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Strengthening a Historic Connection: Center for Small Town Jewish Life to Bolster Community Ties and Replace Them Elsewhere

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—Rabbi
Rachel Isaacs

Strengthening a Historic Connection

Center for Small Town Jewish Life to Bolster Community Ties and Replicate Them Elsewhere

By Stephen Collins '74

For generations, collaboration between Colby and central Maine's Jewish community has been one of the strong threads in the fabric of the town-gown partnership, and in recent years it's grown even stronger. Now a new initiative will extend that tie, attempting to bottle the formula that connects Colby, Hillel, and Waterville's Beth Israel Congregation so colleges and communities across the country can try to replicate it.

The formation of the Center for Small Town Jewish Life, based at Colby, was announced in February along with a gift of up to \$700,000 from the Harold Alfond Foundation to launch the center and to complete the endowment of a professorship in Jewish studies.

GOALS OF THE CENTER:

- expand innovative Jewish life programming for Waterville, including Colby students;
- extend programs to serve small congregations and colleges across Maine and New England;
- identify needs and strengths of small town Jewish communities and small colleges nationally and develop ways to address challenges; and
- work with national organizations and other colleges and communities, further establishing Colby as a recognized leader in opportunities for Jewish life.

Rabbi Rachel Isaacs is executive director of the center, and Pulver Family Associate Professor of Jewish Studies David Freidenreich is associate director. Isaacs, who will be the inaugural Dorothy “Bibby” Levine Alfond Assistant Professor in Jewish Studies, is also rabbi for Beth Israel synagogue, is on the faculty as instructor of Hebrew, is Colby's Jewish chaplain, and advises the Hillel chapter.

The academic mission of the center will build on years of work by Freidenreich and his students, who have studied and documented Jewish life in Maine. Freidenreich said American Jewish studies syllabi usually cover the Lower East Side of New York and then Long Island, but, he discovered when he arrived in 2008, “hardly anyone had studied the Jews of Maine.” So he set out to fix that, establishing student research



projects, where members of the Jewish community provide oral history and then attend presentations of the findings. “That’s been incredibly rewarding for the community and the students,” Freidenreich said. Years of research projects are represented on the Maine Jewish History Project website, web.colby.edu/jewsinmaine.

When Rabbi Isaacs arrived from New York five years ago, she discovered a dramatic difference between city and suburban Jewish communities (home to her and many of Colby’s Jewish students) and the Jewish community she found in central Maine. When she arrived, participation—both numbers and enthusiasm—was low in the Waterville synagogue and Colby’s Hillel chapter.

“In Waterville we have a synagogue that desperately needs youthful energy, and a lot of students that come to Colby with very strong Jewish backgrounds,” Isaacs said. Among other initiatives, a Waterville Jewish Leadership Fellowship for Colby students was created to build a genuine partnership between the two populations. Student roles include serving on the synagogue’s board, teaching Hebrew school, and tutoring for bar and bat mitzvahs.

Cara Goldfarb ’17, a leadership fellow who teaches and tutors, said she especially likes Hillel Home Hospitality, held once every semester. Students attend a synagogue service, and then afterward are paired with a congregation member and go to that member’s home for dinner. For Goldfarb, last semester’s pairing led to hours of engaged discussion dining with her hosts and another Colby student. “It felt like you were far from campus, which is important to have

when you’re a busy college student with a lot of commitments,” she said. “It just feels really homey.”

Isaacs said the idea behind the center is to provide quality resources to small town and rural congregations across the country and a model to leverage those resources in small communities to create vibrant Jewish life.

Freidenreich said the Colby-based center’s role won’t be to research Jewish life in other parts of the country, but rather to provide approaches and resources for other scholars to do regional work. Collaboration between Colby and Jews in Waterville goes back more than a century, Freidenreich says, but national Jewish organizations don’t commit resources to small towns. “The question is how can we serve those Jews who have been underserved to provide ... the kinds of resources that Jews in Newton, Massachusetts, or on Long Island take for granted?”

Goldfarb’s experience suggests it’s a win-win. The town-gown connection “helped me to strengthen my Jewish identity, connecting me with two very different congregations: my one from home and my one here. Both are very important to me in different ways,” she said. “Having a small congregation is something very special. People really care about one another, and we look out for each other.”

For more on the work of Pulver Family Associate Professor of Jewish Studies David Freidenreich and his students, and on Rabbi Rachel Isaacs and her journey to Maine, go to colby.edu/mag. For more on the Center for Small Town Jewish Life go to colby.edu/jewishblife. □

