

# HAIFA LABORATORY FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES | HLRS

## MESSAGE FROM THE HEAD OF HLRS



**Dear Friends and Supporters,**  
The past year has been one of the most challenging for our region in a generation. For Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze and members of other faiths that comprise the multi-denominational fabric of Israeli society, 15 months of war have eviscerated many of the programs and initiatives that undergird the social middle ground that is critical for fostering and sustaining a rich multicultural society.

Amidst these unprecedented adversities, HLRS continues to forge ahead with existing projects while growing its offerings. We have expanded our multifaith councils from Haifa to Acre and Ramle, launched our long-anticipated Interfaith Ambassadors Master's degree, added a new cohort of early career scholars for our Intertwined Worlds fellowship program, inaugurated a partnership with Al-Qasemi College to study Islam in Israel, and initiated a collaboration with the Center for Governance and Markets at the University of Pittsburgh to evaluate our own multifaith initiatives. We hosted an exhibition on the Christian communities of Haifa in December and are planning two different conferences in June, along with walking tours of Haifa's religious communities to continue deepening relationships between academics, community leaders, and practitioners of all kinds.

None of this would be possible without our partners and supporters, particularly the Wayfarer Foundation, which has generously provided critical, consistent, and continuous support for HLRS from its inception. Our gratitude for their commitment to our shared vision is baked into every project we launch and every accomplishment we notch.

We are proud of the multiplicity of projects that have solidified HLRS's place at the forefront of the nexus between academic research and communal action. We hope you'll enjoy seeing below our progress in action, and look forward to the results we anticipate from the coming year.

With warm regards and seasonal greetings from Haifa,

*Uriel Simonsohn*  
**Uriel Simonsohn**  
Head of Haifa Laboratory for Religious Studies

## DIALOGUE

### Multifaith Councils in Israeli Cities



As part of its mission to transform theory and dialogue into practical communal solutions, HLRS is actively collaborating with the **Department for Religious Communities at the Ministry of Interior** to establish multifaith community forums in each of Israel's mixed Jewish-Arab cities. Our tiered strategy began with establishing a forum on "home turf" in Haifa. With its successful establishment, over the past three months we have begun expanding to Acre and Ramle.

#### Haifa

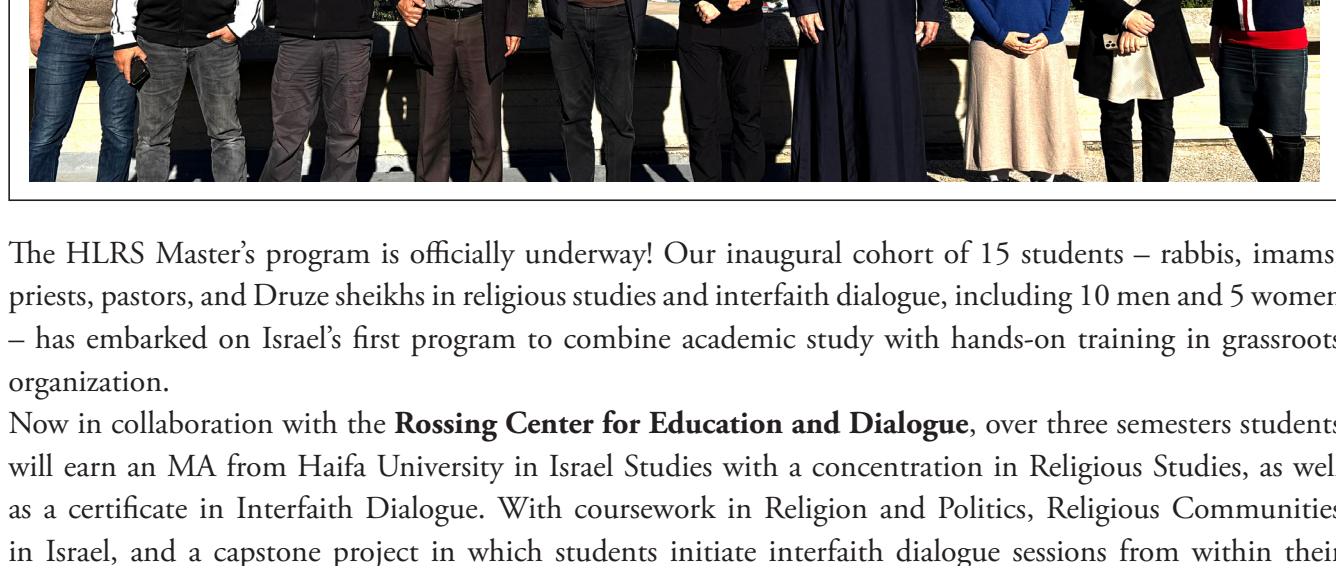
In September HLRS held a special launch event at Haifa's City hall inaugurating its first multifaith forum in Haifa. Over a hundred participants convened to celebrate this momentous occasion, including religious leaders from all of Haifa's communities, school principals, and members of communal boards. Distinguished speakers included Mayor Yona Yahav, Rabbanit Adina Bar Shalom, Catholic Archbishop Yusuf Mata, and University of Haifa Rector Prof. Mouna Maroun. The event highlighted the work of the Haifa Laboratory for Religious Studies (HLRS) and included the municipality's formal endorsement of the forum's future plans, further solidifying Haifa as a model city in religious studies and interfaith dialogue cooperation and understanding.

The group has been continuously meeting. At its last session on **November 25**, the multifaith forum in Haifa discussed educational initiatives in local schools that will promote understanding among religious communities. Ilana Truk, the head of the Haifa Education Administration spoke about the challenges of teaching religious tolerance and mutual respect. The participants broke into subgroups and developed a number of ideas that they are now working to translate into practice, including a coordinated effort to meet with principals of each community's schools to propose a program for religious leaders to jointly teach about each other's religions. **We are excited to watch this special initiative grow!**



#### Ramle

Our initiative in Ramle, which is supported by mayor Michael Vidal, began with a series of meetings with local leaders to promote the project. On **November 12**, we held our first of six closed-door sessions with about twenty religious leaders representing the local Jewish Orthodox, Muslim, and Christian communities. Our hope is that, as in Haifa, these meetings will lead to the development of a multifaith forum to address the complex intercommunal dynamics of life in Ramle.



#### Acre

On **November 6**, HLRS director Prof. Uriel Simonsohn met with Acre's new mayor, Amichai Ben Shlush, who enthusiastically supported our initiative and committed to help lead it. In collaboration with Iyad Sarhan, the head of the Religious Communities Department at the Ministry of Interior, and under the leadership of Dr. Janan Fallah, our senior researcher, we are excited to establish this third multifaith group in a mixed city. **More to come!**



## RESEARCH AND DIALOGUE

### Interfaith Ambassadors Master Program for Religious Leaders



The HLRS Master's program is officially underway! Our inaugural cohort of 15 students – rabbis, imams, priests, pastors, and Druze sheikhs in religious studies and interfaith dialogue, including 10 men and 5 women – has embarked on Israel's first program to combine academic study with hands-on training in grassroots organization.

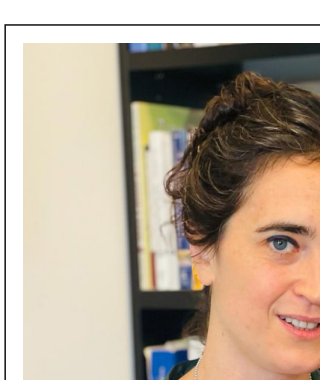
Now in collaboration with the **Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue**, over three semesters students will earn an MA from Haifa University in Israel Studies with a concentration in Religious Studies, as well as a certificate in Interfaith Dialogue. With coursework in religion and politics, theology, and biblical studies in Israel, and a capstone project in which students initiate interfaith dialogue sessions from within their own communities, this unique combination of training is designed to equip students to deeply understand, initiate, and facilitate grassroots-level interfaith dialogue and collaboration.

### Intertwined Worlds - Methodologies of Religious Studies

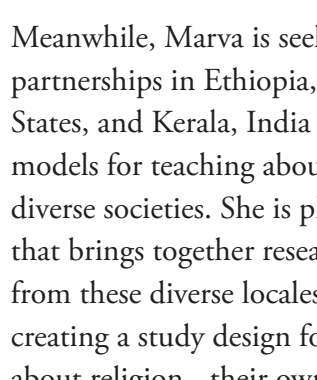


Now in its second year, this special fellowship program led by HLRS's Academic Director Dr. Maayan Raveh, has welcomed its new cohort of eight PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers. Hailing from universities around the country and specializing in such fields as political science, history, theology, and biblical studies, each of these early-career scholars offers a particular disciplinary perspective that is already enriching discussion about the theories and methodologies related to interreligious studies. Topics include: the process of conducting qualitative research within one's own anthropology or another's, quantitative methods from political science, text-based approaches from history, and anthropological theories related to group identities.

As part of its mission to integrate academic methodology with community impact, the group is planning its January tour of the religious communities of Haifa and meeting their leaders. The program's annual conference scheduled for June, will feature our fellows presenting on their finished research projects, and culminate in a bound volume of their published papers on interreligious encounters.



**Dr. Maayan Raveh**  
our Academic director, leads "Intertwined Worlds".



**Dr. Abraham Yoskovich**  
coordinates our Interfaith Ambassadors Master's Program.

### Research Collaboration with University of Pittsburgh Center for Governance and Markets

On the heels of our productive discussion last year with Prof. Jennifer Brick, HLRS academic director of the **Center for Marketing and Governance at the University of Pittsburgh**, Murtazashvili, director of Dr. Maayan Raveh has launched a joint research project: "Religious Leadership and Crisis Management in Mixed Cities: The Case of Haifa and Ramle." The objective is to compare HLRS's initiatives in these two cities and shed light on the mechanisms through which local religious leaders collaborate to manage crises and prevent tensions from escalating.

Two research papers are currently underway: one by Dr. Raveh that evaluates the potential for religious research to be productively involved in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue; and another in collaboration with HLRS researcher Dr. Noga Buber Ben-David that investigates religious leaders' ability to mediate conflict in mixed cities. We anticipate these papers to be submitted for publication by the end of the year, **so stay tuned!**

### "Authentic Islam in Israel" - Multi-disciplinary Research Group with Al-Qasemi College

HLRS has teamed up with scholars from Al-Qasemi College to form a research group dedicated to exploring how Islam has developed under the unique socio-political conditions of Israel. Islam adopts particularistic characteristics in every country, but life for Muslims in Israel is *sui generis* and complex. Unlike immigrants to Europe or America, Israeli Muslims are a native-born minority – both socially and politically – of a Middle Eastern country that was once ruled by a majority Muslim population in what is now a Jewish state.

The research group includes Jewish, Muslim and Druze women and men working from a variety of academic institutions, each of whom brings a wealth of perspectives, drawing together the fields of sharia legal theory and common law, Islam in communal life, politics, and gender studies in order to help sketch out the unique characteristics of Islam in Israel.



The group's first meeting on **November 18** featured a talk by Jerusalem sharia court judge Iyad Zahalka on *fiqh al-aqalliyat* - the Law of Muslim Minorities as it applies to Israel - followed by a lively discussion.

Our second meeting on **December 15** began with a discussion led by Sawwan Kheir, a native of the Druze village of Peki'in in northern Israel currently pursuing dual doctoral degrees in Religious Studies at Haifa University and Psychology at Abo Akademi University in Finland, who presented her research on the multiple ways Muslim students in Israel negotiate life between the values of modernity and tradition. Prof. Yitzhak Reiter followed, using a technical discussion of Islamic laws against usury to evaluate the ways the Northern and Southern branches of the Islamic Movement in Israel mediate between the contexts of global and local Islam.

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

### Research on Education

#### Ethno-Religious Communities in Israel



We are excited to introduce **Dr. Marva Shalay Marom**, who joined our team in November. Fresh out of her PhD at Stanford University in Education and Jewish Studies, Marva is interested in how religion is institutionalized in Israel. Her current project investigates how Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students learn about their own and other faith communities in what is effectively a segregated school system, and compares that with what they experience in their lives outside the classroom. "Educationally, we don't meet people who are different from us in school. We get to know them late in our lives: this is our prism into the conflict." Her aim is to use education research to help cultivate a mutual language that enables these communities to better live together, and ultimately to develop a curriculum to expose youth in each community to Israel's religiously-diverse landscape.

Meanwhile, Marva is planning to establish academic partnerships in Ethiopia, Serbia, Cuba, the United States, and Kerala, India to develop pedagogical models for teaching about religion in religiously-diverse societies. She is planning a five-year project that brings together researchers and practitioners from these diverse locales in the hopes of co-creating a study design for how highschoolers learn about religion - their own and that of others - in diverse societies that experience interreligious conflict.

She is already crossing the boundary between academia and community with a program she is initiating for Haifa youth to receive university credit in their last two years of high school to learn about other religions' - both in text, practice, and personal experience. They will meet bi-weekly to study religious texts, walk the urban reality of religious communities in Haifa, and investigate their own lived traditions by interviewing their parents and grandparents. She is establishing relationships with Jewish and Arab schools now and will begin recruiting next year for a small pilot of fifteen students whom she hopes can be the seed for a new kind of multi-faith community in Israel.

The overarching goal of her work is "to do a tikkan for Jewish education in Israel." We are excited to see these important and innovative projects develop. **Welcome, Marva!**

### Christian Communities Photography Exhibition



On **December 10**, HLRS hosted a special event to open its exhibition, "**Between the Sacred and the Profane - The Christian Communities of Haifa**," that sheds light on this diverse and underrepresented group through dozens of photographs taken by community members. The event welcomed over a hundred participants, and featured remarks by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa; Haifa University's Rector Mouna Maroun; as well as Yosef Mata, Archbishop of the Melkite Greek Catholic community of the Galilee, Nazareth, Northern Samaria, Acre and Haifa; and a keynote address by Dr. Maayan Raveh, scholar of contemporary

Christian theology and HLRS's Academic Director, on the past, present, and future of these communities in the Holy Land.



### Nexus Magazine \*Special Issue\*

#### Sacred Spaces in the Middle East: Catalysts of Conflict and Coexistence

In **November** our online journal, Nexus, published seven original papers from historians, political scientists, and sociologists that explore the theoretically complex and practically fraught topic of sacred spaces. In the wake of colonial influence and emergence of national regimes in the Middle East, some sacred sites have become arenas for political strife and ethnic segregation, while others have evolved into bastions of social harmony that propose alternative models for coexistence.

## ON THE HORIZON

### Annual Symposium

#### Religious Leadership and Peacebuilding in a Post-War Middle East

**June 25, 2025**

HLRS is thinking ahead in all respects. This year's annual symposium will seek to address the long-awaited, post-war era in the Middle East, which will present both immense challenges and unprecedented opportunities for sustainable peace. Religious leaders, communities, and ideas will play a pivotal role in this process, as they are at the heart of social transformation and community resilience. Under the auspices of the President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, and in partnership with the American Jewish Committee (AJC), HLRS is convening a high-level conference bringing together religious leaders, scholars, diplomats, and global experts to explore how faith communities can contribute to a lasting regional peace.

The symposium will feature four dynamic panels, beginning with an exploration of perspectives from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders on interfaith cooperation and peacebuilding. This will be followed by insights from diplomatic stakeholders, who will examine the critical role of community-based (Track 2) peace initiatives in advancing regional diplomacy. Another panel will delve into strategies for faith-based aid, focusing on practical approaches to post-war recovery in the region. Finally, the symposium will highlight case studies from scholar-practitioners who bridge grassroots efforts and governmental (Track 1) peacebuilding, offering innovative models for collaboration.



**Join us as we explore innovative ways faith communities can contribute to a more peaceful and resilient Middle East.**

### Expanding the Interfaith Ambassadors Master's Program

Now that our MA has launched, we are already developing a framework to increase enrollment to 30 students a year, as well as programs with alumni that enable us to be more regularly and deeply involved with their relevant communities, and relations between them. **Stay tuned!**

**As we reflect on the impactful work of HLRS over the past months, we are inspired by the opportunities ahead to continue fostering dialogue, understanding, and collaboration across faith communities. We warmly invite you to stay connected, follow our journey, and explore ways to partner with us on new initiatives. Whether through sharing ideas, joining our events, or collaborating on transformative projects, your engagement is vital to advancing our mission of promoting religious freedom and pluralism. Together, we can make a meaningful difference - let's keep the conversation going!**

### WRITE US

We are eager to hear your thoughts and suggestions, as well as to learn about your own work and initiatives. Please feel free to write to us at any time or reach out to coordinate a meeting. We promise to respond promptly. Our email is [rjglab@uni.haifa.ac.il](mailto:rjglab@uni.haifa.ac.il)