



Q&A with Cooperberg-Rittmaster Rabbinical Intern Rachel Weiss

Q: When did you first think about becoming a rabbi?

A: When I was 15 I led Shabbat evening services at my congregation for the first time, after which my rabbi turned to me as remarked, “You look very comfortable on the *bimah*. Have you thought about becoming a rabbi?” This goes to show the power of good teachers and mentors – much like what I’ve experienced at CBST. Rabbi Cohen and Rabbi Kleinbaum have challenged me in new ways, encouraged me to think more openly and creatively about my rabbinate, and gently supported and guided me through the process. When I work with our families and the 12 young children at *Alef Bet Shabbat*, I wonder who will be impacted by the work that I do at CBST and become the next generation of rabbis.

Q: What did you do between college and rabbinical school?

A: I graduated from college with a degree in Spanish and Gender and Women’s Studies. While I knew that becoming a rabbi was my path, I also recognized that I needed a break from academia. Had I entered rabbinical school directly, I would have graduated a 28 year old rabbi with no “real life” experience outside of school. Instead I pursued my other passion: social work.

As the director of “Nuestro Center,” a family resource center for Mexican Immigrant families, I worked for 5 years with folks for whom “real life” was one series of barriers after another. As a counselor, resource connector, translator, and advocate, I worked with children and adults through the many transitions, stresses, and crises that come with acclimating to a new country. What did I, as a college educated, white, Jewish woman from a middle-class family in suburban Chicago know about being a poor, Spanish-speaking laborer? Joan Baez says “We are the hero of our own story.” Through listening, empathy, and encouragement, I learned what it means to have power and privilege, and how important it is for all of us to learn how to empower ourselves. My role at Nuestro Center was to serve a community in need. Essentially, it was like being the rabbi of a secular organization. After 5 years, I returned to serve my own Jewish community and entered rabbinical school, where I have continued to work for Social Justice as a rabbi – including here at CBST!

Q: What is your vision for your rabbinate?

A: Creativity and the arts are a vital part of my vision for becoming a rabbi. Since Biblical times the Jewish community has used our gifts to create sacred space, and I continue in that tradition. I see creativity as divinely inspired, and expressing myself through visual arts is a reflection of God’s creation. Our *shaharit*/morning prayers say “every day creation is renewed”; it is our responsibility to help make daily creation more beautiful. Whether creating Miriam’s tambourines or pride flags in *Alef Bet Shabbat*, stained glass mezuzot, beaded kippot, or the 17 foot mosaic that hangs at Camp JRF, my art and design is part of my spiritual expression. This summer I’ll return to Camp JRF (the Reconstructionist movement’s –very gay friendly - summer camp), where I’ll serve as *Rosh Omanut*/Director of Visual Arts.

Q: What role does the Cooperberg-Rittmaster Rabbinical Internship play in your education?

A: What I have loved about my work at CBST is that it allows me to experience the fullness of the congregational rabbinate. Whereas most of my colleagues in rabbinical school function mainly as service leaders, at CBST I am a full part of the clergy team. I work with our congregants pastorally, teach classes, lead programs for families, give *divrei Torah*, represent the congregation communally, co-lead our CBCO initiative, and so much more. This LGBT Jewish community is a homecoming for me, as a lesbian rabbinical student, where I can be fully myself. The gift of our community is that we push the boundaries of conventional Judaism, forcing ourselves to think about how we make Judaism relevant to our lives and – forgoing assumptions – strive to be creative through ritual, lifecycle moments, and social justice work. It is a privilege and a true pleasure to be the Cooperberg-Rittmaster Rabbinical Intern.