

## B'NAI B'RITH AND THE GATES OF ZION

While Jerusalem at the end of the 19th century was still the spiritual center of the Holy Land, Jaffa, once a small, provincial backwater, had become not only the main port town of Palestine and gateway to Jerusalem, but also the administrative, cultural, and social center of the Yishuv. The burgeoning Zionist movement brought increasing numbers of immigrants to Jaffa's shores, and these newcomers brought with them a spirit of change, enlightenment, and secularization—"the spirit of living life to the full," was how Jerusalemite Yellin described his coastal brethren. A pluralistic community developed, far less encumbered by the religious tensions pervasive in Jerusalem.

Appropriately named Sha'ar Zion, "Gates of Zion," B'nai B'rith opened its Jaffa Lodge (No. 402) in 1890 under the auspices of the Jerusalem Lodge. Reflective of the time and place and of the spirit of cooperation and tolerance in the port town, many of B'nai B'rith's activities were joint efforts with other organizations and public bodies including a committee charged with lobbying the Turkish authorities to ease restrictions on Jewish immigration. Shortly after its founding, the lodge was instrumental in arranging the first all-communal elections for a joint city council, made up of Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and North African immigrants.

In an attempt to combat Christian missionaries in Jaffa, B'nai B'rith, together with the town committee, established the Sha'ar Zion Hospital in 1890. With up to 40 beds (the town's three other hospitals – all run by missionaries – had only half that number) the hospital provided medical services (including a free eye clinic) to Jews throughout the coastal plain. As immigrants poured into the Yishuv's port town, epidemics, especially cholera, were among the hospital's chief concerns.

Maintaining the hospital was no easy matter. It was forced to shut down for sev-



Sha'ar Zion Library, Beit Ariella building.

eral months a year due to financial problems, and patients were referred to "the Hospital of Inciters" where they had "the pleasure of listening all day to the preaching and prayer of the saints of Christianity." Thus, in a letter to the Jerusalem Lodge, Sha'ar Zion's secretary described how missionaries lured patients by opening an eye clinic next to the hospital on the days when Sha'ar Zion's eye clinic was closed. "We raised funds and now have a doctor on the premises daily." In the end, the missionary clinic was forced to close its doors.

Both in the United States and the Yishuv, creating public libraries and cultural centers was B'nai B'rith's primary concern, and in 1892 the organization established the Sha'ar Zion library in Jaffa, two years before the Abarbanel Library was to open in Jerusalem. B'nai B'rith shared both the financial and administrative maintenance of the library with a number of organizations, including B'nai Moshe, the philosopher Ahad Ha'Am's fervently secular group whose ideology (anathema in the less pluralistic Jerusalem) governed the library's direction.

Under the influence of Jaffa's more secular atmosphere, the Sha'ar Zion Lodge viewed the library as a catalyst for strengthening Zionism and Jewish nationalism, and its collection included many volumes of Jewish and national interest. The library served not only the needs of the growing Jewish town, but also the outlying settlements,

which relied upon messengers to transport the books.

Unlike most public libraries in Eretz Yisrael, the Sha'ar Zion Library stayed open year after successive year. In 1913, a branch was established in adjacent Tel Aviv (founded 1904), keeping its doors open 42 hours a week, including the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. In 1922, the Jaffa library was transferred to the Tel Aviv municipality, becoming the basis for today's Beit Ariella Library. If it never achieved the status as the country's national library—and the Jerusalem vs. Jaffa debate was a fierce one—it was the Yishuv's most important library during the critical years of the 1890s, and Beit Ariella, which opened in 1972, is today Israel's largest public library.

The library that B'nai B'rith opened in Safed in 1891 catered to a very different population. Almost totally cut off from the rest of the Yishuv, many of the residents of Safed were poorly educated and reliant upon *halukah* funds. With its large reading room, the library became the area's cultural center, with evening classes offered in Hebrew and other subjects. The Galilee Lodge established a Hebrew Academy in 1891 “so that Jews would be able to understand the language of their brothers” and, soon after, a Hebrew-speaking kindergarten. These efforts went a long way in alleviating the isolation felt by many of the Yishuv's northern residents.

## OTHER INITIATIVES

The Jerusalem Lodge was the catalyst behind other important initiatives. These included the establishment of the Ezrat Nashim hospital for the mentally disturbed, built on Jaffa Street in 1895. The lodge was also behind the founding of the City Council, with representatives chosen from among all Jewish sects by way of the first elections ever held in the city. Describing this monumental event, Ephraim Cohen wrote, “Through the influence of B'nai B'rith members, the City Council was established in 1898, and its members were elected by general, secret ballot—unheard of until then anywhere in the vicinity of Jerusalem. For these elections, stationary ballot boxes were not set up. [Rather] the sextants of the rabbinical courts walked about the city with ballot boxes went from house to house, so that all citizens of the city had the opportunity to participate in the elections.”

The lodge also adopted as part of its mandate to organize the Jewish communities in the “ancient lands” under the B'nai B'rith mantle in order to “instill in them a spirit of new life, a spirit of national revival” (Yellin). To accomplish this, difficult and sometimes dangerous missions were undertaken between 1891 and 1898 by members of the lodge—particularly Yellin, Edelman, Mejohas, and Rokach—to Alexandria, Cairo, Izmir, Constantinople, Beirut, Plovdaev, and Sofia. Mejohas: “Indeed, these Jewish communities were simply revived by our lodge. They were already submerged in a dangerous, lethargic coma and some had already begun to roll down the slope of assimilation, and our lodge came and gave them a push from behind and brought them back to a better path, to the life of the people, to the life of the language and nationhood.” These lodges and their progeny adopted many of the activities forged by the Jerusalem Lodge, establishing libraries, kindergartens, and schools. Through the efforts of the Jerusalem Lodge, a B'nai B'rith district encompassing all lodges in the ancient lands, was established in Constantinople in order to coordinate efforts and serve as a lobby before the sultan.



Ezrat Nashim Hospital.