

Rabbi's goal is to give back to the world more than he takes

By Claire Bessette

Publication: The Day (theday.com)



Courtesy of Nomi Ellenson

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz says his calling is to be a source of comfort and support for society's most vulnerable people.

Former intern at Norwich synagogue now making a name for himself at UCLA

Norwich — When the Congregation Brothers of Joseph launched a rabbinic internship program four years ago, the small Orthodox synagogue didn't expect to bring in a rabbi who is changing the Orthodox approach to the Jewish faith.

Three years ago when Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, now 29 and a campus rabbi at the University of California at Los Angeles, was a student at the YCT Rabbinical School in New York City, he was looking for an internship opportunity.

At the same time, Ralph Klein, chairman of the ritual committee at Brothers of Joseph, wanted to bring in an intern to assist incoming Rabbi Jeremy Booty.

"I had heard good things about Norwich and had a visit and fell in love with the town and the Congregation Brothers of Joseph," Yanklowitz said in a telephone interview last week. "I found them to be extremely warm and really committed, each member committed to building their community."

Yanklowitz is a rising star in the Jewish community nationally and internationally. He received the prestigious Wexner Graduate Fellowship and in 2008 was chosen by The Jewish Week, a New York publication, as one of its "36 Under 36" - recognizing 36 of the most influential Jewish leaders under age 36.

With that, filmmakers working on a documentary, "The Calling," came calling. The film followed several young people of various faiths for a year to explore their reasons for choosing a religious life. Yanklowitz's time in Norwich, with some footage shot at Brothers of Joseph, will be featured in the film.

Yanklowitz's internship commitment to Norwich officially lasted one year, but he tries to return each year for the Jewish high holidays to renew friendships there and to visit with Rabbi Booty and Klein, who has become a family friend. Yanklowitz called Booty an important mentor in his life and said he is grateful to the Norwich congregation for helping shape his personal mission to make the world a better place.

"The city of Norwich has a very special meaning to my life," Yanklowitz said.

Booty in turn said Yanklowitz has had a profound influence on the Norwich congregation.

"He really has a great ethic about him, about how he sees Judaism affecting the world in a positive way, not just in a ritual way," Booty said.

Traditionally, Conservative and Reformed Jews reach out to the world in charitable ways, while Orthodox Jews concentrate on ritual meanings and applying Jewish law to life, Booty said. Yanklowitz has bridged those two worlds, bringing young people on missionary trips to African nations, Southeast Asia, India and Central America. The groups work in villages, build schools, create sanitation systems and consult with nonprofits in those places. He recently brought a group of 15 Hillel students to Guatemala.

Yanklowitz founded and is president of Uri L'Tzedek, "an Orthodox social justice organization guided by Torah values and dedicated to combating suffering and oppression," according to the organization's website.

Yanklowitz grew up in Toronto, Chicago and New Jersey. His family taught him the Jewish traditions and laws, but he said they were not religiously observant. He got his undergraduate degree at the University of Texas, a master's degree in leadership and psychology at Harvard University and a second master's degree at Yeshiva University in Jewish philosophy. He is pursuing a doctoral degree at Columbia University.

"I really believe that everybody should follow their personal calling," Yanklowitz said.

"For me, my calling has been to be a source of comfort and support for the most vulnerable in our society. The Jewish tradition, the Torah itself, really opened my heart to that possibility, the possibility that I potentially could be capable of committing my life to serving the Jewish people and serving all people."

Yanklowitz said he was hesitant when director Yoni Brook and his crew asked if he wanted to be featured in the film. The crew would be following him for a year and asking about his personal life, his religious calling and his philosophies.

"When they told us the goal of the film is to show the common humanity of the clergy," he said, "that purpose really spoke to me."

Klein said Norwich residents and especially Brothers of Joseph congregation members should keep an eye on Yanklowitz. He predicted the young rabbi will become a world leader in the Jewish faith and beyond in the years to come.

Yanklowitz paused when asked where he sees himself in 10 years.

"I hope I never settle down," he said. "In 10 years, my dream would be to be at a place in my life where I've been giving more than I've been taking. For the first 29 years, I have taken more from the world than I have given. I have taken exponentially more than I have given. Even on those trips to those countries, I have taken more from the world than I have given."