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Croton Rabbi has unusual journey of faith

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CROTON-ON-HUDSON - A pivotal moment in the life of Rabbi Jennifer Jaech came in 1991, when her young son, Isaac, challenged her with some pretty basic questions. "Who is God?" Isaac wanted to know. "What is Jewish?"

His mom was stumped.

"I said that God was like the force in 'Star Wars,' " she recalled. "I couldn't answer the question about being Jewish."

No, Rabbi Jaech was not yet Rabbi Jaech. She wasn't even Jewish.

When the congregation of Temple Israel of Northern Westchester voted recently to make Jaech its next senior rabbi — with not a single hand out of 300 or so opposing her hiring — some congregants probably did not know her full story. They may have known that Jaech worked as a secretary at their Reform temple in Croton-on-Hudson before going to seminary and returning as assistant rabbi, a career path that is unusual enough.

But some may not have known that Jaech grew up studying the Bible around the dinner table, the New Testament included. It's not as if she introduces herself as a former Lutheran. But she'll happily tell her story.

"How did a nice Lutheran girl from Richland, Wash., end up a rabbi in Westchester County?" is how she puts it.

Jaech's story has particular relevancy today. Both the Reform and Conservative Jewish movements are putting an emphasis on promoting conversion for non-Jews married to Jews. So Jaech's journey — from Lutheran to atheist to Jew to rabbi — might seem like a success story for promoting conversion.

Not so, Jaech said: "That would have pushed me out the door."

As Jaech told the temple board during her interview, she is simply not a conventional rabbi.

She was reared a Lutheran, studying the Gospels in the dry, eastern part of Washington. She knew at a young age that the church wasn't for her.

"I rebelled against being told what to believe," she said. "Faith doesn't come so easily for me."

After her confirmation, she made it official. She was not a believer. By the time she got to Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., a super-progressive school founded in the experimental heyday of 1971, she was hostile to organized religion.

Unlike a lot of other converts-to-be, she didn't feel that she was missing anything.

"I felt perfectly fine without religion," she said.

Then she met her future husband, a Jew from across the country in Croton. He told her about Judaism's focus on social justice. She agreed to raise any future children as Jews. They got married and had Isaac. He asked, "What is Jewish?" Then things got interesting.

The rabbi in Olympia gave Jaech some books. She began reading about the tradition of inquiry in Judaism.

"I had this feeling that I had found a place," she said. "I did not have to leave my brain behind, or give up skepticism or intellectual inquiry. I could be part of a community seeking a higher purpose for their lives without having to pass a faith test."

Jaech converted to Judaism in 1992. Her family moved to Croton in 1994. She was already thinking about becoming a rabbi. But the idea seemed a bit outlandish. So in 1995, she took a job as Rabbi Helene Ferris' secretary and assistant. She told Ferris of her plans and spent three years watching and learning.

"I was witnessing a plan, be it God's or hers," said Ferris, who is retiring after 15 years. "Her conversion was only a formal entry into Judaism. She had been thinking about her relationship to the world long before."

Jaech entered a Reform seminary in 1998, and went to Israel for her first year of study. It was her first time there.

"I really wasn't sure what the value was," she said. "I didn't get fed growing up how important Israel is. Now I know the importance of the land to our history, our tradition, our liturgy, our holidays. Everything is tied to that land."

Jaech was ordained in 2003 and returned to Temple Israel as assistant rabbi, soon taking on the position as lead educator, as well. When Ferris announced plans to retire, the congregation faced the unusual situation of having a very familiar candidate.

"We had to be very objective, because we anticipated some dissent if we slam-dunked it," said Phil Silver, 46, a member of the search committee, which would endorse Jaech unanimously.

"It's amazing that she missed out on 20 years of Jewish education," Silver said. "Both of my daughters are in love with her. They will turn out to be decent people and decent Jews, in part, because of coming to the temple and seeing Rabbi Jaech."

Because she had to discover Judaism for herself, Jaech is well-suited to pastor Jews with little religious education, those who have fallen away, those who have married outside the faith. She takes particular pride in reaching out to parents who bring their children to Hebrew school.

Jaech divorced and later married David Sperling, a Bible professor at Hebrew Union College, the Reform seminary. At this point, she can hardly recall her Lutheran self.

"I feel so thoroughly Jewish that sometimes I surprise myself when I remember," she said.

After only three years as a rabbi, she's still surprised by what the job brings.

"Overwhelming moments of joy and fulfillment," she said. "You can't anticipate that, the feeling of making a difference in the world."

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