

CREATING A CARING COMMUNITY: CLINICAL PASTORAL EDUCATION AT HUC-JIR/CINCINNATI

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“I cannot imagine my rabbinical education without CPE,” says Michelle Werner, C ’06. “Nothing prepares a rabbinical student to embrace the sacred role more than this training. We are welcomed as someone to whom it is safe to speak about aspects of life not often shared. For a family in need, I was the one with whom they spoke about matters religious, deeply sad, and transcendent.” Werner’s reflections of her chaplaincy in the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit at Cincinnati’s Jewish Hospital demonstrate the CPE program’s significant role in infusing leadership and excellence in students’ professional development. In December 2005, after ten years of satellite accreditation, most recently with Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, HUC-JIR received independent accreditation to offer Level I and Level II CPE training.

The long road to this accreditation began over fifteen years ago in September 1990, when Rabbi Julie Schwartz joined with the Reverend Henry B. Marksberry, then Director of Pastoral Care and Education at Bethesda Hospital, to sponsor a school year unit of Basic (now Level I) CPE at The Jewish Hospital. With the support of the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati, the satellite program grew to include

The Association for Clinical Pastoral Education recently designated HUC-JIR/Cincinnati as the first rabbinical seminary – and one of only two seminaries currently accredited among hundreds of hospitals, long-term care facilities, hospices, and other medical services – to offer accredited Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). The effort toward accreditation was led by Rabbi Ruth Alpers, Jay Stein Director of Human Relations, who oversees the CPE program and supervises the CPE students in an intensive learning-centered curriculum that enables HUC-JIR’s students to become effective pastoral care givers.



Rabbinical students Evon Yakar, Jonathan Greenberg, and Rabbi Ruth Alpers at the Jewish Hospital, where the students had clinical placements this year.

a summer intensive unit in June 1991 and offered summer stipends for students.

As a rabbinical student, Rabbi Ruth Alpers (pictured above), C ’94, took two units of CPE before such training became a requirement in the rabbinical program. “This experience was transformative in terms of my understanding of my rabbinical direction and how I wanted to

direct my career,” she recalls. “In my first pulpit at Temple Israel in Boston, I realized that 90% of my time was devoted to pastoral care in some way – not only in the context of hospital and nursing home visits, but when people came into my office or stopped in the hall to talk, or during life-cycle events from weddings and baby namings to funerals. These were all pastoral

care opportunities.”

When Alpers returned to her *alma mater* in 1999 to succeed Schwartz as the Jay Stein Director of Human Relations, she spoke with the Reverend William Scrivener, the Director of Pastoral Care at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, and inquired about starting an independently accredited CPE program at HUC-JIR. This was an ambitious goal, since only one other seminary, the Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Virginia, was accredited and HUC-JIR would become the first Jewish seminary to achieve this status.

Adding a Jewish dimension to CPE is a significant contribution to the field, since “accredited Clinical Pastoral Education venues and the Association for of Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) are organizations and ways of learning that are primarily Protestant and Catholic,” Alpers explains. “Consequently, before HUC-JIR’s accreditation, Jews who became involved with CPE were involved with supervisors who didn’t necessarily have an understanding of Judaism and its theology, values, and traditions.”

From Alpers’s perspective, HUC-JIR’s CPE aspirations were a way of increasing the diversity that is present in the ACPE. “In a community in which there are a limited number of rabbis with expertise in the area to serve as mentors, it was deemed that establishing an accredited CPE program at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati was the best way to proceed and offer this valuable form of education. It provided a way of ensuring that Jewish students could learn from Jewish values and texts and of offering this enrichment to seminarians of other faiths who

sought to have a Jewish experience. Thus, we have Protestant and Catholic seminarians who want to have this study experience with a rabbi and Jewish students. Accreditation enables us to get out into the broader interfaith community in ways that are different from the communal and organizational interfaith relationships.”

CPE at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati parallels programs on the other campuses, from the Blaustein Pastoral Counseling Centers in New York and Jerusalem to the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health in Los Angeles. Together, these programs offer HUC-JIR students the crucial training, fieldwork, supervision, and mentorship to enable them to offer compassion and care to those in need.

The rigorous program entails at least four-hundred hours of on-site supervised work in area hospitals, hospices, and clinics; regularly scheduled classroom meetings with supervisors; intensive peer review discussions with classmates; and ongoing self-assessment. Students must apply to the program and have a screening interview. The group is limited to six students per [Level I] unit of CPE, which Alpers offers either as an intensive summer program or in a more extended format throughout the academic year. Certification as a chaplain requires a minimum four units of CPE and an additional year of supervised work.

“I look for individuals who are open to feedback and to examining their own motivation, who have a curiosity about others and themselves and how they function in a group situation,” Alpers describes. She seeks balance in gender and life experi-

ence, as well. Ultimately, she puts together a group that will be able to work productively together. “Everything we do as Jewish professionals, regardless of where we locate our ‘pulpits,’ involves working in groups,” she notes. The program is open to students in the rabbinical, cantorial, education, and communal service programs who seek this kind of in-depth theological and practical training.

“As supervisor, I ask the students to reflect on how their theology supports them in the situations in which they find themselves, where their theology is challenged, and what meaning they take out of their experiences,” Alpers explains. “At the same time that they are learning to help others, I am working with them to help them develop their own personal growth – to reach an ‘aha’ moment when they are able to make a connection between something they have been working on in their own life and relate it to the work they are doing in the hospital or in the congregation.”

Cathy Beumer, RNC, MSN, a Clinical Nurse Leader at Cincinnati’s Jewish Hospital, notes that “HUC-JIR students’ contribution can be summed up in one word: Presence. The students learn to be there for the patient and the family, listening to their stories, their worries, their concerns, and giving a non-medical perspective to the experience of illness and healing. CPE students have helped our patients and families in times of crisis by being a calming presence and offering prayer.”

As chaplains, CPE students work with patients and families of all faiths. Rabbinical student Michelle Werner describes reciting the

Shehechyanu prayer in Hebrew and English for a Catholic patient about to receive a stem cell transplant. “Surrounded by the attending physician, nurses, and family, these people truly were rejoicing in having been able to be sustained so as to reach that moment, a moment so resplendent with hope.”

Alpers evaluates her students’ growth and learning individually at the conclusion of the course, as “each student begins and ends the course in a different place, based on his or her own life experience.” She notes that “HUC-JIR faculty have observed that students who have completed a unit of CPE are more mature and able to ask more integrated questions about the class material. Students come out of CPE with a more balanced way of looking at the world and the people they will serve, with fewer illusions about death, struggle, crisis, and illness.”

“My goal is to convey to our students the importance of pas-

toral care relationships in their professional work beyond the healthcare facility. I want to broaden their thinking and understanding of the full breadth of where they can make an impact, whether in a congregation, in an institution, in a school, or wherever their careers take them. Rabbi Jeremy Barras, C ’02, affirms that Alpers’s work has had an impact. “Without a doubt, CPE prepared me for life as a rabbi in a congregational setting.”

Alpers hopes that the CPE program can be offered one day to alumni, who could convene by video conference or intensive days of on-site study and who would be able to use their congregations or other professional placements as their clinical settings. “I love the work that I do,” Alpers concludes. “When students feel that they have had a transformative learning experience, it doesn’t get any better than that. Everything I do is related to trying to help our students become the best they can be to serve the Jewish community.” ■



Rabbinical student Jonathan Greenberg writing a patient's chart note at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center following a pastoral visit.