


Beth Ahm's Rabbi Steven Rubenstein Celebrates Two Decades in Detroit

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Congregation Beth Ahm will celebrate Rabbi Rubenstein's anniversary on March 9 with a gala event at the synagogue.

Everyone who knows Rabbi Steven Rubenstein even a little bit says the same things about him:

He has a great sense of humor.

He oozes integrity.

He's a mensch.

This year marks 20 years that Rubenstein has been at the helm of Congregation Beth Ahm in West Bloomfield, and 25 years as an ordained Conservative rabbi. The Queens, N.Y., native graduated from the State University of New York at Binghamton, then went on to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York for rabbinical school. That's where he met his wife, Robin, and when he was ordained, the pair moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where he became an assistant rabbi.

Five years later, Beth Ahm invited the Rubensteins to Detroit, and they've never looked back — not even when his first synagogue asked him to return to Kansas City in the senior rabbi post.

Marilyn Rice, a lifelong Beth Ahm member who was on the committee to bring Rubenstein to the synagogue, was greatly relieved when he decided to stay in Detroit. "Steven is like a son to me," she says. "We hit the jackpot with him. He has a way with people; he can calm a room."

Rich Grossman agrees. From the beginning, Rabbi Rubenstein "wanted to be there for everybody. He didn't judge; he's just a great leader," says Grossman, a West Bloomfield resident.

"He knows the pulse of our synagogue, and he knows how to convey messaging that resonates with everybody," Grossman adds. "He's a great listener."

A Perfect Fit

When he first came to Detroit, Rubenstein hoped it would be the right place for his family. It has turned out to be a great fit.

“What drew us here were the people,” he recalls. “I love being a part of families’ lives. I became a rabbi thinking that was going to be the part of the job that I appreciated the most, and that has been true.”

The Rubenstein clan — which includes Ari, 23, and Tali, 20 — have been happy here, he says.

When they first arrived, Beth Ahm was not in a good place; congregants and rabbi alike agree that it’s come a long way since then to become a strong, connected congregation.

Nancy and Ira Goldberg picked up on that from the first service they attended 11 years ago. “We came to the shul not knowing anybody,” Nancy Goldberg says. “We wanted something small, close to home and Conservative.”

At the first service they attended, the pair were invited to open the Ark. “We were flabbergasted,” Goldberg recalls. “We’re brand-new walking into the shul, but that’s the community at Beth Ahm.”

Later, the rabbi encouraged her to lead a service, something she had never contemplated doing.

“I was shocked — that was never anything I felt I could do. It took me a good three months to work up my nerve,” she recalls.

Goldberg told the rabbi he’d have to work with her page by page, and he did. Now, she leads davening on Friday night and Shabbat morning, reads Torah and Haftarah, and has seen her skills expand exponentially under the rabbi’s tutelage.

“I’ve taken a number of classes to grow with my own learning,” Goldberg says. “I really enjoy being on the bimah.”

And that’s all due to the encouragement and support of Rabbi Rubenstein, she notes.

“He’s very open and approachable. He’s available by email, phone, text, and he gets back to you really fast. Plus, he’s got a great sense of humor,” she says.

Most people say that. Rabbi Rubenstein’s calm demeanor and ready smile come with a subtle sense of humor that congregants appreciate and admire.

Under his watch, Jewish learning opportunities have expanded, not only at Beth Ahm but communitywide. Rubenstein has been an instrumental leader in planning Limmud Michigan since its inception in 2015, says Irv Goldfein, a Southfield resident and member of Young

Israel Southfield.

“I admired and respected him from the first moment,” Goldfein says of Rubenstein. The two have grown a friendship while working on Limmud. “I value his input, advice and creative ideas very highly,” he says.

Goldfein lauds Rubenstein’s “serious commitment to tradition, to the Jewish people, to Jewish learning while at the same time being very pluralistically oriented, meaning everyone has a place from his point of view.”

Adult learning has been a priority for Rubenstein. In the synagogue, he’s enjoyed seeing the opportunities for Jewish learning expand and grow over the years. Rich Grossman mentioned the Mussar classes Rubenstein introduced at Beth Ahm and which he loved participating in.

“That isn’t something traditionally studied at a Conservative synagogue,” Grossman says. “We loved it.”

Goldfein says Limmud Michigan would not have been as impactful or successful as it has been without Rabbi Rubenstein’s guidance. “He’s an all-around great rabbi and person to have as a friend and an adviser,” he adds, noting that they have bigger things in store for the next round of Limmud.

When asked why he became a rabbi in the first place, Rubenstein replied, “Without knowing it at the time, it’s the experiences I’ve had at Beth Ahm. That is to say, the opportunity to teach, to help a community continue to grow and change, the opportunity to be a part of people’s lives as they search for different ways to grow their Jewish part of themselves and their families.”

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***Lynne Golodner** is a member of Congregation Beth Ahm and the author of 11 books, including the recently released essay collection, FRice.*