

# JEWIS/MEDIA/RELIGION: MAPPING A FIELD, BUILDING A RESOURCE

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From Jewish film festivals to the Talmud on CD-ROM, from bar mitzvah videos to Internet Jewish matchmaking services, from *Schindler's List* tours of Cracow to Chabad telethons, Jewish engagements with media now proliferate in unprecedented range and scope. How might scholars in Jewish studies—and in other disciplines—approach the study of this extraordinary array of developments?

For the past year and a half, about forty scholars have been meeting at New York University to address this challenge. Convened at the invitation of NYU's Center for Religion and Media, which is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Working Group on Jews, Media, and Religion has been mapping out ways to study and teach a wide range of topics that come into focus around the convergence of Jews, media, and religion. To that end, we have been working collaboratively on an open-source, online curricular project called MODIYA ([modiya.nyu.edu](http://modiya.nyu.edu)), which will launch in September 2005.

Given that this subject has received so little scholarly attention, we decided that the group's initial mandate must be—and to a considerable extent still is—one of reconnaissance. What are the phenomena, both historical and contemporary, that this convergence brings into view? How might a concern with religion and media tell us something significant about Jewish life that we might otherwise not consider? What theoretical frameworks and research methods might we use? Given the scope of this topic, our

approach stresses collaboration and draws on the diverse expertise of a large group of scholars, from senior professors to graduate students, in such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, ethnomusicology, folklore, history, and literature. Not all members work primarily on Jewish subjects, nor are they all based in the university; some work in museums or as artists and filmmakers.

Our concern is not simply with media or mediation per se, but with its relation to what might be considered matters of religion, which can include engagement with the numinous, spiritual communion, the transmission and maintenance of religious observance, religiously inflected erudition and authority, ethics and social justice, and the critique of or rebellion against traditional piety, all of which entail some kind of mediating or communicative challenge. Just how, for example, does the production and circulation of sound recordings inform devotional practice in contemporary Orthodox Jewish communities—especially when many of these recordings cannot be made or played on the sacred occasions they portray? How might such an ephemeral medium as the postcard (particularly series of rabbi portraits, synagogues, scenes of the Holy Land, and Jewish types, as well as postcard collecting practices) figure in modern engagements with religious tradition? Over the past century, and especially in our own lifetimes, we have witnessed an unprecedented array of challenges to Jewish life wrought by new media (for example, how *haredim* deal with the Internet) and

new kinds of engagement with established mediations (for example, digitizing of the *responsa* literature).

We have encouraged the working group to cast a wide net for possible subjects of study and approaches to their analysis. In addition to considering what first comes to mind—the use of different media within Jewish religious life (from parchment scrolls to online *hevruvas*) and mediations of Judaism (books, periodicals, films, telecasts, Web sites, exhibitions, and so on, about Jewish religious life, from *The Eternal Light* [an ecumenical TV and radio program produced by the Jewish Theological Seminary and NBC] to Hasidic blogs and *Jewschool* [[www.jewschool.com](http://www.jewschool.com)])—our attention is also drawn to how Jewish involvement with media has been conceptualized in religious terms. For example, attending Jewish film festivals is frequently analogized to going to synagogue, and works of Holocaust remembrance regularly invoke theological engagement through an array of mediating practices.

We take an expansive approach not only to media, but also to religion. Given the problematic fit between religion and the full spectrum of Jewish experience, we look beyond conventional notions of Judaism and Jewish religiosity—prayer, study of sacred texts, synagogue and domestic ritual—to consider phenomena that test the limits of religion, including secular Jewish culture, Jewish civil religion, cultural Judaism, Jewish nationalism, Jewish ethics and social justice, and Holocaust theology, as well as phenomena that address Jewishness from without: anti-Semitism, philo-Semitism, and Judeo-Christian ecumenism.

Our way of working is inductive. Rather than starting with disciplinary rubrics or theoretical approaches (though we of course keep them in mind and return to them in the course of our work), we start with the media phenomena themselves and let them

The screenshot shows the MODIYA website interface. At the top, the logo 'MODIYA' is displayed with the tagline 'JEWIS MEDIA RELIGION' and subtext 'media • association • messenger • correspondent • informant'. Below the logo is a navigation menu with categories like 'Units', 'General Resources', and 'Admin Tools'. The main content area features a unit titled 'Unit: Textual Practices' with a video thumbnail showing a wedding ceremony. Below the video is a caption: 'The Huppah in the Sukkah," Toronto, 2003. The avant-garde wedding celebration of video and performance artist Melissa Shiff and media scholar Louis Kaplan included projections of sacred Hebrew texts onto both bride and groom during the ceremony.' To the right of the video are sections for 'Unit Topics', 'Unit Resources', 'Browse Items In:', 'Comments', and 'Admin Tools'. The 'Unit Topics' list includes: 1. Jews and their Texts, 2. Historical Perspective, 3. Orality and Writing, 4. Text and Image, 5. Textual Diversity. The 'Unit Resources' list includes: Sites, Readings, Media, Museums/Exhibitions, Artists' projects, Class projects, Additional resources, and Links. The 'Browse Items In:' section shows a dropdown menu set to 'Textual Practices' and buttons for 'Browse Title', 'Authors', and 'By Date'. The 'Comments' section has a 'View Posts (1)' button. The 'Admin Tools' section has an 'Edit...' button and a 'Create Topic' button. At the bottom left, there is a search bar and a 'Logout' link.

Screenshot from MORIYA Web site, [modiya.nyu.edu](http://modiya.nyu.edu).

point to whichever theoretical frameworks would best support our exploration of the convergence of Jews/Media/Religion. We draw from established disciplines as well as from such interdisciplinary formations as religious studies, media studies, visual culture studies, and performance studies. Similarly, while we have started with what has been most readily at hand, the contemporary and local, we are moving outward geographically and backward historically and in all cases consider the larger historical and sociocultural contexts of the material under study. For example, we consider contemporary manifestations of “radical Jewish culture,” their media productions (magazines, music, couture, Web sites) and their relationship to the organized Jewish community as part of a larger history of Jewish youth and alternative cultures.

What is emerging from our work is not simply an extensive corpus of phenomena at the intersection of Jews/Media/Religion, but a potentially new approach to Jewish studies, broadly defined. By making the interrelation of media and religion our organizing principle, we are able to bring a heterogeneous array of

to *media practices*. The study of anti-Semitism, for example, is enhanced by shifting attention from political contexts or rhetorical strategies to mediating practices, which have employed state-of-the-art communications media for centuries, from broadsides to Web sites, including the remediation of the blood libel and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Accordingly, we approach media works not only as “texts” that can be analyzed semiotically, but also as *social practices* (with respect to their making, circulation, reception, application, adaptation, and remediation). This requires an approach to media works and practices as not only *about* something of interest, but also as something of interest in themselves. For example, we view home movies and videos of life cycle events not merely as sources of information about ritual practice but as playing an intrinsic role in the rituals themselves. Not only are ritual events staged for the camera, but also media are increasingly being incorporated into ritual events, including the viewing of parents’ wedding videos at social gatherings leading up to the wedding of their children or projecting old

phenomena into view. Many of these phenomena have never been studied—or never in quite this way—and considered together they can generate new insights. At the heart of our evolving approach is a concern with the nature of media and mediation and close attention

family photographs during the ceremony itself. We also consider how such practices relate to earlier efforts to incorporate visualizations of ritual into sacred objects and texts, such as early modern illustrated *sifrei minhagim* and remediations of them in our own day.

In this way, we hope to expand the range of phenomena and sources considered in Jewish studies beyond texts to include visual, audio, televisual, cinematic, artifactual, and other kinds of cultural “objects,” while also diversifying approaches to their analysis in order to attend not only to their content, but also to their very nature as media and to the social practices associated with them. In the process, we hope to make the arts, beyond literature and film, a more integral part of Jewish studies. Indeed, we view artistic practices in a wide variety of media as modes of inquiry in their own right and find innovative pedagogical possibilities in the work of contemporary artists.

Working collaboratively, we have discovered a substantial field of scholarly inquiry and the opportunities it affords for curriculum development. This is the *raison d’être* for MODIYA, which we have organized into units such as text and textual practices, religious travel, proselytizing media, *haredi* media, Jews and the Internet—mediating ritual, music, film festivals, and home movies. Each unit is subdivided into topics and case studies, whether a particular site (e.g., Lower East Side Tenement Museum), film (*Eyeshet cohen*, from the Ma’ale School of Television, Film, and the Arts in Jerusalem, which is dedicated “to promoting Jewish religious film production”), or mediations of a single work such as Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*, ranging from Broadway musicals to Japanese animé. For each unit, topic, and case study we provide an introduction; a curated selection of online resources, including primary sources, scholarship, media

(images, audio and video recordings, Web sites), and links to digital archives; suggestions for teaching; ideas for research projects; and thoughts on how elements of MODIYA might be integrated into courses on related subjects.

MODIYA exemplifies a research-centered pedagogy by encouraging research and teaching to proceed in tandem. This is particularly well-suited to the study of emergent phenomena, whether they are new in the world or new to Jewish studies. Consolidating and modeling the working group's way of working, MODIYA is also an experiment in the application of technology to collaborative research and teaching. The ITS Faculty Technology Center at New York University has played a vital role in creatively adapting the DSpace engine developed at MIT ([dspace.org](http://dspace.org)) to suit

our subject and ways of working so that MODIYA might evolve into a working archive of leads, possible directions, explorations, and resources that can grow incrementally.

As an open-source project, MODIYA encourages input from visitors—comments and queries about particular subjects, as well as a place to send us “sightings” of interesting phenomena that are encountered in the course of daily life. We invite all members of AJS to log on, register as users of the site, and help us to develop this resource.

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*Center for Religion and Media ([www.nyu.edu/fas/center/religionandmedia](http://www.nyu.edu/fas/center/religionandmedia)): Co-directors: Faye Ginsburg and Angela Zito, Associate director: Barbara Abrash; ITS Faculty Technology Center: Tal Halpern, Nicola Monat-Jacobs, Joe Lee, Tiphaine B. Rabaux; Working Group on Jews, Media, and Religion: Ilana Abramovitch (Museum of Jewish Heritage), Jonathan Boyarin (University of Kansas), Sally Charnow (Hofstra), Judah Cohen (NYU), Ayala Fader (Fordham), Jeffrey Feldman (NYU), Henry Goldschmidt (Wesleyan), Judith Goldstein (Vassar), Barbara Rose Haum (NYU), Samuel Heilman (City University of New York), Andrew Ingall (The Jewish Museum, NY), Jenna Weissman Joselit (Princeton), Emily Katz (Jewish Theological Seminary), Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (NYU)\*, Mark Kligman (Hebrew Union College, NY), David Koffman (NYU), Rachel Kranson (NYU), Faye Lederman (NYU), Edna Nahshon (Jewish Theological Seminary), Edward Portnoy (Jewish Theological Seminary), Lara Ivry Rabinovitch (NYU), Jeffrey Shandler (Rutgers)\*, Menachem Sheinberger (NYU), Richard Siegel (National Foundation for Jewish Culture), Brigitte Sion (NYU), Mark Slobin (Wesleyan), Jeremy Stolow (McMaster University), Ariva Weintraub (The Jewish Museum, NY)*  
\* = co-conveners

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