

BLENDING TRADITIONS: THE BENDER FAMILY'S JOURNEY THROUGH FAITH, HERITAGE, AND HARMONY

May is Jewish Heritage Month, a time to remember and celebrate the contributions of Jewish Americans. As with all heritage awareness months, it's also a time to seek to understand the traditions and the history of our neighbors.

BY JEN GENNARO

Zachary residents Jeffrey and Chelsea Bender have been married for a little over 10 years, forming a mixed faith family where she follows Christianity and he adheres to Judaism. Despite their differing beliefs, they have found harmony in their household and extended families by pointedly honoring and celebrating their respective family traditions.

Jeffrey's paternal grandparents were first-generation Americans. Their parents immigrated from the greater Russian Empire in the early 1900s. His father, Ralph Bender, recalls his grandparents becoming "ardent Zionists" after the second World War, working tirelessly to raise money and making at least five trips back to their ancestral homeland. While Judaism has been passed down through the Bender generations, Ralph says everyone in the family has the freedom to practice a little differently, "the most important thing is that they all have the values of respect, kindness and service," he says.

On his mother's side, Jeffrey's family fled the Poland/Ukraine region around 1902 due to the horrors of the pogroms during that era. For those unfamiliar, the pogroms served as a grim precursor to the Holocaust, involving organized massacres of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia, around the turn of the century. "If you've seen *Fiddler on the Roof*, you're likely familiar with this dark chapter in history," Chelsea explains. The details of their immigration remain largely unknown, as Jeffrey's great-grandparents chose not to discuss it. However, one significant aspect that emerged was the preservation of a special Torah brought with



Jeffrey, Elijah, and Chelsea Bender.

them, which eventually found its way to the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in New Orleans, known as the Pesses Torah.

With the arrival of their son, Elijah, honoring Jewish heritage and culture became even more significant for the Benders. They observe a majority of the High Holy Days, including Rosh Hashanah, Passover, Sukkot, and Hanukkah, ensuring that Elijah grows up familiar with his Jewish roots.

Passover aligns closely with Easter on the calendar each year, marking the Jewish commemoration of freedom from Egypt and the reign of the Pharaoh, leading to their eventual journey to the Promised Land. The Last Supper, observed by Jesus and his disciples, was a Passover seder, a ceremonial meal. Each year, the Benders honor Passover with a seder at Jeffrey's parents' house, where Chelsea follows her stepmom's family recipe to make the famed "fallen" chocolate cake. Its flourless nature holds significance, as Passover dietary laws forbid leavened foods, symbolizing the haste of the Jewish exodus from Egypt, leaving no time for bread to rise.

Last year, during the overlap of Passover and Easter, Chelsea learned to play the Israeli National Anthem on the piano to perform for Jeffrey's family. The anthem is a beautiful celebration of the Promised Land and enduring hope for a place of belonging and freedom—much like the home the Benders have made.