A Place Where Jews Can Feel Safe
Andrew Bernstein's Interview Transcript
Collected and Edited[1] by Eliza Lambert

In Association with the Maine Jewish Museum
and Documenting Maine Jewry

"My mother had an open door policy. Any Jewish kid at Bowdoin who wanted to come to services, who couldn't come home, would go to my parent's house. I remember bringing twenty kids to my parents house, including some non-Jewish kids."

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[1] Note to the reader: Narratives and transcripts have been recorded and compiled to show the slang and quirks of speech inherent in every narrator.

I: Thank you, Andy Bernstein, for meeting with me today. Today is the 16th of January, and we're sitting down in your office to talk about what it was like to grow up in Maine as a Jewish person. Could you talk to me a little bit about your childhood?

N: Sure. I was born in Portland. I grew up in Craigie Street in Portland and I went to Roosevelt Elementary School, grade one through four, kindergarten, one through four. Longfellow five through six. Lincoln Junior High School and Deering High School, and then I went to college at Bowdoin and law school here in Portland. I've been here (laughs) all my life. Growing up Jewish, I never felt it was a, it never occurred to me or considered it to be a problem. I went to Hebrew School three times a week from the time I was old enough to start. I had tons of Jewish friends. My neighborhood that I lived in, around the Craigie Street area, had been built, was a recent development at the time that had been built by a developer in Maine who is named Mitchell Cope. Mr. Cope happened to be Jewish as well, so my parents bought the house while it was being built and on my street, it was a baby boom street. So there were lots of families, lots of kids. On that street and neighboring streets there were a lot of Jewish kids. There was also an area with a lot of Catholic families, who I became very good friends with their kids. I had a lot of Jewish kids around me, even though Portland didn't have a huge Jewish community. I made friends with a lot of Jewish kids cuz we were all going to Hebrew School. So even if they didn't live in my community, my neighborhood, I got to know them very well. Baxter Boulevard area was a huge area of Jewish kids, so my best friend lived on Pya Road, Mark Leiberskind so I spent a lot of time over there as well. School, I never had, I only had one incident were I felt any bigotry. When I was in fifth or sixth grade, there was a kid on the playground who called me a kike. I didn't know what that word mean, so I went home and asked my mother what it meant, and she told me. But other than that, I never felt any stigmatism or any problem. We belong to Temple Beth El, which was in walking distance, so we'd go there on services, Friday and Saturday. Friday night, Saturday. I was bar mitzvahed there. My cantor lived down the street. My grandparents live three streets over, on Bolton Street. On Friday night, for Chabat dinner, we'd go over and have dinner with my parents' parents, my father's parents. My great-uncle, my father's uncle, and his wife, Louise and Selma lived one street over from us, so I spent a lot of time with him, with them. My great-uncle was a phenomenal guy and he was my idol. I thought he walked on water. I thought my parents did too, but he was really cool. It was never an issue for me. I liked being Jewish. I was very active in United Synagogue Youth, which is the Jewish Youth Organization for the conservative Jewish movement in the United States. I spent a summer in Israel at age fifteen. I was the president of the U.S. Y, we're an affiliate here in Portland. We spent a lot of weekends as a US Y group going to various Jewish organizations around New England, and I would stay with families of Jewish kids, so I got to know Jewish kids involved in organizations in Milton, Mass., Beverly, Mass, all these places. It was a very strong Jewish upbringing for me. My father and grandfather and great-uncle all worked in the same law firm. [Interviewer coughs] I spent a lot of time there, and I got to know the lawyers there. That's wanted I went to work, and what I went to work for seven years after I graduated from law school. There were Jews all around me. It was very easy to be Jewish. I had a good upbring - I had a good life. I liked being a kid in Portland, Maine, it was a great place to grow up. A lot of Jewish and non-Jewish friends, so it was pretty good.

I: Wow, that's probably the best explanation of anyone's childhood that I've heard, because, beginning to end, [it's] very succinct. I guess my question would be, did you notice any separation from the more gentile community, and what was that like?

N: Yeah, because, I mean, certainly, I knew my friends who weren't Jewish went to Catholic Mass. I would go to my friend Johnny Logan's house, the Logans, who owned, Mr. Logan owned Logan For Painting, which was two houses over from me and the first time I went there for dinner, we sat at the table with all of his brothers and sisters, his parents, and we said grace. That was a new experience for me, just to, that they said grace and that they said a prayer to Jesus Christ. I recognize that there was a difference, but again, I spent a lot of time at the Temple, Friday nights services, Saturday morning Chabat services. I was involved in Jewish activities at the Temple as well as fun activities at the Temple. I spent summers at Center Day Camp, which was the day camp for Jewish kids at Sebago Lake in Windham, Maine. I definitely noticed the separation. We did a lot of things. My parents wanted me to do a lot of things with the Jewish community, so I did. I sang in the youth choir at Temple Beth El. I acted in - my cantor, Messerschmidt, was a great great guy. He brought cantatas, many Jewish operettas, like Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat* and several other things, and I sang in those. I did a lot that involved the Jewish community. The Jewish Community Center at the time was on Cumberland Avenue and they had all kinds of youth activities. They had a basketball league and they had a pool. I did all that. My life was, to a large extent, did revolve around being Jewish. My parents really, obviously, focused on that. But I also was actively involved in everything else. I had lots of non-Jewish friends and I performed in plays at Deering High School. I, you know, we'd go to the football games, the Deering High Football games every Saturday. My father was a graduate of Deering High School so we had deep roots in the community that went far beyond the Jewish.

I: Great. But I've talked to a lot of people in Maine and of the Jewish faith, and they didn't get quite as involved as you did. They weren't president of things and stuff like that. My question would be, why do you think, what drove you to get that involved and where was that passion coming from?

N: My parents distilled, instilled in me, early on, a passion in Judaism. I liked going to services, generally, until I got to be a teenager and thought it was a pain in the ass so I didn't wanna stay. I loved my father and mother and I loved doing things with my dad. My dad was a great guy. We did a lot of things that had a Jewish connection, so that got to be fun. Mark Leiberskind*, who was my best friend, and I saw him in a Jewish context, so we did a lot of things together that were fun, with Mark and a bunch of our other friends. It became very easy for me to get involved, plus I'm, I think, I'm very good at leadership and leading organizations. I've done it all my life. I'm good in public, I'm good with people, and I think that was just a natural connect. I don't even remember how I ended up being president - I was actually co-president with Lorrie Seltzer - at the U.S. Y in Portland. I don't even remember how that happened except I was probably so involved, our advisor, who was a teacher in the Hebrew school at Temple Beth El, probably talked me into it. It was really easy for me to do. I liked doing it. I'm something

of a ham, I like being in the spotlight. That wasn't that hard. Plus, I got to meet some really nice kids and nice people, and I wouldn't have had that opportunity unless I got myself involved.

I: That's so wonderful. And when you were, was your first trip to Israel your first time out of Maine?

N: No. My parents - we went to Florida, a couple times when I was younger. We went to D.C. and Williamsburg. We traveled a lot to bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs in New England and New York. My parents, I'm one of, I only have one sister. My parents, my parents only had a sister, but his, my grandfather, his father, and his grandmother, his mother, were one of six each, so there was a large group, he had a large group of first cousins, and I had a large group of second cousins as a result. My parents thought it was very important that we keep those connections. So we went, on weekends, it was very common for us to go to the suburbs of Boston, or Boston, or New York City and go to bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs of my relatives, my cousins. So I saw a lot of my cousins and I got out of state as a result. My parents believed in giving me the opportunity to see as much, and my sister the opportunity to see as much of the country as we could. Going to Israel for the summer was certainly the longest I've ever been away. I was very young, I was one of the youngest kids on the trip. Most of the kids in the group were later in high school years, junior, senior. I was a freshman. It was all, I was a little bit immature and it was overwhelming. It was a great time, you know? Probably sixty to seventy kids from around the country and Canada. I love Israel. I've been back several times since then. I would go back in a heartbeat tomorrow if someone offered me the chance to do it.

I: And in your travels, especially as a kid, how did you find that other Jewish communities differed from the Maine Jewish community?

N: Well, certainly, around Boston and New York, the other conservative Jewish communities were much more traditional and Orthodox in the sense that they were, it was very formal. The rabbis and the cantors were very formal, they seemed less approachable than my rabbi and my cantor. They were bigger, huge temples. So compared to little Portland, Maine, with however many families we had in Beth El, to that was amazing to me. You could go into Temple Israel, or Temple Emmanuel, and there would be thousands of people at these bar mitzvahs, going, "Holy cow." That was an eye opening experience, just to see that they were very different. Kids are kids, so the kids, the kids I became friends with and knew in these various Jewish congregations and communities were like me. They were teenagers. They had all the same interests and issues that we all did, so that didn't really matter. But just in terms of the Jewish temples and congregations, they seemed much bigger and much more formal than what I was used to.

I: Why do you think Maine was less formal?

N: I think it was probably due to the leadership of the Temple and the Jewish community center. They were very serious in terms of what they wanted to accomplish and how they wanted to grow the Jewish community and how they wanted to grow the Jewish presence

in the greater Portland area. But, you know, people were much more intimate with each other, and by that I mean they were much closer friends. I think. Maybe I'm wrong, but just the outside looking into these Boston area and New York area congregations, it [Maine] was a small Jewish community in 1950s and '60s. They saw each other a lot and did a lot of things together and as a result, they also were, many of them were professionals who worked with each other outside of just going to Temple. Also, you got to remember that, to some extent, Jews were discriminated against in the '50s and '60s just like African-Americans and others. My father was black-balled four times with the Cumberland Club and the Portland Country Club because he was Jewish. In many respects, you know, we did things together because we found comfort in that and support from that, as opposed to working with - my father and mother had a lot of friends who weren't Jewish, but in terms of organizations, it wasn't a very good place at times. Although my parents never, I never got that feeling from being around my parents. Oh, but I certainly saw.

I: What discrimination do you think your parents were experiencing that you weren't, as part of a younger generation?

N: For example, Bernestein, Shur, Sawyer and Nelson, which is the firm my grandfather and great-uncle started, and that my father joined when he graduated from law school, when that firm started in 1914, and for many many years, they couldn't get clients who were not Jewish because they wouldn't be hired. You know, they're Jewish, they just wouldn't be hired. That was number one. Number two, the Cumberland Club was where a lot of business got done in the city, and contacts were made and clients and attorneys developed relationships. My father wasn't allowed into that club. He had two non-Jewish friends who kept sponsoring him until he finally said, "Stop doing it." At which point they both quit the Cumberland Club. But, you know, that was a barrier for them. They never, though, let it affect them. I never heard them get mad about it. My father was on the town City Council, my mother was the chairman of the School Committee, Portland. My mother and father won multiple awards for civic involvement and they had tons of friends who were not Jewish. They were very involved in the community and obviously got to do things at a high level in the community despite - Judaism wasn't a barrier to doing that. They were pretty amazing people. As you can tell, I'm pretty proud.

I: Yeah.

N: My mother's still alive and she's unbelievable. I wish she was here and not on her cruise so you could talk to her.

I: Oh, I'd love to talk to her.

N: She's amazing.

I: When does she get back?

N: In March, two and a half months.

I: Well, that's awhile from now, and I'm glad, everyone needs a long vacation every now and then.

N: But everyone you'd talk to if you asked about Rosalyn Bernstein, they'd talk to you about what an amazing person she is.

I: Well, I'll be doing interviews through the summer, so I'd love to get in touch with her then.

N: I'm sure she'd be happy to talk to you.

I: Well, why don't we talk about your parents a little bit more and - you said your grandfather graduated from Deering High School?

N: My grandfather and my father.

I: Yeah. Can you talk to me about how long your family's been in Maine?

N: My great-grandfather came to Maine from New York City in the 1920s, no, way earlier than that. Because my great grandfather and great uncle grew up here. Probably the late 1800s, my great grandfather, maybe. They owned a dry goods store in Portland. They lived up on Munjoy Hill with all the other immigrants. We have long-term roots in the community. My, give you an example of getting back to just, anti-Semitism, or just the issue of being Jewish in Portland, my parents wanted to name me Abraham Jacobs after my great-grandfather on my father's side and my great-grandfather on my mother's side. But because they thought it would be hard for a kid in the '50s, a Jewish kid in the '50s and '60s to grow up with the name Abraham Jacob, they named me Andrew Jake. That's a small example. But my great-grandparents were extremely involved in the community, and my great-uncle and grandfather, my great-uncle was one of the founders of the Jewish community and one of the founders of Beth El. He was a municipal judge, before he became a lawyer, and if you walked around town with my great-uncle knew everybody. I mean, he knew everybody. I would go around town with him and they would call him Uncle Louise, even though he wasn't their uncle. They would call him The Judge, or they would call him Major-al, which is a, 'al' is like a diminutive Yiddish. He was a major in the first World War and the second World War.

I: How would you spell that?

N: M-A, 'Major' with 'A-L' or something. That was, you know, what Yiddish is, they'd say, that was kind of like an ending root that went after, it was like a term of endearment. My uncle was a unique guy in the community. My mother used to call my father Sumner-al, for example, his name was Sumner Bernstein. My parents - my mother's from Fall River, Mass. and they met in college, Boston. She was nineteen, he was twenty-four, they got married, she stayed in Boston to finish college and he came up here to start his law firm with his father and uncle. My mother came up here. My mother immediately got

very active in the Jewish community, with Hadassah and a number of the other organizations. My father was the president of Beth El.

I: What do you think gets passed down in a generation that founds, basically, the Jewish community resources in Maine?

N: Well, I certainly grew up with my parents teaching me that giving back to the community, in charitable and civic ways was very very important. If you were blessed enough to have the ability to do that, then you were obligated to do that. That's in Judaism. Judaism, there's a phrase in Judaism called, 'Tikkun olam.' 'Tikkun olam' is Jewish Hebrew for "healing the world." Jews believe and my parents certainly believed, that it was important to give back to the community, that you could, person by person, whatever little bit you could do, would help heal the world and turn it into a better place. I grew up with that, and that's how I've lived, that's how I've tried to live, as best I can, to live my life. The values my parents gave to me have shaped who I am.

I: Do you have any stories that have been passed down about your great-grandfather, and your grandfather?

N: Well, I knew my grandfather really well, my grandfather, grandmother, because I went to Friday night services, I went to Friday night dinner every friday at their house. My grandfather died in his early 70s, my grandmother lived into her 80s. My mother's parents I knew very well. They lived in Fall River Massachussettes. We visited them a lot. They came up here a lot when my mother's father died and my mother's mother, Bertha Spindel, moved up here. We saw her a lot, she babysat for us. I think I was twelve when he passed away, so I saw, I was very close to my grandparents. For stories. My parents told me I could never lie, except to avoid getting in the car with my great-uncle and my grandfather cuz they were the worst drivers in the world. (Interviewer laughs) Let's see. My grandmother, my father's mother was the worst cook in the world, except for her maid, who was worse. For years, my sister and I thought the only way to eat chicken wings was if they were burnt. (Laughs.) My mother, my father hated the smell of fish, and my mother grew up eating fish, so if my father walked into the house and smelled fish, he'd turn around and walk out. None of these are really Jewish memories, they're just memories. When Temple, at services, my father, my great uncle and my grandfather would sit next to each other, and I would sit on the other side of my parents. Part-way through the services, every night, without fail, my grandfather, my great uncle and my father would fall asleep. With their elbows on the seat and their hands, propping their head up. My father, when he was the president of the Temple, had to sit up on the bimma, behind the rabbi and the cantor and periodically he would do the same thing. He would, he would fall asleep, but he would tell us he was resting his eyes and thinking deeply. Let's see. Those are the ones that immediately come to mind. The other one that comes to mind is my grandfather and father became very good friends with the Angeloni's. The Angeloni's started a chain of pizza restaurants in Portland, Angeloni's Pizza, which I don't think there are many left. There are a couple left. But Joe Angeloni, they grew up on Munjoy Hill so, my grandfather, I remember the first time my grandfather and I walked to Angeloni's, which was right next to where the building where

Bernstein, Shur was. My grandfather talked Italian to Joe Angeloni and he responded in Yiddish and I just thought that was, "How is that possible?" But that's because their families grew up on Munjoy Hill and they knew each other.

I: That's so wonderful. What do you think it says about Judaism that you have such a family legacy, and not only that, but in such a specific place?

N: Certainly has probably put a lot of pressure on me to live up to certain ideals, which I haven't always done, but I felt, as I said, I felt very comfortable being Jewish in this community. I never had concerns about Judaism or people thinking less of me because I was Jewish. I think people, because they thought so much of my parents, had high expectations and standards for me and my sister, but were very welcoming to us, because of my parents. My parents opened a lot of doors to me that maybe I wouldn't have had the opportunity for unless, but for the legacy and the work that they had done as Jews and as citizens of Portland. My grandfather and my great uncle had done.

I: Can you talk to me a bit about your trip to Israel and what that was like?

N: Sure! We met in New York City, fifty or sixty kids, as I said, from Canada and the United States, at a hotel in the evening. The next day we got on a plane on EL AL, flew to Tel Aviv, to Ben Gurian Airport. We went to Jerusalem and we stayed at the Rohn Hotel in Jerusalem. We spent the first day in Israel going to the Western Wall, which is in the Old City of Jerusalem, which is the remaining, the only part of Solomon's Temple that still exists, the Wailing Wall. People put little cracks of, little pieces of paper with their prayers or wishes in these little cracks in the wall. It's this huge square. It was an amazing experience for me. I, obviously, had already been learned at Hebrew School about King David and King Solomon and all this stuff and all this history, but to actually be in that place was overwhelmingly cool. We did Chabat services Friday night, there. There were lots of Jews doing services there. This was in 1971, so in 1967, when all the Arab countries around Israel attacked Israel, and Israel defeated them all in the Six Day War, Israel took the Old City from Jordan. Prior to that, the Old City barred Jews. If you were Jewish, you couldn't get in there. Four years later, I was able to go into the Old City, which is a walled city. Just being about to do that was so amazing, and there were so many Jews, we had never had that opportunity. The old city itself was really cool. It had this Arab, the Arab Quarter, the Turkish Quarter, the Jewish Quarter and I can't remember the other one, the Christian Quarter. The markets and the bazaars and just everything about it, walking on cobblestones that were three thousand years old... Just amazing. We had a guide who took us around a lot of places. We went from Jerusalem south to Masada and the Red Sea. Masada is very famous mountain. It's like a cliff at the top, with a mesa. It's where, long ago, when the Romans took over Israel, Palestine, a group of Jews fled to Masada and they lived on Masada and they held out the Romans for years until the Romans, until a Jewish man betrayed the Jews and showed the Romans where this secret cistern was, where the Jews were getting their water from. The Romans barricaded that so Jews couldn't get it anymore. All the Jews, rather than submit to the Roman rule, killed themselves, committed mass suicide. It's a very famous place. We hiked up Masada, it's in boiling heat, so you have to go at two in the morning cuz it's so

hot. We went to the Dead Sea and swam in the Dead Sea. And the Dead Sea is really cool because it's so salty you can't sink, you float on the top. If you have a cut of any kind, it burns like crazy, which I found out when I went in. We went to Ein Gedi which is a Wadi, which is this huge pool of water that, when the rains come, it's this magnificent area with cliffs all around, sand, and so we swam in Ein Gedi, which was cool. We went down to Elat, the Jewish port city on the Gulf of Aqaba. We went all around. We went to Jericho, we went to the Jordan River, we went to Lebanon. At the time, you could go right to the Lebanese boarder, we went right to the boarder. It was very safe. We went to Rosh HaNikra, which is this area right at the boarder on the water, in the Mediterranean where you can take this cable cars down into these caves. That was great, we worked on an archeological dig. Caesareo, where the Romans had built this huge amphitheater, and there were a lot of ruins. The Roman aqueducts. It was a really cool trip. I saw so much, as much as I could. Israel isn't a big country, you can drive across it in a day. You can drive the length of it in a day, it's just not that big. I got to do a lot of things.

I: Yeah. What was it like coming back to Maine after that?

N: It was weird. I felt really good that I had gone. Laurie Seltzer*, who again, was the co-president with me of the U.S. Y, so I had a friend that I knew. I made friends with kids from around the country. There was no email, so we were corresponding by letters. I stayed friends with them for a number of years. I certainly was a big ambassador for people, saying, "You've gotta go to Israel." It wasn't hard at all to come back to Maine. My sister, actually, was in Israel at the same time. She was in college, and she had taken a semester at Hebrew University in Tel Aviv. I spent a little time with her, not much because we moved around so much, but I got to spend time with her. It wasn't hard to come back, it just made me want to go back.

I: Yeah, and you've gone back many times.

N: Gone back twice. The last time was quite awhile ago, my kids were nine and seven. My parents, my sister and her family, my wife and our family all went to Israel. We spent eleven days in Israel and three days in Jordan, which was an amazing trip. But that was, my kids are twenty-seven and twenty-nine, so that was a long time ago. I would want, I really want to go back.

I: What was it like, how would you compare that Jewish community to the Maine Jewish community?

N: Well, you know, Israel is a secular state, it's not a Jewish state. It is a Jewish state, but it's not a religious state in many ways. Many Israelis are a-religious, or they're not very religious. I remember when we were there, the first week or two we were there, we were out in Jerusalem one evening and, I remember, this protest by a huge group of, it was Friday night, I remember this protest by a huge group of Orthodox Jews who were protesting against the fact there were still businesses open and restaurants open on Friday night because their view was Chabat is sacred and your traditional Jewish view of Orthodoxy was you do no work, you do no cooking, you do nothing. It's a day of rest.

That was very interesting to me. But other than that, it's not a, it's a Jewish state, but it's not a Jewish state. It's more about Israel as the Jewish homeland. As a place where Jews can feel safe and went to after. The desire, longtime-desire and goal, and desperate need for a Jewish homeland which came to fruition in 1948, after World War II. The creation of Israel is obviously very very important to Jews, but, in many ways, in some ways, it's not a religious state.

I: Yeah. But being there because you were Jewish, I suppose -

N: I felt very Jewish being there. Because it was a Jewish youth group and we did a lot. We did services, we celebrated. We were there and we embraced the Jewish aspects of being in Israel, as well as the historical aspects of being in Israel. That was, I felt very Jewish there and certainly more Jewish there than I did in Portland, Maine.

I: Why do you think that was?

N: Because I was in a place where there were more Jews around me then there are in Portland, Maine. To walk in the streets of Tel Aviv and to know that the vast majority of people who live in Israel who are walking around me are Jewish is a pretty amazing, unique feeling.

I: Did you miss that, coming home? Or is it just different?

N: It was just different. I missed Israel because it was such an interesting, amazing place historically, for the Jewish people and for me. But I knew it would be different. I knew Portland was different, it was just the way it was.

I: What was it like being Jewish in college, as opposed to living at home where there's this traditional -

N: Well, I went to Bowdoin, which is only thirty minutes up the road. There weren't a lot of Jews at Bowdoin. But we started the Bowdoin Jewish organization at Bowdoin, and I was involved in that, which has become Hillel, which has become the organization that, probably, you know, and almost every college and university in the country. Bowdoin now has a Hillel. I did that. Holidays, Jewish holidays, the High Holidays, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Passover, I would go back to my parents. My mother had an open door policy. Any Jewish kid at Bowdoin who wanted to come to services who couldn't come home would go to my parent's house. I remember bringing twenty kids to my parents house, including some non-Jewish kids, who were interested. I was very involved in Judaism, still, to that respect. But I didn't worry about having to have a lot of Jewish friends at Bowdoin.

I: Yeah.

N: Didn't think about, "Well, I've gotta have 'x' number of Jewish friends." My friends were my friends. It didn't matter what they were, what religion they were. That was my experience of Bowdoin. I never felt any issues with being Jewish at Bowdoin.

I: Good. How has your hometown changed, since you've been here your whole life.

N: Well, first of all, there's a Reform congregation here. Before that, there was just Beth El and Shaarey Tphiloh, which is the Orthodox congregation. There's a huge reform congregation which I've been a member, my wife and I have been members of for twenty-nine years. Maybe more. I've been the president of and been on the Board of Directors of and taught at the Hebrew School, at Bet Ha'am, which is the Reform Congregation. I'm very active in it. I'm the cantor at Yom Kippur services, so we do a lot with Bet Ha'am, so that's a huge change. That's brought in a lot of Jews, who might otherwise not be practicing and a lot of interfaith couples who otherwise wouldn't be raising their kids with a Jewish, sense of being Jewish. That's been a big plus. The Jewish community itself, I think, has grown. We have a congregation in Bath, which they never had, that's very vibrant. There's a congregation in Old Orchard Beach, which there always was, but it's not very big and it's a lot bigger and more active now. The Jewish community is much bigger. The Jewish Community Alliance, which used to be the Jewish Community Center is a big presence in the city of Portland. They do a lot, not only with Jews, but for non-Jews in terms of charitable services, family services. By services, I don't mean services like going to Temple. I mean things they do. It's a very different Jewish community. It's certainly a lot easier, I think, to be Jewish, except in Cape Elizabeth, where my wife and I live, if they had one other student in their class who was Jewish, that was something. But it's a lot easier, it's been a lot easier for them to be Jewish than for me, even as easy as it was for me.

I: Why do you think that is?

N: Because it's just not a big deal. Yeah.

I: Yeah.

N: Whether you're Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, areligious, it's just not made an issue. I also think the younger generations don't care as much about a lot of it. We're so much more open as a society and welcoming to different types of people and people with different interests. The gay and lesbian community and whole LGBT community. The African-American community is a lot bigger now in the greater Portland area and in Maine, then it used to be. I think all that's wonderful, and I think that all has made it easier to be Jewish, in this community. It's just not that big a deal.

I: Right. Why do you think there is a Jewish community in Maine? What drew the Jewish faith to Maine?

N: Well, I don't know for sure. I don't know the answer, and you'd have to ask people of my mother's generation who could know more than I do. But I think it started with a

group of Jews who just came here. More Jews came because there were Jews already here and there was a chance where there was opportunity to grow, to have success, to be successful, to raise families. Once that started, I think it was a natural place Jews knew they could go to Portland, Maine, and there would be a place of great opportunity, the American Dream. My grandparents, my parent's parents came through Ellis Island and my grandparent, my father's father, even though they were here in the 1800s and my grandmother, my mother's parents families were in the Boston area, Portland was a place that just became an easy, a good place for Jews to be. Other than things like the Cumberland Club, there wasn't a lot of really overt, nasty anti-Semitism.

I: How has your Jewish faith changed over time?

N: Well, I was Conservative Jew for a long, for most of my, for all my growing-up years, and I was on the Board of Directors on Beth El and I was very active in the Conservative movement. But when Bet Ha'am started, my wife, who's Jewish, was never raised Jewish so she had no Jewish upbringing. She was less comfortable at Beth El, understandably. Beth El is also, at least from my perspective, you've got this, people are sitting in the seats, and up above is the bimma, the raised area where the cantor and the rabbi are. As I got older, it felt more like a gap between the two and it didn't feel as intimate or as close an experience Jewish worship as I wanted it to be. Bet Ha'am is the synagogue area where we pray. One floor. The rabbi isn't up above us, he's on the same level that we are. It's a very interactive congregation. People talk to the Rabbi during services. It's very participatory. We all sing, as opposed to having a cantor who sings to the congregation, or a rabbi who reads prayers to the congregation, which is what Beth El was, and I don't know if it still is. It felt, it was a much more enjoyable experience for me, and it's been always a more enjoyable experience for me than Beth El ever was. Looking back, than Beth El ever was, even though Beth El was great growing up. It was just not the kind of Judaism I want.

I: Why do you think your needs changed?

N: Because I felt I could approach God easier if I was on the same level as the Rabbi and the cantor and the Rabbi and the leadership of Bet Ha'am. And I felt more intimate to me then in Beth El. I just felt much closer to my religion, and when I go there on Friday nights I feel that intimacy with the people I'm there with, and with God. It's easier for me to pray when it's at the same level as I am, physically and emotionally and spiritually.

I: How was it raising children in the Jewish faith?

N: It was different. We didn't force our kids. They were involved in Bet Ha'am, they went to religious school. My daughter didn't wanna be bat mitzvahed. We didn't force her to. My son wanted to be, so he was bar mitzvahed after that. There was a post-bar mitzvah and bah mitzvah continued education. My kids didn't want to do that and we didn't make them. The other thing was my kids were both active in sports and their sports activities interfered sometimes with Sunday religious school. We did not want to deprive them of their sports, which were important to them. We wanted them to have a rounded life,

education, so my parents would never have, I would have never thought to do that, but we did. I remember when my son was preparing to be bar mitzvahed, he was somewhat behind - Do you need me to stop?

I: No, keep going, I'm just checking the audio.

N: He was somewhat behind because he played hockey and because hockey took up so much of his time in practices and games, he had missed a lot of religious school. Our rabbi at the time said to us, "We're not sure Matt is ready to be bar mitzvahed." And we said, "Well, you have two choices. You can either work with him" - and we had tutors who helped kids - "the tutor can work with him and get him back where he needs to be and he can do his bar mitzvah. Or he won't do his bar mitzvah and you will have lost a kid to Judaism." So they accommodated him. He had his bar mitzvah. Things have changed. My parents probably had a different requirements or expectations than we did. Judaism was still very important, my kids feel very Jewish. They are very active as Jews. My son's in New York City, Manhattan, he joined a Reform congregation down there. My daughter is not, but my daughter feels very Jewish. That's what I care about, and that's what matters to me. But my parents would have been very upset if I had married a non-Jewish girl, or my sister had married a non-Jewish boy. That didn't happen. I don't care. My daughter is engaged to a wonderful guy who happens to be Catholic. But she's said, "You know, if we're going to get married, we're going to raise our kids Jewish." That makes a difference to me. But I would never have said, "Well, you're not going to have my blessing cuz he happens to be Catholic. I'm happy you love each other, that's good enough for me."

I: How do you think your changing views on Judaism made you change your kids' Jewish upbringing from your own?

N: It was, we always had, my parents had a Kosher household. We have not. My parents, you know, we did a lot of things that were connected with the Jewish community center because the Jewish community center was like a, it was a Y Jews, because we played sports there. It was also a place Jewish kids could go when it was a smaller Jewish community, hang out with other Jewish kids. As a result, as I said, there were a lot of Jews in my neighborhood, a lot of Jews in the Baxter Boulevard neighborhood that I became friends with. I went to Hebrew School ten times a week. None of that for my kids, nor did I expect that. I mean, Cape Elizabeth, which is where their friends were, there aren't many Jews and they wanted to do other things and that was fine with me. We didn't go to Friday night services a lot. We went, but not all the time. They were fine. I know we've accommodated that. Saturdays they played sports, and we would go. The only thing we did get - my wife was great about this. For years, Cape Elizabeth, and a lot of other high schools, they play Friday nights. The games would start at four in the afternoon, wherever in the state, and they would finish when the sun, after the sun had set. We felt it was very important that games not start and end after Chabat had begun, which is at sunset on Fridays. My wife raised a huge stink for years with the Cape Elizabeth athletic director and he changed it finally. That. And we had one experience where my daughter had a teacher in sixth grade who said, "We're going to do what we do

every year. We're going to adopt a family for Christmas and raise money for them, Christmas dinner, toys." My wife went nuts, and I did too, went ballistic, and met with her teacher and met with the school principal and said, "This is unacceptable." The teacher had no idea why this was a problem. The majority of the kids in the school are Catholic, Christian. We said, "Too bad. Our kids are Jewish." That ended. My son was in a class where there was another kid, Goldstein and Bernstein, and the teacher made a comment about Hitler, which was not good, and my wife went to the principal and said, "You will take my son out of this class now and you will get him another teacher." And they did. Those are the only negative experiences, everything else was great.

I: Well good. But why do you think those experiences still happen?

N: It's not out of intentional bigotry, it's out of an ignorance. No one means to discriminate against - at least, in Cape Elizabeth, there was no intent to discriminate against us because we were Jewish. Like the teacher said, she'd done this for years and didn't see anything wrong with adopting a family for Christmas. They could have said, "We're going to adopt a family for the holidays." And that probably would have been fine. But we're not going to put up Christmas trees and we're not gonna, you know, that kind of thing. I think it's just out of ignorance. When my company I work for, Unum, merged with a Chatanooga company, Providence, I went down for a meeting in Providence. One of the first times I had been there. I walk into the reception area, there was a Nativity scene. It was December. I came back and I said to my wife, "This is not going to be a place I can work." Again, I think that was out of ignorance. So.

I: Wow. Well, I want to make sure down your family's immigration. Where were they from originally?

N: My father's family is from Russia, and the apocryphal story, that I have no idea if it's true, was when the Czars were in power, if you were Jewish, the Czar would conscript your son into the military and you'd never see him again. But if you had only one son, they would not do that. So the story is that there was a family named Oppenheimer, with two Jewish sons, and so that they wouldn't be taken away, they gave one of their sons to a family named Bernstein. Who knows if it's true or not. They came through, to the United States in the 1800s. My mother's father and mother were sent by their respective families from Poland, where they lived, to the United States to relatives in their teens. They didn't know each other, they met in the United States, in the Bronx. That's where my mother was born. My grandfather, my mother's father's family that was left in Poland, all killed by the Nazis except for his mother and his three sisters, who escaped by going East, where the Soviets captured them and sent them to Siberia. My grandfather had no idea they were alive, found them after the way, with the help of the Red Cross, and got them to the United States. My father, my mother's a first generation American in Maine, their parents immigrated. They moved to the Bronx and then they moved up to Fall River, Mass., where she was raised and went to high school.

I: What's it like having that immigration legacy?

N: Well, I'm certainly much more understanding of immigrants coming to this country. It was, it is the land of opportunity, still, and the American Dream, I think, I like to think it still exists, though it doesn't exist, I know, in reality in a lot of places in a lot of ways. I will say one thing, I think I worry that immigrants in this country, some immigrants, don't have the same expectation of working hard, becoming citizens and sharing the American Dream, as opposed to coming here and feeling they're entitled to things by virtue of being in the country. That may be a Republican view, I think I'm the only Republican - by the way - in this law firm, but I believe it. I think, we have to have, I think immigration is great, and I think people should have the opportunity to come to the United States, but come legally. My grandparents, my father's parents, my mother's parents, when they came here, came here through Ellis Island, and they worked for a long time, and they studied to become American citizens. They had to pass the test. When they became American citizens, it was the happiest day of their lives. I think that's how it should work. They didn't come illegally.

I: Yeah. Those are the questions I had prepared. Is there anything we didn't cover that you think is relevant to the subject?

N: Nothing I can think of, except that I feel very lucky to have been born here, to have been born into the family I've been born into. It's a blessing, so, no.

I: Thank you so much for meeting with me!

POSTSCRIPT
N: I just want to say that one of my heroes and one of my mentors growing up was my cantor, cantor Kurt Messerschmidt, who is a hundred years old, who is a very important influence in my life. He is a Holocaust survivor. His wife is a Holocaust survivor. They had married before, I believe, before the Nazis came to power, or before they were sent to concentration camps. They were sent to separate concentration camps, found each other, both survived, and found each other after the war. Immigrated, came to the United States, and he lived down the street from me. His son Michael and his daughter live in Portland still. His son is a great guy. They're great people. I used to, when I was studying for my bar mitzvah, I used to just walk down the street to the cantor's home. He'd teach me there. But that made a big influence on my life. He was an amazing influence on my life because I knew his story. He's one of the most upbeat, happy, joyous people who takes joy every day in life, that I have ever seen. I can't, I was always in awe of the fact that he could be that way in spite of the horrible experiences he endured.

I: Did he talk to you about the experiences he'd had?

N: No. Not really. I don't think ever. He has the tattoo on his arm, as did his wife, Sonja. When his kids were all grown up, they took a family trip to Auschwitz where either he or Sonja, I don't remember which - I also couldn't believe they had the courage to do that. I don't think I could have done that. They were, he and his wife are just impressive, amazing people. They were people I looked up to. As you can see, I'm getting a tear in my eye. Loved him.

I: What's it like having something that traumatic, like the Holocaust, be so present in your community and your family history?

N: Well, my parents never bought anything German, ever. Never considered traveling to Germany ever. When I was younger it was because they told me if they did they would end up looking at older people and wondering what they were doing in 1942, '43. But it just, the fact that my mother's family and my mother's father's family, and my mother's mother's family died, died, were killed [for being] Jews. And the towns they were in were wiped out by the Nazis and no longer exist, it's perfectly understandable why they feel that way. The Holocaust has had a big presence in my life, knowing that. The statement, 'Never Again,' means a lot to me. That's why Israel is so important to me. I will support Israel no matter what. If Israel feels, to defend itself, it has to go in and kill terrorists, which, frankly, I think is the only thing terrorists understand, I support them. That's part of never again. [Narrator's buzzer goes off] That's my view. The Holocaust - I never want anybody to experience that and so I'm very aware of that as a sense of being Jewish in America. To do that I can, all that I can to make sure that never happens.

I: What do you think Jewish communities, in their ability to exist and grow, say about how the Jewish faith has weathered that storm?

N: I think it's a statement t the Nazis that they failed. The goal was to annihilate the Jews and they intended to build a museum to a dead race, which never got built. It's just a statement, you know, like, "Screw you." That never happened. That didn't happen to us, we grew, we survived, we thrive and we still do. It'll never happen again. Never. And I don't ever want it to happen to any other people. The atrocities that have been committed to various other communities, like the Hutus and the Tutsis... It just never should happen. The Holocaust is no different, it wasn't just Jews. It was Gypsies and non-Aryans, who were not pure in the Nazi's eyes. Never again.

I: What do you think is the best attack against that kind of ignorance and anti-Semitism?

N: Calling it out and not letting it go by. Just because people are your friends, if they say things that are offensive without meaning to, you have to tell them. My wife and I were once at a party where, she worked at this company, and they were wonderful people, all great people, but the family who were, the guy whose house, he and his wife, we were at their home, and he was talking about his house and the renovations he had just done. He was talking about the price he paid for the renovation, he said, "I really jewed the guy down." I spoke out and said, "Look, that's totally unacceptable to me. You may not realize what you said, but you basically said that because you think Jews are cheap, they care only about money. And that's just unacceptable." My wife and I left, and he had no idea what he had said. He called the next day and apologized. I said, I appreciate that, but that's just not acceptable. That's what you have to do.

I: Yeah. Make a statement.

N: Yeah.

I: That's a very powerful part of the Jewish identity, that there's such a traumatic historical event...

N: Sometimes we're pretty defensive, we get defensive. When people criticize Israel I get very defensive. How would people feel if they were living in Maine and Massachusetts was bombing them every day, and they were sending residents of Massachusetts in to Maine with suicide, you know, with bombs strapped, attached to their vests so they would kill innocent people? I'm very defensive of Judaism for obvious reasons. I really get my back up and I get very mad. That's what I mean by never again.

I: Do you think, within Maine, the Maine Jewish community, there is a consensus about Israel?

N: No. Probably just like everywhere else in the world, there are no consensus among any communities about anything. No. There are certainly Jews who are entitled to their opinions who believe that Israel has, I mean, done bad things. Has, you know, tormented refugees and discriminated, and I don't believe that.

I: Do you that's one of the most important questions facing the Jewish community, both in Maine and worldwide, is Israel, right now?

N: Yes. It always has been.

I: What do you think the opinion in Maine is and the Maine Jewish community?

N: I think, generally, they're very pro-Israel. I mean if it was a choice between Israel existing and Israel not existing, I think most Jews in the United States would want Israel to continue to exist. Within Bet Ha'am, I know there are very different views, and I avoid having that conversation because I don't wanna get into a fight. But I have had that conversation (laughs), and my mother's very outspoken. She just is.