

When Dr. Nelson Glueck, President of HUC-JIR (1948-1971), met with Prime Minister David Ben Gurion in 1959 to discuss the acquisition of land to build a branch of HUC-JIR in Jerusalem, Glueck promised that he would bring all of his rabbinical students to Israel for a year of study. In 1970, he fulfilled his pledge and established the Year-In-Israel Program as a mandatory first year of study for all rabbinical students.

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PROMISE FULFILLED:

THE YEAR-IN-ISRAEL PROGRAM

by Ginny Ben-Ari and Rose Ginosar

Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, Glueck's successor as President (1971-1996), nurtured and enlarged the program to include the students in the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at HUC-JIR/ Los Angeles and the cantorial students in the School of Sacred Music at HUC-JIR/New York. These founders' vision is now being sustained by Rabbi David Ellenson's commitment to strengthening this Program and to instilling HUC-JIR's students with a profound sense of Jewish peoplehood rooted in the Israel experience.

The Year-In-Israel Program, by its very existence, affirms the abiding conviction of the Reform Movement and of all Jews that *kol yisrael areivin zeh la'zeh* – that all of Israel is responsible for one another.

“An ideological commitment to Israel has animated and informed our institution's educational policy for over three decades,” states Rabbi Ellenson. “It is a policy that holds that the State of Israel occupies a central position in the life of the Jewish people and religion, and that all persons whom we educate for roles of leadership in the Jewish community must have an extended first-hand acquaintance with the reality of Jewish national rebirth as evi-



The 65 first-year rabbinical, cantorial, and education students in the 2003-04 Year-In-Israel class – the largest in over twenty years – along with their Israeli Rabbinical Program colleagues and faculty.

denced in the State today. For all these reasons, HUC-JIR asserts that a significant Israel experience must be an integral part of the education we provide. HUC-JIR unequivocally regards the Year-In-Israel

Program in Jerusalem as the normative program for all our entering students.”

The impact of the Year-In-Israel Program on Reform Jewry worldwide can be seen in the leadership of the contemporary Reform Movement. Many graduates of the Program now lead the administration of HUC-JIR and the Union for Reform Judaism. They comprise 85% of North American congrega-

tional rabbis, and approximately half of the active cantors and educators. These Jewish professional men and women have experienced life in Israel first-hand, are able to communicate in modern Hebrew, and continue to build vital relationships between Israel and world Jewry through the commonality of *Am Israel*.

This year's class of 65 Year-In-Israel students is the largest in over twenty years. As in every year, the students are a diverse group. Their ages range from 21 to 50, and they hail from small towns to large cities, from the United States and Canada, to as far away as Australia. Many have grown up within the Reform Movement while others have traveled different paths before reaching HUC-JIR. Some have spent significant amounts of time in Israel, while others are experiencing their first encounter through the Program.

Together they all share this year, this time. It is an exhilarating journey – emotional, spiritual, and sometimes unsettling. The intensity of the program is often frustrating, but always rewarding.

The Year-In-Israel curriculum has changed over the years and continues to develop as students are challenged academically while involved in Israeli life and culture. The year begins with an intensive text and site study

orientation to ancient and modern Jerusalem and continues as students begin to confront issues and aspects of Israeli society through a weekly course of lectures and field study. Despite their demanding academic schedules, students still find ways to interact in Israeli society, often through their required community service projects.



Rabbinical student Micah Lapidus with his Ethiopian family.

Micah Lapidus volunteers with Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in the Mevasseret Zion Absorption Center. "Every week, I look forward to my volunteer work. Dozens of beautiful children run out to the bus to greet the HUC-JIR volunteers with hugs and shouts when we arrive. During my visits, I forget all the challenges of life in Israel and focus on the simple human connections that our tradition values so highly," he explains.

Other examples of community service include students working as volunteers in battered women's shelters or at centers for promoting dialogue and conflict resolution, or as tutors for underprivileged children at the Reform Kol HaNeshama Congregation.

Acting Dean Rabbi Naamah Kelman encourages faculty to not only teach their academic courses, but to share with the students their personal experiences as Jerusalemites, as Israelis, and as Jews living in the State of Israel. This informal connection often gives students the most powerful educational experience.

Students are also encouraged to develop contacts with their colleagues in the Israeli Rabbinical Program. Rabbi Michael Marmor began his HUC-JIR studies as a

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The Day After the February 22nd Bombing

Excerpts of a *D'var Torah* on *Parshat Terumah*

by Laura Baum, *Year-In-Israel* rabbinical student

I spent the day wondering what I was going to do with my *D'var Torah*: how could I just give it as planned, in light of the terrible tragedy our community had witnessed almost exactly 24 hours before? I decided to reexamine our *parsha*, *Terumah*, and to think about how I now connected to the text differently than I had earlier. After all, we read the same Torah every year, but it is what we bring to that experience, based on our own lives, that informs how we understand it. I discovered that *Parshat Terumah*, which on first glance may just seem like a series of instructions about how to build the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle, may have a lot to say to us this morning.

At a time when we have come together so powerfully as a community to support each other, I began to see the building of the Tabernacle very much as a communal activi-

ty. Although God gave Moshe the instructions, God said "they shall bring Me an offering... they shall make me a sanctuary...and so they shall do." Indeed, community has become a watchword of our faith. In the book of Genesis we read "It is not good for any person to be alone." Later, Rabbi Tarfon tells us in *Pirke Avot* "Do not separate yourself from the community" and Sholom Aleichem observed "Life is with people." Just as the Israelites were a people working together to physically build the *Mishkan*, we are working as a community as we begin to process what is going on around us, and to make sense of it as future leaders.

The journey to Jewish religious leadership is more than an individual spiritual quest, we are part of a people. By being here, we *show* our communities on other continents that we have a visceral personal connection to the State of Israel – we demonstrate this by being here. Though I am sure that we could

somewhat successfully stand in classrooms in North America and Australia and try to convince people that Israel could have meaning in their lives, we serve as real models by simply choosing to be here. Sometimes telling is not enough; we have to act in ways which penetrate the hearts of others. Through our choices and actions, and how we communicate them, we demonstrate what is important to us. Having been created *b'tzelem Elohim*, we have a responsibility to look into each other's faces and to see God – to experience God's presence dwelling among us – and to remember that we have a common experience, and that we are here for each other.



Judaism is a religion that has long valued deed over creed. Each of us may have different reasons and beliefs about why we are here, but we share something in common: we all picked up

our lives and moved to Israel, and we should not discount the importance of that action. Elazar ben Azariah questioned in the first century, "He whose wisdom surpasses his good deeds, to what is he compared? [He is like] a tree whose branches are abundant, but whose roots are few, and the wind comes and uproots it and overturns it." This year we are growing many branches – our knowledge and wisdom are constantly expanding. But I also hope that we are growing roots through our act of being here – that what we do here somehow grounds us.

As a community, we hopefully find a sense of *shalom* – of peace and of wholeness, together. In difficult times, it may not come easily, and it does not happen overnight. It is a work in progress. Just as the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle were given in fractions, this is something that we can strive for, bit by bit.

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student in the Year-In-Israel Program, but completed his studies in the Israeli Rabbinical Program and served in local Israeli congregations before being appointed Dean of HUC-JIR/Jerusalem in 1998. The expansion of the Israeli Rabbinical Program is a priority for him. Today, there are 30 students enrolled in the Israeli program and interaction between the Diasporan and Israeli students is now expressed through joint worship services, study opportunities, seminars, and friendships. The Jerusalem School has become a true forum for creating professional and personal relationships for Reform leadership worldwide.

Nava Hefetz, an Israeli rabbinical student, stresses, “The relationship between the students is reciprocal. We share a common mission and we have a lot to learn from each other. We also don’t have many opportunities to interact with our peers in North America. This is the only time that we can develop lasting relationships.”

The Program facilitates the integration of academic studies with daily life in Jerusalem. “I have been living in Jerusalem for over five months now, and I am surprised that it already feels like home” says rabbinical student Ana Bonnheim. “Maybe it’s because I’m learning how to do all of the routine things – how to pay my phone bill in Hebrew, how to automatically say *‘slicha’* when I bump into somebody instead of ‘excuse me,’ how to dive into an ancient text in a foreign language.” Rabbi Shaul Feinberg, Associate Dean, believes that “physical contact with the soil of the land and with the people who live on it translates an abstract notion of peoplehood into reality.”



Masters in Jewish Education student Mara Michaels in an Old City shop.

The obvious tensions of living in a society coping with the onslaught of terror can take its toll. Students are restricted at times as to where they can go and what they can do. The HUC-JIR administration and faculty see safety and support for students as the number one priority.

Living in Jerusalem and participating in Israeli society, students learn to look beyond the headlines. “The first few words I learned as I explored Jerusalem’s streets and media on my own were words of tension and tragedy: *bitachon*, *neshek*, *hefetz hashood*, *pigua*, *matzav kashah* (security, weapon, suspicious package, attack, critical condition),” recalls rabbinical rabbinical student Josh Strom. “But Israel has a second

vocabulary as well. This is the language we learn as we live our lives: to ask for *nana* (mint) in your water in a restaurant on Emek Refaim, to ask your cab driver *tish-tamesh bimoneh* (use the meter), to play *Rosh*, *K’tfaim*, *Berkaim*, *Etzbaot* (Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes) with the Ethiopian children at the *merkaz klitah* (absorption center), to *ana hamtinu* (please hold) when you have a question about your phone bill. Sometimes, this language has no words, but instead weaves itself into a melody, a prayer, or a moment.”

Students often encounter traditional Jewish prayer and practice for the first time in Israel. In their introductory courses, students learn the basic history, development, and liturgical rubrics of Jewish prayer. Rabbi Rachel Sabath-Beit Halachmi, a lecturer in liturgy, encourages her students to encounter as many different religio-cultural practices as possible in the richness of Jerusalem’s neighborhoods. She says that the students “gain powerful insights into the idea of collective responsibility among all Jews, deepened knowledge of the prayer and text life of the Jewish people, and an intense appreciation for the potential impact of their profession.”

The year that students spend in Israel brings a new perspective to their lives as Jewish professionals. Not only are they involved with the diverse communities in Israel, but they use this year as a springboard to learn and work with emerging Jewish communities worldwide. For example, twenty North American and two Israeli students traveled to communities throughout the Former Soviet Union to conduct Passover seders this year. Their experiences in Israel have informed and enriched their abilities to transmit Jewish culture and learning.

Summing up this exceptional first year of study, rabbinical student Daniel Schwartz says that “living in a Jewish society where Hebrew is the spoken language, businesses close on *Shabbat*, roads are empty on *Yom Kippur*, school is in session on Sunday, and we are able to travel to places that we are studying in our Bible class, has been a wonderful experience that would be impossible to duplicate in our home communities.”



The 3 Dans at Tel Dan’s archaeological excavation site: [from left] cantorial student Daniel Mutlu, and rabbinical students Daniel Schwartz and Daniel Mikelberg