

Rabbi Solomon B Acrish:

From Morocco, to the Deep South, to a Fifty Year Pulpit in New York

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Introduction

From an early age, Rabbi Solomon B. Acrish was cast into a world of darkness, illuminated by what he often referred to as “sparks of Divine light.” Those sparks, whether they were people or organizations, helped Acrish to escape poverty and anti-Semitism by giving him extraordinary tools and opportunities for success, while at the same time, helping him to recognize love in a hateful world. Over the course of his life, he contended with complex situations and relationships of love and hate, leading him to pursue tolerance, acceptance, and inclusiveness. To this end, his career progressed from Sephardic rabbi, to Southern rabbi, to Reform rabbi, high school teacher, and school psychologist. By the end of his life, he had touched, taught, counseled, and improved the lives of many people with his strong messages of love and understanding.

My wife, Traci Sandler Greenberg, grew up in Temple Beth Elohim in Brewster, New York, and is now a choir member, and a teacher in its religious school. Her parents, Robin and Richard Sills were the longtime cantorial soloist and organist of the congregation, and Rabbi Acrish its spiritual leader. Traci never knew her grandparents, but Rabbi Acrish was like a grandfather to her. He was there for her through her youth and into adulthood and was a strong influence on her moral character and sense of Jewish identity.

After Rabbi Acrish died in May of 2016, I came to understand that many of his congregants saw him in this same way: as a grandfather or a father. He always referred to his congregation as his “temple family,” and the children in his congregation as “his children.” Rabbi Acrish officiated at our wedding in 2014 and was overjoyed by the birth of our son, Jonah. Nothing made him happier than to see the children of “his children” flourishing.

At the end of his life, Rabbi Acrish became ill, and entrusted me with many of his b’nei mitzvah students and families. This undertaking required a great deal of sensitivity and personal attention as many of the families I worked with were devastated by his condition, and saddened by his absence in their child’s bar or bat mitzvah ceremony. I believe that he chose me to take on this role because I had the patience, sensitivity, knowledge, and experience with children and young families to do so, and he also viewed his absence as an opportunity for a young rabbi to grow. Through this work in his congregation, I came to understand his level of devotion to many of his congregants. The relationships he built were the very fiber of what held his community together. I have the upmost respect for how he led in this way, and hope to someday lead a congregation myself following his example of love and kindness.

I did not know much about Rabbi Acrish’s life before his death, but that changed when I heard journalist Lisa Bernard give his eulogy. Bernard met with Rabbi Acrish several times prior to his death, and spoke eloquently at his funeral, briefly covering his journey from Morocco to England to Alabama to New York. Her portrayal of him was inspiring and intriguing, and I was curious to learn more about his life; specifically how he overcame poverty, handled a rabbinate

in the Deep South during The Civil Rights Movement, and transitioned from an Orthodox Sephardic rabbi into an American Reform rabbi. The latter was of particular interest to me as I am a pluralistic Jew who grew up Conservative but wishes to be a rabbi in a liberal community. No scholarly works have been written about Rabbi Acrish until now, although many journalists have written short bios and articles on his life; with Bernard's being the most extensive. It is an honor and privilege to be the first person to write an academic paper on the life of Rabbi Acrish.

#### Part I- Tetouan, Morocco-1939-1954: Poverty, Opportunity, and Rescue:

Part I of this study details the early years of Rabbi Acrish's life in Tetouan, Morocco, while shedding light on Jewish life in Tetouan more generally. Most of the background material on the Acrish family was gathered from interviewing Rabbi Acrish's wife, Terri, and his son, Brian. Additional biographical information came from journalist Lisa Bernard's eulogy of Rabbi Acrish on May 24, 2016, as well as from conversations with Acrish's friends, coworkers, and congregants. Information on Tetouan came from three major sources; two reference books written by historian Michael Laskier, *North African Jewry in the 20th Century*, and *The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco 1862-1962*, and one work by Emily Gottreich, *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco's Red City*, which describes what Moroccan Jewish life was like when Rabbi Acrish was growing up.

When gathering information for this section, I faced two major challenges. First, when I began interviewing the Acrish family, they were still in mourning over Rabbi Acrish and two of his sisters, all of whom had died within the past year. As a result, Rabbi Acrish's last living

sibling, Albert Acrish, respectfully declined my invitation to be interviewed. Albert expressed to me that it was too painful for him to recall his upbringing while in mourning over three of his siblings; however, he did relay some information to me through Brian Acrish. The second major challenge of this section was researching living conditions specific to the Jews of Tetouan in the 1940's and 50's. The majority of reference materials available describe the conditions of Moroccan Jewish communities in general, making the statement that all of them were subject to similar circumstances. Gottreich made the same claim in her work *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco's Red City*, before providing a detailed account of Jewish life in Marrakesh. Much of my research in this regard included sharing specific information from Gottreich's work with Brian and Terri Acrish, and then asking them if Rabbi Acrish had ever described similar circumstances. To this end, they were quite helpful, but I believe that Albert Acrish would have been the best person to provide this information. Other references that helped me to decipher Tetouan's environment from other Moroccan Jewish communities were Laskier's works, quotes from Acrish himself found in newspaper clippings, encyclopedia entries, and quips from Moroccan travel guides.

#### Part II- Ramsgate, England-1954-1959: Sephardic Orthodox Seminary

Part II illustrates the years Rabbi Acrish spent training to become a Sephardic rabbi at Lady Judith Montefiore Theological College. This section gives a general history of the college from its inception to Rabbi Acrish's departure, and describes what the program and surroundings were like when Rabbi Acrish was there. Obtaining specific information pertaining to the college during Acrish's years proved to be a challenge as Lady Judith Montefiore

Theological College was a small, experimental seminary at the time. Much of the information gathered for this section came from email correspondences with Rabbi Martin van den Bergh, of Orthodox synagogue, Childwall Hebrew Congregation, in Liverpool, England. Rabbi van den Bergh is a graduate of Lady Judith Montefiore College, and for many years acted as a liaison between Acrish's first mentor, Haham Gaon, and the students in the seminary.

### Part III- Montgomery, Alabama- 1960-1964: Becoming Reform and Civil Rights

Part III describes Rabbi Acrish's years serving as the Rabbi of Sephardic congregation, Etz Ahayem in Montgomery, Alabama. This section details a brief history of Etz Ahayem, and the setting and circumstances the community was under during the years in which Rabbi Acrish served there. This section chronicles Rabbi Acrish's complicated arrival in the United States, his problematic relationship with his mentor, and his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, Section III gives an overview of the Civil Rights Movement in regards to events that took place in Montgomery, Jewish attitudes in the South, and the activities and stances of Southern rabbis in general, citing a few examples of extraordinary individuals. A good deal of the biographical material for this section came from two phone interviews with Raymond Cohen, a longtime Etz Ahayem member, and lifelong friend of Rabbi Acrish, and from Etz Ahayem archival documents provided by Dr. Dan J. Puckett Ph.D.; Professor of History at Troy University in Montgomery, Alabama. The main historical references used for it were Hasia Diner's *The Jews of The United States 1654-2000*, and Mark Bauman's *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*. These references were critical in helping me to put Rabbi Acrish's Southern experiences into perspective with all that was going on in the

South during the Civil Rights Movement.

#### Part IV- Brewster New York- 1964-2016: Leaving His Mark

Part IV tells the story of Rabbi Acrish in Brewster, New York, covering fifty years of service as the rabbi at Reform congregation, Temple Beth Elohim. Part IV is divided into subparts which cover the following material:

- a) Temple Beth Elohim: The Early Years- 1953-1964
- b) Rabbi Acrish Establishes Himself in Brewster, New York- 1964-1980
- c) Temple Growth, Sabbatical in Israel, and Tragedy- 1980-1990
- d) Doctorate, New Building, Death, and Legacy-1990-2016

The majority of research pertaining to this section came from interviews and conversations with many people in the Temple Beth Elohim and Brewster, New York communities that were close to Rabbi Acrish, including but not limited to: Dr. Samuel "Rollo" Ross, Temple Beth Elohim founder, early president, and lifelong friend of Rabbi Acrish; Nan Coulter, longtime Temple Beth Elohim Administrator; Robin Sills, longtime Temple Beth Elohim Cantorial Soloist, and Richard Sills, longtime Temple Beth Elohim Organist. A great deal of additional information came from newspaper clippings, photo albums, old synagogue bulletins, and meeting minutes carefully preserved in Temple Beth Elohim's archives.



## Part V- Conclusion

Part V is a collection of my thoughts on Rabbi Acrish's life, highlighting and elaborating on specific individuals, influences, and experiences that may have shaped his positions on love, tolerance, and acceptance as his life and career progressed.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Terri Acrish for inviting me into her home, sharing with me Rabbi Acrish's life story, letting me peruse his home office, and providing me with samples of his poetry, sermons, academic papers, pictures, and memorabilia. I would also like to thank Terri for her comforting words, telling me that Rabbi Acrish would want me to take on this endeavor. I would like to thank Brian Acrish for sharing with me his father's story, for acting as a liaison between me and his uncle Albert, and for answering my many texts whenever questions arose in my writing. I would like to thank Raymond Cohen, Rabbi Martin van den Bergh, Dr. Dan Puckett, Nan Coulter, Dr. Rollo Ross, Robin Sills, and Richard Sills for their help as well, not only for speaking with me, but also for providing me with so many useful articles and documents. Finally, I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Ellen Umansky, Professor of Religious Studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut, for her many hours helping me to organize my thoughts, and write academically.

## Part I- Tetouan, Morocco-1939-1954: Poverty, Opportunity, and Rescue

Rabbi Solomon B. Acrish was born in Tetouan, Morocco in 1939, a time and place in which Jewish people lived under extreme poverty and anti-Semitism. Despite these conditions, Acrish emerged with a first class education, fluency in four languages, and a vision of harmony among people of opposing backgrounds. In Acrish's youth, Tetouan was the capital of the Spanish protectorate<sup>1</sup> of Morocco. Dating back to the Spanish Inquisition, it was a thriving commercial seaport, and home to Muslims, Jews, and Christian Europeans. Acrish's home was near the border of Ceuta, Spain,<sup>2</sup> and located inside Tetouan's mellah, or Jewish quarter, which was gated off from the rest of the city. Locals called the Jewish quarter the Juderia which means "Jewish neighborhood" in Spanish and Ladino.<sup>3</sup> When Acrish was growing up, the gates were closed at night and on Shabbat, and regularly guarded by Arabs who controlled what was being brought in or out.<sup>4</sup> Inside the thick, castle like walls, Jews suffered from overcrowding, food shortages, scorpions, snakes, triple digit temperatures, and severely poor sanitation. In several areas, garbage was piled in the streets as high as a meter above the thresholds of people's dwellings, and human waste was bottled up in large pots and left in the sun causing

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<sup>1</sup> A protectorate is a colony. For much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Morocco was divided into Spanish and French colonized zones, before gaining independence in 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, Rabbi Acrish's wife of 37 years, August 18, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Tetouan was the only Moroccan city to call its mellah a Juderia. The other Moroccan cities used the term mellah when referring to their Jewish quarters.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

horrible odors, and epidemics of cholera, trachoma, and other infections and viruses.<sup>5</sup>

Acrish was the oldest of six children. His father, Benito, and his mother Estrella, raised them in a one room apartment divided by a sheet partition. The children in order of age were: Sol, Esther, Rachel, Luna, Albert<sup>6</sup>, and Dori. There were seventeen years between Sol and Dori, and they shared the same birthday: August 16th.<sup>7</sup> The family name was pronounced “Ach-rish”, and like many Sephardic families, they named their children after the living. The Acrish family had an additional tradition of naming children after celestial bodies. In Spanish; Estrella is star, Sol is sun, and Luna is moon. Outside of the immediate family, the same names were used over and over in each household, and Acrish had aunts, uncles, and cousins with names resembling his parents and siblings, many of them celestial; but not always in Spanish. For example, Acrish had a cousin named Kohavi, which means “my star” or “stellar” in Hebrew.<sup>8</sup>

Anti-Semitism in Morocco became a real threat around the time of Acrish’s birth, shortly before the onset of World War II, and with Israel’s War of Independence over two years after the war’s end. In 1940, Germany occupied most of France, and out of fear in the French and Spanish protectorates of Morocco, the sultan ordered all Jews to reside within each city’s

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<sup>5</sup> Gottreich, Emily (2007). *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco’s Red City*. Indiana University Press. pp. 2, 27, and 77-79.

<sup>6</sup> As of 2016, Albert is the only sibling still alive. Albert is ten years younger than Acrish, and is a nurse practitioner living in The United States.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

mellah so that they could be easily corralled and monitored.<sup>9</sup> As Israel fought for independence against a combined force of Arab nations, Moroccan nationalists toured the country holding anti-Semitic rallies urging Muslims to boycott Jewish merchants and businesses. In June of 1948, rhetoric escalated to violence in the Moroccan cities of Oudija and Djerada, roughly two hundred and fifty miles East of Tetouan, where horrific pogroms occurred, leaving forty-seven Jews dead, six hundred and fifty wounded, and some nine hundred homeless.<sup>10</sup> In Tetouan, the situation was not as harsh, as the Jewish marketplace was the center of the city's economy; however, anti-Jewish nationalists did tour there, and the news coming from Oudija and Djerada must have been terrifying.<sup>11</sup> Many years later Acrish told a reporter for a Danbury, CT newspaper, "We Jewish kids were abused, called names, and there were certain parts of town we had to go [to] in groups."<sup>12</sup>

Consumption of alcohol was another damaging problem within the mellah of Tetouan that increased tensions between Muslims and Jews. Due to poor sanitation, people feared drinking the water, and so instead of water, many people drank mahiya, a strong brandy like concoction made of figs, dates, and grapes. Alcohol was strictly forbidden by Islamic culture, and therefore mahiya was kept inside the Jewish quarter by the guards watching the gate. When Muslim outsiders wanted to drink and satisfy other vices, they entered the Jewish

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<sup>9</sup> Laskier, Michael (1994). *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria*; pp. 55-56.

<sup>10</sup> Laskier, *North African Jewry in the 20th Century*, pp.94-96

<sup>11</sup> Laskier, *North African Jewry in the 20th Century*, p.66

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Leonard, "Rabbi Acrish Doubles as a School Teacher." *News-Times*, 1973. Temple Beth Elohim Archives

quarter to do so, which regularly led to violent outbursts.<sup>13</sup> Acrish's father Benito fell victim to alcoholism, and was a violent alcoholic. Often unemployed, he took out his frustrations on his family, but his condition was common, and the family accepted it as a product of their environment.<sup>14</sup>

As bleak as life seemed in the Juderia of Tetouan, Acrish had three saving graces: his mother, his school, and the Haham, Dr. Solomon Gaon, Chief Rabbi of the Sephardim in the United Kingdom, who eventually gave Acrish the opportunity to escape Morocco. Acrish's first language was Spanish, and that was the language spoken in the Acrish home; however, his mother was also fluent in French. Knowing that the best opportunity for her children was to send them to the French speaking school in town, she acquired French books for the house, and she read them to her children, teaching them French from an early age in an effort to give them a leg up in school. In addition to Spanish and French, Acrish also picked up Arabic and Hebrew. He spoke Arabic to the Muslims on the street and in the marketplace, and he used Hebrew for his daily morning prayers at his synagogue, which was at the center of his community. When it came time for Acrish to attend school, he began learning French and Hebrew in a more formal setting.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gottreich, *The Mellah of Marrakesh*. 78-81

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, Rabbi Acrish's son, September 29, 2016.  
Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016.

Acrish's second saving grace was his school, which was funded by The Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU), the first worldwide Jewish organization, founded in Paris, France in 1860. The aim of the AIU was to defend Jewish religious, social, and political rights all over the world wherever Jews were being persecuted. From the late 1920's to the late 1950's, the AIU increasingly came to aid the Jews of Morocco, trying to improve the quality of life in the Jewish quarters of Moroccan cities. The most impactful way in which the AIU was able to help was through the establishment of schools, which gave Jewish children a quality French education, as well as a daily refuge from the deplorable living conditions they suffered at home.<sup>16</sup> The curriculum included Hebrew and Jewish studies, but the education was mainly secular, teaching students a variety of subjects with a heavy dosage of foreign language and social studies adapted from European educational philosophies. AIU schools were known for having first rate educators and high educational standards, which were praised by Moroccan rabbis and educational authorities in Israel. AIU schools were also centers of diversity, serving Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students together, forcing them to learn about and interact with one another for purposes of peace.<sup>17</sup> It is not known if Acrish had any Muslim or Christian friends at school, but simply being in a setting where they were treated as equals had a profound impact on him,<sup>18</sup> and could have been the foundational experience that set up his life-long advocacy for tolerance and accepting others.

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Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>16</sup> Laskier, Michael M. (1983). *The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco 1862-1962*. State University of New York Press, Albany. pp. 1-7.

<sup>17</sup> Laskier, *The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco 1862-1962*, pp.348-352

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

Like many other young Jews growing up in Tetouan, Acrish and his siblings found refuge at their AIU schools.<sup>19</sup> To them, their school libraries were safe havens that protected them from the impoverished conditions of the Juderia. Acrish and his siblings would spend as much time as they could hiding away in their school libraries reading every book they had to offer. When they ran out of books to read, they would read the same books over again.<sup>20</sup> For the rest of his life, Acrish was always immersed in study, pursuing degree after degree, with a strong thirst for knowledge. It is not certain if seclusion and study became his life-long coping mechanisms; however, his life was filled with tragedy, and he never stopped studying.

In 1949, Acrish's third saving grace, Dr. Solomon Gaon, Senior Minister of The Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Synagogue in London, ascended to the rank of Haham, Chief Rabbi of the Sephardim in the United Kingdom, for his work revitalizing the Spanish and Portuguese Sephardic community in London.<sup>21</sup> Heading into the 1950's Haham Gaon's mission was to extend the revitalization of Spanish and Portuguese communities to other areas within the United Kingdom, and then around the world. To achieve this endeavor, Haham Gaon, in partnership with the Torah Department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, assumed the responsibility of reviving Montefiore College in Ramsgate, England, into a seminary for young students who wished to serve as Sephardic rabbis, cantors, and religious teachers. One of the conditions of the partnership between with the Jewish Agency and the Spanish and Portuguese

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<sup>19</sup> The boys went to one school and the girls went to another

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/remembering-haham-solomon-gaon>  
Article Referenced on October 20, 2016

community in London was to offer opportunities and several full scholarships to potential students from threatened Jewish communities all over North Africa.<sup>22</sup> To this end, Haham Gaon sent representatives from London to Tetouan,<sup>23</sup> and it is likely that Acrish's local rabbi, suggested him to Haham Gaon's representatives.<sup>24</sup>

As a teenager, Acrish had no particular calling to be a rabbi, but he did know that he wanted to be a teacher,<sup>25</sup> and as Morocco sought to gain independence from France and Spain, the Jews of Morocco feared that their conditions were about to get even worse. Many years later, Acrish told a newspaper reporter, "There were no universities at the time for me to attend after high school, and the future of an educated Jew in an Arab country soon to gain independence was limited."<sup>26</sup> In 1954, Acrish was awarded a full scholarship, and he left for England. He was fifteen years old. Just two years later, Morocco gained its independence, and the majority of Moroccan Jews began immigrating to Israel.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.montefioreendowment.org.uk/college/about/history/>

Article referenced on October 20, 2016

<sup>23</sup> Email correspondence with Rabbi Martin van den Bergh, Childwall Hebrew Congregation, Liverpool UK. Rabbi van den Burgh is a graduate of Montefiore College, and worked as Liaison between Haham Gaon and Montefiore students, October 26, 2016

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

<sup>25</sup> Eric Gross. "Rabbi Acrish Commemorates his 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary." Putnam County Courier, 1986, Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Jeff Leonard, "Rabbi Acrish Doubles as a School Teacher." News-Times, 1973. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.



## Part II Ramsgate, England- 1954-1959: Sephardic Orthodox Seminary

Young Sol Acrish came to Ramsgate, England in 1954 to study at Lady Judith Montefiore Theological College, a cross between a yeshiva and an Oxford college, under the guidance and scholarship of Haham Gaon, and the Torah Department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem. He was among twenty other North African students who were similar in age and background. The college provided all of his needs, including room and board, books, and clothing.<sup>27</sup>

Lady Judith Montefiore Theological College was founded in 1869 by Moses Montefiore, a prominent British philanthropist, statesman, Sephardic Jew, and advocate for mistreated Jews around the world.<sup>28</sup> He dedicated the college to the memory of his late wife, Lady Judith, who was a full partner and active philanthropist in all of Montefiore's communal affairs, public charities, worldly travels, and social work endeavors.<sup>29</sup> At the college's inception, it was a small beit-midrash and synagogue intended for retired scholars to advance their great learning and piety. It was located on the grounds of East Cliff Lodge, Montefiore's twenty-four acre seaside

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<sup>27</sup> Email correspondence with Rabbi Martin van den Bergh, Childwall Hebrew Congregation, Liverpool UK, and Graduate of Lady Judith Montefiore College, October 26, 2016. Rabbi van den Bergh knew Haham Gaon well and acted as a liaison between Haham Gaon and the students at Lady Judith Montefiore College.

Rabbi van den Bergh added that there were a minority of students there like himself not from North Africa. Van den Bergh was from Rhodesia, and the college did not provide for all of his needs. This was a hardship for him as there were sanctions placed on Rhodesia at the time, making it hard for him to receive money from his parents. While the North African students got new clothes etc, he did not.

<sup>28</sup> Green, Abigail. (2010). *Moses Montefiore; Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, and London England, p 2.

<sup>29</sup> Sonia Lipman L. "Judith Montefiore — First Lady of Anglo-Jewry." *Transactions (Jewish Historical Society of England)*, vol. 21, 1962, pp. 287–303. [www.jstor.org/stable/29778003](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29778003).

estate, eighty-five miles east of London.<sup>30</sup> In 1885, after the death of Sir Moses, the elders of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation in London<sup>31</sup> assumed the administration of the College, and transformed it into a Sephardic Orthodox seminary.<sup>32</sup> In 1896, the college closed<sup>33</sup> and then went through a long period of deterioration spanning two World Wars before Haham Gaon's attempt to revive it in the early 1950's.<sup>34</sup>

When Acrish arrived in 1954, the once pristine East Cliff Lodge was in the process of being demolished. It was occupied by the British army during the Second World War, sold to the Borough of Ramsgate in 1952, and torn down during Acrish's first year there.<sup>35</sup> The College, located on the same property, suffered a similar fate in 1961, when it too was demolished, and relocated to London.<sup>36</sup> At the end of his life, Acrish recalled his time in Ramsgate as being surrounded by damaged buildings, many from the Nazi bombing raids carried out over Britain in 1940 and 1941, and rationing food, nearly a decade after the end of World War II.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Green, Abigail. *Moses Montefiore; Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero*, p.98

<sup>31</sup> Later Haham Gaon's synagogue

<sup>32</sup> Green, Abigail. *Moses Montefiore; Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero*, p.5

<sup>33</sup> Green, Abigail. *Moses Montefiore; Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero*, p.5

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.montefioreendowment.org.uk/college/about/history/>  
Article referenced on October 20, 2016

<sup>35</sup> Abigail Green. "Montefiore's Ramsgate." *The Forward*. May 11, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Abigail Green. "Montefiore's Ramsgate." *The Forward*. May 11, 2012

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Bernard. Eulogy of Rabbi Solomon B. Acrish. Audio recording, May 24, 2016.

Over the course of five years at Ramsgate, Acrish immersed himself in study. The training was Orthodox with a heavy emphasis on prayer, and the language of instruction was Hebrew. The morning curriculum was gemara, tanakh, and dikduk<sup>38</sup>, followed by secular subjects in the afternoon, stressing English for those, like Acrish, who were not yet fluent.<sup>39</sup> The college had principals that ran the day to day activities as well as the recruitment of students, and Haham Gaon acted as College President and active mentor to students and alumni.<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that Haham Gaon was a staunch traditionalist who strove to assure the survival and preservation of Orthodox Sephardic religious life,<sup>41</sup> but it is not known how much mentoring Acrish received from Haham Gaon at Ramsgate, or Acrish's personal theology while he was in seminary.

When his requirements were completed, Acrish was an ordained rabbi, fluent in English, and ready to serve a congregation. Haham Gaon asked him if he preferred a rabbinate in The British Commonwealth, or one in The United States. Acrish chose the US, and briefly returned to Tetouan. He was there for only a few months when Haham Gaon contacted him with his first

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<sup>38</sup> Talmud, Bible, and Hebrew Grammar

<sup>39</sup> Email correspondence with Rabbi Martin van den Bergh, October 26, 2016.

Rabbi van den Bergh graduated in 1969, 10 years after Rabbi Acrish in 1959, and he studied at Montefiore after the College moved to London. The curriculum was the same, but the format (morning/afternoon) may not have been. Rabbi van den Bergh recalls most of the students coming from Morocco, Tunisia, and Melilla, and in need of English classes whereas he was a native English speaker from Rhodesia, and thus he was exempt from having to take English, although he had to learn Hebrew from scratch.

<sup>40</sup> Email correspondence with Rabbi Martin van den Bergh, October 26, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Email correspondence with Rabbi Marc D. Angel, student of Haham Gaon, 10/13/16. Rabbi Angel gave Haham Gaon's eulogy in 1994.

assignment. Acrish was headed to the United States to serve as the rabbi at Congregation Etz Ahayem, a traditional Sephardic synagogue in Montgomery, Alabama. The year was 1960.

### Part III- Montgomery Alabama- 1960-1964: Becoming Reform and Civil Rights

Etz Ahayem was a small Sephardic congregation whose founders came to Montgomery, Alabama from the Greek Isle of Rhodes. It was established in 1916 by a handful of families that wrote its constitution in Ladino.<sup>42</sup> In 1927, the twenty-seven family congregation purchased its first building, and by 1960 the congregation had grown to sixty families.<sup>43</sup> The first generation of Jews that founded Etz Ahayem were traditional, Orthodox, working class immigrants, whose religious practices, customs, languages, and social statuses differed greatly from those of the surrounding American Ashkenazi Jewish communities in Montgomery. By 1960, Etz Ahayem's landscape had changed, as the majority of its second generation consisted of American born, financially and socially well-established Jews who were proud of their Sephardic roots, but not interested in an Orthodox way of life.<sup>44</sup>

For twenty years prior to Acrish's arrival, there were only three years in which an ordained rabbi presided over the congregation. For the majority of the 1940's and 50's, Morris Capouya, educated lay leader and multiple term temple president, assumed spiritual and administrative leadership; Adena Goldwasser, accomplished educator, ran the Hebrew School

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.isjl.org/alabama-montgomery-encyclopedia.html>

Article referenced on August 25, 2016

<sup>43</sup> Hanan, Reuben. "Letter Requesting a Rabbi" Letter to Rabbi Ya'akov Moshe Toledano. 3 Feb. 1958. MS. Montgomery, Alabama. Etz Ahayem Temple Archives organized by Miriam Cohen, and provided by Dr. Dan Puckett, Troy University. Referenced on October 25, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Hanan, Reuben. "Letter Requesting a Rabbi." 3 Feb. 1958.

program; and Reuben Hanan, a prominent and politically aligned congregant, used powerful connections to support Etz Ahayem members in the local community.<sup>45</sup>

In December of 1957, the congregation began looking for a full-time rabbi. The older members insisted on a Sephardic Rabbi, whereas the younger members preferred a liberal leader. Both Capouya and Hanan sent requests for a rabbi with modern Sephardic thinking and English fluency who was not extremely Orthodox in his beliefs. They were prepared to pay this rabbi an annual salary of \$6,000 (equivalent to just over \$51,000 in 2016). Capouya's letter was sent to The Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America<sup>46</sup>, and Hanan's was sent to Rabbi Ya'akov Moshe Toledano, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Tel-Aviv. Hanan closed his letter to Rabbi Toledano by stating that eighty percent of Etz Ahayem's members were lacking in Hebrew education, and not keeping kosher homes.<sup>47</sup> It is not known how Haham Gaon learned of Etz Ahayem's need for a Sephardic rabbi, but it is probable that he was informed by either The Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America, or by Rabbi Toledano, or a third possibility could have been through Haham Gaon's connection to Etz Ahayem's sister community in Rhodes.<sup>48</sup> Haham Gaon put Acrish in touch with Etz Ahayem, and the members of the board

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<sup>45</sup> Capouya, Morris. "Letter Requesting a Rabbi." Letter to The Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America. 18 Dec. 1957. MS. Montgomery, Alabama. Etz Ahayem Temple Archives organized by Miriam Cohen, and provided by Dr. Dan Puckett, Troy University. Referenced on October 25, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Capouya, Morris. "Letter Requesting a Rabbi." 18 Dec. 1957.

<sup>47</sup> Hanan, Reuben. "Letter Requesting a Rabbi." 3 Feb. 1958.

<sup>48</sup> Gaon, Solomon. "Correspondence with Rabbi Acrish" Letter to Rabbi Solomon Acrish. 15 June 1960. MS. London, England. Etz Ahayem Temple Archives, organized by Miriam Cohen, and provided by Dr. Dan Puckett, Troy University. Referenced on October 25, 2016.

made it clear to Acrish that he was the man they wanted for the job, despite the fact that he was only twenty years old, and his location hindered the possibility for a face to face interview.<sup>49</sup>

Once hired, getting Acrish into the United States proved to be a difficult task. At first, the American Embassy shrugged him off, and would not grant him a visa in a timely manner.<sup>50</sup> Reuben Hanan, then contacted J. Lister Hill, United States Senator to Alabama, for help in expediting the approval of Acrish's visa.<sup>51</sup> Hill was from Montgomery, and many years earlier his efforts helped Hanan to rescue his parents from a war torn Europe.<sup>52</sup> J. Lister Hill instructed Hanan and Raymond Cohen, Etz Ahayem member and later Acrish's life-long friend, to go to Atlanta to sign documents expediting Acrish's visa.<sup>53</sup> Hanan and Cohen went to Atlanta, and soon after, Hill received a letter from the State Department in Washington, D.C. complying with his wishes to speed up Acrish's arrival to Montgomery.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, Long Time Etz Ahayem Member, and lifelong friend of Rabbi Acrish. Interview conducted on October, 25 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Henderson, Joseph. Visa Office, State Department Washington D.C. "Confirmation Letter Speeding Up Acrish Visa" to Senator J. Lister Hill. 9 Mar. 1960. MS. Atlanta, Georgia. Etz Ahayem Temple Archives, organized by Miriam Cohen, and provided by Dr. Dan Puckett, Troy University. Referenced on October 25, 2016.

When Acrish first arrived in Montgomery, he did not have a place to stay. Cohen, a bachelor living with his mother, offered a room to Acrish on his first night in town. During the night, the electricity was turned off due to Cohen's forgetting to pay his electric bill. After a long trip, and before his first day of work, Acrish opted for a cold shower! To Cohen's surprise, Acrish was not bothered at all.<sup>55</sup>

A few months into his new job, Acrish began a mail correspondence with Haham Gaon, seeking advice from his mentor while sending him monthly synagogue bulletins. From this correspondence, it is evident that Haham Gaon had high hopes for Acrish to redirect Etz Ahayem back to strict Orthodoxy.<sup>56</sup> In an early correspondence, Haham Gaon wrote: "I am delighted to hear you say that the Reform outlook no longer has attraction for you. I must tell you that we Sephardim had never adhered to Reform doctrines which were not in keeping with the strict rabbinic interpretation of Judaism."<sup>57</sup> He continued by suggesting that Acrish set an example for his congregation via a strict Orthodox lifestyle, whenever possible stating his views with conviction. Haham Gaon knew this would be a difficult task, and therefore he cautioned Acrish to practice tolerance while setting his example.<sup>58</sup> Over the following months, Acrish continued to write Haham Gaon, and Haham Gaon responded with all kinds of advice ranging from the organization of speakers to help on delivering sermons. In one letter Haham Gaon

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<sup>55</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Gaon, Solomon. "Correspondence with Rabbi Acrish" Letters to Rabbi Solomon Acrish. 15 June 1960, 17 June 1960, 29 July 1960. MS. London, England. Etz Ahayem Temple Archives, organized by Miriam Cohen, and provided by Dr. Dan Puckett, Troy University. Referenced on October 25, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Gaon, Solomon. "Correspondence with Rabbi Acrish" Letter to Rabbi Solomon Acrish. 15 June 1960.

<sup>58</sup> Gaon, Solomon. "Correspondence with Rabbi Acrish" Letter to Rabbi Solomon Acrish. 15 June 1960.



counseled: "I suggest that you learn your sermons by heart as Americans are fond of extemporary speaking."<sup>59</sup> Over the next four years in Montgomery, Acrish embraced much of the advice from the Haham. He helped the synagogue with organizational efforts, he spoke off the cuff from the bima, he stated his views with conviction, and he was never bitter or intolerant of anyone.<sup>60</sup> The only advice that Acrish could not heed, to the extreme disappointment of the Haham,<sup>61</sup> was pushing a reforming congregation in an Orthodox direction.<sup>62</sup> Acrish struggled himself to lead an Orthodox lifestyle. It simply was not who he was.

Instead, Acrish embraced his Reform identity, and reached out into greater Jewish community. In the early 1960's, Etz Ahayem was one of three synagogues in Montgomery. Reform congregation Temple Beth Or, and Conservative synagogue Agudath Israel were the other two. Prior to Acrish's arrival in Montgomery, Beth Or and Etz Ahayem had created a joint Sunday school program held at Beth Or where Adena Wasserman of Etz Ahayem taught Hebrew, and teachers from Beth Or taught Jewish history and Judaic studies.<sup>63</sup> Just as Acrish was arriving, Wasserman was leaving, and Acrish joyfully assumed Wasserman's role as Hebrew teacher for the joint program. Acrish poured love and attention into both Etz Ahayem and Beth

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<sup>59</sup> Gaon, Solomon. "Correspondence with Rabbi Acrish" Letter to Rabbi Solomon Acrish. Date Unknown 1960. MS. London, England. Etz Ahayem Temple Archives, organized by Miriam Cohen, and provided by Dr. Dan Puckett, Troy University. Referenced on October 25, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>62</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Capouya, Morris. "Letter Requesting a Rabbi." 18 Dec. 1957.

Or students, regardless of their Jewish backgrounds, and then he expanded his love of teaching into the Montgomery public school system, where he gave lectures and educated students on Judaism and Jewish diversity.<sup>64</sup> In addition to his pulpit work during this time, Acrish earned two undergraduate degrees from Huntington College in Montgomery: a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, and a Bachelor of Arts in English.<sup>65</sup> It was also at this time that he began dating Wendy Herman, who would eventually become his first wife.<sup>66</sup>

In regards to the Civil Rights Movement, The Encyclopedia on Southern Jewish Communities has the following to say about Acrish:

“Rabbi Solomon Acrish of Etz Ahayem spoke publically in favor of the movement, citing the demand in the Torah for social justice. Acrish did not continue speaking against segregation for long as the environment became increasingly hostile. One day he noticed someone following him down the street. A Gentile family, with whom he had long been friends, told him he could not come to their home for dinner anymore because they had been told that Jews supported the boycott. Finally, after Etz Ahayem received a bomb threat by an anonymous phone call, Acrish toned down his support of desegregation.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> “New Doctor in Town.” Journal News, December 25, 1993. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.isjl.org/alabama-montgomery-encyclopedia.html>  
Article referenced on August 25, 2016

Additional sources recall stories of Acrish organizing a sisterhood donation drive in secret to benefit the black community<sup>68</sup>, as well as Acrish attending a dinner party at black religious leader's home.<sup>69</sup> Other sources said that Acrish was diplomatic; tip toeing the line between people on both sides of the issue,<sup>70</sup> and that the only way to understand the circumstances were to live them, and in those days the Ku Klux Klan was around every corner, just waiting to shoot anyone who dared to speak out publically for black civil rights.<sup>71</sup>

In many ways, Montgomery, Alabama was the epicenter of the Civil Rights Movement. Three historical events would categorize it as such: The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56 resulting from the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery bus, the gruesome attack on the Freedom Riders at a Montgomery Greyhound bus station in 1961, and the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965, in which hundreds following Dr. Martin Luther King were attacked and tear gassed for non-violently protesting a brutal murder and their denial of the right to vote.

As of 1954, there were roughly 5.2 million Jews living in America, but of that population only about two hundred and thirty thousand lived in the South. Mostly merchants, Jewish southerners depended for their livelihood on the goodwill of non-Jews, and on the whole they

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<sup>68</sup> Bernard, Lisa. "Eulogy of Rabbi Solomon B. Acrish" audio recording. May 24, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>71</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October, 25, 2016.

were quite successful. As northern and national Jewish organizations became increasingly outspoken for civil rights, Jewish southerners were cast into a complicated and uncomfortable position. By the mid 1950's Northern Jewish activists and rabbis were coming down to the South by the busload, and as a result, Southern synagogues rapidly became targets of white violence. By the late 1950's, synagogue bombings in Nashville, Atlanta, Charlotte, Gastonia, Jacksonville, Miami, Alexandria, and elsewhere terrified Southern Jews, and increased their vulnerability.<sup>72</sup> Despite the bombings, most segregationists differentiated between Northern and Southern Jews, and reserved their prejudices for those "New York Jews".<sup>73</sup> Many white Christian segregationists were friendly with Southern Jews, and many Southern Jews were segregationists themselves. For example, outright segregationist politician, Governor George Wallace of Alabama, had Jews on his staff, including Reuben Hanan of Etz Ahayem."<sup>74</sup>

Most of the Southern rabbis of this era viewed themselves as representatives of their congregations, striving to keep a low profile in order to protect the economic positions and physical safety of their congregants.<sup>75</sup> While many rabbis had black sympathies, the overwhelming majority did not attend demonstrations or align themselves with black preachers

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<sup>72</sup> Diner, Hasia (2004). *The Jews of The United States 1654-2000*. University of California Press; Berkley and Los Angeles California. pp.271-273.

<sup>73</sup> Phone Interview with Dr. Dan J. Puckett Ph.D.; Professor of History, Troy University, Montgomery. Interview on August 16, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Webb, Clive. *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights*. University of Georgia Press, 2001, p.115.

<sup>75</sup> Dinar, Hasia. *The Jews of The United States 1654-2000*, p.27.

crusading for social justice.<sup>76</sup> There were, however, some brave rabbis that decided not to give in to the pressure and fear of their Southern neighbors and congregants. These rabbis include Rabbi Perry Nussbaum of Jackson, Mississippi, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild of Atlanta, Georgia, and Rabbi James Wax of Memphis, Tennessee who staked their reputations and put their lives on the line during the Civil Rights Movement.

Rabbi Perry Nussbaum of Reform congregation Beth Israel in Jackson Mississippi was considered by many in his community to be a reckless advocate for Jewish morality in his campaigns against anti-Semitism and bigotry. He recognized his congregation's strong desire for him to stay silent, but felt morally obligated to visit Northern Jews imprisoned for their participation in the Freedom Rides of 1961. He spent the next several years advocating for tolerance, and speaking out against southern racism. In September of 1967 his synagogue was bombed, and in November of that same year, his home was bombed as well. Despite the bombings, Nussbaum stayed at his pulpit in Jackson until his retirement 1973. At that time there were those in his congregation who saw him as a hero, and others who saw him as an arrogant, disobedient, hothead who endangered his synagogue and its members.<sup>77</sup>

Reform Rabbi Jacob "Jack" Rothschild of The Hebrew Benevolent Temple in Atlanta, Georgia, commonly known as The Temple, was known for giving pro-civil rights sermons, organizing clergy to stand against segregation, rallying Northern Jews to advocate in the South,

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<sup>76</sup> Phone Interview with Dr. Dan J. Puckett, August 16, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Bauman, Mark, and Berkley Kalin, eds. (1997) *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*. University of Alabama Press, pp.230-257.

and inviting prominent black leaders of the Civil Rights Movement to lead educational programs at his temple. In 1957, Rothschild helped write the Minister's Manifesto, a statement from Atlanta's black and white clergy supporting desegregation, freedom of speech, obedience to the law, preservation of public schools, racial peace and proper communication, and the guidance of prayer. Following the Minister's Manifesto, Rothschild's synagogue was bombed in an attempt to strike fear into his congregation and the people of Atlanta who were tolerant to The Civil Rights Movement by comparison to other Southern cities. After the bombing, Rothschild increased his activism, speaking regularly in support of civil rights, and working hard to ensure the peaceful integration of Atlanta's public schools. <sup>78</sup>

Rabbi James Wax of Reform congregation Temple Israel in Memphis, Tennessee had a fiery temperament when faced with injustice and was never afraid to speak out. When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot in Memphis in 1968 over a sanitation worker's strike, the grief and rage of many black Americans erupted in riots across the country. Rabbi Wax quickly organized two hundred and fifty clergy to march in pairs, black and white, down Memphis streets heavily guarded by police dressed in helmets with drawn weapons. On national television Wax faced the mayor of Memphis, who allowed the strike to continue for fifty-three days, saying:

“We come here with a great deal of sorrow, and frankly with a great deal of anger. What

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<sup>78</sup> Bauman, Mark, and Berkley Kalin, eds. *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*. pp.262-285.

happened in this city is a result of oppression and injustice, the inhumanity of man to man, and we have come to appeal to you for leadership in ending this strike. There are laws greater than the laws of Memphis, and these are the laws of God. We fervently ask you not to hide any longer behind legal technicalities and slogans, but to speak out in human dignity.”<sup>79</sup>

In Montgomery, Alabama, there were two rabbis that publically stood up for The Civil Rights Movement before Rabbi Acrish’s arrival. They were Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein of Reform congregation Temple Beth Or, and Rabbi Seymour Atlas of Conservative congregation Agudath Israel. Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein of Reform congregation Temple Beth Or could not remain silent when nine young African American men were imprisoned for the rape of two white women based on faulty evidence. He visited the “Scottsboro Boys” on death row, and connected them to Northern Jewish lawyers for an appeal and change of venue. In 1932, he defended the Scottsboro boys from his pulpit on Yom Kippur, and soon after, the mayor of Montgomery informed Beth Or board members that if Goldstein kept it up, the Ku Klux Klan would organize a boycott of Jewish businesses in Montgomery.<sup>80</sup> That did not stop Goldstein, and out of fear, his synagogue board forced him to leave<sup>81</sup>. They replaced him with Rabbi Eugene Blachschlager, who remained quiet on the issue, and served Temple Beth Or until his

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<sup>79</sup> Bauman, Mark, and Berkley Kalin, eds. *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*. pp.152-167.

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.isjl.org/alabama-montgomery-encyclopedia.html>  
Article referenced on August 25, 2016

<sup>81</sup> Bauman, Mark, and Berkley Kalin, eds. *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*. p. 47.

death thirty-two years later. Rabbi Blachschlager presided over Temple Beth Or in Montgomery, Alabama while Rabbi Acrish served at Etz Ahayem.<sup>82</sup>

Rabbi Seymour Atlas of Conservative congregation Agudath Israel was a staunch supporter of the Civil Rights Movement as it gained momentum in the 1950's. In 1955, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. enlisted Atlas as his personal Hebrew tutor, and invited the rabbi to speak at his Dexter Avenue Church. Through his involvement with King, Atlas supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and he agreed to speak on a panel of clergy for a local radio station at the height of the boycott.<sup>83</sup> National media swarmed Montgomery, and soon after an article about the boycott picturing Atlas appeared in *Life Magazine*.<sup>84</sup> Many members of Agudath Israel were outraged, and the temple president ordered Atlas to send *Life* a letter demanding that they rescind the picture and include a correction stating that Atlas had nothing to do with the boycott. Atlas refused, and his temple board voted twenty-seven to one not to renew his contract. After his departure, the trustees unanimously voted that subsequent rabbis would have to sign an agreement not to discuss "Negroes" or segregation. Rabbi Aaron Barow, a rabbi who most likely signed such an agreement, presided at Conservative congregation Agudath

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<sup>82</sup> Temple Beth Or Website <http://www.templebethor.net/navigation-1/our-history/past-leadership/rabbis-blachschleger-and-baylinson> article referenced on October 14, 2016

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.isjl.org/alabama-montgomery-encyclopedia.html>  
Article referenced on August 25, 2016

<sup>84</sup> Staub, Michael E. (2002). *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*, Columbia University Press, p.60.



Israel in Montgomery, Alabama while Rabbi Acrish served at Etz Ahayem.<sup>85</sup>

Like many Southern rabbis, Rabbi Acrish was torn between fighting for a just cause and protecting his congregation. Unlike many Southern rabbis, Acrish had firsthand experience being the victim of deep seeded racism. His dark complexion may have also played a role in his cautious behavior. It is possible that he felt that he owed a debt to J. Lister Hill, whose signature is on The Southern Manifesto<sup>86</sup>, a petition signed by over a hundred politicians condemning the outcome of Brown vs Board of Education. Another possibility is that Reuben Hanan and other prominent Etz Ahayem members pressured Acrish to stand for segregation or at the very least remain quiet on the issue. Among Acrish's possessions at the time of his death was an autographed headshot of Governor George Wallace, which reads, "To my good friends Solomon Acrish and Wendy, Best Wishes George C. Wallace Jr."

In 1964, Wendy Herman, Airforce Administrator, was transferred from Maxwell Airforce Base in Montgomery to Stewart Air Force Base in Newburgh, NY, and Acrish followed her North.<sup>87</sup> It is plausible that Acrish committed underground actions that put him in danger, prompting Wendy to request the transfer,<sup>88</sup> or it may have been that Acrish was just ready to

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<sup>85</sup> Agudath Israel / Etz Ahayem Synagogue Website <http://www.aieamontgomery.org/>  
Website referenced on August 25, 2016

<sup>86</sup> Tony Badger. "Southerners Who Refused to Sign the Southern Manifesto." *The Historical Journal* Vol. 42, No. 2 (Jun., 1999), Cambridge University Press, pp. 517-534

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

move on.<sup>89</sup> Whatever the case was, the most convincing testimony came from Acrish himself as he lay on his deathbed in 2016. There he told journalist Lisa Bernard that one of his biggest regrets in life was not doing more in support of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Phone Interview with Raymond Cohen, October 25, 2016

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

## Part IV- Brewster New York- 1964-2016: Leaving His Mark

### Temple Beth Elohim- The Early Years

Prior to 1953, ten Jewish families came together, and spent approximately eighteen months meeting in each other's homes. Sometimes they held religious services, while other times they met to formulate the groundwork for the formation of a congregation.<sup>91</sup> In the basement of one family's farmhouse<sup>92</sup>, they were already conducting Sunday school.<sup>93</sup> On October 23, 1953, these pioneers were granted a charter by the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The name on the charter was: *The Putnam County Temple and Jewish Center, Inc.*<sup>94</sup>

The early congregation consisted of mechanics, electricians, farmers, and cattle dealers<sup>95</sup> who had grown up in Danbury, CT attending The United Jewish Center, a Reform/Traditional synagogue, or Congregation B'nai Israel, a Conservative synagogue.<sup>96</sup> Both of these communities are still in existence today. Reform Rabbi Jerome Malino, who presided over The

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<sup>91</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "Happy Anniversary 1953-1993." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1993.

<sup>92</sup> They were conducting Sunday School in Bella Meyer's farmhouse basement

<sup>93</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "Happy Anniversary 1953-1993." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1993.

<sup>94</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "In The Beginning: Rabbi Acrish Celebrating 30 Years." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1997.

<sup>95</sup> Royston Wood. "Rabbi Acrish Celebrates Twenty Years." article by Royston Wood, News-Times, 1986. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Dr. Samuel "Rollo" Ross, Temple Beth Elohim founder, early president, and lifelong friend of Rabbi Acrish. October 5, 2016 at his office on the campus of Green Chimneys, Brewster, NY.

United Jewish Center for over sixty years, was childhood rabbi to many of Temple Beth Elohim's founders. Like a loving father, Malino had a genuine concern to help his children establish a Jewish community in Brewster, NY and he played a key advisory role in getting Temple Beth Elohim up and running.<sup>97</sup> After receiving their charter, temple members began meeting at the Masonic Temple on Main Street in Brewster. As the congregation grew, parking and space rapidly became issues, and the founders looked into obtaining a building of their own.<sup>98</sup> In 1959, a wealthy Jewish family residing in New York City offered them a generous deal on a property located on New York State Route 22, a two lane rural road running along New York State's Eastern border from the Bronx up to Canada. They purchased the property, and that same year they broke ground on building their new home.<sup>99</sup> Upon completion in 1961, they held a dedication ceremony and moved in.<sup>100</sup>

The 1960's was a decade of new membership, reforming traditions, and considerable squabbling over the establishment of community norms. According to Dr. Samuel "Rollo" Ross, a founder and early president of Temple Beth Elohim, despite many the differences within the community, people pulled together with a spirit of compromise and understanding.<sup>101</sup> Before Temple Beth Elohim's affiliation with the Reform movement, men and women sat on different

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016

<sup>99</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "Happy Anniversary 1953-1993." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1993.

<sup>100</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "Happy Anniversary 1953-1993." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1993.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016

sides of the aisle, and people walked to services on Shabbat. After the temple received its charter, they switched to mixed seating, but many continued to walk to shul on Shabbat. Once the building was erected on Route 22, everyone began driving on Shabbat as the new location had an ample parking lot, and was further from the town center. Other quarrels included the wearing of yarmulkes, and the installation of an organ. Compromising between the desires of traditional and Reform members, the community settled on accepting the organ, while at the same time, making yarmulkes mandatory!<sup>102</sup>

The greatest difficulty was finding the right rabbi, and from 1954 to 1966, the congregation went through many rabbis, ranging in denomination, nationality, and degree of Jewish practice. These rabbis were: Rabbi Samuel Lehrer, Rabbi Joel Goor, Rabbi Ronald Millstein, Rabbi Tovia Ben Horin, Rabbi David Ben Ami, and Rabbi Nathaniel Zimskind.<sup>103</sup> The legend within the congregation is that none of these rabbis had what it took to rope together such a diverse congregation, but the truth of the matter is, that the congregation was small, the position was part time and weekends only, and most of these rabbis were offered full time jobs in larger communities.<sup>104</sup> Given these circumstances, Temple Beth Elohim was an unlikely landing spot for a much needed long term rabbi, let alone one that would last fifty years! However, in 1966, their luck was about to change.

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Nan Coulter, Temple Beth Elohim Administrator, October 6, 2016 and various newspaper clippings and articles from unknown sources found in Temple Beth Elohim's archives.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Samuel "Rollo" Ross.

Rabbi Acrish Establishes Himself in Brewster, New York- 1964-1980

Rabbi Acrish came to New York State in 1964. He took on the position of Religious School Principal<sup>105</sup> at Temple Beth Jacob in Newburgh, New York under the leadership of Rabbi Norman Kahan. At the same time Acrish also took on a part-time teaching job at Orange County Community College.<sup>106</sup> Rabbi Kahan was a prominent leader within the Reform Jewish movement, and an influential mentor to Rabbi Acrish. Over the course of his life, Rabbi Kahan served thirty years in two Reform synagogues, Temple Beth Jacob in Newburgh, and later Temple Sinai in Roslyn, Long Island. He was the founder of the Department of Small Congregations of the Reform movement's United American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), since renamed Union for Reform Judaism, and President of the New York Board of Rabbis. For the rest of his life, Solomon Acrish referred to Rabbi Kahan as "his rabbi,"<sup>107</sup> confiding in him, and requesting him to officiate at many of his personal lifecycle events. On December 25, 1964, Rabbi Kahan officiated Acrish's wedding to Wendy Herman.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Temple Beth Elohim Archives. "Brewster Rabbi Gets New Rabbi." 1966.

<sup>106</sup> Temple Beth Elohim Archives. "Brewster Rabbi Gets New Rabbi." 1966.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Nan Coulter, October 6, 2016

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

Kahan officiated at Kevin Acrish's funeral in 1989, and would have officiated at Rabbi Acrish's funeral had he outlived Acrish. Interview with Nan Coulter, October 6, 2016.

In the early 1960's, Rabbi Kahan became acquainted with Dr. Samuel "Rollo" Ross, president of Temple Beth Elohim. Both were involved with Rotary International, a worldwide organization that brings community leaders together in an effort to provide humanitarian services. In search of a rabbi for Temple Beth Elohim, Ross asked Kahan if he had any leads. Kahan's words were, "I have an assistant, but I don't know how long I can hold him, because he should really have his own congregation." Ross then met with Acrish, and concluded that he would be a good fit for Temple Beth Elohim's diverse community based on his compassion and tolerance developed under Rabbi Kahan.<sup>109</sup> Rabbi Acrish was hired as the fledgling Beth Elohim's part-time rabbi."

When Acrish arrived, Temple Beth Elohim was a small community of twenty-five families.<sup>110</sup> There was an active sisterhood, Sunday school, and choir.<sup>111</sup> The congregation could not afford to pay their new rabbi much, so they compensated him with free rent, and put him and his wife up in a small guest house on a congregant's family farm.<sup>112</sup> In April of 1969 Rabbi Sol and Wendy Acrish became parents to their first son Brian, and in December of 1971 they had their second son Kevin.<sup>113</sup> While Rabbi Acrish was starting out at Temple Beth Elohim, Wendy was busy advancing her career as well, diligently working her way up to the rank of

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<sup>109</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "In The Beginning: Rabbi Acrish Celebrating 30 Years." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1997.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016.

<sup>112</sup> The Mendel Family. Farm was located on Route 22.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016.

lieutenant in the military.<sup>114</sup>

In 1970 Acrish began teaching Portuguese and Italian at Brewster High School<sup>115</sup>. His teaching job was his main source of income. Prior to taking the position, he did not speak Portuguese or Italian, but with Spanish and French as his first languages, and his strong linguistic background, he studied Portuguese and Italian, and picked them up quickly.<sup>116</sup> With the addition of these two languages, Acrish was now able to speak Spanish, French, Arabic, Hebrew, English, Portuguese, and Italian. As the 1970's continued, so did Acrish with his academic pursuits. In 1972 he received a Master's degree in English from Western Connecticut State University, and in 1976 he received a Certificate of Advanced Studies in School Psychology from Fairfield University in Connecticut.<sup>117</sup> Soon after, Acrish became the school psychologist at Brewster High School.<sup>118</sup> In addition to Acrish's career and academic successes in the 1970's, things were going well at Temple Beth Elohim. In 1976, the congregation paid off their mortgage, and began planning the construction of a new sanctuary.<sup>119</sup>

In the public eye, Acrish was doing well, but at home, his marriage was suffering due to long hours away from home, and disputes with Wendy, who had her own career, over the

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<sup>114</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>115</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "In The Beginning: Rabbi Acrish Celebrating 30 Years." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1997.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>117</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "In The Beginning: Rabbi Acrish Celebrating 30 Years." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1997.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "Happy Anniversary 1953-1993." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1993.



responsibility of caring for their two young boys. In addition, Wendy admitted to him that she was a lesbian, and the marriage ended in divorce.<sup>120</sup> After the divorce, Acrish won physical custody of their sons, while Wendy maintained regular visitation with them. This was the arrangement that both Acrish and Wendy agreed upon. For the next several years, Acrish raised Brian and Kevin, worked as a rabbi, was a perpetual student, and served as a school psychologist.<sup>121</sup> To Brian Acrish, those years were a very tough time in his childhood, as he spent hours looking after his little brother in places like the high school cafeteria, or in the car, while Acrish worked, studied, conducted funerals, etc.<sup>122</sup>

In 1979, Acrish married his second wife, Terri Berlin. He had known Terri from his time serving in Montgomery.<sup>123</sup> Terri, a relative of Raymond Cohen, Etz Ahayem congregant and Acrish's close friend, first met Acrish when she was nineteen, attending her cousin's bar mitzvah.<sup>124</sup> Berlin was from New Jersey, but she attended school in Montgomery<sup>125</sup>, periodically visiting Etz Ahayem when Acrish served there. After Acrish left Montgomery, he remained close with Raymond Cohen, and after Acrish's divorce, Terri connected with Acrish

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<sup>120</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016.

<sup>125</sup> Deb Kaiser. "Gala Marks Golden Year for Rabbi Acrish." News Times, May 14, 2010.

through Raymond. After a few phone calls, Acrish began wooing Terri with romantic poetry.<sup>126</sup> Once they were married, Terri stepped in and played a big role in raising Brian and Kevin, and Acrish's second marriage lasted until his death thirty-seven years later. In 1980, Temple Beth Elohim's new sanctuary was completed, and Rabbi Acrish was there to lead its dedication ceremony.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>127</sup> Kahn, Stanley. "Happy Anniversary 1953-1993." Temple Beth Elohim Archives, 1993.

### Temple Growth, Sabbatical in Israel, and Tragedy- 1980-1990

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Putnam County was the fastest growing county in New York State in the 1980's<sup>128</sup>, and Temple Beth Elohim benefited from that growth. On any given Friday night as many as 75 to 100 congregants gathered to pray in the newly constructed sanctuary<sup>129</sup> with Acrish leading services by himself, without a cantor or musical accompaniment, singing mostly traditional melodies.<sup>130</sup> On the payroll ledger, he was still a part time rabbi, but as he told a reporter in the mid-eighties, "There is no such thing as a part-time clergyman. I work at the school because the congregation doesn't have the resources to pay me a salary so that my family and I may live. A rabbi is a teacher, so I work at Brewster High School as an extension of my duties."<sup>131</sup>

After eighteen years at Beth Elohim, Acrish told his synagogue board that he was worn out, and he requested some time away to be, in his words, "refreshed and invigorated."<sup>132</sup> At age 46, Acrish was granted a half year's salary to take his family to Israel on a year-long

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<sup>128</sup> Eric Gross. "Rabbi Acrish Commemorates his 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary." Putnam County Courier, 1986, Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>129</sup> Eric Gross. "Rabbi Acrish Commemorates his 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary." Putnam County Courier, 1986, Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Robin Sills, TBE Canrorial Soloist 1992 Present, and Richard Sills TBE Organist 1994-Present. Interview conducted on October 29, 2016.

<sup>131</sup> Eric Gross. "Rabbi Acrish Commemorates His 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary." Putnam County Courier, 1986, Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>132</sup> Harriet Rosenberg. "Rabbi, Family Find a Spiritual Renewal During Year-Long Sabbatical in Israel." Reporter Dispatch, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1985. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

sabbatical.<sup>133</sup> They began their year in Israel by visiting the rest of the Acrish family now living in Nahariya,<sup>134</sup> and then settled into a small three bedroom apartment in Jerusalem.<sup>135</sup>

Acrish's parents and many of his siblings moved from Tetouan to Nehariya between 1969 and 1971.<sup>136</sup> By that time, roughly 225,000 Jews had left Morocco. When the Acrish family left, Jewish schools, newspapers, and synagogues were closing, charitable organizations that functioned to help Jewish people were liquidated, anti-Jewish propaganda was on the rise, and many Moroccans were boycotting Jewish businesses.<sup>137</sup> Starting in the 1950's, Nahariya became home to many Jewish North African and Middle Eastern refugees, and later in the 1990's the city absorbed many immigrants from The Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Due to its geographic location, six miles south of the Lebanese border, Nahariya has long been a target of terrorist attacks and rocket fire. The most notable attack was in 2006 when at least eight hundred and eighty rockets were launched from Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon, causing multiple civilian casualties, fatalities, and significant damage to the city's property, forcing temporary relocation on many of its residents.<sup>138</sup> The Acrish family was lucky not to have

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<sup>133</sup> Harriet Rosenberg. "Rabbi, Family Find a Spiritual Renewal During Year-Long Sabbatical in Israel." Reporter Dispatch, August 10th, 1985. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>135</sup> Harriet Rosenberg. "Rabbi, Family Find a Spiritual Renewal During Year-Long Sabbatical in Israel." Reporter Dispatch, August 10th, 1985. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>137</sup> Michael M. Laskier "Developments in the Jewish Communities of Morocco 1956–76." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26.4, October 1, 1990, pp. 465-505.

<sup>138</sup> Frances Raday. "Israel Under Rocket Attack: A Profile of Displacement and Destruction." New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006.

anyone killed or injured in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, but they did suffer damage to their property.<sup>139</sup>

After a good visit with family, Acrish enrolled in courses at Hebrew University; studying psychology, English literature, and Ladino<sup>140</sup>, while Terri, Brian and Kevin attended Ulpan.<sup>141</sup> Finding the right school was a difficult task, but once they were enrolled, they learned a good deal of Hebrew, and enjoyed being within walking distance of their school.<sup>142</sup> The apartment they lived in was among Shabbat observant neighbors, who at first complained about phone calls, television, and radio sounds emanating from the Acrish residence. As a result, Acrish and Terri decided to be Shabbat observant for the rest of their time in Israel. When they returned to Brewster, Terri told a reporter, “Strict adherence to the Sabbath was an adjustment for the boys, but it was not without rewards. We had an opportunity to talk more, read more, and greatly enhance the closeness of our family.”<sup>143</sup> The Acrish family was in Israel during Operation Moses when 8,000 Ethiopian refugees were airlifted from Sudan to Israel. Politics and media complicated the rescue, and as a result, 1500 Ethiopian children had to leave their

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016.

<sup>140</sup> Harriet Rosenberg. “Rabbi, Family Find a Spiritual Renewal During Year-Long Sabbatical in Israel.” Reporter Dispatch, August 10th, 1985. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>141</sup> Ulpan- Hebrew language courses, Brian was 16 years old and Kevin was 13 years old

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>143</sup> Harriet Rosenberg. “Rabbi, Family Find a Spiritual Renewal During Year-Long Sabbatical in Israel.” Reporter Dispatch, August 10th, 1985. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

parents behind in order to make the journey.<sup>144</sup> Upon Acrish's return to Brewster, local reporters asked him his opinion on the bittersweet operation. He responded by saying that there is not enough tolerance in this world, and that even Israel's most pious are guilty of intolerance. When asked to explain his position further, he expressed his frustration with the control Orthodox factions had over the Knesset, compelling secular Jews to observe religious law.<sup>145</sup>

While Acrish was in Israel<sup>146</sup>, political complications were brewing at home within his congregation. Several families were upset with the timing of his departure, while several others did not agree with the temple's decision to give him a paid sabbatical.<sup>147</sup> Interim Rabbi, Abraham Ruderman, added fuel to the fire by stating to the press that Temple Beth Elohim was a community dedicated to working bingo tables, but not one dedicated to engaging in Jewish activity. Wanting to stay on as the rabbi, he suggested new projects, ideas, and programs that that he would implement if given the chance.<sup>148</sup> When Acrish returned, there were those who

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<sup>144</sup> Parfitt, Tudor. (1985). *Operation Moses: The Untold Story of the Secret Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp. 4-6.

<sup>145</sup> Rosenberg, Harriet. "Rabbi, Family Find a Spiritual Renewal During Year-Long Sabbatical in Israel." Reporter Dispatch, August 10th, 1985. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>146</sup> It was at this time when Acrish became a vegetarian. Terri stated that his decision to do so was not because he wanted to be kosher, but rather because he did not care for the meat in Israel. For the rest of his life, Acrish did not eat meat. According to Terri Sol loved spicy things and sauces much more than he ever liked eating meat. —Interview with Terri Acrish, August, 18, 2016.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016  
Interview with Rollo Ross October 5, 2016  
Interview with Robin and Richard Sills October 28, 2016.

<sup>148</sup> Eric Gross. "Retired Rabbi from Israel finds Putnam exhilarating." Putnam County Courier. June 5, 1985. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

petitioned for Rabbi Ruderman, those who welcomed Acrish back with open arms, and those in the middle who demanded more from Acrish now that he was “refreshed and invigorated”.<sup>149</sup> It was a trying time for Acrish and his family, and so he rolled up his sleeves, worked hard, and persevered, and eventually the upheaval dissolved.<sup>150</sup> Acrish would continue his pulpit at Temple Beth Elohim for another thirty years, but he never took another sabbatical.<sup>151</sup>

The eighties came to a close with a terrible tragedy. In 1989, Acrish’s son Kevin was killed in a terrible car accident. He was seventeen years old. Kevin was an affectionate, intuitive, intelligent, handsome, and very promising young man. His death was a striking blow to the Acrish family as well as the entire community.<sup>152</sup> Acrish did not grieve in public, nor did he cry on the shoulders of his loved ones. He dealt with his pain in solitude, keeping his emotions bottled up.<sup>153</sup> From time to time, he would speak about death from the pulpit. Acrish was never afraid of death. He would say, “God has his reasons, even for Kevin.” Acrish believed that we

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Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>150</sup> For recreation Acrish enjoyed playing tennis, and watching slapstick humor. The Thin Man and Pink Panther movies were his favorites. He also smoked tobacco out of a pipe from his days in Morocco until 1985. –Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>153</sup> Acrish did not cry when his son died, nor when his mother died, but he cried hysterically when the dog died. It was as if he felt that he wasn’t allowed to get emotional, and when we buried the dog he finally poured out his lament for Kevin and his mother. -- Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

are all here for a purpose, and once that purpose is completed that's it.<sup>154</sup> After Kevin's death, Rollo Ross and his wife Myra reached out to Acrish. They had also lost a son, and their support helped Acrish to carry on with his life and work.<sup>155</sup> Years later, a reporter asked Acrish about overcoming the death of his son. Acrish replied, "We did not become bitter. We realized that everyone is precious; the children are precious. We have to live each day to its fullest whether it is good or bad."<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Samuel "Rollo" Ross, October 5, 2016

<sup>156</sup> Deb Kasier. "Gala Marks Golden Year for Rabbi Acrish." News Times, May 14, 2010.



Doctorate, New Building, Death, and Legacy- 1990-2016

In 1989 Acrish was awarded Teacher of the Year for his work at Brewster High School.<sup>157</sup> Five years later, he retired from Brewster High, and some three hundred people attended his retirement party. Acrish said in a newspaper article, “The best part of my job is helping students. I enjoy it immensely when I can help children succeed, help them out of their troubles, or make them feel better about themselves.”<sup>158</sup> His most outstanding attribute was his devotion to children. He took a strong interest in every child, and over the years he helped many overcome adolescent problems and crisis in the roles of school psychologist, rabbi, and teacher.<sup>159</sup> Brewster is a town known for its excellent service to children with special needs. For Acrish, each child, no matter his or her limitations, was set up for success. This was demonstrated at school, and on the bima, with the many special needs b’nai mitzvah he conducted over the years.<sup>160</sup>

In 1993 Acrish received his doctorate from the Union Institute in Cincinnati, as part of the University Without Walls Experiment, a flexible program that allowed him to tailor his curriculum, schedule, and research with the help of his advisor, Dr. Samuel “Rollo” Ross of

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<sup>157</sup> “New Doctor in Town.” Journal News, December 25, 1993. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>158</sup> “New Doctor in Town.” Journal News, December 25, 1993. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>159</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016.  
Interview with Richard and Robin Sills, October 28, 2016.

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016.  
Interview with Richard and Robin Sills, October 28, 2016.

Temple Beth Elohim, who received his PhD from Union Institute in 1979, and acted as an occasional adjunct professor there.<sup>161</sup> It took Acrish eight years of attending seminars and meetings all over the country to receive his degree while continuing to work at Temple Beth Elohim and Brewster High School.<sup>162</sup> In his thesis, Acrish developed a therapeutic model in which he used a combination of traditional psychoanalysis with Jewish wisdom.<sup>163</sup> His project was built upon his 1987 Academy for Jewish Religion thesis, in which he explored connections between Jewish tradition and psychology. After receiving his doctorate, Acrish enrolled in classes at Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion in NYC to sharpen his skills leading a modern Reform congregation, and Jewish Teachers' Seminary and People's University in NYC, a teacher's training college known for its instruction in Yiddish and Hebrew Language and Literature and Jewish Social Studies.<sup>164</sup>

In 1992 and 1994 respectively, cantorial soloist Robin Sills, and her husband, organist Richard Sills, began working at Temple Beth Elohim with Rabbi Acrish. Together the three of them led services and life cycle events for the next twenty plus years, encompassing over three hundred lifecycle events. The services went with the flow just as Haham Gaon once suggested they should in American congregations. Acrish, Sills, and Sills worked well as a team<sup>165</sup>,

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with Rollo Ross, October 5, 2016.

<sup>162</sup> "New Doctor in Town." Journal News, December 25, 1993. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>163</sup> "New Doctor in Town" Journal News, December 25, 1993. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

<sup>165</sup> Acrish loved music, and for a few years starting in 2004 he studied the violin with teacher Julie Paradise. He once told Richard Sills that if he could do his life over, he would have been a musician. –Interview with Richard Sills, October 28, 2016.

improvising often, while devoting special attention to the congregation's children.<sup>166</sup> By the year 2000, the congregation had tripled in size from the 1980's, now serving 250 families.<sup>167</sup> Hebrew school classes were being held in Acrish's office and in the social hall, and the High Holidays were being conducted at Henry H. Wells Middle School.<sup>168</sup> A Ways and Means committee was set up to evaluate options for expansion, and they decided to build a new synagogue on Mount Ebo Road, overlooking Route 22. Visionaries saw the building being used for much more than a synagogue. They wanted it to be a community hub, providing meeting places for scouts, Weight Watchers, dance classes, SAT prep, a nursery school, and a summer camp.<sup>169</sup>

Lay people and professionals were gathered from the community to start the planning, design, and financing of the project. From inception to ribbon cutting there were many issues such as opposition from neighbors, and construction and financial miscalculations, but in the end the community pulled together and broke ground at the new location on September 23, 2005.<sup>170</sup> The building was completed a year later, and on October 15, 2006, Acrish led a

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Acrish's father Benito likely played the violin—Interview with Brian Acrish, September 29, 2016

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Richard and Robin Sills, October 28, 2016

<sup>167</sup> Michael Risnit. "Temple Faces Struggle for Space." *The Journal News*, November 27, 2001. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>168</sup> Michael Risnit. "Temple Leaders Make an Appeal." *Journal News* November 25, 2001. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>169</sup> "The Temple on the Hill", *The Menorah*, Temple Beth Elohim Bulletin, Jewish Culture Section, August 2005. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

<sup>170</sup> Michael Risnit. "Temple Leaders State Case." *The Journal News* August 21, 2001. Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

beautiful Simchat Torah/Building Inaugural ceremony by reading Torah one last time on Route 22, followed by a 2.3 mile precession, carrying the Torahs under a chuppah to the new building, and ending with a Torah reading on Mt. Ebo Road. <sup>171</sup>

The good times did not last long though, as the slumping economy in the years to follow swallowed jobs, homes, and pensions all at once. People found it harder and harder to pay for necessities let alone synagogue dues, and tensions flared as the community was now facing a multi-million dollar mortgage.<sup>172</sup> "We never deny membership to someone who can't afford to pay," Acrish said to a reporter, pausing for a moment. "We've had recessions before, but nothing of this magnitude. This is affecting a lot of people, every segment of the population, but we still have to pay for the electricity and the heating and so forth," he continued. "We're all praying about it, and we believe God will help us." <sup>173</sup>

In recent years<sup>174</sup> temple finances somewhat improved, but Acrish's health began to fail. In the late 1990's Acrish was diagnosed with prostate cancer, but he did not have his prostate removed. He opted for an alternative treatment which proved successful at the time. Fifteen years later a cancerous tumor formed behind his prostate, resulting from the treatment. Over the course of the last two years of his life, as his doctors treated him, he was in and out of the

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<sup>171</sup> "Spiritual Journey" News Times, October 14, 2006.

<sup>172</sup> Brian Koonz. "Churches, Temples Building Faith in the Crumbling Economy." News-Times, November 10, 2008

<sup>173</sup> Brian Koonz. "Churches, Temples Building Faith in the Crumbling Economy." News-Times, November 10, 2008

<sup>174</sup> 2014-2016

synagogue, pushing through pain, optimistic that he would recover. Even in his last few months, he was often at the temple he loved, the place he had built, helping Temple Administrator Nan Coulter run the day to day operations as if he were in full health.<sup>175</sup> When his cancer got the better of him, he was placed in hospice care. He remained there for a couple of weeks, receiving hundreds of visitors and phone calls. Even then, he was still contacting Nan Coulter multiple times daily, answering questions, helping with the operations of the temple, and even arranging the service for his own funeral.

When he died, the funeral was held in “his” sanctuary. Roughly 1,000 people were in attendance. To so many, Acrish was a father and grandfather figure who counseled people, taught students, and built special relationships with just about everyone in Brewster and its surrounding areas. Those who knew him, knew that in those last days, it was very hard for him to let go. He will be remembered in many ways, but as Rabbi Acrish once said, “I would like to be remembered as a teacher. Not as a fundraiser or a terrific speaker. I would like it remembered that I have been able to show my congregants and my children the beauty of the Jewish faith. It would be nice to have someone say, twenty years down the road, they are Jewish and proud of it, and they learned it all from Sol Acrish.”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with Terri Acrish, August 18, 2016,  
Interview with Richard and Robin Sills, October 28, 2016,  
Interview with Nan Coulter, October 6, 2016

<sup>176</sup> Eric Gross. “Rabbi Acrish Commemorates his 20th Anniversary.” Putnam County Courier, 1986, Temple Beth Elohim Archives.

### Part V-Conclusion

I got to know Rabbi Acrish in 2012, just four years prior to his death. As a rabbinical student, I paid close attention to his sermons, sometimes critiquing them to my wife. When I began my research for this project, I was able to dig up several samples of his writing, including his academic papers, his personal poetry, and many of his sermons. One critique, which I confirmed through my research, was that he too often relied on a teaching from the sixteenth century Jewish mystic, Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed. In this teaching, known as “Shevirat HaKelim-the Shattering of Vessels”, Luria describes G-d sending forth vessels of Divine light into our world at the time of creation. This light was so powerful that it shattered the vessels that tried to contain it, scattering Divine sparks of light into a world of darkness. I used to think that this imagery was Acrish’s bread and butter in an unprepared pinch, but now having researched his life, I believe that Acrish viewed this world as a dark and painful place, with human souls acting as Divine sparks, illuminating the darkness. I believe that Acrish viewed his own soul as a Divine spark that would have continued sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss, had it not been saved by other human souls that extended him love, kindness, comfort, and acceptance. From those positive experiences, he developed his life’s mission of therapy and education, easing the pain of individuals, and teaching people how to lift up others from the depths. Therefore, his repetitive use of Luria’s teaching was not out of laziness, but rather his sincere wish for all those he would bless from the bima.

I believe that Rabbi Acrish first developed this understanding in Morocco where he was profoundly impacted by his school experience in contrast to the oppressive way of life that he had grown accustomed to in the mellah. What an eye opening time that must have been for him, learning alongside Muslim and Christian students as an equal, in a clean, academically challenging environment suitable to a young man of his intelligence. I believe it was there where Acrish first discovered positives in people different from his own, the possibility for him to earn respect from people different from his own, and a new perspective on humanity when the right kind of fostering and education are introduced into an environment. I imagine he also felt much gratitude for the loving care and attention of his mother, and the generosity of The Alliance Israelite Universelle for enabling him to reach these breakthroughs.

Still, the persecution that his community was under was severe and getting worse as Morocco moved toward independence, and as enlightened as Acrish may have been, his ability to change the attitudes of the people around him must have been hopeless. Therefore, it is likely that his new perspective drove him to seek out other environments where his potential would not be ruined by close-mindedness, and academia would have been a logical place for him to search for that opportunity. The details of how Haham Gaon came into contact with Acrish are unknown, but I believe that their meeting was a result of active search on behalf of young Acrish.

At Ramsgate, I believe that Acrish had a difficult time grappling between the exclusivity of Orthodox Judaism, and his own thoughts on inclusive education being a key element in

bringing about positive change in hateful world. What good was his rabbinic training if it was designed for him to lead a community to be exclusive in all aspects of life? He had already learned that separation leads to ignorance, ignorance leads to oppression, and to work for peace is to gain acceptance by working in the opposite direction. I wonder if the recent memory of the Holocaust, just ten years prior, and the surrounding WWII destruction at Ramsgate were constant reminders adding to his conviction. While the contradiction between his training and his philosophy may have been at odds at Ramsgate, he had the good sense to keep the controversy to himself, and finish his program without challenging his staunchly traditional mentor. After his ordination, he chose to go to America over remaining in England. I believe that he made that decision to get away from Haham Gaon.

At his first pulpit in Montgomery, Alabama, Rabbi Acrish was thrown into a community split over the same dilemma. The older members of the community valued Orthodox Judaism, and were pushing for the synagogue to reclaim its exclusive traditional rights, while the younger members in the community embraced assimilation, partnered with the Reform temple in town, and were fearful of exclusivity in a dangerous time and place. Haham Gaon sent Rabbi Acrish to this community to reclaim its Orthodox roots, but it did not take long for Rabbi Acrish to understand that he could not fulfill that purpose with integrity. Rather, he embraced the role of a Reform rabbi, working to keep his congregation connected with Jewish tradition, while at the same time, working outside of his community educating the general public about Jewish diversity. I believe that it was this real life experience that propelled Rabbi Acrish to become a Reform rabbi.



It was also at this time in his life that Rabbi Acrish was exposed to oppressive behavior that was not directed at him or his people. This capacity allowed him to understand how fear, ignorance, and shame could motivate good people to commit and/or condone terrible behavior. In a few instances, Rabbi Acrish witnessed, and benefited from, acts of kindness on behalf of some of the most appalling segregationists. I believe that Rabbi Acrish's experiences as a Southern Rabbi during the Civil Rights Movement expanded his belief in the Divine existing in every human soul, albeit complicated, and further developed his passion of using education and therapy to now identify fear, ignorance, and shame within individuals and communities for the purposes of bringing out tolerance and love.

One of the biggest unanswered questions remaining from this study is: Why did Rabbi Acrish leave the South? I was hoping to get a definitive answer, but instead I got many generic answers from people saying that it was just time for him to leave. Why? Was the synagogue bomb threat on his hands? Did the Etz Ahayem board find him to be too controversial? Did he simply just follow Wendy North? It could have been any or all of these, but I believe, one of the major reasons he left for New York was to pursue becoming a Reform rabbi.

When Rabbi Acrish came to New York, right away he formed a lifelong relationship with Reform Rabbi Norman Kahan. Rabbi Kahan stood for education, acceptance, and social justice, and served as the perfect mentor for the kind of rabbinate that Rabbi Acrish wanted to pursue. For the rest of his life, he would often solicit Rabbi Kahan's advice as he obtained several

degrees in education, psychology, and pluralistic Judaism, which refined his core beliefs, and helped him to serve thousands over his fifty year career as a Reform rabbi at Temple Beth Elohim. For Rabbi Acrish, what began as a life entrenched in darkness, developed into a conscientious fulfilment of upholding Judaism through teaching, counseling, and building relationships based on love, understanding, acceptance, and tolerance. His journey took him from Sephardic Orthodoxy through the American South to a long and fruitful career as an American Reform Rabbi in New York.

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