

Bridge Builder

RABBI RACHEL ISAACS LINKS COLBY AND WATERVILLE, TURNING TWO JEWISH COMMUNITIES INTO ONE

PAT SIMS STORY SEAN ALONZO HARRIS PHOTOS

On a recent September night, a storm of nearly biblical proportions unleashed a torrent of rain, a fitting metaphor for the first night of Yom Kippur, the holiest holiday of the year for Jews. But inside Waterville's Beth Israel Synagogue on Main Street, the lights were bright as Rabbi Rachel Isaacs welcomed congregants into the sanctuary.

"*Shanah tovah*," she said, acknowledging the group filing in, a mix of Colby students and Beth Israel members. Isaacs, a Colby instructor in Jewish studies, the campus Jewish chaplain and Hillel advisor, and rabbi for the Beth Israel Congregation since 2010, has succeeded in making connections between the two communities. "We're in this together," she said. "We might be on the hill, you might be in the 'ville,' but we're all Jews, we're all working on the same goals, we're all part of the same five-thousand-year-old community."

These days, thanks to Isaacs, it's not unusual to see Colby students helping Beth Israel students with their bar and bat mitzvah training, or Beth Israel congregants welcoming Colby students into their homes for meals. "For years the synagogue has pretty much kept to itself," said Tiffany Lopes, president of the synagogue's board of directors. "Colby students would come down for certain holidays, but there was never that sense of the community opening up their homes and having students in for dinner. Rabbi Isaacs made that happen."

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—Rabbi and Jewish studies instructor Rachel Isaacs

In her Yom Kippur message Isaacs seamlessly blended the religious with the contemporary, transitioning from the evils of the Boston marathon bombers to—on a much lighter note—the temptations of Facebook. Later she invited Colby Hillel co-presidents Ben



Rachel Isaacs, instructor for Jewish studies, Hillel advisor, and rabbi for Beth Israel Congregation.

Zurkow '15 and Laura Rosenthal '15 to appeal to their fellow students to join the synagogue.

This integrating of the Waterville and Colby Jewish communities has been "absolutely critical on so many levels," said Jim Terhune, Colby's vice president for student affairs and dean of students. "The students feel the wonderful sense of connection, and so do the members of Beth Israel."

Isaacs says making those connections is exciting, rewarding—and exhausting. Besides her teaching and synagogue duties, a multitude of activities encourage participation—bagel breakfasts, Hillel kosher-food tailgating at football games, apple picking, and hikes on

Quarry Road with Beth Israel members in which religious talk and exercise get equal attention. Contributing to the life of Waterville's downtown, Isaacs has held Beth Israel meetings at Selah Tea, a local café, and at a Thai restaurant.

Then there are the Shabbat lunches at her campus apartment, often prepared by her wife, Melanie Weiss (director of education at Beth Israel and religious-school program director at Temple Beth El in Portland). For these meals, Isaacs aims for a blend of Colby faculty, students, administrators, and synagogue members—what she refers to as "a mix of different constituencies."

"There's such a homey feel about a rabbi inviting you to her home for Shabbat lunch," said Lyndsey Pecker '14. "It's just great knowing that there are people there who care for you beyond faculty and friends."

Isaacs found her way to the Waterville synagogue during her studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. There she took part in a program that paid for students to serve small communities unable to afford full-time rabbis. She'd always assumed that, at the end of her fifth year of rabbinical school, she'd join an urban congregation—in New York, Los Angeles, or Boston. But, to her surprise, she said, "I realized that I didn't want to leave Waterville and the congregation didn't want me to leave." Negotiations with Colby followed, and an arrangement was made so that Isaacs could split her time between the synagogue and the campus.

"She has stimulated so much interest that we're getting new members ... fifteen just in the last year," said Sidney Geller, a member of the board of Beth Israel. "We had lost members to the Augusta synagogue, and we're getting some of them back now."

When Pecker arrived at Colby as a first-year student, she tried to reach out to a community that felt familiar. But, she said, it wasn't until Isaacs arrived on campus—full of enthusiasm and new ideas—that that became a real possibility. Pecker was so inspired, she and a friend decided to cook Shabbat dinner



every Friday. “It was the best way to create a community,” she said. “Food always attracts students, and homemade meals will really draw them.”

Attendance at the Shabbat meals has grown—a recent dinner in the Pugh Center drew nearly 50 people—and Hillel membership has jumped from five students three years ago to about 50 this semester. A youth group for teens at Beth Israel initiated by Colby students has also been invited to Shabbat dinner. “I think they’re going to be really stoked about that,” said Pecker. And, said Rosenthal, non-Jewish students are welcome too. “It’s a cool way to show them what our culture is like.”

Isaacs also responds to quieter, more intense issues. “Maybe three or four times a year, I get an e-mail saying, ‘My child is in crisis, he’s not fitting in, she’s not eating,’” she said. Her solution: to personally counsel the student or e-mail a Hillel board member with the subject line “Mitzvah needed,” at which point the member can be counted on to follow up.

“You can empower and train students to be resources to other students,” said Isaacs, “and when a student is sick, we bring them care packages. It’s about Jewish living in every element of your life.”



Top, Rachel Isaacs presides at a campus celebration of the Sukkot holiday, with Colby students and members and friends of Waterville’s Beth Israel Congregation, above, taking part.