

A JOURNEY INTO TOMORROW: THE WORLD OF eLEARNING AT HUC-JIR

Francine Lis

■ A seminar across three stateside campuses ‘convenes’ on live video-conference ■ First-year students in Israel post reflections to their digital portfolio ■ Special presentations are downloadable as ‘podcasts’ for learners to listen to on their own ■ Online text study allows for *hevruta* (study partnership) between alumni an ocean apart ■ Faculty on all four campuses engage in virtual collaboration via live videoconference

This is HUC? Absolutely! These current opportunities and new projects for the upcoming academic year are indeed the wave of the future. Since the establishment of the National Department of Distance Education seven years ago, this innovative department is not only changing the way many teach and learn at HUC-JIR but is also changing its name to better reflect its mission, vision, and activities.

Department of eLearning

The mission of ‘eLearning’ (electronic learning) is to enhance, extend and expand learning both inside and outside of the formal classroom. A creative, multi-talented team of educators and educational technology and design professionals guides the high caliber and diverse learning opportunities offered: Online Learning modules, Virtual Resource Centers, Alumni Study programs, numerous course materials and learning support tools, and more.



The department focuses on synergizing pedagogy and educational technology to further the mission of the College-Institute for excellence in all programs and greater integration of all that we do on our four campuses. eLearning’s projects include collaborations with the HUC-JIR/CCAR Joint Commission for Sustaining Rabbinical Education, the Experiment in Congregational Education, The Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health, the Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation, and the Blaustein Center for Pastoral Counseling in New York.

“eLearning is one of the most important vehicles for achieving these goals. It expands the classroom beyond its walls, making it possible for students to take advantage of academic resources on other campuses and in other institutions,” states Norman Cohen, Provost of HUC-JIR. “This work has also brought academic and intellectual resources to bear on our alumni, the Reform Movement, and the larger Jewish community through cutting-edge programs and the

creation of numerous eLearning and distance education projects.”

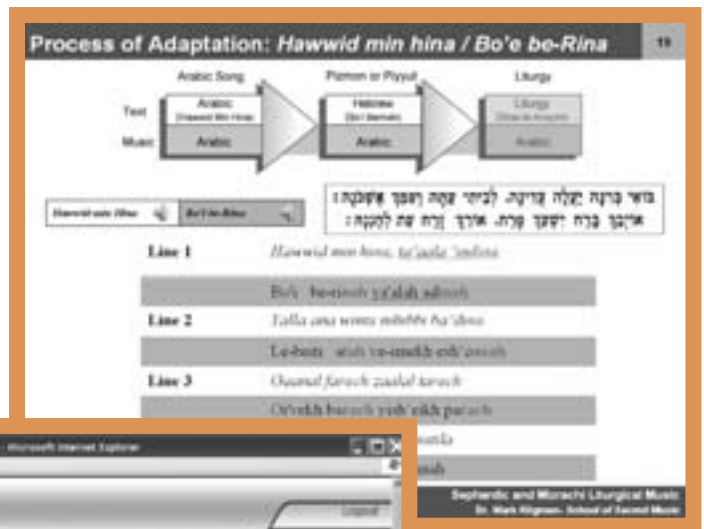
The Team

eLearning’s ambitious vision and programs are implemented by (pictured above, from left) Michelle Lazarow, Educational Technologist; Barbara Lehman, Director of Design for Digital Learning; Gregg Alpert, the department’s founding Director; and Karen More, eLearning Project Manager and Project Manager. “The department is an open laboratory for experimental concepts and pedagogic innovations,” Alpert explains. “With a little guidance and a collaborative process, educational technology can actually be an engine that drives the learning, allows our students, faculty and alumni to explore a broader range of possibilities and, as a result, discover the full potential of each learning opportunity.”

To view the complete article online and explore its links and resources, go to www.huc.edu/elearning/chronicle



From Sephardic Studies to Sakai, student learning and access to eLearning resources is rapidly changing at the College-Institute.



Changing the Mechanisms for Learning and Teaching

eLearning has enriched student learning and faculty instruction across the institution through creative, inter-disciplinary projects and courses, and faculty-student interaction. In one example of innovative programming, Dr. Mark Kligman, Professor of Musicology in the School of Sacred Music in New York, conceived of an interactive PowerPoint presentation that demonstrates for students the evolution of Sephardic music over time and geographic migration. The eLearning staff developed the presentation, which includes custom maps, charts, and sound clips of rare and authentic recordings and is tailored to specific audiences. “The result is amazing,” Kligman reflected. “The students grasp the concepts more quickly and will now be able to review the material on their own.” This presentation is part of a larger academic resource site on Sephardic Studies created by Dr. Kligman, his committee, and the Department of eLearning, funded through the generosity of the Maurice Amado Foundation.

Electronic Text Materials

Dr. Dvora Weisberg, Professor of Talmud and Director of the Lainer Beit Midrash on the Los Angeles campus, was looking to enhance her students’ understanding of rabbinic sources through a new series of digital educational materials. She sought a simple format to present original Aramaic texts side



by side, on-screen, with special passages highlighted; short study guides for take-home, on-screen quizzes; online class notes; and color-coded keys for charts and diagrams. With eLearning, she created a set of PDF’s with editable Word templates that fulfilled all of these goals, helping students better visualize and absorb complex concepts. Easily updated by Weisberg and downloadable by students from the course website, the documents have served as a rehearsal for the new Online Course Management System she is piloting this year.

Online Course Management System

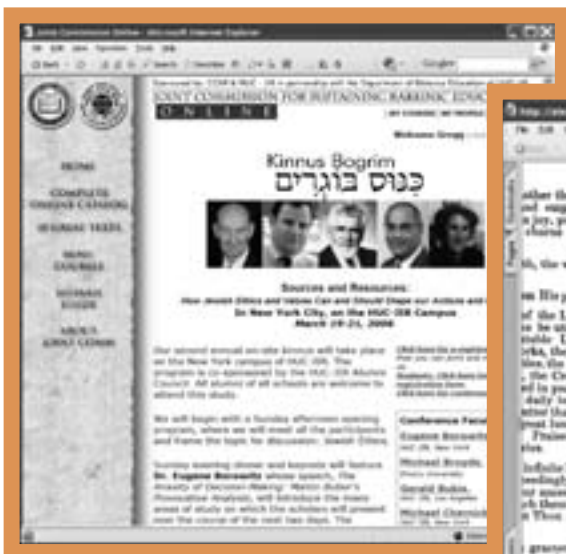
The Department of eLearning is piloting Sakai, an “open-source” Online Collaborative Learning Environment (CLE), which is being developed by major universities around the world. Sakai offers a powerful set of organizational, communication, assessment, and pedagogic tools that will allow

faculty and students to choose the most appropriate means for enhancing their particular course or project, and will provide an institutional platform for sharing resources and common curricular pursuits. It will also be a great asset for committee work, collaborative projects, and research. By contributing to this open-source community (a free, shared online resource to which partners contribute in a hands-on way), the Department of eLearning has aligned itself with forward-thinking innovators who have made a conscious decision to shape the technology that they use, rather than just respond to it.

Student ePortfolios

Based on new faculty-developed assessment guidelines, students will be able to compile their own electronic repositories of work done at the College-Institute, including records of traditional papers, written assignments, and teaching materials, as well as audio and video clips of presentations, recitals, sermons, and classroom instruction. Annotatable by students, faculty, and mentors, the ePortfolios will contain selected exchanges with faculty or congregants, comments by professors, and other notes

Through the HUC-JIR/CCAR Joint Commission Online, alumni can maintain their connection to HUC-JIR and are able to use the resources of the College-Institute to enrich their learning.



demonstrating critique, growth, or achievement. Ultimately, the ePortfolio will be evidence of a student's accomplishments during his or her tenure at HUC-JIR. "This is all about performance-based assessment – not just what one knows but what one can do with that knowledge. Most importantly, students, together with their mentors and advisors, will be able to identify what they still need to learn and will be able to create an action plan for possible next steps," explained Gregg Alpert. "We are also working with the Provost to develop a more comprehensive plan for continuing education for our alumni who will maintain access to this powerful resource as testament of this first of many important steps in their lifelong journey as Jewish professionals."

Alumni Learning and Leadership

eLearning currently provides easily accessible resources and a range of professional development opportunities to all HUC-JIR alumni and the larger world of Jewish professionals. At the heart of the Alumni Online Learning Portal is a link to the HUC-JIR/CCAR Joint Commission for Sustaining Rabbinical Education, a creative collaboration between HUC-JIR and the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The Joint Commission Online was the brainchild of Rabbi Martin Weiner, past CCAR President,

Norman Cohen, HUC-JIR Provost, and Gregg Alpert. To respond to the educational needs of busy rabbis in different time zones throughout the world, the team created a 24/7 online sustaining education program for alumni. Now in its fifth year, the Joint Commission Online is home to more than 20 archived courses with more than 500 participants. The site provides each alum with a permanent eLearning archive of completed courses, creating an expanding record of source materials and lessons that can be drawn upon to craft adult education classes, sermons, articles, and discussions.

Through the enthusiastic leadership of Rabbi Ellen Nemhauser, the Joint Commission's Director, and her collaborative partnership with the department, this year's offerings are being expanded (see page 33). Interactive video recordings of onsite programs like the highly successful *Kinnus Bogrim*, a live, multi-day alumni conference, will be viewable online. The same is true for a new two-year series, "10 Great Texts," enabling alumni to study online with HUC-JIR's world acclaimed faculty. Plans are underway

to make these materials available for ipods in 2007. "Remarkably, all of the electronic and enhanced resources of the Joint Commission will fit in the palm of your hand" explains Rabbi Nemhauser. "Once again though, it's not the technology that's important but the fact that eLearning continues to advance alumni study and professional development, which, in turn, directly impacts and enhances the learning of the communities where these Jewish leaders serve."

The Reform Movement and Larger Jewish Community

The eLearning staff has collaborated with the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) to provide participating congregations with state-of-the-art resources: an extensive website, an Online Learning Experience on Alternative Models of Religious School (AMRS), and a new Online Resource Center. Each is focused on exploring the central questions – how do congregations create new educational visions and 're-imagine' their educational programs? How can they learn from other communities? The AMRS online, interactive, media-rich learning module, which has generated over a thousand reflections by participants, allows individual team members to study sample programs and further explore the models of those that best fit the needs and goals of their community. "I am profoundly moved by the content and presentation, both from an inspiring artistic and a technically proficient standpoint. Judaism was never presented to me this way," said a participant

THE WORLD OF eLEARNING AT HUC-JIR *(continued)*



Mechinah includes an extensive network of background and support materials that appear as needed throughout a lesson and can be accessed by the learner for preparation or review.



in the ECE's Online Learning Experience. Standout programs, such as the Jeff Herman Virtual Resource Center (JHVRC) for Sexual Orientation Issues in the Jewish Community, and the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health have incorporated eLearning into their planning and programming. JHVRC's online materials, which complement workshops and classes on each of the campuses, are now available to the general public (www.elearning.huc.edu/jhvrc/), as part of the new Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation. The Kalsman Institute has also launched a completely re-designed web resource (www.huc.edu/kalsman/), created by Kalsman Associate Director, Michelle Prince and the eLearning design team leader, Barbara Lehman, which offers video recordings from conferences and workshops, as well as new innovative resources. "Our work with the eLearning staff is always collaborative," explains Michelle Prince, an alumna of HUC-JIR's School of Jewish Communal Service. "They guide and engage all of us in their unique process that enables us to better think through what we are trying to accomplish, the best way to get there, and frankly to see things we just didn't see before."

The Kalsman Institute's video recordings are part of an Audio/Video Streaming Portal that allows anyone with a high speed Internet connection to view confer-



ences, presentations, lectures and interviews directly on the HUC-JIR website. The streaming and eventual podcast versions are a glimpse of the future – projects that will continue to expand and extend the reach of the College-Institute beyond physical and temporal boundaries, or as the legendary Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel so eloquently taught us, will help the Jewish people to consecrate both space and time, anew.

The Future

Four years ago, the eLearning Department used HUC-JIR's video conferencing system to offer an experimental cross-campus elective, "The Jew and the Other," taught by Professors David Kaufman, Mark Washofsky, and Wendy Zierler. Four years later, the

department has created the eLearning Classroom program, which will bring state-of-the-art video conferencing to classrooms on all four campuses, with upgraded technology and training for faculty members on how to best use these resources to enhance their instruction and promote deeper connections and learning.

The newest, and most ambitious program being developed by the department is *Mechinah: Preparing Oneself for Professional Jewish Leadership*, an online, media-rich Jewish learning environment that offers students a holistic framework with which to think about, approach, and understand Jewish life (see www.huc.edu/support/AnnualReports/03-04-Page7.pdf). The audience will include incoming students who will complete the online, fifty-session program (with HUC-JIR faculty and led by graduate students and alumni) during their application process and first year of study in Israel, Jewish professionals in the field who have not had the opportunity to study at HUC-JIR, and eventually, serious adult learners around the world. eLearning endeavors such as Mechinah promise to not only change what we know but to forever change the way it will become a part of all of our lives. ■

To learn more about the National Department of eLearning and its programs, go to www.huc.edu/academics/continuing/de.shtm

ALUMNI STUDY TOGETHER AT WWW.HUC.EDU/JOINTCOMM

"This study program far surpassed my expectations!"

"Mind-boggling scholars!"

"The opportunity to devote two days to pure study is amazing, a priceless blessing."

"I have to commend HUC-JIR for the truly substantive high level adult education program it offers rabbis in congregations."

Such were the comments of alumni last March at the conclusion of *Kinnus Bogrim*, the 2 1/2-day study program that brought together fifty alumni, most from the New York and surrounding areas, but some from as far away as Northern California and even Haifa, Israel.

This is one example of the successful efforts of the HUC-JIR/CCAR Joint Commission for Sustaining Rabbinical Education. Now in its second decade of planning and implementing continuing education for rabbinical and other alumni, the Joint Commission is developing innovative ways to gather alumni of the College Institute for in-depth, collegial study.

In its early years the Joint Commission created seminars in specific locales, where rabbinical colleagues would study together under the guidance of national scholars. Seven years ago, with the creation of the National Department of Distance Education (now the Department of eLearning), the Joint Commission embarked on a partnership yielding new and stimulating programs accessible to all alumni wherever they live and work around the world. Alumni have been offered sixteen online minicourses, which incorporate live teleconference sessions and email-based discussion, as well as the highly popular, annual *Sefirah* Study, which over the past five years has provided alumni with seven consecutive weeks of eLearning with numerous experts on a single study theme.

In addition to these eLearning opportunities, the Joint Commission hosts Onsite programs every year during the CCAR convention and every other year on a HUC-JIR campus. The programs are organized by the members of the Commission, currently headed by co-chairs Dr. David H. Aaron, Professor of Bible at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, and Rabbi Irwin Zeplovitz of The Community Synagogue, Port Washington, NY.

Joint Commission programs, offering the most current analysis and commentary on topics of study, aim to complement and deepen the learning that alumni achieved during their student years at the College-Institute. More than 500 rabbis have participated in Joint Commission courses Online and another 150 have taken advantage of the Onsite programs.

HUC-JIR/CCAR Joint Commission for Sustaining Rabbinical Education 2006-07 Programs

Alumni are encouraged to register at www.huc.edu/jointcomm

Two-Year Guided Study through Email, Video, and Teleconference

10 Great Texts

October 2006 – June, 2008

Registration: \$50 per session or \$300 for the two-year program

Bi-monthly study with HUC-JIR Professors Norman Cohen, Michael Marmor, Alyssa Gray, David Aaron, Isa Aron, Eliyahu Schleifer, Reuven Firestone, Richard Sarason, and David Ellenson

Teleconference Minicourse

Toward a Deeper Understanding of Islam and Muslim Jewish Dialogue

December 7, 14, and 21, 2006 at 1:00 p.m. EST

Registration: \$100

Study with Professors Reuven Firestone, HUC-JIR/Los Angeles; Zayn Kassam, Claremont College; and David Elcott, American Jewish Committee, New York

CCAR Convention – Atlanta, GA

A Day in the Beit Midrash

March 13, 2007 at 8:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.

Registration: Included in CCAR Convention fees

Study with Professors David Ellenson, Donniel Hartman, Menachem Lorberbaum, and other HUC-JIR/Jerusalem scholars

Sefirah Study – An Email Text Program with Online Discussion

Uncovering and Upsetting the Paradigms of Prayer?

Liturgical Innovation from Antiquity to the Present

April 4 – May 22, 2007 Registration: \$100

Study with Professors Richard Sarason, HUC-JIR/Cincinnati; Laura Lieber, Middlebury College; Ruth Langer, Boston College

Archived Courses

Twenty-three courses offered over the past seven years are available through the Catalog of Courses at www.huc.edu/jointcomm. All text materials, teleconference presentations, and online discussions with colleagues are available at \$50 for each archived course.

For further information on these programs, please contact

Rabbi Ellen Nemhauser at enemhauser@huc.edu