

The story of Jewish contributions to Canada

Rabbi Stephen Wise

Jews have lived in Canada for nearly 250 years. While the first synagogue was established as far back as 1768, our community grew slowly, through immigration, because entering this country was not easy. Canada, until the 1960's, had professional, educational and immigration barriers – and prejudices – targeting Jews. Happily, things have changed. Today, nearly 400,000 Jewish people live throughout the Provinces and Territories in Canada, especially Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver. In fact, Canada is now home to the 5th-largest Jewish community in the world - following the US, Israel, the former USSR and France. This year, as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the dominion of Canada, I think it's important that we focus on the history of Jewish life in Canada.

We Canadian Jews are a distinct cultural and religious group, proud to be Canadian but also determined to stay connected to our homeland of Israel and to each other. We live in a modern society, where making ethnic or religious differences is a matter of private preference, and of course, many Jews choose to make their lives with friends and spouses outside our community. But, with the decreasing significance of national boundaries, cultural differences and international connections have again become crucial to maintaining our Jewish identity. Identity and community often begin with the synagogue.

Do you know where the oldest established synagogue in Canada is located? Some think its Temple Anshe Sholom in Hamilton; at 165 years, it is definitely the oldest Reform congregation. They started over a store on James street south in 1850, with 16 families. In 1882, they built the city's first synagogue at 143 Hughson St. and in 1952, they raised funds and built a new shul at the corner of King Street West and what was then called Cline Crescent, where it still stands today.

We are proud here, at Shaarei-Beth El, to be recognized as the oldest synagogue in all of Oakville, in fact all of Halton region.

However the oldest synagogue in Canada, is the Congregation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews called Shearith Israel of Montreal, established in 1768. Among its founders are the first Jews known to have ever set foot in Canada, and for the first century of its existence, this was the only Jewish congregation. It is also recognized as the second oldest in North America, after the Spanish Portuguese congregation of New York City.

When these early Canadian Jewish settlers organized together to build a synagogue, recognizing their distance from the birthplace of Judaism in the middle east, they named the congregation Shearith Israel meaning “remnant of Israel”. Although mostly Ashkenazi themselves, they wished to ensure support from the Sephardic congregations in New York as well as the wealthy philanthropist, Bevis Marks, in London. Marks generously gave Shearith Israel its first scrolls and manuscripts on the occasion of its founding. The congregation quickly bought the other

most important communal necessity, a burial ground. The first Jew to be interred in this cemetery was Lazarus David, a real estate owner who was active in civil affairs and died on October 22, 1776. This still stands as the oldest Jewish grave in Canada.

In 1778, Shearith Israel drew up its first set of bylaws. The executive consisted of the Parnas (the president), Gabay (treasurer) and three others called the “Junto”. As soon as you were a member of the Junto, you became “Gentlemen of the Mahmad or Elders”. These men were quite proud of their standing and traditions and rather autocratic powers. For example, members of the congregation could be abruptly summoned before them, reprimanded, and even heavily fined for any misdemeanor. In the board minutes of the 25th of Elul, September 1778, Ezekiel Solomons and Levy Michaels were offered honours on the bimah while three other men were fined 10 shillings for refusing to chant torah on the high holidays. And Samuel Judah was fined three pounds for refusing to be the next synagogue president. I’m planning to bring forth these laws at our next board meeting. The synagogue could get away with such

ruthlessness as there were no other synagogues, and it was very important in those days to belong to a community. Today, the synagogue still exists and though quite small, is known for its tolerant and welcoming approach with services in various liturgical traditions.

While most Jewish settlements happened in Lower and Upper Canada, in 1863 a few Jews landed on the West Coast. Congregation Emmanu-El Synagogue was established in Victoria, British Columbia, and has the distinction of being the oldest Synagogue in Canada still in use, and is the oldest one on the West Coast of North America.

Now we know the first synagogue, but who was the first Jewish person to come to Canada. Before the British Conquest of New France, there were officially no Jews in Canada; when King Louis XIV made Canada officially a province of the Kingdom of France in 1663, he decreed that only Roman Catholics could enter the colony.

Fortunately, there was one exception—Esther Brandeau, a 20 year-old Jewish girl arrived in 1738 disguised as a boy. Apparently, she'd been

on a ship heading to Amsterdam to visit her brother when the ship almost sunk in a hurricane. Somebody saved her and gave her shelter on a deserted island. Esther came out of this experience disguised as a Christian boy. No one knows for sure why, some say she was escaping an arranged marriage, some think she wanted to be explore the world and the only way was to be male, some say she was sick of being persecuted as a Jew. All we know is she did not want to return home. Her disguise worked. Esther kept changing her name, worked in various jobs and eventually got on a ship bound for Canada. Esther finally revealed her identity, hoping she'd be allowed to stay. Such an independent Jewish girl in the new world caused quite a stir. She remained in Canada for a year as officials tried to figure out what to do with her. They asked her to officially convert to Christianity, but she refused. Finally, the government sent her back to France. Esther is on record as the very first Jew to touch ground in Canada. What an inspiring movie this story would make!

The first Jews to settle and stay in Canada legally, are documented in British Army records from the French and Indian War. Here's how it all unfolded: in 1760, General Amherst attacked and seized Montreal, winning Canada for the British. Several Jews were members of his regiments; amongst his officer corps were five Jews: Samuel Jacobs, Emmanuel de Cordova, Aaron Hart, Hananiel Garcia, and Isaac Miramer.

The most prominent of these five men were Samuel Jacobs and Aaron Hart, who also happened to be business associates. In 1759, in his capacity as Commissariat to the British Army, Jacobs was recorded as the first official Jewish resident of Quebec. That's how Samuel Jacobs was recorded as the first Canadian Jew.

After the war, Jacobs remained in Canada, becoming the dominant merchant of the Richelieu Valley. Unfortunately, with such a small Jewish population, it was not easy for Jacobs to find a nice Jewish wife! He ended up marrying a French Canadian girl, and because they brought their children up as Catholics, many Jewish historians skip over him as

the first Jewish settler of Canada. Instead, the first Jewish Canadian of repute is considered to be Jacob's business partner, Aaron Hart, who somehow found and married a Jewish woman and brought up his children in the Jewish tradition.

Lieutenant Hart came to Canada from New York City in 1760. After his service in the army had ended, he settled at Trois-Rivières, where he became a very wealthy landowner and a respected community member. He had four sons, Moses, Benjamin, Ezekiel and Alexander, all of whom became prominent in Montreal and helped build the Jewish Community.

One of his sons, Ezekiel, was elected to the legislature of Lower Canada in the by-election of April 11, 1807, becoming the first Jew in politics (but certainly not the last) and the first Jew to serve as the official opposition in the British Empire. Not surprisingly, Ezekiel was expelled from the legislature with his religion as the major factor. No Jew held elected office in Canada until a generation later.

Most of the early Jewish Canadians were either fur traders or served in the British Army troops. A few were merchants or landowners. There were many challenges to being Jewish in the new land with equal rights; for instance, a law on the books demanded that every Canadian had to take an oath, "on my faith as a Christian". This was finally amended in 1829, removing this oath for Jews. In 1831, prominent French-Canadian politician, Louis-Joseph Papineau, sponsored a law granting full equivalent political rights to Jews, twenty-seven years before anywhere else in the British Empire.

I do want to mention one more early Jewish settler who had a tremendous impact on our history in Canada. In the early 1830s, a German Jew named Samuel Liebshitz founded a town in Upper Canada and called it 'Jewsburg'. Imagine living in Jewsburg. It grew and became German Mills, because of its large German population, and then was renamed Berlin, until World War I. During the war, Lord Kitchener, a British war hero, was killed and the city was named Kitchener, after him.

Over the last 150 years many well-known Canadian Jews have made names for themselves – and have achieved great things for the betterment of our Jewish community.

Sam Bronfman, for example, is one of Canada's most renowned people.

His story starts, like most of ours, back in the old country. He was born in Tsarist Russia and immigrated to Saskatchewan during the pogroms.

His parents owned a small hotel and Samuel soon realized most of their income came from alcohol sales. After marrying and moving to

Montreal, he founded a distillery and then acquired Seagrams.

Prohibition in the US created an unexpected surge in profits that reached record proportions in Canada. Bronfman's business took off; he even

created the famous Crown Royal drink in honour of the royal visit of King George and Queen Elizabeth in 1939. But what makes Sam and

his children earn the name, Shem Tov, is their work in philanthropy.

The Bronfman foundation encourages young Canadian entrepreneurs with generous scholarships, and Samuel helped build McGill and the

University of Montreal. He has also been president of the Canadian Jewish congress which helped Jewish refugees settle here after WW2, and Bronfman mobilized the collection of funds in the early years of the Jewish state. His son, Charles, continued his legacy by creating the Birthright program, sending young Jews on free trips to Israel, as well as other valuable projects in Jewish education and continuity.

Ben Dunkelman is another hero, though I didn't realize the magnitude of his accomplishments until reading about his contributions to pre-state Israel. Born in Toronto to Tip Top Tailor founders David and Rose, at age 18 he volunteered in Israel to help build the state and develop settlements. He served with distinction during WW2, landing on Juno Beach on D-day. Soon after the war ended, he joined a unit of foreign Jewish fighters in 1948 and helped break the siege of Jerusalem during the war of independence. He then helped secure the Galilee. A bridge on the Lebanese border was named in his honour.

Perhaps one of the best-known Canadian Jews is author Mordechai Richler. He created Duddy Kravitz and Solomon Gursky, immortalizing the working class in Jewish Montreal. His books were turned into films, and he won the man Booker prize, the governor general award, the Giller prize and was awarded the order of Canada. Yet he didn't rest on his laurels, writing scathing attacks on the separatist Parti Quebecois and calling out their historical anti-Semitism. A true Shem Tov.

If we look to the world of sports, there is Larry Tanenbaum, a man who has never looked for publicity but has immense power within the Toronto sports scene. As chairman of MLSE, he oversees almost every professional sport in the city, Raptors, Argos, Marlies, TFC and my beloved Toronto Maple Leafs. Certainly, he has made a lot of money, mostly in construction and investments, but it was his love of sports and this city that pushed him to aim for success. Tanenbaum also serves as governor in the NHL, NBA and MLS, and he worked closely with Paul Godfrey in the 1970's to bring a professional baseball team to Toronto

when it was said it couldn't be done. He's a major donor to Baycrest, Mount Sinai Hospital, CIJA and UJA – and has always been open about his Jewish ties as part of his love of sports.

Shouldn't there be at least one rabbi on this list? Rabbi Gunther Plaut of Holy Blossom Temple was rescued from certain disaster in Germany prior to WW2 by the Hebrew Union College to study to be a rabbi in the safe town of Cincinnati. Like most Reform Rabbis, he recognized he had a greater role to play in building bridges among the Jewish denominations and between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Soon after moving to Toronto he founded the Urban alliance on race relations, served on the Ontario Human rights council, led a march on Ottawa in 1971 to support soviet Jewry and brought along other religious groups to boost the cause. Plaut helped start a 3rd Seder for victims of AIDS in the mid 1980's, at the height of that health crisis, and spearheaded a campaign to build low cost housing for the homeless. This is named Plaut manor in his honour. Until his death, just before his

100th birthday, he continued to serve meals at the Out of the cold soup kitchen at Holy blossom Temple, chatting with guests about the dangers of racism and prejudice.

Maureen Forester might not be a name on the tip of your tongue as a great Jewish Canadian, but she's considered Canada's musical ambassador to the world. Born in Montreal, she dropped out of school at 13, though she received 29 honorary degrees and was chancellor of Wilfred Laurier university. Forester began her career with the Montreal symphony before moving onto a career on TV and the stage. She converted to Judaism to marry violinist Eugene Kash, and even after their divorce, she remained Jewish and raised 5 Jewish children. Forester was a strong advocate for arts and Canadian artists, chairing the Canadian council for the arts, and was a companion of the order of Canada, inducted into the Canadian music hall of fame and Canada's walk of fame.

There is one Jewish Canadian who has boldly gone where no one has gone before, William Shatner. He lived at home in Montreal where he had his bar mitzvah, attended university at McGill, and trained classically to be a Shakespeare actor. Then he landed the role of Captain Kirk in an odd show called Star Trek, that barely lasted 3 seasons because of low ratings. Star Trek gathered a cult following and exploded into a 7 film franchise, leading to other shows where Shatner won Emmy awards for Boston Legal, the Practice. You probably also saw him pitching everything from Loblaws to priceline.com with a pompous persona he created. When he accepted a lifetime achievement award in his 80's he quipped, "but there's a problem, I'm a legend in the making".

Rosie Abella's parents barely survived the war and she was born in a DP camp. She fought for human rights throughout her career, and achieved the highest heights in the Canadian legal profession as Canada's first pregnant judge (she had two boys, both became lawyers too), first

female supreme court justice, first Canadian to receive an honorary degree from Yale, and just recently, she delivered the commencement address to Brandeis University. Abella was motivated by her father's experience: he came to Canada after the war and was barred from practicing because he was not yet a citizen. She made up her mind then, as a child, even though there weren't even any female lawyers at the time, that she was going to be a lawyer. Abella has been an outstanding role model, championing refugee rights, women's rights and minorities' rights. I was especially moved by her words to students at Brandeis: "indifference is injustice, it's not just what you stand for, it what you stand up for, and never forget how the world looks to those who are vulnerable."

Finally, and this may sound strange, but Drake is potentially the most influential Jewish Canadian alive today. With three Grammys, 100 million net worth and 30 million followers on social media there is a solid case to consider. One of his recent videos highlighted his

Jewishness by depicting him at his bar mitzvah full of hip hop stars. This wasn't just iconic, it was huge, achieving 46 million hits and winning awards. It made Judaism a little cooler and also highlighted the visibility of black Jews. Drake proved hip hop could be Jewish. And he made Toronto a little cooler too, naming it the 6, spending time here, and showcasing sports teams.

The impact of Jewish Canadians is quite amazing; each person, each congregation, each story is equally important. They all highlight the roles Jewish Canadians have played in this country's history, across the full span of Canada's geography, across disciplines and the religious spectrum, from politics to government, art, music, law and every undertaking imaginable. This year, let's take the time to celebrate Canada's birthday, and our Jewish new year, and how much our community has contributed to make this country great. Shana Tova.