

# SHALOM *y'all*

GOLDRING/WOLDENBERG INSTITUTE OF  
SOUTHERN JEWISH LIFE

WINTER 2023

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## COMMUNITY VOICES

OUR PARTNERS SHARE THEIR STORIES

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## ON THE COVER

Summer 2022 Public History Interns Isabel Bartosh and Clara Posner with a Mississippi Delta music legend—can you guess who it is?

Find the answer on page 26, and read our interns' reflections on a summer in Mississippi on page 10.

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# COMMUNITY VOICES

**A**T THE ISJL, WE SOMETIMES JOKE ABOUT OUR OVER-use of the word “community.”

It’s just so central to our mission— it’s hard to avoid frequently saying things like *community partners*, *serving communities*, *community-centered approach*... but if you have to over-use any word, is there a better one to choose?

We don’t think so.

Community really is at the heart of everything we do. That’s why our *Shalom Y’all* theme for 2023 is **Community**, and we’re kicking it off in this issue by featuring community voices. Our program partners from throughout the region are weighing in on the pages of this edition, sharing their on-the-ground insights into the ISJL and the wonderful (say it with us!) communities we serve.

You’ll hear from a first-year religious school director in Texas, a recent conversion student in Mississippi, and volunteers nationwide committed to supporting, connecting, and celebrating Jewish life in the South.

We hope you enjoy this very special issue—and, of course, we thank you for being part of the ISJL community.

*The Board & Staff of the ISJL*



# FROM THE CEO



**MICHELE SCHIPPER**  
CEO

**T**HE THEME OF THIS ISSUE OF *Shalom Y'all* is "community voices." As the ISJL team began discussing the issue and everyone who would be chiming in with their experiences, I began reflecting on my own experiences with the ISJL. Along with all of the other inspiring stories we began collecting, I began cataloging some of my personal stories, too.

Because while, yes, I'm the ISJL's CEO... I'm also an ISJL program participant. An ISJL community member. A teacher who has used the ISJL curriculum.

When our family moved to Jackson, Mississippi, we immediately joined Beth Israel Congregation. I had heard about the ISJL education program and I wanted to see it in action. That very first year, I volunteered to teach in the religious school.

The curriculum was amazing! Everything was completely written out for me so I knew exactly what to teach, what supplies were needed, and anything else necessary to lead an easy, engaging class. I also appreciated that my own, older children were enriched by the education they were receiving through this program and their volunteer teachers. I also had the opportunity to get to know the Fellows (known today as Program Associates) as they brought excitement and energy on their community visits to help lead services and get to know community members during the Shabbat oneg. One of

my favorite Fellow visit memories was when we turned the Beth Israel social hall into "The Mitzvah Mall"—an all-school program that had children and adults alike delighted and inspired.

With a membership of just under 200 families, I am amazed by the speakers and entertainers the congregation has been able to bring in to enrich congregants and community members, thanks to working in partnership with the ISJL. Joel Hoffman's visit, where he broke down the meaning of biblical texts, was fascinating. The Braid, a Los Angeles theater group, came to Jackson on a southern tour coordinated by the ISJL and gave a wonderful performance of their show *The Matzoh Ball Diaries*.

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"I AM AMAZED BY THE SPEAKERS AND ENTERTAINERS THE CONGREGATION HAS BEEN ABLE TO BRING IN, THANKS TO WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE ISJL."  
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When I wanted to do a little more research on the Jewish community of my mother's hometown of Clarksdale, Mississippi—a



Michele steps in as a substitute teacher for the kindergarten and first grade religious school class at Beth Israel Congregation.

small town in the Mississippi Delta known as the "Home of the Blues"—I turned to the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities. Although my mom left Clarksdale in the early 1950s, she was confirmed at Temple Beth Israel there, which closed in 2003. I found my grandparents and other family members in the cemetery listing in the Encyclopedia. It was an invaluable resource to help me plan ahead and know where to go before I travelled back to Clarksdale to "visit" the family.

From my on-the-ground, in-the-community perspective, the impact of the ISJL is so clear. And as the ISJL's CEO, I could not be prouder of the ways we support, connect, and celebrate Jewish life in the South.

As my husband Ken and I consider where our philanthropic dollars are allocated, we make sure the ISJL is at the top of the list. I hope you will consider joining us in participating with ISJL programs, and supporting our work.

With my sincere thanks,

# FROM THE BOARD CHAIR



JAY HESDORFFER  
BOARD CHAIR

“THE ISJL MAY BE THE BEST-kept secret in Jewish life.”

That was the response from my friend who helped write this column—and I couldn't have said it better myself. My wife Marietta and I are currently splitting our time between Chicago and Sarasota. We have met many new friends in Florida, and have learned that even though they live within the ISJL's region, most are not familiar with our work.

So we invited one of our new Florida friends who is active in Jewish causes to help us out. Marietta and I were eager to explain the work we do.

We told him about the twenty-three-year history of the ISJL, and our mission to support, connect, and celebrate Jewish life in the South. We talked about our three divisions: Education, Culture, and Spirituality.

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"EVEN THOUGH [OUR FRIENDS IN FLORIDA] LIVE WITHIN THE ISJL'S REGION, MOST ARE NOT FAMILIAR WITH OUR WORK."  
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**ISJL Education**, we told him, provides curriculum to religious schools that collectively serve around 3,000 children each year. We also told him about our traveling educators, our annual conference, and our secular education initiatives—which include literacy

programs and a peer mediation program for public schools that helps resolve conflicts before they escalate to violence.

**The Culture division at the ISJL** is just as impactful, we told our friend. Our Southern Jewish Heritage Tours introduce folks of all ages to the nuanced, important history and vibrant contemporary culture in our region—and the ISJL Virtual Vacation video series brings these stories to folks across the country. We also offer in-person and virtual presentations by the stellar presenters on our roster: musicians, speakers, comedians, and more. Phenomenally impressive is the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, where you can learn about the history of Jewish life throughout the South.

**Spirituality at the ISJL** is special because it reaches folks too often overlooked. It's dedicated solely to serving Jewish communities in the region too small to employ their own full-time Jewish professional. The ISJL rabbi travels the region to support Jewish life and life cycle events, coordinates "Rabbis on the Road" visits from other clergy, and provides weekly emailed sermons, bimonthly live text study over Zoom, remote counseling and life-cycle event preparation, and more.

When our friend learned that we partner with more than 100 communities throughout a 13-state region, with a special focus on small Jewish communities that might otherwise be overlooked, he was taken aback at our huge footprint.

Our friend was excited by this work and blown away by the ISJL's outreach. He was inspired by the fact that many of the services we provide would not otherwise be available. Being inclusive, being pro-active and sharing our culture resonated with him.

He said our work hit at the core of what is important to him: to be connected. "I think people are Jewish in their hearts and in their history—and that's what people will see when they look at the ISJL. People will see what you have done and what you are doing, and they will be touched and supportive."

.....  
"MANY OF THE SERVICES WE PROVIDE WOULD NOT OTHERWISE BE AVAILABLE."  
.....

This is our hope—to connect with the Jewish community, one individual at a time, so our work, which is built upon decades of dedication, can continue to thrive as we support Jewish life, provide Jewish education, and create Jewish connectivity throughout the South.

Thank you for supporting the work that we do.

# EDUCATION

## “WE MAY BE SMALL, BUT WE’RE CERTAINLY MIGHTY”

### THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN EL PASO, TEXAS

**M**INDY ESCOBAR-LEANSE IS A PROUD EL PASOAN WHO IS HITTING THE ground running in her first year as music and religious school coordinator of El Paso’s Reform synagogue, Temple Mount Sinai. After spending 13 years in New York, Mindy has returned to her hometown through what she describes as “a work of God and the universe.” While in New York, Mindy struggled to find a congregation that felt like home. When she landed back in El Paso, she realized that she “never needed another congregation” because this one is truly her spiritual home. We sat down with Mindy to pick her brain about what sets the Jewish community in El Paso apart.



Student from Temple Mount Sinai creating art inspired by Marcus Hal’s “D’var Torah” stained glass windows.



#### What makes your community in El Paso special?

What makes this such a special community of Jews is the diversity. Being a border town, we are a city of blended cultures with a strong and vibrant community of *anusim* (descendants of Jews forced to convert to Christianity in earlier generations), converts, and crypto Jews (“hidden Jews” of Spanish descent). For some, these may be new words, but in our community these terms are identifiers. In a region where many families came to hide or were forced to assimilate, people are still discovering their Jewish lineage and, beautifully, reclaiming it. Many rabbis in our community, Rabbi Stephen Leon for example, have helped many individuals find and follow their lineages back to Judaism. This creates a group of people who are passionate about Judaism, the rituals, practices, and community. We may be small, but we’re certainly mighty.

#### What are your roles and responsibilities within your community?

I am the music and religious school coordinator. I work with

Rabbi Ben Zeidman to create services for Shabbat and holidays that are engaging and appropriate musically. For the religious school, I manage our amazing staff of teachers and *madrichim* (teaching assistants). I also create and execute programming for family events and facilitate logistics for visiting musicians.

**What program are you especially proud of in your religious school?**

In my first year in this position, I was given a unique opportunity to create programming around local world-renowned artist Hal Marcus and his piece "D'var Torah" as our synagogue planned to honor him. This magnificent set of four stained glass windows lives in our synagogue space, colorfully depicting stories from the Torah. We spent the first five sessions of religious school this year learning through creating art of our own. We really leaned into the power of interpretation that colors both artistic creation and Torah study. Each student created at least one piece of artwork inspired by Marcus's stained glass windows. The art made a beautiful display for the community during the holidays.

**What do you hope your students take away from their time in religious school?**

I hope that the students take pride in their Jewish identity and feel a sense of safety in our community. I hope our songs and prayers stay in their minds and hearts throughout the week and that they are inspired to live with strong values and passion and to continue learning outside of religious school.

**How has the ISJL curriculum helped your school?**

The ISJL is a great resource for activity ideas and curriculum. Our Program Associate (PA), Elz Bulington, has done a fantastic job at meeting our needs for specific events and projects. I'm inspired by the collaboration between our school and Elz, because we've come up with some fun ways to deepen the learning experience. It's an experiment for many of us but, so far, it seems to be working!

**Any El Paso food recommendations?**

Goodness, what a difficult question but... I have to go with tacos! Specifically tacos from Taconeta, a local shop that makes their own tortillas and specializes in simple but delicious dishes.

Top to bottom: a student working on his stained glass-inspired artwork; the sanctuary of Temple Mount Sinai; students' paintings on display.



To learn more about Education at the ISJL, email [jewisheducation@isjl.org](mailto:jewisheducation@isjl.org).

# YOU'RE INVITED TO THE ISJL CONN



Reconnect  
in person





# CONFERENCE

Join us for networking,  
enrichment, and community



June 25-27, 2023  
Jackson, Mississippi

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

# CULTURE

## BRIEF TIME IN THE COMMUNITY, BIG IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

AT THE ISJL, WE'RE PASSIONATE ABOUT HELPING TO DEVELOP THE NEXT generation of Jewish educators, clergy, lay leaders, cultural professionals, and public historians. We're especially proud that year after year, we're able to hire exceptional college students from across the country to live in Jackson for the summer, get to know the ISJL, travel throughout Mississippi and beyond, and work on exciting public history projects.

In the summer of 2022, we were able to welcome in-person Public History Interns for the first time since 2019. They spent the summer developing episodes of the ISJL Virtual Vacation, working with our ISJL Institutional History Archive, digitizing and processing interviews from our oral history collection, and gaining new insights and knowledge about southern Jewish history and life in Mississippi. Here are their reflections on their time in Jackson.



### "AT LEAST YOU'LL ENJOY THE FOOD" CLARA POSNER

When I first accepted my summer internship at the ISJL, I was bombarded with comments about southern cuisine: "Warning: the tea is SWEET." "You have to try fried okra." "Mississippi? That's interesting...at least you'll enjoy the food." My family and friends seemed to associate this little corner of the world with two things: scorching heat and delicious food. As I look back on this summer, I realize that food was an essential part of my education about the Magnolia State and southern Jewish life. These lessons started with my first meal in Jackson at Aladdin (a Lebanese restaurant that's a favorite of the ISJL staff). In my mind, southern cuisine was composed of barbecue and fried foods, so I was shocked to discover that the city had multiple amazing Mediterranean restaurants. This was the first of many culinary surprises that ranged from Jackson's pig ear sandwiches to the hot tamales

of the Mississippi Delta. Throughout the summer, I noticed various blends of food and culture, which shattered the neatly-defined idea of southern cuisine that I had at the beginning of the internship.

The observations continued during my research for the ISJL Virtual Vacation—I produced an episode about the Cuban Jewish community in south Florida. After reading an article about the immigration of Jews in Cuba to the United States, I had numerous questions about this community: What were the origins of the Jewish community in Cuba? Why did the majority of this population move to southern Florida? How did families share these stories of migration?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted interviews with members of the community. One recurring theme was the importance of food. Multiple interview-

ees talked about how the food they cooked with their families combined Cuban flavors with traditional Sephardic and Ashkenazi dishes.

Through my research on Miami's Cuban Jews and my own Mississippi dining experiences, I came to understand that food is a living record of the people, places, and cultures that have contributed to the evolving landscape of this part of the country. My favorite meals during the internship were unexpected: an alligator po' boy in New Orleans, a smoked sausage slider from the Big Apple Inn in Jackson, and an oyster omelet from Elvie's in Jackson. The history of southern Jewish food is too complex to create a cohesive origin story, but it reflects the integration of different cultures and a love of community. And it sure is delicious.

# ARCHIVAL EXPLORATION

## ISABEL BARTOSH

My summer internship at the ISJL was an invaluable learning experience. Because of the pandemic, all of my previous archival experiences had been digital. I appreciated the opportunity to learn more about how an archive is organized and the different things an archivist must take into consideration. Despite what many may think, an archive is not simply a repository for every photograph, poster, slide, or scrap of paper that crosses an institutional desk. Archives have limited space, preservation abilities, and purpose. We can't keep dozens of copies of the same picture—however, it is still a struggle to discard anything.

The ISJL has conducted hundreds of oral history interviews over the years, and every single tape needs to be digitized and stored before people can access them for research purposes. Our job this summer was to digitize the tapes, scan relevant documents, and organize the interviews into easily-identifiable folders on the computer. This is the first step in the long process of making these invaluable oral histories accessible to the public. I can't wait to see what a future researcher does with this resource.

Our other main assignment this summer was to develop our very own ISJL Virtual Vacation episode. When I learned that Savannah, Georgia, has a significant Jewish community, I immediately wondered if there was a Jewish connection to the Girl Scouts organization, which was founded in Savannah in 1912. For my episode, I got to talk with three women who were involved in Girl Scouts in the 1950s and 1960s, and one woman who is still involved in scouting as a director in Tennessee. I was a Girl Scout for 12 years, so I genuinely enjoyed working on a project that will contribute to public knowledge about an amazing organization. The episode premieres at the end of February—just in time for Girl Scout Cookie season!

I am so grateful for my time at the ISJL. I have worked with some truly amazing people who have guided my thoughts on my future career. I am even more secure in my commitment to the field of history, and I can't wait to continue my education. I can only hope that any future colleagues of mine will be like the people I have met here.



From top to bottom: Isabel and Clara on the road in New Orleans; digitizing oral history interviews; visiting Whitney Plantation; processing materials in the ISJL Institutional History Archive.



To learn more about Heritage & Interpretation at the ISJL, email [heritage@isjl.org](mailto:heritage@isjl.org).



Standing: Lafe, Rayman, and David Solomon, with their father David seated (photo by David Sicher, courtesy of the Solomon family).



Temple Beth El Sunday School, 1922. Courtesy of the Solomon Family.

# A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID SOLOMON

**D**AVID SOLOMON HAS LIVED IN NEW YORK CITY SINCE THE LATE 1960S, BUT HE STILL CONSIDERS HELENA, ARKANSAS, his home. In addition to managing family businesses in the Helena area, he has been involved with a number of historical preservation efforts there. The Solomon family has also supported the ISJL immensely over the years. Most recently, the Solomon family awarded the ISJL a small grant to fund upcoming revisions to the Arkansas section of the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities. **ISJL Historian Josh Parshall** talked to Solomon about his family's Arkansas roots and his continued dedication to his hometown and its local history.

As I like to say, I'm the fourth-and-a-half generation of the family to be from there. My great-grandfather Moses Levy Solomon came to Helena, Arkansas, in the early 1850s. Like many Jews of the era, he was a salesman. He opened a store. He and Pauline, his wife, had eight children, six of whom were boys, born between 1867 and 1883. Moses died when the eldest son was in his twenties and the youngest was twelve years old. Of the eight children, only one went to college—the youngest one. The other seven were entrepreneurial. They worked together, along with the men and women they married. They had retail stores, wholesale stores, they had a bank, and got involved in farming.

The Solomon family helped found Temple Beth El in Helena, and they were among the leading citizens of the town. Helena was more liberal than many communities of the time, and the Jews were fully accepted. One of my cousins was mayor of Helena in the late

19th century, and another cousin and his son were city treasurers in the early twentieth century. It was a flourishing community up until the Second World War.

In the 1920s, there were one hundred Jewish families in Helena, and the temple also drew membership from surrounding counties. The other interesting thing is that the Jewish communities of the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta formed a larger, integrated community. And this was both in my grandparents' time and in my father's and mother's time. It was not uncommon for them to go to dances in Greenville, Mississippi, or for the Mississippi people, from the Jewish community, to come to Helena to socialize.

All these people had roughly similar backgrounds: pre-Civil War émigrés, settlers in the Delta on both sides of the river. They started out in retail and ended up in farming and in the professions. My paternal grandmother came from a very distinguished fami-

ly south of Greenville, Mississippi. In fact, I reckon about a quarter of the graves in the Greenville Jewish cemetery are my relatives. And there are relatives from other towns.

We were raised—my two younger brothers and I—to “get out of Dodge” because it was clear that the Jewish community was declining and opportunity was elsewhere. One brother, Lafe, lives in Washington, DC, and was a lifelong employee of the National Labor Relations Board, rising to be general counsel. My other brother, Rayman, is a law school professor and dean emeritus, and the former provost of Rutgers University-Camden. But we all maintain a strong allegiance to Helena. We have several family businesses in Helena that I run. Pre-COVID-19 I was there every five or six weeks, both because of my father and because of the family businesses. The pandemic put a stop to that, but I have resumed my travels to Helena.

My father died in 2017, and he was the last Jew from the historical Jewish community to live in Helena. Temple Beth El Cemetery, of which I am the head, remains in active use. It is on the National Register of Historic Places, and we maintain it. We bury one or two members of the Helena Jewish diaspora every year. The diaspora, the descendants of the congregation, are all over the country, but they remain united and loyal to their community of origin.

We're one of the few Jewish cemeteries in Arkansas that remains viable, and we are very proud of that. In fact, we are building something we call a history pavilion in the cemetery—a small structure that will contain visual and textual information about the history of the congregation and the community of Temple Beth El. We're doing this because when my generation passes from this earth, there will be nobody

left who can explain the history of the community. We also have an extensive database of the burials and are in the process of putting that on JewishGen.com. So we are doing the best we can to preserve the history of the community and to inculcate the next generation—my two brothers and I have five children among us—and their next generation in the necessity of this history. I will be buried there, along with my wife, and that will make the fourth generation of Solomons in the cemetery. Needless to say, the cemetery is important to me and my brothers.

I became aware of a book called *A Corner of the Tapestry* by Caroline Gray LeMaster, a Christian woman who became interested in the Arkansas Jewish community. She wrote a 600-page book—carefully going through each local Jewish community, collecting information and databases. My father and other members of his generation

of the Arkansas Jewish community supported her research. She was a librarian by profession. I met her after the book was published. She became sort of an adjunct professor at the Central Arkansas Library in Little Rock, working on the Butler Collection for Arkansas History. She provided the library all of her research material, which is extensive. She died some years ago, but the Jewish community of Arkansas owes her a debt of thanks for her work, because most of the communities that she documented are long gone. I was motivated to create a small, donor-advised fund called the Tapestry Fund to support Jewish historical activities in Arkansas. The money is invested and managed by the Arkansas Community Foundation, and I am glad that it will help the ISJL to revise the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities and continue sharing the stories of places like Helena, Arkansas.



Temple Beth El Cemetery in Helena.

Helena,  
Arkansas



Women of Temple Israel in Blytheville, Arkansas, preparing food for a Passover seder, 1990.

With Mississippi revisions wrapped up, our next big Encyclopedia project will be to revisit the Arkansas section. If you're from an Arkansas Jewish community, take a look at the pertinent entry and let Dr. Josh Parshall know what you think.

Email Dr. Parshall at [history@isjl.org](mailto:history@isjl.org).



# JEWISH CULTURE IN KENTUCKY

## HOW THE ISJL HELPS MAKE IT HAPPEN

**W**E LOVE WEEKEND-LONG ENGAGEMENTS FOR OUR ISJL roster presenters, because they are able to connect to congregants and provide full and rich experiences to the congregation. Last spring, Temple Shalom of Louisville, Kentucky, reached out to us about bringing in Rabbi Joshua Garroway, PhD, to their community. Rabbi Garroway is a professor of Early Christianity and the Second Commonwealth at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. Karen Bloom and then Sandra Flaksman of Temple Shalom were the local leaders of this process, and Sandra had a great chat with **ISJL Director of Programs Shira Muroff** about their recent December 2022 event with Rabbi Garroway.



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**Shira: Why did you decide to host Rabbi Garroway, and why did you choose to book him through the ISJL?**

Sandra: We wanted to bring in Rabbi Garroway because our rabbi, Rabbi Beth Jacowitz Chottiner, is friends with him from rabbinical school. We went through the ISJL because working with you allows us to access a discounted speaker honorarium. [The ISJL's more affordable] reduced pricing is what makes it possible to bring in a speaker like him for a full weekend.

**What was it like working with the ISJL for this event?**

You and I had such a good relationship throughout the process. When I sent any email or needed any information, you had very timely responses. I appreciated working together, and the good communication.

**What is it like as a committee chair to bring in programming for the temple?**

I am the education chair on Karen's engagement committee. We both enjoyed bringing in the information that Rabbi Garroway conveys, and learning it ourselves! The topics that Rabbi Garroway brings in are very interesting to me.





Rabbi Beth Jacowitz Chottiner (left) with Rabbi Joshua Garroway, PhD, in Louisville, Kentucky. Courtesy of Temple Shalom.

**Can you tell us a little bit about the event that Rabbi Garroway came in for?**

Rabbi Garroway came in for a scholar-in-residence weekend, speaking Friday night through Sunday. He spoke at Friday night services on The Origins of Christianity and its Parting of the Ways with Judaism. On Saturday he spoke during services and after our kiddush lunch on the topic Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Ancient and Modern. Both of those events were sponsored by the temple Sisterhood. On Sunday, He also spoke at the Men’s Club breakfast about Conversion to Judaism: Ancient and Modern.

**How did the congregation respond to the event? What was the turnout?**

This weekend was very well received! Rabbi Garroway has a way of putting things that makes his content relatable but still exemplifies the scholar he is. We were also glad to see that the audience on Friday included members of the Christian community, and interfaith couples and conversion students from the temple. It was unreal—we had 150 people attend across the three events. There were some repeat attendees across the events, but for a community of 110 family units, having 73 people Friday night was amazing. Everyone was thrilled with the numbers.

**What did it mean to have this program for your temple?**

We are an elderly congregation working with a small budget, existing year to year. To do an event

like this says that we are here and we’re not going anywhere. We’re still a strong group. Amazingly, I also lost count of volunteers during the weekend. It was some of the best volunteer engagement we’ve had at an event, even taking into account events before the pandemic. Some other Sisterhood members and I prepped the food in my small household kitchen. We were a well-oiled machine, and we felt an energy like “this is why we’re supposed to do this.” This event really brought people together; it was a truly engaged event with the volunteers.

**Would you work with us again?**

Of course! Absolutely; it’s nice to know that there’s an organization tailored to southern congregations. We have our own style of Judaism.

**View our dynamic roster of presenters at [www.isjl.org/presenters-roster](http://www.isjl.org/presenters-roster). To learn more about Cultural Programs at the ISJL, email [programming@isjl.org](mailto:programming@isjl.org).**



# JOYFULLY JEWISH



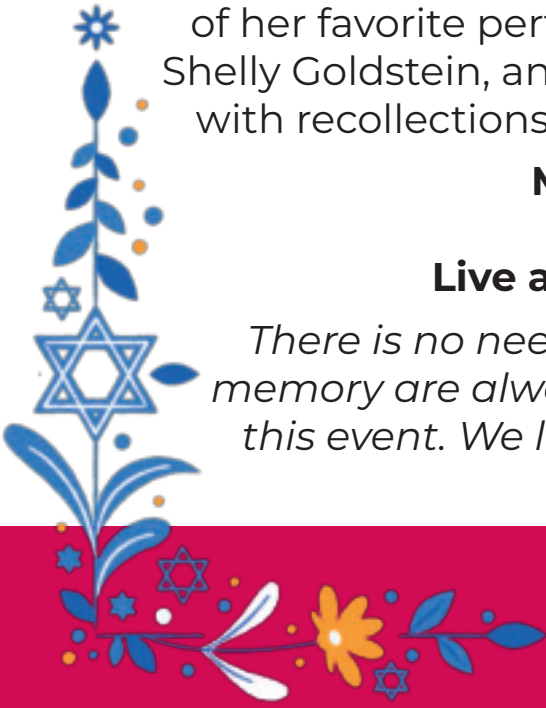
## *Remembering Ann Zivitz Kientz*

Please join us for a celebration of life for our friend and colleague, Ann, as her first *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death) approaches. Some of her favorite performers, including Batsheva, Joe Buchanan, Shelly Goldstein, and Eliana Light, will perform in Ann's memory, with recollections of Ann shared between each performance.

**Monday, February 13, 2023  
6pm Central**

**Live at [www.facebook.com/TheISJL](https://www.facebook.com/TheISJL)**

*There is no need to register or RSVP. Donations in Ann's memory are always welcome but there is no cost to attend this event. We look forward to celebrating Ann with you.*





# SPIRITUALITY

## A MEMBER OF THE TRIBE IN NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI

TERI TILLMAN

TEMPLE B'NAI ISRAEL, NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI

IT WAS THE SPRING OF 1994 AND THE "Natchez Jewish Homecoming" was underway. More than 300 Jews with ancestral ties to the Jewish community in Natchez, Mississippi, had come to celebrate the city's rich Jewish heritage during a three-day "homecoming" co-sponsored by Temple B'nai Israel and the precursor to the ISJL, the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. I was thirty-seven years old and had never been inside a synagogue.

As I walked through the doors of Temple B'nai Israel that weekend, I was overwhelmed, not only by its beauty, but also by the congregation's remarkable history that dated to 1843, when a handful of Jewish immigrants established a burial society in Natchez. As I looked around, I saw their names, and those of their descendants, everywhere: on Yahrzeit plaques, Torah covers, stained glass windows, and prayer books.

My neighbor, the late Rae Weill Rozolsky, took note of my interest in the temple and its history. A few years later, when B'nai Israel opened once again for tours—this time as part of ISJL's Cultural Corridors tour, "Discovering Jewish Heritage Along the Mississippi River"—she asked for my help. I agreed, but not without hesitation. Although I was a certified local tour guide, I knew little about Natchez Jewish history—and even less about Judaism. (When one of our first visitors asked if I was a "mem-

ber of the tribe," I had no idea what he was talking about!) Soon afterwards, the late Robert Lehmann, who had long served as the temple's tour guide, asked me to take over that responsibility. I immediately began reading everything I could find about Judaism and the Natchez Jewish community.

About the same time, Mimi Miller of the Historic Natchez Foundation asked me to research two Jewish merchants who had operated a grocery store in nearby Church Hill, Mississippi, in the late nineteenth century. Plans to turn their former store into a museum never materialized, but my research led to an invitation to speak on the Natchez Jewish community at the next Historic Natchez Conference. By then I had gotten to know all the mem-

bers of B'nai Israel, who not only helped me with my research, but also invited me to attend services on Friday nights. Rabbi Katie Bauman served as our student rabbi that year, and her Saturday morning Hebrew classes played a significant role in my increased interest in Judaism—and more frequent attendance at Shabbat services.

For a few years I continued to attend my local church—while also attending services at B'nai Israel and helping out in any way that I could: offering tours, hosting onegs, and answering occasional genealogical inquiries from descendants of former Natchez Jewish residents. In time I began to consider converting to Judaism.

But our last full-time rabbi in Natchez had retired in 1976, and



Teri with Rabbi Adam Kligfeld of Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles, who traveled to Natchez on a Southern Jewish Heritage Tour.



without even a student rabbi here, I saw no way to do so—until a friend told me that he had converted the previous year with the help of the ISJL.

I contacted Rabbi Caroline Sim, current Director of Rabbinical Services at the ISJL, who readily agreed to guide me through the conversion process. Requirements included an online Judaism course, which I supplemented with extensive independent reading, but it was my twice monthly meetings on Zoom with Rabbi Sim during the following year that I found most helpful as I prepared for this major spiritual change in my life.

Earlier this year I was giving a synagogue tour to a group from Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles, California, when I was asked:

“Did you grow up in Natchez?”

“No,” I replied, “I’m from Florida.”

“So how did a nice Jewish girl from Florida end up in Natchez, Mississippi?”

“Well,” I began, “I’m not actually Jewish—but I will be in about two months—after my conversion ceremony takes place here at B’nai Israel.”

Shouts of “Mazel tov!” filled the synagogue.

These days, I spend as much time studying Torah and Hebrew as I do Natchez Jewish history, and when a visitor asks me if I am a “member of the tribe,” not only do I know what they mean, I am delighted to be able to respond: “Yes, I am!”



Teri on the steps of Temple B'nai Israel.

Teri signs her conversion certificate with Rabbi Caroline Sim and Temple B'nai Israel leaders Elise Rushing and Beau Baumgardner.



Temple B'nai Israel congregants and community members at a Hanukkah celebration in the temple's social hall, 2018.

To learn more about Spirituality at the ISJL, email [rabbi@isjl.org](mailto:rabbi@isjl.org).  
Learn more about our efforts to restore Temple B'nai Israel at [www.natcheztemple.org](http://www.natcheztemple.org).

# OUR SUPPORTERS

## MEET THE DONORS

# HELAINÉ & BILL BRAUNIG

**H**ELAINÉ AND BILL BRAUNIG OF SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA, have been program partners, supporters, and dear friends of the ISJL for many years. ISJL CEO Michele Schipper recently had the privilege of speaking with them about their commitment to community and their deep connections to the ISJL.

**Can you tell me a little about your connection to the ISJL?**

**Bill:** I was in SoFTY (Southern Federation of Temple Youth, now known as NFTY-Southern, the Reform Jewish youth movement) with Macy Hart, the ISJL's founder. We also sent our kids to Jacobs Camp, which was truly a second home for them; we joked that Macy "adopted" our kids. When we heard about this project, we knew it would really have great impact.

**Helaine:** We were both raised in Shreveport, Louisiana, so the whole concept of the ISJL resonated with us. We wanted the kids in the small communities to have connections to other communities and a meaningful way to stay connected to Judaism. We were also pleased to know that the even-smaller Jewish communities would have access to rabbis.

**How did you first get involved as ISJL partners?**

**Helaine:** B'nai Zion Congregation in Shreveport was one of the first ten communities to participate in the ISJL education program when it was first piloted in 2003-2004. I was the religious school director at the time. The carefully crafted new curriculum made it so much easier to secure and retain religious school teachers!

**Why did you decide to donate to the ISJL?**

**Helaine:** We've had many positive experiences with the ISJL which led us to become donors, especially the education curriculum and the annual conference. And we've had wonderful friendships with ISJL Fellows (now called ISJL Program Associates), with whom we've kept in touch throughout the years. We love the impact the program has had on them, and how many have gone on to careers in the Jewish community. And it's not just the education program—we proudly helped pilot ISJL's community engagement programs; we've participated in the shared-expense cultural programming; and we deeply value the ISJL sending rabbis to the smaller communities.

**Bill:** We want to support something that is in our own backyard, doing work that resonates with us. We've seen that the ISJL was fulfilling its mission and meeting its goals, which inspires us to give. Helaine and I were both also active in SoFTY, and our youth group friends became our very closest

friends. We also both had excellent Jewish role models.

**Helaine:** Yes! My parents and grandparents were always donors to the Jewish Federation and the synagogue. There was an understanding of Jewish needs in the local community, the U.S., and throughout the world.

**Bill:** My parents were more "culturally Jewish," but my activity in SoFTY strengthened my Jewish foundation. Plus, I had the good sense to marry Helaine.

*(Editor's note: On February 7, 2023, Helaine and Bill will celebrate their 52nd wedding anniversary! Please join us in wishing them mazel tov.)*



Shreveport, Louisiana

*Interview with the Braunigs, continued*

**The theme of this issue is “community.” Do you have any other thoughts on the ISJL, or your own southern Jewish community, and how community shapes your lives?**

**Helaine:** Our Jewish community is so central to who we are. I served as B’nai Zion’s religious school director for more than thirty years. Bill was a classroom teacher for every age level—wherever and whenever I needed a teacher! He really enjoyed teaching; everyone loved him and called him “Mr. Bill,” and the ISJL curriculum made it easy for him to teach any class. Truly, the ISJL gives so much to our southern communities.

**Bill:** There’s an important Jewish teaching that the world is sustained by three things—and I think the ISJL serves our communities using each of those three pillars: Torah, through living out the To-

rah and Jewish values and cultural celebrations; Avodah, through supporting education and spirituality in a joyful way; and Gemilut Chassadim, all the wonderful community engagement and social justice opportunities the ISJL has offered over the years.

**What are some of the other causes and organizations that you support?**

**Bill:** Hebrew College, where our son Jordan was ordained as a rabbi, and URJ Jacobs Camp, which has cemented the Jewish identities of our children and grandchildren.

**Helaine:** The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is another important cause; I’m on the regional board, and we believe fighting antisemitism is more important than ever. We also support a number of secular organizations.

**Bill:** We ground our actions in the following teaching from Hil-

lel: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

**And finally... what’s your favorite Jewish food?**

**Bill:** Latkes! I make the best latkes, fresh out of the oil so they’re hot and crispy. In December, I helped make 300 latkes for the Shreveport community’s Chanukah celebration. Pro-tips: cook outside and put your frying pan on the grill, so the house doesn’t smell like oil for a week!

**Helaine:** I have to go with matzoh ball soup. It reminds me of all the Passover seders at my grandparents’ house—and I think it’s fun to roll the matzoh balls.

*We are so grateful to Helaine and Bill for their support not only of the ISJL, but also of their Shreveport community and beyond. They truly exemplify what it is to live out their values with joy and integrity.*

## REMEMBERING CONGREGATION ETZ CHAIM OF NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

In the summer of 2022, Congregation Etz Chaim of Northwest Arkansas in Bentonville, Arkansas, held its last service. This fall, as it dispersed its remaining assets, the community sent a donation to the ISJL, which read: "Thanks for your support over the last 18 years. We were blessed by your partnership and services. Please accept the donation in memory of our congregation."

Some of our staff’s fondest memories over the years were working with the membership at Etz Chaim. In this picture, taken in 2006, ISJL Education Fellow Greg Weisman—now serving as a rabbi in Boca Raton, Florida—is seen helping introduce students in Bentonville to the beauty of a Torah scroll.

May the memory of this congregation continue to be a blessing—and the ISJL will continue to be here for the community of Northwest Arkansas.



**To support the ISJL’s work, visit [www.isjl.org/donate](http://www.isjl.org/donate) or reach out to us any time!**

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# AROUND THE REGION

## COMMUNITY IN ACTION



### ***Congratulations, Josh!***

Dr. Josh Parshall was recently named the new President of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. He joined past SJHS presidents at the recent SJHS conference in Charleston. Standing: Phyllis Leffler, Bruce Beeber, Hollace Weiner, Leonard Rogoff; seated: Josh Parshall, Janice Rothschild Bloomberg, Jay Silverberg (photo credit: Samuel Gruber).



### ***Running for Latkes***

Director of Education Molly Levy ran the 2022 Chase the Dreidel 5k in St. Petersburg, Florida, with her son Jonah.



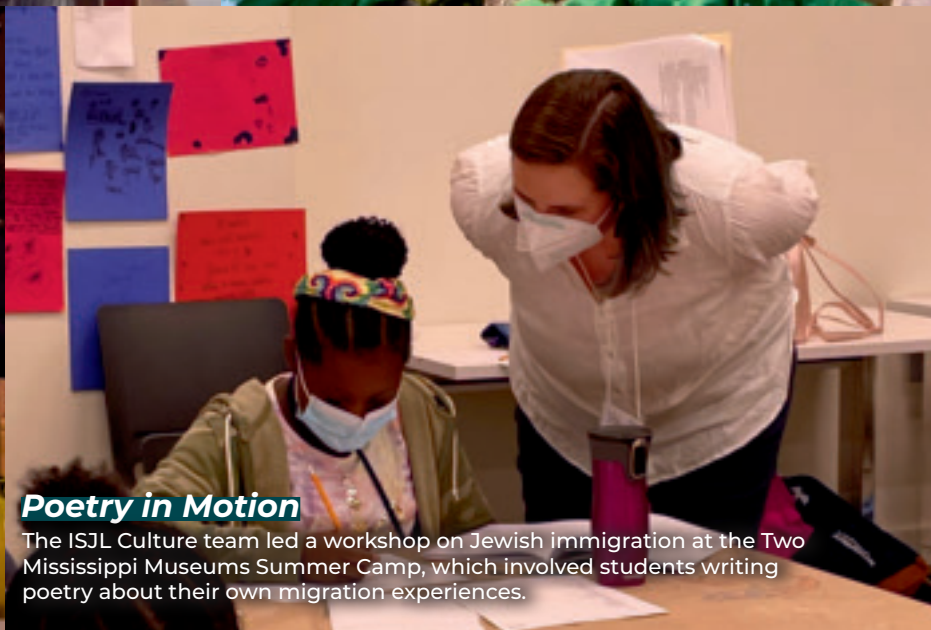
### ***Remote but Accessible***

Lapidus & Myles led us in song during an unforgettable Zoom concert—get in touch to bring them to your community this year!



### ***Keeping Traditions Alive***

Director of Rabbinical Services Rabbi Caroline Sim and Temple B'nai Israel president Beau Baumgardner lit the menorah at the annual Hanukkah party in Natchez, Mississippi.



### ***Poetry in Motion***

The ISJL Culture team led a workshop on Jewish immigration at the Two Mississippi Museums Summer Camp, which involved students writing poetry about their own migration experiences.



**Delta Dreams**

Public History Interns Isabel Bartosh and Clara Posner at Ahavath Rayim in Greenwood, Mississippi, with ISJL Board member Gail Goldberg.



**Getting Married (Again)!**

Rachel and Chris Myers (along with Rabbi Joseph Rosen) demonstrated Jewish marriage rituals at Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, Mississippi.



**Old Friends, New Colleagues**

Director of Programs Shira Muroff caught up with former Community Engagement Fellow (and current Public Programs Manager at the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience) Lizzzi Meister in New Orleans this past summer.



**Giving Back to Our Hometown**

Students from Jackson Public Schools at the ISJL's TAP peer mediation summit.

# GIVING THANKS

## THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

IN THESE PAGES, YOU CAN SEE THE IMPACT THE ISJL HAS 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 1 to December 31, 2022.

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 : This summer, the ISJL Culture team  
 : traveled to the Mississippi Delta, where  
 : they visited the B.B. King Museum and  
 : Delta Interpretive Center. That's right—  
 : the Mississippi music icon featured on  
 : the cover is none other than **B.B. King!**  
 : .....



Photo by Heinrich Klaffs.

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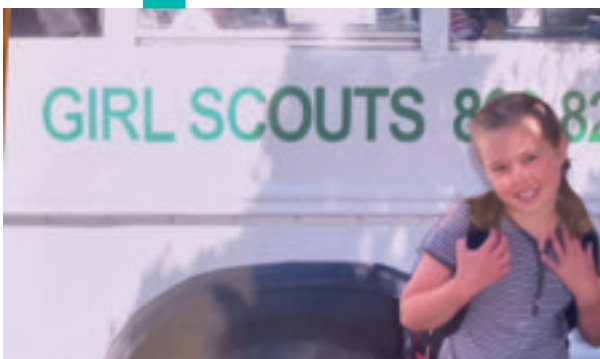
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