

THE TWO RIVER TIMES

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MARC KLINE

The Responsible Rabbi

THERE IS A link between his two careers that may not be quite so obvious on first blush, Marc Kline maintains.

Kline had been a lawyer – a successful one with a prominent law firm where he was working on civil rights issues, among other interests – who then gave up the law and pursued a newly discovered passion for ministering as a rabbi.

“It’s about people who take what their path is,” Kline said about that choice. “To help people, it’s a calling.”

And by doing that, he added, “You’ll also be entrusted with someone’s spirit.”

Kline, who is 57 and lives in Red Bank, for the last three years has been rabbi for Monmouth Reform Temple in Tinton Falls, a Jewish reform congregation of roughly 320 Monmouth County families. Kline has found a profound reward in his work, dealing directly with his spiritual responsibilities and with his work on the social justice front – speaking out against the vitriol and violence he believes has marked the national conversation.

“My faithful passion is to make a difference,” he said.

“I started strictly on a career path,” Kline said. He is originally from Las Vegas, Nevada and attended Tulane University in New Orleans for his undergraduate work. He went on to University of Arkansas, Little Rock, for law school.

After getting his law degree, Kline became “the only white lawyer in an all-minority law firm” in Little Rock, he said. There he practiced “a fair amount of everything,” including commercial law. “But I did a fair amount of civil rights work,” he said, including addressing long-simmering complaints of minority clients in the south, which is still segregated in many ways.

That work included continuing to ensure reluctant participants in Little Rock were adhering to *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas*, Board of Education, the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling declaring racially segregated schools unconstitutional.

Kline grew up in an ethnically Jewish but not religious family. And he never considered himself religious, either. As a matter of fact, he told how he was thrown out of his synagogue as a boy following his bar mitzvah. “I didn’t see God the same way the rabbi did,” he said.

Then in law school, Kline began thinking seriously about meeting someone to marry. “I knew my mom and dad would want me to marry a nice Jewish girl,” he said. So, he became involved with a local synagogue. “But I walked away again.”

As life and luck would have it, Kline did meet someone whom he wanted to marry – Cindy, a Methodist. But Cindy decided to convert to Judaism and said their children would be raised Jewish.

The synagogue’s rabbi, who had helped Cindy with her conversion, eventually told Kline, “She knows more than you do,” and advised him to step up his game.

He began teaching bat and bar mitzvah classes. “I was successful as a lawyer,” he said, “but I loved what I was doing at the temple.”

And that led him to begin his own transformation to a spiritual life.

“I began to love the Jewish value of taking care of the world,” he said and recalled how his former law partner was also an ordained minister for a local African Methodist Episcopal Church. He began to see a progression for his own life’s work.

Kline left his law practice in 1990 and began attending rabbinical school at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, in Cincinnati, Ohio. He was ordained in 1995.

Cindy died in 2008 from a heart attack. In 2011, he remarried, to Lori Bernard, an oncology researcher for Hackensack Meridian Health system. They have a combined family

of seven children, including one daughter who is a senior at Red Bank Regional High School and one grandchild.

He has served congregations in Lexington, Kentucky and Florence, South Carolina.

While in Lexington, he taught ethics, philosophy, religion and government courses in high school and college on the undergraduate and graduate levels. He also began expressing a nuanced view of ministering to his congregations that has grown out of his passion for social justice issues.

“I’m not a religious person. I’m a faithful person,” he said, drawing a distinction. “Spiritual is different than religious,” he explained. “I don’t think God cares what I put in my mouth, kosher-wise. He cares what comes out of my mouth.”

And Kline has used the words coming out at various rallies in recent months, both in New Jersey and Washington, D.C. In late August, Kline helped organize a rally and march in opposition to racist and anti-Semitic flyers circulated and the assault of a transgender person in Asbury Park. Kline joined

thousands of clergy and others for the “Minister’s March for Justice” last month in Washington. And he’s been a regular at the various marches and rallies organized in Red Bank in the aftermath of the Charlottesville, Virginia, protest violence and after horrific mass shootings in the last couple of years.

“I’ve been busy this summer but I hate the fact I have to be,” he said, noting the circumstances that have led to the numerous events he’s helped organize.

“But here’s the good news,” he added. “More people are coming together because of the ugliness out there.”

When he was living and working in Kentucky, Kline formed the Fayette County Urban Government Human Rights Commission. While in South Carolina in 2000, he co-led a march on Columbia to bring down the Confederate battle flag from on top of the state capital.

He regularly encourages his congregants to give back in meaningful ways, performing personal acts of community service. One program, “Shine a Light,” has temple members and members of St. Anthony of Padua in Red

Bank, provide and install bicycle lights, as well as safety helmets, mostly for the area’s Hispanic community for their safety as they ride to work or school and back.

“I have to believe,” he said, “that taking care of each other is the primary goal of faith.”

“We are born to create miracles, and faith is the tool to do that.”

Kline recently had his contract with Monmouth Reform Temple renewed for five years. That extension isn’t just his doing, he stressed, but the work that the congregation is embracing. “It’s an endorsement of what we’re doing,” he pointed out. “People have taken ownership of what we’re doing – young and old.”

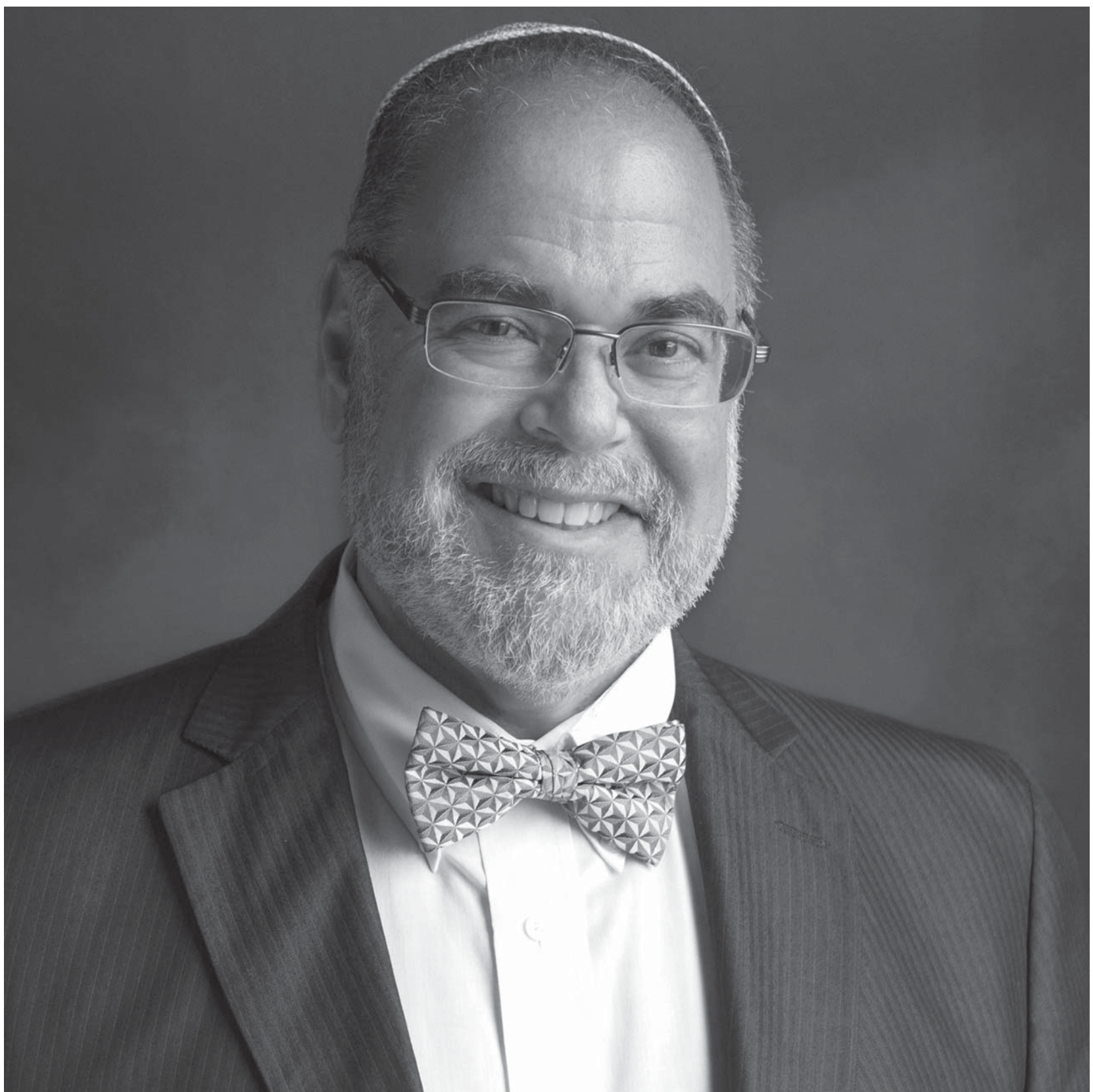
Starting in August, Kline began holding an hour-long open forum at Shapiro’s Delicatessen in Red Bank on Tuesday mornings. “Our goal is to have a civil conversation about whatever comes up,” he said.

Sounds simple enough, but it bucks the current trend for discourse. And, according to Kline, something must be done if change is to be made. “We have to start talking *to* each other rather than *at* each other.”

“If I can tell people how to hear the needs of other people, I’ve done my job as a rabbi,” he said.

By John Burton

DANNY SANCHEZ



“We have to start talking *to* each other rather than *at* each other.”