



## Reflections on Rabbinic Training

ited a yeshiva ... and seen hundreds of young men engaged in a passionate discussion of its text. It was nine in the evening when I arrived at the Yeshiva University in New York. A buzz of furious sound was coming from one of its libraries. It could scarcely have been more different from the obligatory silence of the Bodleian. They were all studying the Talmud, line by line, and this was no exercise in dry scholarship. As I soon realized, I was in the presence of the fissile core of Judaism."

Interestingly, and with remarkable prescience, the author of the 1905 article in *The New Era* closed with the following hope and prophecy, his somewhat mocking criticism of Yeshivat Rabbi Isaac Elchanan notwithstanding:

"If the Yeshibath Rabbi Isaac Elchanan would be taken in hand by men of intelligence who are abreast of the 20th century it might possibly become an unequalled factor for good in American Judaism." He could never have imagined the variegated edifice of Yeshiva University to which RIETS gave birth, nor could he have imagined that the din in the *beit midrash* now would probably be louder than the noise he decried in 1905. And that it would be precisely this hallowed sound that would be divined as "the fissile core of Judaism"!

We view our challenge to continue as this "fissile core" in the new century.

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*"In this post-halakhic era, when the world is changing faster than ever before, the RRC trains rabbis able to face the way in which we must delve afresh into the richness of Jewish text and experience in order to find precedents and values that we can bring to bear in fresh ways on the challenges of our own time." —Rabbi David Teutsch, Sh'ma 1997*

### Jewish Leaders for a Changing World

Dan Ehrenkrantz

**I**t is the heroic mission of rabbis to provide leadership for the Jewish community during these very

challenging times. It is the daunting task of rabbinical schools to prepare rabbis for this role.

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) approach to rabbinic education is deeply rooted in both Jewish tradition and contemporary thought; it places the Jewish people at the center of our concern. In the six years since *Sh'ma* last canvassed the heads of the rabbinical seminaries, we have added advanced courses in Talmud and Bible; launched an innovative program in Jewish Spiritual Direction; built both a new library and an advanced digital language lab designed to enhance the study of Hebrew and Jewish texts and improve the e-learning capacity of the College; added programs leading to Cantorial Investiture and a Master of Arts Degree in Jewish Studies; and established joint programs in Jewish Education and Jewish Music with Gratz College, and Jewish Women's Studies with Temple University. In addition, we have fully endowed two centers: The Center for Jewish Ethics, and Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies.

The warmth, excitement, and creativity of the RRC community are infectious. Our dedication to passionate engagement, stellar teaching, and intense Jewish living provides a compelling environment for rabbinic education. Class size is kept small so that students engage Jewish tradition with the focus and intensity we believe necessary. There are obvious financial costs to the institution associated with this level of student attention, but the task of educating rabbis demands the best of our capabilities. In return, we have been blessed with a student body comprising women and men who inspire us — and each other — daily.

From the classrooms to the lounge, from the noisy *hevruta* study areas to the quiet areas for reading and meditation, the school boasts a very active environment — intellectually, spiritually, and politically. Our ground-breaking program in Jewish Spiritual Direction is charting new pathways for the increasing number of Jews who are seeking to cultivate their ability to discern God's presence in their lives. And our new *tikkun olam* initiative builds on what we have learned, bringing the insights of the Spiritual Direction program outward to repair a broken world.

Dedicated to the renewal of Jewish leadership, RRC prepares promising women and men for a lifetime of service in every area of Jewish life. As an intellectual and spiritual center, our ideas ripple outward to *klal Yisrael*. We train Jewish leaders for a changing

world — leaders who will help determine what the Jewish community will look like tomorrow and shape the lives of generations to come.

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*"To give our rabbis the skills needed to shape such institutions, seminaries must invest much thought and energy into five basic areas of educational process. 1) ... Maximize not only the academic growth of its students, but their spiritual growth as well. 2) ... Curricular and co-curricular programs need to be designed that will prepare future rabbis to help reshape the synagogue and other Jewish institutions into vehicles for Jewish outreach and identity formation. 3) ... Rabbis need to be adept at conveying basic Jewish knowledge and skills to lay people of all ages. 4) ... Supervised in-field training [must] be a primary educational component. 5) ... Rabbinic training is a lifetime experience." — Rabbi Norman Cohen, Sh'ma 1997*

## On Embracing Torah

*Richard N. Levy*

When the first ordination class at the Los Angeles campus of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion walked down the aisle, each member carrying a scroll of the Torah, we knew that they had taken to heart the prayer *v'ten chelkenu b'Toratecha*, "Grant us our portion in Your Torah." As each ordinee rolled the Torah scroll to what they felt was their portion at that moment of their lives, their penetrating looks almost drew the letters off the parchment, and soon-to-be-rabbi and eternal Torah met, embracing for a lifetime.

The challenge of rabbinic education is to prepare students for that embrace. We offer a demanding schedule of readings, classes, papers, daily worship, student placements, and regular mentoring. Students must balance all those requirements with the inevitable crises in their own lives and their congregants, which we need to help them understand through the eyes of Torah and the presence of God. They need to revel in the

beauty of the world around them and to commit time to easing its pain; they must search for love and commit to it, being faithful partners and spouses and parents and children. We need to give them the tools to look historically and critically at ancient texts and modern trends, at the same time being able to gather these texts in their arms, loving them in spite of the problems in them, inspired to proclaim the truths that shine from them, helping others find the God who spoke through them and speaks today.

In his article in these pages six years ago, Dr. Norman Cohen, Provost of HUC-JIR, laid down five basic areas of education that will help to form such rabbis: to maximize students' academic and spiritual growth; to train them to help reshape the synagogue and other institutions; to learn the skills of informal education not only for synagogue service but also in Hillels and chaplaincies; to turn fieldwork into experiences with mentor rabbis who are trained for the task; and to enlist the rabbinic and congregational bodies in ensuring that rabbinic education continues past ordination throughout one's rabbinic career.

All those goals remain valid today, and under Dr. Cohen's determined shepherding of a new Core Curriculum, they are closer to accomplishment than when he penned them. Yet we have also become more aware of the obstacles to achieving them. Sometimes academic and spiritual goals seem to work at cross purposes — critical thinkers are often wary of spiritual embraces, concerned lest the quest to hear God speaking in the texts will make students "grow soft" in their analyses. When praying in rabbinic school, students usually prefer to pray in Hebrew, but we also need to help them find fulfillment through prayers written in the language their people understand, and to give time to uplifting music as well as uplifting words. There is an immense amount that budding rabbis need to learn, but with practicality dictating that it must be learned in five years, demanding schedules make it hard to find enough quiet moments to be aware of God's presence in their lives, to reflect on the mitzvot to which the Holy One is beckoning them. Though our alumni cherish the student mentoring role, their own busy schedules make it a major challenge. Finally, as Dr. Cohen noted, new rabbis need to continue the disciplined learning of their student days, but where will