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Modern Reform Rabbis and Their Stories: How They Can Inspire Others to Action

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Rabbinic Ordination

by

Sara Anne Goodman

Advisor
Dr. Rachel Adler

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Los Angeles, CA
February 2008/5768

Acknowledgments

At the URJ Biennial in San Diego last December, I met several rabbinical students from the Netherlands. One of them teased me that the Dutch were taking over the Reform movement. I said that I didn't mind, because without the Dutch, I wouldn't have been in rabbinical school. I dedicate this thesis to the first Dutch person I ever knew, Rabbi Marianne Luijken Gevirtz *z"l.* She was my friend, and became my mentor after she slyly suggested that I attend rabbinical school. During our final visit together at her home in Springfield, Ohio, we sat in her kitchen and shared dozens of stories. Marianne's were full of wisdom – she told me to give a context to everything I taught and explained what ordination would be like. She has been with me in spirit during these five years and I could not have arrived here without her as my guiding light.

I have been a part of The Movable Minyan, a lay-led egalitarian community, for 20 years. It was there that I met Marianne, the minyan's first member to become a rabbi. I thank the minyan for all the opportunities it gave me to get closer to Judaism and for the many friendships I developed there. The second ordainee produced by the minyan, Rabbi Patti Fenton, coached me through the rigors of life as a rabbinical student and taught me to appreciate rabbinic text. Above all, she has been a kind and caring friend.

I am blessed to have many friends who have supported and encouraged me through this journey. If you are reading this, you are one of them. I can't help but thank a chosen few here, beginning with Harry Chauss, who laughs at my jokes and skillfully edits my sermons. Best of all, he taught me how to be a better friend, and barely complained when I cried on his shoulder and messed up his sweaters. Olga Bluman and

Sarah Wolf, shared advice, laughter and rabbinic wisdom via cellphone while we walked, drove and flew to student pulpits and internships around the country. As I finish this thesis using Rabbi Susan Warshaw's as a template, I want to thank her for paving the way for me at HUC – guiding me to a fabulous Jerusalem apartment and a wonderful student pulpit in Victorville, Calif. Wendy Rohr, who was gracious enough to proofread this entire text, is a dear friend with whom I have enjoyed many adventures.

Throughout my life, I have been blessed with remarkable mentors. Merle Gould *z"l* was my hip, "we can talk about anything" high school teacher. She opened my eyes to the world of intellect. In the brief time I knew her, Rabbi Carole Meyers *z"l* generously shared her wisdom and the beauty of her rabbinate. Dr. Rachel Adler has been my teacher and thesis adviser, guiding me to consider new ideas and helping me refine my thinking. Rabbi Don Goor gave three years of his life to serving as my advisor, always providing excellent counsel, though my voice has never been still or small. Rabbi Jonah Pesner has only begun his role as my CCAR mentor, but already has helped me immensely. Rabbi Karen Fox continually shares gems of wisdom about how to be a better rabbi. I am grateful for her insight and support. The indefatigable staff of the HUC library in L.A. made it possible for me to complete all my projects over the last four years and keep my sense of humor.

A number of rabbis generously shared their stories for this project, providing the insights into living as a Reform Jew that are the basis of this thesis.

Finally, I am indebted to my family. My father Morris *z"l* and mother Eleanor *z"l* taught me to value Judaism and live with integrity. My sister Susan graciously sent me off to Israel for a year despite the number of extra responsibilities that brought her. Just

before I began this rabbinic journey, she presented me with a *yad*, anticipating my path before I even knew where I was going. My brother-in-law Bruce keeps me grounded, alternately telling me jokes that no future rabbi should hear, and then chastising me for non-rabbinic behavior. My nephews Ethan, Jeremy and Matthew are the sweetest boys ever, though I think they would prefer being labeled as "beasts" (whatever that means). Their warm hugs make my day and I am privileged to be their Sha Sha.

Modern Reform Rabbis and Their Stories: How They Can Inspire Others to Action

Thesis for Rabbinic Ordination
By Sara Anne Goodman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1
The need for modern Reform narrative

Since the Bible's inception, its stories have been critical in Judaism for the transmission of knowledge, including standards of behavior, values, and a connection to God. For more than a thousand years, Jewish leaders communicated the lessons of the Bible and Rabbinic text by using narrative contained in these writings to illustrate lessons of behavior. The leaders also were able, within their insular communities, to mandate that those beliefs would prevail.

The Bible begins its narratives with the stories of Adam and Eve and their children, who teach us about proper behavior through their negative example. Later in the Bible, some narratives use a more positive approach to communicate its lessons, such as Abraham's greeting of the three men (angels) at the beginning of Genesis 18. In contrast, God's commandments and orders appear in Exodus through Deuteronomy largely in the form of a list. In the Rabbinic period, texts interpreting these laws often used narrative to illustrate their points. Standards of behavior are expanded on further in later texts, including the *Shulhan Aruch,* often through the use of narrative.

Legal expert Robert Cover greatly admires Judaism's ability to mix law and narrative, and as a result, successfully abide by those laws, *mitzvot,* and values, *middot,* for thousands of years.

> A great legal civilization is marked by the richness of the *nomos* in which it is located and which it helps to constitute. The varied and complex materials of that *nomos* establish paradigms for dedication, acquiescence, contradiction, and resistance. These materials present not only bodies of rules or doctrine to be

> understood, but also worlds to be inhabited. To inhabit a *nomos* is to know how to *live* in it.[1]

Cover views both the Greek and Hebrew worlds' use of narrative as "magnificent." He notes that this approach allowed people to "explore great normative questions."[2] However, European Jews' adherence to these laws under Emancipation substantially weakened. As Jews gained freedoms that allowed them to live outside the boundaries of their tight-knit Jewish communities, they lost touch with the ways of life that exemplified *mitzvot,* and demanded their adherence to commandments. Their behavior was no longer under the purview of the rabbinate or the community. Without that structure, Jews were able to pull away from traditional practice.[3] The methods of conveying these values to future generations also weakened.

That process was exacerbated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as more than a million Jews moved to the United States, where the struggle with assimilation increased. As early as 1896, author and journalist, Abraham Cahan, who immigrated 14 years earlier, wrote about these struggles, including the need to violate Shabbat by working. In his short story, *Yekl and The Imported Bridegroom,* Cahan shows how, for some immigrants, life in America ate away at Jews' levels of observance, as well as identity. These changes are evident in the Americanization of first names, such as the Yekl character in the story taking on the name Jake.

> There is, however, even in Boston a lingering minority of bosses – more particularly in the "pants"-making branch – who abide by the Sabbath of their fathers. Accordingly, it was under one of these that Yekl had first been initiated into the sweatshop world.

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[1] Robert Cover, "Nomos and Narrative" in *Narrative, Violence and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover,* Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, Austin Sarat, eds. (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 97.
[2] Cover, 97.
[3] Eugene B. Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism* (New York: UAHC, 1984), 124.

> Subsequently, Jake, following numerous examples, had given up "pants" for the more remunerative cloaks...Soon after his arrival in Boston, his religious scruples had followed in the wake of his former first name; and if he was still free from work on Saturdays, he found many another way of "desecrating the Sabbath."[4]

Since that time, Jews have continued to adapt to American life, especially as barriers to assimilation have fallen. In many cases, this resulted in the continued weakening of Jews' connection to Judaism. By the late 20th and early 21st century, Jews were fully integrated into the secular lifestyle of their fellow members. Many Jews, like their non-Jewish counterparts, spend much of their discretionary time in a variety of leisure activities, from shopping to sports, rather than building or interacting with a cohesive community dedicated to absorbing the standards of behavior that Jews traditionally have held in the highest esteem.

Today, involved Jews continue to struggle, as in times of immigration, with one of the most prominent regular observances of Judaism, Shabbat. However, Rabbi Peter Knobel also notes that many Jews disregard Shabbat.

> The vast majority of Reform Jews are not Shabbat observers in any meaningful way. I believe one major reason is because there is no social support for observing. The general culture does not support it. The secular concept of time does not include Friday night and Saturday in the category of holy or religious. A Jew who wishes to observe must make a countercultural decision, one that is made more difficult by the lack of social support and, to a certain extent, isolation when one's peer group is not observing.[5]

There is more cultural support for the annual observance of Yom Kippur, but the holiday creates a different kind of struggle for those Jews who have little regular connection to Judaism but feel obligated to commemorate this holiday in particular. This struggle was adeptly portrayed in an episode of the HBO comedy series *Entourage.* A

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[4] Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and The Imported Bridegroom and other stories of the New York Ghetto* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), 11-12.
[5] Peter S. Knobel, "Re-creating the Narrative Community or It's Hard to Do Mitzvot by Yourself" in *Duties of the Soul,* Niles E. Goldstein and Peter S. Knobel, eds. (New York: UAHC Press, 1999), 132.

talent agent – a profession that is not uncommon for a Jewish man in Los Angeles – does not have any interest in Yom Kippur – but his wife does and expects him to solemnly attend their Reform synagogue's services this one time in the year. However, the agent, Ari Gold, finds his entire identity in his high-powered job and refuses to let go of it for even one day. He outwits his wife, leaves services and successfully closes a movie deal on deadline, just before the end of the day. Meanwhile, after services, Ari's wife tries to maintain a modicum of tradition at home as she struggles to keep her guests from breaking their fast before sundown. They are far more concerned with their stomachs than with appealing to God one final time during *Neila*.

This episode is one of the few in the *Entourage* series that directly addresses the Judaism of many of its characters, though their cultural Judaism is always apparent. As is typical in the series, Ari's role is that of the fool. His Yom Kippur antics are designed so that we will laugh at him and his inability to value his family and its traditions. However, the episode captures the struggles shared by many of the show's viewers, no matter their level of involvement with Judaism. The viewers find it difficult to pull away from their secular, assimilated life and make time for a religion that requires them to dig deep, reflect and connect with God, which can be an elusive experience.

Despite the example of *Entourage's* Ari, many Jews reach a point in their lives where they search for a more meaningful existence. Diane Tickton Schuster defines this quest in terms of Jews' growing interest in learning more about their religion. In her study of adult Jewish learners, *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice,* Schuster explains that adults turn to their tradition after experiencing dramatic changes in their lives. The changes may include "experiences that

challenge previously held worldviews" such as the deaths of parents, divorce or even a move to a new community. "They sometimes wonder if Judaism can help them to 'understand' their situation in new ways." Others may try to "make meaning" of their lives after confronting questions and ambiguities in their lives.[6]

When these adults begin to study, they confront another paradox. While they may be successful in their jobs and other aspects of their lives, they may be extremely insecure in their knowledge of Judaism.[7] Schuster states that teachers must help potential students overcome their fears and prod them to begin this journey by "helping adults to discover the excitement of Jewish learning."[8]

Educators also can explain the value of a closer affiliation with Judaism by explaining where Reform Judaism draws its inspiration and why. The Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, adopted in Pittsburgh in 1999, provides a basic outline for this. It states that God, Torah and Israel "give meaning and purpose to our lives."[9] They need to know that while the Reform movement sees Torah as a sacred text that is the "foundation of Jewish life," that does not keep Reform Jews from analyzing and questioning every word in it.

While the Reform Jewish community provides many programs for Jews who seek to learn more about God, Torah and Israel, there is a continuing challenge to make sure these institutions can present the lessons of Judaism within a context that is meaningful today. One way is through narrative. Our primary source of inspiring, value-laden stories

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[6] Diane Tickton Schuster, *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice* (New York: UAHC Press, 2003), 115.
[7] Schuster, 3.
[8] Ibid, 21.
[9] Levy, Richard N., *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism* (New York: URJ Press, 2005), xvii-xx.

today continues to be, in large part, based on the Hasidic lifestyle of 18th century Eastern Europe.[10] Because the design of the stories is brief and picturesque, they are easy to tell and understand. As a result, the stories are still offered in Reform institutions. While the stories may be profound, they do not reflect the life experiences of today's Reform Jews or relate to their frame of reference. This is further undermined by the fact that the ties of most Reform Jews to the European world of their grandparents or great grandparents have dissolved – if their forbearers ever lived that type of lifestyle.

As the Reform Jewish community enters its third century in the United States, it is particularly important to demonstrate that more closely adhering to Judaic practice nourishes our lives. By collecting stories set in a modern context and using them in teaching situations – from sermons to classes to discussion groups – the community can learn of new ways to incorporate these values into their daily lives. The stories may entice Jews into renewing their involvement with religion by providing them with a new way of relating to Judaism. Rachel Adler, in *Engendering Judaism,* details the value of sharing stories as a way to craft a narrative that will guide us as we seek new ways to express our Judaism.

> To determine where we ought to go, we must reflect on where we have been. We do this best by storytelling. As individuals, we continually rework and relate our life stories to ourselves and to others and project ourselves into possible futures through dreams and fantasies. We also lay claim as members of groups to the collective memories of the group. Transmitted from generation to generation, they help to constitute our sense of who we are and to shape our future actions.[11]

Cover elaborates on the value of narrative by suggesting that it be used to rethink unresolved moral problems.[12] This can be achieved by adapting Biblical themes to a

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[10] http://www.hasidicstories.com/Articles/Background_and_Sources/intro.html.
[11] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 21-22.
[12] Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," 120.

modern context. Analyzing that narrative can allow listeners to realize how the ancient messages may apply to them. From there, they can use these narratives to imagine how a decision to act will affect them. They may hear a story of someone working to improve the world in a small way and realize that such an action is gratifying and meaningful. A person may contrast this with his or her regular pursuits – perhaps shopping or playing golf – and discover those activities are not as satisfying as they once were. According to William Cutter, who uses narrative extensively in discussions of bioethics, narrative allows values to be "played out in the story so that simulation of consequences occurs." It then helps "the individual think through consequences" of his or her decisions and actions. [13]

Jewish theologian Michael Goldberg says that religious convictions cannot be conveyed successfully unless the narrative used is meaningful enough to make a deep impact and even transform listeners by allowing them to understand the past or change their future actions.

> Justifiably held convictions must be rooted in some narrative which gives us the capacity to step back from our current engagements and spell out what we have been doing from a broadened perspective, hence enabling us to integrate our lives in a more coherent and comprehensive fashion than before.
> ...The convictions generated by certain stories may be vindicated or invalidated to the extent that those stories can reach out, sustain, and transform the lives of those who hear them and who then go on to claim them as their own. In that respect, some narratives not only help explain to us what has come before, but also show us how we ought to proceed.[14]

One of the ways to convey religious conviction through narrative is through stories that address basic Jewish values, such as those we sing about in *al sh'loshah*

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[13] William Cutter, "Do the Qualities of Story Influence the Quality of Life? Some Perspectives on the Limitations and Enhancements of Narrative Ethics" in *Quality of Life in Jewish Bioethics*, Noam J. Zohar, ed. (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 57.
[14] Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 244.

d'varim, the *Pirke Avot* verse that states that the world is sustained by three things: Torah, worship, and acts of compassion. Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld explains that in modern terms, Torah includes study and continuous Jewish learning, while *avodah* involves worshipping in the community and celebrating the joys of our holidays and Shabbat.[15] Acts of compassion, based on the *mitzvah* of *ahavat Yisrael v'hav'riot* (the love of humankind) are detailed in the prayer *Eilu D'varim.*[16] The text is collectively known as *gemilut hasadim* and is discussed in the *mishnah*, *Peah 1:1* and the Talmud, *Shabbat 127a.*[17] These precepts also are based on Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."[18]

The values are:

- *Kivod av v-eim* (honoring one's father and mother)
- *Gemilut chasadim* (engaging in acts of compassion)
  - *Hashkamat beit hamidrash shacharit v'ar'vit* (rising early for study, morning and evening)
  - *Hachnasat orchim* (assisting strangers)
  - *Bikkur holim* (visiting the sick)
  - *Hachnasat kalah* (assisting the bride)
  - *L'vayat hameit* (accompanying the dead for burial)
  - *Iyun t'filah* (praying with devotion)
- *Havaat shalom bein adam lachaveiro* (bringing about peace between one person and another)
- *Talmud Torah k'neged kulam* (the study of Torah is equal to them all).[19]

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[15] Arthur J. Lelyveld, "Mitzvah: The Larger Context" in *Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle*, Simeon J. Maslin, ed. (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1979), 114-115.

[16] Rabbi Meyer Berlin, *Encyclopedia Talmudica: A Digest of Halachic Literature and Jewish Law from the Tannaitic Period to the Present Time* (Jerusalem: Talmudic Encyclopedia Publ. Ltd., 1969), 272-273. This material states that the precept of *ahavat Yisrael v'hav'riot* "includes the duty of visiting the sick...and escorting visitors on their way; even though most early authorities regard these as Rabbinic obligations only."

[17] Philip Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book: Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1995), 16.

[18] Berlin, 272.

[19] Transliterations from *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007), 44.

This list can serve as an initial guideline for encouraging Jews to make a new commitment to *mitzvot*. Jews also may realize they have observed some of these *mitzvot* as "good deeds," without the Jewish context that would allow them to access the holiness of the experience. Other concepts can be addressed, such as celebrating life with a variety of blessings. However, Jews also need to know that Reform Judaism does not expect them to adhere to all *mitzvot*, but rather commit to the ones most relevant to their lives. Congregational Rabbi Jack Stern explains the way Reform Jews can balance the freedom of informed choice regarding *mitzvot* with the responsibility to live as a committed Jew.[20]

> For the liberal Jew...these *mitzvot* and rulings constitute not the literal worlds of God but the inspired words of the Jewish people at a given moment in history to articulate what they believed the God of the covenant wanted them to do, ritually and ethically. Since we live during another time in history, we are entitled to be selective in our compliance with the traditional *mitzvot*...The indispensable requirement, however, is that we make such selections out of knowledge and commitment, not out of ignorance and inconvenience.[21]

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf explains that integrating *mitzvot* into our lives is an opportunity for deepening our involvement in Judaism.

> We do not constitute the obligatory; we discover it. We must recover all that we can. God has made us an offer we cannot refuse. There are some tasks we cannot retrieve. What we cannot retrieve should not occasion guilt. It should occasion struggle. Even God cannot expect you to do what you cannot do....Congregations' and movements' purpose is to assist persons and families to recover the *mitzvot*. Knowledge empowers, instructs, privileges, obligates, and also condemns.
> What is important, I think – most important – is not the number of *mitzvot* performed, but the direction of our life. We are either going in or getting out....Direction is everything. If we are in the direction...of recovering, then all is beginning to be better.[22]

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[20] Rabbi Jack Stern is rabbi emeritus of Westchester Reform Temple. He is a former president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the national association of Reform rabbis.

[21] Jack Stern, "Jewish Ethics in the Daily Life of a Jew" in *The Jewish Condition: Essays on Contemporary Judaism Honoring Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler*, Aron Hirt-Manheimer, ed. (New York: UAHC Press, 1995), 121-122.

[22] Arnold Jacob Wolf, "Back to the Future: On Rediscovering Commandments" in *Duties of the Soul*, 20-21.

In his doctoral dissertation, Rabbi Zalman Schachter (now Schacter-Shalomi) discusses the evolution of prayer and the methodology for adapting prayer to changing needs. He points out that some material must be dropped and others added (as has been customary in the American Reform movement's *siddurim*), while still retaining elements that have been proven over time.[23] This perspective also can be applied to Reform Jews' approach to *mitzvot* as well as the development of its own narrative.

It should be made clear that the uniquely Jewish aspect of this commitment is based on the covenant the Israelites made with God at Sinai. In Exodus 24:3, Moses repeats to them all of Adonai's commands. The people agree to them, stating "All the things that Adonai has commanded, we will do." While modern Reform Jews do not follow all the commandments, they share that bond with God which leading Reform theologian Eugene Borowitz believes "obligates Jews to sanctify their lives and their relationships with others."[24] This can be achieved through prayer, study and religious observance, as described above in the discussion of *al sh'loshah d'varim* and *mitzvot*. *Middot* and *mitzvot* help Jews keep the covenant by fulfilling what Rabbi Sidney Schwarz calls Jews' special responsibility. "Judaism teaches that its adherents are not holy because of who they are, but because of what they do."[25]

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[23] Rabbi Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi, *A Study of the Rationale Offered for Qabbalistic Prayer Intentions in the Amidah* (Hebrew Union College: Winnipeg, 1960), iii.
[24] Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism, 134.*
[25] Rabbi Sidney Schwarz, *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006), 39.

Another element that can be integrated into narrative is Reform Judaism's attitude toward God, which is in the "reality" rather than the "existence" of God.[26] Reform Jews need to know that while we share a belief in God, we may differ in what that means. Rabbi Richard Levy states that communally, we are all striving to "transform our lives through *kedusha.*"[27] It is critical to note that Reform Judaism is flexible in how those goals are achieved – that it is an evolutionary process. Narrative can demonstrate what is inspiring about venturing more deeply into Jewish life, and the benefit from proceeding on this journey.

Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman believes this can be achieved by focusing on the meaning of Torah. "When we listen to Torah, we are listening to God's voice."[28] However, she explains that the next step is study, which allows us to access what God is saying. Frishman also points out that learning involves community, the creation of which satisfies other needs in this increasingly impersonal society where families are spread apart. As Robert Heller explained in his address at the 2007 Biennial, the Union for Reform Judaism has focused on creating "communities of meaning where members can live their Jewish journeys together." In the last few years, the method of accessing community has been expanded with the creation of the Union for Reform Judaism's Just Congregations initiated, which is dedicated to doing social justice as community. Heller said that congregations have pursued that goal by developing new ways to strengthen

[26] Levy, 19.
[27] Levy, xvi.
[28] Elyse D. Frishman, "A Voice in the Dark: How Do We Hear God?" in *Duties of the Soul,* 115.

communal bonds by encouraging small groups of congregants to meet and get to know each other, sharing their stories. They then decide what social issues to act on.[29]

Modern life stories can convey issues related to theology, no matter what the religion. Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon Jr. wrote extensively about biography and its effect on narrative theology, what he defined as the "way or ways in which the ideas of religion may be expressed in story form." Though McClendon looks at narrative from a Christian standpoint, he offers insights into the contribution of individual narratives.

> There appears from time to time singular or striking lives, the lives of persons who embody the convictions of the community but in a new way...Such lives, by their very attractiveness or beauty, may serve as data for the Christian thinker, enabling him more truly to reflect upon the tension between what is and what ought to be believed and lived by all....If by attending to those lives, we find ways of reforming our own theologies, making them more true...more adequate to the age now being born, then we will be justified in that arduous inquiry. Biography at best will be theology.[30]

When using biography in connection with theology we need to consider the sources of the stories. For this project, the stories will come from Reform rabbis. James Fowler's interpretation of the use of biographical stories, as detailed in *Trajectories in Faith: Five Life Stories,* cautions us to remember that our leaders, just like Biblical characters, are human.[31] They may be fallible and they may struggle with living up to their own expectations as well as those of their communities. That also may be part of their story. In his book on narrative theology, Goldberg highlights the following advice from Fowler.

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[29] Robert Heller, "Chairman's Message: Weaving Social Action into the Fabric of Temple Life," an address by the chairman of the URJ's Board of Trustees at the 2007 URJ Biennial in San Diego.
[30] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 37-38.
[31] Goldberg, 65-66.

> Insights into the personality of a great teacher and a narrative that gives the full context of the teaching lend a note of authenticity to the records of instruction...The biographical details remind us that....heroes are real people whose teachings we repeat and whose lives we honor...Their stories invite us to enter the structures of faith that supported their lives.[32]

When hearing a narrative, the listener also has the opportunity to explore the subtext of the story. Perhaps the listener will internalize the story's lessons by identifying with the main character of the story. Or he or she will take the opportunity to discuss it further with the storyteller. Together, the two can enter into deeper dialogue about the story's deeper meaning or another topic of Jewish learning. While their work focuses on medicine and ethics, Laurie Zoloth and Rita Charon's discussion of communication through examination of narrative, applies to this learning process as well.

> These acts of transmission and reception join the two subjects – the teller and the listener – in an act of moral interpretation, a word that means, as feminist psychoanalytic critic Julie Kristeva points out, "to be mutually indebted." The ordinal tasks faced in this encounter are thus not only the ones of positivistic science, to measure, to replicate, and to change the direction of the outcome, but also the linguistic efforts to make meaning through mutually interpretive acts.[33]

Eventually, those who listen to these Jewish narratives will be able to identify their own stories and develop their own paths to a more meaningful approach to life. According to Stephen Crites, the late Wesleyan University professor of religion, "A man's sense of his own identity seems largely determined by the kind of story which he understands himself to have been enacting through the events of his career, the story of his life...."[34]

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[32] Goldberg, 65-66.
[33] Laurie Zoloth and Rita Charon, "Like an Open Book: Reliability, Intersubjectivity, and Textuality in Bioethics" in *Stories Matter: The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*, Rita Charon and Martha Montello, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27.
[34] Goldberg, 12.

Stories can help create community, particularly in a time of transition. Rabbi Zoë Klein recently became senior rabbi of Los Angeles' Temple Isaiah after serving as its assistant rabbi for seven years. She used stories to build new bonds between her and her congregation. Klein asked a number of congregants to share the stories of their Jewish journeys with her. "When you hear their stories, they know you and they become invested in you." She added that stories help facilitate change. "They know you will listen to what they want."[35]

As Jews become more comfortable with narrative, they may be better able to value the narrative of the Jewish people as a whole, as told through Torah. It would be particularly valuable if they could eventually relate to the narrative of Sinai, or as Cover calls it, "the myth of Sinai."[36] From there, these newer students of Judaism may be more open to taking the next step: moving from absorbing the values illustrated in the stories of Jewish professionals, to considering ways to more actively integrate *mitzvot* into their lives. It is hoped that they will see the value in seeing the myths as Cover does, as "paradigms for behavior."

> These myths establish the paradigms for behavior. They build relations between the normative and the material universe, between the constraints of reality and the demands of an ethic. These myths establish a repertoire of moves – a lexicon of normative action – that may be combined into meaningful patterns culled from the meaningful patterns of the past. The normative meaning that has inhered in the patterns of the past will be found in the history of ordinary legal doctrine at work in mundane affairs; in utopian and messianic yearnings, imaginary shapes given to a less resistant reality; in apologies for power and privilege and into the critiques that may be leveled at the justificatory enterprises of law.
> Law may be viewed as a system of tension or bridge linking a concept of a reality to an imagined alternative – that is, as a connective between two states of affairs,

[35] As told during Ordination Seminar at Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles, on Jan. 24, 2008.
[36] Cover, "Obligation: A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order" in *Narrative, Violence and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, 240.

> both of which can be represented in their normative significance only through the devices of narrative.[37]

Cover is talking about all types of law in this example. He acknowledges the complexity of integrating how we are expected to act with how we do act. He suggests that we use narrative to smooth the way between the two concepts. This suggestion also applies to *mitzvot*, which Cover addresses in depth. He holds the laws of Judaism, and the way of life that comes from it, in the highest esteem. His explanation of *mitzvot* gives Jews the opportunity to view these laws as attractive and beneficial. "Indeed, to be one who acts out of obligation is the closest thing there is to a Jewish definition of completion as a person within the community."[38] Finally, Cover's explanation resonates with the Reform movement's involvement in social justice and provides a compelling case for taking *mitzvot* more seriously.

> It seems to me that the rhetoric of obligation speaks more sharply to me than that of rights. Of course, I believe that every child has a right to decent education and shelter, food and medical care...I do believe and affirm the social contract that grounds those rights. But more to the point, I also believe that I am commanded – that we are obligated – to realize those rights.[39]

In the following pages, the narratives of Jewish professionals will be presented, followed by an analysis of those stories and a guide as to how these stories can be taught to inspire Jews to hold the values of Judaism more closely and integrate them into their lives. Perhaps this process will allow more Jews to identify with a Jewish lifestyle that will provide them, the Jewish community, and the world at large with greater meaning. Or as Borowitz puts it:

> In an age so concerned with the self, so interested in the person behind the façade, religious language without religious autobiography is likely to have limited

[37] Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," *Narrative, Violence and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover,* 101.
[38] Cover, "Obligation," 241.
[39] Ibid, 248.

impact. We need people to break the wall of silence in the Jewish community which quarantines us from hearing about personal belief and we need models of the many ways people can go about building their personal relationship with God despite doubt and trial. A particular burden rests upon the rabbinate. If rabbis are to exercise effective spiritual leadership today, they need from time to time to speak of their Jewish spiritual journey.[40]

[40] Eugene B. Borowitz, *Judaism After Modernity: Papers from a Decade of Fruition* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1999), 49.

Chapter 2
The narrative of modern Reform rabbis

The need to develop the narrative of the modern Reform movement is outlined in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 provides examples of this type of narrative. The stories were collected from rabbis throughout the United States. They shared stories from their lives that exemplify their values and beliefs. Most contributors drew on specific personal experiences that have continued to guide them throughout their lives. Many of their narratives reflect how national and international events have affected them, some from the time they were children. The stories integrate their personal histories from the Depression to the present. The rabbis demonstrate the importance of responding to these events through decisive action.

Da lifnei mi atah omeid – know before whom you stand

When I was a counselor (in 1958) at the Union Institute in Oconomowoc, Wis., the director, Herb Brin *z"l*, said something that has guided me throughout my career: "Be careful of the life you live. It may be the only Torah someone is reading." Whenever I take a Sefer Torah from the Ark before a congregation, I repeat his words to myself. I hope they inspired others – they certainly helped me.

–Rabbi Stephen A. Arnold

Embracing challenge

The two biggest influences in my life are my father and Rabbi Jerome Molino *z"l*, both of whom challenged me intellectually. After I would speak to them, my knees would shake. They were the only two people who ever had this effect on me.

Rabbi Molino was the rabbi at United Jewish Center in Danbury, Conn., for 60 years and he was revered by everyone. When he retired, people lined up around the block to have him sign their prayer books. The first time I encountered Rabbi Molino, I was a teen-ager and I went to his synagogue to hear a lecture. I asked a question, and his response was, "You need to study more." While that might have turned off other people, it challenged me. When I applied to rabbinical school, my goal was to know enough that he would take me seriously. When I was ordained, he asked me what I dreamed about doing as a rabbi. I responded with some idealistic answers. So he told me this story:

A tailor needs an apprentice. He interviews many people and asks each of them what their dream is. He turns away all those who are concerned most about taking care of their families and earning a living. Then, one day the right apprentice appears. The young man tells the tailor that all he can think about is "stitching, stitching, stitching."

Molino taught me that as a rabbi I should think about one thing: teaching, teaching, teaching.

And that's what I have done.

My father also has shaped how I view the world, both through his wisdom and actions. He is extraordinarily generous. One time, he decided to celebrate his birthday at the nursing home where his mother lived. But he didn't make it a private celebration. He brought a sheet cake and hats and invited everyone to celebrate. Everyone thought it was their birthday.

Now, I try to challenge my congregants. For those who are open to it, I try to help them grow. We can only do that by facing our pain and our faults. Instead of burying our pain we can transform it with ritual. After spending seven years trying to have a child, a

congregant had to end those efforts. In a way, she had had an image of a child in her heart and mind for that entire time. She needed to grieve for that loss. I suggested that she light an extra candle on Shabbat and meditate on that child and their relationship.

I also believe in using poetry – not poems but poetic concepts.

One congregant was struggling with her body image after a double mastectomy. I asked her to think of her chest in metaphoric terms – as a sacred altar upon which she sacrificed her breasts in order to live.

The other thing I do with congregants, especially when I am counseling them, is imagine for a moment that I am the person's soul mate. I try to see them through the eyes of someone who deeply loves them. It reminds me that no matter what, each person deserves to be loved and valued. It also helps me understand why people are the way they are. To see that there is a reason for their sour look or their critical manner.

One day, a congregant was waiting to pick up her children from religious school. I knew she was ill with cancer, so I stopped for a moment to talk to her and say a *misheberach*. As we talked, I could see she was suffering intensely. I wondered how else I could help. I asked her if she had dinner for her children. She said no. I went to our kitchen freezer and took out a lasagna, which we prepared on Mitzvah Day for this kind of occasion. As I handed her the lasagna, I could see a little bit of her suffering had lifted.

–Rabbi Zoë Klein

Commitment to community

I grew up in a small synagogue, The Village Temple, in Greenwich Village in New York, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was a nurturing, insular environment, almost like living in a traditional village. My parents were involved in the

synagogue. They believed that was what you did. The possibilities of the things you could do at the synagogue were infinite. My parents founded the congregation's first kindergarten classes. When I was a teen-ager, I decided to direct a play, *The Diary of Anne Frank.* The rabbi, Dennis Mass, said that was fine, all we needed was one adult to be a chaperone. The Village Temple was always a place to shine. I still remember being Mattathias in the Hanukah pageant when I was six.

When I was almost 14, my father died. The congregation helped fill the void in my life. During Confirmation class, we would study at the rabbi's home. He really cared what we thought. I learned that being a rabbi was about relationships. I decided that was what I wanted to be.

Living in Greenwich Village allowed me to learn about people who were different. It was a time of crime and homelessness in New York and I witnessed the incredible disparity between rich and poor. I went with my NFTY group to Washington, D.C., for a demonstration in support of freeing Soviet Jews. I was proud to be there and know that my movement stood for something.[41]

Through NFTY, I also had a chance to go to Israel. My mother and I went to talk to my grandmother about this. It was an expensive trip and money was tight. But it was very important to my family that I go. My grandmother bent down, and reached under her mattress. She took out all the money she had been saving and gave it to me.

[41] NFTY is the acronym for the Reform movement's youth organization in North America – North American Federation of Temple Youth.

I was in Israel for my father's first *yarzheit*. When I said *kaddish*, our rabbinic adviser, Eric Gurvis, put his arm around me. All my friends were standing by me. It felt God's presence. At that moment, I knew I would be OK, despite what I had lost.

–Rabbi Jonah Pesner

One step at a time

It came as such a surprise. Ten years after my father died, 10 years of not setting foot inside a synagogue, I found myself standing at 55th Street and Lexington Avenue in New York late one Friday afternoon. I had walked by Central Synagogue many times, but I had never gone inside. This time was different. It was April 1, 1977, my father's 10th *yarzheit*.

"Why not?" I thought. Even though I'd been raised with only a hint of Judaism in my home (we had a *Seder* but nothing else. We certainly didn't celebrate *Shabbat*), I knew that Judaism had been meaningful to my father. Even though we lit a *Hanukiah* that was practically hidden in a back room, and prominently celebrated Christmas in our living room, my father went to a Conservative *shul* every Saturday morning of my youth. Perhaps now, it was time to look more closely at my father's heritage.

I walked up the synagogue's stairs and went inside.

Someone welcomed me with a smile and handed me a *siddur*. I sat in an empty row, but moments later, a woman about my age sat near me. As the service progressed, she saw that I was somewhat confused, so she inched over and explained a few things. At the end of the service, when I had stumbled through the transliteration of the *kaddish*, I realized why my father had gone to services every Saturday morning. It felt like home.

I decided to create a Jewish home for the first time in my life. I bought *Shabbat* candlesticks and candles. I didn't even know what blessing to say. But after I came home from services, I silently lit the candles. At that moment, *Shabbat* entered my home. It was as though I could literally touch its sanctity.

I continued to attend services and light candles. I learned blessings and attended adult education classes. I traveled to Jerusalem. When I was ready, rabbinic school cried out to me.

It doesn't take much to fill oneself with the beauty of Judaism; all one has to do is take one tiny step, engage in one small act, and the rest will follow.

–Rabbi Connie Golden

Illness as a call of *lech l'cha*

My congregant was dying. She asked me to help her with her struggle. As we talked, I thought about how her experience was like the Torah portion, *Lech L'cha*. How Avram put his complete trust in God. I explained to my congregant that God told Avram to go to a place that He would show him – and Avram went. I suggested that my congregant's experience was similar. She was going through something new. She did not know where she was going, or when. I explained that Avram accepted that he was living in the unknown, but was comforted because he knew God was with him. I suggested that she look at her struggle in the same way. It seemed to give her comfort.

–Rabbi David Novak

The wisdom of humility

Soon after my parents were married, they wanted to join a synagogue. They went to talk to Rabbi Wolli Kaelter, assuming they would join his synagogue, Temple Israel, in Long Beach, Calif. Rabbi Kaelter said he would love to have them as congregants. Then he gave my parents some surprising advice. "This is a big place, and you might easily get lost. There is a small congregation near you that is starting up. If you join, you could get in on the ground floor, get involved, and help build a community."

My parents joined Temple Beth David, which is now in Westminster, Calif., and were active there for years. That was where I met Rabbi Henri Front *z"l* who inspired me to become a rabbi. He was a tireless worker in the field of social justice, and interfaith relations. Moreover, he was a forthright leader. A *mensch* who truly possessed the courage of his convictions. When I close my eyes and imagine what I want my voice to sound like, it is Rabbi Front's voice that I hear.

How many of us would have the *seichel* or the *amatz* to do what Rabbi Kaelter did? He taught me to remember that congregants and congregations are diverse. That we should guide people to find the synagogue that will work for them. Sometimes we view every member that we do not recruit as a failure. How much better it is to remember that we are not in a one size fits all kind of industry. The process is always a far more complex and dynamic phenomenon than we realize.

–Rabbi Anthony Fratello

An "official" Jewish identity

One afternoon, my student cantor and I were sitting with Josh, a bar mitzvah candidate, and Tina, his non-Jewish mother. After the tutoring arrangements were made, I asked Tina to tell me her story. She said she had been living a Jewish life for 20 years, celebrating Shabbat and the holidays. As a child, she became disillusioned with her Catholic faith. She couldn't understand why a person needed an intermediary to communicate with God. We spoke for a while, and I asked her, "Have you thought about making it official?" I said that, rather than, "Have you ever thought about converting?" I realized that in her heart and soul she had already converted, and we just needed to make it official. Tina was sure she had to learn Hebrew to convert, and she had tried but was not able to learn another language at her age. I assured her that while Hebrew would be helpful, not knowing Hebrew would not impede her conversion. After copious tears of joy, we made plans to study together. The *mikveh* and ceremony took place just prior to Josh's bar mitzvah. She lit the candles on Friday night and had an *aliyah*. She said she had been born anew.

I know that my background as an Outreach Director for the URJ (before I went to rabbinical school) helped guide my work with Tina. My experience working with Tina then influenced the way I've worked with another potential *gioret*. This woman has multiple physical and emotional problems, so I realized I could not have the same expectations of her in terms of service attendance and reading that I might have of others. But I know that her desire to be Jewish and to live a Jewish life is so much a part of her that I will take her for conversion before I leave this community in June.

These experiences have helped me expand my view that there are many ways to enter into Judaism. We have to be sensitive to these different ways. If we have a rigid view of the "proper" convert, or see only one way to work with someone, we may be depriving an individual of the joy of belonging to our community, and depriving our communities of people who can contribute so much to them.

–Rabbi Linda Steigman

Seeing the blessings in life

When I was a young rabbi, just starting out in my first congregation, I officiated at a baby naming ceremony. The baby boy's entire family was there, including his great-grandfather, who was well into his 80s and was revered as the family patriarch. He had recently lost his wife and the family was worried about him. They wondered how this once powerful man would manage. But he surprised us all. When the ceremony came to a close we recited the *sheheheyanu.* The clearest, loudest voice of all was that of the family patriarch. In spite of his grief, he, more than anyone else in that room, affirmed the precious gift of life. I learned that in life "*sheheheyanu* moments" don't just happen. Sometimes they are spontaneous – but, really, we *make* them happen. And, in so doing, we affirm life for ourselves and for those around us.

This celebration of life was particularly profound for me since it occurred shortly after I lost my parents and brother in a plane crash. As a rabbi, the baby naming gave me personal perspective. It enabled me to use that perspective to counsel and help others. It also added to my capacity as a rabbi to experience life-cycle ceremonies with congregants and others more richly and deeply.

–Rabbi Shelton Donnell

Generosity with dignity

A number of metropolitan Atlanta synagogues started the High Holy Day season in 1991 by participating in a food-raising drive called Operation Isaiah. Synagogue members would pick up plastic bags as they left Rosh Hashanah services and return on Kol Nidre with bags filled with food. Between 1991 and 1998, the synagogues collected more 200,000 pounds of food, which were donated to the Atlanta Community Food Bank.

Whenever I walked down the aisles of a grocery store selecting the foods to fill my Operation Isaiah bags, I always selected items that I would put on my very own table. I wondered why I did this. Shortly after Yom Kippur in 1995, I found the key to my behavior when I rediscovered a journal I had written in the 1960s. One entry recounted my mother's treatment of our black yardman while I was growing up in the Mississippi Delta in the 1950s. It was a place of complete segregation. The only black people whom I knew personally were the women who worked as domestics in the home of my extended family and the men who mowed the grass, weeded the flower beds and clipped the hedges in our yards. One of these men, Efrem, showed up at our back door in 1954, looking for work. His cheeks were sunken. His clothes were in tatters. He became our regular yardman for at least 15 years. During that time, he knew that if he came by our house at the end of a long, hot workday, my mother, Thelma Leah Davidow, would feed him. One evening as he approached our house, I noticed that he was wearing a pair of chinos that had been mine. His shirt and shoes had come from another house. His mixture of clothing was a sign that he relied on a succession of hand-me-downs from the families whose yards he tended. His was truly a hand-to-mouth existence; he was always on the

level of "survive now" or "perish soon." He was totally dependent on the good will and paternalism of whites.

His travails reminded me of Leviticus 19:13, which says, "The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning." In his commentary on the Torah, Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz comments on this mitzvah, "If the laborer is hired by the day, his wages must be paid to him immediately after the day's work is done. The poor man lives from hand to mouth."

One night, Efrem knocked at our back door. He told my mother that he had worked all day for a neighbor, but despite promising to pay him that day, she didn't. She told him to return the next day for the money. In the meantime, he didn't have a way to buy his supper, so he asked my mother if she could feed him.

Mama fed Efrem that night and many other nights, whether or not he had been denied his wages. Our domestic servant, Lula B. Watson, once told Mama that she was surprised that Mama gave Efrem such good food. Mama replied that she would never give Efrem any food that she herself would not eat.

My mother was living out a Talmudic lesson, "Whatever Rabbi Yochanan bar Nappacha had to eat, he would give the same to his gentile servant."

My journal entry also reminded me of how my mother learned to be so compassionate – it was from her mother, Fannie Schwartz, who I called Mammaw. She performed acts of kindness for countless people, no matter who they were. Once, during the Depression, a vagrant came to her house, asking for food. Mammaw gave it to him willingly. For weeks afterward, men continued to knock on Mammaw's back door, asking for food. She did not mind feeding them, but she was curious about why so many

came straight to her. Eventually, the mystery was solved. She lived near the railroad tracks. As trains passed through town, the vagrants spotted a marker left by the first man, showing where they could go to get a meal.

Mammaw's influence spans three generations. Mammaw taught my mother to be generous and the legacy of generosity lives in my brother. I too am proud to claim a share in that legacy.

–Rabbi Fred V. Davidow

Standing up for your beliefs

When I was in fourth grade, I had a memorable High Holy Day experience that influenced my decision on what kind of rabbi I wanted to be. Busing was a big issue at the time. Our rabbi, Solomon Kleinman, gave a sermon about racial prejudice, racism and the need to support mandatory busing. He said that anyone who didn't support busing was a bigot. Half of the congregation walked out. But I don't think anyone quit. The experience reinforced to me that as rabbis, we should use the Stephen S. Wise model of free pulpit thought.

I think of myself as an activist when it comes to social justice, especially environmental issues. I believe it's important to tie religion to social action, which I do through the way I live. I'm also on a "zillion" boards, including a state Assembly commission on the environment.

As a Hillel rabbi, I also try to help my students deal with the tensions between religious identity and community. I ask them to think about the choices they make – such as choosing to go to a football game rather than High Holy Day services.

–Rabbi Jonathan Klein

In praise of God

It was winter 1975, and we were living in Rye, N.Y. I was director of an organization called the Institute for Jewish Life. My family and I were at LaGuardia Airport, returning from a funeral in Cincinnati. It was a cold January evening with a flurry of snow. I traveled a lot for my job, so the skycaps knew me. As we entered the baggage claim area, one of the men came up and said: "Rabbi Roseman, you take one of the children and get the car. I'll tend to Mrs. Roseman and the other child, and we'll meet you outside with the bags." We got our car, met them at the appointed place and drove off. The kids were antsy and loud; the windows were closed and fogged up with condensation. We just wanted to get through the 45-minute drive, get home, have a little bit to eat and go to sleep.

Just as we were getting into bed, the phone rang. It was our sister-in-law from Cincinnati. "Are you OK?" "What do you mean?" "Turn on the TV. There was a bombing at LaGuardia."

The bomb had exploded near the baggage claim area where we had been. We had left there just a few minutes before. One of the skycaps was killed; another injured.

The next day, we told our young children what had happened. We drove to the hospital in Brooklyn to find the injured skycap, but could not. We explained to our children how lucky we were and how we ought to do a *mitzvah* to express our gratitude to God. We decided to volunteer to conduct services at a home for the aged. We went there every other Shabbat morning. I led the service, with the help of our eight-year-old daughter. Our six-year-old son was the "choir director" – he pressed the buttons on the tape recorder to help us sing *Ein Keloheinu* and *Adon Olam*. After services, we did

something together as a family. We started calling Shabbat "family day." We continued this mitzvah for a year and a half until we moved to Madison, Wis., where I became rabbi of Temple Beth El.

Perhaps the capacity to focus on *mitzvot* and even respond to a potentially traumatic event with *mitzvot* can be learned. My parents, who were social workers, raised me in an environment where *tikkun olam* was simply taken for granted. I also was influenced by my rabbi in Washington, D.C., Balfour Brickner. (In 1964, he was one of the rabbis who was jailed in St. Augustine, Fla., after participating in a civil rights action, see p. 32). As a rabbinical student, I was part of the first group to go to the Reform Action Committee in Washington, D.C., for a week of social action training in the early 1960s. Today, my son and his wife work hard to train their young sons in communal involvement, both by example and directly by getting the kids to perform *mitzvot*. Is it because of what we did in Rye? Undoubtedly, this was one of the influences, but only one.

–Rabbi Kenneth D. Roseman

Opening worlds through dialogue

In 1970, when I was 18, I traveled to Israel on my own. I met a girl. When she broke up with me, I was devastated. I wanted to die, so I made a plan. I decided to go to the Muslim Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem at night. I thought naively that if I walked around with some money in my pockets, I would be killed by an Arab. I ended up near the Damascus Gate. I saw a light on in a shop. Inside, two young Arab men were playing *sheshbesh* (backgammon). I thought, "this is it." But when the men saw me, they weren't violent. Quite the opposite. They invited me in for tea. They wanted to learn

about me and perhaps become my friend. They encouraged me to move into a room in the Muslim Quarter, which I did. I lived under a minaret of a mosque for the summer. That was more than 30 years ago. Saadi, one of those two young men, is still one of my best friends. This experience completely changed me. It taught me to respect people for who they are, not what their stereotype is. I decided to study Arabic and Hebrew and I focused on Mideast studies in college. After I was ordained as a rabbi, I studied for a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic studies.

I have done a lot of work reaching across religious boundaries. In 2006, my family and I lived in Cairo. While I was there, I delivered a paper at one of the universities. It created some controversy, but the most important thing was that I, as a Jew, was able to speak before this group.

My work has allowed me to travel to many Muslim countries and countries in which Muslims are a significant minority. One of these is the Republic of Macedonia. There has been discord between the Muslims and Christians since the 1990s. In 2001, Macedonia's president called a group together to resolve religious differences. He was successful, for a while. But recently, there have been more problems. During one of my visits, I had met a Muslim scholar named Dr. Ismail Bardhi, who was a professor of Islam and the dean of the Muslim seminary there. Unfortunately, some instability in the Muslim community of Macedonia encouraged a number of militants to dominate and intimidate the community. This group considered Dr. Bardhi to be too liberal and therefore dangerous. He had participated in a number of international conferences, including the "Millennium Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders" at the United Nations in 2000. This group forced him out of his position as dean through threats

and eventually violence (he was beaten and gunshots were fired into his office). I was able to obtain funding to bring Dr. Bardhi to teach at Hebrew Union College and the University of Southern California this year. The arrangement ends this summer, and we are looking into what will happen next, both in Macedonia and the U.S.

I was inspired in my efforts to help Dr. Bardhi by the example of Hebrew Union College in the 1930s as Hitler rose to power. Many of the college's founders came from Germany, and a number of parents and grandparents of the Board of Governors had emigrated from Germany. Some faculty members also received their doctorates there, including Julian Morgenstern, who was the college's first American-born president. The college brought five German rabbinical students to the Cincinnati campus in 1935, underwriting their expenses. Beginning in 1938, the college also brought over at least eight Jewish scholars from Germany. One of the last to come was Abraham Joshua Heschel.[42]

–Dr. Reuven Firestone

A Letter from St. Augustine

In 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at the national conference of Reform rabbis. He asked them to join him in a civil rights protest in St. Augustine, Fla. Sixteen rabbis and a lay leader responded to the call. Some were leaders of the movement, such as Eugene Borowitz. Others were newly ordained. All 17 were arrested – either for praying in an integrated group in front of a restaurant or for sitting at the same table as blacks. At the jail, the rabbis discussed their motives for joining the protest. They decided

[42] Michael A. Meyer, *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: A Centennial History, 1875-1975* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1976), 123-126.

to share their thoughts in a letter to the Reform rabbinic union that had collected money to help pay for the trip south. In the letter, they explained that they could not refuse King's call.

"We could not pass by the opportunity to achieve a moral goal by moral means."

They said they could not ask others to act unless they too acted.

"We came because we could not stand silently by our brother's blood."

They said they came because they thought of all those who had been silent during the Holocaust.

"We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man's capacity to act."

They said they learned more than they could have imagined.

It "turned an abstract social issue into something personal and immediate."

We "have learned more about ourselves and our God. In obeying Him, we become ourselves; in following His will we fulfill ourselves. He has guided, sustained and strengthened us in a way we could not manage on our own."

"Each of us has in this experience become a little more the person, a bit more the rabbi he always hoped to be (but has not yet been able to become)."[43]

–Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz

Doing the right thing

When I started rabbinical school, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum. A friend from Harvard urged me to get involved. Not long afterward, I, along with many of my classmates, participated in a national boycott of the Woolworth's

[43] This piece is adapted from Eugene B. Borowitz's recollection in his book, *Studies in the Meaning of Judaism* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 89-93.

dime store. We picketed the store in downtown Cincinnati to protest its whites-only lunch counter policy.

In 1963, my student pulpit was in Jasper, Ala., a suburb of Birmingham. I made a conscious effort to learn about the lives of blacks in the South. I befriended a black bellboy at the hotel where I stayed. We visited his neighborhood. Everyone was very poor and lived in shacks. The area was very different from that of my congregants, who lived in elegant homes. The bellboy introduced me to the black principal of a training school in the area. I visited him whenever I was in town. After President John F. Kennedy was killed, I helped the synagogue's youth group plan a memorial to the president. Someone suggested we invite the principal to speak, which we did. A few weeks later, the synagogue president called me to say that the date for the event wouldn't work. He had called the principal and subtly let the principal know he never would be welcome. I realized how naïve I was for expecting anything else. It also became clear that the Jewish community was terrified, though I wasn't sure of what.

By then, I was committed to working for social justice, wherever I was. Only a few weeks after I was ordained, I responded to Dr. King's call that Reform rabbis join him in St. Augustine (p. 32). We stayed with black families. The only time we were scared was when we walked down the street and saw a white face.

By 1968, I was working at UCLA Hillel. The civil rights movement affected my work again, but in a different way. The Black Power movement decided to oust its white supporters, telling them to create their own revolution. The Jewish students didn't know what to do, so they came to Hillel. The students decided to study Judaism to find direction. We started with experimental courses. The students were particularly affected

by Jewish philosophy. Eventually, more Jewish studies classes were added to the school curriculum and a Jewish newspaper, *Ha 'am,* was started. Jewish students viewed study as an act of protest against the establishment. At one point (after the shootings at Kent State University) the Jewish students boycotted all their courses except for the Jewish studies classes.

My students had a huge impact on me as well. One student, Zev Yaroslavsky, who now is a Los Angeles County supervisor, was deeply involved in the movement to save Soviet Jewry. I couldn't understand why. Naively, I asked why the Jews weren't leading protests in the Soviet Union. Zev explained why that was impossible for them and I reversed my position. In 1986, I finally traveled to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Jews were protesting in their own way. Behind closed curtains, they held Purim parties and celebrated other Jewish rituals.

–Rabbi Richard Levy

A lifelong path of action

We therefore bestow our blessing upon you. May you be the sunshine of your parents and a healing balm to the people of Israel and to all mankind, a good American and a good Jew, and a servant to the God of Israel.

--from a letter to Rabbi Leonard Beerman from his grandparents, Jacob and Rose Grossman, on the occasion of his *brit milah* on April 16, 1921.

Rabbi Leonard Beerman became a leading Reform rabbi, particularly in the area of social justice. But the path there was not direct. It required inspiration, commitment, and community support.

As a child, I didn't have a strong formal religious education. My parents celebrated Shabbat on Friday night and eventually organized High Holy Day services among the small towns in Michigan, where we lived. But our town didn't have a synagogue and my parents could teach me only so much. When I was 15 (it was legal to drive at that age), I drove once a week to a synagogue in Flint, Mich., to attend confirmation classes. Getting there wasn't easy – I was so short that I had to prop myself up on pillows so I could see over the steering wheel.

This was all during the Depression. I witnessed injustice in the form of poverty. My father's business was crumbling. A major factory in town closed, and men were out of work. I'd see them standing on street corners, trying to keep warm. Families were being cut down by forces over which they had no control. I was convinced there had to be a more equitable way for people to live.

When it was time for me to go to college, we moved to State College, Pa. My parents figured out that if they took in boarders, there would be enough money for me to go to school. I attended Penn State. I had so many credits after two years of school, that I decided to take a break. I returned to Michigan and got a job in a factory that was making machine guns to build up America's military supplies in case the U.S. entered World War II. This is where I first directly encountered antisemitism. I was friends with some of my co-workers. One day we were discussing religion. I said I was Jewish. One of the guys said, "If I knew you were Jewish, I would have never had anything to do with you." Then the three men walked out. We never spoke again. Instead, I spent my time at the public library, devouring the two shelves of books they had about Judaism.

After Pearl Harbor, I decided to return to college. I also started to think about going to rabbinical school. After spending a year in the Marines, I entered Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1943. The students associated with each other based on their interests. I focused on social justice. One of the things my group did was try to desegregate the local coffee shops. As in college, I decided I needed to take a break from my studies and do something different. In 1947, my wife and I went to Jerusalem, where I studied at Hebrew University.

After the War of Independence started in 1948, the road to Hebrew University was closed, and we briefly joined the Haganah. Eventually, we returned to Cincinnati. I was ordained in the spring of 1949. I could have worked at some well-established congregations, but I decided to take a job at a young congregation, Leo Baeck. When I came to Los Angeles, I encountered new kinds of social justice problems. Fears about communism were rising and that affected some of my congregants, who were writers in Hollywood. I never thought of myself as courageous, but I got involved in trying to get clemency for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (who had been convicted on treason charges). That was a controversial thing to do.

I continued to stand up for causes that were sometimes unpopular. The Vietnam War catapulted me into action. I spoke out against the war and started a group, Clergy and Laity Against War, with an Episcopal minister, the Rev. George Regas. In 1972, we met with delegates to the Paris peace talks. We spoke throughout Europe, trying to get countries to convince the U.S. to get out of the war. We urged the Germans not to remain silent – to protest. Ironically, they told us they didn't have a right to judge others because

of the crimes committed in the Holocaust. I believe the biggest crime you can commit, is the crime of silence.

I've wrestled with some of the decisions I've made and whether or not to act. I've considered the repercussions. I've been lucky because my relationship with my congregation was relatively tranquil. I think that was because we had a basic sense of trust in each other. People could disagree but still be respectful. My parents taught me that a person's public and private persona should be basically the same.

–Rabbi Leonard Beerman

These stories provide guidance in how to live as a modern Reform Jew. They demonstrate how Judaism influenced and supported the lives of these rabbis and the people who know them. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of these narratives, highlighting the values inherent in each story. Chapter 4 then discusses ways the stories can be used by Reform Jews to develop their own narratives, as well as identify what values are most important to them. The methodology for collecting these stories is discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3
The meaning of personal narrative

The stories in Chapter 2 reflect the journey of Jews in the mid- to late 20th century who became rabbis and continue to serve the Jewish people in the 21st century. The stories incorporate the lessons Judaism has taught since its creation. They also demonstrate the ways Jews, particularly in the American Reform movement, have used that knowledge to respond to society's immense religious and political challenges. As we prepare to complete the first decade of the 21st century, it is clear that the need to draw upon Jewish wisdom is even greater.

We face these challenges from a viewpoint in which we, as Jews, have many choices in the way we live. "In the 21st century, we will function on multiple levels of consciousness" as technology increasingly affects the way we communicate and relate to others, according to Dr. David Ellenson, president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.[44] While Jews have "infinite options" in choosing the direction of their lives, they also are free to "opt out" of traditional religious obligations. However, Ellenson notes that the world is becoming increasingly impersonal, which heightens an individual's need for community. Judaism can provide that sense of community, particularly by helping Jews navigate their way through the complexity of modernity. "We need to learn how to meaningfully combine tradition and modernity in order to forge a Jewish identity in the midst of unprecedented freedom," Ellenson said.

As was established in Chapter 1, narrative is one way of demonstrating to Jews that there is a way to incorporate Jewish practice into their increasingly secularized lives.

[44] Comments made by Dr. David Ellenson during the Rabbi Alfred Wolf Memorial Lecture, "American Judaism: The Great Opportunity," presented at Wilshire Boulevard Temple on Feb. 6, 2008.

The stories in Chapter 2 are examples of how the learned understand the teachings of the Bible and *mitzvot,* how particular *mitzvot* have affected their lives, and how they express their belief in God.

As many of the rabbis in Chapter 2 indicate, they were influenced directly in their beliefs and actions both by their understanding of Biblical law and narrative as well as examples from their teachers and families. One of the underlying themes in many of these stories is the call to action, no matter what the situation. It is worthwhile to remember some of the rabbis in the 20th century who served as indirect influences in demonstrating this. Two of the most commanding stories of the modern era, though not widely know in the U.S., are those of two German rabbis who confronted the onslaught of the Holocaust in exceptional ways.

Leo Baeck was a German Liberal rabbi who was chosen in 1933 to head the national council that represented all of German Jewry. That position became increasingly difficult as the power of the Nazis grew. Historian Michael A. Meyer describes Baeck as standing up to Nazi authorities in a way that "utterly contradicted the antisemitic stereotype of the cowering Jew."[45] Meyer explains that Baeck's Judaism was based on the prophetic tradition, which meant that a Jew could never compromise with evil. Furthermore, Baeck believed that obedience to God "precludes obedience to any secular authority that contravenes God's will."[46] As such, Baeck dedicated himself to protecting the Jewish community as best as he could, especially by helping as many people as possible emigrate. He personally refused to leave, remaining committed to helping the Jews of Germany. In 1943, Baeck was deported to Theresienstadt. He continued to teach

[45] Michael A. Meyer, "The Moral Legacy of Leo Baeck," a lecture delivered at the meeting of the Association for Progressive Judaism on Nov. 13, 2005, at Congregation Emanu-El, New York, 2.
[46] Meyer, 4.

when he could, and helped the camp's inmates remember who they were by engaging in study despite their circumstances. After the war, once all the Jews had been released from the camp, Baeck moved to London.

Meyer explains that Baeck's work is extremely relevant to liberal Jews because of the rabbi's commitment to sanctifying God through moral action. Meyer points out that today "we lack the sense of an absolute that forces us to reject moral compromise." He explains that Baeck had the unique ability to be responsible to a higher will while tolerating the views of others.[47]

Liberal German Rabbi Joachim Prinz also refused to be compromised by the Nazis. He engaged in spiritual resistance by refusing to remain silent. In Berlin in the 1930s, he encouraged Jews to immigrate to Palestine. When that became more difficult, he delivered sermons urging Jews to take pride in themselves, and as Baeck did, refuse to succumb to the stereotypes Nazis had of Jews. Prinz decided to leave Germany for the U.S. in 1937. When he arrived, he fought to alert America, particularly the nation's Jews, to the dangers of Hitler. He also decried the treatment of blacks in the U.S.[48] As president of the American Jewish Congress, he was invited in 1963 to speak at the March on Washington, just prior to Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech.[49] Prinz's words were strong, calling upon his experience in Germany.

> When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

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[47] Meyer, 11-12.
[48] Michael A. Meyer, ed., *Joachim Prinz, Rebellious Rabbi: An Autobiography—The German and Early American Years* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), xx-xxxii.
[49] Meyer, *Joachim Prinz*, xxxv.

> A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder.
> America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act...not for the sake of the black community but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.[50]

The narrative of Rabbi Beerman, the most senior rabbi interviewed, can best be linked to the *mitzvah* of *lo ta'amod al dam rayecha,* which translates as "do not stand by the blood of your fellow" (Leviticus 19:16).[51] The Sifra and later rabbis took this to mean "that one ought not to stand by inactively when one's neighbor's life is in danger."[52] As Beerman discusses, he has held that *mitzvah* dear throughout his rabbinate, participating in broad-based protests against the Vietnam War and the proliferation of nuclear arms. Beerman also honored the precept from *gemilut hasadim* of *hashkamat beit hamidrash shacharit v'ar'vit* (rising early for study, morning and evening) not only through his formal studies, which all of the rabbis interviewed here have done, but through his informal studies.[53] As a young adult, he gained life experience while working at the arms factory in Michigan. When his friends turned against him, he turned to an intense study of Judaism.

Dr. Reuven Firestone expanded on the advice not to remain silent by being involved in dialogue, particularly with Muslims. In his narrative, he explains how his stereotypical view of Muslims was proven wrong and how he integrated that new information into his life. Firestone's narrative is best classified under the tenets of *gemilut*

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[50] Meyer, 261.
[51] Baruch A. Levine (commentator), *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 129.
[52] Levine, 129.
[53] The source for this precept, which is part of *gemilut hasadim*, is Joshua 1:8, which states: Let not this Book of Teaching cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all this is written in it. *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and The New JPS Translation—Second Edition.* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 457.

hasadim – specifically *havaat shalom bein adam lachaveiro* (bringing about peace between one person and another).[54]

Another aspect of Firestone's work is his belief in looking at events, including history, as "half full" – always having a sense of hope that difficult situations will improve. He believes we are obligated to help in that process. This is in contrast to operating out of fear – focusing on the negative things that have happened to the Jewish people and basing judgments about the future on that. Firestone says that the Reform movement has been influential in teaching Jews to "grab a trajectory of hope" – using tradition and a modern sensibility to try to solve the problems of humanity.

The story of the rabbis who went to St. Augustine, Fla., also exemplifies *havaat shalom bein adam lachaveiro.* As the rabbis said in their letter, they were compelled to join in the civil rights protests. In the letter, they also invoke the *mitzvah* of *lo ta'amod al dam rayecha.* One of the youngest participants, Richard Levy, continued to be guided by these *mitzvot.* In his rabbinate, he chose to act, and lead others to do the same.

Rabbi Jonathan Klein's rabbinate focuses on the *mitzvah* of *bal tashchit* – do not destroy – elements of the environment, which is derived from an injunction in Deuteronomy 20:19 against destroying, in times of war, useful materials, including trees and buildings.[55] However, the rabbis extended the meaning of the verse to apply to peaceful times as well, barring any "act of unprincipled waste or destruction of things

[54] Birnbaum, 16.
[55] Jeffrey H. Tigay (commentator), *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 190.

that can be of benefit to man. Reckless demolition is an effrontery against God, since everything is His creation."[56]

Rabbi Zoë Klein's narrative follows the dictum of *talmud Torah* (the study of Torah), which is part of *gemilut hasadim*. Deuteronomy 6:7 teaches, "And you shall teach them (God's commandments) diligently to your children." This verse reminds us that, according to the rabbis, "no human endeavor deserves greater respect than *talmud Torah* – the study of the Torah in its widest sense."[57] Klein focuses on teaching others how they can draw strength from Judaism. Part of the *mitzvah* of teaching is the ability to learn. In *Visions of Holiness*, Levy points out that Maimonides spoke of the beneficial aspect of study for both the teacher and student. "Student and teacher are indispensable to each other, each one sharpening the other, 'as a small branch may set fire to a small tree.'"[58] This is a valuable lesson for students to consider as well when they are concerned that they may not be worthy of their teacher.

Rabbi Linda Steigman's story about the conversions of two congregants carries a similar theme of teacher and student educating each other. The *mitzvah* of Steigman's narrative is *ahavat hager* (loving the proselyte).[59] The verse from Deuteronomy 10:19 reminds us to love the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt.[60] By giving the two women, the *giorot toshavot* (women living with Jewish values) the opportunity to formally convert, Steigman helped them take the final step in embracing their religion and fully joining their community.

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[56] Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot: The Commandments and Their Rationale.* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2000), 444.
[57] Chill, 374.
[58] Levy, 58.
[59] Berlin, 271-272.
[60] Tigay, 108.

Rabbi Fred V. Davidow's narrative focuses on the imperative of *hachnasat orchim*, which is part of *gemilut hasadim*. His mother and grandmother generously helped people who were shunned by others. Davidow's family also drew on the wisdom of the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* (charity), which often involves donations of money or "goods, food, or any other needs...even...words of comfort."[61] In the Davidows' case, they provided sustenance, and treated those in need with dignity.

In Rabbi Jonah Pesner's narrative, *gemilut chasadim* is reciprocal. Pesner's parents were actively involved in their synagogue. After Pesner's father died, the community did its best to help him. Today, as founding director of the URJ's Just Congregations program, Pesner helps Reform Jewish communities around the country engage in the kabbalistic concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) through social justice.[62]

Rabbi Kenneth D. Roseman and his family also engaged in *gemilut chasadim* after avoiding a tragedy. They thanked God by providing Shabbat services at a home for the aged, which also incorporates the *mitzvah* of *shimrat Shabbat* (guarding Shabbat) from Deuteronomy 5:12.[63] The Roseman family made it possible for the home's residents to celebrate Shabbat, which they apparently did not usually have an opportunity to do. Performing this *mitzvah* served as a hands-on model for the Roseman children, who helped carry out the *mitzvah* and feel a sense of holiness by helping others.

In her narrative, Rabbi Connie Golden explains how performing the *mitzvah* of *kibud av va'aym* (honoring father and mother) from Exodus 20:12 led her to the *mitzvah*

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[61] *Sefer haHinnuch: The Book of (Mitzvah) Education, vol. 4.* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1988), 473-474.
[62] URJ's Just Congregations website: http://urj.org/justcongregations/vision.
[63] Tigay, 68.

of *shimrat Shabbat.* On the night of her father's 10th *yarzheit,* which was Shabbat, she was drawn into a synagogue. Through that experience she celebrated Shabbat for the first time as an adult. Being open to her tradition for those few hours, brought Golden to *talmud Torah,* which eventually included attending rabbinical school.

Rabbi Shelton Donnell's poignant story is an example of the *mitzvah* of *ahavat hashem* (love of God) in Deuteronomy 6:5. The Jewish Publication Society commentary on the commandment notes that "love of God in Deuteronomy is not only an emotional attachment to Him, but something that expresses itself in action."[64] Donnell's narrative celebrates the blessings in life in the face of tragedy and the strength we can derive from our love of God.

Rabbi Stephen A. Arnold's narrative provides another perspective on the mitzvah of *ahavat hashem.* His story reminds us that we all serve God. As part of that service, we must remember that we all are representatives of God here on Earth and we should act accordingly, remaining humble and dignified.

Rabbi Anthony Fratello's story about Rabbi Wolli Kaelter also highlights the quality of *anavah* or humility.[65] Rather than viewing his own synagogue as so great that it was the only option for Fratello's parents, Kaelter took pride in the abundance of options in Southern California and directed the couple to a synagogue that would best meet their needs. In the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 20b), two rabbis debate what the greatest virtue is. One says that it is piety, but the other says that it is humility.[66] Judaism also connects the concept of humility to that of holiness. In Exodus 3:5-6, Moses encounters God and God

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[64] Tigay, 77.
[65] Eugene B. Borowitz and Frances Weinman Schwartz, *The Jewish Moral Virtues* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 137
[66] Borowitz, *The Jewish Moral Virtues*, 137.

tells him to take off his sandals and hide his face. The JPS commentary on Exodus explains that in the ancient Near East, taking off footwear is a sign of respect and "displayed an attitude of humility."[67] It should be noted that Kaelter was one of the rabbinical students HUC brought to the U.S. from Germany in the 1930s, (p. 32). In a prayer he wrote for his ordination, Kaelter said: "Grant us depth that we might understand, vision that we might see, and let us never become self-satisfied."[68]

Rabbi David Novak's story of his conversation with a dying congregant allows us to understand the precept of *bikkur holim* (visiting the sick), which is part of *gemilut hasadim,* in a new way. Visiting the sick can involve the act of listening – helping to heal the souls, and possibly the bodies, of the sick by allowing them to share their fears. Novak acknowledged his congregant's fears and provided an empowering link to one of the great stories of the Bible, Avram's ability to trust God and follow God's words of *lech l'cha*. That connection gave the congregant an opportunity to view her struggle as an extremely significant one and provided a model from which she could take comfort.

These narratives are designed to elicit new interest in Judaism from those Jews who are less involved in their religion and do not see its relevance to their lives. While the Jewish precepts discussed here are based on ancient text, their lessons continue to guide us in living in a modern world. We face many of the same challenges as were encountered thousands of years ago. Jewish teachings are valuable in particular because they have helped sustain our people through its many difficulties.

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[67] Tigay, 15.
[68] Eulogy presented by Rabbi Lee Bycel at funeral for Rabbi Walli Kaelter at Temple Israel, Long Beach, CA, on Jan. 10, 2008.

Chapter 4
Practical ways to engage adult learners through narrative

The emphasis of this study has been on providing a new method for the Reform movement to use narrative to help adults find a path to better incorporate Judaism into their lives. The stories presented in Chapter 2 and analyzed in Chapter 3 are examples of the type of modern narrative that would allow these adults to relate more easily to the values and goals of Judaism in the modern world. The next step in this process provides a way for teachers of all kinds, from rabbis to educators, to help these adults personalize their relationship with Judaism.

The narratives presented here can be used in a variety of ways. Rabbis can weave them into sermons or other teachings. Rather, the focus should be on the lessons of the stories. As was discussed earlier (p. 5), the optimum learning environment for adults is one that is supportive. They will not be embarrassed by their lack of knowledge. The narrative of Rabbi Golden (p. 21) could be used to demonstrate an adult's ability to transform his or her level of knowledge about Judaism, from knowing little to becoming a rabbi. Golden started by celebrating Shabbat and learning blessings – the mitzvah of *talmud Torah.*

It is important for learners to know that there are a variety of ways to engage in *talmud Torah* whether it is listening to a sermon, taking a class or participating in a Jewish book group. Students can sanctify the process further by reciting the prayer before study – *laasok b'divrei Torah.*

The narratives in this paper also can be used in a more formal setting, such as a class. Adults can begin their studies by examining the *mitzvah* of *talmud Torah* in more detail. They can define what it means to them as Jews, what they expect from study and

what they want to learn. Once they have reflected on this *mitzvah*, they can develop their own narrative about study. This process also is useful for the teachers. Schuster suggests that educators can best understand the needs of their students by learning how they have developed this new thirst for Jewish knowledge.[69] Discussions of *talmud Torah* can segue into a map drawing exercise. Schuster designed the exercise to inform teachers about their students and provide initial insight for learners. The exercise allows the students to develop their personal narrative by reflecting on their "growth and development as Jews," as well as identifying what started them on this new step in their Jewish journey.

The activity takes approximately 15 minutes and asks the adults to jot down notes about key experiences in their lives, which they then place on a pre-printed map (see Exhibit A) or draw freehand. They then code the map, noting an "A" at the point where they became an adult; a "JA" for the point when they became a Jewish adult; "JC"s for the places where they had significant (positive or negative) interactions with the Jewish community, and "JL"s for positive or negative experiences with Jewish learning. [70] In addition to these notations, the students can indicate what values were represented in those experiences or what values they wish had been present. The students hang the maps on a wall so the group can learn about the "life stories" of all members. Through the sharing of stories, this part of the exercise has the additional benefit of helping the group members begin to form a community.

The teachers and students can move forward by formulating questions about what they have observed from the maps – including what values they may want to focus on in future studies. They also can explore different *mitzvot* and *middot* in a number of other

[69] Schuster, 21.
[70] Ibid, 16.

ways. One option is begin with a study of the *mitzvot* in the prayer *Eilu D'varim*. The students can pair up in *chevrutot* and randomly pick a value or select one that is of particular interest to them. They can discuss their initial thoughts concerning the value. Once they have accomplished this, they will receive a written description of the *mitzvah*. Clear, concise descriptions are available in the *Teaching Mitzvot* book by Barbara Binder Kadden and Bruce Kadden,[71] and in *Teaching Jewish Virtues* by Susan Freeman.[72] The students can return to their *chevrutot* and integrate their initial opinions with what they have learned. They then can determine whether the *mitzvah* is important to them. If so, they can discuss how they might bring it into their lives. They also can discuss why the value is something they do not want to adopt. The students then will share their thoughts as a group. Through this process, the students have a chance to internalize the value and learn about other values.

Adult learners can use the stories contained in this thesis to explore additional *mitzvot,* as well as understand the various ways Jews find value in their religion. Students can take one of the narratives, identify *mitzvot* or other values through the same process as they used with the initial list of *mitzvot.* In addition, the students can read through the stories in *chevrutot* and determine which narratives are most meaningful to them. Teachers also can present stories from a variety of other resources that contain personal narratives. The list of additional resources appears at the end of this chapter.

Another exercise to help adults relate to Jewish wisdom through personal narrative is through the use of Biblical text. A list summarizing eight to 10 Biblical

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[71] Barbara Binder Kadden and Bruce Kadden, *Teaching Mitzvot: Concepts, Values, and Activities* (Denver: A.R.E. Publishing Inc., 2003).
[72] Susan Freeman, *Teaching Jewish Virtues: Sacred Sources and Arts Activities* (Denver: A.R.E. Publishing Inc., 1999).

stories would be distributed. The teacher would select ones that would be of the most interest to the students. The learners would select a story that relates to a challenging personal experience. Students having trouble with their children getting along could use one of the many stories of siblings, such as Jacob's sons, Issac and Esau, or Cain and Abel. People struggling to get along with their own siblings also could use these scenarios. The Ruth story may provide insights for a daughter challenged by her relationship with a parent or in-law. This could allow the daughter to see both the allegiance Ruth showed to Naomi, and the difficulties Ruth encountered because of her devotion to Naomi.

The adult learners can use the Biblical setting in one of the following ways:

1) Rewrite the Bible story using details from their own lives to gain a new perspective on their personal situation. They could create different outcomes as well as imagine new ways to approach their problems.

2) Analyze the problems, solutions and values contained in the Biblical story.

3) Write a modern tale using elements of their personal story and the Biblical story.

These exercises are designed for a class setting, primarily since the student already has dedicated that time to this kind of work. However, since the assignment may be deeply personal, adults may wish to do it at home. This work can be supplemented through the use of a journal, where students can record additional thoughts and insights about their process of study.

After participating in these exercises during a number of sessions, the students will need to identify the next steps they want to take on their journey. There are a variety

of paths they can take. They may want to add *mitzvot* in their lives, attend prayer services more regularly, enter into more study, participate in social action or social justice projects, or repair relationships – a personal path to *tikkun olam.* One way to make a more solid commitment to those plans is through the creation of a *Talmud Torah Testimonial.* This testimonial would be organized along the same lines as an ethical will. The difference would be in the objective. Rather than leaving a set of values to pass on to family or friends, the testimonial would signify an adult's personal commitment to increasing his or her involvement in Judaism. The student would create a specific outline for future involvement. The student also would be assigned a mentor who would advise the adult on ways to achieve the goals set out in the testimonial and provide counsel when necessary. Depending on a synagogue's resources, the mentors could be teachers of the class (who may include knowledgeable congregants), the rabbi or other staff members. After a number of students have taken the class, they also could serve as mentors and/or teachers. The mentors would be able to advise students about future study, answer questions about Judaism, discuss God or help students with rituals or prayer. The adult learners also could support each other by creating a *havurah* or other communal group to engage in future efforts – from study to celebrating holidays to planning a joint project in an area of interest. The initial study process described above should serve as a beginning of the adults' journey. Its value is in creating ongoing efforts. It also should be noted that the teaching aspect of this process is valuable. Borowitz describes the beauty of teaching in reference to religious school, but teachers of adults can achieve the same benefits. "Anyone who has had the experience of the sensitive moment in the classroom, who has

helped children come close to the truth and relevance of Judaism, has in the moment of their affirmation been renewed himself."[73]

The methods for using the narratives presented here are suggestions. Teachers can design other applications as well. What is important is the need to find ways to make Judaism more accessible to those who are marginally involved in their religion. The goal as David Ellenson has stated, is to help the uninvolved forge a Jewish identity in an increasingly impersonal and challenging world.

Additional resources for Jewish narratives

Brenner, Michael, *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

> This book includes personal narratives of German Jews who chose to return to Germany after World War II. In addition to reading the stories of these Jews, adults can gain insight into a Jewish response that is relatively unknown in the U.S.

Hoffman, Lawrence A. and Arnold J. Wolf, *Jewish Spiritual Journeys: 30 Essays Written to Honor the Occasion of the 70th Birthday of Eugene B. Borowitz.* West Orange, NJ: Behrman House Inc., 1997.

> This book contains the narratives of 30 rabbis and Jewish leaders. The book is not widely available, but can be found in HUC libraries and other locations.

"Focus: Character" in *Reform Judaism* magazine. New York: Union for Reform Judaism, Spring 2006. www.reformjudaismmag.org.

> This issue contains articles by leaders of the Reform movement, including Eric Yoffie and David Ellenson, that discuss lessons of life and values. The magazine often features stories by Reform Jews about their values.

Rabbis and scholars often provide personal narratives in the introduction to their books or compendiums of essays, such as in the following two books.

Borowitz, Eugene B., "A Life of Jewish Learning: In Search of a Theology of Judaism" in *Studies in the Meaning of Judaism.* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002.

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[73] Borowitz, *Studies in the Meaning of Judaism*, 29.

Ellenson, David, *After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity.* Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004.

Chapter 5
Methodology

The material for Chapter 2 was collected through direct interviews, either in person or on the phone, and through requests made through the internet. The subjects of personal interviews were obtained through recommendations, requests, personal relationships and availability of subjects. Stories were solicited through the HUC alumni listserv, whose subscribers are rabbis, educators and communal professionals. A request also was made through the CCAR newsletter, whose subscribers are all rabbis. It is distributed in print and appears on the CCAR website. The information for the rabbinic narratives has not been published previously except for the stories about HUC's rescue of the German rabbinical students and Dr. Ismail Bardhi, the "Letter from St. Augustine," and some of Rabbi Richard Levy's reflections.

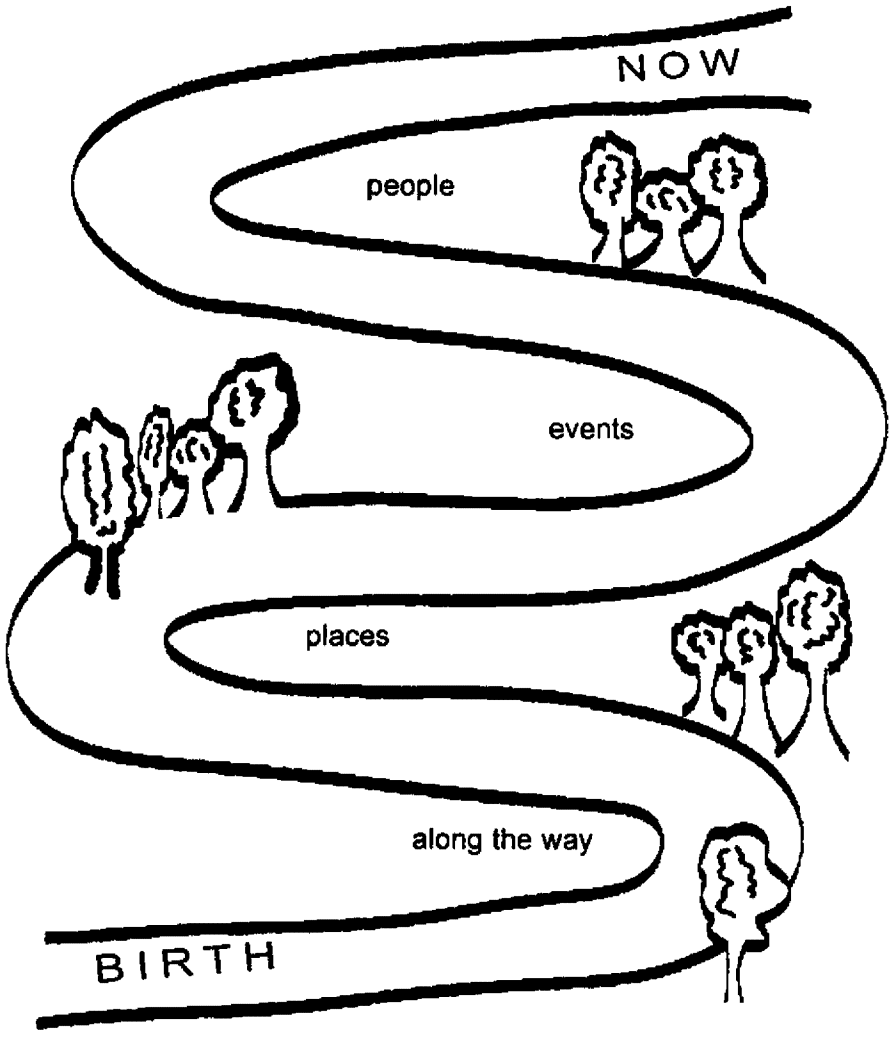
The written solicitations requested stories that would illustrate and inspire people in their practice of Jewish values. The request suggested that contributors share a story about a time when they saw something new that inspired them, or their congregants, to deepen the practice of Judaism or understand a value or practice in a more meaningful way. While stories were requested from a variety of Jewish professionals, only rabbis responded to the solicitation.

The rabbis personally interviewed for this thesis were asked the same type of question. The interviews were documented through note-taking. The stories then were composed by the author of this thesis. Clarifications were requested from the contributors as needed.

The narratives were analyzed in relation to the *mitzvot* and Biblical teachings that each contributor focused on. In that way, students of this form of Reform narrative can understand in more depth how these teachings are used in the modern world. In addition, the students will be better equipped to both apply the teachings to their lives and to seek out teachings that can be meaningful to them.

Exhibit A

Jewish Journey Map*



* From *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice* by Diane Tickton Schuster.

INTERVIEWS

Rabbi Stephen A. Arnold is based in South Easton, Mass.

Rabbi Leonard Beerman is founding rabbi of Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles.*

Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz was ordained at Hebrew Union College and is the Sigmund L. Falk Distinguished Professor of Education and Jewish Religious Thought at HUC in New York.

Rabbi Fred V. Davidow is a chaplain at Glendale Uptown Road in Philadelphia.

Rabbi Shelton Donnell is rabbi emeritus of Temple Beth Sholom in Santa Ana, Calif. He lives in Jerusalem and is rabbinic advisor to the Fourth Year Rabbinic and Cantorial Program at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem.

Dr. Reuven Firestone was ordained at Hebrew Union College and is professor of Medieval Jewish and Islamic Studies at HUC in Los Angeles.*

Rabbi Anthony Fratello is the rabbi of Temple Shaarei Shalom in Boynton Beach, Fla.

Rabbi Connie Golden is based in Philadelphia.

Rabbi Jonathan Klein is rabbinic director of USC Hillel in Los Angeles.*

Rabbi Zoë Klein is senior rabbi of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles.*

Rabbi Richard Levy is director of the School of Rabbinic Studies at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles.*

Rabbi David Novak is rabbi of Israel Congregation of Manchester in Manchester Center, Vt.

Rabbi Jonah Pesner is founding director of the URJ initiative, Just Congregations, and is based in Boston.

Rabbi Kenneth D. Roseman is rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Rabbi Linda K. Steigman is rabbi of Temple B'nai B'rith in Kingston, Pa.

* Indicates interviews done in person. All others were submitted via email.

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