

# THE EGALITARIAN AND FEMINIST SCHOLAR

Elizabeth McNamara Mueller

“When I teach Judaism in Israeli schools I always ask the participants to mention names of leaders in the Bible and the names I get are always of male characters: Abraham, Moses, Aaron. No one ever mentions Miriam, Tamar, Hannah, and others,” says **Rabbi Oshrat Morag, J’08**. “As a Jewish feminist I want to also find women as role models. For me, Rachel Adler is one.”

It is the opportunity to pursue her doctorate with Rachel Adler, Professor of Jewish Religious Thought and Feminist Studies at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, that has brought Morag to HUC-JIR’s School of Graduate Studies in Cincinnati. Having been ordained from the Israel Rabbinical Program at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem in November 2008, she now wants to intensify her studies in the area of Jewish feminism. The 21st-century innovations of Internet technology and electronic classrooms enable her to meet regularly with her mentor, as well as to interact with her graduate studies peers and study with the faculty on the Cincinnati campus.

Her studies of the American Reform Movement with Professors Richard Sarason, Gary Zola, and Michael Meyer are both meaningful and inspirational. “I see people in Cincinnati who were born into the Reform Movement, have grown up in it, and whose sense of belonging to it is absolute,” she explains. “They are not apologetic or self-defensive as I find myself to be, at times, as a Reform rabbi in Israel.” The American Jewish Archives is “invaluable” to her research, with “a treasure of information there, looking to be discovered.” This past year, she researched the decision-making process that led to adding the matriarchs into the Reform prayerbook, and found “an immense amount of material on women’s personal thoughts and experiences on that matter.”

Morag’s academic career is informed by her Jewish experiences in Israel. “One of the primary reasons that led me to join the Reform Movement in Israel was its egalitarian

theology. During my rabbinical studies I realized that while the Reform Movement in America and in Israel might struggle with similar issues, such as individuality versus the community, Jewish feminism in the American Movement has its roots in American history, while in Israel, where the religious establishments are Orthodox, freedom of religious opinions cannot be taken for granted.”

Morag plans to bring the fruits of her doctoral studies back home with her. “As a rabbi I would like to expose Israeli society to egalitarian theology. I believe these ideas, like Reform theology, are a part of Judaism and not the outcome of modern trends imposed on Judaism from the outside. As much as I truly enjoy expanding my knowledge, I also believe that for me to have the right to teach Jewish feminism, I need to gain more profound understanding and engagement, which can be attained by academic research at HUC-JIR.” ■

*Rabbi Oshrat Morag, J’08*



# JUSTICE THEY SHALL PURSUE

Elizabeth McNamara Mueller and Jean Bloch Rosensaft

Reform Judaism from its inception has been inspired by the prophetic message of social justice. **Jonathan Prosnit, N’11**, **Ari Plost, C’11**, and **Joshua Stanton, N’13**, are immersing themselves in political activism, interfaith relations, and human rights work in preparation for their careers as rabbis in the real world.

Fourth-year rabbinical student and Tisch Fellow (see page 16) **Jonathan Prosnit** believes that his rabbinical studies are the key to answering vital questions: “What is my role as a public servant? And how do I channel that, foster that, and make that stronger? I would challenge anyone who says our role is simply to lead worship in the synagogue. I think our future role as rabbis is to recognize that we are developing citizens.”

During the 2008 Presidential campaign, Prosnit organized a group of Reform and Reconstructionist rabbinical students to canvass for Barack Obama in Philadelphia’s Jewish neighborhoods. He believes that “our values are religious values. And when we speak and when we act, whether politically on the right or left, it is with religious conviction and it is with Jewish conviction, with Jewish tradition and history behind us.”

Notwithstanding the prominent role of liberal religious leaders in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, the religious right has dominated the public square for over a generation. Plost argues that “it is really essential that there be a role for progressive left-wing politics in religion. People like Rabbi David Saperstein are out there as religious leaders of our day. I think that it is really important for HUC-JIR students to recognize, wherever they are on the political spectrum, that they are a part of the public process and that there is no monopoly on the religious voice.”



*Ari Plost, C '11, (left) with Rev. Marla Coulter and Rev. Doug Mitchell during his Clinical Pastoral Education program at Christ Hospital, Cincinnati.*

**Ari Plost**, a fourth-year rabbinical student in Cincinnati, says, “A lot of the work that I do now is inspired by work that I did before coming to HUC-JIR, when I served as a consultant for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and at the Abraham Fund, and helped create the Alliance for Middle East Efforts, an assembly of coexistence organizations in Israel.” Since enrolling at HUC-JIR, he spent a summer as the Social Justice Fellow at the Jewish Council of Urban Affairs (JCUA) and worked with the Islamic Muslim Action Center on the South Side of Chicago. Last year, he presented with Quaker and Islamic leaders at Wilmington College at a symposium about “Faith as a Tool for Non-Violent Work.”

Plost’s advocacy for social justice and collaborative interfaith efforts is firmly integrated into his rabbinical studies. In his American Jewish history course, he wrote a paper on Kivie Kaplan, founder of the NAACP, who was also instrumental in the creation of the Reform Movement’s Religious Action Center. His commitments filter into his worship experiences, as well. Plost says, saying “I was helped by Cantor Yvon Shore to design a worship service that used liturgy and themes to reflect social justice.”



*(From left) Jonathan Prosnit, N '11, and his brothers Jacob and Ethan (a first-year rabbinical student in the Year-In-Israel Program) and their mother, Wendy Bloch, campaigning for Obama.*

Second-year rabbinical student **Joshua Stanton** found his direction at Amherst College through his involvement with Hillel and the Multifaith Council. “I began to take great joy both in sustaining the Jewish community on campus and representing it in inter-religious gatherings and discussion,” he says. He found another anchor point and the desire to build a career within the Jewish community through a partnership with Hedy Peyser, Director of Volunteers at the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington, where he helped to create ‘Lessons of a Lifetime.’ Awarded the 2009 Outstanding Programming Award from the Associates of Jewish Homes and Services for the Aging, this program “trains students to record the ‘ethical will’ of senior citizens in the community and brings together students and seniors for ongoing, remarkable interchanges about life and learning.”

*Joshua Stanton, N '13*



student body president of Union Theological Seminary, Stephanie Hughes. Their plan is to produce a top-flight peer reviewed

journal for seminary students, academics, clergy, and non-profit leaders of all religious backgrounds. All articles will be available online, free of charge. Stanton says, “With moderated forums featured beneath each article, we can ensure that meaningful dialogue can take place between religious leaders around the world without having to arrange a formal conference. While in-person dialogue is optimal, the *Journal* is poised to significantly increase both the quality and frequency of religious dialogue with the broader hope of improving inter-religious relations and forming a veritable community of scholars and leaders from all religious traditions. We aim to become a lasting part of the broader movement for religious tolerance, as well as the network of seminaries that is training the future of religious leadership.” ■