

# Strengthening Israel's Progressive Future



Newly ordained Israeli Progressive Rabbis (from left) Daniel Meyer, Gili Zidkiyahu, Nir Cohen, Orna Pilz, Oshrat Morag, and Tali Avnon-Benveniste.

Six Israeli Progressive rabbis were ordained at the Academic Convocation held on the HUC-JIR/ Jerusalem campus on November 14, 2008. These new rabbis strengthen the cadre of 59 rabbinical pioneers working to create a contemporary Judaism that speaks to the values and lifestyle of modern Israelis. Through their efforts, the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ) is gaining ground and furthering religious pluralism in the Jewish state.

The first son of a Reform woman rabbi ever to be ordained, **Daniel Alexander Meyer** took his first steps toward ordination in Jerusalem at the age of eight, while his father, Dr. Michael Meyer, Ochs Professor of Jewish History, was teaching at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem and his mother, Margaret Meyer, was studying in the Year-In-Israel Program. At his *bar mitzvah* service at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, he announced his intention to make *aliyah* and at the age of sixteen, Daniel represented the American Jewish community in the World Bible Quiz for Jewish youth on Israel's thirtieth independence day, winning eighth place. He was active in the Reform youth movement in the U.S. and in the Zionist movement Habonim throughout his teens. At the age of nineteen, after completing a year's studies at Columbia University, Daniel moved to Israel, and worked as a youth leader. After serving in a command position in Nahal (Israel Defense Forces infantry brigade), Daniel made his home on Kibbutz Lotan, where he coordinated date-growing activities, developed the progressive Jewish education system, supervised Noar Telem (the youth movement of the IMPJ), organized Jewish studies for the adult members of the kibbutz, and helped to lead Jewish lifecycle ceremonies. He studied Jewish history in the Open University, completing a B.A. degree *cum laude*, and

earned his M.A. in Jewish history in the Mishnaic and Talmudic period at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Daniel began his rabbinical studies in 2002 with the encouragement of Rabbi Meir Azari and Rabbi Yehoram Mazor. He worked for over three years as a student rabbi in Achvat Israel Congregation in Rishon Lezion and wrote his rabbinical thesis on "Each Generation and Its Exegesists." He is currently beginning to work in Ra'anon Congregation as a member of the team led by Rabbi Tamar Kohlberg.

**Talia Avnon-Benvenisti** was born in Kibbutz Hemdiya in the Beit Shean Valley, completed her military service in the Air Force, and served as an educational emissary in summer camps in North America under the auspices of the Education Department of the Jewish Agency for Israel. After receiving her B.A. in Education and Social Sciences at Beit Berl College, she joined the Ya'adim Institute for the Management of Knowledge in Education, where she helped write several curricula and books. In 2003 Talia joined the educational staff at the Jewish Agency's Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad, counseling groups and promoting the professional development of diaspora Jewish youth leaders. She completed her M.A. in the fields of Bible and Midrash, *cum laude*, at the Shechter Institute last year. During her rabbinical studies, Talia established the field of school programs for the Education Department of Beit Daniel, which today provides Jewish enrichment for thirty schools in the Tel Aviv region, and was appointed director of that Department. Talia's rabbinical thesis discusses the development of new prayers intended for modern, secular Jews, and for believers who seek to enrich the language of prayer.

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While studying at Ben Shemen Youth Village in 1985, **Nir Cohen** began to attend the Reform youth movement Tsofei Telem, where he encountered a religious experience very different from the ancient traditions of the Iraqi, Persian, and Jerusalemite communities he had inherited from his parents and family. After completing his military service in the Intelligence Corps, his enchantment with the desert landscapes of the northern Negev mountains led him to continue to live in this area, working as a desert tourism guide, a jeep driver, and occasionally as a shepherd. Nir studied at the School of Social Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, completing B.A. and M.A. degrees in the

fields of sociology, education, social anthropology, and international relations. He served as a student fellow in the Minerva Center for Human Rights, alongside students from other countries around the Mediterranean who were seeking sustainable solutions to sea pollution. After joining the Israeli Rabbinical Program, Nir became a member of Har-El Congregation, where he performed much of his professional development work. He also served as a rabbinical counselor for Noar Telem and as the rabbi of Kibbutz Yahel. While working for many years as an educator and administrator in the Joint Institute for Jewish Studies, he became convinced of the vital need for dialogue between the different streams in

## To Comfort, To Counsel, To Care

**R**eform rabbis, social workers, educators, and nurses are among the first generation of Israeli pastoral caregivers – *Mezorim* – to be trained at HUC-JIR's innovative Blaustein Center for Pastoral Care in Jerusalem. The first cohort of *Mezorim* received their certificates at the Academic Convocation in Jerusalem on November 14, 2008. These eleven pioneers are helping to redefine Jewish religious outreach, grounded in the values and mission of the Reform Movement, and will have an impact on the lives of many, through their capacity to comfort, counsel, and care. A brief survey of their placements offers an insight into their role as innovators who are introducing the role of chaplain to Israeli society and as catalysts for pastoral care in Israel (from left to right):

- 1 Miriam Gues Taoub, a registered nurse, works in orthopedic rehabilitation at the Sheba Hospital in a position funded by UJA-Federation of New York;
- 2 Saralee Kasel, a registered nurse, offers pastoral care in the oncology department at Soroko Hospital in Beersheva;
- 3 Debi Pinto-Cohen provides home care through the General Ill Fund and works with the support group at Congregation Kol Haneshama;
- 4 Iris Solomon offers solace and care through the Tishkofet Organization for cancer patients and their families, and provides staff support and enrichment for its volunteers at its Zichron

Yaakov branch;

- 5 Ariella Vogel works in the head injury rehabilitation department at Sheba Hospital in a position funded by UJA-Federation of New York as well as with the Chaverut Project and Hadassah Hospital;
- 6 Gila Cohen works in the Beit Levenstin Rehabilitation Hospital, the Beit Hashemesh Senior Home, and in the Special Needs Bar/Bat Mitzvah project of the Masorti Movement;
- 7 Gidi Sand is an educator, able to lead support groups in community settings through *Beit Midrash* study, in which Biblical texts, coupled with creative writing and group dynamic techniques, offer opportunities for spiritual and personal encounter.
- 8 Rabbi Miri Gold is a chaplain in the oncology department at Kaplan Hospital and its home support for patients as well as for her Congregation Birkat Shalom;
- 9 Rabbi Stacey Blank is serving her new congregation Darchai Noam in Ramat Hasharon;
- 10 Avigail Eitam, a psychologist, is still a full-time rabbinical student;
- 11 Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon (not pictured) has worked in home hospice care and is now concentrating on the needs of her growing Congregation Yozma.



Judaism. In recent years, Nir has been active in frameworks promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogue, particularly in the context of the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. He works as a teaching fellow in Prime, a research institute, and is beginning his tenure as the rabbi at the Neve Hannah institution in Kiryat Gat.

**Orna Piltz** was raised and educated in the Neve Magen neighborhood of Ramat Hasharon, which at the time was populated by families serving in the Army. The Yom Kippur War and War of Attrition were formative influences. After a year of study at Bruria College in Jerusalem, she served as a teacher-soldier in Moshav Sde Trumot in the Beit Shean Valley and as a brigade education officer in the north. Upon completing her military service, Orna returned to Jerusalem, received her B.A. in English Literature at the Hebrew University, and worked as a teacher, journalist covering women's issues, and award-winning writer of essays and stories for adults and children. In 2000 she moved to Beit Daniel and took on the position of program director. During her rabbinical studies, Orna taught in Beit Midrash programs in IMPJ congregations, at community centers, and at Alma College, where she previously had taught lifecycle ceremonies and edited the book *Toward Marriage*. She was awarded her M.A. in Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University in 2004. Over the past two years, she has concentrated mainly on leading groups for mothers and daughters about to become *bat mitzvah* – a program for the IMPJ's Education Department that she has been introducing to teachers and implementing at schools, and which provided the subject for her rabbinical thesis. During her final year of rabbinical studies, she joined the staff of the HUC-JIR Education Department and taught in the Israeli Rabbinical Program. As a rabbi, she seeks to continue to develop study groups relating to women's lifecycle.

**Oshrat Morag** was exposed to a pluralistic Jewish heritage combined with profound Zionist commitment through the diverse background of her Orthodox maternal grandparents and her father's upbringing at Kibbutz Kfar Hamaccabi. Oshrat studied at the Reali High School in Haifa and was a counselor and leader in the Scouts. Upon completing her military service as an officer in the Air Force, she received a B.A. in political science from the Hebrew University and worked in the Jewish Agency for Israel as a counselor for groups from North America visiting Israel. This work exposed her to egalitarian and liberal Judaism, inspired her to adopt a Progressive Jewish lifestyle, and led her to study for an M.A. degree in the field of women's stud-

ies in Judaism and Bible, *cum laude*, at the Shechter Institute. During her rabbinical studies, Oshrat worked with empowerment groups for women and *b'not mitzvah*, taught youngsters in pre-Army preparatory programs, led a parents' group in the pre-school at Kol Haneshama, volunteered in an organization that helps children from disadvantaged neighborhoods, and established a group that visits children in the hospital on Rosh Chodesh. She wrote her rabbinical thesis on "Poetry as Midrash" and has just begun her Ph.D. studies at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati under the supervision of Professor Rachel Adler in the field of feminism and Judaism while also serving as a Hillel rabbi in Indiana.

**Gili Zidkiyahu** comes from a family rooted in Iraq, Riga, Hebron, Jerusalem, and Netanya, and her mother's side of the family is raising the eighth generation in Israel. Gili's exposure to issues of faith and tradition began in the fifth grade, when she was a student in the first year of the new Tali School in Hod Hasharon and adopted feminism in defining her beliefs and views. During her military service she was an education NCO and later an officer. Her post-IDF trip as an emissary of the Scouts to the U.S., where she worked in a Reform summer camp, rekindled dormant religious feelings. Gili studied for her B.A. degree in Jerusalem and Haifa and received her M.A. in the Gender Program at Bar Ilan University. She provided a decade of volunteer service at Haifa's Woman to Woman feminist center and rape crisis center, and coordinated an educational program for youngsters to prevent sexual violence. She found a home in Ohel Avraham Congregation, and was among the founders of the seminar center, which later became the Lokey International Academy of Jewish Studies at the Leo Baeck Education Center. Together with Ofek Meir she led the Beit Midrash for Educational Leadership, a position that enabled her to learn as she taught. With the encouragement of Rabbi Dan Pratt, Gili joined the Israeli Rabbinical Program and began to combine her feminist activities with Progressive Judaism by initiating and leading a Rosh Chodesh group for women at Ohel Avraham Congregation, an experience that provided the inspiration for her rabbinical thesis. Gili spent two years as an educational and community emissary to the Liberal movement in England, during which time she attended courses in the rabbinical program at Leo Baeck College. Upon her return to Israel, Gili served in a rabbinical position in the Open House for Pride and Tolerance in Jerusalem. She is currently serving a rabbinical position at Ra'anana Congregation.