

In Maine, the 'invisible' Jews of rural America discuss their unique challenge

Can Jewish communities outside the mainstream, off the beaten paths of Maine, flourish? Jewish shepherds, tree farmers and rural rabbis met recently to explore that question.

By Brian Schaefer 17:52 21.06.15 0

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WATERVILLE, Maine – With her daughter perched on her hip, Margaret Hathaway spoke about how raising goats helped her connect to Judaism's agricultural traditions; the next day, Jack Weinstein, a tree farmer, spoke about the symbolism of trees in Judaism. Both talks were part of the Maine Conference for Jewish Life, held here last weekend on the quaintly colonial campus of Colby College.

Though part of a robust program that included cultural conversations, political debates, serious text study and a keynote address by author Lois Lowry, those two sessions nodded to the uniquely rural nature of the gathering, where much talk centered on the unique challenges of maintaining Jewish communities in a state where congregations are few, small and far between.

"You have to be very intentional about being Jewish in a place where there are so few of you," said participant Ellen Freed, who belongs to Congregation Beth El in Augusta. "There's something really peaceful about coming to a conference like this where you don't have to explain yourself," she added.

The leader of Congregation Beth El, Rabbi Erica Asch, 37, was one of the conference's three organizers, along with Rabbi Rachel Isaacs, 32, and Isaac's wife, Melanie Weiss, 31, a director of Jewish education in Portland and Waterville, all of whom moved to Maine within the last four years, drawn by the small but spirited communities that dot the Northeast. The conference's inaugural outing last year drew over 100 people and exposed a thirst for more communal gatherings. This year's conference increased attendance to over 170 participants, feeding a sense of momentum.

"We can provide ambitious programming that individually we're not capable of doing," explained Isaacs of the collective effort. Isaacs serves as the rabbi of the 100 year-old Beth Israel Congregation in Waterville and is the Jewish chaplain and an assistant professor of Jewish studies at Colby. "It's a waste to struggle alone when we can do really incredible things when we come together in a central location."

"I feel like we're invisible"

According to the 2013 Pew Research study, 49 percent of the American Jewish population lives in urban areas, 47 percent live in suburban areas and 4 percent reside in rural locations, which is most of Maine. Another study that year by the Jewish Federation of North America placed the Jewish population in Maine at 13,890, or 1 percent of the state's population and 0.2 percent of the U.S. Jewish population.

With those statistics, Maine Jews receive very little support and attention from mainstream American-Jewish institutions. "I feel like we're invisible," said Weiss, who, prior to moving to Maine, experienced American Judaism primarily through a New York lens, "which makes it even more important that we do stuff like this."

Isaacs, who was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2011, certainly never thought she'd count herself in those numbers. "I never anticipated leaving the New York area," she told a group during one conference session. "As far as I was concerned, Jewish life was in two places: New York and Israel." But during her last year in rabbinic school, she served as a student rabbi in Waterville and became unexpectedly attached. "When it came time for placement season, all the jobs that I thought I wanted in places like Boston, Chicago, New York didn't look as appealing anymore because I had fallen in love with this congregation in Waterville," she said.

The Maine Conference for Jewish Life is not the first attempt to connect small Jewish communities from around the region. In 1983, a similar annual event was started in Lyndonville, Vermont that brought together far-flung congregations of all denominations, attracting upwards of 200 attendees each year for over a decade.

"For us it was a matter of getting our children together with other Jews," said Deena Weinstein, a longtime Maine resident (and wife of the aforementioned tree farmer) who attended that conference for years and led storytelling sessions at the new Waterville conferences. The Vermont conference lasted into the 1990s and then faded. "We didn't have another generation that picked it up," she said.

Not the only Jewish kids around

Mirroring the broader Maine demographics, the Jewish population skews older and is less financially secure than the national average. Acknowledging the class issue, Isaacs pointed out that, "Most of our budget is for scholarships because there's a huge need for it," she said. "I'm proud that regardless of people's economic background they could feel fully included in a Jewish experience, which I think is becoming quite rare."

As for bringing down the average age, Isaacs took inspiration from her dual responsibilities at the congregation and the college to play matchmaker between a community in need of youthful energy and students in need of a home away from home, enhancing participation in both places. In the nearly four years since she and Weiss arrived, the Waterville congregation has grown from 25 to 65 families and Colby Hillel, which had five active Jewish students when they arrived, now regularly attracts 30-40 students for weekly Shabbat dinners.

"They have created this amazing Jewish community around themselves," said Sarah Rockford, who graduated from Colby this spring, of Isaacs and Weiss. "It's cool to be a part of that." Rockford attended last year's conference and was surprised by the diversity and vivacity of a community that hadn't been visible to her previously. This year, she was a volunteer staff member. "It's validating to feel like you don't have to be in New York to be Jewish or to be part of an interesting Jewish community," she said.

Despite the shot of spirituality and sense of connection that the conference provides, it's over in less than 48 hours. To spread that energy throughout the year, Isaacs has worked with Colby to create the Center for Small Town Jewish Life, which will facilitate collaborations between the Jewish communities on campus, in town and across the region. The center is due to launch later this year.

Throughout the weekend, a dozen or so young children buzzed about. The Weinstein's daughter and son-in-law attended the conference as well, along with their son – three generations of Maine Jews ensuring that the community carries on. "That's my hope, that this continues so that the children will get this," said Deena Weinstein. "They'll realize they're not the only Jewish kids around."