

# Promoting Progressive Values in Israel



*The Ordination Class of 2009 at HUC-JIR/ Jerusalem: (from left) Jehiel Benjamin Gruber, Tzipora Livneh, Chen Ben-Or, Yehudit Edelman-Green, Dalia Tibon Lagaziel, and Oded Mazor.*

A new cohort of Israeli Reform rabbis and an inaugural graduating class of Israeli educators are embarked on a mission to transform Israeli society. These six new ordinees of the Israeli Rabbinical Program and seven graduates of the Master of Arts in Pluralistic Jewish Education are already embedded within congregations and educational institutions throughout the Jewish state where they are offering liberal alternatives to the Orthodox-secular divide.

The ordinees – now bringing the number of HUC-JIR’s Israeli rabbinical alumni to 65 – bring a diversity of backgrounds and a commitment to shared values to their task:

American born, Reform Movement-bred **Yehudit Edelman-Green** immigrated to Israel in 1984, received her Master’s in Jewish Studies from the Schechter Institute in 1994, and has been an active member of Kehilat Hod ve-Hadar in Kfar Saba for the past 25 years. She served as a communal youth worker with 30 youth groups across the religious spectrum in Manchester, England, for the World Zionist Organization, and later led Jewish identity seminars and developed educational games at the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora. Under the auspices of the Masorti Movement, she initiated “*Bar/Bat Mitzvah* for the Special Child,” a national program that she directed from 1995-2004 and

which reached thousands of children with special needs. Her book, *Immigrant Lessons* (2007), is the story of the great hardships and joys of *aliyah*. She is currently working to create a community for adults with special needs – “Rimon Community Project” – which has become a non-profit organization and has been allocated land by the City of Kfar Saba.

Born to a traditional family of Iraqi immigrants, **Chen Ben-Or** holds a Bachelor of Social Work degree from Haifa University and M.A. in Jewish Education from HUC-JIR/New York. During her twenty years with the Midrasha at Oranim College, a center for the renewal of Jewish life in Israel, she organized Jewish identity workshops for teens and adults, young Jewish community leadership development, and programs for new immigrants. A former Marshall T. Meyer Fellow at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in New York City, Chen is one of the founders of the *Nigun HaLev* community at Moshav Nahalal, comprised of residents of the Jezreel Valley who gather for *Shabbat* services, holiday observances, life-cycle events, Jewish studies, and social action projects. In addition to coordinating the community’s steering committee, leading services, and teaching *b’nai mitzvah* students there, she is involved in establishing a national network of communities experimenting with renewal in prayer.

In 2004, she began working on educational projects in the TALI schools in the greater Haifa area in an attempt to bring the topic of prayer to teachers and students. Her rabbinical thesis on pastoral work suggests a model for assimilating traditional tools regarding death and illness in these non-traditional, emerging Jewish communities in Israel.

With his ordination, **Jehiel Benjamin Gruber** becomes the eighth generation rabbi in his family. Raised in Beer Sheva after his family made *aliyah* from Chicago, he attended the Netiv Meir Yeshiva and later combined military service in the Israeli Defense Forces with advanced college-level courses at the Hesder Yeshiva in Yerucham, of which he was a founding member. Under the auspices of the Jewish Agency, Benjie taught Jewish Studies in the Former Soviet Union. Thereafter, he spent two years teaching Judaism to all ages and denominations in Portland, Oregon, where he was drawn to liberal Judaism. A volunteer stint in Malawi brought him to the realization that the rabbinate would enable him to integrate Jewish content and his mission to improve the world. He earned the M.A. in Jewish Philosophy from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and was active in congregations Mevakshei Derekh and Mevasseret Tzion, Rabbis for Human Rights, the Israel Religious Action Center, the *Mekhinah* in Yaffo, and the Nativ conversion program during his rabbinical studies. For the past year, Benjie has served as the student rabbi of Kibbutz Yahel and hopes to move with his family to the Aravah region in the coming year. His rabbinical thesis establishes a basis for Reform Jews to relate to the framework of the commandments as a divine imperative and as a process of individual choice through decisions made anew and sanctified each day.

**Tzipora Livneh** came to Israel from Poland with her family in 1950. Her parents were among the few survivors of the Jews of Chelm, in southern Poland, most of whom perished in the Sobibor concentration camp. The legacy of her family's suffering as well as their faith led her to view education as her calling in life. She earned a Master's degree from the Hebrew University in Modern Jewish History and Educational Counseling. For 33 years, she taught history and citizenship in Jerusalem at Ort College, Ort Minkoff, the Gymnasia, and Tali Beit Hinuch. In Tzipora's vision, the correlation between the knowledge one acquires and the way of life one leads provides for a life that

fosters happiness, fulfillment, self-esteem, and understanding.

**Oded Mazor**, born in 1978 in Kfar Saba, grew up in a family deeply involved with the Progressive Movement in Israel. His paternal great-grandfather was an active member of the Liberal synagogue in his home town in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. His maternal grandfather, Zoltan Schalk, was one of the first members of Congregation Emet V'Shalom in Nahariya, where he volunteered for years as the *shamash* of the congregation. Oded's spiritual growth was nurtured by a number of communities with which he has been affiliated: Darchei-Noam in Ramat Hasharon, where his father, Rabbi Yehoram Mazor, J '90, served as rabbi for 28 years; Hod Ve'Hadar in Kfar Saba; the Tali school in Hod HaSharon; the Noam Youth Movement; and his army Nahal service (an army branch that combines military service with agricultural work and community service) at Kibbutz Keturah. During his studies for the Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University, he taught cantillation of the Bible to *b'nai mitzvah* children and served as the *B'nai Mitzvah* Program Coordinator at Kol HaNeshama, where for the past two years he has been the educational coordinator and rabbinical assistant as well as serving as the rabbi of the Tali School.

**Dalia Tibon Lagaziel** was born in Haifa in 1970 to a socialist home of German heritage, where she absorbed secular humanistic values. As a youngster, she became a leader in the Shomer Hatzair leftist youth movement. After her military service, Dalia created a one-person multi-media performance about the Holocaust, on behalf of the Hedva Eishevitz Holocaust Memorial Institute, and toured high-schools across Israel for two years. She further explored the legacy of the Holocaust and Jewish identity during her travels in Europe, including Germany, for the next two years. Upon her return she completed her B.A. in Jewish Studies at Haifa University, after which she encountered Liberal Judaism for the first time at the Leo Baeck Beit Midrash for Educational Leadership, a program moderated by Ofek Meir and Gili Tzidkiyahu, both Israeli rabbinical alumni today. She joined the Progressive Movement as the Coordinator of the Youth Forum in Haifa and Northern Israel, under the leadership of another graduate of the Israeli Rabbinical Program, Gilad Kariv, conducting workshops, lessons

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and ceremonies, and cooperating with other social activist organizations. For the past eight years, Dalia has worked at the Leo Baeck Center, directing the communal Jewish Education Program. Three years into this role, she committed herself to rabbinical studies. She is now completing her M.A. in Jewish Thought at Haifa University. For the past two years, Dalia has served as a student rabbi at the Sulam Yaakov community in Zichron Yaacov.

The inaugural recipients of HUC-JIR's Master's in Pluralistic Jewish Education Program, a first-time collaboration with the Melton Centre for Jewish Education of the Hebrew University, are advocates for liberal Jewish values within the Israeli educational system:

**Michal Burstein-Azrieli** teaches history and is a twelfth-grade home-room teacher at the Leo Baeck High School in Haifa. She earned her teaching certificate in History from Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva and her B.A. in History and Education from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She believes that the values inherent in Judaism must be brought into the Israeli school system, opening the students to diversity and multi-culturalism.

**Nitza Harel-Attias** is the director of the kindergarten at Reform congregation Kol Haneshama in

Jerusalem. She has a B.A. in Bible and Jewish history and M.A. in Early Childhood Education from the Schwartz Program at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. "The challenge in my work," she says, "is to create an environment of openness to the varied streams of Judaism, making coexistence possible."

**Maital Cohen-Sabag** has a B.A. in Philosophy and Israel Studies from Haifa University and a teaching certificate in History. She teaches history and is a home-room teacher at the Leo Baeck High School. Her personal vision is to train and empower educators in secular Israeli schools, helping them to connect with their Jewish roots and bring their insights and knowledge into their classrooms.

**Oded Mazor**, one of this year's rabbinical ordines (see page 21), has just completed a Master's degree in Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University. Oded is currently the educational coordinator and assistant rabbi at Kol Haneshama in Jerusalem and served as student rabbi in the Tali Bayit Vegan elementary school in Jerusalem for the past four years.

**Lior Nevo** was raised in the Israeli Progressive Movement, from kindergarten and elementary school, to the youth movement, where she subsequently became an educational coordinator after her military service.

*Celebrating the inaugural graduates of the M.A. in Pluralistic Jewish Education: (from left) Rabbi Naamah Kelman, Dean, HUC-JIR/Jerusalem; Ronit Polsky, Coordinator, M.A. in Pluralistic Jewish Education Program, HUC-JIR; Rabbi Ellenson; Dr. Michal Muszkat-Barkan, Director, Department of Education and Professional Development, HUC-JIR; and (from right) Dr. Michael Gillis, Academic Director, Melton Centre for Jewish Education, the Hebrew University; Dr. Michael Marmur, Vice President for Academic Affairs, HUC-JIR; join graduates of the program: (from 5th on left) Israela Ravid, Maital Cohen-Sabag, Lior Nevo, Oded Mazor, and Nitza Harel-Attias (not pictured: Michal Burstein-Azrieli and Rinat Safania).*



She has a B.A. and a teaching certificate in Bible and Jewish Studies and is a graduate of the Revivim Program of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which trains teachers in the field of Jewish Studies. Lior is an educator and teacher of Bible and Jewish thought at the Ziv School in Jerusalem, where she seeks to create an open and pluralistic atmosphere in her classroom.

**Rinat Safania** is an educational advisor at the Dov Hoz School in Tel Aviv and a group facilitator. She completed her B.A. in Behavioral Sciences at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva and has a Master's degree in Educational Counseling and Group Facilitation. "I'd like to give Israelis personal ownership of their Jewishness, rather than having it dictated to them," she says, "and let them make the Jewish tradition, language, literature, and creativity their own."

For over a decade, **Israella Ravid** has been the director of the kindergarten of the Center for Reform Judaism in Tel Aviv, where she has integrated the hearing impaired and special needs children in her kindergarten and implemented values of equality and social justice as an integral part of the daily life of her school. She has written curricula on Jewish values and heritage, and was awarded the Rothschild Prize of Education for her outstanding contribution to Israeli education. Israella says that her Master's studies were an opportunity for her to explore theoretically her practical work in the field of pluralistic Jewish education.



*Other highlights of the Ordination and Academic Convocation at the Jerusalem campus, where these students were ordained and graduated on November 18, 2009, included the presentation of the honorary Doctor of Humane Letters to **Rabbi Michael Melchior**, Ehud Barak's Minister for Israeli Society and the World Jewish Community, and Deputy Foreign Minister, Deputy Minister of Education, and Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's office in successive governments; Chairman of the Knesset committee for Education, Culture and Sports and the Knesset Caucus on the Environment (2006-2009); one of Israel's leading legislators in the areas of education, children's rights, environment, and social justice; and currently a leader of civil society movements promoting religious pluralism, coexistence between Arabs and Jews in Israel, and grassroots inter-religious dialogue in the Middle East.*

Initial funding for the Master's Program was provided by Richard Scheuer, z"l, and the Scheuer Family, the Chais Family Foundation, Ann and Thomas Tisch, and the Alan Slifka Foundation. Their generosity and vision have enabled HUC-JIR/Jerusalem to pilot this program, which will have far-reaching impact on the inculcation of liberal Judaism into the Israeli educational system.

