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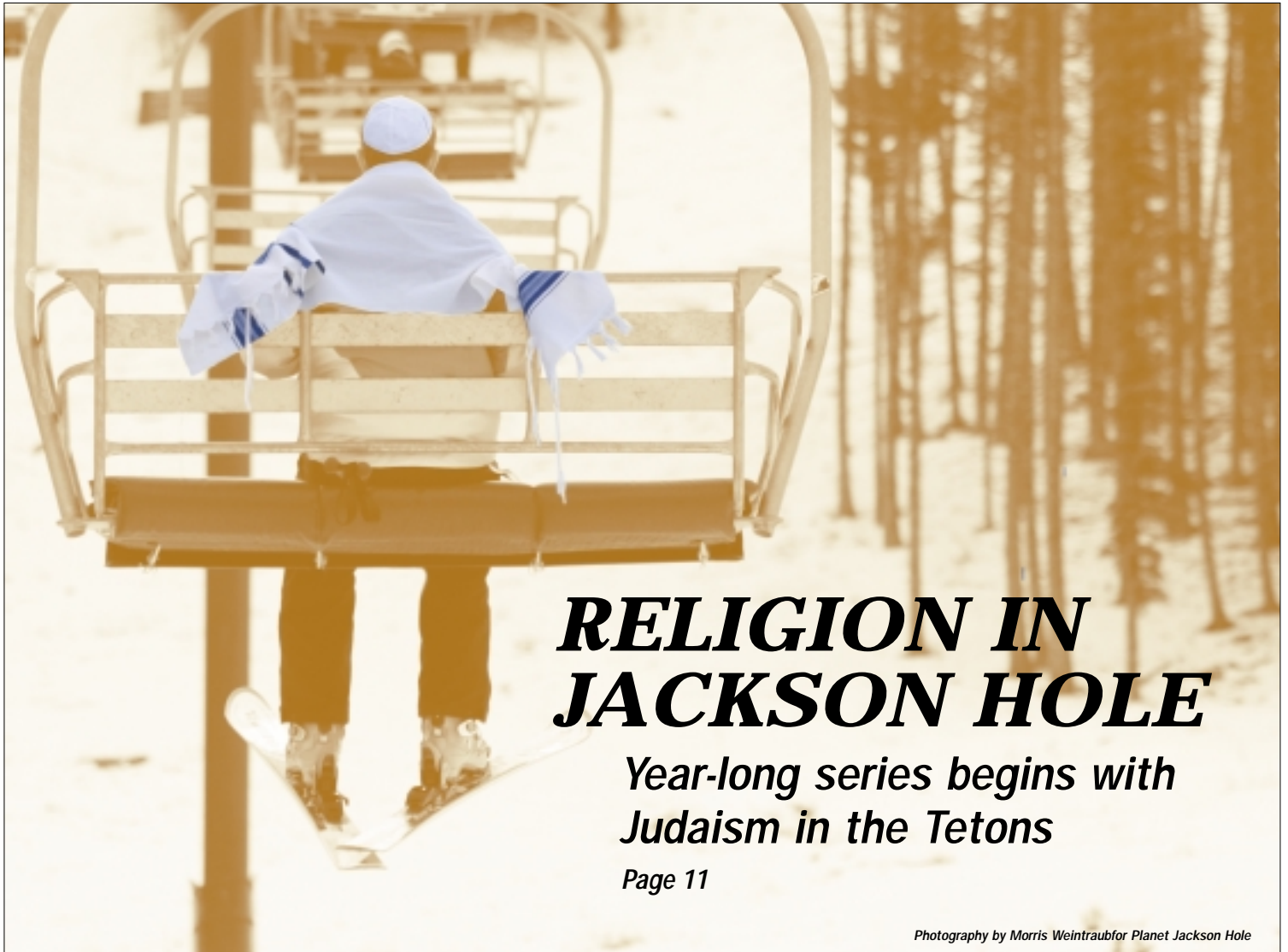
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# planet jackson hole



## **RELIGION IN JACKSON HOLE**

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# Being Jewish in JH

LIKE PIONEERS OF OLD, JACKSON JEWS MAKE DO WITH WHAT THEY HAVE  
TO CREATE A COMMUNITY  
THAT MEETS THEIR NEEDS

BY DANIELLE SHAPIRO



*[This article launches a series about the surprising number of communities of faith in Jackson Hole. Over the next year, Planet Jackson Hole plans to profile the valley's Christians, Catholics, Buddhists, Mormons and other congregations, and to converse with religious leaders about the intersections of faith and politics. We look forward to hearing your feedback and suggestions. — Ed.]*

If you're Jewish, you probably didn't move to Jackson to practice your religion. You might, however, have moved here for the scenery, the outdoor activities, the small mountain town lifestyle. And yet you also might have found a surprisingly thriving and vibrant Jewish life.

With no synagogue, no Jewish deli, it can be hard to feel like part of the larger Jewish world, to strictly observe all the rites and rituals of Judaism, but Jackson Hole still offers all the opportunities to do charitable work, enjoy the outdoors, go to services, celebrate life-cycle events and study the Torah.

"You can lead a Jewish life," said Rose Novak, President of the Board of the Jewish Community of Jackson Hole. "You have to do it yourself. In a way, that means you invest yourself and care more."

That appears to be the consensus among Jews in Jackson: It requires a concerted effort. Unlike major metropolitan areas where synagogues abound, making it easy to follow a faithful life, in Jackson being Jewish means being hands-on. But then, that's what life has been about in Jackson Hole for more than 100 years.

Incorporated as a nonprofit in 1997, the Jewish Community of Jackson Hole, or Jackson Hole Chaverim (the Hebrew word for "friends"), grew out of informal Hannukah parties and services held in people's homes. With no formal meeting place of its own, the group has fostered warm and cooperative relations with several churches around town – including St. John's Episcopal Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – where it holds services and classes.

Through the group is still small, it has

grown significantly – to more than 200 members – and become much more organized in the last several years. The Chaverim now has monthly Shabbat services, special services for the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a community seder for Passover, a Purim party. Rabbi Mike Comins, who served the

dent for the Chaverim and the Hebrew school teacher. "We try to show the children that what they're learning is the same thing that kids have learned for thousands of years, to let them know the context."

Though the gains have been great, given the dearth of Jews in Jackson and

from which they had moved, where their children attended a conservative Jewish day school and studied Hebrew for four hours a day. The atmosphere here was much more relaxed and laid back.

Marc Domsky, an anesthesiologist, said the change was good for the family. He said he's been to more services here than he ever attended in Michigan.

"I look at it more as a cultural thing," he said. "I don't feel pressured here. This community doesn't have much concern for religion – it's more about getting out and doing things together. The whole idea of religion is to form bonds and to practice moral rules. This community epitomizes that ... I'm Jewish and proud of it, but I'm not very religious. Religion causes a lot of divisions, but here I don't feel it."

Domsky's wife, Lisa Finkelstein-Domsky, and daughter, Jodi, are more on the fence about the Chaverim's laxity.

"Some of the informality is a little bit of a turn-off," said Finkelstein-Domsky, a urologist. "I'm somewhere in the middle. At one of the Bar Mitzvahs we had, some of the family members wore jeans to the service. I thought that wasn't appropriate."

Jodi agreed. "I want to dress up and look nice for my Bat Mitzvah," she said. The year-long preparations for Jodi's ceremony still are a big deal here. In conjunction with learning to chant the Hebrew in her Torah and Haftarah portions, Jodi is busy with her Bat Mitzvah project – making beaded bookmarks to benefit the Pediatric Brain Tumor Foundation, in honor of a 9-year-old family friend who has cancer. So far she has raised over \$600.

The casual feel of the Chaverim perhaps grows out of its diversity. When such an eclectic group from such a wide array of backgrounds comes together, tolerance, accommodation and a warm welcome are essential.

"The Jewish community here will take anyone as you are," said Aaron Pruzan, owner of Rendezvous River Sports. "Even if you come to services 45 minutes late with your flip-flops on. That makes it easy to be Jewish. The rest of the community has been so helpful, as well – the



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Since March 2004, Dan Gordon has been traveling to Jackson hole from Houston, Texas, to share rabbinical duties with Mike Comins. He teaches Judaism 101 classes, leads services, consults with the Bet Sefer children's program and helps with the summer day camp. Recognized throughout the Jewish world as a maggid – one who shares sacred stories – Gordon has performed and led workshops in the U.S., Israel and Australia.

community full time for two years, now comes to Jackson six weekends out of the year and for special events such as the High Holidays, weddings and Bar or Bat Mitzvahs. A regular religious school meets every Thursday afternoon, adults can take education classes, and each summer brings a two-week day camp.

Phyllis Turtle is a former board presi-

dent for the Chaverim and the Hebrew school teacher. "We try to show the children that what they're learning is the same thing that kids have learned for thousands of years, to let them know the context."

## Casual and eclectic

When the Domsky family moved here two years ago, they found a community that was very different from the highly observant neighborhood in Michigan

Continued on next page ...



Lutheran church, St. John's, etc. It's less of a challenge than it might be somewhere else, but we don't keep Kosher or anything. When my brother, who is orthodox, came to visit, he had his own meat flown in."

Most Jews in Jackson who participate in the community agree that you get out of it what you put in.

"I didn't move to find spirituality," said Gary Silberberg, "but I found it anyway." He moved here with his family from New York City four years ago. He wanted his kids to attend public school and appreciate the outdoors. "I came to find a community, and I found the broader one and the Jewish community."

Yet there are challenges to being Jewish in Jackson that go beyond the effort it takes to practice.

"It's a challenge anywhere to be a minority," said Silberberg. "It's easier to identify as a minority in Jackson, so I also find it easier to be sensitive to other minorities here."

Silberberg, who is married to a Chinese Catholic woman, recognizes that his children will have an experience growing up here they would have otherwise missed in New York.

"My kids are pretty unique, and they will have to get used to the fact that they're different and know that they will be noticed for it," he said. "Here, everyday, they are reminded that they are Chinese and that they are Jewish. They're going to stand out because of that. In New York they might not stand out as much, but they'll have a stronger identity here."

### Marriage of faiths

Silberberg's family sounds exceptional, but for Jackson's Jewish population, his interfaith marriage is the norm. In fact, Silberberg estimates that around 80 to 85 percent of the families in the Jewish community are interfaith.

Rabbi Mike Comins noted, "Of the 15-plus kids that we had in the Hebrew school when we started, only one had two Jewish parents and none had two born Jewish parents. That's a particular challenge, and one that I love. I really enjoy the non-Jewish spouses in the community, they are wonderful people."

Comins continued, "I found that a lot of the stereotypes from the larger Jewish world towards interfaith couples were not true, a lot of the doom and gloom that the Jewish people will disappear through intermarriage," he continued. "I think that of all the intermarried couples, something like two-thirds of them are sending their kids to the school."

While the predominance of intermarried couples may not hinder engaging the community's children, Novak remains vigilant: "I think it's really important to reach out to those parents and to give them what they want, to let people know that we will fill them in. I'm trying to be a bit more dynamic about that - it's not just a passive, welcoming thing. This is a sort of movement throughout liberal Judaism, to do a lot of outreach and to answer their needs. Especially when they've made a commitment to raise their kids Jewish. That's a huge commitment and we need to support that."

### Full-time Rabbi wanted

Perhaps the defining characteristic of the Jewish Community is what it lacks, namely a synagogue and a full-time rabbi. Most faiths find that a spiritual leader essential for a thriving practice. Jackson's Jews have to make do without most of the time.

After living in Jackson for two year, Comins decided to leave for personal reasons. Though he now commutes from Los Angeles, he remains an integral part of the

time Rabbi. I'm not even sure the whole community wants a full-time Rabbi. Some like things just as they are."

Though the Jewish Community faces its own unique challenges, it shares with the rest of the valley the struggle between outdoor recreation and everything else. Novak calls it "cultural competition." It's not an insurmountable problem for everyone; for some, leading a life in nature and being Jewish are seamless.

"It's like a parallel universe," said Pruzan. "For example, the synagogue I grew up in [in Washington], we'd have Sunday school on Sunday mornings and then a bus would pick us up and take us skiing. I never saw the two things as different. In fact, my earliest paddling experience was at a Jewish summer camp."

Pruzan's wife, Tamsen, who converted to Judaism before they were married, concurs and said their outdoors aspirations actually complement their religious life.

"I gain more of a spiritual satisfaction [from my Judaism] more than anything," she said. "I gain a different sense of humanity, something other than the athletic world I've always been a part of ... There's no conflict for us between Judaism and a good snow day because the snow will always be there. It's important to us to be at seders and Bar Mitzvahs. We make some effort to get there, even if we're late."

Indeed, it is not so odd actually to find coherence between Judaism and nature. At the end of January the Jewish Community will celebrate Tu B'Shevat, a holiday that honors trees and the gifts of nature. And Rabbi Comins himself epitomizes the confluence of the Jewish faith and the environment: He runs a business called Torah Trek, bringing people on what he calls Spiritual Wilderness Adventures, and he has given many a sermon on the subject.

Said Novak, "Most of the people who moved here love the outdoors. We try to integrate that into our tradition and into our lives."

But being Jewish in Jackson Hole does, in many ways, mean being on your own. It often means doing things for yourself, finding Hannukah candles and Challah and other Jewish resources outside of town - often on the Internet. It means accepting a relaxed and informal kind of Judaism that is more about how you live than how you pray. For the community's youth, the lessons of Tzedakah (giving back), social justice, morality and what a Jewish life entails seem to be sinking in.

"I've learned a lot more about being Jewish here than I did in Michigan," said Jodi Domsky.

"Of course," her father piped in. "In Michigan she was surrounded by Jews, so she didn't have to think about it." •



The Finkelstein-Domsky family (clockwise: Marc, Lisa, Danielle and Jodi) sit in front of their "Hanukkah Bush," which they put up for the holidays to embrace the various traditions of the season.

community. His absence is a cause of concern, even the community's youngest members notice.

"My least favorite part about being Jewish here is that if the Rabbi was here all the time that would be much better," said Jodi Domsky, who wishes the Rabbi was around more as she prepares for her Bat Mitzvah.

"Things would go much faster if he was here."

Though Jackson Hole is the ideal place to live and work for many, it has been difficult to attract rabbis to the valley.

"I think some rabbis might not appreciate a community with so many interfaith couples," said Turtle. "But we're also not affiliated to any particular denomination of Judaism [such as reform, conservative or orthodox], so that's probably a greater factor in why we don't have a full-



### GLOSSARY OF JEWISH TERMS (INFORMATION GLEANED FROM WWW.JEWFAQ.ORG)

**Bar or Bat Mitzvah** - A life-cycle ceremony for a young boy (Bar) or girl (Bat) at the age of 13 marking their obligation to observe the commandments. It also celebrates the boy's or girl's coming of age.

**HafTORah** - Literally "conclusion"; a reading from the prophets that is read

with the weekly Torah portion.

**Rabbi** - A religious teacher and person authorized to make decisions on issues of Jewish law.

**Rosh Hashanah** - The Jewish New Year, usually occurring in mid-September.

**Seder** - Literally "order"; a family home ritual conducted as part of the Passover observance.

**Shabbat** - The Jewish Sabbath, a day of rest and spiritual enrichment. From

Friday evening to Saturday evening.

**Torah** - The first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The entire body of Jewish learning.

**Tzedakah** - Charity, helping the poor and the needy. An essential Jewish obligation.

**Yom Kippur** - The day of atonement, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. It is a day to repent for the sins of the past year, to fast and to pray.

## Rabbi Mike Comins on wilderness, community, politics & faith

Rabbi Mike Comins worked full time in Jackson with the Jewish community for two years from 2001 to 2003. He has since moved back to Los Angeles and now commutes to work with congregations in Jackson Hole and Bozeman, Mont. He also runs a business called Torah Trek, leading spiritual retreats into the wilderness that connect his love of the environment with the tenants of Judaism.

In the following conversation, he talks about his views on wilderness, spirituality, politics and what it means to be Jewish in this ram-bunctious ski town.

**Planet Jackson Hole:** How would you describe the Jewish community here?

**Mike Comins:** Small. It's quite amazing that it exists at all. Only until two or three years ago, if you wanted to make sure there was a Hebrew school for your kids and a viable synagogue functioning, you wouldn't have come to Jackson. So you wouldn't expect that the particular group of people here would be who they are, which is in fact strongly identified Jews. And they did get this community going and hired me and so on. That shows something about Jewish identity – that it is very hard to pigeon-hole it and stereotype it.

**PJH:** What are the challenges of being Jewish in Jackson Hole?

**MC:** Judaism is very much a communal religion. It's very hard to do it on your own, so you need other people to study with, to pray with, just to be with. The number of Jews in Jackson is quite small and the Jewish resources available are quite small, so that makes it difficult. I don't think it's so different in Jackson. The geographic isolation counts in the same way that you're not close to a big city and you don't have a university and various cultural institutions. You also don't have them on the Jewish scene. There's no Jewish university or college anywhere close, so you don't have that level of Jewish learning.

The other big challenge, of course, is that in Jackson people just love being outdoors. It's very difficult to compete with that. For me, personally, I put the two together. But that's hard for most Jews to do.

**PJH:** How do you think the community fares with the competing interests of fishing and skiing and golfing? How does the community respond?

**MC:** You have to ask yourself, "Are they doing good for Jackson or are they doing good according to the national standards?" I think most people would say they're doing pretty good for Jackson. But we're not, by national standards, a very active Jewish community. Our kids go to school one day a week and not two or three. We have services once a month and not twice a month or once every Shabbat. I think if you see where the place was five years ago, any fair-minded person would say that's a Jewish community that has accomplished a lot and gotten themselves much deeper into Jewish life than it was five years ago.

**PJH:** As a spiritual leader, how do you navigate between religion and faith and God and then the God of Snow or the God of the Snake River?

**MC:** My personal path is the same God. But it is an issue here. I think that in

life ... Particularly in Judaism, and I just know about Judaism more than the other religions, but from what I can tell every big religion seems to have their genesis in wilderness, whether it's Buddha under the bodhi tree or Jesus's 40 days and nights in the desert. Mohammed got his vision when he went out into the desert, and of course Mount Sinai is in the middle of the Sinai Desert.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is perhaps the greatest Jewish theologian to write on American soil. His book, "God in Search of Man," covers what a Jewish theology book needs to cover: revelation on Mount Sinai, the role of the commandments, various tenets of Jewish faith ... But the first 80 pages of the book are on awe and wonder ... He writes about the human experience of our, what he calls, radical amazement at the world and how awe is not just a reaction, it's an attitude. And that religions, whatever they are, the various ones, come from that.

**PJH:** Come from that awe.

**MC:** Yes, it's a response to God. And the encounter with God is an awesome encounter. I know that we say "awesome dude" to the snowboarders, but they're not the first people to come up with that term.

**PJH:** So, in a sense, here in Jackson, if you were particularly inclined to be religious or to be spiritual and to practice Judaism, it's actually sort of a perfect setting.

**MC:** Absolutely. Jackson is a great setting for developing spirituality ... Tradition is necessary. We all live according to tradition. We're not born into a vacuum, and it teaches us how to get on in the world. And a good tradition opens our eyes and brings us to places we wouldn't have gotten otherwise. But a tradition can also bog you down by institutionalizing and codifying what was at first a radical insight into reality. When we go back into wilderness we get to experience what the first people who started all this experienced themselves –

what the psalmists felt when they were writing the psalms, what the Rabbis felt when they were writing the prayers, which is full of nature when you read the Jewish prayer book. So I'm a big believer in bringing Jews out into the wilderness.

If what I'm looking for is adrenaline, if my goal is to cover 15 miles and build up my body, that's not being in nature in a spiritual way. The synonym for spirituality for me is either listening or response. And to respond to nature you have to go down, walk slowly and listen. So downhill skiing is a wonderful thing, but in cross-country ski-

ing is where you are going to truly feel awe.

**PJH:** How would you say that your faith interfaces with your politics? How are your political opinions guided by your religion?

**MC:** Well, my values come out of a religious Jewish context, so my political choices follow.

In America right now ... it's very clear that people vote their identities and not their self-interest. And we see it over and over again. I think what happened in this recent election is that certain quote-unquote "prairie fire issues" – namely gay marriage and abortion – were labeled (and I guess they are in the right-wing evangelical community) church issues. They were labeled value issues because their values hold a particular consequence in that culture.

**PJH:** What are your views on Israel? Does the Jewish community here in Jackson share those views?

**MC:** I'm an Israeli citizen. I have dual citizenship. I lived in Israel for 15 years. I understand it as a real place and not as a caricature that I've received from the press. I love it dearly. So when I criticize Israel it's different than when somebody who doesn't know much about Israel criticizes Israel. I found that my role in Jackson was generally as a defender of Israel because people, whose opinions I didn't necessarily disagree with, didn't understand what it means to give up the Golan Heights, or to go back to the '67 borders, or the realities of living in a country where terror is a daily occurrence. When you can't get on a bus anymore, when you know people who have been blown up, it's just very different than what people can put their minds around.

I am in favor of a two-state solution. ... I was horribly hurt by the breakup of the Oslo process, and while I think Israel shares some of the blame, my opinion is that Arafat's leadership was a terrible blow to both peoples. I'm optimistic now that he's gone that we can move forward and I like what's happening now.

**PJH:** What would you say is the most pressing issue for Jews in Jackson?

**MC:** I'll answer this question as a Rabbi: For me the most pressing issue is the education of the kids.

**PJH:** And how are they doing?

**MC:** They're doing good. I'd like to see the growth of the last three to four years continue to grow. It's difficult. It requires tremendous commitment from teachers that are isolated and don't have local resources. We have to fight with hockey and skiing and the incredibly busy lifestyles that kids have today. So our teachers are just gems. I try to honor them every year because they are the crucial members of the community. The community is incredibly indebted to them.

**PJH:** Why is education so important?

**MC:** If you care about something then you want it to continue to exist. I think that Judaism is something that should continue to exist and that means passing it down to the next generation and giving them the tools to lead quality lives. Judaism is not a feel-good religion, in particular. It's there to challenge you and demand that you put morality high on your list with what you do in your life. And we start very early with that.



Rabbi Mike Comins (center) leads Shabbat service on the banks of Jackson Lake this past summer.

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order to express Jewish piety in nature requires a fairly high level of knowledge and commitment to a spiritual path. Your average person in Jackson Hole is lacking one or the other.

**PJH:** How do the environment and the wilderness compete with or complement a religious life here?

**MC:** I don't know if that's a particularly Jewish question. Obviously as a Jew I look at it with Jewish eyes, from the culture of Judaism. But it boils down to, whoever you are, how seriously you take your spiritual