

Jerusalem of the North

An Analysis of Religious Modernization in Portland, Maine's Jewish Community

1860-1950

By
Michael Cohen

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for honors in the department of
History and the program in Judaic Studies

Brown University
Providence, Rhode Island
April 17, 2000

For my Grandfather Bill

Acknowledgments

It was a challenge to piece together the history of this community and this task would not have been nearly as successful without the support of a great many people. I must begin by thanking my grandfather, William Cohen, for all of his wonderful support. He brought this story to life for me, and piecing together the community in which he lived provided me with the motivation necessary to undertake such a task. I also must sincerely thank my mother, Marlene Cohen, who compiled countless amounts of information in Portland, while I was busy writing in Providence. She edited my drafts, and I am indebted to her for her consistent support.

I must also thank my advisors who assisted me in shaping this work. Maud Mandel thoroughly critiqued my drafts, even after the birth of her first child, and worked with me throughout the year in focusing my vague ideas into a thesis. Without her guidance, this project never would have happened. Calvin Goldscheider also provided an incredible amount of guidance and advice, always putting into words the concepts that I could not. My uncle, Leonard Nemon, also provided important feedback and helped me with his understanding and insight into this community, and I know that my Uncle Arthur would have been proud of the finished product.

I am also most grateful to Jerry Slivka for translating hours of synagogue minutes from Yiddish to English. These translations illuminated historical events that had never been understood, and served as the most important primary information that I had for this thesis. I cannot thank him enough for volunteering to assist me and doing such a thorough job.

There are many other people who helped me to piece together this history, and I must thank all of the people who shared with me their stories and answered my questions about the reality of Jewish life in Portland. These generous individuals include Rabbi Harry Sky, Myer Marcus, Bert Silverman, Buddy Silverman, Barbara Beckelman Berenson, Dave Astor, Eddie Sacknoff, Steve Hirshon, Arthur Cope, and Bruce Bekritsky.

In addition, I am very grateful to those who assisted me in compiling my information. For this, I must thank Stephanie Philbrick of the Maine Historical Society, Michelle Sampson and Dr. Abraham Peck of the American Jewish Historical Society, and Julie Miller from the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism. I must also thank Jeff Finegold, Jill Shapiro and David Unger of the Jewish Community Center, Ken Levinsky and Rabbi Carolyn Braun of Temple Beth El, and Rabbi Isaac Yagod, Bertha Thorner and Millie Baker from Shaarey Tphiloh for their assistance and cooperation in gathering materials.

Finally, I must thank all of my family and friends who have stood by me while I have devoted so much time and effort to this work. Their support and encouragement truly allowed this project to happen.

Providence, RI
April, 2000

Michael Cohen

Contents

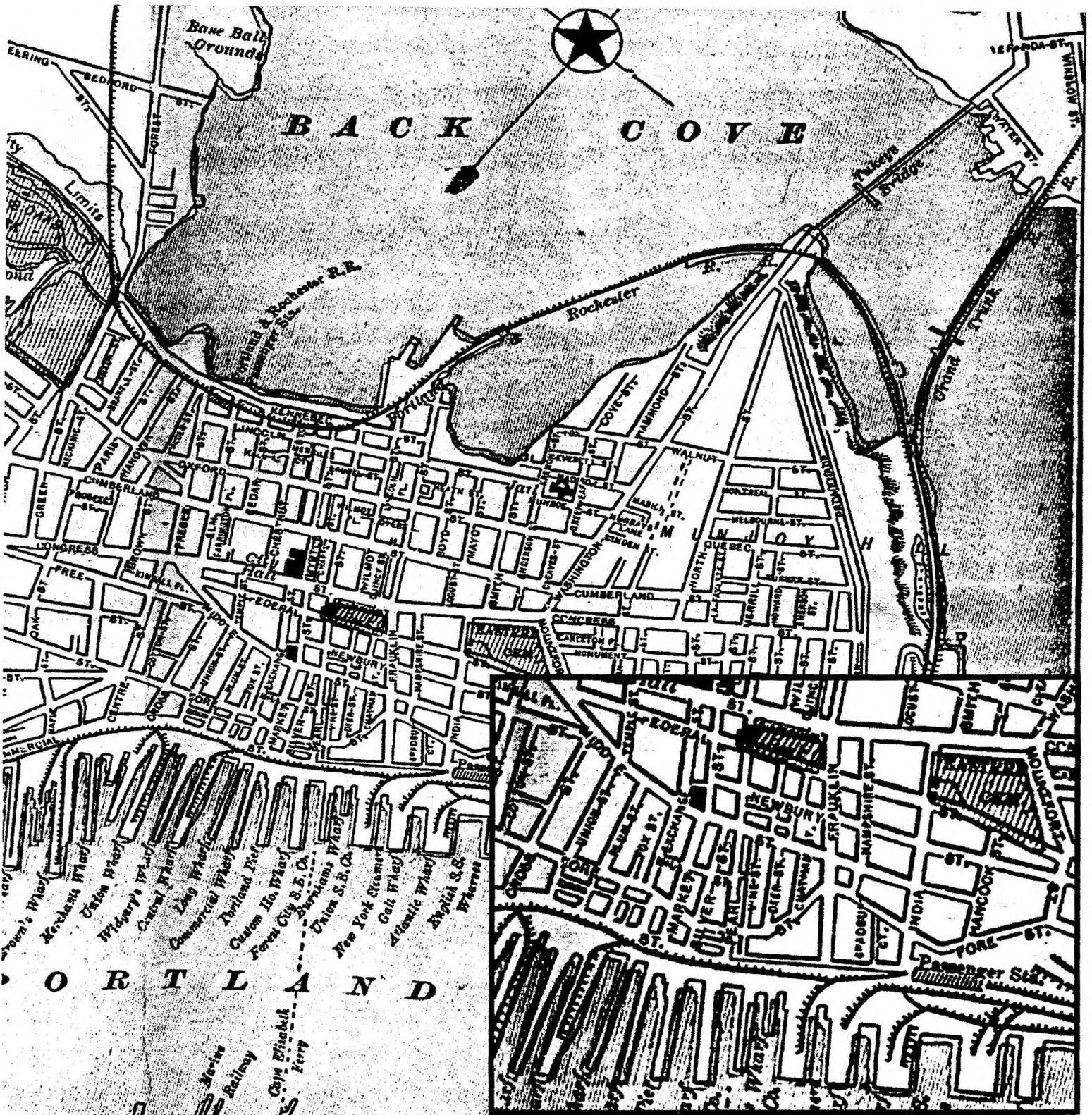
<i>List of Illustrations</i>		vi
<i>Map of Portland, 1896</i>		vii
<i>Institutional Flow Chart</i>		viii
Introduction	Religious Modernization: National Trends in American Jewish History.....	1
Chapter 1	Effects of Immigration: The Creation of a Cohesive Jewish Community, 1886-1917.....	18
Chapter 2	Temple Israel and the Modern Synagogue Society: The Conservative Quest for Legitimacy in Portland, 1913-1919.....	38
Chapter 3	Congregation Etz Chaim: The Struggle Over Acceptable Religious Change, 1919-1929.....	53
Chapter 4	Geographic and Religious Transition: Temple Beth El and the Development of a Conservative Institution, 1929-1950.....	75
Conclusion	Overview: Religious Modernization in Portland and Its Implications.....	96
Epilogue		102
Bibliography		105

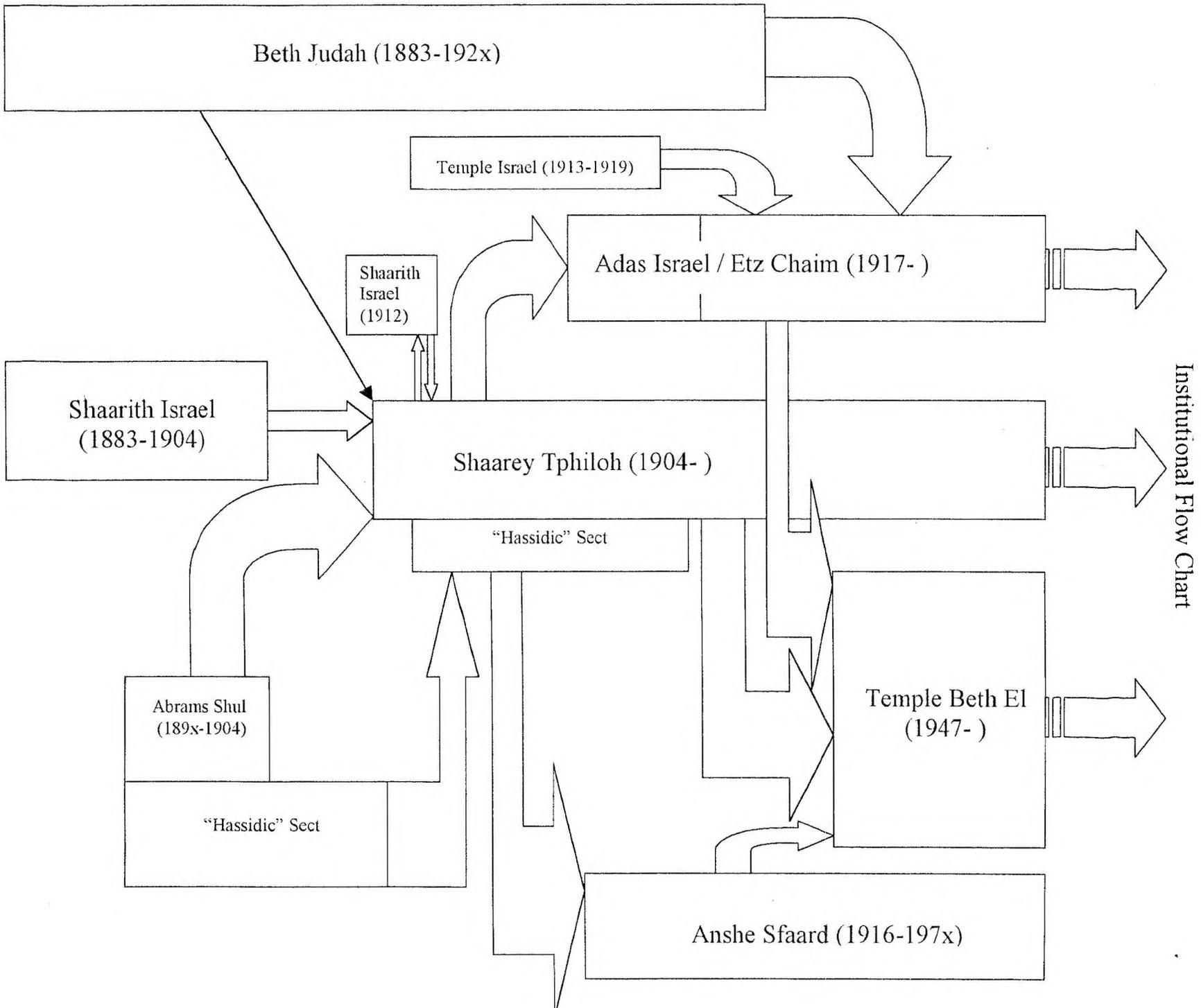
List of Illustrations

Figure 1-1	Middle and Deer Streets, 1924.	23
Figure 1-2	Deer Street, 1924.	24
Figure 1-3	Congregation Beth Judah	26
Figure 1-4	House and store of Jacob Judelsohn	27
Figure 1-5	Shaarith Israel, 261½ Middle Street	29
Figure 1-6	Shaarith Israel, 79 Middle Street	30
Figure 1-7	Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh, Newbury Street	32
Figure 1-8	Sanctuary of Shaarey Tphiloh	33
Figure 2-1	Max Pinansky	43
Figure 3-1	Congregation Etz Chaim	58
Figure 3-2	Student rabbis at JTS, including Phineas Israeli and Mordecai Kaplan	61
Figure 3-3	Congregation Adath Jeshurun, Roxbury, Massachusetts	62
Figure 4-1	Rabbi Mendell Lewittes	80
Figure 4-2	Rabbi Ephriam Bennett	93

Map Of Portland, ca. 1896

Courtesy William D. Barry collection, Maine Historical Society.





Institutional Flow Chart

Introduction

Religious Modernization: Trends in American Jewish History

Religious modernization has occurred within synagogues and temples throughout American Jewish history. While this change has occurred steadily following every wave of Jewish immigrants, it has rarely gone unopposed. In nearly every community and institution that considered such change, there was opposition. This opposition did not hinder those with a reformist agenda in some communities, yet in other communities, traditionalists provided strong resistance against change. The goal of this work will be to examine the process of religious modernization in Portland, Maine, and to examine the dynamic within the community between the elements pushing for religious change and those elements resisting such a process. By analyzing the development of Portland's religious institutions within this framework, we will be able to isolate key factors in the creation of institutions that were tolerant of religious change.

Tracing the religious modernization of Portland's Jewish institutions reveals a rather distinct pattern. While other, larger American Jewish communities created Conservative institutions, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, Portland did not legitimize a non-Orthodox institution until 1947. This work will examine Portland's slow rate of change by asking several interrelated questions. What sparked or prevented religious change in Portland? What was the driving force for change, and where did it face resistance? How did the rate of religious change affect the development of Conservative Judaism? Why was the rate of change so much slower in Portland when compared to other communities? To respond to these questions, this work will

specifically focus on the Conservative movement and the difficulty it faced in gaining legitimacy in Portland.

Before examining the Jewish community of Portland, it would be helpful to have a basic understanding of the city itself. Portland is located in Southern Maine on the Atlantic coast, and was first incorporated as a town in 1786 and later as a city in 1832. It became a major seaport and maritime center by the end of the eighteenth century, and much of its subsequent economic prosperity and population increase have been tied to shipbuilding and trade with foreign ports. While Portland was home to only 7,179 individuals in 1810, its population grew to 26,341 by 1860, and 42,000 by 1893. Heavy immigration increased this total to 70,810 residents by 1930, and at this point, nearly half of Portland's population consisted of foreign-born individuals or those with foreign-born parents. The greatest percentage of these immigrant families were of Canadian or French Canadian descent, while a significant number were also of Irish, Scottish or English ancestry. Italian immigrants arrived in Portland around 1900, and by 1930, Jews represented less than ten percent of Portland's immigrant community.¹

Although a small community numerically, the Jews of Portland remained steadfast in their religious practices. This reluctance to endorse religious modernization can largely be attributed to their patterns of immigration, as elsewhere, religious modernization generally occurred as immigrants acclimated to life in America. While this study will closely examine immigration patterns and their effects on religious modernization within Portland's Jewish community, Portland's distinctiveness cannot be

¹ Portland City Guide (Portland: Forest City Printing Company, 1940), 37, 39, 40, 61-62. Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data 1585-1984* (London: University Press of America, 1990), 84.

understood without a general understanding of how Jewish immigration impacted religious modernization elsewhere. Therefore, to situate Portland in a broader context, we shall first turn to a survey of American Jewish immigration patterns and the religious characteristics of these immigration waves. These immigration patterns reveal a deep social, economic, and religious divide within most American Jewish communities, and this divide helped to shape religious modernization throughout America.

While the largest waves of immigration to America did not occur until 1820, the first Jews came as early as 1654. However, the number of these predominantly Sephardic Jews remained small, and they settled in only six east-coast cities, venturing no farther north than Rhode Island.² The second wave of immigration involved Jews from Central European lands who migrated concurrently alongside Catholics and Protestants from the same areas. This wave of migration, known as the German Jewish migration, took place primarily between 1815 and 1865 and brought a total of about 200,000 Jews to the United States.³ The largest group of German Jews came to the United States between 1830 and 1840, often beginning their careers as poor peddlers, but slowly gaining significant social and economic standing. These Jews gained stature and became quite visible in the communities in which they were living, and this German-Jewish period is one marked by a strong desire to become American.⁴

Although their climb to the top occurred quickly, German Jews followed a trail of Americanization and social and economic modernization that had already been blazed by scores of immigrants before them. From their early positions as peddlers, these Jews

² Rabbi Lee J. Levinger, *A History of the Jews in the United States* (New York: Union, 1964), 141-2.

³ *Ibid.*, 176-7, 232.

⁴ Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration 1880-1920* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins, 1992), 3-4.

followed the rags to riches story from immigrant to middle class status that was characteristic of many immigrant communities. Many of these Jews attained positions of prominence within their communities and came to dominate several industries; others became self-employed shopkeepers, while a small percentage became giants in the clothing industry.⁵ Those who reached the greatest prominence included Benjamin Bloomingdale in New York, Edward Filene in Boston, and A.L. Neiman and Herbert and Carrie Marcus in Dallas. Jews also established themselves in other areas, including the film and clothing industries, as well as real estate.⁶ By the 1880s, German Jews had overwhelmingly reached the middle and upper-middle classes, and this rise in social status was accompanied by a process of modernization and Americanization along social and economic lines that separated them from their immigrant past.

Another component of this Americanization process for German Jews was a transformation in the practice of Judaism to reflect their perceived American, Protestantized religious norms. By updating and transforming traditional Judaism, these new American Jews created a new form, one that seemed to better reflect their new surroundings. By 1880, the effects of this growing Reform movement were quite evident in most synagogues in the United States. This adaptation was evident in their houses of worship, which were now more attractive, and services were conducted in a more decorous fashion. In addition, German Jews referred to their religious institutions as temples, rather than synagogues. German hymns replaced Hebrew chanting, and English later supplanted much of the German. Several longstanding practices were disregarded

⁵ Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration 1820-1880* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins, 1992), 70-80.

⁶ Sorin, 4.

as men and women sat together, and worshippers no longer wore head coverings or prayer shawls during worship. Confirmation replaced the Bar Mitzvah, and choirs of men and women of mixed denomination replaced cantors. The Torah portion was read instead of chanted and shortened considerably, while the Haftorah was read in English. Members of the congregation were no longer called to the Torah for Aliyot, Sabbath services took place later on Friday nights, often in conjunction with a lecture, and many times the Sabbath service was moved to Sundays. Leon Jick summarizes this change by arguing that, “by this time, the service as well as the general ambiance of the Reform temple had been substantially Protestantized.”⁷ This Protestantization appears to have been an attempt to blend in as Americans while becoming less conspicuous as Jews.

Reform Judaism, as it was practiced by most American Jews at the end of the 19th century, proved exceptionally distasteful to the next wave of Jewish immigrants who were bitterly opposed to religious modernization. This third and largest wave of Jewish migration originated from Eastern Europe primarily between 1880 and 1920, although about 40,000 East European Jews already lived in the United States by 1880. This third wave dwarfed the previous two, consisting of 3.25 million Jews.⁸ Upon their arrival in America, Jews from Eastern Europe were immediately confronted with German Jewish religious, economic, and social institutions- all of which jarred with the newcomers more traditional way of life.

The tensions caused by the differences between these two groups of immigrants effectively split Jewish communities into distinct parts. Geographically, the poorer

⁷ Leon Jick, “The Reform Synagogue”, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1987), 85-92.

⁸ Sorin 2, 12, 70; Levinger, 263.

immigrants lived in city centers and slums, while German Jews lived in nicer areas because of their economic affluence. There were very few opportunities for social interaction, and German relations with East Europeans could easily be described as paternalistic. Countless organizations developed with the intent of assimilating the immigrants into American society as quickly as possible.⁹ This desire to encourage the newcomers to blend in was in some senses a response to a growing anti-Semitism. Germans Jews feared losing their social status, and they felt that association with the conspicuous immigrants would only encourage those who felt negatively toward Jews to increase their sentiments. Thus, the German Jews did their best to keep these new immigrants at arm's length.

In addition to social and economic tensions, which separated German and East European Jews in the early years of immigration, another rift emerged around their extremely different set of religious practices. East Europeans refused to worship in the existing German institutions, and instead created their own synagogues and their own hierarchy. The general result was a series of overlapping institutions and leadership structures that essentially created two different Jewish communities with very different belief structures. This divide seems intuitive, as German Reform and East European Orthodox Judaism at the turn of the century stood at opposite ends of the religious spectrum. East European immigrants sought to create institutions that transplanted the piety of East European shtetls to American soil, while German Jews were willing to Americanize the service if something was not seen as American. The average East European Jew was appalled by what he perceived as a desecration of Judaism, and while

⁹ Sorin, 51.

many East European Jews were willing to modernize, they believed that Reform Judaism went too far. As a result, these East European Jews created their own institutions instead of attending the established temples of the Germans.

These new East European shuls stood alongside the German temples and reinforced the notion of split communities. Referred to as *landslayt shuls* because their members hailed from the same old-world communities, these small synagogues served as a link between the newcomers and the particular customs of the East European communities from which they had come. By maintaining their own traditions, the East European Jews could reject the religious modernization of the Germans. As Jeffrey Gurock explains:

Newly arriving immigrants found synagogue practices in America foreign to them. Liturgical variations and modernizations were only part of the problem. Like all Jewish immigrants before and after them, these East Europeans recognized that their American brethren viewed the synagogue as little more than a ceremonial center of minor significance in their lives. For them, the synagogue was central to the civilization they possessed in Eastern Europe.¹⁰

Because traditions varied from place to place, each community brought with them its own ideas and concepts associated with Judaism. The result was the proliferation of small Orthodox synagogues in America. In 1881, only a small minority of the 200 major congregations in America were Orthodox. By 1890, the majority were Orthodox, and by 1910, nearly two thousand congregations considered themselves Orthodox. While religious practice varied from congregation to congregation reflecting the variations across Eastern Europe, many similarities in religious practices did exist among these early institutions. In most cases, it was acceptable for worshippers to come and go as

¹⁰ Jeffrey Gurock, "The Orthodox Synagogue", *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 47.

they pleased throughout the service. Men would chant at their own pace, and the synagogue was often the major source of news and gossip. Many worshippers simply engaged in conversation throughout the service, while children often played with one another and spoke loudly.¹¹ This image stands in sharp contrast to the German Temples, which, like Protestant churches, had stressed decorum in their quest to be accepted as American institutions.

However, as East European Jews began to accumulate wealth, they too began to move to synagogue buildings that reflected this status.¹² Although their outward appearances became similar, these new institutions were not copies of Reform temples. Many times these larger, more ornate buildings were mergers of smaller East European congregations. Of course, with this consolidation, individuals were forced to loosen their hold on their specific traditions and create a practice with which the majority could identify. These institutions came to represent the typical East European Jew, but their religious practices remained bitterly divided from Reform Temples.

However, as East European immigrants began to adjust to American life, the sharp distinctions between Reform and Orthodox institutions began to blur. Like the German Jews before them, the more acclimated the immigrants became to American life, the more their services began to reflect their new lifestyles. Indeed, many reformed so extensively that they began to align closer to Reform practices than Orthodox. To many Jewish leaders, the loss of Jewish tradition through these excessive reforms represented a crisis within American Judaism. These leaders sought to redefine Orthodoxy by adding English, congregational singing, and family seating to the service. These changes were

¹¹ Ibid., 54.

¹² Ibid., 49.

designed to modernize Orthodoxy, yet would not do so in as radical a manner as the Reform temples. However, instead of redefining Orthodox Judaism, these leaders eventually created a new branch of Judaism that served as middle ground with regard to religious modernization. It is critical to realize that while this new Conservative movement eventually institutionalized these religious changes, it did not invent them. Instead, most of the religious change present in Conservative synagogues had its roots in Reform temples, and often were adopted by Orthodox shuls that were later united under the auspices of Conservative Judaism.

The religious modernization of these Orthodox shuls generally began as religious observance among its members declined. As a result, many synagogues became more tolerant of individual practices outside of the synagogue.¹³ Many Jews attended services regularly, yet still violated the Sabbath or the rules of Kashrut. Marshall Sklare argues that this difference between the ideals and actual practice of the Orthodox community created a new class of “Non-observant Orthodox Jews.”¹⁴ Jacob Neusner concurs, arguing that these new non-observant Orthodox Jews often lost interest in the religious meaning of ritual, but were devoted to some aspects of Orthodoxy because participation in the service evoked nostalgia for their parents or childhood.¹⁵ Regardless, the issue of level of observance proved to be quite controversial within synagogues.

One of the first reforms adopted by Orthodox shuls was often the addition of order and decorum to the service. As noted earlier, traditional East European shuls were

¹³ Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵ Jacob Neusner, *Understanding American Judaism: Toward the Description of a Modern Religion*, vol. 2 (New York: Ktav, 1975), 144.

often far afield for American Protestant norms. People came and went as they pleased, spoke to one another as they wished throughout the service, and the Yiddish or Hebrew sermon was not one of the prime attractions of the service.¹⁶ However, this began to change as Orthodox shuls began to add decorum in much the same manner as German Jews had done before them. Noise, commotion, and commercialism were removed from the sanctuary, while leaving the Orthodox ritual unchanged. In 1905, Mikveh Israel of Harlem became one of the first East European institutions to encourage congregational singing, replacing the old model of worshipping at one's own pace. In that same year, cantors began to adopt tunes to which the audiences could follow along, and encouraged their participation and singing. While Mikveh Israel was one of the first congregations to introduce these reforms, others soon followed, and order and decorum became a key characteristic of religious modernization in both Orthodox and Conservative institutions.¹⁷

In addition to order and decorum, many Orthodox institutions added English to the service in an effort to modernize. Traditionally, Hebrew was used for prayers and Yiddish was used as the vernacular. As immigrants grew more comfortable in America and had children, many Jews began to speak English as the vernacular, and many second-generation immigrants could not understand Yiddish or Hebrew. It is no wonder, then, that many congregants began to call for English sermons and readings as part of the service. Many Orthodox institutions obliged, although others fought to keep services in

¹⁶ Sklare, *Conservative Judaism*, 49.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Gurock, "The Emergence of the American Synagogue", *The American Jewish Experience*, ed. Jonathan D. Sarna (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997), 219; Gurock, "The Orthodox Synagogue," 55.

the traditional Yiddish and Hebrew. Conservative Judaism eventually capitalized on this need for English and incorporated English sermons and reading into the service.

Often a rabbi who graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) would champion these changes within Orthodox institutions. JTS was the rabbinical school that produced many of the rabbis who advocated religious change within Orthodox institutions, and this organization later became the seminary for Conservative rabbis. These rabbis were first engaged as associate rabbis in these institutions, and sought to introduce the Conservative agenda to their congregations. Generally, a JTS rabbi was successful if he could convince the synagogue to adopt mixed seating, the most distinctive feature dividing Orthodox and Conservative institutions.

This separation of men and women during worship could be traced back to the medieval period, and it was not until Reform Judaism proposed mixed seating in the 1850s that this basic tenet of Judaism was altered.¹⁸ However, many Orthodox synagogues began to adopt mixed seating. This reform created a great deal of conflict, as to many East European Jews, this new innovation was an imitation of gentile practices. Mixed seating became such a topic of debate because it seemed to exemplify the tug-of-war over religious reforms that was growing within Orthodox institutions, raising issues related to family togetherness, women's equality, and a modern progressive image. It became an issue of assimilation and Christianization, and thus heated arguments, and several legal battles broke out in congregations over this proposed change.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jonathan D. Sarna. "The Debate Over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue.", *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 364.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 371-2, 378, 384.

Although mixed seating grew to be the most distinctive factor distinguishing Conservative from Orthodox Judaism, even the leaders of the Conservative movement had difficulty with this issue. Solomon Schechter, the first president of the United Synagogue of America, the organizing body of Conservative Jewish institutions, spoke for a separation of the sexes without the *mechitsa*, the partition or curtain physically separating men from women. Louis Ginzberg, President of the United Synagogue from 1917-1918, said in contrast that separation had been established for 2,000 years and was not a matter that should be taken lightly.²⁰ In effect, however, the removal of the *mechitsa* and mixed pews became symbolic of the difference between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism.²¹

By 1919, mixed seating catered to East European Jews who wanted to maintain a modified, traditional form of prayer while eliminating some of the entrapments to worship.²² It was this sentiment and ideology that led to the rapid increase of Conservative institutions throughout America. In 1913, the United Synagogue, the organizing body of Conservative Jewish institutions, boasted 22 member synagogues, growing to 150 member synagogues by 1923. Conservative Judaism then witnessed a period of fast growth explosion in the 1920s. By 1929, two hundred twenty-nine Conservative congregations existed in the United States, compared with 287 Reform congregations. Like most American religious institutions in the 1930s, Conservative synagogues had difficulty filling the institutions that they had built in the 1920s. By the

²⁰ Ibid., 380; Abraham Karp, *A History of the United Synagogue of America 1913-1963* (New York: United Synagogue of America, 1964), 2.

²¹ Jack Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue", *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 125.

²² Gurock. "The Emergence of the American Synagogue", 219.

end of the Great Depression, however, the growth of the movement again increased dramatically. By 1937, the number had increased to 350 Congregations, compared to only 300 Reform institutions.²³ However, in that same year, only 390,000 of America's 4.7 million Jews were affiliated with a synagogue.²⁴ While Conservative Judaism had attracted many Jews to its institutions, it failed during this period to reach the masses of unaffiliated Jews throughout America. Growth of the movement continued and the large post World War Two expansion allowed the Conservative synagogue to make major inroads into new suburban communities.²⁵ However, the timing of this development and the pace of modernization varied by location.

What was it that allowed Conservative Judaism to grow so rapidly in this period? Gilbert S. Rosenthal argues that Conservative Judaism represented the synthesis of American Jewish life, while Orthodox and Reform Judaism were the thesis and antithesis respectively. Conservative Judaism pushed Orthodoxy into dynamic action while at the same time limited the excesses of Reform. Mendell Lewittes, an Orthodox Rabbi who served in Portland from 1936 to 1942, argued that it was Orthodoxy's reluctance to confront modern issues that allowed the Conservative and Reform movements to make inroads in communities.²⁶ Marshall Sklare agreed with this assessment. "The failure of adequate adaptation on the part of traditionalists," he argued, "helped create the pressures which resulted in the development of Conservatism."²⁷ Conservative Judaism grew

²³ Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue", 116.

²⁴ Gilbert S. Rosenthal, *Four Paths to One G-d: Today's Jew and His Religion* (New York: Bloch, 1973), 12.

²⁵ Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue," 123.

²⁶ Rosenthal, 65, 174.

²⁷ Sklare, *Conservative Judaism*, 43.

rapidly because it seemed to balance the preservation of tradition while at the same time modernizing Judaism.²⁸

In Portland, the pace of reforms was very slow compared to national trends, where Conservative Judaism was making inroads as early as 1913. Religious modernization within Portland's Orthodox shuls did not keep up with other communities, and as a result, Conservative Judaism did not take root. It was not until 1947 that Portland had accepted the religious changes associated with a Conservative institution, and thus embraced the movement. It will be the aim of this work to isolate the factors that allowed Portland's religious modernization to differ so greatly from the national trends.

Jewish historians have already examined some of the factors that allowed religious modernization to occur and Conservative Judaism to develop within particular communities. According to Jack Wertheimer, the quality of lay leadership and key individuals in a community was one factor in this development.²⁹ JTS rabbis, as previously discussed, often held the power to introduce reforms and convince their congregations to adopt the ideology of Conservative Judaism. Yet Marshall Sklare has argued that many traditional rabbis were threatened by change, and thus in many communities, the impetus for change came from young, socially mobile individuals.³⁰

Economic conditions also played a consequential role in the spread of Conservative Judaism. According to Wertheimer, the most universal factor for the movement's growth was the upward mobility and Americanization of East European

²⁸ Rosenthal, 148-9, 166, 169, 211.

²⁹ Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue," 117.

³⁰ Sklare, *Conservative Judaism*, 58; Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue", 117.

immigrants. Economic success led to migration to new Jewish neighborhoods in more affluent areas, and this in turn led to the creation of new, often Conservative, synagogues.³¹ On the other hand, many individuals had limited status aspirations because greater social mobility most often came at the expense of many Orthodox Jewish rituals, including working on the Sabbath.³² Regardless, economic mobility certainly was a factor and also led to suburbanization.

As Jews reached greater economic prominence, many moved to more fashionable areas. Many of these Jews severed their ties with the ethnic communities that had sustained them when they had lived in urban areas. Conservative temples grew rapidly during the suburban boom of the 1950s, and those who had attended Orthodox services but were no longer satisfied founded many of these Conservative temples. Most of the old Orthodox institutions were located in less popular areas, giving them little appeal to suburbanites or those who did not identify with Orthodox ritual.³³

Another factor in the development of Conservative Judaism was certainly the strength of the immigrant culture. Most Jewish communities contained individuals advocating religious change, as well as those resisting such a process. Wertheimer argues that in communities with strong immigrant cultures, the forces resisting change were well developed and the religious reforms advocated by the Conservative movement had difficulty gaining legitimacy.³⁴ The strength of the immigrant community is a rather vague concept, yet, like leadership and economic prominence, it appears to have a

³¹ Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue", 117.

³² Sklare, *Conservative Judaism*, 57.

³³ Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue", 124-5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

significant amount of importance in whether those in favor of change or those opposed were able to exert their influence over a community.

While the strength of a community can be related to its size, the length of time that a community has been established, and its geographical location, it can also be linked to the degree of cohesion among its members. According to Alan Zuckerman, the degree of cohesion within a society will be greatest when Jews have similar class, social, and political profiles. There is a greater chance of peaceful interaction between individuals when there are similarities within these categories, and there is greater chance for conflict in a community when differences in class and religious belief are present.³⁵

In Portland, the Jewish community was quite strong and cohesive, exhibiting many similarities along class and religious lines. These similarities were due in part to Portland's immigration patterns, as Portland did not exhibit the divisiveness present in communities with both German and Eastern European Jewish populations. In part because of this homogeneity, Portland's Jewish community experienced religious change much slower than elsewhere, yet the community still always featured a group that identified itself as modern. However, their understanding of what was meant by *modern* changed drastically over time and also differed from how Jews in other communities understood the concept. This work will trace the period of time beginning in 1866 and ending in 1950 and will seek to understand how Portland's Jews viewed themselves as *modern* and why Portland would not legitimize a Conservative institution until 1947. What was particular about Portland that allowed it to hinder the process of religious modernization

³⁵ Alan Zuckerman, "The Structural Sources of Cohesion and Division in the American Jewish Community," *Divisions Between Traditionalism and Liberalism in the American Jewish Community*, (Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 18; Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue," 117.

and the development of Conservative Judaism? To answer this question, we shall begin with an understanding of the immigration patterns in Portland and their differences from the traditional model. This immigration history set Portland on a path of religious modernization far different from most communities, and it is the causes and effects of this particular path of religious modernization that we shall seek to understand.

Chapter One

Effects of Immigration:

The Creation of a Cohesive Jewish Community, 1886-1917

The history of the Portland Jewish Community is quite fascinating in its continual rejection of Conservative Judaism and its strong communal support of Orthodoxy. From the 1860s to the 1940s, Orthodox institutions were the sole type of Jewish religious organizations in Portland. While other cities saw a mix of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism, Portland retained a strictly Orthodox community until 1947. Why did this occur and what was different about Portland that allowed it to retain its Orthodox heritage while many other communities embraced these other forms of Judaism? The answer to this puzzle has its roots deeply planted in the pattern of Jewish immigration to Portland, which allowed the city's Jewish community to develop far more cohesively and homogeneously than most other American Jewish communities.¹ This in turn, allowed Eastern European Orthodoxy, the only institutionalized form of religion, to remain firmly entrenched.

Like Jews elsewhere, those who came to Portland differed from one another along geographic, religious, and economic lines. However, when these differences are compared to the differences in other communities stemming from the split between German and East European Jews, Portland becomes an example of relative homogeneity. Portland's German Jewish migration consisted of only a few individuals passing through the city selling their wares, and thus no German community was ever established.

¹ Benjamin Band, *Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development*, (Portland: Jewish Historical Society, 1955), 111.

Instead, East European Jews created the Jewish community without a competing set of institutions or a competing ideology.

Upon the arrival of the East Europeans in the 1860s, there were no religious institutions, no social organizations, and no sense of a Jewish community in Portland.² Moreover, there is no record of any religious services or any attempt to organize German Jews based on their Jewish heritage. In fact, there are few references at all to German Jews in Portland. The Portland Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews was founded in 1823, and its constitution suggests that few Jews were in the vicinity. “The principal design of this Society is to raise money for the purpose of aiding some other Society or Societies in their endeavors to promote the knowledge and belief of the Christian religion among the Jews.” It makes no reference to the presence of any Jews in Maine, let alone Portland specifically.³

It is very likely that German Jewish peddlers did at least pass through Portland, however, throughout the nineteenth century. German Jews had established a community in Boston and also began to settle in Bangor, Maine in 1829. Bangor soon developed Jewish institutions and organizations, and Waterville, Maine was the home of a Jewish cemetery by 1830.⁴ Since three German Jewish communities existed within 130 miles of Portland, and since the primary occupation of German Jews throughout the nineteenth

² Piecing together the history of these early Jewish settlers in Portland involved a significant amount of patchwork, but several sources assisted in this task. Benjamin Band's, *Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development*, published in 1955 served as a base. In addition, an examination of the 1880 census and 1879 and 1881 Portland City Directories yielded much information. Information such as interviews and cemetery records also proved invaluable in trying to piece together this puzzle.

³ *Constitution of the Portland Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews*, (Portland: Arthur Shirley, 1823), 4.

⁴ Band, 6. Benjamin Band, *Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development*, (Portland: Jewish Historical Society, 1955), 6.

century was peddling, it is extremely likely that many Jewish peddlers passed through Portland. As historian Hasia Diner notes:

Jewish peddlers shifted in and out of towns and cities, often by the waterways but on foot as well, looking for promising locations to hawk their wares. Peddling linked one Jewish enclave to the next and helped new immigrants scout out possibilities in America and learn where the best opportunities for small business lay.⁵

German Jewish peddlers probably passed through Portland but did not find the economic opportunity for which they were looking and hence the vast majority chose to settle elsewhere.

However, by the 1860s and 1870s, records show that several German Jews resided in and around Portland. The first German Jew known to have settled in Portland was William M. Shine, who arrived in 1867 at the age of 16, following a brief residence in nearby Standish with his brother Simon. William Shine was born in Kempen, Prussia in 1852. Before coming to Standish, he, like many Jews, lived in New York with his Prussian-born wife, Rachel, and his son Samuel, born in 1879. Once coming to Portland, however, he remained there, dying in 1895 at the age of 44. His brother Simon Shine, also a peddler, arrived in Standish in 1864 at the age of 18, and soon moved to Portland. His wife, Rosa, was also from Prussia. Solomon Shine, who lived with Simon, also resided in Portland and owned a dry goods store. There is no record of the Shine family in Portland after 1895.⁶

The 1870s reveal several other German Jewish families known to be living in Portland. Born in 1849, Maurice S. Fisher of Prussia resided on Chestnut Street. He was a trader and dry goods peddler married to Lydia, a woman of mixed French and English

⁵ Diner, 66-67.

⁶ All biographical information was compiled via the 1880 Census and the 1897 and 1881 Portland City Directories, as well as cemetery records; Band, 8.

descent. There is no record of his burial in Portland. Simon Rosenberg arrived in Portland in 1876. Born in 1851, Rosenberg was a peddler and he died in Rockland in 1922, and was buried in Portland. Morris Wolf was a clothing dealer born in Prussia in 1828. He moved to Maine in 1877 after a brief stay in New York but there is no listing of his burial in a Portland cemetery. There is also record of Mark H. Peavy of Prussia, who owned a clothing shop, and Carl Weber of Cologne who moved to Portland in 1876.

These are the only known German Jewish families residing in Portland before 1880. They certainly do not indicate the presence of any German Jewish community, and because so few were buried in Portland cemeteries, one must wonder how long each stayed in Portland. Did they actually reside in Portland, or did they merely stop in Portland as part of their quest for economic opportunity? The German Jewish community appears to have been very fluid and not well organized, and had very little impact on the East European settlers who began to arrive in Portland at the same time. This of course stands in sharp contrast to other Jewish communities.

Portland's Jewish community began to take shape in the 1860s, as East European Jews began to join the few German Jewish peddlers who resided in the greater Portland area. The first East European settlers began to arrive in Portland in 1866, and like the Germans who made their way through Portland, most were peddlers. While few peddlers had found it economically worthwhile to settle Portland in the years prior to 1866, others began to arrive in Portland in greater numbers that year and in the years following because of new economic opportunities. These new opportunities were quite likely a direct result of the many individuals in need of goods following the 1866 fire that destroyed much of the city. As a result of this fire, 1,800 buildings were destroyed, and

10,000 people were left homeless. On July 4, 1866, what began as a small fire in a boat yard on Commercial Street quickly turned into a raging inferno. A strong wind made the fire-fighting effort essentially useless. The fire burned throughout the night, moving through the heart of the city from Commercial Street to Back Cove and Munjoy Hill. Property damage was assessed at six million dollars, more than one quarter of the city's assessed value. The customs house, post office, city hall, churches, hotels, newspaper offices, lawyer's offices, book shops, retail stores, and wholesale and dry good stores were all destroyed.⁷ It was in these conditions that Jewish peddlers began to find economic opportunity in Portland and began to settle in greater numbers.

The Jews of Portland who settled in the years following this fire established a community that was relatively homogenous. This homogeneity was largely due to the similarity in place of origin of many of these Jews. While Jews in other communities hailed from both German and Russian lands, most of Portland's Jews hailed from Russia or Poland. In addition, many followed their family members, creating small enclaves of friends and relatives from the same communities in Eastern Europe that began to arrive in the 1860s. For example, the Aaronson family arrived in Portland in 1866 from Boston. Reverend Aaron Aaronson, a clothier, and his son Bernard were both born in Russia, and arrived in Boston in the 1850s. Abraham Margofsky, a peddler, Joseph Levy, a merchant tailor, and Isaac Santosky were all from Russia and settled in Portland in the 1860s. Joseph H. Wolf, a clothing retailer, and his wife Hannah were both from Poland and also arrived in the 1860s. Thus, by the 1870s, there were only a handful of families in Portland; some from German lands and others from Eastern Europe. However, the next

⁷ Greater Portland Landmarks Incorporated, *Portland*, (Portland: Greater Portland Landmarks, inc., 1972), 68-73.

few decades would see a dramatic shift in their distribution as Eastern European immigrants flocked to Portland in greater numbers. While a few German Jews did reside in Portland, their numbers never grew extensively. By 1878, Portland was home to 185 Jews, the great majority of whom were of East European descent.⁸

With the growth of East European immigration in the 1880s, Portland Jewry was beginning to become more uniform in terms of the community's national origins. There was no great split between German and East European Jews because, as we have already pointed out, German Jews did not reside in Portland in great enough numbers and created

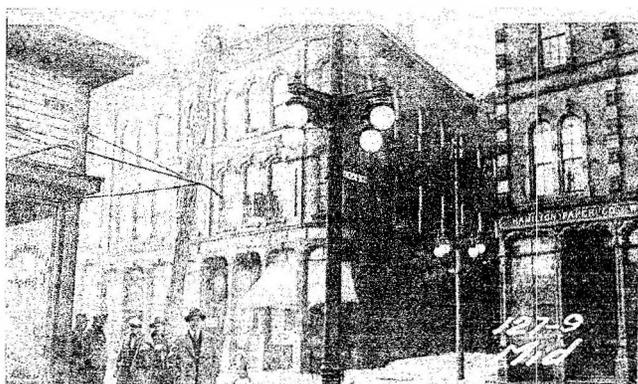


Figure 1-1. A view of Middle and Deer Street in the heart of the Jewish district, 1924. Photo Courtesy of Portland City Clerk.

no institutions. Moreover, most of the Jews living in Portland resided in the same area of the city. This area was bounded by India Street in the west and Commercial Street in the south, and extended north and east.⁹

While it was commonplace to find immigrant Jews living together in heavy concentrations, it was rare to find few, if any, Jews living in the more fashionable areas of the city. Rather than the split that occurred in New York between those who lived uptown and those who lived downtown, nearly all Jews in Portland lived in the same neighborhood.

The similar class and economic backgrounds of the immigrants can also help to explain Portland's relative unity. Without a German middle or upper-middle class

⁸ Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count A People: American Jewish Population Data 1585-1984*, (New York: University Press of America, 1990), 84.

⁹ See map, page vii.

component, there were no Jews to move to wealthier areas of the city. The poverty faced

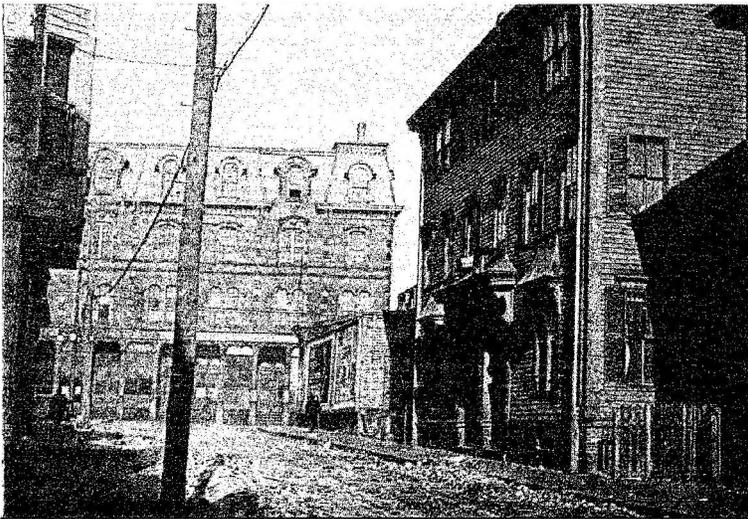


Figure 1-2. A view from Deer Street looking toward Middle Street. Photo courtesy Portland City Clerk.

by Jews in this neighborhood also indicated that the economic profile for most of Portland's Jews in these years was similar. Bernard Aaronson, in a speech made on the occasion of Portland's centennial in 1886, makes note of this economic

condition. He says that, "We number some sixty families, and over the major portion being of the middle or poorer class, yet content with their lot..." He does also note, however, that by 1886, some Jews were "rated financially."¹⁰ Among those who fell into that category were Aaronson himself, as well as Joseph H. Wolf and Isaac Abrams.¹¹ Clearly, the Portland Jewish community of 1880 was not wealthy, but it did begin to make forward strides in the decades following. It is important to note that this economic strengthening was again less divisive than in other communities. While the wealthy certainly stood out among the poor, they did not exist in great enough numbers as to divide the community.

As we have already shown, one of the greatest divides in most Jewish communities stemmed from religious differences. Again, Portland stands as distinct.

¹⁰ John T. Hull, ed., *Centennial Celebration 1786-1886: Portland, ME*, (Portland: Owen, Strout & Company, 1886), 144-5.

¹¹ Band, 16.

While many cities featured a modern Reform Temple and several traditional Orthodox shuls, Portland featured only traditional Orthodox shuls, all sharing a very similar religious ritual. The only differences among the shuls were the social attitudes and economic outlooks of members, as well as small variations in the service stemming from their geographic backgrounds. Therefore, with only Orthodox establishments, there was little deviation in Jewish institutional life.

Until the 1880s, there were no synagogues in Portland. Instead, from the original settlement in 1866 until the 1880s, services were held in the homes of interested persons. Eventually, two distinct groups formed. While the origins of these two groups may have once been landslayt shuls, they soon developed distinct ideologies. One of those groups, considered the more traditional of the two, centered around Jacob Judelsohn. The other group, considered by contemporaries to be the more modern of the two, formed around Bernard Aaronson.¹² Both Judelsohn and Aaronson were East European immigrants who arrived in Portland in the 1860s. In time, a third group would develop around Isaac Abrams, but its perspective seemed to be very similar to the Aaronson group. In 1904, Portland became home to a large synagogue, which developed primarily as a merger between the Aaronson and Abrams groups.

According to Jacob Judelsohn's grandson, William Cohen, the first minyan in Portland was held at the Judelsohn home.¹³ Minyans continued to be held there informally until the official founding of Congregation Beth Judah in 1883. Beth Judah

¹² Ibid., 19.

¹³ William Cohen, interview by author, Portland, Me., 12 February 2000. Cohen, the grandson of Jacob Judelsohn, was born in Portland in 1900. He has lived in Portland for his entire life except for his years of study at Boston University. Cohen was Bar Mitzvahed at Beth Judah and helped to identify many of the photos used in this work.

was located on Deer Street, in the attic of a two family, one-and-a-half story apartment building. The synagogue was quite modest, and both its worship practices and appearance would never be confused with a German Jewish Reform institution. The synagogue could be reached by a stairway in the back that led directly to the attic. The seating capacity was approximately 50 people, and the building was used for daily



Figure 1-3. Congregation Beth Judah. Photo courtesy Portland City Clerk.

minyans, Shabbat and holiday services, and Gemorah studies. A curtain partitioned the attic, leaving a small women's section in the rear of the building. The Aaron Kodesh stood along the front wall, while the bimah stood in the center of the men's section. A pot-bellied wood stove in the men's section provided heat for the synagogue, and the ceiling was high in the center and sloped down toward the sides of the building. The windows were typical of house windows and the seats were simple benches that could fit 8-10 people.¹⁴ The congregation had only one rabbi in its history, as Rabbi Jacob Feinstein was hired in 1901 but remained in Portland for only one year.¹⁵ However, Jacob Judelsohn generally led the services on his own in the absence of an ordained rabbi, and Isaac Judelsohn, Jacob's brother, served as *chazzan*, although he did not officially hold this title.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Band, 20-22.

¹⁶ William Cohen.

While the Deer Street building itself was modest, the religious services that occurred at Beth Judah were strictly Orthodox. Harry Judelsohn, the son of Jacob, remembers the impact that Beth Judah had on him and others.

One person said to me, ‘Harry, I remember that little attic, your father’s synagogue on Deer Street. You know, I know nothing about Judaism, but I remember it was a dirty place, because they had a potbelly stove right in the middle of the room. But I saw G-d there, and I never saw him again, and I don’t know how to explain it to my children, because there aren’t words to explain it.’ I felt the same way.¹⁷

Beth Judah remained a strictly Orthodox shul, and Judelsohn himself remained uncompromising in his Jewishness. However, this was not unique among Portland’s

shuls. What sets Judelsohn and Congregation Beth Judah apart as the “traditional faction” had nothing to do with the religious service itself. In fact, Judelsohn would comfortably worship in any of Portland’s early synagogues if he could assist in

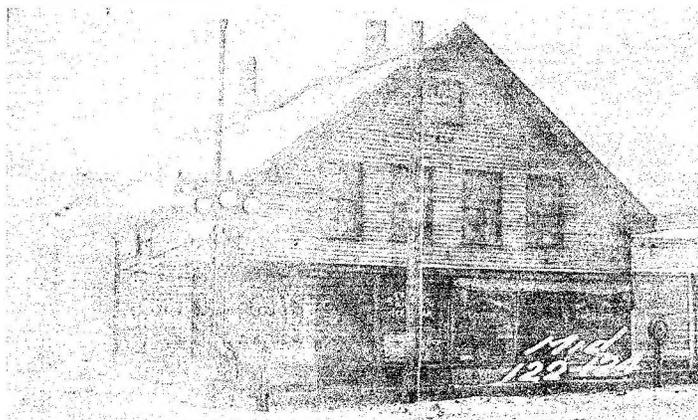


Figure 1-4. Jacob Judelsohn lived in this building with his family above the store that he operated. Photo courtesy Portland City Clerk.

making a minyan.¹⁸ Therefore, we know that the religious service itself remained strictly Orthodox in each of the early shuls. Elsewhere, the notions of traditional and modern were represented institutionally by Orthodox and Reform synagogues. However, in Portland this was not the case. What set the institutions apart as modern and traditional was instead the attitudes toward social and economic integration of their members.

¹⁷ Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Harry Judelsohn, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September 1977.

¹⁸ William Cohen.

Unlike those who organized around Aaronson, Judelsohn was unwilling to compromise his Jewish identity to integrate into American society. Judelsohn feared interaction with gentile society and did not desire to seek acceptance from his gentile neighbors. He did not allow his children to attend public school for fear that they would compromise their Judaism. Instead, despite the trying economic times for Jewish immigrants, Judelsohn hired tutors for all of his children. His son Harry passed the bar exam without ever attending school, studying instead with a local Jewish lawyer. Judelsohn supported Jewish merchants and would not allow his grandson William to purchase a puppy from a gentile girl, fearing that the girl would return to visit the puppy and influence his grandson.¹⁹ Judelsohn wanted his family to remain strictly Orthodox and to keep their distance from American secular society. The congregation he founded reflected those beliefs.

In contrast, Bernard Aaronson, one of Portland's earliest Jewish settlers, also developed a synagogue that was referred to as a *modern* shul. However, despite the inherent differences between the two institutions, their relations were more than amicable. According to Harry Judelsohn, Jacob Judelsohn and Bernard Aaronson were quite friendly. "There was no disparity; there were no arguments between my father's and Aaronson's group. It wouldn't be like that today, you know what I mean?"²⁰

Aaronson's group was officially formed prior to Beth Judah, although the two were both organized as synagogues in 1883. Congregation Shaarith Israel, as the group came to be named, first met at 261½ Middle Street, above a store. Bernard Aaronson served as the first President of the organization until 1889, and his first vice president was

¹⁹ William Cohen.

²⁰ Harry Judelsohn.

S. Rosenberg.²¹ After a period of time in these smaller quarters, Joseph H. Wolf contributed heavily for the erection of a new building to house Congregation Shaarith Israel. This building was constructed at the rear of 79 Middle Street and served as the

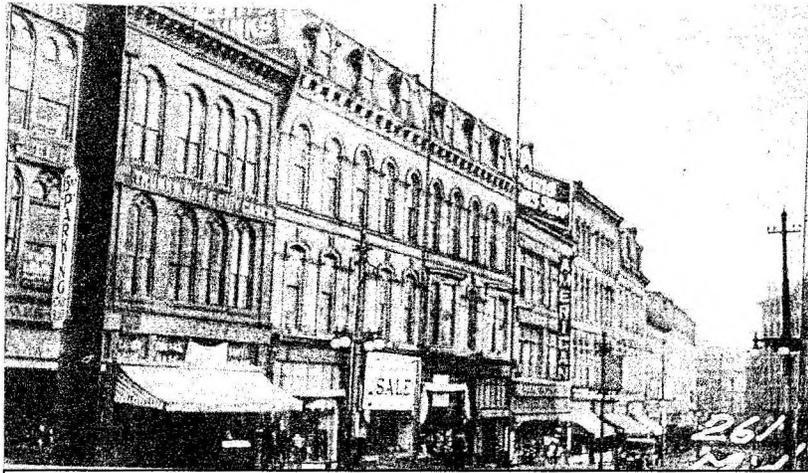


Figure 1-5. Shaarith Israel was first located in this building (between lines in center). Photo courtesy Portland City Clerk.

largest house of worship in Portland until 1904, and its appearance helped Shaarith Israel to stand out as the modern institution.²² Shaarith Israel soon grew into the largest of the synagogues in Portland, and showed its importance and financial success by maintaining its own rabbi.

In 1885, Shaarith Israel hired Reverend Israel Levine as Portland's first rabbi. He also served as the shochet and the Hebrew teacher, and represented the Jewish community alongside Aaronson at the Centennial celebration in 1886.²³ In 1890, Rabbi Hyman M. Lasker took over for Rabbi Levine. Rabbi Lasker was born in Lomzha, Poland and was educated in Kovno, Russia. He was a rabbi in Bludne, Russia before accepting the post in Portland, and left to accept a post at Congregation Sherah Tephiloh in Troy, NY in 1895.²⁴ Rabbi A. Sharshafsky served Shaarith Israel from 1895-1897, and Rabbi Lazarus Drucker served the congregation from 1897-1900. Rabbi Drucker also

²¹ Band, 20

²² Ibid., 22.

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee, 1904), 72.

served in Montreal and Boston. Finally, in 1900, Rabbi David HaKohen Sprince came to Shaarith Israel from a congregation in Paris. He was closely associated with Zadoc Kahn, the Grand Rabbi of France, as well as the new Zionist movement.²⁵ Thus, before Beth Judah had hired its first rabbi, Shaarith Israel had a long history of employing rabbis and was the mainstream religious organization.

In part because of its fancier building and ability to afford rabbis, Shaarith Israel in turn gained the reputation of being the more up-to-date institution. However, it has already been demonstrated



Figure 1-6. The building in the center is 77-79 Middle Street, once home of Shaarith Israel. Photo courtesy Portland City Clerk.

that Shaarith Israel was no more modern religiously than Beth Judah. According to Harry Judelsohn, the “Aaronsons were modern but very little difference from traditional- not like today’s modern.”²⁶ We know very little about Congregation Shaarith Israel and how it classified itself as progressive, but we do know that the social attitudes and economic standing of its members were more liberal than that of Beth Judah. First, we have the speech read by Bernard Aaronson at Portland’s Centennial celebration in 1886. Aaronson’s speech indicates that he desired to see the Jewish population integrate into Portland’s larger society, even if it meant sacrificing some of their traditional values. For example, he states that “The form of religion is Orthodox, and yet thoroughly liberal in

²⁵ Band, 21-22; E. Drucker Papers at American Jewish Historical Society.

²⁶ Harry Judelsohn.

thought and action.” This was clearly at odds with Judelsohn’s view who was unwilling to adapt Judaism to the new, American lifestyle. Aaronson continues, “As a class, Portland’s ‘Sons of Israel’ compares more than favorably with the Hebrew of other cities.”²⁷ Aaronson looked to shed the traditional image of the pious, socially isolated Jew and convince Portland’s wider community that local Jews were willing to adapt their Judaism to the new American context. It would appear that Aaronson saw himself as modern largely due to his embrace of American culture and his willingness to adapt to this new community.

Isaac Abrams, founder of Beth Hamidrash Hagadol in the 1890s, appeared to have a philosophy similar to that of Shaarith Israel and Bernard Aaronson. While there is no evidence that Abrams’ altered the religious service, he seemed willing to integrate socially and achieved economic prominence. Abrams was born in 1843, and like his wife Dora, was born in Russia. He was involved in the retail clothing business and was quite financially stable.²⁸ In the 1890s, Abrams purchased a building on the corner of Fore and Hampshire Streets and founded his new synagogue, often referred to as simply *Abrams’ Shul*.²⁹ The shul was located in the same building as a store, but also contained a *mikvah* and a school and quickly acquired as large a following as the other congregations.³⁰

Since Abrams’ Shul aligned with Shaarith Israel in 1904, it is quite likely that each had similar philosophies. Abrams clearly shared Aaronson’s views on social and economic integration. Abrams himself was identified as one of the wealthier members of

²⁷ Hull, 145.

²⁸ 1880 census; Band.

²⁹ Band, 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22; Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Samuel Cinamon, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September 1977.

the community in the 1890s, and one of his sons grew up to become the first president of Paramount Pictures.³¹ We can also assume that religiously, Abrams' Shul was also just as strictly Orthodox as Shaarith Israel and Shaarey Tphiloh, the organization it helped to create via a merger with Shaarith Israel in 1904. Shaarey Tphiloh remained strictly Orthodox, and there is no evidence to indicate that Abrams' Shul deviated from this norm. It is quite likely that had any substantive religious differences existed, the two shuls would not have merged. Therefore, despite the little evidence available, it can be safely assumed that Abram's shul represented an ideology similar to that of Shaarith Israel, in that both groups sought to integrate into the surrounding community.

With three different synagogues representing similar religious preferences, many community leaders proposed a consolidation of resources. While sharp divisions separated German and East European Jews in other communities, Portland's Jews were quite similar religiously and the multiplicity of institutions did not seem necessary. Therefore, in 1904, Shaarith Israel and Beth Hamidrash Hagadol essentially merged and created Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh on Newbury Street. In September of that year, Philip Silverman presented the key to the building to open a new



Figure 1-7. Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue. Photo from Maine Historical Society Archives.

³¹ Samuel Cinamon.

chapter in Portland's religious life.³² Beth Judah, however, was not part of the merger and while some of its members did help to found Shaarey Tphiloh, the institution remained separate.³³ Jacob Judelsohn defended his decision to remain separate by arguing that he simply was not impressed with the attitudes of others.³⁴ By "attitudes", Judelsohn likely was likely referring to social interaction with American society and a balance of American ideals and Jewish values. In any case, Shaarey Tphiloh immediately boasted a large membership and became the most powerful religious institution in Portland.

Despite the presence of other small congregations, Shaarey Tphiloh clearly remained the dominant religious institution in Portland. In addition to Beth Judah, other small institutions appeared and disappeared throughout the early twentieth century. One notable breakaway institution that was quite short lived was the reorganization of Shaarith Israel, at its former home on 79 Middle Street, on September 26, 1909. The only information known about this new institution was the name of its recording secretary, C. Howitz.³⁵ We do not know if this

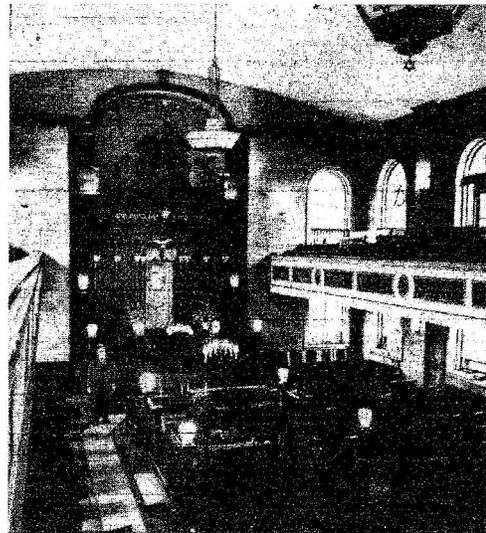


Figure 1-8. The sanctuary of Shaarey Tphiloh. Photo from Portland Press Herald, 14 October 1974.

³² Band, 22-24.

³³ Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Julius Greenstein, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September 1977; Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Morris Iesenman, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September 1977; These oral histories show that both families were members of Beth Judah and later became founding fathers of Shaarey Tphiloh.

³⁴ Harry Judelsohn,.

³⁵ *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol. 12 (Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee, 1911), 257.

group was still associated with Bernard Aaronson, and we do not know what prompted its reorganization. We do know, however, that it could not maintain itself and did not survive very long.

In addition to this small faction, there was a group of Jews who worshipped at Abram's Shul who identified as Hassidic. These Jews were probably not actually Hassidic, but instead were a group of Polish-Austrian Jews with slightly different worship practices. According to Portland resident Daniel Epstein, "The group that we referred to as the Portland Hassidim, actually, they were nothing like the Labuvatcher Hassidim as represented by Chaim Yaffe. It was nothing like that, but you had a few families [who wanted to keep this tradition]."³⁶ Morris Isenman described this group as one started by people who came from a specific area of Russia or Poland. Many of those individuals had arrived between 1914 and 1915 and were still quite attached to their style of worship. Their services were slightly different, providing the 10-20 individuals who represented this group with a more comfortable environment for worship. These Jews remained at Abram's shul after the merger and later worshipped in the basement chapel of Shaarey Tphiloh.³⁷

According to Band, this group began to formulate plans for their own synagogue as early as 1912, and by 1917, most of this group broke amicably from Shaarey Tphiloh and called themselves Congregation Anshe Sfaard.³⁸ This new synagogue was erected on the corner of Franklin Street and Cumberland Avenue. According to Isenman, the synagogue grew rapidly because they accepted members who could not afford dues at

³⁶ Konnilyn G. Feig, interview with Daniel Epstein, in *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program*, 1 September 1977.

³⁷ Sam Cinamon; Shaarey Tphiloh minutes, several references, including 6/28/20.

³⁸ Band, 29.

other synagogues.³⁹ We know also that by 1918, relations between Anshe Sfaard and Shaarey Tphiloh were satisfactory. The two shuls drew up a plan, which was unanimously supported by the board of directors at Shaarey Tphiloh, to share one rabbi.⁴⁰

What then is most important about these early institutions in the development of religious life in Portland? First, despite the small factions, Shaarey Tphiloh had nearly unilateral control of the religious life of the community. In most other communities, Jewish populations were split between the German Reform temples and the East European Orthodox shuls. The two differed drastically in their views on religion. Without this rift, Portland was a far more homogeneous community. Although there were several shuls, there were no institutional challenges to traditional Jewish practices. Moreover, Portland's Jewish community was homogeneous in several other important ways. Portland was relatively isolated from other large east-coast cities, and few Jews arrived there by chance. Instead, the first Jews sought economic opportunity and their families and extended families followed them to Maine. This created a network of families, many of whom became related through marriage. Furthermore, Portland's Jewish population remained relatively small, numbering only 2,000 Jews by 1912.⁴¹ All of these Jews lived in the same neighborhoods, creating a small, cohesive community that contrasted with the larger and more diverse communities present in large cities.

Economically, Portland's Jewish community exhibited relative homogeneity as well. Immigrants remained poor throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, preventing the class divisions that emerged elsewhere from taking root. Indeed, only a

³⁹ Morris Isenman.

⁴⁰ Shaarey Tphiloh Minutes. 2/25/18.

⁴¹ Marcus, *To Count a People*, 84.

few Jews reached economic prominence by the turn of the century, and their wealth did not correlate with their place of origin, as was true for Jews in other communities. However, it is interesting that these wealthier members of Portland's community self-segregated into their own religious institutions. For them, a particular institution emerged as modern based on class, economics, and social standing, rather than on a transformation of the traditional liturgy. This institution and its philosophy were overwhelmingly more popular than the more traditional alternative.

Thus, the understanding of the term *modern* was different for Portland's Jews than for Jews throughout America. In most cities, a clear religious distinction separated traditional Jews from Americanizing Jews and that was the tie to either Orthodox or Reform synagogues. Within these institutions, social and economic differences also differentiated memberships. In Portland, however, with no pressures to reform from German Jews, the most modern synagogue was still strict East European Orthodox. Those Portland Jews who sought to modernize did so by encouraging social interaction with the gentile community and by attaining economic prominence through these social and business interactions. Thus, Portland's institutions could identify themselves as modern or traditional, and yet the religious aspects of each institution could be identical.

For those involved in institutionalized religious life, modernizing meant an alteration of social and economic practices; not religious practices. Indeed, Portland's Jewish community was strong enough to resist these religious changes for many years. While not everybody maintained the laws of Orthodoxy outside of the synagogue, changing the liturgy was simply not an option. Members of Shaarey Tphiloh already saw themselves as modern when compared to Beth Judah, and they had no need to alter the

religious service. This legacy shaped religious developments among Portland's Jews, as we shall now see.