



A Conversation with Holy Blossom Temple's newly appointed Senior Rabbi Yael Splansky

On Leadership, Meaningful Belonging and the Power of Joy

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On April 14, 2014, on the evening before the Passover Seder, the Board of Directors of Holy Blossom Temple, one of Canada's most influential synagogues, with a powerful membership of 1750 families that includes top Bay Street lawyers, investment bankers and influential business and political leaders, appointed Rabbi Yael Splansky, as their new Senior Rabbi Designate, the first woman to hold this role in its 158 year history.

Rabbi Yael Splansky came to Holy Blossom in 1998 after her ordination from Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. She completed her undergraduate studies in Anthropology and Jewish Studies at Indiana University and at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Her rabbinical thesis is entitled, "All is Foreseen and Freewill is Given: A Debate in Rabbinic Literature." Rabbi Splansky served first as Holy Blossom's Assistant Rabbi, concentrating on youth and young families from 1998-2000, then as Associate Rabbi from 2000-2013. As Acting Senior Rabbi since 2013, Rabbi Splansky has successfully led Holy Blossom through a trying time of transition.

Senior Rabbi Splansky is also the immediate past chair of the Reform Rabbis of Greater Toronto. She is the editor of Holy Blossom's new 600-page prayer book, *Siddur Pirchei Kodesh*, an extraordinary effort 10 years in the making, is author of the Union for Reform Judaism's "Reform Voices of Torah: 2012 Commentary on Deuteronomy," reaching a readership of 40,000 and is a monthly contributor to *The Canadian Jewish News*. She has been selected by her colleagues to serve on multiple com-

mittees of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and by Hebrew Union College, to be a mentor to rabbinical students and young Rabbis across North America. Her husband, Professor Adam Sol, is an award-winning poet and together they raise their three sons, Avishai, 13, Eli, 10 and Jesse, 7. Yael Splansky also has the unique privilege of being a fourth-generation Reform Rabbi.

Founded in 1856, 11 years prior to Canadian Confederation, Holy Blossom Temple ("HBT") has deep Canadian roots. Recognized as the first Jewish congregation in Canada, west of the Ontario/Quebec border, Holy Blossom has since played a vibrant role in the Toronto Jewish community, and within Canada, for close to 160 years. As the largest Reform congregation in Canada, Holy Blossom has become internationally known as a forward-looking place of ideas, innovative programming, and most importantly as a place for community, social action and visionary leadership.

Socially active and community focused, Holy Blossom has played a leading role in numerous causes and issues over the years. Since its founding, social action has been core to its values. Holy Blossom was integrally involved in the American civil rights movement, in the battle against apartheid, and in the struggle for women and gay rights. HBT was the first synagogue to participate in the "Out of the Cold" program to provide hot meals and shelter to Toronto's burgeoning homeless population, the first to build an apartment complex to provide affordable housing to the working poor and to provide support to new Canadian

immigrants. It was also the first synagogue to establish an AIDS committee to provide emotional and financial support for those living with HIV-AIDS.

Women have held influential leadership roles in the spiritual life of Holy Blossom for many decades. HBT has also led many firsts in the advancement of women leaders in synagogue life. In 1974, Henrietta Chesnie was chosen as its President, the first woman President of any Canadian synagogue. In 1980, HBT had another first when Joan Friedman was appointed Assistant Rabbi, becoming the first female Rabbi in Canada. Rabbi Yael Splansky's appointment and formal installation on September 20, 2014, marks another first for Holy Blossom, as it is the first female appointment in Canada as Senior Rabbi to lead a congregation of its size and scope. While this is a historic move on the part of Holy Blossom, it contributes to what has been noted as a tipping point within the Jewish Reform movement across North America, where in the past year alone, congregations have chosen women in more than half of all the openings for high profile Rabbi positions.

There is no question that Holy Blossom is undergoing a time of both transformation and renewal and that its congregation is at an important juncture in its history, and Rabbi Splansky indeed recognizes that she has her work cut out ahead of her. Like many Canadian businesses and organizations, HBT has been challenged over the past several years, both fiscally and operationally, and has gone through a difficult time of leader-

ship transition. Like many religious organizations, HBT has faced a declining membership and a congregation that has often been split between both religious and cultural questions and views. The challenges of course are many: it is about finding the careful balance to be struck between tradition and modernity, while re-engaging a community of both old and new. The realities of contemporary trends in Jewish life must also be carefully considered and judiciously incorporated, all while ensuring that the variety of needs of different generations are met. It is about creating an environment in which the community as a whole feels welcomed, motivated, engaged, inspired and that HBT provides meaning and a sense of belonging that is central to their lives. It is about ensuring a sophisticated congregation has comfort that Holy Blossom is on the right track for the years ahead. It is about providing leadership and vision for Holy Blossom, today and tomorrow. It is no small task.

This critical juncture of the congregation is symbolized in part by the Physical Renewal Project that was re-affirmed and formally launched by the Board in May 2013, which will result in a \$34-million world-class renovation. This is but one of HBT's many exciting forward-facing initiatives, which have included a new prayer book which integrally reflects the Temple's religious approach, the recent launch of a new Religious School model, the expansion of the Nursery School programs, and Holy Blossom's internationally recognized Campaign for Youth Engagement. HBT is also strengthening its Temple by-laws and governance processes with formal endorsement by the congregation, anticipated this coming winter. The appointment of a new Senior Rabbi is viewed as the most pivotal element of Holy Blossom's transformation supported by the recent appointment of its new Executive Director, Russ Joseph, new incoming leadership on both the Executive and its Rabbinic team, combined with the strength of its outstanding Cantor, Benjamin Z. Maissner, and a newly stabilized and mobilized congregation, all of which positions Holy Blossom well for the future.

As the theme of this September edition of Women of Influence magazine is on Legacy, we thought it most fitting to engage Rabbi Splansky in a conversation about leadership, her own journey to Senior Rabbi, and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for Holy Blossom.

Lisa: Congratulations Rabbi Splansky on this very exciting first for you and for Holy Blossom Temple. The board's announcement was effusive and empowering. It highlighted your intellectual rigor, your leadership, personal warmth, magnetism and ability to connect with people at every stage of life. It spoke to your effectiveness at building trust across the congregation, while striking the delicate balance between innovation and tradition. In short, it whole-heartedly endorsed you as the right leader for Holy Blossom right now. What has your appointment and this "first" meant for you and for the synagogue? What have you heard and seen?

Rabbi Splansky: I would say first of all, that there is a palpable, momentous, joyful spirit felt around the halls of Holy Blossom. There is clarity of leadership now. Not only in the appointment of a new Senior Rabbi but also with the complete Rabbinic team and Executive team in place, including a new Executive Director in

Russ Joseph. These have each been recent wins for Holy Blossom. Collectively, there is a feeling of new energy, team and possibilities that has contributed to our congregation feeling relieved, reassured and happy. There is a belief that there is nothing we can't pursue now and that as a congregation, we should dream big and that the time to do so is now.

Following the sermon I gave the day after the announcement on Passover morning, I received a standing ovation. For the congregation to all get out of their seats that morning, and to stand up and clap, was such a warm welcome for me. That was my first gift and it meant the world to me. It set the tone that there is reason to celebrate and that there is indeed momentum building for Holy Blossom.

Since the announcement, I have been flooded with Mazeltovs, face-to-face and emails, and beautiful handwritten letters from congregants and colleagues locally, and across North America and Israel. Some of what also followed came from our member donors, small, medium and large, specifically for support for the Renewal Project. It was very affirming for people to say that Holy Blossom Temple is literally a good investment. What they are saying is that the core Jewish values that they carry are reflected in this synagogue,



Senior Rabbi Yael Splansky and Lisa Heidman, Senior Client Partner, The Bedford Consulting Group, Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto, Canada



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so they're going to put their power and their financial support behind us. This financial support is needed and incredibly valued.

Another joyous moment, of which we hope there are many more to come, is when a former member of the congregation who had left HBT, approached me after the announcement, to say that his family is now returning to Holy Blossom. What we're hearing is that the community feels we are on the right track. So I think we have done much to stabilize the congregation, and as I have said, it's now time for us to mobilize as a community.

Lisa: Within Holy Blossom's new prayer book, there is a compelling 150-year history of Holy Blossom, that outlines the Temple's story from its early beginnings and highlights its many challenges and successes over the years. Do you think 50 years from now when they look back and update HBT's history, that becoming Holy Blossom's first woman Senior Rabbi is always going to be a part of your story? How do you feel about this first for you and for Holy Blossom?

Rabbi Splansky: It's so interesting, the first woman Rabbi ordained in North America was Sally Priesand, in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1972. She has said that she never wanted to be the first of anything, she just wanted to be a Rabbi and I would say that I feel exactly the same way. Rabbi Priesand said that she never thought much about being a pioneer at the time, that she just wanted to study for the Rabbinate, and wanted to be the best Rabbi she could be.

I never set out to be the first woman Senior Rabbi at Holy Blossom. It was not anywhere on my radar, until quite recently with all the press it has received. All I knew for sure, is that from very

early on in my 20's, I knew I wanted to be a Rabbi. When I became one, I simply dedicated myself to doing my very best to serve the Jewish people in general and particularly over the last 16 years, the congregation at Holy Blossom. I happen to be, in this moment, the one who was selected best equipped to lead this congregation forward and I'm grateful for the opportunity, and if I may say, I'm good at it.

That said, I do appreciate the significance of firsts, and the many women who laid a path before me, and for me. I also do take pride that Holy Blossom has always been a leader in firsts for women. These firsts were not easy, I'm sure, and I am grateful for the doors they have opened, not only for me, but also for many others. It laid the groundwork for me, so that when I arrived at Holy Blossom, I could just get to work.

Lisa: Can you share with us your early beginnings and family history? I understand you are a 4th generation Rabbi which is noteworthy. Your calling to be a Rabbi must literally be in your DNA.

Rabbi Splansky: I spent my early childhood in Ohio, moving to Boston when I was 13. My father's congregation was in Framingham, Massachusetts. I have an older sister, who is an emergency pediatrician at Boston's Children's Hospital and a younger brother who also lives in the Boston area. My mother is an epidemiologist who works for the Framingham Heart Study. My mother is also the granddaughter, daughter, mother and wife of Rabbis. She knows congregational life and has always provided insight and tremendous guidance to me.

My great grandfather, Rabbi Maurice Lorge, was a Professor of Religion at a women's college in Mainz, Germany. After graduation in 1936, my maternal grandfather, Ernst Lorge, was given a one-way ticket on the Queen Mary. Rabbi Leo Baeck sent him to study at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. My grandfather then went back to Germany, as a U.S. army chaplain and helped to liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp. These experiences led him to march with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, to serve on President Kennedy's interfaith commission, and to lead his Chicago congregation with a powerful voice. Interestingly, and as another point of connection, Holy Blossom, who has a history of attracting world thought leaders to speak, brought Dr. King to our congregation in Toronto in 1962.

My father, Rabbi Don Splansky, is what is called a "Rabbis' Rabbi." He never forgets a person's name or what he's read. Proudly, more than a dozen Rabbis, Cantors and Jewish educators have come from his Boston-area congregation. Then to add into the mix, my sister-in-law, Rabbi Felicia Sol, is also a Rabbi at a large and well-known congregation in Manhattan, B'nai Jeshurun. My cousin, Ari Lorge, is also a Rabbi in Manhattan at Central Synagogue and he is the third Rabbi Lorge in our family. So yes, this profession is definitely in the family DNA.

Lisa: Do you think any of your three boys will be Rabbis?

Rabbi Splansky: They are playful, smart, quite creative and thoughtful. They certainly joke about being Rabbis, it's not an expectation, but it's always a possibility.

Lisa: When did you know you were going to become a Rabbi? How did you make the decision or did you always know this was your calling?

Rabbi Splansky: I grew up in an Rabbinic home, so I was certainly shaped by a Jewish environment. I went to a Jewish day school, I went to a Jewish summer camp, and I was always involved in synagogue life. I was on the youth group board and became the President, first of my local youth group and then of the regional youth group, which was a very transformative experience in my senior year of high school. It was a strong and intensive program.

This experience sent me on a leadership development trajectory. I treated each of these early opportunities like a professional job. I had board meetings and committee meetings, and I had to recruit additional leadership and train them. We then led the educational programming for the whole region. It was a transformative year where I just felt myself growing and stretching in all kinds of ways. I had exposure to other leaders and leadership styles and swiftly developed all sorts of fundamental leadership skills. I learned how to connect with and engage community, what it takes to build consensus amongst disparate stakeholders and most importantly, what it takes to inspire people. I was young, but I understood leadership intuitively even then, it came naturally to me and I ran with it.

I graduated with a double major in Anthropology and Jewish studies in 1993. But it was really during my time when I was in Israel, where privately and consciously the idea of becoming a Rabbi was starting to churn. While it seems an obvious vocation now, it was not an easy decision then. When I came back from Israel before my senior year, I knew I had to make the decision because applications for Rabbinical school were due.

Having three generations of Rabbis before me made for really big and weighty shoes to fill and it did give me pause. The very big shoes of my father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather were looming so large, but I got some very good advice from my boyfriend (now my husband) at that time that was pivotal for me. What Adam said to me was, *“You have your own shoes, Yael, you don’t have to fill their shoes, do it your own way. Lead in your own way.”* That was such helpful advice. Once I realized that this was possible, that I didn’t have to walk in their shoes, but that I could find my own voice, find my own Rabbinate, find my own leadership style, it was a turning point for me. My father’s Rabbinate and my grandfather’s were also very different from each other, so I was able to see that I could pursue my own version of a Rabbinate and that was empowering for me. Once I made the decision, I knew it was right. I just had to claim my own voice through it, and I have.

Lisa: And what is that voice? What is your leadership style?

Rabbi Splansky: I would say what I project is a quiet, warm and reflective person. But when I speak, people listen. There is something that I have to say that people want to hear and it is often rooted in Judaism. Also there is an immediate sense that I am a person who can be trusted. There is discretion that also comes from being raised in a Rabbinic home. Discretion was always the thing that didn’t need to be talked about, it was just carried out. When I was a little girl and the phone would ring, I could tell in the first

10 seconds that someone had died and I knew I needed to get my father fast. Early on, I developed an intuitive understanding of people and their needs, at their most important moments.

Rabbis are also the keepers of a lot of secrets. When it comes to leadership, the ability to build trust and provide thoughtful and reflective counsel is a quality that is absolutely necessary, and it’s not talked about often. Usually when we think about leaders, we think about those who are big and bold and brash and always out front, but I believe there is an important place for reflective leadership.

Obviously a Rabbi is first and foremost a teacher, that’s what the word Rabbi means. There are times when I feel I am spending too much time in the CEO chair and need to recalibrate back to the teacher in me. I have an opportunity to do this, not only in sermons in the Sanctuary, but one-on-one and through much writing and teaching within international publications, our print bulletins, and our bi-weekly online newsletter that goes out to the congregation. For the last couple of years, I’ve also been writing monthly for the Canadian Jewish News. I’ve also done much writing for the Reform Movement across North America, so this is an ability to reach out and provide influential thought leadership beyond our immediate community.

I would say that one of my natural strengths, maybe it comes from being a middle child or an anthropology major, is that I love to study people. I enjoy figuring out what’s important to them and what makes them tick. I believe I have a leadership style that encourages people to come forward and share their stories and to teach me who and what they are about.

Lisa: How did you hone your leadership skills and your ability to lead from within?

Rabbi Splansky: At Holy Blossom, I have had many leadership opportunities. I am proud of heading up many initiatives and developing programs that have contributed to an important cultural shift within our congregation. In all of those years, what I was doing most of all, and what I love to do, and this is perhaps most reflective of my leadership style, is to cultivate meaningful relationships. I am a fundamental believer that meaningful relationships are the capital in congregation life, individual-by-individual, family-by-family, moment-by-moment. We have to leverage every one of these moments that come along and I would say that over these 16 years, it is the collective of all of these moments, that I have been accumulating most of all. It has been the connection with our members and congregants and families, and it is through these authentic relationships that you can build a sense of connection, of community, a home to come home to, and a place of meaningful belonging.

So my leadership style is all about leading from the center. I have always seen the congregation and the Jewish community in concentric circles and I see my place as leading from within, rather than just leading from the top. The hierarchical model of leadership is still our structure, but I don’t think it’s how we actually get things done. Our first step is to bring the outer circle of congregants into the center and to help them feel more engaged. One of my key responsibilities is to help guide people to find their place within Holy Blossom. Concentric leadership is about building on these relationships from the core and appreciating that it is these relation-

ships we share together, that animate meaningful congregational life.

The sacred task of a synagogue, and my job as Senior Rabbi, is to bring meaning, relevance and joy to Jewish life. It's about bringing people closer and reaching people of all ages and in new ways. Although we at Holy Blossom are known far and wide for our serious approach to Jewish life and I don't want to ever lose that because it's so much a part of what we are, who we are and what we have been about. The time is now, however, for HBT to also focus on serious joy. We want Holy Blossom to be a place of light, of celebration, with the sound and pitter-patter of little feet, and of music, and creative and playful programming too.

Lisa: What are the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for Holy Blossom?

Rabbi Splansky: It's a very exciting time for us. I feel that there is a mountain of work ahead but there isn't anything we can't do. We are poised to claim the future that we have been dreaming about. There is nothing standing in our way now. We have all the clarity of leadership. We have all the generosity of our donors and all the wherewithal of our volunteers. We have all the goodwill from the congregation and we have all the expectations of the greater Jewish community.

Holy Blossom Temple is Toronto's first synagogue, so we do carry that responsibility which is to set the pace for Jewish life in the city and in this country and we need to rise to this moment. Last year, there was the release of the Pew Report and the implications and insights that came from this extensive study was devastating for some Jewish communities. The trend lines of Jewish identity for the upcoming generations and the economics of Jewish life, were nothing short of a debilitating message for many.

At Holy Blossom we read that report as a wake up call and as a call-to-action and we took that very seriously. I speak of it whenever I can, about our responsibility to the upcoming generation and how to cultivate new leadership and how to teach Judaism in a way that is relevant and enticing to every generation, but especially our youth. For 158 years, Holy Blossom Temple has always negotiated and navigated the very tricky road between tradition and modernity, of legacy and the future. In every era, we are constantly recalibrating to find just the right balance. I think we are in one of those moments again.

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Lisa: What initiatives are you undertaking to meet these challenges?

Rabbi Splansky: One initiative next year is that we developed a Jewish Leadership Institute for those in their 30's and 40's. It's making sure that we are reaching out to the best and the brightest of our congregation to say not only do we need you, but actually if you stop in your busy life for just a moment and think about it, you will understand that you need us too. That you want Judaism to play a guiding role in your life. That you want the satisfaction of knowing that you are contributing to the strength of the Jewish people. That you want opportunities for intellectual pursuit, a sacred study that will answer your biggest questions. Most of the folks we connect with are grateful for that tap, and say, "I want and need this. I want to be a stronger Jewish role model for my own kids."

We are also looking forward to helping Holy Blossom Temple become both larger and smaller. Larger in ways that people expect from HBT, setting a pace that is ambitious, being a public voice for the Jewish community and beyond, being a beacon of social justice, while growing the congregation, smaller. And when I say smaller, I don't mean the number of our families, I mean closeness. We want to know our people and their families, to be able to address their needs and to help them to find new ways to be meaningfully connected to one another. It's about being more intimate and relationship oriented. It's about reaching out to and connecting with people in new ways. All of the public work that we are doing and the

bricks and mortar work we are preparing for, is being matched by a more private, more communal and intimate way of connecting.

We are also paying more attention to the personal lives of our congregants. One thing we know is that our members are having concerns about caring for their aging parents. One initiative I brought to the Temple and that is really flourishing is a weekly program for seniors. There is an intellectual learning and gentle exercise component, a light lunch and socializing games. This has become a regular destination for our elders and they want it at their synagogue. We also have a terrific new partnership with Mount Sinai Hospital called Living with Dementia.

I also want to speak to the younger generation, because another thing that our congregants are telling us, is that they need help in



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raising their children. I often hear they don't feel equipped; they don't know enough or have enough time to do it all, or to do it all well. A generation ago, people were shy in saying they needed help in raising their children; today they have no shame in saying that. We have a waiting list for our Early Childhood Center, which has expanded and we have a Little Blossoms program where parents and grandparents come with their young ones. They want to have that experience at HBT because they believe that our synagogue should be an extension of their Jewish home.

And of course there is our upcoming Renewal Project, a \$34-million "Renewal of Space and Spirit" led by our own executive and lay leaders, Cary Solomon, Chief Executive Officer of Next Property Group, Chair of the Renewal Project Building Committee, and Tom Friedland, Partner, Goodmans LLP, Chair of the Steering Committee, with the support of many dynamic Holy Blossom volunteers and donors and world-class architects, Diamond Schmidt. Phase 1 of the Renewal Project breaks ground this November 2014, to be completed within the next 16 to 18 months, followed by Phase 2. We're very excited about all that is to come.

Lisa: Can you share with us the vision for HBT's Renewal Project?

Rabbi Splansky: One of the things that Holy Blossom is known for and one of the things that its impressive architecture signals, is that we do have responsibilities for the public domain, for setting

the pace for Jewish life on the landscape for this good country, and we will continue to do that. We are a meeting place for bringing in the leading voices and addressing Jewish issues of the day, including Israel. Our support of Israel, is and always will be, front and center to Holy Blossom's mission.

The intent behind the Renewal Project is to give Holy Blossom new purpose in a built form and to give us a new sense of ourself. The idea is to create space for our community to come together, to provide a living room for the congregation, to create a sacred and welcoming place and to recognize program needs that require flexible spaces with technologically enabled environments. And it will be a space for Jewish celebrations. An important key to HBT's future success is joy. We shouldn't underestimate the power of meaningful belonging and joy. Our new building will be the vessel in which these joyous and community moments take place. Many people will be attracted to a beautiful building, but everyone is attracted to a community that builds together. It's that sense of community, ambition, cohesiveness and vision and that we are a purpose driven community that knows how to work together to achieve our vision and claim our future.

Lisa: Do you feel Holy Blossom is poised well for the years ahead?

Rabbi Splansky: Yes, absolutely. Holy Blossom is a sophisticated and highly educated congregation that is strongly tied to its past and prestigious legacy, yet is forward-looking, and intends to adapt and seize opportunities to transform the status quo. While the Temple must be cost conscious, and while HBT faces the same membership and budgetary challenges as most other religious and not-for-profit organizations, Holy Blossom is blessed with strong resources, both human and financial, and has untapped potential for providing its members with profoundly fulfilling Jewish experiences and community.

Within the vibrant and diverse Toronto Jewish community, in a city that celebrates its multi-culturalism, and nestled within a mid-town residential neighborhood, I believe that Holy Blossom is well placed for a future that is as ambitious as its heritage. With prudent and wisely designed innovations in Judaic spirituality, education and community building, Holy Blossom is well situated to become a model for the Reform Congregation of the 21st century.

Lisa: Thank you Rabbi Splansky for sharing your journey and your vision. Enjoy this first for you and for Holy Blossom Temple. We look forward to seeing the many successes your leadership brings. 🍷

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