

Rabbis in the Field: A Roundtable

To explore a vision for helping rabbis stay nimble and attuned to the demands of their communities, Sh'ma convened a conversation with the heads of several rabbinical schools. We invited two additional seminary deans to e-mail responses to the questions, which we integrated into this roundtable. We then solicited reactions from rabbis in the field to the conversation. Their responses follow on page 8.

Susan Berrin: How do you envision that your rabbinic alumni continue to learn, once they've been out of the seminary for several years? How will your graduates continue to grow as rabbis?

Aaron Alexander: Within the progressive movements, very few of us grew up with *Torah lish'ma* (learning for its own sake) as an inherent value. Our real learning of Torah began in the seminary, which doesn't feel *lish'ma*, because of grades. Creating an environment in rabbinical school that cultivates a love of learning Torah for its own sake is extremely important. Our experiment with removing grades didn't work all that well. While some students managed fine with pass-fail reporting, other students seemed to need grades as a motivation to perform.

Dan Ehrenkrantz: We don't have grades and we've not had that problem. We do wonder, though, how to accentuate what is truly outstanding work.

Renni Altman: Our students can choose grades if they want; otherwise we operate on a pass-fail system. Fundamentally, the rabbi needs to have an ongoing relationship with scholarship and learning, which we create through the alumni association — initially through conventions and now much more so through technology and online courses, many of which incorporate *chevruta* study. Many of our alumni don't have a community of other rabbis with whom they can learn, so online courses create learning opportunities that can work for a whole range of rabbis in different situations.

Sharon Cohen Anisfeld: Once students graduate there is, ironically, much that conspires to make ongoing study a real challenge. That's why it's critical to start thinking about post-graduate continuing rabbinic education in the first year of rabbinical school. I would highlight three ways in which we seek to nurture a life-long commitment to learning. First, we help students develop the skills to engage competently and creatively with classical sources in the original. This is essential if they are to become independent learners by the time they are out in the field. Second, studying in a *beit midrash b'chevruta* grounds the learning process in

friendship and community, and creates an atmosphere in which one is accountable as a student not only to one's teachers but to one's self and peers. Finally, as faculty we model a commitment to lifelong Torah study with our own *chevrutot*; this reinforces a sense of seriousness about the shared enterprise of learning.

Ehrenkrantz: The learning curve for rabbis during the first few years in the field is tremendously high — they serve essentially like a post-medical school residency. It's not until the fourth year or so that a rabbi begins to establish patterns of continuing education and learning. A focus on *chevruta* study during rabbinical school helps rabbis to replicate that method in the field. Ensuring a fixed time for ongoing learning as part of rabbinic life and inculcating that into the daily routine is critical. Missing from the rabbinate is a formal system of continuing education — a requirement that rabbis in the field need to fulfill in order to remain members in good standing of their rabbinical associations. Physicians who don't keep up with their learning lose their license to practice. The rabbinate needs some level of professionalization akin to that model.

Daniel Nevins: There are and should be multiple forms of continuing education. All rabbis must have a *chevruta*, which is a life-long obligation for all Jews, and certainly for rabbis. In addition, many of our alumni should be able to pursue specialized education such as advanced degrees in Jewish studies, or certificates in discrete skills such as clinical pastoral education (CPE) or nonprofit management, and ritual skills like kashrut supervision, *sofrut*, or writing *gittin*. Next fall, JTS will offer onsite CPE for ordained clergy, and I'm developing an advanced halakhah certificate program for our current seniors and ordained rabbis.

Dov Linzer: The Orthodox community already values *Torah lish'ma*. But because so much of the learning at our yeshiva is goal-oriented — learning all of the relevant *halakhot* — we're not cultivating *Torah lish'ma* as much as we should. When we required students to learn a hundred pages of *gemarah* independent of the yeshiva, it became just another requirement. So

ON THE CALL:

Aaron Alexander, assistant dean for the Ziegler School at the American Jewish University, divides his learning into three areas. First, he learns to teach; second, he learns to learn, *Torah lish'ma*; and finally, he learns through mentorship.

Renni Altman has redefined her rabbinate recently from being a congregational rabbi, to serving as associate dean and director of the rabbinical program at HUC-JIR in New York; she continues to learn through her exchanges with the faculty and her rabbinic colleagues.

Dan Ehrenkrantz, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, continues to learn through reading books, magazines, and summaries of business books. Through his studies he seeks ways to connect with and understand the challenges facing the college's alumni.

Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva and dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, tries to continue learning purely for the sake of learning, specifically Torah unconnected to his professional life; he also seeks opportunities to teach subjects that he's not yet fully explored, which creates a great impetus to learn in new areas. Close contact with alumni keeps him alert to the wider world.

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now we're not testing the students on the learning but asking them to keep a journal — summarizing what they've learned. This method, hopefully, will cultivate a love of learning every single day beyond the context of school. We encourage our rabbis to fix times for Torah, maybe learn a *daf yomi*. And while our rabbis pursue Torah learning — needing to provide halakhic answers and teach text courses — that learning does not necessarily nurture the soul, expand the rabbi's horizons, or maintain one's sense of religious purpose. For these essential experiences, we need rabbinic retreats and other opportunities to share with colleagues and to pull ourselves back from the entrenched role of rabbi.

Setting boundaries is critical to counseling or teaching and also to time management.

Altman: And as part of professional development, our rabbis must continue to hone more practical skills needed for their rabbinate.

Alexander: The advance of technology has significantly opened opportunities for studying *Torah lish'ma*. Rabbis with extremely busy schedules can now still find ways to learn — podcasting has become a tremendous resource in Judaism where anybody can download a lecture or *shiur* and listen in the car or while working out. We post an enormous amount of material online and through e-mail. We need to think creatively about how to do this most effectively.

Cohen Anisfeld: While technology is and will continue to be a tremendous asset for rabbis, online resources should not be a substitute for learning that is grounded in personal relationships. *Chevruta* study reflects a deep Jewish intuition about the connection between friendship and learning. It is at least as much about “not knowing” together — taking the risk of asking real questions — as it is about gaining knowledge and information. This is particularly vital for rabbis, who often feel immense pressure to pretend they know more than they do. *Chevruta* is great practice for saying, “I don't know” or “I don't understand this” with someone we trust.

Ehrenkrantz: I'd love to hear feedback on my suggestion to formalize some continuing education units. While some rabbis are really good about carving out time and keeping up with their studies, for others it's a real challenge. If we simply say, *as rabbis you should definitely learn a lot, and here are resources; now go use*

them, the rabbinate may not grow as a profession in the way it should.

Nejvins: Mandating such a program is unrealistic and unhelpful. And I'm skeptical about credit for credit's sake. We know that merely attending conferences does not necessarily lead to the attainment of substantial new skills. But the movements could create standard formats for CRE credits and then issue benchmarks for outstanding rabbis to attain each year. Once this vocabulary is introduced it will become easier to sustain expectations that rabbis stay current in their training.

I would like to challenge rabbis to dedicate each decade of their career to a discrete skill set. For example, the first decade could be devoted to cultivating pastoral skills; the second to refreshing and expanding primary-text skills; the third to engagement in issues of peoplehood and public policy. I like the idea of career stages and shifting our focus periodically in order to break out of habitude.

Linzer: I wonder how many doctors or lawyers take those credits just to fulfill requirements and whether much growth actually occurs as a result of those demands.

Alexander: I'd like to see rabbis leave the seminary with a list of ways to further their education with a mentor who will urge them to continue to learn and grow.

Cohen Anisfeld: Rabbinic mentors help rabbis continue to work toward goals they set as students. Mentorship also underscores that the learning process does not end with ordination.

Altman: A mentoring program offers new rabbis a spiritual guide to replenish the well — especially in terms of self-care — during the early years.

Linzer: We've been struggling with mentorship because it requires preexisting relationships and also because it takes time to develop those relationships — it's not just for help in a crisis. One place to start is during a retreat, with time to share why we're rabbis and reflect on our own spiritual development — where the talks are not just about content but are inspirational.

Alexander: We've been talking about rabbis mentoring rabbis but some of our most knowledgeable, committed, and passionate members of the community are our lay leaders. I wonder what it would look like to have rabbis being mentored by their board members and laypeople.

Altman: Though this could be a helpful exchange of ideas, it might not be a good mentorship relationship. Being mentored by a member

WRITING IN LATER:

Sharon Cohen Anisfeld is dean of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, where she learns through exchanges with colleagues, students, friends, and family members, as well as through her own reading and writing. She is also grateful to study *b'chevruta* with two friends on a regular basis.

Daniel Nejvins recently became dean of the rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He continues to learn by pursuing areas in which he is less knowledgeable.

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of one's board can be fraught with difficulties. And our rabbis need mentors with years of experience in the rabbinate. We all see how often rabbis become burned out, not attending to self-care whether it comes from study, prayer, personal development, spiritual development, retreats, whatever. We can get so caught up in our professional obligations that we neglect ourselves and our families.

Berrin: *A rabbi serves as teacher and spiritual leader. Charisma can draw people to a rabbi; it can be used well, or abused. How do you address the role charisma plays in the rabbinate?*

Linzer: Our pastoral counseling program teaches our students the skills of creating boundaries — making sure they know where they end and where the other person begins. Setting boundaries is critical to counseling or teaching and also to time management — how to be “on” and how to take time “off.” We help rabbis create calendars with clear designations of time for one's own learning, and time off with family or friends.

Alexander: Charisma is a double-edged sword. When one of my friends becomes observant because of one deeply inspiring rabbi, I am thrilled to find somebody has been introduced and drawn to Torah. At the same time, I am also worried that the charismatic leader and the newcomer are unaware that the learning is grounded in 3,000 years of tradition — that anything we teach as rabbis is being taught in God's name; we teach in the name of Torah and not in our own name. This can become a very fine line, especially for charismatic leaders.

Ehrenkrantz: The community does itself a disservice by defining and understanding charisma so narrowly. When Moses is told that he is going to die, his attention goes to appointing a successor. God tells him that he should commission Joshua, an “*ish asher ruah bo*” a man in whom there is *ruah*, spirit. What do we want in our leaders? We want somebody who has *ruah bo*, who has spirit, and that may translate to charisma. But who doesn't have *ruah bo*, who does not have spirit within them? Only a dead body. So, every person has *ruah*; the question is how to see the *ruah* that a person has, to translate that spirit, which may look different than the way charisma is generally understood. In terms of rabbinic training, we concentrate a great deal on self-assessment, being able to see oneself accurately, and to be self-reflective — what we call “use of self.” Rabbis should bring

absolutely everything that they have to offer to the situations in which they find themselves. What they have to offer is a tool. If somebody is very nice looking and people respond to them because they are nice looking, that's great. But just because people respond to a nice looking rabbi doesn't make that rabbi a better person. It's only a tool.

Altman: Conversations about charisma underscore the responsibility inherent in assuming a position of leadership. The danger arises when charisma is a self-serving reinforcement of a rabbi's own ego needs.

Ehrenkrantz: Our students are required to take a mini-course in appropriate boundaries; nobody graduates without it.

It would be ideal for rabbis to work in concert... for congregational bodies to be thoughtful about how to give rabbis the tools they need to succeed in a changing world.

Cohen Anisfeld: We help each of our students cultivate a leadership style that is personally authentic, self-reflective, and responsive and responsible to others. While we address many of these issues in our counseling courses and seminars, no less important are the informal ways in which we teach students about the ethics of leadership. For example, how do we model appropriate boundaries, humility, and a healthy capacity for reflection and personal growth? How do we create an environment within our own school community that leaves space and time for spiritual renewal? How do we honor different voices, different talents, and different styles of leadership among our students and faculty?

Linzer: For some magnetic rabbis we need to worry about lack of substance — charisma has to be harnessed, and it has to be coupled with substance and attention to detail, to text, and to other people. It's not a substitute for the real knowledge and skills that a rabbi must have to be an effective rabbi.

Berrin: *What are some of the more profound challenges for rabbis in the field today and how might continuing education address some of these challenges?*

Alexander: For the Conservative movement, our most profound challenge is to find ways to inspire people to bring into their lives something from within the tradition. As rabbis, we're strug-



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gling to find ways to help people connect, and we all ought to be learning best practices from each other.

Nevins: The ground is shifting constantly — populations are moving, families are morphing, denominational labels are blurring, obscure rituals are being reclaimed, and bedrock practices are being questioned. In this environment a rabbi must be able to identify core values and help shape his or her environment rather than be resigned to reactive behavior. Rabbis are entrusted with communal memory and stability, yet we also are challenged to help the Jewish people adapt its covenantal mission to current circumstances. Our ultimate job is to make Judaism matter for our people and the world.


Ehrenkrantz: The demand and expertise required of rabbis can be an overwhelming challenge. It would be ideal for rabbis to meet with one another, to work in concert, and for institutions — rabbinical schools, rabbinical associations, and congregational bodies — to be very thoughtful about how to give rabbis the tools they need to succeed in a changing world.

Altman: Among the most profound challenges for an individual rabbi is the issue of self-care, of being whole, of finding that elusive balance between personal and professional life — of ongoing spiritual growth and personal nourishment. Professionally, the rabbinate demands an ever-expanding skill set. Today, rabbis are expected to be both visionary — think in terms of the big picture — and aware of all aspects of congregational life. We want leaders to reach out to Jews beyond the walls of the congregation, to the periphery of the congregation. We need to help our alumni develop those ever-expanding skills.

Cohen Anisfeld: We need to be able to respond to the question that so many Jews today are asking in one form or another: “Why be

Jewish? Why does all of this matter?” Though this may once have been the question of the wicked child at the Passover seder — “*Ma ha'avodah hazot lachem?*” (What is the meaning of this worship to you?) — we can no longer see those asking such questions as wicked; we can no longer afford to relegate them to the margins of our communities. In fact, this creates a wonderful opportunity for us rabbis to be more honest and reflective about why we ourselves do what we do, why it all matters. Judaism will thrive if it speaks to the most significant and elemental moments and mysteries of people's lives — to the questions, fears, joys, sorrows, and longings that make us human.

Linzer: The challenge we all face is to connect people to our Jewish heritage. Rabbis must recognize that this is a central responsibility and obligation, and our rabbinical schools must commit time to teach rabbis how to reach out and to help synagogues realize this is the work of rabbis. We've heard some synagogues ask rabbis: *Why are you taking all of that time, you should be focusing on those within the synagogue? And, why are you bringing all these people into our synagogue, they are not our members?*

Rabbis must also address larger global responsibilities, and we can't ignore the current financial crisis that is having a devastating effect on Jewish institutional life. This crisis presents an opportunity to help people focus on questions of meaning rather than materialism. Within the Orthodox community we're very good at learning and observing, but we're less focused on why we're doing something and connecting our behavior and habits to a sense of meaning within the tradition. Modern Orthodoxy has never developed a religious ethos, a religious mentality that offers a perspective on the world, and provides a lens through which to interpret our experiences. 

Continuing Education

KENNETH BRANDER

The offerings of a continuing education program must be broad enough for the entire rabbinic community. We approach our rabbinate based on our own leadership styles, disposition, and community dynamics. And at different stages of our rabbinic tenure, our needs for support and professional development change.

As several of the rabbis in the foregoing Roundtable mentioned, mentoring programs for new pulpit rabbis can be an effective tool in the arsenal of continuing education programs. With the help of the Legacy Heritage Fund Rabbinic Enrichment Initiative, Yeshiva University has been experimenting with different models of preparing the mentors/mentees for rewarding

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