



# DRUMMING MY WAY TO DAVENNING

David Vaisberg, N '11, Mandel Fellow

Although I am a trained guitarist, most of the time I play on my drum, which I still find fascinating as I never actually learned how to play the drum. I only started because one of the traditional egalitarian *minyanim* in Jerusalem asked, at the beginning of my Year-In-Israel, if there was anyone who could drum for their services. I was the only one to volunteer, and I'm still drumming two-and -a-half years later.

The following year, I arrived in New York with its cantorial school and community of trained musicians. When my turn came to lead services as a rabbinical student, rather than as an accompanist, I suddenly had to figure out how to create this same mood with words rather than beats. I learned how to collaborate at a higher level with a cantorial student, and how to lead, rather than follow, with the musical ensemble.

At HUC-JIR we learn to build sacred environments. We have countless chances to try new things, we tell stories and we teach, we bring in new melodies and new translations, and we build moods. Sometimes our ideas and efforts soar, and sometimes they do not. And that's ok, because it is all part of the learning experience.

We all have the opportunity to workshop our skills and build a repertoire of ways to make worship meaningful. We learn from each other and from our incredible faculty. There are other forums for learning as well. I sit on the Worship Working Group, a committee of students and faculty responsible for planning the overall worship and spiritual experience of students. On the committee we learn what it is to envision and implement long-term ideas and projects.

We learn from our pulpits and intern-

ships, where we leave the protective HUC-JIR atmosphere and transpose what we've learned to communities with their own unique traditions. My own pulpit outside of Toronto likes to have its own blend of melodies in Hebrew and English, with a touch of whimsical spontaneity. They even have an accordionist. Thanks to the skills and knowledge taught at HUC-JIR, I have been able to adapt to that environment and learn even more.

We have also had some training in theater. Dr. Lawrence Hoffman has taught us that the service is a 'sacred drama.' For example, when we read *Torah* we are not just reading from a sacred book; we are actually standing at Sinai and receiving divine words. In sacred dramas, intonation, words, and feelings matter. Movement and choreography are crucial.

HUC-JIR has hosted several workshops in this area. In the past, choreographer Liz Lerman has been a visiting faculty member and taught us about movement. Amichai Lau-Lavie's 'Storah-telling' organization has led a five-day workshop on how to bring the *Torah* text to life through dramatic storytelling. We have ongoing speech and communication classes to teach us the basics.

The *Talmud* (*Berachot* 55a) teaches us that Bezalel, the artist commissioned to build the Tabernacle and its holy vessels, was able to bring the experience of God to the Israelites. Likewise, it is through our art, as future rabbis and cantors, that we can bring the experience of the sacred to our communities. HUC-JIR gives us a tremendous gift by developing in us the skills necessary to build our own tabernacles for our future communities. ■



# ISRAELI AGENTS FOR CHANGE

Jean Bloch Rosensaft

Among the 22 students enrolled in the Israel Rabbinical Program, there is a broad diversity of background but a shared passion and commitment to advancing Reform Judaism in the Jewish State. These students will ultimately join the 59 Israeli rabbinical alumni who are transforming the Orthodox-secular divide in Israeli society by introducing a liberal, egalitarian, and inclusive form of Jewish identity, spirituality, and religious practice.

**Benjie Gruber**, who will be ordained this Fall, serves as the student rabbi of Kibbutz Yahel and teaches adult education, provides conversion programs for soldiers in the Israeli Army, and works at the *beit midrash* at Congregation Mevasseret Zion and at the Reform *mechina* in Jaffa. He says, "My four years at HUC-JIR have given me the chance to study Talmud, *midrash*, *halakhah*, theology, Bible, and more with wonderful faculty, and to be introduced to the world of pastoral care by teachers and mentors who are experts in both theory and practice."

*Here are some of his classmates who are entering their second year of the Israel Rabbinical Program, and who will be Reform leaders and agents of change in Israel in the years to come:*

**Na'ama Dafni-Kellen** was exposed to Reform Judaism through her high school studies at the Leo Baeck Education Center in Haifa and has been involved in the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism ever since. Upon completing her Army service, she moved to Jerusalem and studied Jewish philosophy and community work at Hebrew University, while at the same time working as the national director of the Reform Students' Association. After completing an M.A. in non-profit management, Na'ama became the director of Kehilat Tzedek, a training center for congregational social action that works with Reform,