

collective growth in a community as well as those that are miseducative;

- Nurturing community by sustaining values, engagement, and empowerment of members, participation, diversity, and a pervasive sense of purpose and responsibility for the community's welfare;
- Probing the purposes, practices, ideas, and values of Jewish peoplehood over time and its challenges for contemporary Jews.

Melissa Simon, N '10, credits the Mandel Fellows Program for transforming her vision, saying "I seek to serve a pulpit where there is an opportunity to be a part of a change process through dialogue, open communication, understanding of our collective history, and community-building educational initiatives." She has already begun to work on re-imagining congregational education as part of her internships at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in New York City over the past two years.

Stollman concludes, "As I struggle with the essential question of the value of a Reform Jewish education and how to articulate a compelling answer that truly speaks to families, my perspective has evolved. Hearing from educators and rabbis who work in a multitude of settings has expanded my thinking, helping me realize that building community means bringing people into Judaism, not only into a synagogue." ■



The Mandel Fellows meet with leaders of Kibbutz Ketura during the Mandel Leadership Institute in Israel, June 2009.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: "WHAT'S NOT OK IS NOT CARING"

Jean Bloch Rosensaft

“Our students must emerge from their years at HUC-JIR with finely honed, successful strategies for social change and a vision for the core values of *tikkun olam*” says Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, National Coordinator of Leadership Initiatives. “As they prepare to serve as leaders of communities, our students need to be aware of the ‘Obama shift’ and have a solid understanding of the new administration’s stances in foreign policy, Israel and the Middle East, church-state boundaries, racism, the environment, immigration, and inter-religious cooperation. They must learn how to apply Jewish ethical values to the key social issues of the day and, without being partisan, exert a call to action within their communities.”

To accomplish these goals, the Jerome K. Davidson Chair in Social Responsibility infuses the five-year rabbinical program throughout HUC-JIR’s four campuses in a myriad of ways. Faculty teaching Bible and Rabbinics include texts that speak to these issues. Students are required to take specialized courses in professional development, social action and economic justice, community organizing, leadership and organizational dynamics, and training in public policy advocacy. Prominent guest lecturers focus on social issues. Infield experience is gained through supervised internships and learning opportunities with the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) (see pages 25 and 41), Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC) and Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, Rabbis for Human Rights, the Jewish Funds for Justice, PANIM, Hazon, the Coalition on the Environments and Jewish Life, Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, One-LA/IAF (see page 39), Progressive Jewish Alliance, MAZON, Bet Tzedek, and programs for the homeless in Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and the Soup Kitchen on the New York campus. Ongoing mentorship and self-reflective writing assignments are integrated with the requirement to implement an institutional change project to gain hands-on experience in leading social change in their congregational internship settings.

As part of their social responsibility requirement, rabbinical students **Ariana Silverman**, N '10, Tisch Fellow **Matthew Soffer**, N '10, and Schusterman Fellow **David Segal**, N '10, participated in a seminar during which they interviewed 20th-century Jewish leaders who have had a significant impact on society, including Rabbi David Saperstein (RAC), Ruth Messinger (AJWS and Darfur), Leonard Fein (hunger and Mazon), and Elie Wiesel (Soviet Jewry and genocide). Here is an excerpt from their interview with the renowned social activist Rabbi Arnold Wolf, C '41, z”l:

We interviewed Rabbi Wolf because his sermons and writings and activism on issues of social justice were constantly pushing the Jewish community out of its comfort zone. Many of his positions that are now considered mainstream, including those on civil rights, community organizing, and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, were extremely radical when he first argued for them.

Rabbi Wolf: My personal experience is: Everything I have fought for and believed in always lost. Without fail. If you are out to win, you are in the wrong ball game. Our mission is to raise the standard, and stand for what is impossible, and lose.

The three of us were aghast. We wanted to know how to win. What we did not know was that he would teach us an entirely different way of envisioning success.

Soffer: How do you distinguish between the two: losing big and losing because you don't achieve the Messianic Era?

Rabbi Wolf: Our mission as rabbis, or intellectuals, or utopians, is not to produce effect, but to stand for something. What I know is a meta-political language, where theology undergirds political action and re-imagines it. And that is my function. To say something that is not simply political or simply practical, but Jewish. Let's take the Israel-Palestine issue. You might say the world caught up with me. What I have been saying for 30 or 40 years, lots of people are saying now. But now I have to say something else. I have to be more utopian, more Messianic, more meta-political, and see if I can move the whole discourse another notch.

Silverman: What would be your advice to people who are thinking of giving sermons to congregations in a similar vein?

Rabbi Wolf: You cannot be a rabbi and mimic *The New Republic* or *The New York Times* – that is not your text, it is not your expertise. Somebody else in the congregation will do it much better than you will. But there is something only you can do. And that's what I call the meta-political. You can talk about the principles that undergird political decisions. And you can be radical about those things. But you have to know what the other side is saying.

Silverman: How do you keep going if you feel like you keep losing?

Rabbi Wolf: That's called God. God is the name of what you do when you lose over and over again. And it is not so terrible. It is, in a way, reassuring. If people all bought what I said, I'd have to rethink my position.

Silverman: And you don't think there is incremental progress?

Rabbi Wolf: It's very dangerous to think in terms of incremental progress. That is the illusion that the Holocaust, I believe, destroyed – the illusion that there's human progress without cost.

Segal: I feel that my liberal Jewish colleagues – both rabbinical students and rabbis – are really afraid of talking politics from the pulpit.

Rabbi Wolf: It is less dangerous to be political than you think it is. Of course you have to be non-partisan. And you have to be fair. And you have to learn what language to talk in.

Soffer: Can you say a little bit about internal tensions – how have you struggled with this *am keshe oref* [stiff-necked people] of ours?

Rabbi Wolf: In *Rediscovering Judaism*, a book I edited in 1965, there is an essay arguing that the *am keshe oref* in the Bible was a bad thing, but in the post-biblical period, in the *galut* [Diaspora], it's the thing that has kept us alive, and I think that's right. I like that the Jews are intransigent.

Soffer: Do you think the next generation of Jewish leaders is going to need different skills and face different challenges?

Rabbi Wolf: Instead of politics, the apparent thing is going to be psychology. You are going to be counselors. And that is a legitimate role. People will expect you to be less political and less demanding and more concessive, encouraging, and therapeutic. Philip Rieff in his book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* is afraid that we have given up any standards of ethics and politics in favor of happiness or even fun. People expect the synagogue to be happy and pleasant and I think that's not our mission.

Segal: You said: "We're on the right side" and "I may be in the hands of an angry God who is not applauding." How do you know we're on the right side? Have you ever changed your mind?

Rabbi Wolf: I have never changed my mind about God or ethics. I have changed my mind about me a lot. But I never thought the Torah was indistinct. Here is a story about Heschel. He was in Selma with Martin Luther King and came back and gave a lecture here on prayer. And a student asked him, "Dr. Heschel, how is it that when the world is brimming over with issues and problems and tragedies and politics, you're talking about prayer?" Heschel did not say to him what I would have said: "I just came back from Selma, I did everything I could and I'll do more." He said, "Prayer is also important. Prayer is important in its own right. And you don't have to defend it. And if you are doing prayer seriously you are doing ethics seriously." And I've never forgotten that. So you don't have to excuse yourself. The sense of being in the vanguard, in the outnumbered army, is what the best of history knows. Someone said, "Can a small group of people change the world?" The answer is: only a small group can change the world. And if you change it, fine, and if you don't, that's ok too. What's not ok is not caring." ■



Painting a Katrina-damaged house in New Orleans.