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Jewish Community Chaplain Rabbi Barry Cohen, pictured at the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland's offices Wednesday, June 28, 2023. (Rockne Roll/The Jewish Review)

"Being present with people"

Rabbi Cohen takes on many roles with one unifying mission

By **ROCKNE ROLL**

The Jewish Review

There are few constants in Jewish Community Chaplain Rabbi Barry Cohen's day. Except for, perhaps, time spent in the car.

"Thank goodness for satellite radio," he said.

It makes sense that Rabbi Cohen is on the go a lot – within the approximately 5,000 square miles of the Portland area are over 31,000 Jewish households. Eighty percent of those are not members of a synagogue. When those families need a rabbi to officiate a funeral or visit a sick relative, they turn to the community chaplain.

Before Rabbi Cohen was hired into the role five years ago, families unaffiliated with a congregation in need of pastoral services didn't have a centralized resource available – it was a matter of seeing who would pick up the phone and who had time among Portland's rabbis. All too often,

the sad and frustrating answer was "no one."

"It always felt as if it were just one more justification of their not being involved when they couldn't get a rabbi like that because all of the congregational rabbis are already stretched very thin in this town," said Rabbi Ariel Stone of Congregation Shir Tikvah. As a member of the Oregon Board of Rabbis, she was heavily involved in creating the position, along with the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland, and in hiring Rabbi Cohen to fill it. Rabbi Stone recalled sifting through heaps of resumes, but Rabbi Cohen's stood out.

"I think we gravitated toward Rabbi Cohen's resume because of the things he put into that about how important relationships were to him," she said.

Relationships have been at the core of Rabbi

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CHAPLAIN

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Cohen's work long before he took this role, but when you are working with a family that has suffered a loss and need to comfort them while also preparing a meaningful service, those relationships need to form quickly. Every family, every person, every set of circumstances surrounding a death is different. Those differences affect everything from how to approach a grieving family member to how to structure and perform the funeral.

"There's an expression that was just hammered home not only in Rabbinical school, but also in my chaplaincy training program. It's being present with people," Rabbi Cohen said. "I am there. I am listening. I am paying attention. I am curious. I want to learn more."

Rabbi Stone explained that a member of Shir Tikvah's husband had passed away right as they moved to town, but before she had been connected with Shir Tikvah or any other congregation. It was Rabbi Cohen who performed the funeral, and it was an experience that Rabbi Stone said the widow remarked on most favorably.

"I was able to find out from her that it was a wonderful experience and that he did everything that she could have needed at this terrible, terrible time for her," Rabbi Stone said.

That presence is also a critical skill in visiting Jewish patients in hospitals around the area. Rabbi Cohen spends Wednesdays at Oregon Health & Science University Hospital. When other area hospitals have unaffiliated Jewish patients who are interested in receiving a visit from a Jewish clergy member, Rabbi Cohen gets the call – another way in which he has taken a burden off the congregational rabbis in the area.

Debra Mecartea coordinates the chaplaincy program at OHSU hospital. She described the Clinical Pastoral Education training that Rabbi Cohen has competed as the "gold standard."



Rabbi Barry Cohen, right, leads young travelers from the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland's March 2023 mission to Israel in shabbat blessings at a reunion for trip attendees at the Mittleman Jewish Community Center Friday, May 5. (Jewish Review file photo)

"Whether that is someone who is either accidentally listed as Jewish or someone who is really devoutly Jewish or would say they're atheist or something in between, I know that he'll be able to interact with them really well," Mecartea said. "He'll be able to get them the resources they need."

Often, Rabbi Cohen will come in knowing little more than that they are Jewish – they could be very religiously observant or not at all. Like in so many other situations, Rabbi Cohen takes this as an opportunity to listen and connect with the person and what they really need. Some want to pray; others simply want to connect with another person who shares their culture and background. Either way, his mere presence is valuable.

"What I have found is that even the people that may say that they're the most secular or agnostic even, given the opportunity to talk about spirituality, which can really open up a lot about where are they right now," Rabbi Cohen said. "What are their needs? What are their anxieties? What are their fears?"

Rabbi Cohen also spends time

at the area's retirement communities – he's is at Cedar Sinai Park on Mondays and also has regularly scheduled time with five other communities and more sporadic connections at six more.

"He goes to where my mother lives and there's a lot of support," explained Susan Greenberg, Executive Director of Jewish Family and Child Service. "There's a lot of appreciation for what he does at the senior places that he goes to."

Rabbi Cohen also works with JFCS through their "Walking Beside You" grief support group and is working to expand his involvement in other JFCS programs in the coming months.

Rabbi Cohen's Mondays at Cedar Sinai start with breakfast, moving around the room saying hello. Much of this time early in the day could be defined as schmoozing, but those lighter conversations occasionally take deeper, heavier turns. After breakfast, Rabbi Cohen will go to visit a list of residents in their rooms, sometimes meeting with family members and others as he finds them, but sometimes the most important conversations happen in the in-between spaces

and times.

"People are always in the halls. They are always in the lobby. They've now set up a pool table," he said. "You walk by someone, and you start a conversation. Again, it may be surface level, but then again, they may say, 'Hey, can we go over into this corner over there? I really need to talk.'"

Cathy Zheutlin, Spiritual Life Coordinator at Cedar Sinai Park, explains that each person has individual needs, and that one of Rabbi Cohen's best talents is to identify and address that need.

"It's so individual; one person needs to know that they matter in the world, another person needs to be comforted, another person needs companionship," she said. "He can provide, one by one, those kinds of services."

At important times like Passover, Rabbi Cohen makes sure that people living in non-Jewish facilities have access to matza, but less festive activities like grief groups for widows and widowers are the bread and butter of those visits – and they often evolve in unexpected ways.

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Rabbi Cohen had been working consistently with 10 to 15 residents at Courtyard Village in Raleigh Hills for quite a while. “The group got back to me and said, ‘We feel like we’ve done enough of the grief work, but we still want to be together,’” he said. “So, it changed from being a formal grief group to a group that is trying to maximize meaning and significance from the aging process.”

There is so much more, too. While spending time with people at retirement communities and hospitals, Rabbi Cohen also networks with the staff of those locations so that when there are questions or concerns about issues related to the Jewish community, he can respond and be a resource.

Some of the interactions Rabbi Cohen takes on are not as emotionally heavy, like visiting a new-to-town fami-

ly and hanging a mezuzah on their doorpost, performing a baby naming for a child whose parents aren’t affiliated with a synagogue and even speaking at high schools around the area that are interested in learning about Jewish culture and history. As COVID-19 restrictions have lifted, Rabbi Cohen has returned to officiating weddings, performing a number this summer. As if he wasn’t busy enough, he also pens the Chaplain’s Corner column for each issue of *The Jewish Review*.

One of his favorite jobs, a role that he has been called on to fulfill frequently in recent weeks leading up to the High Holidays, is to serve as a member of a *beit din*, the rabbinical court that signs off on conversions to Judaism. A conversion candidate’s appearance before the *beit din* is one of the last steps in the process after a year or more of study and work with a rabbi and is truly a special mo-

ment for both the candidate and the rabbis involved. While Rabbi Cohen refers those interested in studying toward conversion to the Introduction to Judaism class offered by the Oregon Board of Rabbis, serving as one of the other two rabbis on a *beit din* offers a unique opportunity for connection.

“What makes the *beit din* so special is that in preparation, I get to read that person’s story, how they came to Judaism, why they want to embrace Judaism as part of their identity. And that prepares me to be able to have a just a genuine interaction with the conversion candidate,” Rabbi Cohen said. “We have very heartfelt conversations and interactions, you know, where everyone on the *beit din* gets to ask multiple questions about who that person is, what they have experienced, the challenges that may lie in the future, their favorite aspects of Judaism, favorite holidays, favorite foods. It’s very special, because it’s a very genuine interaction.”

One thing is certain – no two days are the same for Rabbi Cohen.

“It’s taken years to have a sense of comfort, knowing that every day can change,” he explained. “That being said, one of the things that drew me to the position in the first place is the whole idea that every day is going to be a little different. I’ve got to be prepared to really pivot to respond to a pressing need or even a crisis.”

Those places that need Rabbi Cohen are also sometimes far apart physically, thus his relationship with satellite radio.

“I’m able to use the time, not just dealing with Portland-area traffic,” he said.

The willingness to deal with that traffic and travel, as well as his training and talents, make Rabbi Cohen a unique part of the infrastructure of the Jewish community.

“I’m just one piece in the whole puzzle of how we’re taking care of people in our in our greater community,” he said.

Rabbi Cohen can be contacted at chaplain@jewishportland.org.

HILLEL

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has been at Oregon Hillel for 11 years.

“We work to instill that they can define what Jewish life means for them beyond college and I take a great sense of pride in that,” he said.

That “beyond college connection” can hopefully expand with the formation of the University’s Jewish Alumni Association. As Jewish UO graduates have spread out from Oregon, Gitelson hopes that chapters of the JAA can provide them with connection and resources, personally, spiritually and professionally, in a way that’s meaningful for all involved.

“They can do something around the holidays, potlucks where our young alumni could tap into those networks when they settle in those communities,” Gitelson said. “Instead of relying on a Hillel or a Federation, or in addition to relying on Hillels and Federations and places like that, they hopefully will now have a Jewish affinity group that they can tap into and see who’s in their community and how can they connect.”

“One of the biggest parts of the alumni association groups is to sustain community that has already been created on campus and to create new community,” added Dëshna Shine, Associate Director of Alumni Engagement at the University of Oregon. “We’re here to support that and manage logistics and administration and marketing and communication. We’re here to staff the events and to train and support the volunteers to be able to, to staff and support the events.”

More information on Oregon Hillel’s 30th Anniversary celebration can be found online at <https://www.oregonhillel.org/>



Rabbi Barry Cohen delivers a *d'var Torah* (scriptural lesson) at the opening of the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland's Annual Meeting Tuesday, June 6, 2023 at the Mittleman Jewish Community Center in Portland. (Rockne Roll/The Jewish Review.)