

Speech by Sara Lewis (Student Awards program, May 2008)

“Tell me, and I’ll forget. Show me, and I’ll remember. Involve me, and I’ll understand.” The Rutgers University Department of Jewish Studies has provided me with an education of which even Confucius would be proud. Throughout the past four years, I have been *involved* in a number of incredible educational opportunities. These experiences have shaped my college career at Rutgers University, helping me to *understand* truly all that I have been taught, in and out of the classroom.

I was one of the unlikely first-years at Rutgers to enter the university already knowing in what I wanted to major. When it was time to register for classes each semester, I would rush to look at what was being offered by the Jewish Studies Department, excited by the prospect of delving into each topic. I reveled in the idea of being able to actually sit in a classroom, studying the history and culture of the Jews from an academic perspective. The first course that opened the door to a new aspect of Judaism was Professor Yadin’s course in Jewish Mysticism. We analyzed the language of the mystical texts carefully, a process that involved us in the richness of the mystical tradition and helped us to understand the deeper meaning of the texts and their authors.

Last year, I had the remarkable opportunity to be a part of Professor Yadin’s majors seminar, “The Body and Sexuality in Judaism.” While I learned so much from the content of the class itself, I learned more from Professor Yadin during the process of writing my seminar paper on women’s hair coverings and how they are debated in Jewish law. After handing in my first draft, I needed to rewrite much of my paper, and Dr. Yadin was always willing to sit down and talk to me about what I had written, helping me to understand better what needed to be fixed. As a student who is QUITE the

perfectionist, I struggled mightily that semester with that paper. Professor Yadin worked with me to help me realize that I don't need to be perfect, as long as I am able to accept constructive criticism. I learned skills in this course that will last throughout the rest of my life.

The courses offered by the Jewish studies department are filled with opportunities to be involved in one's own education, in and out of the classroom. In Professor Shandler's "Ethnography of Contemporary Jewish Life" course, we not only studied the Lower East Side, but we took tours of the neighborhood to truly understand the richness of its history and culture. Rather than just studying Jewish art from slides during lecture, Professor Shandler had us creating our own curatorial projects, helping his students to understand what goes into putting together an exhibit in his class on the "History of Jewish Art." Likewise, the three talented Hebrew professors offer their students a variety of opportunities to hear speakers giving lectures in the Hebrew language.

In my junior year, I had the special opportunity to create my own internship and independent study through the Jewish studies department. After spending a summer working at Camp Ramah in Nyack, NY, I came away feeling that something was missing in the education provided for campers about the prayers they would say every morning. There was no continuity between each age group, and I felt the urge to change this situation. After conferring with the camp director, I approached Professor Rendsburg about creating my own independent study so that I could construct a new prayer curriculum for the camp. Professor Rendsburg led me to Professor Maurice Elias, whom you've heard from already today, who agreed to oversee my project.

I spent my entire junior year doing research about how children relate to religion and the concepts of prayer and G-d. Using this information, I produced a curriculum for children ages 4-9 to teach them weekday morning prayers in a camp setting. The chance to preside over my own project was definitely a challenging experience, and it certainly taught me better time management skills. Because I was creating the curriculum on my own, I had to be careful to set deadlines for myself so that I would not fall behind. Without Professor Elias's help, the project might have led me to a nervous breakdown. I probably e-mailed him 4 times a week, every week, for an entire year, making sure that each step I took was in the right direction. He had an unbelievable way of calming me down when I would walk into his office, panicking that I would never complete the project. He was a constant source of positive support, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

Not only did Professor Elias guide me to the creation of a successful curriculum, he served as a mentor for me in my work in the Jewish community. I loved going to Tillet Hall to meet with Professor Elias because, very often, after discussing the progress of my project, we would begin to talk about the issues facing the Jewish community at large. Thanks to Karen Small and my involvement in the Bildner Center, however, I have also had the opportunity to be a part of important dialogue concerning the New Jersey Jewish community and strategies to combat the problems that face it. I was ecstatic when Karen first told me about her efforts to create the New Jersey Jewish Leadership Forum, a partnership between the Bildner Center and all of the Jewish Federations of New Jersey. When Karen asked me to be a part of the initiative, I was so honored. This seven- part series has been a marvelous educational opportunity for me,

especially because of my desire to work in the field of Jewish communal service. To meet with the executives and lay leaders of the New Jersey Jewish Federations has provided me with the chance for a deeper understanding of the inner workings of New Jersey's Jewish community. It definitely says something about these two amazing people that they were two of the first I informed when I was hired for the position I will begin after graduation. I will be starting June 2 as the Director of Teen Services at the JCC on the Palisades in Tenafly, New Jersey.

I want to express my sincerest thanks to Betty Perl for her generous scholarship award. Your assistance goes a long way to helping me afford my education at Rutgers University. Even more so, I would like to thank the faculty of the Jewish Studies department. I have taken 19 courses in this department during my four years at Rutgers, and each one has helped to mold my academic Jewish studies. While I am nervous to graduate and begin life beyond college, I know that much of the expertise I have gained during my four years here will carry me through the future. Thank you.