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Houstonian fulfills dream to become pulpit rabbi

By AARON HOWARD Thu, Aug 02, 2007



Photo by Lora Schraft / The Morgan Hill Times

Acting rabbi Debbie Israel Dubin read a portion of the Torah to David Miller, 10; Rebecca Snook, 5; and her brother, Benjamin, 7, before Shabbat service Friday night, at Carden Academy in Morgan Hill, Calif.

On Aug. 1, 2004, Houstonian Debbie Israel Dubin sat in Ben-Gurion Airport awaiting a call. Although it was her birthday, Dubin wasn't expecting a call on her cell phone. The call she contemplated spoke to a much deeper need in her life.

After spending the summer studying at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, Dubin felt clearer about the path she wished to follow. She wanted to become a rabbi. The major obstacle: "I was close to an age that other people retire," she said.

Instead of lamenting that she might be too old to be accepted, Dubin decided to follow her calling. She applied to the Academy for Jewish Religion, a transdenominational school for rabbinical, cantorial and chaplaincy studies. The school is located on the UCLA campus in the Yitzhak Rabin Center for Jewish Life.

The AJR was founded in 2000, by a group of Los Angeles-based rabbis, compelled by a belief that there is an urgent need to revitalize Judaism and make it a profound experience. The professors and staff represent a wide range of denominational backgrounds, from Orthodox to Reform. The student body, which now totals some 70 students, is composed of highly accomplished individuals who have a tremendous desire to help their fellow Jews, particularly those who might not otherwise make a deep, personal connection to Judaism.

The AJR accepted Dubin's application without hesitation. With a résumé that includes having been the president of Congregation Brith Shalom in Houston, regional director of Jewish Women International and co-publisher, managing editor and writer of Noah's Ark, an international newspaper for Jewish children (which had its beginnings in the Jewish Herald-Voice), the AJR knew Dubin was exactly the type of student they were looking for.

Maybe not as a pulpit rabbi. "It's not that I didn't want to be a pulpit rabbi," Dubin said, "but I felt it wasn't a reasonable expectation, especially being a woman and not being a young woman. I had a clear idea of the population I wanted to serve: the unaffiliated, disaffiliated and/or interfaith families. I felt I knew people who hadn't found access to G-d, and I wanted to be around to help them, if not as a pulpit rabbi, then one Jew at a time."

Cut to the present: Dubin is now officially a fourth-year rabbinical student at AJR. Until recently, she has commuted back and forth to classes from Houston. Then her husband, Jerry, and she decided to rent a place in Santa Cruz, where they have family.

Just before Pesach 2006, a rabbi who had been ordained at AJR told Debbie Dubin about the need for an interim rabbi at Congregation Emeth in Gilroy, Calif. The 65-household Congregation Emeth is a Reform congregation serving California's South Valley (Gilroy, Morgan Hill, South San José and beyond). Dubin went. She conducted services. The board offered Dubin a student interim rabbi position. She needed an internship. It was a beautiful match.

"The experience was so wonderful in every way," Dubin said. "My teachers at AJR were very supportive. I had a mentor rabbi in Santa Cruz. I don't have my ordination, and you need someone to ask when you have questions. For example, my first funeral: I had a question about burial I needed answered, especially when it came to preparing the body. This is a Reform congregation, and because I come from a Conservative background, I had some questions about their customs.

"[Congregation Emeth] is an amazing congregation. Since [the South Valley] isn't a major Jewish center, it's a lot easier for them to melt into the farmland. But the people keep working to make sure there is a Jewish presence in the South Valley, outside the San José area. Here, people have to seek out a Jewish community. But, it's very inspiring to work with the people who have done so."

Obviously, the congregation liked what Dubin was doing. In January 2007, they offered Dubin a two-year contract as acting rabbi. She said yes.

"I did not see this coming," Dubin said. "I never expected it. And I never dreamed it would happen so close to where my children and grandchildren are. Everything about it feels so miraculous."

Northern California is a different kind of Jewish environment from Houston. In a city like San Francisco, the affiliation rate is about 20 percent. Congregation Emeth is affiliated with the Reform movement. But, the members come out of a variety of backgrounds. Call it trans-denominational or multid denominational.

Dubin said: "Being the only shul in town, we have some folks who want to study Talmud, some who are cultural Jews, some Israelis, some fluent in Hebrew and some not. We have more than 50 percent of the congregation interfaith families [families where one spouse is not Jewish]. They are very active and contribute a lot to the congregation. That's the reality of American life. They are inspiring and holy people who are raising their children to be Jewish. They are supporting a synagogue that may not represent their own beliefs, but they are doing their part to see there is a future for the Jewish people."

On many levels, Dubin didn't expect to have a pulpit. There's a paradigm that a rabbi should be a model, at least in the sense of modeling Jewish behavior. As a mature woman with a lifetime of Jewish service, Dubin believes that as a rabbi, she wants to mirror the experience of G-d's presence in her life.

"I want the people around me, my congregants in particular, to find their own paths to G-d. It has to be a unique path. The Talmud teaches us that we're each unique. G-d makes each of us, and G-d expects us to fulfill our own uniqueness. It's for each of our sakes that the world was created. So, I can't be judgmental about where people are at, if I want to help them find their own path. That's what trans-denominational means to me."

Of course, Dubin has her own mentor: Brith Shalom's former spiritual leader, Rabbi Moshe Cahana, of blessed memory. "I knew he influenced me, but I never realized the extent of that influence," she said.

"Sometimes, I look at my life and see this pattern: these miracles that G-d created around me and how blessed I am. This is a late-in-life calling. But looking over my life, this is really the fulfillment of a life of dreams. It took me a long time to answer the call, but obviously, it's been present for a long time."

When it comes to Dubin leaving her birthplace and lifelong residence, Houston's loss is California's gain.