

I packed up my life in the United States to begin my rabbinical studies and arrived in Israel on June 28, 2006. My new home is a breezy apartment in Jerusalem, situated in the middle of the holiest city in monotheistic theology. Thrown into unfamiliarity, the items I carried across the Atlantic are strategically placed around my apartment, reminding me of home and making this new journey seem slightly familiar.

During my first two weeks, I learned about my neighborhood and my new community, teetering between homesickness and adrenaline for the newness of each moment. Daily, I would wake up with a new sense of purpose as I met new people, both natives and other visitors trying to call Jerusalem home.

We gathered to begin our HUC-JIR orientation the same day that war with Hezbollah broke out. I remember Rabbi Naamah Kelman saying that the purpose of this orientation was more to dis-orient us: we are living in a foreign country and beginning our studies. Hebrew is our new language. A new culture and new faces are our daily life.

One of the goals of the Year-In-Israel Program is to understand life here from an Israeli perspective. From the first days of the war, the administration was very effective in helping us look at *hamatzav* (the situation). We received many updates on what was going on and what we might expect. We were reminded that Jerusalem has existed as a safe haven in the midst of conflicts on multiple fronts throughout Israel's existence.

In discussions with classmates, it has become clear that each of

THE VIEW FROM JERUSALEM

Jessica Gross, First-Year Rabbinical Student, Year-In-Israel Program, HUC-JIR/Jerusalem



Israeli rabbinical student Nir Barkan (left) and Year-In-Israel students visiting his grandfather's home in Jerusalem.

us has spent time preparing for some uncertainty during our year in Israel in different ways. Some of us have anticipated suicide bombers; others have understood that a year in Israel would inevitably bring unexpected moments. After all, life here is a bit beyond the suburban American bubbles familiar to most of us.

There we take peace and security for granted. Here lies just one of many differences between Israeli and American life.

Fifty-seven of us are here. We traverse a spectrum of comfort and anxiety. We have questions. We wonder about the year ahead. We try to put into perspective the additional demands on our purpose as we have lived through war during our initial weeks of study.

Three weeks after orientation and the first fall of rockets, we understood how unrest in Israel affects everyone. Boyfriends and husbands were being called to the Army reserves and students in the Israeli Rabbinical Program were also being summoned to military service in the North. Students from other North American rabbinical programs had left Haifa and joined our *ulpan* (intensive Hebrew language course) here in Jerusalem. Confidence that this situation would be resolved quickly had waned. We were learning how to stay aware and knowledgeable. In Jerusalem, we were learning how not to become complacent as rockets flew not a hundred miles from here.

As the war continued, we donated blood, organized groups to play with children of displaced families, and put together care packages to send to soldiers. We tried to find our own adjustment

to Israel and remember why we came here amid moments that challenged even those who are conditioned to Israeli life.

Friends and family were in touch constantly with emails and phone calls. I spent my time writing about my experience for those people who could only rely on local media. I felt that it was important to remind them that there is more beyond the camera and that day-to-day life goes on in Jerusalem.

Challenging times are when people shine. During those four weeks, we saw an Israel that we might otherwise have missed. Upon completion of our Year-In-Israel Program, we will return as ambassadors to North America, where we will become the leaders of Jewish communities. I am blessed to have been here during this time and I know that my ability to speak to and about Israel and her people in the future will be defined by this experience. I do not wish war upon anyone and I pray every day for peace tomorrow. This experience, which unfolded so soon after my arrival, has allowed me to understand the challenges and beauty of life here in ways I could not have imagined. ■

1. Rabbi Moshe Silbershein leads a text study with students at the Second Temple Model in the Israel Museum. 2. Students embark on a field trip into Hezekiah's Tunnel in Jerusalem. 3. Rabbinical, cantorial, and education students visit the City of David during a weekly tiyul in July with instructor Ofir Yarden. 4. Students outside the Jaffa Gate to the Old City. 5. Rabbinical student Beau Shapiro and other students hold Havdallah services in the park overlooking Jerusalem to transition to the new week. 6. Rabbi David Wilfond and students at the old shop mentioned in "The Tale of Love and Darkness" by Amos Oz in Jerusalem.



The fifty-seven cantorial, rabbinical, and Jewish education Year-In-Israel students, who began their studies in mid-July just as the Hezbollah conflict began, organized a number of activities to assist those who have been affected by the war in the North of the country. A student-initiated blood drive was held in the *moadon* (student center) as a spontaneous response to the Magen David Adom call for blood so desperately needed in the North. A group of students visited a local Jerusalem hotel where Ethiopian families from the North were evacuated for some rest and relief. There they spent time with the children, entertaining them and leading them in recreational activities, giving their parents a much-needed break. They prepared care packages for soldiers and a fundraising campaign for food and supplies for residents of the North.

The HUC-JIR Israeli staff, faculty, and student body were caught up in the situation in very intense ways. Students and staff provided rabbinical support for communities on the frontline and some were called up for Reserve Duty. Terry Hendin (SJCS '74), who formerly had served as the Administrator of the Israel NFTY programs, based on the HUC-JIR/Jerusalem campus, and as a mentor and surrogate family to Year-In-Israel students, was called back to service when the war started. She reorganized the NFTY summer programs throughout Israel, asked rabbinical alumni and members of Jerusalem congregations to open their homes to the teenagers for study, dinners, and enlisted the teens' help to pack gift cartons for children in the Northern shelters and for soldiers.