

AZA Begins: Before B'nai B'rith

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The Aleph Zadik Aleph came in to existence in June 1922 in Omaha, Nebraska with fourteen boys between the ages of 15 and 17 meeting to form a fraternal club “which might fit comfortably into their American and Jewish environments.”¹ Contrary to popular belief, the original members did not form because there was a fraternity called the Alpha Zeta Alpha at their school that would not let them join because they were Jewish.² There had been an issue within a Zionist youth club, the Maccabees, which split the club upon which the members could not come to an agreement. The discontented members left and formed the central group of the Omaha chapter of AZA. In choosing a name, they wanted the name of the club to be Greek-sounding but to be Hebrew.

The first meeting was held in 1923 at Abe Babior’s house³ in Omaha. At that meeting, Abe Babior was chosen as the first president and Nathan Mnookin, a chemical engineer originally from Kansas City, as their advisor. It existed primarily as little more than a social group, having a speaker at each meeting. Mnookin announced at that first meeting that the idea for the group was to

Learn more about Jewish things, try to become more Jewish, and try to attend affairs if you can. The only way to do it is to be in a group that will all decide on different things Jewish or on other things that might help the Jewish organizations that are in them all.⁴

The Jewish outlook of the group was not immediately established, though Mnookin suggested they be orthodox, which was quickly vetoed.⁵ The first meeting went well enough that the boys decided to continue meeting on Sundays, with the second meeting held at the Omaha JCC.⁶

¹ Philip M. Klutznick with Sidney Hyman, *Angles of Vision: A Memoir of My Lives* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), 45.

² “History,” 27 April 2003, <<http://www.bbyo.org/aza/history.cfm>> (26 May 2003). The issue of fraternities not allowing Jews took place in Kansas City - not in Omaha. The fraternities at Manuel High School had not previously admitted Jews until Abe Margolin and Phil Klutznick joined one of them. When a third Jew, Max Wolf, wanted to join it, the fraternity would not allow a third Jew in, so Abe and Phil resigned.

³ Nathan Mnookin “was the one who sort of started things by meeting with Abe Babior’s father and said, ‘Why isn’t there a group of young Jewish boys meeting like in some of the larger cities?’” (Bon Theodore, interview by Nathaniel Huebsch, videocassette, Laguna Beach, Calif., 25 May 1999.)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Two of their first concerns were participating in athletic activities and trying to bring girls into its programming. For athletics, they had a basketball team, though they didn't do that well. Their first major event was holding a dance in order to get the girls involved.⁷

At some point, Mnookin left Omaha to return to Kansas City. When he returned to Kansas City, Mnookin contacted William Horowitz, telling him of his experience and the youth group. Mnookin had Horowitz bring a few friends to discuss a club similar to the one in Omaha. Horowitz brought Lew Sutin, Abe Mnookin, and Phil Klutznick and they were interested in starting up a similar youth group in Kansas City.

When Mnookin left, the boys of AZA approached Sam Beber, a lawyer, to be their advisor.⁸ He accepted on the condition that they would accept his vision for an international organization of Jewish fraternities with the Omaha chapter as the first. He foresaw that out of such a club, Jews would be more dedicated to Judaism as well as receiving experience in leadership. He talked about this idea with friends of his, including Mnookin, who had already established an AZA club in Kansas City.

Beber called a meeting on 3 May 1924. At this meeting, the original constitution and by-laws were composed, they formally brought the AZA into existing as a national organization, created the seven main principles and the Supreme Advisory Council was set up to oversee the policies of the group. The Council was mainly comprised of the Beber's friends and himself. AZA's "aims and purposes" were "Americanism; Judaism; filial love⁹ and devotion; charity; purity of body, mind and soul; conduct; fraternity."¹⁰ The principles were something that the boys "should practice, not just read about them - but really do the things that [they] had planned to do."¹¹ The group was formally chartered as "the Mother Chapter No. 1 of Aleph Zadik Aleph for Young Men."¹² At the same time, Bon Theodore was working on the logo, which has remained to this day.¹³ They decided to

⁷ Ibid. The dance was actually held on Yom Kippur night "because nothing else was planned that night."

⁸ The club actually had five different professionals come and speak to them to see which one of them they liked the best to be their advisor. When Beber spoke, they chose him. (Ibid.)

⁹ Filial love had initially been "Sympathy," but because the boy who presented it had a lisp, they changed it. (Ibid.)

¹⁰ "Aleph Zadik Aleph," B'nai B'rith Magazine Supplement, B'nai B'rith Magazine 39, no. 4 (January 1925): 8.

¹¹ Theodore, interview.

¹² Klutznick, op. cit., 48.

¹³ Theodore, op. cit. Theodore recounted that the chapter was "told, at the time, that everything that we were doing was just going to be temporary, because when B'nai B'rith took over, they were going to bring in professionals. The logo was supposed to be just temporary."

have a national convention in Omaha after other chapters were created before the end of the summer.

And other chapters were indeed to follow, with the Kansas City chapter chartering a week later on 10 May. The third chapter was the first to use an installation ritual in Lincoln, Nebraska on 21 May. The fourth chapter was chartered in Des Moines, Iowa on 30 May. The setup of these chapters was established during this time period to be in somewhat small groups. Max Baer wrote that

this method of setting up the size of the chapters was so that the advisor would have a better opportunity of knowing the individual member and helping to develop as a unique personality. Limiting the size of groups created an atmosphere in which the members could influence one another constructively. It also encouraged greater participation on the part of the individual member and greater leadership development.¹⁴

AZA's first national convention was held in Omaha on 4-6 July 1924 with 94 members in attendance--two-thirds of AZA's total membership.¹⁵ The delegates argued, discussed, and debated over many issues, including electing their first Grand Aleph Godol (international president)¹⁶, Charles Shane of Des Moines. The convention agreed that the second convention would take place in Kansas City in 1925, the fraternity's official colors would be blue and white, and that they would set aside one out of the three dollars of annual dues from each member would go towards charitable causes, even though the dues accounted for all of the income of AZA.¹⁷ They gave the first donation to the Child's Preventorium of the National Jewish Hospital for Consumptives at Denver.¹⁸ They also granted a charter to the fifth chapter in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They further recommended that the Supreme Advisory Council deal with "[o]ther organization procedures, such as arranging for printing charters, membership certificates and cards, rituals, a uniform constitution

¹⁴ Max F. Baer, *The BBYO Story*, Chap. 1 of *Advising B'nai B'rith Youth*, (Washington: B'nai B'rith Organization, 1957), 1, quoted in Daniel Thursz, *Volunteer Group Advisors in a National Social Group Work Agency*, (Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 1960), 117.

¹⁵ Jeffrey R. Hoffman, ed, *Inside Information*, (Washington, DC: B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, 1996), 6.

¹⁶ The title of "aleph" given to members was originated in the Kansas City AZA club by Bill Horowitz, agreed upon by other members. "He knew that in Jewish mysticism the first letter Aleph derives its importance from the fact that it embraces all the letters of the alphabet; the rest draw their energy from it." (Klutznick, loc. cit.)

¹⁷ Max F. Baer, *Dealing in Futures: The Story of a Jewish Youth Movement* (Washington, DC: B'nai B'rith International, 1983), 26.

¹⁸ "Aleph Zadik Aleph," *B'nai B'rith Magazine Supplement*, *B'nai B'rith Magazine* 39, no. 4 (January 1925): 8, citing a letter from Aleph Samuel Schaeffer.

for chapters, insignias and jewelry”¹⁹ and that the SAC should try to get B’nai B’rith to sponsor them as a junior auxiliary. Other activities included debating, basketball, and oratorical tournaments.²⁰

AZA had no real staff for their first couple of years, save for Beber taking on the duties from his law office. As AZA had not much in the way of funds, he went to the Omaha lodge of B’nai B’rith to secure funds, which he received. Afterwards, he went to Sioux City and got B’nai B’rith’s District 6 to give AZA \$300.²¹ He was then able to establish three more AZA chapters in the Midwest by the end of the year.²²

In Omaha, AZA’s first tournaments were held on 21-22 March 1925 in debate and basketball.²³ The following month, Beber approached the B’nai B’rith Constitution Grand Lodge convention in April 1925 in Atlantic City, New Jersey to get them to recognize AZA as their junior auxiliary. Although they liked it, they did not truly adopt it.²⁴ However, the AZA was recognized as Beber had hoped on 24 April 1925 by B’nai B’rith’s Executive Committee when they met, renaming it “the Aleph Zadik Aleph of the B’nai B’rith.”²⁵ The new president of B’nai B’rith, Alfred Cohen, selected an AZA Commission to arrange a constitution, by-laws, and rituals to present to B’nai B’rith’s Executive Committee for approval.²⁶

AZA, not having incorporated the changes made by B’nai B’rith, held their second annual convention at the Young Men’s-Young Women’s Hebrew Association 17 July 1925 in Kansas City. Aside from the previously-mentioned five chapters, chapters from Council Bluffs, Iowa; Minneapolis; Gary, Indiana; St. Paul; Minot, North Dakota; Sioux City, Iowa; and Chattanooga were in attendance. AZA’s membership had climbed to 200.²⁷ The convention elected Phil Klutznick as their second Grand Aleph Godol. In his year as Grand Aleph Godol, he traveled for AZA when he could, with financial considerations in mind, as he was mainly advertising AZA. He also became editor-in-chief of *The Shofar*, the newspaper of AZA when it came out in November of that year.²⁸

¹⁹ Baer, *op. cit.*, 31, n. 4.

²⁰ Theodor, *op. cit.*

²¹ Deborah Dash Moore, *B’nai B’rith and the Challenge of Ethnic Leadership* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), 153.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Baer, *op. cit.*, 44-45.

²⁴ Edward E. Grusd, *B’nai B’rith: The Story of a Covenant* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), 183-184.

²⁵ Baer, *op. cit.*, 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Sam Beber was chosen to chair the commission.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

In Lincoln, Nebraska, on 12-14 February 1926, AZA's second annual tournaments were held in oration (instead of debate) and in basketball.²⁹ A few days earlier in the same state, in Omaha, the AZA commission came together on 9 February. They changed the AZA constitution, mainly concerning the Supreme Advisory Council and the name of the organization. When it changed, the organization's acronym was reformulated to match B'nai B'rith's motto of "Benevolence, Brotherly Love, and Harmony," changing it to Ahavah, Zedakah, Achdus,³⁰ retaining AZA as its acronym. By that summer, the Executive Committee of the Supreme Lodge had accepted the commission's report and all of the District Grand Lodges had recognized AZA, marking "the complete unification of the junior organizations of boys and the complete jointure of the AZA and the B'nai B'rith."³¹

Although AZA had made some leaps and bounds from the summer of 1922 to the summer of 1926, they still had a lot of growth in front of them as Phil Klutznick would help lead AZA in its biggest growth years. Julius Bisno said that the "most important growth in the order took place between 1927 and 1933, years when AZA became a movement in the true sense of the word."³²

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²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Klutznick, op. cit., 46.

³¹ Baer, op. cit., 38-39.

³² Ibid., 29.