

Radical Rabbi

Spiritual leader from D.C. to head Portland's P'nai Or synagogue

BY AARON SPENCER

Rabbi Debra Kolodny, 50, describes her younger self as "a radical social justice tyke." Just a child in 1968, she walked in one of the first women's rights marches of the modern era in New York City.

"And I was very proud of myself because I wasn't wearing a bra," she says. "At 8 years old, I was liberated. It was hilarious."

At 12, Kolodny went to see the dance company the Rockettes and remembers telling her mother, exasperated, "What is this? All of these women are white. This is New York City!"

From an early age, Kolodny says she was possessed to become a civil rights advocate. That's why she went to law school and later worked in the labor movement. But along the way, that possession found a more divine provenance. Kolodny is a converted Renewal Jew and will move from the Washington, D.C. area to start in September as the new rabbi for Portland's P'nai Or congregation.

Jewish Renewal is a relatively new movement in Judaism. It started in the late 1960s and is described by its leaders as a "worldwide, transdenominational movement grounded in Judaism's prophetic and mystical traditions."

The P'nai Or congregation in Portland is comprised of approximately 120 households, about the average size among the 45 congregations in the country. But P'nai Or, due in part to the movement's progressive leanings, has a sizable LGBTQ population. It's a member of the Community of Welcoming Congregations, a nonprofit group of religious and spiritual organizations in Oregon that promotes acceptance of sexual minorities.

Kolodny will be P'nai Or's second official rabbi, after the synagogue's founding rabbi Aryeh Hirschfield died in 2009. Hirschfield helped found P'nai Or in 1991 and was widely respected in Portland's religious circles,

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-RABBI DEBRA KOLODNY

notably for his efforts to connect people of different faiths.

"Aryeh was such an incredible spiritual leader and human being that no one could fill his shoes," Kolodny says. "My hope is to honor his extraordinary legacy."

Kolodny first "fell in love" with P'nai Or when she visited in 2008. She was making her regular rounds consulting and training as the executive director for ALEPH, the headquarters organization for the Jewish Renewal movement in Philadelphia.

"Everything I know so far about Portland blows me away," she says.

"I'm so impressed with its environmental consciousness, its edginess, its hipness ... its organic sustainable foodiness. And in the middle of all that is a queer culture that seems to be thriving."

"I so excited to be coming, and P'nai Or seems to be a beautiful manifestation of everything Portland has to offer," she says.

As executive director for ALEPH, Kolodny is an influential figure in the Jewish Renewal movement, a résumé item that wasn't lost on P'nai Or. But leaders at the synagogue chose Kolodny primarily because they thought she'd be a good fit for its eclectic congregation.

"It mattered to us that we could find someone who was caring and compassionate and respectful of all of us," says P'nai Or's president, Diane Cohen-Alpert.



Kolodny only became a rabbi this year, though she's performed rabbinical duties for more than a decade. She was raised in a secular home in Rockaway, N.Y., a resort area in Queens (her friends called her a "sand hippie"). She adopted her parents' belief system, that there was no God.

But when she was 16, she went on a student exchange trip to Israel, where at the Western Wall, a sacred site for Jewish prayer and pilgrimage, she had an experience she describes as "being in God's presence."

"So there was little atheist Deb who was absolutely sure there was no God, and she left that experience saying, 'Wow, that was God,'" she recalls.

That's where Kolodny's trajectory toward becoming a rabbi began. She read several

books on different spiritual traditions. She explored not only Judaism, but also Shamanism, Taoism and Dzogchen Buddhism. She even practiced as a Quaker for four years and got heavily into Tai Chi. But ultimately, she felt that all signs pointed to Judaism: She was born to secular Jewish parents, and she had her spiritual awakening in Israel.

"God is speaking to me in a Jewish context; so that's where I belong," she says.

But her experience with other faiths strongly influences her theology.

"One of the hallmarks of my spiritual belief system is that all of the world's wisdom traditions have deep truth that I respect and appreciate," she says, "and I delight in all the ways that we really speak the same truth with different stories and different frames and different metaphors."

Kolodny's theology of oneness also plays into her sexuality—she is bisexual.

"I see an alignment between being bisexual and seeing that we are all connected," she says. "As someone who can love beyond gender, I don't constrain myself by externals."

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Religion is often a wedge issue for sexual minorities, but Kolodny says people of faith are not always close minded or judgmental. She intends to keep P'nai Or a place that welcomes everyone.

"My cosmology is that I see all humans as in a state of yearning to connect," she says, "and if we're religious people, then we understand part of that yearning to connect is with God." ☐

RABBI DEBRA KOLODNY starts Mon., Sept. 5 at P'nai Or, 9750 SW Terwilliger Blvd. in Portland. Visit pnaiorpx.org for more information.



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