

# **The History of The Young Israel of Woodmere The Formative Years Rabbi Shya Lebor zt"l**

I grew up in the Young Israel of Woodmere and I owe the shul and its members a tremendous debt of gratitude. My father, Rav Shya Lebor zt"l was instrumental in building its foundations and fostering its initial growth and in order that his legacy is preserved I would like to share a few memories from the perspective of the Rabbi's son.

We moved to Woodmere in the summer of 1960 when my father was hired as the first full time Rabbi of the Young Israel of Woodmere. My rebbe, Rav Binyamin Kaminetzky zt"l, was the founding Rabbi of the local minyan for its first years, but was very busy with the founding of the torah institutions of the area and very soon after the shul became a Young Israel the members realized that there was a need for a full time Rabbi. Rabbi Kaminetzky went on to not only establish the Yeshiva of South Shore, but also Torah Academy for Girls, Yeshiva Ateres Yaakov and other important torah institutions of the area. The fact that the Five Towns are a torah center is much to his credit, his vision, his tenacity and his patience.

When my Father retired, Rav Hershel Billet shlita became the Rabbi of the Shul and has served the shul for almost 40 years. During his tenure the shul has grown to one of the largest in the United States. As I understand it is the largest Young Israel

in the world with over a thousand members. My father and Rav Billet had a great love and respect for one another that one doesn't always find between leaders and their successors. Their relationship was exemplary. Rav Billet has done an amazing job in the shul and we wish him much continued mazal tov and success.

Three great Rabbis served the shul during these fifty years, and they filled different functions in the growth of the community. Using an analogy from building a skyscraper – Rabbi Kaminetzky found the building site and dug for the foundations, Rabbi Lebor layed the foundations and built the lower floors of the building and Rabbi Billet built the upper stories of the building, bringing it to its current splendor and beauty.

Needless to say, the Woodmere of 1960 was much different than it is today. In 1960 there were approximately 30 Shomer Shabbos families from Valley Stream until the Far Rockaway border. There was only one other orthodox shul, Beth Sholom. There was no eruv, not one kosher eatery, no kosher bakery, no chevra kadisha and no local mikva in all the Five Towns. The mikva in Far Rockaway was far away and at that time not in the greatest neighborhood. Someone who needed the mikva on Friday night clearly had a problem. The Vaad Hakashrut was being formed and there was one kosher butcher in the Five Towns. Far Rockaway was a much stronger community but even they had a problem supporting places to eat. The Far Rockaway pizza shop (Sam's Pizza) struggled to stay open. There was one kosher bakery at that time in Far Rockaway, Sari's.

The shul decided they needed to establish a daily minyan for Shacharis, but getting a minyan meant a rotation in the newsletter of who was “on duty” to come to shul that day. Not everyone showed up, so the no shows received a desperate phone call: “Harry, get over here, we’re at Yishtabach and you’re the tenth man!”

The shul had bought a house at 500 Forest Avenue (the corner of Peninsula and Forest) and that was the shul for the first few years. As mentioned this was the only orthodox shul for miles around with the exception of Beth Sholom. Compared to the situation today it is hard to imagine.

My father was instrumental in the growth of the Shul, the Woodmere community and the entire area of the Five Towns. When we came to Woodmere there were 30 members, not all of whom were Shomer Shabbos. When my Father retired in 1980 at the age of 62 in order to fulfill his lifelong dreams of making aliya and spending his days learning Torah, the shul had grown tenfold, to close to 300 members.

Probably the most important physical factor in that growth was the eruv. The main mover in this endeavor was my father. It was his baby. He realized that in order to bring young families to the community an eruv was a necessity. One has to realize how revolutionary this idea was, because at that time very few communities in the United States had an eruv. The Five Towns eruv was one of the very first. Much work and effort was spent both with consultations with Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l and yblc”t Rav Shimon Eider Shlita and with the Town of Hempstead and the electric company (Long Island Lighting Company).

The Vaad Hakashrut of the Five Towns was nurtured from infancy by my father during those years. To the one kosher butcher was soon added a kosher take home and then a kosher pizza shop, kosher bakery etc. etc. Today, there are probably more kosher eateries than non-kosher ones in the Five Towns.

One of the final big projects of my father was building the local mikva on Peninsula Blvd. This was central to making Woodmere a complete torah community.

My Father was a very eloquent speaker and he excelled in his appeals for action from the community. Though it was a young community, the shul always excelled in giving Zedaka and support for both local causes and causes for the entire Jewish World, especially for Israel. Rabbi Billet has continued in this great tradition and the shul is an amazing source of zedaka and chesed that is world renowned. One very big baal zedaka from the shul once told me: "You know I give my share of zedaka, but I owe it all to your father – he taught me how to give zedaka".

At my fathers side during this entire time was my mother, Sarah Lebor A"H. The first years were very tough but my mother was the anchor of stability that not only enabled my father to do his rabbinical work but also added her own tremendous contribution. In the very first years the masses weren't running to move to Woodmere but if they did it surely had something to do with my mother's receptions for new members, the simchat torah Kiddush and the Shavuot afternoon tea. All were held at our house with everything baked by my mother. Nothing was bought.

In the first years my father also founded the afternoon Hebrew school for those that attended public school during the day. Even though my mother was one of the teachers in the school, I think one of my father's happier days was when he closed the school. Due to the fact that basically all the members' children were in the local day schools, there was really no need for the Hebrew school. He looked at the Hebrew schools closing as a sign of the success of the community.

My father was a true visionary. I don't know what made him realize in 1960 that Woodmere would eventually grow. It wasn't obvious then. One needed a lot of foresight and bitachon then to realize that there was potential here. My Father was the Rav of New Haven, Connecticut from 1950-1959. He had a very prominent position there but he realized that a good Jewish education for his children was impossible in New Haven so my parents decided to move to New York. They spent a year in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn and then my father took the position in the Young Israel. This was done with an amazing amount of Mesirut Nefesh by my parents. My father took a 50% cut in salary when he came to New York and his first salary in Woodmere was \$2,500 per year (hard to believe, but I did not forget any zeros). The shul was small and that was all they could afford at that time. My father took the job anyway because he saw that this was a place with a future. One needs great far-sightedness and emuna in order to act in such a way.

Woodmere is a wonderful place with great personal memories of shul members who are B"H still with us and the many that unfortunately are not. I will not mention names

because I will surely leave someone out. Due to this same fear, I am also wary of mentioning the many local Rabbanim that were key figures along the way. I will though single out the two local Rabbanim who arrived in the area even before my father and were not only very close friends and colleagues of my father but also worked with him hand in hand in building the community - Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz z"l of the White Shul and Rabbi Gilbert Klaperman z"l of Beth Sholom.

Obviously, the growth of The Young Israel of Woodmere as a center for Torah, Tefila and Chesed was not due to one person or even its group of three great Rabbis. The entire community of the Five Towns owes a tremendous note of recognition to everyone who was involved during these fifty years, Rabbanim and laymen, men and women who made the community what it is today. To all of them we say thank you and Yishar Kochachem.