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Hollywood writers help rabbis punch up their sermons

BY RYAN TOROK

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Ryan Bauer spent more than an hour struggling to develop a concept for his High Holy Days sermon during a recent workshop organized by the Board of Rabbis of Southern California. The rabbi from Congregation Emanu-El, a San Francisco Reform congregation, finally settled on an idea: The world is ending in 10 days. How would you spend that time?

It might sound like the hook for a Hollywood blockbuster, but that's the point.

Approximately 20 rabbis from Los Angeles and beyond participated in "Punching Up Your Holiday Sermons," a workshop that paired rabbis with screenwriters to help them become more engaging.

Lisa Albert ("Mad Men"), David Israel ("3rd Rock From the Sun") and David N. Weiss ("The Smurfs") were among the eight writers participating in the workshop, part of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California's annual High Holy Days Seminar, which took place at Stephen S. Wise Temple on Aug. 16.

"I view the world of rabbis and the world of filmmaking as very similar — you have to tell a story," said Rabbi Jonathan Hanish, a Board of Rabbis executive committee member who came up with the idea for the workshop. "And if you can tell a story, you can reach people."

The Board of Rabbis of Southern California — a transdenominational organization of more than 300 members — has held the annual seminar for rabbis and rabbinical students in advance of the High Holy Days for the past 11 years, according to Rabbi Mark Diamond, the organization's executive vice president. But this is the first year that the seminar has featured a workshop that pairs rabbis with screenwriters.

Prominent leaders of all denominations — including Rabbi Laura Geller of Temple Emanuel, a Beverly Hills Reform congregation; Rabbi Adam Kligfeld of Temple Beth Am, a West Los Angeles Conservative synagogue; and Rabbi Kalman Topp of Beth Jacob Congregation, a Modern Orthodox shul in Beverly Hills — participated in the workshop, which began with a panel discussion before the attendees took part in small break-out groups, with two to three rabbis for every writer.

"Think of things that you remember from TV shows or movies; it's not the generic stuff," said Dahvi Waller ("Mad Men"), who worked with Rabbis Nancy Myers of Temple Beth David, a Reform congregation in Westminster, and Lawrence Seidman, a chaplain in Orange County jails, to emphasize the importance of incorporating specific details into their sermons.

With the help of the screenwriters, rabbis tackled predictable subjects, such as the state of the economy and the Middle East, in novel ways. One of the participating screenwriters, Alex Litvak, writer of the upcoming "The Three Musketeers" movie, welcomed their ambition.

"It became about something other than the Dow, or the Middle East, or the things that are sort of fundamentally transitory, and it became about something that is fundamentally timeless," said Litvak, who worked with Bauer on his sermon.

Geller worked with Israel on her sermon, which will examine "coming home and what it means to come home," she said.

"We have just finished the transformation of our sanctuary," Geller said, referring to Temple Emanuel's renovation, which began last December, "so we're coming home to a sanctuary that is both familiar and new at the same time. So it raises the question of where we find home at a time like this in the world, when the world seems so volatile."

Working with Janet Leahy ("Boston Legal"), Rabbi Karen Fox of Wilshire Boulevard Temple said she wants to explore fresh ideas about God in her sermon.

"God is in the details, in the quintessential moments," Fox said.

Leahy understood Fox's message — that if you pay attention to these details, you can let go of expectations and feel more



From left: Rabbi Laura Geller (Temple Emanuel), writer David M. Israel ("3rd Rock From the Sun"), Rabbi Kalman Topp (Beth Jacob Congregation). Photo by Marvin Steindler.

anchored — and suggested that Fox connect this idea to people's fears about today's rough economy.

" 'Am I going to have a job this week?' " Leahy posed as a possible question for Fox to ask. "Because that's what people are worried about."

Meanwhile, Rabbi Jason Weiner, who serves as the senior rabbi and manager of spiritual care at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center — and as vice president of the Board of Rabbis — also worked with Leahy and discussed his Rosh Hashanah sermon, which he will deliver to Cedars-Sinai staff, patients and patients' families. He plans to address burnout, compassion fatigue and secondary-stress disorder.

Geller said she found the workshop beneficial. "You can always be better," she said, "and this was a really unique opportunity to do something that I wouldn't have access to on my own."

"I have lots of opportunities to study Torah with wonderful colleagues ... but I don't often have opportunities to sit down with someone who is a television writer and have that person help me think about how to craft a message to an audience that often receives powerful messages from popular culture, from films, from television programs."

The other writers to participate in the workshop included Jason Katims ("Friday Night Lights") and David Sacks ("3rd Rock From the Sun" and co-founder of the Happy Minyan). All the writers are Jewish, the Board of Rabbis' Hanish said, reflecting the spectrum of observance — including those who only attend synagogue during the High Holy Days.

"The idea is to have all of these people [from the entire spectrum], because those are the Jews in the pews," he said.

Hanish said finding current writers was important.

"We were not looking for people who 10 years ago got nominated for Emmys," he said. "We wanted people who were currently working writers today because we wanted the rabbis to take them as seriously as possible."

The idea for the workshop came to Hanish, rabbi at Temple Kol Tikvah in Woodland Hills, after an experience he had two years ago. He was working on a sermon to deliver to Kehillat Israel in Pacific Palisades, his synagogue at the time, and wanted to run it by someone. Hanish — who, prior to becoming a rabbi, worked in the entertainment industry — sent it to an acquaintance, Joel Cohen, Emmy-winning writer for "The Simpsons."

"It really helped my sermon," said Hanish, who ended up using one of the three jokes that Cohen had written for him.

Diamond estimated that approximately 165 people attended the seminar, which also featured Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, a renowned Orthodox scholar, delivering two keynote speeches that addressed Jews' relationship with the covenant; study sessions led by Rabbis Shmuly Yanklowitz, Sharon Brous, Noah Farkas and Zoe Klein; and a lecture by the Rev. Cecil Murray, former head of L.A.'s First African Methodist Episcopal Church, which marked the first time a non-Jewish clergyman has been a speaker at the event.

Hanish said it's possible the writers workshop will be repeated during next year's annual conference.

"It seems to have been very successful," he said.

For Litvak, matching up screenwriters and rabbis makes sense.

"The similarities between movies and faith are that they both reaffirm traditional value systems. In movies, as much as in what rabbis preach, good triumphs over evil," he said. "There is hope."

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