

*Rabbi Deborah Hirsch became the spiritual leader of The Village Temple on July 1, 2016, bringing with her thirty years of experience as a congregational rabbi and leader in the Reform Jewish community. Her wisdom, clarity and sensitivity has transformed our community, honoring the congregation's history and strengths while encouraging discussion and change. Here's a brief introduction to Rabbi Hirsch and her vision.*

*Rabbi Hirsch, what do you see as the strengths of The Village Temple and how can we build on those strengths?*

The greatest strength of The Village Temple is the community itself. It a diverse, forward-thinking and inclusive community, that cares about one another. People come to the congregation from many paths—traditional Jewish to members who, though not Jewish themselves, have agreed to raise their children Jewish—to single-parent families—multi-racial families—GLBTQ members. The congregation meets people where they are and desires people to find a spiritual path that provides meaning and connection. Village Temple is a downtown congregation—the only affiliated Reform temple south of 14<sup>th</sup> Street that has the history and heartbeat of downtown Manhattan.

*You were among the first women to be ordained by Hebrew Union College. What were some of the early challenges of being a woman rabbi?*

I think I, like many women of that first generation, was 'a bit' naïve. I wasn't that aware of how patriarchy and Jewish tradition was so entrenched in every aspect of Jewish life. Perhaps one of the first and most significant challenges was, not finding a female role model (there were none), rather, figuring out what it meant to be that role model. I didn't anticipate the uphill battle of always being compared to male rabbis. In the early days women rabbis were fearful that unless we all followed the same path--solo/assistant rabbi to the next job to the next job—it would reflect badly on all of us. While still in school, student pulpits were selected by lottery—the congregations had no choice. More than one congregation had negative reactions when they learned they were 'getting' a woman rabbi. I encountered one congregant in my first pulpit in Williamson, West VA who expressed his disapproval. He had been raised more traditionally and couldn't get his arms around the idea of a woman rabbi. I spent 1 ½ years in Williamson (I started mid-way through my second year at school). I was so please when he and his wife travelled to Cincinnati for my ordination.

*The face of Judaism has changed dramatically in the twenty-first century and change is reflected in our congregation and our clergy. Rabbi Hirsch, what were the pressures that kept you from being openly gay as a rabbi when you began, and what made you decide to come out twenty-five years ago?*

At the time that I applied to Hebrew Union College rabbinical school, I knew I was a lesbian; however, it was not possible to be out and be a rabbi. We were required to take a battery of psychological tests...I soon learned that one of the reasons for the tests was to weed out homosexuals (gay was not the term used in those early days at the school). I didn't openly come out until 2000 when I became the NY regional director for the Reform Movement. Although there were people who knew I was gay, I spent most of my first 18 years as a congregational rabbi (I ordained in 1982) being terrified that I would be

found out. I remember being an officer of the CCAR (rabbinic conference) in the late 90s, when I close friend (also gay) applied to be a rabbi in a suburban congregation. She was openly out and it was shared with me that the congregation was struggling with the fact that she was a lesbian. She did get the job (really a first in retrospect) but not without loss of some members.

The catalyst for deciding to be out was when I applied for the regional director position. My closest friend (who had the position) had just died, as did my sister. A long-term relationship I was in had ended and I realized that I wanted/needed to have a balanced and integrated life. Although many people in my congregation knew I was gay—there were those who did not want it to become public. As I was pursuing a new position, I didn't want to hide or shade the truth. I was so relieved and grateful when the Director of Regions looked at me stunned when I told him I wanted to be out if I became the regional director—stunned because he couldn't imagine it being any other way.

*Could you describe your Jewish upbringing in Chicago and what inspired you to become a rabbi?*

Our home was very Jewish—my mom was raised Reform and my dad Orthodox. I remember when I was kindergarten and my older sister and brother went to Sunday School, I was sad that I couldn't go with them. I started Sunday School when I was in first grade and continued through Confirmation, and became very active in our temple's Youth Group. I also joined our choir which sang at the regular service each week. Going to Olin Sang Union Institute Camp (a Reform Movement camp) was life altering—it deepened my interest in and attachment to Judaism. Throughout all of these years, however, the idea of becoming a rabbi was not in my mind or vocabulary. I graduated high school in 1972 the same year the first woman rabbi was ordained. When a friend, who was two years older, mentioned thinking about becoming a rabbi when she was in college, the possibility opened up for me. My father and grandfather died during my second semester of college and I backed away from religion. A year later I chose to do my required field term from Beloit College on a kibbutz. The week before my dad died we returned from our family's first and only trip to Israel. It was in Israel, on a secular kibbutz that I realized my strong attachment to Judaism – I decided that the right path for me was to become a rabbi as it combined that passion with my desire to teach.

*Could you describe your idea of a great service? When do you know it is time to change things up?*

Judaism has a healthy tension between *kevah* (that which is fixed) and *kavannah* (intentionality). When anything, especially worship becomes so fixed that is devoid of infusing it with intentionality—it's time to change things up.

A great service happens when there is partnership on the bimah—when congregants can feel inspired and engaged—when melodies are meaningful and joyful—when there is room for personal reflection—when the teachings (sermons or *Divrei Torah*) motivate and provide space for thoughtful reflection.

*What is your hope for the coming year?*

I hope that the Israel trip scheduled for the early spring will enable people to strengthen their connection to Israel even while challenging many of the government's policies and ideologies. To find in Israel those individuals and institutions that are doing good work to promote democracy and protecting the rights of all those who live in that sacred land.

Above all, I hope to build upon the strength of relationships that are already present. To create, as Ron Wolfson has described, a relational community. Like the characters on the old TV show *Cheers*, we want to know everyone's name and know his or her story. I hope we can create paths of connection—even greater intimacy within an already intimate community. To bring people with common interests together--whether working in our soup kitchen, celebrating b'nai mitzvah, dealing with loss, searching for intellectual bonds. To create one-on-one moments between congregants and with clergy—to have a common vision for a vibrant congregation that serves the diverse populations of our Village community.