

The Jews of Nantasket
It is good to be Jewish in Nantasket

Good evening and good shabbos ladies and gentleman and welcome to Temple Israel of Nantasket. First let me thank all of the people who made this evening possible. They are Alison Schnipper, Alyssa Bickoff, Amy Imber, Debby Bickoff and Amy Albert-Schnipper together they helped make this evening possible and the food plentiful. Speaking of food: tonight's Oneg Shabbat is sponsored by Jeff and Jodi Millen, Arnold and Melissa Gilbert, the Imber family and the Appelstein, Greenberg, Veaner and Long families.

This talk is part of a yearlong celebration called, Gathering History at 100 in honor of the first hundred years of organized Jewish prayer in Nantasket. Speaking of prayer, since we just finished Friday night services I will start my talk with this week's torah portion.

We and all synagogues around the world will be reading this same section. The name of the section is Eikev which means "Because". In this section Moses goes over some parts of the story of the Exodus and then explains in greater detail what will and will not happen if the Jews do or do not follow G-d's commandments. Following the commandments brings many benefits and not following presents a much less rosy future for the Jewish people. One of the commandments is Well, to build a synagogue – I am happy they did – especially this one.. And it is my hypothesis from my research that it was a very good thing as it created a unique environment that helped American Judaism grow to what it is today.

But I digress; we all know that Nantasket is a gem, those of us who pray here know that this place is a gem – a gem that needs a little help by the way, but still a gem. Well, gems exist in a place, and place in Hebrew is Macom – and Macom is another word for G-d. So, I believe we are in G-d's place and let me tell you how that came to be.

The Jews of Nantasket is a strange and wonderful story about a people, a place, four distinct times and a legacy that lives on to this day. My conclusion is that Nantasket is and always has been a wonderful place to be Jewish. So let's start the story.

One of the first things that made Nantasket such a wonderful place for Jews in my mind happened in Colonial times. At that time the citizens of Hull allowed a group of Quakers to settle here, a most unusual decision for the time. Then again in 1888 when Hull's resident poet, John Boyle O'Reilly, his home is now the Hull Library, spoke about diversity and the need to accept all "these men are neither Dutch nor Irish – they are Americans. He was speaking about men who had helped on the lifesaving mission, the message was clear, all are welcome here in Hull. This perspective is punctuated further when we learn that the first African American to be admitted to a Yacht club was admitted to the Hull Yacht Club in 1881.

This acceptance of diversity is important because it was not the same in many other communities. For many years Jews were not allowed to easily if all to buy land in towns such as Hingham Cohasset and Scituate. Hull was one place for Jews to buy land, build homes and be. And be they did. But who, when and why. When did it all start.

To the best of my knowledge it starts around 1872 when the Department Store giant R H Stearns bought land on what is now Route 228. This land was close to both Hingham and Cohasset but it was in Hull. Mr. Stearns, a German Jew, was very successful and he built a big house. When he moved away from the area his home became the Villa Napoli. Today the grounds of his estate are condos.

Mr. Stearns seems not to have been the lone Jew here. A Nathan Rosenfield is listed as owning property on Z Street and the Bay on a map from 1895. I cannot confirm that he was Jewish – but according to 1880 census records there is a Nathan Rosenfield from Germany who came here in 1880. Nathan named one daughter Emma and another one named Fannie. It all sounds Jewish but more checking must be done.

The next mention of Jews in Nantasket is in a report on this property where they note that: "as early as 1903 it appears tht there was a small colony of Jewish cottage owners located at Sunnyside." . In the same note it says "A rabbi is listed just north of Skull Head in the 1895 atlas." The next listings of Jews in Nantasket come with families visiting and staying at either the Rockland House or the Atlantic house. Additional listing begin to show up in 1906 with notices

of Jewish families visiting for the summer, ads for rooms to rent, lots for sale, and stores being opened in Nantasket start appearing in the Jewish Advocate, Boston's Jewish newspaper of record.

The first listing I found was of Mr. and Mrs. A. Abraham and daughter of Westland Ave will spend the summer in Nantasket. This was a listing in something called Local Lines in the Boston Daily Globe of July 8, 1906. This is followed on August 20, 1909 with a notice in the Jewish Advocate that Mr. and Mrs. Charles Reinherz with their son Sidney Paul are spending the summer at the Rockland House, Nantasket. Beginning September 1st,

There is a note on a survey of Historical properties by Mass Historical Commission that "By 1903 the area was largely settled by German Jews, the only such concentration in Hull at this time. (Remember our friend Nathan – he was from Germany). The stories were not just for those looking to live here. I have one story of Jews coming to Nantasket in 1910 with a story of Orphan's Day. In this article we learn about children from the Leopold More Home coming to Paragon Park and having a fish dinner at the Nantasket Hotel. In 1913 when we are told that Mrs. I Siskind is spending several weeks in Nantasket Beach.

This is the first stage of development of the Jewish community and it was a golden age. This is the time when land here was open, inexpensive and a great many Jews were gaining success in America. For context you should know that the first great migration of Jews came in 1844 and they were – German Jews just like RH. And Nantasket was known as a place for millionaires. RH was certainly one of them.

These first Jews were wealthy and the cool sea air was as they say it was a mechaye –something that gives great joy. –they settled around Kenberma, Warren and Coburn Streets into what became known as Cadillac alley because of all the chauffeured Cadillac's and Lincolns that were always at the ready. Besides Cadillac road it was also known as gossip alley because ladies from other neighborhoods would walk by and ask the chauffeurs about this or that trying to gather information on the rich and famous. I may have forgotten to mention who some of these rich and famous were. Well there were the Mayer's, as in Metro Goldwyn Mayer, the Lowe's of EM

Lowes , the Grossmans' as in lumber and Envelopes and our present State Treasurer, the Wyners as in Shawmut Woolen Mills and countless others.

It is during this golden age that this building was built; finished in 1921 it stood then as it does today, proudly witnessing that there is a Jewish community here. It also helped set the stage in a breaking down of the walls that separated one cultural group of Jews one from another – but this is a topic for another time.

The next phase in the development of the Jews of Nantasket comes in the late 1930's when upwardly mobile families, recovering from the depression, were looking to partake in the American idea of vacationing. What better place than Nantasket, it was an hour's ride by steamship from either Boston or Dorchester accessible by rail and later by express bus. Besides Paragon Park, which opened in 1906, was well established by then as a great place for summer time fun.

This second group tended to buy homes as groups of families, like in my own case The Israel and Flora Appelstein's who had six kids got together with Flora's brother Louis Long his wife Mary and their four kids to buy a cottage on T Street. With ten kids it seemed like a better investment than sending them to camp. This pattern was repeated all over the alphabet streets in particular but in other places as well. There were of course during this as during previous times, renters who stayed for a week or two, perhaps the whole summer, but the majority of the new Jews in Nantasket were looking to own their own beach house.

With this second group the number of businesses servicing the summer Jews grew. Deli's, bakeries and butchers from Dorchester started opening summer shops to serve their customers.

The third wave of Jews arrives around 1948 with the K V Woolsey development in the Newport Street area on the bay side behind what is today's Riddles. Some 250 homes were built for veterans returning from the second World War. These young men were getting married and starting families and the Federal government through the GI bill was happy to finance their purchase of a new home. Many of them had known about Nantasket as children when they came

to the beach or Paragon Park. Many of them also were Jewish. So many of them were Jewish that by the time their children were in high school – the 1960's - upwards of 50% of students were Jewish. Compare this to one man's recollection that in 1941 he was the only Jewish boy in the third grade. More, in 1948 there were perhaps 10 Jewish families who lived here year round. By the 1960's this had all changed. Before we talk about the next change and the building that marks that change, I need to talk about one of the most dynamic, innovative, and just downright fun places to go if you were a Jewish young adult, The Nantasket Youth Center.

It seems that with all these families and kids coming here in the summers that there needed to be a place for them to go. There is an uncorroborated story about some young Jewish kids being less than respectful to a local police officer who brought them down to the police station. Parents were called, the problem was defined, too many kids, not enough to do. Time to build a youth center.

And they did, they built the Nantasket Youth Center which opened in 1948. It quickly became the place to be. Young women were allowed to walk there at night because that was where the Jewish boys were. Activities galore filled like dances, classes, plays and services filled the time. Reports show that upwards to 1,000 young adults would attend services on a Friday night – not so bad...

The Youth Center made a very clear statement as well as providing a place to go. It said Nantasket welcomed Jews of all backgrounds. It said that the blending of Jewish culture that would lead us into suburbanization was okay. As a people we were transitioning from small groups who were separated by their European roots to a new American Jewish community, Nantasket helped us through that transition.

Jews were here in the summer and they were now here in the winter. They owned businesses, they sent their children to Hull schools, they became active in town politics, and as they say in biblical speak, they became great in number. According to material gathered for the 50th anniversary of Temple Beth Sholom, there were over 600 families living here year round in 1958. A Big change. And yet unlike the scene playing out in other communities around America they were accepted. Sure there were incidents and there were as there always have been bigots, but in general Nantasket was a great place to be Jewish. Many of the people I have interviewed in my

research have said point blank, being Jewish in Nantasket was better than being Jewish anywhere else. Better than Dorchester. Better than Mattapan. My sense is that it was one if not the nicest places in all of America to be Jewish during that time. To meet the needs of this growing population, Temple Beth Sholom was built and opened in 1961. So just to point out, three buildings, three organizations, one purpose, make Nantasket a friendly place to be Jewish.

After the Youth Center was built and it had become the place to meet other Jewish kids the movement to start a year round synagogue started culminating in Temple Beth Sholom which opened in 1961. But before that happened, there was a fourth migration of Jews to Nantasket. Many in this group had been going to Revere Beach, but as they say “Paul Revere rode very fast, the town that bears his name also becomes a very fast town, not the place for a family vacation. With this change in Revere, hundreds of families started coming to Nantasket. A great many of these families rented rooms with kitchen privileges -one shelf in the refrigerator and a hot plate. This made meals a little difficult but they found that since so many had come before, there were lots of stores and restaurants to provide kosher style meals and supplies. Within a short time many of these renters decided to buy homes as there was already a good sized Jewish population and one temple built and another on the way.

The new temple provided a place for large social events, classrooms for Hebrew school and so much more.

A few years later, in an act to cement the Jewish character and our right to be here, the street that this building was on, Wilson Street, was changed to Hadassah Way. Interesting note, Jerusalem road in Cohasset was named by a group of Christians – not in honor of its relationship to Judaism.

And that is a broad timeline, outline of the history of the Jews of Nantasket. It is a wonderful story, and a story that has few equals in America. A place where there were a lot of Jews and a community that welcomed and accepted them. A unique event in history.

But this is only the beginning of telling the story of the Jews of Nantasket. To this beginning YOU must add your stories, your remembrances, and the details. Does your families’ history fit

into one of the four migrations? Do you have documents that could add detail and context to this timeline? If you do please dig them out, scan your old photos. If you were married or had a life cycle event here that shows that it is Jewish, please upload them along with any stories you might have about being Jewish in Nantasket. If you are not Jewish we want your stories and pictures also. Just the other day I was talking to one a wonderful Italian man who told me a story of one of the Grossman's who collected rags, oh so many years ago. If you want thee will be an oral history topic outline so you and someone perhaps, a grandchild, can do an oral history and upload that to the website. All materials will be reviewed before going public on the website. Of course what you post to Facebook will go public.

Speaking of being reviewed, we are not alone in this endeavor, the American Jewish Historical Society New England Archives has set up a Jews of Nantasket Archive, and the first item to go into this archive is this Golden Book documenting the first organized services here in Hull.

I have spoken long enough and you are hopefully hungry and full of stories to tell. SO let's do the blessings over the wine and a challah and then go downstairs to share stories and eat. The downstairs is organized into six areas: This building, Temple Israel of Nantasket, The Youth center, Temple Beth Sholom, the Jewish families of Nantasket, places in Nantasket, and the History of the Jews in Nantasket. Since it is Shabbat we cannot write but we have made up cards for you to take home with you to show you how to contact us. Please take one or more. Let's get the details of the story before it is too late – Because it is the right thing to do. and together we will leave a legacy of a story that needs to be told.

Before I go let me introduce Susan Neiman, Susan has most graciously volunteered to take the leadership in bringing this story to life as I am leaving a week from Monday for two years in the Peace Corps in Armenia.

Thank you...and Shabbat Shalom