

# A Rabbinical Student as Civilian Diplomat in Iran

Sarah Bassin, L '11



Sarah Bassin on a civilian mission of reconciliation in Iran.

“Are you kidding?” These words (plus a few others not appropriate for print) comprised my parents’ reaction when I first told them that I was going to Iran. To their credit, they could not have been more supportive once they got beyond the initial shock. It just took some calmly conveyed logic. I explained my Jewish investment in going: 20,000 Jews still live in the Islamic Republic. I outlined the fundamentals of civilian diplomacy: when governments only use hostile rhetoric toward one another, an obligation falls on ordinary citizens to offer a more nuanced perspective. And I assured them that this delegation was not the first from the United States to go to Iran; the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) ([www.forusa.org](http://www.forusa.org)) had led seven prior trips. Ours would be unique only in its interfaith focus and its Jewish majority of participants.

My commitment to this type of reconciliation work began during my first year of the rabbinical program in Israel. Traveling to Bethlehem and Hebron on the Encounters

program, I was able to hear Palestinians speak of their experience first hand. The checkpoint that prevented hundreds from working and earning a livelihood also prevented suicide bombings in Jerusalem cafes. I saw people on both sides completely shut out the narrative of the other. They stopped listening out of fear that acknowledging the truth of another’s pain would somehow negate the truth of their own. From this experience, I came to believe that if there is any hope of conflict resolution, we have to be able to acknowledge two conflicting narratives simultaneously.

When I hung up the phone with my parents’ blessing, hopping on a plane to Tehran was still far from a done deal. More than once, I reminded myself of my friend stationed with the State Department in Baghdad and how crazy I thought she was to go. The arrest of an American citizen researching women’s rights in Iran just before my departure did not help.

Whatever fears still lingered, I could only scratch the surface of the conflict by reading about it from abroad. I needed to go – even while knowing that our delegation faced severe limitations. Substantive dialogue can be difficult even in the best of conditions. Our FOR delegation faced the added difficulties of losing nuance through translation, the unceasing presence of a government official (as both a helpful escort and a watchful eye) and

what we came to know as *tarof*, Iranian hospitality that prevented dialogue from starting until our hosts poured tea, coffee, and flowering expressions of gratitude around the table. In spite of these limitations, first-hand experience would be more valuable than any reading I could do.

Oscillating between the roles of civilian diplomats and tourists, we accomplished everything from a meeting with an *ayatollah* in the Justice Department to climbing the ruins of Persepolis. Saturday night at the tomb of the Persian poet Hafez topped my personal list of memories. It’s no discotheque, but given the strict morality code, Hafez’s tomb is the closest singles’ venue that Iranians have to a JDate booze cruise.

I was quite conscious of my role as a liaison between the American and Iranian Jewish communities. Many of us in the U.S. cannot help but be perplexed by the continuing Jewish presence there. What makes them stay? No simple answers exist, but I share with you reflections on the most common questions posed to me upon my return.

Are Jews safe there? Well, Jews live very publicly *as Jews* with a Federation-like infrastructure and representation in the Iranian legislative body. The community spoke with pride about its participation in civil society, particularly of the Jewish charity hospital it runs in Tehran. But non-Muslims have fewer rights in civil and criminal court under the religious system of law, making them more vulnerable when engaging with the justice system.

Are Iranian Jews anti-Zionists? Some are. Some are not. Jewish officials in Tehran towed the government line in claiming that they simply remove themselves from all issues of foreign policy. When I saw a teenager wearing a *kippah* decorated with American and Israeli flags at a local synagogue, I understood that policy of avoidance to be coded support of Is-

rael. Iranian Jews are Zionists, I thought, they just cannot publicly proclaim their support. Yet the enthusiastic speech given by Shiraz Jewish officials of their participation in annual anti-Israel parades shattered that opinion.

What about Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah? Given the reality of Iranian rockets reaching Beersheva through the hands of Hamas, this issue is more pressing than ever. Many Iranians believe that their government's focus on Israel is part of the national vision to emerge as a regional power. Support of Hamas and Hezbollah allows Iran to wield greater influence with its Arab neighbors. From what I could gather, the average Muslim citizen seems frustrated that tax dollars are fleeing the country to support organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah when the economy at home desperately needs revitalizing.

Bottom line: I walked away with more hope than fear. Over 60% of the country is under the age of 30. That 60% statistically looks quite favorably towards the United States. I spotted more than one young man donning U.S. army gear... in public. Young women compelled by teachers to spend their lunch break in the mosque quietly rebelled by gathering in the back around a pile of L'Oréal and Lancome eyeshadow. Potential for reform exists. Certainly, the government's structure does not invite it with a religious Supreme Council able to veto any progressive legislation. Nevertheless, the country continues to evolve. The devastating effects of the Iran/Iraq War marked a turning point in Iranian politics and a general shift toward pragmatism.

The American Jewish community possesses a unique opportunity. We have 20,000 brothers and sisters living in Iran whose collective story remains largely untold. Their existence hints that someday, a different relationship with Iran may be possible. In learning and sharing their narrative, we begin to put cracks in the wall of fear constructed around Iran. Their narrative *will* contradict our own on everything from Israel to intermarriage. That may not be easy to hear. But as Jews, as people deeply committed to remembering stories, we cannot refuse to listen out of fear that acknowledging another's truth will negate our own. If there is any hope of conflict resolution, we first have to be able to acknowledge two conflicting narratives simultaneously. ■



# FACING EVIL, FINDING GOD

Jean Bloch Rosensaft and Elizabeth McNamara Mueller

**I**t was a personal tragedy that propelled Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein, N '09, toward the rabbinate. Her husband Michael Bernstein, a lawyer for the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigation (OSI), was killed in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988. He was returning from Vienna, where he had persuaded the Austrian government to accept Auschwitz SS guard Josef Eckert upon his deportation from the U.S. Of the twenty-four former Nazis who had been deported from the United States during OSI's first 10 years, Michael Bernstein was responsible for seven.

made with us as a community," she explains.

She applied to HUC-JIR after a decade of consultation with her rabbi, Fred Reiner, C '73. Being in her late 40s, and wanting to explore what it would be like to study with students the age of her own children, she trained for the Hebrew admissions exam with classes at George Washington University. This experience, along with "studying Torah with Methodists" at Wesley Theological Seminary, which has a high percentage of second-career students, helped prepare her for her years at HUC-JIR.



*Stephanie Bernstein, N '09, (center) surrounded by classmates.*

At the time of his death, Stephanie Bernstein was a clinical social worker with two young children. A lifelong Reform Jew who had grown up within a vibrant community in Duluth, MN, she sought out the comfort of her community at Temple Sinai in Washington, D.C., and became increasingly involved as a lay leader and ultimately served as the synagogue's President. "Community is at the heart of who we are as Jews. Judaism rests on the covenant that God

Married to Henry Winokur since 1990, Bernstein went off alone to Israel and at 50 was the oldest rabbinical student of her Year-In-Israel Program cohort. She nonetheless bonded with the much younger students of her *mabazor* (class), who became among her closest friends at HUC-JIR. She vividly recalls their hike through the Negev, which was supposed to be six hours, but lasted much longer, and required her to climb down a metal ladder built into the side of a