From the Director: Pursuing an Ethic of Excellence

Michael Zeldin ’77

“Excellence” is a word much bandied about in education, sometimes with great integrity, sometimes devoid of meaning, but always expressing great expectations. We at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education have always made excellence our goal, and this spring we explored excellence in new ways, based on a wonderful book, An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship in Schools.

When Bill Cutter created the RHI SOE, he sought to create an appreciation for excellence in Jewish education, which his intuitive genius told him could only be created by full-time professionals. Sara took over the school, and her entire career was propelled by a vision of excellence. Reading her biography (which will appear in a forthcoming book about the contributions of women to Jewish education), it becomes clear that Sara’s experiences at Girls Latin School in Boston and at Radcliffe College shaped her view that striving for excellence is the key to the efficacy of any educational enterprise.

HUC as a whole came to view excellence as one of its two major goals as the result of a major strategic planning initiative conducted a few years back. Excellence was one of the two strategic thrusts that the board articulated, and in a review of the College’s academic programs the Rhea Hirsch School was cited as embodying the excellence that HUC should strive for in all its programs.

But those of us in education know that excellence can easily become a slogan devoid of meaning. Like the emperor’s new clothes, excellence can be extolled in a school or organization without it having even a shred of basis in reality. Indeed, virtually every Jewish day school I have ever visited claims that academic excellence is its chief characteristic. The power of the slogan to recruit families and to motivate teachers is hard to deny, but exactly what teachers are supposed to do to achieve excellence remains a mystery. The challenge facing educators is to identify and articulate what excellence looks like.

In April, the RHI SOE took up the challenge of identifying and articulating what excellence looks like at a major event bringing together all parts of the school to learn from Ron Berger, author of An Ethic of Excellence. Howard Gardner says that “Ron Berger is one of the most remarkable teachers in America today. He sets incredibly high standards in his classes and his students measure up to those standards. Yet Ron Berger’s authentic standards bear little resemblance to what passes for standards in today’s test-obsessed America. For a reminder of what education can and should be, read this passionate book.” Isa Aron says that Berger’s book is the most Deweyan approach to education that she has seen in years. For these reasons alone, it is worth it for Jewish educators no matter what setting they practice their craft in, to study Berger’s approach to teaching and learning.

So how does Berger suggest that teachers help students achieve excellence and at the same time achieve excellence in their teaching? In short, he says to set students out to do work that is meaningful, that has a real audience, that can have a real effect on the world, and then have them work on it iteratively, improving it again and again as they learn more, as they get feedback, and as they strive for the type of product of which they can be proud. Reading An Ethic of Excellence I kept thinking of the curriculum guide project we have our students do.

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Alumni of the RHSOE who live in the greater Los Angeles area have been invited to join with others who are part of the fabric of the RHSOE (clinical faculty who work with students in the MA program; HUC Judaica and education faculty who teach our students; DeLeT mentors, fellows, and staff; heads of the DeLeT schools and other local Jewish day schools) for an afternoon of study with Berger. He explained his approach to teaching and learning and, more important, displayed samples of students’ excellent work. (If the video quality is good enough, we will be posting part of his remarks on the HUC website.)

Berger’s book is worth reading, whether you were with us in April or not, and it’s worth sharing with faculties and boards. We sent the book out to teachers and leaders in the schools that work with DeLeT, and I kept hearing over and over again how much people appreciated reading the book. And I have since heard from clinical faculty, students and others who have read the book who say it is an inspiring work of craftsmanship that helped them think of education in new ways.

The last time I wrote for Tikshoret I told readers about my vision for the Rhea Hirsch School; this time I am showing you my vision: Professional Jewish educators and students from the various parts of the RHSOE coming together for significant learning and discourse about achieving excellence in Jewish education.

L’Shalom,

Michael
community, reconnect with the College, and continue their own learning.

This year, our Leadership Team meeting coincided with the biennial RHSOE Alumni Kallah, and so we had the opportunity to continue learning with our classmates, colleagues, and the Rhea Hirsch School’s students and faculty. The highlight of this year’s Kallah was studying with Tali Hyman (RHSOE ’00), the School’s newest faculty member, who helped us look at Israel education and Jewish Identity through a new set of lenses.

I’d like to thank Julie Lambert, Debbie Niederman, Cindy Reich, Julie Vanek, and Joy Wasserman for their help in organizing and leading such a successful Leadership Team meeting. I also want to thank Melissa Buyer, Stacey Deleau, and Ellen Lefkowitz for all their hard work that made this year’s amazing Kallah experience possible.

Reflections on the Rhea Hirsch Alumni Kallah

The weekend of February 1–3, forty Rhea Hirsch alumni gathered at the American Jewish University Brandeis–Bardin Camp for a wonderful weekend of learning, schmoozing, and Shabbat celebration.

Rabbi Tali Hyman, the newest member of the Rhea Hirsch faculty, was our scholar-in-residence. She challenged our assumptions about identity formation; we wrestled with how to make Israel education meaningful, and we examined a case study in Hebrew learning. Some of the current Rhea Hirsch students led us in a beautiful Shabbat morning service and joined us for learning on Shabbat. Dr. Isa Aron led us in Torah study. Dean Steven Windmueller came to give us an update on some of the exciting projects of the college. We also had the opportunity to officially honor Dr. Michael Zeldin as the new director of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education. After Havdalah, Dr. Bill Cutter and his wife Georgie joined us. We had a special one on to offer words of blessing and congratulations on Dr. Cutter’s retirement.

This was a weekend of deep and enriching learning, connection with colleagues from near and far, and a celebration of a faculty that has great wisdom, passion, and love for the Jewish people and Jewish teaching and learning.

Announcing Two Important Alumni Dates:

2009 RHSOE Alumni Association Day of Learning at HUC-NY
November 18th, 2008

2010 RHSOE Alumni Association Kallah in Jan or Feb. Watch for an announcement shortly!

We shared words of blessing in honor of Michael Zeldin in his new role as director of the school.

Mindy Davids (’90) and her interns present at the Kallah!

The Kallah celebrated the establishment of the William Cutter Educator-in-Residence Fund (supported and created by the Alumni Association) in honor of Bill’s retirement. Bill and Georgie shared Havdalah with us to commemorate this special moment.
Report from the Council of Alumni Associations

The Council of Alumni Associations is comprised of alumni representatives from each school of HUC-JIR — Rabbinic, School of Sacred Music, RHISOE, NYSOE, School of Jewish Communal Service and the School of Graduate Studies — as well as HUC staff who work with the Alumni. The members of the Council meet over the phone 5–6 times a year and meet in person once each year at one of the three stateside campuses of the College. Our Alumni Association representatives to the Council are Julie Vanek ('88), RHISOE Representative to alumni council, and Cindy Reich. Debbie Niederman also sits on the Council in her role as Coordinator of Alumni Affairs for the RHISOE. In addition to Julie and Debbie, two other RHISOE alumni attended the two-day meeting at the end of February: Roberta Goodman, a Past Chair of the Council and Joy Wasserman, National Director of Alumni Affairs.

During our meeting we had the opportunity to hear from many people about current innovations and developments as well as the challenges facing HUC. Norman Cohen, Provost of the College, told us about the work being done to create a culture of sharing resources among the four campuses such as cross-campus courses through the use of the new electronic classrooms on each campus. Imagine being able to take a class from a beloved professor on the New York campus when you’re sitting in a classroom in Los Angeles! Aaron Panken, Vice-President of Strategic Planning, showed us some of the new technological advances being used at the school such as the Jewish Studies Portal that gives students and faculty access to amazing online textual resources. We spent time with David Ellenson talking about the on-going fiscal needs of the College and the important roles that alumni play in various areas. We all enjoyed the opportunity to meet Barbara Friedman, Chair of the Board of Governors, and to hear her passion for HUC and in a groundbreaking step, some of the 11 seats on the Board of Governors that have previously been filled by rabbinic alumni will gradually be filled by alumni from the other schools. This is an example of the work and vision of the members of the Alumni Council to recognize all HUC alumni.

Each of the alumni associations shared their own goals and the ways in which they are working to reach these goals. This sharing enhances the communication among associations and helps us recognize places of potential joint planning and collaboration. Julie, Debbie, Roberta and Joy were very proud to share the experience of our second webinar with the entire Alumni Council and we were thrilled to share the results to date of our fundraising for the Sara Lee Chair for Jewish Education and for the William Cutter Educator-in-Residence Program. It was very gratifying to note that the RHISOE Alumni Association is a model for the other associations in terms of our working group structure and in what can be accomplished by dedicated alumni!

The Sustaining Alumni Education Committee has been working this winter to meld the concept of sustaining education and the benefits of distance education with the launch of two quite successful “webinars” — seminars held via interactive Internet technology.

Almost 30 of our alumni, sitting in their offices, homes or local coffee shops were enriched by the thoughtful and expert presentations of RHISOE faculty, Michael Zeldin and Tali Hyman, on issues of Jewish identity. This was a combined effort, not only of Michael and Tali and us as chairs, but the support of many who worked diligently behind the scenes including Gregg Alpert, Lynn Flanzbaum, Debbie Niederman, and Joy Wasserman. As we write this, the evaluation process is not yet complete, but with that information in hand this committee will continue to take steps forward to support RHISOE alumni, wherever they may be. And you can find it here...if you were unable to participate. (Please note: the URLs are case sensitive.)

Webinars

Michael Zeldin on “Map Questing: Seeking Metaphors for Jewish Identity Formation”:

<http://www.instantpresenter.com/RHSOEalumni/E959DE8788>

(There are about seven minutes of schmooze and introductory remarks on Michael’s. If you wish to skip over these, go to the progress bar at the top left, with the clock at the top right, simply move it ahead to 7:00.)

Tali Hyman on “Jungle Gyms and China Shops: Navigating the Durability and Fragility of Jewish Educational Cultures”:

<http://www.instantpresenter.com/RHSOEalumni/E959DB8687>
Updates From Some of Our Working Groups

Membership Working Group

The Membership Working Group has had a busy year. We are excited to have an outstanding group of alumni on our committee. The members of our committee include: Madelyn Katz, Estee Pollak, Sabrina Sjolseth, Lynn Flanzbaum, Julia Witkow, Ann Sanguinet, Stephanie Marshall, and Adam Schaffer.

During the past year, we have improved our contact with the current education students. Sharon even had the opportunity to hand-deliver RHSOE Alumni Association water bottles in December and to take the students out for lunch in Jerusalem! We have also sent letters out to the graduating students, welcoming them to the field and to the Alumni Association.

We are currently working on the Alumni Association’s luncheon for third year students, which will take place next month, just prior to their graduation. We are also working on the following projects: notes to alumni at times of joy and sorrow, reaching out to our inactive alumni, and developing profiles of our alumni who work in different professional education settings.

Honorary Doctorate Working Group

The Honorary Doctorate Working Group consists of Sue Kittner Huntting, Lauren Chizner, and Cheri Ellowitz Silver along with the help and expertise of Debbie Niederman and Joy Wasserman. We have reviewed a list of 1984 graduates who have been invited to complete the paperwork necessary to be considered for an Honorary Doctorate in 2009. We look forward to recognizing and sharing in the accomplishments of this year’s honorees in our next issue of Tikshoret!

Going to Camp This Summer?

If you are going to camp this summer, please consider yourself a recruiter for all of HUC-JIR’s programs. Being at camp with college students is a unique opportunity to create meaningful relationships and connections. If you will be going to camp, please let our Recruitment Working Group Chairs know by emailing either of them:

Laura Bramson-Hyman
Laura@tioh.org

or

Amy Appelman
relschool@cbahm.org

Announcing Two New Working Groups and a New Sub-Committee

The Alumni Association is thrilled to share with you that we have added two new working groups to our work; The Social Media Working Group chaired by April Akiva (’06) and Beth Goldstein (’06) will focus on using new media to connect alumni and build community despite our geographic differences. Watch for some upcoming opportunities with them!

The Rabbinc-Education Alumni Working Group chaired by Beth Nichols (’05) and Micah Citrin (’03) will survey our Rabbinc-Education alumni, who now make up nearly 30% of our Association, to discover unique needs and how best our Association can meet those needs in our special Rhea Hirsch way!

Our Membership Working Group, chaired by Beth Young (’02) and Sharon Amster Brown (’00), has recently added a new sub-committee RHSOE Gear, chaired by Sharon and Avram Mandell (’01). The Rhea Hirsch School is opening its own shop on-line where you can purchase unique and highly coveted items like; maternity shirts that say, “My parents learned this in confluent ed!” or Alumni t-shirts that say, “Friends of Bill C.” (And some things in good taste as well.) Our shop will open soon at:
<http://www.cafepress.com/RHSOEalumnishop>
Dr. Michael Zeldin Calls for Bold Innovation in Jewish Education

On Tuesday, February 26, 2008, HUC-JIR/LA observed Founders Day, focusing on the Rhea Hirsch School of Jewish Education. Forty alumni joined the morning session. Dr. Michael Zeldin, Professor of Jewish Education and Director of the Rhea Hirsch School of Jewish Education, led an interactive discussion on the topic: “Tohu Vavohu, Btselem Elohim, and Ezer K’Negdo: User IDs and Passwords for Leadership.” Dr. Zeldin introduced an array of materials designed to reconfigure how we look at the issues of leadership.

In his Founders Day Address, Dr. Zeldin addressed the community on the topic “Remembering What We Never Knew: Jewish Education for the 21st Century.” Dr. Zeldin called for bold experimentation and innovation in Jewish Education and encouraged educators, rabbis and lay champions of Jewish education to think in new ways about the purpose and content of Jewish education.

Read his full address here:

Excerpted From Michael Zeldin’s Founder’s Day Address

I recently learned of a technique Buddhist philosophers use that may help us here. Rather than ask their minds to search for solutions to potentially impossible challenges, they simply remember the solutions. The presupposition that they once knew the answers creates a mindset that the answers must exist, thus eliminating the crippling notion of hopelessness. So today I will try a thought experiment, remembering three ideas about Jewish education we never knew. Remembering these ideas can create in us the mindset that answers must exist for the dilemmas facing Jewish education in the 21st century.

Let us begin by examining the metaphors we use to think about Jewish identity and Jewish education. Sociologist Stuart Charme suggests that the “drink your milk” metaphor has dominated our thinking for the past few generations. Children drink milk in their youth to produce strong bones, so that muscles can attach to those bones and can be exercised throughout life. According to this view, Jewish education is the milk of childhood that builds the bones of Jewish identity so that adults can exercise their Jewishness. This pediatric view of Jewish education is supported by a long tradition of research into Jewish identity and Jewish education.

Starting around 1970, researchers began asking about the correlation between Jewish education and adult Jewish identification. In the most notorious study of the era, Harold Himmelfarb discovered that only people who had 3,000 hours of Jewish education were certain to have a strong Jewish identification (that is, do a lot of Jewish activities and have Jewish friends and neighbors and culture in the home). Geoffrey Bock countered that after only 1,000 hours Jewish education can have a significant impact on Jewish identity — at least on what Bock called public Jewishness, behaviors and activities that others could see, like going to synagogue and having Jewish friends. The famous — or should I say infamous — National Jewish Population Study of 1990 yielded a similar idea. “The more the more” was the slogan that emanated from that research: The more Jewish education one had as a child, the more likely it was that he or she would participate in Jewish activities and behaviors as an adult.

What is clear from all of this research is that in the late 20th century Jewish education was appreciated for its instrumental value: Jewish education was good, desirable and worthy of community support because at some point in the future children who went to Jewish schools would be active, identified Jewish adults.

Recent Jewish identity research leads us to question the drink your milk view and ask: Is Jewish education today worthwhile only because it leads to Jewish identity tomorrow? Is Jewish education worthy of support only because it produces good Jewish adults? Or does it have some other value and rationale? The new research challenges the old paradigm on three counts: First, the old paradigm focuses on the “outsides” of Jews, that is, what they do; the new paradigm focuses on their “insides,” what meaning they ascribe to their Jewishness. Next, the old paradigm says that Jewish identity is static and can, as Tali Hyman suggests, best be seen through a still camera; the new paradigm says identity is always continued on page 7
changing and can be viewed best through a movie camera. Finally and most importantly, the old paradigm says that what children do determines the type of adults they become; the new paradigm tells us that we are constantly creating and recreating our Jewish identities with each action we take, each person we meet, and each event we witness. In Bethamie Horowitz’s felicitous phrase, researchers used to ask, “How Jewish are Jews?” and now they want to know, “How are Jews Jewish?”

So maybe we need not see Jewish education only in instrumental terms. Maybe Jewish education is not just about producing results way down the line. Maybe Jewish education has intrinsic value, is worthwhile for what it is now, can be “lishmah.” John Dewey long ago taught that education should not be seen just as preparation for life; school, Dewey said, is life. That’s why the progressive educators who followed him paid so much attention to the quality of the educational experience itself, not just whether it produced results on standardized tests. And that is why Jewish educators can put aside the idea that we are educating for some distant future identification and begin paying more attention to now, to what the Jewish educational experiences children and adults have today is like. We might ask ourselves whether students in our schools, campers in our camps, and adults in our adult learning programs, are engaging in activities in which they find meaning, satisfaction and growth. Are they challenged so they can experience the cognitive emotions that come from solving a dilemma? Are they learning so they go home each day saying, “This was a great way to use my time”? Are they engaged in meaningful activities so they can know that their days have been enriched by taking part in Jewish learning. A 12-year-old philosopher I once knew suggested that at the end of each school day I should ask him three questions: “Did you have fun?” “What did you learn?” “And how did you make the world a better place?” If every Jewish learner can walk away from every Jewish learning encounter with positive answers to those three questions, they will keep coming back because they will know that their lives are being enriched through their engagement with Jewish learning.

Hot Topics in Jewish Education: RHSOE and NYSOE Students Share a Final Project

According to Professor Tali Hyman of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education in LA, it is us, the practitioners, in partnership with the researchers, who grant educational scholarship its practical relevance and potency. We use and apply knowledge in a host of settings and contexts, under a variety of conditions, adapting it, interpreting it, synthesizing it, evaluating it. She reminds students what we already know, “What Contributing to the Field still requires is passion and investment. But it also requires us to speak and act in ways that we can hear and be heard… and copious amounts of imagination and inspiration, together, will lead to the most significant Contributions to the Field."

At the end of the fall 2007 semester, Tali Hyman and Lisa Grant at the School of Education in NY gave the same final assignment to their students in Social Foundations (LA), and History of Jewish Education in America (NY). To create a Contribution to the Field. Students wrote an article suitable for a publication to which reflective practitioners of Jewish education are invited to contribute.

The articles:

- Address a dilemma, concern, or problem facing Jewish education,
- provide some historical and sociological context for the issue and discuss the tensions relevant to this issue, and,
- offer creative, refreshing, compelling analysis of the issue.

There are 26 articles that cover a wide range of topics from Adult education, to B’nai Mitzvah, tefila and Israel education. You are all encouraged to explore the fine work of our “soon to be colleagues,” and reflect on their Contributions to the Field. To view the articles, navigate to the Tartak Learning Center website at:

<http://www.huc.edu/tartak/guide/>
Mazel Tov & Milestones

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing approved HUC to offer teacher preparation programs and DeLeT has been approved as a multiple subject credential program. That means the RHSOE will be able to start recommending candidates for state credentials once they have completed the expanded DeLeT program!

Josh Barkin (’07) and Sara Mason (’08) are engaged.

Melissa Buyer (’00) and her husband Jason announce the birth of their second daughter Josie Rose Buyer born on April 28th, 2008.

Bill Cutter and his wife Georgie celebrated the marriage of their son Ben to Rabbi Sari Laufer in New York on November 11, 2007.

Rivka Dori (’76) and her husband Reuben celebrated the birth of their 4th grandson, Joshua Sam Dori, on December 21, 2007.

Erin Ellis (’08) married Michael Mason (SJCS ’05) on December 30, 2007, in a ceremony performed by David Eshel (’03).

Stephanie Eshel (’04) and David Eshel (’03) are delighted to announce the birth of their daughter Isabel Sarah on November 29, 2007.

Carrie Frank (’07) married Brian Vogel on November 10, 2007.

Audrey Friedman Marcus (’76) is pleased to announce that her book, *Survival in Shanghai: The Journals of Fred Marcus 1939-1949*, written with co-author Rena Krasno, has been accepted for publication by Pacific View Press. It is anticipated that it will come out some time during 2008.

Rony Keller (’04) and his wife Lisa joyfully announce the birth of their son Aviv Shai Keller on October 23, 2007.

Avram Mandell (’01) is engaged to Abby Fifer.

Estee Pollak (’06) was married to Robert Garrett on December 30, 2007.

Jeremy Schneider (’04) and his wife Rachel welcomed a baby boy, Ezra Matan, on December 30, 2007.

Sabrina Sjolseth (’06) and Cody Gantner (MAJS ’05) were married March 9, 2008. They both changed their last name to Bahir.

Jane West Walsh (’85) and her husband Ariel happily report that their adorable new grandson Finn Riley Walsh was born November 28, 2007. Finn and brother Duncan (2 1/2) join cousins Tommy (2 1/2), Brendon (4 1/2) and Kate (6), making 5 grandchildren for the Walsh clan, so far.

Joy Wasserman (’81) and her husband Dr. Rob Weinberg are thrilled to announce that their son Aaron has been selected as a Bronfman Fellow for this summer.

Josh Whinston (’07) and Sarah Raful (SJCS ’05) were married March 23, 2008.

Mazel Tov to our 1983 graduates who will receive their honorary doctorates at graduation this year:

Nili Kosmal
Stanley Schickler

And to our 2008 graduates:

Olga Bluman
Eliana Hall
Noam Katz
Jordan Magidson
Ari Margolis
Sara Mason
Erin Ellis Mason
Daniel Bloom Medwin
Lydia Bloom Medwin
Lev Metz
Rena Yael Polonsky
Micol Zimmerman

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