

# A BERLIN RABBINICAL STUDENT AT HUC-JIR/JERUSALEM

Paul Strasko, Rabbinical Student, Abraham Geiger Kolleg

miles each week to study with a Conservative rabbi in an Orthodox synagogue. This focused determination culminated with a traditional conversion in 1987.

As a student rabbi she preached, taught, and applied Jewish tradition to life-cycle rituals and contemporary issues, and promoted interfaith and intracultural dialogue in Reform congregations and communities throughout the United States, including Piqua and Portsmouth, OH; Columbus, IN; Dothan, AL; Petoskey, MI; Williamson, WV; and Grand Forks, ND. Her rabbinical training included Clinical Pastoral Education at Christ Hospital in Cincinnati. She joined Crossroads Hospice in Blue Ash, OH, where she served as its Jewish Chaplain.

Prior to HUC-JIR, Stanton studied social psychology, neuropsychology, and interpersonal relationships at Lancaster University in England (1983-84), received the B.S. in Psychology (1988) and M.Ed. in Counseling and Multiculturalism (1992) from Colorado State University, and Professional Counselor Licensure (1998). She received the M.A. in Hebrew Letters from HUC-JIR on June 7th at Graduation Ceremonies in Cincinnati.

On August 1, 2009, she became the rabbi of Congregation Bayt Shalom in Greenville, NC – a Conservative congregation of 53 families that recently became dually affiliated with the Reform Movement. She is the proud mother of an adopted 14-year old daughter, Shana.

“Alysa Stanton has a genuine depth of soul that will make her congregants quite blessed to be in her presence,” said Rabbi Ellenson. “Her Ordination, coinciding with the election of Barack Obama, offers a ray of hope that the world can become a better place.” ■

After preparing for the move to rabbinical school at Geiger Kolleg in Potsdam, Germany, I got the news in April of 2008 that Geiger had signed an agreement with HUC-JIR. Would I be interested in going to Jerusalem instead?

As an American, my first days at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem in July 2008 were continuously punctuated by double-takes when introduced as an Abraham Geiger Kolleg student. Despite my Montana birth and American passport, I nonetheless saw myself and was seen as a European student. Most poignantly, while visiting Yad Vashem as part of the weekly “Israel Seminar,” a fellow student asked me as we watched a film of the Nuremberg Nazi rally grounds, “How many people were there? What were they thinking?” How did I suddenly become the expert on German *Volk*-Psychology? I answered as best as I could and accepted my surprise role.

The four international students at HUC-JIR that year, two from Leo Baeck College in London, two from Geiger, spent the year soaking in as much as possible from the experience while trying to interject as much of the Old World as possible. We led a special “German” service for the Reform Liturgy Workshop with liberal doses of Lewandowski, Sulzer, and readings in the vernacular of “our” tradition. It was important to us to use the German language in worship – to reclaim the language of Buber and Heine from the National Socialists.

Choosing rabbinical school in Germany is a guaranteed lightning rod across the Jewish world. Reactions to my story have run the continuum from looks of confusion to outright hostility and anger. My answer: “We are going to serve the German community so that you do not have to.”

When I started looking at rabbinical schools in 2004, I discovered that a new progressive rabbinical seminary, the first since the *Shoah*, had opened in Germany in 1999. I felt drawn to the poignant act of *tikkun olam* that the Jewish *Wiederaufbau* (rebuild-



Paul Strasko

ing) in Germany represented.

In reality, Progressive leadership in America and in central Europe demands two different perspectives. The mere comparison of the nearly thousand Reform *shuls* in the States and the slightly more than 20 liberal communities in Germany makes the necessity of a different approach obvious. In Germany we are project managers as much as spiritual leaders, attempting to help realize a complete rebuilding. When we speak of *minhag* we count our tradition in years instead of decades or generations.

“You are truly moving to Germany forever?” asked a friend a few hours after our last finals marked the conclusion of the Year-In-Israel. I reiterated the open invitation to host my colleagues should they ever visit Berlin. “I never wanted to visit Germany before,” commented another, “but now I think I want to – need to.” With that, the year was proved a success, a little bit of the universe was repaired, and we all went to our separate campuses. ■