Ordained online: Second-career rabbis taking over at traditional congregations

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Some South Florida rabbis hired by long-established congregations are struggling to gain acceptance among their fellow clergy because they got their ordinations in 21st-century style: online.

Rabbis with non-traditional credentials have long been part of South Florida's Jewish scene. They often created their own congregations, separate from American Judaism's traditional denominations.

But at least three Conservative synagogues in Palm Beach and Broward counties are now led by rabbis who got their degrees from a correspondence course based in New York designed for "the mature Jewish adult" who already has experience serving the Jewish community.

These hirings are stingning some leaders of the Jewish establishment, who say these rabbis' educations cannot provide the intensive instruction and training offered by the traditional seminaries of the Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist movements, where graduate degrees can take five years of full-time study.

Rabbi Eli Kavon, of Boca Raton, took a correspondence course and was ordained in 2011 after working for years as a Jewish educator. He got his degree from the Rabbinical Academy of Woodmere, N.Y., which offers off-campus rabbinic and cantorial training. Kavon, 48, has been leading Beth Ami Congregation, a Conservative synagogue in Boca Raton, for the past year.

"To be labeled an 'online rabbi' is a cheap shot," said Kavon, who spent two years completing the course. "The Rabbinical Academy of Woodmere does not offer a fly-by-night ordination. They take candidates with years of experience as cantors and educators."

At least two other long-established congregations in South Florida have also hired Rabbinical Academy of Woodmere graduates: Temple Beth Kodesh in Boynton Beach, led by Rabbi Michael Simon, a former attorney, and Sunrise Jewish Center-Temple Sha'aray Tzedek in Sunrise, where Rabbi Bertram Kieffer, a former cantor, has worked since September.

"We are not alone in feeling that attendance at a 'top' seminary program is not the only way that a rabbi should be judged," said David Berger, Sunrise Jewish Center president. He said Kieffer's enthusiasm and energy have helped synagogue attendance grow on Friday nights from 20 to almost 100.

Acceptance by the wider Jewish community has been mixed. Few Jews question rabbis' credentials, said Rabbi Anthony Fratello of Temple Shaarei Shalom west of Boynton Beach, a Reform congregation.
"It's definitely frustrating," said Fratello, immediate past president of the Palm Beach County Board of Rabbis. "When someone says he or she is a rabbi, many Jews accept this at face value. I constantly encounter people who turned to 'fake' rabbis and were subjected to bad behavior and inappropriate treatment."

Fratello said a few years taking online courses cannot match the intensive training, usually about five years, received by rabbinical students at traditional seminaries. They study ancient documents and texts to get perspective on Jewish history and contemporary life, and spend time as interns at synagogues before taking the helm full-time.

The correspondence courses usually take less time, are typically done at the students' own pace as they work another job, and focus on practical rabbinical tasks, such as conducting weddings and funerals or visiting the sick, with less emphasis on historic texts.

Fred Greenspahn, eminent scholar in Judaic studies at Florida Atlantic University, credits several trends for Jewish congregations' increasing openness to the new degrees. Declining membership rates and revenues have forced some synagogues to find spiritual leaders outside the traditional denominational movements, which can require minimum salary and benefits packages as well as intricate rules about interaction between congregations and rabbinical candidates.

Greenspahn said the new clergy are also more flexible: Many are willing to perform a service or ceremony unacceptable to the traditionally educated, such as an intermarriage co-officiated by a priest or a bar mitzvah for a child who has not had a Jewish education.

"Rabbis used to be teachers, interpreters of Jewish law and tradition," Greenspahn said. "Now the Jewish community wants rabbis to be welcoming, inspirational, to give a good sermon, to do what they want them to do, to behave the way they want them to behave."

Rabbis with correspondence-course ordinations are being hired during a time of turmoil in the Jewish community and in organized religion across the United States. South Florida has one of the lowest synagogue affiliation rates in the country: In Broward County, only 27 percent of Jews are dues-paying members; about one-third in Palm Beach County are members, according to the 2008 American Jewish Yearbook.

Barak Richman, a Duke University law professor who has studied Jewish denominations' rabbi-distribution systems, said the denominations have failed to adapt to the evolving needs of American Jewry, and synagogues are chafing at the restrictions.

"This is an exercise in decentralization, an effort to get out of the grip of the cartel," Richman said. "The movements have to adapt to the population, or the population will go elsewhere."

In the meantime, the new breed of rabbis faces ostracism from their colleagues. Fratello said the Palm Beach County Board of Rabbis will not accept them as members. Nor will the Broward Board of Rabbis, said Rabbi Gideon Goldenholz, of Temple Sinai in Hollywood.

At Beth Ami Congregation in Boca Raton, President Hal Kallman said membership had fallen from 672 seven years ago to 331 when Kavon started. But the new rabbi has helped add 59 members, he said.
"He was willing to take on a struggling congregation," Kallman said. "We are being treated like we hired a scab. But we are the customers, and we have the right to buy what fulfills the needs of our membership."

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