

Mitzi Steiner, 20

A beit midrash that bridges gaps on college campus

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After finding a long-neglected clause in their constitution, Mitzi Steiner reinstated the practice of beginning each meeting of the Hillel student board at Columbia University with a dvar Torah.

Just two years into her career at Barnard College, Steiner, who is pursuing a dual major in American studies and human rights, has already established herself as a leader in Jewish education. Her freshman year, she led the Beit Midrash Committee at Hillel and founded the Jewish Education Workshop (JEW), a pluralistic initiative that matches up student teachers with people seeking to learn specific Jewish skills. "We wanted to create a peer mentorship program where students would work one on one to learn any of the skills that they were interested in," ranging from understanding the prayers to leading High Holy Day mussaf, Steiner says. Today, some of the first participants are now teachers in the program.

Now the Los Angeles native serves as the education coordinator on the Hillel board, where she oversees JEW and other educational activities, working together with representatives of all Jewish affiliations on campus.

"Education is one place where people from different backgrounds can work together," she says, "because learning is learning. If you're sharing a common text, that is something you can speak about together and learn about together."

Steiner, who studied in Israel at Nishmat for a year after high school, attributes her love for Jewish education to her summers spent learning at the Upper West Side's Drisha Institute during high school. She returned to be a counselor in the program last year. While different denominations on campus are sometimes reluctant to work together, Steiner believes that "it's critical, especially when there are limited resources, to bridge gaps between communities, to work together for a common purpose. The desire to learn crosses all boundaries."

Lunch and learn: Steiner tutors first graders once a week at P.S. 36 to help improve their literacy skills.

Leadership qualities: Steiner will serve as the junior class president at Barnard next year.

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