

Perpetuating disappearing congregations

A legacy project helps dwindling US Jewish communities create plans to address what they will leave behind

By Jan Jaben-Eilon *Atlanta*

IN THE 1880s, as the Norfolk and Western (now Norfolk Southern) Railroad inched its way west from the east coast of the United States, the discovery of coal brought national prominence to Pocahontas, Virginia. Jewish merchants from the New York and Baltimore areas followed the railroad and established their businesses and communities both in Pocahontas – named for the daughter of an Indian chief who lived in the 17th century – and other small coal-mining towns in the area. Synagogues and cemeteries soon flourished.

But as coal mining diminished, so did both the general and Jewish populations in Pocahontas. Today, all that remains is the Pocahontas Cemetery, the last home for those pioneering American Jews. The Jewish community in the nearby mining town of Bluefield, West Virginia, which began

developing prior to World War I, eventually took over responsibility for the Pocahontas Cemetery, full of graves of Jewish children who died in the 1918 flu epidemic.

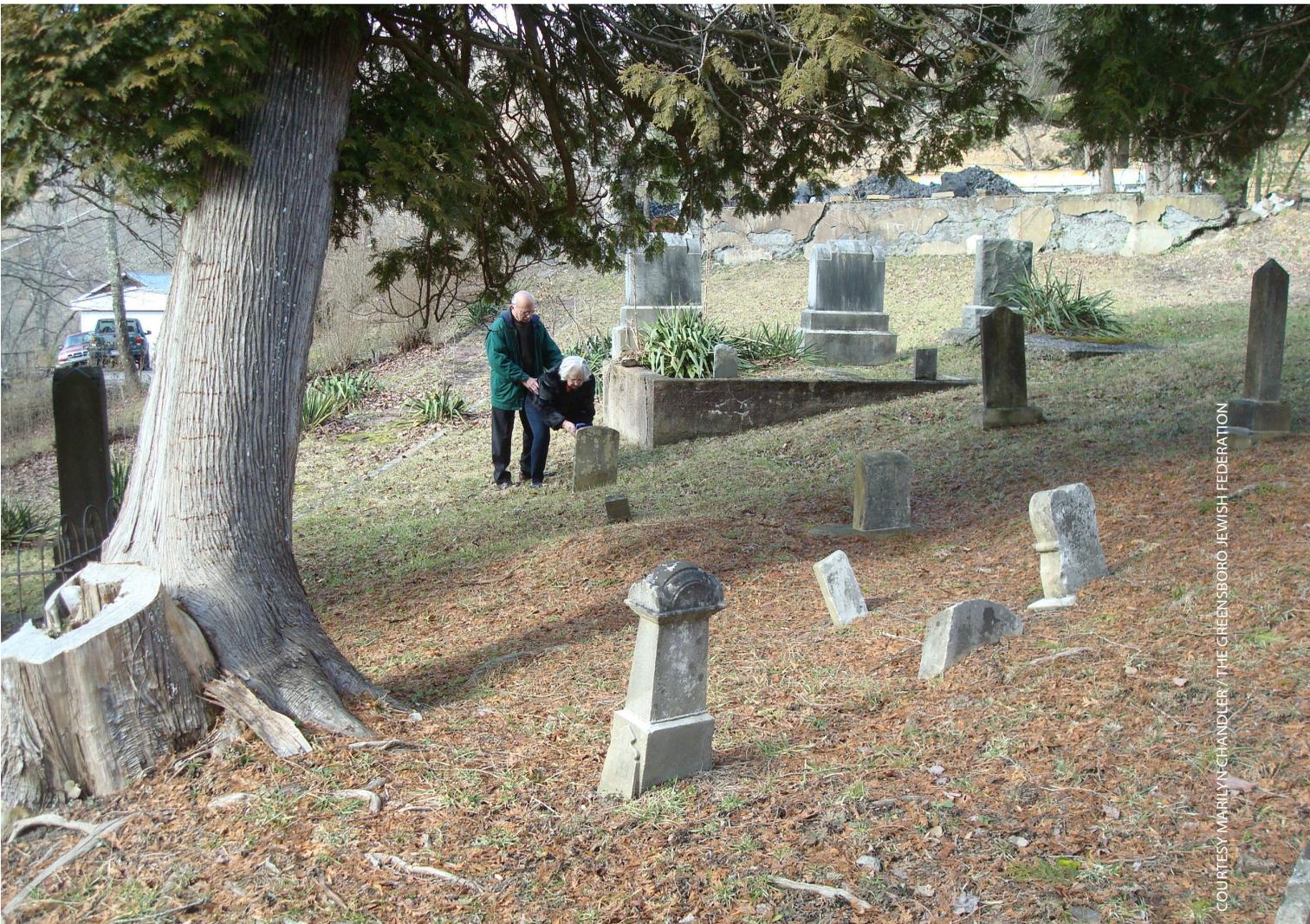
According to 86-year-old Norris Kantor, Bluefield's Congregation Ahavath Sholom had about 100 members in the 1950s when he moved there, the hometown of his wife, Doris. About 18 months ago, however, with only 20 families remaining and an average age in the 60s, Kantor and others realized the congregation's hourglass was getting bottom-heavy.

"We realized that sooner or later we had to do something. What happens to the cemetery and our other assets after we're gone?" he tells *The Jerusalem Report*.

Congregation Ahavath Sholom employed its last full-time rabbi up until about five years ago, relying instead on student rabbis

from the Hebrew Union College (HUC). So Kantor turned to HUC, which directed him to David Sarnat, a former head of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, who had created the Jewish Community Legacy Project (JCLP) with the sole purpose of helping congregations like Ahavath Sholom prepare for a future after they cease to be self-sustaining.

It all began with Temple Sinai in Sumter, South Carolina, says Sarnat. When he was asked to help the congregation in 2007, he discovered that there were about 150 potential communities across the US with a similar experience of aging membership and changing demographics. Soon there would be no Jewish communities in those towns. After Sarnat assisted Temple Sinai with creating a plan to perpetuate its legacy and arrange for the disbursement of its assets af-



COURTESY MARILYN CHANDLER, THE GREENSBORO JEWISH FEDERATION

All that remains of the pioneering American Jewish community of Pocahontas, Virginia is the cemetery

ter it ceases to exist, Sarnat was referred to other congregations in need.

With initial funding from the Marcus Foundation, and now in partnership with the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) and the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), JCLP works with leaders of aging and diminishing congregations to consider ways to extend life and meaning to community assets, religious and historic artifacts, or maintain cemeteries like the one in Pocahontas.

Together with former Atlanta Federation executive Noah Levine, Sarnat works with congregational leadership to assess the realities of their communities, sustain active Jewish life as long as possible and help create a plan to address the legacy they wish to leave behind.

“We ask them what their values and interests are,” explains Levine. Some congregations want to use their assets to support Holocaust education or youth scholarships to Israel, all bearing their communities’ names so their legacies live on.

THE PROCESS, which generally takes one to two years, isn’t easy. “It’s a difficult process because it’s an emotional one,” says Sarnat. Congregations don’t want to acknowledge that their communities won’t be able to sustain themselves forever. “But what starts off very depressing for congregations can become inspiring and liberating. They know they will leave a footprint,” adds Levine.

In the case of Bluefield’s Ahavath Sholom, assuring that the Pocahontas Cemetery is maintained in perpetuity was one

of its top priorities as it prepared its legacy plan. Kantor believes the congregation can continue to operate for probably two more years. “But when we’re down to five or seven families, it will be time to blow the whistle.” Knowing that a plan is in place to take care of the Pocahontas Cemetery and manage the congregation’s remaining assets is a “huge relief,” he adds.

“Congregation boards have a fiduciary responsibility,” says Levine. “They must be strategic and do the planning while there’s still a viable board.” JCLP acts as an independent, outside consultancy that has no skin in the game. Congregations don’t pay a fee for JCLP’s services. “One of the attractions of JCLP is that we come in as honest brokers. We aren’t selling anything; we don’t represent anyone. We just consider the best interests of the community,” Levine



COURTESY THE JEWISH COMMUNITY LEGACY PROJECT

Noah Levine: 'These communities are a significant chapter in American Jewry'



COURTESY THE JEWISH COMMUNITY LEGACY PROJECT

David Sarnat created the Jewish Community Legacy Project



COURTESY THE GREENSBORO JEWISH FEDERATION

Marilyn Chandler, executive director of the Greensboro Jewish Federation

tells The Report.

“We’re not looking to build JCLP as an institution,” stresses Sarnat, but rather “use the resources of existing institutions and work collaboratively with them.” The two former Federation executives don’t make cold calls to congregations in dying communities. They respond to referrals. “To the extent that people are aware of JCLP and make referrals will allow us to help communities,” he says.

The model that JCLP has developed is to connect these diminishing congregations with nearby Federations in larger cities. These Federations have professional managers of endowment funds who are able to take responsibility for funds, established as part of the legacy plans of these smaller communities. “We have identified certain regions with clusters of congregations,” which could be connected to nearby Federations, explains Sarnat.

Recently, Levine traveled more than 2,000 miles, driving around Arkansas, visiting five communities and the Jewish Federation in Little Rock. Two of those congregations will close their doors next summer, while the others are “trucking along fine,” says Levine, who was trained as a community organizer and social worker and has served as the president of his own large congregation in the Atlanta area. “I have a passion for this. I know synagogues are the heart and soul of their communities, especially in small communities.”

“Plus,” he adds, “We can help these congregations recycle their assets.”

For example, Sarnat connected the Bluefield community to the Greensboro Jewish Federation in North Carolina, where some of the congregation’s former members now live. Already, the Greensboro Federation had created a fund for Martinsville, Virginia’s Ohev Zion, which is still viable. “Martinsville wasn’t on our radar,” says Marilyn Forman Chandler, executive director of the Greensboro Jewish Federation, “but the brother of one of our members lives there.

What starts off very depressing for congregations can become inspiring and liberating; they know they will leave a footprint

“We were approached in 2007 by David Sarnat and encouraged to reach out to area communities,” she says. “We were asked to visit Martinsville, formerly a textile community, because it was shrinking. I believe strongly in JCLP’s goals and its mission. I personally and professionally feel strongly in keeping the memories of these communities alive,” says Chandler, explaining that Greensboro, with its 3,000 Jews, is the closest viable Jewish community to both Mar-

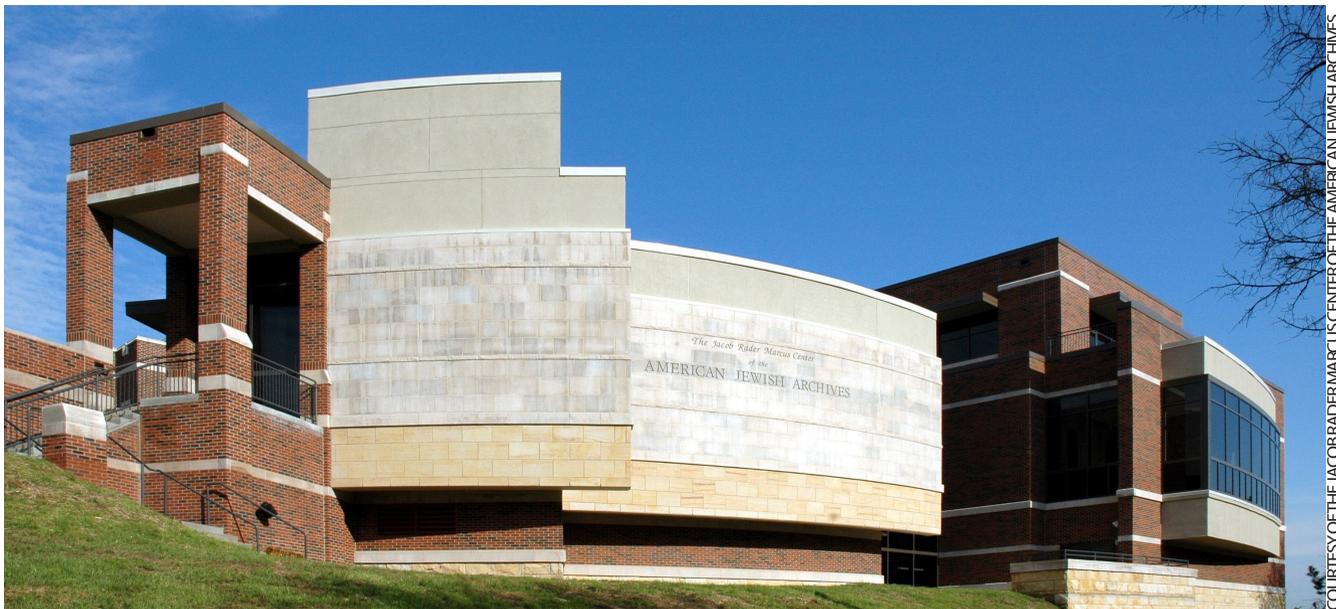
tinsville and Bluefield.

“We have Reform, Conservative, Chabad and Reconstructionist congregations in Greensboro. We call it small, but mighty,” she says, adding that its foundation manages 275 funds with \$60 million in assets. “We are holding funds for Camp Ramah Darom, Hillels, many congregations and schools as well as individual family funds.”

The Greensboro Federation is not the only one reaching out to small Jewish communities in their areas with shaky futures. Beth Israel Congregation in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, is one of several communities, which have created legacy plans that include arrangements with the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh to handle their assets.

According to 84-year-old Milton (Mickey) Radman, Beth Israel will split its investments three ways. One-third will go to the Latrobe Emergency Food Pantry, one-third to Seton Hill University for scholarships to send students to study at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Israel, and one-third to maintain a rabbinic presence in nearby Greensburg. In addition, two Torah scrolls were sold to a Jewish community center in New Jersey and one to a congregation in Pittsburgh.

Latrobe, he explains to The Report, was the specialty steel capital of the world. “This town was a shopping center in itself,” Radman recalls, adding that he owned a men’s retail store that went out of business in the mid-1980s. The Jewish community in Latrobe was very philanthropic and well respected in the larger community, he says,



COURTESY OF THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio

which is one reason that some of its assets will support the local food bank. “We want them to remember there was once a strong Jewish community here.”

“Strong” may be a relative term. At its height in 1964, Beth Israel had 86 members. It never had a full-time rabbi, but used student rabbis. One of them was later known as the comedian Jackie Mason. When he was a seminary student, he conducted High Holy Day services for Beth Israel. “His name wasn’t Mason then,” says Radman, “but during the sermon he had them rolling in the aisles.”

ALTHOUGH RADMAN acknowledges that it’s sad to close a synagogue, it was not a difficult decision. “There’s no one other than me and one other person, the congregation president, to make the decision. We ran the congregation.” He says it’s also a relief to know that a legacy plan is in place. “It’s been a very positive experience working with the Pittsburgh Federation,” he adds.

In Trenton, Michigan – a distant suburb of Detroit – Beth Isaac Synagogue celebrated its 50th year in 2014 before finally closing its doors in May this year. “Seven years ago we established a planning committee with the goal of closing the synagogue,” recalls Nancy Banker, a retired teacher. “We thought it would be five years. We put it off as long as possible, but we didn’t have enough bodies. The same six people were

doing everything.”

The group didn’t know where to start the process until it read about the JCLP in a Jewish publication and contacted Levine. He, in turn, connected them to the Jewish Federation of metropolitan Detroit. The planning group eventually decided on three recipients of the endowment in Beth Isaac’s name: Hunger Relief in the Metro Detroit Jewish community, subsidies for a senior assisted-living center in the Detroit Jewish community, and Birthright Israel.

But finding homes for all of its Judaica took a bit more work and time. Prayer books, menoras, American and Israeli flags and flag poles, Torah crowns and breastplates, *yads* (pointers used for reading the Torah), and wedding canopies were distributed as far away as South Dakota, Texas, Vermont and Virginia. Upon the first reading from the Torah donated by Beth Isaac synagogue, the University of Vermont Hillel adviser commented, “The spirit of the congregation was in the room.”

In addition, the American Jewish Archives (AJA) at HUC in Cincinnati, Ohio, received a CD containing copies of Beth Isaac’s monthly bulletins, minutes, an inventory list, a history of the congregation, a list of its student rabbis, its legacy plan and photos, as well as other historical items.

According to Gary Zola, director of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, his organization was

“way ahead of the idea that embraces the legacy project. Dr. Marcus thought it was important to archive all of American Jewish history.

“I’m enthusiastic about this. Dr. Marcus didn’t say that these congregations would fold, but he was prescient that we need to protect their legacies.”

Zola calls HUC’s rabbinical students, who serve many of these smaller congregations in rural towns, Marcus’s emissaries. “We want to preserve the record of these congregations.”

In fact, the JCLP helped the AJA obtain and preserve the historic records of two congregations: Temple Beth Israel of Steubenville, Ohio and Temple B’nai Israel in Parkersburg, West Virginia. And the AJA is currently working with JCLP to help preserve the histories of a dozen other congregations.

“These communities represent a significant chapter in American Jewry,” says Levine. “These are some of the finest lay leaders who have learned how to help their congregations to survive as Jewish communities in changing demographic environments and now who are able to say that even when they close, it doesn’t mean it’s the end of their existence. They can live on in important activities in the future. It’s all about respecting their past, acknowledging how they are dealing with the present and how they can contribute to the future.” ■