Chapter One: 1917-1927

1911
First Holy Day Services and First Hebrew school classes at Oddfellows Hall. Initial services held in home of A. Matz.

1914
Brandeis appointed to U.S. Supreme Court.

1915
Congregation Kehillath Israel established with a membership of 36.

1916
U.S. Congress establishes Mother’s Day.
World War I begins.

1917
Congregation Kehillath Israel granted State Charter.
Birth of J.F. Kennedy.
Bolsheviks seize power in Russia.
Balfour Declaration, supporting the establishment of Jewish homeland in Palestine.
U.S. declares war on Germany.

1918
Worldwide influenza epidemic strikes.
American Jewish Congress founded.

1919
Red Scare after World War begins in U.S.
KI Sisterhood was founded.
The Treaty of Versailles is signed.
18th Amendment and Volstead Act Passed: Prohibition begins.
Boston Police Strike.

1920
19th Amendment (women’s suffrage) is ratified.
League of Nations meets for the first time at Geneva, Switzerland.
Warren Harding elected.
Histadrut (Jewish labor federation) and Haganah (Jewish defense organization) founded.
Dearborn Independent publishes The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

1921
The Emergency Immigration Act is passed implementing numerical and quota limits.
Land purchased for Synagogue building.
Sacco and Vanzetti found guilty.
Britain proclaimed that Palestine east of the Jordan river closed to Jewish settlement.
Adolph Hitler becomes chairman of the Nazi Party.
From meeting in someone’s home to the building which still stands at 384 Harvard Street, the members who formed KI were determined to make the congregation distinct. KI was the first synagogue that originated in Brookline. In many ways, the synagogue reflected the town in which it began—passionate, self-aware, eager to learn, and willing to work for what it wanted. The building was completed in 1924, and the arrival of Rabbi Louis Epstein in 1925 placed the community on the path to stability, growth, and commitment to Klal Yisrael. Originally an Orthodox congregation, the decision to allow men and women to sit together signaled the desire to balance tradition with modernity.

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise established the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York.
Transjordan established in British portion of Mandate area.
Lenin creates the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.
Fascist Leader Mussolini rises to power in Italy.
The cornerstone of the Synagogue is laid.

1922
1923
Harry Houdini frees himself from a straight jacket while suspended upside down.
Firestone Tire and Rubber starts producing inflatable tires.
The Charleston becomes the dance craze of the decade.

1924
Lenin dies, Stalin begins rule as Soviet dictator.
The first conference of the General Zionist movement is held in Jerusalem.
National Origins Immigration Restriction Act passed.
Joseph Rudnick becomes president.
First Holy Day services are held in the new Synagogue.

1925
Dedication of Temple Kehillath Israel.
Louis Epstein is installed as Rabbi.
Fitzgerald publishes The Great Gatsby.
KI High School organized.

1926
First liquid-fuel rocket launches at Auburn, MA.
NBC radio network opens with 24 stations.
First SAT college admissions test.
Winnie-the-Pooh is published by A. A. Milne.

1927
Charles Lindbergh makes the first solo transatlantic flight.
The Hundred Dollar Banquet held.
The KI Brotherhood organized.
The Jazz Singer opens, marking the end of the silent film era.
Chapter One: 1917-1927

Testaments and Testimonials

Hanging on the wall outside Novakoff Hall was a large framed document written in Gothic calligraphy. Alongside it were photographs of KI’s founders sporting round glasses and somber mustachios. Every Shabbat, I used to pass this exhibit on my way to Nitzaanim—another display of pomp in a venerable building. The document was especially mystifying. Years passed before I could read it, and still more before I actually did:

"Testimonial
Whereas Congregation Kehillath Israel had an indebtedness of Twenty-five Thousand Dollars which was the balance due for the erection of its Synagogue in the Town of Brookline; and Whereas; the members and friends of the Congregation whose names are listed below, through their sincere regard for its welfare, and the welfare of the community, by generously contributing One Hundred Dollars per cover at a Banquet held at the Hotel Somerset in the City of Boston on the sixth day of January, Nineteen Hundred Twenty-seven, have made it possible to pay this debt…"
This correspondence about hardware for the building draws attention to the status of our community.

KI opened its new building in time for the High Holidays in 1924.
358 men and women are listed as having contributed to eliminate the congregation’s debt. This milestone marked the end of KI’s first decade—as Rabbi Louis M. Epstein noted, “the closing of the period of our immaturity.” It also marked KI’s emergence as a stable and financially independent institution. Thus, the Testimonial depicts a congregation poised to grow, burden free.

The Jews of Brookline had been worshipping together since 1911, convened by Mr. A. Matz who needed a minyan to say Kaddish for his mother. Over the next few years, they continued to meet in his home. A sustained effort to form a community that would provide regular services was in place by 1915. These 36 men rented space in various locations and filed for incorporation in February of 1917. Key to this effort were prominent businessmen who had made Brookline their home—Julius and Simon Selya, David Nadel, and A. Glazier. Soon they were joined by Joseph Rudnick, the Rabinovitz brothers, David Dane, and Oscar Landers. They engaged a student at Tufts Medical School, Israel Wrightman, to teach students in the budding religious school.

KI’s members intended their shul to be a guardian of Orthodoxy that emphasized Torah study, ritual, and community. Other congregations existed in Boston’s more Jewish neighborhoods including Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. There was a class dimension to this new congregation that would originate in Brookline—unlike those that would move from the city to the suburbs in the years ahead. The upper-middle class Jews of Brookline saw themselves as distinct and wanted a synagogue that would reflect their success and status.

Over the following decade, the congregation grew dramatically. By 1922, they had the funds to construct the synagogue building (though not before hail interrupted the laying of the cornerstone), which still stands at 384 Harvard Street. The Hebrew School welcomed the children of members as well as the unaffiliated. In 1924, Maurice Liberman was engaged to run the Hebrew School and edit the KI Chronicle, which reported member activities, provided Torah teachings, personal ads, and trumpeted the success
ABSTRACT FROM THE KEHILLATH ISRAEL HEBREW SCHOOL CURRICULUM

FIRST YEAR

HEBREW
1. Mechanics of reading and writing.
3. Hebrew conversation.
5. Memorization and translation of fundamental prayers.
6. Hebrew terms connected with holidays and Synagogue.

RELIGION
1. Customs and ceremonies.
2. Practical Judaism in everyday child life.
3. Principles of Judaism through the medium of stories, playlets, etc.
4. Love for the Synagogue.

HISTORY
1. Bible stories.
2. Biographies of great Jewish men and women.
3. Holiday stories.
4. Stories portraying Jewish life.

MUSIC
1. Hebrew National Songs.
2. Religious melodies and synagogue responses.
3. American patriotic songs.

JEWISH AND OTHER ACTIVITIES
1. Children’s Congregation and services
2. Holiday Entertainments.
3. Clubs, games.
4. Sports.

SECOND YEAR

HEBREW
2. Memorization and translation of selective prayers.
3. Study of the Bible in the original selected portions of the Book of Genesis.
5. Hebrew readers.
6. Writing exercises.

RELIGION, HISTORY, MUSIC, AND JEWISH ACTIVITIES

Along the same lines as in the first year, but more advanced work and in a more intensive manner.

NOTE—The September issue of the Chronicle will contain the complete curriculum of our Regular Daily School, Sunday Classes, and Special Courses.
Maurice Liberman, Principal.

Education was central to KI. Here we see some highlights from the 1925 school year.

FIRST ANNUAL SCHOOL OUTING
The Pupils of Kehillath Israel School
Invite their Parents and Friends to spend with them
Sunday, June 7
AT FRANKLIN PARK

The Juniors who are in charge of this affair promise a good time for everybody

WE ARE NOT FUSSY
Come in your Stars, Buicks, or Pierce Arrows, and take us to the outing. We will be waiting for you in front of Temple Kehillath Israel.
Sunday, June 7, 9 A. M. sharp.
Don’t disappoint us
The Careless Children.

Dr. Wolfson to Address Junior Congregation

Dr. Harry A. Wolfson of Harvard University will address the Junior Congregation Kehillath Israel of Brookline, at their next meeting to be held on May 7th, at 8 o’clock, at Temple Israel, Commonwealth avenue.
of the new congregation. A Chevra Mishna Society was formed, and according to its 1924 by-laws, “women can participate in the society just like men and are obligated to all of the commitments they are capable of maintaining.”

The community hired Rabbi Louis Epstein, who had been serving Congregation Beth Hamedrosh Hagadol in Roxbury since 1918, to begin in the Fall of 1925. Even in these early years, KI proudly proclaimed its offerings for different groups within the community. The Sisterhood held balls, bazaars, and bridge parties. The Juniors, a youth group, was forever in want of members who pulled their weight in organizing the club’s events. Hebrew School students participated in Hanukkah and Purim pageants, portraying characters such as Satan, Miss Irreligion, Miss Assimilation, and the Spirit of Moses. And while the entire community laid the groundwork for their shul’s first hundred years, the Ladies’ Mizrachi Brigade devoted itself to the future of the Jewish people as a whole by promoting “the rehabilitation of Palestine.”

KI’s commitment to strict Orthodoxy soon shifted. Before Rabbi Epstein arrived in 1925, congregants voted in favor of mixed seating during prayer. President Rudnick appreciated the potential consequences of this decision and implored the women of the congregation, “I plead with the ladies of this community, who were so eager to sit with their husbands and children, that they show their appreciation by giving us their full support… and also to help us spiritually to make this Temple a real house of God.”

Nonetheless, the decision created a permanent rift. Some members left and established the “strictly Orthodox” Congregation Sons of Israel, predecessor of today’s Young Israel. KI transitioned from Orthodoxy to traditional-Conservative in an effort to straddle the worlds of Judaism and Americanism. This effort also reflected the community’s “in-between-ness”: not rigidly doctrinal, yet eager to embrace tradition; at once Jewish and American; nascent, but flourishing. KI began a process of maturation.

The Testimonial marks the strong foundation from which they were able to grow. Since its founding, KI has developed into one of Greater Boston’s most prominent
Writing in the KI Chronicle in February 1925, President Rudnick implores those who fought to sit together to please attend services.

THE PRESIDENT'S APPEAL

I want to appeal to the young men and women of this community, or the so-called “victors” that they must at once show their interest as they have promised that they would do so if this congregation would fulfill their wish. There is no excuse now for anyone to stay away, or refuse to give their support to the Temple, or not to pay their contributions which have been pledged. The issue was settled in your favor and it is your duty to do your utmost to put this congregation on a high standard in every way.

I plead with the ladies of this community, who were so eager to sit with their husbands and children, that they show their appreciation by giving us their full support and assist us in raising funds for the Congregation and also to help us spiritually to make this Temple a real House of God.

THE MIRIAM CLUB

The Miriam Girls, after a period of some inactivity, are now having very successful meetings. At a recent election the following girls were elected: President, Frances Rozen; Vice-President, Muriel Sherman; Treasurer, Natalie Broidy; Secretary, Muriel Kodis; Publicity Agent, Judith Thomson; Assistant Publicity Agent, Evelyn Pinkerton.

The club meets every Sunday at 11:30 a.m. After a short business meeting, there is usually a speaker to address the girls.

At the Lag Ba-Omer party which was given to all the Hebrew and Sunday School children, the Miriam girls assisted by serving to the hundred and fifty children that attended.

WOMAN TO PREACH AT TEMPLE KEHILLAH ISRAEL

Tonight, for the first time in the history of Temple Kehillah Israel, Harvard Street, Brookline, a woman will occupy the pulpit and deliver the sermon. Mrs. Irma Lindshelm, president of the National Hadassah, will be the speaker, and the night will be known as “Hadasah Night.”

It is expected that the members of the Hadassah Societies of Greater Boston will be present in large numbers. The services will be conducted by Rabbi Louis M. Epstein.
synagogues. It remains an example of dynamic tradition-alism—a community that endeavors to uphold Judaism’s age-old rituals and ethos while remaining open to change. Now KI is entering its next hundred years and American Jews are redefining their relationship with tradition, just as their predecessors did a century ago. Could the congregants listed in the Testimonial see the fruits of their vision, they would no doubt be astounded. We, too, would probably feel the same if we could foresee the changes that the coming decades have in store for KI.

Annie Davis learned to walk, talk, and daven at KI. She is a recent graduate of Johns Hopkins University with a degree in History and an abiding love of music and theater. Since 2010, she has served as a Park Ranger and volunteer at five different National Parks, from Boston to the Grand Canyon.
The committee from the One Hundred Dollar Banquet, January 1927

A panoramic photograph of the 1927 dinner at the Somerset ballroom. Over 300 people attended and Mordechai Kaplan, then at the Jewish Theological Seminary, was the guest speaker.