

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-

ONE PLUS ONE EQUALS MORE *(continued)*

dress the foreclosure crisis that has afflicted this region. I entered a packed high school auditorium, and I was overwhelmed that one plus one had become thousands – the venue was overflowing and people were standing in the aisles.

Congressional representatives on the state and national levels along with city leaders listened to the moving stories of individuals from the various faith-based communities. One-LA members then made targeted requests of the public officials. As the politicians responded, it was evident that they were as impressed as I had been by the informed, large crowd that stood before them – and they made public promises. I watched as one plus one had spread to all those in attendance and demonstrated the power that we all have to enact change.

I gained a new understanding of the importance of Buber's "I-Thou" encounter whose ultimate outcome we may never know. Our interactions move us – we do not know exactly how in the moment – but the experience of the one-to-one encounter helps us to identify what is important enough to motivate us, along with thousands of others, to brave Los Angeles traffic, to stand side-by-side with those in our community, and to try to make the world a better place. Putting moments of relationship at such a high priority makes us congregant-centered, rather than program-centered, and this is truly the centerpiece of building community.

One-plus-one conversations motivate us towards action, sometimes immediately and sometimes down the road. But ultimately they plant ideas that are nourished by life experiences and blossom into action when each individual is ready. When we live this philosophy throughout our community, we as leaders begin to feel less alone planting such seeds, and instead find partners for sowing the future of our community. This method may take some time to garner its results, but as Jewish professionals this is our task at hand – to create the space to dream of the community that can be and to orient our communities to what one plus one might become. ■

THE MAGIC IS IN THE REFLECTION

Lydia Bloom Medwin, RHSOE '09, L '10

Education is what happens when experience meets reflection. This principle, a gem from my studies at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, was a guiding principle for my work with UCLA students during their Alternative Spring Break (ASB) program. The ASB program empowers students to organize and lead their peers on a Jewish service learning experience. They chose to travel to eastern Tennessee to learn about and serve a small Cherokee Indian community still living in the Smoky Mountains. Hillel of UCLA asked me to accompany twenty-five students as their rabbi/educator.

When we arrived at the hand-built cabins in the mountains of East Tennessee, we were greeted by our hosts and project leaders Ed and Arleen Decker, who explained that we would spend our time doing a variety of

things: playing with Cherokee children in their day care; visiting the local elders in their activity center; immersing ourselves in Cherokee culture; learning homesteading skills like canning apples; building bridges out of lumber; and clearing hiking trails in the remotest parts of Appalachia. After volunteering with different parts of the community, each evening we reflected on our day and what it had meant to us.

During one reflection session, we studied a text: *Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? The one who learns from every person... Who is honored? The one who gives honor to others... (Talmud - Avot 4:1.)* This text came alive for the students during this experience.

One student brought up a major issue for participants of intensive service experiences: Did they really make a difference? Would the effects of their work be lasting?



Lydia Bloom Medwin's UCLA student community service program with a Cherokee Indian community in Tennessee.