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KEEPING THE FAITH

IN THE WAKE OF CONTROVERSY THAT RATTLED A CENTURIES-OLD CONGREGATION, TEXAN RABBI ROBERT HAAS SEEKS SPIRITUAL COHESIVENESS FOR HIS FLOCK

EZRA SALKIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAT BOMBARD

A fresh spirit seems to permeate the walls of Historic Downtown Savannah's Congregation Mickve Israel, the third oldest synagogue in America.

Indeed, something stands out about Rabbi Robert Haas, who became the senior rabbi of the Reform Congregation in July. His boyish face is now among the pantheon of framed sage-like portraits of past rabbis hanging in the halls outside his office. Perhaps the aura Haas's parlor radiates is a result of the *Star Wars* memorabilia that, some might argue, clashes with his collection of scholarly Jewish literature—a more familiar detail of a rabbi's study. A Yoda bobble head figurine sits on his desk, ready to give counsel to any who should enter.

Haas, 43, began his tenure upon the departure of Interim Rabbi Darryl Crystal, who guided the Reform congregation through a year of transition after the slightly controversial exit of the previous rabbi of twenty-something years. The void left by Mickve Israel's former senior rabbi, who was thought by some congregants to have become overly opinionated, left the 275-year-old congregation in an identity crisis of sorts.

"All congregations eventually hit peaks and dips, and we've been around for almost 300 years, so we were due," Haas explains.

For congregants and history buffs alike, there's more to admire than just the façade of the lofty Gothic Revival synagogue, erected in 1876 on Monterey Square. Held within the sanctuary are two of the oldest Torah scrolls in America. Both date back to about 1500, originating in either Spain or Portugal. They accompanied the Jews expelled from those countries, who traveled through England before concluding their pilgrimage in Savannah about a month after James Oglethorpe arrived.

The congregation itself predates America by 50 years. It was here during the Revolution, built in an earlier time when the colony feared Spanish, rather than British, incursion. As old as Mickve Israel is, and because it is located in the South—not exactly the epicenter of the American Jewish Diaspora (the common term for the dissemination of Jews from the ancestral homeland across the world)—it offers a unique microcosm of American Jewry with its own subculture. For instance, the synagogue's homepage welcomes its visitors with a friendly, "Shalom, Y'all."

Mickve Israel also has its own unique issues to contend with. For one, it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and the building itself is a tourist destination. Also, it is much smaller—serving approximately 300 families—than the "mega" synagogues Haas was accustomed to serving in Houston and Dallas, which were home to approximately 2,000 families.

Haas grew up in the small Texas border-town of McAllen, in the Rio Grand Valley. He describes it as "a nice hot place with a lot of birds," and a place, like Savannah, where "everybody knew everybody." Being so close to Mexico, Haas found himself in an unlikely Jewish environment sown with Mexican and Catholic ritual and paraphernalia, marking the beginnings of a lifetime of adaptation.

Although he didn't consider himself "religious" at the time, rather than

get lost in a foreign-looking crowd, Haas decided to cling to his cultural safety blanket, immersing himself in the insular McAllen synagogue life. Haas's father was head of the ritual committee at the synagogue, he says, and sometimes his father made him lead services. Still, he insists, "I really didn't know that much."

After college, Haas taught elementary education and toyed with the idea of attending law school. Because he still "didn't really know too much," Haas dropped his plans and booked a flight to Israel, landing in the small desert town of Arod, close to the Dead Sea. There, his journey culminated in his application to rabbinical school.

Following his experience of serving in Texas, Mickve Israel is just the sort of tight-knit community Haas was seeking, so the Central Conference of American Rabbis matched him here. And, while the congregation and many things about Savannah are very old, Haas saw in Savannah a city that was, in many respects, "young and hip."

This is hardly the first time Haas has found himself adjusting to an unfamiliar environment. Before arriving in Savannah, he had just finished five months of volunteering in Nairobi and surrounding countries—which explains yet another element of unusual décor: two Sabbath candles carved into the forms of African women carrying baskets on their heads.

"Jews are among the most adaptable of people—we're like professional adapters. Throughout history, we've always had to assume, no matter how long we were settled, we might have to get up and move—like gypsies."

Now he has the challenge of planting the seeds to push ahead a historic synagogue, which on the one hand cherishes its past but on the other is looking forward.

"I want the Jewish community to be more cohesive," he says. In other words, he wants to work on programming and outreach, hoping to bring more enthusiasm to the centuries-old congregation. After hearing Haas explain it, one might call his approach holistic. He's already performed a "Bark Mitzvah," where he went to a congregant's home and blessed their dog. "I want someone of every age to be able to come to services and find something they're able to connect with," Haas says.

He's already made inroads. Haas has hosted workshops on Jewish humor and expressed interest in starting a Savannah Jewish sports team. He sometimes even goes out with younger, more adventurous congregants for Savannah roller derby and other rollicking activities. At the same time, he's reached out to those looking for something more cerebral, people like his pre-rabbinic self who might not know that much. Consequently, Haas leads pre-Saturday morning services—that is, Judaism: 101—where questions like, "What is a Jew?" are posed, and he conducts a post-service Torah study that same day.

"Religion used to rest on its laurels," Haas says. "In this changing modern world, where so many options exist, there are new challenges to keeping people involved. We have to adapt."