

100th Anniversary Of The Beth Israel Congregation Bath, Maine

Story by Elaine S. Povich
Photos by Keith Spiro

On January 30, 2022, the Beth Israel Congregation of Bath Maine celebrated the 100th Anniversary of their synagogue. The Cryer is proud to present a unique account of this auspicious occasion by Bath native Elaine S. Povich, a journalist and descendant of one of the congregation's founding families. Mazel Tov to the entire community.



Sister and brother (l-r) Elaine and Lon Povich were honored with carrying the Torah up Washington Street and placing this sacred scroll back in the sanctuary. Their father Donald M Povich is remembered on the Torah cover.

One hundred years ago on a cold, sunny winter day, a hardy band of Bath Jews marched in a parade from the old Music Hall at the corner of Centre and Washington Streets to the newly built Beth Israel Synagogue on Washington Street, across from the library.

To celebrate the centennial of the parade and opening of that historic building, members of the congregation and friends recently walked in the footsteps of those religious pioneers, which included my great-great grandfather, Simon Povich; my great-grandfather, Nathan Povich; and my grandfather, Morris Povich.



The anniversary march took us to the synagogue that still stands as a monument to the founders' perseverance and to the resilience of Bath's Jewish community since 1922. The founders pledged their lives and their livelihoods to the new place of worship. The generations since have kept the flame alive through wars, boom times, depressions, the dwindling of the Jewish community in years past, and its resurgence again into a living and thriving Bath landmark. In retracing their steps, Bath's Jews of today honor the founders' pledge.

In the nomenclature of the early 20th century, the Jews were called "Hebrews," and their place of worship dubbed a "church" in the article published in the Bath Independent in 1922. Now, of course, we know it as a synagogue. Over the century, Bath's Jews have remained, flourished, and integrated themselves into the community of religions in the

city and surrounding area.

The names of those founders — Greenblatts/Singers, Gedimans, Poviches, Browns, Petlocks, Millers, Cohens, Kutzes/Katzes and Soloviches among them — are interwoven into the history of Bath. Many are associated with businesses that helped grow the city.

Five of the 39 founders were Poviches, the most of any founding family, including the three above as well as Sam Povich (who, it is said, invented the lobster roll!), and Morris E. "Matey" Povich, a budding politician who was killed in a car accident in 1936.

Five generations of the Povich family have been members of Beth Israel since its founding, including the fourth generation, Don and Janice Povich, and the fifth generation, their children, Lon Povich and me.

The synagogue thrived due to the dedication of those who do not go back 100 years but who made Beth Israel their home. It is not a stretch to say that as the old families dwindled over the years, relative newcomers took up the reins. Abe Kramer, who came in 1942, became president of the congregation and held the place together for 40 years. But the number of Jewish families was dwindling until Marilyn Weinberg, who came to Bath in 1974, started a religious school for Jewish children. (The story is that the Bath kids were carpooling to religious school in Lewiston until there was not enough room in the car for one more kid, and Weinberg stepped up). Soon, the children's parents got involved and fresh life was breathed into the synagogue. Weinberg became the long-time president, and her husband, Fred, the historian. The congregation grew through the 1980s and 1990s and has now become a regional synagogue, led by Peggy Brown, president,

and Rabbi Lisa Vinikoor.

What's kept it going all these years, Brown said, is a combination of luck, personalities, and a willingness to adapt. "You need those types of things," she said. "At one point, there were a set of old guys" there, when new, young people started to attend. "Maybe it was the flexibility of that particular set of old guys or of the young families coming in" that somehow clicked to invigorate the congregation, she said.

Throughout, neighbors of other faiths have supported the Beth Israel Jews by welcoming them into the community of religions. In 1920, when lending money to Jews was rare, the Bath Trust Company loaned the immigrant Jews \$1,500 toward the \$5,000 cost of the synagogue building. The lead banker, Rupert Baxter (brother of Percival Baxter who founded the state park), also wrote a personal check for \$250 to contribute to the Jews' fundraising drive. Altogether, the Christian community contributed \$2,500 — half the funds.

The rest was raised with nickels and dimes. A committee of the founders traveled around the state to nearby Jewish enclaves and asked for donations to support the fledgling community in building house of worship of their own. The "Hebrew Ladies" club held white elephant sales, raffles and bake sales.

While the old synagogue began in the Orthodox tradition, with women and men sitting separately and giving few rights to women, the congregation today has joined the progressive Reform Judaism movement. Women have equal standing and leadership roles in the congregation and the inclusive synagogue welcomes interfaith relationships, LGBTQ+ members, and those who are interested in connecting Judaism to their lives in today's world.

In a history of the Bath Jews written in 1997, Don Povich told of a series of miracles that kept the community alive — the miracle of the early donations, the Abe Kramer miracle, the Marilyn Weinberg miracle and many others through the years. Now, we have witnessed another -- the miraculous milestone of a century-old building. May it stand another 100 years!



Isaac Ensel (center) with Elaine and Lon, representing the rising generation of congregants, spoke eloquently and with humor about his experience growing up in the congregation and in the greater Bath community.



A large group of congregants, friends and special guests assembled in front of the building to honor, in the words of Marilyn Weinberg, not only the founders but also "each and every one who made this a place of faith, community and love for all."

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