

Response to the Presentation of a Covenant Award Barbara Ellison Rosenblit

Barbara Ellison Rosenblit received a 2004 Covenant Award on November 15, 2004. The Covenant Award is given annually to exceptional Jewish educators. The Covenant Foundation was founded in 1990 in partnership with JESNA (the Jewish Education Service of North America) and its mission is to strengthen endeavors in education which perpetuate the identity and heritage of the Jewish people.

The piece you are about to read was Barbara Rosenblit's response after being presented with the Covenant Award. She began her speech with a few words of personal thanks and gratitude to the Covenant Foundation, to others who had faith in her talents, to those with whom she worked, and to her family.

Over a lifetime of teaching I have learned a couple of things. I'll take a minute to tell them to you.

I've learned that in teaching, it's not important what I know — what is important is knowing what my students know and figuring out how to meet them there, where they are.

I've learned that questions are more important than answers. Answers freeze thinking while questions create thought.

I've learned that our understanding of the word "text" can expand beyond mikrah or mishnah — a Yom Kippur text can be a Rembrandt self-portrait, a Bereshit text can be a Haydn oratorio; a text about exile and exodus can be a canto from Dante; a Jewish history text can be a vintage handbag and the woman who carried it. I've learned that casting the widest possible curricular net is the only way to make sense of the world.

I've learned that teachers must be on a continual path of serious learning. For really good teachers, stretching intellectually is as vital as breathing.

I've learned that generally we infantilize teachers with what we offer as educational opportunities.

I've learned that teaching is usually practiced as a gladiator sport — young teachers thrown into the lion's den and through their wits they attempt to survive and, if they do, the crowd cheers.

I've learned that a single classroom teacher has the potential of affecting thousands of lives.

My professional life is bounded by four classroom walls — actually four trailer walls. It has not been easy to spend my life teaching. An uncomfortable truth about this profession is that financial incentives and social recognition drive exceptional teachers out of the classroom into administration or consulting, lecturing, or curriculum design.

What a peculiar inverted career ladder — professional and financial reward for a teacher means leaving the classroom.

Imagine a profession in which the very best teachers would hold endowed chairs that would offer compensation matching any administrator's.

Imagine a profession where there would be opportunities for funded sabbaticals, from which you would return renewed, revitalized, ideas alive, recharged.

Imagine a school whose day is structured so that time is not the foe of learning, a school of mentors and mentees with time to become self-reflective, self-corrective, self-aware teachers.

Imagine a school in which traditional barriers separating disciplines become porous — Jewish Studies would then be viewed through linguistics and midrash, through literature and law and ethics; through theology and ethnography; through gender, sociology and anthropology, history; through art.

Imagine what teaching would be if we truly believed that teaching is not a place to begin but a place to be.

When all is said and done, I have learned that I can give my students only two things — a mirror and a window. With the mirror they can look at their own reflections and perhaps see who they are. Through the window they must look and see what lies beyond themselves.

My hope is that we can employ these same mirrors and windows both to examine and to energize our own profession.

Questions for Discussion

1. Are there individuals in your circle of acquaintances to whom you would like to give this paper to read?
2. Do you agree with and/or identify with any of the thoughts expressed here? If "yes," which ones?
3. How do you react to teaching being practiced as a gladiator sport - young teachers being thrown into the lion's den and through their wits they attempt to survive - and then, if they do, the crowd cheers? Is there an alternative to this scenario?
4. What did you think when you came to the paragraph about an inverted career ladder, i.e., that professional and financial reward for a teacher means leaving the classroom? CAN you imagine a profession in which "the very best teachers would hold endowed chairs that would offer compensation matching any administrator's"?
5. Can you identify partners in your area who would help advocate on behalf of the educators in your community?
6. Who are the people in your own institution who would benefit from reading this article? And, then, how can you use the knowledge that they will gain to make positive changes in your school and community?

Barbara Ellison Rosenblit is a teacher of humanities and tanakh at the Weber School in Atlanta, GA, as well as a staff developer and mentor to new Judaic faculty. Previously, Barbara taught at the Melton Adult Mini School in both the Morasha Teachers Program and the Community Program. During her fifteen years at The Epstein School, also in Atlanta, she taught almost every subject in grades 4-8, was the Curriculum Coordinator, and in her last six years there, was the Middle

chool Director. Barbara's additional teaching includes Dinner and Dante, a course co-taught with a Catholic colleague and underwritten by the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as courses for the Emory University Jewish Studies Department in a variety of settings.

Please send your comments and suggestions on this 4-sider or other issues to advocacy@caje.org.
Michelle Rapchik-Levin, Advocacy Commission Chair