



The Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies ■ November 2017 / Heshvan 5778

HAVRUTA

Josh Goldstein (Summer 2017)

"This summer at Pardes was my first step on a lifelong journey of exploring and discovering through Jewish texts and wisdom."

**War &
Peace:**

The Challenges
of Sovereignty

Meet the
President

Interview with Rabbi Leon A. Morris

**Learning
Together:**

**Pardes and Hillel's
Ongoing Partnership**

Behind the Scenes

Interview with Rabbi Leon A. Morris,
President of Pardes

Rabbi Leon A. Morris, the new President of Pardes, made aliyah to Jerusalem in June 2014 with his wife, Dasee Berkowitz, and their three children – Tamir, age nine, Yael, age six and Shalva, age four. A leader in the field of adult Jewish study, Leon was the founding director of the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning (now the Streicker Center) in Manhattan. He served as the rabbi of Temple Adas Israel in Sag Harbor, NY. After his aliyah, Leon served on the faculty of the Shalom Hartman Institute and Hebrew Union College.

You've had a lot of experience in many areas of Jewish learning. How have these previous roles prepared you for your new position at Pardes?

I've spent most of the past 20 years working in the field of adult Jewish study. Even the four years I spent as a full-time synagogue

rabbi were largely focused around a vision of Jewish life that would help contemporary Jews be more conversant with the classic texts of Judaism. Every professional role I have held was grounded in the vision of an American Jewish community that places *Talmud Torah* at the center, regardless of observance or denominational affiliation. Pardes is the "gold standard" in terms of rigorous and relevant text study in an environment that celebrates diversity.

How did your personal Pardes experience change or influence you?

Pardes is undoubtedly one of my spiritual and intellectual homes. I initially encountered Pardes during my first year of rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College in 1991. That year, I enrolled in an evening course that applied psychoanalytic ideas to the book of Genesis. I returned for two summer sessions and then for a full year in 1995-96. This is where I first experienced the powerful pull of the

beit midrash (study hall) and where I discovered how energizing it is to learn in *havruta* (paired learning). At Pardes, I was constantly confronted by how much more I needed to learn. Pardes was where I finally came to understand the meaning of *Talmud Torah lishmah* (learning Torah for its own sake).

What are your vision and goals for Pardes?

Pardes's vision must expand beyond Pardes as an institution. We seek something even bigger than Pardes's growth. We are committed to an overall vision of Jewish life with the *beit midrash* at the center. Pardes is a means to that end. There is something particularly urgent, something with enormous currency about the values of the *beit midrash* we hold up: values such as *mahlokot l'shem shamayim* (conflicts for the sake of heaven) and creating community from diversity.

As we begin to make progress on enlarging and refining our vision, we will begin to focus on three large areas that we are committed to rethinking and to developing greater

Pardes was where I finally came to understand the meaning of Talmud Torah lishmah



Leon Morris sees enormous currency in the values of the *beit midrash* such as *mahlokot l'shem shamayim* (conflicts for the sake of heaven) and creating community from diversity.



clarity: redefining the way we think about our alumni, developing new ways to engage and recruit potential students and thinking strategically about the scope and character of our expanding work in North America.

You grew up in the Reform movement and maintain a strong connection to it. However, you have written much about the importance of tradition, the centrality of classic Jewish texts and “the persuasive possibilities of *halakha*.” Would you describe yourself as a hybrid Jew?

I’ve always felt most at home in environments like Pardes that have no formal denominational affiliation, and where our differences in practice and outlook are a source of nourishment for shaping our own Jewish lives.

I think Jewish life is strengthened by the variety of diverse expressions that have emerged to address the challenges that modernity has presented. We want every expression

of Jewish commitment to be “thick” and serious and all-encompassing. We also want to be sure that we create the kinds of communities in which we can, at least sometimes, figure out ways to “do Jewish” together. Occasionally, the value of coming together may supersede the very real and principled differences that divide us. We also want to learn from each other and be intellectually and spiritually challenged. We want to grow in our Judaism.

More personally, given how thoroughly immersed you were in American Jewish life, why did you decide to make aliyah?

When I was in first or second grade, growing up in one of the only Jewish families in Connellsville, PA, I would pore over photos of Israel in Volume Six of our *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I would construct Western Walls out of Play-Doh and dream of what life must be like in a Jewish country. Now, more than 40 years later, I’m generating dozens of such photos on

a weekly basis, mostly featuring my wife and our three children, for family and friends back home via Photo Stream and Facebook.

I love American Jewish life, and am deeply invested in a strong Jewish life there. However, my wife and I both felt strongly that Israel is the most important project of the Jewish people in our time.

In this chapter of our lives, we wanted to contribute to that project and to have our children experience a Jewish life that is all-encompassing and organic; one in which Judaism is lived in the public square, where Shabbat is the national day of rest and where “Jewish holidays” are simply “holidays.” We wanted our children to dream in Hebrew (which they do). Above all, we wanted to be experimenting inside this laboratory of Jewish life that tries to take our most ancient ideas and ideals and create with them a national reality on the ground.

Program Updates



Community Education

Our Community Education program is building on its extraordinary success of last year. For 5778, our tour program and many classes are celebrating and studying 70 years of the State of Israel, including sessions on Zionist thinkers, Israeli poetry and *halakhic* challenges of statehood. Among our new offerings are workshops in creative writing and scribe arts. Join us for a class when you are visiting Jerusalem.

Popular CE teacher Rabbi Reuven Grodner has retired from Pardes and moved on to other pursuits. We wish him much success, and he is already sorely missed.



PCJE Pardes Center for Jewish Educators

Last year's graduates of the *Pardes Day School Educators Program – Two-Year Master of Jewish Education* are teaching in schools across the U.S., including Denver Jewish Day School; Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School, St. Louis; Jewish Community Day School of Rhode Island, Providence; Solomon Schechter Day School of Manhattan and Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston.

Our 2016-17 *Pardes Day School Educators Program – One-Year Certificate in Jewish Studies* Fellow is serving as the director of Jewish Studies at Frankel Jewish Academy in West Bloomfield, MI.

Graduates of the *Pardes Experiential Educators Program – One-Year Certificate in Jewish Studies* are serving across the experiential Jewish spectrum as Programme Director of "Lead," the UK Jewish Community's leadership organization; as Director of Neshama, a Jewish Spirituality and Meditation Project and as a Machar Fellow at Gann Academy of Boston. Others are continuing their studies in Masters or Rabbinical programs.



PCJCR Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution

Over 200 synagogues, 80 Jewish day schools and Hebrew schools and 50 campus Hillels took part in the 9Adar Project: Jewish Week of Constructive Conflict as part of their efforts to strengthen their culture of healthy and sacred disagreement.

The Pardes Rodef Shalom Communities Program opened a text- and practice-based program in partnership with the Union for Reform Judaism called "Creating a Culture of Constructive Conflict."

The Pardes Rodef Shalom Schools Program, in partnership with the PCJE, expanded to 15 Jewish day schools. Many used Pardes's *mahloket l'shem shamayim* "lens" to help foster healthier conversations during the turbulent times over the past year.

In Israel, there were over 120 events in 30 cities as part of Dibur Hadash: Israeli Week of Constructive Conflict (the 9AdarProject's sister project in Israel) in partnership with Mosaica: the Center for Conflict Resolution through Agreement.



Tailored Group Experiences

Over the past several months, we welcomed a wide variety of visiting groups that spent anywhere from two hours to 12 weeks getting a taste of Pardes. The visits were all tailored towards the specific interests of each group. As part of a new initiative of Birthright Israel, Pardes ran a Birthright Israel Plus program on the topic of “Intimacy, Relationships & Gender in Judaism” as an extension option for Birthright participants. We also hosted a number of Birthright Israel groups from college campuses and niche programs. Among the visiting synagogue congregations was Congregation Tiferet Israel from Lincoln, NE. We also welcomed board members, students and faculty from the Academy for Jewish Religion in California, who spent a morning during their visit at Pardes, while the Hineni Australian Gap Year Program learned at Pardes once a week for the entire Spring Semester.

Pardes Executive Learning Seminar

This year, we celebrated the 20th Anniversary of the Pardes Executive Learning Seminar (PELS). Forty learners gathered for an in-depth study of Ezra and Nechemia, and the feedback was outstanding.

“The quality of the program, materials, teaching and teachers was absolutely extraordinary! This seminar was a joy to experience,” said Joe Shafran.

More than half of the participants had attended at least one other PELS, with a number having attended over seven seminars.

We look forward to welcoming learners to our upcoming PELS, which will take place from December 24-27.



Summer Program

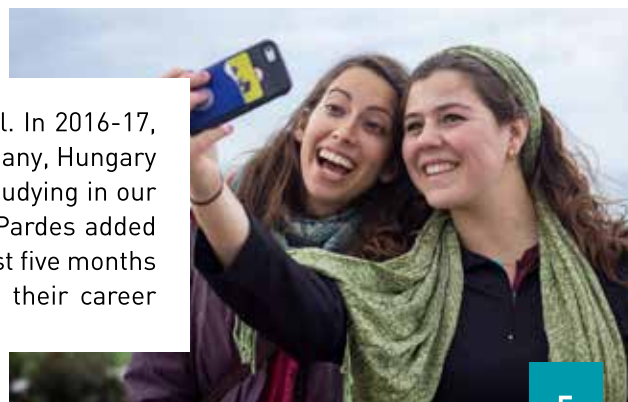
This summer, Pardes buzzed with activity as over 150 students — including a cohort of 20 Hillel professionals — attended our July and August Summer Programs. Class subjects included Talmud, Bible, Jewish philosophy, *Hassidut* and Gender.

Outside of the *beit midrash*, students toured the Old City, hiked and barbecued in the Jerusalem forest, shared Shabbat meals together, heard from influential guest speakers and took part in an uplifting and emotional *tisch*.

Alongside the Summer Program were two programs run by the Pardes Day School Educators Program (PEP). A delegation of day school teachers had special mentoring sessions to hone and enrich their pedagogic skills and classroom content. In addition, the Summer Curriculum Workshop allowed PEP graduates to reflect on their teaching and provided them with time to prepare for the upcoming academic year.

Year Program

This was the year the Pardes Year Program went totally global. In 2016-17, we had students from Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Israel, Switzerland, UK, Ukraine, USA and Zimbabwe studying in our *beit midrash*. For those who want to combine work with learning, Pardes added the *Learn + Intern* program to the mix, with students spending almost five months immersed in study combined with a nine-week internship to give their career goals an extra boost.





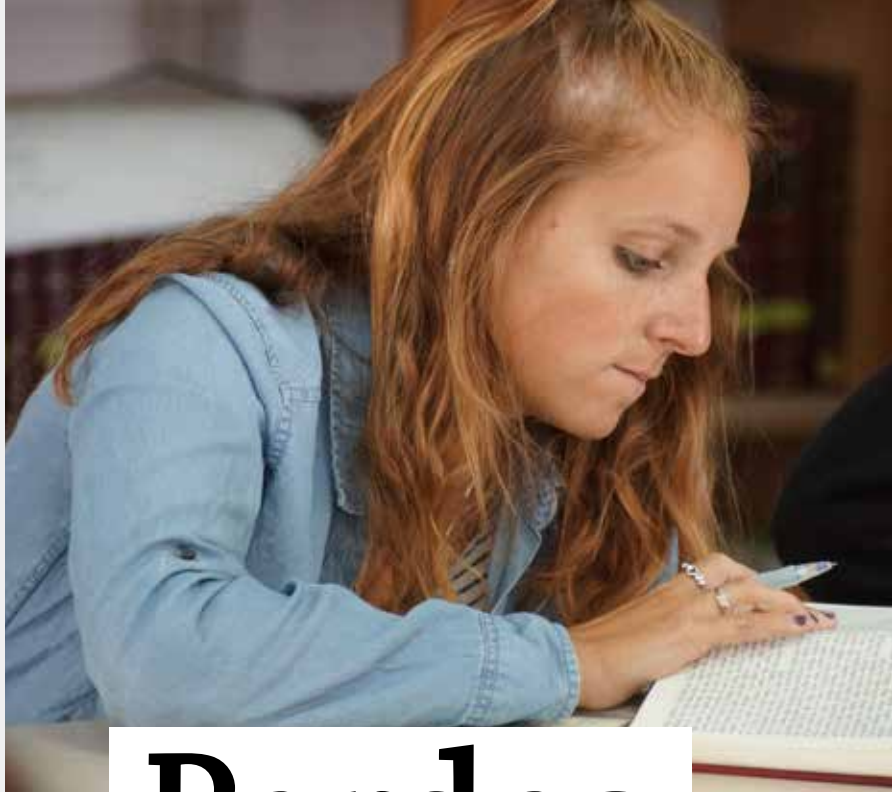
UCLA Hillel

UCLA Hillel is the home away from home at UCLA for all Jewish students to build their identities through Jewish life, learning and Israel. Four of the Hillel team – Rabbi Aaron Lerner, Ben Greenberg, Danielle Natelson and Jessica Jacobs – are Pardes alumni. All four come from very different backgrounds, attesting to the wide range of students Pardes attracts.

"I came to Pardes at a truly liminal moment in my life," explains Rabbi Lerner, executive director – UCLA Hillel.

He describes himself at the time as a recent college graduate, fresh from an intense experience at an all-male, hilltop *yeshiva* in the West Bank. "I was interested in testing my Jewish identity, questioning my beliefs and trying to design my Jewish future. I chose a year at Pardes because I knew I could explore all of those issues in a healthy, rooted and authentic environment. That year set my course for the next several decades."

He married a fellow student (**Dr. Rachel Lerner, '03-'04**), found a love for Jewish learning and wisdom and eventually went to rabbinical school rather than pursuing a career in finance. Years later, he continues to recommend Pardes to his Hillel staff and students. "I am confident that the depth, richness, and grounded-beauty I experienced will inform their Jewish identities and futures as well."



Pardes & Hillel:

Partners in Learning

Pardes and Hillel have long enjoyed a productive partnership. As part of this ongoing relationship, this year 20 Hillel professionals from all over the U.S. took part in the Pardes Institute for Hillel Professionals. The program, which runs alongside the Pardes Summer Program, allows Hillel professionals, mainly at the beginning of their careers, to study Jewish texts, brush up on core Jewish ideas and become more empowered professionals.

Among those staffing the program was Rabbi Megan GoldMarche, rabbi at the Silverstein Base Hillel at Lincoln Park and the campus rabbi of Metro Chicago Hillel.

This wasn't GoldMarche's first time at Pardes. Her participation in the 2006 Summer Program, at the start of her Hillel career, was an important factor in giving her the confidence to serve as a Hillel educator and enroll in rabbinical school.

Speaking of her experience 11 years later, GoldMarche said it was incredible to see her colleagues go through this same transformation. "Many arrived unsure of how they would relate text learning to their work and not fully comfortable in the *beit midrash*. They all left deeply enriched personally and professionally."

Elan Kramer, engagement coordinator at Columbia/Barnard Hillel, says the opportunity allowed him to develop his skills as a Jewish educator in a space he describes as deeply committed to his personal growth.

"Pardes provided me with the opportunity to study, question and think critically about Jewish texts in an incredibly welcoming environment," he says. "The diverse backgrounds and perspectives... offered a unique lens for extraordinarily inspiring learning."

But the partnership between Pardes and Hillel is not just Israel based. Participants in the Summer Program continue to learn with Pardes faculty after returning to the U.S. Over the course of the year, they take part in 10 webinars, allowing them to continue to strengthen their textual knowledge after they have returned home.

Pardes faculty also teach at the Hillel International Global Assembly. At the 2016 Assembly, Yaffa Epstein, Aviva Golbert and Alex Israel taught Jewish Learning Workshops. Aviva and Alex taught alongside Hillel professionals who are also Pardes alumni, strengthening the connection between the two organizations.

The Pardes team hosted a reception at the Global Assembly that attracted over 300 participants, among them 40 alumni. They also held a *dvar Torah* slam in which alumni shared words of Torah with their colleagues, something of utmost importance to the Pardes tradition.

"Pardes has been a wonderful partner in helping Hillel professionals become increasingly confident in their own Jewish experience and better equipped to share it with their campus community," says Abi Dauber Sterne, Vice President for Jewish Education, Hillel International. "Professionals who have been on an immersive Pardes program are excited to incorporate rich Jewish ideas into the Jewish experiences they lead with students."

"Our partnership with Hillel enables the Torah of Pardes to deepen the field of Hillel professionals and to allow rigorous and relevant Jewish study that holds up the value of diversity to reach thousands of young Jews on campuses throughout North America and beyond," says Pardes President Rabbi Leon Morris.



Hillel International President and CEO Eric Fingerhut speaks to students in the Pardes beit midrash during the 2017 Summer Program.



The Office of Innovation at Hillel

The Office of Innovation at Hillel runs a series of "Bases." Each is home to a Rabbinic family and serves as a home base for students and their friends. While every Base reflects the personality of the individual couple and embodies their vision for a vibrant Jewish community, each one is committed to pluralism and is founded upon three core values: hospitality, learning and service.

Pardes faculty have taught in Base houses and built innovative programming together with Base couples around the country. Six Pardes alumni are currently working as founding rabbinic couples in Bases in Brooklyn, Chicago, Miami and Berlin. In addition, **Faith Brigham Leener, a Pardes Year Program alum ('10-'11) and summer ('17)** is Co-Founder and Director, Base Hillel.

"Pardes has been an invaluable partner for the Office of Innovation," says Rabbi Daniel Smokler, Chief Innovation Officer of Hillel International.

"Pardes graduates are passionate, learned Jews who simultaneously embrace the love of Torah and the Jewish people – in all its variegated stripes – while trying to live as a committed global citizen. These are the people we look for to lead Bases, to work on campus and to serve the next generation of young Jews."

War & Peace:



The Challenges of Sovereignty

Seeking peace and harmony has always been a central Jewish value. Despite this, going to war has been far more characteristic of the reality of the Jewish people. Here **Leah Rosenthal** and **Meir Schweiger** discuss the Jewish response to warfare and conflict. This article is taken from a more in-depth discussion between the two teachers. To read the extended debate between Leah and Meir, go to: elmad.pardes.org



When you go out to war against your enemies, and you see horse and chariot, a people more numerous than you, you shall not be afraid of them, for the Lord, your God is with you Who brought you up out of the land of Egypt...

For the Lord, your God, is the One Who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you...

(Deuteronomy 20: 1-9)

כִּי־תֵצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל־אֹיְבֶיךָ וְרָאִיתָ סוּס וְרֶכֶב עִם רֹב
מִמֶּךָ לֹא תִירָא מֵהֶם כִּי־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עִמָּךְ הַמַּעֲלֶיךָ
מִמִּצְרָיִם מִצְרָיִם...

כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הֵלֵךְ עִמָּכֶם לְהִלָּחֵם לָכֶם
עִם־אֹיְבֵיכֶם לְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֶתְכֶם...

(דְּבָרִים כ:א-ט)

LEAH: I am always deeply moved by this passage. Theologically, I am struck by the paradox of telling a people as they prepare for imminent battle it is God who “does battle for you against your enemy.” The passage does not dismiss the terror and dread of battle. It is painfully aware that some, perhaps many, will not return and yet asserts that God will “battle for you, and assure you of victory.” How does one reconcile individual death and sacrifice, the sheer effort and heroism of battle, with a sense of God’s active participation? The Biblical text requires the appointment and active participation of a religious figure to accompany the people into battle, to frame the experience in spiritual and religious terms.

MEIR: As a follow-up to your introduction, I would like to share a story from my experience in the Israeli army. In 1982, I was a newly trained medic for a bridge building unit that went into Lebanon on the second day of the war. While the unit comprised experienced soldiers, as a typical American-Jewish youth, warfare was not part of my experience. I will never forget my emotions when we were about to cross the border.



Photo: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

I recited *tefilat haderekh* (the prayer for a safe journey) aloud for all the soldiers in my unit. When they responded “Amen” with the same fervor and intensity as one experiences on Yom Kippur at the closing *Neila* service, I understood they, too, were afraid and were looking to God to bring them home safely. Once we were in Lebanon we left our fears behind and focused our attention on the mission at hand – to build a bridge over the Litani River that would enable the Israeli army to move forward and distance PLO forces as far away from the border as possible. Thank God, we all returned intact. This was the only time in my life I thought I would die. Ironically, I contributed much more to my unit in my unofficial role as a chaplain than as a medic.

LEAH: Your story emphasizes how the experience of preparing for war has not changed. We are still called to step forward and overcome our personal instincts of self-preservation, to fulfill a calling of deep significance and meaning. Yet, the Biblical passage exempts several specific individuals from active participation in battle. Three categories refer to one who is caught by the events of war in a specific transitional moment in life: marriage, planting a vineyard and constructing a home. The fourth recognizes individuals who cannot overcome their fear and cannot function in battle.

MEIR: The *Mishnah* (*Sotah* 8:4) greatly extends the other exemptions and says if one has consummated these life events, he does not go out to battle nor engage in any support for the war effort. This is based on *Devarim* 24:5 that says when a man marries he shall not go out to war for a year so he can rejoice with his bride. My understanding of these exemptions is that they are a celebration of life in the midst of a reality of death. Judaism is a religion of life and does not put war on a pedestal. Even when necessity dictates we go to battle, we must always keep the desire and the goal of promoting the joys of life in perspective. This is a celebration of continuity.

LEAH: I would like to raise an additional point. The Rabbis emphasized the wording of the introductory verse “כי תצא למלחמה על אויבך” “When you go out to battle against your enemy.” The phrasing here appears redundant. Obviously, you are waging battle against your enemy, not your ally or brother! In the discussion that follows, the Talmudic rhetoric emphasizes the involvement in a struggle against “an enemy,” one who is different than you, who is cruel, aggressive and violent. As you enter the battlefield you are urged to remember “you are waging war against your enemy – not your brother, who, if you are taken captive by him, will have compassion for you. If you fall captive to your enemy he will have no mercy on you...” (*Sotah* 8:1). The discussion that follows is a striking example of creating an image of the “other” who is completely “other” than yourself. The process of dehumanizing the enemy, as a necessary part of preparing for battle, is something I find very disturbing. I understand the need to shift one’s moral and humane perspective in warfare; however, the effect of dehumanizing the enemy is problematic. I fear the effect of this rhetoric on any community that adheres to and perpetuates it. This is one of the greatest moral challenges facing us.

MEIR: Although I understand your concerns about demonizing the other and becoming victims of our own rhetoric, there is just as great a danger, if not more, of viewing the other as playing by the same “rules of the game.” I am against rhetoric, but I firmly believe in seeing reality for what it is. Perhaps the best illustration of this is ISIS. Any words used to describe their inhumanity fall short of the mark. It goes without saying that the same was true of the Nazis. I see both situations as examples where there is no room for compromise or negotiation, and where the only solution is their total defeat. The challenge is how to recognize their inhumanity while not allowing ourselves to be victimized by it, and above all not to become them.

Leah Rosenthal teaches Talmud and Talmudic Personalities.

Meir Schweiger is the Director of Religious Life, Educational Director of the Pardes Executive Learning Seminar and the longest-serving faculty member at Pardes.

Continue exploring *War and Peace: The Challenges of Sovereignty* at the Pardes Executive Learning Seminars June 24-28, 2018 & December 23-27, 2018 in Jerusalem. www.pardes.org.il/executive

Thank YOU

Pardes would like to thank all of its generous Annual Campaign donors. Your contributions strengthen the Jewish people by providing student scholarships and organizational support that enable students to have a life-changing experience studying Jewish texts in Jerusalem and across the world.

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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 more than 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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"I love Pardes because of the skills
 I gained there as a Jewish leader
 and the support I received (and
 still receive) from the community
 to keep growing. I support Pardes
 because it aims to make accessible
 for Jews everywhere the mitzvah
 of Talmud Torah. Our communities
 teach us how to pray, our rabbis
 and faith leaders how to navigate
 particular circumstances, our allies
 and friends where to direct our
 tzadakah and activism, but it takes
 unique efforts, skills and resources
 to become a learner. Pardes is
 a special center among Jewish
 communities for those things."

Abigail Emerson
 (Year Program 15-16, Fellow 16-17)



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Levi Cooper shares Torah ideas from his Pardes classroom, his research and his shul in Zur Hadassah.



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Each week, a Pardes faculty member uses Torah, Talmud and other Jewish texts to explain themes from the weekly portion.



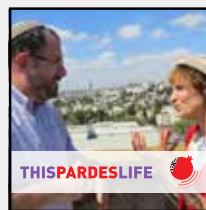
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Pardes teacher Zvi Hirshfield gets up close and personal with fellow teachers and alumni and talks about life, texts and Pardes.

The Parsha Discussion

The Parsha Discussion is a new project set up by Rabbi Alex Israel. Each weekly post is designed to stimulate discussion – based on the parsha – around the Shabbat table.

The Pardes Community Beit Midrash Initiative: Bringing a Piece of Pardes to North America



Learning doesn't stop when Pardes grads leave Israel. The Pardes Community Beit Midrash Initiative answers a growing need (and desire) of our alumni to continue their learning and leadership in their home communities. It was born to help incubate, create and strengthen batei midrash in North America and ultimately transform North American Jewish communal life. We're already well underway in a number of places.

BROOKLYN

The Brooklyn Beit Midrash was founded in April 2016 by five local Brooklynites, four of whom are Pardes alumni. Pardes helped to incubate this beit midrash, sharing resources, content, faculty and best practices. The Brooklyn Beit Midrash is an independent entity creating rich co-educational and cross-communal learning in the local community.

NASHVILLE

The Nashville Pardes Learning Group was founded by alumni of the Pardes Executive Learning Seminar. Every other week, in partnership with the Nashville JCC and The Jewish Federation of Nashville, a committed group of diverse learners from all backgrounds come together to study, combining *havruta* learning with lectures by a Pardes faculty member.

PITTSBURGH

Kulam: The Pittsburgh Community Beit Midrash in Partnership with Pardes was founded by alumni of the Year Program and the Pardes Lishma program, with the help of generous local funders. This interdenominational and intergenerational beit midrash is being taught by Pardes faculty from Israel, as well as adjunct faculty based in North America. It is creating an innovative learning space in Pittsburgh.

MANHATTAN

Together with our partners from Mechon Hadar, Drisha Institute, Yeshivat Maharat, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and the Jewish Theological Seminary, Pardes has been involved in the Community Beit Midrash. Pardes hosts a monthly evening of learning with classes taught by the faculty of the partner organizations.

“Water Wears Away Stone:”



The (Soft) Power of Torah

By Mira Niculescu

After a year of study at Pardes, Mira Niculescu shares her thoughts about Torah learning as soft power and soft power as empowerment. The article is based on her reflection of the Talmudic Aggadic source the Avot de Rabbi Natan.

“What was the beginning of Rabbi Akiva? They say he was 40-years-old and had not learned a thing. Once, he was standing at the mouth of the well and said, “Who carved this rock?” The rock said, “The water that falls on it every day.” The rock then said to him, “Akiva, did you not read water wears away stones?” (Job 14:15)

Rabbi Akiva immediately ruled a *kal v’chomer*, an “all the more so” reasoning. “Just as the soft [water] sculpts the hard [stone], words of Torah, which are as hard as iron, will all the more so carve my heart and mind, which is but flesh and blood.”

Rabbi Akiva is a character who moves me very much, because he came to Torah learning very late in life. This takes so much courage and humility, and is something a lot

of us, especially those who haven’t seriously studied texts before, need when we come to learn at Pardes. No matter who we are in our professional lives, at Pardes, we all become students again — equal and “bare” before knowledge. Before understanding anything, we have to learn Hebrew and Aramaic. Before starting to discuss anything, we have to sit for hours to try to decipher signs on a page.

The image of the water wearing away stones feels exactly like what I came to do at Pardes: to lend myself to the flow of Torah learning.

This was Rabbi Akiva’s “beginning,” and he interpreted the statement with a *kal v’chomer*. “Since Torah is hard as iron, it will sculpt us, who are just soft flesh.” But by saying so, he reversed the whole water metaphor, thereby concealing its power.

While stone crushes and iron cuts, water is [soft] fluid. It embraces the contours of things. This is precisely what is so powerful about this *midrash*. It reminds us that true power comes from what we tend to overlook: not from strength, but from the slow process of “soft power.”

Just as Zechariah says about divine power: “Not by military force and not by strength, but by My spirit.” (Chapter 4:6)

Learning is a deep, spiritual practice in Judaism: a transformative one. And I think this is what happens at Pardes, where we sit day after day in the *beit midrash*.

This story reminds us that learning is much more than taking. It is about allowing ourselves to receive and about being transformed in the process.

So, may we come to learn like stones, giving ourselves to water; and may we become like water with every stone we encounter.

Mira Niculescu is the Founder of “Neshama,” a Jewish Spirituality and Meditation Project. She is an alumna of the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies (Yesod European Fellow and Experiential Educator 2016-17) and of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, and a certified Jewish Mindfulness teacher (IJS 2015). Mira is currently completing a PhD on Jewish Meditation at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris.

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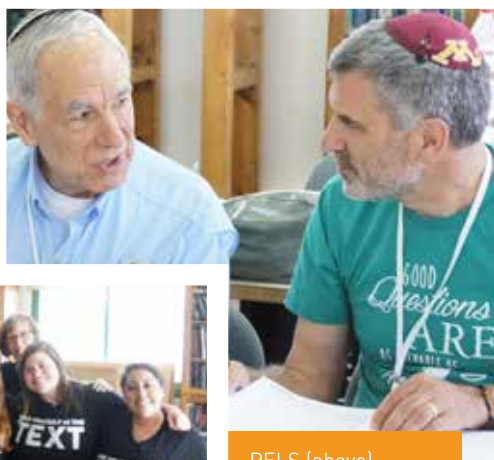
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