



## Rabbi Sharon Cohen

**RABBI SHARON COHEN** was born in Miami, Florida in 1969 where she grew up with her parents, older brothers, and grandparents until the age of twelve. She credits her parents' devotion and community involvement for laying a great foundation for her Jewish identity. She attended Jewish preschool and summer day camps, while her father participated in congregational boards.

Her family's move to Tennessee, however, actually set her on the path to becoming a rabbi. In contrast to the large, Conservative congregation her family belonged to in Miami, their smaller congregation in Chattanooga, B'nai Zion, emphasized egalitarian participation for men and women. She taught both Sunday school and later kindergarten for B'nai Zion.

*"But in Chattanooga...women could get up and do everything that men could do."*

From her undergraduate studies at Washington University in St. Louis through her rabbinic studies at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles (now American Jewish University), she developed her Jewish identity and rabbinic qualifications.

Following her first position as an assistant rabbi in Phoenix, Arizona, Rabbi Cohen moved to Lexington, KY in 2000 to serve as the rabbi of Ohavay Zion Synagogue. Although female rabbis were not new nationally at the time, the idea still challenged the traditional perceptions of who should hold that position. Though she was the first female rabbi in Lexington, the community embraced Rabbi Cohen, including the influential patriarch Oscar Haber.

*"It's not about who likes you, it's about doing the job well and trying to engage as many people as you can. I think this community was ready for a woman rabbi."*

Throughout her nine-year tenure, Rabbi Cohen promoted egalitarian and participatory activity: Torah readings, weddings, funerals, bar and bat mitzvahs, conversions, and hospital and nursing home visits. For her, the greatest joy was connecting with the community on a personal level and watching the growth of service attendance, especially among the youth.



*Rabbi Cohen speaking at her going away picnic for OZS*

*"It's the small details that touch people's lives... they are the real achievements."*

Since 2009, she has held positions that draw from her rabbinical training: in a clinical pastoral education (CPE) program at the VA Hospital, as a family support liaison at Kentucky Organ Donor Affiliates, and as a chaplain at St. Joseph's Hospital. Today, with husband Jeffrey, she is raising two young sons in the Jewish faith.