

Middletown's Adath Israel Synagogue Welcomes First Female Rabbi

By Cassandra Day

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Photo: Cassandra Day / Hearst Connecticut Media



Rabbi Nelly Altenburger, joined Congregation Adath Israel at 8 Broad St., Middletown, July 1. She is the first woman rabbi to lead the parish.

MIDDLETOWN — After a two-year search, Congregation Adath Israel hired a native of Sao Paulo, Brazil to lead the synagogue as the 100-year-old parish's first female rabbi.

Rabbi Nelly Altenburger comes from Congregation B'nai Israel in Danbury, where she served for 14 years. After a decade and a half of leading the Fairfield County synagogue, Altenburger said it came time for a change.

She looked into several job openings, "but this was by far the best fit. A lot has to do with how energies come together, and work for the best, and for the most positive outcomes: keeping religion in general alive and keeping Judaism, one of the most traditional religions, alive," Altenburger said.

"It's not something easy to do. The community needs to be there. It was a coming together of similar hearts, similar minds," she said.

Female rabbis aren't plentiful. "There are always going to be those who hold rabbis in general as a male and masculine space," Altenburger said. "Once you show love for Torah, and once you show you can share that love, gender becomes irrelevant.

"Some can't cross that boundary, and there's nothing you can do about it. It has to be an internal movement," she said.

Even before she began her studies, Altenburger said she was told she wouldn't be able to have children and fulfill her role. However, she's happy to report she and her husband of 16 years have four children.

One thing she and her congregation have had to adjust to is virtual prayer services, which are offered daily. Altenburger participated in Zoom forums even before she came aboard.

"It showed her commitment to us and the new chapter she's starting in her desire to become part of this community," synagogue President Jonathan Shapiro said.

Middletown is a very warm community, Altenburger said.

"There is this idea in Judaism that you only exist because God wants you to be there. God cannot dream of a world without you there, and I think that's true of Congregation Israel as well," Altenburger said.

Shapiro agreed. "We have a very open congregation. We have a lot of interfaith families, a lot of people that have different backgrounds in their past in Judaism. She signifies that in a lot of ways."

He has been a member of Adath Israel, a conservative congregation in the Jewish faith, since he was a child. "We're very fortunate to have her. We were very diligent in our search," he said.

Altenburger has also spent time living in Argentina, England and Israel. She is a fluent speaker of Portuguese, English, Hebrew and Spanish who earned a bachelor of arts degree in Hebrew language and literature from the University of Sao Paulo. She earned her rabbinic ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinical Studies in Los Angeles in 2006. Two faith leaders have been filling in on a part-time basis at the 8 Broad St. synagogue since Rabbi Seth Haaz left: Rabbi Marshal Press, the Jewish chaplain at Connecticut Valley Hospital; and Rabbi Michael Kohn, who formerly led Congregation Bnai Israel.

One year ago, the congregation, composed of about 200 families, welcomed parishioners from Temple B'nai Abraham of Meriden into its fold. Many were already attending services in Middletown. Congregants hail from throughout Middlesex County, Madison and Newington, "and everywhere in between," Shapiro said.

Altenburger said she is a cautious person, and is using that approach to formulate her plans for the congregation.

"There's a beautiful Jewish saying which means people plan and God laughs. You should plan, but you can't get too attached to your plans, because life happens."

"Every religion needs to find ways of renewing and remaining alive and relevant," Altenburger said. "Liberal Judaism has been working through those issues and those questions. How do you marry political instances and a search for justice in this world with a connection with God and people?"

Religion, in general, has been used as a form of oppression in the past. That is where religion needs to change, she said.

"Once you accept certain realities, and you don't change them, then religion begins to die, because religion cannot be just a question of being inside a building, and just a little piece of your life," Altenburger said.

"God is either supremely relevant or not relevant at all: You can't just have something that is a little bit. It's not just about praying to God to change the world, it's about changing the world with your hands as well," she said.

Americans need to relearn how to disagree, and how to love one another despite differences that appear to separate them, Altenburger said. "Every single person is created in the image of God, meaning their souls are connected to God. Sometimes they forget."

One thing she intends to do is learn something about every single parishioner and to develop relationships with them.

"That's what makes or breaks any community is how healthy and positive the relationships are within, because that creates a virtuous cycle of goodness, giving and generosity," Altenburger said.

Her mission is never to convert people to Judaism, Altenburger said. "I set out more to show the tradition is beautiful. It can teach us a lot about how to live in this world, and how to find goodness and how to be a light for everyone."

"To have a new spiritual leader to start this new chapter of the congregation is exciting," Shapiro said. "I was not looking for someone for our congregation that wanted a job as a rabbi. I wanted someone to be a part of the greater community.

"I wanted someone looking for a home," he said. "I think we found it in Rabbi Altenburger."

For information, visit Adath Israel on Facebook, call 860-346-4709, or go to adathisraelct.org.