

A Tribute to David Ellenson

Tradition in Transition: The Incredible Journey of President David Ellenson

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A Man in a Hurry

David Ellenson has always been a man on a mission, even if it wasn't always possible to foresee all the stations on the journey that have contributed so powerfully to the health and vitality of Reform Judaism in the twenty-first century. I personally met David, who would become my best friend, during the first day of classes on the New York campus of HUC-JIR in 1973. Carting a stuffed blue backpack, David rushed into Intro to Bible class, but not exactly to sit and quietly prepare the Rashi for group discussion. With some urgency he wanted to know just what would be covered that day, because he was also registered for a Hebrew literature class which met at the same time.

This guy's in a real hurry, I thought to myself. At that moment, I did not know that a year later David would simultaneously enroll in the Ph.D. program in the Department of Religion at Columbia University. Though this was an unusually ambitious path, David did not want to become a rabbi in order to be a better scholar. He is a brilliant professor who also embodies all the qualities anyone would ever want in a caring, soulful rabbi.

While some first-rate academics find human contact rather inconvenient, David Ellenson thrives on people. They are a great source of oxygen to him. Just as David reads material once and owns it forever, he also meets someone once and has a friend

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forever. His ability and need to meld his intellectual and personal talents make him among the most impressive and memorable leaders our Movement has ever produced.

So, David was earning two tough degrees simultaneously. As if his plate was not full enough, David also was the primary caregiver to his daughter, Ruthie. When I was invited to the first of many dinners at his apartment, I learned how deeply he also embraced the role of tender father and true *baal habayit*. David's wizardry in the kitchen dazzled this young rabbinic student. In minutes David had changed a diaper, straightened up the living room, and placed on the table sizzling kosher steaks together with a half dozen cans of Tab, his favorite diet cola. There were so many things that drew me to David, then and now, but when he started cooking for me, I knew for sure I was in love.

As a husband and father there was true urgency to Dr. Ellenson's scholarly pursuits. With a family to support he did not have the luxury of being a perpetual student. Yet, I would contend that David was seeking something more important in those early days than a means to make a living. Speaking personally I enrolled at HUC-JIR less to become a rabbi than to find myself as a Jew. In my judgment David Ellenson entered both the College-Institute and a prominent secular academic institution in an effort to reconcile two often contradictory aspects of his persona.

The Reform in the Orthodox

How far David had already traveled when I met him on that day in New York in 1973 became clear to me four years later when I accompanied him back home to officiate at his father's funeral in the Orthodox synagogue of Newport News, Virginia. There I immediately saw how much a product of the South he really was. David's graciousness was home grown. Growing up in a small community of very few Jews, he learned to intermingle easily with people of other faiths and races. Though he went to an Orthodox shul he was totally integrated into the community.

No matter what was going on beneath the surface in that breezy, friendly Southern environment, David never experienced any overt anti-Semitism. Out and about David felt truly at home. Inside his synagogue David was exposed to a decidedly pre-modern Orthodoxy whose rabbis had not embraced the conflict of living

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as a Jew in modern times. On the contrary, they saw America as a serious threat to the Judaism they had known all their lives and tried valiantly to maintain. David was incredulous when he heard one of his rabbis proclaim in a sermon, "I can understand why Hitler killed so many Western European Jews; they had assimilated and somewhat deserved their fate. What I can't understand is how the pious Eastern European Jews also were killed." Then and there, the outraged David knew that as much as he loved the people and piety of his hometown shul, he would need to find a way to marry his love of tradition with more modern sensibilities. Reflecting on his youth, David would write, "A sense of distance from my surroundings has always marked me. That description of such tension has allowed me to hold up a candle to my own soul."¹

David Ellenson was ready to embrace the modern world. He graduated from William and Mary and received a master of religion at the University of Virginia. Judaism and the State of Israel continued to exhibit a strong gravitational pull. His experience at a *kibbutz ulpan* during the first-year program in Israel at HUC-JIR reinforced a fierce and undying Zionism that has informed his personal and professional life. What motivated him most, however, was the desire to move beyond his southern small city Orthodox upbringing and find a way to bring traditional Judaism into the modern era.

Through his academic work David would be determined to work out a healthier and more cogent synthesis between these two worlds. In the introduction to his first book, *Tradition and Transition*, Ellenson wrote:

Simply put, the Orthodox Jew and Orthodox Judaism have not been sufficiently appreciated as being active participants in the dialectical interplay of tradition and modernity universally acknowledged as characteristic of other movements and denominations within modern Judaism. Thus, whether consciously or unconsciously, the responsa—in as much as they are a genre of Jewish legal literature bequeathed to modern Judaism from a medieval corporate past—are deemed particularly unimportant for an investigation of a modern Jewish condition in which Jews reside as individual citizens within a modern nation-state. In recent years there has been movement within the academic community to correct this misperception.²

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Dr. Ellenson has steadfastly held to the view that true humanism can be found among these modern traditional *poskim* and has devoted his academic career to a thoroughgoing investigation into nineteenth-century European Orthodox sources pursuing, perhaps cherry-picking a bit, among those thinkers who provide some hope for more Jewish unity, further intra-denominational cooperation, or at least some collegiality.

To that end Ellenson turned his attention to a relatively obscure university trained Orthodox Rabbi who would become the head of the Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin, Rabbi Eseriel Hildesheimer (1820–1899). Far from being a moderate, Hildesheimer felt that there was no other acceptable foundation of Judaism than *Torah min Hashamayim*. In fact, he granted no legitimacy to liberal Judaism whatsoever. Despite this categorical stance, Hildesheimer still recognized the Jewishness of the Reformers and understood that there were many reasons to work together for the Jewish communal good. “I am of the . . . opinion that . . . one is obligated to act in concert with (Liberal Jews) as far as the conscience permits.”³

Hildesheimer supported antidefamation efforts regarding both Orthodox and Reform Jews, but he went much further, believing that Jews should work together on matters of charitable and communal concern. Thus, while Hildesheimer supported Samson Raphael Hirsch’s successful efforts to help overturn a law mandating that Jews must become members of their Jewish community—a measure that prevented Orthodox Jews from seceding from the community dominated by the Reformers—he refused to press for full implementation of that ruling. He conceded that active participation of Reformers in the community could threaten Orthodox absolutism, but he was willing to take that risk for the sake of the well-being of the Jewish community as a whole. Fully aware of the growing distance between the religious movements of Judaism in today’s world, Dr. Ellenson nevertheless regards Hildesheimer as an Orthodox leader worthy of emulation, one clearly not willing to compromise on halachic authority and norms, but whose love for the people of Israel allows him to transcend stricture for the higher purpose of Jewish survival and continuity.

Hildesheimer presages the insights of perhaps the most influential of Ellenson’s teachers, Professor Jacob Katz (1904–1998), who chronicled the profound changes modernity had thrust upon

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the traditional Jewish community. Dr. Katz pointed out that communal leaders no longer held authority over its members. Only the secular State had sanctioning power. So, Jewish associations became more and more voluntary, and no one side of the Jewish spectrum could impose its denominational views upon the other. While Jews increasingly have had an unprecedented choice either to embrace the ethics and practices of Judaism, or to walk away by fully assimilating into majority culture, Katz emphasized in his writings that such monumental change did not lead either to the disappearance of Judaism or the Jewish people. Rather it fostered a reinvention of what it means to identify as a Jew in the modern era. Katz's historical and sociological observations form an intellectual foundation for Ellenson's work and provide the academic linchpin for his fundamental optimism of how the Jewish world could undergo profound change, yet still emerge as a divergent yet mutually reinforcing community.

Dr. Ellenson clearly favors religious leaders who embrace the values of *K'lal Yisrael* and *Ahavat Yisrael*. His search for teachers and *poskim* who embrace the reality of modernity is also driven by his sensible view that contact with the entire Jewish community, even those who don't live Orthodox lives, could help the halachist feel greater personal empathy for fellow Jews and lead to an injection of humanism in the halachic process that is too often lacking.

Ellenson's concerns in this regard became crystal clear to me when just a few years after our ordination, he and I collaborated on two articles published in the *CCAR Journal* that focused on two important modern Orthodox responsa. The first article, written in 1981 concerned a responsum by Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer (1795–1874), one of his era's leading authorities in Eastern and Central Europe. Kalischer was responding to a ruling emanating from the United States that sons born to Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers could not be circumcised by a *mohel* lest these children be mistakenly identified as Jews. Kalischer disagreed. In a letter to Dr. Hildesheimer, he argued that it was in fact a mitzvah to circumcise such children. They should not be discarded by the community; moreover they actually possess *zera kodesh* (holy seed). Such a child is more likely to become Jewish and aspire to holiness with such an embrace. I could see how moved David was by Rabbi Kalischer's evident respect for the father's wanting to circumcise the child and to nourish the spiritual potential the child would hence possess.

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The second responsum (published in Winter 1983) was by Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman of Berlin (1843–1921), who had studied in Hildesheimer’s yeshivah in Hungary and had succeeded him as rector in the Orthodox Seminary of Berlin. Hoffman was asked to rule in the case of a twelve-year-old boy born to a non-Jewish mother and Jewish father who had been circumcised by a *mohel* at eight-days old. Did such a child have to undergo *hatafat dam* (the taking of a drop of blood) before being permitted to convert? In his responsum Hoffman ruled that it was unnecessary to take the drop of blood. It should be assumed, Hoffman wrote, that the circumcision was done for the sake of conversion. Moreover, if there is even a slight chance that drawing the drop of blood will injure the lad, the *hatafat dam* should not take place. Both responsa highlight what Dr. Ellenson has sought: the capacity for compassion within the strictures of the halachic process.

The Road to the Presidency

Shortly after concluding work on his doctorate, David accepted a position at the Los Angeles School of HUC-JIR. He subsequently achieved the title of Professor of Jewish Thought and Director of the Jerome E. Loucheim School for Judaic Studies. For many years Ellenson had been a brilliant and incredibly popular professor, a most sought after speaker and scholar-in-residence throughout the country. While teaching in Los Angeles, David divorced. Over time he fell in love with one of his most impressive former rabbinic students, Jacqueline Koch (who happened to grow up at Congregation Rodeph Sholom in New York where I now serve as rabbi). Jackie was always incredibly smart, mature, and grounded. Aware that falling in love with David meant inheriting his family as well—oldest daughter Ruth is now a writer and Micah was ordained a rabbi on the LA campus of HUC-JIR in May 2014—she was undaunted. When I had the honor of being *m’sader kiddushin* with Jackie and David under the chuppah at HUC-JIR in New York, it was clear to me what a strong bond they had formed.

Jackie’s career has similarly contributed so much to the Jewish world. She has been the rabbi chaplain at the Harvard Westlake School in Los Angeles, chair of Hadassah Foundation, facilitator/leader of VeTaher Libeynu, rabbi/director of Women’s Rabbinic Network, talented teacher of Jewish Spirituality far and wide, as

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well as indispensable spouse and advisor of the immediate past president, now chancellor of HUC-JIR. They went on to have three children together: Hannah, Nomi, and Rafi

I will never forget the hours-long cross-country phone call I had with David as he agonized over whether to become a candidate for the presidency of the College-Institute. He loved being an academic and was aware, at least to some degree, how much his life would change serving the Movement as president. Once Jackie and their five children gave him their blessings, David continued to wrestle until he came to an affirmative decision. His personal statement presented to the Search Committee underscores why he was such a perfect candidate:

The gratitude and devotion I feel for the College-Institute cannot be fully expressed. I had been raised in an Orthodox synagogue. Yet, I never found the atmosphere of Orthodox Judaism—for all that I respected in it—congenial to my own temperament. I have therefore been grateful that for the last twenty-nine years my life has been shaped by this institution and by the sensibilities and beliefs that mark a liberal approach to Jewish religious tradition . . . If possible, the President should be a rabbi-scholar of international reputation whose character and person command universal respect in both the academic and Jewish worlds. The President should embody these qualities because the President serves as a symbol and representative of what the College-Institute is both within the walls of the College-Institute and beyond. The President must be further able to articulate why HUC-JIR is a precious intellectual-religious resource for the ongoing life of the Jewish people and must be someone who can inspire others to aid in the task of building and sustaining this institution. I feel that I possess these characteristics and talents and I believe I can employ them to inspire and guide others to work with me as a partner in the mission that the College-Institute affirms and the vision that HUC-JIR represents.

Then in the next paragraph David reveals the soul within the scholar:

My scholarship and my teaching have their origins in and are motivated by existential concerns. My entire adult life has been spent attempting to understand and lecture on the diverse ways in which different Jews have attempted to answer the question of

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what it means to be part of a Jewish people that strives however haltingly and imperfectly to live in covenantal relationship with God. I love the Jewish people and I am grateful for the liberal approach HUC-JIR has allowed me to internalize concerning how the Jewish tradition can and ought to be approached. I believe in the deepest recesses of my heart as a rabbi that scholarship and knowledge contribute to the enterprise of religious formation.

Dr. Ellenson's significant challenges and important achievements as president will be chronicled by many, but I know how much he has wrestled with questions of what type of rabbi, cantor, educator, communal leader, and scholar we need to produce to meet the ever-growing challenges of Jewish life in the twenty-first century; how to engage faculty who will educate and inspire these students; how to insure the full equality and opportunity for women and for members of the LGBTQ community, whose dignity is core to the covenantal paradigm he cherishes.

As HUC-JIR is one large international family, David has made a point to be physically present to rejoice with our communities on significant anniversaries, mourn for friends who have died, agonize with parents and students alike who bravely carried on their studies in Jerusalem as the Intifada in 2002 threatened them and their brothers and sisters in Israel. Then, there has been the ever-present burden of raising money in order to support the four campuses, the millions of dollars required to maintain the College-Institute in the face of the steady reduction in the contributions member congregations make to the URJ and are then funneled to the College. Somewhat to his own surprise, David has been a brilliant fundraiser. Donors surely are drawn to his easy southern warmth, his insatiable curiosity, and true love of people. What ultimately wins over the generous benefactor, however, is his vision of what HUC-JIR means for the Jewish future in the face of our own sometimes tragic past and ever-present challenges posed by the modern age. His inaugural address at the Plum Street Temple on October 13, 2002, unveiled the core of his approach:

Today we witness an era where the rate of Jewish exogamy stands at an all-time high, and the limitations and constraints imposed by a previous age upon complete Jewish integration into all sectors of the American nation have given way to an epoch where Jews take part as complete equals in every walk of American

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life. At the same time, the twentieth century has borne witness to the previously unimaginable evil of the Shoah, as well as the genocides of other peoples, and we today cannot share the total certainty our ancestors did in the power of reason to achieve the good. Ours is an age of ambiguity and nuance—one in which we stand at the crossroads of global capitalism and global terror.

Yet, we must not allow the uncertainty of our own age to paralyze us. Our contemporary efforts at the College-Institute must be no less than those of our predecessors. We must recognize our own power, and we must employ our passion and our imagination as well as our knowledge to chart the course of Jewish spiritual and communal life for our own time as well as for the future.

In that same address Dr. Ellenson reminded the world of his steadfast devotion to the State of Israel. As President, David has been a champion of the College-Institute's growing program for Israelis, and he has been unshakeable in his resolve that all students experience their initial year of study at the Jerusalem campus.

Writing about one of his beloved teachers, the late Dr. David Hartman, Ellenson contended, "Israel represents a healthy assertion of vitality and moral responsibility on the part of the Jewish people, because it is only by assuming such 'total responsibility for society' that Jews can 'demonstrate the moral and spiritual power of the Torah to respond to the challenges of daily life.' The State of Israel provides the one genuine crucible where the values of Torah can truly be tested and applied, for only in Israel do Jews possess a political sovereignty that entails full accountability."⁴

As a lover of Zion, David is not afraid to challenge the Israeli government that it live up to the words found in its Declaration of Independence, as well as to the ethics found in Torah. Although his body can often be found in New York, Cincinnati, or Los Angeles, a part of his heart always resides in Jerusalem.

Another part of his heart will always be devoted to HUC-JIR and the Reform Movement. Growing up as an Orthodox Jew, David never fully reconciled the emotional comfort he felt when he would daven among the older men of his shul with his ambivalence over the core beliefs and principles of that Orthodoxy. David thus has felt an eternal gratitude to the Reform Movement for allowing him to navigate successfully the journey through both tradition and modernity, the dialectical dilemmas that have formed

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the essence of his academic and personal quest for personal and communal synthesis.

David is blessed by this Reform community; by his *ezer k'negdo*, Jackie; his fabulous five children; his extended family; and countless numbers of friends who truly love him. I am thrilled to be counted in that privileged circle. David's career certainly will contain new challenges, but he has already left his indelible mark on our Movement as arguably our most beloved and successful president.

Dr. Ellenson penned these words for David Hartman, but, in my view, they apply equally to him:

Each generation of Jews has the freedom as well as the obligation to appropriate and employ our inherited Jewish tradition in accordance with its own capacities and comprehensions which can only be done when each current generation recognizes that any attempt to evade responsibility and fit history into a fixed pattern constitutes a delusion. People do not receive community as if by fate. Instead, Judaism impresses upon *Am Yisrael* that the notion of covenant provides for an interpretative tradition that asserts that God empowers the Jewish people to employ such community in freedom.⁵

As a younger man David heard his mother tell him that our ancestors tried to understand God's word in such a way that if God were a human being God would be happy to become your friend. David Ellenson, indeed, has walked with God and we are the grateful beneficiaries of that sacred friendship.

Notes

1. David Ellenson, *After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 15.
2. David Ellenson, *Tradition and Transition* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 2.
3. Ellenson, *After Emancipation*, 180, from Eliav, Hildesheimer Briefe, letter 12.
4. *Ibid.*, 434.
5. *Ibid.*, 527.