



LIVING IN YEHUPETZ:

CONSTRUCTING JEWISH IDENTITY IN THE WEST KOOTENAYS

by

Ronnie E. Tessler

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APPROVAL

Name: Ronnie E. Tessler

Degree: Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Title of project: Living in Yehupetz: Constructing Jewish Identity in the West Kootenays

Examining Committee:

Chair: Dr. June Sturrock

Professor Emeritus, English, (SFU)

Dr. Michael Fellman

Senior Supervisor

Director, Graduate Liberal Studies (SFU)

Dr. Michael Kenny

Second Reader

Professor of Anthropology (SFU)

Dr. Richard Menkis

External Examiner

Associate Professor, Department of Classical, Near Eastern and
Religious Studies/Department of History (Cross-Appointment, UBC)

August 4, 2006

Defended Date/Approved:



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Jews choosing to live in isolation from mainstream Canadian Jewish life in British Columbia's West Kootenay region are constructing Jewish identity. It observes how Jewish heritage and practices have been adapted, changed or rejected by an informal group of liberal individualists and considers whether they have created a new model of Jewish community. The methodology used includes two-hour recorded interviews with past and present residents, literature review, archival research and an email survey of eight other small Jewish communities in Canada. This study demonstrates that Kootenay Jews strongly identify culturally, but are often spiritually pluralistic. They admire Jewish values and persistence, but only meet sporadically for certain holy days and life cycle events. They accept radical change to Jewish laws and many hold anti-Israel opinions. There is no communal structure, but they possess a robust belief in their ability to persevere as a community.

Key Words: Jews, Canadian; West Kootenay; Jewish identity; Spirituality, pluralism; Jewish community

“Judaism was never so powerful as it is in the Diaspora. Not even in the Bible.
The struggle to survive in the Diaspora makes the Jew work hard for his Jewishness.”

-- Isaac Bashevis Singer

“When we treat religious cultures as too fragile to withstand any stress,
we behave as if they were dead, as if they were brittle as dry bones. We can preserve
them as artifacts, shielding them from the battles and negotiations that compose
our real lives. But only if we prophesy over them will these bones live.”

-- Rachel Adler

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the memory of my father, uncles and grandparents
who, with a few dear friends, maintained *Yiddishkeit* in *Yehupetz*.

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When I entered the Graduate Liberal Studies Program at Simon Fraser University in 2002 I intended to look at the world beyond my specific cultural community, which in the prior twenty years had engaged all my professional and volunteer attention. What occurred in this fertile culture of questioning old and new paradigms was the opportunity to look at and frame this connection in fresh ways. For this I thank Michael Fellman who expressed enthusiasm for my topic and established a broad spirit of enquiry in our exchanges, Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon who suggested a different dimension to my study and Richard Menkis for his intellectual rigour and knowledge of the Canadian Jewish community. None of this work could have been completed without the indulgence and support of my family, the encouragement of friends, and not least the openhearted folks of the West Kootenays.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Oh God! I'm just carrying on the tradition of a Jew wandering the world and finding spirit wherever. Moses had to go to a mountaintop to find it, wandered the deserts. I went to a mountaintop! You know, it just keeps rolling on. I used to think that the Bible was over and done with, that that was the olden days. We learned about it in Sunday school and there was this whole disconnect between then and now. As I've gotten older, I've learned that it just keeps rolling along and everybody just carries their little flame with them and transmutes it. It gets tempered by their experiences; but those memories just continue on and get transmitted generation to generation in changed form, diluted form, in modified form, but it keeps flowing on.

--LM, Silverton, 2005

Mi Yehudi, who is a Jew, is the key issue affecting one's identity within the Jewish world, from who is recognized by the Jewish faith to who is accepted as a citizen of Israel. In the past, ghettoization ensured there was rarely a need to deal with this question. In our time whole groups of people emerging from centuries of exile and/or forced conversion, and the complexities of contemporary family relationships, have forced a reconsideration of this basic tenet of Jewish heritage. The nuances of "who is a Jew" are interpreted differently by each denomination and their answers are not necessarily compatible with one another.¹ As if this was not complicated enough, in the past few decades Jews have begun to personalize the meaning of Jewish identity by describing it for themselves within the widest possible parameters, not just in terms of parentage, but also practice.

In the late 1980s, I became acquainted with a small group of Jews struggling to define themselves as a community and as spiritual beings in the isolation of the Selkirk

¹ In Canada all branches of Judaism have a conservative approach, accepting only a person born to a Jewish mother or who has fulfilled the requirements of formal conversion. As this paper develops, we will see that the non-conforming Jews of the West Kootenays accept a much broader definition of who is a Jew.

Mountains in British Columbia's West Kootenay region. Today, thirty-eight years after they first began to make the area home, this struggle is still being negotiated. The resolutions to these private and communal dilemmas are taking shape in ways that challenge the accepted notions of who is a Jew and what is a community as they are recognized among North America's organized Jewish communities.

West Kootenays Jews are creating an organic, fluid form of Judaism that suits their occasional needs. They have avoided becoming a homogeneous congregation with the traditional responsibilities of synagogue, school, clergy and teachers. This is not unusual for a scattered people without financial means, but what is intriguing is that on demand, when they wish it or there is a necessity, they will come together as Jews. It is also a group where expediency and obeying the essence of Judaism are more important than *halacha* (Jewish law). As individuals, Judaism is not the only guidepost they lean upon. As a community, they know what they do not want to be, yet wrestle with the opportunity to create a new paradigm.

The Kootenay Jewish lifestyle is the antithesis of my experience living in large cities with organized communities and institutionalized religion. It wasn't long before I noticed that certain fundamental Jewish rites and laws were being rejected, adapted or recreated as individuals and the community worked through their religious and spiritual conflicts. This raised a number of questions for me: Is it possible for Jews to remain culturally attached to their heritage in a liberal accepting society away from family and traditional support systems? Should they be judged against the standard historical model of Jewish communal life or is it possible they are creating a new definition of community? Alternatively, could the "hippie Jews" of the West Kootenays simply be an advance guard of the polymorphic trends in North American society today?² Will other Jews acknowledge their choices as a viable way of being Jewish in the world?

Jewish heritage and identity have been thoroughly examined on this continent: however, there are specific factors that persuaded me this study would add to the body of information already collected. Over the past hundred years, historians, sociologists, anthropologists and demographers have analyzed North American Jewish life, but rarely

² Clark, 1993

small communities and most particularly not small Canadian communities. What disturbed me about these studies was that the few existing academic models on small communities focused on decline.³ In contrast, I see the West Kootenays as a viable community that is grappling with its identity. In terms of numbers it is slowly increasing; in terms of creating a group identity it perseveres.

A striking feature of this widely scattered group is its online connectivity. This electronic link was inaugurated by Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) Pacific Region in 1985 to bind BC's outlying Jewish communities and was initially funded by a federal grant. The program operated for approximately four years and the Kootenay group was a dedicated user. Recently a community member revived the listserve for local use. The twenty-year span of this online activity provides a unique opportunity to question whether a virtual community enhances or is detrimental to the formation of a physically bonded one in a rural area. No formal association has survived in the Kootenays. The Mountain Chai listserve may be one way this group retains an element of collective identity.

Beyond the pragmatics of community building, West Kootenay Jews are inclined to be spiritual. This spirituality tends to be individualized and pluralistic.⁴ In our search for meaning and expression in the postmodern age, the inclination to personalize one's religious ethos by appropriating snippets of beliefs and practices from various sources is highly distilled in the Jews of the West Kootenays, an area of Canada that is particularly receptive to alternative spiritual modalities.⁵ This facet of the West Kootenay Jewish character allowed me to look at how concurrent spiritual beliefs affect Judaism and Jewish identity, a phenomenon well outside the realm of my own more prosaic Jewish practices.

³ For example, Levinger 1952; Kaplan 1956; Rose 1959; Gold 1987

⁴ Spiritual pluralism in North American religious life has been well documented since its birth in the cultural ferment of the Sixties (Ellwood; Clark; Killen and Silk).

⁵ Miller in *America's Alternative Religions* (1995) says that alternative religion is the term academics now prefer to refer to non-mainstream faiths and new religious movements.

Jewish continuity has been a persistent item on the organized community's agenda for the past two decades due to increasing assimilation and intermarriage rates.⁶ Observing this highly intermarried (more than 90%), well-integrated group as an ethnic body, there is strong evidence that the identity conflicts affecting the first generation are also affecting the second. Because the second generation is even less educated in Judaism than their parents, it is possible that in ten to twenty years the Kootenay Jewish community could become culturally dormant, absorbed by other social groups unless immigration continues and is populated by interested souls with leadership abilities. That dynamic coupled to the freethinking proclivities of the community made this a compelling moment for me to begin this study.

Small communities are a substantial segment of our country's Jewish population. Approximately one seventh, or 50,000 of Canada's 370,505 Jews live in cities with a Jewish population under 1000.⁷ The greater majority of these 50,000 reside in areas similar to the Kootenays with less than 500 individuals. Several years ago a committee of Canadian Jewish scholars and community professionals prepared an analysis of the Jewish population extrapolated from the 2001 federal census. Reporting on eight BC cities with Jewish populations less than 300, they failed to notice that several hundred people in the West Kootenay region identified themselves as Jews by ethnicity or by religion.⁸ Perhaps because this is a "silent" community, one without a building, clergy and membership, it has not registered as a presence in the Canadian Jewish world. Sheva Medjuck, a Halifax sociologist, calls the academic neglect of small communities such as this at best benign and at worst due to the belief that because these populations are small "and, in time, will probably disappear altogether," they are not worth studying.⁹



⁶ There are possibly four Jewish-Jewish couples known to the keeper of the community contact list, which does not represent all the Jews in the area, just those who wish to be contacted. There are approximately 100 households with circa 170 people on the list, not all of whom are halachically Jewish.

⁷ Charles Shaha, *Census Analysis Series of the Jewish Community of Canada* (2004).

⁸ Sources: Shaha; the 2001 BC Kootenay Development Region census, compiled from Canada Census data. See also Appendix D.

⁹ Medjuck. Chapter 15, "From Immigration to Integration." (see bibliography)

These findings were convincing evidence to me that the reality of Jews in small communities was off the radar of most Canadian Jewish scholars. The issue was personal: I was born in the small community of Saskatoon, although raised in the much larger one of Winnipeg, and the connection remains important to me. A review of the available literature showed that this neglect was not unusual. The main medium for Canadian Jewish historical writing is the *Canadian Jewish Studies/Etudes juive canadiennes* journal. A quick count showed the number of published articles on small communities is far under the proportion of small to large communities. The journals and yearbooks of provincial Jewish history societies contain many stories on small town life, but from an academic standpoint these are often marked by chauvinism, nostalgia and a lack of context and analysis. Difficulties maintaining *Yiddishkeit*, Jewishness, are depicted, but rarely the tensions, conflicts and coping skills that underlie ethnic life in remote communities.

Few scholarly surveys of Canadian Jewish history exist. None of the four most complete devote space to an overview of small community life.¹⁰ A comparison between small town and urban values and behaviours would have given a more complete picture of Canadian Jewish society. Several studies written specifically on small communities are more satisfying. Medjuck's *Jews of Atlantic Canada* (1986) analyzes how those particular small communities preserve their cultural and religious heritage while living at a remove from traditional Jewish support systems. Medjuck's perceptions are informed by a lifetime of living and working in the Atlantic Provinces. One of her major conclusions is that small communities differ from each other. They are not microcosms of the larger communities and therefore deserve their own study.

A chapter written by Canadian anthropologist, Gerald L. Gold in *The Jews of North America* (1987) about two depleted Jewish communities in Canada and the United States, glossed over current facts in its selectivity. What was true of Timmins, Ontario, the Canadian town in his study, was not true across the country. Many examples of regeneration or the founding of wholly new communities exist. In BC alone since 1970, new communities have sprouted (Kamloops, Kelowna, Central Vancouver Island, Saltspring Island, Sechelt, and the Sea to Sky Corridor between Squamish and

¹⁰ Sack 1945; Rosenberg 1939; Tulchinsky 1992, 1998; Weinfeld 2001

Pemberton) and several have been re-invigorated, some to sizeable proportions (Victoria, Richmond, Burnaby - New Westminster, Burnaby, Coquitlam, the Fraser Valley, White Rock, Vancouver's North Shore, Prince George and Nelson). Only Trail-Rossland tapered away, although recently it has experienced a very modest increase.

Donna Krollik Hollenberg's article, "At the Western Development Museum: Ethnic Identity and the Memory of the Holocaust in the Jewish Community of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan" (2000), spoke to the vitality and persistence of a specific community in a province with a very small Jewish population and almost no survivors of the Holocaust.¹¹ Along with Medjuck's cogent writings on Atlantic Jewry and Jewish continuity, her article articulated small town Jewish life in the present. None of the communities they described come close to mirroring the situation in the West Kootenays, but of all the Canadian and American scholars reviewed for this project, these two authors' academic initiatives were the most grounded in authentic experience.

The more I read, the more I agreed with Medjuck's assessment that scholarship on small communities is based on presumption rather than research. Missing from these studies is an understanding of the distinct "tensions and dynamics of ethnic survival" in outlying areas.¹² I disagree with her methodology, however, as it is based on a model of community that does not fit every situation. Like many academics, she defines small communities by the success or failure of their religious and social institutions. The notion that all Jewish communities, no matter their size, composition and location, possess an internal structure and traditional religious and communal ideals is not always born out on the ground, particularly on Canada's frontiers where there may be a definable Jewish spirit without recognizable institutions.

Explaining and evaluating what makes small town life necessary, attractive and vibrant is absent in the larger surveys. Medjuck remarks in Brym, et al that, "While their survival may seem to some enigmatic, it should also be a source of pride for it illustrates the centrality that Jews in small communities give their Jewish identity." (364) My father grew up in similar circumstances in pre-war Weyburn, Saskatchewan, a town that barely

¹¹ At its high point in 1921, the Jewish population of Saskatchewan was 5,380; in 1961 it was 2,710; the 2001 census shows that today it is 1,340 with 505 in Saskatoon. (The maximum was 703 in 1941.)

¹² *Jews of Atlantic Canada*, 1986.

knew what a Jew was. My grandparents provided their three sons with a Jewish education, bar mitzvahs and Jewish holidays with friends in nearby towns without the benefit of Jewish institutions. Because of this family history and the example of Saskatoon, my birth city, I have particular empathy for the truth of Medjuck's remarks.

My study's objective was to uncover what was missing in the other studies - an analysis of the motivation, degree and vitality of *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness) - through comprehensive interviews with a cross-section of past and present residents of the West Kootenays (see Appendix A and B for interview questions and D for criteria and methodologies). Fifty-eight people from teenagers to seniors in their late eighties participated in the project. A certain number of them strongly identified as Jews, but did not consider themselves part of a Kootenay Jewish community. Nevertheless, they wanted to tell their stories and were forthcoming with their controversial opinions on subjects close to the hearts and minds of Jews today. This latter group was important to creating a well-rounded view of the community.

Another facet of the study was to reassemble the early history of the current community by examining Canadian Jewish Congress Pacific Region's archives in order to assess the issues and length of time this group has been attempting to create a community. Throughout the 1980s until the early 1990s, CJC had a very active national small communities program in which the West Kootenay group was a keen participant.¹³ The last phase of the study was a questionnaire (see Appendix C) emailed to eight very small communities from St. John's to Whitehorse. Their responses form the basis for comparison between the Kootenays and other remote Canadian Jewish groups.



To understand how West Kootenay Jews differ in their approach to cultural identity, this section of the paper describes the traditional model of Jewish community, provides an overview of the area and an introduction to the first Jewish settlers in the region. One of the contributing factors that may have interfered with development of an organized community today is that there was no physical continuity between the pioneer

¹³ From 1987 to 1992, I chaired the regional committee and was later national co-chair. Shortly after my term concluded, CJC lost their funding for this program. Ontario (twenty-seven communities) and the Atlantic provinces (nine communities) formed their own associations. BC (circa ten communities) did not.

community and the present one; however, it will be shown that in its own way the early group, like the contemporary one, did not conform to traditional patterns of community building.

Another feature of this community's character is its remoteness from large cities with Jewish resources and institutions. For urbanites to comprehend the area's physical isolation it is necessary to look at Nelson, the geographic centre of Kootenay Jewish life, in relation to other major cities. Nelson is a small city with less than 10,000 people located deep in the Selkirk Mountains, 663 kilometers from Vancouver, 624 from Calgary and a three-hour drive from Spokane, Washington. The mountains and valleys of British Columbia run north to south, creating natural barriers to east-west travel. Kelowna, for instance, is a five-hour drive away, Vancouver eight and Calgary about the same; by bus it is even longer. The local airport, a half hour drive from Nelson, is infamous for its short, sharp descent between the mountains into Castlegar, known as "Cancelgar" due to its unpredictable weather.

Nelson was founded in 1887 as a supply hub for the booming mining and transportation industries. Historically, it is the economic, administrative and cultural heart of the West Kootenays and the town that first attracted Jews to the region. The city is set in a glorious landscape of forested mountains and deep lakes. Like so many boom and bust towns, it attracts people from diverse backgrounds: entrepreneurs, workers, dreamers and iconoclasts. More than a few of these people are passionate about the magnificent setting and call it mystical. Not surprisingly, a considerable number of area residents are committed environmental and anti-globalization activists, who at the same time may also be proponents of New Age or alternative religions. At different periods in its history the West Kootenays has provided a refuge, and occasionally a place of pain, for Doukhobors, Japanese Canadian internees, Quakers, American draft dodgers, back-to-the landers, growers of pot and more recently disaffected Canadian urban youth.

The first Jew documented in Nelson, Harris Ginsberg, known as "Silver King Mike," arrived to prospect for silver in 1896 and remained until his death in 1922.¹⁴ A local entrepreneur and character about town, Ginsberg was not known to fraternize with

¹⁴ The Silver King mine was one of the richest claims in the district at that time.

his fellow Jews who were few in number, better educated and more refined than this Polish immigrant and former peddler. A number of these families are known by name and occupation, but their personal histories were not recorded nor any efforts to form a community of co-religionists. Nevertheless, Ginsberg was devout. He closed his shop on major Jewish holy days and on his death left explicit instructions for his body to be transported for a religious burial in a city with a consecrated Jewish cemetery.¹⁵

Despite the dearth of information on the pioneer Jews of Nelson, it is clear there was no community. By 1929, however, we can begin to construct a history of the next phase of Jewish settlement. To place this community in context, one should understand traditional Jewish community life. For centuries, survival has revolved around Judaism's laws and communal institutions. The latter were necessitated by centuries of persecution, exile and relocation, a constant refrain in Jewish history that has shaped its communal life. Over the millennia of exile, a large number of religious, educational and social service organizations have developed whose establishment in each new locale follows a traditional pattern whether the numbers involved are large or small.

The first Jews to settle in the territory of British Columbia were former European immigrants. Individualists seeking religious freedom and economic autonomy, they began arriving by ship from San Francisco in 1858 along with others hoping to take advantage of the Cariboo Gold Rush. This small body of Jews followed an already well-established blueprint for pioneer Jewish life by holding High Holy Day services in a private home shortly after reaching Victoria, the staging point for the goldfields. A religious service can be held anywhere there is a *minyan* (see glossary), but the requirements for Jewish burial necessitate the purchase of land for a cemetery and the formation of a *chevra kadisha*, the burial society that takes care of ritual needs. Inside of five years, land for a cemetery was purchased, men's and women's benevolent societies were in place, a synagogue built and a rabbi hired from England.

The model for establishing a congregation, followed by Victoria in 1863, Vancouver in the early 1900s and Kelowna in 1992, is for lay-led services to be held in the home or business of a community member. With increasing numbers, services move to rented facilities, for example, the Knights of Columbus Hall rented by the Trail

¹⁵ See Leonoff, Cyril E. "Silver King Mike of the West Kootenay, British Columbia 1849-1922".

community in the 1940s and 50s. Next comes the lease or purchase of a building. The final stage is to renovate or purpose build a house of worship, such as North and West Vancouver's Har El congregation did in 1997 after almost thirty years inhabiting leased properties. Somewhere in this sequence, a rabbi will be hired and/or a teacher for the children, and various social service groups will begin to sprout. Jewish education frequently starts in the same fashion, beginning with parent-led classes and moving to professional educators when there are sufficient students and funds to support them.

The foundational pillars of an organized Jewish community today are synagogue, community welfare and security, Jewish education, devotion to Israel's wellbeing and Holocaust commemoration. This mandate creates a complex community structure requiring an extraordinary amount of volunteer time and funds. *Tzedakah*, giving aid in the form of money or volunteer assistance is an obligation in Judaism. It is one of three deeds - repentance, prayer and performance of good deeds (charity), that obviates other sins and gains one forgiveness on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. *Tzedakah* is the main way that contemporary non-Orthodox Jews, who are in the majority today, demonstrate their connection to Judaism and Jewish life.

How do the West Kootenay Jews fit into this profile? Beginning with the post pioneer era, approximately 1929-1954, a fluctuating group of Jewish families settled in Nelson. Among them were European and British immigrants and native-born Canadians. During this twenty-five year period, at least nine Jewish children were born in Nelson. The parents worked hard. The mothers and grandmothers assisted in the family business or owned their own small shops, but most stayed home to raise their children. During that period Jewish men and women were occupied as merchants of clothing and second hand items. The Jewish business that people in Nelson remember best today, besides Silver King Mike's second hand store, was The Ark, a fixture on Baker Street in the 1930s and 1940s whose owner frequently employed Jewish newcomers until they got on their feet financially. Several businessmen had larger concerns such as lumber mills; several others owned services such as a car radiator repair or a dry cleaning shop. At different times, two Jewish doctors and a dentist lived in Nelson: all in all, this was a very small, not very constant group, neither especially cohesive nor well to do.

In most cases Jewish families arrived in Nelson during the Depression chasing economic opportunity and moved on when business was no longer viable or they wanted a more Jewish environment for their children and themselves. One woman who lived there for nine years observed that, "They were all looking for a better living, for a better place." The interviewees said they were accepted in Nelson and did not experience overt anti-Semitism, although the children felt some difference at Christmas, Easter and at the High Holy Days when their parents kept them home from school. Several women found maintaining a Jewish home far from family, synagogue and kosher supplies forced them to adapt their standards. The biggest hurdle was not obtaining kosher meat. "I had never eaten *traife* (unkosher) meat before," said one. To have a *brit milah* (ritual circumcision) or *pidyon ha'ben* (blessing of the first born son) a rabbi/*mohel* (circumciser) had to be brought in from Spokane, a more arduous journey than it is today. One woman called her son's brit in the Nelson hospital a "fifty cent *bris*, like a Dogpatch wedding!"¹⁶ Just the basics: nothing to make it *heimische*, homey, and no family present. "Life was different there, not what you were used to, but you managed."

Only one man in the community was known to lay *tefillin* (bind on phylacteries, a daily obligation for men over thirteen), a few people fasted on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and one or two managed to bring in *matzah*, unleavened bread, for Passover. They did not, however, come together to form a community in the classic manner and for this there are several possible explanations. During the twenty-five year span under consideration, the maximum number of people, and that just briefly, were twenty individuals of varying backgrounds and ages. The children were widely separated in age, sometimes by more than a decade. These factors, transience and different backgrounds and ages, were likely deterrents to bonding as a group.

Families who persevere in their Judaism through adversity usually do so from conviction, force of habit, or because they want to pass on the heritage to their children. The few in Nelson who cared about Jewish observance did their best with it, but some had no interest at all. The community elder, the man with the longest tenure, was a committed socialist with no religious training. There was no leader with the desire to bring everyone together. Families tended to celebrate on their own, or at most with one

¹⁶ She is referring to Al Capp's popular cartoon, "L'il Abner" (1934-1977), about a group of hillbilly's living in the ramshackle town of Dogpatch.

other. Several composed an extended family group in Nelson for a short period, while others kept to themselves or made the drive to Trail or Spokane, trips that meant an overnight stay. In most cases it took the move to a large city, generally Vancouver, before the children gained Jewish knowledge, learned Hebrew, socialized with their Jewish peers and joined youth groups. One man recalls taking a few lessons from an older man in Trail to prepare for a bar mitzvah in Spokane that never came to pass. The distance was one obstacle, money another.

There was no existing tradition of community when this group arrived in Nelson. Most of the Jewish residents were peripatetic, moving on when the economy slumped or their children were ready for university. No one, with the single exception of Silver King Mike, regarded Nelson as a permanent home. Down the road in Trail was a different matter. The smelter, at least for a time, provided the security of a paycheck and a population requiring various services. Jews began arriving in Trail at the same time as they did in Nelson. At its height during the Second World War and early nineteen-fifties, the number of Trail Jewish families reached perhaps sixty to seventy people, all with a desire to build a Jewish life. This community had a charismatic leader with some cantorial training whose father-in-law was an accomplished lay leader in synagogue ritual. From this small knowledge base, eventually they held religious services, started a men's benevolent group and a chapter of women's Hadassah. They plugged into the wider Jewish world by inviting speakers to Trail and had an emotional attachment and fundraising commitment to the new State of Israel. The atmosphere was one of togetherness with community picnics and banquets and almost daily social gatherings in their homes and those of their confreres in Rossland six kilometers away.

A similar quality of Jewish life could be found almost any place in small town Canada at that time. Many towns with a smaller group than Trail's went on to purchase a burial ground, build a *mikveh* (ritual bath), erect a synagogue, support a kosher slaughterer and educate their children, sometimes under less favourable conditions.¹⁷ Although Trail had a minyan, holiday services, a Young Judea youth group and lay-led education, like Nelson it did not establish anything permanent. Neither community left a tangible legacy, a spot where their towns could hang a heritage plaque.

¹⁷ A sampling of very small communities with cemeteries and synagogues include Yorkton and Edenbridge in Saskatchewan; Timmins, Ontario; and Sydney on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.



The presence of Jews in Nelson was completely unknown to the next generation of pioneers: draft dodgers, political dissidents, hippies and back to the landers from the United States. As the sole Jew in town for the last fourteen was leaving years - a pediatrician who moved to Israel during the Six Day War - a new wave of immigrants began arriving. Gentile citizens of Nelson, through business and family relationships, knew more about the departed Jews than their successors did. Without an edifice or even an oral tradition to inherit, there was no passing of the baton and no history to revere.

The newest pioneers were vastly different from their predecessors. Their reasons for being in the Kootenays had nothing to do with economic necessity or joining family, and everything to do with idealism and rejecting their parents' and country's values. These immigrants were dissidents, political refugees from the United States. This status was self-designated and unrelated to the grand narratives of Jewish history: persecution, exile and survival. Jews lived freely in the United States, a relatively tolerant nation that encouraged immigrants to become part of its social fabric. This acceptance resulted in the freedom for Jews to distance themselves from their cultural heritage and to blend in. The irony of disaffection from Judaism brought on by unrestricted opportunity and assimilation is well recognized today and created another characteristic that differentiates this group from the earlier one: an ambiguous and conflicted relationship with Judaism and Jewish heritage. The pilgrims of 1968 were not escaping religious persecution; they were searching for a more humane life less dominated by a political agenda. At the same time in the Okanagan, Kelowna was attracting Jewish retirees wanting to re-establish the institutions they left behind in Calgary, Winnipeg or Montréal.

Nineteen sixty-eight was a pivotal year in twentieth century American history: a virtual revolution and polarization of society along its social, cultural and political cleavages. Troop involvement in Vietnam had escalated and so had the anti-war movement. Many writers on this period have noted the unusual number of Jewish organizers and participants in the mass social and political student movements of the time, thus it is not surprising that a significant number were later found among the

departees for Canada.¹⁸ It was a turbulent era, a time of transition from one value system to another, of experimenting, of combining social and theological ideologies and creating utopias.¹⁹ This was the social and political context that shaped the newest influx of Jews to the West Kootenays.



As people said in those days, you didn't have to go to Vietnam to be burned by it. Between 1965 and 1968, my husband and I lived in Minnesota. Two of our children were born there, one a boy. My husband was still eligible for the draft and by the end of 1968 would have lost his status as a visiting student. An American classmate and father of five was drafted out of their postgraduate program in his final year and sent overseas to the war. After three and a half years watching the distressing parade of orange body bags loaded onto helicopters and listening to the enumeration of American and Viet deaths on the nightly news, we decided to return to Canada. We too went west, but opted for North Vancouver, a small, nascent, urban Jewish community.

Even though we shared their position on the futility of this war, we did not have the powerful feelings of anger and anxiety that our American fellow students did. It was a volatile time that struck at the founding principles of their nation. A woman in the Slocan who left the US legally in 1967, but had been on an FBI list for her work counselling draft dodgers, explained it to me this way:

I think that the majority of us who moved to Canada from the States through the late sixties and early seventies felt incredibly betrayed and dispossessed and so our attraction to those social concepts of creating community and changing the world grew out of that feeling of betrayal and dispossession. Just like an orphaned kid is going to crave having a family, we craved having a nation, and felt unconsciously, or subconsciously, that the way to become part of a nation was to create an immediate community and then the tides would start reaching out from there.

Asked why they chose Canada, she answered bluntly:

¹⁸ Gitlin, Kurlansky, et al

¹⁹ Ellwood, 1994

No military draft, a much freer political climate and a more accepting social climate. We came here and said, 'Knock, knock. Can we come in?' and Canada said, 'Yeah!' Whereas the States was, 'My way or the highway. America, love it or leave it.' Well fuck man; leave it! Leave them. Can't get out fast enough. This is not right. It's like we were kicked out of our house and had to find a new house to live in.

Following the "68ers," there were other waves of Jewish newcomers. Each had its particular character and framework. Most were Canadians from the east, many from Toronto and Montréal. In the beginning, they were in or on the periphery of the American immigrants' generation, the Fifties. The Canadians were driven more by a desire to live a simpler life than by politics. The Nineties and the turn of the century brought in younger people at a slower rate. All of these individuals were seeking a utopia that would permit them to be who they wanted to become in a safe, clean, hospitable, environmentally conscious and politically pacific environment. That the West Kootenay region was also remote, beautiful and supported alternative lifeways were added enticements. One man explained the lure of the West Kootenays this way:

It was a combination of being offered work and the fact that a lot of people garden and when you accost them in their gardens, they actually have the time to stop and talk to you; so the community. It is intrinsically an intentional community in the making. If you're going to generalize about any community, a very large percentage of people here are intentional and aren't here just because their job brought them or because they grew up here, so they're people who are actors in their own lives as opposed to passive and a victim kind of stance in life. That's just generally my way of seeing things. [It's] a much healthier kind of environment and community to be in.

Decade by decade, this is what the demographic looked like regarding geographic origins, Jewish background, marital status, age, education, profession and reasons for coming. To begin with, during the Sixties and Seventies the newcomers were overwhelmingly from the United States, often from New York City and the eastern seaboard. The majority arrived between 1968 and 1971 and were legal immigrants in their early twenties, but there were a few exceptions. This is a highly educated group: of the sixteen interviewed, nine have post-graduate degrees. Ultimately, one left the region to become the first ordained Jewish Renewal rabbi.

A sizeable proportion of this new wave of immigrants have had multiple marriages and relationships, a pervasive trait in Kootenay Jewish life. Among this group are a number who lived in various communes with different partners while they cobbled together a living doing a variety of menial or craft related jobs. There are two Jewish-Jewish couples in this group and two who once had Jewish spouses. Apart from these two couples, all are or have been intermarried or partnered.

Regarding Jewish background, nearly everyone received a Hebrew or Yiddish name at birth. Because it is usual among Ashkenazim for a child to be named after a relative who has died, receiving a Hebrew name indicated to me their parents had some commitment to Jewish traditions.²⁰ Many people said they had little or no Jewish education; however, they were not totally unfamiliar with Judaism. Most had some exposure as children attending holiday meals with family or the occasional synagogue service, and several had bar mitzvahs, but this exposure was often meagre.²¹ Participation in extracurricular youth activities such as Jewish summer camp was rare. Careers in this group vary from midwifery to business entrepreneurs. A number are artists and many work several jobs to keep above water. One man remarked, "You wear many hats in the Kootenays. You can't just wear one." Some told me it is not unusual to live from paycheck to paycheck, but insist it is worth it for the privilege of living in such a beautiful, peaceful, accepting corner of the world.

There was very little American immigration in the 1980s, perhaps reflecting a comfortable life with few challenges. Political and religious conservatism were growing in the United States. "Reagonomics" and the material interests of the "me generation" made political confrontation less of an issue. Only four in my survey arrived in this period, three from eastern Canada and one originally from New York. Also a well-educated group aged twenty-five to thirty when they arrived, two own businesses, one is a consulting forester and another is a PhD candidate. Regarding Jewish experience, three have Hebrew names and they are evenly split between having had a traditional Jewish background (Hebrew school, holy days and bar mitzvah) and little to no exposure to Judaism. Only one had a Jewish spouse and all have been or are currently divorced.

²⁰ Ashkenazim are Jews whose post-biblical origins are Europe, particularly Germany, Austria, Eastern Europe and the eastern part of the former USSR.

²¹ None of the American women interviewed had a bat mitzvah, although from the nineteen-fifties on they were done in Conservative and Reform synagogues in Canada. My own was in 1958.

The 1990s brought a fresh wave of Jews to the West Kootenays. The age of the seventeen interviewed presently ranges between thirty and sixty years old. The majority of this group has lived in the area for more than a decade and is more uniformly Canadian. Several arrived via other countries and settled first in eastern Canada, generally Toronto and Montréal. A substantial number have post graduate degrees. Many in this group are in the helping professions such as social work or medicine.

What is distinctive about this group is the quality of their childhood Jewish experiences, which had more depth than the earlier groups even though four were from atheistic backgrounds. Some are in longstanding relationships, but only five are still married and not one has had a Jewish partner. One woman in her fifties, only eight years younger than myself, could not imagine a relationship with a Jewish man: "That would be incestuous!" This was a marked difference in attitude to what prevailed in my own upbringing during the 1950s and early 1960s in Winnipeg when interdating and intermarrying were in no uncertain terms discouraged and considered a *shanda*, a shame to family and community.

Immigration and in-migration have been slower since 2000. Four people between the ages of thirty and sixty-six agreed to be interviewed. Only one was from the United States, but recently people in Nelson have noticed Americans are trickling in again since the beginning of the US engagement in Iraq, a war they cannot morally support. In this small sample two are divorced from Jewish spouses, one is intermarried and one is married to another Jew. Their Jewish backgrounds are mixed, although each was given a Hebrew name by their family. Two people who intended to participate in the study left the Kootenays because there was not enough Yiddishkeit for them.

The last six participants were second generation, all born in Canada. Three were in their teens, two were university students and one was in his mid thirties. All but one have a Hebrew name, but none had formal Jewish learning making them less familiar with their heritage than their parents are. Three who had bat mitzvah training no longer remember Hebrew. One said to me, "It affected me for a while, but then I became my same old self." Five of them have Jewish mothers, one has a Jewish father and only one has both. Most say they intend to pursue their education and careers away from Nelson, despite their love for the surroundings and a close circle of friends. Other members of

the second generation I was told about but did not meet are all in exogamous relationships, with a single exception.

A significant difference between the present residents and the pioneer group, besides their high intermarriage rate and utter dedication to staying, is iterative of their era: the impulsive reasons they chose the area as home. The '68ers were anxious to make a quick exit from the United States. Immigration was easy then and Canada was welcoming compared to the suspicion and harassment they experienced in the US over their anti-war work. One man said a Canadian border official directed them to a friendlier crossing when he heard why they were there. Once in the area, the natural beauty was a magnet to the spirit, land was cheap and there were many like-minded neighbours with similar values who supported their lifestyle choices.

Just how fey the process of choosing the Kootenays was is illustrated by the stories of two women thirty years apart in age, both of whom arrived in 1971. The older woman, an otherwise pragmatic person, said, "Had a friend who was here. Came out, fell in love with it and that was it. Found a place cheap enough to buy." The younger woman, who opposed the Vietnam War and had gone to anti-war protests while she and her husband were students at Berkeley, explained their choice this way:

We just wanted to get out of the US, because of the political climate, which we did not agree with. First we went to the Yukon Territory and that was a bit harsh. We had passed through here and it was just so beautiful that we came back down to check it out and some people here let us live with them. It was just easy, beautiful and we just loved it.

Some immigrants were drawn to the region knowing that pacifists such as the Doukhobors and Quakers had settled in the Kootenays. Others were enticed by the strong arts community or space to develop a garden. Another reason given was the laid-back lifestyle and lack of traffic and pollution. A 2005 arrival, amazed to see no evidence of anger in the streets said, "Toronto was horrible. I was getting sick a lot and the pace of life there is really fast. I wanted somewhere slow with a healthier lifestyle, where I didn't have to fight against the mainstream to do that. Here it is mainstream and those options are everywhere."

Most people do not regret their offhand decision to stay. One person said he could not have invented a better life for himself if he had tried. In so many ways, the newcomers found the Kootenays close to a heaven on earth. A few more recent arrivees with a desire for Jewish community found that not all their expectations were being satisfied. One woman remarked that she “came with momentum and was not met by any. You need a strong inner sense when you come here. You need to know what you want for your family to make it.” Despite this disappointment, the magic of the lifestyle entices people to remain. One woman said to me, “This place chooses who lives here.” Another explained how she coped and made a place for herself:

The Kootenays, well I mean in terms of sticking around, it's a pretty special area; rich. It's got a big arts community, a lot of alternative healing. It's got a big queer community. It's beautiful. I did find the Jewish community when I first moved here, but I didn't - I don't know, I think I went to something early on and I just wasn't that excited about it, and so I mainly, for the first years, did rituals that I wanted to do and did them up here. So I'd have all my different land mates and my friends come and do Rosh Hashanah with me, but they wouldn't know anything about Rosh Hashanah!

The reasons for thirty-eight years of the kind of communal *laissez faire* described above stem from complex individual attitudes to Jewish identity and the relative intensity of one's desire for a collective identity. Obstructions such as these are not just a matter of will, but of commitment and energy. These are the issues to be explored in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO: CONSTRUCTING JEWISH IDENTITY

*To be a Jew, especially at this historical juncture,
means to lack a single essence, to live with multiple identities.*

--David Biale¹

Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth century Dutch philosopher excommunicated by his fellow Jews, was “deeply enigmatic” and “a heretic with the character of a true believer” according to historian Matthew Stewart.² These qualities fit as easily as a *tallit* (prayer shawl) around the shoulders of West Kootenay Jews. The enigmatic and paradoxical nature of these people and their long search for a comfortable Jewish identity are what first intrigued me about them. Kootenay Jews are a loosely knit group of secular liberals from disparate backgrounds. Nevertheless, they feel an emotional tie to their cultural heritage, if not to the religion of their ancestors. Put off by rote Jewish education in their youth, instead of turning to Judaism they are searching for answers across various social and spiritual planes.

I asked people if they were on a quest when they stumbled onto the Kootenays and decided to stay. The answers to that question reflected both the search and the subconscious pull of their Jewish identity. One woman said to me:

I was on a hippie quest. You know: move out to the country, grow a garden, have babies. You know, be an artist, be a free spirit, so I guess yes, some sort of spiritual quest. But it wasn't anything like Judaism or Buddhism or Islam or anything else like that. It was a free spirit hippie quest. Marijuana? Yeah - a little dope, a little hippie spirit. [But] I've never really been attracted to any other religion. It's not as if I moved away from Judaism in favour of anything else. No. I've always considered myself a Jew... I don't see that the culture has ever left me.

¹ *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism.*

² *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza and the Fate of God in the Modern World* (pp.15-16)

To discover how Kootenay Jews felt about Jewish identity and heritage and how they were being actualized, I asked many questions, such as: what do you connect with in Judaism and Jewish values; what have you passed on to your children; do you have an opinion on patrilineal descent; how do you feel about Israel; do you have any spiritual practices outside of Judaism; if so, how do you create a spiritual identity inclusive of Judaism; do you celebrate holy days and life cycle events. I asked each person if they considered themselves a Jew first or a citizen of the world, a question that caused some surprise and seriously considered replies. My goal was to discover what motivates these people, whose ideas of Jewishness are even more liberal than my own, to remain Jews. It was an effort to stay objective since by the second interview I could see that these were individuals with opinions and practices well outside mainstream Judaism.



When speaking of a Jew, the basic definition of identity is birthright. The halachic explanation of who is a Jew is one born to a Jewish mother or formally converted. This is not a concern to Kootenay Jews. For them it is a cultural, not a halachic, or legal issue. If you have a Jewish parent, if you identify and behave as a Jew, you are a Jew. One woman said, "In this neck of the woods, if someone calls themselves Jewish, they're Jewish. You wouldn't ask who their mother was." A man who leads services when they occur said he feels the same as Ben Gurion, "Those who feel they are, are." Yet another, whose children's mother is not Jewish, said, "It's not even an issue. We don't look for things that divide us. We look for things that kind of bring us together." These statements are appealing in human terms, but for most mainstream Jews it is difficult to ignore the fundamental religious principles that identify us as a distinct people.³

The strongly feminist in the community, many of them single parents, take exception. One vehemently explained why: "Whoa! How do I feel about patrilineal descent? You know this is not particularly around Judaism, but I feel patriarchal descent is part and parcel of us being owned and slave labour and taking power out of our hands. That's how I feel around patrilineal descent!" These women are thrilled that this is the one place in Judaism where they are indisputably crucial. A woman said to me, "It

³ I consulted Jewish Renewal, Reform and Orthodox congregational rabbis in Vancouver. None accept patrilineal Jews without study and a halachic conversion. However, non-Jewish parents can participate in their children's b'nai mitzvahs by leading a prayer that is not obligatory in the synagogue service.

was *me* who pushed him out into this world!" Many women raising children on their own have given them their family name, at the same time acknowledging the irony that it came from their fathers. They are pleased that Jewish inheritance laws are other than the patriarchal practice of Western Christian cultures, "because it recognizes the historical importance of women in culture." However, when the issue is synagogue participation, both factions believe absolutely that patrilineal Jews should have equal opportunity to receive an *aliyah*, to be called to the torah to recite prayers. A patrilineally descended woman who formally converted before her marriage said the objection to full participation is a formality that is not justified in this age of equality. Her opinion would have little influence in Vancouver; in Nelson it is accepted practice.

The previous generation, with their deep regard for the authority of Jewish law, would not have accepted the present ones' definition of a Jew, although through necessity or lack of interest many drastically reduced their Jewish practice in Nelson. Their position now is more tolerant as their children and grandchildren intermarry. In the eight other small communities surveyed, responses to this question varied. Most accept patrilineal descent, but two communities do not. Thunder Bay, with less than twenty families left, three-quarters of them intermarried, is divided on this issue, particularly when it comes to Jewish burial. In Sudbury, where the small lay-led congregation uses Orthodox liturgy but tries to accommodate all denominations, their opinion is, "When you have to say *kaddish* (memorial prayers), one accepts all Jews." The Kootenays is the only community I surveyed that permits patrilineal Jews to have an *aliyah*.

Curious about the experience of patrilineal Jews in Nelson, I interviewed three residents whose sole Jewish parent was their father. A woman who has no connection to the community but a strong bond to the memory of her father, said, "I am conscious of having been brought up in a Jewish experience and I'm also conscious of having to bridge that because half my family is not." Her feeling on the issue of descent has profound yet conflicted meaning for her as a woman with a patrilineal history:

Philosophically and biologically, it [matrilineal descent] appeals to me. What it means in fact, I'm not sure. I mean Jewish girls have been subjected to all kinds of BS, forever, including all of the typical double standards and everything else, which may be changing. It wasn't when I was growing up. That's what matters. I don't really care where the rabbi

thinks his gene pool is coming from. I'm more concerned with genuine, personal empowerment.

Jewish fathers who are attached to their identity can be disappointed when their children resist their attachment to Jewish culture. One man, whose son resists and struggles with it, was pleased when his daughter wanted a bat mitzvah. Regarding identity, she has allied herself with him, perhaps because nothing was offered by her mother, "My mum was Christian when she was little, but she didn't really like it that much, so she just has no religion." She also enjoys the attention of being unique among her friends and with her teachers. "So, like whenever I'm in school people ask you. Whenever there's like questions in Social Studies about Judaism, they all just go to you!" Attending Jewish summer camp has furthered this identity and provided her with a sense of belonging and goals. Before her bat mitzvah, she had a Jewish Renewal conversion ceremony in Vancouver.

More immediately poignant is the situation of an adult member of the community who said he felt comfortable with his Jewish heritage growing up. He enjoyed it because it gave him an identity and a sense of belonging to a group that he "could get a handle on and that I could feel some kind of kinship with. It also gave me a separateness from general American culture, which I didn't want to feel identified with... The only sense in which I wasn't comfortable with it was just that I didn't know where I sat in it. The limbo of the half-Jew." He laughed at this self-parody and added, "The limbo of the mixed blood." He sees himself as part of a "thin layer of newcomers," but is unsure of his welcome in such a tradition-oriented religion. He has thought of conversion, "just because it would clarify my position." His daughter loves *seders*, the traditional Passover meal, but she is "half again as much Jewish as I am." He thinks she would say, "I'm Jewish" because she is less cautious and more willing to count herself in than he is.



For a Jewish male *brit milah*, ritual circumcision is tangible proof of identity, the physical symbol of God's everlasting covenant with the Jewish people promised to Abraham. In *Bereshit* (Genesis 17:10-14) verses ten and eleven, God commands: "This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your

foreskin; and it shall be a token of a covenant betwixt Me and you.”⁴ Verses twelve and thirteen reiterate that the everlasting covenant is with one’s natural and adopted sons. Verse fourteen is explicit about the consequences of neglecting this covenant: “And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken My covenant.”⁵ This was God’s first commandment to the Jews as a people therefore Abraham, at age ninety-nine, is said to have circumcised his son and himself. There is no equivalent commandment for girls to be circumcised; the privilege of passing on Jewish lineage is theirs.

Brit milah is still widely practiced by secular Jewish families, but not in the West Kootenays where an astonishing percentage of boys are uncircumcised. The reasons for this, if not acceptable to mainstream Judaism, are clear in the minds of these parents. Some did not want to mark their sons in a way that stigmatized Jewish males during the Nazi period. Others did not wish to physically alter the perfection of their newborn. One woman explained that her son had had a “really beautiful birth and I just couldn’t see taking a knife to him.”⁶ Another questioned if it was just a physical expression of a covenant, why not take some flesh off the forearm like the Cree do or have a piercing ceremony like the Apache Sun Dance, which people unfamiliar with native culture would think equally horrifying. Most said circumcision was an abusive, painful practice that was not inflicted on Jewish girls, so why boys.

When it comes to brit milah Jewish women have always grit their teeth and held their emotions in check, if necessary leaving the room so they cannot hear their babies’ cry. Pride in perpetuating an ancient covenant helps these mothers overcome their infants’ temporary anguish. It appeared to me that Kootenay parents who chose not to circumcise their boys in order to alleviate a moment of pain in their infancy did not consider the ramifications for their sons when they reached maturity. For example, if the son married a woman with more traditional Jewish standards, he would have to undergo adult circumcision to be accepted as a Jewish spouse. Certain people said it was not right to make this unalterable decision for their sons when they were too young to reason

⁴ Translation: Jewish Virtual Library. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Bible/Genesis17.html>

⁵ The commandment is binding upon the father of the child and the child. If a father does not have his son circumcised, the son is obligated to have himself circumcised as soon as he becomes an adult.

⁶ The Orthodox rabbi/mohel who performed my grandson’s brit in Fernie, BC, had another interpretation: God asks us to perfect the body in the commandment to Abraham, “Walk before Me and be perfect”

for themselves. Others told me their boys could choose to be circumcised later if they wished to. I found it difficult to imagine a man wanting to undergo the psychological and physical pain of circumcision at that stage of his life unless he was specifically requested to or had a deep commitment to being an observant Jew. Although I did not agree with these parents, I suspected why some of them found the decision to forgo brit milah easy. As we will see later in this chapter, many Kootenay Jews explore other theologies. These people identify culturally but not religiously as Jews; therefore the obligation to circumcise has no special meaning for them.

One woman said she did not have her three sons circumcised because, “on the physical side it was barbaric.” Today, she said, “I have a little bit more respect for the ritual meaning of what that might mean to someone, [but] I don’t think it would mean enough to me to do that.” What then will it mean to the boy who has been told he is Jewish and discovers he does not look like other Jewish males? A woman whose sons are circumcised asked rhetorically, “What do you call children like that? They are Jews because their mothers are, yet they’ve not been included in the Covenant conferred on all Jewish men.”

This dilemma was not restricted to women in the community. One man informed me that circumcision is a mutilating practice that has become ritualized and will eventually have to be re-evaluated. This will take time since brit milah is deeply identified with feeling Jewish. Another, born in the secular former USSR, related how he asked to be circumcised at age seven while living in Israel and what he believes today:

My parents never forced me to. I chose it because I was being chastised [by Jewish classmates]. It was a really difficult thing. I mean I did that. It was a difficult thing to go through. I don’t think I would necessarily do it [circumcise his son]. I would probably have the child make the decision on that one. If by a certain age they feel like they want to look like daddy, or they feel that they want to be circumcised too... I’ll explain to them the differences between the two, that it’s a covenant between man and God from a Jewish perspective and if you want that you can. If you don’t want that, you don’t have to.

Like the first man, he concluded by saying, “I really feel that there are a lot of old beliefs and icons that have to be slayed. The Catholic Church has them; the Jewish faith has them, the Buddhist and the Hindu faiths I’m sure have them just the same.”

Many people said there was no valid health reason to remove the foreskin and most believed the superstition that it would lessen sexual pleasure. One person said it was a “weird practice with sexual overtones that makes the penis look different and less sensitive.” Ironically, a young man who is circumcised volunteered this information and remarked that, “circumcision was healthier, so there you go for all you Jewish cats out there, we got one up from what I understand. And I do too. If it’s your thing [religion] respect it, just like all the other ones. If you’ve got kids, let them respect it.”

Women who did not have their sons circumcised were conflicted about their decision because of parental pressure. They looked to others in the community as their role models and went online to websites that would support their case with their families. Often they told me they prayed for a girl so they would not have to deal with this problem. Women who had more than one son said that after the first boy it was easier to say no, but it never became easier for their parents to accept their choice. A woman told me that her father never did get over his disappointment. On his deathbed he had a private conversation with his grandsons requesting they become circumcised. For several weeks after his death, her youngest was afraid to urinate by himself thinking *zaidie* (grampa) would come down from heaven and circumcise him. This mother, who had not wanted to harm her infant sons, inadvertently caused them to experience guilt and fear when they were old enough to understand the implications of circumcision.

Another woman I spoke with whose son was circumcised said it only occurred because her father took advantage of her weakened physical and emotional state after the birth. Her delivery, which was close to the anniversary of her mother’s death, was long and exhausting. “I’m pretty sure though, if she were alive I wouldn’t have circumcised him because I would have held more true to what my position was beforehand.” Seven years later the hypocrisy of the brit still infuriates her. When they were still on speaking terms, her father said to her, “I think that time in my life is over going to synagogue and doing all that stuff.” She remarked that, “[today I find] myself really confused and angry about it all given what an intense [time] that was in our family. He made sure it happened and crossed that off his list and moved on.” She is proud that her young son feels part of a wider Jewish family, but the one element that marks it continues to upset her.

Interested to know what the rabbinic response would be to this local practice, I spoke with three rabbis from Orthodox, Reform and Jewish Renewal (see glossary) congregations in Vancouver. Each one said circumcision is the single commandment more than any other that has been maintained throughout the trials of Jewish history. One said, "Brit milah is an essential part of bringing children into the covenantal features of the Jewish community. Not doing it is tantamount to a rejection of the Jewish people." None see the Kootenay refusal of ritual circumcision as a trend, rarely having encountered it in their congregations. They all thought the fear of marking their sons with a physical identifier in the event of another catastrophe like the Holocaust was an assimilationist excuse, particularly in this age of information technology and access to records. My own beliefs and practices are liberal, but it troubles me when such an irrevocable step is taken to disassociate one's child from the Jewish people.



In the Kootenays, sharing holidays and lifecycle events is a more common source of Jewish identity than obeying ancient commandments. The traditional ones (brit is but one) are marriage, birth, bar/bat mitzvah and death. I was told about two Jewish weddings, but was unable to locate the couples. In both cases the bride had a formal conversion to Judaism. Every other wedding I heard about involved a non-Jewish partner in a secular ceremony. One of the Jewish ceremonies excited an acquaintance of the couple:

They built a *chupah* (wedding canopy), a timber frame chupah. Like I asked [her], 'Wow! You converted. Like how come? It's so amazing.' She said, 'Well we want to have kids and it's important to [him].' And [he]; you know I didn't even know [he] was Jewish, right. I mean I've known [him] on and off over the years and didn't have a clue he was Jewish and they have an actual Jewish wedding! It was wild. It was great. You should get their story, more so than my story!

A lifecycle event that West Kootenay Jews enjoy celebrating communally is *b'nai mitzvah*. Halachically, thirteen plus a day for a boy (bar mitzvah), and in contemporary society twelve plus a day for a girl (bat mitzvah), is the age when a child assumes their responsibilities in the community. When a child reaches that age they *are* a bar or bat mitzvah, a son or daughter of the covenant, they do not "become bar mitzvahed" or

“have a bat mitzvah” as most people say. Originally there was no ritual to mark this date; a boy just took his place in the community. There is no doubt that in our time the ceremony often supercedes the original intent, becoming elaborate, immoderately expensive and “over-ritualized” as one rabbi put it; but no synagogue refuses to permit a bat or bar mitzvah from participating in a torah service or ceremony, or to have family and friends *shep naches*, get pleasure, from witnessing this rite of passage.

During the past ten years there have been eight or nine b'nai mitzvah in the West Kootenays. A lay member of the community who loves to work with children, introduces them to Judaism's precepts as well as their torah passage. He first consults with a rabbi to choose the appropriate torah portion.⁷ He and the child practice the melody and blessings together using a recording made by a *ba'alat korai*, a female torah reader.⁸ I spoke with three post bat mitzvah girls who enjoyed their learning experience with him. Their memory for the details of that learning is now weak, but he is confident that it is imprinted. In his experience, “Mine didn't take 'til I was in my forties!”

Nevertheless, these young girls each believed that their bat mitzvah was an important moment in their lives as Jewish women. Each was influenced by attending a cousin's bat mitzvah and liked the idea of a coming of age celebration that brought together their families and friends. One said the whole community was excited that a “real rabbi was coming to Nelson and bringing a torah” and she was pleased to have been the catalyst for this. But a bat mitzvah is a singular event. A woman concerned for the youth in the community said, “Their interactions with each other are made up of twice a year seeing each other at some Jewish thing their parents made them come to... I think there needs to be something done to keep the kids interested. There are few kids who come from really strong families who made Judaism a priority.”

Two young people talked about b'nai mitzvah that happened serendipitously while they were away from the community. They felt it wasn't “real” because they hadn't prepared, read the prayers transliterated into English and their parents were not with

⁷ The segment of the scroll that corresponds with their birth date on the Hebrew calendar. The child will also learn the blessings recited before and after the reading and may also learn to lead other parts of the service.

⁸ This reflects a very recent change in all but the Orthodox denomination of Judaism, where it is only men who can be readers of the sacred text or receive an aliyah in a public torah service that includes both sexes.

them. Still, they were proud to have participated in a historical continuum. For one it was a spontaneous event shared with a busload of teens touring the Western (“Wailing”) Wall in Jerusalem. This young woman was very articulate about her efforts to find a workable Jewish identity and she hopes some day to study for an “authentic one.” She has stopped eating pork and shellfish and with her non-Jewish boyfriend and friends celebrates *shabbat*, Sabbath, every Friday night.⁹ She “feels a little bit stuck with it” now, unsure how to integrate more Judaism into her life without guidance:

I don't really know what my Jewish identity is yet. I see myself as one and call myself one and I know that I am one, but I still don't really feel that much like I am one, if that makes sense. I know I am and I probably will be more so one day, but I'm not really there yet. It hasn't quite solidified for me yet...It is hard to develop a sense of self when you are alone with it.



When Silver King Mike requested interment in consecrated ground elsewhere eighty-four years ago it was because he knew that Nelson could not accommodate a religious burial, the final rite in the Jewish lifecycle. The same difficulties exist today, unless one is willing to adapt. Nelson does not have a Jewish cemetery or *chevra kadisha*, volunteer burial society whose duties are to wash the body, wrap it in special shrouds and remain with it overnight. If the family is not prepared to ship the body to a larger city for a Jewish funeral, ritual burial in small communities means compromise. Older communities I surveyed have their own burial grounds; newer ones such as Whistler and Har El in West Vancouver have been allocated a section of their municipal cemeteries. One community told me their chevra kadisha is short of volunteers, another said that their duties are limited by local funeral home regulations.

The necessity to train a chevra kadisha and arrange a consecrated burial ground has not crossed the minds of most present-day Kootenay Jews, although the group is aging and the younger generation is moving away.¹⁰ Burial in a non-Jewish cemetery may not be a concern in this community. Two or three people, however, resent the absence of this final service to their fellow Jews and think the group is wearing blinders

⁹ Pork and shellfish are two proscribed foods in *kashrut*, Jewish dietary law.

¹⁰ For a description of Chevrah Kadisha in small communities see Lynn Greenhough's 2001 thesis, "We Do the Best We Can:" Jewish Burial Societies in Small Communities in North America.

on the issue of Jewish burial. The initiative to negotiate and purchase a communal plot takes foresight, leadership and money and none of that is available at the moment. More significantly, group decision-making is not a habit in this community:

I think a funeral, that's a life cycle thing. We're trained to respect those life cycle events. And even if it wasn't, you know, [it was] someone in the community so you've got to pay your respects. I mean we're human beings. So we're Jewish human beings, we have some other responsibilities. I mean we're all going to have to approach it eh? We're *here*. I've been here twenty-five years and we're going to die here, so? In the old days the first thing they did, they got a burial society together because Jewish burials are different than everybody else's, right. So like, we don't! We don't even have *that*. It's like we're all planning to die somewhere else!

A Nelson woman whose parents are buried in a Jewish cemetery told me, "I've made it known to [my husband] that I want to be with him because [he's] the love of my life. I don't have to be in a Jewish burial ground. I know that for all eternity I will always have that sense of that is who I am." A Vancouver rabbi who has officiated at funerals for twenty-six years has a different perspective on Jewish death. He has seen many people who lived marginalized from the community become "more Jewish in death than they were in life" by requesting their gentile spouse or partner to arrange a religious burial. I did not ask people about their burial plans, but I did ask if they knew of a ritual burial in the Kootenays. The answer was always the same two.

The daughter of a frail elderly couple prepared for their deaths by consulting a rabbi, ordering shrouds and caskets that conformed to Jewish standards, finding a Christian funeral home an hour away in Trail that would treat Jewish burial with respect, and purchasing plots "in the most neutral part of the cemetery." As much as it was possible, she honoured the ritual. Her parents' last days were spent in a Catholic seniors home whose staff was especially sensitive: "[I said] 'I have a feeling there is a very profound spiritual moment going to be happening here in a little while. I don't want that up there. I don't want to be the Jew who takes the cross down off the wall.' [The staff person] said no problem. She said it is much better to ask for forgiveness than permission, so she climbed up on a ladder and took the cross down."

The funeral and mourning period were an important process for this daughter. In life her parents had no interest in religious ritual, but she had become more spiritual and found that her ability to provide them with a Jewish burial was both fulfilling and comforting. She was overwhelmed by the community's support. A rabbi came for the first funeral and a community leader led the second from a booklet prepared by another community member. "Just a lot of caring came forth from people. And with my mother's funeral especially, without Hillel [the rabbi] coming, [they] just did a remarkable job, just out of the goodness of their hearts. It was a very moving funeral." Each night of the *shiva* (mourning period) friends brought food for the family. With no experience of Jewish death before her father's passing, when her mother died a year later, she catered the food thinking she could not ask again so soon. Many can only stumble through the Hebrew mourning prayers, but several mentioned they felt a little bereft when the one traditional duty they could perform easily for the family was unintentionally removed.

The death of the community elder in 2005 was handled entirely differently at his request. The body was cremated, an act that is contrary to traditional Jewish law that maintains death is a natural process in which the body should decay naturally. This man was a Yiddishist-humanist whose interests were strongly cultural and anti-religious, which was well known in the community. Rather than the mandated funeral and burial within forty-eight hours, a memorial service was held later that was "more like an art opening. There were no religious trappings as Max would have called it." There were anecdotes, tears, laughter, his beloved klezmer music and food. "It was very, very Max and I'm sure he would have approved," said a younger friend. When I asked his wife if they had a *shiva* and memorial prayers, she reacted to the question with a big laugh, "Oh no! Do you think Max would have liked that? No way! *Sitzn shiva* for a week? No, but people visited, which is the same thing."

Another woman whose husband was not Jewish but had been very supportive of her Jewish identity, died in their small town. Heartbroken and alone, she felt the need for Jewish ritual to help mediate his passing for herself and their daughter:

I mean, I couldn't do a *shiva*, but I did! So we had like a four-day party. People kept coming. I did do the Hebrew *kaddish*. We did *yarzheit* (memorial) candles as well as singing a Jimi Hendrix song. So that's the epitome of what I do. I just kind of blend it with what I understand as

meaningful and important and what I've taken from, yeah, what I think my Jewish roots are.

West Kootenay Jews can usually accommodate non-traditional, even heretical practices as we have seen in these anecdotes, but there are occasional inconsistencies. Recently a young man died in a ski accident. A woman in the community voluntarily sat with the body overnight because she thought it was wrong for a Jewish soul to exit the world unaccompanied. The Christian funeral director lit a memorial candle because he knew the deceased was Jewish. The body was then cremated according to wishes the deceased had expressed to his wife, a recent Jew-by-choice. Because of her newness to Judaism, several people telephoned to inform her that cremation is “wrong.”¹¹ I would not have predicted this response given Max’s cremation the year before, but paradoxes like these abound in the West Kootenays. A Reform rabbi from Calgary conducted the funeral although it is possible he did not preside over interment of the ashes.¹² The rabbis I consulted all said cremation violated Jewish principles. One said it was a “real departure, a disjunction. It is an active suppression of connection to Jewish history; a significant deviation from the definition of community.” The Reform and Jewish Renewal rabbis did say they would consider presiding at a funeral service for a cremated body and providing instruction to the family on the prayers, but would not accompany them to the interment. To date, neither has been requested to provide this service so the dilemma of how willing they might be and how much tacit approval they might contribute to what they consider a sacrilegious act remains theory.



Jewish practices in the Kootenays are often modified, sometimes radically as demonstrated in this chapter. Some practices may not be done at all due to circumstances; for example, the community does not possess a *mikveh*, ritual bath. Even so, one woman told me she tried her best to keep the laws of *niddah*, family purity.¹³ I

¹¹ Many Jews, even if they are not halachically observant, are horrified by cremation because of its connection to the Holocaust and other forced acts of martyrdom in Jewish history.

¹² Some American Reform rabbis are comfortable with cremation. This is generally not the case in Canada.

¹³ Niddah is based on a tractate of the Talmud regulating the separation of a marital couple when the woman is menstruating, including a length of time after the menstrual period until she immerses in the mikveh.

did not meet anyone who performed the daily prayers, but I expected the West Kootenays to be fertile ground for a Rosh Chodesh group.¹⁴ Many urban Jewish women belong to Rosh Chodesh groups that develop practices sacralizing women's experiences, or they may have individual rituals based on the symbolism of the moon and the menstrual cycle. A number of Kootenay Jewish women belong to women's ritual groups, but they have never come together for this distinctly Jewish custom. I thought this unusual in a community where so many women explore spirituality and create ritual since Rosh Chodesh is one place in Judaism where they can craft authentic women's ritual by studying the sources and conceptualizing meaningful practices together.

I spoke with a woman who creates her own rites. She developed one for her sons in lieu of brit milah to recognize their entry into the Jewish world. Neither she nor her former husband, who is Jewish, wanted to appease her parents by having a brit:

There was no way he [her husband] was going to let them be circumcised. He really felt strongly. He felt strongly about a few things when they were little and that was one of them. But I was really mothering. It didn't make sense to me. I didn't feel the need to do that to feel Jewish, even though my parents felt that I was going against Jewish law. They [her sons] were perfect. I couldn't imagine doing that!

She said that Judaism traditionally has controversies around interpretation and there are scholars she can turn to in order to "find the interpretation to support what I feel is right." A man in the community expressed a similar belief when he told me that Judaism is like a restaurant; if you don't like something you go elsewhere. On the eighth day after their sons' births, normally the day of brit milah if the child is healthy, this couple held their own ceremonies. She laughed heartily as she described how for their first son they peeled a banana. For the second, they had a ceremony at home with many guests. She said the blessings and they peeled a carrot: "You know, I *honoured* that tradition. I just didn't want to *do* that to my boys. To this day I feel really glad. I have no regrets whatsoever." This is a woman who looks for the essence upon which to build her rituals and it was amusing, but after a shared laugh I came to view it as a visual pun more than a respectful adaptation of an ancient covenant.

¹⁴ Head of the month – a ceremony welcoming the new month.

Other religious ceremonies, especially b'nai mitzvah, have been fabricated in ways that contain only a hint of the accepted traditions. Interpreting ritual in the Kootenays is extremely personal and based on human values not halacha; the intent rather than the law, but sometimes it is related to circumstances such as isolation and distance. The only Jewish person in Grand Forks has tried to give her daughter as full a Jewish life as possible. One of those experiences was a tangible acknowledgement of her reaching the age of responsibility in Judaism:

She had a bat mitzvah, but she didn't. It was her age, her passing. We had sixteen people at a restaurant and everyone had to bring a bead, and everyone had to give her a wish for her adult life. All women. It wasn't a wish so much as a piece of information about how they saw what a woman would give to a young woman. I have it all on sound. It was awesome. We invited four of her friends and twelve of my friends and we ate and people told stories about her as a younger child and what they saw and wished for her in the future and any pieces of wisdom.

Another woman living in a rural intentional community related this story of her son's bar mitzvah:

When [he] was that age there was no community stuff happening at all and I was really feeling at that point like I wanted to do something for him. I was really kind of stuck because I didn't have the education to teach him, so it was difficult. One of things I was hoping for when I organized that [community] meeting was that there would be some support, or something. I don't think I even really knew exactly what.

We actually pulled together kind of a little bar mitzvah ceremony. There wasn't a bar mitzvah and there wasn't a rabbi. It was a circle of people that I invited. Some of them were Jewish, some of them weren't. [A Jewish friend who was very interested in the spiritual aspect of things] helped us figure out what [his] torah portion would have been. We sort of altered it a little bit so I could find something I could relate to a little more because it ended up being a lot of cubits and things. He read that in English and it was nice. It was a nice event. It was actually the first bar mitzvah event [held in the area] - it wasn't a real bar mitzvah in a lot of ways, but it was kind of the prelude to what [my friend later] did.

Similar to the child in Grand Forks, the father of a boy whose mother was not Jewish held a ritual for his son at their farm. This man is conflicted about his identity; his Jewishness was kept secret from him until he was into his teens. Asked what inspired him to do this for his son given his experience, he replied after much careful thought,

“Well, wanting to give my kids some kind of grounding and some kind of pride in where they come from.” This answer puzzled me since he showed little visible pride in it himself; treating his Jewish heritage more like family history, albeit a traumatic one full of falsehoods. The son of aged Holocaust survivors, he said, “Given my age [fifty-three], yeah I’m thinking about my roots and I’m thinking about what I have given my children; the last little bits of what I have or haven’t shared with my children...but I can’t see any rational reasons for having passed on any information about Jewishness to my children.”

He chose the traditional date for bar mitzvah, thirteen, and invited the boy’s male friends with their fathers. The fathers were asked to speak about something meaningful they had read. He requested they share their thoughts about manhood with his son, what it meant to be thirteen and what they valued in manhood. At the last minute he spoke to a Jewish acquaintance in the village, who called back shortly after to say that the Kootenay community had just been gifted with a torah that he would bring. “So that was the version I did. [It] just happened to coincide with that torah ending up here in Nelson, so the first public use of it actually was at our house.”

I did the equivalent of a bar mitzvah for [my son]; well, for both of my boys. I tried to honour what I understood, the bit of reading I was able to do. I can usually find in most traditions a value in it and my understanding of bar mitzvah, or bat mitzvah, it really has to do with the recognition of the beginnings of some aspect of adulthood; becoming responsible for the consequences of your actions rather than your parents being responsible and that being symbolized by being considered old enough to do some reading and interpreting. So I kind of respected that.

The man who brought the torah told me he also had his own bar mitzvah *tallit*, prayer shawl, with him. He wrapped the son in it, explaining that to be a bar mitzvah all he had to do was hold the torah and say a prayer.¹⁵ He did the same for the father, who had never held a torah. It was an emotional, even tearful moment for everyone there. I recall reading heartfelt emails of congratulations on the listserve afterwards. The father’s almost reluctant pride and dispassionate detachment retelling the story was the most enigmatic and paradoxical experience I had in Nelson, but like the other stories I listened to, it showed a profound, subconscious connection to Jewish identity and values.

¹⁵ The *Bar’chu*, call to the torah. Those congregated chant a response. In this case there was no minyan, the ten (halachically Jewish) individuals required to hold a torah service, and no service was held.

It was not uncommon for people to tell me they lost interest in Judaism until they became parents. One man explained: "You have to figure out what you're doing and what does it mean. Are you a person of faith, or are you not a person of faith? Do you believe in God or do you not believe in God? So it's made me kind of challenge those assumptions of mine." Given the pull of their daily lives, and for some the plurality of their spiritual leanings, what is passed on is sometimes hard to recognize. I made every effort to keep my questions and responses neutral, but occasionally a person would comment that a certain individual was "too far out for me!" In this open-minded liberal society, there are still certain boundaries that cannot be crossed if one is to remain Jewish in their eyes. These rare conservative responses to radical ideas or the inclusion of ritual from other spiritual traditions into Jewish practice were interesting as I recognized within them the limitations of my own standards of tolerance for practices I considered unusual.



After a fleeting attempt at Yiddish lessons in the Seventies, Jewish education has not materialized in the community. Two of the other communities I surveyed were also without formal instruction. Responsibility for Jewish education has fallen entirely on the shoulders of parents whose knowledge and understanding of Jewish history, laws, ethics and holy days are cursory, although the major ones may be celebrated as a time for family and/or community to be together. Very few women welcome the Shabbat into their households. One woman has hosted a potluck *kabbalat shabbat* (receiving of the Sabbath) on the last Friday of the month for several years, but interest has waned and frequently there is no one to share it with. Nevertheless, each month she reminds people via the listserve of her family's availability.

Parents told me they tried to make their children aware they had Jewish heritage and some were able to attend life cycle events or share holidays with the Jewish side of their family in other cities. A small number of children have attended Jewish summer camp. One woman said, "It's really a dilemma for me what to do with it because somehow it does seem important to pass something on to them. That little prescription of passing it along is really branded deep. Some of the problem is that my Jewish education was so informal," which hampered her from passing on Jewish heritage effectively. A number of parents mentioned their regret at not providing their children

with more knowledge. In contrast to that statement, most acknowledged they were no more motivated to keep Judaism in their own lives than when they first arrived in the Kootenays. This does not signify they feel less Jewish. Being Jewish is a part of their identity, even if Jewish precepts and practice are not.

Because of this detachment from Jewish practice, I asked each person what he or she connected with in Judaism. One woman responded, "Oh, that's a big one! I guess culture, worldview, family orientation, humane values, the obligation to repair the world (known as *tikkun olam*), human warmth and compassion, intellectual curiosity, the arguing with God, the lack of dogma." She loves that it is acceptable for Jews to argue about their faith. Her daughter said what appeals to her is the knowledge that she belongs to something bigger than herself; that she has ancestors; that it is a worldwide faith; that it has transcended time and cultures; and that Jews have astounding perseverance. "I would like to fit into that. I think the Jews are the most amazing group of people: their history and the way that they've managed to persevere, it's so astounding. I think it's really cool. It's just incredible and I want to be part of that. I want to carry it on; like I really want to carry it on."

She was equally honest about what did not appeal to her. "I read bible and Reform and Renewal interpretations, but there's part of me that just says, 'No! It is really patriarchal,' and 'No, it *does* encourage subservience.'" She is a little wary of organized religion because she sees in it a tendency to "place itself above humanity." She is unsure whether it is possible to be a good Jew, a "full Jew," if one does not follow all the laws or practices a different interpretation.

The obligation for social action, *tikkun olam*, holds great appeal in this socially conscious group, who are proud it is a Jewish attribute. For others, identification is via culture: Jewish foods, sharing meals and recipes, literature, music or crafts. Other people mentioned the importance of family in light of its fragility after the Holocaust. On the bittersweet side, they also talked about Jewish humour and its ability to carry us through adversities in the blackest moments. Rather than identifying with religious Judaism, their answers focused on universal Jewish values, continuity of important concepts and pleasure in that indefinable moment when one Jew recognizes another:

[I connect with] the radical, political social ideals and values that have been carried throughout the generations. I think there were many great Jewish thinkers. I connect to that. Not that I'm one of them, but I just love that I'm from that tradition. I feel that it's my tribe; it's one of my tribes. It's not a tribe that I connect with as a whole, but I do connect to Jews. I mean I'm pretty conscious of that. You know, you meet a Jew and there's something, there's a connection there.



Pride in Jewish values did not necessarily extend to pride in Israel. No one with negative opinions was reluctant to share them with me. I phrased my question on this topic in neutral terms so as not to bias the answer: Is Israel important to you in any way? One woman unhesitatingly replied: "It's *very* important to me because they upset me. I'm definitely on the side of the Palestinians and anti-Zionist!" When I asked her later if she had any final comments, any last words about something we might not have touched on, she said no; she had just been waiting to tell me what she thought about Israel.

If I was asked for my opinion on Israel, I was careful to say this was their story and we could discuss my views later. Instantaneous, left wing antagonism was the most common response. When I asked these particular respondents if they thought the Palestinian method for achieving statehood was appropriate - this was during an intense period of horrific suicide bombing attacks - some, but not all, would acknowledge that the problem is complex and they were not well informed. Considering the number of negative opinions about Israel, I was particularly perplexed when more than half said they had visited or lived in Israel for a time, or had close family living there: yet another of the inconsistencies I was learning to expect.

Not everyone was factually ignorant. For example, a man who based his entire Jewish identity on national pride and had immigrated to Israel as a young man, said Israel "was an anchor to my identity as a young person." His years in the Israeli army, in social services and on *miluim* (reserve duty) in the contested areas altered his perspective. He believes the Israeli government has two standards and that Jewish minorities and Palestinians are not treated like the rest of the population. Profoundly disillusioned, he emigrated to Canada after "seeing what life was really like for a second or third class minority. The way Zionism manifested itself in twenty-first century Israel

was to me very unsettling and I couldn't identify with it any longer. There are very many aspects within that society that foster discrimination and racism that were things I just didn't want to be a part of any more."

Another man, who has never been to Israel, founded a local branch of an international fellowship working towards peace and reconciliation between Jews and Arabs. Oddly, there is very little support in the community for his work. The group's request to carry the community's torah in a multi-faith peace march was refused by the ad hoc torah guardians, or trustees. The handful of people involved in the march were not happy with this decision, but to me it was logical that the committee did not want the torah, a religious artifact meant for worship and study, to be used as a political tool.

For all those adamantly against Israel, there was an equal number who were conflicted between their hearts and their minds:

I feel intimately connected to Israel because I am Jewish. People say to me, 'You don't have to feel bad about what Israel's doing, you're not Israel.' But I cannot separate; to me that's not true. Being Jewish connects me to Israel. I think it connects all Jews. That's the way I see it. [But] I am very disturbed by the politics of Israel, very disturbed. It's really hard for me to understand - although I can in some ways - what Israel is doing to the Palestinians. It is so horrendous to me. I'm not just disturbed by it; it's really, really horrible and I feel like these are my people who are doing it. And then I'm an American and what we're doing in Iraq; that's like double. I feel really bad about both of them.

A young woman who spent a summer in Israel at sixteen joined the Israel Advocacy Club during her first year at an urban university. She thought, "Yay! I'm going to be Jewish now!" On her return from Israel she had audaciously walked around Nelson "wearing a big star of David pendant and an Israeli Defence [Force] shirt that I wore all the time. I was always talking about being a Zionist or talking about Israel and the conflict there." Her commitment has mellowed since then, partly because her university experience was so negative. The Israel Advocacy Club had many confrontations with pro-Palestinian students that year. The movement became stagnant as both sides' attitudes and behaviours grew entrenched. Ultimately, she came to believe that it was counterproductive to remain in an activity that was metaphorically perpetuating the

conflict and decided it would be healthier to resign. That summer in Nelson, her “passion for it kind of faded” because “the Middle East is such a non-issue there.”

The people whose opinions surprised me most were often on the political left, or were the most acculturated with the least experience of Judaism. I expected them to be anti-Zionist, yet some were very positive about the need for Israel to exist as a refuge for Jews, often because of family history. Where these strong feelings on the need for refuge come from, besides the obvious connection to the founding of the State after the Holocaust, will be discussed in the section on anti-Semitism in chapter three.



Listening to people’s accounts, I was continually amazed by how casually they exposed their life stories, ideas and beliefs to a stranger. Some were living so remote from Jews and Judaism that I wondered why they wanted to be interviewed at all. By far the most astonishing expression of self-identity I encountered, next to not circumcising their sons, was their approach to spirituality, which frequently embraced a range of alternatives outside Judaism. I was told about the odd person who belonged to an evangelical Christian church yet showed interest in Yom Kippur services, but it was the people inhabiting the nether lands between Judaism and some other spiritual continent that most fascinated me. I was curious to know how it was possible to occupy divergent identities and remain unconfused. I read widely in Jewish and non-Jewish sources and discovered that transdenominationalism is a North American trend particularly well represented in the Kootenays and not restricted to Jews.

Religion & Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone (2004), an informative book with a regional perspective, was very useful in analyzing why alternative spiritualities are so prevalent in this area. The editors label the Northwest a region of the “unchurched” and outline why religion is such a weak “shaping force” in this locale.¹⁶ The reasons are numerous and go back to the pioneer period. The population of this region has always been diverse and transient and no church has become

¹⁶ The 2001 Canada Census reports that 16.5% of Canadians and 35.9% of BC citizens are unaffiliated. The only province with a higher rate is YT at 38.9%. The highest affiliation rate in Canada is Roman Catholicism at 43.2%; the next is the United Church at 9.6%. Seventy percent of BC’s 29,875 Jews state they are affiliated; circa 26,000 of circa 30,000 are located in Vancouver and Victoria (2,595). A Vancouver rabbi quotes the affiliated at only 35% in the Lower Mainland, which is similar to the general population.

dominant, such as the Catholic Church is in Québec. The Pacific Northwest has a long history of geographic, social and psychic mobility that has created a “religious environment where boundaries and identities are fluid, where energy and movements coalesce then dissolve.” (10) Social freedom has meant that people are free to experiment and innovate and to pursue or abandon a spiritual quest. The editors state, “It takes a robust experience of the supernatural to hold its own against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains capable of eliciting human devotion.” A man I interviewed in New Denver extended his arm toward Slocan Lake and the mountains behind it and exclaimed, “This is enough religion for me right here.” In the same village, a younger man said, “It’s one of the most amazing places. I feel real blessed to be born here.”

The editors describe four clusters of religious communities in the Pacific Northwest: “mainline” - Protestant, Catholic, and Reform and Conservative Judaism; “sectarian entrepreneurs” - for example, older evangelical groups and “new post-denominational groups” such as the Lubavitch movement; Pacific Rim - Native American and Asian religions; and finally, the “nones” and “secular but spiritual.” Many of the traits they ascribe to this last group correspond with those I observed amongst the Kootenay Jews, such as possessing a social vision for the public good, tolerance, the importance of family and individual responsibility, preference for small group experiences and involvement in spiritual journeys and rituals. Most of this individualistic secular, but spiritual group resist institutional constraints on their “path toward some new constellation of religious identification and belonging.” (17) Illogically, they may also identify with a traditional ethnic or religious community.

Interesting and apt as this is, it was the breadth of spiritual practices I encountered in a single individual that I was most unfamiliar with. Among my family, friends and acquaintances, I have not come across anything like the *mélange* of spiritualities I found in the Kootenays. I am not a spiritual Jew or a seeker of spiritual experience, which placed me in unfamiliar territory. I was totally mystified by what I was hearing. Fortunately this was not conveyed and I was able to participate in many open-ended and enlightening conversations. One man asked me rhetorically, “What would a person who isn’t spiritual be like? Isn’t everybody in some way?” Obviously I needed to learn more and reading broadly continued to be a priority.

Of the many theologies and ritual practices Kootenay Jews have studied, the most prevalent is Buddhism. Other spiritual or mind/body/healing practices that are being explored by Kootenay Jews are Daoism, Five Element Chinese medicine, yoga, shamanism, Wicca, New Age, Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous twelve step programs, rebalancing - a form of Reiki, Naka Ima - a type of transformative workshop, and Native American practices. Most Kootenay Jews have not looked to Judaism for their spiritual inspiration. I do not know why, but more women than men I interviewed are searching for answers in this way. I have read that women need ritual in their lives more than men, but I believe the answer is more complex and cannot be covered here.¹⁷

The most common reason people gave for this almost endemic phenomenon of seeking alternative spiritual fulfillment was the emptiness of their Jewish education, which failed to present them with the precepts of their faith or to encourage questioning:

Being Jewish growing up wasn't really a thing of faith, right, because they made speeches. They never really taught us. They taught us the liturgy, they taught us how to do things by rote. As far as the fundamental understanding, that wasn't it. I felt a little betrayed, a little bit having gone to parochial school but not really having a clue about the stories of the bible even. So I never really understood it. I never really learned it. I feel I was let down that way. So now that you feel let down, how do you overcome that?

Ultimately, this person's decision was to look at his own culture rather than elsewhere: "It's more incumbent upon me to understand my faith so I can say, 'Oh! This isn't for me I'll go look at your faith.' But for me to say, 'Oh yeah, that's a good idea,' without kind of understanding where you come from, it just didn't make sense to me." He represents a minority among the West Kootenay Jews I met, who tended to be culturally Jewish but searching elsewhere for spiritual guidance and gratification. The Jewish Renewal rabbi I consulted thought this could be attributed to the fact that these people had little Judaic knowledge and few adult experiences of Judaism and Jewish learning.

In a certain age group, generally those who reached their teens on either side of 1960, it appeared their rebellion was so complete they rejected not only all of their parents' values, but also their ancestral religion. One woman said to me, "I was always

¹⁷ See Clark 2004; Ellwood 1994; Miller 1995.

sort of a little off beat.” Her revolts were more subconscious than planned. “I just got wilder and wilder.” She was very comfortable with her Jewishness at that age, “you just were.” However, “there were things about the culture that really started irking me when I went into the rebellious period. I really couldn’t stand the emphasis on materialism, which was in my community and in my household.”¹⁸ She became a hippie; “[My partner] and I did the full trip boogie with that one” and “totally dropped out of the Jewish thing.” They tried living in communes and later delivered their two children without medical support, the first in a clearing in the woods, the second in a remote mountainside cabin. She described to me how her spiritual life grew separate from her Jewish identity:

I did have goals. They were to get as far away from mainstream society as possible, to be as self sufficient in relation to that as possible. I had a deep interest in the earth arts like herbs and how to grow food, really a huge interest in simplicity. That came totally natural to me. My goals at that point were, even though I was kind of stoned out, were just to - I always liked to read, so self-education was always there. I was just always trying to figure out why am I here? What am I doing on this planet? What am I supposed to do? And then once my children were born I really wanted to be a good mom.

You know, once I started seeing the vacuousness of the drugs and all that, I was like, ‘This is going nowhere fast.’ I started getting super interested in exploring that part of myself. It was during that period that I started getting involved in Buddhism and have been ever since.

“Buddhism has been a major force in my life. I started practicing when I was twenty-eight and I’m almost fifty-nine now.” She feels all religions are valid, but this is the one that attracts her. She is becoming more aware of human mortality as friends her age die and she wishes to deepen her practice “so that I do everything while I’m living to be as conscious as I can.” Buddhist practice is more than meditation, “It is a whole set of principals; of non-harmfulness, not causing suffering, ethical living and honesty and right speech. A full path of right livelihood, right speech. So I really try and work with those.”

Asked if that fit her values more than Judaism, since these principles are also encompassed in the 613 *mitzvot* or commandments, she replied that was the problem, growing up she learned very little about Jewish values. She knows that Judaism is “full

¹⁸ She was not alone in giving this excuse for her route away from Judaism. I found this criticism of wealth ironic because these same Jews’ philanthropy has allowed Jewish life and values to persist.

of ethics" and says, "If I could have a good teacher that I could study with, I would do it." The appearance of Jewish ethics in her explanation of Buddhism was intriguing. So was her response to the question whether she considers herself a Jew first, a Buddhist or a citizen of the world: "I think I would put the Jewish characterization at the top because I feel that most." Since moving back to the Kootenays from elsewhere in BC, she has become more interested in her Jewish background. "I used to read *Chassidic Tales of the Master* and I really liked it. It's just really close to Buddhism. I like the short pithy teachings. If there was someone doing that kind of stuff in Nelson, I would definitely be going." She maintains the rituals of lighting candles on Chanukah and for her mother's *yarzheit* (anniversary of a death) and goes to seders with a few friends. The heart of her identity is Jewish, but her way of being in the world is Buddhist, something she finds very compatible with her heritage.¹⁹

Another woman I met described her belief system as one in which all religions are complementary. "I just really feel it's all the same. It has different names and it can be called Judaism or Buddhism or yoga or whatever, but it's pretty much about the Oneness and living in a kind way. Yoga and Buddhism are definitely big influences on my Judaism, but it doesn't take away from it, any of them; they're all beautiful traditions." This type of Universalist acceptance paves the way for picking and choosing the parts of a religion or practice that are most relevant to one's concept of him or herself. Rather than belonging to a particular ethical discipline, all boundaries are dissolved and the individual becomes a spiritual traveller.

A woman who attended a yeshiva, an Orthodox Jewish girls' school, talked to me about the different phases of her life. To me her ideas were contradictory, but the longer she spoke the better I understood her perspective on personal growth. As a result of her immersion in Asian religions, she believes that a person's identity is in flux throughout his/her life. To some degree, but not necessarily at the conscious level, she was breaking with her parent's deep involvement in religious Judaism. "I never *not* wanted to be Jewish," but she yearned for other experiences. After seven years of married life and a child, she and her husband divorced and she went to Asia for a year with their six-year old son. This was an enlightening experience, the one her spirit was craving. On her

¹⁹ The trend for educated, secular Jews to find inner direction in Buddhism has spawned its own idiomatic expression, Jewbhu, which several people in the community used to describe themselves.

return she moved to a lesbian land co-op near Santa Fe. "It was very remote, in the mountains. I built a little house, a one-room house; an adobe house. No running water, no electricity and we lived there for seven years. I made my money by sewing." She has a Master of Education in Depressed Areas and taught for many years, but in New Mexico, "I made large wall hangings, but mostly I made my money by making clothing. I brought back beautiful cloth when I'd been in Asia. Made clothing on my treadle sewing machine" like she remembers her grandmother doing.

Following this experience, she spent five years in Santa Fe on staff at an institute teaching transformational courses. Eventually she and her "visionary partner" decided to teach their own course. "We would bring our own experience and the best of what we learned there and create classes, workshops that were more aligned with who we are." Clients in Nelson asked if a teacher could come to them, "So I got sent, and I thought this place was really wonderful. I thought it was a gem, physically, and also I thought that it was an area that was about transformation. So I decided I wanted to live here," which she has part time for eleven years. She jokes that she thought Canada was Nelson until she went to Kelowna and saw that it was not the same all over. She is not alone in finding the West Kootenays spiritually resonant and supportive of alternate paths to personal growth. Asked about transformational workshops, she explained:

It's about recognizing, really knowing, oneself and understanding oneself - who I am and how I operate and my ideas and emotions. Basically recognizing one's attachments and what stops one from being free. And in the moment of recognizing, learning how to let go. Buddhists do that through meditation. We do it through a very interactive process. Really it's about being honest with one's self, and I think there's no end to that, to wanting to be honest with one's self, learning how to do that and what that actually means and then awakening one's consciousness.

She had no interest in maintaining Jewish connections when she arrived in Nelson, "However, as soon as I heard there was a Jewish group I wanted to participate. I wanted to go and see what it was; check it out." She went to several events, but "Nothing was satisfying. I was glad that I went, but nothing really satisfied me. Some of the bat mitzvahs and bar mitzvahs I thought were wonderful. They were really satisfying to me." They had the essence she was looking for. "It's not because I'm inspired by it, it's just that it's part of who I am. You know, if it's happening down my street and I'm available I'm just, I'm drawn to go."

She thinks it is wonderful this is going on in her little town: however, her personal vision for a community in the Kootenays “has nothing to do with being Jewish. It is about expanding my consciousness and preparation for the world that’s changing.” Asked to sum up her experiences being Jewish in the West Kootenays, she said, “My Jewishness is inside of me and I don’t express it much in outward community ways and yet I am always Jewish wherever I go.” Although I found what she said contradictory, both sides of her vision for herself appear to reside comfortably in the same house. The seeking never stops, but this is what she believes is the point of life.

Baby boomers, who make up the majority of the age group I interviewed, have been called a generation of seekers. This is my generation, but the journeys described to me were well outside my experience of personal growth, which did not take place in the spiritual realm. For me the conflict was between development and fulfillment as an artist and viewing that as an ego-driven activity that removed one from family and the obligation to community. I found the inconsistencies, contradictions and ability to live with several conflicting identities that I encountered in the community - which other researchers called typical - very puzzling. I wondered why Jews had to wander so far from their traditions to find a way to be comfortable with themselves when Judaism accommodates so many perspectives.

Wade Roof Clark states in *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, that the boomers’ quest for a meaningful spiritual style has “alter[ed] the religious landscape of America.” He characterizes the dropped out generation as *bricoleurs* “shopping for a congregation... They move freely in and out of, across religious boundaries; many combine elements from various traditions to create their own personal, tailor-made meaning systems.” (5) Ellwood’s opinion is that boomers have become “Robert J. Lifton’s ‘Protean Man,’ whose life-style is characterized by an interminable series of experiments and explorations—some shallow, some profound—who views the self as a work in progress.” (21) I see a risk in this mode of living in that it encourages the formation of a “sovereign self,” a being so intent on self-development that he/she only has time to pay lip service to the notion of *tikkun olam*, the responsibility of one person to another that makes this world a humane place to live.²⁰

²⁰ Cohen, Steven M. and Arnold M. Eisen. *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, p.2.

The woman from Santa Fe was not the only person who considered her life a work in progress. Another, born in Novosibirsk during the Second World War and brought up in Moscow and Warsaw, said her childhood was “awful,” full of physical hardships, anti-Semitism and atheism. There was a spiritual hole in her life that she is still trying to fill. In Israel she met a Dutch student. They married, had children and lived in Holland and Toronto. They began a spiritual odyssey together, exploring shamanism and Native American spirituality. They were devotees of Amma, the hugging guru. When they moved to the Kootenays with the dream of establishing a land coop, he suddenly left her to pursue the quest on his own. She was emotionally and spiritually devastated and suffered a heart attack. The emotional wound was the hardest to recover from.

Her interests are diverse and include holistic healing, inspired by watching her mother recover from two severe heart attacks by “going back to the sweetness” of their heritage, “idealizing and reclaiming it.” She continues her shamanistic studies and rituals and is “resurrecting the office of high priestess.” As a “freelance explorer of life” and a “CRONE, Creative Researcher of New Experience,” she is also drawn to kabbalah. She feels at home in Nelson with its holistic artistic community. She loves the closeness of nature, which reminds her of the Carpathian Mountains of her youth, and the Doukhobors, who speak the “language of my heart.” She feels she is living fully here.

Asked if she was more or less motivated by Judaism since arriving, she said her home is her base to explore and analyze the language of the torah, which she calls “walking barefoot through the torah.” The “language is now alive” in her and she has publicly named her home, which she calls her temple, place of study and play place, *Shechinat Or*, the divine dwelling of light. There are sacred corners throughout her house and yard, evidence of her many spiritual journeys. She concluded by saying she wants to evolve as a woman “with wings fully open” and has only just begun her flight. This interview was intense and confusing with its oblique references to mystical symbols I either did not recognize or could not relate to. Although this kind of spiritual dichotomy is completely foreign to me, I could relate to the great sadness and feeling of displacement within that drove her quest.

Another woman I interviewed is exploring Wicca. I sensed her inner tension when she said, “that’s where I feel I am headed and where I don’t feel met by people here.”

Asked why, she said that for twelve years she has been involved with a women's ritual group. "There's five of us, and that's *really* satisfying. I bring *love* to it and have come to know a lot about it. But there *is* something about meeting Jews and I don't know what that is. It's kind of ineffable and I don't feel it, whatever that is, with the women in my ritual group." Perhaps this is one of those lines that other Jews in the community do not want to cross although Jewish women in urban areas have become "Jewitches."

Once again I found it interesting that Kootenay Jewish women were not turning to their own traditions to find ritual and spiritual contentment. The example of women's *techina* come to mind, personal prayers recited in the vernacular. A *techina* can be a spontaneous expression of thanks, for example on the safe birth of a healthy child, or a recorded prayer linked to the rhythm of women's lives and referencing the matriarchs as well as God. Information on old and new Jewish women's folkways are available online so that a group could be leaderless and still access the knowledge and creative possibilities of Jewish women's tradition, yet this has not happened in the Kootenays.

Rahel Musleah clarified Paganism's attraction to Jewish women for me in an article, "When the Goddess Calls to Jewish Women" in *Lilith*, a Jewish women's magazine. She stated that Paganism celebrates feminism and individuality and encourages its members, who see themselves as participants in a "polytheistic, tribal, nature religion," to "create their own rituals and theology." I understand why this would appeal in the West Kootenays, but respecting the seasons and creating ritual around it are also a vital part of Judaism. Holy days and festivals are based on the seasons and the phases of the moon. Sabbath and holidays begin and end at sunset/moonrise and are preceded by blessing candles, bread, wine and the fruits of the earth, all opportunities to develop and personalize Jewish ritual in the daily life of one's family. In the same article, Rabbi Jane Littman suggests the attraction to Paganism "also speaks to the abysmal Jewish education that took place a generation ago. If Jews had been educated better, there wouldn't be so many Jews who are Buddhists, Wiccans, unattached or hostile to Judaism."

Another woman, a trauma counsellor who has explored alternative spirituality, explained its meaning to her. "[For] most of my belief systems spiritually, I've studied a lot of shamanic healing practices. I don't come out of the closet much about that to be

honest, simply because there's such a high degree of New Agey weirdness that I don't respond to."

In terms of what it means to me in my own experience to connect to something besides myself, to a belief in the world, to a letting go - all of those pieces that actually thread their way through some of the wording of the prayer books that we use for the High Holy Days - shamanic practices encompass that in the way that I'm most comfortable, even though I'm a bit in the closet about it.

I'm part of a group of women who for the past close to four years have met almost monthly, who have had, call it shamanic training I guess. There are very specific practices that are done around healing shamanically. We learned about those and we've also studied. One of the women who leads it is an anthropologist and the other one who leads it is a psychotherapist so there's a real mixing of disciplines around it.

What I *believe* from doing shamanic work, what it has meant for me is spirits in shamanism, as weird as that may sound. Not like ghosts, but spirits. So whomever I'm connected to spiritually, they're always there for me. I just need to ask. They're not putative in their relationship to me. They're there when I want them or not and they can be there even when I don't ask. They just might not be as clearly present.

Shamanism doesn't believe in a hierarchy of spirits. Those values don't have meaning. That's for us in this world. It doesn't apply, and the idea of there just being one God? It's such a human, masculine concept it's not possible! I don't believe it...I got none of that from Judaism...The words about healing and connecting inside that support surrender, you know those ideas; I didn't get any of that from Judaism.

I asked her if she would characterize herself as a Jew first or a citizen of the world. She laughed and said, "I certainly *never* would characterize myself as a citizen of the world. I refer to myself as Jewish [and] I choose when I want to do that." This was becoming a recurrent theme: attachment to Jewish culture and ethics alongside spiritual practices with origins well outside the margins of Judaism. This woman's quest was initiated by a professional and intellectual interest in shamanism. The spiritual fulfillment she gained was a by-product of discovering that shamanism filled an implicit, previously unarticulated need.

Often the people I spoke to were intrinsically troubled, engaged in the continuous pursuit of a magic bullet with which to heal themselves. I did not meet anyone exploring their numinous side who had attained deep spiritual peace or was able to resolve the friction between their cultural and spiritual identities. There was usually at least one revelation of subverted discomfort in our conversation, no matter how spiritually at peace they made themselves out to be. I believe the scope of these explorations is a coping mechanism for troubled souls working to find a home base. Their newly acquired affiliations clash with their upbringing and their family history and its collective memories creating inner conflict. I sense that the strain between Jewish identity and alternative spirituality arises from questioning how to resolve the universal mysteries of life and failing to find the answers close to home, questions such as: why am I here; what should I do in this life; how can I tread lightly on the earth yet make a difference; how should we use our human gifts. Since many Kootenay Jews do not have a strong Judaic background, they are unaware there are Jewish responses to these questions.

This enigma contains within it the option for a resolution. In writing about Jews who pursue alternative theologies, Clark points out that, "It's very important to have some spiritual connections...whether it's meditation, walks in the woods, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Quaker meetings, the Native America sweats, something...[but] the one piece missing is Judaism, the alternative group of Judaism." (24) Jewish Renewal, which is still a small movement after nearly forty years, is an "alternative group of Judaism" in the opinion of many mainstream Jews. It is favoured in the West Kootenays, but its teachings are not being studied and are only accessed on an occasional basis. I put this forward with the understanding that I do not participate in this branch of Judaism and am not advocating what this community should do, but given their existing predilection for Jewish Renewal, when interpretations such as the following so clearly fit the ethos of this group of spiritual seekers, I wonder why it is not given the same chance as the other disciplines being explored: "The *parasha* (torah portion) *Acharei Mot* offers three technologies for integrating the powerful presence into everyday life: (1) interpreting religious ritual psychospiritually; (2) eating consciously; and (3) behaving carefully in interpersonal relationships."²¹ If members of the community are willing to pay for and

²¹ Adapted by Rabbi Laura Duhan-Kaplan, Congregation Or Shalom, Vancouver, from an analytical *d'var torah* by Rabbi Abraham Walfish. <http://www.orshalom.ca/parashot/AchareiMot5765.htm> March 2006.

attend workshops on spiritual development at home and abroad, it is curious they have not thought about bringing in a Jewish spiritual teacher.

One family in the early Seventies solved the conundrum of balancing rural life with their desire for Yiddishkeit by leaving so that he could begin rabbinic studies in the Jewish Renewal movement. For a year they vacillated between these two possibilities - back to the land or a Jewish community - until they came to the conclusion that the kind of Judaism they wanted to live wasn't possible in the Slocan Valley. They settled the issue by living in small cities for a time. City life gave them the opportunity to "live the kind of Judaism we wanted to model" and "enough sympathetic, responsive congregants without raiding other rabbi's congregations." Later his wife trained for the rabbinate as well. Today they are co-rabbis of a congregation in Boston. He says of their brief experience in the West Kootenays that it was "an inward time. I learned a lot, but it was not for us... [We] still say that in many ways it was our most important year. It was the spirit of Jewish Renewal arrived at creatively and intuitively." This experience gave them the commitment to leave and "do Judaism in a global way with a global conscience."

Few Kootenay Jews have sought this integration of mind, spirit and social responsibility within Judaism. For many the actualization factor in all their holistic self-education has not reached beyond self and family. I find it idiosyncratic that the large amount of time invested in attaining a spiritual and emotional baseline and achieving mindfulness has not translated into an interest in giving to the community in a sustained way, despite their pride in the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*. My investigations in the next chapter focus on how these attitudes, and other factors, have affected the notion of a communal Jewish experience in the West Kootenays; whether these feelings have translated into building and maintaining a Jewish community; and in what ways this community has manifested.

CHAPTER THREE: “WE ARE AN AD HOC COMMUNITY”

“Welcome to the largest unorganized Jewish community in British Columbia.”

Jeff Shecter, Rosh Hashanah greeting, Mountain Chai, 2003

“In a democratic age, every people gets the polity and society it deserves.”¹ The society the West Kootenays Jews have created has been close to forty years in the making. Depending on who you speak to it is either still in flux or has reached a casual equilibrium. Its character was described to me by one of the longtime leaders as akin to treading water: “That’s its character. It’s a community that treads water. And that’s not good or bad. We create a little turbulence every once in a while, but basically just tread water.” In our interviews, I asked people whether they considered themselves part of a Jewish community. The answer was unexpected when balanced against the low level of communal activity and resistance to being organized because most said yes. A few were uninterested or not involved and did not comment; several said it did not meet their definition of community as it didn’t have a “heart.” This chapter will explore the concept of community, whether or not it has been achieved in the West Kootenays and on what basis.

Daniel Elazar, the late Israeli specialist in Jewish political traditions, believed that survival should be more than just a passive inheritance. “In human as well as physical matters, it is motion which generates existence in all the myriad ways it is possible to do so.” It was also his belief that “Jews will survive only by acting as Jews.” In the previous chapter we saw how “acting as a Jew” is variously, even radically interpreted by individuals in this community. Amalgamating these interpretations creates a body of people with varying perspectives on what it means to be Jewish within the widest

¹ Daniel J. Elazar, “The Vision of the Jerusalem Centre”, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, <http://www.icpa.org/icvision.htm>. February 2006

possible parameters. In terms of motion, the group practices on-call Judaism. However, "practicing community" does not mean "envisioning community."² Nevertheless, the majority of people I interviewed had a vision of what they would like a Jewish community in the West Kootenays to be.

In contemporary Jewish life, the concept of organized communal life is promoted as the cure for the dilemmas confronting Jews as a historic people.³ It is the conveyor of *tikkun olam* - the obligation to care for others; of educating our youth; creating a sense of belonging through volunteering; and raising the funds necessary for communal maintenance worldwide. This image of being a collective with a shared fate has kept Jews together through severe trials over the millennia. It is only recently that dialogues have become necessary on why community is important, what kind of community to build and how to accomplish it. These discussions are motivated by profound anxiety over Jewish continuity stemming from the irony that in freedom has come loss. This vision of community also infers that the traditional definition is the desired one, thus, when imagination is applied to making community more relevant it is superficial, aimed at maintaining conventional values rather than changing them to suit new definitions.

Jewish identity, which has evolved in revolutionary ways over the last century, is no longer valued for its own sake. Rabbi David A. Treutsch of the Reconstructionist movement comments in the journal, *The Reconstructionist* (fall 2003) that, "Today emphasis is on strengthening identity and intensifying community because identity in a liberal, secular society means Judaism becomes secondary." In the West Kootenays, Judaism is both secondary and occasional. This situation was not just created by the pervasiveness of the multi-dimensional self that Treutsch calls "the basic condition of living in a post modern society," or the shift to alternative spiritualities in the late Sixties discussed in chapter two. On the most pragmatic level, the extraordinarily high and increasing intermarriage rates signify the loss of a specific Jewish identity that will grow exponentially as the next generation deals with the uncertainties of their bi-cultural and ever weakening heritage. If individuals are unclear about who they are it is no wonder an entire community should experience the same fate.

² Editorial, *The Reconstructionist*, "Building Community" issue, Vol. 60, No. 1, Spring 1995. http://www.therra.org/recon_journal.htm. February 2006

³ Editorial, *The Reconstructionist*, Vol. 60, No. 1, Spring 1995.

Many Kootenay Jews told me they do not believe in the concept of cultural “distinctness” and find the notion of Jewish “chosenness” offensive. Similar to their degree of understanding the political situation in Israel, knowledge of what “chosen” means in Judaism is rudimentary.⁴ This misapprehension makes it easy to abandon or alter Jewish commandments and customs and to avoid becoming a congregational community. On the other hand, Kootenay Jews take pleasure in the distinction of belonging to an ancient people with high ethical values. This pride is not balanced by knowledge or practice and some expressed sadness that they had not provided their children with a greater understanding and commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. This situation is comprehensible when one recalls their inherent suspicion of institutionalized religion and their decision to make the Kootenays home because unconventional beliefs are welcome there. Paradoxically, the area of Jewish life where they have chosen to intersect is the celebration of religious holidays.

Baffling contradictions like this coexist at every level of Jewish life in the West Kootenays. One of the essential elements that has held the Jewish people together throughout centuries of exile and dispersion is the synagogue, which traditionally functions as a house of worship, repository of the law, study house and gathering place. The regulated conformity that comes with this territory is not what Kootenay Jews want. Although a few spoke wistfully about having a synagogue in Nelson, the community appears to have reached an implicit rather than formal decision against establishing something material. Since most of the people I interviewed said they were part of a Jewish community, it was necessary to research whether this was typical of small communities today or particular to this one. I discovered that the Kootenay community is distinct from the majority of small Canadian Jewish communities that have established in part or in whole communal places for worship, education and burial of their members. Several remote communities, for example Kamloops, Prince George and Whitehorse, also have high intermarriage rates, are few in numbers and meet very rarely, but no community in Canada has either founded, registered or maintained an association and then disbanded it while there were sufficient members to keep it going, which has happened twice in the Kootenays. This fact is difficult to reconcile with the feeling of belonging that most people said they have.

⁴ My understanding of “chosen people” is that because the Hebrews accepted one supreme being, God relayed His teachings to them along with a set of positive and negative laws (and punishments).

In their 1996 article, "Jews Without Judaism: Assimilation and Jewish Identity in the United States," Robert Amyot and Lee Sigelman defined assimilated Jews as those who do not practice the religion or participate communally with Jews but still have "strong and prideful assertions of Jewish identity."⁵ They call them practitioners of survivalism, "surviving as Jews with no additional interest in what the content of Jewish life and religion should be."⁶ Instead, the authors assert that a kinship web of family, friends and organizations has replaced religion, which I described earlier in the standard definition of a contemporary Jewish community. It is clear that Kootenay Jews are assimilated and unaffiliated, but inconsistent with the authors' full definition is the enigma of the terms on which this group meets – for religious reasons such as life cycle events and Holy Days - and the fact that they choose to meet together as Jews at all.

The West Kootenays Jewish community has a history of close to four decades, but from the beginning it has been tenuous and dependent on individuals. As a group, they possess an innate resistance to creating and maintaining a formal body. A longtime leader confirmed this: "The way it's put out now is that there isn't a whole lot of group initiative, there's individuals initiating." The community's viability and energy has always waxed and waned said another longtime leader: "That's the way the community works. We build momentum and then it just dies. So the continuity is lacking." Many people have been around long enough to witness the entire cycle, from the gathering of a few friends in the Seventies, to a formal entity in the Eighties, to years of indecision alternating with bouts of activity in the Nineties and the present century. A woman who has thought a great deal about the nature of the community said:

Community is made up of relationships, a relationship *around* our mission, what we really want to *do* together. It seems to me what we want to do together depends on what one person brings forward about what *they* want to do! And is that community? It's not really based on the Jewish traditions because if we had weekly services, or even just Rosh Chodesh or something, then I could see we were basing it around some of the tenets of being Jewish, but we don't do that. It's kind of bizarre! I guess it is going to be kind of interesting what you come up with [in your study].

⁵ Beshtel and Graubard in Amyot and Sigelman

⁶ Glazer (1958) in Amyot and Seligman

Her commentary on Kootenay Jewish life is pertinent because it illustrates the contradictions: personal and communal yearning to build something based on Judaic principles in conjunction with an absence of will to create and sustain it. More than ten years has passed since the group last met to attempt negotiating a common purpose. A woman described those meetings to me in words that embodied the community's floundering and reluctance to establish a self-governing association:

It wasn't until I was here and living in what I would have to call Jewish isolation that I suddenly started to really feel the need for more community. [There was an attempt that] lasted for about two years, meetings and stuff, and it became clear there just wasn't - we couldn't even come up with a mission statement that would - I mean, I came up with a mission statement that was as egalitarian as I have ever heard and the only lesbian in the room said, 'You can't say "family" because it has a definition, an understood definition that doesn't include me.' And I can remember lookin' at her and goin', 'Well, *my* sister's a lesbian and I say family and I'm includin' her. What are you on about?' We couldn't even get a mission statement that made people happy!

Other communities I surveyed have had their struggles, but only two of their concerns resonate in the West Kootenays: assimilation and intermarriage. In the Kootenays this is not discussed as a communal problem but acknowledged as a local characteristic. In fact since the meetings ten or more years ago, no issue of community concern has inspired a meeting or group decision. Other difficulties experienced elsewhere are dwindling population and tension between older and newer residents over acceptable ways of doing things, neither of which affect the Kootenays. All except Whitehorse perceive themselves as formal entities if only because they trouble to maintain their synagogue and/or cemetery and hold classes and regular services. Some communities have benevolent groups and Fredericton's Congregation S'goolai Israel has a fulltime rabbi. Nelson possesses none of these attributes of community. Even so, many believe they are one, as one member explains:

In a traditional definition of community, I don't think so. But we're always looking for new definitions to look for the positive aspect of what we do. If you interview more people I'd be surprised if they say there's no community. If someone was to say there is no community it should raise alarm bells within themselves because we have, by osmosis, by socialization, by being involved in the Jewish community elsewhere, we know that's a line we shouldn't cross. So we can't say there is no community.

One longtime resident supposes the reason they continue to meet is because “people just keep being confronted with the question, ‘So what *is* it to be Jewish?’ I mean you can live in a Jewish community if you live the way my father did [in Montréal]. He wasn’t religious at all, but his world was so profoundly Jewish.” She contemplates that the motivation for gathering around religious holidays might be “the feeling that maybe you need to pursue what is spiritual is stronger” when you live away from a stable Jewish community. “I think that’s what brings people together, when there’s a Rosh Hashanah service. They might never have gone if they lived in Winnipeg or Montréal. They wouldn’t need to do that perhaps... I think there are quite a few people who would *like* to have some kind of spiritual centre to a community here.” If she were still involved, she would too, but she does not want to take the time or energy away from her family, something I heard from others. Another interviewee said, “You have to have a lot of drive and a lot of patience and a lot of willing to be the only person doing something, or with one other person, to make things happen here.”

Several people told me they had no interest in religious Judaism or in joining any of the community’s activities, yet they were present during the visiting rabbi’s High Holy Day services in 2005 and seemed moved by the inclusive, accessible and spiritual atmosphere she created. Since this occurred at the end of my research and was the only event I attended where the group was functioning as a community, I was not able to quickly think of a method that was non-intrusive and respectful of the moment or non-confrontational enough to question this incongruous behaviour.⁷

One person characterized community as something people in the Kootenays did on the side. It was not their primary social or religious commitment, but something they did occasionally with a small group, for example, gathering together for a seder. A man declared that what they have in the Kootenays are “occasional Jews” so it is no wonder “the community is ad hoc.” Another person said “There is some dysfunction in this community and I haven’t done anything to change that.” In contrast, a woman who called herself a “fringe Jew” said she was heartened to come to such a sympathetic place, one that is a “conglomerate of fringe Jews like me.”

⁷ I previously attended a bar mitzvah that the entire community was invited to, but life cycle events occur because a family desires them, not at the community’s instigation,

The following two stories about first encounters with the West Kootenay Jewish community are from women close in age, but poles apart in life experiences. Both were from very small communities: "When I got here I heard there was this Jewish community and I thought, 'Oh, I'm going to get involved.' But then it was just such a negative experience. Och!" Asked what made it that way she said she felt a "disconnect," although she readily admitted she hadn't given it much of a chance since she attended so few events. At one she was beleaguered by a serious disagreement with someone else on the politics of war. "Nobody really said anything. [Finally] one guy said, 'Well, I kinda think you're being a little hard on [her]. I can see her point of view and I don't think we should be bombing Afghanistan.' But I felt pretty undefended and I just thought well, if nobody's speaking up then I'm in the wrong place." The antipathy her opinions aroused came from the only person I encountered who is politically right wing so I wondered why there wasn't more vehement support for her position from the others at the gathering.

The second woman painted a different picture of her dissatisfaction. She saw an ad for a Chanukah party "so we went along to see what it was about. Nelson being a very eclectic community, this Chanukah party was even more eclectic. I'd never been to anything quite like it other than Or Shalom."⁸ Apart from being welcomed, "I didn't feel that there was anyone there that I wanted to continue a friendship with just because we didn't have anything in common other than Jewishness. It was a very mixed group, a lot of mixed marriages and ages. I was a little disappointed. I was looking for something a *little* more conservative than I found. It was a little bit too out there for me."

One person I spoke to rationalized the situation this way, "We're so few and we need each other for social reasons more than religious." This emphasis has its charms, but for some the casual atmosphere is apparently off-putting. Several people told me the allure of Chanukah for them is lighting candles to "welcome the dark season," which lends Chanukah a pagan quality that does not square with its message of liberation and religious commitment.⁹ Perhaps the conflict between the religious meaning of the holiday

⁸ Or Shalom is the sole Jewish Renewal congregation in Vancouver.

⁹ Chanukah celebrates the 165 BCE victory of the Hebrews over the Syrians. Led by Mattitياهو and his sons, the Maccabee army rejected Hellenism and pagan customs and restored the Temple's sanctity. Candle lighting commemorates the miracle of a drop of holy oil in the Temple that burned for eight days.

and the freewheeling interpretation and social aspects of the gatherings are what make it unsettling for certain people.

The unconventional nature of the community is what draws such diverse people to it, if only on a part time basis. Some are “Chanukah people” and others are “Pesach people” and are never seen again during the year. Several sources I read commented that secular Jews believe they can still be “good” Jews if they at least observe Yom Kippur and Pesach. For several years a Yom Kippur service has been held in a private home for the dozen or so people who want to share in this annual period of introspection, repentance and atonement. The community also has an attachment to Pesach and Chanukah, two holidays that celebrate liberation. Other commemorations of freedom that are typically observed in mainstream communities, for example, *Yom Ha’Atzmaut*, Israel Independence Day, and *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, go unmarked, although the unofficial community conscience on all things related to Israel and anniversary dates of significant oppressions such as *Kristallnacht*, sends out reminders on the listserve.

The lay leader who steers the community through religious services if he is asked to, based his remarks on the Kootenay community on a friend’s concept that “to be Jewish, you need a community.” He continued, “But I think there are two sides: you are personally Jewish, but you can also really express it and get into it as a community. So as a Jewish person, I didn’t lose it. We brought our menorah, we still have Pesach seders, so I don’t think about [being Jewish].” When asked if he thought it was accurate to call what was happening in Nelson a Jewish community, he responded in the classic, musing Jewish style with a question: “Would it be accurate to call this a community?”

I brought into the conversation the founders’ decision in the 1980s to establish a group and name it the West Kootenay Jewish Cultural Association and how recently a community leader informed me that she had arbitrarily changed it on the listserve to read “Community Association” because that was her hope and vision. His response was that a few people would like to see it like this, “but it’s not.”

The answer to that [earlier] question is yes and no. No it is not a community because there is no real organized structure, there are no meetings, there isn’t an executive that was either self-appointed or

elected. There's no meeting place, even if it is at someone's house. There is no regular structure. But there *is* a group of Jews who whenever there is a party will get together. There are a bunch of people you can call for support, like to put together - like each of the Bar Mitzvahs that have taken place, a lot of people have pitched in to volunteer time to write the *siddur*, the program, to help get the food, to organize, so there are activities that are community-like.

There is a torah now here, but it was privately donated and entrusted to a few of us to take care of and we arbitrarily decide when we get a request if it can go out or not. But it is more like there is no official community structure. There's a hundred Jews over a hundred miles, most of them in mixed marriages, who will come together every now and then, sometimes more often, sometimes not. So does that meet the test of community?

"If somebody wanted to organize a more institutional-like community function here they could. But somebody would have to do it. Every now and then [people] will say, 'Come on, let's get a shul,' and 'We can do it, let's organize.'" However, a vision like this requires an individual or individuals willing to see it through. To date no one has stepped forward to take on this role. If such a decision was ever reached, the resulting creation would require staff, programs, maintenance and ongoing financial responsibilities. "My opinion now, ten years having been involved here, is that there isn't really the will to do that. That's why it would take a *leader* to do it, to call the *shabbases*, to get it organized, to make it happen. Everybody's happy the way things are."

Not everyone I spoke to concurs with him on his or her degree of happiness with the status quo, but they are in concert about their unwillingness to help make change happen. I concluded that the desire to be a religious or cultural community with an address is a pleasant illusion. Another leader in the community said, "It's hard to talk about what are the watershed events that made the community go forward. We don't have any watershed events that crystallized things for everybody so that people went this way and other people went that way. Everybody is just kind of treading water... I'm never one to just tread water. I've gotta go somewheres." He resolves this aspiration by occasionally suggesting or hosting events and volunteering in any way he can.

This acceptance of the status quo often derives from people's appreciation for the organic, easy intimacy of community events. When discussing community together, one woman said to me that moving to Nelson gave her the freedom to celebrate

Judaism creatively. Several university students I spoke with also found this to be true. One was unsure at first, but eventually the intimacy reached out to her and she came to appreciate how Judaism is created in the Kootenays. After visiting synagogues in big cities, she is thankful they go to different homes because it is “really informal” and “has a really comfortable feeling” like being with family:

At one point I was really frustrated that we didn't have a synagogue. It was a couple of years ago. Because I thought it was so hocus pocus, always meeting at different people's houses. You know what I mean? 'Why can't we have a place to go, and it's all set up and everyone doesn't have to stress out about whose house we're going to celebrate at for whatever reason?' Yeah, that bothered me a little bit, but now I think it's better than going to synagogue in a way. To go to different people's homes for dinner or just get together - it seems much more traditional.

The second student said she was frustrated by the lack of cohesion in the community, but after moving to Vancouver and visiting other synagogues she found she missed Nelson. She appreciates that they design their own liturgy, rituals and holidays. Her mother says, “It is a real grassroots effort to create meaningful rituals in our lives, meaningful *Jewish* rituals that everyone can relate to regardless of their Jewish background. And it's also welcoming to non-Jewish partners... I think when you look at what's been accomplished, it's kind of amazing! Like all the bar and bat mitzvahs that have happened here.” Even those who are usually uninvolved enjoy the inclusiveness, originality and beauty of the community's homegrown rituals. A person who is usually not engaged in group events said:

I got excited about the bar mitzvah. It was so beautiful. And I remember people coming to me after and saying, 'Is this what it's like to be Jewish?' and I said, 'Yes.' It wasn't traditionally Jewish and it was traditionally Jewish. It was like a Jewish Renewal service. And the rabbi was so amazing. He included everybody and he knew how to get people involved. It was so beautiful and wonderful and I said, 'Yes, this is what it's like to be Jewish.' I remember a friend of mine saying, 'I wish I had grown up Jewish. It's such a beautiful tradition,' and it is.

A woman who emigrated to the West Kootenays in the Sixties and has never connected with the community is aware of Jewish events in the area, but chooses not to participate. “I'd rather do things based on my identity as a musician than my identity as a Jew.” Told about the donation of a torah to the community and an upcoming bar mitzvah,

she exclaimed, "You know, I really am glad that there are other Jews around who feel that community; feel called to practice that way. I think it's wonderful. I have a *mezuzah* (case with parchment scroll for the doorpost of a home). I don't put it up on my door, but I have it in the house. Uh, yeah! Conflicted about being Jewish? Just a little bit!"



Disparate opinions on the status of the community often came from unexpected sources; for example, several people occupied in communal activities said it is *not* a community and others on the periphery declared definitively that it is. Besides the conflicting ideas about community and how it should be built, another issue I looked at is whether it is harmonious. For two years I have been a member of the sixty-five or so households on the community listserve. Discounting discussions on Israeli politics, which were eventually banned as contrary to the listserve's principle of connecting community, the superficial impression I gleaned from online interactions is that this group is well-adjusted, willing to work through differences, and extends effusive appreciation, thanks and blessings to each other at the slightest pretext.¹⁰ When I asked people if this was so, I received a variety of responses. Not everyone agreed theirs is a harmonious community, but most believed it is, especially in times of celebration or sorrow.

Several people were frank about what they called internal dysfunction. One, who organized a community Passover seder for one hundred people where there were more complaints than appreciation, felt it was impossible to satisfy everyone in a situation of that magnitude. She was not sure if other Jewish communities have conflicts like the type she witnessed and thought this might be a function of the small population base, which provides few opportunities for one to find like-minded souls. She thought another contributing factor might be that West Kootenay Jews have politically diverse views and life-styles and only come together by necessity. She also believes Kootenay people find it difficult to put themselves in the public eye as a member of a group where individuals they do not care for are perceived to epitomize that group. In a large city no one would dream of characterizing a group by the individuals in it. As a result, she and another woman arrived at a solution for the oversized community seders that is still in place today: a

¹⁰ Regarding the heated political discussions about Israel, the monitor said in a recent email to the community, "I admit that I react strongly to anything that I feel threatens the cohesiveness of this community."

matching service that helps community members and newcomers to find potluck seders that suit their locale and interests, for example, traditional, egalitarian or feminist.

A man told me about an experience he had leading a *taschlich* ceremony (the custom of writing one's sins on a piece of paper and discarding them in a free-flowing body of water) one Rosh Hashanah not long after he arrived in the area:

The next year I did a *taschlich* ceremony. It was my first experience getting a funny reaction from a few of the group who had a little bit of a harsh criticism about something not being perfectly what they had in mind. That kind of indicated that something had gone on earlier, or there was some way that things were different; there was a broken place in the community. I wasn't surprised because I know enough about internalized oppression and often Jews have a hard time between them with ways of being Jewish. I became aware, eventually, that there were some ways the community was not able to come together and was having a hard time coalescing.

The same man, who could be describing many of the people I interviewed, said "I'm very much a secular Jew: I'm actually an atheist, but I have a strong sense of wanting to identify with community." In his opinion, "the stronger the community, the stronger the meaning, and meaning is created by connections." The issue is whether or not these connections exist. For a significant body of people they do; they are important and any flaws that exist are worth enduring. For others there is little or no connection with community. These divergent viewpoints are understandable when we recall that not a single individual interviewed moved to the Kootenays seeking a Jewish environment. It follows that for some what is happening communally does not interest them, although most of that group expressed pleasure that there were "Jews out there who cared." For the rest it is a gift, but like most gifts it is not something they put effort into, it is something they receive.

A woman who has been deeply involved in trying to co-create community over the past twenty-five years expressed her views in ways I did not anticipate. When she was asked if she thought there was a Jewish community in the West Kootenays and if she felt part of it, she replied these were "very tricky" issues for her for which she had no clear answers. When she bumps into Jewish people on the street, "I do have a different connection, but the word community entails some sort of congregation for me...[I feel]

pretty alone a lot of the time.” She went on, “If we had a location, interestingly enough, I think things would really change,” but for that to happen “would require some commitment, some financial support, continuity.”

Asked if she thought the group was running from responsibility, she laughed, but did not elaborate. Told that a few people wished an organization, even an evangelizing Orthodox group like Lubavitch, would just step in and provide a *shul* (synagogue), she said, “There are so many gifts in it just being there” and not having the necessity and responsibility of creating and maintaining it. A gathering place would allow the congregation to focus on the religious and the spiritual. However, no one in the community wants another job: “It’s a job [that] doesn’t have a lot to do with Judaism.” Most people’s lives are already full with family, work and the community at large, “so I don’t get that anyone really, really wants to. And yet, if there *was* a shul here, I think a lot of people would attend, even if it didn’t address it in the way that they wanted.”

This idea of a place to worship reminded me of a humorous local characteristic: several people told me they disliked the “touchy feely” services the community holds and would never go again. They also hated the conventional synagogues of their youth, but when they decided to attend a service in Nelson, they wanted it to be reminiscent of the ones they had loved to hate. A man totally uninterested in the community found the one Yom Kippur service he attended unfamiliar and off-putting. He said he didn’t know much about Jewish life in the Kootenays, but “I think that if there was a rabbi that had a strong community organization background or orientation it would make a big difference. Then there would be somebody that would connect the dots... Even myself, someone who has been through the experiences I’ve been in, and had a certain amount of disillusionment should we say around it, I mean if there was a rabbi that was pulling it together, then yeah, I would definitely go and check it out and see what’s up, but without that?”

Looking at the chronology of the community there is a history of stasis that reaches back to at least the mid 1980s. There have been “turbulences” as the unelected pro tem president calls the periods of high interest and more recently these have been considerable: the gift of a torah in 2004 and in 2005, the first complete High Holy Day services in Nelson conducted by a guest rabbi from the Jewish Renewal movement. Neither of these momentous events has led to a sustaining interest or support. The

response to the rabbi was very favourable and the sense of being part of a holy community was strong, yet this winter two requests on the listserve to bring the rabbi back for 2006 failed. Only two people responded.¹¹ A second suggestion made by the donor of the torah to bring in a non-denominational *maggid* (preacher) and storyteller to guide them through this period of moral and spiritual renewal also did not receive a response. Several community members told me the interest and energy levels in the community have always been cyclical. Periodically someone will come forward at the right moment with an idea that inspires and galvanizes the group. This led me to believe that what keeps the community going is a fragile combination of need, communal traditions - as loose and organic as they are - and the odd injection of a new idea.

Newness alone does not guarantee interest. The offer of workshops by a female scribe who is repairing the community torah also had a poor response although the workshops were well placed in the community's areas of interest, required no special knowledge of Judaism and had the added bonus of a feminist perspective. The recent visit of a well-known klezmer musician and storyteller also garnered low attendance. Timing appears to be the main element in whether an event will come to pass or not. Apart from a child-centred holiday like Chanukah or the nostalgia of seders and their connections to liberation, no one is willing to commit to volunteering or participating at anything extra other than the occasional "*simcha*," happy occasion, or funeral.

Keeping in mind this community is an agglomeration of individualists who look at Jewish identity as something personal, just "one piece of life" as a longtime member said, helps to explain this lethargic response. Another member, who has been in the community for twenty-five years, commented to an interviewer for a family history project that, "Most of the people who arrived here came from a rejectionist background and pullin' them together was always - it's been an uphill struggle, so I mean it's *still* an uphill struggle." Several people told me that as their children got older, they refused to be *shlepped* (dragged) out to events with so many "weird people they did not like," a kind of second-generation backlash to their parents' hippy values. In fact, some of the adult second generation have chosen to move to big cities and live lives far removed from the

¹¹ I admit here to doing something no researcher should. Out of compassion for their goals and awareness of the difficulty they would have raising the required money for this unique project, with their permission I went to friends and family and raised \$1600. A member of the community loaned her home to the rabbi and her family for two weeks. Her expenses would not have been met otherwise. These are but two aspects of the tremendous organizing effort that went into creating the first High Holy Day services in Nelson's history.

atmosphere they grew up in. Several have become “suits” with very conventional ambitions. Only one that I am aware of has committed to Jewish observances and another is doing her best but is unsure how to carry it off.

To understand how entrenched the character of the community is I went into the Canadian Jewish Congress archives to refresh my memory on the years Congress supported a small communities project. I discovered a lengthy handwritten report commissioned from Hanna Chusid, a storyteller and community facilitator, and a brief summary typed by a husband and wife student team who travelled to several small British Columbia communities in the mid Eighties. Following a weekend gathering of fourteen adults and ten children at a private home for the festival of Sukkot, they wrote:

The Nelson group is a set of people with varying degrees of interest in Jewish life. While they enjoyed the Sukkot gathering it seems as though there is not sufficient enthusiasm to “institutionalize” the transient community. What is missing is a dynamic and committed core individual group. Max Davis seemed the closest to providing the necessary leadership.

Chusid's perceptions are more detailed. She enlarges on the leadership issue, writing that Max was frustrated because his interest, which was to develop something cultural rather than religious, did not jibe with the community's desire to celebrate holidays with their children. I recall his hope that new leaders would come forward and how hard he tried to encourage that, but as it is today, taking on such a time-rich job was not forthcoming. Chusid noted, “Very few were willing or able to commit ahead-of-time as to whether or not they would show up for a Saturday morning gathering.” The group was also “unwilling to hold a clear-cut ‘session’ devoted to ‘what do you want for this community in the future.’” Twenty years later I witnessed a similar session in the living room of a community member, hosted by a visiting rabbi and attended by just three people. Her agenda was similar to Chusid's: building community. The responses to her questions about their needs as a community were eloquent and poignant, but so few cared enough to attend. The poor turnout reiterated for me that it is likely the status quo will prevail since visioning community is not a priority in the Kootenays.

Chusid's assessment made fascinating reading. By the time I read her report, I had already formulated most of my opinions following several years' research and

interviewing. This report was never pointed out to me during my tenure as small communities chairperson. The fact that our opinions and language were so similar made it doubly interesting:

Many folks - Jewish folks - in the Kootenays are there seeking to live in a world apart from and different from mainstream culture - both mainstream dominant AND mainstream Jewish culture in No. America. It is not reasonable or consistent for them - as a whole - to expect they will actively seek to strengthen ties with CJC, or make full use of the opportunities represented by the small communities grant.

No real community will develop without on-going and consistent leadership - real leadership of a Jewish community requires spiritual leadership...all the funds and computerized mailing lists and committee structures in the world do not serve to bond people's hearts and minds together through shared values, identification with shared history (story), and shared vision. While there may exist the spiritual leadership potential in the person of one of the locals, this potential has yet to be tapped, awakened, recognized.



One area where Chusid proved not to be prescient is the effectiveness of computers and the Mountain Chai listserv as tools for heightening contact, bonding and identity. In true Kootenay fashion its name is a play on the Hebrew word for life, *chai*, and the marijuana high of "Kootenay Gold." Mountain Chai is an important vehicle for connection and communication. In their 2002 article, "Technology and Democratic Realization," Andrew Feenberg and Maria Bakardjieva present the view that "computer networks are not merely additional voice's heard in everyday life, but actually construct" a parallel virtual world alongside the physical one. Quoting John Dewey in their article, they point out that community means "participation, commonness, and shared beliefs." Mountain Chai has successfully utilized commonness within the parallel universe of its listserv, although I did hear from a few lurkers that being online was enough community for them. Blair Nonnecke and Jennifer Preece, in "Shedding Light on Lurkers" (1999), contend that lurkers develop a "sense of community through their lurking," which is a "highly active, methodical, and goal-driven activity." Even people resistant to being on the community list lurk I discovered and several went so far as to say they might someday attend a group function. Being invited to sign onto the listserv provided me

with the opportunity to discover what is important to the group and to observe its online interactions. I also used it to request interviews and send greetings.

Peter Kollock and Marc Smith reported in "Communities in Cyberspace" (1999) that it is very rare for a cyber-community to substitute for a physical one. Mountain Chai has been an efficient tool in connecting people on the community list (and beyond) who wish it and has not prevented them from coming together despite driving distances of up to several hours. The original computer linkup provided by Canadian Jewish Congress to connect BC's small communities was efficient but not accessible to a broad audience. The link was solely between the CJC office and each community's representative. In Nelson, Max Davis was the community representative. He and his wife, Felice, used this electronic link to maximum benefit, communicating with the office on matters relating to their community, to upcoming committee meetings, to make requests and to organize a major event for the West Kootenay community at large. Innovative as this was in 1985, today computer links are less exclusive and more authentically relational since the proliferation of personal computers has enabled all households in the community with a computer and Internet connection to participate if they wish.

Mountain Chai was started in 2003 by a member of the community who continues to monitor it. She says: "I believe that in the absence of a community centre or shul this list is the glue that keeps this loosely knit and very diverse community in connection so I have very willingly carried on with it." As it is a private initiative the rules are hers, the main two being that the list is not a place for political discussion or personal criticism. Genuine dialogue is encouraged. This seems fair-minded enough: however, there have been a several resignations over Jewish jokes deemed in poor taste; for uttering opinions that were either too left or too right wing; and because discussions about community events were considered "too religious." This hypersensitivity sounds more like an excuse to cut contact or the volume of one's emails than the voice of the truly offended. The monitor acknowledged the obvious when she wrote to the membership that, "clearly the list cannot serve such a diverse community to everyone's absolute satisfaction." More typical is the woman living two hours out of Nelson who posted this note:

I am not a very 'vocal' member (in the epistolary sense) of this group, but I read all the postings with interest and do feel part of the community, and

am anticipating a time when my son and I can participate in more events...To have this Jewish community where we communicate with one another is special for me because it feels like family in some ways.

The usual forms of posting are notices about community events, requests for volunteers or assistance, announcements of happy occasions such as the birth of a child or a new arrival to the community, notices of funerals or memorial services, messages of congratulation or condolence, items for sale, services wanted, news of the wider Jewish world, information on online hoaxes, requests for private contact, occasional jokes, poems and photos and the proffering of thanks and blessings. The concept of dialoguing has not yet yielded the results community leaders desired. For example, after the stimulating and well-attended 2005 High Holy Days, a negligible number of people replied to requests for their reactions to the services. I believe this lack of enthusiasm falls into the same category as the poor responses to organizing or participating in new events following a successful one: a kind of “been there, done that this year” attitude.



Another agent for bonding that has received mixed results is the community torah, the gift of a man who accompanied his father to purchase it from a synagogue in South Africa. His father's synagogue in Canada refused the gift - it showed obvious wear and tear - and when he passed away shortly thereafter, the family decided the Kootenays was the appropriate community to receive it. Because the donor was not that inclined to participate in the community in the past, I was curious why this idea came to him. He replied that “it was the first thing I thought of because I was always aware of a certain hole in the community.” To be able to make this contribution was very exciting for him. Because his father believed strongly in women counting in the minyan, he felt that his intent was being honoured by placing the torah in this community. “The key fits right here,” he said, “Besides, the community does hold a sweet spot in my heart.”

Since its arrival two years ago, the torah has been used for a bar and a bat mitzvah, a Yom Kippur service, the 2005 High Holy Days and for the bar mitzvah-like ceremony in a private home described in chapter two. From the beginning, people were thrilled to have this gift and expressed pride in being able to say the West Kootenays is a Jewish community with a torah. It is kept in the home of a woman who was in one of the

rare Jewish-Jewish marriages in the community. The family had a cabinet handcrafted to contain the torah and sewed a new mantle for it. The torah and its ark function like Moses' tabernacle in the desert: it is portable and travels. Unlike ancient times, the torah is not a daily presence in the community - it travels to where there is a need. There is no scholar or rabbi to explicate its commandments and to lead the community in religious observances based on its teachings. The torah guardians are an ad hoc committee who consider requests for its use and monitor its condition. An anonymous member of the community recently contributed \$2000 to have the script refreshed by a *soferet* (female scribe). This is the first community to permit a woman to handle this sacred task.

A number of people I spoke to said they were unaffected by the torah's arrival. Quite a few were unaware there was one in the community, even those on the listserve. Among the aware, I encountered an element of skepticism in several people, particularly about the conditions of its use. One woman said with a sad laugh, "I feel very happy that there's a torah in our community, but what's our community?" Several told me it had no special meaning for them since they are not religious and cannot read Hebrew. Another woman wondered if there was anyone in the area who could interpret it. When told there was someone who could read torah script and lead services, she said, "Maybe he's just the one guy who can read Hebrew and went to Jewish school so he knows how to do the prayers, but that doesn't mean he has a profound understanding of its knowledge. Despite these uncertainties, the donor said, "I already feel that the torah's done its work, creating a great spark, lighting a fire in the community."

Since I witnessed this spark on several occasions, I concur that those who participated in the services were grateful for its presence and felt its power; however, one of the rabbis I interviewed pointed out that it is important not to fetishize the torah as an object, but to prize it for the gift of its teachings. Since there is no resident rabbi or visiting student rabbi as there is in Kelowna, active engagement with the torah will be difficult. In the fall of 2005 following the High Holy Day services with Rabbi Hanalei Laner, the torah committee attempted an online exercise they named "visioning our torah." Much of the discourse focused on the torah's age and fragility, the need to restore it and to establish protocols for its use and storage. There were several aspects of the dialogue that did not work as hoped for, although the discussion was long and heartfelt. One woman eventually requested that the committee meet in person: "I would

like to discuss this face to face with those who are interested in this project. It doesn't feel cherishing to engage in particular aspects of this process via email for me." She also wondered whether others in the community would like to be part of the discussion.

One aspect of the dialogue that raised proprietary hackles concerned custodianship of the torah. In the heat of the disagreement over whether it should remain in one house or have many caretakers, a committee member said, "You wouldn't pass your infant child around from house to house in the neighbourhood with a to-do sheet," so why would you treat the torah this way. There were practical complications arising from this democratic suggestion to have the torah rotate through various homes that had to be considered: for example, whether it is appropriate for the torah to reside in households with non-Jewish members; the problem of multi-party insurance; and the readiness of host families to transport the torah whenever required. Because this group has the will to get along, the eventual resolution to have it remain in the original household was accepted. One issue that has never been resolved, however, is the desire for a monthly *oneg shabbat* service (joy of sabbath - informal gathering to celebrate the Sabbath). From the moment the gift was made known to the community, flurries of emails on this topic have flown around the listserv, especially after successful events, but over two years has passed since the torah's arrival and the plans have yet to gel. Similar to other occasions when something has been yearned for in this community, no organizing force has stepped forward, gathered the ideas and shepherded them to completion. Beyond the pride of ownership, the sense of engagement the torah engendered has yet to translate into regular use.



Leadership is an interesting issue in this community. Generally people who know the community well, and even those who observe it from the periphery, have similar ideas about who the leaders are. One thing is clear: most are in their late forties to late fifties and have been at it a long time. That none of this intermittent but prolonged dedication has evolved into something tangible has several causes. Wavering energy and commitment are the prime reasons, partly because of family obligations, partly because of the desire for a simple lifestyle, and partly from not feeling met with equal enthusiasm by others interested in the job of co-creating community. Although a few

people mentioned dysfunction and the suspicion that something happened earlier in the community's history about which they did not know the details, I think this is an exaggeration of the occasional disagreements over the way things should be done. Most of the people who are critical have either never played a leading role or are natural leaders resigned to the perpetual inertia.

Style is also an issue. When chatting with a community leader about leadership skills, it was said about one person, "You see, I'm a different person than her. When I took on a leadership role I said, 'I'm doing it the way I want and you're invited to come' and I didn't listen to anyone else. [When] people wanted something different they would come and say, 'Hey, how 'bout we do it this way' and she would listen." This person's idea of successful leadership is autocratic, but over and over I heard from members that this is a community that wants to be led, to be spoon-fed, and they reserve the right to complain if the program does not meet their expectations. Some leaders are pragmatic and vocal, others are quiet and run under the surface, a few are spiritual guides; however, there is no consistency in their contributions, only in their regard for the concept of community.

When I questioned people on what they thought would happen if the current leadership moved away or became tired of the struggle, everyone who believed in the community was confident that new leaders would step up to the mark. A current leader said if that happened, the community would roll on in the direction that has always been there. "There is a certain dynamic that continues." Another said, "Everybody has the opportunity and capacity to be a leader [if] someone says, 'You're it!'... I think that's kind of nice that someone in the community will rise to the occasion. So that's a great faith in your fellow person." This idealism has not been tested. Another person said acerbically that if people got tired of their roles "there was nothing to fall apart."

People who were consistently named as leaders were candid about including themselves and their specific leadership qualities on their own list. One of them said to me, "I am a leader because I organize and share whatever I have." Elaborating, he later wrote to me about what leadership means to him and how being a leader in a small community was a special gift that he could not have realized in a larger Jewish centre:

Wow...I've already had the most rewarding experiences of teaching b'nei mitzvah kids, and leading a funeral, and seders, and a few shabbess services, taking care of a Sefer Torah!!! me! a *shlemiel* (simpleton) in the mountains...paid trained dedicated rabbis don't have this much fun! Living in Vancouver, I would never, if I lived to 250 never get the chance to do this kind of work, and take part in mitzvahs like that. never. So it is ironic, (and a gift that I feel so blessed to have been given) that my living here in the sticks, far away from my *chevrah* (friendship circle) whom I do miss, with no Jewish community structures or infrastructures, I get to "be" my Jewish heritage in a delightful and satisfying and meaningful way...which in Vancouver, I would be much more just a participant and not a leader.

Regarding the dynamic between leadership and participation in the Kootenay community, he observed that when somebody has a *simcha*, a happy event, or there is a holiday, people show up. When it is quiescent, there are always things happening in homes, such as seders. This is a lovely vision, imagining homes all over the West Kootenays pursuing Jewish traditions separately until there is a reason to gather, but seders occur just once a year and I met only three or four people who regularly welcome shabbat in their homes. On the other hand, I believe he was correct when he said, "If I put up a notice tomorrow that I'm doing a shabbat service on September first, forty people would show up." All in all, in terms of leadership there is not a lot of reciprocity. The same group of people is still sporadically contributing their skills and no thought has been given to cultivating and encouraging new leadership. In recent years, several younger women stepped up to the plate, but two have since moved away. This is but one of several places in the community where I did not see momentum.



Besides their natural abhorrence to organized groups, fear about potential anti-Semitism also works to prevent the formation of a formal community in the Kootenays. Many people I spoke to expressed antipathy to the idea of identifying publicly as a Jewish group and all mentioned anti-Semitism as the root cause for this aversion. When someone in the community proposed they purchase a brick in a meditative labyrinth being constructed in Riverside Park, a long deliberation with paranoid overtones took place on the listserv. Eventually, someone remembered they were once a registered cultural association and already existed as a public entity, although their charitable status had long ago lapsed. When agreement was finally reached on participation in the

labyrinth, a member offered her store as collection point. Only three-quarters of the one hundred dollars required was donated. I suspect who it was that topped up the contribution, because the brick is in place in the labyrinth and is no more remarkable than its neighbours. Ironically, considering the fears about attracting attention, two members of the community make sure that every year a wreath in the name of the group is placed at the cenotaph on Remembrance Day. Moreover, when something is written in the paper against Israel or that clearly demonstrates anti-Semitism, one or the other replies on the community's behalf, which implies that a Jewish community exists in the area.

When I recall the desecration of Jewish buildings and cemeteries in other Canadian cities and the fire bombing of a Jewish school library in Montréal, I think the anxiety about anti-Semitism I encountered everywhere in the Kootenays is misplaced, yet it is firmly etched in the minds of the community and is the major reason they prefer to keep their activities private. Someone said to me at the High Holy Day services that they were wondering if people knew there was a group of Jews worshipping in this building and questioned what might happen if they did. Paradoxically, the group has always chosen local newspapers to advertise large events like seders and services.

There has never been a truly damaging anti-Semitic incident in the West Kootenays, yet several people told me they were "freaked out" by the thought that white supremacists would discover there were Jews in the area. One woman said with heavy irony that the community pulls back when things get "too Jewish" and that is why there is no building, because, she whispered sardonically, "you would have to put up a *sign*! And that sign would have to have the word Jewish on it somewhere." The fears, however, are palpable: a woman told me she is frightened to follow the old custom of putting her Chanukah *menorah* (candelabra) in the window. She is afraid to advertise that she is a Jew although nothing more overt has happened to her than people using the expression "jew you down" in her presence.

Several mothers described incidents at their children's schools. They were rare, occurred when the children were very young and were quickly resolved, although not always to the parents' complete satisfaction. When I asked the children about it, they were less affected by the memory and did not recall the event with the same horror or

clarity as their parents. These incidents, while not particularly harmful, cannot be discounted since they raised anxiety levels and added fuel to the feeling that incipient racism exists in the Kootenays. The overriding experience of people I spoke to was hearing the stereotyping expression "jew you down." It is a common figure of speech in the Kootenays, along with "gypped," and everyone I spoke to has overheard it or been unthinkingly addressed that way. It is hurtful, but they also admit these expressions come from a place of ignorance rather than from prejudice.

One incident I was told about by several people was discovering anti-Semitic literature in their mailboxes. Later they discovered that the city was blanketed with these pamphlets and no one in particular was being targeted. Although the distributor was not local, the experience fed the underlying fear of latent anti-Semitism. A woman who is leaving to further her education recently posted a note saying, "i'm really excited to be [going] somewhere where there is so much Jewish activity. hearing anti-semitic remarks all the time in trail and castlegar definitely was getting tiring." She was answered with this message: "Yep, the Koots are not immune to antisemitism. The stars of David I see painted sometimes in the lanes or even in front of Hipperson's are not there to promote Judaism, I would assume." The enigma in all this is that not one individual told me the Kootenays is unsafe. Each said it was a comfortable place for Jews to live.



What then is the Kootenay vision of community? Beyond the few people who were skeptical about its existence, this question yielded answers that were unpredictably conventional, although one man responded with characteristic Kootenay distaste for Jewish "distinctness" saying, "I don't really like to define people by who they are. I think people should just be." Another person's vision reflected her preoccupation with an internal search for a higher spiritual plane: "I really don't [have a vision for a Jewish community]. I guess I don't think in terms of a Jewish community but of a human community, whatever form that happens to fall into. If I were involved in the Jewish community I would want it to be - I would be interested in the kinds of things that interest me about Buddhism, like group meditation, really exploring the teachings of Judaism beyond, not law so much, but the actual development of the soul."

On a more mundane level of human gratification, one man said he would like to “know who else in the area is Jewish... It’d be nice to get together and play music sometimes in a way that wasn’t demanding. Not performance, just people getting together, people coming together and hanging out and listening; sort of an informal party type thing. That would be nice if we could do something like that.” Even though there are a number of musicians and a great love of music in the community, there is no cohesiveness to this interest and people play in separate groups in the wider community according to their musical tastes.

Several people spoke about the type of leadership they envisioned. One man’s analysis was that the present leadership has to find “a means to make people instantly delighted to be together” and they could begin by dropping old disagreements or ways of doing things. A woman who has been in the community since the 1960s thought just the opposite; they should to go back to the old ways of making people feel welcome by starting a telephone tree and encouraging young people to get involved on a one-to-one basis. Another woman said to have institutions in the community like a synagogue or school “would take the right leader to bring people together.” This person would have to be “charismatic, energetic, dynamic; a *mensch*” (a good human being). She also believes this is a Jewish community that is unwilling to give the *tzedaka* (charity) necessary to make this happen because Nelson in general is not a culture that saves. Despite this attitude, she thought if there were membership fees of \$100-\$200 per year, people could handle that. An annual contribution would demonstrate commitment to valuing the community and Jewish heritage. In the short term, she said it would be wonderful to have a monthly shabbat service. Some of these ideas have a realistic potential and some have already been tried, although they never lasted more than a short period.

Inclusiveness, a trait the community is proud of, is nothing more than a concept in the minds of a few. A single mother, of whom there are a goodly number in the community, said she had no vision beyond more childcare. “Seriously, it is really an issue for me. Just being a single mom suddenly this puts you in - people see you in a certain way. I didn’t realize that I would have this kind of judgment thrust upon me, you know, and also this responsibility I have to carry myself, [the judgment] that the community doesn’t feel they need to share. It’s sort of like, ‘If you don’t have a partner

and a grandma and money to pay babysitters whenever you want to do stuff, tough shit. Stay home.” Another person said, “I would like to see it as it was in Trail, just at that level. Maybe not quite as intense, because when I think back, that was a real clique.”

Another vision of community was consistency; the simple pleasures of repetition and familiarity, but behind this wish are always the hidden realities of detachment and retreat. A man who was asked whether he had a personal vision for the community or if he was happy with the way things stood, laughed and said, “Who’s going to hear this? Do I have a vision for the community? A vision that is a nice vision, that I’m not prepared to do anything about at this moment, yes...When we were doing our monthly *erev shabbat* evenings [in the late 1990s], that was my peak of satisfaction. It was wonderful.” People travelled across the lake and from the Slocan Valley to attend. This would be part of his vision, a regular activity. “One of the things that made this happen is that you need structure, an infrastructure, and we had the use of the Heddle community hall, and so the event was hosted by us all, and everybody had to come and put everything together and then clean up together. The infrastructure was perfect...[so] having a Shabbat service once a month would be part of my vision. That may happen one day.” Several other people in the community fondly recalled these *erev shabbat* (Sabbath evening) potluck dinners; the singing, the warmth, the closeness, but I am unclear why the inspiration faded and this tradition collapsed.

The man who described these get togethers thought a consistent meeting place would help, but recognized that the group does not have the money to support one. He joked that it would require somebody to donate a *shul* (synagogue) like happened in Kelowna and someone to will the community a house, but a rabbi would have to have another job.¹² Other people joined in this wish for a place to gather, to worship and to have a rabbi in the community. In a burst of improbable enthusiasm, another man said his dream would be for a rabbi he could respect to buy a summer home on the lake and hold one-on-one learning sessions. A woman who agreed with them analyzed the community’s situation as an issue of both money and vision: “This is not a Jewish community with money, although shuls have started in the poorest of the poorest communities. I don’t think people see it as a possibility here. [We] don’t have the Jewish

¹² He is referring to the pews and other synagogue accoutrements, including a torah, that the Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Jewish community donated to the new community in Kelowna when they closed down their shul after the third generation left and the second generation retired to larger communities.

philanthropy. The few people I know who have a fair bit of money are not involved in the community. Some of them dip in occasionally, but not in any really meaningful way.”

Leadership, money and will composed a recurrent trio of impediments people imagined were preventing their dream from being realized. Several parents I spoke with believed the solution was for more people with children to move to the Kootenays:

Absolutely. It's all a question of people. I mean Nelson and area is an anomaly relative to almost any other small towns. Firstly you need reasons for people to move here. Jews moved to places in the first part of the twentieth century because of opportunity. I mean that's what drove everybody...so I think it is all a function of creating opportunity within the community for more people to move here.

A parent of an elementary student and several teenagers has a similar vision. Her dream is for more of her friends to move to Nelson. She talks it up among them, but those with aging parents find it too difficult to uproot and leave them behind and the community has very little Yiddishkeit to offer their children. Like several others, she said she would even welcome an Orthodox group like Lubavitch because everyone has something of value to contribute and they have a lot of energy. Another said, “I think if there were more of a relationship developed with the community in Kelowna or Calgary, there might be more opportunity” to model themselves, grow and attract more people.

Despite the community's resistance to organizing, there is no lack of optimism. One of the longtime instigators in the community said his vision is to “set ourselves the greatest goals of what we could do. We've actually been here quite awhile. We have some continuity of sorts, so let's celebrate it! So vision? I'd like us to get somewhere like Kelowna's been able to do it.” The most clearly developed vision came from a woman who thought long about it and then emailed me:

I'd like a building. Call it the Kootenay Jewish Community Centre. With some office space we could rent out to pay bills (giving Jewish businesses or professionals first dibs), a daycare that made sure to celebrate Jewish holidays along with others, a kitchen, a large space for community events or yoga classes or film screenings, a classroom sized space to run kid and teen programs, a library/archive space and home for our Torah. I'd like it to be downtown in the Old Scandinavian Church (not that it's available). I'd like it to have a sign.

I'd like everyone to set aside their differences and believe that it's OK for Jews to be Jews in the Kootenays. That any and all formats of Judaism be recognized as valid without reservation. So what works for me is just as valid as what works for someone else and we all get to say we're Jewish. To come together to enjoy not the Judaism we grew up with and moved here to avoid but to create what works for us here in our reality.

Her vision provides for a balance between the conventional (building, sign, school, staff, programs), an egalitarian recognition of all branches of Judaism, and the inherently rebellious nature of Kootenay Jews. It is a utopian dream that at least one person in the community believes would cause divisions if it came to pass. This woman envisions a *breakaway group forming if there were permanent institutions*, for example, if a school was founded. In her estimation, half the parents would boycott it and the ensuing criticisms would undermine the community. Since nothing has ever materialized that approaches the magnitude of this dream, it is difficult to know whether her prediction would transpire. It is also unlikely that the current leaders have the energy and perseverance to make this vision work, or even the desire to build this type of community with its heavy financial and organizational responsibilities. Turnout for a visiting rabbi is always very high, but the proportion of people on the organizing committee is usually small and interest in following one success with another activity, even a joyful one like a klezmer concert, is even smaller.

Since the dream and its impossibility coexist in all these visions, I do not see these reveries on creating community translating into either an edifice or regular activities since they are personal, not communal visions. Although I see the potential for rewarding activities to take place without a permanent building, I believe that what one member called the "charm" of the community's ad hoc existence will determine its direction for some time to come.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

"We will never find the truth, but the research itself will do us some good."

--Isaac Bashevis Singer

I opened this paper by saying that I considered the West Kootenay Jewish community to be viable, but I am left wondering what it will look like in five or ten years. Sheva Medjuck wrote, "The continued persistence of Jewish communities in the many small communities of Canada reflects both the tenacity and the salience of Jewish identity." Kootenay Jews are passionate about their identity, but not necessarily for Judaism or an organized community; for many these are just incidental interests. Can a society that is more than 90% intermarried, that is poorly educated in Jewish history, knowledge and values and that cannot commit to a continuing relationship with Judaism and community, sustain itself? Will Jewish identity remain "salient" in the West Kootenays? It was far easier to discover the reasons for these behaviours than it is to predict the outcome.

This is a community that works hard not to marginalize anybody, whether they are halachically Jewish or not. Every effort is made to achieve harmony, especially when points of view diverge. As a group they place equal weight on all opinions, but accept that only a few are capable of leading, particularly when it comes to ritual. Because of this inclusivity, and the part time commitment of the leaders, there is no true hierarchy; there is also no formal leadership, no communal vision and no group decision-making. This makes the community invisible in the wider world, which they find desirable given their fears of covert anti-Semitism. It also makes them invisible in the Jewish world, from which help would be forthcoming should they wish it. Despite the factors working against them, there is a sense that a Jewish community exists in the West Kootenays and many feel part of it, or at the very least are aware of it and wish it well.

As a researcher, I found it an extraordinary privilege to be welcomed into a community that is not my own and to be granted access to observe its inner workings and individual lives. To honour this trust, within the framework that I developed for this paper, I have tried to let the people speak for themselves. Because my role in the community was questioner, I expected some sort of mediation would occur; however, I was surprised to be a catalyst in a direction I had not anticipated. Many interviewees thanked me for giving them the opportunity to reflect on who they are as Jews and for the chance to articulate their ideas and speak their minds openly. Because few had thought about themselves in a Jewish context for a long time, they appreciated being validated as a member of the world Jewish community whose views mattered.

It was refreshing to be in a community not founded on, or entrenched in, paternalistic values and to see how it negotiates the difficult path from theocentric Judaism to a theology based on ritual rather than commandments. I cannot envision mainstream Judaism, or even Jewish Renewal - at least in Canada and certainly not in Vancouver - accepting their alterations to halachic Judaism any time soon. There has recently been a movement in some Vancouver synagogues to introduce new practices into Jewish worship, such as brief meditations and prayers chanted in the vernacular; however, they do not tamper with halacha so much as finesse its interpretation. In the Kootenays, I witnessed radical change to Judaism's foundational principles.

Because Judaism is not a dogmatic faith and there is no central authority there is room for many interpretations, but the type of liberalism I witnessed in the Kootenays and my reaction to it made me realize that I am far more conventional in my beliefs about Jewish identity than I previously thought. Like the Jews in the Kootenays, there are many mitzvot I consider unimportant and do not observe and I, too, have intermarriage in my immediate and extended families. Unlike Kootenay Jews, I have no inner conflicts or misgivings about how to be a Jew. Much of my focus and Jewish identity is based on service to my community and its perpetuation rather than synagogue attendance. In a certain respect, this makes me a part time Jew as well. Nevertheless, I found myself surprised by the elemental changes to profound concepts of Judaism and Jewish identity that I witnessed in the Kootenays. Because my family believes brit milah is important and we bury our relatives according to Jewish precepts and raise our

children as Jews, I had to question whether this made me any more Jewish than the people I was speaking to, given the other parts of halacha I do not observe.

In the context of the West Kootenays, I understand the basic human goodness underlying the changes they are making and am not surprised they are developing in the midst of a group of rebels who live in voluntary exile from mainstream Jewish life, who have retreated from organized Judaism and are highly intermarried. Kootenay Jews are a community without absolutes. They are creating something new by seeking emotional resonance in the essence of Judaism rather than in its laws and obligations. In this milieu, I observed that certain people are perpetually searching for a climactic moment of clarity that will illuminate their path in life. For these people, Judaism is just one possibility on that route. This approach to Judaism makes it difficult for those who are Jewish to their core to establish a supportive community of practice and create a Jewish environment for their family.

The West Kootenay group does not fit the definition of an organized Jewish community. They are frequently conflicted about expressing their heritage, but they unhesitatingly call themselves Jewish. They have chosen a fluid, visionary spirituality rather than adherence to an established tradition with its time-honoured laws and rituals. Urban Jews who are not religious but strongly identified frequently devote themselves to creating community by building institutions and raising funds, but Kootenay Jews consider these activities arid, material and unfulfilling. Instead, they perpetuate *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness) in ways that are meaningful for them.

There is an aura of myth about their lives. Although some say it is difficult and lonely to be Jewish in the Kootenays, no one is willing to let their dream die. They prefer to stay in this earthly paradise and accept their children's drift from Judaism and Jewish identity. Their passion for the West Kootenays reminds me of Sholom Aleicham's fictional shtetl, Kasrilevke: "Stuck away in the corner of the world, isolated from the surrounding country, the town stands, orphaned, dreaming, bewitched, immersed in itself and remote from the noise and bustle, the confusion and tumult and greed, which men have created about them."¹ A shtetl also accommodated everyone, from the

¹ "The Town of Little People"

observant to the simple-minded to the heretical. The difference is, their society was focused around the classic institutions of synagogue, mikveh, house of study and cemetery whereas the Kootenay community is not. Shtetl life was maintained by *tzedaka*, giving, and the philosophy that *kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh*, all Israel is responsible for one another. These attributes are not evident in the Kootenay Jewish community.

At the moment, I do not see a collective commitment to Judaism or community in the West Kootenay Jews. I see instances that are community-like and customs that are superficially Jewish, but not the knowledge or the will to pass on Yiddishkeit in a way that would build continuity. Despite all of that, there is a potent attachment to Jewish identity in this unconventional community. Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, "Judaism was never so powerful as it is in the Diaspora. Not even in the Bible. The struggle to survive in the Diaspora makes the Jew work hard for his Jewishness."² In the West Kootenay Diaspora the struggle is powerful, but the hard work is intermittent and the Jewishness may not survive, unless, as I conjectured in one of my opening statements, "in-migration continues and is populated by interested souls with leadership abilities."

I do not believe Judaism is dying in small communities, I believe it is evolving, although sometimes in ways we do not recognize or understand. If Jewish people stop moving to *yehupetz* (rural areas) then there is a real possibility that Yiddishkeit in small communities might die, but Jews have always been attracted to frontiers; originally to make a living, nowadays to make a life. A leader in the Kootenay community who wrote to me recently is eloquently optimistic that this is exactly what will happen:

My [only] disagreement [with your observations] is that the very nature of our Jewishness today has no built in 'doomed to die' mechanism in that [we have] no aspirations as a community.

We are here, as Jewish as we all care to be, and to work for, and that systemology which you describe so articulately and accurately is as organic as the grass growing each spring, and, in my opinion, can only continue the way it's been, and won't stop anymore than the grass will not come back one Spring.

² Telushkin, Devora. *Master of Dreams: a Memoir of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. New York: Morrow, c. 1997.

Yes all the Jews may die off, but short of that, we will continue as it seems it has been continuing since Silver King Mike requested a Jewish burial.

I led a seder at Sheryl's house [this year] with about 25 people. Some Yids I hadn't met at all who you probably interviewed, who had quite a Jewish background, who were 20 years younger than me, doing what Max and Felice and my generation have and are doing to be Jewish - whatever we want to and whatever we have energy for.

With that as an M.O. (modus operandi), how can it ever die?

GLOSSARY

BAR MITZVAH – a Jewish boy of thirteen plus a day, the age of majority when a boy assumes his responsibilities in the synagogue and the community

BAT MITZVAH – a girl of twelve plus a day, the age of majority when a contemporary Jewish girl assumes her responsibilities in the synagogue and the community

B'NAI MITZVOT – plural form

BRIS – Yiddish for brit milah (see below)

BRIT MILAH – male rite of circumcision on the eighth day after birth (if the child is healthy); first commanded by God of Abraham as a physical sign of His covenant with the Jewish people.

CHANUKAH – Festival of Lights beginning on the 25th of the month of Kislev. Chanukah commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Greeks in 165 BCE, the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem and the miracle of the holy oil that burned for eight days without replenishment until fresh oil was located and consecrated.

DENOMINATIONS (branches of Judaism relevant to this paper)

ORTHODOX – believe the torah was given by God as a code to live by; emphasizes fulfilling all *mitzvot* - the commandments and interpretations composing *halacha* (see below)

REFORM – believe in adapting halacha to fit modern life; stresses ethical behaviour and social action

JEWISH RENEWAL – believe in bringing creativity to Judaism's spiritual and mystical traditions, in egalitarianism and in respect for the eco-universe

JEW/JEW BY CHOICE – a Jew is a person born to a Jewish mother or who has been formally converted to Judaism. The basic rules for conversion include study, examination by a *bet din* (court of rabbis), male circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* (ritual reenactment) and *tevila*, immersion in a mikveh, ritual bath. Not all branches of Judaism accept the conversions of other branches.

JUDAISM – The Jewish religion has no dogma or central authority. The key (Orthodox) beliefs are: there is one God; He gave the torah with its commandments to Moses; adherence to the commandments is an obligation; observance of the Sabbath and customs are essential. There are a number of branches of Judaism (see above for just three), sometimes with variations within them.

KADDISH – commonly called the mourners' prayer, also refers to the period of mourning when one "says kaddish." The prayer does not refer to death or mourning, but is a glorification and sanctification of the greatness of God.

HALACHA – Jewish law, or “the path one walks,” is composed of the 613 positive and negative commandments in the torah and their exegesis. These laws define the relationship Jews have with God, humankind and the universe from birth to death.

MEZUZAH – A small case with the word *shaddai* (almighty) containing verses inscribed on parchment from D’varim (Deuteronomy) 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 in which God states that Jews should bind these words for a sign in their heart and soul (belief and prayer), upon their hand and forehead (phylacteries), and on the doorposts of their homes (mezuzot).

MINHAG – general practice; a tradition reached through common use that over time can become as binding as a law

PASSOVER/PESACH – beginning on the 15th day of Nisan and lasting for eight days, Pesach involves a proscription against leavened foods, a ritual meal and a retelling of the story of the successful departure of the Hebrew slaves from ancient Egypt led by Moses under the guidance of God.

ROSH HASHANAH – New Year, literally “head of the year,” occurs on the 1st and 2nd of Tishrei. One of the holiest periods in the Jewish year, it is a time for introspection, contemplation and prayer.

TIKKUN OLAM – “to repair the world” through social action is an element of the obligation to do *tzedakah* (acts of righteousness or justice). The expression is now commonly applied to individual and communal acts done for the good of humanity.

YARZHEIT – anniversary of a death when kaddish (see above) is said and a memorial candle is lit.

YEHUPETZ – A fictional city created by Yiddish writer, Sholom Aleicham, longed for by *shtetl*, or village dwellers. In North America, yehupetz has come to mean a rural town or region.

YOM KIPPUR – Day of Atonement, occurring on the 10th of Tishrei, is the holiest day in the year; a time of fasting, prayer, reconciliation and atonement by the individual on behalf of his or herself, their community and the world at large.

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Generation One Interview Questions

1. What is your full name in English?
2. Do you have a Hebrew name?
3. Were you named after anyone?
4. Where and when were you born?
5. What are your parents' names and where and when were they born?
6. Did they have a Jewish upbringing and was it important to them?
7. What are your grandparents' names and where and when were they born?
8. Briefly, do you know what kind of attitude they had to Judaism and Jewish identity?
9. Do you have any siblings?
10. What are their names and ages?
11. Where are they now and what are they doing?
12. How would you describe your Jewish upbringing? For example, was there a religious element to it, was it strictly cultural, or secular and unaffiliated?
13. Did you attend Hebrew or Jewish schools, camp or youth groups?
14. Were your friends Jewish or non-Jewish, or mixed?
15. What were your feelings about being Jewish when you were growing up? Were you comfortable with it or was it something forced on you by family and society?
16. What is your educational background or work experience and what are you doing now?
17. Do you have a spouse or partner? If so, what is their name, age, place of birth and background?
18. Is/was he/she supportive of any efforts you make to maintain your cultural identity?
19. Do you have children? If so, what are their names and ages and where were they born?
20. Does/did your spouse/partner support acquainting the children with their Jewish heritage?
21. Please tell me about the reasons that brought you to the Kootenays, the steps you took to get here and what you hoped to find (For example, spiritual completeness, a job, business opportunity, adventure, or a change in lifestyle? Provide approximate dates.).
22. Has your experience lived up to your expectations?
23. Did you have a desire to maintain your Jewish heritage when you arrived here?
24. How did you express it? For instance, did you look for other Jews, or keep Jewish rituals in your home? (Shabbat candles, trying to keep kosher, celebrating holidays)
25. Do you feel more or less Jewishly motivated or involved than when you first arrived?

26. If so, what do you think caused this change in feeling?
27. Have you passed on any aspects of Jewish heritage to your children? In what ways?
28. Do you celebrate the holidays at home or communally?
29. Are you involved in planning or helping at community events?
30. How did you find out there were other Jews in the area, by chance or intent?
31. Do you feel you (and your family) are part of a West Kootenay Jewish community?
32. Is it accurate to call what is happening here a community?
33. Has the presence of a torah in the community changed anything for you?
34. This appears to be a community that is very humane, open-minded and accepting of different opinions and practices and able to come together to celebrate or commiserate when needed. Would you say this is a correct view of how things work here?
35. Who would you say the leaders are and what makes them that?
36. What do you think would happen if they got tired of their roles or moved away?
37. Does the group ever make decisions as a community?
38. How are events such as seders organized and funded and where are they held?
39. Are these community events done in a way that appeals to you and makes you want to participate?
40. What is your personal vision for a Jewish community in this area, or does it fulfill all your needs as it stands?
41. Can you imagine there ever being classical Jewish institutions here such as a synagogue, a Hebrew school or a community centre?
42. Have you been to any Jewish funerals here?
43. Do you know if it was carried out according to any of the precepts of Jewish burial, such as staying with the body, wrapping it in shrouds, saying kaddish or sitting shiva?
44. What about brit milah – have you heard of any and who performed it, a mohel or doctor?
45. What is your feeling about this ritual obligation?
46. Have there been any Jewish weddings in the West Kootenays?
47. Do you prefer to explore or express your Jewishness privately or communally?
48. Do you do anything to educate yourself Jewishly, such as buy or borrow books, have a friendship circle, or contact a rabbi? Where does your best support come from?
49. Do you ever use the Internet as a source for Jewish study, to communicate with other Jews or to answer questions?
50. How do you feel about patrilineal descent? Should a Jew be a person whose mother was Jewish as our laws say, or someone who feels they are and behaves as one?
51. Do you feel that Judaism should be more open, flexible and inclusive of different approaches?
52. Do you bring other forms of spirituality or personal expression to Jewish practice?
53. What kinds of things in Judaism and Jewishness do you connect with?
54. Would you characterize yourself as a Jew first or a citizen of the world?

55. Are your closest friends here mostly non-Jewish or Jewish?
56. Do you feel this is a safe and comfortable place for Jews to live?
57. Is Israel important to you in any way? Have you ever been there?
58. Have you ever experienced or heard anti-Semitic or anti-Israel remarks here?
59. Describe it and tell me how you felt, what you did and if you had any support.
60. Is there anything you would like to comment on that we haven't discussed?
61. Is there anything you would like to say to sum up your feelings and experiences about being Jewish in the West Kootenays?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and adding to our knowledge of BC Jewish history.

Appendix B - Second Generation Interview Questions

1. What is your full name in English?
2. Do you have a Hebrew name?
3. Were you named after anyone?
4. Where and when were you born?
5. What are your parents' names and where were they born?
6. Did either of them have a Jewish upbringing?
7. Where were your grandparents born?
8. Do you know how they felt about Judaism and Jewish identity?
9. What family do you have in the Kootenays? Parents? Siblings? Other?
10. Tell me about your life before the Kootenays.
11. Have you ever attended Jewish camps, youth groups or conventions?
12. Have you ever had lessons in Hebrew, Judaism or Jewish history?
13. How was this accomplished?
14. Do you celebrate any Jewish holidays at home, with the community, or with family elsewhere?
15. What do you do on the High Holy Days, Passover and Chanukah?
16. Are there other holidays you celebrate?
17. Did you have a bar or bat mitzvah?
18. Tell me about it: how you prepared and who helped you, who led the service, what part you played in the service, how you and your family celebrated and if the community joined in
19. Are your friends Jewish, non-Jewish or both?
20. Are you comfortable being a Jew in the Kootenays?
21. Do you let your friends know you are Jewish?
22. Have you ever had an anti-Semitic or anti-Israel experience here?
23. If so, how did you handle it and did you have any support?
24. What are you doing now (and where)?
25. Would you like to remain or return here as an adult?
26. Would it be important to you that your partner or spouse be Jewish?
27. Would you try to raise your children Jewish in some way?
28. What would you do to accomplish that?
29. Do you feel part of a Jewish community in the Kootenays?
30. Is that important to you?
31. Could you see yourself becoming involved in making Jewish things happen here?
32. What are some of things that do and do not appeal to you about being Jewish?
33. If they have gone away to live or study: Have your feelings and experiences as a Jew changed since you've been away from the Kootenays? How are things different?
34. Do you have any thoughts or feelings about Israel?
35. Have you or would you consider visiting there?

36. What are some of the things that make the West Kootenays a great place to live?
37. Are there things about living here that you don't like?
38. Do you see yourself first as a citizen of the world community or as a Jew?
39. What are some of the things that concern you most about our world? (For example, human rights, the environment, globalization)
40. As a Jew, what concerns you most in the world?
41. Is there anything you would like to comment on that we haven't discussed about being Jewish in the Kootenays?
42. Do you have any final words or a message you would like to give?

Thank you for participating in this interview and adding to the story of Jewish life in British Columbia.

Appendix C - Small Jewish Communities Survey

1. What is the Jewish population of your area?
2. Approximately how many families and singles does this represent?
3. Is there a synagogue?
4. Is there a rabbi or are services community-led?
5. Are Shabbat services held and if so, how often do they occur?
6. What other services or holidays are celebrated communally?
7. How would you characterize your services: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Jewish Renewal, egalitarian – or a combination?
8. If there is no synagogue: Where does the community convene and for what occasions?
9. Are there any social service or benevolent organizations, for example, Hadassah, sisterhood, B'nai B'rith?
10. Is there any formal or parent-led education for the children?
11. How is bar/bat mitzvah training handled for those who want it?
12. Does your community accept patrilineal descent?
13. Generally speaking, would you call the atmosphere in your community freethinking or traditional in terms of Jewish practice?
14. Do rabbis or other guests visit the community? Of their own volition or by invitation?
15. Are there any Jews from outlying areas who join the community for example, on high holidays?
16. Does your community think of itself as the "mother community" for its area, does it look to a larger centre for support, or both?
17. What do people do for their Jewish/Judaica needs, for example, buying Judaica such as a menorah or books on Jewish topics, purchasing Pesach supplies or kosher food?
18. Is there a community leader/s and what would happen if s/he/they left?
19. Is there more than one Jewish community group or congregation in your area?
20. Is there a Jewish cemetery or burial ground in your city? If so, is there a Chevrah Kadisha, a burial society to prepare and sit with the body?

Thank you for participating in this interview and adding to the story of Jewish life in British Columbia.

Appendix D - Methodologies

D.1 - Interview Criteria

I first went to Nelson in 2003 to interview two people requesting oral histories on their genealogical submissions to the Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia's Family History Project, which I was chairperson of. I knew one of the interviewees, the community elder; the other emerged as the keeper of the community list and founder/monitor of the community listserv. Both suggested names and provided biographical sketches. Some of those suggested were involved in community events or were occasional participants and others were not involved at all. I was invited to sign on to the listserv and voluntarily given a contact list of community members. Participants suggested other names to me. I used the listserv to extend an open invitation to the members of the group to participate in my study. I also wrote, emailed and telephoned individuals I wished to interview. Telephone contact proved most effective. Details on where, when and directions were better accomplished by email.

Demographically, I interviewed people between the ages of thirteen and eighty-five located throughout the Kootenay Development Region (see below for definition). I looked for a range of religious, educational and occupational backgrounds, marital arrangements, gender distribution (two lesbians participated; I was not told of any gay men in the community) as well as people completely unconnected with the community. There were no controls on the sample size in each decade, but I ensured that each was well represented. An effort was made to broaden the sample beyond those who lived the full hippie experience, which has become a Kootenay cliché and ignores the true demographic of the region.

The interviews took approximately two hours; a digital photo was taken. The interviewees received a CD with both on the spot. CDs containing the interviews, photographs and transcriptions are housed in the Oral History Collection in the Archives of the Jewish Historical Society of BC, Vancouver. Two interviews were abbreviated discussions with members of the wider Nelson community; five were past residents of Nelson (1930s-1952); three printed memoirs were accessed. In total fifty-eight individual's stories became the background for this paper.

D.2 - Demographics and Distribution

There are several ways of viewing the region encompassed by my study: by electoral district, by development region or by what is familiarly called "the West Kootenays". For the purposes of this paper, I am referring to the latter in terms of geographic boundaries, as this is where the respondents live. In terms of statistics, I use the provincial development region because I believe they most accurately reflect local opinions on the Jewish population in "the West Kootenays."

Geographically, the "West Kootenays" include the Kootenay and Arrow Lakes and the Columbia River basin around Trail and Castlegar. Other major cities and towns are Nelson, Rossland, Salmo, Creston, Kaslo, and New Denver. Nakusp, Christina Lake

and Grand Forks are sometimes considered part of the region. Some definitions include included Grand Forks, as I did.

Participants in this study are/were located in Nelson, Grand Forks, Ainsworth, New Denver, Silverton and the villages in the Nelson capture area, such as Six Mile, Balfour, Proctor, Taghum, etc. The references to the former Jewish community of Trail and Rossland were culled from historic interviews, my own interviews with former residents and three memoirs. Of the interviews that took place in the region, seventeen participants lived in Nelson and twenty-one lived in outlying areas.

The 2001 federal census reports that the Jewish population of Canada was 370,505. Using the Standard Jewish Definition formulated in 1981 by Jim Torczyner of McGill University and the Jewish Federation of Montreal, the Shajar Canadian Jewish census (see bibliography), using the 2001 federal census, states that British Columbia had 29,875 Jews. This definition includes people who say they are Jews by religion and ethnicity; Jews by religion and another ethnicity; or Jews by ethnicity and no religion. The nearest cities with a noticeable Jewish population according to the 2001 Canada Census are Kelowna (515) and Vernon (170). Details on local figures are below.

The religions listed in the demographic statistics below reflect the top three affiliations in the province and in the Kootenay Development Region as well as Judaism, Buddhism and Pagan, affiliations under discussion in this paper.

Selected Data on Population:

West Kootenay population, 2001 Census

Population of "West Kootenays"	38,503
Population of Nelson	9,298
Population of immediate outlying villages	7,387
Area (km ²)	10,275
Pop. Density (people per km ²)	3.7

Kootenay Development Region population, 2001 Census

Population	145,153	3.7% of 3,907,738
Area (km ²)	57,756.81	.06% of 926,492.48

Jewish Ethnicity by size and percent of BC population (Shahar)

Jewish	29,875	0.7%
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Jewish Ethnicity by size and percent of Kootenay Development Region population

Jewish (single origin)	165	0.2%
Jewish (multiple origins)	525	0.7%

Selected Data on Religious Affiliation:

Religious affiliation over 100,00, British Columbia

Total population 3,868,875

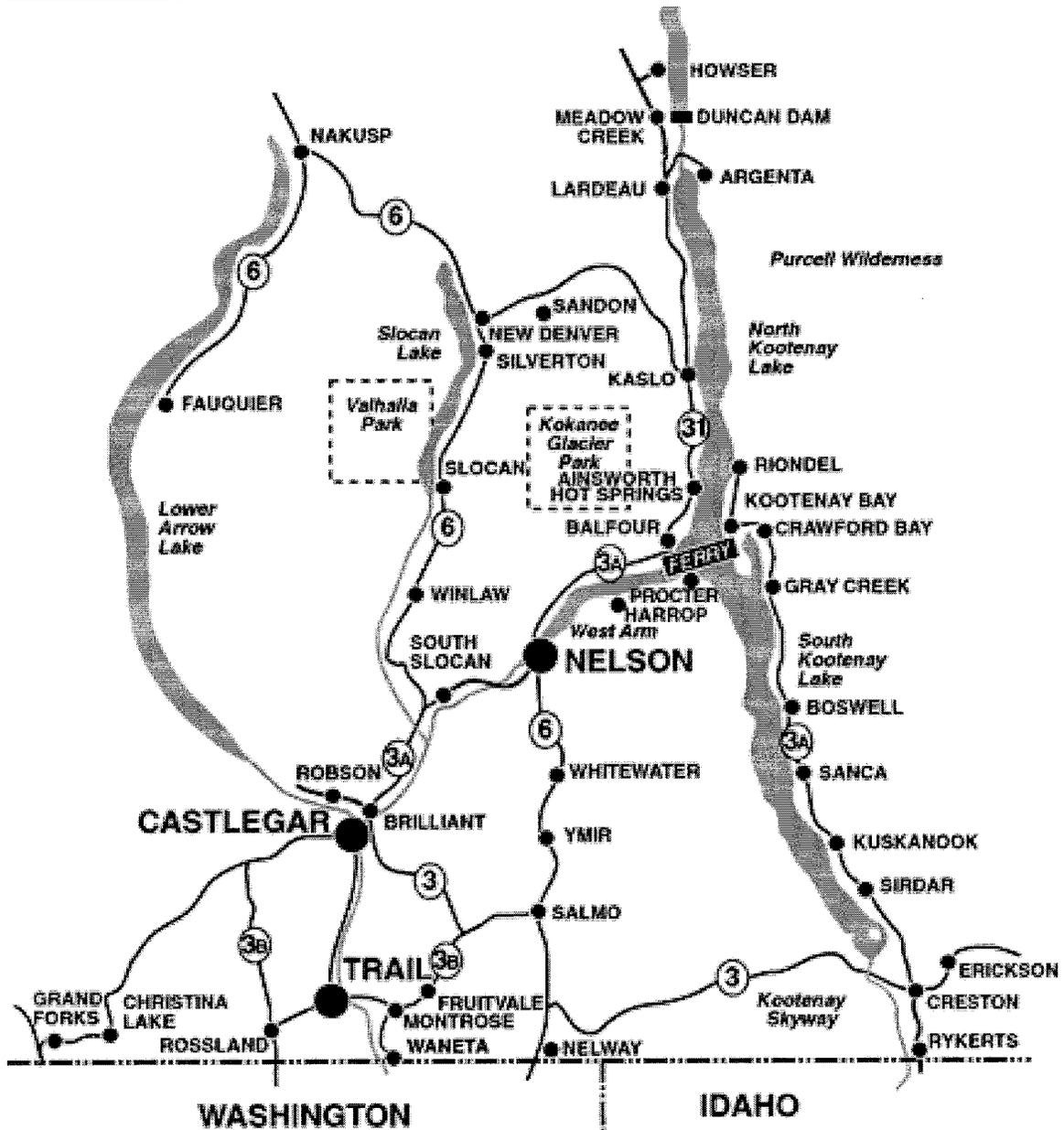
No religion	1,356,600	35.1%
Roman Catholic	666,905	17.2%
United Church	361,840	9.4%
Anglican	298,370	7.7%
Buddhist	85,540	2.2%
Jewish (Shahar)	29, 875	0.7%
Pagan	6,100	0.2%

Religious Affiliation over 10,000, Kootenay Development Region

Total population 143,810

No religion	52,855	36.8%
Roman Catholic	26,550	18.5%
United Church	18,550	12.9%
Anglican	10,310	7.2%
Buddhist	565	0.4%
Jewish	245	0.2%
Pagan	255	0.2%

D.3 – Map and Sources



Sources for Appendix D:

1. Statistics Canada, Census (2001) Produced by: BC STATS www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca
2. <http://www.discovernelson.com/htdocs/statistics.html>
3. Shahar (see biblio.) http://www.ifgv.com/content_display.html?ArticleID=123194
4. Area map source: <http://www.angelfire.com/film/nelsonbc/kootenaymap.jpg>

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