On the road through the Jewish South

As “traveling rabbi” for ISJL, Appel enjoys a wide variety of experiences

Before becoming a rabbi, Batsheva Appel had a particular mindset while doing her sales job — get from one place to another as quickly as possible.

In her role as director of rabbinic services for the Jackson-based Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, she is still doing a lot of travel. But in this position, she takes her time getting to her destination.

“It’s important to get a sense of where you are instead of just getting to places,” Appel said.

As the Institute’s traveling rabbi, Appel visits congregations throughout the Institute’s coverage area, from Oklahoma to Georgia, which generally are too small to have their own rabbis. She is the second person to hold this position, having succeeded Rabbi Debra Kassoff, who spent three years in Jackson.

Macy Hart, president of the Institute, said the Institute is now working on the next phase of the rabbinic program, searching for a second traveling rabbi. The idea is to stagger the placements so the Institute will not have to find successors for both at the same time.

Working out of Jackson throughout the region, Appel said she has been able to enjoy experiences other rabbis would never have. “This is the only position like this in the world,” she said.

She has been active in the Mississippi Religious Leadership Conference. On the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, she blew the shofar to start an interfaith sunrise commemoration service on the beach in Waveland, Miss.

On Jan. 14, she was scheduled to officiate at an unveiling in the Jewish cemetery in Brookhaven, Miss. The unusual part is that the grave is for someone who died in 1896, and the ceremony was being organized by the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

She was attracted to the Institute by the thought of serving many different congregations and communities, getting to know a wide variety of people.

Another attraction was the Institute’s mission. “A lot of people have said ‘what are we going to do about x,’ and ‘what are we going to do about y.’ The Institute is working to provide solutions.”

On a typical weekend, she goes to a small community and leads services on Shabbat evening. Some congregations do a potluck dinner, while at others members traditionally all go out to eat afterwards.

Shabbat morning, there may be a Torah study session, adult education or a service, or a combination. Many times, during the afternoon she visits shut-ins, or goes with the host family to see local sites. Some-
times there is a Havdalah service or
evening program.

On Sunday morning, she visits with
the religious school, if there is one.
Sometimes, she combines two or
three congregations in an area on an
extended weekend. During Chanukah,
she spent four days touring Fort Smith,
Muscogee and Fayetteville.

Generally, she is on the road two
weekends a month. The rest of the
time, she is in Jackson, and sings with
the Shirim Choir at Jackson’s Beth Is-
rael.

When she is on the road, along the
way, she appreciates where she is. Her
adventures have included driving the
Selma-to-Montgomery Civil Rights trail
on the way to Auburn, and retracing
part of the Trail of Tears returning to
Arkansas from Oklahoma. On a recent
trip back from Lake Charles, she was
amazed by the Atchafalaya swamp, and
had it not been pouring rain she would
have stopped to explore it further.

She also spoke of the beauty of driv-
ing through the Mississippi Delta dur-
ing the cotton harvest, when loose cot-
tton can blow across the road in such
quantity that it looks like snowdrifts.

Appel said she anticipated that the
congregations she visits would be
“warm and hospitable, and everybody
has been that and more.”

This is not her first time in the re-
region. Her father was an engineer with
Boeing, which meant the family moved
a lot. When she was 2 years old, she
lived briefly in New Orleans, and spent
fourth grade in Huntsville. “I knew a
little bit about the region, but never
lived down here as an adult.”

After returning to her native Seattle,
she attended Wellesley College and
then worked in the biotechnology field.
She started as a research technician,
thand sold chemicals to research biologists.

Not happy doing direct sales, she be-
came more involved at her synagogue,
and the more she did, the more she
wanted to do. She decided to go to rab-
binical school, becoming ordained at
Hebrew Union College in 1996.

Most recently, she was associate rabbi
at Congregation Beth Chaim in Princ-
eton Junction, N.J.

When she accepted this position, she
asked, “Mississippi? You’re going to
Mississippi?”

She said she has learned a lot about
life in the South, such as what a boiled
peanut tastes like.

Her visit to Auburn’s Beth Shalom
was the same weekend as the Auburn-
Florida football game. She had known
Auburn was known for football, “but
I didn’t know what that really meant.”

Rabbi Appel didn’t even go to the game.

In Lake Charles, she was introduced
to the concept of the King Cake. In-
stead of referring to the baby in the
cake as the baby Jesus, though, mem-
bers of Temple Sinai called it the baby
Moses. “It’s the Jewish response to liv-
ing in the South,” she said. “Northern
Jews don’t know what a King Cake is,
let alone a Baby Moses.”