

cliff. She says, “It was quite a drop, and I thought, you know, this is scary, but it’s not as scary as what I did to get here. So I turned around and I went down that ladder.”

Bernstein continues, “Before I began my studies at HUC-JIR many people told me what a good thing it was that someone like me – with gray hair and lots of life experience – was going to become a rabbi. It gave me hope – as I closed my psychotherapy practice and prepared to begin my studies – that taking on a new professional identity would not be all that difficult. After classes started, it quickly became apparent to me that I would face the same academic challenges as my younger classmates, and that they had something to teach me. Many of my fellow students – Jewish studies majors in college – had far more Jewish knowledge than I did. Many had spent considerable time in Israel, which I was seeing for the first time.”

Bernstein commuted to New York for the duration of her stateside years of study, during which time she served as student rabbi at Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation in Reston, VA, taught Introduction to Judaism at the Union for Reform Judaism, and received chaplaincy training at Sibley Memorial Hospital. A paper on “God and Evil” for Dr. Eugene Borowitz’s class grew out of her personal life experience. Wanting to pursue further study on the “breadth of our history and experience and how *Halakhah* has helped us to survive and adapt in situations that the rabbis never could have envisioned,” she wrote her rabbinical thesis on responsa from the Holocaust era, under the guidance of Dr. Alyssa Gray.

“Being a second career student has been a tremendous amount of fun, very rewarding, and very intellectually stimulating. No one has ever said to me, ‘Oh, what are you doing here?’” ■

*Bernstein was among the demonstrators protesting Scotland’s release of one of the bombers of Pan Am Flight 103 when Libyan leader Qaddafi addressed the U.N.*

Feeling that something was missing from her life, **Rachael Bregman**, N ’10, decided to hike the Appalachian Trail. Traveling alone for six months, from Georgia to Maine, she was “surrounded by other people with profound faith,” She reminisced, “It was an incredible experience. I cried probably every day. And I hated it often. And I love it more looking back on it. Sometimes I think I would give anything to do it again. And sometimes I think I’d have to be crazy.”

Bregman’s journey first began in a deeply committed, Reform Jewish home in the suburbs of Boston. While she loved her Jewish roots, she went to Boston College, a Catholic university. Ironically, this choice was what pushed her toward Jewish professional work. “I missed being around Jews,” she explained. So she became a vice president

and divorced in quick succession, however, hit her hard. She took a year off from HUC-JIR to recover while studying at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies and developed a strong support network of other transplanted Americans and Israeli friends.

A presentation about chaplaincy in the American military services inspired her to return to the U.S. and go into the Navy before she started her second year of rabbinical school. “All I wanted to do,” she affirmed, “was volunteer.” She is now a U.S. Naval Chaplain Candidate and Ensign.

Back at HUC-JIR, she looked to broaden her horizons beyond classroom learning and started working with, and eventually joined the leadership team of the New York School’s Soup Kitchen – a cause in which she is still actively involved. Every Monday evening, Bregman



## FINDING A JEWISH PAT

Sarah Goldberg

of BC’s Jewish student union and began working as a youth group advisor and Hebrew School teacher at a local Conservative synagogue. Her search for deeper meaning in her life propelled her to take that life-changing hike.

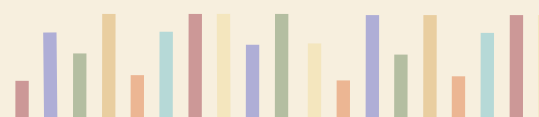
With her newfound experiences in tow, Bregman resumed being a youth educator and advisor, serving as a “de-facto rabbi” for the youth community of a synagogue. “I loved mattering to people” she says, but ultimately she felt she needed “more training to really be able to help people” and applied to HUC-JIR. However, she explains, “the personal interactions that first prompted me to become a rabbi are no longer the reasons I will become a rabbi.” Bregman’s experiences along the way have helped shift her thinking.

Her first stop was HUC-JIR’s Year-In-Israel Program in Jerusalem, where her vision for her life began to reshape itself. The personal turmoil of getting married

interacted with people from diverse walks of life, levels of education, and religious faiths. She offered weekly teachings that integrated Jewish heritage and secular beliefs, discussing “issues of justice, poverty, hunger, and homelessness with reference to Talmudic sources.”

One act of *hesed* led to another and in December 2008, Bregman and a group of twenty young Jews, including HUC-JIR classmates, went on the URJ mission to volunteer in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Bregman was dismayed by the continued devastation four years after the storm and touched by the gratitude of the Louisiana families.

On New Year’s Eve, Bregman spent the night at a shelter in a Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, where she spread hope for the New Year and made pancakes. She then went to Hazon’s Food Conference in Monterey, CA, to learn about Jews, food, and justice. Back in





*Hannah Goldstein (center), N '12, and rabbinical students from HUC-JIR, JTS, Yeshiva University, and Hebrew College clearing a nature reserve trail during their American Jewish World Service mission to the Yucatan, Mexico.*

## H ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

New York, Bregman and fellow rabbinical student Rebecca Cottle Epstein, N '09 (see page 30), began a green campaign to make their HUC-JIR community more eco-conscious and championed environmentally friendly practices. “Now, after practica and sermon discussions, when we are graciously provided with apples, they are from a local, sustainable, New York fruit farm that is a supporter of farm-to-table nutrition education for urban children,” she says.

Soon afterward, Bregman and several other HUC-JIR students went to Mexico on an American Jewish World Service rabbinical student mission to help an impoverished Mayan community develop self-sustaining practices. During their ten days in Muchacuxcha in the Yucatan, the students worked with the indigenous NGO Hombre Siembre La Terre (Mankind on Earth), lived with the Mexican families, and learned their stories. “We carried dirt, shoveled *chickichittas*, the Mayan word for pebbles, and unearthed huge boulders in order to create a

walkable, nature-reserve trail through a beautiful forest. We worked alongside members of the village to help build this base for a sustainable tourist economy.”

This summer she took part in the IAF (Industrial Area Foundation) training to become a community organizer. She then traveled to Rwanda to do some work with Agahozo-Shalom Youth village, and forayed into the capital of Kigali to help get a micro loan for sex-traffickers trying to turn their lives around and build a new economy for themselves. Then she headed off to Uganda for two weeks of traveling from village to village, teaching with an organization called Teach and Travel, and spent *Shabbat* with the Abayudayan Jewish community. From there, she went to Rome for a Catholic-Jewish leadership conference. Back in the U.S., Bregman worked as the Rabbinic Intern for Jewish Community Action, a community organizing organization in Minneapolis, MN.

All of these experiences have filtered back into Bregman's class work, her internships, and her rabbinical future. On her blog, Bregman declares, “we have to be brave enough to cross the barrier of discomfort for the sake of the greater good. I am more afraid of silence and that nothing will change.” Thus, Bregman continues to put herself in uncomfortable situations in the hopes of change. Telling her story is the key, as she explains: “I cannot allow those places to remain in darkness, and I can be noisy. We must constantly be expanding our universe of concerns, even just a little bit at a time.”

As she summed up her mission in her senior sermon, “May the *tzarim*, troubles of our lives, pursue after each one of us so that we can be angry! May that anger pour out against all the injustices great and small and then push us out the door into the world.” ■

*For more about Bregman's studies, work, and travels, please go her blog, “A Rabbinical Career Training Journal” at <http://myrabbinate.blogspot.com/>*