Rabbinical school for me this past year has been filled with both challenge and personal growth. The course work accounted for most of the challenge, with my introduction to Aramaic and Midrash leading the list of the most challenging courses I took. It might comfort you to know that the Hebrew Union College is blessed with a wonderful, learned and dedicated faculty who take very seriously their task of training Rabbis, Cantors, Educators and communal service workers for leadership roles in the Jewish community. The instructors I have been privileged to study with these past two years have patiently and passionately introduced me to the discipline of Jewish study, always mindful of the power of example they have welcomed me and my classmates into their homes, synagogues and offices with an unceasing desire to impart unto us the skills and information we will need as professionals in the Jewish community.

My own personal growth as a Rabbinic Student came this past year through camaraderie with classmates and through opportunities for practice rabbinic experience such as leading High Holy Day services and participating in life-cycle ceremonies. As a class we have learned the value of team work and cooperation and as an individual I have come to appreciate the many challenges and roles today's Rabbis encounters in service to a community. I am humbled by the responsibility I will one day face in our community but excited for the opportunity.

It is not a rare occurrence at HUC when challenge and personal growth each occur from a single experience. When this happens the student is given a unique insight and instruction in to the Jewish world. Lessons learned from such an experience

often shape a students Rabbinate and personal mission in the Jewish community for entire careers. I feel that this past year while performing my Rabbinic internship I encountered such a profoundly important segment of our Jewish community that it will forever shape the work I will do as a Rabbi. With your permission I would like to share with you my experience this past year as a Rabbinic Intern at Vista Del Mar.

Each year the school places it's students in small congregations or Jewish organizations to begin the process of applying what we learn in the classroom to the Jewish communes that exist beyond the grounds of our campus. My placement this past year was as the Rabbinic Intern at Vista Del Mar, a privately funded residential treatment facility for youth at risk. Youth at risk, or Troubled youth, are both modern terms for kids we once called Juvenile delinquents. Vista Del Mar is located in West Los Angeles, where we like to joke their is no Vista and their is no Mar. But what their is, are 100 residents of our treatment center whose history of addiction, crime, violence and general misconduct have led them to this place, one step away from Juvenile Hall. Kids get to Vista in one of three ways, they are either placed their by the courts in the form of sentence for a crime they committed, or they are placed there by Child and Family services when their home environment is no longer safe or beneficial, or in a number of cases they are brought to Vista by their parents who can no longer cope with any or all of the problems I mentioned earlier. Vista treats boys and girls from age 8-18.

And so you might ask why would a Rabbinic Student be assigned to a facility like Vista. I asked the same question when I was informed that this would to be my

internship for the year. That was until I learned that 70% of the population at Vista are Jewish kids. In all honesty I will tell you that upon learning this figure my reaction was disbelief that Jewish kids make up such a large percentage of the population. Not that many of us in this day and age would think that Jewish kids do not get into trouble, of course we know they do. But somehow I always imagined that Jewish kids didn't do the kinds of things that get youth placed in a facility like Vista. This was naivete on my part, or maybe wishful thinking but in the course of the past year I have learned first hand that being Jewish is not in anyway a determinant as to whether or not a child will one day end up in a place like Vista. In fact in some cases it has been thinking like this that has contributed to the reason why Jewish teens past Bar Mitzvah age are the largest single group of residents at Vista. A look at any of the case histories of the Jewish population at Vista shows a significantly longer period of misconduct before the parent or institution began to deal seriously with the child's problems. Many families that I have worked with were slow to identify or comprehend that their child who read the four questions so nicely each year at Seder, or who did such a nice job preparing for B'nai Mitzvah was capable of doing some of the things they were hearing about from teachers and counselors. This is not to say that other parents were not also slow to recognize the signs of trouble, no one wants to believe their child needs a place like Vista, but it is true that their exists a misconception in our community that Jewish kids don't do these things; a day or two spent with the kids at Vista is proof enough that the fact that a child is Jewish has not kept them out of trouble.

But what does make a difference is religious affiliation and association. We have very few kids at Vista that grew up in a home where religion was a healthy and important part of family life. I say healthy as well as important because in the past year I have worked with a small number of kids from the Ultra Orthodox community where it appears their parent's excesses in religious practice have led to excesses in their child's social behavior. But very few if any of the Jewish kids at Vista grew up in a home where religion and faith was a clear, open and positive experience. Of the 100 kids at Vista 30% of them grew up in a home where no religion was practiced at all, while still a startling 50% of the kids at Vista grew up in a home where more than one religion was practiced, and they were raised to be both. The result has been, a group of kids who don't identify as anything, they don't know what they are or what they believe in and so they have almost unifomly opted to believe in nothing. Take for example Michael who dictated the following to his social worker. He stated, "I am the product of a Jewish mother and a father who keeps switching his religion." When asked what Michael considered himself he said, "I don't believe in anything, I am an atheist." Michael later said that this was not a problem for his parents. What this means is that almost all of the kids I work with, kids that have been getting into trouble for so long that finally the state, the courts or their parents felt they needed to be placed in a treatment center, all of these don't believe in anything, they have no place in their life for religion, no concept of faith. They share no religious identification with their

family or friends and they feel none of the moral and ethical direction that comes from being a person of faith.

Upon learning this I understood the what, of what my job was to be at Vista. From a therapeutic prospective my job at Vista is to be a counselor and a spiritual advisor to those kids that want a Rabbi to talk to. But it was not long before I realized that my primary function was to introduce or re-introduce these kids to faith and belief. Under the best of circumstances it is a difficult task to teach someone to believe in something they have decided they don't need. But at Vista this task is made doubly hard when you realize that most of these kids feel abandoned by God, punished by God for actions that led them to this facility and not ready to put faith in anyone or anything, having been let down so consistently in life. How do you help a kid who has experienced nothing but conflict and trouble in life believe in something as abstract as God, as complex as the Torah or as seemly simplistic as religious values and morals. I sat across from these kids in my first session with them and I asked the same question. Of all people these kids probably need religion in their life more than any others but their life and experiences have hardened them and convinced them that they don't need it, can't trust it or that it represents something their parents wanted for them and therefore they must reject it in protest. I will tell you that the answer to the question how, came just like the process slowly, and with small careful steps.

I began by just hanging out with them, eating dinner in their dorms, watching TV with them, playing Video games. I wanted to show them that a Rabbi is also a

person, that I didn't talk about religion all the time and that one can believe in God and still enjoy watching Friends, Sienfeld or after-school cartoons. It took a long time for me to be accepted by them, I don't think it was until the first time we played basketball together that they began to look from my yamulka to my face and see who I really was. I played a lot of basketball in those first few months, in fact in addition to giving me a much better understanding of the rabbinic position, Vista has really improved my jump shot.

At Vista religion is a basic part of a child's treatment. Residents are required to attend either Jewish or Christian worship services every Friday, a blessing is said before every meal, and as the rabbinic intern I teach B'nai Mitzvah and Confirmation classes for kids who are interested. The difficulty as you might imagine is that religion has come to represent everything in their life that they have rebelled against. It represents what their parents always thrust upon them, even if as with many of our kids their parents were not giving a consistent message. Religion in their eyes involves rules ad obligations, it is hard and the language is foreign or complex. At Vista particularly religion is what the establishment wants them to be involved in so for many kids it is exactly what they want to keep clear of.

Not knowing where to turn or what to try next, and realizing that a basketball playing Rabbi was not exactly what I was assigned here to do. I began a question and answer moment in our Friday night services. In the first weeks few kids dared to raise their hands, so I started asking them questions, and bringing in religious objects. I

remember one evening I was talking with them about the V'ahavtah, and explaining not only what it meant but where they could find it. I told them it was inside the mezzuzah on the front door of the synagogue. They didn't believe me so I took out my Swiss army knife and unscrewed the mezzuzah, unrolled the scroll inside and passed it around. They thought this was really cool. In fact they liked it so much that I heard from staff the next week that a few kids had spent the weekend unscrewing all the mezzuzoth in their dorm and collecting the scrolls. At that group of kids became my first B'nai Mitzvah students as I went with to put the scrolls back until they could read what they said.

For a while we did a lot more talking in our Friday night services than praying. The kids had lots of questions and as we got to know each other better they felt more comfortable asking them. They asked a lot about heaven and hell, and sin and repentance. They were really interested in Kashrut and liked to hear stories of Chelm and Jewish times of old. They started to get into the singing we would do and with the help of our song leader a few kids would prepare a Jewish song every week. Sometime around winter break, kids started to come by my office to talk, study Hebrew or borrow a Jewish book. I started leading a traditional minyan on Saturday mornings for the two orthodox kids that had just come in and more than a few times other residents would get up early on a Saturday to join us. In time I was tutoring 13 kids for their B'nai Mitzvah, and working with a confirmation class of 5, and their was a core group of kids who played a large role in leading singing and readings for our Friday Services.

But these success are not about me and they cannot be measured by numbers in attendance. What I witnessed happen at Vista and the lesson I will take from this experience to every community I serve as a Rabbi is that religion is a necessity in a person's life. It gives life direction when we are lost, comfort in times of grief, and hope when we no longer have any. A therapist at Vista will tell you that religion is an important part of treatment because it provides a constant the child can depend on and a strong set of morals and values they can adhere too. This is indeed true, but I must add to this that religion is important for kids like these, because it was also for them that God gave us the Torah.

Sometimes I think that the kids I work with at Vista are as lost as we once were marching through the desert. When we lost our way God provided a cloud by day and a fire at night to guide us through the difficult journey. For these kids, again God provides direction to help them chart their course to recovery. Religion and faith are not the answer to it all, it is not a magic pill that one takes and then all is made better, but I am convinced that it is part of the formula, a crucial element in life without which one loses direction, gets off course and ultimately becomes someone they don't need to be. The kids and Vista and I are helping each other find our course in life, Judaism is giving them a view of the world they had forgotten or never had, and they are giving me a view of the rabbinate I never new existed and now want to explore.

My hope is that their experience might be a lesson to us all. If kids that have been let down by so much can somehow find faith again, then we that have been

blessed with so much, or who have endured so much, need not lose our faith but celebrate it, practice it, and help others to find it again. In this way we become the fire by night and the cloud by day that leads our community on its own course through the desert.