

RABBI MICHAEL L. FESHBACH

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CONGREGATIONAL EXPERIENCE

***Rabbi*, Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands**

July 2017-present

This is an historic congregation of 100 on-island households – and 3200 overseas member families. It is the oldest synagogue building in continuous use under the American flag and the second oldest in the hemisphere. It is one of five synagogues in the world with sand on the floor. The congregation also serves as a landmark, a major point of interest for visitors, host and home base for travelers, and a sought-after setting for destination life-cycle events for Jewish families from all over the world.

MAJOR RABBINIC RESPONSIBILITIES

- Lead the congregation in the full range of rabbinic responsibilities – providing spiritual, pastoral, liturgical, and educational oversight and guidance.
- Create a varied and effective program of services and experiences, providing a full Jewish life in a unique island setting.
- Represent the synagogue in the Jewish and general community, both on island and in the larger world, sharing our story and giving voice to our values.
- Coordinate and conduct “destination” life-cycle events, working with home clergy and local communities to provide meaningful and high-quality experiences.
- Develop and present educational offerings for all ages in varied settings.
- Supervise office staff, Gift Shop manager and museum docents.
- Balance the “business” aspect of this unique congregational experience with the local needs of island-based congregants and community.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

Provided comfort and aid in the wake of natural disasters.

Arrived weeks before two Category 5 hurricanes, whose impact on the Virgin Islands was devastating, and whose aftermath present ongoing challenges for the community here. Worked with no consistent electrical power, cell service, or internet, and with no running water in many places. Provided aid and assistance to those in need, comfort to all around us, and communal support at a critical time.

Maintained continuity of services under challenging conditions.

In 222 years, the congregation has never missed coming together for Shabbat, either on Friday night or Saturday morning, if not both. We overcame obstacles, worked around curfews and showed creativity in maintaining continuity of observance.

Articulated vision for relief efforts.

Gave voice to Jewish values oriented towards helping the entire island; shared with congregational leadership, the community and the Jewish world a sense of mission and purpose, in how we would use funds and donations given to support our recovery.

Led robust recovery campaign.

Blessed with world-wide interest, raised close to a half million dollars in material and monetary donations. We brought aid to the entire island, conducting five distributions of food, toiletries and essential items (solar powered lights and radios, insect repellent, water-purification systems), donating generators to physicians and the hospital, and to other institutions and individuals in need. Coordinated distributions of medical supplies, and provided help to women's shelters, orphanages, family resource centers, and local community foundations. Worked with emerging island and international civic, faith-based and communal support agencies and institutions.

Grew in flexibility in response to communal need.

Adjusted ways we work with visitors to facilitate connections and support, opened for communal meals at no charge at a time when people had neither functioning kitchens nor spare resources. Enhanced existing communal connections and deepened long-standing island traditions, including annual [Interfaith Thanksgiving Service](#).

Brought "new" Jewish experiences to the island.

Brought new approaches to [Chanukah](#) and Purim (including a [Bob Dylan Purim](#) for 2019), introduced Mimouna (traditional Moroccan-Jewish feast for the end of Passover), revived celebrations of Yom HaAtz'ma'ut (Israel Independence Day) and Tisha B'Av. Renewed island tradition of Hurricane Supplication Day. Deepened synagogue-based community observance in honor of [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)

Enhanced our connection and commitment to the larger world.

Shared our story through social media and [traditional news outlets](#). Increased our interaction with the national Reform movement and Federation world; led the first congregational trip to Israel in many years. Led major interfaith [Solidarity Shabbat service](#) after shootings at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Grew in social media and communication skills, updating our [website](#), [bulletin](#) and [Facebook page](#).

Began creative outreach to Jewish youth; adjusting to current educational needs.

Had plans for a new Jewish Religious School of the Virgin Islands; on hold as many Jewish youth off island. Now using on-line learning and other creative approaches.

Senior Rabbi, Temple Shalom, Chevy Chase, MD

July 2001-June 2017

Served as Senior Rabbi of vibrant, 550-household synagogue in suburban Maryland. Offered new approaches to worship, education, social justice and communal life to appeal to the changing needs and wide spectrum of members and local community. Temple Shalom proudly promoted diversity in many forms, from economic to sexual orientation to racial to religious background and traditional practice. A welcoming congregation close to Washington D.C., it was its own mini-United Nations, with children adopted from every corner of the world, Jews-by-choice and multi-racial families, sending a message of inclusivity and openness to all.

MAJOR RABBINIC RESPONSIBILITIES

- Led the congregation in the full range of rabbinic responsibilities – providing spiritual, pastoral, liturgical, educational and programmatic oversight and guidance.
- Supervised senior staff, defining job descriptions, leading ongoing staff and individual meetings, goal-setting, and mutual shared reflections on progress towards those goals.
- Created meaningful and significant life-cycle events for members – helping everyone to find his or her own path and place.
- Worked in conjunction with congregational leadership to articulate and implement a vision of synagogue life.

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MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

- Consciously promoted diversity and set a welcoming tone for Jewish families in all the configurations in which they are composed in the Jewish world of today.
- Developed strategy to reach out to venues not previously utilized; worked to ensure that the images and faces of the congregation reflect the diversity in our midst.
- Strove for a level of excellence and inclusion in worship and spiritual life.
- Introduced the new Reform Shabbat prayerbook (*Mishkan Tefilah*) and the new High Holy Day *machzor* (*Mishkan HeNefesh*); managed these transitions with forums, experimentation, open discussion and minimal disruption. Deepened and expanded Shabbat morning alternatives; experimented with early Kabbalat Shabbat services; introduced joint Festival morning services; involved youth in powerful new ways at important communal moments. Created a Confirmation service families regularly call among the most spiritual experiences of their lives.
- Participated in million-dollar capital/endowment-campaign to renovate the Sanctuary.
- Worked with congregational leadership in identifying potential donors; solicited major gifts; worked to develop naming opportunities while honoring egalitarian ethos which has been part of the congregation's identity.
- Expanded and deepened Adult Education offerings.
- Provided learning options at the synagogue and beyond; initiated opportunities in retirement communities; worked with local educational foundations to bring high-quality scholars to the congregation and teach in places near where many congregants work.
 - Was the first in the area to offer the Shalom Hartman Institute's Engaging Israel series.
- Initiated and promoted congregation's presence in the Jewish and general community.
- Worked with the Interfaith Conference on joint projects. Coordinated social justice initiatives in cooperation with local and national Jewish organizations, from Jews United for Justice and the Jewish Community Relations Council to the Religious Action Center.
 - Initiated a Refugee Response Team which [welcomed and supported a Syrian family](#), galvanized Dream Act and Marriage Equality ballot initiative support, promoted involvement in other aspects of *Tikkun Olam* (social justice) work.
- Worked with volunteers to promote congregational participation in pastoral work.
- Fostered a nationally-recognized Mitzvah Corps in which congregant volunteers participate in hospital visits, receive training in senior care and other life-transition issues, bring meals to shut-ins and others in need, provide direct services as needed, and serve as shiva minyan leaders in houses of mourning.
- Guided the congregation through a series of staff transitions.
- Coordinated expansion of staff roles to include a full-time, invested Reform cantor; crafted job definitions, wrote promotional material and worked closely with all search committees and with the relevant bodies of the Reform movement for senior staff positions.
- Revitalized Israel programming, and restored regular congregational trips to Israel.
- Introduced balanced approach to Israel education and advocacy within the congregation; strengthened teachings on the importance of Israel for Jewish identity formation; facilitated measurable increase in youth participation in summer travel and study programs in Israel; created *Sukkat Shalom: Safe Spaces for Conversations about Israel*, with trained facilitators and many small group discussions; revived regular congregational travel to Israel.
- Empowered congregant-led initiatives at all levels.
- Encouraged worship-initiatives such as an early, congregant-led Kabbalat Shabbat service/Pot Luck Shabbat dinner; promoted congregational service leaders and teachers to supplement professionals, provide support to an innovative core of *Madrichim* (guides) who work with B'nai Mitzvah students on their speeches. Strove to create atmosphere of experimentation, creativity and positive energy on the part of congregants. ("Let a thousand flowers bloom.")
- Established congregational cemetery.

Senior Rabbi, Temple Beth Am, Williamsville, NY

Led the congregation in full range of rabbinic responsibilities, Summer 1997-Summer 2001.

Maintained sense of warmth and intimacy even as the congregation had grown.
Increased connections with the Reform movement on a regional and national level.
Promoted congregational engagement with the general community through significant work in interreligious dialogue and social justice activities.
Transformed Confirmation program to one with greater commitment and participation.
Expanded congregational activities of auxiliaries, Youth and Adult Education.
Guided the Buffalo rabbinic community to articulate public positions on important issues of communal concern.

Rabbi, Temple Anshe Hesed, Erie, PA

Led congregation in the full range of rabbinic responsibilities, Summer 1992-Summer 1997.

Led the congregation from Classical Reform into mainstream of the Reform movement.
Brought a sense of renewed vitality through high level of synagogue activity.
Served as co-Educator of joint Religious School for Reform and Conservative congregations.
Revitalized Youth Programs of the congregation, from Tot Shabbat to Senior Youth Group, including participation on regional weekends, camping trips and other activities.
Promoted Social Action commitments, including collaborative work with other religious and communal organizations, especially in the arena of civil rights and Church-State issues.
Created and led fundraising for a Student Cantor position.

**Concurrent Position: Rabbi, Hebrew Congregation of Chautauqua,
The Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, NY**

Served as rabbi of this summer, non-denominational congregation and led Shabbat morning services during the nine-week season, Summer 1992-Summer 1997.

Assistant Rabbi, Temple Beth El, Boca Raton, FL

Served congregation and the Senior Rabbi in full range of rabbinic duties, including life-cycle, youth, education, counseling, teaching and pastoral work, Summer 1989-Summer 1992.

Coordinated active Chavurah (small group) program; helped form new groups of Chavurot.
Created the congregation's first twenty-thirtysomething young people's social group.
Created Outreach committee, young- and mid-singles groups.
Expanded Basic Judaism and Adult Education programs.
Oversaw Youth Programs and supervised all Youth advisors.
Facilitated rabbinic aspects of a 90-student per year Bar/Bat Mitzvah program.
Organized and led Confirmation Class trip to Israel.
Introduced lay-led minyan services.

RELATED EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Senior Rabbinic Fellow, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Israel

Including completion of the Shalom Hartman Institute's Rabbinic Leadership Initiative IV, Summer 2010-Summer 2013.

Visiting Professor, Allegheny College, Meadville, PA.

Position sponsored by the Jewish Chautauqua Society, Spring 1993-Spring 1997

Taught undergraduate course on Judaism.

Served as adjunct chaplain and counselor to Jewish and other students as needed.

Presented separate lecture series as a Visiting Scholar as the Harry C. Winslow and Madeline King Winslow Religious Leader Scholar (Spring 1994)

Instructor, Gannon University and Mercyhurst College, Erie, PA.

Taught courses approved for credit through two local Catholic universities.

September 1992-May 1997.

Director, Community Retreat, Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Mt. Saint Benedict, Erie, PA.

Led week-long retreat, "The Role of the Person in Community," June 1997.

YOUTH EXPERIENCE

Rabbinic Faculty, URJ Camp Harlam, Kunkletown, PA, Summer 2007.

Rabbinic Faculty, URJ Camp George, Parry Sound, Ontario, Summer 1999.

Rabbinic Dean, SEFTY (South East Federation) Winter Regional, Orlando, FL, Winter 1991.

Program Director, NFTY Torah Corps Program, Kutz Camp-Institute, Warwick, NY.

Directed intensive high school program on religion, history, and identity, Summer 1988.

Group Leader, UAHC/HUC-JIR Maskil Young Scholars Program,

Directed and taught in summer study tour for Reform college students, Summer 1987.

SELECTED COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE

Founder, Dayyeinu/Had Enough? Facebook Group against Islamophobia

Board Member, Planned Parenthood of Greater Washington

Executive Board Positions, Washington Board of Rabbis

Board Member, Interfaith Conference of Greater Washington

President, Buffalo Board of Rabbis

Commentator, National Public Radio

Keynote Speaker, Mark and Sharon Bloome Jewish Environmental Leadership Institute, Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL)

Faculty, Bioethics and Sacred Decisions: Medical Technology. Liberal Judaism

and Our Lives, UAHC Department of Family Concerns Conference, San Francisco, CA

Founding Member, various interreligious dialog groups and civil rights organizations

Founding Chair, Interreligious Affairs Committee, Network of Religious Communities, Buffalo, NY

Citizen's Interfaith Council for Democracy, Erie, PA, 1994-1997.

EDUCATION

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION --

Jerusalem, Israel; Cincinnati, OH and New York,
M.A.H.L., May 1987 (Cincinnati);
Rabbinic Ordination, May 1989 (New York).

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY – Waltham, MA

Graduate School, Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies:
Biblical Studies, 1982-1984.

HAVERFORD COLLEGE – Haverford, PA

B.A. in English and Creative Writing, May 1982.

HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM – Jerusalem, Israel

School for Overseas Students:1980-1981.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family Status: Married to Julie Novick, with three children:
Benjamin, Daniel, and Talia.

Personal Interests: Travel, Science Fiction and Fantasy, Writing, Cooking, Hiking and Camping

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

“How Can We Not? Temple Shalom Responds to the Refugee Crisis,” with Karen Green, in “For You Were Strangers: Our Responsibility to Refugees in the 21st Century,” [The Peoplehood Papers 19](#), June 2017, published by the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education, and in [eJewishPhilanthropy.com](#), June 25, 2017.

“My Idea: Let’s Uplift Our Synagogue Language,” [Reform Judaism Magazine, Fall 2013](#).

“The Secret of Jewish Survival,” [Reform Judaism Magazine, Winter 2008](#) (reprinted December 2016).

“Every Generation: A Jewish Approach to Questions of Genetic Research, Testing and Screening, and Gene Therapy,” in Monsen, R. B. (Ed.) *Genetics and Ethics in Health Care: New Questions in the Age of Genomic Health*. Silver Spring, MD: Nursesbooks.org, December 2008.

“A Name for Ourselves: On Infertility, Struggle, Pain and ‘the Meaning of Life,’”
UAHC Bioethics Study Guide, Fall 1999.

“In God’s Image: Judaism and Homosexuality,” in *Kulanu (All of Us):
A Program for Congregations Implementing Gay and Lesbian Inclusion* UAHC Press, 1996.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

ואחר האש קול דממה דקה:
“*V’achar ha’eish, kol d’mama daka;*
And after the fire, a soft, murmuring sound
[a still, small voice].”

I Kings 19:12

I think often about a man I met in a previous place. Walking towards the *bimah* for his son’s Bar Mitzvah, he suddenly said: “Rabbi, there are so many non-Jewish children present. Is there any way we can involve them in the service?” With this quick question at the right time, literally in the next three steps we took, we partnered to create a new ritual.

It is a custom I use and cherish still. We invite friends of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah – especially those who have never seen a scroll up close before – to stand behind the young person as he or she leads the final *aliyah*, the blessings and final verses of Torah chanted at the service.

This open invitation is more common now than it was. Something like this is now found in many places. But we did something else as well. It was a small risk, a step into the unpredictable. We turn to the assembled friends, and ask if there are any questions, about the scroll, about the service, about anything remotely relevant.

What follows, people say, is often a highlight of the service. Questions run from the curious to the profound, but the experience is almost always moving. The spontaneity can be... interesting. It can seem staged, but much more often it feels fresh and real. And it is a living expression of core values: inclusion, encouragement, openness, and helping everyone find their own voice.

The man I remember is gone now. He passed away in his mid 40’s. But I am grateful to him for his impulsive inquiry, and everything that has flowed from it. When people comment on the custom, I take this as an ongoing and unknowing tribute to him.

Finding our voice. That is the goal when students in Confirmation write their own responses to the prayers and the Ten Commandments, and we weave the service out of their own words. We promote honesty and authenticity, including struggles and disagreement and dissent. Come to a service like that and – even knowing no one in advance -- within moments you get a window into the inner world of these teens.

Finding our voice. That is clear in the way we create welcoming communities out of all the Jewish families in our midst today. A healthy congregation brings together Jews-by-birth and Jews-by-choice, traditional and interfaith and multiracial families and same-sex couples, biological and adoptive parents and seniors and singles and couples without children alike. To be a space where all of us can find our own place, and our own way -- that is the promise and potential of Judaism to me.

But once the doors are open, then what? Why work so hard to make sure that everyone feels comfortable? I believe it is only where we are truly welcome, only in the midst of love that we can be the most open – to ourselves, to each other, to the encounters and challenges before us.

Those challenges come in many forms: love and loss in our lives, the needs of those around us, neighbors and those we do not know. They come as we wonder about who we are, and how we are connected to others, in questions of identity, issues regarding how we relate to Israel and the larger Jewish community, the stories we tell of yesterday and the dreams we have of tomorrow.

These challenges are pastoral and personal, social and moral, spiritual and existential. I have stood with families and communities in the wake of natural disaster, and targeted assassination, the loss of children and healing of rifts, war and peace, welcoming strangers, and fighting for what is right.

In our joy and our sadness, our triumph and tragedy we need not be alone. Starting from a place of comfort gives us a better way of handling that which is uncomfortable, or painful, or difficult. That which challenges who we were, and leads us to who we are yet to be. A safe space makes the best place to grow.

How can an ancient tradition face the future? How will Judaism not only survive, but thrive in the days to come? By nurturing every soul, valuing every voice, embracing every individual, yes -- but also in showing that we are part of something larger than ourselves.

It's about us. And it's bigger than us, an expanding circle of connection, from individual to other, family to community, one group to a sense of peoplehood and only then to the world as a whole. We move from looking inward to, and finding our own voice, outward, and eventually towards an Ultimate Voice whose locus is everywhere and nowhere, real and imagined, the Oneness at the heart of the world.

There are so many choices in the world today. In the midst of so many competing claims, perhaps we can never be sure if one path is more authentic than another.

But this is what I believe: that Judaism demands of us *warmth*, and *depth*, and *breadth*. That it is a vital part of an ongoing and still unfolding conversation.

What is a Judaism for today? At our best, we use creativity and commitment to balance the claims of tradition with the vision and values of our heart, the ethical insight of what our conscience tells us is right. And we bring to our faith and our folk an awareness of history and science, and sensitivity to the needs of the modern world.

It is a great honor, as a rabbi and as a Jew, to be part of that sacred balancing act. In every worship service, in every life-cycle event, and in every individual encounter, there is an opportunity to feel the powerful pull of Jewish identity. We do this through continuity and custom, through creativity and innovation, sometimes through serious moments -- but as often with warmth and smiles.

As a rabbi, I want to lift every person, to make room for every voice. And I want to open us up to the threads and the web which can connect us all. I seek to make the Jewish ties that bind us together stronger in each of our lives.

References and Complete List of Publications Provided Upon Request