

A loaf of challah, a jug of wine and Rabbi Marshal Klaven

By Andy Muchin

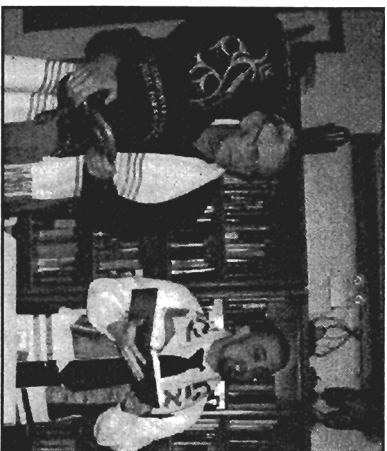
CROSSVILLE, TN - It's not easy to find a challah in the Upper Cumberland section of north-central Tennessee. It's even harder to find a rabbi or a usable Torah scroll — except on a recent October weekend. That's when Rabbi Marshal Klaven, director of the Rabbinic Department of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, made his first visit to the Upper Cumberland Jewish Community (UCJC) centered in Crossville.

In an eventful weekend, Klaven led the seven-year-old congregation through a baby naming ceremony, an adult education session and a combined celebration of the Simchat Torah holiday and Shabbat.

"We had 55 people for Simchat Torah," reported UCJC President Norton Goodman. UCJC has a congregational e-mail list of about 30 households and meets in rented spaces.

Major holidays can draw as many as 65 people, Goodman said. Still, the Simchat Torah celebration attracted new worshipers. Because UCJC advertised the service in two local newspapers, "many people heard about a significant Jewish presence in this area for the first time," Klaven said. "And in my remarks to the community, I challenged them that in addition to now knowing that you are not alone, we can and should utilize the collective strength of each individual, with the support of the ISJL, to continue the great energy and excitement that was present there that night."

The rabbi brought two Torah scrolls borrowed from the ISJL's Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in Utica, Miss. "In all UCJC's history, in the regular worship they had engaged in, they had never read directly from a scroll,"



Norton Goodman (left), president of the Upper Cumberland Jewish Community centered in Crossville, Tenn., holding a Torah scroll during worship led by visiting Rabbi Marshal Klaven (right), director of Rabbinic Services at the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Goodman describes Klaven as "a warm person. He's so enthusiastic."

the rabbi said. "To have one Torah would have been amazing. But, as they expressed, 'to have two is a true miracle.'

"I wish you could have seen the joy reflected in every face of each congregant, as we danced and sang with the Torahs for the seven hakafot (processions around the sanctuary. The community was enthralled in this revelry and, for them, the uniqueness of having the Torahs present, so much so, that everyone wanted their picture with a Torah."

Goodman fondly recalled a 92-year-old man "holding the Torah and dancing around the table."

A worshiper remarked he was "so thrilled at the service, as this was the first time my daughter has heard Hebrew in our prayers."

As the ISJL's itinerant rabbi, Klaven serves 134 Jewish congregations in 13 Southern states with visits, consultations,

distance education and his "Taste of Torah" weekly commentary. Many Jewish congregations in small cities are unable to afford the salary of a full-time rabbi.

The UCJC is affiliated with the Reform Movement. Its congregants include "people who live here only during the summer and go to Florida in the winter," Goodman said, "but most of us live here year-round." Many congregants are what folks in those parts call "half-backs," i.e., northerners who retired to Florida, then decided to move northward and settled in Tennessee and the Carolinas, about halfway back to their original homes.

Goodman described UCJC as "a rather informal group. We meet every other Friday night at a local church," where usually a Hebrew-reading congregant leads services. "Somehow we get a challah, sometimes from Chicago or Knoxville or even shipped from New York," Goodman said.

For Simchat Torah, Klaven brought the wine and challah.

At the baby-naming, the Rabbi noticed "that most of the congregation

was in tears. I felt it too. There was something extra present there with us. I, not surprisingly, would say it was God. But, I am not the only one."

The baby's grandmother, congregant Beverly Press, told Klaven in an e-mail that he had "brought new life to us here in the sleepy hollow. As for Saturday, I believe, especially after listening to the things many people said, that you brought a new sense of Jewishness and love of the religion to us."

Likewise, Goodman reports that he has received "e-mails from people who were thrilled with everything. They loved it. They loved him. He's a warm person. He's so enthusiastic. Simchat Torah was a wonderful holiday to have him." □

The ISJL, a non-profit organization based in Jackson, Miss., is celebrating its 10th anniversary of service. The ISJL provides rabbinical and educational services to Southern Jewish communities, documents Jewish experience, engages in broad community issues and promotes a Jewish cultural presence throughout its 13-state region.