

# Shepherds of the Children of Israel

By Rabbi Jimmy Kessler

The term Rabbi in the original Hebrew means a teacher. In pursuing that calling, individuals have responded to the various needs of their Jewish community. In as much as Texas began as a frontier, Rabbis were called upon to meet an incredibly diverse set of needs.

In addition to the literal meaning of the word Rabbi, Jewish tradition views the three Hebrew letters of the word to represent an acronym. The abbreviation translates to *shepherd of the children of Israel*. Truly this appropriately describes Texas Rabbis.

I was twenty-nine years of age when I became the Rabbi of Temple B'nai Israel in Galveston in 1976. B'nai Israel is the oldest Reform synagogue in Texas, and the oldest extant Jewish community in the state. The average age of the Temple's membership was seventy-nine and they regularly shared stories from their childhood. It quickly became apparent to me that if someone did not record these stories they would be lost as these folk died. For twenty-eight years I have collected these histories and the information in this article is based on that oral tradition.

The Galveston-Houston area was blessed with several gifted Rabbis whose involvement in the larger community, in addition to their Jewish community efforts, played a key role in achieving Jewish acceptance amongst their fellow



Rabbi Cohen served the congregation at B'nai Israel until 1949, and died in 1952.  
Photo courtesy of Temple B'nai Israel.

citizens. Each encountered different communities to whom they directed their attention.

In 1888, an Englishman named Henry Cohen arrived in Galveston to assume the pulpit of Congregation B'nai Israel and remained there for sixty-two years. During those six decades, Rabbi Cohen witnessed the growth of Texas from a frontier to a thriving state as well as significant growth in the Jewish community.

Perhaps Cohen's most significant role came in the rebuilding of Galveston after the devastation of the Hurricane of 1900, the worst natural disaster in the United States

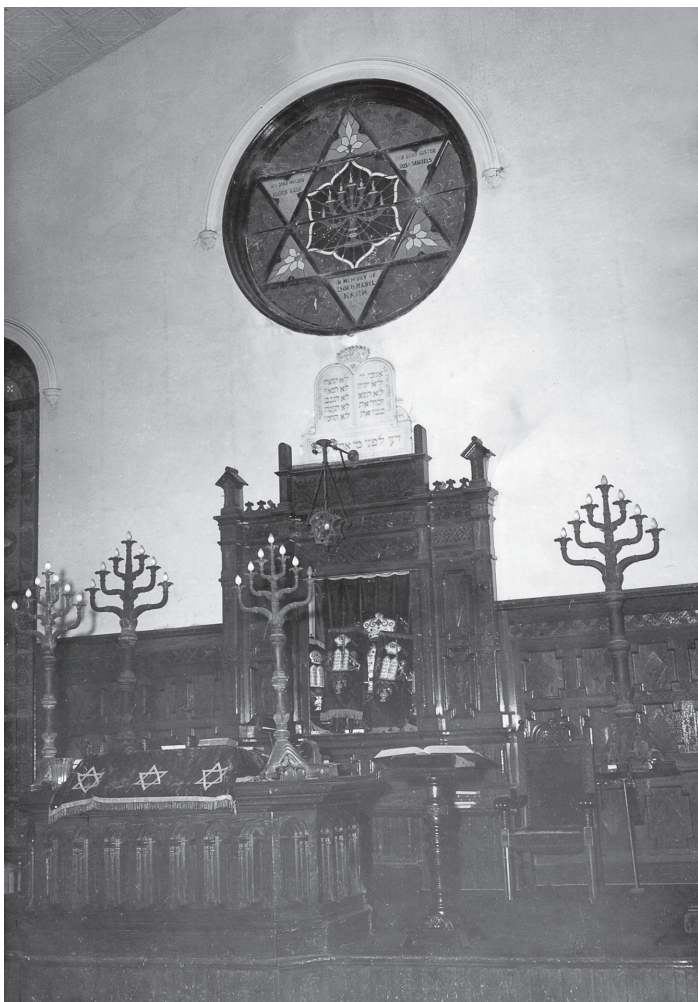
with the loss of over 6,000 lives. Cohen's responsibilities in the storm's aftermath included helping to decide what would be done with the remains of those who died. Galveston's high water table made it impossible to bury the bodies. When the city authorities attempted to sink the bodies in the Gulf of Mexico, the tide brought them back to the surface and to the shore. Ultimately the committee on which Dr. Cohen served decided to



The 1870 Temple B'nai Israel in Galveston with Rabbi Henry Cohen who assumed the pulpit in 1888.

Photo courtesy of Temple B'nai Israel.





*The pulpit of the 1870 Galveston Temple.*

Photo courtesy of Temple B'nai Israel.

cremate the remains in spite of many religious prohibitions.

From 1907 to 1914, Rabbi Cohen served as the main contact person for the Galveston Plan organized to assist Jewish immigrants coming to America and redirect them into the middle states. Approximately 10,000 folk came through Galveston, which ranked as the second largest port of entry in the United States. Though many of the immigrants stayed in the Gulf Coast area and in Texas, Cohen's involvement generated situations that clearly demonstrated his belief that there were no Jewish chicken pox, no Catholic mumps, or any Presbyterian measles.

The many stories of Rabbi Cohen passed down through generations of his congregants testify to his giving spirit. When authorities ordered a newly arrived immigrant in Galveston sent back to Russia even though he explained his return would mean his death, Cohen appealed to local officials, but his petition fell on deaf ears. With the assistance of funds from his congregant, I. H. Kempner, Cohen took a train to Washington to see Texas' Senator Shepherd. Shepherd arranged for Cohen to see the secretary of labor whose department headed immigration. The secretary refused to do anything.

Again through the efforts of Senator Shepherd, Rabbi Cohen met with President William Howard Taft. Although Dr. Cohen impressed the President, Taft said that he normally did not interfere in local issues. As Cohen began

to leave, the President complimented Cohen on his having made such an effort for one of his fellow Jews. Cohen quietly noted that the man was not Jewish; he was a Russian Orthodox Christian. President Taft was so moved that he called Dr. Cohen back into his office and dictated a telegram to the head of the Galveston immigration office directing him to hold the man and turn him over to Rabbi Cohen upon Cohen's return. It should be noted that the appointment appears in President Taft's calendar, and even though the conversation was not recorded, its essence remains clear.

Other projects which involved Rabbi Cohen included his efforts to create a state prison board to handle paroles, preventing the Ku Klux Klan from finding a home on the Island, challenging the liquor industry's influence on many businesses in Galveston, and clearly being the champion of interfaith relations long before the term existed.

The Klan group that organized in Baytown, Texas, planned on coming to Galveston and burning a cross. The Klan arrived at the causeway connecting the island to the mainland, but when they reached the center of the bridge, they were stopped by a pick-up truck turned sideways driven by Rabbi Cohen and Father Dan Kerwin. Moreover, the Galveston County sheriff was in a car behind the truck on the Galveston side of the bridge.

The leader of the Klan demanded to pass but the resisters told him the truck would not start. When the Klansman asked the sheriff why he was there, the sheriff said that he had heard that Kerwin and Cohen had car trouble, and he came to help. The Klan leader then demanded to know why some fifty plus folk stood behind the sheriff, all carrying shotguns. The sheriff commented that they came in case the sheriff could not get the truck started. It seemed earlier that afternoon word had spread amongst the locals that Rabbi Cohen and Father Kerwin planned to confront the Klan and keep them off the Island. One of the shotgun-holders explained that folk drove around Galveston gathering up supporters to come to the causeway—armed.

Not every concern of Henry Cohen rose to such a grand level; however, he clearly remained in tune with individuals in need locally. Several Galvestonians recalled the story of one young lady whose name has since faded from memory. Before autos, Dr. Cohen got around the Island on his bicycle. During one of his outings, he passed a child sitting on the curb crying. The Rabbi stopped to inquire about her problem. She explained that her parents did not have money for a Confirmation dress for her to wear for her service at St. Mary's Cathedral; it would have to be postponed. Cohen got her name and address and pedaled off to one of his congregant's store. The Rabbi arranged for a dress to be delivered to the young lady so she might be confirmed at the right time.

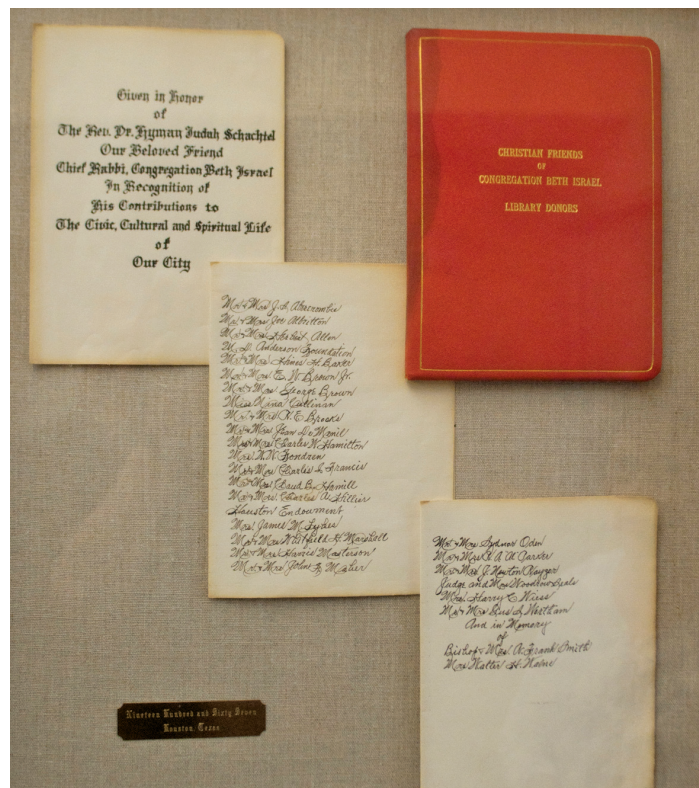
Rabbi Cohen was blessed to serve a congregation with several folk with financial means. As a result, he never hesitated to solicit their support in the need of others. Multiple individuals went off to college, went to medical school, got married, or opened a business with the funds that Rabbi Cohen arranged.

Dr. Cohen did deal with his share of anti-Semitism. Early in his career, he received notice that Ball High School





Rabbi Hyman Schachtel shown in a portrait painted by Robert Joy in 1968. Photo courtesy of Congregation Beth Israel.



At the 1967 dedication of the Hyman Judah Schachtel Library, Christian friends of the Rabbi issued a proclamation in recognition of his contributions to the civic, cultural, and spiritual life of Houston. The library, which houses approximately 20,000 volumes for all ages, serves Congregation Beth Israel, its Religious School, and the Shlenker School. Photo courtesy of Congregation Beth Israel.

planned to study Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice." In as much as its stereotypical, hateful description of Jews provided a historic source of anti-Semitism, Dr. Cohen visited the superintendent of the Galveston schools. After a candid conversation, the superintendent arranged for the high school students to study a different work.

Then there was the case of the Jewish intern at the University of Texas Medical Branch assisting the Chairman of Surgery in an appendectomy. During the procedure, Dr. Cohen burst into the surgery suite with a surgical gown pulled up to his shoulders and holding a surgical mask over his face. Cohen looked at her and declared that he had not seen her in a good while and that he wanted to see her at services Friday night. As fast as he had appeared, he disappeared from the surgery suite. The chairman turned to his resident and remarked that she had better attend the services if she expected to "pass" this part of her rotation. Moreover, he told her that he particularly did not want to hear from Dr. Cohen about her.

During Cohen's tenure, legend has it that new students around the medical school periodically asked, "Who is this Dr. Cohen?" They heard his name all over town as well as in John Sealy Hospital, but they never seemed to run into him in the wards or on rounds. They soon learned about Dr. Cohen and why he remained so well known in the community. Some Christians would remark that they did not go to church or have a pastor, but they did have a Rabbi.

During Cohen's latter years in Galveston, two Rabbis

came to Houston who significantly impacted the city and the Jewish community. Technically one served as the assistant to the other, but ultimately both came to guide two large synagogues in the city.

Houston's Temple Beth Israel is the oldest chartered synagogue in Texas and began as an Orthodox congregation. In the 1870s, the Temple began its move to Reform, and today it stands out as one of the preeminent Reform synagogues in the country. In 1943, their Rabbi since the turn of the century, Henry Barnston, retired, and Hyman Schachtel became the senior Rabbi. Until his death in 1990, Rabbi Schachtel endured as a prominent presence in Houston. Known for his devotion to the arts, he was also a gifted pianist.

Most especially, Schachtel involved himself in a particular part of the Houston community not always open to Jews. His work with people in many levels of society surely supported his selection to give a prayer at President Lyndon Johnson's inauguration in 1965.

Schachtel's unique personality and memorable presence opened many doors to Houston Jews that might have otherwise remained closed. His book reviews of current publications attracted large numbers from both the Jewish and non-Jewish community. Though Dr. Schachtel's early years were embroiled in the then controversial topic of Zionism, his later years saw the growth of a congregation well settled in the American Reform Jewish community.

Prior to Hyman Schachtel coming to Temple Beth Israel and while Henry Barnston served as the Senior Rabbi of





*Congregants come to plant grass at the new Congregation Emanu El before the dedication in 1949.*

Photo courtesy of Congregation Emanu El.

the Congregation, Robert I. Kahn served as the Assistant Rabbi at Beth Israel. Rabbi Kahn came to Houston in 1935 as the assistant but took a leave from the Temple to serve as an Army chaplain. During his years in the service and overseas, Rabbi Schachtel took over the Congregation.

In as much as Rabbi Kahn was a Zionist, and Rabbi Schachtel was not at that time, Rabbi Kahn resigned from the pulpit while overseas. At the same time, Beth Israel split, and those who broke away established Congregation Emanu El, naming Dr. Kahn as the Senior Rabbi in absentia. Upon his return, Rabbi Kahn assumed the helm of a new syna-

gogue that would grow into a large, well-respected Reform congregation. Over the years, many came to consider Dr. Kahn the finest preaching Rabbi in America.

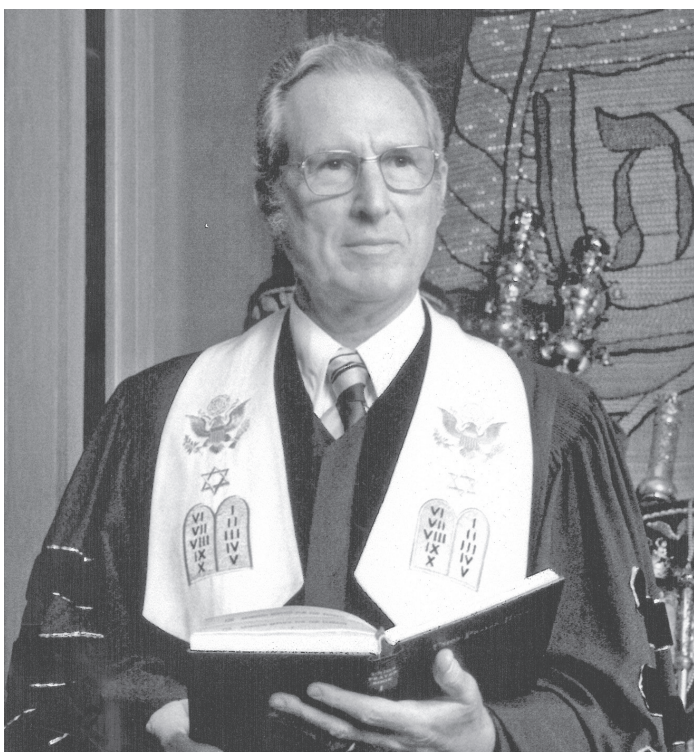
From 1967 to 1968, Kahn was president of the Houston Rotary Club, the largest Rotary Club in the world. He served as the grand chaplain of the grand Masonic Lodge of Texas and was a thirty-third degree Scottish Rite Mason. In addition, the Freedoms Foundation honored him with a George Washington Medal, and the French government recognized him for his service to veterans. Further, Kahn's peers elected him president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Rabbi Kahn was obviously very active in his community and came to represent Houston Jewry in many ways, especially to the general citizenry of the city. Interestingly, Rabbi Kahn gave the invocation at Rice University when President Kennedy came to visit Houston the day before he was assassinated in Dallas.

Just as Rabbi Cohen had done in Galveston, these two imposing Rabbinic figures, Schachtel and Kahn, represented the Houston Jewish community for many decades. They enriched the lives of both their congregants and the general community.

For many years, Texas was seen as a Jewish wilderness. The state had few Jews and very few Jewish institutions such as day schools and community centers. Nonetheless, Jews lived in the Texas area from the time of the conquistadores. Moreover, the initial Jewish presence was made up of people not only committed to their personal goals but also devoted to the growth of Texas. These three Rabbis exemplify that dedication.

**Rabbi Kessler** is the founder and first president of the Texas Jewish Historical Society and the author of three books. He is a native Houstonian and holds the first doctorate in Texas Jewish history.



*Rabbi Robert Kahn.*

Photo courtesy of Congregation Emanu El.