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## Agudas Achim's new rabbi ready for transition

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Congregation Agudas Achim has its first permanent Conservative rabbi.

Members voted April 16 to hire Rabbi Jason Miller. He begins the job July 1.

Rabbi Miller, 29, a native of West Bloomfield, Mich., comes to Agudas Achim, 2767 E. Broad St., after two years as associate director at the University of Michigan Hillel Foundation.

Synagogue President David Spialter said Rabbi Miller's youth and training mattered most to the board. "He's enthusiastic and has incredible energy and intellect, but balanced with the practical side," he said.

"And I think being a Hillel director, he knows how to reach kids. We need to get youth here. He thinks issues through in a *halachic* manner. He's fully egalitarian and committed to it."

Rabbi Miller graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2004. During rabbinical school and afterward, he worked at a number of synagogues and led several youth educational programs. He has received fellowships and awards, including the Lion of Judah from State of Israel Bonds and the Goldstein Award from the theological seminary.

He and his wife, Elissa, a trained teacher and realtor, have a son, Joshua, 2, and 5-month-old twins, Jonah and Talya.



Ruth Portnoy :: TNS

Rabbi Jason Miller and his wife, Elissa, answer questions in the Agudas Achim Synagogue chapel. The couple will move to Columbus in the summer.

Six-hundred families belong to Agudas Achim. The April 16 vote to hire Rabbi Miller was 91–12 with two abstentions. The board vote was 26–1, with one abstention.

Those in favor of the hiring said they are looking forward to the start of Rabbi Miller's service.

Steve Siegel said: "We're excited. Our *shul* has been struggling for some time to get some direction. We've got a nice young guy. He's got a nice young family. We're looking forward to attracting young families back to Agudas Achim."

Gary Beim said, "He's young and vibrant and brings good possibilities."

Rabbi Miller will assume the pulpit as Agudas Achim takes final steps toward fully egalitarian Conservative practice. Its members voted in 2004 to shift from Orthodox to Conservative affiliation, and that has meant working toward allowing women to participate fully in leading prayer services and counting women toward a prayer *minyan*.

In the fall, as it began the search for a permanent leader, the synagogue board appointed Conservative Rabbi Gerald Zelermyer interim rabbi. Most of the clergy who had worked at the synagogue before, including Rabbi Moshe Dick, have left. Only Cantor Baruch Shifman, who has held the job for 25 years, remains. He said he plans to retire soon.

The transition toward full egalitarian practice remains incomplete. Some synagogue members have noted that some worshippers accustomed to Orthodox practices have had a difficult time adjusting.

Spialter said Rabbi Miller will serve as the authoritative voice that will help guide the congregation. "He will be the *marā d'atra*," Spialter said. "Once we have a permanent rabbi, I think the questions will be gone. It will be implemented finally, and done with."

Board member Richard Rogovin said Rabbi Miller is "strong enough to take the *shul* in a direction and withstand divergence, which has been our main problem. We need to come together. We need unity." Rabbi Miller told congregants that is his goal. He said he realizes worshippers may not be equally comfortable participating, and everyone's feelings should be respected. But he added: "I believe very deeply in egalitarianism and in

*halacha*. This endeavor is a learning opportunity."

On April 16, Rabbi Miller spent about a half-hour answering congregants' questions. He outlined his plans to implement programs to attract youth and adults, and to create more Shabbat programming to make the weekly holiday a focal point for more people.

He said attracting new members is important, but he is more concerned with creating a sense of family within the synagogue. "This should be a place where people enjoy coming," he said. "That means more programs, more marketing and PR, more saying, 'This is the new place, the new thing' and there's something for everyone."

He also wants Agudas Achim to connect to the wider Columbus community over matters of social justice. "We really do believe this world is broken and greatly in need of repair," he said. "We are God's partner. But we have to have other partners as well. It may be the church down the street, or your neighbors."