

### **Maurice Elias speech (Student Awards program, May 2008)**

Well, this is indeed an occasion for great kvelling and I think that kvelling is a very important word because every language has a word that tries to capture this emotion. It means more than celebration. It means more than joy. It denotes a very deep emotional connection and yet it's a very thoughtful term; so, when I think of the Jewish Studies Department at Rutgers, I think very much of this combination of the intellectual and the emotional, contemplative but also action oriented. And so I was very thrilled to be asked to speak at the 2008 Student Awards Ceremony in my dual roles as a faculty member in Psychology, as an affiliated faculty member in Jewish Studies and Academic Director of the Civic Engagement and Service Education Partnership Program at Rutgers which is focused on action. But I have to tell you my other affiliation: a few years ago, I was sitting where you're sitting, as the parent of a Jewish Studies student who was pleased to receive one of the awards that we have come together to celebrate today. I have been on both sides and this is what I mean by kvelling. I don't know how else to describe the feeling.

It is an auspicious time for us. We are here at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the State of Israel, another situation that evokes many thoughts, many feelings. To understand Israel, we have to deal with history and philosophy, we have to deal with past and present. The timeliness of this is so striking to me. I am holding up the April 28<sup>th</sup> issue of the Jerusalem Report. The headline says "Serving Country or Nation" and it's about the debate about national service in Israel. And it's so interesting because Ami Ayalon, who has been designated to lead the Civic Service Administration in Israel, says that what he wants to do is kindle a debate about what it means to be a citizen in Israel. And in the

same way, the existence of the Civic Engagement and Service Education Partnership Program is about kindling that debate: What does it mean to be a citizen of Rutgers? What are our responsibilities and obligations? What's the potential?

As a psychologist, I find it very interesting because if you think about service, it reflects the fact that we are hard-wired for altruism and compassion. You know as human beings, we wouldn't have these feelings of altruism and compassion if it wasn't deeply embedded within our very make-up. And so we have the capacity to care and extend ourselves to help others and of course, the existence of the Bildner Center and the Jewish Studies Department is a manifestation of that action on the part of many people, who, more than just caring, gave of themselves, of their time, of their funds, of their energy, of their intellect, to create something very, very important. The Jewish Studies Department and the Bildner Center are mindful of their mission to enlighten the public, to help teachers with Holocaust education, to bring different points of view about current perspectives on Israel and the Middle East and different scholarly perspectives on Jewish history and culture, to enrich the use of the Hebrew language and to bring it to many, many, many more students in deep and meaningful ways, not just as a language but as a language embodying a culture. We have a faculty that explores intellectual questions, while bringing work into the public domain. We have public scholars; they curate museum shows, they lecture at local film festivals, they talk to community groups, they write for the public, they bicycle for humanitarian causes. Our faculty and the Bildner Center also know how to throw a good party, how to cater an event and get you out on time. It is a very fascinating set of gifts because these are also world-class scholars. They pile up academic recognitions with tremendous regularity, they get promoted at

record rates, they do all the things that you would expect of other faculty but then there is that extra thing that we do. And the extra thing is a distinctive concern for students.

I have to say that the seriousness with which this faculty takes mentoring is, in my travels in the university for 29 years, exemplary. They are concerned with the legacy that our students are going to leave behind. It's not something that ends when our students walk out the door. It's deep and lasting. I say this as an outsider but also as an associated faculty member. I see the memos that Nancy Sinkoff sends to faculty members about what we should be doing as faculty during different times of the year. Such incredible, caring detail. And it's distinctive, I mean it's something that you don't see but it's a part of what allows good things to happen here. And I even enjoy coming to faculty meetings, believe me.

So the growth and success and progress of Jewish Studies is not accidental. It is the product of an extraordinary confluence, but it needs to be sustained and nurtured and this is why our donors are so important. And when we gather here, we recognize that it's all based on the bedrock of our students. We applaud the supportive families, encouraging students to follow in this path. We appreciate the wisdom and generosity of the donors, the dedication of the faculty, and the exceptional staff that this Department and Center have been able to attract and maintain, with leaders Karen Small and Arlene Goldstein. Rutgers University is enriched by this Department. New Jersey is enriched by this Department. The wider community is enriched by this Department. And I look forward to hearing shortly about the accomplishments of our students, who are prepared to step into that legacy, and to seeing the wonderful things that you do and will do, taking the education here and putting it to good in the world. Thank you very much!