

Spirit of Reform: VISIONARY RABBIS TAKE THE LEAD IN THE IMPJ *(continued)*

of the largest bomb shelters in the city, one of only five in all of Haifa with activities for children. The Union for Reform Judaism-funded initiative provided educational programming for children and families from morning to night for the duration of the war. The synagogue is also the home and spiritual backbone of the only Religious Action Center (RAC) office in Israel's north, with the first Ethiopian-born lawyer ever to serve in the Movement.

Nof believes that Or Hadash is creating a better Jewish world and that Israeli society desperately needs Reform Judaism to become more pluralistic and egalitarian and more appealing to the younger generation.

In his eyes, the challenges that Reform Judaism faces in Israel are to be expected – change takes time, especially radical change. “I see myself as one of the pioneers,” Nof says. “If you compare the development of Reform Judaism with the birth of the State of Israel, we’re still in the 1880s.” He believes that the hard work will eventually pay off. “Right now we are 25 Reform congrega-

tions up against 6,000 Orthodox synagogues. It will take 200 years to get equal rights in Israel, but it will come. Being realistic, we have to take what we have and make it stronger so that our work will pay off down the line.”



Rabbi Maya Leibovic broke barriers in 1993 as the first Israeli-born woman to become a pulpit rabbi in Israel. American-born Naamah Kelman had been ordained the year before, but to Israelis, a *sabra* (native-born) of their own entering this office was a landmark event. Leibovich remembers a quip by a local journalist that “now the Reform Movement also has a Rabbi Maya,” a play on the name of an ultra-Orthodox Shas *Knesset* member, Rabbi Moshe Maya.

For Leibovic, the day when the term “Israeli woman rabbi” was no longer just a dream was a transformative, highly personal moment. She remembers the pride that she shared with the HUC-JIR community and her family on that day, and the “deep sense of coming back home” that she felt. “When I think of my ordination I miss my father who

banished God from our home as a result of losing his family during the Holocaust. The personal journey I made at HUC-JIR allowed me to reconnect to Jewish text, prayer, and spirituality and has made me a more complete, whole human being.”

Leibovic has experienced the full spectrum of reactions to her choice, but believes that Israeli public opinion has made progress in the 15 years of her rabbinate. “I think Israel as a society has learned to recognize the different voice of women in the rabbinate and to value their leadership.”

She thinks that her gender is an asset in her career, especially at the congregation that she calls home. Kehilat Mevasseret Zion (known by its acronym, pronounced “Kamaz”), was established the year she was ordained, and the two have matured together. The vibrant, 450-family-strong congregation, which recently built a beautiful new building, took some time to gain acceptance. Leibovic describes some of the worst incidents of the early years, including arson and hate letters, and the tragic loss of a kindergarten teacher in the first Intifada. She doesn't look back to those times, however, and focuses instead on the synagogue's present vitality. Under her leadership, Kamaz has nurtured partnerships with other institutions and organizations in the city and has built a very successful social action program

called Time Bank. “Our work is admired by both the local municipality and the mayor. No one makes it too easy on us and yet we are a well-known congregation.”

Leibovic revels in the personal aspects of her rabbinical role, “the teaching, sharing in life events, guiding and being guided by others.” She urges American Reform Jews to develop their personal, spiritual connection to their brothers and sisters in the Progressive Movement in Israel. “Please come visit us. Please remember we are one people. Become true active partners.”



Rabbi Ofer Sabath Bet-Halachmi was pursuing a Ph.D. in Talmud at the University of Haifa and working for *HaMidrashah*, an organization that teaches secular Israelis about Judaism, when he decided he wanted more. He was looking for a spiritual connection to his Jewish identity but didn't know where to look for it in Haifa. He discovered liberal American Judaism for the first time at B'nei Jeshurun in New York, and was inspired by the pluralistic, progressive practice that he felt would really appeal to Israelis. “My Israeli Jewish identity was always strong, but to explore it in a different way, with people with different perspectives, opened me up. I went immediately to HUC-JIR in Jerusalem and started to study.” He was ordained in the class of 2005 with Ayala Sha'ashoua-Miron and is married to Rabbi Rachel Sabath, NY '95, who teaches liturgy at



Rabbi Maya Leibovic reading Torah at Kehilat Mevasseret Zion.



Rabbi Ofer Sabath Bet-Halachmi blowing the shofar on Rosh Hasbanah with his Tzur Hadassah community.

HUC-JIR and leads lay leadership education at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

Sabath Bet-Halachmi is passionate about carving out a uniquely Israeli Progressive Judaism. He says that “we need to renew the way we speak in an Israeli way about Jewish questions, to create a Movement that will address the realities of the Israeli social structure.” He came from a pioneer family and was raised on Kfar Vitkin, a *moshav* near Netanya started by his grandfather with 19 comrades. In recent years, he has watched the strong community structure on which Israel was built unravel in favor of privatization. He believes that Progressive *kehillot* are the communities of the future, and must play a role in creating new Jewish identities in a modern Israel.

His *kehillab*, Tzur Hadassah, is located on the Israeli edge of the Green Line, 20 minutes south of Jerusalem. The 100-family congregation was founded a decade ago by a tight-knit group of committed Anglo *olim* and *sabras* who were exposed to Reform abroad. The emerging community is becoming a popular suburb for young Israeli

families, and now supports a growing kindergarten, furthering the membership boom.

The congregation is the incubator for Sabath Bet-Halachmi’s unique vision of amplifying tradition with experimentation and diversity. He encourages his congregants to write new music and liturgy, and to participate in a “value-centered community,” in which the *Beit Knesset* (worship sanctuary) is just one component among many, and not necessarily the center. “Our community is united by shared Jewish values, but not necessarily in the same space and time,” he says. Some of his congregants want education to give a stronger identity to their kids; others want to study texts, and so join in the *Beit Midrash* but rarely come to services; many want to articulate Jewish values through social action. “My congregants who do *tikkun olam* are dealing with the same spiritual work that others express in worship services,” he says.

This alternative model plays out in a very out-of-the-ordinary building, made of several con-

Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman helping a bar mitzvah boy with his tefillin.

joined shipping containers. The community must juggle the nursery school, worship, and educational activities in the limited space, and a lot of energy these days goes toward fund raising for a new building. The members want to build a “green,” environmentally-friendly structure that embodies their values of environmental justice.



Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman is founder and spiritual leader of Kol HaNeshama, a bustling Progressive congregation in the center of Jerusalem. Though he is at the helm of one of the largest Reform congregations in Israel, he is a transplant to the Movement, having been ordained at JTS prior to making *aliyah* in the early 1980s. Weiman-Kelman arrived in Israel searching for a congregation that fit his spiritual needs. When he found that just the right thing didn’t exist, he started Kol HaNeshama, now celebrating a quarter of a century serving the Reform community of Jerusalem.

His congregation has a membership of about 350 families, and attracts around 300 worshippers

on a typical Friday night. The synagogue is home to a flourishing educational program, with an 80-student preschool, active youth group, adult education classes, and social action programs. He has seen the congregation mature, and babies who were named on his watch have now returned from the army to run youth activities or settle down to raise their own families.

Weiman-Kelman considers it a privilege to be a Progressive rabbi in Israel, offering an alternative to Israelis for Jewish identity, prayer, and social action. His life as a rabbi is very different than it would have been in America – his congregants speak Hebrew and don’t need a rabbi to translate the *Torah* for them. Kids who grow up attending Kol HaNeshama don’t go on Birthright Israel trips; they serve in the Israeli Army and are willing to sacrifice their lives for the defense of the Jewish people.

Weiman-Kelman and his colleagues must offer this next generation an alternative to the extremes of Orthodox and secular worldviews. They are in agreement that the Israeli



