

Elaine Zecher elected senior rabbi at Temple Israel of Boston

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BOSTON – Temple Israel of Boston members voted on Jan. 21 in favor of Elaine Zecher becoming the historic congregation’s 12th senior rabbi. She takes over for Rabbi Ronne Friedman, who will retire in June.

Zecher is the first woman to be elected senior rabbi in the synagogue’s 160-year history. When she first joined New England’s largest Reform synagogue in 1990, she was the congregation’s first female rabbi.

The Jewish Advocate met with Zecher on the day after the vote.

While being the first woman rabbi and first female head rabbi at TI is significant to Zecher, she does not consider herself a trailblazer. She was ordained in 1988, 16 years after the first woman rabbi in the Reform movement.

“I thought it was a really long time,” Zecher said. “I wasn’t among the first generation of women rabbis. They really walked the path that was difficult.”

By the time she got to Temple Israel, Zecher said, she was welcomed with open arms. During her installation, many women, some of whom were authors of the feminist book, “Our Bodies, Ourselves,” cried.

“When I came here, I heard from many people, ‘What took you so long?’” Zecher recalled. “There was such a welcome for the female voice.”

Being the congregation’s first female rabbi came with many other firsts, including being the first pregnant rabbi.

“That image in people’s minds, of the rabbi being pregnant and holding the Torah, for many people that was a new image,” Zecher said.

Right away, she was able to work on projects for women congregants. Zecher initiated women’s study groups and started the women’s Kallah. It was during the initial Kallah sessions that many women held a Torah scroll for the first time.

“That’s one of those moments that you feel it in the air, when people are experiencing something that’s just transformative,” she said.

“That kind of access, making Torah accessible, some of it is female, and some of it is just me,” Zecher continued. “I take information and translate it into living, thriving, exciting Judaism. That’s what my rabbinate has been about.”

Zecher pointed out that while she harnessed women’s energy at TI, the temple has already been supportive of its female members.

“My daughter says that until she was 16, she had no idea that there were any issues between what women can do and what men can do, whether there was any gender bias,” Zecher said. “She had no experience of it because of what she had experienced growing up here at Temple Israel.”

Zecher’s sister is also a rabbi. Her brother, who is Modern Orthodox, lives in Israel. Looking back on growing up outside of Pittsburgh in a small town, she said, “Our whole life was really based around the synagogue.”

Her parents helped found their temple in Monroeville, Pa., a town with very few Jews and an observant Christian population.

After graduating from Brandeis University, Zecher planned to work in the Jewish community; but a mentor suggested she become a rabbi, advice that she did not take seriously at first.

“I was much more interested in Jewish communal life,” she said.

Zecher eventually went to rabbinic school, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, but still with the goal of working in Jewish organizations, rather than becoming a pulpit rabbi.

After working at the now-defunct Jewish Community Center in Stoughton for two years, Zecher realized she was missing the spirituality of Judaism. When a position for a rabbi at TI opened up, she applied.

“I felt this was a communal opportunity to experience spiritual life through prayer, learning and social justice,” she said. “It was an ‘aha’ moment for me. It’s been a love affair ever since.”

“Synagogue is the place where Jews are made,” Zecher said. “Where they are able to grow within the walls and then take that outside the walls of the synagogue.” She sees synagogue life as “the heart” of the Jewish community.

Looking to the future, Zecher wants to continue fostering those connections outside the synagogue and capitalize on her synagogue’s prime location.

“What I want to do is reimagine and re-envision what it means to create pathways from the synagogue out into the community,” she said. “Our location in Boston calls upon us to recognize our place within the city.”