



Rabbi Michael Lezak speaking at Glide Memorial Church, March 26. (Courtesy/Billy Cole Photography)

NEWS - BAY AREA

Can we get an amen? Marin rabbi joins staff at Glide

BY MAX A. CHERNEY | APRIL 4, 2017

Worshippers experienced something out of the ordinary at Glide Memorial Church services last Sunday: Michael Lezak took the pulpit not once but twice to deliver a sermon to a packed house. That's Rabbi Michael Lezak.

"I've been hanging out in synagogues for 18 years," Lezak, 48, told the cheering crowd. "But here's the thing: As you just heard, I've been hired to work right here."

After 14 years at San Rafael's Congregation Rodef Shalom, Lezak will step down at the end of June to become staff rabbi at the Glide Center for Social Justice in San Francisco. It may seem like an unlikely interfaith mashup, but for those who know Lezak and Glide, it's a good philosophical fit.

While he will not be part of Glide's all-Christian clergy, Lezak said he will occasionally take the pulpit to deliver a sermon.

"I am coming in with some humility, wanting to understand Glide's systems, and what they're working on and how I can be of assistance," Lezak told J. "I want to help bring in the broader Jewish communities and build a broader Bay Area interfaith justice movement."

Glide had a rabbi on staff once before, in the 1970s. "Rabbi Abraham Feinberg, he was with us for five years," recalled Rev. Cecil Williams, the church's esteemed 87-year-old pastor emeritus. (He's continued on as "Minister of Liberation.") "When we found out that Feinberg was retiring and wanted to work someplace and be someplace, we grabbed him up immediately. We had a great time."

This time around, the rabbi's position is funded in part by the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, which aims to address social and economic inequities, among other objectives.

"Michael will be a catalyst for greater Jewish community involvement in the Tenderloin at Glide," said Stephanie Rapp, senior program officer for Jewish life at the Haas Fund. "He'll be able to be a bridge for folks who maybe have wanted to do social justice work, and that maybe haven't found the right place. Jews might see this as a great entry point."

Williams said Glide saw value in bringing a rabbi on board again to build a stronger coalition with the Jewish community, but the organization also saw in Lezak a spiritual leader who fit with the church's mission.

"In these destructive times, we wanted to do something about it, and one of the best ways is to find people who are willing to take a risk, and look at things in a realistic way," said Williams, who has led Glide since 1963. "We want to take real action of bringing people together."

Founded in 1929, Glide is a religious and social justice institution in San Francisco's Tenderloin. In addition to religious services held at the church, the affiliated Glide Foundation runs a free hot meal program that serves more than 2,100 people daily, a women's center for victims of domestic violence and dozens of other social programs. It is considered one of the country's most liberal Methodist churches and has been at the forefront of many progressive social justice causes.

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Lezak said it was the social justice work that attracted him to Glide. At Rodef Shalom, he made prison reform one of his paramount issues. His eyes were opened, he said, after reading Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness." He has participated in prison education and outreach programs, including teaching at San Quentin Prison, and has encouraged congregants at Rodef Shalom to take action as well.

When Lezak starts his job at Glide on July 1, he will focus on advocacy, attracting volunteers, education and engagement with the community, according to Center for Social Justice director James Lin.

"Jewish members are an important part of our volunteer core and base," Lin said. "What we'd love to see is even deeper engagement."

Though many Jews attend Glide and volunteer in its programs, Lin said the organization hasn't formally tracked demographics in more than a decade.

"What we can say is that the Jewish community has been a part of Glide from the very beginning, and that included the chair of our board for many, many years," he said. "Purely unrelated to Rabbi Michael's presence, but the day he preached we had two different Jewish groups volunteering in the meals program."

Lezak said in addition to coalition-building, "my counseling work will continue, and my broad outreach will continue. There are thousands of people who are not connected to a synagogue, and thinking back to the times in my life when I needed a rabbi, when I needed counseling, I think it's powerful to have a rabbi in your life."

Lezak, in fact, has a rabbi in his own life. His wife is Rabbi Noa Kushner, who leads the independent San Francisco congregation The Kitchen, which Lezak will be able to attend more often. "I've got a place to pray on Shabbos and the holidays now, I have a place to feed my soul," he said.

Rodef Shalom's Rabbi Stacy Friedman said that while she sees Lezak's departure as a loss for the Marin congregation, she is thrilled about the opportunities for him at Glide.

Added Rodef Shalom executive director Michael Kamler, "The thing about the rabbi that's important to note is that he's not just the social justice rabbi. He's present in lifecycle events, and adds so much meaning and holiness through ritual and tradition, prayers and blessings. That has changed our congregation."

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Max A. Cherney

Max A. Cherney is a former J. staff writer. He can be reached at max@weekly.com.

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