

Molding religious creativity

The Academy for Jewish Religion grows and gets new grants

By [JOANNE PALMER](#) August 25, 2021, 9:00 pm



Lots of Jewish groups send out little gifts to their members at this time of year.

Most of the time, it's a jar of honey; the traditional Rosh Hashanah symbol signals the hope of a sweet new year (or at least a sweeter one. Everything's relative). The honey's usually accompanied by an earnest note, full of thankful, wistful looks ahead.

The Academy of Jewish Religion, the nondenominational Yonkers-based seminary headed by Ora Horn Prouser of Franklin Lakes, is no different. It mailed out a serious,

clearly heartfelt reminder, in both English in Hebrew, of the traditional High Holy Day refrain that “we are like clay in the hands of the Sculptor...”

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There was no honey in the envelope, though. Instead, it came with a tiny container of Play-Doh.

And that’s AJR, if not in a nutshell, then in a small manila envelope.

It is, according to the note, “Where creative ‘Clay Kodesh’ are trained and molded.” A clay is a vessel in Hebrew; clergy are clay kodesh, holy vessels. And in English, well, clay is, well, Play-Doh. (I know. Duh. And okay. I’ll stop now.)



The academy’s new library is set on the Otis elevator factory’s old wooden floors.

The Academy for Jewish Religion is housed in an old, red-brick building that itself is a metaphor for the school. The building started out as Otis Elevator’s first factory, back when elevators were the hot new thing; its strong colored walls and its

renovated, light-flooded spaces give students access to both beauty and solidity, just as the cleverness of its redesign shows them, as just about everything around the school does, the complicated gavotte that tradition does with change.

Or, at any rate, the academy was housed there, before covid. Now it lives just as much in the connections between students and faculty as it does anywhere else.

Although Dr. Prouser — who grew up in Summit, the daughter of Rabbi William and Dena Horn of the Summit Jewish Center — is hesitant to say this too clearly, because of the death and disruption covid has brought, the school has done well. It's doubled its student body in the last four years. That's at least in some part because AJR has focused on hybrid learning; although much is in person, a great deal has been online all along.

“We were in so many ways primed to be able to work through this pandemic,” Dr. Prouser said. “We already were hybrid on Zoom. Over that first weekend, we just changed. We were able to go all Zoom on a dime.”

The academy, which trains rabbis and cantors and gives the Jewishly and academically curious the opportunity to follow their interests to a master's degree, always has attracted second- and even third-career students, people who have begun to realize that their lives and skills and hearts draw them to Jewish life, often to serve the Jewish people. They tend to be serious people, firmly rooted in their families and communities. Because of this, even those among them who have earned enough money to afford to study for another degree often don't have the freedom to uproot themselves.

That's because “we had some students from far away who literally flew in every week, but we decided that there are many people out there who would be incredible clergy, but who could not move,” Dr. Prouser said. “We realized that we wanted to expand our reach and provide people outside of the New York area with a serious, rigorous rabbinic and cantorial education. So we already had gone in that direction.



Pre-pandemic, students practice circus arts in the library.

“What we had already known, but were able to develop further, is how to build community on Zoom. That was not new to us. The world caught up to us, but we were there already.”

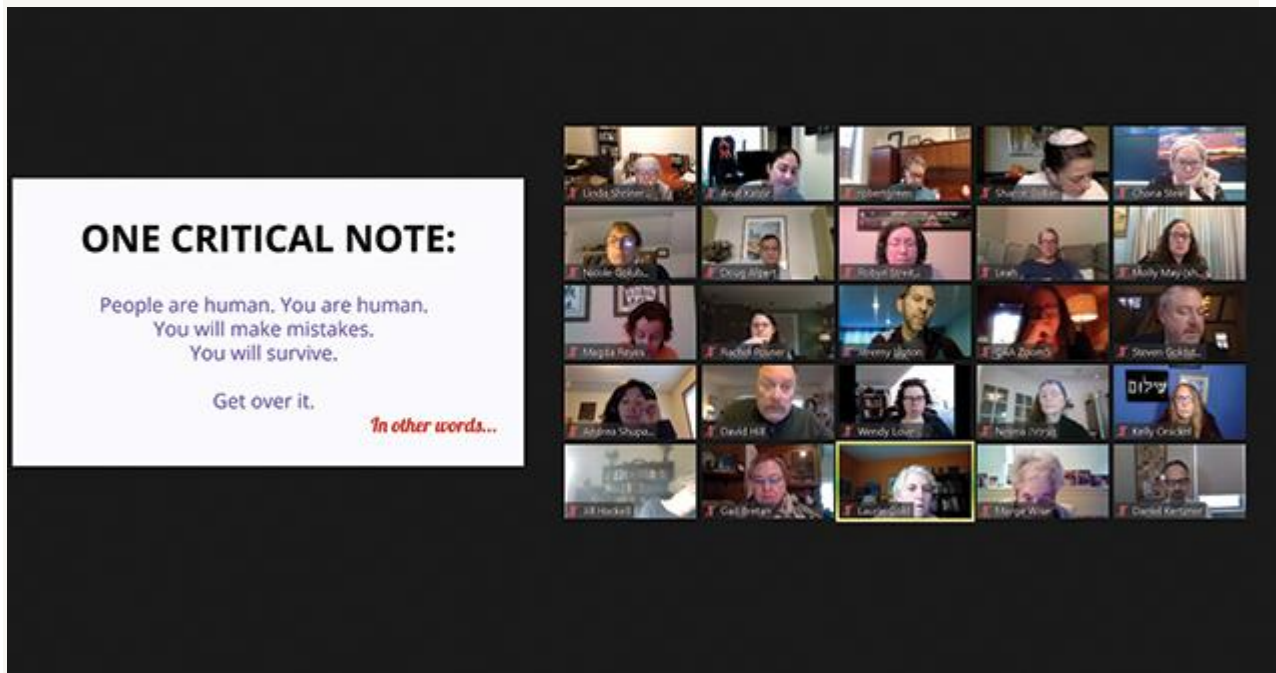
Among the lessons AJR’s students already had learned was how to both use and then pay no attention to the technology as they formed relationships miles away but from their living rooms. “I had a good conversation with a number of students, who all said that it’s hard to believe this, but some of the closest friends I’ve ever had in life I’ve seen in person only two or three times.”

There’s another reason that the academy has flourished. This one has nothing to do with the pandemic. Last June, well into the pandemic, as the culmination of a process that began long before SARS-CoV-2 infiltrated its first victim in Wuhan, the Academy for Jewish Religion became the first Jewish institution to be accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

That accreditation has unlocked a whole series of new possibilities for the AJR.

Specifically, the school has gotten two new grants.

The first is from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, through its Science for Seminaries program. “It’s about the dialogue between science, ethics, and religion,” Dr. Prouser said. “This is the program’s fourth year; every year, a new cohort of schools has a grant to integrate science into the curriculum.



AJR’s students and faculty had begun Zooming before the pandemic, so from the beginning they felt at home with the technology.

“They give you a minimal amount that you have to do – to revamp or create two courses by adding science to them, in whatever way that works for your school. We revamped one course and created three.”

The revamped course had been called “Critical Issues in Halacha”; now, it’s renamed “Critical Issues in Halacha and Science.” The first time it’s taught, it will focus on genetics. It will be taught by a geneticist and an AJR graduate. That’s Rabbi Dr. Jill Hackell of the West Clarkstown Jewish Center. Rabbi Hackell’s a Dr. not because she’s earned a Ph.D. but because she’s a medical doctor. A pediatrician. She’s ideally suited to teach the class.

The three new classes will be in basic science literacy. That's because "so many of our people are liberal arts people," Dr. Prouser said. "Like me! We all did whatever we could in college to get out of science classes." That's led to a deficiency, in areas like "how do you read a science article critically?" she continued. "How do you ask the right questions? And aside from that, science has changed.

"We're creating a course to help our students understand pharmaceuticals." That course, taught by a psychiatrist and a social worker, will help the students get some feeling for how the medications people take affect them. "This came from a story someone told about trying to help somebody, without knowing that the other person was on medication." The affect that the student was seeing was a side effect of medication. "There was nothing he could have done about it.

"The course is to help students recognize what they're looking at."

The third course will be "to use science to understand biblical imagery. For example, how does understanding astrophysics help us understand the biblical command that we should be as numerous as the stars? How does understanding how water works help us understand the imagery of the parting of the Red Sea?"



Rabbinical student Davey Rosen leads Shacharit online as others join the minyan.

The academy always has a retreat. This year's retreat – which will be remote – “is about the science behind meditation and music,” Dr. Prouser said. “How does understanding the science help us use them better? Our meditation and ritual courses already do take it into consideration, but this is more specific.”

The academy's leaders decided to apply for this grant, Dr. Prouser said, because “the possibility came up, and as we thought about it, we realized that it's not just a good thing but a necessary thing at this time, with science being so important, that our clergy be able to speak intelligently and with sophistication about science. We might not have said that 15 or 20 years ago, when science wasn't under attack in the same way, but now clergy have to be able to take the lead.

“We are the first Jewish school to be in one of these cohorts, and it has been a learning experience for us and for them. It's about being clear with them; ‘Yes, we get why you're asking in this way, but that is why we are answering in this other way.’”

The second grant, “from Lilly Endowment, is a tremendous project called the Pathways for Tomorrow initiative,” Dr. Prouser said. “We're looking at how we engage in conversation with Christian seminarians, to help work on issues like language. When Christians use a word like grace, it has a specific meaning. It's about issues like the difference between saying ‘We pray together, in the name of Jesus,’ and ‘I am praying in the name of Jesus.’ The second one is fine — in the first one, you have just othered me.’” (In other words, the first invocation leaves out anyone who does not pray in that way. It's profoundly not inclusive.)

This project, from Dr. Prouser's perspective, is about being othered – being positioned, possibly in the nicest possible way, with the noblest of intentions — as an outsider. An other. “The goal is to talk together and to create materials to use in furthering interfaith dialogue in a way that is sensitive and open. It's really trying to hit this kind of almost third-rail thing head on.

“It’s about working with language and ideas; the goal is to help Christian seminarians understand Jews and Judaism in order to help support interfaith dialogue.



AJR rabbinical student 1st Lt. Shalom Klein helps rededicate a Torah scroll at Fort Bliss, Texas.

“Some of that comes from language, and some of it comes from people who are not in communities with lots of Jews, and who do not have a real understanding of the Jewish community.”

This grant’s newer than the science one, so its details are less fleshed out, she added, but her goal is to create resources that Lilly Endowment can give to the Christian seminaries it supports.

In this, as in the other work that the Academy for Jewish Religion does, flexibility and creativity work with academic rigor and tradition to create something new that’s firmly rooted in the old. Sort of like the rabbinical school inside the elevator factory.

“I always joke that any rabbinic or cantorial program that has circus arts in its curriculum gets its students to be flexible.” That’s a course that AJR, almost definitely unique among Jewish seminaries, does offer. It pairs the physicality of learning circus arts with the emotionality of reading midrash, in a way that takes the stories and makes them physical. But no, it does not require that students take the circus arts

class, if they feel that flying through the air with the greatest of ease would not further their rabbinic education. It's an elective.

Given that flexibility of mind and body, "I feel that we have done a good job of creating the kind of clergy who can see the Jewish community through this pandemic," Dr. Prouser said.

The school's flexibility is evident in the courses it has adapted to these odd times. "We have tried to make the curriculum reflect what we're going through," Dr. Prouser said. "We did a course on healing services — how do you create them? — and on virtual ritual — how do you do that?" That's alongside the regular curriculum, and it adapts as the world around it changes. "A number of our alumni have joined some of the classes. The toolbox keeps changing, and we will try to keep up with it."

When the pandemic ends, the school will not revert to teaching only the courses it taught before the shutdown began. "Moving forward, people will have to know how to do virtual ritual," because we now understand how valuable it can be for people who are shut in or far away. "Some things will be going away but others will not. We will continue to be responsive."

The academy has about 75 students, Dr. Prouser said. They're not in cohorts; there is no set time to start or finish the program, and no expectation about how long it will take. There is no sharp, status-laden division between rabbinical and cantorial students. But that does not mean that there is not a standard curriculum, with required courses as well as electives; people can set their own schedules and timetables, but the school sets the requirements.

"Our students come from 23 states, and one comes from Israel," Dr. Prouser said. They represent a range of interests; that perhaps seems odder on the surface than it does once you think about it.

The academy has the peace studies program that it began a few years ago. It also has a program for military chaplains; it's been approved by the Jewish Welfare Board. "We were approved during the pandemic," Dr. Prouser said. "The fascinating thing is that

we are building up this group of people who are connected to the military, whether they want to be chaplains or already are serving as chaplains. We now have four students engaged in chaplaincy, and one of them got a major scholarship from the JWB.”

That student, Jesse Paquin, went from being an Eagle Scout to being a sailor in the U.S. Navy, where he began to explore Judaism with ever-increasing commitment and passion. He’s still active in the Boy Scouts and he, his wife, and their six children live in Israel. According to a JWB press release, “he was sworn into the U.S. Army Chaplain Candidate Program in early 2021 by his brother, an Army officer assigned to West Point.”

“I find it fascinating that we have a military chaplain’s group and peace studies,” Dr. Prouser said. “Both are growing. It’s a very pluralistic thing to have both.”

The Academy for Jewish Religion is deeply pluralistic; it’s also idiosyncratic, flexible, academically rigorous, and encourages both spirituality and analytic thought. It’s not for everyone, but it’s extraordinarily right for its students. And now it’s tackling new grants and new directions, as the new year approaches.