



When Your Rabbi Leaves

By Deborah Prinz

The transition from one rabbi to another can stir up a flurry of emotions, from anxiety to anticipation, from loss to excitement. To “get on with things,” the synagogue leadership may be tempted to rush through the change process.

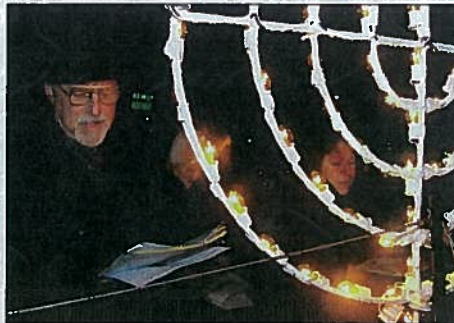
A better option might be to engage a trained interim rabbi.

With a rabbi’s departure, much more needs to transition than the person who occupies the rabbi’s study. This is an excellent time for the temple leadership to focus on envisioning the next era for the congregation: How does our congregation define itself? What makes it unique?

What special contributions do we wish to make to our families, our congregation, the Jewish community, and the world at large? How will our future look?

In 2007, when Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson became emeritus of Temple Beth-El in Great Neck, New York after 45 years of service, “it was hard to imagine Beth-El without him,” says past president Nina Koppelman. “Rabbi Davidson was such a presence, a rock, a friend, and spiritual leader. He had set the tone for everything.”

Enter Rabbi Richard Shapiro, who served the congregation as interim rabbi from 2007 to 2009. He asked the congregational leadership thoughtful questions: What are Temple Beth-El’s goals? How do its current services and finances meet them? Through ongoing conversations he helped the lay and



INTERIM RABBI RICHARD SHAPIRO AT TEMPLE BETH-EL IN GREAT NECK, NEW YORK. CLOCKWISE: OUTDOOR CHANUKAH SERVICE; “THE CONSTRUCTION WORKER” WITH TEMPLE STAFF AT A PURIM SHPIEL; RAISING CHALLAH BEFORE THE MOTZI.

professional leadership establish renewed visions for the future. He also encouraged experimentation in such areas as a new musical Shabbat evening service and redesigned adult education offerings. All of these steps set the stage two years later for an orderly transition to the new senior rabbis, Rabbi Meir Feldman and Rabbi Tara Feldman.

“There were absolutely no down sides to engaging an interim rabbi,” Koppelman says. “Rabbi Shapiro worked really hard at all of the usual rabbinical responsibilities, even as he prepared us for what would follow.”

Employing an interim rabbi is “the healthiest way to go” after a rabbi’s death, a sudden departure brought on by a congregational conflict, or other difficult circumstances, says Shirley Gordon, co-chair of the National Commission on Rabbinic-Congregational Relations and past president of Cape Cod Synagogue in Hyannis, Massachusetts. “He or she will have the capacity

to deal calmly with the raw emotions that emerge at such times.” A trained interim rabbi can also help smooth the successor/emeritus dynamic, when frictions of relationships and ego sometimes spill into the congregational community.

Trained by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, interim or turnaround rabbis can help define a synagogue’s mission, identify the strengths and weaknesses of the lay leadership and staff, build trust between them, heal the emotions related to the earlier rabbi’s departure, and assist the congregation in preparing for a successor rabbi. This work, Gordon says, “helps congregations avoid the mistake of hiring a new rabbi reactively. Often the congregation blames the outgoing rabbi for what is wrong, and expects the new rabbi to magically clean up the mess and make everything right. An interim rabbi can shift the congregation’s attention away from what was to what can be.”

At times, bringing in an interim rabbi may not be necessary. While healthy departures are sad, moving directly to a new rabbi may be preferable. But when there’s a need for “transitional time,” engaging an interim rabbi is usually the best way to go. For more information, contact Rabbi Deborah R. Prinz, director of Program and Member Services for the Central Conference of American Rabbis, (212) 972-3636 x 226 or dprinz@ccarnet.org, or Rabbi Lennard Thal, interim director of placement, (212) 972-3636 x 234. □

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PHOTOS BY BARBARA HERMAN