

Winter 2015

CIRCA

Newsletter of the Goldring/ Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life



#MyISJL



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On the Cover:

Bat Mitzvah student Sarah Cooper from Auburn, Alabama signs in to Skype once a week for her lesson with ISJL Rabbi Jeremy Simons.

CIRCA

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IN THIS ISSUE OF CIRCA...

As anyone familiar with the ISJL knows, explaining the scope of the organization can be a challenge. With our six departments, our thirteen-state territory, our dozens of community partners, programs, and services... it quickly gets overwhelming.

So about a year ago, we adopted the simple slogan: *This is ISJL*. With that declaration, we could introduce individual elements of the organization, department by department, program by program—because every piece of the puzzle is critical to the ISJL’s big-picture.

A collaborative, trans-denominational religious school. *This is ISJL*.

Putting rabbis on the road to communities with no rabbi of their own. *This is ISJL*.

Bringing entertaining, enriching Jewish cultural programs to communities of all sizes. *This is ISJL*.

We want to keep telling the ISJL story in a personal, powerful way. And what better way than to hear it from the people impacted by the ISJL? That’s why this year, and in this special issue of CIRCA, we are focusing on those voices.

We are inviting people to share their own accounts—*This is my ISJL. This is our ISJL. This is your ISJL*.

And so, these pages are filled with articles and contributions not from ISJL staff and board members, but from our community partners. The Rabbinic Department feature comes from a Mississippi man who decided to have his Bar Mitzvah at age 76, with a little help from the ISJL. The Education Department shares the perspective of a religious school director in Kentucky. Several sojourners to the South share their reflections in the Museum / Special Projects section. Throughout this CIRCA, you will experience the ISJL through the eyes of our partners, our parents and our children.

We would love to hear your ISJL stories, throughout the year. Post to our Facebook page, tag us on Twitter or Instagram and use the hashtag #MyISJL, call or email us anytime. *This is your ISJL*.



.....President's Message



By Leah Hart Tennen

For those of you that don't know me, my name is Leah Sara Hart Tennen and I am Macy B. Hart's favorite oldest daughter.

ABOVE:
Leah Hart Tennen
with her dad Macy
B. Hart.

TOP RIGHT:
Leah dressed as
Macy in 1994

BOTTOM RIGHT:
Leah with her
husband Eric and
two sons.

Macy knows everyone, and everyone knows him. For a long time, especially during my adorable adolescence, I was fiercely determined to be me, Leah Hart, and not "Macy's daughter." In fact, there was an "incident" at a NFTY convention in 1993 where, upon receiving an award, Macy introduced me to everyone. (I was 17. You can imagine my reaction.) Over time I have calmed down quite a bit, even going out of my way sometimes to make sure someone knows that I am, in fact, the daughter of the man himself.

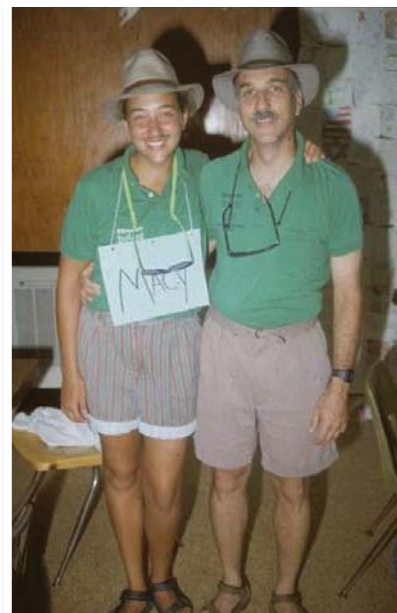
Identifying myself as Macy's daughter is a conversation starter, a relationship builder, and helps create connections with strangers. Ever heard of "Six Degrees of Separation"? Well, with Jews, it's already really three or four degrees, and with someone in the Hart family, it's more like two degrees.

One amazing advantage of being a Southern Jew is the fact that I have never and will never take for granted all the Jewish resources in an area like Boston, where I now live with my husband and two sons. If you grew up in a community with so many Jewish students that public schools are closed for the high holidays, you have never experienced what it's like, trying to explain to your non-Jewish peers why you weren't in school those days. If your lunch table was full

of others eating matzah during Passover then you have no idea what it's like to always be the token Jewish kid coming in to teach your peers about a holiday that happens around Easter, but is nothing like Easter, and why you have to eat weird crackers for a week.

When my husband Eric and I discussed the benefits of different neighborhoods before buying a house, we ranked our priorities. Big Jewish community wasn't high on the list. We agreed that it was up to us to create a Jewish home and involve our family in community events, but we didn't want to live in an area where there were lots and lots of people "just like us." We wanted our kids to grow up in as diverse of an environment as we did, including home, college, and beyond.

The legacy that my parents gave me started many generations ago, and Eric and I are proud to continue it in our own family. We want to truly be part of the community. We want to know everyone... just like Macy.



Board Chair's Message



ABOVE:
ISJL Board Chair
Rachel Reagler
Schulman

BOTTOM RIGHT:
Parents Joanne and
David Reagler
with grandchildren
Sarah and Max
Schulman.

An interview with David and Joanne Reagler, Parents of Board Chair Rachel Reagler Schulman

Over the holidays, ISJL Board Chair Rachel Reagler Schulman visited her parents, who now live in Hot Springs, Arkansas. She talked with them about legacy, Jewish identity, their Southern Jewish roots, and what they think of the ISJL.

Where did you grow up?

Joanne Reagler: New Iberia, Louisiana.

David Reagler: Wynne, Arkansas.

Talk about where you raised your family (us!) and the challenges and rewards of being in the community where we lived...

Joanne: We raised our family in Wynne, Arkansas. Certainly our challenge as a Jewish family there was to give our children a real sense of their Judaism.

David: Joanne drove the children to religious school [in Memphis, Tennessee] every weekend.

Joanne: We tried to create a Jewish home, celebrating Jewish holidays. We were fortunate that the Reaglers were well known in Wynne, and respected, so it was fairly easy to give the children a feeling of self worth. It was important to me that our children feel a part of our Jewish families, both in Wynne and in New Iberia where I grew up, but also a part of the entire Jewish community as a whole.

David: I had very little, if any, "Jewish training." I never had the opportunity to attend religious school. My family and teachers in Wynne, who were

not Jewish, encouraged me to go to a university with a Jewish population and opportunity to make Jewish friends. I found that at Louisiana State University, but Wynne was still home. When I was born, Wynne had a Jewish population of approximately 10-12 families. When we were raising Robin, David and you, there were only 10 Jewish people in Wynne. There was still a sense of community, and in Wynne, our family had a group of non-Jewish friends that loved and cherished us, as well as a very small group of Jewish friends who were like family.

What do you think of the ISJL?

Joanne: I became aware of the ISJL when Macy Hart started the organization. I had such high regard for Macy and what he accomplished at Henry S. Jacobs Camp, I had high hopes for what the ISJL would accomplish as well. When we moved to Hot Springs, I learned of the many activities of the ISJL and its importance in bringing Jewish cultural events to the rural South. The most important effect it has had on our congregation is the education program, which has benefitted both the adult and youth congregants.

David: It has been a wonderful thing for our families. It has enabled my son to teach religious school to his four children and others in our Hot Springs community, which I never could have imagined he would be able to do.

What's your favorite Southern Jewish memory?

David: Making chopped liver with my mother in a wooden chopping bowl with a steel chopper for Jewish holidays, back in Wynne.

Joanne: Being confirmed at age 13 at Temple Gates of Prayer in New Iberia, Louisiana, with all of my family there, being so proud of me.

What does "legacy" mean to you?

Joanne: It makes us realize we are a part of a continuum of a set of values and beliefs that we transmit to our children that we are part of a meaningful and beautiful tradition.

David: Amen.



How the ISJL Helped Me Become Bar Mitzvah... At Age 76

By Steve Koppman

When the invitations for my Bar Mitzvah went out, they read: "STEVE'S BETTER-LATE-THAN-NEVER BAR MITZVAH." After all, I didn't celebrate this milestone until I was seventy-six years old.

So why become Bar Mitzvah, sixty-three years later than most? People asked me this almost comically, and believe me, I asked myself this as well. Was it for guilt, for avoiding a Bar Mitzvah back when I was thirteen? Or guilt for not being "Jewish enough" as an adult?

Not really. It wasn't about guilt at all. For me, it was a calling from God.

During the High Holy Days in 2013 at Anshe Chesed Temple in Vicksburg, MS, I was assisting the rabbi. Most of my life, I thought of myself as a "part time Jew," only half-heartedly participating in Jewish life. That night on the *bimah*, though, I was listening to the rabbi, and holding the holy relic of our faith, the Torah. While standing there, Torah in my arms, I heard a voice calling me. The voice told me to commit to the Bar Mitzvah that I had long ago talked my parents out of making me complete. I don't usually hear messages from God, but this one was unmistakable. After the service, I rushed to talk to the rabbi, and then to my wife Kim (a Catholic). Both said: "Do it!"

And so began a year-long journey. Learning Hebrew is, of course, a lot harder once you tell everyone you're going to do it. After I put this goal out there for the world to know, then came all the stumbling blocks. In addition to the challenge of Hebrew itself, there was my Torah portion. It was the story of Joseph, as a boy. I read it and told Kim: "I don't like this kid." He seemed like an arrogant little



Rabbi Jeremy Simons and Steve Koppman during the Bar Mitzvah ceremony.

jerk, flaunting his father's favoritism, telling his brothers about his dreams and how they would all bow to him. I couldn't stand the guy, and asked the rabbi if I could change Torah portions. He patiently talked me down.

Maybe what I didn't like in Joseph is something we all dislike in ourselves: as young teenagers, weren't we too arrogant? Didn't we all lack a little humility and wisdom? Didn't we think we knew it all? Well, maybe that's how God sees us sometimes. We think we have it all together. We want to do things our way – even our faith. I prayed every day and asked God to take care of my dreams and needs. I didn't listen much, just talked a lot. I didn't make enough of an effort.

Whether you attend synagogue or church, it is an effort to be truly faithful. It's not always convenient, but in my Bar Mitzvah journey, I realized that getting close to God doesn't have to be a chore, but something that leads to peace of mind. Becoming Bar Mitzvah was my choice to fulfill a commandment. Committing to this and connecting with God was fulfilling to me on a level I never expected. So many people prayed for me during this journey. I was encouraged to do this by Jews, Christians, a

Catholic priest, and two excellent ISJL rabbis (I started studying with Rabbi Marshal Klaven, then continued with Rabbi Jeremy Simons, who officiated the ceremony).

My undertaking all of this as "an old guy" created lots of interest. I got to speak to the BBC for a radio special. I got to film a segment for a documentary film student from Stanford. They all asked the same question: "Why? Why now?"

The truth is, I did it because it was life-changing. I felt called by God, and asked for His help, and felt His presence more. My wife supported my decision. So many people who had never been to a Bar Mitzvah, came to mine. It was a great service, a great party, and one of my true successes in life. Becoming Bar Mitzvah helped me realize that Judaism is a path of giving and forgiving until we "get it."

My Bar Mitzvah was a little bit late, but also right on time. It was exactly what I needed in my life. It just took me seventy-six years to realize it.



Reaching Out In More Meaningful Ways

By Susan Pollard



what we can bring to the table as a temple community, and what we can learn from them. Ultimately we chose four organizations with which to work. We have partnered with Aishel House (an organization providing housing, meals, and support to those undergoing long term treatment in the Medical Center of Houston); Oaks Elementary (a local Title One public school); Humble Area Assistance Ministries (a local social service organization); and FamilyTime (a local non-profit which runs a shelter for families who are victims of domestic violence).

Recently, we invited some of the women and children of Family-Time to come to our synagogue, where we had an afternoon of crafts, games, relaxing, and socializing. We even cooked a meal together. We have gotten wonderful feedback about what a difference in mood and attitude an afternoon out makes to the women and children, even those who seemed to be truly struggling. It made a difference to us as well. The children from the shelter and children from our congregation did activities together. Our teens helped with the crafts and games. Our adult congregants spent time with the women. We were moved by their situation, and how we were able to help and share in a supportive day. We now feel a part of their community; we even picked up a few new recipes from each other!

Our new partnerships, and they are all truly *partnerships*, is enriching for all of us. We appreciate the guidance from Malkie and the Department of Community Engagement in helping us get to where we are today.

ABOVE:
Community
Engagement Fellow
Lonnie Kleinman
with congregants
from Temple Beth
Torah during
FamilyTime
program.

Temple Beth Torah (TBT) is a synagogue of 85 families in Humble, Texas, located just northeast of Houston. Our member families are committed to community service. We collect food for our local food bank, donate tzedakah money collected at religious school and are actively engaged in several specific service projects in our community. Individually, members do a great deal of community service too. We volunteer at our children's schools, we work at the local food pantry, we are docents at the Holocaust museum, we... well, you get the idea. This was already a priority for us.

So why partner with the Community Engagement Department at the ISJL?

We wanted to deepen our level of commitment. We wanted to take a more holistic approach. And working with Malkie

Schwartz, Lonnie Kleinman, and the ISJL has definitely added a new dimension to what we do.

We began by forming a Social Action Leadership Team (SALT) and defining our goals. Of course, we wanted to help others, but as we discussed both our needs and the needs of the community, we were able to identify additional goals. We wanted an ongoing relationship with organizations in the local community. We wanted to have activities for all ages so that our children and teens could participate at a personal level. We wanted the community to see Temple Beth Torah as a place that reaches out to help.

Empowered with this strengthened set of goals, we interviewed different organizations to learn more about what we have to offer each other,



Rabbi Michael Cook presenting to an interfaith audience at Temple Israel.

Positive, Powerful Programming

By Allen R. Grossman

The Tallahassee Jewish Federation, a small and underfunded Federation in the Big Bend area of North Florida, had the opportunity this year to work with the ISJL programming department to bring not one, not two, but three programs to our community.

The generosity of a private foundation provided the necessary funds for this first-ever effort on our part. We hoped to arrange a diverse selection of programs, and were pleased to be able to do just that with our ISJL events, which included a comedian, Keith Barany; a musician, Batsheva; and an interfaith lecturer, Rabbi Michael Cook. All three were enormously well received- in fact so much so that we are hoping to expand the program into a Federation sponsored annual year-long Jewish cultural series.

Keith came to Tallahassee in September. His show took place on a Saturday evening at the newly-constructed Florida State University Hillel. Much to our surprise, this was not Keith's first trip to Tallahassee, but it was his first time performing for a predominantly Jewish audience

in Tallahassee. We had approximately 90 people attend the show and everyone thoroughly enjoyed Keith's extremely intellectual and entertaining performance. The show was a smash hit and it made our very first foray into sponsorship of such a program a grand success.

Batsheva's performance was the following month, and was again staged at the FSU Hillel. This time, it was also on the weekend of the FSU v. Notre Dame football game in Tallahassee. In spite of the complicated travel and lodging logistics created by the large number of football fans in town, Batsheva's Sunday afternoon performance drew an audience of more than 75 people ranging from children to seniors.

Acknowledging her mixed-age audience, Batsheva shared folk songs and parodies appropriate for the entire audience, providing wonderfully enjoyable entertainment for all. It was moving to see the recognition by many of the seniors when Batsheva performed old Yiddish standbys. It was also just as rewarding to see the way that she caught the attention of the younger audience with her



Batsheva performs at the FSU Hillel.

explanations of her original songs and her performance of entertaining and insightful parodies. We hope to bring Batsheva and her beautiful music back to Tallahassee next year, for more enjoyment of her parodies and original folk music.

A lecture by renowned scholar and author Rabbi Michael Cook was the grand finale of our programs for 2014. On a Wednesday evening in November, Rabbi Cook, lectured to an interfaith audience of more than 120 people at Temple Israel, Tallahassee's Reform Jewish Congregation. His lecture topic was "Close Encounters of the Religious Kind: How To Answer Questions From Christian Friends." This

relevant theme was an enthralling and entertaining presentation on how Jews can better address the typical questions our Christian neighbors have about Jews and Judaism, and particularly our relation to the Christian religion and the New Testament. The lecture energized everyone in the audience, as indicated by the long line of appreciative listeners who purchased Rabbi Cook's book and waited to meet with him and obtain his autograph during the book signing reception following the lecture. Every book Rabbi Cook brought to Tallahassee was sold and signed. This turned out to be an enormously successful and educational interfaith program in our very Southern and Christian community.

Each of the programs provided through the ISJL highlighted great talent, and gave enriching experiences to all in attendance. Each visiting artist or scholar was extremely easy to work with, and ISJL programming staff ensured that the logistics for their shows and programs were all seamlessly coordinated. This was definitely a factor in how well the programs all went over. After all, we were initially concerned about our ability to pull off these programs, but with the quality of performers provided through ISJL and the able assistance and cooperation of the programming department, everything was stellar.

The programs have had a positive, powerful impact on our Jewish community. We look forward to continuing to work with the ISJL to expand the programs we are able to offer to the Tallahassee community.

Want to bring ISJL cultural programs to your community this year? There are a wide array of wonderful opportunities! Get in touch with Ann Zivitz Kientz: akientz@isjl.org

A New Home for an Eternal Light

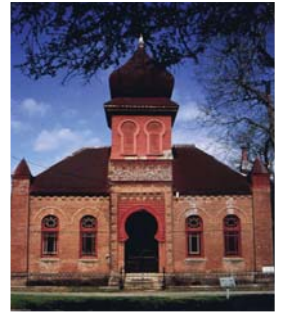


CBE Chanukah celebration takes place beneath the new *ner tamid*.

Rachel Jarman Myers recently traveled to Congregation B'nai Emunah (CBE) in Tarpon Springs, Florida, to help shed light on the history of the congregation's new *ner tamid*, or "Eternal Light."

The *ner tamid* is on loan to CBE from the ISJL's Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience collection. It originated at Congregation Gemiluth Chassed in Port Gibson, Mississippi, the oldest synagogue in Mississippi, whose doors closed decades ago. This journey began with a desire on the part of CBE Sisterhood president Sheila Shear to bring her community an Eternal Light that held real meaning. Says Sheila: "What started out for our Sisterhood as a simple project, replacing our small Ark that had fallen into disrepair, quickly turned into a major *bimah* overhaul thanks to the generosity and hard work of a small group of members. However, we ran out of money for the final phase, the replacement of the *ner tamid*... Then, Joel May, a new member [of CBE] told me about the Institute... suddenly, things began to look up."

Joel May, raised northwest of Birmingham, Alabama, knew first-hand the richness and complexity of Southern Jewish life and also how it has been dying in his native Jasper. As with many Jewish families, his parents encouraged his siblings and him to leave small town life. They presided over the closure of his childhood synagogue, Temple Emanuel, Jasper, in 2005. He knew of the ISJL by their reputation assisting synagogues both in rescuing sacred pieces and in renewing them within active synagogues.



The Gemiluth Chassed *ner tamid*, a ruby glass globe banded with silver tone metal, was originally donated to the Mississippi synagogue by Louis T. Newman, an immigrant from Prussia. The inscription on the medallions of the globe reads: "Presented by L.T. Newman, in memory of his deceased wife and children, October 11th, 1892." Mr. Newman's wife and children died in 1878, likely of yellow fever.



Gemiluth Chassed in Port Gibson, Mississippi.

"Many people don't realize the long and rich history of Jewish communities in the Deep South. Dedicating a piece of the Gemiluth Chassed sanctuary builds a special connection through time and space between these two small congregations, a connection that is important for continuing to support the legacy of Jewish communities in the region," says Rachel Jarman Myers. "The idea that this *ner tamid* will be given the opportunity to shine again and serve a congregation means that the ancestors of small town Jewish communities like Port Gibson will not be forgotten."

Sheila Shear agrees: "How fitting, in our twenty-fifth year of existence, to be able to proudly rekindle the Eternal Light that once shone brightly but was extinguished with the closing of the Mississippi temple. *L'dor v'dor*, from generations past to now, we will be keeping a flame of Judaism alive for future generations."

Reflecting on our Road Trip

Tent: The South was a road trip for twenty-somethings, coordinated by the Yiddish Book Center in partnership with the ISJL. In their travels, *Tent: The South* participants explored the Southern Jewish experience. While traveling from New Orleans to Memphis, spending several days in Mississippi along the way, participants discovered the best that Southern culture has to offer. They visited both small Jewish communities and major cities and explored the musical, culinary, and artistic flavors of the region. During this week-long seminar, participants also studied the history of the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for social justice in the Deep South. Here are a few of the participants' reflections from their time on the road with the ISJL.

"Canadian / Southern Connections" By Gabriel Couture

On our first evening together, the TENT: The South group went for dinner in New Orleans' French Quarter. We



introduced ourselves, and Rachel Myers asked us to draw the South as we imagined it. Many in the group drew things that attempted to define the South by its borders relating to the Civil War or the borders of current American states. As the lone Canadian, this was interesting to me. I took a moment to reflect on what I had drawn: a river, trees covered in Spanish moss, a decrepit shack, overalls, cotton, and a man playing the blues. What had come to mind was a clichéd mythical place spawned by books and films. I didn't think of it as a political region created from conflict and ideology. I realized that in my imagination, the most powerful identity marker of the South that I knew was its ghostly geography. It dawned on me that I knew very little and that I was about to learn a lot. Most obvious of all, who are the Jews of the South? And thus our southern adventure began.

During the trip we visited a variety of Jewish congregations, spoke about Southern Jewish history,

visited museums such as the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, and engaged in lectures with the trip educator, Professor Eric Goldstein of Emory University. What struck me most was the extent by which the regional social and political circumstances impacted Southern Jews. This might seem like an obvious observation, but we often tend to think of our local circumstances as universal. The biggest community we visited was New Orleans, where approximately 10,000 Jews live. In many of the small towns we visited, in the Mississippi Delta for example, only a few families remain from communities that never surpassed a few hundred members. When social and political turmoil erupted, Jews were often forced to make hard choices, pitting their values against certain pragmatic truths. Many Jews came to North America escaping from one form of persecution to another, and the fact they weren't black provided them with a certain level of acceptance in the old South.

The South was also a particularly religious region, and the white community found comfort in knowing that Jews shared certain religious habits. The Jewish community worked very hard at forging a healthy, sustainable and secure place in the South. During our seminars, we came to understand that the Jews didn't act as one harmonious whole. During periods of conflict, the civil war, the civil rights movement and so on, Jews of different political opinions found themselves on both sides of the issues. What's remarkable is that



TENT: The South at Adath Israel in Cleveland, MS.

despite small numbers, varying opinions, social pressures— if anything, these challenges only reinforced their commitment to Judaism, and it continues to this day.

All of these observations and discoveries interested me as a Montrealer. Montreal is in Québec, Canada's French province, which has a history of social tension between English and French communities. Historically, the French were often subordinate to the Chuch and suffered a fear of assimilation similar to that of Jews. Québec's Jewish community of about 90,000 is a minority that was shaped by the efforts of the English and French attempting to secure an identity for the province.

Stuck between two dominant worlds, the community faced and faces different forms of persecution and cultural colonization. Despite knowing this, until my experience learning about Southern Jewish communities, I had never understood this as clearly. Following my TENT experience, I came to better understand and have a new found fascination for my local Jewish community.



From Top Left: Dockery Farms, Cleveland, MS; Woodworth Chapel, Jackson, MS; Touro Synagogue, New Orleans, LA; Temple B'nai Israel, Natchez, MS; University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

"A Truly Eye-Opening Experience" By Danny Lobell

Tent: The South consisted of twenty Jewish "young professionals" (meaning, Jews in their twenties; I personally consider myself a young "un-professional" Jew, hence I put the term in quotes) embarking on a road trip. We started in New Orleans and headed up to the Mississippi Delta until finally winding up in Memphis, all the while stopping and visiting Jewish communities and learning the history that Jews played in the region in addition to the history of the region itself.

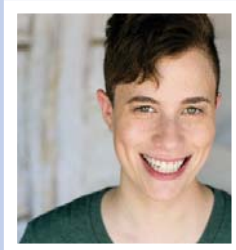
I have participated in a few group trips in my life, and none stand out as having been exceptional— until this one came along. I found the trip so important in so many ways. I connected to my fellow Jews from all different walks of Jewish life, with no labels that divided us. We were not "Reform or Conservative or Orthodox," we were all just one people. I connected to America and gained a much deeper understanding of this country's identity and why we are at where we are right now. It's much more than I ever got out of a history book in school. The story of America came alive for me and everything that I've been living through started making a lot more sense, now in proper context. In just one week I spoke to and heard from so many people in a region of the country that I've hardly spent any time in. I found out what it means to be a Jew in places that were unfamiliar to me.

Looking back on it all, I am amazed by how much I learned and how inspired I am to be more active in seeking out these small Jewish communities around the country and visiting them and showing support. I feel more informed about my own personal history as well as current world affairs. It was truly an eye opening experience for me.



"I am a Border State"

By Puppett



I had never thought about Jews in the South. It was so far removed from everything I knew about the history of the South – which was delineated along racial lines that excluded Jewishness. Who were these Jews in the South? Perhaps even more interesting, who are they now?

We started out in New Orleans, a city rich with history and supporting multiple synagogues. Even the Orthodox synagogue in town, Anshe Sfard, is working toward inclusivity and seeks LGBT involvement. From there, we traveled up through Mississippi and into the Delta, all the way up to Memphis. We stopped in many towns and small cities, and met with local Jewish communities, continuously learning about our Jewish history in the South.

I had many emotional and informative experiences on this trip. Perhaps most personal to my understanding of my own identity was really digging into what the South "is" and "isn't" and what it really means to me as someone who was raised in a border state. Growing up in Maryland, whenever I spoke with Northerners I was told I was from the South, and whenever I spoke with Southerners, I was told I was from the North. It was on this trip, this Southern Jewish trip that I got to go on as a result of my work with the LGBTQ Jews in Los Angeles, that I learned to own the Marylander in me. And in a way, more of my Jewishness too.

Growing up, I saw myself as an "other" compared to the Jews I knew, because of my queer identity. But now I really see the cultural narrative of Jewishness as one of "otherness;" and I see my Jewishness as part of my personal narrative. Many people say they are Jew-ISH; I used to say I wasn't practicing – I was just good at it. Now I don't know what to say. I suppose I am "exploring my Jewishness."

Finally, now I see: not feeling like I'm from the South or from the North, not feeling like my home state has a place in this country's delineation, is really part of my greater narrative. I am a person in-between, or on the line, an "other" from the norm like all Jews and from the Jewish "other." I am finally owning that I grew up on the border between North and South. I am from a border state, and like the place from which I hail – I, too, am a perpetual border state.

"This Is ISJL": Making A Difference Every Day

By Rabbi Ted Riter

I love the bold tagline that is added to the signature of each email that I receive from staff of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL). *This is ISJL*. It says to me, "Here we are! We are making a difference!"

And boy, are they making a difference for Southern Jewry.



Last year, ISJL Education Fellows made 223 visits to southern congregations, their rabbis made visits to more than 50 different communities, and the Institute as a whole reached out to 43% of the congregations in the 13-state southern region.

I am currently serving as the interim rabbi at Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, Mississippi. With Jackson as the home base for the ISJL, I feel my community is doubly blessed with their presence. Not only are we partners in their regional religious school program, and thereby have the benefit of working with our own Education Fellow, Alachua Haskins—but also the entire ISJL staff are energetic and engaged members of the Jackson and Beth Israel communities.

Our Education Fellow, Alachua Haskins, travels year-round to communities across the South. While in residence, she assists in implementing the ISJL curriculum, leads programs, and even officiates Shabbat and holiday services. Alachua is committed, passionate, talented, a joy to be around—she is ISJL.

I look forward to a continued partnership with the ISJL. From my position in their headquarter-community of Jackson, I strongly encourage everyone in the South and beyond to experience what it means when we hear "This is ISJL!"



Interested in hearing more about the ISJL and the communities we serve? Follow us on our blog "Southern & Jewish" hosted by My Jewish Learning. www.myjewishlearning.com/blog/southern-and-jewish

Strengthening Jewish Connections in Kentucky

By Ilona Szekely



ABOVE
Ilona Szekely
(seated)
leading her
students in a
program for the
Global Day of
Jewish Learning.

Ohavay Zion Synagogue (OZS) is a Conservative congregation located in Lexington, Kentucky. We have about 200 families in our congregation, and 35 students in our religious school.

Five years ago, Rabbi Sharon Cohen and I worked together to bring the ISJL's education program to our synagogue's religious school. Rabbi Cohen had been intrigued for some time by the work the ISJL was doing to record the history of Southern Jewry, and she had been working to partner with the ISJL for a while. But in their earlier days, the ISJL's region did not extend as far north as Kentucky. When the Institute did expand the region northward enough to include our state, we were very excited to become partners.

As a professional educator, I understand the importance of

the resources the ISJL offers to religious school teachers, principals, and students. I teach art education at Eastern Kentucky University, and I know how much finesse it takes to keep students engaged in learning. The ISJL really helps our religious school accomplish our goal of a richer educational experience for our students.

For one thing, the ISJL's curriculum creates a sense of continuity. Without the curriculum, it is difficult to see what is going on in each classroom and each grade, and hard to create one cohesive big picture. The curriculum is a map of what students learn and teachers can see how their lessons fit into the overall goal. Teachers appreciate this, and the scripted nature of the curriculum makes it much easier for us to recruit teachers in the first place. For example, this year we have a new teacher in our 5th grade

classroom. The curriculum gives her the support she needs to be a confident teacher, and our students benefit from having a young, energetic role model.

The ISJL curriculum has also helped us partner with the Reform congregation in town, Temple Adath Israel (TAI). Susie Magill, TAI's Youth Education Director, and I have partnered to bring our students together for holiday events and activities. Last year, we threw a joint Chanukah party, learned together on Yom HaShoah, and brought our teen students together for youth group events. I also encouraged Susie to consider bringing the ISJL curriculum to her own school because of how helpful and successful it is at OZS. Susie liked the idea and her education committee agreed. Susie attended the ISJL's conference in June and now TAI is in their first year partnering with the Institute.

Having the same curriculum at both schools has a lot of benefits. Like the ISJL, in our community we believe it is important for Jewish children to know each other and we take advantage of opportunities to bring them together even more, and know they will be on the same educational page.

The ISJL curriculum is now a part of our conversations about our community's future—at both of our congregations. We are grateful for these resources and strengthened connections, and proud to be ISJL partners in education.

This is OUR ISJL!



1. PINEHURST, NORTH CAROLINA

Students from Sandhills Jewish Congregation in Pinehurst, NC and Congregation Beth Israel in Greenville, SC (on screen) participated in a program on Jewish Heroes for the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

2. PANAMA CITY, FLORIDA

Education Fellow Leah Apothaker helps students pick their roles for a Chanukah puppet show at Temple B'nai Israel.



3. MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

As part of Family Shabbat, Education Fellow Bethany Berger led an interactive story time with religious school students in the combined school.



4. COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

Thanks to the ISJL, the Community Engagement Committee of Temple Israel has been able to build an amazing relationship with the students and staff of Rothschild Leadership Academy (RLA), a middle school that serves students in 6th-8th grade. We are proud of the impact the "Read, Lead, Succeed" program is having on student literacy!





5



6

5. BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS

Students at Temple Beth-El learn to shake the lulav during a Sukkot celebration with Education Fellow Arielle Nissenblatt.

6. MARIETTA, GEORGIA

To celebrate Simchat Torah, Education Fellow Missy Goldstein helped students illustrate their own community torah at Congregation Ner Tamid.

7. MERIDIAN, MISSISSIPPI

Rabbi Jeremy Simons and Bar Mitzvah Dylan Strasser at Congregation Beth Israel.



7

Letters to the History Department

The ISJL History Department gets a wide range of phone calls, emails, and letters. Most often, someone reaches out with a historical inquiry about their family or community. Readers of our online Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities are inspired to send follow up questions. We love hearing from interested individuals, reporters, students, and scholars. Helping connect people with Southern Jewish history is a pleasure—and so is reading through some of the letters we get in response. Here are just a sampling of the notes we have received over the past few months.

From Erica Davidson, a student with Operation Understanding, a program for Black and Jewish teens to build bridges while developing friendships and leadership skills:

“My name is Erica Davidson, and I am a member of Class 20 of Operation Understanding-DC. I would like to thank you for taking the time to come speak with our class and let us know about your work. I really appreciated learning about the work you are doing to reach out to Jewish communities throughout the South to ensure that they have the resources necessary to maintain a Jewish community. After visiting Temple Mishkan Israel in Selma, Alabama, and seeing their struggle to preserve their Temple, it was really refreshing to see an organization that is working to help temples like this one maintain their history. Your ability to work with these small Jewish communities has inspired me to encourage my own Jewish community to work towards encouraging others. Thanks again!”



From Julia Hartman, a Legal Studies student at Kenyon College:

“Without the guidance of Dr. Janet Bordelon, it’s possible I wouldn’t be in a position to graduate from college. Okay, this might be an overstatement. But as a fall semester college senior, I found myself in the unexpected (and nerve-wracking) position of being a first-time legal studies student. My final project for this legal studies course required me to produce my own research on General Order No. 11, which was an Anti-Semitic military order issued by Civil War Union general Ulysses S. Grant. Due to the small (yet fascinating) body of literature on General Order No. 11, I quickly found myself at an impasse. I needed a qualified historian to reorient me toward new avenues of research. I reached out to ISJL after hearing of its reputation as a world-class public history institution. Dr. Janet Bordelon, Director of the History Department, responded to my plea for help in an extremely thorough and timely fashion. I was taken aback with the interest level she appeared to have in my work. Dr. Bordelon was able to connect me to scholars who have published research on General Order No. 11. She also consented to be interviewed for my final project, which really boosted the quality of my work. My correspondence with Dr. Bordelon truly validated my self-esteem as a student scholar. Who knows where I’d be without ISJL?!”

From Sharon Muldoon and Judy Scherck, who have been researching their ancestors for years, and reached out for assistance in solving a family history mystery involving the parents of Isaac Scherck, Judy’s grandfather:

“I can’t believe we missed noting Isaac’s parents’ names on his death certificate! In our working lives, I was a researcher (bio-chemistry) and Judy was a clinical trial monitor whose job required careful auditing of records. Seems we should have caught that, but thank goodness for your fresh eyes. ...That is quite a breakthrough for us because we were very uneasy about the timing of Isaac’s birth relative to Richard Theodore and Hannah’s ages.”



(Editor’s note: The 1900 census listed his mother and father as Hannah and Richard Scherck, who would have been around 12 and 17 at the time of his birth! The ISJL History Department helped track down his actual parents, who were actually 42 and 46.)

Please don’t hesitate to reach out to the ISJL’s History Department with questions or stories you want to share. We want to be accessible—visit our website, contribute to our Dropbox, or email Dr. Janet Bordelon directly at jbordelon@isjl.org. Together, we can make sure that the story of Southern Jewry is well preserved for future generations!

Thank You to Our Supporters!

In these CIRCA pages, you can see the impact our education, history, museum, cultural, community engagement and rabbinic programs have on thousands of people just like you. With deep appreciation, the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life extends thanks to everyone who made a contribution or pledge from January 1st- December 31st, 2014 to enable our important work.

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66 Rabbinic visits to **37**
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25 Cultural programs held in **15** cities
 in **8** states

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 members served by the Education Department

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 tours of **15** Southern cities.

10 schools & congregations in
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 Community Engagement
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 Encyclopedia of Southern
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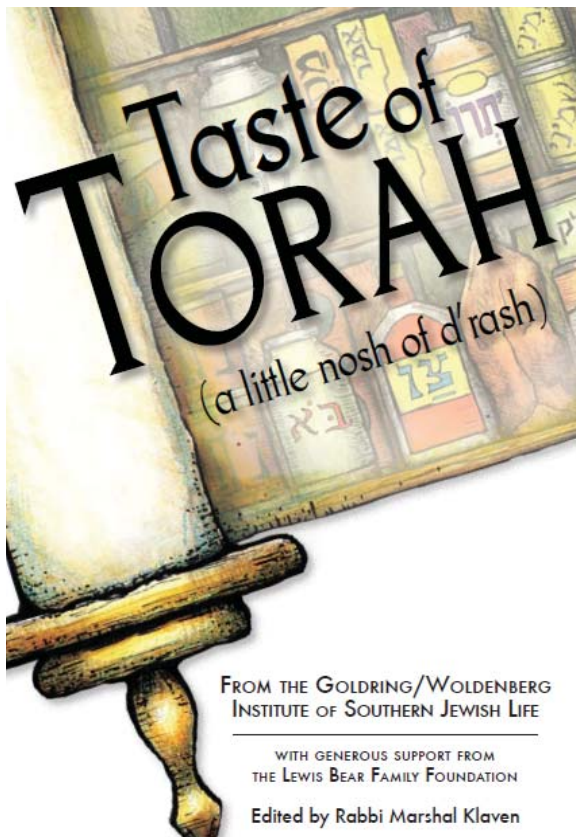


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