

The Newsletter of the Judaic Studies Program
at SUNY-Binghamton

Norman Stillman
JUST Interim Director

Allan Arkush
Ha-Kol Editor

Spring 1989

No. 1

QUEST FOR JUDAIC STUDIES DEPARTMENT GAINS NEW MOMENTUM

For several years, the Judaic Studies faculty have been discussing with members of the Administration their hope of achieving department status. The Program has fulfilled for a long time most of the functions of a department without having the administrative freedom and flexibility of the latter. It is our firm conviction that being a department would allow us to improve the already high quality of education that we offer to students by making better use of our existing faculty and by a fuller integration of curricular subdivisions (i.e., Jewish History and Civilization, Hebrew Language and Literature, Yiddish Language and Literature, Community Internships).

We have been given the "go ahead" by the Administration to submit a formal proposal for establishing a JUST Department. The proposal will have to go through a series of University bodies beginning with the Educational Planning and Policies Committee of Harpur College Council. The proposal is now being formulated and will be submitted shortly. We will report on further developments as they occur.

THE UGLY HEAD OF ANTISEMITISM

We keep watching for it to show itself. We're on the alert. But aside from the bizarre, juvenile, and infinitely tiresome lies and provocations emanating from one of our least respected colleagues, nothing seems to happen. The vandal(s) who defaced the Jewish Student Union office in November has (have) not been caught. The investigation of Sid Thomas is continuing. Meanwhile, thousands and thousands of Jews continue to go about their daily business at SUNY-B completely unmolested.

HIGH ENROLLMENTS

As is often the case, there are a number of large classes in Judaic Studies. Our language courses are full of students, as is Norman Stillman's course in medieval Jewish history (70). The

enrollment of more than seventy students in Allan Arkush's course on modern antisemitism is no surprise, in view of recent developments on our campus. Somewhat more difficult to explain, however, is the sudden explosion of interest in JUST 241, which covers the history of the biblical period. Nearly two hundred students attempted to sign up for that course, which normally has an enrollment of between twenty and thirty. Of these there was room for only one hundred and fifty. Some people think that this surge of interest, too, represents a defiant response to the antisemitic episodes that occurred during the fall semester. Others think it has more to do with reputation of the course's professor, Lance Sussman. Sussman himself thinks the increase in enrollment may result from a new appreciation among the younger generation of the historical importance of King Omri.

HOROWITCH FOUNDATION DONATES FUNDS TO LOCAL JEWISH HISTORY PROJECT

Charles Rosenthal of the University Foundation has informed us that the Maurice and Sheldon Horowitch Foundation has contributed a grant of two hundred and fifty dollars to our local Jewish history project, "Beyond the Catskills." This project, directed by Professor Lance Sussman with the assistance of Community Coordinator Peggy Marcus, a SUNY graduate student and four undergraduates, is documenting the history of the Jewish community in the Binghamton area from its inception to the present day. An on-campus exhibit related to the project is scheduled for this spring. Anyone wishing to submit materials (especially photographs) for use in the exhibition should get them to Prof. Sussman by March 1. Anyone wishing to contribute to the project can do so through the SUNY Foundation or through the Jewish Federation of Broome County. Thanks again to The Horowitch Foundation.

MORE DONATIONS

Once again, we are more than happy to announce that our friends in the area and across the country are continuing to send us gifts of the kind we appreciate the most, i.e. money. We extend our thanks to Associates Allen B. Breslow, Esq., Susan Chrein, Michael K. Getman, Charles A. Kaplan, Paula Kramer, Stephen Kraus, Harold and Libby Krohnengold (who have earmarked their contribution for the Yiddish Program), Prof. and Mrs. Saul Levin, Lisa Lipton, Brian and Susie Savitch, Mr. and Mrs. Theodor Sommer, and Norman and Yedida Stillman (who made their donation in memory of Thelma Diamond).

ETHIOPIAN JEWRY EXHIBIT OPENS

Following much fanfare (some of it in Hakol) and extraordinarily thorough preparation (never mind the exhibit, you should see the brochure!) by SUNY graduate student David Becker and many others, "Beta Israel: A House Divided," finally opened on January 19, at the University Art Museum. The exhibit, which includes everything from blow-ups of black and white pictures of Ethiopian Jewish life to metal and stone figures and examples of native dress and tools, will be open to the public until February 26.

The guest speaker at the opening of the exhibit was Dr. Ephraim Isaac, Director of the Institute of Semitic Studies at Princeton University. Dr. Isaac, who is himself partly of Ethiopian Jewish extraction, is a specialist in the history and culture of Ethiopian Jewry. He is, in addition, as his audience of more than two hundred people learned from experience, proficient in at least as many exotic languages and dialects as Norman Stillman.

Dr. Isaac opened his lecture with a rapid survey of the importance of Ethiopia and Ethiopian Jewry in Jewish history. Ethiopia, he noted teasingly, is frequently mentioned in the Bible, while Poland is named not even once. The Jewish connection with Ethiopia goes back to very ancient times, and it remained significant throughout the Hellenistic period and beyond. The existence in contemporary Ethiopia of a community of Jews is thus no anomaly or enigma, as some people think, but the outcome of an historical process with deep roots in the past.

Dr. Isaac applauded "Operation Moses." He quoted appreciatively the remarks of a prominent American Black politician who observed on Martin Luther King Day that Israel's rescue of Ethiopian Jews proved that, at least somewhere, Dr. King's dream was being realized.

The Ethiopian Jews in Israel do face significant obstacles, Isaac acknowledged. Their chief problem is not, as is sometimes maintained, the difficulty of coming to terms with modern technology. That problem, according to Isaac, is overstated. He himself, he pointed out, didn't sit in an automobile until he was twelve years old, but that didn't keep him from obtaining a Harvard Ph.D., and it didn't even prevent him from acquiring, later in life, the skills needed to drive from Princeton to Binghamton. Other Ethiopian Jews, he is confident, will be equally capable of making similar adjustments.

What is really most disturbing to Ethiopian Jews in Israel, Dr. Isaac stressed, is their uncertainty about the welfare of family members who remained behind in Ethiopia. Conditions in Ethiopia are chaotic, news is difficult to obtain, and people are understandably worried. If we in this country can somehow help improve this situation, and facilitate family reunification, we will be doing the Ethiopian Jews yet another great service.

FACULTY UPDATE

Shalom Shoer, veteran instructor in our Hebrew program and adviser to the Jewish Student Union, has deserted the Physics Department to become a graduate student in comparative literature, specializing in Hebrew and Yiddish literature... Allan Arkush delivered a lecture at the University of Toronto on the subject of Moses Mendelssohn's Jerusalem. On November 12, he was the featured speaker on "Jewish War Veterans' Sabbath" at Temple Israel in Albany, New York. He spoke on "World War I and the Jews." Since it was the twenty-sixth anniversary of his own Bar Mitzvah at the same synagogue, he also recited the Haftorah... Michael Taub's translation (together with Dora Polachek) of a poem by Avraham Sutzkever appeared in the January 1989 issue of Midstream. Taub stunned many of the guests at the end-of-the-semester Judaic Studies get-together when he revealed that Pat Hecht, known until moments earlier as his girlfriend, had recently become his wife... Leon Goldstein (Dept. of Philosophy), before leaving for a semester in Israel, made a point of informing Michael Taub at the earliest possible moment that he had just become a grandfather. Leon and his wife Claire were the guests of honor at a brunch hosted by Shmuel and Audrey Morell shortly before their departure... Yedida Stillman, on the other hand, has stopped commuting to the Middle East and rejoined us in Binghamton. Before returning, she made significant progress in her research (under grants from several foundations, including the Institute for Turkish Studies) on Sephardi costume history. She signed a contract with the Israel Museum in Jerusalem for a study of the Besancenot Collection of Moroccan Ethnographic Material, and was the subject of a feature article in the Turkish Jewish weekly Salom. Yedida was interviewed on French Television News about the Arab-Israeli situation. The impact of this interview on French public opinion is still difficult to measure... Norman Stillman went away himself recently, to appear in a public dialogue with Prof. Mark Cohen of Princeton at the University of Texas at Austin. The program was entitled "Arabs and Jews in Historical Perspective: Two Points of View"... Lance Sussman spoke on "Rethinking Reform Judaism" at the Academy of Jewish Studies in New York City. His article, "Rhetoric and Reality: The CCAR and the church-state debate, 1890-1940," appeared in In Celebration: An American Jewish Perspective on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution. In a startling departure from family tradition, Liz Sussman, Lance's wife, has given birth to a baby girl, Chanah Rachel. Chanah Rachel, who weighed in at eight pounds, two ounces, joins four older brothers, whose collective weight is many, many times greater. Local sexists have been heard to speculate that her birth may presage the advent of a kinder, gentler Binghamton.

ALUMNI REPORT

We like to know what our alumni are doing. We would like to be able to report on their activities and achievements. Unfortunately, it's hard to keep track of most of them. (Take a hint, write to us). There are some, however, who are easier to locate than others. Among them is Matthew Kupferberg, a recent SUNY graduate, who majored in philosophy but took several courses in Hebrew and Judaic Studies during his years in Binghamton. Matthew is now a graduate student in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University. Ha-Kol caught up with him earlier this year in the Brandeis Library.

H: Do you miss Binghamton?

M: I do, in fact. I miss the city itself, the small town atmosphere. Binghamton has, in my opinion, a better social life than Brandeis. There are more things going on there, like the Harpur Film Society, the concerts in the Student Union and at the Anderson Center. And, of course, I miss some of my professors.

H: How would you compare Jewish life at SUNY to Jewish life at Brandeis?

M: Well, things are similar at both schools. In both places you have a large population of Jewish students, most of whom take their Jewishness pretty much for granted. In both places you have only a small minority actively interested in Jewish things....

H: Do you find that the education you received at SUNY prepared you for graduate school?

M: Yes, it did. Particularly my work in the Philosophy Department, for which I wrote my honors thesis. Compiling a large reading list, working independently- it was like graduate school. I would say, also, that the level of instruction at SUNY was certainly as high as the level at Brandeis.

H: What about Judaic Studies? How does JUST stack up against the Brandeis program?

M: I certainly can't answer a question as general as that, but I can tell you that the courses I took at SUNY were both helpful and inspiring. I took three semesters of Hebrew, for instance, with Yedida Stillman. Those three semesters were, it seems to me, comparable to three years of study elsewhere. The courses I took with Norman Stillman stimulated my interest in Jewish and Islamic studies. I came to see the tremendous impact of Islamic civilization on Jewish and Western civilization.

H: And that's what you're focusing on now, isn't it?

M: Yes. I am continuing my studies of Islamic and Jewish philosophy, with Professor Alfred Ivry in particular. I can't say yet exactly what my dissertation will be about, but it will certainly be in this general area.

JUST LUNCH SCHEDULE

JUST Lunch is not what it sounds like; it's more than just lunch. Really, it isn't even lunch at all, unless you bring your own or you can get by on a couple of donuts and coffee. What we supply is not so much the nourishment as the entertainment. JUST Lunch will take place three times during the coming semester, Shmuel Morell informs us. All meetings will take place in LT 1506, at 12:00 p.m. The schedule appears below.

Wednesday, February 8: Sandra Sketchley, a graduate student in the History Department, will speak on "The Fur Strike of 1926," a strike organized by the Jewish furriers' union in New York.

Wednesday, March 8: Faith Rogow, a very recent SUNY-B Ph.D. who, among other things, teaches Judaic Studies at SUNY-Cortland, will speak on "Sacred Survival: A Gender Analysis." She will focus on Jonathan Woocher's recent book, Sacred Survival.

Monday, April 17: Michael Taub will speak on "Sholom Aleichem from Left to Right." He will deal with the difficulties involved in translating Sholom Aleichem into English (and, perhaps, Hungarian and Romanian).

HOLOCAUST POETRY CONFERENCE

Plans for the conference on Holocaust poetry are proceeding apace, Michael Taub informs us. The conference, which will be held at SUNY-B on May 1 and 2, will include two sessions on a number of poets- survivors and others- who wrote on the Holocaust. Among the authors to be discussed are Sutzkever, Celan, Szlengel, Kovner and Reznikoff. Participants in the panels will include Ely Pfefferkorn, David Hirsch, Jerome Rothenberg and Freda Aaron. SUNY-B itself will be represented by Michael Taub, Maya Peretz, Milton Kessler and Pierre Joris.

The evening program, which will coincide with Yom HaShoah, will include a showing of the movie The Partisans of Vilna, and readings of Holocaust poetry by the poets Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris.

COLLEGE OF JEWISH STUDIES PLANS SPRING PROGRAM

In March the Binghamton Jewish community's College of Jewish Studies will resume its activities. The College's Spring Program will include a lecture series and a seminar. According to Allan Arkush, Program Coordinator, the lecture series will be an undisguised attempt to capitalize on the stupendous success of the Fall Program by offering the community more of much the same thing. Its theme will be "Religion, Politics, and Jewish Communities around the World." One of the three lectures will be delivered by our own Lance Sussman, who will discuss the relationship between Judaism and politics in the United States. The other lectures will be given by distinguished out-of-town guests.

In addition to the lecture series, CJS will be offering a class in Yiddish literature (in translation), taught by Michael Taub. Professor Taub's course will focus on the humorous aspects of the work of Sholom Aleichem.

MORE AT THE JCC

Flora Rosefsky has asked us to announce a number of activities at the JCC. On February 2, 16, 23 and March 2, there will be Israeli dancing, led by two SUNY undergraduates. On February 23, as part of a celebration of Jewish Music Month, Judy Fertig, Hillary Edelman, and Alan Stein will be presenting a program of Jewish music. Call 724-2417 for further details.

During the month of February, the Senior Friendship Club of the Center will be coming to the SUNY campus for a "Learn and Lunch" program. The group, accompanied by Rabbi Hurwitz, will lunch at the Kosher Kitchen, and will learn at the Ethiopian Jewry exhibit.

Finally, it is not too soon to mention that there will be Jewish Folk Art Festival at the JCC on May 7. We'll have more on that in our next issue.

FINAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

Professor Gerald Blidstein of Ben Gurion University will speak on campus on Feb. 13. His subject will be the political philosophy of Maimonides... All the arrangements for the Moses Margolis Memorial Lecture are not yet complete, but we can tell you that it will be held on April 9. This year's lecturer will be Professor Herbert Paper of the HUC-JIR. His subject will be "Shalom Aleichem as Social Critic." We'll have much more on this in our next issue.

ISIDORE FRIEDLAND
1900-1988
