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Rabbi Murray Ezring Arrives at Temple Israel

By Lisa Taub

Rabbi Murray Ezring arrived in Charlotte recently to assume the pulpit at Temple Israel. His engagement, the result of an intensive eight-month search that resulted in choosing him from approximately sixty candidates, has been eagerly anticipated by Temple Israel members. His duties began officially on July 7.

Rabbi Ezring comes to Charlotte with an impressive record of building congregations through innovative pulpit and teaching techniques. Most recently he served at Congregation B'nai Torah in Boca Raton, Florida, where he spent six years. During his tenure at B'nai Torah, membership grew from 300 to 850 families. While there, Rabbi Ezring also developed a "Tot Shabbatot" program, family services, regular Shabbat dinners and established an informal, early Shabbat service. He was also responsible for development of a series of family education programs centered around holiday observances (e.g., "Let's Make Shabbat"); organized and taught an adult B'nai Mitzvah class; initiated and maintained congregational chavurot; launched a major outreach program to college students; and created "Chavurim," a pre-Kadima youth group. In the past three years, the congregation earned Solomon Schechter Awards for their bulletin as well as social action and adult education programs.

In Boca Raton, Rabbi Ezring was a leader and innovator not only in his own congregation, but in the Jewish community and the community as a whole. He served as Chief Chaplain for the sheriff's department, worked with terminally ill individuals through a local hospice and served as founding member of an interreligious cable television committee. He also coordinated fourteen local congregations and Federation response to Hurricane Andrew.

Prior to his tenure in Boca Raton, Rabbi Ezring served fourteen years as rabbi for Temple Beth El in Oakhurst, New Jersey. There, he molded a new approach to congregational participation in Shabbat services by using open dialogue and innovative sermon techniques. He also initiated a variety of education programs and monthly breakfasts for high school students and their parents.

Rabbi Ezring was born in Rock Island, Illinois. His father was trained as a rabbi and served as cantor in his Rock Island synagogue. He received his B.A. with High Honors from the University of Illinois in 1973, his M.A. from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1977 and received his rabbinic ordination in 1978. He has received several awards, including the Israel Bond Scroll of Honor (1987), the Ezrat Nashim-Sarah Herzog Hospital New Frontiers for Spiritual Leadership Award (1991), the Federation Rabbinic Leadership Award (1992) and the Men's American ORT Community Leadership Award (1993).

Rabbi Ezring is joined in Charlotte by his wife, Barbara, a speech and language pathologist and his four children who range in age from seven to fourteen.



Rabbi Murray Ezring

According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations, 52% of Jews marry outside the faith. Of the 5.5 million Jews in America, more than 2 million are unaffiliated with a synagogue. There are 287,000 Jewish children now between the ages of four and eight who live in intermarried homes. Startling demographics such as these were at the core of the third national "Conference on Jewish Inter-marriage, Outreach and Conversion...Making Outreach Work," which was held in early June in New York City. Ruth Goldberg and Adrienne Rosenberg, both from Charlotte, were among the 125 Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative rabbis, educators, social workers, federation, synagogue and service organization professionals and lay leaders who participated in the conference. Dr. Egon Mayer, director of the Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) which sponsored the conference, chaired the conference. JOI is the only national organization embracing all streams of Judaism that is exclusively devoted to preserving Jewish continuity and identity. JOI's mission is to be the primary national resource of the North American Jewish community in research, communication and education directed to the end that unaffiliated and marginally affiliated Jews, including their non-Jewish spouses and their children, choose Judaism.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* and *To Life*, was the keynote speaker and said, "Intermarriage can be seen as a doorway into Judaism, not as doorway out or as betrayal." He continued, "We feel so threatened by intermarrying Jews that we reject rather than embrace them. Some times outreach leads to conversion; but when it

"2 Million U.S. Jews Unaffiliated"

By Ruth Goldberg

doesn't, we need to offer a Jewish ambiance to interfaith families." Regarding what appeals to potential converts to Judaism, Rabbi Kushner related in his lecture, "The Spirit of Outreach," that the warmth, closeness and sharing of the Jewish family is appealing as is the intellectual freedom of belief and the story of our remaining Jews when it was threatening to express those beliefs.

"Judaism is the community through which to find God. Judaism is the science of taking the ordinary and making it holy," such as sanctifying food and washing hands. "Nothing God creates," he went on, "is evil; it's up to us to determine what to do with it, to use it right, to make things sacred.... We invite people to join with us to bring holiness (Kedushah) into the world."

Several concurrent workshops were held at the conference which gave participants specific information about successful educational outreach projects in the areas of parents, children, teens and young adults and family-oriented programs.

Sessions on "Working with Interfaith Couples," were led by Rabbi Rachel Cowan, a Reform rabbi and author, with her late husband Paul, of the book *Mixed Blessings: Jews, Christians and Intermarriage*. In small groups, she and four other facilitators demonstrated some model exercises which illustrated and analyzed effective practices in working with interfaith couples in a variety of Jewish communal settings.

Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL), is an Orthodox rabbi, author and educator. He urges congregations of all denominations to welcome warmly, anyone who comes in--Jew or convert or intermarried.

Dr. Egon Mayer, professor of sociology at Brooklyn College, is a recognized specialist in sociological studies of Jewish family and Jewish identity. He concluded the conference with this thought: Jewish outreach to the intermarried, to the unaffiliated and affiliated, is about how to perpetuate a great culture and a compassionate people who can weather the storms with great dignity. The goal is to transform people's lives so they will live better through Judaism.

Goldberg and Rosenberg shared their conference experience and materials with members of the Interfaith Outreach Committee of the Community Services Board of the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte. Last year, the committee conducted a demographic and attitudinal survey of about 2,500 Jewish families in Greater Charlotte. It will also serve as a forum for the sharing and exchanging of outreach ideas and plans in which all local Jewish institutions and organization are involved. Goldberg co-chairs the Interfaith Outreach Committee. Rosenberg, director of Charlotte's Jewish Family Services, counsels families on intermarriage issues and has led several support groups for interfaith couples.



Ruth Goldberg

Ruth Goldberg is a former editor of the American Jewish Times Outlook. An active member of the community, she currently serves on several Federation boards and committees.

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