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THE EFFECT OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY COURSES
ON THE RITUAL BEHAVIOR OF HUC-JIR RABBINIC STUDENTS

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THE EFFECT OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY COURSES ON THE RITUAL BEHAVIOR OF HUC-JIR RABBINIC STUDENTS

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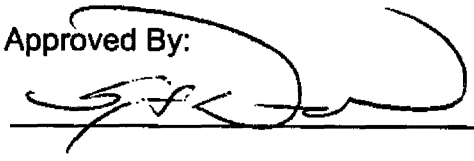

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THE EFFECT OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY COURSES ON THE RITUAL BEHAVIOR OF HUC-JIR RABBINIC STUDENTS

By

Joel Fisher

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the School of Social Work of the University of Southern California in co-operation with Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, California School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work

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MODERN BIBLE STUDIES AND RITUAL PRACTICE: IS THERE A CORRELATION FOR HUC RABBINIC STUDENTS?

JOEL FISHER
2005

THESIS SUMMARY

As a former Orthodox rabbinic student, I was curious to see if coursework in modern biblical studies would alter – diminish, actually - the ritual rigor of HUC rabbinic students, just as the exposure to contemporary scholarship had affected my level of observance when I was in my late teens and early twenties. I used the (infamous) Passover address of Rabbi Wolpe as a starting point, and did some extensive research on the nature of modern scholarship as it pertains to the Bible's historicity and the traditional responses to modernity. I circulated surveys to the New York, Cincinnati, and Los Angeles campuses that attempted to chart what rabbinic students had been doing ritually before they attended HUC and what they were doing after studying for the rabbinate, and I expected to find a drop-off in both the frequency and the range of keeping *Shabbat*, observing *kashrut*, attending services, and fasting on *Yom Kippur*. Unfortunately, the survey response was never adequately high, and to complicate the matter, in my move to the East Coast, much of the data were lost, so there's little that I can conclude about the relationship between coursework and ritual observance. My focus group, however, did reveal to me that modern scholarship *may* not be of any substantive consequence to many – even most - of the rabbinic students at HUC, since they are inclined to search for the spiritual and communal message behind and within the ritual and to feel less duty-bound – in a traditional sense – to observe *halachah* for its own sake.

INTRODUCTION

During Passover in the spring of 2001, Rabbi David Wolpe of Temple Sinai in Los Angeles gave a series of sermons on the "historicity" of the Exodus from Egypt. His thesis was that Jews should begin to see this and - by implication - every other story from the Bible as a legend developed over the millennia from which we might learn essential values for our culture and, if possible, for the culture at large. "The truth is that virtually every modern archeologist who has investigated the story of the Exodus, with very few exceptions, agrees that the way the Bible describes the Exodus is not the way it happened, if it happened at all," Wolpe told his congregants. Many in his Conservative congregation agreed, but others in the room were outraged, and the controversy emerged as a front page story in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Rabbi Wolpe's comments were in line with modern Biblical scholarship, but he is one of the few high-profile religious leaders in the country to make such public pronouncements from the pulpit. Since the "official" approach to Bible studies at HUC tends to reflect the same perspective Wolpe asserted, it would be of some value to examine just what contemporary scholars are saying, and then to chart its potential effect on rabbinic students at Hebrew Union College. So, is there a correlation between the belief/non-belief in the historicity of Bible stories and the observance of Jewish rituals? Does the belief/non-belief in the stories of the Bible have an effect on the way student rabbis plan to explain traditional texts to their congregants?

This thesis will examine the literature pertaining to modern Bible studies, using the Wolpe episode as a springboard, and then interview a cross-section of HUC rabbinic students to determine what effect, if any, this area of study has on their personal beliefs and how those beliefs are manifested in their roles as rabbis.

My interest in this topic is based on some of the transformations I've undergone as a student over the years. In my freshman and sophomore years at Yeshiva University, I was exposed to traditional perspectives on the Torah, but as I read more and began to notice and question textual problems, I found that I could no longer accept the time-honored rationales for ritual observance.

My classmates, most of whom came from religious homes – I didn't – were less perplexed, though, surprisingly, some of my rabbi/teachers at YU subtly indicated to me that they were wrestling with the angels when it came to notions about the historicity of the Bible. I sympathized with their plight; they had nowhere to go to resolve their doubts. As a consequence, I've wondered how less traditional Jews, that is, Jews like those we find in the HUC rabbinic programs, deal with this issue – if at all. Is there a devotion to the articles of the faith or to one's intellect and conscience? Does the information they learn force them to modify their own behavior as rabbis, and what do they do about the potential contradictions between scholarship and belief? Does this have to rise to the level of being a congregational matter? Is this a matter of concern for the Reform Movement?

In the end, these questions will be "answered" by wiser souls than I, but the information will possibly educate HUC's leadership to just how the curriculum of the rabbinic program may be shaping the religious sensibilities of students who will soon be ministering to Reform Jews.

WOLPE INTERVIEWS

In the Fall of 2004, I twice met with Rabbi Wolpe at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles to discuss the nature and repercussions of his Passover address. It's true that his remarks to the congregation were made two-and-a-half years earlier, but it seemed from our conversations that the content was still so topical that Rabbi Wolpe had no difficulty in speaking about it as though it were a more recent event.

I asked him a range of questions, beginning with his impetus for raising his concerns about the Exodus in the first place. On the street, as it were, some people had ventured that this was really an issue of self-aggrandizement and that Rabbi Wolpe was intending to generate publicity for himself. While he said he could understand where these criticisms came from, he disavowed any personal investment in what he had to say about the Bible as history.

Rabbi Wolpe claimed that his Passover address had been in the works for some time. His candor with his congregants that day was in concert with the feelings of many other Conservative rabbis with whom he associated with over the years. He felt that in the context of West LA and the progressive nature of Sinai Temple, raising the historicity – or lack thereof – of the Exodus was something that most people in the congregation already accepted.

While the reaction in many quarters to his comments was vociferous and often personal, he does feel that most people in the room believed exactly what he did. The members of the community who objected to his remarks, he feels, were very much in the minority, but they expressed their anger and dissatisfaction in very vocal terms.

In the public forums I attended back in 2001 when he attempted to air the different points of view around his initial remarks, I noticed that most of the people who came to the microphone angry with Rabbi Wolpe were either traditional Jews or Sephardic Jews. It could be that in those two communities there is no overwhelming compulsion to see the Bible as anything but literal, and based on my unscientific observations at the time, most of the people in the crowd of well over a thousand were sympathetic to the Rabbi's point of view.

In our talks, Rabbi Wolpe contended that most of his peers were exuberantly sympathetic and supportive of what he had done. Even though he had not solicited much advice before deciding to speak, he had no regrets about doing it. He would do it again himself, and he would certainly not oppose having other rabbis do the same. With my biases in mind, Rabbi Wolpe's perspectives in this area were exactly what I had hoped to hear, and his advocacy of modern biblical studies as part of the standard rabbinic academic program dovetails with my personal experience and with what I would hope for modern Jews regardless of their level of observance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the ground having been broken a hundred years ago, a new trend emerged in the 1970's as archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians began to "modernize" the way they treated discoveries in the Holy Land. Concentrating on Israel's ancient history itself, rather than just on the Bible, these academics used artifacts, architecture, settlement patterns, and anthropological models to produce a more "scientific" picture of ancient Palestine and the Israelite people.

Scholars began to question when and why the Bible was written, and their discoveries have cast serious doubt on the historical basis of the Patriarchs, the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and the empires of David and Solomon. The Bible Unearthed, by Israel Finkelstein and Charles Silberman, discusses in some detail the evidence behind these claims, and shows why archaeology can demonstrate that the Torah and the Deuteronomistic history(ies) more probably date from the Seventh Century BCE - and not from Sinai. Archaeology simply contradicts – in the opinion of nearly all modern scholars - some of the textual "facts" in the Bible; for example, camels were not commonly used as beasts of burden in the Near East until the Seventh Century BCE, and the Philistines did not settle in Canaan until after 1200 BCE, so their historical placement in the biblical narratives appears to be anachronistic.

In conjunction with some of Finkelstein's and Silberman's findings, scholars have noted – even going back to Medieval times with Jewish commentators like Ibn Ezra - that the Bible presents difficulties ("The Canaanite was *then* in the land."; the latter chapters of Deuteronomy postdate Moses) that don't jibe with traditional perspectives. Additionally, many of the Bible stories with which we are familiar (Moses, Joseph, the Flood, the Creation myths in Genesis) are similar in content to the legends of other peoples in the region.

These textual problems, when coupled with the results from excavations of several prominent Biblical sites showing that in the early Iron Age the Israelites were insignificant or nonexistent, but by the late Eighth and Seventh Centuries BCE had become important, lead most modern authorities to doubt much – if not most – of the "history" of the Bible.

In essence, the academic community sees the Five Books of Moses as a collection of legends and unifying folktales, a national epic created in the Seventh Century BCE by an unknown author or group of authors, that successfully blended numerous regional and tribal legends into one unified tradition. (Finklelstein and Silberman, 2001; Dever, 2002)

In order to clarify for myself just what the tension between legend and reality is and how the concepts have manifested themselves in Jewish history, I explored the writings of Michael Fishbane, David Myers, David Ellenson, and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi.

For Fishbane, mythos and logos have always been in tension, and in the modern world, the gap between the two has widened. He defines myth as

> *The sacred and authoritative accounts of the deeds and personalities of the gods and heroes during the formative events of primordial times, or during the subsequent historical interventions or actions of these figures which are constitutive for the founding of a given culture and its rituals* (Fishbane, p. 11).

This definition speaks directly to the problem that Rabbi Wolpe encountered in his Passover address to his congregation. For many in the audience, myth and history were synonymous, and to question the events of the Exodus was to tear at the fabric of what had sustained the identity of many traditionally-minded Jews.

Philo, Maimonides, and the Saadia Gaon saw the Torah as the embodiment of reason, and Maimonides considered history a waste of time. As Fishbane notes, myth avoids analysis, and even though much of ancient Israel scholarship was dependent upon the Greek notion that myth was really allegory, most rabbinic commentators and authorities clung to the idea that the events of the Torah were historical truths.

Paradoxically, by the First or Second Century B.C.E., by which time the Torah had been canonized and fixed, myth was always open and primed for interpretation. The *midrash*, as a reflection of rabbinic thought, flew in the face of a canonized, fixed text, and hundreds of years later, mystical texts like the Zohar made every dot of Torah a myth unto itself.

Beginning with Spinoza (and his unintentional predecessor, Ibn Ezra), modern scholarship has focused on the parallels like Gilgamesh and the Code of Hammurabi to show that Scripture was not unique and most probably borrowed from other neighboring cultures. Even in the Talmud and the Zohar, non-biblical myths are discussed by traditional scholars, and the whole notion of the Torah's being an open document is subverted. In actuality, Scripture conceals God, and the theosphere and biosphere are one and the same. It's incumbent upon us, according to the mystics, to understand the unity of the mythos and the logos.

Jewish history becomes, therefore, something beyond the facts, something where every nuance has meaning, something which runs counter to historicism (which sees events in chronological fashion). This is the core, as Fishbane might indicate, of the disaffection traditionally-minded Jews have with an historical approach to sacred Jewish texts. (Fishbane, 2003)

Yosef Yerushalmi notes that an historical approach to civilization, let alone religion, is not a universal notion. It's relatively modern and relatively Western. He mentions that Far Eastern civilizations considered time and history as illusory and that true knowledge comes from that realization. For traditional Jews, Moses is a real historical figure, and as the messenger of the "God of the Fathers," he is acting *in* history. Israel is given an historical past, and Jewish history is a history of God's intervention and humanity's responses. Memory flows through ritual and recital, with the concreteness of Jewish history measured in its historical figures - who are flesh-and-blood humans, not archetypes or gods on Olympus. Post-biblical Judaism believes it has inherited a sacred and organic memory, and the history of the Jewish people became part of its own sacred narrative.

To the modern mind, the meaning of history, the memories of history, and the writing of history are not synonymous; they are linked and they overlap. The canon closed before the appearance of Jesus, and with the exception of Josephus, it was 1500 years before the next "real" Jewish historian, David Gans, appeared on the scene. Yerushalmi takes this as evidence that history *per se* was not a concern for Jews until the early Renaissance, and just as the history of the Talmud cannot be acquired from the Talmud itself, the history of the Bible has to be derived externally.

> *The barriers of the past have been pushed back as never before: our knowledge of the history of Man and the universe has been enlarged on a scale and to a degree not dreamed of by previous generations. At the same time, the sense of identity and continuity with the past, whether our own or history's, has gradually and steadily declined. Previous generations knew much less about the past than we do but perhaps felt a much greater sense of identity and continuity with it.*
> (The quote is Hans Meyerhoff, as quoted in Yerushalmi, p. 81)

In quoting Meyerhoff, Yerushalmi acknowledges that an examination of Jewish history may create a break with that history and that during the Haskalah early modern Jewish scholars were contending with that same potential. Whereas in the Middle Ages Jewish philosophers felt no need to reconcile the "facts" of the Torah with the "facts" of the real world, by the Nineteenth Century, Jewish students of Torah who wanted to operate in the modern world had to find a way to confirm Judaism's historical authenticity. This was the climax of *Wissenschaft*, a break with the old; but as Yerushalmi notes, and Wolpe felt first-hand, there was no necessary enthusiasm for the enterprise. Judaism cannot be immune to modern analysis just because of its unique subject matter, and what used to be considered sacred must now be examined through profane eyes. As Yerushalmi notes, Hirsch, Luzzato, and Rosenzweig did their best to oppose the onslaught of a modern analysis of Scripture, but in the end, their perspective has held little sway in the academic world.

Yerushalmi avers that nothing has replaced the meaning of a messianic faith, the kind of Judaism that was normative until two centuries ago. He refers to the dilemma of modern Israeli history which is post-Holocaust in nature, and seen through the eyes of Israeli writers like Haim Hazaz, the events and characters of traditional Jewish history are to be erased, and the best advice to a young student today is to "go out and play football." (Yerushalmi, 1996)

David Myers writes of the malaise of modernity, and singles out Kierkegaard as the archetype of the modern man who feels that the sacred world has been infected by a destructive form of historicism. For many, the Holocaust has heightened that sense of malaise, and Myers refers extensively to Rabbi Wolpe's Passover address and the bitterness it engendered in the congregation.

In Myer's view, historicism and anti-historicism will always be in contention, and the stakes are highest in the field of theology. One of the seminal events in modern religious studies was the publication of David Strauss' Life of Jesus in 1835, which was an attempt to ascertain the "truth" about the historical Jesus. Even though this book was written by a Protestant - and most of the early historical works about the Bible were written by Protestants - it had an enormous affect on Jewish scholarship.

The *Wissenschaft* created an environment wherein Jewish scholars at first made Jews suitable for modern European civilization. Jews were shown to have a unique, viable, and laudable history and culture that qualified them for status in the modern world. Ironically, as the decades passed, Jews then began to use the study of history as a way to highlight differences between Jewish sects, with each one attempting to legitimize themselves over against the other.

For traditional Jews, historicism led to impiety, and Reform Judaism was deemed heretical because it seemed to use history as a way to demythologize the past and to claim that accepted practices and laws had an inadequate historical basis. On the Orthodox side of the ledger, Samson Raphael Hirsch favored an active engagement with the surrounding world. His notion of *Torah im derekh eretz* urged Jews to move easily into Nineteenth Century European-American society. Hirsch insisted, however, that Torah was literal truth and that contemporary attempts at historicism in relation to the Bible were misplaced and heretical.

(Ironically he himself used historical analyses to defend his position against the work of Heinrich Graetz, his former pupil, who took a modern, analytic approach to the history of the Jewish nation.)

Professor Myers goes on to note that historicism does lead to relativism and that Jewish figures like Franz Rosenzweig denied historicism as the only way to a true theology. Somehow in the aftermath of WW1, Rosenzweig returned to spirituality. His famous work, Star of Redemption, argues for a unique, ahistorical place in the world for Jews and Judaism, one that should be exempt from modern historical analysis.

In the last 100 years there have been many Orthodox Jews (like Chaim Soloveitchik) who have attempted to bridge the gap between the Orthodox world and secular culture. But as Myers remarks, anti-historicism is still with us, and Rabbi Wolpe's speech is evidence of how deep-seated the discomfort with modern biblical scholarship still is.

David Ellenson sees modern Jews as Jewish by choice, given the freedoms accessible to everyone in today's culture. Jews in America have eschewed traditional values, and the Reform movement - certainly in its beginnings – had a strong assimilationist imperative, as exemplified in Israel Zangwill's *Melting Pot*. Judaism, for early American Jews, was private in nature.

It's only in recent years that religious practice has become public in large measure, due to the fact that Jews are so much more comfortable in America today than they were a hundred years ago. This may account for the more public airing of disputes within the Jewish community over events like Rabbi Wolpe's speech, an episode covered extensively in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Ellenson goes on to make some fascinating points – as far as I'm concerned – about the early curriculum of Hebrew Union College. Isaac Meyer Wise himself declared that

> *Hebrew Union College shall be an Orthodox Jewish academy. The masoretic texts of the Bible with the fundamental principle of God, Revelation, Providence, immortality, righteousness, justice, truth, and freedom is the rock of foundation, and our post-biblical literature contains the material upon which and with which our structure of education is to be erected under the help of God.*
> (Isaac Meyer Wise as quoted in Ellenson, p. 284)

The training of rabbis at Hebrew Union College would be based, as Wise stated, on Torah and Revelation. We can infer from these comments that Wise was desirous of reassuring Orthodox Jews in America that Reform rabbis would have a traditional education. Ellenson goes on to note, however, that the stated requirements for Reform ordination were absurdly demanding. Somehow, at the end of four years, a student would have to master Hebrew and Aramaic, Torah, both Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, and the entire span of Jewish history.

With the arrival of Kaufmann Kohler as President of HUC in 1903, there is a de-emphasis of Talmud and a marked accentuation of modern Bible studies. Kohler eliminated modern Hebrew, no Talmud at all was required, and Jewish history was reduced to a bare minimum. In their place, HUC instituted courses on pedagogy, homiletics, and elocution. That is, the preparation shifted from traditional scholarship to practical matters for a congregational rabbi. There was still significant weight to the Bible and *midrash* courses, but as noted above, the teaching of Talmud and *halachah* was reduced to a minimum. (Ellenson, 2004.)

(It's in this context of a more modern and decidedly non-traditional course of study for rabbinic students that I want to explore the relation – if one exists – between modern biblical studies and the ritual practice of Reform rabbis.)

In addition to some of the research I did on the content of what scholars are saying about the historicity of the Bible, I also examined some of the work being done on how the religiously-minded are negotiating the tension between their intellect and their faith. Steven Cohen conducted a study under the auspices of the American Jewish Committee that attempted to gauge the connection between a student's religious attitude and the level of religious observance in the student's home. This 1974 study questioned 1300 Jewish undergraduates at Columbia College, Barnard College, and the Columbia School of Engineering.

Cohen had an inkling that the stronger the level of observance at home, the higher the level of Jewish identification and religious observance in the student's life. In essence, this was more or less borne out by his research. When he controlled for parental religiousness, there was little difference in the level of identification and ritual observance between those who attended some religious school and those who had no formal religious training. Not surprisingly, students who had a yeshiva or day-school background had a higher level of Jewish identification than students who did not have as formalized an educational background.

Even amongst this group of students with a full-time religious background, Cohen charted a higher level of identification and ritual observance in students whose parents were most observant. In general, Cohen determined that students' religious attitudes closely resemble the attitudes found in their homes and that the behavior of religious students can be seen as "attitude maintenance" more than "attitude change" (Cohen, p. 324). Among students from highly observant homes, a full-time religious education can serve as "a powerful buttress" against assimilation (Cohen, p. 325).

In 1966, Andrew Greeley and Peter Rossi published a book that examined the effect of Catholic school education on the maintenance of Catholic attitudes into adulthood. Like Cohen, Greeley and Rossi determined that the religious attitudes of children mirror those found in the home and that a part-time education was less effective than a full-time education. They also concluded that Catholic schools have a significant impact on the development and maintenance of specifically Catholic religious attitudes, but this effect seems to be restricted to students from observant homes. Schools, in their opinion, cannot overcome an unsympathetic home environment. (Greeley and Rossi, 1966)

Paul Perl and Mark Gray, writing under the auspices of Georgetown University, synopsized more recent research of Catholic attitudes and religious education. They see a less-pronounced connection between attending Catholic grammar and high school and the level of religious observance in Catholic adults; in fact, they find the educational effect on religious observance "often not existent" (Perl and Gray, p. 4). Surprisingly, Perl and Gray mention that in the Catholic school environment, students who attended Catholic primary or secondary schools are sometimes *less* observant adult Catholics and that they have a reduced agreement with Catholic pronouncements on sexual behavior. (Perl and Gray, 2004)

Wendy Kaminer, in "Sleeping with Extraterrestrials," bemoans the level of superstition that's prevalent today - whether we hear it from Deepak Chopra or the Oval Office. She's troubled by irrationalism and the likely effect of faith and piety on public policy. One of the perils posed by contemporary religious revivalism, according to her, is the tendency to treat belief in a god simplistically as if it were an unmitigated good. These cases, for her, reflected in part a failure of reason, and she writes about confusing the realms of faith and reason.

Charles Liebman, in The Ambivalent American Jew, writes that it is uncertain just what "religious" means. For him, it is "not unidimensional" and involves ritual, the experience of God, faith in doctrines, knowledge of one's religion, involvement in the religious community, and the extent that religion plays in an individual's life.

HYPOTHESIS

I will attempt to ascertain how modern critical study of the Bible by HUC students affects their religious practice. The study will attempt to interview HUC rabbinic students about their religious background prior to their HUC experience, and, using the criteria offered by Steven Cohen, determine if their level of observance is diminished, increased, or unchanged as they become more exposed to modern scholarship on the historicity of the Bible. I also want to address the possible disconnect they might be feeling between what they personally believe and what they would, as Wolpe did, say publicly.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH DESIGN

This survey will be conducted on the rabbinic student enrollment of Hebrew Union College. The potential sample numbers 185 people and has been mailed to students at the Los Angeles, Cincinnati, and New York campuses. The data to be collected from this survey allow the respondents a variety of responses, from checking off the appropriate box or category, to composing paragraphs to explain their perspectives on the different questions.

The study will compile these results and attempt to discern a link – if one exists - between taking religious courses and courses in modern Bible studies and the personal observance of the rabbinic students.

The survey method will be used because it allows for a richer response from the students and enables them to offer up information that the researcher may not have anticipated in designing the survey. Further, this design was selected because it attempts to create a natural stress-free setting for the students. The questions are open-ended and will remove any restrictions the student might have or the questions might pose. This study is an opportunity to learn from the narrative about any previously inarticulated influences that possibly have affected a person's decision to attend rabbinic school at HUC.

The narrative will also minimize the interviewer's personal bias since there is no apparent connection between the interviewer and the respondent. The survey might additionally elicit information that the interviewer has not anticipated. Since there is no time-limit on taking the survey, the respondent is afforded more time for reflection on his or her private motivations. With a nod to the Heisenberg Effect – that observation affects response - the distance between the researcher and the respondent should minimize any influence of one on the other.

From the perspective of internal validity, there are threats to the accuracy of the survey in that this information is private and personal, and it must be anticipated that not every student will respond with the same level of candor. Furthermore, HUC rabbinic students are spread over three campuses, each with an identity of its own.

Extrapolating from the respondents' surveys to all of the HUC community may not be possible; at the very least, it hopes to rely on a representative sample from each locale. To my knowledge, this is the first survey ever taken of HUC rabbinic students' ritual observance, and so there are no frames of reference through which broad conclusions could be drawn. To be more useful, the study should be repeated in one or more future years to see if any trends persist or if there are discernible changes for students as they accumulate more years of rabbinic training. Ideally, this survey would also be given to students who go on to take pulpits and will be seeing their ritual performance as an extension of the community's needs and not just their own.

In attempting to map a correlation between modern Bible studies and the ritual observance of rabbinic students in the Reform world, I'm drawing on my own experience and assuming that the same causal relationship exists within his sample of rabbinic students today. It is also possible that my history in an Orthodox setting may be qualitatively different from the dynamic one naturally encounters in a Reform environment where there is less rigor around ritual observance. That is, ritual observance and exposure to modern Biblical criticism may have little correlation at all in the Reform world.

There is a possibility that the respondents have poor analytical skills and cannot clearly express what their motivations are for participating in the HUC program.

The students might also be embarrassed about disclosing private details of their lives and consider the survey an invasion of privacy, thereby withholding some information. The questions may not be on the mark and may not ideally elicit the kind of response that would be most illuminating. There might be problems with vocabulary. Unknown to me, some words will antagonize. The students may be unclear themselves about the influences and motivations for their decisions to be more or less observant. And finally, in a way that mimics door-to-door surveys on racial and ethnic issues, the students may respond to questions inauthentically and in ways that reflect more positively on themselves as opposed to what they are privately thinking.

The survey will be confidential, as far as I'm concerned. To further enhance a good response rate, the cover letter will stress that the information is to be kept in-house, is being conducted by another member of the HUC student community, and that the information may have a direct affect on the future curricula of HUC rabbinic students. There are 185 students in this universe, and the research hopes to encompass the narratives of at least thirty.

ORIGINAL SURVEY

1. Before attending HUC, how long had you been considering becoming a rabbi?
2. Before attending HUC, what level of identification with Judaism would you say you had?
3. Is your level of identification and participation as a member of the Jewish community more or less than that of:

a) your parents?

b) your grandparents?

c) your siblings?

(please feel free to elaborate on the differences)

4. Was there any person or any particular experience that dramatically affected your decision to attend HUC?
5. Did you attend or consider attending another rabbinical school?
6. What philosophy courses did you take before entering HUC?
7. What courses on modern Biblical studies did you take before entering HUC?
8. What courses are you taking now in Biblical studies?
9. Did any of these courses have a serious impact on your religious perspective?

10. *What specific behaviors:

a. Friday night candle lighting

b. Chanukah candle lighting

c. Sets of dishes for meat and dairy

d. Saying Kiddush on Friday night

e. Mezzuzah on the door

f. Seder for Passover

g. Sabbath service attendance

h. Yom Kippur service attendance

were part of your regular life before coming to HUC?

11. What about now?

12. If you have a partner or significant other, does he or she play a part in your level of ritual observance?

*(These criteria were developed by Steven Cohen of Hebrew University in order to ascertain what ritual practices would identify a Jewish person as observant.)

EXTERNAL VALIDITY

As far as external validity is concerned, it's impossible at this point to know how the information elicited might be incorporated in the curriculum at HUC. At this writing, the Reform movement is re-emphasizing traditional Jewish behaviors such as *kashrut*, keeping the Sabbath, daily prayers, greater expertise in the Hebrew language, and the wearing of *kippot* and *talitot* during prayer services. The results of this study, as HUC moves in a more traditional direction, could provide information to the faculty and administration about what courses could be emphasized or de-emphasized in order to enhance the ritual observance of the rabbinic students.

If pulpit rabbis are seen as being able to influence the behavior of their congregants, a correlation between modern Biblical studies and the personal behavior of the rabbinate might potentially effect more traditional religious behavior on the part of congregants and on the Reform movement in general.

This phenomenon will be mitigated by the different levels of traditional observance that are anecdotally alluded to on each of the HUC campuses. Cincinnati, for example, is purported to be more classically Reform, while the New York campus seems to attract more observant rabbinic students. Would a change in curriculum be felt university-wide, or will different levels of change be observed campus by campus?

In qualitative studies, reliability and generalizability play a minor role, but there are ways to increase the value and accuracy of the findings. It is also hoped that rich narrative descriptions will allow me not only to obtain a wide breadth of information, but extract from the responses more meaningful themes that may not have been originally anticipated.

I will also attempt to be cognizant of and note any negative or discrepant information obtained by the surveys. As a last enhancer of validity, I will randomly pick respondents who have chosen to identify themselves as part of a peer debriefing process. In this way, any topics that seem ambiguous or unfocused may be potentially clarified and their relevance enhanced.

The surveys were distributed through the Deans of the respective campuses in order to provide as much confidentiality as possible to the respondents. Rabbinic students were allowed to respond on line via e-mail or through hard copy, and the cover letter offered to compensate students for their time and expense in an effort to increase the rate of response.

INTERNAL LIMITATIONS ON DATA COLLECTION

A survey approach to this topic seemed to be the most useful for the researcher since the participants could not be directly observed and interviewed. They lived too far away or, in the case of the LA-based students, the surveys were mailed out when the students were away in the spring and summer. Because of the open-ended structure of the survey, the respondents were able to provide an historical perspective that provided richer, more expansive information about their personal behaviors. The survey also allowed me to define the topic and the frames of reference through which the topic would be addressed.

Negatively, however, a survey lacks a personal element, so I will be filtering the information provided through my own lens and may be unaware of the real intent of the respondent. Furthermore, the respondents are not taking a survey in their natural setting, and it is possible that while out of school or distracted by a summer job, for example, there will be a lower level of clarity and accuracy.

The most glaring disadvantage to the survey system I'm using is that I'm dependent upon the honesty of the respondent; this difficulty may be allayed if a certain theme emerges from the responses in general.

SURVEY COLLECTION

Beginning in the Spring of 2004, I e-mailed (through the registrars in Los Angeles, New York, and Cincinnati) sets of questionnaires for the rabbinic students that would accumulate data on their academic backgrounds and their levels of ritual observance. There are 185 rabbinic students on the three campuses, but I received, however, replies from only four students, perhaps because the survey was mailed out too close to exams or the summer vacation. In any event, the response level was completely inadequate.

When I returned to school in the Fall of 2004, I sent packages of hard copies to New York and Cincinnati and offered to pay the postage and to pay for the time of students who would remit the surveys back to me. On the Los Angeles campus where I was a student, I distributed the surveys by hand to the rabbinic students. After this second round of mailings, I received 25 surveys which seemed to be an adequate for me to begin the analytical process.

In December of 2004 I moved to Boston, and somehow after arriving I no longer had the surveys. They literally had slipped into a hole in time, perhaps one of the non-visual dimensions predicted by String Theory. In any event, I had no data upon which to base any analysis of the ritual observance of HUC rabbinic students.

In February 2005, I traveled to Los Angeles and personally distributed sets of surveys to students there in the hope of collecting enough of them to say something meaningful about how rabbinic student ritual observance is affected by academic coursework. From that latest trip to LA I was able to acquire 13 surveys, and I will base my analysis on them. I certainly wish I had three or four times that number to work with, but I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of information I was able to glean from the limited data at my disposal.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

The intent of the surveys I conducted was to gauge a connection – if one exists – between the kinds of philosophy and Bible studies courses students take and their level of ritual observance. In an ideal setting, I might be able to control for many other factors: family background; experiences in Israel; or personal influences (rabbis, professors, partners). I don't have enough data at this time, however, to make any definitive connections between coursework and ritual practice, but I did receive some interesting ruminations from some of the students about how their perspectives on God and ritual were influenced after their coursework at HUC.

Thirteen students responded to the survey. One of the surprising trends that emerged from the responses was that only half of them had taken religion or philosophy courses prior to coming to HUC. I have been out of college for decades, but I would have thought core undergraduate curricula included mandatory coursework in these areas. As I said, though, only half the students (7) had taken such courses. Twelve of the thirteen students who responded were taking philosophy or modern Bible studies courses at HUC, so at least as far as their present academic experience is concerned, almost all the respondents have some familiarity with modern critical analysis or philosophy courses. That gives me confidence that their responses about ritual experience won't be made in a complete vacuum.

For eleven of the thirteen respondents, there has been no measurable effect - since coming to HUC - on their ritual observance. They keep *kashrut*, they light candles, they attend services regularly, they fast on *Yom Kippur*, and observe *Shabbat* with more or less the same frequency as they did before they came. I did not, however, foresee the emergence of two quite unanticipated "facts": First, I found in the focus group that there has often been a marked change in rabbinic student *perspective* and that students have found some non-traditional prisms through which to see prayer and ritual; and second, two students claim that they now observe rituals to a much *lesser* extent.

While the latter revelation dovetails with my personal experience as a rabbinic student years ago, I was surprised that their years at HUC were accompanied by *diminished* levels of observance. Were I to have the luxury of follow-up studies with these two students – and I don't know who they are – it would be fascinating to see what the roots of this change in behavior are.

An interesting facet of the data I accumulated was that twelve of the thirteen students professed to be more observant and culturally-connected than their grandparents were. As one student wrote,

> *None of my close relatives are Jewish professionals or particularly learned in Jewish subjects. That being said, both my parents were lay leaders for many years in our synagogue and the local B'nai B'rith. My sister went to a local Jewish camp and has lived in Israel. My maternal grandparents are not Jewishly identified and my paternal grandparents... were not particularly active in any Jewish way.*

A second student wrote,

> *My paternal grandparents kept kosher and supported the synagogue. But I don't know that there was much kavanah attached to it.*

In a variation of this theme, for some students, their commitment to HUC brought a greater commitment from their *parents*. As one student wrote,

> *My parents joined a Reform synagogue and became active when I began attending HUC.*

A second student responded that

> *[My] parents became more involved as we children became more involved, more a case of following than leading. [My] siblings are all involved in Jewish life in a variety of ways and the same is true of our children who are also very involved.*

What did come through in seven of the surveys was the pronounced effect philosophy and biblical studies had on the *perspective* of the respondents. One student wrote that coursework didn't "alter" his practice, but it made him "think" about the Bible as a sacred text.

Another wrote,

> *I now appreciate the multilayered depth of the Bible – I don't think I ever thought of the giving of Torah at Sinai as an historical event.*

A third offered,

> *I think my Bible coursework...began a process of seeing sacred myth as opposed to accepting the texts at face value. In some ways it was easier being naïve.*

A fourth noted that Bible studies and philosophy courses did not "significantly" affect him,

> *...but they have helped strengthen my belief in Tanakh as a piece of history, not independent from it, but not written by God, but divinely inspired.*

The one student who elaborated on the negative impact Bible studies had on his ritual practice answered that his exposure to the Documentary Hypothesis "really changed" his understanding of Torah as history.

> *Thinking of Torah as the word of God no longer became my way of thinking. Now I believe that Judaism has become a <u>way</u> of thinking – a way of understanding and engaging the world. That is my basis for Judaism.*

In sum, only two of the students noted a measurable effect on their ritual observance as being connected to the kind of coursework they have taken at HUC. For almost everyone, the particulars in their lives have been relatively unchanged even as they have become more exposed to philosophy and modern Bible studies courses. As I indicated above, only two of the students surveyed reported that their level of ritual observance had fallen dramatically based on "new" information they were acquiring at HUC in the course of their Bible studies. For the bulk of the students, the tangible change came in their perspective. That is to say, they see the rituals less as an historical imperative and more of a feeling of being culturally connected to Judaism. In the focus group which I conducted in my last visit to Los Angeles, the students with whom I spoke universally stressed this theme: They have found and formulated a new justification for the observance of ritual.

FOCUS GROUP

In addition to the surveys, I put together a focus group of four rabbinic students with whom I discussed at length the questions in the survey and then allowed them to elaborate on perspectives they had about the educational process at HUC and the potential connection between their academic work and their professional behavior and demeanor. The hour-long session fleshed out several ideas about the kinds of perspectives rabbinic students have that may or may not become part of their practice in the community and on the *bimah*.

The focus group revealed a number of attitudes:

1. Spirituality means more than praxis;
2. An early desire to "do it right" has been replaced with a flexibility about ritual and cultural observances;
3. Ritual is not enough;
4. Reform Judaism will succeed because it is attempting to find *meaning* in the ritual in contrast to what the students believe about Orthodox and Conservative underpinnings for ritual observance.

According to one student,

> *The more I learn about Bible history, the more encouraged I am to learn more. There is sort of a Bell Curve effect. I am not influenced to do less, but as I learn more about it, the rigor has lessened, and I'm more concerned about the spirituality behind the ritual. For me, courses in Bible studies have increased my thinking about God, and now it is a more defined idea.*

A second student said that since coming to HUC he has appreciated how

> *...teachers view everything with nuance and sophistication, and that has influenced how I see prayer and Shabbat, for example. I'm now mindful of peace-making activities, and I have an awareness of the interaction between prayer and ritual. When I was in college, I was obsessed with "the right way," but I'm more flexible and relaxed now. Judaism is a deeper thing. It's more involved with the divine and less with rigor. I sometimes feel like I was "lied to" as a Reform kid, and in a way I'm making up for stuff that I didn't have when I was younger. Being a rabbi is a way to prove my authenticity. I know what the "right" way is, but I don't care so much anymore.*

At the end of our discussion one student brought up a humorous but rather telling episode about how family members observed Christmas and how this past year Christmas and Shabbat coincided. It didn't bother her at all to celebrate them simultaneously.

It actually was a lot of fun, not weird at all. Their house looked very nice, everybody got gifts, and we drank a lot of champagne. I remember being around Christmas as a kid, so perhaps that's why I'm so empathetic now and why I don't feel threatened at all. I actually think that it was great to have Christmas and Shabbat together. For me today, not everything is as clear cut as when I started rabbinic school. I can't bypass the rigor, but I can understand other ways of being Jewish, and my emphasis is on spirituality. In the modern world, because it has become so secular, spirituality is more a topic of conversation. In my heart, I know that the tradition expects more than ritual in order to be a good Jew.

Two of the students who were in the focus group raised the name of James Fowler and his book, Stages of Faith. Fowler, like Piaget and Kohlberg, developed a multi-stage theory, in this case, of faith development, and they found much of what he wrote instructive for the transformation of their religious perspective as they moved through HUC. In a nutshell, Fowler sees his various stages of faith as simply degrees of movement; they are neither achievements nor the road to salvation. By stage four, people begin to make their own religious conclusions and are constantly changing their personal tenets. Faith becomes individualized, and one is always attempting to grow and reappraise one's faith. In step five, people begin to realize that faith presents paradoxes and that faith has to live alongside logical inconsistencies. In stage six, the religiously-minded person feels at one with God and a part of something much larger than themselves.

Certainly in the conversations I had in the focus group, the HUC rabbinic students are all moving through stages four, five, and six. I didn't detect, from the surveys or the focus group, any indication that the students who responded had any fundamentalist understandings of Jewish history. My impression was that no one believed the Bible to be literal history; in fact, whether it was historical or not did not seem to be of much consequence to anyone. The myths, legends, and motifs of the Bible seem to stand alone outside the rationale for being ritually observant.

The rituals are delineated by the culture or by the demands of Reform Judaism, and the HUC students with whom I spoke looked at each element of ritual and decided for himself or herself what was to be retained and what was to be jettisoned – and as Fowler indicated, they found their own reasons for doing so. While in the past they may have felt that Judaism demanded a certain "code of conduct" as far as ritual is concerned, at this stage in their lives at HUC, the meaning of the ritual is far more important to them than the form. Doing it the "right" way – as defined by tradition – is far less important than doing the "right thing."

CONCLUSIONS

Sad to say, because of the low response rate, a black hole like the one that leveled the Tunguska woods in 1908, and/or my possible negligence over the surveys I finally accumulated, I can't speak with any certainty about the connection between Bible studies, philosophy coursework, and the ritual practice of HUC rabbinic students. I did, however, uncover some creative perspectives HUC students have developed as a basis for their ritual practice, and this information may be of some value to the College in formulating coursework for future generations of HUC rabbis.

When I first set out to gauge the possible effect Bible studies and philosophy might have on the ritual observance of HUC rabbinic students, I expected to find a marked difference in their behavior as they accumulated more information about the historicity of Torah. Without question, I was extrapolating from my personal experience at Yeshiva University years ago when I began to read some books and essays that reflected a more modern understanding of ancient Jewish history than I was receiving in the classroom. Many of those themes – the internal inconsistencies in the Bible, the similarities between the Torah stories and the stories of neighboring cultures, the troubling archaeological data – I addressed in my survey of the literature above. Additionally, a lot of the research and reading I've done in the last thirty years – even before my time at HUC - has only reinforced my view that the traditional justifications for ritual no longer exist.

There is no doubt, however, that the rabbinic students I interviewed have found a way to reconcile these difficulties to formulate a rationale for continuing to observe ritual.

I always found Kierkegaard an appealing thinker, and I've always been struck by his fear that the rational and the spiritual are in irreconcilable conflict. He, of course, chose the spiritual – the "teleological," as he put it – and accepted that the true believer can never fathom the ways of God, so accept human limitations and give in to the eternal. I say this with all respect: Better than I, the rabbinic students I spoke with have found a "loophole" in Kierkegaard's thinking and have created a way to walk the narrow and often blurred line between faith and reason. The ritual has a new meaning for them, and the historicity of the Bible – while important – doesn't seem to play a large role in their religious outlook. Ritual is performed because it has some spiritual meaning for them – at least at this time in their lives – and their new-found knowledge about how little real history there is in the Bible doesn't diminish their commitment to Judaism or the Jewish people.

Will some of them have a "Wolpe episode" from the *bimah* one day? If they do, it's hard to imagine that a Reform congregation – even as Reform moves to the right – will react as angrily as some of Rabbi Wolpe's Conservative congregants did. And unlike for Wolpe, the Orthodox members of a Jewish community will probably not condemn a Reform rabbi for such pronouncements, since Orthodoxy is generally unconcerned about the "heretical" ideas HUC graduates harbor.

Furthermore, in the Reform world, while there is a growing emphasis on ritual, rabbis don't serve the same function as they do in the Orthodox world. Certainly there are occasional questions about *halachah*, but for the most part, Reform rabbis have a much larger educational and pastoral role in their congregations than do their Orthodox counterparts, so concerns about ritual and historicity don't have the same level of gravitas in both venues.

I was surprised to learn from the surveys that nearly half the respondents had no philosophy or Bible studies prior to coming to HUC. If this is the norm here, I think it would behoove HUC to make more of an issue of this as part of the admissions process – if only to guarantee that its graduates have a broader body of knowledge when they're sent out into the real world. Reform congregations want a rabbi who can reference the Rambam *and* Plato, and HUC might give this more attention.

Apropos of the original curriculum structure Isaac Mayer Wise proposed – one that fancifully demanded the mastery of ALL Jewish learning – I had a conversation with David Ellenson about just what an HUC rabbi should be like. His personal experience was unusual in that he was a scholar as well as a rabbi, and we wondered aloud if this were the *best* model for an HUC rabbi. In truth, mastery of (all!) Jewish knowledge may not be anywhere near as important for a pulpit rabbi as the ability to inspire the congregants, lead them "in the path of righteousness," and be there as a friend and confidant in their time of need. Whether Moses lived or not may be secondary to the point of irrelevance.

In the end, I suppose, my thesis – however mangled the data – did raise some valuable points for me: In the Reform world, historicity of the Bible is not a critical concern for most rabbinic students; HUC rabbinic students have found a way to negotiate a landscape pock-marked with historical and archaeological inconsistencies by changing their *perspective* on the rationale(s) for ritual; and they are primed – after leaving HUC – to create and encourage a Judaism flexible enough to accommodate all the challenges modern American society presents an ancient religion and culture. What they told me wasn't *my* "answer" to the dilemmas I believe thinking people face when contending with the "truthfulness" of sacred texts, but I applaud the finesse and intellectual honesty I encountered among HUC rabbinic students as they attempt to navigate these waters.

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