



Red Rock Rabbi

Rabbi Alicia Magal is doing things the Sedona way.

By Kevin Whipps

A few months back, I drove down to Tucson to talk to Esther Leutenberg, who would become our cover story for the November issue. We talked for an hour about her family, her son and the life she's led since her son passed. During our conversation, she told me how she celebrates the holidays. "Actually, there's an amazing temple in Sedona," she said. "We go there for the holidays. Stay for the week and go for the holidays, it's amazing. Woman rabbi. And it just sings to me."

Leutenberg spent the next 10 minutes singing the praises of this mysterious Sedona synagogue, and while we spoke I jotted down a note to myself: "Look up Sedona synagogue with a woman rabbi."

And that's how I discovered Rabbi Alicia Magal.

HOLLYWOOD [VIA ISRAEL] TO THE ROCKS

Sedona is one of those places that everyone has to experience at one point. It's the place where postcards are born, full of beautiful red rocks and pine trees as far as the eyes can see. The people of the town are quite spiritual themselves, and you don't have to travel too far deep into the town to find yourself knee-deep in crystals, psychics and other '60s memorabilia.

This is the home of Rabbi Alicia Magal, the rabbi at Jewish Community of Sedona and the Verde Valley, a synagogue painted a rusty red to match the surrounding area and topped with a nicely weathered copper roof. But this hasn't been her

home forever; she's only been in Northern Arizona since 2006. Prior to that, her path wasn't pointed toward religion.

In the mid-1970s, Magal was a French teacher in Connecticut and decided to visit Israel for just a few months. As she puts it, "I went for six months, met my husband the first day and came back seven years later, married with two kids." Upon her return, now with family in tow, they headed to Los Angeles so her husband, Itzhak "Ike" Magal, could work. He was a production sound mixer in film and television, working on shows such as "Hill Street Blues." He even received an Emmy nomination for his work on the Hallmark channel's "A Painted House." It was a good life for the family.

Over time, Magal found herself teaching her kids about, and involving them in, the Jewish community. But in her mid-40s she started to feel a calling toward a higher purpose. In 2003 she was ordained, and shortly thereafter she found herself the rabbi of a Renewal congregation. The only problem was, it was in Chicago. "And so for three years, a little more than three years, I was going back and forth every two weeks between LA and Chicago," she explains.

The trek was tolerable for Magal, but unfortunately, the congregation couldn't offer her a full-time position. When her husband retired and she was offered that full-time gig in Sedona, they packed up their home and moved east to Arizona.

SERENITY NOW

Sedona is a small town, with only a few ways to get in or out. Even though resorts and hotels abound in this tiny town, it's easy to get lost in the feeling that everyone could be your friend. It's something that Magal experiences daily. "I go to the post office and get a hug, and go to the grocery store and someone says, 'Oh, rabbi, I've been meaning to call you.' It's like my office is the whole city."

What is it that makes Rabbi Magal so different? Leutenberg says, "What I love about [Rabbi Magal] is before every prayer she just tells you one or two lines about what this prayer means. Because when you read the translation you don't know what it means, it's just translated."

Magal works this way because of the diversity of the Jews who live in the Sedona area. "It is extremely varied," Magal says. "We have everything from very cultural, secular Jews, to Conservative and even Orthodox Jews." This leads to her to try to have a service that's as open and welcoming as possible, using whatever means necessary. "I have to weave together all these strands and I try to do that at every service, explaining and translating anything in Hebrew, not assuming they know what it is, and [offer] my own take on meanings. They're not just ..." She pauses. "We don't just recite prayers, we kind of go inside them," she explains.



■ Nika Fleissig (left), mother of Rabbi Alicia Magal (right), signing copies of the book the Rabbi wrote about her mother's dramatic story of survival during the Holocaust.

It means that what she does is whatever she can do to get the point across — to really address what a prayer means, not just the superficial content that you might get from a basic translation. "I use story, I use dance, I use art," Magal says. "It's a very holistic way of presenting a heritage rather than just rules or laws or history."

It means that going to one of her services will likely be a different experience than could be found at other synagogues.



THE RIGHT TIME AND THE RIGHT PLACE

The timing was right for Magal to move to Sedona and continue her path. Her children were grown up and had moved on, her husband had retired and she was ready to dedicate her life to something meaningful. And where better to do it than in such spectacular scenery? "One wants to be spiritual here, so I tap into that feeling through our Jewish tradition," Magal says. "My mission is to bring joyful, juicy Judaism to people who may not have experienced it. I feel very lucky to serve as [the] rabbi of this community."

Jewish Community of Sedona and the Verde Valley, 100 Meadowlark Drive, Sedona, 928-204-1286, jcsvv.org. ■

■ Congregants acting out the Book of Ruth for a Shavuot celebration. Back row left is Itzhak Magal, husband of Rabbi Alicia Magal, pictured to her right.