

# *As Jewish Maine Goes, So Goes American Jewry: A Plea for Portland's Jewish History*

by Abraham J. Peck

The American Jewish community is now half way through the observance of its 350th anniversary. One of the major aims of the national birthday party is to create a greater interest in the history of local Jewish life.

One of the important facts that American Jewish historians have learned by studying their history "from the ground up" is that the history of New York Jewish life does not define the American Jewish experience. Indeed, American Jewish life has been a rich cornucopia of small and large communities, each with a distinctive history that needs to be researched, published and understood.

Yet within the long sweep of American Jewish history, and despite the important differences that emerged from the geographic, religious, and social backgrounds of the various immigrant Jewish communities, several overarching themes emerge that characterize these three and one half centuries of Jewish life in the United States:

- A belief in the promise of America
- Faith in the pluralistic nature of America
- A quest for economic and professional success
- A commitment to the survival of the Jewish community.

But the sense of unwavering continuity of these themes over three and one half centuries has been challenged by a set of ongoing tensions that have highlighted and exacerbated the basic values that distinguish a Jewish and an American identity:

- Assimilation versus the continuity of Jewish identity
- Tradition versus religious change and reform
- Unity versus diversity
- Majority rule-minority rights (the question of a "Christian America")
- The historical Jewish experience versus the notion of American exceptionalism  
(Is America different for the Jews?)

On the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Benjamin Band's, z"l, groundbreaking study of Portland Jewish life: "Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development"(1955), it is time for Portland to examine its own history in light of the themes and challenges mentioned above, themes and challenges that were only beginning to emerge as legitimate areas of research in the mid 1950s.

Benjamin Band understood Maine and Portland's Jewish communities to have a dark cloud hanging over them. In his book he described the stigma thusly: "The growth of the Jewish Community of Portland...has been recorded inadequately by Jewish historians. The reason for this is [that] Maine was considered as being beyond the periphery of the general history of American Jewry..."

I do not believe that to be true. "Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development" was published in response to the call of major American Jewish historians who, in 1954, the 300th anniversary of Jewish settlement in America, sought to shape American Jewish history as a discipline worth being a part of the broader field of American history. Benjamin Band's history was an extraordinary effort to chronicle nearly a century of Jewish life in Portland. But it suffered from the limited time that Benjamin Band was allowed to research and write. It suffered from the fact that Benjamin Band, a gifted linguist and teacher, had to share his precious research and writing hours with the grading of



"Reading from the Torah at the Old Newbury Street Synagogue," counter-clockwise: Harry Mack, Jacob Popkin, Harry Judelshon, the reader, Harry Modes, Paul Berman, and Louis Seavey.

student examinations. It suffered from the inability to answer the call for a "new approach to the interpretation of American Jewish history," one in which "the first step to improve the quality of American Jewish historical writing is to regain the awareness that the Jewish experience in America should be studied as part of American history." The same, I would argue, applies to the history of Portland Jewry and Portland's history.

Our Portland Jewish community is fortunate that it has young, exceptionally gifted students of its history who are beginning to create a new Portland Jewish history. Two of them, Julia Lipez and Michael Cohen, have already written first rate studies of Portland Jewry's secular institutions and of its religious history. It is our hope that some of their findings will appear in the pages of The Voice.

I have entitled this essay, "As Maine Goes, So Goes American Jewry." I do not believe I am wrong. How we write the Jewish history of our community and our state will in the end reflect on our greater understanding of the American Jewish experience.

As I have mentioned, it is by now a well-understood fact that the history of New York City Jewish life is a part of but by no means the full extent of how we are to understand that experience. The story of Portland and of Maine Jewry may resemble the history of other Jewish experiences in America but it may also differ enough to add a new wrinkle to the interpretation.

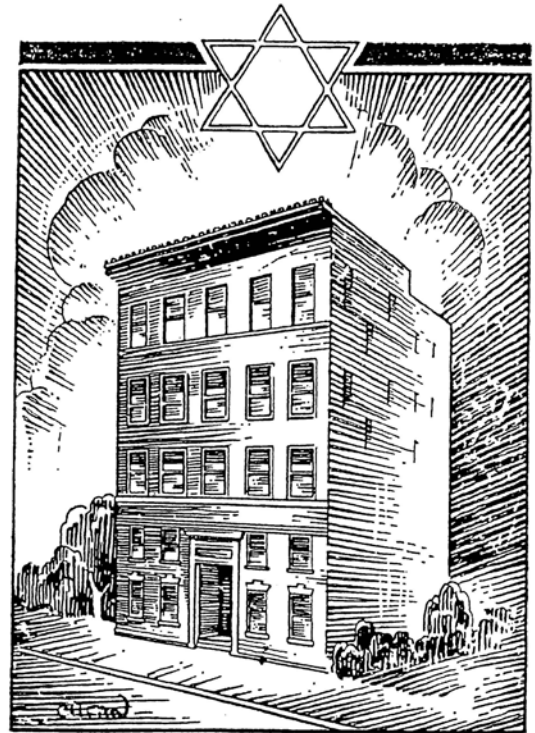
**But we will never know until we begin to collect the history of both. That is where you, who are reading this article, come in. We need materials of any kind that reflect the history of Portland's Jewish family life, business life and professional life, religious life, intellectual life, communal life, German Jewish refugees and Holocaust survivors, women, and numerous other categories that will begin to build those histories.**

Just as Benjamin Band sought to answer the call for a new direction in the writing of American Jewish history in 1954-55, so, too, must we answer the call of those American Jewish historians in 2004-2005, who ask us to formulate new questions and thereby obtain new answers about the American Jewish experience over the past 350 years.

Fortunately, there now exists an institution that is dedicated to the collection and preservation of the Portland and Maine Jewish historical experiences. The Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine is a part of the University of Southern Maine's commitment to diversity within a democratic culture. The Center is devoted to the documentation, study, and promotion of diversity, human rights, and civil rights in Maine.

The Judaica Collection is a constituent part of the Sampson Center. It supports research, educational and public programs and seeks to extend its resources to scholars, students, and the general public about the history of Jewish life in Portland and in Maine.

The Sampson Center contains a state of the art archival facility that will extend the life of artifacts and other forms of historical documentation. Materials donated to the Judaica Collection of the Sampson Center will be acknowledged with a formal donor agreement.



The old Portland Jewish Community Center on Cumberland Avenue in Portland.