

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 Sholom of Huntsville, Alabama plan for the religious school year ahead at the 2004 Education Conference. Photo by Joe Finkelstein.

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.



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
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Message From the Institute Board Chair



The mission statement of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life reads, "to preserve and document the practice, culture and legacy of Judaism in the South." I remember the meetings several years ago where our staff and our board sorted through competing visions and diverging priorities to arrive at a sentence that could summarize our objectives. We agreed that part of our work was to ease the transition for those communities that were irreversibly shrinking. The endgame in that case, was to "document." But also, we focused on the work of "preservation." Not so much in the context of restoring old buildings or maintaining cemeteries, but rather "to preserve" - meaning surviving, even thriving.

In thinking about my role in guiding the Institute's direction, the consolidation of the mission into key concepts has provided clarity for me. I have come to consider that "practice, culture and legacy" can be further summarized as "family." Jewish practice is family-centered. Torah is in fact the stories of our ancient families. Even as Abraham's relationship with God begins, he is challenged to sacrifice his son. Each succeeding generation tells the story of family struggle or of family commitment. Jewish culture is family-centered. We celebrate as families. We study, we love, we dance, we eat, and we give...as families. And what is Jewish legacy if not family? Do we not honor our parents, and theirs, as a central commandment? When we seek to fill the large shoes of our parents, we obey this *mitzvah*.

If we enable Jewish families to thrive then our mission is fulfilled.

The ISJL focuses its resources on enabling families. When a community has no rabbi to help celebrate a birth, or mourn a death, or brighten a gathering, or interpret our traditions...then we are there. When parents step forward to teach their children how to be Jews, but they have no training, and they have no curriculum...then we are there. When our seniors need to record their story, leave their voice, their legacy...we are there. When families wish to pool resources to offer the wider community something to enjoy: films, lectures, books, foods...then the ISJL is there to help.

This month, I have been thinking a lot about family. You see, I am one of those trying to live up to a legacy. I could do much worse than to use my own parents as models. They have given humbly of themselves to their own family, casting a wide net of love, support, and inclusion. They spend untold hours every week leading efforts to sustain Judaism around the world. Wedged in between family and international causes, they manage to be leaders in their hometown community. All of this, they do together. So it is natural for me to summarize our support of Jewish causes in terms of supporting Jewish families. For me, Pat and Jerry Tanenbaum provide the example and the inspiration. As I wish them a truly golden 50th wedding anniversary this June, I hope you will all join me in celebrating your own family's legacies, and in preserving our collective families' traditions, values, and love. *Yasher Koach* and much love, Mom and Dad.

L'shalom

Jay Tanenbaum

Message from the Institute President



Thank you, thank you, and thank you. That is the message I want to send to all of our friends and supporters. In just a bit over five years the Institute of Southern Jewish Life has seen its impact grow as we have delivered much-needed programs. Our staff has received a tremendous welcome in communities that are embracing Jewish programs that had long ago disappeared from their regular menu. We have begun to raise the level of Jewish life and education in the normally underserved, isolated, or neglected communities outside the major urban areas. As we make plans to increase our staff, we hope to have an even greater impact on Jewish life in our region in the future.

It has long troubled me that the national leadership of the Jewish community has missed the relationship between rising unaffiliation, low Jewish literacy, and the lack of attention paid to the outlying areas. Jewish education in one form or another, for example, seems to be the top priority of all Movements, organizations, and funders. Yet, it seems that most all of the resources are devoted to the communities that have "the best numbers." Who is devoting resources to the hinterlands? Why is "how many people are you serving" the first question asked by community leaders and philanthropists? Don't 75% of us move at some point in our lives? Is it surprising when no resources are devoted to non-urban areas that the connection to a Jewish community is not there? If for so many years few resources were devoted to places with "no numbers," why are we still dumbfounded by rising unaffiliation rates in large cities? Is it really surprising that someone who grew up in a small town or city with few Jewish educational resources chooses not to affiliate once they move to the large metropolitan area?

The ISJL is an aggressive organization. We will ask many more questions in the coming years as we seek to provide answers that become solutions that challenge the prevailing culture. The Institute is very focused on a mission that includes a bright Jewish future different from the one represented by the 1990 and 2000 Jewish population studies. We choose not to settle for the status quo, but rather create a direction that gives hope and strength. This organization will continue to define K'lal Yisrael as all the Jews wherever they are and not just in Israel and the Former Soviet Union. The needs of small and mid-sized American communities that do not have day schools, JCCs and other resources are often taken for granted or not understood by those who have them. Yet the needs of these smaller communities have to be met if we want to change how the future unfolds. If we as a Jewish community don't do something differently then we cannot be "surprised" at the next population study or the one after that.

I hope these ideas become a topic for discussion within the Jewish world. But in the meantime, we at the ISJL are moving ahead with a common sense approach to an issue the underserved and isolated have always wrestled with, that of survival amidst limited resources. We represent a challenge to the norm. Judging by our successes and our support, both financial and through participation, I think we have a bright future ahead.

Read on as you digest just how excited our staff and Board is to be "in the mix" for building tomorrow. As always, thanks to those who support us. Please consider this an invitation to join us if you have not already.

Macy B. Hart

ISJL Welcomes New Education Fellows

With the upcoming departure of the ISJL's first Education Fellows, the Institute has been busy recruiting new candidates to fill their shoes. Over the past year, Amanda Abrams and Beth Kander traveled to colleges, career fairs, and Hillel events to recruit dynamic individuals for the fellowship. We are pleased to announce our two newest Fellows who will be officially introduced at this summer's Education Conference on June 19th – 21st.



Debbie Ovadia

Debbie Ovadia

The ISJL welcomed Debbie Ovadia to their staff in February. Debbie is a second-generation immigrant and a proud Sephardic Jew whose parents were born in Egypt. Although she was born and raised in Southern California, Debbie truly enjoys the beauty and heart of the Deep South. She is a recent graduate from the University of California Irvine, where she majored in Social Ecology. Since February, she has been working closely with ISJL Fellows Beth Kander and Amanda Abrams preparing for this summer's transition.



Russel Neiss

Judaism has always been part of her life, from attending religious school as a child to exploring Israel with the help of Birthright. Her Jewish experiences have been more than just learning about her religion. They

have instilled within her a strong Jewish identity. As an ISJL Education Fellow, Debbie is excited to have an opportunity to strengthen the Jewish identity of young people across the region.

Russel Neiss

Prior to moving to Jackson, Mississippi, Russel Neiss spent most of his life in New York City. He is a recent graduate of the Honors College at Queens College in New York, where he majored in Religious Studies and Jewish Studies. He also served as co-editor-in-chief of the college's Journal of Jewish Studies.

For the past four years, Russel has served as an advisor for a local chapter of United Synagogue Youth at the Forrest Hills Jewish Center. Over the past two summers, Russel participated in intensive Yiddish study programs at Columbia University, the YIVO Institute, as well as Vilnius University in Lithuania. His experiences in Lithuania allowed him to be part of a Jewish community quite different from his own and led to his interest to work with underserved communities in the United States. Russel is excited to become part of the education team at the ISJL and to meet the wonderful people in the communities with which we work.

Please drop our new Fellows a note at ovadia@isjl.org and neiss@isjl.org to welcome them to the South!

Farewell Founding Fellows

Amanda Abrams:

The past two years seem like a blur, yet when I think back to vivid memories of people I've met, congregations I've worked with, and roadside restaurants I've visited, I'm reminded of what an incredible experience it has been to serve as an Education Fellow.



Amanda Abrams

Though I spent my childhood here, in returning to the South, my eyes have been opened to the unique challenges faced by isolated congregations. I have been reminded of the difficulty of raising children with a strong Jewish identity in places where there are few Jewish peers. I have been amazed by the dedication of parents, teachers, and lay leaders who give so much of themselves to provide Jewish experiences for the children of their communities.

I feel honored to have been a part of so many congregations, and to have been made to feel so welcome, as if it were my home. Each one of you whom I have met has left an indelible mark on my heart and my soul. While I am certainly sad to be leaving the ISJL, I feel proud that I have contributed to its growth and success over the past two years.

My experiences here have inspired me to continue serving the Jewish community. In June, I will be entering a dual Masters of Jewish Communal Service and Masters of Business Administration program at Hebrew Union College and the University of Southern California. As a Jewish professional, I hope to serve as an advocate for smaller communities.

I feel confident knowing that we are leaving the education program in the hands of talented new fellows. I thank you all for this wonderful experience.



Beth Kander

Beth Kander:

The Hebrew word for farewell, *l'hitraot*, literally means "until I see you (again)." I can think of no more appropriate word as I finish my fellowship and prepare to leave Jackson. More than just Jackson – while Jackson has truly become my home over these past two years, I will miss my other homes throughout Alabama (and Northern Florida!), Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

I cannot imagine two years better spent; personally and professionally, I have grown in so many new directions. I am so grateful for the warmth, humor, and wisdom that I consistently encountered. I feel incredibly lucky to have been met with such welcome, and to have had the opportunity to work directly with my community. I hope that I have made some impact during my time here. There is no doubt in my mind that my experiences here, and the people I have come to know and love here, have impacted me.

The skills and connections I have gained not only enriched my life, but also shaped my graduate school decision. In hopes of continuing a life of adventure, social service, and doing my part to save the world, I will be attending the University of Michigan's School of Social Work. I am looking forward to this next phase of learning and growing, but I am not looking forward to saying goodbye. Nor am I looking forward to scraping the ice off my car (which will probably begin in early October). These are the reasons why I'm not saying goodbye – because just as I cannot imagine not having come to the South, at this point I can't imagine not returning. So with gratitude, affection, and sincerity, all I'll say is *l'hitraot, y'all!*"

Message from ISJL Rabbi Debra Kassoff:



Photo by Alec Kassoff.

I'd had a difficult couple of weeks. First I was sick, then my husband Alec. Two of our cousins passed away, as did an old friend. The semester was drawing to a close with papers due and exams looming, and between illnesses and travel for funerals, Alec seemed more stressed out than I'd ever seen him in the nine years since we met. And for me, work ground on. I felt weary, uninspired, empty.

It's a terrible feeling for anyone to have—this sense of the well running dry, and nothing but drought on the horizon. I found it particularly troubling, considering that much of my work centers around Torah, the source of our strength and our wisdom. It can be all the more distressing for any of us when we know that, our own blank exhaustion notwithstanding, others are still counting on us for support, whether in the form of empathy or expertise, or just getting dinner on the table. How do we give to others when we feel we have nothing left to give?

Years ago, a co-worker once said that he thought of me as an endlessly overflowing vessel, filled from above, able to give to others without ever depleting my own reserves of energy and spirit. It was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to me, not only because of what it said about my capacity to give, but also because of what it said about my ability, at that point in my life uncultivated and unconscious, to receive, to be replenished.

Now, feeling like nothing so much as an overturned vessel, off-balance and drained dry, I recalled with longing a time in my life when inspiration and energy flowed freely, and I wondered what had happened. How could I have been filled to overflowing then, parched and empty now?

Mayyim hayyim, the waters of life, Judaism teaches us, occasionally run dry. "Like a deer crying out for springs of water, so my soul cries out for you, O God," wrote the psalmist. "My soul thirsts for God . . . my soul is downcast," we read in Psalm 42. And this is not only a metaphor: water, real water, runs like a motif throughout the Torah. Abraham welcomed his guests by bathing their feet in water, and he laid claim to the land near Beer Sheva by digging wells. After Abraham's death, the Philistines filled in the wells, and then years later Isaac "dug anew the wells" and "gave them the same names that his father had given them" (Gen. 26).

Even here, amidst wells and foot-washings, the water signifies more than itself: it creates community and establishes connections—among people, with the land, and across generations. The water flows, and there is comfort,

hospitality, and the potential for life and creativity and, eventually, a whole new civilization.

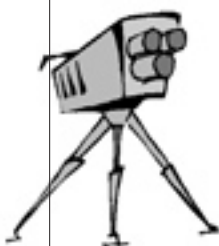
And sometimes the water dries up, and there is despair. In the wilderness, the Israelites grumble bitterly over the lack of water. Moses loses his chance to see the Promised Land when he responds angrily to their complaints. We learn: the water is not always there when we want it, or need it. A lesson of the forty years: the water comes from God, and it is always a gift. It allows us to live, and to live a life of meaning. But we, humans, cannot fully control our access to its source.

A *mikvah*, or ritual immersion pool, must contain *mayyim hayyim*, living waters. This means that its waters must come into contact with (or "kiss," in the parlance of *mikvah*) waters from a natural source, a supply much larger than itself—from a stream, or the ocean, or rain—great, planetary waters. Perhaps herein lies the secret of my own recent feelings of depletion, or of Moses'—when our burden begins to feel too heavy, we can become overwhelmed, and focus on little else. We become cut off from everything larger than ourselves, our task, cut off from the rejuvenating waters.

When Moses remembered to ask God for help, the waters flowed. When I gave up trying to move mountains by myself, I received gifts of friendship and kindness and renewal.

Our holiday calendar reflects this principle. At Shavuot, we receive the Torah. It is the last of the three pilgrimage festivals before the New Year, and a climax: God has given us the stories and the statutes and a structure to guide our lives. We feel powerful, exultant. But then the long, hot summer comes. Our focus dissipates. Our intentions wander. Forty years in the wilderness. Tisha B'Av, the destruction of the Temple. And we realize that we cannot sustain ourselves alone. We participate in something much larger than ourselves, as great as creation itself, and only by acknowledging our limitations do we receive its gifts. And so we find ourselves once again preparing for the Days of Atonement, as the weather cools, and the rains return to the land of Israel.

We lose our balance. We run dry once in a while. But our tradition promises us this much: if we can remain open to the gifts of God and Torah, of the people and of the world around us—if we remember that our vessel is relatively small and that the living waters are quite great—we will soon overflow with shared blessing once more.



Need an anniversary or birthday gift for the family member who has everything? Why not give the gift that will last forever? The ISJL can help.

Preserve your Family's History

What better gift than to arrange for an *oral history* of your beloved family member(s). We can set up a video oral history interview and present your family with a VHS copy and a beautifully engraved bound transcript. You will be preserving the cherished stories of

your ancestors for your family and helping the Institute to continue to capture the history of our southern Jewish heritage before it is lost forever. For more information, contact us at 601-362-6357 or information@msje.org

Dash Moore Brings *G.I. Jews* to Southern Audiences

In March, esteemed American Jewish historian Deborah Dash Moore inaugurated the 2005 season of the Southern States Literary Series with a group of lectures about her new book "G.I. Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation." She started out in New Orleans, where she spoke in the impressive Louisiana Memorial Pavilion of the National D-Day Museum. With actual World War II aircraft and ships surrounding her, Dash

Dr. Deborah Dash Moore signing books and sharing stories after her presentation in Gulfport. Photo by Donald Yule.



Moore recounted the special challenges and triumphs Jewish soldiers experienced. From there, she traveled to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where she spoke to an audience at the University of Southern Mississippi. The next day, Dr. Dash Moore toured Camp Shelby, where many Jewish soldiers trained during the war. Finally, she spoke to a large audience at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College in Gulfport. At each stop, Jewish veterans came up and shared their own personal stories with Dash Moore. She was especially gratified to see many young people in the audience, who were interested in learning about the sacrifices of their grandparents.

The "G.I. Jews" program perfectly embodied the cultural mission of the ISJL: to bring "big city" programs to smaller Southern communities. Indeed, a few days before she came South, Dash Moore was the headlining program at the 92nd Street Y in New York City. But the ISJL cannot do this alone, and we wish to thank the Jewish Endowment Foundation of New Orleans and the Mississippi Humanities Council for their strong support of the program. We would also like to thank our local co-sponsors, including the National D-Day Museum, the Jewish Studies Department of Tulane University, the History Department of the University of Southern Mississippi, Congregation B'nai Israel, the Military Museum of Mississippi, the George H. Altbach Unit #1957 of B'nai B'rith, and Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College.

Look for future editions of the Southern States Literary Series coming soon.

EDUCATION EXPERIENCE continued from page 1: Guest faculty member Gary Shapiro of the CFJE discusses how to teach the Jewish holidays at the annual Education Conference. Photo by Neola Young.



organizations devoted to Jewish education. This interactive early childhood education program is designed to inspire young Jewish children to embrace Judaism by allowing them to explore their interests at their own pace. It will have "discovery boxes," self-contained activity centers where children can explore everything from music to cooking. In addition, the early childhood education curriculum includes a family component so Jewish learning can be enhanced and shared at home.

Education Fellows: The Next Generation

This summer also marks a time of transition for the education department as Beth Kander and Amanda Abrams complete their two-year Fellowships. As the education program continues to expand, the department will now have at least three Education Fellows serving communities in the 2005-2006 school year. At press time, the ISJL has hired two new Fellows, Debbie Ovadia and Russel Neiss. Beth and Amanda have set a remarkable standard for future Fellows, and we are confident that the new team will continue the program's tremendous success.

It has been incredibly exciting to see our abstract plans for an education program come to life as an innovative project that is touching the lives of young Jews across the region. The ISJL is grateful for the participation and enthusiasm of everyone involved in the education project, and we look forward to a bright future ahead.

MSJE Looks to Expand to Meridian

The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience was conceived as a series of branches, with no central location. Currently, the MSJE has sites in Utica and Natchez, Mississippi. In the past year, the museum has begun to work on creating a new site in Meridian, Mississippi. In many ways the Jewish story in Meridian typifies the Southern Jewish Experience, of Jews playing an active role in the life of their community alongside their Christian neighbors. While the museum will interpret the many civic contributions of Meridian Jews, the rehabilitation and use of several downtown buildings established by Jews will serve as a tribute to the Jewish role in the development of this former railroad center. The museum will become a central feature of the story of the Southern Jewish Experience.

The Jewish story in Meridian is unique because Jews have played a prominent role in the city since its founding. Meridian was once a bustling, commercial community whose economic vitality was linked to the railroad. When the rails were first laid in the years after the Civil War, several German Jewish families were among those who founded the town of Meridian on the railway. The town grew prosperous as did many of its Jewish families, who built several impressive structures in the heart of downtown. These buildings included the Lamar Hotel, the Rosenbaum Building, the Threefoot Building, and the Marks-Rothenberg building, which contains a 19th century jewel of an opera house on its second floor, that still has George Gershwin's signature on a dressing room wall.

This downtown is being revitalized under the vision and direction of Mayor John Robert Smith. Mayor Smith has enlisted the support of the National Trust for Historic Preservation to demonstrate that downtowns in small cities across America can thrive through imaginative private-public partnerships. Mayor Smith, has been a catalyst for the \$35,000,000 rehabilitation of the Marks-Rothenberg building by Mississippi State University for use as the Riley Performing Arts Center, to open in 2006. Other downtown development and revitalization plans are also in the works, including restoring the city's African American Business District.

Indeed, Meridian has a significant civil rights history, in which Jews played an important role. In 1968, Klan members bombed Meridian's temple and attempted to bomb the home of the outspoken Meyer Davidson. Most

Once the home of a thriving Jewish-owned business, the Marks-Rothenberg Building and the Grand Opera House are now the centerpieces of Meridian's downtown revitalization. Photo by Neola Young.



The first floor of the old Kress Building is the proposed location for the new MSJE site in Meridian. Photo by Neola Young.

famously, Meridian was the home of James Chaney and the base of Michael and Rita Schwerner, two Jews who were in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964 assisting with black voter registration. With the newly arrived Andrew Goodman, Chaney and Michael Schwerner left Meridian on a Sunday for the nearby town of Philadelphia and Neshoba County to investigate a recent church burning. They were kidnapped, killed and buried in an earthen dam outside of Philadelphia by Klan members who organized in Meridian. This event reverberated across the country and led directly to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Thus Meridian was seared into the American conscious, and its history is linked by U.S. Highway 80 with those other Civil Rights battlegrounds of Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. Much has changed for the better over the last 40 years and, with this distance, there is now great interest in the exploration of this crucial movement in 20th Century American History. The Jewish experience of Meridian is inextricably woven into this history.

The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience aims to illuminate the Jewish legacy of the region through its museum in the heart of Meridian's downtown. Embracing the entirety of the Jewish experience in Meridian, the museum will serve as a central stop on the Jewish "cultural corridor" between Dallas and Atlanta. Design and development are slated to begin in the summer of 2005 with the help of a \$70,000 grant from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Museum construction and exhibit installation will await the rehabilitation of the Kress Building, the projected site for the museum. The Kress Building is adjacent to the Riley Performing Arts Center and across the street from the Threefoot Building, placing the future museum on the center stage of downtown Meridian.

The common history of Jews and the City of Meridian is extraordinary, and the museum will tell this story while preserving the Southern Jewish legacy. It's especially fitting that the museum will help in the revitalization of Meridian, a city that local Jews have loved and nurtured for 140 years.

ISJL Board Tours Selma & Meridian

In February of 2005, the ISJL board traveled to Meridian, Mississippi and Selma, Alabama to investigate the possible expansion of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. In Selma, members of Temple Mishkan Israel gave the board a tour of their historic and beautiful 1899 synagogue, and spoke to the challenges the congregation faces. ISJL board member and Selma native Rusty Palmer then led the group on a driving tour of Selma. The congregation has undertaken a fundraising

campaign to restore the building and establish an operating endowment to support making the synagogue a branch of the MSJE.

The board then traveled to Meridian, where Mayor John Robert Smith outlined his plans for downtown revival, stressing the important role the MSJE will play. The mayor then led the group on a walking tour of downtown Meridian, including the Kress Building, the potential site for the museum. The board also got to see the tremendous restoration work going on in the old Marks-Rothenberg Building and Grand Opera House. Barbaree Rosenbaum Heaster and her husband Harold hosted the board in their lovely apartment in the fully restored Rosenbaum building, where the board saw first hand the tremendous potential of historic preservation. While much work remains to be done on these museum projects, the MSJE is excited to help preserve the history of these Jewish communities and be a part of the redevelopment of downtown Selma and Meridian.



Left: Standing on the bimah at Mishkan Israel, ISJL President Macy Hart speaks to the board about making the Selma synagogue a site for the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. Photo by Bruce Gordon.

Below: Mayor John Robert Smith gives the ISJL board a walking tour of downtown Meridian. Photo by Bruce Gordon.



Southern Jewish Mayors List Ever Growing

In the last issue of *Circa*, we mentioned that the ISJL History Department had compiled a list of 122 Jewish mayors who have served Southern towns and cities. We directed readers to view the list on our website and solicited the names of those we had omitted. The response

was overwhelming. As of the deadline for this issue, our list now has 147 Jewish mayors in 102 different Southern towns. The list continues to grow, and we again invite you to view it at www.isjl.org and suggest additions or changes.

“Marking” Mississippi’s First Synagogue

Although the Conoco station at the corner of South and President Streets on the industrial side of downtown Jackson bears little resemblance to a historic site, recent events would prove otherwise. On April 15, 2005, the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life and the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation unveiled a new Mississippi State Historical Marker signifying the site of the first Jewish house of worship in the state. On an unusually warm Friday afternoon in a vacant county parking lot, members of the community gathered to commemorate this important landmark. With ISJL President Macy B. Hart presiding, speakers included: Jackson Mayor Harvey Johnson; Hank Holmes, Director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Reverend Duncan M. Gray III, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi; ISJL Historian Dr. Stuart Rockoff; and Jerry Klinger, President of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation. ISJL Rabbi Debra Kassoff gave the invocation and benediction. Dr. Stuart Rockoff, Director of the ISJL History Department, views the Mississippi marker as an appropriate symbol for the important role Jews have played in the development of the state: “although Jews have always been a tiny minority of the state’s population, they have been in

the forefront of the economic, cultural, and political development of Mississippi.”

The history of this first synagogue began in 1867 when a small group of Jews calling themselves Congregation Beth Israel purchased land in Jackson and built a small wood frame building. Although Jackson’s Beth Israel was the third Jewish congregation founded in the state, after Vicksburg and Natchez, their modest wood frame building predated the grand synagogues built by these earlier congregations. In the course of researching the marker application, Rockoff was able to debunk a widely held myth about Beth Israel’s first synagogue: “People in the congregation have often said that the first synagogue was burned by the Union during the Civil War, but I was not able to find any evidence for this.” The first synagogue did burn in 1874. According to Dr. Rockoff, “Jackson’s Jews likely conflated this later fire with the Union occupation since it helped them to assert their credentials as true Southerners, that they too had suffered at the hands of the Northern occupiers.”

The marker is part of a national project by the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation to locate the site of the first synagogue in each of the 50 states and have an official historical marker placed there. The Institute of Southern Jewish Life is a regional co-sponsor of this project, and the Mississippi marker is the first achievement of this partnership. According to Jerry Klinger, the founder and president of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, these markers “are a way to show the deep roots that Jews have in this country. Jews have been here since the country’s beginning.”

Speakers at the unveiling ceremony stand in front of the new marker. 1 to r: H.T. Holmes, Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray III, Mayor Harvey Johnson, Jerry Klinger, Macy Hart, Rabbi Debra Kassoff, Dr. Stuart Rockoff. Photo by Chris Goodwin, courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.



ISJL Helps Young Southerners Take Religious Action

In April, Rabbi Debra Kassoff traveled to Washington, D.C. with two Mississippi high school students for a four-day L'taken Seminar, organized by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. The trip resulted from a collaboration of the ISJL, NFTY-Southern, and Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, Mississippi. At the Seminar the two students—Emily Mosow of Hebrew Union Congregation in Greenville, Mississippi, and Albert Oppenheimer of Congregation B'nai Israel in Starkville, Mississippi—joined hundreds of other Jewish youth who had gathered for a lesson in Jewish social justice and the American legislative process, an invigorating dose of D.C. sight-seeing, and the chance to make lots of new friends.

The program culminated in lobbying appointments on Capitol Hill, where Emily and Albert had the opportunity to make presentations for aides to Senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochran and Representatives Chip Pickering and Bennie Thompson on current issues that each of the students had chosen. Here's what they had to say about their experiences:

Albert Oppenheimer:

The second weekend in April I was given a chance that few have, and even fewer take advantage of. I was given the opportunity to help fix the world.

Okay, I realize that I'd look pretty silly looming over the planet with a hammer and some nails. That's not the idea I'm trying to get across. I was able to perform "Tikkun Olam," fixing the world through prayer and action, at the

L'Taken Seminar hosted by the Religious Action Center (RAC). The idea of world fixing is a gigantically difficult concept to grasp, seeing as how the task is so immense and we are so very small in comparison. The Jewish attitude regarding the principle of "Tikkun Olam" has always been that in no way is any individual required to complete the work, but neither is anyone free to abstain from it. Even ants can move a mountain, given enough time and incentive. So, good little ant that I am, I decided to grab this opportunity and hopped a plane to Washington D.C.

The event included an amazing variety of people and activities to keep us occupied. There were many politically motivated youngsters attending the conference from all parts of the United States, many of whom had never even met a Mississippian before! The entire weekend culminated with lobbying our members of congress. The RAC legislative staff coached us in the Reform Movement's view on various political issues and actual legislation being debated in congress. I chose to talk about my opposition to two bills dealing with government and religion. The first would amend the tax code to permit houses of worship to engage directly in political campaigning while maintaining their tax-exempt status. The other would allow the display of the Ten Commandments in government buildings. I argued to legislative aides for Mississippi's senators and congressmen that both bills threatened the constitutional separation of church and state.

Overall, it was an extremely enriching experience, both intellectually and spiritually. I met lots of new people and learned a great deal.

Emily Mosow:

I thought the seminar was totally amazing. I learned the ability of what standing up and giving your opinion to those in office can accomplish. I also enjoyed learning about issues I had not really heard about such as the crisis in Sudan and the filibuster. I enjoyed visiting the Holocaust museum and the offices of the senators and congressmen. I must say though, the most enjoyable thing was being able to meet other teenagers from around the country, instead of just around the South.

In addition to all of their tremendous learning and hard work, Emily and Albert, who are the first students from the state of Mississippi ever to participate in this program, had the opportunity to visit the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the F.D.R. Memorial, and the neighborhoods of Old Town Alexandria and Georgetown. We congratulate them on their successful completion of the L'taken Seminar.

We look forward to bringing even more students, grades 10-12, from small Southern congregations to next year's seminar (dates to be determined). If you are interested in learning more, contact Rabbi Debra Kassoff at 601.362.6357 or kassoff@isjl.org.

Emily Mosow and Albert Oppenheimer pose with Rabbi Kassoff on the mall in Washington D.C.



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The 2005 ISJL Annual Campaign is in full swing. We are pleased to report that gifts to the Institute are at an all time high. Within Circa, you can see our success and feel the positive impact that we are having across the South. Your contribution will ensure that we can continue to move forward with these exciting programs. *Please take a moment today to make your gift to ISJL with the enclosed envelope.*

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Sababa - Summer Edition

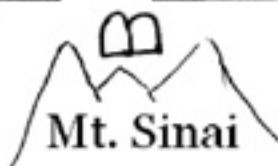
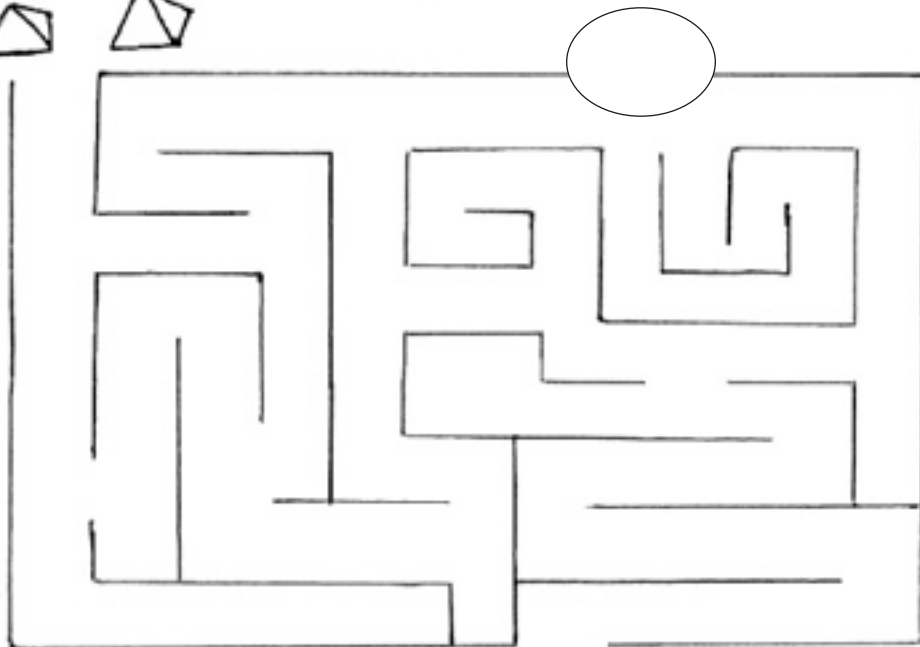
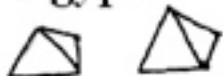


Hey parents, teachers, and students! It's time to enjoy the beauty of spring and celebrate the Jewish holidays that come at the beginning and end of this time of year. This Sababa page focuses two related Jewish holidays Passover and Shavuot.

Passover is a holiday when we remember how the Jews were freed from slavery in Egypt. After the Jews were set free, Moses took them to Mt. Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments and the Torah. Shavuot is a holiday that celebrates the receiving of the Torah. Shavuot is also a harvest holiday, celebrating the first harvest after Passover. There is a period of 49 seven weeks where each day is counted between Passover and Shavuot so that farmers know when they can begin to harvest; this period is called the Omer.

Help the Jewish people find their way out of Egypt and to Mt Sinai where they received the 10 Commandments and Torah.

Egypt



Which of the following foods is associated with Passover and which with Shavuot?

a) Ice cream



b) Matzah Ball soup



c) Honey



Note: Dairy foods like ice cream are eaten on Shavuot because we think of God's Torah as milk and honey bringing health and sweetness to our lives.

Answers:
Shavuot: a & c
Passover: b

Did you know that Shavuot means weeks, for the 7 weeks farmers had to wait from Passover before they could collect their first harvest?

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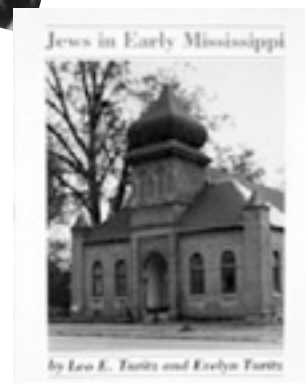
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This one-hour PBS documentary by Mike DeWitt, with narration by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Alfred Uhry, is a unique portrait of Jewish life in "the most Southern place on Earth"—the Mississippi Delta.

57 minutes, DVD: \$22.95



Jews in Early Mississippi

by Leo E. Turitz and Evelyn Turitz

This one-of-a-kind volume includes more than 400 photographs depicting the history of Mississippi Jewry between the 1840s and 1900. A must have if your family history includes Mississippi.

Paperback Price: \$25



Shalom Y'all: Images of Jewish Life in the American South

by Bill Aron and Vicki Reikes Fox

This book tells the unique story of the Southern Jewish Experience through three distinct voices: Bill Aron's evocative photographs, a narrative woven into descriptive captions, and personal stories, memories and anecdotes told by Southern Jews. The book covers all aspects of Southern Jewish life from chopped liver to bagels and grits, from synagogue to civil war cemeteries, from towns named for their Jewish forbearers to the vibrant communities that exist today. A fitting gift for anyone who has Southern Jewish roots. Photos by Bill Aron.

Hardcover Price: \$25

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ISJL Website Reaches New Heights:

If you haven't visited the ISJL website recently, you might be surprised by what you find there. In the coming months, the website will undergo a major expansion as we debut individual pages for each department. Currently, descriptions for most programs can be found by following links from the home page—www.isjl.org—but by the summer, each department will have its own set of pages which will contain constantly updated information about new and exciting programs and services. Each department page will have a complete list of upcoming speaking engagements and programs. If you would like to know where our Education Fellows are going, or where our historian will be speaking as a scholar-in-residence, you can now log on and find out. In addition to adding more information about the various ISJL departments, we will also be working to make the site easier to use and navigate.

The History Department has plans to put more historical content on the website, starting with Dr. Stuart Rockoff's every growing list of Southern Jewish Mayors. Look for more interesting historical information in the months ahead as the department uses the web to bring the story of Southern Jews to a wider audience.

Over the past year, the ISJL website has seen the number of monthly "hits" double, as our web traffic has increased every month. People all around the world, from Mississippi to Israel, have pointed their browsers to www.isjl.org to learn more about the Institute and the Southern Jewish Experience.

If you have suggestions or comments about the website, please contact the webmaster at (601)-362-6357 or email at nyoung@msje.org.

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צא ולמד

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