

A Rabbi, a Van and 28 Temples in 12 States

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ATLANTA, Nov. 25 - When Rabbi Debra Kassoff shows up to lead Friday night shabbat services in McGehee, Ark., she is a bit of a star. People have been known to drive 90 miles to hear the slight 33-year-old read from the Torah and lead prayers. Sometimes, she says, there are even more Christians in attendance than Jews.

That Rabbi Kassoff is so popular is less a testament to her wisdom and insight - though her congregants agree she has both in spades - than it is to her availability. When Rabbi Kassoff shows up, she is the only game in town.

This year, Rabbi Kassoff will travel to 28 temples in 12 states throughout the South to provide leadership to small-town congregations, some with fewer than a dozen members.

Dr. Stuart Rockoff, director of the history department at the Institute for Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, Miss., said that although visiting rabbis were not uncommon at understaffed temples around the country, Rabbi Kassoff was believed to be the only full-time circuit rabbi in the United States.

"I recently took a class on how to serve small congregations," said Rabbi Kassoff, who lives in Jackson. "They defined 'small' as anything with less than 200 members. I thought, 'If that's small, I'm serving micro congregations.' "

Since 2003, Rabbi Kassoff has spent two weekends of every month traveling around the South in her blue van. She ministers to towns where the gatherings may be modest, but where Jewish life still has deep roots, often going back five or six generations to the merchants who first settled in those towns.

Though there is a national shortage of rabbis, that dearth is perhaps felt most acutely in this 12-state region. According to a 2002 study by the Institute for Southern Jewish Life, a nonprofit organization that provides education and rabbinic services to small Jewish communities, 34 percent of the 336 congregations in the Deep South, which excludes Florida, lack a full-time rabbi. In Arkansas, just 3 of 11 temples have full services, and in Mississippi, only 2 out of 14 congregations have been able to hire a full-time leader.

Employing a circuit rabbi to reach the far-flung faithful is not new. In the 1950's, Rabbi Harold Freedman toiled around the back roads of the Blue Ridge Mountains in a bus outfitted with blackboards, a record player, a library, a battery-powered eternal light and even a portable ark.

Dr. Rockoff, who has researched Rabbi Freedman's travels, said more than 150 families were regulars to the bus, and in his first five years Rabbi Freedman trained more than 20 children for their bar and bat mitzvahs. A succession of rabbis made similar travels into the 1980's.

Hiring a traveling rabbi struck Macy Hart, a Mississippi native who founded the Southern Institute for Jewish Life, as an idea worthy of revival. Mr. Hart had watched thriving Jewish communities around him shrink over the years, until even some of the strongest

were struggling to keep their synagogues open. Natchez, Miss., for example, once had more than 200 Jewish families, but now has only 15 members in its temple.

When a congregation dwindles so sharply, it usually does not have enough money to hire a full-time rabbi, and in order to be as inclusive as possible, it often drops affiliation with any particular Jewish movement. As a result, it is much harder to find a rabbi willing to serve their less defined pulpits.

The only way to help them, Mr. Hart reasoned, was to treat small Southern temples as a group, and hire one person to serve them all. In 2003, Mr. Hart employed Rabbi Kassoff fresh out of rabbinical school to be the first on the circuit. Rabbi Kassoff said life on the road was exhausting, but not without its rewards.

"There's something deeply moving about seeing how hard these families are committed to being where they are," she said.

With a lack of strong ties to the larger Jewish world, Jews in the South have been known to make a few accommodations.

Rabbi Pamela Gottfried, a native New Yorker who moved south for a teaching job at a Jewish high school in Atlanta, recalled a woman who approached her to say, " 'You'll have to forgive me, Rabbi, I'm a fifth-generation resident, and Mamma used to make the matzo balls with bacon fat drippings.' I thought I was on Mars."

Beyond dietary restrictions, other Sabbath rules are often overlooked in cases where the end justifies the means. Some temples, for example, have members who drive 50 miles one way to attend services. In some branches of Judaism, driving is considered a kind of work and is frowned upon on the day of rest.

"It's very heartening to me that people work so hard here to maintain their Jewish identities," Rabbi Gottfried said. An Atlanta resident, she will sometimes travel to smaller temples to help with services around the High Holy Days.

Observing life's passages sometimes calls for creative thinking. Nathaniel Graham, a poised, soft-spoken 13-year-old from Auburn, Ala., recently took his bar mitzvah classes with Rabbi Kassoff over the telephone.

For more than a year, Nathaniel and Rabbi Kassoff spoke by telephone - twice a month - for an hour each time. Nathaniel would sing his Torah portion, and she would wait until he finished the phrase to offer guidance. They talked about how he would interpret the Scripture. The two worked long distance until Rabbi Kassoff traveled to Auburn to lead Nathaniel's bar mitzvah last August.

Because Rabbi Kassoff cannot be everywhere she is needed, many rituals are carried out without the aid of a rabbi. In those cases, a senior member of the congregation is usually called upon to lead the service - sometimes with mixed results.

"There are many different melodies for Jewish prayers and we all forget which ones we're doing, so the singing is kind of all over the place," said Cynthia Kristan-Graham, 50, Nathaniel's mother and an art history teacher who worships at Beth Shalom in Auburn, a temple without a full-time rabbi.

Though Rabbi Kassoff only makes it to Beth Shalom twice a year, she has become an integral part of its spiritual life.

"We're really going to miss her when she leaves," Nathaniel said.

Rabbi Kassoff's three-year term will end in 2006; a search for her successor is under way. Rabbi Kassoff said that she would be happy to stay in one place for a while - but that she might also grow restless.

"We're a wandering people," she said. "In some ways, there's nothing more natural than for me to be on the road."