

HA-KOL

The Newsletter of the Judaic Studies Program  
at SUNY-Binghamton

Yedida Stillman,  
JUST Director

Allan Arkusha  
Ha-Kol Editor

Spring 1991

No. 1

SEPHARDIC JEWRY CONFERENCE APPROACHES

We are very pleased to announce that preparations are now almost finished for the Second International, Interdisciplinary Conference on Sephardic Studies, to be held on the SUNY-Binghamton campus and at Binghamton's Jewish Community Center between April 21 and April 23. This will be a conference which will certainly live up to its name. It will be, most assuredly, the second such conference (the first was held in Binghamton four years ago). It will definitely be international- indeed, almost global- in scope, both in terms of the subjects to be discussed and the conference participants themselves. And it is already clear from the conference schedule that our panelists will apply a very large number of academic disciplines in exciting and innovative ways to the study of all aspects of the Sephardic Jewish heritage.

Most of the conference papers will deal, of course, with important figures, intellectual creativity, communities, and material culture in the principal centers of the Sephardic world: the Iberian Peninsula, Turkey, the Balkans, North Africa and the Land of Israel. But there will be no shortage of discussions relating to less predictable and even more exotic locales. For instance, there will be lectures on Haquitia (a Sephardic dialect) as it is spoken in the Brazilian Amazon, Costa Rican Jewry, and even on the subject of North African Jews in Toronto today. And while most of our more than eighty participants will be coming from the United States and Israel, we will also be hosting speakers from Great Britain, Italy, Argentina, Greece, Canada, France, Spain, Turkey and Germany.

Among our speakers there will be historians, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, musicians, folklorists, scholars of literature, people who combine expertise in two or more of these disciplines, and people who simply defy categorization. Their subjects will include examinations of the philosophical and religious outlooks of prominent individuals, studies of the histories of specific communities in diverse parts of the world, discussions of particular genres and works of literature, and much more. The program promises to be fascinating from beginning to end.

Among the highlights of the conference will be the keynote address, which will be delivered by Rabbi Marc D. Angel. Rabbi

Angel is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York (founded in 1654). He is also the President of the Rabbinical Council of America as well as the founder and Chairman of the Board of Sephardic House, a national institution dedicated to Sephardic history and culture. The author of numerous works on Sephardic life and thought, Rabbi Angel will deliver a lecture entitled "From Medieval Spain to the Modern World: An Intellectual Odyssey." Another unique feature of this conference will be a performance of Voice of the Turtle, an internationally celebrated Sephardic music group (see attachment).

All sessions of the conference will be open (free of charge) to the entire university community and to the general public. Further information concerning the exact times and locations of the various scheduled events can be obtained by contacting the Judaic Studies office. We'd especially like to see our out-of-town supporters and alumni come to Binghamton on this very special occasion.

## TWO VISITING PROFESSORS

Considerations of space have necessitated the postponement of our much-awaited coordinated curriculum to our next issue. Connoisseurs of our c.c. would have noted, had we included it, the presence of two unfamiliar names: Rendsburg and Mansour. Both are visiting professors, one from nearby and the other from afar. Dr. Gary Rendsburg is an associate professor in Cornell University's Department of Near Eastern Studies, a Binghamton resident, a regular and appreciative reader of Ha-kol, and a friend of ours. We've brought him on board this semester to teach a course in his area of expertise, the Bible. Professor Ya'akov Mansour, who teaches in the Department of at Haifa University, arrived in Binghamton straight from SCUD-scarred Israel only in the beginning of March, as this issue was going to press. He will be teaching two two-credit courses in Hebrew language and literature. Our pleasure at hosting these two guests is mingled with a sense of regret. Given the university's mounting financial difficulties, it appears very doubtful that we will have access, in the future, to funds which will enable us to hire outside adjuncts. Professor Mansour, we are sorry to say, will probably be our last visitor on the Haifa exchange program, which is in great danger of being eliminated.

## ALUMNI UPDATE

Slowly, we're smoking out our alumni. Rabbi Matthew Cutler, recently located by one of our agents in Massachusetts, has responded in the kindest fashion to our intrusion into his life.

"I just received," he writes to Yedida Stillman, "a copy of Ha-Kol. I was thrilled to read about the exciting things that are occurring at SUNY-B. I must apologize for being a bit lazy in my correspondence... Somehow you and the Editor of Ha-Kol have found out where I am. I am quite curious how you located me [We've told him, but we cannot reveal our agent's identity to the general public, Ed.] I hope you and your husband, Norman, are doing well. I think of you both often, especially when I am teaching material that I learned in your classes. I am most grateful for the gift of knowledge and inspiration that you and the other faculty members instilled in me..." Rabbi Cutler's letter was accompanied by a very generous donation to our program.

Early in January we heard from two recent graduates, Abby Aaron and Michael Pitkowsky (SUNY-B, '89). "Biggest news first! Earlier this year we became engaged! We'd like to make a donation in honor of this happy occasion.... Here is what we are doing: Abby received a Melton Fellowship for day school education from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and is currently completing their M.A. program in Jewish education. She plans to teach in a day school this fall. Michael is working at JTS assisting the Director of Student Life, planning activities and programs for students, and simultaneously taking classes in the graduate school. Michael is preparing to enter the Beit Midrash (the Masorti movement's rabbinical school) in Jerusalem in the fall of 1993. We are planning to make aliyah in the summer of 1992." We thank Abby and Michael for their generous contribution, their kind words (especially about Ha-kol), and wish them the best of luck in the years ahead.

Early in February we received a heartening letter and a very sizeable donation from an alumnus in- of all places- Israel. Jonathan Miller (SUNY-B, '81) writes, "I think it's a bit ironic for contributions to be sent to the USA from Israel in these trying times of air raids, gas masks, and loss of income due to the current situation. However, I also remember the good old days in the kosher kitchen and a few good classes with David Biale (is he still around?). I am also aware of a sharp rise of antisemitism on American campuses and maybe from this whole situation there can arise a spirit of patience and understanding. So let this symbolic gift do what it can and if I can be of any other help- maybe meeting travelling juniors abroad or some other idea- let me know. I currently work as a musician although lately I have no work because of the war..." Thanks, Jonathan! And now that the war's over, we hope you're back at work.

In our last issue SUNY-B junior Mark Kaiserman, compelled by the crisis in the Middle East to return from Israel, asked "Mah La'assot?" Shari Fisch (SUNY-B, '90) has answered him- at great length. Clearly agitated by the outbreak of the gulf war (her letter is dated January 23) and its impact on Israel, sent us what sounds, by her own admission, "like a UJA appeal." What we must do "is support Israel." If people "are wary of going there, which is understandable," they "should Buy Israeli Products!"

Give to UJA!! Buy trees! Something!" Then, addressing Mark more directly, she says that "Yes, you chose to leave for now, but you can promise to return after the hostilities are over- and then do it!" That, Shari should be pleased to know, is precisely what Mark intends to do. Shari herself has begun taking courses at NYU's Wagner School for Public Administration. "I'm pursuing a master's degree in health policy and management," she reports, "and I greatly hope this will give me the necessary background to manage a health care facility, preferably for the mentally retarded. I'm assuming, of course, that Israel needs another health professional to make Aliyah." There's a lot more to Shari's letter, including some very interesting gossip about other recent graduates. We won't announce engagements, though, unless we hear directly from the individuals concerned.

### BACK TO HUNGARY AND POLAND

(The author, Yael Gorodischer, a junior at SUNY-Binghamton, is a recipient of a Faculty-Student Scholarship for the 1990-91 academic year.)

Last summer I fulfilled a longstanding desire to travel to Poland- but I went to Hungary first. I was acting in accordance with the wishes of my mother, who had always said to me: "If you want to see where your relatives died, you should also go to see where they were born."

Hungary and many Eastern European countries recently broke free of communist rule. To my surprise, I found Hungary to be a very pretty country, not a poverty-stricken place. For example, up the street from my aunt's house in Tiszakonjac I saw an elegant three story house that was built under the communist regime. The people in Hungary live a good life, with the same modern technology we have (though I did see some less prosperous areas). Poland, on the other hand, did look poor and abandoned.

My maternal relatives were born in Hungary. In May of 1945 they were deported to Auschwitz and Birkenau- two notorious concentration camps in Poland. On my trip, I saw that both camps have been preserved as they were. Auschwitz and Birkenau are separated by railroad tracks and a two-mile walk. Near the railroad tracks I saw the shack where the infamous Dr. Mengele used to make his "selections."

At Auschwitz six barracks remain standing, transformed into museum-like exhibits. Many of the displays contain suitcases, toothbrushes, eyeglasses and shoes belonging to both children and adults, as well as other accessories that the Jews and other prisoners brought with them. These items now serve as a memorial to those who never left the camps.

My grandmother, who was among the few survivors of Birkenau, once told me that when she was liberated, all she saw around her were the blossoming flowers and the trees. She could not

understand how it was possible for so many people to be killed in such a beautiful place.

Going back to Poland to see where my ancestors perished was a trip I had to make. Now that I have been there, I can promise that I will never forget what happened.

### I STILL WANT TO HAVE IT BOTH WAYS

Late in January, the SUNY-B Administration sponsored a public forum on the war then in progress. The three panelists were our own "Stormin' Norman" Stillman, Don Peretz of Political Science (and also of Judaic Studies) and Ali Mazrui, Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities. Stillman defended the cause of the American-led coalition as a just struggle against a brutal, rapacious tyrant who represented a threat to regional and world peace. Peretz also characterized Saddam as a dangerous and evil man, but greatly regretted that sanctions had not been given a chance to work. He expressed his fears that the war would have ruinous consequences for all concerned. Mazrui, for his part, chastised the United States for not agreeing to negotiate with the Iraqis on the basis of what he considered Saddam Hussein's reasonable terms: the linkage of withdrawal from Kuwait with a resolution of the Palestinian problem.

They all talked for a long time. As a member of the audience, I got to ask only one question, and didn't even have an opportunity to ask a follow-up. But since here, in Ha-kol, I'm the boss, I'm going to stand things on their head and give wholly disproportionate attention to the small part I played in the forum- and I'm going to have the last word (for now, at least).

In his initial remarks, Professor Mazrui condemned Israel for its destruction of Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981. Responding to this accusation, Avi Liberman, a SUNY-B undergraduate, pointed out that Israel and Iraq are engaged in a state of war, which Iraq refuses to end. Israel, he stated, was well within its rights when it attacked Iraq. Here, word for word, is the dialogue which followed:

Mazrui: In that case we should not complain about the present bombing of Israeli cities by Iraq, because that state of war still continues. So you can't have it both ways. Either it was legitimate for Israel to have invaded Iraq, or it's legitimate for both sides to do these nasty things to each other. And I think they were both unjustified...

Arkush (speaking, after an interval, from the audience): I would like to express my shock at the equation Professor Mazrui made a moment ago between the Israeli destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 and the Iraqi bombing of Israel that's going on even as we meet here. The bombing of the reactor was arranged in a way to minimize civilian casualties and in fact led to the

death of one single Frenchman who happened to be on the scene. The Iraqi bombing of Israel that is taking place now is indiscriminate bombing of a civilian population with inaccurate weapons. That constitutes a war crime. It's objectionable on a scale which makes it incomparable to the Israeli action.

Mazrui: Well, first of all I agree with you that hitting civilians is much worse than hitting a target like a nuclear reactor. But you must bear one factor in mind, that the Iraqis do not have the options that the Israelis had. Where is the capability of launching an accurately targeted hit at Israeli relevant issues? How would Iraq reach Dimona? How would it destroy a single Israeli plane? You are dealing therefore with a society which is underdeveloped technologically, which doesn't have the equipment to target military issues the way the Israelis have. It is true that the Iraqis probably didn't care anyhow. Their record shows their value of human life is not very strong, so that you have a point there. But bear it in mind that they did not have the option that the Israelis had of saying that we want to destroy that and that only, and we'll go and do it. And in any case I was responding to the argument that Iraq and Israel are at war, so why shouldn't Israel go in and destroy what it wants? If that is the case, the reciprocal attack is surely also justified.

Arkush (sitting at his computer): What Professor Mazrui seems to be saying is that, in his opinion, there can be no justification either for the 1981 Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor or for the 1991 Iraqi bombing of Israeli cities. But if I think that Israel, as a belligerent, had a legitimate right to strike at Iraq's nuclear facilities, I must then acknowledge that the Iraqis had an equal right to attack Israeli civilian targets. To say this, however, is to disregard completely all of the relevant international law on this subject. According to a number of different agreements signed in the course of the twentieth century, no state ever has the right to bombard the innocent civilian population of a country with which it is at war. Israel never inflicted such damage on Iraq, but Iraq did so to Israel- wantonly. I therefore consider myself entitled to condemn Iraq and Iraq alone. Fortunately, my condemnation is the last thing the Iraqis have to worry about now.

#### DONATIONS

In addition to the alumni gifts mentioned earlier, we have also received donations from other graduates, recent and not so recent. Thanks to David and Sandra Becker, Rosalie Becker, Mr. and Mrs. Allen Berg, Ronald Fried, Mr. and Mrs. Marc Goldberg, Cheryl and Scott Lenowitz, Paul and Martha Resnick, Michael Getman and Barbara Lefsky, Cathy Hezlick, Marsha Krohnengold,

Paula Kramer, Michael Marks, Andrew Mestel, Mark Reisman, Richard Scheingold, Harold Steinbach, Steven Tenenbaum, Ralph Updyke, Laura Vitez, and Dr. Mitchell Zucker.

Parents of alumni and current students have also contributed, along with local residents and other friends. Thanks to Dr. and Mrs. Jerome Cohen, Mr. and Mrs. Edward Esserman, Mr. Arthur Feld, Professor Saul Levin, Naomi and Richard Shore, and Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Wang.

Thanks to Andrew and Lisa Klein, who made their donation "in loving honor of my brother and sister-in-law, Drs. Norman and Yedida Stillman for all that they do, as parents, as teachers and as followers of the word." Thanks to the Romance Language faculty for their donation (for the purchase of video material to uses in classes) in memory of Professor Alex Fischler's mother. Thanks for the most creative donation of the semester to the Levine brothers. As Leonard J. Levine writes: "The enclosed checks represent a donation by my brothers Herbert R. Levine, Carl S. Levine and myself to your program in commemoration of the 100th anniversary on December 25, 1990 of the birth of our father Rubine Levine. By the L.J. Levine version of new math,  $100 \div 3 = 33 \text{ R } 1$ , so I guess that leaves \$5.00 for the stamp "pushkeh" or something. It is our hope that you will find a meaningful Yiddish development use for our contribution. As I told Norman, we enjoy reading about your efforts and successes in your newsletters. Keep up the great work." Thanks to the Temple Israel Chevra Kadisha. Thanks, finally, to Rachel and Andrew Zalman-Miller, for bringing us a bottle of champagne, for giving us a donation for the purchase of videotapes, and for giving us the opportunity to meet them, finally, and to spend a very pleasant evening together.

Thanks to all the donors who earmarked their contributions to the Sephardic conference: Mia and Enan Stillman (who gave us a Channukah gift for this purpose), the Beth David Synagogue (\$100), the Jacob and Rose Olum Foundation (\$700), the Jewish Student Union (\$1000), the Spanish Cultural Office (\$2500). In case anyone's wondering, it's our policy to specify the amounts donated by institutions but not by individuals.

Last but far from least, let us express our gratitude for a number of donations which far exceed the amounts we are generally accustomed to receive. Jonathan Miller's donation (mentioned above) falls into this category. So does a gift from Binghamton resident Bessie Pierson. We are especially pleased when people who can keep a close eye on us show such strong support for our operation. Thanks again to Martin Taub and Moshe Winer for their continually renewed donation for Hebrew and Yiddish studies. Thanks, finally, to a couple of new benefactors who have joined our list of major donors: Michael and Shelly Kassen of Westport, Connecticut. Their donation, your editor blushes to report, was made in honor of Shelly's brother, Professor Allan Arkush. Flattered as he is, he cannot help but see this donation as but one more manifestation of their sustained and laudable devotion of their time and money to worthy causes.

