

Keeping Faith in Rabbis

**A Community Conversation on Rabbinical
Education**

will be infected by rabbinic ego inflation. Refusing to stand on a pedestal, sharing questions and doubts, and remaining aware that much of the feedback reflects the rabbinic role rather than the rabbi's essential self are practices that can be acquired in rabbinical school—and they should be.

The rabbinate can be a lonely profession. Often there is only one rabbi working in a particular setting. Rabbis need to seek out *chevrutas*, clergy support groups, mentors, supervisors and ongoing professional education if they are to continue to grow and maintain perspective as they move through their careers. They will do so only if they are trained to recognize the importance of these activities while they are students. Learning experiences that help students see the value in devoting time and money to these activities can help to sustain careers that will span most of a century.

I did not devote much of this essay to the key questions of language acquisition, decoding Jewish texts, the study of history and a host of practical curricular questions. It is around these kinds of questions that there will necessarily be the greatest differences among seminaries. And seminary faculties are used to focusing on these questions and continually tinkering to improve their curricula. This is a process that goes back hundreds of years. I trust that each faculty does the best it can. But we are still in the early stages of thinking about rabbinic formation more broadly. Our largest challenge as we look ahead is the creation of rabbinic leaders whose vision, inner yes, and caring for others can continue the advancement of Jewish civilization.

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The Chisma Curriculum

By Michael Marmur

Creating a curriculum for the education of rabbis is a complex and fascinating task. Ideological, theological, sociological, political, and institutional dimensions are included in the equation. Every generation is convinced that it is living in remarkable and unprecedented times. At the risk of falling prey to this kind of historical hubris, educating rabbis has never been as uncertain or as intangible as it has become in non-Chareidi Judaism in the 21st Century.

Factors contributing to this complexity include the challenge posed to the denominational model, which has held sway for decades; economic pressures on graduate level professional education in general; and palpable shifts in the cultural landscape. Opening programs that offer rabbinical ordination is easier than ever, while recruiting students to justify this proliferation is hard work.

Thinking creatively about rabbinical education requires discourse with a variety of audiences. There must be a constant conversation with students about their experience of and hopes for the program in which they are enrolled. Sessions with alumni have also proven to be particularly helpful—encouraging graduates to reflect on their education from the perspective of what they currently do in the field helps those responsible for seminaries to think about many aspects of the work of pre-service rabbinic education and the need for in-service continuity. Faculty colleagues are constantly engaged in the trial and error of course preparation, mentoring, and other forms of guidance. Administrators, scholars, mentors and teachers in

sister institutions have much to teach each other, and opportunities for open dialogue are usually of great worth. The wider world of seminary education and other kinds of professional training also offer inspiration and perplexity in roughly equal quantities.

I am charged with the task of working with the faculty of my institution to devise a course of study and overall experience rich enough to send a generation of Reform rabbis out into the world. Such a task can only be undertaken with curiosity and humility. Curiosity because the work at hand should involve anthropology, sociology, psychology, hermeneutics, history, education theory, and pastoral care. Humility because one can only ever hope to be an amateur in most of these fields, and also because there is no evidence that expertise is a key to efficacy or excellence. After all the articles have been read and written, all the studies commissioned and undertaken, after the soothsayers have sifted through the entrails of our contemporary situation, there remains an intimacy and a mystery to rabbinical education. This is an area characterized by a plethora of deeply-held opinions and a dearth of real expertise.

The sources of rabbinic literature have much to teach us about rabbinical education. My colleague Larry Hoffman, one of the great modern masters of this field, has emphasized the gulf separating our situation from that of our forebears: "Whatever our ancestors of the Talmud may have been, "sages" (as we like to think) or "holy men" akin to Zoroastrian magi, rabbis are hardly that."¹ While it is hard to fault Hoffman's statement, there are at least three reasons why looking to ancient rabbinic sources as we contemplate current rabbinical dilemmas can be seen as a worthwhile exercise. Firstly, the term "rabbi" spans the generations and the social contexts. The fact that Jews across the denominational spectrum afford significance to the title and imbue it with different kinds of significance should encourage us to explore the use of this term in earlier times. The title "Rabbi" continues to display remarkable resilience at a time of great

¹ Lawrence A. Hoffman, "The Professionalization of the American Rabbinate," *Rabbi-Pastor Priest: Their Roles and Profiles Through the Ages*, Walter Homolka and Heinz-Günther Schöttler (ed.s) (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2013) 129. There is a burgeoning literature on the institution of the rabbinate in the period in ancient Palestine and elsewhere. For a fine example of the state of historical research in this area, see David Levine, "Rabbis, Preachers, and Aggadists: An Aspect of Jewish Culture in Third- and Fourth-Century Palestine", *Follow the Wise—Festschrift for Lee I. Levine*, Zeev Weiss, Oded Irshai, Jodi Magness & Seth Schwartz (ed.s) (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake IN, 2010) 272-294.

fluidity and change, and that term carries with it layers of meaning, which deserve examination and understanding.

Secondly, perusal of these sources often reveals that the chasm we believe separates the rabbis of today from those who preceded them centuries ago is not always as deep or as wide as we might imagine.

Thirdly, this is what rabbis should do—turn to the literature of our people in search of direction and meaning. And if we bring our own prism of interpretation to the sources we choose to read, we are enacting the finest and most enduring aspect of a rabbinical imperative spanning millennia. Looking to rabbinical literature (and indeed other periods and genres of our tradition) as part of our deliberations about rabbinical education is justified in intrinsic terms and is also an enactment of the best of what the rabbinate can be: a bridge spanning Judaism and the Jews, history and contemporaneity, timeless resonance and timely relevance.

According to the relatively meager sources available to us,² Rabbi Elazar Chisma was a significant tanna of the second and third generation, perhaps both a contemporary and a disciple of Rabbi Akiva. It may be that Chisma is a locative name, suggesting that he came from the place known today as Hizmeh. In some sources he is ben Chisma, which would imply a familial link. Within a tradition within the literature of the Midrash itself, however, Rabbi Elazar came by his name as the result of a great moment of post-ordination in-service rabbinical education. This source is to be found in Leviticus Rabbah 23.4 and in Songs Rabbah 2.7.

We are introduced to the teaching about Rabbi Eliezer in the context of a discussion of the biblical phrase "like a rose among the thorns." It is taught that a person who knows how to behave in a liturgical or ritual situation when nobody else is sure what to do—to recite the blessing for a bridegroom or a mourner, for example—such a person is to be likened to a rose among thorns. Against this backdrop the tale of how Rabbi Elazar came to be called Chisma is

² See Aaron Hyman, *Toldot Tannaim Ve'Amorim* (Pri Haaretz: Jerusalem, 1987, volume 1) 217-218. On the traditions in the name of Rabbi Elazar, see Levine, Diane, "Elazar Hisma", *Persons and Institutions in Early Rabbinic Institutions*, William Scott Green (ed.) (Scholars Press: Missoula, 1977) 149-205.

recounted. The translation offered here, like all translations, is no more than one version of how the story might be understood.

Rabbi Elazar went to a certain place where he was asked to read the blessings before the Shema. He said to them: I do not know them. They said: lead us in the Amidah prayer. He said: I can't.

The man who comes to this anonymous congregation is not himself anonymous. He has attained the title Rabbi, and as we shall presently see, he has already earned something of a reputation as a learned sage. He is asked to perform a standard task and declines because he does not know how. The host congregation may have thought this aberration was connected to a particular section of the liturgy, or perhaps they suspected that he was refusing them because the offer was beneath his dignity. But when they invite him to take on a yet more central part of the liturgy, he declines again. This noted rabbi seems unable to perform the tasks expected of him by the field.

They said to him: this is the man of whom people make such a fuss? What is he called Rabbi for?

The response of the host congregation is swift and merciless. After these two strikes, he is out. They do not simply impugn his skills as a service leader, but rather they seek to undermine his rabbinical status and reputation. This is the same Rabbi Elazar everyone has been talking about? He can't even fulfill rudimentary performance expectations. And if he can't do that, why is he called Rabbi at all?

The people who educated and ordained Rabbi Elazar had not seen it necessary to teach him these particular skills. In a parallel tale of a newly-minted rabbi failing to make the grade in his first congregation, it is explained that he forgets everything he knew and is therefore incapable of answering the legal and philosophical questions posed to him by the lay people.³ Here, however, as the continuation of the story makes clear, these are skills which Rabbi Elazar had not been taught. As a teacher of rabbinical students, I am acutely aware of everything we don't teach and they don't learn which one would want a rabbi to know. If there were a contemporary rabbi incapable of or uncomfortable when leading a prayer service, we would bemoan the fact that he or she did not come from a thick

Jewish environment. But in the case of Rabbi Elazar we might speculate that his inability to act as prayer leader reflects not only his own skills and predilections, but also the attitudes and priorities of his teachers. When the graduate comes into contact with the clear expectations of the Jews in the pews, his ivory tower education seems to have served him poorly.

He was deeply mortified and went to Rabbi Akiva. He said to him: why does your face look so sickly? He told him what had happened. He then said to him: Sir, would you be willing to teach me to learn?

Wounded, Rabbi Elazar makes his way to Rabbi Akiva. At times these two men are presented as contemporaries and colleagues, while elsewhere Rabbi Akiva appears to be Elazar's teacher. In any case, it is to Rabbi Akiva that the demoralized rabbi turns. Akiva sees that his colleague or student is not himself. The fact that Rabbi Akiva notices is noteworthy. The finest teachers are often those who combine good pedagogy with great humanity. The learning moment which is about to take place would not have happened had not the great Rabbi Akiva looked into the face of his erstwhile student and realized that something was awry.

Next is the lynchpin of this tale. "Will you help me learn what I need to know to pass the congregational test?" Some translations of the Aramaic text read this question as being addressed to Rabbi Akiva by Rabbi Elazar. Others suggest that the question is posed by Rabbi Akiva as, "Are you interested in learning from me?" In either case, the key motivation for learning comes from the encounter of the graduate with the realities of the field. There is a triangle at play here, and each angle is acute—the seminary (represented here by Rabbi Akiva), the student, and the demands, needs and expectations of the world. This triangulation leads to a moment in which the newly-minted rabbi comes back to his teacher and is now ready to learn a skill he needs in order to be the kind of rabbi he needs to be.

In some versions of this tale the questioner calls his interlocutor Rabbi. This is easy to understand if Rabbi Elazar is addressing Rabbi Akiva, but at first glance this seems implausible the other way around. After all, why would the great Rabbi Akiva call the rattled Rabbi Elazar by this term, one which denotes not only a certain status but also an acknowledgement of seniority? There is, however, another

³ See PT Y'hudot xii. 13a and parallel sources.

understanding of the scene. Rabbi Elazar has internalized the criticism he received from the unforgiving congregants. He doubts the validity of his own rabbinical status. In that moment Rabbi Akiva shows immense tenderness. Just as he asks Rabbi Elazar if he would like to learn, he calls him Rabbi. “You are my student for the purpose of this particular skill. You are also a rabbi—my rabbi.” This is how we should teach our students. There is an echo here of the blessing given some years earlier by Rabban Gamliel to Rabbi Joshua: come in peace, my rabbi and my student!⁴

He consented and taught him. After some time he returned to the same place. They invited him to say the blessings before the Shema. He did so. They asked him to lead the Amidah prayer. He did. They thereupon said: Rabbi Elazar itchbasam and they called him Rabbi Elazar Chisma.

After Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar speak and agree upon the learning contract between them, the actual learning of the particular skill is not described in any detail. The assumption here appears to be that a bright student motivated by a bracing encounter with the professional environment, tutored by a great teacher, will have little trouble learning the requisite capacities. We know in our own work that motivation and talent are not always enough for great student learning outcomes to ensue. There may be learning challenges, or the teaching may be ill-conceived, or the expectations of the field unrealistic. The essential point, however, is as true today as ever it was. When the teacher, the learner and the milieu are aligned, the chances of imparting the subject matter effectively are enhanced immeasurably.

How should we understand the title given to Rabbi Elazar by the congregation after his successful return to the site of his former embarrassment? The root *ḥ-s-m* covers a broad semantic range, so the conclusion drawn by the congregation once it has seen that Rabbi Elazar can now pass this practical rabbinics test is open to broad interpretation. It may mean that he has now become stronger, more resilient in the face of criticism. The checkpoints in contemporary Israel are *machsomim*, barriers capable of exclusion. In this sense the title given Rabbi Elazar by his congregation is not an unalloyed compliment. Now he is strong and capable and perhaps

also less approachable. There is now no barrier on his mouth—he is a fluent exponent of the dictates of tradition. But perhaps another kind of barrier has been erected? In the Mishna we find our verb used to describe a utensil which has been completed.⁵ It is as if the congregants are saying, “When that rabbi first came to us, he was still in a molten state. He had not yet found his full rabbinical form. Now he is the real deal, the finished item.” It is not clear that to be finished, to be completed, is the most essential rabbinic virtue. I would argue that in the rabbinate one expects a level of competence likely to inspire confidence in those being served, but also a certain aspect of incompleteness, the same cocktail of curiosity and humility described above.

It is hard for a rabbi to appear unfinished. There are the expectations of one’s congregation, often there are denominational politics at play, and of course each rabbi has expectations of herself as well. However, we might observe that the best rabbis are like implements fit for purpose but not yet in their final state.

The root from which Elazar’s nickname is taken bears many meanings: impermeability, strength, completeness, fixity, hardness, silence, and hesitation. It may be that the indeterminate nature of the term they apply to the rabbi also carries with it an important teaching. Our congregations and institutions give us all kinds of reputations and imbue us with any number of talents and shortcomings. We carry around with us the names given to us by the people we serve. For this reason, it is particularly important to know our own name, the identity we have independent of the interaction with the field. Many of the saddest tales of rabbinical meltdown seem to take place when a rabbi forgets his first name and is only identified through the expectations and projections of his community. It is good to have both names.

I recently had an opportunity to study the Chisma text with my predecessor as Provost of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Norman Cohen. With his eagle eye for nuance in rabbinic literature, he noted that in a number of manuscript versions of our

story the name given to Elazar is not Chisma. Rather, the impressed congregants say of the returning rabbi—now he is capable and knowledgeable, using a word from the root meaning wise. Learning, emotional intelligence and intellectual curiosity play a key role at the heart of this process. It is only a coincidence that the Hebrew Union College was established by Isaac Mayer Wise, and that the Jewish Institute of Religion was founded by Steven S. Wise. You don't have to be Wise to establish a rabbinical seminary, but you do have to be wise to make your name as a rabbi.

The midrash has an epilogue. Immediately following the tale of Rabbi Elazar's experience of just-in-time professional coaching, we find a teaching concerning Rabbi Jonah, an *Amora* of the fourth generation who was the head of the yeshiva in Tiberias. Here, then, is the testimony of a seminary president:

Rabbi Jonah used to teach his disciples the bridegrooms' blessing and the mourners' blessing, so that they might be ready for any to call upon them.

This teaching relates to the earlier context of the midrash. A person who knows what to do in peak life cycle moments when everyone else is too overcome or uncertain or uneducated, such a person is to be compared to a rose among the thorns. Rabbi Jonah's practice is included in the text here as if to say, "We are aware of all these examples, including the tale of how Elazar Chisma got his name, and we have altered our curriculum in order to include these skills as a regular part of in-service instruction." The curriculum of rabbinical schools has always been in dialogue with the needs and preferences of the fields in which our graduates will toil. The curriculum, then, is not impermeable or completed. It should strive to demonstrate the curiosity and humility we expect of our graduates.

It may be a stretch to imagine Rabbi Jonah meeting with representatives of the Central Conference of Galilean Rabbis, the Board of the Union for Amoraic Judaism, or for that matter experts and master practitioners from the Kinneret Institute, and demographers pouring over early findings from the fourth century Pew study, along with focus groups of students and alumni. All this is fanciful, but it is less improbable to believe that Rabbi Jonah and his faculty considered the needs of the environment for which they were training their rabbis, and factored in the body of teaching

they were committed to impart whether or not the field articulated a clear need for it. To design the curriculum solely to teach how to perform a smooth wedding is to sacrifice depth on the altar of ratings. To ignore the skills and sensitivities called for out in the world—interpersonal and pastoral skills, marketing and budgeting, new trends in communication, liturgy and music, and all the rest—is to ignore the sacred responsibility of the seminary.

Often in discussions with members of my faculty, I am struck by the tension they feel between the formal curriculum they are striving to impart to our students and what might be described as the shadow curriculum. The shadow curriculum includes any number of co-curricular additions, many of them experiential in nature, which form a major and perhaps increasing proportion of our students' time. I don't know how to solve the tension, which is real. Our students are overwhelmed with the need to balance existential, spiritual, economic, intellectual, academic, personal and spiritual demands. Perhaps we can take comfort in the fact that the tension is, in fact, very ancient.

I am open to the discussion of how much should be crammed into the pre-service part of rabbinical training and what should be fed into the sixty-year curriculum—the life of learning and growth to which all rabbis should aspire. There is a professional basis one has a right to expect from a doctor on her first day after being qualified, and the same could be said for her rabbinical counterpart. I am convinced that the deep knowledge and passion for learning which our rabbis exhibit will be as significant for the future of Judaism as their ability to interpret a spreadsheet. We are constantly striving to work out what should get taught how and when in the arc of an education. Much—perhaps most—will indeed be taught after ordination. Twenty centuries after the curricular discussion began, its next iteration promises to be bracing, unsettling and exciting.

Welcome to the Chisma curriculum. Better to rely on it than on charisma. In this curriculum, the seminary gives you your title. The encounter between you as a person and the persons you serve is what gives you your name.

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