

Business meets religion at management seminar

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December 18, 2008

What business does a rabbi have — in business school? Plenty, it turns out, as Rabbi Alan Silverstein discovered during a five-day seminar for rabbis and synagogue administrators at the prestigious Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Chicago.

Silverstein was one of 56 colleagues from the United States, Canada, and Great Britain who attended the program from Nov. 30 to Dec. 4.

Together, they studied such concrete areas of congregational life as fund-raising, relationship building, leadership development, and conflict resolution.

The seminar, said Silverstein, religious leader of Congregation Agudath Israel of West Essex in Caldwell, was “very good timing” as it came on the heels of his synagogue’s recent \$13 million renovation.

“Given that we’ve just moved into our new building, which is double the size of our old one, it is a time to sit back and thoughtfully and effectively plan a new era and address our future needs,” Silverstein said on Dec. 12.

He was joined at Kellogg by the Conservative congregation’s executive director, Rabbi Richard Hammerman.

Explaining that he is “the leader with regard to religious issues and educational philosophy,” Silverstein said, “In terms of managerial issues, the professional with the lead role is the executive director. We have a close collaborative relationship.”

Silverstein said he expects to use a customized program that allows rabbis and congregations to assess the results of innovations. It was designed by Dinah Jacobs, the academic director of the seminar.

“Dinah’s particular specialty is marketing, particularly how you measure the effectiveness of programs you are doing, the customer service you are providing, and how you can improve upon that,” said Silverstein. “That will be enormously helpful.”



Rabbi Alan Silverstein confers with a classmate during five days of management training at Northwestern University

Photo by Evanston Photographic Studios.

The type of training offered at Kellogg should “absolutely” be taught in rabbinical schools, Silverstein said, adding that he expects to see seminaries increase their business education for clergy.

“But the number of required courses in rabbinical school is so over-the-top already, all you will get there is an introduction to these subjects,” said Silverstein. “You won’t really assimilate them into your rabbinate until you’re out in the field.”

The seminar had the added benefit of bringing together colleagues from the major Jewish streams — a rare opportunity in Jewish life.

“They felt a sense of community,” said Jacobs. “They said, ‘We have met colleagues we would never have met before, and we are part of one community.’ We created a custom program, and when you create a custom program you have more chance to create community.”

Although he said he believes “managerial approaches are relatively similar,” Silverstein found the “cross-fertilization of ideas” among the Jewish streams to be quite productive.

“I could have a conversation with Orthodox rabbis about trying to enable day school families to stay in day school in difficult economic times in a different way than I would have that conversation with most of my Reform colleagues, who often do not have a large contingent of day school children,” he said. “The flip side is I can talk to Reform colleagues about helping religious-school families for kids who go to public school in a way that Orthodox rabbis are less positioned to address.”

Silverstein said he plans to stay connected with Kellogg and his fellow students through refresher courses and on-line “webinars.” Even though he does not consider synagogue management his primary responsibility, the rabbi said, “it is important that I understand these things.”