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Utah, the American Zion

By Carol Goodman Kaufman
Advocate correspondent



Ogden, Utah's Congregation Brith Sholem, established 1890
PHOTO: CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN

OGDEN, Utah – Travelers in Utah could be forgiven for thinking they are driving through Israel, given the stark, desert-like landscape in much of the state, to say nothing of all the biblical place names.

There are as many references to Zion as in Jerusalem, from Zion National Park in the southwestern corner of the state to Zions Bank. The highway connecting Zion National Park to Bryce Canyon and points east is called the Zion-Mt. Carmel highway, a herculean construction that

includes a 5,613-foot tunnel through sandstone cliffs.

There's also Moab, Canaan Mountain, Eden, Ephraim and even Noah's Ark. Then there is America's answer to the Dead Sea, the Great Salt Lake. As if all that weren't enough, the river running through Salt Lake City is none other than the Jordan.

One of Israel's neighbors is also represented in the state. Ogden, a clean and quiet city of almost 85,000, boasts the beautiful Peery's Egyptian Theater. The colorful theater, designed to mimic the courtyard between two temples, was built in 1924, during the national craze for all things Egyptian that followed British archaeologist Howard Carter's discovery of King Tut's tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

One would think from all the Old Testament references that there would be a lot of our fellow MOTs in the state. Not so; fewer than six thousand Jews call the state home, and most of these live in Salt Lake City, Park City and Ogden. Five synagogues serve them, including Ogden's Congregation Brith Sholem. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Brith Sholem was established in 1890 and is the oldest continuously operating synagogue in the state, in a facility celebrating its centennial this year.

The Mormons, who predominate in the state, consider themselves our cousins, descendants of the tribe of Menashe. They are not to be confused with the Bnei Menashe, the people in northeastern India who believe they are members of the ancient lost tribe.

According to their sacred text, the Book of Mormon, the prophet Lehi led the tribe out of Jerusalem around 600 BCE and sailed to the Western Hemisphere. Unfortunately, the "family ties" haven't necessarily translated to good relations. Despite our status as cousins, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints considers all non-Mormons, including us, to be "gentiles."

In 19th century Utah, this belief caused friction between church members ("saints") and non-Mormons. Church leaders believed non-Mormons

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Parshat Toldot



BOSTON	3:54
FALL RIVER	3:57
LOWELL	3:54
SPRINGFIELD	4:01
WORCESTER	3:57
PORTLAND, MAINE	3:47
MANCHESTER, N.H.	3:54

ERUV STATUS:

BOSTON	781-446-9797
MALDEN	781-322-5686
SHARON	781-784-4299

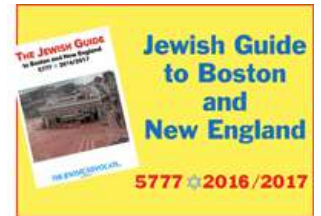
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would weaken Mormon businesses, so in the late 1860s they established a boycott of non-Mormon businesses and instructed church members to do all their business through the Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution.

The boycott caused enough tension that non-Mormons feared for their safety. Jews fled yet again – to Ogden and other non-Mormon cities. The sanctions remained in place until 1869, when the transcontinental railroad and the mining industry increased the need for expanded commerce.

Then there was the practice of posthumous baptism. In 1992, researchers discovered the church had converted Holocaust victim Anne Frank, among other prominent Jews, to Mormonism after their death, and obviously without their consent. While the Mormons claim their practice is welcoming and inclusive – an act of love – a huge outcry ensued. After meetings between Mormon and Jewish leaders, during which the latter presumably explained our people's aversion to being forcibly converted, whether dead or alive – recall the Spanish Inquisition – the church promised to stop the practice.

Despite the sanctions on doing business with non-Mormons, church leader Brigham Young himself loaned property to the Hebrew Benevolent Society for a cemetery in 1866.

Julius and Fannie Brooks became Utah's first Jewish family in 1854, followed by more German Jews. Eastern Europeans followed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fleeing the pogroms and persecution of Eastern Europe. Most came to establish businesses to serve the growing community. By 1930, 100 Jewish-owned businesses could be counted in Salt Lake City.

One of the more fascinating aspects of Jewish history in Utah was the back-to-the-land movement. For five years in the early 20th century, 300 Jewish immigrants settled in the town of Clarion, hoping to establish a Jewish farming colony. Unfortunately, the soil was not amenable to crop growth, and Clarion is today a ghost town.

Despite their low numbers, several Jews have reached prominence in Utah public life. These include Simon Bamberger, the first and only Jewish governor and U.S. senator; Salt Lake City Mayor Louis Marcus; Patrice Arent, the highest-ranking woman in the Utah legislature; and U.S. Rep. David Litvack.

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