

BAJC welcomes Tom Heyn as new rabbi

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By JAIME CONE



Rabbi Tom Heyn stands outside at the Brattleboro Area Jewish synagogue in West Brattleboro.
Chris Bertelsen / Reformer

BRATTLEBORO-- When members of the Brattleboro Area Jewish Community first heard Rabbi Tom Heyn talk over the phone, they were excited to meet him in person.

"We interviewed the candidates on speakerphone, and

we'd been signaling to each other, thumbs-up, thumbs-down," said Martin Cohn, president of the BAJC.

During Heyn's interview, everyone silently gave not just one but two enthusiastic thumbs up, Cohn said.

The BAJC, with its Synagogue located on Greenleaf Street in West Brattleboro, is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. According to Cohn, it has 107 "member units," or households, which regularly attend services.

While searching for a future leader, the congregation was immediately drawn to Heyn's creative approach. His idea for involving youth and incorporating music -- both of which are important to the BAJC -- won the search committee over. Heyn, a professional musician, said he was interested in forming a youth band that could perform both at the temple and in other gigs around town.

"As soon as he said it, it really resonated," Cohn said. "He took two of the most important aspects to us, music and youth, and merged them together."

"I play keyboard but also sing," said Heyn. "I would like to bring music into services and community programs with a lot of instrumental music during services and perhaps a choir for High Holy Days next year."

Two services held as a sort of tryout confirmed it: After months of searching, the BAJC had found its new rabbi.

Originally from Baltimore, Md., Heyn has arrived in Brattleboro just in time to settle in before the Jewish High Holy Days begin in September. He moved from Cincinnati, Ohio, with his wife, Alexandra. He and his wife have three sons, ages 10, 12 and 14.

He is filling the position formerly held by BAJC's former spiritual leader James Levinson, who retired last year.

Given the recent events in Dummerston, where vandals have twice spray-painted racist symbols on a covered bridge, the local Jewish community needs a strong leader like Heyn, said Cohn.

"We're working very closely with Vermont Partnership (for Fairness and Diversity) to craft a response to that, and it's our hope to potentially work with other clergy members to let the Brattleboro area know there is leadership here in responding to these hateful messages," Cohn said.

"Rabbi Heyn is perfectly poised to take that leadership position," he added.

As part of assuming that leadership position in the community, Heyn plans to be involved in multiple aspects of the BAJC, including working with children at its religious school, which he said means a lot to him. The school year begins Sept. 13, and already 36 children have enrolled, said Cohn.

"Religious school is one of the most important aspects of congregational life," said Heyn, adding that he will be responsible for overseeing the BAJC's religious school curriculum and making sure the children are engaged and learning "what they came to learn," including Hebrew and Jewish music and art.

"In recent years, I've found that spirituality and music really work well together," Heyn said. "Jewish music is some of the most diverse -- a wonderful genre of music."

Heyn was ordained in 1999 and has experience in counseling families as well. He's particularly familiar with providing guidance to inter-faith couples, he said.

"The community is excited to have a rabbi they to turn to for questions of the religious spirit," Cohn said.

When it comes to those he looks up to, Heyn said one of his most beloved mentors is Arthur Green, a professor, author and theologian from the Boston, Mass., area.

"His philosophy resonates with my approach," Heyn said. "He challenges a lot of the old ideas, such as the idea of Jews being the chosen people, and brings a more universal quality that I think people are looking for."

Heyn will be leading services on Aug. 21 at 10 a.m. and Aug. 27 at 7:30 p.m. at the synagogue, located at 151 Greenleaf St.

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