

“Think of how bland it would be if we didn’t know how to sing, how to dance; if we did not know how to carve poles--we need these things and they are gifts to everybody”

- Barbara Wilson

Standing beneath the roof of the Chodorow synagogue at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, Israel, was a coalescent moment that has informed my rabbinate. I remember staring in awe and admiration of the paintings gilding the ceiling. The images were vibrant and colorful and came to life above my head; thus, they touched me in a powerful way. As a rabbinical student, I had never seen anything like it in our synagogues; as an artist and woodcarver, I had never seen anything like it; and as the grandchild of survivors, I had been told precious little about prewar Europe. I felt that a noticeable void had existed. I felt a need to fill the void and attempt to restore something that had been lost. On that day, I committed myself to creating an exact replica of a majestic Aron HaKodesh (Holy Ark) from one of the vanished wooden synagogues and bringing it back into ritual use. The project *Opening the Ark* was the brainchild of this moment of epiphany.

During the next two years of rabbinical seminary, I spent much time every evening refining my woodcarving skills. In my final year of rabbinical seminary, I was ready. I began soliciting grants from local and national organizations. I incorporated a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization, and I began managing a team of engineers, woodcarvers, architects, and volunteers.

When COVID-19 hit, the project was propelled to greater heights and proceeded faster than ever. Quickly, the pool of skilled and apprentice volunteers grew exponentially. I designated a volunteer coordinator. The project received new grants as it grew. As the world fell into a state of pandemonium, *Opening the Ark* provided us all with a gift—something

that could not be taken away from us with all the restrictions: art. The tragic irony is that one catastrophe (the Holocaust) nearly eradicated this art form, yet we are reviving it during another catastrophe (COVID-19).

Beginning in February 2021, the ark went on exhibition with a debut gala at the Skirball Museum. The opening gala on February 19 included a Torah service broadcast to 17,000 followers on social media across the multiple platforms of HUC, the Skirball Museum, and the *Opening the Ark* project. At that moment, we transferred the ark formally and spiritually to the Jewish people.

However, as we launched the ark into the ritual and museum spaces, something else came to mind that will define my rabbinate in the future. Building an ark is not enough for my rabbinate. *More important are the people who are called to the Torah, which we take from the ark.* Our Jewish identity is built upon actually opening the ark and reading from it, celebrating with its Torah in *simchas* (joyous occasions), rituals, and daily and weekend services, and sharing our Torah lovingly from generation to generation. For me, the congregation is the best place to enact these holy duties.

The absence of matter is what motivated me to recreate an Aron HaKodesh (Holy Ark) from prewar Europe. However, how sad would it be to imagine a pristine synagogue with a noticeable void left by the absence of the actual congregation? This is a very real scenario for many American synagogues. It is this same motivation that drove me to rebuild a perished item of our heritage, which will propel me into congregational life tomorrow. To thrive in 2022, we must create a growing community of family, inclusion, and acceptance. This is the direction of Judaism for the future.

Today, we are at a crossroads within Judaism, amplified by COVID-19. Many

of our buildings, schools, institutions, and prayers are at risk of becoming outdated very quickly; swallowed by modernity. We will need to rethink Judaism for tomorrow. *Our message of tomorrow must be one of radical inclusion, the embrace of family, and Jewish continuity.* This will be the next big chapter of my rabbinate. I am humbled by the opportunity to share the Torah in the future and call congregants to stand before our Torah and celebrate sacred occasions.

Rabbi Shmuel Polin

Shmuelpolin@gmail.com
www.RabbiShmuelPolin.com

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

06/2022–Present **Rabbi**, Congregation Etz Chaim, Monroe Township, NJ

- Serving a small congregation of 110 families in Monroe, New Jersey

Leadership

- Grew congregation's membership by 12% in three years

Worship and Life Cycle Events

- Established a *Bimah* Project Committee at Temple tasked with raising funds and designing new *Aron HaKodesh*, *Shtenders*, *Bimah* and *Torah* table for our congregation
- Completed our congregation's *Siddur* Project, tasked with publication and personal liturgical contributions to *Siddur Etz Chaim*, our congregation's *Siddur*
- Introduced new programming, including *Rosh Chodesh* Meditation
- Maintain *Minyanim* for weekly Friday evening and Saturday Morning (Torah) services

Youth and Family Engagement

- Created a new bifurcated education and social program for our high school students with *Gesher L'Keshet* program
- Serve as principal of Hebrew School and weekly tutor for all *B'nei Mitzvah* students
- Introduced new programming with *B'nei Brith* Youth Organization and North American Federation of Temple Youth

Pastoral Care

- Provide pastoral care for congregants in hospital and at home
- Lead *shiva minyanim* for deceased congregants
- Work with Caring Committee to provide support for ill members of community

Outreach

- Established Riklis Holocaust Memorial Committee as a committee of Congregation Etz Chaim

- Work closely with bringing in guest speakers and scholars of Holocaust and genocide studies, Jewish National Fund, and the Anti-Defamation League
- Active in representing the congregation at public events addressing the rise of anti-Semitism, October 7, and support for Israel on the local level from Mayor Stephen Dalina and on the state level with Governor Phil Murphy
- Organized the first public celebration of Chanukah in Helmetta, New Jersey; event included Mayor Chris Slav and lighting of *Shamus*

06/2021–06/2022 **Rabbi, Temple Israel, Columbus, GA**

- Served small congregation of 121 families in rural Georgia

Leadership

- Grew congregation's membership by 21% in one year

Worship and Life Cycle Events

- Transitioned congregation to online platforms averaging 200–400 virtual attendees per *Shabbat* service
- Began new programming, including *Shabbat Yoga*, *MileChai*–Temple Israel biking club, and Shabbat meals in restaurants following services
- Included routine guest lecturers on *Shabbatot* from the Anti-Defamation League, Hebrew Union College, Union of Reform Judaism, and American Civil Liberties Union
- Conducted weddings, funerals, *b'nei mitzvot*, and baby naming ceremonies
- Brought Conservative and Reform congregations together for joint programming

Youth and Family Engagement

- Introduced and taught post-confirmation class at Temple Israel Religious School; discussed Judaism and life as Jewish adult in each session over coffee
- Introduced new families to Temple Israel with new opportunities for engagement through online classes during COVID-19 pandemic

Pastoral Care

- Provided pastoral care for congregants in hospital and at home
- Led *shiva minyanim* for deceased congregants
- Worked with Caring Committee (*Kehillat Chesed Committee*) to provide support for ill community members

Outreach

- Began drafting bill for Holocaust education in Georgia with state legislators; took active role in Rotary Club

- Represented congregation at public events, including promotion ceremonies for police department and town hall invocations
- Organized first public celebration of Chanukah in Columbus, Georgia, with entire Jewish community of greater area, including Mayor Skip Henderson lighting *Shamus* and Jewish representatives from the region participating
- Led Shabbat of Healing following Colleyville incident with other faith leaders at Temple Israel

09/2019–06/2021 **Rabbinic Intern, Adath Israel Congregation, Cincinnati, OH**

- Served medium- to large-sized congregation of 600+ families in Cincinnati and rabbinical team consisting of senior and associate rabbis. Accumulated experience with pastoral care, youth and family engagement, worship and life cycle events, outreach, and administrative duties

Worship and Life Cycle Events

- Alternated responsibilities with senior and associate rabbis to lead weekday *minyanim*, *Shabbat*, and major holiday services
- Led Friday evening (*Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Shabbat*) and Saturday morning (*Shacharit*, Torah, and *Musaf*) services
- Led weekday and *shiva minyanim*
- Delivered biweekly *Divrei Torah*
- Provided support on call for senior and associate rabbis for funerals, circumcisions, bar/bat mitzvahs, and weddings
- Led family and youth programs for high holidays and weekly services
- Created online transition to *Tot-Shabbat* programs for young families

Youth and Family Engagement

- Offered outreach to young families through *Shabbat* in the Home programs, which entailed inviting other young families to join our table for *Shabbatot* and *Chagim*
- Served as fifth-grade substitute teacher for Hebrew and Jewish Studies instructor at Jarson Education Religious Center of Adath Israel

Outreach

- Worked with prospective converts and rabbinical team to ease their entering Jewish community
- Oversaw 100% voter turnout of congregants from Cider Village as part of *MitzvahVote Campaign* of Adath Israel
- Organized congregants to participate in 38th World Zionist Congress elections
- Led series of classes open to public on Jewish art, focusing on wood working

Administrative Responsibilities

- Accumulated experience in weekly staff meetings covering expense reports, earnings, changes in health-care plans, grant solicitations from Foundation of Cincinnati, and congregation's annual reports
- Served as part of an organized effort for Adath Israel to acquire 501(c)(3) status
- Chaired ritual committee heavily influenced by major supporters of congregation; cultivating these relationships was key to its successes

Pastoral Care

- Served as primary point of contact for pastoral care to congregants at Cedar Village (Jewish aged home of Cincinnati)
- Led *shiva minyanim* for deceased congregants of Cedar Village
- Undertook hospital visits and phone calls to congregants following surgeries and hospital stays
- Worked with rabbinical team to create *Bikor Cholim* Excel spreadsheet of congregants in hospitals undergoing surgeries and experiencing health complications

01/2020–Present Executive Director/Founder, Opening the Ark Project, Cincinnati, OH

- Helped rebuild lost majestic wooden Torah arks of Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth through Opening the Ark project

Fundraising

- Launched Opening the Ark project; gained 501(c)(3) nonprofit status for donors and organizations
- Raised fiscal support for project from major national granting organizations, including Reconstructing Judaism, The Auerbach Foundation, The Refusenik Project, Jewish Learning Network, The Men of Reform Judaism, Reform on Campus, direct grant issued by GoFundMe Charity, and Adath Israel Congregation of Cincinnati
- Gained fundraising experience with charity crowdfunding platforms
- Exceeded all fiscal goals
- Achieved 100% success in all grant proposals

Budget Management

- Accrued experience with donor relations and cultivation
- Earmarked costs for seven phases of project's start-up development
- Ensured budget covered costs for architects, structural engineers, construction materials (e.g., steel truss framework, harvested Siberian larch lumber, custom columns), marketing, paint, and wood as well as scientific analysis and 501(c)(3) process

Marketing Experience

- Gained experience in creating videos and providing periodic updates for donors using MailChimp platform

Public Relations

- Cultivated relationships with major Jewish organizations in the Cincinnati area, across Ohio, and nationally
- Arranged for completed *Aron HaKodesh* to begin exhibition at Skirball Museum and then move on to exhibition at Ish Festival of 2021
- Supervised daily team of artists and volunteers

05/19–08/19 **Chaplain Intern**, TriHealth Hospitals, Jewish Hospital, Christ Hospital: Arden Ct. Seasons Assisted Care Facility, Cincinnati, OH

- Completed unit of clinical pastoral education

04/18–08/18 **Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati Rabbinic Fellow**, Holocaust and Humanity Center, Cincinnati, OH

- Translated and transcribed Russian Holocaust survivors' testimonies into English for new museum's permanent exhibit
- Researched events documented in testimonies

09/17–05/18 **Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati Rabbinic Fellow**, Kulanu High School, Cincinnati, OH

- Taught *Mussar* and *Kabbalah* courses using visual arts as medium of expression

05/19–09/19 **Summer Rabbinic Fellow**, Jewish Family Services, Cincinnati, OH

- Served educational and spiritual needs of diverse Jewish population
- Offered classes on history of Cincinnati Jewish community, Hebrew, and Israeli politics

08/18–08/20 **Student Rabbi**, Beth Boruk Temple, Richmond, IN (monthly pulpit)

08/17–08/18 **Student Rabbi**, Temple Israel, Paducah, KY (biweekly)

08/16–05/17 **Religious Services Coordinator**, Beit Avot, Jerusalem, Israel

05/15–08/16 **Religious Services Coordinator**, Greenwood House, Trenton, NJ

08/14–08/16 **Hebrew and Jewish Studies Teacher**, Kehillat HaNahar, New Hope, PA

05/12–05/13 **Research Intern**, GLORIA Center, Herzeliya, Israel

01/07–12/09 **Medic/Chovesh**, Magen David Adom in Israel, Beersheba, Israel

EDUCATION

Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, OH

- Rabbinical Ordination, 2021
- Master of Arts in Hebrew Letters, 2020

Rabbinical Capstone: Opening the Ark Project: Bringing a Lost Polish Synagogue to Life
(Advisor Dr. Jennifer Grayson)

Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Israel

- Rabbinic Student Seminar, 2016–2017

Gratz College, Melrose Park, PA

- Master of Arts (Summa Cum Laude) in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2016
- Master of Arts (Summa Cum Laude) in Jewish Studies, 2016
- *Master's Thesis: Film Producers of Jewish and Non-Jewish Origin in the 1930s and the 1940s and their Reception in America* (Advisor, Dr. Michael Steinlauf)

American University, Washington, DC

- Bachelor of Arts in International Studies and Jewish Studies, 2012

SOAS (School for Oriental and African Studies), London, England

- Exchange student, 2011

COMMUNAL ACTIVITIES AND AFFILIATIONS

- Der Arbeiter Ring/The Worker's Circle
- NAJC/Neshama (Association of Jewish Chaplains)

AWARDS AND PRIZES

- Rabbi Samuel Teitelbaum Memorial Endowed Scholarship, Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion; awarded for duration of five-year program for 90% of tuition costs
- Cohades Scholarship, Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion; awarded to students who provided student pulpit service to vulnerable congregations in central region of United States
- Everett and Marian Gordon Scholarship, American University; awarded to students in exceptional academic standing in Jewish Studies program

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- “The Amazing Story behind the Aron HaKodesh in the Scheuer Chapel of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion” (“Zadziwiająca historia aron ha-kodesz z Kaplicy Scheuerów w Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion”), Muzeum Ziemi Nadnoteckiej, Trzcianka, Poland, December 2021, pp. 23–56
- “Failing the Kurds Is a Failure of Justice,” *The Times of Israel*, October 2019
- “Parshat Eikev, London Bridge Is Falling Down with Brexit,” *The Times of Israel*, April 2019
- “Sermon for Pittsburgh Massacre,” *The Times of Israel*, November 2018
- “Making Judaism Relevant in Our High Schools,” *Avodat HaKodesh*, March 2018
- “LGBTQ+ Rights, Feminism and Samuel. Rosh HaShana Sermon,” *The Times of Israel*, September 2018
- Additional publications available upon request