

# Face to Face, Coast to Coast

It is 9:20 a.m. and 13 students in Room 013 in Los Angeles are facing their six classmates in Room 507, three hours later in New York, courtesy of the video conferencing technology in the brand new eLearning-classrooms on these two campuses made possible by the generous support of Gerry and Burt Belzer. These 4th- and 5th-year rabbinical students are inaugurating the first ever Bible cross-campus course at HUC-JIR and advancing the College-Institute's entry into the 21st century.

Team-taught by Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Dr. Andrea Weiss, co-editors of the groundbreaking publication *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, "Introduction to Modern Torah Commentaries in Context" examines the *Women's Commentary* in light of ten other modern Torah commentaries, including Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox ones. "As students analyze a range of Torah texts and Torah commentaries, with attention to historical context, hermeneutics, goals, audience, and reception of each commentary, they are strengthening skills and further developing their own approach to, and interpretation of, the Torah," explains Dr. Weiss.

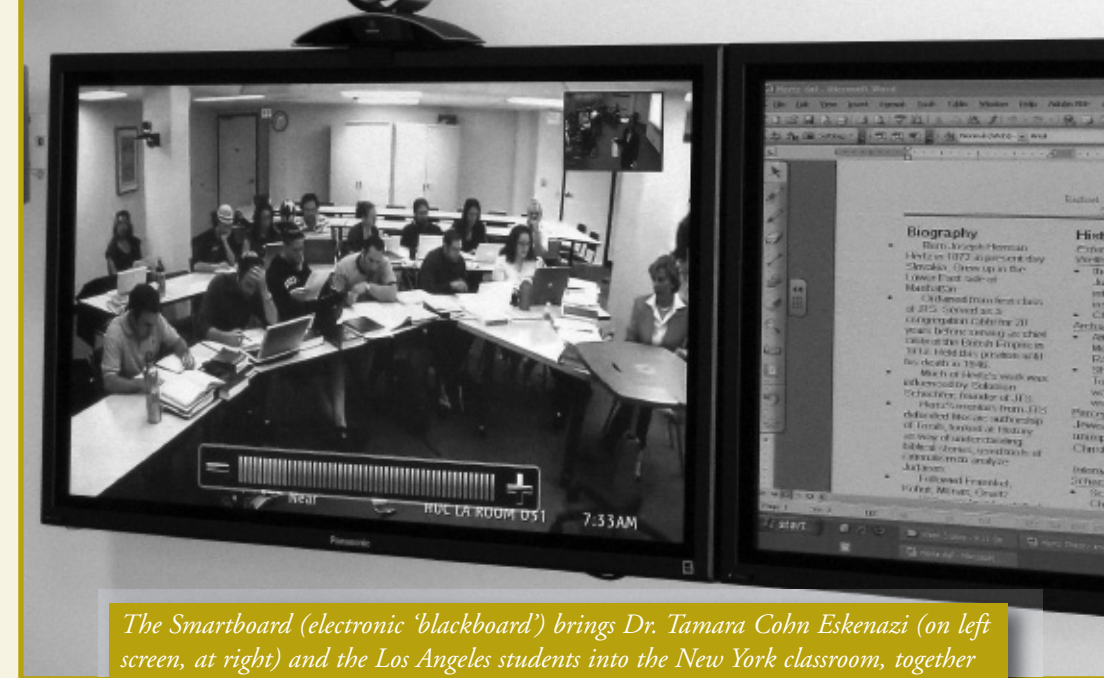
*Dr. Andrea Weiss, Assistant Professor of Bible, and students at HUC-JIR/New York and (on the screen) Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Professor of Bible, and students at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, participating in the first ever cross-campus Bible course at HUC-JIR utilizing eLearning classrooms.*



Each student has been designated to present, and be the ongoing representative of, a specific commentary – Hirsch, Hertz, Plaut, *Etz Chayim*, Stone, Friedman, Alter, Fox, and others – in addition to using *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* as an ongoing commentary. Today it is Rachael Bregman's and Joshua Samuels's turn to teach their classmates about the early twentieth century Hertz *Pentateuch*, offering an overview of Hertz's biography, the history and context of his commentary, and his goals as an interpreter of Biblical text.

As Barbara Lehman of the eLearning Department manipulates documents on the Smartboard (an electronic "blackboard" shared by both campuses), the two students – 3,000 miles apart – take turns sharing their research. Bregman describes Hertz's goal of bridging an emotional connection to Judaism with the discoveries of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the scientific study of Judaism). She tells how Hertz's commentary reflects the influence of contemporaneous archaeological excavations, how it was assembled from the work of a small number of pulpit rabbi contributors who were skilled in teaching, and how the multi-volume set only became popular when Soncino published it as a single volume. Samuels talks about how Hertz wanted to defend traditional Judaism at a time of growing self-hatred and assimilation by appealing to the teachings of ethical values and *halakhah* (Jewish law) and encouraging Jews to take back the study of the Bible and to use his commentary in the pews. Together, they discuss Hertz's interpretation of Genesis 32: 23-33, and 34:1-4 – when Jacob wrestles with the angel and changes his name – and explain how Hertz characterizes both events as victorious.

Then the class shifts gears as Professor Weiss in New York asks the class to break down into small *chevruta* (study partner) groups to analyze the text of *parashat Yitro* in the context of an article by Harvey Meirovich. Once the groups have completed their work sheets, they share their answers. The class discussion encompasses a wide range of issues: the threat within posed by liberal Judaism, the threat without posed by biblical criticism, the defense of divine authorship and the historicity of revelation, the focus on Bible study for the spiritual lives of Jews, and the notion of accepting truth from whatever source it



*The Smartboard (electronic 'blackboard') brings Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi (on left screen, at right) and the Los Angeles students into the New York classroom, together with one of the texts that is the subject for discussion in this cross-campus Bible class.*

comes, noting that Hertz used both Jewish and non-Jewish sources in his commentary.

Professors Eskenazi and Weiss call upon each student by name, and the high definition cameras and ceiling microphones allow everyone to be easily seen and heard. When the class takes a short break, 4th-year rabbinical student Noam Katz shows everyone a photo of his newborn baby. These classmates may be separated by space and time, but are linked in a shared spirit of kinship and friendship.

When the class resumes, Dr. Eskenazi in Los Angeles engages the class in a discussion of the story of Dinah, comparing the translations of Genesis 34:2 in the diverse commentaries. There is an animated discussion of the words used in the translations, and as Dr. Eskenazi circles these words on the Smartboard in Los Angeles, the circles appear on the Smartboard in New York. Melissa Zalkin Stollman comments on the political implications of language; Emma Gottlieb points out the commentator's euphemistic concern for the reader's sensibilities; and Reuben Zellman reflects on the use of language to describe Dinah's role in the event. Dr. Eskenazi asks the students to read aloud from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* on this text, which points out that Dinah never speaks and offers different ways to understand what happens to her.

Each student brings his/her own perspective to the discussion, sharing the insights of the commentary that she/he has selected to focus on throughout the semester. The students pull up their notes on their laptops and log onto Sakai (HUC-JIR's collaborative learning environment) to access reference materials. The classroom interaction is the continuation of online conversations, or cyber *sichot*, that take place before the class as small

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groups of three students across the campuses post answers to a fixed set of questions and discuss with each other that week's assignment. At the end of the class, Dr. Eskenazi "sits down" with the New York students for an informal conversation and feedback.

Professors Weiss and Eskenazi worked from April through August to develop the syllabus for this groundbreaking course, while collaborating with the National Director of eLearning, Gregg Alpert, to develop and incorporate a range of appropriate and meaningful educational technologies into the course's structure. Throughout the semester, they "meet" twice a week to go over the next class, prepare the class assignments on the Smartboard, and choreograph their team-teaching. While it takes some time to adapt to the technology, both Dr. Eskenazi and Dr. Weiss are enthusiastic about the many new opportunities the e-classroom offers in transforming the learning experience and integrating students across the campuses.

As Dr. Eskenazi points out, "This course is not only an opportunity for students to learn how best to benefit from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* and other major modern Torah commentaries. Students are learning also how to teach Bible to a community of learners, and are experiencing and practicing how to teach in front of the camera, how to use the Smartboard and other electronic media, and how to facilitate conversation with classmates on the other coast. In this way, the course is empowering the next generation of Jewish professionals to embrace technology in creative and effective ways."

The potential for video-conference teaching in Smartclassrooms is enormous. When Professors Eskenazi and Weiss presented a demonstration of this class for the HUC-JIR Board of Governors, Rosanne M. Selfon, President of the Women of Reform Judaism, publisher of the *Commentary* with the URJ Press, noted "The WRJ would love to have this capacity to teach about the *Women's Torah Commentary* to our Sisterhood groups throughout North America!"