

**Creating a Legacy**  
**Address of Norman H. Finkelstein**  
**For the Founder's Day Program of the**  
**Walnut Street Synagogue, Chelsea, Massachusetts**  
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The distance between my father's birthplace in Kilikeyev, Ukraine to my mother's birthplace in Chiplivutz, Rumania is 315 miles

And the distance between my father-in-law's birthplace in Libau, Latvia to my mother-in-law's birthplace in Bialystok, Poland is about 340 miles

Back then, just a few days journey would have connected them but would probably never have happened. They met instead in Chelsea. And that is the short answer to the question, "Who were the Jews of Chelsea?" Most immigration records for those first generations lumped everyone together as coming from Russia. We know that they were really coming from Lithuania, Poland, The Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany, Ukraine, Rumania, Serbia, Bosnia, and a dozen other countries. While their religion connected them: the early arrivals were separated by European geography and local culture. Even the Yiddish they spoke and dreamed in had recognizable differences. Your Yiddish would be understood by other Jews but the way you pronounced "Oy! Vey!" quickly marked you as Litvak, Galitzianer or Paylish (and consequently beneath contempt for being negatively stereotyped by your origins.)

It was natural and more comfortable, then, as strangers in a strange land to gravitate toward the familiar. So, when it came time to establish their religious communities in Chelsea, those early settlers organized themselves according to the geographic areas and religious customs

they came from. The Walnut Street Shul was Lithuanian: the Elm Street Shul - Russian. There were shuls founded by *landsmen* from very specific places like Onichty and Lubavitch. Those early associations provided a sense of security, familiarity and camaraderie. But that single-minded sense of purpose quickly gave way to the traditional American melting pot. That's how my Latvian father-in-law and my Polish mother-in-law became members of the *Litvishe* shul. It's fitting that the founders named the shul, Agudath Sholom, (or in the Ashkenazic pronunciation, Agudas Sholom - very loosely translated as "bound together in peace.") The message was clear. This is a synagogue, that although following *Litvishe* traditions, was open to all.

This was not unusual in America. The first Jews who arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654 were Hispanic. They brought with them the religious practices of Sephardic Judaism. Until the 1820s, the only shuls in America were Sephardic even though by then most of their members were Ashkenazim. As Jewish immigration to America grew, with people arriving from different countries with varied ritual observances, the tradition of multi-synagogues developed. Within its 1.8 square mile border, eighteen shuls once served the Jews of Chelsea. The largest being Agudath Sholom and Ahavat Achim Anshei Sfard, both destroyed in The Great Chelsea Fire of 1908 which decimated the city and later rebuilt.

On Sunday, June 5, 1911, over 1,000 people filled the sanctuary as this building was dedicated amid much pomp and ceremony. Rabbi Philip Israelite was joined by city officials, other rabbis and cantors, shul members and local residents. There was much joy at the union of the former Agudath Achim shul located at Walnut and Fifth Street, and the original Agudath Sholom which was located across the street at Walnut and Fourth before the fire. It's interesting to note that the ceremony opened with music by a choir from the Blue Hill Avenue synagogue and here we are celebrating Founders Day also with joyous music. Its location was in the middle

of a thriving Jewish residential and business area. Within walking distance there were butchers, bakers, restaurants, and grocery stores with herring and pickles in barrels. You could pick up a Yiddish newspaper and gossip with passersby. The shul was a short walk from the thriving rag and scrap metal shops which made up a large segment of Chelsea's businesses.

So who were these early founders? Let's focus on this building's first decade.

First, they were proud visionaries. We are not talking about wealthy people, yet they built this highly visible building not as a monument to themselves but as an investment in the future. It was a symbol of their optimism that Judaism was alive and well in America and would survive unto succeeding generations. The synagogue was more than a place for prayer: it was a community center, a social activity site and a place for learning. At a time when some children of recent immigrants rebelled at their hard lives by acting out, the shul in 1918 create a Parents Society for Guiding the Young to advocate before the juvenile court and with the public school teachers. Over two hundred people attended the organizing meeting.

They never forgot their roots. When World War I broke out in 1914, the neighbors and relatives left behind in Europe were in peril. Caught between opposing armies, Jews were particularly hard hit with indiscriminate shelling, forced removals and economic ruin. Local Jews could not sit idly by and watch the suffering. Under the leadership of David A. Lourie they formed the Chelsea Jewish Relief Committee composed of all the Jewish organizations in the city including this shul and raised over \$18,000. In a 1916 letter to Lourie, Louis D. Brandeis, the New England Chairman of the national relief committee wrote "The Jews of Chelsea by their work during the last year...have proven themselves worthy of Jewish traditions." Brandeis also had a second event in mind.

They were ardent Zionists. The modern Zionist movement was born in 1897. Its most fervent supporters were those Jews personally impacted by the pogroms and discrimination of the Russian Empire. So, it almost seems natural that the Jews of Chelsea would also take up the cause. To me, the most pivotal event in the first decade of this building was on Wednesday, June 30, 1915. That's when the national convention of the Federation of American Zionists meeting in Boston moved the entire convention to Chelsea for one day. Why Chelsea? A newspaper article of that time opened with the question: "Where and what is the most Jewish city in the United States?" The answer: "Chelsea, Mass." At the time, twenty-five percent of its population were Jews. A greater percentage than New York City.

A line of cars brought the over 500 delegates to Chelsea. They were welcomed by 1,000 local Jewish children, dressed in white, waving American and Zionist flags and singing *Hatikvah*. Crowds waving flags lined the bunting decorated streets of the city, as a parade of delegates made its way to the Williams School auditorium. There, and later in the day in this very sanctuary, Zionist leaders including Louis Brandeis and Dr. Shmaryahu Levin addressed the delegates and Chelsea citizens.

Brandeis, who that same year would become the first Jew appointed to the United States Supreme Court, said: "We have come to Chelsea. .. because the Jews of Chelsea have, by their conduct, given to the Jewish name a good reputation here and throughout the Commonwealth... We believe that Chelsea is the specific place where the plan we have formulated should be inaugurated. Our purpose is to make every adult Jew in this city a member of a Zionist society." For years thereafter, including after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews of Chelsea were in the forefront of the Zionist movement in America. Three years

later more than 2000 people attended a meeting in the Shul to celebrate President Wilson's public support of the Zionist movement.

And finally, they were American patriots.

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, patriotism was already on display throughout the country. Chelsea was no different. Local Jewish boys headed off to the battlefields of Europe. Some never came back alive. At home, Jews of Chelsea demonstrated their patriotism with the Walnut Street Shul doing its part. Just a few days after war was declared, the shul was the site of a flag raising ceremony attended by 500 people. Starting at the Armory on Broadway, a parade, led by the Coast Artillery Band wound through the streets of the city including a company of militia, Jewish organizations, boy scouts and patriotically decorated automobiles. As everyone arrived in front of the shul, the crowd sang *America* and *The Star-Spangled Banner*. The American flag was then raised by nine-year-old Helen Markell and eight-year-old Ruth Lourie. Rabbi Israelite offered a prayer and local dignitaries, including the mayor, spoke. It is no coincidence that this patriotic display was organized by members of this shul. Proud of their Judaism, proud of their Zionism and proud of their Americanism, they built a foundation for future members of Agudath Sholom and the generations of proud Chelsea Jews who followed.

We've come a long way since 1911. Just as Chelsea has evolved, so have we. Like those early founders of the Walnut Street Shul, we are here today to imagine a new vision for the future of this building and what it represents. May we all go from strength to strength.

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Two-time National Jewish Book Award winner Norman H. Finkelstein is the author of twenty non-fiction books. He is the author of the *JPS Guide to American Jewish History* (Jewish Publication Society). His latest books are *The Capture of Black Bart* (Chicago Review Press) and *Union Made: Labor Leader Samuel Gompers and His Fight for Workers' Rights* (Calkins Creek). He holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from both Boston University and Hebrew College. He is a retired Brookline Public Schools librarian and continues as a long-time faculty member in the Prozdor Department of Hebrew College where he was the recipient of the Louis Hilson Memorial Award for the Advancement of Jewish Education.