Director’s Report:
Making Progress

Student Profiles

News from the Classroom

Farewell to Judith Kornblatt

Jewish Studies on the Road
In the fall of 2010, I had the privilege of leading the strategic planning process at the Center for Jewish Studies. This year-long effort brought together our faculty and staff to identify the Center’s greatest strengths, to pinpoint opportunities for growth, and—most importantly—to figure out what we actually needed to do to reinvigorate the Center over the next decade. I’ve participated in a lot of strategic planning over the years, and most plans merely sit on the shelf after they’ve been written.

But not in our case. My colleagues and I have used the strategic plan’s priorities to map out the future of the Center, and we’ve made significant strides toward making that plan a reality. Nearly two years ago, we identified four ambitious goals: (1) increase faculty; (2) ensure the vitality of our major and certificate programs; (3) bolster our financial health; and (4) expand our public programming and be a welcoming place on campus for faculty and students. As we take stock of the Center today, we’re already seeing good results. Next year, we plan to hire a tenure-track faculty member in modern European Jewish history, and we’re collaborating with other departments to create faculty positions in Yiddish and other areas. The number of Jewish Studies majors and certificate students is at its highest level in many years, and we’re working on initiatives to hire teaching assistants and lecturers in order to expand the number of seats in Jewish Studies courses. The College of Letters and Science has helped streamline our budgeting process, and we’ve embarked on an ambitious fundraising campaign whose goal, through the establishment of the Legacy Fund, is to become self-sufficient in the years ahead. Finally, we have reached out to our friends in Madison and Milwaukee, and to alumni in Los Angeles and New York, to make the resources of the Center available beyond the walls of the university, and we have reestablished a brown-bag lecture series to allow faculty and graduate students to discuss their research. In short, we’ve made progress on just about every aspect of our strategic plan.

But we have more to do. For starters, we continue to have long waiting lists of students who want to get into our classes, so hiring new faculty and instructors is especially important. At a time when funding for public higher education is decreasing, this will be particularly challenging. Still, and as I’ve said in this column before, I have every confidence that our faculty and staff will continue to provide the very best education in Jewish Studies. Just as important, we have a dedicated group of friends and alumni who are ready to help.

So the promise of the Center for Jewish Studies continues to be bright, and we are making good progress on our goals. Thank you for helping us meet them.

Michael Bernard-Donals, Director
Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies
Nancy Hoefs Professor of English

108 Ingraham Hall, 1155 Observatory Drive
Madison, WI 53706
(608) 265-4763
jewishstudies@cjs.wisc.edu
jewishstudies.wisc.edu
BY LAURIE SILVERBERG

For five months straight, Jewish Studies major Michael Felknor practiced an impressive daily ritual: translate a Hebrew poem into English and post the work online. His blog, soulandgone.com, now boasts over 200 translations that cover more than 3,000 years of literary history and features poets from Amichai to Zelda. The blog is a treasure trove of poetry—much of which is unavailable online in the original, let alone in translation—and has attracted the attention of a worldwide audience of scholars and poetry lovers.

What inspired Felknor to pursue what he describes on his blog as a “thanklessly quixotic mission to bring Hebrew poetry to the roughly seven billion people who neither speak Hebrew nor like poetry?” The initial impetus came from a course in advanced Hebrew literature, taught by Jewish Studies professor Philip Hollander. Felknor, who is also majoring in Hebrew, noticed that the one of published translations of medieval Hebrew poetry that they were using was incomplete; the others were, in his mind, less than satisfactory. He decided to do his own translations, “just as an aid to understand the poetry,” but also showed his work to Hollander, who promptly posted the translations online for the rest of the class to use.

Since that initial classroom experience, translation has become for Felknor both an artistic outlet and a process of scholarly discovery. (Felknor also writes his own poetry in Hebrew, but does not post this work online.) In particular, he has developed an interest in the Italian Hebrew poets active during the Renaissance and early Baroque eras. These poets, according to Felknor, demonstrate how Jews, even religious Jews, engaged with the world around them through their artistic production. “You’ll see poets who, on one hand, are writing scathing, bawdy satires, and then they write a beautiful piyyut for the synagogue.” One favorite discovery of his has been the work of Yosef Tzarfati (d. 1527), the first Hebrew poet to write in the Italian ottava rima form. (See inset.)

Felknor continues to post to his blog translations of a wide range of poets, but Italian Hebrew poetry has become a central focus of his academic work. His initial exposure to the Italian-Jewish community came from a course he took with (now emeritus) professor David Sorkin, and he plans to focus on Italian Hebrew poetry for his Capstone project, a requirement for the Jewish Studies major.

What’s next? Felknor, who will graduate in December 2013, plans to continue both his translations and research in graduate school.
How do Jewish texts from Israel and the United States represent the concept of “homeland?”

Alainya Kavaloski, a PhD candidate in English and 2012 recipient of both the Robert and Lynn Berman Scholarship and the Lipton Essay Award, seeks to understand visual and virtual portrayals of the homeland in her dissertation, tentatively titled “Fragmentary Returns: Re-Visioning Contemporary Homelands in the United States and Israel.” Through a study of graphic novels and other texts, she proposes that the idea of a homeland changes under conditions of sustained militarism. Kavaloski uses the Jewish experience of exile and return as a paradigm for understanding this shift in the idea of “homeland” in diaspora and migration studies as a whole.

Thanks to the Berman Scholarship, Kavaloski could travel to the Association of Israel Studies conference in Haifa this past June. There, she was able to gauge the ways that a number of academic disciplines interact with political and aesthetic issues related to Israel. She points out that, though Israel studies is dominated by the social sciences, literature and cultural studies have much to contribute to our understanding of the state. She notes that the Haifa conference was an important experience for her because her engagement with these perspectives “has informed the interdisciplinary work in [her] dissertation.”

Kavaloski’s essay “Contested Spaces in Graphic Narrative: Exploring Homeland in Israel-Palestine through Miriam Libicki’s Jobnik!” won the Lipton Essay Award, and it will constitute a part of her second dissertation chapter. In it, she describes how Libicki’s graphic memoir makes visible the physical and cultural repercussions of living in contested lands, militarization, cultural memory, and bodily experience. “In some ways writing that article was the turning point in my scholarship,” says Kavaloski. “It made clear to me the inextricable connections between visual form and the conceptions of contested geographical spaces. I realized how important it is to ‘see’ beyond what we often think of as the fixed geographies of space.”

Illustrations of Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Palestinian-controlled Temple Mount on September 28, 2000 and the outbreak of the second Intifada overlay domestic images of Miriam on the bus and in her Jerusalem apartment.
STUDENT NEWS

Dowdall Studies Triangle of Labor Relations Between US, Israel, and Africa

BY LAURIE SILVERBERG

As the principal labor organizations in their respective countries, the AFL-CIO and the General Federation of Labor in Israel (the Histadrut) have, not surprisingly, much in common. Aaron Dowdall, a graduate student in the department of History, is working to uncover a little-known chapter in the shared history of these organizations: namely, their joint involvement in labor activities in sub-Saharan Africa during the Cold War. According to Dowdall, American and Israeli labor organizations “established important relationships with African labor leaders and future African presidents, created commercial projects and technical aid programs, and altered the dynamics of decolonization in Cold War-era Africa.”

Dowdall came to UW–Madison expecting to work on diplomatic history, with a particular focus on Africa. His turn to labor history—and particularly Israeli labor history—was inspired by a seminar he took on Communism and Anti-Communism with Tony Michels, Mosse Associate Professor of American Jewish History. As part of the course, they read Glenda Gilmore’s Defying Dixie, which examines the role of Jewish Americans in the Civil Rights Movement. “That was foreign to me and spurred my interest… I was very familiar with works on African Americans and their interests in issues in Africa; I was a little bit familiar with Jewish Americans and their interest in Israel. But what if you start to look at this triangle… how are those places connected?”

The affinity between the AFL-CIO and Histadrut might be self-evident, but what would lead Israeli labor groups, and later the Israeli government, to work in countries like Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania? Part of the reason, Dowdall notes, is that Israel was looking to find new trade partners and sources of raw materials—not to mention sympathetic allies in the United Nations. Beyond that, however, was a more ideological component: “A lot of people in the Histadrut and the Israeli government [saw] themselves as a model: [they] achieved independence and had success in developing as a country… and understood the [African] plight as colonial or former colonial peoples, so there’s a natural relationship.”

Dowdall’s ambitious project has already taken him to a number of archives in the United States. With support from numerous grants through the Center for Jewish Studies, including the David Sorkin Scholarship and the Mazursky Student Support Fund, Dowdall has undertaken research at the Keel Center for Labor-Management Documentation at Cornell University, the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, the collections of the AFL-CIO at the George Meany Memorial Archives in Silver Springs, Maryland, and the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University.

To gain a richer understanding of the work of the Histadrut, Dowdall has also been studying Hebrew for the past two years—a language that he had no prior experience with and an endeavor unusual for specialists in US history. Next year, he hopes to put his developing Hebrew skills to use in Israel, where he will conduct research at archives in Tel Aviv, Beit Berl, and Jerusalem.
NEWS FROM THE CLASSROOM

Jewish Studies Faculty Lead First-Year Interest Group on Zionism

BY RACHEL F. BRENNER

What is a FIG? For most people, the word conjures up the image and taste of the nutritious and sweet fruit native to the Middle East. But for students at UW–Madison, FIG is also the acronym for First-Year Interest Groups. FIGs enhance the nutrition of education with the sweetness of comradeship that twenty students, bound by similar intellectual interests, create over the fall semester by enrolling in three classes linked by a common theme. The opportunity to study together in a small group in close connection with the faculty builds a wonderful culture of learning and helps develop lasting friendships with peers and instructors. And because FIGs are open to all first-year students, regardless of intended major, they become a wellspring of diverse opinions and animated discussions.

This fall, Jewish Studies faculty will offer first-year students the opportunity to study Zionism from a range of perspectives: historical, religious, literary, and philosophical. The centerpiece of the FIG, taught by Rachel Feldhay Brenner (Hebrew & Semitic Studies), will take students on an intellectual journey to the land of the fig fruit: the Middle East. Entitled "The roots of Zionism: Literature, Cultures and Ethics," the course will follow the evolution of Zionism through historical upheavals, cultural transformations, great achievements, and tragic catastrophes such as the Holocaust, which eventually led the Jewish people back to Zion and to the establishment of the Jewish State.

Complementing Brenner’s course will be “Introduction to Ethics,” taught by Claudia Card (Philosophy). The course aims to help students understand the moral foundations of the Zionist movement, which was, to a great degree, shaped by Jewish European ethical and intellectual experiences. Other Jewish Studies faculty will enrich the course as guest speakers: Ron Troxel (Hebrew & Semitic Studies) on the Biblical roots of Zionism; Tony Michels (History) on the inception of Modern Zionism in Eastern Europe; and Nadav Shelef (Political Science) on the implementation of the Zionist idea in the early years of the Yishuv. The third component of the FIG will focus on the study of Modern Hebrew, through which students will learn about vibrant Israeli culture and art, the country’s political and military situation, and the Israeli way of life.

Students enrolled in the FIG will also benefit from a wide range of additional trips and activities, including visits to the Skokie Holocaust Museum and the Golda Meir Library in Milwaukee. Even further, Brenner is devising together with Troxel, the Office of International Programs, and Greg Smith, the director of the FIG program, a two-week program for credit at Hebrew University. Michael Bernard-Donals, director of the Center for Jewish Studies, praised the FIG, describing it as “interdisciplinarity at its very best, and characteristic of the richness of Jewish Studies at UW–Madison.”
NEWS FROM THE CLASSROOM

Introduction to Judaism brings Jewish Culture to Diverse UW Students

BY ALLISON BLOOM

Part of the mission of the Center for Jewish Studies is to make the study and interpretation of Jewish history, religion, politics, society, and culture available to all students, regardless of religious background or prior studies. This past fall, nearly 120 students were enrolled in Jewish Studies 211, Introduction to Judaism. Taught by Jordan Rosenblum, Belzer Professor of Classical Judaism, the course is offered every fall and cross-listed with the department of Hebrew & Semitic Studies and the Religious Studies program.

As we learned in a recent survey, students enrolled in Intro to Judaism reflect the diversity of the UW student body: they range from freshmen to seniors, major in everything from Jewish Studies to animal science to pre-law, and their post-graduation plans include graduate school, traveling for service organizations, and entering careers in business, medicine, and science.

Previous knowledge of Judaism varies widely as well among the students taking the course. Some students have attended Hebrew school since childhood; others hoped to enrich what they’d learned from family members or in high school. Yet even those with prior background in Jewish Studies noted that they enjoyed learning the material anew. One student noted, “What I have enjoyed most is that even though material is extremely familiar to me, I am able to step back from my previous background knowledge and learn the material afresh from a different, academic standpoint.”

Yet Intro to Judaism—and the Center for Jewish Studies in general—also plays a key role in educating the entire UW–Madison community about Judaism. Indeed, many students in the course had no previous knowledge of Judaism whatsoever. As one respondent wrote, “I took this class because I come from a small town that has very few, if any, Jews. I felt very ignorant about the topic and wanted to learn more.” Another noted, “I am Christian and thought it would be neat to learn about another religion.”

Students new to the material said they were especially interested in learning about Jewish history, foundational Jewish texts, connections between Jewish and Christian cultures, and the wide variety of contemporary Jewish practices. One student said she was surprised to find that “the uniform term ‘Jewish’ has so many meanings.” Even those with a fairly extensive background in the topic reported that they learned a lot.

Intro to Judaism is a course that can influence the direction of a student’s education and life. Many students surveyed plan to take more Jewish Studies courses in the future, and several have begun considering Jewish Studies certificates or majors since taking the course. The students wrote thoughtfully about integrating what they’d learned in Intro to Judaism with their own interests, evidence that an engaging Jewish Studies course can give students ideas and information that they carry with them into the post-University world, no matter their background, major, or future plans.
Judith Kornblatt, professor of Slavic Languages and Literature and affiliate of the Center for Jewish Studies, is retiring this year from UW–Madison. She will continue to be active in the field of Slavic studies, as she is the president-elect of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), and she has several research and service projects in progress. But Kornblatt is also using her retirement to embark on a new course of study and a new career: nursing.

“I’ve loved my time in academia, but I’m looking forward to trying something new and being of service in a different way,” Kornblatt said. “I love working with people, and I hope to be able to try lots of different kinds of nursing and to travel with an organization like Doctors Without Borders.”

She’s already been back in the classroom, completing some courses that are prerequisites for nursing school. “Being a student again is really wonderful.”

Kornblatt’s experiences as a returning student round out her extensive knowledge of the university. She has taught undergraduates and graduate students, and served as the chair of her department four times during her 25 years at UW–Madison. Kornblatt also spent twelve years in the Dean’s office, first as an Associate Dean for Arts and Humanities and then as a Senior Associate Dean for Graduate Education. She is an affiliate of the Religious Studies Program, the Women’s Studies Program, and the Center for Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia, as well as Jewish Studies.

“Being present at the founding of the Center for Jewish Studies was one of the highlights of my career,” Kornblatt notes; she participated in early planning meetings for the Center. “I’ve enjoyed being able to participate in the intellectual exchange that the Center offers. This is one of the programs that makes UW–Madison such a wonderful place for faculty to work interdisciplinarily.” She was a presenter at the inaugural Greenfield Summer Institute in 2000, and she will present for the fourth time at this year’s Institute; she notes that Greenfield has allowed her to explore topics that she might not have had the chance to pursue otherwise, including Russian film and the relocation of Stalin’s daughter to rural Wisconsin.

Kornblatt’s work was influenced by these opportunities to explore the interface of Jewish Studies and Russian culture. While on sabbatical in Jerusalem in 1998, she was also able to do research on Jews baptized in the Russian Orthodox church during the Soviet period, a topic that had not been well-explored previously, and which Kornblatt developed into her book Doubly Chosen: Jewish Identity, the Soviet Intelligentsia, and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Kornblatt looks forward to her new career in nursing not only because she will be able to continue learning, but also because she is deeply interested in helping people in times of need. She plans to travel to Chile and Italy after retirement, and hopes to travel more as a nurse. Kornblatt notes with characteristic energy, “the world is a wide and marvelous place.”
Center for Jewish Studies and Hillel bring Yiddishkeit to Madison

BY ALLISON BLOOM

This winter, the Center for Jewish Studies and UW Hillel presented an exhibition of comic posters exploring the concept of Yiddishkeit, roughly translated as “Yiddish culture or sensibility.” Drawn from the 2011 book Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular and The New Land, and edited by the late comic art icon Harvey Pekar and distinguished cultural historian and Center for Jewish Studies affiliate Paul Buhle, the posters feature comic art that examines the impact of pivotal figures and movements in Yiddish literature, theater, music, politics, and comedy.

The pairing of comic art with Yiddish culture is apt. Yiddishkeit is a difficult concept to define, as Yiddish culture is an amalgam of influences, an outsider culture shaped by its marginal relationship to mainstream American culture. Comic art, as an outsider art form that works at the margins of literature and visual art, is perfectly situated to illuminate the contradictory, sometimes earthy, world of American Yiddish culture.

Pekar and Buhle collected comics from artists who work in a wide range of styles; the posters on display feature both well-known and underground comic artists, including Sharon Rudahl, Peter Kuper, Sabrina Jones, and Nick Thorkelson. In addition to sketching the biographies of Yiddish-culture luminaries like Molly Picon, Moishe Oysher, and “Yip” Harburg, the comics in the book also trace the history of the Yiddish language, the transmission of Yiddish culture to America, and its influence on American popular culture.

Harvey Pekar, author of numerous comics and graphic novels and subject of the award-winning film American Splendor (2002), drew upon his own heritage as the child of a Yiddish-speaking household in editing this collection. Yiddishkeit was the last completed major work on his life; the book and posters are influenced by Pekar’s distinctive style. Paul Buhle, who studied with UW-Madison history professor George Mosse and received his PhD from UW-Madison in 1976, recently retired from Brown University. He has published a number of books on a wide range of topics that include Jewish-American history, the history of left-wing politics in America, comic art history, and Wisconsin history.

The Yiddishkeit exhibition was sponsored by the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies through the generosity of Marv and Babe Conney, and UW Hillel. Additional support comes from the Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture.

A gallery of selected artwork is available for viewing online at jewishstudies.wisc.edu/yiddishkeit.
New York City
Several dozen alumni and friends of the Center for Jewish Studies gathered in New York this past October to hear Lorraine Lotzof Abramson give a compelling talk and a reading from her book, *My Race: A Jewish Girl Growing up under Apartheid in South Africa*. Abramson is the daughter of Latvian immigrants who settled in South Africa in the early twentieth century; she became a celebrated, Olympic-caliber athlete who ran in several Maccabee Games representing both South Africa and the United States. A highlight of the talk, which was generously sponsored by Richard Silberberg, was Abramson’s description of a visit she and her family made to the village in Latvia where her father grew up, and to the synagogue, now abandoned, where her family had attended shul. Ms. Abramson, whose two children are alumni of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, will visit the campus this fall to read from her book and give a talk about her experiences in apartheid South Africa.

Los Angeles
During the 1960s, UW–Madison was the epicenter of both political activism and academic innovation. It was also home to prominent Jewish intellectuals and the destination for thousands of Jewish students. On April 7, Peter and Julie Weil hosted a roundtable discussion on “Jewish Madison in the 1960s,” moderated by Jim Hirsch (’69) and featuring Jim Abrahams (’66), Ben Sidran (’66), and Stanley Kutler, Professor emeritus of History. More than 70 alumni and friends of the Center for Jewish Studies attended the program.

Martin Luther King crowd on Bascom Hill, 1969.

The Center for Jewish Studies remembers two key benefactors: Samuel Lipton (1921–2013) and Paul Lipton (1916–2012). Both were graduates of the University of Wisconsin–Madison: Samuel received a BS in Chemistry in 1942, and an MS in 1946 and PhD in 1948, both in Biochemistry. Paul received a BA in Economics in 1937 and a JD in 1939. Through Samuel’s bequest, the Center for Jewish Studies will create a faculty position, the Lipton Professorship in Jewish Studies. Paul has generously endowed a fund for Jewish Studies student support.

– L.S.

The Center for Jewish Studies lost a wonderful friend when Arnold Paster, UW class of 1966, died on February 1st this year. I came to know Arnie under unusual circumstances: he was a childhood friend of my wife JoAnn, and they grew up in the same neighborhood in St. Paul, MN. Many years later, when I became director of the Center for Jewish Studies, JoAnn brought us together in a way that was to benefit us, the Center and the University. He was a man of great emotional and philanthropic enthusiasms, and I will always remember the day we chaperoned him around the State Street area when he returned to campus after a long absence. His joy at making renewed contact with the scene of his undergraduate years was overwhelming to the three of us.

Arnie had financial success with real estate on Long Island, NY. But he derived personal pleasure in sharing his good fortune with students whom he encouraged to extend their educational interests and life experiences, to “reach further than they thought they could.” He served as a mentor to recent UW grads, and endowed scholarships to several UW student groups, notably the Chancellor’s Scholars Program.

One of Arnie’s very special gifts was called the “CJS Director’s Fund,” and it was responsible for funding a week-long trip I led with seven Jewish students to visit and live with the tiny Jewish community in Camagüey, Cuba. A part of the journey was engaging in a service project, and we spent a day repairing and painting the small house that the community used as its religious and social home. I know for certain that the students’ lives were changed greatly for the better by their international encounter, and their contact with a welcoming diasporic community that had experienced much isolation moved and delighted us all.

Besides a devoted family, Arnie leaves behind a record of substantial generosity. He believed that he could make a difference in young people’s lives—and he did.

– Bob Skloot
Summer 2013 Events

Complete and current information about Center for Jewish Studies events is available at jewishstudies.wisc.edu.

Greenfield Summer Institute
Subversive Jews: Dissidents and Rebels in the Jewish Tradition
Sunday through Thursday, July 7–11
Grainger Hall
Registration required; tuition: $160

A Biselle KlezKamp
Sunday, July 21
9:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m.
Union South
Free and open to the public.

Support the Legacy Fund

In the fall of 2011, the Center for Jewish Studies announced the establishment of the Legacy Fund, an endowment designed to provide the Center with financial stability at a time of uncertainty for public higher education. With a goal of $10 million, the fund will give the Center the flexibility it needs to continue to provide an exceptional education in Jewish Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, one of the world’s premier public institutions.

Please consider making a pledge or legacy gift to the Legacy Fund, which will help secure the future of the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies. For more information, please contact Ron Luskin, Director of Development, at ron.luskin@supportuw.org or 608-265-3526.

Newsletter Editor: Laurie Silverberg
Editorial Assistant: Allison Bloom
Photography: Kesha Weber