

# JEWISH STUDIES AT VASSAR COLLEGE

Andrew Bush

The invitation to consider the state of affairs in Jewish studies at Vassar College coincides with a moment when the faculty of our program is engaged in the first comprehensive effort to restructure our curriculum since its inauguration in 2000. At an undergraduate college with an emphasis on teaching, a discussion of course offerings—points of access, the place of Jewish studies in the larger college curriculum and, above all, the shape of the major—is an active arena for debate about the conceptualization of Jewish studies as an intellectual field. The debate is very much in progress here.

To provide an institutional context, I recall that our program was established when a diverse faculty group made the case that 1) there was deep, well-founded and sustainable interest among teachers and students in the particularities of Jewish experience; 2) the prior limitation to the study of Judaism within the framework of religious studies did not suffice to address that interest; and 3) the model of cultural studies as it had emerged in various fields provided an alternative intellectual basis consonant with faculty strengths and other, concurrent curricular developments at Vassar. Let me state the obvious: courses on Judaism continue to be taught in the Department of Religion, which has maintained a strong alliance with the new Jewish Studies Program.

The other salient point is that faculty lines at Vassar are located *in departments*; multidisciplinary *programs* are staffed by drawing on the existing departmental faculties. At Vassar, therefore, program faculty may be categorized as

follows: a very few faculty members with professional training and well-developed research interests in some area of Jewish studies prior to their participation in the program; a larger group with limited training and lesser or no prior research projects in the field; and faculty who, by their own initiative or through outreach efforts on the part of the program, take the presence of Jewish studies at Vassar as the welcome opportunity to begin work as teachers and

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researchers in the field. An important series of ongoing faculty development seminars, which has brought leading scholars from other institutions to Vassar, has reinforced the work of all of those constituencies. So, picture us: a group with a common commitment to the vitality of a Jewish studies program at Vassar, but otherwise diverse in every way—professional training and personal background, general intellectual outlook, and particular understandings of Jewish studies.

The curricular offerings of the first years of the program have been anchored by a set of core courses, one each at Vassar's three levels of

instruction: an introductory course on the question of Jewish identity; an intermediate course on textuality; and a senior seminar focusing on methodological issues. In addition, we offer a small but robust program of Hebrew language study. Other offerings have been contingent on faculty availability, but, for the same reason, heavily weighted toward twentieth-century topics.

The crux of current discussion is the question of distribution requirements within the major. The matter was first addressed in relation to our points of entry. Some argued for a comprehensive survey that would in itself provide an introduction to the areas that constitute the field, defined both by disciplinary approach and historical

period. The faculty chose, however, to provide instead a variety of introductory-level courses. The prevailing argument cited the impossibility of being truly comprehensive; the capacity of instructors to

address gaps in training ad hoc as they impinged upon other courses; and, above all, the strategic value of acquainting as large a group of students as possible with the field, rather than to undercut the number of potential majors by creating a bottleneck at the outset. At the other end, we have agreed to retain the senior seminar, both for its emphasis on methodology as a valuable preparation for the optional senior thesis, and for the importance of bringing the cohort together, at the culmination of their disparate paths through the program, in a setting where their varied studies can be mutually reinforcing.

Distribution requirements have now been accepted in principle, though their definition is in debate. I decline to predict an outcome. Instead, I would return to a theoretical issue that formed part of the initial argument for the establishment of Jewish studies at Vassar, namely, the conception of Jewish studies as an area of cultural studies. Recalling the political climate that engendered—not an idle term in this context—cultural studies more generally, that orientation has led to an emphasis on the varieties of Jewish experience, rather than, say, the investigation of a canon. Some faculty are concerned that this emphasis does not provide adequate preparation for graduate study in the field—due to the contingencies of staffing, we offer no seminars on Talmud, for instance—and approach the curriculum from the point of view of content: what should our majors know upon graduation? Others counter that the question of expected content is but another form of the canon, to which they

object on theoretical and pedagogical grounds. From this perspective, the concerns for preparation for graduate studies may be reversed; one may argue that our emphasis is representative of the evolution of the field—that Gershon Scholem, for example, already revised the scholarly tradition of his *Wissenschaft* forebears, and, moreover, at present, a familiarity with the theoretical writings of his friend Walter Benjamin are as vital to Jewish studies as the work of Scholem himself.

Though we are far from consensus, the general result of our cultural studies orientation, I believe, is that we tend to offer courses that emphasize multiplicity and the formation of Jewish cultural expressions that have grown up in conversation with other cultures from Middle Eastern antiquity to post-Enlightenment Europe to the heterogeneity of American Jewish life. In short, rather like Vassar's multidisciplinary American Culture

or Women's Studies Programs (or perhaps even Physics), our courses tend to treat the Jewishness of Jewish culture as an open question to investigate, rather than an a priori category or a foregone conclusion.

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