

Seeing the Miraculous in the Mundane

FIRST ORAITA RETREAT DRAWS RABBIS FROM ACROSS THE U.S.

For seven hours each day during four days in October, 15 rabbis from all denominations from across the U.S. immersed in Jewish text study with three master teachers—Dr. Arthur Green, Rector of HC’s Rabbinical School, Dr. Melila Hellner-Eshed of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Devorah Zlochower, Rosh Beit Midrash of Drisha. Their topic was “Seeing the Miraculous in the Mundane: Hanukkah, Purim and the Human/Divine Partnership.” But the discussions and collegial sharing about miracles at the first retreat by HC’s Oraita Institute for Continuing Rabbinic Education went far beyond upcoming winter holidays.

After a guided hike through the New Hampshire woods surrounding the retreat center at Camp Yavneh, Rabbi Amita Jarmon of Adas Yeshurun Synagogue in Rockland, Maine, found parallels between layers in the forest landscape and layers of text: “When a guide shows you how he can tell that this side of the wall was cultivated land and that side was pasture, and that thousands of sheep were herded through here 200 years ago, or that this oak and this pine are linked by a mycorrhizal (underground fungal) network which is nourishing both of them, the beautiful forest becomes even more miraculous!” wrote Jarmon to her congregants after the retreat.

“Likewise, when you read a passage from the Zohar which comments on a verse from Exodus by making a playful reference to a passage from the Mishnah, and brings in references from Song of Songs and Isaiah, the vastness, complexity and interconnectedness of our textual heritage is experienced as mind-blowing and miraculous.”

Participants travelled from California, North Carolina, western Pennsylvania and from along the east coast, from Maine to Washington, D.C., to attend the retreat. They continued studying together through December via user-friendly online faculty lectures as well as *havruta* study and group discussions. Many rabbis were from smaller communities, where study opportunities are limited. “They were really hungry for this kind of learning,” says Rabbi Natan Margalit, Director of Oraita and Assistant Professor of Rabbinics.

Sharing lessons from texts, the rabbis also traded strategies for maintaining an awareness of the miracles in everyday practice—such as how to keep the experience of life-cycle events fresh and meaningful. “Officiating at a bar

or bat mitzvah can become routine. It’s easy to get worn down by it,” says Margalit. “They were looking for ways to be renewed.”

“I find myself speaking very enthusiastically about the retreat, am still thinking about it, really appreciated the cross-section of teachers,” wrote Rabbi Jonathan Kligler, Woodstock Jewish Congregation in Woodstock, N.Y. “I’m very glad I participated.”



Oraita continues on June 16–19, 2008, with two leading thinkers on Jewish mysticism, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (via video-conference) and Dr. Arthur Green, teaching together for a week of intensive study on “Judaism of the 21st Century: Paradigms and Practices for the Global Age” at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Conn. Faculty include Rabbi Tirzah Firestone and Rabbi Shaya Isenberg. Cosponsored by Oraita and the Isabella Freedman JRC, the program will offer two tracks—one for rabbis and one for rabbinical students. Oraita’s online component will enable the participating rabbis to continue studying after the retreat, through the end of July. Significant scholarships are available.

Support for Oraita has been made possible by Legacy Heritage Funds Limited and the Lasko Foundations. For more information, contact nmargalit@hebrewcollege.edu or 617-559-8617, or visit hebrewcollege.edu/oraita. **HCT**