the Covenant of Abraham. Sam opened the Jewish service with Masonic rites. The Jewish community of Trinidad wanted something more Jewish. A decision was made to build a synagogue in Trinidad. They named the Temple after the infant whose Bris began the effort, Temple Aaron.

“In 1843, Henry Jones and 11 other German-Jewish immigrants gathered in Sinsheimer's Café (right) on New York's Lower East Side to confront what Isaac Rosenbourg, one of B'nai B'rith's founders, called "the deplorable condition of Jews in this, our newly adopted country.”

The men organized themselves along Fraternal lines and called themselves B'nai B'rith – Children of the Covenant. B'nai B'rith quickly grew into a national Jewish Fraternal organization with chapters spread across the U.S. B'nai B'rith filled a void of Jewish association and mutual support that the rising tide of Jewish immigration to America needed. B'nai B'rith helped them transition in their new bewildering Christian land.

Jews were free to reach for the Golden Ring everywhere in America. B'nai B'rith was the National Jewish anchor for them. B'nai B'rith did not require members to be part of a Jewish religious community.

Temple Aaron, in remote Southern Colorado, established one of the earliest B'nai B'rith chapters. They were on the frontier, they were isolated, they were part of America, and they were proud Jewish Americans.

As a kid in Maryland, I had been part of AZA, the boy's Jewish chapter wing of B'nai B'rith. Our counterpart was B'nai B'rith Girls – BBG. We played sports with other AZA chapters and socialized with BBG girls.

Returning after the Temple Aaron celebrations, and not being very active in any local synagogue, I looked around for a B'nai B'rith chapter to associate with. I could not find any. In Southern Florida, where every other corner has a Bagel Den, and the Jewish population is next only to New York, I was confused. I contacted the Washington, D.C. headquarters of B'nai B'rith for a local Chapter name.

There were none. There had been chapters in Palm Beach but no longer. The membership had grown old. The chapters were folding. Nationally, B'nai B'rith was shrinking, a shadow of chapters and associations but still an iconic name and symbol of Jewish American life.

I contacted one iconic, legacy, Jewish organization after another for a local Jewish chapter to associate with, the American Jewish Congress, ZOA, etc. The story was the same. In the past thirty years, the chapter structure had mostly folded.

I wondered where do the National Jewish organizations get their funding from? Who are their members? Who do they really represent? Who establishes their national policies when they claim to speak on my behalf? Have they become

small, professionally run businesses with big names run out of fancy offices in New York?

I was encouraged to go to packaged events of one Balkanized Jewish interest group or another. They were really fundraisers. There were no Jewish Fraternal chapters anymore.

National American Jewish society had radically changed. I did not appreciate it. The success of American Jewish assimilation is more than successful. 55%+ of Jews intermarry. American Jews affiliate less and less with Jewish religious communities and Jewish national organizations.

Is being a Jew more than the Golden Rule or being Jewish naturally with what the heart feels...

Anti-Semitism is reemerging. In the 1930's Hans Herzl, the son of Theodor Herzl, believed his father's vision of a Jewish State a failure. In the 1930's he was right. Hitler was rising and the Jews had nowhere to go. He, as the heir apparent to Herzl's legacy, tried the ultimate solution to the Jewish question, he converted multiple times to different Christian traditions.

The night before he committed suicide, in his death letter, Hans wrote how he had tried to find a solution but had failed at everything. "In the end, a Jew is a Jew, is a Jew," he wrote.

Hans was buried next to his older sister, Pauline. She tried to find her solution to who she was through a drug overdose. In the early 2000s, Hans and his sister were reinterred in Israel on Mt. Herzl in the Plot for Zionist Leaders.

The seven words on the Temple Aaron marker led to a question, what is the future for American Jewry?

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