



STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

“What Calls the Question?”

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What Calls the Question?

The June 2015 report by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, commissioned by the HUC-JIR Board of Governors, begins with the following assertion:

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform movement, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis stand at a crossroads. It is a moment in Jewish history rife with challenges to traditional institutions. HUC-JIR, in particular, faces a set of critical decisions about how to shape its education programs to meet new and emerging needs and opportunities for Reform clergy...¹

Six years later—with each of the three branches of the Reform movement managing through a pandemic and independent ethics investigations—that statement rings even more true now. RMAC dues have declined,² rabbinical school enrollment remains relatively low,³ increasing numbers of synagogues are closing or consolidating,⁴ and religious affiliation is declining in the Jewish community in North America⁵ and more broadly across the globe.⁶ Add to that list the fact that after sustaining annual structural deficits of \$1.5 million per year on average since at least 2010, HUC-JIR now faces a projected record \$8.8 million deficit in fiscal year 2022.⁷ Yes, we certainly stand at a crossroads.

In a December 2020 Faculty Council discussion of campus placement, former HUC-JIR Provost Rabbi Michael Marmor observed that multiple factors are now forcing us to “call the question” about the configuration of HUC-JIR’s rabbinical school and the future of our other programs, questions that internal and external pressure prevented HUC-JIR from asking when faced with the financial crisis of 2008-2009. Most of these factors have been at play for a number of years, long before COVID-19 exacerbated the urgency of addressing the long-standing educational, structural, and financial challenges facing the College-Institute.

Prompted by the pandemic, institutions of higher education are changing. Synagogues and other Jewish organizations are changing. We are being challenged to rethink our prior conceptions of community and reimagine what it means to gather and learn. The urgency is upon us. The responsibility and opportunities are upon us. After calling the question, the task at hand is to work together to come up with answers that will allow us to respond to the present moment, prepare for an uncertain but promising future, and best fulfill HUC-JIR's vitally important mission.

Trends in Jewish Seminary Education

In a chapter in the 2014 book, *Keeping Faith in Rabbis: A Community Conversation on Rabbinical Education*, Rabbi Ellen Flax summarizes the changing nature of the Jewish community at that time:

There are fewer non-Orthodox Jews, and a smaller percentage of this group is electing to affiliate with a traditional synagogue. There is an increasing concentration of Jews in a smaller number of metropolitan areas, leading to the closure of synagogues in less populous areas. Congregations, even those affiliated with a movement, are willing to hire graduates of less-established seminaries.⁸

Given all this, Flax concludes: "It is not unreasonable to suggest that the rabbinate, and the market for rabbis, is undergoing a significant shake up." This essay, like the others in the book, suggests ways that the training of rabbis should change to meet the evolving needs of a 21st-century Jewish world. For co-editor Hayim Herring, this means training rabbis "to act strategically, and [to be] secure enough in their rabbinical selves to take the risks of wisely leading us through uncharted territory with capable partners."⁹

Recent changes in rabbinical education have involved both how and where Jewish students train to become rabbis. A March 2014 Jewish Telegraphic Agency article, entitled "So you've decided to become a rabbi...",¹⁰ examines two intersecting trends: an increase in North American rabbinical schools and a decrease in the number of students interested in becoming rabbis. This imaginary letter to a prospective rabbinical student begins:

Getting into a seminary shouldn't be too hard. During the decade between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, four consequential new rabbinical schools opened in America: the liberal Orthodox Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in Riverdale, N.Y.; the Conservative movement's Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles; and two nondenominational seminaries, at Hebrew College near Boston and at the Academy for Jewish Religion in Los Angeles.¹⁰

In addition to the growing number of accredited residential-rabbinical schools,¹¹ online programs have expanded options for rabbinical education even further through distance learning programs offered by organizations like ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal and the Jewish Spiritual Leaders Institute.

The JTA article goes on to explain that while the number of rabbinical *schools* was increasing, the number of non-Orthodox residential rabbinical *students* has been decreasing: “Ironically, these schools are now competing for fewer students.” The article calculates that the total number of non-Orthodox rabbinical students in the U.S. declined by 28 percent in a decade, from 118 new rabbinical students enrolled in 2004 to 84 in 2013. In the seven years after this article appeared, that figure declined further, with an average of 80 first-year students in North American residential-rabbinical programs from 2014-2020.¹²

Analyzing enrollment data for those non-Orthodox rabbinical seminaries, a February 2015 article in *The Forward* shows that enrollment at denominationally-affiliated rabbinical programs had been going down as interest in nondenominational rabbinical schools had been going up, particularly at Hebrew College.¹³ The article observes: “Non-Orthodox rabbinical schools have always been heavy on infrastructure and short on students. The five leading non-Orthodox rabbinical schools in the United States own nine campuses between them.” It is important to note that even during a time of increasing rabbinical student enrollment,¹⁴ Hebrew College decided it was no longer willing to bear the costs of that type of infrastructure. In August 2018, Hebrew College announced the sale of its Newton Centre campus in order “to rededicate resources to educational programs and people.”¹⁵ In March 2021, Hebrew College unveiled plans for a new shared campus on the site of a nearby synagogue, “a unique collaboration to create a hub of Jewish life and learning.”¹⁶

Trends in Seminary Education

The issues in rabbinical school education in the Jewish press in 2014 and 2015 reflect broader trends in seminary education. In an article published in January 2020, Frank Yamada, Executive Director of The Association of Theological Schools, examines how changes in the religious landscape in North America and in higher education are leading to changes in graduate theological education. Yamada summarizes some of the “tectonic shifts” that have rattled higher education over the past two to three decades:

Several years of enrollment declines have led to an increasing number of colleges that have closed or merged. Digital technologies have changed how many schools deliver their educational mission...The rising price tag of a high fixed-cost model of education has put strain on university boards while dramatically increasing the amount of student debt...Moreover, the relevance of a college education has been increasingly called into question, citing the well-rehearsed gap between what students have learned and the skills the labor market demands.¹⁷

Seminaries and other graduate divinity or theological schools have been forced to grapple with these issues, along with the impact of significant changes in religious affiliation and practice in the United States. Citing the 2015 Pew Research Center Study of “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Yamada highlights a number of phenomena that are playing out in the Jewish community as well: “congregational attendance is down and ‘graying,’” the number of people who identify as religiously unaffiliated is increasing (especially among millennials),

denominations are less important, and religion has “decreasing influence in matters of our common life and the public good.”¹⁸

Long before the pandemic, these factors in higher education and the North American religious landscape were forcing seminaries to make changes to their organizational and financial models, as well as to their curricula. Yamada observes that when “student populations and budgets are leaner, schools tend to consolidate”¹⁹ or exercise other options: “decreasing or shifting the property footprint of a campus; school relocations; centralizing extension campuses; shared-service agreements among multiple schools; shared faculty positions.”²⁰ Andover Newton Theological School, the oldest graduate seminary in the nation, made this type of major structural change in 2015 when the over 200-year-old school announced plans to sell its 20-acre campus. Two years later, they formally affiliated with Yale University. Daniel Aleshire, then Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, commented: “Andover Newton’s move is likely a harbinger of what lies ahead for about 80 percent of America’s 100 mainline seminaries...Built more than a century ago, they’ve relied primarily on residential education models that are fast becoming unsustainably expensive and ill-suited to current needs.”²¹

As the coronavirus crisis continues, for many undergraduate and graduate institutions finding ways to execute their missions with greater vitality and sustainability is no longer a desired objective, but a dire necessity. An April 2020 article in *Christianity Today* investigates how several seminaries are coping with pressures that have been exacerbated by the pandemic:

For years, evangelical seminaries have been making strategic changes to deal with trends in theological education, financial constraints, or both. Some had restructured curricula, reduced campus sites, sold property, cut budgets, and deepened partnerships with fellow ministries and churches.... Then the coronavirus sent those plans into overdrive.²²

Another recent article considers the future of seminary education at Union Theological Seminary and other schools in light of the existential threats created by the pandemic. Isaac B. Sharp, Director of Certificate Programming and Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary, predicts:

In the coming years, more and more divinity schools and seminaries will be forced to consider the excruciating decision to close their doors forever. The institutions that survive will be those with enough agility to develop timely responses to the rapid changes taking place across the social, cultural, religious, and educational landscapes. With any luck, the institutions that thrive will be those that adapt creatively and proactively rather than defensively and reactively.²³

The pandemic has proven that nearly every organization these days needs to be able to act with agility and adaptability, especially those with financial challenges. A February 2021 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, entitled “The Great Contraction,” offers advice for schools in that situation. The article warns that “slashing budgets alone...isn’t enough to survive.” What will it

take to succeed? “Struggling colleges must cut strategically and adapt to a new way of operating, in order to find a way to eventually grow and thrive.” The potential for future growth and vibrancy should provide the incentive to endure the trials and tribulations involved in making painful but necessary strategic changes. The article advises: “Colleges may succeed in positioning themselves for a future in which they can grow, but that depends on the strategic decisions they make today.”²⁴

Asking Existential Questions and Making Strategic Change

This research shows that HUC is not alone in needing to ask existential questions and make bold, difficult changes. Sharp frames the questions this way:

Faced with these complex challenges, small, independent theological schools, in particular, must continually ask themselves the kinds of existential questions with enormous implications: Who are we? What do we have to offer the world that is unique? How can we do what we do better? What are we not doing that we should be?²⁵

In his recent HUC-JIR Cincinnati Graduation Address, Rabbi Samuel Joseph, Eleanor Sinsheimer Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Jewish Education and Leadership Development, posed several other foundational questions for us to wrestle with at this juncture: “What is a sense of place? What happened to it during pandemic? What will be the new normal?” Noting that “all the unconscious assumptions we learned over time were called into question” once teaching and learning shifted online in March 2020, Rabbi Joseph urges us to think expansively and imaginatively about what a more hybrid school might look like in the future. He enjoins us to take advantage of what the pandemic taught us about our capacity for experimentation and change. “There is no return to normal,” he asserts. Therefore, the challenge at hand is “to make the post-COVID HUC new-normal learning experience a special place”: a place of meaning and connection, a place of “growth and stretch,” a place “where each of us can bring questions, doubts, and challenges,” a place where we are “producing the best future Jewish leaders, and the best future scholars of Judaica and Hebraica possible.”²⁶

To realize our most exalted visions of what HUC might become, we “call the question” with the hope that we can come to consensus about answers that will ensure that our multi-campus, legacy institution can not only survive, but thrive. As the Cohen Center study reminds us, HUC’s “tradition of evolution in response to changes in the contemporary Jewish community dates back to the founding of the institution in the 1870s.” We thus perpetuate our storied past and secure our vibrant future by making the strategic changes this moment demands.

¹ “Envisioning the Future of Reform Clergy Education,” produced for HUC-JIR by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (June 2015).

² In 2006, the generous support of URJ congregations through Reform Movement Affiliation Commitment dollars (RMAC, formerly MUM) amounted to almost \$14 million per year; RMAC revenue is projected to be no more than \$5.4 million for each of the next three years. This is a conservative estimate at this time based on URJ projections.

³ Incoming rabbinical school enrollment tends to fluctuate. In the 10 year period from 2010-2021, first year classes at HUC were as high as 41 (2010) and 39 (2018) and as low as 22 (2019) and 23 (2015 and 2020). Thirty rabbinical students entered the College-Institute in the fall of 2021.

⁴ See, for example, Steven Windmueller, “[Mergers and More: What Is Happening to the American Synagogue, and Why?](#)” in *The Jewish Journal* (November 12, 2020).

⁵ See the [2020 Pew Research Study](#): “In general, Jews are far less religious than American adults as a whole, at least by conventional measures of religious observance in Pew Research Center surveys.... The percentage of U.S. Jews who do not claim any religion (27%) – i.e., who identify as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular,’ religiously – is virtually identical to the percentage of U.S. adults overall in these categories (28%).”

⁶ Ronald F. Inglehart, “[Giving Up on God: The Global Decline of Religion](#),” *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2020).

⁷ The FY22 deficit of \$8.8 million includes \$1.0 million related to HUC’s historical reconciliation efforts.

⁸ Rabbi Ellen Flax, “The Seminary and the Non-Pulpit Rabbinate,” in *Keeping Faith in Rabbis: A Community Conversation on Rabbinical Education*, ed. Hayim Herring and Ellie Roscher (Avenida Books, 2014), 63.

⁹ Rabbi Hayim Herring, “Introduction,” in *Keeping Faith in Rabbis*, 3.

¹⁰ Uriel Heilman, “[So you’ve decided to become a rabbi...](#)” in *JTA* (March 14, 2014). The Ziegler School was founded as an independent West Coast rabbinical school in 1996. Yeshivat Chovevei Torah opened in 1999. The Academy for Jewish Religion in California was founded in 2001. Hebrew College opened its Rabbinical School in 2003.

¹¹ The accredited residential North American non-orthodox rabbinical schools include HUC-JIR (Reform), The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) (Conservative), the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) (Reconstructionist), the Ziegler School at the American Jewish University (AJU) (Conservative), and Hebrew College (Pluralistic). The Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR) (Pluralistic) received accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools in 2020; students at AJR can take 25%-90% of their courses online.

¹² During that time period, the combined number of rabbinical students at HUC, RRC, JTS, AJU, and Hebrew College has fluctuated between a low of 68 in 2015 and a high of 87 in 2017. There were 84 incoming rabbinical students in 2020 and 78 in 2021 (HUC data collected by the Office of Recruitment and Admissions).

¹³ Josh Nathan-Kazis, “[Where Are All the Non-Orthodox Rabbis?](#)” in *The Forward* (February 18, 2015). In a March 9, 2015 response in *The Forward*, entitled “[If Jewish Seminaries Are Empty, Let’s Merge Them](#),” Rabbi Andy Bachman (NY ‘96) advocated for the merger of the Reform and Conservative seminaries. He argued: “Last year, the non-Orthodox rabbinical schools admitted fewer than 100 students for training on a total of seven campuses in New York, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, Boston and Philadelphia. The real estate value of Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary alone exceeds \$200 million. Add in all the other schools and the number is staggering. Is this any longer justifiable given the size of rabbinical classes and continuing trends away from denominationalism? Why not train students together — putting pluralism into practice — in a way that is reflective of the diversity of Jewish life and expression today?”

¹⁴ Enrollment at Hebrew College has largely been on an upward trend, with 17 incoming students in 2017, 14 in 2018, 18 in 2019, and an all-time high of 21 in 2020 (compared to 23 HUC rabbinical students that year); incoming Hebrew College enrollment in 2021 dropped to 13.

¹⁵ Hebrew College Press Release from August 17, 2018: “[Hebrew College Announces Sale of Newton Centre Campus.](#)”

¹⁶ Hebrew College Press Release from March 16, 2021: “[Hebrew College and Temple Reyim Announce New Shared Campus in Newton, Mass.](#)”

¹⁷ Frank M. Yamada, “Living and Teaching When Change is the New Normal: Trends in Theological Education and the Impact on Teaching and Learning,” *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* 1:1 (2020) 25.

¹⁸ Yamada, 25. The 2015 Pew Research Center study of “[America’s Changing Religious Landscape](#)” found: “The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing.” The study also showed that even as numbers decline, “American Christians – like the U.S. population as a whole – are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse.” The Pew study of “[Jewish Americans in 2020](#)” shows that “U.S. Jews are culturally engaged, increasingly diverse, politically polarized, and worried about anti-Semitism.”

¹⁹ Yamada, 26. He notes that since 2009, there have been approximately 30 mergers or affiliations among the 276 schools that are part of The Association of Theological Schools.

²⁰ Yamada, 27.

²¹ G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “[Oldest US Seminary to close campus](#),” *Religious News Service* (November 13, 2015); also see Yamada, 26.

²² Kate Shellnutt, “[COVID-19 Shutdowns Are Shifting Seminary Education](#),” *Christianity Today* (April 23, 2020). The article discusses Fuller Theological Seminary, which “has been in the big-change mindset for years” and announced plans to move from its Pasadena property to a more affordable site in Pomona, but those plans fell through; it also features Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Asbury Theological Seminary.

²³ Isaac Sharp, “[The Future of Theological Education at Union and Beyond](#),” *Union Theological Seminary Blog*, June 3, 2021.

²⁴ Lee Gardner, “[The Great Contraction: Cuts alone will not be enough to turn colleges’ fortunes around](#),” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 15, 2021).

²⁵ Sharp, *ibid.*

²⁶ Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph, “A Sense of Place for Post-COVID HUC-JIR,” *Graduation - HUC-JIR Cincinnati*, October 3, 2021. The title and text of the graduation address refer to a quote from Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss), written while he was a student at Oxford: “I will skip through time and space / So you can find a sense of place.”