



Chattanooga and others offering help to small, vibrant Jewish communities

  **Online:** Hear Rabbi Marshal Klaven talk about small Jewish communities. *Comment.*

By CLINT COOPER
CCOOPER@TIMESFREEPRESS.COM

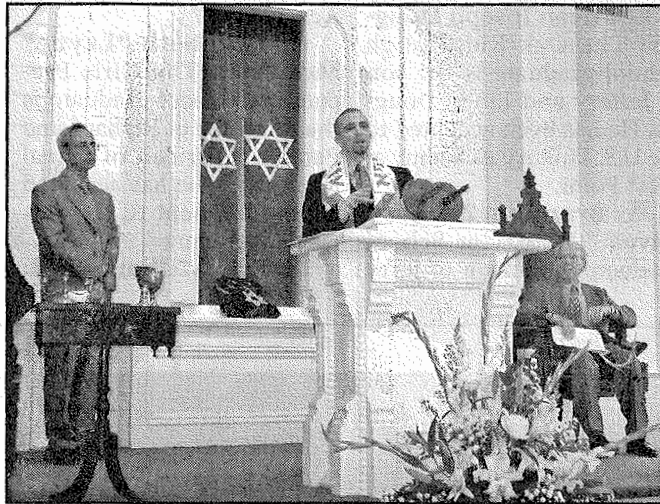
Jews who live between large metropolitan areas must take on the responsibility of keeping their communities together as their numbers shrink, said a rabbi who travels from Virginia to Texas three to four weeks a month to serve 133 small congregations.

Jews, according to *The Economist*, make up less than 1 percent of the population in the South and only 7 percent of all the Jews in the country.

Rabbi Marshal Klaven is director of rabbinical services at the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, a Jackson, Miss., center which provides educational and rabbinic services to Southern Jewish communities, documents and preserves the history of the Southern Jewish experience, and promotes a Jewish cultural presence throughout a 13-state region.

Shrinking numbers, he said, don't diminish the value of the smaller communities and, in some cases, they make them stronger.

"As communities get smaller," Rabbi Klaven said, "more members step up to take a larger role. There is a great sense of responsibility. They understand that, for the community to exist, it really rests on their shoulders."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY RABBI MARSHAL KLAIVEN

As part of his services as a traveling rabbi, Rabbi Marshal Klaven of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, center, presides over a deconsecration service for the B'nai Sholom congregation in Brookhaven, Miss.

A shrinking population, said Rabbi David Cantor, who will become the rabbi at Chattanooga's B'nai Zion Synagogue on July 1, can encourage community members to become more actively involved with each other.

"Sometimes the smaller it is," he said, "the more passionate it is about being a community."

Dalton, Ga., which had its own synagogue, rabbi and a small but active cadre of members for 50 or 60 years, is one of the communities to which Rabbi Klaven referred.

In order to help preserve its culture, many of the town's Jews are coming to Chattanooga for services and programming, he said.

Michael Dzik, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Chat-

tanooga, said Jews in Dalton always have been free to take part in the organization's programs

"Now we're trying to make more of a conscious effort," he said. "We're trying to encourage them that there are a lot of opportunities up here. We definitely are understanding that it's a tough time for them."

The organization also will offer programs and exhibits that tap into the Georgia town's history, officials said.

Rabbi Bill Tepper of Mizpah Congregation said his congregation and others in the city have "opened our arms, opened our doors and welcomed" Jewish residents of Dalton to Chattanooga.

"It's very sad, very heartbreaking when a congregation closes its doors," he said, "especially if you've

grown up or your children have grown up or if you've had life-cycle events there."

What has happened to Jewish communities — and other small populations — in small cities in the South, according to Rabbi Klaven, is no different than what has happened across the country.

"The younger population is not finding the economic opportunities — a sense of the future — in the small towns," he said. "There are more opportunities in larger areas."

The opportunities, Rabbi Tepper said, are economic, educational and cultural. The transplants, in turn, want their children to be able to interact with others of their faith, he said.

"They feel the gravitational pull to larger cities," he said.

In many small towns, Rabbi Klaven said, Jews for many years were merchants, starting and running a variety of different businesses. When larger and larger department stores opened, offering a larger variety of items at a lower cost, he said, many small-town businesses closed.

"When family businesses closed," he said, "there was nothing for the younger generation to take over."

"Jews, like most folks," said Rabbi Cantor, "tend to follow the economy."

Although a recent edition of *The Economist* indicated the Jewish population in the South was shrinking, Rabbi Klaven said the population is more likely simply moving from smaller towns to larger cities.