

HA-KOL

The Newsletter of the Judaic Studies Program
at SUNY-Binghamton

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HARPUR COLLEGE COUNCIL VOTES YES!!!

We are happy to report that we have moved one great step closer to the establishment of a Judaic Studies Department at SUNY-Binghamton. After weeks of deliberation, the Harpur College Council voted overwhelmingly in favor of our proposal (22 to 9, with 5 abstentions). The proposal will now go to the Faculty Senate, where, we hope, it will once again receive the support it deserves.

Getting this far hasn't been easy. The administration, faculty, and student representatives on the HCC posed some difficult questions and confronted us with many serious challenges. Some people expressed their dismay at the way in which our proposal had come to the fore, others objected to the very idea of a Judaic Studies Department. Some were afraid that the creation of such a department would set a dangerous precedent and would contribute to the splintering of the university. And there were people who were afraid that our proposal was simply not a practical one.

We (and our numerous supporters) did what we could to answer everyone. To begin with, we pointed out that the idea of a Judaic Studies Department at SUNY-Binghamton was by no means a new one. We had been seeking support for such a department for years, without making any significant progress. It was indeed true, we acknowledged, that student activism in the period after the vandalization of the Jewish Student Union had lent new life to the idea. But this was no reason either to support or to condemn it. The idea of a Judaic Studies Department, we argued, should be considered purely on its merits. Judging from the subsequent debate, it appears that this argument proved persuasive.

Convincing people that our proposal should be discussed solely in terms of its academic merits was easier than persuading them that the merits it possessed were sufficient to warrant its adoption. We had to contend, first of all, with people who argued that Judaic Studies was not a discipline, and should therefore not be housed in a separate department. To such people

there was little we could say other than that ample precedent already existed at SUNY-B and elsewhere for the creation of such a department. SUNY-B, we noted, already has a well-established Department of Afro-American Studies. SUNY-Albany has even more: a Department of Afro-American Studies, a Department of Latin American and Carribean Studies, and a Department of Judaic Studies.

By noting such facts, however, we only opened ourselves up to criticism from another direction. Wouldn't the creation of a Judaic Studies Department contribute to the fragmentation of the university into more and more small departments? While we couldn't discount such fears altogether, we argued that the danger was being greatly exaggerated. In any case, we said, apprehensions of this kind should not serve as the rationale for keeping Judaic Studies within a departmental framework where it does not really fit. Again and again we stressed that it simply made more sense for Judaic Studies to be independent than to be grouped together with Classics.

Even people who accepted these arguments had their doubts about the viability of what was bound to be a rather small department. We admitted that only half a dozen people (including those who would remain in the History Department) would be teaching in the new department, but we were sure that that would be enough to maintain a full-fledged operation. What about money? We weren't asking for any more money, we explained, not from the University, anyhow (Readers: beware!).

In the face of all this opposition (and more), how, one might wonder, did we manage to win the vote? No exit polls were conducted, but the following factors appear to have been of crucial importance: 1) We had a positive proposal, and we demonstrated, week after week, the strength of our commitment to it; 2) the logic of our arguments proved compelling; 3) a considerable number of students came to each of the meetings of the HCC to demonstrate their support; and 4) we had, at a critical moment, the unwitting support of one of our inveterate adversaries, a man whose clumsy intervention in the debate seems to have brought more than one previously undecided voter to our side.

An editorial in the November 17 Pipe Dream declared that a Judaic Studies Department "would be a welcome addition to SUNY-B," and acclaimed the HCC decision. The only question it raised was "What took so long?" During the past few weeks we, too, often felt that the debate was taking too long. Now that it's over, however, our impatience has dissipated. In retrospect, it is clear that our proposal received a full and fair hearing. We thank our supporters, forgive our opponents, and, as the deliberative process continues, look forward to another success.

OPPENHEIM INNOCENT

On December 11, in Vestal Town Court, after a trial that lasted nearly a week, SUNY-B senior and former JSU President James Oppenheim was acquitted of all charges related to the vandalization of the JSU office in November 1988. As Oppenheim's attorney, N. Theodor Sommer, observed, the prosecution was dealing with "a short deck in terms of evidence." The case against Oppenheim was unbelievably flimsy and full of holes. Now that it is over, it is clear that this trial should never have taken place. And now that he has been fully exonerated, Mr. Oppenheim, we hope, will be able to resume his normal life. We congratulate him on his victory.

NEW FUND ESTABLISHED

Anonymous donors have sent us \$1800 dollars as the initial donation to the "Friends and Relatives of Harriet and Louis Silverman Zalman Fund." In accordance with the wishes of these generous donors, this fund will be used to foster, within the framework of our program, the study of the heritage of Romanian Jewry. Under the direction of Professor Michael Taub, who was born and raised in Romania, we are considering appropriate ways in which to use the money now available to us. The very first thing we plan to do is to purchase a short film entitled "The Last Jews of Radauti." This film, the catalogue tells us, "is a study of Jews in a small Rumanian town," where "we meet the members of this dwindling community, including the rabbi and the ritual slaughterer. We experience intimate expressions of Jewish life... Laurence Salzmann's cinematic eye captures expressive faces animated by a vibrant life force." It will be extremely useful to us to have this film available for classroom use, and we are deeply grateful to our anonymous benefactors for making its purchase- and much else- possible.

OTHER NEW DONATIONS

Big photocopying jobs like the publication of Ha-kol (we print more than five hundred copies) have to go through the campus xerox center. We do medium-sized jobs (e.g., reproducing thirty copies of a one-page Hebrew quiz) on a xerox machine in a

distant corner of the Fine Arts Building. Most of our copying jobs are, however, quite small- two copies of this, three of that. Thanks to Martin Taub, who recently donated a Canon PC3 Copier to the Judaic Studies Program, we are now able to do them most conveniently. Instead of traipsing down to the xerox machine in Fine Arts, any one of us can just step into the outer office, press a couple of buttons, and walk away, in a matter of seconds, with neat, clean copies. Such a convenience, a commonplace in the business world, is a rarity in a state university. We heartily thank Mr. Taub for his generous and extremely useful gift.

Other gifts include Phreadde-Janet Davis's donation of Jewish books to our JUST Reading Room, and donations from Nina G. Stillman (in memory of Haya Kalfon), Joseph and Marilyn Aigen and David and Claire Elias. We thank them for remembering us, and we urge all of the rest of our readers to follow their example. We love to get checks in the mail.

TWO SHARIS RETURN FROM OVERSEAS

Two of our JUST majors, Shari Fisch and Shari Tellerman, returned to campus this fall after studying abroad- Shari Fisch (henceforth Shari F.) in England, Shari Tellerman (henceforth Shari T.) in Israel. Shari T.'s decision to go to Israel requires no explanation; Shari F. went to England in part because her mother wouldn't let her go to Israel, but also because she was afraid she wouldn't be able to find kosher food in Japan, and most of all because she is also majoring in English. Both of these students enjoyed their overseas experiences immensely and felt that their prolonged study abroad gave them new insight into Jewish history and contemporary Jewish affairs.

In England Shari F. was able to find adequate supplies not only of kosher food but of kosher Jews as well. While studying at the University of London she lived in Golders Green, a heavily Jewish suburb of London. At first she lived with an observant family she was able to locate with the assistance of some local friends of her sister. Later she moved in with an elderly Yiddish-speaking Irish-Jewish woman whom she and her friends uncharitably but fondly nicknamed Yente.

Concerning her study of English culture in London Shari F. has much to report. Ha-kol, however, in its relentless parochialism, will ignore this aspect of her experience and focus instead on what she told us about Jewish life in England. She found it both tight-knit and exciting. Having spent her freshmen year in Israel, she already had many English-Jewish friends. Through them she met others, particularly young people in Bnei Akiva (a religious Zionist youth group) and Tagar (a revisionist Zionist youth group). Participating in their activities, around

the country, she was struck by the harmonious co-existence of Jewish groups of very different orientations. Everyone (with the exception of the ultra-orthodox) seemed to get along reasonably well with everyone else.

Shari T. briefly visited Shari F. in England, studied European Jewish history (in Israel) and ultimately visited Europe. During her semester at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem she took a course on the history of the Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of World War I. She found this course particularly exciting because it familiarized her with the world from which her ancestors had come, the world of Yiddish-speaking shtetls, of Hasidism and of the Haskalah. The course concluded with a field trip to parts of Europe which had formerly been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In Budapest, Hungary Shari T. and the other students attended sabbath evening services at the city's main synagogue. There she was struck by the resemblance between the cantor's old-style Ashkenazi Hebrew and that of her own, European-born hazzan at home. What surprised and amused her was to hear the members of the congregation respond with their own, as she puts it, "yumpty-bumpty shabbos shabbos."

Shari T. found the continuation of the trip, in Poland, considerably less amusing. In Cracow, which had once been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and had later been the administrative center of Nazi-occupied Poland, she spotted numerous hand-scrawled swastikas on the walls of the city's buildings. Walking past one of them with a Polish university student, she was horrified when he pointed to it and said "Hitler jah!" He didn't know she was Jewish; she cut loose from him as quickly as possible. This conversation was, for her, a chilling reminder of what had taken place not far away, at the concentration camps (which she also visited).

All in all, both Sharis seem to have benefitted greatly from their studies and their experiences overseas, and not to have suffered too much from the interruption of their studies with our illustrious faculty here at SUNY-B.

OUT-OF-TOWN AND FOREIGN VISITORS

As usual, we have had a number of guest speakers on campus this semester. In October Professor Shelly Tenenbaum of Clark University gave a talk on the emergence of Jewish free loan associations in the United States. Professor Tenenbaum's description of the operation of these associations stirred, in the minds of some of our veteran faculty members, fond recollections of their youth. For some of our students her talk provided not only an illuminating view of the past but useful

guidelines for the future. The associations are still in existence and are prepared to make student loans.

In November Professor Laurence Loeb of the University of Utah visited our campus to speak on the subject of Yemenite Jewish women. Much of his talk focused on the life of a fairly small Jewish community in the interior of Yemen, a community which resettled as a group, forty years ago, in Israel. He showed us slides of their old neighborhoods back in Yemen. What dumps! It looked like the last place on earth that anyone would want to live. It wasn't so bad, though. The Jews were on friendly terms with the local authorities and were well-treated by the general population. Most of the Jewish men were itinerant silversmiths and spent most of their time out of town, leaving their wives alone for months at a time. Even so, nobody could remember any instances of a woman committing adultery- with the exception of one woman (originally from out of town), who became involved with a Moslem man when her husband was away, and who subsequently converted to Islam and married him. And what were the men doing out on the road? Nobody thought to ask.

The following week Abraham David of the Hebrew University spoke to a group of of around twenty-five faculty members and students- in Hebrew- about Jewish life in sixteenth century Egypt, as reflected in documents found in the Cairo genizah. The scholars in the audience were particularly interested in the details he provided with regard to the difficult financial circumstances of their late medieval Egyptian counterparts. They derived little solace from the knowledge that they too had had a tough time making a living.

Our last guest speaker this spring was an Israeli journalist, Danny Rubinstein, who surprised us with his announcement that if he were given another go-around (another gilgul, as he put it), he would want to be a genizah scholar himself. In his current gilgul he covers the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for Davar, an Israeli daily affiliated with the Labor Party. He spoke to us about the intifadah, but instead of summarizing what he said (which was too depressing for a cheery little newsletter like ours) we are going to repeat one of his anecdotes. It was a story he told when dinner conversation turned to the subject of popular perceptions of Jewish power behind-the-scenes.

Back in the early 70's, Rubinstein told us, he had been interviewing Golda Meir about something or other when she told him about something that had happened a few months earlier. A Jordanian Arab came to the Prime Minister's building, desperately eager to speak to her. Why? As her secretary learned from the guards stationed outside the building, this man was the son of the Arab Legionaire who had driven her, in 1948, to her now famous but then secret meetings with King Abdullah. But the secretary could learn nothing more. Had she forgotten a pocketbook?, Golda wondered. Her curiosity piqued, she agreed to meet the man. After the initial (and lengthy) formalities, the Jordanian explained what he wanted. He himself had a son who was

then working as a pilot for Kuwait Airlines, but who wanted to switch over to TWA or some other American company. Could Golda help him? When we heard this, we laughed. "That's how I laughed," Rubinstein said to us, "when she told me. And she said to me, 'What are you laughing for? I did it. I got him the job.'"

LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

(The following poem was written by Eric Goldstein, a SUNY-B senior majoring in Judaic Studies, a student of Hebrew and a lover- but not yet a student- of Yiddish)

MAME-LOSHN

I lie awake listening to music foreign yet familiar
Oyfn veg shteyt a boym
All I know is that these words are Yiddish
As unknown to me as the shtetlach in which Yiddish songs were sung
But I feel these words are mine
They surround me and bombard me
Enter and destroy me.
A child am I
Ignorant of what moved my mothers and fathers.
I can feel a rousing deep within me
So deep I am lost looking for it.
I intensely love these words
They are sung by a defeated people
crying
My people.
I want to help, but I do not understand
Feelings fleeting and elusive
Begging me to listen and listen
Not to let these songs die
And disappear in the ashes where the composers linger.
I need these songs
I know not why
Only that it does not matter
Because I am
Yiddish.

HAPPY HANNUKAH