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RABBI ELIANA  
JACOBOWITZ'S  
AMAZING  
JOURNEY

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## PRAYING OUT LOUD

Before she could spread her message of peaceful inclusiveness – and find a home at Somerville’s groundbreaking temple – Rabbi Eliana Jacobowitz had to forge her own untraditional trail.

BY NANCY BERNHARD



*Katia Green...was delighted to find a young woman rabbi who is “smart, vibrant, funny, and has an edge to her.”*



**I**n the spring of 2010, Dolores Porziella assigned her class of seventh- and eighth-grade English-language learners at the Winter Hill Community School (115 Sycamore St) *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the classic story of a young girl hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam. The students adored the book, but one day, one of them said, "What does a Jew believe, anyway?"

Porziella asked Assistant Rabbi Eliana Jacobowitz, 39, of Temple B'nai Brith (TBB, 201 Central St) to visit the class. Jacobowitz answered the children's questions about Jewish belief, but her stories about her own family's history in the Holocaust riveted them. "She made the history come to life," Porziella says. "It allowed them to draw it to their own home countries," many of which were also torn by war and disaster.

One of the stories Jacobowitz told was about how her grandparents found one another again after the war, when each thought the other was dead. Her grandmother, Marisha, had been in a concentration camp, and returned home to Lodz, Poland to look for family. She found her husband Tuvia's brother Shlomo, who had fought in the Jewish Brigades of the Red and British Armies. They heard that Tuvia was dead. But then as they walked down a street, they met someone who told them that he had just seen a man who looked exactly like Shlomo at a nearby address. They went to the house and found Tuvia there.

The children wrote letters to their new friend afterward. One girl wrote, "I think it was magical that your grandparents found each other. It's like a fairy tale and they were very lucky. I've learned a lot of things. And I think that it was unfair to Jewish people to be treated like that just because they believed in something different."

This ability to connect with everyone, whether they are just learning about Judaism or have been practicing their whole lives, is Jacobowitz's great strength. Longtime TBB member Debra Weisberg participated in a Kehillat (community) service Jacobowitz created in November, and enjoyed how the Rabbi drew people in using the weekly Torah reading. Abraham was wandering in the desert, so she invited anyone "who doesn't know where they're going" to say a blessing. He was also having trouble leaving his possessions behind. "Everyone who needs to throw out a few things, it's your turn," said the Rabbi.

Jacobowitz's own spiritual journey has not been a straight line from A to Z. But her blend of learning, warmth and creativity has proven irresistible to the city's only synagogue at an important crossroads in its history.

### **To make the world a better place**

Jacobowitz was born in Tel Aviv, the oldest of three children. When she was five years old she urged her secular parents to light candles on Shabbat. They politely refused.

She was a child when Israel made peace with Egypt in 1978, and became captivated by the idea that peace was possible between Israel and its neighbors. Her brother Leon, now a post-doctoral fellow at

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**PHOTOS BY KELLY MACDONALD**

Columbia University, remembers her leadership in political youth movements, even meeting members of the Knesset as a teen. She was “always trying to make the world a better place, not through religion, but through politics,” he says.

Her family moved to the suburb Ra’anana, where she went to an arts high school, concentrating on graphic design. She also began reading about Jewish mysticism. When she was 18 – and began her mandated stint in the Israeli army – she flashed a bit of her rebellious, art-school side. She was thrown out of her first Army unit for staging *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, complete with men in corsets. When her army years were done, Jacobowitz wanted to go to art school or none at all; her parents insisted she learn a profession. To please them, she enrolled in law school, but also enrolled in fashion design school at the same time.

Meanwhile, her hopes for a peaceful Middle East grew, embodied by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Oslo Accords he signed in 1993. But those hopes were soon dashed; she was present at the Tel Aviv rally where Rabin was assassinated by a fellow Israeli in 1995. “Sadly, many of us felt our hopes for making a difference in the Middle East and for bringing peace died too,” she says.

Her path toward a spiritual life, at this point, was still not clear. It was not exactly smooth sailing for a woman to become a religious leader. Throughout her life, Jacobowitz was told that when women pray out loud, God cries in sadness. In Israel, where organized Judaism is largely controlled by Orthodox sects, women are not allowed to set foot on the *bima*, or pulpit, in most traditional synagogues -- let alone become rabbis. These divisions manifest themselves in basic consumer interactions, too: On one occasion, a bookstore refused to sell her a religious book, telling her it was out of stock even though she could plainly see it on the shelf.

When she was 26, during her final year in law school, Jacobowitz took a hiking trip to the Rockies. She met an American man who was working on an Indian reservation, got married, and moved to Colorado Springs.

## Backyard treasure

Her interest in spirituality and mysticism was rekindled in the mountains by Native American practices. She attended community college and then the University of Colorado, doing office work, teaching Sunday school and flipping burgers to pay for her degrees.



*Jacobowitz – today more than capable of praying out loud – leads children’s services on the High Holidays free of charge to the community, and hundreds of people attend.*

One day, while reading a book about Jewish spiritual practice, she thought, “Instead of trying to understand intellectually, why not just light Shabbat candles?” She did and found it ineffably powerful. After all her seeking, she remembered that she’d been born with a religion. She cites the revered Jewish teacher, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov: “We travel the world looking for a distant treasure that is buried in our own backyard.”

But her path was still not clear, because of what she’d been taught about the role women were supposed to play in Judaism. It took years before Jacobowitz believed that she could be a practicing Jew without having to surrender the inclusive – and innovative – parts of herself.

## Moving to Boston

Her marriage ended after three years. She moved to Boston for two reasons: She was familiar with the city (and loved it), having frequently visited her sister, who’d lived here in the early 2000s; and she’d decided, all things considered, to become a professor. She came to Boston University to study medieval Jewish mysticism, initially intent on getting a PhD. But once she spent time in academia, she realized it wasn’t a fit; she wanted to practice spirituality as a leader, as opposed to teaching it in a classroom. She finished her studies with a Master’s degree in 2005. Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, provided crucial support in her decision to dive more directly into spiritual life; she was accepted to Hebrew College Rabbinical School in Newton.

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photo by Ian Vestrand

community has a come-as-you-are informality and progressive social beliefs, while still adhering to traditional observance. Few members grew up in the congregation; most chose it. This self-chosen mix represents the future of American Judaism, according to Ellen Smith, Associate Professor at Brandeis and co-editor of *The Jews of Boston*. "The congregation is a strong example that given opportunities, this diverse Jewry can and will choose Jewish life."

Her background differed profoundly from those of her 12 classmates: She was fluent in Hebrew and knew Jewish history, but had never touched a Torah scroll or stood on a *bima* – and she had difficulty praying out loud. By contrast, her American classmates had grown up with women rabbis. (In the United States, Reform Judaism began ordaining women in 1972, Reconstructionist Judaism in 1974, and Conservative Judaism in 1985. Today more than half of seminary students are women.) One classmate taught her to breathe deeply and sing out, while another would bump into her when she was praying too softly.

### A groundbreaking temple

In her third year of rabbinical school, she saw an opening for an education director at TBB. From the very first interview, the match was clear: "It resonated with how I feel that a Jewish community should be self-defined, that it should encompass and mirror the town that it serves," she says. A snapshot of TBB makes it clear what she means: Like Somerville, TBB has a diverse population and an independent spirit – so independent, that it has been unaffiliated with traditional Jewish sects – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist – since the 1978 retirement of Rabbi Leo Shubow. (TBB had been Conservative.) The

ulation between four and five percent, or 3,000-4,000 Jews, which mirrors the percentage in Massachusetts. For most of the 20th century, the Jewish community was made up of Eastern European immigrants. It centered in Magoun Square and up Broadway to Winter Hill. Founded in 1903, TBB built its Byzantine revival-style Central Street building in 1922. But in the decades following World War II, many of Somerville's Jews moved to the suburbs. The congregation lost a generation. By the late 1970s, only a couple of dozen elderly members remained, joined by the occasional student.

In 1980, a philosophy graduate student named Phil Weiss began attending Shabbat services at TBB. Morris and Ada Kleiman, longtime officers of the congregation who owned a pharmacy on Walnut Street, were the heart and soul of TBB. They were struggling to keep it going in the face of the suburban drift and Shubow's retirement. Weiss had grown up in a Conservative congregation, taken courses at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and studied in Jerusalem. The Kleimans saw in him a leader that he did not yet see in himself. Morrie Kleiman asked Weiss to read the Torah during Shabbat services. Eventually, Weiss was

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## RABBI | Continued from page 21

leading almost all the services. Thirty years later, he says with characteristic understatement, "no one has asked me to stop." Weiss goes by the title *darshan*, or teacher, but everyone calls him "Phil." During the day, he teaches philosophy and religion at Wheelock College.

By the mid-2000s, the congregation had stabilized around 170 families, but the young people who – along with Weiss – had helped to revive the congregation were now entering their fifties. TBB needed another youth infusion. One other issue troubled the TBB community: The beloved old building had three floors separated by steep stairs, and no easy place to add an elevator. The lack of handicapped access was increasingly untenable. To afford an elevator, the congregation would have to grow, raise dues, and fundraise. The Board of Directors committed to raise the money in 2008, just as the recession began. Into this climate stepped Jacobowitz, who was hired in the summer of 2008 to lead the congregation's Sunday school and adult education programs.

### Traditional enough and free-thinking enough

As she approached her graduation and ordination in 2010, the Board of Directors decided to hire Jacobowitz full-time, believing that she would attract new congregants – and perhaps, down the line, the increased membership would help TBB afford an elevator.

New members have indeed come. Enrollment in Sunday school has doubled. Davis Square resident Katia Green tried a children's service with her daughters two years ago and was delighted to find a young woman rabbi who is "smart, vibrant, funny, and has an edge to her." Green says that Jacobowitz creates events that neither "dumb down" adult content nor bore kids. The synagogue feels like a seamless part of her family's Somerville community, always nimble and reinventing itself.

Jacobowitz – today more than capable of praying out loud – leads children's services on the High Holidays free of charge to the community, and hundreds of people attend. She has helped start support groups for new parents, a social group for teens, and created a weekly Friday night prayer service. TBB member Morissa Wiser is particularly grateful that Jacobowitz has helped create a venue to "talk about parenting, talk about life, get to know one another, make a connection." Her two-year-old daughter Yaela gets excited when she hears they're "going to see Eliana!"

Congregant Abby Laber feels an intellectual affinity with Jacobowitz that helps her better connect with Jewish practice. In her Yom Kippur sermon this year, the Rabbi talked about God's judgment in a refreshing way. Laber remembers her saying that, in dreams, "you visit God, and you judge yourself in the presence of God." This aligned with Laber's understanding of dreams, and made Yom Kippur more accessible and meaningful to her.

### An informal formality

In a 1988 oral history of TBB, Weiss was asked about the advantages and disadvantages of hiring a rabbi for such an unconventional synagogue. He said that rabbis often bring formality to a congregation, and TBB's great strength is its informality. "The question is whether they make rabbis who are informal enough and innovative enough and 'socially wonky' enough, and also traditional enough and free-thinking enough to fit us."

It took a few decades, but just such a rabbi has arrived. ♦

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