

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1544

LEONARD SPIEGEL

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 9, 1992

Dr. Leonard Spiegel

Dr. Leonard Spiegel was born on May 26, 1929 in the city of New York, New York, the son of Benjamin and Eva Spiegel. He attended secondary school at the George Washington High School, graduating in 1947.

Following high school, Spiegel worked at various jobs before deciding to attend college. He entered New York University, obtaining his Bachelor of Arts Degree. He decided to further his education at Florida State University, earning his Master of Arts Degree in 1954. He furthered his education also by obtaining Doctorate of Philosophy Degree from Florida State in 1963. Spiegel arrived in Youngstown, Ohio in the summer of 1960 to join the staff of the Chemistry Department at Youngstown State University. He soon became involved in a number of community organizations, including B'nai B'rith, Zionist Organization of America.

Presently, Dr. Spiegel remains an integral part of the faculty of the Chemistry Department at Youngstown State. He resides with his wife, Jocelyn, at 2206 Selma Avenue Youngstown, Ohio. Dr. Spiegel spends much of his free time gardening, taking photos, traveling, and studying Western Art. He is also an active member of the Temple Rodef Sholom.

-- Matthew Butts

B: This is an interview with Leonard Spiegel for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz, by Matthew Butts, on July 9, 1992, at 1:05 P.M.

Could you tell me something about your childhood -- where and when you were born?

S: I was born in New York City in 1929.

B: Where about in New York City?

S: In the borough of Manhattan.

B: Did you attend public schools there?

S: Yes, I attended public schools in New York City.

B: The school that you attended was what?

S: The primary school was Public School 173, Junior High School 115, and George Washington High School. Then I went onto New York University, which was located in the Bronx at that time.

B: Tell what it was like growing up in New York City.

S: At that time, it was during the Depression, and at the end of the Depression, I grew up during World War II. The city was much safer then than it is now. We did not have any problems of walking around late at night or taking the subway. I remember going to the New York World's Fair back in 1939-1940 with a friend of mine. We took the subway from Manhattan, all the way to Queens, the two of us. We were like ten or eleven years old at the time and that was an interesting experience.

B: How about your post bachelor education? Where did you attend for your Masters and Doctorate?

S: From New York City, I went to Tallahassee, Florida. I went to Florida State University, where I got my Masters and my PhD. From Florida State, I came up here in 1960 and have been here ever since.

B: What was Youngstown like when you first came here?

S: When I first came here, Youngstown had a very thriving downtown area. There were like five or six movie theaters, many restaurants, of course, two large department stores and many small stores. It was quite different than it is today

because we did not have the malls then.

B: Did you meet your wife in Youngstown?

S: Yes.

B: Where did you reside when you first arrived here?

S: When I first got to Youngstown, I found an apartment above a garage at the King Funeral Home on Wick Avenue. It is no longer there anymore, it has subsequently been removed and there is another building there now. I resided there until my wife and I got married and then we moved to an apartment in Liberty on Rothgate Drive. Then about a year after our son came home, we bought a house on Selma Avenue where we have been living ever since.

B: What did the University physically look like when you started here?

S: In 1960, we had Jones Hall, about half of the Science Building because there was no addition at that time, the administration building which now stands was the library, and there were a couple of other small barrack-type buildings on campus that were left over from World War II. We had a student population then of about maybe six or seven thousand.

B: Could you bring up Youngstown State to the present, the growth that you have seen, for me please?

S: Between 1960 and the present, the enrollment has more than doubled. The campus expanded tremendously. Back in 1966, I believe, we added on the south wing of this building. Six years ago we renovated both wings. At the time, we had much smaller labs. We did not have much equipment. Since we became a state university, our budget has grown. We have added a lot more equipment. We have much more modern laboratories today than we had then.

B: Tell me a little bit about your religious background.

S: When we got married, it was Rabbi Berkowitz who married us at Rodef Sholom. We became members of that congregation. We have been members there ever since. We became active in the community. We joined the B'nai B'rith Organization and I was president of that for two years. Then I joined the Zionist Organization and I am now president of the Youngstown Zionist District for the last year and this current year. My wife and I have been involved with activities at the temple. She has been president of the Sisterhood. I was president of the temple Brotherhood. Our children were active at the Jewish Community Center. What else would you like to know?

- B: Where you brought up in a Conservative household, Orthodox, Reform?
- S: My household was really neither Orthodox, Conservative, nor Reform. When I lived in New York I did go to a Conservative congregation. When I moved to Tallahassee, Florida for graduate school, there was a Reform temple down there which I went to. When I came to Youngstown, I began to go to the Conservative synagogue, but then after we got married I became a member of Rodef Sholom, which is a Reform synagogue.
- B: Can you explain the differences between the three sects within Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform?
- S: The Orthodox branch of Judaism takes a more literal interpretation of the Bible and the writings that came after that, so that there are more observances that are carried on in an Orthodox home. Conservative is more middle of the road. Reform takes a more liberal approach to Judaism. The Reform group can delete ceremonies or add ceremonies or change ceremonies as they so desire. The Orthodox and the Conservative stress the eating of kosher foods and the Reform does not. As far as the observance of the holidays, all three groups observe all of the Jewish holidays. The Reform movement has female rabbi's and female cantors. As far as I know, there is no female Conservative Rabbi, but that may change. Certainly there is no female Orthodox Rabbi.
- B: Is there a separation of the sexes within the Orthodox and Conservative? Is it very male oriented?
- S: Strictly Orthodox synagogues, the women may not sit with the men. They have to be separated and usually behind some type of a lattice work partition. In the more modern Orthodox synagogues, women and men sit together as they do in Conservative and Reform synagogues.
- B: Describe for me the temple at Rodef Sholom.
- S: The temple just celebrated a 125th anniversary, so it is probably the oldest temple or congregation in the city of Youngstown. The building that we are in now, I think, was constructed in the early 1900s and it has been renovated several times. The building is on the historic register. We do have an educational wing where on Sunday morning we have religious school for all the synagogues. They all meet in our building for the Sunday program. What else would you like to know?
- B: What does the temple look like, the inside and out?
- S: It has a dome that is characteristic of that particular building. The sanctuary itself probably will seat close to five or six hundred people. There are stained-

glassed windows on either side. We have an arc where the Holy Scrolls or the Torah is kept. Then, of course, we have offices. The Rabbi and the Cantor have their own offices. There is a general office. There is an office for the office manager and the bookkeeper. Plus, we have classrooms and a library. Downstairs there is a social hall where we can have dinners that will seat about 220 people maximum. There is a stage. There is a very small dance area. We have a fairly modern kitchen. There is a large parking lot in the back that borders on Woodline Street and Bryson.

B: What is the most striking feature for you of the temple, physically?

S: I think the most striking feature of the temple, physically, is the arc. It was redecorated recently with some new sliding glass electrically operated doors. It has new Torah covers that were original.

B: Do you recall the first time you met Rabbi Berkowitz?

S: It was before we were married. I guess when we became engaged I met him. I do not remember exactly where or the exact date. It was somewhere, I suppose, in 1961.

B: What struck you about his persona when you met him?

S: He had a beautiful speaking voice and he was always well groomed. He was a very interesting person to talk to. He was a good conversationalist. I think those are the things that were most striking as an initial impression.

B: What did he physically look like? Was he short, tall?

S: No. He was not tall. He was about medium height. He was not skinny, but he was not obese. He was solid. He wore glasses.

B: At your wedding, he was the officiant. Do you remember anything he did at the wedding, or at any other service, that was his own special stamp?

S: It is kind of difficult remembering what he said back in 1961. He spoke very nicely. He was complementary to both of us. I imagine he would be to any bride and groom who were standing before him.

B: People bring up his ability to be a great orator. What do you think made his sermons or speeches so vivid or profound?

S: He certainly kept up with everything that was going on in Youngstown and in the world. He would give sermons or talks dealing with current issues. He would get to the heart of the issue quite nicely. He had a very nice way of doing it. Again,

with the fact that he had a good voice and he was interesting to listen to and he had something to say, he gave a good sermon.

B: What were the services like? Were they very well ordered? Describe the way he would run a service.

S: We have a prayer book. At that time we used an older addition of the prayer book. He would pick out one of the sections. A prayer usually has five sections, in case there is five Fridays in a month. So, you pick out either one or two or three, and follow that through. Cantor Ehrlich would then come in at the appropriate time and sing, and the congregation would sometimes join the cantor in singing. At a certain point in the service he would then give a sermon. After that, he would conclude the service, which took maybe five or ten minutes more. So the services were formal to a great extent.

B: Was he a very punctual individual?

S: Yes. If a service was going to start at eight o'clock in the evening, it started at eight o'clock in the evening.

B: A lot of people have mentioned that he had a great sense of humor.

S: Yes.

B: Is there anything that sticks out in your mind that he said or possibly did?

S: Let me think now. I remember when we were talking to him just before we got married. He said, "Marriage is a sixty/forty proposition for both the husband and the wife." He was trying to tell us about compromise. One gives in one time. One gives in another time. That one does not get one's way all of the time. I cannot remember jokes too well. He did tell a number of jokes and funny stories. Maybe some of the other people you are going to interview or have interviewed will remember that better than I will.

B: Your children are all confirmed. Were all three confirmed by Rabbi Berkowitz?

S: My children went through Bar and Bat Mitzvah. All three were Bar and Bat Mitzvahed when Rabbi Berkowitz was alive. Confirmation occurred with my two youngest children after he died, with another Rabbi.

B: So your oldest son was confirmed by Rabbi Berkowitz?

S: Yes.

B: Is there any difference than the confirmation they received from Rabbi Powers

and Rabbi Berkowitz?

S: Each Rabbi teaches a confirmation class. They have their own way of doing things . So yes, I am sure there was a difference.

B: What do you think his relationship with the children or young adults within the congregation was?

S: I think he had a good relationship with the children. He was not buddy buddy with the children, but I think the children respected him. I think most of them probably enjoyed his classes. I know my older son did.

B: What is your older sons' name?

S: Jonathan.

B: How would you say Rabbi Berkowitz operated the temple?

S: He worked with the Board of Trustees and their offices were in the temple. At that time many of the things that went on were not public knowledge. Not like things are today. So I think that when things needed to be done, I think many times the Rabbi took it upon his own shoulders to go ahead and get things done. If he needed something and knew a certain person perhaps could afford to pay for it, he went and approached that person directly to make a contribution, and it was done.

B: How do you perceive Dr. Berkowitz's role within the Youngstown community?

S: He was very active in the Youngstown community. He was a member of Rotary, I believe. He was involved with many of the ministers in the city. He was involved many organizations. I cannot remember the names of the different organizations he was involved with. He was involved with, and I heard he was quite highly respected by, the Christian community.

B: Would you characterize him as one of the leaders during his tenure here in Youngstown?

S: One of the religious leaders of Youngstown?

B: Not just religious, but civic leaders of Youngstown?

S: Yes. I would say so.

B: Was the leader of the Youngstown Jewish community considered the head Rabbi?

- S: No. We do not have a head Rabbi in the United States, in the general Jewish community. There may be in certain ultra Orthodox sects. No, I would not say he was a head Rabbi.
- B: Did the rest of the temples and congregations look to him for leadership, not just Rodef Sholom?
- S: Yes. He was active in the Jewish community both at the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation of Youngstown. Yes, so he was active in both communities, Jewish and non-Jewish.
- B: Was he an active member in many of the Zionist organizations within Youngstown?
- S: There was one Zionist organization when he was alive, and that was the Youngstown Zionist District of the Zionist Organization of America. He became president of this organization several years back.
- B: Was he a staunch supporter of Israel?
- S: Yes.
- B: I asked this in an interview with Dr. Friedman and he pointed out that Rodef Sholom had some members that were opposed to the Jewish state.
- S: Yes, but that probably was back in the late 1940s, and it dissipated. There may be one or two still alive today. They would probably be up in their 80s or 90s, who might be anti-Israel. But by and large, the majority of Jews of all the three groups, Reform Conservative and Orthodox, are pro-Israel.
- B: Are you familiar with Rabbi Berkowitz having any dealings with Youngstown State [University] or Youngstown College?
- S: I am trying to think whether he taught a course here part-time in the Religion department or not. I cannot remember. Perhaps you can check the records in the Philosophy and the Religion department. Dr. Shipka might be able to help you there. His wife taught here. So he did know many of the faculty members here. His wife, Pauline, taught French here for many years.
- B: Dr. Berkowitz retired from the Rabbi at Rodef Sholom?
- S: Yes.
- B: Was there any power vacuum?

S: I would not say that, no. No, because Rabbi Powers came in as Associate Rabbi and then after Dr. Berkowitz died, then Rabbi Powers became the full Rabbi. I do not know if there was any vacuum other than people who missed him.

B: Was there any difference between the way Rabbi Powers conducted his service with Rabbi Berkowitz? Did he bring anything new in?

S: Yes. We did change to a new version of the Reform prayer book. So that was different. Some people could not get used that. Rabbi Berkowitz would give his sermons at the bema or the lectern. Rabbi Powers would speak extemporaneously and he would walk around. He would have a microphone attached to his gown with a transmitter. Some individuals were not used to having the Rabbi walking around and speaking, where Rabbi Berkowitz would speak in one place. So that was the difference.

B: Through my research, I have noticed that Rodef Sholom had a great increase of membership during Rabbi Berkowitz's tenure. Is that due to his persona or more of the Youngstown Jewish community's own personality?

S: It is a combination of factors. I am sure his personality had something to do with it. There are probably other factors. The Jewish population in those days was growing more rapidly than it is now. Some people became disillusioned with the Conservative synagogue and left it and came to our synagogue. So several factors caused the increased enrollment in our congregation. Now it is shrinking.

B: Is there anything that we have not really touched on that you think we need to add?

S: I cannot think of anything off-hand. I might think of something later, after you leave.

B: Thank you very much for your time.

End of Interview