

## FEATURES AND LOCAL NEWS

## Recognized as One of North America's Most Inspiring Rabbis, Rimon's Kaya Stern-Kaufman Works Locally to Reinvigorate Spiritual Life

In March, the *Jewish Daily Forward* selected the Berkshires' own Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman, founder of Rimon: Resource Center for Jewish Spirituality, as one of the 33 most inspiring rabbis in North America, choosing her from among hundreds of nominees submitted by readers. "Through Rabba Stern-Kaufman's learning and embrace of diversity," the *Forward* cited, "many people who would not otherwise have a way to connect to Judaism are now exploring the richness of the tradition."

In 2013, the Pew Research Center study *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* set off alarm bells throughout the Jewish community, starting with its intriguing finding that while Jews continue to retain a strong identification with Judaism, "one-in-five Jews (22%) now describe themselves as having no religion." That percentage jumps to 26% among Generation Xers (born 1965-80) and to 32% among Millennials (born after 1980). Yet the study could not easily quantify whether this disconnection is born of lack of education, lack of interest, or active rejection of the faith, nor could it capture statistically what exists of that ephemeral, but enduring and essential, component of the human makeup – the desire for spiritual meaning and engagement.

That is precisely the emotional and intellectual experience that Rabba Stern-Kaufman is working to engage through Rimon. "For many, the Pew study was eye-opening," she says, "but it only documented what I've known anecdotally for decades." For a long stretch of her own Jewish journey, Stern-Kaufman admits, "I didn't find that my spirituality was being nourished." Engagements

as a teacher in local Hebrew schools brought her in contact with "scores of people who felt similarly. That was the background in my developing Rimon."

She describes her initial Jewish identification as "Conservadox" – she was raised in a Conservative home in Monsey, NY, which was then heavily Jewish, but not the ultra-Orthodox enclave it is today. An early and passionate attraction to a deeper Jewish education led her to attend a Modern Orthodox junior high school. "I begged my parents to send me to yeshiva," she remembers. She had been deeply impressed by her grandfather, Harry Katzen, an Orthodox rabbi from Latvia who she describes as a "talmid chacham (wise student) – he was always learning deeply."

She persisted with her Hebrew studies even though her language skills lagged behind those at her grade level who had started learning in elementary school. For the first three years of middle and high school, she spent half her day with studying Hebrew with 2nd graders – "embarrassing, but I wanted it so badly," she says. (She caught up by the time she was a senior.)

"I considered myself at that time a *ba'alat teshuva*," she says, "living *frum* in a non-Orthodox environment." She was a chapter leader of NCSY and attended dozens of Shabbatons.

Though "passionate" in her faith, at the same time Stern-Kaufman started to accumulate experiences that led her to reassess her engagement with Orthodox Judaism. "I was disappointed in some of the rabbis in high school," she says. "Their *middot* (behavior) did not seem to reflect what they were teaching." She felt that "any mystical interest was re-

jected in a very harsh way," nor was she permitted to participate in a "boy's club" study group. Additionally, an NCSY-affiliated rabbi she knew was convicted of sexual abuse – "the deepest level of hypocrisy and betrayal," she says.

She left the Orthodox fold when she attended college, though she continued to practice the faith on her own. Her earlier negative experiences led her to further examine the patriarchal values involved in the formation of Judaism. "I found I couldn't stay connected on an Orthodox level," she says with palpable sadness. "I felt spiritually betrayed as my awareness grew."

Stern-Kaufman became a social worker, married, and raised two children Jewishly. She arrived in the Berkshires in 1996, and taught Judaic Studies at several Hebrew schools. Along the way, she became well schooled in Eastern thought, though she "never identified" with any faith but Judaism. She had trouble finding a clear pathway back to Judaism, partly because of her earlier disillusionment, partly because, she explains, "I was so over-educated [about Judaism] in another context."

Ultimately, however, that background brought her back to Jewish practice. "I hit a certain age," she recalls, "and I felt my Jewish soul and energy calling me. I realized that if you are not happy, if you are feeling unmet, you have to do something about it. And I had the education." She says she was further motivated by "a



Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman

addition to the classes on Talmud and mysticism, musical *Kabbalat Shabbat* services, *eco-tefillah* hikes, and special holiday celebrations presented under the Rimon aegis, Stern-Kaufman often leads services at the egalitarian, unaffiliated Berkshire Minyan and has engaged in outreach to local synagogues in order to support their spiritual practices. "We need to see ourselves as one community," she says of the Jewish Berkshires, adding that there is no space to be territorial.

Since the findings of the Pew Center study were published, it has become more common to encounter – in Jewish publications and from Jew-

ish religious and lay leaders – rhetoric addressing the dichotomy between the idea of Judaism as a peoplehood-oriented religion and the idea of Judaism as a spiritual path. Which of the two is the best way forward, the one destined to keep Jews (particularly those who identify as secular) within the fold?

Rabba Stern-Kaufman's perspective is shaped by her experience in the Berkshires, a region known for attracting earnest and dedicated spiritual seekers of every stripe. Here she has encountered "all kinds of Jews – secular but yoga fanatics to those wanting a traditional Jewish experience – who have all been waiting for years for Jewish spiritual engagement."

"My sense is that there is a movement away from 'tribal' Judaism," she says. "So many people are intermarrying and leaving Judaism, because they only see Judaism as tribal. The only way Judaism with survive among people on the Left, will be a Judaism that survives by sustaining people's spiritual needs."

## Wildman on the Wildmans at the Wildman Lecture

PITTSFIELD – For roughly a decade, Congregation Knesset Israel has been the beneficiary of the annual Wildman Lecture Series established by Joseph and Judy Wildman, siblings raised in Pittsfield by their parents Dorothy and Karl Wildman. Many longtime residents are likely to remember the elder Wildmans primarily as a community-minded couple dedicated to Jewish learning and causes. At this year's lecture, however, their granddaughter Sarah Wildman will talk about her book *Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind*, which recounts their far more complex, and heretofore untold, history.

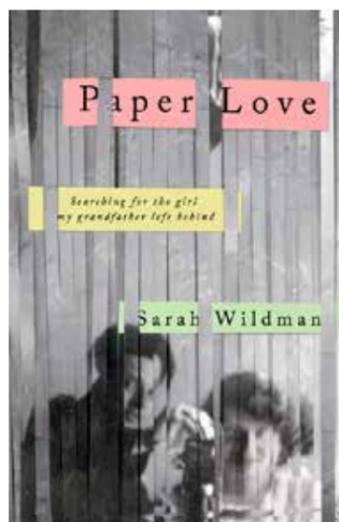
On the weekend of June 12-13 – starting with Shirei Shabbat on Friday evening and continuing through an after lunch talk on Saturday – Wildman will share results of research that revealed a past unknown to even the closest

friends and confidants of her Pittsfield grandparents.

Her book was published in October 2014 to considerable acclaim.

David Grann, author of *The Lost City of Z*, wrote: "In spellbinding prose, Sarah Wildman traces her quest to understand what happened to her grandfather's mysterious lover whom he had to leave behind when he fled Vienna in 1938. Revealing deeper truths about history and the tricky nature of memory, *Paper Love* is a breathtakingly powerful and beautiful new book."

"Wildman long ago turned her attention to the complex afterlife of the Holocaust," wrote Gideon Lewis-Kraus, author of *A Sense of Direction*, "and this book – thoroughly researched, adventurously reported, and vulnerably written – has fulfilled her promise as the most important literary representative of her generation."

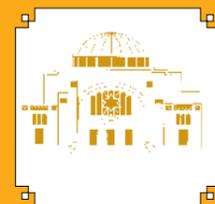


Those interested in reading *Paper Love* before the lecture can purchase a copy at the Knesset Israel office at 16 Colt Road in Pittsfield. For information and reservations, call Myrna Hammerling at (413) 445-4872, ext. 16, or email: mhammerling@knessetisrael.org.

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- THE CONGREGATION IS THE INSTITUTION that has sustained the Jewish people for two millennia throughout the world. Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, or Reform, the Jewish community wins when you join the congregation of your choice.



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