Dear Friends,

JCLP heads into the new year of 5780 by increasing the size of congregations qualified to receive legacy planning assistance. While we maintain national and local partner relationships, JCLP is the only national Jewish organization working exclusively on behalf of small American congregations outside of metropolitan areas. Membership in qualified congregations is now set to include those with fewer than 100 members, up from 80 members.

The first priority for JCLP is to support the leadership, volunteers and active members of these sacred communities, which may be the only Jewish organizations in their locations. By helping community leaders craft strategic plans to address their most pressing concerns, JCLP also helps ensure that critical immediate and future decisions are made with dignity and respect for the accomplishments of previous generations.

This edition of The Legacy tells how the implementation of a Legacy Plan connected two disparate communities. We also introduce Richard Klein, a new member of the JCLP board who has been a longtime friend and champion of the project.

In other news, Board member Sam Bernstine and I made a presentation at a conference in Central Pennsylvania entitled, “Imagining Jewish Communities in a Changing Environment”.

Congregations nationwide are considering and engaging in legacy planning. As always, please reach out if your community or one you know of could benefit from the counsel provided at no expense by JCLP.

Best wishes,

Noah Levine,
Executive Vice President, JCLP
Cell: 1-(678) 429-8895
Email: nlevine@jclproject.org

JOURNEY OF AN ARK

No matter the denomination, the aron kodesh—holy ark—is the centerpiece of every synagogue. Along with the precious Torah scrolls it houses and other religious objects, the holy ark represents the essential material culture of each congregation.

Secular use of an aron kodesh is forbidden.

Built on its worldwide relationships, JCLP has facilitated the transfer of Torahs from legacy congregations to emerging or revitalized Jewish communities around the world—with the bringing of sacred scrolls from legacy communities in Pennsylvania,
Indiana and elsewhere to other congregations in the U.S. and beyond, including Poland, Israel and Indonesia.

Earlier this year JCLP connections led to the transfer of an entire aron kodesh from a Reform temple in the South to a Modern Orthodox congregation in the Midwest.

Ira Kahn, Vice President of Skokie Central Congregation in Illinois, had read about the work of JCLP. In the middle of renovating a new home—a building that had not been designed as a synagogue—for the Skokie congregation, he searched for an aron kodesh that would enhance the experience of the congregants and symbolize the continuity of Jewish life. Through another JCLP Legacy community and JCLP he connected with 70-year-old Temple Beth El in Rocky Mountain, North Carolina. JCLP guided Temple Beth El through the drafting of a Legacy Plan. With the impending closing of its building, Temple Beth El had a beautiful, historic ark available and its transfer to Skokie would become part of the implementation of that plan.

Communication between Skokie and Rocky Mountain, with Noah Levine as the link, began last spring. Barry Chesis and Gail Stafford, Temple Beth El leaders in the creation of the Legacy Plan, realized they had a willing and empathetic partner in the emotional and intricate process of dismantling the ark in Rocky Mountain for transportation and reassembly halfway across the country in Illinois. A local carpenter helped prepare the ark for travel. As they worked, he and Barry Chesis shared memories of acquaintances in common. When he offered to donate his time, the non-Jewish carpenter learned the meaning of the words “mensch” and “mitzvah.” Their activity was documented for archival purposes.

Chesis, who with his family has lived in Rocky Mountain for fewer than 20 years, has a deep appreciation of the congregation's long history. Jews first arrived in Rocky Mountain in the mid 19th century, but it wasn’t until the early 1920s that a group of women led the founding of Temple Beth El. The synagogue building was opened in 1949 just before Rosh Hashanah. With the closing of the building, Barry Chesis acknowledged the end of a symbolic representation of Judaism in Rocky Mountain. When he discussed how he felt with his wife, Indy, she commented that their efforts were allowing for the “growth of Judaism in other places.”

The work that they and their colleagues put into the creation of a Legacy Plan for Beth El assures that the spirit of all those people who stood in front of the incandescent and majestic aron kodesh over 70 years lives on.

This year, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services held extra resonance for the members of Skokie Central Congregation in Illinois because the ark now enfolding the congregation’s six Torahs reinforces their sacred community with the devotion of generations of Temple Beth El members from Rocky Mountain, North Carolina.

Arrival of the Beth El aron kodesh has had a profound influence on our shul,” says Ira Kahn. “It’s continued use, along with the presence of their two statuesque menorahs, assures that the spirit of that community lives on.”

WELCOME TO THE BOARD

Richard A. Klein, recently retired Associate Director of the Network of Independent Communities of The Jewish Federation of North America is the newest member of the JCLP Board of Directors.

“We’re thrilled to have someone with his acute sensitivity join the board,” said Noah Levine,” said Noah Levine. “While at JFNA Network Richard was the first to make a connection between JCLP and a small-town congregation in need of legacy planning.” 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 firsthand 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.

For him, the sadness at the diminished prospects of such towns was always tempered with an appreciation of how these places contributed to the richness of American Jewish life and how planning could preserve their legacies.

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 congregation 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. Another aspect of the plan was the establishment of the Temple Sinai Jewish History Center, part of the Sumter County Museum, now installed in the congregation’s former social telling the history of Sumter’s singular Jewish community.
Martinsville and Petersburg, Virginia, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and elsewhere are among the communities introduced to JCLP by Richard Klein.

“The guidance JCLP gives is a blessing and I am pleased to join the board,” 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.”