

Learning to Lead: SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY in the HUC-JIR Curriculum

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In the words of HUC-JIR President Rabbi David Ellenson, “Judaism is a religion of social responsibility at its very heart.”

With this in mind, HUC-JIR has moved to expand and enhance the incorporation of social responsibility into the rabbinical curriculum, as part of the institution’s broader leadership vision.

The Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson Chair in Social Responsibility

The Jerome K. Davidson Chair in Social Responsibility was created to facilitate the new curricular focus on social responsibility across all four campuses. The Chair will ensure “unity without uniformity,” helping achieve the institution’s overarching aim while assisting each campus as it implements the social responsibility focus based on its own resources and goals. “Our aim is to help students shape a vision of social responsibility in their rabbinate, and provide them with the skills and experience to make it happen,” says Dr. Norman J. Cohen, Provost of HUC-JIR.

Rabbi Davidson is passionate about increasing students’ exposure to social responsibility during their education at the College-Institute. “The goal of the social responsibility focus is to awaken in students an awareness of injus-

Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson and Albert Vorspan teaching their social responsibility course, “Tough Choices, Social Action in the Community,” with guest lecturer Ruth Messinger, President, American Jewish World Service..

tics in the world that are not beyond our ability to make a difference,” says Rabbi Davidson. “By creating a congregational sense of the import of hands-on work in the community to help the needy, vulnerable, and weak, and by encouraging the community to be advocates of public policy that the world needs, rabbis can, in their role as congregational and communal leaders, inspire changes in our society and in the world.”

Several families from Rabbi Davidson’s synagogue, Temple Beth-El of Great Neck, funded this programmatic Chair in his name, an affirmation of his lifelong commitment to social responsibility through his rabbinate. Program funds were provided by a generous supporter of the College-Institute. Rabbi Davidson says that “it is my hope that all students will be moved by their exposure to social action at HUC-JIR, and will choose to make it part of their rabbinate as well.”

Since his retirement from Temple Beth-El, Rabbi Davidson has begun to work with Provost Norman Cohen and part-time leadership program coordinators on each campus:

Rabbi Ken Kanter, Director of the Rabbinic Program in Cincinnati, Rabbi Suzanne Singer in Los Angeles, and Rabbi Darcie Crystal in New York.

Social Responsibility Education

HUC-JIR has always placed a high value on educating its students in social responsibility, and courses that involve elements of social justice have been available on all campuses for years.

In New York, Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson and Albert Vorspan, a founder of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism and the Religious Action Center, have helped students explore the role of the rabbi as a social and political agent for change in their course, *Tough Choices, Social Action in the Community*. In Los Angeles, Rabbi William Cutter and Dr. Aryeh Cohen recently taught *The Seeds for Economic Justice: Jewish Tradition and the Search for Realistic Goals*, which brought students from HUC-JIR and the America Jewish University together with business leaders to explore whether Jewish tradition can have legitimate practical application to

If we are going to fulfill the prophetic mandate of outreach to the disenfranchised in our society, we must be much better trained in effecting change.

Rabbi Charles Kroloff, Vice President for Special Projects

real-life ethical dilemmas and social problems in the marketplace and business community (see page 12).

The Cincinnati campus offers a fourth-year course in *Leadership and Organizational Dynamics* with Rabbi Sam Joseph, who incorporates social responsibility into his class by bringing in speakers from the nationally-oriented Religious Action Center as well as local rabbis and communal leaders who are heavily involved in social action.

In the past, these opportunities were generally offered only as electives. However, HUC-JIR administrators and faculty felt that those students who opted not to take such courses were missing a key element of their rabbinical education. "All rabbis will be confronted in their local communities with issues of social justice, and they need to know how to handle them," says Al Vorspan. Adds Rabbi Charles Kroloff, HUC-JIR's Vice President for Special Projects, "Successful strategies for effecting community change have emerged, but without systematic study and supervised field work, most newly-minted rabbis will never acquire the skills to function most effectively in those areas."

focus on Reform Judaism's emphasis on outreach and social responsibility. Third-year student pulpits will include an institutional change project focused in their congregation, enabling hands-on experience in leading social action in a congregational setting.

The fourth year brings a professional development course in leadership, focused in part on the skills to mobilize congregations and institutions to effect social justice-oriented change. Through this course in New York, titled "Rabbinical Leadership and Social Responsibility," Rabbi Davidson and Professor Vorspan will show students that social responsibility is a mandate of rabbinical leadership. Students will read Biblical and rabbinic texts to gain a more nuanced understanding of the Jewish obligation to promote a fair and just society. In the application of this obligation, discussions will focus on such topics as civil rights, immigration, environmental issues, poverty, housing, healthcare, workers' rights, homeless rights, church/state boundaries, civil liberties, gender issues, anti-Semitism, racism, and interfaith relations. The class will also address how congregations can be organized for effective

include a mechanism for ongoing personal reflection, such as journaling, essay-writing, or regular dialogue with faculty, classmates, or a mentor. Students will be required to participate in one of these programs during their tenure at the College-Institute.

The Hebrew Union College-University of Cincinnati Center for the Study of Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems (HUC-UC Ethics Center) also plays a significant role in the social justice education of HUC-JIR students in Cincinnati. The Ethics Center organizes and hosts a range of conferences on topics such as violence against women, housing and homelessness, and the implications of poverty and welfare on family structures, gender roles, and social institutions. In partnership with the Graduate College of Union Institute & University, the Ethics Center hosted its third annual symposium on *Poverty, Welfare, and Religion* in May 2007. The symposium attracted dozens of leading scholars on these issues from the United States and Europe, and HUC-JIR students received course credit for participation in the program.

Congregation members get a great deal of spiritual uplift from social action work.

Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson

The new curricular focus on social responsibility will demonstrate to students that social justice is an authentic and essential part of Judaism, going hand-in-hand with the academic and spiritual elements of their education. Students will learn how they can best serve as agents for change in their congregations and communities.

Starting in the Fall of 2007, social responsibility will be a required and an important component of the HUC-JIR rabbinical curriculum throughout all five years of study, as part of the new program in leadership preparation. First-year students in Israel engage in a mandatory service project with a local agency or organization, with opportunities for self-reflection, including a culminating self-reflective writing assignment, built into the experience. Students in their second year are required to take a Professional Development course, now redesigned with an added

tive social action; the leadership techniques, tactics, and strategies congregations can use to support their positions; coalition building and public advocacy; theories of organizing; and effective conflict management. According to Al Vorspan, "This is not just a practical course, but an indispensable course." With guidance from the instructors, students will also be expected to integrate some aspect of their coursework into their fieldwork experience.

Following this course, the fifth year's professional development requirement will include a focus on pressing issues of social responsibility along with outreach. HUC-JIR administrators are also developing a list of social responsibility-oriented off-campus training experiences, such as a summer seminar at the Religious Action Center, the Jewish Funds for Justice Leadership Training Program, and the Panim Retreat entitled *Spirituality, Social Justice and the Rabbinate*. These experiences will

Al Vorspan provides some insight into just how far HUC-JIR has come in the past half-century with regard to social responsibility in the curriculum: "Fifty years ago, there was no real curriculum, no course, no program, no training in social justice for our rabbinical students. The College-Institute has gone from being uninvolved to a very active participant in the social justice training of the rabbinate. As a result, today's rabbis are some of the most responsible and involved in social issues in any denomination in the country, of any religion."

Yet there is no doubt as to the need to continue and expand social responsibility education for Reform rabbis. "The communities we work in today and the issues we struggle with are far more complex than ever before," says Rabbi Kroloff. "The time has come for us to focus on social responsibility as we prepare the leaders for the Jewish world of the 21st century." ■