

Q & A with Rabbi Goldsmith

March 2023

The word rabbi originates from the Hebrew meaning "teacher". You are a skilled educator.

What do you enjoy teaching the most?

I most enjoy teaching students who are unafraid to challenge and ask tough questions. The topic matters less than the people in the room and their willingness to engage with the material and each other.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment as a rabbi?

I've been blessed with some Big Important Moments: accepting the pulpit here at Emanu-El, being President of the Westchester Board of Rabbis, and, of course, having Rabbi Howard Goldsmith Day in Westchester County. But, really, the greatest accomplishments are the small moments with families and individuals when I'm able to be with them for the intense moments of their lives.

What's most challenging about being a rabbi?

It's probably the "gear-shifting", going from the cemetery to my kid's baseball game. It can be a challenge to be fully present with a grieving family and then fully present for my family. Or, on the other side of the coin, going from a joyous service like a bat mitzvah and then going home and just doing the dishes. That "gear shifting" can sometimes be a bit disorienting but it is so important in allowing me to be a good rabbi and a husband and father.

You officiate Jewish life cycle celebrations. What's your favorite lifecycle event and why?

Can I choose all of the above? I could really make an argument for all of them. If I had to choose I guess I'd say b'nei mitzvah. I love working with the students over time to help them prepare. Seeing them do something "really hard" and feel successful is so gratifying. I think a lot of our students leave that bima knowing that they can succeed at difficult challenges. Learning that lesson in a Jewish context is a real blessing.

We have the honor of preparing students for their B'nei Mitzvah services. What's your favorite part of a B'nei Mitzvah?

Well, see above. But in terms of the ceremony itself, I love giving the blessing at the ark. I'm able to have a private moment with the student and share some personal wisdom or blessing that is different for each student. It's a special moment.

Please share a favorite memory from your Bar Mitzvah?

I vividly remember the feeling of being done with the service and walking down the steps into the synagogue social hall. I felt so proud and so good and so relieved!

If you could give advice to your 13 year old self, what would it be?

Be yourself. Being authentic and true to yourself is simply the most important thing for being happy. Unless, you're mean and arrogant - then be someone else!

Gratitude is a core Jewish value. What are you most thankful for?

My family. I'm blessed with a great family and, while it may sound cliché, it is the thing that brings most meaning to my life.

What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?

At my bar mitzvah celebration my grandfather told me, "Have fun... but not too much fun. Be good... but not too good." It's a message about moderation. But also a reminder never to take myself too seriously.

How would you define success?

For me success is being able to do what I love with people I care about while being true to myself.

What are you most passionate about?

I'm probably supposed to say "Judaism" for this one... and I am passionate about Judaism. But it's probably a three-way tie among Judaism, food, and the outdoors. I love a good meal - cooking, eating, the whole dining experience. And, as everyone knows from my Emanumail messages, I love the outdoors - hiking, skiing, kayaking, really any time to be outside in nature.

What's your favorite way to spend a day off?

Skiing or hiking.

If you could choose one superpower, what would it be?

There is always so much that I want to do and experience but there are only so many hours in the day. So I'd love the power to be in multiple places at the same time.

What is your favorite Jewish food to prepare?

Bacon-lobster-cheese burgers... just kidding! Probably challah. I love the tactile experience of making the dough, the smell that fills the house, and the knowledge that we'll not only enjoy the flavor of it, but we'll use it to mark the time as special, as holy.

What is your favorite Jewish holiday?

There is a tie here. I love Sukkot because I get to build a hut in my backyard, decorate, and invite friends over to hang out. It also means that the rush of the High Holy Days is past which is always a bit of relief. The other is Passover, I love Passover because I create a new Haggadah every year based on whatever interests my kids. We've had them based on: Disney, Star Wars, Hamilton, the game Clue, Marvel superheroes, and more. I also love that we host the second night for our parents, siblings and friends - I love to entertain.

What is the last book you read?

I just finished "The Mercies" by Kiran Millwood Hargrave about women accused of witchcraft in Northern Norway in the 1600s. We're headed to Norway this August and I like to read historical fiction about the places we plan to travel. It was a compelling book about that beautiful land, its history, and the dangers of religious fanaticism.

What is the last TV show you binge watched?

Tehran

Do you have a bucket list? What's on it?

I could list some outlanding things here but I actually do not have a bucket list because I'm blessed to live a very full life - I get to do and experience so much of what I enjoy and what is meaningful.

Please share your favorite Rabbi joke?

I really don't have one. Actually being a "funny" rabbi is pretty easy. People do not expect anything remotely funny when they walk into a sanctuary. So if I have even a hint of humor in my voice I can usually get a laugh.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment at CEW?

It's all about the people. My greatest accomplishments are the relationships that I have with congregants, lay leaders, and the professional team. Without that, none of the rest of it matters... paying off the mortgage was pretty great, too :-)

What do you hope to accomplish at CEW in the next five years?

I promise to do everything I can to ensure that every member can find the fullest and most meaningful expression of their Jewish life through the services, programs, education, social action initiatives, and community of Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester.