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WORLDLY RABBI

From Argentina, Israel, the Dominican Republic, and Virginia to Fresh Meadows

BY CHRISTINA SANTUCCI

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Traveling the world for nearly 10 years, Rabbi Manes Kogan has moved to Fresh Meadows in order to serve the area's conservative Jewish population. On Sunday, September 17, he was installed as the Rabbi of the Hillcrest Jewish Center.

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Kogan, 40, was raised Jewish, but his family was never particularly observant. As a young man, Kogan was drawn to the Hebrew Scriptures and to the religion's deep faith, which both intrigued and astounded him.

Rabbi Marshall Meyer, a seminal rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City, led Kogan's congregation in Buenos Aires. Meyer, who fought for social justice and spoke out against the military dictatorship in Argentina, inspired the young Kogan to fight against injustice and root himself firmly to his religion.

"There were [other] rabbis in my teenage years who were also very influential in my life," Kogan said, explaining his interest in Judaism.

Slowly through his teens, Kogan was drawn to his religion, so much so, that he decided to become a rabbi so that he could inspire others to practice Judaism.

"My calling, it's a process that develops, like a slow vocation," he said, describing his decision.

At the same time, Kogan's interest was sparked by psychology and the subconscious, so he decided to study for his rabbinical exams and his Bachelor's degree in Psychology concurrently.

"[Psychology] helps you understand sometimes where your congregants come from," he said.

In 1989, Kogan completed his Psychology degree from the

University of Buenos Aires, and four years later, he traveled to Israel to complete the final exams for his Masters in Jewish Education from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The same year, Kogan received his rabbinical ordination from the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano, the Conservative Seminary in Buenos Aires.

After his ordination, Kogan served as a rabbi in Buenos Aires, where he also worked as a counselor in the city's anti-violence program.

Kogan met and married his wife Silvia, and they had one child.

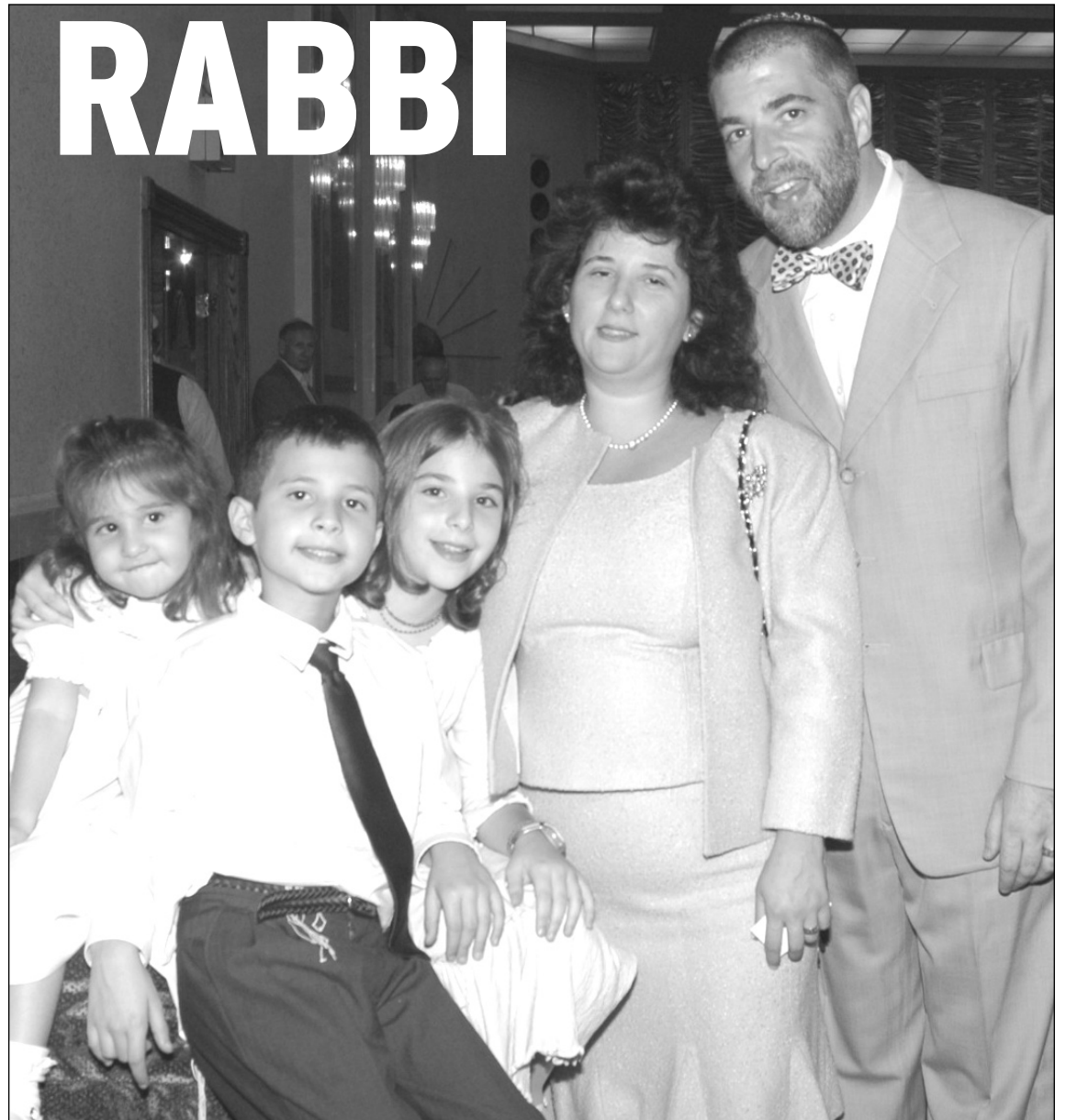
After working in Argentina for three years, he decided that he wanted to experience the culture of another country.

When a position opened in the Dominican Republic, Kogan and his family made the move. Kogan became the rabbi and educational director at the Centro Israelita De la Republica Dominicana, in Santo Domingo, which serves about 100 local families.

"It was an exciting place and a good challenge," Kogan said, of the Dominican Republic, where running water and electricity were scarce. Although Kogan said that he felt that his two years of work in the Dominican Republic were rewarding, he would not choose to go back at this point in his life - now that he has three young children - Daniela, 11, Ilan, 7, and Abigail, 3.

In the Dominican Republic, Kogan met a Roanoke, Virginia man and Peace Corps volunteer, Jared Dunkin, who told him that the Beth Israel Synagogue in Roanoke was looking for a rabbi.

"I applied and that was a wonderful experience also," Kogan said of his first work in the United States. "I wanted a better future for my family, and that is



THE QUEENS COURIER/photo by Allen Ngai

Rabbi Manes Kogan with his wife Silvia, and children, Daniela, 11, Ilan, 7, and Abigail, 3, after his installation as Rabbi of the Hillcrest Jewish Center.

basically what prompted me to come here. I guess that is what brings everyone to America."

At the time, however, Kogan and his family spoke little English.

"Rabbis are usually in the position of influence, but people really needed to help me with my English," Kogan said, describing the two years that it took him to learn the language. "For me, it was very difficult."

In Virginia, Kogan served as the adjunct instructor in the Religious and Judaic programs at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, teaching courses in Rabbinical Literature, Jewish Thought and the Holocaust. His courses were so popular that they were often

filled before enrollment period ended each semester.

For eight years, he served as Beth Israel's rabbi, and in addition to leading services for the 175 families in the congregation, he helped to develop a pre-school program, taught conversion classes, created the "Mezuza Galore for Every Door" and "Shabbat Candle" programs, and compiled an extensive Jewish reference library and music collection.

Nevertheless, Kogan longed to find a position where he would work near other rabbis, instead of serving as the only rabbi for miles as he had in his last two positions.

For the congregants to truly benefit from his preaching,

Kogan believed that he needed to continually examine and discuss the Scriptures of Judaism.

"Roanoke and the Dominican Republic were very lonely positions in this regard. Here [in Queens] are many more colleagues, and it's a wonderful feeling."

Since his installation last month at the Hillcrest Jewish Center, Kogan has begun presiding over weekly services in the Fresh Meadows synagogue.

"I am looking forward to a stronger and more viable Jewish life because this is the place for it," he said. "I am also looking forward to working with a very good, kind and warm congregation ... I hope that I can improve their Jewish lives."

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