

a sense of rootedness, leading to what sociologist Peter Berger has labeled a “heretical imperative”—a world in which people embraced options that would have been unthinkable in a past generation. Today as well, returning to ritual has allowed students to reclaim their ethnic identity and to engage in spiritual quests.

Some of the students also demanded that their education be oriented toward life. They wanted to understand how a particular Jewish teaching would contribute to the religious and spiritual lives of the people whom they would serve. At first, some of our professors opposed this move toward applied learning. Our faculty has always been highly academic in orientation, for without Jewish knowledge, there can be no Jewish authenticity. In time, though, our professors also understood the importance of finding ways to make Jewish teachings meaningful for Jews and Jewish communities. We now ask students to weigh these larger questions of meaning through various programs that explore the relationships among healing, religious sensibility, and spiritual renewal.

What was the impetus for ordaining Sally Priesand, the first woman to become a rabbi in North America?

Actually, there was no formal decision to ordain Sally when she enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Cincinnati and then took five years of classes in the rabbinical program with the hope that she would be allowed to become a rabbi. Inasmuch as she was completing the same course of study that her male classmates had, Glueck expressed his intention to ordain her, but he died before she could complete her studies. In 1972, when she finished her coursework, his successor, Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk, proceeded with her ordination.

Ordaining Rabbi Priesand had a major impact on the development of North American Jewry, tapping into the potential of half the Jewish population to serve our people both professionally and publicly. In the 40 years since, we have ordained approximately 600 women, and currently half of our rabbinical students and almost three-quarters of our cantorial and education students are women. Moreover, women serve as two

of our deans, the director of the graduate school, and directors of our rabbinical schools in Los Angeles and New York. And many of our women graduates have gone on to make significant contributions. Take, for example, Rabbi Andrea Weiss, an HUC-JIR faculty member who previously studied at the College with Professor Tamara Eskenazi, the first woman HUC-JIR appointed to teach Bible. Eskenazi and Weiss have edited and co-edited respectively *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, published by Women of Reform Judaism and the URJ Press, an innovative work that has included women’s voices in the weekly worship life of hundreds of thousands of people in Reform synagogues.

Gottschalk’s impact was therefore immense in this and other arenas, such as his initiating a program ordaining Israeli Reform rabbis on Israeli soil. His successor, Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, expanded this initiative, and during the past decade nearly 70 Israeli Reform rabbis (as well as dozens of Israeli education students in conjunction with the Melton Centre at Hebrew University) have received degrees on our Jerusalem campus.

Under your leadership, students across Jewish denominational lines are learning together.

Yes. Today, the overarching challenge faced by all Jewish denominations is the same: to create a Judaism that will be vital, joyful, and relevant to fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-generation Jews who are no longer compelled to identify as Jews and who have myriad options for living a meaningful life. The unifying forces of past generations, such as social antisemitism and automatic affiliation with Jewish organizations, are no longer at play in keeping Jews involved in the Jewish community. While significant distinctions between Reform, Conservative, modern Orthodox, and Reconstructionist attitudes remain, the elements that bind us—our shared emphasis on Torah learning and desire to have Judaism speak in meaningful cadences to contemporary Jews—are more powerful than those which divide us. Where we are able to work together, we choose to do

so. Two examples: Our Schusterman Rabbinical Fellows program brings future leaders of the Conservative and Reform Movements together for three years of formal study with the goal of creating a cadre of American rabbis who share a broad vision of dynamic communal leadership; and an HUC-JIR and Jewish Theological Seminary transdenominational program trains educators of Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox synagogue schools in leadership, Judaic knowledge, and pedagogy.

As we move in the direction of transdenominational partnerships, we come closer to Isaac Mayer Wise’s dream of an American Judaism than we have since he arrived on these shores.

How do you think Wise would respond today to the institutions he created?

There is a famous story in the Talmud (Menachot) in which Moses views Rabbi Akiba’s academy and is perplexed by what he sees. Upset by hearing Akiba expound on a teaching that seems entirely unrelated to the tradition Moses himself had taught, he asks God to explain. God says, “This is the Torah of Moses,” and Moses is satisfied with that answer.

The author of this legend understood that the Judaism of the rabbis was far removed from that of the Bible—and accepted that such an evolution was a legitimate, natural outgrowth of a living, dynamic tradition.

If Isaac Mayer Wise were to see HUC students studying in Jerusalem, our professors teaching practical rabbinics with an emphasis upon spiritual practice and meaning, and many students embracing traditional rituals, he would likely question: *Is this the Reform Judaism that I knew and helped to create?* However, I think he would also be comforted in the same way that Moses was said to be comforted by God. He would understand that Judaism is an evolving tradition and that our Movement still adheres in spirit to his annunciation that we serve the broadest possible swath of American Jews. Indeed, the framework that emerged out of the vision he put forth has proven genuinely enduring. □