

Riverside rabbi took nontraditional path

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By **DAVID OLSON**
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Rabbi Suzanne Singer spent 20 years as a television programming executive and an Emmy Award-winning producer. She didn't grow up in a religious family and rarely attended synagogue.

When she was in her 30s, Singer began reading the Bible and pondering what it means to be a Jew. That was the beginning of a journey that led her to rabbinical school and later to Riverside's Temple Beth El, which last year named her its rabbi.

Today, at 56, Singer is more content than she's ever been. She feels fulfilled being able to dedicate her life to helping others, reading sacred texts and preserving Jewish traditions.

"It's not entirely different from TV," Singer said. "I went into TV to make the world a better place. And that's why I became a rabbi."

Singer was idealistic when she went to journalism school. While at the Public Broadcasting Service, she produced a show that taught children social skills and respect for diversity, and she won two Emmys for other programs.

Yet she became disillusioned by the behind-the-scenes machinations and office politics.



Silvia Flores / The Press-Enterprise

Rabbi Suzanne Singer, 56, spent 20 years as an Emmy-winning television producer and programming executive before becoming a rabbi.

"On the air, great shows," Singer said. "Behind the scenes, misery."

Singer grew up in New York City in a largely secular Jewish family. They attended synagogue only for major Jewish holidays. They had a Christmas tree.

Yet it was her mother, Nicole Silberkleit, who more than anyone led her to become a rabbi. Silberkleit survived Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp. Her mother's parents, brother and grandmother died there.

Haunted by Call

"I was really driven by 'How could this happen?' and 'What can we do to prevent this from happening again?' " Singer said. "This really haunted me my whole life. ... I feel an obligation to do something about what is unjust in the world."

Even as her mother's experiences spurred her to become a rabbi, it also was one reason Singer didn't develop a connection to God until later in life. She couldn't understand how God could allow something as horrific as the Holocaust to occur.

"One of the things I had to get over was my anger at God, the idea of 'Look what happened to my mother. Look what happens to people all over the world, whether it is in Darfur or wherever it is,' " she said.



Singer said it was her mother, Nicole Silberkleit, a Holocaust survivor, who inspired her in part to become a rabbi.

Classes on modern Jewish thought she took at Hebrew Union College -- mostly at the institution's Los Angeles campus -- helped her work through that.

Singer first went to the college to pursue a master's degree in Judaic studies. She briefly thought of becoming a rabbi in the 1980s, when she began attending lay-led worship services with a friend. For years, she pushed the idea out of her mind. While at Hebrew Union, she finally committed herself.

"I had known it for 10 years and it was crying out at me: 'It's so obvious you want to do this. Why are you fighting it?' " Singer said.

Her first post after ordination in 2003 was as assistant rabbi at a large Oakland congregation. In 2005, she became interim rabbi at Temple Beth El, and later regional director of the Introduction to Judaism program for the Union for Reform Judaism.

In February 2008, she returned to Temple Beth El as rabbi, the first woman to lead the congregation.

Nuancing Politics

In Oakland, synagogue members were either politically liberal "or you didn't talk about it," Singer said. Temple Beth El members are a mix of viewpoints and political affiliations.

That led Singer to be more nuanced in her sermons on current events, although never shying away from tying public policy to Jewish principles.

Singer has spoken out against what she sees as the injustice of low pay for Inland warehouse workers but deliberately does not mention a unionization drive for those workers, knowing that some synagogue members are not supportive of unions. She has advocated some form of universal health care but does not reveal the type of legislation she backs.

"If you want people to listen to your message, you're not going to hit them over the head with it from the word 'go,' " she said. "It's trying to respect people's different opinions. Who am I to say they're wrong?"

That consultative, flexible approach has helped solidify the unity of the congregation, said Kara Gilman, president of Temple Beth El's board of directors. Singer always seeks out different opinions before deciding what position she'll take on a congregation-related matter, she said.

Bob Sirotnik, who has been the synagogue's cantor for 36 years, called Singer "compassionate, understanding and easily accessible. Those are the qualities you want in a religious leader."

Rabbi Richard Levy, who was director of Hebrew Union's school of rabbinic studies when Singer was there, said Singer's nontraditional rabbinical background, including her lack of religiosity through much of her life, is an advantage in counseling and advising secular-leaning

Jews or those who have doubts about their beliefs. Singer takes a highly rational approach to religious texts and ideas, something that appeals to those who question religious belief, he said.

In addition to serving as rabbi of Temple Beth El, Singer is coordinator of leadership initiatives at Hebrew Union College's Los Angeles campus, where, Levy said, she helps rabbis improve their organizational and managerial leadership while never forgetting the emphasis on the spiritual.

"She's been an excellent fit," Levy said. "She herself is a remarkable model of a rabbinic leader."

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RABBI SUZANNE SINGER

Age: 56

Hometown: Riverside

Position: Rabbi, Temple Beth El. Coordinator of leadership initiatives, Hebrew Union College's Los Angeles campus.

Immediate family: Husband Jordan Lund.

Interests: Crossword puzzles, word games, films, theater, spending time with nieces and nephews.