

Picture 26 Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist rabbinical students. Now imagine them swinging pick-axes through a field in El Salvador. While this may not fit our typical model of *Talmud Torah*, eight HUC-JIR students – **Justus Baird**, **Anne Brener**, **Ryan Bauer**, and **Mark Miller** from Los Angeles and **Lisa Cohen**, **Dara Frimmer**, **Ruth Gelfarb**, and **Stuart Seigal** from New York – took part in the first rabbinical student delegation sent to the developing world by the American Jewish World Service in January.

Work in the fields was requisite to a program designed to test both our commitment to and our understanding of *tikkun olam*. We lived for one week in the rural village of Ciudad Romero, named after the Archbishop who was assassinated in 1980, signaling the country's slide into brutal civil war. Death

They displayed warmth and hospitality, opening their homes and telling us about how they fled to Panama before returning to build their village ten years ago. Reforms have been developing slowly, but individual farmers now own small plots of land throughout the country and work with the help of agronomists from the government. For several days in a row, we met these farmers, heard their stories, and learned about their work.

We learned first-hand about the reality of life for these farmers, and our work provided a backdrop for a number of seri-



HUC-JIR and JTS rabbinical students with their host families

Most important, perhaps, were the endless discussions we had amongst ourselves. Our conversations broke down into two primary areas – the nature of *tikkun olam* and the nature of *klal yisrael*.

Repairing the world seems to be a fairly straightforward responsibility, but one of our primary debates was how to prioritize help for the non-Jewish world in the social justice work to which we all aspire. While nobody questioned whether reaching out to those in need was worthwhile, some thought it vital to help Jews first. It remained an open question.

Journey to El Salvador: *Repairing the World, One Small Field at a Time*

BY MARK MILLER, LA '07



HUC-JIR students Dara Frimmer, Mark Miller, and Justus Baird clearing a field in El Salvador.

squads and guerillas left destruction in their wake, and we struggled with stories told to us by people who felt that American dollars had made a bad situation precipitously worse.

Still, we found that the families who hosted us for meals live simple lives. The poverty is apparent but, thankfully, they have roofs over their heads and food in their stomachs.

ous discussions. We spent a significant portion of our time with a former priest named Chenco Alas, who appears to be a Martin Luther King, Jr.-like figure in El Salvador. After heroic activism throughout the civil war, today he preaches Liberation Theology and has been developing something he calls the Theology of Peace.

In addition, Dr. Leonard Fein, founder of *Moment Magazine* and *Mazon*. A Jewish Response to Hunger, accompanied us as our scholar-in-residence. He inspired us with tales of putting ideals into action and prodded us with tough questions about the nature of our responsibility as Jews and as future leaders.

Tilling the fields in Ciudad Romero.

We did not overcome all the difficulties we found in this developing country, but we did make an impact for a small group of Salvadoran farming families. We did not devise a workable plan to achieve *klal yisrael* tomorrow, but we did lay the foundation for action as a group of future rabbis across movement boundaries. And that, in the end, may be the key that allows us to extend this experience past one week in El Salvador and take us one step closer to achieving a dream that knows no bounds – our united Jewish vision of repairing the world one small field at a time.

