

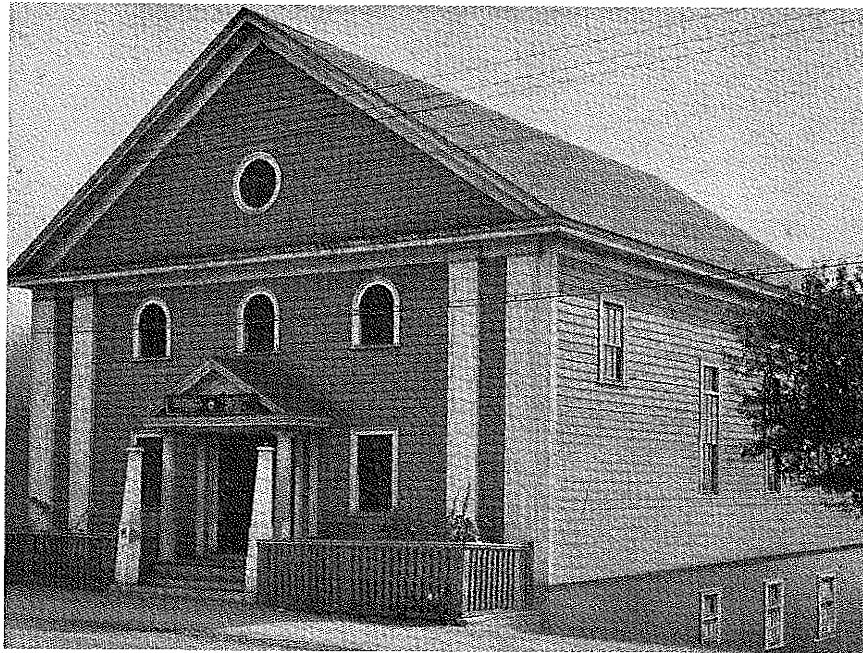
*WELCOME*

*TO THE WORLD OF BETH ABRAHAM.*

History, (his' tor y) n. A chronological record of events, as the life or development of a people or institution.

A simple definition for a very complex subject. What we commemorate here in this Journal are the fifty years since the dedication of the Beth Abraham Synagogue on York Street. But the history goes back well beyond that time. It begins with a sense of need on the part of the original seven founders for a place to worship in the orthodox manner to which they were accustomed in Russia. Even though accommodations were discussed for separate services at Beth Israel Synagogue (which had been established in 1888) these men deigned accommodation. They wanted their own house of worship. It was as simple as that. These men of humble origin were looking for a "shul." Thus the story of Beth Abraham begins ... welcome to our world.

**THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS ON YORK STREET**



**1933**



**1983**

*Photo by Yehuda Inbar*

## HISTORY

The earliest known Jewish settlers arrived in Bangor in the early 1840's. They were a handful of Sephardic Jews who appeared to have been scattered throughout the area. In 1849, with the influx of several Jewish families from Germany, Bangor had its first Jewish Congregation, AHAWAS ACHIM, and its first burial ground. Because of their influence and activities, Bangor was thought to be the first town in Maine to have an organized Jewish group. However, by 1856, most of these families had moved away or had become assimilated with their non-Jewish neighbors.

During the 1880's, Bangor became home to many Jews who escaped the pogroms of Russia and Eastern Europe. Although they were few in number, these new immigrants were determined to preserve their Judaism and their religious and spiritual heritage. Even though they were displaced people, they wanted to maintain their strong passion for the Jewish life filled with rich tradition, ceremony, and ritual. In 1888, only a few years after their arrival, a group of young men formally created the Beth Israel Society, and by 1897, they were laying the cornerstone of the first synagogue in Maine. During the next ten years, Beth Israel witnessed and survived many new changes and events. One of the period's greatest changes centered around a new influx of immigrants from Russia who were determined to maintain their own orthodox way of life and to worship according to their own customs

and traditions. Thus, Congregation Beth Abraham Anshe Sphard was born.

In 1902, Eli Striar, David Pinchos Striar, Hyman Striar, Shel David Striar, Sam Taines, Sam Gass, Sam Bell, Harry Viner and Gimpel Morris were among ten men who felt it was time to start a new synagogue which would be more analogous to their way of life. With nothing more than their beliefs, they rented several upstairs rooms in a house on Pine Street. There they would assemble on the holy days to pray, according to their Orthodox traditions. The Beth Abraham founders continued to congregate in this manner until 1904 when Bangor witnessed its largest immigration of Russian Jews. This time, mass migration was not due to persecution of the Jews as in the 1880's, but due to the Russo-Japanese war and the Jews' refusal to serve in the Czar's Army. By 1905, the house on Pine Street could no longer accommodate the increasing numbers of congregants and in 1907, the first "Russishe" shul was established at 37 Carr Street.

The new home of Beth Abraham was a small building which had been built a few years earlier. Because the original founders wanted their new shul to exemplify their love and commitment for Jewish tradition and ritual, they actually had the building turned around, so it faced the East while they prayed. Also, they added another floor, making it a large three-story building, so the synagogue could meet the demands of a growing congregation.



*Chaim Berg and Family ... A schochet and teacher for the community.*

It is interesting to note that inherent among these Orthodox Jews was the fact that wherever they settled, they were not only responsible for building a synagogue, but were also responsible for establishing a Jewish cemetery and providing burial rites. During this early era (1904-1907) the same men who started Beth Abraham also purchased a small parcel of land off Mt. Hope Avenue in Bangor. They paid the city one dollar for the site which would become the cemetery for the synagogue. Coinciding with this purchase, was the formation of the first Chevra Kadisha of Beth Abraham. Charged with preparing bodies for burial, the Chevra Kadisha has long been a society comprised of righteous and honorable people who held positions of high esteem in the shul. Among the first members of the Beth Abraham Chevra Kadisha were:

Sam Lavcott  
 Sam Smith  
 Barney Cooper  
 Joseph Cooper  
 Harry Viner  
 Louis Weinstein

Mrs. Barney Striar  
 Mrs. Harry Viner  
 Mrs. Pearl Chesner  
 Mrs. Celia Nissenbaum  
 Mrs. Ann Lavcott

During this time, little is known about the spiritual leaders of Beth Abraham. Most of them were not ordained Rabbis, but Hazans, Shohets, Mohels or a combination thereof. Names such as Kaprow, Portnoy, Avirim, Magnidson and Rubenovitz surface as the first spiritual leaders.

It was also during this early period that the shul experienced its first philosophical schism among its congregants. A dispute apparently arose as to the laws of Kashruth; discussions and arguments ensued and, finally in 1920, a group of men left Beth Abraham and established Toldoth Yitzchak on the corner of Essex Street and York Street.

Barney Striar  
 Shel David Striar

Mrs. Sarah Striar  
 Mrs. Zelda Siegel

A glimpse at a ledger sheet from 1924 . . .



On March 20, 1932, the three-story wooden shul was destroyed by fire. According to a Bangor Daily News article, Barney Cooper, president of Beth Abraham at that time, stated that the building cost \$20,000 and the contents were valued at nearly \$10,000. Among the valuable articles in the interior which were totally destroyed were several priceless volumes of the Five Books of Moses.

While the fire was raging, Shel David Striar, the oldest member of the congregation, entered the burning building and made his way to the place where a 150 year old silver crown from Russia was stored. He emerged from the blaze with many severe burns but holding the valuable crown in his hands. This silver crown was later exhibited at the dedication of the new home of Beth Abraham.



**BETH ABRAHAM SYNAGOGUE**  
*Aftermath of the disastrous fire on Carr Street, March 30, 1932.*

# Beth Abraham Synagogue Is Destroyed \$25,000 BLAZE RAZES JEWISH TEMPLE AND ENDANGERS HOMES

Several Dwellings Catch in Thickly Settled Carr  
And Hancock Street District As Building Is  
Reduced to Total Ruins — All Apparatus of  
City Called Out to Fight Flames.

With the Beth Abraham Congregation's Synagogue on Carr Street a raging furnace when Box 18 was pulled in about 11:25 the Hancock Street section of the city got its biggest fire scare in recent years last night. Several dwellings, a monster wooden building used as a storehouse and stores and frame structures between which the distance is measured in feet were threatened and the huge wooden Synagogue was totally destroyed. A second alarm was sounded within a few minutes after the arrival of the fire department chiefs and soon the streets were lined with cars and several thousand people attracted by the spectacular blaze which was visible from all sections of the city.

When the firemen from the Hose 5 station on State Street arrived at the scene of the fire, the first apparatus to reach the fire, the flames were shooting skyward, giving the appearance that all of Carr Street was afire. Within a few minutes of that time 15 lines of hose were playing water on the Synagogue and surrounding buildings to keep the fire from spreading. From the outset it was seen that the building itself was doomed.

The recent heavy snow storm dampened the buildings nearby and contributed much to preventing what would have probably wiped out many of the frame dwellings on Carr, Hancock and Patrick streets.

#### **COST \$20,000 WHEN BUILT**

According to Barney Cooper, president of the board of directors for the Congregation Beth Abraham, the building cost \$20,000 to build and the contents were valued at nearly \$10,000. Among the valuable articles in the interior which were totally destroyed were several volumes of priceless parchment (known as the five books of Moses). The basement floor of the building was recently decorated and a large sum of money spent to make it attractive. The building was a three story frame structure, just off Hancock Street. Rabbi Leizor Lewin was the officiating clergyman.

#### **FIRE DISCOVERED by WOMAN**

Mrs. Jennie Robertson, who lives on Pine Street, looked over onto the next street and saw the flames coming through the upper story of the building and rushed to pull in the fire alarm. Within a few minutes

neighbors were awakened and there was a mad scramble to get onto the street and away from what had all the appearance of a conflagration.

Within a few feet of the fire on the Hancock Street side were several families living in a two and a half story frame apartment house. Mr. and Mrs. Hiram Morgan were awakened by their dog, Teddy, barking and looked out of their window to see the building next door a mass of flames.

#### **NEARBY HOUSES CATCH ON ROOFS**

Frequently while the firemen were fighting the Synagogue blaze the roofs of nearby houses would catch, and four different dwellings were burning a little at some time during the fire. The roof on a vacant house across the street, now being offered for sale, was among those lighted by flying embers.

Mrs. Melissa Dyer's house at 6 Carr caught at one time but the blaze was quickly extinguished by the firemen who were working on the roof.

#### **FIREMEN IN DANGER AT TIMES**

Twice during the fire as the walls were caving in firemen were obliged to leave the alleys from which they were fighting hard to keep the blaze from spreading in the thickly settled area. While replacing sections of hose that had split, in front of the building, several men had narrow escapes as huge pieces of burning wood fell from the roofs.

#### **CROWDS ATTRACTED TO THE FIRE**

From vantage points on all the streets nearby several thousand people attracted to the fire by the blaze and the sounding of the second alarm watched what at a time was a threatening fire.

In the rear of the mass of small dwellings and within a few hundred yards of the Synagogue itself is a monster building, facing on Patrick Street, used by A. Brown as a storehouse for tons and tons of copper, wool, etc.

Chief of Police Crowley and practically all members of the day force responded to the second alarm, augmenting the regular night men already there in charge of Capt. Ambrose Phillips.

Keeping the fire in the one building, the shell of which remained standing, was a difficult job but despite this the all out signal was sounded at 12:15 o'clock.