

**JTS students
push Israel
tourism among
Conservative
Jews.** *Jason Miller*



MISSIONS

Israel Ambassadors In Training

Rabbi Joseph Brodie had been planning a family vacation in Ireland for this summer. But while visiting Israel this month with the Jewish Theological Seminary, he decided to switch plans and bring the family to Israel.

Rabbi Brodie, vice president of student affairs at the Conservative seminary, escorted 102 students on a four-day mission in which they received Ministry of Tourism training to become "tourism ambassadors."

The participants, whose trips were subsidized by the Israeli government and JTS, visited spots in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and met with agencies that help victims of terror and their survivors. In exchange for the subsidy, each student is required between now and April to give several speeches and publish articles encouraging other Jews to visit Israel.

Since the outbreak of the current intifada, it's been widely observed that the Orthodox are continuing to visit Israel while most liberal Jews have been frightened away. This month's trip aims to boost tourism among Conservative Jews.

Conservative leaders see a "potential that's not being met" when it comes to sending synagogues and other movement groups to Israel, said Yoni Schwab, coordinator of the Conservative movement's Israel Tourism Project.

"People need to be asked; they need to be reassured," he said. "But mostly they need to be asked and reminded and then they will say, 'Yes, I really do need to go.'"

Participants said they came away certain that visiting Israel is the best way for American Jews to show support for Israel.

"It's one thing to buy Israeli products from our side of the world, but it's a lot more to actually be there and for them to see we haven't given up," said Jason Miller, a rabbinical student who is also pursuing a degree in Jewish education.

For Andrea Wershof, a junior at both Columbia and the seminary's List College, the trip was a "combination of helping us see how life continues as usual and how Israelis are dealing with the situation."

Wershof said she was struck by the odd contrast between the normalcy of daily Israeli life and abundant reminders of the "situation," as the Israelis call the intifada — boarded-up shops, the heightened security presence and a hospital visit where they learned about preparations for potential biological and chemical attacks.

"There were guards in front of every single cafe," Wershof said, adding that she was pleased to see people still going out but found the security "sobering."

Miller said he has no illusions of convincing American Jews well familiar with news reports of suicide bombings that Israel is completely safe.

"It's OK for people to have a fear of traveling to Israel right now," he said. "I have a fear of getting into my car and driving on the highway — there's also risk in that action. But regardless, as the Jewish people we need to stand in support of Israel and put aside our fear. It's not the best time ever to visit Israel, but it is the most important time."

Julie Wiener