

FORUM RESPONSE

Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert

Although the academic study of Jewish culture in its various forms established itself before World War II—concretely with the appointment of Salo Baron as Professor of Jewish History, Literature, and Institutions at Columbia University—the establishment of undergraduate majors in Jewish studies is a relatively recent phenomenon. Among the five contributions to this issue, Brandeis University’s major in Jewish studies (since 1953) is clearly the exception, due mostly to its founding mission. At this point in time, I think that we can assess this story of the Jewish studies major in American liberal arts colleges as a success story, even if there is no unambiguous way to measure success in this case. But the Jewish studies major can be found in a great variety of institutions, from the smaller colleges to the American elite universities with and without divinity schools. Some of the Jewish studies programs have significant numbers of students enrolled as majors. Such success prods one to reflect on the nature of the beast, so to speak.

There are two important points that emerge from the reports on the Jewish studies major that I would like to raise here in however brief a form, the first one being the interdisciplinarity of Jewish studies extolled by most of the reports, and the second one the question of the clientele or student body for whom Jewish studies programs are designed. Both points will allow us to reflect briefly on the future of the field.

As to the first point, all of the authors describe and praise the inter- or multidisciplinary of their

respective programs and all of them consider this to be a strength. Depending on the size and culture of the institutional contexts, undergraduate students in Jewish studies major in their respective departments (history, religion, Near Eastern studies, etc.) or construct their own interdisciplinary majors supervised by the Jewish studies program, which is also the situation here at Stanford University. While interdisciplinarity often derives from



A student’s handwriting exercise in Haketia (North Moroccan Ladino) written in Sephardi script. Each line reads, “Ama a tu prohimo como a ti mismo [Love your neighbor as yourself].” The exercise is signed by Avraham Ben Shimol. From Tangier or Tetuan, late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Courtesy of Norman Stillman.

pragmatic concerns—after all, the case of Rutgers which has a department is rare—and interdepartmental “programs” of Jewish studies is the more prevalent situation. But whether pragmatic or not, clearly Jewish studies as a field cannot be reduced and subjected to any one discipline, as Jewish culture has found a huge variety of expressions, ranging from art in its various forms via ancient and

contemporary literature to ritual performances. The more the focus of Jewish academic scholarship on the textual and intellectual traditions of Judaism has been demoted from its traditionally central place, the more interdisciplinary Jewish studies has become. This does not remain without problems, as pointed out by several of the contributors, namely the question of what a student who majors in Jewish studies should be made to study and know in order to identify herself respectably as having majored in Jewish studies. This difficult question notwithstanding, the interdisciplinarity of Jewish studies also underwrites its own future, since much in the humanities nowadays rides on being reoriented towards interdisciplinarity as well as the ability to construct conversations which as many people as possible can join. The future of Jewish studies, I would surmise, hinges on the ability of the various programs to overcome insularity and to be part of larger conversations in the humanities. This cannot and should not merely be dismissed as bowing to the most recent fads, rather than as the ongoing challenge of critical self-reflection on what it is that defines one’s place in the humanities and in the liberal arts curricula, especially if most of us believe in the importance of providing a space for critical reflection and education about Jewish culture.

This leads me to the second and perhaps most important, if difficult topic, namely the question of the clientele of Jewish studies. Who are the students who are and might be interested in Jewish studies? Again, like most fields in the humanities, Jewish studies is subject to the laws of the market, and the viability of Jewish studies programs is dependent on the interest they can generate amongst American undergraduate students. Students in the U.S. (as opposed to some countries in Europe for instance) who take Jewish studies courses and who

major in Jewish studies tend to be Jewish themselves, as pointed out by some of the authors. Such is the case not just at Brandeis with its particular history as a Jewish institution. It is true in many, if not most other institutions. As Steve Weitzman points out, “many of our students are motivated by a desire to develop their own sense of identity.” One is tempted to ask whether or not this observed and projected market does not only influence what is taught, but what is thought as well, reflected in the predominance of American scholarship touching upon questions of Jewish identity, including the ascertainment of the impossibility of articulating a coherent, non-sectarian, non-normative definition of Jewish identity. The critical question in my view is how much the field is

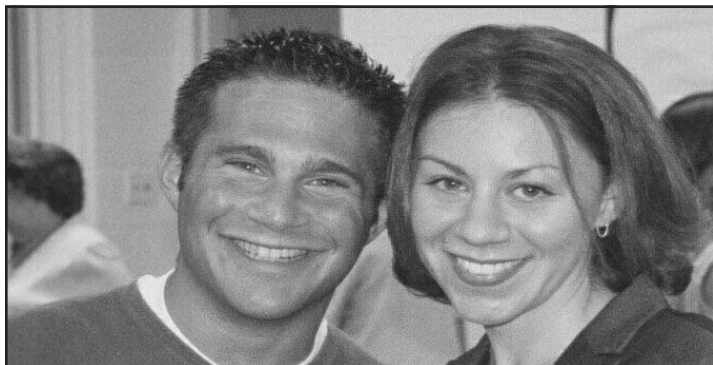
dependent on the fact that our student body, and therefore our readers, are Jewish. Obviously, we are all quick to reassure one another that we are committed to the fact that our programs are located in the context of larger universities and colleges, and that we are not intent

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on merely designing college-level Jewish education, rather than programs of academic and intellectual rigor that are open to all. But it seems to me that the field can only benefit from a serious conversation about what is entailed in thinking about Jewish studies as a field that targets not only students

for whom Jewish studies is “familiar cultural territory,” or who want to deepen their understanding of their own culture. This is not to say that such endeavors should be thwarted. Not at all! Nor should such a conversation derive from an anxiety about relevance. Rather, for Jewish studies the challenge of its location in American universities should only be considered as an opportunity to engage in creative answers to the question of why non-Jewish students should also major (or at least minor) in Jewish studies. This surely will strengthen the position of our field in American undergraduate education.

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