

Solidarity Breeds Responsibility

by RABBI DAVID ELLENSON

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once observed that religion arises in the consciousness of human beings when life addresses us with questions that touch the very core of our being: issues that define our character as souls created in the image of God, and moments that mark the moral-spiritual fiber of a community. Sometimes the quotidian tasks of ordinary life provide the testing ground that reveals such character. At other moments, an extraordinary challenge arises that defines the essence of who we are both as individuals and as members of a community.

The task of maintaining the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Year-in-Israel Program for all our cantorial, education and rabbinic students during these past months of terror in Israel has provided such a trial for the HUC-JIR community. The resolve of our Board of Governors to maintain our program has revealed the character of our school and our deepest commitments during this time of crisis. As all decisions are made in context, let me attempt to provide an outline of the historical background and immediate

Rabbi David Ellenson is President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.



We call upon our graduates to recognize that they are of a people, that Jews throughout the world share a covenant of destiny.

events that have framed and directed the response of HUC-JIR to Israel during this past year.

A brief recapitulation of the College-Institute and its attitudes towards Jewish national rebirth in *Eretz Yisrael* is instructive for an understanding of the central role *Medinat Yisrael* now plays in the life of HUC-JIR. Kaufmann Kohler, who served as President of HUC from 1902-1923, had authored the seminal Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, which promulgated what was then the philosophy of the American Reform Movement. In keeping with early Reform ideas, Kohler was unalterably opposed to the Zionist Movement. During the first years of the twentieth century, Rabbi Kohler dismissed every single faculty member

from the Cincinnati campus who viewed Zionism in congenial terms and he refused to allow modern Hebrew literature and language to be included in the curriculum. In the 1920s, Stephen S. Wise at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York and HUC faculty members such as Samuel Cohon in Cincinnati cast their own Zionist feelings upon the Reform Movement in general and HUC and JIR in particular. Wise was arguably the leading Zionist in the United States

during his lifetime. Cohon authored the Reform Movement's 1937 Columbus Platform, which maintained that it was the religious duty of all Reform Jews to aid in the task of rebuilding a Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel. The influence of these men, combined with an influx of students of Eastern European descent in the halls of HUC

and JIR, reversed the stance that President Kohler had put forth on the question of Jewish nationalism. Nelson Glueck, the famed archeologist-President of HUC-JIR, walked in the footsteps of Rabbi Wise and Professor Cohon. Under his leadership, the Jerusalem campus of HUC-JIR was born in 1963. Alfred Gottschalk, in turn, applied and expanded the vision Nelson Glueck had put forth. Rabbi Gottschalk became the chief architect of an educational policy that has marked HUC-JIR for over three decades. Indeed, since 1970 a year of study in Israel has been a mandatory part of the course of study for every rabbi ordained at the College-Institute.

The reasons for this policy are several. On a basic level, Israel provides an

unparalleled laboratory for the acquisition of modern spoken Hebrew by our students. More profoundly, Jerusalem introduces our students to the reality of a diverse and vibrant Jewish people who have returned to our ancestral homeland from the four corners of the earth — an exposure to *kibbutz galuyot* that could never be matched in the Diaspora. Allied to this is the recognition that the State of Israel occupies a central position in the life of the Jewish people and religion today, and HUC-JIR therefore asserts that all persons whom the College-Institute educates for roles of leadership in the contemporary Jewish community must have an extended first-hand acquaintance with the reality of Jewish national rebirth as evidenced in the State today.

Our students' sojourn in Israel therefore ultimately bespeaks a religious-spiritual commitment that Shimon Rawidowicz captured in his famed work, "Jerusalem and Babylon." In this piece, the late head of the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University employed the two sites contained in his title as emblematic of Jewish existence in both the Land of Israel and the Diaspora, and he utilized the metaphor of an ellipsis to capture the integral connectedness that binds Jews everywhere into one people. The ideals of *achdut* and *areivut* — Jewish solidarity and mutual responsibility — that emerge from these teachings are the foundational components of the education HUC-JIR provides for our students, and Israel constitutes the lynchpin in this educational process of religious formation.

We believe that the journey to Jewish religious leadership is much more than an individual spiritual quest. We call upon our graduates to recognize that they are part of a people, that Jews throughout the world share a covenant of destiny. This conviction animates and

informs our course of study at HUC-JIR. Our students must recognize that their responsibility extends to the Jewish family everywhere.

All this has been at stake in the discussions that have tested the ongoing commitment of the College-Institute to our Year-in-Israel program. Our Board of Governors and I are keenly aware of and have been deeply distressed by the marked escalation in the cycle of violence in Israel during these past two years. At the same time, members of our Board of Governors and I have made numerous trips to Israel during this time, and we have seen that life continues. We have had countless searching discussions with colleagues and students both in Israel and in the Diaspora. In the end, we are convinced that our unanimous decision to maintain our Year-in-Israel requirement for our students is both correct and responsible. It is also consistent with the religious mandate and moral undertaking that inform the mission of HUC-JIR.

Speaking on March 15, 1948, at his inauguration as President of Hebrew Union College, just a scant two months before the State of Israel was born, Nelson Glueck observed



that the soon-to-emerge Jewish State was "literally under fire." He went on to state that "to abandon" an embryonic Israel would grant "license to terror." Dr. Glueck refused to do so. We who have inherited his mantle can do no less. 🌸

RENEWING OUR TIES TO ISRAEL

by ANDREA FRAM PLOTKIN

In the face of the current *matzav*, the need for Israel education is greater than ever. We face a time when few teens and young adults are traveling to Israel. They lack the experience of personal engagement with the land that often leads to a lifetime love for the people and for the state of Israel. The question is, how do we "hardwire" the American



Jewish community to intensify its connection to, understanding of and support for Israel? This requires new approaches to Israel education that reflect the complex realities of the 21st Century.

The Jewish Renaissance and Renewal alliance of United Jewish Communities (UJC) and the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) has been struggling with just these questions. We began almost two years ago with the development of the *Israel Education Resource Book*. The book, anchored with the *Israel NOW Solidarity Response Curriculum* developed by the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, is a compilation of curricula, one-time programs, bibliographies and website listings. It serves as a resource aid to day schools and supplementary schools across the country. An online, regularly updated version of the book is available at www.ujc.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=38208.

The Jewish Renaissance and Renewal alliance sponsored the North American Alliance for Jewish Youth "Israel In Our Lives" summer camp retreat, in which teen leaders learned about Israel advocacy. We have also embarked on Israel Education Month (January 19-February 16, 2003), a collaborative effort between the Jewish Renaissance and Renewal alliance and the Jewish Agency for Israel's Education Department in cooperation with a host of religious education and communal organizations. Israel Education Month is the launching pad for a wide range of activities reaching children, youth, college students and adults. This endeavor will galvanize a continuing effort to renew and expand educational engagement with Israel in North America.

Andrea Fram Plotkin is Staff Associate for the Jewish Renaissance and Renewal alliance of UJC/JESNA.