

NEWS / LOCAL

Congregation Bet Haverim Appoints New Rabbi

In August, Rabbi Mike Rothbaum will join the city's only synagogue affiliated with the Reconstructionist branch of Judaism.

By **BOB BAHR**

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Congregation Bet Haverim, which has a long history of working for social justice and racial and gender diversity, has just appointed a new senior rabbi who has a strong commitment to those values. Beginning in August, Rabbi Mike Rothbaum will become the senior rabbi at the city's only synagogue affiliated with the Reconstructionist branch of Judaism.

Rothbaum comes to the synagogue from Congregation Beth Elohim in Acton, Mass., which describes itself as independent and non-affiliated and — like Bet Haverim — welcomes diversity among its congregants, regardless of ethnic background or sexual orientation.

Rothbaum, who is a 2007 graduate of the pluralistic Academy of Jewish Religion in New York City, plans to continue the synagogue's tradition of reaching out to the broader Atlanta community. He feels that this is particularly important as we emerge from the social and psychological isolation that has touched the lives of so many during the pandemic.

“It's obvious we need that connection because people are feeling more and more alienated. We had two years of being stuck inside and being afraid of our neighbors or vice versa. And so people are just aching for connection, and you can see it all over the place. Sometimes they do it in beautiful ways. Sometimes they do it in destructive ways. So connecting people to people inside the community and between the community and the folks in the greater Atlanta Jewish world and the greater Atlanta world, that's one thing I want to harness.”

Rothbaum is affiliated with a number of Jewish national and regional organizations that advocate for social justice. He is a part of T'ruah, an organization of progressive rabbis with an interest in Israel and the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.



Rothbaum has had a particular interest in labor issues and immigrants' rights.

He serves on the advisory committee of Bend the Arc, which claims to be the only national Jewish organization focused exclusively on progressive social change. In terms of broader political and economic issues, the rabbi points out that he grew up in a family with strong ties to union organizing and the labor movement. He plans to make worker rights — particularly for those who are recent immigrants — an important part of his rabbinate.

“Latino immigrants in large part run our country. They are the building blocks of construction, landscaping, food service, food preparation, restaurants, childcare and elder care. They are paid poorly in general for that work, which undermines our shared Jewish values. We’re supposed to honor and compensate, fairly, laborers. And then, if we turn around and not only underpay them, but we then repay them with harassment and persecution and oppression and deportation, tearing families apart ... This should be anathema to every Jewish soul,” Rothbaum said.

The new rabbi succeeds Rabbi Joshua Lesser, who is stepping down after 22 years as a prominent voice, both locally and nationally, for many of these same issues. Since last June, Lesser has been working 20 hours a week to help with lifecycle events and to ease the transition in leadership. He said that his lengthy stay at the congregation has been “an incredible experience,” but that he felt it was time to move on.

“I was kind of beginning to become concerned that my bold vision wasn’t always necessarily where the congregation wanted to be led. There was never any confrontation. There was never anything incredibly negative. But I think that there was a change in feeling during the pandemic,” he said.

Lesser plans to remain active in the Atlanta Jewish community as a consultant to national and local organizations, including the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, where he has been an important participant in the program to administer their justice, equity, diversity and inclusion grants.

During his years at Bet Haverim, which was originally founded to help create a spiritual Jewish home for the gay community, he was a prominent participant in the annual Gay Pride celebration and was instrumental in helping to found SOJOURN: the Southern Jewish Resource Network for Gender and Sexual Diversity.

Although he has had occasional differences with the congregation, Lesser says he’s a strong supporter of his successor and the continued progress of the congregation. As Rabbi Emeritus, he plans to offer help, as needed.

“I am not running away from the congregation, and I really am committed to their success. I’m excited about Rabbi Mike coming in and really want to do everything I can to ensure his success. Sometimes that means actively being supportive of him. And often that means getting out of the way.”