

Continuous hope

How the remaining Jews of Selma reckon with a complicated past and prepare for an uncertain future

By Amy K. Milligan
Photos by Jerry Siegel

Driving through downtown Selma, Alabama, it is impossible to miss the imposing and majestic presence of Temple Mishkan Israel. Standing on Broad Street, the two-story, 1899 Romanesque Revival building has a brick exterior and a multiangled slate roof. The front has three brick arches with elaborate wrought-iron railings flanked by two towering turrets. Stunning stained-glass windows frame the structure, including a large circular window above the entrance featuring a Star of David, the center of which says, in Hebrew, *Adonai Echad* (“The Lord is One,” a line from the Shema, the central declaration of Jewish faith).

Unfortunately, only three congregants remain to tell the sacred site’s story. Once numbering more than 300 strong, Temple Mishkan Israel’s three, potentially final, members now serve as stewards, interpreting and preserving their community’s rich history for future generations. Together, they bravely confront a painful reality: How do you ensure a community’s story lives when it exists only in memory?

History to preserve, truths to tell

Today, there are approximately 10,500 Jews living in Alabama, 85 percent of whom live in Birmingham, Mobile, and Montgomery. There are other Jewish congregations throughout the state, but 325 Jews live in towns without congregations or with extremely small Jewish populations, including the three members of Selma’s Mishkan Israel. And while the temple has predominantly served those who live in the city, it has also historically welcomed members from surrounding rural Black Belt communities.

Difficult as it may be to imagine now, the Jewish population of Selma once thrived. Jews were among the earliest settlers of the city, making their way to Selma first from Southern seaports and later from up and down the East Coast. They arrived in Selma as peddlers, many of whom eventually settled in the city and opened downtown storefronts. Their early presence in the city was unlike other White Selmians: They did not own plantations, nor did they work the land.

Early Jewish Selmians existed in a space between the Black and White populations, serving both plantation owners and enslaved individuals. Later, as the cotton industry boomed, Selma's Jews engaged in cotton brokerage and exports, selling the cotton sold to them by rural White enslavers from nearby towns. Their businesses eventually evolved into local dry goods, general merchandise, department, retail, and grocery stores, all of which lined the streets of downtown Selma.

Unlike the city's early White Christian population, which quickly erected church buildings on the land provided to them by city planners, Selma's Jews initially worshipped in private homes. The first congregational gatherings were in 1867 in the home of Joseph Meyer and Adolph Elkan, local merchants who shared a boarding-home residence with several of Selma's other early Jewish merchants, most of whom later established separate residences in the city.

Selma's Jewish congregation soon grew large enough that they began worshipping at Harmony Hall — the heart and hub of the Jewish social scene when Jews were largely banned from other cultural, fraternal, and social organizations — and, later, in space that they rented from St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Temple Mishkan Israel was built in 1899 and has been the congregational home ever since. B'nai Abraham, a much smaller, Orthodox temple, also existed in Selma for nearly fifty years until the two congregations merged in 1944.

At its peak, Selma's Jewish community had 104 households (about 325 individuals). Selma's Jews served their city in numerous civic roles from the water commission to the school board, and, most notably, Selma also had three Jewish mayors. The history of the city is so intertwined with its Jewish history that the two cannot be separated. Still, as the city faced economic and population declines, Selma's Jewish community decreased, too. Younger generations left the city to pursue education or employment and did not return; moreover, after the closure of Craig Air Force Base in 1977, there was little new industry bringing new citizens to the city. By 1980, the temple had 200 aging members. Today, only three remain.

Still, those who grew up in Selma or have familial ties to the congregation remain invested in the city and temple. The "Selma family," as they call themselves, gathered in 1997 and 1999 for "Home for the Holidays," reuniting more than 300 Jews from across the nation with ties to Temple Mishkan Israel. Their efforts have continued, with a temple board and a fundraising campaign to preserve the temple and its legacy.

In 2021, the group rebranded itself as The Selma Temple, an international organization that honors the Jewish heritage of Selma and seeks to demonstrate an ongoing investment in the city by promoting racial reconciliation and healing. The group is committed to sharing and exploring the stories of Jews in Selma. Perhaps more importantly, they also seek to aid and amplify work being done in the Selma community that serves the needs of the city, particularly supporting the work of Black Selmians. They actively engage with the local arts community, as well as in city improvement efforts. Most recently, after a devastating tornado destroyed much of the city in January 2023, The Selma Temple made generous contributions to help rebuild homes and support the needs of several Black, Christian families — with donations coming from the temple's restoration funds, members' own money, and additional support raised in other cities.



Interior of Selma's 1899-built Temple Mishkan Israel.





Temple members: Ronnie Leet, Hanna Berger, Joanie Gibian Looney (who passed away in 2021).

As tours and school groups pass through Selma, brought there by their interest in civil rights history, they often stop at the temple to hear about the legacy and impact of the Jewish community. Temple members recount an honest story, engaging in truth-telling about both the good and the difficult parts of their city's history and their temple's navigation of the civil rights movement. They discuss how Jewish Selmians, like other White southerners, were divided in their opinions about civil rights. They educate students and visitors about the power of standing on the right side of history, the pain of denying others their full humanity, and, perhaps most importantly, the dangers of inaction born out of fear. Their story sits in their city's ever-present tension of looking forward while simultaneously holding oneself accountable for, and interrogating, the past. There is a keen awareness that the story must continue to be told, even if the day comes when there are no longer active members of the congregation living in the city.

'We have hope'

The reality of their small membership is not a story of failure or of sadness, although it is about the inevitability of aging and of the struggles of a small congregation in the Deep South. It is, more importantly, a portrait of a dream fulfilled: the tale of Jews fleeing persecution and settling in Alabama, of pursuing and achieving the American dream for themselves and for their children, and of establishing a deeply rooted community — creating a home that their children and grandchildren want to come back to time and time again, a place that even strangers come to and feel like family.

Yes, it's true that there are few Jews left in Selma, but their legacy lives on in the larger "Selma family" dispersed across the U.S. that still sees their Jewishness, their families, and their identities tied to a small town in the Black Belt of Alabama.

In a personal interview shortly before her death in 2021, Joanie Gibian Looney described how the temple was not a relic of another era but rather an indelible mark on the landscape of a changing city. "I just don't think there's going to be anybody left soon," she said. "I don't see anybody else coming to take our places. But we have hope, a collective hope, that there will always at least be a Jewish presence. We're not going to be here, we know that. I don't know how it is going to play out. Even a hundred years from now, will the temple still be here? Will anybody care? But at least we have hope. And we can only hope that we are remembered for our continuous hope."

So often the focus of American Jewish history is on the stories of large Jewish temples in northern or urban areas, but one of the best lessons we can learn is from a small congregation in Alabama's Black Belt. Indeed, in a world plagued by hate and indifference, Temple Mishkan Israel is cultivating a legacy of sustained civic investment, truth-telling, and hope. The Jews of Selma teach us that no matter our size or location, we all have the power to impact change, to give back to our communities, and to continue doing the hard work of interfaith understanding and racial reconciliation.

To learn more about the past, present, and future of Temple Mishkan Israel, visit selmatemple.org.