

Traces of our Past: Shomrim Laboker, Beth Yehuda, Shaare Tefila,  
Beth Hamedrash Hagadol-Tifereth Israel,  
(Tifereth Joseph)

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*This article was written in 2001 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Shomrim Laboker, an amalgamation of six earlier congregations. There was, however, no historic evidence to support the choice of 1901 as a founding date for any of the congregations.*

The Industrial Revolution was marked not only by mass production of goods but also by mass migrations of peoples. Fleeing poverty and persecution, the Jews of Eastern Europe were among those seeking new homes. The largest numbers made their way from Russia to the United States, making New York's Lower Eastside the most densely populated area in the world at the time. Not insignificant numbers, however, made their way to Montreal. Leaving towns and areas named Pinsk, Moroshe, Galicia, and Ozeroff, they settled on streets named St. Urbain, de Bullion, St. Viateur, and Papineau. The area of greatest concentration was an area of only two square miles in the Plateau Mont Royal. To the Jewish community of the time this area was known not as the "Plateau" but as "downtown," a distinction which was more social than it was accurately geographic. This term, in its broadest sense, distinguished the predominantly Eastern European immigrant, working class, mostly Yiddish speaking neighborhoods from the "uptown," established, mostly Anglophile Jewish community. Eddy Wolkove, a former residence, fondly recalls these neighborhoods as the "Golden Ghetto." Life may have been difficult and primitive compared to today but it was marked by a sense of intimacy and communality in which both services and friends and family were near at hand.

The growth of these neighborhoods was accompanied by a growth in synagogues. Often down the street, around the corner from each other, and two or three to a block, the plethora of synagogues could only partly be accounted for by the growing numbers of worshippers. Israel Medresh, an immigrant to Montreal in 1912, provided an anecdotal description of the establishment of Montreal's synagogues in the early decades of the century. When an immigrant Jew would come to Montreal, he would first attend an existing synagogue.

"When (he) began to feel at home in these congregations, he began to express his opinions and to become involved in the synagogue's business and procedures. With time he would come to disagreements with the president, the rabbi or the gabbai, and he would become unhappy. When a few such unhappy members would come together they would begin planning a new congregation where the rules would be more democratic, where there would be a brotherly feeling..., where more familiar people (mere haimishe menshen) would be elected to the offices of president, vice-president, trustee, etc. And in more or less such a manner were 'shuls' and 'shulelach' created in Montreal by immigrant Jews."<sup>1</sup>

By 1945, some thirty synagogues marked the landscape of the "Golden Ghetto." Yet soon the Jewish community was to shift its geographic focus. An early historian of Montreal's Jewish community and journalist for the Canader Adler, B.J.Zack wrote with regret in 1958.

“Our old orthodox synagogues-monuments of our Jewish community...are now disappearing...Traces of these buildings,” Zack continued, “remind us of the role that these orthodox synagogues played in local Jewish life...”<sup>ii</sup>

The synagogue, which today stands at the corner of Westbury and Plamondon, represents the amalgamation of six of some of the oldest congregations in Montreal. Some traces of these buildings continue to dot the urban landscape. Shadows of a former rosette window filled in with bricks, or a brick Star of David, etched away by time, mark a few of these former Jewish houses of worship. Others have been completely demolished and replaced by newer buildings and one has been renovated, obliterating its past function.

The corner of Milton and Clark, just off the most fashionable strip of today’s Plateau Mont Royal, is marked by a state of the art high tech cinema production and viewing facility. Not even a trace remains of what was probably the first synagogue in the Plateau. The **Shaare Tefilah-the Austro-Hungarian Shul**, may have been established as early as 1892. The synagogue at 29 Milton, built in the first decade of the twentieth century, was a most imposing structure. It must have been an important building in Montreal as it was captured by the famous Montreal photographer, Notman. An eclectic blend of architectural styles typical of the late nineteenth century historicism, the detailing was possibly of Austrian influence. Punctuating the peaked roofs, the circular elements, seemingly stylized rays of light, can be seen as decorative elements in German and Austrian synagogues and churches. This imposing façade was fitting for the formal interior and demeanor of its congregants. Sara Jacob’s father, David Soloman, was instrumental in the building of the synagogue. He served as president until his death in 1918. Ms. Jacobs recalls that while a green velvet curtain covered the gaps of the railing surrounding the women’s gallery, protecting the women’s legs from immodest view, the women’s faces were not curtained. She had a clear view of her father sitting on the central bimah dressed in the formal attire of the President in a high silk hat and morning coat.

The **Beth Yehuda** on the corner of Duluth and Hotel de Ville, was an equally impressive structure. A badly deteriorated photocopy from a newspaper article, nevertheless, confirms the architectural program of the building. The article, announcing the opening of the building in 1921, heralds this as one of the most beautiful synagogues in Canada. The peaked roof created a domed interior that was illuminated by rosette windows and four stories of windows on the sides. The Stars of David on the facade and sides as well as the Tablets of the Ten Commandments on the peak of the parapet clearly distinguish this as a synagogue. Hovering over the modest surrounding buildings, this synagogue served its congregation until its amalgamation with the Shomrim Laboker in 1957. It was converted into apartments in the sixties. The apartment building balconies, aluminum windows, and side wings overlay original architectural details. The former circular windows, which must have flanked the women’s gallery, are now boarded, nonfunctioning rings of brick, visible only from a distance. Inscribed in the rear of the building is a tracing in brick of the former rosette window, which probably illuminated the space above the Aron Hakosesh.

The Beth Yehuda, as one of the largest synagogues in the Plateau, hosted larger weddings. Like the Beth David and the B’nai Jacob, located further north in Lower Outremont, this synagogue was known for its choir. Many young boys gained their first exposure to synagogue life through their participation in these choirs. Harvey Berger still sings the tunes learned during his

childhood and recalls been shuttled from congregation to congregation to present choral arrangements at the Sunday weddings in these larger congregations. Music in general plays an important role in the memories of former visitors to the shuls of these neighborhoods. Former residents recall going from shul to shul on a Shabbat to hear the different cantors. Well known visiting cantors would draw crowds to even the smaller congregations. Indeed, even some of the small shulelach, though they might not have had a regular rabbi, had a cantor.

Not three blocks south of the Beth Yehuda, on St. Dominique, was the smaller and more modest **Shomrim Laboker**. For most of its existence at that location one certain rabbi was associated with that congregation. As most rabbis of the time, Rabbi Jacob Lieb Colton was an honorary rabbi in the sense that he was not paid for that role. He made his living instead, as did many rabbis, as one of the city's most popular mohels and as a successful shochet. He also did not necessarily minister on Shabbat or daily minyans but provided learned authority and led the congregation on the High Holidays. One particular Kol Nidre night stands out in his son's memory. "During the Kol Nidre appeal," Yoel Colton recalls, "the youngsters would run outside to play. On the Kol Nidre evening after the creation of the State of Israel my father locked the doors of the sanctuary. 'No one is going out,' he announced. So I remained in the room during that appeal. 'I know what you all earn. This is what you are going to give and this is what you are going to give.' And so he went around the room and no one refused him. Everybody gave that night and I was impressed by my father's leadership." Rabbi Colton was a dignified yet bold gentleman. He wore a top hat and used a walking stick to emphasize his gait, a stick which he did not hesitate to wield against the neighborhood's hooligans.

The Shomrim Laboker may have been established as early as 1906 and may have had its first premises at 250 or 259 Cadieux Street (now de Bullion). A deed of sale, dated 1913, registers the purchase of a property at 3675 St. Dominique. The simple duplex, part of a series of row houses built in the 1890s, was converted into a small synagogue. The names of the trustees, acting on behalf of the congregation, reveal the working class status of these early members: "Ephraim Rosenblatt, butcher, Max Lichterman, tailor, C. Drucker, presser, Aaron Pervin, merchant." As in many of these small congregations, the members had a hand in building their holy places. Shulamis Yellin, whose grandfather handcrafted the Aron Hakodesh, recalls the festive opening of the synagogue on Simchat Torah probably in 1918.

"Dressed in white starched dresses which stood out stiffly over even more stiffly starched petticoats, Henny (my cousin) and I marched proudly to shul with Zaida. Joyously we turned the corner onto St. Dominique Street, joining the throngs of parents and children carrying, like us, small flags with polished apples and small coloured candles at the top. We would follow the elders as they circled the Synagogue with the Torahs in their arms so everyone could see the Holy Scrolls and kiss them with joy. How beautiful the Synagogue appeared that night!"<sup>iiii</sup>

The original building was extended, probably in the mid twenties, to create a vestibule and an exterior entrance to the stairwell leading to the women's gallery. A telltale section of a cornice molding partially embedded in the brick at the side of the building marks the point at which the vestibule-lobby was extended from the original building. The brickwork on the façade features a curious element. The symbol most commonly used to designate a synagogue, the Star of David, is depicted sideways instead of point up. Today the Shtull family, who purchased the building on St. Dominique when the congregation moved to its present location, continues to operate an egg and dairy distribution business from the premises. A theatre inhabits the upper level, which was

once the women's gallery. Inside, two original double doors, with inset circles of stained glass Stars of David, lead from the lobby into the former sanctuary. Tracings of the central bimah can still be seen on the planked wood floor while several brass plates along the wall bear the numbers of former seats. A second floor now spans the opening to the women's gallery, which once bore illustrations depicting the signs of the Zodiac on the panels of the balustrade. A barrel vaulted ceiling, flanked by two rows of identical stained glass windows, once rose above the gallery. A single stained glass window hangs on the wall of Mr. Shtull's office.

In later years the congregation continued to grow. In order to serve congregants who had moved further north and west, Shomrim Laboker established a "branch" at two locations: 5617 Park Ave. and 5310 St. Laurent. The second location might have been space provided by a member of the congregation, a furrier who operated his enterprise at this address. That the vibrancy of the congregation was maintained for decades is revealed in a newspaper article written in 1943. Reporting on the synagogue's recent election of officers, the writer takes obvious pride in pointing out that this "downtown shul" has three morning minyans, "more than any other congregation in Montreal," and that furthermore, "the shul owes money to no one." Though the synagogue would seem to have been robust and solvent, no fancy caterer was hired for the installation dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Green are thanked for cooking the chickens for the dinner honouring the new officers.

Further north on St. Urbain, between St. Viateur and Fairmont, a small Greek church, with bright yellow stucco walls and terracotta Mediterranean roof tiles, reveals no clues as to its original vocation. Congregation **Tifereth Israel**, established perhaps as early as 1905, purchased a duplex at 5390 St. Urbain in 1914. A 1939 map identifies the building as "Tifereth Israel Hebrew School and Synagogue." The school had been accommodated by an earlier extension. The original building was demolished and rebuilt in 1947. An anniversary brochure boasts that this "was one of the most modern, finest, small synagogues of the time."<sup>iv</sup> Archival photos reveal the transformations, which the building subsequently underwent, first as a Baptist church and today as a Greek church. The Baptist church retained the unique yet simple wrought iron railing featuring rows of seven branched menorahs. The roof parapet was peaked with the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. A later incarnation removed these elements. In a final act of urban layering, the entire façade was resurfaced in the summer of 1999. Only the rear reveals a clue to the building's past function. Like a barely whispered secret, the circular tracing in the brick recalls the former rosette window, which, like others, probably featured a stained glass Star of David.

The other two congregations, whose names are associated with today's Westbury synagogue, were outside of the centre of the Jewish community. Not listed in the signage marking the amalgamated congregations on the side of the synagogue, the **Tifereth Joseph** was one of three congregations in the Papineau district. The internal disputes, which fostered the creation of at least two of these congregations, are still remembered today. A writer for the *Canader Adler* in 1910 described these wranglings with obvious cynicism:

"...Papineau already has two hundred Jews and, with our growing population we might acquire another five Jews, and if Mr. A is president and Mr. B is Gae and Mr. C is trasurer are D and E, and etc. lesser persons?... We report on two congregations already, (the 'Congregation of All Israel are Friends' and 'The Glory of Jerusalem') but before writing this editorial this settlement may acquire a third, possibly the

“Extension of the Berdichev Congregation, or a fourth, the ‘Congregation of all Israel are Enemies,’ and before this is printed Papineau may have a fifth, the ‘Congregation of the Observers of Tuesdays’ and so on.”<sup>v</sup>

In deed, as this writer had predicted, a third congregation, the Tifereth Joseph, was soon established in Papineau. Today, its identity is submerged within the interior of the Westbury shul as the name of the daily chapel.

To the south of the Plateau, **Beth Hamedrash Hagadol**, at 1887 Notre Dame, was in the present day antique district. Today the building and its surrounding structures have made way for a residential development. In 1951 its president, Jacob Cohen and a handful of members, as representatives of an already defunct congregation, approached the officers of a burgeoning congregation on McKenzie in the Cote de Neige district. This new congregation took over the older synagogue’s assets, accepted its charter, perpetuated its name and hung its memorial plaques in the new synagogue. In 1963 the Tifereth Israel, following its members who were moving north and west, merged with this congregation. The amalgamated congregation joined the Shomrim Laboker in 1995. The inauguration of the McKenzie shul, in 1953, was dedicated to the members of Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol, 1917-1949, and to its honorary president, Jacob Cohen.

On Rosh Hashona of 1934, Jacob Cohen addressed a heartfelt letter to the members and seat holders of the Beit Hamedrash Hagadol of Montreal. Serving as an invitation to the eighteenth anniversary meeting of the shul, Mr. Cohen’s letter reveals both a pride in the synagogue’s accomplishments and an uncertainty of the future which must have characterized the mood of these synagogues during the depression years. “How much toil and money went into creating the results you see today,” he wrote. “Who better than we Jews of this neighborhood know how important it was to have created the only synagogue and Talmud Torah in this neighborhood.” He announces with pride that the shul has engaged the famous Cantor H. Rubenstein of the Tifereth Zion Shul in Warsaw. And yet, to meet the challenges of the economic crisis, he urges the members to become involved in the shul, to sell seats, to pay off their debts to the shul, to bring in new members, and to become active in the Ladies Auxiliary and the Young People’s Society.

“In general,” he concludes, “he who comes to shul to worship, he who gives light and warmth to the shul, is one who gives tzedakah. He who is sincerely concerned with the activities of the shul, will receive God’s help, and we will be assured of a good year of health and income...”

It is in this spirit that the “100<sup>th</sup>” anniversary of the Shomrim Laboker, Beth Yehuda, Shaare Tefillah, Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Tifereth Israel (Tifereth Joseph) is celebrated. Today’s synagogue bears not only the names, but also maintains the traditions of orthodoxy and the “briderlichkiet” and “heimishkiet” of the earlier congregations.

<sup>i</sup> Israel Medresh, *Montreal of Yesterday*, published in Yiddish in Montreal, 1947

<sup>ii</sup> B.J. Zack, “Our Old Orthodox Shuls” *Canader Adler*, October 19, 1958.

<sup>iii</sup> Shulamis Yellin, *Shulamis, Stories From A Montreal Childhood*, Montreal, p. 29.

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<sup>iv</sup> Louis Coplevitch, a history written on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the amalgamation of the Beit Hamidrash Hagadol with the Tifereth Israel, probably 1973.

<sup>v</sup> These tales from the Keneder Adler were translated by David Rome and will soon be published in a book entitled “Through the eyes of the Eagle-Translations from the Keneder Adler (the Canada Eagle) and other early Montreal Yiddish Press.”