



February 7, 2024

Dear beloved colleagues:

I look forward to being with many of you virtually this coming Sunday at the RRA's annual business meeting and in person in March at the RRA Convention in Atlanta.

I feel certain that, whatever your political commitments, whatever your relationship to Israel, these last four months have been agonizing and heart-rending. I do not think it is possible to write an introductory statement beyond those words that would encapsulate the searing pain we all feel across our political and ideological diversity. For this reason, I am going to dive right into substance.

Last December, James and Elyse encouraged me to share information about RRC's educational commitments around Israel. I have waited until close to our annual meeting so that I could incorporate insights and clarifications from RRC's most recent faculty in-service, held on January 24 – 25 and significantly dedicated to discussion of Israel in our curriculum, and from our most recent all-school immersive retreat, held on January 29 – 30, which was entirely focused on Israel and Palestine.

The mention of an immersive retreat will likely spark for many of you how much RRC's curriculum has evolved since most of us were in rabbinical school. An RRC education is still grounded in an understanding of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization, still prioritizes practical rabbinics alongside academic and spiritual learning and still has a significant residency requirement. And over the last 15 years, the faculty has revised the curriculum twice and has also incorporated many learnings out of the Covid-era, when we were almost entirely online for two years. Here are certain key features of RRC's curriculum:

RRC's curriculum is now competency-based. [Here](#) is an overall list of what the faculty, with significant input from RRA members and congregational leaders, has determined are competencies necessary for the 21st century. The overarching competencies are:

- be a vessel of Torah;
- demonstrate personal and spiritual grounding for effective and ethical Jewish leadership;
- demonstrate the professional skills and knowledge for effective and ethical Jewish leadership; and
- be a helpful and healing presence.



If you click through the above hyperlink, you can see that there are additional competencies under each over-arching competency. All competencies can be acquired through our program and students are expected to show significant capability, if not complete mastery, and students may demonstrate proficiency in multiple ways. In addition to being more measurable, competencies make it easier for students with advanced standing (e.g., other graduate coursework, significant work experience) to move through the program more quickly.

Field education, practical rabbinics and supervision are even more central. RRC's residency requirement is now for the first three years of the program (distinct from *Mekhinah*). The curriculum for these first three years prioritizes academic learning (including the breadth of the civilizational curriculum) and field readiness. In the last two years of the program, advanced students can be based at any location to pursue advanced internships (15 – 30 hours/week). They continue their coursework online, receive both onsite and RRC-based supervision, and come together with the rest of the RRC community at the beginning of each semester for an immersive school-wide retreat.

Clinical pastoral education is now a requirement. RRC provides stipends for students completing CPE either during the summer or during the academic year.

The merger that yielded Reconstructing Judaism created many new opportunities for RRC students, including greater exposure to Reconstructionist rabbis. These opportunities range from internships to deeper and more effective counsel from congregations to greater exposure to Reconstructionist rabbis. Students interact with Elyse in her role as RRA executive and Isaac Saposnik, '08, in his at Havaya Summer Programs as well as the several Reconstructionist rabbis on the faculty (Melissa Heller, '08; Rayna Grossman, '17; Alex Weissman, '17; Linda Holtzman, '79; Alan LaPayover, '02; Sarra Lev, '96). Other Reconstructionist rabbis work on the movement side, including Amber Powers, '02; Maurice Harris, '03; Micah Weiss, '18; Sandra Lawson, '18; Jacob Staub, '77; Lily Solochek, '20; Ash Sofman, '23; and myself, '99. Many Reconstructionist rabbis teach as adjuncts, serve as spiritual directors and provide supervision for students in their field placements. The merger also formalized rabbinic participation in governance. As enshrined in Reconstructing Judaism's bylaws, there are at least four rabbinic governors on our board of governors. Currently, they are Avi Winokur, '91; David Kominsky, '04; Isabel de Koninck, '10 ; and Lina Zerbarini, '97. The RRA president is a voting member of the board and its Executive Committee, and the RRA executive an ex officio non-voting board member.

RRC's Israel education is significantly different. We now have a required minimum program of a summer term in Israel that is offered through [Bina](#), which is supremely mission-aligned, and we provide financial support for students who choose to stay longer. Out of consideration of the remaking of the higher education landscape after the Great Recession of 2008 and the [crippling student loan debt](#) that a majority of our current students carry, the Israel program is included in RRC tuition and we also provide every student with a living stipend for their required summer in Israel. The program combines classroom, experiential and service learning

to help students better understand the role of the land and state of Israel in the Jewish civilizational project, especially in the modern and contemporary periods. It addresses the history of the contemporary state of Israel and focuses on fostering an understanding of the diversity of Israeli experiences and perspectives, including the experiences of Palestinians within Israel and the occupied territories. Students are expected to complete the Israel summer term program before entering year 4 of the program.

All courses and learning experiences at RRC are created so that they help students to attain proficiency in the program's competencies. Our Israel education endeavors to cultivate the following competencies:

- Articulate the perspective of Judaism as a dynamic religious civilization.
- Demonstrate familiarity with the diversity of contemporary Jewish communities including an awareness of how group dynamics, power, privilege, and authority affect the experience of various Jewish populations both in the mainstream and on the margins.
- Articulate a personal, authentic spiritual/theological, professional and political vision.

The faculty has also articulated educational objectives that we believe will fulfill the major competencies of a Reconstructionist rabbinical education:

- Demonstrate familiarity with Israel's place in the history of Jewish civilizations and knowledge of the complexities of Israel and Israeli society.
- Demonstrate familiarity with practical resources based in Israel for use in the Reconstructionist rabbinate.
- Articulate how Israel impacts upon their personal and spiritual/theological vision.
- Demonstrate the ability to lead difficult and emotionally charged discussions about Israel and Palestine.

At the faculty in-service on January 24 – 25, the RRC faculty unanimously re-affirmed our understanding that RRC is the seminary of the Reconstructionist movement; that RRC's curriculum always has been and continues to be shaped by Reconstructionist ideology and commitments; and that when we articulate rabbinic competencies, we are doing so because we believe that mastery of these competencies is necessary to become effective and responsible Reconstructionist rabbis. We recommitted to these competencies and objectives around RRC's Israel education and continued our work expanding how, in addition to courses like Modern Civ, Israel Civ and Contemporary Jewish Landscape, we can bolster students' learning about Israel in North America, especially before the fourth year of the program. This work is being led by Rabbi Bill Plevan, visiting assistant professor of contemporary Jewish thought and Israel coordinator.



The all-school immersive last week dedicated to Israel and Palestine was extraordinary in the quality of attention and participation. RRC students learned deeply from our colleagues. On the first day, there was a very rich panel on RRC's place within the larger Reconstructionist movement that featured Rabbi Maurice Harris in his role as Israel Affairs Specialist at Reconstructing Judaism; Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, magnificently representing the RRA; and Gabrielle Ariella Kaplan-Mayer, MAJS '01, Reconstructing Judaism's director of virtual content and programs, who holds primary responsibility for Ritualwell. They all spoke about how they and the program areas/organizations/initiatives they are responsible for have been affected since October 7. Among other things, Maurice spoke about how much of the membership of the Reconstructionist movement is oriented to J Street, the range of [resources](#) Reconstructing Judaism offers and the consultations and programs he has done with more than 30 Reconstructionist affiliates and on behalf of the movement. Elyse reflected powerfully on how the RRA works hard to stay together in covenantal community across political differences. Gabrielle shared how [Ritualwell](#) has posted dozens of prayers, poems and rituals and has sponsored a community gathering called "Holding Each Other" every Thursday since October 12 that has drawn hundreds of people. The second day featured an extraordinary panel of rabbis in diverse settings sharing the same reflections. Rabbis Elliott Tepperman, '02 (Bnai Keshet in Montclair, NJ), Isabel de Koninck, '10 (Drexel Hillel in Philadelphia) and Michelle Stern, '11 (CJE Senior Life in Chicago) spoke with eloquence and wisdom.

Over the course of the two days, students chose from workshops featuring other Reconstructionist rabbis not on the regular faculty, including:

- "Definitions of Antisemitism" with Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, '85
- "Trauma Informed Pastoral Care around Israel and Palestine" with Rabbi Julie Greenberg, '89
- "Giving Divrei Torah about Israel and Palestine" with Rabbi Toba Spitzer, '97
- "Race and Israel Discourse in the American Jewish Community" with Rabbi Sandra Lawson.

On the second day, I gave a well-received plenary talk on RRC as the seminary of the Reconstructionist movement. I stated clearly that rabbinical students need not be ideological Reconstructionists when they start or graduate from RRC and that the individuals who teach at, staff, govern and champion RRC do not presume ideological conformity. All these champions believe it is essential to train rabbis from a Reconstructionist perspective. We believe in the transformative role that rabbis can play in the lives of individuals and communities. We believe that a Reconstructionist approach to rabbinical education cultivates depth and complexity that is necessary and vitalizing for this moment. We believe that the intersection between bet midrash and professional training and field work, grounded in a civilizational perspective, will create rabbis who are self-reflective and effective leaders. I emphasized that the board of Reconstructing Judaism and most of the major supporters of RRC are ideological Reconstructionists and that the stance of the Reconstructionist movement since the time of

Mordecai Kaplan to this day is that **Israel has a right to exist and is a vital center for Jewish life and the Jewish people**. For most Reconstructionists, this translates into:

- An insistence that Israel has a right to exist
- Feeling a sense of Jewish peoplehood or kinship with Israelis
- Opposition to the Occupation and belief in Palestinian self-determination
- Acknowledgment and advancement of dual narratives
- Investment in coexistence and civil society
- Strong prioritization of Israel's democratic commitments alongside and in some instances over Israel's Jewish commitments

We embrace the diversity of the Jewish people, who hold a wide range of identities, are shaped by different histories and experiences, and develop different ideological perspectives. I asserted that the board and faculty are firmly and proudly united around having no litmus test around Israel, and that we are equally united on the fundamental Reconstructionist commitment of **building covenantal community together across our differences**. We aim to train rabbis who can lead with love, compassion and the capacity to center relationships so they will be able to have the greatest possible leadership impact depending on the contexts and settings within which they find or located themselves. I shared that the faculty had reaffirmed our commitment to Israel education along the lines competencies and objectives outlined above and stated that, however students demonstrate proficiency, it must be shaped and demonstrated through experience, knowledge and relationships. I also affirmed that, even as the movement's commitment to Israel's right to exist has institutional implications for RRC, we are equally committed to academic freedom, so there is no mandate that this commitment be adopted by every individual associated with the College or the movement.

This orientation carries over to the work of RRC's Admissions Committee. They continue their longstanding focus on assessing candidates in regard to their characters, inclinations toward service, orientations toward the Reconstructionist movement and their capacity to build covenantal community across difference. They take seriously that they are charged with discerning whether prospective students meet the faculty's criteria for "fitness for the rabbinate" and that there is alignment in the middot and values that will shape their participation in community, when they are students and when they join our ranks as Reconstructionist rabbis. In addition to this general orientation, which pervades the entire interview, the Admissions Committee includes questions that directly address Israel and Palestine and diversity of opinions, focusing on being in community across difference, both as a community member and as a rabbi; express discussion of the required summer term at Bina; and alignment of shared values with the Reconstructionist movement, including framing that RRC is located with the movement and that Reconstructing Judaism is a founding member of the Progressive Israel Network.



**RECONSTRUCTIONIST
RABBINICAL COLLEGE**

Deeply rooted. Boldly relevant.

As I mentioned above, the faculty continues to revisit and refine how we bring our Israel education to life. Bina is an outstanding partner and the nine students who attended the program last summer found it rewarding and growthful. (We plan to ordinarily run the program every other year to create maximum critical mass and the next cohort is scheduled for summer 2025.) Our major work right now is to deepen the education and experience the students receive while in the States.

I offer my thanks to James and Elyse for this invitation to provide update on RRC's Israel education and to you if you have read this far.

With deep appreciation for the commitment and passion of each and every Reconstructionist rabbi—

Deborah