

B is for Belonging

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In the years after World War II an astounding variety of clubs for Jewish teenagers flourished in the Twin Cities. Hundreds of boys and girls joined up, participating in social, athletic, religious, and community-service activities, always with a Jewish connection. *Belonging: Jewish Teen Life in the Twin Cities, 1945–1970*, on view through June 2004 in the “B” space of the *Minnesota A to Z* exhibit at the Minnesota History Center, showcases these clubs and the reasons they were so popular.

The 1950s and 1960s are generally viewed as a prosperous and peaceful, if culturally static, time in U.S. history. America’s Jews had reason to be satisfied. Their

BELOW: St. Paul teens having fun at a B’nai Brith Youth Organizations mixer, about 1955, St. Paul Jewish Community Center, Holly and Grotto streets. The presence of the African American teen reflects the warm friendships between blacks and Jews at nearby Marshall High School.



religion was now considered one of the country's three major faiths rather than the manifestation of a peculiar ethnicity. Efforts to promote interfaith understanding were a staple of many churches and synagogues. The birth of the state of Israel inspired pride in Jewish hearts and presented a compelling antidote to the image of the Jew as constant victim. The Cold War and the 1951 spy trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, however, warned Jews to renounce elements of their radical past and show themselves to be 100-percent Americans.

In the Twin Cities, Jews had weathered the Great Depression and World War II and now enjoyed a considerable level of prosperity. With the mayoral election of Hubert H. Humphrey in 1945 and his formation of the Fair Employment Practices Commission, the era of entrenched anti-Semitism that had tarnished Minneapolis's name was drawing to a close. The North Side still held the largest concentration of Minneapolis's 20,000 Jews, although movement to nearby St. Louis Park had begun. St. Paul's Jewish community began leaving center-city neighborhoods for the Highland Park area.¹

During this period Jewish youths were encouraged to join organizations intent on molding members into either the next generation of community leaders or the compliant and informed rank and file. Continuity of Jewish life, then, was one goal of the clubs. As Morris Sherman, a Minneapolis teenager in the 1950s, put it, "In the postwar period the options for assimilation became greater. The outside pressures that kept the community intact lessened. In part the [formation of] youth groups was an attempt to maintain the fabric." He continued, "There were two phenomena—mobility and prosperity. Kids earlier had worked after school. By the time we were teenagers there was enough affluence so that we could specialize in being teenagers. And we had cars!"²

AN AMAZING VARIETY of youth clubs known by an alphabet salad of abbreviations sought members in these postwar years. Adult fraternal organizations such as B'nai Brith and synagogues representing the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform branches of Judaism sponsored organizations. There were, as well, Israel-

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Invitations, tickets, and badge from the 1950s and '60s hint at the variety of B.B.Y.O. events.

centered groups. Herzl Camp nurtured Jewish identity in the summer, and Hillel House as well as Jewish fraternities and sororities kept Jews in line at the college level.

The most popular clubs were B.B.Y.O.'s—B'nai Brith Youth Organizations—for high schoolers: A.Z.A. for boys and B.B.G. for girls. A.Z.A. was founded in 1923 in Omaha to protest the exclusionary practices of Greek fraternities. (Aleph and Zedik are the first and last letters in the Hebrew alphabet.) Its five-fold program stressed athletics, social life, education, community service/social action, and Judaic content. At its peak in the 1950s there were 14 A.Z.A. chapters meeting in the Twin Cities' two Jewish Community Centers. Athletics—particularly basketball—and socializing were the cornerstones of this organization.

B.B.G. or B'nai Brith Girls did not gain great popularity in the Twin Cities until the early 1950s. Its six-fold program stressed Jewish heritage, community service, social action, recreation (bowling was popular), creativity, and sisterhood.³ Again, the area supported about 14 chapters. Regional B'nai Brith youth conventions brought together youngsters from Kansas to Manitoba for contests and conviviality, while regional and national camps taught leadership. Beryl Berke, a St. Paul teenager in the late 1950s, recalled the importance of B.B.G. in her life:

I was an officer, president, regional officer, and went to district, national, and international camp. It was my life. . . . There was something going on every week. The socializing was unbelievable. We would do parties with

other A.Z.A. or B.B.G. chapters, we had a father-daughter dinner and a bingo night with mothers at the Standard Club [the Jewish equivalent of the Minneapolis Club, which did not then accept Jews] to make it special. We had parties and meetings and committees. After school and in the evenings there was always something going on. . . . Even if we were active at school . . . we were still involved.

Each chapter of A.Z.A. and B.B.G. held an annual popularity contest, as well, during which A.Z.A. chapters sponsored B.B.G. candidates for Empress Queen and each B.B.G. chapter voted on an A.Z.A. Sweetheart Beau. The boys and girls were responsible for planning elaborate events—dances, parties, luncheons, and dinners—and funding them, chiefly by selling advertisements for programs.

Like A.Z.A. and B.B.G., U.S.Y. (United Synagogue Youth) was open to all Jewish youth, even though it was sponsored by the Conservative synagogues. U.S.Y. was founded in the Midwest in 1948 and, according to Rabbi

Kassel Abelson (former rabbi of Minneapolis's Beth El), was originally conceived of as a youth congregation. It soon added social and athletic activities. As Rabbi Abelson recalled, "One of the first things that was organized was an athletic league where the youngsters competed not only with the other U.S.Y. groups in the city, but, representing the synagogue, got involved in a city-wide league."⁴

If U.S.Y. was created for the rank and file, the mission of L.T.F. (Leadership Training Fellowship), established at about the same time, was to train future leaders of the Conservative movement. This elite group of 18 youths chosen annually from the four congregations met for three-hour monthly sessions devoted to studying sacred texts, prayer service, dinner, and discussion. These elites were expected to assume leadership positions within the synagogue as well, teaching Sunday School or taking a role in Sabbath services.

Here was yet another opportunity for an active social life. Recalled Rachel Levitt, "There was a tremendous coming together of the St. Paul and Minneapolis Jewish communities. Every month we would go to a mixer at



Unrolling a Torah scroll at services that inaugurated a regional convention of United Synagogue Youth, Temple of Aaron, St. Paul, 1958

another synagogue, and we knew everybody because we had L.T.F. And there were gatherings for the region as well.” Morris Sherman had another perspective: “In the Conservative movement during the early postwar years, the rabbis decided they had to compete [with the B’nai Brith youth activities] for these kids.”

Although U.S.Y. was open to all, the other branches of Judaism created similar groups to capture the allegiance of their youth. S.Y.O. (Synagogue Youth Organization) for the Orthodox and N.F.T.Y. (National Federation of Temple Youth) for Reform Jews were established in the early 1950s. Both had active religious, social, and athletic programming in the Twin Cities as well as regionally and nationally.

BESIDES THE B’NAI BRITH and synagogue-sponsored youth groups, there were at least two Zionist organizations aimed at youngsters. Young Judea was Israel-centered but did not promote *aliyah*, or moving to Israel, as vigorously as did Habonim, which was affiliated with Poalei Zion, a left-wing labor Zionist party. Sponsoring dances to choose kings and queens was certainly not part of their agendas. Rather, these groups promoted Israeli singing and dancing and discussion of issues such as Jewish identity and history. As Elaine Handelman recalled her Young Judea days and Ruth Paradise her Habonim involvement, they agreed, “We looked upon ourselves as being kind of nerds, wishing to get together to discuss ideas.”

Containment, or countering assimilation, was certainly one focus of the B’nai Brith and synagogue-sponsored youth groups. More important, perhaps, was continuity. As Morris Sherman explained:

The greatest sin—you could be an ax murderer in my mother’s lexicon—but you couldn’t marry a non-Jewish woman. So, much of it was . . . enlarging the option pool, not only in the Twin Cities but by means of conventions and camps. . . . The rabbis were reflecting my parents’ views. It was learning social graces, socializing, it had educational and Zionist functions, but the underlying function was to keep the group intact.⁵

The understanding that one was to marry within the group was explicit in a B.B.G. song from the early 1950s: “When we grow up we will marry/ Izzy, Isaac, Jacob, Harry./ We don’t care if his name is hay,/ As long as he’s an A.Z.A.”⁶



Young Judea convention committee members Elaine Handelman, Miryom Arnold, and Stan Kaplan prepare a welcome banner, 1956

Yet another cluster of Jewish clubs were the high-school sororities and at least one fraternity. Central High School in St. Paul and North High in Minneapolis each had several sororities from the 1940s until the early 1960s, which added an element of class distinction to the organizational mix: One had to be invited to join. One national sorority, Sigma Theta Pi, cherry-picked the elite of St. Paul and Minneapolis Jewish teenagers. It is probably no surprise that the majority lived in affluent South Minneapolis. Similarly, the XV Club, a fraternity, drew most of its members from this neighborhood.

B’NAI BRITH YOUTH ACTIVITIES emphasized sports and socializing; religious study and leadership training were the lures of synagogue youth groups, while Israel was the focus of the Zionist clubs. Despite this contrast, the major goal of all groups was bringing Jewish youth together locally, regionally, and nationally. These organizations were younger versions of the adults’ religious and social spheres. They were intended to create a hermetic world where Jewish youth would marry each other—and it worked pretty well until the early 1970s.

And then it broke apart. Suburbanization, greater acceptance of Jews, and the smorgasbord of after-school activities fractured it and brought into question the assumptions about continuity and marriage that had sustained that world. As Morris Sherman admitted, “For our kids there were more options, so the intensity of the

Jewish experience and the containment didn't work as well. Kids today are far more sophisticated. We were nonpolitical, and there were only two TV channels. All of that informed our awareness. And today there is geographic dispersal. My children had no Jewish friends on our block."

Yet the Twin Cities Jewish community has coped with change. In the twenty-first century, community is fostered in Jewish day schools rather than through the walking neighborhoods of years past. Leadership is nurtured in adult institutes. Synagogue youth movements seem strong, B'nai Brith youth organizations are moderately active in Minneapolis, and Jewish camps thrive. Continuity is still the driving force behind Jewish teen activities.



Portrait from Sigma Theta Pi's winter dance, 1958. This national Jewish high-school sorority drew members from the more affluent strata of Twin Cities households.

Belonging evokes what appears to have been simpler times when the rules were rigid and Jewish rebels were relatively few. The Jewish experience it portrays is purely a case study. Exhibit visitors who grew up in Catholic or Lutheran youth groups will no doubt see many similarities to their own teen experiences—especially in the rules that were laid down and the outcomes that were expected. □

The Minnesota Historical Society gratefully acknowledges the generous support of Oren and Sharron Steinfeldt, which partially funded this article.

Notes

1. 7,000 children under 18 years of age were counted in the Minneapolis Jewish Federation study, "Jewish Community Self Survey of Social, Cultural and Recreational Needs, June 1958," Highlights of the Findings, vi, in Minneapolis Jewish Federation Collection, box 14, Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. No figures were found for St. Paul, but its Jewish population at the time was roughly one-third the size of Minneapolis's.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this article were taped at a session with people who were active in Jewish youth organizations in the 1950s and 1960s, Dec. 11, 2002, at the Minneapolis Jewish Community Center.

3. *This is Our Order: BBG, A Manual of Information for BBG Girls*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: B'nai Brith, 1996).

4. Interview with Rabbi Kassel Abelson, June 24, July 1, 1993, tape recording, Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, Barry Family Campus, Minneapolis Jewish Community Center.

5. I feel that there was little or no difference in the mission of Catholic and Lutheran teen organizations. Both, in fact, had the added layer of parochial high schools to contain their youth. On this, I have been influenced by Elaine Tyler May's 1988 book, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* and her discussion of containment.

6. B.B.G. song sheet, ca. 1950, in possession of Rachel Levitt, St. Paul.

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