

Facebook post from Rabbi Larry Hoffman, Emeritus Professor, HUC-JIR. Wednesday, December 9, 2020. Shared with permission.

Open Letter to My Students #11: True East

I sometimes compare my own seminary education with what today's students receive – not as an exercise in nostalgia, but to learn something important about being clergy in our world. I speak only for the NY campus which I attended; Cincinnati graduates may have their own story; there were no LA graduates yet.

HUC of the 1960s was not even remotely the same school as it is now, roughly half a century later. There was, for example, no Israel program, so unless we knew Hebrew already (or took a year off to go to Israel on our own) our modern Hebrew competence was pretty much non-existent. Our five-year-long lockstep curriculum was heavy in text, but the only Hebrew grammar most of us knew upon entering was whatever we had picked up from a single summer preparatory course. We spent the next five years “deciphering” texts, word for word, with minimal success.

Part of the problem was the text teachers, giants in knowledge, but a generation for whom modern pedagogy was not so much a lost art as it was an art not yet discovered. I can only imagine their own frustration, having to put up with students like us. I recall one professor struggling to coach one of my classmates through just a few lines of Talmud; and then plunking some coins down on the table with the sardonic request, “Please go to the payphone; phone Bellevue Hospital; reserve a room for me in their mental ward.” Nowadays, he might be reprimanded for a microaggression, but we took his remark in stride. Given the chance, we might have booked rooms for ourselves.

What I didn't learn in text, I more than made up in history and theology because of two outstanding teachers who changed my life forever: Eugene Borowitz, *zikhrono livrachah*, and Martin Cohen, *yibadel l'chaim*. They made massive reading assignments and held us responsible for them. For roughly one semester a year (and for five years!), Dr. Cohen assigned up to a book or article a week – and tested us on it every Friday morning. Dr. Borowitz assigned Baeck, Buber, Kaplan, Rosenzweig and more – incessantly; in just the introductory course alone, we wrote three lengthy papers, redoing them if we did not live up to his formidable standards of acceptability. Both professors lectured back then – an era when we appreciated great lectures from which we filled our notebooks and our minds with organized synopses of data we could never get in any other way. I was ordained immensely knowledgeable in Jewish history and thought.

More significant, however, is something else that I learned from these two teachers – and from others too, whom I have not mentioned: what we nowadays call “formation.” All the history and theology – and even the text skills that I did not learn until later – are beside the point if they are not guided by “formation.”

Formation is a combination of character, vision, depth and commitment. It is the seminary equivalent to what Bill George, the noted Harvard Business School professor from 2004 to 2014, called our “true north.”

“True North” he writes, “is your orienting point – your fixed point in a spinning world – that helps you stay on track It is derived from your most deeply held beliefs, your values.... It is your internal compass, unique to you, that represents who you are at your deepest level.”

Formation is the way seminary education helps us locate our “true north.” It is the internalization of a deep and lasting sense of “mission”: not the details of “what we do” (teaching, counseling, preaching, etc.) but the big picture of “what we are doing in the first place” and “why it matters that we do it.” It confirms our linkage to something necessary and profound. Once internalized, it fortifies us for life.

Given Judaism’s traditional preference for facing East (as if Jerusalem, Jewish history, and even God, inhabit some metaphysical east, no matter where on the globe we actually live), we might call it our “True East.”

Formation of the Jewish True East happens around the edges: not just in formal lectures, but in hallway conversations, in communal prayer, and in meetings (planned or unplanned) with professors. It comes from observing the commitment and calling of our teachers, seeing in them the character and passion that we then emulate.

Looking back, I see more clearly what I attained from my student years at HUC, certainly from Rabbis Borowitz and Cohen, but also from others: my exceptional thesis advisor, Dr. A. Stanley Dreyfus, and even some of the professors whose absence of pedagogical skills I have lamented. HUC cemented within me the foundation for my true-east formation: honesty and compassion, faith and fortitude, empathy and truth; love of Jewish learning and of Jewish peoplehood; respect for other paths to God (not just the Jewish way); a certain selflessness in pursuit of the common good; and the certainty that Judaism has a mission in the world – that the world would be impoverished were Jews not in it to make it matter.

These remain today. At moments of vocational confusion, doubt, or despair, these have rescued me.

Two particular components of this True East need special mention, because I consider them critical, and they are under attack.

First is my commitment to the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment, the faithful pursuit of goodness, nobility, progress, beauty and truth. As much as we immersed ourselves in Jewish classics, we had teachers who were equally at home in what 19th-century critic Matthew Arnold called “the study of [human] perfection.... the best that has been thought and said.” My Talmud teacher, Dr. Atlas, was also a formidable interpreter of Kant. Dr. Henry Slonimsky – a magisterial classroom presence, if ever there was one -- taught an elective in Nietzsche, to help

us confront the scourge of nihilism. Dr. Fritz Bamberger taught 19th-century idealist philosophy as the intellectual milieu in which Reform Judaism had emerged. To be sure, we now expand the Enlightenment “canon” to include women and cultures whom Matthew Arnold did not recognize, but the goal has not changed. I was formed to see Judaism working hand in hand with the richness of the human spirit. That intellectual, ethical, artistic and spiritual partnership remains part of my True East, and I am richer for it.

Second was my teachers’ commitment to Reform Judaism as that form of Judaism that has historically, and most clearly, articulated the Jewish partnership with universal wisdom. To be sure, especially in New York (where our founder, Stephen S. Wise, had instilled the love for Clal Yisrael), we valued modern Judaism of all stamps: the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements too, of course, but secular Zionism also.

I saw my place, however, as a proud interpreter of Reform. The Second Temple’s fall had not doomed us to exile; it had raised the curtain on a world stage where we could pursue a role that was the whole point of Judaism, its unique contribution to human betterment. Ethics mattered most; I could not escape my conscience. Reform had worked in the trenches (so to speak) of modern life: it was the first to embrace the need for change, sometimes radical change: worship reform; authentic but non-halachic Judaism; full inclusion of women and then LGBTQ+ identities; expanding our musical canon; inventing the modern cantorate as clergy partners with rabbis; insisting on an American religious presence in Jerusalem.

The record is not all successes; we have had our failures as well; and the details of Reform as we understood it would change with time, but that we had a historical mission and a historic role in history I have never doubted. I have regularly seen myself standing on the frontiers of history, developing Judaism for every new tomorrow, but always in line with my Jewish wisdom and conscience wed to universalist values, and motivated by the divine purpose of human endeavor in the first place.

In this era of radical choice, we need strong Jewish addresses all along the Jewish spectrum – who knows where seekers of Jewish wisdom will find their home? But no single person can live everywhere; so we must each take our own personal stand somewhere on that spectrum. I study with, work with, and value equally all who labor for their own responsible Jewish address, whatever that address may be. I need them, and they need me; we need one another; it is my job to offer the best Jewish depth and insight that my Jewish address allows me to see. If I fail in that, I let everyone down. If I succeed, I become a partner with Jewish teachers everywhere, all of us striving for our elusive, but real, true east.