

NEJS Newsletter



Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, Brandeis University

2008

A Tradition of Excellence



The Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies bears a proud tradition of scholarly excellence in both of the fields it embraces: the history, languages, and cultures of the ancient Near East and the modern Middle East, and the study of the Jewish people, including their history, religion, literature, and place in civilization.

Our students and faculty demonstrate this commitment to excellence. In this 2008 edition of the NEJS Newsletter, we shine a spotlight on the accomplishments and stories of some of the department's current students, alumni, and faculty. These people are the epitome of the department's commitment to research and teaching distinction.

- We feature two of our many undergraduate NEJS majors, Avram Mlotek and Zach Margulies. These young scholars are putting their NEJS knowledge and values to work through exciting internship and work opportunities.
- We brag about our many current graduate students who are winning awards, publishing, and presenting papers in dozens of multi-national conferences.
- We highlight two recent alumni who impressively answer the question, "What do I do with a NEJS Master's?!"
- We are proud of our faculty, and we share some of their recent accomplishments.
- Finally, we remember that the NEJS Department is part of a complicated nexus of programs and centers. In this newsletter, we hope to untangle the institutions and explain their different missions.

We hope you enjoy this 2008 edition of the NEJS Newsletter!

NEJS Undergrads

Brandeis has one of the strongest and largest departments of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies (NEJS) outside of Israel. NEJS faculty examine a wide variety of fields, including the Bible and the ancient Near East, the modern Middle East, Jewish civilization from its inception through contemporary times, as well as Christianity and Islam. Courses are taught at many levels and introduce a wide variety of scholarly approaches, including historical, textual, sociological, and literary. Students of all backgrounds are encouraged to explore the diverse traditions represented in the department. The NEJS undergraduate major is designed to combine a broad

education in the various disciplines and periods that constitute this field, with a degree of specialization in one specific area.

Undergraduate students are welcome to study in the department as majors or as minors, or simply to take individual courses. Majors find that their NEJS background serves them well in preparation for a great variety of graduate and professional careers. Past majors have gone on to law and medicine, academic or diplomatic/professional careers related to the ancient Near East, the modern Middle East, Judaica, the rabbinate, Jewish education, and other professions in the Jewish community.



Avram Mlotek '09

from Teaneck, New Jersey, is majoring in NEJS and “probably minoring in Creative Writing.” He has been awarded the 2008 Ethics Center Student Fellowship, and he will be working for Hope Community Services this summer at an orphanage in Mekelle, Ethiopia, teaching English, counseling, and creating a music program based on the traditional Jewish concept of *niggun*, or voice music. Performing publicly since age 4, Avram speaks and sings in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. He currently works in two different Hebrew schools teaching third- to fifth-grade students, some of whom have Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and autism.

After the summer, Avram will travel to Israel to volunteer at an Ethiopian absorption center. There, he will work on a similar music program.

NEJS IN ACTION



Gath, where he volunteered for the four-week summer season. Besides being his first dig, it was also his first trip to Israel. “I absolutely loved it.”

The eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath Archaeological Project is a long-term investigation aimed at studying the archaeology and history of one of the most important sites in Israel.

The Tell was the site of the largest of the five principle Philistine cities, and many scholars identify it as the biblical city of Gath. Several biblical figures hail from Gath, most famous among them the warrior giant Goliath (1 Samuel 17). The site was settled almost continuously from the 5th

millennium BCE until modern times. Zach’s excavation area was on a ridge overlooking the Elah Valley.

Zach returned the next summer, this time to a posting near the acropolis in a Philistine kitchen destroyed in Hazael’s sack of the city in the 9th century BCE. Knowing Zach’s deep archeological interest, his supervisor this time taught him the technical side of the profession—the paperwork, recording, labeling, drawing balk sections, and so on. He learned digging techniques, such as identifying pottery and differentiating soil colors.

Zach will return this summer as an assistant supervisor. After college, he hopes to continue his NEJS studies in graduate school, focusing on Near Eastern Archaeology and Literature.



Zach Margulies '10

is double-majoring in NEJS (on the Bible and Ancient Near East track) and Classics (Classical Archaeology and Ancient History track), with “possibly a History minor.” He arrived at his interest in the ancient world through hands-on archeological experience.



Four years ago, after his junior year of high school, Zach participated in his first archeological dig. A family friend working on

an excavation had made the suggestion, and Zach jumped at the chance. He joined a dig at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/

NEJS Grad Students

Doctoral students develop a program of study within the three major graduate fields offered in the department: Bible and the Ancient Near East, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, and Jewish Studies. Students undertake three years of course work in preparation for their doctoral examinations and the supervised writing of a PhD Dissertation.

Michelle E. Taylor

just completed the commentary on "Numbers" for the *Biblia Africana* Commentary Project. The project aims to produce one-volume commentaries on the Hebrew Bible that draw on the intellectual traditions of the peoples of Africa and the worldwide African Diaspora. The volume will be published in the fall. In addition, Michelle's article was chosen for a reading at the *Biblia Africana* Panel at the upcoming Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston, November 2008.

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Adam Mendelsohn

has been appointed as an assistant professor of Jewish Studies at the College of Charleston beginning in Fall 2008. However, he is taking a leave of absence for the 2008-09 academic year to participate in the Fellowship program at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at UPenn.

In 2007-08, he was awarded a Dissertation Year fellowship by

the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and a Dissertation Scholarship from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. He presented papers at the "Global Civil Rights: Third Annual Scholars in Critical Race" conference in Memphis (March 2008) and at the "Conflict and Community in Early America and the Atlantic World" Biennial Graduate Student Conference at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania (September 2007).

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David E. Bokovoy

published an article in the Spring 2008 *Journal of Biblical Literature*, entitled, "שמעו והעידו: שמועו וזהעידו: Invoking the Council as Witnesses in Amos 3:13."

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Michael A. Singer

presented a paper at the New England Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (April 18, 2008), entitled, "What to do When Yahweh Attacks:

Students in the Master's program are trained in either the general discipline of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies or in one or more of its specialized areas. The program generally requires the equivalent of two years of course work culminating in a comprehensive examination, a thesis, or a final project.

Three Targumic Treatments of Ex. 4:24-26."

In addition, he wrote four entries on noted American Jewish women for the forthcoming *Westminster-John Knox Dictionary of American Women and Religion* (tentative title).

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Molly DeMarco

presented a paper at the New England Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (April 18, 2008), entitled, "Amos' 'Cows of Bashan': The Beautiful and the Damned."

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Lucia Finotto

presented two papers at two conferences this year: "Attitudes Towards Jews and Crypto-Jews in Medieval Sicily: Ecclesiastical Powers, Secular Rulers and the Inquisitions," delivered at the First International Conference on Inquisition Studies, Springfield, Missouri (Feb. 8, 2008), and "Analyzing Anti-Jewish Violence in Late Medieval Sicily: Power,

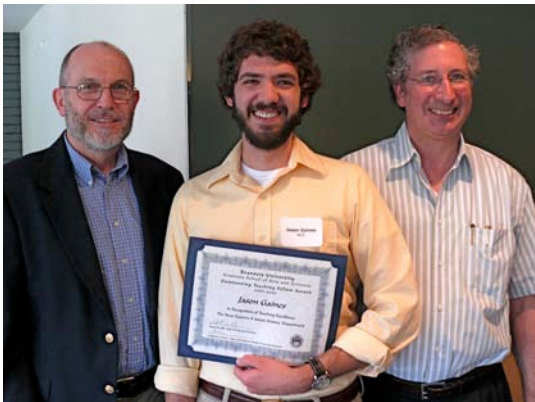
People and Perceptions,” delivered at *Beholding Violence: A Conference on Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, Bowling Green State University (OH) (Feb. 28, 2008). In the latter, she writes, “The population of medieval Sicily has always been portrayed as one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse of the Mediterranean world and often praised for a high level of tolerance and reluctance to adhere to harsh anti-minority regulations. However, episodes of physical and psychological violence against the Jewish community were considered as within the normal range of acceptable, although generally punishable, incidents throughout the Middle Ages. Christians were always the sole and unique religious group entitled to full citizenship on the island, despite their receptiveness to religious and cultural diversity.

Using original sources of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, this paper examined how episodes of anti-Jewish violence in medieval Sicily are described in official documents and church and Inquisition records, and how they are perceived by observers who did not belong to the power elites (merchants, travelers, and laypersons). Through the examination of coercive measures, like the obligation to listen to sermons by specially appointed friars, the practice of stoning Jews on particular Christian religious festivals, and the comparison to writings of laypersons, like the description of an *auto-da-fé* by a Venetian merchant, I showed how the ‘eye of the time’ can be inferred from the texts. I also tried to understand if and how the perception that Sicilian Jews and Judaizers had of their own identity and place in the public sphere may have been shaped by those same views.”

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Jason Gaines

received the 2007-08 Outstanding Teaching Fellow Award from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at a ceremony on May 7th. Jason’s advisor Marc Brettler and NEJS Department chair David Wright attended.



Jason presented a paper at the New England Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (April 18, 2008), entitled, “Private Rites, Public Religion: The Evolution of Public and Private Ritualized Action in the Book of Genesis.” He writes, “Rituals exist in degrees on a continuum, and some actions are more ‘ritualized’ than others. The book of Genesis contains ninety-six examples of highly ritualized action. The characters execute some of these rituals

in private, such as when Abraham nearly sacrifices his son Isaac, while other times the characters perform rituals as part of public events, such as the large wedding feast when Jacob marries Leah. Genesis is comprised mainly of the redacted work of three distinct authors who wrote hundreds of years apart, and it is possible to see an evolution in the types of rituals about which the authors wrote. In general and over time, there is a progression away from private ceremonies and towards public rituals. Most ritual actions found in material attributed to the oldest author are performed in private, while the most recent author is seemingly distrustful of private religion and prefers public settings for his narratives. This evolution is either part of an authorial attempt to centralize and control the cult, or else it is a byproduct of that struggle. The progression also sought to safeguard proper cultic observance as the Judean community went into the Babylonian exile. In order to guarantee the continuation of the Israelite religion, texts were written to steer the community away from the observance of secret, private rites and towards the concept of a public religion.”

A PhD Survival Guide

By Michael R. Cohen, PhD

When I first came to Brandeis, I was lucky—I quickly found people to show me the ropes. Most of the advice I received was helpful, and much of it has stuck with me to this day. As I prepare to head out into the world of academia, I am happy to pass their words on to those who are just beginning their academic careers. May they be as useful to you as they were to me.

Plan your courses with your comprehensive exams in mind.

Just as you might think through an outline of a paper before you write, it is a good idea to look at the big picture before you start your coursework. Sit down with your professors and figure out what they will want you to know in three years. In what fields should you be comfortable? What are the key books in those fields? Are there enough courses in the department, or will you need to set up readings courses? If you think this through in advance, putting reading lists together down the road will be a snap.

Don't fear your comprehensive exams.

I can't say that I believed this when I first heard it... but if you plan your list early, the exam gives you an opportunity to demonstrate what you know. It is a chance to have an academic conversation with your professors and to demonstrate that you can hold your own. They don't want to know what is on page 100 of Salo Baron, and they don't want to fail you. If they didn't think you were ready, they wouldn't let you take the test.

Once you have done some dissertation research, start writing.

Don't wait until you think you are ready to write a whole chapter, but write a little bit each day. The very act of writing will help you to clarify your thoughts and help you to focus your research. It may even prevent you from spending weeks in an archive gathering materials that you won't need! While this material may never make the final draft, simply starting to write will take you in new directions, so don't be afraid to start.

Your dissertation is never going to be perfect.

Don't get me wrong, it needs to be good... but if you aim for perfection, it will never get done. Listen to your professors on this one, and follow their advice. Remember—after you finish, you will have time to revise and transform your dissertation into articles or into a book.



Michael is the Schusterman Visiting Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies at Tulane University, and he received his PhD from NEJS in May 2008. His

dissertation, Schechter's Disciples: How Solomon Schechter's Students Created Conservative Judaism, 1902-1946, analyzes the emergence of Conservative Judaism in America.

NEJS Alumni

Alumni from the NEJS Department have gone on to greatness. Below are two stories from students who received Master's degrees from Brandeis in the last several years.

Wendy Fergusson

moved to Washington, DC after finishing her NEJS degree to begin a job as the Director and core curator of the Ann Loeb Bronfman Gallery. She curates exhibitions and develops supplemental programs that enhance Jewish identity, examine issues of social importance, and develop community. Over the course of the last year, she has mounted three exhibitions: "Reconciling Worlds: The Work of Soviet Artist Yefim Ladyzhensky"; "Inside the Great Synagogue of Aleppo, Syria"; and "L(A)TTITUDES": mapping borders and boundaries of Israel and Palestine.

She is currently in the middle of curating an exhibition on American Jewish gangsters (spring 2009) and will present her MA thesis work in an exhibition of the Jews at Black Mountain College, NC (fall 2009).

She is also continuing her research with the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia and is finishing hundreds of American Jewish biographies for the first floor of the new museum (opening 2010).



Wendy (right), pictured with an art dealer.

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Nicole Samuel

is a Research Associate at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. Her research portfolio includes Jewish identity, Jewish education, and communal organizations; previous projects include studies of Jewish summer camp, young adult involvement in volunteer service, and the evaluation of the Limmud NY conference. Nicole was a lead member of the research team mapping Jewish education in the United States for the Jim Joseph Foundation. She is also co-author of *Developing the Developers*, a study analyzing the shortage of qualified fundraisers in the Jewish community. She received her MA in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Women's Studies from Brandeis University in 2005, concentrating in Contemporary Jewish Life. Nicole wrote her Master's thesis on innovative *minyanim*, traditional worship communities with egalitarian or gender-inclusive practices.

Religious Zionism and the Messianic Clock

By Mordechai Inbari, PhD

Mordechai “Motti” Inbari received a PhD in 2006 from the Institute for Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is the first Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, 2007-2008.

For the last ten years, I have been studying active messianic movements in contemporary Israel. I joined End of Days cults, I interviewed prophets, and I demonstrated at the gates of the Temple Mount. I witnessed the strength of millenarian expectations, followed by the failure of prophesies and the subsequent decline of messianic faith. I studied people who are at the fringe of society—some in regard to the religious mainstream, others who see themselves as an avant-garde of a much wider political phenomenon.

So, what’s a secular Jew like me doing interacting with people so enchanted by religious dreams and aspirations? Truthfully, I was drawn to this study by accident. As a junior freelance journalist in 1994, I was assigned by my editor, together with my wife who was also a reporter, to bring a story about a strange new phenomenon. A rabbi named Uzi Meshulam, who lived in a small town near Tel Aviv, had organized a violent demonstration with his followers. He demanded a government committee to investigate the fate of the “missing Yemenite children,” and he and his followers barricaded themselves in his house. The police put the home under siege for 47 days and eventually broke into the compound. During the attack, the police shot one member of the group who died of his wounds. The rabbi and his followers were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. As journalists, we came to the conclusion that this group was fueled by acute messianic expectations that encouraged them in their violent behavior; they believed that the messiah would come and rescue them.



Allegedly empty graves of Yemenite children, shown on Israeli TV.

At the same time, I had started graduate study at the Institute for Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The affair with rabbi Uzi Meshulam interested me for further investigation, so I decided to take a course on messianism. I enrolled in a seminar with Jonathan Frankel, and I wrote a paper based upon what I had witnessed during the unfortunate affair. The seminar paper later became a Master’s thesis.



In 2001, I enrolled in the PhD program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Under the supervision of Jonathan Frankel and Menachem Feidman, I started a new project which became my doctoral dissertation—*King, Sanhedrin and Temple: Contemporary Movements Seeking to Rebuild the Third Temple and to Establish a Torah State*. The doctoral thesis was submitted in January 2006.

My research looked at several contemporary movements within religious society in Israel—Religious Zionists, Ultra Orthodoxy, and the Chabad *hasidic* movement—that advocate building the Third Temple as the zenith of a messianic process leading to the establishment of a Torah State. Those movements are revolutionary by their nature, and they seek a total change within the structure of the state of Israel. They do not anticipate “Redemption” as a process that will come by miracles or by Godly intervention. Rather, it demands human action. They focus on the Temple Mount because they believe that the Third Temple is a strong enough symbol to lead people to action. Their aim is to touch the fundamentals of faith of every Orthodox Jew—the desire for a Third Temple is part of daily prayers and symbolizes the religious foundation of those who see the State of Israel as the “first step of our redemption.”

During my studies, I learned that those fringe movements are the leaders of a radical ideological change within mainstream rabbinic authorities of the Religious Zionist camp. Why is this so?

The Temple Mount Dilemma

Over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in rabbinical rulings that permit the entry of Jews to the Temple Mount. It began with the precedent-setting ruling of the Council of Yesha Rabbis (from Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip) in February 1996, which permitted Jews to enter certain areas of the Mount, with a call to each rabbi who agreed with the ruling to go up to the Mount together with his congregation. The only limitation was to observe the restrictions regarding purity when doing so.



Since the reopening of the Temple Mount to Jews in November 2003 (it had been closed because of the Al-Aqsa Intifada), one can see the practical expression of this decision since every day now many Jews go up to the Mount, most of them members of the "nationalist yeshivas," for a visit and silent prayer. According to information published by then minister Tzachi Hanegbi, during the year following the reopening of the Temple Mount, more than 70,000 Jews visited the site.

This phenomenon represents a genuine revolution in religious behavior. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews have been considered impure due to contact with dead bodies, and therefore they are forbidden to enter the area where the Temple stood. This state of impurity can be changed into one of purity only with the help of the ashes of a red heifer and, as we know, such an animal no longer exists. Moreover, the exact dimensions of the Temple have been lost as well. We don't know on which parts of the Mount the Holy of Holies was located, since the Temple Mount is much larger than the dimensions of the structure itself. Therefore, it was ruled that the Temple Mount should not be ascended. According to *halakha* (Jewish religious law), anyone who enters the Mount will be punished by *karet*—a death sentence carried out by God. This decision has been reinforced in innumerable rulings. One was handed down by the chief rabbinate after the capture of the Mount during the Six-Day War in 1967, when Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, then head of the ultra-

nationalist Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, joined its call. And this custom is followed by the vast majority of ultra-Orthodox rabbis.

How is it that so many observant Jews behave in opposition to such a prohibition? How can it be that the religious law on such a central issue has been breached, and that Orthodox rabbis permit something that is considered by most authorities as prohibited?

The answer can probably be found in the manner in which the religious leadership is attempting to deal theologically with the crisis that the peace processes creates for them. In order to understand them, we need to understand the religious attitudes of many members of religious Zionist movements toward the state of Israel. Almost since the inception of the religious Zionist Mizrahi movement, there have been many Orthodox Jews who didn't consider the establishment of the state a goal in itself. The activist messianic faction of religious Zionism called the Zionist process *at'halta degeula* (the beginning of the Redemption); Zionist activity was interpreted as something secular that would eventually bring about, without the knowledge of the secularists, the fulfillment of the religious goal of the Return to Zion, namely, the establishment of the religious kingdom and a renewal of the rites on the Temple Mount.



After the Six-Day War, the enthusiasm that ensued swept religious Zionism into the settlement movement. The victory in the war led many to believe that total Redemption was about to begin, and so they went out to capture the land by establishing the so-called facts on the ground.

But since the peace agreement with Egypt, and even more so since the peace process with the Palestinian Authority, the leadership of religious Zionism is in a state of crisis and faces a religious dilemma: How can one identify the beginning of Redemption in a state that is returning territory to Arabs and becoming increasingly secular? How can one identify the process of Redemption in the uprooting of settlements?

This dilemma gave rise to the counter-reaction of a strengthening of the desire for the Temple Mount and of greater commitment to the goal of rebuilding the Temple. The fear of the upcoming changes, which included talk of giving the Temple Mount over to Palestinian rule, has led to moves that are designed to prevent them. In order to "prevent" the Redemption from being lost because of the behavior of the State of Israel (which is unaware of its destiny in this historical drama), permission was found to enter the Temple Mount and establish "facts on the ground."

The breach of the rabbinical decision that forbids entry to the Temple Mount demonstrates that strict religious law can be updated in accordance with changing political circumstances.

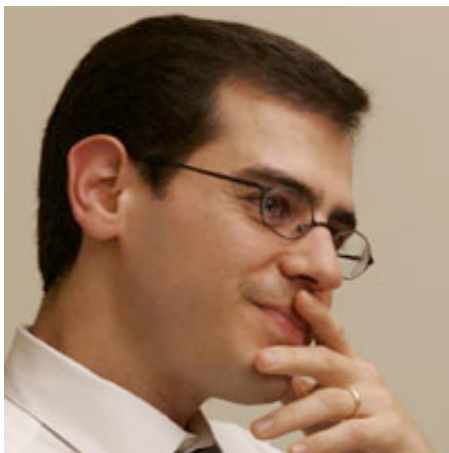
NEJS Faculty and Staff

Established in 1953, NEJS is the oldest program of its kind in the United States with the largest instructional staff of any secular university outside of the State of Israel. Its faculty covers the ancient Near East, the modern Middle East, Christian and Islamic studies, and the range of Jewish experience from the Bible and the ancient Near East to present-day world Jewry. The variety of scholarly disciplines represented by members of the Department include history, philology, history of religions, literary criticism, political science, and sociology. The Department's Hebrew Program is the largest in the country.

"My experience in NEJS was everything that I could have hoped for. The faculty was challenging, accessible, and supportive: they taught me how to expect the best of myself while giving me the tools to be a serious scholar. I also benefited from and truly enjoyed the opportunities I had to teach in the department. In addition, the sense of community among faculty, staff, and students in NEJS makes it a wonderful place to study. I am convinced that my training at Brandeis was second to none"

-Jeffrey Stackert, PhD '07

Jon A. Levisohn



Assistant Professor of Jewish Education in NEJS and Assistant Academic Director, Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education

At the Mandel Center Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature in January, Prof. Levisohn presented a paper on "A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature." Rabbinic literature is not a specific discipline or methodology but a set of texts, and not even a sharply defined set of texts but a loosely

and variably defined one. The teaching of these texts occurs in various places, for various purposes, with various assumptions. So what can be said about the field of teaching rabbinic literature as a whole? Following Barry Holtz's work on the teaching of Tanakh (in *Textual Knowledge*, 2003) and Pam Grossman's work on the teaching of English (in *The Making of a Teacher*, 1991), Levisohn's presentation introduced the idea of "orientations" to the teaching of rabbinic literature, and proposed a set of ten specific orientations that encompass the field.

Prof. Levisohn studies the interpretation of texts, both historical and sacred. As a philosopher of education, his work focuses on the varieties of interpretive experience in order to illuminate the goals and processes of education, both Jewish and general.

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Antony Polonsky



Albert Abramson Professor of Holocaust Studies

Prof. Polonsky has been awarded the Gantz-Zahler prize of the Foundation for Jewish Culture for a forthcoming publication on Jewish history. In addition, he has been invited to be the Ina Levene Senior Scholar next year at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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Anne Lawrence



“It’s not that I deliberately set out to test this..., but in case anyone wondered about the spirit of warmth and caring that exists within NEJS (and its neighbors, friends, and alums), let me assure you that it’s very much alive and thriving. When I was scheduled to have knee replacement surgery recently and was put on Medical Leave, the result was an overwhelming display of support from every corner of the NEJS community. Even as I write this, I continue to be cared for in so many ways by so many people. The feeling of being part of this wonderful ‘NEJS Family’ has been heart-warming. There have been cards, emails, phone calls, deliveries, visits, flowers, food of all kinds, groceries, errands run, pharmacy pick-ups, and continual offers to help, and I’m so very grateful to everyone for all their expressions of comfort and kindness.”

Anne is the NEJS Department Administrator.

“The NEJS Department Cares”

NEJS Faculty:

David Wright, Chair

Biblical studies; Languages and literatures of the ancient Near East

Tzvi Abusch (on leave 2008-2009)

Languages and cultures of ancient Mesopotamia; Ancient Near Eastern religions

Guy Antebi

Hebrew language

Marc Brettler

The Bible and its interpretation

Bernadette Brooten

Christian studies

Aliza Brosh

Hebrew language

Jonathan Decter

Undergraduate Advising Head; Sefhardic studies

Sharon Feiman-Nemser

Jewish education

Sylvia Barack Fishman

Contemporary Jewry and American Jewish sociology

ChaeRan Freeze

East European Jewish history

Sara Hascal

Hebrew language

Ellen Kellman

Yiddish language and literature

Reuven Kimelman

Talmud; Midrash; Liturgy

Jon Levisohn

Jewish education

Avigdor Levy

Middle Eastern studies

Joseph Lombard

Classical Islam

Kanan Makiya

Middle Eastern studies

Antony Polonsky

East European Jewish history; Holocaust studies

Bonit Porath

Hebrew language

Benjamin Ravid

Medieval and early modern Jewish history

Jehuda Reinharz

Modern Jewish history

Vardit Ringvald

Director, Hebrew and Arabic Languages; Hebrew language

Jonathan Sarna

American Jewish history

Eugene Sheppard

Graduate Advisor; Modern Jewish history and thought

Esther Shorr

Hebrew language

Ilana Szobel

Modern Hebrew literature

Ilan Troen

Israel studies



NEJS Conferences

The NEJS Department and its affiliated programs sponsored several major research conferences last year.



“A research conference featuring presentations by and discussions with outstanding teachers of rabbinic literature from diverse settings and multiple levels.”



In late January 2008, more than 200 academics and educators gathered at Brandeis for a major conference on the teaching of rabbinic literature.

The participants represented 30 Jewish day schools, 20 colleges and universities, and 12 *yeshivot* and rabbinical seminaries from across the Jewish denominational spectrum.

Hosted by the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education and chaired by NEJS faculty member Jon A. Levisohn, the conference featured over 50 presentations on teaching *midrash* to children, teaching Talmud to teens, teaching the history of the rabbinic period to university students, and more.

Other participating NEJS faculty included Tzvi Abusch, Marc Brettler, Bernadette Brooten, Sylvia Barack Fishman, Reuven Kimelman, Eugene Sheppard, and Esther Shorr, as well as Sharon Feiman-Nemser, director of the Mandel Center. Materials from the conference—videos and papers—are going up on the conference website as they become available. For more information, including the conference program and photos from the conference, please visit: <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/TeachingRabbinics.html>



Jon A. Levisohn speaking at the concluding session of the conference, with Lee S. Shulman and Sharon Feiman-Nemser (both of the Mandel Center).

Friends of the NEJS Department: The Lown School

Walking to his or her classroom in the Lown building, a student often comes across a section of hallway with carpeting different from the standard Lown parquet. This change signifies that the student has entered the territory of an affiliated but different institution. The **Philip W. Lown School of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies** is actually comprised of tens of different programs, centers, and organizations. The **NEJS Department**, a division inside the Lown School, is

the primary teaching unit. However, it is far from the only center of teaching and research.

What follows is a short tour of all the different organizations that comprise the greater Lown School.

Together, they make one of the most comprehensive of such centers outside of the State of Israel, offering academic and professional training in the areas of the ancient and modern Near East, Jewish Civilization, the study of religions, language instruction, and research in Jewish life and literature.

Hornstein: The Jewish Professional Leadership Program @ Brandeis

Hornstein prepares future Jewish leaders to address the challenges of a fast and ever-changing Jewish community. It offers a dual MA program with the NEJS Department. Hornstein has been educating professional leaders for the Jewish community since 1969. “We believe that if a Jewish Professional is to succeed, expert skills and knowledge must be linked to an underlying passion for Jewish life. Because Hornstein is an independent program, not bound by one movement or ideology, we are able to offer a candid view of the Jewish community while presenting a solid intellectual approach to the critical issues we face.”



“The Hornstein Program transformed the field of Jewish Communal Service. Today, there is hardly a Jew anywhere in the United States who has not benefitted from the work of Hornstein Alumni in Jewish community centers, schools, synagogues, social service agencies and related institutions. Across North America, in Israel and around the world, Hornstein alumni are working to strengthen the bonds of Jewish communal life and to promote a better future for Jews everywhere.”

-Prof. Jonathan Sarna
Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History
Director, Hornstein Program

Maurice and Marilyn

Cohen Center
for Modern Jewish Studies

The mission of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies is to conduct scholarly work that can enhance understanding of the Jewish community. The Center is a multi-disciplinary research institute and an integral part of Brandeis University's distinguished programs in Jewish studies and communal service. Research conducted at the Center focuses on studies of

American Jewry and Jewish institutions and is widely disseminated.

The Center's faculty and student staff include psychologists, sociologists, and scholars trained in Jewish studies. They share a common interest in Jewish identity, culture, family life, religious expression, and Israel-Diaspora

relations. They are committed to academically rigorous research that contributes to a deeper understanding of modern Jewish life and the role of religion and ethnicity in modern society. "Leading edge" research done at the Center provides policy-makers and Jewish community leaders with timely analyses of current problems.

Recent studies conducted by the Center have been done in synagogues, schools, summer camps, and Israel, and they have dealt with a cross-section of American Jewry. A signature feature of the Cohen Center is its use of innovative research methods to answer complex questions. Research is designed and conducted by teams that combine a rich mix of skills, experience, and perspectives. Findings are disseminated in academic journals, books, conferences, meetings of Jewish organizations, and in the Jewish media.



The Fisher-Bernstein Institute for Jewish Philanthropy and Leadership is dedicated to strengthening the human and financial resources that form the foundation of the Jewish communal infrastructure. The institute's core mission is to educate volunteers and professionals for leadership in fundraising and philanthropy. To this end, it generates research, develops instructional materials, and offers seminars and conferences to those concerned with fund development in the Jewish community.

Steinhardt Social Research Institute

The Steinhardt Social Research Institute was established to collect, analyze, and disseminate unbiased data about the Jewish community and about religion and ethnicity in the United States. The Institute will collect and organize existing socio-demographic data from private, communal, and government sources and will conduct local and national studies of the character of American Jewry and Jewish organizations.

The work of the Institute will be done by a multidisciplinary staff of faculty and scholars, working with undergraduate and graduate students, and augmented by visiting scholars and consultants.

The Steinhardt Social Research Institute was established in 2005 through a generous gift from Michael Steinhardt, chairman of the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation. It works in close collaboration with the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry

The Tauber Institute is devoted to the study of modern European Jewish history, thought, culture and society. It has a special interest in studying the Holocaust and its aftermath within the context of modern European intellectual, political, and social history.

The institute is organized on a multidisciplinary basis with the participation of scholars in Jewish studies, history, philosophy, political science, sociology, literature, and other disciplines.

The Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education

Founded in 2002 as the first academic center of its kind, the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University is dedicated to improving Jewish education through rigorous study of the core practices of teaching and learning.

At the end of the 20th century, the Jewish community expressed a renewed commitment to education. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Center builds on that commitment by striving for greater understanding of the purposes and practices of Jewish education, and by developing Jewish educators who are sophisticated and thoughtful about those purposes and practices.

Towards these goals, the Mandel Center pursues innovative research initiatives, pilots fresh approaches to professional development, and partners with Jewish educational institutions from across the community.

The Mandel Center is a partnership between the Mandel Foundation of Cleveland, Ohio, and Brandeis University, which has enabled Brandeis to establish the Center's home on the Brandeis campus and to recruit talented researchers and educators to carry out a distinctive program of research and professional development.

A RESEARCH CENTER AT BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY



The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute develops fresh ways of thinking about Jews and gender worldwide by producing and promoting scholarly research and artistic projects.

The world's only academic center of its kind, the HBI provides research resources and programs for scholars, students, and the public. The Institute publishes books and a journal, convenes international conferences and local programming, and offers competitive grant and internship programs. Among HBI's primary goals is to

advance the fields of Women's/Gender Studies and Judaic Studies by introducing both to each other, while supporting the work of individual scholars in these areas. In doing so, Hadassah-Brandeis Institute broadens contemporary understandings of Jewish women's lives, history, roles and experiences.



Schusterman Center for Israel Studies

The Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, founded in 2007, is dedicated to promoting exemplary teaching and scholarship in Israeli history, politics, culture, and society at Brandeis University and beyond. The Center is committed to advancing knowledge and understanding of the modern State of Israel by training a new generation of scholars and teachers, building a vibrant academic community, and supporting research, publications, and conferences. It seeks to make Brandeis a hub for nurturing and catalyzing Israel Studies.

Summer Institute for Israel Studies

At the Summer Institute for Israel Studies, faculty from universities in North America and around the world participate in seminars at Brandeis and in Israel that will help them design courses in Israel Studies for their home universities.

During the first two weeks, Institute Fellows spend two weeks in residence at Brandeis and participate in seminars taught by distinguished Israel Studies scholars. These seminars focus on Israel's society, history, politics, economics, culture, foreign affairs, and diplomacy. Fellows will be required to present syllabi for the courses they plan to teach on their home campuses.

In Israel, Institute Fellows meet with scholars, government officials, writers, artists, public intellectuals, and Jewish and Arab community leaders. Fellows also visit select historical and cultural sites. Participation in this portion of the Summer Institute is highly recommended but optional.



The Institute for Informal Jewish Education at Brandeis University is dedicated to keeping Jewish youth engaged in the Jewish community by:

- developing professional leadership
- sponsoring dynamic new programs
- maximizing the Jewish learning potential of informal Jewish education.

Jacob and Libby Goodman Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel

The institute sponsors research, symposia and publications as well as teaching in the historical and ideological development of the Zionist movement, and the history, society and culture of the state of Israel.

Crown Center for Middle East Studies

“Established through the generosity of the Crown Family Foundation, the Center's geographic scope encompasses the twenty-two members of the Arab League, stretching from Morocco to Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The Center's research focus extends well beyond Arab-Israeli tensions to include Arab politics, Islamic studies, economic and social developments, and regional security and arms control.

The Center's research staff reflects its broad geopolitical focus. During its first year of operations, experienced researchers with high-level expertise about Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran conducted research for the Center.



In addition to their research activities, the Center's staff teaches undergraduate- and graduate-level courses at Brandeis University, offering students a unique opportunity to learn about different perspectives on the Middle East.

The Center's activities include conducting conferences, seminars, and workshops. In addition to publishing basic research in the form of books and monographs, the Center has created tools for "real-time" distribution of analyses regarding current developments and events in the Middle East.

The Center has also established the Crown Forum - periodic briefings held in Boston with Middle East insiders regarding regional developments. Forum participants include members of the business community; scholars from Brandeis University, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and senior members of the media.

With a commitment to objective research and such a wide array of activities, the Crown Center is poised to take its place as a leading university research center for the study of the Middle East.”

*-Professor Shai Feldman,
Judith and Sidney Swartz Director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies*

The Sarnat Center for the Study of Anti-Jewishness at Brandeis University

The Bernard G. and Rhoda G. Sarnat Center for the Study of Anti-Jewishness aims to promote a deeper understanding of the genesis, causes, nature, and consequences of anti-Jewish prejudice, as well as Jewish and non-Jewish responses to this phenomenon, especially in North and South America, from both a historical and contemporary perspective.

The Center initiates and supports research, lectures, and conferences, and carries out activities in partnership with other Brandeis departments, centers and institutes, as well as other universities and organizations.

The Gralla Fellows Program for Journalists

The Gralla Fellows Program, under the auspices of the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University, seeks to enhance the quality of religion journalism by providing journalists in the early and mid-stages of their careers with an intensive four-day program of instruction in Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. Focus is on the American Jewish religion “beat.”

The faculty features leading scholars, community leaders, and senior journalists conducting seminars, lectures, tours, and workshops on issues of key concern to journalists working on religion stories with Jewish content or context. The program is designed to enhance journalists’ knowledge of Judaism, American Jewish life, and trends relevant to religion reporting. The program is offered in two tracks, for religion journalists and for journalists in the Jewish press.

Topics include “front burner” stories; Jewish history, religion, and culture; changing American Jewish life and institutions; Israel-America and Israel-Diaspora relations; interfaith issues; and researching and reporting new story ideas. Specific topics planned to be covered include (but are not limited to) American Jews and American Politics; American Jewish-Christian relations; American Jewish-Muslim relations; covering sensitive religion topics; an overview of Jewish texts; new ways of covering Jewish holidays; the 350th anniversary of Jews in America; visits to area synagogues and Boston’s historic Jewish districts; trends in Jewish museums and memorial sites; Jewish education; Jewish medical ethics; the historical, cultural, and organizational background of the American Jewish community; current trends in Judaism and spirituality, and much, much more.



Genesis at Brandeis University

“A taste of college, a feeling of camp—a Jewish high school experience unlike any other.” Four weeks of living in diverse community, with teens from different parts of the country and the world, different experiences and backgrounds with Jewish practice and belief, different interests and ideas—it's an experience that only Genesis can deliver. A team of community educators oversees residential life and coordinates a rich experience of building and exploring Jewish community throughout the summer. They come from diverse geographic and Jewish backgrounds and are graduate students and professionals with expertise in Jewish education. Working closely with the community educators are four Genesis Interns

who oversee the social action component of the program. Interns are in their upper years of college or recent college graduates who are interested in experiential Jewish education.



The National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF) is a unique nonprofit motion picture archive, distributor, and resource center housing the largest, most comprehensive collection of Jewish-themed film and video in the world.

The ongoing mission of NCJF is to gather, preserve, catalogue, and exhibit films with artistic and educational value relevant to the Jewish experience, disseminating these materials to the widest possible audience. NCJF’s first priority continues to be the preservation and restoration of rare and endangered nitrate and acetate films. The Center has long been recognized as a leader in the revival of Yiddish cinema, rescuing watershed films like “Green Fields” (1937) and “Tevye” (1939) from virtual oblivion. By producing and distributing pristine film and videocassette editions of such historic works with new English subtitles, NCJF effectively reintroduces modern audiences to a unique cultural and cinematic experience.

The center is independent of NEJS but housed in the Lown building.

The Jewish Studies Colloquium

Hello fellow Graduate Students!

My name is Daniel Schwartz. I am a first year PhD student in NEJS, and I am writing in the NEJS Newsletter to tell you all about one of the best resources we have here at Brandeis: The Tauber Jewish Studies Colloquium. For those of you who are unaware, the second floor of Lown not only contains festive offices and classrooms, but it is also the home of the Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry. Founded in 1980 by a donation from Dr. Laszlo N. Tauber, and named in honor of his parents, the Tauber Institute has been a resource for publications, research grants, and all manner of scholarly endeavors during its twenty-eight years.



One of the more recent additions to the Tauber Institute has been a regular lecture series and colloquium. The colloquium consists of faculty members and graduate students from Brandeis and other area universities coming together, three times a semester (or so), to hear, discuss, and critique a work in progress of a visiting junior scholar or graduate student. This year, I was lucky enough to attend all of the colloquia, and I must say that it was one of my favorite academic experiences thus far at Brandeis. The topics vary from session to session: this year, the material ranged from a study of 12th century panegyric Spanish-Jewish poetry, to a look at the development of a

literary cannon in Israel, to an analysis of the influences on the philosopher Solomon Maimon. Despite the varying topics of discussion, the format for the sessions is rather consistent. Each attendee receives an advanced copy of a work-in-progress—generally what will become either a paper or a book. After the guest lectures for between ten and twenty minutes, there is open discussion.

Now, one does not need to be an expert in Spanish Poetry in order to contribute to, or at the very least learn from, the discussion to be had. Indeed, the discussions are open and foster a very collegial atmosphere. Graduate students and emeritus faculty can sit together and discuss ideas without any pretenses: there is just the work and an honest interchange of ideas and constructive criticisms regarding it. Moreover, for any scholar (especially the graduate student), there will be some theme, idea, fact, or mode of inquiry discussed in every session applicable to his or her own work. I know that this has been the case for me, despite the fact that no single session was dedicated to my area of inquiry.

Unfortunately, not many Brandeis graduate students attended this year's lectures and discussions. I must say that those of you who did not come were missing out. The colloquium is a great academic opportunity: the lectures and discussions are a lot of fun, and there is even a spread of cookies, coffee, tea, and fresh fruit at every session. Come to the colloquia next year: you won't be disappointed.

Established in 2001, the Jewish Studies Colloquium provides a forum for graduate students and faculty from Brandeis University and other academic institutions around the world to discuss their current research and works-in-progress. Co-sponsored by the Tauber Institute and the NEJS Department, the colloquium engages a wide range of topics in Jewish studies from history and thought to political and national identity.

The Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies



Established in 1953, Brandeis's Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies (NEJS) is one of the strongest and largest in the world. It offers undergraduate students the chance to major, minor, or simply take courses in the field. It offers both MA and

PhD degrees with courses in a variety of subjects, including the Bible and ancient Near East, Islam, the modern Middle East, Israel studies, Christianity,

classical Rabbinics, Sephardic studies, Hebrew literature, Jewish history and thought, contemporary Jewish life, and Jewish education.

The people of the NEJS Department—students, alumni, and faculty—epitomize the program's commitment to excellence. This 2008 NEJS Newsletter highlights some of those extraordinary individuals, telling their stories.



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