Applying for An Academic Position

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It always struck me that one of the great indignities of graduate school—an otherwise blissful experience, as we all know—was the final stage. After all the wide reading, deep thinking, and torturous writing, you now had to go out and get a job. Shouldn't labor of this depth and commitment simply assure graduates of gainful employment? Perhaps yes, but, alas, the reality is quite different. The good news is that there are jobs available, and that good and qualified people get them. The bad news is that our field appears, based on a highly unscientific observation, to be descending from the peak of institutional growth seen in the 1980s and 1990s—a period in which every major research university and many smaller colleges saw fit to establish a center, chair, or position in Jewish studies.

The academic job market in general is likely to be very tight over the next three to five years, as academic institutions contend with smaller endowments and reduced state subsidies. On one hand, this means that graduates should really regard the job search process as a two to three year proposition. On the other hand, it is imperative for graduate students to prepare themselves in the best and most thorough manner for the often capricious market that awaits them. And the preparation must begin in the first years of graduate school, indeed, upon point of entry. This doesn't mean that you must plot every move in graduate school for the purely instrumental reason of getting a job; there is a grander intellectual calling that animates many of us. Nevertheless, you must be mindful of the realities of the market and prepare accordingly. Below are a few principles to bear in mind as you begin this work.

WHATEVER THE OUTCOME, YOU MUST REMEMBER THAT THE PROCESS OF FINDING A JOB MAY TAKE A FEW YEARS AND YOUR OWN SELF-WORTH SHOULD NEVER HINGE ON THE VAGARIES OF AN OFTEN ARBITRARY MARKET.

Teaching

It is axiomatic that applicants must have teaching experience, preferably broad experience, when entering the job market. Few institutions will consider your application seriously without it. So you should make all efforts to work as a teaching assistant at some point during your graduate school career; even better is to have the opportunity to teach a course of your own design. It is possible that you'll be asked to TA for a course in your area of Jewish studies; it's also possible that you'll be asked to TA for a course with no, or limited, connection to Jewish studies. This is not to be avoided. The broader your teaching portfolio, the more appealing you are as a candidate. In fact, when applying for a job, make sure to indicate not only those courses that you've taught, but those which you're capable of teaching based on your training (divided according to the categories of lower division undergraduate lectures, upper division lectures, and seminars—depending on whether the institution in question is a research university or a teaching college). You should also think of producing syllabi for the core courses that you'll be expected to teach. In addition, you'll want to think about how you'll teach key courses, what themes you'll cover in them, and which books you'll use, because these are questions that will likely arise during an interview. In sum, take teaching seriously. Even though your main mission in graduate school is to produce a serious piece of original research, you will be hired, at least in part, based on your experience and potential as a teacher.

Visibility

One of the great virtues of graduate school, which will become readily apparent when the manifold demands of an assistant professorship descend upon you, is that you are called upon to develop scholarly expertise largely in the confines of your own study. At many points in your training, it is just you and your dissertation, without much extraneous activity or input. The challenge of the graduate student is to marshal this precious time, and yet also to become a known and visible presence among your professional colleagues. This means following and joining online scholarly debates, attending conferences (including the AJS), giving papers where possible, and attempting to publish your work in refereed journals. Increasingly, that which distinguishes two qualified candidates for a job, even those still in graduate school, is their respective publication record. This is not a call to rush into print an undeveloped seminar paper. But it is a reminder that search committees increasingly choose candidates who have some publications to their name, as an indication of their scholarly promise and productivity.

In a related vein, it is very important that while delving deeper into your unique

research topic, you always think of how this topic relates to the key questions and problematics of your wider discipline (e.g., history, literature, religious studies) and that you develop the ability to render the topic understandable and interesting to non-specialists. For when you receive an on-campus interview, it is likely that the search committee and many of the prospective colleagues whom you'll meet will not be from the field of Jewish studies. The ability to explain to them what the payoff of your study is for the broader discipline is important, and not merely for tactical reasons. It is a matter of utmost intellectual concern, for you too will want and need to know how your project relates to a larger corpus of knowledge of which it is a new building block.

Job Market Checklist

In the spring of the year in which you will begin sending out applications for jobs, you should begin to put together the template for your job packet. Thus, you should draft a concise but informative curriculum vitae and begin to formulate a two-page letter of application. This letter will vary depending on where you're applying. A letter to a large research university should spend more time on your research accomplishments; a letter to a small teaching college should focus on your teaching skills. But this is a matter of proportion. In both cases, you will want to do the following: introduce yourself and your academic background, describe your dissertation research (and its significance to the field), and discuss your teaching experience and offerings. You should also set up a dossier at your institution's career service center to which letters of recommendation from advisors can be sent and from which these letters will be sent as a package to institutions to which you apply for employment. You should also assemble a list of potential courses to teach, as well syllabi from courses you have taught or plan to teach—again, calibrated to the kind of department and institution to which you're applying.

In the fall of the year in which you're applying, you should make sure to peruse the usual sources for information about job openings. You should also ask your advisors and readers to update old letters of recommendation based on your most recent work. And you should begin to think about the contours of a job talk, usually drawn from the dissertation, in the event that you'll be invited for a campus interview in the winter. In preparation, plan on giving a talk at the AJS in December.

If you are fortunate enough to get a campus interview, make sure to find out all you can about your schedule, expectations (e.g., length and nature of job talk), and those whom you'll be meeting. While perhaps most of the process is beyond your control, there is 10 to 20 percent of it that you can control. Come to your interview prepared—prepared to speak intelligently and concisely about your work, prepared to speak to others whose work overlaps with yours, and prepared to be treated as a colleague. Indeed, the campus interview signals the decisive moment of transition from your student years to your professional career. Whatever the outcome, you must remember that the process of finding a job may take a few years and your own self-worth should never hinge on the vagaries of an often arbitrary market. In the sometimes difficult transition years spent searching for a position, continue your research and publishing; it will be an important source of satisfaction.

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