



# A Clear Connection

Why we excel at building Jewish life on campus

*Also:* Decoding Jewish Mysticism  
A Different Kind of Legacy

2010 Annual Report



Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

בית המדרש לרבנים ליהדות מתחדשת

# A Clear Connection

By Eileen Fisher

RRC's people excel at the imaginative, eclectic work of **bringing Judaism to college campuses.**



Rabbi Jake Rubin, '09 (left), with University of Virginia student Henry Tessler

In a truly accurate job description for a rabbi on a college campus, the list of challenges might read: **Work with people who are highly unpredictable**—and take their constantly revised intentions as a creative opportunity. Much of the time on the job, you will be following them down **the winding road that is their day-to-day existence**, looking for opportunities to involve them on their own terms in Jewish life. It is a road marked by **many cups of coffee**; you must be very patient. And yet dynamic! Your audience bores easily, and the competition for five minutes of undivided attention—especially the competition from electronic media—is fierce.

The rewards? These can be stated in a few words: Doing rabbinical work on campus puts you in a position to help people—many people—lay a lasting groundwork for a meaningful life. And your tools will be the very ones you hold most precious.

Indeed, not everyone is well suited to campus work, but those who are can see great results from taking the time to build the individual relationships

that are central to being good at it. And in the last few years, RRC has found itself in the fortunate position of supplying many such rabbis (see sidebar); among the 2008 and 2009 classes alone, RRC graduates took five new college positions.

“RRC is one of the few rabbinical schools that have curricula focusing on community leadership,” says Rob Goldberg, vice president for external

*Until a recent trip to Israel with Rabbi Jake Rubin, '09, University of Virginia student Simon Svirnovskiy approached Judaism like “an illiterate person who has hidden his problem by saying that he doesn’t want to read.”*

relations for Hillel, the international Jewish organization on college campuses. “This makes RRC a significant partner for us, because the professional training for RRC rabbis goes beyond standard skill building.”

Rabbi Jake Rubin, '09, serves not just in a rabbinical capacity but as executive director of a Hillel Goldberg calls “important, with extraordinary students.” To say Rubin is a busy man at the University of Virginia is a gross understatement; in addition to handling all of the Hillel’s programs, religious services and teaching, he currently is responsible for its administration and for raising funds in both an annual campaign and a capital campaign. Yet before he took off for a Taglit-Birthright Israel-sponsored trip in January with 40 students in tow, Rubin had gathered these facts about Simon Svirnovskiy, a student on the trip, even though

Svirnovskiy had not set foot in a service or any other Hillel program: He was raised in Belarus and immigrated to the United States in 1993. He had little Jewish background and had never had a *bar mitzvah*, though many of his friends had. As time went on he regretted it more and more; he was interested in the possibility of having a *bar mitzvah* in Israel. At college, he, along with his friend Andrew, sang in an a cappella group.

“To celebrate our arrival in Jerusalem, I asked the two of them to participate in a *shehekhianu* ceremony,” Rubin says. “They both said yes, but Simon told me he was unsure of the Hebrew. So I worked with him. They did a beautiful version of ‘Oseh Shalom.’ And I believe when Simon saw his travel group’s response, he was encouraged and decided that he wanted to do a *bar mitzvah* of his own before he left Israel.”

The *bar mitzvah* was nontraditional, with no Torah portion, and was an occasion no one would soon forget. “First and foremost I want to thank Jake Rubin for helping me throughout this entire process—from our first talks back in October ... to helping me solidify my name choice on the bus 20 miles from Gaza,” Svirnovskiy began his speech. He spoke of his complicated relationship with a heritage he barely knew: “I honestly think that in terms of Judaism, I have, up until now, lived the life of an illiterate person who has hidden his problem from everyone else by saying that he doesn’t want to read, or has just avoided situations where he’d have to read.” And he spoke of how far he’d come since stepping off the plane: “This trip showed me, for the first time, that there is much less judgment and stratification in Judaism than I thought. ... I am having a *bar mitzvah* today to take one more step

## RRC graduates serve at ...

Goucher College  
Indiana University  
Miami University  
Middlebury College  
Ohio State University  
Ohio University  
Stanford University  
SUNY Albany  
University of Maryland,  
Baltimore County  
University of Massachusetts  
University of Michigan  
University of Virginia  
Ursinus College  
Vassar College  
Wesleyan University  
Yale University

## RRC students serve at ...

Brandeis University  
Bryn Mawr College  
Haverford College  
Philadelphia University  
Swarthmore College  
The University of the Arts  
(in Philadelphia)  
University of Delaware  
Vassar College  
West Chester University



out of my Jewish illiteracy and to tangibly dedicate myself to this quest. ... I care, and have cared very much, about my Jewish identity and about how lucky I am to be a Jew.”

Student rabbis, too, can see dramatic results as they intern on college campuses and defy expectations about what Judaism can look like. Third-year student Josh Bolton, a poet who in 2008–09 was the award-winning initiator of the new Hillel group dubbed “JewArts” at Philadelphia’s University of the Arts (“UArts”), remembers the first Shabbat meal he orchestrated in a student apartment. Bolton arrived that Friday night to find “a typical place you might find four guys living in. But all together, we dragged up the tables I had brought, tablecloths, flowers, candles, and good-smelling food. We transformed that place from a jungle to a Shabbat paradise,” Bolton recalls.

“And when all the students began to arrive—and nearly 20 did—their eyes were so big. First, they couldn’t believe the apartment had undergone that transformation. (Perhaps that was the greatest miracle.) And they were giddy with this new attention. At some point someone mentioned Hillel, and a few voices echoed, ‘*This is Hillel?*’”

The recognition that relationships are key marked a critical turning point in the development of campus work, says Barbara Hirsh, RRC’s dean of academic administration and director of its campus internship program. Hirsh worked in two Hillel offices, including as associate director of



Barbara Hirsh, director of the campus internship program, with first-year RRC student Nick Renner

Hillel of Greater Philadelphia, before coming to the College. The Hillel organization has existed since 1923. As recently as 30 years ago, its campus houses were still more like clubs; every year they would sponsor activities, and the assumption was that students would show up to participate. “Hillel then was still the place where Jewish boys went to meet Jewish girls,” Hirsh quips. “What evolved since was the understanding that Hillel was not

just a building—that the effort needed to radiate from the center out, to reach people where they were already engaged and to bring opportunities to them, so they could discover and connect with Jewish possibilities that they had never experienced before.” She says that the Philadelphia-area Hillels have been on the leading edge of that change.

*RRC grads are especially well suited for Hillel work because they are prepared to help others become the leaders, teachers and arbiters of their own Judaism, says Rabbi Howard Alpert of Hillel. He calls Barbara Hirsh one of the best campus supervisors in the country.*

And nearby RRC, which was founded not simply to fuel a Jewish denomination but with the explicit goal of serving the wider Jewish community with a creative approach—to “meet people where they are”—has been a natural hot spot for this kind of thinking. Graduates say that given the Reconstructionist approach—studying Judaism as an evolving civilization—they came naturally to work on campus with the assumption that there is no one way to be Jewish. They also mention that learning to build community among a pluralistic student body at RRC was essential preparation. Both Goldberg, the Hillel vice president, and

Rabbi Howard Alpert, executive director of Hillel of Greater Philadelphia, confirm these points. “One thing that makes RRC grads especially well suited for Hillel work is that the College’s culture and training prepares them to help others become the leaders, teachers and arbiters of their own Judaism,” Alpert says. And, he adds, Hillel’s goal is similar: “to help students own their own Judaism.”

Hirsh’s supervision of campus interns also is a key strength of RRC’s training in the field. Students receive oversight by administrators at their workplaces, of course. But the added supervision by Hirsh is invaluable, say graduates, and Alpert agrees, calling Hirsh one of the best campus supervisors in the country. Many students choose to stay in the RRC supervision group for more than the required single semester, and may also take the Rabbi as Organizational Manager course with Hirsh.

In the last several years, the buzz among RRC students about campus work has grown, and so has the College’s internship program. Momentum started to build in spring 2003, when Hirsh

was informed that enough money had collected in an RRC fund to enable a student to work on a local campus; by the following academic year, the Herman Silver and Dr. Lee Winston Fellowship was active once again, and a Bryn Mawr/Haverford College internship had come into being. And RRC students started to hear from Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appel, ’08, about how exciting he found his work at the sister and brother schools. Soon other schools were added to the mix. In 2005, when Annabel Lindy, z”l, a leading-edge supporter of resources for the Philadelphia Jewish community and an RRC board member, was searching for a way to honor her deceased father, she decided to devote the majority of her new RRC funding to campus work, and the William Flesher Campus Internships were born. “The internships gave students the opportunity to ‘help people discover their Judaism and create ways to express it,’ and that reflected Annabel’s sharp strategic thinking and true originality,” says Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz, RRC’s president. Alpert agrees, calling her “a visionary who understood what it is to build an inclusive Jewish community.”

In 2006, the student opportunities now known as the John Bliss Campus Internships, funded by RRC board member William Fern, Ph.D., were created. RRC students now work at nine different colleges and in one position coordinating service learning for Hillel of Greater Philadelphia.

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If rabbis connecting personally with students can lead to Jewish engagement, it is also true that successful Jewish engagement on campus must be personal. College students are in the distinct developmental stage that psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, whose materials Hirsh uses in her courses, calls “emerging adulthood”—a period that offers “the most opportunity for identity exploration in love, work and worldview.” “You get to be a part of this unbelievable moment in their lives,” confirms RRC fifth-year student Isabel de Koninck, who works on the Bryn Mawr and Haverford campuses and also helps students at several colleges find service-learning opportunities. “Students are so much more willing to adapt and change and question everything. A

*Developmentally, college students are in a stage of intense personal exploration, and are willing to question everything. “You get to be a part of this unbelievable moment in their lives,” confirms fifth-year student Isabel de Koninck.*



Isabel de Koninck





At Ohio State University Hillel on Shabbat, top: Samantha Bloom, Rabbi Leigh Ann Kopans, '08, and Marla Davis light candles; right: Kopans talks to the group.

Far right: Ursinus College student Carly Freedman (left) with Rabbi Danielle Stillman, '09



student plops down in your office and you never know what the conversation is going to be. It could be 'I'm not going to be a lawyer like my dad!' And sometimes it's 'I want a more fulfilling spiritual life.'"

And when students do show up at a "lunch and learn," the event must hit home. Take for example the teaching Rabbi Leigh Ann Kopans, '08, gave this winter at Ohio State University about the "women of the wall," the women who pray by the Western Wall in Jerusalem despite the adverse reaction of traditionalists who pray only in sex-segregated groups. The students' main reaction was surprise, Kopans says: "This is going on in a world I have so much connection to, and I didn't know about it! They're not learning first and foremost about the women of the wall. They're learning about their connection to other women in the Jewish world, to Israel; they're formulating what they think about women and prayer. They're running through their life history of prayer—remembering their *bat mitzvah*, what that felt like. And they're thinking about what they want for their daughters.

"To learn that halfway around the world, where many of them have gone on Birthright, women can't get up on the *bimah* as they do all the time here—what challenges does that issue to their Judaism? It's important that we realize those questions are implicit in the situation and that we're able to utilize them to start conversations."



Early on a Friday afternoon in January, Rabbi Danielle Stillman, '09, talked with visitors as she waited for students to arrive at the campus house that is the Ursinus College Hillel in Collegeville, PA. Later, when her group of dinner shoppers had finally gathered, she discussed with Carly Freedman, the Hillel president, what soup the group would offer for that evening's *seder* in honor of Tu B'Shevat, the Jewish New Year for Trees. She accompanied Freedman and Katherine

Murphy to the nearby Wegman's store to shop for a long list of items for the *seder*. On return, Stillman greeted students as they arrived to cook; she stopped in periodically to help.

"You might think, 'For this I went to rabbinical school?'" Stillman allows. "But I'm getting to know the students in a different light. They eventually share things with you."

Chopping, arranging and simmering at an almost feverish pace, students chatted and sang as they worked around each other in a small kitchen. By about 6:30 p.m., a multicourse meal had emerged.

By 7 p.m., about 30 guests—a significant number on this mostly non-Jewish campus—had trickled in. And the mundane duties of the day were left behind. The group listened as Stillman progressed through her explanation of the foods on the table and their significance in the Jewish mystical tradition of *kabbalah*. She narrated through the *sefirot*, or levels, symbolized by the foods on the table, until she reached the 10th and highest, the one said to bring participants close to God. Things were quiet for a moment. Then several conversations started up around the table, and a pleasant commotion filled the room.



At Ursinus College Hillel's Tu B'Shevat *seder*, top: the dinner; left: Rabbi Danielle Stillman, '09; from far left: students Anna Leh, Neil Rosenthal, Katherine Murphy and Ted Branston prepare the foods.