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The chain of successionBeth Sholom rabbinic transition plan approved

by Richard Greenberg

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Beth Sholom Congregation and Talmud Torah picked its new senior rabbi last week, but he'll have to wait a few years to change the nameplate on his office door.

The senior rabbi-elect is Nissan Antine, Beth Sholom's assistant rabbi for the past four years. He will succeed Rabbi Joel Tessler, the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Potomac congregation since 1983.

The leadership change -- which will take effect in 2013 -- was necessitated by Tessler's plan to fulfill his longtime dream of spending more time in Israel and ultimately making aliyah.

Adding urgency to the transition planning was that Antine had recently been approached by another congregation and was asked to apply for its senior rabbinic position. The current contracts for both Antine and Tessler expire on June 30.

"The board wants Rabbi Antine to know he has a future at Beth Sholom, and for his part, Rabbi Antine would like to stay at Beth Sholom," shul president Fay-Ann Brodie and Jonny Charnoff, chair of Beth Sholom's succession planning team, said in a joint statement issued in early October. "While there may be other strong rabbinical candidates in the field, if we already have an excellent rabbinic leader who knows our community well, there is a compelling reason for avoiding a search that is often a divisive process for communities."

Under the rabbinic succession plan approved Wednesday of last week by the shul's board (on a 25-2 vote, with one abstention), both Tessler and Antine will continue in their current posts until June 30, 2013.

At that point, Antine will become senior rabbi, but Tessler will remain at Beth Sholom for the next three years as a part-time rabbinic scholar (at reduced pay), an arrangement that will enable him to spend more time in Israel.

"Most synagogues don't have a succession plan in place," Charnoff said in an interview last week. "Thanks to Rabbi Tessler's outstanding leadership, we have the opportunity to conduct a seamless transition process that might be a model for other organizations."

Tessler could not be reached for comment following the board vote.

"It feels wonderful," Antine, 31, said of his promotion. "This is such a wonderful community, and I'm looking forward to doing some very important work here."

Antine was ordained by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a self-described "Modern Open Orthodox" institution in New York that has come under fire from traditionalists for being too liberal.

For that reason, YCT graduates like Antine are not eligible for membership in the centrist Rabbinical Council of America, which bills itself as "the largest Orthodox rabbinic organization in the world." (The RCA is affiliated with the Orthodox Union.)

In some cases, YCT rabbis have also been denied membership on their local rabbinic counsels.

Possible concerns prompted by these and other developments were addressed during an open membership meeting on Oct. 20 at the synagogue that was attended by about 200 congregants. (Beth Sholom has roughly 700 adult members.)

Issues of interest were presented, question-and-answer-style, in a handout that was distributed at the meeting. For example, will Beth Sholom "change direction" when Antine becomes senior rabbi?

Answer: Unlikely. "A rabbi should not have an agenda to impose on a community," Antine added in an interview, "but should work with the community to satisfy its spiritual needs."

Question: What is the significance of Antine having been ordained at YCT?

Answer: The impact is likely minimal. Some other Orthodox synagogues in the area have rabbis who are not members of the Vaad Harabanim Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington, known as the Vaad, "and those shuls have not been negatively impacted by that fact," according to the handout.

Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld of Ohev Sholom-The National Synagogue in the District is among those rabbis. His nonmembership in the Vaad "has not been a hindrance in the slightest," he said in an interview. "I have high regard for the Vaad, but this is a total non-issue."

Antine added: "I would very much like to serve on the Vaad to benefit from their advice and expertise."

Although YCT graduates are not eligible for membership in the RCA (the O.U.'s sister organization), that is not necessarily an impediment to them serving as rabbis in O.U. congregations, such as Beth Sholom. A dozen YCT alumni serve in O.U. synagogues, including nine who are senior rabbis, according to Ruthie Strosberg Simon, director of recruitment and placement at YCT.

"I don't see it as a hindrance at all," Antine added. "I'm just serving my community. When I'm working with a congregant or their family, I don't think about the alphabet soup of communal life. I don't feel any controversy."

Tessler, who attended the Oct. 20 membership meeting, said after that meeting that the tone of the session was collegial, respectful "and very dignified. It was an extraordinary display of synagogue unity."