Pinpointing Our Roots

Atlanta congregations guide partners in the small-town South
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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 racing on the
role of big brother to small-town Jewish life surviving 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 Goldberg-Walden 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 ask-
ing 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 1980.

In 1998, 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 populations
study conducted by the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, the Jewish population had reached 110,000, 44th-
largest in the nation, and the annual growth has been estimated at 5,500.

Meanwhile, the membership of the Reform synagogue Temple is in
creasing. LeGrange'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 1,140 families, met almost two months ago with the head of the ISJL, Macy Hart, to discuss the possi-
bilitv of adapting Beth El. The Temple mem-
bers were excited about being able to work with the LeGrange congregation, which is too small to draw from the four towns south of Atlanta on Interstate 85.

Beth El is one of 31 congregations within
200 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 demography in addition to other actual needs.

But only Beth El and two others, one Reform and one Conservative, were consi-
"dered ready to be contributing particip-
ants. That situation aligned well with the Atlanta participants, two of whom Reform and one Conservative. (Abodeh Achim is still finalizing its partnership with the small Conservative shul.)

After the initial meeting with Hart, rep-
resentatives from The Temple made contact with Beth El, and after some discus-
sions, Beth El signed on.

Paul Wolcott, the secretary/manager for Beth El, grew up in Atlanta, but a job edu-

the synagogues are not highly observant. Weckfeld said high school football tends to drag down 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 Shalom help, Weckfeld 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, Weckfeld said. "It seems like it is going well."

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

Since Weckfeld 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 Feldhers, the president of Beth El, was born and raised in LaGrange. For the past 15 years he has run the family business, LaGrange 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, Feldhers said, his family attended synagogues in Columbus, a few miles away (ID 1.95).

"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, Feldhers noted the importance of Jewish life in the small town and credited the SBJ with the curriculum and religious school noreferrer. "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. But maybe have the ability to attend some larger functions like Purim carnivals and have my kids get more incorpora-

...
Edelson said, "This is kind of to expand our synagogue outreach. Without [the SHS], this wouldn't be possible."

Temple Sinai, which has about 1,200 families, has teamed up with 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 Lowenberg said.

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

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

The Temple will meet with Beth Els congregation at the Temple's Feb. 16 Synaplex, which will feature a Seder 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 Reiner will host a book review and recipe sampling from Mazal Zal: Gourmet 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 music show for the Shabbat evening is at 6 p.m., worship service with guest speaker Ed Edelson. 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 Idas in the South."

After the Southern-style meal at 7 p.m., attendees will be able to ask Tisha B'Av questions.

Berrie Van Gelder, the program director at The Temple, has big hopes for the visit from Beth El and is excited to see how a narrative map of the Southeast is filling up with rugged pastries. 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 music lobby at the Temple. By Feb. 16, the members hope it fully reflects their Southern pride.

Rabbi Beter 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 the opportunity to highlight their shared roots.

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

— Rabbi Judith Reiner
Jews in the South

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emporal member Donny Marcus in Birmingham, Alabama, transplant, and her story of growing up during the civil rights movement involved a backlash against the Jewish community. "There were no black kids when I went to school, so we were the poor Jews on the block as far as the cultural norm went, so the kids picked on us because we were the dirty Jews. They didn't pick on the black kids because 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 cemeteries and deli- tante balls." Marcus remembered 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 with going to church with her, and her sister wanted to get her letter rolled up, and they were supposed to take it home, and she said, 'Oh, come to the country club for my lunch!' And I walked into the non-Jewish country club, and duggers were through me from him. She was never allowed to come play with me again." Marcus lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood and said there were specific areas where Jews were not allowed to live. And the KKK Klan was nearby. "Not so much in the community we were in, but the KKK was in the diocese," she said. "The building 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 1920s and 1930s. "When I was growing up, I didn't notice any anti-Semitism," she said. "We were surrounded by a town, and she said the teaching of religious schools mostly took place at home. There were no classes, no synagogues." 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 notion of her friends connecting because of their religious beliefs. "Religion — it was all in the home. Not religious was all in the home; that is where it mostly took place. We'd go synagogues on the High Holy Days," she said. "I don't think there was that much emphasis on synagogues per se as I was growing up. If there was overt anti-Semitism, Shacter said, she didn't notice. "I never saw anti-Semitism until I was married and the husband was in the service. And it was notable because they were well-educated, nice, lovely, people." Although she didn't elaborate on the subtle signs, she said the anti-Semitism sentiment was always there. "We got to be aware of it," she said. "And as Shacter and Temple Rabbi Judah Ben-ner noted that being Jewish carries as 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 Ben-ner, 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 Ben-ner said. "The situation is the same, in a different way." "The truth is, we have a warm, full, and active Jewish community in the South. From all of its stripes, we're got everybody here. The bigots and the extremists, they don't show the same here," she said, with a laugh.

Marcus chimed in. "The girls are great!" Aside from the Southern fair 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 Ben-ner said: "I think people tend to be very provincial as to where they see it." 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, they were afraid to fit in society. Well, today it is OK to be Jewish, as 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 Ben-ner 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 partnerships congregations to participate in events con- nected to the Jewish South. - At The Temple, author Elissa Evers will be the featured speaker at 6 p.m. on Sunday during the Zyngalee program Friday, Feb. 18. His topic will be "Growing Up Jewish in the South: A Southern Jewish Perspective on the Changing Religious Ethos in the South." - Evers is the author of The Provocative: A Personal History of Jews in the South, which won readers inside the news of Southern and Jewish life, from early immigrants to the present. - Temple 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 Michael Lowenberg. 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 communi- ty where Jews became an integral part of delta life. Those who remain discuss their experience in a joint event sponsored by the Preservation League of Mississippi. - ‘Why ‘Y’all Join a Jewish Congregation in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964.” An artisan dinner of the event, costs $75, reservations are required. Call (662) 252-3073.
Rabbis on the Road

By SUZI BROZMAN
The Jewish Times

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or you know a rabbi who has done an unveiling for a Jewish Confederate soldier? Ask Rabbi Butchke Appel. He recently officiated at one, for Elias Brown, 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 70th of Confederate Veterans called him for help.

"All over the South, especially in rural areas, there are communities of "under-served Jewish congregations," to some places housing near-thrived, but demographically and economically tenuous situations among 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 connection, the Goldthwaite-Wedenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (IJSJL) is making a difference.

When the rabbi got the call about Brown, 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 few did attend the ceremony."

Rabbi Appel spends two to three Shabbatons per month visiting communities. A typical visit will include a Friday evening meal and service and Saturday Torah study or adult learning sessions 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 congregations who cannot get to the synagogue or communal meeting place.

Saturday evening there will often be a potluck dinner or a dinner with congregants and a Shabbat service, then religious school on Sunday. There are two Shabbatons, baby namings, bar and bat mitzvah charters, 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 tenure as being invited to participate in a multi-faith service in Westland, Miss., after Hurricane Katrina devastated the region.

"There are a lot of under-served 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, and usually we sent out a letter introducing me. Most of the communities we serve have been getting visits from the institute's former interim rabbi, Dylan Kassell, for the last 3 1/2 years."

The congregations Rabbi Appel serves have no permanent rabbis, student rabbis or visiting retired rabbis. She serves whatever functions they require. There is an ongoing relationship, just as any rabbinic relationship. People will share with me if I'm
Institute Helps Guide Jewish Education

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 summons Jacobson, the Atlanta head of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute for Southern Jewish Life, said great opportunities will come from synergistic partnering. "By pointing to a distinction in that we have an interested rabbi and a department focused totally on education," he said of the JI.

"We have interested fellows, and every community which uses our developed curriculum has the support of our fellows," Jacobson added.

For example, in seventh grade most public school students are learning the same things, but that is far from always the case. In general, smaller congregations that lack full-time rabbis are responsible for religious schools. The JI curriculum takes over the groundwork and provides all the resources.

The curriculum, running from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade, offers 200 schools in all 36 participating Jewish communities in the South to be on the same educational page, Jacobson said.

Jacobson, 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 Baltimore, and said the JESJ work is "how he is best known."

Did you know?

- The Carlin-Weinstein Institute for Southern Jewish Life was established in 2000.

- It is the institute and its Jewish education projects have grown from a 15-person staff to a 200-person staff.

- The Carlin-Weinstein Institute for Southern Jewish Life is the largest Jewish education program in the South.