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'ADVENTURE RABBIS' IN TRAINING STUDENTS BRAVE THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Rachel Litcofsky



How do you turn a hike through the woods into a lesson about the principles of *bal tashchit* (do not destroy or waste) or a discussion about the values of *ts'ar ba'alei chayim* (compassion for animals)? These challenges are what motivated a cadre of rabbinical students from across the campuses – Justus Baird, NY '07; Nicole Greninger, NY '08; Jordie Gerson, NY '09; Emily Huebscher, C '10; Josh Brown, LA '08, RHSOE '08; Evon Yakar, C '07; Jessica Kessler Marshall, NY '08; Owen Gottlieb, NY '10; Mitch Delcau, C '08; and Stacey Delcau, MAJE '01 and Director of Outreach Education and Supervisor of Clinical Learning, HUC-JIR/Cincinnati – to participate in the first ever HUC-JIR 'Adventure Rabbi' Training Program.

This innovative program, which took place over a long June weekend in Colorado at Chitaqua Park near the Flatiron Mountains, was organized by Rabbi Jamie S. Korngold, C '99, an avid outdoor sportswoman and founder of 'Adventure Rabbi.' Previously, Korngold had worked as a wilderness guide for the Union for Reform Judaism summer camp Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute (OSRUI), competed in an ironman triathlon, and bicycled 4,020 miles from New York to San Francisco during one summer.

She initially followed the path of many newly-minted rabbis and served a congregation of two hundred families in Alberta, Canada, only to realize that her spiritual calling was pointing to a different path. She credits her mentor, Rabbi Kenneth Ehrlich, Dean of HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, for encouraging her to pursue

her own rabbinical journey. In her forthcoming book, to be published by Doubleday, Korngold explains her decision to create a new kind of synagogue without walls:

"I realized that there are many rabbis who can serve the 30% of

American Jews who are affiliated with congregations. But how many rabbis are reaching the 70% who are not members of congregations? How many can relate to those who prefer skiing or hiking on Saturdays to synagogue? How many rabbis are able to understand and accept those who say, 'Running is my religion,' or 'I feel more inspired reading Robert Frost poetry than Psalms?' I put in my resignation from my congregation and, in November 2001, loaded my truck and drove back to the United States, this time to Boulder, Colorado, to launch the 'Adventure Rabbi' Program."

The 'Adventure Rabbi' Philosophy

The purpose of 'Adventure Rabbi' is to bring unaffiliated Jews back into communal religious life through innovative programs, which combine the outdoors and Jewish practice. Korngold believes that "the spirituality of the wilderness awakens Judaism and that the open countryside, unhindered by traditions of conventional worship environments, allows the awareness of the connectedness of all things to permeate our souls." 'Adventure Rabbi' offers life



(Top) Rabbi Jamie Korngold, Executive Director of 'Adventure Rabbi,' teaching HUC-JIR students in Boulder, Colorado during the training program in June 2006. (Bottom) Rabbinical student Nicole Greninger chanting blessings before reading from a backpacking Torah in Rocky Mountain National Park.



HUC-JIR students join together for Shabbat services in Rocky Mountain National Park.

cycle events for all stages of Jewish life; these events are held in private homes, unusual facilities, and wilderness venues. The rabbis and rabbinical students who lead these programs are all trained by the Reform Movement; the liturgy used is reflective of mainstream Reform congregations. The organization's website www.adventurerabbi.com receives over 200,000 hits a month from visitors from over sixty countries.

In addition to serving as the spiritual leader and guiding force of 'Adventure Rabbi,' Korngold also facilitates an adult-learning program, serves on a monthly basis as rabbi for a congregation in western Colorado, and creates innovative programs for the 20's – 40's group for another congregation in Boulder. She is assisted by a small but highly resourceful staff, including wilderness guides well-versed in Jewish education.

Over the last five years, Korngold and her 'Adventure Rabbi' supporters have witnessed a growing demand by the community for its programs. In order to successfully expand the program, she and her staff have been seeking to involve more Reform Jewish professionals who identify with its philosophy. Her mentor, Rabbi Ehrlich, helped her reach out to the entire HUC-JIR student body to recruit rabbinical

students to join her for the first annual HUC-JIR 'Adventure Rabbi' Training program.

Becoming an 'Adventure Rabbi'

What motivated this inaugural cadre of HUC-JIR rabbinical students to volunteer to be trained as 'Adventure Rabbis?' A common goal was their hope of incorporating Korngold's teaching philosophy into the pulpit work they do as student interns and in their future rabbinate.

"I know that an important part of my rabbinate will be finding ways for Jews to leave the comforts of the sanctuary, to seek God and the Jewish community in the wilderness," Nicole Greninger explained. "I believe they are searching for informal Jewish experiences and for Jewish activities that take place in nature. I am not sure exactly what kind of rabbinate I am looking for, but I know that the outdoors will be part of it in some way."

As part of their training, the students hiked, celebrated *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* (an all night study marathon in commemoration of receiving the *Torah* on *Shavuot*), prayed together on the mountainside, and enjoyed *havdalah* services amidst the outdoors. The weekend provided a stimulating forum for discussing the key issues confronting Jewish life

today and brainstorming about new strategies to build Jewish life and community.

Evon Yakar, who has been affiliated with Reform Jewish camps for more than sixteen years, valued this opportunity "to meet other students from HUC-JIR and to learn from a rabbi/educator who has successfully applied the values of Jewish education in an outdoors setting."

Jessica Kessler Marshall came to this experience through her active involvement with *Hazon* – the Jewish environmental group that organizes bike rides and retreats in the U.S. and Israel – whose mission is rooted in the belief that environmental education is a vital and significantly underutilized resource in Jewish life. She found the 'Adventure

Jews, and those who love the outdoors are not being reached."

Going forward, Stacey Delcau "would recommend this program to other students because it is so important to be exposed to a variety of ways of fostering spiritual engagement." She sees this program, which links her concern for the environment and Jewish learning, as "a great opportunity outside of the classroom to discuss issues facing the future of Judaism."

Korngold plans to continue this training program and build upon the relationship with the College-Institute and its students. She has demonstrated that connecting to Judaism can take place in unexpected places. 'Adventure Rabbi' provides students with yet another



Rabbi Jamie Korngold (center) and HUC-JIR students in Rocky Mountain National Park.

Rabbi' training program to be an ideal opportunity to integrate her commitment to Jewish environmental education with her rabbinical education and professional development.

"My first spiritual experiences were in the out-of-doors, but I never found a Jewish group that was interested in doing things outdoors until after college," recalled Justus Baird. "I think the cultural bias of Jews as urban folk doesn't work for all

professional development opportunity to advance their skills as innovators of meaningful programs that can attract and engage the largest percentage of Jews in America – those not connected to the synagogues and other institutions of Jewish communal life. ■

Students, alumni, and HUC-JIR community members interested in becoming involved in 'Adventure Rabbi' should contact 303.417.6200 or info@AdventureRabbi.com