



RABBINICAL COUNCIL OF AMERICA

הסתדרות הרבניים אמריקה



*As part of our new initiative to spotlight outstanding RCA members in our newsletter, we are proud to feature Rabbi Nissan Andrews, rabbi of [House of Jacob-Mikveh Israel](#) in Calgary. A Calgary native, Rabbi Andrews received semicha from Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Levin zt”l at Telshe Yeshiva in Chicago. Rabbi Andrews has served congregations across North America and the UK, including as Associate Rabbi at Finchley United Synagogue in London. Alongside his wife Hannah and their four children, he brings warmth, vision, and a deep commitment to fostering spiritual growth and connection. We asked him 12 questions about his career – read his answers (edited for clarity and length) below.*

**1. RCA: If you weren't a rabbi, what would you be?**

I think I would likely be an engineer. I actually think of the halachic process as being very, very similar to engineering in that it's very much rooted in mechanisms, rules, interactions, and how they interplay with flow charts and things of the sort.

I very much like learning halacha. I spend a good deal of my available time for learning *inyanei halacha*, and I view the process much like how an engineer views a machine, or perhaps a problem that has to be solved within a framework, within a system of rules and obligations.

**2. What's the first thing you do when you sit down to write a *shabbos derasha*?**

Well, I say a short tefillah that I should have, and finding the appropriate thing to say that will resonate with my kehillah. But after that, the first thing that I do is actually, you know, go through the entire *parasha*, take a look at various *midrashim*, some of the *meforshim* that I enjoy looking through. I like to go for walks and mull it over and see if there's any way that I can relate it to whatever challenge I'm facing within the shul or that we as a community are facing.

That's usually where I start. It's with reading the *parasha* and much time and contemplation.

**3. Most memorable rabbinic moment?**

That will likely be very early on when I was called by a congregant whose brother was in hospice. I was present at his side when he passed away. And while I was sitting there, acting as the *shomer* until the *chevra kadisha* could arrive, I closed the individual's eyes and covered his face with a sheet. And it was a very serene, very, very uplifting moment. It's not something that I can quantify or qualify.



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It's not something that I can explain, but it was exceptionally meaningful to me. And it really brought into focus what it is about my job that I love.

**4. What is your favorite part of what you do professionally?**

What I enjoy most about the rabbinic is that it provides an opportunity for me to help people. Whether it's being a shoulder for someone to cry on, whether it's a sympathetic ear, whether it's answering a halakhic question, whether it's finding some kind of resource with social services for an individual who's down on their luck, or even administering *tzedakah*. What I really value about my job is that it allows me to interact, to interface with people and be helpful, be a cog, be a part of their life in a way that's meaningful, uplifting, and significant.

**5. What is your favorite sefer?**

That is a difficult question to ask. It's like asking someone who their favorite child is.

I have a very soft spot in my heart for the writings of the *Kasav Sofer*, the son of the *Chasam Sofer*, Rabbi Binyamin Shmuel Sofer. He had an incredible *bikiyus* in Midrashim, Agadah, and Gemara more generally. He was able to combine all of that together and write the most fascinating *drashos* on the parasha.

His *Kasav Sofer AlHatorah* is one of my favorite things to go through, and he has incredible *drashos*; some of the best *drashos* I've given have come from the *Kasav Sofer's* writings

**6. Describe Shabbos at your shul with three words.**

I'm not sure that I can only say it in three words, but I can definitely condense it down to a sentence: It's the high point of the week. It's the most significant day.

It's in a place like Calgary, where the Jewish community is quite small. This is the time when Jews who work in the public sphere, who don't have Jewish neighbors, are able to come together as a community. I often say the most important part of shul is not so much the davening, but the *l'chayim* and the bit of herring that people have after davening, because it's really, in many people's cases, it's the only time they have to socialize and to be part of a community, be part of the Jewish community.



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People don't work in Jewish businesses here. We don't necessarily have a Jewish neighborhood where everyone is Jewish. Coming together on Shabbos is really the high point of the week.

**7. Best advice you've ever received?**

The best advice I've ever received is from my Rosh Yeshiva, R' Avraham Chaim Levine *z"l*, who once told me to speak simply, speak to the point, ensure that the message is heard. You can use a lot of flowery oratory, but if it goes over people's heads, then it's absolutely for naught.

Another piece of great advice I received is from Reb Michel Twersky of Milwaukee, who told me that he was *mekarev* more people through his potato kugel than any number of *drashos* that he's ever been able to give at his shul. And I do make that a part of my rabbinate as well, where I give as many classes as I can and I speak to as many issues as I possibly can from the pulpit, but ultimately, it's that personal connection that people have with their rabbi that makes all the difference.

**8. Any advice for balancing rabbinic duties and family life?**

I don't have any advice. I'd be open to any suggestions – I struggle with this myself.

**9. Your professional role model / rebbe?**

In terms of professional role models, there are many rabbis I've met throughout my life, but most notably Rabbi Yisrael Miller, who was the senior rabbi here for many years, Rabbi Zev Cohen from Chicago, from whom I received *shimush*, my Rosh Yeshiva, R' Chaim Levine.

I have many role models, and I model different aspects of these individuals when it's appropriate. Not every person is the most, not every role model is necessarily the best role model for every juncture of one's life.

**10. Coffee or Tea?**

I'm a coffee person.

**11. Morning person or night person?**

I used to be a night person, but as I've been getting older, I'm becoming less and less a night person, but I've still never become really a morning person.

I guess I am no person.



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**12. How old were you when you knew you wanted to be a rabbi?**

Initially, when I was in Kollel, I was looking to join a community-Kollel to continue that part of my life where I would spend a great deal of time learning, but in the community Kollel context, I'd have the opportunity to be much more actively engaged with the broader community in many, many different ways. It was at the height of the 2008-2009 recession, and the community *kollelim* weren't hiring, and even pulpit positions were not as available, but there were definitely more pulpit positions than Kollel positions, and as I had received smicha and as my Rosh Yeshiva told me that he wanted me to move in that direction and become a pulpit rabbi – perhaps as an ultimate goal – it gradually dawned on me that the community Kollel step might have to be leapfrogged, and a pulpit position essentially fell into my lap, and I took that bull by the horns. I took that challenge, and I've never looked back.

I've been very, very fortunate to have a very, very varied career in terms of the places that I've been. I'm a native of Calgary; I started off there, and I'm back in Calgary now. In the interim, I've been to as disparate places as Milwaukee, Allentown, Pennsylvania, and London.

In London, I was hired by an incredibly large *kehillah*. I was the junior rabbi, but because the chief rabbi, Rabbi Seraphim Mervis, had a soft spot for *Telzers* (I'm a *Telzer*, I learned in Telshe yeshiva) and because I had taken over his *kehillah*, and partially because he wasn't entirely happy about the direction the shul was going, when he became the chief rabbi, he left, and several people were hired to replace him, I being one of them. He became my personal mentor, and I had – and continue to have – a very strong and very warm relationship with Rabbi Mervis. I speak with him several times a year, and he's one of my most important contacts, connections, and mentors that I have.