PICTURING SOUTHERN JEWISH LEGACY

EDUCATION: TO INFIN-EIGHTEEN AND BEYOND p.8

THE LEGACY OF SOLDIER-CITIZENS p.18

ASK: A NEW TAKE ON TIKKUN OLAM p.20
ALL YEAR LONG, THE ISJL HAS BEEN CELEBRATING our “Chai” year. Eighteen years of serving Southern Jewish communities is a milestone we are so proud to share with our partners and supporters. We are only here because of those who have worked with us, supported us, encouraged us, believed in us; you are all a part of our legacy, and we are honored to be a part of yours.

As part of our yearlong Chai Celebration, we invited communities to participate in a regional art project. Picturing Southern Jewish Life asked individuals and communities: “When you picture Southern Jewish Life... what do you see?” and encouraged them to create collages to answer that question. As the collages began pouring in – at the education conference, after community visits, in response to programs – our hearts swelled with pride. The legacy of the Southern Jewish community, and of the Jewish people, is truly awe-inspiring.

Throughout this issue of Shalom Y’All, we’re taking an intimate look at Southern Jewish life and at what it truly means to embody a Jewish legacy. Within these pages, you’ll find:

- The heartfelt words of a donor, Elaine Gutenstein, on why her family recently made a tremendous gift to the ISJL
- Images from the Picturing Southern Jewish Life art project, highlighting communities across the region
- An article about the mentorship program enriching our Fellow Alumni Network and continuing their connection to the ISJL legacy
- A save the date to celebrate someone who truly embodies Southern Jewish legacy, our own Macy B. Hart
- Updates from each department of the organization, sharing news from 2018, and looking ahead to what the future will bring
- And much, much more!

As always, we invite you to join in the ongoing conversations about legacy, education, history, heritage, family, and more. And as we approach the end of the year, we hope you will remember the ISJL in your year-end giving. Each gift helps to ensure the ongoing impact and legacy of the ISJL, and the communities with which we partner.

Thank you for eighteen wonderful years.
Here’s to the next eighteen!
As we raise a glass to toast the ISJL on our 18th year, it is with a Mazel Tov and congratulations to us all on this milestone and it’s also a nod to the future. We still need your help and support so that we may have another toast on our Double Chai (36th year). Won’t that be amazing?

May we all continue to go from strength to strength.

CEO MESSAGE

Michele Schipper
ISJL CEO

TIME FLIES. I LOOK at my youngest son, who is a high school senior and almost 18 years old. We are approaching this milestone so quickly. The days passed in an instant; I remember watching him take his first steps, throw his first baseball, read Torah, pass the driving test – all of these significant moments in his life. Soon he’ll embark on his next adventure – college. He has accomplished so much in his first 18 years, and I am so very proud of him. That’s how I feel about the ISJL.

I recently re-read an article from an early issue of CIRCA, the precursor to Shalom Y’all magazine. In it, the hopes and dreams of what this organization could be were shared by Macy Hart and members of the ISJL board. Just as I have provided guidance, focus and parenting for my son, so too did those early leaders guide the ISJL, helping us mature into the vibrant organization we are today. We’ve celebrated our 18th birthday all year – and what a year it’s been! We welcomed our new rabbi, Rabbi Aaron Rozovsky to continue the important work of serving Southern Jewish communities with no full-time rabbi. Our community engagement department has strong initiatives working in the community, partnering with other organizations and impacting the greater community. Our education program now serves almost 4,300 children across our 13 state region. In the early years we had twenty participants at our first education conference. This year we had 150! We also started working with other synagogues who no longer have religious school aged children, but want to enrich the lives of those adults in a community to provide adult education opportunities.

Our historian has been on the road to work towards completing our online encyclopedia of southern Jewish communities with our last state of Florida. I remember when our state by state research was simply in a filing cabinet in the office – now it’s a searchable and ever-evolving online resource. Our heritage and interpretation department has assisted with four groups exploring the rich history of Southern Jewry and our cultural programming department continues to partner with excellent musicians and speakers to enrich the lives of those in our southern communities.

Just as my son grew in stages, so too did the ISJL – growing in stages. As the ISJL has taken the concept of a holistic approach to Jewish life in the South and made the dream a reality, but the ISJL board and staff members didn’t do it alone. We did it with you – our community partners and donors. In these pages of Shalom Y’all you will see the direct impact of your contributions. You have helped us attain this 18th year. Thank you!

As we raise a glass to toast the ISJL on our 18th year, it is with a mazel tov and congratulations to us all on this milestone – and it’s also a nod to the future. We still need your help and support so that we may have another toast on our Double Chai (36th year). Won’t that be amazing?

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Rachel Reagler Schulman
ISJL Board Chair

“You ARE NEVER too old to set another goal or dream a new dream.” - C.S. Lewis

As we move towards the conclusion of our yearlong 18th birthday celebration, I raise a glass to toast the past, past where we are today, and toast a Mazel Tov to the future! In particular, I want to thank the people who gave from their hearts, minds, and wallets, to create and make the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life what it is today. The goals and dreams they first envisioned are the ones we’re still building on today.

Our founding leader, Macy B. Hart, transitional Board Chair Herman Kohlmeyer, Jr. and incoming Board Chair Sylvia Goodman worked with the first Board of Directors of the ISJL; did they imagine that there would be staff of more than 50 Fellow alumni, maintaining ties to the ISJL and a commitment to the Jewish community? The idea of Rabbis traveling to communities in our region to serve as spiritual and practical rabbinical resources, on the ground and also available by phone and video conference, was revolutionary to our communities when the ISJL was founded. Now it’s a resource counted on by dozens of communities.

Did the first board members know that the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, which was created and is maintained by the ISJL’s historians, would draw hundreds of thousands of viewers to the ISJL website? Individuals and academics alike value being able to easily look up information on Southern Jewish communities – it’s not just challenging and in areas where there is no longer a Jewish presence. People from around the world visit our site; we’ve been featured on the BBC, in the Jewish Daily Forward, and all over.

As you can imagine, I can go on and on about our wonderful organization and what we are doing now, how we have grown and surpassed goals and dreams from “Year One” of the ISJL. However, I want you to read the rest of this great edition of Shalom Y’all so I will stop for now.

I hope you will join me and raise a glass. Whether your glass contains grape juice, Manischewitz, or a glass of Chianti, please join me in celebrating all of the wonderful achievements of the ISJL thus far, and help us continue to grow and celebrate in the future.

L’chaim!

Rabb. R. Scher

BOARD CHAIR MESSAGE

Michele Schipper
ISJL CEO

HE HAS ACCOMPLISHED SO MUCH IN HIS FIRST 18 YEARS, AND I AM VERY PROUD OF HIM. THAT’S HOW I FEEL ABOUT THE ISJL.

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L’chaim!

Rabb. R. Scher
THE GUTENSTEIN FAMILY

By Elaine Gutenstein

For years now I’ve been holding little hands on their journey into that thing we call life. Most recently my favorite little hand to hold, when he stops moving long enough to let me, is that of a beautiful almost-three-year-old – Elliot.

When I hold hands with Elliot, heaven opens up. Somewhere his namesake is singing her version of “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” while she watches over the scene. I feel the meaning of legacy.

Not long ago, another scene played out, embodying legacy in another way: A quietly generous philanthropist became a legend while the last nor’easter of the season covered the land. He answered to “Bob” and “Dad” and “Poppi.” He was my father-in-law, Robert Gutenstein. And before he left this life, he planned for his legacy. The dream he carefully nurtured over decades is becoming a reality.

For the past thirty-one years, my husband and I constantly witnessed the difference one person can make. Together with his wife, Ellen, Robert Gutenstein created a foundation that has touched many generations and helped shape their futures. Many new traditions have been created while honoring those important traditions of our faith. The middot (practices) we hold so dear shape our decisions. They form the basis for our giving.

The torch has been passed and it is our time now. Just as the generation before us heard their calling so do we hear the calling. It is our responsibility to ensure that future generations know who they are, and we believe that begins by knowing the traditions that shape them.

Those traditions start with education and mitzvot – values my husband and I have seen embodied for years by the ISJL Education Department. It is such a privilege to get to give to this program; we are glad we can give a gift to an endeavor that has been a gift in our own lives, and in our community. It is with much humbleness that we honor the legacy we have inherited. It is with great pleasure that we continue to model for our children and our grandchild’s generation the gift of giving. It is through such gifts that we keep our heritage alive... just as our ancestors kept it alive for us. That’s legacy.

The next time you are given the opportunity to hold the future in your hands, will you grasp it or simply let it go?

Our traditions teach us that we are all responsible for each other. Each of us has a legacy to leave. For Michael and I, our partnership with ISJL is a genuine extension of the tradition, Education and Mitzvot: That’s our legacy. We leave our children and our grandchild’s heritage alive... just as our ancestors inherited. It is with great pleasure that we honor the legacy we have been given.

There are many more opportunities to support ISJL staff positions, departments, and the organization as a whole. We thank the Gutenstein family again for leading the way with their heartfelt and visionary gift.

To learn more about legacy gifts and supporting the ISJL, visit www.isjl.org/plannedgiving or email Beth Kander-Dauphin (kander@isjl.org)
TO INFIN-EIGHTEEN... AND BEYOND!

By Rabbi Matt Dreffin, MAJE
ISJL Director of Education

教育

When I moved to Mississippi in 2013 (the ISJL’s Bar Mitzvah year!) I was excited to have a job back in the South. But my wife, Erica, and I were of the mind that I’d fulfill my first three-year agreement and then move on to another job. We didn’t think our future was here. But five years later, we’ve purchased a home, brought a new life into the world, and both got promotions at our jobs.

As the new ISJL Director of Education, I’m reflecting on how I’ve really put down roots both at the Institute and in Mississippi. A freshly minted educator and rabbi, I was blessed to be raised up as a partner in leading the Education Department by Rachel Stern. She included me in virtually every detail of running the department—from supervising Fellows to talking to the lead on talking points at the Conference. Her inclusive attitude gave me many experiences that give me high confidence in my ability to run the department moving forward. I feel comfortable, but not complacent. I am reminded of a quote from a famous Mississippi educator, Andy Mullins: “Good schools don’t just happen and certainly don’t happen overnight; they are built and rebuilt by loving critics, and it takes time.”

The ISJL Education Department is more than a good school; it is a great school. And, it didn’t happen in the span of twenty-four hours. As the entire program developed over the course of the last 15 years, we have adjusted and improved at every step. And, we will lovingly build, critique, and rebuild, taking a look at our processes, procedures, and programmatic content to ensure that we are always growing and getting better.

I particularly want to pay attention to how we can make the ISJL Education Fellowship the premier Jewish Fellowship in all of America (if not the world). We will analyze the Fellowship experience from top to bottom to find out how we can ensure we get the highest level of applicants. One of the ways in which we have already started doing this in our 36th year is by instituting a calendar of professional development through next year. From service-leading skills to developmentally appropriate practice, we will be able to point out to any future applicants the experiences they will receive and areas in which they will gain specialized training—beyond the natural learning that will occur as they write programs and visit each of their communities.

We are also paying close attention to demographic and educational shifts to explore how best we can accommodate congregations and communities who may move away from the “traditional model” of religious school. What worked in a school of 100 kids in 1980 may not work for the school of 4 in 2024. We want to make sure that the people in our partner communities know we are committed to enabling them to access Jewish life, to learn in engaging ways how Judaism can enhance their life, and the myriad of ways in which being an active Southern Jew is a great thing.

As an organization that cares about lifelong Jewish learning, some of our adjustments include how to serve congregations in our region who do not operate religious schools. Expanding our work in “Adult Ed” communities is a priority. This year, we will have 5 Adult Education partner congregations, part of our largest group of overall ISJL Education Partners (74 communities comprised of 80 congregations).

As we acknowledge this 18th year of the ISJL’s existence, I realized I am entering my 36th year of life, or double chai. The symbolism is exciting. I look forward to mentoring many cohorts of Fellows. I look forward to bringing in another supervisor to help me help the Education Department. Most of all, I look forward to being in a place I love at an organization doing work I love. I can’t predict precisely what will happen in the next 18 years, but I’m confident that the ISJL will serve the Jewish South’s educational needs in a stellar manner for the foreseeable future. What an honor to be part of this ongoing legacy.

This call and response formula for prayer sums up my feelings of working with the ISJL. I truly feel like I was called to do this work, and each and every day on the job I felt my role and my purpose.

The work of the ISJL is rooted in the notion of community, and also follows this call and response formula. The ISJL heard a call from the communities, and responded with resources and support. The communities of southern Jewish congregations that the ISJL has convened also came together, able to call on and to respond to each other. Just like prayer, our experience can be made greater by others and there is a role for everyone involved.

When I first received my call we were in the beginning stages of creating the Institute. It has been the joy of my career to have helped this program grow from humble beginnings to region-wide impact. Yes, prayer can be a solitary experience or it can be enhanced by others. My experience has been greatly enriched by all of you: all of the Education Fellows (past/present), tireless education directors and clergy, risk-taking teachers, generous donors, my colleagues at the ISJL, the ISJL board, my partner and now successor Rabbi Matt Dreffin, and of course Macy and Michele who gave me this life changing opportunity. I cannot thank all of you enough.

As I respond to my new calling at Shalom Austin, I will make sure to keep up with amazing things and all of you. I’m still ready to respond whenever I’m needed. L’hitra’ot!
FOCUS ON FAN

One of the most lasting legacies of the ISJL is embodied in our Fellow Alumni Network (FAN). In this issue’s Focus on FAN, we wanted to share one of the exciting initiatives the budding FAN group launched earlier this year: A mentoring program, partnering current Fellows/recent Fellow alumni with former Fellows who have been in the professional world for several years.

In January 2018, the first seven mentor-and-mentee pairs kicked off the program. Spearheaded by Mandy Farb Herlich (Education Fellow 2007-2009), the program launched with all mentors and all mentees reading the book *Starting Strong: A Mentoring Fable*. Mentors then had a training session with Mandy over video conference, to frame the mentorship program, followed by another video conference with all mentors and mentees to review SMART goals and set expectations for the overall experience. The mentor and mentee pairs then set their own monthly meetings, goals, and mentoring parameters.

While most of the FAN projects focus on supporting the ISJL and its communities, when the network convened in 2016 and 2017 to plan for its future, a desire for networking and connection between Fellow cohorts was expressed as something that could add to the meaning and value of FAN and the fellowship legacy.

Mandy Farb Herlich, who cherished her time as an ISJL Education Fellow and continues to work in Jewish education as Director of Lifelong Learning at Temple Beth El in Northbrook, Illinois, found this mentoring program to be a smart next step. “Mentoring is an important focus for FAN because we all share common stories and experiences from our time working at the ISJL,” Mandy explained. “We can use these stories to connect while sharing with each other our continued career successes. As alumni grow more experienced in their fields, they are a perfect resource for younger Fellows to turn to, in order to help them learn and grow on their own professional journeys.”

SAVE THE DATE

April 6, 2019

To celebrate Macy B. Hart!

We’ll gather in Jackson in honor of Macy’s retirement, and thank him for his five decades of service to the Jewish community and beyond.

If you’re interested in being a sponsor of this event, email Michele Schipper at mschipper@isjl.org
FOCUSING ON FLORIDA AS WE CONTINUE AN ONGOING LEGACY

By Dr. Josh Parshall
ISJL Director of History

Preserving and sharing Southern Jewish history is an ongoing legacy at the ISJL, and one I’m pleased to oversee as we deepen our outreach and expand our offerings.

This summer, we re-instated our ISJL History Internship. I had the pleasure of working with two exceptional history interns, Margaret Weinberg and Jacob Morrow-Spitzer, who primarily spent their internship helping me with research and writing for the forthcoming Florida section of the online Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities.

Margaret and Jacob got us off to a great start on the forthcoming addition to the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities.

We visited Pensacola, Fort Walton Beach, Panama City, Tallahassee, and Quincy, with important findings in every stop. We also got to spend a little time on the beach! With the interns departed and fall starting, the History Department is once again a solo operation, and I am hard at work on the remaining Florida essays. Among the more surprising stories from the current research is the history of Jewish life on the Space Coast (Brevard County), where military contractors and rocket scientists played important roles in the organization of Temple Beth Shalom (Melbourne). Like the Jews of Oak Ridge, Tennessee—home to a Cold-War-era nuclear facility—Temple Beth Shalom’s members used their practical skills to build much of their original synagogue building themselves. The building’s wiring, for example, was done by Leonard Arnowitz, an electrical engineer on the Vanguard satellite project.

Keep an eye out for the Florida section of the encyclopedia, which will launch in spring 2019, and will be packed with fascinating stories. I’m glad to continue the legacy of these stories through our free online resource, and excited to keep preserving and sharing Southern Jewish stories.

HISTORY INTERNS SPOTLIGHT: The 2018 Summer History Internships were a great success! Whether writing for the Encyclopedia, recording and conducting interviews, or keeping score for a trivia game, Margaret and Jacob tackled all of their assignments with grace and aplomb. They were welcome additions to the ISJL’s office culture, and we wish them the best of luck in their future endeavors!
LOOKING AT LEGACY
When we picture Southern Jewish Legacy, we see...

GIVING IS A GIFT
Meaningful gifts carry meaningful messages

As a nonprofit organization, we rely on donors to make our work possible. Every gift touches our hearts—and some gifts come with a note like this one, which thrills us. Notes like this get circulated around our office, so every staff member can see that our supporters are as touched as we are by the work the ISJL does. We asked this donor, David Shemper of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, if he would allow us to share his kind words not only with our staff but also with our Shalom Y’all readers. He graciously agreed.

Thank you, David!

ISJL BOARD CHAIRS: LEADERS WHO PAVED THE WAY TO THE ISJL LEGACY
We gratefully acknowledge all the men and women who have served as Chair of the ISJL Board of Directors, each of whom provided steady leadership, guidance, and encouragement over the past 18 years:
Herman Kohlmeyer, Jr. | Sylvia Goodman | Jay Tanenbaum | Rayman L. Solomon | Rachel Reagler Schulman
In January, we launched a region-wide multimedia art project. It’s a chance to have conversations about Jewishness in the South, covering topics from food traditions to more complex issues of identity and community. Education Fellows and other staff members have been bringing the program to communities from Texas to Virginia, encouraging participants from early childhood to adulthood to make collages from materials like brochures, newspapers, magazines, maps, photographs, instant camera pictures, and even an ultrasound image!

Picturing Southern Jewish Life is a project that celebrates the ISJL’s 18th anniversary – our Chai year. We’re working with partners throughout the South to create visual representations of our communities, large and small. We exclaim “L’chaim!” (“To life!”) in times of celebration just like this one. In this celebratory moment, we’re asking our partner communities – both Jewish and secular – to picture what Southern Jewish life means to them and what their communities look like today. We’re sparking conversations about community values, identities, and memories as we create images that represent who we are.

What does a Picturing Southern Jewish Life session look like? Like most lessons in the ISJL Education curriculum, it begins with a set induction, priming participants for learning. If you’re an early childhood education student, you might have a discussion about things from your home that would help a friend learn why you love that place. Elementary school students discuss the Jewish value of hachnasat orchim (welcoming guests), and compile a list of things from their congregation that they might share with a new member of the community. Middle school students talk about community symbols, and high schoolers devise an imagined time capsule with physical and intangible items representing their congregation.

Adult participants in the program view and discuss historic images of Jewish life in the South, dissecting these photographs of southern Jews of the past and their contemporary parallels. Other participants might be asked to think about a quote from Deuteronomy Rabbah – “a community is too heavy to carry alone.” Participants then move on to a photography challenge in which they explore their congregation and photograph places and people that they consider to be important representations of their communities. These photographs – along with magazines, newspapers, flyers, tourist brochures, maps, and other materials – form the basis for collaborative collages, accented with rich color from oil pastels.

The collages return to the ISJL in Jackson, Mississippi, to be photographed and scanned for use in an online image gallery and virtual exhibit – and for other displays and uses as well, which we’ll be rolling out over the coming year.

Excited about Picturing Southern Jewish Life? Want to bring it to your community? Talk to your Education Fellow or contact ISJL Director of Heritage & Interpretation Nora Katz at nkatz@isjl.org.
Rabbinical

HEEDING THE CALL TO SERVE: THE LEGACY OF SOLDIER-CITIZENS

By Rabbi Aaron Rozovsky

ISJL Director of Rabbinical Services

“The National Guard has served America as both a wartime force and the first military responders in times of domestic crisis. Hundreds of times each year, the nation’s governors call upon their Guard troops to respond to fires, floods, hurricanes, and other natural disasters” - Lieutenant General (retired) Russel Honore

"Then I heard the voice of God saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me.” - Isaiah 6:8

One of the things that I am most grateful for in working at the ISJL is that in addition to the meaningful work I do each day as the ISJL’s Director of Rabbinical Services, I have received the Institute’s full support in continuing my National Guard career. This aspect of service is vital to my rabbinate. I have been in the Army National Guard for twelve and a half years (which has included year-long deployments to Afghanistan and Guantnamo Bay, Cuba). I chose this path long before I ever considered becoming a Rabbi. For many years I was a Military Police Officer. Now in congruence with the other facets of my life, I am a Chaplain.

One could argue that “going off and playing Army” one weekend a month and two weeks a summer is a distraction from the vital work we do at the ISJL. In fact, the opposite is true—being an Army National Guard Chaplain makes me a better rabbi for the ISJL, and being an ISJL rabbi makes me a better National Guard Chaplain. This is because there are many similarities between these two worlds.

Working for the ISJL and the National Guard both involve a commitment to serving Jews and Jewish communities that are located far from major resource-laden population centers like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Both involve conducting services and ceremonies where often many of the attendees sitting in the pews are not Jewish. Both heavily incorporate the customs and traditions of the larger communities in which they find themselves—“Southern Judaism” as I have come to find out, definitely possesses a culture unto itself, and the military, especially the National Guard, certainly has its own way of doing things as well.

Ultimately, I have found that being a rabbi has allowed me to serve as an ambassador of the Jewish people and faith to both the brave men and women who selflessly serve in our armed forces as well as the numerous friendly and welcoming communities throughout the 13 state ISJL region. I feel blessed to simultaneously serve in two such wonderful organizations!

To connect with Rabbi Rozovsky, email arzovsky@isjl.org.

Programming

THE LEGACY CONTINUES: WELCOMING NEW PRESENTERS, AND A NEW (AND NOT-SO-NEW...) DIRECTOR OF CULTURAL PROGRAMMING

By Alachua Nazarenko

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, I’ve been privileged to serve as the coordinator of ISJL’s cultural programming. One of my favorite parts of my position is the outstanding presenters with whom I work. I am constantly meeting new people, learning about them, and getting excited by the ways in which they can ultimately enrich so many of the ISJL communities. No two presenters are the same; each individual or group offers a different set of expertise and talents. I get to know them all very well, but I would like to take the opportunity to introduce you to two of the newest groups on our programming roster, both of whom have already started to mark their mark as members of the ISJL family.

If you attended the 2018 Education Conference in Jackson, you’ll recognize these two either from their Wild Card session on creating sacred space in the classroom, or from their Monday night concert. With their warm folk harmonies and indie sensibilities, Eric & Happie can spend a weekend in your community leading you in song, prayers, and workshops — and their personalities are as lovely as their music!

The Bible Players

The Bible Players are a comedy team who describe themselves as “improv”-ing Jewish lives (yes, improvisational comedy is part of their routine!). From plays to stand-up shows to training workshops, they use improv and comedy to teach Jewish values. Whether you want a program for students, a show for adults, or a weekend covering multiple age groups, The Bible Players are an excellent addition to any community. And wait, there’s more: The Bible Players will be the featured presenters at the 2019 Education Conference—so make sure to come to Jackson to learn and laugh with them!

As you can tell, I feel very lucky to work with such amazingly talented folks, but you don’t have to take my word for how great they are! You can visit the ISJL website anytime to check out video clips of our presenters and get a better sense of what they can offer your community. If someone piques your interest, just be in touch to learn more. Before you know it, you’ll have presenters like Eric & Happie or The Bible Players providing high-quality Jewish programming in your community. They’re joining a long line of existing and past presenters who have enriched the fabric of Southern Jewish life through their dynamic performances. It’s been a privilege to work with these presenters, and all of our communities. However, this fall I’m beginning a new role in Texas. Good news: Ann Kientz, the ISJL’s former Director of Programming, is re-joining the team to lead this department. It has been an honor and a joy working with you, and I hope you get as much pleasure from getting to know the presenters on our roster as we have, and I know Ann will be delighted to get to work with them—and all of you. 
Community Engagement

ASK: A NEW TAKE ON TIKKUN OLAM
By Dave Miller
ISJL Director of Community Engagement

One of the benefits of working at the ISJL is that we are provided the opportunity to ask Jews around the region what being Jewish means to them. Most responses center on traditions, values, and engagement. We love our holidays, the warmth from the Shabbat candles, the reflection of a powerful Passover Seder, and the joy of standing with loved ones in the sukkah. We care deeply about welcoming the stranger, pursuing justice, and educating our children. We actively pursue opportunities to collaborate in secular arenas, gather and share with individuals of all faiths, and to ensure that Jews of all ages feel at home in the Jewish community now and in the future.

Over the last two years, the Community Engagement Department has been developing and piloting a new program that embraces these cornerstones and asks participants to explore their faith with us. During our time together, participants engage in 90-minute modules that cover a wide array of topics all centering around the ideas set forth in Pirkei Avot: On three things the world stands: the Torah, the service, and acts of lovingkindness. The name of our program is ASK which stands for Act (wherein we explore direct service and action), Share (where we explore themes of loving-kindness and sharing with others), Keep (how we keep the traditions of our heritage and Torah alive by working to make the world a better place).

In true ISJL fashion, we have designed the ASK modules to amplify the joy and fun in learning and perpetual need for more shtick. Don’t expect a lecture. We incorporate arts and crafts, songs, games, meaningful discussion, and, of course, debate. ASK isn’t just for the kids. We have modules for Eema, Abba, Bubbie, and Zayde too. Recently, Community Engagement (CE) Fellows Lizzi Meister and Ava Pomerantz as well as CE Associate Rachel Glazer went on a weeklong summer road trip bringing ASK to Dothan and Birmingham, Alabama; and Atlanta, Georgia. They drove over 1,600 miles, presented to individuals from ages 9 to 98 years young, had over 165 participants, and met and presented to groups as diverse as camps, federations, congregations, Hillels, and an assisted living facility.

For Rachel, some of her highlights included seeing the differences in perspective across the generations and hearing the various stories people shared during the Jewish Social Justice module. “Often they surprised, moved, and delighted members of their own community as much as they did us as outsiders! I enjoyed seeing our programs embraced by such a diverse array of participants and hearing the conversations continue even as we packed up to leave each site. Being honored with an aliyah in Birmingham was a really special moment toward the end of our journey.”

For Lizzi, she reflects fondly on having led two groups with the same program, one at a camp and the other at the assisted living facility. It was powerful for her to hear a child’s perspective on a topic, and compare and contrast that with someone who has a much broader perspective on life. She notes that many of the 5th graders had an expansive view on Jewish social justice as well as an eagerness and thirst to do the work while those at the assisted living facility had a passion for sharing and passing on their ideas, ideals, and beliefs.

Ava’s moment of impact came while she too was at the assisted living facility. While working on one of the activities an older gentleman said to her, “Think about what you say because when you say it, it isn’t yours anymore, it’s the world’s to share.” For Rachel, Lizzi, and Ava the ASK Tour was a journey about providing Jews the opportunity to reflect on their values as well as an opportunity for them to embrace what it means to have their words available for the world to share, or at least Alabama and Georgia.

Working to repair our world is an important link in the chain of Jewish legacies generally, and the Southern Jewish experience specifically. We’re honored to share a new way to bring tikkun olam and Jewish service-learning to your community – ASK us all about it!

To learn more about the Community Engagement Department and all its programs, contact Dave Miller at dmiller@isjl.org
I'M NOT JEWISH, BUT MY SUMMER INTERNSHIP WAS

So... what's it like working at a Jewish office when you're not Jewish?

By Taylor Ortner

You're gonna work with the Hebrews?" My dad asked in his incredibly southern accent. "Those are God's people, y'know;" he remarked before I could answer.

The answer was yes. I had been accepted as an intern for the Heritage and Interpretation Department of the Institute of Southern Jewish Life.

"We have Jews?" My mom piped up.

The answer was, again, yes. "We" – the South – have Jews. Being southern born and raised, outside of the major metropolitan cities like Atlanta or Houston, coming across the region's Jewish presence is rare. My family and I would pass synagogues during drives through the rural South, but they had often been repurposed as Protestant places of worship. My grandparents, living outside of Eudora, Arkansas, would sometimes mention a store "run by a Jew," but it seemed like a distant and unrelated past. We sometimes attended Seder, but even then it was always Christianized. In short, my knowledge of Judaism and Jews was just that: short.

As a future historian, and a gentile among the Jews at the ISJL, I was offended that no one had stopped to inform me about just how influential and instrumental Jews were in the South. I'm in awe at our differences, but even more so at how similar we are. I remember being nervous standing in front of the imposing temple in Natchez, Mississippi, but I was pleasantly put at ease by the leader of the congregation, a man who looked and sounded just like my very own Pawpaw. My mind was blown.

The marriage between progressive values and faith is something I seldom get to experience in the Deep South. Here, strict conservatism is often synonymous with Christianity. The friends I have gained through the ISJL and the conversations I have been privileged to take part in have opened me to reexamining my own personal faith, this time in a more positive and progressive light. I have gained so much more than an internship to add to my resume. This summer, I have gained a perspective that most do not get to experience, learned a history that is seldom taught, and met a wonderful group of people committed to their community. I felt honored that I was able to share my enthusiasm for Jewish learning through the Immigration Traveling Trunk—with southern Jews and southern Gentiles alike. I wouldn't trade that for anything.

P.S. I eventually thought of "Jewish fashion puns." It was slightly disappointing to me that the Rabbis I met did not dress like Tom Hardy on Peaky Blinders. However, I was delightfully surprised to see beer at after-hours office gatherings (something unheard of at any southern Baptist get-together).

All jokes aside, my internship was incredibly enriching. The marriage between progressive values and faith is something I seldom get to experience in the Deep South. Here, strict conservatism is often synonymous with Christianity. The friends I have gained through the ISJL and the conversations I have been privileged to take part in have opened me to reexamining my own personal faith, this time in a more positive and progressive light. I have gained so much more than an internship to add to my resume. This summer, I have gained a perspective that most do not get to experience, learned a history that is seldom taught, and met a wonderful group of people committed to their community. I felt honored that I was able to share my enthusiasm for Jewish learning through the Immigration Traveling Trunk—with southern Jews and southern Gentiles alike. I wouldn't trade that for anything.

P.S. I eventually thought of a Jewish fashion pun — Kosher Couture!
WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR LEGACY TO BE?

Legacy is more than what we leave behind—it’s what we send ahead to those we love. It’s how we impact the future, starting today.

What is a “legacy gift” or “planned giving”?
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How can the ISJL help?
Whether it’s preserving Southern Jewish stories, putting rabbis on the road to small towns, furthering Jewish education, making our world a better place through literacy and life-changing community engagement initiatives—whatever touches your heart and resonates with your legacy will shape the conversation of how together, we can plan for a meaningful future. The ISJL’s Legacy Giving program can help you meet your planned giving goals. To learn more, visit www.isjl.org/planned-giving or email us at kander@isjl.org.

The ISJL’s Legacy Giving program can help you meet your planned giving goals.

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