

When a *nasi* - President dies, everyone rends their garments (Mishne torah mourning laws 15:9)

Rabbi Aaron D. Panken, Ph.D., 12th President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, z"l

We are terribly saddened to announce the untimely death of Rabbi Aaron Panken, Ph.D., President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, who died tragically in a plane crash on May 5, 2018. He served as the 12th President in HUC-JIR's 143-year history.



Dr. Panken led the four-campus international institution of higher learning and seminary for Reform Judaism. HUC-JIR's campuses in Cincinnati, Jerusalem, Los Angeles and New York provide the academic and professional training programs for the Reform Movement's rabbis, cantors, educators, and nonprofit management professionals, and offer graduate programs for scholars of all faiths. HUC-JIR's 4,000 active alumni serve the Reform Movement's 1.5 million members and nearly 900 congregations, representing the largest Jewish denomination in North America, and the growing Progressive Movement in Israel and around the world.

Rabbi Panken was a distinguished rabbi and scholar, dedicated teacher, and exemplary leader of the Reform Movement for nearly three decades. As a product of the Reform Movement's camps, youth movement, and seminary, his passionate commitment to Reform Judaism, to the State of Israel, and to the Jewish people worldwide inspired his efforts to ensure HUC-JIR's academic excellence in fulfilling its sacred mission. As HUC-JIR President, Rabbi Panken implemented his transformative vision by forging strategic planning initiatives: embedding new technology in support of student learning and administration, strengthening recruitment to yield the largest incoming classes in a decade, launching new Jewish education, nonprofit management, and entrepreneurship programs and academic partnerships, and invigorating the ties linking HUC-JIR's four campuses in Cincinnati, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, and New York and their larger communities and regions. He was a staunch advocate for religious pluralism in Israel and was proud to have ordained the 100th Israeli Reform rabbi graduating from HUC-JIR's Israeli Rabbinical Program on November 16, 2017. It was his vision to renovate and transform the Jerusalem campus into a dynamic educational and cultural center for the larger public. He exponentially increased the number of Israelis studying for the rabbinate, as educators pastoral caregivers, and interfaith teachers for tolerance on the Jerusalem campus.

Rabbi Panken was elected HUC-JIR President by the Board of Governors on July 31, 2013. His appointment was effective on January 1, 2014 and he was installed on June 8, 2014 in Cincinnati. Ordained by HUC-JIR in New York in 1991, Rabbi Panken previously served as Vice President for Strategic Initiatives (2007-2010), Dean of the New York Campus (1998-2007), and Dean of Students (1996-1998). He joined the HUC-JIR faculty in 1995, and taught Rabbinic and Second Temple Literature, with research interests in the historical development of legal concepts and terms; narrative development; and development of holiday observances. His publications included *The Rhetoric of Innovation* (University Press of America, 2005), which explored legal change in Rabbinic texts, the newly published, co-edited *Engaging Torah: Modern Perspectives on the Hebrew Bible*, and articles in leading academic journals and scholarly volumes.

Rabbi Panken strove for ongoing innovation and creativity in strengthening HUC-JIR as the intellectual center of Progressive Judaism worldwide, with its renowned faculty of scholars and thought leaders and internationally recognized library, archive, and museum research resources. Rabbi Panken stated, "Our mission is to help our students grow into authentic Jewish thought leaders, able to articulate and advance their own visions of a rich Jewish life for a new and rapidly changing religious landscape. We are shaping a compelling message that will have an impact on the largest denomination of Jews in North America and the growing Progressive Jewish community in Israel and worldwide."

An ardent supporter of Reform Judaism in Israel, Rabbi Panken said, "As the only North American seminary with a full campus and programs in Israel, we are uniquely positioned to influence both Israeli and North American society, and to ensure that the relationship between these two great centers of Jewish life continues and thrives. We will work hard to improve the understanding and integration of Reform Jews worldwide with our Jewish State and with all our global partners."

An alumnus of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship, Dr. Panken earned his doctorate in Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. He was on the faculty for the Wexner Foundation and the Editorial Board of *Reform Judaism Magazine*, and served on the Rabbinical Placement Commission, the Birthright Education Committee, the CCAR Ethics Committee, and in a variety of other leadership roles within the Reform Movement and the greater Jewish community. He lectured widely at academic conferences and synagogues throughout North America and as visiting faculty at universities in Australia and China. Prior to teaching at the College-Institute, he served as a congregational rabbi at Congregation Rodeph Sholom in New York City and as a rabbinical intern at Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, NY. A native of New York City who graduated from Johns Hopkins University's Electrical Engineering program, Rabbi Panken was a certificated commercial pilot and sailor.

At his inauguration convocation, he said, "For me, Reform Judaism has always symbolized what I consider to be the best of Judaism – firmly rooted in our tradition, yet egalitarian, inclusive of patrilineal Jews and intermarried families, welcoming to the LGBT community, politically active, and respectful of other faiths and ideologies."

Rabbi Panken most recently presided over the New York Graduation Ceremonies on May 3, where he said, "Our celebration comes, this year, amidst a particularly challenging and painful world, one that in many respects transcends anything I have seen in my lifetime. We now live in a world in which truth is distorted, basic institutions of American life like the press, the courts, the electoral system, the FBI, the beautiful mosaic of immigration that made this country what it is, the dignity and value of public leadership and civil service, egalitarianism and a woman's right to choose, and so many others, are threatened in ways we simply could not have imagined a mere two years ago. We see countries long civilized reverting to policies of nationalism and tactics of scapegoating reminiscent of our darkest times. We labor under the challenges of privacy and the ability for noxious leaders to spread their message ever more broadly and more efficiently through warped use of social media, cynical and often violent supremacist protests, and through targeting innocent immigrants as vicious criminals. But here's the thing: the Jewish people, and our religious friends of other faiths, have seen this before, and we have lived through it, and thrived and built again and again and again. We are a people of action and courage, of innovation and fearlessness, of adaptation and endless creativity."

He added, "The work of our alumni continues to make an enormous difference in our world. When tragedy strikes, in Parkland and Houston, in the Caribbean and Charlottesville, in Los Angeles and Santa Rosa, our alumni are there. For Syrian and Iraqi immigrants, in congressional offices fighting for sensible gun safety, in hospitals and in classrooms, in innovative synagogues and new communities everywhere, our alumni are there. There is nothing in the world that makes me prouder, and nothing can make me more certain of the extraordinary Jewish future we have ahead of us, than knowing who they are and what they are doing, and seeing how they have produced the next generation of committed, learned Jews, through their hard work and their wisdom."

Rabbi Panken is survived by his wife, Lisa Messinger, his children Eli and Samantha, his parents Beverly and Peter, and his sister, Rabbi Melinda Panken of Congregation Shaari Emeth in Manalapan, NJ.