



CONGREGATION ETZ CHAIM

BIDDEFORD, MAINE

Congregation Etz Chaim

York County Jewish Community News

www.etzchaimme.org

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Rosh Hashanah Services

Mon., Sept. 22: Evening Service, 6:30 p.m.

Tues., Sept. 23: Service, 9 a.m.–12 p.m. (Tashlich to follow at Saco River)

Wed., Sept. 24: Service, 9 a.m.– 12 p.m.

Tashlich at Saco River to follow, approximately 12:30 p.m.

Yom Kippur Services

Wed., Oct. 1: Kol Nidre Service, 6:15 p.m.

Thurs., Oct. 2: Service, Morning Service, 9 a.m.–12:30 p.m. (Yizkor Service begins at 11 a.m.)

Afternoon Service, 4:30–6:30 p.m.

Break Fast at conclusion

If you plan to participate remotely and would like to borrow a prayer book, please indicate this need when you register.

Cantor's Corner: Facing the Music

Cantor Beth Strassler

As I sit in front of my laptop during a beautiful (and not too hot) day at the beginning of August, I am struggling to figure out what to write. It is not the first time I have found myself “tongue tied” at this time of year. After all, Rosh Hashanah is a big subject.

It seems so much easier to sit here in the warm sun with a cool breeze and believe that the Holy Days are very, very far away in the future. After all, I feel content today, so why stir up anything until I have to in the middle of September when the Holy Days are listed on the calendar?

During Rosh Hashanah, we have the opportunity to pause everyday life to refocus, reflect, and reassess our deeds of the past year. We step back from our daily routines of merely seeing sights and hearing sounds. We leave our work for a few days, change our life scenery to include the synagogue, its music, the river, our potential for healing, and surround ourselves with family and our synagogue community. In this environment, we are encouraged to find options for changing and rewriting our Life Song that we may not realize so quickly as we scurry around with everyday life.

I recently read a small but powerful essay by Rabbi Shefa Gold. In it, she talks about the “Song of My Life,” and the concept resonates with me. I tend to look at the world as musical — big surprise, I know.

In My Life Song, I can hear both dissonance and harmony. There is discord between my intentions and my actual deeds. At times the tempo is too fast to keep up with or too slow to inspire. When there is too much noise, the volume is turned up, and I don't want to listen; but sometimes, the volume is just right for hearing whatever I need to hear. Sometimes the pitch is in a key too uncomfortable for singing, but, sometimes, the pitch is just right, and then my voice soars. Is My Life Song taking me where I want to go?

When we celebrate the New Year of the World, we also recognize that a new year of our life is imminent and ripe for making changes. We hear special High Holy Day synagogue music only during the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The music includes prayers exclusive to the 10 days and prayers whose words are more familiar but are sung in the unique High Holiday melodies (i.e. The Amidah prayer). They all contribute to the story of the season: We try to be good, we are not good; we identify what we want to do differently and try to do better in the coming year.

We stand together to pray for the other members of our community family. We raise our voices in prayer or listen carefully to take in the spirit of the prayers. We stand together in prayer to support one another because it is difficult to look at our own shortcomings as we face the music of our one-of-a-kind Life Song.

THEN, we add the shofar to the music of the synagogue. Whereas music adds depths to my prayers, I feel that the blowing of the shofar touches my soul.

It seems to me that the scene is set, and the atmosphere optimal for each of us to be able to "Return again to the essence of ourselves, Return again to the land of our souls."

May the coming year be full of good health, peace, love, and joy for you and your loved ones.

See you soon!!
Beth



שנה טובה ומתוקה

Return again, Return again.
Wake up to the sounds of shofar
Come back to who you are.
Come back to why you're here.
Come back and begin again
Again and begin again.
Return again, Return again.
Wake up to the sounds of shofar.

Who Knows Five?

David Strassler

"Who knows five? I know five. Five are the books of the Torah."
From the English version of "Echad Mi Yodea" ("Who Knows One?")

What started out as wishes became more meaningful than we could have imagined. It all came to fruition on May 10, 2025. Lowy Fairfield became a bat mitzvah, and our shul gained a new Torah.

Several months prior to this date, the Rosen Family wanted to make a sizable donation to our shul and asked what we needed. After I gave them a list of possibilities, they decided to donate a new Torah to our community. This was purchased from Israel Book Shop in Brookline, which received this Torah 10 years ago from a synagogue in Detroit that closed its doors.

At this special service, the Torah was passed down through the generations: from Walter and Sandra Rosen to Lowy's mother, Gaby Grekin, and finally to Lowy. Following this, Lowy beautifully chanted her Torah portion from our new Torah.

Sandra, representing her family, shared the following at this presentation:

We are honored to present this Torah to Congregation Etz Chaim in memory of our loved ones who are no longer with us. Walter's family came to Maine from Europe in the late 1800s. His parents, Ben and Charlotte Rosen, and family lived in Bangor where he was born. My parents, Joseph and Rica Penn, were Holocaust survivors who lost their families during the war — parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters. We know they would be so proud of us dedicating this Torah to our congregation. L'dor Va-Dor.

Afterwards, Toni Ayres Grekin, mother of Gaby Grekin and grandmother of Lowy Fairfield, shared the following: "The unexpected power of knowing that Lowy's bat mitzvah becomes the first for the new Torah just heightened the experience for those of us who fully appreciated its significance. Steve's grandfather (Lowy's great, great grandfather) was a sofer, Torah scribe. Ostensibly [he was] a butcher in Brooklyn, after he arrived from Russia. But it was Grandma Ida who ran the shop while he sat and did his calligraphic magic!"

But the story goes back to 2006, or even 1982.

When our family first arrived at Congregation Etz Chaim for the High Holidays in 1982, I was impressed that its Aron HaKodesh, holy ark, was filled with five Torahs.

Why five? I used to ask that same question to my Hebrew school students. The most common answer? "There are five books in the Torah," they'd say — just like in the Passover song "Who Knows One?" "Who knows five? I know five. Five are the books in the Torah." I would take that opportunity to teach them that each scroll contains all five books — so the number of scrolls was not based on the number of books.

So why do we have five Torahs? I don't know for sure, but I would guess that since the synagogue was established in 1906, members donated Torahs over time in order to support the community and honor loved ones. And, five Torahs fit so nicely in our Aron Hakodesh.

Usually, only one Torah is used during a service. Occasionally, two Torahs are used for a holiday, such as during the High Holidays. Using two scrolls allows each portion to be read without having to roll back and forth, which would be time-consuming. And once a year, we even use three Torah scrolls — on Simchat Torah.

In 2006, Congregation Etz Chaim had all five Torahs evaluated by a sofer, to verify that they were kosher and to register them in case they were ever stolen. What would make one of our Torahs not kosher? Over time, Hebrew letters can become damaged or deteriorate.

At that time, one of our Torahs was kosher. Three were not, but the sofer was able to repair them. And unfortunately, one Torah was deemed beyond repair — our oldest Torah.

This Torah was donated by Samuel and Nettie Shapiro. According to their granddaughter, Lynne Shapiro Gordin, when the shul opened in 1906, it had no Torah. Samuel Shapiro asked a cousin in Israel to send the Torah that the family had saved from their Russian shul. An uncle had been shot while trying to protect that Torah in Russia. When it arrived in Biddeford, the Torah still had blood on the parchment. It was repaired before it was used here. The Shapiro name can still be seen on the eitzim (wooden rollers) of the scroll. Today, this Torah serves our community — as a teaching Torah.

I had hoped that one day someone would donate a Torah to once again fill our Aron HaKodesh with five *kosher* Torahs and continue our tradition.

A miracle happened, thanks to the generous donation from the Rosen Family. Who knows five? I know five. Five are the number of kosher Torahs we have in our Aron HaKodesh.



Left: Cantor Beth Strassler poses with the Rosen family, who generously donated our newest Torah, bringing the number of our kosher Torahs to five. L-R: Cantor Beth Strassler, Brian Rosen, Sandra Rosen, Walter Rosen, Sam Berman, Lisa Berman

Below: Lowy Fairfield, proudly holding the new Torah, donated by the Rosen family, at her bat mitzvah on May 10, 2025.



A Light Restored: Rediscovering the Beauty in Our Sanctuary's Stained-Glass

Jennie Aranovitch

For years, the grand stained-glass windows at the front of Congregation Etz Chaim's sanctuary sat quietly behind clouded plexiglass — an architectural treasure all but hidden from view. Installed when the building was first constructed as an Episcopalian church in 1894, the windows had become increasingly difficult to appreciate from the outside, their vivid colors obscured by decades of sun exposure that had yellowed the protective covering. And behind that haze, time had taken its toll: many of the individual glass panes were cracked or broken, their delicate artistry in need of care. But thanks to a generous, anonymous donation and the skilled artisans at Sash & Solder in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, this past spring marked the completion of a remarkable restoration — one that has quite literally brought new light into our sacred space.

On March 22, 2025, a group of ten congregants had the unique opportunity to visit the workshop of Sash & Solder, where our stained-glass windows were undergoing their final stages of restoration. The tour was led by Tom Driscoll and Dennis LaVersa, two of the company's artisans, who graciously walked us through the meticulous process they had been undertaking over the previous months.

The project began in January of 2025 with the removal of the windows from the synagogue. To do this as safely as possible, the team divided the windows into six segments. The two largest sections were stabilized at their centers, and strips of tape were carefully applied to prevent further damage during transport. Before any physical work began, the team conducted extensive photographic documentation to preserve a visual record of the windows' pre-restoration state.

Once at their workshop, the next step was to create rubbings of each window — a process much like taking a grave rubbing. Using a wax crayon and paper, they traced the outlines of the lead strips that held the individual glass pieces together and documented the location of each break or flaw. These rubbings served as essential maps to guide the rebuilding process.

As Tom and Dennis explained, aside from the obvious repairs, likely made over three distinct times in history, the stained glass was original to the 1894 building — making the windows more than 130 years old. The lead, they said, was showing its age and had rendered the windows structurally unsound. Lead is the traditional material used in stained glass for good reason: it's strong yet flexible, capable of adapting to seasonal expansion and contraction. But over time, it corrodes and loses its strength, eventually failing to hold the glass securely.

Though beautiful even in their compromised state, about a quarter of the the individual glass panes were cracked or broken, and many others were mismatched — perhaps as the result of repairs undertaken without concerns for accuracy or

adequate funds. Some substituted glass differed in color or texture, disrupting the original harmony of the design. In addition, parts of the original stenciled glass border had been replaced over time with plain, unstenciled panes. These borders had once



Left: A group from Congregation Etz Chaim gathers at Sash & Solder to learn about the restoration process.

Next page: The restored windows in all their former — and now current — glory; The view of the windows from the exterior at night

featured delicate patterns that added visual structure and artistry to the windows. Using archival detail and careful craftsmanship, the restoration team recreated the stencils by hand, restoring the border to match its original look and returning an important design element that had been lost to time.

Using traditional methods — essentially the same techniques that would have been used in the original construction — Sash & Solder painstakingly rebuilt the windows. Where new glass was needed, they used handmade, mouthblown glass — likely from the same American manufacturer that produced the original panes — and carefully selected pieces to match the color and texture of the originals. The goal throughout was preservation rather than replacement.

They were able to tell that the window frames had been removed at some point in the past. In keeping with their restoration philosophy, Sash & Solder chose to repair rather than replace the wood of the frames wherever possible, addressing areas of rot while retaining as much original material as they could.

To ensure that the newly restored windows remain protected while still visible and vibrant, the synagogue also hired Portland Glass to install a new exterior covering. Unlike the old plexiglass, which had yellowed over decades of sun exposure, the new protective glass is designed to remain clear over time. It offers crucial protection from weather and potential vandalism while allowing the true beauty of the stained glass to shine through.

Now fully restored, the windows glow with renewed vibrancy. Seen from inside the sanctuary, they once again fill the space with color and light, inviting reflection, reverence, and awe. Seen from the outside — and especially at night — their radiance transforms the building into a beacon of warmth and history, a breathtaking sight for anyone passing by.

What was once hidden has been revealed. What was fading has been revived. What was broken is now whole again. And what has long been part of our building's story can now, finally, be fully seen and appreciated.

Watch a video of the tour: <https://etzchaimme.org/video-archives/stained-glass-window-tour/>



Remembering Arnold Shapiro With the Shapiro Community Service Award

Elaine Shapiro and Sue Masse

On July 27, 2025, at Congregation Etz Chaim's Annual Meeting, President David Strassler announced this year's winners of the Arnold Shapiro Community Service Award, an annual scholarship, honoring former congregation president, Arnold Shapiro, awarded to one or more high school seniors who have been actively involved in providing service to the synagogue community. A special treat this year, Arnold's daughters, Elaine Shapiro and Sue Masse, were in attendance and shared with the community the following tribute to their father:

It is with great pleasure and pride that we stand here today to honor not only our father but the legacy of dedication and service he built over his lifetime. The community service award, named in his honor, is evidence of his commitment to the Congregation Etz Chaim community.

In the 1970s, when the Etz Chaim community was at a crossroads, there was discussion about whether this struggling congregation could survive. We remember lots of meetings at our house. There were representatives from most of the families in the congregation, and, while many of those folks eventually made up the board of directors, Arnold became the president. Truthfully, we have no idea if it was an election or an appointment. Clearly, we weren't in the room where it happened. It doesn't really matter. His community service to Etz Chaim lasted for 30 years, and we called him "president for life."



He understood the assignment. If someone in the congregation was in need, Arnold would rally the congregation. If there was an issue with the building — and there were always issues with the building — Arnold was there. Heating and plumbing issue? No problem, he had that covered. Electrical, carpets, stairs, the front door ... the board would meet. If there were no funds, the money would be found, and the problem, whatever it was, would get fixed.

He had a way of bringing people together not just over physical plant

issues but over policies and direction for the congregation. The original congregation was Orthodox, and, in order to sustain or grow the congregation in the 70s and 80s and beyond, the congregation needed to shift and become more inclusive and welcoming, particularly for interfaith families. It sounds simple when you think about it now, but, at the time, it was kind of a big deal.

Arnold's community service and leadership led the congregation to where it is today. Our hope for the future is that the recipients of this award, Eva Aranovitch and Noah Hammond, will build on the lessons they learned here and carry on in Arnold's spirit.



Above (left): Former president, Arnold Shapiro

Above (right): Elaine Shapiro and Sue Masse at the Annau Meeting 2025.

Keep reading to explore the essays submitted by this year's scholarship winners ...

Shapiro Community Service Award Essay

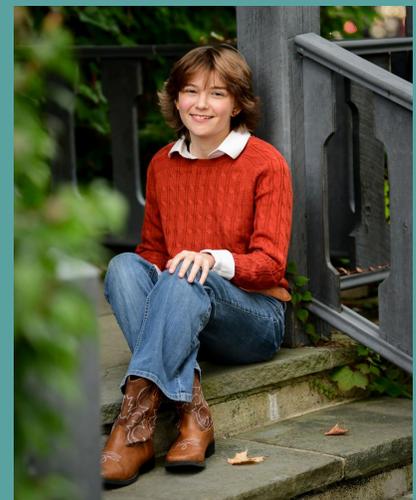
Eva Aranovitch

Etz Chaim means “tree of life,” a tree I see not only as a birthright but as a representation of my family’s culture and history. My Jewish identity is rooted deeply in Congregation Etz Chaim. Despite the odds of moving to two other states throughout my life, my baby naming and my bat mitzvah happened in the same sanctuary. Etz Chaim has become entwined with my Jewish identity, something I am taking with me to college as I plan to minor in religious studies at Bates College.

The feeling of walking into the sanctuary alone may be one of my favorites. During every potluck and event downstairs, I try to find an opportunity to sneak upstairs and allow myself the peace of entering the sanctuary in solitude. While I find connection to my religion through the sanctuary filled with people and prayer, I truly “find myself” when I am alone in the sanctuary, allowing myself to remember the ancestors who came before me who sat and stood in that very room. The rich velvet, the smell of the wood, the yahrzeit plaques always remind me of who I am: someone who cherishes both tradition and my relationship with religion.

It is because of this connection that I am proud to have given back to Congregation Etz Chaim in the ways that I have. My service opportunities at the synagogue started when I was an assistant teacher for the Hebrew school. Passing our traditions to younger generations is deeply important to me, which is why this experience was especially meaningful. In the sanctuary, I see fewer and fewer young people singing along to the prayers, so I am extremely grateful for the experience that allowed me to further these students’ education. I have also supplied child care and early Jewish education for the synagogue by keeping an eye on and entertaining the younger kids during events. Thanks to Anthony and Jessica Allen, I have been able to teach and experience Judaism in ways geared toward a younger audience. I am so grateful to have been a part of both of these teaching services.

I am also extremely appreciative for having the opportunity to do graphic design for the York County Jewish Community News newsletter. I worked with Joseph Strassler as he was designing the new website so the visual motifs and color palette of the newsletter would mesh well with the synagogue’s online presence. I was able to work alongside my mother on producing the newsletter through many instances of troubleshooting and experimentation. Throughout this experience, I have been exposed to so many new ideas and knowledge about what the vibrant Etz Chaim community does to connect to their Judaism and what the synagogue does to keep the community connected to one another. What I have given to the community has been returned to me tenfold by the synagogue through many gratifying experiences.



Eva Aranovitch
 Biddeford High, Class of '25
College: Bates College;
 Lewiston, Maine
Degree: B.A.
Major: Neuroscience
Minor: Religious Studies

Through Teen Class I was exposed to many cultural aspects of my Judaism, especially in literature. Without this experience, I think my interest in Judaic/religious studies would be much less impassioned than it currently is. I was exposed to authors such as Chaim Potok and historical stories such as that of Leo Frank — writers and figures that inspired me, even after finishing Teen Class, to continue to read on and learn more. With the help of the Samuel Osher Memorial Library, I have continued to read books intertwined with the main themes of Judaism. I am so grateful for the experiences David Strassler exposed me to throughout my three years of Teen Class and the resources the synagogue has given me to become the person I am today.

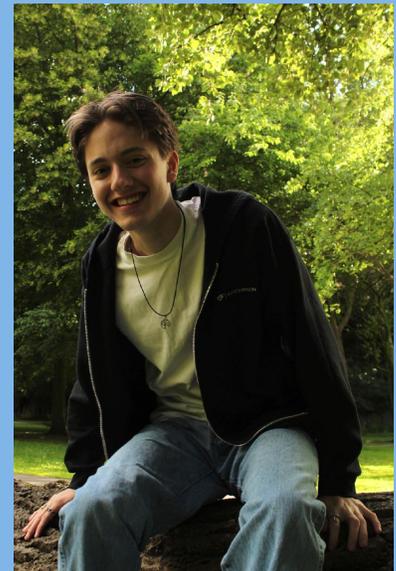
The sense of belonging and connection I've found in the Jewish community is something I will hold onto in college and beyond. I am so excited to further my Jewish identity based on the lessons I have learned and experienced at Congregation Etz Chaim, the tree of my Jewish life.

Shapiro Community Service Award Essay

Noah Hammond

I have been an active member of the temple since I was basically born. Throughout my younger years, I participated in Hebrew School every Thursday. I would be in all the little plays we put on, as well as attend many holiday services and parties. When I got to the Teen Class, I felt more mature and developed a sense of wanting to help my Jewish community as well as learn about our history. I did this by helping to host fundraisers with raffles and auctions, baking for community members, and set up before and clean up after Congregation Etz Chaim's holiday celebrations. And, during Rosh Hashanah, I was proudly on the bimah blowing shofar with other members of our community.

As part of my bar mitzvah project, I made and collected cards from the community to give to people living with cancer. This was a big part of why I love community service, and I feel as though this project sparked that inside of me. I love to give back to my community in any way I can and hope to do this after college. Knowing I made a difference in my community is why I love helping others so much. This is a part of what Congregation Etz Chaim means to me. It has helped me in so many ways, including maturing, learning more about my Jewish background, and showing me what service means to a community.



Noah Hammond
Kennebunk High, Class of '25

College: Ithaca College;
Ithaca, New York

Degree: B.F.A.

Major: Stage
Management

Shana Tova!



**The Board of Directors
and Cantor Strassler
wish you and your
family a happy, healthy,
and sweet New Year!**

*We look forward to seeing
you at High Holiday services,
beginning with Erev Rosh
Hashanah, Monday, Sept. 22,
at 6:30 p.m.*

*View the full High Holiday schedule
on page 1 or on our calendar at
etzchaimme.org/calendar*

Samuel Osher Memorial Library Improvement Hits Major Milestone

Leah Macomber

What happens when a lively group of volunteers leverages their life-long learnings and love of libraries to focus on improving our beloved Samuel Osher Memorial Library? Lots of improvement so far — and more coming!

The Library Committee hit a major milestone last month when it launched the Samuel Osher Memorial Library Online. We now have an online catalog of our books so anyone can search or browse our collection with ease. Our online library is hosted on "Library Thing" a web-based platform that is tied to both Amazon.com and the Library of Congress. It has a simple interface that allows users to search for books by author, title, or subject, or to use links to browse books on interesting topics like Arab-Jewish relations, Jewish cooking, the Holocaust, or the Women's Book Club. You can access the online library here www.librarycat.org/lib/CECLibrary1 or via the Library page under the Educational Programs tab of the synagogue's homepage (www.etzchaimme.org).



The committee also reorganized the physical library to make it easier for you to find books you're looking for, or to browse books in categories you're interested in. You can browse sections of fiction, non-fiction, biography, cooking, Arab-Jewish relations, and children and young adult, for example. Or you can look up a book online and find the book on our shelves. Currently featured in the young adult section is the full volume of the comic book *Shaloman* – come take a look!

When you're ready to check out a book (even a *Shaloman* comic book), a Library Committee member can help you check it out with our new online circulation system, which is also tied to our online library. Library Committee volunteers will be available for book check-out during events at the synagogue.

Modernizing our library is a big job, and its progress is ongoing. The online catalog is not perfect, but it's a great step. Future improvements include adding links and instructions on the etzchaimme.org website, adding titles of our multimedia to the online catalog, and also installing more shelving.

If you have comments or suggestions for the Samuel Osher Memorial library, or would like to help keep it vibrant, please contact David Strassler, the Library Committee chairman.

Echoes From the Archives: From Main Street to Aranovitch Park

Jennie Aranovitch

This article is dedicated to the memory of the many Jewish-owned businesses that once lined the streets of downtown Biddeford — some with names immortalized in stone, others surviving only in the stories we tell. Years ago, one could find the fresh offerings of S. Cohen Fruit & Produce and Central Fruit; the fine garments of Meyer A. Simensky, Henry Cohen, and Feinberg's Quality Clothing; the sparkle of Jack & Larry's Jewelry; the refreshing beverages of York Bottling; the skilled workmanship of Shapiro Superior Service; the dependable goods of Sam's Place; the careful craftsmanship of Eli the Cobbler — and so much more — among the contributions of Biddeford's Jewish shops. Each played a vital role in the life of the community. Whether their traces remain in brick and mortar or exist only in memory, all deserve to be kept alive in our hearts and in our written history.

At Congregation Etz Chaim's recent Annual Meeting, we had the pleasure of hearing from Rabbi Andy Bachman, whose talk, "Jews in the Heartland: Thriving and Surviving in Small Towns," carried us far beyond Biddeford — to the South, the Midwest, and into the beating hearts of small Jewish communities across America.

Rabbi Bachman spoke of the past 10 years he has spent visiting these towns, learning their stories, and getting to know the remaining members of their Jewish populations. He said something that immediately struck me: whenever he arrives in a town that was once thriving, he looks for signs of a past Jewish presence. In so many places, the clues are there — on the Main Streets lined with old brick buildings, many of which once held Jewish-owned shops, the vital arteries that carried life and livelihood throughout those communities.

As I listened, I couldn't help but think of our own city of Biddeford. We were once a booming mill town, our Main Street alive with Jewish commercial activity. At the turn of the 20th century, Jewish immigrants arrived here, as they did in so many other small cities, often beginning as peddlers or junk dealers before eventually opening their own shops. By 1900, there were seven Jewish-owned retail stores in downtown Biddeford. Twenty years later, that number had more than tripled, and by 1950 — at the very height of the local Jewish population — there were 38 Jewish-owned businesses in the twin cities of Biddeford and Saco.

It was a remarkable moment in our community's history — two generations at work: the immigrant shopkeepers, who had built their livelihoods with grit and determination, and their children, many of them college-educated, who were forging new white-collar paths.

And yet, walking down Main Street today, the visible reminders of that vibrant Jewish presence are few. For years, the only one I could point to was the Polakewich Block on Main Street, its name proudly inscribed into the building's facade high above the street — a silent witness to a family of clothing retailers who helped shape the Biddeford of yesterday.

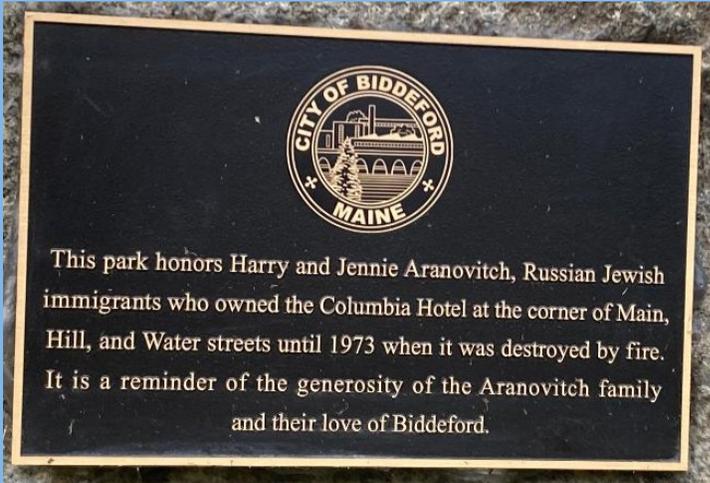
This summer, however, something extraordinary happened. After more than 50 years of anticipation, a second physical reminder of our Jewish presence in Biddeford's economy has been added to the cityscape: a park bearing my family's name.

Aranovitch Park stands just across from where my great-grandparents, Harry and Jennie Aranovitch — later joined by their eldest daughter Eva — ran the Columbia Hotel. Once situated at the intersection of Main, Water, and Hill streets, the hotel was in operation from 1926 until it was destroyed by fire in 1973. It was more than a business — it was a home, a hub of daily life, and a place where people from near and far sought shelter — some for a night or two, some for extended stays.

The street level bustled with small businesses over the years, including a pharmacy, a barber shop, and, in later years, my grandfather and great-uncle's beer garden. Above, my great-grandparents lived with their family of six children, renting out the rooms on the top floors, at one point in history, for a dollar a day. My mother spent her first four years of life there — and nearly every weekend thereafter until she left for college. She remembers the small details: her grandmother making her own bars of soap for the communal bathrooms, the names and faces of the regulars, and the day her grandfather — well into his sixties at the time — stood up to (and knocked down) two drunken sailors who had come looking for lodging and unleashed antisemitic remarks.

When the hotel burned down, my great-grandmother, then a widow in her 90s, had no desire to rebuild. She sold the land to the city at a greatly reduced price, with the understanding that it would become a park. It was a handshake agreement, never put in writing. Time passed, years turned into decades, and the promised park never came. Our family had almost let go of the idea.

Then, in the early 2000s, thanks to the jogging of the keen memory of former very longtime city employee Bob Dodge, the agreement was brought back to life, and my family was, at long last, provided with written documentation. I held onto the document Bob prepared for almost two more decades until I saw an opportunity. After getting to know then-Mayor Alan



Clockwise: The Columbia Hotel, 1929; The newly installed plaque at Aranovitch Park; Jennie and Harry Aranovitch; Descendants of Harry and Jennie Aranovitch gather for the park dedication.

Casavant, with whom I served on the board of the Biddeford Cultural and Heritage Center, I raised the matter with him. Alan listened, advocated, and promised the city would make things right. While the original land on which the hotel sat, unfortunately, had since been sold, the timing was fortuitous: plans were underway to reconfigure the intersection where the hotel had been located, creating a new green space directly across Water Street from where the hotel stood at what is, essentially, the entrance to Biddeford. That spot was identified as the home for Aranovitch Park.

It was Mayor Martin Grohman who carried the project across the finish line, and on August 18, 2025, under a bright blue summer sky, the city held a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Descendants of Harry and Jennie, across three generations and from four states, gathered together in the new park.

The plaque we unveiled that day, intentionally worded to acknowledge my great-grandparents' religious and cultural identity, tells the story not only of Harry and Jennie Aranovitch, the people, but recognizes them as belonging to Biddeford's Jewish community. Harry served as president of Congregation Etz Chaim for 15 years, while Jennie poured her energy into Hadassah and countless other fundraising and community-building efforts. Their lives were deeply intertwined with the life of this congregation. As the drafter of the plaque's message, I felt confident that that my forebears would want their Jewishness represented.

To me, this plaque is more than a marker — it is a bridge. It connects the Biddeford of today to the Biddeford of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Like the stone of the Polakewich Block, it quietly says: *We were here. We helped build this place. And our story is part of its story.*

And perhaps that is the beauty of moments like this. Rabbi Bachman reminded us that Jewish history is not only in the great cities' monuments and famous landmarks — it is in the small towns, in the shop signs now faded, in the stories handed down, and in the names etched in stone. Now, when I walk past Aranovitch Park, I see not just my family's name but evidence that the local Jewish community is woven into the tapestry of Biddeford's history. It is a promise kept, a memory made visible, and a sign for future generations that we thrived here, we belonged here, and we will continue to do so.

Beyond Security: Building True Community Safety

Elyse Oliver

Our congregation has made significant investments in security infrastructure over the past three years, thanks in large part to a Nonprofit Security Grant Program award from FEMA. This program provided grant funding to physically improve our building and hold activities that increase protection against terrorist and extremist violence. These security approaches focus on traditional "target hardening"— creating physically intimidating infrastructure like contracted security personnel and new security equipment — to deter threats.

While these physical security improvements have been necessary, we can do more than build higher walls. To truly build a safe community, we need to act in accordance with a broader definition of safety: community safety. This approach recognizes that safety looks different depending on who you are and what you've experienced. For some, safety means protection from physical violence. For others, it means strong physical and mental wellbeing, appropriate systems for preventing harm, or reliable relationships within a community where you can turn for support when needed.

Understanding these varied perspectives becomes crucial when we consider that actions making one person feel safer might make others feel less so. Target hardening practices, while protecting against external threats, can feel threatening or exclusionary to those who have experienced surveillance or profiling — including immigrants, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, Muslims, Black people, Arabs, and other people of color.

In shaping our congregation's safety strategy, it is vital to keep these perspectives at the forefront for several reasons. First, diversity within our community is growing. According to the 2024 Maine Jewish Community Study by Brandeis University, 60% of married Jewish Mainers have a non-Jewish spouse, and of the 28,000 individuals living in Jewish households, 8,900 are not Jews themselves. Second, as we expand relationships with other faith communities, we must understand what safety means to those outside the Jewish community to ensure all feel welcome in our space. Third, our safety is interconnected with that of other faith communities. Just as the Anti-Defamation League tracked 8,873 antisemitic incidents in the U.S. in 2023, the Council on American-Islamic Relations tracked 8,061 anti-Muslim incidents over the same year; 140% and 56% increases in complaints from 2022, respectively. These parallel surges in hatred can only be eradicated through joint efforts and underscore the importance of creating safe spaces at a time when they are quickly dwindling.

The reality is that hate doesn't discriminate in its targets, even if it manifests differently across communities. We're safer when all faith communities are safer, and while there's no one-size-fits-all approach to safety, here are some practical steps we might consider to better embrace community safety:

- We could partner with nearby faith communities to "trade" greeters, providing volunteers to welcome community members to each other's events while ensuring those observing can engage fully in worship.
- We might upgrade bathroom facilities to single-stall, gender-neutral options, helping all congregants feel comfortable in vulnerable spaces.
- We could maintain readily available face masks at services to protect immunocompromised members (we've already made progress here).
- We might update our membership handbook with clear protocols for reporting incidents of harassment should they occur in our community.
- We could be explicit about how we collaborate with local and federal law enforcement regarding our security footage and procedures.
- We could invite other faith communities to participate in health and safety trainings that we organize for our congregation.

We risk our ability to grow our community if we remain satisfied with the strides we've taken through FEMA's support alone. True security comes not just from physical barriers but from fostering communities where everyone belongs, everyone matters, and everyone looks out for one another. This is community safety, and it's how we build the kind of congregation we want to be — one that's both protected and welcoming, both secure and just.

Synagogue Contacts

Lifecycle Events and Pastoral Counseling: Cantor Beth Strassler,
cantor@etzchaimme.org

Community Outreach: Denise Hammond,
communityoutreach@etzchaimme.org

YCJC Newsletter: Jennie Aranovitch, newsletter@etzchaimme.org

Yahrzeit Reminders: Jennie Aranovitch, yahrzeit@etzchaimme.org

Memorial Plaques: David Strassler, president@etzchaimme.org

Hebrew School and Religious Services: Beth and David Strassler,
mail@etzchaimme.org

Prayer Books: David Strassler, president@etzchaimme.org

Library: David Strassler, library@etzchaimme.org

Family Education: Anthony and Jessica Allen, familyed@etzchaimme.org

Communications and Press/Media: Jennie Aranovitch,
communications@etzchaimme.org



About Congregation Etz Chaim

Congregation Etz Chaim, founded in 1906, is a full-service synagogue located in Biddeford that serves the York County community. A non-denominational congregation, it promotes Jewish cultural, social, educational, and religious activities in an exceptionally welcoming and inclusive environment, making available a range of activities that facilitate the expression of what each individual finds valuable in the Jewish experience. We embrace people along the entire spectrum of Jewish practice and theology and welcome all who are interested in our congregation, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender expression, sexual orientation, or formal religious affiliation.

For more information, visit www.etzchaimme.org

About YCJC News

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YCJC News Team

Jennie Aranovitch, Editor-in-Chief
Eva Aranovitch, Design Assistant

CEC Communications Committee Members:

Jennie Aranovitch, Chair	David Strassler
Adrienne Levy	Joe Strassler
Leah Macomber	Shona Workman
Beth Strassler	

**Congregation Etz Chaim
PO Box 1473
Biddeford, ME 04005**

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