



# RRC Creates New Ways to Transform Students Into Rabbis

*Plus:*

Twenty-six rabbis gather to **learn** and revitalize.

A Chinese scholar has something to **teach** us about RRC.

2009 Annual Report



Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

בית המדרש לרבנים להוראה ולחיים



Rabbi Meirah Iliinsky, '07, created the illustrations in this issue using gouache, a water-based opaque paint.

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## ABOUT RRC

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) is the intellectual center and rabbinical training institution of the Reconstructionist movement, one of the four main branches of American Judaism. The outgrowth of a philosophy developed in the 1930s, the graduate school was founded in 1968 with the explicit objective of training a new kind of rabbi, one uniquely prepared to lead and serve a rapidly changing American Jewish community in myriad settings. RRC's rigorous curriculum emphasizes the study of Jewish theology, history and ritual while also addressing the practical aspects of rabbinic life and the responsibility of rabbis to act as agents of social change. Graduates go on to assume leadership positions in synagogues, nonprofit organizations and philanthropies; to become educators at colleges and universities; and to serve as chaplains in hospitals and the military.





# A Message From the President

By Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz



*Mentsch tracht, Gott lacht.*  
Human beings plan, God  
laughs. So goes a well-known  
Yiddish saying.

The past year, in particular,  
rendered many plans laughable,  
as the economy went into a  
downward spiral; the value of  
our endowment plunged, and

all of our revenue streams have been adversely affected. This same year was the first one governed by RRC's new board-adopted strategic plan, which will take us through 2013. And even in this unanticipated environment, our strategic plan has provided sound guidance.

In some ways, the plan's continued value is not surprising: The purpose of strategic (rather than long-range) planning is to create direction for an organization even during times of rapid change. The current environment has forced us to revise our expectations regarding what we may be able to accomplish in the short term. And it has caused us to focus more on those elements of the plan that touch on our financial well-being.

However, some elements of the plan—even some we consider crucial—do not require financial resources. Take, for example, our mandate to train rabbis to understand Israel. An objective in our plan states this aim: "Ensure that an understanding of Israel—the land, the literature and the people—is a vital and effective component of RRC's curriculum."

That objective, of course, isn't easy to meet. It is extraordinarily challenging for a rabbi to be an

effective leader on matters related to Israel. On the one hand, a rabbi should be a spokesperson for and defender of the Jewish people—and Israel is the most extraordinary project of the Jewish people in our time. On the other hand, a rabbi should represent the moral and ethical teachings of Judaism. And like every other modern nation, Israel frequently falls short of the highest ideals.

To better equip our students for the challenges they will face upon graduation, we have begun to increase and revamp our counseling and mentoring both before and after the required year of study in Israel; next year, we will develop this support system even further. We seek to invest our graduates with the extraordinary knowledge and sophistication it takes to engage all types of Jews—from those who defend Israel right or wrong to those who disparage Israel right or wrong—and help all of them grow more devoted to the Jewish people, to Israel and to Judaism. We also aim to help our graduates rise to the task when they are called upon to represent Israel to the non-Jewish world. Rabbis frequently face this challenge, at which most Israeli diplomats fail.

Although our primary focus during these difficult times has to be on our finances, we have not stopped improving our program. A rabbinical school must itself model ongoing growth or it will not be able to produce leaders who can help individuals and communities reach their potential. We hope that you will recommit yourself to our important work, to creating direction for the Jewish future, and that you will help us meet our current challenges.

# The Intangible Ingredient

**RRC finds new ways** to transform students into rabbis.

*By Wendy Univer*





Academic Dean Tamar Kamionkowski, Ph.D., has done a lot of thinking about how RRC students become rabbis. What fascinates her is not just how they attain a collection of skills with text, ritual and language, but also their actual transformation into spiritual leaders. Among clergy educators, the formal term for this process

is “rabbinic formation.” When Kamionkowski talks about it, she often prefers the simplicity of the Yiddish expression for getting something deep in your guts, or *kishkes*.

A new vision for rabbinic formation at the College began to take shape after Kamionkowski attended a weekend retreat in 2006, sponsored by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. She saw the need to imbue text and Hebrew language classes with the power to help students *become* rabbis while they acquire the knowledge that rabbis must have. “It’s not just about decoding the text; it’s also about cultivating a love and appreciation for the text, a personal relationship with it,” she explains. “We want classes that ask, ‘How does this knowledge impact on your emerging identity as a Jewish leader?’”

Ultimately, the Wabash Center agreed to fund an ambitious three-year plan to introduce a new framework for teaching text and Hebrew at RRC. The results are evident in a new level of energy and engagement in classrooms and faculty meetings, in the Bet Midrash (study center) and in spontaneous conversations throughout the building. Discussions with faculty and students offer insights into a shift in education at the College that has already borne fruit and will influence coming generations of rabbis.

RRC's innovative program, led by Kamionkowski and Bet Midrash director Rabbi Vivie Mayer, '96, focuses particularly on text and language classes because these can easily slip into skill-building exercises without connecting to the student's rabbinic core.



Contemplating the way she teaches text, Elsie Stern, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Bible, says, "Rabbinic formation is a whole attitude and approach in which the text becomes the students' frame of reference, their window on the world. Rather than have students thinking, 'How can I apply this to my professional life as a rabbi?' the question would be, 'How does this text become a frame of reference for me—a lens through which I see issues ranging from the current economic crisis to perceptions of the divine?'"

Mayer explains the corresponding approach for Hebrew instruction: "We want Hebrew not to be an obstacle that students have to climb over, but something to love, in part because Hebrew takes the moment out of the ordinary, temporal realm. One can effect a holy moment by using holy words."

As the program nears completion, RRC faculty members have had a range of experiences that include cluster meetings, in which small groups of professors exchange ideas and inspiration, and annual faculty retreats. Classroom observation by Mayer, who later offers peer feedback and questions, helps teachers reflect and grow. One-on-one pairings of teachers with RRC alumni open up dialogue about

how text and language underpin rabbinic identity in a wide range of settings where rabbis work.

### **Text study: How can we deepen the love relationship between the rabbi and Torah?**

RRC students are expected to develop familiarity and ease with an immense array of Jewish texts written over centuries: from the Bible, or Tanakh; to the puzzle-like analysis and debate in the Talmud; to the medieval legal codes of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah and the Shulkhan Arukh. The intellectual demands of this process can dominate the classroom, with little attention paid to how the information enters the souls of the students or prepares them to help people create meaning in their lives. As Mayer puts it, "If I'm grappling with fourth-century rabbinic thinking, how does that change me as a Jew in 2009? How does looking at seemingly esoteric texts actually bring me closer to Jewish truth and the enterprise of Torah?"

David Brodsky, Ph.D., co-chair of the Department of Rabbinic Civilization and Assistant Professor of Rabbinic Literature, confirms that it's easy for the study of Talmud to seem foreign. It's a Rubik's Cube of law, philosophy, argumentation and logic—with critical pieces missing. This requires readers to guess at the missing information and then trace the path of their hypothesis through the text. Often they find that their initial premise was wrong and they must start the process over again.



Thanks to the school's new approach, Brodsky has changed his selection of Talmud *sugiyot* (units), choosing those that are most accessible and relevant. More important, he says, he now articulates in classes "what this process teaches us about the early rabbis and what life lessons we learn from it. I discuss what it is about the rabbis that I appreciate and how learning from them has helped me grow as a person." In fact, according to Mayer, the program's co-director, one of her main roles has been to ask teachers what inspires them and gives them joy in the material they teach, and then encourage them to share and model that passion in the classroom.

In Brodsky's case, his devotion to Talmud stems partly from what it teaches about risk taking. After studying Talmud, he asserts, "one cannot be afraid of failure, because being wrong is just part of the process and part of life." He also believes that rabbinic literature teaches people to think systematically and thoroughly and to cultivate humility.

"It's about being able to step into a box, but also step out of it and see from both sides. Talmud will run through one person's set of positions and the opposite person's set of positions and try to understand both of them holistically," says Brodsky. That's an essential approach for professionals who have to guide people through everything from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a family dispute over how to handle end-of-life decisions for a loved one.

Students respond to these classroom changes with great enthusiasm. "Compared to my first encounters with text study at RRC, now the texts are becoming part of my hard drive," says fourth-year student Evette Lutman. "I own them."

When questioned about how one "owns" sacred texts, Lutman first points to classroom assignments that ask students how they might teach a particular text in a congregational or adult education setting. "You have to take ownership of the text or you can't teach it," she says, and other students echo that view. However, there's a deeper sense of ownership going on now, as well.

Early in her text study, Lutman felt frustrated by the intense focus on grammar and translation when she longed to grapple with meaning.



**"After studying Talmud, one cannot be afraid of failure, because being wrong is just part of the process and part of life."**

—David Brodsky, Ph.D.

An encounter with a text that disturbed her, such as the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, felt incomplete and unsatisfying. "There wasn't a lot of opportunity to say, 'Whoa, this text really bothers me! What does this mean for us

as Jews? How do we help our congregation with this really difficult text?'"

That need to question, to "step inside and outside the box," as Brodsky puts it, is precisely why Lutman left her previous career as an attorney and came to RRC. Today she finds more of a balance in text class. "Now there's more space to step back and question," she explains. "Our congregants will ask questions; Judaism is about asking the harder questions."

Indeed, questions fly fast and furious in a class on "Poverty and Social Welfare in Classical Jewish Texts" taught by Stern, the assistant professor of Bible. Ostensibly, the day's topic is a section of Mishneh Torah on the payment of farm workers. Stern admits that it is an especially dense and difficult passage.

The group struggles to decipher the law and find meaningful concepts about labor practices in it. Yet ultimately, Stern sparks a lively discussion on topics ranging from the impact of a "market rate" in a particular region, to who benefits

when an “agent” acts as an intermediary between workers and a landowner. At a pivotal moment, she asks directly: “When you end up making contracts as rabbis, which parts of this feel applicable and which don’t?”

One student hesitatingly describes a situation in which she has felt uneasy with an employer outside of the College. Eagerly, the class uses the day’s text to analyze the dilemma, pointing out her rights,



the “going rate” for this job in various communities, and the assumptions that her employer might be operating under that are different from her own.

Both during class and in later conversations, the woman expresses gratitude that the text allowed her to see the problem in a new light, with a more open heart and a wider range of options. Informally, classmates continue to help her think through her choices, grounded in the Jewish law they’ve learned together. Ultimately she finds a solution that seems just and fair. She’s felt a real “shift of gears” in her studies, she notes, empowering her to guide congregants to find

meaning for their own lives in the written heritage of Judaism. “That’s what I came here for,” she concludes.

### **Hebrew language study: How does a student appreciate language as a holy vessel?**

Teaching “Hebrew of the Rabbinate,” Associate Professor of Hebrew Language Adina Newberg, Ph.D., helps students learn how to write a modern *ketubah* (marriage contract); change the gender of a prayer from masculine to feminine; and compose a *misheberakh* (blessing) in poetic contemporary Hebrew. These are functional skills a Reconstructionist rabbi needs. However, RRC also wants to educate women and men who feel at home in the language and in awe of its power for the rabbi and the community.

Composing and offering a blessing exemplifies this combination, according to program co-director Mayer, who has seen Newberg at work. “Turning a person into someone who bestows blessings!

You come in a student and when you leave you’re expected to be a conduit of blessing! How does that happen? It makes you stop and wonder: ‘Wait a minute. Who am I?’ You really get in touch with the humility of it. And any moment of wonder or sense of awe a student has, those are true moments of formation.”

Newberg, a native Uruguayan who lived in Israel for many years, has done research on adult learners who engage in spiritual searching. She believes that learning contemporary Hebrew helps students become comfortable vocalizing in biblical Hebrew as well. The living language also connects them more closely to modern Jewish culture. She’s quick to point out that half the Jewish population of the world today speaks Hebrew.

Mastery of ancient Hebrew also deepens the students’ bond with the language and its critical role in Jewish peoplehood. Without that rootedness in Hebrew, asks Mayer, how will rabbis function as translators and bridge builders,



**“You come in a student  
and when you leave  
you’re expected to be  
a conduit of blessing!  
How does that happen?”**

**—Rabbi Vivie Mayer, ’96**





allowing the people they serve to connect with Jewish tradition?

**Faculty engagement:  
How does this shift in  
teaching style change  
professors as much as  
students?**

“So much of our Wabash work is just getting faculty to slow down, self-reflect and share,” Mayer says. “The excitement is there; we just need to provide the time and space for talents and intuitions to blossom and feed each other.”

Faculty members agree that the program has generated a wonderful sense of synergy and cross-pollination among individuals and disciplines. Stern says that her Hebrew-teaching cluster members helped her see Hebrew “as a gateway language, as talismanic for congregants and other people.” And she notes how enlightening it was to spend time with Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, ’85, her alumni consultant who is Vice

President for Strategic Alliances at the Jewish Funds for Justice.

Stern also mentions that the Wabash initiative has encouraged her to share the ways in which Jewish text study has been transformative for her “humanly, Jewishly and ethically,” even though she does not believe in the Bible literally. “It feels important to model this,” she adds, “because rabbis will run into congregants like me.”

Brodsky feels that he’s “found his voice” as a teacher of rabbinic literature. In particular, he mentions the impact of his paired meeting with Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, ’86. “That conversation helped me to see that students want to learn more from me than just how to read the text. I can and should articulate in class my deeply personal, spiritual reasons for loving Talmud. In part, I’ve learned to be a little bit of a rabbi in my own classroom.” His students have responded enthusiastically to the changes.

RRC does have many teachers who are also rabbis, and they, too, have benefited from this refocusing of pedagogy. “We see every member of the faculty now using the language of rabbinic formation in what they do in the classroom,” says Kamionkowski, the academic dean.

From a Reconstructionist point of view, Mayer believes that the movement is not just about reinventing Judaism in each generation, but also about uncovering and reclaiming a consciousness that stretches far into the past. This, too, is a vital role for the rabbi in building community and continuity. “Studying all these layers with an eye towards rabbinic formation, we can access deep parts of ourselves, like an 80-year-old accessing parts of herself that are childlike, but still exist. We can stay open to revelation, to blessing and to the wisdom of Torah.”



# What the Traveler Has to Teach



A Chinese scholar of Jewish studies spends a year at RRC, takes a tour of American Judaism, and shows us something about ourselves.

By Eileen Fisher



At the *brit milah* of Shlomo Jacobs-Velde, a young Chinese man stood close to the *mohel*, observing his every move. Jewish ritual circumcision was something he'd read about, but this baby boy's traditional ceremony, which brought together students and other

members of the RRC community one evening this past fall, was the first he had ever witnessed.

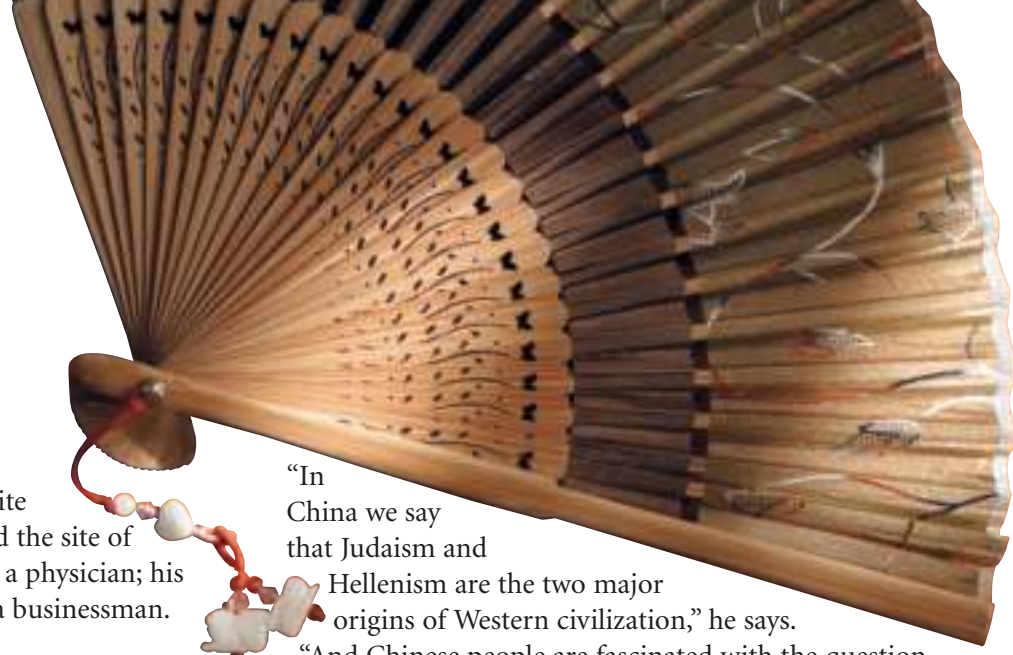
He stood among the group, swept up in the moment. It was one of many events that have attested to what Lihong Song describes as RRC's intimate quality—its atmosphere “like a big family,” which to all appearances has welcomed him as a member. But with an academic's more objective eye, he also says of that evening, “The experience strengthened my concept of Judaism as a *living organism*.”

Indeed, the *brit* was one in a series of cultural and at the same time personal adventures that are giving Song, a professor of Jewish studies from Nanjing, China, a picture of Judaism in practice, as part of his guest-student stay this year at RRC. These are experiences he can't have in China, where only émigrés are allowed to worship at the few Jewish services that are held in Shanghai and Beijing. In China, where the study of Judaism often is motivated by what Song calls “cultural curiosity,” “Jews and Judaism are studied as a kind of *living fossil*,” he says.

His visit here is a logical step in his travels—he has spent time in Israel in two separate trips, as a postdoctoral fellow and in intensive Hebrew study—but until now he did not have an opportunity to experience the much more pluralistic American Jewish scene. Yet he could not have anticipated what it would feel like to exchange the impersonal atmosphere of a large secular university for the intensely close-knit environment of this small seminary.

And for RRC, there have been surprises as well: Song's visit is an unexpected opportunity to view Judaism from afar, and to see the College community itself through new eyes.





**Song, 35, grew up in Nanjing—**the southern capital, poised opposite the northern capital of Beijing, and the site of his home university. His mother is a physician; his father, a civil servant; his brother, a businessman.

He was trained originally as a Roman historian at Nanjing. Song was fascinated by what he saw as the Roman Empire's parallels with China—its geographic expansion, its multiethnic and multicultural society, and what he calls its negotiation between identities. But at one point he became especially interested in a particular, perplexing figure—Josephus, a Jewish general who surrendered to Rome rather than leading the Jewish people to fight its army. As a renegade, Josephus stood in direct contrast to what many Chinese people believe about Jews: that icons such as Marx, Freud and Spinoza mark Jews in general as smart and successful, and that Jews are successful because there is not a single turncoat in all Jewish

“In China we say that Judaism and Hellenism are the two major origins of Western civilization,” he says.

“And Chinese people are fascinated with the question of why Jews, after so many persecutions, can manage to survive. This has stimulated much admiration for Jews in China; I also am fascinated by this.”

**In fact, Jewish studies are very popular in China.**

At the Glazer Institute of Jewish Studies of Nanjing's Religious Studies Department, Song's open-enrollment course in “Judaism and World Civilizations” attracts about 400 students at a shot. There are no fewer than 10 programs in Jewish history and culture in the country, all founded around or after 1992, when China established diplomatic relations with Israel. And the shelves of Chinese bookstores brim with bestsellers such as *Revealing the Secrets for Jewish Success in World Economy* and *The Talmudic Wisdom of Jewish Education*. (In China, where there is no religious conflict to foster anti-Semitism, these books reflect what Song calls *Judeophilia*, part of a “fervent eagerness with which the nation tries to modernize itself.”)

Beyond political forces or cultural curiosity, though, Song allows there is an underlying reason that the officially atheist government supports religious-studies programs in its universities. “China is increasingly integrated into international society. More and more Chinese are accustomed to seeing themselves with different perceptions, both foreign and traditional.” That situation has a couple of additional implications: “Christianity, for example, spreads very fast in China. There is a huge interest in Judaism on the part of Christians. And there's a resurgence of interest in our own traditional religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism.

“It is in this context that Judaic studies emerged in

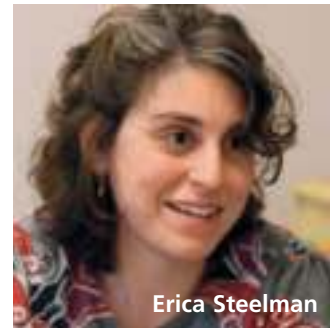


Lihong Song's kippah is from Kaifeng, in northeast China, the site of an indigenous Jewish community since the 11th century. Its residents are not officially recognized as Jewish. “Who is a Jew is also a thorny question in China,” Song says.

history. So it was that one overturned assumption began Song's quest to form his own understanding of Jews and Judaism, a field of knowledge viewed as highly important in China.

China—it's what I call a spiritual quest. People are trying to sense the meaning of the world in a society that is changing dramatically and quickly."

**A Hasidic Sukkot celebration in Brooklyn, NY,** a Conservative Kol Nidre service for Yom Kippur in Baltimore, and a foray to Manhattan's Lower East Side (now peopled mostly by Chinese and Chinese-Americans) also have been part of Song's busy agenda, which he pursues with the help of hosts Erica Steelman, a second-year student, and Boris Dolin, a third-year student. Song's visit to the United States is made possible by RRC board member William Fern, Ph.D., who met him during a visit to the Nanjing Institute in 2007. The idea is to show firsthand American Judaism in all its diversity. "I spent a year and a half in Israel," Song says, "but the Jewish scene there, dominated by Orthodox synagogues, is completely different." Yom Kippur in Baltimore and Sukkot in Brooklyn felt like examples of two different religions, he adds.



Erica Steelman

Song also has given talks at synagogues and campuses about Jewish studies in China, and he is speaking at various seminars; one this past fall in Washington, D.C., focused on the Holocaust. At RRC, Song has enrolled in many of the seminars centered on periods of Jewish civilization; he hopes to bring the syllabi back to China, lending his popular course a more systematic approach. But some of his choices have been driven by his own curiosity. This fall, he took "Torment and Ecstasy in the Teachings of Rebbe Nahman of Brazlav," with Rabbi Joel Hecker, Ph.D.; he found the writings of this Hasidic master "spiritually satisfying."

It's his experiences at RRC that have anchored his time in the United States, he says, providing a way for him to shape his interest—"giving it a tangible meaning." And the atmosphere of RRC has been just as interesting to him as the learning. "When I have spent time at Penn [the University of Pennsylvania], I have felt it is more like a university in China—there is not a sense of community. At RRC, I feel the sense of caring between individuals. RRC is a heartwarming place."

**A master's thesis about Mordecai M. Kaplan, in Chinese,** is one of the more surprising holdings of RRC's library. The author is one of Song's students; and when Song explains why the student chose Reconstructionist Judaism's intellectual founder as a





topic, it makes perfect sense. In fact, the reasoning jives with Song's own take on Jewish studies.



"We are living in a postmodern world," he explains. One of the salient features is the development and emergence of ethnic communities across the world. We talk about the Jewish diaspora in the United States; but there are also many Chinese diaspora communities around the world. How to be Jewish in the context of the diaspora has many implications for how to be Chinese—how to adhere to our traditions while at the

same time keeping abreast of modern currents in our host culture. This has universal significance." He says it's probably the reason some Chinese scholars are interested in Kaplan, who put forth the idea that to be American and Jewish is to live with one foot in each world.

As she accompanies him to various places, Steelman, one of Song's student hosts, finds Song "particularly interested in the two-civilization aspect of how we live." Dolin, the other host, remembers Song being particularly interested in one rabbi's sermon that included a discussion of football. In their travels together, Song's academic knowledge has impressed many people, both students report, including an Orthodox rabbi who joined Song in a long conversation in Baltimore. And his viewpoint as an academic offers a change of pace in classes at RRC. "He'll often ask, What should we accept; what, not accept, as historical fact?" Dolin reports.

Song's outside perspective has proved to have an educational value, Dolin says. "It's interesting trying to figure out how to explain things to him. What is the essence of a particular holiday? What is the essence of some specific thing that happened at the *brit milah*? Even though I may know the answer, it's interesting for me, knowing that he's an academic and from China, to try to figure out the best way to explain it to him."

But in true RRC style, it is probably Song the individual—not Song the scholar—who will be missed most when the academic year ends. Dolin delights in Song's love of idioms and other American vernacular. He notes that though Song is not Jewish, when he comes to *daven* at RRC, he sits and rises with the group, and sings parts of the service with relish.

Steelman glows as she comments, "I feel really lucky to have this opportunity to work with him. I think we are blessed; the power of the universe did a good thing in bringing Lihong to RRC!"

"We spend so much time in this building, and RRC is such a rich community in itself. It's exciting to open it up beyond our walls—all the way to Asia."







# Read, Pray, Sing

A winter retreat gives 26 Reconstructionist rabbis a chance to learn and revitalize—and launches an ambitious new program of professional enrichment.

One weekend this past January, 26 rabbis gathered in Paradise, TX, to share an idyllic experience. The beautiful Garrett Creek Ranch Conference Center was the site of RRC's first *Tzey U'lemad* retreat, which included pulpit rabbis, chaplains, educators and Hillel rabbis, with graduation years ranging from 1981 to 2005. They came from all over the country and brought with them a myriad of opinions and experiences.

The gathering focused on Jewish text study. In two short days the group read from the Zohar, a 13th-century mystical text, with esteemed scholar Daniel Matt, Ph.D.; prayed under the guidance of Rabbis Vivie Mayer, '96, and Shefa Gold, '96; and had a mini-session with David Trietsch, the director of Boston Combined Jewish Philanthropy's Leadership Development Institute, who is slated to lead a second retreat, on leadership. And there was plenty of time for informal collegiality—talking over meals, singing around a fire.

This vibrant event represented the launch of the *Tzey U'lemad* Program for Enrichment and Continuing Education, designed to provide



ongoing education for graduates of RRC and for other members of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. The program, directed by Rabbi Deborah Glanzberg-Krainin, '96, came about in response to focus groups RRC held with alumni, who candidly told us they felt compelled to keep up their text study, to hone their skills as leaders, and to network with other rabbis, overcoming the isolation they felt as the top people of their organizations. Made possible by a generous grant from Legacy Heritage Fund Limited, *Tzey U'lemaad* is a two-year pilot program that comprises retreats plus weekly *hevrutah*—paired learning sessions—by phone, using texts and online resources. The project also will make available a wide variety of online resources for all RRC graduates. And rabbis who can't attend the longer retreats can take advantage of regional “days of learning,” which will include opportunities for lay people as well.



**Rabbi Barbara  
Penzner**

At the core of the program are the rabbinic retreats, and we wondered how participants experienced the Texas weekend. To get an insider's view, RRC staff spoke with Rabbi Barbara Penzner, '87, of Temple Hillel B'nai Torah in West Roxbury, MA, just after she returned from Texas.

—Eileen Fisher



Q: Do you feel different after the retreat?

A: It did just what I wanted it to do. It gave me the time to process some issues that I'm having in being a spiritual leader. It renewed my energy, my enthusiasm. All of it—studying Zohar, doing the prayers—was organic; it was all of a piece. It was about opening ourselves to God in a way that allows us to be more loving to the people we work with. That's it for me; that's the whole idea.

Q: In the focus groups that jump-started the program, people expressed diverse needs—including leadership skills, text study and interaction with peers. Which were you particularly interested in?

A: I've been putting text study into my life for a decade, but I haven't felt that I'm studying with colleagues who share a common worldview. And I've been looking for texts that speak to my life.

I don't know how to be a rabbi if I don't continue to study. One of the reasons I needed this retreat was that my study had gotten stale. The rabbinate isn't like other professions, where you just have to keep up with what's new in the field. There's no end to learning as a rabbi; if you're going to be a teacher, you have to be a continual learner. And as a learner, I need a community.

Q: You said that you also were looking for text choices that would be relevant to you. What sorts of texts do you mean?

A: I've been looking for some time to do Hasidic texts—texts that help deepen our experiences as human beings in relationship to God; texts that could enhance not just my rabbinate but my own soul.

Q: Did you have any favorite pieces of text at the retreat?

A: There were a couple of texts I'll bring to teach to congregants. And as for myself, I love studying Zohar. It's like watching a flower bloom. Each phrase, each idea, unfolds and reveals a piece of Torah or a piece of Midrash. It brings me joy to connect with so many different Jewish texts.

Q: You've done other professional development designed for rabbis. Were there differences you noted in *Tzey U'lemad*, which was designed as Reconstructionist?

A: The last retreat I went to was a pluralistic group, across Jewish denominations. It had a different feel to it. It was interesting and worthwhile, and there was good sharing, but my Reconstructionist colleagues are my family. We understand each other and we have a history together.

Q: The two *Tzey U'lemad* retreats cover what appear to be two very different roles within a rabbi's job—as scholar and as organizational leader. Did the retreat experience lead you to think about this balance in a new way?

A: These retreat experiences really are not as separate as they might seem. We did a short session on leadership at this retreat, to prepare for the next one. And it was clear to me that the text learning we had been doing clearly influenced what we thought was important in being a leader: being a good listener and a good communicator, being inspiring. We play multiple roles—every rabbi does—but we don't do any of them in a dispassionate way, practicing the mechanics of leadership. For me, it's theological. What I am is a vessel for God's presence, and everything I do should reflect that as much as possible.

Q: What were your favorite moments from the weekend?

A: On the second day during *maariv*, the evening service, Shefa [Gold] taught us a chant; we were going to move around the room and touch hands with everyone. She used a verse from Isaiah: "You are engraved on the palm of my hand." The image was, we were engraving ourselves on the palms of each other's hands. Through us, God was being engraved; then we were going to be connecting to many other people when we left, bringing them a connection to people we'd touched and been touched by. It was about realizing we're not alone—that we're connected to colleagues, that God works through us and that what we do is holy work.

# From Our Academic Centers: News in Review

## The Center for Jewish Ethics

The Center for Jewish Ethics has accomplished several important goals this year.

The Center has expanded its course offerings to give RRC graduates a much deeper grounding in rabbinical ethics. For the first time, the faculty has made Senior Seminar a required two-semester course; it now provides a substantial focus on the RRA Code of Ethics and on moral issues of particular relevance to rabbis. The Center also offered an elective course in family and sexual ethics.

Through the joint agreement between RRC Press and Wayne State University Press, the Center published two new books by its director, Rabbi David Teutsch, Ph.D. *Making a Difference: A Guide to Jewish Leadership and Not-for-Profit Management* integrates state-of-the-art organizational theory and practice with Jewish values, and draws on scenarios from Jewish not-for-profit organizations. *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Gemilut Hesed, Tikun Olam and Community*, part of the ongoing *Guide* series, also is valuable as an independent exploration of these forms of Jewish acts of kindness and social action. Both books further the Center's commitment to providing practical guidance for Jews seeking tools to make decisions underpinned by Jewish tradition. Teutsch also published an article on rabbinical ethics, "The Crowns of the Rabbi" (*CCAR Journal*, Summer 2008).

The Center also is committed to furthering dialogue across the spectrum of the Jewish community about moral issues and decision-making methods. Teutsch finished a two-year term as president of the Society of Jewish Ethics, the main gathering place for scholars in the field. During his term he helped the young association increase its membership, stabilize its organizational structure and reach out to graduate students entering the field. At its annual conference, he chaired a plenary panel on political ethics that included Rabbi Elliot Dorff of American Jewish University and

Dr. Noam Zohar from Bar Ilan University. Teutsch also gave the conference *dvar torah*. In addition, the Center has cosponsored the Academic Coalition for Jewish Bioethics. At its conference for Jewish bioethicists in April, Teutsch was the respondent for the opening paper by Dorff.

As always, the Center continues to answer a steady flow of diverse moral inquiries from rabbis, students, physicians and other professionals.

## Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism

One of Hiddur's finest achievements this year was a single, great conversation—in an unusual format. On one end—at his home library in Boulder, CO—sat Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the founder of the Jewish Renewal and Spiritual Eldering movements. On the other end—in RRC's Bet Midrash, 1,800 miles away—were 34 students and 15 faculty members and administrators, listening with rapt attention. On November 18, 2008, the RRC community viewed Reb Zalman's filmed interview with Hiddur director Rabbi Dayle Friedman; then the guest speaker joined the group in real-time conversation via Skype. This dialogue was the latest installment in Hiddur's series "On Being an Elder," in which distinguished Jews reflect on their journeys in later life. The RRC audience heard profound insights on spiritual life and the rabbinate from this revered scholar and innovator. Students and faculty were hushed as they took in what one called "the downloading of wisdom."

Hiddur continues to work toward transforming the culture of aging; its impact has been both deeper and wider over the past year.

At RRC, Hiddur is working to equip all of RRC's graduates to creatively serve and engage elders and their families. Through *Embracing Aging*, our



Retirement Research Foundation–funded initiative, Hiddur is infusing learning about aging into both formal and informal education at RRC. Faculty education on aging, including one-to-one meetings and faculty seminars, has begun to bear fruit: a focus on later life is beginning to appear in text, language, thought, civilization and practical-rabbinics courses.

In the field at large, Hiddur has expanded its efforts to train professionals in the spiritual dimensions of aging. Presentations by Hiddur’s Bader training team and Hiddur’s director have brought training to social workers, rabbis, chaplains and Jewish-community professionals in national conferences, Jewish Federations, hospitals and universities across the United States.

Finally, Hiddur’s work is gaining a wider audience through Friedman’s new book, *Jewish Visions for Aging* (Jewish Lights). She was recently included in the Forward 50, *The Forward* newspaper’s listing of outstanding American Jews.

## Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women’s and Gender Studies

Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women’s and Gender Studies continues to bring inspirational programs to RRC and meaningful innovations to the Jewish community.

Kolot’s Ritualwell.org, the premier online resource for contemporary Jewish observances, developed an elaborate section on Birkat HaChammah, the service for the sun Jews hold only once every 28 years, when, according to the Babylonian Talmud, the sun returns to its position at Creation. Kolot and various Jewish organizations used the occasion (April 8) to increase ecological awareness and responsibility. Ritualwell’s newest sections are “Communal Responsibility” and “Preserving Creation” (forthcoming).

RRC was among only 10 seminaries nationwide (and



Center Directors Rabbi David Teutsch, Ph.D., Lori Lefkovitz, Ph.D. and Rabbi Dayle Friedman

the only rabbinical school) to meet the criteria for best practices in the new report “Sex and the Seminary: Preparing Ministers for Sexual Health and Justice.” The report—issued by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing and the Union Theological Seminary—recognized Kolot and its director, Lori Lefkovitz, Ph.D., who consulted and participated in a preparatory colloquium.

Committed to recovering the traditions of Jewish women, Kolot promoted Hag HaBanot, the Festival of Daughters that is celebrated on the new moon of Hanukkah. Lefkovitz taught on the subject in Jerusalem and Philadelphia. To reconstruct the Fast of Esther as a day for advocacy, Kolot again worked with its pilot site, the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation (JRC) in Evanston, IL. Honored as this year’s “Esther” was Congresswoman Janice D. Schakowsky, who addressed the government’s role in creating a just world.

Kolot’s cosponsorships included the conference on Jewish Women’s Prayer, held in New York City in March.

At RRC, Kolot’s fall program featured Siona Benjamin, an Indian-American Jewish artist who uses traditional Indian painting techniques and styles to explore race, religion and cultural expression.

A spring fashion show for rabbinical students posed the questions “What is and is not appropriate attire for the rabbi on a day off? Officiating at a funeral? At a black-tie wedding?” Poet and biblicist Alicia Ostriker was this year’s Wenkart Writer-in-Residence, and Kolot sponsored a “panel of experts” for students and their partners on the role of the modern *rebbetzin* (rabbi’s spouse).

# Join Our Inner Circle, the President's Council

*By Barbara Lissy*

The RRC campus is home to an array of dynamic programming that exists nowhere else in rabbinic education. Recent events have featured the co-directors of Rabbis Without Borders, an expert on the spiritual development of children, and a panel of leaders in social justice and the rabbinate, among many others. According to third-year student Nehama Benmosche, such programs “provide a chance to see cutting-edge work that rabbis are doing in the world; they open up more possibilities for us as Reconstructionist rabbis.”

Enriching experiences such as these can continue only if growing numbers of supporters make a concerted effort to fund the full range of College activities. We, in turn, have a responsibility to give back to donors in ways that offer a sense of connection and fulfillment. We want you to feel that you are a vital part of the intellectual center of the Reconstructionist movement and the future of progressive Judaism.

With that goal in mind, in 2005 we founded the President's Council, a program for those who support the College at the level of \$1,800 and above. Financial support from President's Council members has been essential to the continued success of the College—enabling us to expand scholarships, internships, special programs and employment opportunities for students; and to provide faculty with innovative professional development.

In return, we offer the chance to learn and grow with us and help us incubate new ideas. Membership in the President's Council gives you the opportunity to be a change agent in Judaism and rabbinic education.

Each fall, we invite President's Council members to a weekend retreat in a relaxed, beautiful setting where we offer opportunities to learn, pray and converse intimately with RRC's leadership, faculty, alumni and students. The 2009 retreat will take place October 30 through November 1 at the Hyatt Regency Tamaya

in Santa Ana Pueblo, NM. Costs are generously underwritten by anonymous donors.

President's Council members also receive communications directly from Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz. During the last presidential election, our own president was invited to several exclusive meetings of Jewish leaders with then-candidate Barack Obama, and he shared the content of those meetings with Council members. We also hold periodic conference calls during which you can learn with our president and with other members of our faculty.

Council members tell us that opportunities to meet faculty, students and other supporters in person make their RRC affiliation more personal and tangible. They particularly enjoy the retreats' informal atmosphere coupled with intellectual rigor and stimulating exchanges on substantive issues. Within this exclusive group, there's an inclusive attitude.

In 2008 we welcomed 37 new members to the President's Council; the group now includes people from 16 states and Canada. Each new member helps strengthen us as an institution and enriches us as a family. While today's economic pressures affect all colleges and universities, at RRC we feel called to be at once efficient and even more innovative. This is the ideal time for you to make a difference.

I warmly invite you to join the President's Council—to help us advance RRC, advance Judaism, and ensure that rabbis continue to transform individuals and communities everywhere.



**For more information, please contact Barbara Lissy, Assistant Vice President for Development, at 215.576.0800, ext. 155, or [blissy@rrc.edu](mailto:blissy@rrc.edu).**

# Financial Statements

## Statements of Financial Position (Audited) as of August 31, 2008

### ASSETS

Cash and Equivalents	\$	3,190,563
Accounts Receivable, Pledges Receivable and Other Assets		6,006,260
Beneficial Interest in Charitable Annuity Lead Trust		3,212,065
Investments		
Operating Funds (including Restricted Funds)		132,584
Endowment and Trust Funds		16,057,346
Land, Building and Equipment		<u>2,024,499</u>
<b>Total Assets</b>	\$	<u><u>30,623,317</u></u>

### LIABILITIES AND FUND BALANCES

#### Liabilities

Accounts Payable and Short-Term Liabilities	\$	175,171
Deferred Revenue and Other Liabilities		<u>418,655</u>
<b>Total Liabilities</b>		593,826

#### Fund Balances

Operating Funds (including Restricted Funds)		6,029,719
Plant and Reserve Fund Balance		2,001,420
Endowment and Trust Fund Balances		<u>21,998,352</u>
<b>Total Fund Balances</b>		<u>30,029,491</u>
<b>Total Liabilities and Fund Balances</b>	\$	<u><u>30,623,317</u></u>

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