

ISRAEL: A CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

By: SHUVI SANTO (BC '00)

I am in no state to meet fifty new people. I wish that my headache would go away so that I could muster a smile. But someone is pushing me from behind and my bags keep getting stuck. The air is so still I can hardly breathe. I look around. I'm supposed to be finding my way to seat 54B, but I have no idea where that is. I see a girl that I went to elementary school with. Oh God, I always hated her... maybe this trip wasn't such a good idea. But all of the eleventh graders in school told me they had such a good time when they went. "What's better than going to Israel after tenth grade and spending the summer chilling out with your friends?" they said. So here I am on a plane heading to Israel. The only glitch is that I didn't bring many friends, so I'm nervous...

I've been in Israel for five weeks now and things are better than I could have imagined. The air is so clear and dry that my headaches have miraculously disappeared. I haven't seen a rain cloud since I left New York and the word "muggy" doesn't exist in Israel's vocabulary. Every day is beautiful and clear, albeit a bit hot. I wake up each morning, smiling. After heading off to services and mumbling through the words, we get onto the bus, drive to a mountain, and climb up. My legs and heart are constantly pumping. When we get to the top of the mountains there's always another breathtaking view. In these past five weeks, I've seen mountains that are green and lush with waterfalls around every corner, and deserts with pink, cream, and burgundy mountains that stretch out for miles. I have never seen a country so beautiful.

There is only one thing unsettling about my experience here so far. Throughout my whole life, teachers, friends, and camp councilors have been telling me that the Old City of Jerusalem and the Western Wall are the holiest places on Earth. So there I was last Friday, standing at the Western wall. 'Feel Something!', I heard myself thinking. 'Feel Something!', I heard it again. "Think about the fact that for thousand of years, Jews came to this site to give thanks to God," a voice echoed in my head. "Think about the fact that right behind this was there was once a holy Temple," I almost

shouted to myself. So I thought about the history and the importance of the place but I felt nothing. It was just a big white wall.

That last time in Israel I was fifteen. It's two years later now and I'm not proud of that great summer I had. I can't believe that I paraded around in Israel then in boxer shorts and V-neck T-shirts. I was practically naked! I can't believe I cursed during a tour of the temple Mount excavations. My behavior was completely inappropriate. This time my experience in Israel

will be different. I will spend my time learning about my heritage. I've been going to Hebrew day school for thirteen years and I'm embarrassed at how little I know about the traditions of my people. That is what this year is for. Learning and strengthening

our Jewish background before we venture into the uncharted waters of secular universities and the rest of our lives.

I've been in Israel for five months now. I spend my days pouring over ancient Hebrew and Aramaic texts, trying to understand what the greatest minds in Jewish history say about how to live a meaningful Jewish life and exist in God's world. I sit in classes and learn about how to be a modest Jewish woman. I am studying the stories in the *Prophets* like David and Goliath, and Samson and the pillars. I stay up late every night reading in the study hall because I am so fascinated by it. The teachers smile and shmooze with me. It makes me feel good to have them look at me with admiration.

I feel myself growing stronger each day. My skills are developing so that I don't have to struggle with the texts as much. When I look around the four walls of the study hall I remember that this is not the Israel that I knew in high school. Occasionally the school takes us on a hike or a tour for the day, but these are only temporary distractions from our larger goal of learning. I understand that our teachers are right¾ learning Jewish texts and Jewish history is the most important part of our experience in Israel. Site seeing was great for me when I was fifteen, but now I have to learn to

On the one hand Israel holds so many wonderful memories of my past and my development, and on the other hand it is a symbol of my ignorance and fear.

appreciate Israel because of its history and its significance for the future of the Jewish people.

When I graduate from college I'm going to come back here to live with the rest of the Jewish people. I can't imagine living in New York or anywhere else in the world. God gave us Israel as a gift and it is our duty to live here. Now when I go to pray at the Western Wall, I concentrate on the destruction of the Temple two thousand years ago.

In my prayers I think about all the Jews who would have been spared their suffering had Israel only existed in their time. I know that as a Jew Israel is where I belong.

I can't believe I ever contemplated living in Israel. The home of all the Jews, a place where all Jewish people are welcome..what a joke. Israel is a haven for Orthodox Jews, people who live their lives according to Biblical and Talmudic scripture. What about the rest of the Jews that have caught up with the times, why isn't Israel a haven for us? I don't have an answer to that question and just thinking about it makes me angry. What kind of government makes laws dictating whether people can or can't take a bus to visit their friends on the Sabbath? How can the Israeli police justify breaking up mixed prayer groups having services at the Western wall? Israel is a Jewish country; it should be a place where all Jews, irrespective of denomination can practice Judaism with pride.

I don't know how I spent so much time in Israel without realizing that there was such intense discrimination of religious and cultural groups. I guess I was comfortable, so that was all that mattered. Or maybe I knew but I didn't care. Whatever the case, I'm not proud of myself and my behavior...again. There is the discrimination against religious minorities in Israel that I chose not to see. And then the Palestinians, another group that I chose not to care about. I remember sitting on buses in Israel and getting very scared when a man with a *kafeyah*, an Arab headdress, mounted the bus - not to say that I was justified in my fears. There were buses blowing up every other week. But I



did not think beyond whether or not I was going to make it back to my dorm alive, to try to understand why radical Palestinians were blowing up buses. I knew they wanted land but I thought they couldn't have it because it was ours^{3/4}God gave it to us. I look back and see how narrow my perspective was. I know that we took Israel from the Palestinians. They were here when we settled in the early 1900's. We pushed them out of their own land and now that it is Israeli soil we will not give them equal rights as citizens? That is absurd! I do think that the Jewish people should have land they call home, but I realize that the way we got our homeland is unjust. It is time for us to atone for our sins.

I haven't been to Israel in over a year. When I think about going back I get sad. It is such a complicated place for me. On the one hand it holds so many wonderful memories of my past and my development and on the other, it is a symbol of my ignorance and fear. I don't know what is going to happen when I go back; I don't know how I will feel. All of my experiences in Israel thus far have been positive ones and I'm afraid to lose the connection that I felt. I still love the land. I haven't lost the appreciation for Israel's beauty that I gained from my first summer there. Thinking about the vast desert and the lush green mountains and waterfalls still makes my heart pump. But there is so much more to Israel than what I saw on the mountain tops.. Israel is no longer the pristine and beautiful place that I knew when I was in high school and it is not only the God given land that I thought it was before college. It is a place of conflict and confusion as well as a place of comfort and tradition. Finally for me, Israel is real.

UNDER KIPA IN ISRAEL

By: ILANA GARBER (BC, JTS, '00)

"I look at the time I spent in Israel as a challenging and provocative time, and I hope that my struggle may have lessened the shock for future kipa wearers."

Most students who go to Israel before college have some kind of amazing positive religious experience there that somehow affects the rest of their lives. My personal pre-college experience did have a significant impact on me, yet it was not entirely positive. While I tried to grow and learn for a year in the Jewish homeland, I was mocked at the Western Wall, ridiculed on Ben Yehudah Street, and criticized in the Religious Kibbutz movement. I struggled to express myself freely as I spent a year in Israel as an observant Conservative Jewish woman.

One of the ways in which I defined myself as an observant Conservative woman in 1995, was that I wore a *kipa* (skullcap) at all times. I wore a *tallit* (prayer shawl) that I had purchased the year before in Israel on a trip with USY (United Synagogue Youth), and after studying the laws of *tefillin* (phylacteries), I started to don tefillin every morning. I took upon myself the obligation to pray three times a day, and to do so in accordance with the traditional rituals that are usually reserved for men.

Israel is not the most welcoming place for a woman who walks around wearing a kipa. I was often stopped by Israelis on the bus (I proudly rode through *Mea Shearim*, the ultra-orthodox neighborhood, wearing my kipa), or in the *shuk* (marketplace). People often shouted to me that I was confused about my role in religion. I have to admit that I usually enjoyed shocking these people. "Oh yeah?" I would counter. "I not only wear a kipa, but this morning I put on tallit and tefillin!" The response was always the same. I was told how inappropriate my behavior was. I

was lectured on the laws of *beged ish* (clothing designated specifically for men) and about the concept of *guf naki* (that a woman's body is not ritually clean enough to wear tefillin). My conversations with such people almost never ended with a mutual respect or understanding. Often I still heard snickers and jeers.

Ironically, the most traumatic encounter that I experienced occurred at the Western Wall, a place which millions of Jews consider to be the holiest on earth. I went to the Western Wall at night with some friends to have a private, quiet, religious experience. A *chayelet*, a female soldier, noticed my kipa and insulted me. I was mortified that at this sacred place in Jewish history and religion, I was unable to express myself in the religious manner that I had chosen. At the same time though, I felt strong and decided not to let her ridicule deter me; it only served to strengthen my religious convictions.

When I arrived at Kibbutz Sa'ad, a religious kibbutz in the Negev where I was to stay for a few weeks, I was politely asked not to wear my kipa in public because I might confuse the children. I accepted this rationale, but while I put on my tallit and tefillin in the privacy of my room during the week. I came to the kibbutz synagogue on Shabbat with my tallit and kipa. Everyone noticed, and while some people asked me questions, nobody argued. Towards the end of my stay, an article appeared in the kibbutz newsletter which commented on the strange rituals introduced to the kibbutz by the American visitors.

After my year in Israel I embarked upon a journey from one religious conviction to another. Perhaps this was because of the reactions I received in Israel. Perhaps not. To be honest, I'm not exactly sure why I began to ask questions and search for new answers and new ways of living as an observant Jew. I still do not have the answers. I look at the time I spent in Israel as a challenging and provocative time, and I hope that my struggle may have lessened the shock for future kipa wearers. Maybe I'll even be one again someday.

MY DEAR ISRAEL

By: ABBIE YAMAMOTO (BC '01)

During the winter break of my sophomore year in college, I went to Israel for the first time in my life. Ever since I had become aware of the special connection existing between Israel and the Jewish people, ever since I had realized that there was a larger Jewish community than the one I knew, I had wanted to go to Israel and see the land for myself.

Now that I've been to Israel, I have been faced with many questions from people regarding my feelings towards Israel: "Don't you want to fly back there right away?" Well, no. "Now do you want to make *aliyah* and live in Israel?" Certainly not. "Didn't you have a great time in Israel?" Not really. "What went wrong in Israel? Why didn't you fall in love with the place?" I am not exactly sure what the answer is to this question, but I'll try to explain.

It's not that one specific thing "went wrong." It's just that I had specific expectations when I embarked on the trip, and I was very disappointed with what I found.

One of the aspects that I love most about New York is its cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity. I soon found that Israel was diverse as well, among its Jewish population, but there was a negative feeling behind this diversity. While I had been so excited to be in a land where the rabbis' rulings determined public aspects of the every-day life, I soon found that not all of the rabbis were considered legitimate amongst the religious Jews. There was no unifying voice among them. Meanwhile, the secular Jews didn't even care about which rabbi said what. I couldn't get over how there was so much division, and so much antagonism towards anyone who was different. Everyone had his or her own strong opinion and did not want to hear from the others.

I had assumed that in Israel, the actual Jewish homeland, I wouldn't have to explain to people what it meant to be observant. I had thought that if one came from the Jewish State, surely he or she would know at least the basics of Judaism and Jewish observance. I was mistaken. The secular and religious Jews in Israel do not respect one another's

differences and the two different Jews do not relate at all. This is partly because the secular Jews often feel threatened by religious observance, because in Israel, it is loaded with political connotations.

While this alienation of the secular Jews from the religious was very upsetting, I found that on the other hand, I could talk about the situation with the Arabs only with the secular Israeli Jews. It seemed that the religious Jews didn't consider the situation with the Arabs to be a very important issue. They ignored the conflict for the most part, and when they discussed it, they spoke disparagingly about the Arabs.

There was a large gulf dividing the two worlds of secular and religious Jews. To talk about

national security as a single issue now seems absurd to me. The national security is not being threatened by outside sources nearly as much as it being threatened by the Jewish people themselves.

My experience in Israel was heart-wrenching.

I couldn't talk about the Palestinian issues with my religious friends; it was not in their scope. Meanwhile I had to explain the basics of observant Judaism to my secular friend. I could not find my place with the people I loved.

I know that I was there for too brief of a visit to really know about Israel and to find my place there. Yet I do know one thing: Israel is not a comfortable place the way New York is. This is the main reason that I don't want to make *aliyah*. And I don't feel this way about New York simply because I've grown up here, as I myself have actually been displaced to New York. My real home is in Japan. That's where my childhood and adolescence lie. That's where my parents, my heritage, and my good friends live and remain. To establish another home in another country with another drastically different culture is beyond my strength.

Visiting Israel was a deeply meaningful, but also a tough experience. I gained a great deal from the trip. I needed to go. I know that. But when will I return? This, I don't know.

"I couldn't get over how there was so much division, and so much antagonism towards anyone different"

ISRAEL: THE QUALITATIVE DIFFERENCE

By: ILANA BERMAN (BC '02)

As a child, I was never one to name my teddy bear "Bear" or my stuffed dog, "Dog." I had one favorite doll that I carried with me constantly, and I dynamically named her, "Ilana." I don't claim to have been incredibly creative, but an objective label was out of the question - everything I loved had a real name. So just as I never called Ilana, "Doll" or Ben, "brother," or Lynel, "Cousin," it also never occurred to me that *Saba* and *Savta* were literal translations for grandfather and grandmother. They were names - as far as I knew; my grandparents' phone and electric bills were addressed to "Mr. and Mrs. Saba Kantor."

Seven years after my mother's parents passed away, was the first time I heard another child yell out, "Savta!" I wasn't something I ever heard on the streets of my native Maine, and I hadn't known to expect it when I entered the bus station in my mother's native Haifa. Despite wearing a backpack that filled the space of another me, I instinctively whipped around to see my grandmother - nearly knocking over the Savta who was actually being called. My mother's mother was not behind me.

I was in Israel. It was the year after I graduated high school, and I had set out for the Jewish homeland. At home, exposure to Judaism outside the walls of my house was essentially limited to High Holiday services, so in my enthusiasm for connections to Jewish life I didn't think outside the realm of upcoming celebrations. I was relieved that Rosh Hashanah would finally not have to imply the hassle of missing yearbook picture day, and I was excited by the prospect of living in a city whose local supermarket would not display matzo box pyramids as a tribute to the Jews on Chanukah.

But in assessing what life would be like that year, I had somehow overlooked that Judaism in Israel is more than an annual break-the-fast, and a dreidel game. At least I had forgotten to predict that in Israel I would find other people who had Savtas, that not just my own mother opens and closes lights instead of turning them on and off, that I would hear

my family's direct translations and bedtime lullabies while sitting on a public bus. I didn't expect to find that the flowers in the background of my mother's black-and-white photographs still grow in Israel. I didn't expect to find them bright red, and I didn't expect them to make me feel Jewish. But they were, and they did, and I realized that in no way was I the same Jew in Israel that I had been in America. The Israeli moon was Jewish, the sand in the Negev was Jewish. I had lived my whole life on the coast and never thought I'd encounter Jewish sand. And thus the feeling overcame me: the consciousness of being a Jew with no formal holiday to remind me of it.

"I went to Israel to find God and found heritage instead, and I began to question whether in my heart they were one and the same."

For me in Israel, Judaism lost its definition as a type of behavior; it was a magic. In Israel I found the childhood of my mother and the language of my grandmother. There were times when I

closed my eyes and found myself in my mother's black-and-white photographs, and in those moments I actually was my mother, I was my grandmother, and I was watching me, standing in the same fields with the same flowers. I went to Israel to find God and found heritage instead, and I began to question whether in my heart they were one and the same.

I am not considered an observant Jew. I practice my violin on Saturdays, I eat shrimp in restaurants, and the one long skirt I own is crumpled somewhere in my closet. These actions are not meant as theological statements; my eating with metal silverware on the college dining hall is not a rejection of Judaism. It just isn't meaningful for me - I celebrate my Judaism elsewhere. But I left Israel nine months ago and feel removed from that consciousness I thought I had captured. I can't say that I'll never find it if I'm not in Israel, but I am in a city now with prominent Jewish and non-Jewish communities, where the ways in which I've known how to be Jewish suddenly don't apply anymore, and I don't know where to begin searching. The question gnaws at me: If I was such an expert at carrying with me what I loved - if I could be so attached to my Ilana

doll that I wouldn't put her down, and if I could remember my Savta with such ardor that I carried her within me for seven years and believed, if only for a split second, in the impossible - then how could a mere location allow me to let go of my sense of Judaism? Israel, of course is not merely a location. But then, neither is my home. If in one place I find what my family believes in, but in the other I find my family, I cannot choose between them. A friend once pointed out to me that if one had two homes it is impossible ever to fully belong in either one.

I do not believe that every Jew needs to live in Israel in order to lead a fulfilling Jewish life. Part of the magic I discovered within Judaism is rooted in the Diaspora, and the unique beauty of our heritage has become equally apparent to me meeting Ethiopian Jews in Israel as it was when I met an Ethiopian Jew on the C train. But I also do not believe that one can be the same Jew in Israel as he or she can be elsewhere. It is not an issue of quantity; one is not more of a

Jew simply because others also refer to their grandmothers simply as "Savta," and one is not less of a Jew if his or her beaches have secular sand. It is a qualitative difference. It is a difference that lies partly in that consciousness that I have somehow lost in America, the celebration of Judaism that many around me have found through God but that I only seem to have found in Israel. It is partly the magic in knowing who else has hiked down the same desert

pathway that makes Jews close their eyes and know that Eretz Yisarel flows within their blood. What labels Israel as the Jewish homeland is the comfort in knowing that everyone around will not only know about the Jewish holidays and traditions but will share them. Yet, like I discovered as a young child, a label is not synonymous with a name - and though Israel will always be the Jewish Homeland, not every Jew is required to call it Home.



THE OTHER SIDE OF ISRAEL

By: PENNY SINONAGLU (CC '00)

In high school I loved Israel with the best of them. I soaked up the Zionism I was fed, even though I critically questioned many of the other beliefs and practices I was being taught. As a non-Jew deeply involved in the Reform Movement's National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY), I felt a pressure to fit in, to show that I was just as serious about Judaism as my friends. Fortunately, "fitting in" meant learning as much as I could, questioning what I learned, and deciding what was right for me. Every ritual, belief, and tradition was weighed, turned over, and inspected. But not Zionism.

Love for Israel was expected and celebrated. I sang songs about the glories of the pioneers, the soldiers, the land. I begged my parents to let me go to the Israel I'd been shown on all the promotional videos and glossy pamphlets advertising NFTY's Israel programs. My friends went and came back gushing about Israel. I wept when Rabin was assassinated and knew more about Israeli politics than I did about the politics of America or of my parents' native lands. Not until my senior year in high school did anyone in my NFTY region bring up the fact that Reform Jews did not have full civil rights in Israel. We quickly decided this wasn't Israel's fault, but was instead the fault of the Orthodox movement. Israel remained unstained and blameless.

On Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day, 1998, I finally converted to Judaism. The choice of day was ironic — unintentionally — because by that point I strongly identified as non-Zionist. The bulk of the conversation I had with the three Reform rabbis in my beit din revolved around my intense criticism of Israel and my refusal to identify as a Zionist. I felt then the way I do now, almost a year later. I feel a whole-

ness that comes from being honest with myself. Before, I was a non-Jewish Zionist, and now I am a Jewish non-Zionist — once again half in and half out of the normative Jewish community.

I am fascinated by Israel specifically because opposition to its policies, and perhaps even to its very existence, immediately places me on the fringe of the Jewish community. The vast majority of Jews support Israel. Some Jews are more blindly supportive, while others voice loving criticism. Many Reform and Conservative Jews

loudly criticize Israel for denying them the right to practice Judaism as they wish. Scholars have critiqued the problematic absorption of Ethiopian and

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Soviet Jews into Israel. The New York Times regularly makes quips about rude Israelis. American Jews certainly have issues with Israel and yet their love for it seems to win out in the end. Hundreds of American teenagers go to Israel every summer to "find" their Jewish identity and visit their "homeland." American Jews send hundreds of thousands of dollars in charitable aid to Israel every year. They lobby congressmen about Israel, sing about it, pray for it, dance its dances, eat its food. If American Jews have one thing in common, it is some sort of attachment to Israel.

Israel is like so many other countries in the world that violate civil and human rights and exist because the land was taken from other people. Israel is racist, unjust, and colonialist, and many national myths have been created to draw attention away from those facts. This is nothing unusual. After all, the United States violates human rights, is a racially biased society, exists on land that once belonged to Native Americans, and has a whole host of national myths about liberty, democracy, and the land of opportunity to draw attention away from its misdeeds.



For the first time in thousands of years, Jews have a country and are a majority of the population in that country. Unfortunately, it seems that being in power is morally corrupting the Jewish people. As a people, we willfully ignore or dismiss with slick rhetoric the plight of the Palestinian people we displaced in order to claim our "homeland." We support and glorify an army of occupation. We love a country that denies non-Orthodox Jews the rights that are theirs in countries across the globe. We teach our children to claim cities and deserts and mountains as rightfully, historically, and divinely ours, without mentioning the Palestinian, Bedouin or Christian child who once lived there. For a people generally characterized as exceptionally just, we are surprisingly op-

pressive. We are the proof that power corrupts. Israel is a place that makes me mad, keeps me humble, and ultimately makes me a better Jew. In high school, I thought I would discover more of a Jewish identity by going to Israel, crying at the Wall, hiking in the desert, hanging out on Ben Yehuda, seeing the land, singing, and eating falafel. I have found part of my Jewish identity in Israel, but not in the way that I was led to believe I would. I've stood far away from the Wall, fuming that there is no mixed section, and have noticed every Yerushalayim Shelanu (Jerusalem is ours) sticker over the Arabic part of street signs. I've watched Israeli policemen harass Arab shopkeepers in the Old City and seen an ultra-Orthodox boy slap a small Arab boy in the face in the middle of the shuk (marketplace). Interestingly enough, my identity as a Jew has not been that affected by my recognition of injustices done in the name of the people I have chosen to join. My interest in the study and application of human rights not only as an intellectual exercise, but also as an ethical Jewish imperative, has sprung directly from my relationship with Israel. In that sense, Israel has been the key to part of my Jewish identity.

GROWING TOWARDS ACCULTURATION

By JOSHUA ADAM FOGEL (SEAS '01)

"It is an enormous task for the Jewish student to grow at Columbia in face of the tidal wave of culture that threatens assimilation."

It seems simple enough. Plants do it. Animals do it. Fungi do it. As human beings we should want to do it. As Jews it is our duty to do it. Yet growing, in college at least, is not as simple as the model set up by Mother Nature. Growing in Columbia means incorporating our classes, books, and fellow students into our own system of beliefs. It is an enormous task for the Jewish student to grow at Columbia in face of the tidal wave of culture that threatens assimilation.

Columbia takes greater pleasure in nothing more than in hurling diverse types of people together for social events. From the freshmen orientation meals on the lawn to the senior networking socials, there is no escape for the Columbia student. I found that the new faces were not as overwhelming as the distinct cultures and beliefs behind each new face. The professors only serve to heighten the problem, as they are just as dissimilar to us as our classmates are. There is, however, a tremendous amount to be gained from Columbia. When in pursuit of these gains, we must draw that proverbial line: a line which, if crossed, would signal that we have sacrificed some of our own beliefs for the college experience.

To draw a line before we enter the college world is easy. To adhere to that line once in school is a little more difficult. During my first semester, I came to find that the line that I had drawn for myself had begun to fuzz. The difficulty arose when my new Columbia friends wanted to take our friendship to the next natural level: off-campus. As some of my newfound friends were girls, this was something I was not comfortable doing. Almost by accident, I found a solution to my dilemma: Hewitt. Hewitt, the Kosher dining hall, when it comes to Jews, is comparable to the Lower East Side at the turn of the century. It is a place where I felt comfortable. Synthesizing college life into something with which we are comfortable is a challenge, but the Hewitt solution, or its equivalent, exists for those who search for it.

When solutions are not forthcoming, I look to the larger Jewish community for support. There

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are many Orthodox Jews who have found themselves in such predicaments. In addition to having more experience, older classmates serve as role models and anchors in an environment that by its very nature suppresses individuality. Most importantly, Columbia offers Jews the chance to continue to grow in their Torah study. The plethora of programs run by the JSU, the Beit Midrash, and the Wednesday Night Learning Program supply the Columbia Jew with a variety of choices. When these choices do not suffice, one need only take a subway to arrive at the West Side Kollel, Drisha, or Yeshiva University.

At the same time, there is an inherent danger in having a Jewish community that is so large and diverse. When exposed to Jews with different backgrounds and beliefs, a person might rationalize that if others live in different ways, and are content with who they are, then so should he or she be content. These people change religiously, not from growth and deliberation, but from laziness.

Working in cahoots with the overwhelming culture-both Jewish and Gentile-is the workload. Day after day, our work hacks at our daily religious routines, asking us to forgo them in order to make life easier for us. To listen to that voice, even for a few days, can start a person down what may be a very steep slide.

To be diligent in one's Judaism is not an impossible task. A solution exists, and one need only seek it out. It is true that the college experience can change a person, but that is dependent upon the individual. With the proper precaution, persistence, and diligence, the Columbia experience can be one of acculturation-where we remain true to our beliefs while still absorbing the dissimilar cultures in our environment, while not becoming assimilated into the new environment.

MAKING ROOM FOR EVERYONE

By: KAREN SIEGEL (BC '99)

It is clear to me and to most of the returning members of the Jewish Theater Ensemble (proudly associated with the Jewish Student Union), that any of the members of the Jewish community who still come to our shows are going to ask why we decided to put on the play that we've chosen this term. Why Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*, a play about sexual politics with explicit content? Why depict homosexuality, allow swearing, or approach race and gender issues with such provocative material? The answer has a good deal to do with the favorite question around the JSU lately: should the JSU attempt to attract the unaffiliated Jews at Columbia? And if so, how? This, of course, relates to the movement towards pluralism in the past few years, and to how we may still have a way to go.

I am in no way knocking the efforts of the hard workers on the JSU board or of so many other people in the JSU who have worked towards (and have to some extent succeeded in) making this a far more open community. I am only saying that there's still work to be done. As the JSU (and the JTE) began to work towards attracting some of the less observant members of the Jewish community, restrictions were set in order to maintain a level of comfort for the large and powerful Orthodox factions. No one wants to exclude one group in order to attract another. The coed dancing circle at the celebration on Simchat Torah has grown, benching in Hewitt (the Kosher dining hall) has begun to be said out loud so that people less familiar with this tradition could keep up, and the JTE decided to hold open auditions and to adopt a policy of blind casting (choosing actors based solely on ability rather than taking into account religion or if he or she keeps Shabbat). The JTE also decided that it shouldn't perform material that any member of the Jewish community would feel uncomfortable watching. As someone who has helped to sort through potential directors and submissions for the last three years, I can promise that we rejected all kinds of sexually explicit, swear-heavy, and anti-religious material. No matter what we chose to do, someone was unhappy.

My suggestion is that we shouldn't try. The only way to attract the unaffiliated Jews on this cam-

pus is to hold programs to which non-Jews would also feel welcome. At Yale, for instance, Shabbat dinners have become such an event that many students come just for dinner, while some have non-Jewish friends meet them after services to see what it's all about. I'm not suggesting that we sing the *bircat hamazon* to the Columbia fight song (which they do), or that it's possible for a campus in New York to have the same sense of community as one in New Haven, but I think it is possible to try a little harder. Will traditionally observant members of this community feel completely comfortable at every event aimed at attracting the Jews who don't feel at home in the JSU now? Of course not, but I do think that there is room in the JSU for this community. Campus holiday events, such as the Passover seders, might generate a higher attendance, if the JSU was provided a place where people who can't go home feel welcome before and after these events.

"NO ONE WANTS TO EXCLUDE ONE GROUP IN ORDER TO ATTRACT ANOTHER."

The JTE has never asked a Jewish cast member to do something that he or she has felt uncomfortable

with. All rehearsals and performances strictly adhere to Shabbat observance. In all honesty however, the Jewish Theater Ensemble is about good theater. Are there Jews on this campus that won't watch *Cloud 9*, or wouldn't act in it? Yes. Does that mean we shouldn't do it? I've been told, "Yes. The JTE is supposed to be for all Jews." But it must be understood that the JTE attracts a fair share of unaffiliated Jews, and certainly a large number of non-Jews, but I don't think the organization should be limited by either extreme of its membership. Our potluck Shabbat dinner/cast party has been the first positive Jewish experience at Columbia for several JTE members who are not affiliated with the JSU. That makes me sad.

Having been part of both extremes of the Columbia Jewish community, I know that many of the less observant Jews on campus feel as profoundly excluded from events dominated by the Orthodox community as they may feel from this production. *Cloud 9* is a good play. The JTE chose it because it is a good play, and a dedicated and qualified director proposed it. It is not outrageous — there is no nudity or prolonged bouts of

continued *Making Room* page 29