

January 12, 2017

Bayonne's rabbi with a plan

*Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger talks about the city,
his shul, and his unusual path to them*

by JOANNE PALMER



Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger is so extraordinarily well-rounded that it's amazing he doesn't bounce.

It is of course not a physical thing — Rabbi Unger is trim and handsome — but his list of accomplishments is so varied, and the worlds they touch are so wide-ranging, that it is impossible not to marvel.

Does this sound hyperbolic? Rabbi Unger is an actor with credits in commercials, television, and three feature films; he's a classical guitarist, arranger, and composer; he holds a Ph.D. in political science and is a tenured associate professor at Wagner College on Staten Island, where he teaches urban planning. And oh yes, he's also a pulpit rabbi, new to Congregation Ohav Zedek in Bayonne, where he plans to help revitalize an already growing community. And his background and skills, he firmly believes, position him uniquely for that task.

Rabbi Unger's own story starts in Bay Ridge in 1968, but he has roots in Hudson County. His maternal grandmother, Molly Safier, had a big brother, Shloimeh — it became Sam once he came to this country — who was born in 1869. "He is the oldest figure in the family, legendary, almost mythological," Rabbi Unger said. In fact, he is known in family lore as Uncle Safier,

never the less formal Uncle Sam. He was the carrier of the family name. “He had a big paper plant in Jersey City, and he lived in Hoboken,” Rabbi Unger said; he’s not sure what the plant was called, but he knows it was destroyed in a fire at some point, probably in the 1930s.

Uncle Safier embodied the entrepreneurial spirit. He came from Galicia, and started the business in Jersey City because of the transportation opportunities it offered — “the Lackawanna Railroad was a transportation hub,” and the rivers offered yet more shipping lanes, his descendant the urban planner said. The products he made were thick, industrial-grade wrapping and waxed paper, unglamorous but necessary.

He was responsible for bringing over many relatives; “now he has hundreds of descendants, from Lakewood to Brooklyn,” Rabbi Unger said. “And he remained observant. He was the founding treasurer and gabbai of the United Synagogue of Hoboken,” which now is Conservative but then was Orthodox. It was an old-style synagogue then; the men would go to shul in top hats on Shabbat mornings, he said.

“His name is on the plaque outside the sanctuary, dated 1915.”

That’s particularly interesting to Rabbi Unger because United Synagogue’s rabbi, Robert Scheinberg, is an old friend; the two were in the Columbia University-based Jewish a cappella group Pizmon together.

Rabbi Unger’s parents, Sherwood and Myra Unger, both have deep roots in Brooklyn, Sherwood in Crown Heights and Myra in Bensonhurst. They were — and still are — observant Orthodox Jews. They were — and still are — also active lovers of the arts. Sherwood Unger, a broker at Morgan Stanley, is a serious connoisseur with a deep knowledge of music and a particular love of opera, his son reports, and Myra Schiffer Unger, a retired teacher, also performed, and designed arts curricula for Lincoln Center.

Both Abe and his sister, Judy, who is now an L.A.-based actress, loved to perform. “As a kid, I loved to dress up and put on shows at Thanksgiving and Pesach,” he said. “We would put on plays at home. We wrote scripts and memorized them.” His parents approved. “I was shy as a kid, and my folks thought that it would help bring me out of my shell.” His father worked with someone who knew someone who knew an agent, and soon Abe was working.

He went to the Professional Children’s School in Manhattan, which allows its students the flexibility to take jobs and work their academic schedules around them.

Most of his work was in commercials, and he stresses that there is no reason that someone who is Shabbat-observant cannot have a thriving career in commercials. “Commercials don’t film on weekends!” he said. “It’s not hard at all. All you have to do is get off early on winter Fridays.” He also was careful not to audition for jobs that would be made around the holidays. Most films don’t shoot on weekends either, he added; it’s only live theater that conflicts with Shabbat and holidays.

Rabbi Unger made about 100 commercials and three feature films “as a principal” — that is, with a speaking part — during this period, including the “Bad News Bears Go To Japan.” “I was the kid with the yarmulke,” he said.

When he was 12, going on 13 — exactly bar mitzvah age — Rabbi Unger played a bar mitzvah boy on “Saturday Night Live.” Kirk Douglas played his father, Gilda Radner was his mother, and Bill Murray was the entertainment.

“It was fun,” he said. “I remember meeting Kirk Douglas, and the first thing he said to me was ‘Have you learned your haftorah yet?’ I remember that I wore a velvet kippah with silver trim. Very 70s. And Gilda Radner was smart and quick and kind. My grandmother came with me, and she was very sweet with her. Very nice. They all were.



Rabbi Unger also appeared in the “Bad New Bears Go To Japan.” He’s standing, second from left, next to the coach, played by Tony Curtis.

“And I did all this while learning Gemara,” he added.

While he was in school, Rabbi Unger’s parents made sure that his Jewish education continued. Rabbi Jay Miller, “who taught honors Talmud at Ramaz,” a beloved, creative, and idiosyncratic teacher, who Rabbi Unger loved, separately taught both him and his sister Talmud. “He was an educator’s educator,” Rabbi Unger said. “He would puff on Camel cigarettes — he chain-smoked — and ashes would fall in his beard, and he would say ‘Abe, read the Gemara.’”

“He was an old-school teacher, a tremendously creative mind, and he knew the Western canon intimately.”

So Abe Unger was living two lives — the performing life and the Jewish one — but they never felt like anything other than one complete and happy one, he said. “I didn’t have friends at school who were missing things on Friday nights or learning with a private rebbe with a big black velvet kippah, but I had my music and my art and my acting, and I thank God that my parents were wise enough and open enough to let us pursue it.

“I always thank my parents for having the foresight to say ‘If that’s what you love, go do it.’”

Rabbi Unger feels strongly that the arts and a religious life are good for each other. Art requires discipline; it demands the same kind of close, rigorous attention to detail that Jewish text study demands. In fact, often it is exactly the same kind of text study.

“There has to be rigor involved,” he said. “When you are really involved, when you practice every day, you are disciplined and focused.” And when you are thoroughly involved in your study, of text or of music or of any other art, it is “a great forum for kids to explore themselves.” That’s because close study of traditional texts demand that each student bring something new to it. “A hiddush,” he said. “You are supposed to interpret it anew. You are the new link in the chain.

“I encourage Jewish day schools to provide substantial arts programming, both for discipline and creativity,” he said.

After high school, Rabbi Unger went to the Manhattan School of Music for his undergraduate degree. He majored in classical guitar, which is his passion.



“It was a conservatory program,” he said. That discipline that he so valued in his art was an integral part of the school’s approach. The school taught academics as well as performance, and each student had to pass formidable juried performance trials to move on to the next year. Rabbi Unger graduated in 1988. He was 19 years old.

After a few years as a musician, arranger, and songwriter — and then a seemingly abrupt shift to an internship doing political analysis at Lehman Brothers — “I realized how much I loved learning,” Rabbi Unger said. “The intellectual side grabbed me.



“I loved the study of religion and politics. I was reading it for fun — music and acting was my work — so I decided to pursue academic work in political science. I went for a master’s degree, took a short break, and then went for a Ph.D. in political science, with a specialty in urban economic policy.” He did his graduate work at Fordham. “It is a Jesuit institution, so it had that close analysis of text and followed the traditional canon,” he said. “I felt very comfortable there.”

Rabbi Unger’s dissertation was on the politics of gentrification in New York City, and specifically on business improvement districts and public/private partnerships. It has been turned into a book, “Business Improvement Districts in the United States: Private Government and Public Consequence.”

“While I was in graduate school, I kept on learning privately,” Rabbi Unger said. “I spent some time at the Telz-Stone Kollel in Israel, outside Jerusalem, to seek ordination, and they also recognized me at the same time as a marriage officiant *chutz l’aretz*” — outside Israel. “I really wanted that.

“I kept on learning because I love to learn, and the text is alive for me, as a living text,” he said. “I could see Rabbi Akiva arguing with Rabbi Ishmael. The idea of creating thinking, of being a contributor to the tradition, was the same as it was at Fordham, and the same as being an interpretive artist. It was all seamless. I just kept on learning.

“My father taught me that an educated Jewish person just keeps on studying throughout his life.”

Rabbi Unger got *smicha* in 2000; in 2007, he became Rabbi Dr.

“The idea of practicing as a rabbi became increasingly close to me,” he said. He began doing community service, and then, with his ordination, went on the staff of the White Street Synagogue in downtown Manhattan. (It’s since had its name changed to the Tribeca Synagogue.) “The rabbi comes from the Mir Yeshiva, but it’s also very diverse for a mainstream Orthodox shul, with people from all over,” he said. “I enjoyed it.”

Rabbi Unger also set up a nonprofit group called the Mosaic Colony, an artist-in-residence program that provided artists with the chance to teach art to day school students, and of course gave the students an arts education. “Our jewel in the crown was a teen filmmaking program,” he said. “Students at schools like SAR and Ramaz were making feature films — they had to be on Jewish topics. The faculty had to be people making a living in their fields. Some of them were well known.”

The 2008 financial meltdown was very hard on Mosaic. The program is basically hibernating now. Rabbi Unger would love to be able to find funding that could wake it up; it would be ready to go, he said. “We have the equipment, the studio space, the curriculum. We could reboot it quickly.”

In 2008, Rabbi Unger started working at Wagner College, a “wonderful small liberal arts school. It comes out of the Lutheran tradition, although it is no longer affiliated, and that means that it has a tradition of service and is respectful of faith communities.” It also “has one of the best theater arts programs in the country, and the students who graduate from it get work in their fields,” he said; he is not sure why so few people outside the arts community know that.

Rabbi Unger now is tenured as an associate professor of government and politics. He also is the campus rabbi, and he is Hillel’s rabbi as well. He also publishes; he’s particularly proud of having written the entry on Jewish philosophy in the latest edition of the Catholic Encyclopedia, and he has finished a new manuscript, “God and the Global City: A Jewish Public Theology.” He even has a publisher for it — Lexington Books.

So with all this going on in his life — Rabbi Unger also is the single father of 10-year-old identical twins, Ari and Rafi, and newly engaged to Deborah Lupkin — and a comfortable home in Hoboken, what is he doing in Bayonne?

He’s in Bayonne, Rabbi Unger said, because the urban planner in him is excited about the possibilities, the Orthodox Jew in him is excited by the community, and the rabbi in him is excited by the chance to grow a fairly small but enthusiastic congregation in a city that’s always had a Jewish life and now is seeing it expand.

Bayonne never declined, he said; it’s not dangerous and never was. It’s not scarred or even graffiti-marred. But it has been overlooked. “This should be the way station for young Jewish families,” he said. “They’re 20 minutes from Teaneck or Elizabeth,” where there are day schools and dazzlingly huge selections of kosher food. There are Conservative and Reform synagogues in town, as well as Ohev Zedek, and the Bayonne JCC “has arts and culture programs, and early childhood classes. And there’s the Jewish Learning Project, an outreach program that meets at the Conservative shul, Temple Emanu-El.

“We have the infrastructure. We are not isolated in Bayonne.”

The potential for growth in Bayonne is not restricted to the Jewish community. “For an urban planner, there is nothing as exciting as being here, at the very threshold of growth,” Rabbi Unger said. “Bayonne has the infrastructure. When you look for a gentrifying community, you look for certain features. You look for a walking commercial retail strip.

“We have one. We have Broadway. It’s one block up from the synagogue — about 2½ miles. And it’s woven to major arteries and transportation. About every couple of blocks, parallel to Broadway, there is a stop for the light rail that goes to Jersey City, Hoboken, and the PATH to Manhattan. And we have roadways that can get you to the Holland or Lincoln tunnels to Manhattan in 20 minutes. And when the Bayonne Bridge is open” — it’s undergoing major construction now, and is open only some of the time — “it can get you to Staten Island in 15 minutes or less.

“Not only do we have transportation, and a walkable retail area, we also have a combination of urban and suburban living,” he continued. “There are new Manhattan-style buildings, with doormen, just like in Hoboken and Jersey City and downtown Brooklyn. And there also is nice suburban housing stock, with backyards, so people with children can move here. We are starting to see pockets of coffee shops and art galleries. It’s just beginning — it’s not systematic yet, but you see it.

“What is systematic is the residential development,” he said. “I don’t think that the developers are part of any kind of formal consortium, but they all are choosing to put their buildings parallel to the light rail stops.”



There also is some renovation; the old Maidenform building is being converted into lofts, called SilkLofts.

The city traditionally has been home to many ethnic groups; historically “it’s been Polish, Irish, Italian, and Jewish families,” Rabbi Unger said. “Some of their descendants are still here. You have solid ethnic enclaves.” Some of his congregants, in fact, come from those Jewish families.

“Now, the city is starting to attract DINKS” — couples with double incomes and no kids — “yuppies, singles, and maybe a few families with small children. The goal is to have about 3,000 to 5,000 people come over the next few years. About 50 percent of the new housing stock is studios and one-bedrooms, clearly meant to attract people getting priced out of the city or Jersey City or downtown Brooklyn.”

Rabbi Unger also is enthusiastic about his shul’s future. Although he is strongly Orthodox, and he is proud of Ohav Zedek’s membership in the Orthodox Union, he says that the shul welcomes everyone, and is proud of its diversity. It’s a small, homey place, in an old building that housed a church, and its dark wood and lived-in feel are welcoming. It offers a youth group for toddlers during Shabbat morning services. Rabbi Unger is proud to report that his sons run it, and there are enough toddlers to keep them busy.

For now, Rabbi Unger will continue to live in Hoboken — he stays in an apartment close to the shul for Shabbatot and chaggim — but who knows? Maybe someday — maybe someday soon — Bayonne’s urban charms will pull the urban planner in full time.