Leah Newman
Commencement Speech 2017

“The years furnish us a hard school, and just as the hammer is needed by the sculptor to fashion a masterpiece, so the blows of tribulation, of mistakes in belief and in action, the attainment of the lesson of moderation in the presence of life’s defeats and victories—all the tragedy and the pride, the joy and the agony of our earthly experience, may, perhaps, help to mold a deserving soul.” On June 13, 1953 the Brandeis University Commencement speaker, Rabbi Louis I. Newman, addressed the second graduating class in a powerful speech titled “Discovering Values for Ourselves,” asking each student to reflect on the importance of their individual chosen life work, and imploring them to discover the wonders of life as they began the journey down their own distinct path that they had just begun to pave.

President Leibowitz, members of the board of trustees, honorary degree recipients, phenomenal professors, irreplaceable staff members, loving family and friends, and of course my fellow members of the class of 2017, thank you for giving me the honor and privilege to speak from the same podium that my great-grandfather, Rabbi Louis I. Newman, spoke from 64 years ago.

Today, I look out in front of me and don’t just see a group of graduating students, I see individuals with potential to change the world, chiseled by our Brandeis experience. I see writers and producers, doctors and lawyers, accountants and consultants, artists and historians, and activists for the causes in which we each individually so strongly believe. In my time working for the Brandeis admissions office the most frequent question I would receive from prospective students, aside from “how do you survive the cold,” was can you paint me a picture of the typical Brandeis student. After four years of struggling to come up with an answer, I am proud to say I
still don’t have one. On this campus, and within our class, it is hard to find two people with the same path of study, the same extracurricular interests, the same form of personal expression, and a passion for the exact same causes.

On March 11, 2011, I first set my snowy footprint on this campus, and I’d like to believe that my footprint, along with all of ours will forever leave a mark. My tour was guided by a junior who was a double major, a triple minor, a student actor, producer, varsity swim team member, Crowd Control performer, Waltham group volunteer, Orientation Core Committee member, and in his free time president of the Student Union. Back then I was in awe of his accomplishments, and so inspired that a college student could have the drive and time to participate in so many meaningful activities. Today I look back and realize that he was pretty typical, combining his interests and translating them into a personal charge to change the world, starting from the most obvious place, our world for four years, the Brandeis campus.

Often when graduating college students look forward they see graduation as a starting point to the rest of their lives, but I ask you all today to look back to our first day of orientation and see that as the start of our journey that is only continuing after today. Not only is this a time for reflection, but it’s a time to be proud of all that we have accomplished in these past four years, and a time to be thankful for the people and the institution that helped us accomplish these goals.

Did you act in a show? Coordinate a Waltham Group Initiative? Share your culture with fellow students through song, dance, or a campus favorite, free food? Did you advocate for a cause you believed in? Speak out against racial injustices? Speak up for those whose have been stripped of their rights or those don’t have access to the amazing education we’ve been afforded? Or even just pass a class in a subject that was hard for you? These victories, big or small, won’t
just have a lasting impact on our selves, but on the Brandeis community, and the global community as a whole. You may not know it yet, but you have inspired so many students to follow in your footsteps, and grow their passion for the same causes you so strongly believe in. Herbie Rosen, my tour guide from March 11, 2011 doesn’t know it, but he inspired me to pursue my interests and attempt to better myself and the world through the tools Brandeis gave me.

I’m sure you all remember our first club fair when you wrote your name down to sign up for every club listserv that even remotely grabbed your attention. Or when it came time to declare your major, and you couldn’t help but contemplate a major in eight different subjects. What I know came next for me, and I hope came next for all of you, was the thought process that allowed you to identify how pursuing studies in these subjects, or involvement in these clubs, would allow you to have an impact on yourself and others around you.

While identifying our passions, as Brandeis students we’ve also wrestled with ideas that were foreign to us before starting college, allowing our minds to grow and our previous beliefs to be challenged. For me, what has always characterized these discussions is a reverence for everyone’s opinion, and the core belief that no one person’s opinion is greater than any others, they are all worth hearing. After a recent post-class discussion where I remained silent in order to hear my fellow student’s poignant arguments, Professor Maura Jane Farrelly, emailed me to ask if I wanted to continue the discussion outside of the classroom, as she noted, the only way we can learn is through sharing thoughts that may have otherwise not been considered. To me, this characterized my entire Brandeis experience. As individual students we have forged our own paths, but not without being supported by the paths others have created, allowing us to take a piece of Brandeis wherever we go. Never forget your passions, never give up on your mission,
and always remember that learning can only come from listening to everyone’s opinion, even those who we may strongly disagree with.

As my great-grandfather said to the class of 1953, “resolve to stand firmly upon your own feet; seek your own independence; try your wings as you wish; feel free to make your own mistakes…In college you have been embarked on the quest for academic truth; in the community you must learn to implement the truth you have you have sought.” My fellow graduates, now is not just the start of a new chapter, it is the continuation of the book that started when we set foot on this campus and began our quest to discover how we can change the world. Now it is time to act upon those values we have discovered. Take your talents, combine your passions, and continue to forge your own path to change the world around you. Congratulations class of 2017, today is the beginning of the rest of our journey!