



Gratz Insider, December 2015 - Story Continuation

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Notable Newsmakers Bring *Naches* to Gratz

Upon learning that she had been selected to receive an honorary doctorate in pedagogy from JTS, **Hedda Morton** was utterly speechless. Then, after hearing the names of the other 12 honorees, she managed to eke out incredulously, “Are you sure there hasn’t been some mistake?”

Given all of Morton’s accomplishments in the field of Jewish education, there was definitely no mistake. Morton served as principal of a religious school in Charlottesville, Virginia, and later, worked in community Hebrew schools in Philadelphia for over a decade. For the last 14 years, she has been the educational leader of Adath Israel Congregation in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. Over time, Morton’s position at Adath evolved from education director to director of congregational learning. As her current title implies, she is responsible for all educational programming at the synagogue, including religious school, adult education, community-wide conferences and any other educational initiatives.

Committed to inclusivity, Morton organized the first-ever conference in the Princeton, Mercer and Bucks County region on children with learning differences in the synagogue school setting. She has also expanded her school’s resource center, which relies on innovative programming to cater to the learning needs of all children. In recognition of her work on inclusion in religious school education, she received the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Ministries Educator Award.

Discussing her long and productive career in Jewish education - which also included a stint as president of the Jewish Educators Assembly - Morton describes herself as “the product of many hands.” As she recounts her story, it is clear that one of those hands belongs to Gratz College. Morton graduated from Gratz with a master’s in Jewish education in 1992. Describing her education there as being like the “gold standard” in professional training, she adds that Dr. Saul Wachs’ approach to curriculum design has since informed every curricular decision she has made.

“I entered Gratz with the goal of becoming a synagogue school administrator,” says Morton, “and left as a Jewish educator.”

Making the doctorate in pedagogy even sweeter for Morton was the fact that she shared this honor with her colleague, dear friend and former Gratz classmate, **Hazzan Arlyne Unger**. Like Morton, Hazzan Unger was selected to receive the doctorate in pedagogy because of her contributions as a longtime practitioner in the field of Jewish education. She has served as educational director of Beth Tikvah B’nai Jeshurun (BTBJ) in Erdenheim, Pennsylvania, for 22 years - and for the last 20 years, she has also been the congregation’s cantor. In fact, she is the first woman in the Philadelphia area to hold these two positions simultaneously. In addition, she has taught religious school, trained cantorial students and held leadership positions in professional organizations, like the Jewish Educators Assembly and the Cantors Assembly Delaware Valley Region.

Hazzan Unger attributes her professional success to her deep-rooted passion for her work. Even as a young girl, she loved religious school, explaining that it “filled a deep need in [her] soul.” Later, she spent a considerable amount of time at Gratz College, where she earned multiple degrees, including a diploma from the Gratz high school program, a Bachelor of Hebrew Literature with a Hebrew teaching certificate, a Master of Arts in Jewish Education and a Master of Arts in Jewish Music. She even traveled to Israel - and met her future husband - on a Gratz *ulpan* program.

As a result of her long history with Gratz, she jokes, “I can honestly and proudly say that I took more courses with Saul Wachs than anyone else in the world!”

Hazzan Unger credits Gratz’s hands-on, practical approach to education, including its valuable internship program, for enabling her to assume the role of educational leader at BTBJ with confidence. In addition, the joint degrees in Jewish education and Jewish music from Gratz made it possible for her to combine her two passions and to pursue her current career path.

Yet, despite her dual role at BTBJ, Hazzan Unger concludes, “I see myself first and foremost as an educator and bring that to everything I do.”

Equally committed to Jewish education is **Wendy Light**, the third Gratz College alumna to receive an honorary doctorate in pedagogy from JTS last month. Now living in Los Angeles, Light pursues her passion for Jewish education as an independent consultant for synagogues, Federations and other Jewish institutions, where she provides training and program support.

Light began her career as a religious school teacher, and later, served as education director of two Philadelphia-area congregations. By the end of Light’s ten-year term at Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El in Wynnewood, student enrollment in that congregation’s religious school program had almost tripled. After her three-year term at Ohev Shalom of Bucks County, student enrollment there had increased by 25%.

Light’s local success was followed by her professional advancement onto the national stage. In 2001, she was hired as a national education consultant for the The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ), the umbrella organization for Conservative congregations. Light worked in the USCJ’s Department of Education for the next 13 years before going off on her own as an independent consultant.

Throughout her extensive career, Light received many awards and honors, including a \$56,000 PELIE Grant for the purpose of training over 100 educators. But, she still lists her selection as valedictorian for her 1989 commencement from Gratz College’s Master of Arts in Jewish Education program as one of her greatest honors.

Describing the Gratz faculty as special, Light says that her professors provided her with the necessary foundation to construct her own ideas on Jewish education. Committed to the principles of diversity and pluralism, the Gratz faculty does not, according to Light, create “cookie cutter educators.” Instead, their goal is to nurture each student’s individual passion for Jewish education, regardless of upbringing or affiliation. For Light, that passion now comes from the responsibility of preparing the Jewish educators of today to inspire the Jewish leaders of tomorrow.

As Wendy Light, Hazzan Arlyne Unger and Hedda Morton received their honorary doctorates in pedagogy last month, Professor Wachs watched with pride, in part, because their achievement is a reflection on Gratz College, a sentiment clearly confirmed by the women themselves.

“We are very proud of these three distinguished graduates,” says Professor Wachs. “They have all enriched the field of Jewish education and raised its stature through their efforts.”