

Style 4 MAINE WEEKEND

Growing up Jewish requires definite commitment in rural Maine

By Pam Linnell
Special to the NEWS

GARLAND — When you enter the Weinstein home in Garland, you can't help but notice the Hebrew emblem fixed to the doorjamb.

"The menusa," explained Deena Weinstein, "the sign of a Jewish home. We have lots of signs of our Judaism around the house."

Deena and her husband Jack want the Weinstein children — Ben, 8, and Rachael, 6 — to know that their home and their faith are something unique.

Symbols such as the menusa are especially important to the Weinsteins, since it can be hard to maintain a sense of identity in a sparsely populated state such as Maine.

"The home is the center of Jewish life," said Jack, who works in Bangor as a real estate appraiser. The children's religious training centers when the family practices Sabbath customs and holiday traditions.

At some point, though, many Jews decide to participate in the community life of the synagogue. "Once you have children, you really need to join," Jack said. "It gives a foundation to their education."

The Weinsteins belong to Congregation Beth Israel in Bangor, even though a trip to town entails a commute of an hour and a half. It's a dilemma other Jews in rural areas share — synagogues are located only in Maine's larger cities.

Even so, Ben and Rachael have attended Hebrew school at the Jewish Community Center in Bangor since they were preschoolers. They study a program of Hebrew language, Bible studies and history.

Ben, a fourth-grader, will soon begin more intense studies to prepare for his bar mitzvah, a religious ceremony for boys of the age of 13. Rachael will have a similar ceremony, but mitzvah, when she comes of age.

It's no small effort to take the children to Hebrew school three times a week. Deena assumes most of the responsibility for driving back and forth from Garland. "It does fall on me," she said. "The Jewish marriage vows state the home and children's education are the responsibility of the mother."

Deena manages in spite of her job as a nutrition aide for the Cooperative Extension Service. She finishes her workday just in time to pick up the children in Dexter.

"There's a lot of shuffling, a lot of scheduling — and menu planning," she laughed. "I have to make sure everyone eats."

She plans days that begin at 7 a.m. when Ben and Rachael leave for school, and don't end until 11 at night when they all come in from Bangor. Ben does his homework in the car. "We can usually count on at least 30 hours of light for homework," she said.

Deena and Jack also attend synagogue on holy days and for adult study groups. Deena is a member of a Jewish life studies program which draws participants from as far away as Bar Harbor.

For the Weinsteins, participating in synagogue activities became more meaningful with the arrival of Rabbi Joseph Schonberger and his wife Susan to Beth Israel several years ago. "He's had a consolidating effect on Jews in the area," Deena said. "He's brought rural couples to-

gether and made them feel welcome."

Deena is frequently asked by local organizations for information on Jewish life. In rural areas, no rabbi may be available to field questions on Judaism. Pine Tree Hospice in Dover-Foxcroft called on her to participate in a panel discussion on aid to the dying. Her studies in Beth Israel's para-rabbi group have helped her. "Now I feel I have the support and background to serve as a resource person," she said.

Deena particularly appreciated the Jewish community when her own mother died. "When a family member dies, Jews have a seven-day mourning period called shiva. You stay at home for that week and the community pretty much takes care of you. Friends bring in food and stay awhile to comfort you. Friends come from as far away as Bangor to sit shiva with us," she said.

Jewish children in rural areas need to see the extended Jewish community in action, too, especially when they may be the only participating Jews they know in a small town. Ben and Rachael have never had any Jewish classmates at Dexter Primary-Middle School.

Ben recalls with amazement the first time he visited a large Jewish neighborhood in Boston. "After living in Maine, I had thought Judaism was almost an extinct religion," he exclaimed. He knows better now.

Deena helps educate Ben and Rachael's classmates by visiting their classrooms to explain Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah and Passover.

The rest is up to the children, and



— RACHAEL AND BEN Weinstein (seated) review their workbooks from Hebrew school with the help of their parents, Deena and Jack Weinstein. The

children's attendance at religious education requires three trips a week from Garland. (Pam Linnell Photo)

they are eager to share their traditions with their friends. Ben keeps a small sign with the greeting "Shalom" on his desk at school.

"I've never appeared to say I'm Jewish," Ben said with a serene, unflinching gaze. "Sometimes it's hard to be different," he admitted. "Some

people might not understand, but some people will."

As long as the Jewish community is so widely scattered over central Maine, the Weinsteins know they must take the initiative to foster the family's Jewish identity.

Jack has hung two photographs in

Ben's room — one of a rabbi and the Torah, and one of Jack's own father performing the Sabbath rituals.

"When Ben looks at those pictures, he knows his tradition," Jack said.

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