

## ***South Florida Sun-Sentinel: Saturday, March 15, 2003***

**IN PROFILE: Mitchell Chefitz**

**By James D. Davis**

**Title:** Spiritual leader of Temple Israel of Greater Miami, a synagogue of 450 families; also founder of Havurah of South Florida, a network of home-centered study and prayer groups, for 22 years, ending in 2002.

**Other job experience:** Author of two novels, *The Seventh Telling* and *The Thirty-Third Hour*, about Judaic spirituality and synagogue life.

**Other community posts:** Local board member of Anti-Defamation League.

**Education:** Degree in English, University of California at Berkeley; master's degree in Hebrew literature, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York.

**Personal:** Age 61. Born in Boston. South Florida resident 27 years.

**Family:** Married to Walli, an occupational practitioner. Children: Walter, 28; Josh, 25; Adam, 21.

### **Q. A distinctive feature of your approach to religion?**

**A.** I'm a spiritual coach. I think that's the best translation of "rabbi." This is not the time for gurus or rebbes. This is a time for people learning as much of Jewish spiritual practices as they can, without becoming dependent on me. That's really the havurah model.

### **Q. How did you get into your vocation?**

**A.** I was in MIT; I thought I would be a doctor. My daddy, bless him, was a physician in family practice. But when I took a half year off at Boston University Medical School as a surgical technician, I found other doctors weren't like my father.

So I decided to become a writer and went to Berkeley. But when I graduated, didn't have anything to write about. So I went to sea, on a destroyer.

Then I went back to Berkeley, but everything had changed.

I was confused and decided to go to Israel to study for two years. I liked what I was learning, so I came home and enrolled at HUC-JIR.

### **Q. What's religion for, in 25 words or less?**

**A.** To teach the practice of becoming frictionless, so you can be aligned with the purpose of creation. That's where fulfillment and enjoyment come from.

### **Q. Favorite part of your work?**

**A.** It's an extraordinary challenge to teach from the full spectrum of Jewish texts, from the Zohar to the Old Testament. It's also a challenge to convert the service from pageantry to prayer, an honest expression of spirituality.

### **Q. Hardest part?**

**A.** The hardest part is remaining Mitch. There are those who insist on stereotypes - wear a robe, speak in stentorian tones-and not the man behind the rabbi. I'd known men like that. They were lonely and unhappy.

### **Q. What do you do to relax?**

**A.** I have my motorcycle, a Honda ST100, a large, fairly old sport touring machine. I've put 70,000 miles on it. I've been to Maine and back several times.

**Q. Favorite vacation spot?**

**A.** Southern California. My boys are there.

**Q. Favorite music? Favorite performer(s)?**

**A.** My favorite music is piano by Prokofiev. It's a nice blend of modern and classical.

**Q. Do you have a hero?**

**A.** I don't have a single hero. I've assembled one from several. In the rabbinic field, it would include Shlomo Carlebach, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Jack Riemer. A past master would be Eli Matalon, who was once the minister of security and justice for Jamaica. He retired to the U.S. and was a friend for more than 20 years. Through him I learned that there's not much difference between politics between nations and politics in a synagogue.

**Q. Favorite TV shows?**

**A.** My wife and I have been watching *24* religiously. Maybe we've ceased to like it. But because we watch it together, we're committed to it.

I also watch the first 10 minutes of *The Tonight Show*. I get my real news from Jay Leno. If he's not making fun of it, it's not really important.

**Q. Is there one thing you can't stand?**

**A.** Dogmatic positions. I can't stand certainty. When a person is utterly certain that his or hers is the only right approach, then there is no argument, no growth, no opportunity for any meaningful dialogue.

**Q. What's the most important thing you've ever learned?**

**A.** Faith, really. I remember being really confused about my third year of rabbinic training. I told an adjunct professor that I didn't know what I was doing. He said, "Keep working at it and it will all come together." He was right.

**Q. What person in history would you like most to meet?**

**A.** Maimonides. He was the epitome of the mystic and the rationalist together. Also Rabbi Akiva. He was able to keep a foot in both worlds.

**Q. Have you ever doubted your faith?**

**A.** I haven't. It took me quite awhile to acquire it. I did it through surrender.

**Q. Is there a God? You sound rather tentative about it.**

**A.** Maimonides said he didn't have to prove the existence of God. He merely had to prove that the universe had a beginning. If it did, then it had a creator. And there is no creation without purpose. And Torah spells out the purpose.

**Q. Motto, or favorite Scripture verse?**

**A.** *Yirat hashem raysheet hochmah*. That is usually rendered, "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." I prefer, "The recognition of the immediate relationship with God is the beginning of wisdom."

**Q. What would you like most to be remembered for?**

**A.** I'd like to be remembered for my grandchildren. I don't have any. I'd like to stick around long enough to play with them.