



Mission Statement

The mission of the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute is to inspire Jewish learning worldwide and to transform Jewish life and the greater community through Torah study. Our goal is to create a global network of informed students connected by bonds of shared Jewish experience. JLI aspires to be the preeminent provider of adult Jewish education, and to continue to set new standards in the field. We are a learning organization, listening and responding to our affiliates and students so we can continue to grow in new ways.

Our holistic approach to Jewish study considers the impact of Jewish values on personal and interpersonal growth. Drawing on research-based instructional design and cutting-edge approaches to adult learning, JLI's innovative presentation of traditional Judaism is designed to be both intellectually rigorous and highly accessible. JLI is associated with Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, the educational arm of Chabad-Lubavitch.

Portraits in Leadership: Timeless Tales for Inspired Living



Course Rationale

We are a generation obsessed with the subject of leadership, perhaps because it seems that there are no leaders anymore. In our information age, heroes inevitably turn out to have clay feet, and it is clear that power and greatness do not necessarily go hand in hand.

It is easy to wonder whether there were ever true heroes. Perhaps we were all once simply more naïve. We react to our disappointment and disillusionment by defining leadership down, placing it within the grasp of anyone who is willing to reach for that gold ring while astride their wooden horse on the merry-go-round of life. Yet even in our jaded times, we have the power to be moved by the everyday heroes who never sought the limelight yet admirably rose to challenges that crossed their paths.

Captain Chesley Sullenberger, who spent a lifetime honing his flying skills and his preparedness for emergency, successfully landed a plane in the Hudson River and saved the lives of everyone on board. “We were just doing our job,” he said, when the president called to congratulate him.

Malden Mills owner Aaron Feuerstein continued to keep his workers on payroll even after a fire destroyed the mill in 1996. Seven years later, he was forced to file for bankruptcy. Yet he has no regrets about his decision. “It would have been unconscionable to put 3,000 workers on the street,” he said. “It was the right thing to do.”

While leaders emerge from the shadows in times of crisis, the preparation for leadership is the single-minded dedication to being a person of character. This ethical focus prepares them to take on hard tasks without hesitation when the need arises.

The sages of the Talmud are case studies in leadership. Driven by the moral vision set out by the Torah, they

sacrificed for their values from an early age. And when the difficult times came, leadership was a natural and automatic response, for they had spent their whole lives in preparation for those critical turning points.

This course is a biographical description of six sages of the Mishnaic era. Though each lesson examines the life story of a particular sage in light of the personal characteristics that uniquely positioned him to respond to the challenges of his time, this course also charts the successful efforts made by the sages to lead our people through what is arguably the period of most profound change in our rich, colorful history.

In two short centuries, Jews saw the collapse of all the major institutions upon which they had once relied. Until that time, the *Beit Hamikdash* and its sacrificial rite was the primary outlet for Jewish ritual devotion, and the oral tradition was the primary source of Torah vibrancy and knowledge. Whereas the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash* was swift and dramatic, the collapse of the oral tradition was a slow, painful process that extended over close to two hundred years.

Through dedicated effort and patient nurturing, our sages successfully steered our people into the future, leaving these critical institutions behind but salvaging the fundamental principles that characterized those institutions. This course traces the story of this successful orchestration, through the notable stories of six pivotal leaders.

The course combines the drama of history, the inspiration of character, and the personal relevance of the stories of our tradition. In doing so, it helps us reflect on what is most central in our own lives, and the qualities we possess that can help us weather times of crisis and change.

Yochanan Ben Zakai daringly proposed a solution that no one else dared consider. **INTEGRITY.** He was willing to sacrifice everything in his life except truth. The loss of influence, esteem, and position could not force him to bend. Rabbi Elzer was willing to endure loneliness, but found solace in his own absolute integrity. **PERSEVERANCE.** Here was a man who should have called it quits before he started. But, buoyed by the encouragement of Rachel, his wife, Rabbi Akiva showed the tenacity and resilience to build and rebuild again. **INNOVATION.** A maverick who refused to toe the party line, his brilliance was matched only by that of his wife, Beruriah. Maintaining contacts in places that others dared not go, Rabbi Meir earned the trust of those who could admire him but could never really understand him. **VISION.** He did not wait for crisis to force his hand. Creating alliances and carefully cultivating friendships, Judah the Prince used his influence to secure the well-being of his people. He then led with Jewish values and moral integrity.

Course Objectives

While it is difficult to fully appreciate the heroes of this course without understanding the historical backdrop, this course is first and foremost biographical. Through the prism of the vignettes and anecdotes recorded in the Talmud, we gain a sense of the timelessness of Jewish values. We can see what was important to the sages, from the stories they recorded. In the process of reading these lives as the sages of the Talmud preserved them, we have the opportunity to reflect on the attitudes and strategies that provide us with the resilience and strength to adapt to difficult times.

Some of the questions the course addresses are:

- Are leaders born or made? How do circumstance and personality interact in the lives of our Jewish heroes?
- How do leaders respond to change? Do shifting times require shifting values, or is there a way to adapt to new conditions while remaining faithful to eternal principles?
- In what ways can these stories help us nurture our own strengths and identify our personal style of leadership? How can they inspire us to take a more proactive role in living with character and dignity?

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Course Overview

Lesson One:

THE HUMILITY TO LEAD

Can you think of an unfortunate event in your life that you could have prevented if only you had been willing to ask for help? Can you think of a friendship destroyed because you were too proud to say you were sorry? Can you think of an opportunity missed because at the time you thought it was beneath you?

In an age of image management, we sometimes forget that admitting vulnerability can be a source of strength. When we are cognizant of the facts that others have something to teach us and that each person is deserving of our respect, then our influence is often enhanced.

Hillel is an example of someone whose power as a leader derived from his humility. He was not afraid to give up wealth and stature in exchange for the opportunity to learn from the greatest teachers of the generation. He was not ashamed to admit that he had forgotten something he had been taught. And he showed patience and respect even to those who seemed to least deserve it. A model of restraint, he was able to maintain peace in turbulent times.

Lesson Two:

THE COURAGE TO LEAD

How much are you willing to risk for the chance to preserve what is most precious to you? It does not take courage to rise to a challenge that you know you can win. It takes great nerve, however, to move forward with total confidence in untested territory, knowing that the slightest hesitation will ensure loss.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, for all his gifts and talents, was referred to as the youngest of the students of Hillel. Living as he did through the time of the destruction of the temple, it would have been easy for him to defer the difficult decision-making to others. Yet he rose to the challenge, undergoing great personal risk to negotiate with Rome and trade the loss of the temple for the survival of the academy.

Lesson Three:

THE INDEPENDENCE TO LEAD

We are social creatures, looking to our family and friends for love and support. What in your life is so important that you would pay the price of distancing yourself from the ones you love, in order to preserve it? Are you independent enough to stand against the world to protect what matters most?

It is said that it is lonely at the top. True leaders must often forge a path on their own, enduring the scorn and censure of those around them who do not understand what they are trying to achieve.

As a young man, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus left a family business and risked being disinherited in order to study Torah. Later in life, he endured excommunication in order to ensure the faithful preservation of the tradition.

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Lesson Four:

THE PERSEVERANCE TO LEAD

Are there dreams that you have given up on? What is it that you once would have loved to do, but think you are too old to do now? What new dreams are you afraid to consider because you think it is too late? Too often, we are content to live within the limits defined by distant decisions and former failures.

Rabbi Akiva, however, who spent his youth disdaining the academy, was willing to rethink his life at the age of forty, and with the encouragement of his wife, Rachel, spent the next twenty-four years absorbed in study and scholarship. He was able to see the destruction of Jerusalem, and yet retained faith in the future of the next generation. And when, as a centenarian, he lost all but five of his students in a plague, he began investing anew in training a new cohort of protégés who would transmit his teachings to the next generation.

Lesson Five:

THE INNOVATION TO LEAD

Have you ever broken into your own car? Hacked your computer to get to your own files? Sometimes we need to know how to bend the rules in order to preserve the system.

Rabbi Meir was the most gifted of Rabbi Akiva's students. With his brilliant wife Beruriah, he worked tirelessly to salvage and reconstruct the oral tradition during one of the most oppressive periods of our history. He made the controversial decision to maintain relations with his former teacher turned heretic, Elisha ben Avuyah, in an effort to ensure that Elisha's knowledge would not be lost to future generations.

Lesson Six:

THE VISION TO LEAD

Hard times can make heroes of us all. But there are some who do not need crisis to force their hand. They have the imagination and the vision to picture a life beyond anything they have known, and the will to make that vision a reality.

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi came from a respected family. He was a wise and talented student and enjoyed wealth and authority. He was a great statesman, a close personal friend of the emperor of Rome. He led the Jews through a period of relative peace and prosperity.

Yet he remembered the hard times that had preceded him, in which Torah had almost been forgotten from Israel, and he resolved to ensure that the Jewish people would never face this crisis again. With vision and ambition, Rabbi Yehudah decided to organize all of the oral tradition into written form, preserving it for all generations. His monumental task was achieved with the recording of the Mishnah.