Without a *Minyan*: Creating a Jewish Life in a Small Midwestern Town

Daniel Mandell, Barbara Smith-Mandell, and Jerrold Hirsch

Throughout Jewish history, Jews have tended to live in community with other Jews. There are many reasons for this, but an important logistical reason is that although the basic unit of participation in Judaism is the family, a *minyan*—ten adult Jews—is required for many rituals and community celebrations, like reading from the Torah scroll. We do not have to have a rabbi or a cantor to lead a service, but most Jews, even those who are fairly well educated in the religion, cannot lead a service unless most of the participants are fully conversant in the prayers. And since the service is designed with the assumption that there will be a *minyan*, it does not lend itself very well to a setting that includes significantly fewer Jews than a *minyan*. Since hospitality is an important aspect of Jewish holidays, Jews tend to seek other Jews with whom to celebrate, enhancing our celebrations in many ways. Living in community gives Jews opportunities for worship, celebration, and support that are not available in areas without a significant Jewish population.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Jews have become a part of mainstream America, welcome in board rooms and private clubs. Part of that trend has been the growing percentage of Jews living in American metropolitan areas. Many Jewish communities in small towns in the Midwest and the South have shrunk or disappeared altogether as the children of immigrants find success as urban or suburban professionals. Another part of that trend is the increasing acculturation, rising intermarriage, and other developments that concern Jewish leaders, organizations, and parents. Many pages of many reports and many academic papers and conferences have been generated in dissecting and arguing about this trend in modern Jewish life.

But barely noticed and almost never written about are Jews living in small rural communities, often in very small numbers, who lack the institutions, organizations, and other support mechanisms that exist in and near cities. Indeed, the number of Jews living in small towns may be increasing. This is not only because at this stage in American Jewish history more Jews feel they do not need the security of a Jewish community, but also because through their work they are more and more integrated into American life, which often takes them to places they would not have expected to live in, places where there are few Jews. A significant and perhaps growing issue is how Jewish
families and their children will manage in this isolation and (by extension) how or if Jewish institutions will cope with this aspect of modern life in the United States. In part to start a discussion of these concerns, the Mandell family—Dan, Barbara, and their two sons, David and Joshua (with the help of another Jew in Kirksville, Jerry Hirsch)—offers this account of their life in Kirksville, a small isolated town in rural northeast Missouri.

OUR STORY
In July 1999, we moved to Kirksville so that Dan could take a tenure-track teaching position at Truman State University. At the time Truman was completing its transition from a regional teaching college to a highly selective statewide liberal arts college that was winning recognition from various national college-ranking services. For Dan, this was a great opportunity—and after seven years of wandering in the wilderness from one temporary position to another (and two years teaching secondary schools), it was the only opportunity to continue working as a scholar.

When Dan interviewed at Truman State University, the department and administration made sure he knew that he would not be the only Jew on the faculty and introduced him to another Jewish faculty member. But we were still apprehensive about this move because we knew Kirksville had no organized Jewish community. With a population of 17,000, Kirksville is the largest town in northeast Missouri. It is big enough to have a movie theater, some decent restaurants, and a Wal-Mart Supercenter. There is a public pool, a nice public library, a lot of small city parks, and a state park nearby. We were warned that we would probably miss the shopping and other conveniences of a larger community, but our only real concern was that the nearest synagogues were in Columbia, Missouri, ninety miles to the south, and in Quincy, Illinois, ninety miles to the east. The folks at Truman were helpful and supportive; we got acquainted and quickly found out that there were about three Jewish faculty members at Truman—and that was about all for the entire town. We were also living in the Bible Belt, something that was a new experience for us.

Our concerns about how we would manage in Kirksville were in large part shaped by what we had left. For a decade we had been part of a large and close-knit Jewish community in the Boston suburb of Sudbury, including many academics and artists, embracing and studying Judaism and seeking ways to make its traditions more contemporary. Shabbat was the centerpiece of our week and was truly a day of rest and rejuvenation with the community. We began with Torah study over bagels and cream cheese, with fifty or more
participants drawing on history, psychology, language, and other elements to glean as much as possible from the week’s parasha [Torah portion]. This was followed by services that would last two or three hours. There were no pews, no one sat on the bimah [raised platform], everyone participated in everything (including taking turns reading from the Torah scroll), and children played on the floor at the back of the room while their parents participated in the service. After services, there would be a kiddish luncheon where we lingered, sometimes for hours, as we ate and schmoozed. Even “minor” holidays were important community events: the Tu B’S’vat Seder packed the sanctuary; dancing, singing, and music overflowed the building on Simchat Torah; and only freezing temperatures put a damper on Sukkot’s progressive dinner where we visited sukkahs at half a dozen homes before ending up at the synagogue, Beth El, for desserts [fig. 1].

Fig 1: Many families with young children attended services on a typical Shabbat morning at Congregation Beth El in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

Even in the Boston area, we were part of a minority, but there were lots of minority groups and most people seemed to know the basics and to respect the cultures of their neighbors. Being part of an active and vital Jewish community meant that the rhythm of our lives was largely dictated by the Jewish calendar. Before moving to Kirksville, we had lived for a year in the Chicago suburb of Carpentersville, where Dan taught at a private secondary
school. We had not found another congregation like Beth El, but our lives did not change that much. In both Massachusetts and Illinois, most of the people we interacted with on a day-to-day basis were not Jewish and work schedules were still based on Christian holidays, but we never felt alone. Obviously, things in Kirksville would be very different.

We were quickly exposed to one of the more disquieting aspects of being Jews in a small midwestern town: the strange and occasionally tense conversations with non-Jews. A day or two after we moved in, a neighbor stopped by with a plate of cookies and told us to stop by if we needed anything. Two days later, Barbara needed some local information, so she went to the house of the cookie lady. She invited Barbara in, asked how the unpacking was going, and began chatting. After Barbara had jotted down the information she needed, cookie lady leaned toward her and whispered, as if sharing an especially good piece of gossip, “So I heard you’re Jewish.” Several times, when discussing with colleagues or acquaintances about how to meet people outside of the college, including other children to play with our sons, aged one and four and one-half, people suggested joining a church—including some who knew we were Jewish. One person said, “Well you live in Kirksville now, so can’t you just go to church like everyone else?”

Many similar encounters gave us the clear message that we were somehow strange but could easily fit in if we tried. The prevailing culture in Kirksville is much more homogenous than other places we have lived, and that culture is ruled by the rhythms and assumptions of Christianity. Much of the social activity (especially in the summer) revolves around churches. Almost all social activities and sports are on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, and few people have any awareness of Jewish holidays. One of the few other Jews in town told us that when she told someone she did not celebrate Christmas, she was asked, “So when do you celebrate Christ’s birth?” Somehow people thought even after they found we were Jewish that we could and should still attend a church [fig. 2].

Barbara in particular was confronted with this lack of comprehension because she was a stay-at-home mom for the first five years in Kirksville and interacted primarily with people outside the university community, while Dan from the beginning spent most of the day in the more cosmopolitan university. These conversations shaped subsequent relationships—or lack thereof. Because we do not attend a church and have experienced tensions in relationships with some of the townspeople we have dealt with in Boy Scouts and a few other organizations, we have very little social life outside of our Truman State University friendships. As a result, while in many ways we have adjusted to life in Kirksville, even after a decade we still feel like outsiders.
Our biggest problem—really, the boys’ problems (although they may not remember)—came in public school. David as the elder was first, and to some extent he seems to have blazed a trail for his young brother. Kindergarten was the most trying. In early December, the teacher started to incorporate Christmas themes into art projects, songs, reading and writing assignments—everything—and later there were special assemblies and decorations. But she had no sense of how to deal with the inevitable issues that might arise for a non-Christian student. When David became upset at having to attend yet another Christmas assembly, she treated it as a discipline issue. We pointed out that she should not force him to attend but should provide an alternate activity, like reading in the library. So the next day, when there was (another) Christmas concert, she sent him to the principal’s office rather than the library—as if he had violated some rule and was being punished. Things got better over the years, and by third grade the teachers were aware enough to offer secular alternatives to Christmas crafts.

Joshua has generally had better experiences with teachers, although both boys are occasionally harassed by classmates from fundamentalist households who seem to take great joy in explaining how they are going to hell, and
both boys are bothered by T-shirts with evangelical messages and the fact that classmates can bring Bibles to school, while they are expected to keep quiet about their religion. For both, throughout elementary school every year we had to explain to teachers and administrators (the same ones as the year before!) why our children would miss school on certain days and had to remind them that these were excused absences. Sometimes it took more than a gentle reminder. And we battled with the principal over whether Joshua should be eligible for the annual attendance award since the only school days he missed were for Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. As a result of such stresses, both boys for years became defensive when, for example, a store clerk would wish us “Merry Christmas,” and both are also adamantly opposed to public observance of any religion.

Some of these problems followed our boys to extracurricular activities and clubs. After David missed a soccer practice during first grade because of Yom Kippur, the coach kept him out of the next game as a penalty. Of course all of the soccer (and baseball) games were on Saturdays, while nothing was done on Sundays. Boy Scouts was another stressful situation. Forget the close connections with the hosting church and the fact that opening prayers were never really nonsectarian: adult leader training was scheduled on High Holy Days three years in a row, and the Scout summer camp near Kansas City (despite the presence of Jewish Scout troops in that city) seemed unable to deal with the need to avoid pork and shellfish, although they did manage to get a Chabad rabbi to visit—on Sunday morning. More generally, how much do Jewish children miss socially because they are not members of any of the numerous Christian youth groups in town?

Of course, most of our friends, acquaintances, and others we deal with regularly are not Jewish, and that is to be expected. But there is an inevitable moment in any developing relationship when religion comes up and we mention that we are Jewish and try to be observant. Sometimes we find that the person has never met a Jew and does not know what that means. In this area, new acquaintances often ask where you attend church, which forces us to decide whether to finesse the question, sound vague, or say simply that we are Jewish. To a large extent our decision depends on the situation, and over time, we have become better at saying we are Jewish and keeping the conversation short. Another aspect of settling in is how David and Joshua have become better at handling the very public celebrations of Christmas, although the “What is Santa getting you?” question continues to be a problem for the younger Joshua.

Missouri is part of the Bible Belt, and there are many fundamentalist and evangelical Protestant churches in Kirksville. So there is a general attitude of
respect for religion, and for many people, this includes a respect for religions other than their own. Often, when someone finds out we are Jewish, they are interested and want to know more. But just as often, we encounter people who have a view of Judaism that is at best distorted and at worst simply wrong. Some know only what they learned in church Bible school about the Old Testament and think our beliefs and rituals have not really changed since biblical times. While they do not seriously believe that we still sacrifice animals, there are quite a few who think our goal is to return to those practices. Most believe that we are still waiting for the messiah—that is, the Christian definition of a messiah—because we just do not quite get it about a certain Galilean carpenter. And many think we will have a significant role to play in the End of Days. They are focused on beliefs and see what we are and do through that lens, so they are more interested in Jewish beliefs than ritual and are baffled by the way Jews tend to be distinguished by level of observance rather than minutia of theology.  

For example, at our first Seder in Kirksville, one of our two guests was a reporter from Rural Missouri magazine who had asked to attend because he was writing a story on Jews in rural areas. He hung out in the kitchen while we cooked, asked lots of questions, and took a few pictures. Then he asked how we could be sure we had gotten all of the chametz [leavened products] out of the house. When we told him that we did our best and then recited a blessing in which we “disowned” any we had been unable to find, he responded that this just reinforced the idea that Jews were overly legalistic. We tried to explain that we saw it as taking the laws seriously, while recognizing the realities and limitations of real life. Somehow this led to contrasting the Jewish view with the Christian view of the laws in the Torah, and he told us that the problem for those of us who are still Jews was that nobody had really explained Christianity to us properly. We were taken aback, but since then, we have heard similar things, though not from guests at our table.

**JEWISH COMMUNITY IN KIRKSVILLE**  
Many people also have interesting ideas about the Jewish population in this area. While most say that we are the only Jews they have ever met, a surprising number are nevertheless convinced that there are lots of Jews in town and there must be a synagogue. An equal number tell us they are pretty sure there are not any other Jews in town, at least none who were openly Jewish. And in a number of cases, people have told us about friends who have a Jewish parent or grandparent, but they have attended this or that church for years. Despite the common assumption that Judaism, like Christianity, is based on personal
belief, they still classify those people as at least partly Jewish and see them as slightly different. And one woman we met, whose grandmother was born Jewish but never practiced the religion, was sure that she knew more about our religion than we did because she had heard a few stories.

The actual Jewish population in Kirksville is fluid and hard to identify, partly because students at the university and medical school generally maintain religious ties to their home community rather than establishing new ties in Kirksville. Of course, more importantly, the lack of an organized community means that we are sort of invisible. For the first couple of years, each time we met someone Jewish, they said, “I thought I was the only one in town.” They are not, but there is only a handful of Jews who celebrate holidays—which takes much more of an effort in Kirksville than in places where there are Jewish communities.

If we lived in a town with a Jewish community, it would be easy to meet other Jews. Here in Kirksville such meetings are rare flukes—and one has to pursue every opportunity. Once Barbara was in the grocery store and heard a woman (who turned out to be a medical student) asking whether the store carried matzah, so she followed her and introduced herself. Another time, the mother of a student was behind her in the checkout line and noticed her Magen David [Star of David] necklace. The woman struck up a conversation and introduced herself. We ended up becoming friendly and saw her several times while her son was at school in Kirksville. Once when Barbara and a friend were at a local coffee shop, a visiting doctor overheard them discussing Torah and introduced himself. Another visiting doctor showed up for our Tu B’Shvat Seder one year because someone at the medical school told him about us. We are not sure who told him and it was nice to have him, but it was interesting that the assumption was that anybody and everybody could just show up. But then again, our house has often been referred to as the center of Jewish life in Kirksville.

The most significant Jewish community in Kirksville has been the Hillel at Truman State University. Hillel students have had a major role in our lives, helping us fill our living room for holiday gatherings and planning and putting on Shabbat dinners and other events on campus. But that group did not exist when we first arrived. Many years ago, when more Jewish families lived in small towns in the Midwest, a local Jewish businessman bought a house where a small group of Jewish students could live and hold events, and he paid for a rabbinical student to come on High Holy Days. But by the late 1990s, the businessman, the house, and apparently most if not all of the Jewish families in the area had been gone for many years. We found a small, informal group of Jews (about five) and no trace of a Jewish student group on campus.
In the spring of 1999, a Jewish student approached Dan to help organize a Hillel, and the following year a small but fairly active group of students got involved: they obtained university recognition and national affiliation for the group [fig. 3]. Since then, Truman Hillel has grown and become well known on campus for their Shabbat dinners, annual Hebrew learn-a-thons, film series, and other events. The Jewish students are part of the sixty percent of Truman students who come from the St. Louis and Kansas City suburbs. Despite Truman’s status as a highly selective liberal arts college, few actively Jewish students choose to come to Truman. Although their number has increased slightly over the past decade, from perhaps ten to about forty (with fifteen to twenty quite active), Jewish students with the kind of academic records that would allow them to attend Truman generally choose instead to go somewhere with a flourishing Jewish student life.

Every few months, Dan receives an e-mail from a parent of a prospective student asking whether there is a Jewish community in Kirksville and Jewish students at Truman; some are probably wondering whether their daughter or son will be able meet a nice Jewish boy or girl here. Some say they are concerned
that Truman might be dominated by Christian evangelicals who will target their children or that they will be the objects of other forms of antisemitism. While he can truthfully reassure them that antisemitism and other forms of harassment are not a big problem, he finds it more awkward to tell concerned parents about the lack of a Jewish community in Kirksville while still touting Truman Hillel’s activities. He is helping Truman recruit Jewish students, trying to tap into the large pool of potential students in St. Louis and Kansas City that so far the school has had little success in attracting. Dan has also helped to make Jewish students feel more at home at the university—for example, by persuading food services to get matzah during Pesach.

More Jewish students at Truman would benefit our efforts to build a community in Kirksville. They play a very important role at the university and in Kirksville. And of course, Hillel students regularly attend celebrations with our family, giving us the community we would otherwise lack. Perhaps most importantly, Hillel events draw many non-Jews and therefore educate the university community about Jewish rituals, holidays, and history [fig. 4]. As Hillel has become more established, more Jews seem willing to be “out of the closet.”

![Fig 4: At Passover, Truman Hillel hosts a table in the Student Union Building to educate the community about Jewish traditions.](image-url)
JEWISH LIFE IN KIRKSVILLE

Most of our Jewish life in Kirksville has been within our household. One important observance that we have maintained is keeping a kosher kitchen. We began keeping kosher fairly early in our marriage and continue to do so, with separate sets of dishes for milk and meat and separate things for Passover. We have a third set of cheap plastic dishes for the other Jewish food group—Chinese takeout—but we still avoid pork and shellfish and do not combine milk and meat. There are two grocery stores in town—Wal-Mart and Hy-Vee—and the latter is willing to special order food and has been more likely to stock some kosher and Passover foods. For a while we bought kosher chicken there because they were willing to store a case and allowed us to pick up a few boxes at a time. But this stopped after the manager ended up with a case of frozen kosher turkeys when we asked him if he could get us one for Thanksgiving—they got annoyed when we said we did not need one for Christmas. But generally the unavailability of kosher meat in Kirksville (aside from Empire kosher hot dogs) is for us not a problem because our older son is vegetarian, the younger one mostly so, and we generally eat fish or tofu products.

We usually buy a few prepared kosher foods at a store in Columbia, where our synagogue is located. This is particularly important at Passover, but over the past decade the Columbia store has stocked fewer Pesach items and less of each type. Starting several years ago, Hy-Vee started carrying a limited but vital selection of Passover food, apparently in part because Truman food services began regularly buying from them large amounts of matzah for Jewish students. For less-common items, like whole-wheat matzah and cereal kosher l’pesach, we have managed in different ways. For several years we had Dan’s mother in Tucson ship it to us; two years ago Dan happened to be driving back from the St. Louis airport just before the holiday and stopped at a store; and last year he was in Chicago for a conference and filled up a suitcase that he carried back on the train.

For people who keep kosher, eating out is a challenge almost anywhere. When dining in restaurants, we look for dishes that are either vegetarian or kosher by ingredient—meaning they could have been kosher if they had been made in a kosher kitchen. When we ask about ingredients, it is often easier to mention lactose intolerance or shellfish allergies or to say we are vegetarian—otherwise, we have to explain at great length why we cannot mix meat and milk or must avoid shrimp. Most people know that Jews do not eat pork but think that is the only element in keeping kosher, and we would rather not discuss religious rules in every conversation. Moreover, we have noticed
that many people in the Kirksville area do not know what “vegetarian” means and apparently think it refers only to avoiding red meat (i.e., beef). At various times, we have been told that pork egg rolls, a dish containing shellfish, and a cream sauce containing bacon bits were all vegetarian.

One of the more fascinating and challenging aspects of our experiences in Kirksville is that fundamental theological differences have shaped our experiences and particularly our problems in ways we did not anticipate. We somewhat expected that we would spend a lot of time explaining ourselves and our religion to other people in town because we would be the only observant or at least knowledgeable Jews they have met. What we did not expect is that many assumed that because they are Christians they already know a lot about Judaism because, as they say, Christianity replaced Judaism. Unfortunately, most of what they think they know is wrong. For example, we are not sitting around waiting for the messiah to come. We are not going to recoil in shock and bewilderment if they tell us we are going to hell because we do not believe the right thing.

These may sound like abstract and distant theological minutia that should not affect day-to-day life, but somehow they do, at least in this part of the United States. If you think religion is based on personal beliefs and that the individual’s relationship with God is central to your practice, then you approach the whole subject of religion differently than when you see religion as a set of behaviors that are practiced within a communal setting and that the community’s relationship with God is central. We begin with the assumption that religious pluralism is normal and good. But many people we meet who claim they have no problem with religious pluralism still insist that their religion has The Truth—which means that they feel it their duty to tell you that Truth. This tends to make us want to roll our eyes and is not something we experienced before we moved to Kirksville. So we are often a bit nervous whenever the subject of religion comes up because we are afraid someone is going to ask us why we do not accept Jesus as our personal savior or ask “but you still celebrate Christmas, don’t you?” or try to tell us that the problem is that we just do not understand Christianity properly.

All of this underlies our basic dilemma. While much in Judaism is centered in the family, an active community is vital to observance. And while other aspects of life are very nice in Kirksville, unfortunately that particular (and very significant) part seems unlikely to change in the near future.

HOLIDAYS IN THE WILDERNESS

Our tradition tells us that, more than Jews keeping the Sabbath, the Sabbath
has kept the Jewish people. This became very apparent in our experience in Kirksville, in which bit by bit we have stopped doing the Shabbat things that used to be so important to us. When we first moved to Kirksville, we knew that the long distance from the synagogue was going to affect how we celebrated Shabbat. During our first year, we were able to participate in a Torah study group that met on Saturday mornings, led by the wife of a medical student, with ourselves and two other faculty members. Unfortunately, the group dissolved when the medical student graduated and moved away; the others were not interested enough to keep it going, and both drifted away from Jewish practices soon after. After that, we were pretty much on our own.

We did join Congregation Beth Shalom in Columbia, ninety miles and nearly two hours away, and every few weeks we went there for services. In a weird, contradictory way, the long travel times made Shabbat once again a daylong event even though it violated the basic point of it being a day of rest. Initially we went for Friday night services and drove home afterward, even though this meant that Shabbat dinner was sandwiches or fast food eaten in the car and we could not light the Shabbat candles. After services, we would stay around and chat for a little while, but the children, then preschool aged, were tired and we needed to head home. We eventually shifted to attending Saturday morning services, which allowed us to have a relaxing Shabbat dinner with candle lighting and challah—but shifted the burden of traveling to another day and made for a very long day for the boys. To attend services in Columbia meant packing up toys, books, snacks, and often lunch and spending almost four hours in the car. If the weather was nice, we would go to a park or something in the afternoon, but few people attended services and no other families were bringing children, so we were unable to make the kind of connections that would make the day enjoyable for both parents and children.

For several years regular attendance at Beth Shalom helped us keep the “fence” up that makes Shabbat special and holy. But it bothered us that so few members of that community came to services—some Saturdays they did not even make a minyan. No children of our sons’ ages attended services, so the boys spent most of the time outside the building or reading in another room, which made it seem less meaningful as a family. Because we lived so far away, we felt more like celebrities than members of the community; we were unable to attend other types of events, which were held during the week, and while we made some friends we never felt that we had really become part of the community.

If the week had been particularly busy, if the weather or the roads were bad, or if we were just too tired for the long drive, we did not go. For a couple
of years, the boys played soccer, which meant not going to services at all
during soccer season, and for a while, Boy Scout activities often interfered with
Shabbat. If we lived in a community with a synagogue, these activities would
not have meant the whole family missing services altogether. We could have
left services early to get to a soccer game, or the adults could have taken turns
attending Scout activities with the boys. Dan’s job has also, at times, interfered
with our ability to observe the Sabbath. Truman always scheduled recruiting
activities and parents “meet and greet” events for Saturday mornings. While
Dan could and for several years did decline to take part in these events, he
also recognized that if the university was to attract more Jewish students, he
needed to meet potential students and parents.

Ironically, we really got out of the habit of going regularly to Beth
Shalom when our sons began Hebrew school in 2001; since we had to take
them down there on Sundays, also going on Friday night or Saturday was too
tiring and too expensive. And then the rabbi and congregation decided to
reduce the length of Yom Shabbat services to about the time that it took to
drive there, which meant that we were traveling for twice as long as the time
we actually spent “shabbating.” We still went once or twice a month, but
then the price of gasoline began zooming upward. Last summer (2008) we
went only once, only rarely went during the school year, and have not been to
services yet this summer.

In other ways the town, the neighborhood, and our jobs have exerted
pressures that have worn away at Shabbat. For example, while we do not live
in a particularly noisy neighborhood, people around us mow their lawns on
Saturday and on Sunday do quiet things. After Barbara went back to work,
we sometimes needed to do some errands or housework on Saturday that
previously she would have gotten done during the week, and since many
places are not open on Sundays, some errands had to be done on Saturday.
Other pressures have increased as the boys have gotten older. One factor was
that they wanted to do regular things like watch TV and play computer games,
and we had nothing interesting to offer them instead. For a long time we just
said no, but we had to compromise. We did not want them to see Shabbat as
a day of boredom and deprivation, and we had no alternatives.

We decided that when we cannot do specifically Shabbat things, like
praying, studying, and socializing with a Jewish community, then we should
try to do family activities together, and this has often included TV, computers,
and other traditionally non-Shabbat-like things. With the public library open
on Saturday afternoons and closed on Sundays, going to the library seemed
like an appropriate compromise activity for Shabbat. But recently, Dan’s
research and writing projects seem to be calling him to spend more time with
them, so that some Saturday mornings he will go downstairs to his study and write. In the afternoon, he will often go bicycling with a friend whose need for company has increased as his wife’s health has worsened. That too seems like an appropriate thing to do on Shabbat—at least more so than many other activities. But if we lived close to a synagogue, we could take turns going to services or Torah study if the whole family cannot or did not want to and would at least have the opportunity to socialize with others who are also observing the Sabbath. At this point, we often feel that we are no longer keeping Shabbat but are only remembering it—and sometimes it seems we are barely doing that.

We always attend High Holy Days at Beth Shalom, though that also has had its challenges. We found it strange the first year, when we found that the congregation borrowed the larger Baptist Church in Columbia; the few crosses that could not be removed or covered up bothered us, although we did get used to the building after a few years. We always stayed the night in Columbia rather than go back and forth from Kirksville: initially in a hotel, then in the farmhouse that the congregation had purchased, and more recently (as the boys have grown) in the more comfortable hotels. This is a major expense and requires extensive preparation, packing, managing meals, arranging pet care, and other concerns that would be irrelevant if we lived in the same town as our synagogue.

While we are not completely happy with our synagogue, we realize it is doing the best it can. It has grown over the years since we moved to Kirksville, bought its own land and recently built a sanctuary, and has a fairly active program even as other Jewish communities in Missouri are dying. During the past five years, several synagogues in central Missouri and northern Arkansas have closed and given their ritual objects and remembrance boards to Beth Shalom. This is part of the larger story of American Jews as the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those who had lived in rural communities, especially in the Midwest, have moved to the cities to attend universities and become professionals. Those going in the other direction are relatively few, but given the circumstances of Jews in America, it may be growing.

So at this point, our Jewish life is largely in Kirksville, and other than Shabbat it is centered in the holidays we celebrate with others: Chanukah, Tu B’shvat, Pesach, and Sukkot. Right from the beginning, we found that we needed (and wanted) to have non-Jewish friends participate in our festivals. Part of this was the simple desire to share, but more critically, without them we would rarely have more than our family and a few others at the celebration. As time went on, Truman began attracting more Jewish students, and they
attended many holiday events. Still, the participation of non-Jewish friends was and still is very important to us. In a very substantial way, the regular participation of non-Jewish friends in our celebrations is our community in Kirksville [fig. 5].

We usually have a latke party for Chanukah and invite everyone to bring their *hanukiot* [Chanukah menorahs] and to play dreidel; at this festival we occasionally get a few families with children. At Tu Bsh’vat we have a Seder that Barbara wrote with some Beth El friends years ago, and usually several friends participate with us. And at Sukkot we build a large sukkah and host at least one large potluck dinner [fig. 6]. But Pesach has been perhaps the most important celebration for us—which fits into the general trend among American Jews. We use our own *Haggadah* [book for Passover Seder], which we put together from various sources, designed to keep all of the essential elements and incorporate some new ones while relying heavily on English translations. Over time, the number of participants has grown, cresting at about thirty-five, although we reduced it last year to only twenty-five. To keep kosher l’Pesach, we do all the cooking, although those who can manage bring raw ingredients, and some friends and students come to help with the cooking. We have also twice received grants from Hillel-Soref to help defray
Fig 6: At Sukkot, non-Jewish friends join us for a potluck dinner in our sukkah.

Fig 7: Truman students create a family for us at Passover.
costs since many attending are Truman or medical school students who cannot get home for the holiday [fig. 7]. One medical student attended all of our holiday celebrations for three years, and at his last Seder he made a little speech thanking us for providing him with a Jewish community. But it goes both ways: we were grateful to him for giving us what we needed—people with whom to celebrate over the years. Students are a wonderful and critical part of our Jewish community, but unfortunately as soon as we really get to know them they graduate and leave town.

We love having a big crowd for the Seder, and we are grateful to all those who come and celebrate with us. It would not seem like a holiday without our friends and our community. But because people know we host a big Seder and are happy to invite people who just want to learn, sometimes we look around the room and realize that we will need to explain the Seder as we are going through it because most of the people in the room are not Jewish and this is their first Seder. We may talk late into the evening, but that is not because we are debating the serious spiritual and philosophical issues raised in the Seder ceremony but because we are explaining the Seder, the holiday, and our entire religion to those who are there to learn. The first night Seder often ends up being so much work that we do nothing special for the other nights of Pesach, and we miss being able to just participate in a Seder without having to do all the work. We worry that our children's Jewish education and their experience of the holidays are skewed by the constant emphasis on educating non-Jews about our exotic customs. We wish they could live somewhere where they did not always have to explain themselves and were not so often the first Jewish persons someone had ever met.

OPENLY JEWISH IN THE BIBLE BELT

Right from the beginning of our lives in Kirksville, we have been some of a very few “public” Jews in the area. There are many interesting aspects of being the only identifiable Jewish household in the town. For example, putting the Chanukah menorah in the window of our living room is traditional, but here it takes on special resonance [fig. 8]. Several years ago, the boys insisted that we get an electric menorah that attaches to our big picture window that can be seen from the street, and every year since then they make sure that is up and lit every night. Perhaps the best symbol of our life in Kirksville is that, five years ago, we purchased a sticker for the rear of our car: it is a fish, on the outside like those various Christian fish that so many cars in town sport, but inside that outline it has the word “GEFILTE” [fig. 9].

As a result of being open about our religion, a regular aspect of our lives
Fig 8: Each family member has a favorite hanukiah [Chanukah menorah], and we light them all.

Fig 9: It’s easy to see which car is ours in the Wal-Mart parking lot.
in Kirksville has become educating others about Jewish culture and traditions, especially holidays. When the boys were younger, Barbara was regularly invited to talk to their classes about Chanukah. One time she and David even made and cooked latkes in the classroom. Friends in Truman’s religion department who teach Judaism or world religions invite her to talk to their classes about Jewish culture and traditions. She finds that it can be fun and is happy to do it, but we are sometimes disconcerted when people with whom we have no connection ask us to do things for them. For example, the high school world cultures class has a section on Judaism, and one year a woman called us out of the blue to ask if her daughter could borrow some menorahs to show for her project on Chanukah. Another time a student asked Barbara to provide recipes for traditional Passover foods for his project—due the next day.

Some requests have been more intrusive. One time Barbara got a call from a teacher at a high school located an hour away, who asked her to talk to his class on a particular date and time. When she said she could not, he became irritated and told her that when he called a mosque in Kansas City they had agreed to send a person who worked there, and so he felt Barbara (who has a very different full-time job) should be equally available. In the end, it turned out that she had to go to Kansas City, so she agreed to stop in Brookfield and talk to his class on a different day. While even that was inconvenient, Barbara was concerned that if she did not go, the teacher would assume that all Jews were aloof and selfish.

Some of our more interesting experiences have been at Pesach. One year a Mormon discussion group asked Dan to come talk to them about Passover. Unfortunately, they asked him to come the first night of Passover. They picked another evening, and it was an interesting experience; but he is still not sure they actually believed him when he told them that most Jews are not eagerly anticipating that the messiah will come rebuild the Temple in our time. About five years ago, an acquaintance whose church was holding a Christian version of the Seder asked Barbara to provide recipes and matzah. She made this request two days before Passover; we were busy with our own preparations, we had purchased what little matzah we had in Columbia, and at the time none was available in Kirksville. Two years ago, a Christian student group asked us to provide a Seder plate and other objects for their Christian Seder, which they were holding during Passover, when we needed to be using them ourselves. But it was better than the previous year, when they advertised and held an “authentic Jewish Seder” without talking to the Hillel students or us.

It is not that we mind being asked to educate others about our religion and culture, but apparently to some people, that is our only reason for being
here. We would not have minded if they wanted to interview one of us, but in some cases, we felt that they were not interested in us as individuals; instead, they saw us as “official” Jewish representatives or (even worse) they just wanted our stuff. We do see educating others as something we should do, but it totally changes the focus of our own holiday preparations and celebrations to have to spend so much time dealing with other people’s needs.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Religious education is an important part of Jewish observance, but when the synagogue is so far away, decisions about religious school end up affecting the rest of our life. When we moved to Kirksville, Joshua was one and David was four and one-half. We assumed that much of their religious education would be what they do at home on a regular basis, but we have also sought to get them a more standard Hebrew and religious training. About 2001, we began taking them down to Columbia every Sunday for religious school. The experience was not always a good one—after sitting in a car for almost two hours, the boys did not want to sit still and pay attention in a class. And needing to drive to Columbia every Sunday meant that we really did not want to drive down on Saturdays for services.

Then three years ago, a student sent Dan an e-mail telling him she was about to start at Truman and asking whether there was a synagogue and religious school in Kirksville, as she had been teaching in a congregation outside St. Louis and hoped to continue. There is no synagogue, he told her, but have we got a couple of boys for you! She began tutoring both boys but soon found it best to focus on Joshua while helping Barbara with the curriculum for David. This worked very well: last December, David became a Bar Mitzvah in Columbia [fig. 10]. We studied at home with the assistance of a tutor from the congregation who worked with us via e-mail. David read his portion flawlessly after giving an amazing drash [commentary]. Unfortunately, most of the Kirksville contingent was unable to make it because of an ice storm that closed the roads. The student working with Joshua has begun Truman’s Master of Arts in Education program, and so she should be here long enough to help him prepare for his Bar Mitzvah ceremony.

THE CHILDREN SPEAK (WITH JERRY HIRSCH)

One way of gaining a telling perspective on Jewish life in a small midwestern rural town in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century is to look at questions of identity, of being a minority, and of antisemitism from the perspective of children who are growing up in this world. For that reason I conducted oral
history interviews with Joshua, age ten, and David, age thirteen. These were open-ended interviews, not questionnaire-driven sessions. The interviews took place in October 2008, during the presidential campaign, an event both boys tried to integrate into their American and Jewish identities.

A sense that they were Jewish and that made them different permeated the interviews with the Mandell children. Clearly their primary Jewish community was their family, where they learned about and practiced Judaism and being Jewish [fig. 11]. Between them and a larger gentile (overwhelmingly Protestant) community, there was no cushion of having other Jews who understood them and their experiences, and most importantly there were no other Jewish children for whom living a Jewish life was important.

These two children have very strong positive feelings about being Jewish and equally strong negative feelings about the experience of difference in a community where as Jewish children they are virtually alone. Each child recalled antisemitic incidents vividly: Joshua talks about how hard it is to be Jewish in Kirksville, “without everybody teasing you all the time.” Asked to describe this teasing, he responded: “it’s like whenever something bad
happens they’re like, it must be another Jewish conspiracy. In other words, they’re real jerks.” David is unlikely to ever forget “finding that the swastika has been carved into the desk. And wondering what will it take for them to replace the desk. What will it take, a huge four letter word scrawled across the entire thing?” He tries to take a large perspective on the students who do this: “they’re ignorant. Most people don’t know what a Jew believes.” From the interviews, it is apparent that the boys do not in response play down their Jewish identity. Just the opposite is true. And they maintain a strong sense of the injustice of antisemitism that helps them link their Jewish and American identities. Asked about good things about Kirksville, Joshua declares, “there aren’t religious laws forcing us to believe one thing.”

In his ideal world, “it would be against city law to mock someone because of their religion.” He perhaps at times fantasizes a world in which the tables would be turned and you would, as he says, “need a license to not keep kosher”—but he also immediately concludes, “no, that would be kind of rude.” Reflecting on the harsh treatment he occasionally receives from other children, he weaves together both the abstract principles of religious freedom and kind manners. David would like to live in a “more accepting community.” He would like not to be asked so often, “Do you celebrate Christmas?” and

Fig 11: David and Joshua enjoy taking turns holding the havdallah candle at the end of every Shabbat.
“Are there Chanukah figures like those in Christmas stories?” Jews, he points out, “want separation of church and state.”

Aside from overt antisemitic incidents, Joshua and David have experienced on a regular basis the incomprehension, insensitivity, and ignorance of a community where Jews are virtually unknown. This is not limited to just other children, nor is it limited to just some adults. The issue of difference has made itself manifest in the institution in which they have spent a good part of their lives—public schools. They have a clear sense that not only other children but also public school educators make too little effort to accommodate difference and, indeed, often do not think they should have to do that. David comments that, at every stage of his schooling, “when everyone else was getting perfect attendance . . . I wasn’t.” Some of these educators have no sense that it is wrong to call being absent for Yom Kippur an unexcused absence, while ignoring the fact that since Christmas is an official school holiday the majority is accommodated so that there is no issue of an unexcused absence. David recalls that “on the High Holidays we’ve had to deal with the schools counting them as unexcused absences.” He sees the issue of difference and majority privilege and insensitivity clearly: “they still said that because it’s the majority that is Christian, they don’t have to count Jewish holidays as excused absences.” David makes it clear that he thinks these school officials are “pretty dumb” and that in his view their policy is “unconstitutional.”

David in particular resented that some teachers insist that they know more about Judaism than he does: “My teacher even thinks a Jew has to believe in God, which isn’t true; if you are Orthodox, yes, but if you’re Reform or something, not really.” This is but one example, but it stands out for David because right now he considers himself “an atheistic Jew.” But aside from defending his own views, he is clearly irritated that non-Jews, even some of his teachers, presume to know all about Judaism and attach too little value to his experience and knowledge. This insensitivity at times carries over into incomprehension about why assignments that posit children living in a Christian family are wrong for Jewish children. Nor did he think he should have gotten “in trouble” when he said “the Easter bunny didn’t exist.” David makes clear that he has little patience with adults who ask if he has “a Chanukah figure,” presumably like they have Christmas figures.

My sense that neither child thinks about being Jewish as only a burden is confirmed by their strong identification with the Jewish life and practice of their parents, their sense that antisemitism is not only painful but wrong, and their creative response to their situation. David not only talks about celebrating Shabbat in his family but also regrets “we haven’t been able to make our own challah. Usually we have to settle with twisted bread rolls.”
He mentions that he liked making challah. At Passover, Joshua likes looking “for the *Afikoman* [hidden piece of matzah] over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over.” His answer to the question, “Who asks the four questions?” is hardly matter of fact and quite revealing: “Me always, because *I’m like the youngest Jewish person in town* probably besides someone else who isn’t actually old enough to ask the four questions” (emphasis added). As important as they find Jewish family celebrations, including both those just with their parents and those where guests are invited to the house, Joshua and David are well aware that to go to a synagogue, for example, for Sabbath services or for Yom Kippur, “they have to,” as Joshua puts it, “go to Columbia every single time.” Joshua, as is David, is ambivalent about this because of the hour-and-a-half drive each way. On the other hand, David points out that he does like the open discussion on Shabbat of the Torah portion and recalls interesting sermons by the rabbi, such as one on the environment.

In response to a world, in this case, a school, saturated with Christmas stories, these two boys have created and developed their own stories about the Chanukah slug. It is important to see the stories as more than a form of self-defense, although David recalls, “someone asked me if I had a Chanukah figure and I said, yes, we have the Chanukah slug.” And surely there is some fun, transgression, and aggression, when David told the other children that instead of milk and cookies, “we leave [the Chanukah slug] beer.” Both boys, as one would expect, like the presents that come with Chanukah, the latkes (the cat, Pumpkin, getting sick eating latkes is part of family lore), the menorahs, and the candles. Joshua is very enthusiastic about how “my brother tells funny stories about the Chanukah character he made up called the Chanukah slug.” He clearly enjoyed retelling how “the Chanukah slug, it is has a Star of David on its back and carries all the presents and [my brother David] says the reason that Chanukah is eight days long is because the slug takes so long to deliver the presents.” How elaborate this story cycle is is not entirely clear, but as the boys point out, one year Chanukah “lost one day because the Chanukah slug had an implant that made him faster.” What clearly comes across in this story cycle is how much both boys enjoy telling and performing these stories. Their own creativity is a source of pleasure for them. In addition, the performance affirms bonds of community for them that defy and/or counter a less sympathetic outside world with its Christmas characters.

Both boys also claim that being for Obama over McCain is in line with Jewish tradition and values. Both boys intensely dislike Sarah Palin’s evangelicalism, although they do not use that word, and her attitude toward the environment in general and toward hunting moose in particular. (Joshua and David try to be vegetarians and also see that as compatible with their
Jewish identity. The point here is not whether they are right about politics but that they integrate their being Jewish into the fabric of their lives as Americans. David declares, “Obama is more sympathetic to Jewish values,” does not favor the rich over the poor, and, more than McCain and Palin, stands for “separation of church and state.” And he makes assumptions about what it might mean to have a minority status in the United States: “Well for one thing [Obama’s] a minority and we can identify more with that than McCain and because McCain is bland.” If, by calling McCain “bland,” David meant that, unlike minorities, the majority does not have a distinctive culture, he would be echoing a thought common among both those perceived as the majority and those seen as minority groups in the United States. This widespread perception, although it is probably wrong, affects how Americans think about each other.

There is no denying that growing up Jewish in a small town like Kirksville is difficult for Joshua and David. And while they convey a sense of meeting the challenges and embracing their Jewish identity, the story is not all one of triumph. The question of whether they would like to live where there was a larger Jewish community and synagogue elicited a sort of “yes” response and a protest that the idea was too abstract, something they had never experienced. And while it is difficult to talk about what was not said in the interviews, it is possible to make some inferences. Being Jewish for these two boys is rarely routine. Some adult Jews are concerned about the shallowness of merely going through the routines of Jewish observance without contemplating their meaning. But there is a positive side to routine; it is the familiar that makes us feel that we are with others in our community, that we are at home. For Joshua and David, being Jewish is all too rarely familiar and reassuring. The nearest synagogue in Columbia is an hour and a half away, and the boys find the trip a burden. Joshua points out that if “there were more Jewish people [in Kirksville] then someone would start a synagogue.” And as it turns out, going to Columbia has not, in fact, created for them a community of Jewish children who would find them not different or odd for being Jews, but part of their community. They do not see the community of people who come to the Mandell house for Jewish holidays, such as Passover, as their community. Joshua off the top of his head imagines that anyone who is Jewish who comes to the Seder must be coming from Columbia—which is not the case, as he knows when he stops and thinks about it a bit longer—because he can hardly think of Kirksville and Jews outside of his family. Nor, as David points out, are most of the people who come over people he feels are part of a familiar community: “I look forward to Passover. And I look forward to some people coming over. About half the people, I don’t know so, you know.” Much of
the time he says, “I keep to myself.” A sense of difference and aloneness is not inherently a negative experience, but when coupled with a sense of isolation, it is clearly difficult. Perhaps even David’s Jewish atheism is tied to his lack of a Jewish peer group. Perhaps it is a reaction to the fact that the only people in Kirkville his own age who talk effusively about believing in God are evangelical Christians.

When I started this interview project, I assumed I would hear a lot from Joshua and David about both antisemitism in Kirksville and about the richness of the Jewish life their family practices. I did, indeed, hear about these things. I anticipated to some extent that the absence of a Jewish community in Kirksville would be important. Adult that I am, I did not think enough about what it must be like to not have a peer group of Jewish children where much could be taken for granted, where there was little need for explanation, where one could relax and just be someone who was Jewish. A self-conscious identity has in various ways been a positive part of their lives; but unlike Jewish children in communities with other Jewish children, they do not get to experience many moments of Jewish identity as shared and accepted, a “natural”-seeming part of daily cultural life.

JEWS IN OTHER SMALL TOWNS

Our situation in Kirksville is important to us, of course, but does it have any larger significance or connections to larger developments among American Jews? Lee Shai Weissbach, historian and author of *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History* (2005), found that most Jews in rural and small-town America before 1950 owned and operated small stores. Many were “well integrated into local society and came to play prominent roles in public life,” although widespread Christian prejudices and stereotypes of Jews generated anxiety and a sense of social separation. There was usually only a single synagogue in the community and few other opportunities for Jewish education and culture. Maintaining Orthodoxy was especially difficult, and “observing the traditional prohibition against work on the Sabbath was particularly hard and often abandoned” because most rural Americans shopped on Saturday and Jewish merchants depended on that business.¹

Peter Rose, in *Strangers in Their Midst* (1977), provides a more in-depth study of small-town Jews in the mid-twentieth century, based on a fairly extensive survey in 1958 of Jewish households in seventy-one communities in upstate New York and “several” in Pennsylvania. He predicted that those families that identified as Jews in these towns might actually have a more intense sense of identity than those in cities with Jewish neighborhoods, “for
they could well find themselves in the position of representing ‘their people’ to the communities in which they lived.” Most (96 percent) had come from a city rather than being born in the town. A slight majority was either in medicine (36 percent) or nonmedical professions (15 percent) such as lawyers, accountants, or engineers, all of which required skills lacking among locals who had not gone to college. The other major occupational category was merchants, with 20 percent of the small-town Jews surveyed.

Rose found that these families had and often expressed the desire to be recognized by the Christian world—for example, by explaining their holidays by comparing them to Christian or secular ones and practicing only those that made sense in the American Christian context. What drew them to the small town was economic need; for example, that was the easiest place for a small peddler to become a merchant and for a refugee to practice medicine. But the cost “was often an overwhelming sense of alienation,” a fear of “being swallowed up by that Christian world that had allowed them entry,” and the constant fear that their children would become non-Jews—although in fact their children tended to more open and outspoken about their Jewish identity.

This seems a fair reflection of our situation in Kirksville. Rose also noted that his subjects would also need to either participate in small-town events and culture or be completely friendless. We are not sure in which category we belong: we are part of many university groups and activities, but our efforts to participate in town organizations were relatively tentative and have almost completely ceased.

Weissbach found that in the last few decades, small-town Jewish life has changed. Jewish-owned businesses have been replaced by chain stores, and Jewish children have pursued university educations and professional opportunities in cities. The numbers of Jews in small towns are growing, but most are professionals, educators, or retirees rather than entrepreneurs or merchants, and “they are seldom socially marginalized in small-town society.” Some sociologists who study contemporary Jewish population dynamics are fairly certain that the movement of Jewish professionals to small rural towns is an important development, even though the larger pattern in the twentieth century has been from rural to urban and suburban areas. Sergio DellaPergola, head of the A. Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, notes that the movement of Jews from cities to rural areas is not a mass movement, but it is an increasingly visible part of American Jewry. The reason is obviously the national spread of socioeconomic opportunities, and the occupational skills of Jews who are generally highly educated. There are two opposite trends at work
here. Usually large metropolitan areas offer more opportunities of the kind congenial to Jewish population training and skills. . . . But there is also the opposite. . . . Many universities and research facilities that are attractive to Jewish manpower are located on purpose out of the main metropolitan areas. Many of the old minor communities in the US have declined because they were located in locales mainly based on basic resources processing and on manufacturing, and these places had little to offer to Jews. The new locations offer more sophisticated employment in the tertiary services, higher education and the like and are attractive to Jews. In addition, the overall acculturation of Jews in America tends to create a sort of major convergence in geographical terms between Jews and the total (white) population.5

Facilitated by the Internet and other technologies that allow rapid communication and have to varying degrees eliminated the need to be near one’s suppliers and clients, and driven by the rising costs of urban and suburban living, a noticeable number of high-tech companies and various professionals have since the 1980s been moving to rural areas, such as small towns in Idaho or in Iowa. Many Jewish professionals have become part of this movement.

PRESERVING JEWISH LIFE IN RURAL AREAS

Since our situation is not unique but is rather part of a developing trend, our experiences raise the question of how Jews, individually and collectively, in parts or in the whole of the United States, can or should adapt to this development. We do have some recommendations that would enhance our Jewish lives and help others in very small rural communities expand their participation in Jewish rituals and celebrations. While there are important logistical difficulties for Jews in rural areas, the need for community through regular interactions with other Jews poses a much greater challenge, and it is a need that Jews in isolated areas cannot solve on our own.

• Create virtual communities through discussion groups, Facebook, or other technology that would link Jewish individuals and families in rural areas, creating a twenty-first century social web that would offer much of the support and assistance that other Jews find within their local synagogue or Jewish community center.

• Encourage and help urban Jewish federations to work with and reach out to Jewish individuals and families in rural towns within their region.

Through existing religious movements, have rabbis or rabbinical students visit such individuals and families on a regular basis. Perhaps the Chabad’s experience would help in this effort.
• Encourage congregations that draw Jews from surrounding rural areas to make a special effort to integrate those individuals into the community socially and to consider scheduling changes that would increase opportunities for participation by Jews living at a distance.

• Create opportunities at Jewish camps or other institutions for family vacation programs in parts of the country where Jews live in isolated communities.

When we moved to Kirksville, we knew that there were few Jews and no congregation here, that we would have difficulty getting kosher food, that we would probably be seen as somewhat different, and that to a large extent our household would need to be the center of our Jewish life. But we did not anticipate the effects, some subtle and others profound, that living in Kirksville would have on our lives and our family. In a community where social lives are centered on churches, we continue to feel like outsiders even after a decade. We struggle to balance our need to fit into the community with our desire to maintain our individual distinctiveness. A seemingly mundane but nagging example of that tension is that people get together to socialize on Friday nights; everyone mows their lawns on Saturday morning and afternoon; and schools, clubs, and teams have events on Saturday because Sunday is reserved for church and family.

Because we do not quite fit in but rather stand out as being different, we have become the Jewish representatives in Kirksville. We do not always feel like everything we do is seen as somehow reflecting on the Jewish people, nor are we conscious that people are judging us according to their preconceptions of Jews. But we do spend far more time and energy explaining our holidays, rituals, and aspects of our beliefs than we expected or desire. It can be almost laughable, like the time that, after ten minutes of us explaining how we celebrate Chanukah and not Christmas, someone asked “So, when DO you celebrate Christmas?” It can be somewhat annoying, as when others expect that we will loan them ritual objects or when we have to persuade the school administrations several years in a row that our children are allowed by law to be absent for High Holy Days without penalty. And it can be agonizing, as when our sons are told by classmates that they are going to hell.

Certainly there are many rewarding aspects of our situation. We have become the Jewish community center in town: the place where Jewish students year after year can come to observe holidays away from home and where non-Jews can learn about and participate in holidays. We have helped establish a strong Jewish organization at the university, and not infrequently we serve as a significant resource for the town. We are proud of our heritage and what we
have been able to offer Kirksville. We think our situation has helped teach our sons empathy for those of other minority groups. But our situation places a burden on us to be available and to play host for every occasion rather than being able to just relax and enjoy ourselves from time to time. We desperately wish there were a few more permanent Jewish residents of Kirksville who also wished to celebrate Shabbat and other holidays—at least a minyan!

NOTES
2 Peter Rose with Liv Olson Pertzoff, Strangers in Their Midst (New York: Richwood, 1977), 1, 4, 64-65. Rose limited his study to communities with fewer than 10,000 residents in which ten or fewer Jewish families lived (2, 54). One of his students did a follow-up study in the mid-1970s of the adult children of those same families, which is the last chapter in the book.
3 Samuel C. Heilman, review of Strangers in their Midst, American Journal of Sociology 84 (1979): 1307.
4 Weissbach, “Jews in Rural America.”
5 Electronic correspondence to Daniel Mandell et al. from Sergio DellaPergola, Shlomo Argov Chair in Israel Diaspora Relations, The A. Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, October 16, 2008.