

Facts on the Ground: Jewish Studies in the Public University

The Melton Center of the Ohio State University

With four new faculty appointments in the past two years, the Melton Center at The Ohio State University is now one of the largest and most dynamic Jewish Studies programs in the country. These new faculty join a diverse program in Jewish Studies which is thriving. At present there are twenty-four faculty members at the Melton Center for Jewish Studies, representing a variety of disciplines, including Hebrew language, culture and literature; Yiddish and Ashkenazi Studies; Jewish History; Jewish Thought and Philosophy; Political Science; Jewish Music; Law and Judaism; and Jewish-American Literature. Recent additions to the Hebrew program include Professors Daniel Frank and Adena Tanenbaum, bringing the total number of Hebrew faculty to five. Prof. Daniel Frank, whose areas of expertise are medieval Jewish history and literature, Judeo-Arabic and Karaitica, directs the Hebrew language program at Ohio State. Prof. Adena Tanenbaum specializes in medieval Jewish literature and thought as well as modern Hebrew literature. She coordinates the several sections of the very popular course, "The Culture of Contemporary Israel" which is offered every quarter.

In addition, two new faculty join the history department. Matt Goldish, a specialist in early modern Jewish History, will hold the Samuel and Esther Melton Chair in Jewish History and Jewish Studies and will provide a broad range of expertise to Jewish history students. He received his Ph.D. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and has recently published *Judaism in the Theology of Sir Isaac Newton*. Robin Judd, currently completing her dissertation "Those Bloody Jews: German Jewish Rituals, Bodies, and Citizenship" at the University of Michigan, will join the faculty as an assistant professor. She will add social

and cultural history as well as gender studies to the scholarly approaches offered in Jewish history courses.

The Ohio State University is the second largest public university in the United States, with over 40,000 students enrolled at the undergraduate level. The Samuel and Esther Melton Chair in Jewish history and Studies, established at Ohio State in 1966, was the first Jewish Studies position endowed at a public university. The Melton Center for Jewish Studies was established in 1976 to coordinate the rapidly growing program in Jewish Studies on campus. In the 90's, many of the over 4,000 Jewish students enroll in at least one or two Jewish Studies courses, some exploring issues of self-identity, others pursuing well-defined academic

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goals. In addition, many other students, representing a multiplicity of perspectives and backgrounds, also take Jewish studies courses. Very often students enroll in Jewish Studies courses to fulfill the university's General Education Curriculum Requirement (GEC). Many courses in the Jewish Studies program satisfy this GEC requirements, e.g. History of Ancient and Medieval Jewish Civilizations, Biblical and Post-Biblical Hebrew in Translation, Yiddish Literature and Film, and Jewish-American Voices in U.S. Literature.

The diversity of the student body involved creates the possibility for a dynamic learning climate in which to study Judaica. At a large university, however, Jewish studies courses must compete with courses in many other appealing areas of study. All too often at a state university, enrollment numbers, instead of academic concerns, have been known to drive the direction of the curriculum. Since the Melton Center at

Ohio State is a fully endowed program, we can sometimes resist the pressure of the "numbers issue," but the concern always remains in the background. Inasmuch as a class with an enrollment of less than six is difficult to defend no matter how significant the course offering, it can be a challenge to offer advanced undergraduate courses in specialized areas. Although we offer a full array of advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars in Hebrew language, Jewish history and philosophy, we have found it difficult to fill these courses on regular basis.

Most Jewish studies programs in the U.S. are structured in a way that faculty are tenured in their respective departments rather than in a department of Jewish studies. So too, at Ohio State, Jewish studies is not designated as a separate department but rather functions as an academic center or program. Such a

structure has, of course both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, the Center must rely upon the good-will of

departments to hire Jewish Studies faculty. We have been lucky to enjoy the support of most departments in this regard; there is, however, the feeling in such a situation of not fully controlling one's programmatic autonomy and destiny. This aspect is counter-acted, however, by having a structure which reinforces the engagement of faculty in their home departments. Hence, for example, inasmuch as the Yiddish and Ashkenazi Studies program is housed in the Germanic Languages and Literature Department, both faculty and students can avail themselves of the advantages offered by being associated with a German department. So, too, the Hebrew faculty interact fully with Arabic faculty in the Near Eastern department, thus reinforcing a strong comparative Hebrew-Arabic program of studies.

It is the aim of the Melton Center to encourage a comprehensive and

competitive Jewish Studies program at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The Center can provide undergraduates with the option of choosing to major or minor in Jewish studies by fulfilling a basic set of designated requirements; it informs and guides these students and provides enrichment programming for them. Many of our students commence at the elementary language level, and progress to a fair degree of language competence. Courses are also taught in rabbinics, so that students have the opportunity to do serious text study in an objective, academic environment. Although Ohio State offers a wide array of undergraduate courses at all levels, from the most elementary to advanced courses in Jewish history and language, we encourage our students to supplement their coursework with a semester or year abroad, either at the Oxford Yiddish Program, or at an Israeli university. Generous stipends are provided to students for travel and study abroad.

Serious graduate study at both the Master's and PhD level is another important part of Jewish studies at Ohio State. Two graduate fellowships for advanced study in a core area of Jewish studies were recently established to foster the growth of advanced studies in Judaica. Because our graduate degree programs are all located in separate departments, students coming to Ohio State to do graduate work in Jewish studies must be fully integrated into the intellectual life of their home departments. Language proficiency is a pre-requisite for graduate study. This gain requires co-operation on the part of other departments. To date we offer an M.A. degree in Hebrew, and Ph.D. degrees in Jewish history, Jewish philosophy and Yiddish and Ashkenazi studies. Although our courses in these areas are sufficiently advanced to encourage serious graduate study, we

do encourage graduate students as well to do course work overseas (e.g. Israel) when appropriate, to supplement their graduate program.

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supplementary courses; one of our present graduate students in Jewish philosophy, for example, has taken courses in Latin, Arabic, and scholastic philosophy in order to strengthen her training and background in Jewish philosophy. Increasingly, however, many of our students would prefer to concentrate fully upon Jewish Studies. We are therefore in the process of introducing an M.A. Certificate in Jewish Studies, and hope to introduce a separate M.A. in Jewish Studies in the near future.

Community involvement is an important part of the mission of the Melton Center at Ohio State, as it often is with Jewish studies. We are fortunate to have enjoyed the support of an enthusiastic and committed Jewish community which has established many programs to serve both the students and the community. The Pearl and Troy Feibel Lecture on Judaism and Law, The Thomas and Diann Mann Distinguished Symposium Series, The Betty and Herbert Schiff Lehrhaus for Jewish Studies and the Friends of the Melton Center Distinguished Humanist Lecture create outstanding opportunities for interchange with prominent visiting scholars of Judaica. In addition the Melton Center co-sponsors an annual Jewish film festival, as well as speakers, concerts, exhibits and conferences with other departments at Ohio State. The Midwest Jewish Studies Colloquium has for thirteen years provided an

opportunity for Jewish Studies scholars in the Midwest an opportunity to share research in an informal environment.

The opportunities for cross-fertilization are thus many and diverse, and they serve to further enrich the program.

Resources such as a comprehensive library and distinguished research facilities are a valuable benefit a large university can provide. Ohio State is fortunate to have a full-time Judaica librarian, Joseph Galron, who heads a noteworthy collection of over 100,000 volumes and maintains a Hebrew, Yiddish and Jewish Studies Reading Room in the main library, a unique arrangement at a public university. ALEPH (Automated Library Expandable Program, Hebrew University of Jerusalem) has been implemented by the University Libraries under Joseph's direction since 1992.

I have served as the Director of the Melton Center for the past ten years. Perhaps our greatest challenge at the undergraduate level is to maintain high expectations and strive to create a dynamic, open atmosphere which engages and motivates many student levels. At the graduate level, we must be more aggressive in advertising the fact that we are now one of the most comprehensive Jewish Studies programs in the country. At the same time we must promote the advantage of pursuing Jewish Studies at a major secular university, combining the best qualities of excellent Judaic studies with disciplinary training and focus.

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