Dear Friends,

Spring’s unfurling leaves on what had been winter’s bare branches, along with fresh green shoots pushing out of formerly frozen earth, denote the continuity of the seasons.

On the holiday calendar, Purim hamantashen and merriment give way to Passover seders and matzah. After seven weeks of Omer-counting there is then Shavuot and celebration of the giving of the Torah.

And so it goes season after season and generation after generation.

This edition of The Legacy highlights one of the results of the continuing purpose of JCLP to cultivate Jewish continuity from generation to generation by encouraging communities to consider how they can honor their history and plan for the future. There is also another profile of one of our hard-working board members.

Since the beginning of this year, seven new congregations in Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina asked JCLP for assistance in creating legacy plans and another five congregations in Nevada, New Hampshire, Texas, and Vermont made inquiries. Six communities in Arkansas, Illinois, and Ohio are now establishing endowment and maintenance arrangements for their cemeteries with the help of local Jewish Federations facilitated by JCLP.

We are assisting a congregation in Massachusetts that will be closing in June to create legacy endowments designed to support both Jewish and general programs in the Boston area.

JCLP will participate in the fall conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society as a panelist in a presentation on the them of “public memory” and is involved in the planning of a conference in Central Pennsylvania that will focus on the subject of “communities in a changing environment.”

I’m also pleased to announce that www.jclproject.org now features a direct link to a page describing congregational artifacts available for sale or donation. Direct contact information is on the page as JCLP does not handle sales or transfers of objects.

We continue our sponsorship of articles about Jewish life in small towns in the Atlanta Jewish Times. Read here about why Rome, Georgia, is like the storybook Little Engine That Could and here about what summer camp meant to isolated Jewish kids in Mississippi.

JCLP participation in regional meetings and conferences allows an opportunity to meet representatives of communities that may be benefit from insights and connections offered by JCLP but, as always, please reach out if you know of anyone of your particular acquaintance who might be interested.

Sincerely,

Noah Levine
A Laudable Mitzvah

The first mention of burial in Jewish tradition is in Vayeiya when Abraham buries Sarah.

Through the Commission on Cemetery Preservation (COCP), a supporting foundation of the Jewish Federation of Cleveland, Jewish Cleveland continues to recognize that honoring those who came before by caring for their final resting places is one of the highest mitzvot we can achieve.

A community-wide effort was undertaken to look after older cemeteries in the Cleveland area that have fallen into disrepair because the congregations that owned them are no longer in existence or were unable to maintain them. There are 16 Jewish cemeteries in the Cleveland vicinity and another three general cemeteries with Jewish sections. Seven of the Jewish cemeteries are now under the jurisdiction of the Commission on Cemetery Preservation and the Commission has accumulated a wealth of knowledge in the best practices to ensure the long-term ability of these historic and sacred, but regrettably overlooked, places to endure.

With an appreciation of the Commission’s expertise, JCLP consultant Steve Edelstein approached colleagues within the Federation to explore if and how the foundation might help three small communities beyond Cleveland in Northeast and North Central Ohio. Cemetery maintenance is frequently the first issue faced by contracting Jewish communities and was an important part of the Legacy Plan that each of these congregations was in the midst of drafting.

Emanuel Jacob Congregation of Mansfield, Congregation Oheb Shalom of Sandusky, and Temple Tifereth Israel of Ashtabula are typical of the small Jewish congregations that characterize JCLP Legacy communities: diminished in size but fierce in devotion and a recognition that they must plan for the future.

“We were so impressed by the forward thinking of these small communities in outlying areas and how much they want to maintain a Jewish presence,” said Barry Reis, chief financial officer of the Jewish Federation of Cleveland. “We in Cleveland were happy to help out.”

The Sandusky and Mansfield communities own their historic cemeteries, with some graves dating to the 19th century. Dedicated volunteers currently handle care and maintenance of the properties. There is a Jewish section of the Ashtabula Township cemetery.

As of late May, the Commission on Cemetery Preservation of the Jewish Federation of Cleveland has come to an agreement with all three communities to ensure the future of their cemeteries by providing them with an infrastructure of guidance and expertise. The Commission has agreed to be a resource to ensure the continued care and maintenance when local volunteers in Sandusky and Mansfield can no longer perform those tasks. In the case of Ashtabula, the Commission will be a periodic monitor of Jewish graves in the township cemetery and act as a reference on Jewish ritual for local providers.

The sensitive and responsive manner in which the Jewish Federation of Cleveland is working to preserve the cemeteries of smaller, distant communities that might look at Cleveland as the big and impersonal city is a model of exemplary kindness. We strengthen our present and future when we so honor the past.

“Cemetery preservation, everywhere our people live, is an issue Federations will have to grapple with nationwide,” said Reis.

Please reach out to JCLP if your small-town or rural Jewish community has concerns about perpetual care for a cemetery.

ETZ CHAIM HE LAMACHAZIKIM BA

“It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it.”

Unity prevails when those words are sung as the Torah returns to the aron kodesh after being read. Those in attendance feel connected to others where they are, and also to others wherever else in the wide Jewish world a Torah is being read.

Crafted with ritual precision and decorated with velvet mantels and silver crowns, each Torah tells a story beyond that of scrolls
commemorated on Shavuot. Torahs are precious possessions and the passage of a Torah from one community to another is the most visible sign of a legacy from one generation to the next.

There are currently 29 Torahs from Legacy Congregations in many regions of United States out in the world where they are honored and appreciated by new generations of Jewish practice. Synagogues of multiple denominations in the United States but also in places as disparate as Paraguay and Guatemala and Indonesia and Israel and Poland now cherish Torahs that were once cherished by Legacy Congregations.

Several of these Torahs are from Temple Hadar Israel in New Castle, Pennsylvania, which before closing at the end of last year crafted a thoughtful and complete Legacy Plan that considered how the members of the Hadar Israel community wanted their essence to endure. Hadar Israel President Sam Bernstine believes so strongly in the value of the JCLP process that he joined the board of directors.

In one especially poignant exchange, Beit Centrum in Warsaw received a Torah, given to this congregation that is part of Poland’s re-emerging Jewish community, that was originally from Poland. To reach its destination, the Torah was carried by a congregant from New Castle to Los Angeles and handed over in front of Wilshire Boulevard Temple’s stained glass windows depicting the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Torah was then carried to Warsaw by the executive director of Friends of Jewish Renewal in Poland.

Another Torah from New Castle went on a different journey to Temple Solel in Fort Mill, South Carolina, where this young congregation crafted a new ark and decorations for it and thinks often of the kind people from New Castle they met during the acquisition of their beloved Torah.

Yet another Hadar Israel Torah has gone to a new home in Indonesia, where it is one of the few in the country and helps bring the small and spread-out Indonesian Jewish community closer to the rest of the Jewish world.

In Israel, Dr. Yizhar Hess, CEO of The Masorti Movement in Israel, happily presents the richly-colored new mantel of his congregation’s Torah that was a gift from B’Nai Jacob Congregation in Ottumwa, Iowa.

Summer camps and Hillel chapters around the country have also been recipients of Torahs from Legacy Congregations.

When students at the University of Vermont first observed Shabbat in the fall just after receiving the gift of a Torah from Beth Isaac Synagogue in Trenton, Michigan, it was a cause for celebration.

“The spirit of Beth Isaac filled the room,” said Matt Vogel, executive director of UVM Hillel.

The greatest expression of L’Dor V’Dor—Generation to Generation—that JCLP seeks to perpetuate is reflected in the beaming face of the young woman pictured here when she celebrated her recent bat mitzvah with the Beth Isaac Torah and the University of Vermont Hillel community.

MEET MICHAEL Z. KAY, JCLP BOARD CHAIR

“While big cities get much of the attention when the past hundred or so years of American Jewish history is told, small towns played a compelling part of the story,” says Michael Kay.

Although he grew up in one of those big cities and now lives in Atlanta, family lore gave him a sense of connection to that small-town Jewish past. He never knew his grandparents but did know that his grandmother came from one such town—Amsterdam, New York, on the Erie Canal.

Interest in and appreciation of the contributions of such communities to American Jewish life played a factor when, as a longtime leader within the Atlanta Jewish community, he was asked to chair the board at the time the Jewish Community Project became a 501(c)(3) corporation.

Retired from a prominent career as a hospitality executive, and especially lauded for his accomplishments while president and chief executive officer at LSG Sky Chefs (the world’s largest provider of airline catering services), Michael Kay has been an officer of Jewish Federation of Atlanta, United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, The Weber School, Jewish Family & Career Services, and the Community Foundation of Metropolitan Atlanta.

He is respected for depth of experience in both commercial and charitable organizations.

“My role at JCLP is to make sure we are building a stable and sustainable structure for the organization,” he says. “Establishing trust has always been the toughest hurdle to overcome when encouraging communities most likely to benefit from engagement with JCLP to do so.

“We now have board members from congregations that have been through the process of creating a legacy plan and the valuable counsel and connections attained through JCLP. These individuals are the ones best able to relate to others in similar situations because of their experiences, making consideration of the future less stressful.”
Under the guidance of Michael Kay and through the efforts of the entire board of directors, JCLP will continue to respect and assist small-town American Jewish communities in the creation of legacy plans that honor an important aspect of the American Jewish story.

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