

Rabbi Marina Yergin

Personal Statement

For me, the rabbinate is fundamentally about relationships and getting to know people as they are, who they are, where they are, and where they want to go in their world and on their Jewish journey. Each of us is unique. This is why Zelda's poem "Each of Us Has a Name" is so powerful to me.

EACH OF US HAS A NAME by Zelda, translated by Marcia Lee Falk, 2004

Each of us has a name given by God and given by our parents.

Each of us has a name given by our stature and our smile and given by what we wear.

Each of us has a name given by the mountains and given by our walls.

Each of us has a name given by the stars and given by our neighbors.

Each of us has a name given by our sins and given by our longing.

Each of us has a name given by our enemies and given by our love.

Each of us has a name given by our celebrations and given by our work.

Each of us has a name given by the seasons and given by our blindness.

Each of us has a name given by the sea and given by our death.

Zelda's poem "Each of Us Has a Name" is a powerful reminder that we are defined not only by our families but also by our experiences, our celebrations, and even our struggles. For me, it has always felt like the poem was missing one line, a line that speaks directly to the core of my rabbinate: "Each of us has a name given by our Jewish journeys and given by our growth through challenges". It is my passion to empower people to discover their own names, to share their stories, and to grow through their Jewish journeys and life's inevitable challenges.

Empowering people to discover their own name has been paramount in my conversion program, where I have accompanied 150 individuals on their Jewish journey. While I guide them, I am not a micromanager; I am their partner, providing the tools and resources for them to build their own Jewish lives. The commitment of these individuals to delving into ancient texts and historical contexts has allowed me the immense pleasure of falling in love with Judaism through their eyes, transforming my own connection.

My work in this program is deeply relational. I get to know the candidates' interests, their families, and their jobs through countless hours spent in class, reading their journals, and in email exchanges. They, in turn, get to know me, and they've been amused by my seemingly never-ending resources, which led one to get me a nameplate for my office that reads, "Rabbi Yergin: Resource Queen". When candidates ask questions about doing things "correctly," they've come to expect my knowing smile and shrug with the accompanied "you do you," as I encourage them to discover their own practices rooted in tradition.

The ultimate reward is watching these individuals not only create their Hebrew names but also soar and thrive in their new community. When Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the URJ, visited for our Temple's 150th Anniversary in April 2025, he held a leadership training where participants shared how they started at the congregation. Nearly 75% of the attendees had converted to Judaism, and Rabbi Jacobs was deeply impressed by their incredible commitment and the high numbers of Jews by Choice. Watching these leaders—the ones who had been terrified to take the first step and had now taken on key roles in both Temple and the larger community—I had trouble not crying. I felt like a proud mother, "*shepping nachas*," if you will.

When it came to social justice, the same thing is true; we must walk the walk and not just talk the talk. I discovered that to create genuine change in our world, I had to truly get to know people and their stories; a central concept in Community Organizing. During the summer of 2017, I used what I had learned in my classes as part of the URJ's Community of Practice. I trained congregant facilitators and together we

engaged with 200 congregants, asking them a single question: "What keeps you up at night?" The answers were profound—one congregant shared their personal abortion story, another shared why education was so important to them, even if it was outside of their professional field. This experience changed my entire approach to social justice; it's about a person's "why" and curiosity that takes center stage, not political affiliation or agenda. It's about empowering people to move beyond media narratives and share what is truly in their hearts. This realization of social justice being fully relational has given me the opportunity to both act for justice and to hold space for every single person as we go beyond surface level.

I have also had many opportunities to grow in my understanding of who I am as a rabbi. While I have learned new skills and truly learned what it means to be a rabbi, I have found myself dedicated to creating safe, authentic Jewish spaces that are nurturing and ethical. This came about in the last few years as I realized I needed to speak up and speak out as a survivor of ethical misconduct within the Reform Movement.

My journey of healing has given me a unique perspective on leadership. I have learned to not just sit back and wait for an institution to act. Instead, I explored the idea of "calling out while calling in." This approach allowed me to challenge leadership and institutions while simultaneously inviting them into a conversation, rather than just pointing a finger. I strengthened my resolve in engaging with harmdoers – institutional, direct, and secondary – with passion, fierce determination, and Jewish values.

Through this work, I cultivated deep relationships with restorative justice consultants, grassroots organizers, other survivors, rabbis who are survivors, and with the Reform Movement leaders I challenged. This relational work has been transformative; I've learned the critical practice of taking accountability, how to meet survivors' widely varying healing needs, and how to support organizational change that creates healthy, compassionate systems. The lessons I learned from Maimonides' *Hilchot T'shuvah*, Laws of Repentance, helped me connect Judaism and the steps for institutional and personal healing on a survivor-centered path. The experience has made me a stronger, more empathetic leader, one who is not afraid to speak up when needed. This is why I pushed my own congregation to create its own Ethics Code—because it is paramount that we walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

I have a name given by those during lifecycle events and given by all ages.

I have a name given by my coworkers and given by Reform institutions.

I have a name given by those in need and given by those thriving.

I have a name given by elected officials and given by our larger community.

These names given to me by those I serve and by the work we've done together have shown me that I am Rabbi Yergin; a rabbi who believes in the transformative power of a Jewish journey, the incredible impact of radical welcome, and a relentless pursuit of a more just and holy world guided by curiosity and compassion. I can't wait to join a community where we can discover our names and build a beautiful Jewish future together.