

PROFILE OF RABBI MAX SAMFIELD, PhD
SPIRITUAL LEADER
CONGREGATION CHILDREN OF ISRAEL 1871-1915

Max Samfield was born in Markstett, Bavaria in 1844, the son of a rabbi.

At age 12 he was an advanced student in all branches of study and fully prepared to enter a Talmudic school. After receiving further instruction in rabbinic lore, he was sent to Bayreuth where he entered the Real Gymnasia and for two years enjoyed the privilege of being aided in his studies by Dr J. Fuerst. He then pursued a doctorate in Philosophy at the Julius University in Duerzburg and culminated his education with a course in Linguistic studies. In 1867, he was ordained into the Rabbinate, and he left Europe for the United States.

During his years of study he had become imbued with the new Reformed Judaism and pursued a new course with his American assignment in Shreveport, Louisiana, at B'nai Zion congregation. He remained there until 1871 when he received an invitation to relocate to Congregation Children of Israel, Memphis. He was then 25 years of age. In 1873 he married Pauline Frank of New Orleans. They were blessed with four sons (Lawrence, Marcus, Samuel, Joseph) and three daughters, (Helene, Rosiland and Lelia). Two of their children succumbed to yellow fever and there were also two adopted daughters whose parents were yellow fever victims.

In Memphis he followed the tenure of Rabbi Simon Tuska who had died the previous December. He was quick to establish his new presence with many accomplishments. He obtained charter membership for Children of Israel in the new American Reform Movement. He pursued all forms of philanthropy. During the yellow fever epidemics of 1873, 1878, and 1879 he remained in Memphis ministering to the sick, helping the orphans and burying the dead regardless of race or conditions.

He was recognized as a scholar and a leader in public affairs such as public school work. The times required that he be a man of action as well as vision. Rabbi Samfield's marriage registries show that he converted individuals prior to officiating at their marriage.

He was one of the governors of the Hebrew Union College and one of the founders of the Tennessee Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Children, the United Charities of Memphis, the Young Men's Hebrew Association of Memphis, and the Hebrew Relief Association. He was a trustee of the New Orleans Orphan Asylum Home.

In 1885 he founded the Jewish Publishing Company and served as Chief Editorial Contributor. He was also the proprietor, assisted by his son Joseph. He published the Jewish Spectator with its first edition on October 19, 1885. The paper's main thrust was directed to matters of Jewish interests both political and social. The paper was distributed in Memphis and New Orleans, as well as other cities in Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas and Louisiana. The Business offices were located at 206 Front Street in Memphis. A yearly subscription was \$2.50. It was later recognized as the oldest Southern Jewish Journal.

In 1847 Joseph Andrews bought the land to bury his brother, Samuel. This became the Bass Street Cemetery. As the Jewish community grew, so did the cemetery, necessitating a new location. About 1884 the City of Memphis passed an ordinance to the effect that cemeteries must be located three miles from the city limits. The Bass Street Cemetery is where the Shelby County

Health Department stands today, on Jefferson near the medical center. The new cemetery was located on Old Hernando Road with the purchase of 10 acres. The tombstones at Bass Street were moved to the new site. The congregation's Board of Directors assisted by Rabbi Samfield had made the selection.

In 1911 Congregation Children of Israel had brought to Memphis Rabbi William Fineshriber to serve as assistant Rabbi. This move was made with the anticipation that Rabbi Samfield would soon retire. In 1915 he announced his planned retirement for October 1, when he would deliver his last sermon. On the last Tuesday in September he was suddenly stricken and passed away. He was buried on Friday October 1, the day of his planned retirement; he was 71 years of age.

He was mourned in many quarters and as a tribute to the rabbi, business activities ceased throughout the city for a few moments out of respect.

Following Rabbi Samfield's death the Board of Directors, Congregation Children of Israel, passed a resolution to create an annual gift to be paid to Mrs. Samfield for life. Pauline Samfield lived to celebrate her 100th birthday on February 9, 1954, and died three days later.

Bibliography: Rabbi Samfield's Folder Topics, (Temple Israel Archives)

- 43.2.1 Deaths & Memorials
- 43.2.2 Jewish Spectator (all see individual editions on file & scanned)
- 43.2.3 Journal by Helene
- 43.2.4 Life Cycle
- 43.2.5 Literature
- 43.2.6 Organizations
- 43.2.7 Photos
- 43.2.8 Rabbinical contracts
- 43.2.9 Religious Observances
- 43.2.10 Rosalind (Daughter)
- 43.2.11 St. Joseph Hospital
- 43.2.12 Sloan, Polly Collection (Granddaughter)
- 43.2.13 Tributes