

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Thirtieth Anniversary Greetings
February 29, 2019

I first learned about Shaarei Shamayim when I was in my last year at the UW here in Madison. I saw a flyer on a bulletin board that said that Shaarei Shamayim was looking to hire a Hebrew school teacher. I had been thinking that I wanted to apply to rabbinical school so what could be better than this job?

I got the job, and it was a disaster.

Class – if you could call it that – was once a month, in the basement of Prairie, while services were happening upstairs. My students were one to 13 years old, and parents brought them in whenever they felt like it.

But the Coordinating Committee was just so happy that there was someone doing something with the kids that they asked me to become the children's education chair. At the age of 22 I went from failed Hebrew school teacher to frightened board member.

Out of that experience, however, we developed a six-week kindergarten class with five students, and each year we added more weeks and more grades. This past November I got to officiate at the wedding of my first kindergarten student.

My time with Shaarei Shamayim wasn't actually so bad, because it led me to decide to go to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

I applied and was accepted, and for the next six years I was a student, working in various congregations and organizations, in a hospital and assisted living center.

In my second to last year of rabbinical school, I saw that Shaarei Shamayim was looking for a half-time rabbi. Lucky for me, the search failed, and they settled on a student.

I became the student rabbi, and it was one of the best jobs that students in my class had. It was a progressive congregation in a great city. I got to work with people of different ages, and I had a range of responsibilities. I learned so much that year.

I never thought that I would become a congregational rabbi, but my experiences at Shaarei Shamayim taught me otherwise.

There was just one problem. It was widely understood that if you opposed the Israeli occupation, even said the word "occupation," there was no way that you could be a congregational rabbi. The year was 2002, and it was a very different Jewish community then.

I had to know whether Shaarei Shamayim fit that pattern, so I broke all the rules, which stated that never, ever talk about Israel your first year as a rabbi. Even more so as a student rabbi.

But that first Yom Kippur I did, because I wanted to know whether we could live with each other. I said the word "occupation" – as well as a few other things.

It was a terrifying experience. I'm pleased to say that no one walked out, and only one person really yelled at me afterwards. Enough people appreciated what I had to say, though it wasn't a great sermon.

The time came for me to decide whether I was going to stay following my year as the student rabbi. I had met Renee in rabbinical school, and she was two years behind me. She was going to London that next year. If I went with her it was unlikely that I would ever work at Shaarei Shamayim again. But I wasn't willing to part with her for the year. So, since it was only a part-time position at the time, I asked if I could work 26 weeks a year. What followed was a series of intricate charts where I mapped out my time between Madison and London, and the Coordinating committee went for it.

Seventeen years later, I am amazed that we are celebrating our 30th anniversary. This congregation taught me how to be a rabbi, mentored me in those first years, challenged my assumptions about what a Jewish community could and should be.

What I most appreciate about Shaarei Shamayim is the creativity of our members, our ability to imagine what a meaningful and inclusive Jewish community looks like. We don't do rituals or programs because that's what we've always done or that's what Jews are supposed to do.

We create a community that reflects who we are and suits our needs. We experiment with different ideas and carry them out until they don't work anymore. We show up when someone is in need.

In Jewish tradition, the 30th year life is the year of strength. May this congregation go from strength to strength and enjoy many, many more years of growth and success.