

*The mission of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life is to preserve and document the practice, culture and legacy of Judaism in the South. The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience operates under the auspices of the Institute.*

## ISJL Education Program Continues to Grow

With the ISJL education program entering its fourth year, its reach and impact have never been greater. The number of congregations using the ISJL curriculum continues to increase, with more than thirty communities sending representatives to the 2006 ISJL Education Conference, June 25-27 at Pearl River Resort in Choctaw, Mississippi. Participants will be coming from congregations scattered throughout the original pilot states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, as well as newly added communities in Georgia and Tennessee. The conference brings religious school teachers and directors together with nationally renowned educators for communal learning, resource-building, and interactions with their counterparts in other communities.

Since its inception three years ago, the ISJL curriculum and its traveling education fellows have made tremendous headway in improving the resources available to underserved Southern Jewish communities and connecting them to larger communities that also use the curriculum. The growth of the department has been steady. The ISJL hired its first two education fellows in the summer of 2003. After the first Education Conference

in August of 2003, the program gained momentum. In the spring of 2005, the department grew to three fellows. For the first two years, the fellows were supervised by a part-time education consultant. In January of 2006, the ISJL hired Rachel Komerofsky as its full-time educator. As the number of communities increased, the need for more fellows became clear. The ISJL education department has recently added two new education fellows. Bethany Zwick and Amy Steinberg join with veteran fellows Debbie Ovadia, Russel Neiss, and Greg Weisman to make up the largest team of education fellows in ISJL history. The institute has plans for further expansion next year, when the education curriculum comes out of pilot.

The enthusiastic and growing staff of the department has been an important factor in the success of the ISJL's education initiative. The other key is the curriculum, the centerpiece of the program. That's why, in addition to the hiring of two new Fellows, there are more education program innovations to highlight this year:

- *A high school unit on comparative religion.* The ISJL high school curriculum features a series of units with topics such as Jewish art and Jewish cooking. This year, a new unit on comparative religion has been incorporated, addressing the interest raised by many of our high school students in learning more about other religions and cultures.
- *A supplemental series on Jewish texts.* In response to communities' desire for more Jewish text-based resources, supplemental lesson plans on Jewish texts will be available in the 2006-2007 curriculum for middle and high school students. These engaging and interactive lessons make Jewish texts such as Mishnah and Talmud accessible to students.

As the program continues to strengthen and develop, the ISJL education department will remain committed to its mission of building a common body of Jewish knowledge while increasing the resources and services available to the communities they serve.

*Upper right:  
ISJL Educator  
Rachel Komerofsky  
teaches children  
in Lafayette,  
Louisiana about  
the Jewish value  
of saving the  
environment.  
Photo by Stacy  
Riggs.*



*Education Fellow  
Greg Weisman  
leads a Tu  
B'Shvat Seder at  
Temple Shalom in  
Lafayette.  
Photo by Stacy  
Riggs.*



*A breakout session  
on early childhood  
education at  
the 2005 ISJL  
Education  
Conference.  
Photo by Adam  
Stein.*



## Message From the Institute Board Chair



It is a pleasure to volunteer to serve an organization when things are going so well. What an easy job I have as chairman of this one. Sometimes I pinch myself and wonder:

What if we didn't have a group of Jewish educators that combines knowledge and a passion for creating new ways of bringing excitement to our children? It's no longer necessary that a parent/teacher worry over how to engage children for a few hours each week. Our education fellows, led by ISJL Educator Rachel Komerofsky, provide the paths for creative experiences to our children. The ISJL "spiral" curriculum builds each year on the youngster's understanding of Judaism. Originally designed for small and underserved communities, it is no wonder that some of the largest congregations in the South are adopting our program.

What if we didn't have a top level Jewish historian whose ability to convey the richness and depth of the Southern Jewish legacy is impossible to miss? Whether Stuart Rockoff sits with you to explore your family's history, or whether he speaks to your community group about a piece of Jewish life and its influence on our neighbors: he rocks! If you haven't heard Stuart bring our heritage alive, then you should.

What if we didn't have a rabbi with the dedication and the compassion of Debra Kassoff? As our first director of rabbinic services, she has created a model for all who follow. Serving congregations across the South, and serving anyone hungry for a closer relationship to Judaism, she now has a congregation of admirers too broad to measure.

What if we didn't have a staff that could run our programs and our office with spirit, with humor, and with our trust? I am astounded by how much work is accomplished by so few. Nonnie Campbell, Holly Lange, Betsy Samuels, Neola Young, and Lynda Yule combine to provide us with two museum locations, expansion efforts for two more sites, traveling exhibits, conferences and events, a dynamic traveling literary series, a multi-city film festival, Judaica shopping as part of a complete web site, a fundraising campaign, a robust accounting and control system, and still somehow respond to our "idea-a-minute" president.

And about that: What if we didn't have a president with the vision and the non-stop energy of Macy Hart? He is relentless in his efforts to build this institute as one that delivers only the highest quality programming, but doing so efficiently and in geographically remote areas. What if his vision were blurred instead of sharp? What if he had not brought all these pros together?

### AND: What if we didn't have your support?

It is that time of the year that we ask for your pledge of financial support. I submit that we have earned every dollar in advance. I am fortunate to serve an organization with so many superlatives, with so much dedication, and with so much to offer. This makes it is easy to ask you to help. We are grateful for your support. We need that support to continue to grow. Just think what we could accomplish if you act now.

L'shalom

## Message from the Institute President



This edition of *Circa* will, like so many of our previous issues, showcase some extraordinary programs and events, acknowledge an ever growing list of supporters, and reaffirm that the ISJL is having a strong impact on its region by making Jewish opportunities available where they hadn't been before.

National Jewish organizations have not focused on the needs of non-urban areas because of their relatively small numbers of Jews. I have heard this justification for inaction time and again. At the ISJL, *K'lal Yisrael* means all the Jews wherever they are, not just in far away countries. After all, most Jews raised in non-urban areas end up settling in the big city. We continue to hope that the national Jewish leadership recognizes the potential of these future migrants and adopts programs directed to where they live now, to ensure they became active parts of the community once they move to the big city.

Ideas like regional programming and the sharing of resources are outside of the mainstream for program planners whose urban world has enough "natural resources" to lull one into a sense of non-reality. Programs in big cities usually attract only a tiny percentage of the Jewish community, while in isolated areas where "natural resources" are scarce, the Jewish community often shows up in large percentages. This example shows that smaller communities have a tremendous thirst for more Jewish programming. The ISJL will continue to meet this demand while trusting that our model will be emulated in other regions in the months and years ahead.

Also inside this issue is the final message from our first Director of Rabbinic Services, Rabbi Debra Kassoff. I have watched Debbie grow in her rabbinate in such a gentle and caring manner since she came to us from rabbinic school. Her three years with us are up and she moves on to be the assistant rabbi at Temple Emanu-El in

Marblehead, Massachusetts. She arrives there ready to incorporate what she has learned serving small congregations into a community that is filled with those "natural resources." Her new congregation will be stimulated in ways that personify what she has gleaned during her great adventure in the South. Debbie, like almost every staff member of the Institute, sat in a chair that no one had ever sat in before and helped us to create the position. Replacing her will be difficult. She has left a big chair to fill. We will miss her and wish her well in her career. She will make a difference wherever she goes and for those who come within her embrace.

There is one other subject that I would like to address. I have not written about this in several years but now ask for your indulgence. My position requires me to raise a lot of money. The ISJL budget is approaching \$1.5 million a year. We have to raise every dollar of this as we are not funded by any ongoing sources other than grass roots individuals. We collect no dues. Over 800 different individuals made a donation to the institute in 2005. Our staff has expanded over the years from one person to sixteen currently, and possibly twenty by year's end. Most all of this growth has been in program staff, not administrative. This next sentence is a direct solicitation. If you are already a contributor, I say thanks and ask that you consider an increase in your level of giving. If you are not, I am asking you to make a beginning gift and help us continue to grow these services that have helped to revitalize an area long underserved and neglected. If you are moved to respond, I would be very grateful as we continue to challenge the status quo of the Jewish community. Thank you.

# Southern States Literary Series Offers Seconds of *Matzoh Ball Gumbo*

Earlier this year, the ISJL brought Marcie Cohen Ferris to Mississippi to inaugurate the 2006 Southern States Literary Series. On the heels of the successful tour, Marcie will serve up another batch of *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* in Alabama in June.

The Institute of Southern Jewish Life and its Southern States Literary Series is pleased to bring Marcie back to the Deep South to discuss the fascinating story of how Southern Jews found their home in the South around the dinner table. Ferris will make a multimedia presentation about the foodways of Southern Jews based on her new book *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South*. The book, which has been called “the definitive study on Jewish cooking in the American South” by renowned cookbook author Joan Nathan, and was a nominee for a 2006 James Beard Award for best writing about food, mixes historical analysis and family memories, and even has mouth-watering recipes at the end of each chapter.

On Saturday, June 24<sup>th</sup>, Marcie will speak at the Levite Jewish Community Center in Birmingham at 7:00 p.m. On Sunday, June 25<sup>th</sup>, she will be in Huntsville, speaking at the Huntsville/Madison County Board of Realtors building at 3:00 p.m. This program is sponsored

in part by the Alabama Humanities Foundation. Co-sponsors include Temple Emanu-El in Birmingham, the Levite Jewish Community Center, and Etz Chayim and Tempel B’Nai Shalom in Huntsville.

Raised in Blytheville, Arkansas, Ferris was the first project director of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. She later received her Ph.D. in American Studies from George Washington University. She is currently the associate director of the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies and assistant professor of American studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a board member of the Southern Jewish Historical Society and the Vice President of the Southern Foodways Alliance.

The Southern States Jewish Literary Series seeks to bring leading authors and scholars to the region to discuss the southern Jewish experience. See our website ([www.isjl.org](http://www.isjl.org)) for more details, or contact the Institute at (601) 362-6357.



Photo by Bill Ferris.

## ISJL Unveils Natchez Marker

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, as part of its ongoing partnership with the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation (JASHP), the ISJL unveiled a historical marker signifying Temple B’nai Israel of Natchez as the oldest congregation in Mississippi. In 1843, members of Natchez’s growing Jewish community came together to form B’nai Israel. They completed their first building in 1872, though it was destroyed by fire in 1903. Their current synagogue was completed in 1905. Though the congregation has seen its numbers decline in recent decades, they still worship together regularly and hosted a student rabbi from Hebrew Union College this past year. The marker, mounted to the side of the building, testifies to the Jewish community’s long history in the state.

ISJL President Macy B. Hart presided over the marker dedication ceremony. Rabbi Debra Kassoff gave the invocation and benediction. Jerry Klinger, president of the JASHP and an ISJL board member, told the audience about the freedom Jews have enjoyed in America during their long history in this country. Natchez Mayor Phillip Curtis West brought greetings, and Reverend Brandt Dick of Trinity Episcopal Church spoke about the long and close ecumenical relationship between his church and B’nai Israel. When their first synagogue burned in 1903, Trinity Episcopal allowed B’nai Israel to use its sanctuary for services. Teri Tillman, a local historian who has done a great deal of research on the congregation, gave a brief history of B’nai Israel and the Natchez Jewish community. After the marker was unveiled, Anne Tillman hosted the attendees at her historic home, Glen Auburn, for a lovely reception. Special thanks to Mimi Miller of the Historic Natchez Foundation for her help in planning the dedication ceremony.

The ISJL is pleased to play a leading role in the preservation of Natchez’s Jewish history and its beautiful synagogue. The members of B’nai Israel have entered into an agreement with the Institute to operate the synagogue as a museum once the congregation is no longer able to continue. With the help of the JASHP, the Institute will continue to mark the deep roots of Jews in the South.

(l to r) Rabbi Debra Kassoff, Dr. Stuart Rockoff, Robert and Elaine Lehmann, Mayor Phillip Curtis West, Rae Rozolsky, Macy B. Hart, Mimi Miller, Jerry Klinger, Jay Lehmann. Photo by Neola Young.



# Message from Rabbi Debra Kassoff

My editor is growing justifiably peevis. My last Circa column is overdue—I have put off writing it for about as long as possible. I've never been good at endings. How can I sum up, what shall I conclude, after three years of travel, teaching, learning, of surprises and gifts too many to count?



Photo by Alec Kassoff.

It's been on my mind for weeks now. I've spoken to a few friends about it. "How about 'happy trails'?" one friend suggests. She does not intend this as the theme, but rather as the full text of the column. "Maybe you can do something about *nesiah tovah*," another offers, using the Hebrew expression for wishing someone a good journey.

I dismissed both—the first as absurd, the second as somehow too simple—until I realized that both of these friends, a Baptist minister and a Jewish educator, had in fact made exactly the same suggestion in two different languages. Happy trails. A good journey. I'm leaving my position at the ISJL, but in terms of what really matters, this is not an ending. The journey, for all of us, continues.

In the book of Deuteronomy, we read about the transition of leadership from Moses, who will not complete the journey to Canaan with the Israelites, to Joshua, who will step into Moses' role. The transition itself is entirely understated. There is no grand coronation ceremony or passing of the torch. In fact, when Moses finally finishes delivering his final address to the Israelites—filled not with reminiscences of his experiences or triumphs but rather recountings of God's instructions to the people, he goes off to die alone. Tradition tells us that while God personally attended to Moses' burial, no human being knows the spot. This was the message to the Israelites: leadership comes and goes. The journey is eternal. This is what matters.

I retell this story, not to compare myself to Moses, but to compare all of you to the Israelites. Many people might have done the work that I have done these last three years, and God willing, many will carry it forward in the years to come, but none of it would matter if not for those of you who make up the Southern Jewish Experience, those of you who support Southern Jewish life.

When I first arrived here, I did not know, could not know, exactly what to expect—but I never imagined the diversity of community and the broad range of experience that I would encounter. At one time I had imagined that there might come a day when the work that I have done here, serving small, isolated congregations, might no longer be necessary—but I no longer believe that. The job description may change as congregations close or decline, as populations redistribute themselves, but the journey of Jewish life in the South will carry on, unstoppable as the waters of the Mississippi River.

Just a couple of weeks ago I led the final service, the farewell service, at the 90-year-old synagogue building of Temple Beth El in Helena, Arkansas. I felt a bit as if three years of work had been compressed into a single Shabbat service as I witnessed one congregation—aging, closing the doors to its building, but still committed to meeting for weekly services in members' homes, still holding open the doors of community, the doors of the spirit - pass along many of its artifacts, as well as its history and legacy, to another congregation—Etz Chaim, the new Jewish community of Bentonville, Arkansas, whose first building I helped to dedicate last fall. Two congregations at different points in their journey, different parts of the life-cycle, each contributing something very precious to the treasure-house of Southern Jewish life.

Whether growing larger or smaller, whether saying goodbye or hello, we are all on a journey, an eternal journey, to live out our unique role in God's plan for Israel. As I say goodbye for now, as I leave for another part of the Jewish world, I know that your journey will always be a part of me; I pray that some aspect of our time together may always stay with you as part of your journey.

*Nesiah tovah. Happy trails.*

*Rabbi Debra Kassoff leaves us this summer to become assistant rabbi at Temple Emanu-El in Marblehead, Massachusetts.*

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## ISJL Welcomes New Education Fellows



Amy Steinberg

The ISJL is delighted to announce the hiring of two new education fellows who will begin their two-year appointments this June. The new fellows were selected from an impressive range of candidates. It is gratifying to have attracted such exceptional young Jewish adults, confirming that the education fellow position has become a nationally recognized, sought-after position. Look for them soon in a community near you!



Bethany Zwick

**Amy Steinberg** hails from Memphis, Tennessee. She is a 2006 graduate of the University of Missouri. During her time in college, she was involved with Adventure Club, a before and after school program for elementary school students. She has also been a senior counselor at the Memphis JCC camp. Amy's enthusiasm for Jewish education was influenced by her experiences with Jewish

camping and teaching religious school, and she hopes to pursue a career in Jewish education. She looks forward to beginning her career as an ISJL education fellow.

**Bethany Zwick** is a 2006 graduate of the University of Texas-Austin with a B.A. in history. She has lived in many parts of the country, but most recently in Dallas and Houston. Bethany is a former counselor at Greene Family Camp in Texas, and while a student at UT, she taught Hebrew school at Temple Beth Israel in Austin. As part of her history major, she participated in the Normandy Scholar Program, involving intensive study of World War II and European history and culture. She loves traveling, reading, dancing and painting. Bethany eventually plans to attend graduate school for museum studies in exhibition design and education.

# ISJL Helps Close Helena Temple



*Above: David Rayman (left) and ISJL board member Rayman Solomon carry the congregation's Torah through the sanctuary during the closing service.*



*Right: Beth El members Ed Grauman (left) and Alan Levine after removing the Torahs from the ark.*

*all photos by Holly Lange*

*Right: Rabbi Kassoff and Miriam Solomon.*

*Far Right: Rabbi Eugene Levy, David Solomon, and Rabbi Debra Kassoff entertain and inform the crowd on Friday afternoon.*



On April 28-29, Temple Beth El in Helena, Arkansas said goodbye to its 90 year-old synagogue and returned to its early roots of worshipping in members' homes. Over 100 friends and family joined the 27 members of the congregation for a very special weekend, honoring the history of this 139 year-old Arkansas Delta congregation.

On Friday afternoon, the general public was invited to attend a lecture by ISJL historian Dr. Stuart Rockoff on the history of the congregation. Following the lecture, ISJL Rabbi Debra Kassoff and Rabbi Eugene Levy from Little Rock discussed Judaism and the meaning of the sanctuary's artifacts and symbols. Many of the non-Jewish guests had never visited a synagogue before.

Rabbi Kassoff led a Kabbalat Shabbat Service on Friday evening and shared inspiring words with those present about the joy and the sorrow surrounding the weekend. At the conclusion of the service, everyone enjoyed dinner and shared memories at a lovely dinner hosted by Miriam and David Solomon at the Helena Country Club.

On Saturday morning, with help from Rabbi Meir Feldman of Temple Israel in Memphis, Rabbi Kassoff led the final Shabbat morning service at Temple Beth El. At both services, families of the congregation were honored by reading the blessings and sharing in a procession of the Torahs. Especially poignant was Rabbi Kassoff's reading of every name on the congregation's *yahrzeit* list. The names of deceased Beth El members filled the sanctuary one final time before the mourner's *Kaddish*. The long list was further testament to Jews' deep roots in the region. After the Torahs were removed from the Ark for the last time, guests enjoyed lunch in the temple's social hall.

With assistance from the ISJL, the precious items from the sanctuary will find new homes. Temple Israel of Memphis and Congregation Etz Chaim of Bentonville, Arkansas will receive many pieces, including bima chairs, lecterns, and the Ark. Other items will be preserved in the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience.

In July, the temple will be given to the Delta Cultural Center for use as an auditorium and community meeting space. The legacy of a congregation steeped in community involvement will live on through this remarkable act of generosity.

Holly Lange, director of special projects at the ISJL, worked closely with Beth El's leadership to ensure that the weekend was a success. It was an honor for the ISJL

to be a part of these final services at Temple Beth El and to assist the congregation as it prepared to close its doors. Special thanks to Miriam Solomon for her perseverance and passion, to David Solomon for his generosity and patience, and to the entire Beth El congregation for allowing us to enter their sacred space and to be a part of their enduring legacy.



# Temple Beth El: Keeping Judaism Alive in the Arkansas Delta for 139 Years

*Below is an abridged version of Dr. Stuart Rockoff's remarks on April 28 in Helena honoring the history of Temple Beth El.*

Jews first settled in Helena in the early 1840s. From their earliest arrival, Helena Jews sought to maintain their religion. We know that in 1846, the small community of Jews in Helena was able to borrow a Torah from Congregation B'nai Israel in Cincinnati to use for the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This shows the strong ties between large Jewish communities like Cincinnati and the small but growing hinterland communities like Helena. It also shows Helena Jews' strong desire to observe the Jewish high holidays despite the challenges they faced.

In the decade before the Civil War, the small Jewish community in Helena continued to grow, as Jewish peddlers and merchants from central Europe settled in towns along the Mississippi River. The 1870 US Census indicates that most all of the Jewish residents of Helena were born in Prussia or other parts of what would soon be Germany. Most of the men owned dry goods stores or other retail establishments.

As Jews settled in these small towns, they began to create institutions that established Judaism as an important part of religious life in the South. This was certainly the case in Helena. Although we know that Jews were worshipping as early as the 1840s, they did not organize an official congregation until 1867, when 65 Jews banded together to form Congregation Beth El (House of God). Initially, the fledgling congregation worshipped in the homes of its members. Later, they met in a rented store-room on Ohio Street, and then a former church. According to the story, at the wedding of Charlie Meyers and Celia Weinlaub in January of 1880, members of the congregation finally decided to build a synagogue. By October of 1880, the brick building at the corner of Perry and Pecan Streets was completed. At the dedication ceremony, Rabbi Max

*Rabbi Abram Brill (back row, third from right) and the rest of the graduation class of 1900 from Hebrew Union College. Brill was one of many young short-tenured rabbis Beth El had in its early years.*



Samfield from Temple Israel in Memphis was the featured guest. Rabbi Samfield's presence initiated a long and meaningful relationship with Temple Israel and its rabbis, which continued into the 1980s when Memphis's retired rabbi James Wax traveled to Helena once a month to lead services.

In its early days, Beth El did not have a rabbi of its own. Their first rabbi, Abraham Meyers, did not arrive until 1879. In fact, Dr. Garrison, a local Methodist minister, sometimes conducted funerals or weddings of congregants when no rabbi was available. A Methodist minister acting as a rabbi might sound rather strange, but I think it highlights two important points. First, Temple Beth El had embraced classical Reform Judaism, joining the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1875. It's hard to imagine Dr. Garrison conducting an Orthodox Jewish wedding or funeral.

Second, and more importantly, Dr. Garrison's willingness to help the congregation reflects the strong interfaith relations that existed in Helena since Beth El's beginning. Before they had a building of their own, Beth El rented a former Presbyterian church, which they shared with a local Methodist congregation that was building a new church at the time. In 1896, Beth El's board voted to allow St. John's Episcopal Church to use the synagogue while they were constructing a building of their own. A few years later, the choir of St. John's Church sang during Beth El's sabbath service. The temple later allowed a local Methodist Church to use the building for services Sunday mornings and evenings and Wednesday evenings. This

*The only known photograph of Beth El's first synagogue. The temple is in the background on the left.*





*Jacob Trieber from Helena became the first Jewish federal court judge in the U.S. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

*Temple Beth El dedicated its new synagogue in 1916. Ninety years later, it will become a community cultural center. Photo by Holly Lange.*

strong sense of interfaith fellowship reflected the acceptance that Jews enjoyed in Helena.

Dr. Garrison's service also shows the difficulty Beth El often had finding and keeping rabbis. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were not enough rabbis to go around in America, and they often left their congregations in search of bigger cities and salaries. For a small, rural community like Helena, keeping quality rabbis was a serious challenge. In the summer of 1900, they hired Rabbi Abram Brill, a recent graduate of Hebrew Union College to be

their full-time rabbi for \$1500 a year. Rabbi Brill was quite popular, and was unanimously reelected by the congregation in 1901. The following year, Rabbi Brill was offered the pulpit at the much larger congregation in Greenville, Mississippi, which he accepted.

Over the next several years, the pulpit at Beth El was a virtual revolving door, as the congregation struggled to keep it occupied. Most of their rabbis were recent seminary graduates, who used Helena as a stepping stone to larger congregations, often in the North. Between 1879 and 1960, Beth El had 21 different rabbis.

Perhaps because of the revolving door nature of the position, the members of Beth El reserved great power over religious ritual and services. When Rabbi Aaron Weinstein arrived in 1909, just after graduating from Hebrew Union College, he was informed by the temple's Ritual Committee that his sermons could not exceed 15 minutes. Apparently, he followed these orders rather well, as he became a very popular rabbi. In 1912, they gave him a contract extension and a raise. A few months later, he resigned to take another pulpit. When his replacement, Rabbi Samuel Peiper requested that the congregation rise together for the Kaddish, they refused to change their ritual practice. At Beth El, the laity was in charge.



In 1916, the congregation completed work on its current building, which is now the oldest synagogue in the state. Beth El did not just serve Jews in Helena, but rather it was a regional congregation that attracted Jews from such smaller towns as Marianna, Marvell, Holly Grove, Trenton, and West Helena. In 1904, Jews in Marianna asked whether Beth El's rabbi could lead services there once a month. The temple board agreed as long as they became dues-paying members of Beth El, which they did. Marianna Jews have been a part of Beth El ever since. This regional nature of the congregation was apparent in the windows in the main sanctuary. One was donated by the Jewish citizens of Marianna, one by those in Marvell, and another by a member who lived in Marks, Mississippi.

In addition to Beth El, Jews in Helena were active in other Jewish organizations. Twenty-one local Jews formed a chapter of B'nai B'rith in 1871. There also was a short-lived Young Men's Hebrew Association and the Lotus Club, a social organization for Helena Jews. One particularly influential group was the Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Association, which was formed in 1875 to support those in financial need. The association also played an important role in supporting Temple Beth El. In 1904, they paid to add indoor toilets to the synagogue. The next year, when the temple needed a new roof, the Ladies' Benevolent Association paid for it themselves. When Beth El moved to a new synagogue in 1916, a significant portion of the cost was borne by the Ladies Association.

Although Beth El members supported so many Jewish organizations, they did not close themselves off in a Jewish enclave. The members of Beth El were closely engaged in the civic issues of the larger Helena community. In 1903, the local newspaper described Helena's Jews, writing: "they are almost to a man valuable citizens and upright gentlemen." Two Jews have served as mayor of Helena: Aaron Meyers, who served from 1878 to 1880; and Jacob Fink who was elected in 1906. Jacob Trieber first settled in Helena in the 1860s, and became a well-respected lawyer and civic leader. He served as a city councilman, county treasurer, and a U.S. district attorney, before he was appointed a federal court judge by President William McKinley. Trieber was the first Jew ever appointed to the U.S. federal bench. This remarkable accomplishment reflects the degree of acceptance Jews enjoyed in Helena and the state, but also how active Jews were in the larger community. This civic involvement has continued through today, as members of Beth El have decided to donate its lovely building to the community as a cultural center.

Helena was never a large Jewish community. Its peak size, according to the American Jewish Year Book, was in 1927 when 400 Jews lived there. Since that point, the community has experienced gradual decline. In 1967, at Beth El's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, the congregation had 68 families, with 109 members, not including children. Since then, its decline has continued, with only fifteen members remaining in the area today. Together, they have come to the difficult decision to close their building and return to their roots of worshipping in members' homes. While there is a definite sadness to this event, I hope we can reflect on the long and impressive history of this congregation, which has kept Jewish life thriving in the Arkansas Delta for 139 years.

# Rabbis Hit the Road



Rabbis On The Road  
רַבִּימַת הַדֶּרֶךְ

The partnership of the Southwest Association of Reform Rabbis, the Southwest Council of the Union of Reform Judaism, and the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, continues to flourish through the Rabbis on the Road program. Rabbis on the Road is a program that works to match rabbis with congregations that are without rabbinic leadership. In our second year, we have been able to

facilitate several rabbinic visits in this region, fostering new relationships between congregations. We will soon be mailing information about the third year of the program. If you are part of a congregation without rabbinic leadership in the Southwest region of the URJ or are a rabbi interested in donating a weekend of your time, please contact us at: [nyoung@isjl.org](mailto:nyoung@isjl.org) or (601)-362-6357.

## Working to Create “Culture Change” in Atlanta

One of the goals of the ISJL is to help create “culture change” within the American Jewish community’s establishment. Why can’t large congregations with a wealth of staff and resources in major metropolitan areas adopt smaller, isolated congregations in their region? Why can’t the different congregations in a large city put together a trans-denominational community Jewish education curriculum? Armed with these questions, ISJL President Macy B. Hart met with rabbis from the Atlanta, Georgia area in an event hosted by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin of The Temple, Rabbi Neil Sandler of Ahavath Achim Congregation, and Rabbi Ron Segal of Temple Sinai. Macy explained that Atlanta is uniquely positioned to address the issues that the ISJL has raised for the Jewish community. He suggested an “adopt a congregation” program by which a large Atlanta synagogue would send one of its pulpit rabbis to their small “adoptee” congregation a few times each year, and offer to share their religious curriculum and other resources. There was tremendous enthusiasm for this idea, and the ISJL has begun to take steps to set this program in motion. The ISJL hopes that Atlanta becomes a regional center of Jewish services and a national model. The rest of the country can learn much from the South about how Jewish communities can thrive and survive.

## ISJL Board Convenes in Birmingham

Birmingham played host to the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life Board of Directors meeting on April 21-23, 2006. The meeting was held at the historic Tutwiler Hotel. ISJL Board members were guests at Temple Emanu-El for Friday evening services.

The Board dealt with a number of issues related to the tremendous growth of the Institute. The main focus of this meeting was the ISJL’s Education Department. Rachel Komerofsky, ISJL Director of Education Services, updated the Board on the continuing development and editing of the “spiraled” curriculum as it remains in pilot. The Board discussed the issues related to the curriculum

coming out of pilot phase. Plans for the 5<sup>th</sup> annual “Go and Teach” Education Conference for religious school teachers and directors were announced and the Board will have a presence during the conference.

While in Birmingham, long-time ISJL friends and supporters Ronne and Donald Hess generously opened their home to the Institute by hosting a reception in its honor. Members of the Birmingham Jewish community were invited to meet the Board and hear a presentation by Macy B. Hart in order to learn more about the work of the ISJL. Our thanks to the Hess family for their continued support of our work.

The Board will meet again in the fall of 2006.

## Lange Named “Top 40 Under 40”

Holly Lange is honored by Joe Jones, Publisher of the Mississippi Business Journal and Rick Loser of the Cirlot Public Relations Agency.



The ISJL is proud to announce that its special projects director Holly Lange was named one of the Top 40 leaders in Mississippi under the age of 40 by the Mississippi Business Journal.

Now in its thirteenth year, the Top 40 under 40 program recognizes young leaders throughout the state for achievement in both the business world and their communities. An increasingly competitive program, Top 40 under 40 is one of the most prestigious awards in the state.

Lange was honored for her accomplishments in working with non-profits and arts-related organizations, both in a professional and volunteer capacity. Lisa Hawthorn of BellSouth said of Holly, “She is one of the most dynamic, energetic and diplomatic people I’ve worked with and her dedication to her community is highly regarded.”

A three-judge, independent panel selects the winners. This year’s recipients were honored at a luncheon January 18, 2006, at the Mississippi Trademart in Jackson. More than 500 people attended this year’s event.

# Museum News

The past few months have been fruitful for the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. In addition to our normal stream of acquisitions, the MSJE has recently received various items from the recently closed Temple Beth El in Helena, Arkansas. While the closing of any synagogue is a somber occasion, the MSJE is able to aid in preserving the history of this Jewish community. We are currently processing such items as religious school photographs (including a mint-condition photograph from 1922), religious art, and various pieces of Judaica. The MSJE is expanding its Judaica collection with items such as a megillah, Kiddush cups, and shofarot. Until now, the museum had no shofar in its collection, so we are excited to add these historical pieces. MSJE is especially pleased to be able to compile a congregational history through the artifacts and photographs. If you are seeking a preserva-



*These are just some of the artifacts the museum received from Temple Beth El in Helena, Arkansas. Photo by Neola Young.*

tion option for your family documents, photographs or other pieces of family history, please consider donating to the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. If you have questions about donating items to the MSJE, please call or email the museum registrar, Neola Young. You may reach her at 601.362.6357 or [nyoung@msje.org](mailto:nyoung@msje.org).

## Southern Jewish Youth Lobby for Change in D.C.

Greetings from our nation's capital! March 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>, 2006, high school students from three Mississippi congregations traveled with ISJL Rabbi Debra Kassoff to Washington, D.C. for the Religious Action Center's L'Taken Seminar. Jennie Fisher of Meridian, Nathan Docter and Nick Handelman of Jackson, and Rachael Rosenthal of Greenville represented their Mississippi congregations at L'Taken for four days of Jewish worship, learning, and political advocacy alongside some three hundred Jewish students from across the country. Here are their thoughts about the experience:



*L to R: Rachael Rosenthal, Jennie Fisher, Nick Handelman, Nathan Docter, and Rabbi Debra Kassoff get ready to lobby Capitol Hill.*

Although my entire experience at the L'Taken Seminar was memorable, some moments were truly unforgettable. It was fascinating to see people from all over the United States come together as one group striving toward the same goal: voicing the opinions of the Reform Jewish Movement.

The most exciting part of the trip was when we actually began lobbying on the issue of our choice. We were in these beautiful buildings, presenting issues that we cared about. My issue, reproductive rights, was quite interesting to discuss with our senators' aides. No matter how different our views were, they seemed quite pleased that our group was so prepared and well informed.

I had an amazing time in Washington, D.C. and learned a lot about myself and my religion. I have already held a few gatherings around my school to keep people informed of what is going on in the world and what we can do about it. Basically, the L'Taken seminar was not only a great time, but was also informative and inspiring. I could not imagine spending my spring break any other way.

—Jennie Fisher, Congregation Beth Israel, Meridian, Mississippi

During the L'Taken weekend, I was preparing for a lobbying visit to Senators Thad Cochran and Trent Lott and Representative Bennie Thompson. I had never spoken to such important people on such an important issue (Genocide in Darfur), and I was very nervous about it. When Rachael Rosenthal announced that the receptionist was her English teacher's daughter, it helped lighten the mood. We also later discovered that the aide we spoke with was Jennie Fisher's English teacher's daughter, with both English teachers' daughters coincidentally having the same last name of "Long".

The two aides we met with were very nice, and they alleviated my nervous feeling with some friendly conversation about Mississippi. The other two meetings went equally well, and the aides were very friendly. I went home that night knowing I had successfully completed my first experiment in politics.

—Nick Handelman, Beth Israel Congregation, Jackson, Mississippi

One of my favorite parts of the seminar was when we had a group of homeless people come talk to us about their daily struggles and hardships. It made it very real to hear first hand from someone who suffers from homelessness.

Towards the end of the weekend we began to really concentrate on our lobbying. The issue that I chose was economic justice. We worked really hard to get ready for Monday when we would finally get to lobby. Our first visit was to Senator Thad Cochran's office to meet with his Legislative Aide. The whole seminar was an unforgettable experience. I will never forget all the things I learned, people I met, and all the fun I had while I was there; I would highly recommend this experience to anyone who might be considering it.

—Rachael Rosenthal, Hebrew Union Congregation, Greenville, Mississippi

This is the second year that the ISJL, in partnership with NFTY-Southern, has sent a group to L'Taken, and it is a tradition we hope will continue and grow. L'Taken Seminars are open to high school students in grades 10 through 12. Contact the ISJL office for information about future trips.

## 2006 ISJL Contributions

The ISJL Annual Campaign has been a great success since its beginning and it looks like 2006 will be another record year for the Institute. Within *Circa*, you can see our success and feel the positive impact that we are having across the South. Your contribution will ensure that we can continue to move forward with these exciting programs.

With great appreciation, the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life extends gracious thanks to all those who have made contributions between January 1, 2006 and April 30, 2006 to support the mission of the ISJL.

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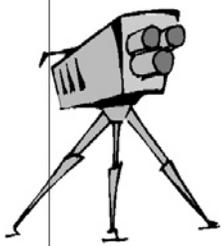
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<i>Miriam Cohn-Happy</i> <i>Mother's Day</i> -Dan Cohn	<i>Hannah Hart &amp; Will Martin's engagement</i> -Charlett & Marshall Frumin	-Temple Meir Chayim- Dermott, AR -Faye & Elliott Roberts -The Perry Family -Elizabeth Hoover -Katherine & Larry Buck -Sara & Ron Israel -Noelle & William Marks	<i>Jared Orkin</i> -Mrs. Maurice Joseph	<i>Joe Stein</i> -Gay Block & Rabbi Malka Drucker -Ed Kittredge
<i>Ruby Cubell's birthday</i> -Darren, Michele, Megan & Caitlin Cubell	-Rabbi Jeffery & Ann Lois Ballon -Suzanne & Mel Rockoff	<i>Eve Kirshner's birthday</i> -Dori & Rabbi David Kirshner	<i>Their 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary</i> -Isabel & Gerald Posner	<i>Phyllis &amp; Joe Stern's anniversary</i> -Susan & Macy B. Hart
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<i>Florence &amp; Jack Goldin's anniversary</i> -Amy & Martin Goldin	<i>Phyllis Flowers Insler &amp; Bernard Insler's anniversary</i> -Amy & Jordan Estra	<i>Elaine Lubert's birthday</i> -Suzanne Gladney & Alan Lubert	<i>Bob &amp; Joan Sadoff's birthdays</i> -Joyce & Barry Levin	<i>Jean &amp; Bob Weinfeld</i> -Betty & Mac Lyons
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**Need an anniversary or birthday gift for the family member who has everything? Why not give the gift that will last forever? The ISJL can help.**

## Preserve your Family's History

What better gift than to arrange for an *oral history* of your beloved family member(s). We can set up a video oral history interview and present your family with a VHS copy and a beautifully engraved bound transcript. You will be preserving the cherished stories of

your ancestors for your family and helping the Institute to continue to capture the history of our southern Jewish heritage before it is lost forever. For more information, contact us at 601-362-6357 or [information@msje.org](mailto:information@msje.org)

# Gathering the Stories of Southern Jews

For the ISJL History Department, the research never stops. Our mission is to collect as much information as we can about every Southern Jewish community that has ever existed. Much of this information consists of stories that exist only within the memories of often elderly Southern Jews. Thus oral history has long been a special emphasis of the ISJL. Recently, ISJL historian Dr. Stuart Rockoff traveled to Atlanta to gather stories of Southern Jewish life. He interviewed Jennings Hertz about his long career as a successful businessman and philanthropist, and his memories of his aunt Paula Ackerman, who served as the spiritual leader of Meridian, Mississippi's Beth Israel in the 1950s. Hertz also discussed the role of Jewish

businessmen in the wine and spirits industry in the South. Since most Southern Protestants avoided the liquor business, many Jewish and Catholic businessmen found tremendous opportunity in the industry.

During his trip to Atlanta, Stuart also interviewed Joseph Engel, the father of ISJL board member Ilene Engel, and longtime leader of the Jewish community in Jasper, Alabama. Mr. Engel served as treasurer of Temple Emanu-El in Jasper for almost seventy years, before the congregation closed a few years ago. Mr. Engel is an invaluable link to the history of this congregation and with his help the story of the Jasper Jewish community will be preserved. Stuart plans to visit Jasper this summer to collect more information and stories about this deeply rooted Jewish community.

The ISJL History Department is on the cusp of some very exciting projects, including putting material from its community history files on the ISJL website. The ISJL has also entered into a partnership with the Jewish Women's Archive to document through oral history the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Jewish communities of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. See [www.isjl.org](http://www.isjl.org) and future issues of *Circa* for more information about these new efforts to preserve and interpret the Southern Jewish Experience.

*The ISJL History Department is committed to preserving the history of small Southern congregations like the recently closed Temple Emanu-El in Jasper, Alabama. Photo by David Sampliner.*



# The Peddler's Cart

## The Ultimate Southern Jewish Shopping Experience



### **Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South,**

by Marcie Cohen Ferris

In a culinary journey through the Jewish South, Arkansas native Marcie Cohen Ferris explores how southern Jews embraced, avoided, and adapted southern food and, in the process, have found themselves at home. Ferris demonstrates how southern Jews reinvented traditions as they adjusted to living in a largely Christian world. Featuring a trove of photographs, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* also includes anecdotes, oral histories, and more than thirty recipes to try at home. Ferris's rich tour of southern Jewish foodways shows that, at the dining table, Jewish southerners created a distinctive religious expression that reflects the evolution of southern Jewish life. Jonathan D. Sarna calls it "a bountiful feast brimming with well-researched history, loving memories, and unique recipes." Hardcover.

Price: \$30

### **The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South,**

by Eli Evans

Newly reissued by the University of North Carolina Press with a new introduction by the author, this seminal work was the first to take readers on a journey into the soul of the Jewish South. Evoking the rhythms and heartbeat of Jewish life in the Bible belt, Eli Evans weaves together chapters of recollections from his youth and early years in North Carolina with chapters that explore the experiences of Jews in many cities and small towns across the South. He presents the stories of communities, individuals, and events in this quintessential American landscape that reveal the deeply intertwined strands of what he calls a unique "southern Jewish consciousness." Softcover.

Price: \$22

### **Shalom Y'all: Images of Jewish Life in the American South,**

by Bill Aron and Vicki Reikes Fox

This book tells the unique story of the Southern Jewish Experience through three distinct voices: Bill Aron's evocative photographs, a narrative woven into descriptive captions, and person stories, memories and anecdotes told by southern Jews. The book covers all aspects of Southern Jewish life from chopped liver to bagels and grits, from synagogue to civil war cemeteries, from towns named for their Jewish forebearers to the vibrant communities, which exist today. A fitting gift for anyone who has southern Jewish roots. Hardcover

Price: \$25

### **The Jewish Community of New Orleans**

by Irwin Lachoff and Catherine C. Kahn

Irwin Lachoff and Catherine Kahn have gathered over 200 archival photographs to illustrate their fascinating history of this colorful city and its Jewish community. Small as it is in proportion to the population of New Orleans, the Jewish community has made contributions that far exceed their numbers in cultural, educational, and philanthropic gifts to the city. Softcover.

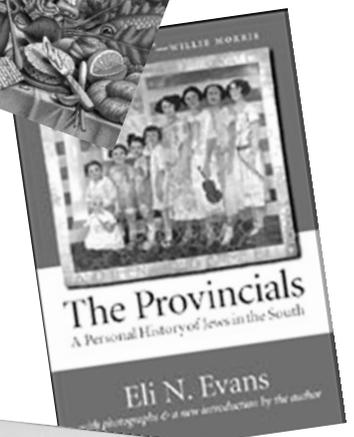
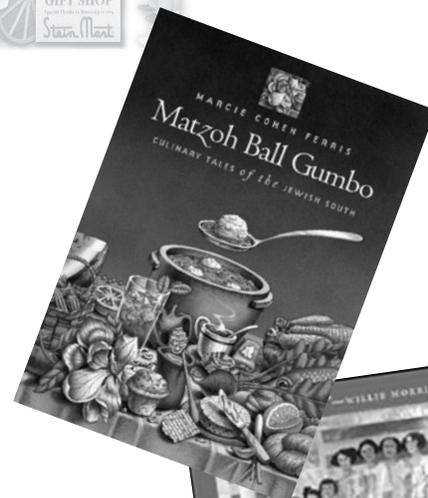
Price: \$20

### **Shalom Y'all**

*Shalom Y'all* is a documentary feature film about the Jewish experience in the American South as told through the eyes of a native son and the cultural cousins he encounters. At the center of the story is filmmaker, Brian Bain, a third generation southern Jew from New Orleans, searching his cultural roots. Traveling in an old Cadillac like the kind his one hundred-year old grandfather drove as a hat and tie salesman on the same roads, Brian takes the viewer 4200 miles through Delta flatlands, coastal low country, mountain passes, small towns, suburban subdivisions and sprawling sunbelt metropolises to discover a vibrant regional culture that blends the Old World with the New South. Through his search for a balance between modern life and ancient traditions, the filmmaker paints a post-modern picture of American life at the beginning of a new century.

Available in VHS or DVD

Price: \$20



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over \$100	\$11.00			_____

**Order on-line, quickly and safely, at [www.isjl.org](http://www.isjl.org)**

**Shalom Y'all (Hebrew) Campfire Mug**  
Heavyweight, 15 oz. White ceramic mug, dishwasher and microwave safe. **Price for one: \$8**



**Shalom Y'all (Hebrew) T-shirt**  
Jade or black, 100% cotton. Adult sizes: M, L, XL, XXL. **Price for one: \$16**



**Shalom Y'all Apron**  
Polyester/Cotton, one size with adjustable straps and generous pockets. Black. **Price: \$20**



**Shalom Y'all Hat**  
Available in Navy or Khaki. 100% Cotton with adjustable back. **Price: \$20**





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## Institute Web Site [www.isjl.org](http://www.isjl.org)

Visit us "on-line" to learn more about our programs and upcoming projects. For a great selection of gift ideas – from books to t-shirts, including several Shalom Y'all items – don't miss our web site shop. We ship anywhere.

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*circa* (sər'kə) prep. [L.] about: used before an approximate date, figure, etc. [*circa* 1650]

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