

# HUC-JIR'S

The Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program, established by the Wexner Foundation in 1988, augments the Wexner Israel Fellowship Program and Wexner Heritage Foundation as the Foundation's third large-scale initiative designed to strengthen the current and next generation of Jewish leaders. Through these programs, participants ranging from teenagers and

# Wexner

graduate students to professional and lay leaders participate in academic and professional training.

The Wexner Graduate Fellowships are granted on a two-year term basis, renew-

# Graduate

able up to two additional years, to college graduates preparing themselves for academic and professional training in the fields of Jewish education, Jewish communal service, the rabbinate, the cantorate, and Jewish studies. The Fellowships cover full academic tuition and required fees and include a living stipend. While they

# Fellows

by Rachel Litcofsky

are limited to those who have not yet begun their professional training, individuals with prior graduate work in a different field who choose to shift to a Jewish professional discipline are eligible. The Fellows are enrolled in different graduate programs at a wide variety of Jewish seminaries and universities throughout North America.

The College-Institute takes great pride in all of the accomplished men and women who are admitted to our core Jewish professional programs.

Through rigorous application and interview processes they have demonstrated their academic achievement and commitment to careers of leadership. Over the past two decades 50 of these students have been further distinguished by their designation as Wexner Graduate Fellows. There are 10 Wexner Fellows currently enrolled in HUC-JIR's programs.

in diverse Jewish seminaries and universities throughout North America.

HUC-JIR's Wexner Graduate Fellows receive leadership training, peer support, professional mentoring, and networking both during graduate school and throughout their careers. "Fellows gather for two institutes in the winter and the summer months where we interact intensively with Jewish leaders and one another," says **Dara Frimmer**, a third-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/New York. "At these institutes we focus on themes



*August 2002 Retreat of HUC-JIR's Wexner Fellows (some of whom are now Wexner Alumni) and Wexner Alumni with HUC-JIR and Wexner Faculty: Top Row, left to right: Melissa Fand, Rabbi Rachel Goldenberg, Robin Nafshi, Dara Frimmer, Sari Laufer, Nina Price, Cantor Jeffrey Saxe. Middle Row: Larry Moses, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Rabbi David Ellenson, Dr. Alyssa Gray, Rabbi Elka Abrahamson. Bottom Row: Rabbi Jonathan Crane, Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Brett Krichiver*

Chosen by the Wexner Foundation on the basis of grades, recommendations, and personal essays outlining their vision for the Jewish future and their aspirations to contribute to North American Jewry, these stu-

dents augment their HUC-JIR coursework with supplementary studies and professional training through Wexner-sponsored seminars and institutes. In joining a select and pluralistic cadre of 20 full-time Jewish graduate students each year, these HUC-JIR rabbinical, cantorial, communal service, and education students partake in a unique program of scholarship and mentorship with peers enrolled in graduate programs

such as Israel, gender, and Jewish literacy, while also building leadership and group dynamic skills."

**Elana Erdstein**, a second-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles is heavily involved in research and committee meetings to plan this year's summer institute. As an aspiring congregational rabbi, Erdstein values the ways in which learning with Fellows from different denominational backgrounds and career directions is broadening her own perspectives on serving her future communities.

**Justus Baird**, a second-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, praises the diversity of the Wexner Graduate Fellows. "It's an opportunity to sit alongside a

Fellow who may not necessarily be part of the Reform Movement, to be challenged on some of your views, and to experience prayer in a pluralistic environment. You start to think about your role within the broader Jewish community.” It is this very aspect of the Program that expresses the ideals of *klal yisrael*.

“What truly augments my HUC-JIR education is what I learn from my Wexner classmates,” concurs **Sari Laufer**, a third-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles. “Whether meeting at the institutes or corresponding over email, I see and learn things through their eyes, and broaden my understanding of the diverse perspectives within the Jewish community as reflected within this peer group.”

Recent college graduates, Internet entrepreneurs, and educators – HUC-JIR’s Wexner Graduate Fellows’ backgrounds are as diverse as their future career paths. **Robin Nafshi**, a fourth-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/New York, is not only a current Wexner Graduate Fellow but an alumna of the Wexner Heritage Foundation Program in



**Seth Goren and Ariana Silverman, first-year rabbinical students, HUC-JIR/Jerusalem.**

San Francisco (1996-1998) when she was a legal author and editor in Berkeley, California. “It was a life-changing experience that led ultimately to my decision to apply to rabbinical school,” explains Nafshi.

**Seth Goren**, a first-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, practiced consumer protection law in Philadelphia for five years prior to applying to HUC-JIR. Now, not only does he study with his American and Israeli HUC-HIR classmates but with other Wexner Graduate Fellows living in Israel, as well.



**Justus Baird and Elana Erdstein, second-year rabbinical students, HUC-JIR/LA.**

Throughout their studies, each Wexner Fellow examines what his or her role and contribution will be as a leader of North American Jewry. **Elizabeth Rubin Kessler**, a second-year cantorial student at HUC-JIR/New York, draws upon her student pulpit experiences in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, and her activities as a Wexner Fellow to develop her vision of an educationally focused cantorate in the synagogue.

**Ariana Silverman**, a first-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, is seeking to find new ways in which Judaism can serve as a voice for social justice and public policy. She credits her past experiences of working at Hillel and as a legislative assistant for the Coalition for the Environment in Jewish Life and The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism as major influences on her decision to serve the greater Jewish community. “It was when I left the RAC to work for the Sierra Club for two years, that I realized that missed talking about Judaism and social justice from the perspective of my faith,” recalls Silverman. “I cared about environmental protection from seeing the world as holy. Once you see the world as holy it is impossible to take that language out of the way you talk about it.”

“We have a responsibility to make Judaism relevant in new and creative ways,” adds **Brett Krichiver**, a fourth-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles. He is exploring ways in which Jewish text and ritual can be made acces-

sible through the medium of theater and hopes to realize his vision of creating a Jewish theater company.

HUC-JIR’s Wexner Fellows bring a profound commitment to scholarship to their studies. **Julie Pelc**, a third-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, is the co-author of *Joining the Sisterhood: Young Jewish Women Write Their Lives*. “Six years before I became a student at HUC-JIR, while on a trip to Israel with the *Kol Isha Young Women’s Retreat*, I realized that there was not an extensive resource of creative and thoughtful pieces written by young women. This experience led to this anthology of young Jewish women’s writing,” explains Pelc. Her association with the Wexner Program enabled her to concentrate on finishing the book. In fact, it was while attending one of the Wexner institutes that she had the opportunity to meet with scholar Riv-Ellen Prell, who subsequently wrote an enthusiastic affirmation for the book’s back cover.

Beyond their student years at HUC-JIR, there are many opportunities for Wexner Graduate Fellows to stay active as alumni through continuing leadership training and learning. **Cantor Jeffrey Saxe** (SSM ’03), a Wexner Fellow during his cantorial studies

who is now continuing his studies as a fourth-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/New York, has just returned from participating in the Wexner Alumni Institute, which focused on the theme of the Jewish family. He joined other alumni in Torah study sessions and networking opportunities, and had time to catch up with former classmates.

The Fellows learn not only through peer mentorship, but from professional mentorship opportunities, as well. The Director of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program is an HUC-JIR alumna – **Rabbi Elka Abrahamson** (N ’85), who has served as a member of HUC-JIR’s Clinical Faculty and on HUC-JIR’s Board of Governors. Rabbi Abrahamson serves as a mentor to



**Elizabeth Rubin Kessler, second-year cantorial student, HUC-JIR/NY.**



**Julie Pelc, third-year rabbinical student, HUC-JIR/LA.**

*(continued on page 29)*

# HUC-JIR'S Wexner Graduate Fellows

(continued from page 7)

Fellows, guiding them in decision-making with regard to courses and careers.

Wexner Graduate Fellowship alumni can also be found on the HUC-JIR faculty, including **Dr. Alyssa Gray**, Assistant Professor of Codes and Responsa Literature at HUC-JIR/NY and **Dr. Jonathan Krasner**, Assistant Professor of American Jewish History at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati.

**Dr. Aaron Panken**, Dean of HUC-JIR/New York and a Wexner Fellowship alumnus, continues to be involved with the Program as a member of its faculty. He teaches professional skills development at the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Institute. For the past five years he has also worked with the Director of the Alumni Institute in teaching a session that transitions the Fellows to the next level as Wexner Graduate Fellowship alumni. "As a Wexner Fellow,

I was given a set of resources I would not normally have access to," explains Panken. "The combination of learning tools, peer mentorship, and the network of people I was exposed to are resources I still utilize today." Recently, Panken, along with his Wexner classmate, Rabbi Dov Weiss from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, brought together their Reform and Orthodox students for dinner and dialogue. It was a rare opportunity for both groups of students to discuss issues that affect their respective movements and to learn more about each other.

In this and so many ways, HUC-JIR's Wexner Graduate Fellows bring the enrichment of the Program back into the fabric of student life and learning on campus. Together with their classmates, they are builders of the Reform Movement and the Jewish People.

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## And Rachel Stole the Idols The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing

(continued from page 17)

At this point in the poem, the speaker steals the poetic/prophetic language of Ezekiel 8:2-4 as a means of expressing her own vision of inspiration. Suddenly, the poet speaker sees a huge flame that takes hold of a lock of her hair [*tsitsit roshi*], sets her on fire, and carries her aloft. The poem reaches its climax as the female speaker, hovering in the heavens, proclaims herself sevenfold as bright as the (male-gendered) sun, an allusion to Isaiah 30:26, where the prophet foresees that "on the day that the Lord binds up the breach of his people, and heals the stroke of their wound," the light will be "sevenfold, as the light of seven days." As in the case of the Ezekiel reference, this biblical allusion endows Bat-Miriam's

vision with a prophetic importance. More precisely, Bat-Miriam's speaker seizes upon the language of prophecy as a means of giving voice to her countertraditional poetic vision. David Jacobson reads this poem as transforming "Ezekiel's vision of a fiery God who causes the prophet to view Israel's evil into a vision of a cruel sun-god who implants an evil fiery passion within the speaker and shouts at her." According to Jacobson, in these early poems Bat-Miriam "conveys her longing to discover the image of a divine being who could serve as a positive alternative to the cruel uncaring image of the shouting, bursting sun-god." Contrary to Jacobson's reading, I would argue that Bat-Miriam is championing herself

over the sun-god and celebrating her superior form of illumination, even as she seems to apologize for it. Yes, the poem describes an explosive daytime encounter between the speaker and the screaming sun, but the speaker bravely and proudly announces that in her inspired state she is sevenfold as bright as the sun. The speaker relishes rather than rails against this poetic confrontation.

The combination of audacity and trepidation evident in these early poems by Bat-Miriam is a widespread feature of early Hebrew women's writing both in the Diaspora and the Land of Israel. These women knew well that they were treading on territory previously off-limits to them. It was their unprecedented task to cross into these spaces, seize the language, and transform it into something new, even as it echoes or borrows from tradition. On occasion, they faltered in this task, but more often than not they triumphed.

## In Memoriam

### Muriel Berman

Loving mother of Nancy Berman, Director Emerita of the HUC-JIR Skirball Museum, whose devotion to Jewish learning and the arts endures as a source of inspiration.

### Jane Evans

Cherished honorary alumna of HUC-JIR and Director Emerita of the Women of Reform Judaism, whose visionary leadership advanced human rights and whose love for the arts beautified the HUC-JIR/New York campus.

### JoAnn Morrison

Beloved friend of HUC-JIR, whose devotion to HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, which she shared with her husband, David, found expression in generous support for its programs and the establishment of its Hallel Community Choir.

### Peggy Weil Steine

Dedicated member of the Cincinnati Board of Overseers and the Board of Governors and, together with her husband, David Steine, z"l, a generous supporter of HUC-JIR.

### Laurence A. Tisch

Esteemed friend of the College-Institute; beloved father of Andrew Tisch, a member of the President's Council; and beloved father-in-law of Bonnie Tisch, a member of the Board of Governors, whose visionary philanthropy and leadership to strengthen Judaism were recognized by HUC-JIR's Award for Distinguished Jewish Service.