

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN ALPENA

BY MARK HUNTER

You may have seen the movie, or the play version of "Fiddler on the Roof." The major theme of the movie is "Tradition." Tevye, the main character is the "Papa." He sets the rules of the family. He sings about the traditions of the Jewish people. He sings: "You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you, I don't know! But it is a tradition! And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is . . . and what God expects him to do." Rabbi Maya Leibovich and now over 2 million Reform Jews in the United States, no longer feel bound by parts or that tradition, no matter how solidly adhered to it has been in the past.

Recently, visiting Rabbi Maya Leibovich held Sabbath service at Temple Beth-El located on White Street in Alpena. Her husband Menachem was the lay cantor. Rabbi Leibovich does not bind herself to tradition as follower of the Reform Movement. She did announce that some of the service would be in Hebrew, as she said, "This is your language." There are points in the service where members of the congregation participate at the front of the synagogue. Traditionally, only men are permitted to this level of participation, but Rabbi Leibovich called both women and men to assist in the service.

Opening the window of the mind is a central theme of Rabbi Maya Leibovich. She was the first female rabbi born in Israel, and the first female to do a military funeral, the first woman rabbi in the former Soviet Union, and the first giving a blessing at a mikvah.

Mikvah blessings are used for special occasions, such as a ceremony for con-



Rabbi Maya Leibovich and Menachem Leibovich seated at Temple Beth-El.

verts to Judaism, which involves immersion in water and a blessing. The female convert was being blessed by a male rabbi. After his blessing, the convert took hold of Rabbi Leibovich's sleeve, and asked Rabbi Leibovitz to also give a blessing. The window opened.

Filling spiritual emptiness is also part of this Rabbi's mission. Rabbi Leibovich felt through the convert's eyes that, "She wants you because you are a woman, she thinks there is something that did not pass through her own rabbi (a man), . . . I just put my hands on her head and I cry when I think of it, and we both cried. I couldn't utter a word of it. It took me like two minutes. All of a sudden, I understood the power of water and the power of immersion. I look back at that moment. That moment was a transforming moment. . . . She taught me the power of a blessing after immersion in water." This quote is from a Youtube video.

Although male rabbis objected, Rabbi Leibovich gathered other female rabbis to form a team of Reform female rabbis to study the mikvah.

The issues they discussed were turned into a beautiful book call Parshat Emine still used in Israel by female rabbis. Rabbi Leibovich's father escaped Nazi controlled Germany, but he would never speak about it to her. He abandoned Judaism, because God allowed the Holocaust. Maya Leibovich felt emptiness. She dated Jewish boys, learning about Judaism through them. Her first career was teaching Hebrew at George Washington University in Maryland. At forty years old she saw a female rabbi on television. The window of her mind opened. She would become a rabbi. While raising four children she studied and was at ordained in 1993 at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem. Late in his life, Rabbi Leibovich's father re-

turned to Judaism.

Menachem's parent's escaped Nazi controlled Poland on the last ship leaving Gdansk going to London. The sheriff of Prague was a friend of his father's who warned him to leave that day, because the sheriff had orders to arrest Jews the following morning.

Maya said, "I pass on what I know and hope to make a difference. . . . bringing open mindedness, inclusiveness, liberalism, mainly to Jews." She works to "Strengthen the connection of the Reform Movement between Israel and the US and other places."

Again, showing her desire to fill emptiness, she said, "You never finish being a rabbi," she said, although she is retired. "Religion is a way to not be alone, get connected. Know there are others like you." She is proud of the Israeli people and grateful for what they have achieved. She clearly separated the thoughts about the people of Israel versus the government of Israel. She wants a better Israel that finds a way to live peacefully with its neighbors. Today her great joy is spending time with her 11 grandchildren.

There must be a writer of biographies who could capture Rabbi Maya Leibovich's life and accomplishments. There are far too many details to present in this short essay. She opens the window and fills emptiness for female rabbis and members of the Reform Movement.

The Reform Movement of Judaism is one of a number of movements within Judaism. Sometimes these are called denominations. The main ones are Reform, Conservatism, and Orthodox. There are other smaller movements. Temple Beth-El on White Street in Alpena welcomes all Jews and anyone else to their services.