

100 years of Beth Israel

by Hasan Bhatti

A small-town story

“The synagogue is the principal means of keeping alive the Jewish consciousness. It is the only institution which can define Jewish aims to a world that would otherwise be at a loss to understand why we persist in retaining our corporate individuality.”¹

--Abraham Karp

“I remember feeling a closeness there, when you went into the old synagogue. I liked that building. I remember I liked that building. That’s all I can recall. There was a closeness and a lot of wood.”

--Peter Beckerman

Religious institutions serve as a concrete way to locate religion within the real world. For Jews, this is no different. Wherever they have settled throughout history, the synagogue has become a center for the Jews within American society. The synagogue, on the one hand, serves as a nucleus of Jewish religious and social activity.² At the same time, however, American synagogues are the prime physical manifestations of a Jewish presence within a non-Jewish community.³ In addition, the physical presence of a synagogue symbolizes Jews’ willingness to live in the community they inhabit. Wherever its location, the synagogue has remained a consistent force for American Jewry.

There have been multiple studies conducted over the past few decades regarding the role of the synagogue within small-town Jewish life in the United States.⁴ This report is yet another

¹ Karp, Abraham. “Overview” in Wertheimer, Jack. The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 p. 31

² Engelman, Uriah Zevi. “The Jewish Synagogue in the United States” in *American Journal of Sociology* Volume 41.1 (1935) p. 46

³ Weissbach, Lee Shai. Jewish Life in Small Town America: A History. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005 p. 178

⁴ Goldstein (1992); Weissbach (2005); Hoberman (2007)

distinct story within the larger trends of other small-town Jewish communities in the United States. As with other small-town Jewish communities, the patterns of Beth Israel's synagogue history can be fully understood only in light of the fact that limited size and the small-town setting were powerful environmental factors.⁵ Beth Israel Synagogue in Waterville, Maine shows both similarities and differences to these larger trends throughout its history, and though it has often shown signs of decline, it is a testament to the perseverance of small-town Jews to hold onto their Jewish identity despite all odds.

In the beginning...

The origin of Beth Israel follows a common progression in most small-town synagogues in the United States (as charted out by Michael Hoberman⁶ and Lee Shai Weissbach⁷). Somewhere during the latter half of the 19th century, seven interrelated families from Eastern Europe came to settle in Waterville with high hopes. The seven saw in Waterville an opportunity to lead a life of economic prosperity and personal freedom that had been impossible back in the shtetls of Eastern Europe. The families had been part of a mass migration from Eastern Europe to the United States that started in the 1880s. Like the other Eastern European immigrants arriving in the United States at the time, these seven families had a strong desire to hold onto the Jewish heritage they carried over from the Old Country. To ensure the continuation of their traditions, the families tended to stick together within the broader Waterville community. Pretty soon, however, the families realized that this was not enough. Waterville at the time did not have any Jewish institutions, and with the pressing need of formally preserving their Jewish Orthodox traditions like they had in the Old Country, the heads of the seven households resolved to band

⁵ Weissbach, Lee Shai. Jewish life in small-town America. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005 p. 197

⁶ Hoberman, Michael. How Strange it Seems. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008 pp. 169-171

⁷ Weissbach, 2005, pp. 178-180

together in an effort to foster Judaism for themselves and their families. The initial meetings took place in the privacy of the family's homes, much like many young congregations in the small-town United States. Though it is unclear how often they would meet, each meeting would consist of a service according to the Orthodox tradition carried over from the Old Country, and eventually, seeing the consistency of the meetings, the group decided to establish themselves as a congregation. On June 16, 1902, Julius Levine, William Levine, Louis Wolman, John Paikowsky, Moses Silver, and John Williams named their group the Beth Israel Congregation, and chartered it as an official group in Waterville, Maine.

During the early 1900s relatives of the 7 families began to flood into Waterville from Eastern Europe. Just as the 7 initial families tended to stick together within Waterville, so did the newly arrived Eastern European immigrants. The new arrivals, like other Jewish immigrants across the country, came to Waterville to join their relatives because they “knew they would not be alone.”⁸ However, the influx of people posed a problem for the congregation, as the regular services quickly grew too big for the dens and lounges of their private homes. They began to rent out public spaces like the House Number 4 Fire Station on Ticonic Street to hold High Holiday Services. The congregation began to realize that they needed to have a House of Worship for themselves, and, luckily for them, it wouldn't be long before this dream came true.

Within a year of its establishment, using the dues it collected from its members (which at the time were 10 cents a week), the congregation purchased a barn on the corner of Ticonic and Kelsey Street. Their goal: to remodel the barn into a House of Worship according to the Orthodox tradition. They hired contractor Charles Fitzgerald of Winslow to help with the project. While workers remodeled the building, the growing congregation continued to conduct daily services, renting out public spaces for larger events if needed. Hyman Shenson, a newly arrived

⁸ Diner, Hasia. A New Promised Land. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 p. 27

immigrant from Lithuania, acted as the spiritual leader during the first 11 years of Beth Israel's existence. There are no written or documented accounts of social events during this period, though given the trends of Jewish congregations within small-town US at the time, there is reason to speculate that there were informal gatherings within people's homes after services for bridge, refreshments, or other forms of entertainment. In the spring of 1905, the Beth Israel Synagogue on the corner of Kelsey and Ticonic Street opened its doors for use, and became the central location for the Greater Waterville congregation's ritual services over the next 53 years.

The Old Synagogue

During the first 50 years of the synagogue's existence, many of the congregants lived in close proximity to each other. Hasia Diner, in writing about the first immigrant neighborhoods concludes that, "families lived close to each other and to synagogues, schools, bakeries, butcher shops, settlement houses, and other community institutions where they met and carried on their social life."⁹ Waterville's Jewry was no exception to this rule. As Burt Shiro put it, "it was like a little village outside of Vilna."

As was the case all across the United States in newly arrived communities from Eastern Europe,¹⁰ Beth Israel's ritual services accorded to the Orthodox tradition practiced in the Old Country. Built into the Kelsey Street Synagogue was a balcony where the women prayed separately from the men. The reasoning for this separation was to maintain the sanctity of the prayer experience. The service was conducted entirely in Hebrew with everyone praying at their own pace. This prayer style often created a noisy and chaotic atmosphere during services. Women at the time could neither be counted in a minyan nor undergo the bar mitzvah ceremony.

⁹ Diner, Hasia. A New Promised Land. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 p. 71

¹⁰ Goldstein, Judith. Crossing Lines. New York: Morrow, 1992 p. 64; Cohen, Michael. "Portland: Jerusalem of the North." History/Jewish Studies Honors Thesis, Brown University, 2000 p. 8.

Gordon Wolman told me bluntly in an interview in March, “people at that time were very religious.”

Another chief concern for the newly made congregation was the issue of passing on Jewish education to their youth. In the Jewish shtetls of the Old Country, there were already plenty of sources for Jewish education: well-established Hebrew Schools, a set of communal ethics to educate their children about the Orthodox traditions, familial support, etc.¹¹ In the more cosmopolitan United States, however, they lacked the formal structure and insular communal structure that had kept their traditions in line back in Eastern Europe. As such, it became necessary for many American Jews across the nation to create methods of Jewish education to keep Judaism in their children. Due to the lack of funds, Waterville’s Jews improvised. Lester Jolovitz recounts that his father was paid as a tutor of sorts on the side to teach younger boys Hebrew in preparation for their bar mitzvah. “Most of the young children would be taught by their parents,” he said, “and in my father’s case, where he was well-educated, he provided some education, or prepared some of the students.” Families were a vital socialization group for Jews living in Waterville during Beth Israel’s early years, and this trend continued until the acquisition of the Talmud Torah building in 1924. This persistent improvisation when the going got tough is, as you will see, something that continued to occur throughout the congregation’s history.

Before the acquisition of the Talmud Torah, however, 1921 proved to be the beginning of an important chapter in Beth Israel’s young history. After a series of different spiritual leaders and rabbis passing through Beth Israel from 1914 to the early 1920s, Reverend Abraham Hains and family arrived in Waterville from Canada. Although he himself had not been trained as a rabbi, he was very knowledgeable of the laws and statutes of Orthodox Judaism, and the congregation hired him as their de facto spiritual leader. Reverend Hains was fondly remembered

¹¹ Goldstein, Judith, 1992, p. 42; 43.

by many in the community for being extremely intelligent and for having a beautiful deep singing voice.

As spiritual leader, Reverend Hains would be in charge of leading and keeping order during services. Reverend Hains had also been trained as a shochet, a kosher butcher, and supplied kosher meat to the Jews in Waterville from the back of his own home on Ticonic Street. Sometimes the multiple identities would prove to be quite an interesting combination. It was very difficult for women to participate in Beth Israel's Orthodox services because they couldn't understand the Hebrew present in the service. As such, the women would gossip very loudly during the service, often disturbing and eliciting hushes from the men praying down below. As Myrt Wolamn remembers from her experiences at the Old Synagogue in 1946, "there was always someone banging on the siddur to tell people to be quiet upstairs, but that's typical." As I said before, Reverend Hains various roles as spiritual leader, in which he would shush those that were disturbing the service, and community butcher often elided into quite the domineering figure within these contexts. As a child, Sara Arnon tells of such an image: "Mr. Hains was an interesting man, because I would only see him as a butcher outside of the synagogue. Then in the synagogue, he was the rabbi... So Mr. Hains would go, 'Shh! Shh!' to get everyone quiet, and he would scare me to death, because he was the person who was always shushing the children; and I thought, 'Oh my God, if he ever sees that it's me up here, he's going to come after me with that knife!'"

Horror scenes aside, Reverend Hains proved to be a vital resource to the Waterville community in terms of youth education over his 32-year term. Reverend Hains was very well read in Hebrew, and after the purchasing of the Talmud Torah building on Ticonic Street in 1924, he began to teach Hebrew School formally to youth for the first time in the synagogue's

history. Throughout his tenure, Reverend Hains only taught the bare necessities to students, namely the few tasks that one must do in preparation for his bar mitzvah. “I was taught nothing about the holidays, nothing about the religion,” said Gordon Wolman, “Bar mitzvah preparation that was all... in fact, Myrt knows more about the holidays than I do.” Lester Jolovitz and Burt Shiro, both of whom had their bar mitzvahs in the late '30s, only learned how to read Hebrew without translations. Later on, some students learned how to translate what they said, but as Peter Beckerman, bar mitzvah class of 1961, so eloquently put it, the translation “was just a hair above ‘see dick run.’”

Regardless of the banality, the Waterville Jewish youth studying for their bar mitzvah had no alternative when it came to attending Hebrew School. “I had to learn [Hebrew] when I was growing up,” Gordon Wolman told me firmly, “Hebrew School was expected of me.” As Peter Beckerman would say about his Jewish education in the '60s, “I think I had to go 3 times a week, somewhat at gunpoint. At the time it was a painful, you know, get off the baseball field or whatever and go to Hebrew School sort of thing... but Hebrew School and bar mitzvah was something that was in the cards, so we all went to study with the rabbi anyhow.” During the earlier years, studying in preparation for your bar mitzvah was not an option; it was a requirement.

During this time, there is also evidence of the existence of a minyan. It is unclear how often they met (whether it was daily or a couple times a week). For people that needed a minyan to recite the kaddish for a deceased relative, 10 or more of the community's men would get together and hold a minyan for the mourning community member. Gordon Wolman remembers these minyans: “At one time (1935), people in Waterville were very religious, up to my grandparents' time. I used to, if somebody needed a minyan, when I was a teenager and had my

license, I used to drive my grandfather around and pick up other Jews to make a minyan. Did that for a number of years. It was very difficult.” Difficult or not, these minyans would last for the entirety of Reverend Hains’ tenure.

One burden associated with the new synagogue building, as it was with all small-town congregations, was in raising funds. Because small-town synagogues had significantly less members than in more urban centers, synagogues located in the small-town United States like Beth Israel often appealed to its members for money.¹² This took a variety of different forms.

One tradition for raising money during this period in particular came from selling religious honors. Gordon Wolman’s grandfather, Hyman Rosenthal, was extremely active in the synagogue for many years. During his childhood years, Gordon recalls seeing Hyman on several occasions acting as an auctioneer for the concluding service during Yom Kippur. People who wanted to lead the service would bid against each other to figure out who would lead it, and all proceeds would go directly to the synagogue.

From the mid 1920s to the early 1940s, another form of financial aid began to shine through for the Jewish community. The Hadassah Chapter and the Theodore N. Levine B’nai Brith Chapter in Waterville began to emerge as a strong factor in the synagogue’s financial and social life. Though the synagogue still didn’t own a space to hold social events for free, the two organizations worked to raise funds for the synagogue by running social events for the congregation and for the non-Jewish community at large. These social events included house bridge/whist parties, an annual night out at the movies, rummage sales, communal dances, and various holiday parties. Funds from these events would go directly to the synagogue. Despite the fact that the synagogue building was itself unable to host social events, these two organizations remained a consistent social force for the synagogue until the early 1950s.

¹² Weissbach, 2005, p. 185

A Need for a New Building

Following the Second World War, many young Jewish couples began to come back to Waterville. As Myrt so eloquently told me, “The Waterville men imported their wives.” This ‘importation of wives’ amplified the already more secular and progressive view of Judaism coming from the younger more Americanized 2nd generation of Waterville Jews. In fact, the Americanization of the 2nd generation of Orthodox immigrants was a common phenomenon for small-town Jewish communities with only one Jewish institution during the mid 20th century.¹³ This was mainly because Orthodox parents lacked the ability to pass on and solidify Orthodox traditions like they had in the old country; such a process was impossible within a more secular and cosmopolitan United States atmosphere, especially given the significantly reduced critical mass of smaller Jewish communities in America at the time.¹⁴ Thus, with the more prominent entrance of progressive views into the Waterville Jewish community, the congregation began to question the unilaterally accepted Orthodox values. “The old synagogue was closer to Orthodox than it was Conservative,” remarked Sara Arnon, “but I don’t think that people really knew why they did things then, they just did them, and they just did them because they were supposed to.” During the late ’40s, members began to call for family seating and for more women’s participation within synagogue life in general. In response to these progressive demands, the board created the Beth Israel Sisterhood in 1954 to act as the women’s leadership body within the synagogue, but the issue of separate seating remained unresolved.

¹³ Hoberman, 2008, p. 175; Weissbach, Lee Shai. “Community and Sub-community in Small-Town America, 1880-1950” in *Jewish History* Vol. 15.2 (2001) p. 257

¹⁴ Weissbach, 2001, p. 259

These newcomers, of the same generation as the mid-century feminists and civil rights activists in the rest of the country,¹⁵ also began to tire of traditionalist style of services because of the lack of congregational participation, and demanded a more egalitarian and participatory service be instituted.¹⁶ A big reason for this shift had to do with the tedium associated with services. Peter Beckerman, who was around 8 years old at the time, told me that “services to me as a young boy were very dry. Just so boring. Such a tedium to go to service because again you got an Orthodox service and you have an Orthodox/Reform type congregation. And so it was very dry.” Traditionalists in the community were appalled that the younger generation had started to make these demands, but as Myrt Wolman told me bluntly in an interview, “The old story of two Jews and three opinions, that’s always going to be.”

However, according to some in the community, these demands were not as passive as they seem. The demands began to become more pointed and more confrontational. Some of the newly arrived women soon started trying to get rid of Reverend Hains because, as Marion Hains put it, “he wasn’t modernized for them enough.” “They made things very difficult, very unpleasant for him,” Marion told Becky Muller in an interview. There seemed to be a clash between the older and newer generations here, yet at the same time, it didn’t seem to put the congregation as a whole at risk. After the passing of Reverend Hains in 1953, the debate was put to a vote, and it was decided to become a part of the Conservative movement. As such, the synagogue, like those in small communities like Durham, North Carolina,¹⁷ hired a more progressive Conservative spiritual leader to usher in a new era, Rabbi David Prince.

¹⁵ Weissbach, 2005, p. 193

¹⁶ Support that this happened in the rest of small-town Jewish communities in the country: Hoberman, 2008, p. 179

¹⁷ Weissbach, 2001, p. 254

A shift in views wasn't the only issue for the congregation, however. Like many small-town synagogues in the United States,¹⁸ Beth Israel, as the only Jewish institution in the area, drew people from surrounding area. People began to realize that the 50-year-old synagogue on Kelsey Street was much too small to accommodate the influx of newcomers into the area. In addition, the actions of the three Jewish organizations in charge of running social events, Hadassah, B'nai Brith, and the Sisterhood, were inhibited by the fact that the synagogue didn't have its own space to hold social events. The increase in population, the entrance of more progressive Jewish values, and the growing need for a space to hold social events seemed to point Beth Israel toward an almost incomprehensible solution: we must build a new synagogue to accommodate our modern era. As the Beth El Dedication Booklet proclaimed, there arose within the community "a need for a larger and more modern place of worship."

And so, under the leadership of President David Gray, the congregation set out to start building another synagogue to accommodate the times. The congregation hired an architect to sketch up a plan and announced publicly in 1957 to the Waterville community that there would be a new synagogue built on the corner of Main Street and Kelsey Street. Most of the work to build the synagogue was done by the men. "The men, they built the synagogue—that was their thing, they were on the building committee and things like that," remarked Myrt Wolman. David Gray's leadership along with the generous financial help of Harold Alford accelerated the work on the new building, and led it to completion by early spring of 1958.

On the last weekend of March, 1958, the synagogue held a three-day dedication ceremony to which everyone in the broader Waterville community was invited. The whole congregation participated in the weekend, with the men conducting the public ceremonies and

¹⁸ Gerard, Helene. "Yankees in Yarmulkes: Small-town Jewish Life in Eastern Long Island." *American Jewish Archives* 38.1 (1986) p. 26

the women organizing the social events. The Sisterhood put on an enormous Dedication Ball in the Abraham Hains Community Center open to everyone in the community on the Saturday night before the Dedication, an event that raked in more than \$500 in profits for the synagogue the first year. Because of its success, the event became an annual occurrence in the community, and one that the community members like Phyllis Shiro and Myrt Wolman looked forward to year after year.

The Dedication Ceremony itself was held on Sunday, March 30, 1958. Both Jews and non-Jews were present at the dedication ceremony, with prominent members from each making speeches during the ceremony itself. One prominent highlight from the ceremony was the procession of the younger generation bringing the Sifrei Torah from the older synagogue to the new synagogue up the street. “You haven’t seen anything like it in your life,” Myrt told me after an interview one day. The ceremony was a day of general celebration for the congregation. “Oh, we were very proud of it,” Myrt Wolman told me. “The dedication was a big deal, and everyone participated as they could.” In articles documenting the event, prominent members of the broader community exclaimed their praise for the new building. Waterville Mayor Albert Bernier exclaimed, “the construction of this building speaks a tribute more complete than I or anyone else could possibly say.” In the words of a fellow Christian clergyman, Malcolm MacDuffie, “It is a great deed to build a house of prayer, instruction, and worship.” These comments along with the many notes in the advertisements near the end of the dedication booklet, it seemed that the non-Jewish community was equally as proud of the accomplishment as the congregation themselves.

Though the dedication was certainly cause for celebration, some keynote speakers at the event chose to remind the synagogue of their duties following the dedication. As Rabbi

Zdanowitz of Lewiston's Beth Jacob states, "You have built the building and you have done the job well, now begins the difficult job of maintaining the building." Indeed, Beth Israel's Rabbi Steinberg pushes for the congregation to "accept the ever-present spiritual challenge that lies ahead and strive always toward the ultimate purpose of our initial task—that of human betterment." The dedication was a significant cause for celebration for the people of Waterville, yet Zdanowitz and Steinberg reminded that great accomplishment comes with great responsibility. The Beth Israel Synagogue's work was far from done.

The New Synagogue

Yet, as had been the case in the years beforehand, the congregation was more than ready to face the challenge of a new building. The Sisterhood immediately started to work on the new building's kitchen and social hall, slowly buying supplies to build up the synagogue's inventory. Because the synagogue was on a tight budget, however, the Sisterhood, like the Waterville community had always done, improvised. Sara Arnon tells the story of how her mother Giselle Miller sought to deal with the problem of money in acquiring goods for the synagogue: "I remember that they were on tight budgets and they were trying to figure out how to stock the kitchen, and Jiff peanut butter had two kinds, as they all do, plain and crunchy, and two sizes of each kind, let's call big and small. And plain came in a cut glass in the two sizes and my mom Giselle said 'Look! This is perfect! A water glass and a wine glass!' So she encouraged everybody to serve Jiff peanut butter to their kids so they would have service for however many of these glasses so they wouldn't have to pay for glassware. Well, it seems the Miller family is

the only one that ate the peanut butter because we have hundreds of these glasses and the synagogue never got them.”

Even though Giselle was unable to mobilize the community to her peanut butter idea, the Sisterhood’s creativity began to slowly add more and more to the synagogue’s physical infrastructure. When a marriage happened at the synagogue, the women would use it as an excuse to buy a gift for the synagogue. Giselle Miller, before each of her daughter’s marriages, bought pillows for the pews, drapery for the windows, and large mosaics to put up around the synagogue that remained there until another person would improve it. Giselle was just one of many women who played a prominent role in the upkeep of the new synagogue. Others got involved planning social events or running the Hebrew School as part of B’nai Brith or the Sisterhood, whose overall goal was to fundraise for the synagogue by providing social activities for the congregation. As had been the case in the past, the synagogue’s congregation remained stoic in the face of its challenges.

Following the dedication, the education of the youth continued to blossom as well. There were many children attending Sunday/Hebrew School at that time, and Rabbi Steinberg was an extremely gifted teacher for the up and coming bar mitzvah students. “He was very, very good,” Myrt Wolman said to me, “he was smart, he was young, he was vital, he was good looking and he attracted people. He was easy, he celebrated all the holidays... He also represented the Jewish community very nicely.” Unfortunately, Rabbi Steinberg got offered a spot at a big synagogue in Long Island, and left a short while later. As Marion Hains said, sadly, “there just weren’t big opportunities here in Waterville for rabbis that there were in the cities and other towns.”

One important thing that informants kept telling me about the post-war period, which I define from about 1946 to 1965, is the palpable sense of closeness that they felt as part of this

community. When asked what the Jewish community was like after the war, Marion Hains responded, “well, close-knit. A close-knit group. They tried to keep the synagogue going, and they’d grumble about things, and there was never enough money to run it, and somehow it survived!” “Those were the heyday years for Waterville,” Peter Beckerman explained to me:

Sunday school was a time when everyone was there. We would learn the Hebrew national anthem, we would all sing it together. You were there with all your cousins. My mother played a lot of bridge and the people she played bridge with, all their sons and daughters were in my grade... But we were all thrown in together and we were really close. The kids were close and the parents were close... Waterville was a very affluent sophisticated town. It was a wonderful time to grow up... It was a real closeness.

Another significant trend that took place within the post-war years was an increased involvement by the faculty and students at Colby in the lives of the Waterville community. Colby students from away who had been trained back at their home synagogue began to help out at the community Hebrew School, taking on students and aiding teachers in whatever ways they could. Colby students also attended community-wide functions held at the synagogue or at local restaurants. Peter Beckerman, a teenager at the time, remarked that, “They were impressive to me because they were college students eating with us... They weren’t Jews from around here, outsiders from my little enclave. Nice guys! A lot of fun.” Sara Arnon remarks that Colby’s involvement was also quite convenient for her dating choices: “The Jewish community always opened their doors to Jewish kids from Colby. It was great when I was in High School growing up because for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I was assured that I was going to meet at least five or six young Jewish guys early in the school year, so that was wonderful.” Colby’s involvement would continue to grow stronger within the community over the next few decades of the congregation’s history.

After Rabbi Steinberg left in the early 1960s, the synagogue was unable to hold a rabbi for a period of time. Because of the lack of consistent religious leadership combined with the congregation's increasing Americanization, the synagogue's traditions began to get more and more lax ritually to the chagrin of the old timers. When interim rabbis would skim parts of the service, Peter Beckerman would recall some of the traditional men objecting: "We also had a rabbi chanting up there one time, he'd tell us to turn to page 407 or something and you'd hear some of the elders go 'no no no you gotta do 405 first. Don't skip! We can't skip that because it's a full moon on a certain day in Nissan or something...'" and they would hold grudges too. "He was going to skip that paragraph? He doesn't know what he's doing!" At the same time, more traditional characters in the community began to lax in their observance as well. "And then you got Pacey and Ludy," said Peter Beckerman, "with their hearing aids, and I think this might of actually been pre-hearing aid. As much as they came from a strict father, William Levine, they didn't care about the service. If they wanted to discuss the Red Sox during davening for Yom Kippur, you'd hear them talking about the Red Sox. Loudly." On another instance, Peter Beckerman told me about a dilemma on High Holiday services one year in the mid-'70s:

I remember one time the High Holidays fell on a weekend and Colby was playing football. You take a break during Yom Kippur. And the break, we would always hope it'd be at 1:30 when the game would start. And if it wasn't, then there'd be a few of us, and probably Pacey and Ludy also, who would excuse ourselves from the service and never come back. We'd go to the Colby game on a Saturday. We'd come back for the evening service.

Despite the ever-long conflict between the old and the new that was present in the Post-World War II years, it seemed that the old Orthodox values of the Old Synagogue at the corner of Kelsey and Ticonic Street had started to wane under a more Americanized and 'modern' Conservative congregation.

As the years went on into the late '60s and early '70s, the community life began to slow down as well. The annual Dedication Ball that had become an annual event since the 1958 Dedication had ceased to be profitable and was cut from the event calendar in 1973. Most of the children of the post-WWII couples had graduated from high school and migrated out of town in pursuit of other opportunities. Many of the parents involved in the synagogue had begun to shift their focus to other aspects of Waterville's life. This isn't to say, however, that the members from the post-war years didn't support the synagogue. "My family never gave up its membership," remarked Peter Beckerman, "but we would only go for High Holidays basically... We never went on Friday nights. It wasn't on our radar. Religion versus the traditional feelings for the tribe. But we retained our membership." On the other hand, if there was a Yahrzeit that needed to be observed, "the rabbi would call me and would then call at least ten other men... it was an honor to go." Indeed, such an affinity to the synagogue seemed to be a trend throughout small-town communities in the latter half of the 20th century as well. As one informant in Hoberman's study put it, "I think that one understands that being Jewish involves being involved in a community, helping to sustain it, making sure that it grows and that it will be there for future generations to come. I think there's more of a sense of responsibility [now]."¹⁹ Indeed, there was still a sense of kinship with the synagogue even though there was not much going on in the synagogue ritually or socially.

During the late 1960s, another group of more Reform Jews began to arrive in Waterville to supplement the 3rd generation of the "indigenous Beth Israel Jews." The Lunders, the Gellers, and the Maisels all began to become more involved in Jewish community life as well. Why did they want to get involved? "Well," Sandy Maisel said, "I'm Jewish! I'm not a religious Jew by any means but my parents were always members for much of my life of two synagogues, so I

¹⁹ Hoberman, 2008, p. 183

decided I should always join a synagogue.” In addition, the fact that the Maisels, the Lunders, and the Gellers all had kids involved in the synagogue’s Hebrew School during the 1980s was a very big reason for their involvement. “I had children and the children were going to Hebrew School,” Sandy told me during our interview. “I was asked to be on the board, so I was on the board. I eventually became president because my children were about to be bar and bat mitzvahed, and I cared about that.” It seems that Gordon Wolman’s parents caring about him having a bar mitzvah continued into the latter half of the 20th century.

Sid Geller also became a president of the synagogue during the mid-1970s. Interestingly enough, he didn’t even attend the board meeting at which he had become the president. “I was kind of president by default. My name was proposed and those present who voted voted me in. It was without even asking me. From that point on, I made sure that I went to every meeting that I could.” Though he was elected as a president, Sid laughed and told me, “well, you might say I was a glorified janitor.” For most of his time in office, Sid and the treasurer at the time Sam Shapiro worked on the physical framework of the building, fixing the woodwork, putting in better insulation, installing a heating system, etc. Throughout his presidency, even though broader social life was quiet, he continued to be involved in the ways that he was able.

Even though these two presidents were voted in during relatively quiet periods in the history of the synagogue, they felt honored to have been selected as a Jewish leader within the Waterville community. “It meant a great deal to me in one sense, which is like many people in my generation. My Judaism comes from my father and my grandfather. To me it was an honor and it was a sense of responsibility.” Sid told me that even though he had never thought of being the president of the synagogue “I was pleased and accepted” the invitation. There is a distinct

sense of identification within both of these accounts, continuing the type of ethnic closeness that Peter Beckerman and Marion Hains felt while describing the post-WWII years.

“The Rabbi Krinsky Years”: 1980-2006

The final chapter of the Beth Israel History that I focused on was on the Rabbi Krinsky years, which spanned from 1980 to 2006. After a number of different rabbis came and went (including Ernie Nadler, a rabbi who had faked his rabbi’s diploma and blew his cover by taking kids out for cheeseburgers after Hebrew School), Rabbi Krinsky was up in Waterville attending High Holiday services and found that the synagogue was in need of a religious leader. He offered to take the position and the synagogue hired him in the spring of 1981.

It is important to understand that at around this time, women began to gain equal rights as men within the Jewish faith, and had begun to be counted as part of a minyan in the mid 1970s. It was a period marked by inclusion of all differences regardless of your background, sexual orientation, or race. Rabbi Krinsky, who had been trained in the more progressive Reconstructionist strain of Judaism, tended to be very liberal toward change and difference, and tried to instill these values upon his congregation as well. The congregation as a whole was very open to change. This seemed to mirror a larger trend within American synagogues that was arising at around that same time: “the American synagogue was remarkably sensitive to the changing needs of America’s Jews and responded by reordering its priorities and programs to meet [the congregation’s] needs.”²⁰

Because of the relative openness of the community to change, Rabbi Krinsky immediately started to adapt rituals to what he saw as necessary without compromising to the congregation’s beliefs. One big that he tried to stress during his years as Beth Israel’s spiritual

²⁰ Karp, Abraham, 1987, p. 30

leader was the importance of congregation participation within their ritual experience. As such, he began to rework the service so that it would be shorter and included many more opportunities for the congregation to get involved in the service. Rabbi Krinsky included excerpts of the service in English so as to include those that didn't understand Hebrew. This included non-Jews who would come to the synagogue for a friend's bar or bat mitzvah.

In addition to adding more participation to the service, Rabbi Krinsky also hoped to personalize the ritual experience for each of the congregation leaders. He also streamlined the service so that those that did know Hebrew didn't have to stay in services as long as they did back in the days of the Old Synagogue on the corner of Kelsey and Ticonic Street. When a family was to have a bar or bat mitzvah for a child, Rabbi Krinsky would ask them what things they would like to do for their bar mitzvah. There were of course limits to this request, as the Haftarah and Maftir were required, but the rest was up to the family. Sandy Maisel recounted one of his children's bar mitzvahs in which his family had created the service themselves: "Our family in Buffalo has had a traditional service and we took that service and expanded it. It's a lot more liberal than most people here are used to... when my kids were bar-mitzvahed I remember we had a guitar on the bimah... the rabbi said if you want to do it, that's what you'll do." In addition, Rabbi Krinsky would allow the bar or bat mitzvah to choose their own parsha from the Torah, as some Torah portions are more interesting or compelling than others. These are just a few ways in which he would try to personalize the ritual experience. Despite the fact that many of the changes went against traditional values, the community seemed amenable to the ritual changes brought on by Rabbi Krinsky.

Another key theme of this time period was Rabbi Krinsky's urge to involve non-Jews in the life of the synagogue. This theme took three forms. Firstly, Rabbi Krinsky found it valuable

for the congregation to understand the beliefs of their neighbors so as to better relate to them. “It made for comity,” he told me, “It made for awareness of the ‘other’ and also the ‘other’ of Jewishness.” Secondly, Rabbi Krinsky saw it valuable for the Jewish ‘other’ (or people of a different faith) to understand the ways that Jews learned. As such, Rabbi Krinsky actively invited classes from public schools in the area that were studying Jewish literature (such as Chaim Potok’s The Chosen) to engage them in conversation about Judaism. In addition, an article would come out in the local paper explaining to all in the community the different Jewish holidays as they came up. As Rabbi Krinsky told me in an interview, “I was quite aware of the necessity of that being broadcasted to the community at large, through the only organ in the community, the local paper.” The third and final way in which Rabbi Krinsky would engage the Jewish community in the broader non-Jewish community was through participation in the Waterville Interfaith Council. In the Interfaith Council, clergy of all different religious denominations would come together to create events for all faiths to attend in order to foster a mentality of mutual respect and understanding.

Sid Geller also mentioned that within the last couple of years the synagogue has been involved with helping the homeless through donations to the food bank. In addition, when Christians or Muslims had a holiday, Jews would take their shifts at the hospital or the local store to keep business running.

All this engagement, according to Rabbi Krinsky, was in an effort to make “the community at large know that we are the Jewish community and that we are not exclusive in any way; we’re open.” Rabbi Krinsky also stated that including non-Jews in their activities “is part of being Jewish in a community where you are a very distinct minority,” because “the [Jewish] community wanted to be recognized for its existence within the community at large.” Thus, all of

this outreach is to form mutual bonds with these people of interfaith in order to carve out a secure place for the Jewish community within the larger non-Jewish community.

Another key theme from this time period is the more active involvement of Colby students and faculty within Beth Israel. During the first couple of years of Rabbi Krinsky's term, a Colby professor by the name of Jay Labov served as a cantor for Beth Israel during High Holiday services for several years. Professor Labov also served as an advisor to Hillel, and later, a president of Beth Israel for a short time. During his time involved in Beth Israel, Jay actively engaged Colby kids in the life of the synagogue so as to, in Rabbi Krinsky's words "keep it moving, so to speak."

After Jay Labov left Colby, Rabbi Krinsky started to recruit Colby students to be service leaders or Hebrew School tutors. He also actively involved Colby students in community Seders. Peter Beckerman explains that, "if we heard about a Colby student who is here over the weekend, Yom Kippur or whatever, we certainly would invite them into our homes for a traditional dinner." In this way, Jewish students from Colby became more involved in the broader Waterville Jewish community. When asked why the emphasis on Colby participation, Rabbi Krinsky replied simply, "it seemed appropriate to have community participation in the service... we wanted participation." Colby College is included within the Waterville Jewish community, and as such, has a place at the Beth Israel Synagogue.

In terms of Jewish education, Rabbi Krinsky made it a point to provide schooling for anyone that wanted it (this included non-Jews as well). His goal was to assure newcomers to this area who sought Jewish education for their children would receive it from Beth Israel's system. In the Hebrew School system, Rabbi Krinsky sought to teach students about both ethnic and ritual traditions within Judaism. This simultaneously prepared them for their bar mitzvah and for

living a lifestyle of Judaism. Students would learn everything from the four questions to their Haftarah. Then, when a child is getting closer to their bar mitzvah, Rabbi Krinsky would work with them one on one to teach them everything that they needed to do in preparation for the ceremony.

Rabbi Krinsky also involved himself in teaching adult education classes for anyone in the Waterville community. Classes ranged from elementary Hebrew to a history of Judaism to an introduction to Judaism to how Jews see the bible. In order to make people aware of the importance of Hebrew in a Jewish community that had forgotten how to use Hebrew, Rabbi Krinsky would put the letters and pronunciations in the synagogue's bulletin.

Social life during the Rabbi Krinsky years remained relatively stable. Holiday parties were held at every opportunity and sometimes presidents organized potluck dinners before services on Friday night. However, making social connections was a key function of the synagogue, whether you came for religious or social reasons. In a Waterville that had lost all of the interconnected old-timers, the synagogue had become the way to connect to the Jews in the broader community around you. In a sense, much like it was originally for the immigrants coming from Lithuania, the synagogue served as a secure support system for Waterville's Jewish population.

Trends:

1. One notable trend throughout this history is a shift in how the congregation viewed Jewish identity. As Peter Beckerman implies, the closeness between him and the other community members is the connection of all being Jewish, and not of all being strictly Orthodox. In the beginning, congregation members stressed the importance of ritual within the synagogue,

whereas, in the later years, congregation members began to be more impressed with the ethnic identification of Judaism. Such a transformation is characteristic of the transitions undergone by small-town Jewish synagogues everywhere in the US over the course of the 20th century. With a general decline in religious practice due to Americanization, the American synagogue center began to draw its ideological justification from cultural pluralism,²¹ or more simply, began to accord to the changing lifestyles of its more Americanized constituents. Indeed, as Weissbach states in his book, “it was the nearly complete disappearance of Orthodox congregations from small communities by the middle of the 20th century that distinguished those settlements from larger Jewish centers, where at least something of an Orthodox presence survived.”²² Thus, what Peter Beckerman, Marion Hains, and Myrt Wolman mean when they refer to the closeness of the post-war years is the intimate connection established by the simple reasoning of being Jewish, and not of being strictly Orthodox. Indeed, it seems that these ethnic connections are everlasting, and transcend time and space. As Peter Beckerman told me in an interview, “Post-WWII was a time when you formed bonds with everybody which are still close today. We still are on our email lists and are scattered all over the place. I think as we’re getting older now, we’re looking to retain that connection... The email lists, I can tell from the connections we still keep making with each other, I can tell that they also yearn for those days no matter where they are.” Though the cohesiveness of the synagogue throughout the latter decades of the 20th century waned considerably, the synagogue remained a significant center in establishing ethnic connections between the Jews in Waterville. As historian Uriah Engelman states that

²¹ Karp, Abraham. “Overview” in Wertheimer, Jack. The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 p. 20

²² Weissbach, 2005, p. 197

the American synagogue serves “not only a religious but a social function. It [is] the *sine qua non* of Jewish existence.”²³

2. One other trend of note is the fact that, no matter what your individual belief or ritual, the synagogue served as a support network for Jews in Waterville. Gordon Wolman, when asked why he was still a part of the synagogue after all these years exclaimed to me, “Why? Because I’m a Jew!” As Sandy Maisel states, “I’m not a religious Jew by any means, but my parents were always members for much of my life of two synagogues... so I decided I should always join a synagogue too.” Membership with the synagogue was a given for all that were Jewish in the Greater Waterville area. This seems to mirror Hoberman’s conclusion that synagogues in the small-town United States served as their only outlet to Judaism. As one informant in his study states, “you had to belong [to the synagogue] if you were a small-town Jew; otherwise you felt really lost.”²⁴

At the same time, Beth Israel proved throughout its history to be a support network for Jews in the greater Waterville area. Sara Arnon, when asked if her mother met any close friends with people at the synagogue answered, “Oh, absolutely! It was a combination of the involvement in the synagogue... You are involved with the people you spend time with, either at church, at work, or raising your children.” Later, she would tell my colleague Becky Muller what she thought was the impetus behind her mother’s involvement: “I think that the synagogue for her was her Jewish identity... I guess for all of them, that synagogue was kind of their lightning rod. It kind of grounded them.” The notion that the synagogue unites the Jews in a certain area within the bonds of brotherhood is not a new concept, and yet for

²³ Engelman, Uriah Zevi. “The Jewish Synagogue in the United States” in *American Journal of Sociology* Volume 41.1 (1935) p. 46

²⁴ Hoberman, Michael. How Strange it Seems. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008 p. 171

everyone at Beth Israel, throughout its history, this has held true, whether it was driven by ritual or ethnic motives.

3. A third trend to note is the congregation's consistent emphasis on spreading Jewish education to the youth. This seems to mirror a wider trend of small-town Jewish communities in the United States, where communities depend on the ability to educate their children in order to continue over time. As Uriah Engleman stated in the mid-1930s, "the perpetuation of the Jewish synagogue in the US will depend on continued membership, which in turn will depend on the extent and quality of the religious instruction given to the Jewish children." The emphasis on continually providing Jewish education for their youth roots out of a wider desire to keep the community going and, like all Jews around the world, to keep the Jewish legacy passed on from your ancestors alive.
4. A fourth trend to note is the consistent desire to include non-Jews in the Waterville Jewish community. Rabbi Krinsky put it well in saying that "including non-Jews in our activities is part of being Jewish in a community where you are a very distinct minority." I saw this trend even in my study of communal and civic engagement in January. The Waterville Jewish community wanted to be recognized for its existence within the community at large, and, as such, continually sought to include non-Jews in the Beth Israel social life. At the same time, they made sure to not let this desire to fit in compromise their identity as Jews. This phenomenon seems to mirror broader trends in other small-town Jewish centers. In nearby Portland, Maine, Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh presented the honor of laying the synagogue's cornerstone to a prominent non-Jewish member of the Portland community in order to gain "recognition from the larger community."²⁵ At the same time, Shaarey Tphiloh

²⁵ Cohen, Michael. "Adapting Orthodoxy to American Life." in Judd, Richard W. et al Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present. Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 1995 p. 177

maintained their Orthodox traditions to this very day. Though the population base of Jews in Portland is much higher than in Waterville, the same remained true in small-town America. Indeed, as Peter Rose states in his study, “the secret of a Jew living in a small town is to assimilate [into the community he is a part of] as soon as possible, but always to remember that he is a Jew.”²⁶

5. A final trend that can be identified from the data collected is that, despite all odds and clashes along the years, the congregation and the synagogue still stands, and it has primarily done so because of the individual efforts over the past 100 years. As Marion Hains exclaimed, “They went through a lot of rabbis. Well they wouldn’t stay, they stayed a while, they had personal problems, and they’d leave, you had to hire some more. But the synagogue’s still here! It’s still here.” The prime reason for the continuation of the Waterville Jewish community has been due to the rise and fall of key individuals or groups during certain periods of its history, and though there were periods of relative quiet, the Waterville Jewish community remains active.

Conclusion

To sum up, the experience of the Beth Israel synagogue in Waterville, Maine, in many ways, mirrors the trends inherent in other small-town Jewish centers. A quote from Lee Shai Weissbach’s 2005 study on small-town Jewry in the United States seems to align down the center with Beth Israel’s history: “Jews in small towns tended to establish synagogues as soon as a minimal number of their coreligionists were present, and these institutions almost always became the essential foci of Jewish life.”²⁷ Many of the trends inherent in Beth Israel’s history seem to align directly with other trends in small-town Jewish centers. However, the history of

²⁶ Rose, Peter. Strangers in Their Midst. Merrick, NY: Richwood Publishing Company, 1977 p. 95

²⁷ Weissbach, 2005, p. 157

this synagogue has remained distinct for community members, as the experiences and memories that have come with the rich history of this congregation can never be mirrored anywhere else.

“The synagogue tried to be all things for all people,” Sandy Maisel told me in an interview.

Indeed, throughout its history, the synagogue, in its own way, served as a lightning rod for each of its members.

Unresolved/Uninvestigated Questions:

1. Why did the years immediately following World War II experience such a closeness while the periods between the 1970s and 1990s did not? What is the difference between these two time periods in terms of community cohesion?
2. Why has religious modernization and Americanization had this type of effect on the cohesiveness of Beth Israel Synagogue?
3. What are some external forces that have caused the synagogue to change in certain ways over time?
4. I found in my secondary research that the American synagogue provided a concrete code of behavior and values that guided and governed congregants' lifestyles.²⁸ Though I was able to uncover some data in this area, I was unable to really determine how Beth Israel's ritual traditions affected Jewish values in the area, if at all. Thus, one other unresolved question is this: to what degree did Beth Israel Synagogue shape the Jewish values or beliefs of its members?

²⁸ Gerard, Helen, 1986, p. 45

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