

August 8, 2011, 1:10pm



The 'Friday Night Lights' Rabbi

By Gloria Feldt

On the day I was to interview Rabbi Holly Cohn, the new spiritual leader at the lone congregation serving a 100-mile radius of West Texas, at Odessa's tiny [Temple Beth El](#), the television series "Friday Night Lights" was trending on Twitter. The story of the fictional town of Dillon, Tex., where high school football is a central cultural focus, was about to end its final season.

I could only hope that Rabbi Holly, as she calls herself, would not see this as a negative sign. As the show's fans know, "Dillon" is actually Odessa, a town where I lived for 20 years and the football team is based on Odessa's Permian High School Panthers.

Temple Beth El, which self-identifies as Conservo-Ortho-Reform since it must appeal to all denominational tastes, has just brought in its first full-time rabbi. Cohn, a 42-year-old, yarmulke-and-tallit-wearing female Reform rabbi, has been hired as its quarterback. The congregation hopes she will revitalize its shrinking community and attract the unaffiliated Jews scattered around the windswept area.

In the 1960s and '70s, when I was a member, it had 65 affiliated families and a religious school bursting at its seams. Services were lay led and part-time rabbis were brought in for major holidays and bar mitzvahs (no bat mitzvahs back then, and when I co-led the first Sisterhood Sabbath, some congregants viewed women on the bimah as a *shande*). Membership has now fallen to around 35 families, with just seven children in the religious school.

Football and traditional religion share androcentrism. How delicious that if this congregation is to thrive or even survive, it will be a woman leading these Jews to the promised land. And Cohn might be especially well prepared for the task.

After longing to be a rabbi since a teen trip to Israel, but taking a detour through several years of working in advertising, Cohn was ordained by Hebrew Union College 11 years ago.

She is excited by the challenge her new community presents and says that being in an isolated location like Odessa has advantages. "I especially love direct people work. That's what appeals about the West Texas position," says Cohn. "I'm able to drive the 87 miles to where we have an older member who can't get to services. If I do a hospital visit, I can stay and listen. I can be there for people and be part of the community."

What's ahead for Jews in isolated communities like Odessa? Assimilation and intermarriage have taken a toll there perhaps more than in urban areas with large Jewish communities. "Where there isn't a deli, a Federation, a JCC, the congregation becomes more important," she says. The congregation has a higher ratio of participants in weekly services than big city synagogues often do, she says.



COURTESY OF RABBI HOLLY COHN

Using new media is part of her strategy. "I know how to appeal to people, how to be creative about finding solutions." She plans, for example, to set up Skype sessions with children in the religious school and kids in Israel.

The Torah portion her first week at Temple Beth El was about Miriam's well bringing forth water for the Israelites wandering in the desert. That evening, rain fell in the parched West Texas expanse. Her son said that must be a positive sign for them in their new home.

Rumor has it that "Friday Night Lights" may next have [a movie sequel](#). Will Cohn create a new future for the Jews of West Texas? She may score a touchdown.

Gloria Feldt is the author of "No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power" and a frequent speaker on women, power and leadership. Her 30-year career with Planned Parenthood began as executive director of its West Texas affiliate in 1974 and culminated as national president from 1996 to 2005.

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