



Visions from a new rabbinical school

by Daniel Gordis

Years after graduating rabbinical school, I was invited to teach at a summer program for Jewish collegians. Shortly before the program was to begin, I called the director of the institute to ask what he wanted me to lecture about. His answer was simple. "You have twenty lectures," he said. "Make your best case for Jewish life."

I felt stumped. Nothing about the years I'd spent studying Bible, rabbinic literature, philosophy or Jewish history had forced me to ask myself, "Why does Judaism matter?" To those of us in rabbinical school, that was a given. But to the students I was about to teach, it was not. It suddenly occurred to me that while rabbinical school had prepared me to engage in dialogue with other committed and educated Jews, it had not prepared me to make our case to the Jews we most needed to attract.

That is the essence of what the rabbi of the 21st century will have to do. Rabbis are now entering a community in which the "ought" of Jewish life is no longer a given. The old plausibility structures, to paraphrase Peter Berger, no longer speak to young Jews. The "Why be Jewish?" question now reigns supreme and any rabbinical school worth its salt has to train a cadre of rabbis who take the question seriously and who know how to address it.

Who We Are

It is no longer sufficient for rabbis to "hatch, match and dispatch," to serve as CEO's of synagogues or to preside over annual High Holiday pilgrimages. Rabbis have to make the case for Jewish life. They need to be trained to address the real spiritual hunger that pervades American Jewish life (and to which Buddhism, Christianity and other religious forms are too often the answers Jews find). They have to be taught to communicate the sense that Judaism is about something, that it possesses both intellectual as well as spiritual sophistication. Too few Jews sense that today, and it is up to the rabbis to change that.

How might a rabbinical school train such rabbis? With courage, with humility. For starters, though, I offer four basic components critical to our sense of who we are:

First: We believe that the next generation of American Jews would commit themselves to a tradition that deepened and enriched their very

being. We want the Ziegler School, incorporating the best of the *yeshiva*, graduate school and professional school models, to foster spiritual and intellectual community in which visions of such a Judaism will emerge. From where will those visions come? This new rabbinical school is predicated on the notion that Judaism's richness and sophistication emerge from serious engagement with classic Jewish texts. That is not new. What is new is our grappling with the question of what it means to "know" a text. Which mode of studying text will lead Jews back to reverence of the Torah as sacred, to a sense that in Torah lie Judaism's responses to our perpetual existential searches for meaning? To us, what matters most is not how our texts came to be this way. That is not an unimportant question, and we will not ignore it. But more central to our study is: now that we have this sacred work, what does it say? Can we learn to hear God speaking through these texts? How can we teach others that Jewish life at its richest is a dialogue with sacred Jewish words in the company of other searching Jews? Can we re-create a laity for which Judaism is the defining component of their lives, for whom the pages of our tradition are bridges to immortal ideas and insights? We believe we can.

Second: The Ziegler School is committed to the proposition that American Judaism in the 21st century is going to have to be *halakhically* serious. The antinomian, autonomy-based American Judaism of the last fifty years is ailing. Increasingly, Jews returning to the "fold" seek norms, spiritual discipline and a commitment to ritual that sustains community. Thus, the Ziegler School's community is as observant one, but one in which we recognize that (again) the old vocabulary for why *halakhic* living is important no longer suffices. "Continuing revelation" and similar constructs, designed to re-assert the halakhah's authority in the face of modern biblical scholarship, never really worked. Let us cease trying to breathe life into dying forms. A new vocabulary about the importance of *mitzvah* has to emerge. Why do *mitzvot* have authority? What does it mean to be "*halakhically*" serious? Are there serious alternatives to the ossifying formalism of most contemporary halakhic discourse? Our post-modern world has taught us that we will never fully resolve these questions; but the deliberation is sacred, and it must continue. How? We hope that our students, witnessing and participating in the conversation, will emerge with the ideas and passion needed to bring more American Jews into serious encounters with the *halakhic* tradition.

Third: Jews, like other Americans, also seek healing for their souls. Ours is a harsh, unforgiving world, in which Jewish communal life needs to offer sanctuary, respite, a safe haven for the vulnerable in us. Rabbis need to nurture these restoring communities; rabbinical schools must therefore explore not only "want to know" and "how to do," but also "who to be." We want our students to internalize the human ideals in the texts they study. The Ziegler School is a community in which *mentschlichkeit* is an absolute requirement, in which decency, honesty, modesty, gentleness and openness are prerequisites to everything else. We study *halakhah*, but also address *mussar*. Why? To become a community that our graduates will want to re-create when they serve congregations and institutions throughout the country as they bring healing to those they teach.

Fourth: The conversation about American Judaism and "post-denominationalism" may be somewhat premature, but it is not irrelevant. Denominational structures will undoubtedly exist for some time into the future. We are part of the Conservative movement because of our commitment to *halakhah* and our sense that no realm of human discourse should be ignored, no questions deemed heretical or *traif*.

But at the same time, denominational vocabulary is often over-wrought. Being part of one denomination or another cannot be what being Jewish is about. The old questions that formerly defined the denominations are worn out and tired; they are not the questions American

Jews are asking about themselves, their children or their community. No longer is the prevailing thrust among American Jews about blending into America. Fewer and fewer serious Jews want to reconstruct Judaism to fit our Christian culture. Today's search is for meaning. Jews want distinctive and Jewish answers to the questions about why their lives matter; rabbis of the 21st century have to be taught to help provide that. This is a transdenominational Jewish hunger. If we recognized the similarity of our searches, our answers might unite us, rather than divide us.

Not all the answers, of course, will be the same, and differences among Jews will never disappear. At the University of Judaism, we know we are not the only answer. We hope, however, that our shared search might come to unite us all, and that history will say that the Ziegler School community made at least an important contribution to this sacred, emerging conversation.

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