

Rabbi Opening Synagogue's Doors to the Community

By Brian Brehm. The Winchester Star, February 22, 2019.

WINCHESTER — Scott Sperling loves to teach. He was going to pursue a career in academics before deciding to become a full-time rabbi with a side job as an adjunct professor of religion at Shenandoah University.

Each year, Sperling further indulges his passion for teaching by opening the doors of his synagogue, [Beth El Congregation](#) at 520 Fairmont Ave. in Winchester, to tell all interested community members about the Jewish faith.

This year's outreach service is at 7 tonight and will begin with Sperling explaining key elements of Judaism and answering questions about the religion's beliefs and practices. A sabbath service on "The Blessings of Community" will be at 7:30 p.m., followed by fellowship at 8:30 p.m. in the synagogue's social hall.

"This is an opportunity for us to open the doors and say, 'Please come and join us and let's have a little dialogue,'" Sperling said on Thursday. "I have yet to come across a question during one of these opportunities that wasn't thoughtful and intended to elicit a helpful response."

Sperling said he is frequently asked by service attendees about the torah, with questions ranging from how it is made to why the religious scroll is read from left to right, and Judaism's thoughts about the man who Christians believe is the son of God.

"Jesus ... represented a breakaway movement from the Judaism of his time, and his followers after him founded a new religion," Sperling said. "From the mainstream Jewish perspective, Jesus was a teacher who claimed to be the Messiah, and most of the Jews of that time rejected that claim as most Jews today do."

While the community outreach service has been going on for years, it has taken on renewed importance following the Oct. 27 hate-fueled shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue that killed 11 and wounded seven.

Jews have been persecuted, discriminated against and victimized for centuries, most notoriously by Nazi Germany in the 1930s and '40s. Sperling said antisemitism "is a grim but nonetheless historical reality" spawned by both ignorance and prejudice.

"There is a notion that antisemitism is the world's longest-standing hatred," he said. "I don't think that's too far from the truth."

Sperling said Jews have to be "extraordinarily vigilant" in protecting themselves from irrational hatred, but at the same time be patient enough to understand the fundamental sources of hatred.

"I always want the opportunity to look carefully at where that individual who expresses anti-Jewish sentiment is coming from," Sperling said. "Are they angry that we haven't accepted Jesus? Are they angry with the policies of the modern state of Israel? Are they upset because they've read 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion' [a hoax published in the early 20th century that claimed Jews have a secret plan for world domination] and they believe it?"

Sometimes the prejudice is so ingrained and irrational that the only realistic response for Jews is to keep a distance and protect themselves from potentially dangerous people, Sperling said. Other times, misguided opinions can be changed with face-to-face conversations.

Sperling describes himself as "a hopeless optimist" who has seen firsthand how love and compassion can overcome hatred and intolerance.

When his son was in first grade, Sperling said, a classmate proclaimed, "Everybody knows that Jews are stupid." The teacher stopped the class and challenged the boy's prejudicial statement.

When Sperling was a boy and was beaten because he was a Jew, a friend's mother took him to her church so he could see that the majority of Christians are kind and respect him as a human being.

Perhaps the most touching example of a compassionate response to hate came last year after the mass shooting in Pittsburgh. On Nov. 1, an estimated 400 people filled Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Winchester to stand in solidarity with the local Jewish community.

"God bless them," Sperling said. "That room was packed with people of many different faiths — and no faith — who wanted us to know we do not walk alone and our community has our back."

Sperling said he hopes the interfaith support continues tonight at Beth El's community outreach service.

"I have benefited over the years from a willingness to take a chance and open my hand in friendship to people," he said. "It hasn't always resulted in a warm, firm handshake, but the overwhelming majority of times, it has. I'm a prisoner of hope, and that's okay."

For more information, visit Beth El Congregation's website at bethelcongregation.org.

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