

“‘Serve US without service’ runs contrary to all that makes us Jewish, and it is a journey down a dead-end street. As long as we focus on programs that serve the members without also summoning them to serve others, we will perpetuate our woes.”

ized that inspiring religious life can be found in any place, just as uninspired religious life can be found in any place.

How did these experiences lead you to become a Reform rabbi?

After I returned from Israel I wanted to pursue a degree in religious studies and thought that a seminary would be the best place to learn. Rabbi Leonard Thal, who had been on the Camp Swig faculty, encouraged me to consider HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, and when I walked into Rabbi Harold Schulweis’ Talmud class I thought, *This is where I belong*. Frankly, I was also put off by the other seminaries, which required that I first sign a document declaring my level of Jewish observance. That, I felt, was between me and a much higher authority.

During most of my years at HUC-JIR, I told anyone who would listen, “I’m not going to be a congregational rabbi. There is no way I’m going to be part of an institution that didn’t serve me well in my youth. That’s not going to be a career for me.” My classmates would roll their eyes, thinking, *Shut up already, Jacobs. We’re all going to be congregational rabbis, and we don’t want to hear it.*

So what caused you to change your mind about becoming a congregational rabbi?

While at HUC-JIR I interned for Rabbi Jack Stern, of blessed memory, at Westchester Reform Temple. I watched him lead that community, thinking, *This is an unbelievably compelling way to spend a professional career*. As I followed him around, listening to him, observing him, I saw how he shined the light of his humanity on every person he encountered, no matter how tough the situation. I’ll never forget the time when Jack was rehearsing consecration students for their formal processional to the *bimah*. The kindergarteners were distracted and walking aimlessly, so he called out, “Kids, watch me and do exactly as I do.” Now, Jack had a bad leg, so he limped down the center aisle—and then all 50 kids followed, limping just like him. What did Jack do in this uncomfortable situation? He burst out laughing. He spontaneously and lovingly turned what might have been, on reflec-

tion, one of the most embarrassing moments in some of these young people’s lives into a funny moment of connection. He made me look at the role of a congregational rabbi in a new light.

Before going to rabbinical school, you had also considered becoming a professional dancer. How did dance enter your life, what is it about dance intrigues you, and are there any parallels for you in the dance and rabbinic worlds?

Igrew up in an area of Southern California where boys didn’t dance. Basketball, yes, track, yes, dance, unthinkable. In college, on a whim, a friend and I entered a dance contest sponsored by the Black Student Union. We came in second, and it almost started a race riot at school. The whole experience intrigued me, and I decided to take a modern dance class, which I loved, and then ballet, which I tolerated, but it helped me catch up to those who had spent their youth in dance class.

Interestingly, my exploration of dance came at exactly the same time as my deepening interest in religion. Dance and religion have exciting commonalities; both explore non-rational, non-verbal, artful dimensions of reality.

Once I was accepted at HUC, I thought I’d have to defer dance, but a chance encounter with the man sitting next to me on the El Al flight to Jerusalem for my first year of HUC study intervened. He asked me what I was planning to do in Israel.

“I’m going to study; what about you?” I replied.

“I’m going to teach.”

“Oh,” I said, “maybe you’re going to be one of my teachers.”

“Well, I’m a ballet master. I’ve got a studio here in New York City, and I’ll be at the Ruben Academy in Jerusalem.”

“That’s funny. I dance.”

“Really? Let’s see what you got.”

“Well, we’re on an airplane...”

The ballet master then asked one of the flight attendants for a food cart, which I used as a ballet barre as he led me through dance barre exercises with all of the El Al passengers watching. When I finished, the man said, “Okay, you’re in. You just got a scholarship to the Ruben Academy. I’ll let them know you are eligible to