

# THE JEWISH IDENTITY

Less than 15 years ago,  
there was still organized exclusion.

Today, there is an effort  
to maintain individuality.

It may be spring in Israel, but it is still the dead of winter in Cape Elizabeth. On this January 19, a fresh snowfall whitens the spacious yards around the big homes at Broad Cove. But in Israel, the rainy season is just about over and the sap has begun to run. It is Tu B'Shevat, the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat, and Israeli school children will be busy planting young saplings to mark this New Year for Trees. In Cape Elizabeth, seven Jewish families have gathered with their rabbi at the home of Harvey and Sara Berman to hold a seder (ritual meal) for Tu B'Shevat.

The seder consists of eating the native fruits and nuts of Israel, reciting Hebrew blessings together, and reading poetry and scriptures. It is a happy, informal family gathering and all 18 children, 14 adults, and the rabbi and his wife take part.

Dr. Stuart Gilbert, a radiation therapist at Maine Medical Center, explains that the seven families (along with four others not in attendance) began meeting like this five years ago as a *havurah* (friends group). The *havurah* functions as an extended family, the purpose of which is to affirm and preserve a Jewish identity in a community which, until recent years, many considered closed to Jews.

The Cape Elizabeth *havurah*, made up primarily of successful young professional people and their families, gives evidence both of the continuing pattern of Jewish integration with mainstream American society and of the attempt to maintain cultural roots and a sense of heritage in an homogenized society.

"I've found," says Dr. Gilbert, "that as my Judaism grows people respect me more."

So has Maine society evolved to a point where mutual respect allows ethnic and cultural diversity? And more to the point, can the Jewish community of greater Portland, a significant local minority, manage to maintain its identity in the face of rapid assimilation?

"Almost all Jews feel an identification," says one member of a prominent Jewish family who no longer considers himself to be Jewish. "They feel more comfortable with other Jews. They call themselves Jews. The word 'Jew' just jumps off the page at them. They are thrilled when they find out that someone, say Paul Newman, for example, is Jewish. But I don't feel Jewish. I wish I did because I like the feeling of belonging, but I just can't manufacture it."

"It's too easy *not* to be Jewish these days," says Robert Willis, the youthful president of both his family's Maine Printing and Business Forms company and of the Jewish Federation of Southern Maine. Willis understands the non-identification of the previous speaker. He recognizes the irony

identity in a society that did not accept Jews than in a society that does. So Willis says, "It's too easy not to be Jewish" and others say, "America is loving Jews to death."

"Right now," says Willis, "I'm trying to deal with two major problems I see in the Jewish community. The first is a problem of mobility. Because people aren't as focused into the Woodfords area [where the majority of Portland Jews once lived], there isn't that closeness and physical togetherness there used to be. So how do you attract and keep young people together as a group?"

"The other major issue is getting young leadership. It's difficult to get young Jewish people to commit themselves."

Willis says that young Jewish professionals, in particular, are slow to give their time, energies, and money. He also notes that because so many doors have opened to Jews in Portland, Jewish energies and talents have been channeled away from the Jewish community. Jews who are leaders in the Portland community are not always leaders in the Jewish community. But certainly, a great many Jews are leaders in the civic life of the city.

Currently, for example, four of Portland's nine city councilors — Linda E. Abromson, Edward I. Bernstein, David H. Brenerman, and Mayor William B. Troubh — and three of Portland's nine school board members — Michael P. Asen, Alan J. Levenon, and Jacqueline Potter — are Jewish.

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ryne, was the head of the Portland Society of Art during the museum expansion phase. And the list of contributions goes on and on.

In Portland, as elsewhere, Jews have achieved success disproportionate to their numbers. But if the doors to Portland are now open to Jews, they were not always so.

"I don't think this community really changed until 1970," says Robert Willis.

That was the year, 1970, that the Cumberland Club was opened to blacks and Jews after Dr. Benjamin Zolov and Rabbi Harry Sky of Temple Beth El went before the Portland city council to complain that a liquor license should not be issued to any social or fraternal organization that practiced discrimination. Similar practices were cited at the Portland Yacht Club, Portland Country Club, and Woodfords Club, all of which opened up under the threat of losing liquor licenses.

Dr. Zolov, who was also instrumental in the six year legislative battle that culminated with Maine's resort discrimination law in 1956 (a bill that made it illegal for Maine summer resorts — notorious for turning away blacks and Jews — to refuse minorities), is sanguine now about the racial climate in Portland. He can laugh about how frightened he was as a boy in 1922 when the local Ku Klux Klan threatened to tar and feather his father.

"I see a healthy future myself," says Dr. Zolov. But that does not mean he and others are not watchful for signs of latent anti-Semitism.

"I think that the five o'clock shadow is still there," Rabbi Sky told an interviewer in 1976. The five o'clock shadow he was referring to was the shadow of prejudice, Jews and gentiles getting along politely during business hours, but going their separate ways at the end of the day. Eight years later, Rabbi Sky still detects traces of that five o'clock shadow around the city.

"I think in certain circles it's still so," says the rabbi. "With people in their 30s, you're less apt to find it, but with people in their 50s, 60s, and 70s, there are still many thinking in the old ways."

"I can't remember a major [anti-Semitic] incident in Maine in the last five years," says Leonard Zakim of the regional Anti-Defamation League office in Boston. "To my knowledge there has been no organized hate activity in Maine in recent times."

But Zakim does not believe that the absence of overt anti-Semitic acts means that anti-Semitic attitudes have been eradicated.

"I don't think attitudes have changed that much," says Zakim. "What's changed are people's actions."

Overcoming prejudice, says Zakim, is a process of

prejudice does not disappear in 14 years just because a dining club decides to let in a few Jews in order to get a liquor license.

Ask most Portland Jews about anti-Semitism and they will tell you that they have never felt discriminated against, that prejudice is not something they live with every day of their lives. But if you discuss the subject long enough, an incident or

But if one is concerned about where anti-Semitic sentiments have gone, the Anti-Defamation League's Zakim and others suggest looking no further than Senator William Cohen's 1981 vote to sell AWACS spy planes to the Arabs. Cohen, whose father is Jewish, rejected Jewish appeals to vote against the arms sale to the Arabs on the grounds that he feared an anti-Semitic backlash if he did so.



*The Harvey and Sara Berman family is active in a Cape Elizabeth havurah (friends) group of 11 Jewish families in order to maintain their Jewish identity and roots.*

two will come up. Minor perhaps, but still evidence of prejudices bubbling away beneath the thin veneer of civility. Everyone has stories — from name-calling to tales of tokenism, from racial stereotyping to swastika daubings. In recent years several Jewish-owned businesses as well as the synagogue have been targets of anti-Semitic graffiti. There is, in fact, a faint white swastika at this very moment chalk on the front gate of the Etz Chaim synagogue. Just kids? One hopes.

In a doubly misguided act of anti-Semitism, person or persons unknown undertook a telephone campaign against the election of Barbara Reidman

"I think anti-Semitism is now under the guise of anti-Zionism and anti-Israel," says one young Jewish woman. "If you're looking for anti-Semitism, that's where it's gone."

"Every Jew has two addresses . . . one here and one in Jerusalem," says Rabbi Sky.

A non-Jew may have difficulty comprehending how central the State of Israel is to the thinking and outlook of Jews everywhere. To the devout and observant Jew, Israel is the Promised Land the fulfillment of God's covenant with the Jews. To all Jews in the Diaspora (historically denoting the scattering of the Jews after the destruction of

only were there the bonds of custom and language, but there was a larger community not yet ready to accept them fully. A third generation Jew today must often assert a Jewish identity in order to preserve it. But the second generation was a turning point. The old ways were fading and the world opening up. To some it may have seemed a choice between being Jewish and being American. And this generation did not yet have the inspiration of Israel.

Joel Abromson works with Sumner Bernstein on the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the national Jewish lobby that attempts to educate national leaders concerning the plight of Soviet Jewry, the danger of arms sales to the Arabs, and the importance of foreign aid to Israel. Joel Abromson is a personal microcosm of the evolution of Jewish consciousness.

While Abromson was growing up in the French section of Auburn, he was regularly bullied by Catholic boys because he was a Jew. When his family prospered and moved across town, the harassment stopped. At Bowdoin College (Class of 1960), Abromson experienced ambivalence about how to regard Jewishness. He emphatically resisted the idea of the Jewish students starting a Hillel Foundation (a national Jewish college organization named after the first century Jewish sage) on campus, arguing that Jews should not ghettoize themselves voluntarily.

"Somehow it didn't occur to me," says Abromson, "that the fraternity I belonged to was 75 percent Jewish."

Today, Joel Abromson is the president of Maine Rubber International and a leader not only in the Portland Jewish community, but nationally as well. He is a past national chairman of the Young Leadership Cabinet (for men ages 25-40) of the United Jewish Appeal. He and his wife, Linda Abromson, have led a number of missions to Israel

including escorting Senator William Cohen there in 1979. Abromson sees his wife's public activism as part of a new trend among Jews nationally.

"The doors are pretty much open now," says Abromson, "but it used to be that Jews never ran for office. They always worked behind the scenes and raising money. Jacob Javits was one of the notable exceptions. Today, there are something like 30 Jewish congressmen and seven or eight Jewish senators."

Joel and Linda Abromson are high profile modern Jews. Not only is Linda a former school board member, mayor, and current city councilor, she also has visited some 30 states, lecturing on the Holocaust.

Joel Abromson's office proclaims his Jewishness almost as aggressively as it proclaims that he was a Bowdoin Polar Bear. Abromson wears a *Zachor* (Remember) pin in his lapel as a reminder of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. His silver I.D. bracelet bears his name in Hebrew. And on the wall behind his desk is a poster depicting a Jewish Superman (the Star of David replaces Superman's S) in commemoration of the heroic Israeli raid on Entebbe in 1976. In this day and age of open doors, however, Abromson is also a member of both the Cumberland Club and the Portland Country Club.

Now that Jews are part of the mainstream and the establishment in America and Maine, the problem they face is not that of being handicapped by Jewishness, but of retaining what remains of that Jewishness not already eroded by assimilation and intermarriage.

"We hate to lose any Jews," says one woman expressing the prevalent Jewish fear of loss of Jewish population through intermarriage.

Nationally, about one in three Jews marries out of the faith. Locally, there is hardly a family that has not experienced intermarriage.

"You don't say intermarriage is wrong," says

Rosalyn Bernstein explaining how a Jewish parent might try to discourage intermarriage. "Judaism is 5,000 years old. It is really a very precious heritage. It is the foundation of a positive ethical heritage for the entire western world. It's survival enriches us all. It is obviously something very special. It is a tragedy to give up voluntarily something that has survived so long."

"We have found," says Rabbi Sky sounding hopeful, "that in mixed couple situations the Jewish partner usually wants to retain Jewishness and the non-Jewish partner usually wants to find out what it's all about."

Still, for many intermarried couples, it is easier to neglect religious affiliations than to come to terms with conflicting beliefs. . . or in some case, the lack of belief. For Judaism loses young people not only through intermarriage, but for many of the same reasons that other organized religions do.

"Judaism is too patriarchal," says one young woman who has discarded her Jewishness in favor of a personal spirituality more in keeping with her feminist thinking.

"There were no answers to my questions," says another young woman who was born Jewish but who has since converted to evangelical Christianity. "There were no answers, just traditions. I found nothing to build my faith on."

According to Rabbi Asher Reichert of the Orthodox Shaarey Tphiloh synagogue, a high percentage of young people who convert to cults (such as Scientology and Hare Krishna) are Jewish. He cites one study that suggests as high as 40 percent of the young Americans who become involved with such cults during the 1980s will be Jewish by birth.

It is not just Jews, but a certain Jewish tradition that is being lost through assimilation.

"What's been lost are the things that have no

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*Joel and Linda Abromson typify the new high profile Jewish community leaders.*

# JEWISH IDENTITY (continued)

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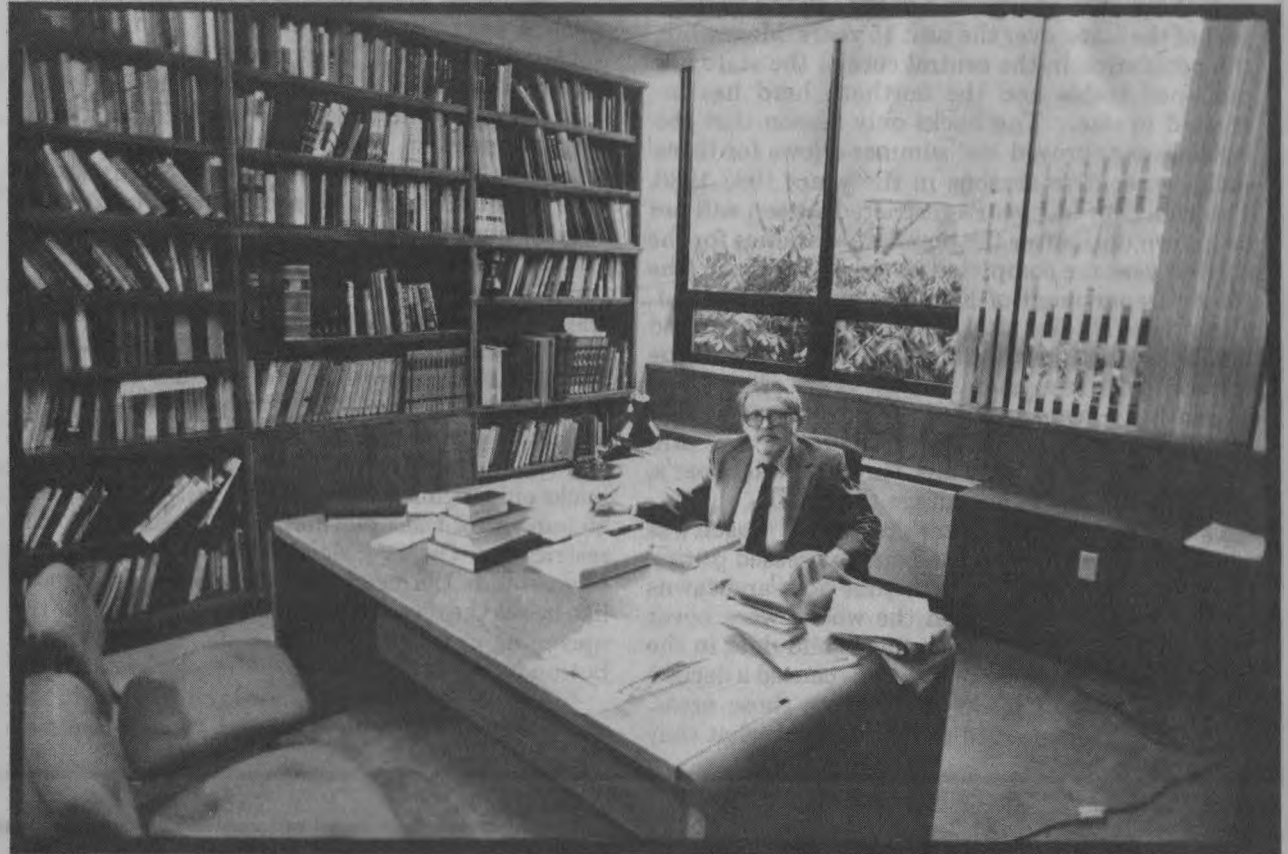
place in modern life," says one man who no longer feels identification with his Jewishness.

Many of the Eastern European trappings of Judaism have naturally all but disappeared. Very few young people in Portland today can speak Yiddish. The mikvah (ritual bath), once a regular part of Jewish ghetto life, is now only used at Shaarey Tphiloh by a very few very devout women. The mikvah at Etz Chaim synagogue was boarded up years ago. The purpose of the mikvah was to spiritually cleanse a woman after menstruation or childbirth or before marriage.

The prohibition against riding on the Sabbath is largely ignored these days. A no parking ban is in effect Saturdays on Noyes Street in front of Shaarey Tphiloh, but Rabbi Reichert says he does not bother to monitor this aspect of his congregation's behavior.

Another aspect of Jewish life that has changed is the lay study of the *Torah* (the Five Books of Moses, corresponding to the first five books of the *Bible*) and the Talmudic laws (the collection of Jewish laws and traditions consisting of the *Mishna* and the *Gemara*). Sumner Bernstein's grandfather, Abraham Bernstein, was buried in a coffin made from the bench upon which he had studied *Torah*, but such pious scholarship is rare today.

The role and place of women in Jewish religious life has also undergone a change over the years. In 1950, when the Conservative Temple Beth El was founded, women were no longer segregated in separate seats as is the custom in Orthodox synagogues. The temple continues to support women's rights, having only last year voted to endorse the rabbinate for women. Reform Judaism has been ordaining women as rabbis since 1972. Liberal Conservative Jews will eventually have to take a stand on the recent Reform decision to



Rabbi Harry Sky of Temple Beth El

validate Jewishness along patrilineal lines. Jewish custom dictates that only children born to Jewish mothers are Jewish by birth.

Rabbi Reichert explains the Orthodox custom of segregating women in the synagogue as a function of demonstrating that one's relationship to God comes before one's relationship to family. Rabbi Reichert

sees the Reform position on patrilineal descent as a change in standards resulting from assimilation.

"I have a sense," says Rabbi Reichert, "that what has been valid and effective for Jews in the past 4,000 years is still valid and effective today. I'm not anxious to change things because of a vogue."

What some would see as needed reforms, others

would see as accommodations to a secular age. But regardless of the reasons for change, change has occurred in Portland's Jewish community.

"We're not as honed as we were," says Rabbi Sky. "You look in the 1930s. All of the Jewish activities took place at the Jewish Community Center. It's not that way anymore."

In the 1920s, the Jewish Community Center functioned primarily as a self-help agency to orient immigrants to the new life in Portland. The center's role then shifted to one of Americanizing the Jewish population, teaching English and preparing individuals for citizenship. And from the late 1930s (when the Jewish Community Center moved to larger quarters on Cumberland Avenue) through the late 1960s, the center was the focus of social and cultural life in Jewish Portland.

By the 1970s, however, the center's ark of a building was in the wrong part of town, was expensive to heat, and was no longer the focus of Jewish life. In 1979, the Cumberland Avenue building was sold, and in 1982 the community center moved into smaller quarters on Ashmont Street. Twenty-five years ago, the Jewish Community Center had an enrollment of 654 households. Today, the center membership stands at 339 households.

The practice of *kasrut*, of keeping a kosher home by observing the Jewish dietary laws, has also undergone transformation and interpretation.

"This store is under the supervision of the Portland Vaad Hakasruth," reads the sign on the meat counter at Penny Wise Market on Ocean Avenue. Penny Wise, operated by the Berenson family, is the principal outlet for kosher groceries in the city and has recently become the only kosher meat shop in Portland.

Seven years ago when Louis Seavey's kosher delicatessen in the East End closed, the Berensons added their line of kosher foodstuffs — from jars of *horvcht* and *gefilte* fish to matzoh balls and frozen *knishes*. Five years ago, when S. Blumenthal & Sons

kosher butcher shop went out of business, the Berensons added the kosher meat counter.

Gary Berenson, who runs Penny Wise with his father, Jack, estimates that the market's business is half Jewish and half neighborhood. The meat counter accounts for about one-third of the total business. There is no longer enough business in Portland to support a kosher butcher shop alone.

Berenson says that non-Jewish customers do not buy kosher meats because they are much more expensive than non-kosher meats due to all of the special handling and supervision involved. A London broil that the supermarket might sell for \$2.29 a pound, might fetch \$3.39 a pound at Penny Wise.

To please the most Orthodox members of the community, Penny Wise would have to be closed on Saturday, the Sabbath, but Gary Berenson says, "That's just not economically feasible." So a compromise has been worked out and the meat counter is locked up on Saturday.

"For the Jew who wants to live an observant life in the company of like-minded people," says Rabbi Sky, "it's difficult here. He doesn't have the social milieu. The sort of Orthodoxy you find in Boston and New York just doesn't seem to flourish here. People leave Portland who want to live that way [strictly Orthodox]."

Rabbi Reichert says it is not difficult to maintain a kosher home in Portland, "just inconvenient."

"I think the education system is what will save Judaism," says Rabbi Reichert.

Since becoming the spiritual leader at Shaarey Tphiloh four and one-half years ago, Rabbi Reichert has had two thrusts to his work. The first is shepherding his aging congregation. The second is focusing on children.

When Rabbi Reichert first arrived in Portland, the Levey Day School, the Hebrew elementary school housed at Shaarey Tphiloh, had been floundering for several years. Twenty-five years ago, the day school had 75 students, but in the past

four years the enrollment has been built up from three to 21 full-time students.

The Community Hebrew School, the after-school program, presently enrolls about 200 youngsters where, 25 years ago, there were 302.

Very recently, some 15 families, including some of those active in the Cape Elizabeth *havurah*, formed a separate Family Hebrew School which met for a time at Temple Beth El and then set up a classroom at Etz Chaim. The Family Hebrew School suspended operations last year, however. According to Robert Willis, president of the Jewish Federation, the federation was willing to fund the family school, but the program failed for lack of leadership, not lack of money.

Paula Borelli, executive director of the Levey Day School, reports that half the families who send their children to the school are either members of Temple Beth El or are unaffiliated with any of the three synagogues in town. Further, Mrs. Borelli reports that one-third of the couples who send their children to full-time Hebrew school have mixed marriages.

Why are intermarried and unaffiliated parents sending their children to Hebrew school instead of public school?

"One of the strong primary reasons for sending a child to the day school," says Mrs. Borelli, who is herself a partner in a mixed marriage, "is so the child will get a strong Jewish identity. It's difficult to be a Jew in isolation. Judaism is very much a community and home-based religion. If you have an intermarried situation, one side of the family doesn't have that tradition and background."

According to Rabbi Sky, a *havurah* for intermarried couples is just starting in greater Portland, and last November, the lead-off event in a series of six Omnibus Jewish cultural programs was a lecture by Paul Cowan, author of *An Orphan in History*, an account of how he rediscovered his Jewish heritage after his parents had brought him up without it.

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