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Professional identity formation in a liberal Israeli rabbinical seminary: Spiritual transformers in the learned curriculum

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ABSTRACT

We examined Israeli Reform rabbis' reflections on what components of their training most influenced the development of their rabbinical identity. Theoretical perspectives applied in planning the study and analyzing the data were: professional identity formation; pedagogies of training clergy; and taught vs. learned curriculum. We identified four common learning experiences as important in rabbinical identity formation: introspection; gaining ownership of classical texts; partner/group study; and teachers who were mentors/models. We argue that these 'spiritual transformers' express a search by the rabbinical students for a sense of connectedness, with themselves, with each other, and with the tradition and its bearers.

Historical background

The collapse of the medieval community and the rise of Enlightenment and emancipation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries challenged the traditional model of the rabbinate as a leadership elite with the authority to set *halacha* (Jewish law based on the interpretation of the Torah—the Pentateuch). In order for a rabbi to serve as an authority for Jews living in an open society, he¹ needed not only Torah knowledge, but also facility in navigating the larger cultural context. Recognizing the rabbinate as a profession requiring formal preparation, rabbinical seminaries were founded with the goal of aligning Torah study with the modern academy and facilitating acquisition of professional skills such as homiletics and pedagogy (Ellenson 2004, 283; Bremer 2009, 28–31).

Moving into the twentieth century, the rise of post-halachic streams of Judaism (Reform, secular, secular Zionist) posed new challenges for the rabbinate, raising the question of just what the role of Torah should be in the life and training of a rabbi serving a post-halachic community. To what extent should different skill sets play a central role (e.g., pastoral care, oratory, political activism, education, liturgical creativity, music, and marketing)? (see, e.g., Lieber [1987]; Shulman [2006]).

These challenges are exacerbated in the state of Israel, where the ordination and employment of rabbis fall under the jurisdiction of a government bureaucracy controlled by Orthodox rabbis, yet serving a citizenry, most whom do not aspire to a life governed by *halacha* (see, e.g., Sheleg 2008).

¹ Until the late twentieth century, due to the patriarchal structure of Jewish law and Jewish communities, all rabbis were men, even in the liberal movements (Nadell 1998).

Theoretical perspectives

The present study seeks to gain insight into the role of the Reform rabbi in Israel—and especially into the nature of preparation for that role—by examining rabbis’ own perceptions of their work and their training. We bring to this examination three theoretical perspectives, discussed in the sections that follow.

Professional identity

Nisan (2009) showed that a significant part of adult identity is defined by one’s professional life. Adults seek meaning and self-actualization through their work. According to Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo (2010), a professional identity combines both personal and social elements; is claimed and granted in social interaction; and evolves over time through experiences that enable professionals to gain insight into their preferences, talents, and values (Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo 2010). This “identity crafting” has been conceptualized as the development of an authentic self-concept (Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo 2010).

The literature on career choices in clergy and education suggests that in these fields, there is a deeper, perhaps spiritual, dimension to career choice—a sense of “calling” or “vocation.” (See, e.g., Foster et al. 2006, 298). Is there a difference between career choices in general and career choice involving a calling?

Gustafson (1982) suggests three characteristics of such a professional calling:

- a. The mastery of a body of theory, knowledge, and skills—and the reflectiveness and intelligence to adapt and apply these to real-life situations.
- b. Institutionalization: social controls—such as certification, membership, standards—that define one’s practice and one’s identification as a professional.
- c. A service orientation: It is assumed that one enters the profession not primarily (if at all) for personal enrichment or aggrandizement, but out of a moral commitment to “doing good”—to individuals, a community, or humankind.

A prior study of the motivations of Israeli Reform rabbinical students (Muszkat-Barkan 2013) found that the decision to study for the rabbinate was made at a relatively advanced age, growing out of a search for self-realization and advancement in a second career. It arose from the participants’ sense of incongruity among their personal, cultural, and professional lives. Entering the rabbinate offered the opportunity to align these in a profession reflecting a “calling”; that is, a desire to manifest their spiritual selves in their profession and to mediate Judaism to secular Israelis. Thus, we were interested in examining how preparation for a “calling” generally perceived as spiritual was reflected in the rabbinical students’ training experience, where spirituality can be defined as “the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual participates in the sacred—something greater than the self. It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose and ethical responsibility” (Yust et al. 2006, 8).

Pedagogies of training clergy

Foster et al. (2006) studied a sample of clergy training programs in the United States (Christian and liberal Jewish). By observing seminary teachers in action, and eliciting their reflections on their work, the authors identified four “signature” pedagogies that shed light on the trainers’ assumptions about the knowledge, skills, commitments, and personal qualities that characterize professional clergy (Foster et al. 2006, 33):

- Developing in students the facility for *interpreting* texts, situations, and relationships.

- Nurturing dispositions and habits integral to the spiritual and vocational *formation* of clergy.
- Heightening student consciousness of the content and agency of historical and contemporary *contexts*.
- Cultivating student *performance* in clergy roles and ways of thinking.

We were interested in exploring the relationships between these pedagogies as reflected in the curriculum and the graduates' perceived learning experiences.

“Taught” and “learned” curricula

The above four pedagogies are a useful lens for observing the intentions and the practices of seminary educators. However, in order to understand the professional-identity development process it is necessary not only to study the teachers' intentions but also to investigate the students' learning experiences.

Cuban (1992) distinguishes between three types of curriculum: “intended”— what is planned; “taught”—what teachers teach; and “learned”—what students learn. These may, of course, diverge widely from each other. Many different intentions can be ascribed to traditional Torah teaching/study (Kehat 2016, 19)—and the teacher's and the student's intentions are not always the same. For example: the teacher may teach a text intending to fulfill a divine commandment, while the student perceives that s/he is studying in order to acquire valuable professional skills; alternatively, the teacher may intend to impart important cognitive knowledge, while for the student the experience may have great personal, spiritual impact.

We hope that this research can help create a window on the students' experience, enabling those who train clergy to enrich and improve their work.

Description of Israel rabbinical program

The rabbinical training program of the Reform movement in Israel is explicitly directed toward social and spiritual change. It defines its ideal graduate as “... an outstanding facilitator and teacher ... familiar with the world of prayer and ceremony, internalizing its power as an emotional foundation of the individual and the community; able to create and lead ceremonies bringing sanctity into everyday life; imbued with a sense of mission for ‘repairing the world’” (<http://huc.edu/node/3667-Heb>). Graduates are expected to integrate the various tasks facing the liberal rabbi with an authentic sense of personal and professional self, and thus to serve as a change agent in Israeli society.

The Israel Rabbinical Program (IRP) of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC) opened in 1975 and by 2013 had ordained about eighty rabbis. The four-year course of study, two days per week, typically comprises:

- 72 semester hours classic Judaic texts (Bible, Talmud, Liturgy, etc.);
- 40 semester hours practical rabbinics (pastoral care, education, etc.) and electives.

In addition, students are required to obtain a master's degree in Judaic studies from a recognized university, and to serve in a professional internship one day a week.

Research methodology

This research follows the principles of qualitative research, using triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) of three sources of information: a written, criteria-focused questionnaire; interviews based on the written questionnaires using both open and criteria-focused questions; and an analysis of written curriculum materials of the IRP.

The study's aim was to describe the IRP graduates' perceptions of their experiences as seminary students, based on their own interpretation of the reality they experienced (Matthew and Huberman 2014; Lincoln and Guba 1985 178–94; see also Shkedi 2012).

Questionnaires

An e-mail was sent to all IRP graduates asking them to answer anonymously an Internet questionnaire, with an option to volunteer to be interviewed. Thirty-seven responded to the questionnaire. Of these, thirty-three agreed to be interviewed. Thirteen interviewees were chosen, based on their accessibility and an attempt to reach a cross section of the gender and age/experience of the graduates.

The questionnaire included questions on:

- Jewish background, educational and professional experience;
- Present professional and voluntary activities;
- Motivation for entering the program; how they felt they changed during—and since—the program;
- Description of and reflection on one or two courses that particularly influenced their development.

Interviews

The thirteen criteria-focused telephone interviews were conducted after the data from the questionnaire were collected. They lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed *verbatim*. Interviewees were asked to elaborate on their current practice and perception of their rabbinate and to choose a metaphor for their rabbinate in order to illuminate the meanings of their experiences (Carpenter 2008). We asked interviewees to elaborate on their responses in the questionnaire, and to describe and interpret the most significant experiences in their rabbinical training.

Data analysis

Data analysis attempted to identify the “learned curriculum” reflecting graduates' perceptions regarding their professional identity formation in the IRP. We looked for theoretical concepts to emerge from a close reading of the questionnaires and interview transcripts. Throughout the process, we worked collaboratively, reading the transcripts multiple times, arriving at consensus about the emerging themes and categories—and the inter-relations among categories (Shkedi 2012).

Reliability and limitations of the study

Both of the researchers knew most of the interviewees well, having served on the faculty of the IRP. On the one hand, this relationship with many of the interviewees might have encouraged them to speak freely and honestly. On the other hand, the interviewees might have emphasized factors that they expected would gain the researchers' approval. In order to increase objectivity interviewees were asked not to talk about the researchers' classes in which they had participated.

Table 1. Descriptions of Interviewees.

| Code name | Gender | Age | Years since ordination | Current activity |
|-----------|--------|-----|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Gail | F | 36 | 2 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Ariana | F | 48 | 2 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Yehuda | M | 50 | 6 | Education |
| Moshe | M | 54 | 21 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Gali | F | 42 | 5 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Anna | F | 55 | 0 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Hannah | F | 50 | 4 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Eti | F | 42 | 9 | Education |
| Ziva | F | 48 | 3 | Education |
| Ephraim | M | 42 | 7 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Noam | M | 47 | 6 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Naomi | F | 35 | 1 | Congregational rabbinate |
| Nili | F | 59 | 7 | Education |

The questionnaire and interviews were in Hebrew; responses quoted herein were translated by the authors. Responses quoted anonymously are from the questionnaire; those from code-named respondents are from interviews. Although this study is focused on a specific group of Reform rabbis, we believe that it raises important issues in the training of educational and religious leaders in general.

Description of the findings

Profile of the sample

Questionnaire respondents:

Female: 21, Male: 16

Range of ages (in 2013): 33–66; average: 47

Ordination year: 1990–2013

Age at ordination: 29–62; average: 41

Average years since ordination: 7

Current professional activity:

Congregational rabbinate: 16

Education (formal/informal): 16

Administration: 3

Other (free-lance): 2

Interviewees:

See [Table 1](#)

General reflections

Of the thirty-seven rabbis who completed the questionnaire, twenty-four responded to the open question: “How did you change in the course of the rabbinical program?” The most prevalent comment indicated that the graduates felt that they had grown personally, and had developed a mature and self-conscious religious identity and/or belief system. In addition, some respondents mentioned the acquisition of skills, especially self-confidence:

I matured, I acquired the ability to take a stand, to speak out on my views.

I developed a love of learning, and interpretive skills.

I acquired a lot of knowledge, experience, and self-confidence.

A related, but distinctive theme can be seen in repeated explicit references to development of a *professional* identity as a rabbi: “Most important was the development of my professional identity; when I started, I didn’t really know what a rabbi was—and when I finished I knew for sure that I was a rabbi, and I knew what that meant to me.”

The relationship between the process of formal learning and the feeling of personal growth was mentioned in some of the comments: “I confronted issues of identity and interpersonal relations, as I was exposed to new content and concepts; all this led to personal and spiritual growth”; “A new world opened for me; I encountered people, materials, and experiences that influenced and enriched my identity.”

The Reform rabbinate in Israel, according to our respondents, is both a calling with a personal faith agenda and a new professional role.

Ariana: The journey at HUC was to connect to the heart and the soul. . . . Ultimately, what I wanted to do was to see how it is possible to speak with people about faith, and to educate them to belief.

Anna: I essentially create my own rabbinate *ex nihilo* in a place where there is no beginning, no system which I am joining. I test out each new idea that appeals to me, and what works—works.

Images of the rabbinate

When asked to suggest a metaphor (Carpenter 2008) that describes their rabbinate, most of the interviewees chose images reflecting a range of different activities, among which the rabbi moves in a certain state of tension: acrobat, sun (radiating in all directions), compressed spring, octopus, and mediator (Ariana, Anna, Hanna, Ephraim, Noam, Nili).

In each case the rabbis placed themselves at the center, beset by the centrifugal forces of diverse communal needs, their own ideas and aspirations, and the pressures of earning a livelihood. A similar image, the *mosaic* (Gali), reflects the diversity of the role; and Ziva’s image of the rabbinate as *swimming* expresses the sense of constant motion from one challenge to the next and from goal to goal. All of these seem to express feelings of being pulled in different directions.

A few interviewees suggested images conveying a less conflictual and more passive perspective. Eti saw the rabbinate as a book, in which each person can write—and in which there can occasionally be dialogue between pages; Gail used the image of agriculture, where to get from sowing to sprouting requires time—and the influence of many factors. These images place the rabbi not at the center of the action, but included in it as observer and facilitator of the creation of something new out of the convergence of diverse elements.

These perspectives on their actual rabbinate can guide us in examining the graduates’ responses regarding the components of their rabbinical studies that most prepared them for their roles.

Significant courses and pedagogies

The emphasis of the respondents on processes of personal identity formation in the program, combined with their description of their multiple tasks in the rabbinate, led us to expect that they would identify as most significant those courses that were process-oriented, developing professional rabbinical skills. However, that was not the case. In response to the question, “Looking back, what course(s) were particularly significant in your training as a rabbi?”

the breakdown of courses listed (up to two per respondent—some only listed one) was as follows:

- Talmud, halacha, Bible, Jewish thought, liturgy, comparative religion: 41
- Pastoral care, education, personal theology, practical rabbinics, homiletics, student community, student worship: 26

Thus, “hard-core” academic courses in the Jewish studies disciplines were seen as more significant for personal professional development than were the courses that addressed that development directly.

The questionnaire asked, “Why was this course important in your eyes?” Aside from answers referring to the general importance of the subject, a number of respondents referred to the impact of the course on their personal and/or professional identity. This theme was strongly echoed in personal interviews.

Learners’ experiences: Spiritual transformers

Reviewing the data, we noticed that it was indeed possible to associate the graduates’ reflections with the four pedagogies identified by Foster et al. (2006). However, in looking more closely, we observed a different set of categories that cut across these pedagogies. We suggest that these categories are an expression of the “learned curriculum” (Cuban 1992), as distinguished from the “taught curriculum” expressed in the signature pedagogies. The deconstruction and reconstruction of the data led to analytic generalization and extrapolation to a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of the types of learning experience that were seen by the graduates as contributing to their “identity crafting” process (Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo 2010). From this analysis, we found four experiences perceived as fostering spiritual transformation; we identified these “spiritual transformers” as introspection, gaining ownership, *chavruta* (partner study), and mentorship/modeling.

1. *Introspection*: Courses that allowed/required students to look at their own beliefs, abilities, and commitments.

Gali: “The way in which our teacher sang a Hasidic melody: The experience was one of holiness. The sound-box that is the voice and not the prayer lets me encounter what I can and cannot do, where I find within me these abilities.”

This process could occur in professional development courses, as exemplified by Gali’s experience. However, it took place in text courses as well. Indeed, in many cases, students emphasized that it was not the formal content of the course that had impact, but rather the reflective experience that it stimulated:

Hannah: It’s not what I learned in the course but where it touched me. . . . It’s not a matter of how many Talmudic legends I learned but the places in which I was required to respond that were significant for me. Thus a way was opened for me, an opening to writing and to my own internal matters.

Eti: The course in Talmud with D. and S. allowed me to understand my identity. What are the things towards which I want to educate and to lead? We started from the text, we swam in it, and we returned to it. The text was inspiration and challenge. It was a mirror to us. You look at the text and see whether you are reflected in it or not.

Gail: Personal Theology in year 3, even though in retrospect I don’t really know how much I can say that I know something about what is theology. . . . It was important to me that we had the possibility to sit and speak with the group about our beliefs in a way that was neither cynical nor closed. We allowed ourselves to open up. The writing of a paper on personal

theology was very important to me; to give myself the chance to write, to articulate for myself my thoughts.

It appears that the introspective experience is a powerful element of the program. Even seemingly “academic” text courses are seen as demanding of the students an often difficult process of reflection and self-examination, as a catalyst in identity formation.

2. *Gaining ownership*: Gaining a sense of ownership of the text (i.e., self-perception as an “expert” with the ability to navigate and apply the subject matter independently), a sense of oneself as having the ability to navigate and apply the subject matter independently, and creating personal/professional ties to the subject matter by finding in it a source for one’s own values. Note that while ownership implies a degree of mastery of the material, the two are not synonymous: ownership refers to a subjective feeling of being an expert.

Ariana: I took with me from these classes theological insights, and a deep, fundamental understanding that the Talmud is really pluralistic. Also a very strong connection to values and morality.

Noam: The liturgy course served—and serves—as a central anchor. It became a central axis of my educational practice in the school [where I serve].

Hannah: The bodies of knowledge that were significant for me were those that I needed to use in order to do something for which I needed to learn. It was practical knowledge, and I asked the questions for which I needed to know the specific answers.

Ephraim: The fact that we analyzed the thinking of the Rabbis and that brought us to creation and to our own creativity.

3. *Chavruta (partner study)*: The course—or the program as a whole—as a social platform for shaping rabbinical identity. Graduates’ reflections emphasized the significance of the collegial experience—both in specific courses where *chavruta* study and small group discussion provided intimacy and a sense of belonging—and in the program as a whole, where the community of students provided spiritual support, models, and a safe sounding board.

Ariana: A small group in which each presents his own faith concept. This requirement to sit and articulate and bring the significant texts was wonderful. Afterwards, to present to other people, to open up our guts; there was a lot of intimacy.

Eti: Here they helped me to focus, to build, to spread wings. What happened during breaks and among friends; ... To understand who I am over against—and together with—worlds of others who are amazing.

Gali: It was significant to be part of the community of students.... I stayed because of the feeling of “home,” of belonging. It was not the world of content that held me, but the feeling of struggling with significant questions.... If the study [program] had been individual I would not have stayed.

It seems that shared experience created a sense of intimacy, and required students to listen to each other and to articulate and present their own beliefs. This ongoing discourse helped mirror and shape their process of spiritual formation, and provided emotional and practical support in meeting the challenging demands of the program.

Hannah: Most significant for me in rabbinical studies was that we were together, a community of people occupied with forming its professional rabbinical identity.... While I was studying I had a congregation and worked in it. The people with whom I worked were not the “refiner’s furnace” for me, but rather, the people with whom I studied; that was most significant—the *chavruta* of those who were with me.

4. *Mentorship/modeling*: Relating to the teacher as a model to be internalized, and seeing the teacher–student relationship as a resource for personal growth. Several features in graduates’ reflections on significant teacher–student relationships stand out:
- The teacher’s deep and broad knowledge of the traditional text.
 - The teacher as a model of integration between traditional text and lived values.
 - Charisma, authority, and “distance” were not mentioned—but rather, modesty and accessibility were emphasized.
 - Explicit awareness by the student of his/her internalization of the teacher’s voice.

Ariana: The spirit that she brought, her way of seeing, her deep understandings are always with me. Also a very strong link between values and morality ... understandings about life. Theological understandings. First for my own life and from there to the lessons I teach; it influences the way I design a lesson and the directions in which I lead people.

Gail: She was very different from the other teachers. She came from another world, and I felt that I received from her a significant lesson in Torah study for its own sake, and in great openness of thought. And perhaps because of who she was: her personality, and the way she taught us. Something in her modesty. I felt that this was someone very authentic, who modeled the approach she taught us.

Ephraim: The integration of her personality and her way were very meaningful in my eyes. Being anchored in the text. ... But the main thing was her way—she enabled me to see myself as an interpretive resource, who has something to contribute. This is what made her special as an empowering teacher.

The experience of personal, human encounter with teachers was mentioned repeatedly:

Etti: The ability to come to his office at just about any time and to sit and talk was significant. This support, to know that it was there; and the thought: what would he say about this; if I were to tell him, how would he respond?

Naomi: He is a formative personality for me, a unique mensch. One can’t separate. ... The personal elements are the most important. Anything that allows the private and intensive encounter between teacher and student. The “rabbi-disciple” relationship doesn’t find expression in lectures, but in private meetings.

The model of the teacher–student relationship that emerges from these reflections is not that of the master delivering the truth to the disciple *ex cathedra*; rather, the teacher and student are spiritual and intellectual equals imbued with mutual respect and human concern. The teacher serves as a sympathetic model, coach, and foil as the student observes, seeks, and challenges, along the path to forming his/her own identity.

Discussion

Historical change of context

The central place of personal autonomy in liberal Jewish life—and the attendant diminution of the place of rabbinical authority (Cohen and Eisen 2000; Batnitzky 2011)—challenge both the purposes and the substance of Torah study and the role of the teacher in the seminary (Meron 2009). However, in analyzing IRP graduates’ perceptions of what most shaped their personal and professional preparation, we were surprised to encounter elements corresponding to traditional rabbinical preparation.

Graduates indicated the centrality of the study of traditional text, of teachers who are role models and mentors, and of *chavruta* study in their professional identity development—as well as emphasizing how each of these contributed to the introspective process of spiritual formation. Thus, it seems that these rabbis saw their rabbinical identity as having been formed—in a modern, professional-training setting—through experiences that were central in pre-modern (traditional) rabbinical preparation.

Liberal rabbinate as a calling

Both in a previous study (Muszkat-Barkan 2013) and in the current study the Israeli students in the IRP were vocal about their personal search for self-realization. They expressed a calling through their wish to align cultural (textual knowledge), professional (ordination), and personal (actualization of values and spiritual development) dimensions of their lives in their rabbinate. These three components correspond to Gustafson's (1982) definition of "calling." This can serve as an important clue in understanding our finding that the rabbis perceived that the key elements of their professional identity formation had been those fostering spiritual transformation.

Current professional context

Our findings show that Reform rabbis in Israel see their profession as a dynamic and sometimes hectic aggregation of improvisations and responses to needs. Most of the graduates have to clear their path and create their own rabbinate, sometimes in a hostile public environment (Azulai and Tabory 2008; Muszkat-Barkan 2013). Therefore, they are involved in many activities such as advocacy, teaching in schools and in various types of adult programs, leading services and communities, conducting life cycle ceremonies, and more—often in scattered settings (i.e., juggling multiple part-time commitments).

In such an uncertain and fragmented reality, when looking back on their professional preparation they express appreciation for those learning components that empowered them personally and helped them gain a sense of professional identity. This is congruent with Nisan's (2009) finding that adults seek meaning and self-actualization through their work, and with Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo's (2010) description of the transition to a leadership role as entailing a process of identity re-imagination. Many of our respondents indeed talked about a transformational process during their rabbinical studies. Their remarks show that they perceived their studies as contributing not only to what they know, or what they know how to do—but to who they are.

Seminary intentions: Vision and pedagogies

The stated mission of the IRP is to prepare rabbis with the knowledge, skills, and qualities needed to facilitate spiritual and social change in Israeli society (<http://huc.edu/node/3667-Heb>). In this regard, IRP is typical: Seminaries are aware of the changing reality in which their graduates will serve and lead, and seek to prepare clergy for emerging challenges. In analyzing clergy education in North America, Foster et al. (2006) identified universal "signature" pedagogies. Despite differing belief systems, the seminaries all sought to develop in their students skills and habits of interpretation, contextualization, and performance, as well as to support the formation of a personal religious identity. We found in the IRP graduates'

reflections references to these four pedagogies. However, these findings do not tell the entire story of our participants. Since they talked about their seminary studies as transforming their personal and professional identity, we sought to understand what learning components were transformational—the “learned curriculum” (Cuban 1992). We were able to characterize four recurrent types of learning experience, which we term “spiritual transformers.” In articulating these, we hope to contribute to the construction of more effective programs for the professional development of rabbis—and clergy in general.

The common feature of these transformers is that they are all relational (Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo 2010). They all aim to create connectedness—both inwardly, with oneself (introspection)—and outwardly, with what transcends the self: with the Torah in its broad meaning (gaining ownership), with colleagues (*chavruta*), and with significant teachers (model/mentor).

The spiritual transformers

Introspection. The graduates appreciated opportunities to delve into subject matter, especially classical Jewish text, when those studies facilitated their own search for meaning, pushing them to explore their own beliefs and commitments. Sometimes, indeed, the knowledge itself was secondary to the spiritual insights gained. This finding echoes Nisan’s emphasis on the centrality, in leadership training, of opportunities to discuss and re-think personal goals, purposes, and commitments (Nisan 2009). Studying Torah as a traditional rabbinical praxis is seen by the graduates as the authentic platform for personal professional growth (Kehat 2016, 19, n. 19). It seems to us that the importance of this transformer stems from the graduates’ perception of their rabbinate as more dependent on their own authenticity (Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo 2010) as Jews than on specific knowledge.

The graduates valued courses and learning activities that enabled them to achieve expertise in Jewish texts. Their responses reflect aspects of expertise as described by Feltovich, Prietula, and Ericsson (2006, 55–57), in particular: intimate knowledge of the material; the mastery of sufficient knowledge and skills to be able to have an integrated overview—and thus to interpret and apply text in new situations; and the ability to reflect on their own processes of interpretation and application. This finding corroborates the theory of “teaching for understanding” (Wiske 1998) that emphasizes not only the ability of students to absorb new knowledge—but requires applying it in new settings.

We find another dimension of connectedness in the graduates’ emphasis on the importance of collegial relationships as expressed in *chavruta* learning. This is congruent with two unique characteristics of adult learning and leadership development: the centrality of friendship/colleagueship in the process of “self-imagination” and identity transition (Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo 2010); and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) suggestion that professional identity is shaped by participation in a “community of practice.” According to the graduates’ reflections, small group discussion provided the intimacy and support needed to face big questions of faith and Jewish life and to reshape their own identity together with colleagues struggling with the same issues.

Teacher as model/mentor. Our graduates most appreciated teachers who modeled integration between traditional text and life: they singled out teachers who demonstrated not only deep knowledge in their subject matter but also an investment in the text as a source of values to be lived. Our participants were explicit in their desire to internalize these teachers’ voices. This finding echoes the importance of “relational methods” in the process of leadership development (Ibarra, Herminia, and Ramo 2010, 28). We believe that the desire for connectedness

can explain this appreciation. Our graduates see in these teachers living models of connection between belief and action, an authentic Jewish voice. These models serve to guide them in their own journey of imagining themselves as Reform rabbis in Israel.

Implications

At first glance it seems that our findings point to a high degree of self-centeredness in rabbis' reflections on their professional preparation. The learning experiences identified as significant were all focused on the subjective, on the individual's identity development. One might have expected—hoped for—among rabbis, a selfless devotion to Torah and the Jewish people. However, on closer examination, this appears to be a false dichotomy, as in talking about themselves, the graduates were actually speaking about their yearning to be part of something transcending themselves, of a synchronic and diachronic tapestry of connections—with teachers, with colleagues, with Jewish tradition and text. In this sense, we can see their learning as an old–new interpretation of devotion to Torah study for the sake of integrating Jewish wisdom, spirit, community, and self.

Note that this perspective may pose a challenge to professional training programs. As mentioned above, a sense of ownership is a subjective category, while mastery is generally measured by objective methods and criteria. A student's feeling of ownership may not correspond to his/her teacher's evaluation of mastery. Institutions must confront this tension and make explicit their priorities.

Applications

Examination of the “learned curriculum” can serve as a useful and important opportunity for any educational institution to explore outcomes—and the gaps between those outcomes and their intentions. Our study shows that the graduates of the IRP valued relational methods that facilitated spiritual transformation: They strove for connectedness. Learning opportunities that enabled this process were perceived as most significant in preparing them for their roles as rabbis. This research raises several questions for both researchers and practitioners:

- Further research is needed on learned curriculum in religious leadership training programs for adults. There is a need for deeper understanding of processes of identity transition in these programs. We defined four “spiritual transformers,” but further refinement may be called for—and there may well be others.
- How should the observed centrality of spiritual transformation affect the curriculum planning process—the balance between quantitative goals (what the graduates are supposed to be able to do and to know) and qualitative goals (who they are supposed to become)?
- Adult learners in the process of identity transition—especially educational and religious leaders—look for opportunities to work with significant others—authentic selves. This implies the need to support appropriate faculty development processes, as well as enhancement of the student “community of learners.”
- We suggest that professional training programs seeking to develop leadership for social and spiritual change may themselves need to undergo a perpetual institutional process of “self-imagination” regarding their social and cultural vision.

In many respects, the modern liberal rabbinate can be categorized as a profession like other professions: preparation involves passing exams and fulfilling requirements, proving knowledge and demonstrating skills. However, the graduates of the IRP testify that the core of their

professional identity development is transformative. For them, the defining experiences of their rabbinical preparation were those that furthered their spiritual development. We suggest that this finding reflects the social and spiritual challenge of our time: the search for connectedness—between the individual and the collective, the past and the present, tradition and renewal.

Preparing rabbis and other educational leaders for this reality requires that spiritual formation be a guiding theme in program planning and evaluation. On the one hand, there is something paradoxical about the attempt to engineer transformative experiences; however, leaving them in the realm of the informal—or even the accidental—seems to us a failure of imagination. In training rabbis for our time, one must keep in mind that academic knowledge and professional skills may be necessary but not sufficient. Rabbinical identity is formed through a spiritual journey leading to a sense of connectedness with the tradition and its bearers, past and present.

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