



A Visit with
Rabbi Evelyn Baz
Page 5

A Visit with Rabbi Evelyn Baz

By Diane Joy Schmidt

Rabbi Evelyn Baz, 34, has been the new rabbi at Congregation B'nai Israel for a year and a half. She is the first woman rabbi at the more than 90-year-old Conservative congregation, and brings with her a new energy and a passion for the office. We sat down in her study on Thursday afternoon, Nov. 9th, for a short interview that was sandwiched between her many duties as a congregational rabbi.



Rabbi Evelyn Baz

Link: Where are you from originally?

EB: I moved to New York to take a job with an Australian investment banking firm in NYC, and my parents were living there at the time, so I moved from Australia to join them. I moved right after college, I was 19. I worked in a private equity arm of the Macquarie Group, and we primarily focused on infrastructure, mergers and acquisitions.

Link: Was there a point at which you became more interested in pursuing a different kind of career?

EB: Yes, around the time of the financial crises in 2008. I realized that to be an investment banker was to be really focused on money. But the end goal didn't motivate me. I considered a lot of things, a Ph.D. in

Jewish studies, law school, but one thing really kept calling to me and that was to be a rabbi.

Around that time Pardes, a yeshiva in Israel, offered full tuition scholarships—you could go for free, for a year, in Jerusalem, and I decided to go. Many of the faculty of Pardes are Orthodox. They're welcoming of students of all backgrounds. You have people at Pardes that are from the entire spectrum of Jewish life, that's what's so incredible about it.

Then, for almost six years, I was at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles. I went back to Jerusalem during rabbinical school to study at the Conservative

yeshiva for another year.

Link: Did you get to the beach much in California?

EB: I did. I would surf before class. I decided that if I was giving up NYC which I loved, I was determined to learn how to surf when I started up rabbinical school in California. I love challenges.

Link: At what level are you now?

EB: A beginner (laughs cheerfully). When you imagine a surfer, and they're graceful, and they're cutting back, and — not that! If you picture someone sort of awkwardly getting up, slowly, you got me.

What I love about it, and I think it's kind of a metaphor for life, it doesn't matter how skillful you are, it's still such a joyful activity, it's still so much fun, even when you're absolutely a beginner, and even if you paddle out and you fall off ten times in a row and you get pummeled by a wave ten times in a row, you're still learning, and the next time you go out you'll be better, and you won't fall in the same way, and I feel so much of life is like that. And we too often give up when that wave comes crashing over us, but the trick is to, is to learn how to catch it.

Link: Is it everything you'd hoped it would be, to become a rabbi?

EB: It's really incredible. It's the

most challenging job I've ever had, and I wouldn't trade it for the world. It's the most wonderful job. I spend my days doing the things that I love.

And rabbinical school was that too. One of the things that is so precious about the Ziegler School is they have both a commitment to tradition and also are dedicated to training rabbis who are really prepared to work with people, to counsel them, to support them, to lead.

I'm a musician, I began violin lessons a couple weeks shy of my third birthday, I play violin and piano, and over the years I've learned cello and guitar and you see those drums behind you, and I get to use music in my job whether it's to teach students services and Torah reading, whether it's leading services for the congregation, I get to use music regularly.

And, I love ritual. And being a rabbi lets me be present with people in their most significant moments, whether they're joyful ones or tragic ones, and let people access the divine, help people make meaning out of these incredible life moments.

Link: Do you mean that you are leading them to a more spiritual frame of mind?

EB: We have a tradition that can help people access what is sacred, and what is their inheritance—it's really their heritage that I'm helping people access in those moments. In

order to find some comfort, in order to make meaning, and you could be making meaning or deriving significance whether your child is turning thirteen or you're burying a loved one. People are seeking meaning. I see my role as facilitating a connection between their seeking and our tradition.

Link: What do you personally find interesting in studying the traditions?

EB: For me it's the Talmud, and rabbinic literature, stories and laws and traditions that weren't codified.

During the following Saturday morning service, with about forty congregants present, as Rabbi Baz sang from the Torah, her voice flowed out and filled the sanctuary. During the prayers for healing, she gently went up to each person individually who had stood to ask for healing for someone and had them speak the name, and personally acknowledged them.

Then she gave an impassioned sermon that began with a story about trying to force her young dog, Scout, to do something she didn't want to, and segued to how we must find a way to bring more legislation to gun control, that even if it's not perfect, that we cannot do nothing, that we have to try.

VISIT continued on page 13

VISIT continued from page 5

At the Sunday morning religious school, about thirty children from pre-school to high school gathered beginning at nine a.m. for prayers and where she would lead them with her guitar.

EB: We have a pretty vibrant high school program here. What's pretty special here is, all the kids who I worked with for their bar mitzvah last year are continuing. Most synagogues lament that the kids are 'bar mitzvah and done.' Our kids are pretty special, they're all here still, every Sunday morning, for a three-year program.

When I talk to the kids they're always surprised they can come to a rabbi's office and it's fun — if you ask the children what they do in my office, they say, 'we see Scout! oh, and the rabbi.' She's a Cavalier King Charles, and, she's a little adventurous. She's 2 1/2.

Link: Do you have an activity you want to engage the community with, social activism?

EB: I was heavily influenced in NYC by a community called B'nai Jeshurun and in LA, IKAR. These communities are creating a Judaism that is both is authentic to our tradition, and is meaningful and lived and felt by its participants. That's the kind of Judaism that I'm driven by, and try to create here in everything I do. People don't come to hear a rabbi's commentary, but they do come to hear what our tradition has to say about the real world.

And it has a lot to say about poverty, about immigration, about authority and judicial process. We have some nascent programs here . . . I have been active in the community as a faith-leader speaking out in support of individuals who are seeking sanctuary in religious organizations in New Mexico, and

speaking out against hate speech and anti-Semitism disguised as free speech, when UNM campus played host to Milo Yiannopolous, and the other issue in New Mexico that is most concerning, is poverty and unemployment and underemployment—I see people having to decide which utility they can live without.

At that, it was time for Scout's walk. As they headed off with a brisk note into the bright fall air to circle the building, an older male congregant came out of the synagogue and hurried to catch up to Rabbi Baz to discuss a pressing issue. After he tangled himself a bit in the dog's leash, she slowed a bit, and he managed to keep pace with them and they rounded the bend together.