

March 2015/5774

Congregation Etz Chaim

Shtetl: a small Jewish town or village formerly found in Eastern Europe (from Merriam-Webster.com/dictionary)



Isaac Bashevis Singer from Google images

Teen Class Field Trip

by Jackson & Rob Pierce

Inside this issue:

Hanukkah Community Event	2
Occasion Donations 2014 Chanukah Party	3
Recommended Reading	4
Sarah's Part of the Story	5-6
What's New on EtzChaim.org ? Note from the Board Go Green, Library	7
What does Faith have to do with Judaism?	8
2015 Purim Party Collage	9
Historic Temple Photo	10
2015 Passover Collage	11
Board of Directors. Shabbat Services .Community Services	12
Our Synagogue .Synagogue Contacts	13

The teen class took a field trip to the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts on Sunday, December 7th. We piled into a van at 7:30 in the morning, watched and sang to Fiddler on the Roof, and got there just in time for our 11:00 tour. The Center is on the campus of Hampshire College, and the architecture of the building made us think of an old world shtetl. Once inside, we checked out the gift shop while we waited for Rob to check us in.

Our tour leader was a really cool 23 year old, who was becoming an expert in Yiddish. She was super knowledgeable and enthusiastic, and shared some really great stories. The Center had a picture wall of Isaac Bashevis Singer and she was pretty impressed we knew who he was! (We've read "Gimple the Fool" this year, plus we've seen a video about Singer.)

We went into a room where there were running films of different famous Yiddish speaking actors and actresses. We saw boxes of Yiddish books that people from around the world continue to send to the book center to add to their collec-

tion. We also got to see a lithograph and other older equipment that showed how newspapers were printed up until the 1970's. We explored the stacks, looking for the oldest title and got to go into the "vault" where the oldest and most protected books were.

The Yiddish Book Center started in 1980 when the founder, Aaron Lansky, had collected so many Yiddish books that he had to figure out what to do with them all. (He wrote a book about his experience, called "Outwitting History.") They opened the Book Center in 2009 and allow visitors to use the books. You can buy them, take classes, and they have a web site with a section that includes lots of recordings by people who tell their stories that connect to Yiddish history and culture.

It is important to save Yiddish books, so the memory of our Eastern European Jewish culture and way of life can be appreciated by future generations.

Hanukkah Community Event

by Denise Hammond

I am not usually a writer, but after my day today, I felt inspired to share my experience which reminded me of one of the reasons we are part of this Jewish Community! I have been a member, in some fashion, of this congregation since my 12 year old was born. After the birth of the next, and the next....and the next child, I realized we were in this for the long haul, as I was dedicated to raising my children in their Jewish faith. The most important piece to me was that my children feel a sense of Jewish community, and have a place they can feel safe exploring what being Jewish means to them. Today, I realized it is working! Finding a Jewish community for kids in Maine has proved harder than I anticipated. Of course, there are Jews everywhere; we just don't always come together very easily, with our busy lives. We have thankfully been making an effort to come to temple on a weekly and monthly basis and I feel although small, it is a community nonetheless.

Today our community gathered in Alfred at the York County Homeless Shelter to help organize the Thanksgiving Day food boxes for the York County population that was in need of a Thanksgiving dinner. This experience proved to be AWESOME, in all sense of the word.

During Hanukkah, for the past 5 years, my family has done a family project of giving back to the community. This year, we were looking for something to help the homeless and hungry. Through researching how to do this, the homeless shelter popped up. Instantly, I thought of inviting our temple friends, the Sunday School/Hebrew School kids and their parents, to join us. Five families gathered between 12-3:00 to help clean, organize, pack, sweep, break down, play and eat together at the pantry and we had a great time! Watching my 5 year old fill each box with bread with his "best friend", a sophomore in high school, filled me with a sense of community I was hoping for. To see parents marching around rows and rows of food with their little ones, filling boxes and laughing, was just such a great way to spend the afternoon. To know that your kids can be part of a group with all ages, backgrounds and genders of other kids, feels like a great spiritual fulfillment! There are so many ways we can be better, do MORE, but today, I realized, maybe what we do is just enough, and that is fine.

Thank you for letting me share my family ...and a little bit of me, with you!



Occasion Donations

by Julie Campisi

A wonderful way to honor the memory of a loved one or commemorate a special occasion is to make a donation to Congregation Etz Chaim. Donations can be made in memory, in honor, in celebration, or to recognize a person or event. When you make a donation, an acknowledgement is sent to the family or person being honored.

In future newsletters, donations of this type will be listed. The amount of the donation will not be published, just that the donation was received, the occasion and who made the donation. For example, *The Campisi Family made a donation commemorating Barry Marcus' 80th Birthday.*

Of course, you can specify your donation not be included in the newsletter or you can remain anonymous.

If you have any questions, please contact a board member or e-mail Julie at bedlam3@outlook.com.

The 2014 Chanukah Party

December's Chanukah party was very successful, with over 100 people in attendance. It's always a pleasure to have the Klezmer band perform and encourage both children and adults to get up and dance. The children enjoyed Dreidel games.

Todah Rabahs go out to: Chuck Neureuther, Doug, Cindy & Dylan Adamsky, Denise Hammond & Ethan Davis for turning out awesome potato latkes and to David & Beth Strassler, Julie Campisi, Leah Macomber, Sue Pierce & Jo Johnson for their help in making the party a success, and to the Teen class for their help in cleaning up. Much appreciated!

Linda Federman and Barbara Seminsky

Recommended Reading

by Cynthia Kurtz

Do you like mysteries? Suspense? Family histories? The history of modern Jews? History in general? If so, then I think you will like "Three Minutes in Poland: Discovering a Lost World in a 1938 Family Film" by Glenn Kurtz, chosen by NPR, The New Yorker, and the Boston Globe as one of the best books of 2014.

In the book, the author brings to life a small shtetl in Poland, the birthplace of his grandfather, who subsequently emigrated to America. The shtetl is briefly captured on film only months before the onslaught of the holocaust. Of a vibrant pre-war Jewish population of 3,000, fewer than 100 would subsequently survive the war.

Glenn Kurtz unexpectedly discovered an old, deteriorating family film that had been shot by his grandfather while visiting pre-war Poland in 1938. It includes brief footage of a crowd of Jewish adults and children in a typical Polish village: what turned out to be a rare surviving glimpse into a world that soon would be almost totally wiped out. Kurtz recognized the value of the film and donated it to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and through their joint efforts the film was restored and made available on their website.

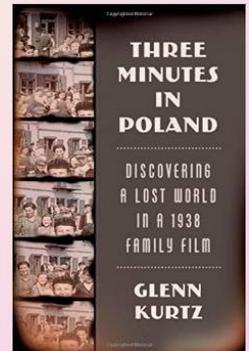
The story really takes off from there, when a young woman sees the film and recognizes her grandfather, now a resident of Florida, as a young boy. He appears briefly as a grinning spectator hamming it up for the camera. She had never seen her grandfather as a young man before, because, as a survivor of the Holocaust, he had lost everything during his escape, and had not retained any photos. This fortunate, serendipitous event begins a two-year adventure whereby the author meticulously and painstakingly identifies more survivors from the town, leading to revealing discoveries and profound relationships, resulting in a well-crafted portrait of a town and community that was lost forever.

It is a poignant tale, reconstructing the moment just before the shadow fell on Europe, and, as NPR eloquently notes, "reminds us that the horror wasn't just the violence itself, but the loss of a vibrant, joyful, bustling life."

Of course, for me, there is an extra, personal element to the story. The author, Glenn Kurtz, is my brother-in-law. The family film discovered and explored in the book was filmed by David Kurtz, my son David's great-grandfather (and namesake). Still, others will surely enjoy and appreciate the story. Glenn succeeds with great compassion and humanity in bringing the small town and its inhabitants to life. He evidences a deep desire to preserve the memory of the Jewish community despite, or perhaps because of, its harrowing and violent demise.

In the end, this is a story of survival of the human spirit. It celebrates the strength of community and shared values, while at the same time being a poignant reminder of its fragility.

Three Minutes in Poland
by Glenn Kurtz



She had never seen her grandfather as a young man before, because, as a survivor of the Holocaust, he had lost everything during his escape, and **had not retained any photos.**

Sarah's Part of the Story

By Beth Strassler

Last summer, I took an intensive course on the Akedah, the time when Abraham took his son, Isaac, up to the top of Mount Moriah. He believed he was being asked by God (Hashem) to offer his son as a sacrifice.

I have long wondered where Sarah, Isaac's mother and Abraham's wife, was during this ordeal. It was important for me to find her voice in this story. Here is my "modern midrash":

Yes, I laughed when the Holy One, blessed be He, announced that I would conceive a child in my old age with my beloved husband, who is even older.

I was suddenly filled with feelings of warmth and love. I could feel our baby in my arms, suckling at my breast, playing at my feet, chasing after his father. I could imagine him as a boy playing in the fields, tending the sheep, growing into a young man. And, yes, I laughed. I laughed from the pure joy that bubbled up from inside of me.

When Hashem took my husband aside and asked him why I laughed, I was embarrassed. What's more, I was ashamed that I may have embarrassed Him. So, I lied. I said "I didn't laugh (in that way)." But His warm, gentle voice teased me in a tone that told me that He understood and He addressed me saying, "Yees, you did-d-d-..." We both smiled.

My husband has always been a handsome man, whose eyes twinkle like the stars in the sky. From the moment I first saw him, I knew that the favor of Hashem was with him. He told me things that put words to many of the feelings I had hidden from others. I always felt like I was different from other people, but I could not articulate how or why. But Abraham and I spoke the same language, the language of the love of Hashem. We built a home together and I know that we have always loved each other as only a man and a woman who are joined together by Hashem's love are able.

My husband and I have lived long lives together. He endured many trials from Hashem. I have endured my own trials, but their details were never fully recorded. I think that you know of them, though.

You can imagine what it was like to leave our homeland and travel into unknown territory as a young couple. I left my family and my sisters to go to the land of Canaan with my husband, his father and his cousin. At that time, I knew that Hashem had communicated with my husband and told him that our journey was blessed.

You also may ask: How did I endure my time with Pharaoh? I posed as my husband's sister for the sake of his safety and so that it may go well with him. Meanwhile, I lived as Pharaoh's concubine in his palace. He treated me as a queen and I dressed in fine clothes, ate fine fruits and waited for the time I would re-join my husband. Meanwhile, I could feel that I was not alone because Hashem was with me.

I knew Hashem was not happy with this "sister" plan, but He resisted interfering with the ways of men and respected my husband's decision. However, as soon as He saw that my husband had accomplished his mission, He struck down Pharaoh's household with great plagues. Pharaoh understood immediately and returned me to Abraham, ordering us to leave his lands so that things may go well again.

My husband has always been a handsome man, whose eyes twinkle like the stars in the sky. From the moment I first saw him, I knew that the favor of Hashem was with him.

Sarah's Part of the Story, cont.

By *Beth Strassler*

There were more wanderings and more trials, and many years passed. My husband wondered how his covenant with Hashem would be fulfilled, but we never felt abandoned by Hashem. I know that my husband talked with Him more than once. Each time, he felt re-assured.

And then, the day came when I laughed. My husband extended our hospitality to three strangers traveling through our land. Before they were on their way again, they announced that I would conceive a child in my old age with my beloved husband, who is even older. And I have explained to you why I laughed.

Today our son is thirty and seven years of age. He is a sturdy, thoughtful and generous young man, full of curiosity. His eyes twinkle like the stars of the sky and I know that the favor of Hashem is with him. But a dream from last night is still with me this morning. Not its images, but the feelings that it stirred deep within me. Hashem came to me and, as it has happened in the past, He left me with feelings I do not understand. I know He meant to reassure me, but I do not know why. But He is here with me this morning and His Presence is soothing and comforting.

As I look out of the window of my room, I see my husband, our son and two of our best servants preparing for a journey. They have large sacks of provisions and plenty of water. They have the wood and knife, and must have the fire, so I know they are going to make a sacrifice to the Lord and will be gone for several days. My husband is saddling his ass himself, which I have seen him do before when he is deeply troubled. This is the part of the picture that I do not understand.

The little entourage has been gone for three days. Today, I stand at the same window and search in the direction to which they journeyed. I feel the Lord's presence and I am not afraid, but I do not understand why I feel so strangely.

I open the window and feel the cool morning air. I breathe deeply and shade my eyes from the sun as I search into the distance. There is suddenly a strong gust of wind and a blinding flash on the horizon. Within minutes, I see a flock of birds flying from this direction toward me. Soon, I hear them, chattering among themselves. A few more minutes bring them circling in front of my window, as if assuring me that all is right with God's world. They circle excitedly before me and then fly back from whence they came.

The servants return home days later. I rush to meet them and inquire of my husband and son. They reassure me that they are safe, but Abraham has gone to Beer Sheva for awhile. Our son has gone his own way, as we knew he must one of these days.

I understand that my husband is troubled and has chosen to live by himself right now. This is not the first time. Somehow, I also know that he has aged more than the sum of the days of his journey and that the twinkle is gone from his eyes.....

What's New @ etzchaimme.org?!

By Leah Macomber



We recently launched our new website! Bright colors, updated information, an integrated calendar, links to photo albums, videos and to our Facebook page. We've launched a new series called The Member Spotlight, where you can read about members in our community, and have added some Recipes Submitted by Members (in the Members section.) The current Member Spotlight is Julie Campisi, and she started our recipe collection with some Passover favorites. Check it out!

Coming next to the website will be a new blog by our very own cantor-in-training, Beth Strassler.

Special thanks to Joe Strassler for working with the Etz Chaim Board of Directors to design and implement the new site!

Call to Action!!! Would you like to be featured "in the spotlight" or share your recipes on the website? Do you have some feedback about the website, photo album, or Facebook page? Would you like to help keep our social media presence lively and relevant? If so, please contact me.

Leah Macomber, ellemaco@yahoo.com.

A Note from the Board

President David Strassler and the entire Board of Congregation Etz Chaim wish you and your family a Happy Passover.

\$

You could save trees & money by receiving your newsletter & all Jewish community announcements electronically. Just write to our mail address & ask to

"Go Green".

\$

**Samuel Osher Memorial Library
at Congregation Etz Chaim**

**Jewish Books, Music & Movies
for the
York County Community**

To donate books call: 967-5833

What Does Faith Have to Do With Judaism?

by David Strassler

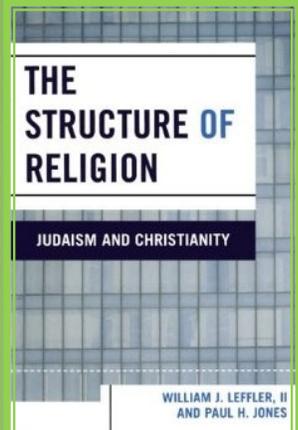
A few years ago, I was invited by a Protestant minister to be on a panel of people representing a variety of religions. I agreed to represent the Jewish perspective.

The topic was: What does faith mean in your religion? As the day of the presentation got closer, I got more and more anxious. It seemed like a simple question, but to me there was no clear answer. I decided to do some research to see what some of the great Jewish thinkers thought about “faith”. I found next to nothing.

Several months ago, I sat next to retired Rabbi Bill Leffler at one of our community pot lucks, and told him this story. His response was reassuring: That faith is not a Jewish concept, but very much a Christian concept. As a matter of fact, Bill had written a book about this very issue, called The Structure of Religion: Judaism and Christianity. He has taught classes on this topic for about 25 years.

Bill has agreed to teach a course called: “Comparison of Judaism and Christianity Like You Never Heard Before”.

There are **four sessions of this course**, scheduled on Sundays from 4:00-5:00 pm: 4/19, 4/26, 5/3 and 5/10 at Congregation Etz Chaim. Tuition will be \$20.



2015 Purim Party





Do you know anything about this photo? Let us know if you do.

Passover Seder 2015



Visit our website:
<http://etzchaimme.org>

Shabbat Services

*Join us for Shabbat Services:
Every 1st and 3rd Saturday of the month,
beginning at 9:30 am
(No services on April 4)*

Board of Directors at Congregation Etz Chaim

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Leah Macomber
Pamela Small Oliver
Sue & Michael Rubin
Jack Schraeter
Beth & David Strassler

York County (YC) Jewish Community

This newsletter is published three to four times each year. It is intended to announce and report on Jewish community events in York County, and especially at Congregation Etz Chaim in Biddeford. It offers local perspectives on historical and contemporary aspects of Jewish life.

Adrienne Levy, Editor & Layout Design Consultant:
Levy family & Board members
mail@etzchaimme.org

If we have your email address, you have been removed from the snail mailing list.
If you wish to continue to receive a paper newsletter, just write/email us.

Our Synagogue

Our community programs are available to all members of the York County Jewish Community and are driven by the following mission statement:

“We promote Jewish cultural, social, educational and religious activities in southern Maine. Our primary goal is to make available a range of activities that facilitate the expression of what each individual finds valuable in the Jewish experience.

We attempt to accommodate individuals along the entire spectrum of Jewish practice and theology. We value and support the existence of a local formal congregation, but view our community programs as open to all interested people, regardless of whether or to what congregation they may be formally affiliated.”

Synagogue Contacts

Please mail Membership dues to:

*PO Box 905,
Kennebunk, ME 04043*

**Memorial Plaques, Prayer books,
Etz Chaim books of Torah:
Hebrew School/Services:
Shabbat Potlucks:
Library
Sunday School:**

David Strassler:

Beth & David Strassler:

Linda Federman:

Beth Strassler

Denise Hammond:

967-5833

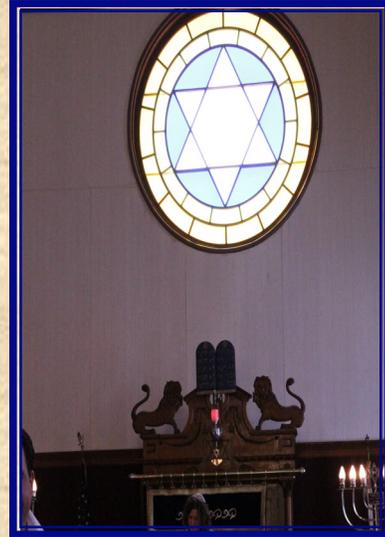
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York County Jewish Community News



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