

SHALOM *y'all*

GOLDRING/WOLDENBERG INSTITUTE
OF SOUTHERN JEWISH LIFE

WINTER/SPRING
2024

ISJL
PRESENTERS
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LOOKING BACK

SUPPORTING, CONNECTING, AND CELEBRATING TOGETHER



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This photo of Henrietta Levine in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, with her "world famous chopped liver" has been one of our favorites for decades now. Taken by Bill Aron as part of his Shalom Y'all photo series, the iconic image has been featured at many ISJL events and in ISJL publications and still makes our whole team smile.

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THEN. NOW. ALWAYS.



Our *Shalom Y'all* theme this year

will span our organization's history, and look toward our future. In this first issue of 2024, we're **Looking Back** at some of the moments, memories, and meaningful relationships that have gotten the ISJL to where we are today. We reminisce with the first "ISJL rabbi" (page 16), hear from some of our longest-standing donors why they're so committed to supporting southern Jewish communities (page 18), and stroll down memory lane in Mobile, Alabama (page 6).

Our next issue will focus on **Where We Are**, providing a snapshot of our communities and organization in the current moment, and our final issue of the year will focus on **Looking Ahead**. In preparation for both of those themes—meeting the present moment, and preparing for the future—we'll be sending out a survey soon. If you are in the South now, or have a direct connection to Jewish life in the South, please be on the lookout for the survey. We will share it on our website, social media, and in emailed requests for participation.

But for now, please enjoy this look back through the last two dozen years of supporting, connecting, and celebrating Jewish life in the South. The conversations and archival-sifting involved in creating this issue brought our team some smiles, tears, and enthusiastic reminiscing. We hope it will do the same for you.

The Board & Staff of the ISJL





MICHELE SCHIPPER
CEO

There's a photograph hanging in my office that represents so much of what I cherish most. Its significance is hard to overstate; in one black-and-white image, it reminds me where I've been, why I am where I am now, and what I want to carry with me as I continue to move forward on my journey.

It's a photograph of my parents, Judy and Irv Feldman, taken in the late 1980s by photographer Bill Aron as part of his Shalom Y'all photo series documenting Jewish life in the South.



In the photo, Judy and Irv are proudly pictured in their "family business," the Olde Tyme Deli of Jackson, Mississippi. Although it's now been closed for more than twenty years, the deli still looms large in the collective memory of the Jackson community. It wasn't just a restaurant. It was

Michele Schipper FROM THE CEO

a gathering place for all people, welcoming to everyone, and often providing a particular welcome to the Jackson Jewish family (see our Donors article in this issue for more on that, from longtime Jacksonian Arty Finkelberg!).

There are so many stories I could share about the place and its people, and of course, the food—because truly, the food, was wonderful! But what made Olde Tyme Deli so special was so much more than the delicious cheesecake and corned beef on rye.

It's how my parents made people feel, each time someone entered their restaurant: it always felt as if they were welcoming someone into their home.

This makes perfect sense, because truly, the deli was an extension of our home. The values and warmth my family shared at our house were the same values and warmth that welcomed everyone to their business.

While I didn't take over the "family business" in the sense that I didn't take over running the deli, the values and warmth my parents modeled for me in life and in business absolutely still shaped my career. I came back home to Jackson, Mississippi, with that in mind. These days, I like to think that what we do here at the ISJL makes people feel welcomed, included, supported, and appreciated, throughout our regional "home."

The lessons that I learned from my parents included *I'dor v'dor*, "from generation to generation." From them, I learned that living a good life means giving back to the community you live in, and beyond. It means donating what you can to the causes you believe in. It means modeling for your children what it means to live a life of meaning and bring your warmth and welcoming to your career, whatever it might be.

When I look at this image in my office, I am reminded of all of this, and so much more. Their photograph reminds me daily what matters. I feel honored to work at an organization that serves southern Jewish families whose stories are like that of my family: people who find ways to create community and flourish wherever they are.

With your support, we don't just have to look back on the memories of southern Jewish families who became so intrinsic to their communities. We can also help support such families today, continually ensuring that while pursuing their careers and daily lives, all families in our region also have the opportunity to experience positive, welcoming Jewish programming, and never feel alone.

Thank you for being part of our community, and here's to drawing on the warmest memories from our past to light the way to a bright future ahead.

Michele Schipper
CEO



JAY HESDORFFER
BOARD CHAIR

This is a particularly poignant moment for me to “look back” at my work with the ISJL. Almost exactly 10 years ago, I was sitting in my office in Chicago when a call came in from my childhood camp director, Macy B. Hart. Macy wanted to know if I would consider helping the ISJL with its work. I was honored he thought of me, and told him I would be happy to help in any way possible. I probably initially thought this meant making another donation, or attending an event here or there.

Little did I know it, but that conversation would actually serve as the kickoff for a decade-long stint on the ISJL’s Board of Directors—including serving as Board Chair for the past three years. If I’d known that was what the call from Macy was really about, maybe I would have hesitated before answering!

But the truth is, I have enjoyed this experience immensely.

Working with the staff and other board members has been a joy. The passion, commitment, and vision to support, connect, and celebrate Jewish life in the South inspires me daily. Our communities, partners, and entire team are second to none. But most importantly, because of the ISJL, no Jewish family in the South has to feel alone—and now, more than ever, that’s incredibly important.

Now, more than ever, Jewish folks living outside of major metropolitan areas need to feel

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

connected. For every Jewish person and Jewish community in the South, the ISJL is there when you need us. We’re literally a phone call (or Zoom call, email, road trip, or short plane flight) away. Congregations too small to hire their own rabbi can lean on us. Congregations in need of religious school support rely on our wraparound educational services. Congregations in need of cultural opportunities can work with our team to elevate their local programming.

We are proud to be a consistent source of support, each and every day, to the Jewish communities of the South.

Over the course of my time as Board Chair, we weathered all the storms of the onset of the pandemic, pivoting and adapting in ways we might never otherwise have imagined. We added new programs—from a podcast to online concerts to streaming seder celebrations and more. We deepened our commitment to interactive resources, adding virtual Torah study sessions with our rabbi and online coffee talks with our educator and more.

In 2023, we resumed our in-person conference for the first time since 2019—but more than that, we’re evolving it from an “Education Conference” to a “Southern & Jewish Conference,” with tracks not only to support our partners in Jewish Education, but also to empower community lay leaders, connect cultural coordinators, and bring together friends and friends-to-be from across the region. In fact, we hope that YOU will join us at the ISJL’s conference this June! You can learn more at www.isjl.org/conference.

We have, of course, faced challenges and unexpected obstacles along the way. We lost two current or recently-retired staff members, Ann Zivitz Kientz in 2022 and Shirley Friedman Eriksen in the fall of 2023 (our tribute to her is on page 25). We learned a lot throughout the pandemic, but it wasn’t easy. Still, through trial and heartache, our outreach remained consistent. Our ability to help others never diminished. If anything, it grew stronger, and our role became more vital—because we know that now, more than ever, we need one another.

As I approach the end of my term as Board Chair, I am reflecting on all of this. My successor will be taking over in March. That means that this is my last letter as Board Chair (which is surely a relief to my ghost-writer wife). But my work on the board will continue, because I believe in the ISJL and the meaningful work we do.

Once again, we’re in a moment when our southern Jewish communities, and their neighbors of all identities, need to feel connected. They need to know they are not alone—and we will always assure them that they have our unwavering support. Everything that the ISJL has done, is doing, and will do... truly comes down to you, our friends and supporters. YOU make it possible. You’re the reason the tiniest communities can stay connected. You’re the reason the ISJL’s outreach is so successful.

Now, more than ever, we need you, too.

Thank you.

Jay Hesdorffer
Board Chair

EDUCATION

WHAT A TRIP: A JOURNEY THROUGH ISJL TRIP REPORTS

MOLLY LEVY *DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION*

Looking back on our twenty years of Jewish Education programming, the ISJL has truly created a special niche within the field. One of the many things that make us unique in the landscape of Jewish Education is our fully-scripted, spiraled early childhood through 12th grade curriculum. Another has been the two decades of in-person visits from our Program Associates (formerly known as Education Fellows). These two ideas set us apart from other educational programs from day one.

Our curriculum has made it possible for anyone to feel comfortable teaching about Judaism, giving congregations across the South the ability to continue their religious schools, even without trained religious school staff. Now supplemented with online resources, a vast program bank, weekly e-newsletters, and more, the curriculum continues to evolve to meet the needs of our communities.

Our in-person visits—full of youth group events, family programs, teacher training events, and more!—have always brought vibrancy

and connection to our partner schools. We would never want to forget the memories made on these trips. Luckily, after each visit to a community, we write a trip report, detailing what happened in each community... which means these have been very well-documented journeys!

For this issue of *Shalom Y'all*, we would like to traverse through some of our trip reports from one of our longest Education partners: Congregation Ahavas Chesed in Mobile, Alabama. Please enjoy these excerpts from visits to Mobile, as submitted by various Education team members who hit the road to this

special community over the years!

2004: On one of the first visits to Mobile, the focus was on training their teachers in using the curriculum... but the visiting Education Fellow also noticed another reality we still see today!

“Following religious school, I led a training session for three of the teachers and the rabbi. Because their religious school only meets every other week, I focused on combining lessons, using outside resources, and continuity between lessons. I encouraged all of the teachers to attend the summer Education



ISJL Education Fellow Molly Glazer (now ISJL Education Director Molly Levy!) with students in Mobile in 2009

Conference. The teachers are some of the most committed parents in the religious school, but they are also stretched thin with all their other synagogue commitments!" - Amanda Abrams, ISJL Education Fellow 2003-2005

2009: Something that comes up in most of the trip reports is Rabbi Steve Silberman's incredible stories. They really made an impression on many ISJL Education Fellows, including... me!

"We began religious school with morning prayers, and Rabbi Steve gave a talk about the soul. He asked what color we thought our souls were and talked to us about how to keep our souls happy. I decided that my soul was made of glitter. It would be beautiful, but hard to clean up." - Molly Glazer, ISJL Education Fellow 2009-2011

2015: Over our time visiting Mobile, we have gotten to create some fun programming, including a particularly interactive Sukkot activity.

"We began our Sukkot scavenger hunt. This game is played in three separate rooms that lead to the sukkah. We started in the preschool hallway, where there were 10 different decorations hidden. Once a student found one, the group had to freeze and that student could make a rule, like you can only find the next decoration walking on



Molly and Rabbi Silberman

your tiptoes or backwards. Once we arrived at the sukkah, they hung up all the decorations that they found. Then we played a sukkot matching game. Everyone had so much fun!" - Ali Duhan, ISJL Education Fellow 2015-2017

2018: Carrie Bohn ran into an interesting situation during one of her visits. Sunday school was on, but the power was out!

"I arrived at religious school to find that there was no

power at the synagogue! We persevered, and held class in the library, which was full of natural light. I ran a program where the kids made their own Mishloach Manot (Purim gift bags), and in order to be given the items they needed to fill the baskets, they would have to answer trivia questions about Purim. It went great and the kids really enjoyed it. Afterwards, I was gifted some homemade hamentaschen and promptly ate them on my way back." - Carrie Bohn, ISJL Education Fellow 2018-2020



ISJL Education Fellow Carrie Bohn with students in Mobile in 2018

EDUCATION



Students in Mobile enjoying an ISJL-led scavenger hunt!

2021: Even during lockdown, Ahavas Chesed continued to meet online and offer moments for families to celebrate their Judaism. During a virtual ISJL visit, even the parents got in on the fun.

“We sang a lot of Ellen Allard songs, where the kids got to do hand motions and work on kinesthetic developmental skills. There were three families on the Zoom, with two kids each, and I think one of the parents had more fun than his daughter. It was really great to see the parents doing silly hand motions and singing along. We had a dance party to Noah

Aronson’s song ‘Goofy Guf’ which was a big hit.” - Julian Cohen, ISJL Education Fellow 2019-2021

We have loved partnering with all of our communities over the years and it is truly special to see the connections, stories and programs that arise during our visits. Our time in our communities impacts us as much as it impacts the community. Looking back over the years, our whole team is so proud of the memories made, and are looking forward to making new memories in Mobile and region-wide in the years ahead.

To learn more about Education at the ISJL, email jewisheducation@isjl.org.

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on your phone, or call our
office if you need more
assistance!

[www.isjl.org/
conference](http://www.isjl.org/conference)

This year, we're piloting a new approach to our annual conference.

While there's still plenty of Jewish Education content, this now a conference for EVERYONE with a connection to Southern Jewish life. There will be content relevant to educators, clergy, lay leaders, parents, and more.

As always, there is NO FEE for the conference, only room and board costs.

Get early bird room rates until April 15, 2024!



CULTURE

EVERY STAGE, EVERY PAGE: WHAT OUR PAST PUBLICATIONS REVEAL

DR. JOSH PARSHALL AND SHIRA MUROFF *ISJL CULTURE TEAM*

In the spirit of “looking back,” we treated ourselves to some archival research by combing through a few drawers of vintage ISJL publications and taking a deep dive on the ISJL website to see what two decades of printed materials could teach us about the organization. (Interested parties can venture over to our website to view some of these for themselves:

www.isjl.org/shalom-yall.) Unsurprisingly, the history of this magazine reflects important aspects of the ISJL’s development over the years, and the contents reveal a variety of interesting details about what we do, who we are, and how we share our work with the communities we serve.

The ISJL originally published a newsletter entitled *Circa*, which adopted a magazine format in 2009, going from temple-bulletin style paper to a glossy-magazine format. Then in 2018, for the ISJL’s 18th anniversary and to more accurately reflect our evolving organization, we changed the name to *Shalom Y’all*. That first title, *Circa*, was actually an artifact of the ISJL’s roots in the original Museum of the

Southern Jewish Experience in Utica, Mississippi. *Circa* means “approximately,” and frequently appears on object labels or other museum

text and panels. When the ISJL was established in 2000, the new organization incorporated the museum and adopted the old newsletter

**GOLDRING
WOLDENBERG
INSTITUTE OF
SOUTHERN
JEWISH LIFE**

CIRCA

SUMMER
2005

Volume XIV, Issue 2

The mission of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life is to preserve and document the practice, culture and legacy of Judaism in the South. The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience operates under the auspices of the Institute.

An Educational Experience!

Over two years ago, *Circa*'s headline blared "From Vision to Reality" over an article detailing our plans to create a complete K-10th grade religious school curriculum along with an education department to implement and administer it. At the time, these were still just ideas. But now, as the ISJL Education Department celebrates its second birthday this summer, it's a good time to step back and look at how far we have come. When the education program launched in June 2003, ten communities joined in the initial pilot. By June 2004, the number grew to twenty-three communities. This year, we are looking to expand even further in order to meet the demand for the curriculum. The tremendous growth over the course of the department's first two years speaks to the relevance and efficacy of the program.

The education program benefits communities in several ways. The annual conference fosters networking and resource sharing. Fellows provide support, resources, and educational programs tailored to each community's needs. The implementation of a regional religious school curriculum has not only elevated the level of Jewish education for children in the South, but has also allowed isolated communities to gain access to resources and opportunities that are traditionally only available to larger metropolitan areas.

The 2005 ISJL Education Conference

A central part of the program is the annual education conference. The 2005 conference will be held June 19-21 at the Pearl River Resort in Choctaw, Mississippi. Leaders in the field of Jewish education will join the ISJL staff and representatives from our pilot

The education staff of Temple B'nai Shalom of Huntsville, Alabama plan for the religious school year ahead at the 2004 Education Conference. Photo by Joe Finkelstein.

communities for two days of learning, networking, and resource sharing. Guest faculty will include figures from such leading organizations as the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE), the Jewish Outreach Institute, Facing History and Ourselves, and the Community Foundation for Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago. In addition to professional enrichment programs, the conference will also provide the only opportunity for communities to join the third year of the pilot education program, receive the third draft of the curriculum, and meet the new team of ISJL Education Fellows.

Curriculum 3.0

Throughout the school year, Education Fellows make two site visits to each community using the curriculum. Their goal is not only to help local congregations better implement the curriculum, but also to get important feedback about how to revise and enhance it. Over the last several months, the education department has been busy producing the third draft of the curriculum incorporating these comments. The most notable changes in this third draft are:

- Our comprehensive, graduated K-7th grade Hebrew program. This program builds consistently each year and will allow for students to move forward each year in a progressive, cohesive course of Hebrew study.
- A new Early Childhood Education Curriculum, developed by the staff of the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE), one of the leading national

(continued on page 5)

4th grade students from the Northshore Jewish Congregation in Mandeville, Louisiana, just one of the 23 congregations taking part in the ISJL Education Program. Photo courtesy of Miles Mark.

title while adapting the contents to promote our expanded mission. The ISJL's *Circa* maintained a similar look, printed primarily in black and white with the title and a few other highlights in our signature blue. It wasn't until 2009 that the full magazine was printed in color.

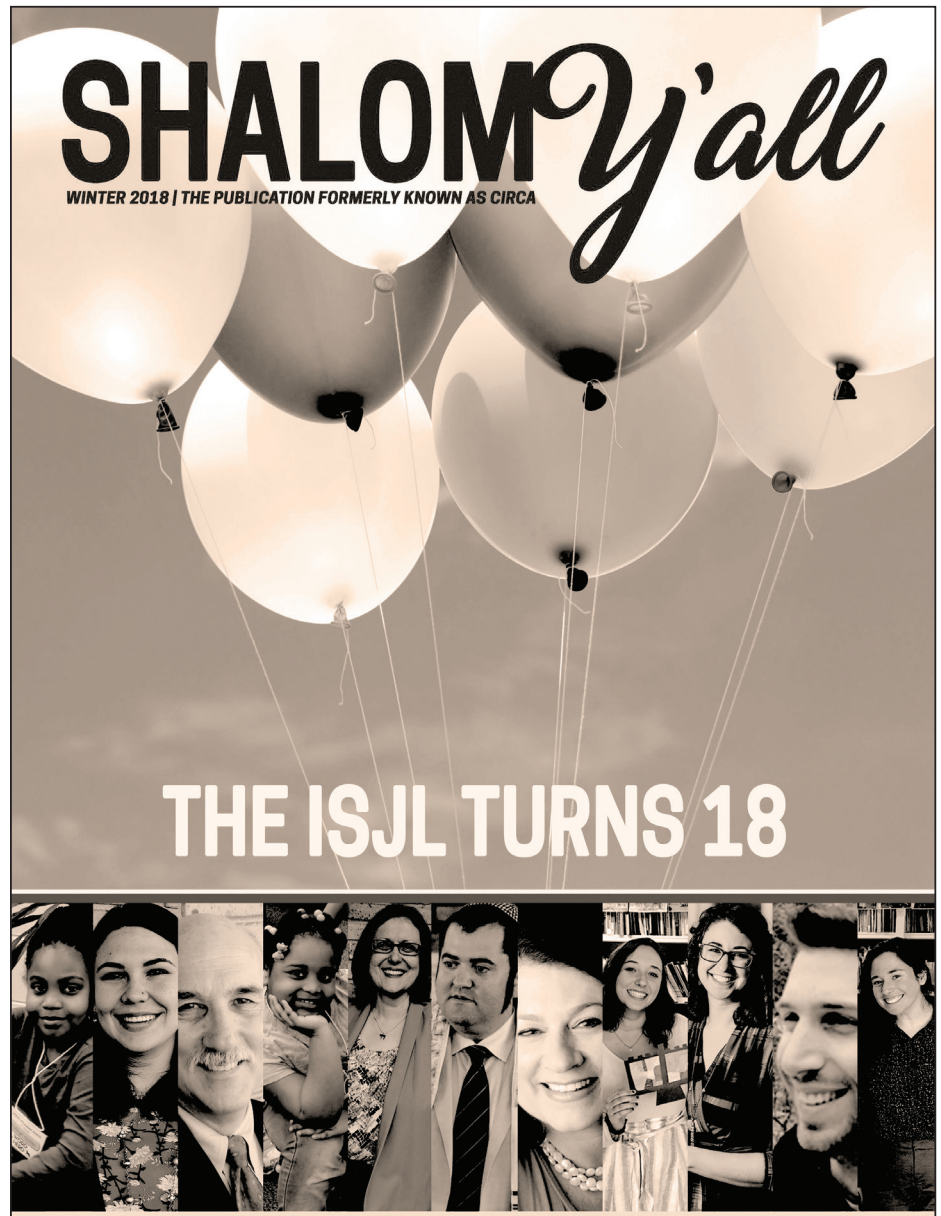
The most obvious historical information from early issues of *Circa* concerns the ISJL's development as a multifaceted religious, educational, and cultural resource for the Jewish South. The summer 2004 issue, for example, boasts about the second year of the ISJL Education program, which had enrolled 20 religious schools. (Two years later, there were 35 congregations enrolled.) Rabbi Debra Kassoff, the organization's first clergy person, had just completed her first year of traveling for the ISJL. She wrote about small communities' increasing desire for visiting rabbis, and announced an initiative to coordinate rabbinical visits by in-region colleagues to communities who did not have their own full-time clergy, which would launch soon thereafter as "Rabbis on the Road." The issue also promoted the weekly Taste of Torah emails, which remain a hallmark of the ISJL's Spirituality division. The fall 2006 issue announces the launch of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities*. Subsequent issues trace the growth of our oral history collection, the expansion of the religious school curriculum, and the proliferation of cultural programs such as film

festivals and book tours. As ISJL publications documented the buildout of our various departments, they also recorded a number of important arrivals and departures. The headline "The Institute Continues to Grow to Meet Demand" leads the front page of the spring 2007 issue, which announces a trio of new hires, including Michele Schipper as Chief Operating Officer. Spring issues wished fond farewells to departing Education Fellows each year, but occasionally announced that they would be staying on at the ISJL—as in the case of

Megan (Roberts) Koller, who became our "Special Projects Coordinator" at the end of her 2007-2009 fellowship.

These old issues of *Circa* (and, eventually, *Shalom Y'all*) not only allow us to track what we were doing and who was doing it; they also tell us a great deal about how we communicated with our partners and supporters. For years, ISJL publications included a Peddler's Cart section that advertised items

CONTINUED →



CULTURE

from our gift shop as well as a detachable form for mail-in orders. By early 2005 we were also directing readers to our online Peddler's Cart: "Secured site ordering now available!!!!" While *Circa* eventually dropped the order form and directed shoppers to the ISJL website, Peddler's Cart ads remained a staple of ISJL publications until we adopted the *Shalom Y'all* title in 2018. Over those years, magazine items reflect the growth of the ISJL's online resources and communication methods. Under the headline "ISJL Website Reaches New Heights," the 2005 issue announces that each ISJL department will soon have its own section on the site, and it hints at the beginnings of the ISJL's Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities. While our print magazine and the website continue to provide important information about ISJL programs, we're now just as likely to promote time sensitive items and cross-organizational collaborations on social media—a prospect that was barely on the horizon in 2005.

These days, we're not just reporting on organizational updates. We're able to use these mailed periodicals to dive deeper into the work that the ISJL is doing, to highlight communities and community members, to share insights from our donors and board

members, and to preview new online and on-the-ground resources. Some of our most popular issues are when we hand over the proverbial reins to community members, giving them the opportunity to write every article in the publication and highlight their own local challenges and triumphs.

All of these past *Circas* and *Shalom Y'alls* have created an archive of where the ISJL started, how things have evolved, and what our future

plans may be. But as much as things may change, the spirit of these publications has stayed the same. When *Shalom Y'all* arrives in your mailbox, you'll see staff members arrive, leave, and maybe even return to the team (most recently, Rabbi Salem Pearce, our 2017 rabbinical intern, became our Director of Spirituality!). You'll hear about upcoming conferences and who is new to the programming roster, and always some southern Jewish history highlights.

Remember the Peddler's Cart when selecting gifts for family and friends!

The Peddler's Cart ORDER FORM

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Shalom Y'all (Hebrew) Campfire Mug
Heavyweight, 15 oz. White ceramic mug, dishwasher and microwave safe. Price for one: \$8

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Available in Navy or Khaki. 100% Cotton with adjustable back. \$20



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*The Peddler's Cart no longer exists, but this used to be our order form!
(Do the shipping costs give away how old it is?)*

Looking at these pages to see the ISJL at every stage thus far has been eye-opening for us, and truly shows how valuable this magazine is not only as a current source of information but as a historical record of impact. We hope you will all continue to read this magazine for years to come, and if you wish to peruse the

archives and do your own institutional deep dive, you can find more than a decade's worth of issues archived at www.isjl.org/shalom-yall. You can even search for the first time Josh Parshall and Shira Muroff appear in an issue (hint: both are returning-team-members, who had different job titles here prior to

their current ones). Feel free to email us when you find our canonical first appearances!

To learn more about History at the ISJL, email history@isjl.org. To learn more about Programming at the ISJL, email programming@isjl.org.

CULTURAL PROGRAMMING THROUGH THE YEARS

The *Circas* and *Shalom Y'alls* of years past also shows the trajectory of cultural programs through the ISJL's history. Looking at the publications from 2004-2006, there is a heavy focus on advertising both Jewish Cinema South, a network of southern Jewish film festivals, and the Southern States Jewish Literary Series, which consisted of multi-city tours from visiting Jewish authors. Likewise, the History department in 2005 ran a "Magical History Tour" celebrating 350 years of Jewish life in America. *Circa* was the perfect place to advertise these events at the time, since it was the primary piece of communication with our ISJL community.

The department was very focused on these region-wide programs where the ISJL acted as the hub. Over time, we have handed over the film festivals to the individual cities, a phenomenon we explored in our last issue of *Shalom Y'all*. We have also changed how our presenters function over time. The Southern States Jewish Literary Series consisted of a relatively limited number of authors who would do readings and present lectures based on their new books within small circuits in the region. We've shifted away from that model, instead focusing on curating a larger roster of authors, musicians, comedians, and more, and then allowing communities to initiate which presenter they'd like to bring to their community (with the goal of community cost-sharing still in place). In spring 2009, there was the first mention of the predecessor of our current roster, this one referred to as the "possible programs artist roster." While the roster format has grown and developed over the years, it's still one of the key features of the culture division! You can see all of our current roster at isjl.org/presenters-roster.



ISJL Presenters Roster

Some of our newest additions:



STEVE LEE WEINTRAUB
Yiddish Dance



LAPIDUS & MYLES
Soulful Musical Duo



JOANIE LEEDS
Grammy-Winning Music



RABBI MICAH STREIFFER
Scholar in Residence

If your community needs an incredible presenter, we've got you covered. From dance and drama to comedy and Midrash, come check out our stellar lineup of Jewish culture.

isjl.org/presenters-roster

SURVEY OF SOUTHERN JEWISH LIFE 2024

WE
NEED

YOUR

INSIGHTS!

As the ISJL plans for our future, WE need to know what YOU need.

Please take the 2024 Survey of Southern Jewish Life, available through mid-March:

www.isjl.org/survey2024



SPIRITUALITY



Rabbi Kassoff leads a service on the historic Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama

FOND MEMORIES, FAVORITE PLACES: RECOLLECTIONS FROM THE ISJL'S FIRST RABBI, DEBRA KASSOFF

RABBI SALEM PEARCE *DIRECTOR OF SPIRITUALITY*

More than twenty years ago, Rabbi Debra Kassoff met Macy B. Hart, the founder of the ISJL, in the Mississippi Delta. They were both at a banquet before the annual Jay Mosow Memorial Delta Jewish Open – a golf tournament in Greenville, Mississippi, described by Southern Jewish Life Magazine as “a homecoming for Jews from the Mississippi Delta.” Rabbi Kassoff, the rabbinical intern at Hebrew Union Temple in Greenville, was not yet a rabbi (that would happen in 2003) and the tournament actually didn’t allow non-Jews to participate yet (that would happen in 2012), serving truly as a small Jewish-community-event in the heart of the Deep South.

The ISJL was different, too, then: It had just opened its doors in Jackson. When Rabbi Kassoff was ordained, she was hired as the ISJL’s first Director of Rabbinical Services in 2003. At the time, the institutional range was officially only a four-state region (Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Arkansas), although Rabbi Kassoff also

wound up visiting Jackson, Tennessee, and Wichita Falls, Texas, that first year, as well.

In many ways, however, the more things change, the more they stay the same. After completing a three-year-appointment as the ISJL’s rabbi, Rabbi Kassoff and her family moved up to Marblehead, Massachusetts for a few years—but they then returned to Jackson. Rabbi Kassoff resumed a part-time pulpit serving at Hebrew Union Congregation in Greenville, and has now worked with them for more than 13 years, currently while also working full-time as a regional organizer with Working Together Mississippi.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down and chat with Rabbi Kassoff at Coffee Prose one cool December afternoon in Jackson. Twenty years after she inaugurated the ISJL “circuit rabbi” position, she shared with me a few highlights from her tenure. Rabbi Debra Kassoff has many memories from her time working at the ISJL

that are unique to the position and the region she served. For example, she was presented with the key to the city of Fort Smith, Arkansas! A congregant there was friends with the mayor, who was interested in recognizing the Jewish community. At the ceremony, the mayor joked that if she ever was stopped for speeding within city limits, she “should just show the officer the key and proclamation.” (When she shared that anecdote, I confessed to my rabbinical colleague how helpful a key like that would have been when I was pulled over in Yazoo County the morning after Yom Kippur this year traveling back home from Cleveland, Mississippi to Jackson!)

It was in Helena, Arkansas, that Rabbi Kassoff was introduced to the local custom of the “Yom Kippur luncheon,” hosted at a congregant’s home between morning and afternoon services... an odd tradition on a holiday that is perhaps most-well known for its traditional 25-hour fast! But for that synagogue, it was

a long-standing tradition for their community, which included congregants who might have driven hours to get there and might need some sustenance. The luncheon developed as a way to build relationships among geographically disparate members; long-time Helena residents David and Miriam Solomon – parents to ISJL board member Rayman Solomon – opened their house for the luncheon as well as for Yom Kippur break-fast.

Certainly Helena was not alone in adapting its practice to the realities of rural Jewry. As a 2005 *New York Times* article about Rabbi Kassoff noted: “People have been known to drive 90 miles to hear the slight 33-year-old read from the Torah and lead prayers. Sometimes, she says, there are even more Christians in attendance than Jews. That Rabbi Kassoff is so popular is less a testament to her wisdom and insight – though her congregants agree she has both in spades – than it is to her availability. When Rabbi Kassoff shows up, she is the only game in town.” Because the *Times* piece described her work in another small Arkansas town (McGehee), it attracted the attention of a noted Arkansan, former President Bill Clinton, who wrote Rabbi Kassoff a letter commending her for her service to the state.

In the spring of 2006, Rabbi Kassoff led a “de-consecration ceremony” for

the few remaining members of Temple Beth El in Helena, after which the synagogue building was donated to the state for use as a community arts center. “Years later I officiated a wedding there,” Rabbi Kassoff recalls. But that closing was the real highlight. She recounts the packed sanctuary, with generations of former residents returning to the small town in the Arkansas Delta for one last prayer service. “It was a beautiful celebration,” she says. Rabbi Kassoff knows that such a characterization might sound odd to some. But it was always “an honor to get to be in people’s lives at incredible sacred moments,” she argues, “and to celebrate that community’s incredible legacy.”

The end of more than 160 years of Jewish life in Helena doesn’t have to be just a sad story, she insists: “We can honor the wonderful people and rich stories by considering them not just ended but *completed*.”

Her time in the South has spanned her rabbinical career and her life. It has seen her leading services not only from the pulpit at small synagogues, but also on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama (pictured), at ISJL conferences, and in interfaith settings. The community of the Deep South has been front and center for her, personally and professionally. Rabbi Kassoff has recently faced two hard losses in her life – the deaths of a rabbinical school

colleague, and a camp friend of her daughter’s, both lost to this world well before their times – and has been listening to Anderson Cooper’s podcast “All There Is” as one way of coping. (The CNN journalist started the project after the death of his mother, the fashion icon Gloria Vanderbilt.) A recent guest on the show talked about how we live in “a culture that resists narratives of loss and grief,” a notion that resonates with Rabbi Kassoff in both her personal and professional lives.

“We become so much stronger and more alive when we face what we try to hide from,” she says, smiling a bit sadly. It’s a lesson many isolated congregations, with their realities of dwindling populations, would do well to heed, she believes.

Having made her home in Jackson for the past almost decade-and-a-half, Rabbi Kassoff loves the stories of southern Jewry, in part because they complicate the traditional, northeastern-based narratives of Jews in the United States.

“Y’all come visit!” she says, smiling more broadly this time.

To learn more about Spirituality at the ISJL, email rabbi@isjl.org.

DEVELOPMENT

DONORS FROM THE BEGINNING: INSIGHTS AND INSPIRATION FROM LONG-TIME SUPPORTERS OF SOUTHERN JEWISH LIFE

OLIVIA RENATA ZALE *ISJL DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT*

In preparing for this issue of *Shalom Y'all*, I reached out to several of the ISJL's longest-standing supporters to ask them about their involvement. I heard back with enthusiasm from everyone I contacted. We are honored to share their stories, and re-live these many years of partnership and collaboration!



Beth & Steve Orlansky

We are both southern Jews, and we have experienced first-hand the phenomenon of shrinking congregations due to failure of young people to return to the small towns where they grew up. We don't

believe Judaism will leave the South permanently, but as our numbers outside the major cities become smaller, the need for connections through a central organization of Jewish communal professionals becomes more and more important.

As the then-chairman of the Jacobs Camp Committee, Steve was a member of the founding board of directors of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in 1986. As the MSJE (which now exists as its own separate entity) was initially incorporated into the expanding mission of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life in 2000, we continued to support its mission and were excited to see the foundational idea grow from a repository for Judaica from dying congregations to much-needed support for all current southern Jewish congregations through education and social and cultural programs.

The ISJL has enriched the Beth Israel community in Jackson

in countless ways—without the staff of the ISJL, our participation in many activities would be much reduced. We enjoy taking advantage of the programs sponsored by ISJL and want to support the enthusiasm they generate in small congregations throughout the South.

Peggy Banks

I became involved in the early days, because my son, Peter Banks, was the first field representative for the ISJL, traveling the region to help assess needs and plan for the organization's launch. I'm told that he wrote a report at the conclusion of his work, entitled "The Banks Report," which still informs the ISJL's work today!

The mission of the ISJL is important to me. My southern roots go back to the mid-19th century, when my father's family emigrated from Prussia and settled in Georgia. In fact, my father was born (in 1894) and raised in Athens, Georgia. He moved to New York to attend Columbia Law School after he graduated from the

University of Georgia in 1914. My brother, Stanley Funston, served as a rabbi in Asheville, North Carolina, and later in Dothan, Alabama, which is what prompted him to convince Peter to attend Jacobs Camp. I grew up in Arlington, Virginia, and attended the Women's College of the University of North Carolina. So when it comes to the ISJL region, I'm pretty much covered!

It has always amazed me that, when I tell people that Peter went to Jewish summer camp in Mississippi, the response is always: "I didn't know that there are Jews in Mississippi." This is true even of the of my own congregation, Temple Micah, in Washington, DC – a wonderful community not that far from the South, but still learning of its stories. Providing support to families and individuals, especially in small communities, is critical to keeping Judaism alive and well! That's why I continue my support to this day.



Arty Finkelberg

I first got involved with the ISJL when (ISJL founder) Macy B. Hart wanted to discuss an idea that he had been thinking about. So, I thought, all right, Macy, what's your crazy, overly-ambitious idea? He described

his mission of what he wanted to achieve – to reach out to small communities that didn't have a synagogue, or a rabbi, or Jewish support. As I suspected, it sounded overly ambitious.

But it also made a lot of sense.

Since that early conversation, it's been an amazing experience to witness the growth and the success and to see the impact the ISJL has had on communities. I grew up in the Bronx, where there were plenty of Jews, plenty of synagogues, and plenty of opportunities for Jewish community. When I visited Jackson, Mississippi, for the first time while interviewing for a job, I was pleasantly surprised to find a vibrant Jewish life here. In fact, it was Michele Schipper's dad, Irv Feldman, who convinced me of the local Jewish community's deep hospitality. He graciously took time from his busy lunch hour to discuss Beth Israel Congregation and Jewish life here in Jackson. Truly, he convinced me to move here—for a poignant, personal reason: my father was an immigrant from Ukraine, who eventually saved up enough to open a luncheonette in downtown Manhattan. So, I know that when a restaurant gets crazy busy, you don't leave the register. When I was introduced to Michele's dad, it was a football Saturday and was insanely busy at Olde Tyme Deli... but he left the register, and spent about an hour and a half with me. After that conversation, I thought that if people here are that nice, and we have this

thriving and supportive Jewish community, I'll give it a try!

Jackson has a wonderful synagogue and rabbi still to this day, but that's not the reality for many small southern Jewish communities. The ISJL can bring Jewish learning and celebration to many places that would otherwise have a Jewish void. Community is immediately important when you're the minority of a population. With the loss of Jewish population in so many communities, the ISJL's mission is more essential today than ever before. For those who recognize the importance of building Jewish community, education, celebrating life cycle events and promoting religious practice, supporting the work of the ISJL is crucial to the future of Jewish life in the South. My wife Amy and I are thankful that Macy's dream blossomed. We are grateful to Michele and the entire team at the ISJL for what they do for so many people, and proud to support the ongoing work.

Minette Cooper

I have long been involved with museums and archives in Norfolk, Virginia. So many years ago, my friend told me about the work (ISJL founder) Macy B. Hart was doing to preserve items from shuttered synagogues. Cultural and historical preservation of southern Jewish communities was really of interest to me, and so my involvement with the organization began.

I am originally from Vicksburg, Mississippi, which is not

CONTINUED →

DEVELOPMENT

exactly thriving, as far as the Jewish community goes. After moving to Norfolk, a thriving Jewish community, I became very involved here and served as president of our congregation. During my time as congregational president here in Norfolk, I spent a lot of time going back and forth from Virginia to Vicksburg, visiting my parents and extended family while they were still alive. I was very intrigued with the idea that the ISJL could help their congregation.

One year, my kids and I were in Vicksburg over Christmas weekend with extended family. There were about seven of us and we walked into Anshe Chesed and we made the minyan (this refers to the minimum of 10 Jewish adults required to be together in order for some prayers to be said). Without us, there would not have been a minyan. I made sure my kids realized that if they didn't participate, there wouldn't be anyone to carry on Judaism in the area. It was very

powerful. That's why you have to get young people involved.



Esther Polland

I first became involved when ISJL was still the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. Sometime in the late 90's I reconnected with (ISJL founder) Macy B. Hart, who I had known at the University of Texas, when he was recognized at the Federation's General Assembly for receiving the Covenant Foundation Award. I was impressed with his vision, and what he had already

accomplished, and became a supporter.

As a Texan, I never really thought of myself as being from the South. But the history of Jews in small towns in the South, including Texas (where my family had settled in the 1800s), is very much the same and it's important that it be preserved. Texas is in the ISJL's region, and I'm glad my home state gets to benefit from the resources the organization provides.

I continue to appreciate not only what the ISJL does in isolated and underserved communities, or in small congregations with limited resources, but also its ability to provide and enhance the religious school curriculum in larger congregations, too. It's crucial to connect with and support Jews' ability to live meaningful Jewish lives wherever they choose to live, and the ISJL is the model for making that happen.

Olivia is excited to connect with friends and supporters of the ISJL.

To schedule a time to chat with her, reach out anytime to ozale@isjl.org.

To make a contribution to the ISJL online, visit www.isjl.org/donate.

MEET THE BOARD

KATHRYN WIENER: A BOARD MEMBER “FROM THE BEGINNING”

Kathryn and her late husband, Julian, are incredible examples of community leadership. In the Jewish and secular communities near and dear to their hearts, they never shied away from stepping up to do what was needed.

Kathryn and Julian were the first chairs of the Board of Directors for the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, the precursor to the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL). When they first got involved in the organization, Julian had recently retired from his urology practice and had the time to really commit to growing a new project and leading a Board of Directors. Kathryn had majored in art history, and was very interested in the museum world. This was something they could do together, and their combined talents helped establish a firm foundation for the organization to move forward.

“The ISJL has grown so much, and fills so many of the various needs of the community,” Kathryn reflects. “The ISJL sees a need and then answers that need.

The ISJL has been very judicious in hiring the right people for the right job. If a community needs something, there’s someone on staff who can meet that need.”

Kathryn feels that the ISJL’s Jewish Education program, including the curriculum, is particularly important. “Many synagogue schools in our region don’t have the resources to access the kind of support they need. The ISJL provides the basics and beyond to

ensure their religious schools can thrive.”

Kathryn, who still serves as an Ex-Officio on the ISJL Board of Directors, is pleased that her daughter, Mary, is also on the board. The continued family involvement is a source of pride, and, she believes that she and Julian set an example for their children and grandchildren.



Kathryn and Mary Wiener

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In August 2023, longtime ISIL staff member Shirley Friedman Eriksen passed away. She is remembered fondly by board and staff, particularly every rabbi for whom she served as administrative assistant. She is also remembered by her beloved family and friends. This image shared by a friend is Shirley's Biloxi High School 1966 portrait. May her memory be a blessing.

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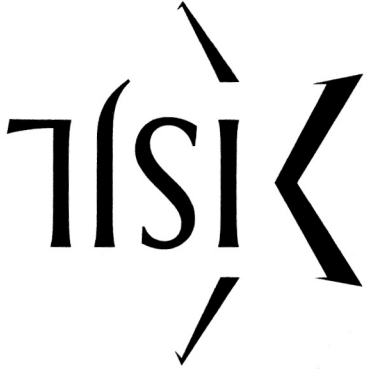
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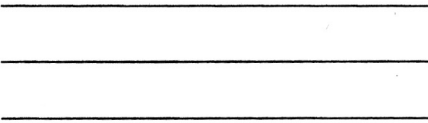


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