

Converging Paths

As the local Jewish community was looking for leadership, Rabbi Francine Roston was looking for a new beginning

BY JUSTIN FRANZ // DEC 1, 2015 // NEWS & FEATURES



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WHITEFISH – *If you were to bump into Rabbi Francine Roston in a crowded coffee shop, you likely wouldn't realize you had just crossed paths with someone who only a few years ago was a "rising star" in the Conservative Jewish movement.*

Roston, 47, is an approachable and unassuming mother of two who holds a small but important place in Jewish history; in 2005, she became the first woman to lead a Conservative Jewish temple with more than 500 families.

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As the rabbi of a large temple in New Jersey, Roston was a prominent voice in the community, but it was a job that kept her away from her own family. So in 2014, Roston and her family moved 2,370 miles away to begin a quieter new life in Whitefish.



At about the same time, the Flathead Valley's two Jewish communities were looking to merge into one but needed some spiritual help. After helping form Glacier Jewish Community-B'nai Shalom, Roston stepped

up as rabbi for the small congregation.

Leading a small Jewish community in Northwest Montana (there are about 100 members) is a far cry from her busy job back East, but Roston said it's a perfect fit.

"My family just loves the quality of life here," she said last week. "We love the fact that people work hard and play hard here."

Roston grew up in Michigan and from a young age wanted to be a rabbi. After high school, she attended Brandeis University and then the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. She was ordained in 1998 and got her first job as an associate rabbi at a Conservative temple in New Jersey.

Judaism has three major denominations: Orthodox, Reform and Conservative. Orthodox is the more traditional sect and closely follows the Torah, whereas Reform has a more liberal interpretation of Jewish traditions. The Conservative movement falls in the middle.

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After a year as an associate, Roston became the primary rabbi at a small Conservative temple. As a female rabbi, Roston said she faced resistance from older members who believed that only men should lead a temple. The Reform movement first ordained a female rabbi in 1972 and the Conservative movement started allowing female rabbis in 1985. That resistance to female leadership meant she often had a hard time finding work and, during one interview, was told she was “the rabbi of the future, just not the present.”

“We’re all raised with the premise that if you work really hard you can find a job that fits your skills and aspirations,” Roston said. “But with sexism that is not always the case.”

In 2005, Congregation Beth El in South Orange, New Jersey began looking for a new rabbi and was open to both male and female applicants. Roston emerged from a field of more than 30 candidates and became the congregation’s new leader on July 1, 2005. Her historic appointment warranted attention from the national media, including a story in the Washington Post.

As the leader at Beth El, Roston frequently spoke at Jewish seminaries and her sermons were quoted in the New York Times. But the work of running a large synagogue can be consuming, and Roston was often frustrated by how it interrupted her family life. Though she had broken the “stained glass ceiling,” as it was called, being a female rabbi at a large synagogue had plenty of challenges.

“When you break that barrier there is a lot of excitement,” she said. “But there were challenges within and some people in the congregation were questioning my authority.”

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A few years ago, Roston and her family took a vacation out West, touring some of the region's most iconic sites, including Glacier National Park. Like so many who visit here, the Rostons fell in love with the area and the following year they spent part of their summer in Whitefish. It was then that Roston's path converged with members of the local Jewish community, who were exploring a merger into one congregation.

Sandy Perry, president of the local congregation's steering committee, said Roston was instrumental in helping bring the two temples together this past summer and guiding them through the complicated process.

"She's a teacher, so she relishes the role of being a rabbi and she incorporates that skill into everything she does," Perry said.

With the creation of a Jewish congregation, Perry said the group also began searching for a new rabbi (it had been a few years since the community had an official leader) and Roston was the obvious choice. The timing was perfect because Roston and her husband, Marc, had decided to move their family to Whitefish full-time in 2014.

"When you live in the city you start to think you control everything and your world seems so small," Roston said of the decision to leave New Jersey. "But we love being here and going into nature to see that we're not so big and that we're not in control, that in reality we're just a speck."

Ironically, Roston's husband and young son learned the realities of nature firsthand this past summer when they escaped the massive Thompson Fire in Glacier Park by helicopter.

As the leader of a new congregation, Roston said she hopes to help it grow in the coming years and be a voice for issues that are important to her. Recently, she raised concerns about a possible plea deal for David Lenio, a man accused of threatening school children and Jews. Roston said as the valley's only active rabbi she felt threatened by the messages Lenio put on Twitter.

"A part of me could have done the safe thing and stayed quiet on the matter, but that's not who I am," she said.

Roston's biggest aspiration is to help Jewish people in the Flathead Valley find a connection with their faith and its traditions.

"I've wanted to be rabbi since I was a little girl because I love being in the temple and I love the traditions," she said. "I've always thought it's exciting to share my passion with others. As a rabbi I can be preacher and a teacher."

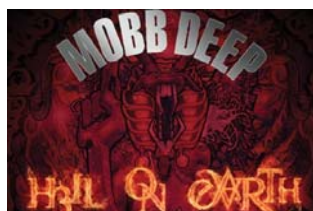
Roston and the Glacier Jewish Community-B'nai Shalom are hosting a Chanukah celebration on Dec. 11. The congregation regularly holds Shabbat services and celebrations of other Jewish holidays. During the summer there are also bi-weekly Bible studies at Sykes Diner in Kalispell. For more information, email Roston at rabbi@glacierjc.org.

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