

Rabbi Ginsburg and the Deicide Debate

By Kathryn Ivany

Rabbi Louis N. Ginsburg was the rabbi at Beth Israel Synagogue from 1953-1955 and again from 1963 -1967. A native of Minneapolis, he had previously served congregations there and in Saskatoon. He was also active in the general community. The bachelor rabbi was chaplain of the Alberta Curling Association and a director of the Edmonton branch, Canadian Mental Health Association. He was not only a popular speaker at sports banquets, but city churches of all denominations invited him to speak. "It's a breath of fresh air," he says, "because there really is very little difference between denominations and there is a great need for the love of your fellow man. Love only comes with understanding the other fellow."

In the spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, in the late 1960s, the various denominations of Christian Churches in the downtown joined together to offer support to Edmonton's two Synagogue congregations during a period when anti-Semitism experienced a resurgence in Edmonton. At the invitation of Beth Israel, several clergymen and priests from the neighbouring churches, including Msgr. Joseph P. Malone of St. Joseph's Cathedral, Dr. Edwin J. White of First Presbyterian Church, Dr. James E. McNeill of the Central United Church, Rev. Cannon John Flagler from St. Faith's Anglican Church, and Dr. Carl Klein, Rabbi of Congregation Beth Shalom, came together to discuss "deicide", specifically the role played by the historical Jewish people in the crucifixion of the Christ.

In light of an upcoming vote of the Vatican Council on the absolution of the Jews of the charge of deicide, the panel discussed interpretations of history and scripture which informed the audience of the Christians' belief that people of the current Jewish community could in no way be held responsible for the death of Jesus. Further, the participants in the discussion held that Jesus freely chose his death and that, as a final point, as God, Jesus could not be killed. The successful conclusion of the discussion led to a convivial gathering for refreshments. From this initial basis of discussion the group continued the conversation on a number of other issues of mutual interest over time which proved Rabbi Ginsburg's theory that understanding and love are closely linked.

Rabbi Ginsburg later moved to Calgary, where he served at the Shaarey Tzedec congregation from 1967-1971, and served as the first advisor to the newly-formed University of Calgary Hillel chapter in 1967. Many Calgarians still recall Rabbi Ginsburg's friendship with Father Pat O'Byrne and how it contributed to his nickname, "the Catholic Rabbi." A famous picture of him in the Calgary Herald from 1971 shows him ringing the bell for the Salvation Army in uniform during their Christmas campaign.

Ginsburg was also a sports announcer, worked on the Hospital Pastoral Care Association of Alberta, the United Way Campaign and Century Calgary. In 1976, Premier Peter Lougheed presented Rabbi Ginsburg with the Government of Alberta Achievement Award, one of many awards he received in his lifetime. At a 1972 dinner sponsored by Calgary citizens of all faiths, Mayor Rod Sykes said of Rabbi Ginsburg, "While Sharry Tzedec is his congregation, all of Calgary is his parish."

Rabbi Ginsburg (left) officiates in 1962 at the second 'Bar Mitzvah' of Congregation Beth Israel's founding Rabbi, Rabbi Hyman Goldstick (1906-1912) on the occasion of his 80th birthday. (photo courtesy, JAHSENA Archives)

