

Rabbi shares faith, snowboards

Rather than proselytize, Mendelsohn says he makes himself available for questions from all.

By Kelsey Dayton

Rabbi Zalman Mendelsohn is sipping on a bottle of Dr. Pepper. His phone lies on the table beside him. Even if the restaurant was crowded he would be easy to spot in his suit, as the other patrons wear jeans. His black grizzled beard and yarmulke frame his face.

When I greet to him, instead of shaking hands, he bows slightly.

As a member of the Chabad Jewish faith, he believes touch between a man and a woman is reserved for spouses.

He knows he seems different than the rest of the town, where laid-back is a way of life and people wear snow pants to dinner and jeans to work. Mendelsohn practices a religion that often brings to mind the word "conservative."

It is only days before Yom Kippur, and Mendelsohn's schedule is full, but he's made time to sit down with me to share how he is not that different from the community he serves. In the summer, he hikes at least once a week with his wife, Raizy, and daughters, Chaylae, 2, and Chanie, 9 months. In the winter he snowboards, and this year plans to learn to ski. Aside from his love of recreating in the mountains, Mendelsohn has found in Jackson a way to serve others and share his faith.

Mendelsohn, who declined to give his age, was born in Miami. Both of his parents were Jewish but didn't regularly practice the religion, maybe attending services once a month.

His family lost people during the Holocaust, and it seemed some of the traditions were lost, too.

His parents grew more interested in Judaism and began to explore their faith as they got older. Mendelsohn, even as a child, was fascinated with people who did good deeds. He always sought to help others.

His desire to give himself to others led him to consider becoming a rabbi. He studied advanced Jewish studies for eight years followed by two years of intense rabbinical training.

After 10 years of studies, he was sent out to communities to help other rabbis and to learn from practical experience.

Mendelsohn came to Jackson about two and a half years ago. He visited years before while traveling to serve underdeveloped Jewish communities. People in the state asked him to come back. He took a permanent position in Jackson, where as a rabbi he officiates at funerals, weddings and other celebrations. He leads prayer services and offers counseling and teaches Torah classes.

Adena Chernosky has lived in Jackson about 10 years. Before Mendelsohn arrived she would attend services only for major holidays.

Growing up in Pennsylvania, she was active in Judaism, attending temple and a Jewish camp in the summer, and acting as president of her youth group. But when she graduated, she fell away from religion.

Balancing three jobs in Jackson, she didn't seek out the Jewish community. When her parents planned a trip to see her in April 2009 and asked about Jewish services, she called Mendelsohn. She was scared to make the



Rabbi Zalman Mendelsohn is Wyoming's only resident rabbi, offering Jackson Hole's Jewish community an orthodox alternative.

phone call. She thought of Chabad as orthodox Judaism with strict people who not only kept the rules of the Torah but shunned those who didn't.

She was wrong. Mendelsohn and his wife were friendly and welcoming.

"They lead by example. They live their lives exactly the way they should," Chernosky said. "In everything they do, there is joy in it and beauty in it. And there's no judgment in them."

Since that first phone call, Chernosky has been active in the Chabad community, often up to three times a week.

"That's my religion and it's part of my life," she said.

Mendelsohn's arrival in Jackson brought mixed reaction from the established Jewish community and outsiders.

In a small town, he stood out. In a liberal town, people thought he was too traditional.

"A lot of people are afraid of people who look different from them," Mendelsohn said. "I don't see that as offensive, but as a challenge."

Mendelsohn approached earning acceptance in Jackson as though he was running for office.

Each Friday he brought fresh-baked challah as a surprise to about a dozen people in the community, something he still enjoys doing.

As Wyoming's only resident rabbi,

he doesn't proselytize, but instead makes himself open to questions from all people.

Why does he wear a yarmulke?

It represents his belief in a power above him. It shows humility.

What about his beard?

Rabbis have worn long beards for thousands of years. It is part of his culture and heritage.

How do traditions like Shabbat relate to people today?

It is a day of rest and meant to be a day for families and friends to spend time together. There is more relevance in the weekly tradition today more than ever, as people lead fast-paced lives and spend hours at work.

It didn't take long for Mendelsohn to feel accepted in Jackson.

Having two Jewish communities in Jackson offers people more choices, said Andrea Mazer, executive director with the Jackson Hole Jewish Community.

The two groups get along and collaborate.

"It's great, because both groups offer more Jewish events in the valley," she said.

Mendelsohn agreed that even though the groups have differences, there is unity, he said. "The Jewish community in Jackson today is an example of peace."

Promoting peace and strong relationships is his ultimate goal. And that is something he thinks people in Jackson relate to, regardless of their faith.

LOOKING BACK



45 years ago ...

A Michigan man shot a near record-sized grizzly bear while hunting with a guide. The grizzly's skull was 22 and 6/8 inches. It took 23 inches to get in the record book. Measurements are taken on the widest part of the skull. ... A 22-year-old man was brought back to Jackson from Oregon to face a murder charge involving a 5-month-old girl. The baby's body was found in July in a shallow grave off Highway 26, a few miles over the Idaho border. The baby was identified as the daughter of woman who traveled with the suspected murderer. ... A traffic study for August showed a 13 percent increase in vehicle on U.S 26, 89 and 187. ... With an early snowstorm, the first ski ticket for the year was purchased at Teton Village. An owner was called out of a meeting to sell the pass to someone so excited for the season to start he couldn't wait to buy his ticket.

30 years ago ...

In a closed meeting, the Jackson Town Council nominated one of its own members to run against Bob Shervin in the November mayoral election. If Councilor Betty Frazen didn't win, she would retain her council seat. ... The county attorney planned to call a third grand jury to continue investigating drug traffic in Teton County. ... A seven-man search party from Sublette County discovered the remains of a man on Monument Ridge in Bondurant. The search started after a hunting party found a boot in the woods with a foot still in it. About 300 feet from the boot the search party found signs of a small fire, leg bones, hanks of hair, shreds of clothing, a pistol, hunting knife and belt buckle. All the rounds in the pistol had been fired. A young hunter was reported missing in the area the previous fall. ... The investigation into the drowning of a man on the Snake River started talks for policy changes in Grand Teton National Park, including a possible new requirement that float trip passengers wear life jackets while on the river and that boatmen have CPR certification.

15 years ago ...

A fire at Emerg-a-Care burned the front wall and damaged the waiting room and receptionist's area. Police said the fire was obviously arson. Owner Dr. Brent Blue said he suspected his building was attacked because he offered family planning and abortions among his medical services. Members of Right to Life of Teton County said they were shocked by the attack and wouldn't condone that type of action. ... Environmentalists planned to sue to block a plan to trap and remove a grizzly bear that chased and killed cattle near Togwotee Pass. The bear supposedly killed six head of cattle and chased cows all over the grazing allotment on the Bridger-Teton National Forest. ... Wyoming Attorney General Bill Hill ruled the state's 2 percent lodging tax can't be used for purposes other than promotion. ... Jackson's famous cat, Monster, who was known for regularly visiting the Town Square, died of cancer. The cat was known for taking on any dogs that came to the square. Monster was almost 15 years old when he died.

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