

suffering was in fact *caused* by the laws of the Torah rather than alleviated by them — our rabbis would have not only the skill but also the courage to utilize the tradition in radical yet authentically Jewish ways to relieve that suffering, even if it initially appeared “impossible” to do so. The *ultimate* goal, we should remember, was not simply that the suffering at hand be eliminated, but that *our tradition would continue to fulfill its mission*: to enable Jews to become fully human, human beings, and to help us create a world where all barriers to the fulfillment of each person’s humanity are removed.

The academies of the talmudic era were not just rabbinical schools. They were think tanks where the many dilemmas of living in an era of enormous change were resolved with the most radical and courageous of new methodologies. The deans of our founding rabbinic institutions knew that there were “captives” to be freed — freed from the bondage of the laws of the Torah itself — and they were moved to do something about it. They understood that, if Judaism were to remain a believable and effective path to wholeness and a repaired world, then their mandate was to address these injustices and to use the Torah, in its broadest sense, to do so.

Our tradition’s early vision of rabbinic education was to train rabbis (a) first and foremost, to have the sensitivity to recognize *who* our tradition’s captives were, (b) to master the principles and mechanisms of the Jewish legal process, and (c) to have the courage to utilize them. I am convinced that they intended their record of this process — the Talmud — to be not so much a compendium of laws to follow as a blueprint for how to change those laws in authentically

Jewish ways when necessary. It is a sixty-three-volume charge to future generations of rabbis to be observant enough to know when such times had come, compassionate enough to be moved by them, and courageous enough to utilize the radical talmudic methods bequeathed to them. We need to return to that vision of rabbinic education, to rabbinical schools that see themselves as modern Jewish think tanks — certainly so that we produce humane and courageous rabbis, but, more important, so that Judaism remains a humane and courageous tradition.

How rabbis respond to their generation’s captives determines the health of our *nefesh* as a people. Today, to the disgrace of our tradition, gay and lesbian Jews have been rendered captives by rabbis who either lack their ancestors’ courage to be legal activists or who fail to realize the enormous pain they perpetuate with their inaction. We risk our *nefesh* as a people when we pretend that the only way to do the right thing is to step outside of a Jewish legal framework. And we risk our *nefesh* as a people when we diminish Jewish law — and God — by hiding behind an impoverished caricature of both, claiming that “Our hands are tied,” or “It’s God’s will,” allowing injustice and human suffering to continue.

Rabbi Benay Lappe is Resident Rabbinic Scholar at Aitz Hayim Center for Jewish Living in Highland Park, Illinois, and an Associate at CLAL — the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. She teaches “Judaism, The Owner’s Manual: A Crash Course in Jewish Law for Traditional Radicals” at synagogues and schools around the country.

Continuing Education for Rabbis

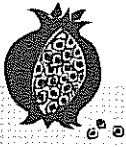
Hayim Herring

Rabbinical schools today are failing to develop a broad communal vision of Jewish life. Students are sometimes exposed to fragments of a vision but are not typically provided with a coherent whole. And when students wrestle with the “role of rabbi,” they are often unable to translate their ideas in the field.

While rabbinical schools provide some training in organization and management, their primary focus must remain on Judaic subjects. Even if schools

had adequate faculty and time to offer a serious program in professional development, talking theory (role-playing, case studies) is a pale substitute for the Jewish world that students will encounter as rabbis.

To their credit, rabbinical organizations have been steadily increasing the range, quantity, and reach of professional development opportunities for rabbis. However, these courses are offered sporadically, for brief periods of time, and without any follow up. Rabbis are, therefore, unable to adapt their acquired



theoretical knowledge into concrete organizational change. While continuing education is firmly embedded in most professions, rabbis are not required to take continuing education credits in order to retain active credentials. Continuing education recognizes that professionals remain maximally effective over time by participating in peer-related, professional development programs. Why do we not bring the same expectations to the rabbinate?

The irony is that rabbis are continuous learners. Ask a rabbi about a Jewish text, secular book, or article that she has read recently, and you are likely to hear several titles. But, ask a rabbi about the last time he attended an intensive, sustained professional development program (which generally excludes rabbinical conventions) and you are more likely to hear silence. This is not only because rabbis lack a culture that fosters continuing education as do other professions, but also because their volunteer leadership is often unwilling to make time and money available for such participation.

There are many cogent reasons for promoting continuing education for rabbis. Rabbinical school does not train rabbis to respond to a growing diversity of Jewish families. Today, there are significant numbers of people for whom being single is not a temporary state but a voluntarily permanent status, or one that they will retain for long periods of time. In addition to large numbers of singles, we have single parents, empty-nesters, interfaith families, gay and lesbian families, biracial families, adoptive families . . . and other kinds of as-yet-unimagined families.

As well, continuing education would prepare rabbis to address the unprecedented challenges of responding to four generations of Jews at the same time. Members of the "Veteran/Silent Generation," "Boomers," "Gen X'ers" and "Millennials" are each influenced by different historical forces and bring different values and expectations to the Jewish community. Not surprisingly, the religious identity characteristics of each generation vary because of generational dif-

ferences in attitudes toward organized religion and because of different developmental needs that emerge at various life stages. While many teachings in our tradition are timeless, if we want them to be timely, then we have to learn how to translate them into meaningful categories for people at different stages of life.

As rabbis, we emphasize the importance of building Jewish community, practicing ritual behaviors, respecting religious authority, and valuing the objective wisdom of the Jewish tradition. And yet our lack of training is not preparing us to think creatively about a large cohort of soon-to-be Jewish adults.

Recent studies on dynamic religious institutions point to the excellence of clergy as the key variable for their success. Excellent clergy:

- Have a clear sense of purpose and know how to articulate it in a compelling manner. At the same time, they accept their congregants where they are.

- Build community through work with small groups, committees and the board. Lay leaders are not

viewed as obstacles to clergy; they are allies in helping to fulfill a community vision.

- and Express their vision through local congregational and community action.

But, rabbis can lose their sense of calling over time and become engulfed in the routine tasks of congregational or organizational life without a spiritual vision that continuously replenishes the strength required of religious leadership. While necessary, merely having a clear sense of religious mission is insufficient for leading a synagogue or institution. Dynamic secular and religious nonprofit organizations have high-functioning boards, motivated volunteers, effective communications, good marketing, up-to-date use of technology, and comprehensive human and financial development programs. In short, they incorporate the theory and best practices of nonprofit management.

Jewish spiritual leadership is anchored in a broad understanding of 21st-century America, the adaptation of the Jewish tradition to a diverse,

Rabbis can lose their sense of calling over time and become engulfed in the routine tasks of congregational life.

multigenerational community, and nonprofit management; these three areas call for a fully developed, required program of continuing education for today's rabbis. Understanding in these areas is imperative if we wish our congregations

and Jewish institutions to be robust and evolving places of Jewish living for all of the members of our community.

Rabbi Hayim Herring, Ph.D., is Executive Director of STAR (Synagogue: Transformation and Renewal).

The Rabbinate: Studying at a Common Table

Cherie Koller-Fox

In the past century, we have created lines of demarcation — lines that among other things keep our rabbinical students sitting at separate tables. That was not the dream of the founders of the first rabbinical schools in America, who made a concerted effort to unite the nascent community around study. Typically, when Jews today gather to study Jewish texts and traditions, they sit around a table with those who most closely share their religious practices and worldview. This occurs even more often in rabbinical schools that teach from a denominational perspective. This seems antithetical to the ways in which those very texts are structured and best understood.

The Babylonian Talmud, the most authoritative document in the Jewish library, is a case in point. There, all possible voices are encouraged in the pursuit of truth. In Eduyot 1:4–6, the Mishna points to the value of preserving on the page even those opinions that we do not hold, so that future generations will learn that “none should persist in his opinion.” Thus, multiple viewpoints are conveyed from generation to generation with disagreements intact — only waiting for rhetorical discourse to one day lead to understanding for the sake of heaven. Even the Shulchan Aruch, which tries to draw conclusions from the talmudic page, often feels the need to bring more than one opinion to bear.

Encouraging widely differing viewpoints based on common beliefs is a time-honored way of gaining understanding of difficult issues. Senator Joseph Biden explained recently that presidents choose advisors by picking people from their side of the equation but with radically different views, e.g. Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld. In this way, the President is exposed to the most divergent opinions he might ultimately consider. By listening to a broad range of

views, he can better understand the issues and make the best decisions. Too often in Jewish life, we do not realize that we are all on the same side of the equation, and when we don't hear voices from the whole spectrum of opinion, we are not following the wisdom of our ancestors.

Strengthening *klal Yisrael*, the entirety of Israel, means loving the people Israel in all its diversity. But how can we love what we do not know? Rabbinical students, as the future leaders of American Jewry, need opportunities for study and dialogue across the denominational spectrum. The Jewish people would benefit from the personal ties and increased tolerance that might emerge. Our common texts beckon us to dialogue and encounter.

The idea of encounter with *am Yisrael*, the people Israel, was described by Rabbi Avi Weiss in an article in *Judaism* called “Open Orthodoxy.” “Encounter describes a mutual interaction in which all parties benefit and acquire deep respect for the other.” The term, he says, “also evokes how each of us, souls ignited, becomes involved in a process of continuous religious striving and, in this sense, comes to encounter our inner spiritual selves.”

Study ought to be the common language of all Jews. Rabbinical students, rabbis, educators, indeed Jews across the spectrum, should have the opportunity to *encounter* their fellow Jews across a common table with a book open in front of them.

Rabbi Cherie Koller-Fox is the Interim President of the Academy for Jewish Religion, where a diverse body of rabbinical and cantorial students learn from teachers that cross the spectrum of Jewish belief and practice. She is a founder of the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education.