

# HAVRUTA

THE PARDES INSTITUTE OF JEWISH STUDIES | DECEMBER 2020 | KISLEV 5781



## *Celebrating Rabbi Meir Schweiger - page 4*

RESILIENCE  
AND  
COURAGE

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Page 8

REMEMBERING  
RABBI ADIN  
STEINSALTZ Z"l

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Page 14

THREE WOMEN,  
ONE FAMILY,  
ONE INSTITUTION

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Page 22

מכון פרדס לחנוך יהודי ע"ר  
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## A Letter from the President



Dear Friends,

It has been about eight months since our first lockdown when Pardes quickly and successfully pivoted to remote operations and online-based classes. Our faculty, staff, and students came together in a way that exemplified the very best of Pardes, a community that brings the values of Torah learned in the Beit Midrash to life with an uplifting spirit of hope and communal responsibility. We held each other up and proved that even a pandemic cannot truly separate us from each other or from Torah study.

It was not long after this extraordinary transition that Pardes's leadership publicly committed to **Uninterrupted Torah** and offered an extraordinary tuition package of 50% to 100% off for every student accepted to the 2020–21 Year Program. And the commitment has paid off.

The elation we felt on September 1st when we kicked off the new academic year with 90+ full and part-time students enrolled for in-person, Jerusalem-based programming was nothing short of profound. Not only did we successfully overhaul our operations in a matter of months, we attracted a strong cohort of students. By the close of the academic year, we expect to have met or have exceeded our enrollment results from the previous five years, despite the global pandemic.

On pages 10 and 11 you will find a detailed timeline of the events that shaped our transition from lockdown to renewal, which itself is superimposed over a picture of our very first in-person and fully-masked gathering with new students on August 31st.

But the pandemic was not the year's only story. Inside you will find many other special stories: a tribute to Rabbi Meir Schweiger who is retiring after 43 years, the marriage of two alumni who met in our Beit Midrash, a memorial tribute to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz z"l who was part of Pardes's original faculty in 1972, updates on Pardes's new building and our North American programming, an alumnus's debut novel, and three generations of Pardes alumnae from one family.

These articles collectively tell a greater story — one of a living and dynamic global community dedicated to a kind of Torah study that affirms the place of every single Jew in the Beit Midrash. At Pardes we value discovery, belonging, and the deep engagement of our tradition, here in Israel and around the world.

I invite you to not only read these stories, but to join Pardes in the growth of our work. **Please, make a gift today at [www.pardes.org.il](http://www.pardes.org.il). The next generation of Jewish leaders will thank you.**

May the coming months bring healing to all and a deepened commitment to Torah as a common language of meaning and connection.

Warmly,

Rabbi Leon A. Morris  
President

# Pardes Enrollment

## *A Story of Uninterrupted Torah*



Pardes expects to meet or exceed enrollment results from the past **5 Years** despite a global pandemic.



**+36%**  
enrollment  
growth since 2015



**Learners**  
from around the world  
joined online classes  
and events over  
**6500**  
times since March 2020.



**90+ Students**  
were enrolled in full and  
part-time programs as  
of September 1, 2020.



**50% to  
100%**  
off tuition packages for  
2020–21 Year  
Program students  
reflected Pardes's  
deep investment in  
*Uninterrupted Torah*.



**950 donors**  
made it possible for  
Pardes to offer generous  
financial aid packages  
this year, removing  
financial barriers to  
enrollment.



# Rabbi Meir Schweiger *Retires*

*43 Years of Dedicated Service to Pardes*

## Growing Up in the Bronx

In eighth grade, a young Meir Schweiger had to make a choice: apply to the Bronx High School of Science to pursue his passion for technology and space exploration or apply to Yeshiva University High School to immerse himself in an environment of Jewish learning and observance.

Young Meir chose the latter, not knowing at the time that his decision would propel him down a sacred path as a highly regarded Jewish educator with a distinguished 43-year career at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies.

An only child, Meir was born in 1950. His parents were Holocaust survivors who came to the United States three years after the war. With limited English and no professional training, Meir's father eventually found work cleaning windows, at first employed by

a family member, but later becoming independent and eking out a modest living for his family.

The Schweiger home was a traditional one, but it was not grounded in *halakha*. While Meir's parents came from a Hasidic background, their Judaism was mostly a social construct. "My first language was Yiddish and most of my parents' friends were also survivors, so that was the culture I grew up around," Meir remarks.

The family regularly attended an Orthodox shul on Shabbat, but his parents were not particularly educated. More than anything, Meir explains, "They were proud Jews. Judaism was the core of who they were."

Shul became an important part of his life at a young age and davening was

a personal passion that elevated him to the role of *chazan* and *gabbai* in youth services. Beyond shul, his early Jewish education took place in yeshiva elementary school, which his parents felt was important despite their limited financial resources.

"My parents were certainly not coercive," Meir explains. "To a great extent, they allowed me to decide what I wanted to adopt and what I didn't want to adopt. And, as a result of my yeshiva education, I became more and more *halakhically* observant."

*Meir leads a 2006 student tiyul in the Negev.*





## The Path to Becoming an Educator

It was Meir's early Jewish education that influenced his decision to attend Yeshiva University High School instead of the Bronx High School of Science. And it was his education at Yeshiva University High School that, in 1968, likewise influenced his decision to choose Yeshiva University's undergraduate program instead of the California Institute of Technology.

"By that time it was clear that I was going to continue to be an observant *halakhic* Jew, but the question was how much was learning going to be a part of it," Meir said. "After some consideration, I decided that I wanted the learning, so I chose YU."

Becoming a Jewish educator, though, was not yet a firmly established idea. "It was really my junior year in college, when I spent the year learning at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, not far from Ashdod, that was critical in pushing me in the direction of Jewish education," Meir explains. "I kept my options open after that year. Even

when I made *aliyah* [in 1972], I was open to the possibility of not going into Jewish education, but I was certainly going in that direction."

After moving to Israel, Meir spent a year learning at Yeshivat Har Etzion as its first American kollel student. Soon after, Meir was offered the opportunity to join a new kollel that the esteemed and industrious Rabbi Chaim Brovender was building at Shapell's, a yeshiva for young men seeking out a Modern Orthodox lifestyle. "The moment I was offered that possibility, it was pretty much clear that I was going to go into Jewish education," Meir remarks.

Eventually, Rabbi Brovender left Shapell's, and Meir decided it was his time to leave as well. At Shapell's Meir had become very close with a student named Levi Lauer, a young rabbi, who told Meir that he was looking for a different type of yeshiva,



Sheva Berakhot at the wedding of Steve (Year '84-'86) and Naomi Moss in 1986.

one where he could explore women's issues in Judaism, an increasingly discussed topic at the time. While Meir knew very little about Pardes, he was aware that it openly engaged such questions. He

also happened to know and respect two members of the faculty, Rabbis Dov Berkovits and Zvi Wolff, and suggested to Levi that Pardes just might be a good fit for him.

Levi followed Meir's advice and enrolled at Pardes. Serendipitously, Pardes was seeking a new Director at the time and, after two weeks as a student, Pardes leadership asked Levi to fill the role. He accepted and ultimately held the position for 18 years. A month later, Meir asked Levi for a job.

## Pardes — The Early Years

"My first year was a culture shock," Meir says emphatically. "It was the first time I had students coming from a non-Orthodox background who intended to *remain* non-Orthodox and who were very much challenging the system. It led to a number of clashes with students."

When asked to expound on these early challenges, Meir candidly responds saying, "I was a presence there. I was in your face. I was clearly the person who represented *halakha* and I was pushing it, but I never did anything that was coercive. There were a lot of students who were passionately

egalitarian and I was non-egalitarian so that led to various clashes."

During these early years, Meir was also not initially in favor of women learning gemara, but for different reasons than one might expect. "I didn't think gemara should be at the core of *anybody's* education. I felt that unless you were going to be studying it in depth for an extended period of time — an option that at the time was only available to men who could dedicate many years to learning — it was a shame not to be studying other areas, especially at Pardes where students generally studied for just one year."



Meir teaching during the 2004 Pardes Learning Seminar.

With the passage of time, though, Meir admits that he mellowed. "Over the years, I have certainly changed my position. Being at Pardes and seeing our students learn gemara, in particular the women learning gemara, and seeing how much it meant to them and how much it impacted their Jewish lives, that certainly made me much more receptive to it."

## Educational Philosophy

**M**eir insists that his philosophy as an educator is to not simply hand over *information*. “My job is actually to hand over an *experience*. Beyond the information and skills, I want my students to see that learning Torah is exciting and very much relevant to their lives. We [Pardes educators] see Torah as transformative. We are not teaching it as an academic exercise. The question is always, how is this impacting on your life?”

But does Judaism have to feel good? Meir is not so sure. “There have to be elements of it that feel good, but educationally people should be grappling with things that don’t feel good.”

Meir is concerned that too many people reject Judaism altogether unless it is sugarcoated. “I want to open people up, to have them really struggle. Struggle was a key word during the early years at Pardes. When we decide to sugarcoat and validate things simply so that people feel good, I think that something is lost there.”

Reflecting on his own path to observance, Meir notes that there were many things he found challenging, but argues that these same issues forced him to be honest about what he was doing and why. “I think the more secure people are with themselves, the more open they are to experiencing different things. They are not worried that alternative experiences are going to destroy who they are.”

## Students and Colleagues

**A**mong the Pardes faculty and staff, it’s universally understood that if one cannot recall a past student’s name, just ask Meir. In fact, Meir is likely to also recall various anecdotes about a student, where they are from and the approximate year they studied at Pardes. The trick, Meir explains, is working to make genuine personal connections.

“It goes back to the idea of being an educator,” Meir says. “It’s not that I’m just handing over information. Ultimately, I am creating a relationship with my student through the texts, and if you really create a relationship with someone, you remember their name. Creating these relationships is one of my goals, and text is the vehicle to do that.”

Being part of a student’s growth also creates a certain intimacy, Meir says, which also strengthens the potential for long-term personal connections. “Pardes attracts students who are very bright, who are very interested, who certainly ask good questions. It’s so exciting to see the transformation that happens. For 15 to 20 years I have been teaching *Humash Bet* (Torah Level 2). One might think I’d get bored teaching a lower level course, but I enjoy it. You really see the shift with people who come in with very few text skills, but they get to a point where they could really take off, and they do! To see the growth curve with people is very exciting.”

Finally, exploring Israel with students outside the Beit Midrash creates the space for very special student-teacher

## Israel and Zionism

**T**here is no question that I am a very passionate Zionist and that I see Israel at the core of my identity as a Jew,” Meir says with zeal.

Meir graduated college knowing that he would soon make *aliyah*, and his commitment to the ingathering of the Jewish people has not diminished. “I do believe that every Jew should live in Israel, but I also very much understand and accept the many reasons why people can’t.”

Meir’s appreciation for struggling with identity and Jewish texts holds true when discussing the modern State of Israel as well. “What I have difficulty with is when people brush off Israel and say, ‘Who needs Israel? Israel just complicates my life.’ It worries me greatly when we need to be overly apologetic when talking about Israel — when they are seemingly unwilling to engage it because it’s sometimes messy and challenging. I wanted anyone who went through Pardes to see Israel as a central part of their life, even if that means uncomfortably confronting its many complexities.”

When it comes down to it, Meir says, whether it is Israel, lifestyles, approaches to Judaism or observance, “I can accept a person without having to validate and endorse whatever they do or think. I think a lot of people have trouble with that distinction.”

interactions. “I could write a whole book about Pardes *tiyulim* (field trips). I participated in almost every one in 43 years. It played a major role in creating Pardes community. It was also part of my family experience. My kids grew up on Pardes *tiyulim*.”

Meir concludes on a more somber note, reflecting on the way tragedies have also brought the Pardes community together. “The most difficult experience at Pardes was when [Pardes students] Ben Blutstein z”l and Marla Bennett z”l were killed [in the 2002 Hebrew University bombing]. Despite the tremendous pain and loss, it was when I think Pardes was at its best. Pardes somehow put the pieces back together to create a certain healing.”



## Mentors

Even rabbis have rabbis — colleagues, scholars and guiding lights that shape their approach to Torah. While Meir rarely touts admiration for specific Jewish leaders, there are several who are particularly dear to him. “The two people who impacted the most on my learning and teaching are Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and Nechama Leibowitz. Rav Soloveitchik in terms of his method of analysis, which is rooted in gemara and Rambam, and his way of integrating *halakha* and philosophy,” Meir explains. “Nechama Leibowitz, on the other hand, gave me a methodology of how to teach Tanakh (Bible).” Meir also cites long-time Pardes faculty member Rabbi Dov Berkovits, whose approach to teaching Mishnah had a tremendous impact on Meir’s relationship with Tannaitic (Early Rabbinic) sources and Avie Walfish, Meir’s longest standing *havruta* (learning partner) and friend. Avie also taught at Pardes for many years.

Reflecting on his own education over the years, Meir shares that, “for the teachers I had a relationship with, the thing that impacted me was not what I learned from them, but much more their personality. And to a great extent, that has also affected how I teach.”

Finally, Meir notes his high regard for the relationships he’s built with his colleagues over the years. “Pardes has always succeeded in having really good people. That’s a significant part of what kept me at Pardes for so long.”



Meir and Dean David Bernstein on tiyul with students in 2018.



Meir with his wife, Malkah z”l, in September 2020.

## Retirement

As for what’s next, it’s complicated. Sadly, Meir’s wife, Malkah, unexpectedly passed away on October 23rd, a week after having emergency triple-bypass surgery. This tragedy came just a month into Meir’s retirement and has reverberated heavily throughout the Pardes community. Plans are currently being made to honor her memory and the role she played over the years. She not only supported Meir’s deep commitment to Pardes, but was also an important figure to many students whom she hosted, mentored and befriended since Meir joined the faculty.

Meir plans to teach select classes online while continuing to play a key role in the development of Pardes programming in North America. Meir’s weekly online *parashah* class, which was launched as an effort to bring more Torah to those stuck at home during Covid-19 lockdowns, will also continue this year. These online classes have provided a special opportunity for Meir to reconnect with past students who were thrilled to have Meir and his teaching once again a fixture in their lives.

And at some point, Meir hopes to expand his own personal learning. “The one area I would like to delve more into is *halakha*. Teaching *halakha* was never my passion and I would like to spend more time with the sources.” He looks forward to taking some time to explore Kabbalah in more depth as well.

Meir’s life is truly a living expression of the endurance, hope and faith of the Jewish people. The only child of Holocaust survivors from the Bronx enters retirement at the age of 70 with nine children and 29 grandchildren, all of whom live in the modern State of Israel.

Meir’s advice for his students? “You have to have a sense of humor. You have to have the ability to laugh at things and not always take them too seriously. You have to laugh and laugh at yourself and that can really open you up to different kinds of people and experiences.” 🍎



# Resilience & Courage

יָאֵל וְכֹחַ



**Faculty members Yiscah Smith and Mike Feuer discuss Resilience and Courage, the theme of the 2021 Pardes Learning Seminars.**

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

**Yiscah:** I would like to suggest that strength and resilience come from both within and without. Either way, the process begins by seeking an immanent and visceral encounter with the Divine Presence as the foundation. A direct experience with God is the first step. This first step is essential for one's Judaism to be far more wholesome, mysterious and comprehensive than a mere cerebral appreciation of history and tradition. The resulting inner shift produces and develops quality traits that are Judaism's core values: humility, gratitude, integrity, compassion and respect. These core values become hallmark ingredients that constitute strength and resilience.

This teaching from the Piaseczner Rebbe (Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, 1889–1943) addresses this first step:

"We exhort you in the strongest terms: teach yourself to watch, gaze and contemplate. In general, become a person who seeks out the Divine Presence everywhere. Perhaps you will indeed find God, Whose presence, holiness and glory is subtle and hidden. And when you seek God out, you will in fact find God. Where will you find God? Within yourself and within everything around you." (Bnei Machshava Tova, entry 11)

**Mike:** I agree that strength and resilience come from both without and within, and in fact I often find myself questioning whether this dichotomy is an entirely healthy one. I think that the real source of strength comes from experiencing ourselves as a sort of vortex, as a stream of Divine will flowing through creation. I'll say more about this later.

I want to push a little on your assertion that "a direct experience with God is the first step." This is a very high bar, and one over which many are likely to stumble. In my eyes, the first step is a commitment to a relationship, which itself becomes a vessel for real encounter. Picture Moshe in the wake of the Golden Calf. While it is true he had a deep Divine relationship before the societal breakdown, it is only in light of his work to restore God's presence to the people that he receives the promise, "I will make all My goodness pass before you..." (Shemot 33:19). This is a whole new level of relationship, and it comes through Moshe's commitment to both God and Israel.

This is what I hear in the words of the Piaseczner Rebbe. The act of seeking is a belief in a relationship which I do not yet experience; it is a constant commitment to making that relationship real in my life. In my experience, commitment is one of the greatest sources of strength and resilience that we have.

To circle back to the "inside/outside" dichotomy for





a moment: Rav Kook (Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, 1865–1935) teaches that when we conceive of ourselves as separate from God, a sense of moral and physical exhaustion is all but inevitable. In other words, the very perspective which places God “outside” and thus forces me to ask whether I should look without or within for strength is the cause of much of our weakness.

**Yiscah:** I appreciate that you see my view as setting a high bar. I agree with you. This is why cultivating inner strength and resilience is so important. For example, the Piaseczner was critical of the status quo observance of Judaism in pre-World War II Warsaw. To use your words, he raises the bar, saying: “We passionately seek instead to be on the level described in the Torah: ‘You are children of God’” (Deuteronomy 14:1). Whenever we do God’s work, whether we study, pray or perform any of the mitzvot, we wish to feel that we are always growing closer to God.

So, while seeking a direct encounter with the Divine is setting a high bar, at the very least, we must attempt to do everything possible to achieve this. Even if we do not actually sense the Divine Presence in our midst, imagine how different the Jewish world would be today if this would be our paramount value.

I would argue as well that it’s much more tenable than normative Jewish leaders would have us think. It is radical, yes. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l taught, the Torah is the most radical document humankind has

produced. The real question is if this is what we seek, or even more to the point, is this what we Jews yearn and long for?

The Ba’al HaTanya (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745–1813) teaches that this sense of encounter and closeness with God is not only possible, but probable. He derives this from the verse, “For this thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it” (Devarim 30:14). Hence, I believe this is part of the spiritual dimension of cultivating inner strength and resilience, especially and regretfully, since this practice is not given the priority worthy of it.

Finally, I can’t help but hear the words, “*Ein Od Milvado*” (There is none Other) when you quote Rav Kook. The Piaseczner makes a similar assertion. “It’s nothing other than a false allusion to believe that God dwells both within and without.”

**Mike:** I am all for the radical shift! The world does not need more religion which advocates for a pedestrian, bourgeois attitude. In fact, this posture of religion can be dangerous — it will expend its energy preserving what is rather than giving expression to what might yet be. Our holy ancestors who lived the reality of “*shver tsu zayn a yid*,” (it’s hard to be a Jew), be they Ashkenazi or not, were sustained by the conservative structures of Torah. Our challenge now is that it is too easy to be a Jew, and so to push the story forward we must unleash the redemptive potential of Torah. This will be the source of our strength for the challenges which lie ahead.

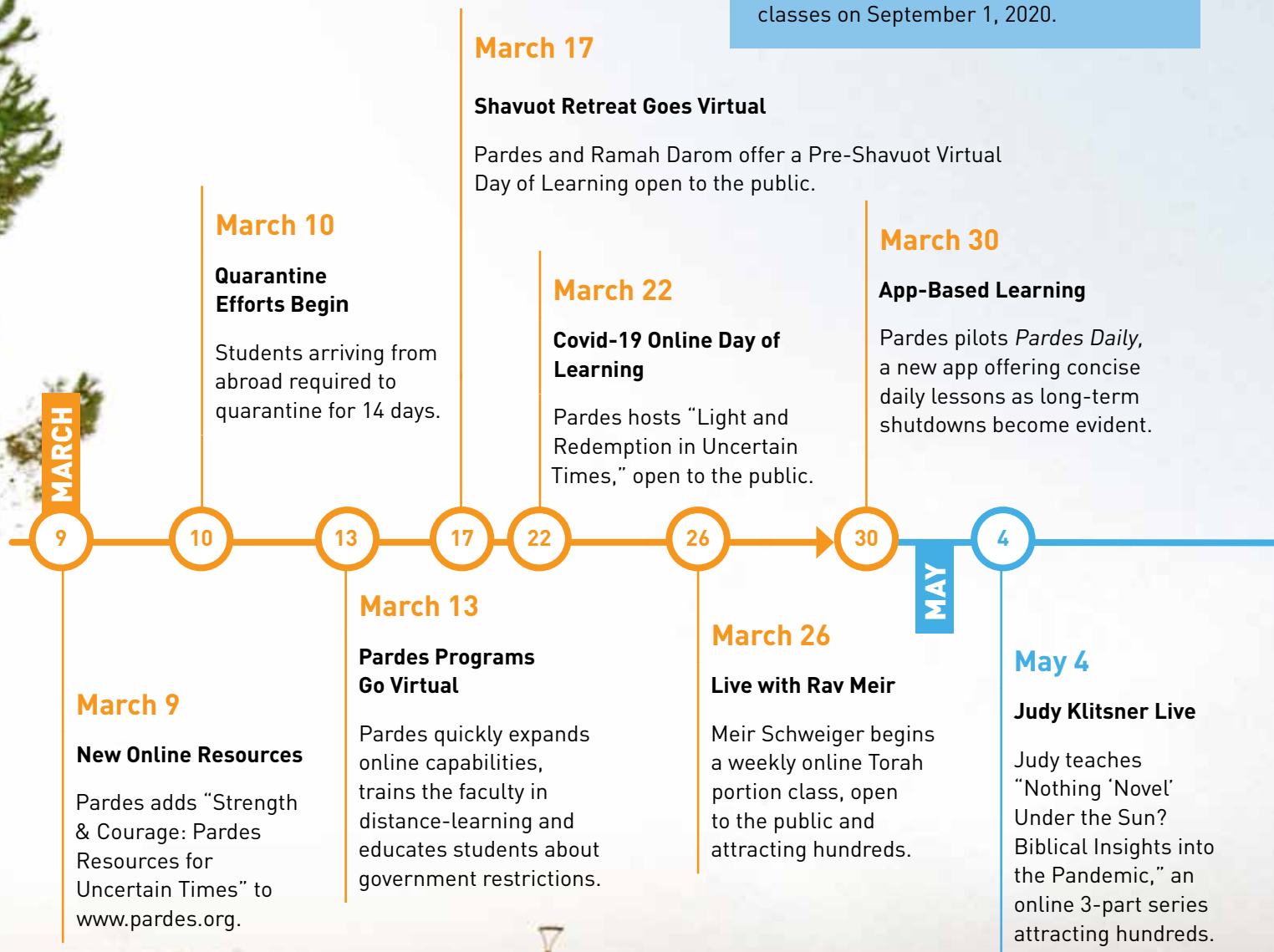
I am glad that you heard the “*Ein Od Milvado*” (There is none Other) in the quote I offered. It was certainly there. Now I must balance it with the other driving inner-dimension of Rav Kook’s teachings — covenant. It may seem that a posture of all-in-God (or panentheism as the theologians say) contradicts covenant after all. In order for there to be a relationship there must be “other” to whom I relate. In my eyes, this is why Rav Kook characterized himself as a torn soul, indeed as he says, “It is impossible for us to conceptualize with our intellect an individual whose soul is not torn — only the inanimate is whole.” Perhaps this was the great source of his strength and resilience from which we can learn. In our heart of hearts we must know that we are not other than God, or even one another; but we must bind ourselves together in a commitment to the actions which can truly make the world whole.

Thank you so much for this brief exchange of words, I look forward to many more. For now, may you be blessed that the light in your heart illuminates the faces of all you encounter. 🌟

# Uninterrupted Torah:

## Pardes Responds to Covid-19

In early March 2020, Pardes initiated a major overhaul of operations due to Covid-19 with a goal of returning to in-person learning as soon as safely possible. Pardes's faculty, staff and boards successfully adapted to the new reality and quickly expanded online resources. Despite unprecedented challenges, the goal of returning to in-person learning was achieved with the commencement of classes on September 1, 2020.



Pardes faculty member Rabbi Dr. Meesh Hammer-Kossoy speaks to new students in Jerusalem on August 31, 2020.

Photo Credit: Tzipora Lifchitz



**May 19**

**Lockdown-Themed Podcast Series**

Pardes releases "Home is where the Torah is," a 6-part series recorded by Pardes faculty in their homes under lockdown, exploring the concept of home in Jewish texts. Matti Rosenshine, the architect of Pardes's new home, adds his thoughts to conclude each episode.

**May 20**

**2019–20  
Year Programs End**

Year students host an outdoor *siyum*, concluding ceremony, to mark the end of the year.

**May 20**

**Generous Tuition  
Discounts**

Pardes announces 50%–100% off tuition to accepted applicants of the 2020–21 Year Program.

**July 5**

**The Pardes  
Summer Program**

Session One of Pardes's 3-week Summer Program takes place online for the first time, with a record number of participants. Session Two begins on the 27th, also with record enrollment.

**July 30**

**Tisha B'Av Online**

Pardes hosts a virtual Tisha B'Av panel discussion entitled, "Will Things Ever Be the Same? — Jewish Tradition as it Adapts and Resists Disruption/Destruction," attracting hundreds.

**August 10**

**Levi Cooper Live**

Levi begins a 4-part online series entitled, "Rabbinic Responses to Past Pandemics."

**August 31**

**PARDES REOPENS!**

Over 70 students begin in-person classes at Pardes in Jerusalem following all government guidelines and in consultation with a private epidemiologist. Students come together for an opening ceremony with the magical Jerusalem backdrop pictured here.



# A Match Made In the Beit Midrash

Amalia Mark (Educators '16-'17, Year '18-'19) and Louis Gordon (Year '18-'19) met at Pardes and got married this fall. We discussed their upbringings, Pardes experiences and plans for their future.



## What were your paths to Pardes?

**Amalia:** My parents met through Hillel, became Orthodox through Chabad, and raised their children in the Yeshivish world with Lubavitch *minhagim* (customs) and values. I'm a product of a world of black hats and streimels, Hasidic tales, *Eretz Yisrael* (The Land of Israel) not *Medinat Yisrael* (The State of Israel), and gendered lines. I heard about Pardes when I was 18 in "seminary" for young women in Beit Shemesh. Intrigued by the openness, I became something of a fangirl, but I didn't have a chance to visit. I returned home, completed my Theater degree and started my career as a Jewish professional.

By 2016 I had been working at the University of Arizona Hillel for two years and wasn't sure what would come next. I loved facilitating Jewish experiences and wanted to learn more myself — maybe even gemara for the first time. So I took a leap and applied to the Pardes Experiential Educators Program. As soon as I finished in 2017, I already wanted more. Luckily, I returned in 2018 for my third year of Hebrew College's rabbinical school. Little did I know that I would meet Louis on my first day back.

**Louis:** I wanted to be a learned *Ba'al Teshuva* (newly religious individual) who approaches social progress from a critical and intellectually honest standpoint, which was not offered by most yeshivot. Growing up, we

affiliated with a Reform Temple, I went to Sunday school and had a Bar Mitzvah, but our literacy didn't expand far beyond popular holidays and the *Aleph Bet*. I became more curious about learning in college largely thanks to a *kiruv* (Orthodox outreach) organization, but I didn't jive with their social-pressure tactics.

I took on mitzvot in a serious context after the Gaza War in 2014. I had a short-lived goal of producing a podcast interviewing activists, rabbis, soldiers, regular Israelis and Palestinians in hotspots like the Old City of Jerusalem and Hebron. That project fell flat, but I did spend time learning at Aish HaTorah. Returning home in 2017 I changed my life in significant ways and soon looked for a yeshiva; somewhere to build skills without the pressure of a particular *hashkafah* (religious approach) I didn't believe in. People in my community recommended Pardes, so I went for it. Finding a life partner in Israel was also a motivator, but dating a non-denominational rabbinical student was a surprise to me.

## Amalia, did you consider the rabbinate earlier in life?

**Amalia:** Definitely not! I only knew about women rabbis because they were the subject of cruel jokes in my community, with "Rabbi Sally" as the condescending name for a woman who dared call herself "rabbi."

There wasn't a magical set of realizations. It was an idea at the back of my mind that I was scared of entertaining. It would place me *b'ever ha'nahar*, on the other side of the river, from my family and community. I wasn't ready to take that leap until I went to Pardes. During Sukkot of my first year I was reflecting on the powerful female



rabbinic figures and rabbinical students from across the denominational world whom I had met, and I started seeing the person I wanted to become. Sitting in a sukkah, I said it out loud: “I think I want to be a rabbi. I’m going to apply to rabbinical school.” From there, I didn’t look back.

#### How does Jewish life play out in your relationship?

**Amalia:** One thing that I love about Louis is his commitment to the halakhic process. Even when we disagree, I remain invested in the Jewish world we are co-creating. It isn’t easy or simple, but it’s deeply worthwhile. My theater background and Louis’s work in film has a part in this. Louis has a rare balance of professionalism in film and a commitment to *halakha* and learning. I never thought I would find a person who complemented so many parts of myself.

**Louis:** We deeply disagree on a few key aspects of *halakha*; even on the systems of *chiyuv* (obligations) that we follow. But we do a fair amount of stretching to accommodate one another’s needs, which has made every moment worth it. It’s not often that Amalia accompanies me to a *mechitza* (gender segregated) minyan, but she comes now and then, and I know it’s an act of love. So I gladly accompany her to egalitarian settings. That’s what it means to love someone. I ease up on my preferences to leave space for her, and in that space we have honesty and love.

#### Can you describe your experience at Pardes?

**Amalia:** It was exhilarating and exhausting. I constantly felt full of new ideas and skills and was hungry for more. The summary of my experience is the more I learn, the

more I realize I don’t know. It’s extremely powerful to be a part of a deep tradition that, no matter how much I plunge the depths, there will always be *seforim* (books) unread, and ideas undiscovered. The duality of *אין כל חדש תחת השמש*, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Kohelet 1:9) and *הפך בזה, והפך בזה, דכלא בזה*, “turn it and turn it again because everything is in it” (Pirkei Avot 5:22) has been a steadying foundation in this process.

**Louis:** At first it was a little bit isolating. I felt pressure to prove my seriousness as halakhically committed to distinguish myself from students who weren’t. It was especially hard to feel religiously in tune with folks in level Aleph, where I was initially placed. Many of my classmates were not as religiously committed, and were testing out Jewish practice. So my patience was tested, but I improved my Hebrew skills and soon placed into level Bet. More peers there were aspiring towards rabbinical and Jewish careers, which was the environment that I needed. That said, I don’t think another yeshiva would have given me the perspective I have now or would have been as honest about the process of halakhic development and variety of Jewish outlooks. Pardes is special for this.

#### Amalia, where might your rabbinate take you?

**Amalia:** I would love to continue working in reclaimed ritual spaces. I’m an intern at Mayyim Hayyim (a pluralistic community *mikveh* and educational center near Boston) and have the gift of educating visitors about *mikveh*. When a nine year-old visits, she encounters *mikveh* as another part of her tradition, like lighting Shabbat candles or saying *Shema*. There’s no stigma in her eyes. I hope to continue facilitating experiences that offer knowledge of Jewish ritual which spark agency and choice.

#### Louis, how does your career relate to your Judaism?

**Louis:** I became a film and TV sound engineer in 2013, but many shoots take place on weekends, which was a dealbreaker for Shabbat observance. So, I switched to screenwriting and directing, where schedules are more flexible. It’s hard, but I’m enthusiastic about the transition.

While at work, I often bring Torah into my writing and I strive for *Chesed* (lovingkindness) and *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of God’s name) in my relationships with colleagues.

Success in film is often regarded as serendipitous, but I feel God’s hand in my career. Failure is frequent, and Torah is a rubric for how to fail forward. So, yes, Judaism is intimately tied to my work, but I also don’t think that they must be related. That’s something Orthodoxy emphasizes well: Torah learning belongs to secular professionals as much as it does to Jewish professionals. Judaism is not a career guide, it’s a life guide. ●



# Memories of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz



Rabbi Steinsaltz z"l was a member of Pardes's founding faculty in 1972. Rabbi Michael Swirsky and Dr. Bernie Steinberg reflect on the time they spent with him inside and outside the Beit Midrash.

Photo: Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz z"l in Jerusalem in 1988.

By Rabbi Michael Swirsky

When I first approached Adin Steinsaltz to teach at what was to become the Pardes Institute, it was the fall of 1971, a little less than a year before we opened our doors for the first time. He was then 34 years old, but already his genius, erudition, and vision as an educator were widely recognized. His Talmud translation and commentary were well underway, and he had taken part in several other pioneering educational initiatives. I was thus pleasantly surprised when, hearing what this new institution would be about, he smiled with understanding and agreed immediately to come on board.

The original Pardes curriculum was to consist of five required courses, introductions to Jewish religious discourse, thought and practice as reflected in the main genres of the traditional literature. Two of the courses were devoted to the Rabbinic tradition, one stressing *aggadah* (narrative texts), the other *halakha* (legal texts). It was the latter that I asked Adin to teach.

Each course would take up one full day of the week, with four morning hours of *havruta* (paired) study in the Beit Midrash, under the supervision of a tutor, and a two-hour lecture-discussion session in the afternoon with the main teacher. As a tutor to work with Adin, I enlisted a similarly brilliant and erudite young man, Aryeh Strikovsky, who, at 30, already had advanced yeshiva training, several university degrees, and university teaching experience in both Bible and Talmud behind him. (Aryeh was one of Pardes's longest-serving faculty members, retiring only after some forty years of devoted work.) It was a tandem of *talmidei hakhamim* (great scholars).

Although I sometimes sat in on classes, I also had the good fortune of getting to know Adin in a personal way over the course of that first year. Each week, I would pick him up from his home off *Rehov Graetz* (a modest cottage where he lived most of his life), drive him to the small Pardes campus on *Rehov Gad*, then take him back home when class was done and all the students' questions had been answered. The conversations in the car, and sometimes beyond, were always fascinating and enjoyable. And it was a connection that continued for many years afterward, when both of us had gone on to other roles.

Adin had a quintessentially Jewish penchant for weaving together profundity and humor, the abstract and the concrete, reverence and irreverence. The range of his interests and knowledge was truly dazzling. But what impressed me and the students even more, were the warmth, gentleness, and modesty of his manner and his accessibility and openness to questions. I believe that his own experience as a *hozer biteshuva* (one who becomes observant) gave him a special understanding of, and sympathy for, the sorts of bright, young seekers who had come to study at Pardes, with their particular spiritual and intellectual needs, concerns and aspirations. There could be no more appropriate background for a Pardes teacher.

Adin — Rav Steinsaltz — made vast contributions over his long life to the religious heritage of the Jewish people and the world, contributions that will continue to enrich and inspire many future generations. We were privileged, at Pardes, to have had him among us near the beginning of his journey and ours. יהי זכרו ברוך - May his memory be a blessing. 🍀 Rabbi Michael Swirsky is the founder of Pardes.



## By Dr. Bernie Steinberg

I met Adin Steinsaltz at Pardes during its founding year. I was among its first cohort of students. On a personal quest for meaning, I entered with no professional goals. I ended up devoting my life to Jewish education. Pardes transformed me and shaped the direction of my life-work, because its extraordinary teachers embodied the Torah they taught.

My deepest, broadest impression of Adin Steinsaltz was that he spoke in a single voice. He spoke simply about complex matters and playfully about the most serious life questions, with confidence and humility. This voice reflected his unpretentious, complex but remarkably integrated personality. Adin Steinsaltz the person was not different from Adin Steinsaltz the already renowned Talmudist or Adin Steinsaltz the activist, who was involved in pioneering projects of Jewish communal renewal — mostly in Israel but also on behalf of global Jewry — or even Adin Steinsaltz the new father.

My wife, Roz, bumped into Steinsaltz at the old Misgav Ladakh maternity hospital (now the Yakar Synagogue) in the winter of 1974, when his wife Sarah had just given birth to their first child. Roz had walked up to the window to see the newborn daughter of a close friend. Rabbi Steinsaltz was standing there, waiting restlessly to see his own newborn. He turned to Roz and said in English, in a warm, friendly way, “I just can’t relate to newborns!” Roz, who herself was about to give birth in a matter of weeks, exclaimed, “Why?!” With a twinkle in his eye, Adin replied, “You know, they can’t do anything, I mean, talk or anything.”

Adin was deeply rooted in the Land, an Israeli in every way. Without apology, he considered the Diaspora *galut* (exile), yet, in my view, he was not a nationalist. In fact, I got the distinct impression that he did not see himself or view others in terms of any modern “ism.” He was a Jewish spiritual visionary with a huge imaginative capacity, an ability to think expansively and creatively, but whose visionary perspectives were grounded in concrete, empirical, and also I sensed, deeply metaphysical realities. To me he embodied Pa-R-De-S (the Hebrew

acronym for the four types of rabbinic exegesis: literal, allegoric, comparative and mystical).

His extraordinary authority and impact, felt by all of us, derived not from any externally conferred status but from the sheer depth and expanse, not only of his knowledge, but of his wisdom. It was a wisdom that encompassed not just knowledge integrated with life-experience, but a rare, profound metaphysical intuition. Post-modernism aside, it was wisdom with a metaphysical foundation.

I also view Rabbi Steinsaltz as having been a living embodiment of the acronym Cha-Ba-D — *chokhma, bina, da’at* (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge). I say this with some irony, yet I think there was a basis for this impression.

That he did not — would not — assume any official Chabad role, as *Rebbe* or even *shaliah* (a Chabad representative in a community) — was somewhat confusing to us Pardes students. After all, his bond to Chabad was well-known. He had a deep, personal relationship, indeed had studied, with the Rebbe himself. He had close ties with Kfar Chabad, the Lubavitcher village near Ben Gurion Airport. He even taught the *Tanya*, the “bible” of Lubavitch Hasidism, to then President of Israel Zalman Shazar.

To Pardes students, he looked the part, acted the part of a Chabadnik — in terms of stringent halakhic practice — and, it seemed to us, “thought the thought” — in terms of his distance from *Dati-Leumi* (Modern Orthodox) ideology. Yet, when asked by a student whether he was a Chabadnik, he demurred. And in fact I remember him once saying there were many approaches to Judaism, Orthodoxy included, that he was skeptical about. By the same token, in an interview with the *New York Times* a decade ago, he said, “By nature I am a skeptical person, and people with a lot of skepticism start to question atheism.”

I recall another student asking him about his personal experience moving away from atheism, from a secular world and way of thinking — his father had been a Communist — to exploring Judaism and then becoming a *hozer biteshuva*. “You know, you remain the same,” he replied, “yet everything is different. I immersed myself in the *mikveh*, and when I came up I saw everything with completely fresh eyes. Yet, I still remembered the old risqué jokes. I still thought they were funny. Nothing changed, yet I was completely transformed!”

Dr. Bernie Steinberg was a student during Pardes’s first year and is Director Emeritus of Harvard Hillel.

Original student materials from the Pardes archives.

### FACULTY: 1972-73

#### Lecturers

Rabbi David Hartman (Rabbinics)  
Michael Rosenak (Jewish thought)  
Dr. Yaakov Rothschild (Siddur)  
Dr. Eliezer Schweid (Jewish thought)  
Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz (Rabbinics)  
Aryeh Toeg (Bible)

#### Regular Tutors

Rabbi Bernard Berkovits  
Menahem Fromann  
Dr. Aryeh Strikovsky  
Elliott Yagod  
Rabbi Burton Zeffren

5) Talmud and Halakhah. Selected sugyot in Talmud, concentrating on language, methodology and the development of specific laws within the Talmud itself and in later commentary and codes. Teacher: Adin Steinsaltz. Tutor: Aryeh Strikovsky. *Thursdays*.

# Daily APPdate

**L**ife is busy. We must tend to our partners, our parents, our careers, our children, our synagogues, our homes...the list seems endless. Sadly, investing in ourselves, pursuing opportunities for personal growth, and exploring our passions often seems like luxuries we can't afford. Juggling the complexities of our lives has always been challenging, even in the best of times, and it is all the more so in the age of Covid-19.

That is where ***Pardes Daily*** comes in.

The new *Pardes Daily* app allows anyone to experience (or re-experience) the magic of Pardes, anytime, anywhere. The concept is simple. 10 to 20-minute audio lessons, five days a week for a limited number of weeks, that focus on specific texts.

While Pardes's programs in the Beit Midrash in Jerusalem are primarily focused on our tradition's concept of *B'lyyun* (in-depth) learning, *Pardes Daily* leans into our tradition's notion of a *B'Kiut* (breadth-focused) learning. Using this methodology allows *Pardes Daily* users to cover more ground and achieve learning goals that can fit into even the busiest of schedules. With *Pardes Daily*, activities like taking a short walk, washing dishes, breaking between online meetings, or doing the laundry can be transformed into opportunities for Torah study.

*Pardes Daily* was originally scheduled to launch during the summer of 2020, but as Covid-19 lockdowns expanded, Pardes was insistent on putting easily accessible and inspiring Torah learning opportunities into the hands of learners worldwide. The app was piloted almost exclusively with Pardes alumni during the week before Passover. Approximately 200 users participated and offered critical feedback that was used to improve the app for the official launch.

Based on the overwhelmingly positive response, *Pardes Daily* set its sights on a more ambitious goal — the High Holy days. During the month of Elul, traditionally a time when Jews spiritually prepare for the upcoming new year, *Pardes Daily* challenged users to complete one of three Rosh Hashanah-themed daily learning tracks: a Mishnah track with Rav Rahel Berkovits, a Talmud track with Rabbi Zvi Hirschfield or a Tanakh/Bible track with Rabbi Michael Hattin.

The response to the Elul challenge was also extremely positive. The app was downloaded more than 600 times and an impressive community of app-based learners suddenly came into existence. At the conclusion of the four-week challenge, users reported wonderful experiences and offered more important feedback that Pardes is using to further improve the technology.

**Stay tuned for the next *Pardes Daily* challenge, coming soon!**

**More information and links to download the app can be found at [www.pardes.org.il/pardesdaily](http://www.pardes.org.il/pardesdaily).**







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Pardes's ambitious \$36 million capital and endowment campaign has now raised over \$20.7 million.

The rendering above reflects the final design of the building's facade.

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Pardes would like to acknowledge and thank **Masa Israel Journey** for its ongoing partnership and support, including scholarships and grants that assisted almost 40% of students studying in Pardes's academic-year programs. This support provides key assistance that enables Jewish young adults to engage deeply with Jewish texts and explore Israel, while gaining valuable tools for future leadership.

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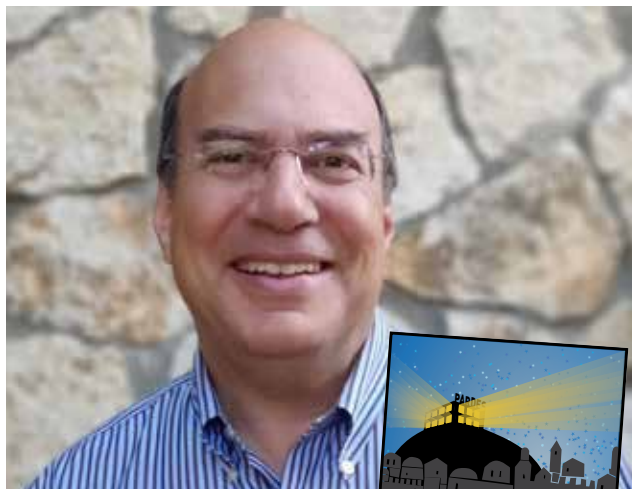
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Thank you to board member Larry Kluger for launching and overseeing Pardes's longest-running podcast series, *Pardes from Jerusalem* (PFJ), for the last 15 years. Under Larry's care, PFJ ranked among the most listened-to Jewish learning podcasts and its listenership continues to grow. Pardes is indebted to Larry for his foresight, creativity, innovation and initiative.

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# TURTLE BOY

## A Debut Novel

By Alumnus Evan Wolkenstein



**W**ill Levine is a tween with more than just the usual dramas and tensions. A lot more. Will's father died tragically when he was four, and the lonely twelve year-old has a maxillofacial disorder that is causing his chin to recede. And, to top it off, he is kind of a nerd, interested mainly in his turtle collection and hanging out, alone, in the nature reserve behind his school.

Compounding his receding chin, Will wears an oversized hoodie so he can hide his face and he carries around a big backpack full of books. Unintentionally, he actually looks a little like a turtle, so some of the mean kids in school call him Turtle Boy.

As part of his Bar Mitzvah preparation, Will is "voluntold" into visiting a chronically ill teen in the local hospital. RJ seems like someone Will — who has trouble making friends even under much less trying circumstances — would never get along with. But the more they spend time together, even as

RJ moves closer and closer to the end of his short life, the two boys bond and become very close.

RJ has a bucket list of activities he desperately wants to complete before he dies. Since he can't do most of the activities on his list himself, he enlists Will to do them instead. Undertaking this mission — helping RJ, doing things that scare him out of his mind, and growing out of his own shell — is what ultimately makes Will into the Jewish man he was meant to be.

Will, a character born both of the life experience and vivid imagination of Pardes alumnus **Evan Wolkenstein** (Year '98-'00, PEP '00-'02), is the protagonist of Evan's debut young adults' novel, *Turtle Boy* (Random House, '20).

One theme of the book, and one critical area for Will's development as a Bar Mitzvah, focuses on Will discovering what Jewish practice and study can add to his life. At the start of the book, Will is largely

"agnostic" about his Jewish upbringing — it is simply a fact of life, like the fact that he lives in a small town in Wisconsin, an accident of upbringing. However, as Will goes on the journey to confront his father's death, and his own feelings about his new friend's deteriorating health, *tefilah* (prayer), *teshuvah* (repentance) and community play a larger and larger role — though not in the way the reader might expect.

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Teaming up with the Pardes Center for Jewish Educators, Evan created an innovative Bnei Mitzvah curriculum based on the novel.

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“Like I was as a kid,” says Evan, “Will is ambivalent about his Jewish identity and somewhat hostile towards the Jewish expectations that are placed upon him. But as he begins to feel and acknowledge his own vulnerabilities, and also develop confidence in his own choices and identity, Will finds a way to refashion the *kaddish* — one of the most central Jewish communal prayers — into a new musical form.”

Evan continues saying, “this is a metaphor for the journey of many of our students, in whom we must nurture the confidence to see how being Jewish is not only about receiving or even choosing, but also creating, interpreting, and improvising. These are skills that I developed at Pardes, and it would mean a great deal to me if this book lit a candle in some young (and even adult) readers’ hearts about the potential for Judaism to form not four constricting walls, limiting choices and options, but rather, a mirror, a window, a door.”

After *Turtle Boy* was published, Evan (who is a veteran teacher and administrator at the Jewish Community High School of the Bay in San Francisco) felt that there was a great deal that could yet be done with the book for middle-school kids. Teaming up with the Pardes Center for Jewish Educators, Evan created an innovative Bnei Mitzvah Judaics/Literature curriculum based on the novel.



Each of the curriculum’s four units, which all include both remote and in-person learning options, features strong, authentic Jewish content, which focuses on the themes of apologizing and forgiving, acceptance vs. pushing, innovation vs. tradition, and emotional resilience in the face of very overwhelming and difficult conditions. The experiential activities of each lesson promote reflection, debate, and personal exploration perfect for today’s tweens and young teens in both supplementary and Jewish day schools.

Susan Yammer, a longtime PCJE faculty member and Director of Novice Teacher Support, was Evan’s partner in creating the *Turtle Boy* curriculum. “Working with Evan was both exhilarating and inspiring!” shared Susan. “In these companion lessons, he has created opportunities for students and fans of his novel, *Turtle Boy*, to learn, along with Will, the hero of the story, tools for how to face challenges and nurture one’s own resilience.” 🍎

*Turtle Boy* can be purchased on Amazon or at [www.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com).

You can browse and download the complete *Turtle Boy* curriculum - for free - at [elmad.pardes.org/2020/06/turtle-boy-curriculum](http://elmad.pardes.org/2020/06/turtle-boy-curriculum).

# Three Women, One Family, One Institution



**P**ardes is an institution known and celebrated for its diversity. Upon walking into the Beit Midrash it is not uncommon to encounter recent college graduates learning alongside retirees, and from time-to-time, even two generations from one family can be found learning together. The Asa and Zahavi-Asa family, though, holds the rare distinction of having three generations of women who attended Pardes.

The family's relationship with Pardes begins almost as far back as the institution itself.

In 1979, just seven years after Pardes opened, 16 year-old Aviva arrived in Israel. Only a few credits shy of graduation, Aviva was hoping to finish high school in Jerusalem, but when her plans fell through, she was not sure what to do.

It was then that Aviva's father, Haim Asa, a prominent Reform Rabbi who also happened to be friends with Pardes's Director, Rabbi Levi Lauer, suggested that Pardes might just be the right place for her.

When asked about her first impressions of Pardes, Aviva reflected on the initial anger and frustration she experienced. She had always felt well-versed in Judaism. She was the most knowledgeable and educated of her friends, she went to Jewish camps and she participated in Jewish youth movements. And yet here she was, suddenly awakened at Pardes

to the gaps in her Jewish education, specifically the lack of textual learning skills. She remarked that prior to Pardes, she had never heard the word *halakha* (Jewish law) and had never delved deeply into the sources.

Despite the angst and vulnerability she was feeling, she credits Pardes for never making that experience feel unpleasant.

"I think what always stood out is the openness and intellectual curiosity without an agenda," she remarked. "Their willingness to accept people where they are at is really unique."

Rav Dov Berkovits opened up a brand new world for her with his revolutionary Mishnah class, which awakened a love of Mishnah that she maintains to this day. And this was just one of many seminal moments. "How many times can you say this really changed the course of your life?" she rhetorically asked while considering the tremendous impact Pardes had during these foundational years.

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**"The family's relationship with Pardes begins almost as far back as the institution itself."**

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Fast forward three years to 1982 when the Asa family was back in Israel for another sabbatical year. Aviva's mother, Elaine, now had four children and, wanted to find an activity for herself while they — were in school. Aviva, who had enrolled at Hebrew University, fittingly suggested Pardes. Elaine was intrigued.



*Despite their differences in age, and their varied Pardes experiences, they each reflect on their time at Pardes with warmth, fondness, and respect.*

Although Elaine grew up culturally Jewish, she and the community around her did not practice traditional Jewish life in any notable way. As she succinctly put it, “Everyone was Jewish, but no one did Jewish.” As such, the idea of finally learning Mishnah, Torah, and *halakha* was very appealing.

While Aviva held the record as the youngest student to have learned at Pardes (a record she still holds), Elaine now found herself at the other end of the demographic spectrum, as one of the oldest students in the Beit Midrash.

Affectionately dubbed “Big Mama” by her younger classmates, she was a surrogate mother to many who were learning at Pardes, far away from their parents back home. Elaine also became a guide and mentor to younger students who were making sense of their new understandings of and commitments to Judaism that emerged through their studies at Pardes.

Elaine, too, was a student of Rav Berkovits and remembered fondly how his father, the illustrious Rav Eliezer Berkovits, would make cameo appearances in class to see his son teaching Torah.

33 years later, yet another Asa entered the Pardes Beit Midrash. In 2015, Liel, Aviva’s daughter, and Elaine’s granddaughter, graduated from Lesley University with a degree in Expressive Arts Therapy. Before starting her professional career, she decided to first spend time deepening her knowledge of Judaism. Having grown up hearing her mother and grandmother’s rave reviews, she knew Pardes was the logical place to be and quickly joined a Hillel Summer Cohort at Pardes.

Liel, who is now studying to be a tour guide in Israel, found that Rav Mike Feuer’s teachings spoke to her, greatly inspired her and taught her to look at the land of Israel in a new light.

Despite their differences in age, their varied Pardes experiences, and their affinity towards different members of the faculty, they each reflect on their time at Pardes with warmth, fondness, and respect.

Elaine, Aviva, and Liel each note the tremendous impact that their beloved husband, father, and grandfather, Rabbi Asa, had on their lives, and they marvel at the miraculous kinship that exists within their diverse, and at times diametrically opposed, family.

Though she eschews labels, Elaine elaborates on the diversity of her family. Her son identifies as Haredi, two of her daughters as Modern Orthodox, and another daughter as loosely affiliated with the Reform Movement, and yet she says they are always able to find common ground through Judaism. “If you want religion to be the way to divide, there is a way, and if you want it to unite there is also a way,” Elaine explains.

Both Elaine and Aviva remarked that if their family can find common ground and get along, then there is hope for the Jewish community. Pardes, they feel, is a place that embraces that mentality; a microcosm where no matter your affiliation, an individual can feel simultaneously challenged, enriched, and accepted. 🍅





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

Jerusalem  New York

[info@pardes.org](mailto:info@pardes.org)