

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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# SITUATING OUR WORK IN 21<sup>ST</sup>-CENTURY NORTH AMERICAN JEWRY

HUC-JIR has a threefold mission of Education, Scholarship, and Thought Leadership for the Reform Movement and the entire Jewish Public Sphere. We operate in two primary ecosystems – North America and Israel, each of which faces a very different set of challenges.

The challenges to the Jewish future of Jewish life in North America are significant, following closely the decline of liberal religious engagement of all faiths in America. Levels of Jewish education, Jewish engagement, and Jewish identity are weakening. Non-Orthodox congregational life is declining across all movements as traditional membership patterns are changing. Individuals born after the 1980s (Millennials and Gen Z's) are having families later in life, further challenging institutional structures built on a model of first engagement with young families.

Paradoxically, the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have also been a period of innovation and vitality within non-Orthodox Judaism. Non-denominational congregations are attracting thousands of members. Dynamic new educational institutions offer direct-to-user experiences without regard to affiliation – Hartman, Wexner, and Hadar, to name perhaps the most prominent. And as Jewish philanthropy has expanded, new Jewish social-activism organizations like [Tzedek America](#), [Avodah](#), and [American Jewish World Service](#) are working outside of the traditional infrastructure to engage a new generation of Jews.

The demographics of North American Jewry have changed as well.

Within North America, Jewish life exhibits significant regional variation beyond the categories of “East Coast,” “West Coast,” and “Mid-West.” Southern Florida, Toronto, the Pacific Northwest, and small communities of the rural south are some illustrations of the 8 or 9 different regions that describe different Jewish experiences in North America.

We are diversifying religiously as well. Most individuals who now identify as “Reform Jews” are likely to have non-Jewish members of their extended families. Because of our movement’s decades-long commitment to inclusion, they have found welcome homes within our institutional infrastructure. Most rabbis ordained in this century are believed to officiate at interfaith weddings. And our professional organizations (CCAR and ACC) set membership based only on individual qualifications of the member; they thus include a few members partnered with non-Jews – a number likely to increase given demographic trends.

Similarly, there is growing awareness of the significant diversity of racial, gender, and sexual orientation backgrounds and identities. Jews of Color and gender non-binary individuals within our communities are growing yet often unseen. The future vitality of our movement and community will depend on eliminating barriers of implicit and explicit discrimination.

# OUR MISSION

## HUC'S MISSION STATEMENT

- Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) is North America's premier institution of Jewish higher education and the center for professional leadership development of Reform Judaism. A multi-campus academic and spiritual learning community, HUC-JIR builds vibrant progressive Judaism in North America, Israel and around the globe by:
- Studying the great issues of Jewish life, history and thought with an open, egalitarian, inclusive and pluralistic spirit;
- Educating innovative, visionary clergy and professionals who embody the sustaining values, responsibilities, practices and texts of Jewish tradition to inspire future generations; and
- Advancing the critical study of Judaism and Jewish culture in accordance with the highest standards of modern academic scholarship.

## HUC'S MISSION STATEMENT

*Our mission statement expresses our **identity**, our **work**, and our **values**.*

- Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) is North America's premier institution of Jewish higher education and the center for professional leadership development of Reform Judaism. A multi-campus academic and spiritual learning community, HUC-JIR builds vibrant progressive Judaism in North America, Israel and around the globe by:
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**THE MISSION OF  
HUC-JIR  
EXPRESSED IN TERMS OF OUR IDENTITY, WORK, AND VALUES**

**OUR IDENTITY**

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) is North America's premier institution of Jewish higher education and the center for professional leadership development of Reform Judaism. A multi-campus academic and spiritual learning community...

**OUR WORK**

HUC-JIR builds vibrant progressive Judaism in North America, Israel and around the globe...

Studying the great issues of Jewish life, history and thought...

Educating innovative, visionary clergy and professionals...to inspire future generations;

Advancing the critical study of Judaism and Jewish culture

**OUR VALUES**

Open, egalitarian, inclusive and pluralistic

Embody the sustaining values, responsibilities, practices and texts of Jewish tradition

Highest standards of modern academic scholarship

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO FULFILLING OUR MISSION



# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO OUR MISSION

## OUR IDENTITY

*First of three*

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**“North America.”** As a North American institution, HUC has a long and important history of serving a diversity of Jewish life in America. It was established in 1875 as the only religiously progressive seminary for the purposes of training Congregational Rabbis for the Reform Movement. Today, in the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, populations have significantly diversified by race, gender, and sexual orientation, shifted geographically to more than just three regions of “Midwest,” “East-,” and “West-” coasts. As an institution committed to remaining vital to all of North American Jewish life, how can we most effectively serve the diversity of that life, producing clergy and leadership prepared to lead the varied needs of the entire North American Jewish Public Sphere?

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO OUR MISSION

## OUR IDENTITY

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**“Premier institution of Jewish higher education”** Since the 1970s, the proliferation of dozens of departments of Jewish studies, programs for Jewish professional training, and new religiously progressive seminaries has left HUC in a more competitive environment. Even as competition with other liberal seminaries has significantly increased in the last 20 years, the total number of students annually enrolling in non-Orthodox rabbinical programs has declined almost 30%. If we want to remain “premier” how should we best leverage our comparative advantage of attracting the most students in any year? And which programs and activities can we do at a level of excellence and distinction while disengaging from others that we cannot?

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO OUR MISSION

## OUR IDENTITY

*Third of three*

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) is North America's premier institution of Jewish higher education and the center for professional leadership development of Reform Judaism. A multi-campus academic and spiritual learning community...

**“Reform Judaism”** “Reform Judaism” is both an ideal and a movement, defined by its philosophical core and by the individuals and institutions that support it. Both are seeing significant challenges. “Reform Judaism” as a specific approach to Jewish life is often defined by its rejection of religious practices. At other times, it is identified by its embrace of universal values (like inclusion and social justice) that emerge from it, rather than an affirmative theology. As a movement, Reform Judaism includes a network of over 800 congregations that support the URJ and HUC through RMAC. Even as this network is now the largest in North America it has significantly declined over the last 20 years. RMAC’s support of HUC’s budget in 2008 it represented just under 40% of our budget; in 2019 it represented 19%. HUC’s graduates continue to strengthen the URJ congregations even as they are finding meaningful careers outside of denominational institutions. At the same time, demand for future Reform clergy (rabbis and cantors) appears to be significant as anticipated retirements of Baby Boom clergy are expected to outpace these declines. How can we find ways to strengthen our congregational infrastructure and support our movement partners? How do we strengthen our partnership with the URJ to work more collaboratively in support of congregations? With our graduates seeking opportunities throughout the entirety of the Jewish Public Sphere, (Hillels, JCC’s, Jewish Federations, and the military, among others) how do we continue to build and support an entrepreneurial spirit of innovation that will create new demand for Jewish life both within and outside of traditional institutions?

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO OUR MISSION

## OUR WORK

*First of three*

HUC-JIR builds vibrant progressive Judaism in North America, Israel and around the globe...

Studying the great issues of Jewish life, history and thought...

Educating innovative, visionary clergy and professionals...to inspire future generations;

Advancing the critical study of Judaism and Jewish culture

“North American, Israel and around the globe.”

The Jewish People are now more populous in Israel than North America. As our population in Israel grows, so will our work to strengthen religiously progressive Reform Judaism there. Our entering Rabbinical School classes in 2020 reflected these shifts, with our incoming Israeli cohort of 10 students (our largest yet) compared to our incoming North American cohort of 22 (our smallest yet). Given that the challenges we are training for in Israel and North America are so very different, should we think differently about our work in these places? For example, in North America, Reform Judaism is the most prominent denominational affiliation even as denominational life is weakening. By contrast in Israel, we are seeing growth in Reform congregations and religiously progressive Judaism, even as the legitimacy of Reform Judaism is questioned by both the state and entrenched cultural practice. In North America, our students enter with limited knowledge of Hebrew, Jewish history, Jewish texts, and Zionism, challenges not faced by our Israeli students. Finally, while we currently operate programs in North America and Israel, our graduates continue to serve with distinction throughout the globe. Along with Jewish population growth in Israel that is expected to outpace that in North America, should we consider the development of a more robust global structure to support the growth of religiously progressive Judaism in Israel, and use that as a platform for growth in Europe, South America, and other global communities?

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO OUR MISSION

## OUR WORK

### *Second of three*

HUC-JIR builds vibrant progressive Judaism in North America, Israel and around the globe...

Studying the great issues of Jewish life, history and thought...

Educating **innovative, visionary clergy and professionals**...to inspire future generations;

Advancing the critical study of Judaism and Jewish culture

**“innovative, visionary clergy and professionals.”**

(i) In the coming decades, a significant number of Reform clergy will retire. As the seminary of the Reform Movement, we have a responsibility to meet the anticipated demand. Since the 1980s, the Jewish Public Sphere has drawn on an increasingly diverse number of clergy and non-clergy professionals within and outside of the congregation, with a growing demand outside of congregations, as well. HUC is singularly well positioned to meet these various clerical and non-clerical professional needs through its diversity of schools and programs. How best can we leverage this diversity to provide opportunities for cross-training of students between programs and schools to cultivate innovation and dynamism and make our students distinctive in the job market? How best can we partner with external institutions (as we have with USC, University of Cincinnati, and Hebrew University) to find ways to enrich our current students and faculty?

(ii) To create great alumni, we must start with the very best students. Recognizing that there are multiple excellences within each field of study, what practices must we use to identify new pools of potential students and cultivate their interest in Jewish religious and professional service? How do we continue to recruit the very best students even as we increase the quantity and diversity of students who have distinguished themselves with clear achievement prior to arrival? How can we marshal our limited resources to secure those with the greatest potential to strengthen our Reform Movement, the Jewish people and our world?

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO OUR MISSION

## OUR WORK

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**“Advancing the critical study...”** With the expansion of Jewish studies departments since the 1960s, dozens of academic institutions now seek to understand Judaism and Jewish culture in the manner pioneered by HUC in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. How do we maintain our distinctive role in promoting and developing Jewish life through building Jewish education, engagement, and identity? How might we build even stronger academic partnerships with other institutions to leverage these relationships for mutual benefit of our faculty and students? How can we best foster inter-institutional collaborations? Should we formalize other relationships, pursuing a strategy of joint appointments, shared students, and joint classes? And should we explore academic partnerships to help increase access to our academic holdings (AJA and Klau Library) to amplify and increase their impact for the sake of the Jewish People and the scholarly community?

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO OUR MISSION

## OUR VALUES

*First of three*

Open, egalitarian,  
inclusive and pluralistic

Embody the sustaining values, responsibilities, practices and texts of Jewish tradition

Highest standards of modern academic scholarship

Open, egalitarian, inclusive and pluralistic.

HUC is committed to these universal values because they are ethically just. They also allow us to attract students passionately committed to the pursuit of Justice in our world. They further express our core commitment to creating a safe and respectful environment for our students, faculty, staff, and volunteer leadership.

(i) Where these values once distinguished us from other institutions, they no longer do. Even some traditional seminaries now embrace many of these values within the framework of open-Orthodoxy. How can we continue to project our institution's commitment to these ideals, even as we maintain an open environment for individuals of all identities and political commitments?

(ii) These values emerge from core principles of Reform Judaism: (i) faith in reason as that which renders us *b'tzelem Elohim* (in God's image); (ii) embrace of moral and religious autonomy; and (iii) and commitment to *Torah* (text study), *Avodah* (ritual and ethical action), and *K'lal Yisrael* (the Jewish People) as instrumentally important towards achieving Justice. How might HUC promote these fundamental principles of Reform Judaism in order to more deeply root the universal values they promote?

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Highest standards of  
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## Embody...Jewish tradition.

With Jewish engagement declining throughout North America, our students frequently enter HUC without significant Jewish education or engagement in serious Jewish spiritual practice. This long-noted challenge leads us to a quandary: do we limit our potential student pools to those with the strongest existing education, background, and experience, or do we select for talent and future potential? How do we craft a dynamic curriculum that exposes them to the varied and rich experience of Jewish life and leaves time for development of deep exploration and experimentation with varieties of Jewish spiritual and ritual practices? How do we remain responsive to the evolving variety of Jewish life, particularly in North America, while continuing to recruit the best students? And how do we tailor a curriculum sensitive to the needs for academic study and spiritual reflection that require time to master?



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## Academic Scholarship.

HUC as a seminary was founded on an academic, rather than a “yeshivish,” model reflecting Reform Judaism’s commitment to reason and science as something to be incorporated into our religious understanding and practice. Such a commitment requires the maintenance of distinguished faculty and access to significant academic resources, including library holdings. How can we maintain a faculty that is adequately supported to achieve these standards of research, scholarship, teaching, and student mentorship? How do we create communities of intellectual vibrancy, with significant density of students and faculty that express the strength and vitality of our movement from which academic scholarship – and a commitment to study as a spiritual practice – can emerge?