

SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW

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by Norwin Merens
BHCBE Membership VP



▶ Rabbi Michael Cohen

The Cohen File

- A native of Wilmington, Delaware, Michael Cohen split his childhood among Wilmington, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and finally the Chicago area where he attended Solomon Schechter for eighth grade. He then went to Ida Crown Academy for high school and attended Camp Ramah in Wisconsin during the summers.
- He is the son of Rabbi Kenneth S. Cohen, z'l who served as the beloved spiritual leader at Northwest Suburban Jewish Congregation, Morton Grove, Illinois for nearly 13 years until it closed in 2010.
- Rabbi Michael Cohen is married to Anna Cohen Rosenblum M.D., who is a resident in orthopaedics at the University of Chicago. In his leisure time, he enjoys cycling, cooking, photography, squash and various board games.

The current generation of Conservative rabbis making their mark on synagogues, public and social service agencies, schools and other institutions possess an entrepreneurial persona and energy that has been taught and embraced by The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York City for more than a decade.

According to JTS' provost Alan Cooper, today's rabbinical students are now receiving training in pastoral education, acquiring academic internships and fieldwork and receiving a hands-on understanding of the spiritual arts along with traditional Torah learning. He believes these skills and training have aligned JTS students with the expectations of the communities they wind up serving.

Enter BHCBE's **Rabbi Michael Cohen** who has served as education director of the Wilmette, Illinois synagogue's Hebrew Academy since 2011. He received his first formal teaching opportunity in 2004 when he taught Jewish teens at a high school program and has been teaching at Jewish institutions since.

Rabbi Cohen graduated from the joint program between JTS and Columbia University with degrees in Hebrew Bible and 20th Century history magna cum laude.

He then spent a year abroad working for the Masorti movement as part of a program to reach out to Jewish university students throughout the United Kingdom.

It was this experience that inspired Michael to become a rabbi, and he returned to JTS as a rabbinical student in 2007. He ultimately earned a master's degree in Jewish Education from the Davidson School of Education where he concentrated in congregational education.

As part of BHCBE's ongoing "Someone You Should Know" series, Rabbi Cohen recently answered the following questions and now offers his impressions on topics that have shaped his own personal upbringing, education/training and life.



Rabbi Michael Cohen oversees BHCBE youngsters during a Havdalah ceremony as Cantor Pavel Roytman and Rabbi Annie Tucker look on.

What led you to choose the rabbinate as a career? How did your father, Rabbi Kenneth Cohen, of blessed memory, influence your career path?

RC: I actually grew up swearing I'd never become a rabbi. I didn't enjoy moving around when I was a child and saw a lot of stressful aspects of what it means to be a pulpit rabbi. My attitude changed when I graduated college and spent a year working in England with the Masorti community there. The parts of that job I enjoyed the most involved teaching classes about Judaism and bringing people together.

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What have been some of your most positive experiences as a rabbi?

RC: Lifecycle events are very meaningful for me. I get the chance to be there for a family during a powerful time in their lives and hopefully I can help enhance the experience.

What are your personal practices around Torah study?

RC: I'm sad to say that like many rabbis, I tend to only sit down to learn when it's time for me to teach. One of the reasons I enjoy teaching so much is that it gives me an excellent excuse to deepen my knowledge in a new area. I do pick up books that I think I might be able to use for a class later. For instance, I'm currently cycling between Bernard Lewis' "The Jews of Islam" and a book with an alternate explanation on why Jerusalem was saved from the armies of Assyria in 701 BCE.

How do you envision your role in BHCBE's synagogue (adult) education program?

RC: My most recent class on Judaism life during the Crusades was very popular. I anticipate continuing to teach adult classes with a focus on topics in Jewish history. I see my role as working with the adult education committee as one of the ongoing teachers in the BHCBE community.

How do you approach leading a prayer service with the focus being on young adults?

RC: For young adults (as well as actual adults) often the key to success is creating a culture of participation. This is often easier said than done and is crucial to meaningful services. The virtual siddur that we use during morning Academy tefillot allows our students to better engage with the cantor and other leaders of the service as they don't have to be looking down in a book the whole time. We are also always looking for new ways to make our services more engaging.

What elements of the BHCBE service experience do you personally connect with?

RC: I've always liked the community and camaraderie of our Shabbat morning services. People are genuinely happy to see each other and attend in large numbers. It's a great part of our synagogue.

What current and future goals do you have for shaping BHCBE's Academy? Specific plans/initiatives for Shaare Tikvah Bnai Zion (STBZ) funding?

RC: The three goals that our school strives for are literacy, community and relevancy. We want our students to be literate Jews, familiar with the texts, holidays, traditions, and language that are the essence of our people. We also want our students to make friends and feel like this is a place where they belong and to want to be part of Jewish community later in life. We also want to lead our students to finding out how the tradition is meaningful for them and how it can be helpful in their lives. These three goals together will create a new generation of dedicated Jews.

We are using our STBZ funding to help pursue these goals. Right now, the Academy does a great job with literacy – our students have some of the best Judaic and Hebrew outcomes among religious schools in Chicago. Where I think we need to grow most is community and relevancy. We are piloting some projects to help address these two additional goals, including increasing the effort and planning that goes into each grade sleepover (Shabbaton) and other school wide events so that community building is an explicit goal from the outset.

We are also looking to new methodology to make subjects more relevant for our students. One area we are focusing on is a new Play Project that will be starting in the Hebrew High. A group of high school students will be working with a professional actor / director with a Jewish background to help them understand key moments in Jewish history through the prism of drama. I'm very excited about this upcoming project and will have more details about it coming out shortly.

What have been some WOW experiences for you at BHCBE during the past four years?

RC: I found the event honoring Rachel Stempel, Rutie Nakar, and Rutie Halpern this past spring to be deeply meaningful. It was great to see evidence of how much people appreciate what they have done for our community and to further deepen that commitment by creating a scholarship fund for needy families. I enjoyed it very much.

I also love Purim at BHCBE. We always get new faces and come up with crazy new themes to transform the place. It's a fun time for kids, adults, and the whole community.

What are some of your hobbies and interests when you're not working?

RC: I have an art background and when I first started even took classes at the Evanston Art Center. I also like photography, games of all kinds (especially basketball and board games on Shabbat), bike riding, and learning about how the world works. As everyone who has been to my office knows, I'm also an aquarist. I tend to have a new project every couple of months. The most recent one was making homemade pizza. I even invested in a baking steel to get closer to pizzeria quality pizza!



3220 Big Tree Lane • Wilmette, IL 60091
Tel 847.256.1213
www.bhcbe.org