

The Symphony of Jewish Life and Learning

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Parashat Mishpatim: **Exodus 21:1-24:18**

Haftarah: **2 Kings 11:17-12:17**

Where do rabbis go to recharge their spiritual and intellectual batteries? Jerusalem...New York....Los Angeles...Malibu. Yes, Malibu, site of this week's inaugural alumni study retreat of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America.

I was privileged to help organize this Jan. 23-26 conclave at the Steven Breuer Conference Center on the campus of Wilshire Boulevard Temple Camps. Hartman senior rabbinic fellows/alumni of the Rabbinic Leadership Initiative (RLI) gathered from across the United States and Canada for text study and roundtable forums led by Prof. Israel Knohl (Hebrew University/Shalom Hartman Institute), Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi (Hartman Institute) and Rabbi Ed Feinstein, senior rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom, Encino. The Jewish Federation/Board of Rabbis enjoy a longstanding partnership with Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute. Joining me at the retreat were Los Angeles colleagues Rabbis Morley T. Feinstein, Judith HaLevy, Sherre Hirsch and Michelle Missaghieh. All of us are alumni of the Rabbinic Leadership Initiative and were sponsored by the Jewish Federation. As we and our fellow RLI alumni convened in southern California, Board of Rabbis leaders and colleagues Rabbis Denise L. Eger, Stewart Vogel and Ken Chasen were on their way to Jerusalem for the winter seminar of RLI 4.

What is so special about these gatherings? Rabbis sit together and study texts with colleagues from diverse congregations, movements and communities. We read and discuss Torah and rabbinic sources hevruta-style, in small groups of two to three learners who model this hallmark of traditional Jewish study. We mine sources of wisdom—Jewish and non-Jewish, ancient and modern—under the tutelage of brilliant scholars and master teachers from Israel and America. We debate the most pressing issues of contemporary Jewish life with creative and talented thinkers and leaders of synagogues and other Jewish communal institutions. We “let down our hair” and share the joys, frustrations and challenges of our profession, even as we renew old friendships and forge new ones.

One day of the retreat was set aside to share these experiences with a broader circle of colleagues. Area rabbis joined us for “A Day of Hartman Learning” featuring hevruta study, Prof. Knohl's provocative session “Joining the Covenantal Community: The Question of Conversion from a Biblical Perspective,” and Rabbi Beit-Halachmi's timely presentation “Engaging Israel: Foundations for a New Relationship.” Welcoming colleagues to the seminar, I

spoke about the strong bonds between southern California and the Hartman Institute, including the Federation's sponsorship of RLI and the Mickey Weiss Fellowship that sends rabbis each summer to Hartman's Rabbinic Torah Seminar. I acknowledged the profound effect the Hartman Institute has had on my own rabbinate, observing that the day's passionate learning and discourse were "a taste of *olam haba* (the world to come)."

And I referenced this week's Torah reading--*parashat Mishpatim*, the portion that immediately follows the revelation at Mount Sinai. Towards the end of the *parashah*, we learn: "Moses took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, *kol asher deebayr Ado-nai na-aseh veh-nishmah*. "All that God has spoken we will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7-8).

Some 3,200 years after our forebears proclaimed *na'aseh v'nishmah*, we live in a world of "Been there. . .done that." We are ever on the lookout for new thrills and adventures to make our lives whole and complete. Looking back on thirty-two centuries of Jewish life, we can say with pride: We've been there, and we've done that. For our tradition places a premium on finding joy and meaning doing the same things over and over again. Things like--learning Torah each day; keeping Shabbat each week; celebrating holidays each year.

I believe that our challenge is to make each experience more meaningful and spiritually satisfying than the previous one. We should uncover a fresh insight each time we open up a sacred text. We should discover a new tune for a family Shabbat celebration or a new custom to incorporate into our own fabric of Jewish living.

Rav Kook taught: "What is holy must be renewed and what is new must be made holy." This is the *raison d'être* of the Board of Rabbis, the Jewish Federation and the Shalom Hartman Institute. These are my spiritual and intellectual gifts from the rabbinic study retreat. *Na'aseh venishmah*. May we always be a people of doing and hearing. May we create and recreate new melodies of meaning as we celebrate together the majestic symphony of Jewish life.