

RABBI JOSH LEIGHTON

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Putting the F.U.N into Jewish Life

Foundation - Unbridled joy - Nearness

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Rabbi, The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah

2019-Present

B'nai Jehudah is a congregation about 1,000 member units in Overland Park, KS (Kansas City). As a member of the senior staff, my responsibilities include engagement, outreach, education, and advancing the shared vision of the congregation by:

- Connecting with all new members through emails, phone calls and in-person meetings at temple, in their homes, or out for coffee to learn about their story and how the congregation can be part of their Jewish journey.
- Primary contact for those looking to learn more about Judaism and those seeking to begin their Jewish journeys.
- Ensuring that members feel cared for by reworking and managing the Chesed (caring) program including a volunteer-led Chesed meals initiative.
- Curating all engagement opportunities into one centralized location to make it easy for congregants to access their Jewish opportunities by developing and managing the creation of comprehensive Program Guides.
- Serving as teacher or organizer of multiple adult education opportunities including:
 - The Chicken Parmesan Dilemma
 - Examining the role of poultry in the laws of milk and meat.
 - Ten Commandment Tuesdays
 - Studying one commandment each week leading up to Shavuot.
 - Judaism and the Stars
 - Exploring how Jewish tradition has understood and interpreted the lights in the night sky and the nature of the cosmos.
 - Jewish Life in Poland
 - A two-part series on Zoom bringing in first a photographer who documented Jewish life in Poland in the 1970's and again in the 2010's and then hearing from a modern Polish Judaica company.
 - Critical Conversations
 - A joint group with another congregation using the Chai Mitzvah Critical Conversations curriculum examining topics such as faith, the nature of good vs. evil, religion and science, and modern idolatry.
- Serving as a teacher in the religious school programs:
 - The history of Ancient Israel from Joshua to the aftermath of the destruction of the 2nd Temple (5th Grade)
 - Including immersive learning through re-enactments of historical events with costumes and props, building scenes of ancient history with blocks, cardboard boxes and other materials, text based learning, and the creation of an illustrated timeline
 - Exploring modern Israel (4th grade)
 - Including making and tasting Israeli food, and meeting with the community Israeli emissary.

- Mahloket Matters: How to Disagree Constructively (7th-9th Grade)
 - Piloted a program from Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies focusing on civil disagreement and to ensure that our disagreements are “for the sake of heaven.”
- Challenges and Choices: A Jewish Teen’s Guide to a Balanced Life (10th grade)
 - Teaching the idea of Mussar to confirmation students as they work on discovering themselves and exploring their individual Jewish journeys.
- Jewish Holy Stuff (8th Grade)
 - Exploring what makes something “holy,” “sacred,” or “Jewish” and how the students can personally relate to Jewish tradition.
 - Students created this definition: “Jewish Holy Stuff is something special that makes us feel closer to ourselves and connects us more with religion and/or life!”
- Brought the Kansas City Jewish teen community together for an evening visit to the exhibition, Auschwitz: Not long ago. Not far away.
 - Organized and led the experience of over 230 students and their family members from seven local congregations coming together for this evening of learning, remembering, and planting the seeds for a brighter future.
- Created “Share Shabbat,” our monthly Shabbat opportunity for young children and their families in partnership with The J and PJ Library.
 - Each month we meet for an hour of songs, stories, blessings, and themed activities. This has become a flagship opportunity for young families in the community.
- Planned and ran youth services and programs for High Holidays as well as serving as a puppeteer and actor during the High Holiday children’s Puppet Services.
- Rabbinic duties include working with conversion students, serving as B’nai Mitzvah tutor, and leading daily Minyan services.
- Integral thought partner on the team that advances the education vision for the entire congregation, including helping to develop the new experiential model with immersive rooms.
- Serving as staff liaison to Brotherhood and assisting Brotherhood in program planning.
 - Partnered with Brotherhood to restructure and strengthen leadership to ensure continued success
- Staff liaison to the Chavurah program.
 - Checking in with Chavurah leaders and convening regular meetings of all leaders to share successes and challenges as well as worshipping new ideas. Working to create new groups and opportunities.
- Worked with a dedicated group of religious school parents to create opportunities for them to meet, network, and discuss a wide range of issues.
- Addressed and heightened the congregation’s approach to hospitality and welcoming, including creating welcoming lawn signs, table tents with texts, blessings, conversation starters, and the WiFi password, and creating flyers and brochures highlighting ways to be involved.
- Partnered with TribeKC to create a second day Rosh Hashanah lunch and learn opportunity for 20s-30s at a downtown deli, culminating in sounding the shofar from a rooftop overlooking the city.
- Organized and directed Mitzvah Day programs for May 2021 and upcoming event in May 2022 by partnering with and supervising staff in planning stations and activities, recruiting volunteer leaders, soliciting donations and purchasing supplies, creating program plan, coordinating communication plan with communications director, and facilitating the on-site portion of the program.
- Working at the tech booth during Shabbat services: helping with cameras, transitions, and other necessary functions to assist with the livestream.

RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

The majority of my time at B'nai Jehudah has been during the Covid-19 pandemic. In responding to the new and ever-changing reality in the wake of the pandemic I have:

- Maintained nearness between members and the congregation through spearheading and managing virtual connections. These included hosting live morning broadcasts every day during the first few months of the pandemic, launching a Small Groups program, creating a full slate of virtual Adult Learning opportunities, and coordinating with Sisterhood and Brotherhood on their Simcha Snacks program delivering treats to congregants' doorsteps.
- As a religious school and adult education instructor, I quickly shifted to teaching on Zoom and offered many engaging classes utilizing the varied array of web-based tools and the items found in everyone's homes.
- With regards to holiday celebrations, I planned, oversaw and implemented socially-distant drive through/drive-in experiences that were highlights for the congregants during a very different fall and winter holiday season:
 - Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Drive-Thru experiences. These opportunities on the afternoons of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were highlights for congregants as we got to see each other in-person while taking part in two unique experiences:
 - Rosh Hashanah's Drive-Through Tashlich involved themed activities such as tashlich out of the car window, hearing the shofar sounded by teens up on the hill, and writing prayers to be sent to the Western Wall in Jerusalem.
 - The Yom Kippur drive through was an immersive exploration of the "Holiness Code" found in Leviticus 19 and included four stations where Torahs were on giant stands and read aloud, a series of thought provoking lawn signs relating to different texts from the portion, and a sampling of the "This is Hunger" exhibit from Mazon leading to the annual food drive drop off.
 - The Chanukah 8th night Light Up the Night Drive-In experience featured a playlist of Chanukah music videos on a giant screen, singing lead by the music director, lots of glow sticks and other light up accessories, and was all topped off by a fire dancing performance that culminated in the fire breathers lighting a tiki-torch menorah.
 - I also created a schedule of opportunities for congregants to connect daily with the congregation during Sukkot and Chanukah.
- Many of the innovations during the early part of the pandemic have continued as I am still leading Daily Minyan to Facebook Live, and took a leading role in planning this year's Shofar in the Park activities which were based on the drive-through experiences.

Community Involvement, Greater Kansas City Metro Area

2018-Present

- Co-creator of 2021 Rabbinical Association Passover Seder video:
 - Co-Hosted, planned, solicited videos, developed flow and editing points, worked with video production editor on final product:
 - <https://vimeo.com/519756417/731e1c6b6d>
- Launched the local PJ Library "Gathering for Good" program; opportunities for small cohorts of families to come together for learning and Tikkun Olam.
- Brought new joy to families in reparation for Passover with the creation of the, no annual, Junk Food Seder which I created and have led both in-person and on Zoom.
- Member of Federation's Young Families Working Group
- Panelist at "Parenting During a Pandemic" community program.
- Member, Greater Kansas City Rabbinical Association:
 - Instructor in the Community Conversion Class
 - Presenter at community Day of Discovery
 - Liaison to the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education (MCHE):
 - Serving as a judge in the MCHE's annual essay contest
 - Helping to create the annual community Yom HaShoah commemoration

AUSCHWITZ: NOT LONG AGO. NOT FAR AWAY.

As MCHC rabbinic liaison I have been invited to participate in a number of events and ceremonies both before and during the presentation of the exhibition. These have included:

- Serving on a panel discussion for Yom HaShoah, providing a Jewish voice for the occasion and offering memorial prayers.
 - <https://www.facebook.com/UnionStationKCMO/videos/1752567818249373>
- Offering a blessing during the ceremony which included local survivors marking the installation of a WWII era German rail car as one of the first artifacts ahead of the exhibition's opening.
- Having the honor of participating in the opening night events of the exhibition.
- Creating and leading a Ceremony of Memory and Hope along with local colleagues between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
 - <https://www.facebook.com/UnionStationKCMO/videos/369201348240819>
- Organizing the community teen visit as mentioned above.
- Offering an opening benediction during the private dinner announcing the extension of the exhibition's stay in Kansas City.

Rabbi, Jewish Congregation of Kinnelon, Pompton Lakes, NJ

2012-2018

The Jewish Congregation of Kinnelon was a small congregation of 50-75 families . Along with all of the regular rabbinic duties of a congregational rabbi my accomplishments include but are not limited to:

- Guided Reform congregation in transition from renting space at a church to co-owning and building sharing with a Conservative congregation, transforming what was previously a Conservative Synagogue into a welcoming pluralistic space for all.
 - Crafted joint High Holiday services, Shabbat and other holiday services, and programming, blending the two styles of worship and observance to create comfortable and satisfying experiences for members of both congregations.
 - Oversaw the creation and implementation of a shared religious school, respecting the various practices of both congregations and movements, while providing students with a comprehensive Jewish education. Served as teacher and service leader in the school.
 - Guided the experimentation and transition to various models of worship and programming both in the shared space, back at a local church for High Holidays, out in the community, and in member's homes.
- Instituted a teen program consisting of monthly "Lunch 'n' Learn" sessions and participation in NFTY; increased post-B'nai Mitzvah involvement over 500%.
- Revitalized the culture of Shabbat in the congregation and reinvigorated their creativity through themed services, services and dinner in congregant's homes, and other Shabbat non-traditional evening activities. These efforts garnered more participation and interests.
- Worked with many families and couples of differing backgrounds in planning meaningful, inclusive, and welcoming B'nai Mitzvah, Weddings, Baby Namings, and other important moments.
- Partnered with educator to re-envision the entire school program into an experiential, "camp-style" model, blending a wide range of activity types to suit all learning styles, including sessions at a local park and day-long family retreats at a local camp.
- Transformed congregational celebration of Holidays and Festivals through engaging programming and services, such as Shavuot Under the Stars at a local planetarium.
- Supervised and mentored student cantors and song leaders.
- Participated in local school district strategic planning.

NFTY Garden Empire Region, NJ/NY

2011-2018

• Clergy Team Member

- Advisor and mentor to Regional Director and teen leaders. Assisted Regional Director in visioning clergy partnerships and overall goals for Jewish enrichment. Led sessions at teen leadership training seminars.

- **Program Associate**
 - Coordinated with Regional Director and Regional Board to develop and implement regional programming. Using video-chat, email, and Google Docs, coached teen leaders through the process of planning the full arc of programming and ways to infuse Jewish content and learning throughout each event.
- **NFTY 678 Launch Coordinator**
 - Worked directly with Regional Director and Congregations to help launch NFTY's 6th-8th grade programming and events within the region. Coached adult leaders in the process of partnering with other congregations to plan programs. Trained and certified adult leaders in official procedures, such as safety and proper conduct, in order for them to become "Certified Adult Mentors."

URJ Camps & Israel Programs **2011-2018**

Broad experience in camp-style programming as well as supervision and mentoring of campers, participants, staff, and professional colleagues.

- **Camp Harlam – 2012-2018**
 - Faculty member and faculty dean. Participated in staff training.
- **Crane Lake Camp – 2005, 2008, 2011**
 - Unit Head, Assistant Limud (Jewish education) Director, Faculty Member.
- **URJ Keshet Birthright – 2012**
 - Birthright Trip Staff Member.

Torah Study Teacher, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ **2015-2018**

- Instructor for Interfaith Torah Study group.

Rabbinic Adjunct, Temple Emanu-El, Westfield, NJ **2012-2018**

- Adult Education Teacher.
- Rabbi for B'nai Mitzvah.
- Collaborated with Men's Club on services and served as scholar-in-residence for retreat.
- 8th-12th Grade Religious School Teacher.

Community Rabbi, NY/NJ area **2011-2018**

- Officiation at Life Cycle Events.
- Provided coverage for local colleagues and congregations in times of need.
- Led Passover Seder and learning sessions at senior living facilities in the area.
- Taught local Introduction to Judaism class sessions.

Assistant Rabbi, Temple Emeth, Teaneck, NJ **2012-2014**

- Primary focus on Youth Groups and teaching in High School program.
- Other Rabbinic duties including Shabbat Services and Shiva minyan leader.
- Adult Education teacher.

Religious School and Adult Education Instruction, NY/NJ area **2011-2018**

Broad experience in teaching youth and adults of all ages and levels of Jewish knowledge:

- **URJ New Jersey Area Study Shabbaton Instructor - 2012-2018**
- **Temple Shalom, Succasunna, NJ – 2011-2013**
- **Temple Emanu-El, Edison, NJ – 2011-2012**
- **Temple Har Shalom, Warren, NJ – 2011-2012, 2014-2015**
 - Developed curriculum and taught Introduction to Judaism class for adults.
 - Youth Engagement Coordinator.

Visiting Rabbi, Temple Beth Ha-Shalom, Williamsport, PA **2012**

High Holiday Rabbi, Temple Beth El, Jefferson City, MO **2011**

EDUCATION

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, OH—

- Rabbinic Ordination** **2011**
 - Rabbinic Thesis: “You Can’t Milk a Chicken! But God Said So: The Chicken Parmesan Dilemma as a Paradigm for Understanding the Rabbinic Method and Assessing its Modern Validity.”
- Master of Arts in Hebrew Letters** **2010**
- Clinical Pastoral Education (one unit)** **2009**
 - V.A. Puget Sound Healthcare System, Seattle, WA.

University of Rochester, Rochester, NY— Bachelor of Arts in Religion **2006**

- Take Five Scholars Program.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP, & CONTINUING EDUCATION

- Member:
 - Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) (2011- Present)
 - Member, Editorial Advisory Committee— *Seven Days, Many Voices: Insights into the Biblical Story or Creation*. Rabbi Benjamin David, ed. CCAR Press. 2017.
 - Rabbinical Association of Greater Kansas City (2018 - Present)
 - Program and Engagement Professionals of Reform Judaism (PEP-RJ) (2020 - Present)
 - New Jersey-West Hudson Valley Association of Reform Rabbis (2011-2018)
 - Secretary (2016-2018)
- Trained Facilitator:
 - Mahloket Matters: Navigating Inner Challenges and Societal Discord through Jewish Text and Social Emotional Learning.
 - Prepare-Enrich Pre-Marital Counseling (www.prepare-enrich.com).
 - Chai Mitzvah—A program for adults and teens to engage in deeper Jewish learning, experiences, and ritual. (www.chaimitzvah.org).
 - Shevet Achim: The Brotherhood—A program by Moving Traditions to engage teenage boys in informal learning. (www.movingtraditions.org).
 - The Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning
 - The Mussar Institute
- Other Professional Development:
 - Central Conference of American Rabbis Conventions and continuing education offerings.
 - URJ Biennial Conventions.
 - Youth Summit at NFTY Conventions.

AWARDS, HONORS, & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Lifetime Member, NFTY Garden Empire Region, awarded spring 2018.
- The Stephen N. Levinson Memorial Prize: Awarded to the member of the senior class who has rendered the most significant service to HUC-JIR (Cincinnati) and its student body.
- The Israel Bettan Memorial Prize: Awarded to the senior student (HUC-JIR, Cincinnati) who has been most creative and imaginative in their pulpit presentation.
- The Society for Classical Reform Judaism and HUC-JIR Partnership Prize Essay: “The Union Prayer Book: A Treasury of Reform Tradition,” published in *The Reform Advocate*.
- South Dakota State Capitol, Pierre, SD: Delivered the invocation before both the state House of Representatives and Senate.

PUBLICATIONS

- What's Jewish About Tug-of-War? (July 16, 2017)
 - <https://campharlam.org/2017/07/16/whats-jewish-tug-war/>
- Selichot: Returning to God and to Each Other (September 3, 2015)
 - <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/selichot-returning-god-and-each-other>
- NFTY-GER: After NFTY Convention, GER Teens Debrief with In-flight Interviews (February 27, 2015)
 - <https://nfty.org/2015/02/27/nfty-ger-in-flight-interviews/>
- A Rabbi's Excitement for NFTY Convention (February 13, 2015)
 - <https://urj.org/blog/rabbis-excitement-nfty-convention>
- Values in Action: A Service-Learning Program for Teens (January 9, 2015)
 - <https://urj.org/blog/values-action-service-learning-program-teens>

REFERENCES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

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“Did you have fun?” That was always the first question my parents would ask me whenever I came home from any activity. Before asking what I learned, what I did, or if I won or lost, my parents wanted to make sure that I had a good time. From an early age I learned that it is the overall experience that matters the most. Having fun infers positivity and promotes candor, curiosity, creativity, mental and physical well-being, and increased engagement.

Likewise, I have always been encouraged to retain my youthful enthusiasm, creativity, and flexibility; to feel free to be silly, to see the world through the eyes of a child, to be playful yet sincere. This attitude influences my approach to the rabbinate, as well as my approach to life.

As we grow and mature, however, we often lose sight of those child-like qualities of wonderment, enthusiasm and the willingness to believe. I strive to work with Jews of all ages to discover the many marvels that exist in our tradition and how they relate to daily life. I encourage both youth and adults to continue dreaming, to keep an open mind, and to find both pleasure and fulfillment from engaging with our tradition.

Through my experiences in the rabbinate I have often found myself reflecting on my parents’ teaching. I focus my work on heightening the experience of Judaism for all. I now understand “fun” as both a word and an acronym. Therefore, my overall goal in the rabbinate is to put the **F-U-N** into Jewish life: **Foundation—Unbridled joy—Nearness**.

Laying the **Foundation** of Jewish Learning and Understanding:

I believe that being Jewish and living a Jewish life cannot be complete without having a strong grasp of the foundations of our tradition. As such, in all congregational or community activities that I lead or participate in, I always find opportunities to incorporate teachings about our history, our theology, and the meanings behind our prayers, holidays, and rituals. I accomplish this through engaging, accessible, and relevant sermons, classes, and informal conversations. There is always more to learn and none of us, myself included, will ever truly know all that there is to know about the Jewish past. Our modern take on Judaism is based on the ancient rabbinic teaching “*v’talmud Torah k’neged kulam*,” the assertion that study is equal to all other acts of loving-kindness. By linking our past to our present I help everyone develop a deeper understand of our rich traditions, both the timely and timeless meanings behind them; laying the foundation for a strong future.

Experiencing **Unbridled Joy** in Jewish Life:

I believe in providing opportunities to rejoice in our tradition as individuals and as a community so that we may celebrate with and support each other whenever possible. In more places than I could count, our tradition instructs us to rejoice and be happy on our holidays and in fulfilling our commandments. The Book of Proverbs teaches, “A merry heart is a good medicine, but a broken spirit dries bones.” (17:22) When we experience Judaism first-hand we are able to truly feel the joy that comes from spirituality, from learning, and from being part of something bigger than ourselves.

Whether it is the satisfaction of learning even just a few Hebrew letters or mastering an entire Torah portion; whether it is finding a personal connection with God or delighting in the energy of communal prayer; and whether it is the thrill of private study and reflection or the pleasure of meeting new people and making new friends, I ensure that we all find joy in the various facets of Jewish life.

Cultivating **Nearness** to God, Tradition, and Community:

Judaism as a religion and as a people would fail if we were not able to make personal connections to our tradition and to find meaning in living a Jewish life. Our tradition is so varied and contains so many gems that there is something with which each and every one of us can relate. I make Judaism come alive for all of us, in services, in religious school, in youth activities, and in personalized life-cycle events in the synagogue, in our communities, in our homes, and in our hearts.

In our lives we undertake the bold endeavor of trying to live in close relationship with God. Two of our greatest commentators, Maimonides and Nachmonides, differ in their beliefs of how we can experience God. Maimonides teaches that we can only experience and understand God through intellectual pursuits. Nachmonides teaches that we seek an even greater closeness or nearness to God called “*d’veikut*,” a more metaphysical and spiritual understanding and experience of God. I strive to support personal exploration of the idea of God, helping others draw closer to however they understand the divine.

I believe that our relationships with each other are equally as important as our relationships with God. Judaism becomes ever more personal when we develop authentic relationships within our Jewish community. My rabbinate has been, and always will be, about establishing meaningful relationships with congregants, families, the congregation as a whole, and our greater community. In a Jewish community we learn from and support each other; we lift each other up, making the experience of Judaism that much greater.

I empower the members of my community to take ownership of the aspects of Judaism that speak to them. I mentor others as they spark their own relationships with tradition. I help to guide them towards being confident in their Jewish identities and practice. I see my role as coach and counsel; teacher and student; pastor and friend.

As a rabbi I continually encourage others—those with whom I work, whom I teach, and from whom I learn—to look at our tradition with youthful wonder and unbridled joy. I foster excitement in the experience and study of Judaism and help everyone make personal connections within our tradition. I look forward to serving a congregation committed to these goals. Above all, I look forward to accomplishing this together as we put the Foundation, Unbridled joy, and Nearness into Jewish life.