

The 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht was commemorated by the dedication of the Yanov Torah, donated to HUC-JIR/Los Angeles by Rabbi Erwin Herman, z"l, and his wife, Agnes. It was Rabbi Herman's hope that this Torah, rescued out of the ashes of the Holocaust, would travel with rabbinical students to their pulpits, so that a new generation of Jews would bring the scroll back to life and with it a new era of hope for Jews everywhere. Excerpted here is the student sermon presented at this memorable event.

their life-force. After the liberation, it was lovingly patched together by the lonely fingers of people who had lost everything but their tradition. Like the lives of the survivors, this Torah would never be the same, stitched back together yet bearing its physical scars forever.

Receiving this Torah on the eve of the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht, during Parshat Lech Lecha, is not without significance. We read of Avram receiving a divine call to journey not only physically to the land of Israel, but also spiritually inward to his soul. As we are taught by the Hasidic mas-

behind and journey to the unknown suggests that he possessed a powerful faith in God. We, however, often struggle with our faith in God; we are often afraid to admit to ourselves and each other that after answering God's call to us, "Lech Lecha," to travel inward, all we found were unanswered questions. These doubts can paralyze us on our personal journeys of faith as we struggle with God and our own humanity.

Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Ger wrote, "The effects of any earthly struggle with God must also affect God. The battle is not between us

THE YANOV TORAH AND OUR FRAGILE FAITH

Rabbi Joel Simonds, L '09



In the Yanov work camp at a time when hope was nearly impossible, when the greatest horrors imaginable had been exceeded, when hunger had reached its ultimate agony, a small community risked everything in order to smuggle in a *Sefer Torah*. These inmates risked not only their lives but also the enduring shame of sinning against God. They desecrated the Torah by tearing it into pieces. Yet they acted in the face of these risks, in order to be comforted by the Torah's light.

This is a Torah that was hidden column by column in bedposts, inside pipes, under floor boards, anyplace where it might be safe. Its discovery would have certainly meant the death of its stewards, but its presence was also

ters, *Lech Lecha* can mean to travel within ourselves. Often we consider these two interpretations separately.

We marvel at Avram's brave physical journey and we ponder the meaning in his spiritual journey. But the Yanov Torah represents the symmetry and connectedness of both journeys. From the cemetery, through the hands of those who smuggled it into the camp, to its stay in Russia, to its safety with Rabbi Erwin Herman, z"l, and his wife, Agnes, and now to us, this Torah's travels from captivity to freedom, from brokenness to repair, from hopelessness to faith, can inspire us to attempt a spiritual journey akin to the one God demanded of Avram.

Avram's willingness to leave everything

HUC-JIR students and Agnes Herman (center) at the dedication of the Yanov Torah.

and some independent power. The struggle goes on inside God. It is a part of God; it is a part of ourselves." Thus, even when we struggle, we journey.

Doubt is a profound element of our humanity. We doubt each other, we doubt ourselves, and when we look at the destruction and disorder in the world, we can't help but doubt God. But when we allow our doubt and struggle with God to become a part of us, when we embrace our doubt, we become one step closer to the divine, one step closer to faith.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us that faith is not the same as belief. Whereas belief occupies one part of who we are, faith is an act of the whole person, of mind, will, and heart. Rather than viewing faith as the feeling we get when we conquer doubt, our faith can be viewed as the process of dealing with doubt. Faith is not a constant, faith comes and goes; like the Yanov *Torah*, our faith is stitched together imperfectly as a reminder of the brokenness life has shown us. As heirs of this *Torah*, we are reminded and comforted that our faith comes from generations who have journeyed and struggled before us.

Twenty some years ago, Rabbi Herman took this *Torah* to Temple Beth Solomon of the Deaf. As Rabbi Herman was talking about the *Torah*, a man from the congregation stood up in the middle of the rabbi's address and began walking toward the *Torah*. As he approached, in sign language he said over and over again, "That's my *Torah*, that's my *Torah*." Ludovic Wurmfeld, z"l, was an inmate at Yanov. Because he was deaf, the Nazi guards thought he was dim-witted and he was allowed to leave the work camp regularly because the guards did not perceive him as a threat. Every time Ludovic returned from the town, he was wrapped in the words of *Torah*. Columns of *Torah* were curled around his legs and sewn into his jacket. Decades later, he lived to see them again, stitched back together in a *shul* in Los Angeles.

Faith can lead us on unimaginable journeys, from light to darkness to light again. With each journey, like the Yanov *Torah*, we acquire new physical and spiritual scars that we carry with us forever. These scars are the reminders both of our fragile faith and the need to mend it. When we hold this *Torah*, when we read from it, we cannot help but think of the courage, strength, and enduring faith of its previous caretakers. May their legacy inspire us to journey inward to discover our own courage, summon our own strength, and fortify our own faith in our tradition, which is sewn together with the threads of beauty and struggle. Through our journeys, through our brokenness, and through our attempts at repair, we too will be able to stand up, carry close our fragile faith, and say, "That's my *Torah*, that's my *Torah*." ■

ALYSA STANTON — THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN RABBI IN JEWISH HISTORY

Jean Bloch Rosensaft



Alysa Stanton, the first African-American woman to be ordained a rabbi in Jewish history, was ordained by Rabbi David Ellenson on June 6th at Cincinnati's landmark Plum Street Temple. She was among 14 new rabbis (10 women, 4 men) who were ordained in Cincinnati and one of the 43 rabbinical graduates of the Class of 2009 (30 women, 13 men) at Ordination convocations in New York, Los Angeles, and Cincinnati during HUC-JIR's 134th academic year.

"Alysa Stanton's history-making journey reflects her profound commitment to Jewish learning and leadership," stated Rabbi Ellenson. "She brings to her rabbinate an infinite capacity for human understanding and pastoral care, as well as a passionate commitment to building a sacred, inclusive community. She and her classmates of the Class of 2009 emerge from the College-Institute imbued with leadership skills, steeped in knowledge, strengthened by a commitment to service, and dedicated to bringing hope and healing to our troubled world."

Stanton said "I am honored to be a visual presence of the 'new face' of Judaism in an era for deepening our faith in humanity and strengthening our faith as Jews. My goals as a rabbi are to break down barriers, build bridges, and provide hope. I look forward to being the spiritual leader of a community that welcomes and engages all."

According to the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, at least 20% of



Rabbi Ellenson and Alysa Stanton at her Ordination at Plum Street Temple

American Jews are racially and ethnically diverse by birth and by the portals of conversion and adoption. Approximately 20,000-30,000 marriages between Jews and African-Americans grew out of the civil rights movement. This diversity, reflecting the variety and richness of Jewish heritage, is embraced by the Reform Movement with its commitment to inclusivity.

Stanton entered HUC-JIR's rabbinical program in 2002 after a career as a licensed psychotherapist in trauma and grief. A native of Cleveland, OH, she and her family moved to Lakewood, CO, at the age of eleven. She comes from a Pentecostal Christian home, but started her own spiritual quest at the age of nine. She converted to Judaism over twenty years ago during her college years, driving 144