

Boundaries and the aims of liberal education

History

On Liberal Jewish Seminary Education

I considered applying to HUC three times in my life.

The first, I chose not to apply because I was upset

By the emergence of “action-at-a-distance” magical speech

That seemed ascendent in Reform Judaism.

I was a songleader at the time,

And had been asked to fill in when Debbie Friedman

was unable to songlead

at a conference at Brandeis.

I was *definitely* a b-lister songleader at the time

I had run the songleading program at Kutz camp for a few years in the 1980s

and was a soloist in Reform and Conservative synagogues around the country.

But I was concerned that prayers and rituals meant to motivate us to pursue justice,

To express gratitude and forgiveness,

And to raise our awareness of the majesty of God’s universe,

were now being treated of as *incantations* to affect change in our material world.

The trend seemed to take off following the introduction of Debbie Friedman’s

setting of *mishebeirach*.

A prayer that, in my mind, should call our attention to community members who are suffering so that we might perform the action of *bikur cholim* after services were over.

This prayer was becoming a magical speech to heal cancer.

Said one rabbi,

“Let us send out our healing energy so that the cancer may recede...”.

Really?

I thought, “what has happened to Reform Judaism?”

And so I pursued an academic education instead.

I moved to Chicago ultimately taking a Ph.D. in from the University of Chicago.

But I never stopped engaging in Jewish life.

I ran the confirmation program and later the Youth group.

And I joined the board of the synagogue, KAM-Isaiah-Israel.

The congregation was such a thriving, engaged community was due to two historic leaders,

Max Janowski an extraordinary composer of Jewish music (who died 18 months before I arrived)

And Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf,

a close friend of Rabbi Eugene Borowitz,

and a luminary among congregational rabbis.

Rabbi Wolf became my rabbi and rekindled my hope for Reform Judaism

in which faith in God and the transcendent
were expressed *through the exercise of reason*
in partnership with our heart, and soul, and body.

I call it “faith bounded by reason,” and there is more to say about that another time.

As I completed my PHD,

I began questioning my earlier decision
not to apply to HUC.

But by then, almost ten years later,

I had a professional wife, two young children, and 8 years in graduate school
without much of an income.

I had a responsibility to get a job.

Fortunately for my rabbinical aspirations,

there seemed little chance of success:

250 people were chasing 26 academic positions.

So even as I applied for jobs

I prepared to apply to HUC.

I enrolled in a weekend Hebrew immersion program

to refresh my Hebrew learned on a gap year I had spent in Israel.

And then I called the HUC admissions office.

The admissions team member was formal and officious.

She explained to me the process,
how to submit my materials,
including my GRE scores.

Since HUC only accepted GREs within 5 years of the test,
I would need to retake it.

But she went on,

“Unfortunately, it is now October. And the last test for this cycle was held last weekend.

You will have to wait until next year to apply.”

I thought she might be joking

“Uhm, can I ask, why do you require the GRE at all?”

“Dr. Rehfeld,”

—she was very formal—

“we need to be sure you are capable of graduate level work.”

I paused before responding.

“Wouldn’t successfully completing an MA and PHD at the University of Chicago be

A reasonable indicator of that I was capable of “graduate level” work?

The conversation ended soon after that.

(And for the record, that admission officer was not Rabbi Rachel Gross-Prinz or Rabbi Adam
Allenberg!)

Though I’m rather sure I could have successfully appealed that decision—I didn’t have to.

I landed one of the best jobs on the market

and spent 18 years on faculty ultimately as a tenured professor at Washington University in St. Louis

I held appointments in the Political Science Department,
the Law School,
and served on the faculty advisory committee
of the Danforth Center of Religion and Politics.

Always, always, wondering, what if...what if...

2.

The theme of Kallah this year
is about how we navigate *discussions* about hard topics

Eilu v'eilu d'varim Elohim chayim,

these and those are the words of the everliving God.

It's not easy to disagree about issues

we feel passionately about,

and where the stakes are high.

But as rabbis and cantors,

As leaders of the Jewish people

You will be called on

not only to create healthy and respectful communities of discourse.

You will be called on to make *decisions*.

And when decisions need to be made,

Sometimes one side must prevail.

The decision to require a new GRE test
meant that I was unable to apply that year.

And in our own tradition,

decisions about communal practice

cannot always accommodate both sides, no matter how reasonable.

Should we follow Hillel in lighting the Chanukiah in ascending order

Or with Shammai in descending order?

We keep Shammai's argument on the books for various reasons

But a communal practice requires us to go in one direction or another.

Not both.

[Side note: really, why not do both?! With multiple chanukiot every year, I think the Reform
Movement should start a practice of lighting at least three *chanukiot* each year,

two in ascending order (to respect communal norms)

and one in descending order,

to embody in a ritual the respect for different views.]

I digress.

The fact is, some decisions

Often the most consequential you will make

Require choosing one path and forgoing another.

Not every decision will allow you to capture

the truth that exists

on both sides of opposing views.

3.

The GRE requirement created a boundary to entry into HUC

A decision that could not accommodate the reasonable thought that a PHD might qualify a student just well.

This summer two boundaries were set at HUC

Where the truth on both sides of the issue could not be equally embraced.

I want to say that both decisions were fraught, and continue to be,
precisely because there are very good reasons
thoughtful,
respectful reasons on both sides of the issues.

The first boundary issue was the decision to end HUC's requirement

that the partners of rabbinical and cantorial students

must themselves be Jewish.

Many of our faculty opposed the change

a few others believed it was long overdue

still others were deeply uncomfortable with it

but accepted or acquiesced in the decision.

And those of you who supported the change,
I encourage you as I have in the past,
to speak to your faculty and program leadership.
Try to understand why they felt passionately the way they did,
whether in support or opposition.

The second boundary decision was to reject a call
by a prominent New York Reform rabbi
to require HUC students to sign a statement
that they are Zionists as a condition of ordination.

Even as I affirmed this institution's commitment to liberal Zionism,
and our commitment to cultivating *ahavat Yisrael in our students*.

I rejected that call

Because I do not believe that cultivating an authentic love for Israel and the Jewish People,

Can be done with integrity,

if the threat of expulsion is hanging over your head.

Just as I understand, respect and appreciate

those who believe removing the Jewish-partner requirement

was the wrong decision to make,

I understand, respect, and appreciate

those who want to erect boundaries for anti-Zionists.

Amidst rising antisemitism,

continuous assaults on Israel's very being,

even after October 7

by terrorist groups hell-bent on the destruction of Israel

how *can* we tolerate those who won't sign a statement of fidelity to Zionism?

Indeed, I find it deeply, deeply offensive for Jewish leadership to proudly embrace the label "anti-Zionist" right now, still post-October 7"

I am happy to discuss these issues with you at another time

But they illustrate that no matter how we navigate ideas of *respecting disagreement*,

sometimes decisions must be made.

And so in the context of the themes of this Kallah and our work at HUC:

How does we make decisions

while respecting reasonable disagreement on all sides?

4.

One way is to be careful of the language that you are using, and choose your words carefully.

Curiously to me

both decisions have been framed

as illustrations of the Reform Movement's commitment to "inclusion."

No doubt: both decisions create a more inclusive community

But they were **NOT** actually driven by a commitment to inclusion, per se.

And the language of inclusion here can be incredibly dismissive of those who opposed either decision.

Let me be clear, I care deeply about inclusion.

I am proud to be part of an institution and a Movement that has made inclusion a priority.

But the matters we were addressing

Did not involve whether we should be more inclusive or less.

Rather, they involved a substantive question: were the boundaries that defined access to our community were the right boundaries to have?

When you frame these decisions in terms of “celebrating inclusion,” you risk maligning the other side.

Opponents of the interfaith policy change were not *against inclusion*,

they had good reasons,

considered reasons,

reasons grounded in our tradition,

to believe that the religious status of your partners

was an appropriate boundary to ordination.

Promoters of a litmus test on Zionism are not “against inclusion,”

they have good reasons,

considered reasons,

reasons grounded in our history and the present moment
to believe that affirming your commitment to Zionism
should be an appropriate boundary.

But inclusion for its own sake is rather empty.

The image of a tent with flaps open wide tells us nothing about what goes on inside the tent.

What expectations do we have of those who enter?

How our tent is different from the tent over there?

No matter which side you fall on the relationship policy or litmus test,
you are making a case for what the appropriate boundary should be.

4.

How do you define the Boundaries?

One way to translate from reasonable disagreement
to a decision that requires a choice
is to try to agree on shared standards
and an appropriate process for making decisions.

One of the challenges of both decisions is that we don't have agreement
on the standards by which to judge,
nor on the process for making these decisions.

The process issue is one we need to work on at HUC
as a matter of shared governance.

But the issue of shared standards is a bigger one

that will apply to all of us in the room.

You are being prepared for ordination as Reform Rabbis and Cantors.

I believe any boundaries we establish should be based on what we believe it means to be a Reform Rabbi and a Reform Cantor.

And that requires a clear and idea not merely of what “rabbi” or “cantor” means

But what Reform Judaism requires.

In part that is a philosophical, ideological, and theological question

In part that is a question based on a community of practice of Reform Jews.

We don’t actually have a clear *statement* of what HUC takes Reform Judaism to be

Such that it could apply to the work we do

or the policies we set

no matter the religious commitment of those applying the standard.

And that means that part of the challenge

is that we may all be applying different standards

To answer the same question

Rather than having a shared understanding of what ideas should guide our policy.

In my view, anyone who leaves this institution should be able to say,

“here is what makes me a Reform Rabbi, here is what makes me a Reform Cantor,”

One that refers to a distinct approach to God, Torah, Israel, and perhaps redemption too.

One that is philosophically coherent and connected in some way to the history of our Movement.

5.

As for the education at HUC, I believe it should be driven by the aims of Liberal Jewish Education.

How do we do this: liberal Jewish education

Requires of us the openness for deliberation

Requires of you the willingness to take a chance

And to listen without reacting

I want to encourage you to challenge your own core thinking about the most important issues of your life, about God, Torah, Israel and redemption, and how they apply to religious, political, moral and communal matters.

It is an approach to education that recognizes the fact that you are autonomous beings

Being prepared for service in open, liberal communities.

But more than that,

It is an approach to reflects our faith

in your capacity to make good decisions

grounded in learning and tradition

so long as you use this space

to do the hard work of questioning and confronting the most important questions of your lives, not desisting from them.

6.

The third time I considered applying to HUC was some years later.

By that time it was clear to me that while I was successful as an academic I was living two different lives—one as an academic, the other as a Jew.

So I began working on a project on the political uses of the Hebrew Bible.

I became the CEO of the Jewish Federation of St. Louis

And I taught two seminars at Wash U,

one on Jewish Political Thought,

another on Zionism and the History of Israel.

I played in two different Jewish bands on in synagogues and one out

And then I had a conversation with someone encouraging me to apply to HUC.

This time I said no, because I believed I no longer qualified.

You see, I was invited to apply to be HUC's next President

And the barrier—you know it—was that I was not a rabbi.

Part of what I came to understand as part of that process was that so long as we look at

"You're not a rabbi". Cantors. Educators. Non profit managers.

Confidence in them. Hope for our future.

*As aspiring leaders of the Jewish community, we will be serving a diverse and fractured people. But that's nothing new. The richness of Judaism stems, in large part, from our differences. Our tradition is a multivocal, deeply-dialectic and, at times, outright vociferous compendium of competing thoughts. Our ancestors weren't afraid to disagree; on the contrary, they recognized that disagreements deserved to be codified. There was even a formula to introduce such contradicting opinions: *davar acher*, "another way to understand what's being discussed." The Jewish community we will serve is deeply divided. That's a challenge. But it is also a strength. Even within our own HUC-JIR community, we know that there is a huge range of opinion on a variety of topics. Instead of pretending that these differences aren't there, we hope Kallah will provide an opportunity for meaningful and supported engagement.*