



# JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH

## *Southern Jewish Heritage*

VOL. 31, NO 1

*Preserving the Past and Enhancing the Future*

FALL, 2021

## Cotton in the Fields and Challah on the Table: A Family Affair in the Mississippi Delta

*By Marcia Levy*

*"People are surprised that you're Jewish and a farmer, but . . . Gee, we were farming a long time ago in Israel. And we just went from shepherders to raising cotton. My grandfather farmed, my father farmed. That's the only thing I've ever wanted to do was farming. My wife and I, we've been farming for over 38 years here on this land. Cotton has been good to the Jewish people that came to the Mississippi Delta."*—Ben Lamensdorf

From an interview by Alfred Uhry in the 2000 documentary film, *Delta Jews*, directed by Mike DeWitt

If you take U.S. Highway 61 from Memphis south into Mississippi, with a few twists and turns down through Alligator, Mound Bayou and Cleveland, Merigold, Anguilla and Rolling Fork, you will come to Cary, a town where cotton is still king and where Morris Grundfest, a Jewish immigrant from Minsk, bought his first 200 acres of cotton land in 1919.

Like many immigrants, Morris entered America through New York. He had listed his occupation as a "cloak maker" and first lived on Ludlow Street on the lower East Side, where he befriended a fellow immigrant, Ike Bernstein. According to a family story, Ike was awaiting his sister Mollie's arrival from Ukraine. He couldn't get off work in time to meet her ship and asked Morris to pick her up at the dock. But Mollie refused to go with a man who

was a stranger to her, so Ike had to leave work and pick her up himself. Afterward, he introduced Morris to Mollie, and they later became man and wife.

Morris was looking for opportunity in his new homeland, and he heard that the Mississippi Delta was good place to go. He began as a peddler, but soon was able to open a store called M. Grundfest. He was well respected in Cary, served on the school board, and was supportive of the community, saying, "We came over on different boats, but we're in the same boat now." He applied for citizenship, and his swearing in was at the courthouse in nearby Rolling Fork, where Ben Lamensdorf served as his witness. At the time, Morris and Ben could not have imagined that someday their families would be united through marriage.

*Please see COTTON, page 3*



Mike & Mary Jane Lamensdorf; Ben & Betty Lee Lamensdorf;  
Dr. Lou Jacobs & Deborah Lamensdorf Jacobs

# President's Message . . . .



I would like to begin this message with a heartfelt THANK YOU to the JHSM board and committee members for enduring the challenges of the past two years and agreeing to stay on for a third year through 2022, ensuring continuity as we transition out of COVID.

I sincerely appreciate everyone's efforts and patience in planning Zoom programs, enhancing and updating our fabulous website, writing exceptionally interesting newsletters, writing Hebrew Watchman articles and ads, creating a new meaningful logo, balancing our budget, and reaching out to our members with letters and emails keeping everyone connected. The expression "it takes a village" is an understatement.

We have amazingly talented and dedicated board and committee members who have done whatever was necessary to make sure JHSM programs and educational opportunities are available in unprecedented times. I have received so many compliments about our Zoom programs and sincerely appreciate all the creative ideas and efforts to make the programs happen over these trying months. Phyllis Groskind and Lynne Mirvis, co-vice presidents of programming, have been so diligent with their innovative, creative, and engaging programs. I am very excited about our upcoming programs and hoping we will be able to transition in 2022 to in-person programming.

On Sunday, November 7th, via Zoom, film director, Donna Kanter will talk about her film, *The Presence of Their Absence*. It is the story of Fred Zaidman, the Los Angeles son of Holocaust survivors, and his search for his roots in the ashes of the Holocaust with the help of an Atlanta, Georgia minister and helpers from abroad, as he faces his own pain and reconstructs his future, through the puzzle of his ancestral past. Donna's father, Hal Kanter, was a prominent writer, producer and film director. It is a small Jewish world and Jewish history is everywhere.

Please see the back page of this newsletter for interesting and engaging programs to come. The remainder of the 2022 programming year is still being planned.

JHSM tries to never miss an opportunity to pre-

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of Memphis & the Mid-South

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\*Of Blessed Memory

serve the past and enhance the future of Memphis and Mid-South Jewry. Hopefully, we will have the opportunity to enhance our work with the archives, identifying and developing new sources of historically relevant materials. Oral family histories are very important to JHSM and hopefully the oral interviews and collection of family history will be resumed to preserve the past. Again, many thanks to everyone for giving me the privilege and honor to lead JHSM.

Wishing everyone a very healthy, happy, sweet, and safe NewYear(5782),L'Shanah Tova!!

All the best,

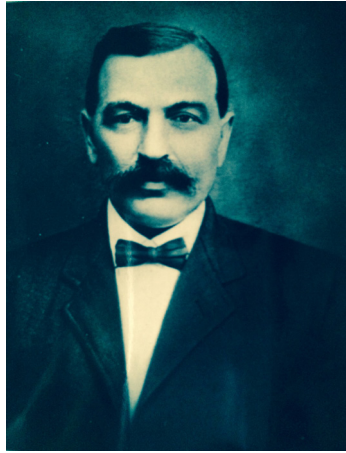
*Lorraine Wolf*

Check our website [www.jhsmem.org](http://www.jhsmem.org) for updates  
on programming, videos of past programs, our  
newsletter archive, and research resources.



Ben Lamensdorf was the son of Isaac and Miriam Lamensdorf. The Lamensdorfs had been innkeepers in Germany before coming to the United States with their ten children in the 1880s. They settled in Chicago, but four of the children, including Ben, opted to move south to Mississippi where they settled in and around Rolling Fork, which had been relatively small and undeveloped until the arrival of the New Orleans and Texas Railroad in 1883. As opportunities for commercial trade increased, enterprising Jewish merchants moved there and set up retail stores. Ben's son Sam, had a son also named Ben, the third generation of Lamensdorfs to reside in Rolling Fork.

Unfortunately, Morris Grundfest died at age 50 in August, 1925, after developing pneumonia while recovering from an emergency appendectomy in the hospital. It was suggested that the culprit may have been a fan which was blowing on him to bring relief from the brutal summer heat. Morris and Mollie had eight children. Their son, Ike Grundfest, followed in his father's footsteps, living in Cary, carrying on the family business and continuing to acquire cotton acreage. Eventually cotton farming became a more profitable business than operating a general store. Ike and



Morris Grundfest

his wife June had two daughters, Ann and Betty Lee, the third generation of Grundfests to live in Cary. In 1956 Betty Lee married Ben Lamensdorf, thus linking the third generation descendants of two Jewish immigrants, both of whom had come to Mississippi to make a living and establish secure lives for their families.

What was it like being Jewish in the Mississippi Delta? Betty Lee and Ben not only were involved in their families' farming operation, which had grown and prospered, but also were active members of Anshe Chesed Congregation in nearby Vicksburg. Mississippi Delta Jews have remained committed to keeping Jewish life alive in the area for as long as they can, often by creatively intertwining their Jewish roots with their southern roots. Temple Anshe Chesed is possibly the only congregation that has ever decorated its sukkah with cotton bolls. A family reunion inspired the

Lamensdorfs to create a challah cover and tallit that will be a family heirloom for generations to come, because it was woven from cotton harvested from the first piece of land originally bought by Morris Grundfest. That land is still in the family after more than 100 years.



Morris Grundfest Store in  
1937 flood.



Gathering at Cary train depot, c. 1909

Born in 1935 in Vicksburg, Betty Lee Grundfest was a lifelong resident of Cary. In addition to playing a supportive role in her family's farm, she was devoted to her husband Ben and to their children, Deborah and Mike, and was involved in a number of civic and social organizations. Her focus was organizations that benefited children—she volunteered as a Scout leader and served on the boards of Jewish Children's Regional Services and the Institute of Southern Jewish Life.

Also born in Vicksburg in 1935, Ben Lamensdorf grew up in Rolling Fork. Ben had a keen interest in local history especially as it related to Sharkey County and the Mississippi Delta. His career farming cotton

*Please see COTTON, page 4*



spanned over 60 years. During that time, Ben served in various capacities with numerous organizations and boards. He was elected Board Chairman of Bank of Anguilla, President of Delta Council and Board Chairman of Staplcofn, the oldest and one of the largest cotton-marketing cooperatives in the United States. He was a proponent of conservation and was appointed by Gov. Kirk Fordice to the Mississippi Forestry Commission. He worked to improve the cotton industry, and in 1981 Ben was named Cotton Farmer of the Year.

Their daughter, Deborah Lamensdorf Jacobs, who now lives in Atlanta, said she had always felt it was a privilege to represent Judaism in the Cary community. She added that the Delta was a “melting pot,” with Chinese as well as African Americans and Caucasians. When Chinese immigrants were looking for places in the South where they could put down roots, they often chose towns where there were Jews, because they knew these were diverse communities and believed they would be accepted there. Jacobs compared the rich diversity brought to the Delta by the various waves of immigrants who settled there to the various layers of rich soil which were washed over the land by the spring floods of the Mississippi River.

The Grundfests and Lamensdorfs wanted their community to be strong, so they set an example by performing acts of tzedakah to benefit not only the Jewish community but the community as a whole. Although the Jewish presence has diminished in the small towns of the Delta, the vast farmlands still become fluffy seas of white in the fall, with cotton ready to be picked, ginned, baled and shipped all over the world. The process now is streamlined, with automated cotton pickers and high speed gins that can produce a bale of cotton in two or three minutes.

Betty Lee Grundfest Lamensdorf died in 2017 and her husband Ben Lamensdorf died just a little over a year later in 2018. Both are buried in Anshe Chesed Cemetery. However, the family tradition of farming has been carried on by their son Mike Lamensdorf, who is the fourth generation to grow cotton on the flat fertile land first settled by his great-grandfather Morris Grundfest. ☆

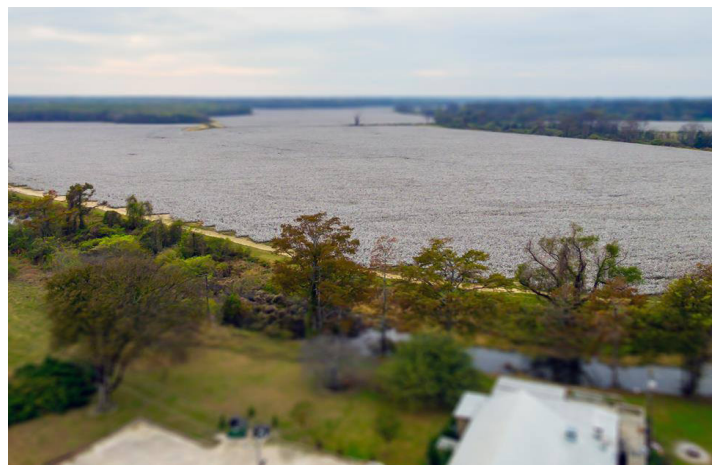
*Many thanks to Ann Grundfest Gerache and Deborah Lamensdorf Jacobs for providing the information and photos for this article.*



Challah cover and tallit woven of cotton harvested from Morris Grundfest's original land



Anshe Chesed sukkah decorated with cotton



Fields of cotton look like 'seas of fluffy white'



# The Rich History and Struggle for Survival of Two Jewish Congregations in the Mississippi Delta

*Anshe Chesed in Vicksburg was chartered in 1862, the second oldest congregation in the state of Mississippi. The Henry Kline Memorial Congregation in Rolling Fork, Mississippi, was organized in 1953 at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Grundfest. Both are examples of how Jews in small southern towns were committed to keeping Judaism alive in their communities.*

## Anshe Chesed Congregation

The Jewish history of Vicksburg predates the formal creation of a congregation. Between 1820 and 1840, about 30 Jewish families worshipped together informally in private homes. Barnard Yoste, a local merchant, was their president and led services. After the group outgrew the space available in private homes,

Yoste built an upstairs hall in a building he owned on Levee Street, and Vicksburg's Jews started meeting there.

These early settlers remained very devout, worshipping in the orthodox style and keeping kosher. By 1841, the growing Jewish population moved to form a congregation, calling it the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation of the Men of Mercy. By 1862, it had grown to 50 families, and was officially chartered with the state as Congregation Anshe Chesed—People of Loving Kindness.

As the congregation grew, they began the search for a rabbi. They learned of a rabbi named Henry Gotthelf in Louisville, Kentucky who had been only the second Jewish chaplain in the Union army during the Civil War. Apparently, these proud southerners did not hold this fact against the rabbi, and began to recruit him to come down to Mississippi.

Rabbi Gotthelf was a particularly active rabbi, who had immigrated to the United States from Bavaria with his wife Sophie Launauer. In 1866, the congregation hired Rabbi Gotthelf at a salary of \$40 per month. Under

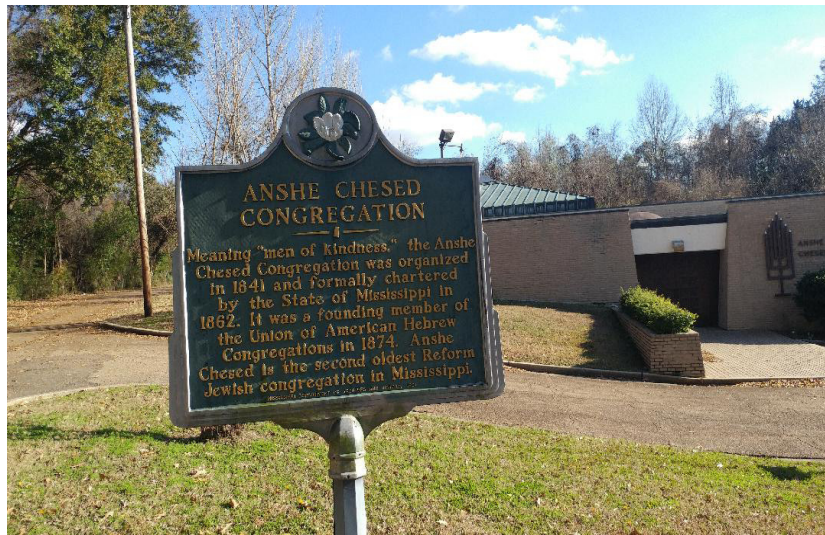
Gotthelf's leadership, the congregation gradually moved away from the orthodox tradition, and in 1873 adopted Reform Judaism when they became a charter member of the new Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Soon, the congregation took the logical step of building a house of worship. The congregation secured the required \$25,000 by a combination of selling their pews

and soliciting private donations from congregants. On February 27, 1868, the congregation purchased land on Cherry Street for their temple. On May 20, 1870, the temple was officially dedicated, and the Vicksburg press called it, "a day of gladness and joy, such as we will naturally feel on having accomplished a good object." Rabbi Max Lillienthal of Cincinnati

was the featured speaker for the occasion. The program began with a parade from the B'nai B'rith hall to the new temple, led by a police escort and Jaeger's Brass Band from New Orleans. Special guests included Mississippi Governor James Alcorn, the mayor of Vicksburg, and many other state and local officials. Several Christian clergy members also took part in the ceremony. The dedication ceremony was followed by a grand banquet.

After Rabbi Gotthelf died of yellow fever in 1878, the congregation had trouble filling the position until 1883 when Rabbi Herman Bien was invited to lead Anshe Chesed. He was known as the "poet Rabbi" and he wrote several volumes of poetry, the most impressive of which, *Ben Beor*, was written while in Vicksburg. He was well-loved by his congregants for his excellent oratory skills. On April 22, 1895, however, he was found near death at the Florence Hotel in Birmingham, where he had left a suicide note



Temple Anshe Chesed on Grove Street and Historical Marker

for his family and friends revealing his disappointment with his life. The suicide happened just after he was replaced at his Vicksburg pulpit, and followed a job rejection from Temple Emanuel in Birmingham.

Rabbi George Solomon, who had replaced Bien, started in 1895. Rabbi Solomon was well known for riding his bicycle all over town. In addition to providing leadership to his congregation, he also operated a Vicksburg private school, which served as an alternative to what was in his view, "a deplorable state of public education." After his tenure in Vicksburg, Rabbi Solomon moved on to Congregation Mikveh Israel in Savannah, Georgia.

Between 1880 and 1900, a new wave of Jewish immigration bolstered the Jewish population numbers in Vicksburg. These new Jews did not share the German background of their fellow Vicksburg Jews, but instead came largely from Eastern Europe. With few exceptions, the new Jews practiced in the orthodox tradition, and rather than joining Anshe Chesed, they formed a new congregation called Ahavas Achim. They held services at the Old Masonic Temple Building.

Ahavas Achim did not last long however, and financial difficulties forced them to unite with Anshe Chesed. The decision to join Anshe Chesed is frequently attributed to Rabbi Sol Kory, who began leading the reform temple in 1903. He made a sincere effort to reach out to these new Vicksburg Jews, and worked to accommodate their traditional practices. They were allowed to wear yarmulkes during services, which were usually forbidden in classical reform temples. Rabbi Kory served the congregation until his death in 1936.

According to his successor, Rabbi Stanley Brav, "Rabbi Kory must be given full credit for having affected the nearest thing to a united religious community in the course of his ministry, both by winning over newcomers through his personal involvement with their problems and by getting old timers to attend occasional minyans and meet other religious needs deeply felt by the more traditionally minded of the newer families." Rabbi Kory was additionally appreciated for his services outside of Vicksburg, frequently visiting both Greenville and Lexington.

Rabbi Brav, who came to Vicksburg in 1937,

was notable for forming the first temple youth group in the state of Mississippi as well as the Jewish Welfare Federation of Vicksburg. Brav was very involved in the larger community as well, giving numerous radio messages which were reprinted in the Vicksburg Evening Post. When the city celebrated the end of World War II, Rabbi Brav led the city's ecumenical worship service on the courthouse steps. He was also committed to interfaith relations, and started an annual Thanksgiving service that brought Christians and Jews together to worship. In 1948, Rabbi Brav moved on to take a pulpit in Cincinnati.

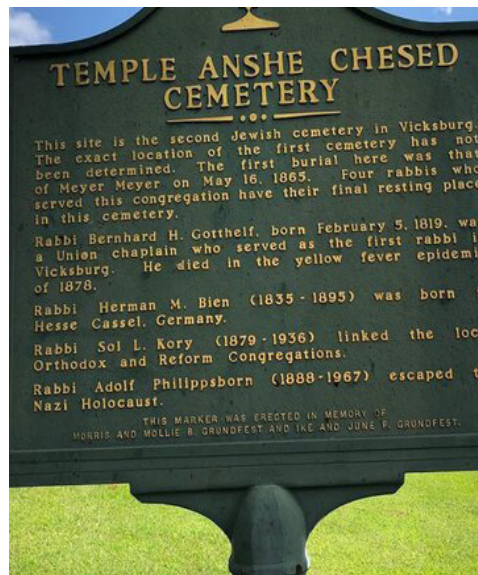
He was replaced that same year by Rabbi Samuel R. Shillman. Rabbi Shillman served the congregation only five years but was highly influential in the community,

and served as chairman of the Crippled Children's Society, Vicksburg National Park Study Commission, and president of the Warren County Ministerial Association. In 1953 he left Vicksburg in favor of a post in Roanoke, Virginia. Shillman was followed by Leonard Rothstein (1954-1956), Adolf Philippsborn (1956-1961), Robert Blinder (1962-1965), and Allan Schwartzman (1966-1989).

In 1865 there were about 90 Jewish families and about 35 Jewish-owned retail stores in Vicksburg. After the Civil War the Jewish community experienced further

growth with increases in population and affluence. A magnificent temple on Cherry Street was completed in 1879 and a city-wide dedication celebration attended by dignitaries from diverse faiths was held.

After World War II the Jewish population in Vicksburg began to decline. The congregation decided to leave the downtown area, and a new smaller temple was built near the cemetery at the end of Grove Street. It was dedicated in 1970. By 1989, the congregation no longer had a full-time rabbi, relying on visiting rabbis and lay leaders. In 2015 the congregation celebrated its 175th anniversary, but eventually, only a small contingent of Jewish families remained. The congregation now has donated their building to Friends of the Vicksburg National Park and Campaign in return for a guarantee to maintain the cemetery, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.





## Henry Kline Memorial Congregation

For much of the late-nineteenth and twentieth century, Jews from the Sharkey County towns of Rolling Fork, Cary, and Anguilla attended services and performed life cycle events at Greenville's Hebrew Union Congregation. As the Jewish population grew over the course of the twentieth century, community leaders began to explore the possibility of forming a congregation to maintain Jewish continuity in their area.

In the 1880s, Henry Kline arrived in Anguilla by way of the emerging railroad. Kline was unsatisfied with the dearth of Jewish educational opportunities available to Jewish children in the rural area. To remedy this, he opened up his home to the children of the community and taught Hebrew lessons every Sunday.

It wasn't until 1953 that the community came together to worship together. Up until that time, observant Jews had to travel to 40 miles to worship in Greenville. Dedicated Jews that wanted a closer option like Mrs. William Klaus were instrumental in the creation of a Rolling Fork congregation. The first organizational meeting occurred after that, and the group began meeting at the parish house of the local Episcopal Church.

Members named the congregation the Henry Kline Memorial Congregation, in honor of the religious school pioneer. Rabbi Herbert Hendel of Greenville visited every second and fourth Sunday of the month to lead services. These hour-long worship services were quite popular and attracted between forty and fifty people per evening. Along with services, the congregation also held community Passover Seders in the mid-1950s.

In addition to hosting community seders, Rabbi Hendel conducted Union Thanksgiving services for the Rolling Fork Community. In the temple bulletin, one resident thanked him for his ecumenical sermon:



"It was good to hear a Union sermon that praised God without any sectarian tinting. We do need reminding at least once a year that regardless of our personal beliefs, we are neighbors who live and work together for our common good."

By 1956, the Rolling Fork congregation became so successful that members sought to build a permanent house of worship. Local Jewish and Christian families donated money for a permanent synagogue building. Jack and Ike Grundfest built the temple structure in honor of their father, Morris, and their brother, Sam.

The Congregation continued to thrive between the 1960s and the 1980s. Greenville's rabbis continued to support its congregants through regular visits. Temple leaders came from the families of Anguilla, Rolling Fork, and Cary. Longtime Rolling Fork Mayor Sam Rosenthal, for example, served as president of the congregation.

The temple became an established and accepted part of the larger Sharkey County community. Local football coaches used to rearrange the schedule around the High Holiday season so that the Jewish players could play in Friday night games. The Temple Youth group held cake and rummage sales to raise money for the congregation and conducted study groups. They also invited clergy from around the town to speak to them about their religious traditions.

Due to changes in the Rolling Fork economy, the synagogue's membership dropped significantly by the 1990s. The congregation finally closed its doors in 1992. The remaining Jews around Rolling Fork are active in Greenville's Hebrew Union Congregation. ☆

*Information about Anshe Chesed and the Henry Kline Memorial Congregation is used with permission from the ISJL Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities. Thanks also to Stan Kline for his assistance. Information about more communities in Mississippi and other southern states can be found on [www.jhsmem.org](http://www.jhsmem.org).*



# Coming Attractions!

**November 7, 2021, 2:00 pm**

Film Director Donna Kanter will speak about her new film  
*The Presence of Their Absence*

**November 11, 2021, 7:00 pm**

In partnership with the MJCC Literary and Cultural Arts Series  
Author Pam Jenoff will speak about her book  
*The Woman with the Blue Star*

**January 9, 2022, 2:00 pm**

Panel discussion with Dr. Gary Zola and other Jewish summer camp experts  
“The History of Jewish Summer Camps”  
Program will be moderated by Rachael Brill

See [www.jhsmem.org](http://www.jhsmem.org), postcard, or email for Zoom information

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