

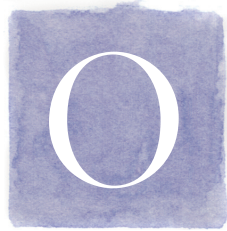
Small Towns

RACHEL ISAACS



Aneinu, aneinu b'yom koreinu —

Answer us, answer us on the day when we call.



ON SIMCHAT TORAH in the fall of 2020, 50 members of my community marched around the outside of our small synagogue in Waterville, Maine, singing together. We had made an ostensibly risky choice in this first holiday season of the pandemic: We joined together to pray in person. Even though rural Maine often felt removed from the worst of things, we knew individuals dying in local hospitals, and family and friends in major cities described a world that was terrifying. And yet, we too were suffering — from isolation, despair, and deepening depression. We decided to celebrate together, outdoors and in masks.

For our final *hakafah*, we crossed Main Street and made our way together to Johnson Heights, a nearby road that used to be home to many of our congregants. With a small sefer Torah in my right hand and my eldest daughter's hand in my left, I led the group toward the house of our synagogue's nonagenarian matriarch. She was waiting for us, sitting on a lawn chair in her driveway, waving a Simchat Torah flag,

ready to behold the community she could no longer safely join. When her home came into view, my daughters ran to give her a hug. For a moment I tried to stop them, but instead I stopped myself. There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, Ecclesiastes tells us. This was a time to embrace.

The previous April, this woman's eldest son had died. She watched me perform his funeral on her iPad. Unable to bear the thought of her sitting alone, two of the stalwarts of our synagogue sat next to her in her kitchen, against public-health recommendations. They knew that there are many things short of physical death that nonetheless rival its pain — like watching your child's funeral on an iPad as you're alone in the house where you raised him.

In the early days of the pandemic, many of us tried to find the beauty and meaning in lockdowns. They would be like a sabbatical, we said, a time for reflection and resetting. There were promises of what technology could deliver to Jewish communities, especially ours. An online Judaism would be the solution for the everyday challenges facing rural Jews, we heard Jewish leaders say. Now we could attend the *best* Jewish day school, connect to the *most* inspirational prayer services, and access the *top* Jewish scholars. However, we all knew that when this ended, urban and suburban Jews would still be able to access the basic privileges (or maybe the new luxury?) of a physical community. What would become of rural Jews if our in-person communities withered?

Although the Conservative movement soon made the decision that minyan could be made virtually to protect people's health and save lives, I nonetheless chose to mostly continue holding services and classes on our synagogue patio. If there was a storm, we'd move online, but I didn't make it a habit. Many of the more distant members of my congregation didn't have broadband and couldn't connect reliably. My synagogue couldn't afford the technology to stream well. And I didn't

want synagogue to be something like CNN that you could have on in the background while you chopped carrots for dinner.

You cannot achieve harmony on Zoom; your heart doesn't feel the reverb of the person singing next to you. You don't check on one another's kids on the way to the bathroom; you can't feel the release that comes when someone lays his hand on your shoulder after a tough week. My synagogue wrestled with policy fights and alienation like all other houses of worship during the pandemic, but we were not among those who struggled to bring members back in person when restrictions were lifted. The thread connecting us all had stretched, but it was still there.

Some of the technological adjustments that came out of the pandemic were positive for us. It is nearly impossible to access quality mental health care in rural Maine, and telehealth has been transformative, the demand for it high. Our synagogue board meetings are now online; members of my board live in a 150-mile radius around the shul, and we can access their talent and commitment even at a distance.

However, a big reason we have created and maintained such a dedicated community is that we stuck together, physically. The congregation still talks about our 2020 High Holidays, with that Simchat Torah march down Main Street and services held under a tent in a large open field. Congregants took pride in transferring hundreds of chairs and *mahzorim* in the back of their pickup trucks, and were delighted by the unexpected gift of apple cake that Julie, one of our members, baked for each member of the community.

Julie had come to Maine from New York with the back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s. She is emblematic of our community: people who chose to create, to cultivate, a life in Maine. They opted in to chopping wood on the weekends to heat their homes, and weeding rows of cauliflower and potatoes in the early-morning hours before work.

They also knew that being part of a rural Jewish community would require a sacrifice of time and energy—driving an hour to Hebrew school and Shabbat services each week, with many more hours in the car taking kids to Jewish youth-group gatherings in major cities. If my congregants had wanted lives of comfort and convenience, they would never have moved here in the first place. As a matter of conviction and principle, they were always willing to put skin in the game.

Which is to say, in a fundamental sense, they were willing to live the values that a rich Jewish life requires. Ultimately, their commitment inspired me and my wife to make a life here, too, even if most of my congregants no longer observe the tradition in the way we do. Like generations before us, we bought a chest freezer for months' worth of kosher meat delivered on the bus from Boston, so we can have kosher brisket on Rosh Hashanah with the homegrown potatoes we plant each spring on our next-door neighbors' farm.

Judaism is, at its core, an embodied faith. A full Jewish life cannot be evaluated like a checklist of programs completed, conversations convened, or words uttered. The spirit of our faith lives in between the data points, in the interstitial spaces where we savor sweetness, meld our voices, and show up when we are called. *