



Training Rabbis to Lead

Rabbinical student Elizabeth Richman recently interviewed Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva and Academic Head of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, about his decision to include training in community organizing within the yeshiva's curriculum. Rabbi Linzer, a recipient of the Javits fellowship, is a doctoral candidate in Religion at Columbia University. He has published in Torah journals and lectures widely at synagogues and conferences on topics relating to halakhah, Orthodoxy, and modernity. Elizabeth Richman, a third-year rabbinical student and Wexner Graduate Fellow at the Jewish Theological Seminary, co-chairs Keshet JTS (www.keshetjts.org) and serves as a member of the Jewish Funds for Justice Clergy Taskforce. Prior to rabbinical school, she worked in the field of local and international community economic development.

Elizabeth Richman:

What moved you to include a class in congregation-based organizing at the yeshiva?

Dov Linzer:

I was impressed by the model of leadership this form of organizing represents. From the outset, our rabbinical school has focused on leadership and professional development. For example, we have a rigorous pastoral counseling program, and we've worked with several institutions to develop leadership training. This model, though, suggested a bottom-up rather than a top-down model. In a top-down model, the rabbi cultivates a vision and then figures out how to get everybody to follow it. This model, by contrast, begins with a core of congregants, and the rabbi acts as an actualizer — the person to pull the people together and empower them to realize their goals. The rabbi learns to bring like-minded people together. This model also encourages people to think beyond their synagogue to a vision of the rabbinate that addresses social justice in addition to running services and teaching Torah. One last factor was the skill set — the one-on-one connecting, creating of alliances, getting congregants to articulate their passions and emotional investments, and to be empowered to do something. These are all powerful tools to use not only in the larger arena of social action but within a synagogue as well. Our students immediately begin to use these tools — even within their rabbinical training program.

Elizabeth:

Have you encountered any resistance within the broader Orthodox community to the involvement of your students in justice organizing? Justice organizing has become such a byword of the non-Orthodox denominations.

Dov:

Nobody has complained to me. But it's a shame that because something is so deeply part of non-Orthodox Judaism, like social justice work, it becomes not so kosher for Orthodox

people. This is an area that is clearly mandated both halakhically — as part of the mitzvah of walking in God's path — and in terms of core Jewish values. Some, however, question whether social action is an important Torah value. But I'm hoping that through this particular leadership program and others like it our students will serve as new models for the broader Orthodox community.

Elizabeth:

How does your justice organizing curriculum compare to those at other rabbinical schools? Is your curriculum grounded any more specifically in Jewish language?

Dov:

I don't know how much is grounded in specifically Jewish texts. This was not presented as a Torah-based approach, but rather as a practical skill set. This is about how smaller groups create alliances and work with those who are empowered to affect change. It is not important to ground a skill set in Jewish terms. But it is important to ground social justice in Jewish terms, and our curriculum opens with a full day of studying texts and creating a language around these issues.

Elizabeth:

For me, as a rabbinical student at JTS, the training also helped create a crucial connection with people in the rest of city, where I go to school, work, live. The relationships we developed in the inter-seminary class will also enable us as rabbis to build better communities and help our congregants empower themselves.

Dov:

The “one-on-one” relationship helps the rabbi understand who his congregants are and what they care about. It's then easier to get them fired up. I imagine that real leadership comes by balancing one's rabbinic vision for the congregation and enabling and facilitating the congregation to act; the dynamics of the relationship make both succeed. Too often, rabbinic leadership doesn't pay attention to what the congregation wants.

Elizabeth:

Has your vision on social action or organizing changed because of this new curriculum?

Dov:

The challenge I face, having chosen to head a rabbinical school rather than a synagogue, is that I am more invested in training rabbis than in larger community issues. I've not had as much opportunity as I would like to be involved as a rabbinic leader — it's a trade-off. But I do experience a lot vicariously through my students, and I'm happy that I can help empower them to do this good work. If you would have asked me a few years ago, how should a rabbi be involved in social action, I would have answered: organize the shul's clothing drive or a soup kitchen. Now if you asked me that question, I would speak about a very concrete skill set that a rabbi can use to affect real change at a much deeper structural level in the broader community. I changed my thinking about what is possible, what a rabbi's vision should be.

Elizabeth:

Is there anything about the organizing model that you disagree with or that you find particularly challenging? One example I found in my own training at the national level is that some of the standard organizing language about power and powerlessness doesn't always resonate with the segments of the Jewish community that feel increasingly powerful and comfortable in America.

Dov:

I would imagine that one issue that comes up is when there are halakhic obstacles to certain forms of social action, such as entering the sanctuary of a Catholic church or cooking meat and milk together in a soup kitchen. Here, obviously, social action yields to halakhah. I could also imagine that working with other clergy who use Christological language would create discomfort. Much of our community is comfortably upper middle class, and that raises questions about whether we are doing social action to help the other or we are helping our own. Just helping the "other" can be patronizing — it creates a dynamic of being a magnanimous well-off rabbi or congregation that is helping the other, rather than addressing issues that are part of the community's needs as well. Part of the solution to this is realizing these needs are present in our own community. The other part of the solution is defining our community in broader terms.

Elizabeth:

What I find so revolutionary is the organizing model's emphasis on uncovering the self-interests of those in our own community and then figuring out how those interests intersect with the broader community. For example, I often hear people discussing how the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization discovered a common cause among affluent Jews who had older parents in nursing homes who were not being properly treated and poorer people of color who were working as attendants in those nursing homes under difficult labor conditions. While the two groups may not have initially recognized their connection, once organizers began to do one-on-one meetings with individuals in the two communities they uncovered a great deal of common self-interest. Then they were able to organize against the nursing home administration for better working and living conditions.

Dov:

What goes unaddressed is the number of people in our shuls who can barely afford to pay the rent or put food on the table for Shabbat. We allow ourselves to pretend that that's not us, maintaining an image of financial affluence. Caring for the orphan and widow recurs as a theme in the Torah so often because these figures are invisible members of society. The rabbi doesn't get the same kudos for spending time addressing their needs as he does with the shul's movers and shakers. This is why it is so crucial that these issues not remain invisible in our own communities.

Elizabeth:

What is your vision for your rabbinical students as they become communal leaders?

Dov:

I like to think of two models of rabbinic leaders: Avraham and Yitzhak. Avraham is the visionary, the revolutionary, the one who introduces monotheism to the world. Yitzhak is not the visionary, but the one who devotes his life to sustaining the vision of Avraham and passing it down to the next generation. Both are necessary. Judaism has only survived because we have had leaders in the mold of Yitzhak, leaders who have kept the flame alive, who have preserved and taught Torah, offered halakhic guidance, and tended to the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of our people. But Judaism has only kept its vitality because we have had leaders in the mold of Avraham, visionaries who could articulate a vision that's appropriate for the time. A key component of rabbinical leadership is to address halakhic issues and teach Torah; the other component is to address the new intellectual, cultural, sociological, practical challenges and battles, to broaden our vision of how essentially we should be living in connection to the larger world and all of humanity.
