



CONGREGATION ETZ CHAIM

BIDDEFORD, MAINE

Congregation Etz Chaim

York County Jewish Community News

www.etzchaimme.org

Fall 2026/5787

Inside This Issue:

Page 2	Cantor's Corner
Page 3	A Growing Community
Page 4	Shaloman Revisited
Page 5	Community Spotlight on Alan Fink
Page 6	A New Chapter for the SOM Library
Page 7	The Books That Bring Us Closer
Page 8	Echoes From the Archives
Page 9	More Than Manischewitz
Page 10	Praying for the World
Page 11	Building Our Future Together
Page 18	Synagogue Contacts
Page 19	About Congregation Etz Chaim
Page 19	About YCJC News

High Holiday Schedule

Rosh Hashanah

- Erev Rosh Hashanah: Fri, Sept. 11 • 7 p.m.
- Rosh Hashanah Day 1: Sat, Sept. 12 • 8:45 a.m.–12 p.m.
- Rosh Hashanah Day 2: Sun, Sept. 13 • 8:45 a.m.–12 p.m. (Taschlich at Saco River at 12:30 p.m.)

Yom Kippur

- Erev Yom Kippur (Kol Nidre): Sun, Sept. 20 • 6:30–8 p.m.
- Yom Kippur Morning: Mon, Sept. 21 • 8:45 a.m.–12:30 p.m. (Yizkor at 10:45 a.m.)
- Yom Kippur Afternoon: Mon, Sept. 21 • 5–6:45 p.m. (Torah reading at 5 p.m.)
- Break Fast: Mon, Sept. 21 • Approximately 6:45 p.m.

See the full schedule online:
etzchaimme.org/religious-services/#hhschedule

Cantor's Corner

Cantor Beth Strassler

On the Jewish calendar, it will soon be the first day of the seventh month when we are called to celebrate with shofar blasts.

We are commanded to hear 100 blasts of the horn.* Our horn is the shofar, and the day is Yom Teruah/Day of Celebration. The sound is activated by the life force that G-d breathed into each of us. The sound is piercing and unique and reaches into our soul.

The jubilant song we sing after each series of shofar blasts is "Hayom Harat Olam," which translates as "The Day of the Birth of the World." Adults are invited to trade in their "cake-and-ice-cream" picture of the world's birth-day, and marvel in the miracle, absolute miracle, of G-d's creation.

It is a time of reflection, quieting our minds from everyday concerns, engaging in 10 "Days of Awe" (between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), and evaluating how our lives are progressing. Where do we falter? What do we do well?

I believe G-d wants us to succeed in the world. We have 10 days to guide us in reflecting on how to become a better person in the coming year. We begin with celebration and end with repentance. The Holy Days represent G-d's confidence that we are capable of righting the wrongs in our lives.

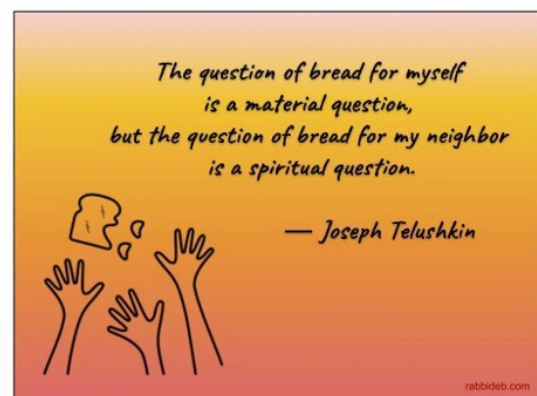
We often recognize that we have fallen short of the quality of the life we want to lead. T'shuvah is repentance, and repentance precedes another opportunity to begin again and shape our lives according to our ideals. Each year we expect that we will get it right this time.

It is difficult to get it "right enough" to satisfy our own expectations, but we appreciate and capitalize on the opportunity to sincerely try. We may always try again next year.

This year, the first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. Since we do not sound the shofar on Shabbat, the second day (Sunday, Sept. 13) will be our only opportunity to hear the full 100 blasts of the shofar and walk to the Saco River to observe Tashlich, which begins at about 12:30 p.m.

May the coming year bring you and your family good health, love, and tranquility.

Looking forward to seeing you soon,
Beth



*Leviticus 23: 23-24 and Numbers 29:1

A Growing Community

Anthony Allen

Across the United States, many synagogues are facing declining attendance at Shabbat services and programming as demographic shifts, aging memberships, and changing patterns of religious engagement reshape Jewish life. While many congregations thrive during the High Holidays, year-round participation remains a growing challenge and has led synagogues to rethink how they connect with younger families and future generations.

In contrast, our synagogue's attendance continues to rise steadily. Friday night and Shabbat morning services are well attended, and our Kiddush meals rarely have leftovers. Additionally, I am proud to say that, as co-principal of the Hebrew School and Family Program alongside my wife, Jessica, our youth program has experienced tremendous growth.

When Jessica and I took over the program several years ago, we carefully analyzed ways to better connect with our younger congregants and truly ignite that *pintele yid* (the Jewish spark) not only in the children but in their parents as well. Our first year was a valuable learning experience. We leaned on long-time members for ideas from previous years while also exploring new ways to create excitement and meaningful educational experiences. Many of our classes centered around the major Jewish holidays, but they also included hands-on activities and crafts that nurtured the children's Jewish pride. Whether it was growing parsley for Pesach seder plates, creating Chanukah arts and crafts, or baking hamantaschen for Purim, fun, laughter, and engagement could be found around every corner.

Continued on page 12



Hebrew School students enjoy the performance of a magician during the annual Purim Party.

Shaloman Revisited

David Strassler

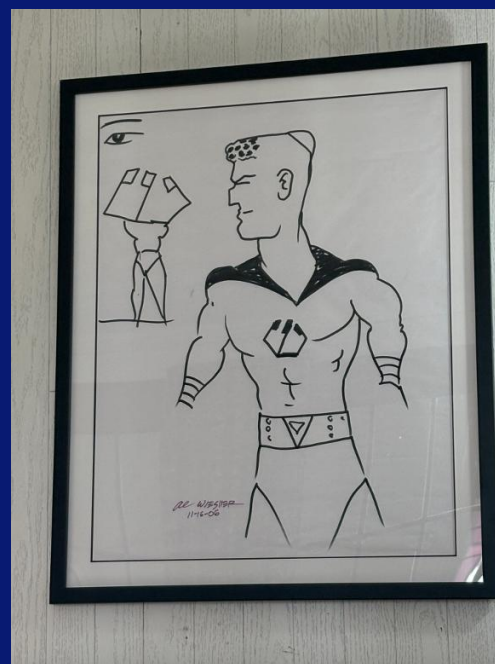
While reorganizing the Samuel Osher Memorial Library at Congregation Etz Chaim, I recently noticed that the framed picture of Shaloman, a beloved Jewish superhero created by Al Wiesner in the mid-1980s, was missing. After more than 20 years, it had slipped off the wall and disappeared behind a shelving unit. "Oy vay!" When I found it, the picture was in rough shape. What should I do?

As it turned out, the answer arrived a few weeks later. Whether by chance or destiny, I came across a cardboard tube labeled "Shaloman." Inside were original drawings that Al Wiesner had created during his visit to Congregation Etz Chaim in 2006. (Read the recap of that visit on page 14.) Today, one of the signed illustrations has been newly matted and framed, and once again a depiction of Shaloman hangs proudly in our library.

I was first introduced to the *Shaloman* comic books about 25 years ago by one of our members, Ednamay Taraba, who was Al Wiesner's cousin. I immediately became a collector and made sure our library also had a complete set. With Ednamay's help, we were fortunate to host Al for presentations to both our Hebrew School students and the broader community. He delighted audiences by demonstrating how he drew both Shaloman and his archenemy, Dr. Traif. The comics were an instant hit with our Hebrew School students, who eagerly borrowed them from the library.

Another Shaloman story unfolded this past year. During a tour of our synagogue, I met a professor of graphic arts who travels the country visiting synagogues to study and appreciate their architecture. Of everything she saw and learned during her visit, the one thing that fascinated her most was our *Shaloman* collection. She couldn't believe she had never heard of the series — and by the end of her visit, she had become a fan.

Continued on page 14



Keep reading to see the original "Shaloman" article from the York County Community News January 2007 issue

Community Spotlight on ... Alan Fink

Jennie Aranovitch

Community Spotlight is a YCJC News feature designed to help us get to know the people who make our community what it is — one conversation at a time.



If you've attended High Holiday services at Congregation Etz Chaim, you've almost certainly heard Alan Fink's voice. For many congregants, his confident, melodic Torah chanting is as much a part of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as the shofar itself. But Alan has contributed far more to the congregation than what members hear from him on the bimah. As a longtime board member and Ritual Committee member, he has helped guide the synagogue through years of growth and change. *YCJC News* spoke with Alan about a lifetime of Jewish learning, the evolution of Congregation Etz Chaim, and his enduring commitment to preserving our traditions while helping shape the congregation's future.

***YCJC News:* Tell us a little about yourself. What brought you and your family to Maine, and how did you become involved with Congregation Etz Chaim?**

Alan: My journey to Maine began with acceptance to Bowdoin College in 1964. I grew up in Milton, Massachusetts, after my family moved there from Dorchester. After marrying my wife, Elaine, in 1969, completing a Ph.D. in child clinical psychology, and teaching for six years at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, I was ready for a career change. A position at York County Counseling Services brought us and our four-year-old son back to Maine, where we've lived in Saco for the past 48 years.

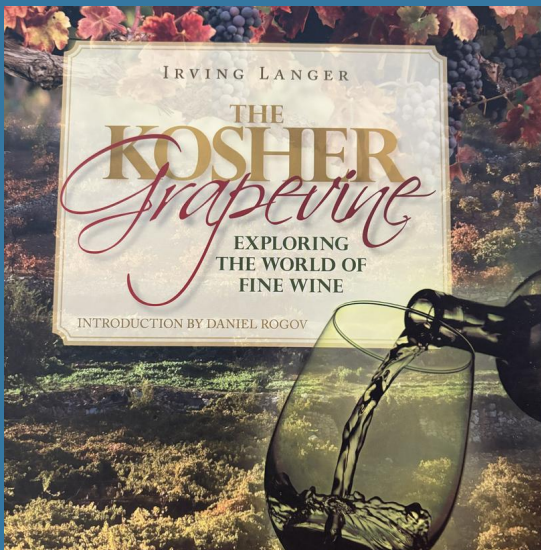
I was already familiar with Temple Beth El in Portland. Rabbi Sky visited with some Jewish students at Bowdoin periodically, and with my background, I actually taught a first-grade and a teen class at Beth El on Sundays during my sophomore year at Bowdoin.

We were not regularly practicing Jews at that time of new careers and young children (twin boys joined the family shortly after our arrival in Maine) and were not active in Beth El for several years. I recall attending a meeting at Congregation Etz Chaim out of curiosity during our first few years, and the primary agenda item was whether the shul should disband! When time came for Hebrew School (circa 1981), Beth El was the only choice. Our three sons all attended and were bar mitzvahed there. After the twins' bar mitzvahs in

Continued on page 15

A New Chapter for the Samuel Osher Memorial Library

Phyllis Turtle



The Samuel Osher Memorial Library keeps getting better — it's time to pay a visit! New furniture and shelving have made the space more organized and serene and has created a nice place to sit with a good book or the perfect spot to bring your children when they find it difficult to sit quietly in the sanctuary. The assortment of children's books, toys, and games can entertain while keeping Jewish content top priority. Drop in anytime the synagogue is open and see for yourself the happy changes that have taken place.

To be truly effective, a library must grow and bring new resources to users. The Library Committee is working to create collection development policies and budgets. We are purchasing some new titles, but, to expand our offerings, we are asking the congregation for help. If you have recent books (the

last couple of years) that have a connection to Judaism by content or author, we would welcome the donation. Novels, nonfiction, and biographies would all be appreciated. Donations will be acknowledged with a book plate. Growing the collection together with the congregation will give everyone the satisfaction of seeing our library flourish.

In July, CEC presented a program on Kosher wines. For those of you who want to know more or who were unable to attend, please take a look at one of our newest acquisitions, *The Kosher Grapevine: Exploring the World of Fine Wine* by Irving Langer. Richly illustrated, the book offers us a very easy-to-absorb, basic lesson on wine, the making of different varieties, and how best to sample them and pair them with foods. He goes on to put wine in the context of Jewish observance and explain its importance, the laws governing kosher wine, and the history of wine in Jewish spiritual observance.

Langer writes, "When I enjoy a great glass of wine it brings me closer to the uplifting wonder I find in Talmudic discussion or an insightful Midrash." His excitement for wine is humorously expressed in the creation of his "Wine Map," populated by the Rizlinger Chassidim, the Chardonner Chassidim, and others that give different wine, like different groups of Chassidim, their own personality.

The Kosher Grapevine is available to check out from the library and is best appreciated held in one hand with a glass of wine in the other.

If you would like to take out a book, or just peruse our extensive collection of Jewish books when the synagogue is not in use, contact David Strassler at library@etzchaimme.org.

The Books That Bring Us Together: Vulnerability Literature

Susan Pierce

Years ago, David Strassler asked me to write a short piece about what drew me to Congregation Etz Chaim. My answer then — a sense of community — is the same answer I would give as co-facilitator of CEC's Women's Book Club. All these years and books later, what brings me back again and again, is the feeling of community — belonging to others and to something.

As I think about the epidemic of loneliness in our society, being part of a book group, and especially CEC's Women's Book Club, offers many valuable chances to connect to others. As children, we make friends through proximity — same neighborhood, same park, same school — and you see those friends easily and repeatedly. Adults don't have the same mechanisms to meet and make friends. Work colleagues are an option, but there are always the pressures of work that can get in the way. Researchers show that for adult friendships to form, three basic qualities need to exist: regularity (contact has to be consistent and frequent, such as when participating in an exercise or art class), low stakes, and what I would call purpose (some shared material or mission to discuss or work on together).



*Members of CEC's Women's Book Club
at a recent in-person gathering*

Book groups provide the foundation for all three of those qualities to exist. Ours certainly does. But it turns out, what we read has as much of an impact on the sense of connection as how often and how safe the group feels. "Vulnerability literature" — novels that involve emotionally complex people and situations, memoirs about struggles and suffering, and non-fiction that shows us the human condition — work by what is called the "side door" effect. We might not want to show vulnerability — our weaknesses, foibles, and difficulties — directly, but when we can relate to a character in a novel and reveal to our group, "When she said that, it really resonated with me," it helps us show our vulnerabilities through our identification with a character or a situation.

Recognizing something in a character and saying

that out loud gives the participant a safe way to show vulnerability and connection — but with what psychologists call "deniability disclosure," so the social risk is low while the emotional exposure is there. So, every time a character shows vulnerability — be it fear, love, or shame — it opens up the door for someone in our book group to walk through and share their lives. The better the book illuminates the interior lives of people, the more readers can connect to the book — and to each other. The group discussions that vulnerability literature generates are about the story and the people in the book group, at the same time.

Continued on page 16

Echoes From the Archives: The Deed That Started It All

Jennie Aranovitch

Sometimes the most important treasures in our archives are not photographs or ceremonial objects — they're pieces of paper.

Earlier this year, as part of the city of Biddeford's process for maintaining our property tax-exempt status, the congregation was asked to produce the deed to our synagogue property. That task sent President David Strassler on a mission to the York County courthouse in Alfred, where he located the original deed dated July 2, 1907.

His discovery prompted me to refresh my memory of the course of events that resulted in the document's creation, so I pulled our earliest minute book from the archives. There, in the faded handwriting of the congregation's first secretary, was the story behind the document.

The minutes reveal that on June 11, 1907, members began the legal process of incorporating as the Biddeford Hebrew Synagogue



Above: Excerpt from the original deed transferring ownership of Christ Church to the Biddeford Hebrew Synagogue Association, signed July 2, 1907. More than 100 years later, this document still serves the congregation as both a legal record and a tangible connection to our founders.

Association. Just over a week later, at a meeting on June 19, they voted both to incorporate and to purchase Christ Church, an Episcopal church built in 1874, located on Bacon Street in Biddeford.

The purchase price for the church was \$4,100 — a considerable sum for a small immigrant congregation in 1907. The members paid \$1,100 down and financed the remaining \$3,000 with a mortgage from the Saco Savings Bank. Less than two weeks after the June 19 vote, on July 2, 1907, the deed was signed, officially transferring ownership of the property to the new congregation.

Continued on page 13

More Than Manischewitz

Anthony Allen

On July 12, 2026, Congregation Etz Chaim proudly revived one of its most beloved community events: a kosher wine tasting that had not been held in more than a decade. Determined to make this event unlike any previous tasting, event coordinator Jessica Allen immediately began researching new ideas that would create a memorable and engaging experience for congregants. Rather than simply recreating the format of years past, her goal was to combine education, Jewish tradition, and hospitality into an evening that would appeal to both seasoned wine enthusiasts and first-time participants.

As part of her planning, Jessica reached out to friends within the Portland Chabad community for guidance and recommendations. Through those connections, she was introduced to one of the world's foremost kosher wine experts, Rabbi Yisrael (Yisroel) Bernath. Rabbi Bernath is a Montreal-based Chabad rabbi, author of *The Forgiveness Experiment*, speaker, podcaster, and relationship coach. He serves as the spiritual director of Chabad NDG and as the Jewish chaplain at Concordia University in Montreal. Beyond his work in Jewish education and matchmaking, Rabbi Bernath has earned international recognition in the kosher wine world as a certified sommelier, wine writer, and co-host of the *Kosher Wine Podcast*, where he explores wine trends, tastings, wineries, and kosher wine culture alongside industry experts from around the globe.

Jessica and Cantor Beth Strassler met with Rabbi Bernath to discuss Congregation Etz Chaim's previous wine tastings, as well as their vision for creating something fresh and inspiring. Together, they developed a program that would seamlessly blend Jewish wisdom, biblical history, storytelling, and the appreciation of fine kosher wines into an interactive and approachable experience. Their collaboration transformed the event from a simple tasting into an evening of education, culture, and meaningful conversation. Once the program was finalized, a date was selected, invitations were distributed, and excitement quickly began to build throughout the congregation.



On the day of the event, Jessica transformed the social hall into an elegant tasting venue. Tables were beautifully dressed with navy-blue tablecloths, polished sparkling wine glasses, professional spittoons, and generous charcuterie-style plates filled with crackers, dried fruits, fresh fruit, and assorted nuts that perfectly complemented each wine selection. The thoughtful presentation immediately created an atmosphere of sophistication while remaining warm and welcoming. Guests gathered with anticipation as Rabbi Bernath began leading them through each tasting,

Continued on page 17

Praying for the World

Cantor Beth Strassler

Being in our synagogue during the High Holidays feels different to me. It feels like an exceptionally spiritual place, transformed not only by the sounds of shofar but also by the unique prayer melodies we use only at this time of year. (One example is the High Holiday tune for the Amidah.) Our prayers also include a sincere intention to make our lives more meaningful and useful.

I envision us as being on our planet in an oval orbit encircling G-d (the sun). But our position is not in the middle of the oval; it is closer to one side. When we are at the part closest to G-d, the time of year is the High Holidays. G-d is always close to us, but when we are at this time and place, now is the opportunity for us to reach out and become closer to G-d. We have an extra special invitation to talk to G-d so that we are heard. One way we talk to G-d is through prayer.

It is intended to be a time of complete rest. In fact, one of the names for Yom Kippur is "Shabbat Shabbaton," or the Shabbat of Shabbats. No work, no everyday worries, quieting down of the mind, and praying.

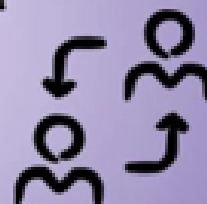
As we confess our sins, you may notice that the prayers are sometimes "I" have sinned, and sometimes "We" have sinned. We pray for ourselves. We pray for the person standing next to us, and for our world-wide Jewish community.

This year, there is an overwhelming need to pray not only for the Jewish community but for all people in every place of the world. Several of our prayers traditionally end with "v'kohl Yisrael," (which means "and all the people of Israel.") This year, we will end more prayers with "v'kohl Yeshvei Teivell," meaning "all the peoples of the world."

In the middle of every war, act of violence, natural disaster, and famine, there are everyday people trying to live their lives. Let's pray for them as we reach out to G-d.

**The only way to change the world
is to change
yourself into what you
want others to be.**

—Mordecai Kaplan



Building Our Future Together: What Our New 501(c)(3) Status Means for CEC and Ways To Give

David Strassler

"I am thrilled that Congregation Etz Chaim (CEC) is now a 501(c)(3) because I can make donations from my Donor Advised Fund (DAF). I have a DAF with the Maine Community Foundation and can use it to give donations to any 501(c)(3) organization! In addition, when CEC is recognized as a 501(c)(3) with the Maine Community Foundation, it can apply for grants through Maine Fund Connection and also with the York County Fund. Great work on getting the 501(c)(3) status!"
— email from Leah Macomber

I am excited to share an important milestone in Congregation Etz Chaim's history: We have officially received recognition from the IRS as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Here are answers to some common questions about what this means and how it strengthens our congregation's future.

Q: What does it mean that CEC has received 501(c)(3) recognition?

A: Although CEC has always been tax-exempt as a religious organization and contributions have always been tax-deductible under IRS rules, formal recognition provides added clarity for donors, families, and estate planners while expanding opportunities for grants and charitable giving.

Q: Why is this important for our congregation?

A: Our new status strengthens CEC's financial foundation by opening the door to additional grants, foundation funding, donor-advised funds, and other charitable support. It also demonstrates responsible stewardship and helps ensure the long-term sustainability of our congregation.

Q: Why are additional donations important?

A: Membership dues are essential but do not cover the full cost of an active and growing congregation. Additional gifts help support worship, education, programming, facilities, security, and future improvements while reducing our reliance on reserve funds.

Q: What other sources of funding support CEC?

A: We are fortunate to have received grants from the Samuel L. Cohen Fund, the Federal Nonprofit Security Grant Program, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, and the Alfred and Suzi Osher Charitable Fund at the Jewish Community Fund of Maine. We are especially grateful to grant writer Elyse Oliver and everyone who has helped identify opportunities and prepare successful applications.

Q: How has member generosity made a difference?

A: Last year, member generosity allowed us to avoid using the \$18,000 budgeted from our Brokerage Account Fund. This year's budget includes using \$11,000 from those reserves, and we hope continued support will allow us to preserve those funds once again.

Q: Why should I consider increasing my support?

A: Every gift matters. Whether through increased membership support, an additional contribution, or a special gift, your generosity helps CEC remain a welcoming, flourishing, and financially secure home for Jewish life.

Continued on page 13

A Growing Community

(Continued from page 3)

This past year felt different. From our first gathering and bonfire in the Allen/Strassler Sukkah to our final class, where the children proudly received their certificates, we watched our synagogue's youth program flourish before our very eyes. We grew from four families to six families this past year, and the enthusiasm surrounding our program has sparked interest from additional families throughout the area. We are hopeful that we will welcome two more families for the upcoming school year. It is exciting to see our community continue to grow, one family at a time.

A special thank you is owed to the parents of our students. Getting everyone out of bed on a cozy fall morning — or in the middle of a snowstorm — is no easy task. Yet these parents consistently prioritized their children's Jewish education. I think of parents like Shelley Meyerheim, who would work double shifts overnight as a nurse and still find a way to get her three children to class on time. That level of dedication is truly inspiring.

The efforts of our teachers, President David Strassler and Cantor Beth Strassler, with our older students have also been remarkable. Together, they developed a curriculum that has generated excitement among current and future b-mitzvah students while helping strengthen their connection to Jewish learning and synagogue life. These wonderful circumstances did not exist just a few years ago. Every member of our congregation who has supported this effort has helped strengthen our community, and, for that, Jessica and I are deeply grateful.

In the interest of continuing this positive momentum, Congregation Etz Chaim applied for a grant through the Jewish Community Alliance and the Jewish Community Fund of Maine. We are pleased to share that our religious school program was awarded a grant of \$10,600 to help support staffing and classroom supplies. On behalf of our Board of Directors and our religious school program, I extend our sincere gratitude to the Jewish Community Alliance, the Jewish Community Fund of Maine, and the Alfred and Dorothy Suzi Osher Charitable Fund for their generous support. Their investment in our children is an investment in the future of our congregation and our Jewish community.



Building Our Future Together: What Our New 501(c)(3) Status Means for CEC and Ways To Give (Continued from page 11)

Q: What is a Donor-Advised Fund (DAF), and how can it help support CEC?

A: A Donor-Advised Fund, often called a DAF, is a charitable giving account that allows individuals and families to make a contribution to a fund, receive a potential tax benefit, and then recommend grants to qualified charitable organizations over time. Many people use DAFs as a convenient way to organize and manage their charitable giving. Because CEC is now a recognized 501(c)(3), we can receive grants from DAFs. If you have a DAF, you may recommend CEC as a recipient. Contact your financial advisor or DAF sponsor for details.

Q: Can I support CEC through my IRA?

A: Individuals age 70½ or older may be eligible to make a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) directly from an IRA, which may provide tax advantages. Those considering this option should consult their financial or tax advisor. Beth and I also support CEC by donating appreciated stock through DonateStock, which provides a simple way to make tax-efficient charitable gifts: <https://donatestock.com/congregation-etz-chaim-1>

Q: How do these giving opportunities help secure CEC's future?

A: Membership support, additional donations, grants, Donor-Advised Funds, IRA charitable distributions, and other planned gifts all help ensure CEC's long-term financial stability. Together, we are honoring the vision of those who built our congregation while creating a vibrant Jewish home for future generations. Our future depends on all of us — our commitment, our participation, and our shared investment in a thriving Jewish community.

Echoes From the Archives: The Deed That Started It All

(Continued from page 8)

While the minutes do not explicitly explain why incorporation came first, becoming a religious corporation gave the congregation a legal identity that could own property, obtain financing, and enter into contracts. The deed itself reflects this new status, identifying the purchaser as the "Biddeford Hebrew Synagogue Association, a religious corporation duly created by law." While the minutes stop short of stating the reason for incorporation, the chronology and the language of the deed point to the purchase of Christ Church as the likely impetus for creating the Biddeford Hebrew Synagogue Association.

It's remarkable to think about what those few weeks represented. A group of Jewish families came together, established a legal organization, secured financing, and purchased a permanent home for their congregation. Their determination ensured that Jewish life in Biddeford would have a lasting presence for generations to come.

The story did not end with the signing of the deed. For the next three decades, congregation members faithfully worked to pay off the mortgage. On March 19, 1939, they celebrated with a mortgage-burning party — a joyful occasion marking that the synagogue building was finally theirs, free and clear.

Today, the deed serves as more than a legal document. It is a tangible link between the congregation's founders and today's members — a reminder that the decisions they made in the summer of 1907 continue to shape our congregation more than a century later.

Shaloman Revisited

Continued from page 4

Now, with our rejuvenated Hebrew School, a new generation of students is discovering *Shaloman*. Once again, the complete collection of 42 comic books is finding their way off the library shelves and into the hands of eager young readers.

Some things really are timeless.

*In memory of Al Wiesner
July 2, 1930 – March 4, 2025*

From the York County Community News January 2007 issue:

Shaloman Comes to Biddeford

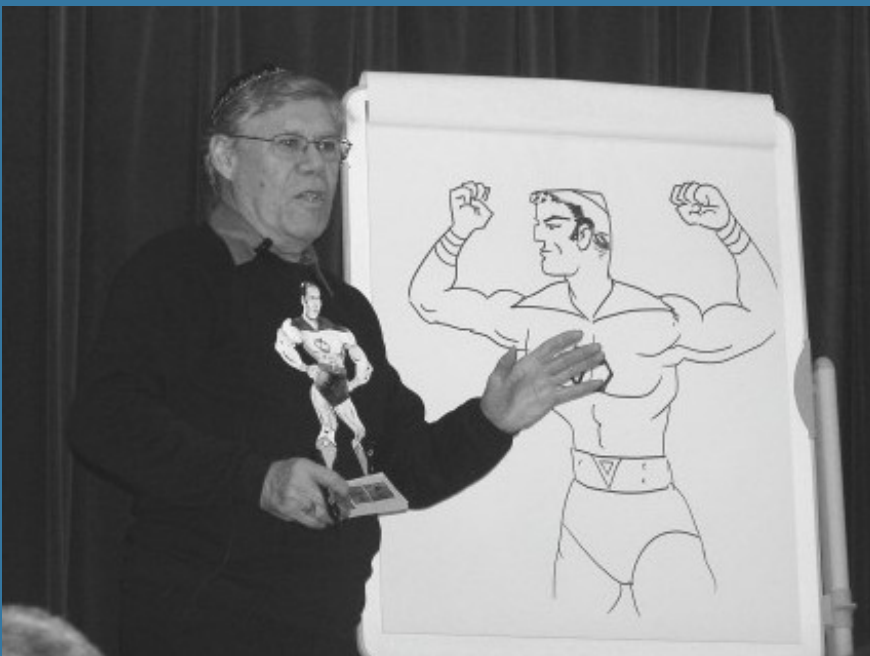
Enthusiastic audiences welcomed Al Wiesner, the creator of the first Jewish superhero, Shaloman, to Congregation Etz Chaim in November 2006.

Al traced the beginnings of comic books in America, noting that several of the original artists were Jewish. He believes the success of *Shaloman* followed the establishment of the state of Israel, making the world ready for a physically powerful Jewish figure.

Responding to the distress call "Oy vay!" Shaloman emerges from a rocky topped mountain in Israel. He is easily identified by his rippling muscles, kipa, and large letter Shin on his chest.

Many of the Hebrew School students have followed his adventures by checking out copies of the comic books from the complete collection in our synagogue library.

Al Wiesner's visit was supported by a grant to Etz Chaim Community Education by the Sam L. Cohen Foundation.



Al Wiesner presenting to the Congregation Etz Chaim community in 2006 about his comic book, Shaloman, featuring a Jewish superhero.

Community Spotlight on ... Alan Fink (Continued from page 5)

1993, we looked for a geographically closer temple affiliation, and my involvement with CEC began. Arnold Shapiro, then president of the congregation, quickly invited me to join the board of directors where I've served for 20-plus years.

YCJC News: During those 20-plus years, you have seen the congregation move through many chapters of its history. Looking back, what are some of the biggest changes you've witnessed?

Two major changes over the past 20 years come to mind. First is our slow but steady growth in membership and financial stability. Early in my involvement, the congregation offered primarily High Holiday services and a Chanukah party with a small core of active members. Thanks to David and Beth Strassler, periodic philanthropic gifts, and many dedicated volunteers, we've expanded our programming, grown our membership, strengthened our leadership, and achieved greater financial stability. Second is the evolution of our religious services as we moved in my view from a more Orthodox/Conservative position to greater emphasis on English inclusion, congregation participation, music, and seeking meaning in our prayer. As a long-time member of our Ritual Committee, I'm proud of the religious services we now offer.

YCJC News: Many congregants know you for your beautiful Torah reading during the High Holidays. Can you tell us a little about your Jewish background and what reading Torah for the congregation means to you?

We circle back to my childhood in Milton ... My family was traditionally observant, and Jewish education was central to our lives. My mother was a graduate of Hebrew Teachers College and the primary teacher at our synagogue's Hebrew school, and my uncle was a cantor at a large Conservative congregation in Sharon, Massachusetts. I began attending Hebrew school in Dorchester five days a week at age 6 and attended children's services without fail every Shabbos and Jewish holiday. By age 8 or 9, I read Hebrew fluently and by 11 was able to lead the children's services at Temple Shalom. Through years of study with our cantor and Hebrew school principal, by my bar mitzvah I was proficient in leading many parts of the Hebrew liturgy, including Torah and Haftarah reading. Looking back, and without going into too much detail, my high school adolescent self did not want to be known primarily for that identity, and while I did attend Hebrew Teachers College during my Milton High years, escaping the script was a big part of my choosing Bowdoin.

In 1964, my brother had worked during the High Holidays at a Conservative synagogue in Lewiston, Maine, of all places, and when the opportunity became available, I auditioned and spent the next three years there serving as High Holiday Shacharit cantor and Torah reader. Truth be told, there was some mercenary element involved. I discovered that the \$300 earned for three days' work almost equaled my entire summer wages working in a factory for the then minimum wage of \$1.25 an hour! About 15 years ago, our beloved High Holiday cantor, Scott Rapaport, welcomed my taking on the role of reading Torah. It feels good to utilize this fairly esoteric skill from early in my life to enhance our CEC services.

YCJC News: What do you think makes Congregation Etz Chaim such a special community and what has kept you serving the community for so many years?

Continued on page 17

The Books That Bring Us Together: Vulnerability Literature

(Continued from page 7)

Vulnerability literature makes personal connections normal. We connect with the book; the book disclosed the vulnerability first and then we mirror that vulnerability by acknowledging the character's vulnerability through our own life experiences. The book normalizes the honesty, and the community strengthens as a result of honest vulnerability. The book is the reason to join in the community, and the permission to be honest is the infrastructure the community is built upon.

Research on what produces closeness among people shows that it's the sharing of personal information in reciprocity, and doing so overtime creates a sense of closeness and earned connection. Book groups can do this same thing over time. The book curates the disclosure, and, over time, book group members get to know one another on a more personal, intimate level. The reciprocity occurs between the book and all of the members at the same time. We have all felt grief, excitement, jealousy, etc. at some point, and when a situation or character resonates with us, everyone can recognize themselves in it. The disclosure happens to everyone simultaneously, and this structure produces mutual knowledge.

The CEC Women's Book Club reads books about Jewish women, written by Jewish women authors. The pages we pore over show the interior lives of the characters, allowing us to examine our human connections, share our personal experiences, and support each other in our vulnerabilities. It is a powerful connection; it takes time and trust. So, I would encourage you to join a book group, read hard books, engage as though the stories are your life stories, and build a foundation worth building with others.

CEC Women's Book Club meets monthly via Zoom every second Thursday at 6:30 p.m. To explore our 2026 reading list, including books we've read and upcoming selections, visit etzchaimme.org/wbc-books/. For questions or to join, please email Maureen King or Susan Pierce at bookclub@etzchaimme.org.

This newsletter article is a summary and application of the material in this essay:
<https://www.thinkandsavetheworld.com/law/law-0/why-book-clubs-that-read-about-vulnerability-build-deeper-friendships>

Cantor Strassler and the Board of Directors Wish You and Your Loved Ones a Sweet New Year!



More Than Manischewitz

(Continued from page 9)

effortlessly sharing his extensive knowledge of Israeli vineyards and the unique challenges of cultivating grapes in the country's harsh desert climate.

Throughout the evening, Rabbi Bernath captivated the audience with fascinating stories that connected each wine to Jewish history and the land of Israel. One particularly memorable account centered on nearly 3,000-year-old grape seeds discovered during an archaeological excavation that were successfully germinated by researchers and eventually cultivated into a thriving vineyard. The remarkable achievement demonstrated the resilience of ancient grape varieties and offered participants a tangible connection to biblical history. To imagine enjoying wine produced from vines genetically linked to those cultivated by our ancestors thousands of years ago left many guests in awe. The story perfectly illustrated how wine can serve as more than a beverage — it can become a bridge connecting generations, history, faith, and tradition.

The evening was met with overwhelmingly positive feedback from the over 30 attendees, many of whom commented that the event was unlike any wine tasting they had previously experienced. Conversations continued long after the formal presentation concluded, as members lingered to discuss what they had learned and to enjoy one another's company. By successfully reviving this cherished tradition with a fresh and innovative approach, Congregation Etz Chaim demonstrated its commitment to creating engaging programs that strengthen community while celebrating Jewish heritage. The success of the event has generated enthusiasm for future kosher wine tastings for years to come.

Community Spotlight on ... Alan Fink

(Continued from page 15)

Let me answer with another anecdote. Ten years ago, I was recovering from surgery and the radiation/chemotherapy treatment for pancreatic cancer. For the first time in my life, I was too weak and unable to attend High Holiday services. Around 1:30 p.m. on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, our phone rang. It was David and Beth Strassler, asking if they could pay a visit on their way home from services. After gladly saying yes, in they walked and proceeded to recite the blessings and blow the shofar while standing in our living room. I don't think you find that kind of caring and feeling for community in most congregations. That's what makes me want to continue serving and giving back.

YCJC News: Looking ahead, what hopes do you have for the future of Congregation Etz Chaim?

My true answer is I'm not totally sanguine or confident in the future of American Judaism. Maine is one of the most secular states in the country. Living Judaism as we now know it presents many challenges: learning Hebrew, maintaining home customs and rituals, making time among so many other work, parenting, and domestic responsibilities, finding compromise within inter-faith marriages. My most simple hope is that in 100 years, CEC is still here. I'd love to see, and am recently encouraged by, a resurrection of our Hebrew School. I hope for an increase in our younger membership age demographic. I hope we can continue to evolve in meeting the spiritual and Jewish identity needs of our wide range of members. The positive benefits are well worth the fight.

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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

The *York County Jewish Community News* is published twice yearly by the Congregation Etz Chaim Communications Committee. All issues — current and past — may be accessed at www.etzchaimme.org/newsletter/. Congregation Etz Chaim reserves the right to edit articles for length, clarity, grammar, and style.

YCJC News

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Save Our Trees: Go Green!

You can help to save our natural resources and to reduce our costs by receiving your newsletter — and all CEC community announcements — electronically. Just email us at mail@etzchaimme.org or write to us at PO Box 1473 Biddeford, Maine 04005 and ask to “Go Green.”