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Young rabbis quickly get in touch with the needs of their congregations

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Rabbi Naphtali Weisz thought growing a beard might help him look older.

"I thought you needed a rabbinic image," said the 26-year-old spiritual leader of Beth Jacob Synagogue in Berwick.

But after he shaved it off — accidentally — he realized it didn't make that much difference. "People see beyond that," he said.

Rabbi Jason Miller, 30, six months into his job as pulpit leader at Congregation Agudas Achim in Bexley, said he doesn't think about his age most of the time. Tall and broad-shouldered with a closely cropped beard, the rabbi is conversational, readily offering his hand in greeting to anyone, young or old.

But once in a while, he senses that some congregants look at him and see their grandsons. "People still think of the rabbi as this older male figure," he said.

Rabbis Miller and Weisz are two of a new generation of rabbis, not long out of rabbinical school and now standing on the pulpit as senior rabbis.

It's an awesome responsibility, both say. And both have awesome goals: build their congregations, attract younger members, develop programming to serve a range of needs and demographics. But both are confident they can do the job, and their congregants seem to be giving them room to develop.

Still, both say, there are moments when the challenges of the job are tough to juggle.

The grandson from Berwick

Rabbi Weisz is familiar with Beth Jacob. He spent his childhood attending services there. He also knew its longtime rabbi intimately.

The late Rabbi David Stavsky, who died in 2004, was his grandfather. Young Weisz, or "Tuly," as many still call him, used to walk to *shul* with him and hang out in his rabbinical office.

Now, while he's sitting in the same office where he once peered over his grandfather's shoulder, Rabbi Weisz realizes to some extent, he's working in the older man's shadow.

"I was concerned that he would be this presence I was never able to shake," he said of his grandfather. "But the more I'm here, the more I'm beginning to appreciate my grandfather in a



Ruth Portnoy :: TNS

Rabbi Naphtali Weisz



Photo courtesy of Rabbi Miller

Rabbi Jason Miller with his son, Josh, and Stinger at a Columbus Blue Jackets game.

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whole other capacity.

"He was able to manage an entire *shul*. He would give a *Gemorrah shir* (class on the Talmud) and another *shir*, and speak at this event and that event. And he never said, 'Oh my gosh. What am I going to speak about?'"

Synagogue members say they can't help but make the comparison.

"It's a tough act to follow," said synagogue board chairman Jon Young. "I'm sure some people have an expectation."

Young said no one is concerned.

"We know he needs to get some experience under his belt dealing with things," said Young. "But he's a go-getter."

Following in his grandfather's footsteps was not Rabbi Weisz's original plan. He had planned on a law career. He attended Yeshiva University's rabbinical school to satisfy his personal study goals.

Rabbi Weisz said he applied for other rabbinical posts. But the Beth Jacob position tugged at him. Since his grandfather's death, the synagogue had been searching for a suitable permanent leader. Some members had left for neighboring congregations, and not many new people were joining. Membership is around 220 households and hasn't grown in several years. Five families recently left for a neighboring synagogue, said the rabbi.

"That saddened me," he said. "I almost felt a sense of obligation to do something."

Young said the search committee was impressed with the rabbi's level of Torah knowledge, but also with his enthusiasm for returning to his hometown.

"I think he's going to attract a lot of young people," Young said.

Rabbi Weisz's goals are manifold, he says, among them creating more local youth programming so that Orthodox Jewish teens have more weekend social choices. He and Abby recently took synagogue youth on a ski trip.

His larger goal is to create programming across the entire Jewish community and develop ways to attract more young Orthodox families to the area.

He is working with Rabbi Howard Zack of Congregation Torat Emet/The Main Street Synagogue on joint community educational events and with Rabbi Cary Kozberg of Wexner Heritage Village on programs to include older adults and those with disabilities.

But there also is the *shul's* daily business. The pace is hectic. Rabbi Weisz leads services and gives sermons. The rabbi has been at work on redesigning Beth Jacob's newsletter, "Voice of Jacob." His next project is a revamp of the Web site.

Balancing everything that needs to be done with the attention required at home isn't easy, he says. Abby and Rabbi Weisz have 19-month- and 3-month-old daughters.

"The job is a little more than 24/7," he says. "You have to run out in the middle of the night or early in the morning. It cuts into family time. We try and have our boundaries. I'm always there for bath time and dinner and bedtime. So far, I've been pretty good."

He admits he could never do his work without the help of volunteers. He said he's been moved at the way congregants have stepped forward as lay leaders.

"For example, I was at the hospital visiting so many different people," he said. It was overwhelming. I felt I needed to be there all day with this lady. She has nobody else. Then the next day I was visiting somebody else and I felt I should be there for hours and hours. But I couldn't."

Now, with the help of sisterhood president Stacey Leeman, members of a lay committee also visit the sick.

Rabbi Weisz said knowing the community has been an advantage. But sometimes it creates awkward moments. His parents, Michael and Chanita, are *shul* members. And so are many people who watched him grow up.

One of the more difficult areas for him has been counseling those he has known since boyhood. "People have a lot going on beneath the surface. A lot of trouble," he said. "I know these people, but now they are opening up and confiding in me."

Stepping into transition

Rabbi Jason Miller arrived at Agudas Achim eight months ago armed with ideas.

The Michigan native, whose last job was as rabbi at the University of Michigan Hillel, has started by trying to make Shabbat a more exciting time.

"Shabbat is prime time," he said. His goal is to inspire the community "to be able to come here and be excited about *shul* and excited about Judaism."

Rabbi Miller has enrolled the synagogue in the Synaplex program, through which it receives advice and assistance in designing and evaluating Shabbat programs. Through Synaplex, Agudas Achim now offers occasional, full-weekend events, with several activities from which participants can choose. The menus include alternative prayer minyans, yoga sessions, family dinners and seasonal activities. About 250 people came for each day of the first Synaplex weekend.

Rabbi Miller also wants to enlarge the preschool, which has 16 students. "We're planning on doubling in size," he said.

He conducts an interfaith discussion group for intermarried couples.

He also conducts a Torah study one Monday night each month at the Bexley Monk restaurant. About 25 people generally attend and enjoy beer, wine and snacks.

To assist him, the board recently hired a family and youth program director and a new ritual director — both of them in their 20s.

Synagogue board members say they haven't given the new rabbi a list of specific directives. But Steve Shkolnik, board vice chairman, said the trustees want to raise Agudas Achim's profile and increase its membership. That's already happening. About 500 households are members. Fifty of them joined in the last eight months, said Rabbi Miller.