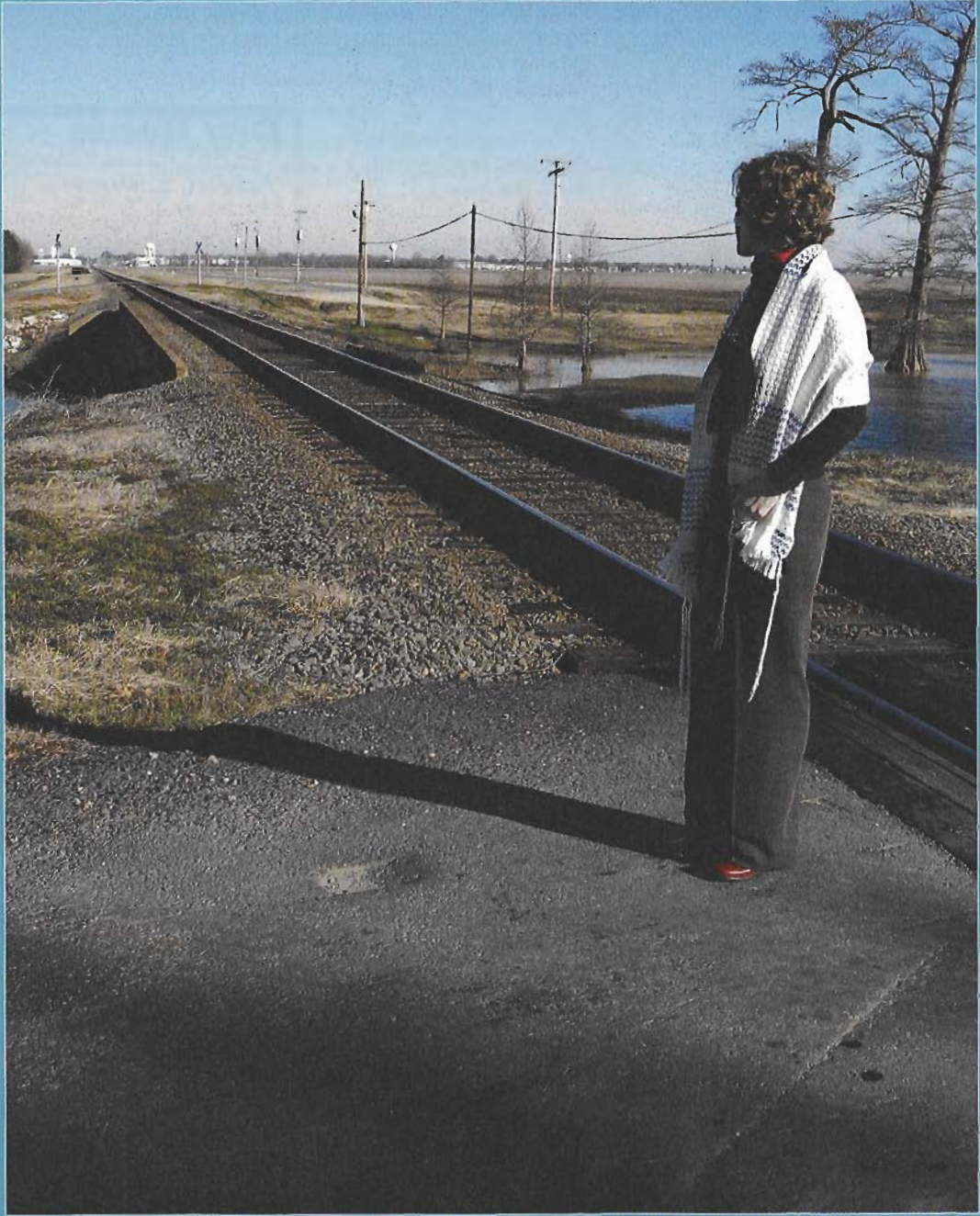


Cotton, Catfish & Challah



A Tale of a Traveling Rabbi in the South

Jennie Rothenberg



It's early on a sunny Friday in January, and the cotton fields of southeastern Arkansas are a cold muddy brown. Rabbi Debra Kassoff's blue van streaks down Highway 65, two narrow lanes leading into the town of McGehee. The land here is flat, the arrow-straight highway running parallel to ever-present railroad tracks. Tractor dealerships, catfish eateries and rundown shacks blur by, punctuated by innumerable Baptist churches. Every few miles, a green sign announces another town with a population under 300.

The rabbi is on a weekend road trip, paying a first-time visit to McGehee's tiny Jewish community. On the dashboard of the van are handwritten instructions from RoseAnn Maron, the local congregation president:

Bear onto Junction 1. When you see a sign that says "Jesus is #1," turn right. Drive two and a half blocks to Meir Chaim Temple, a blond brick building across from the Presbyterian Church. "I don't actually know what street the synagogue is on," RoseAnn had admitted when Kassoff requested a street address. "Everyone just knows where to find it."

Kassoff is unperturbed as she rounds the corner into McGehee. As a traveling rabbi, she is used to deciphering all kinds of driving directions. Her official title is Director of Rabbinic Services at the Goldring-Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Based at Institute headquarters in Jackson, Mississippi, she spends most of her weekends on the road, crisscrossing the southern states to visit far-flung congregations, some of which have no more than a dozen members. On a given Friday, she might drive as far as Selma, Alabama (196 miles) or Lake Charles, Louisiana (299 miles).

The moniker "traveling rabbi" conjures up images of the classic southern preacher, a stern clergyman in a dark suit shuttling from one town to the next, but Debra Kassoff defies that stereotype. At 33, she is a slim, pretty, thoughtful

woman with honey-colored curls. "I don't mind these long stretches of road," she says introspectively. "I listen to music. When I'm organized, I take a digital voice recorder along and make an audio journal while I drive. But I like just watching the scenery. It's definitely one of the best parts of the job."

There's no trace of southern accent in her voice. Kassoff grew up in Columbia, Maryland, 36 miles south of the Mason-Dixon Line but a world away from the Deep South. Still, she has an obvious affinity for the small communities of Jews whose families have lived in the South for as long as two centuries. Many are descendants of adventurous German Jewish merchants who set up shop on southern Main Streets throughout the 1800s, decades before Eastern European Jews began descending on Ellis Island. "The communities here are much less transient than in the North," Kassoff has observed. "You find families that have been here for generations and have very strong ties—economic and political."

Like so many small southern towns, McGehee is long and narrow, stretching out just six blocks along the railroad tracks. Nearly every street corner offers a view of vacant wintry fields expanding endlessly in all directions. A barber shop, a florist and a pharmacy are clustered together in a two-block "downtown," while the City Clerk, Mayor's Office and Fire Department are housed in a single modest building on Holly Street. There's no movie theater, but there are 20 houses of worship—eight of them Baptist. Kassoff passes several in her search for Meir Chaim. Before long, she spots a front-lawn sign identifying the Presbyterian Church. Across the street is the synagogue, just where RoseAnn said it would be.

The first traveling rabbis in America were, according to the historian Jacob Rader Marcus,

“schnorrers and adventurers.” They were European rabbis who journeyed back and forth across the Atlantic, often bearing vague credentials and mysterious backgrounds. At that time, American congregations were run almost exclusively by educated laymen; the Old World rabbis mainly provided special services like kosher slaughtering and circumcision.

The landscape of American Judaism changed in 1847 with the arrival of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, himself an import from Central Europe. A Reform rabbi bent on modernizing American Judaism, Wise brought in choral singing, replaced Bar Mitzvahs with confirmations and seated men and women together. He also opened the first Jewish rabbinic seminary in the United States, Hebrew Union College. By 1880, more than 90 percent of American synagogues were practicing Reform Judaism, many with American-trained rabbis of their own. But the South, where towns were small and distances daunting, continued to depend upon the services of traveling rabbis. Their presence irritated some of the new Reform rabbis, who saw practices like *brit milah* and *kasbrut* as a throwback to a less enlightened age. (The 19th century Reform leader Abraham Geiger deemed circumcision “a barbaric, bloody act, which fills the father with fear.”) In 1880, Jacob Voorsanger, a Reform rabbi from Houston, complained in the pages of *The American Israelite* that mobile rabbis had “infested [southern] cities like an army of grasshoppers.” As an antidote, Voorsanger and four other Reform rabbis in Texas divided the state into five parts, each overseeing an entire region. Other states followed suit, and for the next several decades, the South was filled with range-riding Reform rabbis.

This organized network of traveling clergy closely resembled the old southern tradition of the itinerant minister. Since the revival meetings of the 1700s, when charismatic traveling preachers attracted such huge crowds that they had to hold services outdoors, Christians had gone to great lengths to minister to every soul in the American South, no matter how remote its dwelling. Jews essentially adopted this model, sometimes with creative variations. During the 1950s, in a program dreamed up by a wealthy North Carolina philanthropist, Rabbi Harold Freedman began driving through the Blue Ridge Mountains in a bus

that contained blackboards, a record player, a library, a battery-powered eternal light and a portable ark. More than 150 small-town families became regular visitors to the bus, and during the first five years, Freedman trained 20 children for their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. The bus became the subject of a Mickey Mouse Club newsreel and a *LIFE* magazine article, attracting Jews and non-Jews alike. Everyone who came aboard left with a free mezuzah.

Half a century later, Mississippi native Macy Hart resurrected the traveling rabbi model when he founded the Institute for Southern Jewish Life. By that time, even some of the stronger Jewish communities in the South had fallen into decline as young people moved to urban areas. The Jewish population of Natchez, Mississippi, once several hundred strong, had eroded by the year 2000 to fewer than 15. Hart saw that these communities were struggling to keep their synagogue doors open, let alone hold services. “Outside the urban areas, Jewish services and organized Jewish communities are non-existent,” Hart explains. “There is a need to do more.”

Looking for a rabbi to head his new institution, Hart met Debra Kassoff, then a student rabbi making twice-monthly visits to Greenville, Mississippi. He was struck by the gentle, intelligent young woman who was constantly taking in new information about southern culture and history. Although she would soon be married, she was willing to go on the road in a van packed with rabbinic supplies: prayer books, *tallitot* and a box of children’s art materials. She was eloquent but not intimidating, able to speak about Talmud one minute and cake recipes the next. Most importantly, she was flexible and open-minded, a student of the South as well as a teacher of Judaism.

At the Days Inn outside of McGehee, Kassoff quickly changes clothes, replacing her traveling attire with an elegant periwinkle blouse, black dress slacks and a silver necklace with a dangling Star of David.

Minutes later RoseAnn Maron, the silver-haired Temple president, and Hattie Heiman, another local Jewish leader, arrive to greet her. RoseAnn and Hattie look like typical Southern matrons, decked out in checked country shirts and coiffed hairdos. They whisk the rabbi off to lunch, the car bumping over small roads and

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Debra Kassoff poses beside a decidedly non-kosher restaurant at the edge of Dumas, Arkansas.

narrow bridges on the drive to the Walnut Lake Country Club. The restaurant is perched at the edge of a bayou with plantation fields stretching in all directions.

"Tell me the history of your synagogue," says Kassoff, as the women wait for the food to arrive.

"All I know is what Aunt Joanna Hamburger told me," says Hattie, 72, her voice taking on the animated tone of a storyteller.

"Aunt Joanna was your aunt?" Kassoff inquires politely.

Hattie laughs heartily. "No, no, she's no relation of mine."

"She *is* a cousin of mine," chuckles 60-year-old RoseAnn from her seat across the table.

"Well, be that as it may," says Hattie, "she was Aunt Joanna to everybody in southeast Arkansas. Her husband, Uncle Bill Hamburger, came here as a mule trader. He was our Temple's first president."

Today, RoseAnn and Hattie are responsible for almost everything that goes on at Meir Chaim. "Sure, we have a Board of Directors," RoseAnn quips. "I call Hattie, and Hattie calls me." Despite their banter, the two women were genuinely concerned a few years ago when attendance at services dropped to almost nothing. Hattie gathered donations from former congregation members, mostly younger people who had moved away to bigger cities, and RoseAnn began drafting a Temple will. The Temple was saved by the unexpected

arrival of a few new Jewish families—among them two newspaper editors, a university professor, a pair of scientists and their two young children.

When RoseAnn was growing up in McGehee, the congregation was larger—she remembers missing cheerleading performances at her high school so she could attend sizable Yom Kippur services. Hattie, who lives in the nearby town of Dumas, was raised in Georgia, where religion was central to her life. "When I was 12, I wanted a Bible for my birthday," she chortles, "and my mama just about dropped

her teeth." For both women, being Jewish means attending old-style Reform services conducted almost entirely in English. RoseAnn has never attended a Conservative service—Conservative Judaism, with its careful compromise between ancient and modern, caught on mainly among traditionally minded Eastern European Jews who settled in Northern cities after 1910. Hattie, who was never taught to read Hebrew, was "bored absolutely to tears" when she had to sit through a Conservative service, and she wrinkles her nose at the mention of Orthodox Judaism. "We studied Hasidic Jews in Sunday School," she says. "I distinctly remember my teacher, who was a very learned man, saying, 'You want to stay away from these people. They're a little *mesbuggab*.'"

Listening to these women speak, it's apparent that they have less in common with Jews living in New York than they do with Christians living next door. They eat, dress, speak and even worship very much like the Southerners they are. In the same spirit that good Southern Baptists pitch in for a bake sale, good Southern Jews work together to prepare a Friday night meal. "Here in the Bible Belt, everyone is expected to belong to a church," Kassoff tells me later. "It's okay if that church happens to be a Jewish one."

Kassoff has noticed that Christians often turn up at her events to support their Jewish neighbors, as they did during a Rosh Hashanah service in Selma, Alabama last year. Without them, attendance at the

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RoseAnn Maron, Meir Chaim's president, fills the rabbi in on local customs for Friday night services.

service would have numbered in the low 20s. Sometimes Christian involvement takes an even more powerful form. After Hattie's husband died, a group of Methodist women went so far as to host a dinner in their church for Jewish out-of-town guests. The Methodist minister personally welcomed the rabbi who had come down from Little Rock. "This church is your synagogue," the minister proclaimed. "Do whatever you need to do."

Everywhere Kassoff goes in the South, elderly Jews feel compelled to inform her that they have never experienced any form of discrimination. "We've got a good, friendly bunch of people around here," RoseAnn says, "and as far as any anti-Semitism..."

Hattie completes the sentence: "...we just never run into it."

This rosy picture might come as a surprise to Northern Jews, who often envision the South as a land of white supremacists and overzealous Christian preachers. Few can forget that as recently as 1989, David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and author of the book *Jewish Supremacy*, won a seat in the Louisiana state legislature, then had a surprisingly strong showing in his 1991 bid for governor. But many Southern Jews are quick to point out that the North, with its Henry Fords and "restricted" hotels, has exhibited its share of animosity toward Jews. In New Hampshire, Jews were not allowed to vote until 1877—contrasting sharply with Virginia,

which granted them that right in 1789. And during the Civil War, when Jews were ordered to leave Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi, it was Union General Ulysses S. Grant, not Confederate General Robert E. Lee, who issued this demand.

When a plate of fried okra arrives at the table, Hattie launches into a mini-lesson on southern cooking, proclaiming, with a mischievous glint in her eye, "I'm southern first, and then I'm Jewish." To some, these words would smack of sacrilege, but they hint at the long, prestigious history of Jews living in tiny southern communities. Unlike their northern counterparts, who clustered together in urban neighborhoods with Yiddish theaters and bagel shops, southern Jews settled in undeveloped rural areas and helped to build new towns from the ground up. They served on city councils and ran successful chain stores with names like Sternberg's or Rosenzweig's. Even now, when small-town southern Jews need help, they are often wary of accepting assistance from outsiders, even when those outsiders are Jews.

Kassoff knows this, and her voice holds an audible note of restraint when she asks RoseAnn and Hattie, "I'm wondering what the Institute can do to help your congregation." Her query sounds innocent enough but it represents one of her toughest challenges: getting small southern congregations to connect with the larger Jewish world. "There are some national Jewish organizations with resources that might be helpful to you," Kassoff adds. At the word "national," the two women stiffen in their chairs.

"We certainly get enough information through the mail," Hattie informs the rabbi. "But I'm not a big supporter of national Jewish organizations. They just never have seemed as important to me as what we do locally."

"Our biggest concern," RoseAnn cuts in, "is trying to keep our own congregation going."

As if to demonstrate their competence, the women turn to practical matters: the evening's musical program, a flaw in the Temple heating system, the pesky fire ants that ate the electrical wiring last summer. Hattie glances around the dining room. The only other patrons are two ladies looking over fabric swatches and linoleum samples.

"Our congregation may be small, but we're mighty," Hattie says in a low voice. "There are Jews here with huge businesses that employ a lot

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of people. The first mayor of Dumas, Gus Waterman, was Jewish. His son went on to become the founding dean at the University of Arkansas Law School.” She pauses for effect. “He *started* the University of Arkansas Law School,” she repeats proudly. “A town does not mess with people like that.”

After lunch, Kassoff pays a visit to Haskell “Hack” Wolff, an 82-year-old man suffering from a bone infection called osteomyelitis. Wolff is precisely the sort of prominent Jewish leader a town would not want to mess with. His father, Sigmund, was an adventurer who arrived in the undeveloped South and opened a successful department store. Hack became a prominent local figure in his own right, serving as a city alderman and water board member. At various times, Hack has been president of both the Chamber of Commerce and the Lions Club. The street where he lives with his wife, Elaine, is named Wolff Street.

When Kassoff is on the road, she often drops in on sick and elderly Jews who rarely get to see a rabbi. But standing on Hack Wolff’s front porch, with its wooden swing and mounted brass fox ornament, she hesitates briefly. Her work can be daunting: Each time she visits a new community, she is expected to act as a spiritual leader for people she has not yet gotten to know. “I’m a ‘closet’ shy person,” she whispers before knocking on the door.

An African American woman named Dixie appears and leads the rabbi into a parlor crammed with Japanese artworks and books about World War II. Hack Wolff, a balding, elfin-faced man, sits under a mounted menorah, dwarfed by his large armchair. “This young rabbi is going to try and make a religious man out of me,” Hack remarks to his caretaker as Kassoff enters. “She’s got her work cut out for her.” Dixie laughs. She is wearing a red T-shirt emblazoned with the words “Jesus Children’s Workshop” and a citation from the New Testament book of Romans.

Christians in the South lament that their congregations are shrinking because so many young people have gone off to find opportunities elsewhere. But for Jews, with their smaller numbers and strong emphasis on education, the attrition rate is even greater. Both of Hack and Elaine’s

children have long since left Arkansas to pursue impressive careers. Samuel Wolff is a partner in a prominent Washington, DC law firm, and Sally Wolff King is the Associate Dean of Emory College in Atlanta. “My daughter wrote this,” Hack says proudly, handing Kassoff a book called *Talking About William Faulkner*. “And this one is by my son,” he adds, bringing out a thick volume entitled *Emerging Trends in Securities Law*. “You don’t have to read it. It’s written in English, but it may as well be Greek.”

Dixie offers Kassoff a thick slice of chocolate cake, and the rabbi takes delicate forkfuls as Hack tells her about his business. After nearly a century of family ownership, Wolff Brothers Department Store is about to change hands. “You know, in a little congregation like this, you tend to make more of an effort,” says Hack’s wife, Elaine, who has come in from a morning of wrapping things up at the store. “We worked hard to teach our children about Judaism. But we also told them they could go to any college they wanted. So they did—and they learned to like all sorts of cultural things that just aren’t available here.” She smiles a bit sadly. “As one friend of mine put it, our congregations are

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JENNIE ROTHENBERG

Kassoff helps six-year-old Ethan Miller—one of a handful of children at Meir Chaim—embellish his Tu B’shvat art project.

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At the end of her visit, Kassoff turns to Hack with the barest hint of a smile. "I wouldn't want to be accused of trying to make you religious," she tells him. "But I did want to ask whether you'd like me to pray with you." When he mumbles his consent, she opens her little prayer book and recites a few blessings. At the end, she adds some words of her own: "I pray for your speedy return to health. And I pray that this time of transition goes smoothly for your whole family."

Elaine, who moved to her husband's side when the praying began, seems thoughtful. "It's funny how some prayers keep taking on new meaning," she says. "You can read the same words for 40 years, and suddenly something new jumps out at you." Hack says nothing, but as he gazes up at the rabbi, his face is almost youthful with appreciation.

When the sun goes down, Debra Kassoff is behind the pulpit at Meir Chaim Temple. The sanctuary is an impressive room outfitted with towering stained glass windows and a built-in ark with electric powered doors. There's also a dining room where dinner has just been served. A few upstairs rooms were once used for Sunday school classes. No one ever ascends the staircase now, not even to put in working light bulbs.

When a rabbi comes to town, nearly every Jew who lives within a two-hour radius shows up for services. There are a dozen or so in the sanctuary tonight. Most have white hair, and some have come from as far as 90 miles away—"a fur piece up the road," in RoseAnn's words—for the rare opportunity to see a rabbi. At the same time, the rabbi has to bend to the ways of the congregation. Tonight, for example, she will break with tradition and read from the Torah on Friday night instead of Saturday morning. "Apparently, people only come to synagogue on Friday nights here," Kassoff explains later. "There's no real reason they couldn't have the service on Saturday instead. It's just that this is how it's always been done."

Before Kassoff entered the rabbinate, she was pursuing a Ph.D. in English, and tonight she starts off her sermon with a passage from the author Grace Paley. The memoir tells of a far-off world: the New York neighborhood of Paley's childhood, "so dense with Jews that I thought we were the

great majority." Paley goes on to describe her African American neighbors whose ancestors were slaves. "Like us?" the young Paley asks her father. "Like us," her father replies. Paley's story ends with a bold charge to Jews everywhere: "We had been strangers and slaves in Egypt and therefore knew what we were talking about when we cried out against pain and oppression. In fact, we were obligated by knowledge to do so."

The rabbi looks up from her reading. The congregants gaze back at her, their expressions pleasantly interested. Kassoff has no particular reason to believe that anyone in the congregation harbors racist attitudes. Jews have sometimes been accused of playing a significant role in the slave trade, but that claim has been discredited by the leading African American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. of Harvard University. When it comes to defending African American rights in the South, Jews have a better than average record. The fate of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner—two young Jewish civil rights workers who were killed in Mississippi together with their black colleague, James Chaney—is one of the best-known examples, but even earlier, Jewish men risked their lives to fight alongside the famous abolitionist John Brown. It's also true that Jewish lawyers were often the only ones who would defend black clients—in some of the larger civil rights cases in the South, defense teams were composed entirely of Jews. All the same, not every Jewish southerner rushed to the aid of black neighbors, and Kassoff believes many could have done more. However small the numbers, the fact remains that some Jews sold slaves, and other Jews owned them, and when it comes to today's southern culture, the deepest wounds still fester along racial, not religious, lines.

As she comments on the week's Torah portion, which depicts the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, Kassoff returns to the ongoing struggles of African Americans. "There's more to the world than the Jewish community," she says slowly. "As long as one person suffers, no one is free. Congregations throughout the South are shrinking, and there is a sadness that the Jewish community is losing its status. Wouldn't it help us to feel greater than our numbers if we could do something for our neighbors in need?" She scans each face in the room. "We can't turn back time," she concludes. "But we

can learn lessons from our predecessors who reached out to help the society around them.”

Driving back to the Days Inn later that night, Kassoff evaluates her own speech. “I was trying to give a sort of straight-ahead message sermon,” she confides. “I’m not sure what I imagined would come of it. I looked around, and everyone was older. There just aren’t many people with the time and energy to start something new.”

As she pulls up to the motel, Kassoff realizes she needs to buy construction paper, an essential ingredient for the children’s class she will be teaching at the Temple in the morning. There’s a faintly illuminated Wal-Mart near the motel, but when she reaches it, the doors are locked. So she walks back across the dark parking lot, stopping once to avoid getting run down by a speeding pick-up truck. “What is it about the South?” she muses, surveying the flat, rural surroundings. “It’s a very conservative part of the country. Ties are closer here—people stay near home.” She falls silent for a moment. “This congregation may be gone in a generation or two. But I want these people to know that they are part of a larger Jewish community, and a larger human community, that isn’t going to disappear. I want them to feel connected to something vibrant and alive.”

Because her visit falls just before Tu B’Shvat, the Jewish “birthday of the trees,” Kassoff has decided to make her class into a holiday celebration. Ruminating through her van in the morning, she manages to find a few sheets of brown, yellow and green paper, enough to create an art project for a pair of brothers, the only two students who will be attending her class. There are a handful of other Jewish children in the area, but they are otherwise engaged. RoseAnn apologized the day before that her nephew had already made plans to go duck hunting.

Undaunted, Kassoff bustles about in the kitchen of Meir Chaim, humming along with a CD of Jewish children’s songs as she slices fruit for the Tu B’Shvat seder plate. “Do you think lime will keep apples from turning brown the way lemon does?” she calls out. “You see, this is the unglamorous side of my job. If there’s one class rabbinical schools should add, it’s Catering for Rabbis.”

By the time eight-year-old Jack Miller and his six-year-old brother Ethan bound through the door, Kassoff is ready to begin her lesson on the Jewish nature holiday. She starts with a brief prayer service in the sanctuary, then moves the two children to the long dining room tables, where she passes out markers and the colored paper.

“How do you think people are like trees?” she asks. When the children look back at her blankly, she prods them. “Trees have roots. What do we have that nourishes us and keeps us alive?”

“Our mom and dad,” Ethan offers.

“Good,” she says. “And trees also have branches. What do branches do?”

“They reach into the sky,” Jack replies.

“Right! And what are some of the things you reach for?”

Ethan considers for a moment. “I reach for monkey bars.”

Kassoff laughs and unfurls a table-length sketch of a tree trunk. Before long, the boys are decorating it with long brown paper “roots,” each bearing a word like “toys,” “school” or “traditions.” Green paper leaves are soon labeled with the boys’ dreams and desires: “learn about sharks,” “help others,” “run faster,” “jump higher.” Jack and Ethan hum as they work, oblivious to the fact that, a few years from now, there might be no children left at Meir Chaim.

But Kassoff is mainly concerned with the present, not the future. “My feeling about this work is that every Jewish soul counts,” she says. “Judaism teaches us to make our lives meaningful by sanctifying the everyday activities—being aware of the holiness in a meal, or in the relationship between a teacher and student or parents and child. That’s where I find God. And that’s something all Jewish people deserve to experience, no matter how small their congregations may be.”

When the boys’ parents return, Debra Kassoff is already packing up art supplies and sealing leftover fruit in plastic bags. She will drive directly back to Jackson where her husband, Alec, a law student, is waiting for her. Jack leans against his mother’s side, answering questions about the rabbi and her lesson. But Ethan is still focused on the art project. Clutching a fistful of green leaves, he crawls away from the roots, upwards along the trunk, adding more dreams to the branches of his symbolic tree. ☺

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