Helping small Jewish communities honor their pasts while planning for their futures

JCLP The Legacy Spring 2018
www.jclproject.org

In this season of Yom Ha-Atzmaut and Shavuot when we celebrate Jewish peoplehood and the giving of the Torah, The Legacy recognizes our interconnectedness. Forward thinking by those in small-town America devoted to Jewish heritage whose planning and actions preserve their good works strengthens future generations and connects us all.

As Jackie L. Jacobs, Chief Executive Officer of JCLP partner Columbus Jewish Foundation, says "[we offer] immortality, which is a unique product."

He speaks of the financial endowments that are an important aspect of legacy planning, but the JCLP process embraces much more. Documents placed in an appropriate archive, a precious Torah now treasured by another appreciative community, and recorded personal and community histories to help those who follow understand the everyday life of those who came before are all markers of immortality. And so is a verdant and groomed cemetery.

JCLP does not charge for its services although as a non-profit corporation does welcome contributions and is now included on the Community Wish List of Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta.

Helping JCLP is a way for people who hold affection for or have sentimental connections to small-town America ensure that these places leave more than just memories when a previously vigorous Jewish community is no longer sustainable.

As ever, please reach out if your or anyone you know might benefit from JCLP's insight and knowledge.

Sincerely,

Noah Levine
Senior Vice President, JCLP
Highlighting a Member of the Board

JCLP has an accomplished board of directors composed of lay leaders and Jewish professionals from around the country. Some live in cities and some do live in small towns that are the focus of the JCLP mission, but all are dedicated to the preservation of the legacies of the communities JCLP guides.

Ann Tettelbaum and her husband, Harvey, are co-chairs of the Long Range planning committee for Temple Beth El in Jefferson City, Missouri. Constructed in 1883, Beth El is affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism and is the oldest synagogue west of the Mississippi in continuous use. Members of the community lead weekly Shabbat services in this closely-knit congregation in the state capitol.

After hearing about JCLP and being introduced to the legacy process, members of the committee recognized that Beth El would benefit from having a plan. Beth El officially engaged with JCLP at the end of June 2016. By September of the following year, a plan was approved and in place.

"It's quite an accomplishment to have our desire and intention for a positive communal legacy recorded," said Ms. Tettelbaum. "I found the process of working with JCLP fascinating and enjoyable. The emphasis on preserving legacies appealed to me and I valued the counsel and gentle direction we received from the moment of engagement."

According to Ann, creating the plan inspired members of the congregation to learn more about the history of Beth El, and anyone can now learn about that history on the congregation's new Wikipedia page. One task she and Harvey shared was to gather documents not already held by the American Jewish Archives and the State Historical Society of Missouri and provided copies to those institutions.

Historic preservation activities at Beth El are ongoing, including the submission of yahrzeit plaque and burial information to the appropriate online databases. Under the direction of President Gail Severance, Ann and other congregants are recording and transcribing oral histories just as called for in the plan. All other aspects of the plan including the future of the congregation's assets are in place to be enacted in the event that the congregation ceases to be viable. One important line in the plan states very clearly that is an "unlikely event."

Ann joined the JCLP board when retirement from a career as a Certified Public Accountant gave her more time for volunteer activities. She and her husband are stalwarts of Central Missouri Jewish community. She believes in the mission of JCLP and became a member of the board in order to share her experience and that of her community to help others understand how beneficial an articulated communal legacy plan can be.

"With Beth El's Legacy Plan successfully in place, I enthusiastically encourage other similar congregations to appreciate the merit of working with JCLP," she says.

A Respected and Longtime Partner

"It's bittersweet," says Richard A. Klein who, in his job as Southeast Regional Director for Jewish Federations of North America Network of Independent Communities, was one of the first people to make a connection between JCLP and a small-town congregation in need of legacy planning.

He refers to the sadness surrounding diminished prospects for vitality within singular Jewish communities in towns outside of metropolitan areas tempered by an appreciation of how these places contributed to the richness of American Jewish life and how planning can preserve their historic legacies.

Richard grew up in Charlotte with a strong connection to Judaism and to the synagogue of which his
grandparents were founding members. He later served on congregational boards and was also president of the Charlotte Jewish Federation. After retiring from his family business, Richard joined JFNA professionally and saw first hand how easily a Jewish community in a small Southern town could fade from the scene without a plan in place to manage a changing environment.

Richard and JCLP President David Sarnat came to know each other over many years before the initiation of the project, and when Richard learned about the JCLP concept, he recognized its value and how it made sense as a means to help communities that needed guidance.

After his introduction, Temple Sinai in Sumter, South Carolina, became the first congregations to engage with JCLP to create a legacy plan, which was undertaken in 2010, and included provisions for relationships with Jewish Federation and Congregation Kahal Kodesh Beth Elohim in Charleston. The latest manifestation of the Sumter plan to preserve the historic legacy of that community will occur when the Temple Sinai Jewish History Center, Sumter County Museum, opens this summer in the temple's social hall.

Martinsville and Petersburg, Virginia, along with Oak Ridge, Tennessee, are among other communities introduced to JCLP by Richard Klein.

"The guidance JCLP gives is a blessing," he says with an empathetic understanding of the challenges facing lay leadership. "Few people know how to address all the difficult tasks faced by a congregation. For example, they don't know what to do with archives or objects and that's when a knowledgeable resource comes in handy."

Coming to a Considerate Ending

By the end of the 19th century, almost every significant town in Ohio had a Jewish presence and small congregations dotted the state. Zanesville, about an hour's distance from Columbus, and once known as the "Pottery Capitol of the World," was home to cohorts of Hungarian, Polish and German Jews with various occupations.

The family of Beth Abraham Synagogue president, Craig Ballas, has operated a manufacturing business in Zanesville since 1928.

As was the pattern for similar communities in Ohio and elsewhere, changing business and demographics in town caused the once-lively Beth Abraham to diminish.

It took several years for the active members of the synagogue to acknowledge the reality of their situation as a Jewish community in decline-- according to Art Rogovin whose family has been part of the congregation since the 1940s—with a looming possibility of closure. Decades worth of religious objects and books and documents would have to be dealt with.

Awareness of that necessity eventually crystallized into action after becoming acquainted with the Jewish Community Legacy Project, which provided the framework of a professional organization to do what was needed. "They were such a good resource in helping us wind down," said Mr. Rogovin. "Steve Edelstein and Noah Levine were important in helping us plan everything."

Noah connected Beth Abraham leadership with a trusted sofer to evaluate and arrange a sale of the synagogue's sifrei Torah, with a stipulation that one remain in Central Ohio to be available to members of the Beth Abraham family in the region. A Torah is now on permanent loan to Temple Beth Shalom in New Albany.

Maintenance of the historic Beth Abraham cemetery was a priority. Since there are Columbus families with Zanesville roots, JCLP partner Columbus Jewish Foundation was entrusted with that important task as well as with the management of endowments to support projects that resonate with the remaining Zanesville Jewish
Longtime Beth Abraham religious leader, Rabbi Jeffrey Elson, performed yeoman service in the disposition of the synagogue's extensive library. Books from Beth Abraham now in possession of the Columbus Jewish Day School, Hillel chapters at Ohio universities, and elsewhere keep alive the intellectual spirit of Beth Abraham.

Houston, Texas, is far from Zanesville but the intellectual spirit of Beth Abraham also lives there. Last summer's Hurricane Harvey devastated Congregation Beth Yeshurun and lost in the flood was Rabbi David Rosen's treasured edition of the Encyclopedia Judaica. A JCLP partner asked if one might be available from within the network and conveyed how it would be a small, meaningful gesture to send it to Houston. Shortly thereafter, three boxes of the multivolume encyclopedia arrived at Beth Yeshurun and one of the country's smallest congregations had just helped one of its largest. We are all responsible for each other—kol yisrael arevim zeh la zeh.

A solemn and poignant, although celebratory, ceremony last October deconsecrating the Beth Abraham building included a final Torah procession and readings before the mezuzah was removed and the Eternal Light extinguished. The physical building of Beth Abraham may no longer be a sacred place, but by adhering to a thoughtful and considerate plan the leadership of Beth Abraham ensured that the congregation's legacy will endure.

"We want people to know that Jews lived in Zanesville," Art Rogovin says.

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