

A Decade of Dubowe

Temple Adat Elohim celebrates 10 years with world's only deaf female rabbi.

by Sharon Schatz Rosenthal, Contributing Writer

June 15 will be an important date for Rabbi Rebecca Dubowe. It marks the next new moon, the time when the moon lies between Earth and the sun, making it nearly invisible in the night sky. The time is also the beginning of a new month on the Jewish calendar, which is based on a lunar cycle. For Jews, the new moon signifies new beginnings and a time to reconnect with Judaism. And you can count on Dubowe to remind you of its powerful presence.

"I just feel a connection with the moon," said Dubowe, 44, of Temple Adat Elohim in Thousand Oaks. "It swells and then it goes down and then it swells again. That image provides hope, strength and determination to get through the good times plus the bad times."

The very same qualities could be used to describe the rabbi herself.

Nearly a week after the new moon, Dubowe will mark another important event. On Saturday, June 23, Adat Elohim will host a gala dinner in her honor to celebrate her 10th year at the synagogue and her 13th year as a rabbi.

A Los Angeles native, Dubowe grew up in the Fairfax area. When her parents learned that she was deaf at the age of 18 months, they took her to the John Tracy Clinic in Los Angeles, which provides services to young children with hearing loss. It was there that she began to learn how to lip-read and to speak.

Dubowe is the first and so far world's only deaf female ordained rabbi.

These days, she insists that her deafness is a gift from God.

"People ask, Why am I able to speak and others are not? Why am I able to learn Hebrew? Why am I who I am?" Dubowe says.

"I don't take it for granted."

When her parents enrolled her at Sinai Akiba Academy at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, the administrators had doubts. To appease the faculty, the rabbi's parents proposed that the school grant their daughter a six-month trial period. While her parents

"I don't have the perfect voice, but I did it," she said. "Being on the bimah was an incredible moment."

The pediatrician who diagnosed her as a toddler and Louise Tracy (Spencer Tracy's wife, who founded the John Tracy Clinic) were among the many guests who attended her ceremony.

After taking a number of comparative religion classes at CSUN, the rabbi took a trip to Israel that changed her life. She explored the Holy Land and spent time with her Holocaust survivor cousin. These experiences inspired her to attend the University of Judaism (recently renamed American Jewish University).

"I loved the idea of being able to study and teaching and inspiring others to embrace Judaism," she said.

When she first set foot in Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles with an impressive resume and a wealth of Jewish leadership experience under her belt, she was, once again, greeted with some hesitation because of her physical disability. During her admissions interview, the dean of students brought out a Torah and asked her to read it for him.

"He wanted to see if I knew what I was getting into," Dubowe recalled. "Not only did I read it, but I offered to translate it for him."

Clearly impressed, the dean agreed to admit her with the stipulation that she would be patient with the school, as she was their first deaf student.

"I said I'll be patient with you if you'll be patient with me," she said.

With trust and fortitude, she began her rabbinical journey.

Along the way, Dubowe found support in her husband, Michael Dubowe, whom she met on her first day of school at CSUN.



Rabbi Rebecca Dubowe. Photo by Jodye Alcon

knew she would excel, the school officials were quick to assume that a hearing environment would prove too challenging.

"Of course, I proved them wrong," said Dubowe, her shoulder-length brown hair bouncing as she nods curtly.

The rabbi is a member of the school's first graduating class.

At her bat mitzvah, the determined pre-teen insisted on chanting her entire haftorah portion.

"Early on I didn't think I'd marry someone who was deaf like me, but it turned out to be the best thing that's ever happened," Dubowe said.

The couple has two teenage daughters who are also hearing impaired.

After spending four years as associate rabbi at Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple in New Brunswick, N.J., Dubowe returned to her Los Angeles roots in 1997 and began her tenure at Adat Elohim.

The last two years have proved to be a time of transition for the synagogue, with the addition of a new senior rabbi, a new cantor, a new administrator and a new early childhood education director. The other clergy and lay leaders feel that Dubowe's guidance helped quell discontent during the state of flux.

"She's been the steady hand," said Ken Bock, the synagogue's outgoing president. "She's been the calm, steady spiritual presence."

In addition to her role in overseeing the temple's youth programs, coordinating adult education programs and teaching b'nai mitzvah students, Dubowe's favorite part of the job is teaching and guiding people how to live their lives Jewishly.

"I love being a part of peoples' lives and offering them comfort in times of sorrow and joy in their times of simcha," she said.

Up on the pulpit, Dubowe makes sure she is understood. She distributes photocopies of her sermons in order to reach all of her congregants.

She also offers her time to the Jewish deaf community, was a board member on the Women's Rabbinic Network and served on the board of the RAIN Project, a transitional shelter for homeless families in Camarillo.

While she has many passions, the rabbi treasures motherhood most of all. In fact, this past year she won the Agoura Hills Mother of Year Award. Facing new challenges ahead in both parenthood and in the rabbinate, she looks forward to many new moons.

Rabbi Ted Riter, Adat Elohim's senior rabbi, comments that Dubowe's hearing loss is not an issue.

"It's easy to forget that she is hearing impaired," he said.

Bock, the shul's president concurs, calling Dubowe "an inspiration."

"People see her as our rabbi. There's no asterisk," Bock said. "She demands that kind of respect."

Temple Adat Elohim is hosting a dinner-dance in honor of Rabbi Dubowe on Saturday, June 23 at 7:30 p.m. 2420 E. Hillcrest Drive, Thousand Oaks. \$125. For more information, contact Lisa Zweig at (805) 732-5733 or e-mail 2ltlpeaches@earthlink.net. ●