

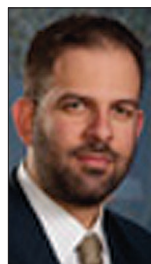
Agudas Achim's Blumofe to receive double ordination

By **Tonyia Cone**

Special to The Jewish Outlook

After serving Congregation Agudas Achim since 1998 and commuting between Austin and Los Angeles or New York each week for almost the last four years, Hazzan Neil Blumofe will receive rabbinical ordinations from the Academy for Jewish Religion, California, and the Jewish Theological Seminary this month.

While studying in Europe and Israel during college, Blumofe recognized that he wanted to learn more about who he was and saw being a cantor and entering into spiritual exploration through music as the most natural way for him to begin doing so.



Hazzan Neil Blumofe

When he returned to the United States, Blumofe began to think seriously about what it would mean to devote his life to serving a Jewish community and, in 1993, proceeded to immerse himself in all things Jewish for five years at JTS, where cantors are trained for the Conservative movement.

A friend of Blumofe's had helped with High Holy Days at Agudas Achim and suggested he connect with the Austin congregation.

Agudas Achim, Blumofe said, matched his ideas of what a community should be in terms of excitement, expansion, verve and possibility.

"It was quite a grand experiment," he said. "I hadn't considered it until I saw the great potential of Austin and Congregation Agudas Achim and thought it would be a good match. I have not been proven wrong, that's for sure."

A sacred singer, composer and teacher, as well as a classically trained pianist schooled in jazz saxophone in New Orleans, Blumofe began serving the congregation in 1998, when he finished studying at JTS. He has since released several albums and served on numerous boards.

Blumofe, who holds the diploma of Hazzan as well as master's degrees in sacred music and Bible as well as ancient Semitic languages, began thinking about the next steps he wanted to take in his life. While on sabbatical in 2005, he realized he wanted to continue developing himself. He identified that, to continue serving the Jewish community, studying to become a rabbi was the next logical step.

"People, no matter at what age or path in life, should find ways to continue to learn, grow and expand their horizons," he said.

As he researched how to pursue his goal while continuing to serve Agudas Achim, Blumofe learned that JTS required living full-time in New York. But AJRCA, a trans-denominational seminary in Los Angeles, offered a program for those able to study only on a more limited basis.

Blumofe said that AJRCA offered an excellent program, perspectives and ideas from the West Coast. Backed by his congregation, he studied with AJRCA in 2006-07, traveling to Los Angeles for three days a week to complete coursework and a thesis.

Upon finishing his coursework at

Congregation to celebrate Blumofe

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In serving Congregation Agudas Achim as its Hazzan, Neil Blumofe has touched many congregants' lives.

Valerie Newberg, Agudas Achim member and vice president of outreach and engagement for the Jewish Community Association of Austin, said that Blumofe has reached out to members of the congregation and community through his warmth, compassion, love of music, dedication to our community and an understanding heart.

"We look forward to Rabbi Blumofe continuing to grow our congregation, while enhancing our love of Judaism and deepening our relationship with Hashem and each other," Newberg said.

Marc Winkelman, another Agudas Achim member, said that, through his teaching and music, Blumofe has raised the Austin community's awareness of Judaism and Jewish culture. "His time and talent have been a remarkable contribution to us all," Winkelman said.

Agudas Achim member Donna Berber said Blumofe offers the community deeply profound spiritual understanding and perspectives along with his compassionate heart and mind, with wit, wisdom, sensitivity and care. He relates to people of all ages, Berber said, and they to him.

Her husband, Philip, continued, "As rabbi, he will be able to explore and embrace new opportunities, bringing his unique spiritual and personal gifts and talents, for the well-being of those he touches, while building upon the foundations and relationships that he has already established in Austin, in Jewish, non-Jewish, secular, musical and other circles.

"Congregation Agudas Achim has been supportive and committed to him and will be rewarded in so many ways by the new Rabbi Blumofe."

Dana Baruch, JCAA president-elect and founder of the Austin Jewish Acad-

emy, said she has enjoyed watching Blumofe engage with members of the community, adults and children, as he worked to build and strengthen connections and relationships that each has with Judaism and each other.

"Neil was an integral part of the early years at AJCDS (Austin Jewish Community Day School, now called Austin Jewish Academy), infusing the halls of the school with a love of learning and a deep respect and knowledge of our Jewish heritage and observances," Baruch said. "As one committed to Jewish living and learning, I have been touched by and impressed with Neil's inspirational teaching. He is a friend and colleague and I look forward to welcoming him as my rabbi."

In recognition of Blumofe's achievements and contributions to his community, Agudas Achim is planning the Rabbi Neil Blumofe Investiture Weekend at Congregation Agudas Achim: Celebrating Together. The celebration begins Aug. 28 at Friday services, at 7:30 p.m., followed by a dessert oneg.

On Saturday, Aug. 29, Torah study and services are planned, starting at 8:30 a.m., followed by Blumofe's installation and a kiddush luncheon. That evening, a festive, entertainment-filled evening at "The J" begins at 8:45 p.m.

Sunday, Aug. 30, is a "Day of Learning" (Yom Iyun), with classes for people of all ages at 9:45 a.m.-noon.

Michael Whellan, president of Agudas Achim, said, "To recognize Neil Blumofe's rabbinic ordinations and continued leadership at Congregation Agudas Achim, we are planning to come together as a community to pray, learn and celebrate. Our weekend of events will be open to all, and the evening festivities will be a special event filled with music, fine food, laughter and friends."

Sponsorship opportunities for the event are available. More details will be available closer to the date of the event.

AJRCA, he renewed contact with JTS and arranged a similar arrangement to study there. Last summer he began traveling to New York for three days a week to complete coursework, while continuing to serve as Agudas Achim's spiritual leader. In April, he wrapped up the program with a senior sermon on Yom HaShoah at JTS.

Blumofe will receive rabbinical ordination from JTS on Thursday, May 21, and from AJRCA on Monday, May 25.

While the two schools have been respectful of each other's programs, Blumofe said, they differ from one another: JTS bills itself as the academic and spiritual center of Conservative Judaism worldwide, and AJRCA, as a trans-denominational school, is more experimental.

"This is a positive example of how movement and non-movement seminaries, educators and people can work together," he said.

Blumofe explained that Jewish life on the East Coast is concentrated in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York, and

has been an established community for more than 100 years. Many in that part of the nation see anything happening in the Jewish world beyond their community, Chicago or Miami as "the great beyond."

On the other hand, he said, the L.A. community embodies a pioneering spirit and is growing into its role and establishing itself in the Jewish world. It's much more expansive and recognizes how large and diverse American Judaism is, he said.

"It struck me immediately," Blumofe said. "The West Coast is more open. Relationships are more creative, with Jews and Jews by choice, those not affiliated, and non-Jews vs. generational experiences in congregations."

Earning ordination in both places gave Blumofe the opportunity of being exposed to many perspectives. "Recognizing deep advantage points is an important component of sensitive listening," he said.

Give and take between coasts is important, he said, and studying in both places

showed him that Austin's Jewish community enjoys the best of both worlds.

While Los Angeles and New York share being large cities, Blumofe said, he felt more camaraderie between movements on the West Coast, while on the East Coast everyone has four cubits of influence.

"I find both important and refreshing," he said, but Austin reflects a mixture of the two perspectives.

"That ambiguity is important to realize how complex it is to be Jewish," he added. "We need both perspectives to be strong and have a good future."

Blumofe said his fellow students had heard of Austin, mostly because of such events as South by Southwest, but especially in New York they thought of this city as being a million miles away and people generally did not have a sense of what the city is like.

Because Texas is more connected to California than to New York, he said, Austin registered more with people at AJRCA.

Though pursuing the two degrees at the same time as he did is uncommon, Blumofe was thankful for the experience, despite the long commutes. Concentrating on one week at a time, rather than being overwhelmed by looking at the big picture, helped him to get through the demanding schedule.

A lot of work and effort went into completing both programs, Blumofe said, and he would have been unable to do it without his supportive family, congregation, individual members of the congregation, staff and other clergy members throughout the community who stepped up to help while he was out of town.

Upon receiving his ordinations, Blumofe plans to remain in Austin, serving as Agudas Achim's senior rabbi and spiritual leader. He would like to use his experience to reach out across the city and nation to have conversations about how best serve the Jewish community with inspiration, dedication and positive learning.

While his day-to-day work will not change significantly, Blumofe said, people react to rabbis differently than cantors serving as spiritual leaders because they have more of a sense of a rabbinic role. (He is one of three cantors serving local congregations as spiritual leader.)

"I won't deny or ignore the background and training I have," he said. "I will have more opportunities to continue leading people and lead conversation nationally and locally."

To him, the best days of Agudas Achim and the Austin Jewish community lie ahead.

"There's no better place in the pulpit or community I'd rather lead. I think Austin has the best of everything. I wouldn't say that about other places in Texas. There is true potential in the Austin community. I serve with talented leaders in a great community. It's endless, leading to where we may go," he said. "We just continue to get better. I think the future is very exciting for me, my community and what we're trying to do."

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Tonyia Cone is a regular contributor to The Jewish Outlook. Contact her at tonyia76@gmail.com.