

rabbi leonard helman

"I guess I get bored easily," Rabbi Leonard Helman shrugs, by way of explaining his myriad interests and achievements. In addition to his theological calling, he has been a lawyer, a physiology teacher, a championship contract-bridge player, a masterful dancer who performs in public, a public-utilities expert, and always a humanitarian. As a young man he taught himself to love opera, by listening to hundreds of hours of music. He assiduously reads *The New York Times*, to stay current with the news.

And 30 years ago, in 1974, he found the perfect position for himself, as the rabbi for Temple Beth Shalom, which was then the sole Jewish congregation in Santa Fe. With only about 60 families at that time, the temple was seeking a *part-time* rabbi—which was also exactly what Helman was seeking. That way, he could do other things as well.

From the start, he held two positions in Santa Fe, one at the temple, the other with the New Mexico Public Service Commission, where he worked as a lawyer. And although both jobs were described as part-time, he devoted between 30 and 40 hours a week to each. "Call me a workaholic," he says now, looking back. At Beth Shalom he delivered sermons, taught bar-mitzvah classes, visited the sick, administered temple business, brought in speakers from Israel and other countries, and set up special programs for the "creative, well-informed and varied" congregation he tended in Santa Fe—"with members from Orthodox to atheist." For his state job, he judged cases regarding oil, gas and electric companies, and traveled across the country attending conferences.

Concerned also on the international level, he led in the early 1980s a project to deliver medical supplies, clothing and other desperately needed survival items to the Falashas, black Jews suffering persecution in Ethiopia. It was, he says, "a mystical experience."

Helman presided over a drive to build a fine new Temple Beth Shalom, which opened in 1986 to serve a rapidly growing congregation. Not long afterward he stepped down as rabbi, and left Santa Fe to do other work. But like so many who deeply love this city, he returned a few years later, and became rabbi of a new, second Jewish congregation.

In recent years a progressive disease has slowed down Helman, affectionately known as Santa Fe's "Rabbi Different," but has never stopped him. He keeps contact with friends and congregation members, and still pursues many interests. He sums up his life's work as "not easy but joyous." And adding to the joy is his sense of play: If you're lucky, you might even see him tap-dancing in the spotlight at Vanessie some night soon.

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