

# HAVRUTA



THE PARDES INSTITUTE OF JEWISH STUDIES | DECEMBER 2019 | KISLEV 5780

## Forging New and Diverse Paths to a Meaningful 21st Century Judaism



IDENTITY  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup>  
CENTURY

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CHOOSING JUDAISM  
CHOOSING PARDES

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A SPECIAL  
HAVRUTA, ONE  
DECADE LATER

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# A Letter from the President



Photo credit: Aviv Naveh

Dear Friends,

This past year alone, Pardes ran hundreds of programs, touching students around the world. In early 2019, our first-ever Winter Learning Intensive in Jerusalem brought together college students and young professionals to explore *Power, Privilege and Responsibility*. In December 2018 and July 2019, our Executive Learning Seminars, geared towards more established adults, explored the themes of *War and Peace: The Challenges of Sovereignty* and *Shaping Meaningful Relationships in a Lonely World*. And, in July and August 2019, our sold-out Summer Program drew more than 120 students, ranging in age from 18 to 81, from 14 different countries. These are just a few examples of the vitality of our *beit midrash* in Jerusalem, above and beyond our long-term Semester, Year and Educators learning programs.

Meanwhile, in North America, Pardes provided important retreats as well as professional development opportunities for Jewish educators, such as our *Tefilah Education Conference for Day School Administrators* and the *Pardes-Kevah Teaching Fellowship*, which is designed to help Jewish educators more effectively teach Jewish texts to adults. We also saw 50 communities sign up for *Mahloket Matters: How to Disagree Constructively*.

Elmad, our online learning platform, was accessed thousands of times this year, bringing Pardes faculty members to learners globally through podcasts, recorded lectures, holiday companions, articles and much more. And, early this coming January, we will post the 800th episode of our signature podcast, *Pardes from Jerusalem!* Be sure to subscribe and visit Elmad to listen at [elmad.pardes.org/podcasts](http://elmad.pardes.org/podcasts).

Our two biggest projects are both a result, and an extension, of our successes: first, the imminent construction of our new home in Jerusalem, Beit Karen, fueled by an exciting \$36 million endowment and capital campaign, and, second, our ambitious and budding program expansion in North America.

We – Pardes students, alumni, and supporters – are builders. And, as Rabbi Elazar said in Berakhot 64a, when we build through a love of Torah, we increase peace in our homes, in our communities and in the world.

In the following pages of this year's *Havruta* magazine, I invite you to be inspired by the stories featuring our alumni and how their paths have been shaped by their experiences at Pardes. I invite you to be engaged in a stimulating back and forth discussion between two faculty members on the meaning and complexity of identity. Last but not least, I invite you to join us in thanking the hundreds of supporters whose generosity and partnership make the Pardes experience possible. Thank you.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Leon A. Morris  
President

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Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: The students of the Sages increase peace in the world, as it is said [in Isaiah 54], “And all your children shall be taught of the Eternal, and great shall be the peace of your children [*banayich*]. Read not “your children” [*banayich*] but “your builders” [*bonayich*].

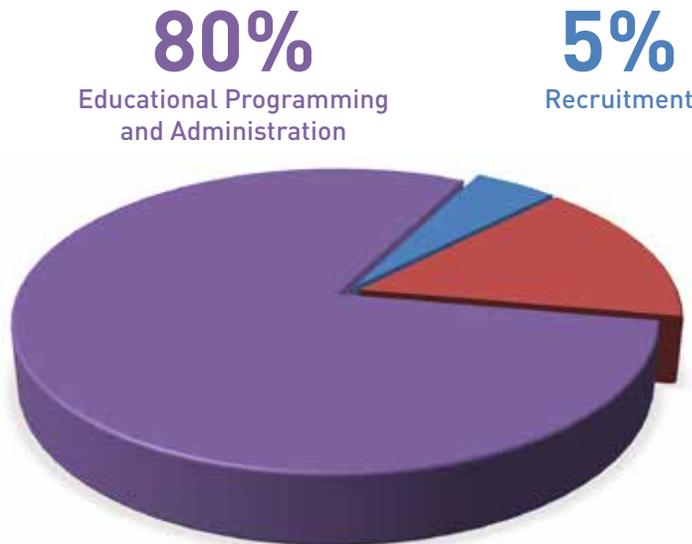
*Berakhot 64a*

אמר רבי אלעזר  
אמר רבי חנינא תלמידי חכמים  
מרבים שלום בעולם שנאמר  
'וכל בניך למודי ה'  
ורב שלום בניך אל תקרי  
בניך אלא בוניך

”

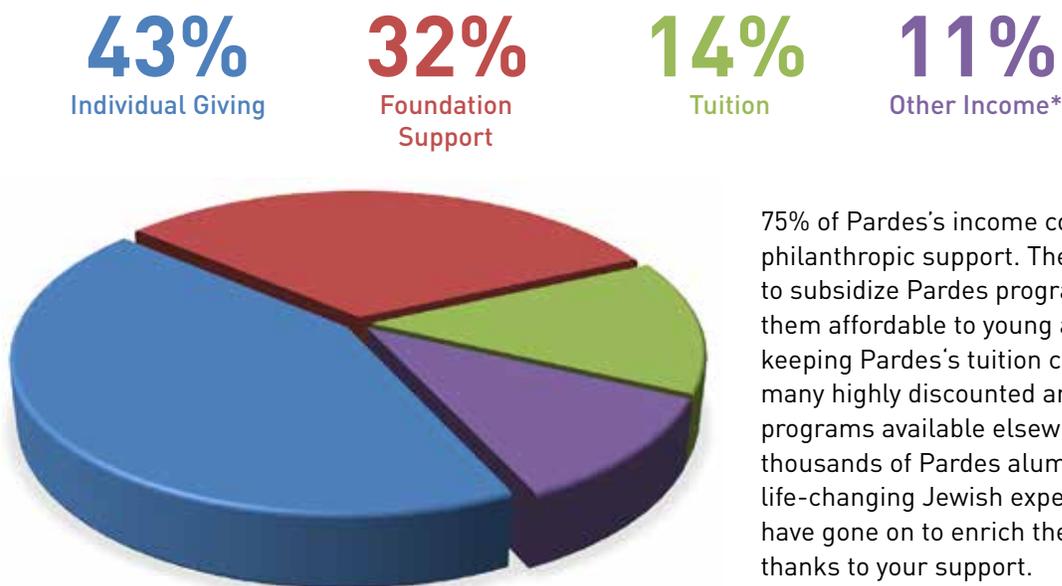
# Where Does Your Money Go?

## Expenses



80% of Pardes's expenditures go directly towards engaging Jews of all backgrounds in the study of classic texts and ideas of their heritage while also providing a rich experience of Jewish life and tradition. Most programs take place in Israel, but a growing number take place in North America and beyond. Elmad, Pardes's online learning platform, also brings Pardes learning to students anywhere in the world at any time.

## Income



75% of Pardes's income comes from philanthropic support. These dollars help to subsidize Pardes programs, making them affordable to young adults and keeping Pardes's tuition competitive with many highly discounted and free Jewish programs available elsewhere. Simply put, thousands of Pardes alumni have received life-changing Jewish experiences and have gone on to enrich their communities thanks to your support.

\*Individual Masa Israel Journey grants are included within Other Income.

# Who Am I?

## The Complexity of Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



Faculty members Michael Hattin and Rahel Berkovits discuss identity, the theme of the 2020 Pardes Learning Seminars.

[www.pardes.org.il/seminar](http://www.pardes.org.il/seminar)

**Rahel:** In this day and age, our students, like so many people, have different and complex identities. There is their religious identity, their gender identity and their sexual identity. They may be Jews of color. They may be politically left or right. They may be proud Zionists or embarrassed Zionists. They may be carnivores, vegetarians or vegans and so many other things.

Their identities are a complex intersection of different parts of their being and what makes them who they are. One of the things I hope they take away from learning Torah in the Pardes *beit midrash* is that they should bring their whole self with them as they study. The *Gemara* in *Sotah* 21b teaches:

אין דברי תורה מתקיימין אלא במי שמעמיד עצמו ערום עליהן

*The words of Torah only endure within the one who stands naked before them.*

I understand this to mean that we must approach the study of Torah with our whole beings, as our true selves. One cannot hide an essential part of oneself as one approaches Torah, because that type of Torah study will not be transformative and lasting.

**Michael:** While I certainly agree that our students have many different and complex identities, I would like to add that we, as their *faculty*, do as well! I appreciate your reading of the passage from *Sotah*, but for me it



raises two critical questions for our multiple-identity era. First, what things about ourselves do we consider foundational to our identity, and what things are less about our identity and more about our interests? If, for example, I am an avid biker, is that part of my *identity* or is it just an *activity* for which I am prepared to devote time and energy?

Second, I concur that we must approach Torah study with “our true selves,” without hiding who we really are so that it can be transformative. But, for me, real transformation includes the possibility that basic assumptions that I make about the world and my place in it, about God and about myself, about the Jewish people and my connection to them, can be challenged. Otherwise, what is the point of Torah study at all? Surely, honesty demands that it be more than self-affirmation.

**Rahel:** You ask a good question about the difference between our intrinsic identity and our interests. However, I would argue that even being aware of the parts of our personalities that create or feed our interests and hobbies also enhances our Torah study. I have learned meaningful things from students about Talmudic statements regarding prayer because they practiced yoga or meditation or were avid hikers and connected with nature. Why is it important to you to make the distinction between these two realms of identity and interest?



I agree that for Torah study to be truly transformative, one has to be open to all possibilities and be willing to consider different viewpoints that might challenge personal assumptions. Yet, you state that honest Torah study means that even basic givens about identity can change. I am not sure what you mean by that. I think that there are some basic core identities that one might have that are never going to change. That I am a Jewish cis-woman with children is a core part of my identity that for me seems fixed.

For me, to bring one's whole self to Torah does not mean that I only learn texts that make me feel good. It means that I engage with the text as my full self, to honestly try to hear what the text is trying to say or teach and see how I can integrate that into my relationship with my Creator and my relationship with the Jewish community.

**Michael:** I agree that our students' unique perspectives are a function of their identities and experiences and can shed light on a Torah text in ways that I never could have considered. My concern, however, is that in constructing overly complex identities that don't recognize any hierarchy between core self-definitions (which I submit may be immutable) on the one hand, and lifestyle choices and interests (which can evolve and change over time) on the other, we run the risk of moving away from diversity and towards divisiveness.

In Western culture, one's identity is intensely personal and not subject to anyone else's input. I use my identity to draw together other individuals of similar mind into an exclusive group, and I exclude anyone else. Identity politics, for instance, discourages collaboration between different groups in society. Narrow religious identities fuel conflicts all over the world. Identity that is an exclusive function of race, ethnicity or gender often delegitimizes others even as proponents pursue the noble quest of righting historic wrongs. The more aspects of ourselves that we define as utterly intrinsic to our identity, the less we are able to identify with others!

While you may define yourself as a "Jewish cis-woman with children" (and who am I to question that?), I suspect that there are many more aspects to your personality, character, lifestyle and likes/dislikes, that you consider noteworthy but not crucial to your self-definition. By distinguishing between our core identity (which consists of a few fundamentals) and our interests (which are innumerable), we stand a better chance to be able to collaborate on many more things.

For me, my Jewish identity is more than a personal spiritual quest or a special interest lifestyle. It is my divinely-mandated responsibility to interact constructively with others in the creation of a larger community, in the shaping of the Jewish people and in the improvement of the world. As such, the more common ground that I can find with others, the greater the chances that together we can succeed.

**Rahel:** I totally agree with your view of Jewish responsibility and your grave concerns of the divisiveness of the world today. I personally feel that, while you are correct that it would be easier to succeed if we did not emphasize our differences, it is also our responsibility to build connections with others who, as part of their core identities, are inherently different from us. That can only happen if we enter the dialogue, bringing those core parts of ourselves to the conversation. Whether we agree or disagree does not matter; it is the conversation *l'shem shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven) that is of paramount importance! Issues of identity need to be discussed in a serious manner for they are essential, as you eloquently said, in "the creation of a larger community, in the shaping of the Jewish people and in the improvement of the world." ●

*Interested to learn more? Enroll in the 2020 Pardes Learning Seminar, "Who am I? The Complexity of Identity in the 21st Century," which takes place from June 28-July 2, 2020 at Pardes in Jerusalem. See [www.pardes.org.il/seminar](http://www.pardes.org.il/seminar) for more details.*

# Living the **Torah of Pardes** in Different Ways

There's the life one lives while studying at Pardes,  
and then there's life after Pardes.

Many students are deeply affected by the time they spend at Pardes and find that their experience affects many of their life decisions.

Some continue learning at Pardes, some become Jewish professionals, some become active lay leaders in their home communities, and some even build lives in Israel. Pardes is proud to have alumni who are expressing their Judaism in diverse ways.



**B**ruce Goldberger, counsel at Paul, Weiss, who lives in Manhattan with his wife and their two daughters, says it was his experience at Pardes that allowed him to develop a deeper Jewish identity.

“It was an opportunity to just think about questions, about what my values are and how I wanted to live,” said Bruce, who spent a year at Pardes in 1994–1995.

He was raised in Monroe, New York, attended Camp Harlam, a Reform summer camp in the Pocono Mountains, and later traveled to Israel with the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY).

Yet it wasn’t until his senior year of college at Harvard that Bruce attended an egalitarian *minyan*, where the prayers were in Hebrew, that he began thinking about other ways of religious practice and learning.

“A friend at Harvard once observed that I loved being Jewish, but was Jewishly ignorant,” laughs Bruce.

Bruce arrived at Pardes as a Dorot Fellow following his first year at Harvard Law. He took off a year from school and seized the opportunity to experience Shabbat, to live according to the Jewish calendar for the first time, and to consider what he wanted from his Jewish life.

Bruce gained much more from Pardes than familiarity with Jewish tradition and life; he learned his way around a page of Talmud, gained an appreciation for the weekly Torah portion and became familiar with the traditional sources.

“I gained an appreciation for *tefilah* at Pardes and for making that part of my life,” he said. “Also a sense of how knowledge is really empowering and that it’s a very strong framework around which to build a rich interior and communal life.”

Once he returned to Harvard Law, Bruce joined the school’s egalitarian *minyan* and then headed to New York. It was there that he joined a partnership *minyan* and met his wife, an Israeli who was spending a year in New York working on her Master’s Degree in Architecture.

It’s been about 25 years since Bruce spent the summer at Pardes. He and his wife send their two daughters to an Orthodox day school and are deeply involved in Darkhei Noam, a lay-led partnership *minyan* in New York.

While he hasn’t yet been back to study at Pardes, the experience and decisions he made while he studied there have stayed with him.

“If I had to pick the most transformative year of my life, it would be that year,” he said. “It was a very fertile time and it was an amazing time to be there with a great cohort of people, a rich community of people from different backgrounds.”

Many Pardes alumni say that while they spent a relatively short time at Pardes, it turned out to be a pivotal time that allowed them to find their path in life.



**I**t was a fully immersive experience at Pardes that **Rabbi Hazan Aliza Berger** sought when she enrolled for the 2011–2012 year. She was raised in an active

Colorado Jewish Renewal community and dreamed of becoming an opera singer.

That particular dream proved elusive, and she consoled herself for awhile by singing loudly on the women’s side of the *mechitza* at the Orthodox shul she attended while in college.

An older friend from that shul encouraged her to attend Pardes, which she did after college. She threw herself into the experience and took on the role of *gabbai* at the Pardes daily egalitarian *minyan*. She spent countless hours discussing *sugiyot* (passages of Talmud) and commentaries.

“I loved the community. It was an amazing group of people from all over the world. It was a special space,” said Aliza.

Aliza sought a more permanent Jewish community after Pardes. She decided to attend rabbinical school at Hebrew College in Boston, where she also worked in admissions for the cantorial school. That job led her to attend cantorial school herself, fulfilling an aspect of her operatic dreams.

Now she’s part of the clergy at the largest Conservative synagogue in New England, Temple Emanuel. Her job is to engage the approximately 500 teens in the community with social justice initiatives, sermons, pastoral care and as cantor during the high holidays.

“Given that I’m a rabbi and a cantor and my work is community engagement,” said Aliza, “I live in the *pardes*,” using the Hebrew word for orchard to describe her community. “I love the Pardes name. It’s all these people going into the orchard, and you come out different - you come out with a different approach.”

She uses her familiarity with pluralism and learning, skills she gained at Pardes, in her synagogue and community work.

“My work is very pluralistic. I work with young people who are religious and those who are very secular and I design programs for everyone’s needs,” she said. “My life is about finding the ways to make Jewish life wonderful and to connect with Jewish tradition. That’s very much the work Pardes is doing. The experiences in the pluralistic community are something I learned to love at Pardes.”



**F**or **Amanda Pogany**, who is 40 years old, it was her Torah learning from Pardes that allowed her to enter and succeed as Head of School at Luria Academy of Brooklyn.

“Because of my sophisticated Jewish education from Pardes, I have the context and have the skills; I understand *halacha*; I can learn with teachers and talk to parents about what’s halachically challenging,” said Amanda.

“I would not be prepared to lead this community without it.”

A graduate of Solomon Schechter and then Barnard College, Amanda attended Pardes’s Year Program and then participated in the first cohort of the Pardes Educators Program.

“My mom jokes that I called the second week to tell them about the Educators Program, and she said, ‘we’ll see her in three years.’”

After she completed the program, Amanda returned to the US, teaching middle school Judaic studies and rabbinics, offering the kind of introduction to the Talmud that she never had at that age.

“It was a *tikkun* (repair or correction) for all the learning I missed,” she said. “It was for kids going to public school, getting skills that I didn’t have until I was 22. It was for them to understand the bookshelves and what they’re looking at.”

When her son started preschool at Luria Academy of Brooklyn, then just a small school up the block from Amanda’s family’s home, the school asked her to come on as the principal.

“No way,” Amanda told them.

She recently completed her seventh year in that role, and there are now 300 kids in the school.

At Luria, families come from a variety of different backgrounds, and the intention is to offer a very sophisticated Jewish education.

Amanda feels that it’s her Pardes experience that allows her to uphold the mission of the school. She hopes that her Luria students deeply understand that the greatest insight comes from people who are different from one another, and that they won’t judge a person by what their home looks like or what kind of *kashrut* they practice, rather by who they are.

She thinks back to her time at Pardes and sees something that was very radical at that time, looking past religious observance and ritual and giving people the skills and tools to look at text directly and independently.

“I am who I am because of the text learning I gained from Pardes,” she said. “They were a model of what a community like this could look like, a community where you would learn Torah with someone even though you’re from totally different backgrounds.” ●

# Mother Daughter

## Strengthening Family Bonds Through Learning



**Kim Rubenstein and her daughter Cohava Rubenstein Sturgess joined the Pardes week-long Winter Learning Intensive in January 2019.**

*Kim is a Professor in the Law School at the Australian National University, in Canberra, Australia.*

*Cohava is a student at the University of Melbourne, Australia, where she is majoring in Philosophy and Politics. Cohava spent her gap year in 2017 at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem and is currently the Coordinator of the Bnei Akiva Youth Movement in Melbourne.*

*We asked Kim and Cohava about their experiences learning in a mother-daughter havruta.*

### Why Pardes and why did you choose to be *havrutot*?

**Kim:** I am in Israel on my sabbatical from the Australian National University, and I saw the advertisement for the Winter Intensive – *Power, Privilege and Responsibility*, which are themes that I grapple with in my own legal scholarship and academic life. I had heard so much about Pardes but had never visited. I immediately contacted my daughter Cohava to see if she wanted to join me. The timing was perfect for us.

I was keen to be in *havruta* with Cohava because learning with my daughter is a wonderful privilege. It was also an opportunity for me to learn from her. She had spent the calendar year of 2017 at Midreshet Lindenbaum, so I knew she'd be able to help me navigate the texts.

**Cohava:** I was attracted to a “contained” one-week course that I could take with my mum. I love learning texts at a high level, had heard a lot about Pardes and wanted to see what it was like.

### What were the highlights?

**Kim:** I thoroughly enjoyed it all, but my own highlights have been sitting in class with Cohava. The daily sessions, “The Daughters of Tzelophchad” with Tovah Leah Nachmani and “Talmudic Power Narratives” with Gila Fine, were stimulating in themselves. They also both highlighted the parallels I see in my own work on constitutional and citizenship law and gender and oral history, and how best to think about power, identity and community.

**Cohava:** Learning in Tovah Leah and Gila Fine's classes was a highlight. These classes were both extremely stimulating and colorful, and it was really great being in *havruta* with my mum.

### How did learning with each other make you see the text/topic in a different way?

**Kim:** I think the whole *havruta* framework is something I want to take back to my law classes. Seeing the same text through different people's eyes expands your own thinking about what



you are reading – and this can be about any text you read together. Doing *havruta* with Cohava enabled me to benefit from her richer Jewish text learning experiences. Her eyes enlarged my own.

**Cohava:** Learning alongside another person with their own life experiences and insights naturally helps you see any given topic in a different light. We all project our own perspectives onto the text, and this broadens your perspective. In particular, my mum’s eagerness to learn, and her deep and fierce intelligence and open-minded approach made the learning experience rich.

### Did learning text in *havruta* make you see each other in a different way?

**Kim:** I think the process of *havruta* deepened my own (existing) admiration for my daughter.

**Cohava:** It is just a lovely, great framework which enables us to have discussions about things that don’t necessarily come up every day - like power, privilege and responsibility.

### What surprised you about this experience?

**Kim:** I am not sure surprise is the right word, but I was stimulated by Pardes as an institution and its inclusive and diverse student population and the wonderful teachers on its faculty. I hadn’t expected it to be as rich as it was in all senses.

**Cohava:** I was really surprised by the level of engagement of the whole student body. Everyone was keen and interested to learn, which made it a fantastic learning environment.

### How has studying Jewish texts impacted your Jewish life?

**Kim:** I think studying Jewish texts is affirming of my own Jewish identity and my professional life as a teacher of law and as someone interested in public policy around issues of power, politics and identity. If the opportunity arises again, I’d love to do more learning here.

**Cohava:** Studying Jewish texts is something I think is extremely important for an engaged, conscious and meaningful Jewish life. I really enjoy learning and it is part of why I am interested in pursuing Jewish education. I think my Jewish literacy has made me feel empowered and has strengthened my Jewish identity.

### Are there any take-away thoughts about the topic that will have an ongoing impact on you?

**Kim:** Part of my attraction to doing this Winter Intensive was that these ideas feel particularly pressing in terms of current public policy and societal issues. The texts we examined closely during this week affirmed how important it is to reflect on our own individual power and how we exercise it. We need to do this in personal relationships, at our work and communal frameworks, and to always consider the impact of our actions and decisions on others.

**Cohava:** Learning about the different ways that people navigate power and the tremendous privilege as well as the dangers power has, will make me more conscious in my day-to-day life. 🍀

*Following their experiences at Pardes, Kim and Cohava aim to continue their own havruta throughout this coming year.*

The 2020 Winter Learning Intensive is “The Many Faces of Me: Exploring Identity in a Post-Modern World” and takes place January 5–9, 2020 at Pardes in Jerusalem. See [www.pardes.org.il/wli](http://www.pardes.org.il/wli) for more details.

A woman with blue hair is shown in profile, looking out over a cityscape from a rooftop. She is holding a violin and bow. The background shows a blurred view of buildings and a clear sky.

# Point of Contact

By Alicia Jo Rabins

Photo credit: Alicia Rose

Originally appeared in "Paper Brigade," the annual literary journal of Jewish Book Council. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

**I**n my own way, I was a fundamentalist, worshipping at the altar of art.

I began playing a tiny violin when I was three, after my mother saw a Phil Donahue special about the Suzuki method. Throughout my teenage years I spent my Saturday mornings at the local music conservatory, as a religious girl would have gone to *shul* – not out of obligation or ambition – but out of love.

I didn't grow up surrounded by Jewish texts, but I was surrounded by books, and I wanted to be a writer ever since I could hold a pen. I loved series, the epics of my childhood: *Little House on the Prairie*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Earth's Children*. In the plucky, flawed heroines I saw myself; and by reading about their struggles and desires, I began to understand my own.

At seventeen, I took my violin and moved to New York City to study creative writing in college. In the late nineties, there was a free broadsheet that listed every single reading in the city; I taped it to my wall and took the subway to literary events night after night. I stayed up late having pretentious arguments with my poet friends. I also played in a string quartet, learned about music

composition, improvised scores for dancers, and wrote songs.

In class, I encountered the *Odyssey*, my first real epic. I was captivated by its mysterious scale: replete with gods, but also fundamentally human. Despite my best efforts to read with academic detachment, I experienced this classic of Western civilization much as I had experienced *Anne of Avonlea*. I searched for reflections of my inner life and found them there, writ large.

As I read, I performed a sort of translation. When the Sirens called to Odysseus, I thought of my high school eating disorder, the dangerous seduction of thinness. When Penelope tested Odysseus upon his return, I understood that she was asking him, "Do you truly see me?" When Odysseus responded with the secret of their marriage bed, I knew he was saying, "Yes, I do," and hoped to find that sort of love one day.

Then I took a class on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and felt a shock of validation. Joyce wrote the way I read (except, *l'havdil*, he was a genius). He translated Odysseus' wanderings into a single day in the life of Leopold Bloom, a Jewish Dubliner, a regular person experiencing



# Choosing Pardes After Changing One's Faith



**Michael Tuohy:  
From Parochial School to Pardes**

**T**he ability to strengthen one's Jewish identity at Pardes was a comforting factor for **Michael Tuohy**, (Year Program '17-'18) a Texan who began his journey toward Judaism when he turned 60.

Michael was born to a family of Irish descent that wasn't very religious. He was raised Catholic and attended parochial school where he learned a kind of "regimented Catholicism." "I was an altar boy. I wasn't really religious, but I was observant."

He maintained his Catholic faith through high school, but eventually stopped any kind of religious activities for about 20 years. "I never lost my ability to talk to *Hashem*," said Michael, using the Hebrew term for God, "But then I just had this feeling that I needed to be doing something."

When he began seeking religious answers again, Christianity was the only thing he knew, but he didn't identify with it.

"I was earnestly seeking, trying to find out until, one night, while in prayer and meditation, just when I felt like giving up - a small, still voice within me called out, 'I want you to be a Jew,'" said Michael.

Michael was about two years into learning about Judaism when his wife, Sharon, died. She wasn't as keen on organized religion, and it was only after her death that he first visited Israel and Pardes for a summer, after hearing about it from his rabbi. He fell in love with the country and found that it felt like a familiar landscape.

His Conservative conversion process took about three and a half years, and it was during that time that he came to Pardes. "Some students were surprised to find out that I was a convert," said Michael, before adding "Pardes just strengthened more of what I needed to learn."

"A lot of my questions were answered," he said. "There had been a lack of knowing and understanding. Judaism has opened doors, and it has shown how a lot of things work. I know what *Hashem* has planned for me and my legacy is very simple: to follow the Torah, learn what I can, and try to pass on my own personal experiences."

Michael moved to Israel this summer, despite its distance and differences from Texas. Pardes will continue to be a part of his life because, as he put it, it's a place that "just makes sense to me."

## David Ben Moshe: From Evangelical Christianity to Orthodox Judaism

For David Ben Moshe, once known as **David Bonett** (Year Program '17-'18, Summer Program '17), now 32, the introduction to Judaism came when he was in prison. He was serving 30 months for selling drugs, and was in the library during a five-hour lockdown.

"I saw a guy reading something in a language that I didn't understand," said David, whose parents, immigrants to America from the Dominican Republic and Belize, had raised him as a religious Evangelical Christian with a strong background in Bible reading.

His fellow prisoner Mitch was reading the weekly Torah portion with commentaries. The concept of differing explanations and opinions on the Bible was hard to grasp for David, who had grown up in a religion that did not allow debate and assumed wrongdoing for anyone who disagreed with the Scriptures.

"The way I grew up with religion, it was, 'this is what it means.' There was no debate. And if you disagreed, that was wrong and you're on your way to hell," he said.

He couldn't imagine having a religious life with different interpretations.

As David began studying Judaism, he found that it also had facets that were inconsistent, but offered reasoning and rationale.

He began studying with a Reform rabbi who visited the prison. He considered conversion, but knew he wanted the stricter codes of Orthodoxy.

When he was released to a halfway house in Baltimore, his first requests for passes were to attend the local Orthodox synagogue for morning services and to speak with the synagogue rabbi about converting.

Five years later, David had converted and completed his college degree in exercise science at Towson. He had heard of Pardes from a friend, and spent time there following a trip with Birthright Israel. He loved being in



Photo credit: Aviv Naveh

Israel and returned for the Summer Program and then the Year Program.

"I loved the ability to meet people where they're at and not push them somewhere they don't want to be," he said. "I'm African American. I was in prison, and most of the Pardes people are American, white, post-college age, and they tend to be more accepting of different viewpoints. I just bring another perspective to this diverse place."

During his first trip to Israel, he met his American-born Israeli wife, Tamar Gresser, whose parents also studied at Pardes. They married last year and had a baby this spring.

Now David is living in Beit Zayit, a community outside Jerusalem. He's regularly in touch with his parents, who now come to visit every six months and have adjusted to the major changes in their son's life.

"Here, despite my conversion, I'm just a Jew," said David. "Here, people just know I'm religious because I wear a *kippah* and *tzitzit* and that's more conventional than being an Orthodox Jew in the US."



## Helen Ressler: From Presbyterian to Pardes

When Helen Ressler (Educators Program '17-'19) first entered Pardes, she knew she had found her sacred home. The 27-year-old Divinity School graduate had converted to Judaism some six months earlier and went on Birthright Israel, with five days at Pardes tacked on to the end of the trip.

"I had studied text for so long in an academic sense, but at Pardes, I was studying text because it was sacred," said Helen.

Helen returned to the States to start work as a trauma chaplain at Baltimore's highly prestigious John Hopkins Hospital. However, she loved Pardes so much that, when she was offered the opportunity to join its Educator Program, she headed right back to Pardes.

"It's a bit surreal," said Helen, who is in her second year of the Educators Program. "I had no idea I was going to be a Jewish educator, or a Jewish professional. I was excited to be a Jewish layperson."

For people who have decided to convert to Judaism, Pardes has been a spiritual home where they can deepen their Jewish education and knowledge in a variety of ways. Some of them end up making their home in Israel, while others join the Pardes Educators Program and become part of the global Jewish education community.

Their stories are fascinating, emanating from communities and backgrounds perhaps lesser known to the more typical Pardes student. They show their fortitude and drive in pursuing their path and their desire to find the community and home that feels right to them.

For Helen, who was raised in a Presbyterian home by her Calvinist parents, there were certain ironic similarities between her Calvinist ancestors and Judaism, including what she calls a "similar guilt complex," a life's mission to better oneself and the world. Even the languages bore similarities, with the Pennsylvania Dutch of her paternal grandparents, a German patois, bearing a certain similarity to Yiddish.

Helen always assumed she would be a minister because of her lifelong interest in exploring theology. She grew up

in a home where her family regularly discussed religion, talked about the Sunday sermon and asked questions.

When she graduated with a degree in astronomy and history from Wellesley College, she headed home to Nashville and Vanderbilt University to attend Divinity School, and began the ordination process to become a Presbyterian minister. It was while attending a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service at a local Conservative synagogue, part of a course taught by a local rabbi, that Helen found herself enraptured by the service, feeling something she'd never experienced before.

While continuing her divinity studies, she began attending the local Reform synagogue and their conversion classes.

"I felt like I couldn't really tell anyone," said Helen. "I didn't know what I wanted."

That double life continued for a year: going to synagogue on Saturday, church on Sunday and divinity school classes during the week.

She made a point to visit every other synagogue in Nashville, eventually finding her permanent home in the Reform movement.

When she finally decided to announce her decision, it was "like coming out of the closet," she said. "It was a hard decision to make. My entire life had been leading up to something else."

Helen's mother was with her at the *mikvah*, and she took her mother's name, Rebecca, as her Hebrew middle name.

Six months later, she was studying at Pardes, and has found it to be an opportunity to achieve Jewish literacy.

"One of the things I love about Reform Judaism is its mantra about making an informed choice," said Helen. "I came to Judaism because of that, because of the informed choice, and now I'm gaining so much more information. Now I have all the language behind it."

That thought is echoed by other Pardes students who have chosen Judaism as their faith.

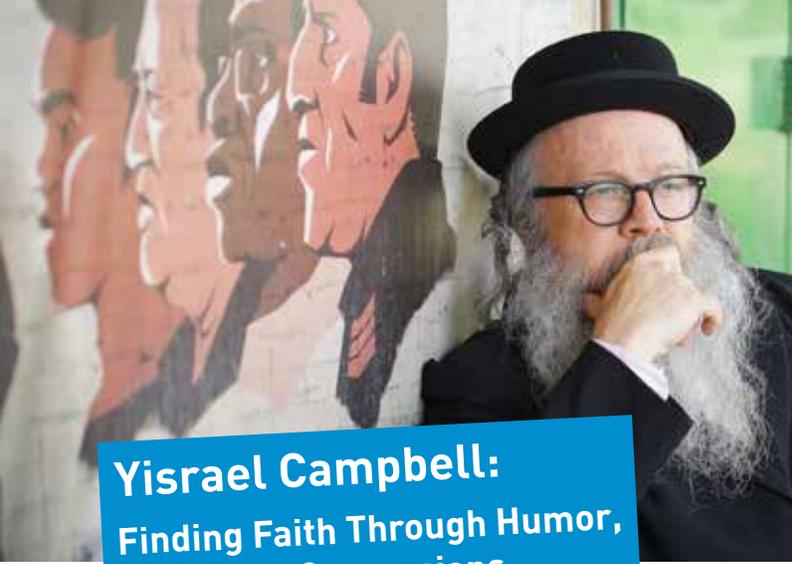


Photo credit: Aviv Naveh

## Yisrael Campbell: Finding Faith Through Humor, and Three Conversions

While most Pardes students return to their lives and families in North America and beyond, their connection to Pardes often continues for years. That's particularly true for stand-up comedian **Yisrael Campbell (Year Program '00-'01, Fellows Program '01-'02)**, perhaps the best-known Jew by Choice at Pardes. He now lives in Jerusalem with his wife, whom he met at Pardes, and serves on the Israel Board of Directors.

One of Yisrael's best-known jokes is that he converted three different times: He first converted, at age 30, with a Reform rabbi, again with a Conservative rabbi and a third time, with an Orthodox rabbi while at Pardes. He then decided to stay in Israel.

"I had tried church. I had tried meditation and the Zen Center in Los Angeles. I had tried all different tribes," said Yisrael, who grew up Catholic in Philadelphia (where he was Chris). He started his spiritual search at 16, when he got sober from alcohol and drugs. Yet he had always been fascinated with Israel and Judaism and his commitments were deepened during a Reform conversion course.

His path toward the Conservative movement began when he wanted to put on *tefillin* and join a morning *minyan*. When he looked to buy a set the Jewish bookstore offered him a payment plan, so his Reform rabbi instead gave his own pair to Yisrael.

As he attended the Conservative morning *minyan* daily and got to know the regulars and the rabbi, Yisrael made the decision to convert again, this time with a Conservative *beit din* (religious court). He gradually became more observant while socializing with a circle of friends, some of whom were Orthodox in practice, which led to questions about whether Yisrael could be counted in *minyanim* or lead *Birkat HaMazon*.

"I considered myself to be Jewish since converting in the Reform movement," he said. "But I started pursuing an Orthodox conversion because I was tired of everybody else deciding."

Then he came to Pardes, a place of study where all of his friends had studied and urged him to go.

He crammed *ulpan* classes and the Pardes Summer Program into one season.

When David Bernstein, Dean of Pardes, invited him to stay for the Elul Program, it seemed like the right thing to do. And then he decided to simply stay for the entire year.

"It seemed smarter just to stay," he said. "I loved the seriousness but also the openness. From where I was coming from, it seemed even a little stricter than I would have thought."

There were also the teachers, people like Aryeh Ben David, who encouraged him to take a new, Jewish name, which he did.

"It was serious, and that's what impressed me," he said. "It was so much learning, so much more than anything I'd ever done. The best I'd ever done was take a class regularly."

It was also during that first Summer Program that Yisrael met Rabbi Avital Hochstein, then a teacher at Pardes. They married a little over a year after Yisrael came to Israel, and now have four children. During those first two years in Israel, Yisrael completed his Orthodox conversion, a long, complicated process despite his two earlier conversions.

Soon after he made *aliyah* and Pardes became Yisrael's spiritual home. Despite a penchant for dressing in Hasidic garb, he is a communal Jew, and loves the egalitarian essence of Pardes, the mix of men and women teaching and their commitment to the learning and the place.

"It was this sense of openness, and a willingness to take people seriously who want to be taken seriously," said Yisrael. "There are people willing to go down that road with you. Converts are one kind of out-of-the-ordinary Jew, but there are so many other categories. There's never a sense of, 'Oh my God, you don't know that?' And that gives great comfort, at least to me, as a convert." ●

# Expanding The Pardes Library

## ALEX ISRAEL

### II Kings: In a Whirlwind

The Book of Kings narrates the turbulent history of Israel from the Temple's construction until its destruction and the national exile. This exciting historical period finds Judah and Israel frequently "in a whirlwind," caught in the turmoil of religious and political forces that threaten the very survival of kingdoms. Using traditional and modern commentary, literary analysis, archeology, and Near-Eastern history, this volume leads the reader through the complex lines of biblical narrative in an enthralling and readable commentary.

*II Kings: In a Whirlwind* can be purchased at [www.korenpub.com](http://www.korenpub.com).



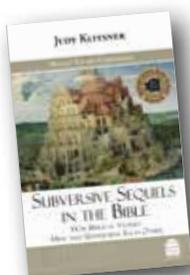
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## MICHAEL HATTIN

### The Book of Judges: The Perils of Possession

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*The Book of Judges: The Perils of Possession* describes the struggles of the tribes of Israel to overcome their external enemies as well as their internal differences as they are forged into the nation of Israel. It highlights their formidable transition from a nomadic, shepherding life to one that is settled and agrarian. It introduces us to the tribes' colossal challenge of addressing pervasive moral and cultural values that are incompatible with their mission as a people. But, as the reader learns, the judges who must lead the tribes as they make their way in the new land are not always up to the task.

*The Book of Judges: The Perils of Possession* will be available for purchase this winter at [www.korenpub.com](http://www.korenpub.com).

## MIKE FEUER AND DAVE MASON

### Key of Rain

The second book in *The Age of Prophecy* series, *The Key of Rain* transports you back 3,000 years to the epic battle between the Israelite Kings and Prophets. In his war against the idolatrous King Ahav and his Queen, Izevel, the Prophet Eliyahu (known in English as Elijah) has brought a devastating drought upon the Kingdom of Israel. While all search in vain for Eliyahu, the Queen hunts the remaining prophets, driving the survivors into hiding. Our story follows Lev, an orphaned musician, who scrambles to keep the prophets alive while trying to mend the rift in the Kingdom. In the face of danger and temptation, Lev must strengthen his will or fall prey to the agents of Izevel's gods, Baal and Ashera. Rooted in the ancient oral and mystical traditions, this epic story is brought to life and will re-frame all you've ever learned about the Israelite Kings and Prophets.

*Key of Rain* can be purchased at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).



# A Special Havruta One Decade Later



**H***avruta*, the tradition of studying Jewish texts in pairs, is the very basis of learning at Pardes. At the same time, *havruta* has a special meaning for one particular set of *haverim*, friends, who met in the *beit midrash* more than ten years ago.

In fact, it was the art of learning in unison that came to epitomize their friendship.

These four friends, **David Lipton** (Year Program '07-'08), **AdAm Mayer** (Kollel '07-'08, Educators Program '12-'14), **Ethan Witkovsky** (Year Program '07-'08) and **Matt Bar** (Year Program '07-'08, Fellows Program '08-'09), met at Pardes in 2007. Their initial meeting was practical; David and Matt had met one another and found an apartment that had room for two more people. They joined forces with AdAm and Ethan, who were looking for a place to live.

The four were known as the "38 Tchernichovsky guys," for the Jerusalem address at which they lived.

They came from different backgrounds, which was perhaps part of the initial attraction.

**Ethan**, now 34 and a Conservative rabbi at Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City, is from Madison, Wisconsin, from a family affiliated with the Conservative movement. He had already decided to attend the Jewish Theological Seminary for rabbinical school but wanted to augment his Torah study with some full-time text learning, which was what led him to Pardes.

**Matt** grew up in Iowa City, where there were few Jews. A musician and rapper, he had visited Israel on a Livnot U'lehibanot Birthright Israel trip, and was living in New York and teaching Hebrew school. There, he successfully introduced rap into a lesson plan,

unintentionally creating Bible Raps, his educational company. He felt he needed some more intensive Jewish learning, which brought him to Pardes that same year.

**AdAm** Mayer, now an Orthodox rabbi, is the son of a Reconstructionist rabbi (his mother) and grew up in a religious home, but without much of a Jewish peer group in his Connecticut hometown. He chose to study at Pardes after attending Brandeis, when he was looking to spend time in Jerusalem.

**David** grew up in a Reform household, and it was during a group trip to Israel that he made his way to Pardes, where he fell in love with its openness and diversity. He came for a semester and stayed for a year.

While it was their mutual need for a living situation that brought them together, learning Torah as a four-person *havruta* became an essential element of their burgeoning friendship. They studied together all the time, in a ritual that became as familiar to them as deciding what to eat for dinner or whose turn it was to go to the grocery store.

"Our friendship was born in *havruta* and Torah," said Ethan. "We would also go to the bar or watch *Lord of the Rings*, but since we were learning together, we would have dinner and talk about our learning."

Their levels of Jewish learning differed from one another. David, currently a postdoctoral fellow in neuroscience at Hebrew University, often brought science to a discussion that included Matt's poetry for an injection of the "wow and awe factor," said David, while AdAm was "so knowledgeable and wise, and Ethan was an amazing leader."



“Every group has these defining experiences, especially when first establishing the friendship,” he said. “For us, it was all learning together.”

There were other, memorable elements of roommate life as well.

AdAm remembers their weekly preparations for Shabbat, which often included a late morning basketball game for Matt and Dave and cooking in the kitchen with Matt playing the guitar in the background. They often invited fellow Pardes students over for dinner, as well as some of their teachers and families.

“We all had a transformative kind of year and we’re all very intimately connected to one another’s year, and these cornerstones of our spirituality consist of one another,” said Matt. “It’s a foursome element that has a unique energy.”

While they each came from different Jewish backgrounds, they found that Pardes offered each of them a voice in Torah, said AdAm. Torah was available to everyone, and the four of them internalized that sentiment.

“Everyone came with this open creativity and curiosity for learning and connecting,” said AdAm. “If you came home with questions about something you learned, it would jumpstart a whole conversation.”

Now, all these years later, it’s challenging to find the time and opportunity to learn together, but it still happens on occasion. Matt and AdAm are both married with families, and live in Philadelphia. They usually meet once a week to learn and record their podcast, “Rappers and Rabbis.” Ethan, also a creator of the podcast, lives in New York with his wife and child.



David, currently living in Israel as a postdoctoral researcher, tries to visit as regularly as possible.

Occasionally, all four have Skyped together in order to learn. They agree that it is worth the effort, though they also agree that their learning is far different now than it once was.

“Everyone’s knowledge has changed,” said Ethan. “AdAm, Matt and I are professional Torah teachers, Dave has a PhD and lives in Israel. Everyone is a little more interesting than we used to be, but the dynamic is still similar. AdAm and Matt are a little bit more on a mystical kick and Dave is a scientist. Sometimes it feels like we’re back in Jerusalem.”

There’s also a certain rhythm that can only be duplicated when all four are together, said Matt.

Learning is fundamental to their relationship and the learning takes on a broader definition the farther they are from the Pardes *beit midrash*, and more entrenched in their personal lives.

“We all really love learning Torah, and it’s something that is so essential to us as friends,” said David. “Every time we learn, it’s a way to access that place of sharing and discussing the most important issues in life.”

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