A Suburb Unlike Any Other: A History of Early Jewish Life in Los Alamos, New Mexico

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ABSTRACT

A Suburb Unlike Any Other: A History of Early Jewish Life in Los Alamos, New Mexico

A thesis presented to the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

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This thesis examines the development of the Jewish community in Los Alamos, New Mexico during the 1940s and 1950s and compares its development with Jewish communities located near federally funded scientific research centers. The Jewish community of Los Alamos formed during World War II as over one hundred scientists from around the world arrived to work on the development of the atomic bomb for the Manhattan Project. When the war ended, dozens of Jewish scientists remained at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory and established a permanent Jewish community. As the federal government transformed Los Alamos into a suburb in the 1950s, its Jewish community adapted many elements of suburban Jewish life. This thesis examines how Los Alamos Jews integrated socially and culturally into Los Alamos’ diverse cultural milieu and how Jewish scientists balanced their professional commitments as scientists with their religious and ethnic identities.
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Introduction

Harris Mayer fell in love with Los Alamos, New Mexico when he moved to the community in 1947. In the eyes of Mayer, a Jewish physicist from the Bronx, Los Alamos had it all. The Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory had an excellent scientific research infrastructure and counted the world’s top scientists and mathematicians as staff members and consultants. Los Alamos’ collection of brilliant scientific minds was not the only thing that made Mayer feel at home in the small, secretive community nestled in the rugged mountains of Northern New Mexico. The town’s cosmopolitan atmosphere and unconditional acceptance and support of its Jewish community made Los Alamos “the most wonderful place for Jews in the world.”

The history of Los Alamos’ Jewish community is given brief attention in studies of New Mexico Jewish History such as Henry Tobias’ *A History of the Jews in New Mexico*. Tobias’ analysis of Los Alamos’ Jewish community and Abraham Shinedling’s *History of the Los Alamos Jewish Center* focused exclusively on the development of Jewish communal structures and religious institutions. There has been little discussion of how Jews fit into the social fabric of the “atomic city’s” social and cultural life. Previous studies neglected the Jewish identities of the prominent American and European émigré scientists who worked in Los Alamos on the Manhattan Project during the World War II and at the postwar Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory.

In this thesis I will demonstrate that as Los Alamos developed into America’s “nuclear suburb”, its Jewish community came to embody many characteristics of a 1950s suburban Jewish community. Though Los Alamos did not develop around an urban area,

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it offered the benefits of suburban living to residents through amenities such as new, private single family homes and nearby shopping and recreation. In an effort to recruit scientists, the federal government presented Los Alamos to the country as a modern, suburban outpost that happened to be in the same neighborhood as a mysterious nuclear weapons laboratory.²

The suburbanization of Los Alamos’ Jewish community paralleled the town’s suburban shift. In postwar Los Alamos the synagogue quickly became a key Jewish communal institution, a development that occurred throughout dozens of suburban Jewish communities.³ Jewish women were the key organizers of Jewish life in Los Alamos, mirroring a trend that evolved throughout the landscape of Jewish suburbia. As suburban congregations placed more emphasis on youth education and programming in the 1950s, so did Los Alamos’ Jewish community, with the creation of a Hebrew School and youth groups.

While Los Alamos had many elements of suburban life, it also had key differences with other suburban Jewish centers. Los Alamos’ Jews and non-Jews regularly mixed in social settings, unlike most suburban Jews who largely socialized with Jewish peers.⁴ When members of the Los Alamos Jewish community were the targets of what looked like anti-Semitic discrimination, the community rallied to the support of the Jewish community.

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Though many Jewish scientists participated in Los Alamos’ organized Jewish life, the town’s most well known Jewish scientists like J. Robert Oppenheimer and Edward Teller were not involved in synagogue activity or communal organizations such as B’nai B’rith and Hadassah. Oppenheimer and the town’s other “non-Jewish Jews” would renew their ties with Jewish social and political causes in the decades after their careers in Los Alamos.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Los Alamos was part of a wave of new Jewish communities that developed around federally funded scientific research centers. The same year the Los Alamos Jewish community formally organized its synagogue, the Los Alamos Jewish Center, a group of scientists from the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics’ (NACA) Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory in Cleveland, Ohio formed Beth Israel-The West Temple. Scientists were the majority of each synagogue’s founding members. The new congregations were made up of transplants to their respective communities. Each organization had hallmarks of postwar synagogue life with strong commitments to religious and youth education. But the two communities had key differences. Though Beth Israel-The West Temple was on Cleveland’s west side, which had a small Jewish population, it was only a 40-minute drive away from one of the country’s most influential Jewish communities. While Los Alamos’ internationally renowned Jewish scientists chose not to identify with the local Jewish community, the creation of Beth Israel-The West Temple was driven by Abe Silverstein, the associate director of the Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory and a crucial figure in the development of the American space program. The Jewish communities of Los Alamos
and the west side of Cleveland demonstrate the role of geography in communal
development.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the nation became intrigued with the scientific
discoveries developed in Los Alamos and the mysterious aura that surrounded the town. The Jewish experience in Los Alamos during the 1940s and early 1950s adds depth and intrigue to the early history of one America’s most scrutinized scientific research hubs. Los Alamos’ Jewish community was born in 1943 in the secrecy of wartime on a rural and remote military base in a state with approximately 1,000 Jews. In this mélange, a Jewish community developed that embodied the key components of suburban Jewish life such as the elevated role of women and the prioritization of Jewish youth education. On the outskirts of Los Alamos’ Jewish life, the community’s most well known Jewish scientists emphasized their commitments to science over their ethnic and religious heritage. In rural and isolated New Mexico, Los Alamos’ Jewish community resembled the religion and culture of post-World War II suburban American Jewry.

**The Manhattan Project**

Jews from all over the United States and Europe found their way to Los Alamos in the 1940s and 1950s because of the Manhattan Engineering District, known as the Manhattan Project. The Manhattan Project was established in 1942 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt tasked the Army Corps of Engineers with supervising the construction and maintenance of a central research facility and manufacturing plants that

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could produce newly developed nuclear material. The Hungarian Jewish physicists Edward Teller, Leo Szilard and Eugene Wigner, with the help of Albert Einstein, first introduced the idea of creating an atomic bomb in a letter to Roosevelt in 1939.

Colonel Leslie Groves, the head of the Manhattan Project, picked University of California-Berkeley Professor J. Robert Oppenheimer to lead Project Y, the code name assigned to the research facility at Los Alamos. Oppenheimer was born in Manhattan to a prosperous German-Jewish family and earned his undergraduate degree at Harvard. He then went to Europe where he obtained his PhD in physics from the University of Gottingen in Germany.

The decision to create the Manhattan Project’s research facility in the remote New Mexico wilderness stemmed from Oppenheimer’s background. Oppenheimer spent part of his summers in New Mexico and loved the region. Oppenheimer was familiar with the Los Alamos Ranch School in Otowi, a boarding school that educated the boys of the nation’s elite, and suggested Groves look at the site. The Manhattan Project leadership settled on the Los Alamos Ranch School site after considering a location in Jemez Springs, New Mexico. Groves liked the Los Alamos Ranch School because it was

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7 Ibid., 19.
9 Ibid., 19-20.
10 Ibid., 12.
geographically remote and surrounded by federally controlled land. Additionally, the school had existing housing, buildings and other infrastructure.\textsuperscript{11}

Project Y at Los Alamos opened in the spring of 1943 and rapidly grew from a population of a few hundred to approximately 6,000 by the end of the war.\textsuperscript{12} The military brought in personnel from the Provisional Engineering Detachment, the Special Engineering Detachment, the Women’s Army Corps and the Military Police to help with the site’s operations. Hispanic and Native American workers from nearby communities worked as janitors, plumbers, maids, carpenters and drivers on “The Hill”, the nickname for Los Alamos. The mixture of émigré scientists and the local Hispanic and Native American labor force “reminded some at the site of a foreign city, or a mini United Nations.”\textsuperscript{13}

The Jewish population in Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project era reflected the diversity of the community. The hometowns of Jews working on the Manhattan Project included large cities like New York, Chicago and Cleveland and small towns such as Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and Hillside, New Jersey. The project’s European Jewish scientists hailed from cities such as Budapest, Hungary and Lvov, Poland. During the war era, some Jewish personnel used Jewish religion and culture to create a feeling of community on the isolated military base. While others did not practice their Judaism or

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 17-18
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 38
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 28-30
consciously affiliate with the wartime Jewish community, they were painfully aware of their Jewish backgrounds as news trickled in of the destruction of Jewish life in Europe.\textsuperscript{14}

**Jewish religious and cultural life in Los Alamos during World War II**

General Leslie Groves once described physicists as “a ‘godless bunch.’ ”\textsuperscript{15} While the physicists may not have believed in a supreme higher being, their wives did. The women of Los Alamos led the efforts to establish religious life on the base during the Manhattan Project.\textsuperscript{16} They organized church services in one of the base’s movie theaters and arranged for Santa Fe priests and ministers to officiate at religious events. Though the scientists at Los Alamos were infrequent religious worshippers, the community still felt a need for religious guidance and Chaplain Matthew Imrie was assigned to Los Alamos in 1944.\textsuperscript{17}

Organized Jewish worship was absent during the first 16 months of the Manhattan Project. The primary reason it took so long for Jewish worship services to materialize was because of the crushing workload.\textsuperscript{18} The first formal Jewish worship services were held in August 1944 shortly after Imrie’s arrival. Following services, Jewish and non-

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 145
Jewish staff and military personnel delivered speeches on religious topics. Speakers included post commander Lt. Col. Whitney Ashbridge and Sgt. Leonard McKee who gave a lecture titled “A Christian View of Judaism.” The services hewed to the style of Conservative Judaism.

Soon after Imrie’s arrival a Hebrew Services Committee was formed. The 11 person committee included civilian scientists, members of the Special Engineer Detachment, medical officers, wives of laboratory staff members and Imrie. From November 1944-May 1945, the Hebrew Services Committee hosted a Chanukah party, Purim party and Passover Seder. Imrie and Colonel Gerald R. Tyler, the post’s commanding officer, both delivered addresses at Los Alamos’ 1945 seder, which had over 110 people in attendance. Marcel Pick, a Jewish merchant in Santa Fe active in Jewish affairs, worked with Imrie to ensure that Los Alamos’ Jews had matzah, prayer books, Bibles and wine to celebrate Passover.

The Jewish community in Los Alamos had intermittent contact with New Mexico rabbis. Rabbi Harvey E. Wessel of the USO Club in Fort Sumner visited the community in July 1945. Rabbi Solomon E. Starrels of Albuquerque's Temple Albert visited the

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21 Shinedling, History of the Los Alamos Jewish Center, 2.
Jewish community in Los Alamos from September 1944 through July 1946.\textsuperscript{23}

Interactions with New Mexico’s other Jewish communities increased after the conclusion of the war, when Jewish staff members were given access to cars to attend High Holiday services in Santa Fe or Albuquerque.\textsuperscript{24}

In his history of the Los Alamos Jewish community, Abraham Shinedling identified Lionel Ames (then known as Lionel Shapiro), a soldier in the Special Engineer Detachment, Philip Rothstein and Maurice Gold of the Provisional Engineer Detachment and Florence Schulkin (née Pachter) of the Women’s Army Corps as the primary organizers of the first Jewish services in 1944. For Ames the impulse to organize and participate in Jewish life was rooted in his childhood. Ames, who changed his last name after the war when he entered the entertainment business, grew up in a Jewish neighborhood on Chicago’s west side. His father was an Orthodox rabbi and his family kept kosher and observed Shabbat. Ames attended Hebrew school and spent time in a yeshiva in Chicago before enrolling in pre-engineering courses prior to the war. As a child Ames enjoyed listening to records of famous cantors belting out Jewish liturgical melodies. Ames enjoyed going to synagogues in his neighborhood and hearing different cantors. Participating in Jewish communal life and leading services was a “natural

\textsuperscript{23} Shinedling, \textit{History of the Los Alamos Jewish Center}, 3.
Religious life provided him with a form of recreation and helped him maintain connections with his upbringing.

Mathematician Peter Lax and his family arrived in New York City as refugees in 1941. Lax’s story was typical among the European Jewish scientists and mathematicians that worked on the Manhattan Project. Many of the Jewish émigré scientists, like Lax, left Europe after it became increasingly difficult for European Jews to live and work in their homelands. Lax and other prominent émigrés were raised in assimilated households where Judaism and Jewish culture were not emphasized. Lax’s father was a prominent physician at the city’s Jewish hospital and had no “religious feelings.” As part of his school’s religious curriculum, he occasionally had to attend synagogue, an exercise he found “excruciatingly boring.” As a child Lax fasted on Yom Kippur and his family also had a Christmas tree. “I was a very bad Jew. I never denied my Jewish identity,” Lax said of his Budapest childhood. It took war and displacement for him to construct his personal vision of Jewishness. “My Jewish identity was given to me by the Nazis,” he said. Lax did not recalibrate his Jewish identity during the Manhattan Project. He was not active in Jewish communal life in Los Alamos, similar to his childhood in Europe and New York.

Non-participation in religious life in Los Alamos did not reflect lack of consciousness of a Jewish identity. During his time in Los Alamos for the Manhattan

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26 Peter Lax, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, June 11, 2017.
27 Peter Lax, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, June 11, 2017.
Project, Ben Bederson’s social network resembled his friend group in New York. His friends in both places were mostly non-religious Jews. Bederson was born in New York City to Yiddish speaking parents who immigrated from the Russian Empire before World War I. He grew up in a heavily Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx and attended a Jewish supplementary school but had little connection with Jewish religious practice. His father was a dedicated Communist and Bederson spent a year in Moscow as a child where his father installed an American kitchen in a factory. During his youth, Bederson was a member of the Young Pioneer League, the communist party’s youth group. At Los Alamos Bederson’s religious convictions did not change. He did not attend any of the Jewish religious services. When the holidays came, Bederson treated them like any other day of the week.  

Jewish social life in Los Alamos also existed outside the sphere of religious practice. Bederson’s card-playing group was made up of fellow Jewish soldiers. The “Salami Club,” a group of Jewish workers, bonded over rye bread and salami that a Jewish soldier’s mother sent to the base.  

In wartime Los Alamos, expression of Jewish identity varied greatly. Some soldiers like Ames used religious observance as an outlet for Jewish expression and as a conduit to their prewar lives. Others, like Bederson and members of the “Salami Club”, recreated the social dynamics of their urban ethnic Jewish neighborhoods in wartime Los Alamos through Jewish social networks. Jewish staff members like Lax, who had little

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28 Benjamin Bederson Sr., Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, June 10, 2017.
connection with Jewish life before the war, did not suddenly change their religious and social patterns during their years on ‘The Hill.’

After the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 and Nagaski on August 9 the future of Los Alamos was murky. The scientists, soldiers, civilians and technicians of the Manhattan Project’s Project Y had accomplished their goal. The future of the research site and its Jewish community remained to be seen.

Suburbia on the mesa: Jewish life in postwar Los Alamos

In the immediate aftermath of the war, it was unclear whether the federal government would continue to financially support Los Alamos. The combination of Los Alamos’ subpar housing stock, a cold winter and the federal government’s unknown stance on the site’s future triggered a “Great Exodus” from Los Alamos in the winter of 1945-1946.\(^{30}\) Behind the scenes Groves laid the foundation for a permanent peacetime scientific research presence in Los Alamos. In January 1946 Groves wrote a letter to Norris Bradbury, who succeeded Oppenheimer as the laboratory’s director following the war, committing the army to a permanent presence in Los Alamos.\(^{31}\) Bradbury knew that in order to retain wartime staff and attract new talent, Los Alamos would have to appeal to families.\(^{32}\) In the years following the war, Los Alamos’ Western Area evolved into a suburban neighborhood with the construction of new single family homes. The town’s

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\(^{31}\) Ibid., 97.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 98.
1946 Master Plan called for the construction of a community center that featured town council chambers, a recreation hall, bowling alley, movie theater and retail spaces, all staples of suburban living.\(^{33}\)

On the surface, Los Alamos does not appear to meet the qualifications of a suburb. It is not close to a dense, urban metropolis. The decision to create a suburban community in Los Alamos had nothing to do with the town’s urban geography or economy. The federal government designed Los Alamos as a suburb in order to attract talent and mute the town’s military mission.\(^{34}\) The lens of a suburb allows for an understanding of Los Alamos as the manifestation of the ideals the federal government projected onto the new town and the cultural values Los Alamos residents cultivated in their households and communal institutions.

The suburbanization of Los Alamos occurred at the same time as American Jews flocked to suburbs from urban Jewish neighborhoods. The 1952 American Jewish Yearbook noted that the number of Jewish families was growing in the suburbs of New York, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Chicago.\(^{35}\) Early Jewish settlers in Los Alamos hailed from the cities where suburbanization was happening at a breakneck pace. Had they stayed in their hometowns, Jewish Los Alamosans would have likely joined their coreligionists in the suburbs.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 104.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 105.  
Los Alamos, like the rest of the United States, experienced a flowering of religious life following the Manhattan Project and in the 1950s. In 1947 a community chapel open to all faiths was built and dedicated as “a concrete symbol of the religious faiths of atomic workers”.36 *The Los Alamos Times* article about the chapel’s dedication noted that several pastors from churches in nearby towns were invited to the dedication ceremony but did not mention if local rabbis had been invited. Los Alamos’ Baptist and Methodist congregations and the town’s United Church each acquired their own buildings during the 1950s.37 In August 1952, the Los Alamos Ministerial Fellowship formed, which was open to all religious faiths.38 The Los Alamos Jewish Center was established in 1954 with the mission of “further[ing] the religious, cultural, and educational aspects of American Judaism.”39 The new Jewish center was an outgrowth of Los Alamos’ B’nai B’rith and Hadassah chapters, which were created in 1948.40

Jewish life in Los Alamos developed at a time when American Jews were achieving prominence in scientific fields. In the first half of the 20th century, scientific careers were a way for American Jews, particularly those of Eastern European descent, to climb from poverty to economic stability. To achieve success in science one did not need

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38 “Hill Clergyman Form Fellowship,” *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, August 29, 1952
40 Ibid., 43,49.
to be the scion of an elite Protestant or Jewish family. Careers in science and medicine provided economic stability and a chance to make a positive societal contribution.\textsuperscript{41}

After World War II, American Jewry began grappling with the intellectual challenges posed by balancing science and religion. The Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists formed in 1947 with the aim of reconciling the relationship between science and halacha, Jewish law. In \textit{Judaism and the Scientific Spirit}, Reform Rabbi Gunter Plaut wrestled with the balancing of science and faith. Published in 1962, 17 years after the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Plaut declared that in order to live a full life one “needs the knowledge which science provides, as well as the values and goals which his faith supplies. Science without faith is barren.”\textsuperscript{42} Plaut’s analysis of the necessity of both faith and science likely resonated with portions of Los Alamos Jewry like scientists Jay Wechsler and Louis Goldstein, who both were dedicated to their scientific careers and observing Jewish religious tradition.\textsuperscript{43} Jewish scientists Joe Bergstein and Haskell Sheinberg did not associate with the Jewish community to fulfill

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Plaut’s desire of marrying science and religion. The two men, and others like them, wanted to socialize with peers from a similar ethnic and cultural background.\textsuperscript{44} While many new suburban congregations throughout the country chose to affiliate with a denomination, usually Conservative, the Los Alamos Jewish Center did not forge a formal relationship with any branch of American Judaism.\textsuperscript{45} Shinedling, a Reform rabbi who served the congregation from 1956-1957, noted that while the Los Alamos Jewish Center’s families’ religious observances “leans more towards the progressive and modern, and away from the traditional,” the congregation, like other suburban synagogues, still preferred Conservative style services.\textsuperscript{46} While the community occasionally debated adopting more Reform practices during the early years, members continued reciting core prayers in Hebrew and maintained trappings of Conservative services.\textsuperscript{47}

The Los Alamos Jewish Center’s nominal embrace of Conservative Judaism made sense given the diverse backgrounds of its founding members. Brothers Joe and Ivan Bergstein grew up in an Orthodox household in McKeesport, Pennsylvania and attended

\textsuperscript{44} Joe Bergstein, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 25, 2017; Haskell Sheinberg, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 24, 2017.  
\textsuperscript{46} Abraham I. Shinedling, \textit{History of the Los Alamos Jewish Center}, 28.  
\textsuperscript{47} Bert Heil, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 24, 2017.
religious school, begrudgingly, several times a week.\textsuperscript{48} Harris Mayer learned to read and recite the Hebrew prayers from his grandfather before he could fully read English. His family regularly marked Shabbat and Mayer attended Hebrew school several times a week.\textsuperscript{49} Jay Wechsler, a leader of Los Alamos’ Jewish community for decades following the war, grew up walking to synagogue with his father on Shabbat and prayed everyday as a child.\textsuperscript{50} On the other end of the spectrum were members like Haskell Sheinberg and Bertram Heil. Sheinberg grew up in a home in Houston that bore a close resemblance to Reform practice. Heil grew up attending the Reform synagogue in El Paso, Texas.\textsuperscript{51} Praying in the Conservative tradition and using Conservative prayer books allowed more traditional members to hold onto vestiges of their childhood. By worshipping in the Conservative style the congregation was able to capture Conservative Judaism’s “middle-of-the-road message, [of being] at once religiously authentic and amiably inoffensive” without explicitly identifying with the movement.\textsuperscript{52}

Like other suburban communities, religious observance in Los Alamos was low. Shinedling noted that about two to three families kept kosher.\textsuperscript{53} On the High Holidays,

\textsuperscript{48} Joe Bergstein, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 25, 2017.
\textsuperscript{49} Harris Mayer, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 25, 2017.
\textsuperscript{50} Becky Wechsler Oertel, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, July 6, 2017.
\textsuperscript{51} Bert Heil, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 24, 2017; Haskell Sheinberg, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 24, 2017.
\textsuperscript{52} Jonathan D. Sarna. \textit{American Judaism: A History}, 284.
\textsuperscript{53} Abraham I. Shinedling, \textit{History of the Los Alamos Jewish Center}, 28.
lab employees would take a few hours off for work to attend services and then return to
the laboratory when services were over.\textsuperscript{54}

Historian Edward S. Shapiro explained that the synagogue was important in
suburban religious life because of its role in transmitting Jewish identity to children.\textsuperscript{55}
Shinedling described the Los Alamos Jewish Center as a congregation heavily invested in
youth programming. The Los Alamos Jewish Center had a youth group, junior
congregation and Sunday School. Shinedling, who taught in the synagogue’s religious
school from 1956-1957, proudly noted in his history of Los Alamos’ Jewish community
that all the families that were members of the Los Alamos Jewish Center sent their
children to Sunday School during the year he taught in Los Alamos.

New suburbs tended to be remote from the hallmarks of ethnic Jewish
neighborhoods. Jewish newspapers, delicatessens and butchers were rare in the new
American suburban frontier.\textsuperscript{56} None of these features of Jewish life were present in Los
Alamos.

Los Alamos differed from other suburban Jewish communities in its patterns of
social engagement. Sociologists used the term “five o’clock” shadow to describe the
phenomenon of suburban Jews and Gentiles not mixing socially outside of work.\textsuperscript{57} The

\textsuperscript{54} Bert Heil, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 24, 2017.
\textsuperscript{55} Edward S. Shapiro, \textit{A Time For Healing: American Jewry Since World War II}, 150.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{57} Jonathan D. Sarna. \textit{American Judaism: A History}, 283.
“five o’clock” shadow did not apply in Los Alamos. “The social life in Los Alamos was based on who you worked with. Those were your friends,” recalled Bert Heil. “Religion just didn’t play a part in the laboratory.”

The social mixing between Jews and non-Jews in Los Alamos distinguished it from other suburban Jewish communities. Shapiro observed that in the 1950s and 1960s, suburban Jews’ relationship with their non-Jewish neighbors “tended to be functional and casual, in contrast to the close and warm relationship among Jews.” Sociologist Benjamin B. Ringer titled his 1967 book about relations between Jews and non-Jews in Lakeville, an upper-middle class suburb with a large Jewish population, *The Edge of Friendliness*. In Los Alamos, because of the dominant presence of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, no borders existed between Jewish and non-Jewish community members. Relationships between Jews and non-Jews regularly transcended functional and casual purposes and often developed into meaningful and long lasting bonds.

In addition to the lack of a “five o’clock” shadow, Los Alamos’ Jewish community never fretted about its social standing amongst non-Jewish peers. Historian Lee Shai Weissbach remarked that in the early 20th century, in communities like Los Alamos where the Jewish population was in the hundreds, Jews encountered anti-Semitic

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58 Bert Heil, Interview with Gabriel Weinstein, May 24, 2017.
sentiments and feelings of inherent difference from other residents.  

The phenomenon Weissbach described never existed in Los Alamos. Non-Jews in Los Alamos always respected the town’s Jewish scientists, dating back to the Manhattan Project era.

In his classic study of suburban Jewry in Park Forest, Illinois, sociologist Herbert Gans noted that women were the primary drivers of informal Jewish communal life. Women were responsible for establishing social circles and dictating the content of social interactions. In Los Alamos, like Park Forest, women were instrumental in organizing and maintaining Jewish religious and cultural celebrations. The Los Alamos Hadassah chapter was well-known in the community for its bake sales, rummage sales, bridge parties and sponsoring a film series of old movies rented from the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. From 1949 through 1955, the Hadassah chapter was the primary sponsor of Los Alamos’ community seders, which regularly drew over 100 participants.

“They were more into it than the men,” recalled Joe Bergstein, whose first wife was Hadassah’s treasurer from 1953-1954. Harris Mayer explained that women did “everything” in Los Alamos in the realm of religious life. The prominent role of women

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63 Abraham I. Shinedling, *History of the Los Alamos Jewish Center*, 44.
in Jewish communal affairs was a result of the community’s belief in gender equality and the lack of an extended family support system, according to Mayer.

By the late 1950s, the Jewish community of Los Alamos resembled a typical suburban Jewish community. Many of the men were at the beginning of their professional careers. There were few, if any, traditionally observant families. Jewish religious and cultural life revolved around the Los Alamos Jewish Center, which had a strong emphasis on programming and content aimed at children. Jewish women, many of whom were housewives, played essential roles in maintaining Jewish ties. Los Alamos’ patterns of Jewish religious practice and gender roles helped created a suburban Jewish enclave in the isolated mountains of Northern New Mexico.

“Non-Jewish Jews” in Los Alamos

In History of the Los Alamos Jewish Center, Shinedling listed 111 Jews who lived in Los Alamos between 1944-1946. The Manhattan Project’s famous Jewish names, such as the physicists J. Robert Oppenheimer, Richard Feynman, Edward Teller, Hans Bethe, John Von Neumann, Victor Weisskopf, Otto Frisch and the mathematician Stanislaw Ulam were not included on Shinedling’s list. It’s possible Shinedling did not include the names of prominent scientists because his sources did not know that figures like Oppenheimer, Teller and Ulam were Jewish. "Jewish names were everywhere, [yet] you never really knew who was Jewish," Jay Wechsler, a Manhattan Project veteran and a longtime leader of the postwar Los Alamos Jewish community, recalled during a

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65 Abraham I. Shinedling, History of the Los Alamos Jewish Center, 4.
conference panel in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{66} The Manhattan Project’s famous Jewish scientists probably did not discuss their Jewish roots very often. Most had little to no affiliation with the Jewish community before the Manhattan Project. Oppenheimer’s family belonged to Felix Adler’s Ethical Culture Society in New York City and his parents viewed their Jewish roots as an “obstacle”.\textsuperscript{67} Teller remarked in his memoir, that his family never discussed Judaism.\textsuperscript{68} Feynman declared in his memoir that “I didn’t believe anything about that stuff [Judaism] and was certainly not in any way religious.”\textsuperscript{69} The attitudes of Oppenheimer, Teller and Feynman toward Judaism were representative of Los Alamos’ contingent of “non-Jewish Jews.”

In his essay “The Non-Jewish Jew” historian Isaac Deutscher describes the “non-Jewish Jew” as a heretic that has left the Jewish community. According to Deutscher, “Non-Jewish Jews” such as Baruch Spinoza and Rosa Luxemburg found Jewish tradition and belief limiting and discovered meaning outside religion and ethnicity in fields such as science and politics.\textsuperscript{70} Up to World War II, Oppenheimer, Teller and Feynman all found


more meaning and gratification through their identification with physicists and scientists than in the Jewish community. Oppenheimer and Teller were born and brought up on the fault lines of different cultures and nations, just like Baruch Spinoza and Deutscher’s other model “non-Jewish Jews.” Oppenheimer’s education took him from Harvard to elite universities in Europe, before returning to the United States to resume his academic career. Teller was born in Budapest, educated in Germany and lived in England and Denmark before settling in the United States. These two giants of American physics were intimately familiar with the cultural borderlands inhabited by other non-Jewish Jews. Their status on the cultural fringes of American society allowed them to clearly observe what Deutscher called “the great movement and the great contradictoriness of nature and society.”

Oppenheimer, like Spinoza, Luxemburg and other “non-Jewish Jews”, experienced persecution and isolation because of his political beliefs. Historically, “non-Jewish Jews” have been condemned and ostracized during times of rising nationalism, religiosity and fanaticism. Oppenheimer lost his security clearance during the 1950s Red Scare. In late 1953, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) informed Oppenheimer of its intention to revoke his security clearance because of his association with communist politics and activists during the 1930s. Additionally, the AEC did not approve of

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Oppenheimer’s opposition to the construction of the hydrogen bomb after the war.\textsuperscript{73} Over the span of a decade, Oppenheimer went from being viewed as an indispensable government resource and ally, to having his political loyalty questioned. The same conditions that led to the downfalls of “non-Jewish Jews” like Spinoza and Luxemburg, rising tides of nationalism and fanaticism, led to Oppenheimer’s political decline.

The Holocaust had a dramatic impact on the way Los Alamos’ “non-Jewish” Jewish scientists evaluated their Jewish identities. Teller, was acutely aware of his role as a Jew and scientist working on the atomic bomb effort. “While dead and dying Jews were being shoved into the icy Danube near the ruined Chain Bridge, I was safe and comfortable in Los Alamos and thinking about how the plutonium bomb might be completed in the least time,” Teller told a California Jewish newspaper in 2002.\textsuperscript{74} While he felt connected to his Jewish background during the Holocaust, Teller would not begin his involvement with Jewish institutions for another two decades.

Teller’s involvement with Jewish causes increased in the decades after he left Los Alamos. He became interested in Jewish causes and institutions when he was able to combine his passions of diplomacy, science and nuclear advocacy. He established ties with Israel in 1964 when he met the Israeli physicist and politician Yuval Ne’eman in

\textsuperscript{73} Jon Hunner, \textit{Inventing Los Alamos}, 190.

\textsuperscript{74} Joe Eskenazi, “Edward Teller most proud of role as H-Bomb proponent”, \textit{Jewish Bulletin of Northern California}, August 2, 2002. 23A
California. Beginning in 1965, Teller made annual trips to Israel for Tel-Aviv University board meetings and consultations with Israeli government officials. In Israel, Teller found a society that warmly embraced the potential of science and technology. Additionally, Israeli policymakers valued nuclear weaponry, at a time when Teller faced criticism in the United States for his continued support of nuclear armament. In Israel, Teller was able to happily be a non-religious Jew, nuclear technology advocate and policymaker.

Of Los Alamos’ high profile non-practicing Jews, Stanislaw Ulam had the longest tenure in postwar Los Alamos. Ulam, a native of Lvov, Poland, and his wife raised their daughter in Los Alamos. They told her of the family’s Jewish background but did not affiliate with the Los Alamos Jewish Center. Though Ulam did not practice Jewish religion, he never attempted to transcend his Jewish background. In his memoir, Adventures of a Mathematician, Ulam regularly references other Jewish peers he met and befriended throughout his career. He proudly noted how Lewis Strauss, the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, “had the rather common— and to me pleasant— Jewish tendency to admire successful scientists.” He was happy to describe a childhood study partner as being “full of the urge to innovate which is so Jewish.”

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75 Yuval Ne’eman, “Edward Teller, the Hungarian, the American and Jew, too,” 162.
76 Ibid., 163
80 Ibid., 22
was related to a descendant of Prague’s famous Caro rabbinical dynasty.\textsuperscript{81} While Ulam was not part of Jewish religious life in Los Alamos, he was not a “non-Jewish Jew.” Unlike Feynman and Oppenheimer, he saw value in identifying with other Jews and Jewish culture. He derived joy in his identity as a Jew and felt no ambivalence or burden about his standing as a mathematician and ethnic Jew.

Los Alamos’ small Jewish community had two distinct subgroups. The first, and largest group, was mostly comprised of American-born Jews reared in urban, ethnic Jewish neighborhoods. The second group, the town’s “non-Jewish Jews,” counted the local Jewish scientific elite among its ranks. Los Alamos’ “non-Jewish Jews” found more intellectual and social fulfillment in the laws of fission and fusion than in the five books of Moses. Their presence in Los Alamos illustrates the ideological and cultural diversity of Los Alamos’ early Jewish community.

\textbf{Ethnic and Racial Tension in Post-War Los Alamos}

Jews had called New Mexico home for nearly a century before the start of the Manhattan Project in 1943. The absence of a flood of European immigration to New Mexico and the state’s slow process of industrialization and urbanization prevented the development of anti-Jewish feelings that had surfaced in major urban hubs during the interwar era.\textsuperscript{82} Though New Mexico had historically welcomed Jewish settlers, Jewish communal workers were concerned that Jewry might struggle in postwar Los Alamos.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 109
a January 1948 field report, an Anti-Defamation League worker from Denver noted that many residents had never met Jews before arriving in Los Alamos. “So far their reaction to the new contact has been favorable,” the worker noted. In a follow-up visit in November 1948, a different Anti-Defamation League representative wrote that some of the Jewish scientists were concerned about the possibility of anti-Semitism becoming an issue because of the increase in Southern laborers in Los Alamos. Additionally, Anglo workers had occasional struggles with Hispanic colleagues.

In August 1950, two years after the Anti-Defamation League workers first wrote about their concern over potential anti-Semitism, Jewish dentists Howard Belgorod, Harold Barrie and Nathan Peretzman were fired from the Los Alamos Medical Center’s dental clinic after failing New Mexico’s state dental licensing exam. Their three non-Jewish colleagues at the dental clinic passed. In an article in *The Santa Fe New Mexican* Barrie criticized his firing as “hasty and ill advised.” But he emphasized to the newspaper that anti-Semitism was not a factor in his dismissal. “I cannot accuse the state dental examiners of discrimination,” he said. “After all the board is the only agency which has the legal authority to reject or accept applicants for practice.” Peretzman instead blamed the incident on workplace politics and accused the executive director of the medical clinic of using the three dentists as a way to “discredit the dental clinic.”

The community rallied to the support of the three dentists. Citizens wrote letters to *The Santa Fe New Mexican* that praised the work of the dentists and casted suspicion on the state dental licensing board. A *New Mexican* reader wrote about the quality care he

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83 Bernard Somers Message to Louis Sidman, January 26, 1948  
84 Joseph E. Kauffman, Message to Louis E. Sidman, November 15, 1948  
86 Ibid.
and his children received from Belgorod and Barrie and the favorable reports he heard in
the community about Peretzman. “The discrimination issue certainly needs airing,” the
reader wrote. 87 Another New Mexican reader compared the tribulations of Belgorod,
Barrie and Peretzman to a situation in Stalinist Russia. 88 The Los Alamos News wrote
that the episode had “left a bitter taste in the mouths of New Mexicans generally.” The
Los Alamos News noted that New Mexico was “pioneered by people of distinguished
Jewish background and Jews have been welcomed in all circles as free American citizens
with a right to belong to any church of their choice.” 89 Los Alamosans editorial support
of the embattled Jewish dentists was matched by civic action. The Los Alamos town
council met with the hospital board, medical board, American Legion and several church
groups to come up with ways to prevent similar episodes from re-occurring. 90 A
reverend chaired a concerned citizens group tasked with representing the community’s ire
about the treatment of Belgorod, Barrie and Peretzman. 91 The local uproar from non-Jews
in Los Alamos over the firings of Belgorod, Peretzman and Barrie pressured the State
Dental Board into withdrawing the dentists’ terminations. 92 Though his employment was
restored, Barrie resigned from the Los Alamos Medical Center two months later to enter

87 Preston C. Hammer, “Mr. Citizen-What He Thinks: Los Alamos Resident Approves of
Three Exiled Dentists,” The Santa Fe New Mexican. August 28, 1950. 4.
88 A Doctor of Medicine, “This MD Thinks Oppression Here As Bad As Anything Joe S.
September 1, 1950. 1.
90 Dale Lane, “Council Maps Session On Dentist Dispute,” The Santa Fe New Mexican.
August 28, 1950. 1.
91 Dale Lane, “3 Uncertain Of Taking Later Tests,” The Santa Fe New Mexican. August
29, 1950, 1.
October 19, 1950.
the army’s “doctor’s draft.”93 The community’s reaction to the troubles of Belgorod, Barrie and Peretzman aligned with New Mexico’s historical embrace of Jews. New Mexicans had voted Jews into political office as mayors, governors and state representatives, decades before the Manhattan Project.94

The conflict over the medical center’s handling of Barrie, Peretzman and Belgorod was the start of a turbulent four months in Los Alamos. The community returned to the front pages of The Santa Fe New Mexican on December 1, 1950 when William Stone, an African-American security guard for the Atomic Energy commission, accused the barbers at the city’s only full-time barber shop of refusing to cut his hair because of his race.95

The Santa Fe New Mexican’s editorial board compared the behavior of the Los Alamos barbers to Nazis and slave holders.96 In letters to the editor, an anonymous Los Alamos resident claimed that the racism in Los Alamos had long been a problem and planned on boycotting the barbershop until Stone was given a haircut.97 A letter signed by Los Alamos residents wrote that the barber shop incident was an example of the “that corruption of the mind, that virulent disease of the South-racial prejudice- [which] has

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been spreading over New Mexico like a blanket of misery and cruelty.” Stone’s quest to get a haircut in Los Alamos’ barbershop ended on December 14, when barbershop manager Darrell MacCleskey cut Stone’s hair. The manager of the barbershop gave Stone a haircut after two Hispanic barbers from the nearby town of Española said MacCleskey had not responded to their applications calling for barbers willing to cut the hair of African-Americans.

Stone received less public support from community members than the three Jewish dentists. A group of concerned citizens did not publicly and vocally help Stone the same way community groups supported Belgorod, Peretzman and Barrie. There is no evidence that the Jewish community, who had received overwhelming public support in the midst of possible anti-Semitic threat only months before, provided any public support to Stone.

In an article in *Western States Jewish History* about his years in Los Alamos, Jewish scientist Paul Sperling wrote that Stone, whom he does not mention by name, came to the Jewish community looking for help in resolving his problem with the barbers. According to Sperling, Stone along with members of the Jewish community and Harold T. Agnew, who would later lead the laboratory from 1970-1979, confronted MacCleskey. When the group’s meeting with the AEC barbershop manager did not yield a solution, Sperling wrote that the group instructed a *New Mexican* reporter to go to Española, the nearest town to Los Alamos, and ask barbers there if they would cut

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Stone’s hair. On December 14, 1950 an article appeared in *The New Mexican* where barbers from Española said they had no problem cutting Stone’s hair.\(^{100}\)

The overlap between Sperling’s memoir and *The New Mexican* article give credibility to Sperling’s recounting. Yet the overlap also raises questions. Why is there no evidence in newspapers of the Los Alamos Jewish community supporting Stone? Why did Sperling wait decades to write about the Jewish community’s involvement in helping Stone fight racial inequality? The Jewish community’s involvement in major social issues such as Stone’s was likely a one-time occurrence. Longtime Jewish residents of Los Alamos had faint memories of the episode and few ever recall the community being seriously engaged with social activism work during the 1950s. While the Jewish community of Los Alamos enjoyed the strong public support of its non-Jewish peers during a time of crisis, the Jewish community did not show the same public enthusiasm to battle injustice when Stone needed assistance. Still recovering from the shock of the dentist episode, the Jewish community likely decided it could not spend political capital on the public defense of another persecuted minority group.

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\(^{100}\) Dale Lane, “They’ll Cut His Hair-But: Barbers Say Bids Ignored.” *The Santa Fe New Mexican*. December 14, 1950. 1.
Beyond ‘The Hill’

The establishment of Los Alamos as a permanent scientific research site set the stage for the creation of new federally funded scientific research centers throughout the country.101 In areas where new scientific research sites were established new synagogues usually followed. These congregations, like their peers in Los Alamos, focused on creating synagogues that provided Jewish education and religious services.

A few of the new congregations sprouted in communities directly affiliated with the Manhattan Project. The Jewish community of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the Manhattan Project’s administrative and military home, completed construction of the Beth El Center in 1952 and joined the Conservative movement in 1959.102 In 1950, workers affiliated with the Hanford Site in Washington state, the main center of plutonium production during World War II and the Manhattan Project, formed the Richland Jewish Congregation. The Richland Jewish Congregation immediately offered congregants Sunday School lessons and B’nai Mitzvah tutoring.103

In 1956 nine families, many associated with the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, formed the Livermore Valley Jewish Community Center, known today as Congregation Beth Emek.104 Four years earlier, Edward Teller and E.O. Lawrence, both Manhattan Project veterans, established the laboratory as a research center dedicated to

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nuclear weapons research and development. The openings of new federally funded laboratories and scientific research centers in Aiken, South Carolina and Huntsville, Alabama brought new Jewish families to what had been stagnant Jewish communities.

The Jewish congregations near the new federal scientific research sites were mostly situated in what were then small towns. Cleveland’s Beth Israel-The West Temple, established in 1954, developed on the city’s west side in the shadow of one of the nation’s largest and influential Jewish communities. During the 1950s, Cleveland’s Jews had largely left the city’s urban neighborhoods and settled in the eastern suburbs. The city of Cleveland Heights emerged as the Jewish community’s suburban hub of Jewish cultural and spiritual life. Many members of Beth Israel-The West Temple worked at the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics’ (NACA) Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory, housed on the city’s west side and a considerable drive from Cleveland Heights and other suburban Jewish enclaves on the east side. Abe Silverstein, the laboratory’s associate director, recruited Lewis scientists to establish the new congregation.

Comparing the histories of the Jewish communities of the Los Alamos Jewish Center and Beth Israel-The West Temple during the 1950s illuminates the role of geography in the development of Jewish communities. In 1954, the year Beth Israel-The West Temple was established, there were an estimated 80,000 Jews living in the greater

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Cleveland area. An estimated 1,245 Jews lived in the entire state of New Mexico in 1954, the year Los Alamos Jewish Center was organized.\textsuperscript{108} Beth Israel-The West Temple, had access to a Jewish population that was larger than the combined Jewish populations of New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado and Utah, the Jewish communities that surrounded Los Alamos’ Jews.\textsuperscript{109} Beth Israel-The West Temple’s proximity to major Jewish population hubs provided it access to educational and cultural resources not available to its peer synagogues in more remote locations.

Beth Israel-The West Temple took advantage of its geographic proximity to key centers of American Jewish life. The congregation affiliated with the Reform movement and its early rabbis were students from the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. The presence of HUC-JIR rabbis invigorated the young congregation’s membership. An early student rabbi, Daniel Litt, became the synagogue’s first full-time rabbi in 1961.\textsuperscript{110}

Beth Israel-The West Temple also benefitted from being close to other congregations and rabbis. Rabbi Myron Silverman, of Suburban Temple in the eastern suburb of Beachwood, provided counsel to the congregation in its early years.\textsuperscript{111} Perhaps influenced by Silverman, who selectively officiated at interfaith marriages, Beth Israel-

\textsuperscript{110} Beth Israel-The West Temple,Beth Israel-The West Temple: Ten Eventful Years, 3, Box 2, Folder 44, Beth Israel - The West Temple Records 1923-1981, Western Reserve Historical Society.
\textsuperscript{111} Beth Israel-The West Temple, Beth Israel-The West Temple: Ten Eventful Years, 2, Box 2, Folder 44, Beth Israel - The West Temple Records 1923-1981, Western Reserve Historical Society.
The West Temple, made explicit its embrace of non-Jewish partners and non-Jews in its constitution.\textsuperscript{112} The synagogue’s constitution declared that membership was open to “any person professing to be Jewish by birth or belief.”\textsuperscript{113}

While the Los Alamos Jewish Center did not affiliate with any denomination, Beth Israel-The West Temple deliberately chose to align itself with the Reform movement and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The synagogue’s founders envisioned a congregation rooted in a “rational approach to Judaism.” Beth Israel-The West Temple’s leadership believed the Reform movement was best suited to American Jews of the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. The founders reasoned that:

“ In the Reform movement, Judaism is dynamic and not static; changes in the forms of Jewish practice or in the interpretation of the concepts of Judaism maintain its vitality and influence. With such a background, the Congregation can give a meaningful interpretation to Jewish traditional practices and build a feeling of belonging to the community.”\textsuperscript{114}

The decision to affiliate with the Reform movement also allowed for easy access to student rabbis, a luxury that the Los Alamos Jewish Center did not have. Beth Israel-The West Temple had six student rabbis from 1954-1961. Shinedling was the only steady rabbinic presence in Los Alamos during its early years in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

\textsuperscript{113} Beth Israel-The West Temple: Constitution and By-Laws, March 18, 1955, 1, Box 1, Folder 2, Beth Israel - The West Temple Records 1923-1981, Western Reserve Historical Society.
\textsuperscript{114} West Temple Bulletin, September 1954, 1, Box 1, Folder 34, Beth Israel - The West Temple Records 1923-1981, Western Reserve Historical Society.
Like the Los Alamos Jewish Center, Beth Israel-The West Temple served a primarily suburban constituency. While Los Alamos was constructed as a suburb in a remote rural setting, Beth Israel-The West Temple’s congregants lived in traditional suburban communities. Members lived in Cleveland’s western and southwestern suburbs such as Middleburg Heights, Parma, Parma Heights and Fairview Park. The congregation mission’s outlined in its constitution was typical of a suburban, child-centered synagogue like the Los Alamos Jewish Center. Beth Israel-The West Temple proclaimed in its constitution that the new congregation was established so “we and our children may enjoy the blessings of the Jewish way of life in a community of our brethren.”  

In the inaugural issue of the synagogue’s West Temple Bulletin, the synagogue leadership explained that Beth Israel-The West Temple was to be a vehicle to introduce children to Jewish tradition and bring back Jewish adults that had drifted away from Jewish education and practice.  

What distinguishes Beth Israel-The West Temple from the Los Alamos Jewish Center and other congregations affiliated with scientific research sites, is its engagement with community action and social justice projects. Beth Israel-The West Temple envisioned the synagogue as an organization that would spur congregants to participate in communal affairs. For years, Beth Israel-The West Temple was involved with the local

Council on Human Relations and held interfaith holiday celebrations with other non-Jewish congregations. In the 1960s and 1970s, congregants produced and directed a radio program about Jewish life on a local radio station. A Fair Housing committee used the synagogue’s facilities for meetings. But the congregation’s most notable community affairs achievement was its pioneering role in the Soviet Jewry movement. The Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism began at Beth Israel-The West Temple and spurred the birth of the movement to free Soviet Jewry across the United States. The contributions Beth Israel-The West Temple members made to the Soviet Jewry movement have been memorialized in scholarly works such as Gal Beckerman’s *When They Come For Us We’ll Be Gone* and on numerous web pages dedicated to Jewish history.

The social climates of northern New Mexico and greater Cleveland help explain the differences in social activism between the Los Alamos Jewish Center and Beth Israel-The West Temple. Los Alamos’ location in the mountains of rural, northern New Mexico isolated the community from mainstream American society. The congregants at the Los Alamos Jewish Center did not experience the tense racial climate, or witness up close the battles over fair housing and school integration that simmered in urban areas like Cleveland, in the late 1950s and the 1960s. While mid-century Los Alamos did have serious communal problems, such as African-American security guard William Stone’s struggle to get his hair cut at a local barbershop, they never received the same exposure or communal pressure as social issues prevalent in urban areas like Cleveland.

In Los Alamos, major scientific figures like J. Robert Oppenheimer, Richard Feynman and Edward Teller never took an interest in Jewish communal life or the Los Alamos Jewish Center. At Beth Israel-The West Temple, prominent staff members from the Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory cast a large influence over the congregation. Abe Silverstein was the most prominent figure from the laboratory involved with the synagogue. Silverstein served as the congregation’s first president and helped recruit the congregation’s early families. He left Lewis and the congregation in 1958 when he was transferred to Washington, D.C. and was appointed director of NASA’s Office of Space Flight Programs. He returned to Cleveland as the director of Lewis in 1961 and resumed his involvement with the congregation.120

Silverstein’s involvement with Beth Israel-The West Temple was one of several Jewish causes he was associated with during his career. He received an honorary degree from Yeshiva University in 1960, a listing in the 1963 edition of Who’s Who of World Jewry and a grove of trees was planted in his honor in Israel in 1970 for his service to greater Cleveland.121 Silverstein, unlike the prominent Jewish scientists of early Los Alamos, saw no cognitive dissonance between being a scientist and being a Jew. “The scientist and Talmud student work the same way. Each tiny step is examined inside and out, all sides argued and discussed, and a conclusion is drawn,” he told a reporter from

the *Cleveland Jewish News* in 1970.\(^{122}\) Silverstein’s approach toward Judaism and Jewish life was markedly different than the major Jewish scientists of early Los Alamos.

In the mid-20\(^{th}\) century Los Alamos and Cleveland were two of several sites across the country that saw the rise of new Jewish communities driven by a new generation of American Jewish scientists. The establishment of nuclear research and space exploration centers throughout the country sent American Jews into new stretches of the American frontier. These new Jewish migrants, unlike the pioneer Jewish settlers of the 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century, did not arrive in their new locales in search of commercial opportunities. The itinerant American Jews of the mid-20\(^{th}\) century ventured out to their new homes with advanced degrees in science and mathematics instead of rucksacks stuffed with home goods. In Los Alamos, the Jewish scientists and their families created an entirely new Jewish community. While in Cleveland, scientific workers rejuvenated what had been a small Jewish outpost.

Analyzing these two communities together, highlights the importance of geography in the development of Jewish communal life. The Jewish community of Los Alamos and the Los Alamos Jewish center developed in a small town physically and culturally isolated from America’s major urban centers and large strongholds of postwar American Jewish life. The scientists that affiliated with Beth Israel-The West Temple grew their community a short drive away from the large Jewish community of Cleveland’s eastern suburbs. They benefited from close proximity to HUC-JIR in Cincinnati. The level of involvement of major scientific figures associated with the respective local scientific research facility also shaped the congregations in Los Alamos.

and Cleveland. Together, these two congregations provide a snapshot of the different ways American Jewish scientists balanced their identities as scientists and Jews following World War II.

**Conclusion**

In 1957 the Atomic Energy Commission took down the security gates that surrounded Los Alamos for the previous 14 years. Los Alamos, which had been separated from the rest of the world, was now fully integrated into New Mexico and the United States. For the town’s Jewish community the process of integration began long before the Atomic Energy Commission decided to remove Los Alamos’ protective buffer. The security gates did not prevent Los Alamos’ Jewish community from resembling Jewish communities in the heart of suburban America.

Los Alamos’ Jews experienced full integration into the social and communal life of Los Alamos. When the community sensed injustice against the Jewish community, Los Alamosans responded with swift and forceful actions protesting the perceived mistreatment. Los Alamos’ Jews had no problems blending into America’s nuclear capital.

In Los Alamos, a number of Jews, particularly the community’s famous Jewish scientists, chose to not affiliate with the burgeoning Jewish community. These “non-Jewish Jews” identified with Jewish communal causes after leaving Los Alamos. When Los Alamos’ “non-Jewish Jews” later associated with Jewish life and culture, it was in a context that allowed them to fuse their identities as scientists and Jews with little cognitive conflict.
The Jewish community of Los Alamos arose during an era when American Jewish scientists began establishing new synagogues and communal organizations across the country. From the mountains of New Mexico to the shores of Lake Erie in northeast Ohio, American Jewish scientists came together for religious worship and Jewish communal functions. The trajectories of these new Jewish communities were heavily dependent on the surrounding geography and the personalities of the scientists that emerged as Jewish communal leaders.

The case of Los Alamos suggests that mid-20th century suburban Jewish life was not restricted to region or the size of a neighboring metropolis. In some ways, Los Alamos was the typical American Jewish suburban community. The burgeoning community centered itself around the synagogue and its commitment to education and tradition. However, the young scientists and their families did not recreate mirror images of suburban Jewish communities in suburban Jewish enclaves such as Brookline, Massachusetts or Cleveland Heights, Ohio. The Jewish pioneers in nuclear America challenged the traditional social boundaries of suburban Jewry while still maintaining core institutions such as the synagogue and communal groups. As the Jewish scientists covertly advanced America’s nuclear defense infrastructure, a new era in American Jewish History simultaneously silently erupted. In the mystic mountains of Northern New Mexico, Los Alamos became a suburb unlike any other.
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