DIRECTOR’S REPORT
Combatting Hateful Behavior

I am writing this note to you at a challenging time for the university and for us at the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies. Like most other departments on campus, we are struggling with budget cuts, course enrollments, and changes to the rules governing tenure. But what concerns me more at this moment is the seeming rise of hate on our campus.

As I write you now, the latest count has risen to 33 hate-related incidents since the start of the year—and for every reported act, I imagine that there are at least a few that go unreported. The reported acts include defacing property with swastikas and other symbols of white supremacy, threatening, harassing, and intimidating students of color, homophobic name-calling, and the mocking of a Ho-Chunk elder performing a ritual at a residence hall. These incidents are saddening and deeply worrisome. Every student on our campus deserves to feel safe and valued; every hateful offense enacted against any minority diminishes our community as a whole. This is not the UW-Madison we want for our students, for our staff and faculty, for our children or ourselves.

I don’t know if this is naïve, but this is what I like to think about the perpetrators: that they have fallen prey to what my colleague Katherine Cramer labeled “the politics of resentment,” that they are acting out of ignorance and fear, that they are new to the university and new to the kind of learning we provide, but that they are not lost causes. Through thoughtful and thought-provoking education, through the careful construction of empathic bridges, through caring and consequential learning, they can come to understand the seriousness of their actions. They can change, and often they do.

This is the kind of teaching and learning that the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies is now and has always been about. Please know that despite these hard times, we remain committed to helping our institution live up to its highest ideals and that we will continue to do everything in our power to combat hateful behavior.

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Religion and Sexuality: An Interview with Belzer Professor Jordan Rosenblum on his New Course

BY MEGGAN BILOTTE

Can you tell me about this new course you’re offering?
Religious Studies 101/Jewish Studies 231 is an introductory course for new students to the UW. As part of its mission, it has to compare three different religious traditions and three different methods or approaches to studying those traditions. My primary area is rabbinic Judaism, but the course focuses on ancient Mediterranean religions. It looks at ancient Judaism and early Christianity, (and the very earliest Christianity is very much connected to ancient Judaism), but it also looks at Greek and Roman religions. Within this context we look at the ways these ancients understood and regulated sexuality and how they understood the body, gender, and rituals associated with sexuality. We learn about topics such as: a rabbinic student hiding under his rabbi’s marital bed in order to learn about sex; rabbinically-approved sexual positions; why early Christians spent so much time talking about Jesus’ foreskin; and why Vestal Virgins who have sex are buried alive.

What are you hoping your students come away with from this course?
My hope is that students will learn that looking at the ways in which sexuality and bodies are regulated often reveals discourses for other ideas and beliefs. For example, why is there no masculine Hebrew form for “virgin” (betulah) in the Hebrew Bible? What does it mean to only conceive of “virginity” in the feminine grammatical gender and only in regard to women? Further, is sexuality, or renunciation of sexuality, a good thing or a bad thing? In this class I’m talking about things that happened 2000 years ago, but through our discussions, students are going to gain perspective on what they think about issues today. I want them to think about what is at stake in the decisions that they make, their friends make, and society makes, and what is being communicated by these decisions. A good example is the recent controversy surrounding bathroom legislation in North Carolina. Though I do not discuss this particular issue in class, we have investigated what it means to define “male” and “female” and the social performance of these roles. Students are therefore better equipped to consider what is at stake in such legislation and to examine the issue from multiple angles and from the perspective of history.

Do you think students come into the class thinking there is a tension between religion and sexuality?
Students might come to class thinking they’ve already made their decision on things, but I want them to hold off on that.
I don’t mean for them to forget what their predispositions are because I want them to think about, again, what’s at stake. You might connect to one of these traditions but these traditions are vastly different in the ancient world than they are today. For example, today there are rabbinic debates about the social appropriateness of a woman breastfeeding her child in the synagogue, whereas in the ancient world they were more concerned with the implications of the fact that, according to ancient medical opinion, breastmilk was transformed menstrual blood. So, instead of debating whether “breast is best,” they asked questions like “is male breastmilk kosher?” or “on the Sabbath, can one move a shofar [an animal horn] filled with breastmilk in order to pour the milk into an infant’s mouth?” What students think they know about these issues is vastly different than what the rabbis actually thought and that’s also why we focus a lot on primary texts. I’m going to say, “Is it in the text?” and often it isn’t in the text but in some medieval or modern commentary on the text and so you have to bracket out what the text says and then what other people say about the text.

Do you think students are excited to do that primary document work?
I hope so. It’s the thing that got me first interested in becoming a scholar. As an undergraduate, I was taking two different courses, a medieval Jewish history course at the Jewish Theological Seminary and a medieval Christianity course at Columbia University, and the professors both had us working on primary sources. At one point, one professor claimed that Judaism was a religio licita—a legal religion under Roman law—and another professor claimed that this was not so. I went to each professor and asked them where this information was found in the primary sources, and neither knew; it was just information that they had accepted as fact. But they both worked with me to discover where this claim came from. Eventually, I found that this was based on an early Church Father, Tertullian, who used this claim to argue that Christianity, which was a religio illicita (an illegal religion), should really be legal. However, much was read into (and out of) a few words written by Tertullian. That investigative work got me thinking about how one person can have one view and another person can have another. There is what the text says, and then there is what people are trying to read into or out of it. A lot of students do engage with that. It’s like a map, I’m showing you my work and I’m saying, “here is the text,” and then it gives us a common conversation. And then we can try and understand how two ancient texts about the religious conversion of prostitutes are very different based on various assumptions of rabbinic Judaism (in which a rabbi visits a prostitute and then his adherence to the biblical commandment to wear fringes on the corners of his garments inspires the prostitute to convert and marry him) and early Christianity (in which a prostitute is inspired by a bishop to convert to Christianity, become a “bride of Christ,” move to Jerusalem, and then live as a cloistered, male, eunuch monk).
In December 2015, a crowd gathered in Amsterdam to watch a debate nearly four centuries in the making: Should the philosopher Spinoza be forgiven by the synagogue that excommunicated him in 1656? Among the participants was Steven Nadler, William H. Hay II Professor of Philosophy and Evjue-Bascom Professor in Humanities. He spoke about the experience with Inside UW–Madison.

Q. First, a little background for the non-philosophers among us—who was Spinoza and why was he excommunicated 359 years ago? How is he relevant today?

A. In July of 1656, Bento Spinoza was only 23 years old, and hadn’t published or even written anything—certainly not yet a famous philosopher. But that month he was put under “herem” (excommunication) by the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish congregation for his “abominable heresies and monstrous deeds.” It was the harshest excommunication ever issued by the community and it was never rescinded. However, the herem document does not tell us what exactly his offenses were.

He would go on to become one of history’s most important and influential—and vilified—thinkers. In his mature treatises, he argued that there is no such thing as a transcendent, providential God; God is Nature, and everything that is is a part of Nature. He also claimed that the Bible is just a work of human literature, and a rather imperfect one at that, whose only message is “love your neighbors and treat them with justice and charity”; and that Jewish law is an obsolete body of superstitious ceremonies that are no longer valid for latter-day Jews. He was, in addition, a proponent of democracy and freedom of thought and expression. These were probably just the kinds of things he was saying as a young man, around the time of his excommunication.

Spinoza continues to inspire philosophical, moral, religious and political thinkers with his radical ideas about religion; about the importance of a secular, liberal state with extensive toleration; and about the dangers of superstition and prejudice.

Q. How did the movement to reverse the excommunication come about?

A. In 2011, a member of the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish congregation asked for a reconsideration of the ban, with the hope that it would finally be lifted. (It seems to happen periodically that someone, somewhere, demands the ban to be revoked—the former Israeli Prime Minister David ben Gurion did so in 1953.)

The congregation’s leaders felt they needed more information, so they convened a committee of four scholars specializing in Spinoza and in Dutch
Jewish history to advise them on the historical, philosophical and religious contexts of the case. We prepared our reports without consulting with each other, and were asked to consider the pros and cons of lifting the ban.

A year after we submitted our reports, we eventually learned that the rabbi had decided that, as powerful and important an intellectual figure as Spinoza was, there was no precedent in Jewish law for lifting the ban. He argued, too, that lifting it would be a dangerous precedent, given Spinoza’s attack on the foundations of Judaism. All this was done quietly, and with little public attention. But finally the congregation, with sponsorship by the University of Amsterdam and the CRESCAS Institute for Jewish Education (in Amsterdam), decided to hold a public event around the case and these recent deliberations.

Q. You are one of four scholars invited to advise the synagogue’s rabbi on this matter—what sort of research have you done that’s relevant?

A. I am the author of a biography of Spinoza, as well as several other books on his philosophy and religious and political thought. I have also given many public talks on Spinoza and his ideas, especially in synagogues.

Q. Have you ever participated in something like this before? How did you prepare?

A. Certainly nothing on this scale, and it was very exciting and a great honor to do so. Philosophers rarely get the opportunity to take their scholarly work into the public domain and actually participate in something as consequential as this. I was also a bit intimidated, not knowing what the audience expected or how the participating rabbis would approach the whole issue.

Preparing was easy, since all I was expected to do was review what I took to be the reasons for the herem. In my view, it was a matter of his philosophical ideas (his “heresies”), although some other scholars have insisted it was for more practical violations of the Amsterdam Jewish community’s regulations, such as taking advantage of Dutch law to avoid debts (within the Jewish community) inherited from his late father.

At the same time, I was nervous about presenting my own thoughts about whether the ban should be lifted. I do believe it is always and absolutely wrong to punish people for their ideas; on that point I’m in total agreement with Spinoza himself (not to mention the First Amendment). On the other hand, given the historical circumstances of the ban, it is totally understandable why the 17th century congregation reacted harshly to Spinoza’s ideas. I also think that lifting the ban now would be a meaningless act. And if we were to ask Spinoza himself what should be done, he would most likely say, “I couldn’t care less.”

Q. Describe the day and the debate itself—what was the experience like, both intellectually and emotionally?

A. This past Sunday, 500 people in Amsterdam showed up in the hall of a former “schuilkerk” (“hidden church,” where Catholics could practice safely in a fiercely Calvinist land) to hear a discussion of the case. Spinoza is a great hero of Dutch history, so the size of the crowd was no surprise. The four of us who made up the scholarly advisory committee made our presentations and outlined the essentials of the case. Then several rabbis and other scholars spoke, adding their own perspectives.

One rabbi from Israel, in fact, exclaimed: “For God’s sake, lift the ban!” However, the current chief rabbi of the Amsterdam Portuguese congregation explained why lifting the ban would be wrong, and why he had no intention or even right to do so.

Q. What happens next?

A. One possibility is that, in light of Sunday’s event and the overwhelming affection for Spinoza shown by the huge crowd, the rabbi reconsideres his decision. This seems highly unlikely, however; these things are not decided by public popularity.

Of course, the Catholic Church reconciled itself with Galileo. However, that affair was quite different, since Galileo did not directly attack the foundations of the Catholic religion; his ideas were primarily scientific (although the Church did not see it that way).

Spinoza, on the other hand, launched a direct assault on the essentials of the Jewish faith. However, even if the herem is not lifted, it would be nice to see the congregation make a gesture and acknowledge the historical significance of arguably its most famous (if outcast) member, and especially his importance for Jewish intellectual history.
Thanks to the generosity of the European Institutes for Advanced Study (EURIAS), I was able to spend the Spring 2015 semester as the EURIAS Senior Fellow at the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg (HWK) in Delmenhorst, Germany. The mission of the HWK is to promote intellectual collaboration within and across academic disciplines by offering scholars from around the world an opportunity to concentrate on particular research projects for a limited amount of time without the distractions of their regular academic responsibilities. I used my time at the HWK to complete the manuscript for a book I've been working on for the past six years, provisionally entitled *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought*. The book, which is now under review at a major academic publishing house, investigates how Jews became a major reference point for defining modernity and national identity in French, German, and American social thought from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. This new book is not merely a study of classical sociological theory but also a study in the comparative and historical sociology of ideas. I hope it will also have broad interdisciplinary appeal to scholars in anthropology, cultural studies, history, Jewish Studies, and American and European studies as well as sociology.

While I spent the bulk of my time in Germany working to finish this manuscript, it was not the most memorable part of my visit. In January 2015, shortly after my wife and I arrived in Delmenhorst for the start of the fellowship, we were jolted by the grim news that Islamist terrorists had murdered eleven people in the Paris offices of the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. In a related attack, another terrorist had taken hostages in a kosher supermarket in a Paris suburb and then murdered four of them before he was himself killed by police. While these terrorist attacks had occurred some 800 kilometers away, they felt deeply disturbing. With soldiers subsequently guarding Jewish institutions in France, and the closure of Jewish schools in Belgium and the Netherlands, I felt the need to seek out and show solidarity with the small Jewish community in Delmenhorst. My wife and I paid a visit to the local synagogue and met the gabbai, Vladimir, who had emigrated from the former Soviet Union. He spoke no English and little Hebrew, so my wife's fluency in Russian came in very handy. We learned that the synagogue was served by a remarkable young woman named Alina Treiger, another immigrant from the former...
Soviet Union who in 2010 became the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi in Germany since the Nazi era. When we returned to the synagogue for a Kabbalat Shabbat service, we discovered that many of the congregants were emigres from the former Soviet Union. Few spoke English, but these mostly post-Soviet Jews welcomed us warmly. Especially hospitable was the chairman of the Delmenhorst Jewish community, an emigre from Chile named Pedro Benjamin Becerra. Fluent in English and several other languages, Pedro is a member of the German Social Democratic Party and an elected member of the Delmenhorst city council. His sense of humor immediately put me at ease, and I soon came to admire his community leadership and active involvement in public affairs. I was honored that Pedro and his partner Waltraud Kurzhals-Dingel took an interest in my work and attended my lecture at the HWK. Eventually my wife and I met the charming and history-making Rabbi Treiger as well, who is also fluent in English and contributed in no small part to our warm welcome. We returned to the synagogue in Delmenhorst several times, but I am especially grateful that we were able to join a wonderful communal Passover seder in April 2015 led by Rabbi Treiger and conducted in German, Russian, and Hebrew. Every seder warrants a shehechyanu, but especially seders like this one.

When my wife and I returned to Madison after six months in Germany, I realized how much I had gained from the experience. To be sure, I had finished the manuscript I set out to complete, but more importantly we had made new connections and new friends.
During our visit to the Jewish sections of Forest Hill, we noticed a tombstone with an engraving of an electric guitar with no Jewish symbolism, as well as a tombstone with a cross on the left and a Jewish star on the right. How does one narrate the story of these images? Are these symbols evidence of a deteriorating Jewish tradition or an impressive demonstration of the innovation and adaptation of American Jewish culture? Gravestones can, in this way, point to some of the central debates and politicized questions of Jewish diasporic history.

One visit to one cemetery is, of course, not enough to fully understand its story. Insights about a particular site like the Jewish sections of Forest Hill can only emerge after cross referencing other Jewish cemeteries and exploring the existing scholarship on the subject. But there is also an advantage to witnessing these sites with fresh eyes and approaching them with the sincere curiosity of the uninitiated. For this reason, cemeteries are especially powerful and accessible teaching tools, offering something to experts and amateurs alike. Dylan used photographs from her visit to Forest Hill Cemetery in a presentation on American Jewish cemeteries in her Modern Hebrew class. She was assigned to present on any topic of personal interest; the only requirement was that the presentation be in Hebrew. Idit explained her abiding interest in reading cemeteries as historical texts to a packed audience at the University Club as part of the Center for Jewish Studies Lunch and Learn series.

For more information on this site, see Professor Bill Cronon’s impressive website, “Forest Hill Cemetery: A Guide,” (http://foresthill.williamcronon.net), which gives an orientation to Forest Hill’s landscape and history, including a page on the Jewish sections and Jewish burial customs.
Jewish Outreach from the Orthodox World

Originally from Scarsdale, New York, Sasha Baken describes her experience with the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies as “wonderful.” During her studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison she has been impressed at the uniqueness and diversity of topics offered in the classes and the tremendous amount of knowledge each professor extends to Jewish Studies students. She believes that the program has given her a meaningful outlet, or maybe inlet, on such a large campus as UW-Madison.

For her capstone project in Jewish Studies, she is researching kiruv, the Hebrew word for Jewish outreach efforts specifically in the Orthodox world. She seeks to understand the origins of kiruv, which seem to connect back to the Holocaust, and to provide an explanation for its continued popularity. She has been working with Professor Tony Michels whom she describes as “extremely helpful and interested in my findings.” Sasha has been fascinated by her research and is amazed that the Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox movements all have different modes of outreach work and yet tend to diminish the other movements’ approaches. She believes that over time, however, interdenominational understanding will prevail and possibly grow—maybe even through outreach.

After graduation she plans to move back to New York to work in the field of conflict resolution. Eventually, Sasha wants to attend law school and perhaps specialize in mediation.

—Meggan Bilotte

Reform Judaism in the 1930s: Shifting Views on Zionism

When she’s not on campus, Naomi Segal likes cooking and hiking. Her real passion, though, is her work with high school students. For the past three years, Naomi has served as a youth group advisor and mentor at a local reform synagogue in Madison. It is perhaps fitting, then, that after she graduates this May she will be a unit head, or Rosh Eidah, at the Reform Jewish sleep-away camp, Olin Sang Ruby. After the summer ends, we hope she gets some much-needed sleep before she starts her new job as the Youth and Family Engagement Director for K-12 Programming at Temple Jeremiah in Northfield, Illinois!

Naomi has loved being a Jewish Studies major and has taken advantage of many of the opportunities offered through the Center. In addition to her coursework, Naomi travelled to New York on a Jewish food tour—generously funded by the Colemans—with Professor Jordan Rosenblum. It was her first time in New York, and through...
At the Cutting Edges of Tradition and Beauty: Judaism and Cosmetic Surgery

During her studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Gabrielle Schwartzman has pursued her interests in biology and Jewish studies. These seemingly disparate poles have come together in the thesis that she is working on under the guidance of Professor Jordan Rosenblum. Combining her passion for medicine and Jewish Studies, Gabi’s project looks at how rabbis and Jewish thinkers consider cosmetic surgery: when is it allowable or not, under what circumstances, and with what potential consequences. Gabi is applying to medical school and hoping to attend after a gap year.

One of the highlights of Gabrielle’s Jewish Studies experience has been the opportunity to study abroad at Tel Aviv University. She loved becoming truly proficient at Hebrew while there, she liked learning alongside Israelis, and she loved her courses. Originally from Highland Park, Illinois, she has also loved her time at Madison. She especially enjoys finding new restaurants to try out with old friends.

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