

Rabbi Stephanie Alexander celebrates High Holy Days

By Peg Eastman

For more than 4,000 years, Judaism was a patriarchal religion that did not include women in leadership roles. Rabbi Stephanie Alexander enjoys the unique position of being the first woman rabbi in Charleston, serving at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (Holy Congregation House of God), which is better known as KKBE.

Rabbi Alexander feels fortunate that she was born after the first female rabbi was ordained in the United States because she never encountered any opposition because of her gender. It was quite the opposite. Her youth advisors and the director of admissions at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati encouraged her to pursue her goal. In discussing the role of women in the clergy, Rabbi Alexander paid homage to Germany's trailblazing Regina Jonas, who overcame considerable opposition before becoming the first woman rabbi ever; Jonas later perished in Auschwitz during the Holocaust.

Rabbi Alexander received a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from Tulane University and two Masters degrees from Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. After her ordination, she served as an assistant rabbi at Temple Isaiah in Lexington, Mass. and went on to work at the URJ's Midwest Council. Just before coming to the Lowcountry, she spent four years as the solo rabbi at Temple Beth El in Dubuque, Iowa.

She met her husband, Rabbi Aaron Sherman, while she was still a student at Hebrew Union College. Today, Rabbi Alexander says that she couldn't perform her current job without her husband's support and friendship. Son and brother of rabbis, her husband understands the demands of a congregational rabbi and is able to serve as an insightful resource. In addition to assuming many domestic demands, he serves a small congregation in Florence twice a month and volunteers at Coastal Crisis Chaplaincy.

Rabbi Sherman considers it a pleasure to give his wife ample time to fulfill her rabbinic responsibilities.

Throughout her training and practice, Rabbi Alexander has sought institutions that value creativity in programming, and she has found a home at KKBE, the nation's oldest synagogue still in continuous use. The present building is described as one of the country's finest examples of Greek Revival architecture. Coming to a historical synagogue with a strong sense of community had special appeal to a family looking for a place to put down roots.

Rabbi Alexander considers herself very fortunate to be in a profession that has so many rewards for doing what she is trained to do. And she is very effective. Membership at KKBE continues to increase, and her congregation feels that she has made KKBE exactly what they wanted their synagogue to be. She has received so many appreciative letters that she has a special "happy file" chocked full of expressions of gratitude.

This year KKBE will begin celebrating the Jewish High Holy Days at sunset on Sunday, September 16. Rosh Hashanah, literally "head of the year," is the Jewish New Year. The rabbi will wear a white robe, symbolizing purity. For the next ten days Jews will gather for prayer, reflection and an accounting of the past year, evaluating what was good, while recognizing that no one is without faults. The beauty of reflection and commitment to spiritual improvement is being given a clean



PHOTO BY GEORGE WOOLSTON

Rabbi Alexander stands in front of the temple at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim.

slate; communal support helps participants to become the very best they can be in the following year.

To uplift the spirit during the services, the KKBE choir performs both

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ancient chants and modern "soaring" music in the loft. A French horn, harp, organ and cello accompany the vocalists.

Accompanying Rosh Hashanah are rituals that date back to antiquity. As part of the religious service, a member of the congregation is accorded the honor of blowing the shofar (a ram's horn). Congregants eat apples and honey symbolizing hope for a sweet new year. They also eat a round bread called challah, which symbolizes the cycle of the new year; some like to dip their challah in honey. In the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, the ritual of tashlikh is performed by reciting prayers near natural flowing water, casting one's sins symbolically into the water.

KKBE congregants go to Waterfront Park and toss breadcrumbs into the water where the "seagulls eat most of the sins," Rabbi Alexander said. The High Holy Days end ten days later with the observance of Yom Kippur (the day of atonement), the holiest, most solemn day of the Jewish year. Yom Kippur

ends with a congregational Break-The-Fast feast.

As the High Holy Days approach, Rabbi Alexander's hope for the future is that she continues to merit the loving embrace of her "special congregation" and that together they will be able to realize their mission of ongoing education, communal worship, pursuit of social justice and making the world a better place by repairing the broken systems of the world.

At the dedication of the Hasell Street synagogue in 1841, KKBE's Reverend Gustavus Poznanski was moved to say, "This synagogue is our temple, this city our Jerusalem and this happy land our Palestine." Readers may visit KKBE's website to learn more about the synagogue's rich history and how Jewish citizens have played a vibrant role in Charleston's business, philanthropic and social life since colonial times.

Peg Eastman has written numerous books about Charleston. Hidden History of Civil War Charleston has recently been released by History Press. She may be reached at pegeastman@comcast.net.