

# News

[Home](#) > [News](#) > Taking the long way to becoming a rabbi



## Taking the long way to becoming a rabbi

By LAUREN MIKALOV

Need to have your driveway paved? Rabbi David Berkman might have a few tips. How about lawsuit advice? Maybe Rabbi Craig Scheff could help. Many of our local rabbis never dreamed way back when that their cap and gown would lead someday to a yarmulke and pulpit. Some once held jobs and professions that were the furthest thing from leading Jewish holidays in prayer, being a counselor to those in need of spiritual guidance, or an expert on Jewish law.

"If you told me that someday I would be a rabbi while I was in high school or college, I would have told you that you are legitimately crazy," said Rabbi Josh Gruenberg, of Congregation Sons of Israel in Upper Nyack, once an aspiring basketball star who majored in political science. "That was the last thing I wanted to be."



**Rabbi Josh  
Gruenberg**

Rabbi Craig Scheff of the Orangetown Jewish Center was a successful corporate lawyer, with degrees from Harvard and Boston University. "I never dreamed I would be a rabbi," said the 1982 graduate of Clarkstown High School North.

Surprisingly, their stories are not that unusual. The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City is seeing more change-of-career rabbis than ever. In fact, according to admissions director and associate dean, Rabbi Charles E. Savenor, this fall will bring three lawyers and one Emmy-award winning film maker to the rabbinical school. Past years have included a plastic surgeon "at the top of his field" and an Oxford PhD recipient who was an author and philosophy teacher. Up until about 2001, there was about one- or two-second career rabbis in each graduating class; today, it is about 10 percent of each class, he said.

Becoming a rabbi requires an enormous commitment: at least five years of full-time study. And after graduation, it remains a full-time role; much like being a physician, calls for help can come at any time of the night or day.

"It's not a quick process and it's not a quick program. I really respect someone who is well respected in their field and then becomes a rabbi," Savenor said.



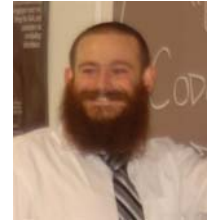
**Rabbi Elizabeth  
Dunsker**

Still, the majority of area rabbis knew their calling from the onset. Rabbi Elizabeth Dunsker of Shir Shalom, Suffern, knew by the age of 16. She entered Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion straight directly from college. She was inspired by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, who taught a workshop about belief in God "at my youth's summer camp program. She was the most impressive person I'd ever met," Dunsker said. Rabbi Yisroel Goldberg of Chabad, New City, also said he knew as a child that he wanted to be a rabbi, and reform Rabbi David Fass of Temple Beth Sholom, New City, went straight to the

rabbinate, becoming ordained in 1973. So what made some end up as rabbis, when it was the furthest thing from their mind growing up?

Raised in a Reform, Dix Hills, N.Y. household, Rabbi Chanan Krivisky, teacher, Chabad and Hilell rabbi at Rockland Community College, graduated with a degree in English Literature at University of Michigan. Shortly after, he became a truth seeking New Age soul, lived on a Native American reservation and studied anthropology. He even checked out Buddhism. From ages 21 to 23, he trekked to California, then to Hawaii, then back to California. He wandered to Oregon, then to Montana, back to Oregon, back to California, and then to Colorado. Along this interesting journey, there were several clues as to what he would become.

"In 2001, at a Rainbow Gathering in Montana, there were different kitchens set up, including one called the Jerusalem kitchen where all the Jews gathered," he recalled. "I was with friends on a road trip from Oregon and decided to check out the Jerusalem kitchen since it was next to the Hawaii kitchen where a lot of my friends were. I put on my first pair of tefilin and spent my first Shabbat there. After that experience, I kept in contact with many of the Jews I had met.



**Rabbi Chanan Krivisky**

"When I was studying Judaism and got to the level of the laws of kaoshrut, I was quite interested in it and that is when I decided I wanted to become a rabbi," he said. "I chose Chabad out of all the different sects of Judaism because it is grounded with roots and concrete rituals and halachot (Jewish laws), yet still fits my spiritual soul. It is the perfect balance of spirituality and down to earth rules for me."

Rabbi Gruenberg, of CSI, always thought growing up in Westchester he would be a professional basketball player. He was the best player among his Jewish day school peers. College burst his bubble, though, and he majored in political science. After teaching at a Jewish day school for a few years, he met an assistant Judaic studies teacher who was also a rabbi. She inspired him to such an extent that Gruenberg applied to rabbinical school.

"I definitely enjoyed teaching, no question about it, but I wanted to do something more. Being a rabbi is a little more intense and a little more substantial. It's a service-oriented career as opposed to a different kind of field. You are involved with people at their most difficult and their best times. You share their tragedy and their joy."

Rabbi Scheff, the successful corporate lawyer, also enjoyed his career but felt spiritually unfulfilled. "I loved many aspects of being a lawyer," he said. "I loved advocating and standing up in front of a judge. I loved the research and always felt comfortable in that role. It was not all bad, but it was not fulfilling. It was empty. I did not come home at the end of the day saying that I made a difference in the world today.



**Rabbi Craig Scheff**

"The minute I walked into the rabbinical seminary for the interview, I knew," he said. "I had two little kids, a nice townhouse in a beautiful community. All of the creature comforts in the world did not make my soul feel better about what I was doing with my life." Scheff sold his home and, with his wife and two small children, moved in with his in-laws in order to attend JTS. "We gave up everything we had in order to start our new life together," he said.

Rabbi Paula Mack Drill, also of OJC, was a social worker before entering JTS for six years of full-time study. She was 40.

"Becoming a rabbi was nothing I dreamed of at all after college," she said.

However, after seeing the first conservative woman JTS graduate, Amy Eilberg, get ordained in 1985, the seed was planted.

"I thought, 'wow, I could do that'," she said. "It was an ideal that sat with me for 12 years and I did not let go of it. I was too busy having four children and loved being a social worker. It stayed as a primary idea in my mind." After her mother's death, she decided it was time to enter rabbinical school. "My dad was already gone, too, and I thought life is too short. Sometimes, life's crisis will kick us into action. I had a midlife crisis and instead of getting a Porsche, I went to rabbinical school," she joked.

"Social work is objective, but now I can be attached to a moral system and a set of rules. I feel like I have to keep earning the title every day." Going to school full-time required the complete support of her husband and children. "We also had a nanny for 10 years who is a family member. I couldn't have done it without her. I also didn't sleep very much. It would be 11 at night and I would be sitting down to study."

Rabbi David Berkman of New City Jewish Center had to sell his side of his road paving business, based in Chicago, in order to become where he is today. "A friend of mine and I started D & D Paving. We made a lot of money and it grew into a real business, a nice business. We paved with asphalt and small parking lots. It's a small business and had an easy start up."

While keeping up the demands of business, Berkman enrolled in the Art Institute of Chicago and earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts. "I was always involved in art. My father was a photographer and is a metal sculptor today. I lived in that world growing up and I thought somehow I would be involved in the arts. I was thrilled to get into the art institute because it was a great environment. My art was very successful, especially sculpture and printmaking. But I needed something more to hold onto."



**Rabbi David Berkman**

After college, like so many other graduates nationwide, Berkman headed off for his European adventure. He ended up in Eastern Europe with his parking-lot paving partner; there, they met many Russian Jews who were not allowed to emigrate to Israel. "We had bought our Eurorail passes and planned to study a few weeks in Poland and on to Germany and France. But we ended up so fascinated by the whole culture of the Eastern Block from the political and Jewish perspective. I was so taken with the Jews of Moscow, Leningrad and Poland that we chucked our train passes and spent the next four or five months in eastern Europe and ended up in Israel.

"The summer before I started JTS, I went to Israel to study Hebrew. I met my wife there, dated for one year and lived in Israel for two years," he said. Rabbi Morris Zimbalist of the Montebello Jewish Center, majored in psychology at Boston University. He used to work at a psychiatric research hospital and co-authored two works on genetic links to mental illness. After studying with local rabbis, he was inspired to enroll in Rabbinical School at JTS, and was ordained in 2002.

Rabbi Scott Bolton, ordained in 2000, is head of Reuben Gittelman Day School, New City. He used to dream about being a fire chief, and then thought about becoming a politician or lawyer. Raised in a Reform home, he graduated from public high school in Mount Olive, N.J., and then studied communications and criminal justice at American University in Washington, D.C. "I was still in college when I started working for the



**Rabbi Paula Mack Drill**



International Association of Fire Chiefs, writing congressional testimony for fire and emergency service leaders and doing cause-related marketing and writing educational material for fire and life safety," he said. He also had a small business, dealing in his artwork and photography.

**Rabbi Scott  
Bolton**

It was his work in political and neighborhood advocacy - watching groups advocate on their own behalf for positive change - that led him to change his own life.

"I really saw the power in groups of organizing around things they cared about," he said.

Believing that there was some other path for him, he consulted the rabbi at the synagogue where he'd grown up. "He said, 'go read Isaiah.'" Reading the prophet opened Bolton's eyes and he felt that he needed to work with people, not just any people, but his people to teach them and help them work for change, both on personal and societal levels

As for making the career switch, Bolton said, "I look at it like this. This is the path that I love for my life and that God has shown me. And I'm trying to make the holiest contribution that I can every step of the way. That really is how I say it. I am ready, if God should have a different mission for me tomorrow. But this is the one that God has here in store for me now.

"The prophet Isaiah really convinced me. Those words really reached down into my soul. I felt that my Jewish neshama, my soul, that the flames were being fanned," he said.

"They all want more," said Savenor, of JTS. "I would say the one thing they all have in common is that they want to spread God's word. For some people, they come to be turned on to Judaism in their adult life and they want to spread that passion to others. The rabbinate is the best vehicle to do that."

***Marla Cohen and Sara Gilbert contributed to this story.***