Rabbis’ Biographies and Vision Statements

Shelly Barnathan

Shelly grew up in Baltimore, MD, the daughter of German Holocaust survivors Louis, z”l, and Irma Prentzfelder, who created a loving Orthodox home for Shelly and her brother Jeff. Shelly’s family attended Congregation Ner Tamid, where Shelly acquired her passion for Judaism. The Hebrew language, with its beautiful songs and prayers, brought light to young Shelly, and continues to be a tremendous source of or—light—for her today.

A lover of language, Shelly studied French, German and education at the University of Pennsylvania. Prior to rabbinical school, she was an instructor of Spanish and French for over 30 years in both private and public schools in the Philadelphia area. But all along, Shelly’s passion for Judaism kept rising to the surface as her greatest source of fulfillment and joy. She knew that her neshamah was most nourished when she was leading davening, chanting Torah, or facilitating Melody and Meaning of Prayer at her beloved home congregation of Beth Am Israel in Penn Valley, PA. With the encouragement of her dear friends, and with the support of her family, Shelly left her long-time teaching position and began her rabbinical studies at RRC.

During each of her years at RRC, Shelly has worked at Beth Am Israel, first as rabbinic intern and then as morah rukhanit/spiritual educator. During her RRC years, Shelly also served as student rabbi for Casa Hillel in El Salvador; as rabbinic intern at the Interfaith Center of Philadelphia; as high holiday hazzan at Bristol Jewish Center; and as educator both at RRC’s Mekom Torah and at the Jewish Education Project in New York. In addition, Shelly has taught a steady stream of amazing b’nai mitzvah students.

Shelly would like to thank her Orthodox Hebrew school teachers, who, without knowing it, instilled in a little girl such a love for Judaism that she is now a rabbi. Shelly would also like to thank all of her teachers, mentors and dear friends who have supported her on this journey to the rabbinate. They have each kept her on this holy path.

Shelly extends her deepest thanks to her family—to Elliot, her “Rebbizman,” who has made this all possible; to her children Julia, Evan, Marissa, Aaron and Mollie, and to her sweet grandchildren, Lila and Rose. She knows that they all love her for who she is, and for this she will be forever grateful.

To her Mom, Dad, z”l and Omi, z”l, Shelly says: “I love you with ahavah rabbah, great love, and I know that you are proud of me, as I become a rabbi today.”

In your light we see light.
—Psalm 36:9

It is a blessing to receive light from both God and from our fellow human beings . . . May we each find the light in ourselves, offering it proudly to the world . . . for when we do so, we touch the Divine.