

For a Big Conservative Synagogue, a New Style of Rabbi

By Bill Jeff Diamant April 2, 2005

A New Jersey synagogue has secured a small place in Jewish history, becoming the first Conservative temple anywhere with more than 500 families to hire a female rabbi since the denomination began ordaining women in 1985, a rabbinical group said.

Francine Green Roston will become rabbi of Congregation Beth El in South Orange, which has 550 families, on July 1, when she leaves her job at Congregation Beth Tikvah in New Milford, N.J., which has 150 families.

"I'm mainly excited because [Beth El] is a great congregation in a great community, and it's a great job," said Roston, 36. "But I'm also excited because a path is being set."

Orthodox Judaism does not ordain women. The Reform movement was the first Jewish denomination to ordain a female rabbi, Sally Priesand, in 1972. Reconstructionists followed in 1974, and Conservative Judaism ordained its first woman rabbi in 1985.

Female rabbis in the Reform movement have headed congregations larger than the 500-family threshold, a figure which, although of little scriptural significance, seems to carry weight in a decimal-oriented society.

But a study last year showed that no woman had ever been hired to lead a Conservative temple of that many families, and the concept of female rabbis remains controversial at many Conservative synagogues.

"There will be a few members of the congregation who will resign because they feel this is not what they want," said James Schwarz, co-chairman of Congregation Beth El's search committee. "For people who are more traditional, meaning they've always had a male and they see a male as their rabbinical figure, it's tough."

The search committee agreed from the start that in replacing Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein, who has served for 35 years, it would not discriminate by sex, Schwarz said.

Despite some initial grumbling, most skeptical older members quickly warmed to Roston when she visited in late February as part of the search, said Aaron Nierenberg, who led the search committee with Schwarz.

"The weekend she was with us . . . there was an electricity in the room that you could almost feel, just the way she connected with people," Nierenberg said. "She had no problem just approaching people. She would walk up to little kids, older people, and engage them in conversation."

One 83-year-old member of Congregation Beth El, who had been skeptical about Roston, turned to search committee members after her appearance and said, "She's my guy," Schwarz said.

Roston grew up in Farmington Hills, Mich., a Detroit suburb, and knew from an early age that she wanted to become a rabbi. It helped that she grew up as a Reform Jew and that the movement was ordaining women while she was a child, Reston said.

"When I grew up and said I wanted to be a rabbi, no one told me no," she said.

During college, she became more traditional in her Jewish practices and gravitated toward the Conservative movement.

After graduating from Brandeis University in 1990, she enrolled in a pre-rabbinic studies program at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, a school of Conservative Judaism. She was later recognized at the school for her knowledge of Talmud -- ancient biblical commentary by rabbis -- and graduated in 1998.

Her first job after graduation was at Temple Beth Shalom in Livingston, N.J., as an associate rabbi. Then she was hired by Congregation Beth Tikvah, where she was praised for starting a Hebrew school that draws 40 students and for bringing in 28 families.

The Conservative movement, which is international but concentrated in North America, has ordained 188 female rabbis. The Reform movement has ordained 417, and at least 15 lead congregations with more than 500 families, said Emily Grotta, spokeswoman for the Union for Reform Judaism.

Still, Roston said, she feels like a pioneer. "I say that with the humility and consciousness that there are Reform colleagues who are out there doing the work and succeeding. But people tend to look within their own movement, and within the Conservative movement it is groundbreaking."

Rabbi Francine Green Roston says "a path is being set" for women at big Conservative temples.