

# THAVRUT

**COMMENT** | If the message of the Book of Job is that God's purpose is unknowable, even to one with perfect faith, for my generation the Shoah offered the proof-text. That it was, and is, possible in the face of this vast unknowability to retain one's faith, let alone discover it, ignites me with wonder and awe. Therefore it is with considerable reverence and admittedly unbounded curiosity that I approach individuals, such as those portrayed here, whose lives are testimony to the working of faith. This indeed is the thread that runs between a Jew in the Soviet Union whose new-found knowledge of Torah makes him/her willing to forfeit material well-being in exchange for spiritual reality, and the *ger tzedek* (convert to Judaism) whose apprehension of God leads him/her to embrace the faith and fate of the people of the Torah.

In PARDES REVISITED, Dr. Joseph Leibowitz, rabbi and teacher at Pardes, introduces us to the problem of theodicy (God's role in relation to the suffering of the just) in the Book of Job. PARDES PEOPLE is a testimony to four individuals who have chosen to embrace Judaism. The sensitivity, thoughtfulness and sincerity that underlay their decisions are apparent in the telling of each of their stories. Our feature "The Russians are Coming" is the story of Pardes' growing involvement with Soviet Jewry as evidenced in the adoption of a Moscow refusenik family and embracing of other refuseniks newly arrived in Israel. We hope the remarkable faith and persistence of these people are in evidence here as well as of the Pardes students who are working so diligently on their behalf.

Jane Kimchi



*As we were going to press, we learned that Pinchas Polonsky was finally given permission to emigrate! For many friends and family members, however, the gates still remain closed. The struggle continues on their behalf.*

*Left: Greeting the Kitrosskys at Ben Gurion Airport. l. to r., Jon Rosenblum, Richard Barron and Levi Kitrossky.*

*Below: Kitrosskys on route to hotel.*



## THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING

### Pardes' First Adopted Family Arrives

Levi Kitrossky sits at a table outside his room at Jerusalem's Tamir Hotel and pores over his first "Israel-published" map of Israel. The distinction is important, he says; every map he saw in the Soviet Union labelled Israel's borders only as "occupied territory."

But as of midnight May 7, with more than 30 Pardes students and faculty at Ben Gurion Airport to greet them, the Kitrossky family began calling Israel home.

Levi Kitrossky, 28, a chemist, formerly studied and taught Jewish texts to fellow

Moscovites. One of his close friends is Pinchas Polonsky, the refusenik whom Pardes adopted in January. In a telephone conversation just before Pesach, Polonsky asked Pardes to bring the Kitrosskys into the "adoption." That includes Levi, his wife Miriam and their three children, Leah, Elisheva and Yosef.

The Kitrosskys said, in a seminar at Pardes two weeks after their arrival, that when they first applied for emigration they were planning to go to the U.S. "Then I read *Al-Kuzari*," said Levi, "that prayers (for Zion) without going to Israel



are 'as the chatter of birds'. We decided to go to Israel."

Miriam Kitrossky said she's looking forward to the freedom of studying Jewish texts. "In Moscow, it was dangerous to even talk about *shuirim*." Miriam said that her Hebrew teacher Alexi Magarik is still serving a jail term for teaching, though the Soviet authorities invented drug charges to hold him.

After two weeks, Levi describes Jerusalem as "a beautiful city, very moving. I've been most impressed by all the children. There are so many, and well-dressed and free." The Jewish Agency is putting the Kitrosskys up in a hotel while they search for permanent housing, and Levi has begun looking for work.

According to Pardes social worker and volunteer project coordinator Tziona Melman, "Russian *olim* face serious absorption problems. Not only do they arrive without a *grush* in their pockets, but also there is no effective mechanism for helping them upon their arrival. We at Pardes are trying to fill this gap." Pardes students and faculty are helping the Kitrosskys find housing and jobs, *ulpanim* and schools. This means not only escorting them to myriad offices to complete the necessary paperwork, but also providing household goods, babysitting, advice and companionship. According to Tziona, "Bonei Pardes are actually in a better position than current students to help new *olim* with some of these tasks because they've been through the process themselves. Their support will be greatly appreciated taking newly arrived families on day trips and helping orient them to their surroundings." Anyone with children's clothing and books, household goods or time to contribute to the Kitrosskys and to the families that it is hoped will soon be following them, should please contact Tziona. •

## Jon Rosenblum

*Jon has a B.A. from Duke University in political science and French and has been a print journalist and an editor in state government in the U.S.*

My volunteer project with Soviet Jewry, the adoption of the Polonsky family, marks the first time I have ever been involved with the fight to free Soviet Jews. I did it for several reasons. One is I have always felt somewhat distanced from the individual Jews being held in the Soviet Union. This may have been due in part to the media presentation of news stories, and to my own "media mindset." When you think of Soviet Jewry as an issue rather than as the plight of individuals, you can't help but feel distanced. You lose track of the people. I thought "Soviet Jewry" and not "Pinchas Polonsky."



*Richard Barron (l.) and Jon Rosenblum briefing busload of Pardes students and teachers on way to airport.*

Secondly, two years ago, I spent some time with my grandmother listening to stories from her life in the Ukraine and compiling an oral history of the family. Some of her brothers and sisters didn't get out of Russia before the Revolution and World Wars and communication was lost. I guess somewhere in my mind, I really do feel as if I'm helping family members take the step into freedom they missed seventy years ago.

The first question was how would Pardes choose among the many thousands of Russian Jews who have applied for exit visas. I strongly felt we needed a tie that would engage students and faculty and that we should try to find a family connected with Jewish learning, perhaps in the same age range as Pardes students. We wanted someone who was involved in the daily struggle for freedom of worship and study in the Jewish world of the Soviet Union. That is, a community with questions similar to our own about Jewish identity, tradition and texts — but with none of the resources of Pardes.

So I went to the Soviet Jewry Information and Education Center in Jerusalem and sat down with one of their directors. Among those suggested was Pinchas Polonsky, who is investing all his energy into bringing Jewish texts to Soviet Jewry. He is 30, has twice applied for *aliya* and been rejected. He and his wife Natalia have five children. It sounded right.

There's also a serendipity factor in this whole process. As soon as I came back from the Center and told Richard Barron, a fellow student, about Polonsky, Richard said that this is the very person he had been helping recently from San Francisco as a board member of the Bay Area Council for Soviet Jews. This coincidence decided his involvement in the project and he's really been the lead workhorse. Then it turned out that three

Pardes teachers had met Polonsky when they were in the Soviet Union.

In adopting the Polonskys, I discovered an issue on which I could have an impact, and which, as it turns out, is also transforming me. To be involved with Soviet Jewry means taking a distant person and place and focusing your moral energy to bring them closer. To hear of their commitment amid oppression is truly inspiring. Levi Kitrossky (see story) is 28, the same as I, and he had been a *refusenik* since the age of 20. I can see that he had to make decisions that I have had the luxury to avoid. To be a *refusenik* seems to me to have been both a statement of commitment and an act of resistance. At the age of 20, I was celebrating the freedom of being in a liberal arts college and studying aesthetics, politics and religion without anyone forcing me to make lifelong decisions. To meet my Jewish counterparts from the Soviet Union and find them fluent in Hebrew and already well-versed in the texts drives home the kind of commitment to Judaism we should all be striving for.

## Richard Barron

*Richard has a B.A. in English from the University of Vermont and has been volunteering on behalf of Soviet Jewry for the past several years. He is a board member of San Francisco's Bay Area Council for Soviet Jews.*

I first became interested in Soviet Jewry because of the growing importance in my life of Jewish religious observance and of the study of Jewish sources. When I heard about Soviet Jews who are paying a severe price for their desire to engage in these activities, it hit home in a highly personal way.

I am very happy about the arrival in Israel of Levi and Miriam Kitrossky and their family and the fact that Pardes has

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### "...UPON THE RIGHTEOUS, UPON THE CONVERT AND UPON US"

by Levi Lauer

It is a pleasant task to discuss the place of the prospective or new convert (*ger tzedek*) at Pardes. For at this time when controversy over "Who is a Jew?" continues to fragment the Jewish community evoking sectarian bias and growing intolerance, Pardes fortunately remains free to address purely educational concerns. How does Pardes contribute to the creation of the convert's new theological and communal identity, and what contribution does the convert make to Pardes' *beit midrash*?

Encounter with the convert can be a humbling experience. Whatever difficulties a Jewish student encounters accepting responsibilities at variance with the standards and expectations of parents, the convert reminds him/her that there is an even greater distance to negotiate.

More than this, the convert is a powerful refutation of any claim for a biological, Jewish chauvinism. The Torah truly is the rightful possession of those who learn to heed its commandments and teach them to future generations, be they born to Jewish mothers or the converted sons and daughters of Avraham, every Jew's first father.

It would not be a surprise if the legitimacy of these children were questioned

by those who are calling into question, redefining and strengthening the grounds of their own Jewish identity. The insecurity that accompanies the making of new commitments can be masked by denigrating the even newer, perhaps more tenuous commitments of others, particularly the convert's. However, in ten years at Pardes, I have never encountered a single expression of such hostility. I see that as evidence not only of a profound, fundamental decency (*derech erez*) which pervades the *beit midrash*, but also of the emotional and intellectual maturity of students whose past and present selves live together in generally well-integrated harmony.

The convert derives much benefit from this. S/he is not encouraged to disavow the past, family, or even previous spiritual development. After all, there is surely much of value and strength in that development that brings one to embrace the God and People of Israel, that enables one to learn Torah with such determined dedication. So it is that the convert studying at Pardes is accepted as part of that learning community without hesitation or equivocation.

Presumably, these individuals are grateful for that acceptance. We are

grateful for their presence, for the quality of their learning, for the optimism engendered by their confirmation of our common faith and love of *Torat Yisrael* and *Am Yisrael*, and for enabling us to expand the limits of our responsibility and accountability.

In the convert we encounter one for whom we can assume previous years of preparation (including periods of preliminary decision-making and rethinking); a firm foundation of study (Pardes' ten to twelve hour daily regimen and more); exposure to a variety of Jewish communities; and unequivocal commitment to conversion as a goal in itself.

Perhaps, it is with careful purpose that the thirteenth of the *Amida's* nineteen benedictions links us most proximately to the convert. ("May Thy compassion, Lord our God, be aroused upon the righteous ...upon the convert and upon us.") May the day soon be at hand when that vision will determine the tone and substance of the process by which an individual converts and becomes one of our people. May Pardes continue to encourage such sensitivity, thus bringing us to merit the blessings of a God who joins our fate to that of the righteous. ■

### Anne (Chana), 1984-86

I was born in Ottawa, Canada into a Roman Catholic home that was religious, church-going and family-centered. I was the sixth of seven children. Our primary, and part of our secondary, education was provided by nuns and priests. The Christianity I grew up with, both in my home and in the French convent school I attended, was built primarily on faith. And throughout my life, I have always retained a fundamental belief in God. What was lacking, however, was an emphasis on learning. Even as a youngster, I began to rebel against a system in which innocence was valued above understanding.

The truth is that before ever leaving home, I had moved away from Catholicism, though I always remained strongly connected to my family. At some point I stopped going to church and to confession, two priest-centered activities in which I was never able to give true expression to my innermost yearnings.

It wasn't until I left the convent and went to public high school that I met people of different religions and back-



grounds. I had a lot of Jewish friends in high school. Throughout university, religion was not a relevant interest, but at home I continued to go to church so as not to offend my parents.

After university I moved to Toronto where I won a scholarship to the Toronto Dance Theater and began seriously learning dance. I then started to perform children's theater professionally and to tour with a dance company. Throughout this period, questions of religion and spirituality did not come up.

I moved to New York to study with the Meredith Monk Dance company, and it was in New York that I decided to visit a Jewish friend in Israel.

Coming to Israel reawakened my spiritual sense. Soon after my arrival, I even toyed with the idea of converting to Judaism, but I feared it would be at the risk of losing my identity. I also believed at that time that to be really Jewish one had to be born Jewish. Nevertheless I felt at home with the country, its history and its people.

After 2-1/2 years of living in Israel, I knew I wanted to remain. I was thinking a lot about my future, while working, teaching, and rehabilitating a torn Achilles tendon. I thought about how important my family was to me and began to feel I wanted a family of my own. I also knew I wanted religion to be part of that family. Then I met Arieh (Pardes '81-'83), an observant Jew and teacher of the tai chi class I was taking to rehabilitate my leg. We were attracted to each other at the outset.

Arieh was in a yeshiva. I began to ask him what he was learning. I started to feel a void within myself and knew I wanted to begin to explore the Bible. So



I started studying with a Pardes student who came to my house Shabbat mornings. Because I never saw Arieh on Shabbat, I felt excluded from the most important part of his life. Arieh, throughout this period, proceeded slowly, sensitively and honestly. It was not until many months after we first met, that I started seeing him on Shabbat.

I loved Shabbat, its very difference from the rest of the week. I also enjoyed the ritual of it. Perhaps coming from a theater background explains its special appeal to me. Catholicism too has its rituals, but they are all in the church, not in the home.

I wanted to study even more seriously and began learning privately with a Pardes teacher. It was wonderful and influenced me very positively. As a result, I decided to become a student at Pardes and also to investigate what would be involved in becoming Jewish.

That summer Arieh visited me in a dance camp where I was teaching, and I began to feel there were irreconcilable differences between the world of the yeshiva and the world I was in. For Arieh there seemed to be nothing Jewish about my dancing. For me, teaching young Hebrew-speaking Jews who had been born in Israel felt truly authentic. The tension became unbearable, and by the end of the summer I decided to break up with Arieh but to continue with plans to study at Pardes.

I loved Pardes. I struggled with the Hebrew which was at first very difficult for me. But in learning Torah I discovered the beauty in the language and how exciting it is to see the difference between an English translation and the original Hebrew.

Gradually I began to sort out what I wanted in my life. I knew I wanted a family and a Jewish home, so I decided to make an appointment for conversion with the *beit din*. It was also at that time that Arieh and I resumed our relationship and became strong as a couple.

What appeals to me very much about Judaism is that the home is the center of Jewish life—a holy place, a sanctuary. But I was also attracted to the sense of community binding the Jewish world together, in place of the centrality of one man. By the time I was ready to go before the *beit din*, the studying I had done was no longer just theoretical. After living in Israel for five years and being involved in the Jewish nation, I felt a sense of identification with the Jewish community. Furthermore, I had kashered two kitchens, kept kosher and observed Shabbat with friends for over two years, putting into practice what I was learning. I certainly felt committed and ready.

Then I had to begin dealing with my folks. We started calling and writing. I

remember telling them I felt as if my soul were being torn apart because I was so upset about hurting them. My correspondence began with my father for whom acceptance of my decision was much more difficult. My mother wrote me that everyone has his own path to follow and only God knows what that is. Her faith gave me strength, along with her concern for my happiness. With my father, on the other hand, I had to deal with his own internal conflict. It was soul wrenching to write to him and I would often cry as I wrote. Yet, eventually I received from him a letter in which he indicated that inasmuch as I had investigated what I was undertaking and had looked into it as deeply as possible, he could only accept and respect my decision. In making my decision and communicating sincerely with my parents, I ended up feeling even closer to them.

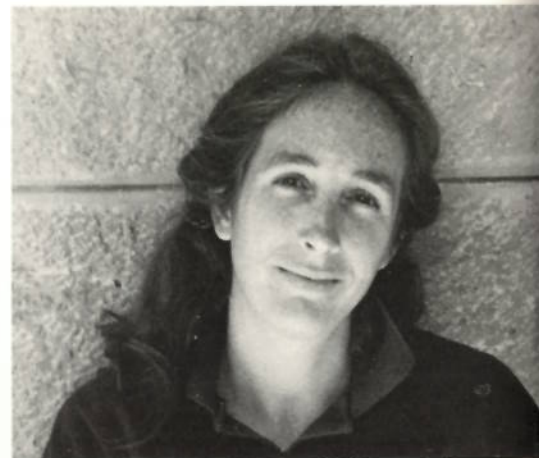
I remember clearly the *mikva*, the final stage in the process of becoming a Jew. Dramatically it was a perfect day, December 17 and the first of the rains of the year. I had to pick up the rabbis who would serve as the *beit din* and take them to the *mikva*. A friend brought fresh strawberries so that I could say a *shecheyanu* in the *mikva*. After the formal ceremony, my friends burst in and congratulated me. The rabbis waited in the waiting room while my friends and I ate strawberries. Then I went to Arieh's yeshiva. We were ecstatic. Later in the day I celebrated with my dance friends.

By taking on observance does one lose one's identity? It's a problem I never stop thinking about. Part of this is worry whether I am going to lose my non-religious Jewish friends, but of course a newly-observant Jew has these same concerns. I bring to my new home fragments of my past, of the old me. I also take on new commitments, not just for myself, but in my relationship to my husband and in the way we will bring up our family. ■

### Shoshana, 1986-87

As I near the end of my time at Pardes and two years in Israel, having finished my conversion and been accepted into a Ph.D. program in *midrash* at Jewish Theological Seminary, I draw a sigh of relief. Whatever the struggle, the hardships, the joys, for good or bad I am part of the Covenant. These are my people, and I cannot disassociate myself from them, nor they from me.

When I first arrived in Israel in July 1985, as a "visiting graduate student" on Hebrew University's One Year Program, I was a postulant for ordination for the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. I was taking a year off from Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massa-



chusetts to study Hebrew and to quench my thirst for learning more about Judaism, both from the classical texts and from day-to-day life in the Jewish State. My thirst was not quenched. Rather, it was as if someone had piled fuel onto a quiet flame that had been burning my whole life.

I think I became interested in Judaism when I was quite young. I dimly remember seeing a movie in a children's film festival about a Catholic boy and a Jewish girl going to each other's places of worship, but I don't think I was exposed to anything particularly Jewish until I saw "Fiddler on the Roof," when I was about nine or ten. I do remember asking my mother to explain the difference between Jews and Christians. She told me Jews believe in the same God we do but they don't believe in Jesus. I said to myself, "See, that's just like me."

When I was quite young, before I knew what "religion" was, I had had a strong sense of the presence of God. I think I took it for granted, like the air or the sunshine. I might attribute this to the sure and ever-present love of my parents, but none of my three brothers gravitated toward the theological as I did. One is a photographer, one a jazz musician, and the youngest a painter. I joke that someone had to chair the "theology" department in the family, while they took care of the "fine arts." My father was an engineer who loved sailing and flying. He died in a glider crash three years ago. I guess you could say he was a pagan who worshipped wind and water. It was my mother who took us all to church when we were little, and insisted that I get confirmed at age 12, even though by that age I had many questions and objections to Christian belief and teaching.

I remember being in junior choir at church, sitting in stalls next to the altar. Over the white marble altar were marble slabs engraved with gold letters spelling out the Ten Commandments in English. I would read them when I was bored. I



couldn't understand why the most prominent object in the church stated "no other god before me," and yet there we were worshipping Jesus. It also troubled me that there was supposed to be a Sabbath day committed to God when one did not work, but we didn't seem to do that. Weren't Christians supposed to keep the Old Testament? It bothered me living with all these contradictions. I went on with my confirmation but Jesus and the Holy Spirit were never that real to me.

I also had objections to many of the Church's claims: that Jesus is God or the son of God, or that salvation can come only through Christian belief. However, I was attracted to the ritual and liturgy of the Episcopal Church, and kept going to church even after my brothers had stopped. By the time I was 16, I was the one dragging my mother to church.

At the same age I entered Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. There I discovered a whole new world of literature, philosophy, political thought and action. It was there I made my first Jewish friends, began reading Heschel, Rosenzweig, Buber, Shestov, Wiesel, and I.B. Singer, began to struggle with the blood-ridden history of Christianity in relation to Judaism, and studied Yiddish with Yechiel Lander, the Hillel rabbi. I majored in English literature, but when I graduated in 1980 I had a thought of someday pursuing further study in Jewish-Christian relations.

For three years after college I worked with Laotian refugees and part-time at a shelter for the homeless in Boston. I finally decided the way to be more effective in the work I was doing was to be religious by profession. If a priest talks to someone about God it's acceptable, but not when a social worker does. That's how I saw myself, as a religious social activist. I appreciated the importance the Episcopal Church placed on social activism and decided to apply for acceptance to the postulancy for the Episcopal priesthood, and to enter seminary.

Ironically it was at Episcopal Divinity School that I began to delve again into things Jewish. I took my first Hebrew course at nearby Harvard Divinity School, and began scrounging around for English translations of *midrash* and Jewish commentaries on the Bible to supplement "Old Testament 101." By the second semester of my first year at seminary, I was going to Friday-night services at local synagogues and becoming involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue. I took a course in Jewish liturgy with Jakob Petuchowski when he was at Harvard for one semester, and became very close to him and his wife. I also became friends with a young Reform rabbi who was doing a doctorate in New

Testament at Boston University, and asked him to tutor me during the summer. In my second year at seminary I read *Midrash Tanhuma* with John Townsend, the Hebrew teacher at my school, an Episcopal priest who is now publishing the first English translation of *Tanhuma*.

I was beginning to have my doubts about whether I was really suited to the priesthood. I was becoming more keyed into Judaism and repelled by the anti-Semitism that is inextricable from the New Testament. I found I couldn't say prayers anymore. The eucharist seemed like idolatry to me. I knew I had to choose between getting out of this business or living on a lonely, prophetic cutting edge with ulcers and *tzoris*. It was then I decided to take a year off to go to Israel. Dr. Townsend was an "American Friend" of Hebrew University; he recommended its ulpan and One Year Program to me.

I signed up to live in a *shomer Shabbat* and kosher dorm. I wanted to learn as much as I could by being with observant Jews and living with an Orthodox roommate. And so it was here in Israel, in the midst of Jews, where all my friends were Jews, that I started to hear the question more clearly, "Why not?" Having grown increasingly uncomfortable with Christianity's emphasis on the centrality of Jesus, I realized that the theology of Judaism and I had always been very compatible. One Shabbat morning, after having been in Israel for three months, I said to myself that I can't live on the outside for the rest of my life. I want to be on the inside. I wrote to my bishop and told him I had decided to convert to Judaism. Knowing me, he was not surprised, and wrote back, giving me his blessing and saying that he truly thought I had found God's will for my life.

I had also decided I wanted to study for a Ph.D. in *midrash*, and eventually to teach on a university level. But I knew I had nowhere near enough background in Hebrew and rabbinic texts. I was also falling in love with Israel, so the question of what kind of conversion I would choose to undergo was foremost in my mind. Through one of my teachers at Hebrew University, Jonathan Cohen, I learned about Pardes. I went to talk to Director Levi Lauer who impressed upon me the necessity of finding a Rav and beginning my conversion process officially. I needed to go back to Boston for the summer to finish up my M.A. in Bible (at Episcopal Divinity School), so I decided to "find a Rav" in the United States. Through good connections I found Rabbi Walter Wurzbarger in Lawrence, New York. While originally I had sought out an Orthodox Rav primarily because of concern for my status

in the event that I might make *aliya*, I soon realized, however, that I could not just go through the motions in order to please an Orthodox *beit din*. I had to be sincere and serious. So I began to wrestle with *halacha*.

At the same time, however, I had to be sincere with myself about the questions and problems I had with Orthodox belief. Yet what I found is that it is precisely within the disciplined framework of Jewish observance that I have the most freedom to give my doubts and questions full voice. I don't have perfect faith in God every morning when I wake up. But I *daven* anyway, no matter what rebellious thoughts might be roaming around my head during prayer. I don't know if I believe in a personal God who sees our individual deeds, but my way of believing, especially when I cannot make myself believe with the intellect, is simply to do the deeds. I also have a problem being a woman within this halachic framework. As is apparent, I still have a lifetime of wrestling with angels to do. But the *beit din* in New York considered me committed enough this past January, to see me to the *mikva* and hear me say the *Sh'ma* and the *bracha on tevila* (immersion). And now I am a Jew. ■

## Yochanan, 1984-86

I started out as an agnostic, perhaps even an atheist. When I was 14, I remember telling my mother I didn't believe in God and how that saddened her. When I was in 10th grade I had an argument with a Jewish friend and proved God didn't exist. He cried. My perception of the world at that time was conditioned by my interest in science and by a desire to explain everything rationally.

I learned years later that there had always been tension between my grandfather and my mother over her children's religious education. My mother is a believer, but not a church goer, and we





didn't have a religious upbringing. At my grandfather's insistence my sister and I were taken to Sunday School, but we disliked it and complained bitterly. After a few months my mother took us out. I don't remember my parents going to church except when my grandfather was visiting. He is one of the few religious Christians I knew, and Christian practice is still important to him.

Interestingly, my high school and college years were spent in Jewish neighborhoods, so I always had a few Jewish, but secular, friends. Religious sensitivity developed only after I was in college.

At the University of Maryland, among my best friends were Jews and born-again Christians. Then in my sophomore year I met a girl, and began falling in love. It was during this period that I had what I call a revelation. One night, I remember dwelling on the idea of love between people, when suddenly I realized God must exist. This awareness came to me with considerable intensity and an overwhelming sense of emotional certainty. I spent the next two years trying to ascertain what God wants of us and what His relationship is to the world. I hoped to find people who felt the way I did. I believed God had created everything and I had a feeling that the world was moving toward an ideal which could only be realized by a partnership between God and man. I discussed this with a Christian friend. When I described what I believed, he said it sounded Jewish and suggested I talk to a rabbi. So I went to the Hillel rabbi and described my feelings and basic beliefs. I said, "I think I'm one of your boys," and told him I wanted to know more about Judaism. He handed me a reading list containing about 50 titles and said if I was still interested I should get in touch. I read every one and was amazed that this Jewish world existed. We agreed to begin conversion and I sat in on the rabbi's Introduction to Judaism class and began learning to read Hebrew.

During my senior year I celebrated Hannukah. It was winter break and I was living at the greenhouses on campus (my major was horticulture). I remember lighting the candles every night and how moved I was by it. When I graduated from college, the rabbi advised me to find myself a rabbi. I found Rabbi Jacob Agus and his Congregation Beth El of Baltimore, and he agreed to take over my conversion. Through Rabbi Agus and this congregation of elderly Jews, I began to experience the first symptoms of peoplehood and to feel an historical connection to the Jewish people.

One day an old man in the congregation asked me if I had ever thought about Israel. Until then I had thought it was a concept in the prayerbook. I wanted to investigate and went that week

to the *aliya* office. And from then on I began to read everything I could find about Israel. Finally I went back to the old man and told him I had decided to return home.

I felt as a Jew, Israel was my homeland and it made all the sense in the world for me to come here. Making *aliya* was 99% faith. I had no idea what I would be encountering. I was prepared to face a barren desert. I returned to the *aliya* office and soon I was rushing to get my passport and to complete the final stages of conversion.

The rabbi, the cantor and the principal of the Hebrew School served as the *beit din*. The State of Israel accepted my papers and accepted me under the Law of Return. In Israel I became an active member of *Am Yisrael*. I had gained a people, a country and a nation in the process of conversion. I knew I wanted to join an agricultural community, putting my horticulture background to use and helping to feed the very people I had become a part of. I began looking for a religious but not Orthodox kibbutz on which to settle and thus be able to grow religiously at my own pace. I soon joined Kibbutz Yahel (the first Reform kibbutz) and later became a member.

I had expected that acceptance to *Klal Yisrael* would not be easy, yet I never encountered any resistance. Most Jews were delighted. The first time my Judaism was ever questioned was by the rabbinite at the time of my marriage on the kibbutz, five years after my conversion.

The rabbinite, which controls marriage, divorce and conversion, refused to authorize our marriage because of my Conservative conversion. However we needed an official registration of marriage so that my wife could be released as a married woman from the army. Although as part of my conversion I had completed the Orthodox requirements of *hatafat dam brit* (symbolic circumcision), *mikva* and acceptance of the yoke of *mitzvot* in the presence of witnesses, and had prepared myself spiritually by studying for about a year, in the eyes of the rabbinite my halachic status as a Jew remained undefined. I knew I was a Jew with the rights of a Jew in the State of the Jews, and I was treated as a Jew by everyone else. Not until years later, however, in the middle of my second year at Pardes, did it become possible to undergo a token conversion acceptable to the rabbinite.

When I first became a Jew I viewed observance as a goal for the future. I wanted to absorb things slowly and not have them scotch-taped onto me. My early kibbutz experience provided that opportunity. The problem, however, was eventually I began to diverge religiously from the kibbutz. It was becoming more secular and I more religious. So, after

some seven years on kibbutz, including 1-1/2 in the army, I painfully disengaged myself from Yahel and came to Jerusalem to Pardes. I had always wanted to do yeshiva study and this was an excellent opportunity.

At Pardes I moved from the world of Jewish Publication Society how-to books which I had devoured at Yahel to the world of the sources. I found at Pardes examples in the teachers of how a Jew should be. I saw problems being tackled and sympathy towards women's issues. The text was allowed to do the teaching so that students could reach their own conclusions. I'm pretty halachic now, though often lenient in my approach. I can't see a person being a halachic Jew if he's not also a *ben adam* (good person). I'm a strong believer in *Am Yisrael Ahad* and believe *halacha* necessarily makes us a separate and special people, but when it separates us into two warring camps of Jew against Jew, we all lose.

What I like best about Judaism are the cycles that bring with them continual renewal, sustaining us in the present. I like people getting together and routines being broken, reminding us that we are required to make room for joy in our lives. I have no problems with the Jewish religion, but with people who apply *halacha* as though God were the God of resounding judgment, who act as if *halacha* requires the giving up of one's own judgment. I believe there is a partnership between God and the Jewish people and that we have to work together to make this world a better place. When *halacha* is separate from the world, serious problems develop. It all comes together for me when I see a large, close halachic family, and all the children *benei adam*. I know they must be doing something right. ■

## Frances (Avital) 1985-86

By the time I graduated from high school in Puerto Rico, I knew I didn't want to remain a Catholic. But it was a very private feeling. I was having difficulty believing in Jesus as God, in the Trinity or in Immaculate Conception. I also was uncomfortable with the notion that anyone who's anyone in Catholicism is celibate. Because I never spoke to anyone about it, I began experiencing increasing tension. Nevertheless, I never questioned belief in God. I remain a strong believer in God and in Torah from Sinai. I believe this is God's law, and for a long time now I have wanted to be part of it.

I recall an incident when I was ten years old. I was reading the Ten Commandments in Spanish. I read that you have to keep the Sabbath, which seemed





obvious to me to be Saturday from the Spanish word *sabado*. I said to the nun who was teaching, "We're doing it all wrong," and she said, "Well, we do it on Sunday." I felt thoroughly confused. How could we arbitrarily choose to do other than what God commanded. Later in my Catholic upbringing I received more sophisticated answers, but none seemed appropriate to me.

I would call this the first stage in the process of my becoming a Jew. It was a period characterized by the growing feeling that it didn't make sense to believe in something I had difficulty comprehending. You can't imagine how difficult it is to be aware that you are running counter to the religion of your family, your upbringing and your culture. It rocks the foundation of your system of values and results in considerable discontent.

The second stage began when I made a conscious decision to do something about it. This occurred when I left home and entered college at Yale. There my spiritual unrest found expression in experimentation and in continually carrying on discussions with people of different faiths. I would go occasionally to the Catholic Church, but also tried Christian Science and even Black Gospel. The strange thing is that my roommate at that time was Jewish, but because she was not observant, I didn't have an opportunity to see Judaism being practised, and so it never occurred to me to try to find out about Judaism. However, when I was a sophomore, I made acquaintance with an observant Jew. She was the girl who lived across from me. One Shabbat afternoon in her room she said suddenly, "I have to make *havdala*." She explained it to me in a beautiful way, as saying goodbye to the Shabbat Queen, and she had me hold the candle. I was intrigued and thought the ceremony very moving. I was also very impressed with someone who was so strong, so Jewish and so deeply religious. I didn't know many other people with a faith in God to equal hers. I asked

her to teach me about Judaism, and that's how it all started.

I was fortunate in that I met people welcoming me from the very beginning. I think it must be difficult for individuals who are not Jewish and want to explore Judaism to do it without supportive friends and without ties to someone who can patiently present to them all that Judaism means in a compassionate and understanding way. Through my friends I became involved in Jewish life, went to Seders and began observing Shabbat and attending synagogue.

Shortly after I began to be involved in Jewish life, I knew there was something special here. I also knew this was the way I would choose. Since childhood I had accepted the biblical account of the Torah having been given by God to the Jews. Now, when I thought about it, I knew that for me becoming Jewish was the logical direction I should take if I wanted to put myself more directly in touch with divine revelation.

Invited by a friend, I came to Israel for a short visit in April 1985. I then realized how much better it would be to be able to study in Israel prior to my conversion, rather than in the U.S. In Jerusalem, immersed in a Jewish society, I would learn not only from my studies but from exposure to the vibrant Jewish life around me.

My parents were not happy with my decision. They regarded Israel as a war zone and were worried about my safety. Why take off a whole year to study in Israel? Wouldn't it be better to learn about Judaism in the States while at the same time pursuing my career? Did this full-time devotion to study indicate a desire on my part to become a rabbi? I explained that for me it was crucial to study; before converting I had to know I was making an informed decision. Two months later I entered Pardes.

My parents knew, despite missing me, how happy and fulfilled I was with my studies and with my life in Israel. They were very supportive. I believe this comes from their commitment to the value of religion and makes them tolerant of choosing a religious life, even if not their own. My mother thinks Judaism is too much work. She feels you don't have to be kosher to believe in God. Both my parents find it difficult to understand the importance of keeping the law. Catholicism is a religion of faith, so why complicate one's life. "The Old Testament is *so old*, Frances, how can you live it?"

For me, keeping of *mitzvot* adds a certain depth which I felt lacking in Catholicism. Judaism makes you aware of your relationship to God in everything you do from the time you wake up until you go to bed. The energy invested in pursuing and enriching a Jewish life provides me

with more intellectual and spiritual fulfillment than I could hope for in Catholicism. However, I did not always feel this way. Mine was not an easy progress, but a very difficult and slow uphill climb. Many laws seemed strange and difficult to understand. For example, the laws of family purity seemed to me discriminatory with regard to women, but through a process of learning about them I've begun to understand the concepts behind them. More and more I see a value in *mitzvot* which at first I couldn't understand.

The third and final stage for me was the decision to take the step of formally embracing my new religion, of calling the *beit din* and saying "I'm ready." My first Shabbat as a Jew was very special, lighting candles and saying "...has commanded us..." I felt really included. Before this, I had always felt a little like an outsider. But now I know that *mitzvot* are a responsibility I share with the community of Israel. ■

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## THE COMPANY WE KEEP

■ JERRY GOODMAN, owner and managing director of Alutherm on the outskirts of Jerusalem, has been providing Keren Pardes with the benefit of his business acumen for a number of years. As chairman of the Board of Directors of Keren Pardes, his sound practical advice has been of tremendous value to Pardes, especially in the area of financial organization. Originally from Springfield, Massachusetts, Jerry served in South America in the Peace Corps where he met his wife, Maggie. After making *aliya*, he founded several successful business ventures before establishing Alutherm. At Alutherm he developed a new system for reprocessing aluminum waste into aluminum powder for use in industry. Jerry, Maggie, and their five children live in Jerusalem.

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continued from p. 2

taken them under its wing. I do feel, however that we must not be lulled into a false sense of security by the seeming improvement in emigration from the Soviet Union. The gates could close permanently at any time, and things are still extremely uncertain and dangerous for the majority of the 400,000 Russian Jews who have expressed the desire to emigrate as well as for those who wish to live fully as Jews within the Soviet Union. Very likely this number would be even greater were there no intimidation or loss of freedom. Once a Jew formally applies for a visa, he is commonly forced to resign from his profession or educational institution and is reduced to a poverty-level job. He becomes socially ostracized, and is subjected to constant surveillance, intimidating apartment searches, threats, interrogation by the KGB, and, at times, to physical abuse.

Soviet Jews are treated as second class citizens — the objects of humiliating propaganda and discrimination. There is a general scarcity of both Jewish materials and opportunities for Jewish education or observance. Involvement in Jewish activities and the teaching of Hebrew results in arrests and in harsh prison and labor camp sentences. Frequently visas are given to only some members of the same family, with the result that families become painfully separated for many years.

There are two ways we can make a difference. One is by putting pressure directly on the Soviet government, letting them know that human rights violations will not be tolerated. This can be effected through public protests such as the vigil Pardes mounted last year, letters to Soviet officials, pleas to the governments of Israel and the United States to link human rights with trade and economic negotiations, and by letters, petitions, phone calls, and pleas on behalf of specific individuals.

A second way is by creating direct contact with Soviet Jews, which provides moral support and lets them know they're not forgotten. This can be done by sending material aid, maintaining contact by letters, telegrams and phone calls, and by visiting them. The contact a Soviet Jewish family receives from the West can be crucial in enabling them to get visas and in making them less susceptible to harassment by authorities.

Those of us blessed with freedom — and especially the freedom to study and learn Jewish texts, such as here at Pardes — carry with us an obligation to speak out on behalf of those who don't have these rights. I feel that Pardes is a very special and caring group of people. Our efforts on behalf of our adopted Polonsky family and of others could be the deciding factor in getting them out. •

## THE PARDES CONNECTION

news of classmates and staff...

**Lisa Cooper** '86-'87, will be entering Brandeis University this fall. An Israeli citizen, she completed her army service before attending Pardes.

**Steven Fine** '80-'81, a graduate of the University of Southern California (USC) Museum Studies Program, recently curated an exhibit at USC of over 2,000 Syro-Palestinian artifacts.

**Robin Lowitz** '82-'83, is entering medical school this fall at Case Western Reserve University.

**Elaine (Ross) Rose** '75-'76, has completed her Ph.D. in sociology. She is living in Highland Park, New Jersey.

**Jeffrey (Tzvi) Stern** '83-'84, '85-'86, is entering Columbia Law School in the fall.

...and their weddings...

**Karen Koosis** '84-'85, to Jerry Benjamin. They are living in Boston.

**Arlene Ruby** '86-'87 and **Mickey Harel** '86-'87. They are living in Jerusalem.

**Rona Shapiro** '81-'82, '84-'85 to Judah Mandelbaum. They are living in New York City where Rona is studying for the rabbinat at Jewish Theological Seminary.

**Michael Stein** '83-'85, to Rachel Tovah Simes. He is serving in the Israel Defense Force. They are living in Jerusalem.

**Stuart Zusman** '86-'87, to Chaya ben Chanan. They are living in the Jerusalem area where Stuart is continuing his work as a farrier (shoeing horses).

...and their babies...

**Jeffrey Allon** '79-'80 and **Shulamit (Shelly) Rifkin** '81-'82 are the parents of a son, Ariel Natan Chaim. They are living in Jerusalem.

### PARDES HOSTS CCJS

Offering a unique opportunity to experience Jerusalem through text, archeology and daily life, Pardes was host this spring to The Jerusalem Adult Institute of the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies (CCJS). The ten-day program, consisting of morning seminars, afternoon tours and evening cultural events, was organized and administered by Pardes which provided faculty, logistical assistance and Shabbat hospitality to 16 adults and three CCJS faculty members who accompanied them.

### NEW FACULTY

Pardes will have two new faculty members this coming year. Dr. Daniel Sinclair, formerly Associate Research Member of the Centre for Criminology and the Social and Philosophical Study of Law, Edinburgh University and leader of the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation,

**Linda Cherkas** '74-'75 and **Chaim Dworkin** '73-'74 are the parents of a daughter, Elisheva Lila. They are living in Philadelphia. **Ncoom Gilbar** '80-'82 and **Chaya Kaplan** '81-'82 are the parents of a son, Yachdav Neshet. They are living in Jerusalem.

**Chaim Goldman** '79-'80 and wife Netta are the parents of a son, Elad. They are living in Jerusalem.

**Julie Shubot Haimon** '79-'83 and husband Zvika are the parents of a son, Ariel. They are living near Tel Aviv.

**Bracha Stein Heskel** '80-'81 and husband Baruch are the parents of a son, Tzvi Yair. They are living in Shlomi, a new development town.

**Dan Kahn** '81-'82 and wife Joan are the parents of a son, Yair Yosef. They are living in Beersheva.

**Levi Lauer**, Pardes Director, and wife Chaya are the parents of a daughter, Anya Natalya.

**Tina Nachmani** '85-'86 and husband Gabi are the parents of a daughter, Michal Ashira. They are living in Safed where they work with Livnot U le-Hibanot.

**Richard Schuldenfrei** '82-'83 and **Helen Plotkin** '82-'83 are the parents of a daughter, Sara Ann. They are living in Media, Pennsylvania.

**Meir Schweiger**, Pardes faculty, and wife Malka are the parents of a daughter, Ayala Ruth.

**Chana Forse Shloush** '73-'74 and husband Netanel are the parents of two sons, Aron Meir and Levi Yitzchak. They are living in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

**Reuven Spero** '82-'83, '84-'85 and **Tami Waysman** '81-'82, '84-'85 are the parents of a son, Shmuel Yoreh. They are living in Louisville, Kentucky where they are teaching in a Hebrew Day School.

**Sam Wineburg** '80-'81 and wife Susan Monas are the parents of a daughter, Shoshana. They are living in Palo Alto, California, where Sam is completing his Ph.D. in educational psychology.

will be teaching Halacha and the Philosophy of Halacha. Dr. Steven Copland will be teaching Midrash. He was formerly with the Melton Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora at Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

### PARDES VIDEO

A new 12-minute video portraying Pardes' approach to Jewish education and offering viewers a glimpse of life at Pardes is now available for use in both recruitment and fund-raising. Anyone interested in using the video should contact Pardes.

### STUDENTS PLEDGE

In an effort to encourage ongoing alumni involvement with Pardes, students this year decided both to make a financial pledge and to volunteer to help with recruitment upon returning to their homes. Pledged was \$1,300 a year for the next seven years.