

PASSOVER IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Jean Bloch Rosensaft

For the seventh consecutive year, the HUC-JIR *Pesach* Project brought 16 first-year cantorial and rabbinical students to the Former Soviet Union (FSU), where they conducted *seders* for over 5,300 Jews in 28 cities in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. **Amy Goodman**, N'13, and **Jordan Helfman**, C'13, student co-coordinators of the project, and Rabbi David Wilfond, project supervisor and Regional Director for Outreach and Admissions at HUC-JIR/ Jerusalem, were determined to ensure the

Yevpatoria, Kerch and Feodosia in Ukraine.

Amy Goodman reflected on her experiences:

Ever since the Goodmans and the Wolfes first arrived in the United States over 100 years ago, our family has been celebrating Passover together for at least five generations.

But for the Russian Jewish community, there is a gap of two generations – at least 60 years during the Communist era – when Soviet Jews could not freely express their identity.

Today, the young people of the FSU are

“The implementation of the *Pesach* Project this year encouraged the continued development and growth of Jewish life in Ukraine, showing the members of our congregations the size and importance of the Reform Movement and the concern of both HUC-JIR and the World Union for them during such difficult times.”

Alex Kagan, WUPJ Director for the FSU, agreed, saying, “I would like to express my gratitude to the HUC-JIR staff and students who took part in the project. Their presence and enthusiasm was felt in the congregations, and provided much needed spiritual assistance to our six rabbis, enabling those living in the big centers and periphery an opportunity to take part in the holiday rituals and celebrations.” ■



Passover seder in Simferopol led by HUC-JIR students.

success of this program, particularly during a period of diminished resources for the Jewish communities of the FSU due to the state of the economy.

The planning process for this annual project began in Jerusalem at the start of the academic year when HUC-JIR students and World Union for Progressive Judaism representatives met to work together. The *seders*, which involved all generations, from kindergarten classes to senior citizens, took place in Chelyabinsk-Tyumen, Lipetsk-Moscow, JEEPS (Jewish English Speaking Expats), and St. Petersburg-Tver in Russia; in Mogilev-Bohruisk-Vitebsk, Gomel, Baranovichi, and the Minsk cantorial festival in Belarus; and Poltava, Lvov, Odessa, Cherkass, Simferopol,

starting to get really excited about learning about their Jewish heritage, even while the elderly are still visibly cautious about demonstrating too much Jewishness and the middle-aged are somewhere in between.

We, as Jews in the United States, have always had that choice. Before this trip, however, I never understood the power and importance of a collective memory of Pesach. It was a really remarkable experience and in the future, all of my Passovers and Pesach seders will continue to connect me with St. Petersburg, Tver, and Russia.

The impact of HUC-JIR's students was confirmed by Alexander Haydar, Executive Director in Ukraine for the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), who said,

REIMAGINING PRAYER

Jessy Gross, L '11,
Mandel Fellow

In *midrash*, the ancient rabbis caution us not to ask what came before Creation. If we discuss the *tohu v'vohu* that existed before God began to create, then something exists beyond God. This may enter dangerous territory for the rabbis of old, but as a rabbi to be, envisioning God as master Creator, working with tools and colors to create the ultimate masterpiece, presents a divine notion.

Were we to envision God as architect and artist, perhaps these raw materials became tools used to produce the masterpiece of Creation. Matisse, Rembrandt, and Chagall all created masterpieces that feel almost eternal. It is the lasting works of art that inspire generations, not the raw materials used to initially create them.

Prayer is also created from raw materials. Texts from various sources have been

constructed alongside one another, creating a form of fixed prayer (*keva*). This structure becomes a genre allowing others to both replicate and deviate, hoping to evoke an emotional response and offer a meaningful interpretation.

In order for prayer to be complete, intention (*kavanah*) is also necessary. This is something that each of us must offer individually. The role of clergy is to provide the atmosphere for meaningful worship experiences that can range from quiet spaces with little distraction to a box of finger paints or sidewalk chalk.

As part of the alternative *minyán*, which meets on Tuesdays and Wednesdays on HUC-JIR's Los Angeles campus, students have often led morning worship services with a creative twist. From a service held in August, the sidewalk leading up to the campus's main doors remained decorated with vibrant, colorful depictions of the morning *shacharit* service long after *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur* and *Sukkot* had come and gone. Following President Obama's inauguration speech on January 20, 2009, students gathered once again to offer their visual hope for the new administration, sharing the juncture at which these

hopes meet themes in the daily morning service. Personally, I take these ideas to my student pulpit in Spokane, WA, welcoming creative interpretations of the prayer service from adult worshippers alongside pre-*b'nei mitzvah* participants during a Saturday morning creative service.

At HUC-JIR, we are learning to take what inspires us and integrate this inspiration into our Jewish leadership. We have our individual boxes of raw materials to create, fine tune, and strengthen. In training to become Jewish professionals, we are provided with many white canvasses to experiment on and a studio space that offers supervision, instruction, and imagination. Then, we take our portfolio out into the world, hoping to collaborate and create alongside others.

As God created, so too do we. It is a *mitzvah* (*hiddur mitzvah*) to make things beautiful. By bringing art into worship we encourage an openness to the divine through our creative processes. We are given guidance (*keva*) but we are also in need of our imaginative self (*kavanah*) to internalize Jewish prayer and create a meaningful relationship with God, and our own creative communities. ■

Arab and Israeli Coexistence... in the Most Unlikely of Places

Jennifer Gubitz, NY '12

During my first year of rabbinical studies at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, I spent a considerable amount of time in Israel working with inmates – both Jewish and Arab – who had committed a variety of crimes, the details of which I was generally unaware. They would show up at 8:30 a.m. at a *Kibbutz* educational garden. Thrilled to see us, they would approach us with handshakes and hugs, and chain smoke cigarettes and drink instant coffee until we called them over to the benches in front of the outdoor Ark. My classmate **Evan Schultz** and I would lead them in a few songs – a camp singalong really – and the men would clap and smile and continue smoking, thrilled to be outdoors, relatively free, and amused by two Americans with poor Hebrew. The Jews and Arabs sat side by side on the wooden benches, Isaac and Ishmael literally and figuratively, grinning and relaxed.

Occasionally, one would share a story with me about how he found his way to jail. One took the fall for a ring of lawyers involved in a scandal; another killed his best friend in a drunk driving accident. Some made their crime in America and asked to be jailed in Israel because the Israeli jail system has a unique aspect to it. In Israel, one of the equivalent words used for parole is "*Teshuvah*." Translated literally this word means "turning or returning," but we also translate it as repentance, a theme most relevant to *Yom Kippur*. It is intrinsic in the Israeli criminal justice system that one is able to repent



Chalk drawings on the Los Angeles campus sidewalk enrich worship through creativity.