A Clear Connection
Why we excel at building Jewish life on campus

Also: Decoding Jewish Mysticism
A Different Kind of Legacy

Connect With RRC

2010 Annual Report
Reconstructionist Rabbinical College
About RRC

A Message From the President

A Clear Connection

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

Decoding Jewish Mysticism

RRC’s resident Zohar scholar, Joel Hecker, Ph.D., translates holy texts that sing like jazz.

A Different Kind of Legacy

Rabbis Sheila Peltz Weinberg, ’86, and Ezra Weinberg, ’09, both feel driven to create new forms of Jewish expression.

Watch video features.

From Our Academic Centers: News in Review

Financial Statements

Thank You for Your Support

Endowed Programs

Faculty and Administration

Board of Governors

On the cover, from left: At Ohio State University, student Michelle Cohen and Rabbi Leigh Ann Kopans, ’08; at University of Virginia, Rabbi Jake Rubin, ’09, and student Henry Tessler; at Ursinus College, Rabbi Danielle Stillman, ’09
About RRC

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College educates leaders, advances scholarship and develops resources for contemporary Jewish life.

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

THE BIG PICTURE of Jewish higher education in the United States has never been a static landscape. The first U.S. seminaries were established in the late 19th century. In the early part of the 20th century, colleges of Jewish studies joined the scene. In 1968, RRC came into being. And since the late 1960s, secular colleges and universities also have offered degrees in Jewish studies—posing direct competition to the specialized Jewish colleges. In fact, the fastest-growing arena for Jewish higher education in the last three decades has been the many Jewish studies programs within secular institutions. With a degree from an Ivy League school more likely to lead to a professorial position at a university, these programs attracted money more readily than the colleges of Jewish studies. Baltimore Hebrew College has now integrated with Towson University. Dropsie College became part of the University of Pennsylvania. The other colleges of Jewish studies have attempted to change their missions to adapt to changing needs. None of them is without struggles.

What does that bode for the future of the seminaries and for RRC in particular? The seminaries too are struggling. The costs of education keep rising, and endowments are down. Foundations that have historically funded Jewish programs have grown less inclined to support rabbinical schools. And outside the Orthodox world, the number of rabbinical schools recently has grown—but fewer students choose to attend.

Yet seminaries fulfill a unique mission, and there would be a great cost to the community were we to “outsource” the whole of Jewish higher education to secular colleges and universities. Academics are expected to study their material objectively, indeed critically, without reference to practical application. If they veer into the realm of contemporary applications for their research, they risk crossing the boundary between teaching about a particular religion and promoting that religion.

At RRC, we want our students to be able to understand the work of Jewish academics. However, we don’t want them to stop there. Promoting Judaism—a cardinal sin, so to speak, for academics in a university—is precisely what rabbinical education is all about. We insist that our students constantly ask questions about how new knowledge is relevant to contemporary Jewish life. In other words, we see rabbis not as Jewish academics but as a bridge between the acumen of the academy and the practical application of that acumen to the way we live now.

And it is our particular mission at RRC to train rabbis who understand that Judaism has evolved and changed throughout time, who are capable of responding to the challenges of today’s world with 4,000 years of collected wisdom at their fingertips. We expect that our graduates will offer new and challenging insights about Judaism and will use those insights to improve people’s lives and strengthen the community.

Within the liberal community, Jewish learning (as opposed to learning about Jews) is under siege. But it is impossible for members of our community to respond if they don’t know about the problem. I hope that this column begins a dialogue among your friends and within your community. You who see firsthand the benefits that our graduates offer—delivering religious teaching and spiritual inspiration, building community, and counseling individuals in need—know that RRC plays a unique and essential role in today’s Jewish scene.

Evidence of our good work can be found within this annual report. In the following pages you will meet some of our students, faculty members and alumni. I hope you enjoy these snapshots of the life of RRC and that they inspire you to renew your efforts to help us remain a vital force for good.
RRC’s people excel at the imaginative, eclectic work of bringing Judaism to college campuses.

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...
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 ‘Osheh 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.” 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

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.”
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 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, ’07, 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.

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 fifth-year student Isabel de Koninck.

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
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.
Decoding Jewish Mysticism

By Wendy Univer

When Joel Hecker, Ph.D., first encountered Sefer ha-Zohar, or the Book of Splendor, as a graduate student in Israel, he felt seduced by the text — its language, theology and erotic style.

As he explains it, the intensely poetic and esoteric prose of the Zohar attempts to communicate “things that rest in the heights of the universe; it is a highly sensual and luminous kind of language. It includes a great deal of tactile imagery. It’s not a book of abstractions. It interprets the material world, the natural world, and—most important—the Jewish textual world as a coded manifestation of God’s own being.”

Hecker frankly admits that the notion of a God with multiple identities, including strong masculine and feminine potencies, was “very striking and exciting” to him as a young man in his late 20s. However, what influenced him most is the Zohar’s picture of a direct and mutually influential connection between people and the Divine. This launched him on a career dedicated largely to Jewish mysticism and kabbalah—the medieval mystics’ reinterpretation of Jewish tradition. That path now culminates in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Hecker, who chairs the Department of Modern Jewish Civilization at RRC, is one of only two academics in the world invited to join distinguished Zohar scholar Daniel Matt, Ph.D., in the monumental task of writing the first unabridged translation of and commentary on the Zohar in English. The original texts in Aramaic and Hebrew have been virtually impenetrable to untrained readers. Existing English translations fall far short. The new Zohar: Pritzker Edition, commissioned by philanthropist Margot Pritzker, will create an unprecedented level of insight and access for academics, rabbis and rabbinical students, and educated lay readers. Pritzker was motivated by her own text studies as well as a desire for a translation that includes more recent scholarship and matches the wondrous nature of the original.
The kabbalists depicted God as a complex web of multiple potencies and identities—male and female, loving and angry, accessible and ineffable.

“The Zohar is a masterpiece of world religious literature, one of the most stunning pieces of writing I’ve come across,” says Joel Hecker, Ph.D.

Matt, professor of Jewish mysticism at the Center for Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, has worked on the Zohar Education Project full time since 1997 and has published five volumes so far, to great critical acclaim; he anticipates producing four more. However, to meet the project’s targeted completion date of 2015, a team of advisers began looking for additional translators. They offered RRC’s professor an assignment based on his previous publications and the sensitivity he demonstrated in bringing zoharic text to life in English.

Hecker and Nathan Wolski, Ph.D., of Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, will focus on Zohar Chadash, which is material that came to light after the initial printing of the Zohar in 1558 in Italy. Working independently, the two expect to produce volumes 10 through 12 in the series. Hecker notes that he and Wolski must be “faithful to the Zohar, in harmony with Danny’s style, and yet true to our own vision of what the Zohar is trying to communicate.” They will draw on extensive Aramaic-to-English glossaries developed for the early volumes.

Matt expresses great excitement about the partnership: “Joel combines superb scholarship with literary sensitivity. I am confident that he will produce an accurate, vibrant, and uplifting translation, enabling English readers to explore the enchanted world of the Zohar.”

History of a mystery

The unusual origins of what became known as Sefer ha-Zohar help explain many of the complexities involved in translation. Pieces of the text first appeared in Spain in the late 13th century, circulated by a kabbalist named Rabbi Moses de Leon. He claimed that they originated with a second-century rabbi, Shimon bar Yochai. Contemporary experts believe that de Leon probably authored the bulk of this material himself, possibly in collaboration with a group of his contemporaries. They wrote in Aramaic, a sister language of Hebrew and the voice of the Talmud.

However, the Zohar’s Aramaic is highly idiosyncratic, due to a combination of linguistic error, poetic embellishment and a deliberate desire for mystery. The work values alliteration, ambiguity and aural play, such as the frequent use of open vowel sounds like “ta” at the ends of words even when this is grammatically inappropriate.

Later scribes “Aramaized” some of the related texts that appeared in Hebrew to match de Leon’s, adding
another layer of complication. The end result is nearly 2,000 pages of commentary on Torah and Talmud—as well as wide-ranging material that covers theology, cosmogony (the origin and evolution of the universe), psychology, parables, narratives and poetry, all designed to draw readers into participation in a mystical drama. Scholarly readers have compared zoharic text to jazz, with a variety of voices improvising around a theme. Hecker agrees, saying that one can definitely recognize when a “Miles Davis” shows up and starts to play.

The kabbalists depicted God as a complex web of multiple potencies and identities—male and female, loving and angry, accessible and ineffable. “It is a masterpiece of world religious literature, one of the most stunning pieces of writing I’ve come across,” observes Hecker, who received his undergraduate degree in literature before pursuing a rabbinical degree and a Ph.D. in Judaic studies.

According to Hecker, Matt wants to “recover the Zohar’s primal texture and cryptic flavor” and convey the text’s “strangeness, potency and rich ambiguity.” All three scholars are striving for the “most colorful and zestful” translation possible.

Matt’s work to date shows ample evidence that he has succeeded. In Volume 2, he offers this description of the Milky Way:

In the middle of the sky, a lustrous path is woven—Celestial Serpent—all gossamer stars clustered within, mounds upon mound encharged with requiting the deeds of inhabitants of the world. Similarly, numerous bands of dazzling demons issue from this supernal, primordial serpent—by whom Adam was seduced—and they are all encharged with requiting deeds of the world. (Zohar 1125b; Matt 2004–2009, vol. 2, p. 215)

He diverges dramatically from earlier English translations and provides meticulous documentation of his word choices. For example, in a passage in which Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (the purported author of the Zohar) invites his son to interpret the Torah, a literal translation looks like this:

Recount something good, my son, because a word from your mouth is like the voice of the lamp.

Whereas the Pritzker Edition offers this:

Speak, my son! May dazzling topaz from your mouth resound like a spark! (Zohar 1:92b; Matt 2004–2009, vol. 2, p. 84)

To deepen the reader’s understanding, extensive notations in the Pritzker Edition cover a broad range of topics: explaining how Latin, Greek, Castilian and Arabic influenced the language of the Zohar; offering historical context for the narrative’s references to physics, botany and medicine; and much more.

Sefirotic system of meaning

At the heart of the Zohar and kabbalistic thinking lies a depiction of a God made up of 10 sefirot, or gradations of divinity, each representing a different attribute, such as the stern judge or the compassionate healer. Hecker explains that for the kabbalists, these identities are indivisible and always unified, yet have sharply different characteristics that offer flexibility to the faithful in interpreting God’s actions.
“Having 10 sefirot or 10 ‘balls in the air’ to describe how divinity interacts with the world, humanity and the Jewish people—manifesting itself through nature, Torah and mitzvot—helps to fashion a web of meaning that is always referring back to itself,” he says. This kaleidoscopic framework grows logically from the medieval mindset as well as from competing religious forces of that era, full of magic, myth, angels and demons, and other sacred fantasies.

Academic Dean Tamar Kamionkowski, Ph.D., notes that current biblical scholarship also offers “a rediscovery of God as a fluid spiritual force who manifests in different ways at different times.” In fact, kabbalistic thinking draws upon a very ancient way of approaching divinity that may even be “the most dominant in Judaism.” She is excited by the prospect of faculty work that opens such pivotal Jewish source material to a broader audience.

**Spirituality, not pop psychology**

The recent popularity of kabbalah—attracting celebrities from Madonna to British soccer star David Beckham—does not surprise Hecker. However, he considers this a commercialization that distorts its meaning, sometimes to the point of denying its Jewish nature entirely. As a result, rabbis today have an even greater need for textual and historical grounding in Jewish mysticism, so that they can guide people who feel drawn to its appeal. But this subject matter isn’t new at RRC.

The College began offering coursework in kabbalah as early as 1976, when the pure rationalism of the early Reconstructionist movement was giving way to a wider range of ideas and practices. By 1985 it had become a requirement—part of RRC’s long-standing leadership in training rabbis who can meet their communities’ needs for spiritual exploration.

Today, all students take a minimum of one course in kabbalah and one in Hasidism, the mystical beliefs and practices that evolved in the 18th century. Hecker observes: “It seems to me perfectly in keeping with the Reconstructionist mission to integrate the best of kabbalistic lore, thought, practice and theology, in order to help reconstruct Judaism in the most vibrant form that it can adopt today. Ultimately, what the writers of the Zohar are trying to do is make sense of the Bible and rabbinic tradition and of God’s message to Jewish people.”

Hecker appears to relish the challenge of sifting through layers of meaning that have accumulated over centuries. He looks forward to translating the Zohar’s commentaries on Song of Songs, Lamentations and the Book of Ruth as well as other material. “After the five books of Moses, the Song of Songs is the single most important text for the kabbalists,” he explains. This stems from the belief handed down from Rabbi Akiba that it represents the love song between God and the Jewish people.

Ultimately, Hecker describes his work on the Zohar: Pritzker Edition as more than a prestigious scholarly assignment. “I relate to the Zohar as a sacred book of Jewish tradition, and I approach the task of translating it with a fair amount of trepidation and a sense that what this text wants to do is help us to seek God. I’m aware that in translating it, I’m trying to open up the English language to be able to deliver that same kind of experience. It is not only an academic endeavor; I believe that this is holy work.”
A Different Kind of Legacy

Rabbis Sheila Peltz Weinberg, ’86, and Ezra Weinberg, ’09, both feel driven to create new forms of Jewish expression.

It was against her own expectations that Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, ’86, became one of the first generation of women rabbis. “I had never found a way of living a Jewish life that was intense enough for me,” Weinberg reflects. Her own search for a Judaism that was compelling enough to engage her was what attracted her to the seminary. Yet she would later go on to become a key player in the creation of new projects in Jewish mindfulness that would substantially change the wider Jewish landscape. And after nearly 25 years in the field, she would see her son, Ezra, join her in the rabbinate.

Though he has forged a distinct path, he shares his mother’s attraction to new Jewish ideas and practices. In 2009 the Weinbergs became RRC’s first parent-child graduates, and their stories illustrate how, though times may change, the strong personal drive that fuels a truly original rabbinate remains the same.

Sheila grew up in the Bronx and was exposed to many Jewish communities from an early age. During her childhood and adolescence, Camp Ramah was her salvation. She loved learning to speak Hebrew and learning about Jewish tradition. She begged her parents to let her attend a Jewish day school in Manhattan, but her mother believed there was such a thing as “too Jewish.” The compromise was that Sheila was permitted to attend Hebrew school at her family’s Conservative synagogue. Her deep love of Judaism was notable, and she found out later that the other kids had taken to calling her “the little rabbi.” Had she known this at the time she would have found the idea as outrageous as they did. In the ’50s, women didn’t become rabbis—they married them.

Growing up just a few decades later, however, Ezra and his sister, Abby,
found themselves surrounded by female Jewish leaders. It was the 1980s, and Philadelphia’s Mt. Airy neighborhood was a hotbed of progressive Judaism. Ezra wrote vividly about this community in his application essay for RRC:

I could not have realized that I was living in a unique environment because it was all I knew. I just figured there were many more Jewish communities around the country comprised of vegetarians, lesbians, female rabbinical students and chanting-style davening sessions in big circles on rugs. Weekends were spent at havurah retreats. ... I went to this farm where lots of rabbis and hip Jews would spend hours experimenting with new forms of prayer and worship.

He was grateful for a well-rounded Jewish upbringing that taught him there were many entries into the religion. As he grew older, his primary connection to Judaism was through Habonim Dror, the progressive labor Zionist youth movement. He rose to leadership positions within that organization by the time he was in college, but grew disappointed that the emphasis was on political Judaism at the expense of Jewish spirituality and practice. It was partly this desire to reintegrate spirituality into his life that led him to Israel.

Ezra had studied conflict resolution in college and graduate school, and Israel was the focus of his master’s thesis. He moved there with the dream that he would “bring peace to the Middle East,” but everything changed after the outbreak of the Second Intifada; he witnessed the disbanding of nearly all the peace-building efforts and organizations. He marvels that “the only exception I saw to that was the job done by rabbis and religious peace-builders. I saw the power of religion. Religion is often seen as the reason there’s so much conflict, but I was seeing religion as being the one sustaining force in a society of conflict. The strongest element of the peace-building community was the religious voices. They weren’t dependent solely on having funding. These people were peace-builders in their hearts.”

All of Ezra’s passions came together during this time. His activist instincts, his spiritual searching and his admiration for religious peace-builders helped affirm his Judaism and his ambitions within the Jewish community. At the same time, Reconstructionist Judaism reentered his life; he started attending RRC’s monthly minyan in Jerusalem. The decision to attend rabbinical school evolved very naturally. It was not out of any sense of legacy, but because it was the only logical channel for his disparate Jewish aspirations and values.
Yet the nature of his decision might have felt familiar. Sheila too had entered rabbinical school almost as a matter of personal necessity. She had married midway through college and soon was living as a young mother outside of Scranton with her two children. She writes frankly in her new memoir, *Surprisingly Happy: An Atypical Religious Memoir*, about the personal troubles, including alcohol addiction, that first plagued her during this time. The salve was a meditation and spirituality group that introduced her to new ideas and Buddhist concepts; she instinctively found ways to place these teachings in a Jewish context.

It was around this time that her friend Jeff Eisenstat enrolled at RRC and told her that some of his most exciting classmates were women. “It blew me away that there were women rabbis,” Sheila recalls. “It was thrilling. As soon as I heard it I said, ‘Oh my God, that’s what I’m supposed to do!’” She applied to rabbinical school and was accepted to both RRC and Hebrew Union College. After deciding on RRC, she moved to Philadelphia and deferred her enrollment for five years while she recovered from her divorce and settled Abby and Ezra in the new community.

During their times at RRC, Ezra and Sheila both were able to pursue projects that would lay the groundwork for their inventive rabbinites. After graduating, Sheila served as the spiritual leader of the Jewish Community of Amherst, MA, for 13 years; but she had been immersed since her RRC days in Jewish feminist and spirituality groups that anticipated her current work at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. IJS is not explicitly feminist, but Sheila believes it builds on the revelations of the feminist movement by validating individuals’ experiences. She now teaches the meditation and mindfulness practices that have had such a powerful influence on her own life to rabbis and other Jewish leaders.

And her influence has been profound. Rabbi Jacob Staub, ’77, Ph.D., director of RRC’s Jewish Spiritual Direction Program, counts himself among those
who have been transformed by her work. He says, “Sheila’s work over the last two decades to reintroduce meditation and contemplative spirituality back into Jewish practice has transformed the Jewish community in North America and elsewhere beyond recognition. Through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and, before that, through the Mindfulness Leadership Training Program, she has taught and mentored hundreds of rabbis and other Jewish leaders, so that there is hardly a corner of the Jewish world that has not been influenced by her, directly or indirectly.”

Throughout his rabbinical education, Ezra sought out opportunities to explore prayer and spirituality more deeply. He became the rosh rukhanyut (spirituality director) during Camp JRF’s early years and was instrumental in the creation of RRC’s davening collective. He believes that his role in the collective was what secured him the prestigious Marshall T. Meyer Fellow position he currently holds at B’nai Jeshurun in New York City. The position has given him the opportunity to work with a unique group: BJ’s newly formed men’s havurah is an effort to reengage Jewish men, who have become much less active than women in synagogue life in recent years. Ezra is excited to be part of this project and notes that he’s “always had the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time, where new things are starting up.”

The story of the Weinbergs reflects not just family history repeating itself but also the arc of liberal Judaism in America. Undeniably, the last 25 years have seen unexpected changes. Who would have predicted in the early ’80s that men would one day need their own groups for social and spiritual support? Yet as these two careers demonstrate, RRC continues to produce rabbis who embrace the challenges of a changing Jewish landscape.
The Center for Jewish Ethics

The Center has been busy this year with publishing, rabbinic education and lectures in the broader community. Perhaps the single most important activity of the Center is its work on the series A Guide to Jewish Practice, which is used for adult and high school education as well as for personal reference. The book on family and sexual ethics became available in March, and work is under way on the volume about holidays. In the next 18 months the Center anticipates finishing the section of the Guide dealing with everyday ethics.

Center director Rabbi David Teutsch, Ph.D., published articles on leadership in the Jewish Exponent (in response to the Madoff investment crisis), on the Reconstructionist approach to Jewish ethics for the forthcoming Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics, and for the journal Textual Reasoning examining Mordecai M. Kaplan’s pragmatic approach to Jewish education.

The Center continues to expand the presence of Jewish ethics in RRC’s curriculum and related activities. Teutsch taught a fall senior seminar focused on ethics for contemporary rabbis and a spring Jewish bioethics course. He also offered an introduction to rabbinic ethics as part of the Prospective Student Institute, co-led a College Time program titled “The Challenges of End-of-Life Decision-Making,” and did a lunchtime program titled “Key Issues in Healthcare Reform: How Can Rabbis Address These?”

Teutsch was the scholar in residence for a rabbinical student mission to Senegal sponsored by the American Jewish World Service and later provided a briefing for the organization’s executive staff. He gave the Fran Kane Memorial Lecture for the Jewish Family and Children’s Service of Philadelphia, “Values-Based Decision Making and Organizational Ethics,” and participated in a panel on healthcare reform sponsored by several organizations. He also delivered a lecture at Ursinus College titled “Bioethics, Religion, and Genetic Selection.”

Teutsch continued his work in professional development for Jewish leaders, including a Web-based seminar for rabbis and a training series for the Palm Beach Federation. He also served as scholar in residence for the Beit Breira Congregation in Miami, where his topics ranged from the ethics of food, sex and power to the challenges of maintaining community.

Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism

In the past year, Hiddur has completed two major initiatives that have helped current and future leaders of the Jewish community transform their approach to later life.

A three-year Helen Bader Foundation-funded training initiative culminated with “Addressing the Spiritual Journey of Jews Beyond Midlife,” a conference presented in partnership with UJA-Federation of New York. Attendees described the day as “groundbreaking,” “shifting how we think about aging—from aging as a problem to aging as a privilege.” Two hundred rabbis, chaplains, agency executives, social workers and lay leaders from a broad spectrum of Jewish movements and communities around the United States and Israel participated. An online conference toolkit was created that includes resources from the workshops, audio clips and results from a survey of innovative practices.
Hiddur offers these unique resources free of charge on its Web site at www.rrc.edu/spiritualjourney.

The other major undertaking completed this year was “Embracing Aging,” a Retirement Research Foundation-funded effort to develop new models for seminary training on aging. “Embracing Aging” has infused learning about aging throughout RRC’s courses, co-curricular programming and field experiences. It has helped faculty and students see the importance of engaging Jews beyond midlife—whether in congregations, organizations or chaplaincy settings. In a recent series of focus groups and interviews, 100 percent of student participants expressed a strong interest in working with populations beyond midlife. Their growing enthusiasm was evident. For example, one student said, “Everyone has a soul, and that soul gets wiser, better, richer, deeper as they age.” The “Embracing Aging” model will be disseminated in a special issue of The Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging focused on clergy training, edited by Hiddur Director Rabbi Dayle Friedman.

With these major accomplishments completed and a challenging economic environment continuing, Hiddur’s future efforts will focus exclusively on training rabbis at RRC about later life. Hiddur’s unparalleled, comprehensive program of academic courses, internships and informal learning will continue to prepare RRC students for the challenges and blessings of the aging Jewish community.

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

This year, Kolot is celebrating its bat mitzvah milestone with programs organized around the theme of gender, power and healthy relationships. Several programs for rabbinical students have sought to raise awareness about intimate-partner violence in the Jewish community and how rabbis can help as leaders and counselors.

An expert from Jewish Women’s International educated students about the prevalence and signs of abuse and what practical steps rabbis can take when confronted with the possibility that a woman may be in danger. In anticipation of this program, students created an artwork clothesline at the entrance of the communal sukkah, using fabric to reflect on domestic violence and raise awareness in the RRC community. This project added to the meanings of the sukkah, transforming it into a symbol of the potential fragility of the home.

At the second in a series of events for rabbinical students and their partners, Kolot presented a Hanukkah evening program titled “Rabbits Raising Children: That’s a Miracle!” A full house listened as children of rabbis talked about their experiences growing up, answered questions and offered advice. The conversation about the pitfalls and blessings of raising children in the public eye was both enlightening and fun.

This year, Kolot’s annual initiative to invigorate the observance of Ta’anit Esther as a “Jewish Day for Justice” began with a panel presentation by health professionals who enlightened students about the features of healthy relationships. A Ta’anit Esther text study helped reveal the importance of appropriate clothes in empowering both biblical priests and Queen Esther. Kolot also named Nancy Lublin, the founder of Dress for Success (an international not-for-profit that helps women secure employment) as Kolot Queen Esther 2010. In support of Dress for Success, Kolot is collecting suits for women reentering the workplace.

In addition, Ritualwell.org—Kolot’s unique Web site for contemporary Jewish ritual—continues to provide an indispensable resource to the Jewish community. New sections on the environment and communal responsibility have been added.

Finally, Kolot proudly announces the publication of a new book by Director Lori Lefkowitz, Ph.D.: In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities (Rowman and Littlefield).
Financial Statements

Statements of Financial Position
as of August 31, 2009

OPERATING REVENUES:
Gifts and grants 3,008,000 54%
Endowment resources 849,000 15%
Student tuition and fees 613,000 11%
Investment income 39,000 1%
Other sources 67,000 1%
Program funding 1,013,000 18%
Total Operating Revenues 5,589,000 100%

OPERATING EXPENSES:
Salaries and benefits 3,427,000 65%
Travel and special events 650,000 12%
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General and administrative 258,000 5%
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Plant operations and maintenance 157,000 3%
Communication 144,000 2%
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