

Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights



August 24, 2012

Topic: "Seeking Balance in Our Lives: How a Medical Doctor Becomes the First Female Rabbi in South America" featuring Rabbi Dr. Analia Bortz

Two favorite quotes: "How beautiful that all the brothers and sisters are sitting together."

"Leadership is the sense of being there, wherever you are needed."

Rabbi Dr. Analia Bortz kicked off the morning with her personal story, beginning in her country of birth, Argentina. From a family of dedicated doctors (and obviously, high achievers), young Analia was highly influenced to study hard, excel academically, and to become a doctor herself. At the age of 22, she received her medical degree and according to her family, this was when "life starts". While in medical school, she also decided to study at rabbinical school in the evening - since she had so much spare time! Actually she would ride the bus to medical school departing at 5a.m. and finally returning home each night around midnight.

"Rabbinical school was to be simply a hobby," Rabbi Dr. Analia said. "I wanted to study religion to look at the whole person – the body AND the soul. I didn't want to have to wait to the fourth year of med school to study the human being!"

Of course the hobby would ultimately become something much more. She went on to finish rabbinical school the first year that they ordained a female Rabbi in Jerusalem. And later, against some rather daunting challenges, Analia became the first female Rabbi in Argentina. She also continued to serve as a medical doctor and gained recognition for both roles.

On May 18, 1994 the Jerusalem Post published an interview with Rabbi Dr. Analia saying that as a medical doctor, she was performing circumcisions – the first woman to do so. "This is actually a mistake," points out Rabbi Dr. Analia. "Moses' wife performed the first circumcision. However, this article was posted on the door of the hospital where I worked and I was no longer welcome there anymore."

Rabbi Dr. Analia and her family moved back to Argentina shortly before the 1994 Jewish Community Center bombing. Sadly, one of her closest friends was killed in the bombing. As a doctor and a rabbi, she was sent to identify bodies in the morgue for weeks after the bombing, a most difficult task. As a result, she and her family decided to move back to Jerusalem for a time. Eventually, Rabbi Dr. Analia would answer a call to go to Chile. There she began working with a congregation and she also completed her PhD in Bioethics at a Catholic School. (Editorial note: an over achiever's pattern continues to evolve.)

At one point, she was let go from the school in Chile for challenging the Bible when she said, "Thank God we were kicked out of the Garden of Eden – otherwise, we would have been puppets of God. Now we have free will." This comment – and her overall tendency to speak her mind and to challenge the status quo - led to her being asked to teach professors from the 'secret' point of view, the highest level of study.

Fast-forward to 12 years ago – Rabbi Dr. Analia, her husband and 2 daughters decided to move to a new country - this time, the United States - where they could more freely express their views. While they initially thought New York City might become their new home, they ended up in Atlanta and fell in love with the area. She and her husband, also a rabbi, started a new congregation in Sandy Springs and have grown it from about 50 families to almost 1600 people.

"I am extremely thankful for the privilege to be in the USA and especially in Atlanta – the home of Coca-Cola, CNN & Delta – and such a diverse and caring community. Ten years ago, my husband and I became citizens and now this is our country too," proudly stated Rabbi Dr. Analia.

Q & A & Other Pearls of Wisdom from Rabbi Dr. Analia:

➤ *Q: Why did you pursue rabbinical studies when they turned you away?*

A: "I am very goal-oriented – and a Type A personality. I did it initially for the purpose of studying, of learning - not to become anything. It was a normal, fluid process. It was also a way to share my passion with my husband, who was also in rabbinical school."

➤ *Q: What do you do for relaxation, for balance in your life?*

A: "I typically go to the gym at 5a.m. I also love to read and to paint. My husband and I also love to travel and to go places where we can scuba dive. I think the ocean represents a 'validation of each species.' (By the way, I don't like the word tolerance, I prefer validation). These are some of the ways that I re-energize but of course, my family is my absolute first priority."

➤ "I felt a great sense of responsibility to do something else. I have since started a group called Seeds for Hope. (There's also a book called Hope for Seeds.) This is a group of women struggling with infertility and we've been meeting for seven years. Typically men were not receptive to facing a group. Since the beginning, over 100 kids have come from this group, either by birth or adoption, due to the sense of trust it fosters. It opened their minds AND in many cases, their fallopian tubes too as well!"

➤ "I believe it's important to bring God into everything that we do. For example, one day while driving around Atlanta with its many trees, my youngest daughter said, 'Stop the car. We need to make a blessing for the trees.' How important it is that we take time to delight in life."

➤ "I believe an open mind is an open heart."

➤ "I love simplicity. Da Vinci was the ultimate in sophistication and yet simplicity."

➤ "I have had the opportunity for several years to be part of an African American - Jewish coalition. As world pilgrims, we have taken trips on an interfaith mission: 11 Jews, 11 Christians, and 11 Muslims." Our latest trip was to Spain & Morocco."

➤ "I categorize people into dwellers, those who are comfortable as they are - and seekers, those who are learners, searching to improve the world."

- “My mother and grandfather were the biggest influences in my life. Despite working as a doctor, sometimes for chicken and eggs, and raising a family, I never noticed that my mother had any stress.”
- Rabbi Dr. Analia is both pro-Jerusalem and pro-Palestinian. She thinks that both groups are wonderful people led by terrorist organizations that have no respect for their own people. We need to give them the opportunity to have success on their own. There needs to be a two state solution.
- “I am sorry” is a sign of strength.