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## Rabbi aims to bridge gaps in Jewish education

**Vicky Tobianah**  
Special to The CJN

**W**hen Rabbi Lawrence Hajioff was growing up, he wanted to break the Jewish stereotype of becoming a lawyer or a doctor and instead opted to fulfil a different one by becoming a comedian.

Little did he realize that his love of laughter would lead him to become a rabbi. He is now the official rabbi for Birthright Israel in Manhattan, the Jewish educator at the Jewish Enrichment Center in New York and a teacher at Stern College, the women's division of Yeshiva University in New York.

Known as an inspiring and comedic teacher from Stern College, Rabbi Hajioff will be in Toronto on June 16 to deliver the keynote address at the Yeshiva University (YU) Torah MiTzion Beit Midrash fundraiser, honouring the beit midrash's second year in Toronto and its partnership with YU Canada.

Originally from London, England, Rabbi Hajioff grew up with a yeshiva education but called it "uninspiring." He did not take his Jewish studies too seriously and instead dreamed of becoming a comedian.

His role models were not his yeshivish rabbis but comedic acts including Mel Brooks, Monty Python and Jackie Mason. He ended up working for MTV in production, and ironically, it was there that he became reconnected to his Jewish roots.

"I grew up with a lot of rabbis who were nice, but I couldn't relate to them. When I started working for MTV, a few of my non-Jewish friends encouraged me to get involved in Jewish activities. After working in media for a few years, I realized I needed more from life," he said.

Rabbi Hajioff recalled the moment he realized he wanted to learn more about his Jewish faith.

"I was on a bus when a priest sat next to me, and he asked if I was Jewish and if he could ask me a question about the Ten Commandments. I was Jewish and I had received a Jewish education, but I couldn't even name all the Ten Commandments. So I answered him the best I could, but I realized I needed to know more about my own traditions since a priest knew more about my religion than I did," he said.

After this incident, he began taking classes and meeting new rabbis. He went back to yeshiva and began to love what he was studying, which prompted him to start studying for his smichah.

Nowadays, he is known as the "funny rabbi in New York who can relate to college students and young professionals."

One of his famous talks is called "Why Jews become comedians," which he will be delivering in Toronto on Thursday.



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**Rabbi Hajioff handing out a copy of "The Big Book of Jewish Humor" to Birthright Alumni participants.**

He believes that comedy is deep-rooted in the Jewish people, attributing the first Jewish joke to have been told after the Jews were standing at the Red Sea and asked Moses, "Are there no graves in Egypt that we have to die here?"

"Inside the Jewish people is the ability to laugh because Jews had to deal with desperate situations and comedy was our way to deal with tough times," Rabbi Hajioff said.

He also works with Jewish alcoholics and addicts through an organization called JACS. He met all kinds of people, from Chassidim to completely secular Jews dealing with the same problems.

"It was the most incredible unity I had ever seen," he said.

He quickly learned that everyone has baggage.

"There is a disease in our generation of low self-esteem. This causes a lot of problems, and most of my job is now relationship counselling because people are waiting for the 'perfect' person they see on TV. I spend a lot of time dragging people to the chupah," he said, laughing.

After becoming ordained as a rabbi, he was selected to be the official rabbi of Birthright Manhattan.

He works with Birthright alumni who "have been sparked" and want to learn more about their religion.

He travels to Israel three times a year with more than 80 students to provide students with a deeper, more meaningful experience of Israel and runs programs and classes at the Jewish Enrichment Center in New York.

One of his most successful programs is called the adult bar and bat mitzvah program for which he gives bar and bat mitzvahs to adults in their mid-20s who have never had one.

"I have people come to me who have been to Israel on Birthright, and they come back and ask

'what next?' My centre fills in that gap, maintaining the connection people felt on Birthright so it doesn't disappear. Birthright sparks, but we have to keep the flame alive."

His goal is to provide young professionals with a place to meet other Jews, learn about their traditions in a fun, inspiring setting.

"In colleges, there are usually Jewish organizations that keep students involved in Jewish life, but where do you go for your Jewish fix once college is over? We fill that void."

It is especially important for Rabbi Hajioff to fill in that gap, considering the majority of Jews do not get married in college and will meet their spouses when they are in their mid-20s.

Many people say the biggest challenge facing the Jewish community is intermarriage and assimilation but, according to Rabbi Hajioff, these are just symptoms of a larger problem.

"The real challenge is the lack of an inspiring Jewish education, making kids enjoy and want to be Jewish. The 'just say no' campaign for drugs failed because students want answers to their questions. It's the same way with Judaism. Negative advertising, like telling your kid not to inter-marry, won't work because they need a real authentic Jewish education," the rabbi said.

He added that being Jewish can be inspiring. Many young professionals who come to him say that they have never met a rabbi they feel connected to.

"The Jewish educational system has failed us to some degree, but it is changing and I am hopeful. Toronto is on the leading edge of this and has a lot of inspiring communities here," he said.

"There is a tremendous need for spirituality and authenticity in our generation. I help give people the tools to look at Judaism themselves, to empower them to take their Judaism and pass it along to others. If we make Jews passionate about Judaism when they had no passion to start with, that's a real sign of success."

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**Rabbi Lawrence Hajioff**