

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-

See *Road*, page 10



Rabbi Batsheva Appel and Leon Jacobs, president of Anshe Chesed, Vicksburg, during one of her first visits since joining the Institute of Southern Jewish Life

>> Road

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 Israel.

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 driving through the Mississippi Delta during the cotton harvest, when loose cotton 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 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, then did sales for a company that sold chemicals to research biologists.

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

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

When she accepted this position, she did get a lot of "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." Being in town that weekend showed her, and she wasn't even at the game.

In Lake Charles, she was introduced to the concept of the King Cake. Instead of referring to the baby in the cake as the baby Jesus, though, members of Temple Sinai called it the baby Moses. "It's the Jewish response to living in the South," she said. "Northern Jews don't know what a King Cake is, let alone a Baby Moses."