



Can Historic Pocomoke Shul Survive?

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(Photo Justin Tsucalas)

Pocomoke City, Md.

A small-town shul struggles to survive.

Judi Scher doesn't like talking about it much. It's, well, personal. You can see it in her hesitant eye contact and halting speech. Not really other folks' business.

But just about every single day, on the way to her family's store in the mornings and on the way home in the evenings, Mrs. Scher drives by Congregation of Israel, a red-brick, Colonial-style synagogue surrounded by Episcopal and Methodist cemeteries in this sleepy, two-stoplight town, and prays.

She generally parks her car near the quiet corner of Third Street and Linden Avenue, walks up to the small, unobtrusive *shul* with a busted Star of David neon fixture, lightly touches the building's weathered *mezuzah* and presses her fingertips to her lips. Then, she peeks around, just to make sure no neighbors are watching, and stands there on the steps, *davening* for a fairly short spell.

It is Mrs. Scher's spiritual encounter ritual, her place and time to chat with God, even if the house of worship is locked up, deserted and bereft of congregants.

"I usually say the *Shema* and prayers for everyone," said Mrs. Scher, a Baltimore native who attended the Bais Yaakov School for Girls and Beth Tfiloh Community Day School before graduating from Western High School. "When my dad [the late Samuel Edlavitch] was sick, I went over there three times a day."

But with small-town pragmatism, pluck and quiet stubbornness, the result of living in this Lower Eastern Shore river city of around 4,000 souls for the past 27 years, Mrs. Scher denied that the decision not to hold High Holiday services at Congregation of Israel this year — for the first time in the Conservative synagogue's 130-year history — nor the shul's murky future in general are emotionally distressing for her.

"They have to do what they have to do," she said of the shul's leadership, which largely consists of her husband, Marc, and Dr. Barry Spinak, a longtime congregant who now lives in Bainbridge Island, Wash. "I don't get attached to buildings. Things move on and change."

But with a flash of regret shooting across her face, Mrs. Scher conceded that the decision was painful for her daughters, Rachel, 28, and Lauren, 25, both of whom live in Bethesda, and Sarah, 18, a freshman at the University of Delaware in Newark.

"They were disappointed with their colleges' High Holiday services, because they weren't as haimish as what they were used to," Mrs. Scher said of her two eldest daughters. "They all had their little bat mitzvah celebrations [at Congregation of Israel] and grew up there. It's all they know, their whole lives. They're sad. The High Holidays here were always a little like the way some people celebrate Christmas, with lots of food and relatives and people. "It's just going to be strange this year for us."



A Pocomoke City native, Marc Scher says he is the last remnant of the original Jewish community in that Lower Eastern Shore river town.
(Photo Justin Tsucalas)

This evening, as the first faint traces of darkness fall on Pocomoke City — a picturesque but economically depressed town about 40 minutes southeast of Salisbury — Congregation of Israel's humble, 60-year-old building will remain silent, solemn and empty at the start of Rosh Hashanah. Once a community of 20 to 25 Jewish families and considered the epicenter of Eastern Shore Jewry, Pocomoke City today has, at best, only an estimated handful of Jews.



The Scher family of Pocomoke City was profiled in a Baltimore Jewish Times article in July 1988. Shown here are (left to right) Judi, Rachel, Irv, Doris, Marc and Lauren Scher. (Photo Terkowitz)

"It's really sad," said Pocomoke City Mayor Michael A. McDermott. "A lot of the families had stores here and in other communities around here, and they organized this synagogue. But a lot of the families relocated or their children moved on, so it dried up. Having the synagogue in the city, even if it was lightly used, was unique. It was slowly ebbing away, but there's a real sense of loss. We've lost a part of our heritage."

Congregation of Israel's usual "congregants" — whom largely consist of the Scher and Spinak families, a few scattered unaffiliated (and mostly intermarried) Jews who live on Maryland and Virginia's Eastern Shores, and others with deep familial ties to the shul who drive or fly in from other parts of the country — will be at other synagogues and worship services tonight to usher in the New Year.

The Schers, for example, will spend Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur this year at Hillel services at the University of Delaware. Most years around this time, they're busy getting the synagogue ready for services and spending long hours in their home kitchen, making traditional holiday meals (and a Yom Kippur break-fast) for worshippers who come over after shul to their house only a few blocks from the 60-seat Congregation of Israel. Among the delicacies, the annual tradition features Mr.

Scher's cabbage soup, for which he snagged the recipe from Jennie Grossinger's cookbook (and which he sometimes brings to Baltimore Ravens' tailgating parties).

"It really bothered me that people would come to services here and have nowhere else to go afterward," said Mr. Scher, 52, a stocky, affable man whose occasionally circuitous manner of speech reflects his small-town roots. "So I opened my home and cooked my specialty. The Sunday before services, we always had at my house 'Cabbage Soup Sunday,' when the girls and I would make the soup."

The result was a tight-knit community of sorts that gathered every year for spirited and friendly services and meals with a decidedly folksy, small-town ambience. In recent years, around 30 people came to Congregation of Israel for Rosh Hashanah services and about 18 for Yom Kippur. (Because of declining membership numbers and the absence of a full-time rabbi, the synagogue has not held regular services for anything but the High Holidays in more than a half-century.)

"Something magical happens there," Rabbi Judy Weiss said of the synagogue's High Holiday services. A Boston resident who recently completed her doctorate at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Weiss was hired by Congregation of Israel for the past decade to lead services there. She and her husband, Alan, have sometimes stayed at a bed-and-breakfast in Pocomoke City and taken bicycle tours around Worcester County.

"It's like an annual reunion, something like 'Brigadoon,'" she said, alluding to the musical about a mythical and mystical Scottish village that arises for one day every century. "It's a warm atmosphere where everyone was like family. They just so enjoyed the synagogue and their time together, and I found such a craving there for learning. We even learned a set of special melodies [for prayers] that we really enjoyed."

"Just imagine people who come from California or Florida or Connecticut, and this year they're going to a shul with something like 1,500 people and then they'll go home and not to Marc's house," Rabbi Weiss said. "They won't have a family meal or a service specifically tailored for them. I just can't even imagine what it will be like for them to go to a non-magical service this year."

Tammy Green feels the same way. A Bethesda resident, she and her family first stumbled upon Congregation of Israel while vacationing in Bethany Beach, Del., during the High Holidays of 1972. They have been coming back every year since.

“We wanted something intimate and different than our synagogue in Bethesda, and it’s become an important part of our lives,” Mrs. Green said of Congregation of Israel. “Back then, there were three families to make sure that everyone had a home to go to for dinner, like an extended family. But the people started to die off. I don’t know what we’ll do this year for the holidays. [Congregation of Israel] is very close to my heart.”

Another Congregation of Israel member, Dr. Howard M. Rebach, who lives in Salisbury and teaches sociology at the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore, in Princess Anne, said he will go to services this year at Beth Israel Synagogue in Salisbury.

“This year, I’ll go to shul with hundreds of people, most of whom I don’t know,” he lamented. “What made Pocomoke special was the familiarity, the *Yiddishkeit*. I came in the late ’70s with my kids and I was thoroughly welcomed. That’s all gone now. It’ll be a void for us all.”

A Tough Call

One afternoon last week, Marc Scher sat at the end of a wooden pew in the center of Congregation of Israel, barely noticing a nearly deafening church bell ringing from St. Mary’s Episcopal Church next door. He rested in the same seat where his late father, Irvin, used to sit, and in the same pew where he and his two brothers, Michael and Gary, were usually seated during services. Occasionally, he glanced at the rusting *ner tamid* above the Torah ark, as well as the stopped-in-time clock over the sanctuary’s entranceway.

Making the decision not to hold High Holiday services this year at Congregation of Israel, the Eastern Shore’s oldest synagogue, was no simple matter for Mr. Scher. A Pocomoke City native whose grandfather, Philip, in 1933 started the family business that is now Scher’s Bridal Shop on Market Street near the river, he knew that he was making a decision that would upset some people and, perhaps more importantly, break the link in the chain in Pocomoke City’s Jewish history.

The shul’s problem, he said, was not about money (the congregation’s coffers can cover the synagogue’s annual budget of \$6,000 for a couple of years, Mr. Scher said), but about getting people in the door.

Mr. Scher modestly brushed aside any suggestions that he is a Jewish version of George Bailey, the James Stewart character in “It’s A Wonderful Life” who remains in the small town of Bedford Falls making the hard decisions while his counterparts travel around the world.

But he admitted, “It was tough on me to make the call. But I crunched the numbers. The first day [of Rosh Hashanah], we would’ve had a good number of people. But the second day would’ve been tougher, and for *Kol Nidre* and Yom Kippur, we probably wouldn’t even have had a *minyan*.”

Mr. Scher — who noted that a few other Jews live in Pocomoke City but that he is the last remnant of the original Jewish community there — said he consulted with Dr. Spinak (the shul’s acknowledged head) and Rabbi Weiss before making the decision last June. With Dr. Spinak and his family unable to fly back this year for the holidays as originally expected, Mr. Scher decided against holding services this year.



(Photo Justin Tsucalas)

“Barry and I are the only true members [of Congregation of Israel],” said Mr. Scher. “There’s also Howard [Rebach] and a man in Ocean Pines, but Barry and I run things, we’re like brothers, so half the congregation wasn’t even going to be here this year. Barry was always the glue. He blew the *shofar*, called up the *aliyahs*, kept everything moving.

“I remember being a kid here and the synagogue was full,” he said. “If someone would’ve told me, ‘You’ll be the last one,’ I’d have said they were crazy. But that’s what it came down to.”

Dr. Spinak said he agreed with Mr. Scher’s decision, although with a certain amount of regret and remorse.

“Marc thought it was too iffy this year,” said Dr. Spinak, whose Lithuanian-born great-grandfather, Faivel Heilig, a cantor and *schochet* (ritual slaughterer), settled in Pocomoke City in 1901 and served as Congregation of Israel’s first spiritual leader. “I feel bad that my moving made the difference, but I guess that was coming anyhow. The last couple of years, we’ve been bringing in less money than we’ve been spending, so I guess this was inevitable. Our numbers have been dwindling.

“I’ve always come back for services, wherever I lived, or tried to,” he said. “Everybody always came back — the townspeople, the kids who grew up there and had moved away — but there’s been a lot less of that in the last 15, 20 years. The children went to college and went away. So when the old people died, it all dried up.”

Said Rabbi Weiss: “What I tried to go over with Marc is that there’s a core group that shows up every year. Without Barry and [his wife] Sharon, and maybe his kids or his mother and brother, is this just a year when it’s not going to happen? You just don’t want it to be me and four other people.

“It’s a bittersweet thing, but there’s a realization that they might not go on forever,” she said. “Or it may be just a bump this year. I’m hoping that we’ll all be together again next year in Pocomoke.”

Among those distraught about Congregation of Israel being closed this High Holiday season is Mr. Scher’s mother, Doris Scher Kohan, a Baltimore native who now lives in Delray Beach, Fla. Like her son and others, she has countless memories stored in that tiny shul — her wedding in 1952, her three sons’ *bar mitzvahs*, gatherings with good friends and townspeople to pray and celebrate the holidays.

“It was such a friendly place, and there were a lot of Jewish people there back then,” Mrs. Kohan said of Pocomoke City. “It was such a nice place to raise children.”

But in between memories, Mrs. Kohan admitted she cannot stop herself from weeping out of concern about the synagogue’s future.

“I’ve always gone to Pocomoke for the High Holidays. It’s my home,” she said. “What will happen to all of the [memorial] plaques, all of the new prayer books, those old Torahs? It’s such a shame. I hate to see it go like this. It disturbs me to no end. All of our *brises* and *bar mitzvahs* were there. All of my memories go back to Pocomoke.”

This year, Mrs. Kohan said she will attend High Holiday services at her stepson’s brand new temple near Delray Beach. “This will be my first holidays that I haven’t gone to Pocomoke,” she said, tearfully. “It really makes me sad, but as someone once said, ‘There’s nothing permanent in life but change.’ So we’ll all have to adapt and hope for a miracle.”

Also hoping for a miracle is Anne Hall, 43, a resident of the small town of Atlantic, Va., near Chincoteague, who has been coming to Pocomoke City for the High Holidays since 2003. She first heard about Congregation of Israel from her non-Jewish husband’s aunt, who lives in Pocomoke City.

“This was my Jewish outlet, going to Pocomoke,” Ms. Hall said. “It’s my one connection to my Judaism. It’s just really special, the camaraderie and feel of it all. I just hope and pray it all works out for next year.”

Waiting For A Revival

For decades now, people have been sounding the death knell for Congregation of Israel and the Jews of Pocomoke City. As Salisbury grew to become the commercial hub of the Eastern Shore, its Jewish community there has grown and become the regional center for Jewish life.

"It never, *ever* really happened for Pocomoke," said Mrs. Kohan, with bitterness in her voice. "People go to Salisbury, but they don't want to go to Pocomoke. Salisbury's leaders had foresight, and they had a bigger Jewish community. You need those Jews to get things done. Pocomoke never had as many Jewish families, and they weren't really progressive people. So nothing ever happened in Pocomoke."

Dr. Spinak's 83-year-old mother, Ruth, a Pocomoke City native who now lives in Herndon, Va., agreed. "It's a small town that hasn't grown much," she said. "I was taught that Pocomoke was the one expected to grow because of the Pocomoke River, but it didn't happen. We thought when they built the [Chesapeake Bay] Bridge, it would happen for Pocomoke. But it never did. Salisbury's the town that grew."

What has happened to Pocomoke City Jewry is being played out in small communities around the nation, according to Dr. Rebach.

"The Baptists and Methodists are having the same problems in Pocomoke City, as I understand it," he said. "There's nothing that really happens in Pocomoke. There are no economic opportunities there. Working at Lowe's or flipping burgers at Mickey Dees [McDonalds] — that's the level of employment for most people. What's there is minimum wage. So the young people are leaving, if they have any ambition at all, and this is happening all over the country. It's typical."

Karen Falk, curator of the Jewish Museum of Maryland's 2002 exhibition "We Call This Place Home: Jewish Life In Maryland's Small Towns," said Pocomoke City's story is quite similar to that of other small Jewish communities.

"This is what happens in small towns. Membership dwindles at synagogues and they close," said Ms. Falk. "There are closed synagogues now in places like Frostburg and Brunswick. It's a tribute to Barry and Marc that [Congregation of Israel] is still there. It's amazing they've been able to hang on as long as they have."

"The Jews in the small towns were pioneers of what we have today," she said. "If you were going to be Jewish there, you had to strategize. And that's what synagogues are doing today. You have to make a conscious decision, a commitment to do this and why. The small town folks pioneered it."

Strolling through downtown Pocomoke City with Marc Scher — as he pointed out old buildings where Miller's Dress Shop, Feldman's Furniture Store, Rose and Morris Groh's clothing store and other Jewish-owned businesses once thrived — a visitor feels at times like he is walking through a ghost town. Many of the storefronts are either empty or have "For Sale" signs posted, although the recent refurbishment of the Mar-Va Theater on Market Street and the establishment of the new Delmarva Discovery Center offer signs of life. Meanwhile, the streets have little traffic and few pedestrians traverse the town's sidewalks.

"Back in the day, this was a thriving area, and these stores did a lot of business," said Mr. Scher, who is president of the Pocomoke Downtown Association. With a flagpole rope snapping in the wind and the river tide slapping against the walls of the nearby drawbridge, Mr. Scher gestured toward a small, white building.

"This barbershop used to be Flax's Confection Shop," he said. "My dad used to come here for his coffee and newspaper, and he used to take me here every Sunday." After the barbershop owner came out, offered greetings and noted that he was trying to sell his business, Mr. Scher smiled and said, "It's a tough time right now. For everyone."



Entrepreneurial Jewish immigrants first came to Pocomoke City in the late 19th century. This postcard shows the town's Market Street, circa 1900.
(Photo provided)

But Mr. Scher's commitment to Pocomoke City remains unwavering. He's the kind of guy who knows virtually everyone in town by their first name, bought his childhood home from his mom and still lives there, and always gives his bridal customers his cell phone number in case any problems crop up. He wholeheartedly believes in the spirit of the personal human touch.

"I've always loved this town," said Mr. Scher, who lived in Baltimore for three years before returning to his hometown with his wife and eldest daughter. "I like the life of a small town. It was good for my kids. I like the quality of life here. I have friends here I've had all my life. I like the convenience of a small town and having no traffic, and feeling like I'm part of a community. ... You always know you're different [because of being Jewish], but our family always fit in very well."

Later on in the day, Mr. Scher stared at the flaking wooden window trimmings while standing in front of Congregation of Israel. "We need to hire some painters and take care of this," he mumbled, seemingly unaware of the irony of fixing up a facility that will not be used this year for its traditional sole annual gathering. "We plan on maintaining. Something has to be done."

Although Congregation of Israel will be a silent place for the High Holidays this year, Mr. Scher still holds out some hope for the synagogue's future. Since news broke of the synagogue's decision not to hold services, Mr. Scher said he has received several phone calls from a few area rabbis, former congregants and others — including former Gov. Marvin Mandel — offering their help to save the shul.

"I think we're going to wait a couple of years and see if there's any kind of revival at all," said Mr. Scher, staring down at the synagogue's faded light blue carpeting. "I don't see how it will happen, but you never know. Stranger things have happened. We'd need an influx of people. But there was a place for this synagogue in this town, and there still is. There are some people in this area who don't belong anywhere and want to go somewhere. We don't have a set [membership] fee and we don't turn people away."

"I'm willing to listen to all and any ideas," he said about rescuing the synagogue, selling it or possibly turning the building over to an historical society. "But no matter what happens to this building, we'll always have a special place in our hearts for it. It'll be sad if it ever becomes something else, but that's how it goes. We'll just have to see what happens. It's just the way the cookie crumbled."

One of Mr. Scher's fondest memories of growing up at Congregation of Israel is of his late father, Irv, coming to the shul's doorway when Marc and his brothers were playing outside during a break from services. "At some point, we'd see him at the door and he'd give us a look that we knew meant, 'Back in, guys. Come on, let's go,'" Mr. Scher remembered with a chuckle. "And we'd always immediately come right back inside."

Decades later, Marc Scher still isn't quite ready to leave.

On Pocomoke Jewry

- Jews, most of them immigrants from Lithuania, first came to Pocomoke City and other nearby parts of the Lower Eastern Shore in the 1870s and early 1880s as merchants and peddlers. Among the first Jewish merchants in Pocomoke were the Bacharach brothers and Simpson Katzenberger;
- Originally an Orthodox synagogue, Congregation of Israel first met in worshippers' homes, lodge halls, a fire station and above stores;
- The shul's first spiritual leader was Faivel Heilig, a cantor and *schochet* (ritual slaughterer) born in Uzventis, Lithuania. He and his wife, Ida Dora, and their 13 children moved to Pocomoke City around 1901*. "The fact that he was a *schochet*, that he could provide kosher food for the community, that was quite unique to have in a small town," said

Karen Falk of the Jewish Museum of Maryland. Heilig's grandson-in-law, Abraham Spinak, who died in Jan. 1997, and great-grandson, Dr. Barry Spinak, would later run the synagogue;

**Correction – Faivel came to Pocomoke around 1900-1901. His oldest child, a daughter who was married with children of her own at that time, remained in Lithuania. His oldest son went to Quebec where he married a woman he probably knew in Lithuania and whose family had immigrated to Quebec. Faivel's next 2 oldest children came to Pocomoke City in 1902, and Ida Dora came with the remaining 7 living children (3 had died in Lithuania). The last two children were born in Pocomoke City in 1903 and 1905.*

- Barry Spinak

- Congregation of Israel dedicated its 2,000-square-foot synagogue on Third Street on Dec. 12, 1948. It was the first permanent synagogue structure on the Eastern Shore. Many of its congregants came from such nearby towns as Snow Hill, Princess Anne and Crisfield, as well as Virginia's Eastern Shore. An estimated 80 worshippers attended High Holiday services there in the late 1940s;
- The synagogue had a full-time rabbi, Jacob Saffra, until the mid-1950s, according to Dr. Spinak. A rabbi from Salisbury then came to Pocomoke City every Wednesday night for a weekly prayer service, religious school class and study session. Around that same time, Dr. Spinak said Congregation of Israel stopped holding weekly Shabbat services, only to open on the High Holidays, with rabbis hired from various *yeshivot* and seminaries;
- During times when members had children, Congregation of Israel sent most of its students to religious school at Beth Israel Synagogue in Salisbury, as well as for *b'nai mitzvah* instruction;
- Most deceased Pocomoke City Jews are buried in the Salisbury congregation's cemetery;
- In 1998, despite a dwindling membership, Congregation of Israel underwent an extensive refurbishing;
- In recent years, congregants usually performed the *Tashlich* service during the High Holidays in town, at the banks of the Pocomoke River;
- As for the future, Dr. Spinak said, "We're not dead yet. Everything is by word-of-mouth on that side of the shore. We just don't know who will be moving in. We still get some retirees who move to the area. I don't want to pull the plug completely yet."

— A.H.F.