Director’s Report: A Time of Change

The Ethics of Witnessing

Gift Launches Partnership with Tel Aviv University

New Track in Jewish Studies Major

Farewell to Bilha Mirkin

Spotlight on Careers
write this column as the new director of the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies. Despite the fact that no one was ready for him to end his time as director, Michael Bernard-Donals was appointed Vice Provost for Faculty and Staff this past summer. The good news for us at the Center is that even though he’s already terribly missed, we now have a close friend in high places; the bad news for me as director is that he left exceedingly large shoes to fill. Mike moved the Center forward in powerful ways, building on the successes of all the preceding directors. I am honored to continue the work they started, even as I am keenly aware of challenges ahead.

I am writing this column at a moment when the ceasefire in Israel and Gaza is holding, but it is unclear whether or how a truce could pave the way for a lasting peace. It is a moment when opposition to the current Israeli government’s positions has bled into violent and regressive anti-Semitic expressions. And it is a moment when universities are grappling with what it means to encourage political diversity, respect freedom of speech, and still cultivate humanity. In short, it is a time of change.

And this, to me, is precisely why we need to keep the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies robust. Centers like ours are places where the complexities of Jewish worlds and worldviews, past and present, are investigated, illuminated, critiqued, and understood, wherein the academic study of Jewish history and culture, philosophy and art, sociology and political science, is not goal-driven towards the end of creating a specific kind of Jew, but oriented towards creating a general type of human: the learned type, the type for whom a serious liberal arts education paves the way for a career, for continued curiosity and for the hard work of sifting and winnowing in pursuit of making the world a better place. Put plainly, as I see it, this is a time when the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies has a role to play on campus, in the state, the nation and in the world, and not an unimportant one. I look forward to continuing this work, and I thank you in advance for your support as I learn to lead.

Simone A. Schweber, Director
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and Goodman Professor of Education and Jewish Studies

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How did Polish writers respond to the Holocaust? What can the diaries of Gentile Polish authors tell us about the relationship between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors? These questions guide Professor Rachel Feldhay Brenner’s research on the complex position in which Polish witnesses to the Holocaust found themselves—research that, she argues, continues to be relevant to the world we live in today. I recently sat down with Professor Brenner to learn more about her work on the ethics of witnessing atrocity.

**Describe the predicament of these Polish writer-witnesses.**

I study Polish intellectuals, such as Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz and Maria Dabrowska, who were all prominent writers before the [Second World] War. They considered their work as providing a moral compass for fellow Poles, as well as shared cultural interests with their Jewish friends: Chopin, poetry. But suddenly, these writers were forced to watch as their friends were taken away and transformed into subhumans by Nazi ideology. The central question I explore is this: could these educated, humanistically oriented writers maintain their values and identity in such an extreme situation?

**Why focus on specifically on Polish writers’ diaries?**

It grew out of my previous research on the diaries of Jewish women writers. Several years ago, I published a book on their works, entitled *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum*. But once I finished that book, I realized that the story was incomplete: I had studied the victims, but not the witnesses. I chose Polish writers’ diaries because Poland is a special case that can teach us a lot. Since Poles themselves had lost their homeland and were brutally persecuted during the Partitions [of Polish territory during the late 18th century], they shared a special affinity with their “brother Jews.” It is this common bond that makes the wartime diaries of Polish writers so rich.

**What do you hope others will take away from your work?**

Above all, I want others to realize that we are witnesses in our world today. How do we respond to those who are deprived of human rights? I hope that those who read my work will gain a better understanding of the psychological struggle that witnesses experience, so that they can reflect on their own capacity for empathy.

**Last November, you were invited to Warsaw to speak at the opening ceremony of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. What are your impressions of visiting Poland today?**

I had the privilege of meeting with many Polish youth when I visited. Young Polish intellectuals today are invested in studying the Holocaust, and they are actively questioning established narratives of who suffered more [i.e., Poles or Jews] during those years. Others may disagree, but I can say that I see strides currently being made against anti-Semitism in Poland.

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*The Ethics of Witnessing: The Holocaust in Polish Writers’ Diaries from Warsaw, 1939–1945* was published by Northwestern University Press this past summer and can be purchased online ([nupress.northwestern.edu](http://nupress.northwestern.edu)) or through your local bookstore.
Alumnus funds partnership between UW–Madison, Tel Aviv University

BY JOHN SUVAL

As an undergraduate at UW–Madison in the 1970s, Richard Sincere (B.A. ’75, History) spent his junior year at Tel Aviv University. The experience proved so transformative that today, some 40 years later, he and his wife Debra are paving the way for a new generation of students and scholars to reap the benefits of a globe-spanning education.

To that end, the Sinceres are funding an innovative multi-year program of academic collaborations between UW–Madison’s Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies and Tel Aviv University’s Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, a top-ranked think tank in the region.

“One of the goals is to make sure that students have a broader worldview,” says Richard Sincere, founder and president of Sincere & Co., LLC, which specializes in mutual funds. “You’ve taken these two outstanding schools and brought them together. That, to me, is what’s so exciting.”

The new program provides support for a five-year collaboration between the universities, including an annual conference organized around a timely theme. The first conference, which will take place in Tel Aviv in November, focuses on “Religion and the Public Sphere in the Contemporary Middle East.”

Six UW–Madison scholars from a range of disciplines will travel to Israel to participate, including Chad Goldberg (Sociology), Teryl Dobbs (Music), Philip Hollander (German and Jewish Studies), Anya Paretskaya (Sociology), Simone Schweber (Education and Jewish Studies) and Nadav Shelef (Political Science and Jewish Studies).

“All of our faculty are, in some way, engaging with religion,” says

New Track Allows Students to Focus on Israeli Culture

Jewish Studies majors may now pursue a specialized track in Modern Hebrew Language, Literature, and Israeli Culture. Modeled after the existing Jewish Studies major, the track requires students to take courses in Jewish history, literature, social sciences, the arts, and Hebrew language. In addition, students in this track must achieve a higher level of Hebrew proficiency and take a cluster of courses focused on Israeli history and culture.

The impetus for the track came from the restructuring of the Department of Hebrew & Semitic Studies, a process that moved the Biblical Hebrew program to the Classics Department and the modern Hebrew program to the Center for Jewish Studies. The major in modern Hebrew is now closed to new enrollment.

Yet beyond being a mere replacement for the modern Hebrew major, the new track will enable Jewish Studies majors with a passion for Hebrew to situate their studies within a broader social and cultural context. The new track, moreover, reflects a growing interest in Israel Studies—both within Wisconsin and across the country.

The track in Modern Hebrew Language, Literature, and Israeli Culture is both grounded in history and forward-looking. Students following this track will be part of UW–Madison’s rich legacy of Hebrew Studies, yet uniquely positioned to study the rapidly changing, culturally rich, and politically complex state of Israel.
BY LAURIE SILVERBERG

The Modern Hebrew program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has long been recognized as one of the finest in the country. By all accounts, the success of the program would be unthinkable without Bilha Mirkin, who has taught here for nearly four decades. “Bilha and I joined the Hebrew Department at the same time,” recalled Gil Morahg, now an emeritus professor of modern Hebrew. “I was hired to restructure and revitalize the modern Hebrew language and literature program. As I began working, it quickly became clear that Bilha was the most valuable collaborator in this undertaking.”

Mirkin’s students and colleagues will now have to face the unimaginable: Mirkin, who started teaching here in 1977, will retire at the end of the fall semester. “It’s almost as if Bascom Hill or the Terrace were to one day disappear,” said Jacob Beckert ’14, a former student, upon hearing the news.

With her colleague Haya Yuchtman, Mirkin was responsible for teaching the first 2–3 years of the modern Hebrew sequence. Despite the difficulties of learning a new language, Mirkin inspired students to rise to the challenge. “She is so passionate about what she wants students to get out of her class that she is not afraid to stand her ground,” noted Naomi Segal, a major in Jewish Studies. “When a student complained about rules in Hebrew, [she would say to them], ‘It’s not my father’s factory,’ —i.e., she did not create these rules, but they are the way they are.” A note of thanks Mirkin received from two former students conveyed a similar sentiment: “We have never met such a teacher… who has made us truly passionate about a language.”

Beyond teaching Hebrew language, Mirkin exposed her students to the richness of Israeli literature and culture. As Yuchtman recalled, “working with Bilha, I could feel the enthusiasm and passion she had for the Hebrew language, Israeli culture and Jewish heritage. Bilha brought to her classes an authentic and memorable Israeli experience.” For many students, Mirkin’s classroom offered a place of refuge and support. “It is very easy to get lost at a school this big, but your class is the thing that keeps me smiling,” wrote a student to her years ago. Mirkin’s colleague Professor Rachel F. Brenner similarly observed that Mirkin “gave [students] a sense of understanding and sympathy that is so difficult to find in a big university.”

Mirkin will remain in Madison after her retirement, using her new time to do other “adventures of the mind,” as she puts it: travel to India in February, auditing courses, and spending time with her family. “We wish Bilha all the best in the next phase of life for her,” Simone Schweber commented about Mirkin’s retirement, adding, “we also secretly hope that she may decide to come back and teach Hebrew again…”

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Schweber, director of the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies and Goodman Professor of Education and Jewish Studies. “My hope is that the trip will help us understand a little better how Israeli academics are grappling with a complex subject in complicated times.”

In addition to sharing ideas and research, the conference will offer opportunities for UW–Madison and TAU scholars to get acquainted and make preparations for future events involving more faculty and students. The next gathering is slated to take place in Madison next spring. “There is great potential for this to turn into a groundbreaking partnership,” Schweber says. “We are thrilled that Richard and Debra Sincere have given this gift.”

For Richard Sincere, it comes down to bridging cultures with face-to-face conversations around humanities topics—something that transformed his life as an undergraduate and, he says, contributed to his professional success.
Editor's Note: In August 2013, College of Letters & Science Dean Karl Scholz launched the L&S Career Initiative, which aims to engage students in personal and career development from the time they step on campus to graduation. On these two pages, you will learn more about the experiences of Jewish Studies majors in the work force and what UW–Madison is doing to help connect them with rewarding career opportunities.

Interns Connect Coursework to World Beyond the Classroom

**BY LAURIE SILVERBERG**

What can one do with a Jewish Studies major? At some point, every Jewish Studies student, prospective student, or parent faces this question. But for three Jewish Studies students who took part in internships this past summer, there is little doubt that the knowledge and skills they developed in the classroom have considerable value for the world beyond it.

**Naomi Segal ’16,** a Lewis Summer Intern through the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, found applications for her Jewish Studies coursework almost daily while interning at CJE SeniorLife at the Lieberman Center for Health and Rehabilitation in Skokie, IL. For example, while teaching the residents a class on Jewish popular culture during the Borsht Belt era, Segal found herself drawing extensively from a course on American Jewish Popular Culture, which she had taken with Professor Tony Michels. “I was able to use material from class and readings to help shape my lesson,” recalled Segal. Moreover, she noted, “my coursework gave me more confidence when interacting with the residents because I had heard of the singers, songs, radio shows, T.V. shows and movies of their era.”

Since the majority of Jewish Studies majors (and all certificate students) complete an additional major, internships enable students to integrate what they are learning across different departments.

Jewish Studies major Jenna Freeman ’15, who is also majoring in Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education, spent the summer working with kids with special needs at the Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah (California), a position she has held for the last four summers. “It was a direct application of everything that I am learning in my coursework: interventions for behavior challenges for kids with special needs, importance of treating everyone as an individual and celebrating each others’ differences, and infusing Jewish values into daily life for our campers and participants.” Similarly, Political Science major and Jewish Studies certificate student Lisa Geller chose to intern with J Street. “I thought that working for a pro-Israel nonprofit would cater to both of my areas of study,” says Geller. “As J Street’s political intern I was able to use my knowledge of American government and Jewish Studies continuously.”

For all three students, the internship experience has left them with a greater sense of excitement for their work and direction for their post-graduation plans. While Freeman intends to search for full-time work that will allow her to combine Judaism with special needs, Geller is now considering law school or graduate work in public policy. And Segal, though unsure of her precise plans, is quite certain she will continue work in the Jewish community—particularly with Jewish youth—or pursue graduate work in Jewish Studies.

According to Lindsay Williamson, career advisor for Jewish Studies students, all three are well positioned for the job market upon graduation. “Summer jobs and internships are really valuable,” says Williamson, “that’s where you gain the network of people in the profession you’re interested in—people that can help you down the road.”
“It’s never just about the resume.”
Translating Jewish Studies Degrees into Rewarding Careers

BY LAURIE SILVERBERG

After graduating from UW in 2006, Lindsay Williamson took a job unusual for an English major: working for Cisco Systems, she drove a truck across the country for and gave presentations on their routers and switches. “I was one of fifteen interns, the only woman, and the only English major in a group of male computer science majors,” she recalled. “But at the end of the program, I was one of just four accepted into Cisco’s associate sales and marketing program.”

This early experience serves Williamson well in her current position as Career Connections Advisor for the Historical Humanities—a cluster of programs that includes Jewish Studies; History; Religious Studies; History of Science, Medicine and Technology; Art History; and Classics. Since 2012, Williamson has guided students through the process of translating liberal arts degrees into rewarding careers.

What do Jewish Studies majors have in common with those majoring in other Historical Humanities disciplines, and how do they stand apart?

Everyone is developing research, writing, and presentation skills. More broadly, they are also gaining an awareness of history, culture, and different people—an empathy and understanding of the world around them. But Jewish Studies majors are more focused: they are learning in greater depth the history and culture of a people, and the relevance of the past for the present.

There’s a perception that majoring in business or finance will offer better job prospects. What do you hear from employers?

A recruiter for a consulting company told me that they like hiring liberal arts majors because they have the great ideas. They’re more creative, and they know how to write. They’re used to working in teams, and they’re great at creative problem solving.

What would you say to a student considering a Jewish Studies major but wondering about their job prospects?

If you’re passionate about Jewish Studies, then you will excel as a student. You are developing important writing and presentation skills—far more so than if you were studying something that you didn’t love. But I also try to learn about other interests: if you have a knack for technology, consider getting a certificate in digital media studies or computer science. Think about a certificate in business, if you think you want to run a nonprofit or be an entrepreneur.

How can friends and alumni of Jewish Studies help?

If anyone is interested in coming to speak to students about their careers, I would love to hear from them. It would be wonderful to be able to take students to New York, Chicago—even within Madison—to visit workplaces and meet with industry professionals. I love engaging with alumni. The more they can interact with students, the better.

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GET INVOLVED

The Center for Jewish Studies, the Historical Humanities Cluster, and the L&S Career Initiative need alumni and friends like you to share valuable insights about the job market, internships, career development, and more. To learn more about how you can get involved with the L&S Career Initiative, please visit go.wisc.edu/lsci. More information about career development in the Historical Humanities and Jewish Studies is available at historicalhumanities.wisc.edu.

Lindsay Williamson
Save the dates!

**Schrag Lecture**  
The “Jewish” Michelangelo: German Jews, the Renaissance, and the Dream of Italy  
Asher Biemann  
March 9, 2015

**Conney Conference on Jewish Arts**  
Jewish/American/Israeli: Intertwined Identities  
March 24–26, 2015  
University of Southern California

**Weinstein-Minkoff Lecture**  
Ami Pedahzur  
April 20, 2015

**Greenfield Summer Institute**  
Reading Jews: People of the Book  
July 12–16, 2015  
Registration required

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