

Preparing Tomorrow's Leaders: New Fellowship Programs at HUC-JIR

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The College-Institute has embarked on new initiatives offering intensified leadership training to exceptional rabbinical students. The goal of these programs is to develop visionary leaders for our people, who will understand the dynamics at play in the American Jewish community and who will be able to transform their synagogues and their communities into vital and exciting arenas of engagement and meaning.

“We are greatly indebted to the Mandel Foundation, Bonnie and Daniel Tisch, and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation for their visionary support for these new programs,” says Rabbi David Ellenson. “Their generosity will enable future generations

of Reform rabbis and educators to truly make a difference in our synagogues and schools, the Reform Movement, and the American Jewish community at large.”



The Mandel Fellows Program

The role of the rabbi as congregational leader is critical to creating synagogue communities that will engage the Reform Jews of today and tomorrow. Dr. Rob Weinberg, National Director of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), observes, “The rabbi plays a unique role in the transformation of the synagogue and synagogue life. To transform congregations rabbis must act both as symbolic leaders and collaborative leaders.”

To help our students become such leaders, HUC-JIR has partnered with the Mandel Foundation to create the Mandel Fellows Program. This program provides an additional year of study that will enable exceptional rabbinical students to enhance their leadership skills, educational abilities, and organizational knowledge with the goal of creating vibrant Jewish learning communities in Reform synagogues.

The Mandel Fellows Program builds upon the rigorous, five-year academic and professional

course of study already required of all Reform rabbinical students. Students who apply and are selected as Mandel Fellows will spend a sixth year of study earning Masters degrees in the Schools of Education on HUC-JIR’s Los Angeles or New York campuses, where they will engage in reflective learning and shaping a new vision for Jewish institutional life as well as their own professional practice and leadership.

During their year as students in the education programs, Mandel Fellows will also participate in

two special seminars created by the Mandel Foundation in collaboration with HUC-JIR faculty. A winter seminar at Brandeis University’s Mandel Center will focus on a vision for Jewish life in North America and its expression in Reform synagogues. At the completion of their year of

The 2007-2008 Mandel Fellows: (from left) Melissa Zalkin-Stollman, Rachel Kort, and Melissa Simon at HUC-JIR/ New York; and Ari Margolis, Noam Katz, Erin Ellis, Rena Polonsky, and Dan Medwin at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles.

education studies, Mandel Fellows will participate in an extended seminar at the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem, concentrating on the centrality of Israel and Jewish peoplehood with special attention to enhancing the capacity for these future rabbis to embed these two core affirmations in the vision and life of Reform synagogues.

“The Mandel Fellows will benefit from the unique training of both our Schools of Education and the Mandel Institute faculty.

Through this program, they will gain a clearer sense of how to shape an engaging Jewish community that can touch people’s lives,” says Dr. Norman J. Cohen, Provost of HUC-JIR.

Eight Mandel Fellows are chosen annually from among those rabbinical students applying to the education degree programs in Los Angeles and New York. The criteria for selection include academic excellence; demonstrated leadership potential; capacity for vision; capacity for reflection; and com-

mitment to the congregational rabbinate and transforming synagogue life. A national HUC-JIR committee of faculty and program directors selects the Mandel Fellows based on both written application materials and a personal interview. For the 2007-2008 academic year, three men and five women have been selected as the first cohort of Mandel Fellows. Mandel Fellows studying at the Rhea Hirsch School in Los Angeles are: Erin Ellis, Noam Katz, Ari Margolis, Daniel Medwin,

and Rena Polonsky. Mandel Fellows studying at the New York School of Education are: Rachel Kort, Melissa Simon, and Melissa Zalkin-Stollman.

The Mandel Fellows Program will equip participating rabbinical students with the understanding and skills necessary to guide their congregations to become engaging, visionary institutions of Jewish living and learning.



The Bonnie and Daniel Tisch Fellows Program

Jewish identity is a matter of choice for American Jews today, and it falls to the Jewish leadership to encourage and inspire future generations to embrace Judaism. HUC-JIR must therefore train its rabbinical students to exert leadership in creative and innovative ways, to help bring Judaism to the center of our childrens’ lives, and create an inclusive Judaism that speaks to new generations.

The Bonnie and Daniel Tisch Fellows Program – a pilot initiative that has been inaugurated at HUC-JIR for the 2007-2008 academic year – is uniquely designed to meet this need. Each year, five carefully selected rabbinical students will be named Tisch Fellows and complete a

three-year intensive leadership training program. By identifying and nurturing successive cohorts of students with outstanding potential for leadership, HUC-JIR will create an extraordinary pool of talent for today’s evolving Reform Jewish and larger Jewish world.

Tisch Fellows will be identified at the end of the second of the five-year rabbinical program, through faculty evaluations, recommendations from the Dean, Provost, and President, and personal interviews. They will receive full tuition scholarships and living stipends, enabling them to focus completely on their studies and professional development. The 2007-2008 Tisch Fellows are Jill Perlman, Joseph Skloot, Rachel

Shafran, Yaron Kapitulnik, and Matthew Soffer.

The leadership program will include 3-5 days of intensive seminars each year, focusing on such areas as organizational dynamics, creating community, and becoming a change agent. Each seminar will have a major intellectual or spiritual theme, such as “Social Responsibility and Judaism,” “Israel,” or “God,” around which course work, text study, and professional development activities will be designed.

Tisch Fellows will be required to complete a summer rabbinical residency program, designed as an eight-week experience onsite in a congregation, Jewish organization, Jewish camp, or healthcare

facility, under the supervision of a trained rabbinical mentor. As residents, the Tisch Fellows will receive a unique and individualized hands-on learning experience with the opportunity for reflection and advisement with a mentor.

As many aspects of the rabbinical role are learned on the job, each Tisch Fellow will participate in an additional mentoring program that will begin during their fifth year and continue for two year-following ordination. This

Rabbi Shirley Idelson, Dean, HUC-JIR/New York, and Bonnie Tisch with the 2007-2008 Tisch Fellows at HUC-JIR/New York: Yaron Kapitulnik, Jill Perlman, Rachel Safran, Matthew Sofer, and Joseph Skloot.

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program will pair fellows with rabbinical mentors who have demonstrated the characteristics of transformational rabbis. Fellows will meet regularly with their mentors as they interact with congregations and institutions that are increasingly sophisticated and demand a broad spectrum of professional, spiritual, and intellectual skills.

In addition to the intensive programs described above, Tisch Fellows will benefit, with their fellow students, from an enriched curriculum that will include specialized spiritual, intellectual, and professional development in such areas as pastoral counseling, social responsibility, and outreach and conversion. Tisch Fellows will also have the opportunity to pursue their academic and intellectual interests through individualized coursework, structured opportunities to interact with professors in their fields of interest, and vehicles for independent study.

“With so many unique opportunities and experiences, Tisch Fellows will acquire the skills to respond to the complex and changing issues of their rabbinates with skill, sensitivity, and confidence, inspiring the Jews of modernity to willingly and joyfully embrace Judaism,” says Rabbi David Ellenson.

The Schusterman Hevruta Program

In an effort to increase collaboration between the Reform and Conservative denominations of Judaism, Lynn Schusterman, Chair of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation (CLSFF), has initiated a five-year interdenominational pilot program for rabbinical students studying at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). The initiative, called the Schusterman Hevruta Program, will bring together Reform and Conservative rabbinical students in academic, religious, and social settings, representing the first time JTS and HUC-JIR rabbinical students will be involved in a sustained, collaborative educational program.

“The goal of the fellowship is twofold: to train transformational rabbinic leaders capable of profound and sensitive change in the communities they serve, and to better equip the rabbinate to address the ever-evolving needs of the American Jewish community, especially those of interfaith families and other Jews who find themselves on the margins of Jewish life,” said Lynn Schusterman, who announced the creation of the program at HUC-JIR’s Graduation ceremony, held at Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York on May 3 (see page 47).

In addition to their regular coursework, Schusterman Hevruta Fellows will study together in regular meetings and retreats facilitated by faculty from both seminaries as well as educators from STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) and the Center for Leadership Initiatives, Inc. (CLI). The Program will focus on areas such as counseling congregants in areas of acceptance and diversity among mixed faith families; strategic planning and administration; interdisciplinary and interdenominational approaches to rabbinical curricula; and general leadership skills. Students will have the opportunity to collaborate, study together, and build leadership skills in a context of the shared values of the Reform and Conservative Movements in Judaism.

Rabbi David Ellenson said, “I am grateful to the Schusterman Foundation for its vision in initiating this fellowship. This program models the kind of cooperation that can and ought to mark American Jewish life. Ours will be a partnership that respects denominational differences, while also recognizing that the American Jewish community faces a common set of challenges and requires transformational rabbinical leaders who will revitalize contemporary Jewish life.”

Sandy Cardin, President of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation (CLSFF); Lynn Schusterman, Chair, CLSFF; Rabbi Ellenson; and Barbara Friedman, Chair, Board of Governors, HUC-JIR.

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor of JTS, stated, “The connections our students will make with their fellow students at HUC-JIR, and the deepening ties between our two institutions, bode well for the future of the American Jewish community.”

Starting in the fall of 2008, eight outstanding students (four from HUC-JIR and four from JTS) will be admitted to the program for each year of the five-year pilot phase of the project. The Program will cover tuition costs and provide an annual cost of living stipend for all participants for their third and fourth years of rabbinical studies; afterwards, participants will receive ongoing support as they search for employment and the opportunity to join the STAR network of rabbis.

Schusterman expressed the hope that “this cooperative relationship will yield benefits far beyond the campus walls and bring congregations from the Reform and Conservative traditions together.” ■