

**Lean on Me:
Community Building within Bangor's 1850s Jewish Population**

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Small communities are often forgotten about, or ignored, and as a result the community members depend solely on one another for support. People need to work together because this cooperation serves as their sole means of achieving success in the face of the challenges that small community life brings. This closeness seems to be an inherent aspect of small communities, and is something I found myself connecting to while studying the small German Jewish population of 1850s Bangor, Maine. I recognized the shared community building strategies utilized by both my own small Maine community and Bangor's 1850s Jewish community. These Jewish immigrants sought to create a long-term and cohesive community in Bangor, despite being a small sub-group within Bangor's larger, and predominantly American born, Christian population. In the end these Jewish immigrants decided that Bangor was not the right fit for them and left. Despite this fact, what the community accomplished during their brief stay in Bangor is an important reminder of the ways that members of small communities can work together to find religio-cultural, social, and economic success.

Before delving into the story of Bangor's first Jewish community, I need to address what made mid-19th century Bangor a worthwhile destination for these German Jewish immigrants. Bangor during the 1840s and 1850s was experiencing a period of economic success due to a lumber boom that had started in the 1830s (Hebert 461). Lumber and natural resources were integral to the economy, and they provided the city with an enormous amount of wealth during the first half of the 19th century (Allin and

Judd 263). The increased economic activity during this time period was coupled with immense population growth, and by 1850 Bangor was Maine's second largest city (Hornsby 37). Bangor also attracted woods workers and river drivers who came to the city to receive their annual pay, and then promptly spent their money in the city. Historical accounts state that every year these lumbermen provided an economic "harvest time" for business owners in Bangor, such as "the dealers in [cheap] ready-made clothing," which included many of Bangor's 1850s Jews (Allin and Judd 271). Bangor was a city that not only offered a place for Jews to start their own businesses, but also provided a population that purchased their goods and services. Bangor, in this sense, was typical of many other small urban centers in American that attracted Jewish merchants by "creat[ing] concentrations of consumers who needed the kinds of goods and services that budding Jewish entrepreneurs...could provide" (Weissbach 38).

Once the Jews arrived, though, they faced the challenge of isolation that came with being approximately 100 Jews amongst Bangor's population of 14,432 people (1850 U.S. Census). Bangor's Jews combatted the difficulties of being a minority group by using strategies similar to other small Jewish communities throughout the United States. Jewish immigrants "lived, worked, and socialized with one another," and "created institutions that embodied their sense of belonging while serving practical communal needs" (Diner, *Time for Gathering*, 86). As the first major Jewish population in Maine, Bangor's Jews employed these methods as a way to unite and create a support system for one another.

One means by which Bangor's Jews united was through their shared faith. For those Jews who wanted to maintain their Jewish identity, the synagogue was important

because “it was extremely difficult to maintain any kind of consistent Jewish identity without synagogue affiliation” (Weissbach 157). The importance of the synagogue was apparent in Bangor’s Jewish community as well. Many of the Jews who were in Bangor during the mid-19th century arrived in 1849 and immediately got to work on the creation of a synagogue. Details of the synagogue’s activities and proceedings were recorded in an official minute book. The first entry on July 20, 1849, lists the 13 men who initiated the first formal synagogue meeting of Ahawas Achim, “The Congregation of Brotherly Love” (Ahawas Achim 3-4). The first priority of the synagogue was to find a plot of land they found “suitable for burying [the] dead.” The purchase of a modest size piece of property one month later, in August, represented Ahawas Achim’s first major successful action (Ahawas Achim 5; Leffler 3). By September of 1849 the congregation had acquired a Torah scroll and hired Mr. Samuel H. Heinemann to serve as a cantor (Ahawas Achim 6; Leffler 3). Laws and by-laws for the synagogue were considered and written between November and December of 1849, and efforts to rent official meeting rooms were carried out in March of 1850. All these activities occurred before Ahawas Achim was officially recognized by the city of Bangor on May 4, 1850 (Ahawas Achim 2-3, Leffler 3).

These preliminary actions carried an especially strong message regarding the Bangor Jews’ intentions to establish a long-term and supportive community. These people were willing to donate the initial starting money out of their own pockets, totaling \$275.00 between the cantor, the Torah, and the burial ground. This was a substantial sum of money in the 1850s, especially for a group of people who had just begun to establish their businesses in the area. Financial dedication such as this serves as an early sign of the

commitment that Bangor's Jews had toward each other, and toward making a strong Jewish community in Bangor a reality. Ahawas Achim's founders truly valued the community in which they were investing. Members of Ahawas Achim even volunteered their own homes as meeting places for the synagogue, or offered to look after the different buildings the synagogue was housed in, as the location of the synagogue was never permanent (Leffler 7). Ahawas Achim's first meeting occurred in the home of one of the founding members, Haiman Phillip Spitz, and later on other members, such as Solomon Kurtz and Samuel Heinmann, took on the responsibility of finding and maintaining suitable meeting rooms (Ahawas Achim 3; Leffler 8). The strides that these men took to make sure that there was always a place for the synagogue to meet serves as further evidence of the Bangor Jews' commitment to reinforce communal ties and strengthen Bangor's Jewish community together.

The general rules of the synagogue further fostered this goal to create a close-knit Jewish community in Bangor. The guidelines for attending to members of the congregation who fell ill are especially poignant. If a member of the congregation fell sick it was the duty of the president, vice president, and trustees to visit the patient and let the rest of the congregation know how they were doing (Ahawas Achim 31). Synagogue rules also considered the dietary needs of the community and facilitated the process of finding kosher meat in Bangor. The cantor of the synagogue, who also served as the ritual slaughterer, was required to slaughter poultry, free of charge, at the request of any synagogue member (Ahawas Achim 6). The articles of the synagogue also mandated that, "should a member of the congregation demand religious aid," the cantor needed to be ready at any time to assist the member in need (Ahawas Achim 7). Rules such as these

illustrate that the Jews of 1850s Bangor, Maine, understood that the integral role they could play in each other's lives extended beyond the synagogue's walls. This theme of support beyond the context of formal synagogue meetings was present in many other synagogue and benevolent societies scattered throughout America. These institutions, similar to Ahawas Achim, also "saw themselves as serving more general religious needs as well," and sought "to assist the needy and the sick" (Weissbach 41).

Another set of examples within Ahawas Achim were the guidelines surrounding deaths and funerals of synagogue members. In the event that a member of the congregation died, the cost of the hearse, grave-digger, and the carriage used to transport the body were paid for with synagogue funds. Furthermore, all members of the synagogue were required to follow the funeral to the cemetery, and from there ten men were required to attend the funeral ceremony and burial (Ahawas Achim 17-18). Concern for the health of synagogue members and respect for members who passed away further highlight the ways in which Bangor's 1850s Jews fostered community values, and sent the message that no member of the community would have to face hardships alone. Each member of the synagogue was vital to the strength of the congregation, and deserving of the care, concern, and reverence of the entire Jewish community.

Along similar lines, every member needed to be an active participant in order for the Jewish community to thrive. Attendance policies for the synagogue were particularly strict, and reflect the desire for full commitment to the group. Synagogue members were met with a host of fines if they failed to comply with policy. For example, trustee members could be fined \$1.00 for missing a general synagogue meeting, and they could

be fined \$0.50 for missing a trustee meeting (Ahawas Achim 14). Furthermore, general members of the synagogue were expected to pay a \$0.25 fine for missing a meeting without a valid excuse (Ahawas Achim 16). These policies may seem overzealous, but instead I believe they reflect a group of people who wished to build an institution based on respect for one another and for the Jewish faith. Just having people show up is the central building block to any community.

Bangor's Jews also intended to establish further community enrichment programs, and notes from the Ahawas Achim minute book show that the synagogue contained cultural and education committees (Ahawas Achim 29). The education committee was of particular interest because of the committee's intention to create a school that taught German, English, and Hebrew (Ahawas Achim 40). The plan to create a school was first mentioned in September of 1852, but the school appeared to never come into existence. Meeting minutes from four years later show synagogue members still trying to come to an agreement regarding paying for a teacher (Ahawas Achim 50; Leffler 14-15). The desire to create a school, regardless of the actual outcome, does indicate a population that was looking to stay and educate the next generation in Bangor. Small Jewish communities in other parts of America utilized education similarly to "secure the survival of the Jewish people as a distinct identity within the American polity by fostering group feeling and identity," (Diner, *Time for Gathering*, 218). Bangor's Jews may have never been able to tap into the educational realm during their community building efforts, but their attempt further demonstrates the goal of creating an enduring Jewish community.

The support network and community building between Bangor's Jews could be found within the socioeconomic sphere as well. Such support systems included the

personal and familial connections that existed between Jewish storeowners. The interconnectedness amongst Bangor's Jewish business community reflects a larger trend throughout small Jewish communities in the United States. Economics within small communities "could not be separated from family life, and the bonds of kinship and matrimony facilitated it" (Diner, *Time for Gathering*, 60-61). For example, Haiman Philip Spitz and his brother Peter Spitz had been business partners for years in various places throughout the United States. When Haiman moved to Bangor in 1849 and opened a clothing store, his brother Peter followed suit soon after, arriving in Bangor in 1850 (Spitz 7-8; Leffler 21; Bangor, Maine, City Directory, 1855, p. 94) Haiman's presence in the city was most likely a major influence on his brother Peter's decision to come to Bangor. Thus, their relationship added both to the number of Jews present in Bangor, as well as the number of Jewish businesses.

The relationship between Jewish storeowners and the Jewish peddlers (similar to salesmen) and clerks of Bangor also fostered a more close-knit community. Peter Spitz had three peddlers listed as members of his household and similarly Isaac Bach, another storeowner, had a clerk by the name of M. Harris living in his home (1850 Census, Bangor, Maine, pp. 58, 112). The three peddlers, as well as M. Harris the clerk, most likely sold goods or worked in Spitz and Bach's respective businesses. This type of exchange was true regarding the relationship between many Jewish merchants and peddlers. Even for merchants and peddlers who were not directly related, "Jewishness was a sufficient link" (Diner, *Roads Taken*, 57). Regardless of whether they were family, Bangor's Jews connected via their shared Jewish identities and used that

interconnectedness to lay the foundation for a strong economic network, while simultaneously assisting one another in achieving financial success.

A majority of the Jews who came to Bangor during this time period carved out their own economic niche as dry goods store owners. Dry goods refer to things such as fabric, thread, and clothing. The R.G. Dun credit reporting company's records on Jewish business owners provides further evidence of community support systems. These records are composed of the notes of different credit reporters who would go out and visit different businesses and jot down their observations and opinions about how the business was doing. According to the records, these support systems included Jews lending money to one another, rather than relying on non-Jewish lenders. For example, Peter Spitz, one of the founding members of Ahawas Achim, mortgaged part of his stock to a Jewish woman, Hannah Silber, and her son who also owned a business in Bangor (R.G. Dun & Co. Credit Report Volumes, Maine, 22:71). Another member of Ahawas Achim, Jacob Gunst, allowed his own business to suffer in an attempt to help other Jews who had failing businesses (22:123). The efforts these business owners undertook to help each other and their employees relate back to the overarching goal of establishing a strong community. Strengthening the economic standing of everyone within Bangor's Jewish community was integral to ensuring any future success.

Members of Bangor's Jewish community also provided financial and economic support for one another as a means of combatting the damaging and alienating stereotypes some of Bangor's non-Jews assumed about them. These stereotypes served to dismiss both their intelligence and their business competency. Credit reporters often referred disparagingly to "the untrustworthiness of Jews," as well as "to the natural

tendency of Jews to default on loans” (Diner *Time for Gathering*, 77). Bangor's 19th-century Jewish business owners were also victims of such negative references. An R.G. Dun credit reporter made a note “Can't tell much about foreigners,” after visiting Peter Spitz (R.G. Dun & Co. Credit Report Volumes, Maine, 22:71). Another reporter dismissed Jewish business owner, Mark Levy, as a “German Jew... one of those of whom we know nothing of and can learn nothing reliable” (22:128). Economic prejudices such as this made the practice of lending money to one another as much a means of economic survival for 19th-century Jews in Bangor as it was a means of community building. The camaraderie that came from knowing that they were the only people who would fully respect and support each other further substantiated the formation of a close-knit Jewish community.

The story of the efforts put forth to build community amongst Bangor's 1850s Jewish immigrants cannot be concluded without mentioning their ultimate departure from Maine. Despite all the groundwork they laid, historians believe that all of the Jewish population who came at the beginning of the 1850s had moved on to different parts of the country before 1860. The R.G. Dun records reveal that many of the Jewish storeowners closed up their businesses in and around 1857. The events that triggered this mass exodus are unclear, but what is clear is that the decision to leave appeared to be collective. The notes from the Ahawas Achim minute book for Bangor's 1850s Jewish immigrants abruptly end in November of 1856 and do not pick back up until 1889, following a new wave of Jewish immigration to Bangor. The final minutes from the 1850s group contained no mention of any trouble within the community or synagogue and even include the induction of two new members (Ahawas Achim 50). This sudden end

suggests that the entire, or nearly the entire, community came to the agreement that, despite their dedication to each other Bangor was not the right place for their community. Some of Bangor's 1850s Jews, like many other Jews in small communities, may have left "because small towns were too insular to provide unlimited economic and cultural opportunities" (Weissbach 71). Other Jews may have left Bangor due to a larger financial crisis that struck the city in the later 1850s. For example, Haiman Philip Spitz chose to leave Bangor after a large decline in the lumber industry resulted in a subsequent lack of lumbermen who could purchase clothing from his store (Spitz 22).

Regardless of why Bangor's Jews left, the decision to leave does not reflect poorly on the many strategies within the religio-cultural and socioeconomic spheres that these Jews utilized to make their community work. Bangor's Jewish community reached out and truly connected and played an active role in one another's lives in the face of isolation and minority status. Bangor's Jews realized that they would provide each other greater strength together than they could generate for themselves alone. Bangor's 1850s Jewish immigrants serve as a reminder of the power that existed and still remains within small communities to support each other and create their own success.

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