

Seven Rabbis From Charlotte — Who are They? Where are They?

By Joel Goldman

Dovid Barman, Daniel Brenner, Binyamin Levin, Frank Levin, Janet Liss, Jacob Luski and Mordechai Richardson.

Seven people from Charlotte who share one thing in common, and from this same thread weaving through their lives come many questions.

What is there about our city, our Jewish community and our Jewish institutions that caused these seven people to follow the identical calling in life? Or, has Charlotte had little to do with their destinies, and are we involved instead with an inner feeling of spirituality that transcends environment?

These seven individuals have chosen to become rabbis, and considering the fact the Charlotte Jewish community is not as large as other Jewish communities which produce only one or two rabbis, the question invites closer scrutiny.

To best understand this unique situation, one must con-



Rabbi Daniel Brenner

sider the role of parents in a child's religious development as well as the parts religious school, temples, youth groups and other Jewish experiences play.

Of course, the most revealing answers must come from the rabbis themselves, and each of the seven were eager to share their thoughts.

Rabbi Daniel Brenner is enrolled in his fourth year at the Reconstruction Rabbinical College in Philadelphia. He is also the Rabbi for a liberal conservative synagogue in Bordentown, New Jersey.

The son of Dr. Saul and Martha Brenner, spoke of his growing up in Charlotte. He and his brother were the only Jewish children on their street. "To be a Jewish youngster in a small Southern city in the 70s was to be very much a minority, and to be Jewish on a Christian street was even more of a challenge," Rabbi Brenner emphasized.

He stated he first truly became aware of his Jewishness at the North Carolina Hebrew Academy, which he attended from age 5 to 12. "It was an excellent experience about the celebration of being a Jew."

He remembers how important Temple Israel's Confirmation Class was to him, and in particular, the USY. "From both the class and, in particular, from a USY meeting in Atlanta, I began to realize that Jewish kids my age throughout the region shared my concerns about growing up in the South as a member of a minority. I learned how they dealt with problems coming from being Jewish, and it increased my pride in being Jewish."

Another youngster growing up in Charlotte in the 1970s was Rabbi Frank Levin. He recalled the closeness of the Jewish community in Charlotte at that time. "We were a small Jewish community in the South, and we looked to each other for our Jewish identity."

He looks back fondly on those days because of youthful solidarity in the community. My experiences from that time were very good and positive ones," he indicated. "Also, my parents, Norman and Donna Levin, instilled within me a strong sense of pride in my Jewishness. They were an important force in my becoming involved in Judaism."

Rabbi Levin is the campus rabbi at the University of Pennsylvania, offering Jewish support and education to the students. He has, as his base, the Chabad House in Philadelphia.

The only woman in this



Rabbi Janet Liss

group is Rabbi Janet Liss. The daughter of Ron Liss and Evelyn Floreste, She now serves as the rabbi of a Reformed temple in Tampa, Florida.

She spoke of her parents' activities in Temple Beth El. "My father was president of the synagogue and my mother was president of the Sisterhood. I was raised to believe in my religion, and to always be proud of the fact that I was a Jew."

Also, Rabbi Liss warmly recalled the times spent as a youngster at the old Amity Club. "We were different than other children in Charlotte. In those days, public schools did little to recognize our holidays, and being together at Amity Club and

youth groups gave us a strong sense of togetherness based upon our Jewish identity."

"Growing up in Charlotte," she concluded made me feel very special. Those years were extremely important to me.

Rabbi Mordecai Richardson leads a Conservative congregation in Israel, and was unavailable for comment. However, his father, Shai, spoke of his son's early interest in Judaism. "He had a good Jewish family background," Shai revealed, "and as a youngster he was an officer in the Conservative youth movement in Charlotte. Later he went



Rabbi Mordecai Richardson

to university at Johns Hopkins, and later studied at the Hebrew Union College."



Rabbi David Barman

As with the other rabbis interviewed, Rabbi Richardson's secure family base and youth activities would seem to be the foundation upon which his adult involvement in the religion was built.

"Kadima, Hebrew School and particularly Arthur Tirsun, Educational Director at Temple Israel." So answered Rabbi David Barman, son of Marvin and Lorri Barman, when asked what, in Charlotte, influenced him the most.

There were several teachers at Temple Israel Hebrew School who made a strong contribution to Rabbi Barman's desire to learn more of his Jewish background. But, more than the others, the Rabbi spoke of Tirsun and how he instilled within him the need to study Judaism in great depth.

Rabbi Barman also spoke with emotion of Rabbi Richard Rocklin, a past Rabbi of Temple Israel. "Rabbi Rocklin was always there to answer any ques-

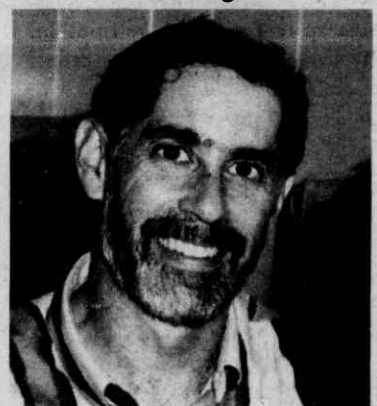
tions I had," confided Barman. "He made himself available to all of us, and he was of enormous help to me through his patience and knowledge."

At the present time, Rabbi Barman assists in the spiritual administration of Temple Mogen David in Surfside, Florida. "Pride! Pride in my Jewishness. Pride in my religion."

So emphasized Rabbi Binyamin Levin, son of Jerry and Barbara Levin. "My parents, because of their interest in Jewishness and the importance and love they felt for our holidays, gave me that same sense of identity with and respect for our religion."

After graduating high school in Charlotte, Rabbi Levin traveled to Israel, where he cultivated a strong sense of identity with that nation. After college, he returned to Israel, and attended a Yeshiva there. "This made me very open to Jewish educational experiences," added the Rabbi.

"I was impressed with the Yeshiva rabbi and he allowed me to appreciate even further the wisdom of our religion."



Rabbi Binyamin Levin

Also, Rabbi Levin recalled the contribution Rabbi Richard Rocklin of Temple Israel made to his life. "Rabbi Rocklin used words and metaphors as a means to tell a story with a message. His stories always made people more aware of their identity and purpose in life, and I wanted to incorporate that approach in my own teaching of others," Rabbi Levin enthused.

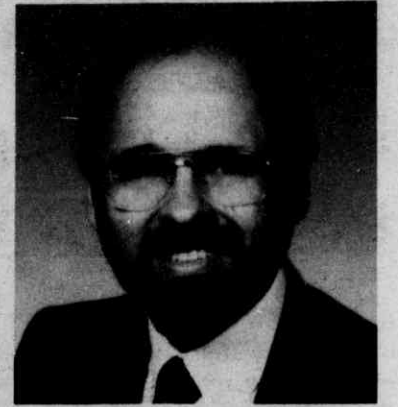
The Rabbi teaches Hebrew classes in Charlotte as well as torah on an independent basis, and brings groups together as a teacher to use his words and metaphors to their most beneficial advantage.

Now a conservative rabbi at Temple B'nai Israel in Tampa, Florida, Rabbi Jacob Luski moved to Charlotte in the 7th grade.

He had exceptional religious guidance from his parents, Abe and Rose Luski, and this, coupled with his Jewish education at Temple Israel served as a basis for his future involvement

in the religion.

Rabbi Luski fondly recalled Rabbi Michael Hecht of Temple Israel as well as congregational



Rabbi Jacob Luski

leader Morris Speizman.

"They encouraged me to seek as much Jewish knowledge as possible," Rabbi Luski mentioned. "They taught me how important all experience gained in Judaism is. They were very supportive of me and their advice is still an influence in my life."

He studied engineering at Georgia Tech and to help pay his college expenses he worked at the Atlanta conservative synagogue. That, combined with a summer's study at the Jewish Theological Seminary, were the stepping stones to his becoming a rabbi.

And so the questions asked earlier, confront us again. What did Charlotte provide as a city and what did our Jewish community offer to cause these seven individuals to seek their life's callings in the rabbinate?

Family was certainly a strong influence in their growing up years. Community and spiritual leaders influenced them as did youth groups. The warmth of their temple surroundings and experiences in Israel all served to shape their futures.

Certainly a most important answer involves their having been raised in a small southern city, where Jews were much in the minority. From this came the realization that participation in a group sharing history and tradition brings a feeling of unity and identity.

But is there not something else that rises above all these attributes? How fulfilling and enduring our religion must be to enable those who turn to it for strength to also find spirituality, joy and pride.

In discovering spiritual sustenance for themselves, these seven individuals have elected to pass on such a gift to others. And is this not possibly the common thread that weaves throughout our tapestry?

Photo not available for Rabbi Frank Levin.