

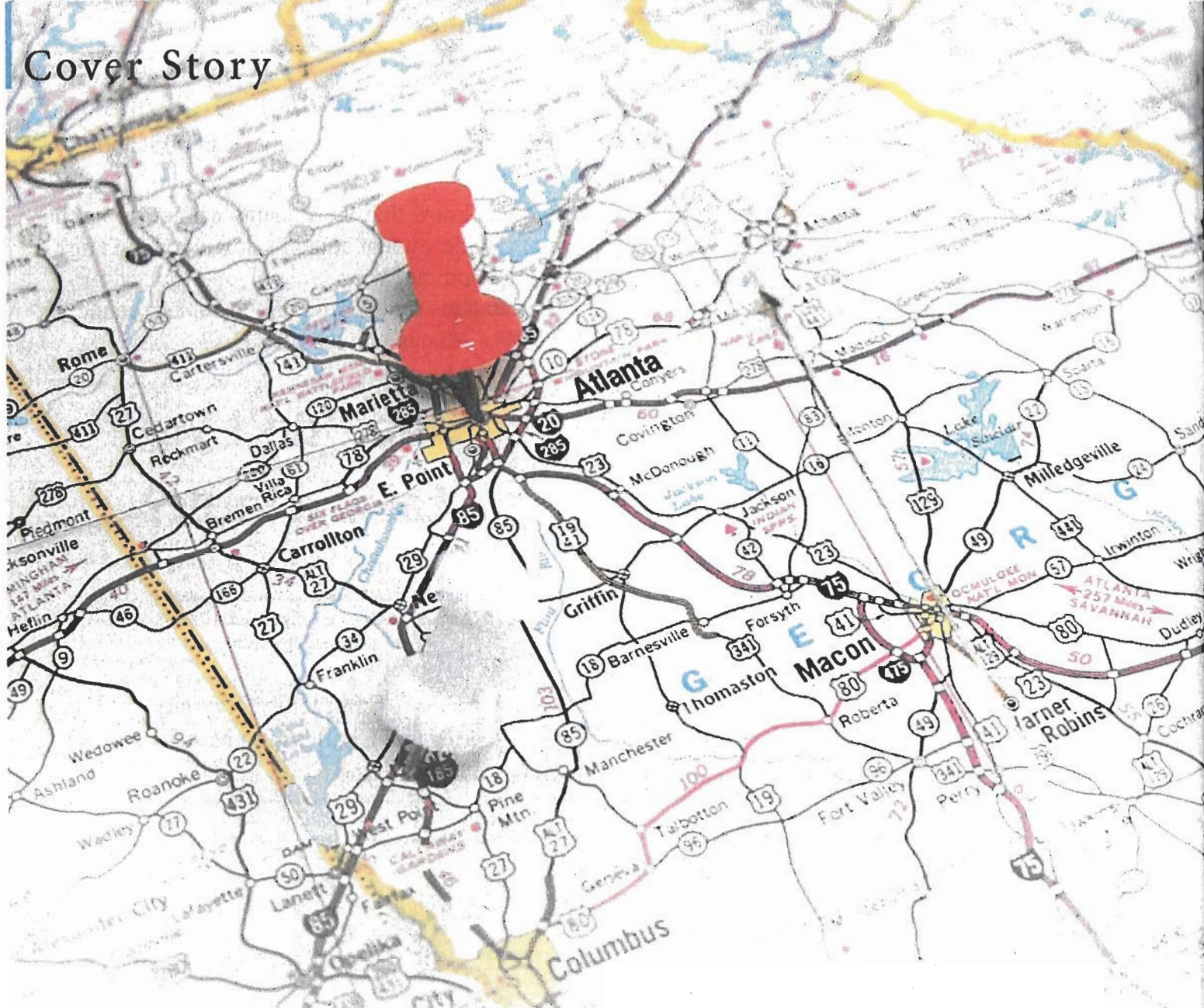
# Pinpointing Our Roots

*Atlanta congregations guide partners in the small-town South*

**INSIDE:**  
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Guide

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# Pinpointing Our Roots

Atlanta congregations mentor small-town shuls to preserve the Jewish South

By **MARCY J. LEVINSON**  
The Jewish Times

**S**ome of metro Atlanta's largest congregations are taking on the role of big brother to help small-town Jewish life survive in the South.

The Temple in midtown and Temple Sinai in Sandy Springs, both Reform, and Conservative Ahavath Achim Synagogue in Buckhead have signed up for the partnership program through the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute for Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) in Jackson, Miss., for a simple reason: They have many resources that small Jewish communities lack and don't feel comfortable asking for.

It's part of the responsibility that comes

from being the capital of the Jewish South and from recognizing that even as Jewish Atlanta has grown to national prominence, the Jewish presence in small towns across the South is in danger of disappearing.

According to Stuart Rockoff, an ISJL historian, the overall number of Jews in America is stagnant and even declining, but the number of Jews in the South has doubled since 1960.

In 1996, metro Atlanta had an estimated 77,000 Jews and was the nation's 17th-largest Jewish community. By early last year, according to the centennial population study conducted by the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, the Jewish population had reached 120,000, 11th-largest in the nation, and the annual

growth has been estimated at 5,500.

Meanwhile, the membership of the Reform synagogue The Temple is mentoring, LaGrange's Congregation Beth El, was 12 families a decade ago when the *Jewish Times* did a story about it, and Beth El is little changed today, with 15 to 20 families regularly participating in synagogue life.

A committee of board members of The Temple, which has 1,450 families, met almost two months ago with the head of the ISJL, Macy Hart, to discuss the possibility of adopting Beth El. The Temple members were excited about being able to work with the LaGrange congregation, which is less than two hours south of Atlanta on Interstate 85.

Beth El is one of 30 congregations within 300 miles of Atlanta that the ISJL iden-

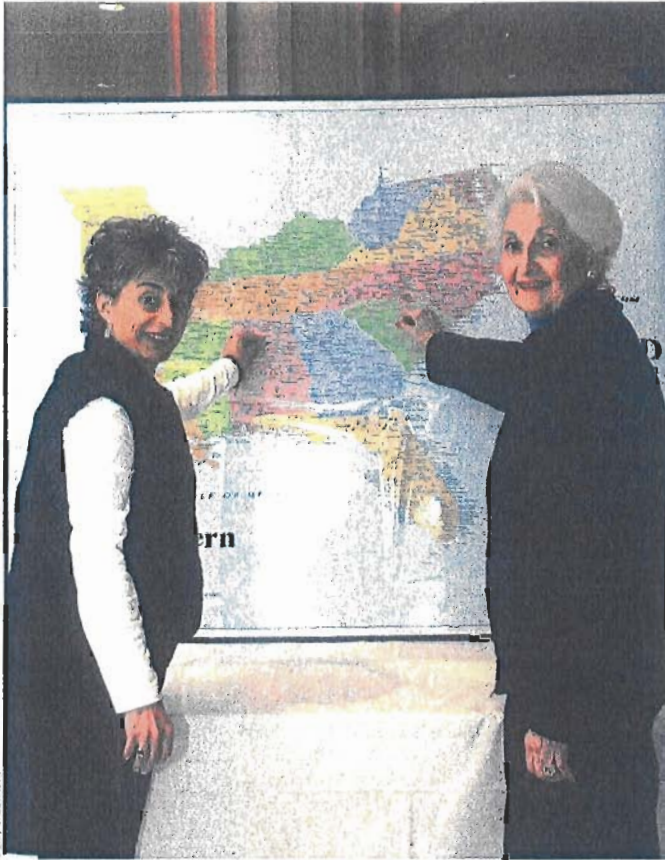
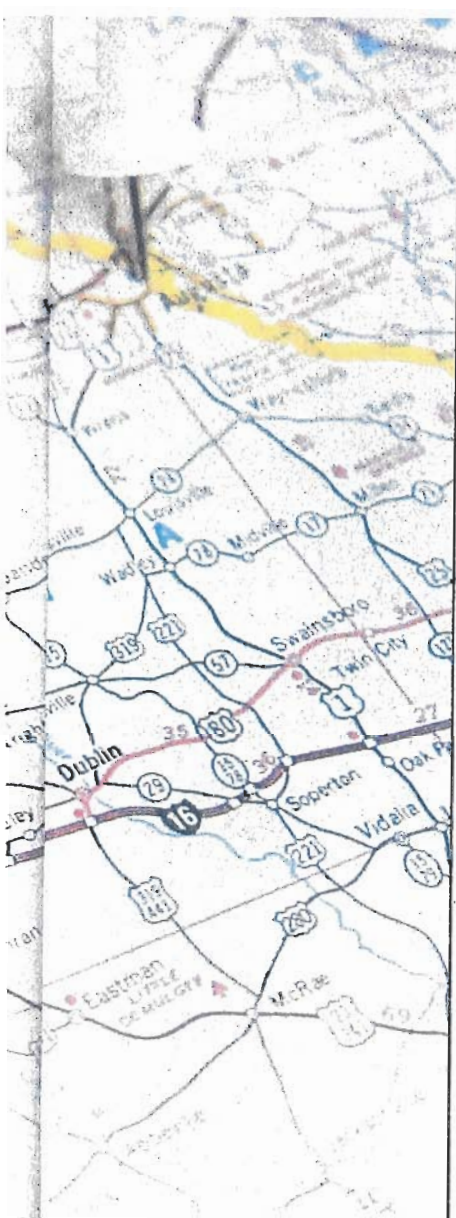
tified as possibilities for the partnership program. Some of the factors involved in choosing the synagogues are location and denomination in addition to other actual needs.

But only Beth El and two others, one Reform and one Conservative, were considered ready to be contributing participants. That situation aligned well with the Atlanta participants, two of them Reform and one Conservative. (Ahavath Achim is still finalizing its partnership with the small Conservative shul.)

After the initial meeting with Hart, representatives from The Temple made contact with Beth El, and after some discussions, Beth El signed on.

Paul Wolkoff, the secretary/treasurer for Beth El, grew up in Atlanta, but a job relo-

# Cover Story



Henry J. Levinson

**Denny Marcus (left) grew up in Birmingham, Ala., and constantly faced anti-Semitism. Ruth Shacter never had a problem being Jewish in Columbia, S.C.**

cation landed him in LaGrange, where he joined Beth El about seven years ago.

Beth El holds services on the first Friday of every month in the former Episcopal church the synagogue bought in 1940. That purchase put the only synagogue in LaGrange on Church Street.

The building was built in 1893. The congregation had air conditioning and heat installed just a few years ago.

Wolkoff said that although the Jewish community is tiny by Atlanta standards, it is lively.

"It is a small but very dedicated following," he said.

Like many Jews in rural areas,

the congregants are not highly observant. Wolkoff said high school football tends to dominate the community during the fall in small towns. That makes worship difficult, but Beth El meets the demands and needs of its members.

The resources and expertise offered by The Temple should help, Wolkoff said.

"It is a great resource if we have a question," he said. "In starting our religious school we will have resources; we can call somebody."

Beth El launched its religious school in the fall and has five pupils, Wolkoff said. "It seems like it is going well."

The school initiative shows that no matter how small the numbers, the Jewish community in LaGrange intends to survive.

Since Wolkoff joined Beth El, he said, the membership numbers have remained static, which at least means they aren't declining, as many other small Jewish communities have.

Stephen Edelson, the president of Beth El, was born and raised in LaGrange. For the past 15 years he has run the family business, Edelson's Army Store and Sporting Goods. This

year the family will celebrate 50 years of business as a pillar of the LaGrange community.

When he was a child, Edelson said, his family attended synagogue in Columbus, a few exits away on I-85.

"We went to High Holiday services here in LaGrange, but [my parents] went the extra mile to make sure we had a Jewish upbringing. Every Sunday, sometimes against our will, we went to Sunday school" in Columbus, he said.

Now as an adult striving for a Jewish upbringing for his own children, Edelson noted the importance of Jewish life in the small town and credited the ISJL with the curriculum and religious school navigation. "A year ago today we didn't have a religious school. We had the kids, but not a school."

He hopes for his children that the partnership with Atlanta will expand Beth El's resources and friendships.

"We would like to have the resources we don't have now. Just maybe have the ability to attend some larger functions like Purim carnivals and have my kids get more incorporated into the Atlanta community,"



The only synagogue in LaGrange, Congregation Beth El has been in a former Episcopal church on — where else? — Church Street since the 1940s.

*“What I think our goal is is to celebrate the South. Part of what we want to do as a community is enable the uniqueness of all the members.”*

— Rabbi Judith Beiner

Edelson said. “This is kind of to expand our synagogue outreach. Without [the ISJL], this wouldn’t be possible.”

Temple Sinai, which has about 1,200 families, has found its partner a little farther west: Beth Shalom in Auburn, Ala. The two Reform congregations will kick off their partnership during this weekend’s scholar-in-residence program, Rabbi Brad Levenberg said.

“We are very optimistic that our relationship with the congregants of Beth Shalom will be mutually beneficial. There is much that we look forward to sharing, to learning about each other,” he said.

During the scholar-in-residence program, Rabbi Levenberg said, “we will welcome a delegation from Beth Shalom and together will plan a series of programs to take place during the next year. We will also lay the groundwork to grow the relationship over many years to come.”

The Temple will meet with Beth El’s congregants at The Temple’s Feb. 16 Synaplex, which will feature a Southern theme, including fried chicken at supper. Synaplex is a program of “cultural, educational, spiritual and social events” designed to bring people together for a range of programs in a flexible format.

Rabbi Judith Beiner will host a book review and recipe sampling from *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South* by Marcie Cohen Ferris. Also in the mix of things to do is a timeline craft project for families. It will be an opportunity to lay out the family timeline with significant dates,

photos and events.

The main draw for the Shabbat evening is the 6 p.m. worship service with guest speaker Eli Evans. He has written several books on his personal journey of growing up Jewish in the South. The topic of his talk is “Growing Up Jewish in the South: A Southern Jewish Perspective on the Changing Religious Ethos in the South.”

After the Southern-style meal at 7:15, attendees will be able to ask Evans questions.

Ronnie Van Gelder, the program director at The Temple, has high hopes for the visit from Beth El and is excited to see how a massive map of the Southeast is filling up with flagged pushpins.

Van Gelder set up the map to provide a visual for those attending Synaplex. All visitors are encouraged to place pins marking their respective hometowns. The map is in the main lobby at The Temple. By Feb. 16, the members hope it fully reflects their Southern pride.

Rabbi Beiner is excited about the Synaplex dinner, at which people will be seated at tables according to their native states. The point is to allow people to make connections with their shared roots.

“What I think our goal is is to celebrate the South,” she said. “Look, part of what we want to do as a community is enable the uniqueness of all the members. All the more so where Atlanta has been overrun by non-Southerners, and the Temple is no different. Let’s give them a chance to tell their story.” □

## Jews in the South

**T**emple member Denny Marcus is a Birmingham, Ala., transplant, and her story of growing up during the civil rights movement of the 1960s is one riddled with anti-Semitism and fear.

"We lived a very active Jewish life. We went to services, celebrated all the holidays and lived," Marcus said, recalling her confrontations with anti-Semitism even before the civil rights movement sparked a backlash against the Jewish community. "There were no blacks where I went to school, so we were the poor kid on the block as far as the cultural totem pole, so the kids picked on us because we were the dirty Jew. They couldn't pick on the black kids 'cause they didn't know any. They didn't go to school with them."

Not surprisingly, she said, "we weren't allowed to go to their cotillions and debutante balls."

Marcus recounted an incident when she was 13 when she ended up at a "no Jews allowed" country club. "I remember specifically having a little girl spend the night

one night and going to church with her, and her sister wanted to get her father riled up, and they were supposed to take me home, and she said, 'Oh, come to the country club for lunch.' And I walked into the non-Jewish country club, and daggers went through me from him. She was never allowed to come play with me again."

Marcus lived in a primarily Jewish neighborhood and said there were specific areas where Jews were not allowed to live. And the Ku Klux Klan was nearby.

"Not so much in the community we were in, but the KKK was in the fringes," she said. "The bombing of the church [in Birmingham], the guards at the temple, it was the first time you feared for your life because you were a Jew."

In a different era in a different part of the South, anti-Semitism was not typical.

Ruth Shacter of The Temple said she did not experience anti-Semitism while growing up in Columbia, S.C., in the 1930s and '40s.

"When I was growing up, I didn't notice

any [anti-Semitism]. I never ran into any," she said. Jews were scattered around town, and she said the teaching of religion mostly took place at home. "There were no ghettos so to speak. Maybe now there are."

Friday nights for Shacter consisted of her father going to the Conservative synagogue and coming home for dinner. She went to Sunday school in addition to hanging out with friends on Wednesday nights at their churches. She said there was no threat of her friends converting her or her converting them.

"Religion — it was all in the home. Your religion was all in the home; that is where it mostly took place. We'd go to synagogue on the High Holy Days," she said. "I don't think there was that much emphasis on synagogue per se as I was growing up."

If there was overt anti-Semitism, Shacter said, she didn't notice. "I never ran into anti-Semitism until I was married and my husband was in the service. Most of it was subtle because they were well-educated, 'nice, lovely people.'"

Although she didn't elaborate on the subtle signs, she said the anti-Jewish sentiment was obvious to her.

"You've got to be above it," she said.

Marcus, Shacter and Temple Rabbi Judith Beiner said that being Jewish carries an added burden of responsibility, and being Jewish in the South compounds that responsibility.

"They were always aware you had to be more. They wanted you to be a good citizen and be looked up to and do the right thing," Shacter said.

Rabbi Beiner, who is from Phoenix, said people are always surprised to hear about Jews in her hometown.

"There's a misconception. People say, 'You mean there's Jews in Phoenix?'" Rabbi Beiner said. The situation is the same in the South.

"The truth is, we have a varied, full and active Jewish community in the South. Even of all stripes, we've got everybody here. The bagels and the pastrami, they don't taste the same here," she said with a laugh.

Marcus chimed in, "The grits are good!"

Aside from the Southern flair added to traditional Jewish food, Marcus said non-Jews may not understand the responsibility that comes with being Jewish. Marcus writes it off to ignorance.

Rabbi Beiner said: "I think people tend to be very provincial no matter where they are from."

Marcus said her upbringing in Jewish Birmingham taught her: "A lot of people don't want to know, other than what they want to know. In the early days of Reform Judaism, we sort of had to fit into society. Well, today it is OK to be Jewish, so we can be proud of who we are, openly proud."

Now all American Jews can be proud of their heritage and religion regardless of location and worship proudly, Rabbi Beiner said. "The whole point was to fit in and to be like everyone else, and we don't have to do that anymore." □

### Learning to Say, 'Shalom, Y'all'

You don't have to be a member of one of the partnership congregations to participate in events connected to the Jewish South:

- At The Temple, author Eli Evans will be the featured speaker at 6 p.m. services during the Synplex program Friday, Feb. 16. His topic will be "Growing Up Jewish in the South: A Southern Jewish Perspective on the Changing Religious Ethos in the South."

Evans is the author of *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*, in which he takes readers inside the nexus of Southern and Jewish histories, from early immigrants to the present.

- Temple Sinai will screen the film *Delta Jews* on Sunday, Feb. 18. The free screening will start at 6:30 p.m. and will be followed by a discussion moderated by Rabbi Brad Levenberg.

The film is about Jewish life in the Mississippi Delta. For more than a century, the rural region has been home to a thriving Jewish community where Jews became an integral part of delta life. Those who remain discuss their experiences in a society dominated by fundamentalist Protestantism and divided by racial inequities.

Narrated by Alfred Uhry, the film includes an account of a surprising Jewish reaction to the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964.

An optional dinner at 6 p.m. costs \$7; reservations are required. Call (404) 252-3073.

## Rabbis on the Road

By SUZI BROZMAN  
The Jewish Times

**D**o you know a rabbi who has done an unveiling for a Jewish Confederate soldier? Ask Rabbi Batsheva Appel. She recently officiated at one, for Elias Bowsky, a Southern Jew who lived in New Orleans and in Brookhaven, Miss. Time and the elements had caused damage to his grave marker, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans called her for help.

All over the South, especially in rural areas, there are communities of "underserved Jewish congregations." In some places Judaism once thrived, but demographics and economic considerations resulted in dwindling Jewish populations. Other places never had many Jews. Whether today there is an organized congregation with no regular rabbi or simply a group of people interested in maintaining their religious connections, the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) is making a difference.



Rabbi Batsheva Appel officiates at the unveiling for Confederate soldier Elias Bowsky.

Rabbi Appel is ISJL's director of rabbinic services. Her job is to visit underserved congregations in the South, mostly in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Arkansas, but also in Texas, Oklahoma and a bit of Tennessee.

When the rabbi got the call about

Bowsky, she called a friend, a rabbi in New Jersey who is a Civil War nut. "I called him to come down and help," she said. "I can honestly say I've never done one like that before and probably never will again. The remaining family was too frail to come, but I sent out a letter, and

some Jews did attend the ceremony."

Rabbi Appel spends two or three Shabbatot per month visiting communities. A typical visit will include a Friday evening meal and service and Saturday Torah study or adult learning session and morning services. There may be a program with a religious school, if there is one, or a visit with whatever children there are, especially in an aging congregation whose young population is disappearing. She will visit congregants who cannot get to the synagogue or communal meeting place.

Saturday evening there will often be a potluck dinner or a dinner out with congregants and a Havdalah service, then religious school on Sunday. There are tot Shabbats, baby namings, bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, and other lifecycle events of all kinds.

Rabbi Appel is also available to speak to civic groups and churches and to participate in interfaith work. She recalls a highlight of her travels as being invited to participate in an interfaith sunrise service in Waveland, Miss., after Hurricane Katrina devastated the region.

"There are a lot of underserved congregations, so I generally go once a year to most communities," she said. "I serve all denominations as they invite me. We're in communication with synagogues. Generally, we sent out a letter introducing me. Most of the communities we serve have been getting visits from the institute's former itinerant rabbi, Debra Kassoff, for the last 3 1/2 years."

The congregations Rabbi Appel serves have no permanent rabbi, student rabbi or visiting retired rabbi. She serves whatever functions they require. "There is an ongoing relationship, just as any rabbinic relationship. People will share with me if it's

something they need to do. People maintain communications individually, and I write a weekly d'var Torah that we e-mail to some 500 subscribers. Frequently people want to discuss that with me. Is the relationship as close as if I were in their community every day and ran into them at Kroger? No, but there are close relationships that develop. You can imagine there is a lot to do. In fact, we are recruiting for a second rabbi." Anyone interested in the job can call her at (601) 362-6357.

Appel's job is based in Jackson, Miss, but her time there is limited. "There's a fair amount of travel involved. I've joined the synagogue. It's Reform, as I am, but there's a sense of sharing. As the only game in town, it strives to compromise, with Friday evening Reform, Saturday morning somewhat more Conservative."

As to her varied congregations, Appel notes that there is some growth. "Bentonville, Ark., has a thriving Jewish community. Much of that is due to the presence of Wal-Mart's headquarters. Since they've required vendors to open offices in town, the Jewish population has been booming. Congregation Etz Chaim has been growing quite rapidly." She has also seen signs of progress in New Orleans.

Rabbi Appel is not the only Jewish cleric reaching out to isolated Southern communities.

Rabbi Seth Limmer of Armonk, N.Y., decided about five years ago that he wanted to move down to the Mississippi Delta as a rabbi. "I had a sense, having studied it, that there was a lot to pay attention to, especially me living in an affluent suburb with a huge population. I thought I'd find a heterogeneous delta a different way of life. I'd meet some interesting people, see things important to my congregation. I wasn't sure how to do that as a rabbi. I wasn't sure what made it rabbinic."

Rabbi Limmer contacted a friend, Rabbi Micah Greenstein in Memphis, Tenn., and soon went to visit, meeting people in health care, law enforcement and other areas. He called the ISJL's director, Macy Hart, who was enthusiastic. "He said this was perfect. He was looking for someone whose responsibility it would be to ride the circuit around towns not big enough to have a full-time rabbi — a pooled resource. He was raising funds and searching for someone to fill the job. He asked me if I'd like to be the prototype. He asked three questions: What time do you get up? What time do you want to go to

bed? And when can you be here?"

He took a trip south and saw eight communities in seven days, "from congregational covered-dish suppers to services, interfaith lectures, hospital visits, speeches, Torah study. I was able to spend at least a night and a service in each small town and get to know these people. I learned a lot."

A few months later, Rabbi Kassoff signed on to be the full-time circuit rabbi. Rabbi Limmer spoke about his experience to his New York congregation, and the next year he returned to the delta with six families to build bridges of understanding and connection between Jews and non-Jews, blacks and whites, Northerners and Southerners.

Someone told Rabbi Limmer's wife: "For 25 years rabbis have been visiting and promising to come back. You're the first who did."

With an interest in race relations, Rabbi Limmer met with a former governor and others who have been active in race reconciliation. This year, he intends to go through the hill country of Alabama, visiting Anniston, Birmingham and other cities.

"A lot of the members of the Jewish community in these places are worldly folk who do travel, but many are older. Spending time with them makes me have a tremendous amount of respect. They are Jews in the most full-time extent of everyone I know," Rabbi Limmer said. "In the South, everyone goes to church. I know Jews who go to Memphis every month to photocopy the rabbi's sermons in towns that are lay-led. They have a commitment to be at services every Friday night. If they don't go, there's not a service. They've got to be the people to go to on everything in a town where people may only know eight Jews. My congregation and I want to learn from them, see where they're coming from. Macy helps me with what I do every year. The institute's work is vitally important. I just go down to say hello. They're the ones telling their story, helping them with the issues of how to deal with communities where the young folk have gone away. They do the work of seeing to the needs of the Southern Jewish community first and dealing with the legacy afterward.

"For me, I am biased to making a connection with people, whatever it takes to make a connection. These are good people. The Jewish community is interconnected. If there's a way to connect and build resources, that's a good thing." □

## Institute Helps Guide Jewish Education

**S**usan Jacobson, the Atlanta coordinator for the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute for Southern Jewish Life, said great opportunities will come from synagogue partnering.

"A point of distinction is that we have an itinerant rabbi and a department focused totally on education," she said of the ISJL. "We have itinerant fellows, and every community which uses our developed curriculum has the support of our fellows."

For example, in seventh grade most public school students are learning the same things, but that is not always the way it goes with small congregations that lack big-city resources for their religious schools. The ISJL curriculum takes away the guesswork and provides all the resources.

The curriculum, running from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade, allows religious schools in all 36 participating Jewish communities in the South to be on the same educational page, Jacobson said.

Jacobson, the wife of The Temple's executive director, Mark Jacobson, was born in Little Rock, Ark., and grew up in Houston. Her father was born and raised in Brinkley, Ark., so she said the ISJL's work is close to her heart. □

### Did you know?

- The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life is 6 years old.
- In 2006, the institute sent out 24,750 e-mail messages to congregations as Shabbat messages from ISJL rabbis.
- The traveling ISJL rabbi serves 48 congregations.
- 36 communities in the southeast use the ISJL curriculum.
- According to the *American Jewish Yearbook*, in 1960, 195,000 Jews were in the South (Texas included; Florida excluded). By 2001 the same area was home to 386,000 Jews.
- According to the *American Jewish Yearbook*, 51 Jews lived in LaGrange in 1937, and 25 in Opelika, Ala.
- Current estimates in Birmingham, Ala., are 5,300 Jewish residents, the same as in 1937, according to the *American Jewish Yearbook*. In 1960 about 4,090 Jews lived in Birmingham.
- Columbia, S.C.'s Jewish population has steadily grown over the years, from 680 in 1937 to 1,225 in 1960, 2,300 in 1980 and an estimated 2,750 today.