

CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

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ON OUR COVER

Maimonides letter concerning the ransom of Jewish captives, with Maimonides signature (Cairo *Genizah* fragment).

Cover design by Adrienne Weiss.

Celebrating 100 Years of the Rabbinical Assembly

Introduction

The rabbis had all arrived in New York, at the Chancellor's invitation to receive an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree, each having served the Jewish community for 25 years or more. The chill of the raw November day was dissipated rapidly by the warmth of the gathering as colleagues and friends greeted one another and renewed acquaintances after long periods of separation. The rabbis had come with family members, with officers of their synagogues or institutions and organizations. All were joined by the Seminary faculty in academic garb and regalia. It was a time of celebration and thanksgiving.

As was the tradition, and is still, each honorary degree candidate was presented to the public by a member of the faculty together with an individual from the community in which the rabbi served. As each rabbi was called forward, a short statement was read describing the rabbi's service and accomplishments. And as each account of service was heard, the cumulative impact of the efforts of rabbi after rabbi became awe-inspiring. On that November day, 42 rabbis, each devoting more than 25 years to caring for the Jewish people, presented an immeasurable legacy of sacred accomplishment.

Seated alongside me during the ceremony was our revered colleague, Rabbi Abraham Karp, eminent historian of the rabbinate and of our movement, who leaned over and whispered, "Isn't it is astounding to hear these accomplishments? The whole is greater than the sum of the parts." Yes, I agreed, the sum of all our rabbinic labors is, at the end of the day, far greater than each of our individual contributions. Yet, how precious is each of our contributions. It is rare indeed that we have the opportunity to comprehensively view what we together have accomplished through and across time as a Conservative rabbinate, and the impact our collective rabbinate has had on the history of our people and its well-being. Each of us quite naturally tends to focus on our own sphere of effort. Yet, it is essential that we pause occa-

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sionally to see ourselves as part of a dedicated collective of colleagues, each contributing our labor to the whole so that, in effect, the whole ends up being greater than the sum of the parts. The honorary doctorate ceremony, which unfolds every two to three years, gives its participants an opportunity to realize how each of us contributes our energy to the collective of our movement and our people. The opportunity of the 100th anniversary year celebration of the Rabbinical Assembly provides an opportunity for us to do so as an international rabbinic community.

It is very hard to capture in one volume, much less in a few pages, the total impact of a century of rabbinic effort, of rabbinic collegiality, of creative debate and purposeful effort. But the personal statements which follow give a picture from various perspectives of our lives and our work as rabbis. While a formal history of the Assembly is being prepared for publication in time for our upcoming convention, we have chosen to devote sections of the next four volumes of *Conservative Judaism* to personal reflections on our rabbinate, our work, and the major influences upon us. We had asked all of our RA colleagues to write down reminiscences and thoughts about their rabbinate. We received hundreds of responses of varying lengths and emphases. From these we have chosen to highlight four areas of our rabbinate: The first issue of Volume 52 contains reminiscences of the influences which led us to enter the rabbinate. The winter edition of *Conservative Judaism* will recall memories of our student years and the influences of faculty members and others upon our development. In the spring we will relate what we have sought to bring to our synagogues and communities through our sacred service. The final issue of this volume next summer will contain our views of the essence of our rabbinate, that which we experience as the most essential aspect of being a rabbi.

While we are holding on to all the responses for possible future use, we are publishing selected passages that contribute to each of the four parts of *Conservative Judaism's* "scrapbook." What is thrilling is that in these pages and statements we find represented three generations of rabbinic experience woven together in a tapestry of voices. They speak eloquently and, in the end, express the impact and influence of the totality of this rabbinic community we call "the Rabbinical Assembly." I believe we will find upon reflection that indeed not only is the whole greater than the sum of the parts, but most importantly, that each one of us continues to provide a beautiful, essential piece of the whole.

JOEL H. MEYERS

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY

Part One: Influences

הלומד ילד למה הוא דומה? לדיו כתובה על ניר חדש
(*Pirkei Avot* 4:25)

My career began before I was born. My mother came from a long line of rabbinic families. My parents decided to continue that family tradition and, before my birth, they agreed that if their first born would be a male child, they would direct him to grow up into the rabbinic calling. I recall that from my earliest years, I had been groomed to be a rabbi.

I did not know too much about who and what a rabbi was. I saw the priest in the town where we lived. I liked his black robe. So, to anyone who asked me what I wanted to be, I answered, "a Catholic priest."

Living in a small town where there was no formal Jewish education, my parents made sure that I would learn. From age three, I walked five days a week to the home of the local *dayan-shohet* for my Hebrew studies.

My own plans were changed due to a bitter experience. At age six, I skipped the opening day of my first year in school. In a country where Roman Catholicism was the state's religion, school opening was held in the church. My parents did not allow me to attend. The next day, like all school days, the first hour was religious instruction. We were two Jewish boys in the class, seated in the last row of desks. The priest asked to introduce ourselves by name and declare our religion. The two of us, hearing that everyone was Catholic, were afraid and we announced ourselves to be Catholic. We learned to make the cross. When in the afternoon my mother learned about what I learned, she decided to accompany me to school and tell the priest that I cannot participate in Catholic religious education. When she did it, the priest angrily decided to punish the two of us for lying. For half a year, we knelt on corn every morning while he was teaching. My parents finally arranged for us to be excused from the first class.

As a result of my elementary education, and because I knew more than the other Jewish children, at age six, in the first grade, I was teaching the alef-bet for six months until a teacher could be engaged.

We moved to a larger city. I was enrolled in public school. In my third year, my mother asked the teacher to permit me to wear a cap while eating my lunch. The teacher told her, "if this is what you want, send your son to a parochial school." Although the tuition fee was high, my parents made sacrifices, and my formal religious education began.

JOEL T. KLEIN
MANCHESTER, NH
(JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF HUNGARY, 1949)

My mother, the daughter of a rabbi from Shavlon, Lithuania, always pushed me toward the rabbinate. My father, a shomer Shabbat and shomer mitzvot,

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enrolled me in a yeshiva at the age of 6. When friends asked him, "how come you send your child to a school from 8 o'clock in the morning until 6 at night; it's inhuman." His answer was, "it will keep him off the streets."

ALBERT L. LEWIS
CHERRY HILL, NJ
(JTS, 1948)

Growing up in a loving, wonderful rabbinic household undoubtedly had a profound influence on the path that I would ultimately take. The family was the process and the context, but the magical moment was at Ramah in the Poconos. At the conclusion of a Shabbos morning service a rabbinical student, a few years my senior, rose and led the *Kaddish Yatom*. I was inspired and touched by the moment. I don't know why, but something stirred within me that instant and I knew I was destined, happily to serve the Jewish community as a rabbi.

SHALOM J. LEWIS
MARIETTA, GA
(JTS, 1978)

Fifty years in the rabbinate now, but lasting impact is limited in terms of the number of people. My father, of course, was/is number one. Head of the Orthodox Rabbis of Chicago for about seventy years, he was the gentle human being whose words and actions showed me what a rabbi is and should be—human, understanding, and liberal. Yes, liberal in Hillel's sense. Unlike other Orthodox rabbis, he did not dissuade me from becoming a Conservative rabbi, And my mother's insistence on Jewish education . . . From elementary school, every day at 3:00 p.m., she would take her four children on two trolley cars, one hour of time, to the other side of town, to *heder*, and wait for us until 8:00 p.m., before taking us back home. For years. That's dedication; it's also unforgettable impact.

ALEX J. GOLDMAN
STAMFORD, CT
(HEBREW THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE, 1944)

The sudden death of my father changed every aspect of our lives. My mother, a widow at thirty-four, had to plunge into the working world to provide us with basic needs. As caterer and waitress, her hours were long and exhausting. Our paths crossed from moment to moment as each one rushed on to the next assignment. At the age of eleven, I had to make my own contributions of time and supportive tasks. There was little time to express the pain and fear at the loss of a beloved, funny and sympathetic companion-

father. I missed him every moment of the day and night but I had to mask the tears and sorrow for my mother's sake. She was carrying her own burdens and I found I could not add to her grief by sharing my sense of loss.

My day began as a ritual. Mother worked into the late hours so she was asleep when I began my school day. New England mornings can be cold and I can still feel the chill of my clothes as I moved quietly from bedroom, to bathroom to kitchen. There was always a note from her with a coin that would allow me to buy my lunch at school. The note was encouraging but there was an underlying sadness that reflected her loneliness and her fatigue.

Classes began at 8:30 a.m. but my day began at 5:30 a.m. It was a long walk to school and there was a ritual that preceded my arrival at the Theodore Roosevelt Junior High School. Each morning I would walk to the morning service (the minyan) at Temple Mishkan Tefila which was halfway to school. Every morning, as an only child, I would be part of the morning service and recite the Kaddish, the mourner's prayer. It was my tribute to my father and, as I later recognized, a major aid in dealing with a devastating loss. There was no one else to recite the Kaddish so the fact that I was not yet a bar mitzvah was overlooked by the doting and protective members of the minyan.

After the first week of this schedule, something quite unusual happened. Mr. Einstein, the shamash of the synagogue, appeared at my front door each morning just as I left the house for my trek to the synagogue. He was not a young man and on the first week I noticed that he arrived for the minyan in an automobile driven by a congregant. Now, each morning he seemed to be passing my home just as I began my walk to synagogue and school.

He explained, "Your home is on the way to the synagogue. I have to go this way and I thought it might be fun to have some company. That way, I don't have to walk alone."

Each morning he was there. We trekked through snow, pelting rain, the exquisite New England fall, the hopeful days of spring, the stifling humidity of summer. We walked and he taught. Each morning there was another story about the Jewish People, the prayerbook, the questions of faith. He listened to my expressions of grief and quietly reflected the tradition that deals with sorrow as with joy. He held my hand as we crossed busy intersections and, after some weeks, he held my hand throughout the journey. I sat next to him in the synagogue and he listened and he taught and he hugged and he moved into a void that was tearing at my heart and soul.

Years went by and we spoke by phone and letters. I had entered the Seminary and the day of my ordination as rabbi was my present to him.

Mr. Einstein was in his 90s when I visited Boston with my wife and six-month-old child. I wanted him to see my baby so I phoned and asked him to come to the home he had passed so often. He agreed but said that it was impossible for him to walk; would I please come to get him by automobile. I realized that I had never known where he lived so I asked for directions and set out to meet him.

The journey was long and complicated. His home, by car, was fully twenty minutes away. I drove in tears as I realized what he had done. He had walked

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for an hour to my home so that I would not have to be alone each morning. My home was not on the path to the synagogue; it was completely out of his way. He had made me feel that I was helping him with companionship; the opposite was true. He knew my loneliness and he did not want my day to begin without him. He met my son and held him. Members of the family stood by and watched; there was not a dry eye. Each one knew our story and the sight of the next generation nestled in the arms of a beloved teacher and friend required no words. It is a picture that is etched in my heart. When I took him to his home and we embraced, we both wept. We knew it was the last time we would see and touch each other.

My life has been blessed with personal and professional success. Yet, wherever I went, in soft moments and in moments of exultant triumph, Mr. Einstein was holding my hand. By the simplest of gestures, the act of caring, he took a frightened child by the hand and he led him with confidence and with faith back into life.

GERALD I. WOLPE
NARBERTH, PA
(JTS, 1953)

My Seminary experience began the month I graduated from high school in June 1926. All of my closest friends were talking about the colleges they were going to: Harvard, Yale, Columbia, etc. I didn't talk because I had no idea about going to college. I didn't have a dollar to my name. My parents were both dead, having died at 36 and 34 years of age in the influenza epidemic of 1918. My grandfather who reared me was a poor man. One day, my rabbi, Rabbi Solomon Goldman of the Cleveland Jewish Center, called me into his office and said simply, "I have decided, Armond, that you should become a rabbi and I have arranged for you to be admitted to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Since you will be taking classes in the Seminary, I have arranged for you to be admitted to New York University where I graduated. You will talk to the Dean, James B. Munn, and he will arrange for you to have classes afternoons and evenings. I know you have no means of your own and I have arranged for this congregation to loan you all the money you will need."

I left home for the first time six weeks later, went to New York, and did exactly what my rabbi told me to do.

ARMOND E. COHEN
CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OH
(JTS, 1934)

The event that led to my becoming a rabbi occurred soon after my twelfth birthday. Until that time my Jewish education came from two sources. When

I was about eight years of age, some months after my mother had died, my father sent me to a primitive Hebrew school at the nearby synagogue. My teacher was notorious for carrying a ruler in his hand that he used with great dexterity in swiftly striking the hand of a student whom, out of the corner of his eye, he caught not paying attention. I was a generally serious pupil, but one hot Baltimore afternoon, my mind wandered when, suddenly, I felt a stinging smack of the ruler across my hand. Without thinking, I rose, seized my text and hurled it at my teacher. I fled out of the room down the stairs to the street. That ended my first chapter in Jewish education.

The next experience was with a private *melamed*, Mr. Goldberg, whose house was little more than a block from ours. He had outfitted the room next to his kitchen with several old school desks and benches. I went to his home for several years. He belonged to that class of elderly immigrant Jews who could not make a living so they became Hebrew teachers. Every Saturday night he would come to my father for his weekly pay. One Saturday night, honest man that he was, he said to my father in Yiddish, "I really should not take any money from you this week."

My father asked, "Why not?"

The answer came, "Because your son did not come all week."

My father was surprised, but he insisted on paying him. After Mr. Goldberg left, my father turned to me. "And where were you every afternoon last week when I thought you were going to Mr. Goldberg?"

"Pop," I replied, "in Easterwood Park, playing football. Mr. Goldberg teaches only two things — the siddur and the *humash*. When I arrive, he sits me down, opens to a page in the siddur and says 'Read.' I start reading and he goes to the kitchen, sits down and drinks a glass of hot tea through a cube of sugar — I can hear him sipping the tea through the sugar. When he finishes he comes back, closes the siddur, opens the *humash*, points to a verse and translates the Hebrew words into Yiddish, from one language I don't know into another language I don't know. So why should I go to him? I know for years how to *daven* and *humash*, I'll never learn from him. So, I'm not going back to Mr. Goldberg."

My second mother was listening too. She panicked. "He's already twelve years old. Let him at least become bar mitzvah! What will happen to him? He'll become a truck driver!"

That was the worst thing she could imagine. Then she caught herself. "I'll call Moshe Zeidel, my *landsman*." Dr. Moses Saidel, who had come from the same town in Lithuania as she, was the principal of the Baltimore Talmud Torah, a progressive, modern Hebrew school. She called him and he advised her to bring me to his office the next afternoon.

It took almost an hour by streetcar to get to the school the next day. Dr. Zeidel interviewed me and brought me to a classroom where the teacher was a young man, a student at John Hopkins University. He was teaching the book of Second Samuel, of course using English. After class, he spoke to me, "What do you really like to do?" he asked.

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“Good,” he said. “Would you come early tomorrow and draw on the blackboard a map of Palestine as it was in the days of King David? I’ll show you such a map in our textbook.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yes, I shall be glad to do that.”

I came to the class early the next day and drew the map. The teacher had won me over instantly. Eagerly, I attended class regularly, became bar mitzvah and continued in the next class—a Talmud class. A year and a half later the school awarded me a scholarship to attend the Yeshiva in New York — today called Yeshiva University and I was on the way to the rabbinate, ten years later.

JUDAH A. NADICH
NEW YORK, NY
(JTS, 1936)

Regarding the influences that caused me to choose the rabbinate as my profession, I am afraid that there is more than one personality who is responsible. My grandmother lived with our family and Judaism and its observances were prime movers in her life. She and I were bosom buddies and I feel certain that she inspired me to love the religion, never to consider any of the observances to be a burden.

Dr. George Gordon, one of the founders of the Minneapolis Talmud Torah retired from his practice of obstetrics and taught Talmud to the senior classes of the school. He was always well-prepared and loved to discuss the logic of the Rabbis and make a complicated issue become very clear in our minds. The rabbis of the community attended sessions in which they could ask us any questions they chose. When we realized that we were capable of responding correctly, we were indeed very proud of ourselves. Dr. Gordon, being an obstetrician, had brought most of us into the world. He often reminded us when we were caught unprepared, that if he had known this he would have “snuffed us out as soon as he first laid eyes on us.”

MOSHE V. GOLDBLUM
DOVER, DE
(JTS, 1944)

Although this may sound trite, the one force that most influenced my decision to become a rabbi is my family.

I grew up in a fairly traditional Conservative Jewish home; we always had a kosher kitchen and attended synagogue regularly. Judaism was not in any way dogmatic in our family; it was much more organic. My grandparents and parents showed us a Judaism that was beautiful, fun and meaningful. My parents showed their commitment to Judaism through more than words; my mother was involved in Women’s League and eventually became synagogue president, while my father chaired the youth commission and was a Saturday morning gabbai.

Throughout my upbringing, Judaism and family were always intertwined.

Cousins, aunts, uncles and other relatives were seen at weddings, b'nai mitzvah and other events that revolved around Judaism. In this way, holidays (and Shabbat) as well as life-cycle events became something special, something to which we looked forward. Unlike the situation in many families today, Judaism was not an "extra-curricular activity"; it was a part of nearly everything that we did.

I would make a much better story if I could say that there was some light bulb that went on, or that I "heard the call," but my decision to become a rabbi really came out of an environment that made it seem like the natural thing to do. Judaism was what I enjoyed the most and what I wanted to be involved with for my entire life.

MICHAEL N. UNGAR
TOLEDO, OH
(JTS, 1992)

If there was someone who most influenced me in considering the rabbinate, I believe it was our rabbi in Kansas City, the late Gershon Hadas. But if Rabbi Hadas was "responsible," it was, on his part, only indirectly. As much as he played a major role in the lives of his congregants, he was by nature too gentle and too forbearing for him to have actively led anyone into a field which, he surely knew, was fraught with complexity. One local rabbi did actually suggest that I enter the rabbinate. That was Samuel Mayerberg, a Reform rabbi, who made that suggestion to three members of his confirmation class, which I had become part of. (The other two class members *did* in fact enter the Reform rabbinate.)

Yet for me it was Rabbi Hadas, whose manner of teaching and making Jewish learning seem exciting, who captured my interest. Through his warmth and good humor, he created an aura of fascination even about deciphering a simple Hebrew text. Several young people who had been bar and bat mitzvah had a standing invitation to come to his home Shabbat afternoons where he would open up some Hebrew book, from *Pirkei Avot* to *Ivrit Haya*. For various reasons I never had any formal Hebrew education until college years, but these sessions with the rabbi were my introduction to Jewish literature. Through him, too, I became aware of other rabbinic teachers. Rabbi Hadas was a good friend of a man we had heard about, whom we had also seen on occasion on his visits to Kansas City, Dr. Louis Finkelstein.

As a young boy I noticed a certain book in our bookcase that looked extremely interesting. It was Finkelstein's *Akiba: Scholar, Saint & Martyr*. Although I never read it in its entirety, I was intrigued with how it explored the life of a rabbinic hero in Jewish history. At any rate, in the summer of 1948, a year before graduating high school, I came with my family to visit New York for the first time. I had made a list of 56 places I wanted to see. The Jewish Theological Seminary was one of them.

HENRY A. SOSLAND
NEW CITY, NY
(JTS, 1958)

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We speak of the potential of a person being a sefer Torah. I lived this experience in the defined role of a rabbi who was truly the paradigm of Torah in all its crystalline refraction.

The rabbi was Isaac Klein. He was my childhood rabbi in Springfield, Massachusetts where he served as rabbi of a congregation with separate seating and a balcony. He captured his membership with his knowledge in *all* areas of life, but mostly with his character and love. Isaac Klein was also a war hero.

Rabbi Klein began his day around 5:00 a.m. studying gemara. His day was focused on Torah in the most pure ways. His attentiveness to me was unique. But I learned this was his style with everyone.

When Springfield could not offer me a quality advanced Jewish education, even with his private tutoring, he saw to it I attended a yeshiva. Summers he arranged for me to attend Camp Ramah. When I first left for a yeshiva in Baltimore, Isaac and Henrieta Klein gave a gift to my parents: train tickets to visit their son in Baltimore!

I saw in Rabbi Klein the ideal person living a life of Torah, closeness to God, and an integrity where ideals and values counted more than politics or policies.

I saw in Isaac Klein not only a *gaon* in Torah knowledge and living, but the purest soul. Isaac Klein had kissed one woman in his life: his wife, after marriage!

I imaged myself as an Isaac Klein. He guided me in Torah, rebuked me for my weaknesses, enlarged my vista when he noted my ignorance in secular scholarship, and was an ever-present support when, like with all of us, the world seemed to go out. He approved of my choice of wife, but only after he questioned her in the archives of the Seminary!

My fantasy was that I could be an Isaac Klein in depth of knowledge, in awareness and sensitivity to people, and in influence to insure that Judaism would not only continue, but would be the magnet attracting all, far superior to the routine of the secular.

My maturity was evident after I was ordained. I learned that there cannot be another Rabbi Isaac Klein, and, most certainly it never would be me.

The adventure into the rabbinate came from the inspiration, influence and example of Rabbi Isaac Klein.

The disenchantment is the realization that I can not even be a reflection of his greatness.

But then, maybe the mystery of God and this messenger of God was the teaching that as Rabbi Isaac Klein was unique, in Divine ways, maybe Sandy Press is expected to be human with all the frailties of our humanness.

Perhaps my task is to be a pinpoint of light in darkness, acknowledging that there was an Isaac Klein. And, in the aridity of our, or any age, another Isaac Klein can be!

SAMUEL B. PRESS
DAYTON, OH
(YESHIVA UNIVERSITY, 1960)

Although my father was an Orthodox rabbi and my grandfather, Rabbi Zvi Pesach Frank, was the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, I was all set to embark on a career as a chemist. I had received my bachelor's degree in chemistry at the University of Chicago and my master's in Rubber Chemistry at the University of Akron and had no thought of becoming a rabbi.

That all changed when I attended Brandeis Camp Institute in 1943 and one of my instructors was Rabbi Milton Steinberg. The impact of his passion for Judaism was so great that I began to seriously change my vision for the future, seeing my role as an agent for advancing the cause of my people rather than pursuing personal professional goals.

JOSHUA STAMPFER
PORTLAND, OR
(JTS, 1949)

My call to the rabbinate came from my college rabbi, Al Axelrad. In those years, Al was unabashed about seeking out young women with strong Jewish background and leadership potential, and coaxing and cajoling us to consider a career in the rabbinate. I remember his moment with me with great vividness. Doubtless at his urging, I had served as *shelihah tzibbur* one Shabbat morning early in my freshman year for the egalitarian service on campus. Fresh from active years in USY, I davened competently and, I suppose, passionately. The next thing I remember was Al taking me out to lunch one day the following week, pointing a finger straight at me and saying, "You've got to be a rabbi."

It was 1972, and Al knew as well as I that the ordination of women was not yet even a serious possibility at JTS. But Al had planted a seed. I will always be indebted to him.

AMY EILBERG
PALO ALTO, CA
(JTS, 1985)

I first knew Amy Eilberg when I was an undergraduate at Brown University; we had close friends in common in Providence. She was pursuing a degree in rabbinics at JTS and a master's degree in social work at Smith, in order to put together the package of rabbinic skills and imprimaturs that she could not (yet) gain via rabbinic ordination in the Conservative movement. I was so impressed by this woman a few years older than me. What a thought — to quietly tell the world through your own choices: I will do what I am meant to do, despite the barriers.

After my graduation from Brown in 1984, I worked as a paralegal representing low-income tenants in Philadelphia. When Amy was finally ordained, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* did a feature story on her (her parents lived in the area), including a photo of her standing in front of the sculpture which adorns

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the Seminary courtyard. I had the whole huge newspaper article taped to the wall of my tiny closet-cum-office, with Amy smiling down at me, my overflowing files, my troubled clients. I had no intention then of becoming a rabbi. The article said to me: You'll find your way. You'll make your way.

SUSAN P. FENDRICK
PROVIDENCE, RI
(JTS, 1995)

In accordance with my rabbinical training at the University of Judaism and JTS, I used to see myself as a rabbi in intellectual terms. On my first interview for the assistant rabbi job in Kansas City that was to be the start of my career in the rabbinate, the senior rabbi, David Oler, asked me where I stood philosophically. I told him that I saw myself as a rationalist, except for that time on Shabbat between *minḥa* and *ma'ariv*, when I was a mystic. Except for those fleeting moments of union, I understood Judaism to be governed by dispassionate rules of logic derived from principles and statutes, in good *Wissenschaft* fashion. I was, in essence, just an observer of the grand design that was Judaism and the world.

But now I realize that although I honor my teachers who believed in and taught me these notions, their teachings are incomplete. Rules, after all, must exist within a context, and we could never survive, much less thrive, without passion. Indeed, the presence of Rabbis Elliot Dorff and Joel Rembaum each summer at Camp Ramah in California, their participation as living embodiments of Torah within the very normal life of the Jewish community, was probably the most important influence on my decision to become a rabbi. As camp rabbis, they functioned not as distant and untouchable "symbolic exemplars," but as *k'lei kodesh*, "temple vessels," made extra valuable for the Torah they learned and taught, rather than for their title, wealth, academic degree or anything else. Specifically because they were such "normal" people, who yet embodied an additional (Jewish) dimension of life, I was able to picture the potential for that "something extra" within each of us, even within me!

DAVID BOCKMAN
NEW ORLEANS, LA
(JTS, 1986)

Without a doubt, Camp Ramah had the greatest influence on my decision to become a rabbi. There was no epiphany, no rebbe, no one person or event, even at Ramah, that shaped my entire future. Rather, there were hundreds of experiences and dozens of accessible role models over several summers as a Ramah camper — and later as a staff member. During these years, Judaism became alive, vibrant, and creative.

GERSHON SCHWARTZ
BALDWIN, NY
(JTS, 1979)

Corny as it sounds (though at this time in American Jewish life – it is no longer corny or banal – I wish it were) – the person who influenced me to become a rabbi was – my pulpit rabbi, Sam Lachs, *Sheyebadel l'hayim arukhim*. When he found out I wanted to go to rabbinical school (at age 14), he taught me Mishna at 7:00 a.m. at his home – every weekday for two full summers. I traded my lessons for babysitting – for which he even paid me. When he found out I wanted to go to Ramah at age 16, he made it possible. From the time of my bar mitzvah through junior year in high school (when he left our pulpit for university teaching), he taught a group of us – each Shabbat afternoon before minḥa. From the group of 10 people emerged a ḥazzan, five rabbis, two Judaica scholars and two other volunteer Jewish leaders. What a model of the pulpit rabbinate for a teenager!

SHELDON DORPH
NEW YORK, NY
(JTS, 1969)

Two things seemed to have most heavily influenced my decision to become a rabbi. First there was the foresight of my rabbi, Rabbi Benjamin Birnbaum, the rabbi of our synagogue, Ner Tamid Congregation in Chicago, who called me in to his office one day, when I was a teenager, and told me that I should seriously think about studying for the rabbinate. On what did he base his decision to urge me in this direction? Well, first of all, I was a very serious student in the Ner Tamid Hebrew School. Second, I was always to be found around the synagogue, whether helping out in the office or leading junior congregation service on Shabbat. Third, back in the winter of 1946 he had urged my parents to enroll me for the first season of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, and saw how enthusiastically I responded to the Ramah experience. So, first came the prescience of my own rabbi.

However, I believe that Rabbi Birnbaum's importunings would never have born fruit were it not for the impact of the JTS rabbis and students whom I met in that first and later summers at Ramah. Sylvia Ettenberg and Moshe Davis did a remarkable job of recruiting charismatic students from the Rabbinical School and Seminary College to serve as counselors at Ramah. There were David Lieber, Hillel Silverman, Harold Stern, Sam Scolnic, Kassel Abelson, and others. Until this time, I had never met, let alone spoken with a rabbi who might serve as an accessible model in my selection of a career. Through Ramah, the young members of the Rabbinical Assembly and their spouses have had a remarkable impact upon the creation of a new cadre of Conservative rabbis who, because they were Ramah campers as I was, came from within the Conservative movement.

BURTON COHEN
NEW YORK, NY
(JTS, 1957)

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The person who most influenced my decision to become a rabbi was the rabbi who “bar mitzvahed me” back in 1960, Shammai Kanter. I had, for some still unknown reason, taken an extreme liking to religious school studies. When Shammai Kanter came to Toronto and came into my life in the late '50s, I began to become even more enthused about the prospects of becoming a rabbi. He was warm, personable, fun for kids to be with, and a good teacher and engaging leader of our Junior Congregation. The other thing I was impressed with was his guitar playing and his wonderful performances at several Sisterhood meetings. His playing inspired me to get a guitar for my bar mitzvah. With my guitar I was able to pay my own college tuition by singing in a Hebrew folk rock group called Arbaah Kolote (Voices Four). We had our very first concert at a post-Hanukkah party at the Seminary.

RON ISAACS
BRIDGEWATER, NJ
(JTS, 1974)

No single person or event influenced my decision to become a rabbi. It was a decision I made sometime between ages five and ten. Quite possibly, nothing more “spiritual” was involved than observing my rabbi at the time (whose name I do not recall) doing his thing on the *bimah*, and concluding, “what he does up there, that’s cool” – although “cool” in the contemporary sense had not yet gained currency. However it came about, I have never regretted that childhood decision – although, truth to tell, there have been trying moments when, at one and the same time, I have abominated being a rabbi and yet have been incapable of seeing myself doing something else.

KENNETH BROMBERG
CLEARWATER, FL
(JTS, 1956)

In Calcutta, India, lived a small Jewish community of five thousand souls rooted in Middle Eastern Sephardi heritage with no formal rabbinical leadership. For six generations, hazzanim in three synagogues performed religious services and *sh'lihim* with varied intensities of yeshiva education passed through the city, some staying permanently. Complicated halakhic questions were addressed to the Baghdad rabbinate.

As a result of two world wars, Western ideas and influences percolated. Inter-marriage, unheard of in the 19th century, began slowly appearing. Perhaps in response, a newly formed Zionist movement joined with two Jewish day schools to organize a 45-minute children’s Shabbat morning service. I was part of the leadership of this experiment.

We were discovered by Rabbi David J. Seligson, a chaplain in the American China-Burma-India sector between 1943 and 1945. So impressed was he by one of the services I had conducted, he recommended I consider a career rabbinate. Back in the United States, he consulted with Rabbi David de Sola Pool of New York's Shearith Israel. Jointly, this Orthodox-Reform team recommended me to the Seminary.

EZEKIEL N. MUSLEAH
PHILADELPHIA, PA
(JTS, 1952)

To some extent my resolve to work in the Jewish field was prompted by the Holocaust's impact on me. As a rabbi I would be affirming that *am Yisrael hai* despite our Shoah losses, and I would be helping the Jewish people to live.

LOUIS KAPLAN
WALLINGFORD, PA
(JTS, 1956)

I chose to become a rabbi for a number of reasons. I am the son of Holocaust survivors who fled from Nazi Germany eventually to give me life. I internalized an understanding that Jewish identity was special. While being a Jew in the face of anti-Semitism carried a price, Judaism and the Jewish people constituted special treasures to be safeguarded for the current and future generations. My father's family had been annihilated by the Nazis. I chose the rabbinate in part for my family and the Jewish people as a whole; in order – as Emil Fackenheim formulated it – “not to give Hitler a posthumous victory.” Both my parents, John and Ilse Lewy, were Zionists – my father participated actively in the synagogue of his youth. Their gift of Jewish observance and books were very important in honing my Jewish identity. I was touched by and valued the lessons taught at the San Francisco synagogues of my childhood especially by Herman Hirschfeld (a teacher at B'nai Emunah), Simon Feibusch (my great uncle and Ner Tamid shul shamash), and Rabbi William Dalin (Ner Tamid – whose example led to the ordination of several other colleagues, including his two sons). In college years I inhaled all that Jewish Studies courses and Hillel experiences at the University of California and Hebrew University had to offer, including through the personal and intellectual lessons taught by colleagues David Berner, Jack Cohen, and Richard Levy. I recall special memories of havdalah at a Hillel kallah at Camp Ramah, David Berner's special gift of *hakhamasat orhim* at his apartment, when I was in between dormitories, and Jack Cohen's stimulating course on Reconstructionism, as well the great understanding created by his Arab-Jewish dialogue programs.

LEONARD LEWY
RESEDA, CA
(JTS, 1980)

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If there was one seminal event that was the watershed for my decision-making, that event was certainly the Six Day War and my opportunity to spend an academic year at the Hebrew University three years later. The Six Day War raised my consciousness and I started to wear a kippah publicly at all times during and after the war. The Hebrew University not only strengthened my academic skills, but opened up for me the world of Jewish learning I so much enjoyed. And Israel itself provided the spiritual template where I could experience the breadth of traditional Jewish life. By the time I returned to Toronto, I had virtually concluded that I would enter the rabbinate.

LIONEL MOSES
MONTREAL, CANADA
(JTS, 1977)

In the last week of May and first week of June, 1967, the Arabs were making ready for war on Israel, and their charismatic leader, Nasser of Egypt, promised to “drive all the Jews into the sea.” While the Arab world promised genocide, the rest of the world – including the United States – maintained a curious neutrality.

Those two weeks were significant days in my life as well. The last day of May 1967, I was graduated from college and made ready to spend the summer at Stanford University with a Government fellowship for Chinese language. For the fall of '67 I had won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to enter the Ph.D. program in Chinese at Yale Graduate School.

I had been preparing for a career involving a language, literature and culture that was exotic and exciting. But it was not mine.

As anti-Semitism and genocide loomed imminent in the Middle East, I starkly realized that there was a language, literature and culture that *was* mine. I had studied it as a boy in yeshiva. Now, with my people undergoing mortal danger, I knew that I wanted to devote myself to my people whose fate I shared and to my culture and faith-tradition that was forever misunderstood and under assault.

In May 1967, about one billion people spoke Chinese as their native tongue – surely enough people to keep that culture alive. What did it matter how many advanced degrees I would earn in Chinese? What did it matter, when my own people were under threat of annihilation once again?

I grew up knowing that six million of my people were killed while an apathetic world stood by. But I was born after the Shoah. I had never directly known Jewish agony.

Now, in early June of 1967, I saw the possibility (at that time we feared, the *likelihood*) of genocide unfolding before my very eyes. Now I could understand very well that such a thing happens.

I felt the truth of *Am levadad yishkon, u-va-goyim lo yitkhashav* – Jews are

“a people who dwell apart, and their destiny is different from that of all other nations” (Numbers 23:9).

I decided that my destiny was with my own people. At a time when a young man or woman solidifies his or her career choice, I now decided that my career was not going to be that of an academic, and my contribution to the world would not be in Chinese linguistics. My career would be one of engagement with people, and my contribution was going to be the teaching and living of Torah.

That fall I dutifully entered Yale Graduate School. By day I studied Chinese and Japanese language, classical Chinese philosophy, the linguistics of Asian languages.

By night I studied Heschel, Gordis, Mordecai Kaplan.

At Yale’s Graduate Department of East and Southeast Languages and Literatures, my mind was being exposed to new worlds of intellectual possibility. But my heart was telling me that this was not my place. The Jewish people were my place. The Torah was my place. I would not research classical phonemes as my calling. I would try to touch human lives as my calling.

After a year, I left Yale. I enrolled in the mechinah program of the rabbinical department of the Jewish Theological Seminary. I was told that my course of study would take six years. Apparently, the Seminary didn’t give credit for reading Confucius in the original, nor for the demonstration of writing skills in Japanese.

I didn’t mind. I enrolled.

I was on the road to becoming a rabbi.

STEPHEN CHAIM LISTFIELD
POMPTON LAKES, NJ
(JTS, 1974)

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