

SHALOM *Y'all*

GOLDRING/WOLDENBERG INSTITUTE
OF SOUTHERN JEWISH LIFE

FALL 2023

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BUILDING COMMUNITY

SUPPORTING, CONNECTING, AND CELEBRATING TOGETHER

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ON THE COVER

The annual ISJL conference, held each year in June, is one of the ISJL's most joyful annual community-building events.

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BUILDING COMMUNITY

Our *Shalom Y'all* theme this year has been “community,” which, well, has kind of a familiar ring to it. In fact, around the office, it’s a joke that it might be our most-frequently-used word of all time.

Community has always been at the heart of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL). We exist for our community, and we exist because of our community.

Our first issue this year focused on Community Voices; our second, on Community Visits (something we were truly thrilled to fully resume in-person over this past year!); and in this issue we’re focusing on **Building Community**.

- * What does it look like to build community?
- * How has the ISJL been a partner in community-building over the past two dozen years?
- * What are some lasting impacts we’ve had—things the ISJL has helped build from scratch (or maintain over time) that have strengthened our whole community?
- * What do we need to focus on next, as we continue to build our community a bright future, together?

These are some of the questions that shape the articles, essays, and images you’ll find in these pages. You’ll also meet some of our new team members—Rabbi Salem Pearce, Olivia Renata Zale, Ana Berman, and Rebecca Rich—who are building out the ongoing work of the ISJL in new and exciting ways.

As always, we are grateful to work in partnership with all of y’all. Thank you for helping us build this incredible community.

The Board & Staff of the ISJL





MICHELE SCHIPPER
CEO

FROM THE CEO

When I was in high school, I entered the NFTY (North American Federation of Temple Youth) sermonette contest. The writing prompt was: “Can One Be Jewish Without Participating in the Jewish Community?” In my essay, I took the stance that participation in the Jewish community was vital to celebrating one’s Judaism.

That belief has stayed with me throughout the years. It’s why I have worked as a Jewish professional my entire adult life, and why the mission of the ISJL is so important to me. After all, how does the ISJL support, connect and celebrate Jewish life in the South?

It’s all about building community: making connections, engaging with communities, providing resources, and helping to ensure that the Jewish community will continue to thrive in generations to come.

As I engaged more with my own Judaism through the years, I have developed a greater understanding that there are many ways to participate in the Jewish community. **The ISJL works to make sure that the paths to participation in the Jewish community are broad and varied.** I have had the good fortune to be part of the ISJL team for 16 of its 23 years of existence, and have been able to see the many forms “community-building” can take.

We build community through education. When I first arrived, the extraordinary education program was coming “out of pilot” and the opportunity to create partnerships throughout our 13-state region continued to grow. The program has continued to grow and evolve as we listen to the community members’ needs. We are working to ensure that Jewish children and their families continue to be active learners and community participants.

We build community through spirituality. It has been my privilege to learn from and with ISJL’s rabbis, many of whom have started their rabbinical careers at the ISJL, or brought additional experiences with them. These clergy members have been enriched by the uniquely rewarding opportunity to serve multiple communities who do not have their own full-time local Jewish clergy. The community members’ deep appreciation for our rabbis’ visits and remote support is heartening. The journeys are varied but all meaningful: some congregations that were once served by the ISJL have closed their doors, and we were there to offer them support until those last days;

some remain small but sturdy and stable; others have grown, and new congregations have been formed.

We build community through culture. Every year, thousands of people engage with ISJL cultural programs. The ISJL has worked with more than 50 presenters over more than two decades, and we feature new artists each year. As these presenters are on the road (or via Zoom) to community members, thousands have been enriched by these Jewish cultural experiences.

We build community through partnership. For those individuals who engage with their Judaism through social justice work, the ISJL has continued to work in the Jackson community and beyond with literacy initiatives and opportunities to increase the Jewish learning around this work. Community is at the core of everything we do, together. And as for that NFTY competition long ago... with assistance from my rabbi, Richard Birnholz, I submitted my essay and was indeed one of the winning finalists. I ended that heartfelt sermonette with the following quote from the great rabbi Hillel: **Al tifrosh min ha’tzebur: Do not separate yourself from the community.**

I ask you today to deepen your commitment to our shared community-building, to continue to engage with the Jewish community, and make the ISJL one of your charities to support this year and beyond.



FROM THE

BOARD CHAIR

JAY HESDORFFER
BOARD CHAIR

The ISJL is all about building community. So many people have felt our reach since we started doing this meaningful work in 2000. February 2024 will mark the ISJL's 24th anniversary. That means that for almost two dozen years, we have been establishing and sustaining strong partnerships with individuals, congregations, and organizations across the South—building community every step of the way.

Just a few of the milestones over the past twenty-three years that set our firm foundation in community-building have included:

* **2000** We first opened our doors in February of 2000, launching literary series events and regional film festivals, putting historians on the road to pave the way for the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, and forging partnerships to assess communal needs and build out our programming

* **2003** We hired our first rabbi, Rabbi Debra Kassoff, and also launched our Education department. Both of these things allowed us to put even more Jewish professionals directly in to even the smallest of southern Jewish communities as we continued to build out our programs and services

* **2007** Because our community includes not only the Jewish community but also all of our neighbors, we began developing secular literacy and leadership programming to help continue the southern Jewish legacy of local civic engagement

* **2013** After a decade of service, our education program alone had grown from serving 4 states in its first pilot year, to serving the 13 states we still serve today, reaching thousands of Jewish children and families annually

* **2019** We deepened our community-building through a region-wide survey and also a full-fledged ISJL Listening Tour, conducting more than two dozen in-person focus groups throughout the region (at least one session in each of the 13 states) so our senior staff team could hear directly from communities about what they needed to continue not only surviving but also thriving and building for the future

* **2020** This year brought unprecedented challenges for all, but also brought our team and communities together in new ways—and now, in 2023, we're able to offer both online and in-person programs, making our regional community even more interconnected and accessible to all.

The only way we can continue building is with your help! So as we approach the end of 2023, I want to

encourage you to please support the ISJL with your financial gift.

You can give online www.isjl.org/donate, over the phone **601-362-6357**, or by mail **ISJL, PO Box 16528, Jackson, MS, 39236**—or you can use the envelope conveniently enclosed in this issue! I'm also thrilled at our recent hiring of Olivia Zale to serve as the ISJL's Director of Development; she is eager to connect with our supporters and build even more support for the important work of the ISJL. The ISJL exists because of you and thanks to you. For every donation received before year end, I will personally call to thank you—

because building community is what we are all about, and I am honored to be your partner in this work.

EDUCATION

HALLWAY MAGIC AT THE ISJL CONFERENCE

MOLLY LEVY *DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION*

The ISJL Conference has served as a convergence for our region for many years. The annual gathering is something that we build our calendar around at the ISJL, and is known as an “all hands on deck” event for the entire ISJL team. The ISJL Conference (formerly called the ISJL Education Conference) offers community members, directors of education, teachers, rabbis, history enthusiasts, board members, lay leaders, and more to gather from across the region and build a true sense of southern Jewish community.

Of all the pieces of my job at the ISJL, putting together the ISJL Conference is one of my favorites. This year felt extra special, because it was our first time coming together after three pandemic years of holding the conference online. We still felt interconnected, and still offered dynamic learning and robust resources, but of course the person-to-person interaction was missing.

What we missed was the “hallway magic.” The hallway magic is something impossible to recreate online. It’s all the between-session (and yes,



sometimes in-session) side chats, the buffet banter, standing beside one another at a service or cheering on our team at trivia night. It’s the unscheduled moments existing alongside the full itinerary of engagement. If you have ever been to an ISJL Conference, you know what you can expect. Dynamic speakers, organized schedules, meaningful themed “tracks” for small-group learning sessions, and, of course, popcorn. However, there is something that happens whether we plan for it or not that makes the conference so special. It is that moment when you strike up a conversation with someone at the conference and walk away with a solution

to a problem you have been struggling with for months; or you overhear a new idea from another congregation that might also be perfect for your own; or you just make the perfect networking—or



friendship—connection. It is that moment that makes all of your travel and planning “worth it.”

Hallway magic does not have to happen in a hallway. It can happen at a meal, in the elevator, or even by the pool. It is the best part of any conference, but it can be very difficult to help create. However, this year’s ISJL Conference was full of hallway magic from the very beginning. We knew we were striving for pure hallway magic and did this by building our Conference around a common theme, reworking our schedule to give it more breathing room, and expanding the definition of our community.

For this year’s theme, we chose “Reconnect.” We focused on reconnecting with each other, ourselves, and our love for this work. Our keynotes reflected this theme in their topics. Amanda Winer, former ISJL Education Fellow and Director of Research and Evaluation from the Jewish Education Project, shared about the JEP Census of part-time Jewish Education. She shared how we can learn from one other to help us reconnect with our communities. Paper Midrash invited us to be creative and discover our inner golems. We all tried paper cutting for the first time and made artwork that can help us connect with our personal values. And finally, during my wrap-up session, I focused on reflection and how it is a



tool that can help make our lessons really “stick.”

The theme that tied all of these programs together was that, no matter what, relationships and connections are at the center of moving Judaism forward. Each program also allowed for a lot of discussion between participants, creating more possibilities for magic to happen.

—○—○—○—

It is important to us that anyone who is passionate about supporting, connecting, and celebrating Jewish life in the South attend and engage with our conference.

—○—○—○—

Our team worked incredibly hard to make the connections and hallway magic that happened seem effortless. In preparing for the conference, we spent a lot of time crafting a schedule that would allow more time for hallway magic. We slowed down the pace of the conference, giving more time to walk and talk between sessions. Most sessions began with mixers or questions that helped participants get to know one another and gave plenty of time for sharing. For one of our wrap-up sessions, we utilized “open space technology” and created a structured way to network.

We knew that our participants were excited to be together, but that they may need some help getting back into the swing of a full conference. And we prioritized fun and silliness wherever we could, including a very competitive trivia night led by our Culture team. One team represented five different rabbinical schools, while another included folks who had no idea they were in the same cabin together at summer camp. These connections

CONTINUED →

Images on pages 6-7: Conference attendees connecting and sharing at the 2023 ISJL Conference.

EDUCATION



The 2023 ISJL Conference was full of moments of connection

continued to add to the magic of this year's conference.

Another big change for this year's conference was the move from the ISJL Education Conference to the ISJL Conference. It is important to us that anyone who is passionate about supporting, connecting, and celebrating Jewish life in the South attend and engage with our conference. It's not just a showcase for the Education team at the ISJL—it's truly an all-organization approach to communal life, and that's an exciting new dimension to the conference.

This year, our Culture department led a track on using books as a powerful teaching and resource tool. Participants explored texts from a synagogue library and participated in a mitzvah project by packing books for Big House Books, a non-profit organization that delivers

books for those who are incarcerated. Our Spirituality department led beautiful services and text study opportunities throughout the conference. Beyond that, many of our community members stepped up to lead discussions, impromptu worship experiences, and activities.

Because of these changes, the overall theme, and the excitement of being together, we truly created a community in three days. Our participants knew each other, learned from one another, and had fun. This was everything we wanted and more.

The hallway magic was real and has spread into the rest of the year. We are excited to see what we can create at our next conference, June 23-25, 2024.

Hope to see you there for all the hallway magic ahead!

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



Kelly Cohen was one of the stellar presenters at the 2023 ISJL Conference

MEET NEW PROGRAM ASSOCIATES: ANA BERMAN & REBECCA RICH

We are thrilled to welcome two new Program Associates for the 2023-2024 school year! We invited them to introduce themselves. Enjoy meeting Ana and Rebecca!



ANA BERMAN

Shalom, y'all! My name is Ana Berman, and after spending an incredible summer as an ISJL Public History Intern, I am so excited to introduce myself to you once again... this time as a 2023-2024 Education and Culture Program Associate! I grew up on New York City's Upper West Side as an active member of Congregation Rodeph Sholom. I then continued my Jewish learning journey at Macalester College, where I earned my degree in Religious Studies and History. My undergraduate work there culminated in an honors thesis on Jewish heritage tourism in Spain. This summer I came to the ISJL as a Public History Intern to gain a more well-rounded understanding of Jewish

heritage work, and I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to stay at ISJL in this new role. As an Education and Culture Program Associate, I am excited to engage not only with communities' past, but also with their present. I love hearing about family histories and traditions, and I cannot wait to hear what you have to share with me! In advance of meeting you and hearing your stories, permit me to share a couple of things about me: I am an avid sports fan (I will talk New York Rangers hockey and/or Texas Longhorns football anytime), a devoted Taylor Swift listener, and some of my favorite Jewish foods include black-and-white cookies and bialys.



REBECCA RICH

Hello! I'm so excited to be on the ISJL team. I'm originally from Bethesda, Maryland, and moved with my parents to West Bloomfield, Michigan after my first year of college. I graduated from Brandeis University in 2022 with a major in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and a minor in Arabic Language, Literature, and

Culture. I have always been heavily involved with the Reform Jewish community. Right before coming to this job, I spent nine months volunteering in and learning about Israel through the Yahel Social Change Fellowship. I was living and working in Kiryat Haim, a neighborhood of Haifa. Living in the Jewish homeland and interacting regularly with diverse Israelis, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, recontextualized my own Jewish identity and solidified that I wanted to work in the Jewish world after the end of the program. As I contemplated my next steps post-Israel, I found the ISJL online and realized immediately that this position would be perfect for me in this phase of my life as I try to decide what the next steps in my career will be. I have already learned so much about the various facets of Jewish Education, and I am excited to learn more. The staff has been very supportive as I move forward in my journey. I am especially excited to visit my Gimel communities later this year and work with them to create great weekends of programming. I cannot wait to find out what makes each community I am working with special. As for my favorite Jewish food, I absolutely love challah. To me, there is nothing better than a fresh and perfectly soft and sweet loaf of bread.

CULTURE

THE ISJL AND THE SJHS: BUILDING A SOUTHERN JEWISH ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

DR. JOSH PARSHALL *HISTORIAN*

This August, I began working on making updates and revisions to the Little Rock, Arkansas, entry in the ISJL Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities. As I reviewed our original essay featured on the site and began to put together new research notes, I quickly realized that I needed more information about the Concordia Association, a prominent Jewish social club in late-19th- and early-20th-century Little Rock.

Fortunately, I knew that the person to contact was Phillip Spivey, Senior Lecturer of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Central Arkansas and the Congregation B'nai Israel Historical Archivist. And I knew that because he had delivered a presentation about the Concordia Association at the Southern Jewish Historical Society's 2018 conference in Mobile, Alabama.

The Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS) is different from many of the local communities and organizations with which the ISJL often partners. The group's membership spans the United States, and SJHS



only officially meets in person once each year. The society serves as a professional network, somewhat separate from the social, religious, or ethnic associations that might define its predominantly-Jewish membership in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, there is a community there, one that brings together scholars, archivists, local historians, and history enthusiasts with an interest in the Jewish South, and that community has a long relationship with the ISJL, and with me, personally.

The SJHS was founded in 1977 in order to promote historical

scholarship about the Jewish South. In addition to its annual conferences, the organization provides research and archival grants and publishes an academic journal, *Southern Jewish History*. Early SJHS meetings and publications by SJHS leaders spurred the development of southern Jewish history as a subfield, which in turn influenced the development of the ISJL and its public history programs. Even before the establishment of the ISJL, in fact, the organization's founder, Macy B. Hart, helped to organize the SJHS conference in Jackson, Mississippi (with visits to Natchez and Gulfport), in 1990.

Since the ISJL's establishment in 2000, our organization has played a major role in SJHS activities. Staff historians have published in *Southern Jewish History* and contributed to SJHS conferences. Dr. Stuart Rockoff, ISJL Director of History from 2002 to 2013, joined the SJHS board, and then served as the society's president from 2010 to 2012. In 2016 the ISJL hosted the SJHS annual conference at Temple B'nai Israel in Natchez, Mississippi. At least three former ISJL history interns are active SJHS members, and one of them sits on the society's board of directors. I myself joined the board of directors in 2017 and assumed my current position as president in 2022.

Of course, the ISJL benefits considerably from our participation in the SJHS. I refer to *Southern Jewish History* and other work published by my SJHS colleagues as I update the ISJL encyclopedia and develop new lectures. SJHS participants also include local archivists, genealogists, and lay enthusiasts, all of whom provide invaluable leads when we conduct original research. Additionally, the SJHS helps us expand our audience. Its newsletter, *The Rambler*, carries notices about ISJL programs and resources, and fellow SJHS members often invite me to give talks at their own institutions.

So far, I've described a professional network, but my relationship to the SJHS goes deeper than that. By the time that this issue of

Shalom Y'all lands in your mailbox, I will have returned from the society's 47th annual conference, hosted by Rice University's Program in Jewish Studies and the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives. Sustained, in-person time with colleagues in our particular sub-field allows for more thoughtful and wide-ranging conversations than we usually manage in professional correspondence or rushed committee meetings. Between sessions and at meals, I catch up with senior scholars whose work I have followed for years and get to know first-time conference attendees as well. Over the past eight-or-so years, a cohort of (relatively) younger scholars has formed, and we generally organize a night out at some point during the conference. Every year,

the conference reinvigorates my interest in the Jewish South and its history and strengthens my relationships with friends and colleagues.

I have another year as SJHS president, and I'm looking forward to advancing the society's work and continuing to build this academic community. If you're interested in southern Jewish history, drop by the SJHS website, www.jewishsouth.org, where you can peruse an expansive bibliography, read back-issues of *Southern Jewish History*, and learn more about the organization. And keep an eye out for future conferences, which may be headed to a city near you.

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

SJHS Conference in Charlottesville, VA: An impromptu reunion of ISJL staff and 2018 summer interns Jacob Morrow-Spitzer and Margaret (Weinberg) Norman!



CULTURE

BUILDING COMMUNITY, ONSCREEN & OFF: A LOOK BACK AT JEWISH CINEMA SOUTH

SHIRA MUROFF *DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS*

At the ISJL, cultural programming has always been about community-building. In fact, the whole philosophy behind our regional approach to cultural programming is to help communities of different sizes partner with one another to help lower costs and bring opportunities to communities that might otherwise not have access to world-class Jewish performers and events. Working together, ISJL staff and our community partners have built some pretty incredible things over the years.

One of the earliest programs that exemplified the effective partnership between the ISJL team and southern Jewish communities region-wide was Jewish Cinema South, a program started in 2001 that created a network of regional film festivals, several of which continue to this day.

In late 2001, Nashville, Tennessee; Montgomery, Alabama; and Mobile, Alabama were the first three cities to host Jewish Cinema South film festivals. Over the years, the Jewish Cinema South locations expanded to include Jackson, Mississippi; Baton Rouge, Louisiana;



Austin, Texas; Macon, Georgia; Roanoke, Virginia; Houston, Texas; The Triangle, North Carolina; and Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia.

This project is a picture-perfect example of the ISJL's mission to support, connect, and celebrate Jewish life in the South. As with so many ISJL projects, the ISJL staff members were able to provide administrative coordination, programmatic resources (from initial screener-film acquisition through negotiating screening prices), marketing resources, and all the overarching support—and then the staff from each city was able to personalize materials, events, and local add-ons for their specific audience.

Much like the ISJL Conference today, Jewish Cinema South also built community by bringing folks together.



Representatives from each film festival city would gather in Jackson early in the year to view films together, discuss the films and how they might resonate for their communities, determine potential filmmakers to bring in to the region and transport from festival to festival, and more. For three days of movie-viewing and popcorn-munching, a small crowd of between a dozen and three dozen folks bonded over a shared love of cinema and Jewish stories. We are indebted to the years that our administrator Lynda Yule spent pre-screening hundreds of films at her desk and coordinating festival details, as well as all the work put in by our initial ISJL Program Director, Lynette Allen.

Going back to our mission statement, we started by supporting the communities. After Lynda completed the initial film screening (weeding out those not quite ready for

showtime!), representatives from the film festivals were able to connect by convening in Jackson to screen more films and decide which would be the best for their communities. They would even get possible discounts on a movie if more than one site picked it. ISJL staff members were then able to give the community leaders best practices on different aspects of how to run a film festival: working with media, creating press releases, getting the word out, establishing a relationship with a local movie theater, and drafting letters to sponsors.

While communities were back home creating their festivals, ISJL staff were able to work on graphics for the communities. The Jewish Cinema South poster even won an American Advertising Award! And as communities gained more years of experience, returning communities were able to present about their festival experience with new communities. This network of film festivals was also a true celebration of Jewish culture, and reached diverse audiences numbering in the thousands. Between 2001 and

2010, Jewish Cinema South went from bringing in 700 people across the region to reaching more than 7,000 people each year!

These film festivals involved more than movies. Communities brought in directors, speakers, and even school groups for conversation and dialogue. They partnered with local museums, universities, and interfaith groups (and once even had a hummus tasting). Many of these festivals live on, even though the official ISJL-overseen Jewish Cinema South network ceased operations in 2010. From Austin to Baton Rouge, Mobile to Nashville, and right near our own headquarters in Jackson, we love seeing that communities continue to bring a variety of Jewish cinematic experiences to their cities.

I can personally vouch that the Jackson, Mississippi festival has continued on in the ISJL's backyard. During my second year as an Education Fellow in 2017, I joined as co-chair of the film selection committee of Jewish Cinema Mississippi, following in the steps of other Education Fellows before me. The three years I spent on that committee were a very

cool experience, getting to see so many new films and discuss with our committee which would be the best to screen in Jackson.

The legacy of Jewish Cinema South can be seen in festivals around the region, from the artwork that some festivals still use, to the collaboration between cities when scoping out new films. The ISJL itself has kept the lessons that we learned from Jewish Cinema South. With all ISJL current programming, we try to share best practices and create networks of communities. One of our featured programs is our Presenters Roster, which connects speakers, musicians, comedians, and more, to our communities. When we put presenters on the road, we create mini tours that lessen costs for each community. And we still collaborate on promotional materials, taking administrative work off of communities' very full plates, just as we did twenty years ago.

To learn more about Culture at the ISJL, email culture@isjl.org



JEWISH CINEMA SOUTH

MOBILE JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL

JACKSON JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL

BATON ROUGE, LA | JACKSON, MS
MOBILE, AL | THE TRIANGLE, NC

MOBILE JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL October 25, 26, 27, 28 & November 1

FILMS

THE CASE FOR ISRAEL: DEMOCRACY'S DILEMMA Monday, October 26, 7:00 pm Sponsor: American Jewish Archives	KNOWLEDGE IS THE BEGINNING Tuesday, October 27, 7:00 pm Sponsor: University of Southern Mississippi	STEEL TOES Wednesday, October 28, 7:00 pm Sponsor: University of Southern Mississippi	THE LITTLE TRAILER Thursday, October 29, 7:00 pm Sponsor: University of Southern Mississippi	WAVES OF FREEDOM Friday, November 1, 8:00 pm Sponsor: American Jewish Archives
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TICKETS
\$10 Adults
\$5 Seniors & Students

For additional details, call 201-363-7197 or e-mail mobilejewishfilm@isjl.org

BUILDING COMMUNITY ACROSS 13 STATES

What does BUILDING COMMUNITY look like? It looks like cooking together. Like preserving history. Like sharing in interfaith experiences. Like bringing people together for conferences and concerts. Here are just a few examples of what southern Jewish community-building looks like at the ISJL—one from each of the 13 states we serve:



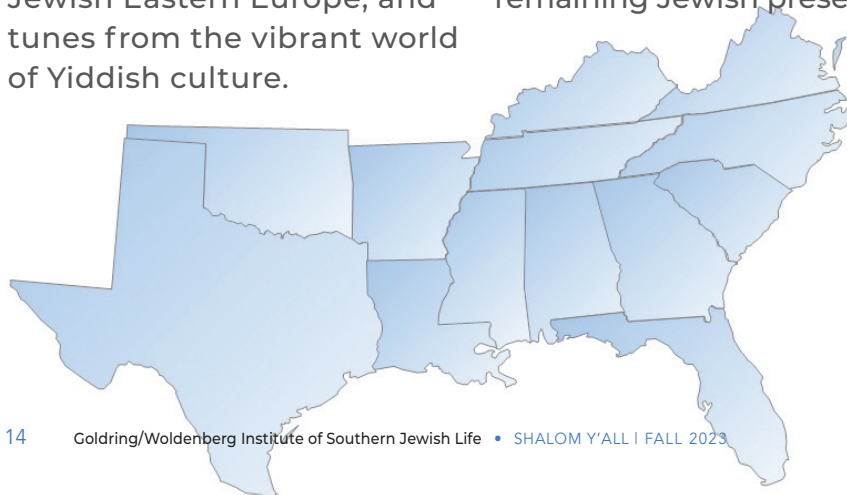
ALABAMA Tsvey Brider (“Two Brothers”), a Yiddish songwriting, arranging, and performing duo composed of artists Anthony Russell and Dmitri Gaskin, brought their music to Temple Beth-El in Birmingham, Alabama in April 2023. Their concert combined African-American spirituals, the music of Jewish Eastern Europe, and tunes from the vibrant world of Yiddish culture.



ARKANSAS This is the gravestone of Rosalie Cohen beneath the branches of a magnolia tree at Oakland-Fraternal Cemetery in Little Rock. Preserving local history is part of building community in the present, both in places with still-thriving Jewish communities, such as Little Rock, and in towns with no remaining Jewish presence.



FLORIDA Pictured above, ISJL Education Director Molly Levy ran into several ISJL partners at the Chase the Dreidel 5K in Central Florida, such as Maureen Sechan from St. Pete. One of the beauties of our community-building model is how it helps us connect with our community throughout the region at others’ events, too.





GEORGIA URJ Camp Coleman campers participated this summer in the new Jewish Learning and Belonging (J-LAB) curriculum created by the ISJL. Campers worked together to learn about Jewish values and build community through fun and meaningful programming.



KENTUCKY Rabbi Joshua Garroway, PhD, a professor of Early Christianity and the Second Commonwealth, was the scholar-in-residence at Temple Shalom in Louisville, KY in December 2022. Friday night's audience included members of the Christian community, interfaith couples, and conversion students from the temple—truly building up the entire community!

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BUILDING COMMUNITY



LOUISIANA In January 2023, the ISJL senior staff had a retreat in New Orleans which included a visit to the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (MSJE). The ISJL's Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities features prominently in the permanent exhibit, and there is so much shared history and partnership between our organizations; we are proud to work together to build southern Jewish community!



OKLAHOMA At a visit to Temple B'nai Emunah in Tulsa, the ISJL Education team led community teachers through an exercise they could use with their students to create collages exploring how the communal experience of saying the *Sh'ma* prayer feels to them.



MISSISSIPPI The Mississippi Freedom Seder is a collaboration between the ISJL, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and the Jackson community. It brings together people of all backgrounds to celebrate freedom and the ongoing work of liberation. In 2023, the seder featured musical duo Lapidus & Myles.



NORTH CAROLINA

This March, The Bible Players performed their Unkosher Comedy Show in Wilmington, NC. This show was sponsored by Bnai Israel, Temple of Israel, and the UJA of Wilmington. Both the online and in-person participants were engaged throughout—community-building in the modern era!



TEXAS We have more education partners in the Lone Star state than in any other single state! In our first *Shalom Y'all* issue of 2023, we had a wonderful piece highlighting our partnership with El Paso, Texas. Here's one of the images from their beautiful congregation.

SOUTH CAROLINA

In 2022, the ISJL sent our staff rabbi to Beaufort, South Carolina, for the High Holy Day season. From leading services to sharing meals to conducting visits throughout the ten Days of Awe, the dedicated time on the ground led to lasting community-building.



VIRGINIA Program Associate Elz Bulington leads a mindfulness centered program for students at Williamsburg, Virginia's Temple Beth El.



TENNESSEE For many years, the Upper Cumberland, Tennessee, Jewish community has been one of the sites of the ISJL Passover Pilgrimage, a series of seder celebrations attended by diverse audiences in communities with small Jewish communities—always an inspiring, informational, interfaith-audience-attended event that builds community, goodwill, and a spirit of freedom.

SPIRITUALITY

ON COMING BACK TO MISSISSIPPI

RABBI SALEM PEARCE *DIRECTOR OF SPIRITUALITY*

I arrived at the Birthplace of Elvis Presley on a Shabbat afternoon, during a break in the schedule of my visit to Temple B'nai Israel in Tupelo. The year was 2017, and I was still in rabbinical school at Hebrew College in Boston. Within a month, I was slated to start a new job in New York City. I figured it was possible I might not ever make it back to Mississippi, and so between the morning Torah study at the temple and the pastoral visits of the late afternoon, I decided I wanted to see where the King of Rock and Roll was born.

The white clapboard house his father built—but lost a few years later when he couldn't repay the loan for the materials—stands in its original location, bought by the city when Elvis was in his early 20s. The house is now encircled by a “Walk of Life,” with dated bricks denoting each year of the singer's life from 1935 to 1977. To my utter delight, however, only the first 13 years of his life contain markers with significant events: the 13 years that he and his family lived in Tupelo. The last recorded event on the walk is the family's move to Tennessee. I

certainly appreciate the site's claim that despite his eventual superstardom, Elvis “always maintained his humble spirit in keeping true to his roots and formative values in East Tupelo.” It was, after all, proceeds from a concert he played on the Tupelo Fairgrounds in 1957 that enabled the purchase of the site's extensive grounds.

The entrance to the birthplace is marked by a replica of the beautiful 1939 green Plymouth sedan that the Presley family

used to drive to Memphis in 1948, and the car points north still. On that afternoon in 2017, I wondered whether the teenage musician assumed he might not ever return to Mississippi either.

But Elvis did indeed return to Mississippi, and so did I.

Six years after my summer rabbinic internship with the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life concluded, I got an email from the CEO about an open

Rabbi Salem Pearce at the 2023 ISJL Conference



position as the ISJL's Director of Spirituality. Michele and I caught up, and the interview process gave me a chance to reflect on the significance of the four short weeks I spent in Jackson as a rabbinical student (during which I also visited the communities of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Monroe, Louisiana). Since that time, I served as the director of organizing at T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, and then as the executive director of Carolina Jews for Justice (CJJ) in Durham, North Carolina.

Thus, early this September, I wrangled my cats into carriers and all of my possessions into boxes and drove to Jackson in my car (a decidedly less memorable sedan than the Presley family's glorious green automobile). When I spotted the blue and red *Welcome to Mississippi* sign on the border from Alabama, I felt a sense of rightness.

My job at T'ruah brought me back to the South more than a few times, as I organized many trips for rabbis and cantors to the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, and to the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas. But it was my time in Durham that really rekindled my passion for supporting Jewish communities in the South.

In addition to my social justice work at CJJ, I also officiated various community lifecycle events. In New York, rabbis abound, but in North Carolina—as in so many of the states in the ISJL's 13-state region—Jewish clergy are scarce, and the communities who need them are diffuse. I began doing conversions, weddings, funerals, baby namings, tutoring for b'nai mitzvah, and I loved each and every one of these “add-on” pastoral tasks. I went to Hebrew College with the intention of becoming a social justice advocate, but I found renewed purpose in the relationships I built by accompanying people in these significant moments of their lives—especially during a global pandemic, when we all felt so isolated from each other. At this time, I also became very involved with Beth El Synagogue, where I led Shabbat services and read Torah regularly.

About six months ago, a friend whom I hadn't seen in a long time visited Durham, and she asked me: “What's giving you

joy right now?” Without a beat, I replied: “The lifecycle events I've been performing.”

So when I got the opportunity to continue to do this rabbinical work on an even broader scale by becoming the “ISJL rabbi”... I knew the answer had to be yes.

Thus, early this September, I wrangled my cats into carriers and all of my possessions into boxes and drove to Jackson in my car (a decidedly less memorable sedan than the Presley family's glorious green automobile). When I spotted the blue and red *Welcome to Mississippi* sign on the border from Alabama, I felt a sense of rightness.

As I write this, I am spending the High Holidays at Adath Israel Congregation in Cleveland, Mississippi, and looking forward to autumn and winter visits to Monroe and Lafayette, Louisiana; Tallahassee, Florida; and Amarillo, Texas.

If you need a traveling rabbi, please consider adding me to your community's schedule! My proverbial door is open, and from my new home base in Mississippi, I am eager to serve and continue building connections in this beautiful southern Jewish community.

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

DEVELOPMENT

MEET OUR NEW DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT: **OLIVIA RENATA ZALE**

The ISJL is thrilled to welcome Olivia Renata Zale to our staff team. In her introduction, you'll see why we're so excited to have her helping us build more communal support for our organization and count her among our tight-knit crew!

I think it's safe to say that my road to the ISJL has been thousands of miles long. Hyperbolic? Perhaps. But, hear me out. My first interaction with the ISJL was almost fifteen years ago in Lafayette, Louisiana, where my parents had recently moved. A family friend introduced me to Alex Glass, an Education Fellow (now called a Program

Associate) who was spending the weekend with the Lafayette congregation in preparation for an upcoming holiday celebration.

I was confused. This young woman was my age, Jewish... and visiting Lafayette, Louisiana, intentionally? At the time, I still found this surprising—because the truth is, for me, the recent move to Louisiana had been a major cultural shock.

I grew up in New York City, and never gave much thought to what it meant to be Jewish. Judaism was important in our home, but it wasn't until moving to a place with a significantly smaller Jewish population that I began to define what being part of a community meant to me. In New York, I was one in a crowd. In Louisiana, Judaism felt different. A starker label. Over time, I learned to make Judaism my own. Becoming aware of the ISJL during that transition was uplifting, and it opened my eyes to the possibility of greater connection in an unfamiliar, new home—one that I would come to deeply appreciate.

I am grateful for the experience of having lived in many places. My road-trip-of-life has taken

me from New York to South Florida and then to Boston, Massachusetts and Lafayette, Louisiana. College sent me to Walla Walla, Washington and then Madison, Wisconsin. After graduation my now-husband and I decided to make Chicago our home. That's where I'll be working remotely from, while hitting the road for the ISJL.

In a full circle moment, my parents, who lived in Lafayette for the past 17 years, moved to Chicago this summer. I'm thrilled to have them so close to me after being a literal thousand miles away. They're thrilled, meanwhile, to learn that now I'm the one with the fresh southern Jewish connection!

All of these experiences have shaped me. Meeting new people and hearing their stories has become how I acclimate to a new place, learn about myself and create community and connection. A foundational building block of community for me has always been family, and I'm grateful to have meaningful relationships with many of my first and second cousins (and my first and second cousins once removed!). My family's southern roots began in small-town Texas at the beginning of



Olivia with her husband (Herb) and parents (Claudia and Stanley) at a family reunion in Cat Spring, Texas.

I'm excited to begin the next phase of my professional career, aligning my passion with my skill set and building relationships with both new and sustaining donors through our shared goal of ensuring that the ISJL can continue its important work.

the 20th century and many of my extended family members still live in the South. We've had the unique privilege to collaborate with one another through our family's foundation, cherishing our family ties as we spread out all across the country. My experience with the foundation over the last 15 years has informed who I am and what I value. One of my biggest takeaways has been understanding the importance of building Jewish community and ensuring that anyone who desires to feel connected to their Judaism has the opportunity to do so.

I'm excited to begin the next phase of my professional career, aligning my passion with my skill set and building relationships with both new and sustaining donors through our shared goal of ensuring

that the ISJL can continue its important work. In my few short weeks here, I have already heard from folks seeking advice as they endeavor to bring their small congregations back together and from educators sharing resources and offering support for one another as a new school year begins. The ISJL inspired me before I became the Director of Development and I pinch myself every morning that I now get to be the one to tell its stories of connection, support, and celebration.

Most importantly, I want to say thank you to YOU! Yes, you—the person reading this new, amazing issue of *Shalom Y'all*. Your commitment to the ISJL inspires me every day. If I can answer any of your questions, or if you'd like to have a conversation about which methods of giving align with your goals, please reach out to me. I can't wait to hear from you!

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.

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Travel the Jewish South with the ISJL in 2024.

The ISJL Culture team is excited to offer two opportunities to travel through our home state with us. Together we'll share off-the-beaten-path destinations, big conversations about southern Jewish culture and history, and the best art, music, and food Mississippi has to offer.

Jews, Blues, and Food in Jackson, Memphis, and the Mississippi Delta: January 31 -February 5, 2024.

Jewish Life in the Most Southern Place on Earth: Jackson, Natchez, Vicksburg, and the Mississippi Delta: February 18-25, 2024.



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