

# AN UNPREDICTABLE JEWI

Marion Lev Cohen, N '10

citizens. It was made perfectly clear to us that this party line is not embraced by all within the government, and certainly not embraced by the German people as a whole. That these are the official stances, however, in a country that at one point so despised the Jews, created a sense of optimism within our small group.

We also toured many parts of the city of Berlin (especially the Jewish areas), talked with a group of religion students at the Humboldt University (with whom we had a screening of the Israeli film *Walk on Water*), and met with various organizations as well as with the cultural and media relations chair of the Foreign Office and representatives of the American Jewish Committee. We visited the infamous Wannsee Villa, where the Nazis solidified and launched the implementation of the “Final Solution of the Jewish Problem.” A Jewish artist took us around Dresden to picture the once great Jewish presence there.

Two of the most powerful experiences of the trip, however, came while we were interacting with the Abraham Geiger Kolleg, the progressive rabbinical (and now cantorial) school affiliated with the University of Potsdam. While the college “campus” only spans one office suite in a city building, the enthusiasm of the staff as they described their program made me very proud.

What made me even more proud was what immediately followed that meeting. We met with the Geiger students for *Shabbat* services and a potluck dinner at the Jewish Museum of Berlin. While the museum and sharing *Shabbat* with our Geiger peers were powerful experiences, what made the night even more extraordinary was what happened when the museum closed and we had to leave.

We hadn't yet recited the *Birkat HaMazon* or sung *Shabbat zemirot*. So what did we do? We sat outside on the steps of the museum, in the streets of Berlin, and together – HUC-JIR students, Geiger students, and one of the Geiger faculty rabbis – we sang our hearts out, drawing the curiosity of passersby. We sang and we prayed. We ended the evening by singing *Hatikvah*. ■



Marion Lev Cohen, N'10 (third from left), with her Talmud class study partners.

**I**n an age of unpredictable Jewish journeys, I imagine that the winding road that led me to rabbinical school at HUC-JIR is about as unpredictable as anyone's. My life's journey begins with an Orthodox childhood, followed by years if not decades of a sort of Jewish wandering, and an epiphany (in Cuba of all places) that brings me back to intensive Jewish involvement and where I am today – a 5th-year HUC-JIR rabbinical student, with two grown children, two homes (one in New York, the other in Jerusalem), and a second (or maybe, third) career.

To start at the beginning ... I was born in 1948 into a Modern Orthodox home in Queens. My European-born parents sent me to Ramaz Yeshiva, and to a Zionist summer camp where we spoke only Hebrew. My early adult years saw something of a rebellion against my Orthodox Jewish youth (the details of which I'll leave to the imagination), and a suburban life in the Boston area quite distant from intensive Jewish involvement.

But with all these twists and turns in my Jewish journey, what has been a consistent thread and probably the underlying reason I

am at HUC-JIR today, has been a lifelong quest to live a meaningful life. My career choices have been animated by the enduring question of what it means to be in relationship to God and how I can make a difference. These questions have informed my first two career choices: to become a clinical social worker and a Jewish communal volunteer. In both capacities, I sought to help better the lives of others. As a clinical social worker – where I worked with individuals particularly around women's health issues and also ran a graduate training course for social work students at a Harvard teaching hospital – I tried to help people live happier and more productive lives. As a communal leader, I tried to help Jewish people and communities lead richer and more meaningful lives.

Both of my prior careers impelled and informed my decision to become a rabbi. In 1993 I moved back to New York City and faced some personal and professional situations that taught me the limitations of psychotherapy to help cope with crises, transitions, and loss. It was then, as an adult

## ONE PLUS ONE EQUALS MORE

Ari Margolis, L '10, Mandel Fellow

Jewish learner, that I began to explore how our ancient texts and traditions can help people deal with life's most troubling and challenging issues.

About the same time, I took a life-altering trip to visit the Jewish community in Cuba with UJA-Federation of New York. I returned to become involved as a lay leader in the "Jewish Renaissance" efforts to revitalize the Jewish community in the U.S., Israel, and around the world. My intertwined passions brought me to work on strengthening the connections between North American Jews and Israel, to help Jews to engage in the moral, political, cultural, and religious complexities of both countries.

With Ordination coming up next year, I am at a juncture where I can both reflect on what it has meant to be a student, and also to give serious thought to my future role as a rabbi. It has been such a privilege to be a student at HUC-JIR, to immerse myself in the study of our texts, liturgy, theology, and pastoral counseling. I have grown to genuinely enjoy and appreciate my younger classmates, as *hevruta* (text study partners), colleagues, and friends. The depth of their commitment to serving the Jewish people has truly moved me. We offer each other different generational perspectives, mutually enriching one another. The HUC-JIR community has been the source of what I believe will become life long-friends, mentors, and colleagues.

In the years ahead, I am eagerly anticipating serving a congregation in a rabbinical pastoral capacity. I would hope to help build a strong synagogue community by spiritually supporting congregants during times of illness and crisis, and by creating life cycle transitions that give them profound Jewish meaning. The confluence of my life's experiences and my rabbinical education at HUC-JIR has helped prepare me for serving Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish community. ■

In early January I joined a number of classmates from Los Angeles and Cincinnati for HUC-JIR's weeklong intensive course in faith-based community organizing. This seminar provided an opportunity to imagine what our future congregations and Jewish institutions could resemble when we systematically bring people together one-to-one and share our stories and our passions. Rabbi Jonah Pesner and Lila Foldes of the Union for Reform Judaism's Just Congregations, along with Sister Mary Beth Larkin of the faith-based community organizing foundation One-LA, led us in an exploration in the methods and process involved in community organizing. And it all starts at one plus one.

and sharing such perceptions with others helps us to find communal support to meaningfully address such gaps. We engaged in such discussions during our coursework together and learned more about each other than spending years as classmates had yielded.

These meaningful one-to-one conversations spiral out throughout the community until there is a critical mass of people inspired to support one another, and motivated to act. Suddenly, we look around and one plus one is no longer just two, but equals a significant base of people motivated to make the world better. When partnered with a faith-based organization, one congregation plus one congregation raises the stakes even higher. This process of organizing lays a



Mandel Fellow Ari Margolis, L'10, RHSOE '10, (second from left) and classmates at HUC-JIR/ Los Angeles.

We learned that by applying the process of faith-based community organizing infused with Jewish learning in the contemporary synagogue, our congregants can find shared vision and mission. The key to such community building begins with one-to-one conversations that delve beneath the typical *oneg* pleasantries and into the realm of issues of profound concern. Such conversations help us to identify the differences between the *world as it is* versus the *world as it should be*,

foundation for enacting meaningful social action, a core communal Jewish aspiration.

A few weeks after our intensive course ended, I had the opportunity to experience first hand what one plus one could equal, as I attended a One LA action that brought together communities from synagogues and churches across Los Angeles, all of whom had started with their own one plus one conversations, culminating in this meeting. The goal was to achieve some real action to ad-