

# A Decade of EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES

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In the fall of 1986, the College-Institute in Jerusalem celebrated the dedication of its new and expanded campus. President Alfred Gottschalk, Dean Michael Klein, and Chairman of the Board of Governors Richard Scheuer, had positioned the campus in its rightful and worthy place. Situated at the intersection where the ancient Jerusalem calls to the modern Jerusalem, literally and figuratively where East meets West, Old meets New, nothing could define the vision of Reform Judaism for Israel better than that meeting place. Now, the incoming first-year rabbinical, cantorial, and education students from our stateside campuses would have a real campus and a home away from home. Now, the Nelson Glueck School of Archeology could find its rightful place, where its research center and museum could tell the story of Tel Dan and other biblical sites. Now, a beautiful Abramov Library could serve scholars and students from all over. Now, the Beit Shmuel Youth Hostel and Cultural Center, adjacent to HUC-JIR and under the auspices of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, could launch the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism.

This was and remains the historic “watershed” moment for Reform Judaism in Israel. So looking back over the past 22 years, and particularly over the past ten, one can only be deeply grateful and humbled by the incredible opportunity to help grow an indigenous Israeli Progressive Movement through the graduates of our Israeli Rabbinical Program and other programs; create deep bonds between our students and the State of Israel in general and our Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism in particular; become an international Jewish address for Reform Jews for a variety of educational and enrichment programs; and slowly earn our landmark status in Jerusalem as a hub of events and activities.

In 1986 Michael Marmur and I were first-year students in the small Israeli Rabbinical Program. Five rabbis had been ordained by then, and each had tackled the challenge to forge a Movement. They faced almost impossible conditions of limited budgets, hostile religious establishments, and often cynical secular Israelis. They, the Israeli rabbinical students following their lead, and others who joined their ranks from sister seminaries, poured their energies and passions into changing Israeli Judaism by shaking it from its pat religious/secular bifurcation while creating compelling alternatives.

As students, we dreamed together how we would “run the Institutions of Reform Judaism” when one day we took leadership positions. In 1998, when Rabbi Michael Marmur was appointed Dean, he was the first graduate of the Israeli Rabbinical Program to take this position. Now was the moment to transform the Jerusalem School and its programs and to fill the beautifully enlarged campus to full capacity and really turn its face to Israel.

Under Michael Marmur’s visionary leadership over these ten years, a series of dramatic processes and changes were put in motion. First, the Year-In-Israel Program was redefined, placing the Israel Experience at the center as every Wednesday became Israel Seminar Day. Hebrew and foundational text courses remained the building blocks of the program, with a growing emphasis on community building and first steps in professional development. Second, the Israeli Rabbinical

## A Decade of EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES *(continued)*

Program was greatly strengthened by the appointment of Dr. Yehoyada (Yoki) Amir as its Director, thus allowing for a complete overhaul of the academic program and the addition of a serious professional development component to the program. In the process, the student body was tripled over time. Third, with more students available and eager for engagement, the Year-In-Israel and the Israeli Rabbinical Programs could now engage in more substantial encounters. Fourth, two critical areas – both discrete and intrinsic to the other programs – were nurtured and developed: Education and Spiritual Care. Fifth, an international agenda reaching to Europe and the Former Soviet Union was set in motion.

Dean Marmur has elaborated on many of these developments in his article. I would like to turn our attention toward the question of how we push these processes and changes to intensify our impact on North American and Israeli Jewry. Looking at the Year-In-Israel Program in 2008 and beyond, we are now asking the question, how do we keep the Israel Experience compelling to our students, who are becoming our future professionals in an age where Israel is a complex and often confusing place? Ironically, as the Israel Progressive Movement gains more ground, it also uncovers some of the real cleavages in Israeli society, where the growing fundamentalist Orthodox establishment makes our students feel estranged and angry. How can interaction with our Israeli rabbinical students or other serious encounters with Israeli peers bridge the gap? We are very engaged with this question as our students have expressed their desire to feel connected. We want to send them home to North America and Europe as ambassadors for Israel and for a Progressive Israel with which they can wrestle.

Jerusalem, with its demographic changes, remains both enchanting and difficult for our students. But for locals and the greater Israeli society, we must be a beacon of liberal Jewish programs and initiatives. This gem of a campus now pulsates with programs whose



*From top to bottom:*

- *Rabbis Ellenson and Marmur leading the Ordination processional.*
- *Year-In-Israel students preparing for Rosh Hashanah.*
- *The Jerusalem community attending an academic convocation at Mercaz Shimshon.*

impact will be felt in the years to come as we slowly bring forth Israeli rabbis, pastoral support professionals, educators, and more.

Our Israeli rabbinical graduates are trained first and foremost to serve the institutions of our Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, specifically our congregations and educational institutions and other programs. There are now a number of important synagogues throughout the country that need more than one rabbi to serve the growing needs of that area. One fact is irrefutable: wherever dynamic and energetic graduates of HUC-JIR have been put on the ground with reasonable support, it has been transformative. These places include Tel Aviv, Haifa, Modi'in, Jerusalem, and more (see page 25). In addition, our rabbis are leading educational programs with serious impact.

These are just some of the “ordinary” placements in extraordinary circumstances. Building these congregations – with thriving pre-schools, a growing youth movement, and adult education programs – where such models of community previously did not exist for secular Israelis, is one of the small miracles we experience here. We have transformed the notions and practices of *bat mitzvah*, weddings, baby namings, and funerals. These more personal, inclusive, and affirming rituals are being adopted and integrated into the mainstream by others, in Orthodox and secular settings.

Our pre-Army *Mechinah* Program in Yaffo, now with some 30 youths and reaching 40 next year, is one of the most exciting and promising year-long leadership programs. These young people are our future, and their role models are our rabbis! The Israel Religious Action Center, where a number of our students are working with Rabbi Gilad Kariv, truly embodies the idea of Israel as a “Light Unto the Nations.”

There is more. Some of our rabbis are serving institutions that are not Reform but reach out to an Israeli secular public searching for connection. Rabbi Mira Regev at Tel Aviv’s

secular *Yeshivah* is one example. Increasingly, Israelis of diverse backgrounds who are involved in creating community and educational programs are in our Rabbinical Program, and they serve the so-called unaffiliated in frameworks that try to re-define Judaism in Israel. It is crucial that we be a spiritual and intellectual home for these people and their initiatives, even at the risk of their independence. Let us all keep our “eyes on the prize” – the engagement of Israelis in a meaningful Jewish life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that embraces pluralism, egalitarianism, and democracy.

Our rabbis are not alone as they forge a new Jewish identity paradigm for Israelis. As Progressive rabbis, they represent a different kind of rabbinate. Some of them are being trained, along with social workers, educators, and nurses, to be the first generation of Spiritual Caretakers (aka Chaplains). We are literally creating the language and the vocation as Israelis turn to this support in times of illness, crisis, and joy. Our students are in health care facilities (hospitals, hospices, rehabilitation centers) that we could not approach a mere four years ago. Some are leading support groups in community settings with texts and techniques previously unknown to Israelis.

This “experiment” has sparked a second track of professional enrichment and training. We are now developing a unique approach to *Beit Midrash* study where group study of ancient texts, coupled with creative writing and group dynamic techniques will facilitate human development. This will not be an academic approach but rather a place for real spiritual and personal encounter. This is a quiet revolution where the College-Institute is a lead player. Most gratifying is the fact that our stateside colleagues, Professor William Cutter of HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, and Dr. Nancy Wiener of HUC-JIR/New York, have provided invaluable input to the development of our Spiritual Care programs.

Our new Master of Arts in Pluralistic Jewish Education will surely have a great impact on the institutions from which our education stu-



*From top to bottom:*

- *First-year rabbinical, cantorial, and education students in the classroom.*
- *Cantorial students performing with the Hallel Community Choir.*
- *Teaching pre-school children in the Early Childhood Pedagogic Center – the Sadna.*

dents come: teachers from our own IMPJ pre-schools; high school and senior educators from the Leo Baeck Center in Haifa; and our youth movement educators, among others. The M.A. cohort includes educators from secular and even Orthodox institutions. Our faculty is articulating a language and methodology of Jewish education. We now have the capacity to train our people for our institutions. One day soon, an HUC-JIR-trained educator will lead a major high school in Israel, or perhaps head an educational effort in the Israeli Army. This program is another way for HUC-JIR to enter the mainstream in Israel.

All of these programs have placed us in conversations with colleagues and partners, both in the U.S. and Israel, at the epicenter of Jewish renewal and renaissance. Thanks to our deep connections with the World Union for Progressive Judaism, we are also in ongoing dialogue with the leadership in Europe and the Former Soviet Union. Our campus must be an international address for Progressive Jews worldwide. In order to fulfill the promise that every Jew may feel at home here in the Promised Land, Progressive Judaism must thrive. We cannot and must not do it alone. We need a reciprocal flow of ideas between us and the Diaspora – we can and must strengthen each other. This crucial dialogue can take place on our campus and reverberate throughout Israel.

*The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, just published by Women of Reform Judaism with the input of scores of our alumni and edited by leading women scholars on our faculty, is just one example of this kind of interchange. When “launching” this groundbreaking new volume here in Israel, it was covered on the front page of the *Haaretz* newspaper and other important media venues and attracted prominent public attention. The possibility of translating it into Hebrew generated tremendous excitement. These developments and more will make our historic landmark campus the “jewel in the crown” of King David Street...for Jerusalem, for Israel, and for world Jewry. ■