

New rabbi in town

• Bend's Temple Beth Tikvah welcomes its new leader just as its ark nears completion

By Alandra Johnson / *The Bulletin*

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Meeting Rabbi Johanna Hershenson for the first time, it's hard to believe she and her family arrived in Bend just a few weeks ago. With her casual style, easygoing nature and love of the outdoors, she seems perfectly at home in the High Desert.

Hershenson is the new rabbi for Temple Beth Tikvah, a Jewish Reform synagogue formed in 2008 with about 70 member families. In the past, the synagogue had a part-time rabbi who visited once a month. Hershenson, 45, will still work part-time, but she is the congregation's first rabbi to live within the community.

Another local Jewish congregation, the Jewish Community of Central Oregon, has been led by Bend resident Rabbi Jay Shupack since 2000.

"That was our dream, to have a resident rabbi," said Kathy Schindel, who served as co-chair of the search committee for a new rabbi. She calls it "huge" for the congregation to have someone who not only will lead them, but who will also be a member of the greater Bend community as well. And she says Hershenson is a great fit.

"When we brought her here for her interview visit, we were just so impressed with her religious knowledge, her energy and her personality," said Schindel.

For her part, Hershenson hopes to stay for a long time, along with her husband, Mark, and daughters Zoe, 16 and Abi, 13. After working as a rabbi in New Zealand, Southern California, Alaska and Austin, Texas, she feels as if she and her family have found the right spot.

"Now we found home," she said. "We really like it a lot here."

Hershenson and her husband love the outdoors the way many Bendites do; she says they "need wilderness." They read *Outside* magazine, trail run, mountain bike, kayak and more.



Photos by Andy Tullis / *The Bulletin*

Rabbi Johanna Hershenson, who arrived in Bend just a few weeks ago, feels she's found the right spot. She and her husband are trail runners and love the outdoors.

"I feel like there's a huge connection between spirituality and nature," said Hershenson, and she believes that is likely true for many of the other members of Temple Beth Tikvah. "Jews didn't come here to be Jewish — they came here to bike and ski."

She is also excited about helping the congregation grow. "My hope is to help lead the congregation to really fine tune what it is they are trying build," she said.

Hershenson already feels part of the community. When the family drove up to its new house, Hershenson says more than a dozen people were waiting to help them unload the truck; they stocked her kitchen with food and stayed to talk and share stories.

"They are such a friendly and caring and welcoming community," said Hershenson.

Tikvah growth

It's an exciting time for the small, relatively new synagogue. In addition to Hershenson's arrival, the congregation will also soon celebrate the completion of its ark. The ark is a place where the Torah scrolls are housed, and it is considered a sacred space.

Temple Beth Tikvah's ark was created from black walnut and was designed by members of the congregation with the help of local fabricators. Hershenson says the design represents the Tree of Life. "There's a simplicity to it; it's meaningful and beautiful," she said.

Hershenson will dedicate the new ark during her first Friday-night service on July 26.

Schindel says it is "amazing" to have both of these exciting steps for the congregation happen at the same time.

Unusual background

Hershenson didn't grow up in a particularly religious household. Her family attended temple sporadically and on major holidays, and her father was Christian until Hershenson was about 11. She remembers having the biggest Christmas tree in her neighborhood in Maryland, not far from Washington, D.C.

She didn't become deeply involved in her faith until high school. Hershenson didn't fit in well and ended up joining a Jewish youth group, where she blossomed.

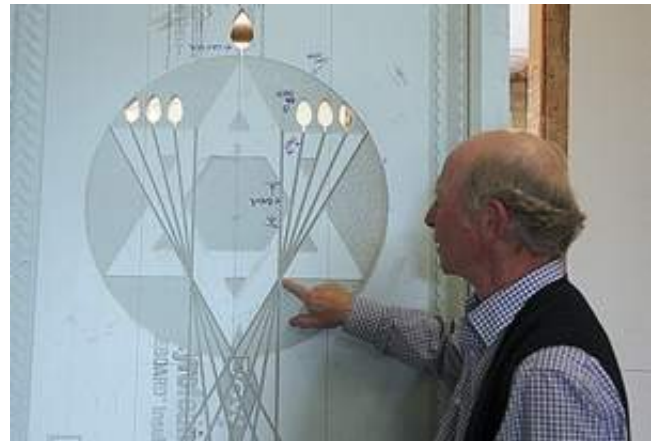
"It became a home, a place where I was successful, where I developed my spirituality," she said.

The moment she realized she wanted to be a rabbi is crystallized in her mind. It was when she saw a rabbi wearing jeans on a basketball court. She had only known rabbis to wear black robes and be formal. "I was completely blown away," Hershenson said. "You could be normal and spiritual? Really?"



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Bend resident Mike Ross of Natural Edge Furniture, from left, Gerald Greenbach, of Sunriver, and Lawrence Schechter, of Bend, talk about the progress of a the ark that's being created for Temple Beth Tikvah. The ark is a place where the Torah scrolls are housed, and it is considered a sacred space.



Andy Tullis / The Bulletin

Lawrence Schechter points out the template for the panel being created for Temple Beth Tikvah's ark at Natural Edge Furniture in Bend on Friday.

From then on she felt she had her calling. The youth group was also a place where Hershenson became involved in social justice issues. As a teenager, she lobbied for handgun control, opposed mandatory school prayer and called for the U.S. to divest from South Africa, which was practicing apartheid.

From there, Hershenson went to the University of Wisconsin, where she met her husband and also continued her interest and advocacy for all manner of social issues, including participating in a dialog between Israeli and Palestinian students. She then attended rabbinical school in Cincinnati.

After that, the couple traveled across the globe together so Hershenson could work at various synagogues. (Mark was a stay-at-home dad and is now a filmmaker.) While living in New Zealand, the couple decided to make a film together that told the history of a local Torah, which was originally from the Czech Republic and had survived the Holocaust. Hershenson took time off to make the film, called "A Torah Tale," and the couple has spent the past four years "floating around trying to find a place to settle."

Hershenson has retained her open-minded approach. "I do not feel bound to Jewish law as something that is governing my choices; it's a source of guidance," she said. "It's a treasure trove, but I do not follow every rule."

Looking forward

For now, Hershenson will help conduct about three services a month, one Friday night, one Saturday morning and another led by lay people targeted at young families. The three services will be spread out through the month.

Schindel says eventually the congregation would like to offer Hershenson full-time employment, but she has no idea how far in the future that would be.

"I can't tell you when that could happen; we'd do it in a minute if we had the resources," said Schindel.

Hershenson likes that the members of Temple Beth Tikvah are not tied to many old traditions — they can work deliberately together to create new ones. "They are very open-minded and committed to each other," she said.

Going forward, the congregation will also have to decide what it wants to do about space. Right now, the synagogue rents space from First United Methodist Church in downtown Bend. Hershenson says: Is the goal to build or to do something else, to create a new model?

"I have lots of ideas," she said, "but my job is to come in and help them."

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