

CHAPTER III

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

The initial problems which faced the budding Jewish community in Portland were religious. It was necessary to make arrangements for religious services, supplies of kosher meat and a burial ground.

The first problem was solved temporarily by holding religious services in homes of interested persons. Barnard Aaronson and his father, Rev. Aaron Aaronson, took the lead. Later Shiah Berman and Jacob Judelsohn organized a makeshift congregation in their home. In the early 1880's these groups formed the nucleus of the first permanent congregations.

The problem of ritual slaughter was partially solved because Barnard and Aaron Aaronson were both qualified to act as *shochetim*. They were, however, only trained to handle fowl. For the slaughter of cattle it was necessary to bring an experienced *shochet* from Boston or New York. This was done for the first time in 1872.¹

Acquisition of a burial ground was frequently discussed but not accomplished until the founding of the Portland Lodge 218, Independent Order B'nai B'rith.

Early in 1874 a petition was sent to the First District Grand Lodge, I.O.B.B., requesting permission for organization of a Portland lodge. The petition was signed by seven men who were to become the charter members. They were Barnard Aaronson, Morris Wolf (sometimes spelled Woolf), M. Herzberg, Robert Boas, Samuel C. Abrahams, Isaac Gossman and Joseph Levy.

On July 19, 1874 the lodge was installed by Grand Lodge representatives. In addition to the seven charter members, twenty-five petitions for membership were accepted and by special dispensation all members received their first, second and third degrees.² Barnard Aaronson was elected president by acclamation. Other officers included Morris Wolf, vice-president; William Schryver, recording secretary; and M. Herzberg, financial secretary.

Portland Lodge quickly concerned itself with the cemetery question and appointed a committee to seek a suitable location. To help finance the project, it was decided to hold a "festival" the next Purim. Tickets were printed, each to sell for one dollar,

for distribution among local members and also for sale to all other lodges. Proceeds, it was hoped, would cover the cost of a burial ground, which was expected to be approximately two hundred and twenty-five dollars.

After several delays, the special committee found a suitable site in Cape Elizabeth. In May 1875 Barnard Aaronson, Morris Stearns and Samuel C. Abrahams on behalf of the Lodge purchased a lot, sixty-five by one hundred feet, from John Woodbury, after securing permission from the Cape Elizabeth Board of Selectmen to use it for burial purposes. At a lodge meeting on May 23, 1875, the committee reported completion of its task. Portland had its first Jewish cemetery.

During its brief existence from 1874 to 1880, Portland Lodge functioned as the focal point of community activity. In the earlier years, the lodge sponsored High Holiday services and directed charitable and social service activities. Members were entitled to a sick benefit of five dollars a week for any illness which prevented them from pursuing their regular vocations. Members were also assessed from time to time to provide assistance for needy brethren.

In addition to uniting the local community, Portland Lodge was in constant contact with other lodges and, through it, Portland Jewry was bound up with the fortunes of American Jewry. The records of this period contain many references to appeals from other lodges for assistance to widows and others in distress. In nearly every such case Portland Lodge sent the fixed sum of sixteen cents for each of its members toward an endowment for a needy widow and family. This response from each lodge presented the recipient with a helpful fund.

In the conduct of its business, Portland Lodge was most efficient. The meetings were held with strict regard to protocol. Fines were imposed on members for being absent and for disturbing orderly procedure of meetings. At first, the fine for absenteeism was one dollar for officers and fifty cents for general members. The lesser fine was later adopted as the standard for all. Of course, it was not imposed if an acceptable excuse was offered. In one such case the minutes record somewhat quaintly: "Brother Outer Warden absent and on grounds of reasonable reason was excused."

That the ritual of the lodge was guarded very carefully is evident from the excitement that resulted from a reported leak. On January 21, 1876, the lodge appointed a committee "to investigate report that Ph. Silverstein revealed the secrets of the lodge to

his wife." No further mention is made of this matter and it can be assumed that the members were sufficiently impressed to exercise greater vigilance.

Whether the extensive fines served to stimulate a greater conscientiousness on the part of members cannot be determined. It is evident, however, that the freedom with which they were imposed proved very helpful to the treasury. In addition to the standard fines there were others. Jacob Judelsohn was fined fifty cents for leaving during a meeting, and on another occasion "the President fined (\$1.00) Isaac Abrams for (unbecoming conduct) leaving the Lodge without saluting the chair." In spite of these unpleasant incidents meetings always ended with "Brotherly Love and Harmony," according to the standard formula used by all the recording secretaries.

An amusing incident which deserves to be quoted took place at a meeting on March 3, 1878. The minutes read:

Bros. M. S. Fisher and B. Aaronson both claiming the floor. Bro. President recognized Bro. Aaronson and ordered Bro. Fisher to sit down and (he) refused to do so, and the P. fined the Bro. F. 25c and ordered the Bro. F. to sit down, and again (he) refused to do so, and the P. again fined the Bro. 50c and called the Bro. to order and Bro. Fisher said (") Bro. P. I appeal from your decision (") and the P. called the Bro. to Order and (he) still refused to do so, and he was fined \$1.00 and still persisting not to obey Order so the Bro. President ordered the Bro. F. to leave the room and he has done so.

In spite of this unpleasantness, the secretary reported the meeting closed "in the usual form of Brotherly Love and Harmony."

Another incident, on the lighter side, is mentioned in the minutes of February 4, 1877. It seems that "Bro. Boas sent the sum of \$8.42 for dues. Said Bro. supposes that he owes said sum to the Lodge but his wife advanced the sum unknown to the Bro. The Lodge voted to send the money to the wife of Bro. Boas."

When the first burial ground was purchased in 1875, Portland Lodge organized a "Chevra Kaddisha" to supervise burial of members "according to ritual." This group consisted of seven members: Barnard Aaronson, Moses Fonsaca, Zorach Hirshon, S. Berman, Solomon Schryer, Samuel C. Abrahams and Morris Stearns. At the same time it fixed as fees for interment of non-

members and strangers not less than ten nor more than fifty dollars.

Membership in Portland Lodge was highly prized and the records contain applications from Jews in Saco, Lewiston and Bangor, as well as Portland. On one occasion several lodge officers traveled to Bangor to initiate candidates who were unable to come to Portland. In order to become a member the candidate had to apply through a standard "petition" and be sponsored by one or more lodge brothers. An investigating committee reported on the character and reputation of applicants. If the committee reported favorably, the applicant's name was placed before the entire membership and he was accepted only if no "blackball" was cast. On one occasion a favorable vote was reconsidered at a subsequent meeting and the candidate was rejected.

After the first few years the vitality of Portland Lodge was gradually sapped by economic pressure. There were frequent calls for more money as members became lax in payment of dues. Although details of this period are scanty, it is evident from the records that clashes between personalities became more pronounced and the idyllic unity suffered a mortal blow. Until the very end the lodge continued to initiate new members but meetings were held less frequently, due to the lack of a quorum.

Toward the end of 1880 the feeling became almost unanimous among members that the lodge had outlived its usefulness. It had acquired the burial ground and had helped in forming the religious community and a rudimentary social service agency. It had apparently reached the limit of its creative potential. The kernels it had nurtured were now ready to develop on their own. Thus, in November 1880, by unanimous vote, Portland Lodge decided upon dissolution and applied to a Boston lodge for admission in a body of those Portland members who wished to remain in the Independent Order B'nai B'rith. The final meeting was held on November 21, 1880, and the property and assets of the burial ground were transferred to a newly formed organization, the Portland Hebrew Benevolent Society.³ With all other business wound up, "it was decided to dissolve the Lodge forever."

Portland's Jewish population in 1880 is difficult to determine. City directories of the period are incomplete, omitting many names of persons known from other sources to have been residents. A critical analysis of all sources results in the conclusion that there were thirty to forty Jewish families.

Occupationally, the Jewish community was engaged principally in peddling, the junk trade and the clothing business (including second-hand clothing and tailoring). Many Portland Jews were compelled to travel beyond the city limits in the course of peddling, living for a time elsewhere, then returning to Portland. Some of these peddlers recalled in later years their contact in smaller towns with isolated Jews, many of whom regarded themselves simply as "Germans."

In spite of the rapid strides toward Americanization, the Jews of Portland were still too new on the scene to participate in civic affairs. The Jews, as a whole, lost no time in applying for naturalization and from the earliest years were the object of appeals by politicians. Richard Hebert reports that during the political campaign of 1872

Democrats even went so far as to adopt the dangerous expedient of resorting to personal attacks and to the risky business of trying to arouse Catholics and Jews against the Republicans on the grounds of religious and racial prejudice.⁴

When, in the late 1870's, Jews were becoming accustomed to having civil as well as religious marriages, Barnard Aaronson became a justice of the peace "for the double purpose of officiating in a civil capacity at marriages and settling, officially, disputes among his people."⁵ He also functioned as a notary public and never accepted a fee from a Jew. Although he had a deep interest in public affairs, he declined to accept nomination for official positions.

Internally, the Jewish community in the late 1870's functioned as one large family with its characteristic solidarity ruffled by occasional friction. The joys and distresses of individuals became community affairs. Before Passover, for example, when a few Jews traveled to Boston to purchase provisions for the festival, they carried with them order lists from every family.

Religiously, a schism was in the making. Although Portland Jewry was loyal to Orthodox Judaism, there were two trends, one strictly traditional, the other somewhat "modern." In the late 1880's this breach was expressed in the creation of two separate congregations.

Until 1884 Portland had no full-time rabbi. The Rev. Aaron Aaronson, father of Barnard, spent only a few years in Portland with his son and then returned to Boston. In the late 1870's and in the 1880's he made occasional trips to Portland where he per-

formed rabbinical functions. These trips became unnecessary when Portland was able to support its own rabbi.

An important factor working toward solidarity in the early Portland Jewish community was the intimate relationship established between many of the older families by marriage. Thus, even in present-day Portland Jewry, one is struck by the elaborate inter-relationship existing between descendants of the earlier families.

The period between 1880 and 1904, despite the many important changes and developments, must be treated as a whole. It was a period of expansion and diversification in all spheres of religious and social life, culminating once again, in a unified community.

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER III

¹The *Jewish Messenger*, of New York reported in its issue of June 7, 1872: "From the *Commercial* June 3, 1872. The first Jewish ceremony ever witnessed in Portland, Maine was performed lately. A priest of the faith came on from New York and went to the slaughter house, attired in his official robes, to kill an ox for the food of the faithful." Cited in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, Vol. 37, page 38, footnote.

²A complete list of the original members can be found in the appendix.

³The officers of the society were: Barnard Aaronson, president; Solomon Mathias, vice-president; Solomon Schryver, treasurer; Solomon Shine, financial secretary; Joseph H. Wolf, secretary. No records of this society have been found and it is difficult to determine how long it remained in existence. It may be identical to the Portland Hebrew Benevolent Burial Association which later purchased a burial ground in Portland, which it turned over to the Mount Sinai Cemetery Association in 1920. See Chapter IX.

⁴*Modern Maine*, Vol. 1, page 233.

⁵From biographical data furnished by the late Benjamin Wolf of Portland, son of Joseph H. Wolf and nephew of Barnard Aaronson.