

SUMMER 2022

SHALOM *y'all*

A PUBLICATION OF THE GOLDRING/WOLDENBERG INSTITUTE OF SOUTHERN JEWISH LIFE

CULTURE

**CULTIVATING
SOUTHERN
JEWISH CULTURE**
p.12

**MEET THE ISJL'S
NEW DIRECTOR
OF PROGRAMS**
p.18

**IN MEMORY
OF ANN ZIVITZ
KIENTZ**
p.26

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ON THE COVER:

Temple B'nai Israel of Natchez, home to the oldest Jewish congregation in Mississippi, needs your help. Learn more on page 15!

CONTENTS

Leadership Messages.....	4
Education.....	6
Culture	12
Spirituality.....	20
Meet the Board	22
Meet the Donor.....	24
Giving Thanks.....	29

CULTURE AT THE ISJL

“CULTURE” IS ONE OF THOSE WORDS WITH SO MANY meanings it’s almost impossible to know what it’s referring to out of context. (For example, taking a *throat culture* evokes a very different response than *learning about French culture*.) So when we talk about “culture at the ISJL,” what do we really mean? This definition from the Oxford Dictionary provides a good starting point:

Culture (noun): the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.

At the ISJL, culture touches on all of these things. Through the lens of the southern Jewish experience, culture encompasses customs and traditions, arts and performances, institutions and historic buildings, and Jewish individual and collective contributions to the fabric of our society. Culture is one of our three core service areas. In our mission to support, connect, and celebrate Jewish life in the South, sharing Jewish cultural experiences is at the heart of what we do.

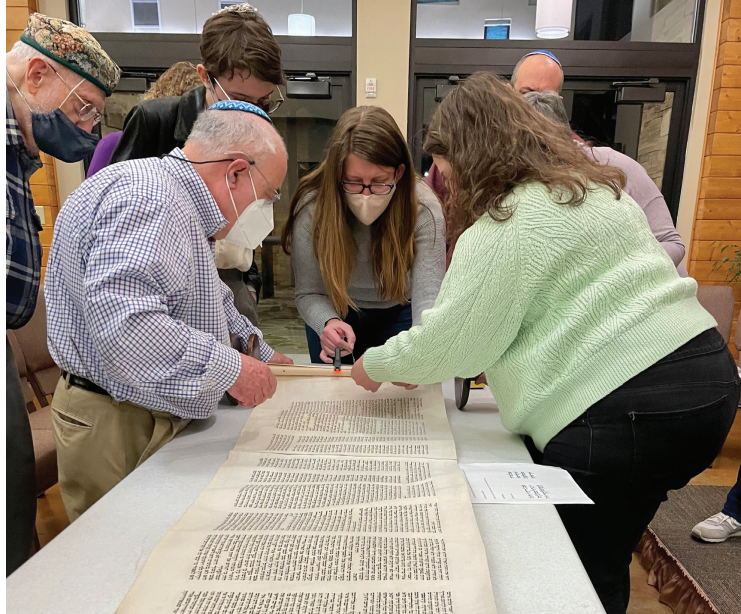
Within our Culture service area, we focus mostly on historic preservation, interpretation and direct engagement with public history, and presentations by Jewish artists, performers, and teachers. Helmed by Dr. Josh Parshall (Historian), Nora Katz (Director of Heritage & Interpretation) and Shira Muroff (Director of Programs), the ISJL Culture team is committed to offering relevant and responsive opportunities to engage with a wide array of Jewish culture.

But Jewish culture is something intrinsic to every single one of our people and programs—from sending our rabbis to visit small southern Jewish communities to providing secular literacy programming for Mississippi public school students. In some way, shape, or form, Jewish culture informs every aspect of what we do.

This issue focuses on the broad theme of culture: direct cultural programming, how culture impacts Jewish education, and so much more. We also discuss the staff culture at the ISJL, an environment where teamwork and humanity are always valued, and share a tribute in memory of Ann Zivitz Kientz z”l. Ann’s life and work revolved around Jewish culture, and as we still mourn the recent loss of our friend and colleague, it feels appropriate to lift up her memory as we continue cultural conversations informed and inspired by her legacy.

Thank you, as always, for your support.

The Board & Staff of the ISJL



FROM THE CEO



Michele Schipper
CEO

AS I WRITE THIS ARTICLE, WE are in the midst of spring. Everything is green and growing, and flowers are blooming in abundant glory. In this rainbow of colors and beauty, there's something yellow that is not quite as lovely in this bouquet: pollen. It triggers our allergies and puts a slight damper on all the springtime joy—but never manages to overpower it. And so it is with the ISJL. We are growing, we are blooming, and sometimes there is a little pollen sprinkled in that will challenge us—but not overpower us.

This issue of *Shalom Y'all* highlights the Culture division of the ISJL. As we celebrate culture, I also want to celebrate “culture change.” This is something we’re embracing at the ISJL. We have raised levels of expectation for what can be possible – what resources are available to Jews everywhere, so that everyone has access to

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“WE ARE GROWING, WE ARE BLOOMING, AND SOMETIMES THERE IS A LITTLE POLLEN SPRINKLED IN THAT WILL CHALLENGE US—BUT NOT OVERPOWER US.”

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dynamic, interconnected Jewish life. We actively work to engage everyone, from our youngest to our most senior community members, with meaningful programming. We celebrate our vibrant history and our southern Jewish heritage. We have partnered with presenters, historians, authors, and musicians who bring joyful, experiential culture to the participants of these programs. Our lives, and the lives of our neighbors alongside us, continue to be enriched by these experiences.

All of this programming can only happen with your continued financial support. If you have enjoyed receiving *Shalom Y'all* magazine, if you have been inspired by watching an ISJL Virtual Vacation episode or read an entry in our Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, or if you have attended any number of our programs with a speaker, musician, comedian, or other performer—please consider making a gift to ISJL.

That is our challenge (our pollen, if you will): raising the dollars to keep all of our incredible programs going, and ensure that they are affordable for even the smallest communities that we serve. Please help us continue to grow and flourish. After reading the articles throughout this moving issue of *Shalom Y'all*, you will see there is no doubt about the impact the ISJL has in communities throughout the South and across the country.

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“THAT IS OUR CHALLENGE (OUR POLLEN, IF YOU WILL): RAISING THE DOLLARS TO KEEP ALL OF OUR INCREDIBLE PROGRAMS GOING, AND ENSURE THAT THEY ARE AFFORDABLE FOR EVEN THE SMALLEST COMMUNITIES THAT WE SERVE.”

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As I conclude this message, I want to dedicate this issue to Ann Zivitz Kientz, ISJL Director of Programming, who passed away suddenly earlier this year. Ann was a dear colleague and friend who epitomized the joy of cultural programming and celebrated the wonderful relationships that the ISJL team and community partners have formed over the years. Ann loved the ISJL, cultural programs, and working with all of you. She was a gift to us and she will be sorely missed. May her memory always be a blessing.

With my sincere thanks,

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR



Jay Hesdorffer
ISJL Board Chair

I REMEMBER MOVING TO Chicago in 1985, sitting in a deli listening to two couples talking about “their rabbis.” Multiple rabbis, at one congregation! I grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, where we had just one synagogue and just one rabbi. It never would have occurred to me that one might be able to choose from a plethora of local temples and rabbis. For me, that was a bit of culture shock.

A few decades later, many of the communities the ISJL serves are one-congregation towns (Jackson, Mississippi, numbering among them). Some are so small they don’t even have one local rabbi; others are larger, but still in need of the education, culture, and spirituality resources offered by the ISJL.

Cultural programming and preserving the unique stories of Jewish life has always been at the heart of the ISJL’s work. Our work in that realm has long been interesting to participants and supporters alike. What is it about Jewish culture that is so compelling? Is it the music? The commitment to education? The food? I think it’s all of that—and also our deep respect for history and our commitment to community. The ISJL is dedicated to helping provide southern Jews with positive Jewish experiences that build an informed, engaged Jewish identity. It’s also important that we provide

our neighbors throughout the region with positive, informative encounters with Jewish culture.

Cultural experiences enrich our lives and help others identify with Jewish culture. Whether this leads to Jewish people recognizing themselves within an aspect of culture we’re celebrating, or our neighbors feeling more connected and allied with the Jewish

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community, we’re deepening cultural understanding and making the world a better place.

Inclusion is absolutely central to our culture at the ISJL. The stories we tell, and also the ones we listen to and learn from, have always shaped Jewish identity. We care about how we make people feel, and how we represent our entire community. This welcoming cultural commitment is part of the

fabric that binds us together.

Particularly as we witness the conflict in Ukraine, we are reminded of how often we have had to fight for freedom and cultural expression. As I write this during Passover, our festival of freedom, I cannot help but reflect on how culture is so much more than any single practice or performance. Our history of crossing the desert helps us identify with others in their journeys from one side of the desert to the other. Seeing our shared humanity through a Jewish lens provides important representation, helping our communities feel more seen and helping others see the beauty of Jewish culture. Whether we’re coming together over a meal, to clap along to music, or to learn from one another, Jewish culture is truly the fabric that binds us together, now and always.

I also want to mention the ISJL’s recent tragic loss of a staff member, Ann Zivitz Kientz. Ann contributed so much to the culture of this organization, and indeed the entire region. May we all be inspired by her example to continue connecting with one another, sharing our culture with joy, and working to better the world around us.

Thank you for supporting the work that we do.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jay Hesdorffer". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

EDUCATION



Rabbi Matt Dreffin playing guitar at a bar mitzvah in Auburn, Alabama.

CULTURE: AN EDUCATIONAL KEY

RABBI MATT DREFFIN
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

THE MOST RECENT PEW Report on Jewish life (*Jewish Americans in 2020: Pew Research Center*) indicates that self-identification and expressions of Judaism are increasingly aspects of identity discovered far beyond the traditional bounds of synagogue walls. Despite the percentage of individuals identifying as “religious” being on the decline in recent years, the vibrancy of Jewish culture seems to remain strong. How can this be?

In a word: culture.

The vast majority of respondents acknowledge they engage in “other markers of cultural identification”—food, social justice, pop culture, and any number of Jewish entry points—to connect with Judaism. That’s significant, and something we need to factor into our work.

Since the original iteration of our curriculum, we have always had ten key content areas, and culture has had an ever-increasing presence. As it stands today, culture is one of the most frequently recurring key content areas throughout the entire

curriculum—second only to Hebrew and *mitz’vot* (commandments). Throughout the curriculum, from the youngest ages to the more “experienced” learners, we integrate cultural aspects of Judaism.

What does this look like in practice? The cultural aspects of Judaism often lend themselves to our more kinesthetic learning activities. Our students use their feet to dance to Jewish songs and Israeli folk tunes. Our learners get to see, smell, and taste the various regional delicacies that the Diaspora

.....

have created for us. Our participants explore different types of art and architecture that incorporate local styles while retaining distinctly Jewish elements.

The cultural elements of Judaism also lend themselves to the trans-denominational lens we use in the ISJL curriculum. Different levels of religious observance and denominational perspectives might view rituals differently. We try to avoid stating that there is one specific way to practice Judaism. However, when we get to illuminate items within the cultural realm, all that denominational preference seems to float away. It is a tremendous opportunity for us to broaden the understanding of what a “Jewish recipe” is or what Jewish themes are woven into a new film. The cultural aspect of education is the most universal in some ways, enabling us to appreciate others’ experiences just as much as our own.

Critics of “cultural” Judaism may point to the Pew report’s indications that religion comes before culture—according to the survey, someone who identifies as religious is also much more likely to participate in a Jewish cultural happening. But even if religious Jews are more likely to attend cultural events, the fact remains that the majority of Jews are more likely to attend a cultural event than a religious event. After attending a cultural event, they’re more likely to engage in other events and aspects of Jewish life. Culture can therefore be viewed as a *m’ta-avein* (appetizer), an entryway to the entrées that are available in our tradition.

We, however, think Jewish culture is also a symbolic meal unto itself. As a standalone or a supporting element, culture is a true pillar of Jewish identity and



From top to bottom: Auburn students making a community puzzle; a tactile activity at Tot Shabbat in Jackson, Mississippi.

education. That’s why we work to embed aspects of culture into every educational lesson, program, and presentation.

Our most recent, large-scale endeavor has been a complete overhaul of the 9th and 10th grade curriculum. These thirty-two lessons are broken up into the following cultural areas: Jewish

Film, Jewish Art, Jewish Conflict Resolution, Jewish Music, Jewish Humor, and Jewish Food. We’re excited to bring these interactive and experiential lessons to our students. We hope that they prove to be an amazing resource to all of our partner communities’ teens so that they will continue finding pathways into Jewish life.

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



A L'HITRA'OT FROM RABBI MATT DREFFIN

I FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life when I was a rabbinical student in Los Angeles. ISJL founder Macy B. Hart was on campus to introduce our community to the ISJL, its work, and the opportunities it could provide emerging Jewish professionals. As someone looking to return to the South, I was intrigued. Still, in that first moment, I did not know that I would land my dream job at the ISJL.

Since my hiring nearly nine years ago as the Assistant Director of Education, I have truly been living my professional dream. As I advanced from Assistant Director to Associate Director and then Director of Education, I was constantly inspired. This region, this position, and this work has been a place for

me to grow, to be challenged, and to have a positive impact on our southern and Jewish communities.

The time I spent with community partners has been invigorating. I've delighted in bringing engaging education, meaningful worship, and exciting programming to all manner of folks. What I have valued above all are the relationships I've developed—with community members, colleagues, and especially with the ISJL Program Associates (formerly Education Fellows). When I was about to be ordained, my rabbinical mentor handed me a piece of art that highlighted a Talmudic text reading: "I have learned so much from my teachers, even more from my colleagues, but from my students I have become enlightened." I thought I understood

the concept behind the phrase, but it wasn't until working with these young professionals that I fully realized its essence. Supervising a team that pulls off incredible work has been a huge challenge and a constant joy. Every morning, I have been excited to come to the office, execute our mission, and laugh with our team in a way that few get to experience.

When my wife Erica and I moved to Jackson, Mississippi, in 2013, we did so in order to advance my career. It is now time for me to support my wife as she advances in her own profession. In order for her to take the next step, we need to move. Thus, it was with a heavy heart that I informed the ISJL's CEO, Michele Schipper, that I will be ending my tenure as Director of Education in the summer of 2022.

The ISJL has always been supportive of "family" at all levels; this is a move I must make for my family. I do not yet know what my next position will be, but wherever I go I will carry the ISJL's lessons with me. I will always care deeply about the ISJL's mission to support, connect, and celebrate Jewish life in the South. I wish for that mission to continue at a high level even after I move. No one will be cheering for my successor louder than I will be!

Speaking of my successor, I could not be more thrilled that Molly Levy will be stepping into this role. Molly, a former ISJL Education Fellow and now a longtime professional educator, brings exactly the right mix of dedication, enthusiasm, work ethic, and genuine joy for Jewish education that this position needs.

I will miss the meaningful work, the energetic office, and most of all, working with such a terrific team. I will forever be connected to the organization, no matter where I go and what I do, and I am grateful to the entire ISJL community for all the good it has brought into my life. Thank you all.

FOCUS ON FAN

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE 2020–2022 ISJL PROGRAM ASSOCIATES?

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF *Shalom Y'all*, we'll introduce the new members of the ISJL Education team...but first it's time to share our excitement about the next adventures our 2020–2022 ISJL Program Associates will embark upon as they join the

ISJL FAN community. The ISJL Fellow Alumni Network (FAN) is a group of over 60 former ISJL Fellows—now, of course, known as Program Associates—whose paths have taken them all over the country in a variety of fields, but who all got their start

at the ISJL. This summer, four new members join their ranks as the 2020–2022 ISJL Program Associates complete their two years at the ISJL. Welcome to FAN, Julian Cohen, Landon Crawford, Dylan Rice, and Gabby Tropp!

So what are Gabby, Landon, Julian, and Dylan doing next?



GABBY will be pursuing rabbinical ordination and a Master of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, California (after a first year in Israel!).



LANDON will be pursuing a Middle Level Education: Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) at the University of Vermont—and he will also be marrying another ISJL alum, Rena Lubin! They'll be making their next home together in Burlington, Vermont.



JULIAN will be pursuing rabbinical ordination at Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts.



DYLAN will continue serving southern Jewish communities as Director of Jewish Community Relations for the Consulate General to Israel of the Southeast in Atlanta, Georgia.

As far as what's next for all of FAN—including the big question of whether our name will change due to the position's name changing!—stay tuned. We're always excited to share the continuing journeys of this terrific group of former staff, forever-colleagues, and loyal supporters.

What's next for the 2020-2022 ISJL Program Associates?





JOIN US THIS JUNE!

THIS YEAR'S ISJL EDUCATION CONFERENCE IS online and all-access... meaning for the first time, we're also inviting interested folks from outside our region to attend! The conference is free for in-region partners, with only a modest request of a \$36 or more donation from out-of-region attendees to join in on the learning.

By the time you get this issue of *Shalom Y'all*, the conference will be only a few weeks away... but consider this your reminder to register if you haven't already! Two of the highlights of this year's conference will be a keynote from Dr. Emily Aronoff of Dr. Emily Celebrates, and getting to meet our new Director of Education, Molly Levy (pictured, right). Don't miss out!



To register for the conference, visit www.isjl.org/education.

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club

ISJL

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The Chai Club is the ISJL's monthly giving society.

You can have as little as \$18 a month deducted automatically from your account to provide stable, vital monthly support to the ISJL!

Visit www.isjl.org/donate to join the Club!

You can attend the 2022 ISJL Education Conference from wherever you are! This year, we're even inviting out-of-region education allies to attend.

REGISTER
for the
CONFERENCE

—
JUNE 26 & 27
2022

To learn more, visit www.isjl.org/education.

CULTURE



Dr. Josh Parshall, Nora Katz, and Shira Muroff make up the ISJL's Culture team.

HERITAGE & INTERPRETATION

CULTIVATING SOUTHERN JEWISH CULTURE

NORA KATZ

DIRECTOR OF HERITAGE & INTERPRETATION

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL years, my colleagues and I have been thinking a lot about what culture means at the ISJL. We use the word “culture” to describe our programs and resources, the umbrella term for the myriad ways in which we deliver arts and public history for and from the Jewish South.

At the ISJL, culture includes the

visual and performing arts, public history, storytelling, collective memory, and the many ways in which we work together to envision the southern Jewish past, present, and future.

But I am a language nerd, and when I think about culture I also think about its etymology. The English word “culture” comes from the French *culture* (the action of

cultivating the land) and the Latin *cultura* (cultivation or tillage), and a collection of other words stemming from the Latin verb *colere* (to tend or cultivate). So culture is not just about the sum of a human society's customs and way of life, nor is it merely about communal or cultural consciousness. At its root, culture is about growth and change. There is a

reason that in biology (and yogurt!) we often hear about culture, a controlled medium in which cells can grow and multiply.

So maybe culture is less about what we do, and more about the environment we're in—an environment that is enriching, engaging, and allows for growth and change. That's exactly what the ISJL does with our public history programs and resources—we're creating a culture of culture, if you will.

Our Southern Jewish Heritage Tours create opportunities for travelers to experience the Jewish South with their whole selves—having thought-provoking conversations, eating great meals, and visiting immersive historic sites. The ISJL Virtual Vacation video series cultivates curiosity through innovative approaches to southern Jewish stories. Musicians, authors, lecturers, and other presenters on the road build bridges between far-flung Jewish communities. The

Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities creates a space to document the rich history of Jews in the South, and to understand something about religious and regional identity in the process. Oral history and archival initiatives provide opportunities for us to consider our roots and to collect stories about what it means to be southern and Jewish.

Our public history internship welcomes stellar college students to the ISJL, where they learn to do the challenging and important work of public history in a lively and ever-changing environment. Preservation work at Temple B'nai Israel, home to the oldest Jewish community in Mississippi, ensures that the story of southern Jews continues to be told in perpetuity. All of these projects have culture—and cultivation—at their core.

I am especially proud of the ISJL Virtual Vacation's role in sparking important cultural conversations,

including in-depth interviews with scholars and practitioners whose work adds to the depth and breadth of southern Jewish life. Recent episodes have featured food scholar Marcie Cohen Ferris, musical theatre and Yiddish performer Tatiana Wechsler, and Samantha Rosenthal, author of the new book *Living Queer History: Remembrance and Belonging in a Southern City*. You can watch all of these episodes (and many more!) for free on our website: www.isjl.org/virtual-vacation.

Our programs and resources are thought-provoking, responsive, and innovative. We're dedicated not only to sustaining and enriching southern Jewish culture, but also to building a culture of creativity, collaboration, and sustainability that helps us all thrive. I think the cultivation metaphor works well here. We're growing something amazing at the ISJL, and I hope you'll pick up a shovel and dig in.

SAMANTHA ROSENTHAL



TATIANA WECHSLER



MARCIE COHEN FERRIS



To learn more about Heritage & Interpretation at the ISJL, email us at heritage@isjl.org.

SPECIAL FEATURE

ISJL PUBLIC HISTORY INTERNS

THE CULTURE SERVICE AREA IS EXCITED TO BE WELCOMING TWO summer interns to the ISJL team. Our interns will immerse themselves in our public history initiatives, including working with the ISJL Institutional History Archive and our oral history collection, creating content for the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, and developing episodes of the ISJL Virtual Vacation. Please join us in welcoming our summer 2022 public history interns, Isabel Bartosh and Clara Posner!



CLARA POSNER

CLARA IS A RECENT GRADUATE OF CARLETON College where she studied psychology and digital humanities. She is interested in pursuing a Master's degree in public history, focusing on archives and digital curation. Her previous historical work includes collecting and transcribing oral histories for a digital archive that documented the experience of Carleton students during the pandemic, as well as researching Danish contemporary art movements during a curatorial internship at the ARoS Aarhus Art Museum in Denmark. Clara was first introduced to the ISJL through a three-week externship during her junior year, where she produced two episodes of the ISJL Virtual Vacation that focused on the intersection between Yiddish and Americana music. She is excited to build on her previous experience with the ISJL and learn more about Jewish communities in the South. In her free time, she enjoys rock climbing, skateboarding, and watching cheesy rom-coms.



ISABEL BARTOSH

ISABEL IS A SENIOR AT SEATTLE PACIFIC University and will graduate with a B.A. in History and Museum Studies with a minor in Women's Studies. Recently, she conducted an oral history research project for the History department that focused on the history of queer student life and activism at Seattle Pacific University from the 1960s to 2021. In 2023, Isabel intends to start working on a Master's degree, aiming for a specialty in Middle Eastern studies and public history. Isabel was born and raised in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and lives in Seattle now, so she is excited to experience southern life and culture for the first time. Through this internship she hopes to gain relevant and hands-on experience with public history and contribute to the ISJL's focus on a unique part of southern history. In her spare time, Isabel is an avid houseplant collector and museum-goer.



Temple B'nai Israel's iconic dome and cupola.

SPECIAL FEATURE

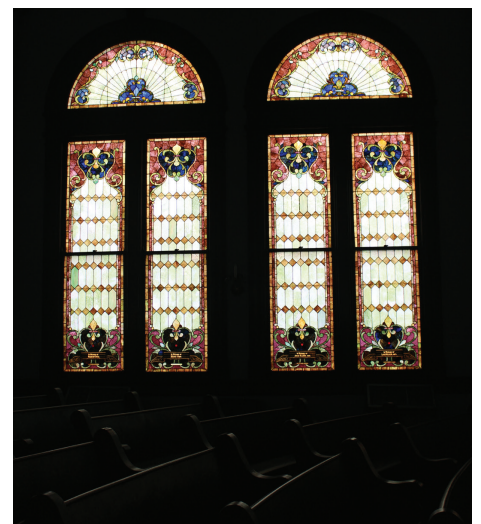
TEMPLE B'NAI ISRAEL

TEMPLE B'NAI ISRAEL IN NATCHEZ, Mississippi, is home to the oldest Jewish community in the state. While Natchez was once the hub of Jewish life in Mississippi, today the congregation has fewer than 10 members. Thanks to a dedicated congregation and strong relationships with organizations like the Mississippi Heritage Trust, Visit Natchez, and especially the Historic Natchez Foundation, Temple B'nai Israel remains a vibrant center for Jewish culture—but the temple, built in 1904, is in urgent need of restoration.

In partnership with the ISJL and with funding from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Temple B'nai Israel is

embarking on their next phase of restoration and preservation efforts. This summer, TBI will be replacing the building's outdated electrical system and installing a fire suppression system, bringing the congregation one step closer to completely restoring the building as a community gathering space, hub for the arts, and monument to the legacy of Jewish life in Natchez.

The ISJL and Temple B'nai Israel need your support to make this project a reality! Visit www.natcheztemple.org to learn more about the project and donate to support this landmark of southern Jewish history and culture.



Visitors to Temple B'nai Israel are treated to a breathtaking view of the stained glass windows in the sanctuary.

To help us save Temple B'nai Israel, visit www.natcheztemple.org.



HISTORY

CULTURAL CROSSROADS

DR. JOSH PARSHALL

HISTORIAN

WHILE CONDUCTING historical research for the ISJL Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities or other projects, I occasionally come across sharp reminders that the ISJL's regional approach to Jewish education, spirituality, and culture has a number of interesting precedents. Whether our predecessors organized statewide conventions for religious school teachers, hired circuit-riding rabbis, or arranged multi-city tours by Jewish speakers and performers, they often sought to combine

efforts in order to enrich Jewish life in southern towns and cities.

Through the ISJL's public history work, I have the pleasure of documenting how Jews in the South have expressed Jewish culture over time, even as I contribute to Jewish cultural life in (and beyond) our region in the present.

When the Yiddish Book Center invited me to speak on Yiddish culture and social justice in the South last fall, I built my lecture around three Yiddish songs that were mentioned in historical materials

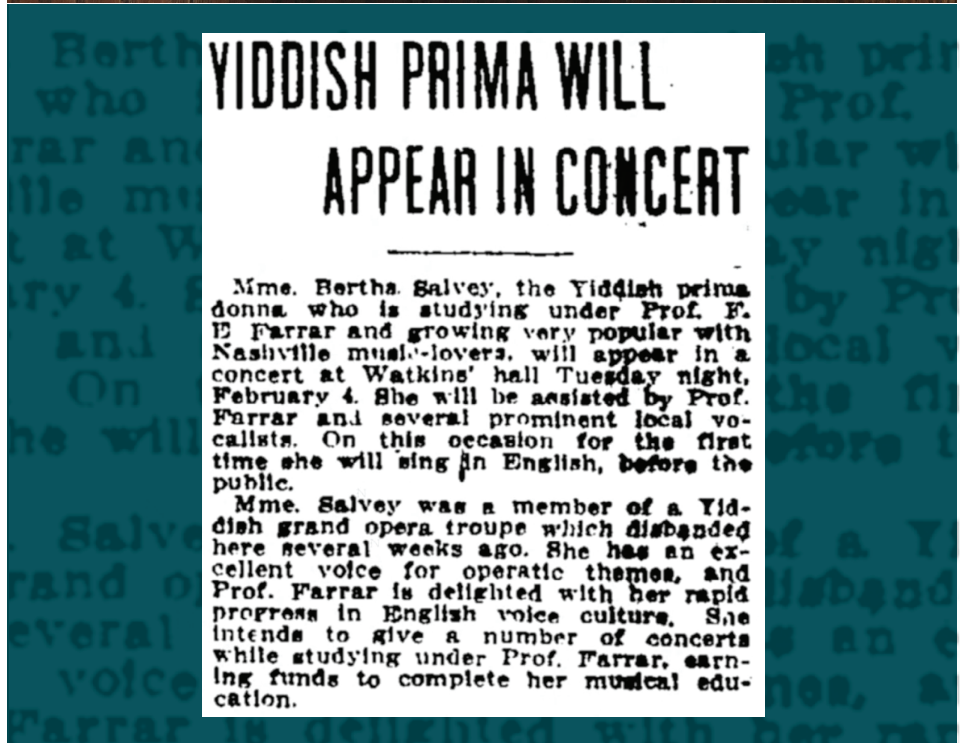
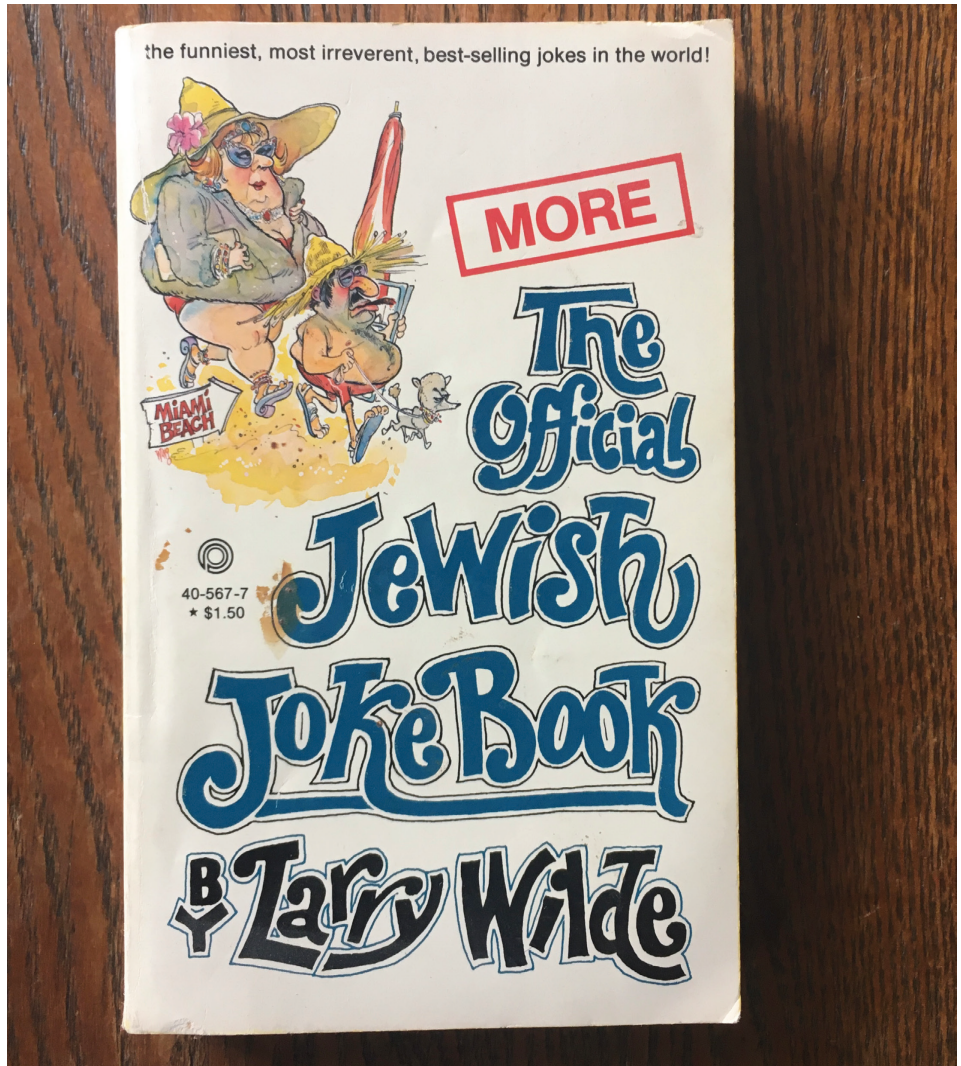
related to southern branches of the Arbeter Ring (Worker's Circle). We commissioned multi-instrumentalist (and hometown friend) Jordan Wax to record new arrangements of each of the songs, which had been sung respectively by adults at regional conferences, by children at a local concert in Houston, and at a concert in Miami Beach. Each selection provided some clues as to how a subset of southern Jews expressed their Jewish culture in specific times and places.

We also express and consume culture through the objects we collect, use, and display. I've seen a wide assortment of Jewish objects in the homes of people who have provided oral history interviews for the ISJL, including ritual objects, artwork, books, and musical recordings. These range from prized family heirlooms and valuable pieces of art to artifacts as mundane as my grandfather's old copy of *The Official Jewish Joke Book*. As Marcie Cohen Ferris illuminates for us all in *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South*, Jewish historians would be remiss to ignore how Jewish identity shows up in domestic life and shapes our day-to-day experiences.

Of course, our work at the ISJL is not merely to study and document. As a featured presenter for our cultural programs and as an available guide for Southern Jewish Heritage Tours, I share stories of the southern Jewish past with a variety of audiences, and that engagement with Jewish history is an important part of American Jewish culture today. As a member of the Culture division team, I am involved in identifying presenters and performers for the communities we serve and planning cultural events, both online and in-person. I also get to help out with our educational offerings whenever Program Associates or other staff develop new lessons related to my areas of interest, including Yiddish, Jewish music, and the Jewish South.

I look forward to continuing to connect our communities to Jewish culture, past and present, both by documenting Jewish culture in the historical South and supporting Jewish culture here and now.

To learn more about southern Jewish history, email history@isjl.org.



Top: A copy of *The Official Jewish Joke Book* from the home of Noah and Gerry Barkovitz, Hayti, Missouri. Photo courtesy of Tim Parshall. Bottom: Concert notice for "Yiddish prima donna" Bertha Salvey, *Tennessean* (Nashville), 31 Jan 1913.

PROGRAMMING

MEET THE ISJL'S NEW DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS: SHIRA MUROFF

SHIRA MUROFF
DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS



I AM SO GRATEFUL TO BE back at the ISJL as the Director of Programs. In 2016, I first joined the ISJL as an Education Fellow, where a highlight for me was learning about southern Jewish history and culture with students and families across the South. Growing up, I always loved the intersections of my local and Jewish cultures. As a product of the Southern California Jewish community, I grew up surrounded by Jewish music and books year-round, and spent my summers at Jewish summer camp. Moving to Mississippi in 2016 and spending my first two years traveling across the South, I learned a lot about how southern Jewish culture is created

and celebrated.

When I completed my fellowship, I spent four years at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) taking a deep dive into Mississippi culture, creating workshops and materials that would bring our state's history to students and teachers. While working in the secular world during this time, I still had the opportunity to absorb southern Jewish culture, but this time solely as a local resident, not a full-time Jewish professional. Whether it was working with Jewish Cinema Mississippi, our local Jewish film festival, or teaching religious school here in Jackson (using the ISJL curriculum), I was still a consumer and educator of Jewish culture. I even had the opportunity to collaborate professionally with my former team when MDAH partnered with the ISJL to host the first Mississippi Freedom Seder in 2019.

Being back at the ISJL now, I have a different viewpoint on being a southern Jew than I did six years ago. I've spent more holidays with folks across Mississippi (including with ISJL board member Gail Goldberg's family in Greenwood, Mississippi), and I've had more time to navigate what it means to be living in a city with both a small Jewish population and vibrant local culture. In my

new position, each community member and presenter has been so welcoming as we've navigated their upcoming programs, and I'm so excited to see our presenters on the road and online.

Cultural programming is essential to Jewish life. It brings us closer to Jews of the past and present, and gives us an insight into Jewish traditions and thoughts that might be different from our own. Making sure that Jewish cultural programming is available to every Jewish community, no matter the location or size, is so important to me. I hope that we all feel a little more connected to our Jewish communities this year, and I can't wait to bring more Jewish cultural programs into communities throughout the South.

To see our current roster of presenters, please visit www.isjl.org/presenters-roster. There, you can scroll through the musicians, scholars, and performers on our ever-expanding roster; please reach out if you'd like to bring one of them to your community, virtually or in person! Monthly Zoom programming will also continue. Your community can sign up for events or get more information about upcoming opportunities by emailing me anytime.

To learn more about the ISJL's Cultural Programming, email programming@isjl.org.



**We bring great Jewish
cultural presenters to
you... in your community
or over Zoom.**

Visit us online to explore our roster of great presenters, which includes musicians, comedians, authors, theatre groups, and so much more.

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SPIRITUALITY

WHAT IS JEWISH CULTURE?

**RABBI
CAROLINE SIM**
DIRECTOR OF RABBINICAL
SERVICES

AS A JEW LIVING IN A largely non-Jewish area, and as a religious leader in particular, I often get asked about Judaism—not only for a definition but also for its breadth and scope. The people who ask these questions really run the gamut. As one might expect, many are non-Jews asking out of pure curiosity. There are also those who are preparing to convert to Judaism, and may be early in their journey of learning what it means to be Jewish. But there are also a number of lifelong-Jews who ask about the nature of Judaism.

Sometimes people are asking for an explanation of a ritual (“Why do we do this? Which candles do we light first?”). Sometimes it’s to clarify a perceived inconsistency (“Does the Bible really say that? I definitely didn’t learn that in Sunday School!”). And sometimes it’s to seek reassurance (“Is this Jewish enough? Does this ‘count?’”).

Judaism, by and large, is hard to describe and hard to define. Often, the answers to even seemingly simple questions are “yes, no, and/or we don’t know.” For us, the





Rabbi Caroline Sim explores the Torah with congregants in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

discussion around the question is often just as important as the “final” answer (something which rarely exists in our culture). The questions have always been complicated.

In recent years, there are even more complications, and new questions. Many people have been raising questions about genetics as a way of defining who is Jewish—not, as may have been the case in the past, questions of matrilineal versus patrilineal descent, but rather results of DNA testing. With the increased availability of genetic tests, more and more people are finding significant percentages of Jewish ancestry in their DNA. Results from these kinds of tests may inspire some individuals to learn more about Judaism, or even to convert, but it is not a way to “define” someone as being Jewish. Judaism—and being Jewish—is about more than the contents of our blood. In a way, we are all “Jews

by choice.” While some of us may be “born” Jewish, each one of us who considers themselves a Jew, who considers being Jewish a part of their identity, makes the decision to be Jewish each and every day.

One thing that can definitively be said, however, is that Judaism is more than a religion. To be sure, our beliefs and ritual practices are important, and integral to Judaism as a whole. But much of Judaism extends beyond the synagogue, into our lives and homes. Jewish community is built upon learning and growing together, of sharing and improving our lives and the lives of those outside the Jewish world as well. Religion is just one component of Jewish culture. From literature to food to music, to pursuing social justice and change, there is a lot about “being Jewish” that has little to no direct ritual or liturgical component at all, even if it has its roots in religious doctrine.

Here in the South, we are doubly blessed in this cultural aspect. Not only do we have the cultural traditions inherited from our family background, but we also have our own southern twists. From Passover brisket with BBQ sauce to Jewish bluegrass music and more, there is so much about being a Jew in the South that is unique and special. But one thing that connects us all is our sense of Jewish identity itself.

Whether our Jewish neighbors are down the street or in the next state, what we do to be Jewish and how we define Judaism for ourselves forms the bedrock of our communities. Because, at its core, Jewish culture is Jewish community. Like secular culture, our Jewish culture may change and evolve, but at the end of the day, Judaism will always be what we make of it.

To learn more about the ISJL's Spirituality division, email rabbi@isjl.org.

OUR SUPPORTERS

MEET THE BOARD

WHO IS ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE ISJL?

3 FUN FACTS ABOUT THE ISJL BOARD



#1 THEY ALL HAVE A SOUTHERN CONNECTION (BUT DO NOT ALL LIVE IN THE SOUTH.)



Our board members live all over the country! But currently, every single one has some direct tie to the South: they grew up here, or currently live here... or in a few cases, both! But in years past we've also had board members with no direct southern ties who simply believed deeply in the ISJL's mission.



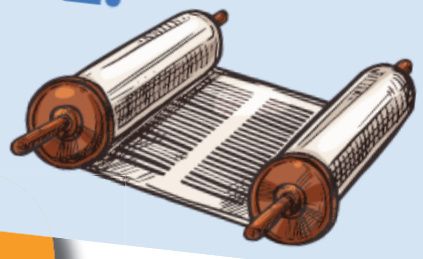
#2 THEY ALMOST ALL HAVE PETS!

We see our board members (and our staff!) not only as incredible professionals but also as the incredibly interesting multi-faceted people they are... and in the case of this group, that means a lot of pet owners!



They're leaders in their local congregations. They're raising Jewish kids. They're advocating for the ISJL. In so many ways, in so many places, our inspiring leaders are connected by their deep commitment to Jewish life and community.

#3 THEY SHARE A DEEP COMMITMENT TO JEWISH LIFE.



To view the entire ISJL Board of Directors list, visit www.isjl.org/board-of-directors. If you are interested in supporting the ISJL's work or learning more about leadership opportunities, email information@isjl.org.



MEET THE DONOR

ELIZABETH FRIEDMAN

RISA KLEIN HERZOG

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT I have yet to actually meet Elizabeth Friedman in person. When I started working at the ISJL in the fall of 2019, one of my first responsibilities was to coordinate with Elizabeth on an ISJL event that was set to take place in San Antonio. As an enthusiastic ISJL donor and volunteer, Elizabeth (along with her husband David) was eager to help spread the word and share her passion for the ISJL with others in her community. And while this San Antonio gathering is still pending, over the past going-on-three years, we have talked, strategized, planned, laughed, worried, hoped, and shared our lives with each other.

Elizabeth is dynamic. She has a very full and busy life with a loving family, a satisfying career, and a strong Jewish community full of opportunity. How, and why, does she carve out time to support the ISJL?

When we first met, Elizabeth shared that when she first learned about the ISJL's educational, cultural, and spiritual work in smaller, underserved Jewish communities across the South, she exclaimed, "That is ME. Growing up in the only Jewish family in Del Rio, Texas, I am exactly who the ISJL is talking about!"

It all comes down to a personal connection to place, or a particular kind of place: a small, southern town, for example. Where we come from shapes our identity—and so, too, does our family's culture. This intersection of local place and historic culture has a lot of meaning for southern Jews. By sharing our culture and connecting to it, we

are brought back to the familiar, which brings us a sense of home. Few understand this as deeply as Elizabeth and her family.

Thank you, Elizabeth, for embracing our work and for helping the ISJL create a Jewish community and a culture of belonging for us all!

What is your connection to the ISJL?

When I met (ISJL founder) Macy B. Hart, I said to him "I am you," based on his lived experiences and mine, which were strikingly similar: growing up, I was the only Jewish girl in nine counties in Southwest Texas. I understood and valued his desire to create the ISJL. I knew if I had had the opportunity as a child to experience the sort of Jewish education that the ISJL provides Jewish children in the South, my own life path would have been smoother. I chose to gain formal Jewish education when I moved to Houston to finish college. I lived and worked in Houston until I was 27 and moved to Chicago for graduate school; I have been back in Texas for years, raised my children here, and know the true value of the ISJL. Our daughter, Kesler, even wound up being an ISJL Education Fellow—and that experience was fantastic! Our family still benefits from her training there, and we know the extended family will continue to grow from those gifts. She has been able to weave a thread within my family for my two brothers and me. We all have expressed our "Jewish" lives quite differently. Kesler tells the story well. Many of her friends

cannot "believe" both of my parents were Jewish in our small Texas town. Kesler loves sharing my story, and I love sharing hers, too.

Why do you choose to be a donor to the ISJL?

Our support will enable other Jewish families as well as our neighbors to learn and grow as they experience our history and culture. I believe all of us working in partnership with the ISJL are truly making a better world for all to enjoy.

Can you share a past moment of impact and/or a meaningful experience you have had with the ISJL?

Hearing about Kesler's experience with two young girls in Greenville, Mississippi, learning about Judaism, as well as Kesler's experiences in Memphis, Tennessee (at a large temple), engaging many more people in the same sorts of learning experiences—really resonated with me. Knowing that we can be living the Jewish life in small towns and big cities, and knowing we are all connected—that's inspiring.

How do you choose to give to the ISJL (what type of gift)?

We choose to give an annual gift to the general fund.

How does the ISJL differ from other causes you support?

The ISJL embraces a broad spectrum of life for Jews and non-Jews. It is inclusive! That is so important to my family.

And just for fun, what is your favorite Jewish food?

Savory kugel!

To learn more about supporting our work, email development@isjl.org.

IN MEMORY

In February, the ISJL lost a staff member, partner, and friend. Our longtime Director of Programming, Ann Zivitz Kientz, passed away with her family at her side. Mourned by her husband, son, sisters, father, extended family, and her wide community in New Orleans and beyond, Ann will be deeply missed.

Her funeral was held at Temple Sinai in New Orleans, where Ann was not only an active lifelong member but also a past President and former staff member. Her colleagues at the ISJL were invited to share some words of tribute at the ceremony; in loving memory of Ann, we wanted to share those words here as well:

No one was more joyfully Jewish than Ann Zivitz Kientz.

As the Director of Programming for the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, Ann connected thousands of people with Jewish cultural experiences. The absolute exuberance she brought to her work almost defies description. She was the biggest fan of every single presenter she put on the road. Jewish music, theatre, books, lectures—every event she coordinated was exactly the sort of thing she would be the first in line to attend.

Ann's colleagues were all lifted up by her eager celebration of culture and community. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and even when it was a presenter or topic that made some of us raise our eyebrows—"Hey, have you read this book about whether or not Superman was circumcised?"—ultimately Ann could convince almost anyone to try almost anything. She was a team player, always ready to lend a hand, and always championing her colleagues' efforts. She was a gracious host to staff members who stayed at "Chez Kientz" on trips to New Orleans. She and Chris were the dinner guests we all wanted to be seated with at board and staff events. Ann made everything just a little bit more fun.

Our hearts ache as we all mourn the loss of our friend and colleague. In her absence, we will strive to continue doing the work she found so sacred, serving the communities she held so dear. May her memory always be for a blessing, and in her honor, may we all remember to embrace our life, our work, and our whole identity with as much joy as Ann Zivitz Kientz.

ANN ZIVITZ KIENTZ



SHALOM



Y'all

THE EMAIL EDITION!

You no longer have to wait months between issues: you can now get a monthly email from the ISJL with insights, updates, recipes, and more! (And don't worry, it's replacing other emails we used to send, so while you'll get MORE news - you'll get FEWER emails!)

Our first email went out in January 2022. If you didn't get it, and want to make sure you get on the mailing list, just email information@isjl.org!



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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 – April 15, 2022.

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We apologize that these donors were not acknowledged in the previous issue of Shalom Y'all. Their contributions in support of historic Temple B'nai Israel in Natchez, Mississippi, are deeply appreciated by the ISJL and the Natchez community.

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