

“Gaining a deeper understanding of Israel is essential for anyone who seeks to be an advocate for the Jewish people,” says **Jenna Fields**, SJCS, '10, one of the 18 students from the School of Jewish Communal Service (SJCS) who participated in the biennial Israel Seminar in December 2008. A requirement for the Masters of Jewish Communal Service degree program, the students spent the equivalent of 100 class hours meeting with Israeli nonprofit professionals, political leaders, journalists, cultural figures, intellectuals, and academics to get an in-depth exposure to issues in contemporary Israeli society. With an emphasis on Jewish identity, Israel-Diaspora relations, and Progressive Judaism in Israel, the seminar included visits to a variety of social agencies, innovative enterprises, and cultural institutions.

The School of Jewish Communal Service Israel Seminar, December 2008.

Most of the students had been to Israel previously, so the Israel Seminar was definitely not a “tour.” Instead, the students had the chance “to see and experience Israel at its most intimate and most vulnerable,” adds Fields. “Whether it was meeting with a local Arab scholar in Jaffa to hear his perspectives on Israeli-Arab relations or visiting a Tel Aviv garbage dump that is being turned into an ecological park, we



EXPERIENCING ISRAEL AS FUTURE PROFESSIONAL LEADERS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE



Jean Bloch Rosensaft

“Our purpose was to examine not only communal institutions in Israel, but also to explore Progressive Judaism within the country,” explained **David Harris**, SJCS '09. “We met with members of the Progressive Jewish community, from heads of liberal *yeshivot* and Reform congregations to the director of the Israel Religious Action Center.”

Being in Israel was both professionally and personally meaningful for the participants. Fields recalls a concert the group attended that featured Miri Maseka, a popular Israeli singer/songwriter. “Set in an intimate club setting, the stage was surrounded by small tables packed with local fans. At the beginning of the concert, Miri asked a young girl to light candles for the second night of *Hanukkah*, and the whole audience joined in as she said the blessings. I felt so connected with Israel that night as I observed communal and cultural life at its most poetic.”

had the privilege of seeing the achievements and challenges of this incredible State.”

Richard Siegel, SJCS Director, noted that “the Israel Seminar was consciously organized to provide students with perspectives that they would not normally encounter and to expand their appreciation for the creative energies pulsing through the country. At the Diaspora Museum we deconstructed the messages of the museum with the educational staff to envision how it might be re-organized to more appropriately reflect the meaning and values of the Diaspora. Our visit to Mount Herzl was an opportunity to understand how Israel creates a civic religion with the calendar, historical personalities, and national symbols. A meeting with Rabbi Jakobovitz in Bnai Brak explored how elements in the Haredi community are working to integrate with the values of the modern state. At the Tel Aviv Municipality the students met with one of the architects of Tel Aviv’s new strategic plan, which projects the city as the creative, cultural,

and commercial center of the country. All of these encounters allowed the students to apply the skills and professional education they are receiving at HUC-JIR and in their dual degree programs at USC, whether in social work, public administration, or communications management.”

The Seminar was perceived as vital to the students’ preparation to be nonprofit professional leaders in the Jewish and larger community. At a time when studies indicate that American Jews are growing increasingly distanced from Israel, and there is a great diversity of viewpoints on Israel’s search for peace and security, the Israel Seminar strengthened the students’ knowledge and understanding, as well as their emotional and professional connections with the country. Fields concludes, “My understanding of Israel’s role within the Jewish nation is much stronger. This experience gave me the tools I needed to articulate Israel’s importance to Jews here at home.” ■