



In September 2003, Richard M. Joel celebrated his investiture as the fourth president of Yeshiva University. He comes to the YU presidency from Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, where for 14 years he enjoyed enormous success in strengthening Jewish campus life internationally as president and international director. He holds both a B.A. and J.D. from NYU, and was a Root-Tilden law scholar. Early in his career, he was Cardozo's associate dean for business affairs during the 1980s and taught both Professional Responsibility and Legal Writing at the Law School. Two months after Joel's investiture, *Cardozo Life* editor Susan Davis met with him for this interview.



# An Interview with Yeshiva University President Richard M. Joel



**DAVIS:** Why don't we start with a reminiscence of Cardozo?

**JOEL:** I had a wonderful sojourn at Cardozo, where I worked for about eight years. I had finished law school a few years earlier and was working at the Bronx DA's office. Dr. Lamm, who was then president, lured me to Yeshiva to build an alumni office. He got my boss, Mario Merola, to agree to give me a two-year leave of absence. I enjoyed legal public service very much, but I was excited to be at Yeshiva.

As the two years came to an end, there was a recognition that Cardozo needed someone to help administer the school, especially during a time of transition—Dean Monrad Paulsen had just passed away and Lester Brickman had become acting dean. I agreed to try the job for three months. The faculty was very gracious and inviting; both they and I found it to be a good match and I stayed on.

When Monroe Price became dean several months later, he asked me to be associate dean and chief operating officer. Cardozo was a very exciting place. It was a young school, but from the very beginning it had a world-class faculty. Everyone had great aspirations for Cardozo to become a major law center that would send students off to fix the world.

**DAVIS:** How did you like working with Monroe?

**JOEL:** Monroe is an outside-the-box thinker, a possibility thinker—both in terms of education and marketing. He wanted Cardozo to be a “personal” school where a student could shape how he or she wanted to be equipped to practice law. Monroe was great—and a master teacher for me. He helped me realize that creative thinking is what's needed to meet challenges in new and different ways.

I always think of him as the Norman Vincent Peale of education—a

believer in possibilities. My job then was to help create a tone of warmth at the Law School, to make sure that services were delivered effectively, and to refine and make real those ideas that Monroe manufactured daily.

During his years, there was tremendous change, experimentation, and growth. It was also a time when the University and Law School were learning to live together. There was vitality and newness, and some of the programs Cardozo is best known for started during Monroe's tenure: programs like ITAP, our Criminal Law Clinic, the entertainment law program, and our moot court program. And that's when the legal writing program became one of the best.

**DAVIS:** Now fast forward 15 years. Some of the things that you mention, like newness and creativity, are the qualities we still pride ourselves on. How do you think Cardozo has changed?

**JOEL:** It seems to me that Cardozo has been weaned from its infancy and has developed a mature personality, one that prides itself on creativity, the personal nature of the school, the ability to deliver dreams—and be successful.

The student body has grown stronger, which is a tribute to the quality of the faculty, as well as to the achievements of the early graduating classes. Through their professional pursuits, they have enhanced Cardozo's reputation even more.

Now, Cardozo is under the leadership of a dean who comes from the faculty—a former colleague of mine when I was associate dean. I knew David then as a stellar legal educator. Now he is a stellar leader who has done heroic work. I find him to be the greatest of partners, because there is trust, confidence, and mutual support—and a creative tension that comes from knowing we have parallel but not identical objectives. That's the way a healthy university is supposed to work.

**DAVIS:** It must have been pretty exciting and interesting for you to return.

**JOEL:** It meant a great deal to me that when my appointment was announced I received a message from the Cardozo faculty welcoming back the “prodigal son.” The welcome was wonderfully warm. You know, we had been soul mates. We shared dreams. And as educators, we want to give dreams to our students.

Keep in mind that when I left Cardozo, Jacob Burns was chairman of the board. I was teaching legal ethics and professional responsibility, which I really loved. It brought me close to Jack Burns, who was an ethicist. When I went on to Hillel, the first major benefaction came from Jack. He made a \$1 million gift to establish an endowment for an ethics program, which helped launch me. He had a very strong influence on my life.

So when I returned to Cardozo, I found a new Jacob Burns Moot Court that would make Jack cry with joy. His grandson, Barry Shenkman, is treasurer of the Board—a great validation of Jack's life. I think Jack Burns was very emblematic of Cardozo. He was serious as an attorney and he was an accomplished

painter. That same flair for excellence and ethics, for rigor and creativity, has remained the signature of Cardozo.

**DAVIS:** Are there certain ideas or priorities that you and the dean have discussed for Cardozo?

**JOEL:** I am delighted that the visions I hear articulated are ones I embrace myself. It is important to have the world see Cardozo's great qualities: the dimension of its programs, its rigorous curriculum, and esteemed faculty. One of my jobs as president is to draw attention to these attributes, but I also think I should be asking hard questions of Cardozo—and all the schools—to help frame the responses. I will be partnering with David and with the



We must dream dreams,  
but we have to **work** towards them.

I believe presidential leadership is about  
**creating**  
communities and creating conversations  
about our futures and destinies.

faculty to conceptualize the future, and help attract new faculty, philanthropic support, and the best students.

**DAVIS:** At your investiture you spoke of YU as a vehicle to “ennoble and enable.” I know the law is often seen as a noble profession. Our current students are facing increased tuition, greater student debt, and a small loan forgiveness program. They are hesitant to take public service jobs, which usually pay considerably less than those in the private sector. Since public service employment is often seen as the more “noble” side of the legal profession, do you have a plan in place to alleviate some of the student burden at Cardozo?

**JOEL:** I think public service is important; it is the field of law I went into. But it is not the specific field one enters; rather it is how one conducts oneself within that field. Everyone practicing the law should do so with nobility.

That being said, I believe there is a crisis in this country and a conflict in terms of how we advance civilization through service and yet send an opposing message in how we compensate important service providers like educators, or health care workers, for example. So, part of the solution rests with the university, part with our society. It is important that we use our respective bully pulpits as university presidents, deans, and trustees to make sure our society and government face up to their responsibilities in this equation and that collectively we ensure that we have a world worth living in.

Many public policy decisions affect how we charge for legal education and what programs we offer. Society has a very strong interest in making sure that we provide the most rigorous legal education we can. How then do you turn to an institution that has labored to

create a school of excellence and say, “Now, you better figure out how your program is not going to cost a lot of money”?

There are segments of society who may ask, “Why have you, Yeshiva University, made a commitment to build the Rolls Royce of law schools?” My answer? Because that’s what we do. Certainly that’s what the founding faculty wanted to do and what the trustees today want to do. They want an institution of excellence because our children deserve no less. If we can’t save money on faculty, courses, location, recruitment, or placement—and we can’t—then, how do we pay for all of

this? I think we have to put all these challenges out to the philanthropic community, including the need for scholarships that encourage our students to go into public service. Am I supportive of working with the dean to find funding sources? You bet!

**DAVIS:** You have been hosting town hall meetings at which you said you are developing an overall strategic plan with the administration. Is there a timetable for the plan, or are there parts that you can now discuss?

**JOEL:** Much about my strategic plan is described in my investiture speech, which is available online to any insomniac. I believe presidential leadership is about creating communities and creating conversations about our futures and destinies. Therefore, the town hall meetings are really part of my plan.

The full plan is a challenge to the YU community to move in partnership: all of the component parts—the different schools, students, alumni, people of good will—to grow stronger and deliver the best education possible. At Cardozo, the challenge is not so difficult because for years the Board, deans, and faculty have been thinking strategically. Dean Rudenstine is looking



very deliberately at concrete steps to move Cardozo forward. He is developing key metrics of measurement to mark success. I hope by the end of the academic year that each school will proffer their long-term plans and that the trustees will embrace them. Then together we will move forward to make those plans a reality.

My hope is that the Cardozo Board will look at the price tag and say, “We have to help pay for the plan.” Hopefully the alumni will say, “Yes, this is what we want and we are going to help by providing jobs for students,

They want excellence. My goal is to raise aspirations while managing expectations. We must dream dreams, but we have to work toward them. I would like to be in the right venues to provoke conversation, community, and planning. If the right vehicle for that is a town hall meeting at the Brookdale Center, then let’s do it.

**DAVIS:** On a similar note, I understand that you lived in the dormitory on the Yeshiva College campus part-time for four months last spring. What was that like? You

must have found enlightenment there that is propelling you on some level.

**JOEL:** When you bond over the banality of laundry, it creates a special relationship.

If you are going to lead, you have to listen; therefore, you need to be in a place where you can hear the voices. One very real way for me to do that was to live in the dormitories. I hoped that I was helping to create a new mood and a tone. I was trying to be a defining force in the culture, a president who cared enough to live in the dormitory.

I have spent the past 15 years listening to students at campuses around the world. I know who students are. I hear their voices and their dreams. The opportunity to live on campus validated my belief in how wonderful young people are. This is not a cynical generation—it is one that is looking for meaning, one that wants their lives to matter, yet is practical and realistic about the challenges that await them. And they want to cast a shadow—one in technicolor, not black and white.

**DAVIS:** Do you think it is your ability to hear young people, your ability to lead, or is it other qualities that make you feel you will succeed at YU as you did so well at Hillel?

**JOEL:** Like everything else, it’s smart to be lucky. Timing is not everything, but it’s a lot. At Hillel I came into a position where people were looking for the next steps, and I was able to articulate a direction. I really like people. I really like young people—and I’m a passionate educator. My Jewishness informs my life in ways I hope are broad. And I believe in the possibility of possibilities.

I’m a good impresario. Yeshiva is a very strong university, as Cardozo is a very strong law school. Both can rest on their laurels, doing quite nicely. However, our community does not want that. Why? Because it is not enough. We want this university to be at the forefront of universities committed to the value of values. We believe we have much more music to write and songs to sing. ■



(From left) Dean Rudenstine, Libby Pataki, President Joel, Cardozo Board Chair Earle I. Mack at Cardozo ribbon-cutting marking the president’s investiture.

by teaching in the Intensive Trial Advocacy Program, or legal writing program, or moot court. We will interview prospective students and be cheerleaders for the School. And hopefully the University trustees will be supportive as well by saying this is a coherent program of ennobling and enabling.

As president, I will advance the vision and be a solid partner to Dean Rudenstine. Remember, a strategic plan is a way to live; it is not a final destination. It is dynamic and it should continue to be amended. I hope that this year we will set a good beginning to our race. This is not a sprint; it is a marathon.

**DAVIS:** Are you planning town hall meetings for the graduate schools and the alumni too?

**JOEL:** I will hold town hall meetings any place people believe they will be helpful. In what ways will I add value? I take my guidance from my deans, my trustees, and my students. At the first two meetings, I learned a lot, and I think people felt good about them.

Young people want to matter. They want community.