

A Century of Jewish Life in Biddeford-Saco

Introduction

The first Jewish residents of Biddeford, Maine arrived in the 1880's. The Jewish community that grew in the area was mainly comprised of immigrants from Lithuania, Russia, and Poland who fled from persecution in their home countries. These first Jews of Biddeford primarily spoke Yiddish (the common language of all Eastern European Jews), having very limited knowledge of English. They lacked formal educations and came with little money to invest in businesses. Commonly, Jewish men became peddlers to earn their living. The booming population of mill workers in Biddeford provided the Jews with a sizeable community to whom they could market their goods.

The early Jewish settlers of Biddeford-Saco had no synagogue, so they held their religious gatherings at community members' homes. By 1894, they had moved their gatherings to an Alfred Street social hall. By 1906, another social hall on Main Street as well as rooms in a community member's Pool Street home were used as meeting places.

As the Jews settled into their new lives in Biddeford-Saco, they brought from Europe their family members as well as their "lantzmen," friends from their homelands. By the turn of the century, the Jewish community had grown in size and in resources, and in 1907, they pooled their money to purchase a building to serve as the community's synagogue. The building, located on Bacon Street in Biddeford, had been built in 1874 as an Episcopalian church. The Jews converted the church into a synagogue and later named it Congregation Etz Chaim ("Tree of Life" in Hebrew). Having undergone many changes and adaptations over the last century, Congregation Etz Chaim, still located in the same building, remains an active synagogue to this day.

The congregation became the focal point of Jewish community life in Biddeford and Saco. In addition to being a house of worship, it provided religious education to Jewish children and became the cradle from which local chapters of national Jewish organizations sprang.

The synagogue was the center of Jewish religious, social, and cultural events, providing a place for Bar Mitzvahs (ceremonies marking Jewish boys' rite of passage into adulthood), weddings, cleansings in the mikveh (ritual bath), chapter meetings, and social dances and parties.

In the 1920's, the Biddeford area was home to about 40 Jewish families. By the middle of the next decade, about 70 families resided in the twin cities. In 1939, a mortgage burning party was held in celebration of making the last payment on the synagogue building.

Etz Chaim's Hebrew School at this time enrolled approximately 35-40 students. Most of these students were the children of the immigrant generation. They attended the public schools of Biddeford and Saco in addition to Hebrew School classes five days per week. However, after graduating from high school, many of these children went away to college, and the Jewish population in Biddeford and Saco began to decline.

The return to the area of some of the Jewish college graduates brought a change in the climate of Jewish businesses in Biddeford-Saco. These educated members of the second generation opened professional, "white collar" businesses, which began to replace their parents' generation's retail shops.

With the departure of Etz Chaim's last full-time rabbi, Boris Gottlieb, in 1967, and with the growing dissatisfaction with the congregation's orthodoxy, the congregation struggled for many years to stay alive. Hebrew School classes ceased, and High Holiday services (for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), which generally draw the largest crowd of the year, only brought about 25 people. In the 1980's, however, through the combined efforts of Jewish newcomers to the area and committed long-time members of Etz Chaim, the congregation experienced a major revitalization and exists today as the hub of a vibrant Jewish community in York County.

From Roots to Regeneration

The first wave of Jews who came to Biddeford, Maine in the 1880's had no synagogue in which to congregate. They did, however, have Torah scrolls, containing the first Five Books of Moses, which had been brought over from Europe. For several years, daily religious services were held at community members' homes. A Hebrew Congregation was officially organized in 1892 under the leadership of the first president, Hyman Goodkowsky, whose second-floor apartment on Alfred Street was one of the first homes at which the men gathered. By 1894, the community held its religious gatherings at St. Anthoine's Hall (which came to be known as "The Jewish Hall"), a social hall located at 26 Alfred Street. The gatherings were later held at other venues, the Knights of Pythias Hall (260 Main Street) and Nathan Shapiro's home at 5 Pool Street. By 1900, the community was being served by Hirche Hazid, the first known Biddeford rabbi.

On June 19, 1907, the Jewish community incorporated under the name of "Biddeford Hebrew Synagogue Association." At this time, the congregation elected a new slate of trustees and officers, with Lewis Polakewich serving as president. They had raised enough money to buy the Episcopal Church (built in 1874), located on Bacon Street, Biddeford, and finalized the purchase later that month. The congregation, which paid the sum of \$4,100 to the church's trustee, Robert Codman, of Portland, made a down-payment of \$1,100 and took a mortgage for \$3,000 from the Saco Savings Bank. In 1910, the congregation was named "Congregation Etz Chaim" (pronounced Aytz Khayim), Hebrew for "Tree of Life," reportedly in honor of Hyman Goodkowsky (whose Hebrew name was Chaim) after he left Biddeford for Lewiston, Maine.

The congregation was established as an Orthodox synagogue, adhering to the strict religious traditions that the immigrant generation brought with them from Europe. Services were conducted exclusively in Hebrew, women were not allowed to read from the Torah, and the sexes were seated in separate sections in the sanctuary.

Rabbi Hazid did not continue to serve the Jewish community after 1907. With a mortgage to pay, the congregation could not afford to hire a full-time rabbi, so they created a combined position of cantor, kosher butcher, shochet (slaughterer), and janitor. Chlavno Cantor filled the position for only about five months, and it was then taken over by Joseph Caplan for about two and a half years. The congregation relied upon its most learned members and its Hebrew School teachers to lead High Holiday services for the years during which no rabbi or cantor was employed.

The unfinished basement of the synagogue was home to the congregation's mikveh, a pool used for ritual cleansing. The basement also served as the location of the Talmud Torah, the Hebrew School, established in 1922, which was attended by the Jewish children in the afternoons, Monday through Thursday, and on Sunday mornings.

The year 1939 marked an important time in Etz Chaim's history as it brought full and clear ownership of the synagogue building. On March 19th of that year, with approximately 70 families in its membership, Congregation Etz Chaim held a mortgage burning party, consisting of a memorial service and a celebratory dinner. Congregation member Sam Osher was given the honor of setting fire to the mortgage papers.

Etz Chaim's shochet and spiritual leader, Morris Nathanson, served for nine years, from 1936-1945. His departure was followed by a progression of five different rabbis over the next nine years.

In 1948, under Rabbi Benjamin Roth and congregation president, Leo L. Simensky, the synagogue underwent a partial renovation. After many very heated debates between the more religiously strict members of the congregation and those who wished to shed some of the synagogue's Orthodox traditions, it was decided to remove the mikveh from the basement of the building. The basement was then "finished" and redecorated as a vestry or social hall. On December 12, 1948, Etz Chaim held a dedication celebration for the new vestry that included dinner and the entertainment of New York humorist Dr. W.E. Sims.

Rabbi Boris Gottlieb accepted the position of rabbi in 1954 and brought an end to the rapid turnover of rabbis that the congregation experienced over the preceding decade. He remained the rabbi of Etz Chaim until 1967.

It was during Rabbi Gottlieb's tenure that the synagogue celebrated its 50th anniversary. Counting the life of the congregation according to the Roman calendar rather than the Hebrew one, the anniversary was celebrated in 1957. A three-day celebration began on November 15th with a special Friday evening service conducted by Rabbi Gottlieb; a guest speech by Dr. H. Lewis Cutler, pastor of the Second Congregational Church; and a reception in the vestry. On the morning of the following day, Rabbi Gottlieb delivered a special sermon entitled "The Synagogue Faces a New World." The following evening, a golden jubilee banquet was held in the vestry, where members enjoyed a dinner and the performance of a Boston humorist, Mr. Ben Gailing.

Faced with a dwindling membership and the departure of Rabbi Gottlieb in 1967, Congregation Etz Chaim entered a very difficult period in its history. For over a decade, the synagogue's doors remained closed except for yearly High Holiday services, conducted by visiting rabbis or cantors. At one point, there were even discussions about closing the synagogue permanently.

Fortunately, however, the arrival of several young Jewish families in the 1980's and 90's sparked a revitalization of the synagogue. David and Beth Strassler worked with Etz Chaim's president, Arnold Shapiro, as well as other long-time members of the synagogue to breathe new life into a largely inactive congregation. In the late 1980's, Etz Chaim discontinued its Orthodox affiliation and began to operate as an unaffiliated synagogue, drawing a much larger and younger membership. The new Hebrew School began weekly classes in 1988, and currently has 27 students enrolled.

Today, Congregation Etz Chaim offers, in addition to weekly Hebrew School classes, twice monthly Sabbath services, community potluck Sabbath dinners, monthly Sunday School classes, a Teen Class, yearly High Holiday services, and other yearly holiday celebrations including a Chanukah party, Purim Party, and Tu B'Shvat Seder, as well as several other Jewish activities. In addition, the synagogue is home to the Samuel Osher Memorial Library, established in 1999, which offers Jewish themed books, videos, CDs, cassettes, DVDs, and games.

Having reached a membership of 100 families in time for its 100th anniversary, Congregation Etz Chaim stands poised for the next century as a true "Tree of Life" — a sturdy yet pliable pillar of vitality, whose branches bend with the winds of change but remain a source of regeneration and renewal.

THE WOMEN OF CONGREGATION ETZ CHAIM

Historically, Jewish women played a relatively small role in public religious life. The Jewish community of Biddeford-Saco was no exception. Only men counted toward the minyan, the quota of 10 people needed to conduct services. And since women did not “count,” they generally did not attend services. Women’s primary expression of religion at this time was their fulfillment of their duty to keep their homes kosher; that is, in accordance with the Jewish dietary laws of Kasruth. Generally, they came to the synagogue to worship only on the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Because the synagogue upheld Orthodox traditions, the women (and young children) sat apart from the men in the sanctuary’s balcony (whose staircase, once located in the building’s former bell-tower, is now gone).

At an unknown point in history when the bell-tower (a vestige of the Christian elements of the building, originally an Episcopal Church) was razed, the women’s section was relocated to a second sanctuary, known as the “little shul,” separated from the main sanctuary by a wall with many sheer-curtained windows. These windows, when opened, enabled the women to hear the service. (The curtains were there to discourage the women from viewing the men, though some women recall that in their youth they enjoyed peeking.)

It is estimated that by the late 1930’s or early 1940’s, women had gradually transitioned from sitting in the little shul to sitting in the main sanctuary during services. However, they sat on one side of the aisle, while men sat on the other. It was not until the late 1950’s or early 1960’s that congregants took the next step toward gender egalitarianism. Men crossed over to the women’s side of the aisle in order to sit with their families. Those who participated in this “mixed” seating arrangement were tolerated but were expected to stay in the back rows of pews, while the front rows of the two aisles remained single-sex.

It was not just seating arrangements that kept females and males on unequal footing at Congregation Etz Chaim. Some girls received home instruction from learned men even in the early days of Biddeford-Saco’s Jewish community, and many girls attended the Hebrew School that was established at Etz Chaim in 1922. However, Orthodox Judaism provided the girls with no counterpart to the Bar Mitzvah (literally “Son of the Commandment”), the ceremony in which a 13 year-old boy “comes of age” and reads from the Torah before the congregation for the first time. It was not until 1956 that the first Bas Mitzvah (“Daughter of the Commandment”) ceremony was held at Etz Chaim, and even this was not truly comparable to a Bar Mitzvah, as the girls did not read from the Torah.

The women of Etz Chaim, however, were not without power, influence, or responsibility at the synagogue, even in the early years of the congregation. In 1910, they formed the Ladies Aid Society, which provided financial assistance to the synagogue as well as assistance to newly-arrived Jewish families. Later, the women formed The Ladies’ Auxiliary, also known as The Sisterhood. The Ladies Auxiliary was headed by elected officers (like the all male Board of Trustees of the synagogue), including president, vice president, treasurer, recording secretary, corresponding secretary, and financial secretary. Many committees, each with at least one chairwoman, served a variety of purposes for the benefit of the congregation. From keeping the kitchen kosher, to cleaning the synagogue, to ordering flowers for the sanctuary at the High Holidays, the members of the Ladies Auxiliary performed many tasks that kept the synagogue running smoothly and provided a much needed woman’s touch. The Auxiliary disbanded in the early 1980’s.

Since Etz Chaim’s rebirth as an unaffiliated synagogue over the last 20 years, egalitarianism has been upheld in every respect. Seating is mixed, Bas Mitzvahs and Bar Mitzvahs are conducted in the same manner, and the Board of Directors is comprised of equal numbers of men and women. The sanctuary’s empty balcony, with its staircase long gone, hangs over the congregation—unreachable—as a reminder of the marginalization of women which Etz Chaim has left in the past.

From Peddling to Prosperity

Biddeford-Saco's early Jews, like most Jewish immigrants in America, left their homelands in Europe to escape religious persecution and/or financial hardship. Under strict regulations that dictated the professions to which they could aspire in the Pale of Settlement (in Poland and Russia), for example, the Jews thought of America as the land of economic opportunity.

Many of the Jews who came to Biddeford-Saco during the immigration wave of the first decade of the 20th century did not come directly to the twin cities from Europe. Rather, they lived in other states in large cities such as New York and Boston, or in other in-state cities, such as Portland and Bath. Biddeford appealed to those who were not content in their first American locations, in part, for economic reasons. The booming mill town seemed a good choice for two reasons. First, it offered jobs that required little English and that provided a relatively quick source of income. The vast majority of Jewish immigrants who took mill jobs did so only temporarily, while they situated themselves and saved money. The notion that Jews did not make good mill workers grew so embedded in Biddeford's culture that by the 1940's, Jews looking for mill work were sent away and told that they "belong on Main Street."

This concept of Jews "belonging" on Main Street reflected the fact that Biddeford-Saco's Jews established a reputation as shopkeepers. In fact, the opportunity to sell goods for a living was the second reason why Biddeford, a mill town, attracted Jewish immigrants in the first place. The booming population of mostly Franco-Americans who worked in the mills provided a large population to whom the Jews could sell merchandise.

But most of the Jewish immigrants lacked the means to begin their new lives in Biddeford as shopkeepers. Instead, they gradually took several steps toward store ownership. Typically, when a man saved enough money to buy a peddler's pack, a pack of merchandise worn on his back, he would become a professional foot peddler, walking for many hours a day to sell his wares. Peddling was grueling work, but if a man was successful at it, he could save his money to purchase a push-cart. The job of pushing a cart full of merchandise was exhausting work too, but the cart allowed the peddler to sell in greater volume and to sell larger, more expensive items. If he made enough money selling items from his push-cart, he could then buy a horse-drawn wagon, and, if he was prosperous enough, he could eventually become a shop owner.

By 1900, there were seven Jewish-owned retail shops in Biddeford. Twenty years later, there were twenty-three Jewish-owned retail and service businesses in Biddeford, plus three in Saco. The number of Jewish-owned retail and service businesses (or "blue collar" businesses) peaked in 1950 at thirty-eight. The Jews of Biddeford-Saco supported one another financially by making it a point to patronize Jewish stores whenever possible. But Jewish-owned shops were certainly not limited to Jewish customers. In fact, for

many of the gentile adults and the children who attended parochial schools in Biddeford, transactions with Jewish shopkeepers were nearly the extent of their interaction with and knowledge of Jews. As late as the 1960's, for example, local children referred to Central Fruit on Alfred Street, Biddeford, owned by the Wilensky family as "The Jew Store."

Not a single Jewish professional (or "white collar") business appeared in either city until about 1940. This is not surprising, as members of the immigrant generation were not formally educated. However, some members of the second generation, those who were American born and/or American educated, were sent to college, and most who returned to Biddeford-Saco went into professional fields, rather than continuing their families' retail or service businesses. Therefore, beginning in the 1950's, there was a simultaneous decline in "blue collar" Jewish businesses and increase in Jewish professionals in the twin cities. Even those second generation Jews who did not attend college contributed to the decline of the retail and service shops, as many moved out of Biddeford-Saco or out of Maine altogether after graduating from high school to seek out the excitement of big cities and to expand their options for marriage partners of their faith.

Other contributing factors to the post-1950 decline of Jewish-owned shops in Biddeford-Saco were the same factors that led to the decline of all of the twin cities' downtown shops. The creation of shopping centers, with convenient parking lots in this era of the automobile, as well as the construction of the Maine Mall in South Portland in 1969 hastened the demise of small downtown shops, which could offer only on-street parking and a limited variety of merchandise.

A few Jewish-owned shops have weathered the changes that the decades have brought and still operate today under Jewish ownership. The oldest Jewish-owned business still in existence is Sam's Place, which was established by Sam Osher circa 1915 as a hardware store on Water Street (later on Alfred Street) Biddeford. The Cowan family bought the business from the Oshers in 1964, moved it to its present location on Main Street, Saco in 1968, and transitioned the store into a paint/wallpaper/art supply store.

Other long-surviving Jewish businesses of the area that still exist today include the Shapiro family's Union Oil (whose roots began in 1921 as a radiator repair shop run by Esidore H. Shapiro); and Jack and Larry's Jewelry, opened by brothers Jack and Larry Simensky in 1949 (and still run by the former) on Alfred Street, Biddeford (now on Main Street, Biddeford).

The survival of these Jewish-owned retail and service businesses is a testament to the hard work and ingenuity of their owners and to the pride they take in sustaining their families' contributions to the economic vitality of Biddeford and Saco.

Jewish Businesses Plagued by Fire

The Jewish businesses of Biddeford saw their fair share of fires over the years. One of the worst was the blaze that began in the Central Hotel on Alfred Street on April 13, 1969. The building in which the Central Hotel was housed was owned by Jewish community member Sam Cohen. The ground floor of the building was occupied by several retail stores, many of which were Jewish-owned. Myer Simensky's clothing store and Jack and Larry's jewelry store, both fronting on Alfred Street, were burned, as were Sam Cohen's fruit store and Feinberg's Clothing, fronting on the Main Street side of the building. Five men, all guests of the hotel, lost their lives in the fire.

One of the earlier known fires to destroy a Jewish business was the one that engulfed York Bottling Company, owned by Julius and Celia Cohen, in December of 1931. The Cohens and their seven children lived in part of the building. Though no one was hurt, their home was badly damaged. The family was given rooms at the Columbia Hotel, which was owned and operated by Harry and Jennie Aranovitch.

Many years later, the Columbia Hotel, itself, located on the corner of Main, Water, and Hill Streets, succumbed to blazes in 1973. A guest in the hotel, who was smoking a cigarette in bed, accidentally started a fire that destroyed the hotel, one floor of which served as the living quarters of the Aranovitch family. The site on which the hotel stood was sold to the city of Biddeford and is now known as Liberty Park.

Esidore H. Shapiro's Modern Radiator Works and Auto Supply store on Alfred Street caught on fire in 1935 when a kerosene tank exploded. Shapiro rebuilt his store on the same lot the following year as Shapiro's Superior Service, adding gasoline and heating oil to his list of products and services.

Getting Organized, AZA to ZOA

The Zionist Organization of America

Over the years, the Jews of Biddeford-Saco established local chapters of several national Jewish organizations. One of the oldest national Jewish groups in the United States is ZOA, the Zionist Organization of America. Founded in 1897, ZOA's original purpose was to re-establish a Jewish state in the ancient Holy Land. ZOA's efforts helped mobilize support in America for the establishment of Israel in 1948. Many local Jewish men belonged to the Biddeford-Saco Zionist District, raising money for the creation (and later the benefit) of Israel.

Hadassah

In November of 1926, 25 Jewish women of Biddeford and Saco established a local chapter of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. Founded in 1912 by Jewish scholar, teacher, journalist, and social worker, Henrietta Szold, the national organization sought to improve the substandard health conditions that Szold witnessed as a visitor in Palestine. Hadassah's mission expanded to improve the overall quality of life in Israel, focusing not just on health care (with the establishment of hospitals, medical schools, research labs, clinics and health centers), but also on education (with its Hadassah College Jerusalem), the environment (with its water conservation and tree planting initiatives), and the youth (its Youth Aliyah program dedicated to supporting Israel's disadvantaged children).

The Biddeford-Saco chapter of Hadassah met monthly at Congregation Etz Chaim and held yearly Donor Dinners at the Lafayette Hotel in Old Orchard Beach. Annual meetings, at which the officers were elected, were held in October. By 1927, one year after its conception, chapter membership numbered 40. The chapter had several committees at this time including a Sewing Group (part of the Palestine charity effort), the Jewish National Fund Committee (headed by Mrs. Etta Fogel), and the Infant Welfare Fund or "Milk Fund" (organized by Mrs. Rebecca Thorner). Mrs. Sela Shutz headed the Penny Luncheon committee, whose mission was to hold luncheons at which members donated their pocket change. Mrs. Esther Green ran the United Palestine Appeal Committee, and Mrs. Eva Cetlin chaired the Cultural Committee. A Publicity Committee was also formed.

The women of the local Hadassah chapter worked hard to raise money for the Jews of Palestine/Israel. The women passed out tin boxes, called "pushkes" in Yiddish, to members of the Jewish community who put money into them throughout the year for the Jewish National Fund. The Biddeford-Saco chapter also held raffles and rummage sales to raise money. The rummage sales were particularly popular. Landlords of empty downtown stores gave the women permission to use their facilities for the sale, and members of the Jewish community donated unwanted clothing and household goods. Because the Jews had a reputation for having good quality clothing, these sales drew large crowds from the community. Long lines of Biddeford and Saco residents arrived at the sales early and waited for the doors to open.

After Etz Chaim's basement was converted to a vestry in 1948, the Hadassah chapter held many fundraising events there. Members prepared delicious food in the synagogue's kitchen, and charged a modest fee to those congregants. With a declining membership and an increasing financial quota to make, the local chapter of Hadassah disbanded in the early 1980's. The Portland chapter integrated many of the former members.

B'nai B'rith

On May 5, 1935, Leo L. Simensky of Biddeford founded a local chapter of the Jewish service organization B'nai B'rith. Named for a departed prominent Jewish citizen of Saco, the Samuel M. Solmer Lodge, which had 26 charter members, was first headed by President Simon Spill, and meetings were held at Congregation Etz Chaim one Sunday morning per month.

Founded in 1843, B'nai B'rith International is dedicated to upholding the human rights of Jews world-wide, getting involved in community initiatives for humanitarian purposes, and advocating for Israel in political arenas. Like its international parent group, the Samuel M. Solmer Lodge participated in non-sectarian activities intended for public benefit, such as awarding an annual scholarship to a local needy student wishing to attend college. The local chapter members were known to extend invitations to the public in general and specifically to various churches, fraternal and social groups with the goal of exchanging views and ideas.

Aleph Zadik Aleph

A young men's order of B'nai B'rith was created in Omaha, Nebraska in 1924. A fraternity for high school boys, Aleph Zadik Aleph, or AZA, like B'nai B'rith, focuses on community service and Judaic enrichment programs. The Hebrew letters—Aleph, Zadik, Aleph—stand for Ahava, Tzedakah, Ahdoot, Hebrew words that mean love, charity, and harmony. Fourteen young men of Biddeford-Saco's Jewish community formed an AZA chapter (Chapter 371) on March 24, 1939.

Women's Auxiliary of B'nai B'rith

The local B'nai B'rith chapter also created a women's auxiliary, which was part of the Grand Lodge of District 1. Separate Junior Leagues were formed specifically for teenage girls. On February 5, 1939, 17 girls from Biddeford-Saco formed their own junior league, with Jeannette Remar serving as the first president and Rose Baker as the first secretary.

Jewish War Veterans

On June 26, 1946, the National Headquarters of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States granted a charter to 20 Biddeford-Saco men, thereby creating the Osher-Edelstein Post (number 508). The JWV advocates for Jewish veterans before the U.S. Veterans Administration and works for veteran health and employment benefits.

The Workmen's Circle

Biddeford-Saco Jews were also active in the Workmen's Circle, otherwise known as the Arbeiter (Yiddish for "Worker") Ring, a Jewish labor fraternal order. Founded in 1892, the Workmen's Circle became a national organization in 1900 and was dedicated to supporting the labor and socialist movements of the world, while being closely linked to Jewish unions and the Yiddish labor press. Some of its goals were to promote Jewish education, to preserve Yiddish language, arts, and culture, to provide members with health and death benefits, and to bring about social change in America. Membership peaked in 1925 with 87,000 members nationwide. As membership subsequently dropped, the organization shifted its focus from political ideology to Jewish cultural activities. Biddeford-Saco Chapter 71 of the Workmen's Circle used Congregation Etz Chaim as its meeting place.

Keeping Kosher on Bacon Street

The first generation of Jews comprised a relatively small minority within the mainly Franco and Anglo populations in Biddeford and Saco. Partly as a result of their cultural and religious differences and partly because of their small numbers, the Jewish community was "close-knit" in every way. People rarely knocked before entering their neighbors' homes, and women watched over and fed each other's children with great frequency. In many instances, this unity was a blessing; a bar mitzvah, wedding, birth, sickness, or death was celebrated or endured with a communal interest or effort that is foreign to most people today. It was not uncommon, for example, for the Jewish community to contribute money to bring a local boy's sweetheart over from Europe so that the two could marry and settle here.

But the community's closeness was also often a source of tension, as privacy was not always respected. For example, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, during which observant Jews do not eat or drink, some community members would ask to see others' tongues. A white tongue would prove that the fast had not been broken. A pink tongue, however, marked a person for gossip.

Because of the all-encompassing nature of Orthodox Judaism, nearly all aspects of everyday life for the first few generations of Biddeford-Saco Jews were steeped in Jewish practice. One of the most basic decisions of life—where to live—was dictated by religious beliefs, as proximity to the synagogue was of utmost importance. Even after automobiles became available and affordable for them, most Jewish families remained within walking distance of the synagogue because the modern Orthodox interpretation of ancient Jewish law prohibits driving on the Sabbath. Consequently, most Biddeford Jews lived in the area surrounding Bacon Street.

Jewish law also spells out strict dietary guidelines. One of these kosher laws requires observant Jews to only eat meat that comes from certain kinds of animals that have been killed in a ritual manner by a person qualified to perform such a slaughter. In order to observe kosher rules, the Jews had to buy their meat at a kosher butcher shop. One such shop, run by butcher Max Shear, was located on Foss Street in Biddeford. Many members of the Jewish community were not happy with Shear, however. The Cohen family helped to bring a second kosher butcher, Mordechai Cohen (not related), to Biddeford from Palestine in the mid 1930's. His shop was located at the corner of Hill and Granite Streets.

There were also at least two other men in the community over the years who were qualified to perform the kosher slaughter of chickens. They traveled to the homes of people who either owned chickens or had ordered them from local farmers, and the slaughterers charged a fee per chicken killed. One of the men was Rabbi Morris Nathanson, spiritual leader of Congregation Etz Chaim from 1936 to 1945, who would walk as far as three miles each way to people's homes to slaughter their chickens for five cents per bird.

By the 1950's with fewer Jewish families keeping kosher, the Biddeford kosher butchers had gone out of business, forcing observant Jews to travel to Portland to buy their meat. (Although in the summers, for the convenience of the many observant Jewish vacationers who summered in Old Orchard Beach, a kosher butchery, run by Mr. Sheffschick, and a kosher bakery operated on East Grand Avenue near the kosher Lafayette Hotel for several more years.)

In addition to dictating where they lived and how they ate, religious beliefs influenced many other aspects of everyday life for the Jews. Until its dramatic decline in membership in the 1970's, the synagogue, itself, served as a major forum for social interaction. Socializing took place before, after, and during weekly religious services; and bar mitzvahs, weddings, funerals, and Jewish holidays all brought the community together in social contexts, both in the synagogue and in one another's homes. Construction of the synagogue vestry in 1948 ushered in an era of dances (with live music) and formal dinners, both of which further marked the synagogue as a social venue.

Etz Chaim also provided the root from which grew local chapters of national Jewish organizations such as ZOA, Hadassah, B'nai B'rith, AZA, and the Workmen's Circle. These local chapters, as well as the Ladies' Auxiliary of the synagogue brought together Biddeford-area Jewish men and women in contexts that were social but still very much grounded in their common religion and culture.

Thus, for the early Jewish residents of Biddeford-Saco, their Judaism was an omnipresent force in their lives, impacting not just how and where they worshipped but how and where they lived and with whom they socialized. Yet the local Jews were a minority group in the community and as such, they had to attain a certain degree of acceptance. This acceptance, which some would call assimilation, was more of a goal among the second generation of Jews than it was for their immigrant parents. The first American-born generation of Jewish children attended public schools and was more integrated into the gentile world than their parents had been in Europe. Generally, Jewish students of this generation excelled in public school and, more often than not, were awarded the top honors.

School was not without its challenges to this generation of Jewish children, however. While public school students of different ethnicities more or less got along with each other, even if they were not necessarily friends, the process of getting to

school was often frightening for those Jewish children who had to walk by parochial schools on their way to and from public school. Catcalls in French were often shouted at the Jewish children, and Jewish boys often ran past the parochial schools for fear of being caught and beaten. Ironically, however, it was the Jewish boys, more so than the girls, who formed friendships with gentiles in the public schools through participation in sports.

The 1940's brought the Jewish community of Biddeford-Saco together for two important causes: the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Even before the United States officially recognized the extermination of European Jews by Nazi Germany, special meetings were held at Etz Chaim to raise money for European Jewry. After WWII, local Jews joined the world-wide Jewish effort to create a Jewish state. Meetings were held in the social hall above the Ross family clothing store, The American, on Main Street, Biddeford, to raise money for the establishment of the state of Israel. The Zionist Organization of America periodically sent to these meetings a speaker who had traveled throughout the Holy Land.

Like other Jews throughout the country, the Jews of York County have become increasingly assimilated as the role of religion in every day life—once all-encompassing—has diminished. Few families in the area are Orthodox or keep strictly kosher. Once centered in Biddeford-Saco, the area's Jewish population is now spread far and wide, with families residing in the Kennebunks, Arundel, Alfred, Acton and Lyman.

Jewish community life under such circumstances is certainly not as cohesive as it once was. It is to the credit of Congregation Etz Chaim, however, that it has rebuilt itself over the last two decades in a way that emphasizes communal involvement. From lay-led Sabbath services to community potluck dinners; from bat/bar mitzvah celebrations in the vestry to synagogue-sponsored mah jongg games, Etz Chaim is still the force that keeps Jewish community members connected to each other and to Judaism.

JEWISH WAR VETERANS

Many of Biddeford and Saco's young Jewish men served in the military during times of war, particularly during World War II. So many of them were gone during this time, in fact, that a plaque, listing their names, was kept in front of the synagogue during the war years. The plaque was crafted by community member Benjamin Remar of Biddeford, who excelled in his hobby of wood-working.

Whenever a local Jewish boy was being deployed, Jewish resident of Biddeford and Maine State Legislator, Benjamin Stern, met him at the train station to see him off and to give him cigarettes and other gifts. In 1942, a group of young Jewish men from the Biddeford-Saco community all boarded the same train together, departing for basic training. The group included Fred Green, George Cohen, and Ivan Aranovitch, all of whom returned from the war.

The men who served in the military were not the only members of the local Jewish community to make an organized contribution to the war effort. The Biddeford-Saco B'nai B'rith Chapter created recreational facilities at military posts in Kittery, Togus, Saco, and the outposts of Portland, in order to help raise the morale of the armed forces stationed in Maine.

School in the Shul

Integral to Jewish culture is the education of children in matters of religious practice and in the Hebrew language. In fact, so entwined are Judaism and education that the Yiddish word for synagogue, "shul," literally translates as "school." Before Etz Chaim's Hebrew School was established in 1922, many Jews of Biddeford-Saco secured Jewish education for their sons (and sometimes their daughters) by paying a rabbi or other scholarly man for private lessons in the children's homes. By around 1915, Max Cohen of Biddeford, a learned man and shochet (kosher slaughterer), was giving lessons to children in his home.

In 1922, Etz Chaim's officers voted to begin a Talmud Torah, a Hebrew School, at the synagogue. They voted to hire Mr. Kodkov as teacher for the salary of \$40 per week. The school operated in the unfinished basement of the synagogue. In addition to attending public schools, Jewish boys and girls in Biddeford-Saco went to the Talmud Torah in the afternoons, Monday through Thursday; and on Sunday mornings.

The first generation of Etz Chaim's Hebrew School students was comprised primarily of the American-born offspring of the immigrant generation. They spoke English (though many were bilingual, speaking Yiddish at home) and, consequently, many grew bored and frustrated listening to their teacher's lessons in Hebrew. The restless students, often uncooperative and unenthusiastic, were a cause of much consternation to their teachers, who often lost their patience with the children.

In the mid-1920's, boys were sent upstairs to the "little shul," the smaller of the two sanctuaries, to do their lessons, while girls were kept in the basement. Because of the unruliness of the children and the fact that they could not be trusted to work without supervision, the teacher finally abandoned his goal of keeping the sexes separate in the Hebrew School, and he returned the boys to the basement. Both girls and boys were later moved back upstairs to the little shul.

For many of these children, Hebrew School was not without its benefits. They enjoyed learning Hebrew songs and dances and spending time with their Jewish peers, with whom they did not always share classes in public school.

In the Jewish faith, the thirteenth birthday is a milestone that marks the time at which a Jewish boy takes on the adult responsibilities and privileges of fully observing Jewish law. The rite of passage into adulthood is traditionally celebrated with a Bar Mitzvah ("Son of the Commandment"), an occasion during which the young man reads from the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) for the first time in his life. Females, who are not permitted to read from the Torah under strict Orthodox law, had no comparable ceremony until the 1920's when the Bas Mitzvah (commonly written today as "Bat Mitzvah"), "Daughter of the Commandment" was introduced and began to be accepted in certain circles.

Bar Mitzvah ceremonies at Etz Chaim for the first generation of Jewish boys were kept very simple. At the conclusion of the Saturday morning service at which the Bar Mitzvah boy read from the Torah, the congregation members gathered in the smaller of the two sanctuaries, known as the "little shul," to congratulate the young man and to eat some simple snacks, such as pickled herring, prepared by the boy's mother.

The congregation eventually realized the importance of making the Hebrew School experience more palatable to the children. In 1945, a new rabbi, Rabbi Akiba Zilberberg, was hired, and though he only stayed at Etz Chaim for about two years, he is credited with reorganizing the Hebrew School for the benefit of the younger generation. From this point forward, Hebrew School classes became less rigid, and the Hebrew language books of the early days, printed exclusively in Hebrew, were replaced with more use-friendly editions that used a combination of Hebrew and English.

The next radical change in Hebrew School instruction at Etz Chaim came in 1956 when, under the leadership of Rabbi Boris Gottlieb, girls were granted the right to have Bas Mitzvahs. On June 10, 1956, for the first time in Etz Chaim's history, five teenage girls, dressed in white robes, became Bas Mitzvah in a group ceremony. Under Orthodox law, the girls were not allowed to read from the Torah like their male counterparts; nor were they given the privilege of individual ceremonies. Instead, they made speeches in English on matters of Judaism and sang Hebrew songs. The congregation awarded them with certificates and gifts of inscribed bibles and commemorative bracelets. A reception was held at the Lafayette Hotel, a kosher hotel in Old Orchard Beach.

The boys' Bar Mitzvahs of the 1950's were still relatively simple, though not as modest as those of their fathers' generation. In 1958, Phillip Saperia was the first boy in this era to chant the Musaf part of the service in addition to the Haftarah at his Bar Mitzvah. His reception consisted of a kosher catered luncheon in the vestry.

Hebrew School classes were not offered in the 1970's and most of the 80's, during Etz Chaim's period of relative inactivity. Children continued their Hebrew education at Temple Beth El in Portland, where Hebrew School classes were held after school three days per week and on Sundays. In the late 1980's, however, the revitalization of Congregation Etz Chaim gave birth to a newly organized Hebrew School at the synagogue. The York County Community Hebrew School was launched in 1988, with 10 pupils and one teacher. No longer affiliated with the Orthodox movement, the unaffiliated synagogue celebrated its very first egalitarian Bat Mitzvah (the first celebration of an Etz Chaim trained student in 30 years) in May, 1993, as Sarah Rubin ascended the bimah at age 13 to read from the Torah.

Today, Etz Chaim's York County Community Hebrew School enrolls 27 younger students and several teens in 5 different class levels, taught by 10 instructors. The weekly classes are interactive and engaging, focusing on Hebrew language, Jewish culture and values, and current events affecting Jews in the modern world. Having dispensed with previous generations' attempts to make Hebrew classes rigid and formal, today's Hebrew School program at Etz Chaim is so well-liked by the students, that a post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah Teen Class was formed in 2003 for those teenagers wishing to continue their Jewish education. The enthusiasm of the Hebrew School students and their voluntary enrollment in the Teen Class are both testaments to the quality of today's Jewish education programs at Congregation Etz Chaim.

Biddeford-Saco's First Jews: The Families of 1885-1915

The first and smaller wave of Jewish immigrants to Biddeford-Saco arrived in the 1880's mainly from Lithuania, Russia, and Poland. They came to escape religious persecution and to seek better economic opportunities than they had in Europe. Portland, Maine was a port of entry into the United States at this time, and while some of the Jews who entered there went north to Lewiston-Auburn, others went south to Biddeford-Saco. Jewish immigrants also came into the country through Ellis Island in New York, a common port of entry for Jews who came to America in the second wave of emigration at the turn-of-the-century. This wave included many who illegally left Russia in order to escape military service in the Russian Army, where Jews were often treated as dispensable bodies in times of war.

Many of the Jews who ended up in Biddeford-Saco lived elsewhere in America before settling here. Some, like Harry Aranovitch, found the living conditions in a big city like New York deplorable and wanted a cleaner, more hospitable place in which to live. Others, such as Julius Cohen, who first went to Rumford, and Eli Lerman, who first settled in Bath, made their first homes in Maine cities but chose to move to Biddeford-Saco for economic opportunities. A common reason why Jewish immigrants chose Biddeford was because they had family or "lantzmen" (friends from the old country) who encouraged them to come.

The trip by boat from Europe to America was costly, even for the cheapest steerage tickets, so entire families rarely could afford to make the journey together. Oftentimes, a husband traveled to America alone, and after he had found a source of income and a place to live, he would save money to send to his wife and children to pay for their passage.

Hyman Zaitlin, for example, emigrated in 1913 from Russia, but he did not reunite with his wife Rose and son Irving, for eight years, when they finally joined him in Saco. Rose had tried to make the journey in 1914 with 18 month-old Irving, but they were not able to cross the Russian border because of the outbreak of World War I.

Not only was the journey expensive, but it was dangerous as well. Cramped living conditions on the ships, particularly for the steerage passengers, were breeding grounds for disease. When a man left for America, there was a very real risk that he would never see his family again, as he and/or his family members might perish from contagious diseases during their separate voyages. Babies were at particularly high risk. Harry Aranovitch had never laid eyes on his eldest child, Eva (born four months after he departed from Russia in 1904) when she, at 15 months of age, contracted scarlet fever en route to America with her mother Jennie. Since Jennie had no money to pay the ship's doctor for his services, he told her that baby Eva would be thrown overboard. Fortunately, with the help of other passengers who could speak some English, Jennie convinced the ship's captain to intervene on her behalf. Mother and child spent the remainder of the journey in quarantine.

Regardless of where they came from, why they left, what they endured on their journey, and how they came to settle in this area, the Jewish families that populated Biddeford-Saco during its first 30 years of Jewish settlement were a courageous group who left behind an unsatisfactory existence for one that was largely uncertain, but full of potential and possibility. It was these families who helped pave the way for our Jewish community today.