An Interview with Rabbi Myron Geller
by Ken Lawson

Rabbi Myron Geller and his wife, Eileen. Photo Courtesy of Susan Federspiel
FOREWORD

Gloucester is rightly known as an immigrant city. Since the mid-1800s, waves of immigrants from Nova Scotia, Portugal, Scandinavian countries, Italy/Sicily, and other places have made Gloucester their home. Less numerous immigrants were Jewish people from various countries. The first Jews who settled north of Boston were, like other Gloucester immigrants, of European descent, simply seeking a better life. After the Civil War ended in 1865, Jewish men, some with families, started settling in Gloucester and surrounding communities north of Boston. Temple Ahavat Achim in Gloucester traces its origins to a small group that started meeting in the 1880s and was incorporated in 1904. Translated into English, the temple’s name means “Brotherly Love.” After World War II, the Gloucester Jewish presence was more noticeable, as Jews successfully ran many businesses downtown along Main Street. In Gloucester, Jewish people met in private homes for decades. Around 1916, they purchased a house on Prospect Street, converted it into a synagogue, and sold it when they bought a former church on Middle Street in 1950. The longest serving rabbi in Gloucester was Myron S. Geller, who served at Temple Ahavat Achim from 1965 through 2006.
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Please tell us a little about where you were born and raised.

I was born in Brooklyn, NY, in 1937, the youngest of three sons. We were raised in an East European Jewish immigrant community where Yiddish was the spoken language. I attended a day school that provided both Jewish religious and city-mandated secular education from 9 AM to 6 PM, Sunday to Thursday, and 9 AM to 1 PM on Friday. My friends were all classmates and neighborhood kids with the same roots and education.

We were an observant Orthodox family attending synagogue services every morning. We observed the Sabbath in the synagogue and with extended formal meals around a large dining table on Friday evening and Saturday lunch at home.
How did you come to study for the rabbinical ministry?

Both my older brothers had continued their religious education after high school while attending city colleges at night, and I followed their example. I received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Brooklyn College and was ordained as a rabbi in 1959.

What was your life like before you came to Gloucester?

After acquiring my college degree, and ordination in 1959, I was appointed a 1st Lieutenant Chaplain in the US Army. I reported for active duty in January 1960 and served at Fort Bliss, Texas, before being assigned at Poitiers, France, where I was the only Jewish chaplain responsible for coverage of fourteen Communication Zone installations in the western half of France. My Brooklyn girlfriend Eileen and I were married in December 1960, and she accompanied me to France, where two of our children were born. We returned to the US in June 1964 to Fort Devens, MA, and I was discharged from active duty in September 1965.
How did you come to serve in Gloucester?

I left the Army to return to graduate school at Brandeis University and found a part-time rabbinical position in Gloucester to supplement various grants. I learned of the opening when a friend sent an ad from Boston’s Jewish newspaper. I applied, met with a committee on a Sunday morning, and was offered the position immediately.

What are three highlights from your decades of life and service in Gloucester?

First, the decision to move here in 1965 and then becoming familiar with the Jewish and general communities. Second, being involved in the establishment of the Cape Ann Interfaith Commission. Before 1966, the Protestant churches and the synagogue were meeting as a local chapter of the Protestant Council of Churches. I didn’t understand why the synagogue was a participant in a Protestant church group and why no Roman Catholics were involved in our local meetings. I issued a call to create a new local Interfaith Commission. Over the strong public opposition of one minister but with the support of his church members and the leadership of my close friend, Bill Stayton, the minister at the First Baptist Church, the Interfaith Commission was created. It was my mission, our mission, to create a genuinely unified voice that represented the religious community in the city. Third, the purchase of our East Gloucester home for the last 53 years shortly before the birth of our third child.

What are three lowlights?

First, the infrequent but disturbing show of anti-Semitism: graffiti on the temple, letters placed on windshields in shopping areas, and even letters printed in the Gloucester Daily Times showing hostility to Israel and Jews in America. Second, the year the police chief had to sit in an unmarked car by the temple on Middle Street during the High Holy Days after a threat against the Jewish community. That same year on Yom Kippur, a physician in the community told me he would sit in the last row next to the door in the rear of the sanctuary and carry a licensed loaded gun just in case. Third, the terrible fire in December 2007 that destroyed our wonderful, beautiful temple.
The temple building had a long history in Gloucester; it was the former third home of the First Parish Church, built in 1828 and purchased by the growing post-WWII Jewish community in 1950.

The sanctuary at Temple Ahavat Achim in 2006 before it was destroyed by fire, Middle Street, Gloucester.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT KRAMER
Tell us something about your work as a reserve army chaplain.

After discharge from active duty in the Army, I stayed in the reserves for many years, retiring on my 60th birthday as the senior Army Reserve chaplain in the six New England states with the rank of colonel. I liked being a citizen-soldier-chaplain. This was a part-time military ministry. Due to my chaplaincy status, I was regularly asked to offer inspirational words at civic gatherings on holidays. Also, I had invitations to speak at various churches and civic groups, such as the Rotary, Masons, etc. My own congregation was both proud and distressed when I was invited to Frankfort, Germany to be the scholar-in-residence at a convocation of Jewish military personnel in Europe. They were proud that their rabbi was called, upset that their rabbi would be away for a week - a strange reaction.

During the ferocious Blizzard of ‘78, how did you and your congregation respond?

I don’t really know; nobody showed up at the synagogue for two weeks, including me. Most important, however, was the death of an old-time temple member wintering in Florida. She was to be buried in Gloucester. There were many delays getting her remains home, and the family was grieving. Then there were delays and setbacks in opening the local Mount Jacob Cemetery. Mounds of snow on unpaved and unplowed Fernald Street made it hard to clear the cemetery road and dig the grave. Jewish law requires prompt burial, but, in this case, it was delayed by two whole weeks.

The September 11, 2001, attack on America – what are your recollections?

Fear and horror and an attempt by me to offer words of comfort individually and publicly at services. A passenger on one of the planes flying from Boston was the brother-in-law to a member of our congregation and son-in-law to a long-time Rockport resident I knew well. The family and community felt all the angst and sorrow appropriate to his horrible death and the delay in receiving news about the retrieval of his remains.

What other world events come to mind that affected the Jewish community?

Two wars involving Israel in 1967 and 1973 were deeply emotional. The first elicited dreadful
fear of Israel’s anticipated defeat but was transformed into a spectacular victory. The liberation of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem that had been destroyed and closed to Jews since 1948, when it became available for visits to Judaism’s holiest site at the Western Wall. Our congregation organized a community trip to Israel the following year for about 25 of us who spent two weeks touring the Jewish State, flying over the Sinai desert (then in Israel’s hands) to view Mount Sinai and having the opportunity to pray at the Western Wall.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 was a shock but also ended in a better situation, an eventual peace between Israel and Egypt and the return of Sinai to Egyptian control. Judaism is a world religion, and the status of Israel was on everyone’s mind.

**What are some significant memories of Gloucester?**

Jewish people have a lot of holidays, and family is important. Holiday celebrations required planning and plenty of support from wonderful volunteers. Preparations included ensuring that the sacred Torah scrolls were rolled to the right place for public reading, that those to be called to the reading were identified and notified in advance, and that the appropriate prayer books were in place were all time-consuming and demanding tasks. Fortunately, a cadre of devoted folks got together weeks before each high holiday to accomplish everything in an efficient and timely way. For me, writing meaningful sermons was my primary responsibility. To challenge yet offer hope - all at once - was not an easy task. It took much thought, writing, and rewriting.

Life cycle events such as baby naming, bar/bat mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals were a regular aspect of my service. Of course, the joyous ones were the best, with much celebration and extended family coming from near and far. Funerals were difficult.

I officiated at the funerals of a whole generation of Jewish residents of Cape Ann during my 41 years as the community rabbi and several since. The most troubling was that of a young man who committed suicide, although there were rumors that his death was the result of a gangland slaying. Sadly, I transferred all the funeral records of my tenure to the temple when I retired, now gone in the 2007 fire. But when I am at the Mount Jacob Cemetery, I walk past dozens of gravestones eliciting memories of people I knew well, who were my friends and older contemporaries.
Tell me about the temple’s expansion under your leadership.

Well, first let me tell you a bit about the church building that eventually became our temple. In 1828, when its new building on the same Middle Street site where its previous home had stood for 100 years was dedicated, the First Parish Congregational Church went out of business. Its membership chose to affiliate with the Unitarian movement then sweeping New England. Five pious souls led a number of members across the street to create Trinity Congregational Church. In 1950, when the Unitarian Church merged with the Universalist Church further up the street, their building became available for purchase by Temple Ahavat Achim.

The Middle Street location was the third or fourth home of Cape Ann’s Jewish community since the arrival of the first Jewish immigrants to the city around the 1880s. Several private homes were gathering places for services and socializing before the purchase around World War I of a private residence on Prospect Street to be reconfigured and used exclusively as a synagogue. Temple Ahavat Achim was able to relocate to a more appropriate, historic and prestigious facility in 1950. Renovations transformed the sanctuary into a synagogue, and a classroom and social hall were carved out of the basement. As the Jewish congregation grew during my tenure, substantial additional renovations were made. We enlarged and enhanced the social hall, and added a full-service commercial kitchen, two more classrooms, bathroom facilities, and a sound system. A most beautiful chapel was built, with an ark cover lovingly designed, created, and painted on silk by members of the community.

Sadly, the fire of 2007 destroyed almost everything. We rebuilt a modern building at the same location.

Temple Ahavat Achim, 2022.
The congregation grew substantially over the decades and the enlarged facility was put to good use. As the number of children and staff increased at our Temple’s Sylvia Cohen Religious School, the question of funding became greater. After Eileen’s retirement from presiding over the school, and my retirement a few years later as rabbi, the congregation created the Rabbi Myron and Eileen Geller Endowment Fund. Its purpose was to underwrite the cost of providing a Jewish religious education for all the children in our community and to ensure the continuity of our congregation.

What are your thoughts on Gloucester now that you are Rabbi Emeritus?

I am fortunate to have spent all these years as the Cape Ann rabbi at Temple Ahavat Achim. The congregation has honored me by appointing me to be its Rabbi Emeritus and I’ve been treated with the greatest respect by the congregation and by my rabbinic successors. I’ve been invited sometimes to participate in leading services during the Rabbi’s absence. Eileen and I have maintained our ties with the congregation and our social ties with some of the old timers and our friends for which we are very grateful. We’ve been blessed to live all these many decades in this beautiful place and with this lovely community, we raised our three children here and they were married here. We plan to remain in our East Gloucester home as long as we are able. Our children and grandchildren visit us here and would not forgive us if we sold the place; they talk about eventual retirement in Gloucester too. We can happily imagine a future when a thriving Temple Ahavat Achim counts future generations of our family among its members and supporters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS FROM RABBI MYRON GELLER

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