

A Different Path to Ordination

Distance seminaries are training rabbis in less time, for less money, than traditional seminaries—and synagogues are hiring them

BY ANDREA D. LOBEL JANUARY 21, 2021



Rabbis Rob Kvidt and Aryeh Azriel leading High Holiday services COURTESY JEFF TUCKER/THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF KAUAI

Prior to the emergence of the first of today's large, centralized rabbinical schools in the mid-19th century, rabbis were traditionally referred to as such when their rabbi-teachers considered them ready.

Although *semicha* (ordination) had existed since the medieval period, until the early 20th century, it was common for Jewish religious leaders and teachers to use the title of rabbi without holding formal credentials.

Today's North American Jewish landscape offers would-be rabbis educational options spanning the denominations. Yet, with few exceptions, most are five-

year, on-site programs out of the financial reach of many candidates, even with financial aid. For example, tuition is \$17,520 per semester at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and approximately \$26,500 per academic year at Hebrew Union College and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

A new generation of smaller seminaries that operate at a distance, online or by phone, have come to fill this need, offering prospective rabbinic students the opportunity to obtain *semicha* at a fraction of the cost of the mainstream rabbinical schools, and in far less time. This can be as little as a year or two, depending on candidates' prior academic degrees and Jewish community experience.

These "distance seminaries" cross the Jewish spectrum, from Orthodox yeshivot such as Pirchei Shoshanim, Machon Smicha, and WebYeshiva, to liberal schools like Rabbinical Seminary International, Mesifita Adas Wolkowisk, Jewish Spiritual Leaders Institute, and Pluralistic Rabbinical Seminary. Over the past 20 years or so, hundreds of students have graduated from these new seminaries, earning *semicha* and the title of rabbi. In turn, more and more congregations have begun to hire these rabbis.

Rabbi Sherril Gilbert's "trajectory into the rabbinate" crystallized in one key moment in the 1990s. Her *havurah* was part of a group holding holiday services at a senior residence. These were led by a visiting rabbi, and Gilbert savored the beauty of the ritual. "I wish I could be that rabbi, leading services," she said. One of her teachers, standing nearby, replied with words that set her off on a journey: "Sherril, why can't you?"

That led Gilbert to enroll in the ALEPH Ordination Program, and to obtain three forms of *semicha*: rabbinic chaplain, spiritual director, and a private, rabbinic *semicha* from Renewal founder Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. She was also accepted as a member of the Montreal Board of Rabbis.

Due to the contemporary focus on certification in the rabbinate, private *semicha* is not consistently recognized in the Jewish world. As a result, although Gilbert had been ordained by Reb Zalman, already served as a rabbi, and her mentor, Rabbi Daniel Siegel, often reminded her that she *was* a rabbi, she sought the formal institutional backing of a rabbinical school as well. That is, "*semicha* from a seminary." Unfortunately, the five-year schools, including the ALEPH program itself, were out of Gilbert's financial reach. Through word of mouth, and with Siegel's encouragement, she found Mesifita Adas

Wolkowisk. For Gilbert, her ordination two years later at the Holocaust Center at Queensborough Community College, in Queens, “was one of the deepest, highest points in my life.”

Today, Gilbert, in her early 60s, is co-founder, and a rabbi of, the Montreal Open Shul, and co-executive director of ALEPH Canada, a charity dedicated to Jewish Renewal. In addition to founding and providing spiritual leadership to B’nai Or Montreal Community Shul, she has served congregations in several cities as rabbi, rabbinic chaplain, spiritual director, and adult educator. She is also a board member of OHALAH, the Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal.

Like Gilbert, Rabbi Dr. Oren Z. Steinitz had experience in the Jewish world before seeking rabbinic ordination: He held a Ph.D. in religious studies from the University of Calgary, and had already served as a Jewish university chaplain for five years. “People started considering me a rabbi even though I did not have the title,” Steinitz, 40, told Tablet. “And at some point, it became a problem. On one hand, I knew that this had become my identity, but I did not have the formal recognition.” Like Gilbert, Steinitz was unable to consider the mainstream seminaries due to the expense, and their reluctance to give candidates substantial credit for prior work. “It was just not something that I could have done. We could not afford a few more years of being in school,” he said. A year after earning *semicha* from Mesifita Adas Wolkowisk, Steinitz was hired as rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami, an egalitarian synagogue in Elmira, New York, in 2015, and moved there with his wife and two children. He is also a member of OHALAH, and he was recently ordained as a Dayan, Mediator and Adjudicator of Jewish Law by ALEPH Canada.

A self-proclaimed “retired rock star who became a Jewish educator and rabbi,” Rabbi Patrick Beaulier exemplifies the nontraditional rabbinic candidate. Although he did not originally consider the rabbinate, Beaulier had been a Jewish educator, and eventually decided that he wanted to step into community leadership. He, too, faced barriers to *semicha*. “I had to choose between my family and my education. And I chose my family. That meant I had very few educational options,” Beaulier said. He was eventually ordained by Rabbinical Seminary International. Alternative rabbinical study is different, he explained, calling for a mix of seminary, Jewish community participation, and mentoring with other rabbis and Jewish educators—what Beaulier terms “an ecosystem.” In his view, this diversified approach is a way of filling in the

gaps for nontraditional rabbinical students. “You don’t go into this the same way that an HUC student might where you have a four-year degree and some experience.”

Founder of Darshan Yeshiva, and spiritual leader of Kehillah, an experimental Jewish community in Richmond, Virginia, Beaulier sees his mandate as reaching out to seekers, interfaith families, and those who don’t think of themselves as “synagogue people.” He is also co-founder of Pluralistic Rabbinical Seminary, which accepted its first cohort of rabbinical students last year.

Rabbis need not all be scholars, Beaulier said. Although he values, and hires, rabbis specializing in Jewish studies, he views the central rabbinic task as meeting community needs. And the most pressing need right now is for tradespeople. As a mentor told him, “we build something for people.” For Beaulier, “the job is, at the end of the bar mitzvah, to see Bubbe cry because her grandchild has become a Jewish adult. Our job is to have a couple say thank you for understanding that our love transcends religious, cultural, or ethnic identities.” In today’s Jewish community, rabbis are most needed during life-cycle events and holidays. “That is when people feel most Jewish. And our job as rabbis is to help people feel Jewish,” Beaulier said.

The Jewish community of Kauai, Hawaii, had been lay-led for 35 years—relying upon fly-in rabbis to lead High Holiday services—before engaging Rabbi Rob Kvidt, said spokesperson Jeff Tucker, who is also Kvidt’s husband. Kvidt, 63, a convert from Catholicism, had been a member of the Reform congregation for 16 years, and after studying Judaism for some time, considered *semicha*. Unfortunately, as he lived far from any established rabbinical schools, “he was left with few choices,” Tucker said, and was accepted to RSI. After his 2019 ordination, Kvidt began to act as the community’s rabbi, holding services, doing baby-namings, and leading online services during COVID-19. “Whether he will be on a full-time, part-time, or ad hoc basis,” said Tucker, is still under discussion.

Similarly, Rabbi Craig Mayers was hired by Temple Beth Sholom, an egalitarian Conservative congregation in Melbourne, Florida. As Temple President Bill Troner and Neil Perlman, VP of religious life, explained, Mayers, 52, had grown up Conservadox, was a lay-leader, and taught in the temple’s religious school. Mayers, his wife, and their three sons, had been members

since 2004. Over time, he served as ritual chair, VP of religious life, as music director, and on the temple board. Three years ago, when Temple Beth Sholom began a search for a new rabbi, the congregation held town halls to narrow down the qualities they most sought. Aside from a rabbi with a strong understanding of Judaism and ritual, the top criterion was someone approachable, who congregants could talk to. Mayers was quickly identified as a natural fit. “You can’t change someone’s personality and traits ... but you can educate someone who’s willing and interested,” Troner said. Temple Beth Sholom asked Mayers to obtain *semicha*, which he received at JSLI in 2018, weeks before being installed as rabbi. “It started out as a conversation, and ultimately led to growing our own rabbi,” said Troner. Mayers has also continued to learn, and leads Zoom services during the pandemic. Perlman added that Mayers has helped bump the congregation up the ladder of spiritual development. “It’s been just a tremendously positive experience,” Troner said.

What do the mainstream seminaries have to say about the alternative *semicha* phenomenon? Rabbi Daniel Nevins, dean of the Division of Religious Leadership at JTS, told Tablet that he is “heartened to learn about new and expanded interest by those who wish to pursue a path in the clergy,” but also highlighted the fact that the skills “required for rabbis to become conversant in our 3,000-year tradition, and competent leaders for contemporary Jewish communities, take time to develop.”

RRC Dean Elsie Stern echoed this, explaining that it takes approximately 10 semesters to cultivate rabbinic knowledge and skills in students with minimal background. But she acknowledges that the barriers to rabbinical studies exist, stating that the “flexibility and the degree of financial stability that a five-year residential program requires limits the diversity of the rabbinate in ways that are serious.” She appreciates the fact that shorter distance programs make the rabbinate more accessible, pointing out that the RRC is “committed to a rabbinate that really does reflect and respond to the diversity of today’s Jewish people. We take limits on access very seriously.” RRC therefore helps the approximately 25% of students with prior learning to accelerate their program.

While Stern said that a student who enters rabbinical school with existing competencies “can absolutely become a wonderful rabbi in less than five

years,” she is also concerned about the lack of “standardization and breadth of preparation” in alternative programs, and their variable underemphasis on soft skills such as self-reflection and change-management.

Stern encourages synagogue search committees to ask what expectations and skill competencies they have for a rabbi hired to serve their community: “The answer to that question may vary congregation to congregation.” The most important thing she wishes committees would consider, however, is the importance of oversight. “I think it’s really important for rabbis to belong to rabbinical associations,” she said. “I think that binds them to a code of ethics; that puts them in a community of peers, both for mutual support and for resources and reality-checking.”

However, despite the fact that many rabbis ordained by distance seminaries have landed pulpits, alternative *semicha* can make it difficult for candidates to join rabbinic associations, even with decades of Jewish leadership experience.

Steinitz is among those admitted to a rabbinic association—in his case, soon after ordination, which he sees as a reflection of his credentials. “I do not believe that I would have been able to get a pulpit without being a part of a rabbinic association, nor should I,” he said. Still, the Jewish community “has a very narrow definition of who should go to rabbinical school, and they’re missing out on some fantastic people.” According to Steinitz, the alternative seminaries “serve a purpose,” and though he understands the reasons for suspicion, many of their graduates had no other way, and this should not be held against them. “You have to look at every person individually,” he said.

As Gilbert sees it, the distance programs are “not like getting an online minister’s certificate.” Asserting that “these programs are not all the same,” she encourages people to ask questions of faculty and students, and find the right fit. Having experienced some “flighty” rabbinic programming, Gilbert thinks that “those kinds of programs give our training a bad name.” Yet, she added, “Wolkowisk is nothing like that. There’s nothing light or airy-fairy about it at all.”

For Stern, these seminaries address the problem of access, and this invites and challenges the “more conventional seminaries” to broach the matter. Ultimately, she emphasized, this is a diversity issue. And it can be addressed “in ways that don’t run the risk of training rabbis inadequately for the incredibly impactful and sacred work that they do.”

The distance rabbinical schools also respond to Jewish needs among both future clergy and community members alike—namely, unfolding economic uncertainties that will continue to call for less costly paths to the rabbinate, and diverse, rapidly changing spiritual, educational, and ritual needs among unaffiliated and intermarried Jews.

As Gilbert stated, what matters to our rabbinate is what we bring to it, and “how we present ourselves to the world.” As for people who question her rabbinic credentials, whether out of curiosity or judgment, she chooses to educate them about her path, and to be a role model for others who feel called to serve. “And that’s good enough for me,” she said.