

Rabbi Erin Hirsh - Statement of Motivation

(Written in support of nomination for a Covenant Award for Excellence in Jewish Education, 2015.)

My parents believe that becoming a rabbi was my belated teenage rebellion, but I actually think my rabbinate is a synthesis of everything my family taught me. My grandmother had a sense of Jewish peoplehood woven into her soul, but wasn't comfortable with Jewish religion. At one point, she founded a congregational school that only taught Jewish history and culture. Grandma attended services, but didn't sing because she didn't believe in God and felt hypocritical participating. My mom was a social worker who internalized her mother's love of Jewishness and of learning, as well as her skepticism of religiosity. My dad was a popular high school teacher whose childhood was saturated with Jewish language and food and jokes, but largely disconnected from synagogue life.

My childhood was filled with Jewish friends, family and neighbors. Ongoing Jewish learning was expected and celebrated. My liberal American Jewish parents expressed their Jewishness most comfortably by supporting the Democratic party and the ACLU. Their careers and political activities taught me that compassion for others is an essential goal of Jewish learning and an integral component of Jewish living. Institutional Judaism, however, was of questionable value to them. There were plenty of years we were "unaffiliated," despite our life in a community of synagogue-affiliated Jews.

In kindergarten, my parents enrolled me in a "Conservadox" Sunday school. One day I reassured my secular mother that she shouldn't cry over anything because *Moshiach* was coming. Not surprisingly, that was the end of that! Even as a child, I was frustrated by the dissonance between my family's Jewishness and the Judaism I was formally taught. I insisted on attending Hebrew school and becoming a *bat mitzvah*. My parents supported me, but I knew that I was always free to drop out. I endured terrible teachers, boring lessons and bullying classmates for years. Once I brought home a test about Judaism and Christianity in which I had answered every single question wrong! I could not explain why I felt compelled to keep going. In retrospect, I think my interest in reimagining weak Jewish education programs had already been sparked.

In high school, I discovered Young Judaea, a new Jewish environment in which learning was celebrated and secularity common. Y.J. gave me my first taste of compelling experiential Jewish learning. At a Y.J. event, I happened across Mordecai Kaplan's Judaism as a Civilization, which helped me articulate and understand some of the inconsistent messages about Jewishness and Judaism sewn into my childhood. After reading Kaplan, I convinced my family to join the local Reconstructionist congregation. My Jewish identity felt more coherent, which was timely, since I lost one friend to murder, one to suicide and a third to cancer at the end of high school and beginning of college. I don't think of myself as being motivated by death or tragedy, but their premature deaths did give me a determination to appreciate life and to help others experience rich and meaningful lives.

When I became a student Vassar College, I was surprised by how many of my peers felt that being Jewish conflicted with other parts of their identity, such as being gay, feminist, liberal or agnostic. I understood for the first time what a gift my unwaveringly positive Jewish identity is. During long conversations with other students, I discovered that my intellectual approach to Jewishness could be a gateway to Jewish living, rather than an impediment to it. I realized that, while I had not been taught to believe in a traditional God, I did inherit a profound sense of life as holy and a belief in something greater than myself. I became more comfortable framing my Jewishness in religious language, enjoying weekly Shabbat dinners and services at Vassar. Those Friday nights became an anchor for me and other Jewish students on a campus consumed by multicultural tensions. I applied to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College with a sense of clarity of purpose that has only grown with time.

I immediately focused on Jewish education in rabbinical school, taking education electives and teaching in local synagogue programs. In my second year, a classmate invited me to direct a new school in the congregation she had founded. It was the perfect opportunity to experiment with the ideas we debated in our classes. Two years later, when my own congregation needed an education director, I was ready with the right combination of knowledge and experience. Over the course of the next nine years, I dedicated

myself to cultivating a congregational school in which the Jewish lessons and experiences we created were relevant, meaningful and inspiring to the children, their parents, and the faculty.

When I was offered the role of Director of Congregational Education for the Reconstructionist movement, I knew it was time to explore how I could apply my experiences in a specific community to the movement's 100+ congregations. I utilized my personal Jewish educational journey, my studies at Vassar and RRC, and my professional educational experiences to design learning opportunities that resonated with other Reconstructionist Jews. It was a wide-ranging position in which I provided consultative support, curricular content and direct programming for youth, lay leaders and professionals. When my position was eliminated, the members of RENA (Reconstructionist Educators of North America) honored my service by creating an annual prize in my name.

In 2012, Gratz College received a grant with which I launched NEXT, an online professional learning program for teachers in part-time Jewish educational programs. I have relished the opportunity to work in a pluralistic institution, expanding my professional contributions beyond the Reconstructionist movement. I now direct Gratz Advance, a department that offers multiple programs to support complementary Jewish education. In my rabbinate, I use my mother's social work skills and my father's teaching skills on a daily basis to transmit our shared love of Jewish learning and living. So much for teenage rebellion.