

# JEWISH STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Beth Wenger

The University of Pennsylvania has been home to scholars in Jewish studies since the nineteenth century. Yet the establishment of a formal program occurred only in 1982, at a time when Jewish studies programs were being created at universities across the country. From its inception, Penn's program reflected both the faculty's desire to create a shared discourse among students and faculty working in Jewish studies, as well as a strong belief that Jewish studies should not be defined as a single field or discipline. When the program was established, Penn faculty decided to build an interdisciplinary program that would encompass a variety of approaches to the Jewish experience. From the outset, Penn's program constructed Jewish studies as an integral part of the liberal arts curriculum with a presence in departments throughout the university.

As the program has evolved and the faculty has increased, Jewish studies at Penn reflects the initial mission to locate the teaching of Jewish subjects within multiple disciplines. The result is a program that, in practice, supports not one but four distinct majors that address different areas within Jewish studies. The major that carries the official designation of "Jewish Studies" is our interdisciplinary major, overseen by the Jewish Studies Program, where students take courses in Jewish history, literature, culture, and religion. At the same time,

three other Penn departments offer majors that include a Jewish specialty: Within the history major, students may elect a concentration

in Jewish history that focuses on the evolution of Jewish life in the various societies in which Jews have lived. The Religious Studies Department's concentration in Judaism provides students the opportunity to explore Jewish religion within the context of other world religions.

Finally, the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations sponsors a Hebrew and Judaica concentration that contains a specific focus on Hebrew language, literature, texts, and artifacts. Penn students thus encounter multiple options in Jewish studies when they choose a major.

Penn's model for Jewish studies is likely more decentralized and varied than programs at most universities, suggesting to students quite emphatically that no single discipline or approach defines "Jewish Studies." Only the interdisciplinary major is directly controlled by the Jewish Studies Program, which determines the requirements and policies of the major. The individual departments that sponsor the other three majors set the standards for their students, who must fulfill the general requirements of their majors in addition to taking courses in their area of Jewish specialty. In practice,



Detail from the *Rothschild Mahzor*, Italy, 1490.  
Courtesy of The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

however, a degree of consensus applies across the various Jewish studies majors. Because the faculty who supervise the Judaica concentrations in each department are also members of the Jewish Studies Program, there is room for dialogue, if not complete unanimity, about general expectations.

A consensus about the importance of proficiency in a Jewish language (either Hebrew or Yiddish) prevails throughout Penn's programs. Language proficiency is required in the interdisciplinary major as well as in the Jewish History major and the Hebrew and Judaica concentration in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC); proficiency is strongly encouraged but not required in the Judaism concentration in religious studies. The most rigorous application of Hebrew language exists in NELC's Hebrew and Judaica concentration, with its focus on textual study, where in addition to language

proficiency students must take at least three courses that require reading Hebrew texts in the original.

The four different tracks in Jewish studies reflect the different methodologies and intellectual goals of each major, but despite their distinct designs, many common courses are either required or counted in all four. The three Jewish history surveys (covering a broad chronological sweep) fulfill requirements in all tracks. To some extent, all the majors require chronological breadth, covering the history, literature, and religious practices of Jews across time. Jewish studies courses from several departments count as requirements or electives in all four majors. This means that students majoring in the various Jewish studies tracks find themselves

in many common courses, creating the foundation for an intellectual community. Three of the four tracks contain a significant research requirement, and all offer the option of an honors thesis. The

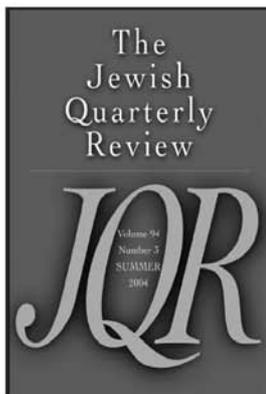
**PENN'S MULTIFACETED JEWISH STUDIES PROGRAM OFFERS STUDENTS THE OPTION TO EXAMINE JEWISH EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE THAT INTERESTS THEM MOST, OR TO CHOOSE THE INTERDISCIPLINARY JEWISH STUDIES MAJOR.**

interdisciplinary major requires a senior seminar and encourages students from all four Jewish studies majors to enroll.

Penn's multifaceted Jewish studies program offers students the option to examine Jewish experience within the discipline that interests them most, or to choose the interdisciplinary Jewish studies major. In many respects, this

construction of multiple majors reflects a normalization of Jewish studies within the academy, situating the study of Jewish life integrally and organically within the liberal arts curriculum. Prospective history or religious studies majors encounter a menu of concentrations that includes Jewish history and Judaism as standard fare. The culture of Jewish studies at Penn remains diverse, multidisciplinary, and located in distinct but interconnected arenas across the university. The construction is inherently complex, but this is the lesson that we teach our students about the nature of Jewish studies.

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