



Q&A WITH RABBI JASON NEVAREZ

CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF AND WHY YOU DECIDED TO BECOME A RABBI?

My childhood dream was to become an architect. I followed that passion through my studies at the Bronx High School of Science and into the College of Art and Architecture at the University of Michigan (Go Blue!). Concurrently, a love of Jewish learning and synagogue involvement followed me from childhood through my college days, so much so, I became drawn to teaching at a local synagogue in Ann Arbor. The passion I felt for teaching even sparked a desire to shift my undergraduate focus to Judaic and World Religion studies on an academic level.

In college and beyond, I became a Jewish youth and education professional, serving in both local and regional Director positions. I felt inspired by the connections made, as well as the evolution of Jewish identity commitment among the many I taught and learned from. Throughout those years, the mentors in my life shined a bright light upon the possibility of my serving the greater Jewish community as a Rabbinic leader. That prospect, over time, has been a driving force in the sacred work I am blessed to do each and every day.

WHAT IS YOUR VISION AS A RABBI AND HOW DO YOU DEFINE YOUR RABBINATE? My rabbinic vision is to:

- 1 Honor the sacred obligation of impacting lives and facilitating change. I continuously seek to uncover new and meaningful ways to bring about balance, wholeness, and Jewish relevance.
- 2 Teach Torah in the broadest sense and to help people strive to “walk the talk” - making those teachings actionable in daily life.
- 3 Lead programming and prayerful moments that result in intentional Jewish memory making, Tikkun Olam (Social Justice), and Kehilah Kedosha (sacred and inclusive community) so the way we interact with our communities and the world reflects those core values.

I am ever-reflective of Rabbi Zalman’s teaching: “A little bit of light dispels a lot of darkness”. In a world that is wrought with turmoil and fierce polarization, as a faith community, we must illuminate our moral voice and be the first responders to the injustice, apathy, and inequity we encounter. I envision Beth Israel as a 21st Century laboratory for animating Jewish life, THE go-to address for progressive, inspirational, and even disruptive Judaism; where our doors remain wide open, so that seekers and cynics alike have a place at the table, and where newbies and tenured guardians of our tradition can deepen their Jewish identities in meaningful, impactful ways.

WE HAVE ENJOYED HEARING ABOUT THE WORK YOU DID TO REINVIGORATE WORSHIP AT YOUR CURRENT CONGREGATION. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THAT EFFORT?

Absolutely, it is one of the things I am most proud of. Prompted by the feedback of a congregant, I formed a Jewish Life Task Force, a cross-section of congregants charged with examining the opportunity to restructure our high holiday services, a feasibility study of sorts.

We sent surveys and engaged in dialogue with our membership. The result was a clear mandate to establish an alternative to the traditional High Holy Day worship experience.

I partnered with congregants to vision and develop – based on a commitment to find a healthy balance between the traditional elements of our liturgy, progressive modalities in worship and historical congregational precedents – a new High Holy Day Service experience. We were successful and to date, there is large and broad participation. The alternate service is a critical thread in the fabric of our annual holiday offerings. The experience of this effort led me to create PrayerLab: an interactive laboratory space to experience current prayerful modalities and envision those yet to be.

WE ARE CONCERNED ABOUT LOCAL, NATIONAL AND WORLD EVENTS, PARTICULARLY RISING INCIDENTS OF DOMESTIC TERRORISM, HATE CRIMES AND ANTI-SEMITISM. HOW WOULD YOU WORK AT BETH ISRAEL TO CREATE HEALTHY DIALOGUE WITHIN DIVERSE COMMUNITIES OF OPINION AND THOUGHT?

I share your concern. History has shown us, time and again, that when people fuel fear and hatred, Jews are inevitably targeted. As a rabbi, I remind our community that anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; anti-Semitism is a human problem we collectively own.

As I think about coming into the Beth Israel community, I will of course first want to become more familiar with Beth Israel’s response and involvement in discussions and community activities. I envision establishing a Beth Israel Forum – an intimate space for healthy and respectful dialogue and debate. Using the wisdom of our tradition, we will invite thought leaders, experts, and others to speak on the issues of our day, where those gathered can offer opinion in a safe space; an environment where people treat each other respectfully and where we can hold one another accountable. I look forward to partnering with local and regional Jewish colleagues, elected officials, community and religious leaders to learn how we can best support one another and make an impact as a team to dismantle silos and speak out against anti-Semitism and hate.

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE SERMON TOPICS AND HOW DO YOU PREPARE YOUR SERMONS?

My sermon topics are derived from a variety of places and experiences. At times, I like to incorporate a personal experience or life story, so that those hearing my words can, perhaps, find a personal point of connection, a soulful resonance. There are moments when I am impassioned to parse the weekly Torah portion. As a voracious reader and news enthusiast (junkie) radio programs, podcasts, newspapers, and books, serve as sources for hot topics and current events. I try to present views that are intellectually honest and balanced, yet inclusive of my own positions. Most importantly, I am intentional about weaving the fabric of Jewish life and living into sermons.

KNOWING THERE ARE MANY GREAT CONGREGATIONS IN SEARCH, WHY DID YOU CHOOSE BETH ISRAEL?

Throughout my interactions with Beth Israel, from reading the first words on the Central Conference of American Rabbis (“CCAR”) application, “This time we are going

ON JANUARY 9, 2020,

the Senior Rabbi Search Committee recommended to the Board of Directors that Rabbi Jason Nevarez be presented to the congregation for election as senior rabbi. The Board unanimously approved this recommendation, and a congregational forum and election will be held on Tuesday, February 11 at 6:30 p.m. at Congregation Beth Israel. All members are invited. The recommendation of Rabbi Nevarez culminates nineteen months of work by the Phase 1 and Phase 2 Search Committees, congregational leadership and members.

SEARCH COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

Rabbi Nevarez made a powerful, positive, lasting impression with the Search Committee early on in our phase 2 search process. He set the bar based on his proven qualifications which aligned well with our Self Study guiding principles. We particularly enjoyed the consistently warm and genuine interactions we had with him over the course of the six months of getting to know each other. Rabbi Nevarez is a sincere, welcoming, relationship-driven rabbi. His current congregants spoke with us about the close bonds they had formed with Rabbi Nevarez and that they felt blessed and joyful to have him as their rabbi. In particular, they noted his ability to meet individuals where they were while engaging them spiritually, religiously and socially.

Having spent the last 16 years at Temple Shaaray Tefila performing many of the duties Beth Israel asks of its senior rabbi, Rabbi Nevarez is well-positioned to be our senior rabbi. He is a talented mentor, a team unifier and one who patiently listens and hears others. We learned that he is a true collaborator and is very much looking forward to partnering with our clergy team and lay leaders. We are excited about his innovation around education and delivery of immersive learning. His passion for social justice work in Israel and Latin America has been ‘hands-on’ and admirable. Also, as a past chair for the Northern Westchester Interfaith Council, his work aligns well with our commitment to interfaith families and building connections outside of our four walls.

Rabbi Nevarez shared that his rabbinic vision is channeled through the sacred obligation of impacting lives and facilitating change. He seeks to continually uncover new and meaningful ways to bring about balance, wholeness, and Jewish relevance to his congregants and colleagues in the midst of a landscape that is continually in flux and challenged by ever-growing distractions and value shifts.

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from strength to strength” and through virtual and in person interviews, I have felt an overwhelming sense of “destiny”, (bashert), that Beth Israel was my match.

I knew Beth Israel as a flagship congregation in the greater reform movement. What I experienced through the interview process is a community that is rich, diverse and geographically expansive. With nearly 160 years of institutional memory and activity as the oldest and largest Jewish synagogue in San Diego, I quickly came to learn that much of the fabric of Jewish life in San Diego has been woven by this congregation. I felt an energetic connection as I engaged with tremendously devoted staff and passionate lay leaders. I had rich encounters with the extraordinary clergy and left eager to be in thought-partnership with them. I was captivated by the notion of helping to lead this strong, vibrant community into its next chapter – building off its many successes and innovating to form new connections and remain relevant in a time of competing priorities and value shifts. I am very excited to begin that journey with you!

HOW WILL YOU APPROACH YOUR FIRST YEAR AT BETH ISRAEL? WHAT WILL BE YOUR FIRST PRIORITIES?

Knowing the membership vote has not yet taken place but because I am so excited about this opportunity, I have already begun thinking about transitioning to Beth Israel as its next senior rabbi. As I look toward my first year, the following is key to my (and our) collective success:

- 1 The 3 R's: Relationships! Relationships! Relationships! I want to know you and for you to know me (and my family). What commonalities might we share.... what excites you about being part of this community....your passions....your challenges and opportunities. I want to listen and learn and better understand how I, your clergy, staff, and lay leaders can better serve you. I hope to visit with you in the Spring to get a jump start on opportunities to connect, to start to get to know each other and form meaningful relationships.
- 2 Continue strengthening our clergy and staff teams: I want to better understand the current synergies between clergy, the education team, programmatic leadership, staff and lay leaders, recognizing that each individual and role is instrumental in making Beth Israel what it is. Through team building activities and other leadership design tools, I will partner with our senior leadership on how to best evolve these sacred partnerships in a manner that respects the deep history but also recognizes that the arrival of a new senior rabbi is change.
- 3 Engaging with Community Partners: Beth Israel is already regarded as a premier legacy Jewish institution in San Diego with a multitude of successful partnerships built over many, many years. I will work to familiarize myself with those already in place, and endeavor to establish new ones as our congregation begins to write its next chapter.
- 4 Rabbinic Advisory Council: In addition to the 3 legged-stool (Board President, Executive Director, Rabbi), a sacred partnership that will offer much leadership and guidance, I am eager to establish a council with a group of congregants that will share continuous insights and constructive feedback, as we continue to build upon our collective visions and goals.

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 CONGREGATION
BETH ISRAEL
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San Diego, CA 92122

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SPECIAL MEETING of the CONGREGATION Tuesday, February 11, 2020

5:45-6:30 p.m. – reception in
the David and Dorothea
Garfield Social Hall

6:30 p.m.- Special Meeting of
the Congregation in the
Glickman-Galinson Sanctuary

CAN YOU SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION AND INNOVATIONS YOU MIGHT WANT TO BRING FORWARD TO ENRICH OUR SCHOOLS AND FAMILY EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES?

I am impressed with the incredibly diverse opportunities offered at Beth Israel – from meaningful experiential and project-based learning, to Jewish values and identity building. Throughout my tenure, I have worked in partnership with educators to create some wonderful educational models, specifically in the areas of whole family learning and engagement. I lead an annual B'nai Mitzvah Family Retreat, where we celebrate Shabbat together and explore the meaning of Bar/Bat Mitzvah through experiential hands-on learning and activities. We implemented a pioneering family learning model called Mishpacha (“family” in Hebrew) – parents and children learning together, both in and out of the classroom, embedded into the formal curriculum throughout the year. On Sunday mornings, while students are in the classroom, I facilitate a “Parents-Only” learning center called Café Shaaray. At the beginning of the year, parents help develop the curriculum of hot [Jewish] topics they would want to learn about. I develop teachings and facilitate discussions on those topics. Parents drop-in as they wish, and many parents reflected that this curriculum was the highlight of their Jewish learning. At the beginning of my tenure at Beth Israel, I look forward to becoming familiar with all that has been established, and to see how we might reimagine and complement these offerings with those experiences I bring with me to deliver challenging, inspiring and energizing Jewish learning.

A CONVERSATION with RABBI JASON NEVAREZ

 BETH ISRAEL

