

BY JASON P. LORBER

It's easy to have preconceived notions about rabbis. No one knows that better than Rabbi David Steinberg, a new hire at Burlington's Ohavi Zedek Synagogue.

"I never thought I could be one," said Steinberg in a phone interview with *Out in the Mountains*. "I thought that rabbis had to believe that God wrote the Torah, and I didn't believe that."

Growing up, he also thought that rabbis couldn't be openly gay. But Steinberg later learned otherwise.

David Steinberg grew up in New York City, where he attended Orthodox Jewish schools. He later lived on Long Island, where he had his Bar Mitzvah (a coming of age ceremony for boys who have reached age 13 in the synagogue), and then served as a regular Torah reader at a Conservative synagogue. Being Jewish was a big part of his life. And so was music.

A viola player, he studied music at the University of Pennsylvania, where he graduated summa cum laude.

Steinberg went on to Harvard Law School where he earned his J.D. Upon graduation, he moved to Portland, Maine, to become a corporate lawyer.

But Judaism and music remained central to Steinberg. He served on the Board of Directors of his synagogue in Portland, as co-president of their Brotherhood organization, and taught at the Portland Community Hebrew School. Musically, Steinberg continued to play viola, and also sang prayers as a cantorial soloist. In his spare time, he played viola and sang with the Casco Bay Tumblers Klezmer Band.

But he didn't really enjoy being a lawyer. "I was pretty bored by the work," he said. Plus, he was living in the closet.

"I had been dealing with gay issues for many years," said Steinberg. "One of the reasons why I took so long to come out was that I had no openly gay Jewish role models."

In 1989, when Steinberg was 28, he attended the Conference on Judaism in Rural New England, held in Lyndonville, Vermont. He describes that as his catalyst for coming out. It was during his reading of the book *Twice Blessed* a few months later that Steinberg learned the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College admitted openly gay and lesbian students. Steinberg later recalled a memory of wanting to be a rabbi when he was 8 years old.

So he signed up. After 6 years of study and part-time Hebrew school teaching and tutoring — including a year in Israel during which Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated — by 1997 he was an ordained rabbi. He also spent a year at Beth Simchat Torah, a gay and lesbian congregation in Greenwich Village.

Steinberg helped found Am Chofshi, a



COMMUNITY PROFILE: Rabbi Steinberg Reaches OZ

chavurah (social group) serving the Jewish glbt community in southern Maine. He met other openly gay and lesbian Jews who were "completely integrated into Judaism." Steinberg said that was important to him because "being gay was this new concept for me, but being Jewish was already central for me. Knowing that I didn't have to give up one to embrace the other was a tremendously empowering experience."

From 1999 to 2005, Rabbi Steinberg served Temple Beth Israel in Plattsburgh, NY. As that congregation's sole spiritual leader, he played the roles of both rabbi and cantor (the cantor has the role of leading the musical aspects of worship), and taught students and adults in the religious school. He also served on the Interfaith Council of Clinton County, and as president of the Interfaith Council in Plattsburgh.

Each Informs the Other

For Steinberg, being Jewish informs his gay identity, and visa versa. "Being gay in a predominately heterosexual society, I think I have a critical view of what society takes as a given. The same is true about being Jewish in a Christian society."

Steinberg is also quick to note, "That doesn't mean that you don't accept society. I'm actually quite conventional in my tastes." Steinberg's pastimes include classical music, running, the gym, and *The New York Times* crossword puzzles.

When confronted by those who say that the Torah condemns homosexuality, Steinberg recalls one of the most memorable lessons he learned when he was a little kid going to Hebrew School in Brooklyn, "It's okay to be mad at God, it's just not okay to ignore God." Steinberg continued, "There's a traditional Jewish blessing that says that God commanded us to engage in Torah. [The prayer] doesn't say that we're required to believe in Torah, but rather to engage in it. So when I come to parts of Leviticus that I don't agree with, I still believe that I'm being true to Jewish religion by engaging with it."

Working in the Land of OZ

Last month Rabbi Steinberg began a new job in Burlington at Ohavi Zedek Synagogue — which is often called OZ. Successfully navigating his way down the yellow-brick road, Steinberg serves as OZ's school principal and cantor. He oversees the direction of the Synagogue's educational programs, leads prayers, and organizes holiday events. Steinberg also encourages lay leadership of prayers and chanting the Torah from the scroll, noting that one doesn't have to be ordained in Jewish worship.

Steinberg wants people to know how vibrant, progressive, and welcoming OZ is to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Much of that he credits to OZ's Rabbi Joshua Chasan, who performed same-sex ceremonies before Civil Unions were even discussed in Vermont.

Steinberg noted that OZ is a place with past and present leadership that includes GLBT people, including the immediate past president who was a lesbian, and where one of the current vice presidents is a lesbian.

Steinberg didn't feel that being gay was an issue when he applied for the job. Throughout the entire process, he felt that he and his partner were welcomed. Steinberg lives with his partner of 2 years, Peter Blackmer, who is Assistant to the Dean of Libraries at UVM. The two were joined in Civil Union in May 2005. ▼

Jason P. Lorber and his partner Nathaniel G. Lew are members of Ohavi Zedek Synagogue.