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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.