

Finding his faith community: Mayor of Providence Brett Smiley converts to Judaism

“I was very private about it at first, because I wasn’t sure,” he said. But the more he studied, talked, and thought about the Jewish faith, “the more it felt right,” he said.

BY STEPHEN MACHADO, BOSTON GLOBE – DECEMBER 23, 2024



PROVIDENCE — It was a mild Thursday in early October when members of the Jewish community from across the city gathered on the banks of the Seekonk River, tossing duck food pellets in the water as part of a Rosh Hashanah tradition known as Tashlikh.

The annual tradition brought together Jews from different synagogues and sects, and many noticed someone quite recognizable in their midst: Brett Smiley, the mayor of Providence.

Politicians often attend community events at synagogues, mosques, and churches. But this tradition — the ceremonial casting off of one's sins before the new year — didn't usually draw elected officials.

"That's when it seemed like the rumor mill caught fire," Smiley said in an interview with the Globe. "And when everyone said, 'What's the mayor doing here?'"

Indeed, Smiley, 45, who was raised going to church in a Chicago suburb, had recently converted to Judaism after about a year of study. He joined Temple Beth-El, a reform synagogue on the East Side of Providence, but had not yet shared his big life change with the wider community.

"I was very private about it at first, because I wasn't sure," Smiley said. But the more he studied, talked, and thought about it, "the more it felt right," he said.

Smiley, a Democrat who was elected mayor in 2022, grew up in a liberal family in the United Church of Christ, a Protestant denomination, but stopped attending church years ago. He had a Jewish grandfather but didn't celebrate Jewish holidays growing up; his family stuck to Christmas and Easter. ("It was more Santa Claus than anything else," he noted.)

He lives on the East Side with his husband, real estate agent Jim DeRentis, who has been supportive but is not converting to Judaism, Smiley said. DeRentis was by his side when Smiley took the final step of officially becoming a Jew in August: submerging in the mikvah, a ritual bath.

"I always had kind of a foundation of some basic beliefs and a foundation of faith, but it didn't really have a home, and I haven't had a home in adulthood," Smiley said.

About a year after becoming mayor, he felt it was time to do something about it.



Providence Mayor Brett Smiley with Rabbi Preston Neimeiser at Temple Beth-El in Providence, R.I. TEMPLE BETH-EL

“The decisions that I have to make right now in this job, some of them are pretty heavy, and they weigh on me,” he said. “That emptiness that I had had around a faith community and a spiritual foundation, it really felt particularly vulnerable. And I said, ‘I really need to shore this up.’ Now more than ever, I feel like this has become more of an acute need in my life.”

The mayor was drawn to Judaism not only because of his grandfather, but also because of friends who had shared traditions with him over the years. “There was just something that was always very attractive to me about their morals and the way in which their faith helped them see the world and some of the challenges in it,” he said.

He started talking to Rabbi Sarah Mack, the senior rabbi at Temple Beth-El. Traditionally, a rabbi will reject a prospective convert three times to ensure they are sincere.

“We do it a little bit differently,” Mack told the Globe. “I will never chase after someone. I will invite people to be the authors of their Jewish destiny. And in that way, all of the energy propelling the journey really is coming from the person who’s choosing to be Jewish.”

What followed was about a year of study, including reading assignments from Mack and many discussions.

Smiley went before a court of three rabbis called a “beit din” to answer questions before immersing in the mikvah waters, emerging as a Jewish person.

Smiley is not the first Jewish mayor of Providence, a distinction that belongs to David Cicilline, who served as mayor from 2003 to 2011 before he was elected to Congress. Cicilline was also the city’s first openly gay mayor. “He keeps stealing all the firsts,” Smiley joked.

As a reform Jew, Smiley is a member of the most common branch of Judaism in the United States. It came out of assimilation in western Europe, Mack said, as Jews “had to find a way to live their faith and live in the contemporary world.” Key tenets of the movement are to “repair the world, to feed the hungry, to lift up the fallen,” Mack said.

Reform Judaism is supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, including marriage equality, which was important to Smiley. His childhood church was similar.

“I’ve certainly known many people in my life who have some resentment against religion, and have reasons for that because they felt excluded for who they are,” Smiley said. “I wouldn’t have been attracted to a place that I didn’t feel like I could be my complete self.”



Providence Mayor Brett Smiley with his husband, Jim DeRentis, at Aleppo Sweets, a Syrian bakery in the city's Fox Point neighborhood, when he was first elected back in 2022. RYAN T. CONATY / RYAN T. CONATY FOR THE BOSTON GL

It was a solemn year to become a Jew. Antisemitism is up, according to the both the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Alliance of Rhode Island, especially since the Oct. 7, 2023, terror attack on Israel. The retaliatory war in Gaza has prompted fierce protests, including in Providence, where Democrats are divided on the issue.

During one of Smiley's many meetings with Mack, a bomb threat came into the synagogue. It wasn't uncommon.

"Rabbi Mack and I talked about it early on, near the beginning of the war," he said. "I think what the rabbi said to me was that now more than ever, do we need Jews who are willing to speak out about their values."

Smiley, who flew the Israeli flag outside City Hall after Oct. 7, is a supporter of Israel. He's visited the country once as a staffer for former governor Gina Raimondo, and hopes to return. He opposed a recent proposal from the City Council to divest city funds from Israeli bonds.

“The reality is that there are members of our community who are afraid, who are hurting, who are affected,” Smiley said. “I care as much about Islamophobia as I do antisemitism. I don’t want Providence to be a place where either are tolerated.”

Lately, Smiley is taking adult bar mitzvah classes, a rigorous 18-month process that involves learning Hebrew so he can read from the Torah for the first time, likely in 2026. The ceremony is usually for 13-year-olds, but adults who never had one can do it later in life, allowing them to participate more fully at temple afterward.

He and his 12 classmates are already planning the after-party; the all-important theme (teenagers usually pick something like “baseball” or “Broadway musicals”) is still under discussion.

For Christmas, Smiley will celebrate in Chicago with his mom. And then on Thursday, the second night of Hanukkah, Smiley and DeRentis will fly back to Providence and light the big menorah outside City Hall, which is displayed every year alongside the city Christmas tree.

But there will also be a second menorah, inside Smiley’s office.

“The candles will glow right from the mayor’s office,” Smiley said. “Perhaps a little symbol of hope and belonging to all the Jews in Providence.”

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/12/23/metro/providence-mayor-brett-smiley-converts-judaism-jewish-faith-hanukkah/>