Background:

At the beginning of this course I was sure that I was going to pick a topic that would interest me and make for an intriguing, yet straightforward, research project. In the end I picked a topic that followed a curvier path, but nonetheless held my interest. When I heard that Temple Shalom wanted students to conduct research on the Jews of Lewiston/Auburn I was instantly interested. As a member of Bates Hillel I'd heard that the Jewish population had been on the decline for some time. Other than that I had no idea what the Jews had experienced in this mill town. So I decided that using Temple Shalom and (hopefully) Temple Beth Abraham’s records I would try to paint a picture of Jewish life in Lewiston/Auburn prior to 1900.

I spent quite a bit of time reading what others had already written about Jews in Lewiston/Auburn. There hadn’t been much research on the topic. The work that had been done was mostly based on interviews with members of the various congregations of Lewiston/Auburn. Although interviews are a useful source these pieces felt like such interviews were relied on too much. It almost seemed like I was reading a family history. This isn’t to say that family histories aren’t acceptable as sources; I just wanted something that was based on more traditional sources as well, such as synagogue records. Nonetheless, these documents really showed me how little there was on the history of pre-1900 Jews in Lewiston/Auburn. I was excited at the prospect of making a contribution to this topic.
After two days of exploring Temple Shalom’s many boxes it was clear that little in-depth research could be done using their resources. However, what they held did spark some new ideas for projects. Someone had put together three scrapbooks containing articles from local newspapers that had to do with the Jewish congregations from 1958 to 1961. I decided on a whim to look through these articles for connections to Bates College. Most of the articles mentioned Bates Hillel. From the information in those articles I decided that I should look through Bates’ archives and try to see what kind of lives Jewish students were leading at Bates.

Hillel at Bates College: The First Twenty Years

“When founded in 1855, Bates was the first coeducational college in New England, admitting students without regard to race, religion, national origin, or sex.”¹ Bates College has always been open to all people, but that doesn’t necessarily create a community that is comprised of many different traditions. Jewish people have been traditionally a group of people that others tend to exclude, ostracize, and ignore.

However, my Jewish experiences at Bates especially within the Hillel organization have been met with welcoming arms by both Bates and the Jewish community of Lewiston/Auburn. My personal experiences led me to the following questions: Has Hillel always had healthy relationships with the rest of the community? Did the Hillel organization have problems becoming integrated into the college’s body?

I decided to try to answer these questions using the school’s newspaper, yearbook, and the scrapbooks for Temple Shalom. I checked in the Hillel office and online trying

to see if there were documents from the founding of our chapter or anything exciting like that, to no avail. Using the school newspaper and yearbook was the only way I could think of to find out about whatever events they held. All posters or mailbox announcements are long gone today. Regardless, I did feel I had access to enough documents to put together a full report.

Hillel began in the United States in 1923, and shortly thereafter became part of the B’nai B’rith, a nationwide Jewish service organization. The idea behind the Hillel organization was to give Jewish students more opportunities to lead a Jewish life during their college years. Certainly there was some Jewish programming on college campuses across America prior to 1923 but the Hillel organization provided a more formal structure to facilitate fulfilling the needs of Jewish students. ²

Bates Hillel was established November 6, 1945. It was the third Hillel in Maine. The purpose of Bates’ chapter was described as “the foundation intends neither to substitute for university life but is planned as a supplement to it.” ³ There was no information on why Bates Hillel was established then. However, it appeared to become part of campus life easily. The first articles in the school paper about the club describe Hillel being very social and having good turnouts. For instance, thirty Bates students attended a conference where four Maine colleges created governing constitutions. ⁴ The earliest information about Hillel’s activities usually mentions another college or the rabbi

from Beth Jacob’s congregation participating. Bates Hillel was connecting to both the campus and outside communities.

Not being confined to the Bates campus from the beginning is important in many respects. Firstly, if the Bates students were interacting with the Jewish community of Lewiston/Auburn they would be considered a part of the community as well. This may seem obvious, but the implications are great. Jews were a minority in both the Bates and Lewiston/Auburn communities and by joining together in some activities each group became more established. They supported each other in the way they presented themselves to the rest of the world. Also, by having strong bonds between different colleges and the synagogues all could lead fuller Jewish lives. The different traditions that undoubtedly were apparent when the different groups interacted would lead to discussion and learning about what it means to be Jewish.

The first few years of Bates Hillel were widely publicized by the school’s newspaper. Almost every other week there was at least a small blurb about Hillel’s most activities. Many of the articles mentioned speakers coming to the Jewish Community Center in Lewiston or to Temple Beth Jacob. Surprisingly, only one Hillel sponsored activity mentioned in The Bates Student took place on Bates’ campus: a fundraising campaign for the United Jewish Appeal.5 The weekly meetings didn’t even take place on campus; rather they would meet at the synagogue or a home a few blocks away.6

Why did the students keep their Jewish activities off campus? There is no easy answer to this question. It is obvious that there was no loud anti-Semitic voice on campus. If there had been there would have been reports of it in the paper. Also, it is

5 “Hillel Bends All Efforts on UJA,” The Bates Student, April 21, 1948.
likely that letters to the editor would have expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of attention that Hillel received in their first few years. Because it is likely that this new national organization wanted to keep tabs on its members maybe keeping it off campus made sense. By having events at the synagogue and community center the local chapter of B’nai B’rith could participate more fully in the programming. Also, having events at the Jewish centers of town would lead to more solidarity within the Jewish community.

There is one more possibility that occurred to me in the course of this research. In the November 14, 1951 edition of The Bates Student the editorial addressed the problem of the Christian Association’s Constitution stating

The purpose of this organization shall be to lead students to faith in God Through Jesus Christ; to promote their growth in Christian character; and to influence them to share in the active Christian fellowship, striving to make the will of Christ effective in human society both at home and abroad.\(^7\)

Although it is entirely appropriate for a Christian club to have a mission statement including their beliefs in Jesus Christ, it is not, as the editorial points out, appropriate for the club to have such a mission statement if club membership is mandated for all students.\(^8\) Although no one points it out in the article or in responses in later editions of the paper, this could not have been a comfortable situation for the Jewish students. Thus, a mix of reasons can rationalize why most of the activities were off campus.

I decided early in my research that, because of time restraints, I would look at the first twenty years of Bates Hillel’s history. From 1944 until 1951 there is fairly regular

\(^7\) “CA Constitution Needs Amending,” The Bates Student, November 14, 1951.
\(^8\) “CA Constitution Needs Amending,” The Bates Student, November 14, 1951.
announcements of a variety of activities. Interestingly, few of these activities are purely religious. Most of the events are speakers on “Jewish issues” such as Israel and inter-religious marriages. Some of the events have no religious overtones, other than the sponsor was Hillel and presumably Jewish students attended. For instance, they threw a purely social party at Tripp Lake for Colby’s Hillel. Bates Hillel was an organization dedicated to addressing all the needs of their members: spiritual, social, and educational.

Between 1953 and 1955 there is no mention of Bates Hillel in The Bates Student. There are events involving Jewish speakers, blood drives that take place at the Jewish Community Center, etc. There is no mention of Hillel. Then, in 1957 a “Religion Notes” column began in The Bates Student and Hillel is mentioned again fairly regularly for the next year. The club hosts breakfasts and movies open to all of the Bates community. However, after the spring of 1958 there is no mention of Hillel through 1964, which is where the scope of this paper ends.

This isn’t to say that Hillel was not active during the years when The Bates Student didn’t report on their activities. Temple Shalom of Auburn has three large scrapbooks full of newspaper clippings from 1958 to 1961. Unfortunately most of the clippings are no longer taped into the books and the paper is very fragile, so it is a source that perhaps will not be around for a long time. There was no note of who compiled these articles, but they seem to be any article that has something to do with a Lewiston/Auburn Jew or any of the congregations of their community. In these books there is proof that Bates Hillel was still in existence and active during the pauses in reporting by The Bates Student. For instance, in March of 1959 Morris Kronenfeld, the

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advisor to Bates Hillel, spoke to the Twin City Chapter of B’nai B’rith about the recent activities of the group. In another article from 1961 there is an announcement that a professor of philosophy from Brandeis University gave a lecture to Bates Hillel at the JCC. One more example is Rabbi Zdanowitz, of congregation Beth Abraham, addressed Bates Hillel on the topic of “What is a Jew?” in 1959.

Obviously Bates Hillel was active even if The Bates Student wasn’t reporting on their programming. This makes me question why weren’t Hillel’s activities announced to the rest of Bates? Perhaps they were on posters, etc. That still wouldn’t fully explain the lack of reporting. If the city’s paper saw these events as significant enough to report on them, it seems The Bates Student should have as well. While looking through many papers that were void of announcements about Hillel activities I noticed there were few articles about other club’s activities. Perhaps it was just the policy of the editors to do a minimum of reporting on clubs. Or maybe they didn’t recognize Hillel’s activities as important to the Bates community.

The lack of reporting does indicate that Hillel was probably not one of the biggest clubs on campus at the time. Further evidence of this is there is no mention in any of the yearbooks from 1944 to 1964 about Hillel. Again, it doesn’t seem like all of the clubs are listed in the yearbooks, so perhaps this shouldn’t be surprising. However, a club that’s been around for over a decade not getting mentioned in the yearbook is definitely odd. Perhaps Hillel was such a small club it didn’t make sense to give it full recognition. Or

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maybe they weren’t well known enough on campus because they were never in *The Bates Student*. It would be interesting to see the publishing policies of both *The Bates Student* and *The Mirror* to see if the lack of publication for Hillel was unique.

Hillel at Bates has a long history, but at this point a somewhat incomplete one. Perhaps if former members could be contacted, some holes could be filled in. However, this brings up a whole new set of problems. Without *The Bates Student* or *The Mirror* reporting on who was participating in Hillel it would be difficult to find the alumni. Additionally, because I chose to explore the earliest years of Bates Hillel, the age of those who remember these years is quite high. Thus, it may not be realistic to hope that interviews are a possibility. Another idea towards completing the history of Bates Hillel would be getting in touch with the national Hillel offices to see if they have anything in their archives about Bates Hillel.

With this incomplete history of Bates Hillel we do know that it was a club that was fairly active. They provided their community with speakers on Jewish topics, added to the social scene at Bates, and generally provided an opportunity for the Jews of Bates to continue living a Jewish life. The scale of their activities is something that is harder to gauge. Obviously this was not the largest group on campus, but due to difficulty with sources and a lack of time, it is difficult to say how many people were involved.

Regardless of size, Bates Hillel is part of a bigger movement in the Jewish people in America. Many of the Jewish students in college in this period of time were the sons and daughters of immigrants. These students were shaping how Jewish life was going to be different in America from their parent’s experiences. Hillel provided a forum for these students. Hillel also was one of many options for Bates students to learn and grow
outside of class. This tradition that began in the 40’s will surely continue for a very long time.
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