

BECOMING LEADERS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN JERUSALEM



Francine Lis

Jorg Ahrens was born in post-Holocaust Germany. Raised in a nonreligious home in Frankfurt, he knew that one set of his grandparents were Holocaust survivors. A year ago, he decided to move to Israel.

Andrea Zanardo grew up in Milan, Italy, and is a Jew-by-choice and the first Progressive Italian rabbinical student. In 2000 he was one of the founders of the Association of Progressive Judaism in Italy.

Tracy Fishbein always loved to sing. She grew up in a large Reform congregation in St. Louis, where from the time she was 13 she sang in the Temple choir.

When Evan Schultz was a child, his family seemed to move to a new city every two years for his father's job. As he adjusted to a new school, a new neighborhood and new friends, he always found a home in his local synagogue.

Matthew Dreffin attended a glass blowing workshop while a student at Tulane University. After Hurricane Katrina, he moved back to New Orleans to work in a glass studio to contribute to the rebuilding of the city.

After finishing Georgetown Law School, Carole Gould settled in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where she raised two sons, worked as a

tax attorney, and wrote a weekly column for *The New York Times* Sunday business section. Carole was brought up by unaffiliated Jewish parents and first stepped into a synagogue when she was looking for a Hebrew School for her young children.

What do these people have in common? They are participating in the 2007-2008 Year-In-Israel Program at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem. They are among a class of 52 bright, creative, and enthusiastic graduate students from the United States, the Former Soviet Union, and Europe who have embarked on a new journey toward becoming Jewish leaders as rabbis, cantors, educators, and communal professionals. What better place than Israel to begin their training to serve the Jewish people?

"This class reflects the success of our Movement," says Rabbi Naamah Kelman, Director of the Year-In-Israel Program. "They are outstanding products of our NFTY summer camps, our synagogues, and campus life, and inspired by our finest alumni. What distinguishes this class is their commitment to community building. Many come with first-hand life experience in social action and social justice as a source of motivation, while others have felt the "calling" to serve our

Year-In-Israel students at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem

people since high school and are eager to get started. Most have been out in the world for a year or two after completing undergraduate studies, which certainly enriches their journey. Unlike the beginning of the academic year last summer, during the Lebanon War, we are off to a wonderful and peaceful start; at the same time, the students are awash with activities and opportunities to enjoy Jerusalem and Israel. My hope and prayer is that this simply continues."

HUC-JIR's Year-In-Israel Program is a rigorous eleven-month program of professional education that marks the beginning of a challenging and inspiring path toward becoming Progressive Jewish leaders. Rabbinical, cantorial, and education students are required to spend their first year on the Jerusalem campus for a year of bonding – with classmates from around the world and with the land and the people of Israel. The goals of the program are many and include an intensive immersion in the Hebrew language, experiential living in the modern State of Israel, acquisition of core Jewish textual skills, and an exploration of one's religious and spiritual identities. Most participants report their year in Israel to be one of the richest experiences of their lives.

This year's class includes forty-one rabbinical students, five cantorial students, and six education students, one of whom plans to pursue a second Master's degree in Jewish Communal Service at the College-Institute's School of Jewish Communal Service in Los Angeles. Four of the HUC-JIR students were born outside of the United States in Israel, Ukraine, and Russia, three are Wexner fellows, one is a United Jewish Communities Federation Executive Recruitment and Education Program (FEREP) scholar, and eight are second-career students. For many, this is one of numerous visits to Israel, and for others, this is their first time in the country.

gram, with alumni gathering for the annual Alumni Seminar (see page 7) for a week of study with leading Israeli academics and community leaders, with the larger Jerusalem community during *Shabbat* services, and with alumni living in Israel or visiting during the summer and participating in the Annual Alumni *Havdalah* Reception. Furthermore, one only needs to take a short walk from the idyllic campus setting to experience the vitality of life in Jerusalem, whether it is walking through the Old City, navigating the crowds of Ben Yehuda Street, or enjoying the many cultural activities taking place at any given moment throughout the city.

next year, gave up a successful law career to enter HUC-JIR with the goal of becoming a congregational rabbi. "The way of *Torah* is to live the best possible life we can," he says. "A rabbi can help one lead that kind of life. Helping others to live a good life, that is a great job description!"

Many students cite the mentorship of a respected rabbi, cantor, educator, or Jewish communal professional as pivotal in their decision to enter HUC-JIR "I hope that I will inspire others to continue in Jewish life in the ways I've been inspired by the Reform Movement," says Ariel Boxman, a native of Cincinnati, alumna of Camp Eisner and NFTY-NE, and the daughter of Rabbi Bradd Boxman, C '86. The Year-In-Israel class includes other offspring of alumni, including Joshua Franklin, whose father is Rabbi Stephen Franklin, C '69.

"My vision is to be on the cutting edge of educational techniques," adds Brad Cohen, an education student, who recalls the HUC-JIR high school weekend program that he attended in Cincinnati as a teenager. Brad chose HUC-JIR because "it's the complete package – Israel is an important part of Jewish education and hard to grasp if one has not spent significant time here."

David Gerber, a second-career rabbinical student who will attend the Cincinnati campus next year, believes that his prior professional experience in finance will be valuable in his rabbinate, pointing to "the work ethic and discipline, as well as the idea of leading and being part of a team." This is David's first time in Israel.

"I realized about two years ago that it was something that was inside of me from the beginning" shared Julia Rubin-Cadrain, a cantorial student, who was raised in Connecticut and attended the New England Conservatory in Boston. "I went to *Rosh Hashanah* services and observed the cantor's beautiful voice and how she related to the congregation." Julia looks forward to her role as a cantor, saying "I hope to find new ways to connect people to Judaism."

Jorg Ahrens, a rabbinical student from Abraham Geiger College in Berlin, who made *aliyah* a year before beginning the program,



Israeli folk dancing at the Shabbat dinner for students and alumni, sponsored by Rabbi David Posner, C '73 and Temple Emanu-El, New York.

In addition, for the first time ever, HUC-JIR is partnering with the two leading liberal Jewish seminaries in Europe to host four of their first-year rabbinical students (see page 8) as part of the Year-In-Israel Program. These four students (two from Abraham Geiger College in Potsdam, Germany, and two from Leo Baeck College in London, England) are launching this historic and unique relationship.

The students experience the energy and bustle of the Jerusalem campus with its many exciting programs and activities. At any given moment during the opening week of school in July, students interfaced with Jews of all ages and backgrounds from all parts of the globe – with classmates in their own program, with adult learners studying in HUC-JIR's two-week Liberal Yeshiva pro-

The Year-In-Israel student community is diverse in background, but has shared aspirations. Igor Kholkhov and Olga Zelberg are from Bryansk, Russia, and have participated in Jewish activities in the former Soviet Union, the United States, and Israel – including a summer at the Brandeis Bardin Institute in Simi Valley, CA, and a year at the Rothberg International School at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. They chose to attend HUC-JIR to gain the skills and resources to succeed as outstanding Jewish educators. Upon completing their degrees at the New York School of Education, they plan to return to the Former Soviet Union and take strong leadership roles in the Jewish community.

Joe Schwartz, a second-career rabbinical student who is headed for the New York campus

previously was a sales and marketing executive for international companies in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and Latvia. He has witnessed the many ways people from different cultures express their Judaism. After ordination, Jorg plans “to build community by being a German rabbi in Germany, to continue the tradition we had before the Shoah, and create a new German Jewish thought.” According to Jorg, today there are about 20 - 30 rabbis in Germany with approximately 120 synagogues, asserting “The need is great!”

Mentoring the first-year students during the summer were three fifth-year rabbinical students, Daniel Mikelberg, L '08, Kate Speizer, L '08, and Nicki Greninger, N '08, NYSOE '08. As part of their last summer before ordination, they worked closely with the faculty to design and implement an orientation that would successfully prepare the new students for their experience in Israel and continuing studies stateside at the College-Institute. “Seeing these students beginning their HUC-JIR studies has helped me to reflect on my personal HUC-JIR experience as it is nearing to a close with ordination next May – it has been a journey of growth, study, exploration, and holiness,” says Mikelberg. “We’ve shared memorable experiences with the first-year class, ranging from watching a sunrise concert at Masada with leading Israeli singer David Broza to exploring God’s role in our sacred journeys. This is a special group of students and it has been an honor to work with them.”



A study group overlooking the Old City.

“It has been a tremendous beginning of a new academic year for us in Jerusalem, a fitting response to the challenges of the previous year, when Israel was shaken by war and conflict,” notes Dr. Michael Marmur, Dean of HUC-JIR/Jerusalem. “We were delighted to see the range and quality of the activities taking place, and to greet a new cohort of students, particularly the students from our sister institutions attending our program for the first time this year.” Marmur points to exciting new developments at the Jerusalem campus, where he is in the final planning stages of a brand new M.A. program in Jewish Education for Israelis to be run with the Melton Center at the Hebrew University.

The Year-In-Israel students had a unique experience shortly before the High Holy Days, when the Jerusalem campus welcomed some 700 residents from the western Negev who have been under almost constant rocket bombardment from the nearby Gaza Strip. The evening included *Kabbalat Shabbat* services, a festive dinner, and a concert by

some of Israel’s finest entertainers, co-sponsored with the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) and the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ), with the support of Washington Hebrew Congregation, Washington, DC.

“It was hard not to be moved by their inner strength and resolve,” Rabbi Uri Regev, WUPJ President, said of the guests.

“For many this was the first *Shabbat* in a long time in which there was no need to run to security rooms and shelters. We felt privileged to offer this respite.”

This was just one more example of the many ways in which HUC-JIR’s Year-In-Israel students come face-to-face with the realities of life in Israel – both its challenges and its capacity for hope. As they witness the Reform Movement advancing religious pluralism and Jewish values in Israel, they are gaining invaluable knowledge and understanding that will enrich their professional lives for decades to come. Through their studies, community service, and being an active part of the Israeli community for a year, they are helping Israel fulfill the promise of the Torah. As Regev says, “It will be due not to divine intervention, but to the determination of the value-driven groups in Israeli society that you and we represent, groups that seek to change our reality, renew the Zionist-Jewish vision, and strive for a more just, progressive and peace-seeking society.” ■

ALUMNI SEMINAR AT HUC-JIR/JERUSALEM

Alumni from throughout the United States participated in HUC-JIR/Jerusalem’s annual Alumni Seminar, which this year focused on the theme of *Democracy and Judaism*. They expressed their pleasure at reuniting with former classmates, taking part in a stimulating week of study with outstanding faculty members, and grappling with contemporary issues with the input and guidance of Israeli community leaders. “Becoming acquainted with many of the first-year students, some of whom were their confirmation students, was a meaningful by-product of the program,” notes Dr. Michael Marmur, Dean of HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, who hopes to see this program grow in the coming years, with alumni from all of HUC-JIR’s programs in attendance.

Sherri Morr, SJCS '77, Western States Director of the Jewish National Fund, reports that “it was great to be on the Jerusalem campus for the first time. The presenters at the conference were inspiring. The topic of *Democracy and Judaism* could not have been more apt – it surely comes up in my work. Studying with the rabbis and educators was a wonderful educational opportunity and a pleasurable social one as well. No cell phones, no meetings, just time to learn. What a treat!”

Rabbi John Bush, C '98, Senior Rabbi at Temple Anshe Hessed in Erie, PA, says “Reconnecting with the HUC-JIR/Jerusalem faculty, staff, and classmates from our Year-In-Israel in 1993-94, celebrating *Kabbalat Shabbat* with the first-year students and listening to their hopes and dreams, we were again reminded of why we had decided to become the Jewish professionals that we are and of how blessed we have been.”