



SPEAKING OF DIVERSITY

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Dialogue on Diversity



“These are the conversations that force people out of their comfort zone and into the space of potential listening and learning about other perspectives and experiences; and that environment is the best one for learning and growth.”

Rabbi Wendi Geffen, Senior Rabbi, North Shore Congregation Israel, Glencoe, IL

Dialogue On Diversity is designed to help better understand the issues we face in today's challenging times. This month, Rabbi Wendi Geffen talks about the challenges she faces as the senior rabbi in a large and affluent Reform congregation and how she is dedicated to empowering each person to define their Jewish identity and Jewish journey.

Q: Please tell us about your background and what prepared you for your current role.

A: I grew up in Dallas, Texas; attended Emory University for undergrad where I received a BA in Political Science and Judaic Studies. I attended Hebrew Union College for seminary and joined the rabbinic team at NSCI in 2002 immediately after my ordination. I became the ninth senior rabbi of NSCI in 2015. I've always been inspired by and passionate about how Jewish wisdom adds meaning to our lives and enables us to better our world every day.

Q: What challenges do religious institutions have in order to be more inclusive; and to help their congregants connect with people outside of their community?

A: I cannot speak to the challenges religious institutions have in this matter. I do believe that a key responsibility of any religious institution, no less a synagogue, is to strive to create a community that walks the talk of inclusion and bridge building. In particular, in our world today, where we, as humans, find it so easy to live in our own filter-bubbles of the like-minded, the like-believing, the like-earning, the like-zip coding, etc., religious institutions must do more to remind our congregants/parishioners that every person is, in fact, created in the image of the Divine and therefore of value.

Q: Two of the fundamental principles of Judaism include pursing tzedek (justice) and tikkun olam (repairing the world.) How does NSCI, and you as it's spiritual leader, empower the congregation and larger Jewish community to do this? And how does it extend outside the Jewish community?

A: For me, the pursuit of justice and restoring the world are key ways that we, as Jewish people, can actualize our traditions, beliefs, and practices. From a most fundamental Jewish view, we humans were created in order to care for this planet and its inhabitants, as stewards of the creation. At NSCI, we act on that obligation and opportunity in a number of ways, within our congregation, the larger Jewish community, as well as the larger faith community, and simply the larger community as a whole. From turning our synagogue into a homeless shelter with the help of Family Promise for two weeks every summer, to helping a recent refugee family integrate into American society, to building relationships with church communities from the North Shore to the West and South Sides, to travelling throughout the South on Civil Rights excursions, to inviting our congregants to ask and discuss the hard questions of our time, we are engaged in practices that align our words with our actions.

Q: What made you decide to host The Defamation Experience at NSCI? Please tell us a bit more about your experience:

A: We were thrilled to be able to bring the Defamation Experience to NSCI, mainly because of the opportunity it presents to allow each audience member to really put themselves in the story and explore their assumptions, comforts, discomforts and talk about

them. It was immensely well-received, even for those who found the exercise challenging. I would absolutely recommend it to other organizations as it offers the opportunity to open up dialogue that most likely doesn't otherwise occur in a productive way.

Q: How can difficult conversations like this within any religious organization benefit their communities?

A: These are the conversations that force people out of their comfort zone and into the space of potential listening and learning about other perspectives and experiences; and that environment is the best one for learning and growth.

Rabbi Geffen is a tireless leader, a person who people turn to for counsel, education, and insight year after year. Her vision for NSCI is reanimating and redefining what a 21st century synagogue can become—synonymous with thriving and transformation, developing relationships of significance, and a larger sense of purpose and impact in the world's repair. [Click here](#) to watch her speak at the 2019 celebration of Martin Luther King Day at the Stone Temple Baptist Church on Chicago's south side.



Combined with an audience deliberation and a facilitated discussion THE DEFAMATION EXPERIENCE is a unique opportunity for your community to engage in civil discourse about the most pressing social issues of our day.

Watch the trailer at TheDefamationExperience.com. Contact Kimm Beavers at defamationtheplay.kimm@gmail.com to start a conversation about bringing The Defamation Experience to your venue.