

A tearful congregant at my student pulpit approached me, needing help with a family crisis. Sadly, the situation involved child abuse, drug abuse, financial problems, and family secrets – things I was accustomed to seeing in my professional life as a social worker. Only this time, the “client” didn’t come to see a social worker, the congregant came to see a rabbi.

I have always wanted to be a rabbi, but it took me a while to get here to HUC-JIR. I became President of the Temple Youth Group, Social Action Vice President of what was then SCFTY, and a CIT at Camp Swig. During college, I was the youth group advisor and day camp director at my synagogue,

A SECOND CAREER CALLING

Rabbi Karen Sherman, L '09

and my teachers and mentors encouraged me to go to HUC-JIR. But my life took a different course.

I earned a Master of Social Work degree at USC and specialized in Community Organizing, Policy, and Administration. For 12 years I worked at the policy, management, and administrative levels of a Los Angeles based nonprofit agency serving women and children with histories of poverty, family violence, mental illness, and homelessness, and then at another nonprofit agency that specialized in policy analysis and advocacy for women and children to improve collaboration between substance abuse agencies and child abuse agencies across California.

I loved social work and relished the opportunities to engage in social justice, but I wanted to do that work in a Jewish way. I wanted to nurture my love for Judaism in a

deeper way than I had done before, to learn and to share that learning, to teach it, and to live it. I felt called to become a rabbi, and a trusted mentor helped me to see that I had to pursue that path.

Once I became what HUC-JIR calls a ‘second career student,’ my experience differed from that of most of my classmates. This was especially true during our first year of study in Jerusalem. Following my acceptance in 2004, my husband Harvey and I sold our house and moved to Israel with our two daughters. At 7 and 3, Rebekah and Eliana were the perfect ages to learn a new language and adapt to life in a new country.

I might have missed out on some opportunities that my classmates enjoyed. While they were climbing Masada, I was waving as one daughter rode to *Tali Bayit v’Gan* by school bus and walking the other to *Gan* at Congregation Har El in Jerusalem. While my classmates were spending their free time in local bars and at concerts, my family and I were having play dates with Israeli parents and celebrating birthdays and holidays with Israeli families. My children created their own community, but they also loved being immersed in the HUC-JIR community. Our apartment became the place for anyone and everyone to spend *Shabbat*. My children considered all my classmates to be their family – they joked that it was like having 70 cousins!

As a student in graduate school for the second time, I had life experiences behind me and different expectations for my future. It was a special challenge to balance school and internship responsibilities with my family life and life in my own Jewish and neighborhood community in Los Angeles. It was not always easy to explain this path to people of my age who were already settled in their homes and careers, so I found myself having even more in

common with my classmates. To my school community, I contributed my personal and professional life experiences to help make theirs easier. My classmates and teachers opened my eyes to new possibilities, and they taught me to be more open to change.

Along this path I have reenergized my counseling skills, reawakened my commitment to social justice, and discovered a love of Liturgy, Biblical Poetry, and Jewish Thought. Most importantly, I continue to develop a spiritual side of myself that has helped me to become a more fulfilled human being and a more complete Jew.

Rabbi A.J. Heschel wrote, “We must learn how to be one with what we do.” When people come to me needing guidance, I no longer question whether I am the social worker or the rabbi. Skills and experiences, old and new, all combine to create one whole person with varied and complex facets: a rabbi. Eventually, I even managed to climb Masada. ■



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