

Beth El Congregation Welcomes New Rabbi

Robyn Taylor, *The Winchester Star*, August 28, 2020

WINCHESTER — It's been a week of ceremonies for the new rabbi at Beth El Congregation.

Today, Aaron Stucker-Rozovsky will participate in his official installation service at the synagogue on Fairmont Avenue.

Last Friday — in a very different type of ceremony — he was promoted to the rank of major in the U.S. Army National Guard.

Such a busy schedule doesn't fluster the 34-year-old, who recently moved here from Mississippi with his wife, Eliza.

After more than 14 years in the military, Stucker-Rozovsky is comfortable moving to unfamiliar territory and making a home.

Born in Nova Scotia, Stucker-Rozovsky has lived in New England, the Midwest and the deep South, studied in Israel and was deployed to Cuba and Afghanistan with the military.

When searching for a place to live and work, the Winchester area ticked off several items on the couple's wish-list. It's close enough to a big city to let them enjoy the cultural attractions but not so close that they can't get outdoors easily for hiking trips or visits to farmers' markets, both activities they enjoy. It was also close to James Madison University, where Eliza is pursuing a doctorate in psychology.

"My wife and I really wanted to live in small-town America," said Stucker-Rozovsky, who lived eight years in Richmond as a youth, where he had his bar mitzvah and graduated from high school.

An added bonus is that the area is friendly to the military, said Stucker-Rozovsky, who enlisted in 2006 while attending Providence College in Rhode Island, where he earned a bachelor's degree in history.

He also has a master's degree in international studies from Central Connecticut State University and another masters in Hebrew Letters from the Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

Stucker-Rozovsky's first deployment was to Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where he served as a platoon leader from 2009-2010. He was the only Jewish guy in the unit, he said.

"You get to do a lot of pastoral care when you're one-on-one with soldiers," he said.

As he became closer to the soldiers, they started asking him about his religious practices or his diet. Since he wanted to give them knowledgeable responses to their questions, he turned to scripture and Jewish law.

"I would often have to go home at night to crack open the Torah or the Talmud to get their answers," he said.

His faith deepened as he studied and taught. And it became obvious that this military man had found another calling. "I really credit the Army with putting me on this path," said Stucker-Rozovsky, who was also deployed to Afghanistan before studying to become a rabbi.

For his first job out of seminary, he served as the director of rabbinical services for the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Based in Mississippi, he was responsible for helping Jewish congregations

in 13 states that didn't have rabbis of their own. It was while working in Mississippi that he met Eliza. The couple married in March.

The experience with that first job was “incredible — a wonderful way to start off,” he said of the constant travel and busy schedule. “But it’s one of those things that you don’t want to do forever, especially once you get married.”

The position at Beth El is Stucker-Rozovsky’s first job as a rabbi devoted full-time to a single congregation. He started work Aug. 1.

Beth El, made up of 95 households, serves the Jewish population throughout much of the Shenandoah Valley.

Stucker-Rozovsky is taking over for Rabbi Scott Sperling, who announced last year that he planned to retire and move to Atlanta to be near his son and daughter-in-law.

Stucker-Rozovsky favorably impressed the congregation with his knowledge and insights on modern Reform Judaism and his experience working with small congregations in the south, Larry Weiss, president of the congregation, wrote in an email.

Beth El members also liked his enthusiastic attitude and were delighted that his military background give him a different perspective on life.

Starting a new job in the midst of a pandemic comes with added challenges. Beth El is not holding services or educational classes in the building. Even the High Holy days, which begin Sept. 18 with Rosh Hashanah, will be conducted online.

“We do a lot over Zoom,” he said. “We put a premium on everyone’s health and safety.”

But Stucker-Rozovsky feels that he’s lucky to have found a home at Beth El, no matter the timing.

“The beauty of this congregation is that there’s a lot of diversity in their Jewish experiences,” said Stucker-Rozovsky, adding that “the congregation is extremely adaptive and creative. I’m blessed.”

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