

THE HISTORY OF CONGREGATION AHAVAS ACHIM

KEENE, NEW HAMPSHIRE
1887-2000



By Michael A. Schuman

In The Beginning

In 1887, the President of the United States was Grover Cleveland. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was five years old. The nation's first successful electric trolley line was built in Richmond, Virginia. Overseas, Queen Victoria was serving in her fiftieth year on the throne and the character of Sherlock Holmes was introduced by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Here in Keene, a group of about ten Jewish peddlers began holding services every Saturday morning in a clothing store at the head of Central Square. This is the first record of Jewish services taking place in Keene.

The peddlers worked independently of one another. They lived the archetypal lives of itinerants, traveling throughout southern New Hampshire and Vermont, bearing their wares in bulky packs they carried upon their backs. Some kept rooms in and around Keene where they spent weekends. In time, a few opened small stores in the area, such as food markets and clothing shops.

One such man was Hayman H. Cohen, uncle of Keene native and long-time Ahavas Achim member Florence Aliber Lipsky. Cohen peddled household wares from door to door until he opened a clothing store in Peterborough in 1895, thereby becoming the first Jewish resident in the town.

There is no record of where the Torah was kept in the earliest years. However, it is known that some time around the turn of the century, shopkeeper Samuel Finkelstein kept the Torah in his home on Ellis Court, near the present day Recreation Center. Services were held in his home as well.

It is believed that in the early years services were conducted by members. Then, in 1907, a man named Novich began traveling

from Boston to Keene to fulfill rabbinical duties. He was not an ordained rabbi, and was referred to as Reverend. While in Keene, Reverend Novich boarded in the homes of Jewish families.

For a while, Reverend Novich led services upstairs from a restaurant called the Bon Ton, located at 45 Main Street in the building occupied by a Hallmark store in the 1990s. Every Saturday morning, congregants climbed the stairs to the second floor, which was used for both services and as a cheder (classroom for children).

At weekly services, men -- and the participants were all men -- prayed while sitting at individual tables. All services were conducted in a strict Orthodox manner. When Reverend Novich was not in attendance, a member would lead services. All men could read Hebrew and a few could read the Torah. It was of the maximum importance that boys attend cheder. Girls, on the other hand, had a choice whether or not to attend.

Perhaps symbolically, High Holy Day services took place one level up, in the building's third floor ballroom. In the Orthodox

The Kosher Express

Each family kept a Kosher home. How was that possible in Keene? A company called Railway Express provided the answer. On Thursdays, a Boston-based Kosher butcher took Keene residents' meat orders to North Station. They were then shipped on a four-hour train ride to Keene. Cost for transit ranged from 35 to 50 cents per order. In Keene, Railway Express delivered orders directly to each family's home.

By the mid-1910s, weekly services moved back from the Bon

Ton to the head **of Central Square**. This time, the sanctuary was on third floor over Lord's Candy Store, today the Fleet Bank building.

On a cold winter day, a singular event breathed life into the Jewish community in Keene. The date was January 17, 1916. A charter was granted by the state of New Hampshire to the "Keene Hebrew Community," incorporating a synagogue.

Following are the four Articles of Incorporation:

1. "The name of the corporation shall be The Ahavath Achim (sic) of Keene."

2. "The principal place of meeting of the congregation shall be Keene, Cheshire County, New Hampshire."

3. "The object of the corporation shall be the promotion of the cause of religion among the Hebrew people of Keene and vicinity."

4. "The first meeting of the corporation shall be held at Keene in the County of Cheshire on the twenty-fourth day of January, 1916."

The following five names were on the charter: Morris Lis, Joseph Myers, Aaron Aliber, Abraham R. Quint and Hyman Lichman.

Why it was decided to incorporate at that time is speculative. Perhaps it had something to do with the specifics of Chapter 147 of the Public Statutes of New Hampshire, which in 1916 included the following:

1. sole rights to use the synagogue name;
2. right to collect dues;
3. right to accept donations as a non-profit organization;
4. right to elect officers.

Through World War I, through the Roaring Twenties and into

society president in 1927. She served in that post well into the 1950s.

Over the course of those many years, the society conducted fundraisers, sponsored educational programs and supported Friday night services. Common events were flea markets and rummage sales. They took place semi-annually -- in spring and fall -- for years and were a reliable source of income.

Presidents and Residences

A long-time synagogue president was Harry Kharfen, who served from 1925 to 1945. Kharfen was owner of a cutlery factory on Washington Street. (Today the building houses apartments.) He was succeeded by Harold Slavitt, another president who served for many years.

The venue for services changed with some regularity during the years between the world wars. Following their home at Lord's Candy Store, the congregation moved in 1928 to Saint John's Block, also known as the Elliot Block, on the corner of Main and West streets. Keene area Jews developed strong calf muscles; services were held on the fourth floor.

In 1943 services were moved to a building on Winter Street, today opposite the courthouse parking lot. The sanctuary was conveniently located on the ground floor. Classrooms and social rooms were in the basement.

As before, services were conducted by spiritual leaders who usually were not rabbis. A Reverend Zieff served the congregation when it met in the Saint John's Block. Following his departure, Reverend William Weiner arrived in 1938 to become spiritual advisor and teacher. Reverends Zieff and Weiner were learned men, although it is believed neither was an ordained rabbi. As before, all services were Orthodox in prayer and style.



This building at 91 Court Street was the home of Congregation Ahavas Achim for over 20 years.

In what could be construed as foreshadowing, Ahavas Achim members held outdoor summer functions as a means of raising money in the 1920s and early 1930s. Congregations from nearby Massachusetts communities regularly joined them. In return, Ahavas Achim members patronized those congregations' fundraising activities.

Through the early and mid-20th century, membership stayed steady at about 20 to 25 families. In 1940 roughly 20 families belonged to the synagogue. However, World War II was to take a toll on the number of regular participants.

Ahavas Achim men who served in the war included: Sydney L. Aliber, Melvin Binder, William H. Binder, Milton Borofsky, Abraham Chorney, Julius Chomey, Philip Cohen, Joseph Crocker, Michael Crocker, Sam Fox, Edward Kapiloff, Lawrence Kapiloff, William Katz, Godfrey Klein, Harry C. Lichman, Jacob J. Lichman, Rubin Lipsky, Herbert Lis, Sydney Merritt, Irving Slater, Harry Sockol, Harold J. Weiner and Theodore Witkin.

One of Ahavas Achim's most active members, Eli Court, served as state commander of the American Legion in 1944. The

Holding Court on Court Street

Two years after the war's end, after decades of moving, Congregation Ahavas Achim purchased a permanent home. The local chapter of the American Red Cross, headquartered at 91 Court Street, sold its building to the congregation in 1947. Three men who played integral parts in acquiring the new home were Max Kapiloff, Harold Slavitt and Isadore Borofsky. Reverend Weiner, who had left for a short while, returned to become the first spiritual leader to serve in the new synagogue

Reverend Weiner made the synagogue his full-time home. A second floor room in the building was converted into his apartment. The sanctuary was in a large, renovated first floor room. Also on the first floor were a kitchen/banquet room, a cheder and a library facing Court Street. The library was also used for overflow High Holiday seating.

The same year, a local Hadassah chapter was founded. Members held a monthly fund-raising dinner at the synagogue and split profits equally between the synagogue and Hadassah.

On a few occasions, the New England Hadassah held regional conventions in the congregation's own proverbial backyard. The Lake Spofford Hotel, owned by Abe Jacobson, was a Kosher hotel and an ideal country escape for urban Hadassah members. It stood on the present location of Spofford Hall. When regional conventions took place there, members of Ahavas Achim hosted.

Meanwhile, synagogue business was conducted as usual. In August 1950 it was decided to charge the following for High Holy Day tickets: \$10 a seat for members and \$15 a seat for non-members.

Annual dues in 1952 ranged from \$1 to \$2 a week. The rabbi earned a yearly income of \$2,600; he was paid \$300 for conducting High Holy Day services.

The first synagogue youth group was founded in the late 1940s. Members, aged 13 through 17, hosted parties and dances in Keene. As with the fund raisers held earlier, members of Greenfield and Athol Massachusetts congregations attended Keene events, while Keene residents attended those of their Massachusetts neighbors.

During some post-war years, services were not conducted by rabbis or reverends. When rabbis were on staff, they did not stay



Purim 1952 at 91 Court Street. Children, standing from left to right: Arthur Tenofsky, Aaron Lipsky, Malcolm Sockol, Marlene Slavitt, Michael Elkins, James Lipsky, Frances Cohen (partially hidden), Linda Stone, Nancy Slavitt, Dorothy Lipsky. In the lower left hand corner is spiritual advisor Reverend William Weiner.

long. A listing includes: E. Slotki, for one year from 1957 to 1958; David Sheinkopf from 1958 to 1960; H. Lazarus from 1961 to 1963 and Samuel Soibelinan, hired in 1963. All were ordained.

Rabbi Slotki was paid \$77 a week (\$4,004 per year) and was given the front upstairs apartment in the synagogue building. Further perks were free rent, heat, electricity and telephone service. He had five weeks of annual vacation: one month in July and one week in late December.

Membership in the late 1950s and early 1960s remained at about 25 families. In spite of what might seem a small number, the building on Court Street was beginning to feel cramped. This was especially true on the High Holy Days. At other times, noises from the synagogue library carried over into the sanctuary. Something



The time: the early 1960s. The event: the burning of the mortgage on Congregation Ahavas Achim's Court Street home. Abraham (Tommy) Chorney at the far left and Julius Chorney third from the left watch as their mother, Esther, puts match to mortgage. The man at the far right is believed to be the congregation's spiritual leader at that time.

A Long Time Coming

In 1966, a major decision was made by then President Dr. Arthur Cohen and Vice-President Edward Kapiloff. Dr. Cohen called a special meeting to be held in a conference room at the Keene Clinic, then located on West Street. The idea of constructing a new synagogue building was the top priority. After lengthy discussion and deliberation, a vote was taken on a motion to build the new house of worship. The ayes had it by a slim majority, 15 to 12.

As early as the 1940s the idea of constructing a synagogue building had been discussed. The minutes of a November 13, 1946 board meeting show that Morris Lis had offered to sell his property on Willow Street for construction of a synagogue building. Finally, 20 years later the dream was about to reach fruition.

once said all major decisions are made on the golf courses. One day synagogue member Bernie Wildove was hitting the links at the Keene Country Club with local landowner Robert Burr. Burr happened to possess a parcel of vacant land next to the National Guard Armory on Hastings Avenue. The two golfers made a wager. Burr bet Wildove that he could beat him at a set amount of money per hole. Bernie said he had his own idea. He would double the amount if he lost to Burr. But should Bernie win, Bob would sell the Hastings Avenue property to the synagogue. Guess who won. (Would Burr have sold the property even if he had won? Probably so.)

Off the golf course, tough work began: raising money. The Keene Jewish community had generous help from area churches. The two Catholic and several Protestant churches held special bingo nights and other fund-raising activities to raise money to help the synagogue's construction. The Swanzey Fire Department did the same and hundreds of individuals sent donations. A total of over \$30,000 was raised by regional non-Jewish communities. Keene Cooperative Bank offered a markedly reduced mortgage rate.

Robert Gorman was hired as project architect. Ivah Ballou and Son were signed as contractors. The style of the Ark was designed by Harold Slavitt and built by local carpenter Frederick Wright. And the wood used to build the synagogue? It came from Dr. Cohen's red oak tree farm which had once belonged to the

Red Oak New Hampshire

Dr. Cohen later wrote, "Thus, the red oak wood in the synagogue was harvested by a French Catholic lumber company from land once owned by a Protestant church, all serving the interest of one God."

Completion of the new home was years away. Meanwhile, the synagogue had to use the property in some manner to preserve its tax-exempt status. In addition, more funds were needed. And so, the Kosher Q was born. The chicken met the grill on Hastings Avenue for the first time on August 6, 1967.



Nat Cohn tends the grill at a late 1960s Kosher Q.

The roots of the chicken dinner were hatched in the minds of Julius Chorney and Jerry Weinrieb. On the menu at the premier feast were chicken, chopped liver, sliced vegetables, pastries, corn and coffee. Tickets were \$2.50 per adult and \$1.25 per child. In addition, hot dogs were sold from a cart for 25 cent each.

The debut Q began at 10 a.m. and ran well into the afternoon. For three decades, the image of Eddie Kapiloff donning an apron and engrossed in grilling rows of chickens and corn became emblematic of the event. Mercifully, rain-soaked days have been few; someone up there must like us.

In 1967, the Hebrew Ladies' Aid Society embarked on a special project. They obtained a linen tablecloth and sold the right to have anyone's name cross-stitched on it for posterity. Unfortunately, the years were not kind to what should have been a valued heirloom. The tablecloth has disappeared and the congregation would love to some day locate it.

Meanwhile the property on Court Street was sold. For the next few years, no regular Shabbat services took place. The Keene Unitarian Church served as the home for Hebrew School classes. In fall, congregants gathered at different area buildings for the High Holy Days. Sometimes it was the Winding Brook Lodge on Park Avenue. Another time, it was the Salvation Army building on Roxbury Court. The bar mitzvah of Steve Cohen took place in 1971 at the United Church of Christ. The church's cross was covered during the service.

A Swanzey resident, Saul Mariaschin, was hired to serve in a teaching role in 1967. A learned man but not a rabbi, he was addressed as Mr. Mariaschin. (An item in the *Keene Shopper* then referred to him as Rabbi Maria Schin.) Today, his son Daniel serves as Director of International and Public Affairs at the national office of B'nai B'rith.

The year 1972 was a noteworthy one. Dr. Cohen went before the Keene City Council that year and stated that all local religious denominations but the Jews had their own cemetery. In a unanimous vote, the city council awarded Congregation Ahavas Achim a portion of Monadnock View Cemetery in west Keene, not far from where the synagogue would be built.



The ground breaking for the synagogue's current home, April 9, 1972. From left to right: Arthur Cohen, Eddie Kapiloff, Julius Chomey, Leon Schor, Irving Kacanek, contractor Ivah W. Ballou, architect Robert Gorman.

And So The Rain Clouds Parted

Then on April 9, 1972, ground was broken on the Hastings Avenue property on a sunny spring afternoon. The first High Holy Day service in the new building took place in 1973, marking the dawn of the year 5732. Michael Kapiloff chanted a haftarah the same year, making him the first bar mitzvah in Congregation Ahavas Achim's new home. A few weeks later, Bruce Cohen was the second bar mitzvah.

The formal dedication service and banquet took place on June 2, 1974. About 150 invited guests and congregation members were in attendance for the occasion.

The Keene Sentinel said of the event, "Renewed peace in the

Middle East and the parting of rain clouds were just two of the blessings counted Sunday, as Jews and Christians shared in dedication of Keene's Community Synagogue."

The dedication service was conducted by Rabbi James M. Lebeau of Lowell, Mass. and Cantor Nathan Bryn of Patchogue, N.Y. The Torah was the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Brownstein of Greenfield, Mass. It was presented in thanks for the recovery of Keene resident Isadore Brownstein, Jack's brother.

Several locally prominent speakers were on hand. Mayor James Masiello announced, "I wish the whole city could get out here and see what you have accomplished, even if the wood is from Swanzey." Regional representative for the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Robert F. Babcock, said the synagogue is the newest addition to what over the years has been the "greatest growth in Keene," its numerous houses of worship.

The day was also utilized to make a few special awards for those who took T-square to paper and hammer to nail. Contractor Ivah Ballou was given an honor for outstanding workmanship on the project. A citation for craftsmanship went to William Cumpiano and Michael Millard of Richmond, who did the millwork and fashioned the pews. Keene architect Roy Palhof presented the awards and said the synagogue was the only building in Keene to be so recognized.

Also in attendance that day was Fannie L. Merritt who served a link to the Keene Jewish community's lengthy past. Her father was Samuel Finkelstein, in whose home services were held and the Torah was kept more than 70 years earlier.

Why was our building constructed in such a novel shape? Then synagogue President Dr. Arthur Cohen wrote in the dedication program, "The unusual design of our synagogue is to resemble a

tent, to represent the goodly tents of Jacob which served as the first synagogues for the Jews." In Numbers 24:5 it is written, "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places O Israel".

Pushing Forty

About that time, Ahavas Achim began to break the membership barrier of 40. As more Jews moved into the region, the percentage of those who were Orthodox decreased. In 1976, Ahavas Achim officially became a Conservative synagogue.

That same year, in keeping with the new affiliation, the synagogue by-laws were amended so that women could be included in a minyan "provided ten men are not present." Florence Lipsky was the first woman to be included in a minyan.

Shortly afterwards, Ahavas Achim bat mitzvahs began taking place. One of the first was an unusual multiple bat mitzvah of four women well past their 13th birthdays: Ruth Schor, Judith Tieger, Rena Resse and Ellen Post, all on June 2, 1979.

The Hebrew ladies' Aid Society continued as an active group. In 1975, its 50th year of operation, it continued to raise much needed money. That year the organization set up a booth at City Sidewalk Days (later the Keene Street Fair). There was also a Purim dinner, a bingo night and a physical fitness class. Among the longtime officials were Ruth Cohen, Edith Cohen and Florence Aliber Lipsky. The society was active until 1982 when women were first elected to the synagogue Board of Directors. The society has never officially been disbanded, although its purpose is being carried forward by a new Sisterhood group formed in 1999. (Florence Aliber Lipsky and Ruth Cohen also joined the new group, forging a link to the past.)



Rabbi David Ellenson leads the blessing over the wine around 1980.

By 1980, there were roughly 55 family units (families or individuals) who were members of Congregation Ahavas Achim.

Among those serving as officers were Treasurer Nat Cohn and Recording Secretary Gordon Stone. For years Leon Schor arranged seating for High Holy Day services and sold tickets at the Kosher Q. Also playing integral roles are the Cohens--Lester and Norma, and Rick and Jan--who for many years have been actively involved in searches for leadership and support of the congregation. Jack Tenofsky has served as president as well as ever reliable snowplower, groundskeeper and building doctor; the synagogue building will never crumble as long as Jack is around. And after eight days, male babies were in the fine hands of Dr. Cohen.

In the early 1980s, the congregation embarked on an experimental method of providing spiritual leadership. Student rabbis were recruited to officiate at bi-weekly services and special occasions. These included; David Ellenson, Debbie Hachen, Gary Schoenberg, Phil Cohen and Julie Gordon-Ginsberg.

A few years later it was decided to utilize part-time rabbis. Josh Segal and Kalman Newfield were among those who served for short periods. Because of the varied affiliations of the different rabbis, the synagogue ceased to be aligned with any specific branch of Judaism. During times when there was no rabbi on staff, Eddie Kapiloff and Ruth Schor taught Hebrew to children and conducted b'nei mizvot classes.

Approaching the Century Mark

A full-time rabbi, Barry Krieger, was hired in 1987. Rabbi Krieger served until 1996. Membership during that period increased dramatically, approaching 100 families and individuals. In 1990, the synagogue sponsored Russian Jewish immigrants to our area. The family of Alex and Ella Motorney was resettled in Keene. This received regional and statewide media attention. In April 1993, the Motorneys' relatives, Naum and Ella Litovsky and family, also were resettled in Keene with the help of the congregation.

The Nathan E. Cohen Memorial Lecture Series, named in memory of Arthur Cohen's father, was instituted in 1989. Notable speakers have included former ABC news correspondent Bill Seamans, author and professor Julius Lester, Congressman Dick Swett, prominent political figure John Rauh, former Governor Walter Peterson and Congressman Charles Bass. There has been substantial and wellplaced coverage of several speeches in *The*

Also giving Congregation Ahavas Achim visibility is a world-famous and highly respected group of musicians. Thanks to the remarkable acoustics of the synagogue's sanctuary, the Apple Hill Chamber Players based in nearby Nelson, New Hampshire and featuring music director, pianist and synagogue member Eric Stumacher, have recorded several compact discs in the tent-shaped building on Hastings Avenue. The players, who have performed in venues around the globe, routinely rehearse in the synagogue, where they also perform an annual benefit concert. An offshoot of Apple Hill, the Keene Chamber Orchestra, rehearses weekly in the synagogue and has performed concerts there as well.

In the fall of 1996, Paul Gordon, a student rabbi, became the congregation's spiritual leader. During Rabbi Gordon's tenure, Achavas Achim formally affiliated with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and is now officially a Reform congregation. After finishing his studies, Rabbi Gordon was succeeded by Rabbi Yael Lavi-Romer in the fall of 1999.

As we enter the 21st century, our congregation membership has wavered between 90 and 100 member units and the Sunday School has an average enrollment of roughly 50 students. The three most attended annual events are the Passover seder, the Kosher Q in summer and the Latke Blowout at Chanukah.

And to think it all started with a handful of itinerant peddlers meeting in a single room at the head of the square well over a century ago.

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