

## **Rabbi Scott Sperling Retires** ***The Winchester Star, June 23, 2016***

WINCHESTER — Rabbi Scott Sperling spent time this week packing up his office and preparing for his last service after six years at Winchester's Beth El Congregation. He is retiring after 40 years as a rabbi.

### **Becoming a rabbi**

Sperling, who grew up in Los Angeles, had parents who were very active in their synagogue, and he followed in their footsteps.

But serving a congregation wasn't always part of Sperling's plans growing up. From childhood and into his first two years of college, Sperling said he intended to become a lawyer. His path changed, and, after his sophomore year, he decided he wanted to go to rabbinical school and become a professor. Through his studies, he spent time working with children and realized he wanted to broaden his horizons. He said by the time he finished his rabbinical studies, he was looking forward to serving a congregation.

"I've served congregations small, medium and large," the 66-year-old said. "From congregations with 15 families to 1,400 and everything in between."

Sperling was a rabbi in Los Angeles for 14 years, then moved to Bainbridge Island, Wash., in 1990 and served for 11 years in Seattle. In 2001, he and his family moved to the Washington, D.C.-area, where he became the regional director of the Mid-Atlantic Region for the Union of Reform Judaism. He moved to Winchester in 2010, when he became the rabbi at Beth El.

At Beth El, which was founded in 1954, it was clear to Sperling that he could contribute in two areas because of his strong administrative background. He helped with the synagogue's renovation that expanded the size of the structure, getting the building ready for the next 60 years.

Sperling said he also had the privilege of ushering in the use of two new prayer books that became part of worship at Beth El last year.

Frederick County resident Ellen Zimmerman, who is a Beth El Congregation member, said Sperling did a wonderful job coordinating the renovation, including organizing where services would be held during construction.

"Like Moses, he led us out of Egypt to Braddock Street United Methodist Church, where we [held services] for a whole year and led us back into the new Beth El," she said.

### **Love from his congregants**

Zimmerman said she enjoys that Sperling incorporates his love of music into the services.

“He leads the services with song and his guitar,” she said. “It’s very joyful.”

Sperling also led Beth El into working with the Winchester Area Temporary Thermal Shelter program, which provides the homeless with food and overnight shelter during the winter months.

While teaching bar and bat mitzvah classes to Beth El youth, Zimmerman said Sperling has a way of making the children feel good about themselves and what they have accomplished.

“It’s been a really, really good six years,” she said. “Everybody is going to miss him. We’re saying thank you, but not goodbye.”

Stephens City resident Ron Kaplan has been a member of the synagogue since he moved to the area from Harrisburg, Pa., eight years ago. Since joining, he has had the opportunity to get to know Sperling as a congregant as well as socially.

“He’s a great guy, very gregarious,” he said. “He’s very erudite and well-read. He could speak on any subject. I appreciate his sense of humor and learning.”

Sperling has had a very diverse career and has worked in diverse geographic locations. Because of this, Kaplan said, he’s seen how different congregations do things.

Kaplan also said Sperling has served as a good role model for the synagogue, getting along with others and finding common ground with people of diverse backgrounds.

“I’ve never met anyone who didn’t like him,” Kaplan said. “When he’s talking to you, he makes it feel like you’re the center of the world. We’ll miss him.”

Sperling also has had a wonderful experience working at Beth El.

“In 40 years, [Beth El] is the nicest group of people with whom I have ever worked,” he said. “It has been a great joy serving the congregation and coming in contact with amazing and remarkable people.”

### **Lessons learned**

Sperling grew up in a politically divided household. His father was conservative, while his mother was a “classic FDR Democrat.”

“What I learned at the dinner table is you can have political differences and still love each other,” he said.

As a rabbi, he has found that the same is true among congregants who may not all share the same views. He said one reason why he has good relationships with members of his congregation is because he is respectful of who they are.

There is not another synagogue within 50 miles of Beth El, and Sperling was concerned when he first started in Winchester that he would experience a feeling of isolation. However, because of the warm relationships he has made with area clergy and support from Shenandoah University, he has not experienced that at all.

When he was a rabbi in Los Angeles, a congregant with ties to the film industry shared with him a phrase that he has remembered throughout his career.

“He said, ‘To have a friend you have to be a friend,’” Sperling said.

### **Life after retirement**

An interim rabbi will step in at Beth El after Sperling retires. Sperling said he will not have a presence in the synagogue immediately after leaving. Part of his experience as a rabbi has taught him it is best for the recently retired rabbi to be scarce for the first year.

He plans to maintain relationships and friendships in the area while also taking time to do things for himself. Reading, working on projects around his house, gardening and traveling to visit friends and family throughout the country are some of his plans. He also wants to visit sites like Luray Caverns and hike in the Blue Ridge Mountains. “I’ve been here six years and I haven’t seen many tourist areas,” he said. “I’m looking forward to doing fun things.”

He and his wife, Laura, plan to continue living in the Winchester community. “I love our house, and I love our neighborhood,” he said.

Living here is convenient to Washington Dulles International Airport, which works well since their son, Eli, works at Emory University in Atlanta, and their daughter, Margit, has spent the past nine years in Madrid.

Sperling said he and his wife don’t have plans to move back to the West Coast any time soon; however, in his experience, he can’t say that with complete certainty.

“People plan and God laughs,” he said.

Sperling’s last service at Beth El Congregation is Friday and his last day in the office is Tuesday.

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