In 1873, Isaac Meyer Wise convoked a meeting of the representatives of thirty-four congregations in order to form a confederation of synagogues. “It is the primary object of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations,” they wrote into their founding Constitution, “to establish a Hebrew Theological Institute . . . to establish, sustain, and govern a seat of learning for Jewish religion and literature.”1 Two years later, a renamed Hebrew Union College was founded. Wise recognized that a growing American Jewish community could not possibly develop without its own seminary and that no such institute could survive without a firm financial foundation. Once a coalition of synagogues could be formed (effectuated principally by Wise’s own congregational president, Moritz Loth) dedicated to the founding—and funding—of an institute, the actual creation of the program would follow close behind.

I am personally intrigued that it took eight years from the opening of the College in order to ordain its first class. What did the students study over that span of time? Historian Michael Meyer asserted that Wise planned for an eight-year curriculum from the start: four years of preparatory education and four years collegiate. All of the classes, however, would be given in conjunction with classes to be taken at a high school and then the University of Cincinnati. The motivation for this course of study, Meyer suggests, was “the type of rabbi called for . . . was not the legal scholar and decisor . . . The rabbi was to preach, to conduct services, to teach children, to be a pastor to his flock. He was also to be a scholar, but his scholarship was expected to extend to secular learning as well as to Jewish studies.”2

Today, nearly 140 years since Rabbi Wise and an assistant, Solomon Eppinger, presided in the basement of the Mound Street Synagogue over a class of “fourteen noisy boys . . . Four of them wanted to study; ten wanted to make noise,”3 HUC developed a campus in Cincinnati, merged with New York’s Jewish Institute of Religion, and opened centers in Los Angeles and Jerusalem. It is the oldest rabbinic seminary in North America and one of the oldest in the world. Yet, it is remarkably true to the initial vision of
Isaac Meyer Wise. It is founded on the financial support of a union of North American congregations, and it seeks to train rabbis (as well as cantors, educators, and Jewish nonprofit managers) who are not just legal scholars and decisors.

From Wise’s death in 1900, HUC (and after 1950, HUC-JIR) has been led by seven presidents. The sixth of those presidents, Dr. David Ellenson, took on leadership at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For the twelve years he led the institution, he had to confront the myriad challenges of preserving and developing an international institution through a period of pronounced changes—economic, intellectual, and spiritual—in the Reform Movement. And through that time, he also managed to teach, study, and publish at the highest level of scholarship. In 2012, Rabbi Ellenson announced his plan to retire by 2014. In anticipation of his retirement, I asked him and a few colleagues to each write a paper for the *Journal* as a tribute to his service to the College-Institute. David has kindly contributed a reflection on the forces and influences that moved a small-city Orthodox Jew to the leadership of the premier scholarly institute of Reform Judaism. Robert Levine has provided a personal reflection on his friend and colleague, a relationship that reaches back to their first days together at the New York school of the College-Institute. Rachel Adler, who acquired her doctorate under Rabbi Ellenson’s supervision, adds a scholarly consideration of the Talmudic concept of lament, a reflection of Ellenson’s academic influence.

Having established a confederation of synagogues and a rabbinic seminary, Isaac Meyer Wise, in 1889, completed the triad by organizing a rabbinic collegium, the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Only a few years later, the Conference began to entertain the idea of setting up a process that would regulate the search and hiring of rabbis. It took a mere seventy years in order to turn this idea into a functioning placement system. Alan Henkin, current director of Rabbinic Placement, has captured the fits and starts that characterized this long gestation period in “The Unholy Scramble for Pulpits.”

This issue includes a number of articles that analyze classic sources. Two—Henry A. Zoob’s reading of the three “wife-sister” stories in Genesis, and Karl A. Plank’s discussion of the encounter between R. Eliezer and the Sages over the oven of Aknai—mine new insights from familiar texts. Two others—Yoni Regev’s raising
the permissibility of cremation, and Scott Hoffman’s investigation of the shifting understanding of repentance from biblical to Rabbinic thought—bring to bear less familiar texts to well-known tropes of Jewish practice. While these articles investigate the textually or thematically familiar, two more papers—Gary Stein’s explication of the surprising impact of General Grant’s Civil War directive to expel Jews, and Shai Afsai’s description of an Ethiopian Jewish ceremony—bring to light little-known but valuable elements of the Jewish corpus of knowledge.

There is hardly a single unifying theme that binds together the contributions to this issue of the CCAR Journal, and yet seeping through many of the articles is the sense of discovery: David El­lenson finding a liberal vision of Judaism even within an Orthodox household; Shai Afsai uncovering an extraordinary ceremony among an ancient but mostly isolated community of Jews; the CCAR finally hitting upon a formula that will allow for the regulation of the placement of its members in Reform congregations; and many more. I hope that this issue will foster a sense of discovery among you.

Paul Golomb, Editor

Notes

3. Ibid., 19.