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‘We’re going to get started’ says new spiritual leader of Temple Israel

By Hannah Berdowski: August 11, 2015



Rabbi Rob Morais says he plans to embrace the openness and creativity of Temple Israel “and to advance that.”

Rabbi Rob Morais has only been in Ottawa for a few weeks, but he’s jumped right into his role at Temple Israel of Ottawa as the Reform congregation’s new spiritual leader.

A Toronto native, Rabbi Morais has returned to Canada from Michigan where he served as spiritual leader of Temple Beth Israel in Jackson and as director of the Jewish children's museum in Detroit.

"This is the kind of city I want to live in. This city has lots of potential; the synagogue is in a good healthy place," Rabbi Morais said during an interview with the *Ottawa Jewish Bulletin*.

"It's a huge transition for the congregation. Number one, we have a transition of rabbis after 20 years."

Rabbi Morais succeeds Rabbi Norman Klein, who served as interim rabbi for one year following the June 2014 retirement of Rabbi Steven Garten, who served as spiritual leader of Temple Israel since 1995.

Rabbi Garten continues to be involved with the congregation as rabbi emeritus, the first in Temple Israel's history.

Rabbi Morais said Rabbi Garten will maintain an active role in congregational life, continuing to teach and being a great source of information. Rabbi Morais said the two have been working closely together and revealed their relationship began many years ago.

As a young boy, Rabbi Morais was a student at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto where Rabbi Garten was the director. After earning his rabbinic ordination at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Rabbi Morais worked with Rabbi Garten through Camp George, the Reform movement camp in Ontario.

"This has been a very carefully planned transition. There have been many, many, wonderful and dedicated people who worked on the transition," said Rabbi Morais. He was particularly appreciative of the work done over the past year by Rabbi Klein.

"The role of the interim is to bridge between old and new, and to be able to navigate for the congregation. [Rabbi Klein's] job was preparing them for a new leader, and that was done exceptionally well. They're poised, they're ready, they're hungry. I'm hungry, and so we're going to get started."

A second transition is taking place at the Temple Israel Religious School where Sue Potechin, a former teacher and youth adviser for the congregation, has been hired as the new director of Education.

"I come with a lot of programmatic and education experience. So, together, we will be providing a significant change and enhancement to our education program," said Rabbi Morais.

"I think that there's enormous potential to develop Jewish programming and Jewish activities and Jewish experiences for people across the age spectrum. I think there is an amazing dedication to Jewish life, that I've seen here, that doesn't exist in other places."

Rabbi Morais spoke excitedly about his new congregation and the values Temple Israel instills.

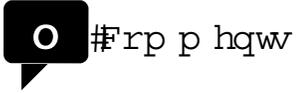
"[They are] poised to understand that we need to do it differently than we've done it in the past," said Rabbi Morais, who spoke about learning to embrace people with different ideas, and families of different backgrounds, including those centred on same sex couples.

"This synagogue has been doing [that] forever, but we haven't talked much about what we do," said Rabbi Morais, whose goal is to get the word out about "the warmth and the excitement that is Temple Israel.

"Nothing radical is going to change tomorrow, but we'll make sure that the changes we do make are done in a thoughtfully planned way."

His strategy, he said, is to re-evaluate and reflect on all areas of the synagogue by asking, 'Is this our best, and what the synagogue needs?'

"The plans are to embrace the openness and creativity that the synagogue has always shown and to advance that. ... I think the synagogue sees itself as an extended family and [I hope] to embrace and nurture that and be the one to help guide the vision ... we create together," said Rabbi Morais.



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