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A child of the Reform movement faces challenge of revamping it

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Rabbi Jonah Pesner

Rabbi Jonah Pesner wants to know you.

How were you raised? What does Judaism mean to you? How do you express your Judaism?

He focuses on you with sharp blue eyes and asks question after question.

What did your parents do? What kind of Jew do you want to be? What issues do you care about?

This is how he starts conversations with strangers – needless to say, it’s hard to stay a stranger with Pesner.

This is how he worked to revolutionize the landscape of faith based community activism in Boston’s Jewish community and to push for the state’s universal health care program and marriage equality law.

And this is how he said he wants to change the Reform movement, one conversation at a time.

“We all need to be talking to each other about how to engage our base, about what synagogues should look like in the future,” Pesner said. “We conduct one-on-one conversations in order to get people to have that sacred conversation about what our Jewish values mean and what it means to be a Jew in the world.”

Pesner will get a chance to have more of those conversations next year when he assumes a senior leadership position in the Union of Reform Judaism under new president Rabbi Richard Jacobs. Jacobs, who has been

criticized from the right for some stances on Israel, will be replacing the long serving Rabbi Eric Yoffie in 2012.

Now, Pesner is leading the transition team ahead of Jacobs' inauguration. Pesner, 42, is stepping down from his position as founding director of the URJ's Just Congregations, a community-organizing initiative. However, the Newton resident said he has no plans to move his wife and four daughters to New York, where the URJ is headquartered.

Pesner is very much a product of the Reform movement he will soon be helping to lead. He grew up in a Reform synagogue, he was a leader in the movement's youth group and he worked at Reform summer camps.

But Pesner and his passion for social justice were also shaped by his hometown, New York. There he was exposed to both vibrant Jewish communities and rampant poverty and homelessness.

As a teenager, Pesner attended the prestigious public high school, Bronx Science. Every weekday, he would commute from the East Village in lower Manhattan to the Bronx, New York's northernmost borough. That two-hour round trip, five days a week, may have been more influential than his four years in the classrooms.

The subway ride would take him from the Village, home to artists and authors, through the Upper East Side, home of New York's rich and beautiful, into the South Bronx of the early 1980s.

"It was a devastated, burnt-out place," Pesner recalled. "But it was where I needed to be. I couldn't escape from the realities I saw there, a subway ride from my home."

The trips inspired Pesner to become more active in social justice work, and he found a home in the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY), the Reform movement's youth group. That's where he met mentors Rabbi Eric Gurvis and Rabbi Elaine Zecher – now both in the Boston-area.

Zecher, now at Temple Israel in Boston, was the NFTY regional advisor. "I was an adult, and he was a high school kid but there was this intense positive energy radiating out from him," Zecher recalled about their first meeting.

When he was 16, Pesner reached out to the African American community after Jesse Jackson's "hymietown" remark about New York City. "He hopped on a subway, went to Harlem, went into church, introduced himself to the minister, struck up a conversation and the next thing we knew every kid in our group was on a train and going up to Harlem," Zecher said, laughing.

Pesner's relationship with the Jewish community and with his own faith deepened when his father died in 1982. Pesner was 14.

The community surrounded the family, Pesner recalled, supporting them and consoling them.

"I feel so blessed by what G-d has given me," Pesner said. "I was given a gift of joy and comfort in the very worst of times. I remain so touched by it."

He attended Wesleyan University as an undergrad and was ordained as a rabbi in 1997 from Hebrew Union College in New York.

He moved to Boston soon after to serve at Temple Israel. There, he started thinking of ways to approach social action beyond Mitzvah Day. He thought about his high school days in the Bronx and about visiting the area years later.

In the late 1990s, churches in the Bronx teamed up to clean up the area. The Jewish community should follow that example, Pesner thought: Organize around an issue of communal concern and work together to get things done.

So Pesner started talking to people. He started holding conversations with his congregation, after services, after pre-school drop off. Hundreds and hundreds of conversations.

What are the issues that concern you? Pesner would ask. How do you express your Judaism? What does social justice mean to you?

He started the Ohel Tzedek initiative at Temple Israel and became involved with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), where he met Reverend Hurmon Hamilton, senior pastor of Roxbury Presbyterian Church.

One concern Pesner repeatedly heard from congregants was health care reform, an issue that also galvanized Hamilton.

The two men co-chaired the health care strategy team for GBIO. Together, they talked to people about health care, listening to their stories about being uninsured. They lobbied the state Legislature and worked closely with then Governor Mitt Romney.

For Pesner and Hamilton, health care wasn't a political issue, it was a moral one. "Health insurance is a right, and you have that right not because you are American, but because you are a human being," Hamilton said.

Pesner felt that acutely, Hamilton said. "Jonah at his best captures the places where G-d's heart is broken, and Jonah feels that brokenness and that brokenness drives Jonah to action to do something about it," Hamilton said.

Pesner delivered the invocation at Governor Deval Patrick's inauguration, after working with the candidate on his health care platform during his first campaign.

Rabbi Gurvis of Temple Shalom in Newton has known Pesner since he was 14. Now, Gurvis said, when it comes to community organizing, he turns to his former NFTY student for lessons.

Pesner invited him along to a meeting with Patrick during the 2006 campaign.

Gurvis said he was prepared to take a back seat, but Pesner pushed him to engage

"He wasn't like watch this or read this," Gurvis said of Pesner. "This was like jumping into a pool and just getting comfortable. ... Jonah has always been able to connect everyone in a room, not just to him, but to each other."

In 2006, Pesner left his life as a congregational rabbi to run URJ's Just Congregations, a national expansion of the program he set up at Temple Israel. He traveled across the country – from Dallas to Seattle to LA – coaching congregations on social justice campaigns.

"No matter where I was, people wanted their kids, and their kids' kids to be Jewish and find meaning in Judaism," Pesner said. "They want Israel to stand for what their kids stand for."

Seeing the Reform movement at a national level gave Pesner a perspective that would help in his new post. “Reform Judaism happens in camps and day schools. It happens in Israel and Canada. It happens in small towns in the south and in Houston and Dallas. It doesn’t just happen at 633 Third Avenue [the URJ offices].”

Finding out how the Reform movement can be meaningful for all Reform Jews can be simple, Pesner said. All you have to do is ask.