

## Congregations

### Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation welcomes new rabbi

Emily Eisbruch, special to the WJN

The Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation (AARC) is delighted to welcome its new Rabbi, Ora Nitkin-Kaner, starting on September 1.

“We were looking for someone who could lead engaging and inclusive services, provide pastoral support, and help our community grow,” explains AARC board chair Debbie Field. “Rabbi Ora led a Shabbaton for our congregation in the summer of 2016, and we were extremely impressed by her thoughtful service leading and teaching and by her warm, empathetic presence. We are looking forward to welcoming her and helping her to find a home with us.”

Born and raised in Toronto, Rabbi Ora learned to love and wrestle with Judaism at home, in Hebrew day school and at the University of Toronto.

As part of her rabbinical training, she worked as a student and sabbatical rabbi in synagogues in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. During her final year of rabbinical school, Ora served as the Bert Linder Rabbinic Intern at West End Synagogue in New York City. Rabbi Ora was ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in 2016.

Prior to entering the RRC, Rabbi Ora spent the years of 2008-2010 in New Orleans as a fellow of the Jewish service corps organization, Avodah. There she worked with the organization Resurrection after Exoneration which was founded by death row exoneree John “JT” Thompson. Following her ordination in 2016, Rabbi Ora returned to New Orleans and spent the past year there working as a chaplain in a local hospital.

Below, Rabbi Ora shares thoughts about her recent experiences in New Orleans and her plans for leading the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation.

**Eisbruch:** Tell us about your chaplaincy work in New Orleans.

**Rabbi Ora:** This past year working as a chaplain

at East Jefferson General Hospital has been hard and emotionally rich. Most of my work is with oncology patients, which means that I am often sharing pastoral conversation, reflection, and prayer with people facing their own death within months or even weeks.

On one occasion, I was called to the death of an elderly woman who had suffered from dementia for years. Prior to her dementia, the patient had been a difficult and harsh parent, and had had trouble expressing affection to her daughter. I was present as the patient’s daughter stood at her dying mother’s bedside. The daughter stroked her mother’s forehead over and over for hours, and, crying, reassured her mother, ‘It’s ok for you to go. I’ll be ok. You can go now.’

One dynamic I have observed in hospital chaplaincy is that regardless of faith tradition, patients often approach their deaths in ways similar to how they lived. For several months I visited a patient whose family and early relationships had taught her to repress her more difficult emotions so that she would not ‘push people away.’ As she grappled with the news that she would likely die within a few weeks, I witnessed her dancing around her coming death, sometimes engaging and sometimes retreating, as she was able. It seems that if we are lucky and we get the chance, even dying can offer a heart-wrenching opportunity for growth, not only for ourselves but also for our loved ones as we take leave of them.

**Eisbruch:** How has the chaplaincy work impacted you?



Rabbi Ora Nitkin-Kaner

**Rabbi Ora:** Much of the work of a good chaplain happens inside. During my work this year, I have been challenged to remain emotionally present and compassionate towards patients who are abusive, volatile, racist, or anti-Semitic; I have set clear and appropriate boundaries with patients whose mental or physical illnesses cause them to want to break down boundaries between themselves and others; I have been challenged to be empathic without being consumed by another’s grief or my grief for them; and I have mourned the losses of patients whose lives touched mine, often deeply and often briefly, before they died.

**Eisbruch:** What are you most looking forward to as you start your Rabbinical work with the AARC?

**Rabbi Ora:** I have been so moved and impressed by AARC congregants’ joyful commitment to vibrant and creative Jewish life in Ann Arbor. These are folks who have full time jobs, families, and diverse responsibilities outside of AARC, but they consistently make time to dream and create meaningful Jewish experiences for themselves and others. I am excited about being in community with such thoughtful and curious Jews.

**Eisbruch:** What are you bringing to Ann Arbor from your experience with the New Orleans Jewish community?

**Rabbi Ora:** I am looking forward to building and growing relationships between AARC and other local synagogues and Jewish organizations. When I first moved to New Orleans in 2008, I was struck by how the city’s synagogues had really come together to support one another in the

wake flooding after the levees’ failure in Hurricane Katrina. I began attending Beth Israel, a Modern Orthodox shul whose building had been destroyed in the storm, and whose services were ‘temporarily’ housed in Gates of Prayer, a large reform synagogue. This temporary arrangement ended up lasting several years, until Beth Israel raised funds to build a new synagogue on property purchased from (and adjacent to) Gates of Prayer. This was such a sweet model of collaboration, and it is one that I believe does not have to be precipitated by a natural disaster! There can be a lot of joy and meaningful friction when Jews of different denominations and backgrounds come together to learn and eat and pray, and I am hoping there will be many opportunities for this kind of cross-community building in Ann Arbor as well. I am also looking forward to establishing and deepening relationships with local non-Jewish faith communities.

**Eisbruch:** What do you expect to be your first areas of focus as Rabbi for the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation?

**Rabbi Ora:** I will be focused on listening closely to the needs and dreams of the AARC community: what congregants are hopeful and hungry for, what their pastoral, spiritual, and educational needs are, what kind of leader they want for themselves, and how they want to grow as individuals and as a community. I am looking forward to offering and sharing soulful, song-filled services, vibrant Jewish learning, a commitment to local and national justice issues, and a spirituality that is nourishing and potentially transformative. ■

For more information about the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation, visit <http://aarecon.org/>.