

JTS Students Name Teaneck Man ‘Professor of the Year’

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Jonathan Milgram, assistant professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, says he has learned a great deal from watching the way his own children are learning at Ben Porat Yosef in Paramus.

“My teaching style has been very much affected by observing how wonderfully kids learn,” said the Teaneck resident, explaining the emphasis in the lower grades on varied and individualized instruction.

Not everyone absorbs information in the same way, he observed. “Watching how successfully [children] learn, I asked myself [as a college professor] how I would teach kids who study that way when they reached college age.”

His conclusion — to focus similarly on individualized instruction — has been greeted warmly by his JTS students. Milgram was elected professor of the year by the Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies of JTS for the 2008–2009 academic year.



The professor said he has tried to foster the intellectual growth of individual students even though his classes are fairly large. He also tries to make himself available to his students.

“I care deeply about the material and make sure they understand why Talmud is an essential discipline to study even in the 21st century,” he said, adding that such study is “also relevant to intellectual and spiritual growth.”

Milgram, who has done research in Talmud redaction and medieval Jewish law and is writing a book about rabbinic inheritance law, came to JTS in 2004 after serving as professor at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies and London School for Jewish Studies. A former coordinator of JTS’s Saul Lieberman Institute for Talmudic Research — an institute dedicated to the computerization of medieval Talmud manuscripts — he has also taught at Hunter College, the Drisha Institute, and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah.

With a bachelor's degree from both Columbia University and JTS, a master's degree and rabbinic ordination from Yeshiva University, and a doctorate from Bar-Ilan University in Israel, Milgram feels he has "crafted a style of teaching that responds to different needs."

"I want to keep it fun, interesting, and immediate," he said, "making clear the relevance and practicality of talmudic wisdom."

The professor said he varies what he does so that people with different strengths will be equally served.

For example, he said, "I may give a 15-minute lecture, take 10 minutes to look at the text together [with the students] and check how they're doing, and then do some kind of exercise to flesh out the text."

In addition, he might offer a video presentation of some kind, said Milgram, who recently invited students to his home for a sukkah party, "integrating the practice of Jewish life with its teachings."

Exams are also varied, he said, noting that he mixes oral tests, written quizzes, and take-home papers.

"Everyone has different strengths," he said. "By varying instruction and assessment, I ensure that everyone can learn. I see it as my job as an educator to package the knowledge I wish to teach in ways that are accessible to the audiences receiving it."

Milgram said he has learned a good deal from his own teachers, whom he called the greatest scholars of their generation, citing in particular Shamma Friedman (JTS and Bar-Ilan University), Menahem Kahana (Hebrew University), and Hayyim Soloveitchik (Yeshiva University).

"Each of my mentors brought something unique to his teaching style and at times I see elements of their teaching echoed in my own," he said. He adapts his philosophy of individualized instruction to lifelong learners as well, he added, and has served as an adult education teacher and scholar-in-residence all over the country.