

Congregations

Two of Reconstructionism's leading lights to lead Ann Arbor services

Jonathan Cohn, special to the WJN

Michael Strassfeld and Joy Levitt are among the most influential and interesting Reconstructionist rabbis in America. He recently retired as leader of the Society for Advancement of Judaism, the famous New York City Congregation, and was co-editor of the Jewish Catalog, one of the best-selling Jewish books in history. She is director of the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan and recently founded the Jewish Journey Project, which seeks to develop and spread innovative approaches to Jewish learning. The two also collaborated on *A Night of Questions: A Passover Haggadah*. But this year, you don't have to go New York to soak up their insights, energy, and warmth. You don't even need to buy one of their books.

All you have to do is attend one of several special services they'll be leading at the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation—starting in September, with the High Holidays. In keeping with AARC tradition, the High Holiday services are open to all members of the community and require no tickets. The services, including special children's services, take place at the Ann Arbor Unitarian Universality Church at 4001 Ann Arbor-Saline Road. More information is available at the AARC website, ww.aaarecon.org.

"We're really excited to welcome Michael and Joy to Ann Arbor this year, to share the start of the year and our community's work at *teshuvah*," said Margo Schlanger, co-chairperson of the AARC board. "It will be a real privilege to have them as service leaders, and we welcome our members and non-members alike to our ticketless High Holiday services."



Rabbi Joy Levitt

And what will their services be like? A major theme running through Strassfeld and Levitt's work has been finding ways of engaging wider audiences, as Levitt explained during an interview from the couple's New York home. "I think both of us have careers driven by a desire to make Judaism accessible to large numbers of people—whether it's Michael through his books, me through my work at the JCC, each through our Haggadah and our congregations."

One way to make Judaism more accessible is to show how its traditions and teachings remain relevant in a contemporary world—something that Strassfeld says is particularly important at the High Holidays. "One of the big challenges for Judaism—and for rabbis—is connecting the themes of liturgy to what people really care about in their lives. It's not just that some parts of liturgy might seem objectionable to modern ears, although that happens sometimes. It's that

the liturgy doesn't even seem to matter. OK, we talk about the sun and the moon and praise god, etc., that's not objectionable. But why do I even care about that? That's the challenge—to show that there are actually some important teachings here, things we can learn from."

Of course, leading services at new congregation can be a challenge of its own, particularly when those services are for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—the most important days of the year. "It's always a challenge to go someplace new," Strassfeld acknowledged. "But in the process of talking to people [at the AARC] and getting to know them, I think we've found we're pretty aligned. We are flexible and the congregation is too."



Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

Strassfeld added that getting a feel for a congregation's different and changing interests is something that rabbis must always do, even

when they've been with one congregation for a long time. "One of the challenges for the rabbi is always to figure out what feels important, not just to me. I have to figure out what the community will be reflecting and thinking about, what they will respond to."

And while Strassfeld said he was still thinking through exactly how to use his time as AARC's visiting prayer leader, he said he's always thought of the High Holidays as a fundamentally optimistic time—a chance to reflect upon transgressions of the past year, for sure, but also to think about the capacity to do better in the year to come.

"I'm really optimistic about the possibility of people changing," Strassfeld said. "We want to be our better selves, but it can be hard to do that. . . . High holidays are really an opportunity to spend time thinking about wishes and hopes for the coming year. Most people don't give themselves that time—they are too busy living and getting through the day and doing what they have to do, and worrying about whatever it is that worries them. But to really reflect on where you've been and the possibility of changing in the next year, that's one of the great traditions and opportunities of Judaism. . . . You can get some opportunity to think about the next year, and the possibility of changing, of coming closer to the ideals that each of us carries with us."

The services with Strassfeld and Levitt are part of the visiting rabbi arrangement the AARC is using this year. Rabbi Alana Apart, of Detroit's Congregation T'chayah, will be leading additional services over the course of the year. More will be written about Rabbi Apart in next month's *Washtenaw Jewish News*. ■