



CENTER FOR
SMALL TOWN
JEWISH LIFE

April 2019; Nissan 5779

Dear Friends,

“I don’t feel like we are a *real* synagogue. Don’t come in with too many expectations.” As I conclude my eighth full year as a rabbi in Maine, I recall one of the most defining conversations with a member of my synagogue at the beginning of my Jewish journey here. “A *real* synagogue.”

I realized that I would need to look as much to the *Velveteen Rabbit* as the Torah in serving a community that had internalized negative and demoralizing messages about its worth, its value, and its place in the broader Jewish community. The Jewish community in Waterville was always real, but it needed to believe that its future could be something other than its recent past. Community members needed to believe that they were worthy of care and success, and that these goals were indeed possible.

Our greatest journeys don’t take us from Egypt to Israel. They transport us from mundane and narrow spaces to new worlds of expansive possibility. As Passover approaches, we recall that our tradition teaches us that the Israelites needed to take a circuitous route to liberation not because they were lost, but rather because our ancestors needed time to adjust to the dignity and choices of freedom. True liberation and meaningful progress always begin with a change in mindset; we achieve our promise when we believe that we are worthy, and that the world can be different through courage, vision, hard work, collaboration, and the keeping of promises.

My congregant’s confession was not unique to Beth Israel or Colby Hillel. Her doubts have been shared by small-town synagogues in Maine and across the country. However, slowly but surely, there has been a significant shift in Jewish life in our state, not only as a direct result of the Center’s programs, but also through the renewed self-confidence of all Maine’s Jewish institutions.

This Passover, I invite you to join us on a journey into the possibilities of an expansive and exciting future. By making a gift today to support the Center for Small Town Jewish Life, you can continue to prove what is possible through collaboration, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to equal access to the best of Jewish life and learning. It is thanks to the contributions of supporters like you that Maine is redefining what small-town Jewish life can be. Since last Passover, the Center for Small Town Jewish Life has:

- Spearheaded the Maine Jewish Youth Connection with the support of the Bader Family Foundation. We have brought dozens of Maine teenagers together with Colby Hillel students for Torah learning, community building, and dynamic social activities around the state, culminating in a weekend of Jewish exploration in Boston.
- Convened the lay leadership of several Maine synagogues to work with a nationally renowned consultant in a series of collaborative workshops. This effort is revitalizing and professionalizing how our institutions are run.

- Mentored rabbinical students in our small-town synagogues and Hillels. These future rabbis are bringing new Torah to our communities, and learning about the challenges and opportunities of serving small congregations and campuses.
- Cultivated a strategic relationship with the Israel Policy Forum to bring top scholars to the Maine Conference for Jewish Life, deepening Mainers' connection to and knowledge of Israel and the Middle East.
- Hired a full-time program director with the support of Hillel International to further strengthen synagogue-Hillel relationships across Maine and increase the quality and impact of our core programming.
- Built sturdy and dynamic connections between Colby College and downtown Waterville through our Community Conversations program.

And we are not stopping there. In early May, Colby College President David Greene, Waterville City Manager Mike Roy, and I will engage in a timely public discussion about relations between Waterville and Colby. Additionally, the Maine Conference for Jewish Life will return to Waterville in June with dozens of dynamic teachers and our keynote speaker, Amir Tibon, Washington editor of *Ha'aretz*. This summer, Colby students will join rabbinical students as counselors at the mid-Maine Jewish Funtensive, bringing immersive Hebrew learning and outdoor adventures to scores of Maine kids. We will also welcome famed Jewish bluegrass band Nefesh Mountain to Colby and downtown Waterville for our fall Shabbaton (October 25-26, 2019), and join forces with the Conservative Yeshiva in February to bring small-town Jews from around the United States to small towns in Israel and to Jerusalem.

I hope you will consider partnering with us to help make these initiatives possible.

With warm wishes for a joyous Passover from Waterville,



Rabbi Rachel M. Isaacs, Director
Center for Small Town Jewish Life

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