

New Jersey Jewish News MetroWest Feature

Local philanthropists nurture a fellowship that nurtures synagogues

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Located in one of the country's fastest-growing counties, the only Conservative synagogue in Leesburg, Va., has no rabbi and no paid staff. When the community erected a building in 2004, they included a rabbi's study with a pullout bed and a shower, because there is no available housing within walking distance, save for the million-dollar homes that were recently built.

The one thing Congregation Sha'are Shalom does not lack is the service of reliable and talented rabbinical students, thanks to an initiative conceived and funded by North Caldwell residents Ned and Jane Gladstein.

The initiative, known as the Emerging Kehillah Fellowship, pairs Conservative rabbinical students with emerging congregations. Upon ordination, the student is required to serve an emerging congregation for three years.

During the fourth and fifth years of rabbinical school, the students are mentored by rabbis of established congregations, in whose communities they must live.

Through the pilot phase of the project, Congregation Agudath Israel of West Essex in Caldwell served as the mentoring community.

The program's goal, according to Rabbi Alan Silverstein of Agudath Israel, is "to challenge the Conservative Movement to seed and develop emerging congregations systematically, aggressively, and effectively and...to create a higher profile within the rabbinical school for serving in congregations."

This last point, said Silverstein, is because of a trend among newly ordained rabbis "to serve in rabbinic positions outside of congregations."

The students are known as Gladstein Fellows; the program is being formally launched this fall.

Ned Gladstein, owner of Sunrise ShopRite Inc., which owns and operates ShopRite grocery stores in West Caldwell and Parsippany, is former chair of the [Jewish Theological Seminary](#) Rabbinical Advisory Board and incoming member of the JTS board of directors.

He was intimately familiar with issues facing both the movement and the students. But the idea "evolved," he said, over a number of years.

He had visited emerging congregations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union with [Masorti Olami](#), the international Conservative movement, and noticed the same kind of phenomenon in London and Paris. "All over the place there are people trying to make new shuls," he said.



Ned Gladstein with Rabbi Jason Miller

Gladstein had already been funding a rabbinical fellowship at JTS, but realized he could make a far greater impact.

“It’s easy to say, ‘Here’s a fellowship’ and shake hands with a student at the end of five years and keep in touch,” he said. “I wanted to form a strategic partnership between JTS, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism’s Alim Program, and the Rabbinical Assembly to help promote emerging congregations in the United States. That became my dream.”

“It’s transformative for the movement,” said program coordinator Rabbi Mychal Springer, associate dean of the JTS Rabbinical School and director of field education. “It’s a way of thinking about shuls that we haven’t done before. We’re taking an interest in small groups that have headed out on their own and supporting them before they ask. Usually, people want money and have to sell their idea. But [in this case], we know people out there are doing creative things. We want to work with them.”

The Alim program was established to help congregations as they form and get off the ground, according to Paul Drazen, director of the USCJ Department of Congregational Services. He will help JTS identify start-up congregations in need of rabbinic leadership.

The Gladstein fellowship was initially piloted in 2003-04 at Agudath Israel and Sha’are Shalom, then known as the Loudoun Jewish Congregation; **Rabbi Jason Miller**, then a student, was already living in the Caldwell community, and he began working with Silverstein and serving Sha’are Shalom for about 10 weekends during the year.

Since then the program has been tweaked. Recruitment now begins with incoming rabbinical students instead of those entering their fourth year; the requirement to serve an emerging congregation was added as well.

In return for their commitment to the Kehillah program, Gladstein fellows receive tuition assistance and a stipend. During their first three years, students receive \$5,000 or 20 percent of their tuition, whichever is more. In the last two years, they receive full tuition plus a living stipend pegged at twice the tuition. There are also traveling costs built in, so that the total investment is just under \$100,000 per year.

Before the fellowship came along, the Leesburg congregation had managed by relying heavily on a rabbi from a neighboring community. They would hire a rabbi for the High Holy Days, but went without a religious leader the rest of the year or would have basic needs, from services to life cycle events, met on a monthly basis by a local community member.

The Leesburg congregation had had the services of JTS students since Miller piloted the program, although there was no mentoring component in the intervening years between his service and this year. **Lorraine Davis**, president of Sha’are Shalom, noticed the difference.

“Before [this year], the student rabbis would have to ask this teacher and that teacher, wait for an answer, and then, depending on their religious or political perspective, would have to refract it to something meaningful,” she said. By comparison, she added, “the mentor responds quickly.”

Types of issues that have arisen over the years include everything from conversion and the kashrut of cheese to whether or not synagogue members could use stickers on Shabbat.

This year and next year, fourth-year rabbinical student Michael Rogosin will be mentored by Rabbi Gordon Tucker of Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY, where he will live while serving Sha’are Shalom for eight to ten weekends per year. When he is not physically with them on those weekends, he will be available via e-mail and telephone.

Meanwhile, fellows currently in their first, second, and third years of rabbinical school will alternate between West Caldwell and White Plains.

Since the pilot year of the program, when the congregation had just 40 members and no building, Sha'are Shalom has grown to 125 members and is now on its way to hiring a full-time rabbi in 2008. Rogosin will be their last Gladstein fellow.

Ned and Jane Gladstein hope other donors will join the Kehillah project. "We'd like to see more fellowships. There could be Schwartz Fellows and Cohen Fellows. That's a big next step," said Ned Gladstein. "We have had to turn down students who could have done a spectacular job. And we have to make decisions picking just one emerging congregation. The need is tremendous."

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