

# Sharing sacred space with Rabbi Sunny Schnitzer

By Andrea F. Siegel - May 29, 2022



Rabbi Sunny Schnitzer. Photo courtesy of Bethesda Jewish Congregation

## Andrea F. Siegel

At the end of June, Rabbi Elhanan “Sunny” Schnitzer, 69, will retire from [Bethesda Jewish Congregation](#), the unaffiliated synagogue where he has been on the pulpit since 2001.

His first service with the independent congregation in the Maryland suburbs came unexpectedly on Sept. 12, 2001, a memorial service for the 9/11 victims. It took place [jointly with Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church](#), as he was preparing to leave Beth El Hebrew Congregation in Alexandria, Virginia, and assume the leadership of BJC.

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WJW asked him about the past, present and future.

**How did you earn the nickname “Sunny”?**

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I was 14 and at a theater camp. I would come into the dining hall every morning, full of enthusiasm, smiles and sunshine. One of the older actors grabbed me by the coffee urn and said, ‘If you don’t stop being so blankety-blank sunny in the morning, I am going to rip out your tongue.’ I was the gofer that week for the adult company, and every time this guy needed something he would say, ‘Send that sunny so-and-so.’ It was the same time as that song ‘Sunny’ by Bobby Hebb — everybody was singing “Sunny” when I walked into a room. I went to a new school that fall and introduced myself as Sunny, and there it was.

**What has being a rabbi taught you?**

Being a rabbi in community has taught me the intrinsic worth of everyone — and has taught me also that my judgment of others was not needed.

**What did BJC teach you?**

The great value of patience, not just with other people, but the patience to allow people to grow.

When you throw something out there, some people go ‘Yay’ and some people go ‘Meh.’

Synagogues, if you’re not growing you are dying. For American Jews, the need to adapt is constant, and I didn’t understand that until I had this experience at BJC.

I learned how to appreciate those who are different. Diversity is our future. I am pleased that this congregation is a place where diversity is embraced.

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It's not just survival, it's thrival. Change is an organic process, seeing what's needed and saying, 'Let's see if this meets the need,' because if we say, 'No you have to do it the way we do it to fit here,' we will die.

**BJC enjoys a long partnership with Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church. A mosque, Maqaame Ibrahim, has been sharing space with you at the BJC-BHPC campus for a few years. You and BJC are known for social justice and interfaith works. Why is that important to you?**

When I got to Bradley Hills, I was really thrust into this 'spiritual siblings sharing sacred space.' It wasn't just about sharing space. It was about sharing spiritual ideals.

With our interfaith partners we have successfully launched four Afghan families. We march together for social justice causes. We marched together with Bradley Hills — a gun control rally, a women's rally, rally for the Sudanese, there are more. We do better together than what we could do by ourselves.

**Before becoming a rabbi and soon-to-be rabbi emeritus, you worked in acting, and also in a family auto service business in Baltimore. What's next?**

For my wife and I, this has been our spiritual home for 20 years. We will be around, and we will be engaged.

And I plan to do a little theater.

**As in Broadway?**

(Laughs) We'll start local and we'll see what happens.

**How would you like your BJC congregants to think of you?**

I would like it to be as a rabbi of great imagination and energy who did his very best to create a place where people can celebrate the simchas and share their sorrows in a very meaningful way.

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