



## A-list Celebrities

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Rabbi Steven Z. Leder in his office at the Wilshire Boulevard Temple.

# The God Squad

Sermons... script consultations... screenings on the studio backlot.... It's all in a day's work for Hollywood's

Rabbi David Baron has many of the same goals for his congregation that any clergyman in America might. He would like to raise funds to replace seats in his sanctuary. He would like to establish a religious school on the premises of his synagogue. He would like, above all, to see more people at Friday-night services.

But as the leader of Temple of the Arts, which has its headquarters inside the Art Deco Wilshire Theatre building in Beverly Hills, Baron has resources that many rabbis would climb Mount Sinai for: mainly a 1,910-seat performance space in which to hold services; a bimah (or altar) designed by an Emmy-winning art director of the Academy Awards; a cantor who played Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* on Broadway and this year sang the show's "Bring Him Home" on the High Holidays "for the troops," Baron says; and a congregation that includes directors Jon Avnet (*Fried Green Tomatoes*) and Brett Ratner (*Rush Hour*), *Forrest Gump* producer Steve Tisch, *Seinfeld* star Jason Alexander, and Larry King, who helped arrange for Hillary Clinton to orate on Yom Kippur in 2006 (the topic: learning to forgive).



Cantor Lam in his office, which doubles as a recording studio.

Invited speakers are usually housed at the Four Seasons, because the owners belong to the temple too. "I call over and say, 'We need a room at the inn,'" says Baron. "It's nice to have a member in the hotel business."

Baron has the exceedingly well-groomed visage and piercing blue eyes of an actor. Coincidentally, he appeared as a rabbi in the 2004 film *Along Came Polly*. (Offscreen he presided over the wedding of the movie's producer, Stacey Sher, but he insists she still made him audition for the part.) Baron, 56, tends to prefer torn, whiskered jeans to dress pants, and though he grew up Orthodox, the temple is just as relaxed as his attire. He wouldn't call Temple of the Arts, which he founded in 1992, Reform. "I hate denominations. They're divisive," he says. "I prefer to call it religion through the arts." In other words, he incorporates performing arts into services, and roughly 75 percent of the congregants are in the entertainment business.

Ratner was especially impressed by Baron's choice of speakers this past Yom Kippur. The rabbi brought in Herman Rosenblat, who survived the Holocaust with the help of a young girl who lived near the concentration camp and threw food to him over the fence. Twelve years after World War II, he was living in New York and was set up on a blind date with the very same girl. They married and are still together. "That would make a great movie," Ratner says.

Of course, catering to the entertainment industry brings up a host of issues. For instance, the writers' strike. "I think we all want to see it figured out," says Baron in his office, a few days before the actual picketing began. "We have a congregation of actors, writers, producers and directors, and we hope it doesn't last long. I might feel that the writers should get DVD residuals, but I'm not going to make any proclamations. Who am I? I'm just a rabbi."

Though corporate conglomerates in the movie business are now the norm, many movers and shakers in Hollywood, historically and today, have been Jewish. (Neal Gabler, a journalist and senior fellow at the University of Southern California, even wrote a book about it called *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*.) And, if this is true, where does that place their religious leaders, who so often have their ear? Certainly not in the "just a rabbi" category. Hollywood rabbis have long served as consultants, script readers and just plain old sounding boards.

Lucille Ball, for instance, would show Rabbi Alfred Wolf—who joined Wilshire Boulevard Temple, the oldest synagogue in town, in 1949—film and television scripts she was considering, to help her decide if they were morally appropriate. Today, Rabbi Marvin Hier, the 68-year-old founder and dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, produces documentaries about human dignity and tolerance—with subjects ranging from the Holocaust to the rise of right-wing extremism in Europe—that are narrated by Kevin Costner and Nicole Kidman, among others. Hier reads *Variety* every week, has won two Oscars and was elected a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1981. Last year he voted for *The Queen* over *The Departed*. "Helen Mirren was phenomenal," he says.

In 1997 Hier won a statuette as coproducer of the Holocaust documentary *The Long Way Home*. "It used to be, if you want to

win an Oscar you had to go to acting school. Now all you've got to do is go to a good yeshiva," he remembers Jack Lemmon joking backstage. "The point is," says Hier in his spacious office, which features photos of him with Harrison Ford, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Steven Spielberg, "we either try to bring our message using the medium of the age, or we're going to be talking to ourselves."

"The bottom line is Los Angeles is the most important city in the world to be a rabbi," says David Wolpe, a rabbi at the Conservative Sinai Temple in Westwood, where Ryan Seacrest, Aaron Sorkin and Sherry Lansing have all come recently to speak. "For better or for worse, because of television and movies and media, L.A. has a great influence on the entire world. If you can influence the values of people who create these shows, you can make a major difference by ripple effect."

These sonar waves can be small: David Kohan, a congregant and the creator of *Will & Grace*, once assured Wolpe that *Grace* would never marry outside the faith. Indeed, Wolpe notes, Debra Messing's character eventually ended up with a Jewish doctor played by Harry Connick Jr.

Wolpe, 49, who, like many of his colleagues in the rabbinical field in Hollywood, has star quality and matinee-idol good looks, admits he's not really a cinephile. And he encourages his 11-year-old daughter to watch old episodes of *The Waltons* and *Mork & Mindy* rather than reality television. But many of his sermons, which he records and saves on compact discs for posterity, relate to and interpret contemporary issues in the entertainment industry: the poor role models provided by Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan; the Janet Jackson fiasco at the 2004 Super Bowl; or the lessons to be learned about outsiders from the musical *Wicked*. (The show's producer, Marc Platt, also happens to be a Sinai congregant.)

Rabbi Laura Geller, 57, the first woman rabbi on the West Coast and one of Barbra Streisand's teachers for the 1983 film *Yentl*, insists that her sermons, though they often reference pop culture, are not composed with the Hollywood community in mind. She sees art and culture as a way for all of her congregants to explore their faith more deeply.

"I love movies. I love stories," she says, as she steeps a cup of tea in her plant-filled office at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills. She has delivered sermons based on *Thirteen*, a 2003 film about teenage rebellion, and the recent space exploration documentary *Dark Side of the Moon*. In 2006 she built a family education program around *Keeping Up With the Steins*, a comedy starring Jeremy Piven and Garry Marshall about over-the-top Hollywood bar mitzvahs.

"If I was a rabbi in Kansas City, I would have done that," Geller says. "But it's different here in that we went to a special screening on the studio backlot instead of watching it on DVD." Along the same lines, during a recent confirmation class, she adds, "when we talked about stealing, it related to the issues of intellectual property. That might be different in Peoria."

The rabbis interviewed for this story were careful to emphasize that despite their temples' proximity to Hollywood, their congregations are not composed solely of filmmakers, agents and executives. "I'm not nuancing for a Hollywood community; I'm nuancing for a contemporary community," explains Rabbi Steven Z. Leder, 47, of Wilshire Boulevard Temple, whose sanctuary was paid for in the Twenties by the four Warner brothers, Louis B. Mayer of MGM, and Universal Studios founder Carl Laemmle. It also served as a location for a recent episode of *Entourage*, a show Leder admits he has never even watched a full episode of. (*Entourage* creator Doug Ellin's brother is a Wilshire member.)

"Our congregation includes some remarkable people who work in Hollywood, but also the guy who invented laproscopic surgery," says Leder. "I try to be there for my congregants, whether they're concerned with issues at the hospital or they're writing a movie. They're just Jews. I've buried their husbands. I've brisned their boys. I've danced at their weddings. That's being a rabbi to the Hollywood community."

Leder, whose congregants have referenced his sermons in their television shows and who, on occasion, meets with actors to discuss film projects that deal with Judaism, is the author of *More Money Than God: Living a Rich Life Without Losing Your Soul* (Bonus Books), a 2004 book that landed him a profile in *The New York Times Sunday Styles* section as well as on NPR and several talk shows. It made him realize that being a celebrity was not what he wanted. "If fame is what you're after, it's a full-time occupation," he says.

Still, he admits, the exposure that comes with being a Hollywood rabbi can be empowering. For instance, when Mel Gibson was arrested, Leder was one of a handful of religious officials called by the national media for comment. "Occasionally you're given these opportunities to talk on a larger platform," Leder says. "And that's an amazing aspect of being a part of this temple."

Cantor Nathan Lam, 61, is a bit less modest about his accomplishments within the music industry. His office at Stephen S. Wise Temple, which boasts congregants such as former Paramount chief Jonathan Dolgen, producer Peter Guber, Ed Asner and Michael Ovitz, is actually a recording studio. A mural painted by a congregant, of Lam reading the Torah under a holywood sign, covers one wall. A singer who hopes to have the new album he recorded with the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra on iTunes soon, Lam is also a voice teacher who specializes in vocal rehabilitation for patients who have had or are trying to avoid throat surgery. He has worked with Diahann Carroll, Michelle Pfeiffer, Patti LuPone, Belinda Carlisle and Rod Stewart as well as slightly more incongruous acts like Whitesnake, Metallica and Mötley Crüe.

"I went on the road with Poison for four or five days," says Lam, who has a jovial and warm presence seemingly at odds with

headbanger rock. "What looks glamorous is blown out of proportion. They play Trivial Pursuit and sleep the whole day."

If you're thinking he'd make a great television show, his former student Tyne Daly already pitched it over a decade ago, without much success. And a documentary crew would only get in the way of his work. He enjoys the occasional loose arrangement he has as a vocal producer for acts like the Go-Go's, but he would never give up his station at the temple. "My primary thing is as a religious leader," Lam says. "I want people to see that a religious man can also operate in the real world, with lots of slippery slopes in it."

Michelle Missaghieh, the current associate rabbi at Temple Israel of Hollywood, is also attempting to meld religion with the realities of Tinseltown. A 41-year-old mother of three, she maintains that services at her synagogue are "not a place for Hollywood people to see and be seen." Still, the community has a colorful anecdotal history. Founded in 1926 by a handful of movie moguls, the congregation rented out the legendarily palatial home of Bridge on the River Kwai star Sessue Hayakawa to hold services before erecting the current building off La Brea. Tony Curtis attended the Purim Carnival in 1952; the temple's Rabbi Max Nussbaum converted Elizabeth Taylor to Judaism in 1959 and officiated at her wedding to Eddie Fisher in Las Vegas; and in 1975 Marlon Brando, a non-Jew with a strong affinity for the religion, brought Bob Dylan to a temple Passover seder, where the singer performed "Blowin' in the Wind."

The temple's proximity to the industry has brought Missaghieh, like many of her local colleagues, closer to understanding the practices of television production. "We actually call it Temple Showrunner because of the number of television writers in the congregation," says member Jill Soloway, a writer on Dirty Sexy Money who is at work on a pilot with J.J. Abrams. When Soloway worked on Six Feet Under, she modeled a potential love interest for Nate (Peter Krause) on Missaghieh. "There are so few Jewish women on television that are positive and smart and sexy," says Soloway. "It's always been my secret wish to put more women like that on television for Jewish girls to relate to."

More recently, a producer on Grey's Anatomy asked Missaghieh to consult and take a small role in an episode. "There were a lot of Jewish problems with the script, actually," she recalls. An Orthodox teenage patient needed a heart-valve replacement. The doctors wanted to give her a pig valve, which the show's writers believed would pose a religious quandary in that it wouldn't be kosher. "They thought this was sort of sexy," Missaghieh explains. "I told them this was not an issue; you do almost anything to save a life." The writers also wanted the teenager's rabbi to be an Orthodox woman, a plot twist Missaghieh disputed as nearly impossible, because the Orthodox movement does not permit female rabbis.

But as any religious leader can tell you, the counsel of clerics isn't always followed. When she watched the show, Missaghieh discovered the producers had ignored her advice on both counts. "I was naive," she says.

Like Missaghieh, Rabbi Jonathan Aaron, 46, a colleague of Rabbi Geller's at Temple Emanuel who trained as an actor, does a bit of consulting. Last year, for instance, his daughter's babysitter recommended that the producers of The Nativity Story, which starred Keisha Castle-Hughes and featured some spoken Hebrew, employ his expertise. Aaron, whose wife, Michelle Azar, is an actress who has appeared on episodes of Monk, ER and Without a Trace, understands that Judaism is not always depicted accurately onscreen. When Aaron meets with writers and producers, "I just tell them what I think," he says. "There is no such thing as 'It would never happen this way.'"

But when a production is being staged at Temple Emanuel, Aaron gets to call the shots. In 2001 he wrote a full-length musical for the synagogue called Hyrcanus about the great Talmudic scholar Rabbi Eliezer. Aaron has plans to write a sequel, tentatively titled Hyrcanus 2, and he wouldn't mind if other congregations across the country wanted to perform his plays. Still, he's never tried his hand at writing a screenplay. "I think a lot of the stories in the Talmud are really rich, but I never have thought about making a movie," he says, before pausing thoughtfully and breaking out in a laugh. "Why haven't I?"

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