

HA-KOL

The Newsletter of the Judaic Studies Program
at SUNY-Binghamton

Yedida Stillman,
JUST Director

Allan Arkush
Ha-Kol Editor

Fall 1990

No. 2

SPECIAL EDITION!

JUDAIC STUDIES, SUNY-B AND THE CRISIS IN THE GULF

LAURIE MYLROIE SPEAKS ON CAMPUS

On November 15, the Judaic Studies Program and the Jewish Student Union sponsored the visit to the SUNY-B campus of one of this country's foremost experts on Iraq, Dr. Laurie Mylroie. Dr. Mylroie, currently a Bradley Fellow at Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, has written numerous studies of contemporary Middle Eastern politics and is the co-author of a book on the current situation entitled Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf (Random House, 1990). In the past few months she has made appearances on National Public Radio, CNN, ABC's Nightline and other network television programs. Her commentaries on recent developments have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe, The Jerusalem Post and other newspapers. An old friend of ours, she graciously

allowed us to exploit, at minimal expense, her new-found celebrity.

She may be a friend of ours, but she's no friend of Saddam Hussein's. He's a tyrant, she told us, and if we really want to understand the man the best places to begin are Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Politics, where one can find the classic descriptions of such characters and their methods of ruling. Dr. Mylroie (cont. on p. 2)

MAH LA'ASSOT?

(In our last issue we promised you a letter from Mark Kaiserman, one of our students in Israel. What we have instead is a letter from him- postmarked New York. It explains itself.)

Reading the daily papers in America, it's hard to imagine how anyone could be leading a normal life in Israel now. (cont. on p. 2)

MYLROIE SPEAKS, cont.

argued emphatically that Hussein is a war criminal who represents an intolerable threat to international order and security and must be stopped. If the United States resorts to military force to do so, she said, its best course of action would be to undertake air attacks aimed at destroying Iraq's military infrastructure.

Dr. Mylroie maintained that Iraq does not necessarily pose any immediate threat to Israel. She thinks that Hussein, despite his bluster, would only attack the Jewish state if he were to find himself in truly desperate straits. The chief danger Iraq presents to Israel at the present moment, according to Dr. Mylroie, consists in its availability as a term of comparison. All sorts of people have been comparing Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with Iraq's occupation of Kuwait, suggesting that the United States and other nations are employing a double standard when they tolerate the former and condemn the latter. Dr. Mylroie disagrees. In her opinion, the real use of a double standard is to mention Israel's policies and Iraq's atrocities in the same breath.

KAISERMAN WRITES, cont.

It seems that people are getting stabbed every day, gas masks are the new fashion rage, and life is practically impossible.

I just spent three months in Israel. I was never attacked, stoned, or threatened nor did I witness a single gas mask during my entire stay there. For eight weeks I attended class for four and a half hours a day. In the evenings I studied Hebrew or cooked dinner. And I spent my weekends touring the country that I had longed to see.

Now here I am in America watching L.A. Law each Thursday instead of spending seven months studying in Israel as I had originally planned.

I was in Israel on the Hebrew University One Year Program in Jerusalem. It was my junior year abroad- a chance to become independent, learn Hebrew, experience another culture and meet all kinds of people. I spent three months having one of the best times of my life, and was well on my way to fulfilling my goals.

Four days after I arrived, Iraq invaded Kuwait and quickly amassed troops on the Saudi Arabian border. I was three hundred miles away from a madman with chemical weapons. This was a sobering thought. However, life continued without much change. Yes, some of the people on the program left as early as a week after arriving. But the number was small, a mere trickle. I still spent my days conjugating verbs and making sure my adjectives and nouns matched. My weekends were filled with

exciting trips to places like the Golan Heights or Ein Gedi or restful times with perhaps a visit to the Western Wall.

The crisis did eventually affect us. I made sure to listen to the news each night. In our conversations the name of Saddam Hussein inevitably came up. Some of my friends did ride on buses that were attacked. The situation looked bleak, but each day's news was always merely a different aspect of the same old stuff.

Eleven weeks after I arrived, my parents requested that I return to America. They said they had discussed the matter with everyone they knew. My mother said she hadn't been sleeping and my father had a very worried tone in his voice. I knew the danger that was possible if I remained. I also knew the fun I was having, the friends I was making and the things I was looking forward to doing. However, my parents have generally been right in the past. They were so candid on the phone, that I felt that returning to America was the best course of action. A week later, I left.

I still listen to the news every night. Now I have a few more options than the one 8:00 PM English radio show we used to listen to in Israel. I write to my friends there and try to discourage rumours among people here in America. I worry not just about the threat of war, but about the increasing violence following the incident on the Temple Mount and now Meir Kahane's assassination.

People often ask me how I feel about returning home. I usually give them ambiguous answers. I will return to Israel again before long. I'm not miserable in New York and I even worked a trip to Florida out of my parents. But I still have many friends over there. Only one other of my friends has left since I have. My ambiguity in my answers is the truth.

The Hebrew expression "mah la'assot?" (What is one to do?) keeps coming to mind. What should I have done? The expression is usually answered simply and obviously with "la'assot." One does what one has to do. I did what the situation dictated for me alone. What is there to do? Do what you think is most honest to your feelings. That's what I did.

(Mark, we are happy to report, will not spend the spring semester in Florida but will be rejoining us in January in sunny Binghamton.)

ARKUSH CHATS

(Our editor himself has a story to tell about his own involvement in the crisis.)

I was sitting at my desk early one morning in mid-October when the telephone rang in the outer office. After a moment's hesitation I pressed the button to transfer the call to my own phone and proceeded to greet the unknown party at the other end

with the standard "Judaic Studies." Seconds later I heard the response of a booming, strangely amplified voice. "This is Peter Collins in Amman, Jordan," it said. I knew immediately that this was no hoax. ABC-TV was calling. They had exhausted their reservoir of Middle Eastern specialists, I quickly conjectured, and were now seeking expert commentary from anybody they could find, even, perhaps, me. But with millions listening, what should I say? And would it be good for the Jews? Would it be good for SUNY?

These reflections were cut short by Mr. Collins's next words: "Is Norman Stillman there?" My heart sank. It's not fair, I thought, they're always looking for the experts. No, Professor Stillman's not here, I told the not-so-famous correspondent, and started to give him some of the numbers where he might be reached. But he stopped me. He had already tried those numbers, with no success. "But since you're in Judaic Studies," he said, "maybe you can help me." I was back in business! I said I could try.

He asked his first question: "What is the Torah?" Of course, upon being asked such a thing I immediately reacted the way anyone would. Love thy neighbor as thyself, I thought. The rest is all commentary. Go and learn! "Is it the entire Old Testament," he continued, "or something else too?" I straightened him out on that pretty easily, and then, in response to further questions, I explained a little bit about Friday evening services and identified that "piece of greenery," as he put it, that Jews shake in the course of their prayers on Sukkot.

Why did he want to know these things? Was he thinking of converting but unable to find a rabbi in Amman or, for that matter, to place a call to much-nearer-by Israel? I finally received some inkling of the purpose of his call when he asked his last question. "We visited a synagogue in Baghdad," he told me, "located along the shores of a river- a famous river, one I'm sure you've heard of. Is it pronounced in English Tee-gris or Tie-gris?" Fortunately, I possessed sufficient erudition to solve this mystery for him. And that was it.

When I got in touch with Norman later in the day I found out what the story was. Mr. Collins and his ABC News team had had the dispiriting experience of visiting the only remaining synagogue in Baghdad. They had watched as a few elderly Jews prayed under the intimidating supervision of the Iraqi secret police. Back in Amman, Collins had telephoned Norman to learn something of the modern history of Iraqi Jewry. The previous night they had had a very long conversation on the subject. The questions he had asked me were the ones he had not got around to asking Norman.

All of this was part of the preparation for a news segment dealing with the Jewish community in Baghdad. Was it ever broadcast? I didn't see it, and I don't know anyone else who did. But if any of you did, please write and let me know. I'd especially like to know how, in the end, Mr. Collins pronounced the name of that river.

MAH LA'ASSOT? (II)

Just before we received Mark Kaiserman's letter we had a visit from Amy Sugin (SUNY-B, '89), who had been fortunate enough to spend her junior year at the Hebrew University at a less menacing time. Now she works for the Hebrew University, out of its New York office. She covers the Northeast Region, which extends from New York up to Maine. As part of her job, Ms. Sugin periodically visits college campuses throughout the region, familiarizing students with the Hebrew University's one-year program and other programs as well.

Despite the current crisis, Ms. Sugin tell us, there is still strong student interest in the program, especially in the Boston area, Syracuse, Cornell and Binghamton. When we saw her she was on her way to a meeting with some of our students. "Lots of students from Binghamton participate in our program," she told us, "because the school makes it easy for them to go. The administration encourages them and tries to help them. They're very good about giving credit for courses taken in Jerusalem."

Ms. Sugin spends a lot of time in her office at 11 East 69th Street, New York, New York, 10021 (telephone 212 472 2288). She'd be happy to provide additional information about the one-year program and other, shorter programs at the Hebrew University.

THE HOME FRONT

Widely publicized budget cuts are having a strong and direct effect on every aspect of life at SUNY-B, including our program. As this issue goes to press, it is still not clear how deeply the current crisis will affect us, but there is no doubt that things are looking bad. Living under these trying circumstances, we are grateful to our most recent donors for their thoughtful gifts, which have been of great use to us.

Thanks to Mr. and Mrs. William Burstein, Mr. and Mrs. A. Kanter (parents of Beth Kanter, a JUST major), Rabbi and Mrs. Aaron Slonim (whose donation is in memory of Michael Taub's father), and Rabbi Lance Sussman (whose donation was also in memory of Michael Taub's father), and Dr. Jill Thierman (an alumnus).

We would very much like to hear from more of you.

FROM CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO BINGHAMTON

An audience of roughly one hundred people gathered in Fine Arts 258 on October 8 to hear SUNY-B Professor Alexander Fischler reminisce about his experiences as a boy in Europe during the

years of the Holocaust. We will do our best to repeat the gist of his tale.

Alex (as we will now, most of the time and for obvious reasons, identify Professor Fischler) was born in 1931 into a lower middle class Jewish family in the small Czech town of Liberec. The Fischlers' placid provincial existence came to an end in 1938, when Hitler forced Czechoslovakia to cede to Germany the region (the so-called Sudetenland) in which Liberec was located. To escape the Nazis, Alex's family moved to Prague.

But Prague was clearly not safe enough. The family therefore made unceasing but unsuccessful attempts to obtain certificates to move to Australia or to some other safe haven. At the end of 1938, however, it was almost impossible to get exit permits. Around this time, in spite of the dire circumstances in which they found themselves, the Fischlers sent their two sons on a skiing vacation. On that trip Alex and his brother struck up a friendship with the son of the French consul in Prague. Thanks to this new connection, the two boys were able to obtain precious visas enabling them to enter France.

In January of 1939 the two brothers left by themselves for Toulouse, a city in southwestern France where they were fortunate enough to have relatives. They lived with these relatives until the summer of 1942, when the Nazis occupied the city. At that point the boys were placed, for their own safety, in a Catholic boys' school, where they pretended to be Catholics (though the priests running the school knew the truth). Their lives were remarkably like the ones depicted in the recent French film "Au revoir, les enfants," though the school they attended was considerably less classy than the one in the movie. In spite of everything, it was, Professor Fischler tells us, an "incredibly normal life."

By the end of 1943, however, Alex's relatives in Toulouse felt that the situation was much too dangerous, and arranged to have themselves and the boys smuggled into Spain. The adventure of crossing the border, which Professor Fischler recounted vividly, is too long a story for us to repeat. Suffice it to say that they made it safely to Barcelona, where they all lived until January of 1944. Alex and his brother were then lucky enough to be included in a rare and little known wartime transfer of Jewish refugees to Palestine.

Alex's father died during the war, a victim of the Nazis. His mother, on the other hand, survived (this too is a story in itself, which we cannot relate), and returned from Poland to Prague in 1945. She immediately started to search for her boys, beginning at the newly restored French embassy. There, to her great dismay, she was told only that they had disappeared. Still reeling from this news, weeping, she stood outside on the steps of the embassy and tried to decide what to do next. Just then a French soldier approached her and asked what the problem was. After she told him, he surprised her by offering his help. "I'm Jewish, and I studied in Toulouse too," he said. "Who are your relatives?"

"The Estleins," she replied.

"Why, one of their daughters is married to my best friend!" the soldier exclaimed. "They're all in Barcelona now." And, of course, this was all Mrs. Fischler needed to know in order to track down her boys.

After hearing this entire story, it is not difficult to understand why Professor Fischler, who is unwilling to profess any belief in God, freely proclaims his belief in miracles.

FACULTY AND ALUMNI UPDATE

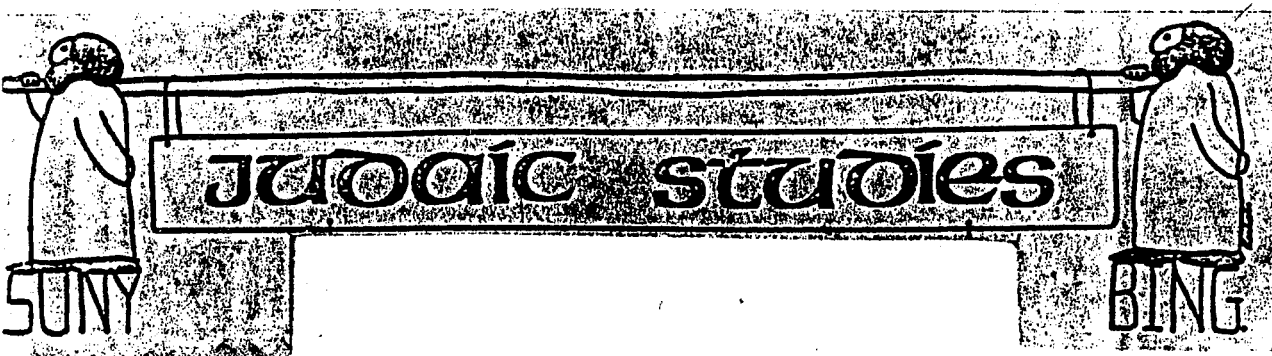
We won't be carrying a full-scale faculty update in this issue, but we would like to take note of the doings of two of the members of our larger Judaic Studies family whom we were unable to report on last time.

Deborah Hertz's book Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin (Yale, 1988) has been published in German, under the title Salons um 1800: Jüdische High Society im alten Berlin (Frankfurt/M. : Anton Hain, 1990). She will present a lecture entitled "Leaving Judaism for a Man: Conversion and Inter-marriage in Germany, 1810-1848," at a conference on "Jewish Women in Germany" in Heidelberg, Germany in March of next year. Milton Kessler of the English Department has recently published a book of poetry entitled The Grand Concourse. We hope to be able to interview him about his work in a future issue.

In our last issue we issued a plea to all of our readers for information concerning SUNY-B alumni too busy to notify us of their recent achievements. There has been a response! One of our informants (who shall remain anonymous) has reported to us that Matthew S. Cutler (JUST major, SUNY-B '85) was installed on November 2, 1990 as assistant rabbi of Temple Shalom in West Newton, Massachusetts. In addition to congratulating Rabbi Cutler, we challenge him to identify the source of our information.

WHAT ELSE?

It's not too early to mention the Sephardic Conference scheduled for this April, but it's too late- in this issue- to say more than a few words about it. It's going to be big, really big. Eighty scholars from throughout the world have already announced their plans to participate. In addition, there will be a public lecture by Bernard Lewis, one of the leading scholars of our generation, a public performance of Sephardic music and much, much more. Our next issue will tell you all about it. But for now, we have absolutely no more space.



Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage

PAID

Permit 61
Binghamton, N.Y.