

Jewish Community

A Brief History

Jewish immigrants who came to Maine were relatively few in number. Between 1890 and 1910, only 1,835 Jewish immigrants settled in Maine.¹ Primarily from Russia, Poland and Germany, the newly arrived immigrants strove to succeed economically and socially, but also to retain their religions and cultural traditions:

“Away from the densely populated, culturally engulfing Jewish ghettos of New York and other Eastern cities, the Jews in Maine boldly broke off from the mainstream of immigrant life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were in the vanguard of the collective thrust of all Jewish immigrants: to leave the ghettos as quickly as possible, enter the middle class, partake of American education and assume some of the mores and manners of Protestant society.”²

The first arrivals in Biddeford and Saco, opened small businesses or became independent itinerant businesspeople. By 1906, about 25 Jewish families, mainly from Lithuania, Russia and Poland, formed Congregation Etz Chaim, Hebrew for “Tree of Life”, converting the former Episcopal Church on Bacon Street into a synagogue. Because the early members were Orthodox and observed the Sabbath, the original Jewish community lived within walking distance of the synagogue on Bacon Street.

Jennie Aranovitch of Saco is from one of the oldest Jewish families in the Biddeford and Saco area. Her great grandparents, from the town of Slutsk in the country today known as Belarus, were like many of the early immigrants, speaking “Yiddish at home and English at the shop.” Her great-grandfather was a peddler and eventually opened a second-hand furniture shop on Main Street in Biddeford. Her great-grandmother, noted as being a great baker who always made *challah* for the Friday night *Shabbat* dinner, helped start the local chapter of Haddasah, an International Jewish women’s aid society.

For decades, this tight knit, predominately Orthodox community attended Etz Chaim and ran businesses throughout downtown Biddeford. During the community’s peak, between about 1920 and 1960, there were as many as 70 Jewish families and more than 30 Jewish-owned businesses in Biddeford. As the community grew and prospered, the children and grandchildren of the first immigrants began to move away from the orthodox religious identity as well as from Biddeford and Saco. Many of the educated second and third generation moved to Portland or out of state. As a result, the Jewish community became more dispersed and by the 1970’s Congregation Etz Chaim’s membership had dwindled to less than 25 families—about what it had in 1906.

The synagogue, long the unifying force in the Jewish community, no longer had a rabbi or offered Hebrew instruction. In the early 1990s, Arnold Shapiro, a long-standing member of the Biddeford community and current president of Congregation Etz Chaim, “nudged the orthodox congregation toward the less-strict conservative movement and

¹“Crossing Lines” Judith S. Goldstein, p.44

² Goldstein, p.272

helped form the York County Jewish Community Council.” It was an innovative effort to reach a wider and younger Jewish constituency and would include younger families from the greater York County area, not just Biddeford and Saco.

The strategy worked. Today, the synagogue has revived its role as the cultural home for all of York County’s Jewish community. With new families and a renewed sense of energy, the current congregation has grown, and reached an all-time high of 100 families in 2005. A recent look at their website www.etzchaimme.org and their “York County Jewish Community Calendar,” lists a full plate of religious and cultural activities including the monthly *Shabbat* potluck dinner, Sunday school, and numerous important holiday observances like Yom Kippur, Purim and Passover.

For Yom Kippur, perhaps the most important Jewish holiday marking the beginning of the Jewish New Year, the lay leadership gathers the members together for observance and Cantor Scott Rappaport from Bangor is brought in for the service. Many fast while they consider the events of the past year, and atone for past sins through prayer and charity.

In addition, the York County Community Hebrew School has started up again under the direction of David and Beth Strassler. Many community members volunteer as teachers and the Hebrew School now educates more than 40 young students. The community has also started the Samuel Osher Memorial Library, an impressive collection of books and resources about Judaism and Jewish culture as well as a series of community cultural events like the annual York County Chanukah Party and the recently formed Mah Jongg club.

But in spite of the changes in religious direction from orthodoxy to an unaffiliated congregation (meaning that the synagogue’s leadership acts as a religious facilitator with the community and that there is no rabbi), Jewish life in Biddeford and Saco continues to follow many of the Jewish traditions worldwide including the observance of and participation in the cycle of religious holidays and life cycle events.

The Jewish calendar includes daily, weekly and annual cycles. The Jewish day begins at sunset daily. The *Shabbat* or Sabbath begins each Friday at sunset and lasts until Saturday at sunset. For observant Jews, it is the weekly time to obey the commandment to suspend work and travel in order to remember the creation of the world and the exodus of Jews from Egypt. A special *Shabbat* dinner is prepared that usually includes soup, salads, vegetables, roast chicken, wine, dessert and *Challah*, or braided egg bread. The best dinnerware is used and all preparations must be finished before sundown. The woman of the house lights the *Shabbat* candles thirteen minutes before sundown. After prayers are said and those attended synagogue are home, the meal and celebration begins.

At Congregation Etz Chaim, a *Shabbat* Potluck is scheduled once a month as a community event. People are asked to bring candlesticks and a dairy or vegetarian dish to share. Drinks, homemade *challah*, desserts are provided.

Another community event at Congregation Etz Chaim is Chanukah. Over one hundred members of the local Jewish community attended this event each December. Called the Festival of Lights, Chanukah celebrates the military victory of the Maccabees over the Syrians and the subsequent cleansing and rededication of the temple, which had been defiled. During that time, the oil for the temple lamps miraculously lasted eight days rather than the expected one day. In commemoration, on each day of Chanukah, Jewish families light an additional candle in the *menorah* (a candelabra holding eight candles). Children traditionally play with a *dreidel*, a small spinning four-sided top. Each side of the top is inscribed with a letter, which stands for the word, “a great miracle happened there.” Today, many children receive gifts during the days of Chanukah.

Traditional foods including potato latkes with applesauce or sour cream are served at the December 30 event. Master latke chef, Marc Feldman, who cooks over 100 lbs of potatoes for the celebration, makes the potato pancakes.

Latkes

1 lb. baking potatoes, cubed

1 ½ tbs. Matzo meal

1 tsp. Salt

1 egg white

4 tbs. Vegetable oil;

Bake or boil cubed potatoes and let them cool. Place cooked potatoes, matzo meal, salt and egg white in a food processor. Pulse the food processor until potatoes are chopped and all ingredients are mixed. Heat one tablespoon of oil in frying pan. Drop one heaping spoon of batter onto pan. Turn when brown. Repeat oil and frying instructions until all the batter is used. Serve with sour cream and applesauce.

Music for the Chanukah party is provided by the Casco Bay Tumblers, a Klezmer band from Portland. Klezmer music originated in the ‘shtetl’ villages of Europe and Russia, where itinerant Jewish troubadours, known as “klezmorim” performed at Jewish weddings and events. The Casco Bay Tumblers play Eastern European Jewish music, Yiddish theater songs, and Balkan dance music. Performing since 1988, the band is invited back every year for the Chanukah party where dancing is an important part of the celebration.

As part of the community’s renewed interest in Judaism, Etz Chaim has begun performing Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Both boys and girls go through a coming of age ceremony at age 13. The boys’ ceremony is called a *bar mitzvah* and the girls’ is a *bat mitzvah*. At Hebrew School, the child usually begins to learn the portion of the Torah that he or she will chant a year or more before the mitzvah. The ceremony involves going into the synagogue on a day when part of the Torah is read. The child reads a portion of the Torah and is accompanied by at least nine other adults. Jews may not conduct services unless there are at least ten adults present. Ten adults constitutes a *minyan*.

Becoming *bar* or *bat mitzvah* signifies that the child has been brought into the synagogue and community as an adult, is now responsible for keeping the 613 commandments, and that the parents have fulfilled their responsibilities as Jews. On this special occasion, the child usually receives a handmade prayer shawl (*tallis*) or *yarmulke*, a skullcap, which creates a division between man and God.

Continuing these traditions is a community effort. Louise Schraeter, one of the older congregants, donated a *chuppah*, or wedding tent, to the congregation in 1994. Originally from the city of Sighet, the Romanian hometown of Ellie Wiesel, it has been repaired over the years but the basic gold brocade remained the same as well as the words "Mazel Tov" written in Hebrew. The *chuppah*'s original owner was Rabbi Aaron Schraeter who passed in on to his son, Rabbi Jacob Schraeter who, upon his death in the early 1940's passed it on to his son, Rabbi Arnold Schraeter, wife of Louise Schraeter. It was actively used at Jewish weddings until his death in 1986. At a recent wedding the Etz Chaim *chuppah* was part of a new generation's wedding ceremony

Jewish foodways are also an important part of both the religious calendar and everyday life. Some people keep kosher as stated in Leviticus 11:1-46. The laws prescribe what may and may not be eaten and the way in which foods must be prepared. Briefly, Jews that keep kosher may eat cattle, chicken, ducks, turkey, fish with fins and scales, dairy products except those prepared with rennet, and neutral or parve foods (those containing neither milk nor meat). In order for meats to be acceptable, they must be slaughtered in a kosher manner, inspected for kosherness, and prepared in a kosher kitchen. In kosher kitchens, meat and milk must not be mixed, and this extends to the utensils and receptacles used with them. Thus kosher kitchens and homes must have at least two sets of everything kept in separate cabinets. A dish containing meat must not be cooked at the same time as one with milk. In Biddeford and Saco, many Jewish foods, including kosher meats are available in the ethnic food section at Shaw's supermarket.

Community Resources:

- Jennie Aranovitch, community history, Saco, 286-8676
- Beth Strassler, coordinates programs at Etz Chaim, 967-5833
- Arnold Shapiro, community history, Biddeford, 283-3946
- Jack & Larry's Jewelry Shop, Biddeford, 284-7112
- Samuel Osher Memorial Library, 36 Bacon Street, Biddeford, 284-5771
Hours: Thursday, 3:30 to 6 pm
- Congregation Etz Chaim
36 Bacon Street, Biddeford, 284-5771, www.etzchaimme.org

Suggestions for future projects:

- Train team to conduct oral histories of older members of congregation
- As part of a larger project on Jewish history in Maine, document cultural traditions of York County
- As part of an exhibit on the Franco, Greek and Jewish communities of Biddeford and Saco, document Passover or Chnunukah