

RAV CHESED

essays in honor of

Rabbi Dr. Haskel Lookstein

VOLUME II

EDITED BY
RAFAEL MEDOFF

The Halakha According to B'nai B'rith

Jonathan D. Sarna



KTAV Publishing House, Inc.
Jersey City, New Jersey

2009

The *Halakha* According to B'nai B'rith

Jonathan D. Sarna

According to an oft-repeated tale, the Jewish fraternal organization B'nai B'rith, founded in New York City on October 13, 1843, was established by recent German immigrants in response to antisemitism.¹ Hasia Diner's account reflects this dominant view:

Twelve young Jewish men, all from Germany, got together informally on a regular basis on Sundays at Sinsheimer's saloon on New York's Essex Street. These young merchants with a few artisans among them had all been in the United States less than a decade and at Sinsheimer's found a place to relax and interact with their fellows. Four of them belonged either to the Masons or the Odd Fellows. In the 1840s, when those organizations began to systematically reject Jewish applicants for membership, these young Jews decided to create a Jewish equivalent.²

Thanks to Cornelia Wilhelm's careful research, we now know that this is a complete myth. First of all, the founders were *not* all immigrants; Isaac Dittenhoefer, for example, was born in America. Second, they were not just starting off in life; instead, they were "already successful, middle class self-employed men with

a bourgeois consciousness and standing.”³ Finally, and most important, antisemitism had almost nothing to do with the organization’s founding. Most of the founders, in fact, were members in good standing of Masonic or Odd Fellows lodges, and those lodges did not change their policies toward Jews in the 1840s. Instead, individual Jews were turned down on other grounds, such as lack of personal morality and a dearth of genuine religious motivation. Some of them blamed religious prejudice for their misfortune, but those charges, at the time, were considered baseless.⁴

The complaints of the rejected fraternity members served, nevertheless, as the catalyst for establishing what was originally conceived to be “a society for the purpose of supporting its members in the event of illness and other untoward events.”⁵ Even Jewish members of the Masons and Odd Fellows sought the company of their fellow Jews during times of severe illness or when a death occurred. Those rejected by non-Jewish fraternities required Jewish companionship at such times all the more. Two decades earlier their needs would have been met by what was then New York’s only synagogue, Shearith Israel, which assumed responsibility for the entire New York Jewish community. In the interim, however, the “synagogue-community” of early America had collapsed into a community of eight competing synagogues.⁶ While many of the founders of B’nai B’rith belonged to Congregation Anshe Chesed, growing numbers of New York Jews were “indifferent”; they belonged to no synagogue whatsoever.⁷ Already in 1841 a group of New York Jews who were unconnected with synagogues formed what they called the “New Israelite Sick-Benefit and Burial Society,” supposedly the first “overtly secular Jewish philanthropy in the United States.”⁸ The new society, one suspects, looked to follow in its footsteps, forging links among Jews that reached beyond the synagogue’s now delimited sphere.

Within weeks, however, the plan had broadened from the creation of a “society” – the equivalent, perhaps, of a traditional “*hevra*” with provisions for branches in other cities – into a full-fledged fraternal order. That idea had actually been percolating

for several years, influenced by the example of the Masons and Odd Fellows, and in response to the growing fragmentation and factionalism in American Jewish life. Since synagogue disputes and an array of other religious differences now divided Jews from one another, the new goal, according to B'nai B'rith's longtime president and first historian, was to create a fresh basis for unity based on the fraternal and covenantal ties among Jews:

A society which, based on the teachings of Judaism, should banish from its deliberations all doctrinal and dogmatic discussions and by the practice of moral and benevolent precepts bring about union and harmony, where before had existed strife and dissension. Such a society, eliminating geographical lines and bringing together upon a common platform German and Pole, Hungarian and Hollander, Englishman and Alsatian; extirpating the narrow prejudices and superstitions of sections and provinces; inculcating lessons of discipline and toleration; of mutual forbearance and respect, of brotherly love and harmony, could not fail, it was thought, of producing a complete and radical change in the manners, habits, thoughts and actions of its adherents.⁹

The new organization bore the German name Bundes Brüder and the euphonious Hebrew name B'nē B'rith (as it was originally spelled). The German name stressed fraternity ("league of brothers") without a Jewish component, while the Hebrew name denoted connection to the covenant (*brith*) that linked Jews across time and space. Revealingly, it was the Jewish name that quickly became the dominant one. By 1851, when B'nai B'rith published a revised constitution, its German name had been discarded.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the secular universalism that underlay the original German name remained influential within some lodges of B'nai B'rith. Emanu-El Lodge in Baltimore, for example, defiantly admitted a non-Jew to membership in 1850, warning against "exclusivity." The Grand Lodge, however, firmly rejected

the Baltimore lodge's decision. Acknowledging the universalistic hope that someday the "mission of Israel" would be fulfilled and all the nations of the earth would worship one God, the Grand Lodge ruled that, for now, "we must...abide [*sic*] our time." B'nai B'rith, it decreed, was open only to Jews. Emanu-El lodge, dissatisfied with that decision, disbanded just as B'nai B'rith's new constitution came into effect.¹¹

By the time its 1851 constitution appeared, B'nai B'rith was benefiting from surging Jewish emigration, principally from Central Europe. The size of the American Jewish community had more than tripled over the previous decade, ballooning, according to some estimates, from 15,000 in 1840 to 50,000 in 1850. The Jewish population of New York City, at the same time, grew from about 7,000 to over 16,000. These numbers would increase at the same rate during the 1850s.¹²

"Many land on this shore, ignorant of the vernacular, without direction how to proceed, without home to settle down," the new constitution observed. "Thus they wander about, longing for the brotherhood, which is willing to help, to render assistance, and to counsel them how to make a living."¹³ This was essentially the mission that B'nai B'rith took upon itself at that time. Its goal was not so much to create a "secular synagogue," as Deborah Dash Moore argued,¹⁴ as to establish a secular *kehilla*, an organized lay-led Jewish community that would bind together religiously divided and geographically dispersed Jews into a single covenanted community:

Therefore this new covenant of peace; that its children should not only extend to each other the friendly brotherhand in all changes of life, where aid and assistance becomes necessary, when misfortune here and sufferings there make their appearance but where their strength may unite also to higher and usefull [*sic*] objects, to call into existence benevolent institutions, to found associations for instruction, art and knowledge, but more especially to cultivate and guard