



CENTER FOR SMALL TOWN JEWISH LIFE



December 2019; Kislev 5780

Dear Friends,

"I want to hear somebody pray. I want to hear somebody pray! Down in the valley and over yonder, I want to hear somebody pray." On a late-October evening, in a packed dining hall on Colby's campus, hundreds of Mainers joined in to sing these lyrics with Nefesh Mountain, a nationally renowned bluegrass band. Children as young as two years old, along with grandparents in their eighties and students from Colby, Bates, and the University of Maine, came together to raise their song with banjos, mandolins, and a beautiful chorus of human voices.

Like all Center events, it was an evening that was modest, intimate, and joyful. No frills. No swag. A dinner of baked salmon, simple soups, and vanilla ice cream. As we transitioned from dinner to our Friday-night service, we all moved our own wooden chairs from dinner tables to be closer to the small stage at the front of the dining hall. Kids sat in the laps of parents, grandparents, and synagogue friends. As the night went on, I looked back from the front row and saw faces aglow as the crowd swayed. It was good to come together from our small communities across the state and find joy in one another, in music, in our tradition, and in the privilege of knowing that a few times a year we can find comfort and joy in a truly statewide Jewish community.

The next day, we set up chairs for 15 people to join a few rabbinical students and Center staff for a small, traditional Saturday-morning service. We wondered whether it was even worth it to bring the Torah scroll down to our Shabbaton headquarters at Millett House because what were the chances we would actually make a *minyan*? By the time we reached the Torah service, we had 40 people packed into our small barn in Waterville for morning prayers. After services, the room was beyond capacity to hear former Member of Knesset Dr. Ruth Calderon teach "small-town Talmud" and to engage with our rabbinical fellows as they honed their pedagogical skills and shared their favorite texts. When we bundled up and pulled on our boots for our afternoon prayer hike with Nefesh Mountain, there were more than 100 of us climbing Runnals Hill, singing, sharing, and learning as we gazed down at the Kennebec Valley as the sun began to set.

Hanukkah is a holiday when we give thanks for unexpected miracles. It is a holiday that reminds us that our ancestors' response to daunting challenges was not just to curse the

darkness, but to kindle a small light in the hope that our light would grow. The Center for Small Town Jewish Life began as a spark, and now the light is spreading and illuminating the lives of hundreds of students and Mainers across our state.

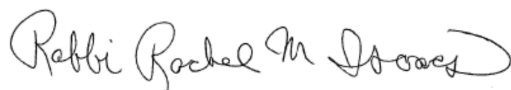
Our Fall Shabbaton would not have been possible without the hard work of our staff, but its real luminescence was guaranteed by the students who labored alongside us. Our Shabbaton fellow, Alecsandria Davis '20, is a Jewish studies minor from a small town in Oklahoma who has found a home at the Center and has brought the skills she gained from her family's restaurant business to planning events like the Shabbaton. In the spring, she will teach a Hebrew class via Zoom to folks across the state as she completes her fourth semester of Hebrew at Colby.

When our staff looks back at our work over the past few months, it is stories like Alecsandria's that affirm our purpose, give us the motivation to keep laboring to connect people through learning and service, and inspire us to keep spreading the sparks of Torah learning to students of all backgrounds.

This work would not be possible without the gifts of supporters across the nation who share our commitment to equity and access to superlative Jewish learning. This Hanukkah, I hope that you will consider making a gift in support of our shared work toward spreading the light of Jewish learning and tradition across the state of Maine, and, increasingly, to small towns and colleges across our nation.

To donate online go to colby.edu/jewishlife/support and click the Center for Small Town Life on the drop-down menu. If you prefer to send a gift by mail, please use the address below.

With gratitude and light,



Rabbi Rachel M. Isaacs, Director
Center for Small Town Jewish Life
Dorothy "Bibby" Levine Alford Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies

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Center for Small Town Jewish Life
Colby College
4270 Mayflower Hill
Waterville, ME 04901
207-859-4271
jewishlife@colby.edu
www.colby.edu/jewishlife

Center for Small Town Jewish Life | Colby College, 4270 Mayflower Hill, Waterville, ME 04901

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