

President's Message

During the High Holy Days this year, I am especially mindful of the fragile nature of our existence along with the delicate potential for renewal that infuses the *Yamim Noraim*. On a personal level, I have during this past year coped with the deaths of a close friend and beloved President and Chancellor Emeritus, Dr. Alfred Gottschalk (see page 2), the illness of another, and my own individual health problems. At the same time, I also eagerly await the birth of our first grandchild in December as I watch our own family being renewed for a new generation. As President of the College-Institute, I have had to deal with the unprecedented economic challenges HUC-JIR has had to confront this past year. Of course, there is not necessarily anything unique about any of this. The very nature of life is such that anxiety and uncertainty alternates constantly with confidence and hope. *Ecclesiastes* taught us these truths millennia ago.

With these thoughts in mind, I have been turning more than ever to the work of Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899), the founder of the Berlin Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary in 1874. This institution was the first such Orthodox seminary in history, and I first wrote my rabbinical thesis on its founder under the direction of my teacher Professor Fritz Bamberger at HUC-JIR in New York in 1977. I expanded the thesis and completed my dissertation on this topic at Columbia four years later under the supervision of Professors Joseph Blau and Gillian Lindt.

I was intrigued by this topic because I wanted to understand how a traditional religious leader like Rabbi Hildesheimer who was also wedded to the culture of the modern world could both affirm the authenticity of the *Massoret* (Jewish tradition) and be open to the changing currents of the modern world. I felt Rabbi Hildesheimer provided a model worthy of exploration and emulation precisely because he was involved in the unending dialectic that marks the relationship between Tradition and Modernity. As Rabbi Hildesheimer dealt with the trials of his day, he strove with all the knowledge and talents at his disposal to create a modern seminary that would educate rabbis and other religious leaders who would serve and guide the Jewish people meaningfully and joyfully as they faced the challenges of the modern setting. While his precise answers to the problems of the modern situation were not and are not mine, I did and do identify with the problems he faced and see his tasks as in so many ways my own.

In an 1873 letter Rabbi Hildesheimer addressed to those who might support the creation of his proposed seminary, he stated that there could be no task “more holy and pressing than the establishment of this school.” Without the best teachers to instruct and guide the graduates his proposed institution would ordain, Rabbi Hildesheimer believed that the future of Judaism and the ability of our Tradition to inform the lives of Jews would be dim. While the challenges of our day are surely distinct from the precise ones that



Rabbi Hildesheimer faced in his, the overarching framework is the same and our task at HUC-JIR today – to educate religious, intellectual, educational, and communal leadership for the Jewish people – is identical to the task Rabbi Hildesheimer identified for his institution and himself in 1873-1874.

The lead article in this issue by Professor Steven Cohen describes precisely the dilemmas and opportunities that mark the situation of North American Judaism at the beginning of the 21st century. Rabbi Laura Geller and Professor Bruce Phillips offer their own thoughts on what Professor Cohen has written, and the remainder of our issue points to programs – Mandel, Schusterman, and Tisch – as well as portraits of faculty, alumni, and students who are each attempting in diverse ways to have Judaism speak in meaningful cadences to the Jewish people now and in the future. Following these portraits, a dozen books written in recent months by our outstanding faculty – who constitute the heart of our institution – are featured. The range of topics on which they have conducted their researches is genuinely breathtaking, and this scholarship, as well as the portraits of the individuals who are presented in this edition of *The Chronicle*, testify to the vitality that infuses the College-Institute and its students and faculty.

The dialectic between Tradition and Modernity with which Rabbi Hildesheimer struggled in the 19th century marks our own efforts in the present, and his attempt to create a corps of religious leaders capable of having Judaism speak in meaningful terms to a contemporary Jewish community is no less ours than his. Just as he devoted himself to the formation of Jewish religious and intellectual leaders who could provide insight and inspiration for the Jewish community of his day, so we at HUC-JIR continue this sacred and enduring task of forging leadership capable of bridging the divide between past and present in authentic and meaningful ways for our people today.

As this New Year begins, Jackie and I, along with our children Ruth, Sara and Micah, Hannah, Nomi, and Rafi, wish you and yours a *shanah tovah u'metukah*, a good and sweet New Year.

Rabbi David Ellenson
October 2009 *Tishri* 5770