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26-year-old Adam Scheier brings 'poise and knowledge well beyond his youthful years' to his position as religious leader of Canada's oldest Jewish eastern European establishment

Young rabbi breaks the mold

TIA GOLDENBERG
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Adam Scheier has been described as a "rabbi for the 21st century," and he is ready to take on his greatest challenge as a religious leader.

The Shaar Hashomayim synagogue in Westmount, Canada's oldest Ashkenazi or Jewish eastern European establishment, will be installing Scheier as new chief rabbi today.

"I'm not trying to be anybody I'm not," the Rochester, N.Y., native said.

"I'm taking this as a wonderful opportunity to grow with the synagogue," said Scheier, who is only 26 years old.

His professional experience has been somewhat limited because of his age.

Scheier grew up in what he calls a "socially Orthodox" home, in which his family belonged to an Orthodox synagogue, but never really attended on a regular basis.

"My parents made our home kosher so that my more observant friends could come over and play," he said.

After he finished high school at 16, he decided to attend a religious school in Israel to broaden his horizons.

"I felt that it was the one part of my life that I didn't know enough about."

Two years later, he returned to the United States with a plan to study medicine, but turned to rabbinical studies instead. He was ordained as a rabbi shortly afterward.

Scheier began exploring the Jewish world outside his American borders.

He helped set up a yeshiva (religious school) in a small community in Germany, home to many Russian Jews who immigrated after the fall of the Soviet Union.

After he learned German, he set up youth programs and taught Bible courses to the 200-member community.

"To sit with people one on one and look them in the eye, and have a conversation and try and bring some meaning into their lives is a fantastic opportunity," Scheier said. "I really appreciated that intimacy."

He continued to work in



JOHN MAHONEY THE GAZETTE

Fresh face, no beard: Rabbi Adam Scheier doesn't look like a typical rabbi, but he has been warmly received at the Shaar Hashomayim. He wants to help the synagogue thrive by appealing to young people.

smaller communities in eastern Europe and then Houston, Tex. After that, he served as spiritual leader at a 1,000-family synagogue in New York. He then made a pilgrimage to Canada's largest Ashkenazi congregation, with 1,600-members.

Since his formative experience was at smaller synagogues, Scheier had his apprehensions about coming to Montreal.

Those soon faded.

"What I found here, and in the Montreal community in general, was a real tight-knit group, closeness and intimacy that I wouldn't have expected in a city of this size."

This isn't the first time the Shaar has hired a young and inexperienced spiritual leader. Former Rabbi Wilfred Shuchat was in his late 20s when he was installed in 1947.

Scheier came to the Shaar last September as an associate rab-

bi. The Shaar is the biggest synagogue he has served.

Despite the differences between the smaller European congregations and the Shaar, Scheier said the similarities are more striking.

He said he feels as comfortable talking to members one on one as he did in the small town of Flenzburg, Germany. He added that all communities, whether large or small, are looking to grow.

Scheier speaks softly but eloquently about his big plans for the 160-year-old synagogue.

He said one way to make sure the synagogue thrives is by appealing to young people, just like him.

"One of my challenges is engaging my peers. I hope to develop a base of friends around the community, who I can also help bring into the synagogue," he said.

It was during his year as asso-

ciate rabbi that he earned the respect of his colleagues on the synagogue's board, who chose him to be chief rabbi.

"We saw in him poise and knowledge well beyond his youthful years," said Jonathan Schneiderman, former president of the board.

Despite his age and lack of big-city synagogue experience, current president Alvin Fagen said the community has been receptive to him.

"They say, 'You made the right choice. This is a rabbi for the 21st century,'" he said.

But both men said he keeps in line with the synagogue's traditions, allowing him to appeal to the young and the old.

"We need a rabbi who can meet the needs of both ends of the (age) spectrum, and in Rabbi Scheier we have found that," Schneiderman said.

Barbara Bronstein, a retiree who volunteers at the Shaar, agreed.

She was able to get to know Scheier after he officiated at her mother's funeral last year.

"I don't feel that his age is a detriment. I think he's conducted himself very well and has tremendous potential," said Bronstein, a synagogue member for more than 40 years.

Fagen and Schneiderman said Scheier already has grasped the importance of the Shaar's history.

"It's a very meaningful experience to be able to sit in the same seat that your grandfather and your great-grandfather sat in," he said.

Despite the acclaim he has received from the community and his colleagues, Scheier speaks candidly of his unconventional appearance.

"People have an idea of what a rabbi should be, and to break molds is always difficult. If you're picturing a person that's 60 years old with a long beard, well I'm certainly not going to fulfill that dream."

But there's more behind simple appearances.

"What's important to the synagogue is that we're being consistent with our traditions," he said, sitting in a boardroom filled with photos of former, bearded rabbis.

"But at the same time, we're looking forward."