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QUEERING THE RABBINATE:  
AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER DIVERSITY AND CHANGING ROLES AMONG  
RABBIS OVER THE PAST FIFTY YEARS

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Rabbinic Ordination

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Introduction:

On July 11th, 1883, the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR or HUC) ordained four male rabbis as their first class of ordinees. In the Spring of 2024, thirty rabbis will be ordained. Of the thirty, only six identify as cis-men.<sup>1</sup> This ordinee class features rabbis across the gender spectrum who serve as rabbis for various communities and industries. As the Jews of America became more open to varied gender expressions, so did the American rabbinate. Even though there are many more barriers for those who do not identify as white cis males, the current ordinee class of HUC serves as testament to the progress made by the Reform movement's diversity and inclusion within the rabbinate. In celebration, I have created a series of eight paintings expressing my own personal journey through rabbinical school, the changing role of the modern rabbi, and current gender expressions within the progressive rabbinates.

We can learn about the early rabbis' traditions, qualifications, and values through our early texts. Within Pirke Avot, we can see ourselves in the chain of tradition and the values celebrated during the time of the Mishnah. While surveying these texts, we see that study, outward behaviors, attitudes towards teaching, and community were all considered while the rabbinic tradition was in its early days. In addition, the recorded qualities and qualifications of the most popular rabbis of this time reflect the ideal characteristics of rabbis throughout history. Therefore, we learn what traditions and behaviors were taught as part of the implicit and explicit curriculum of rabbis in formation in our tradition's early days.

Pirke Avot 1:1 reads, "Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly." For the rabbis of the Mishnah, a person's pedagogy did not affect their ability to

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<sup>1</sup> Based on an internal survey I conducted among all thirty ordinees in February 2024.

inherit Torah or become a teacher of Torah. Starting with Avot 1:1, the transmission of Torah and tradition is not in the hands of royalty or priests. It is in the hands of the rabbis of the great assembly. A man did not need to be a prophet or wealthy to become a member of the assembly, rather, they were bequeathed an intellectual prophetic inheritance through the study of Torah inspired by the prophets. Therefore, the transmission of Torah and tradition was accessible to many, establishing the convention that Torah is meant to be shared by Jewish community.

In addition, Avot 1:1 starts its instructions for the sages with its declaration, “They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah.” Here, the early rabbis declare that the transmission of the Torah relies on the value of teaching content and teaching and highlighting attributes. Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz expounds upon this idea in his opening chapter of *Pirke Avot: A Social Justice Commentary* as he writes, “[Avot 1:1 teaches] although we learn through relationship transmission, we must hold ourselves each spiritually and intellectually accountable to the collective holy enterprise of transmitting Torah to the next generation.”<sup>2</sup>

This spiritual accountability is highlighted in all six chapters of Pirke Avot. In Chapter 1, verse 4, the value of communal hospitality is celebrated and seen as a conduit for learning. In Chapter 2, verse 9, the attribute of humility is lifted up by Rabban Yohanon ben Zakkai as he states, “If you have learned much Torah, take no special credit for yourself, for it was for this that you were created.” Even the spirituality of nature is discussed by the early rabbis, as made evident by Avot 3:9. Rabbi Yaakov teaches the need to maintain sensitivity to multiple pathways to God, including through appreciating nature. The attributes discussed in these opening chapters express the need for the sage to be a student not only of literal Torah but of personal spiritual growth attained through connectivity.

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<sup>2</sup> Shmuly Yanklowitz, essay, in *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary* (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2018), 6.

Many desirable characteristics of the sage are also found in the later chapters of Avot. Chapter 4 of Avot offers many insights into how to avoid sin and declares, once more, how positive interpersonal relationships are paramount to the transmission of Torah. Verse 9 reads, “Rabbi Shimon said: There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty, but the crown of a good name supersedes them all.” Having a good name, or a positive reputation, in one’s community encompasses the results of living a life dedicated to community and rejection of many kinds of sins, including material indulgences, as referenced in 4:1.

In discussing Chapter 5, Rabbi Marc D. Angel argues that the chapter explores the concept of equanimity as it relates to achieving a life of depth, meaning, and happiness. He states:

[These rabbis argue that] Life should not be lived passively or carelessly, with a sense of entitlement. Rather, one must exert tremendous mental, emotional, and physical energy to maintain a balanced and meaningful life. To stay on the path of Torah is the result of much effort; the reward is spiritual exhilaration and fulfillment.<sup>3</sup>

As these verses state, an ideal life is full of challenge and balance. To be a worthy sage is to embrace this balance and find it through the pursuit of Torah.

The last chapter of Avot explores the idea of righteousness and the acquisition of Torah. 6:6 lists 48 virtues through which Torah is acquired. These range from concrete skills like knowledge of Scripture and Mishna to spiritual attitudes like loving God and humanity. Interestingly, the antepenultimate verse of Pirke Avot is attributed to Rabbi Yose ben Kisma, who proclaims only good deeds, and Torah accompanies those who depart from this world. In addition, here in this chapter, we see that the pursuit of the Torah is not for intellectual stimulation but rather to inspire acts of goodness, enabling righteousness to exist in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Marc Angel, *Koren Pirkei Avot*. (Jerusalem, IS: Ltd. Koren Publishers, 2015 Israel), 118.

With this in mind, we see that Pirke Avot is not simply an instructional manual for the life of the layperson or the sage. Instead, the work proclaims the values heralded by the rabbinic community of the Mishnah. Therefore, even though no specific qualifications are described for the sage or rabbi, we learn from this text that spirituality, teaching, education, and communal life are the tenets of a life worth living. If these are to be the benchmarks for the layperson, all the more so must they be for the sage of the Mishnaic period and beyond. The curriculum for the sage is not explicit but rather implicitly extracted from the values emphasized in this text.

We can also learn about the implied qualifications of the rabbi through two of the most famous rabbis of the rabbinic tradition, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai. Through their leadership, scholarship, and interactions with others, we learn what behaviors and characteristics inspired the next generations of rabbis in the ancient era of the Talmud. As their teachings still accompany us, we learn what character qualifications are paramount to the modern rabbi.

In modern seminaries, we keep the spirit of Pirke Avot alive spiritually and learn practical skills in our preparations to become rabbis. The outward and inner characteristics of the early rabbis echo in our coursework and fieldwork. Over time, curricula have molded and adapted to the calls of the modern world. This is especially true throughout history at Hebrew Union College.

In discussing the ideal curriculum for its rabbinical students, the first appointed commission of HUC gathered. In 1879, they wrote:

We do not attempt the hopeless task of teaching everything that might be desirable; but our intention is to furnish the student with tools whereby he may, with proper zeal and industry, overcome all difficulties. We also provide the means of introducing the future rabbis and teachers to the practical duties of their calling.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel S. Cohon, "THE HISTORY OF THE HEBREW UNION COLLEGE." *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 40, no. 1 (1950): 17–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43058685>. p. 29.

In its early versions, according to the vision of Dr. Isaac M. Wise, the rabbinical school's curriculum included an emphasis on Bible, Talmud, Apocrypha, History of Jewish Culture, Jewish Religious Philosophy, Homiletics, Pedagogy, and Liturgy. However, the classic education problem arose: insufficient time for students to absorb the material in the proposed amount of time. Throughout its history, the college has expanded and contracted its curricula according to the needs of the students and rabbinate as a whole.

In Oct. 1985, another task force was established to survey the curriculum at Hebrew Union College. Almost one hundred years after the initial commission, the curriculum highlighted technical and soft skills. The task force summarized responses of faculty, students, and alumni of the college when asked, “What kind of rabbi do we want to produce?” When asked to describe the general description of the rabbi of the time, the survey stated, “[A rabbi] is warm, personable and *menschlich*<sup>5</sup>, someone who genuinely cares about the well-being of others.” The task force stated:

The problem of preparing a rabbi for the contemporary scene is exacerbated by the fact that while the congregational rabbinate is still the dominant model for rabbinic life and activity for most of our ordinees, there is a steady growth of rabbinic careers in Hillel, academia, communal service, federations, education, counseling, poverty work, international service projects, and chaplaincies of various kinds which attract increasing numbers of our graduates.<sup>6</sup>

These tensions brought up by the college administrators and faculty through the generations are still present in today's instructions of current students of the rabbinate.

To address the tensions, the current iteration of the college's curriculum features a strong emphasis on fieldwork where, according to Rabbi Jan Katzew, “Students translate theory into

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<sup>5</sup> <https://jel.jewish-languages.org/words/2273>.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Cohen et al., publication, *Innovators of Torah: Preparing Tomorrow's Rabbis for Reform Judaism* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 1988).

practice when they serve agencies that respond to communal needs.”<sup>7</sup> Through stipends from the Jewish community, students serve in schools, hospitals, Hillels, museums, local congregations, and Jewish family service centers. Today, with the integration of electives, available spiritual counseling, and various forms of strong mentorships, HUC rabbinical students translate their technical skills and soft skills to their training and rabbinate. Consequently, the visions of the ancient rabbis and the founders of the college are still felt today.

While connecting to their ancient beginnings, the role of the rabbi has transformed over time according to the needs of their community. In generations past, the rabbi was the principal religious leader of Judaism. In *The Rabbinate in America: Reshaping an Ancient Calling*, Rabbi Jacob Neusner explained that rabbis were men who made judicial decisions for the community, served as unparalleled scholars, advocated for the Jews to Gentiles, and were considered holy men.<sup>8</sup> He argued that this was no longer the role of the modern rabbi; “they now enjoy more influence than before, and influence in shaping the ideas and purposes of others represents significant power to achieve concrete ends.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, rabbis are no longer constrained to the pulpit. Rabbis Steve Fox and Lance Sussman, Central Conference of American Rabbis chief executive and national chair of the press, stated:

Not only are [Rabbis] the religious, spiritual, educational, pastoral, and organizational leaders of their communities; they are also expected to be community organizers, outreach experts, technology mavens, financial and personnel managers, social justice advocates, membership recruiters, Middle East experts, and more.<sup>10</sup>

The rabbi’s role has always responded to the Jewish people’s larger milieu.

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<sup>7</sup> Jan Katzew and Samuel Joseph, “A Radical Change in Rabbinical Student Education,” Jewish Insider eJP, December 9, 2014, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/a-radical-change-in-rabbinical-student-education/#comments>.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinate in America: Reshaping an Ancient Calling*, vol. 10, 10 vols., of *Judaism in Cold War America 1945-1990* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Neusner, ix.

<sup>10</sup> “The Rise of the Reform Rabbinate: Rabbinic Road Out of a Wilderness,” *Reform Judaism.org Jewish Life in Your Life* accessed October 27, 2023, <https://reformjudaism.org/rise-reform-rabbinate-rabbinic-road-out-wilderness>.



In 2024, regardless of gender identity, the rabbi holds many roles that blur the distinctions between secular and religious, universal and particular. We lead services, and we encourage voter registration. We walk others through divorces, addiction and heartache. We drink coffee with our loved ones, and we write responsa. We carry many roles behind and beyond the pulpit.

With the inclusion of women in the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist rabbinate, the role of the rabbi redefined the profession. It renewed its promise by introducing its communities to formerly excluded talent. Since the ordination of Sally Priesdand in 1972 from HUC in Cincinnati, the rabbi in the American public consciousness is no longer limited to those who identify as male. In *The First Fifty Years: A Jubilee in Prose and Poetry Honoring Women Rabbis*, Rabbi Hara Person proclaims,

“[The rabbinate now claims] a richness of experience that nourishes us all, individuals of all genders, identities, and roles in our Jewish communities. Becoming the most beautifully diverse, inclusive, and thriving community of our highest aspirations, we all need to know what has led us here on the path to a healthy, equitable, and flourishing future.”<sup>11</sup>

This is in stark contrast to her reflections on her rabbinical training at HUC, as she related in her address at HUC Cincinnati’s 2019 ordination:

In the waning days of my fifth year as a rabbinic student, a rabbi posed a question to my class. He asked, “How will you come to feel authentic as a rabbi?” And I remember instinctively blurting out an answer, “When I grow a beard.”<sup>12</sup>

These eight pieces depict my reflections, learnings, and conversations on these momentous changes.

In my first career, I was an artist. My undergraduate degree is in fine art and graphic design. As an art student, I learned to translate my expressions into visual representations.

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<sup>11</sup> Hara Person, “Introduction,” in *The First Fifty Years: A Jubilee in Prose and Poetry Honoring Women Rabbis* (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2023), 32.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Hara Person, “Finding Our Authenticity as Rabbis: Sermon from Ordination, Cincinnati, 2019,” RavBlog, August 25, 2020, <https://ravblog.ccarnet.org/2019/06/finding-our-authenticity-as-rabbis-sermon-from-ordination-cincinnati-2019/>.

During rabbinical school, I expressed myself primarily through written work and sermons. For my capstone, I wanted a body of work that reflected the visual artist and the rabbi within me. This exhibit reflects my journey of growing into the role of rabbi while celebrating my own marginalized identities. As a racially mixed, queer female rabbi, I wanted to express my gratitude and awe for the opportunities granted to me by HUC and the trailblazers before me.

In preparation for this capstone project, I researched portraits of rabbis over the last three hundred years. I immersed myself in Pirke Avot to understand the mindset of our ancient rabbis. I read accounts of the history of the expanding gender representation within the progressive rabbinate. I interviewed five rabbis to hear about their experience in the rabbinate as members of marginalized Jewish communities. In addition, I developed my watercolor skills to help my ideas reflect clearly.

This series features four moments in my life during rabbinical school that solidified my identity as a rabbi. Studying, teaching, bringing joy to others, and witnessing pain allowed me to gain confidence as I worked toward the title of rabbi. The other four pieces are portraits of rabbis who are my daily inspiration. They are rabbis who keep me grounded in my pursuit of Torah and community care. The quotes paired with each piece are from my research and convey the energy and intention of the pieces.

Discussion of Pieces:

### **Piece 1**

The rabbi of 2024 heals wounds of past learning experiences for our students. We redefine the intimacy of learning and fill it with compassion and accommodation. We honor our teachers by transmitting their knowledge to others. In this exchange, we invite the Shechinah into our midst.

The ancient rabbis were, at their core, teachers who infused day-to-day life with Torah. They held their own teachers and their students in great regard.

Bruce Newman, pictured in Piece 1, joined the Adult Bnai Mitzvah program at Kol Tikvah at age 85. He came with an eagerness to learn and jokes to spare each class meeting. We became quick friends, and slowly, he became my greatest teacher in my third year of rabbinical school. Together, we worked out how to make learning accessible with his hearing loss coupled with his eagerness to make this bar mitzvah meaningful and joyous, unlike his adolescent bar mitzvah.

Bruce asked to continue his Hebrew studies after our time together in class and the completion of his second bar mitzvah. We began meeting on Sunday mornings when he would be waiting for me with a fresh cup of coffee and a bagel. During our meetings, we would work on his Hebrew reading, and he would teach me words and phrases in Yiddish. He told me about his grandkids and his time in the Navy.

Our time together made my weeks holy. The grind of my studies melted away as we laughed and sang together. He would make self-deprecating jokes about his Hebrew reading. I would encourage him and laugh at his youthful energy. He honored me with his vulnerability and love. I strived to honor him with care and words of gratitude for our time together. My Sundays with Bruce were a slice of Heaven.

## **Piece 2**

Over the past five years, my couch and computer became my portal for learning. As depicted in Piece 2, the Covid pandemic brought the Beit Midrash home as we transferred our learning to virtual classes and countless Zoom calls. I conjured images of the yeshiva as I bent over my digital Talmud deciphering, translating, and synthesizing. Disconnected from the

outside world for hours at a time, Rabbinic text, Jewish history, and philosophy became my inner monologue. My Spotify playlists were my lifeline to modernity. Curled on the couch with my dog, covered in blankets, I found my rabbinic voice as I wrote, and wrote, and wrote.

In seminary, we find our anchors. Our chevrotot poke and prod at the parts of our minds that were once unexplored. Our teachers push us to be our best selves while slowly transforming from sage to colleague and learning partner. Our little community watches as we navigate our transition from “Jew in the Pew” to an arbiter of Jewish practice, history, and spirituality. A transformation often filled with existential crises, laughter, and, hopefully, song.

To be a rabbi is to commit to lifelong learning. In our training, our study transforms us. During this time and beyond, we actualize Hillel’s words in Avot 1:13 while prioritizing our study over pursuing prestige and power. While expanding our knowledge, our intellect, and our capacity to hear other’s ideas and Torah, we honor the gift of life. As I honor my life in this way, I thank those who paved the way for me to be my most authentic self as a rabbi, student, teacher, and woman.

### **Piece 3**

Judaism is a religion of observance of faith and a culture of feeling. As rabbis, we attempt to bring holiness to each moment, big and small. In doing so, we bring God into the mundane and holy. In Rabbi Jack H. Bloom’s *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar*, he states that the rabbi may be seen as a symbol of God on earth.<sup>13</sup> With the introduction of women in the rabbinate, Rabbi Laura Geller argues that the hierarchical structure of the rabbi-congregant role has begun to dissolve.<sup>14</sup> Rabbis are no longer symbols of God but rather elevators of moments who embody

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<sup>13</sup> Sara Mason-Barkin, “The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar: A Feminist Critique,” essay, in *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate* (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2016), 649.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Geller, “Women Rabbis and Feminism: On Our Way to the Promised Land,” essay, in *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate* (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2016), 360.

gracious leadership. With continued movement in this direction, rabbis are more integrated into the lives of their congregants, clients, and students. Joy is shared rather than instructed.

Rabbi David Kasher officiated my wedding in 2021, as pictured in Piece 3. With his exuberant smile and Torah expertise, he brought the Schinah into our special day with care and ease. He also provided me counsel during my decision to attend rabbinical school. Like any trusted friend, we spoke on the phone for hours, discussing our shared experiences and struggles. He spoke of his decision to attend rabbinical school and his relationship with Halacha throughout his life. Over our phone calls, he was not a deity or a stand-in for one. He was my friend who was invested in my success and joy.

In his essay on Ki Tavo, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “*Simcha* in the Torah is never about individuals. It is always about something we share...*Simcha* is joy shared. It is not something we experience in solitude.”<sup>15</sup> As rabbis, we share our joy with our communities and loved ones. Through our emotional connection with others, we infuse life events with spirituality and care. We provide emotional intimacy that would not be possible if not for the inclusion of women and gender expansive rabbis into the profession. As all of our identities become celebrated, so does our humanity.

#### **Piece 4**

Piece 4 depicts a snapshot of my Los Angeles General Medical Center chaplain residency. Through their Clinical Pastoral Education program, I served as a spiritual counselor for various patients in the hospital. I worked primarily in the emergency department, which is the largest on the West Coast. I learned alongside other clergy students from different faiths. During my residency, I saw just how much I had learned through my time at HUC. I counseled people

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Sacks, “The Pursuit of Joy: Ki Tavo: Covenant & Conversation 5775, 5782,” The Rabbi Sacks Legacy, September 14, 2022, <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/the-pursuit-of-joy/>.

during their last breaths, during extreme duress, and in moments where spirituality provided as much comfort as their medical attention.

Even still, I was constantly reminded of my gender when patients and staff learned that I was a rabbi. They asked how it was possible to be a rabbi as a woman, and I found myself either hiding behind the title of chaplain or using the short answer, “I’m a member of one of the progressive movements of Judaism.” Between the horrors of the ER, working in a foreign environment, and feeling the need to explain myself at unsuspecting times, I would often retreat to the window alcoves of the hospital. There, I could calm down and remember my role and purpose of my time at the hospital, to apply my rabbinical skills of care and consideration to my local community.

## **Piece 5**

Rabbi Rebecca Einstein and Rabbi Alysa Mendelson write, “For decades, the word ‘rabbi’ conjured up a certain stereotypical image.”<sup>16</sup> Still, today, when you Google the word “rabbi,” images of old men with long white beards and Chasidic-looking clothing populate the screen. Of course, this image is changing in the cultural zeitgeist, with female clergy members featured in Hollywood shows like *Transparent* (2014) and *Big Mouth* (2019). However, in 2024, I am still asked regularly with incredulous looks, “Women can be rabbis?” With many strides towards gender inclusion within the rabbinate, it is still seen as foreign to many Jews and non-Jews outside of the progressive movements.

And yet, the movements have made continuous strides towards representation of various genders in their rabbinate. In her reflections on Betty Friedan’s speech at the 1979 CCAR Convention, Rabbi Geller proclaimed, “It is hard for us now to remember all those barriers that

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<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Schorr, “Image,” essay, in *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate* (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2016), 647.

Betty Friedan spoke of, now that as of 2015, there are 669 women rabbis in the Reform Movement.”<sup>17</sup> Almost a decade later, that number has only increased. According to an informal survey by the CCAR in 2024, more than 835 rabbis identify as women, transgender, or non-binary, over a twenty-five percent increase in less than ten years. We who identify in this way stand on the shoulders of those who worked tirelessly to have women recognized as rabbis in their own right. Today’s women rabbis can trace their rabbinic lineage to Rabbi Sally Preisand, Rabbi Regina Jonas,<sup>18</sup> Oznat Barzani,<sup>19</sup> and Bruiah of the Talmud.<sup>20</sup> In addition, according to the Mishnah, we can trace our spiritual lineage and role as rabbi back to Moses himself.<sup>21</sup>

As American culture has embraced intersectional feminism,<sup>22</sup> the rabbinate of the progressive movements have seen a slow rise in clergy who identify as Jews of Color. With the historic ordination of Angel Buchdahl, the first East Asian-American to be ordained at HUC in 2001, and the ordination of Alyssa Stanton, the first black American to be ordained by HUC in 2009, the face of the rabbinate continues to expand.

Rabbi May Ye was ordained in 2023 at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. In piece four, she is pictured in front of Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf of the first graduating class at HUC, Rabbi Aaron Hart, who served as the chief rabbi of London from 1704-1756, and Rabbi

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<sup>17</sup> Geller, 359.

<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Jonas was the first woman to be ordained in 1935 in Berlin. She was killed in Auschwitz in 1944.

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jonas-regina>

<sup>19</sup> Female Torah scholar of 16th-century Kurdistan.

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/barazani-asnat-bat-samuel>

<sup>20</sup> Bruiah is the only woman mentioned in the Talmud to study Torah and offer rabbinic counsel. She is said to be the wife of Rabbi Meir. She is mentioned in the Tosefta and various midrashim.

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/beruryah>

<sup>21</sup> Avot 1:1.

<sup>22</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American law professor who coined the term in 1989, explained intersectional feminism as, “a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other,” in a recent interview with Time.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters>

Menasseh ben Israel of 17th-century Portugal. Her presence as an activist in the rabbinate continues the progress of inclusivity in the rabbinate as she continues to serve her community New Haven, Connecticut. In an interview with the Jewish Women's Archive, she stated, "I became a rabbi for those like me who are fully Jewish, but for whom Jewish doors never opened, and for those who have been disenfranchised and marginalized by Judaism and Jewish spaces." In conversations with her, Rabbi May stated she would like to see a rabbinate "as diverse as the Jewish population." Racial diversity in the rabbinate continues growing with each HUC ordination class.

## **Piece 6**

This Spring, Kelly Whitehead, pictured in Piece 6, will be the third black American to be ordained by the college. In her senior sermon in the Fall of 2023, Whitehead confronted the lack of racial diversity within the rabbinate's past, stating, "Clearly, the Rabbis of our past could not envision that blackness and Jewishness could be intimately intertwined, yet here I am." Whitehead currently runs a fellowship for Jewish Teens of Color where participants express and attend to their unique needs and identities. Through her activism and leadership, she opens the door to the next generation of American Jews, and possibly rabbis, who were previously ignored or disregarded.

In her roles, Whitehead personifies what Rabbi Jack Bloom deems the symbolic exemplar. Bloom explains:

To be a rabbi means being a symbolic exemplar who stands for something other than one's self. It is the symbolic exemplarhood that enables the rabbi to be taken seriously in the first place, and the myth that surrounds this symbolic exemplarhood provides much of the rabbinic power to touch individual lives and direct the future of the Jewish community.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jack Bloom, "The Special Tensions of Being 'The Rabbi,'" essay, in *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar: By the Power Vested in Me* (New York, NY: The Haworth Press, 2002), 136.



Each rabbi chooses what role they will play in their career as a leader. Upon their entrance to the rabbinate, the rabbi decides how to use their power to project their hopes and dreams for the Jewish people and the world. Though each rabbi's time is unique to them, they echo the teachings of the ancient rabbis as they attend to the needs of their communities through their actions. With the inclusion of rabbis of multiple racial identities within the rabbinate, these exemplars attend to more diverse needs and identities of the Jewish community.

### **Piece 7**

In reflecting on the fiftieth anniversary of her ordination, Rabbi Sally Priesand wrote:

When I was studying for the rabbinate, most people were conscious of only two genders, male and female; today we know there are many more—transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer—and we know too that the Jewish community is very diverse, coming as we do from many different backgrounds...Let us never forget that one of the blessings of being human is the right to identify as we wish, to know ourselves and be ourselves.<sup>24</sup>

Since the ordination of Rabbi Elliot Kukla, the first openly transgender ordinee at HUC in 2006, the rabbinate now reflects a wide variety of gender expressions.

In 2017, Rabbi Ariel Tovlev wrote, “Transgender people are a small enough demographic as it is; when you narrow down the list to trans rabbis, we become almost a novelty.”<sup>25</sup> Only seven years later, trans rabbis are unabashedly featured in many Jewish communities. In Piece 7, Rabbi Tovlev stands with his spouse, Cantor Ze’evi Tovlev, on their wedding day. Rabbi Tovlev is a member of the new generation of trans rabbis in the American progressive movements. With poise and vulnerability, he uses his talents to relay his trans experiences in and out of rabbinical school. In March of 2023, Tovlev reflected on his difficulty in traditional synagogue communities:

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<sup>24</sup> Sally Priesand, essay, in *The First Fifty Years: A Jubilee in Prose and Poetry Honoring Women Rabbis* (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2023), 37.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/2017/08/03/the-next-generation-of-trans-rabbis-a-conversation/>

I know [my public trans identity] has also negatively affected the way others view me. In my various job searches, one time, I was told the community wanted a rabbi who was trans rather than a trans rabbi, while another community said not even a rabbi who was trans would be acceptable — they just wanted a “normal” rabbi.

Today, as the third ordained trans rabbi of HUC, Rabbi Tovlev writes and consults with various communities. He and Cantor Tovlev recently led services at the Union for Reform Judaism’s Biennial convention, where they presented their original liturgy for thousands of participants. In their shared vision published in 2024, the two wrote, “As pioneers, we are comfortable with newness.” Rabbi Tovlev’s professional and personal journey highlights the tremendous strides of gender inclusivity in the rabbinate and the profound challenge of the modern rabbi: to integrate one’s personhood into the role of symbolic exemplar.

## **Piece 8**

With the Covid-19 pandemic and the Hamas terrorist attacks on October 7th, 2023, in addition to many more historic world events, the rabbi of today is positioned to attend to the needs of the Jewish community in ways unimaginable to the ancient rabbis. Particularly at this moment, rabbis are expected to care for communities during a time of uncertainty for the State of Israel and rising antisemitism in America. While caring for others, they also must manage their internal burdens while maintaining the status quo to the best of their ability. In my interview with Rabbi Laura Geller in January of this year, she stated, “I’m very happy that I’m not a congregational rabbi now. I think the job of the congregational rabbi right now is to make space for people’s feelings of rage, of fear, of confusion -- and it’s a lot. [My friend who’s a rabbi is] pastoring others and no one is pastoring him.” Geller highlights the isolation, loneliness, and extreme expectations incumbent upon today’s rabbi.

In Piece 8, Rabbi Grey Myrseth carries a Torah accompanying Rabbis for Ceasefire during their November 13th, 2023, march in Washington, DC. In concert with hundreds of

rabbis, Rabbi Mysreth uses their passions and rabbinic voice to advocate for building community and, currently, efforts towards a resolution to the current war in Palestine and Israel. In the last four months, Rabbis for Ceasefire have organized protests, tefillah experiences, and calls to action to attend to communities looking to end the current suffering of Israeli and Palestinian citizens. This collection of rabbis is making room for the “rage” of others while simultaneously voicing their own. Similar to the ancient rabbis, these rabbis are political activists and community organizers who utilize Torah according to the needs of their Jewish communities. However, unlike the ancient and American rabbis of the past, these leaders can publicly express their personhood through gender expression and in ways only possible in 2024 through political demonstrations and social media.

### Conclusion

This past year, I traded the Beit Midrash of my living room for my art space. Growing up, I did not have female rabbis to look up to. In the Conservative movement in the early 2000s in Los Angeles, there were not many women on the bimah in general. In my twenties, I finally started to see female, trans, and non-binary rabbis in more progressive Jewish communities. When I visited HUC as a prospective student, I was floored by the number of rabbis who were not men on the faculty. Six years later, I am truly honored to be ordained alongside so many female, non-binary, and trans rabbis.

In creating these paintings, I found myself meditating on the visions of the ancient rabbis of Pirke Avot, the creation and many iterations of the Hebrew Union College curriculum, and the feminists and rabbis who made my career possible. After a year of research, drafting, and painting, I am in a true state of awe. Rabbis are no longer only men highly regarded for their

expertise in ancient texts. Rabbis are political leaders, heart healers, joy creators, and much more. We integrate our learning of technical and pastoral skills into each role we inhabit. Today, rabbis in progressive movements share their racial and gender identities publically and proudly, a dream made into reality by the tireless work of the trailblazers of the past. I am honored to call them my teachers and colleagues. And yet, the rabbinate continues to evolve as it addresses the Jewish people's needs and progresses in celebrating varying identities.

Piece 1: Sundays with Bruce



רבי אלעזר בן שמוע אומר, יהי כבוד תלמידך חביב עליך כשלך, וכבוד חברך כמורא רבך, ומורא רבך כמורא  
שמים

*Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua said: let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own,  
and the honor of your colleague as the reverence for your teacher, and the reverence for your  
teacher as the reverence of heaven.*

*Avot 4:12*

*Piece 2: Talmud with Indy*



הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, נִגַּד שְׁמָא, אֲבִיד שְׁמָהּ. וְדָלִא מוֹסִי יִסָּף. וְדָלִא יִלְיָהּ, קִטְלָא תֵיב. וְדֹאשְׁתַּמֵּיט בְּתַנְא, תִּלְף

*[Hillel also] used to say: one who makes his name great causes his name to be destroyed; one who does not add [to his knowledge] causes [it] to cease; one who does not study [the Torah] deserves death; one who makes [unworthy] use of the crown [of learning] shall pass away. Avot 1:13*



Piece 3: Joy with Rabbi Kasher



*Simcha in the Torah is never about individuals. It is always about something we share...Simcha is joy shared. It is not something we experience in solitude.*  
Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

#### Piece 4: Breaks in Window Alcoves



*[Rabbis] are called to respond more than ever to substance abuse, domestic violence, and all kinds of family and personal problems. Although clergy have always been needed by those facing illness and death, their desire to bring both well-honed clinical skills and spiritual resources to these crises has grown.*

Rabbi Dayle Friedman



Piece 5: Rabbi May Ye (She/Her)



*In the waning days of my fifth year as a rabbinic student, a rabbi posed a question to my class.  
He asked, "How will you come to feel authentic as a rabbi?"*

*And I remember instinctively blurting out an answer, "When I grow a beard."*

Rabbi Hara Person

Piece 6: Rabbi Kelly Whitehead (She/Her)



*Clearly the Rabbis of our past could not envision that blackness and Jewishness could be intimately intertwined, yet here I am...It is important as leaders of our movement to view our history through an honest lens. Instead of stewing in the shame we uncover, we can use it as a launching pad towards justice, restitution, and reparations.*

Rabbi Kelly Whitehead



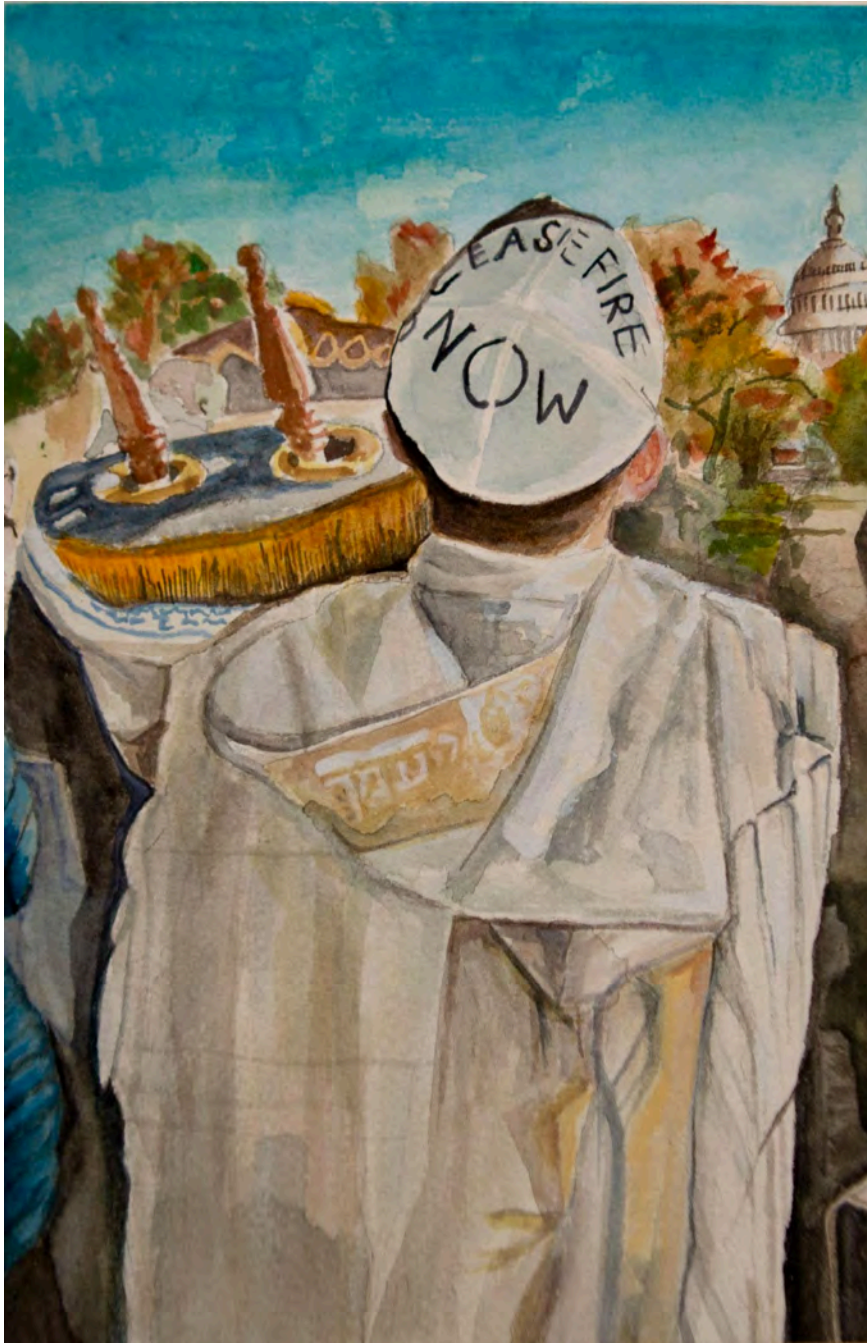
Piece 7: Rabbi Ariel Tovlev



*When I entered rabbinical school, there had only been two out trans students before me. At times I felt so isolated. Trans clergy may feel new, but our world is changing, and we are the agents of change. I thought I would be the only one. But now I am one of many.*

Rabbi Ariel Tovlev

Piece 8: Rabbi Grey Myrseth (They/Them)



*Not only are [Rabbis] the religious, spiritual, educational, pastoral, and organizational leaders of their communities; they are also expected to be community organizers, outreach experts, technology mavens, financial and personnel managers, social justice advocates, membership recruiters, Middle East experts, and more.*

Rabbis Steve Fox and Lance Sussman

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