

Rabbi SAMANTHA Kahn

*Temple Sinai's
Spiritual
Leader*



Rabbi Kahn officially joined Sarasota's Temple Sinai in July 2019 and is only their third rabbi. She succeeded Rabbi Geoff Huntting who had held the position since 1993.

She is also their first female rabbi joining an elite group estimated to be 350 women who have become rabbis in the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative branches of American Judaism since 1972.

Temple Sinai is a Reform Congregation and culturally diverse community of 450 families who have welcomed their new Rabbi, her husband Matt and their two children Roey, age six, and Stella Mae, age four.



Back in December 2019, Temple Sinai had its Erev Shabbat service (meaning the eve of shabbat or sabbath) and installed Rabbi Samantha Kahn as the Temple's rabbi.

According to the Encyclopedia of Jewish Women, "In 1972, Sally Priesand became the first woman ordained a rabbi, teacher, and preacher in America. Since then more than 350 women have become rabbis in the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative branches of American Judaism." Rabbi Kahn is the first female rabbi at Temple Sinai, a Reform Congregation and culturally diverse community of 450 families.

Rabbi Kahn, who officially joined Temple Sinai in July 2019, is only their third rabbi and succeeded Rabbi Geoff Hunting who had held the position since 1993. Yes, she looks very young, but that belies a woman who has traveled, studied and worked in a vast array of ways. She admits—but doesn't want to dwell on—that there were some concerns about "the new rabbi" but that went away after she was on board due in part to the fact that she's invited everyone in the congregation to meet her one-on-one.

Judging by her schedule, they've taken her up on the offer as she's met well over 400 people who can choose anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour with her (most have opted for the hour). "I've got another 200 to go," she observes calmly. "I was told that I won them over. We joke that a long beard won't work. I can't fix my age, gender or height." The rabbi is not only wise, but has a sense of humor and doesn't take herself too seriously, it would appear.

Before Sarasota, Rabbi Kahn and her family lived in San Francisco where she was San Francisco Bay Area Director for InterfaithFamily and Director of Sherith Littles at Congregation Sherith Israel. The Jewish News of North California reported on her hiring that "Samantha will counsel interfaith couples and help build bridges between them and the Jewish community, but that's only part one of her work. She also will focus on ensuring that the Jewish community is welcoming in deed as well as word."

Before San Francisco, they were in Texas where she spent six years as Assistant Rabbi of Congregation Emanu El in Houston where she garnered the nickname 'Chief Engagement Officer' at the city's largest Reform synagogue.

As part of her post-Rabbinical School experience she was at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills in California

as a Rabbinic Intern and Communal Service Intern. It was there she worked with another trailblazing female, Rabbi Laura Geller, now Emerita Rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, who was the first woman to be selected through a national search to lead a major metropolitan synagogue as Senior Rabbi. Rabbi Geller was twice named one of Newsweek's 50 Most Influential Rabbis in America and was featured in the PBS documentary "Jewish Americans."

Other intern experiences included University of Florida Hillel in Gainesville where she was a Rabbinic High Holy Day Intern, Ronald Reagan Medical Center in Los Angeles, California where she was Rabbinic Pastoral Intern and Temple Shalom in Yakima, Washington where she was a Student Rabbi for two years.

It was while a student pulpit at Temple Shalom she recalls "that I learned what it means to be a rabbi." As if anticipating my reaction she notes, "Rabbis do move around a lot," while I tried to mentally GPS her career's path. She graduated from Rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College. Rabbi Kahn has additional degrees in nonprofit management and Jewish Communal Service.

Her move to Sarasota was part of the continuum of her career, but also a desire to make a lifestyle change. San Francisco gave her and her husband "a crazy lifestyle" with "long commutes." She had vacationed in Sarasota so the weather and lifestyle weren't a complete surprise and, she adds, she loves manatees.


Rabbi Kahn was raised in Miami and her calling came early. She recalls her brother being in a coma and she would visit him while she was in college. "My rabbi said I had a gift for pastoring," she relays. Being a rabbi, she explains "has always been about pastoring."


Every congregation has different demands, she explains. Some may have other clergy members already in place, for example. At Temple Sinai, they have an extensive amount of programs including a childcare center, a women's club, a men's club, adult learning, religious preparation (bat and bar mitzvah) and social action activities. Some of their extensive social action projects have been collecting for Mothers Helping Mothers, food drives for All Faiths Food Bank and their mitzvah days where they go out in the community and help an organization as a group for a day.


The Temple's campus includes The Sanctuary, a social hall, classrooms, a gift shop and offices. Some congregations can have as many as 2,000 families, but Temple Sinai has around 450 families and to her "that feels right." She compares the process of finding and fitting in with a new congregation to finding your partner in life. Speaking of partners, her husband is Matt Kahn, a Philanthropic Advisor at Gulf Coast Community Foundation. In San Francisco he was the Regional Director for the American Jewish Committee, a global advocacy organization. Prior to that, Matt worked at Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston. Locally, Matt both teaches leadership to middle school students and volunteers with Temple Sinai.

The couple have two children, Roey age six and Stella Mae who is four. Their son is named after an Israeli soldier who was killed after jumping on a grenade to save the lives of his fellow soldiers.

What are her goals as Rabbi of Temple Sinai? She's found that there are thousands of unaffiliated Jewish people in our area. "How can I reach them and infuse Judaism into their lives?" she asks. She's also found that there are also many interfaith couples—one partner may not be Jewish—and wants them to feel accepted and welcomed. She strives to be "fully inclusive" at Temple Sinai.

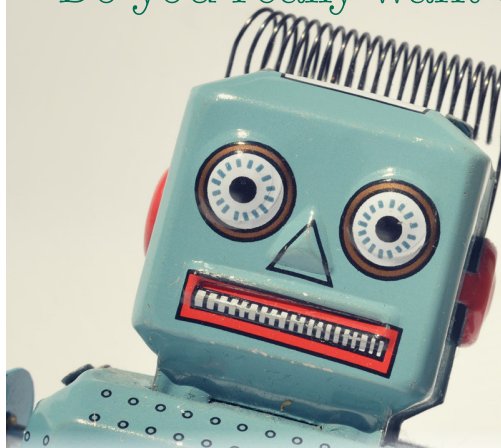
Of her new spiritual community Rabbi Kahn says, "This is a wonderful organization" and when she says it, you become a believer. 

 **STORY:** Louise Bruderle

 **IMAGES:** Evelyn England

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