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A Uniquely Jewish Family

Creating an open environment for future Jewish leaders

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A Uniquely Jewish Family

CREATING A NUTURING ENVIRONMENT FOR FUTURE JEWISH LEADERS

By Shani Goloskov

The first thing you see upon entering the Schoenfelds' Pikesville residence are the warm smiles of Joan and Stuart Schoenfeld. Their home is clearly one of love for Judaism, with curio cabinets and bookshelves filled with Jewish memorabilia – menorahs of all styles on a bookshelf in the den; Jewish books and seforim along the den's back wall; a cabinet of kiddish cups from Israel in the dining room. Cherished photographs of the parents, their daughters at various ages, and of course, grandchildren, fill the house.

Stuart and Joan Schoenfeld have been active in Judaism since the early 1970s, having helped the downtown Toronto Jewish community blossom into the thriving community it is now. Their work inspired daughters Devorah, 47, and Rachel, 44, who are now both rabbis of two opposite movements. Rabbi Rachel is ordained under the Reconstructionist sect, while Rabbi Devorah is an Orthodox rabbi.

"Stuart said, 'We are mother and father of rabbis,'" said Joan. "I said, 'It's better than being mother of dragons!'"

Stuart and Joan, born and bred Baltimoreans, moved to Toronto in 1970



Rabbi Dr. Devorah Schoenfeld



Rabbi Rachel Dvash Schoenfeld

when Stuart accepted a position as a professor of sociology at York University in Toronto. So Rachel and Devorah were born and raised among the pluralist Jewish community of downtown Toronto.

"When I was looking for work, I only wanted to take an offer from a place that had the Jewish community," Stuart said. "We also liked the Jewish community in Toronto. Because ... it felt very Jewish. There was a strong sense of individual connection to the Jewish community."

"What was unique about the downtown community ... is that all the different denominations, from Orthodox to Reconstructionist to secular Judaism, all cooperated," said Joan. "Different groups supported each other without being jealous of their own space."

But downtown Toronto was home to

more than various Jewish sects. Its community was filled with people of all different races, ethnicities, orientations, and family compositions.

"Canada has this tradition of being multicultural," Stuart said. "Being Jewish in Canada has that feel, that you don't have the pressures of assimilation because it's a multicultural society."

Rachel laughed as she recalled being spoken to in Greek by people at her school because she looked Greek. She noted that their neighbors were primarily Chinese, Greek, and Portuguese, among other ethnicities, and that her school was filled with immigrants from various countries.

"Our daughters ... experienced the Jewish world as pluralistic, and that pluralism, Jewish pluralism, was a good thing," said Stuart. "A



Above: Schoenfeld family, left-right: Joan, Deborah, Rachel and Stuart
Left: Devorah and Rachel as children

pluralist environment is all they knew.”

Both Joan and Stuart were actively involved in their synagogue, the First Naravever Congregation. The synagogue was a traditional Orthodox synagogue when they began attending. Stuart served as president of the synagogue board and helped start an egalitarian minyan, which began the synagogue’s evolution into a more trans-denominational, egalitarian synagogue open to people of all Jewish backgrounds.

“It was [just] the neighborhood synagogue,” said Stuart.

The couple was among the numerous families who helped found the Downtown Jewish Community School in 1979, where Joan served as the school’s principal. Devorah and Rachel were in the school’s first junior kindergarten and first-grade classes respectively and attended through seventh grade. In 1998, another group of families got together and founded what is now the Paul Panna Downtown Jewish Day School, where Joan served as principal until her retirement in 2013.

Joan and Stuart raised their daughters in an egalitarian, non-denominational household. They instilled their love of Judaism and the importance of investing in the Jewish community in their daughters.

“I always saw how important Judaism was to them,” Devorah said. “Their kind of leadership was all about seeing a need and making something happen to meet that need.”

It was apparent to others as well just how passionate Devorah and Rachel were for Judaism. Grandmother Ida Gulin recalls

the girls’ great-grandmother, a very religious woman, watching as her grandson-in-law performed the Shabbat rituals with the girls following along.

“She prophesied to me and said, ‘I may not be around, but I want to tell you those two girls are going to be very, very important people to Judaism,’” Ida recalls.

Stuart also attributes the girls’ love for Judaism to Joan’s parents, Ida and Edward Gulin, who created a “very warm, loving household” that formed a positive association with Judaism in the girls’ minds.

“What they got from [their grandparents] is the association of Jewish life with many good things,” Stuart said.

From a young age, both Devorah and Rachel knew they wanted to be rabbis. In 1983, fifth-grader Devorah participated in a national Bible contest and came in first – and so it began. She filled out a survey at age 12 about future careers, and immediately put down “rabbi” as the career she wanted.

“I’ve always been passionate about Judaism,” Devorah said. “It was always clear to me that whatever I was going to do to, it had to do with Torah.”

Rachel noted that having parents who were such passionate supporters and innovators of Judaism and Jewish community “made becoming a rabbi a possibility.”

“I grew up with affirmed Judaism and affirmed feminism,” she said. “From my youngest memory, I always knew there was a possibility for me to become a rabbi.”

Despite starting out on similar paths, Rachel and Devorah’s respective journeys to becoming rabbis were quite opposite.

“It’s funny – we’ve had parallel paths but very different paths,” Rachel said.

Rachel majored in Jewish Studies at McGill University in Montreal. While there, she was heavily involved with the school’s Hillel and Jewish Student Union and became involved in the local chavurah movement.

Rachel received her rabbinical ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2005. She taught Jewish Studies at Shoshana S. Cardin Jewish School for a year and participated in the Baltimore chavurah movement. After serving as a rabbi in Boston for 14 years, Rachel moved to south New Jersey in January 2019 to serve as the rabbi for Congregation B’nai Tikvah Beth Israel (CBTBI) – a diverse, unaffiliated synagogue open to people of all levels of observance, sects, races, and sexual identity. The congregation’s diversity was one of the synagogue’s main pull factors for Rachel.

Rachel describes her relationship with Judaism as something that “infuses my life.” She loves that with Judaism, “the way things are are not the way things need to be” – that it is possible, by working with God, for improvement and change to happen. This message of change is also found in a key lesson Rachel gained from her parents.

“[They taught me] that changing the world is what it’s about, and ... Judaism and Jewish community can give you the strength to do that,” Rachel said.

In addition to being a rabbi at CBTBI, Rachel is a soferet (female scribe) and mediator, primarily on Israeli-Palestinian relations and conflict.

Devorah’s path had a few more obstacles



lining it. Devorah made aliyah to Israel in 1990 and was there for 11 years, studying and teaching at various yeshivot. She also taught weekly Parsha classes at a conservative rabbinical school for men. An influential person in this time was her chavurah (study partners) during the 1990s with Havivah Ner-David, who would become one of the first Orthodox women to receive rabbinical ordination.

“She was an Orthodox woman who was trying to be ordained in Israel before Orthodox women were being ordained,” Devorah said. “We worked together to be ordained.”

Devorah found herself constantly jumping around denominations, trying to find one where she could receive rabbinical ordination, with no luck.

“It just kept not feeling right to me,” she said. “I would [always] end up back in the Orthodox synagogue.”

Devorah completed her bachelor’s degree while in Israel. She completed her masters degree in Comparative Religion in 2001 and attained her doctorate from the Graduate Theological Union in 2007. Devorah moved to California in 2005 to teach at the University of California Davis, then came to Maryland to teach in the Religion and Philosophy department at St. Mary’s College of Maryland from 2007-2010. She also served as the department’s Ike Weiner Endowed Chair of Jewish Studies. Devorah is now a professor of theology at Loyola University in Chicago, where she has worked since 2010.

While these academic honors provided Devorah with numerous opportunities within the world of academia to her, it was not the same as teaching Torah among her own people. At times it even felt awkward, as most of her academic counterparts in the field of Jewish-Christian relations were priests.

“I had this longing to teach Torah, but opportunities were limited within my own community,” she said. “It felt like something was missing.”

Three years ago, Devorah found the answer to her goals of rabbinical ordination: the Yeshiva Maharat in New York. The yeshiva, founded in 2009, is a three-year rabbinical college for women like Devorah – Orthodox women with advanced academic degrees and teaching experience who had



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— Stuart Schoenfeld



previously been unable to attain rabbinical ordination. Yeshiva Maharat has ordained 26 graduates to date, with 30 women students.

Devorah finally received her long-awaited ordination from the school’s Advanced Kollel Track on June 13.

“[Receiving my ordination] felt like finally giving a name to something that had been true for a long time,” Devorah said. “I am so grateful to Yeshivat Maharat for making this possible.”

“She has been studying all her life,” Joan said. “She was studying [by] herself with such enthusiasm, but it’s nice to see it recognized! You know, it’s taken this long for it to be recognized.”

When asked what her favorite part of Judaism is, her answer was immediate: the ever-present relationship with God.

“Everything you do, every moment of your life – there’s always a prayer to say or ritual to do, a way to feel God’s presence,” she said. “There’s a mitzvah you can do at every minute of your life!”

Despite their different paths, both sisters expressed their mutual respect, admiration and support for each other. Rachel applauded her sister’s intelligence and dedication, stating that she was “so, so proud when she graduated from Maharat.” Devorah admired the work her sister does and “the impact she has on her community.”

“She has an amazing ability to reach Jews who are still trying to figure out how to live as Jews or what Judaism can mean to them,” Devorah said.

It is unique to see two sisters with the same upbringing and similar childhoods to end up in such similar yet different places.

“I feel like we’ve taken the values our parents taught us and are living them out in our different ways,” Devorah said.

Joan and Stuart returned to Baltimore in 2013 upon retiring in order to take care of Joan’s parents. They are currently members of Beth Am Synagogue in downtown Baltimore.

“It’s like what our experience was in Toronto downtown, because the downtowns tend to get migrants,” said Stuart. “I remember the first time I walked into Beth Am, immediately somebody came over and said, ‘We’d like to put you on our mailing list!’”

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