

Community

May 6, 2009

[Email](#) | [Print](#) | [Text - Text +](#)

Glass Ceiling Twice Shattered at Board of Rabbis

By [Julie Gruenbaum Fax](#)

This week, the Board of Rabbis of Southern California will install Rabbi Denise Eger as its president — the first woman and the first gay rabbi to hold the position at the 72-year-old organization. And perhaps what is most notable is that her gender and her gender orientation seemed to be a non-issue for the 300 or so colleagues of all denominations who voted her in.

"Honestly, I don't think it was an issue at all," Rabbi Mark Diamond, the Board of Rabbis' executive vice president, said of the fact that Eger is gay. "At no point do I recall either a discussion of that or any concerns about it."

Eger, who founded Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood in 1992, has faced down some opposition, mostly from Orthodox rabbis, since she came to Los Angeles just after she was ordained in 1988. But even that has quieted as gays have won broader acceptance in the general society over the last three decades, and the liberal Jewish community has erased most lines distinguishing gays from straights.

Only about 20 Orthodox rabbis are currently active in the Board of Rabbis, and those who are involved, Diamond notes, are committed to the interdenominational vision of the organization and respect all their colleagues. In fact, the chair of this year's nominating committee was Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, a past president of the board who leads the Modern Orthodox B'nai David-Judea.

Eger sees her election, which took place in March, as an affirmation of the bridges she has worked to build over the years.

"I'm very excited about it and very honored," she said. "It's really a statement by my colleagues."

The board is a beneficiary of The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and provides professional development and networking opportunities for rabbis, and educational programming, interfaith outreach, chaplaincy services and social justice advocacy for the wider Jewish community. The presidency rotates every two years among rabbis from the four denominations.

Eger's ascension is no accident. At a Los Angeles conference of Reform rabbis about 15 years ago, she and other female colleagues noted the dearth of women in Jewish communal leadership. They challenged themselves to try to change that.

Committed to a vision of Jewish unity, Eger chose to become active in the Board of Rabbis. She toiled on committees, and with growing acceptance and respect from her colleagues, joined the executive committee. She will be installed as president May 11.

"In the last 30-odd years there has been an explosion of change" in the role of women in the rabbinate, said Rabbi Laura Geller, who was the Hillel rabbi at USC when Eger was the college's Hillel student president. Geller was the first woman to lead a major metropolitan congregation when she took the pulpit at Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills in 1994. "Jewish feminism has had a transformative effect on Jewish tradition in North America. In particular, the focus on spirituality and on personal spiritual journey is directly attributable to Jewish feminism's acknowledgement that people bring their whole life story to the Jewish experience."

After ordination in 1988, Eger took the pulpit at Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC) on Pico Boulevard, the world's first congregation for gays and lesbians, founded in 1972.

"1988 was a very dark and awful time in the gay community," Eger said. "People would get diagnosed with HIV and would be dead six weeks later. Mortuaries questioned whether they could take the body, nurses would leave food on a tray outside the door and refuse to come in," she recalled.

Worse was dealing with patients' families.

"Jewish parents would swoop in, having not talked to their child for years, and kick the lover out of the house," Eger said. "And they didn't understand why the rabbi would not side with them."



Rabbi Denise Eger

Today, a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS is no longer considered a death sentence, and alongside that, social acceptance of gays has become the norm.

In 1992, about 35 members left BCC with Eger to found Kol Ami to serve the West Hollywood community, both gays and straights. A new building went up in 2001, and the congregation now has 300 member units — including straight young professionals now moving to West Hollywood.

Eger and her followers have been at the forefront of the fight to legalize gay marriage. Last summer, she married her longtime partner, Karen Siteman. The two have a 15-year-old son who plays varsity baseball at Beverly Hills High.

Even with the marriage controversy hanging over the gay community, Eger these days is thrilled that the lifecycles she presides over are happy ones. Her lifecycle career has been all out of order, she notes: first funerals, then a gay baby boom, then weddings and now b'nai mitzvah.

Ascending to the presidency of the Board of Rabbis is another milestone.

She looks forward to her work helping other rabbis, especially as many are called upon to counsel people through financial anxiety. She plans to shore up the social justice aspect of the board's agenda and to continue its interfaith outreach; Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist and Muslim clergy will be among those attending Eger's installation.

Most of all, Eger wants to use her new position to further her passion for Jewish unity through programs like One People, One Book, an inter-synagogue, yearlong book club.

She says that growing up in Memphis, where Jews of all denominations knew each other and interacted, embedded within her a sense of klal Yisrael, the oneness of the people of Israel.









"I still believe that it's true today, no matter where you daven or don't, that as Jews we have more in common with one another than we have differences," Eger said.

"We owe it to ourselves to know one another and to talk to one another and to respect each other, even in our differences."

Tags and Sharing

TAGS

SHARE THIS STORY

 del.icio.us  Digg  Facebook
 Google  Reddit  StumbleUpon
 Technorati  YahooMyWeb

EMAIL

[Tell a friend about this story by email](#)

Discussion

We welcome your feedback. Please share your views and insight in [The Jewish Journal Reader Forums](#).

PRIVACY POLICY

Your information will not be shared or sold without your consent. [Get all the details.](#)

Advertisement



Four hundred artists.
Ten architectural gems.
One great cause.

Art & Architecture Tours **May 16 & 17**
Venice Art Walk & Auctions **May 17**

www.veniceartwalk.info
310.392.WALK (9255)

38th ANNIVERSARY
Venice Art Walk & Auctions
By and For Venice Family Clinic