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Wednesday the Rabbi Sat Still: Retreats offer spiritual boost



Institute for Jewish Spirituality

Canadian Rabbi Shumel Birnham contemplates during an Institute for Jewish Spirituality retreat for Jewish clergy in Southern California.

By **Sue Fishkoff**

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SIMI VALLEY, Calif. (JTA) -- Three dozen rabbis and cantors are sitting in silent meditation in a sun-filled room at the Brandeis-Bardin Campus at American Jewish University in this southern California town.

They open their eyes and Rabbi Sheila Weinberg guides them in a mindfulness exercise.

"Feel how much space there is in your body, how much aliveness," she urges.

Later the clergy share deeply personal feelings about challenges they confront on the job.

One rabbi describes how vulnerable she feels when she wants to introduce a new melody to her worship service. Sometimes, the rabbi admits, she avoids doing so out of fear the congregation will protest.

Another rabbi says that when he comforts a grieving congregant he sometimes cries. He wonders if, as a professional, he should mask his emotion.

The others in the room nod sympathetically.

"If your heart is stirred, your heart is stirred," Weinberg says.

These clergy members -- many of them top rabbis and cantors in the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal world -- are spending five days at a contemplative practice retreat organized by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

Since January 2000, the New York-based institute has run retreats for hundreds of rabbis, cantors and Jewish educators, bringing them together in cross-denominational cohorts that meet for four five-day sessions over an 18-month period.

This particular group is part of more than 200 alumni of earlier retreats. They again have taken five days away from their pulpits to meditate, do yoga, share their feelings about their work and study Chasidic texts on spirituality.

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They come not to learn how to be better at their jobs -- although that's certainly part of it -- but to recharge their spiritual batteries, renew their souls.

"What we're trying to do, on one level, is renew rabbis, cantors and educators whose jobs just drain them," says Rabbi Rachel Cowan, the institute's director and one of the founders of the spiritual retreat program. "It gives them rest and companionship. They're really quite lonely."

In the process, Cowan says, retreat participants report back that they are better at their jobs.

"Rabbis need to be genuinely present in people's lives at times of pain and joy, not coming in with a formula," she says. "What blocks them from doing that is overwork and emotional burnout."

Jews expect a lot from their clergy. They must be towers of spiritual and moral strength, compelling speakers, skilled administrators and creative innovators. They must be learned in Torah, kind to children, willing to leap tall boards of directors in a single bound.

Above all, they must have no personal needs.

"To a certain extent, congregations are still looking for that superhuman rabbi," says Rabbi Levi Moreofsky, the director of rabbinic programming at Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future in New York. "There's still the assumption that the rabbi knows everything, can do everything."

That all-powerful image increasingly is coming under attack as rabbis, cantors, seminaries and other Jewish organizations begin to realize that clergy, too, need a place to renew their spirits. But it's difficult to get past the stereotype.

"Burnout, job fatigue -- clergy are totally subject to all of that," says Rabbi Marc Margolius, who coordinates the Institute for Jewish Spirituality's alumni retreats. "But it doesn't seem to register as a professional need."

In recent years, however, rabbinical seminaries and some Jewish organizations have started to address the issue. They mainly run leadership training courses for rabbis and, to a lesser extent, cantors. The courses are aimed at improving job skills, although some



attention is given to meditation, one-on-one mentoring or discussion groups where clergy can air their grievances within the fold, far from the prying eyes of their congregations.

"It's a relatively recent development," says Rabbi Hayim Herring, the executive director of STAR/Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal. "For a long time, congregations took it for granted. What needs does a rabbi have? He's there for our needs."

As part of its PEER program, STAR brings up to 20 younger rabbis a year to leadership development retreats that have a strong focus on self-care. Rabbis are notorious for neglecting their own health, Herring says, and the those who attend these retreats must "publicly commit" to an ongoing program of exercise, yoga or the like.

Several have "changed their lives" because of the program, he says. One who pledged to run three times a week later called Herring to say he'd actually lowered his cholesterol.

The Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary has been running Rabbinic Training Institutes for 23 years. Each year the seminary brings 60 rabbis to a remote location for a week of professional and personal growth.

Rabbi Marc Wolf, who runs the program, says evenings are devoted to discussions of personal and spiritual needs in small groups, with conversation catalyzed either by text study or more experiential methods. Last year Rabbi Alan Lew, the author of "One God Clapping," led the group in meditation and a discussion on anger.

"Rabbis suffer from compassion fatigue," Wolf says. "They use the same faculties in their professional lives as in their personal life. This gives them a time to unplug from their congregational lives, to recharge their spiritual batteries and reconnect with colleagues."

Two years ago the Center for the Jewish Future took over a Yarchei Kallah program developed in Boston by Rabbi Jacob Schachter. Forty Orthodox rabbis under the age of 40 are invited to join a cohort that meets twice a year for two years and then once a year thereafter for two-day retreats focused on teaching, learning and bonding.

"The rabbinate is very lonely," Moreofsky says. "They come together to share Torah and what they're going through -- what they enjoy in their work, what they see as a

challenge.”

Rabbi Asher Lopatin of Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel in Chicago says he “very much” enjoyed “the safe space and collegiality” he experienced at the kallah.

“The Orthodox world is waking up to this,” Lopatin says, adding that he and his younger colleagues are more willing to show their human side than their elders were.

“The stiff upper lip is the old rabbinic attitude,” he says.

Retreats focused solely on spiritual renewal for rabbis, like those run by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, are much rarer. And the rabbis and cantors who have been involved say it changed their lives and their congregations.

Rabbi Laura Geller of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills joined the institute's first cohort eight years ago after six years at her large Reform congregation.

“When you're a rabbi, especially in a large congregation, it's very easy to dry up without noticing,” she says. “This has given me the ability to take care of my own soul. It allowed me to see my relationship with God and prayer as a central part of who I am, as a Jew, a rabbi and a teacher.”

At the retreats Geller learned how to be silent -- something not always easy for rabbis. Geller began to slow down and listen instead of relying on her facility with words to master a situation. She took risks, such as spending a week at a silent retreat in northern California and then talking to her congregation about it.

As she changed, Geller brought change to the synagogue. Worship services now incorporate more silence, and she has introduced new music and meditation.

That personal transformation is central to the institute's philosophy, says Jonathan Slater, the co-director of programs for the institute.

“It is about waking up the heart and connecting with the divine,” he says.

That's why virtually all the texts studied come from the Jewish mystical tradition, which focuses on that connection.

According to an institute survey, 75 percent of the rabbis in the first two cohorts say they now have a closer relationship to God.

Rabbi Stephan Parnes, a Conservative rabbi at Temple Beth El in Lancaster, Pa., who joined the second cohort, says the approach to text study he encountered at the retreats forced him to go beyond the strictly intellectual course he had learned at rabbinical school.

The seminary approach focused on text fluency and learning the commentaries. Here it was something deeper, more emotional.

"I found myself speaking differently to my congregation," Parnes says. "Instead of telling them Rashi says this or that, I began talking about their lives and how the patterns present in the text can become a living reality for them. People come up to me and say something you said really made a difference for me."

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