

ALANA SUSKIN'S DEEP DIVE

By Kayla Steinberg
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Rabbi Alana Suskin doesn't think she is worth a profile — but from what her resume and friends say about her, she's wrong.

The Rockville resident is co-founder of interfaith organization Pomegranate Initiative, senior managing editor of progressive blog *Jewschool.com* and co-chair of the Maryland Poor People's Campaign, titles that underscore a commitment to social justice.

But Suskin, who often dons her late father's pork pie hat and plaid blazer, hinting at eccentric tastes, was ordained first as a Conservative rabbi in 2003 from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. Yet, over the past few years, she has felt more connected to Orthodox Judaism, preferring its balance between halachah (Jewish law) and the modern world.

"[Conservative Judaism] works very hard to maintain a balance between halachah and the world that we live in," says Suskin, 51. "It just finds that balance in a different place."

There's the Conservative movement's decision to allow Zoom services on Shabbat, allowing congregations to gather, even if some individuals break Shabbat prohibitions by not turning the platform on before the holy day and leaving it untouched until Shabbat is over.

"There are sometimes hard laws that can't be crossed," Suskin says. "Law is divine, and if we really understand the Torah as having some kind of divine connection — that the Torah is from God — you can't just say, 'We'll just ignore that because our community might fall apart.'"

"I don't fit neatly into boxes," she says. "But I was looking for a place where I might fit slightly better into the box."

So she went back to school, opting for Yeshivat Maharat's Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track. Yeshivat Maharat, founded in 2009, trains and ordains Orthodox women, and has received backlash from Orthodox organizations for doing so.

But Suskin puts the criticism into perspective. "It's not like it was easy for any of the movements when women first started [being ordained] — there was kicking and screaming and biting and dragging heels in every movement," she says.

As the three-year, part-time Kollel program is primarily online, Suskin stayed in Rockville with her husband and 16-year-old son, though she's bummed she couldn't join the four other third-year Kollel students in the Bronx for their June 9 ordination, held online due to COVID-19.

Suskin says she attended the program out of a love for learning.

"My goal was really to learn the things that I'm learning: to do a deep dive into halachah and have that opportunity to really understand it deeply, and



then to take that learning out into the world."

Rabbanit Amalia Haas, an organic beekeeper and chaplain who studied with Suskin at Yeshivat Maharat, describes her learning partner as "intellectually indefatigable."

"She has a limitless commitment to returning to a text and working with it until she fully understands it," says Haas. "She'll look up every word if necessary."

The two unpacked the nitty-gritty of halachah — like laws about how to prepare tea on Shabbat — in erudite discussions that showed Suskin's insatiable curiosity and commitment to activism.

"Rabbi Alana is such an extraordinary individual to learn with, not just because of her intellectual fierceness and crazy hat-wearing and hair-dyeing and fun, but also because she is a lifelong activist who has put herself at the crux of pushing forward... progressive thought in and well beyond the Jewish community," says Haas.

Suskin's commitment to social justice is epitomized by her latest endeavor: co-founding and directing the Pomegranate Initiative. Since they founded the initiative last year, Suskin and her Muslim counterpart, Hamza Khan, have travelled around the country to fight anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, work they continue now in virtual town halls. Many of the people they speak with have never met a Jew or a Muslim.

Suskin hopes that the effort fosters connection and learning. "I build a bridge for them to walk over so that they can understand a little more than they understood before," she says.

Though Suskin describes herself as "full of opinions," she engages with people of different backgrounds and beliefs with kindness.

"Whether I'm talking about Palestinians and Israelis and American Jews trying to make a way forward or whether I'm talking about between Muslims and Christians and Jews trying to talk to each other and to fight anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, it's all about holding that place of compassion while people do hard work to change," she says.

Agnes Veto, one of Suskin's other learning partners at Yeshivat Maharat, describes Suskin's outspokenness and tolerance as a rare blend. It seeped into their learning sessions, when Suskin unfailingly pointed out Jewish laws she considered absurd and misogynistic.

"Nobody else was that outspoken about misogyny," says Veto.

She notes that Suskin's commitment to both Orthodoxy and activism sets her apart. "That combination — that somebody would be invested to that extent in Modern Orthodoxy and also in social justice — is unique to Alana," she says.

Haas sees Suskin's devotion to social justice as an expression of her Judaism. "For her, it is such a given that what you do as a Jew is you put yourself on the line, get yourself arrested and hustle," she says.

This hustle is evident in Suskin's response to George Floyd's death: She contributed to progressive Orthodox organization *Torat Chayim's* statement about fighting racism and is working to act on its promises.

Haas hopes Suskin's Yeshivat Maharat experience will help her with her social justice work.

"Insofar as Alana does cutting-edge social justice work and advocacy, I think that having this skill will allow her to join the wisdom of Jewish law and tradition with the great needs of our time," she says.

"It's a privilege and a humbling thing to learn with a woman who is a walking embodiment of what Torah is meant to be." *WJW*

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