Twenty Years After: From Rabbinical Student to Dean

By Rabbi Danny Nevins

I write this essay at a propitious time, twenty years since my ordination, seven since I became dean of the school that ordained me. I first arrived at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in 1989, just after graduating college, following a decade of Jewish searching and study. That journey took me from my parent's wonderful Reform *chavurah* to a black-hat yeshivah in Monsey, NY, and then on to more modern yeshivot in New Jersey and Jerusalem, as well as to Conservative congregations, Ramah camps and our campus Hillel. Each community gave me a glimpse of the Holy, but I also felt fragmented and idiosyncratic in my Jewish identity.

In college I had grown uneasy with the bifurcation between my religious mind, which cherished textual prowess and consistent practice, and my modern mind, which valued critical inquiry and moral reasoning. On campus we protested South African apartheid in make-believe shantytowns, and I initiated dialogue between Jewish and Arab students. At a Lutheran church I volunteered in a homeless shelter, while at Hillel I read Torah and spent Shabbatot singing *z'mirot*. Present-tense political problems were becoming the most compelling theater of religious meaning. As a history major, I learned to examine the context and agenda of every author that I encountered. But in the realm of Torah, I continued to inhabit a pre-modern consciousness of revealed truths, unchanging norms, and a spiritual hierarchy that conveniently placed me, a Jewish heterosexual male, at the very top of God's order. There was growing tension

between the way I observed the world and the way I observed mitzvot, between the lens used to study the humanities and the lens employed to study Torah.

As I sought a more integrated sense of learning and living, with mitzvot and common sense morality in constant dialogue if not perfect harmony, it became clear that I needed to engage more, not less, in my religious education, and that I had to find a place that would welcome and challenge my spiritual growth. I was required to adjust my grip on tradition in order to experience its vitality more fully. From one scholar I acquired the expression, "to find a usable past," which meant learning to segregate regressive elements of my tradition and highlight its redemptive ones, while looking honestly at the complex record of our religion, and seeking insights even in its less palatable features.

By the time I entered rabbinical school, the worlds of Talmud Torah, of Jewish history and theology were familiar to me, but the information had entered my mind hodge-podge, with no organizational principles and no overarching themes. When I arrived at The Jewish Theological Seminary in 1989, it felt too good to be true. There I was able to study our classical literature at the highest levels while inviting the independent and critical consciousness of the modern academy to guide my exploration. In an egalitarian setting, I could ask foundational questions about the covenant, and begin to ponder moral quandaries such as the untenable position of gay and lesbian Jews in the realm of traditional halachah. At JTS I would engage in Jewish literature that had barely registered in my yeshivah education: the Bible itself, the midrashic collections, Kabbalah, and also the secular literary products of modern Jewish experience.

I benefited from a graduate fellowship granted by the Wexner Foundation that brought me into contact with an all-star cast of Jewish leaders and peers from across a broad spectrum of the Jewish world. Pairing my JTS education with the semi-annual retreats of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship ensured that my rabbinic education would be both deep and wide. A program called Seminarians Interacting introduced me to Christian students and challenged me to consider my calling to become a rabbi. Sure, it was interesting to

study Torah, and satisfying to practice mitzvot, but what was my purpose? What did God want from me?

For five years, mostly in New York, but also in Jerusalem, I explored the world of Jewish texts, becoming a better reader and a more nuanced believer. I was conscious of the professional side of my training, but it was never primary. For me, the goal of rabbinic education was to become a learned Jew, a generalist who could help contemporary Jews find guidance and inspiration in the Torah. Eventually I did take a few practical courses in developmental psychology and homiletics, and I completed brief field placements in a hospital and in a Brooklyn congregation. Moreover, I took jobs leading High Holiday worship, tutoring *b'nai mitzvah* and serving as a secretary for the Rabbinical Assembly's law committee. I continued to volunteer in nursing homes and homeless shelters, and came to see continuity between my religious and social selves. Fortified by my studies and by the rich friendships of those years, I began to assemble a rabbinic identity. Yet there was no forum for discussing the integration of these disparate elements of my Jewish identity. It was obvious to me that a good Jew would study Talmud by day and volunteer in a homeless shelter by night. But how did these aspects of being Jewish fit together? How would I prioritize them when things got busy? As a rabbi, where would I put my energies—into adult education or social justice work? What did the job require? What did the people desire?

Upon ordination, I took a rabbinic position in a large suburban congregation near Detroit. For the next thirteen years, I developed my rabbinic identity and also built a family with my wife and our three children. The concept of a servant leader was never explained to me, but I intuited the point. From early each morning until late into the night, I was involved in the lives of my congregants, and from them I learned what was needed. Becoming a father that first year in the pulpit was a radical transformation. Nothing shifts one's focus from self to other as dramatically as becoming responsible for a baby. We basked in the adulation of our family and congregation, but it nevertheless challenged us to transition from the self-centered lives of urban graduate students to the service mindset required of new parents and pulpit clergy.

There were days when my life felt balanced, but on others I was dizzied by the rapid reversals from sorrow to joy. I recall running one Sunday morning from a pre-marital counseling session after minyan to the cemetery for an unveiling, then back to the shul for a wedding, but en route stopping to say the final confession (*Vidui*) with a dying congregant, before finally performing the wedding; I ended that long day with a shiva call, and then trudged home, bewildered by the roller coaster ride of human experience I had ridden. Meanwhile, my wife and young kids had experienced a completely different Sunday filled with toddler birthday parties, errands and the sort of mini dramas that are hard to explain afterwards. By the time we reunited, there was no way to catch up.

Each one of my rabbinic encounters that day affected me deeply, but I needed to compartmentalize them from each other, and all from the experience of my family. The couple under the chuppah couldn't know that I had been holding a dying man's hand less than an hour ago, or that I was eager to get home to my own family. When I did walk into the house, and my young children would bowl me over with their eager embrace, it was never possible to answer their simple question of "Where were you?" Fortunately, my wife could and did support me through these emotional vicissitudes, but much of what I experienced was confidential and impossible to share. And how could I catch up on what she had felt all day?

In addition to facing the typical challenges of pastoral, professional and personal duties, I also wanted to continue my own Jewish learning. Each year I identified and attempted to fill gaps in my knowledge. I built relationships with rabbis of other denominations and also with clergy from other religions. I got to know the chareidi community through my Talmud *chevruta*, and I came to understand the nuanced differences between Presbyterians and Methodists from local pastors. From my remarkably knowledgeable and devoted lay leaders at the shul, I learned the budgetary and governance realities of a religious non-profit, the basics of fundraising, and the challenges of building new institutions, such as a community high school that I helped to organize.

Nothing in my JTS education directly prepared me for these experiences. I had received effectively no training in pedagogy, non-

profit management, pastoral counseling, community organizing or entrepreneurial leadership. Yet I didn't fret over these blind spots. Thirteen years in a large congregation and a tight-knit Jewish community provided the best training I could imagine in all of these areas. I also benefited from continued professional training experiences with the Wexner Foundation, Clal, STAR, and other programs for young clergy.

Being a congregational rabbi gave me the chance to knit together a coherent narrative of Jewish meaning that might work not only for myself but also for other Jews. I learned to listen more than speak, and to ask questions before suggesting answers. My goal was always to help people find *sh'leimut,* or wholeness, in their relationships with each other and with God.

Still, when I returned to JTS in 2007 to become dean of our rabbinical school, I found that for many students, fragmentation was the norm. Few had charted a direct path through all the programs of our movement, and even those who had often felt the need to overcome many obstacles before embracing their path to the rabbinate. In many cases it was the strength of personal relationships with friends, teachers and mentors, more than the power of ideology, which brought them to the decision to become rabbis. Listening to their narratives of discovering that Jewish engagement and leadership needed to become the center of their career was exciting and humbling. I was eager to make their Jewish and professional education more systematic and supportive.

Fortunately, JTS had not stood still during my thirteen-year absence. My predecessor Rabbi Bill Lebeau and his team had introduced many enhancements to our field education and professional skills courses. In my first year as dean, our new chancellor and new provost both encouraged me to think big about curriculum, and I did. With the help of a faculty committee and input from students, alumni and lay leaders, I designed a two-stage curriculum which front loaded language and text skills, moved the Israel year earlier, and then dedicated the final three years to high level academic work and robust professional training.

In our new curriculum (which we have continued to revise nearly every year since), every student was required to earn a departmental

MA in place of the prior generic MA in Jewish studies from the Rabbinical School. Dual enrollment tuition was eliminated, and options were offered for every rabbinical student to earn a degree in Judaica from the JTS Graduate School, in Jewish education from the Davidson School, or in sacred music from our H.L. Miller Cantorial School. Moreover, the former succession of survey courses (medieval history, thought, and literature; modern history, thought, and literature) was eliminated, and in their place, students were invited to take electives in these disciplines. The goal here was to give students far more ownership of their academic experience, and less time marching in lock-step with their classmates for five years. By preparing for comprehensive exams or writing an MA thesis, the students would truly master a discipline and bring more value and marketability to their rabbinic careers.

An even larger agenda was to expand and integrate our professional and field education. We removed the peer-led course in life-cycle officiation from the first year seminar, and gave it to a practicing congregational rabbi to teach in the third year. We canceled the brief coaching sessions in homiletics (sermonizing) and created a full course on communications. We required courses in pedagogy, counseling, non-profit management and rabbinic leadership, and further developed our field education system with internships, seminars, and innovation grants for our students. We recruited younger and more diverse rabbis from the field to teach professional skills, and sought women and men to model rabbinic careers for our students.

One of the most exciting developments at JTS was the creation of a new Center for Pastoral Education. We were already encouraging our students to complete at least one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), which typically involves 300 clinical hours and 100 hours of peer and mentor meetings at a hospital. Soon we had a licensed center of our own, only the third seminary-based CPE center in the country, and we began to require all rabbinical and then cantorial students to complete at least one unit. We also began to offer a certificate program in pastoral care that required a second CPE unit and twelve credits of course work. JTS began to attract seminarians from schools of other denominations and faith

traditions to study CPE with us, and we developed a reputation for excellence in clinical education.

The landscape of American religion has been shifting rapidly, and it has been a challenge to remain true to our greatest strengths while also appealing to new styles of Jewish expression. Younger rabbinical students continue to crave the authenticity of deep immersion in traditional text study, yet many are also eager to move on to professional skills such as CPE that do not involve poring over the fine print in the back of the Talmud. There is respect for ancient normative traditions balanced by fierce defense of personal autonomy. We are supposedly in a post-denominational age, and yet the most active Jews remain affiliated, except perhaps during a brief stage of young adulthood. The JTS brand stands for serious engagement both with traditional text study and modern scholarship, as well as a balance between rigorous normative Jewish practice and a non-judgmental perspective. Like many learning communities we struggle to express consistent values and practices while also welcoming and encouraging diverse voices.

In this dynamic environment, JTS is changing. More of our faculty have welcomed a return to traditional styles of Torah study that use the informal environment of the *beit midrash* to establish an individual and collective learning culture. More classes include attention to questions about the personal and professional significance of the texts. Our worship space is now more inclusive of music and meditation, not just rapid-fire mumbling of the liturgy. We take time to process our emotional response to the experience of rabbinical studies and are in general a far more spiritual and supportive place than ever before. Still, students come to JTS looking for a rigorous academic environment and a diverse faculty, not just a modernized yeshivah, and this means that we value critical thought. Finding balance between the open atmosphere of the academy and the spiritual sensibility of the yeshivah remains the core tension of our Seminary. It is a productive tension, I think, and yet it is not always easy to manage.

One thing that has greatly helped in our quest for integrity and kindness is the increased openness to welcoming students of diverse backgrounds, including those from interfaith families, and those with

different sexual orientations at JTS. As the student body becomes more diverse, our conversations become richer and our preparation to serve the evolving patchwork of Jewish life in America has greatly improved. Our general approach is to bring ancient wisdom into productive conversation with contemporary social realities, with the assumption being that this interaction, for all of its tension, can make us better citizens and Jews.

The winter of 2006-07 was quite eventful for us. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards approved a responsum that I co-authored with Rabbis Eliot Dorff and Avram Reisner making a halachic case for normalizing the status of gay and lesbian relationships based on the demands of human dignity. We followed up with a 2012 paper on same-sex marriage and divorce ceremonies just in time for the spread of State and then Federal recognition of gay marriage. Soon after the 2006 CJLS vote, I was offered the position of dean, and JTS began to accept gay, lesbian and bisexual students. We worried that our gay graduates would struggle to find jobs but, with internal coaching and external interventions, they have been welcomed as talented rabbis and cantors bearing valuable gifts.

Little attention was paid initially to transgender issues, but with prodding from our students and extended discussion among faculty and staff, JTS announced that what had already been *de facto* would now be *de jure*: there would be no discrimination in either employment or admissions based on either sexual orientation or gender identity. We have a long way to go towards understanding the diverse forms of gender expression, but JTS had made great strides towards welcoming a more diverse student body and faculty. Classes on family law and life cycle officiation now include attention to the many forms of family arrangements in the contemporary Jewish community, and we are collectively attempting to bridge the divide between ancient norms and contemporary insights so that we can be at one as a religious community.

As part of a strategic planning process, JTS reorganized its administrative structure. I became dean of a new unit called the Division of Religious Leadership, which includes the rabbinical school, the H.L. Miller Cantorial School, the Center for Pastoral Education, as well as programs such as our summer Nishma Beit

Midrash. This structure has allowed for greater integration between our schools, and has made it easier to require students to study and build Jewish community together.

JTS is an accredited academic institution and as such, is responsive to the requirements of New York State and also the Federal Government. Like schools everywhere, we have been challenged to define our learning objectives and then to collect data in order to assess our institutional success in achieving these goals. Like administrators everywhere, I am periodically frustrated by the diversion of scarce resources to data collection and analysis, but it has been constructive for us to debate and define our learning goals more precisely. Recently we, like colleges across the country, were told to expand our faculty contact hours with students quite substantially. While this shift has complicated our schedules, our students will benefit from a more extensive and varied learning environment as a result.

Like non-profit organizations everywhere, JTS is receiving a larger proportion of its financial support in the form of program grants rather than general institutional support. Once again, this is periodically frustrating. Few foundations are interested in paying for faculty and staff compensation, recruiting costs, capital improvements or utilities, yet all of these expenses are essential to maintaining a strong institution. Nevertheless, the challenge to define new needs and to propose new programs has been healthy for our school. In recent years generous grants have allowed us to revise our Israel program and to create a new series of opportunities for students to study rabbinic leadership and receive funding for their own entrepreneurial projects. Even as old structures such as congregations in demographically challenged areas crumble, new structures are emerging, and we are preparing our students to lead the way to a vibrant Jewish future.

The rabbinical school that we are rebuilding at JTS responds to the fragmentation of Jewish identity that I experienced to a small extent in comparison to many of my students. Our ultimate goal is to allow students of Torah to feel at one with themselves, with God and with their community. As we pray on Shabbat afternoon, "You are one, your name is One, and who is One like your people Israel?" We seek to educate the head, to engage the heart, and to instruct the hands, so that our students can emerge as *k'lei kodesh,* conduits of holiness to heal the world. Integration, not fragmentation, is our personal and professional aspiration, and each year we come a little close to this never completed goal.

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