

From the stage to the sanctuary

Rabbi David Dunn Bauer's second act

by Lisa Oram

When Rabbi David Dunn Bauer stood before the members of the Jewish Community of Amherst (JCA) on the evening of Friday, Aug. 15, to begin his first service as their new spiritual leader, he took a deep breath and began with the Shehecheyanu, a Hebrew blessing that gives thanks for gathering together on special occasions.

Then, he acknowledged the death of Shirley Gladstone, a beloved longtime member of the community who had died the day before. The funeral and burial would take place on Sunday, he said.

The sanctuary was filled that night, a not-so-common occurrence in August. To those who might have come to honor Gladstone, Bauer explained that Kaddish, the traditional prayer of mourning that is recited at every Friday-night service, could not be said for Gladstone until after her burial.

"Already he was teaching us," said Barbara Burkart about this little-known procedural point that applies when the Sabbath falls in the period between a person's death and burial.

"Rabbi Bauer was incredibly graceful in handling the dynamic tension of that night," said Burkart, who was co-chair of the committee that spent two years searching for a new rabbi. "I was able to relax into the service. I realized I didn't need to still wear the search committee hat. He was on his own, and I let go."

Bauer, at age 43, is at the beginning of a new career. He is, also, so to speak, a relatively new Jew. For the JCA, his arrival follows two years of transition that included the resignation of Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg after 13 years of service, a rabbinical search that failed, the decision to affiliate with the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, a year without a rabbi, and finally, the hiring of Bauer.

For both Bauer and the JCA, the path to each other has been complex. In each of their stories, perhaps, are the kernels of character that make them believe they are a good fit for one another.

Several weeks later, at the JCA offices, Bauer pointed out an exhibit of nature photography hanging in the hallway. Called "The Seven Days of Creation," it was the work of JCA member and University of Massachusetts astronomer Judy Young. "I love that there is art in the synagogue," he said, "especially with a theological theme. That's exactly the way it should be."

Among the things Bauer hopes for in his tenure at the JCA is to explore a "shared arts life." He comes to the rabbinate following a 20-year career as a director, manager and teacher in the world of professional theater and opera, a career which he says at one time felt sacred and spiritual, but had lost its pull on him by the time he left.

THE STORY OF Bauer's journey from the theater to rabbinical school starts in earnest in 1992. He had moved to Germany from New York City seeking work in the theater. "There is a theater in every town," he says. "The quantity of work is immense, and the cultural attention given to the arts makes it an exciting place to be."

To make himself more employable, Bauer decided to claim the German citizenship that was his legal right as the son of a refugee. His father was born in Germany and evacuated to England in 1939. In the process of gathering documentation, Bauer found, "the reality of my family's persecution and of their lives as German Jews became three-dimensional and palpable as it had never been before."

Although he was born to Jewish parents, he says there was no Jewish practice in his home. When he was a child, his family attended a Unitarian Universalist Church in Birmingham, Mich., and celebrated Christmas and Easter as American holidays. "Santa and the Bunny were more real to me than Jesus," he said.

When Bauer was 10, his family moved to Philadelphia and Bauer attended a Quaker school. He went on to Yale University in Connecticut and after graduating with a degree in literature and theater, he lived in Washington, D.C., where he worshiped at an Episcopal church. He says he pursued a spiritual direction for many years, in particular seeking assurance that as a gay man he could have a connection to God. But mostly, he says, the fit was not complete or satisfying. The spiritual practices he came most to rely on were private and personal.

During his second year in Germany, Bauer became involved with the New Israeli Opera through an American director who had been hired to help the company move into a permanent home in Tel Aviv and upgrade from a "funky, regional" theater into one that could command an international reputation, he said. Bauer was hired to teach and to train an Israeli assistant director and other staff members.

In 1994, he moved his home base back to the United States and commuted to Tel Aviv for eight shows over the next two years. At 34, he also began to attend Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, which describes itself on its Web site as “New York City’s Synagogue for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Jews, Our Families and Our Friends.” In doing so, he says, he experienced an unexpected familiarity—he felt the years of his private worship reflected in the texts and voices around him. Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah became “an inspiration and guide” for him, he says.

During his stints in Israel, Bauer’s desire to worship with a liberal and English-speaking congregation led him to the Hebrew Union College, the rabbinical school of the Reform Movement, in Jerusalem. As he became friendly with rabbinical students and faculty, he says, the idea came to him: They aspired to a life that he, too, wanted. They were studying and teaching, dealing with the most important of life’s issues.

Bauer says he had felt for some time that he had exhausted opportunities in the theater world that fed his soul and spirit. Through the rabbinate, he believed, he could pursue his values on a deeper level. Religious services are theatrical, he says, and participatory. “Anyone who holds a prayer book, holds a script,” says Bauer. “Congregants are actors and audience at the same time.” He had found, he says, a new medium to enrich his own life and reach others more surely than his theater career allowed.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS after first considering becoming a rabbi, Bauer found himself before the admissions committee at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in Wyncote, Pa. “First I said I wanted to be a rabbi, and I didn’t care what school I would have to go to. After I visited RRC, I said this is where I want to study and I don’t care how long it takes me to get in.”

He had studied hard, taken graduate school admissions tests, withdrawn from his professional theater life and the New Israeli Opera, and “staked a great deal” on this dream. His parents, he says, backed him with financial and emotional support.

Although the interview went well, the committee expressed concern that Bauer had been a practicing member of another faith, he says. Though he had been living and worshiping as a Jew for over a year, they said he needed a ritual affirmation of his intentions. They prescribed a rite that included immersion in a Jewish bath known as a mikveh and Bauer’s recitation of a statement of affirmation which he would compose. He would be accompanied by witnesses, including his mentor, Kleinbaum, and two others of his choosing.

Bauer says he knew that his spiritual search of 25 years had been sincere; he did not wish to “wash anything away.” He did, however, welcome the idea of symbolically immersing

himself into the Jewish world. In fact, he says, after the ritual, “The feeling of uncertainty about my Jewishness that I had experienced since childhood was gone.”

IN THE YEARS that Bauer was finding his way to Reconstructionist Judaism, the JCA, similarly, was moving toward becoming a Reconstructionist congregation. Since its earliest incarnation during the 1950s, the JCA had been an independent community, not affiliated with any of the major Jewish movements: Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist or Reform. Natalie Jarmon of Amherst, a founding member who was involved in 1966 with incorporating a group that was then called the Amherst Jewish Education Committee, says the early members were academics who were mostly interested in providing a Jewish education for their children. “I think our ‘do-it-yourself’ attitude significantly shaped the character of this congregation,” she says.

Reconstructionist Judaism is the newest of the four major religious movements in Judaism, and according to Bauer, the fastest-growing. Founded on the teachings of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan in the early 20th century, Reconstructionism defines Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people.

“The concept of civilization is central to Reconstructionist philosophy,” Bauer says. “Judaism is not just a faith, but a culture, with language, art, mores. We believe that contemporary American Jews live in two civilizations, an American one and a Jewish one simultaneously. We are operating by the civilizational trends and tenets of both at the same time.”

In addition, Reconstructionists seek a Jewish practice that is connected to tradition, yet reflects the contemporary Jew. “The process is to recognize a need, see what tradition offers, take what is useful, and build,” Bauer says. His own ceremony of affirmation is one example of a Jewish practice “reconstructed” to fit a particular and individual need. A mikveh is a ritual most commonly used by women to establish purity after menstruation and by men before a wedding, holiday or holy event. Similarly, Reconstructionists first introduced the bat mitzvah in 1922, a coming-of-age-ritual for girls that had previously been conducted only for boys.

Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, who preceded Bauer and was the JCA’s first full-time rabbi, was trained in the Reconstructionist movement. Each of the movements has its own rabbinical school and trains rabbis for leadership among its affiliates. The Reconstructionist Federation allows a one-time exception that permitted Weinberg to work with the JCA as an independent congregation.

When Weinberg left the JCA in July 2002 to pursue her increasing role as a leader of rabbis and a teacher on a national level, the congregation was left with a liturgical approach and a set of values that fit well with Reconstructionist

practice, says Barbara Burkart. However, because the congregation was not affiliated, it was not allowed to seek a Reconstructionist rabbi.

A search among a relatively small pool of unaffiliated candidates was unsuccessful, says Burkart. "We were getting mavericks, people on the fringe, who are disaffected in some way," she says.

The congregation finally decided it was time to join the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. Although some still wanted the JCA to maintain an independent status, at least 90 percent of the congregation voted to affiliate, says Beth Eisenberg of Northampton, co-president of the congregation. "It was a very healthy process," she says.

"IT WAS FUN, in a way, to run things without worrying about what the rabbi said," says Eisenberg with a laugh as she recollects the year between rabbis Weinberg and Bauer.

"The community grew closer," says Burkart. "Because of the inter-reliance, there was more cohesion. We discovered that we could count on each other. Many things that people needed and wanted were met, and even if they were met with less skill, the heart and commitment were there."

Members of the congregation divvied up responsibility for all the tasks usually handled by the rabbi. From leading services to preparing students for their bar or bat mitzvahs, the lay leadership of the JCA was able to run things mostly as if it was business as usual.

A group of seven JCA members, for example, two of whom are rabbis and five of whom are therapists, pooled their expertise and volunteered their services to the congregation as pastoral counselors. They provided on-call services seven days of the week for confidential consultations.

Judy Young, of Amherst, co-chair of the religion committee for the past seven years, points out that, above all, the community did not fall apart. The strength of the group, she says, transcended the power of one individual.

AFTER SIX YEARS of study at rabbinical college, Bauer's wish list for a place to work included a large congregation with "enough Jews to sculpt with." There are, he says, only a handful of communities among the 100-plus Reconstructionist synagogues in the country with over 300 members. The JCA has about 350 member groupings including families, couples and individuals. He was also looking for a "smart bunch of people and an intellectually alive place to live." It doesn't hurt, he adds, that it's gorgeous here.

Burkart describes the search process as a cross between hiring a school superintendent and getting married. It was, she adds, "just one of those times to be of service."

Of the final candidates, Burkart says, Bauer got strong backing from both the community and the committee. He received a unanimous vote of the board.

Now that he's here, Bauer says, he expects to feel like the new rabbi for at least a few years. He admits that there are many in the congregation who know more than he does—Jewish scholars and people with more congregational experience than he has. He says he is glad to know that he wasn't hired to "do everything," nor does he single-handedly carry the ball for the whole congregation. "Reconstructionism promotes the least hierarchical vision of the rabbi/congregational relationship. And we acknowledge that it makes it challenging. It's easier to come in and be the honcho," he says.

While he is confident that he was well-trained by his school, he adds, "It doesn't mean I'm not on the phone to colleagues, professors, saying, 'What do I do now?'"

IN EARLY September, the congregation held a welcome party for Bauer. On a quintessential New England fall day—clear skies, temps in the mid-70s—gardening, hiking or any number of other outdoor activities could have competed with the event, but JCA members showed up in force to sing, dance, eat and shake hands with their new rabbi.

Robert Brandt of Northampton says he considers himself a 'Coolidge Bridge because it felt like "a momentous occasion."

There were musical performances by Makhela, a newly formed Jewish choral group in the Pioneer Valley, and the JCA klezmer orchestra. Bauer was lifted in a chair and danced around the room, a common practice at Jewish weddings. The religion committee performed a song to the tune of "Matchmaker, Matchmaker," poking fun at the long search process and the success of the end result. The dessert table was filled with berries and melon, brownies and strudel, and despite its many visitors, never seemed to empty.

Off to the side, in a quieter corner of the building, children and others compiled a decorated book of questions for the rabbi. Andra Rose of Amherst coordinated the project and contributed the question: "Is there a Jewish form of training for the body (like yoga)?" Her 6-year-old daughter, Ruth Goldstein-Rose, added to her family's page, "Do horses have thoughts and feelings?"

Bauer spoke briefly to the assembled community. Nothing in his training, he said, had prepared him for the warmth, kindness and affection of the event, "so early in my time here." He recited the Shehecheyanu and said, "My moment-to-moment prayer is that I live up to this day."

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