



Three Ideas from David Ellenson z”l

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Drawing on collective Jewish wisdom and the personal experiences of Hartman’s network of North American and Israeli research fellows, faculty, rabbis, and Jewish communal professionals, our new blog [Notes for the Field](#) offers guidance, inspiration, and support for navigating the challenges facing the Jewish people today.



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There is a teaching in the Talmud (Shabbat 105b) that when a rabbinic scholar dies, everyone is like that person's relative (*hakol ki-krovav*). I understand this teaching to mean that when a great scholar dies, even those who were not that scholar's family feel the loss and need a way to mourn and remember.

Rabbi David Ellenson, PhD, who died in early December, was president of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion from 2001-2013 after many years of serving on the faculty there. He was also a friend of the Shalom Hartman Institute for decades and taught in countless Hartman programs. Last September, he became a fellow at the Institute's Kogod Research Center in North America. I had been a rabbinic student during Rabbi Ellenson's tenure as president, and he ordained me, making the opportunity to work closely with him particularly joyful.

Rabbi Ellenson's scholarly contributions are immense. At a recent gathering of our research fellows in New York, we reviewed his scholarship on modern Jewish orthodoxy among other topics, and we extolled his generosity and kindness. But Rabbi Ellenson was not only a scholar; he had a well-earned reputation as a Jewish leader as well. I'm writing today to share with you three pearls that emerge from his scholarship, his leadership, and how he lived his life. All three—life, leadership, and ideas—are worthy of our attention.

First: **Judaism is a tradition that can, does, and must *evolve***, which Ellenson understood, in the words of his teacher Jacob Katz, as tradition and change. Ellenson's personal biography—growing up Orthodox and then becoming a Reform Rabbi and eventually president of the Reform movement's seminary—testifies to this commitment and belief. But so does his scholarship, much of which focused on modern Orthodox *responsa*, especially from Orthodox rabbis who pursued flexibility within the tradition when they felt it was needed. To cite one characteristic example, in his review of a David Hartman essay for the *New Jewish Canon*, Ellenson highlights how Hartman strove to “interpret and renew the Jewish legal tradition so as to demonstrate its vitality,” in part to reconnect with Jews who did not find the tradition compelling.

Second: **a diaspora Jew should pursue a deep relationship with Israel, with the courage to critique when called for**. Born less than a year before the founding of the state, Ellenson's commitment to Israel appears throughout his writings and leadership decisions. I entered HUC the year after Ellenson made his controversial

but admirable (and firm) decision to require a year of study in Jerusalem for Reform rabbinic students; he was fond of saying, “the path to ordination goes through Jerusalem.” In more recent years, Ellenson felt compelled to use his reputation to publicly express concern about actions by the state that he found troubling. In 2014 he joined Deborah Lipstadt to write an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* about the nation-state law that was then under consideration in the Knesset. They conclude, “For many decades, Jews such as us feared—and often rightly so—that criticism on our part could provide ammunition to those who opposed Israel’s existence. Now, to a certain degree, the tables are reversed. In speaking out against such a bill, we speak for the future good of the Israel we cherish.” Ellenson grew to become what we might call a “connected critic,” a leader whose deep connection with the State of Israel included occasional public disagreements.

Third, **a teacher of Jewish tradition should strive to show interest in their students’ lives.** This pearl is rooted in Ellenson’s behavior, perhaps one of his superpowers. He showed genuine interest and concern for the lives of those around him, especially his students. He knew the names of partners, maybe their kids too, along with details he could ask about the next time he saw them. And it meant taking time to connect: I was one of many people on his list of “lunch dates trying to be scheduled” when he died. The result was, as noted by his many eulogizers, that everyone felt close to him.

Judaism as a tradition that changes, particularly in response to modernity, a loving relationship with Israel that is not beyond public critique, and following the lives of your students: these three ideas, among the hundreds that Rabbi David Ellenson was committed to, are each worthy of our attention.

To all who knew and loved him, especially his partner Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson and their family, we say: may his memory be for a blessing. At the Shalom Hartman Institute, it already is.

More opportunities to learn from David Ellenson:

- [American Judaism: The Chain Novel](#) (David Ellenson on Identity/Crisis, March 2023)
- [David Ellenson’s short essay about David Hartman’s *A Living Covenant*](#) (reprinted from *The New Jewish Canon*, 2020)

- [The State of Faith in North American Jewry](#), a 2012 panel in Jerusalem with Art Green and Yehuda Kurtzer (Ellenson's remarks begin at 22:35)