

## A Life-Changing Experience

When Rebecca Szer graduated from Ft. Mill High School, her plans were to study Pre-Medicine at The College Of Charleston. Little did she know that by signing up for a program at the end of her sophomore year, she would have a life-changing experience. She recently told her story at a regular monthly social of Temple Solel, where she and her parents, Steve and Carol, are members.

Rebecca, now a junior, registered for a two-week program abroad entitled "Tracing the Holocaust Through Eastern Europe." The trip included numerous stops in Poland, Lithuania, and Germany with visits to three concentration camps, four ghettos, and nine museums/cultural centers. She was so moved by the experience that she has already signed up to be a part of the same program as a Peer Facilitator in May of 2013.

One of her most memorable visits was to Vilnius, Lithuania, where she learned detailed accounts of what took place in the

Kovno Ghetto from which her grandfather had escaped.

"When I read and watched videos on what took place in that Ghetto, it made me realize how much he must have gone through, how much pain he must have felt, and how many loved ones he probably watched die. Only 8% of the 30,000 Jews in the Kovno Ghetto survived. Only 8%, and my grandfather was one of them. I wondered, how do you go on living an average life, when someone took such extraordinary measures just to give you that life."

Rebecca said she is very concerned that all the people who were there and experienced the horrors of the Holocaust are aging and dying, and that soon no one will be left to tell what happened. "It will all be history, and the problem with history is that people forget it." It drove her, she said, to make a promise to herself, "I realized that no matter what I do in life, I have to make sure people remember."

In commenting on why she is



Rebecca in Poland.

going back as a Peer Facilitator next May, she said, "I want to help people have the same experience I had so that they will want to pass on the stories so that they will never be forgotten."

When asked about her own faith, Rebecca said, "I thought the experience might make me doubt God after seeing the horror that he let his people face. But instead, it

## Charlotte Participates in AIPAC National Rabbinic Symposium

By Rabbi Chanoch Oppenheim,  
Charlotte Torah Center

A few weeks ago I got a call from AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) about a one day symposium for Rabbis. The idea was to keep Rabbis up to date with what is going on in Israel, as well as American foreign policy—especially concerning Iran. Many Jews are aware of AIPAC's existence but don't realize the magnitude of the organization; some think that they (AIPAC) probably rent a floor or two of office space in Washington, DC; after all how much is involved in lobbying for Israel? I, too, had no idea of how grand this organization was until I entered their beautiful eight story building in the heart of Washington.

The rabbis were from all over and included all denominations of Jewry. The terms "Reform," "Conservative," and "Orthodox," or any other didn't seem to have any significance because we were all coming for one reason — to support Israel, one of the few causes that can still unite Jews of all persuasions.

When walking into the building, one is met with the stark reality of our precarious situation even in the freedom of the democracy in which we live. The security is more than just a guard, it's a bit of a fortress with a system set up that reminded me of the security procedure in the Mecklenburg County jail when one visits an inmate. We Jews sometimes forget that there are people who would rather see us and some of the causes for which we stand eliminated from the world.

There were about 100 rabbis there and more than 125 others who participated in the program via video conference. Seeing this eclectic assemblage was a source of inspiration because support for Israel seemed to trump any other squabble that exists between the



movements concerning ideology, theology, or world outlook. We were there as co-religionists in support of a Jewish land that is the birthright of every Jew; that was a good feeling.

The full day program included a number of top tier presentations but before beginning there was a slide presentation showing different aspects of how Israel, being a democratic state, shares the same values as the United States. Commitment to democracy, the rule of law, freedom of religion and speech, and human rights are all core values shared between the United States and Israel. In stark contrast to other Middle East nations, Israel (like America) has an independent judicial system, which protects the rights of individuals and operates under the principle of "innocent until proven guilty." Israel also features regularly scheduled elections that are free and fair and open to all its citizens, regardless of religion, race, or sex. Unlike any other Middle Eastern nation, women are at the forefront of many aspects of Israeli society. Israel has always had at least one woman on its Supreme Court, and Israel is the only country in the Middle East to elect a woman, Golda Meir, to the position of prime minister. Although these facts might be

common knowledge to many *CJN* readers, the younger generation of Jews is increasingly less aware of these things. This point was mentioned in the excellent presentation of Rabbi Daniel Gordis.

David Makovsky, the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy Project, spoke about the challenges that Israel faces in the region. There was a panel discussion featuring Dr. William Kristol, (Republican) founder and editor of the magazine *The Weekly Standard*, and Ann Lewis, (Democrat) political advisor who was Senior Advisor for Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign, which focused on the upcoming elections. Rabbi Daniel Gordis spoke, via video conference, about the challenges to Jewish peoplehood and the role of Israel in the coming year. Ambassador Michael Oren, also via video conference, spoke about Israel's vision for the coming year. Another panel featured Ambassador Dennis Ross and Elliot Abrams on how Middle East policy is crafted. The final session featured Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of *The New Republic*, who spoke to the rabbis about the future of Israel. Each speech was extremely informative and the panel discussions were refreshingly balanced and respectful.

It was a wonderful day; the fact that rabbis from such diverse backgrounds would travel to Washington just to rally under the common goal of supporting Israel was truly encouraging. I was proud to be part of it as Charlotte's representative.✳

made me more religious than I had ever been. It made me gain faith in my people, and want to pass on their legacy they worked so hard to keep."

On the personal side, she spoke of the inspiration she received. She said, "If my grandfather could live through all that horror, escape a Nazi Ghetto, live in the woods for a year, come to America and build his own successful business from absolutely nothing, just think what I could do."

Rebecca Szer is a talented, industrious student who now sees her life as far more than good

grades and getting a degree. She moved with the members of Temple Solel with her presentation and clearly has the capacity to help "make sure people remember."

Please join us for services the 2nd Friday of each month at St. Philip Neri Church, Munn Road, Fort Mill, SC 29715, beginning in October. Check out our website, [templesolel.org](http://templesolel.org) or visit our Facebook page for Temple Solel SC.

Temple Solel is a Reform Jewish Congregation serving York, Lancaster, and Mecklenburg Counties.✳



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