

LEADERSHIP THROUGH SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Rachel Litcofsky

An integral part of our students' lives during their tenure at the College-Institute is the way in which they express the shared Jewish value of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Through *gemilut chasadim* – acts of loving kindness, and their pursuit of *tzedek* – justice, our students have taken on a variety of leadership roles within the realm of social action and social justice.

Students have participated in various social justice/action projects, including raising awareness about the genocide in Darfur, fund raising for *tzedakah* programs, running a weekly soup kitchen, addressing the root causes of social injustices through broad-based community organizing, and traveling to other countries with peers from other seminaries to help residents of impoverished communities.

Recently, the Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson Chair in Social Responsibility was established to strengthen HUC-JIR's core curricular commitment to training Jewish professionals with a foundation in this area. For over a decade, Rabbi Davidson and Albert Vorspan, Vice President Emeritus of the Union for Reform Judaism, have jointly taught students in New York about the importance of social responsibility within congregational life. They have helped hundreds of students prepare for the realities they will one day face as religious and professional leaders through their team-taught elective course, *Tough Choices, Social Action in the Community*.

This fall, they will teach the course *Rabbinic Leadership and Social Responsibility*, a requirement for all fourth-year rabbinical students. Similar programs are offered at the other campuses, including a course this past spring on *Economic Justice*, which brought together students from HUC-JIR and the University of Judaism, with business leaders in the Los

Angeles community. (The next issue of the Chronicle will feature an in-depth view of the social responsibility track of the core curriculum at HUC-JIR.)

Rabbi David Ellenson, Terry Rosenberg, a member of the Board of Governors, and eight HUC-JIR rabbinical students joined seventeen rabbinical students from other seminaries and American Jewish World Service president Ruth Messenger for a ten-day mission to El Salvador. The delegation lived in the rural village of Cuidad Romero with host families, tilled the fields, worshipped and studied Jewish texts, reflected on issues of faith and identity, and discussed how these experiences would strengthen their life-long dedication to social justice as future leaders of the Jewish people.

Upon her return, Rosenberg shared her experiences with students and board members. She reflected that "it was in the afterglow of such an experience, that I face my biggest challenge, a moment of choice, as it were. How do I honor my experience as my life returns to its usual hectic, consuming pace and the visceral experience of El Salvador gradually fades to black? What is the extent of my Jewish moral obligation outside the bounds of the Jewish and American communities?" (For more information on AJWS missions, visit www.ajws.org.)

Carrie Frank, a rabbinical student who is also pursuing a degree in Jewish Education, and Rogerio Cukierman, a student at the School of Jewish Communal Service, found their calling to social action this year as the organizers of several school-sponsored social action/justice programs involving the entire Los Angeles campus community of students, faculty, and staff. They created an ongoing recycling program, a *mitzvah* project that

fostered a partnership with the Leo Baeck Temple, and a *tzedakah* opportunity that centered around the March Madness basketball tournament.

Each Monday at the New York campus, students have the opportunity to cultivate leadership skills and build relationships within the New York community through the student-run soup kitchen (www.huc.edu/read/soupkitchen). They work side by side with religious school student volunteers and local community members to provide meals, clothing, and conversation to local New Yorkers who are unable to provide for themselves.

The soup kitchen is just one such program where students have taken the initiative to reach out to the greater community in need. Erica Greenbaum, recently ordained in New York, has been a Kavod Tzedakah Fellow (www.kavod.org) for the past four years. Kavod is a *tzedakah* collective that was created by Rabbi Josh Zweiback N '98 when he was a student. The mission of Kavod is to encourage rabbinical students to gain experience in the challenges and rewards of raising funds and distributing *tzedakah*. Since her first year as a fellow, Erica has individually raised over \$25,000.

Students in Israel for their first year of studies at HUC-JIR find diverse ways to become involved within the community in and around Jerusalem. The Year-In-Israel Program provides a long list of organizations where volunteers are truly needed and where students can help throughout the year. This year, students worked with the Ethiopian-Jewish immigrant community in Mevasseret Zion or accompanied the elderly who work on producing crafts for sale in their gift shop at Yad LaKashish (Lifeline for the Old) (www.lifeline.org.il) in Jerusalem.

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1 HUC-JIR rabbinical student Beth Kalisch and Ari Weiss, a student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in New York City, working together as part of the the American Jewish World Service rabbinical student delegation to El Salvador.

2 Rabbi David Ellenson and Ruth Messinger, AJWS President, tilling the fields alongside students on their recent trip to El Salvador.

3 Together in El Salvador: (from left) AJWS Board member William P. Becker, Rabbi Ellenson, Michael Rosenberg, HUC-JIR Governor Terry Rosenberg, AJWS President Ruth Messinger, and Chencho, Director of the Foundation for Self-Sufficiency in Central America.

4 HUC-JIR students and PANIM Founder and President Rabbi Sidney Schwarz (left) at the recent Social Action retreat.

5 Students at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles clean up the beach for Heal the Bay, as part of the School of Jewish Communal Service's Kadima program, to encourage social action.

6 Rachel Isaacson, MAJE, MAJCS '07, led team Emunah, a group of 15 HUC-JIR students and friends, in the Breast Cancer 3-Day Walk in San Diego.

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Our students also forge their own service-oriented paths. Diana Fersko, a first-year rabbinical student, found a way to foster change by becoming active in K.E.E.P. (Kehilat Kol HaNeshama English Experience Program) (www.kolhaneshama.org.il/). The program aims to provide English language enrichment and support to disadvantaged children from diverse social, religious, and economic backgrounds in Jerusalem. Diana found that working with this population taught her a great deal about the creativity, flexibility, and determination needed to be an effective teacher and mentor. It is through this community-based service program that she has gained invaluable experience that will strengthen her future work in informal education.

The College-Institute encourages students to build relationships with other seminarians, community leaders, and organizations within and beyond the Jewish community to address the root causes of social injustice. Many students have joined the Jewish Fund for Justice (www.jfjustice.org) to receive training in the arts of Community-Based Congregational Organizing. They have developed the skills to build relationships with others, discovered shared stories, and marshalled power within a diverse community in order to effect real change. Students have used these skills in their pulpit internships to change the ways in which congregations talk about social justice, and to develop strategies for how, as Jewish leaders, they will engage others in the public arena. Others have worked with organizers in some of the leading broad-based organizations, including One LA and Manhattan Together. This work is supported by an initiative of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) and Just Congregations (www.urj.org/justcongregations), founded by Rabbi Jonah Pesner.

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Second-career students bring prior work and life experience to their social justice work. Rachel Timoner, a rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, had a full-time career in social justice before rabbinical school. Through the economic justice work she did this past year, she was able to envision how she would incorporate economic justice organizing into her rabbinate, through strategies that engage and empower congregants to select issues and campaigns on which to take action collectively, and by using the *bima* as a platform to inspire others to get involved.

Rachel Isaacson, who recently received a joint Masters in Jewish Education and Jewish Communal Service, served as the team captain for fifteen HUC-JIR students and friends in the Breast Cancer 3-Day Walk in

San Diego this November (www.the3day.org). Together they walked 60 miles with thousands of others to promote breast cancer awareness and research. They called their team *Emunah* (faith) because they believe in a world without breast cancer, and collectively raised over \$40,600.

The Union for Reform Judaism (www.urj.org) enables HUC-JIR students to connect with high school and college students across the country in a variety of social justice programs. Melissa Simon, a rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, has spent the past two summers working with both the NFTY (North American Federation of Temple Youth) Bay Area Mitzvah Corps, and the 'Summer JAM' (Judaism, Activism and Mitzvah work) run by PANIM (www.panim.org), the Institute for Jewish Leaders for Values. Melissa found that both of these experiences helped her transmit her enthusiasm for social justice and Judaism to the next generation of Jewish leaders.

This past April, Owen Gottlieb, a second-year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR/New York, attended an interdenominational PANIM retreat with other seminarians to learn how he could integrate the ideals of social justice into his rabbinate. Owen credits the retreat as an effective forum on community organizing, spirituality, and social justice that opened up meaningful dialogues with other seminarians.

Students are applying what they learn about social responsibility in the classroom into action through these myriad activities, as well as in their student pulpits and internships. The relationships and experiences they build upon now will provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills to help shape the communities they will serve in the future. ■