



FRUM on the FRONTIER

In recent years, an increasing number of young rabbis have been moving to congregations that are quite a distance from major Jewish population centers. Settling in small communities with little or no Jewish infrastructure, these idealistic rabbis and their wives are *moser nefesh* to bring Torah to Jews who often have limited Jewish knowledge. In this issue, *Jewish Action* salutes a few such pioneers—who are often the sole Orthodox representatives for miles—for spiritually sustaining small developing Jewish communities throughout North America.

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

THE CHIEF RABBI OF NEBRASKA: RABBI JONATHAN GROSS

The richest man in the world lives in Omaha, Nebraska, according to a 2008 *Forbes* magazine report. Although the publication was referring to legendary investor Warren Buffet, Rabbi Jonathan Gross, rabbi of Beth Israel Synagogue, would ardently insist that the author really must have meant him.

The spiritual leader of Beth Israel since 2004, Rabbi Gross, who is in his thirties, wakes up each day thrilled with his calling. From the start, he jumped right into the heart of Jewish Omaha—a city with an overall Jewish population of 6,500—offering educational programs and youth initiatives that have sparked the interest of Jews across the spectrum. Since his arrival, the shul has grown by one hundred members, many of whom are children. Rabbi Gross says he intends to keep up the momentum and draw even greater numbers from the larger community.

Originally from Teaneck, New Jersey, Rabbi Gross didn't plan on being a

pulpit rabbi. He majored in math at Yeshiva University (YU) and after a brief, unsatisfying stint as an actuary, he thought he should “do something Jewish.” In August 2001, he participated in YU's summer Torah Tours program, which sends students to various communities to inspire greater enthusiasm for Torah. Rabbi Gross' tour took him to Omaha. He found the people friendly and saw real potential for growth.

Although barely twenty-five at the time, he started thinking seriously about getting involved in a leadership role in Jewish communal work outside the New York metro area, confident that it was something he could do well. While studying for *semichah* at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in New York, he returned to Omaha for Sukkot and Shavuot, as well as for another summer Torah Tour. There, he conducted classes, ran children's programs, taught a “lunch and learn” and lectured in the evenings—cultivating close relationships with people in the community. In 2003, while Rabbi Gross was completing his

studies, the former rabbi of Beth Israel called to inform him that he would be leaving in a year. Rabbi Gross filed the information away and promptly sought a rabbinical mentor from whom he could learn the trade.

Go West, Young Rabbi

Rabbi Gross wanted his mentor to be a shul rabbi with the word “dynamic” emblazoned in front of his name. He chose Rabbi Steven Weil, then senior rabbi of Beth Jacob Congregation in Beverly Hills, California, and currently the Orthodox Union's executive vice president, whom he remembered as a teacher during his years at The Frisch School, a Jewish high school in Paramus, New Jersey. Rabbi Gross was impressed with Rabbi Weil's ability to build relationships with the Frisch students. “He took a personal interest in the wellbeing of everyone,” says Rabbi Gross. A visit to Beverly Hills reinforced his positive impression, and he decided to ask about the possibility of a position. Rabbi Weil offered him a rabbinic internship, and Rabbi Gross headed west.

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Six months into his new post, Rabbi Gross received a call from Beth Israel in Omaha, offering him a job. “That was it; no search committee,” says Rabbi Gross. “When I came for the interview, I already knew everyone there; they were all my friends.” The Beverly Hills community reluctantly let him go. “If he had wanted, we would have created a position for him here,” says Rabbi Weil. “That’s how popular he was.”

In Omaha, he’s still making lots of friends—a congregation-full and counting—and he intends on keeping them. “This is not a stepping stone for me,” says Rabbi Gross. “It’s not a three-year job; it’s a generational job. I want to take children from *brit milah* to high school graduation; then I will have done something here.” He means what he says. Before his move to Omaha, Rabbi Gross was taught by a professional *mohel* how to perform *brittot*, and he has succeeded in turning Beth Israel into a shul where children are eager to visit.

During his frequent visits to Friedel Jewish Academy, the community day school, Rabbi Gross connects with administrators, faculty and the student body. The school, which had twenty-four students when he first arrived, now boasts sixty. Janet Kohll, whose children have attended the day school and who is also a member of Beth Israel, reports that the students love him and that many children



Beth Israel Synagogue in Omaha, Nebraska, has grown since the arrival of Rabbi Jonathan Gross in 2004. Courtesy of Beth Israel

whose families aren’t affiliated with Beth Israel want to go there. Rabbi Gross has also brought his excitement for Judaism to teens by reviving Omaha’s NCSY chapter. He has attended its *Shabbatonim* and has personally taken the group on trips. Due to his involvement, in 2006 the Omaha chapter earned the title of Midwest NCSY Junior Chapter of the Year.

Word about Beth Israel’s warm, energetic rabbi has sparked the interest of

Jews throughout Omaha. “He is probably one of the most admired clergymen in the city,” says community member Zoe Riekes.

The Renaissance Rabbi

As the only Orthodox rabbi in Omaha, Rabbi Gross has had to master all aspects of rabbinics. He had to learn all the *halachot* pertaining to an eruv as well as to *kashrut* and funerals—in-deed, every facet of communal life. It’s

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no surprise he calls himself the chief rabbi of Nebraska. “My constituency extends far beyond the people in the shul,” he says. “When one is in a neighborhood with other congregations and rabbis, you have support—a colleague with whom you can talk over issues. In larger communities, the Orthodox rabbi doesn’t have to do everything; some do *kashrut*, some *eruvim*, et cetera. Here, it all falls on me. I am the Orthodox rabbi for the entire state of Nebraska.”

Rabbi Weil thinks his former rabbinic intern is more than equipped for the job. “He has a real sense of community,” says Rabbi Weil. “His strength is his ability to relate to individuals. He’s a rabbi to all of Jewish Omaha and feels responsible for each and every member.”

Evidently, his diligence is paying off. “I have members for whom their involvement in the shul is the first thing they are doing Jewishly in their lives,” says Rabbi Gross. “There’s a congregant who grew up in Alma, Iowa, the only Jewish boy within a hundred-mile radius, who now never misses a minyan.” Kohll reports that

she was drawn to Rabbi Gross because of his genuine respect for, and interest in, every Jew. “Before [Rabbi Gross arrived], if you talked to people about going to the Orthodox synagogue, you might as well have talked to them

an energy that makes one want to keep on being observant; it has helped us to keep on trucking.”

Beth Cohen, executive director of Beth Israel, reports that the shul has enjoyed a surge in membership and has attracted many families with young children. Some, she says, have even moved to the area, motivated by the rabbi’s family-oriented programming. “[These families] see that we have a vibrant, active Orthodox community and shul,” says Sharon Kirschenbaum, campaign director for the Jewish Federation of Omaha. “We might be in the middle of the country, but it’s not in the middle of nowhere.”



Howie Beigelman, left, deputy director of public policy at the OU’s Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), and Rabbi Gross, right, meet with Senator Mike Johanns (R-NE) in February to discuss the OU’s legislative priorities and the needs of Omaha’s Jewish community. The IPA holds dozens of meetings each year to connect Jewish community leaders with their local elected officials and candidates. Courtesy of Howie Beigelman

Sacrifice or Paradise?

One would expect that an East Coast transplant, who grew up amid a large concentration of *frum* Jews, would experience some culture shock living in the middle of the Midwest. But Rabbi Gross, who married his wife, Miriam, this past summer, feels right at home in Omaha. “In a small town, everyone is dependent on one another,” he says. “If someone isn’t in shul, it’s very noticeable. There is something familial about that; the community becomes very close.”

However, there are aspects of his “former life” that the rabbi still pines

about going to the moon,” she says. Kohll, who had explored and embraced Torah observance before Rabbi Gross joined the community, has since strengthened her commitment. “Omaha is predominately a non-Jewish city; sometimes a [*frum*] Jew can feel isolated,” she says. “Rabbi Gross brings



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Rabbi Gross leads a rally for Israel during the Gaza War.
 Courtesy of Beth Israel

for. “In a large community, I walk into a shul that has five daily *minyanim*,” says Rabbi Gross. “[In Omaha], we have to make phone calls. It’s five guys sitting around, waiting for ten.” In the winter, he says, when the days are shorter, there’s a chance he might not get to *daven* Minchah with a minyan. “That’s very, very hard,” he says. Similarly, as the Orthodox authority whom the community turns to for all its Torah needs and *she’eilot* (halachic questions), Rabbi Gross wishes he had other rabbis nearby with whom to discuss halachic issues. He also longs for a yeshivah with *rebbeim*

“He’s a rabbi to all of Jewish Omaha and feels responsible for each and every member.”

and “tons of *talmidim*” so he could benefit from *shiurim* and drop in on Sundays to learn in the *beit midrash*.

Nonetheless, Omaha needs him. “It’s not a strong Torah community [yet],” he says. “Although our day school tuition is very affordable, it’s hard to convince people to send their children [there]. The larger Orthodox communities are built on people who . . . give their life’s blood every year so that their children [can] have a Jewish education. I’m trying to build that kind of commitment here.” Rabbi Gross wants to reach every one of the 6,500 Jews in Omaha. “We’re all working to build something together,” he says. “I think I’m in the right place at the right time.”

His growing congregation would like that “right time” to extend to forever. “When he first came, we were worried that he was going to jump ship and move to a big shul on one of the coasts,” says Dr. Alan Kricsfeld, a physician from Omaha. “But [fortunately] he doesn’t want to. The synagogue in Nebraska is part of him.”

“I am dedicating my life to making sure that when I retire from this [role], *rabbanim* will be vying to take over my position,” says Rabbi Gross. Until then, like Mr. Buffet (the *other* richest man in the world), this Nebraskan is enjoying his riches. ■

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