



## Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies Plans June Conference

by Schelly Talalay Dardashti  
2016 Conference Chair

**J**oin us for the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies' 26th annual conference — a secular venue for the descendants of crypto-Jews, scholars and interested individuals to network and discuss relevant issues. It opens Sunday, June 26, and ends Tuesday, June 28, at the Drury Plaza in Santa Fe.

The foundations of each event are the panels and round table discussions with SCJS presenters and members sharing their experiences, insights and personal stories. Informal networking opportunities take place every day.

Following successful conferences in Miami, Dallas, San Diego, and elsewhere, the society is coming home to New Mexico.

This year's theme, "Redefining Crypto-Judaic Identity: Then and Now," invited papers on crypto-Judaism from any discipline (e.g., anthropology, history, sociology, philosophy, literature, music, art history, etc.) and from any geographic location or time period, especially the issue of crypto-Jewish identity, past and present. All aspects of the Sephardic experience and that of other communities exhibiting crypto-Judaic phenomena anywhere in the world were also encouraged.

Some confirmed topics, as of this writing, include the crypto-Jews of Indone-

sia, transmitting crypto-Jewish identity, literary representations of crypto-Jews, epigenetics and the trauma of the Inquisition, DNA, the *Converso* Genealogy Project, crypto-Jewish identity in Sicily and Sardinia, documentary records for *conversos* and crypto-Jews, the *anusim* of St. Augustine, Florida, the Lemba of Zimbabwe, the Donme of Turkey, Sephardic origins of Cotija (Mexico), and more.

An essential segment of each SCJS conference are presentations by members of the crypto-Jewish community, who share their unique personal stories, research and journeys. Speakers come from Israel, El Salvador, Turkey, and from across the United States.

artists, including Jacobo de la Serna, Deborah Rael Buckley and others to speak and show their works. Photographer Stephen Collector will present his evocative New Mexico photographs, which will be displayed at the hotel. Vanessa Paloma will headline the Judy Frankel Memorial Concert following dinner on Monday evening. Hazzan Neil Manel Frau-Cortés, born on the island of Mallorca, will present "The Music They Brought: New Mexican Cantigas and Sephardic Romanzas," following Tuesday's lunch.



Schelly Talalay Dardashti

The event opens with a pre-conference genealogy workshop on Sunday, June 26. It will be conducted by genealogists Genie Milgrom and Bennett Greenspan (founder and CEO, FamilyTreeDNA.com) and Schelly Talalay Dardashti, with sessions covering Sephardic resources, Sephardic genealogy, *converso* research techniques, and DNA genetic testing. This year, Henrietta Martinez Christmas, New Mexico Genealogical

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### Keynote

Our keynote speaker is Inquisition history specialist Dr. Richard Kagan, Arthur O. Lovejoy Professor, Early Modern European History at Johns Hopkins University. He holds a joint appointment as professor in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. His books include the edited *Atlantic Diaspora: Jews, Conversos, and*

*Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500-1800; Students and Society in Early Modern Spain (1974); and Inquisitorial Inquiries: Brief Lives of Secret Jews and Other Heretics.* His keynote, "A Hornet's Nest of Heretics," will focus on an interesting case of 17th-century crypto-Judaism in Mexico City.

Conference arts coordinator Ellen Premack has arranged for well-known

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## President's Column



week ago, I stood in the courtyard at La Posada Hotel in Santa Fe, looking at the old apricot tree planted by Julia Staab and her friend, Bishop Lamy. I listened as La Posada's historian, Sara Eyestone, told us that if the spring is mild and without a sudden freeze, this ancient tree will again yield a bumper crop of apricots, which the hotel will give to a local homeless shelter.



**NMJHS President  
Paula Amar Schwartz**

This image remains with me as a metaphor for the importance of history, and as an example of Jewish values. One hundred and fifty years ago, a lonely German Jewish pioneer bride, befriended by a Catholic cleric who shared her love of botany and spoke her languages (German and French), planted a tree in the courtyard of her home in remote Santa Fe, as New Mexico became a territory of the United States. Today, that tree still stands, an emblem of pioneer history, while giving fresh fruit to those in need. We are taught in Torah, "Feed the stranger, for we were once strangers in the land of Egypt."

The history of Jewish New Mexico is filled with stories like this—poignant, rich with meaning, a gift that keeps on gifting. This year has been filled with such moments. From the Fall Conference in Las Cruces to the day-long workshop of Scholar-in-Residence Bennett Greenspan on new DNA research confirming the personal histories of many of New Mexico's hidden Jews, our understanding of history keeps unfolding.

I am grateful to have been given the task and opportunity to lead and grow this Society during its 30th year. Young adulthood—whether for a person or an organization—is a very rich time, filled with opportunity and promise, and this year has proven to be just that. Thanks to our hard-working officers and board, our small but highly productive group has managed to produce programs, research materials for exhibits, as well as work collaboratively on multiple projects.

My special thanks to Treasurer Gila Yaniv who is stepping down. I could not have done this job without her help, support, and painstaking attention to detail. It is my pleasure to welcome Rae Siporin who will replace her in this vital task. The legendary aspirin, symbol of the presidency, will be passed to Linda Goff, whose many strengths I will share at the Annual Meeting in May.

L'chaim! To the future! ☆

### Mission Statement

The New Mexico Jewish Historical Society is a secular organization that welcomes all interested people, regardless of religious affiliation. Its mission is to promote greater understanding and knowledge of New Mexico's Jewish history within a broad cultural context.

### Welcome New Members

- Maria Apodaca
- Sheryl D'Amico
- Melissa Drolet
- Lillian Druxman
- Louise Feldman-Baskey
- Bobbie Ferrell
- Valerie Frost
- Ismelda Gamboa
- Christopher Gibson
- Shelly and Herb Koffler
- Jim Mafchir
- Brenda Ramsey
- Leona Rubin and John Rivers
- Linda Smith
- Gloria Zaguirre

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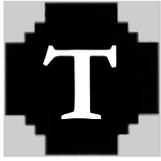
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# Las Cruces' Jewish Community in a National Context

by Jeffrey Brown



he growth and development of Las Cruces' Jewish community has been a part of larger national and world Jewish events.

This essay will explore the growth of the Las Cruces community.

Jews were very mobile long before they came to the United States. European Jews sometimes moved because they were ordered to move, or because they had to move to survive. They moved, too, because Jewish families raised many children, but laws or customs limited the ways in which Jews could earn a living. Mass production and a spreading European railroad network undercut the rural Jewish economic way of life. Many families had to move to seek their living. Jews also moved to societies that offered more personal freedom. Some Jews wanted to escape what they saw as stifling villages. Some were attracted to religious or political reform movements that did not flourish in traditional villages or under restrictive governments.

A steady stream of Jews, often people whose recent forebears had moved to towns or cities, moved after 1850 to new communities. Many moved within Europe, but millions went overseas, above all to the United States. While some Jews returned to visit their relatives, most young Jewish men and women made permanent moves. They sent money home for other relatives, stimulating a chain of migration.

Except during periods when refugees and survivors fled mass slaughter, the migrants were often less deeply Orthodox than those who stayed in Europe. Orthodox rabbis warned villagers that living in modern societies almost guaranteed assimilation, so many who did move overseas were often nominally Orthodox. Jews soon assimilated the languages and popular cultures of New York or Buenos Aires or Montreal. They were willing to explore new approaches to faith as well, so over time many joined the Conservative and Reform movements.

Jews developed skills in adjusting to new situations long before they came to America. European Jews often had to deal with officials, landowners, merchants and farmers who spoke different languages and



Jeffrey Brown

(continued on p. 4)

## SAVE THE DATE

New Mexico Jewish Historical Society  
Fall Conference 2016

Jewish Identities: Lost, Rediscovered,  
and Reclaimed, November 12 & 13, 2016

New Mexico History Museum and The  
Lodge at Santa Fe

The Fall Conference will be held in conjunction with the exhibition at the New Mexico History Museum, "Fractured Faiths: Spanish Judaism, the Inquisition and New World Identities."

The keynote speaker will be Professor Jonathan Israel, Andrew W. Mellon Professor at Princeton University, Institute for Advanced Study.

The dinner speaker will be Dr. Frances Levine, President of the Missouri History Museum.

It is a full program of speakers from New Mexico and beyond on *conversos* in New Mexico. See the website, [www.nmjhs.org](http://www.nmjhs.org) for details.

## June Conference (continued from p. 1)

Society president, has been invited to participate and present New Mexican resources.

### Hotel

The conference hotel, the Drury Plaza (<http://druryplazasantafe.com>), has provided a special conference room rate of \$109 per night (single or double, one king/two queen beds), including breakfast. There are a limited number of rooms available; we suggest that reservations be made immediately at <https://www.druryhotels.com/Reservations.aspx?groupno=2249433>, or call 1-800-325-0720, specify GROUP RESERVATIONS, use group 2249433. It is also a good time to begin looking at flights into Albuquerque or Santa Fe.

### Registration

Meals are included with registration fees beginning with the opening Sunday dinner event. Kosher meals (additional fee), if required, are provided by Chabad, but only available with full registrations. Partial registration is available for those who cannot attend all days. For registration details, go to [www.cryptojews.com](http://www.cryptojews.com).

**Note:** The Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies (SCJS) was founded in 1991 and fosters the research of the historical and contemporary development of crypto-Jews of Iberian origin. It provides a venue for the descendants of crypto-Jews, scholars, and other interested parties to network and discuss pertinent issues. ✧

*A journalist, genealogist and international speaker, Schelly Talalay Dardashti has been researching her families across Spain, Iran, Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and Russia. She is the U.S. Genealogy Advisor for the global genealogy company, MyHeritage.com, and serves on the steering committees of the Jewish Genealogical Society of New Mexico and the Sandoval County (New Mexico) Genealogical Society. She is the founder of "Tracing the Tribe - Jewish Genealogy on Facebook," with 10,000+ global members.*

**Las Cruces' Jewish Community** *(continued from p. 3)*

used different alphabets. If Jews peddled or engaged in borderlands trade, they might need to understand a range of local laws and deal with multiple currencies and coinage. Jewish men were mostly literate (at least in Hebrew). Jews planned for the future, and lived within a set weekly work and religious calendar. Jews maintained social and economic networks with relatives and people from their former villages as they scattered to new areas. These networks helped them adjust to new homes and engage in long-distance trade with people they trusted. Jews took networking to the United States as well.

The United States was itself an unusually mobile society, and Jews who came here were very mobile. As they moved from neighborhood to neighborhood, or from one state to another, Jews had to rebuild their community structures and institutions. It has been a normal pattern for American Jewish communities to develop quickly and flourish—and also to shrink.

The Jews who came to the United States entered a new nation with more possibilities than they had experienced in Europe. The United States did not freeze white people in the same rigid categories common in Europe. While some Americans treated Jews with suspicion or hatred, many showed toleration for Jews that was startling by European standards. Toleration often gradually became acceptance.

Jews loved the United States. They became proud patriots and volunteered for military service. Young men and women were free to build businesses, pursue higher education, and advance in the professions. In a land where people could re-create themselves, many Jews changed their names and their religious practices. Some drifted almost completely out of the Jewish orbit, and minor rates of intermarriage steadily rose. At the same time, many other people converted to Judaism, and Sephardic crypto-Jews began returning to open Judaism. Jewish willingness to lead or adapt to cultural changes eventually led communities to accept people with different gender identities. Jewish women outside Orthodoxy limited the number of children that they bore and pursued far wider opportunities than could have been imagined in 1900. Jewish communities steadily changed.

**The Las Cruces Community**

The development of the New Mexico Jewish community and that of Las Cruces reflects all of these sweeping demographic and cultural changes.

The first Spanish-speaking settlement in the Mesilla Valley, the village of Doña Ana, was founded in 1843. The United States occupied much of the region several years later, and by 1854 had purchased the Mesilla area. Las Cruces, Mesilla, and other small towns developed in the Mesilla Valley; Las Cruces

became the largest of the towns. As Jews moved there, they developed communities and ways of life similar to Jews who settled in northern New Mexico and Arizona. While many of the earliest Jewish settlers in this region were from Germany, at least some came originally from Eastern Europe.

Records make it clear that many early Jewish settlers came to join relatives, or people they had known in a previous community. Jewish families pursued multiple occupations; some prospered, building bigger homes and opening stores. Some who did not prosper moved to try their luck elsewhere. At the same time, some successful families moved to bigger cities. Since the Jews who remained were often reasonably successful, but not wealthy, a middle-class Jewish community emerged in Las Cruces. Some Jewish merchant families in Las Cruces had links with Jews in Arizona and California, while others were linked to Jews in east-central New Mexico.

Jews who succeeded in business had to earn the trust of their neighbors in order to buy and sell goods. They often became successful in politics and in organizations such as the Masons. Gustave Manasse in the 1920s, Samuel Klein in the long period from 1932 to 1952, and David Steinborn in the later 20th century were all mayors of Las Cruces.

*(continued on p. 5)*

**Many Thanks for Your Contributions**

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**Las Cruces' Jewish Community** *(continued from p. 4)*

Las Cruces was a small city with somewhat over 6,500 people in 1930. Its Jews had many links to El Paso, a much larger city only 45 miles south. El Paso was a major railroad center and border trade city with more residents in 1920 than Phoenix, Tucson or Albuquerque, and ties with El Paso were natural for Las Cruces Jews. El Paso had both a Reform temple and a Conservative synagogue. Las Cruces' early Jews went to El Paso to attend High Holy Day services, and men belonged to an El Paso B'nai B'rith lodge.

Las Cruces Jewish families operated stores or insurance agencies near the original downtown on Main Street. Collectors for the United Jewish Appeal had only a small area to cover when they greeted their landsmen. Stores closed for High Holy Days and advertised in newspapers that they were closed for religious observances. The small Jewish community in a desert town was tightly knit; it tried to maintain Jewish practices to the degree possible. Other Jews, such as members of the Bellman and Levenson families of La Mesa, also owned stores in the Mesilla Valley and interacted with the Jews of Las Cruces and El Paso.

The United States underwent drastic changes during and after World War II. The war brought hundreds of thousands of Jewish men and women in military service to new parts of the United States. Many moved to Sunbelt communities such as Las Cruces; Holocaust survivors also came to the Southwest. As more Jews moved into the professions, the number of Jews employed at universities such as New Mexico A&M in Las Cruces slowly increased. The Las Cruces Jewish community gained new members. Some of the new Jewish families later moved or were transferred; they had fewer reasons to remain than families who owned local stores.

During the 1950s, Frances Williams and other Jewish women from White Sands Missile Range and Las Cruces organized a Jewish Sunday School in Las Cruces. New Mexico State University professor Max Cramer urged Jews to develop a formal organization and hold religious services. By 1956, women formed a Sisterhood. A proto-congregation met three weeks per month in Las Cruces, and once a month at White Sands, where Private Louis Levy was a chaplain's assistant. After Professor Cramer left Las Cruces, the community group developed other lay leaders. The Sisterhood donated an ark and an altar clock in March 1958, and in September presented the group with a Sefer Torah.

**A Permanent Building**

By 1960 Las Cruces Jews discussed having a permanent building and a membership campaign. The group bought a lot on Parker Road. They held a bagel and lox breakfast and recruited 21 new members, each pledging \$100 per year in dues. They hired an experienced rabbi, although he soon left. The group's board made key decisions that shaped the community; some members wanted very Reform-style services, while others were much more Conservative. In July 1960, the Board defeated a motion to require that all Torah services be held in English. The group voted 22 to 1 on January 22, 1961, to proceed with a building. Families began donating prayer books and other materials, and member Mark Wechter received some funds from El Paso's Temple Mount Sinai and Congregation B'nai Zion. The new structure was dedicated on May 27, 1962. Both of El Paso's congregations helped in the building's dedication with Rabbi Floyd Fierman from Mount Sinai presiding.

The group decided to affiliate as Temple Beth-El within the Reform movement. It established more im-

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**CORRECTIONS**

- Philanthropist Helene Singer Merrin's name was incorrectly written in the story and photo caption on New Mexico History Museum's groundbreaking exhibit. She is not Helene Merrin Singer as stated in the winter issue.
- In the article entitled "A Very Successful Conference" in the winter issue, Jan Siegel Hart played the role of Hannah, her maternal grandmother. The article incorrectly stated that she played the role of Anna.

**Las Cruces' Jewish Community** *(continued from p. 5)*

portant precedents: the board voted in 1962 that members who could not pay \$100 annual dues would be asked to donate what they could, but they set a minimal payment at \$48. The congregation set Sunday School fees at \$25 for the first child, and \$10 for each subsequent child. It adopted a formal constitution in the fall of 1962, and after considerable debate decided that it would not reserve High Holy Day seats for members.

Leaders and members moved to Las Cruces or left, but Temple Beth-El endured. Records for 1966-68 show that the temple planned extensive social activities that included a bagel and lox breakfast, an October carnival, a trip to see the play *Pajama Game*, a January dinner dance, the annual deli dinner, a second night seder, and a May 1967 picnic. The board decided to build a larger structure that included six classrooms. Member Jay Druxman led the purchase of 40 cemetery plots from the Masonic order. By 1968, the Temple had more than 70 members, including 18 children in Sunday school. It helped an additional 33 Jewish students at New Mexico State University.

Both Temple Beth-El and Las Cruces grew rapidly during the 1970s. This reflected increasing retirement to the Sun Belt, the growth of universities, and for Jews, the willingness of professionals to move to smaller Jewish communities. Temple Beth-El had 86 adult members in 1974. A Jewish encyclopedia estimated in 1977 that there were about 100 Jews in Las Cruces. This was certainly an underestimate!

During the 12 years from 1974 to 1986, 58 percent of the temple's members died, moved, or resigned. The temple grew despite these losses, reaching 191 adult members by 1986. This growth, at a rate of 6.8 percent a year, considerably outpaced Las Cruces' overall 4 percent growth rate. During this period of rapid

membership turnover, the 36 members remaining from 1974 constituted less than one fifth of the 1986 members. The temple continued to serve a mixed congregation, and a survey in 1990 found that almost 60 percent of the families called themselves Reform and another 40 percent self-identified as Conservative.

A number of rabbis served the community over time, including Herbert Strauss, Abraham Kertes, Joseph Klein, Howard Laibson, Cy Stanway, Gerald Kane, and the current rabbi, Larry Karol. As the temple grew, its Sisterhood, Hadassah, Mensch Club and social action committees provided service and outlets for temple members. By 2007-08 the Temple Directory listed 153 member families, as well as 13 persons who were members of only the Sisterhood or the Mensch Club.

The community outgrew its aging building on Parker Road. Many members felt that a new building would encourage additional families to join the temple. The Religious School projected an enrollment of 50 young students and 18 Hebrew students in 1996-97, so any further growth would overwhelm the Parker Road facility. A decade-long effort to raise funds and construct a new temple led to the completion of the new structure in 2007.

**Today's Congregation**

Temple Beth-El's membership changed during the fund-raising and building period. While better medical treatment across the nation has helped many Jews to live well into their 80s and 90s, families became smaller. Parents raised fewer children, and as pensions, investments, Social Security, and Medicare made it possible for more retired people to move far from their earlier homes, a steady stream of retirees moved to warm climates far from frequent snow. These developments produced a new demographic structure in which many

Southwest Jewish communities became predominantly retired.

A special Temple Beth-El survey in 2007-08 with 100 respondents found that only 21 reported having children living at home. Twenty-two households contained single adults, widows or widowers. The other households had couples with no children living at home.

Temple Beth-El also became much more Reform by self-identification. Seventy percent of the 2007-08 respondents saw themselves as Reform, Reconstructionist, or humanist, while only 21 percent called themselves Conservative or Conservative/Reform. This change reflected larger trends in American Jewish society, although some of the more Conservative Las Cruces members had left Temple Beth-El to join a Las Cruces Chabad.

By 2013-14, the Temple Directory listed only 137 member families, a decline of somewhat over 10 percent from 2007-08. A draft Temple Directory for 2015-16 contained 132 member families, including one family each in the Cleveland and Dallas areas. Some 73 of the 153 member families present in 2007-08 (47.7 percent) were no longer Temple members in 2014-15, while 53 of the 137 member families in the 2014-15 Directory (38.7 percent) had not been listed as member households only seven years earlier. Clearly, a high turnover rate continued.

The aging membership of Temple Beth-El and its increasingly Reform inclination reflects larger trends in New Mexico, where a Jewish Federation of New Mexico survey found by January 2015, that 71 percent of New Mexico's Jews were over the age of 45, with 34 percent across the state over the age of 65. A Pew Charitable Trust study across the United States found that 35 percent of American Jews are Reform,

*(continued on p. 7)*

# Seymour Merrin: the Visionary of the “Fractured Faiths” Exhibition

by Ron Duncan Hart

**S**eymour Merrin had a unique vision in supporting the New Mexico History Museum through the Crypto-Jewish Project, which he encouraged and funded. Merrin had a Ph.D. in geology, and lived and worked in mining and research in the Southwest during the early 1960s. As his interests shifted to the new world of computing, that took him away from the region and its cultural history for a number of years.

He had a successful career in computing with many patents and industry awards. He became one of the important spokesmen in the United States about computing systems and their future, and he was regularly quoted in *The New York Times* and technology magazines about everything from the launching of new computer hardware to business computing needs. He returned to Santa Fe in 1997 and became a major figure in philanthropy, funding projects about crypto-Jewish history and Native American arts, among others.

Drawing from his passionate interest in crypto-Jewish history, he worked with Fran Levine, then the director of the New Mexico History Museum, to fund the program “Sephardic Voices” to a full house at the Lensic in October, 2008. Stan Hordes organized the event that included readings by Isabelle Medina

Sandoval, Mario Martinez, and Carol Lopez, and two musical performances of Sephardic music, one by Consuelo Luz and another by Vanessa Paloma.

Merrin had a larger vision of a major museum exhibition that would docu-



*Seymour Merrin*

ment that history, and after the Lensic event, he began working to make that larger vision a reality. He provided a major lead grant for the exhibition, and the discussions about it started immediately. Even as he was holding meetings and talking with people about the exhibition that he envisioned, his health began to decline. He pushed forward as long as

possible, but his passing in 2010 left a vacuum.

During those years of envisioning and funding the startup of the project, he worked closely with his wife, Helene Singer Merrin. They read about crypto-Jews and discussed what could be done. After his passing, Helene picked up the torch of this work and has seen it through to the realization of the exhibition. It begins with the experience of Jews in Spain and follows the developments of the Inquisition, the Expulsion from Spain, and the *converso/ anusim*/crypto-Jewish phenomenon as it evolved in Mexico and the mountains in northern New Mexico. The exhibition will bring objects from Jewish life in Spain, an original of the Edict of Expulsion, and documents from the Church and the Crown addressing the issue of Jews and Jewish practices. This exhibition shows the *converso/ anusim* experience, as never shown before.



*Ron Duncan Hart*

“Fractured Faiths: Spanish Jews, the Inquisition, and New World Identities” will open May 22 at the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe and will run until December 31. This is the first major museum exhibition on this subject, and it was the vision and funding of Seymour Merrin that made it possible. ✧

## Las Cruces’ Jewish Community *(continued from p. 6)*

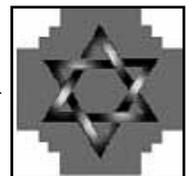
but clearly Temple Beth-El exceeds this percentage.

During the period from the 1970s to the present, Temple Beth-El underwent both growth and shrinkage. Its members became older, although families with young children were temple members at all times. Temple members

saw themselves as increasingly Reform. Many people came and left, but some families remained members for many years. The temple gained converts to Judaism and crypto-Jews returning to Jewish affiliation. The Las Cruces Jewish community has become much more diverse. It will be fascinating to see how it evolves.

*Editor’s note:*

*Jeffrey Brown, Department of History/College of Arts and Sciences, NMSU, based this article on his presentation of the same title at the NMJHS Conference in Las Cruces on November 15, 2015. ✧*



# Growing Up Jewish in Las Cruces

by Debra Wechter Friedman



emory can be elusive.

It was Mark Twain who said, “The very ink with which all history is written is merely fluid prejudice!” The following are my family’s and my recollections, along with those of Sis Druxman and Bea Klein, two original founders of our Jewish community.

While memories and facts can get fuzzy after so many years, a most serendipitous intervention occurred. Halfway into the collaborating project, Lee Druxman, Sis’s grandson, furnished me with a mother lode of information: a recorded session from 1988 in which members of Temple Beth-El were recounting the community’s history, as well as newspaper articles in the *Las Cruces Sun-News* from the 1950s. How valuable it was actually to hear the dates and facts of this community’s beginnings directly from the mouths of Howard Klein, my father Mark Wechter, and Nate Weiselman, who were all original or early members of the community.

## Early Settlers

My parents moved to Las Cruces from El Paso and Galveston in 1948 and started the Music Box, a retail music store on Main Street that was in the same location as White’s Music Box today.

My father commented how he and my mother, Rose, felt like outsiders when they arrived. The Kleins, Glucks, Sterns, Rosenfelds, Davidsons, and Krepps families were all related and the Freudenthals already had deep roots in Las Cruces. But a bond formed with all of these Jewish merchants and, as Sis Druxman said, “Social gatherings enforced a sense of community.”

Frances Williams and the Traftons helped form the first Sunday School in 1954. Shortly thereafter, the Yalkuts, Sis Druxman, Bea Klein, Belle and

Abe Pearlman, and my parents became involved with the Sunday School. Due to my father’s upbringing and Jewish and Hebrew education at Congregation B’nai Zion in El Paso, he was considered a valuable resource for the fledgling school. According to Sis Druxman, my father was the “go to” person for religious education, not only as a teacher but for guidance as well. Mike White and Jeanette Modern were Sunday School teachers, among others.

Sunday School was held at various locations, including the Elks Lodge and the Unitarian Church, and also in empty rooms in the Gene Stern building.

My sister, Marcie Wechter Leff, recalls that Sunday School also met in the Legion Hall on Main Street, which was a couple doors from the Music Box. My father and sister would arrive early on Sunday mornings to pick up empty beer bottles from the night before and clean up before the rest of the students and teachers would arrive. Marcie also remembers Sis Druxman and our mother being around Sunday School a lot and handing out little favors to the kids after school was out.

## Forming a Synagogue

When anyone in Las Cruces wanted to attend services, they had to go to El Paso. The university, as well as the White Sands Missile Program, attracted Jewish people who were well educated in Judaism and had a desire to build a strong community.

In 1956, Dr. Max Cramer, a math professor at NMSU, was the leading force in calling the Jews in the community together to form a congregation. Their first meeting was on campus. Then religious services were held at the Gene Stern building, the WIA Hall, the Unitarian Church, Lions Club, and finally, the Branigan Public Library. Dr. Cramer was the first president of the congregation

and he also led the first services. Services were held 52 weeks a year, MINYAN OR NOT! Once a month they were held at White Sands Missile Range, officiated by Lou Levy who was a chaplain’s assistant and army private. Learned volunteers and other military people also led services.



**Debra Wechter Friedman**

My father led High Holy Day services with prayer books from Temple Mount Sinai. One of my sweetest memories is that of my father practicing chanting Kol Nidre along with Perry Como’s recording of the prayer. He would practice in our living room for weeks leading up to Yom Kippur. To this day, many people have said that they still compare the singing of Kol Nidre to when my father was singing on the bimah. Now as an adult, I am brought to tears during the singing of Kol Nidre in my congregation, as I can feel my father’s presence and hear his voice as I am singing with the cantor.

My sister told me that one year there was no one to blow the shofar, so Dad had a record player behind the bimah and would play the appropriate sound of the shofar blowing when necessary!

Bea Klein recalls that her family’s rabbi from Tucson, Rabbi Belgrade, helped the Las Cruces congregation become affiliated with the Reform movement. Other rabbis from neighboring towns also helped the fledgling congregation.

The Sisterhood, officially formed in 1955, worked diligently to raise the funds necessary to purchase a Torah, ark and altar cloth. My father purchased the Torah in Los Angeles and dedicated it on September 1, 1956, at the Branigan Public Library auditorium. Rabbi Renov of

*(continued on p. 9)*

## A Retrospective Look *(continued from p. 8)*

B'nai Zion in El Paso officiated. Rabbi Floyd Fierman of Temple Mount Sinai of El Paso also attended.

Morris Gluck was the official mentor and Torah scholar who read and chanted Torah.

Mike White and his family donated the second Torah and silver dressings from a shul that was closing in Boston.

Dad passed on his religious education by assisting 25 to 50 students to prepare for their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Sis remembers that the first several kids to celebrate their Bar Mitzvahs were Melvin Williams, Ben Pearlman, Louis Druxman, and Harris Klein. Bar Mitzvah services were held at Branigan Public Library.

For the first Purim, Sis remembers that she, Bea Klein, and my mother made the hamentaschens and gathered costumes for the children.

Sis and my sister also remember that for the first Sukkot celebration, they built a sukkah on Compress Road with wooden fruit boxes collected by my mother and assembled by her and Sis. My sister remembers decorating this sukkah with pumpkins, cotton bales, and branches of cotton.

### Community Working Together

In 1961, under the leadership of Iz Goldstein, the board members, along with the original members of the congregation, voted to put up their own building.

Efforts to raise money included rummage sales, bake sales, and a large community-based delicatessen dinner that was held at Las Cruces High School. Kosher meat from El Paso kosher butchers Alex and Doris Gluck was brought in. Bea Klein and Sis Druxman made cole slaw; every person helped, including kids who bussed tables. My mother was the top saleswoman for

tickets sold throughout the larger Las Cruces community. Large amounts of money were raised for several years with this event.

My father was in charge of fundraising for the entire building project. Because our local community was so small, even though there were several generous donors, Dad had to reach out to the El Paso community. He wrote 1,262 letters to members of B'nai Zion and Temple Mount Sinai. Ninety percent of the donations came from Temple Mount Sinai members. Dad said it was not the wealthy who donated; he would receive \$5 one month and \$15 the next from individuals. He was quoted as saying, "It was a joy to receive these small amounts monthly!"

Eventually, the congregation purchased land on Parker Road and a pre-constructed BANES building. One large room with a tiny kitchenette housed our small community. The ark was brought from the Branigan Public Library. Bimah chairs, along with the eternal lamp, the Ner Tamid, came from the old Temple Mount Sinai. Folding chairs were purchased. Temple Beth-El came into being!

Rabbi Renov from B'nai Zion was the officiating rabbi because my father's allegiance was still with the Orthodox shul, even though the majority of funds came from the generous folks at the Reform temple.

Rabbi Fierman of Temple Mount Sinai and my father formed a special bond. Rabbi Fierman saw to it that prayer books were donated for our new temple.

When a Jewish community is formed, it also needs a cemetery. While he was president of Temple Beth-El, Jay Druxman arranged to purchase 40 burial plots at \$140 each from the Masonic Lodge. Sis remembers her husband writing the check for the \$2,000 down payment out of their personal funds to make this hap-

pen. The board approved the purchase and payments three years later in 1971.

The underlying message of this entire great story is this: Individuals banded together and took responsibility to make things happen. The Jewish community in Las Cruces, complete with its original members, transplants who moved because of employment with NMSU, and those from the White Sands Missile Range ALL helped make Temple Beth-El what it is today.

As Sis said, people pitched in; there were no prima donnas. When there was a job to be done, no one said, "NOT ME!" The jobs got done. And now we carry on with much gratitude to those who had a desire and vision for a close community and were willing to give of themselves. ☆

*Editor's note: This article is based on a presentation by Debra Wechter Friedman and Sis Druxman at the NMJHS conference in Las Cruces on November 15, 2015. They were part of a panel on "A Spotlight on the Las Cruces Area Jewish Communities."*

### AWARD-WINNING BOOK

*The Jewish Legacy in New Mexico History*, a publication of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society, has been named the winner of the Lansing Bloom Award by the Historical Society of New Mexico (HSNM). This award is given annually by HSNM for an outstanding publication in New Mexico or Southwest borderlands history by an institution affiliated with the Historical Society of New Mexico. This fascinating anthology, edited by Richard Melzer, contains articles detailing the Jewish legacy in New Mexico history--from the frontier through World War II and beyond—and is a wonderful contribution to New Mexico history.

Congratulations, Richard!

# In Memoriam Len Torobin

by Rabbi Malka Drucker

**W**e are saddened to share that Len Torobin, Marcia's husband, has died this past week in Los Angeles.\* Many of us knew him well and would wait for his unique commentary during

Shabbat *parsha* discussions. Len lived into the age of wise counsel, yet Marcia would comment: "his energy was like that of a ten-year-old." That exuberance makes this loss even harder to accept.

Marcia and Len met at the base of Mount Everest over forty years ago. Although we in Santa Fe met him in his late seventies, the athlete was still apparent in his posture and demeanor.

Len created the grass roots business plan for the formation of Exxon Nuclear and then joined its implementation as head of R&D and Marketing. In 1978, he became Chairman and CEO of Materials Technology, and later Microcel. In 1991, he helped create Nanofiber Technology. Those eyeglass and small electronics cloths we all use to clean fingerprints, smudges, and grease are the result of nanofiber technology.

Len was an intellectual, and we enjoyed many conversations about a shared affection for our Rabbi Harold Schulweis. He proclaimed Rabbi Schulweis a true Spinozan, as Len proudly was.

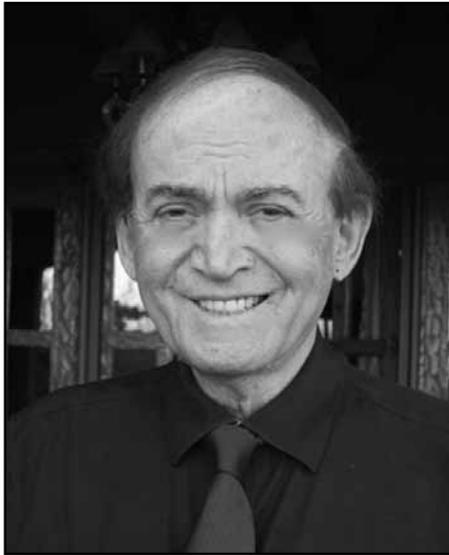
Len's love for Marcia was most evident in his support for her extraordinary contribution to all Jews in Santa Fe. We

grieve alongside Marcia during this difficult time.

After my father died, Len told me something that I'll never forget. I was surprised to hear this shared truth from my supremely rational friend, after

telling him that my father often came to me. Len said "pay attention when that happens, because if you don't, the visits will stop." His consoling words guided me to understand that while people die, relationships go on.

*\*Editor's note: This essay originally appeared in the HaMakom email newsletter on December 29, 2015.*



Len Torobin

## Neysa Pritikin

Neysa Pritikin passed away peacefully in her home on January 24, 2016, encircled by family, friends, and love.

Neysa was born May 18, 1949, in Chicago. She graduated from Brandeis University in 1971 and got her master's in behavior modification at Southern Illinois University. She worked as a psychologist until she got her MBA at Northern Illinois University. In 1993, she moved to Silver City where she sold real estate and became a loan officer, connecting her clients with the community and more often than not becoming their friend.

Neysa was a positive influence in Silver City, nurturing and supporting its creative potential. She served as president of the Mimbres Region Arts Council and was instrumental in starting the

Silver City Blues Festival. The artistic community of Silver City would not be as rich today without her. Graciousness, friendships and hospitality were hallmarks of her life; her loving bond with her parents was an inspiration. She had great compassion and love for her dogs and the animal kingdom in general. She had an adventurous spirit and a love of travel and delighted in the beauties and the wonders of the world.

She is survived by her father, Leonard Pritikin, and her brother, Steven Pritikin. Her mother, Geneva Copeland Pritikin, preceded her in death.

*Editor's note: This article is adapted from her obituary that was published in the Las Cruces Sun-News on January 27, 2016.*

## Barry Bernard

Barry Bernard, husband of Myrna for 62 years, passed away Friday, January 1, 2016, surrounded by family, music and love. They were both members of NMJHS.

They came to Santa Fe five years ago from Boston after Barry retired from the dry cleaning business. It was a blessing for our community and for them.

They moved from Santa Fe to Santa Barbara this past summer to be nearer to their grandchildren. Shortly after the California move, Barry discovered he had cancer. Characteristically, both he and Myrna remained hopeful to the end.

*Editor's note: This article is adapted from a longer one that appeared in the HaMakom email newsletter.*



# From Your Mouth to God's Ear: A Celebration of Local Jewish Women Poets

by **Tori Lee**

Last fall the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society, along with Hadassah Santa Fe and the Adult Education program of Temple Beth Shalom, sponsored what organizer Joan Logghe laughingly termed “an historic event.” Not only had 15 Jewish women poets agreed to share a microphone and read from their poems, they had also agreed to limit themselves to just five minutes each. Joan remarked that she now understood what poet Anne Sexton meant when she wrote that “we are all writing a communal poem.” After invoking the presence of the *Shekinah*, the feminine aspect of the Divine Presence, Joan invited each poet to share a piece of her poetry.

Many of the poems centered on loss and on grieving that loss. Poet Debbi Brody remarked how strange it was to attend a poetry festival in a synagogue. “I usually come to Temple for funerals.” She read her poem, “For Travis on His 20th *Yahrzeit*.” He asked to be buried near the babies who die before they are 30 days old, who are sinless. “I promise to care for them.”

Janet Eigner pulls from the Jewish shamanic tradition in many of her poems in *What Lasts is the Breath*, a collection of poems written in memory of her beloved daughter, Naomi Tamar, dead far too young from a brain tumor, leaving a two-year-old son Isaac, who grows up carrying his mother in his heart.

Elizabeth Jacobson read a brief selection from “Humor,” about “the need to touch something of the world and be embraced by it immediately.” Her chapbook, *A Brown Stone*, collects vignettes from a 1950s-1960s childhood remembered against a backdrop of a baby sister born

ill and dead a few months later.

In a stunningly intimate poem, Rabbi Chavah Carp mentioned one does not say *Kaddish* for a stillborn fetus/baby and how she mourned at the sight of her womb preserved in a jar of formaldehyde, evidence to be used in a malpractice lawsuit.

Carol Moldaw read two brief excerpts from her new book of poetry, *Beauty, Refracted*. In “My Measure,” she asked, “what do the dying and the dead hear?” She also mentioned “negative space, the space absented by you.”

Rachelle Woods spoke about tears in her poems, how to collect tears in small bottles, and why did people cry those tears? She offered the image of a departed dear friend “to whom I can’t send an email anymore.”

By no means were all the poems about mourning. Joan Lipman read from her poem “Mystery School,” in which a

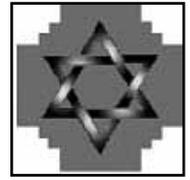
ing her crypto-Jewish roots, Isabelle. wrote *Guardians of Hidden Traditions* and spoke about “the arroyo of her spirit.” Joan shared a poem about her Aunt Clara who wanted to know about northern New Mexico: “So any Jews there?” She mentioned images of a matzo ball moon, of chopped liver and green chile, and of Jews bearing bagels to a New Mexico nativity.

Poet Miriam Sagan read “Start Anywhere,” in which she used the image of a bridge hung between two voids. Sharon Niederman offered a poem in which she asked “does forgiveness bring healing?” Michelle Laflamme-Childs chose Maimonides as the source of inspiration for her poetry manuscript, *Some of 613*, a reference to 613 *mitzvot* in the Torah, not an intuitively obvious inspiration for poetry.

Ellen Shabshai Fox presented an inclusive picture of Judaism in which “we belong to the same tribe but heard the voice of different prophets.” Hearing formed the central image of a poem by Lauren Camp, “A Long Day at the Torah.” She compares the sound of rain to the voice of the cantor pouring out while teaching her the Torah portion for her Bat Mitzvah.

Randi Ya’el Chaikind read brief selections from her most recent book, *Revelations of the Heart*, a book of poems and writing prompts designed to be used during the 49 days of Counting the Omer.

At the reception and book signing after the completion of readings, many attendees remarked how beautiful the poems were and how such a Jewish poetry festival should be an annual event.✧



**Tori Lee**



**Women Poets**

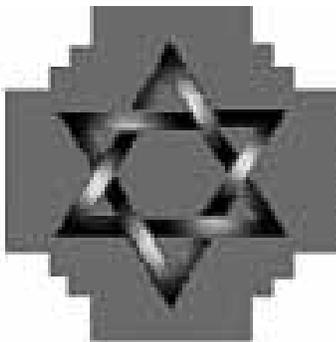
*bracha*, God’s blessing, flows out and can adhere to both people and places, a blessing such that “even cherry blossoms fall to the ground laughing.”

Poets Isabelle Medina Sandoval and Joan Logghe focused on the sometimes strange intersection between Jewish customs and New Mexico culture. Discover-

New Mexico Jewish Historical Society  
5520 Wyoming Blvd. NE, Suite B  
Albuquerque, NM 87109

## Membership in NMJHS

For information contact the NMJHS office at 505-348-4471 or [admin@nmjhs.org](mailto:admin@nmjhs.org) to request a membership brochure. Alternatively, you can download a membership application from the NMJHS website [www.nmjhs.org](http://www.nmjhs.org)



## Calendar of NMJHS Upcoming Events

Check for future events at [www.nmjhs.org](http://www.nmjhs.org)

**May 1:** Montefiore Cemetery Clean Up, Las Vegas, New Mexico, 10 a.m.

**May 15:** Annual Business Meeting, JCC Albuquerque, 1-2 p.m. Open to NMJHS members. Program: Screening of film, "Challah Rising in the Desert," 2-3:30 p.m. Open to the public.

**May 22:** "Fractured Faiths: Spanish Judaism, the Inquisition and New World Identities." New Mexico History Museum/ Palace of the Governors, Santa Fe. Opening to the public at large.

**June 5:** Special tour of the "Fractured Faiths" exhibit for the Santa Fe and northern New Mexico Jewish communities. 1 p.m.

**June 24-25:** Festival Djudeo Espanyol, Drury Plaza Hotel, Santa Fe. Music, art poetry, personal journeys. For information: [hershel@herschelweiss.com](mailto:hershel@herschelweiss.com)

**June 26-28:** "Redefining Crypto-Judaic Identity: Then and Now." 26th annual conference of Society of Crypto-Judaic Studies. Drury Plaza Hotel, Santa Fe.

**July 26 at 8 p.m., July 31 at 3:30 p.m., August 2 at 8 p.m.** "Sephardic Legacy" concert led by Joshua Habermann with vocalist Vanessa Paloma and oud and percussionist Fattah Abbou. New Mexico History Museum, Santa Fe.

**November 12-13:** NMJHS fall conference in Santa Fe, "Jewish Identities: Lost, Rediscovered, and Reclaimed." New Mexico History Museum and The Lodge at Santa Fe.