

Interview

The passionate Rabbi Zeldin

By Joseph N. Feinstein

Passion is powerful...Nothing was ever achieved without it, and nothing can take its place.

Rabbi Isaiah Zeldin has been Mother Superior of Stephen Wise Temple since its inception almost two generations ago. "Shy," as some people call him, isn't! I have known, admired and loved this man from our first meeting almost 30 years ago. I served as a teacher and confirmation supervisor for 20 years at his temple.

Had he entered any other profession, he could have been our first Jewish president, or certainly become as wealthy as Sam Wall or Bill Gates. Instead, Rabbi Zeldin has created a templeopolis atop Mulholland Drive.

No Jewish clergyman has ever dreamed such dreams and watched them turn into abundant reality as he has. He may well be our first Jewish Genie, for no one can say so little, yet produce so much, as he: not one, but two sanctuaries; not two, but five full-time rabbis; not just a nursery school but a day school, now supplemented by elementary, junior and senior high schools; not just a playground, but the first "shul with a pool."

It was Stephen Wise, the rabbi, who believed that the temple should be all things to all people. It was Rabbi Zeldin who turned Wise's dream into reality.

Zeldin's method is simple: "I think I can" is his credo; "I know I can" is his belief!

I had the pleasure of talking with him last week on a variety of subjects. His mind and heart and voice are expansive, optimistic, positive and deep. He simply can't wait for the next dream to pop into that fertile brain, for at 77 he has just begun to fight.

Go tell him. "There's no more room at the top of that mountain!" and he'll tell you, "If not now, when?"

What a guy!

□

Joseph Feinstein: When did you decide to become a rabbi?

Rabbi Zeldin: When I was 13, in 1933, Hitler was on the rise. I marched between Rev. Holmes, a Unitarian minister, and Rabbi Stephen Wise in protest against Hitler. It was then I knew I would become a rabbi.

My first position came in 1945 in Stockton, Calif., and it was then that I

realized I wanted to stay here and not return to Brooklyn.

I see you as one of the most tireless, highly motivated, enthusiastic rabbis. Where did all this energy come from?

It's a Zeldin family trait. My grandchildren have inherited it also. Both my sons are workaholics. I call these efforts positivism and optimism. It's all part of the Zeldin make-up. I got it from my father, who was principal of a Hebrew school and who worked with Rabbi Stephen Wise. My dad was a great orator and was the Yiddish speaker on the radio for FDR. My dad kept an audience in rapture for he spoke so beautifully and articulated so well.

What are some of the differences you see in the graduating Reform rabbis today and those in the days when you graduated?

There are many differences:

A. When I graduated HUC, the rabbinate was a seven-day and-night

'I want all my people to enjoy Judaism in whatever form they pick.'

position. Today, rabbis insist on certain days with time off. I was on call 24 hours; nowadays, not.

B. In my day, the rabbi's spouse came along as absolutely essential. She took a very active part in the ongoing life of her husband. Today, the spouse is on his/her own and is not part of the deal.

C. The rabbis today have a better Hebraic background than I did when I went to school. They have to go to Israel for one year today to perfect their Hebrew; I did not. And, in addition, my course took four years and today's rabbi studies for five years.

What are a few reasons Reform Judaism appears to be returning to Orthodox externals — wearing tallits and or yarmulkes, extra Hebrew in the services, longer services, etc?

The main reason is that Reform Judaism discovered you cannot teach ethics and principles of Judaism without the Jewish ceremonies. Reform Judaism may be philosophically where it has always been, but in its externals, it has been forced to change and return to the ceremonies. For instance, today every boy and girl is being bar or bat mitzvahed. The ceremonies have a binding effect upon all of us.

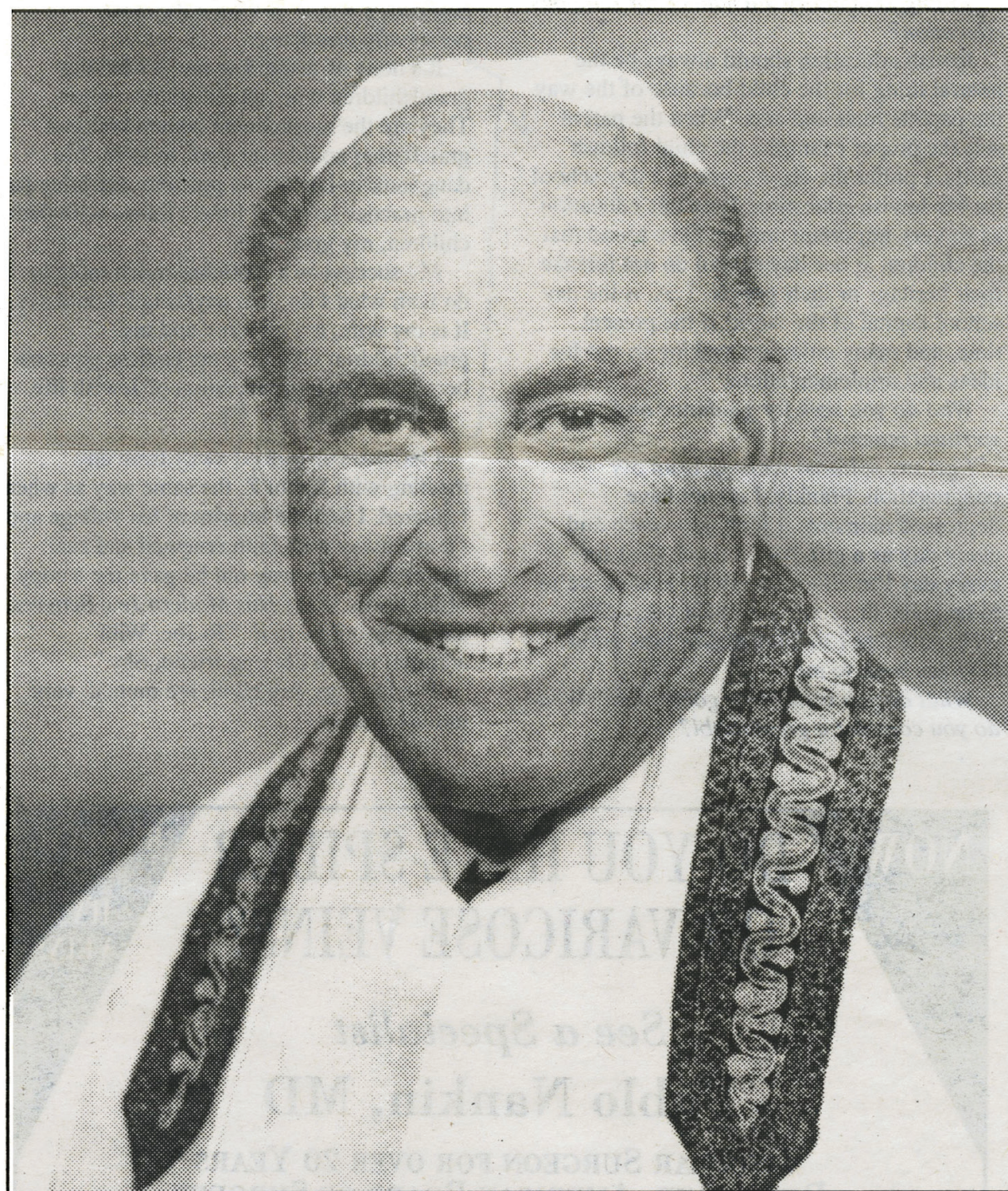
What is the message(s) you like to instill in your associates, educators and all personnel about Stephen Wise?

I want all my people to enjoy Judaism in whatever form they pick. Here we are very pluralistic, but also very positive. Without ceremony, Judaism is empty. But, in addition to ceremony, I want my staff to experience wide community involvement. We have a *Chesed* (lovingkindness) project which involves everyone in giving time, energy and love

most positive Jews I've ever known. He was anaximalist in that his dreams and outloc swept over a wide area of life.

Whn former Mayor Bradley called the templ "the shul with a pool," he left a most iportant impression. Did you conscrusly plan to create the mega-templyou have created or did it grow like, yu should excuse the expression, Topsy

Yes I had great dreams right from the begining for our temple. I wanted this



back to the community in the form of time at a variety of agencies and city-projects.

Who were some of the people who influenced you personally?

I've had several wonderful people in my life like that. Both Rose and her husband, Dr. Abraham Franzblau, were there for me while I attended theology school. They nominated me as the most likely to succeed.

My dad was one of the most erudite people I've ever known. He was a speaker par excellence and some who could move anyone to tears.

Rabbi Stephen Wise was terrific. I worked for him and I admired him. And Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver was one of the

temple to become the center of Jewish life for all its members. I knew I wanted the temple to be a mega-temple, but there was no way of knowing what the implications of such a plan was really all about. Who knew or could imagine we'd have 26 different athletic teams? And who could imagine the many different aims our parenting center would embrace? Attached to the parenting center is an adoption-support center, a center for normal parents with handicapped children, a center for handicapped parents with normal children, an infertility-support group. It's quite staggering, but extremely

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