

Strength in Low Numbers

By Kaylene Johnson

Alaska's Jews may be isolated and few, but they strive to maintain their traditions

When Sukkot, the festival of tabernacles, comes around every fall, not everyone takes up David Crowson on his invitation to sleep in his family's Sukkah. And those who do often don't stay all night. For the seven days of the holiday, tradition requires they eat all their meals and mainly dwell in the Sukkah—a wooden “tent” with a roof open to the sky. But temperatures dip below freezing that time of year. And let's face it: when the desert fathers thought to commemorate Jews wandering the wilderness, they probably didn't envision temporary, open-air shelters in Fairbanks.

“I only had four takers this year,” Crowson said about his annual challenge. “Three were children but only one lasted the night. It's supposed to be joyful—not a survival situation.”

Weather presents just one of the many challenges the Jewish faithful face in Alaska as they struggle to sustain their culture and observe traditions in the north. There is the issue of lighting candles for Shabbat, a weekly celebration that lasts from sunset Friday to sundown Saturday. Tradition says to light candles an hour after sunset—but what happens when the sun doesn't set in the



Relatives and friends lift up Levi Barsis in a traditional dance of celebration during his bar mitzvah at the Kenai Senior Center in 2007. Liam Ferguson [RIGHT] sports a Star of David on his face at the Festival of Lights celebration in Anchorage.

summer? Or doesn't rise in the winter? Reform congregations usually designate a time—say 7:30 p.m. More orthodox observances, however, require that candles be lit only after sunset. Jews in Barrow, where the sun never sets in the summer, might observe Shabbat as close to Anchorage time as possible.

Alaska's Jews face challenges most other Jews have never imagined. How do you observe High Holy Days when there are only two rabbis in a state near-

ly three times the size of Texas? Traveling from remote places to the few urban synagogues here poses another dilemma. Jacqueline Barsis of Sterling, a mother of three, eventually grew tired of sending her children to Anchorage once a month to learn Hebrew.

“Rabbi Greenberg (of the Lubavitch Jewish Center of Alaska) would meet my son and then daughter at the airport, and he was wonderful,” she said. But because the children each had to study the lan-





Congregants pass the Torah at the dedication of their synagogue—a 13- by 18-foot cabin—in Kenai. The congregation held services in the basement of a Catholic church for 15 years before the cabin was built.

guage for at least a year before their bar and bat mitzvahs, the cost of monthly plane tickets from Kenai to Anchorage was getting out of hand.

So, with the help of a rabbi from Seattle, Barsis learned Hebrew so that she could teach it to her third child at home.

Alaska has an estimated 4,000-6,000 Jews, a group that makes up less than one percent of the state's population. Small numbers make it hard for a congregation to find a permanent home. The Kenai congregation met in the basement of a Catholic church for 15 years. Today the congregation owns a 13- by 18-foot cabin that serves as a synagogue, but it has no running water. They are raising funds to pay for indoor plumbing.

Although being Jewish may be more difficult in Alaska than other areas of the country, a recent study showed that Alaska Jews are more observant than their Lower-48 counterparts. While only 27 percent of Jews nationwide belong to



synagogues, 42 percent of Alaska's Jews belong to the tiny smattering of synagogues across the state.

Fur Traders and Matzah

The first Jewish influence was felt here long before Alaska became a state. In 1728, Danish explorer Vitus Bering captained a Russian expedition that led to the permanent settlement of Russians in Alaska. Jewish fur trappers accompanied Bering and were later involved in the Russian-American Co.

By the 1850s and 1860s, Jewish merchants from San Francisco had developed strong commercial ties with the Russian-American Co., and they lobbied California Sen. Cornelius Cole for an exclusive concession to do business in Alaska. When the merchants discovered that the Russian government planned to sell the Alaska territory, Cole took the information to his former classmate—U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward—who orchestrated the purchase of Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million—less than

Carrie Plant, a teacher at the Joy Greisen Jewish Education Center, helps students light candles during Hanukkah. The school, housed at the Beth Shalom synagogue in East Anchorage, is open to children of all faiths and aims to educate the community about Jewish traditions and culture.



COURTESY MERRILL S. SIKORSKI

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two cents an acre. At a ceremony on October 18, 1867, Benjamin Levi, a U.S. soldier and a Jew, raised the American flag in Sitka to commemorate the purchase.

After Alaska became a U.S. Territory, Jewish merchants Lewis Gerstle and Louis Sloss purchased the interests of the former Russian-American Co. and changed its name to the Alaska Commercial Co.—the same A.C. stores that still exist in many Bush communities. Back then, the U.S. Government gave



Alaska Airlines flew 40,000 Jewish refugees from Yemen to Israel between 1948 and 1950. A new museum, expected to open in Anchorage in 2009, will tell that story and share other remarkable ties the state has to Jewish history.

the company exclusive rights to harvest fur-bearing seals from the Pribilof and Aleutian islands. In return, the company was required to help develop the territory. Along with providing merchandise for trappers, gold seekers and explorers, Alaska Commercial Co. stores became hubs of community life in villages across the state, serving as post offices, courtrooms, wedding chapels and banks.

In 1900, 33 years after the purchase of Alaska, Sam Bayles stepped ashore in Nome with the state's first Torah in his arms. The Torah is a sacred scroll made of sheepskin that contains the first five books of the Bible handwritten in He-

brew. Bayles had obtained his Torah from his father—a rabbi from Lithuania—and its arrival marked the beginning of a Hebrew congregation in what was then a bustling gold-rush town. One hundred years later, that historic Torah was flown back to Nome from its current home at Anchorage's Beth Shalom synagogue for a centennial celebration of the founding of Nome's congregation.

Beth Shalom lends the Torah for various events across the state, such as

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bar and bat mitzvahs, but the sacred text must be hand-carried. Getting it to Nome required two airline seats—one for the Torah and one for Michael Silverbook, a Beth Shalom board member who accompanied it.

Like Sam Bayles and other pioneers, many Jews have come to Alaska seeking their fortunes, or at least gainful employment. Some have stayed and prospered, carving a life on the Last Frontier. Others left, in part, because of the difficulties in keeping the faith.

“You might say most people don't come to Alaska to affirm their Jewish identity,” said Steve Dulin, a lay leader in Ketchikan. Dulin and his family open their home to others in the community for Shabbat and holiday ceremonies. “We believe that every Jewish home is a temple and every Jewish table is an altar. It's a difficult place for anyone who wants to be observant.” His family stays kosher with vegetarian fare, and by occasionally ordering specialty foods—such as kosher meat—from Seattle.

Today, there are five synagogues in the state, including two in Anchorage—Beth Shalom, a Reform congregation that is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and Shomrei Ohr-Chabad and the Lubavitch Jewish Center of Alaska. In the Lubavitch tradition, the rabbi practices orthodoxy but the congregation is open to all Jewish affiliations. These Anchorage congregations have the only two synagogues in Alaska with rabbis.

The Or HaTzaron synagogue in Fair-

A Few Notable Jewish Alaskans

Robert (1878-1974) and **Jessie Bloom** (1887-1980) formed a Jewish congregation in Fairbanks in 1904. Robert Bloom helped establish Ladd Air Force Base, which later became Fort Wainwright. He was also one of the founders of the University of Alaska. Jesse Spiro Bloom started the first Girl Scout chapter in Alaska. Together the Blooms founded the Fairbanks Airplane Co. and were active in conservation and wilderness preservation efforts in Alaska.

Warren N. Cuddy, (1886-1951) lawyer, banker, and businessman, arrived in Valdez in 1914 and worked as a grocery clerk until he established his law practice. Moving to Anchorage with his family in 1933, he became president of the First National Bank. His son, Dan Cuddy, grew the bank into the largest Alaskan-owned bank, with assets of \$1.8 billion. Cuddy continues to use his resources to make contributions to Alaska's public education system, including its universities.

Leopold David (1878-1924) became the first mayor of Anchorage in 1921 and was re-elected in 1922. He was first employed by the Alaska Central Railroad in Seward. He later took up a law partnership with L.V. Ray of Seward.

Ernest Gruening (1887-1974) was a leader in the drive to gain Alaska statehood. He was appointed first governor to the Territory of Alaska in 1939 and elected to the U.S. Senate in 1958, one year before Alaska became a state.

Zachary J. Loussac (1882-1965) was an immigrant from Russia who prospered in Anchorage with drugstores and investments in gold and coal mines. Active in civic affairs, Loussac was elected mayor of Anchorage in 1948. He established a trust fund that enabled Anchorage to build a new library building in Anchorage.

Jay Rabinowitz (1927-2001) was sworn in as an Alaska Supreme Court justice on March 4, 1965. Rabinowitz remained on the state Supreme Court for 32 years. The Rabinowitz Courthouse in downtown Fairbanks is named after him.

Dave Rose (1937-2006) was the first director of the Alaska Permanent Fund, the first chairman of the Anchorage Assembly, and possibly the first Jew to open a kosher delicatessen in Alaska.

banks, Sterling's Briat Elhoim synagogue and the Sukkat Shalom synagogue in Juneau are Reform congregations led by laymen. They depend on rabbis to travel from Anchorage or Seattle to help celebrate the High Holy Days. In places that have no synagogue—including Nome, Bethel, Ketchikan and Sitka—the faithful meet in each other's homes to celebrate Shabbat and other Jewish festivals.

During Michael Oblath's recent installation as the new rabbi for Beth Shalom in Anchorage, he was surprised that Gov.

Sarah Palin and Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich dropped in to wish him well. Oblath, who hails from California, said, “I doubt (Gov.) Arnold (Schwarzenegger) would have done that.”

The other full-time rabbi in the state is Yosef Greenberg of Congregation Shomrei Ohr-Chabad.

A Rich History

The new Alaska Jewish Historical Museum and Community Center is expected to open in Anchorage in 2009. Along with stories about Jewish fur traders and gold-rush pioneers, the museum's exhibits will include a replica of a modified C-46 where visitors can learn about Operation Magic Carpet, during which more than 40,000 Jewish refugees were flown by Alaska Airlines from Yemen to Israel between 1948 and 1950. Another exhibit will tell the remarkable story of the 12-day journey of Seward resident Jack Johnson, who helped pilot the *Exodus*, a ship that attempted to move 4,500 Jewish refugees from France to Palestine in 1947. The British Navy turned back the *Exodus*, killing a crew member and injuring dozens of passengers. The event garnered worldwide attention and is credited with helping turn international opinion in favor of the formation of Israel.

The museum will also chronicle a darker chapter of Alaska Jewish history. Nearly seventy years ago, Jewish refugees appealed to the United States for entry in an attempt to escape Nazi Germany. But a plan to loosen immigration quotas on Jewish refugees coming to Alaska—The King-Havener Bill of 1940—failed to gain the support of Congress, in part because Alaska residents strongly opposed it.

Greenberg, whose congregation is helping to found the museum, hopes it will be a place where visitors learn the value of diversity. “Education brings awareness, knowledge and understanding, which are necessary steps in creating tolerance within a community,” he said. “We want this museum to build a cultural bridge of tolerance and appreciation.”

Many Jewish Alaskans find that an unfettered lifestyle on the Last Frontier compensates for the loneliness of being a minority in a remote place. Tara Witterholt even sees advantages to living in an independent-minded place like Alaska. “Being Jewish is challenging in the sense that there aren't very many of us,” she said. “But it's also good, in the sense that

you have the opportunity to create your own identity.”

An essential part of creating and nurturing that identity for any Jew, anywhere, is educating young Jews about their faith, heritage and culture. Most of the major Jewish congregations in the state have religious and Hebrew schools, and the Lubavitch Center in Anchorage offers a pre-school and a summer day camp where Jewish children can spend time together.

The Joy Greisen Jewish Education Center at Beth Shalom in Anchorage extends those programs even further, to educate non-Jews about the faith and culture. Witterholt is one of the administrators of that congregation's pre-school and after-school programs and vacation and summer day camps. Along with arts and crafts, playtime and sing-alongs, kids of all faiths learn about Jewish holidays and traditions, get some basic Hebrew language skills and celebrate Shabbat every Friday afternoon.

Not every congregation has the resources to reach out to the non-Jewish community in such an organized way. Paula Bute of Kenai said it has been hard on her kids to be Jewish in an environment that is primarily Christian, but Bute has started her own outreach program, volunteering to teach her children's classmates about Jewish holidays such as Chanukah.

Like Jacqueline Barsis from Sterling, Bute taught her children Hebrew at home. “I would have much rather dropped my kids off at a Hebrew school and let someone else do it,” she said. “It was hard work for all of us but, of course, I wanted to do it.”

Bute said her decision to stay in Alaska more than 30 years had little to do with her religious beliefs or cultural upbringing. And some of the inconvenience—like living far away from extended family—is common to many Alaskans, not just Jews. A tiny religious community is one of the sacrifices she made for life on the Last Frontier.

“I grew up in a tough neighborhood in Brooklyn,” she said. “I'm thankful that my kids were able to grow up in a place where their only fear was meeting a moose on their way to the school bus.” ■

Kaylene Johnson's book *Valley Girl*, a biography of Gov. Sarah Palin, will be released this spring by Epicenter Press. She lives and writes in Wasilla.

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