New Milford ~ The Jewish Experience

This exhibit explores the growth, contributions and evolution of Jewish immigrants to New Milford. From the late 19th century, Jews evolved from old world traditions assimilating into American life.

Members of the Golden Family prior to emigration to the US in 1906.

"Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life."
– PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

New Milford - The Jewish Experience

EARLY JEWISH FAMILIES IN NEW MILFORD

1869 Alex Levy, the earliest known Jew, settles in New Milford having traveled from London to the U.S. in 1851

1870 Max Neisner family from Poland, one of the two earliest known Jewish families, settles in New Milford

1891 Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a Belgian Jewish financier, founds The Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society (JAIAS) to help emigrating Jews purchase and operate farms, many of which were in CT, NJ and NY. There are none known in New Milford.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

1900 Joseph Golden, age 21, flees Eastern Europe in 1898, settles in New Milford, and opens a dry goods store with his brother Ezra on Railroad Street eventually moving to Bank Street. The store, originally known as Golden Brothers, later becomes Joseph Golden and Sons until 1970.

THE FIRST JEWISH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

1910 Beginnings of the Jewish community in New Milford centers around Joseph Golden's Dry Goods Store where the orthodox Congregation Beth Aaron is formed

1913 Herman Gartner becomes the first Bar Mitzvah in New Milford

1920 Some of the private lake communities are reputed to have had restrictive covenants for Jews and Blacks throughout the decades

1944 Congregation Beth Aaron disbands

New Milford Jews attend religious education and worship at the United Jewish Center in Danbury through 1958

1955 Abe Ribicoff, the first Jewish Governor of CT and later U.S. Senator, works with First Selectman E. Paul Martin to bring a Kimberly Clark plant to New Milford

JEWISH LIFE: POST 1959

1958 The Jewish Community holds a meeting at Odd Fellows Hall and the Temple Sholom vision is created. A month later the First Friday night services are held in the chapel of the First Congregational Church on the New Milford Green.

1959 **A year of firsts for Temple Sholom:**

Inaugural annual meeting is held at the Firehouse on Church Street

Eleven student rabbis serve until the first full time rabbi is hired

First full fiscal year begins with 48 original families

Anne Weiner and Marjorie Golden start the Temple Sholom Sisterhood

Sunday School opens with mothers volunteering as teachers, and classes being held in the Parish House behind the church

Judith Deborah Lieff is the first baby naming at Temple Sholom. Her parents, Marilyn and Erwin Lieff, were founding members of Temple Sholom.

1960 Rabbi Alan Secher chants the Shema prayer (The affirmation of Judaism) at a Memorial Day ceremony on the steps of the New Milford Library

1964 Land is purchased on Route 7 for the building of Temple Sholom

1970 Construction of Temple Sholom begins

Nathan Chesler, president of Temple Sholom, becomes the first Jewish principal of New Milford High School

1971 Procession carries the Torah from the First Congressional Church on the Town Green to the new home of Temple Sholom

1978 The last known Jewish farmer in New Milford, Ben Kramer, passes away

1979 Norman Koch becomes the first long-term Rabbi, serving for 35 years. Among his many achievements is assisting refugees from Vietnam to become acclimated to the community.

1991 Liba Furhman becomes the first Jewish Mayor of New Milford, serving two terms

1992 Walter Gotlieb, who broke barriers selling real estate to Jewish families around Candlewood Lake, passes away

1993 "Explorations", Temple Sholom's new innovative religious-education program is honored in 2000 by the Jewish Education Service of America

1994 The Greater Washington Coalition for Jewish Life is established to provide an alternative Jewish connection for area residents

1996 Marjorie Louis Golden, a major influencer in the Jewish community and president of the Visiting Nurses Association, passes away

1998 Merrill Golden donates the library as part of Temple Sholom's new addition

2000 Joe Lieberman as Jewish Senator from CT, becomes the first Jewish nominee for Vice President of the U.S.

2015 Temple Sholom's Rabbi Ari Rosenberg builds membership and connects with the wider community helping settle Afghanistan refugees

2017 A swastika is painted on recently opened Black-owned Thompson's restaurant. Rabbi Rosenberg, along with other clergy leaders, rallies the community in awareness of the issues bringing much support to the family and restaurant.

2019 Harry Cohen, local attorney, activist, volunteer and founder of many civic organizations passes away

Over 35 women attend the first Women's Seder at Temple Sholom run by Cantor Laura Breznick, the first female spiritual leader of Temple Sholom

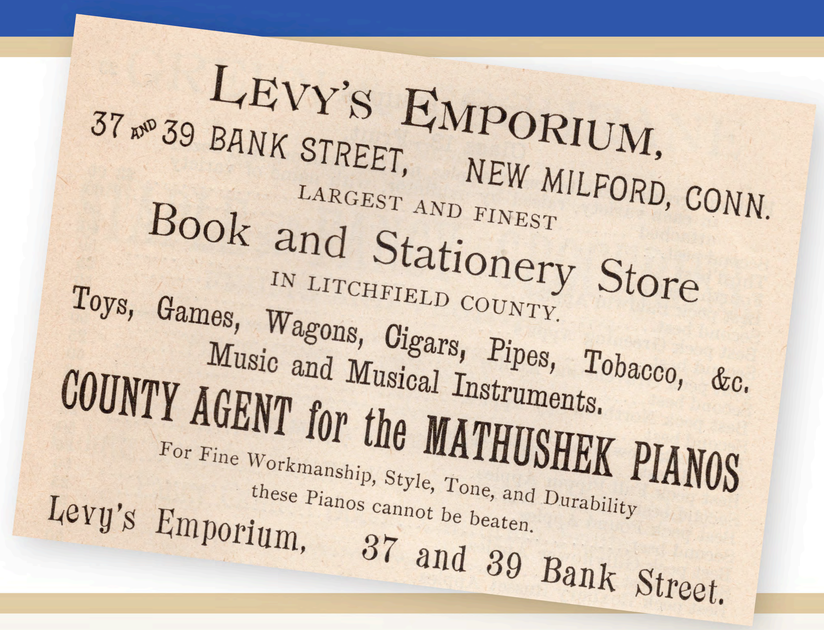
2023 Israeli Flag raising at Town Hall is led by Mayor Pete Bass and Temple Sholom's Rabbi Mark Cohn. The Rabbi continues to strengthen ties with the Western CT Jewish Federation and Sherman JCC which provides a social opportunity for area Jews.

2024 "New Milford – The Jewish Experience" exhibit at the Historical Society opens

Early Jewish Families in New Milford

Although the arrival of Joseph Golden to New Milford in 1900 is considered the beginning of the Jewish community in New Milford, two members of the Jewish faith are known to have settled here during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Both were merchants who lived in the town for several decades and departed after the Fire of 1902. Despite their prominence in New Milford, neither left an institutional footprint that would be carried over to the next generation of Jews in New Milford.

ALEXANDER LEVY, born in 1840, emigrated with his family from England in 1856 and arrived in New Milford in 1869 becoming the first known Jew to settle in this town. (England was a somewhat unusual point of origin for Jewish immigrants to the US during this period). In his store on Bank Street, he sold a variety of goods including books, stationery, pens, cigars, pipes, tobacco and sporting goods. He also ran a circulating library and was a steamship ticket agent. During the 1870s, Levy manufactured cigars. Levy lived with his wife and six children on South Main Street which towards the end of the nineteenth century was becoming a favored residence for prosperous New Milford merchants.


LEVY'S EMPORIUM,
37 AND 39 BANK STREET, NEW MILFORD, CONN.
LARGEST AND FINEST
Book and Stationery Store
IN LITCHFIELD COUNTY.
Toys, Games, Wagons, Cigars, Pipes, Tobacco, &c.
Music and Musical Instruments.
COUNTY AGENT for the MATHUSHEK PIANOS
For Fine Workmanship, Style, Tone, and Durability
these Pianos cannot be beaten.
Levy's Emporium, 37 and 39 Bank Street.

MAX NEISNER, born in 1844, emigrated from Lithuania arriving in New York City in 1860. He volunteered for the Union Army in 1862 under the name of Nesner (perhaps to mask his Jewish identity, a mistake which he had to rectify when later applying for veterans' benefits) but was wounded in the Battle of Antietam with a bullet to his elbow. He moved to New Milford in 1870. He may have owned the building on Bank Street where he maintained his retail store as the structure was later referred to as 'Neisner's building'. He sold ready-made clothing, furnishing goods as well as hats and caps. The building also contained a Masonic lodge, and a bowling alley in the basement run by a Moses Cohn about whom nothing is known.

There was a third store in New Milford that was a branch of a prominent New York Jewish clothier, M. Cohen & Co. It dubbed itself "The New York Clothing Store." A picture exists of the store but it is not known who ran the New Milford outlet.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Both Levy and Neisner appear to have been well integrated into the New Milford community. Levy was a Justice of the Peace, as well as a 33rd degree Mason. Whatever the social functions of Masonry, for Jews it often served as a means of forging ties to prominent citizens in the community.

Neisner was active in the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the association of veterans of the Civil War. In addition, he was also active in some unknown capacity, but likely as a volunteer as it appears by his uniform and hat in a photo, with the Water Witch Hose Company #2 in New Milford. In 1890, upon the opening of a new fire station on Church Street, Neisner donated a beautiful, ornate, high-back chair with a plaque on the front indicating his donation. The chair is still used today by the president of the fire house for scheduled meetings at the Grove Street location built in 1960 to replace the Church Street station.

It is not known how, or if, Levy and Neisner practiced their Jewish faith while living in New Milford.

POST NEW MILFORD

Both Levy and Neisner departed New Milford for Bridgeport after the Fire of 1902 destroyed their businesses. Both were financially successful in Bridgeport; and both joined a reform synagogue as well as B'nai B'rith, a Jewish fraternal and philanthropic organization. Levy died in 1918 and Neisner in 1922. Upon his death, Neisner left a bequest in his will that required his executor to find a synagogue in Jerusalem which would recite the Mourner's Kaddish (prayer sanctifying God's name in memory of the deceased) on the anniversary of his death.

The Beginnings of The Jewish Community in New Milford

Of the one and a half million Jewish immigrants who migrated from Russia and Eastern Europe ("The Pale of Settlement") to the United States between 1881 and 1920, the vast majority settled in New York City and other metropolitan regions. A small but significant number settled in rural towns such as New Milford.

JOSEPH GOLDEN

One of these immigrants was Joseph Golden. After the departure of Max Neisner and Alex Levy in the early years of the 20th century, Joseph is regarded as the founding father, "The George Washington", of the Jewish community in New Milford.

Golden's path to New Milford was a circuitous one that attested to his drive and determination to make a better life for himself and his family in America. He was born in Lunna, a small town located in present day Belarus, where Jews suffered from rabid antisemitism, pervasive discrimination, and periodic persecutions. At age seventeen, Joseph was drafted into the Russian Army while gentiles were excused from service. Conditions for Jews were terrible in the Czar's Army and Joseph, on leave, vowed that he would not return. He was able to escape and made his way to Hamburg where he got passage by ship to New York. Upon arrival in 1898, he had one dime in his pocket.

Golden joined his older sister in Kingston, NY. His first job was on the Hudson River pushing ice with a long pike. On his first day, the pike slipped out of his hand, and he ran quickly from the river, fearing he would be put in prison, or worse. He became a peddler, first by streetcar in Kingston. Then in Poughkeepsie he worked his way toward the purchase of his own horse and cart. He sold goods from the cart along a route to New Milford, where he often stayed overnight and where he became entranced by the beauty of the Housatonic River Valley. He found New Milford very welcoming with great opportunity and decided to settle here.

With two of his brothers, Golden was able to set up a dry goods store on Railroad Street in 1900. His brothers eventually left the business to start their own ventures, and Joseph ultimately moved the store to Bank Street in 1909. Golden married Eva Effron of Poughkeepsie and they had five children, all born in New Milford. After World War II, Joseph's sons, Merrill and Lawrence, succeeded Joseph in running the business. Joseph passed away in 1947. Merrill and his wife, Marjorie, would become founders of Temple Sholom.

Other Jewish Immigrants

The Goldens were joined by other Jewish families who also found a welcoming home in New Milford including:

ALEX KRAMER

Alex Kramer came to this country from Lithuania in 1917 at the age of twenty. Like Joseph Golden, he demonstrated an iron resolve to succeed taking any number of odd jobs in Pennsylvania including skinning horses. He parlayed his savings into opening a dry goods store in New Milford on Bank Street opposite Joseph Golden's. His business lasted until 1965. He was a very exacting person, emphasizing to his son that if you are going to do something, do it right! His other mantra was "education, education, education" which demonstrated considerable prescience into the evolving criteria for success in America. Like Joseph Golden, he was very generous, extending credit to customers and not foreclosing on debt for those who were impoverished.

Additional Jewish immigrant families and their progeny who settled in New Milford included:

Ben Kramer

NAME	ORIGIN	DOMICILE IN TOWN	OCCUPATION	NOTABLE FACTS
Ben Kramer	Poland	Wellsville Avenue	Farmer/Cattle Dealer	• Only Jewish veteran of World War I. Name is listed on memorial to Veterans of Civil War and WWI on Town Green • Slaughterhouse on Wellsville Avenue existed until 2000 • Only original Jewish settler who was founder with wife Anna of Temple Sholom
Samuel and Sarah Sacartoff Cohen	Russia/Belarus	Brookside Avenue	Cattle Dealer and Horse Trader	• Owned over a hundred acres in diverse neighborhood east of Center Cemetery • Their son, Harry, became a prominent lawyer and founder with wife, Frances, of Temple Sholom
Louis Shapiro	Poland	Railroad Street	Cattle Dealer	• Son, Bernie, maintained farm on Wellsville Avenue • Son, Irving would become noted business investor in this town. • Irving and wife, Bea, were founders of Temple Sholom
Jacob and Rose Sacartoff	Belarus	Bennitt Street	Junk Dealer	• Daughter, Evelyn, married Joesph Golden's brother, Isadore. Evelyn became Secretary of Temple Sholom's initial Board of Directors • Daughter, Elizabeth, served in Women's Army Corps (WAC) during WWII and helped reunite Jewish families after the Holocaust.
Jacob (Jake) and Frances Dube	Parents born in Russia	Bank Street	Dry Goods Merchant	• Jake's brother, Norman, became an attorney and was later appointed Superior Court judge in New Haven. He was married to Anna Golden, Joseph Golden's niece.
Saul and Mimi Barrick	Parents born in Lithuania	Northville/ Candlewood Lake Rd.	Business Owner	• Saul and wife, Mimi, became founding members of Temple Sholom • Saul's mother, Dora, later donated to Temple Sholom one of the Czech Torahs rescued from the Holocaust
Alexander and Dora Lapin	Poland	Bennitt Street	Retail Grocer	• Maintained store on Railroad Street, named Lapin's Market • Alexander was also a cattle dealer
Nathan Schiff	Poland	Bank Street	Tailor	• Well respected in town; frequent speaker at Lions Club and Rotary Club with his Yiddish brogue • Founding member of Temple Sholom
Louis and Dora Gartner	Ukraine	Bank Street	Tailor	• In 1913, their son, Herman, became the first Bar Mitzvah in New Milford

The First Jewish Religious Community in New Milford

Challenges In Forming A Religious Community

The Jews who moved to New Milford during the first decades of the 20th century shared common characteristics: they were independent business people, whether merchants, cattle dealers or tailors; they spoke Yiddish, reflecting their shared background living in the Pale of Settlement with all its trials and tribulations (although they did generally learn English quickly); and they lived within walking distance of each other near the center of New Milford socializing with each other as well.

It was at Golden's store beginning around 1914 that Jews came for "a little guidance, a little advice, talking of what you should do.... what you shouldn't do" as Joseph's son, Merrill recalled. "This is where the problem of one Jew became the problem of all Jews." Golden's store also became the central meeting point for the town's Jewish cattle dealers.

Inspired, Joseph Golden formed Congregation Beth Aaron named for his father, Aaron, who had emigrated to New Milford with his wife, Elke (Alice), several years earlier and who would provide advice but, because of advancing age, would not become active in the Congregation. Joseph traveled to New York to purchase a Torah and prayer books. High Holy Days (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) services as well as weekly Sabbath services were held in various members' houses. The Congregation had between ten and fifteen members and lasted until 1944 a few years before Joseph's death.

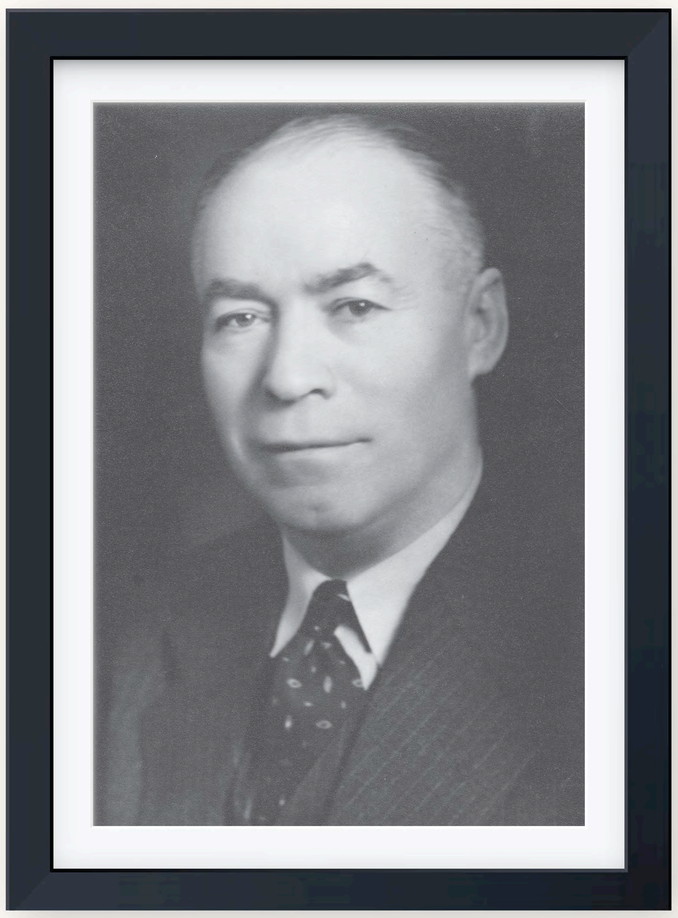
Most importantly, however, they were orthodox Jews by tradition and by training. At the most basic level, this entailed strict observance of the Sabbath on Saturday and keeping kosher (adherence to Jewish dietary laws), which were difficult in a small town like New Milford. Saturday was the busiest shopping day of the week (stores were closed on Sundays) and a shopkeeper's presence was required to greet customers and deal with unexpected issues. Also, as a Jewish merchant, it was essential to avoid the perception of being seen as different from other merchants, which also entailed not wearing a yarmulke (head covering). At best, it might be permissible to be absent from the store for a few hours on Saturdays. Synagogue worship on the Sabbath required traveling to Danbury, Bridgeport or New Haven. Due to the difficulty of travel, individuals justified traveling for High Holy Days (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) but generally not on the Sabbath.

Keeping kosher was initially challenging as well and relied upon traveling butchers (at least one of whom taught Hebrew to Jewish children in New Milford during his visits). Over time, the community was able to settle on placing a group order with a reliable butcher in New Haven.

Forming of the First Jewish Religious Community

The beginnings of an organized Jewish community in New Milford began in Joseph Golden's Dry Goods store on Bank Street. Retail stores, especially in rural America, often served as centers of community as well as commerce, enabling shoppers to interact with each other through sharing news, information, and gossip.

Portrait of JOSEPH GOLDEN



Joseph Golden was the ideal person to form a Jewish community in New Milford due to his character and accomplishments. People flocked to this self-made and self-educated man for advice. He also had a tremendous sense of justice believing that everyone deserved to be treated fairly. Given his fluency in multiple languages (Russian, Polish, German, Yiddish, and English), he eagerly assisted non- Jewish immigrants with their citizenship papers. During the Depression, he extended credit and made gifts of clothing to those in need. He also had a wry sense of humor and appreciated the irony in situations despite being a realist.

Jewish Life in New Milford: Post WWII

In the nearly fifteen years between the dissolution of Temple Beth Aaron in 1944 and the dedication of the Temple Sholom sanctuary in 1970, a seismic change had occurred in the composition, geographical location, and denominational affiliation of the Jewish population in New Milford. The original Jewish settlers, who had been mainly independent, self-educated merchants and cattle dealers, had attempted to replicate in New Milford a semblance of their original Orthodox religious practices from the Pale of Settlement albeit with considerable modifications.

This younger generation began to adopt more Americanized lifestyle changes due to exposure to radio, newspapers, magazines as well as attendance at public schools. This generation pursued professions beyond farming and mercantile endeavors.

After World War II New Milford and surrounding towns experienced an influx of Jews from the greater New York City region and by the 1970s, at least 87 Jewish families lived in New Milford or in surrounding towns.

This post-war Jewish population of New Milford lacked the tight communal bonds of the immigrant generation or the commitment to a stricter and more observant form of Judaism.

The Formation of Temple Sholom (1958)

In the fall of 1958, ***Dr. Noah Barysh, Harry Cohen, Merrill Golden*** and ***Irving Shapiro*** formed a committee to establish a congregation in New Milford. Following the dissolution of Congregation Beth Aaron, Jews in New Milford had been attending services at a synagogue in Danbury. Now they wanted a temple of their own closer to home. Except for Dr. Barysh, the committee members were descendants of the original Jewish settlers.

By the start of 1959, members of the community decided to establish Temple Sholom and to affiliate with Reform Judaism.

Worship at The First Congregational Church on the Green (1959 to 1971)

In January 1959, the first Friday night Shabbat services were held in the chapel of the First Congregational Church on the New Milford Green thanks to the generosity of the ***Reverend Russell Ayre*** and his congregants. This became Temple Sholom's home for the next eleven years. The religious school also opened with three women from the congregation serving as teachers: ***Bernice Golden, Evelyn Golden*** and ***Marion Kramer***. The classes were held in the parish house of the First Congregational Church.

Construction of Temple Sholom Sanctuary (1970 to 1971)

New temple opens

During the Fall of 1970, construction of Temple Sholom began on Route 7. ***Erwin Lieff***, a founding member, designed the building based on a modified plan of Riverview Baptist Church next door. On March 10, 1971, during the festive holiday of Purim, a procession of Temple members carried the sacred Torah (five books of the Hebrew Bible) from the First Congregational Church to the new Temple sanctuary for the dedication of the building.

Religious and Political Acceptance of Jews in New Milford

The forming of Temple Sholom in 1959 occurred at an auspicious time in American history just as Judaism was being embraced as one of the three institutional pillars of religion in this country alongside Protestantism and Catholicism. This was exemplified in New Milford in 1960 when ***Rabbi Secher*** chanted the Shema (an affirmation of belief in one God) at a Memorial Day ceremony on the steps of the New Milford Public Library organized by temple member ***Marilyn Lieff***. This may have been the first formal recognition of the Jewish population as an organized religious community by the Town of New Milford.

Thankfully, antisemitism has not been a major issue in New Milford nor have Jews faced significant obstacles in succeeding in this town. In the latter half of the 20th century the Jews of New Milford found further acceptance. This was best exemplified by the election of ***Liba Furhman*** as town mayor in 1991. She was not only the first Jew to serve as mayor but also the youngest mayor ever and the first woman in that role. After serving two terms, she continues in a number of leadership positions throughout the community.

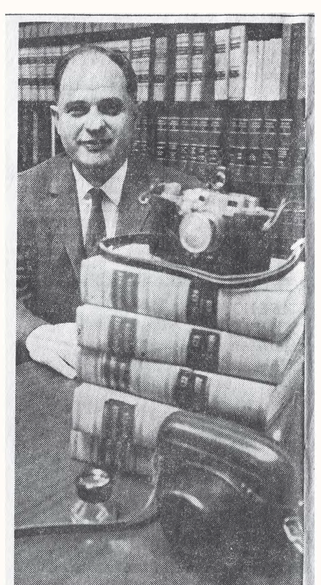
Later Years (1979 to Present)

In 1979 ***Rabbi Norman Koch*** became rabbi of Temple Sholom serving for 35 years. He developed strong personal ties both with the congregation and the leaders and members of religious and civic organizations.

- From 2015 to 2020 Rabbi Ari Rosenberg served Temple Sholom making significant contributions in the community. Collaborating with other religious organizations, Rabbi Rosenberg helped found the New Milford Refugee Resettlement Group.
- 2020 to 2022 Cantor Laura Breznick served as the first woman spiritual leader.
- 2024 Tamara Potter retires after 25 years as Executive Director of Temple Sholom.
- 2023 Rabbi Mark Cohn to present day serves as Rabbi and led New Milford's first Israeli flag raising at Town Hall.

In the 1990s, three new institutions were formed to help deepen opportunities for Jewish engagement: Greater Washington Coalition for Jewish Life, Jewish Community Center in Sherman, and Chabad Lubavitch of Northwest CT.

In 2019, one of the last of "the older generation" died. ***Harry Cohen***, local attorney, and founder of many civic organizations left behind a legacy which includes The New Milford Community Center (current Parks and Recreation), the Creative Arts Center (TheatreWorks), Temple Sholom, Literacy on the Green, and The New England School of Photographic Arts. Harry was also involved in bringing the historic WWII tank to the Town Green.


FOR LAWYER HARRY COHEN, life is more than law books. It includes, in ample measure, drama, music, photography and community service. — Hartford Photo.