

For Boston's Temple Israel, a trailblazing senior rabbi

The largest Reform Synagogue in New England has named Elaine Zecher to the post.



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

AS TOLD TO MARISA DELLATTO SEPTEMBER 07, 2016

I grew up outside Pittsburgh, [where] the synagogue was very much part of the fabric of our lives. There weren't a lot of Jews, so that's where we celebrated our Judaism together as a family and with our community. My parents [instilled] in us how important [it was] to have a role in making sure that Judaism thrived.

It was being in Israel my junior year of college when I [realized that I] wanted to be a rabbi and be a part of people's lives. At a summer camp, one of my mentors sat down with me and said I should be a rabbi. He said that with my talents and abilities, Judaism needed me.

The first female rabbi in the Reform Movement was ordained in 1972, and I was ordained in 1988. People were used to the idea by the time I came around. My predecessors [at Temple Israel] were very invested in bringing in a female rabbi and ensuring it would work. When the Temple Israel [position] opened up [in 1990], I felt like I had been planted in a beautiful garden of the possibilities that I had there. They weren't used to that idea that a woman could be the head rabbi. Now, there are open arms for me. I feel very embraced.

As a rabbi, I get to help people and accompany them on the path of mourning and through sickness. I see that as a great honor. It does not drain me; I see it as a privilege. [The senior rabbi] sets a vision. We are in a world now where we curate our own lives, which makes people feel very independent. People, in their own independence, can find meaning through a larger whole. Our mission is that we live Judaism together.

A NEW CHAPTER Rabbi Elaine Zecher will be installed as senior rabbi at Temple Israel on September 16 at 6 p.m. Visit tisrael.org.

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