

Pioneering Pluralism in the Jewish State

"Im tirtzu, ayn zo aggadah – if you will it, it is not a dream."
Theodor Herzl

On the 25th anniversary of the ordination of Rabbi Mordechai Rotem as the first Israeli Reform rabbi, four new rabbis were ordained at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem. There are now forty rabbinical alumni serving Progressive Judaism in Israel today, with an additional thirty-three students currently immersed in their four years of study toward ordination. As pioneers promoting liberal Judaism, they are transforming the fabric of Jewish life in the Jewish State.

Each of these newly ordained rabbis reflects a different Jewish ethnic background, life experience, and orientation toward his or her professional goals. Most have been profoundly influenced to become rabbis by the vibrant Jewish life they discovered during their stints working in Reform summer camps in the United States or during their experiences living and studying stateside. Exposed to the vitality of synagogue life as a modern of Jewish continuity, the flourishing of Jewish spirituality and innovative ritual and practice within the Reform community, and the models of Jewish affiliation to the educational and cultural institutions of North American Jewish life, they have returned to Israel with the vision to bring these gifts to Israelis searching for an alternative to the polar extremes of Orthodoxy and secularism.

Stateside traditions of synagogue affiliation are not part of the Israeli culture. The burgeoning numbers of Reform Israelis participating in life cycle events, educational programs, and religious services at Israel's Progressive congregations do not necessarily become 'members' in the North American fashion. HUC-JIR's Israeli rabbinical alumni therefore need to construct innovative modalities to attract and steward growing relationships with those who are seeking Jewish tradition, spirituality, ethical guidance, and cultural heritage. Thus, the Israeli Reform pulpit is developing into a new, emerging position of the 'community rabbi' for many of these alumni. Others look to education as the forum for their outreach.

Strengthening this outlook are their first-hand experiences advancing the renaissance of Jewish life in the Former Soviet Union. As participants in HUC-JIR's "Rabbinical Infusion" programs there, students and alumni have traveled to communities large and small in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Latvia to conduct holiday services, teach in the religious schools and youth groups, and forge links of Jewish solidarity and peopled. As witnesses to the passionate commitment to Judaism on the part of Jews deprived of their religious heritage by the Soviets, these Israeli rabbis want to spur that same drive among Israelis alienated by religious fundamentalism but hungering for a lost tradition via a liberal ethos.

How will these four new rabbis make a difference?

Rabbi Adi Cohen's rabbinate is focused on Jewish education in the schools of the Sharon region, drawing upon his extensive expertise in formal and informal Jewish education. Acknowledging the complex challenges of infusing Judaism into the prevailing secular Israeli landscape, he says: *"Just as the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea on twelve paths – equal to the number of tribes – the path along which the Jewish people walk today also offers many routes to those who travel it: the path of faith, the path of knowledge, the path of commandments, the path of morality, the path of the individual, and the path of community."*

Mira Regev, born to a religious Zionist family, is integrating her concern for the environment and her advocacy on behalf of Arab-Jewish coexistence through her work at the Leo Baeck Education Center in Haifa. *"I pray that we, as a Movement, will develop and uplift our unique voice, while listening to the other realities around us to create a beautiful quilt binding the diversity that is within and beyond us."*

Ofer Sabath-Beit-Halachmi's family was among the pioneers who founded the Emek Hefer region and the Israeli transport system. As a medical organization officer in the Israel Defense Forces, he has witnessed the devastation of terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians. Nonetheless, he expresses his optimism in the future: *"Faith in human liberty, in the need for change and the capacity of humans to influence their*

future for the better, can all be realized in a Jewish way only when two elements – spirit and action – meet in the present. In Jewish language, this meeting is called 'commandment.' Let us remember the act of the Covenant and recall our obligation to change that which can be changed."

As a screenwriter of Iraqi-Zionist heritage, **Ayala Sha'ashua-Meron** seeks to replicate the vitality of Jewish life she discovered while living in Los Angeles by becoming a rabbi in her homeland of Israel. Her goal is to be the community rabbi of Rosh Ha'ayin, near Tel Aviv, by reaching out to those searching for Judaism's spiritual and ethical values. *"It took me some time to understand that the loyalty that Jeremiah describes does not imply that we must adhere forever to the status quo. This is a loyalty that requires us to move, change, and continue our journey."*

Such idealism reflects the spirit of the College-Institute as an academic institution of excellence that ensures the best professional and spiritual leadership for the Jewish future around the world.



Newly ordained Rabbis (from left to right) Ofer Sabath-Beit-Halachmi, Mira Regev, Adi Cohen, and Ayala Sha'ashua-Meron with Rabbi Ellenson and Rabbi Michael Marmor at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem Ordination Ceremonies.