

Judaism 'taken seriously'

By Judith S. Antonelli
Advocate Staff

Bangor, Maine, has about 750 Jewish households, three synagogues, a mikvah, and a kosher bagel shop that also brings in kosher meat. To be Jewish in Bangor, "one must be more active and take Judaism seriously," says Rabbi Joseph Schonberger of Congregation Beth Israel, the town's Conservative synagogue.

"There are fewer Jewish institutions and professionals creating programs," he continued, "so that requires community people to be more involved. That motivation benefits us greatly. It is important for us to work together with everyone, because we don't have the luxury of a big population.

Congregation Beth Israel, founded in 1888, was the first synagogue in Bangor and is the oldest surviving synagogue in Maine. It has 200 members and 38 children in its elementary school. The Conservative synagogue also has a preschool, a daily minyan, a junior congregation, Hebrew classes, a bimonthly Saturday night film series, a monthly book club, and private study with the rabbi for conversion.

Beth Israel provides a full sit-down Shabbat lunch every week and child care during services. "We have a real diversity," says Schonberger. "We are a unique combination of new and old people and approaches because of the nature of Maine. We have a traditional history and traditional services, but we also work to make Judaism relevant and appealing to every generation."

The demographic changes have brought people from urban centers to Bangor, while people growing up in the town have moved away. "It creates a change in perspective," says Schonberger. "It requires more outreach. There is a greater network of Jews who are not connected to families in the community, so they are not

Bangor & Waterville at a glance

Beth Abraham (D)
145 York
Bangor, ME 04401
(207) 947-0876

Congregation Beth El (R)
31 Grove Street
Bangor, ME 04401
(207) 945-4578

Congregation Beth Israel (C)
144 York Street
Bangor, ME 04401
(207) 945-9433

Congregation Beth Israel (C)
30 Roosevelt Avenue
Waterville, ME 04901
(207) 872-7551

The Bagel Shop
1 Main Street
Bangor, ME 04404
(207) 947-1654

automatically involved."

Congregation Beth Israel is the most eastern congregation in the United States, Schonberger said, joking that the rest of the country's synagogues face it during prayer.

Bangor's Orthodox synagogue, Beth Abraham, was founded in the 1920s. With 60 families, it has a religious school with 20 students, daily services, and adult education. There was a day school for 20 years.

"We are the only Orthodox synagogue within hundreds of miles," notes Rabbi Henry Isaacs. "It is an oasis in the desert. There are very few Jews here....People are more assimilated now. It is difficult for Orthodox Jews to live here. If they remain observant, they'll be outstanding wherever they go."

Bangor's Reform synagogue,

Congregation Beth El, was founded in 1982. It has 115 members and 65 children in its grade school. Services are held three Shabbats a month (two evenings and one morning) and on holidays.

Beth El has bimonthly Torah study, adult Hebrew and Torah chanting classes, monthly family services, a singing group, and social action programs. The temple also sponsors a monthly open discussion group in Bar Harbor on topics of current Jewish interest.

Beth El also has a "diversity of membership, from a variety of backgrounds and a wide geographical area," says Rabbi Laurence Milder. "We reach out to people who travel quite a distance to come here. There is a progressive, creative, informal style in our worship and programming.

"Bangor is a delightful community to live in," he added. "The congregation has many highly committed Jews who are tremendously devoted to keeping alive an organized Jewish community in an area where there are few Jews....The synagogues are the core of Jewish life here."

Waterville, Maine, has one synagogue, also named Congregation Beth Israel. Founded in 1902, it has nearly 100 members of all age groups, and 20 children in its religious school. Services are held monthly on Friday evening, on holidays, and for bar/bat mitzvahs.

Rabbi Raymond Krinsky, the Conservative synagogue's leader, is also the Jewish chaplain at Colby College in Waterville, where 10 to 12 percent of the student population is Jewish and there is an active Hillel. Beth El participates in many Jewish events sponsored by Colby.

As the only synagogue in Waterville, Beth Israel "serves the needs of the people. We are pretty open and liberal in approach," says Krinsky. Members come from several nearby towns well.