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A Letter to Our Readers

The rabbis of old loved to distill Jewish wisdom into adages. Back in Brooklyn, the classrooms at my co-ed yeshiva elementary school were decorated with proverbs that contained the kernels of Judaism: *Im ein kemach, ein Torah* - figuratively, “no dough, no Torah;” in other words, a religious Jew has to make a living. *Eizehu gibor hakovesh et yitzro* (“Who is strong? He who conquers his evil inclination”): a posting perhaps intended to boost student decorum, from the Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers 4:1).

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” as it is famously written in Leviticus (19:18), sets off two millennia of rabbinic argument about the technical definition of the word “neighbor” - *re’ah* in Hebrew, which also means “friend.” In the Midrash, Rabbi Akiva says that this neighborly dictum is *klal gadol batorah* - a great principle of Torah.” (Sifra Kedoshim 4:12) But who is this friend and neighbor? Does this cardinal principle apply only to Jewish friends, or to all humankind? Along comes Ben Azzai, in the very next line of the Midrash, and clarifies: “This is the book of the generations of Adam’ (Genesis 5:1,) that is a greater principle.” For Ben Azzai, the words in Leviticus include all people. The unquoted remainder of that verse in Genesis makes the point clear: “In the day when God created man, in the likeness of God he made him.” Love other people as you love yourself, Ben Azzai is saying, because all of you are made in the image of God.

This Winter 2011 edition of *Havruta* is dedicated to a search for such *ikkarim*, core principles of Judaism. The issue also serves to introduce our readers to members of the Shalom Hartman Institute’s North American Scholars Circle (NASC), which in the summer of 2010, at a gathering in Jerusalem, marked the completion of its first year. The purpose of NASC is to widen the activities of the Institute in the field of applied Jewish Studies, by utilizing the tools of innovative scholarship to address the needs and concerns of North American Jewry. To that end, the first cohort of NASC fellows - seventeen men and women, scholars and teachers at Jewish institutions and secular universities - devoted their year of research and conversation to the subject of *ikkarim*.

The authors of our five featured articles are all NASC members, professors from both coasts. David Myers, chairman of the history department at UCLA, invokes theorists of Jewish nationalism to test conventional notions of Israel and Diaspora. Joel Hecker, a professor of mysticism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, juxtaposes Maimonides and the Zohar in a quest for a theology available to all Jews. Charlotte Fonrobert of Stanford argues that openness to converts is a unique *ikkar* of American Jewry. Naomi Seidman, who teaches Jewish Studies in Berkeley, makes the case for and against the centrality of the Beit Midrash for secular Jews. Jeremy Dauber and Wendy Zierler, professors of Jewish literature at Columbia and Hebrew Union College respectively, conduct a collegial conversation about defining literature as an *ikkar*: do only Jewish texts qualify, whatever “Jewish” may mean?

The contributors to our Symposium, who include North American SHI fellows alongside Israeli scholars, offer commentary on such Jewish essentials as peoplehood, *tikkun olam*, money, and the

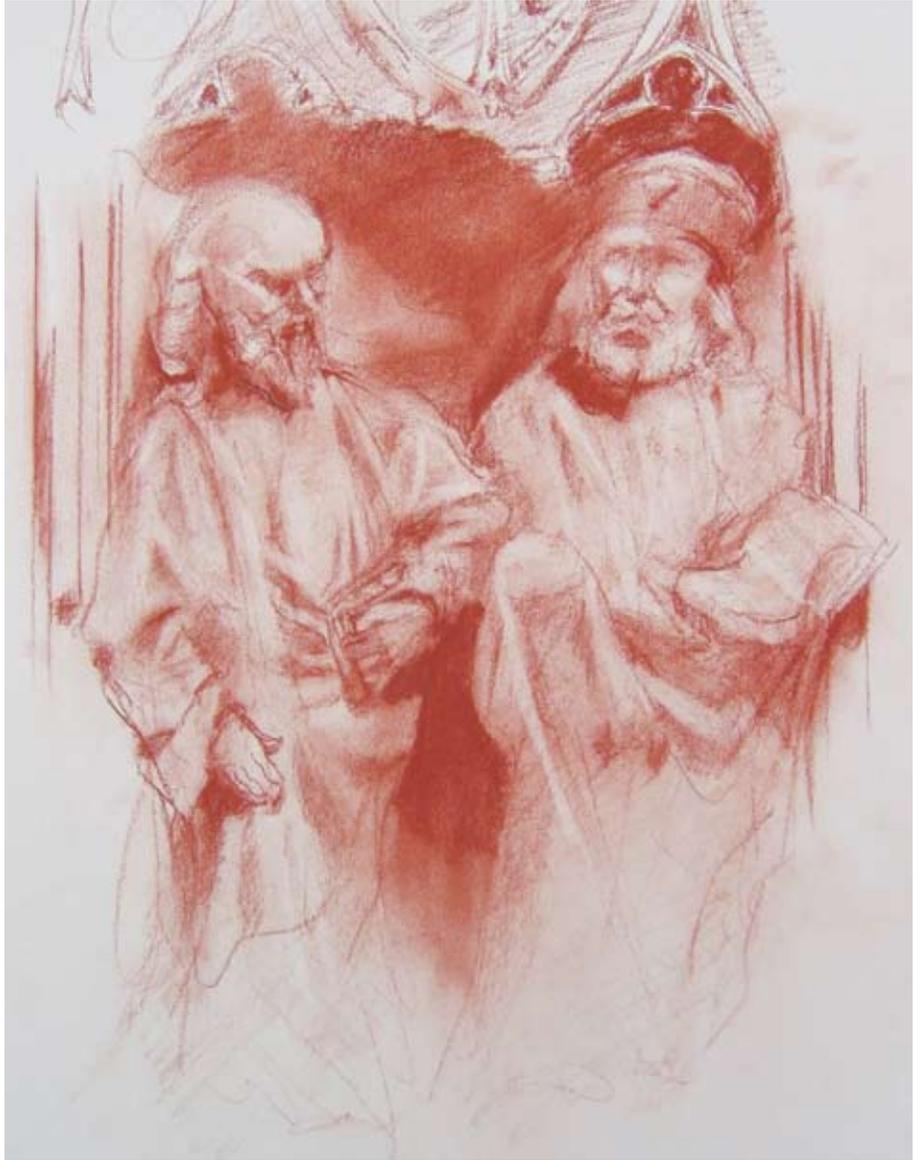
culture of debate. Donniel Hartman, President of SHI, emphasizes the larger challenge of finding solid *ikkarim* that inspire Jews without imposing authoritarian boundaries. Yehuda Kurtzer, President of SHI North America, looks for *ikkarim* in 1st-century Alexandria. Moshe Idel, longtime SHI fellow and pre-eminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, speaks about Radbaz, a leading 16th-century sage who didn't like the idea of *ikkarim* to begin with, and the father of Gershom Scholem, who flouted Jewish tradition in 19th-century Berlin. And speaking of debate, our Afikoman section presents a Jewish-Christian disputation in medieval Spain as a multi-faceted episode of Applied Jewish Studies.

The whole mix of our *ikkarim* issue might be seen as a postmodern spin on Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai, or simply an amalgam of old and new, tradition and reinvention. Either way, it brings to mind another memorable adage, this time from *The Leopard* (1958), an elegant and elegiac novel by a Sicilian prince, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." This *ikkar*, too, could be posted on the wall of the 21st-century Beit Midrash.

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"Zion and Babylon," by
 Currado Malaspina. Conté
 crayon on paper, 2005.