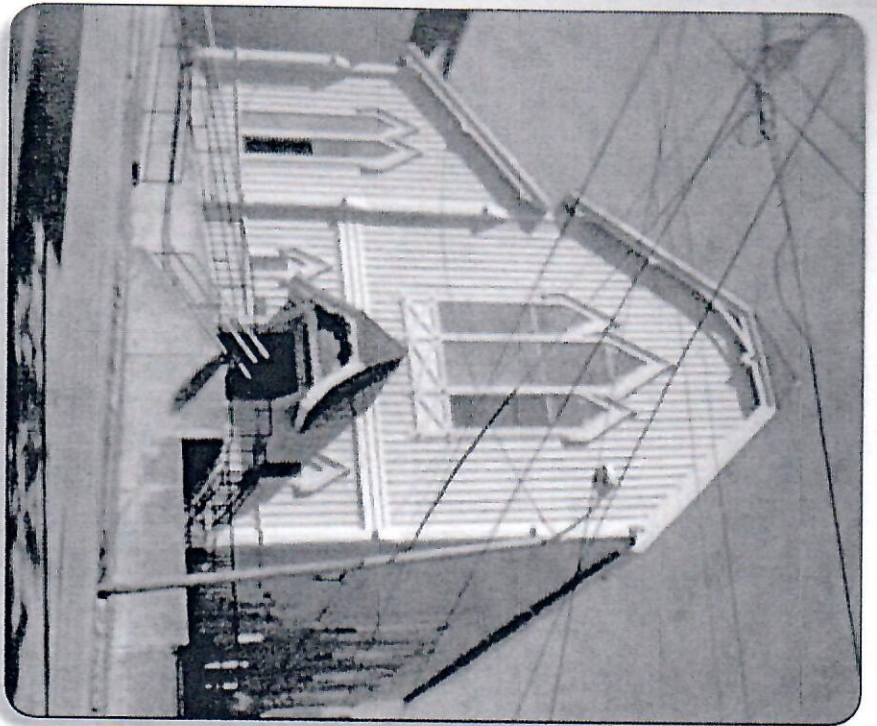
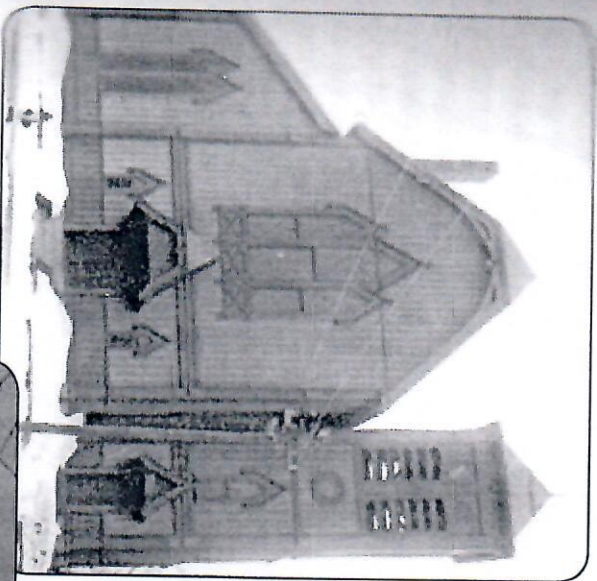


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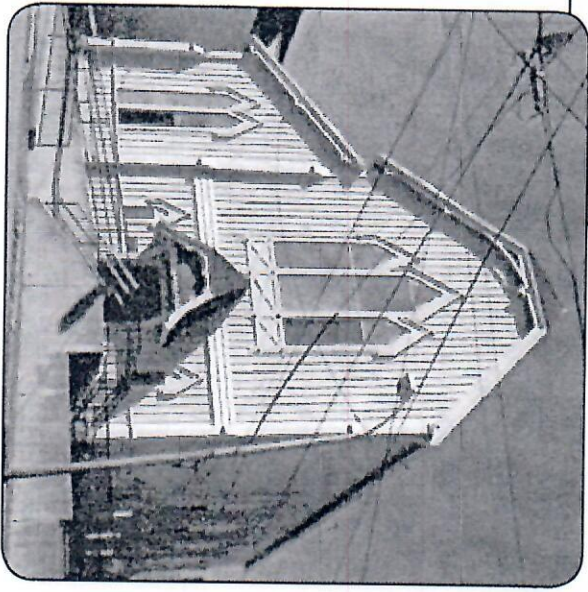


A History of Congregation Etz Chaim
Biddford, Maine
By Jennie E. Aranovitch

For more than 100 years, Congregation Etz Chaim has served the Jewish community of Biddelford Saco, Maine. The congregation, which has roots in informal get-together gatherings in the homes of immigrants in the 1890s, has been located at 30 Bacon Street in Biddelford since 1907. The congregation has weathered a great deal of change in the community and nearly closed its doors in the 1970s. Over the past 25 years, through the combined efforts of Jewish newcomers to the area and committed long-time members of Etz Chaim, the congregation has undergone a renaissance, and it exists today as the hub of a vibrant Jewish community in York County.



Congregation Etz Chaim, 1908, before removal of bell tower (courtesy of McArthur Library)



Congregation Etz Chaim, 2006 (photo by David Verse)

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

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

The trip by boat from Europe to America was costly, even for the cheapest steerage tickets, so entire families rarely could afford to make the journey together. Oftentimes, a husband traveled to America alone, and after he had found a source of income and a place to live, he would save money to send to his wife and children to pay for their passage. Hyman Zaitin, for example, emigrated in 1913 from Russia, but he did not reunite with his wife Rose and son Irving, for eight years, when they finally joined him in Saco. Rose had tried to make the journey in 1914 with 18 month-old Irving, but they were not able to cross the Russian border because of the outbreak of World War I.

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

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hall located at 26
Alfred Street. The
gatherings were
later held at other
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On June 19, 1907, the B
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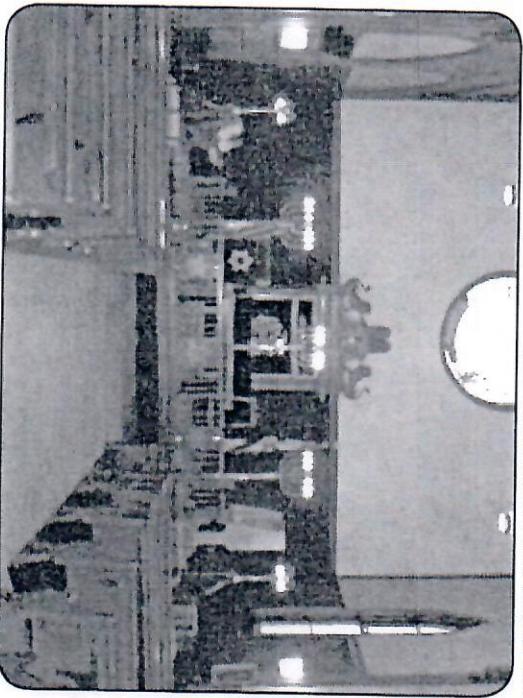
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Regardless of where they came from, why they left, what they endured on their journey, and how they came to settle in this area, the Jewish families that populated Biddeford-Saco during its first 30 years of Jewish settlement were a courageous group who left behind an unsatisfactory existence for one that was largely uncertain, but full of potential and possibility. It was these families that helped pave the way for today's Jewish community in Biddeford-Saco.

Congregation Etz Chaim: From Roots to Regeneration

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



Etz Chaim's sanctuary, 2006 (Photo by David Vensel)

On June 19, 1907, the Jewish community incorporated under the name of "Biddeford Hebrew Synagogue Association." At this time, the congregation elected a new slate of trustees and officers, with Lewis Polakowich serving as president. They had raised enough money to buy the Episcopalian church (built in 1874), located on Bacon Street, Biddeford, and finalized the purchase later that month. The congregation, which paid the sum of \$4,100 to the church's trustee, Robert Codman, of Portland, made a down-payment of \$1,100 and took a mortgage for \$3,000 from the Saco Savings Bank. The irony of a synagogue located on a street that shares a name with a non-kosher meat has been a longstanding source of amusement in the community (in fact, in the 1970s, "Ripley's Believe it or Not" featured a segment on "the synagogue on Bacon Street.")

Orthodox tradition, it was decided to remove the mikveh from the basement of the building. The basement was then "finished" and redecorated as a vestry or social hall. On December 12, 1948, Eitz Chaim held a dedication celebration for the new vestry that included dinner and the entertainment of New York humorist Dr. W.E. Sims.

Rabbi Boris Gottlieb accepted the position of rabbi in 1954 and brought an end to the rapid turnover of rabbis that the congregation experienced over the preceding decade. He remained the rabbi of Eitz Chaim until 1967. It was during Rabbi Gottlieb's tenure that the synagogue celebrated its 50th anniversary. Counting the life of the congregation according to the Roman calendar rather than the Hebrew one, the anniversary was celebrated in 1957. A three-day celebration began on November 15th with a special Friday evening service conducted by Rabbi Gottlieb; a guest speech by Dr. H. Lewis Cutler, pastor of the Second Congregational Church; and a reception in the vestry. On the morning of the following day, Rabbi Gottlieb delivered a special sermon, "The Synagogue Faces a New World." The following evening, a golden jubilee banquet was held in the vestry, where members enjoyed a dinner and the performance of a Boston humorist, Mr. Ben Gailing.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Congregation Eitz Chaim was faced with a dwindling membership base. Most younger Jews left the area to go to college or to take jobs elsewhere rather than joining their families' local businesses. The decline of Biddford-Saco's textile industry had resulted in a sharp drop in the local economy, making it difficult for small, family-owned businesses to prosper. In 1950, at the peak of Jewish business activity in the area, there were approximately 45 Jewish-owned businesses in Biddford-Saco; by 1970, there were 15, and by 1990 there were just 15. In addition to losing membership due to the decline in the Jewish population, Congregation Eitz Chaim saw its numbers dwindle further when Rabbi Gottlieb left the community in 1967. It was then that the congregation entered the most difficult period in its history. For over a decade, the synagogue's doors remained closed except for yearly High Holiday services, conducted by visiting rabbis or cantors. At one point, there were even discussions about closing the synagogue permanently.

Fortunately, however, the arrival of several young Jewish families in the 1980s and 90s sparked a revitalization of the synagogue. David and Beth Strassler worked with Eitz Chaim's president, Arnold Shapiro, as well as other long-time members of the synagogue to breathe new life into a largely inactive congregation. In the late 1980s, Eitz Chaim discontinued its Orthodox affiliation and began to operate as an unaffiliated synagogue, drawing a much larger and younger membership. The new Hebrew School began weekly classes in 1988, and currently has about 30 students enrolled.

Today, Congregation Eitz Chaim offers, in addition to weekly Hebrew School classes, twice monthly Sabbath services, community potluck Sabbath dinners, monthly Sunday School classes, a Teen Class, yearly High Holiday services, and other yearly holiday celebrations including a Chanukah party, Purim Party,



Lewis Polakewich, Inc., clothing store on Biddford's Main Street, circa 1955; this business operated for nearly 100 years before closing in the early 1980's (photo courtesy of Sarah Polakewich Fink).

ed basement was home to a mikveh, a ritual cleansing. Also served as the Jewish children in the afternoons, Monday through Thursday mornings.

marked an important time in Eitz Chaim's history as it brought the Jewish children in the afternoons, Monday through Thursday mornings. On March 19th of that year, 70 families in its membership, Congregation Eitz Chaim held a memorial service and a celebratory service for Sam Osher was given the honor of setting fire to

ochet and spiritual leader, Morris Nathanson, served for nine years. His departure was followed by a progression of five presidents, Leo L. Simensky, the synagogue underwent a period of many very heated debates between the more religiously minded members of the congregation and those who wished to shed some of the

and Tu B'Shvat Seder, as well as several other Jewish traditions. In addition, the synagogue is home to the Samuel Oshet Memorial Library, established in 1999, which offers Jewish themed books, videos, CDs, cassettes, DVDs, and games.

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

Organizations: AZA to ZOA

In addition to being a house of worship, Congregation Etz Chaim has also served as the focal point of Jewish community life in Biddelford and Saco for more than 100 years. Over its history, the congregation has been home to the local chapters of many national and international Jewish organizations, as described below.

The Zionist Organization of America

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

Hadassah

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

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

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

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

B'nai B'rith

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

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

Aleph Zadik Aleph

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

Women's Auxiliary of B'nai B'rith

The local B'nai B'rith chapter also created a women's auxiliary, which was part of the Grand Lodge of District 1. Separate junior leagues were formed specifically for teenage girls. On February 5, 1939, 17 girls from Biddelford-Saco

formed their own junior league, with Jeannette Renmar serving as the first president and Rose Baker as the first secretary.

Jewish War Veterans

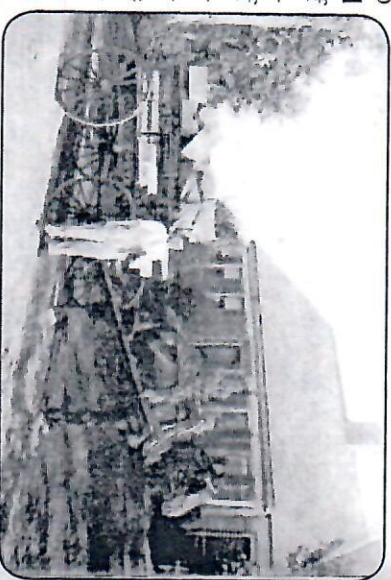
On June 26, 1946, the National Headquarters of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States granted a charter to 20 Biddeford-Saco men, thereby creating the Osher-Edelstein Post (number 508). The JWV advocates for Jewish veterans before the U.S. Veterans Administration and works for veteran health and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

The Workmen's Circle

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

Community Life: Keeping Kosher on Bacon Street

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



Fruit peddler Simon Epstein, photographed in Biddeford circa 1915 (photo courtesy of McArthur Library)

But the community's closeness was also often a source of tension as privacy was not always respected. For example, on Yom Kippur, **the Day of Atonement**

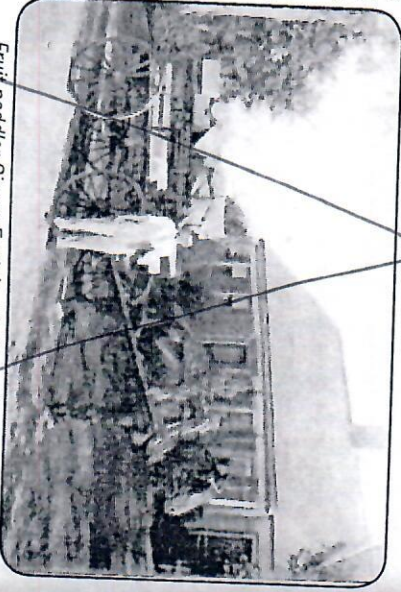
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Fruit peddler Simon Epstein, photographed in Biddelford circa 1915 (photo courtesy of McArthur Library)

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during which observant Jews do not eat or drink, some community members would ask to see others' tongues. A white tongue would prove that the fast had not been broken. A pink tongue, however, marked a person for gossip.

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

Jewish law also spells out strict dietary guidelines. One of these kosher laws requires observant Jews to only eat meat that comes from certain kinds of animals that have been killed in a ritual manner by a person qualified to perform such a slaughter. In order to observe kosher rules, the Jews had to buy their meat at a kosher butcher shop. One such shop, run by butcher Max Shear, was located on Foss Street in Biddelford. Since many members of the Jewish community were not happy with Shear, the Cohen family helped to bring a second kosher butcher, Mordechai Cohen (not related), to Biddelford from Palestine in the mid 1940's. His shop was located at the corner of Hill and Granite Streets.

There were also at least two other men in the community over the years who were qualified to perform the kosher slaughter of chickens. They traveled to the homes of people who either owned chickens or had ordered them from local farmers, and the slaughterers charged a fee per chicken killed. One of the men was Rabbi Morris Nathanson, spiritual leader of Congregation Eitz Chaim from 1946 to 1945, who would walk as far as three miles each way to people's homes to slaughter their chickens for five cents per bird.

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

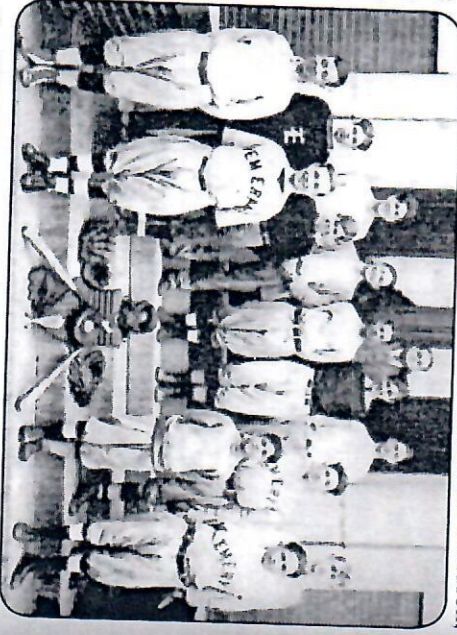
In addition to dictating where they lived and how they ate, religious beliefs influenced many other aspects of everyday life for the Jews. Until its dramatic decline in membership in the 1960s, the synagogue, itself, served as a major forum for social interaction. Not only did the synagogue serve as a meeting place for local chapters of national Jewish organizations, it provided a venue for informal social interaction as well. Socializing took place before, after, and during weekly religious services; Bar Mitzvahs, weddings, funerals, and Jewish holidays all brought the community together in social contexts, both in the synagogue and in one another's homes. Construction of the synagogue vestry in 1948 ushered

in an era of games (with live music) and formal dinners, both of which further marked the synagogue as a social venue.

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

School was not without its challenges to this generation of Jewish children, however. While public school students of different ethnicities more or less got along with each other, even if they were not necessarily friends, the process of getting to school was often frightening for those Jewish children who had to walk by parochial schools on their way to and from public school. Catcalls in French were often shouted at the Jewish children, and Jewish boys often ran past the parochial schools for fear of being caught and beaten. Ironically, however, it was the Jewish boys, more so than the girls, who formed friendships with gentiles in the public schools through participation in sports.

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



The 1927 Emery Grammar School city championship baseball team, including Sam L. Cohen (front, second from right), Arthur Stern (front, far right) and Ivan Aranovitch (second row, second from right) alongside their non-Jewish teammates (photo courtesy of Leah Aranovitch).

of America periodically throughout the Holy Land. Like other Jews through increasingly assimilated compassing — has diminished strictly kosher. Once common now spread far and wide Jewish community life as it once was. It is to the rebuilt itself over the last involvement. From lay-led that/Bar Mitzvah celebrant James, Eitz Chaim is still needed to each other and to

School in the Shul

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In the mid-1920s, boys the two sanctuaries, to do because of the unwillingness invited to work without so keeping the sexes separate basement. Both girls and for many of these children enjoyed learning Hebrew as

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ents of Bideford-Saco, their Judaism was impacting not just how and where they worked and with whom they socialized. Yet the in the community and as such, they had to ce. This acceptance, which some would call among the second generation of Jews than the first American-born generation of Jewish rd was more integrated into the gentile world pe. Generally, Jewish students of this generation with the emphasis in Jewish culture on lenges to this generation of Jewish children



Every Tammam School city championship baseball team (front, second from right), Arthur (far right) and Ivan Aronovich (second row, second from right) alongside their non-Jewish teammates (photo courtesy of the author)

was the Jewish boys, more so than the girls, in the public schools through participation

community of Bideford-Saco together for two and the establishment of the State of Israel. Itally recognized the extermination of European meetings were held at Eitz Chaim to raise WWII, local Jews joined the world-wide Jewish Meetings were held in the social hall above American, on Main Street, Bideford, to the state of Israel. The Zionist Organization

of America periodically sent to these meetings a speaker who had traveled throughout the Holy Land.

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

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

School in the Shul

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

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

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

In the mid-1920s, boys were sent upstairs to the "little shul," the smaller of the two sanctuaries, to do their lessons, while girls were kept in the basement. Because of the unruliness of the children and the fact that they could not be trusted to work without supervision, the teacher finally abandoned his goal of keeping the sexes separate in the Hebrew School, and he returned the boys to the basement. Both girls and boys were later moved back upstairs to the little shul. For many of these children, Hebrew School was not without its benefits. They enjoyed learning Hebrew songs and dances and spending time with their Jewish

peers, with whom they did not always share classes in public school.

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

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

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

The next radical change in Hebrew School instruction at Etz Chaim came in 1956 when, under the leadership of Rabbi Boris Gottlieb, girls were granted the right to become Bas Mitzvah. On June 10, 1956, for the first time in Etz Chaim's history, five teenage girls, dressed in white robes, became Bas Mitzvah in a group ceremony. Under Orthodox law, the girls were not allowed to read from the Torah like their male counterparts, nor were they given the privilege of individual ceremonies. Instead, they made speeches in English on matters of Judaism and sang Hebrew songs. The con-

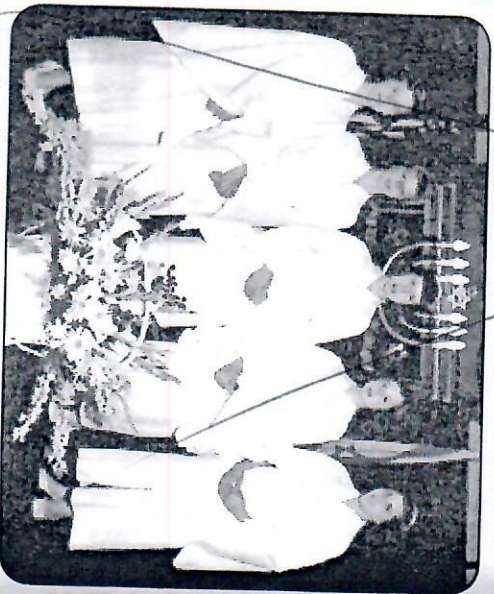


Etz Chaim's first Bas Mitzvah class, 1956, including Leah Aranowitch, Lynn Carp, Ellen Haas, Sharon Sneider, and Linda Spill (photo courtesy Leah Aranowitch).

gregation awarded them with gifts of inscribed Bibles and five bracelets. A reception at the Laryette Hotel, a kosher hotel on Third Beach, The boys' Bar Mitzvahs were still relatively modest as those of their fathers. In 1958, Phillip Saper's reception consisted of a luncheon in the vestry. Hebrew School was not offered in the 1970s, during Eitz Chaim's first period of inactivity. Children's participation at Temple Beth Shalom, where Hebrew School classes were held three days per week in the late 1980's, however, was limited. In the late 1980's, however, a newly organized Hebrew School was formed at Temple Beth Shalom. The York Congregation's Hebrew School was launched in 1990, and one teacher, Leah Aranowitch, was hired to teach Hebrew and English. The celebration of an Eitz Chaim Bar Mitzvah, as described in the book, was a significant event for the community. Today, Eitz Chaim's York Congregation has over 40 younger students and several teachers. The weekly class is held in English, a modern language, Jewish culture, and Hebrew classes. Having this modern world, Hebrew classes are so well-liked by the students that they were formed in 2003 for those who are interested in the Hebrew language. The enthusiasm of the Hebrew School in the Teen Class are both programs at Congregation

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Etz Chaim's first Bas Mitzvah class, 1956, including Leah Aranovitch, Lynn Carp, Ellen Haas, Sharon Sneider, and Linda Spill (photo courtesy Leah Aranovitch).

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regation awarded them with certificates and gifts of inscribed Bibles and commemorative bracelets. A reception was held at the Lafayette Hotel, a kosher hotel in Old Orchard Beach. The boys' Bar Mitzvahs of the 1950s were still relatively simple, though not as modest as those of their fathers' generation. In 1958, Phillip Saperia's Bar Mitzvah reception consisted of a kosher catered luncheon in the vestry. Hebrew School classes were not offered in the 1970s and most of the 80s, during Etz Chaim's period of relative inactivity. Children continued their Hebrew education at Temple Beth El in Portland, where Hebrew School classes were held after school three days per week and on Sundays. In the late 1980's, however, the revitalization of Congregation Etz Chaim gave birth to a newly organized Hebrew School at the synagogue. The York County Community Hebrew School was launched in 1988, with 10 pupils and one teacher. No longer affiliated with the Orthodox movement, the unaffiliated synagogue celebrated its very first egalitarian Bas Mitzvah (the first celebration of an Etz Chaim trained student in 30 years) in May, 1993, as Sarah Rubin ascended the bimah at age 13 to read from the Torah.



York County Community Hebrew School, 1995 (photo by Beth Strasser)

Today, Etz Chaim's York County Community Hebrew School enrolls about 30 younger students and several teens in 5 different class levels, taught by 10 instructors. The weekly classes are interactive and engaging, focusing on Hebrew language, Jewish culture and values, and current events affecting Jews in the modern world. Having dispensed with previous generations' attempts to make Hebrew classes rigid and formal, today's Hebrew School program at Etz Chaim is so well-liked by the students that a post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah Teen Class was formed in 2003 for those teenagers wishing to continue their Jewish education. The enthusiasm of the Hebrew School students and their voluntary enrollment in the Teen Class are both testaments to the quality of today's Jewish education programs at Congregation Etz Chaim.

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