

## Jewish High Holy Days a Time to Celebrate, Reflect

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By Maggie Wolff Peterson Photo credit: Scott Mason/The Winchester Star



WINCHESTER — With the arrival of autumn come the holiest days on the Jewish calendar. Beginning with Rosh Hashana and concluding with Yom Kippur, these are called the Days of Awe, or the High Holy Days.

It is believed that the new year arrives with Rosh Hashana, initiating a 10-day period for reflection and repentance that reaches its apex on Yom Kippur. This year, Rosh Hashana arrived at sundown Wednesday, and Kol Nidre, the evening before Yom Kippur, starts at sundown Sept. 29.

At Beth El Congregation in Winchester, services during this period will be led by Rabbi Michael Kramer, assisted by Cantor Karen Webber.

Beth El's part-time interim rabbi, Peter Grumbacher, who is with the congregation 20 weeks a year, has a commitment to a retirement community for the High Holy Days, which is why Kramer and Webber will lead services.

Kramer, a former congregational rabbi in New York and Connecticut, continues to serve while in his retirement. Kramer, 70, was a full-time congregational rabbi for 37 years and continues in retirement to teach Judaism at the college level, and lead congregations occasionally.

“I had the opportunity to do this and I took it,” he said. “I really enjoy the interaction with the congregation, the people.”

Like clergy of all faiths, Kramer considers the daily world around him in forming material for his sermons. For this season, he is ruminating on how — or even whether — to speak about politics from the pulpit. And during this term in Winchester, he said he is thinking about recent events at the University of Virginia.

Kramer’s challenge will be how best to weave these earthly concerns into a greater canvas. “The holidays are a very dramatic time,” he said. “The whole atmosphere is one of greater spirituality.”

Additionally, Kramer will have to navigate the social, personal and communal aspects of a congregation that he doesn’t know.

“Each congregation has its own traditions,” he said. “You want to make people in the congregation comfortable.”

But it’s work Kramer looks forward to. He will never really retire, he said.

“When you are a rabbi, even though you’re retired, you’re still a rabbi and enjoy all the functions of the rabbinate,” he said. “When you retire, you have to continue a life of meaning.”

Webber has made a career of itinerancy.

“I’ve always looked for unusual opportunities in far-flung places that are small,” said Webber, 55. “I go where God leads me.”

Having begun her higher education with a degree in theater and dance, Webber brings an eclectic approach to liturgical music, she said.

“I’m not only a cantor, I’m an artist,” she said.

Webber sources her material traditionally, but also from spiritual veins in folk music and even jazz. She considers making music akin to having a conversation, where she is as much a listener as a creator.

“I want to make meaning with music,” she said. “Music is not the end. Music is a vehicle.”

Especially meaningful is employing music during the most spiritually significant period of the Jewish year, Webber said.

“The High Holy Days are the pinnacle of the year for me,” Webber said. “They form the rest of the year. Yom Kippur is an opportunity, if you take it, to be really mindful. Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world. Don’t we need that?”

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