

FAMILY IS THE FOCUS FOR TEMPLE JUDEA'S NEW RABBI (Roslyn News 9/14/06)

Tastefully framed family photographs, both in color and black-and-white, prominently cover the tables and desk top in Rabbi Todd Chizner's office. An older couple, a young woman, smiling children and other individuals seem to gaze at the viewer, as a welcoming symbol and a reminder of home to the newly installed spiritual leader of Temple Judea of Manhasset.

Family, both at home and within the ranks of synagogue members, is of utmost importance to Rabbi Chizner, who joined Temple Judea in July. The new spiritual leader of this nearly 600 member congregation will be formally installed during a special service on Friday, September 15. On the eve of this fall's Jewish high holidays, he looks forward to immersing himself in the family life of his new spiritual home.

Previously the assistant rabbi at Temple Beth Torah in Melville, Rabbi Chizner comes to his second pulpit at Temple Judea. In his previous position, he worked for seven years alongside Rabbi Marc Gellman, well known on Long Island and the metropolitan region for his collaboration with Monsignor Thomas Hartman in "The God Squad," a cable television program that has discussed spiritual and human issues.

It was at Temple Beth Torah that Rabbi Chizner learned to work as a team with the other clergy, senior staff members and the synagogue's lay leadership, the board and committee members who generate the bulk of temple life and programs. He also spent time with congregants and their children, empathizing with them during times of joy and sorrow. Early in his tenure there, he experienced a life-changing experience when both of his parents passed away within one year. "I learned how to preach, how to teach and how to mourn," he said. His personal experience helped him understand firsthand how to counsel families in times of mourning and loss.

This sensitivity to the strength and power of family ties is a practice he plans to bring to his rabbinate at Temple Judea. The influence of his immediate family was, in fact, what Rabbi Chizner reports helped mold him as a Jew and as a future rabbi. A Long Island native, he was raised in the South Shore suburb of Lawrence, as a member of a Reform Jewish family and "the only non-Orthodox on my block," he said. But instead of wishing to separate himself from his more religious brethren, he sought to comprehend the larger question of "what are our similarities?" he asked himself. "I wanted to understand who the Jews really were."

A partial response to that prodigious question emerged from the role models of his mother and father, who were active both in community activities and at his local synagogue, Temple Israel of Lawrence, which was at the time Long Island's largest Reform temple. He explained, "Through my parents, I learned that culture, understanding and learning are of great importance."

One of six children, Rabbi Chizner had a Bar Mitzvah and was confirmed, as were all of his siblings. "Family came first, and holidays were always at our house," he recalled. He remembers, with great joy, his family's "tremendous" Passover seders, where extended family and friends were welcomed around the table.

As a teenager, Rabbi Chizner learned firsthand and painfully about the importance of familial support. At age 17, as a high school senior, he fell gravely ill with encephalitis,

meningitis and Epstein-Barr virus. His recovery was lengthy, and the care he received at home was crucial. The experience with life-threatening illness, survival and recovery “made me more mature, and filled me with a sense of thoughtfulness,” he said. “I knew I wasn’t going to squander my second chance at life, and I turned around what had happened to me into a blessing.”

A seasoned, serious and thoughtful young man, Rabbi Chizner graduated from SUNY Stony Brook with a major in Psychology and a minor in Political Science. It was not until after graduation that he gravitated toward the rabbinate, however. He had considered becoming a lawyer, and spent his first post-college summer working in a law firm. “I was in a courtroom only once,” he recalled, “but I saw a lot of paperwork.” Though he liked law intellectually, he hoped to make an impact on a larger audience and affect people’s lives.

This feeling led him to become a mental health associate at a psychiatric hospital. As a per diem worker, he was responsible for serving the needs of many seriously ill and suicidal patients as they went about their daily routines. His year in this position, regularly hearing “the most heartbreaking stories” about mental and physical abuse, led Rabbi Chizner to build a great personal sense of spirituality. “I realized that I wanted to help people in a long term structure of what was right and wrong,” he said.

Around the same time, his home temple had hired a new rabbi, whom he heard preach and then befriended. This man “wove together thoughts in an intelligent way; he was intriguing to me,” Rabbi Chizner said. He observed that in the course of one day, a rabbi could perform a myriad of pastoral tasks: baby naming, teaching, counseling and bringing peace to people’s lives.

Such a career choice appealed to Todd Chizner, who spent his first year of rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, in Jerusalem. It was there that he met his future wife, Lauren, who was working toward a master’s degree in Jewish education. He followed her to Los Angeles the following year, where he completed two more of the five-year rabbinical study program.

His spiritual self-definition continued to build while he presided over a “student pulpit” in Merced, California. As a Reform Jew, Rabbi Chizner at that time did not wear a yarmulke, a prayer skullcap. A young mother in the 30-family congregation asked that he don a “kipah” to set an example for her son, who knew few Jews. He took that request to heart and now wears a yarmulke daily as a symbol of his Judaism.

During his final two years before ordination, Rabbi Chizner was married and had his first child. He worked at Temple Beth Torah for seven years, and Temple Judea is his second full-time post. When not occupied with temple duties, Rabbi Chizner treasures time with family. He is the proud father of two sons, aged seven and five, for whom he serves as assistant soccer coach. This activity allows him to indulge his love for sport, which also includes running and golf. Rabbi Chizner’s daughter, aged three, starts preschool this fall. His wife, Lauren, is director of education for the Community Hebrew High of Western Suffolk, supported by four temples.

Already, Rabbi Chizner has begun to familiarize himself with the workings of Temple Judea. He has arranged weekly meetings with staff members to pool ideas, suggest programs and “to support each other,” he said.

He plans to visit the religious school regularly so that the children feel comfortable with him. He is brainstorming ideas with temple committees, particularly social action, one of his pet interests. Rabbi Chizner describes himself as “very supportive” of community service, and he hopes to involve Temple Judea’s high school students in such work through the synagogue.

The “old model” of a temple youth group, popular a generation ago, does not attract today’s busy teenagers, Rabbi Chizner noted. He hopes to engage them as he did at Temple Beth Torah by organizing projects with Island Harvest, Long Island Cares and other such groups. In this manner, he hopes that teenage students will view the temple as “their Jewish home.”

He plans to form connections to all families at the temple, and hopes members will feel comfortable calling and talking to him. In addition, he hopes to engage young families in temple activities and perhaps will consider creating a nursery program in the future.

Interfaith community activities will play a role in Rabbi Chizner’s new position. Already, he has joined interfaith clergy groups in both Manhasset and Roslyn. In short, he wishes to respond to the needs of Temple Judea’s entire extended family.

“I hope to make every synagogue member feel at home. This is a house of God that can relate to them,” Rabbi Chizner said.

Temple Judea of Manhasset, affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), is located at 333 Seasingtown Road, Manhasset, NY. For more information, call the temple office at (516) 621-8049, or visit the website at www.temple-judea.com.