

Dancing Her Way to the Rabbinate

Samantha Massell

Students leading services have asked if I would come in and do a short performance piece or lead yoga during *tefilah*.”

Yoga during worship? **Rebecca Cottle Epstein, N'09**, who entered HUC-JIR's rabbinical program as a serious modern dancer, has clearly become an innovator in her own right. Her philosophy: “I think one of the most important things about being a Jewish leader is experimenting with different ideas on how to get people engaged in Jewish life. It's hard, especially in communities that have been established for a long time, to think about innovation and change. But that's always been a part of our tradition – it's what's at the cutting edge.”

Epstein, a Vassar College graduate, certainly followed her mantra at HUC-JIR/New York. For starters, she created the Eco Kosher Potluck Group, which meets often to prepare a meal with organic, kosher, local, and packaging-free foods, to discuss environmental issues and synagogue life, and to consider the ethical standards of the companies from which the food ingredients come, including their treatment of workers.

Having studied ballet and modern dance from a young age, Epstein has integrated Jewish themes and music into her dancing with the Avodah Dance Ensemble, with whom she worked to choreograph a piece based on her senior sermon. “As I was wrestling to understand why God would have wanted Moses to kill all those who had worshiped the golden calf during the Exodus journey through the Sinai desert, I wanted to wrestle with it as a dancer, as well. So we choreographed a dance that was performed at a synagogue in Massachusetts. And then we taught a dance *midrash* class in Dr. Norman Cohen's creative *midrash* class.”

She cites the amalgamation of dance and Judaism as a wonderful way to bring together two parts of her life. “I've always viewed dance and performance as a way of bringing

more sensitivity and beauty into the world. And I think that Judaism helps us do the same thing. That's also how my spiritual life as a Jew has developed.” These goals planted the seeds for her decision to apply to HUC-JIR.

About three years after graduating from college, Epstein had been busy dancing, working, volunteering at a couple of organizations, and even teaching Hebrew School. “Basically,” says Epstein, “I was kind of checking out all these different ways that I could help people.”

She cites September 11th, 2001, as the major turning point in her decision to go to rabbinical school. “Anyone who was here at that time remembers how the atmosphere in the city changed, as people reached out to one another, strangers, to help each other through this tragedy.” Soon afterward, Epstein wrote a letter to the parents of her Hebrew School class expressing her hope that the Jewish values and traditions she was teaching would bolster the children as they went through this tough time. It was then that she realized that as a rabbi she could build relationships with people by giving them a sense of community and a set of positive values.

“HUC-JIR and the Reform Movement provide a wonderful platform to express yourself and your passions,” she says. “There are communities out there who are hungry for innovation and want to see new things. HUC-JIR gives you that pathway to connect with them, and the

opportunity to go deeply into your own creativity and Jewish self, and then figure out how to bring these ideas to people in order to engage their interests and talents and create synagogue life anew.” Epstein is now implementing her vision for innovation as Assistant Rabbi of Anshe Emet Memorial Temple in New Brunswick, NJ. ■



Rabbi Rebecca Cottle Epstein, N'09,