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Address Given by Donald Povich at Beth Israel Synagogue (2000)

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Address given by Donald M. Povich at Beth Israel Synagogue Oct. 25, 2000

Good evening. I am here tonight at the request of the Bath Historical Society to speak on the history of this synagogue. Before I begin, however, I would like to give some background of Jews and Judaism in the State of Maine. I will be happy to answer questions at the end of my presentation.

The first Jewish resident of Maine was Susaman Abrahams of Waldoboro. Abrahams was a wandering trader and on June 2nd 1781, some two years before the end of Revolutionary War, he arrived in Waldoboro and purchased a farm of one hundred and thirty acres from Philip Shuman.

Abrahams, according to the History of Waldoboro (5), was a unique individual whose background was somewhat obscure. He was known to have come from the Hamburg Ghetto.

He was a tanner, a fanner and a peddler and peddlers were known to wander quite far from their homes and it seem quite possible that Abrahams made it as far as the Kennebec River and to Bath thus being the first person of Jewish descent to set foot in what is now Sagadahoc County.

Despite the fact that he professed to be strong in his Jewish faith, he attended Christian worship and was a pew holder in the first meeting house of Union. He married a widow, Mary Jones of Friendship on Nov. 29, 1810. The couple had no children.

Susaman Abrahams died October 6, 1830, at the age of about 87. He is buried in Union and his grave can be seen to this day. It is on avenue g lot 280 in the Union Common Cemetery.

The first real Jewish immigration of any size in Maine started about 1835. In Bangor a group of German Jews, who arrived in about 1840, consisted of a small number of peddlers, tailors, and dry goods merchants. They established the first synagogue in Maine (Ahawas-Achim), which means Brotherly Love with approximately thirty members. The Synagogue was chartered in 1849 and was known for its well-kept records written in German.

They established all the necessary elements of a Jewish community, ie. a cemetery which still can be seen on Webster St. in Bangor, employed a shochot (ritual animal slaughter), planned a school and discussed building a Mikva (ritual bath).

Because of an economic downfall in the 1850's the congregation was disbanded and its ritual objects sent to Boston for safekeeping.

Some fifteen years later was the beginning of the Civil War. Historian, Simon Wolf (11) says 8400 Hundred Jews served in the Civil War out of a total population of 100,000 Jews. Some say that figure is much too low and that in fact there ten to twelve thousand in the Union Armies alone and a like number in the Confederate Army. Three hundred and fifty six Jews were killed in the War and another three hundred and sixteen wounded. Seven Jewish servicemen received the Congressional Metal of Honor. Lt. Colonel Edward Solomon fought with the 82nd Illinois at Gettysburg at Chattonga and Lookout Mountain, Missionary Ridge and the March through Georgia. He later became Governor of the Washington Territory. The book, Jewish American Soldiers, (12) states that eight Jewish Generals, twenty-one Colonels, Nine Lt. Colonels, forty Majors, 205 Captains, 325 Lieutenants and 25 Sergeants served in the Union army and Edward Rosewater of the Telegraph Corp. Telegraphed the Gettysburg Address to the nation.

There were apparently no Jews in Bath at the time of the Civil War and no records seem to have been kept about any Jewish men who served in the Union armies from Maine. We are therefore left with only the slimmest of information from which to make assumptions. Some seventy thousand men serve from Maine. The list does indeed have some names, which sound as if they are of Jewish origins. It is well to remember that earlier New Englanders did use many

Old Testament names and therefore the designation is blurred. The archives list names such as Henry Feldman who served in Company E of the 14th Maine. Louis Droz of New Orleans, which had a very early Jewish congregation, was also in the 14th Maine.

Also listed is Moses Glass in company D 3rd Infantry, Isaac Golden Co D 17th, Gottlieb Wolf Company G 14th Artillery, Also James Cohen, Abraham Cohn and Emanuel Blumenthal. The name of Morris Cohen appears as one of those, who like many of Bath's prominent citizens, bought a substitute. We know that there were Jews in Bangor in 1840 and the name of Morris Cohen appears in the 1850 census of Portland.

William Filene came to America from Germany at the age of eighteen. He worked as a peddler, a tailor and a glazier. In 1852 he met Clara Ball in Hartford, Conn. and married her in 1856. By that time he had saved enough money to open a small store in Salem, Mass. When William suffered a stroke in 1880 and was no longer able to work, it was his son, Edward, who took over. In the beginning, Edward saw the stores grow to four. One in Lynn, two on Winter St. in Boston and one in an improbable place, Bath, Maine. The Bath store on Front Street, probably opened in the mid 1880's making it one of the first Jewish owned businesses in Bath.

And now let me tell you something about this synagogue, Beth Israel.

Do you believe in miracles? The Bible is full of miracles, seas that part, bushes that bum without being consumed and manna from heaven. I want to tell you that right here in 2000 you are seeing a miracle. As a matter of fact you are sitting right in the middle of one. The miracle I speak of is the Beth Israel Congregation. From its very beginning it has always overcome the odds. Its founders were a group of poor, very poor, immigrants who came to this Christian community with little money but with a pocket full of perseverance and a heart full of hope. Can you imagine what the first families of Bath, some of whom traced their roots back to the Pilgrims, thought of this tiny group of foreigners, who spoke English badly, were mostly peddlers, tailors and small shop keepers. I am not sure. But I do know that to their lasting credit some of them made contributions to those Jews to help them build this building in which you sit. Picture this scene if you will. A group of Jewish men led by their congregation president, Solomon Greenblatt, enter a local bank, hats in hand, to plead with a local banker to loan them \$1500.00 towards their goal of \$5000.00 to build this building. Not only did the banker, a member of one of Maine's first families, the Baxters (his brother gave Baxter State Park to the state) loan them the money but then and there he wrote his personal check for \$250.00 a handsome sum indeed for that time. A Miracle? Perhaps.

The founders had their glory years. With their big families, they held services in their empty hall never missing a chance to raise money. Not a week went by without a penny collection, a quilt auction or a fundraiser of some kind, until at last they turned this empty space into a finished building. They installed the heating system and the plumbing; they built the "bimah" and the pews and they turned this empty hall into our "shul" (synagogue). And that was a miracle too.

All along the way, down through the years, the miracles continued to happen. Let me tell you about just a few.

As the years progressed the founders began to give up the reins of the congregation and many had died. There was a man in Portland. He had traveled around the country as far away as Alaska. Perhaps traveled is too kind a word, "bummed" is more like it, at last returning to Portland. He married and settled down to try to make a living in the grocery business. Just as his struggle in Portland seemed not very successful, a man in Bath named Lloyd Steeves, who was a playboy at heart, but in the grocery business, decided it was time for him to go on with his life

and the confinement of business was not part of his plan. Enter Abraham Kramer, of Portland. Not only did he buy Mr. Steeves store, he bought his home in Bath and his summer camp on Damariscotta Lake as well, all for one price. I can't begin to tell you the contribution Abe Kramer made to Beth Israel over the next forty years. For most of those years he was president of the congregation. He was the "shamas", (which means janitor) he was the Cantor, he was the torah Reader, he conducted all the yortzite services as well as the services for the minor holidays. No man ever did more for so long for any congregation and his pay was only the pride he had in his "Shul". Who made Lloyd Steeves leave and who sent Abe Kramer to us? A miracle indeed.

During all the years that Mr. Kramer was president, one problem presented itself annually. Who would conduct High Holiday Services? Mr. Kramer would help but he was not capable of conducting the entire three days of worship. So each year the search began. In 1968 time was growing short. It was August and still no one had been hired. In desperation, an ad was placed in the Jewish Advocate newspaper. That ad was seen by a young man at camp Ramah in New Hampshire. He was only nineteen years old, a sophomore at Columbia University. He had never conducted High Holiday services before. He had a Jewish day school education, could read Hebrew with ease and was a fine musician, planning to attend Julliard School of Music. So, some say on a dare, some say on a lark, he answered the ad. Mr. Kramer contacted him and setup a time for an interview. That put the young man in somewhat of a panic. He got out the books and burned the midnight oil, sought the aid of his friends and gave himself a crash course in High Holidays 101. When the appointed day arrived, Mr. Kramer along with another synagogue member, Max Kutz, made the drive over to New Hampshire where they met with the somewhat apprehensive young man. Mr. Kramer opened the interview with the question, "Will one thousand dollars be enough?" The young man having no idea what to ask said he thought so. To which Mr. Kramer replied, "OK your hired". Mystified, the young man said, " don't you want to hear me sing?" and Mr. Kramer answered," no, we in Bath are more interested in character." That young man was Stanley Sperber, and that day a relationship was begun that lasted nineteen years. Stanley Sperber learned to love us and we learned to love him. He became a part of Beth Israel with his annual visits. Today Stanley Sperber is the conductor of the Haifa symphony in Israel, a world-renowned and respected director. A far cry from the first year he came to Bath and got out off the bus with a cooked chicken under his arm, which his mother in Brooklyn had given him for fear that he would have nothing kosher to eat in the hinterlands of Bath, Maine. Why did Stanley answer that ad on a dare and whose hand sent him to us? Another miracle?

When Stanley announced that it was impossible for him to return for his 20th year, Beth Israel was left with a massive void. The venerable Abe Kramer was still President. This is the story of Stanley's replacement.

Once, and only once, the synagogue was broken into by thieves. At the insistence of the insurance company, a burglar alarm, which still exists today, was installed. Mr. Kramer never quite got the "hang" of activating and deactivating the system. He was prone to turning on the alarm and trying the door afterwards, which immediately set off the alarm. The local police would come swarming down only to find the surprised Mr. Kramer standing by the door.

Now it was late summer and still there was no one to conduct the September Holiday services. The congregation was desperate. All efforts to find someone to conduct the services had proven futile. As fate would have it, Mr. Kramer, in his usual confusion with the alarm, had left the door unlocked with the alarm on. The space was invaded and the police as usual were on the spot. They found Rabbi Leeman of Long Island, New York, along with his wife and two sons peacefully looking over the synagogue. The elder Leeman had come to Maine to pick up his sons

who were at music camp in Castine. The police were about to take the whole group in for questioning when the Rabbi pleaded with them to call the president of the congregation. They did so and soon Mr. Kramer arrived on the scene and assured the police that there was no problem.

A conversation began between Mr. Kramer and the Rabbi and Mr. Kramer told the tale of woe about the congregation's inability to find someone to conduct the services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He pleaded with Rabbi Leeman to come to Bath but the Rabbi was otherwise occupied. The Rabbi then said, "my boys can do it", much to the shock of Ben and Dan Leeman who had never conducted a service of any kind before. Mr. Kramer hired them on the spot. The boys went home and they too took a crash course from their father, practicing two and one half hours a day, and arrived in Bath scared but prepared to do the service. For five memorable years after that, the Leeman boys, Ben and Dan, later joined by their sister, Eve, conducted High Holiday, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, services in Bath. At that time all were in undergraduate school. Later Daniel became a full time cantor, Ben went on to medical school and became a doctor and Eve went to dental school to become a children's dentist. There are those who wonder who sent the Leemans to Bath under such strange circumstances. I say it is just another in our long string of Miracles.

In case I have given you the impression that these miracles only happened in the distant past like manna from heaven, let me assure you that that is not true. These miracles go on.

Less than twenty years ago Beth Israel was in failing health. The old founders had long since passed away. By this time, many of the second generation had died or moved away. The congregation grew smaller and smaller until at last, despite the noble efforts of those who remained, it seemed as if the congregation might die. At the time there was a young couple living in Bath who had a little boy. A few of the other Jewish parents, who wanted their children to have a Jewish education were driving them to Lewiston to attend Hebrew and Sunday School. As it happened, there was no room in that car pool for that one little boy. As a result the mother turned to our beloved Marilyn Weinberg and said, "Why don't you start a Sunday School here in Bath?" And Marilyn did just that. From that amazing humble beginning, the school grew to over forty students who came from the entire area. What followed was the reorganization of the synagogue. More Jewish young people arrived. They came from larger cities looking for a more relaxed way of life. They wanted not only to have a Hebrew School thrive but also the synagogue to which it was attached. Their fervor and desire was no less than that of the founders of Beth Israel. And in a sense that little boy, who was named Micah, after the prophet, was responsible for the rebirth of this congregation, and that was a miracle too.

As the years went by, we became known as the "do it yourself synagogue". And we did it ourselves against all odds. We survived and we thrived until at last it became time to seek professional help. There were the nay sayers. How can we afford a Rabbi? Where will we find one? Who wants to come to Bath-Brunswick anyway? But our youthful members were not discouraged. They formed a search committee and the effort began. They found ways to search and a way to pay. By this time Marilyn Weinberg had become president, our first woman president.

The steady hands of Diane Powell and Lynn Frank along with Marilyn and the other committee members, mounted the effort and we found our Rabbi in Omaha, Nebraska. Omaha, Nebraska? A Rabbi in Omaha, Nebraska? But somehow she found us and we found her. And with aid of the hand of Providence, which always seems to be present in this congregation, Rabbi

Ruth Smith came to us. She was our first Rabbi in over fifty years and, fittingly, she was our first woman Rabbi.

The miracles never seem to stop. When Rabbi Ruth and her husband, Larry, wanted to move into their new home, members of the congregation were going to help them. The weather report for moving day was awful, rain, sleet and snow. When the appointed day and hour arrived, lo and behold the sun shone like a day in springtime.

In turn as time passed, the Jewish people of the Bath area have given of their time, talent and money to support every civic and community activity. They have been movers and doers and their heritage has become a part of Bath's Heritage.