



Beth Israel Hires Uri Topolosky as New Rabbi



Photo by Alan Smason

The Topolosky family will serve Beth Israel starting in August

By Alan Smason, Deep South Jewish Voice

Nearly two years after flooding related to Hurricane Katrina devastated its Lakeview property, Congregation Beth Israel announced plans to hire Uri Topolosky, 28, as their new rabbi, effective August 1.

Topolosky, who is an associate rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York, was ordained from the Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in 2005. YCT Dean and founder Avraham "Avi" Weiss, who is also senior rabbi at HIR, asked Topolosky to become an associate rabbi there following his ordination.

Topolosky, who grew up in Sharon, Mass., and Silver Spring, Md., studied in Israel at a yeshiva there for two years prior to college.

Following his return to the United States, he continued his studies at the University of Maryland for two and a half years before he graduated with cum laude honors and a bachelor's degree.

"Essentially that was a place where I really grew in terms of what I wanted to do with my life and finding that the Jewish community was a place where I wanted to serve," he explained.

Following a stint as the president of an Orthodox student union group at Maryland, Topolosky had what he considers a life-changing realization. "Very quickly I realized that it (Orthodoxy) was such a small fraction of the Jewish community — what I call the Jewish people," he said. This brought about a change in his dynamic in which he now tries to reach out to all Jews from across the spectrum without being critical or exclusive in some way.

"Much of my family is Irish Catholic and that has had a profound influence on me in my understanding of the larger world community," he continued.

Following several learning opportunities and a job working with Isralight, a birthright organization in Israel, Topolosky elected to enroll in the fall 2001 class at YCT. He says he was immediately drawn to Rabbi Weiss's warmth and spirituality. "Two things he taught me were the notions of spiritual humility and spiritual accessibility," Topolosky said.

Topolosky says his approach to Orthodox Judaism is to make it more open. "It is an Orthodoxy that is committed to halachah (Jewish Law) and is traditional," he explained. "Yet it is open in the sense of accessibility of all Jews, open to cross-community and cross-denominational dialogues and relationships."

To that end, he is respectful of all religions and all people. Topolosky says embracing others and accepting them where they are was one of his biggest roles as an associate rabbi and one he expects to continue in his new post at Beth Israel.

"I want not to judge or condemn or push others, but to embrace people where they are with a warm, spiritual presence."

Topolosky believes in the wholeness of the Jewish people. "I am looking forward to finding increased roles for women to be engaged in our community," he said. Another cornerstone of his belief system is a steadfast commitment to the modern state of Israel.

Topolosky says all synagogues should periodically examine if they are effectively serving their communities. "All synagogues should take a serious look at themselves and ask, 'Are we filling a real need?' It's like saying we are ready to be reborn. We are ready to begin again. Right now, Beth Israel is being forced to ask these questions," he noted.

Rather than being scared of a community in crisis, both the rabbi and his wife Dahlia admit they are drawn to the spirit and strength of the people of New Orleans. "We really wanted to go to a much smaller Jewish community where together we could make a difference," the rabbi said.

"In fact it was inspiring to see such people who, after such loss and destruction, could have so much hope and passion to rebuild. I was really moved," his wife acknowledged.

"It says to me that this is a community that is committed to growth and is very attractive," he added.

With the congregation presently occupying donated space at Gates of Prayer in Metairie, Topolosky is assessing what additional steps he should be taking as a leader of the synagogue's

rebuilding efforts. “Beth Israel is developing plans for rebuilding and we’re looking to actively recruit young people in our community,” he says. “That is part of my responsibility and we are hoping to attract young couples from across the country to join us.”

(Editor’s note: The author has been a member of the Board of Directors of Congregation Beth Israel for the past decade. Previously, he served as Treasurer and Second-Vice President while a member of the Executive Board.)