

Reflections from the 2010 SJCS Culmination Class
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It was June 12th, 2009, the first day of our Communal Service opening retreat. I woke up that morning excited about the academic adventure I was undertaking, nervous about if my classmates would like me, and thrilled that I would get to spend a night at a Jewish camp, an experience I'd never had before. My emotions were no more complicated than that – I get to start this great new program! I hope people like me! Will I be sleeping in a bunk bed?

A few hours later, I sat down at lunch with my first- and second-year classmates, Richard Siegel, Lori Klein, and then Dean of the Los Angeles Campus, Steven Windmueller. I was totally star-struck by Dean Windmueller – two of my most important mentors from my time at the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston, Nancy Kaufman and Alan Ronkin, had both told me about how important Steven was to their careers, and that he was a paragon of Jewish professional leadership and service. There I sat, a plate of tuna salad in front of me, poised to soak up every ounce of knowledge I could from this incredible man.

It was then that Steven told us that in a matter of days, it was likely that the HUC Board of Governors would vote to close our program, and potentially to close the Los Angeles campus all together. He spoke about the financial difficulties that HUC, like so many other organizations, had encountered in the last year. Needless to say, this was not exactly the welcome to the school or to the field that I had anticipated, and the panic it inspired in my classmates was also just a bit troubling. Here we were, about to begin our graduate school education, being told that within a week our program may not even exist anymore.

I chose to begin with this story because as I prepared to give this speech, I was compelled to draw inspiration from the book of Deuteronomy, the book of the Torah from which we read at this time of year. Deuteronomy finds the Israelites on the brink of redemption: there they stand after forty years of wandering in the wilderness, after generations of bondage, looking down into the Holy Land God had promised them. Deuteronomy is Moses' opportunity to retell to the Israelites their own story of what had come before, of the journey they had taken together – a journey that saw the dramatic reorganization of their society, a journey that took them from a collection of individuals to a cohesive people.

It is an immense privilege to stand before you today to retell the story of the last year and a half. It has been a period of tremendous flux in the Jewish communal sphere, but also of great resilience and a rededication to our core values. And it has been a period that has taken the eight of us receiving our Certificates of Jewish Communal Service from a collection of individual students, with different backgrounds, different aspirations, and different Jewish identities, to a cohesive cohort on the cusp of beginning a variety of important and impressive careers.

The Jewish organized community we will be joining, or rejoining, when we finish our time at HUC looks dramatically different than it did two years ago. Organizations have closed, merged,

“streamlined” or otherwise undergone change. Fundraising has been more difficult than ever; there are fewer jobs to be had; Israel-Diaspora relations are more strained than we could have possibly imagined. And yet, our communal professionals have taken these challenges and are using them as opportunities to rededicate our organizations to our core values of the continuity and flourishing of our community.

HUC and the School of Jewish Communal Service have both done just that. SJCS has not only survived HUC’s financial crisis, it has thrived: the first year class is twice the size of the second year class, and the program has undergone a thoughtful strategic plan and will emerge this fall as the newly minted School of Jewish Nonprofit Management. HUC itself kept all four of its campuses open, and has created the New Way Forward to ensure a fiscally viable, educationally excellent future. Federations and other organizations across the country created emergency funds to support their struggling constituents and have continued to support innovative initiatives in their communities. They have created a new model for how the Jewish community responds to crisis. The Jewish organizations that have survived the last two years have honed their missions, become more efficient, and continue to provide invaluable services to the communities around them.

My classmates and I are preparing to enter this new iteration of the Jewish communal field, armed with the best education and training possible to tackle the challenges that will come our way. We are as ready as we can be to help navigate our community through this period of uncertainty because of the tools and mentorship we’ve received here at HUC. In the last year and a half, we have gained critical skills for Jewish nonprofit management: how to raise the dollars we so vitally need to continue serving the Jewish people; how to navigate the leadership and management dilemmas we will encounter; how to build relationships and create partnerships with other agencies, Jewish and non-Jewish alike; how to analyze our communities in order to best assess their needs; and, perhaps most importantly, how to rely on each other and our other colleagues to help support us personally and organizationally.

The time we’ve spent in the School of Jewish Communal Service has created an indelible intellectual, professional, and yes, social, bond between me and my seven classmates. We have come to intimately know each other’s academic strengths and weaknesses. A couple of weeks ago, an organizational consultant came to work with us in Steven Windmueller’s leadership class. She administered the Kiersey Bates Personality Sorter, a personality test similar to the Myers-Briggs. As we discussed who was an Extrovert and who an Introvert, who a Sensate and who a Feeler, each of us could easily come up with many examples of when our classmates had behaved according to her “type,” and why it was so wonderful that she is the way she is. We have come to understand where each other’s professional aspirations lie, and in what corner of the Jewish community we want to effect change. We have practiced our listening and our feedback skills with each other, practicing constructive candor both in and out of the classroom. And we have come to truly love each other – I consider these women my family in Los Angeles, and feel so blessed and honored to have had – and hopefully to continue to have – them in my life.

The Certificate in Jewish Communal Service is an intense experience, both academically and personally – our own personal Sinai wilderness. And the Promised Land we are poised to enter

does not look exactly how we had expected or hoped that it would. But it is nevertheless ours – our joy to inherit, our burden to care for, our legacy to leave behind. My classmates and I owe Richard Siegel, Lori Klein, Hattie Pearson, Steven Windmueller, Bruce Phillips, Sarah Benor, Jake Cunningham, Josh Garroway, Etel Leit, Richard Levy, Julie Pelc, Phil Liff-Grieff, Leslie Robin and our other mentors a huge debt of gratitude. Without our teachers, we would have been as the Israelites would have been without Moses – lost to wander, aimless, divided, without a compelling vision of the future to draw us forward. And without each other, we would have been as orphans, without a family to support us, motivate us to try harder, to be better.

I hope that I have captured in some small sense the journey that our profession and our class have taken in the last two years. Thank you all for your contribution to that journey.