



Social action fellowship bridges theory, practice

S. Orange student is among recipients of seminary honor

by Robert Wiener
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April 23, 2009

As an intern at a New York City anti-poverty program, Bara Slafkes Levitt devotes part of her life to fighting hunger.

At the same time, the South Orange resident is committed to Jewish education and is enrolled as a junior at Columbia University and List College, the undergraduate branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

And now she has received an honor that recognizes the intersection of these two passions. Levitt is one of five students at List to receive a Fellowship in Jewish Social Entrepreneurship.

It is the first year the JTS has offered the fellowships, which gives List students “an understanding of social justice and social change that is rooted in and nourished by Jewish values,” according to a school press release.

The fellowship includes an internship, a biweekly seminar exploring Judaism and activism, and networking opportunities with those already active in “social entrepreneurship.”

“These things combined give us a comprehensive approach to our internships. It is very exciting,” said Levitt in a phone interview on April 14 as she took time out from studying for final exams.

Levitt is spending the semester and part of her summer vacation at the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, an umbrella agency for some 1,200 soup kitchens and food banks. Its stated mission is to “help families move out of the soup kitchen and into self-sufficiency.”

“At the same time, the coalition focuses on political advocacy,” Levitt said. “It does a lot of advocate training and pushing to get people involved in the anti-hunger fight.”

As part of such advocacy, the coalition is fighting the city’s attempts to identify food stamp recipients through finger-imaging technology, an anti-fraud measure that, opponents say, is wasteful and ineffective.

The campaign is helping Levitt hone lobbying skills she learned last summer when she worked on women’s issues as an intern in the Washington, DC, office of Hadassah.

Part of her work at the coalition involves the Interfaith Alliance Against Hunger, where Levitt contacts faith-based student groups.

Much of the coalition’s outreach work is focused on Manhattan’s communities of color. “The focus of our work is above 125th Street, where there tends to be mostly churches and a few mosques. There really aren’t many synagogues,” she said. “In many ways, the Christian motivation is the same as ours. In the meetings, they speak of the moral imperative to help others, to help the stranger and the downtrodden.... It brings Christians and Muslims and others to the table.”

There are certainly issues that unite members of the coalition, Levitt said. “There is definitely the enthusiasm to collaborate and people are motivated by bringing faith and hunger issues together.” However, she added, there are also issues that can be divisive.

With competing beliefs and constituencies, “everything doesn’t come out as smoothly as you might want at the end of a meeting. But it is beneficial to have the back-and-forth to figure out what different communities need.”

Social justice tie-in

Levitt is a graduate of Columbia High School in Maplewood and attends Congregation Beth El in South Orange. At the university and JTS, she has a double major — sociology and Jewish women’s studies.

Her study of sociology enables Levitt “to understand things in terms of race, class, economics, gender, and other elements that play a role,” she said.

Back at List, “we look at various Jewish texts that have to do with social justice and tie in themes with timely holidays to put our work in more of a Jewish context.”



Bara Slafkes Levitt, a List College Fellow in Jewish Social Entrepreneurship, at the Western Wall in Jerusalem on a visit to Israel.

Photo courtesy Bara Slafkes Levitt

For example, in considering Passover, Levitt said, they examined the story of the two Israelite midwives, Shifra and Puah, who rebelled against the Pharaoh's demand that the male Jewish babies they helped deliver be put to death.

"They were there for the birth of Moses, but they didn't kill him. So in class we looked at: What was their leadership? What did they stand up against?"

She also discovered a connection between the secular and religious portions of her life beyond the pages of the Bible.

"When I went to my seder I was thinking about people saying, 'We're hungry. Let's get to the meal.' But my understanding of hunger is now so different. It isn't 'I haven't eaten since lunchtime and the seder is taking forever.' It's that there are really people out there who really are hungry a lot of the time and have no food to put on the table, or need to decide between paying their rent or buying food.

"I was able to express that to the rest of my family and talk a little about what it actually means to be hungry."

While she is "not particularly interested in becoming a rabbi," Levitt said, she does plan to stay involved in social action programs and the Jewish community through work with Hadassah.

"Most likely I'll be going into education," she predicted, and said she plans to teach before becoming a school administrator or educational policy expert.

"I don't really consider myself religious, but I consider myself maybe more than just culturally Jewish. The learning component of Judaism is really important to me," she said.

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