

My work in Ukraine and Ethiopia varied immensely but was always coupled by strong Jewish values like *tikkun olam*, compassion, and the act of *tzedakah*. I learned that the field of international Jewish communal service demanded a certain kind of flexibility and optimism not often required at home. Electricity is scarce, civil unrest is unpredictable, muddy roads threaten to keep you in the car overnight, and overwhelming poverty can be unbearable. Our overseas colleagues help people who need assistance but who sometimes do not quite fit the bill of our more traditional clients at home. They rely on local culture and tradition to make decisions they might not otherwise have chosen.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, “Pray as if everything depended on God, but act as if everything depends on you.” The job

is heart-breaking and exhausting, yet tremendously rewarding.

Working in the Jewish community has never felt like a job. For me, it is a calling from God and has only served as a blessing. In *Pirke Avot* it is written, “You are not obligated to complete the task but neither are you free to desist from it.” With so much work to be done, I had to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

As I started my own life in NYC, it may have seemed like an untimely move but the truth is that there was never going to be a “good” time. And along the way, I realized that Jewish communal service is about much more than planning programs, raising dollars, and amassing donors; it is about building lifelong relationships and partnerships. Those are the signposts we leave for generations to come. ■



Judaism Down Under: The Doctor Who Became a Rabbi

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Following the ashes of the Holocaust, tens of thousands of Europe's Jews thought of Australia as simply the farthest place on earth they could get from the terrors they had just suffered. And so it was that the post-war Jewish immigration to Australia came to invigorate the longstanding but relatively small Jewish community that had been in Australia since the earliest days of European settlement in the late 18th century. Since then waves of immigrants have continued to increase Jewish numbers over the latter part of the 20th century with significant arrivals coming from the former Soviet Union, South Africa, Israel, and even the United States. Today Jewish Australia numbers around 120,000 (out of a total population of approximately 20 million) with about 50,000 each in Melbourne and Sydney, about 10,000 in the isolated west coast city of Perth, and the rest scattered around the sparsely populated country.

But you wouldn't know that there were only 120,000 of us Jews Down Under. Jews have contributed in significant and notable ways to the fabric of Australian society. Two Governors-General (akin to the role of an Israeli President) have been Jews – Sir Isaac Isaacs and Sir Zelman Cowen (the latter being a member of Temple Beth Israel, Melbourne, the congregation I currently serve). A major university and a whole city have been named after a prominent general during World War I, Sir John Monash, who was also Jewish.

For a community its size, Melbourne boasts a surprising number of vibrant Jewish institutions. There are over 50 separate congregations ranging from tiny *shtetl* (prayer houses) to large established synagogues. Jewish day schools provide educational opportunities for about 80% of Jewish children and span the range of Jewish outlooks from the Secular Yiddishist (Bundist) Sholem Aleichem School to the Progressive (Reform) King David School (with 900 students spanning preschool to 12th grade), Modern Orthodox

and Zionist community schools, and ultra-Orthodox, non-Zionist *yeshivot*. Youth movements originally transplanted from Europe remain popular with new ones continuing to sprout, including the thriving Reform Zionist youth movement, Netzer, which was founded in Melbourne in the 1970s and is now international. The Florence Melton adult education program is active, there are two Jewish museums, two widely read Jewish weekly newspapers, a Hebrew language weekly newspaper, regular Hebrew and Yiddish radio programs, growing departments of Jewish studies at the major universities, and a very high level of Israel awareness and Israel-directed philanthropy.

The Progressive movement, affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism, will soon be celebrating its 80th year. Over the years, congregations and other dynamic Progressive institutions have emerged in all of the Australian state capitals, some smaller Australian population centers, and beyond Australia in our WUPJ region, including New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Mumbai. Beijing and Shanghai have the beginnings of Progressive congregations.

Growing up in Melbourne, my own journey to the rabbinate was forged in the context of this diverse Jewish community. I was raised at Temple Beth Israel, studied at The King David School, and attended Netzer. I was also influenced by the strongly Bundist wing of my family and the numerous Orthodox and secular Jewish friends I met through B'nai Brith's Youth group, AZA. But most of all, my drive to become a rabbi was sparked by learning with and getting to know the rabbis I grew up with – especially Rabbi John Levi and the several HUC-JIR graduates from the U.S. and Australia who spent their first years in the rabbinate in Melbourne and who now serve



communities across America. Their love of Judaism and passion for Progressive Judaism in particular were infectious and inspirational.

My journey to HUC-JIR and the rabbinate took a detour via medical school. Here in Australia where medical studies begin straight out of high school and take six years, I was a doctor on the wards at the age of 23. But my interest in the rabbinate kept nagging at me and after three years as a resident in a large Melbourne public hospital, I took a year off and studied at the Liberal Yeshiva then operating at HUC-JIR's Jerusalem campus under the leadership of Rabbi Naamah Kelman. Learning with HUC-JIR faculty and meeting rabbinical students from the US and around the world re-inspired me to consider a career change. On my return to Australia, I discussed rabbinical school with then rising fourth-year student, now Rabbi, Rayna Gevurtz, C '01. Rayna, a native of Port-

unity is closer to its European immigrant roots and to the types of religious and philosophical frameworks seen in Israel today, which can make it more challenging to be a Progressive rabbi in the context of the wider Orthodox-acquainted Jewish community. Yet the opportunities here are enormous.

More and more individuals who have grown up secular or even nominally Orthodox are coming into contact with Progressive Judaism and finding it a better match for their worldviews. As in America, here in Australia there is a rise in interfaith dating and marriage. In Australia non-Jewish partners will often choose Judaism and our Introduction to Judaism and conversion programs are thriving. We as a community are reinvigorated by young families that choose to make Judaism an important part of their lives and would otherwise not have had the opportunity to do so.

Here in Australia we are proud to live in such a diverse, multicultural, and democratic country that is home to a unique and flourishing part of the Jewish Diaspora.

land, Oregon, was doing a summer rabbinical internship at Temple Beth Israel, Melbourne, the first in a long line of rabbinical and cantorial students to do so (summertime in the Northern Hemisphere coincides with winter in the Southern Hemisphere, so our program year is in full swing and there is lots to do). Rayna helped me decide to apply to HUC-JIR and the following northern summer, in 2000, Rayna and I were married. We moved to Jerusalem where she was completing her final year and I was entering my first year of rabbinical training with the support of my home congregation, the Union for Progressive Judaism (Australia, New Zealand and Asia) and the WUPJ.

My final four years at HUC-JIR were my first four as a "rebbetzin" or, as our teacher Professor Michael Meyer would insist, "rebbetz." I had the opportunity to study at the Cincinnati campus while Rayna served at I.M. Wise Temple before we moved out west (closer to Oregon and Australia), where Rayna served as a rabbi at Temple Bat Yahm, Newport Beach, California. I served there and in El Centro, CA, as a student rabbi while commuting to HUC-JIR's Los Angeles campus. Upon my ordination in May 2005, we moved back to Australia where we now both serve as rabbis at Temple Beth Israel under the leadership of Leo Baeck College, London-trained Senior Rabbi Fred Morgan.

The Progressive Movement in Australia is growing despite certain unique challenges. Progressive Judaism is less dominant in the general Jewish community than Reform Judaism is in America. Compared with Americans, Australians generally are more secular, less "church-going." Families move around less (for career or study) than is the case in many American communities and it's still the common thing for families to gather for *Shabbat* dinner every Friday night (regardless of religious affiliation or lack of formal communal affiliation). Consequently, there is less of a draw to synagogues in the formation of community and friendships. The Jewish commu-

One of the most exciting projects currently under way in our region is in the area of liturgical transformation. For years the dominant prayer book in our region has been Gates of Prayer and now we are working with the CCAR Press to publish a World Union edition of *Mishkan Tefillah*. Changes are expected to include some accommodation to the slightly more traditional orientation of Progressive Jews in our part of the world, the inclusion of national anthems in addition to those of Canada, America, and Israel, as well as seasonal references that address the needs of those of us living in the Southern Hemisphere.

Our regional rabbinical organization, the UPJ Moetzah, with its dozen or so members, meets twice a year to collaborate and discuss issues of mutual concern including conversion standards and procedures; officiation at same-gender commitment ceremonies (which is now permitted to those rabbis who wish to do so); and the provision of rabbinical support to mostly outlying Progressive communities without their own rabbis. In addition, rabbis in our region are linked to international rabbinical organizations, particularly the CCAR, with a growing number of us, living by the Pacific Ocean, seeing ourselves legitimately as the westernmost members of PARR (the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis).

Many of those Jews who chose to call Australia home in the mid-twentieth century did so because it was so far away from the destruction they had experienced in Europe. Australia is still far away – it's 15 hours flying time from Los Angeles to Melbourne. But the world is shrinking and telecommunications technology and air travel have made Australia's isolation far less apparent. Here in Australia we are proud to live in such a diverse, multicultural, and democratic country that is home to a unique and flourishing part of the Jewish Diaspora. If you are ever in the area, let us know and we'll be happy to show you around! ■

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