

LEADERSHIP AND JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

North American and European Rabbinical Students Join Together at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem

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Dr. Michael Marmur, Dean of HUC-JIR's Jerusalem School, Dr. Sabine Kunst, President of the University of Potsdam, and Dr. Admiel Kosman, Academic Director of Abraham Geiger College and Director of the Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Potsdam, signing the agreement to bring together rabbinical students for a first year of study at the HUC-JIR campus in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem campus.

In July of this year, the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion opened its doors to embrace the international scope of the Progressive movement. For the first time, first-year rabbinical students at Leo Baeck College in London and Abraham Geiger College in Potsdam, Germany joined their North American counterparts at HUC-JIR for a year of study based in the heart of Jerusalem.

Through this collaborative endeavor, the three partnering seminaries will ensure that all Reform/Progressive rabbinical students receive the transformational experience of a first year of study in Israel, and will foster a new current of exchange and collaboration among the Progressive leaders of the future. "Our mission to prepare leaders for the Reform Movement who share a strong commitment to the people and land of Israel and an identification with Jewish peoplehood worldwide is strengthened by this historic agreement," said Rabbi David Ellenson, HUC-JIR President.

The agreement was reached after lengthy discussions between the leaders and administration of the three sister institutions. Rabbi Ellenson, Dr. Michael Marmur, Dean of the Jerusalem School, and Rabbi Naamah Kelman, Director of HUC-JIR's Year-In-Israel Program, conversed at length with Rabbi Marc Saperstein, Principal of Leo Baeck College, and met in Jerusalem with Professor

Dr. Sabine Kunst, President of the University of Potsdam. The agreement was announced by Rabbi Ellenson, together with the Principals of the sister institutions, Rabbi Professor Saperstein and Rabbi Professor Dr. Walter Homolka, at the World Union for Progressive Judaism conference in Jerusalem last March during a panel discussion on "The Future of Rabbinic Training."

The arrangement stipulates that all rabbinical students at Leo Baeck College and the Abraham Geiger College will spend the first year of their rabbinical studies in Israel, learning alongside their colleagues in the HUC-JIR Year-in-Israel program and in close contact with HUC-JIR's Israeli rabbinical students. HUC-JIR's stateside rabbinical, cantorial, and education students are required to fulfill their first year of study at HUC-JIR's

"Having American students working together during their first year with European students from Leo Baeck College and Abraham Geiger College will strengthen their sense of Progressive Judaism as a world Movement, not limited just to the United States and Israel," said Rabbi Saperstein. Students from the United Kingdom will also benefit academically, as "having the immersion experience of intensive Hebrew study in a Hebrew-speaking environment during the first year will raise the level of instruction in the first courses taken by Leo Baeck students."

The agreement with Abraham Geiger College also outlines other areas for potential cooperation beyond first-year study, including joint graduate-level and exchange programs. The first such exchange began this past spring, when Professor Samuel Joseph of HUC-JIR/Cincinnati taught as a Fellow at Geiger College. In the 2007-2008 academic year,



First-year students studying at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem.

Rabbi Dalia Marx of HUC-JIR/Jerusalem is in Potsdam serving as a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) Visiting Professor. Dr. Marx will teach three courses: *Jewish Women Piety, From Cradle to Grave - Jewish Life Cycle Events*, and an advanced course in contemporary Hebrew. Her courses will explore women's historical Jewish rituals, the way various streams of Judaism observe life cycle events, and conversational and literary aspects of the Hebrew language.

This endeavor represents an unprecedented venture among the seminaries affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism to coordinate their curricula in such a way as to build lifelong connections and cooperation among the members of each new generation of rabbis on a global basis. "As our North American and Israeli rabbinical students at HUC-JIR study side-by-side at our Jerusalem campus with their colleagues from the Abraham Geiger College and Leo Baeck College, they are forging permanent bonds of friendship and partnership in the service of the Jewish people," said Rabbi Ellenson. "Their year in Israel connects them to the millennial heritage of our faith, history, and values as well as the realities and challenges facing contemporary Jewish identity in Israel, North America, Europe, and around the globe. Together, they are embarking on charting new directions and a new vision for the Jewish future – with a shared sense of responsibility that transcends geography to assert the overarching unity of the Jewish people."

Seminary leaders expressed the hope that all of the Reform and Progressive rabbinical students will share their unique experiences from



Students in the Year-In-Israel program during a discussion group.

home and gain a deeper understanding of the depth and breadth of Progressive Judaism throughout the world. "It is fantastic that European students will be able to share with their colleagues from the U.S. an insight into slightly different ways of Reform Judaism and also the roots of American Reform," said Rabbi Homolka. "The cultural exchange will work both ways and raise the awareness for each other while being immersed in the experience of Israel. It will contribute towards making the international Progressive Movement an even stronger option for Jews globally. And it will help to shape an international Progressive rabbinate where colleagues are friends because once they were classmates."

The experience of studying together in Israel is clearly having the impact that seminary leaders are seeking. Less than one week after his arrival in Israel, Paul Strasko, a first-year rabbinical student from Abraham Geiger College, said in his blog that "Already the

mere existence of this joining of programs has built amazing good will." Strasko relates instances that demonstrate the value of learning from one another. "Other students have already specifically said to me such things as, 'I never wanted to have anything to do with Germany, but now I know I want to visit and see what the Progressive Movement is about.'" The students are also clearly aware of the significance of this endeavor for the future of Progressive Judaism, as one American student told Paul, "It is hard to see the details of an event when you are at the beginning of it, but this seems like something that we'll all look back on in 20 years and say, we were all there when it started."

The introduction of cooperative rabbinical training among these three institutions will, in the words of Rabbi Saperstein, "foster a sense of solidarity in a new generation of Progressive rabbis throughout the world." ■

ABRAHAM GEIGER COLLEGE

Abraham Geiger College, Potsdam, is the first liberal rabbinical seminary founded in Continental Europe since the Shoah. It was founded in 1999, admitted its first students in 2001, and held its first ordination in September 2006, when it ordained the first three rabbis to be ordained in Germany since the Holocaust. Its mission is the education of rabbis for Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe. Rabbinical studies are integrated into the extensive curriculum of the College for Jewish Studies at the University of Potsdam, providing the ambience and resources of a large, secular state university. This in turn helps promote understanding of Judaism within a pluralistic context.

LEO BAECK COLLEGE

Leo Baeck College, London, founded in 1956, is a premier center for Progressive Jewish learning, training rabbis, leaders, and teachers to develop Progressive Jewish congregations and communities throughout the United Kingdom and in many other countries. The College reaches out to support the growth of today's Jewish communities across Europe and beyond. It is the first College in Europe to train rabbis from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe – who are then able to return to lead their home communities. Through its Department of Education and Professional Development, it is helping to establish a new cadre of professionals for synagogues, youth movements, schools, and other organizations.