A New Rabbinate for a New Time

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion has expanded its professional development in the areas of pastoral counseling and spiritual growth.

Psychodynamics and Pastoral Counseling

"Congregants lead increasingly complicated lives," says Betty Roswell, a clinical social worker in Bridgewater Township, NJ. "They turn to clergy for help in dealing with a myriad of personal, family, and spiritual issues, among them the illness and death of loved ones. Our clergy and educators need the skills and understanding to support their congregants effectively."

To answer these needs, HUC-JIR/New York has launched the Hilda and Jacob Blaustein Center for Pastoral Counseling, established with a $2.5 million endowment in memory of Roswell’s beloved parents. Rabbinical students in New York are now required to study psychodynamics and pastoral counseling through the Center, organized in partnership with the CCAR and the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health. In addition, all rabbinical students must complete supervised clinical training, including a year of congregational work and a year-long pastoral counseling internship.

"It is critical that our spiritual leaders are able to listen and advise, respect confidentiality and boundaries, and gauge their own limitations," says Dr. Nancy Wiener, clinical director of the Blaustein Center and field work coordinator. "Through the center, HUC-JIR students will have greater opportunities to develop their identity as rabbis—gaining insights into the expectations, demands, limitations, and power that come with the title and role."

Field work placements are designed to help students acquire skills that are unique to the rabbinate, among them counseling, teaching, preaching, group dynamics, leading services, and ritual responsibilities. "Students receive hands-on experience in a highly supervised setting as well as opportunities for individual and group reflection to gain greater understanding of their goals as rabbis," Dr. Wiener explains. During their second-year Jewish education course, rabbinical students are required to teach in a religious school. As part of their third-year counseling class, their field work includes placements in hospitals, bereavement groups, and clinics. Students spend at least one year in a congregational setting, with supervised pulpit responsibility; their second year of field work, a choice of congregation, hospital, nursing home, or organization (including the UAHC), depends on, and helps define, their future career goals. The goal is to integrate practical experiences and academic study. "If students are asked to counsel the ill and dying and their families at the same time as they study Jewish theology in class, their own beliefs will be challenged and will become more refined," Dr. Wiener says.

At HUC-JIR’s Los Angeles School, the newly established Sexual Orientation Issues in Congregations and Community Initiative assists students in working within the Jewish gay and lesbian communities. The newly endowed Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health, founded on the principle that health and healing are a fundamental part of Jewish religious experience, offers a national think tank for theological and philosophical discourse on Judaism and health. "Part of its mission," explains Kalsman Institute director and chaplaincy instructor Dr. William Cutter, "will be to train future religious leaders in the complex issues of health provision and ethics."

HUC-JIR’s Cincinnati School offers students the opportunity to participate in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), a national experiential education program that teaches pastoral care in healthcare settings; and the Mayerseon Mentoring Program, in which students serving as the sole rabbi for small congregations are mentored by rabbis in the field. Students visit their mentors’ congregations and the mentors visit the students’ pulpits, a supervision process which supports students’ growth as spiritual and educational leaders while building strong relationships between ordained rabbis and their future colleagues.
The new curriculum also requires three supervisory sessions per semester, biweekly small-group sessions facilitated by rabbis with advanced degrees in counseling, and six to eight sessions on professional issues ranging from ethics and boundaries to time management and working with boards. In addition, a Senior Seminar Practicum explores practical professional issues such as budgets, pensions, and clergy teamwork. And prior to graduation, seniors are matched with mentors with whom they will be able to consult during the first years of their careers.

Through these professional development programs, HUC-JIR prepares future rabbis to balance the complex demands of career and personal life. Students are conditioned to integrate their studies, field work, and personal lives into a coherent whole, “so when congregants question the meaning of their own lives,” says Dr. Wiener, “their rabbi is able to be a source of counsel and support. It is only after grappling with these issues oneself that a rabbi will be able to truly help others achieve a meaningful Jewish life.”

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner: Spiritual Growth Adviser

“How can future rabbis provide spiritual guidance to their congregants and inspire worship?” asks Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, HUC-JIR’s new rabbi-in-residence in New York and the author of more than ten books on Jewish spirituality. His answer: “By exploring and strengthening their own sense of connection with God, through a heightened awareness of their own presence within the Holy One.”

“I’m the students’ rabbi,” Rabbi Kushner explains. “I help students sharpen their questions about their relationship with God and then find ways to integrate that into who they are and how they serve congregations—a gamut which runs from taking charge when the groom faints to answering the question: what really happened on Mount Sinai?”

Today, HUC-JIR’s revised rabbinical core curriculum, in addition to academic course work and professional development and field work requirements, places emphasis on individual spiritual development. Students are encouraged to experiment with ritual, liturgy, music, and prayer. Through this process, rabbinical, cantorial, and education students explore their own spirituality as a means of empowering others to do the same. “One of the most daunting challenges facing every rabbi is ‘Just what is supposed to be my Torah’—i.e., how do I discover my own innermost teachings?” says Rabbi Kushner, who has served for thirty years as a pulpit rabbi and a decade as a visiting lecturer at HUC-JIR. “Some students read more Hebrew books, others learn to sing, others spend more time comforting hospital patients, and still others learn to sit in stillness. Together with God’s Torah, we begin the work of a lifetime.”

A Doctor of Ministry for all Faiths

“Honor your father and your mother” always has been a precept of Belle Kligberg’s life, guiding her relationships with her parents and children. In a ceremony at the Islandia Retirement Home in New York, led by Rabbi Steven A. Moss, Belle, 82, discussed the Fifth Commandment and then bestowed the priestly blessing to her children—as part of her bat mitzvah ceremony. Islandia resident Dan Kenny joined in the simcha, making Kiddush with the cup his father handed to him in 1926.

Rabbi Moss, ordained in 1974 and recipient of an HUC-JIR Doctor of Ministry in Pastoral Care and Counseling in 1999, cherishes using religious rituals with seniors to prompt their memories as part of his Ministry demonstration project. “Reminiscing,” he says, “provides powerful psychological and spiritual functions that allow us to relive good times and resolve conflicts—forgiving others and ourselves.” Many participants observed Jewish rituals for the first time, such as lighting Shabbat candles as a mother had done in the past or reciting Kiddush for a long-deceased spouse. As a result of these experiences, the fifteen participants formed a ritual committee to write a prayer book, which is now used at the nursing home.

The D.Min. program at HUC-JIR is the only one of its kind in the United States that combines the resources of a major seminary with an acclaimed psychoanalytic institution, the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health. “Students enter the program because they have discovered that the challenges they face in their day-to-day ministry are not sufficiently met by their seminary training,” explains Dr. Carol Ochs, coordinator of Graduate Studies at HUC-JIR/New York. All students in the program are ordained clergy representing diverse faiths and cultural backgrounds, including rabbis of all Jewish denominations, Protestant ministers, Catholic nuns, and priests. They come from as far as Nigeria and India.

“It was twelve years after my ordination,” says Rabbi Shira Stern, HUC-JIR class of 1983, “and I had to go back to school to find ways to revitalize my rabbinate. What I discovered was a new vision that broadened my career.” Rabbi Stern now serves as a Jewish chaplain in hospitals, hospices, and nursing homes as director of Jewish Chaplaincy for Middlesex County, NJ. She continues to preach, teach religious school children, and lead a Rosh Hodesh group at Temple Rodeph Torah, Marlboro, NJ, where her husband, Rabbi Donald Weber, is spiritual leader. “The D.Min. enabled me to find my niche—one that began when I was a thirteen-year-old who wanted to do bikur cholim and regularly visited nursing homes and hospitals.

“I couldn’t do this job without my D.Min. training,” she adds. “The neonatal pediatric wards and young parents coping with crisis, the adolescents struggling with critical illness, the middle-aged individuals coming to grips with their mortality, the solitary elders for whom I am the only visitor—I now have the tools to mitigate their isolation and suffering and provide a nurturing presence.”

As a pastoral counselor, Rabbi Stern engages in a process she describes as “being with the patient in the moment. I listen to their tears, acknowledge their fears, and let them articulate the feelings that can unleash the healing process.”

Rabbi Stern lauds the D.Min. program for “its rich opportunity to study and share our work with those of other faiths and ethnic heritages. Theology and psychology courses provide a forum for interfaith dialogue and understanding, and you experience a heightened appreciation for your own faith when required to explain its beliefs, ethics, and values to someone else.” Thirty-four students have completed the D.Min. degree; thirty-one others are currently enrolled in the two-year program. For more information, please call (212) 824-2252 or e-mail nygrad@huc.edu.

—Jean Bloch Rosensaft