

The Jewish Week, September 25, 2009

New JTS Focus on Pastoral Care



Rabbi Mychal Springer: New JTS pastoral care initiative “will deepen our engagement” with Union Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College.

by Stewart Ain
Staff Writer

In meeting with Conservative rabbis from across the country who were ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, its chancellor, Arnold Eisen, found the “overwhelming majority” had been inadequately trained in pastoral care.

At the same time, Eisen said, the rabbis said it was the “most rewarding part of their jobs — dealing with people at times of stress, end of life and serious illness.”

“Rabbinical students who got this training said it was the most meaningful part of their education,” he said.

Now, armed with a \$500,000 grant from the Charles H. Revson Foundation, Eisen said the seminary will expand this training program, “institutionalize it and make JTS ... the center for clinical pastoral education in the city of New York.”

“Rabbis from all denominations who are already in the field will be able to get further training together,” he said. “When doctors and nurses in the New York area are looking for the address to turn to find out what the Jewish attitude is on care for the terminally ill, JTS will be the principle address to which they would turn. We will also have public programs, faculty seminars, programs in hospitals and elsewhere. This is a major investment by us and by Revson.”

The Revson grant is just one of several the seminary received for the current academic year — despite budget woes that saw the seminary’s budget slashed 18 percent over

the prior year.

The Center for Pastoral Care is to be headed by Rabbi Mychal Springer, who has taught in this field before. But Rabbi Springer said the revised program will offer clinical pastoral education accredited by the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education. The new center has been accredited as an ACPE satellite of New York Presbyterian Hospital, and it will be open to clergy of all faiths.

“We have had a longstanding relationship with the Union Theological Seminary and students have cross registered,” she said. “But this will deepen our engagement with Union and [the Reform movement’s] Hebrew Union College.”

The Revson funding — which will be spread out over four years — will lead to the creation of four separate programs focusing on the training of ordained clergy.

Each summer, seminarians of all faiths — Christian, Muslim and Jewish — will be invited to participate in a summer pastoral program. The first of those programs was held this summer for seven seminarians.

“We placed each of them in social service agencies and their pastoral supervision was very intense,” Rabbi Springer said.

“Some people may believe the chaplain pushes people towards faith, but the chaplain makes space available for people to wrestle with what role faith has in their lives when they feel abandoned. A part of our tradition is that we cry out when we are suffering. The psalms articulate that — ‘how can you turn your face from me?’ It’s one of our most ancient questions.”

Julie Sandorf, president of the Revson Foundation, noted that when Eisen approached her foundation for assistance, Rabbi Springer was already working on establishing the center.

“Our grant provided the resources to jump start it in a way that allows it to be a full-fledged center from the get-go,” she said. “And it pushes the issue among scholars and physicians. It’s not just science but a combination of heart and soul and science.”

Asked whether it would be difficult teaching pastoral care to clergy of all faiths because of their different beliefs, Rabbi Springer replied: “There are different resources we draw upon, but one of the things that excited me is that I recognized that the most profound multi-faith, cross-faith conversation is through pastoral education. We all need to address the suffering of people who are facing tragedies in their lives, who ask what does life mean and how is God helpful to me in my life?”

“All clergy of all faiths grapple with those questions,” Rabbi Springer continued, “and there is a feeling of commonality in what we have to address. ... When we talk of core beliefs, we discover that the dialogue is rich because we are all people faced with the human condition. And the message is in many ways the same.”

Sandorf said the new center is a perfect fit for the foundation, which has a “long history in Jewish life and culture and in supporting the seminary, biomedical research, and improving the health and welfare of Jews and non-Jews.”

She already knew Rabbi Springer, her work on issues of pastoral care and of her efforts to formulate such a program at JTS.

“Her ideas are living examples of opening the doors of the seminary to actual practice in the field,” she said. “The second compelling reason is the health care debate, which has brought this to a nadir. The question of end-of-life care is front and center in the national debate — issues of life and death, critical care and what makes for quality of life — for a good end of life.”

“What Eisen and Springer are attempting to do is create the Jewish address for grappling with an issue that is critical to the national policy debate and a critical issue of our time,” Sandorf added. “Jews who are not necessarily observant come to think of spiritual issues when they think of life and death and trauma.

“It’s amazing what happens when you deal with trauma — you start speaking about those questions. And the center would, on a clinical and scholarly level, provide support for dealing with the ultimate ethical and moral quandary of our time. It affects everyone.”

Pastoral training is just one of three grants that Eisen said “signal a new direction” for the seminary.

“Just as we don’t want to graduate clergy in the 21st century who are not familiar with the needs of pastoral care, so we don’t want to graduate clergy who are not conversant with the arts,” he said. “It’s a way of human expression, a matter of spirit, and for many of us art is a spiritual pursuit. Judaism has always had a strong tradition in the arts.”

Last spring, the seminary hired its first artist-in-residence, Tobi Kahn. He has been meeting with a group of students, faculty and staff and together they have examined recent works of Jewish art and created Jewish ritual objects.

Now a grant from the David Berg Foundation will support a fellowship next spring in the seminary’s master’s program in Jewish art and visual culture. A first of its kind in the United States, the master’s program is designed to provide students with the knowledge and expertise to place Jewish art in the perspective of both Jewish studies and world art history.

The other new arts program is made possible by a grant from the Tikvah Fund and is designed to “make sure that scholars of Western civilization and scholars of the history of Judaism talk to one another,” Eisen said.

“You find a lot of Jewish scholars of world civilization, particularly Western civilization, who don’t know very much about Jewish thought, Jewish text, Jewish tradition, Jewish literature,” he added. “So we’re going to have a program that brings a select group of Tikvah scholars to study Jewish philosophy and the history of Jewish thought.”

Eisen said the study would provide “integration between the Jewish and the general” using, for instance, the works of Maimonides as well as the Talmud, the Bible and Jewish literature.

“You want this kind of thing to be cross fertilizing,” he said. “This is Judaism speaking to the world and the world speaking to Judaism. If I were not chancellor and I were back in my old days as a professor, this would be the single most exciting thing I could do.”

In the future, Eisen said he would like to see the seminary add programs for rabbinical students in management skills, fundraising, budgeting and working with boards.

“We do this now in continuing education, but they should know about this before they leave,” he said.