

Report by the Co-Chairs of the 2018-19 Rabbi Search Committee

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Specially Called Congregational Meeting, January 6, 2019

As co-chairs we make this report on behalf of the entire Rabbi Search Committee, a smart, hardworking, and dedicated group of volunteers with whom we were privileged to serve. The circumstances of this year's search for a senior rabbi differed from those the last time around. Then, the congregation had a full year with Rabbi Crystal as interim rabbi, which afforded us the leisure to hold a series of listening sessions: outcomes of those sessions informed the application to the placement office at the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the reform rabbis' leadership organization.

This time around, Rabbi Bach's sudden departure, and the need to hire another interim rabbi, put us slightly behind, but only slightly. All that congregational input from the previous search was fresh enough so that the synagogue leadership did not feel the necessity for major rethinking of our priorities. So, with Rabbi Franken's position secured, the 2018-19 search committee was formed, with **diversity** of age, interest, experiences, and length of membership an important criterion. As but one example, almost 60 years separated the youngest member of the team from the oldest!

The committee started its work in mid-July, 2018. In a lively exchange via technology, input from the entire search committee continually improved the first application draft created by the co-chairs. We then submitted the final application to the CCAR in early September and made the greater part of it available to the congregation. In addition, through weekly email notices from the temple office, the congregation was routinely apprised of the progress of the search, and a dedicated email address was well publicized so congregants could—and did—provide their

opinions and questions. All told, 27 candidates applied for our senior rabbi position. This cohort of rabbis was as diverse as our committee, even geographically: we had a candidate from England and another from Costa Rica.

Over the summer months, the committee functioned electronically via email and Google drive. Our first all-team in-person meeting was right after Labor Day, and we met regularly on Wednesdays after that initial get together. Divided into three groups, Aleph, Bet, and Gimmel, committee members carefully reviewed the applications assigned to them and assessed the other groups' applications as well when time permitted. All written applications were rated using a standard form. Winnowing down the written applications took a good amount of time and debate. It was not always easy to gain consensus from 14 people with strong opinions, but the intense discussions about each and every candidate were respectful, good-humored, and productive. We evaluated on many criteria, chief among them being the fit of a candidate's experience and essays with Judea Reform priorities as we had articulated them in our own application to the CCAR. Some candidates went readily into the yes pile, some landed in the no pile, and many others were maybes.

The CCAR's strict rules about confidentiality complicated the process of investigation, but committee members searched the Internet for additional information and videos of the candidates to supplement our impressions of the written materials. Eventually we decided on 13 candidates for Skype interviews lasting 45 minutes, with another 15 minutes after each interview concluded to allow for discussion of the candidate among ourselves. These Skype sessions were held over several weeks in the fall. We asked a common set of questions to all candidates. Here are the questions, as created and refined through our committee work; they are, shall we say, extensive:

1. What is your personal approach to the concept of God and the role both God and Torah should play in reform congregational life?
2. We have a diverse congregation and value the inclusion of inter-faith families, and people of all ages, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations in our community.
 - a. Give examples of how you would foster inclusion in worship services and congregational life.
 - b. Do you perform inter-faith weddings? What, if any, conditions do you place on the couples?
3. Describe how you would counsel a congregation through a shared trauma, and your approach to pastoral care in general.
4. Education at all ages is a key value to us:
 - a. How do you describe yourself as a teacher?
 - b. What do you see as the Senior Rabbi's role in both youth and adult education?
5. Judea Reform has very strong lay leaders and an equally strong volunteer core. How would you describe your leadership style? Please describe a time in which you played the role of a consensus builder. What approach did you take?
6. Please share your thoughts about how to conduct worship services in a manner that is meaningful and spiritually nourishing to congregants. What role should music play in worship and other aspects of synagogue life? What do you see as the ideal relationship between the rabbi, the music director, and the lay cantor corps?
7. We have a highly educated population with a wide range of opinions on various subjects, including the current political and socioeconomic situation in Israel. How would you

negotiate the differences and sensitivities around this important topic to engage the Judea Reform members in discussion on Israel?

Amazingly, we managed to get all these questions answered, with some minutes to spare for opening up the conversation with the candidates! And right before that opening up, we asked a question we knew was on our congregation's mind: Have you ever been brought up on charges to the Committee on Ethics of the CCAR? (All interviewees answered no.) In some cases, after the Skype session we followed up with additional questions by email, to gain clarity on a particular matter.

After the final Skype interview the committee sat in special session to select the three to invite for a visit. We held a fourth person in abeyance, and that person moved up to third place when one of the top three candidates indicated that she had received a job offer elsewhere that she intended to accept. A fifth candidate who had garnered some support was kept on hold for a time, with good communication between us and that candidate. In fact, the communication channels between the co-chairs and all the candidates, as well as with the head of placement at the CCAR, were honest and open throughout the process, and all candidates, whatever their status, were treated with respect. The finalists' references were contacted, but, because two of them had not yet told their congregation that they were in placement, checking outside of their lists could not be done. We were not even permitted to provide the names of the visitors to our congregation at large before the meet-and-greet sessions, and we know that this was frustrating to many of you. We felt the same way about that situation.

With the invaluable assistance of synagogue personnel, especially Emily Young, Aviv Sheetrit, and Ray Jones, and with experience from our last search, elaborate, complicated schedules were devised and executed successfully for the three visitors. If anything, the necessity

to fit in every stakeholder group indicated clearly the priorities of the congregation, some of which had been added or emphasized since the last search, like inclusion, the caring community, and Israel discourse. The packed schedules thus did more than keep the candidates busy from early morning to late at night, though they certainly did that; in and of themselves the schedules conveyed how thoroughly our congregants are invested in their synagogue, through volunteerism, and how willing they—you!—are to give time and energy to Judea Reform. All three visitors understood that message and commented on how impressed they were by it, by you.

Every scrap of input from the evaluations of these candidates, whether on paper or on line, was reviewed carefully after the on-site interviews—that is, all the feedback from our various committees and constituent groups as well as the general congregation. Of the three visitors, one was ranked as the overwhelming favorite. Of those expressing an opinion about whether or not to hire Rabbi Matthew Soffer, 96% said yes and 4% said no. No candidate will garner 100% support from a large and diverse congregation such as ours, of course, but the enthusiasm for Rabbi Soffer as our next senior rabbi was a clear super-majority opinion. On December 8, 2018, the search committee unanimously recommended him to the Board of Trustees as our next settled rabbi; soon afterward, the Board voted to offer him the position, and on December 14, Rabbi Soffer signed a letter of intent.

Let us tell you a little bit about Rabbi Matt Soffer; you will find a few copies of his full resume at the back, if you want to know more. A 2002 graduate of Muhlenberg College, Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude, Rabbi Soffer was ordained by the Hebrew Union College-Institute of Religion in 2010 and also received a Master of Arts in Hebrew Literature in 2009. He has had additional training in seminars designed to enhance skills in leadership, management,

entrepreneurialism, and fundraising. In 2013 he was selected as one of the Religious Action Center's "50 Faces of Justice" for his social action work; other honors include but are not limited to the *Newsweek/Daily Beast* article on "10 Rabbis to Watch" in 2013 and the *MyJewishLearning.com* selection as "America's Real Top Rabbi." At Temple Israel in Boston, where he began in 2009 as summer rabbinic resident and was immediately hired upon ordination, Rabbi Soffer has risen steadily in responsibility at that 1300 household congregation over the last decade, from assistant rabbi to associate rabbi, and then to senior associate rabbi. Besides taking on ever greater leadership roles he is known for his musicality and sense of humor. Rabbi Soffer is ready to take the next step in leading his own congregation and has the requisite qualities and experiences to do so successfully.

The 2018-19 Rabbi Search Committee was honored to be asked to serve on this all-important committee and took its task very seriously, as the congregation would expect and certainly deserves. We are enthusiastic about the outcome and believe you are as well. Thus, we now move the election of Rabbi Matthew Soffer as Judea Reform Congregation's senior rabbi beginning July 1, 2019.