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Congregations

Two Recon congregations build bridges from Ann Arbor to Detroit

Jonathan Cohn, special to the WJN

It takes a little under an hour to drive from Ann Arbor to Oak Park, where the Reconstructionist Congregation T'chiyah holds its worship and activities. But this year the distance might start to seem a little smaller.

The reason is Alana Alpert.

Alpert is T'chiyah's rabbi. But this (Jewish) year, about once a month, she will also be leading services at the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation (AARC).

Her stint as a visiting rabbi is part of arrangements that the AARC has made for the year while it conducts a search for a new, permanent rabbi. In addition to recruiting Rabbi Alpert, the AARC brought in Michael Strassfeld, former rabbi from the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York, and Joy Levitt, executive director of the Manhattan JCC, to lead services at High Holidays. Rabbi Strassfeld will be back for two more shabbatonim in 2016, in January and March.

Congregational leaders at both AARC and T'chiyah hope that Rabbi Alpert's work in Ann Arbor can do more than provide spiritual leadership. They hope it's the beginning of closer ties between the two congregations, which have a great deal in common. That's a goal Alpert endorses, too. "It would strengthen both of our congregations to be more connected

to each other, and to collaborate," she said in an interview. "This is a nice way of starting to create that relationship. There's not a grand plan for it, but we're hoping that sparks will fly."

Alpert says the opportunity to work with AARC has been both exciting and a little intimidating.



Alana Alpert

Alpert is fresh out of rabbinical school and arrived in Detroit only a year ago, moving here from the Boston area. But she's already developed a reputation for stirring sermons that reflect her strong interest in social justice. A major project at T'chiyah right now is the launch of "Detroit Jews for Justice," a program modeled on similar initiatives in New York, Washington D.C., and the Twin Cities.

During the interview, Alpert spoke of her commitment to highlighting issues like inequality, LGBT rights, and the struggles of racial minorities in the U.S. Alpert cites as a role model Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Polish-born rabbi who emigrated to

the U.S. and became famous for marching alongside Martin Luther King in Selma.

Last year, Alpert made a similar journey of her own, organizing a carful of young Jewish activists to travel to Ferguson, Missouri—where she ended up on the front lines of protests and then addressing the crowd. She wove this subject into her d'var torah for High Holidays this year at T'chiyah. Andy Levin, the congregation's president, called it "transformative and inspirational." Alpert, he said, "really challenges the community."

Alpert says that's one of her main goals—to engage the American Jewish community in work to make their neighborhoods, their nation, and their world a better place. That's one reason that cooperation with AARC makes so much sense, she says. AARC members are already active in many social justice causes, both personally and as a group. For example, over the past year, the congregation has been leading a coalition of community partners in a "food, land, and justice" initiative.

"When I give a d'var torah, nine times out of ten I'll be talking about social justice," Alpert says. "It's just the kind of rabbi that I am, and the kind of Jew I am—and it's clear to me, already, how much I have to learn from AARC members about some issues that I've cared about for many years."

AARC members, for their part, seem just as excited about Alpert's arrival—and not just because they share Alpert's vision of a Jewish community engaged in social action.

Deb Kraus, a founding AARC member, was part of a delegation that first traveled to T'chiyah to see Alpert in action. "From the get go, I was impressed by how down-to-earth Rabbi Alana is, both as a person and as a service leader. In my experience this is pretty rare. She incorporated people into the service almost seamlessly, and in a central way, not as an afterthought. She projects a sense of warmth."

Kraus calls T'chiyah and the AARC "a natural coalition" -- a sentiment echoed by Debbie Zivan, who is on the AARC committee that is facilitating this year's rabbi arrangement. "AARC members are enjoying Rabbi Alana as a service leader. And we're looking forward to broadening our community by bridging with Congregation T'chiyah. I think both congregations will get a refreshing boost in creativity by sharing events, ideas and friendship."

Alpert will next lead services on the Fourth Friday in November, at the JCC; all members of the community are welcome. Details on this and additional events are available at <http://aarecon.org>. ■