

# MID LIFE RABBIS

An increasing number of 40-somethings are flocking to the pulpit. Is Judaism better off for it?

**I**N AN ERA OF FLUID CAREERS AND CONSTANT self-reinvention, there are few people rounding 40 who have not taken stock of their careers—even secure, lucrative, and prestigious careers—and asked: “Is this what I want to do for the rest of my life?” And at a time when millions of Americans across the religious spectrum are engaged in spiritual search, perhaps it should come as no surprise that each year, an increasing number of middle-aged Jewish men and women—many of whom are parents with children at home—enter rabbinical and cantorial schools for five rigorous, gruel-

ing years of pulpit preparation. But it’s a trend to which Jewish leaders are just beginning to awaken.

They come from all walks of life: physicists, psychotherapists, symphony conductors, songwriters; teachers, lawyers, and homemakers. One, a pork trader, says he locked his office door each day at noon and studied Torah until 4:30 p.m. Another, just out of seminary, who had worked in public relations and as an air traffic controller, journeyed from halfhearted childhood Protestantism

ELLEN  
JAFFE - GILL



Rabbi Shoshanna Wiener (left), president of the Academy of Jewish Religion, did not begin her studies until she was 40.

to skeptical Catholicism before becoming a Jew. One of his classmates, an ex-convict who is recovering from drug and alcohol abuse, is now the spiritual leader of a congregation geared toward recovering substance abusers. Like their younger counterparts, they are passionate about Judaism and dedicated to learning. Unlike their classmates who matriculate at the seminary right out of college, however, their paths have been neither straight nor clearly marked.

The straight path—from college to seminary—was once the rule, and to a large extent, it's still the norm. But the unthinking expectation that rabbinical or cantorial school is something to be undertaken in one's 20s has fallen away in recent decades. Years of learning, earning, loving, and struggling with loss are increasingly seen as assets—and there are more pulpits to be filled than there are young rabbis and cantors to fill them. Prosperity permits midlife retooling toward a religious vocation that may offer a smaller paycheck than other professions, but has a greater possibility for satisfaction and contentment. For all of these reasons and more, Jewish men and women 15, 20, and even 30 or more years out of college, pack up each year and strike out for class, seeking to fan a spiritual flame that other work can't fuel.

“There are days I think  
I was totally nuts to do this,  
and days I think it's a gift.”

—RABBI SERENA FUJITA, 54, ORDAINED MAY 2000,  
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THE STORIES ARE ALL DIFFERENT, YET TIED together with a thread of often astonishing personal commitment. Many have made herculean efforts and placed heavy demands on their families. But despite their obvious drive and commitment, when “grown-ups” first began turning up in the seminaries, the schools were sometimes less than supportive.

Rabbi Helene Ferris, the first “older woman” (then 38) to matriculate at the rabbinical school of the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), left a husband in New York in 1976 and packed up her children, then 12, 9, and 7, to begin the required first year of study in Israel. “I cried the whole way over,” Ferris said. “I was very happy until I got on the plane

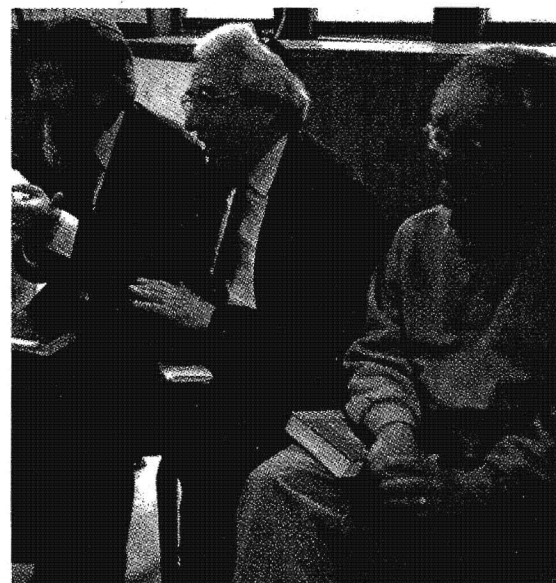
and the plane took off. Then I realized, ‘What the hell am I doing?’”

Once Ferris and her kids got to Jerusalem, she couldn't find a place for them to live: “[The college] wouldn't vouch for me, wouldn't co-sign a lease, because they thought I was a rich, bored, Scarsdale matron who would probably flunk out.” Five years later, ordination accomplished, she won HUC's homiletics (preaching) competition and had the satisfaction of hearing HUC's then president, Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk, tell her: “You have taught the school more than the school taught you.”

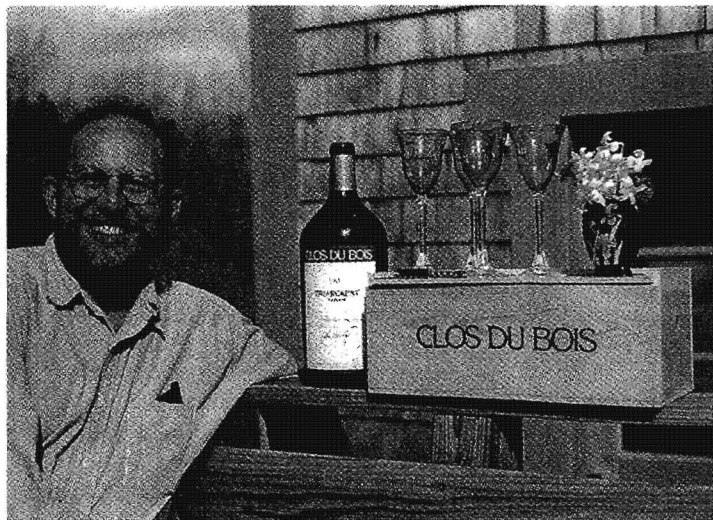
The dislocations tolerated by these determined older rabbinical students can stretch credibility. A *New York Times* reporter, after interviewing Avis Miller—then a 38-year-old rabbinical student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia—called her to say: “There must be a problem with my notes. I've written that you have five kids, you live in Washington, you go to school in Philadelphia, and you have a pulpit in South Bend [Indiana]. This can't be right.” But it was, and today Miller, who was ordained in 1986, is associate rabbi at Adas Israel, Washington, DC's largest Conservative synagogue.

Ferris and Miller were pioneers for others of their age and sex. But middle-aged men, too, were oddities in rabbinical and cantorial school until relatively recently. In 1960, the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) told Leon Kahane, a 38-year-old Holocaust survivor and Toronto religious school principal, that he was too old to begin rabbinical school—no congregation would hire him. Two years later, he was admitted to HUC and spent the next five years

Not your typical students: rabbinical and cantorial schools are joining the second and third career trend that other professional schools have been experiencing.



ELLEN JAFFE-GILL



**Andrew Hechtman** felt unfulfilled at his winery. He began studying for the rabbinate at age 45.

JTS (Conservative) and centrist Orthodox's Yeshiva University—have cantorial programs as well. In addition, two programs with greater flexibility are the ALEPH rabbinic program, affiliated with the Jewish Renewal movement, and the small, nondenominational Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR) with a well-established program in New York and a new branch in Los Angeles. Most seminary programs run five years, though some schools add a preparatory year for students who need it, and the Reform, Conservative, and

Reconstructionist institutions require candidates to spend one year in Jerusalem, primarily to improve their Hebrew.

commuting between Toronto and New York. After his ordination, he relocated to Los Angeles, became an associate rabbi in a large suburban synagogue and later landed a solo pulpit in a beach community. Now in his late 70s, Kahane continues to lead a congregation and conduct weekly services.

Helga Newmark also faced admission barriers when she approached HUC's rabbinical school at age 55, in 1987. Newmark was hoping that her years of experience as a Hebrew school teacher and principal would overrule the fact that she had never gone to college. HUC discouraged her from applying, but that didn't stop Newmark, who went elsewhere to earn a bachelor's degree in administration and a master's of social work. She was finally admitted to HUC's rabbinical school in 1992. In May, Newmark became the first woman survivor of the Holocaust to be ordained.

The negative attitudes that Newmark and others have encountered are not new. Study for the rabbinate became the province of the young in the 19th century, when seminaries offering *s'micha* (ordination) began replacing what had been largely a system of private study. "Rabbinical training schools took their lead from secular training programs" in terms of admitting young pupils, said Conservative Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, dean of the University of Judaism's Ziegler School of Rabbinical Studies. "You wouldn't take someone to medical school unless he could, over a number of years, repay the investment of the school. So rabbinical schools thought of themselves as Jewish law schools, medical schools, whatever, and followed that model." Now rabbinical and cantorial schools are joining the second-career trend that other professional schools have been experiencing.

The Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements all have seminaries training rabbis, and the three largest schools—HUC (Reform),

All these programs admit older students—and are doing so in growing numbers. About 20 percent of the students in HUC's programs are over 40, up from 10 percent a decade ago. At JTS, the ranks of older students in the rabbinical school have gone from a scattered few to an average of about 15 percent today, according to the school's dean, Rabbi Alan Kensky.

Older students predominate at AJR, which has no Israel requirement and schedules classes to meet just three days a week, and in the ALEPH program, which has evolved from a program of private ordination to a more structured course of mentored independent

*continued on page 87*



**Rabbi Helene Ferris** was the first "older" woman to matriculate at Hebrew Union College. She was 38.



## Midlife Rabbis *continued from page 75*

study (but which still permits students to do most of their training in their home cities). In addition, Reform and Conservative cantorial soloists in these programs can become certified as cantors by meeting rigorous entrance requirements, studying under the guidance of mentors, and passing the same final exams as seminary students. Cantor Alane Katzew, who administers the Reform organization's certification program, estimates that 90 percent of its applicants are over 40.

For people who don't live near New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, or Cincinnati (where HUC has its flagship campus), matriculating at a major-movement seminary may require relocating. (Only rabbinic and cantorial students who demonstrate complete facility with Hebrew are exempted from Israel requirements.)

Difficulties can be financial as well as geographic. For students not subsidized by grants or a salaried spouse, attending seminary means depleting savings and running up debt at a time when they would otherwise be socking away money in retirement accounts. The current annual tuition at seminary ranges from \$7,250 a year at the University of Judaism to \$12,630 at JTS, with most schools charging between \$8,500 and \$9,000 a year. Many rabbinic and cantorial candidates hold down student pulpits, teaching assignments, or paid internships that help meet expenses.

Michael Lotker, 52, a third-year student at HUC's Los Angeles campus whose three kids have left home, said, "I've really collapsed my lifestyle and gone from homeowner to student. It's kind of ironic: I saved money for all of my children's college educations, but now I'm borrowing." David Kaiman, 45, in his third year at JTS, is married to a social worker; one of their sons is a college student. "It's expensive to have a father and son in college at the same time," he said. "When we go out to buy books, we go out to buy books!"

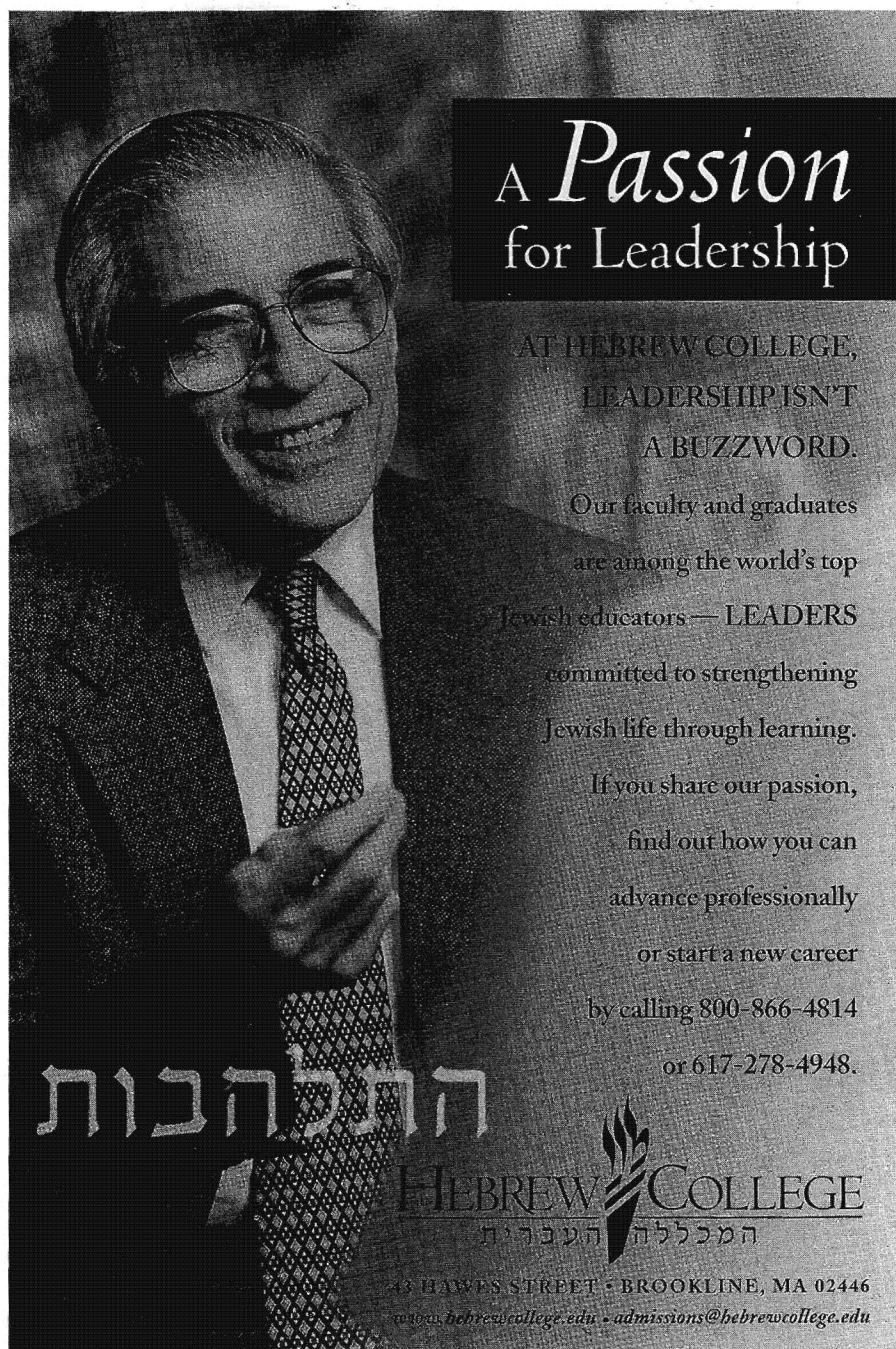
Financial stress is an expected problem for many older students, but less-predictable difficulties occur once inside the doors of the seminary. The mature adult frequently feels that he or she has been stuffed into a one-size-fits-all experience geared to students in their 20s. Over and above help with loans, housing, and child care, some older students want to see their course requirements adjusted individually—for example, giving an experienced teacher a pass on a course in educational theory in favor of more Hebrew or text study.

Emphatically, these men and women don't want to be treated like kids. "The school's philosophy is that you're a precious vessel, but we're not just vessels; we have our own thoughts and emotions and experiences," said one rabbinical student. And another student said: "Because you know the meaning of life out there, some of the myths of academia are hard to swallow at this stage of life, because you know better what you're going to be able to use outside and what you're not. There's a boot camp mode at work; the faculty assumes they need to break you down so

they can mold and form [you]. We're a fuller package, and we need to be taught and responded to in a different way than a 20-year-old."

But while older students make demands on the seminaries, no one running a rabbinical or cantorial program thinks school would be better off without mid-life clergy students. Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, president of HUC rabbinical school, calls older candidates "a major new source [of Jewish professional leadership] that no one really has paid much attention to."

"There is a less volatile quality to their being; they can handle challenges just a little



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better without going crazy right away," Zimmerman added. "I've seen a number of cases where younger students have felt calmed, nurtured, and cared for by the older students."

For their part, second-career adults appreciate their own richer life perspective when studying Jewish texts. Alan Lew, 56, a 1988 JTS graduate and rabbi of Congregation Beth Shalom in San Francisco, spent ten years immersed in Buddhism beginning in his late 20s, drawn by its discipline and full-time spiritual commitment. His journey away from Judaism and back, described in his book *One God Clapping—The Spiritual Path of a Zen Rabbi* (New York: Kodansha America, 1999), began with parents who were intensely cultural Jews but intensely nonreligious. When Lew went in search of his spiritual path, "it never occurred to me that Judaism could be that path." In his late 30s, however, he left Buddhism. "There was a big void in my life that this very absorbing practice had left. Little by little, I got involved in Jewish practice and Jewish observance ... It was actually the experience of Buddhist practice that brought me to realize the depth of Jewish spirituality."

"I'd lived through births and deaths and all the things that Jewish sacred texts talk

about," said Lew. "I'd already been through crises with my belief in God, so these texts really spoke to me in a very direct way. For the younger people, I think they were kind of abstract—more difficult to relate to."

Lew was drawn back into Jewish life by a dynamic rabbi who led a small synagogue in Northern California, and by the time that rabbi left, he had groomed Lew to run the congregation himself; in fact, some people who enter rabbinical school later in life do so after serving congregations as close to full-service lay rabbis. Many more are called to the rabbinate after being immersed in synagogue life for most of their adult lives, serving on synagogue committees and boards of directors, participating in adult education, carrying responsibility for special programs, leading worship, and delivering sermons. On the other hand, some adults who have little or no Jewish background are emerging from a long period of estrangement from the synagogue, are suddenly drawn to the idea of becoming rabbis after making a powerful connection to Judaism.

Paula Mack Drill, 41, a third-year rabbinical student, had been raising four children and doing social work in the Jewish community when she decided to become a

rabbi. Her rabbi's request that she lead a study program on healing and visiting the sick was the spark igniting her life change. "I've never been shy," she said, "but I found a different kind of voice, a voice that had to do with teaching text and leading people to find their own connections to text, and talking about my own connection to God in a more public way."

Steven Burton, 52, a third-year rabbinical student at HUC in New York, had toyed with the idea of becoming a rabbi as a teenager, but when he was 21, his father died and Burton lost his faith. "Throughout this period, I longed for God; I was regularly searching for a way back and just not finding it." Twenty years later, his mother died. "I found myself wanting to say Kaddish. It didn't take but six months of going to synagogue when I realized what was missing from my life, and at that point, I decided I wanted to be a rabbi." Burton says he was inspired by dynamic clergy both in youth and as an adult. Like Burton, Lew and many others interviewed mentioned specific rabbis and cantors who engaged them spiritually and intellectually as adults and, in time, encouraged them to enter the clergy.

But it doesn't always happen that way. Rabbi Rachel Levine, who received s'micha in 1985 from Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the spiritual founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, grew up in a Lubavitch community—a tough environment for a girl who wanted to be a rabbi from age nine. "I was looked upon as crazy, and I literally had to fight for my Hebrew education," she said.

On the other end of the spectrum are adult students reared in secular households or by parents who paid little more than lip service to temple affiliation and ritual. Newmark, the first woman Holocaust survivor to be ordained, is a native Hollander who lost most of her family in the Holocaust. She survived the camps with her mother, who told her afterwards that there was no God and that she should put being a Jew out of her mind. It wasn't until Newmark was in her 30s—with children who were beginning to ask questions about religion—that she joined a synagogue, which led to a career in Jewish education and, ultimately, the rabbinate.

Rabbi Shohama Wiener, president of AJR, didn't begin her studies at that school until she was 40. "The Judaism I was exposed to [as a child] left me very puzzled, spiritually. It didn't connect with my life. I knew we had a wonderful tradition of ethics and family and Israel, but religion, spirit,

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God? No. So I opted for marriage and family." Like Newmark, Wiener was initially drawn back to Jewish life by her children.

Candidates for cantorial school, in general, are different. Late entrants to cantorial school are likely to have had substantial professional experience in the field of Jewish music. Wendy Shermet, for example, a student at the Reform movement's School of Sacred Music, enrolled with a master's degree in music and years of singing in temples under her belt. "I wanted to make a commitment to being a cantor and not just a cantorial soloist. I was educated musically, but I was not educated Jewishly, and there were a lot of questions I couldn't answer," she said. "And what it came down to, finally, was that the music I sing best ... is cantorial music."

Richard Berlin, a college instructor and educational consultant for many years, moonlighted as a High Holidays soloist and, later, as a small synagogue's year-round lay cantor. He had already rounded age 50 when he wrote to JTS saying he wanted "more information about this profession, which it now seems has chosen me as much as I have chosen it."

And Jewish music brought William

Wood not only into the cantorate, but into Judaism itself. He converted to Judaism the year before matriculating at the School of Sacred Music. "Singing Jewish liturgical music in synagogues had a profound effect on me and opened my eyes to a totally new world. I immediately embraced the music and felt very comfortable in the Jewish environment," said Wood, who graduated in 1988 at age 44 and is now cantor at Central Synagogue in Rockville Centre, New York. "It changed the focus of my career from classical and opera to sacred music and ... enabled me to use my music to touch and influence people in a very special way. As I look back on my life, I feel it was *bashert* that I followed this sacred path."

*"Almost as soon as I graduated from rabbinical school, I was the right age to be a rabbi."*

—RABBI ALAN LEW, CONGREGATION BETH SHOLOM, SAN FRANCISCO

The immediate future appears to be bright for Jews entering the clergy as a second or third career. Older students don't have to worry about employability; there's a shortage

of rabbis and cantors across the United States. Rabbi Arnold Sher, who runs the placement office for the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis, said that 75 of the movement's approximately 900 congregations were looking for rabbis this year; at least nine major congregations were unable to get assistant rabbis from the newly ordained class, he said.

The shortage is largely driven by a period of American prosperity that offers young potential seminarians a wide range of lucrative careers in law, finance, medicine, science, and, of course, the cyberworld. Entry-level pay for full-time cantors is about \$50,000, and new rabbis earn about \$60,000 to \$70,000 plus benefits. But pulpit jobs also go unfilled because many newly minted young rabbis, especially those with small children, are unwilling to take on the 80-hour weeks and constant demands of congregational life. "The shortage of rabbinical candidates is real and will last for some time as the Reform movement grows, as the classes stay small at [HUC], and as rabbis find their way to other positions in the Jewish world beyond the congregational rabbinate," Sher said.

The clergy shortage in the Conservative movement is even more pronounced, fueled

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by factors not present in the more liberal movements. JTS and UJ seminarians *daven* three times a day, keep kosher, and maintain strict Shabbat observance. Many of the young students come from traditional backgrounds, and when they find themselves in synagogues where only a handful of congregants are observant or knowledgeable about worship, they may be put off.

Most older candidates, however, are eager for congregational work. After demanding careers and the rigors of child-rearing, long hours don't scare them, and with maturity comes the ability to deal with congregants' quirks and occasional churlishness. "I am a more compassionate person than I was when I was 25," said Maralee Gordon, 52, a rabbinical student in her fifth year at AJR. "I'm much less judgmental than I used to be."

Stephen Stein, 43, a third-year student at HUC in Cincinnati who gave up a successful career as a symphony and opera conductor to begin rabbinical school, doesn't see congregational work as much of a stretch, either. "I know that I have moved people; it's been a wonderful, gratifying thing, but I've always done this at a distance," he said. "I want to be able to do it


beside a hospital bed, in a classroom, from the *bimah*, under a *chuppah*."

Mark Sameth, 46, who graduated from HUC in 1998, considers himself a "trans-denominational" rabbi and leads an unaffiliated congregation: "Well into rabbinical school, I wasn't sure I wanted a pulpit rabbinic. Eventually I chose congregational life because, to paraphrase Willie Sutton, that's where the Jews are."

And once they take over their pulpits, midlife rabbis and cantors are finding that their congregations respond to them. "Congregations value people who have maturity," said Shermet, from the School of Sacred Music. "When I deal with the parents of b'nei mitzvah students, I'm talking to them like I'm an equal parent, and that's helpful. I think if I were 25 and in a student pulpit for my first job, I would be intimidated by a lot of what's going on."

"I think that congregants can relate to me and my journey to serious Judaism," adds Rabbi Kim Geringer, a former psychotherapist and classmate of Sameth's, who divides her time between a congregation in New Jersey and a position at the Reform movement's headquarters in New York. "I'm not very different from them. I'm just a little further along the path. Sometimes Jews look at rabbis ... as if they're a different species, as if they have all the spiritual questions figured out already. But with me, people know that I wasn't always like this, that I've struggled for answers too, just like they do."

To some degree, then, it may be natural for people to become rabbis and cantors after spending a few decades hashing through life's challenges. Historically, for the Jewish people, that's how it has often been. Moses, after all, didn't shoulder his leadership of the Israelites until age 80; Rabbi Akiba, one of Judaism's foremost scholars and leaders in the second century of the common era, spent his first 40 years as a shepherd; and the great Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai in the first century, came to the academy late in life, after a career in business.

"We moved away from home base," said Artson, of the University of Judaism. "Home base for us was always the moment that you're inspired by Torah study. That's when you should go do it." 



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