

By **Tonya Cone**

Special to The Jewish Outlook

When the 80th session of the Texas Legislature is gaveled to a start at noon Tuesday, Jan. 9, six Jews from around the state will take their seats among other lawmakers: two in the Senate and four in the House.

Each of the Jewish legislators — one of them from Austin — had a different type of upbringing, practices Judaism differently today and says the voice they bring to the Legislature may be influenced to some extent by their religious background.

Here's a rundown on the state's Jewish legislators, starting locally:

REP. ELLIOTT NAISHTAT



In the state House of Representatives, Austin Democrat Elliott Naishtat was raised in a "typical, middle-class, Queens, Jewish household" in New York City. He attended the Sunnyside Jewish Center, a conservative synagogue where he became bar mitzvah and his parents were involved in Hadassah and B'nai B'rith. His father was president of the synagogue's board.

"I remember my extended family from Brooklyn, The Bronx and Queens gathering together at our house for Passover seders and Chanukah celebrations," Naishtat said.

After graduation from Queens College, Naishtat joined Volunteer in Service to America, or VISTA, part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty."

What Jewish perspectives bring to halls of state Capitol in upcoming 80th Legislative Session

When he signed up for the program, he was promised an assignment in San Francisco, but was sent to Eagle Pass, southwest of San Antonio on the Texas side of the U.S.-Mexico border, where his group started a Head Start program for Hispanic children, organized neighborhood associations, worked on health issues and sought to provide water and sewer service to a *colonia*.

After finishing his VISTA service, Naishtat moved to Austin and earned a master's degree in social work and a law degree from the University of Texas at Austin. He was elected to the Texas House in 1990.

"My Jewish upbringing has played a significant role in what I did with the VISTA program and what I have done as a member of the Texas House of Representative, especially in terms of focusing on health, human services, housing, education and issues that affect vulnerable populations," Naishtat said.

Naishtat, who has served as chairman of the House Human Services Committee and names low-income people, minorities, children, the elderly, victims of domestic violence and people with disabilities as members of the vulnerable populations he looks out for, has passed more than 150 bills since first being elected.

For three years, Naishtat has served as president of the National Association of Jewish Legislators, a non-partisan group of Jewish legislators from across the nation that focuses on social justice, education, and health and human services issues. Also, he has also been to Israel six times since first being elected to the

Legislature and has attended international conferences with Jewish parliamentarians from around the world.

Naishtat is a faculty member of the UT School of Social Work and teaches policy as an adjunct professor at St. Edward's University. He also serves on advisory boards of several organizations, including Communities in Schools, the Settlement Home, Helping Hand Home for Children, Austin Groups for the Elderly and the Women's Advocacy Project.

In his spare time, he enjoys swimming, jogging, hiking and spending time with his 96-year-old father, who now lives in Austin.

"My dad has been trying to become a Texan after 94 years in New York City," Naishtat said.

SEN. FLORENCE SHAPIRO



A Republican from Plano, state Sen. Florence Shapiro was raised by first-generation Americans who survived the Holocaust and moved to the United States from Berlin in 1947. Shapiro

cites her family's history as "a huge part" of who she is today.

Her grandfather, a very religious orthodox man, had fought in World War I and considered himself a German first and a Jew second.

"He never believed that was happening would affect him the way it did, which was his death and the death of his wife and daughter," Shapiro said.

As a result, her father taught her to always question things and not to take anything for granted.

Shapiro graduated from Hillcrest High School in Dallas in 1966 and earned a bachelor's degree in secondary education from the University of Texas at Austin. After college, she worked as a public school teacher until she began her political career by serving six terms on Plano's City Council. She was elected to the Texas Senate in 1993.

Since her background is different from many Texans', Shapiro said, she feels obligated to hold steadfast to her beliefs and speak out for those who might not be spoken for otherwise. Her top priorities are education and children's issues. She has served on the Senate Education Committee for four years.

"A priority for Texas must be to educate every child in the state. That is our future," she said.

In previous legislative sessions, which are held January-May every other year, Shapiro has fought to restore parental rights in the fight against drugs, worked for election reform measures and led the effort to require a doctor to notify a parent 48 hours before performing an abortion on a minor daughter.

She also worked to pass a package of bills known as "Ashley's Laws," which changed how the state adjudicates, punishes and tracks sex offenders. She has also championed women's healthcare issues and reform of adoption procedures, making it easier for Texas families to adopt children.

Shapiro and her husband, Howard, have three children, five grandchildren and are expecting another grandchild in January. The couple are founding members of Chabad of Plano.

When with their oldest daughter, Lisa, and her husband, Brian Strauss, a rabbi at Beth Yeshurun in Houston, Shapiro said, they are Shomer Shabbos. They keep the kosher laws, walk to the synagogue and observe other Shabbat laws when observing Shabbat with the family.

"It is very reflective and rewarding.

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We do it because we have a great deal of respect for our daughter, her husband and their family. It is important to us and we enjoy it," Shapiro said.

The Strausses have three children: Joshua, Noa and Ari. Shapiro's son, Todd, is a lawyer who lives in the Dallas suburb of Frisco with his wife, Jori, and their daughter, Ella. Shapiro's other daughter, Staci Rubin, is a social worker who also lives in Frisco with her husband, Paul, a pediatric dentist, and their son, Samuel.

Shapiro says she spends any free time she can find with her grandchildren. She also enjoys exercising and gardening; is president of Shapiro & Co., the advertising, public relations and special-events agency she founded in 1984; and is on the board of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

SEN. KEL SELIGER

An Amarillo Republican, Sen. Kel Seliger was raised in the nearby Panhandle town of Borger, belonging to one of the 10 to 12 Jewish families. The nearest synagogue was about an hour away in Amarillo.

"Because we lived in a small

town, it was not a traditional Jewish upbringing. It was not consistent or all the time," Seliger said, explaining that his family attended High Holiday services at the synagogue in Amarillo, with about 60 to 70 other families, each year.

While Seliger, a graduate of Dartmouth College, said being Jewish probably gives him a different philosophical perspective on life, he does not think it affects how he approaches his role as a legislator.

"It is part of who I am, no different than any other person of faith, but I'm there to represent 700,000 people. That's the guiding factor," he said.

Seliger, who was sworn in during 2004 to complete Teel Bivins' term and was elected later that year to serve another term, said he is working on a variety of issues for the upcoming legislative session. Pipeline safety, public education and testing for drivers older than 80 to 85 years, as well as natural resources such as water, oil and gas, are issues that are important to those in his district.

Also, the state's prison system costs as much as the public school system and needs to be reformed, said Seliger, who serves on the Senate Criminal Justice Committee.

When not working at the Capitol and representing his constituents, Seliger said, he spends time traveling the roads on his Harley Davidson motorcycle and the skies as a commercial pilot and flight instructor. He said he would continue playing golf until his son can beat him.

Seliger lives in Amarillo with his wife of 19 years, Nancy, and their two teen-age sons, Matthew and Jonathan. The senator is co-owner and executive vice president

of Lake Steel Inc., a steel service center in Amarillo.

REP. SCOTT HOCHBERG

When Rep. Scott Hochberg (D-Houston) joined the state House in 1993, few Jews served as Texas legislators.

"The numbers had dwindled, and it is important because there are issues of particularly strong interest to the Jewish com-

munity," Hochberg said.

Since first being sworn in, he has had the opportunity to weigh in on broad issues that he plans to continue working on in the upcoming legislative session, such as measures against hate crimes. He previously fought a case where a judge ruled that no hats could be worn in his courtroom, including yarmulkes, and continues to work to fulfill prisoners' religious needs, such as providing matzot during Passover.

"There are times when being here as a member who's Jewish presented views that would otherwise have not been here," he said.

While Hochberg's district was primarily Jewish before the controversial Texas redistricting in 2003, he said, the Jewish community in his redefined district is not large enough for a minyan. Apparently, however, his experience as a vocal minority gained during his upbringing as the only Jewish student in his grade in his Chicago-area school will not go to waste.

"Being the only Jew in school gave me perspective on what that's like, that people in the comfort of a Jewish community don't feel. I was aware I was different," he said. "I am comfortable learning about other religions because of my upbringing."

Hochberg's district now includes a large Pakistani Muslim community, and the Pakistan American Council of Texas has honored him with an appreciation award for his work on a law that cracked down on deceptive advertising of Hallal foods.

"That was basically a cut-and-paste on a law dealing with kosher foods that was passed by my predecessor, Paul Colbert," Hochberg said.

Domestic issues such as separation of church and state, rather than international issues concerning Israel that are usually at the forefront of Jews' political consciousness, are important to Hochberg. His parents and grandparents, he explained, passed values on to him through their traditions that he did not realize at the time were Jewish values. These values include the importance of education and asking questions, respect for human life and individuals, and the "need to do good."

"These were the values of my family, the way I was brought up," he said.

A baseball fan, Hochberg said Sandy

Koufax empowered a generation by refusing to pitch during a 1965 World Series game on Yom Kippur. As a leader, Hochberg said, he believes it remains necessary to set the example that it is important to recognize traditions, especially since he is occasionally forced to choose between religious obligations, usually during Passover, and representing his constituents.

After being scheduled to attend a meeting on Yom Kippur during a special session one year, he worked for a rule the next year that would prohibit committee meetings that conflict with members' religious holidays. The motion, however, failed overwhelmingly.

Hochberg, who earned his master's degree in electrical engineering from Rice University, operates a software development company and serves on the Community Relations Committee of the Jewish Federation of Houston. He also is on the local chapter boards of the American Jewish Committee and Anti-Defamation League.

In his spare time, he enjoys theater and travel.

REP. JOE STRAUS

While the family of Rep. Joe Straus (R-San Antonio) has been involved at Temple Beth-El for generations, he said, they were "not the most observant family in town." They celebrated the High Holidays, as they still do today, and he was confirmed at the Temple but did not become bar mitzvah.

As an elected official, Straus does not approach his public service from a religious standpoint. But, he said, a strong sense of justice, equality and freedom are values that are important to Jewish people and to him.

"I've been troubled the last several years by those who try to manipulate, in the public policy arena, and try to divide us, in the legislative body, through the use of religion in making arguments," he said. "I think good legislators are usually religious people, but don't think they have to beat you over the head with religion to prove it."

Straus, who was elected to the Texas House in a 2005 special election, says he has been drafting a variety of bills that focus primarily on local issues. Some of the issues include the environment and clean air, combating domestic violence, industry regulation, telecommunications infrastructure fund and judicial reforms.

Straus and his wife, Julie, have two teen-age daughters, Sara and Robyn.

Noting that his wife his wife is not Jewish, he added with a laugh, "I'm bipartisan."

Looking forward to the upcoming legislative session, Straus recalled an honor he received last term. On the last day of the

last session, while killing time awaiting results of a report, Naishtat and Hochberg announced that Straus was being honored as the House Jewish Caucus Freshman Member of Year. They presented him with a Star of David they had sketched on a piece of paper.

"Ellen Cohen would be a strong favorite to win that coveted award this year," Straus said.

REP.-ELECT ELLEN COHEN

At the classical reform synagogue and summer camp she attended while growing up in Columbus, Ohio, state Rep.-elect Ellen Cohen (D-Houston) was taught that as a Jew, she is responsible for

making the world a better place and that it is important to participate in community activities. When she is sworn into the Texas House on Jan. 9, the first day of the 80th Legislative Session, she will have the opportunity to impact the world from her new vantage point in the Texas Capitol.

"The issues my district cares about happen to coincide with issues I was brought up to believe strongly in," Cohen said.

Her top priorities, she said, are education and children's health care, because those who care about the human condition care about children.

"The Jewish community was the benefactor of the public education system when my parents and grandparents came to this country. If it hadn't been a quality public school, we couldn't have achieved the American dream," she said.

A 37-year breast cancer survivor, Cohen said her "Jewishness" was part of her work when she began Reach to Recovery of Canada, a program that helps people cope with breast cancer. She also has served as executive director of the American Jewish Committee in Houston and has been president and chief executive officer of the Houston Area Women's Center, which assists domestic and sexual abuse survivors, for 15 years.

"The core of Jewishness is: 'If I'm only for myself, who am I, and if not now, when.' That saying always goes through my head," Cohen said.

Cohen, whose husband, Lyon, died about four years ago after battling a rare form of cancer, typically reserves Friday nights to observe Shabbat with her daughter, son-in-law and their three children in Houston. Her son, his wife and their son live in Aspen, Colo.

In her spare time, Cohen said, she enjoys cycling, walking, hiking and horseback riding. Also, she is a member of Houston's Congregation Beth Israel and serves on their executive committee.

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