

**Right:** Rabbi Eliyahu Shain, from New York, in Anchorage to perform a ceremony, flew to Knik Glacier and Lake George for sightseeing. **Far right:** "Colonel" Solomon Ripinsky (center) operated a trading post and acted as postmaster at Chilkat, a cannery village near Haines from 1894 to 1899. **Below:** A 1910 walrus-tusk Rosh Hashana (New Year) greeting from Nome carved by "Happy Jack" Angokwazhuk shows a couple believed to have run a store there. Gift of the Kanofsky Family in memory of Minnie Kanofsky.



## COMMUNITY

# THE FREEZING FEW

JEWISH HERITAGE IN ALASKA

by Michael Engelhard

“YOU NEED NINE GUYS on a field to play baseball and 10 Jews in a room to say Kaddish,” Joel Fleischman explained in an episode of the 1990s cult sitcom *Northern Exposure*. The young New York doctor practicing in small-town “Cicely,” Alaska, nearly despaired over finding his *minyan*, the quorum for the traditional Mourner’s Prayer. His plight, though fictional, hinted at truth. Alaska’s roughly 6,000 Jews, mostly clustering in Fairbanks, Juneau, and Anchorage, go to great lengths for their faith, or a good bagel.

Jason Ellis, who owns Mo’s Deli and Catering in Anchorage, recalls a rabbi friend of his father’s flying in from Seattle for his bar mitzvah. And East Coast specialty-foods shipments sometimes take weeks. Unfazed, visitors of “destination ceremonies”—weddings or mitzvahs—combine rites of passage with kosher Inside Passage cruises. Their hyperborean hosts learn Hebrew by Skype, prepare halibut gefilte fish, and attend services wearing XTRATUFs. The high latitudes gum up devotional works: believers light post-sunset midsummer Shabbat

candles inconsistently, after midnight (meaning, on Saturdays), or synced with Jerusalem. Before Anchorage got its ritual *mikvah* bathhouse, the *Rebbe’s* wife went monthly to Seattle for immersions. She once switched to a local lake where an ornery cow moose guarding twins delayed the sacrament.

Surprising to Outside Jews and Alaskan gentiles, the Diaspora’s tides lapped Arctic margins. Hebrew-Inupiat unions and offspring have been toasted. Seders in Utqiagvik and Kotzebue commemorated the Exodus. Congregants also gather in Sitka, Homer, Ketchikan,

Soldotna, Kenai, Haines, and Bethel, their roots running as deep as any non-Native ones there.

During the 1850s and '60s, San Francisco Jewish furriers with *Rossiyskaya-Amerikanskaya Kompaniya* (RAK) ties visiting regularly pushed for the territory's purchase. At the transfer in Sitka, Benjamin Levy lowered the two-headed eagle before hoisting Old Glory. Abraham Cohen, blown in from Thuringia via California, under municipal restrictions made "Pure Beer" at Alaska's first brewery "Expressly and Exclusively for Medicinal, Mechanical and Scientific Purposes;" two daughters were postmistresses in Sitka, perhaps the country's earliest. The Native pupils of Haines schoolteacher and Jacob-of-all-trades Sol Ripinsky spoke English with a Polish accent. Lewis Gerstle and Louis Sloss' Alaska Commercial Company bought RAK warehouses, wharves, and ships. (Their corporate heirs operate 33 rural general stores.) Louis Rotman, seeking furs, marrying locally, in 1932 started Selawik's trading post and later a Kotzebue grocery still existing. Dawson's 200 Jews included Sid Grauman, future owner of Hollywood's Chinese Theater. When Fortuna moved on, Max Hirshberg, intermittently snow-blind, raced breakup on the Yukon River to Nome—1,100



**Left:** Displays at the Alaska Jewish Museum in Anchorage.

miles—by bicycle. In town, Wyatt Earp's gambling common-law Jewish wife Josephine "Sadie" Marcus helped the ex-Marshall manage the Dexter Saloon. Sam Bayles stepped onto the same shore cradling Alaska's first Torah, which his Lithuanian father, Rabbi Afroim Hessel Bayles, had entrusted to him. The Bayles Torah briefly returned for the centennial, paraded to the beach where again the *shofar* ram-horn's droning summoned the faithful to prayer.

After Germany's heinous Kristallnacht, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior backed a proposal to open the Alaska Territory to Europe's persecuted Jewry, an idea the Russian-Jewish-émigré and Fairbanksian Abe Spring already had floated in 1906. It died in Congress in 1940—as would six million overseas—when schmucks objected. "Alaska wants no misfits" and "Keep Alaska American"

the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* opined in a preview of current, national sentiments. Jewish-Alaskans nonetheless influenced post-WWII society. The "father of Alaskan statehood," territorial governor Ernest Gruening, became the state's first U.S. senator; Jay Rabinowitz for decades ruled at Alaska's Supreme Court; and one of Anchorage's three Jewish mayors, Russian-born Zachariah Loussac funded Anchorage's first spacious library.

Jewish-Alaskan culture, far from conspicuous, today thrives even at 40 below. The world's northernmost synagogue, Or HaTzafon ("Light of the North") in Fairbanks, screened a Jewish Film Festival. On its hoodies, replacing Polaris, the Star of David blazes above a moose. The reformed and orthodox alike call themselves "The Frozen Chosen," yet Rabbi Yosef Greenberg deems Anchorage's climate

less harsh than Chicago's. Having founded the Lubavitch Jewish Center—a campus comprising a Chasidic outreach house, synagogue, the Alaska Jewish Museum, and, finally, a mikvah bath—he administers to outlier families too. The center hosts Hebrew crash-courses, braided-challah Shabbos-bread bakes, girls' and boys' bat and bar mitzvah clubs, and Camp Gan "Izzy" Israel, where kids stage talent shows, study the Torah, and kayak on Eklutna Lake.

Greenberg's museum exhibits honor the enclave of Michael Chabon's 2008 novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. Chabon spun history's what-if into a smart whodunit set in Sitka, a Jewish two-million-people metropolis in the wake of fledgling Israel's 1948 collapse.

A Panhandle humanitarian haven for Semitic industry was always a pie in the sky. But *machers* (movers, shakers) shaped a land of if not milk and honey then lox and caribou knishes inversely to how few Frozen Chosen chose to make it their home. ♡

**A big klezmer fan, the author was disappointed to hear that half of Alaska's only secular, Yiddish-music group—a duo—left for the Lower 48.**