

March 2014/5773

**Congregation Etz Chaim**

There may be varying degrees of Jewish practice, but nonetheless, we're all Jewish.

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**Growing Up Jewish in Portland, Maine***An Interview with Barbara Lerman Simensky**By Beth Strassler*

*Barbara Lerman Simensky has been a teacher in our Hebrew School since she retired from her "day job" in July 2005. She agreed to be interviewed about her experiences of growing up Jewish in Portland. She presently lives in Biddeford.*

**Where did you live with your family in Portland?**

I grew up in a house at the bottom of the hill behind the Cathedral Church on Mayo Street, off Cumberland Avenue.

**Did your parents grow up in Portland?**

Oh no, My mother was born in Padol, Russia and my father was born in Oshick, Poland.

**Tell me about your family.**

My mother came from a family of nine children and there were nine children in our family. We were raised orthodox. My mother had a boy, two girls, a boy, two girls, a boy and two more girls: Sid, Ruth, Eleanor, Max, Dorothy, Shirley, Mel, myself and Elaine. Although she always called me "Breyndel", my Yiddish name, not Barbara.

**So, there were many years between yourself and your oldest brother.**

Yes, I don't know how many. I was four years older than Elaine and then Mel was four years older than me, so probably some of the oldest were not even living at home anymore when I was born.

**So, you kept kosher?**

YES! My Mother kept an orthodox home where there was always plenty of food. She made delicious challah and challah rolls. She was always

cooking. Holidays were at our house with the relatives coming over. She always invited all of the cousins. She used to say, "If another person is coming for dinner, I'll just put another cup of water in the soup!" She made her own wine for Passover seders and root beer. And she made something called "mead". I am not sure what that was....(Beth: The dictionary says it is an alcoholic drink of fermented honey and water.)

**Was the neighborhood Jewish?**

No--there was a mix of families. I had both Jewish and non Jewish friends. I remember my Father packing all the neighborhood kids in the back of a pickup truck and taking us to the Eastern Promenade to run around and play on the weekend. He loved children.

**What else do you remember?**

We walked everywhere! We walked to the library because we read a lot. After Shabbat, we walked to the butcher and the bakeries to get the groceries for the week. There was Rice's Bakery and Sclars'. Then we would go home and my Mother would slice up the meat and slice the bagels and we would all sit around the table eating bologna sandwiches and listening to the radio. You know, "The Shadow" was a very popular program.

My Mother raised the youngest of us by herself. Elaine was born twenty days after my father passed away. I was five years old, and Mel was nine. She did what she had to do because she had no choice. Although one of the cousins said that she should give some of her children up for adoption. (Beth's comment: This was not an unusual practice in those times under such difficult circumstances.) But my Mother said there was no way that her family was not going to stay together.

## Growing Up Jewish in Portland, Maine, cont.

*An Interview with Barbara Lerman Simensky*

*By Beth Strassler*

### ***How did your Mother "make ends meet"?***

My Mother worked as a seamstress in the laundry. She would also do sewing for other people and she made our clothes. She would pick up clothing at a rummage sale and then cut it down and sew it to fit one of us. Sometimes, she would make enough of her challah to sell. And she and her friend, Bessie Edison, earned money by catering Jewish events. She worked really hard and I remember her being exhausted. Remember, these were the days of wash boards and wringer washers!

There was always music in our house. My Mother played mandolin and she gave each one of us music lessons. We all played in the high school band or orchestra. My oldest brother, Sid, played piano and he could play anything! He wrote and arranged music, too. As an adult, he had his own band that played big band music. He was well known all over Maine and played at all the social weddings. They played the Graymore Hotel in Portland and Vallee's in Scarborough. There were 17 or 18 members---all men. They played at all of the Jewish weddings, Bar/Bat mitzvahs and other important Jewish events. He was also the Grand Organist for the Shriners.

### ***Tell me more about your Mother.***

My Mother had a wonderful Jewish spirit. She was very active in the Jewish organizations and always encouraged us to help in the community. She did charity work to raise money for cancer and heart treatment. Most of her meetings were at the Jewish Community Center on Cumberland Avenue. In fact, we kids did *all of our* activities there: Girl Scouts, dancing lessons, Young Judea--all of it was at the JCC near Preble Street. And the Hebrew School "Talmud Torah" was there for the community.

### ***Did girls go to Hebrew school?***

Yes! We had classes with boys and girls together, with ten or twelve students per class. We went six days a week.

### ***What was it like?***

*(Beth: It certainly was different from our Hebrew School!)* The teachers were from Eastern Europe and I still remember each one of their names. We learned almost everything by rote (memorizing). We would all sit in class and together repeat what the teacher said. Like "ba, beh, bo", and so on. It was so boring! The teachers were very strict. If you did anything wrong, they rapped you on the palms of your hands with a ruler. We could read all of the prayers and follow the service....there was no English in our prayerbook!

### ***Did girls become bat mitzvah?***

I was one of the first five girls to become "bas" mitzvah in our synagogue. It was on a Sunday afternoon during Hebrew School in June of 1948. We all wore white robes and each had a reading to do, but it was not from Torah. I don't remember being nervous, I just did it. And we were each given a white Bible.

Girls weren't allowed to read from Torah or even go up on the bimah. It still feels funny to me when I go up on the bimah at our synagogue these days.

### ***Could you describe a boy's bar mitzvah in those days?***

It was a very simple affair, sometimes on Saturday, but also, sometimes on Thursday, another day when Torah is read. The relatives came and there was food downstairs after the service. It was very simple.

### ***What synagogues were in Portland at that time?***

We went to Anshe Sfard, which was the Polish synagogue on Cumberland Avenue. At that time, Shaarey Tfiloh was on Newberry Street and Etz Chaim Synagogue has always been in its present location on Congress. Of course, all of them were Orthodox.

### ***Who in your family were you closest to?***

I was closest to Elaine and Ruthie. When we were older, Ruthie would come pick me up with her car so we could go visit Elaine after she moved to Massachusetts. Elaine had two daughters, Julie and Denise (Hammond). I think we went to every single one of the girls' dance recitals.

## Growing Up Jewish in Portland, Maine, cont.

*An Interview with Barbara Lerman Simensky  
By Beth Strassler*

When we were growing up, Elaine washed the dishes and I dried. When we visited Elaine and stayed for a meal, she and I would do the dishes: She always washed and I dried. Anytime we were at a family get together, that is the way it was.

### ***Did you always live in Portland?***

No, Shirley was married and moved to Toronto, and I went there to work after high school. I wanted to get away and I lived with my aunt and uncle. I worked at the Israeli Bonds Office and the Toronto Jewish Youth Council with people from all different places: England, Romania, New York City and Germany.

On Sundays, we would take the train to meet other young people at the Jewish hotels. We would all wear our star necklaces so others could identify us as Jewish. We would only date Jewish boys.

The funniest date I had was one time, when we were getting off the street trolley, my coat got caught in the door. Here I was running alongside the trolley until the driver finally heard us yelling and stopped to open the door!

### ***When did you get married?***

Well, I moved back to Maine and lived with my Mother. Then I met Arthur and we got married when I was 23.

### ***When did you have your children?***

Michael was born when I was 25 and Steve was born when I was 29.

### ***And now you are a proud grandmother.***

Yes, I am! I have a wonderful granddaughter and grandson, Elyse and Joshua.



May 1991 at a wedding in Bangor:  
Back Row: Sid Lerman, Dorothy (Lerman) Weiss, Max Lerman, Mel Lerman.  
Front Row: Elinor (Lerner) Feinstein, Elaine, Barbara.  
Missing from the photo are Ruthie (Lerman)Feinberg and Shirley.



Photo taken about 1942:  
L to R: Barbara, her younger sister, Elaine (Lerman) Ferrer and their older sister, Shirley

*We are making updates to  
etzchaimme.org.*

*If you have any suggestions,  
please send them to*

*Leah Macomber at:*

*[leah.macomber@yahoo.com](mailto:leah.macomber@yahoo.com)*

“The younger children run around, brightly colored dreidels in hand, looking for a table at which they can gamble away their bags of gelt.”

No matter how much laughter or blush-red cheeks are involved, everyone who participates ends up with a night of fun and a fond memory.

## Hannukah Party, 2013

By Sarah Beth Campisi

The indulgent aroma of potato latkes greets the party guests at the door. Chatter and laughter echo all around; the sounds of people catching up and sharing experiences. The younger children run around, brightly colored dreidels in hand, looking for a table at which they can gamble away their bags of gelt. The older kids nestle themselves into the back room, or “the teen room,” their comfortable little corner for playing intense, annual games of hangman and dreidel. The overflow of people settle themselves wherever they can, in one of dozens of chairs lining the tables, or a piece of the stage’s edge that they will claim for the rest of the night.

In the kitchen, Marc Feldman is going back and forth between pans of piping hot latkes, and pans of latkes that have yet to be cooked. Already the tray of the famous Hanukkah treat placed at the end of the buffet is a small mountain.

Marc is accustomed to the chaotic process of preparing for Congregation Etz Chaim’s annual Hanukkah party. He and his wife, Maureen Feldman, have been preparing the parties together for over 15 years.

“To me it’s always been about making the kids smile,” Marc said. “It’s about community, getting everyone together and having fun.”

Marc and Maureen are not alone in the kitchen. Julie Campisi, and any other congregation members who volunteer a few moments to lend a hand are also peeling away at potato skins, placing dishes out on the buffet table, or putting out new pots of coffee and bottles of soda.

At clean up each year, after almost everyone has packed up and brought their half-asleep children home, Maureen, Marc, and Julie can already be heard discussing the details of next year.

The 2013 Hanukkah party was Marc, Maureen, and Julie’s last year of putting the event together. The three collectively seemed to be relieved that the duty was no longer theirs for next year. Nostalgia, however, found its way of sneaking in.

“Putting this together has pretty much been the same each year. It’s been mostly the same. The only things that really change are the kids. Sometimes there are people you see for the High Holidays and the Hanukkah party, and that’s the only time you see them all year. And whenever you see them, they’re all taller and older,” Marc said.

When it is announced that people may begin getting food, these children all come flocking, grabbing their plates and piling them high with bagels, fruit, and as many latkes at Barbara Simensky will let them take.

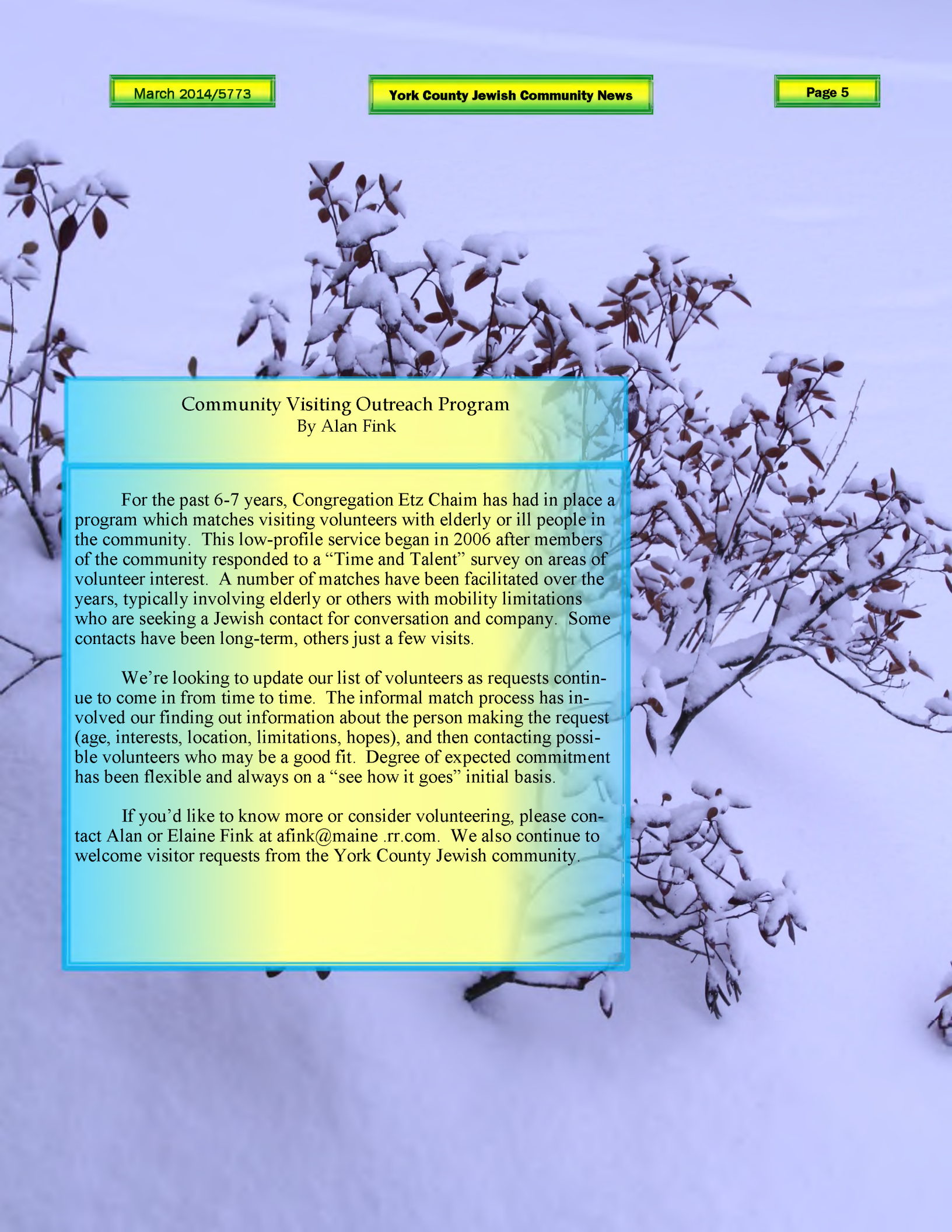
Latkes are not the only important tradition of the Hanukkah party. Much of the party revolves around music. Each year, David and Beth Strassler lead the party-goers in holiday songs, such as “Dreidel Dreidel Dreidel” and “Hanukkah Oh Hanukkah.”

Upstairs in the sanctuary, the music continues with the Casco Bay Tumblers. The Tumblers are based in Portland, and have been performing klezmer music since 1988. The festive klezmer music and dancing are an exciting tradition of the Hanukkah party.

There are always some people willing to jump right into the group of dancing people, learning the steps as they go. The sight of dancers dragging their family members and friends into the circle will never become uncommon. No matter how much laughter or blush-red cheeks are involved, everyone who participates ends up with a night of fun and a fond memory.

Marc labeled the 2013 party, “a success, as every party has been.” From the over-satisfied appetites, to the smiles exchanged amongst the crowd, it is obvious that the party was, indeed, successful. “I hope I can make it to next year’s,” Marc said, “but who knows what I’ll be doing by then?” Marc can’t guarantee that he’ll keep attending, but he is happy with the way his last party turned out.

In the future, the new coordinators of the party will learn the ropes that Marc, Maureen, and Julie had to, and their parties will be just as successful. Let the latkes, gelt, and memories keep on coming, year after year.



## Community Visiting Outreach Program

By Alan Fink

For the past 6-7 years, Congregation Etz Chaim has had in place a program which matches visiting volunteers with elderly or ill people in the community. This low-profile service began in 2006 after members of the community responded to a “Time and Talent” survey on areas of volunteer interest. A number of matches have been facilitated over the years, typically involving elderly or others with mobility limitations who are seeking a Jewish contact for conversation and company. Some contacts have been long-term, others just a few visits.

We’re looking to update our list of volunteers as requests continue to come in from time to time. The informal match process has involved our finding out information about the person making the request (age, interests, location, limitations, hopes), and then contacting possible volunteers who may be a good fit. Degree of expected commitment has been flexible and always on a “see how it goes” initial basis.

If you’d like to know more or consider volunteering, please contact Alan or Elaine Fink at [afink@maine.rr.com](mailto:afink@maine.rr.com). We also continue to welcome visitor requests from the York County Jewish community.

## POTLUCK HAPPENINGS

BY BARBARA SIMENSKY & LINDA FEDERMAN

Our first Pot Luck of the year was held in October. Our guest speaker was Dr. Joe Rosenstein, author of our new holiday prayer book & Siddur Eit Ratzon, which we now use at our services. His topic was "Applying the Spiritual Lessons in the Jewish Prayer Book to our Lives Today". The evening was very well attended, thanks to this wonderful speaker that we were fortunate enough to acquire.

November Pot Luck, although not as well attended, was very cozy & enjoyable.

January Pot Luck was our beautiful Tu B'shevat service & seder with Beth Strassler leading us with music & prayer. Our Hebrew school children also participated. There were 29 in attendance & everyone seemed to be enjoying the evening. Adrienne & Ethan Levy kindly offered to stay & help at the end. Much appreciated!

Many Ta-dahs to Beth, for sharing her musical talent with us throughout the year.

Our next Pot Luck will be our annual Purim party. Always much fun, with plenty of hamantashen, games & prizes.

We would like to thank everyone for their gracious contribution of delicious recipes. We would love to have our entire congregation participate in welcoming our beautiful Shabbat.

Last Pot Luck of the year will be on May 2. Please mark your calendars. We promise not to disappoint!!

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## “Welcome Back!” to Hillel

*By Elyse Oliver*

So I'm not gonna to lie; when I walked over to Hillel one August afternoon for the “Welcome Back!” kosher barbecue, I was expecting a small gathering of around fifteen Jews. With Maine, especially Biddeford, seriously lacking in the Jewish student department, I figured fifteen was about as close as it would get. However, as I neared the Smokler Center for Jewish Life (yes, Jewish life has its own department), I could hear music; actual music from a sound system and the melodious sound of many more than fifteen voices chatting nonstop. Why did it sound like there were so many people? Well, it was because there were a lot of people. Funny enough, outside of Maine, there are a lot of Jews.

College campuses always boast a diverse student body. Even within the Jewish student body, things are no different. I have friends with family in Israel, friends who've gone to Jewish day schools their whole lives. Some have even lived in kibbutzes during their Israel gap year. I have friends who speak Hebrew and some who don't. I have some who attend services and some who just show up for the monthly, free Shabbat dinners.

There may be varying degrees of Jewish practice, but nonetheless, we're all Jewish. It's something Hillel stresses with its very open atmosphere. The Assistant Director takes each new freshman out for coffee and new faces quickly become old. Non-Jews stop by Hillel as well, joining us for free Shabbat dinner, especially when it's Chinese themed. Prospective students have been known to stop by, and there's always the option of studying at Hillel, even if it's finals week.

There are diverse levels of Hillel involvement, as well. I go to services and dinners, but I don't have to go. There are opportunities to join committees and listen to guest speakers. There are weekly “Pizza and Parshah” sessions, as well as Cafe Ivrit, where you can hang out with friends and speak Hebrew.

Looking back on that one August afternoon, I'm definitely glad I wandered on over to that barbecue. It's been great to meet so many people who also happen to be Jewish. So the next time you smell the tang of cookout, stop on by. You never know where it may lead.

## *Biddeford Community Clean Up Day*

*by Ethan Levy*

To further help out our community, many people from our temple helped to clean up the local Biddeford community. With us Levys, the Macomers, the Bilslys, and the Hammonds, we all put in a lot of work to improve our surroundings for ourselves and others. Everyone there put in hard work for several hours that day, and the results were visible as soon as we were finished.

Even though we are not able to clean everything around us, we were able to put in hard work and dedication to do what we could. What we did will be remembered, and may even inspire others to help make the community a better place. Our community in Biddeford was very grateful for our help, and I believe that these types of activities will help our temple grow!



## Sunday School~ It's the Temple's Sunday Party!

by Denise Hammond

Sunday school has been through the ages, a way for folks from the Jewish community to come together with little kids, middle sized kids and big kids! It's been a place for parents to get their kids acclimated into the Jewish traditions, learn about the Jewish holidays, and socialize, have fun!

This year has been no different. The families that have been going regularly have been rotating responsibility in organizing each month's activities, and it's been a great success!

We have celebrated and learned about Shabbat by making beautiful kiddush cups and decorating Shabbat placemats. During Hanukkah, we learned about the holiday by making our own menorahs!

The difference we have worked on this year is getting out into the community:

- Spiller's Farm was kind enough to host our group of kids and parents to pick apples for Sukkot and learn about the holiday in their homemade Sukkah. The kids all loved it and the apples were delicious!
- PJ Library and the Sunday School hosted a wonderful Hanukkah party at RiverTree Arts in Kennebunk.
- Perfecto's Cafe donated bagels and coffee, which helped draw in a great crowd of new families.
- Coming up, we have Bowling for Purim at the Vacationland Bowling in Saco and learning about the making of bagels at Union Bagel in Portland.

We are taking Sunday school on the road, and would love to have new families join us!

Please contact **Denise Hammond** at 251-1282 for more information.



Visit our website:

<http://etzchaimme.org>

## ***Shabbat Services***

*Join us for Shabbat Services  
every 1st and 3rd Saturday of  
the month,  
beginning at 9:30 am*

## **Board of Directors at Congregation Etz Chaim**

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Alan Fink  
Stanley Karlin  
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Cynthia Kurtz  
Jeff Levy  
Jon Nathanson  
Pamela Small Oliver  
Sue & Michael Rubin  
Arnold & Barbara Shapiro  
Jack Schraeter  
Beth & David Strassler

## **York County (YC) Jewish Community**

This newsletter is published four or five times each year. It is intended to announce and report on Jewish community events in York County, and especially at Congregation Etz Chaim in Biddeford. It offers local perspectives on historical and contemporary aspects of Jewish life.

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If we have your email address, you have been removed from the snail mailing list.  
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## Our Synagogue

Our community programs are available to all members of the York County Jewish Community and are driven by the following mission statement:

“We promote Jewish cultural, social, educational and religious activities in southern Maine. Our primary goal is to make available a range of activities that facilitate the expression of what each individual finds valuable in the Jewish experience.

We attempt to accommodate individuals along the entire spectrum of Jewish practice and theology. We value and support the existence of a local formal congregation, but view our community programs as open to all interested people, regardless of whether or to what congregation they may be formally affiliated.”

## Synagogue Contacts

**Please mail Membership dues to:**

*PO Box 905,  
Kennebunk, ME 04043*

**Memorial Plaques, Prayer books, Etz Chaim books of Torah:**

*David Strassler: 967-5833*

**Hebrew School/Services:**

*Beth & David Strassler:*

*967-5833*

**Sunday School:**

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*[dghammond@roadrunner.com](mailto:dghammond@roadrunner.com)*

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## York County Jewish Community News



Congregation Etz Chaim  
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