



# THREE DECADES OF EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP: RABBI SAM JOSEPH

Kim Zeitman

As the descendant of a German Jewish family that helped found the Reform Movement in America, it is perhaps no surprise that Rabbi Samuel Joseph chose to enter the rabbinate. “I was thrilled about going to rabbinical school, as I loved the congregational experience,” said Joseph. This love would ultimately lead to a career focused on improving the congregational, educational, and organizational systems of Jewish life.

Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph, Ph.D., is Professor of Jewish Education and Leadership Development at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, where he teaches in the Rabbinical School. His special interest is how Jewish institutions and organizations, ranging from schools and synagogues to national groups, can be most effective as they seek to fulfill their mission and vision. Toward this end, Rabbi Joseph consults with rabbis, educators, administrators, and communal and lay leaders throughout the world, supporting them as they lead their institutions and organizations.

Rabbi Joseph’s Jewish journey began in childhood, with attendance at URJ camps and a family active in the Reform Movement. After earning a B.S. in Education and History from the University of Cincinnati, he went straight to HUC-JIR’s Cincinnati campus to earn the M.A. in Hebrew Literature in 1974 and rabbinical ordination in 1976. Rabbi Joseph served first as a rabbinical intern and later as Assistant Rabbi at Temple Israel in Dayton, OH (1974-1979), where he worked

extensively with the religious school and in adult and family education.

Upon ordination, Rabbi Joseph also began writing curricula for the URJ, but he found himself disappointed when he saw teachers using his educational materials. “I was very upset – I didn’t recognize what I’d written,” said Joseph. “I got involved in teacher training, and began to realize that the issues were larger than the classroom teacher; lots of elements of success in the classroom have to do with the entire system of the school, and the school system is part of the larger congregational system.” With these realizations, Rabbi Joseph’s career shifted from “the micro of curriculum-writing to the macro of the congregational system.”

## Coming Back to HUC-JIR

In 1979 Rabbi Joseph received a call from HUC-JIR’s then-President, Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk, asking whether he might be interested in taking on the position of National Director of Admissions and Alumni Affairs and Assistant to the President at HUC-JIR. “I loved HUC-JIR and had a great experience there, so I decided to return,” he recounts. This was to be the beginning of a three-decade career at the College-Institute. After serving as an administrator for several years, Rabbi Joseph became a faculty member in 1981, the same year that he earned his Ph.D. in Education and Organizational Development from Clayton University in St. Louis, MO. He

has taught the students of HUC-JIR’s Cincinnati campus ever since.

These days, Rabbi Joseph splits his time between classroom teaching and consulting and coaching work with rabbis, congregations, and Jewish communal professionals. His teaching in recent years has combined his background in leadership, organizational systems, and education, including courses such as “Leadership and Organizational Dynamics,” “Teaching About God to Children and Adults,” “Leading Change in Jewish Organizations,” “Life Long Adult Learning,” and this past semester’s new course, “Philanthropy and Fundraising in Jewish Organizations for Rabbis.”

As a consultant, Rabbi Joseph has worked with nearly 300 congregations in the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox denominations, as well as Jewish communities in Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Argentina, and Hong Kong, where he is the founding rabbi of a liberal congregation. “What’s fun is helping congregations and organizations figure out their unique way of doing things and how to be most effective with it,” he explained. “What can they change to be more effective?”

Rabbi Joseph served as the 2006 and 2007 Walter Jacob Jubilee Fellow at Abraham Geiger College in Berlin, the first rabbinical seminary in Germany since the Holocaust. In 2007 he also taught at the Levisson Institut in Amsterdam, the Progressive Rabbinical Seminary for Dutch Jewry. He is the author of four books: *Lead-*

*ing with a Jewish Heart: Text Study and Good Leadership Practices for Congregational Leaders* (forthcoming), *Portraits of Schooling: A Survey and an Analysis of Supplementary Schooling in Congregations* (1998), *How to be a Jewish Teacher: An Invitation to Make a Difference* (1988), and *Jews and the Founding of the Republic* (1985), and has published more than fifty articles in the areas of education and leadership.

### Relationship with Xavier University

One of Rabbi Joseph's greatest achievements at HUC-JIR is the establishment of an academic relationship with Xavier University, a Jesuit Catholic university in Cincinnati. As there is no school of education on the Cincinnati campus, rabbinical students who wish to engage in deeper study in this field may earn a Master of Arts in Education degree through a joint program with Xavier University, which can be completed within the five years of the rabbinical course of study.

Rabbi Joseph was inspired to begin working with Xavier as a result of his students' needs. "Over the years I've had a few students each year who wanted to do more in education than you can at the Cincinnati campus and were unable to attend HUC-JIR's Rhea Hirsch School of Education in Los Angeles or New York School of Education. They would go on their own to Xavier or the University of Cincinnati to earn a Master's degree in Education. I had very little control over that, and there was no communication or coordination between the HUC-JIR program and those of the other universities."

Several years ago, Rabbi Joseph discussed with Xavier administrators the possibility of creating a joint program with the College-Institute, and they welcomed the idea. Since 1999-2000, students are able to apply directly to a program at Xavier that culminates in a Master of Education degree in Educational Administration. The M.A. requires that they take courses at Xavier University and courses with Rabbi Joseph at HUC-JIR, and Rabbi Joseph offers electives geared toward the students in the joint program.

Rabbi Loren Filson Lapidus, a 2007 graduate of the Xavier program who received her rabbinical ordination in May 2008, elaborates on the content and value of the program: "The program balances educational theory and educational topics, personnel and administration issues, and trends in Jewish education. We learned how to empower teachers and staff, provide meaningful feedback, formulate curricula and long-term visions for a school, and make our instructional time most effective. Rabbi Joseph provides an essential Jewish angle, making us aware of the innovations of schools and congregations in the field of education and current issues being discussed. I feel that the HUC-JIR-Xavier program has given me the tools to be a better teacher, a better educational resource to congregations, and a better rabbi."

The success of the HUC-JIR-Xavier endeavor is evident in its rapid growth, with 14 graduates and 5 current students. Students and alumni praise the program and appreciate the unique opportunity to learn with diverse students in a different environment. Rabbi Adam Grossman, a 2008 alumnus of the program, remarks that

"Xavier students and professors come with different perspectives and knowledge bases, which can expand our thinking and give us new ideas to incorporate into Jewish settings." Xavier students also benefit from what Grossman calls "the ultimate interfaith dialogue." He adds, "A rabbi is a teacher, so as a rabbinical student I felt it was important to learn as much as I could about the education process and Jewish education today."

Rabbi Joseph notes that Xavier professors often comment on the joy of teaching full-time graduate students of the caliber of HUC-JIR rabbinical students, and hopes to build on the success of the HUC-JIR - Xavier program by extending the relationship between the institutions, which this past year launched a joint Jewish and Interfaith Studies Program (see [www.huc.edu/support/fnecr.pdf](http://www.huc.edu/support/fnecr.pdf)). Xavier has one of the top M.B.A. programs in the country, and Rabbi Joseph would like to develop a certificate for rabbinical students in the area of organizational behavior and leadership. There is interest on the part of Xavier's business school administrators, and Rabbi Joseph hopes this will lead to further cooperation and partnership between the two institutions.

After thirty years in the field, Rabbi Joseph retains an abiding passion for his work. "I still run to work everyday. I love what I do, and I consider myself incredibly privileged to teach the next generation of Reform rabbis. It is our job to help rabbinical students learn to be reflective leaders, who can build community and work for change." He considers his ability to combine practice and theory one of the greatest assets of his job. "I'm quite lucky to do a tremendous amount of consulting with rabbis and lay leaders all over the world, and within days I'm back in the classroom with rabbinical students, so I can talk with them about what's happening, get their ideas and reflections, and take them back into consulting," said Rabbi Joseph. "I think I have the best of every world." ■



*Rabbi Sam Joseph and students at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati.*