

HUC-JIR ALUMNI CHANGING THE WORLD

As an ardent advocate for spiritual practice in contemporary Jewish life, Rabbi Rachel Cowan is having a significant impact on the creativity and enrichment of worship, liturgy, and ritual throughout the Jewish community, its institutions, and congregations,” said Rabbi Ellenson in presenting Rabbi Cowan with the President’s Medallion at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem’s Academic Convocation on November 14, 2008.

Ordained at HUC-JIR/New York in 1989, Rabbi Cowan was recognized for her groundbreaking contributions to Jewish spirituality; as a guide to the *Mezorim* Program at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, which is creating the language and vocation for a new profession of pastoral care-giving to serve Israelis at times of illness, crisis, and joy; and for her ongoing inspiration and support for HUC-JIR’s students and alumni.

In a recent article for *Shima*, Rabbi Cowan noted that “finding ways to promote the spiritual formation, development, and nurturance of rabbis is a critical issue for seminaries. As students develop skills in studying and analyzing texts, teaching, preaching, counseling, and leading services, they also need to understand the importance of cultivating their soul.” Acknowledging that students emerge from HUC-JIR to enter intense lives in their professional placements, she notes that “they need spiritual practices that strengthen their *middot*, their faith, their courage, their equanimity, their sense of authenticity, their prayer-life, and their vision, so that they can inspire congregants and the larger community. These qualities keep their rabbinate fresh and live, mitigating the burnout and compassion fatigue that are dangerous professional traps.”

Rabbi Cowan has witnessed this first-hand in her capacity as Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS). The IJS seeks to develop, nurture, and disseminate through mainstream Jewish institutions the vitally needed stream of contemplative Judaism that serves to enrich the inner lives of Jews, revitalize the Jewish wisdom tradition, open Jewish institutions to new forms of liturgical and ritual expression, and ultimately to link the search for

Rabbi Rachel Cowan: A Rabbi’s Rabbi

Jean Bloch Rosensaft



Rabbi Rachel Cowan, N ’89, received the President’s Medallion at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem

inner wholeness with social and environmental activism. The IJS creates extensive learning experiences for Jewish professionals and lay people and supports Jewish professionals in creating environments in their own communities that will provide such learning opportunities for others. It guides Jewish institutions to develop their capacity to meet more effectively the needs of their constituents for a contemplative Jewish practice, and nourishes a network of faculty and students to support these goals. More than 50 Reform rabbis have participated in the Institute’s rabbinical leadership program and more than 20 Reform cantors

Pointing to the concept of “spiritual re-formation,” Rabbi Cowan advocates for the opportunity to take the time and “look anew at our theology as it evolves with life experience, to reconnect with prayer.” This is crucial, she says, because “without a spiritual practice of cultivating humility, clarity, truthfulness, and discernment,” spiritual leaders may run the risk of “not seeing how the power of their ego can lead them to believe that they are exempt from normative standards.” She believes that the “core of spiritual formation for rabbis is simple: God wants our heart; the essence of the spiritual life is to work on ourselves; and we cannot teach authentically when our role is divided from our soul. We cannot give what we don’t possess.”

Rabbi Cowan received her B.A. in Sociology from Bryn Mawr, and her M.S.S. from the University of Chicago. She served as the Director of the Jewish Life and Values Program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Director of Outreach at the 92nd Street Y in New York.

Born to a Boston-based Unitarian family that traces its roots to the Mayflower, Rabbi Cowan converted to Judaism after sixteen years of marriage to the writer Paul Cowan, z”l, with whom she co-authored *Mixed Blessings: Untangling The Knots in an Interfaith Marriage* and *A Torah is Written*. She has spent many years leading workshops for interfaith couples and advocating for Jewish communities to be more open to non-Jewish spouses and to encourage their commitment to Judaism.