Reflections on Jewish Studies, Twenty Years Later

Howard Tzvi Adelman

In 1988, as a newly minted PhD, tenure-track assistant professor, and first director of the Jewish studies program at Smith College, I received an invitation to submit an opinion piece about the history and nature of Jewish studies to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In my brief essay, I took note of two competing theories about the origin of the field, one tracing its roots through the centuries-long history of Hebraic and Judaic studies in universities and seminaries and the other focusing on more immediate stimuli, such as heightened awareness of ethnicity in post–1960s America and Israel's victory in the Six Day War. I also reflected on the tension between our colleagues' goals of achieving acceptance within the academy and aiding Jewish continuity.

"Jewish-studies scholars," I wrote, "often try to distance themselves from the label 'ethnic,' while at the same time listing all the benefits the Jewish community derives from the academic study of Judaism. They argue that Jewish studies should not be a partisan enterprise, but they overlook the fact that, like other fields, it has always been committed to fostering particular values." I went on to say that the "ultimate defense against ideological forays into the classroom is the academic process, which is based on rigorous questioning of all disciplinary and methodological assumptions and conclusions. If such tests are not applied to new fields—and, even before the development of ethnic studies, they have not always been—the fault lies not with a particular field but with the academic process itself."

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Point of View By Howard Adelman

Jewish Studies: an Ethnic Program or Part of Academic Tradition?

The history of Jewish studies is still being written. Scholars engaged in researching that history usually take one of two extreme positions. One side holds that the field developed largely as a result of both the heightened Jewish self-awareness after the Six-Day War and the black and ethnic consciousness that emerged in the 1960's. The other maintains that the study of Hebraica and Judaica has always occupied an ancient and honorable place in the traditional university curriculum.

As often happens in such cases, the truth lies somewhere in between. Jewish studies—by which I mean the critical study of the history, literature, and thought of the Jewish people since the end of the biblical period—while perhaps not as venerable as those holding ... avowedly Jewish professor in the United States, started to teach Semitics (for no salary) at New York University. During the second half of the century in Europe, soon after Jewish students began to be admitted to universities, a few Jews did finally receive isolated faculty appointments.

However, the European Jewish-studies movement did not fulfill its goals—indeed, its goals made success impossible. The attempt to use Jewish scholarship to create a sense of pride for Jews opened the door for some to use it for other purposes, and much of the material produced during that time by Jewish scholars was marked by tendentiousness and denominational bias. By the end of the century, Moritz Steinschneider, ...

... lum. Although the substantial academic contributions of the early Christian pioneers in Jewish scholarship were often used for the furtherance of Christianity at the expense of Judaism, the first Jewish practitioners in the field also had an agenda that would now be categorized as ethnic—Jewish survival.

The failure of Jewish studies to find acceptance at universities until the 20th century had as much to do with its nature as with the educational establishment. Because the field was developed mostly in Jewish institutions, notably rabbinical seminaries, it acquired contours that still make it difficult to fit into the secular-college curriculum.

Nevertheless, the responsibility to make adjust- ...

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A decade after writing these words, and after having received tenure at Smith, I spent a sabbatical in Israel, where my family and I decided to settle. In the course of my work at one of Israel's new regional colleges, I became involved in the implementation of the Shenhar Report, which urged the strengthening of core curriculum in Jewish studies in Israeli schools. Since the program also stimulated similar courses in Islamic culture, I found myself co-teaching dialogue courses for Jews and Muslims with one of two colleagues, Muhammed Abu Samra from Jerusalem and Muhammad Hussein from Ramallah.

Muhammed Abu Samra and I also taught together in the U.S. as visiting Israeli scholars at Knox College in Illinois, conducting classes with Jews, Christians, and Muslims, many of whom came from Middle Eastern countries. Discussion, based on radically different positions, was intense, productive, and not confined to the classroom. On one occasion, for instance, we spoke at a joint meeting of the campus Jewish and Muslim students groups.

But things did not always go smoothly when we traveled and lectured together. In my public presentations I spoke freely and openly of my experiences as a new Israeli citizen over a period of five years, basing myself on my daily life, what I read in the papers, heard on the radio, saw on television, studied in books, and garnered from friends, students, and colleagues of all persuasions. To my dismay, what I said often elicited hostility and stony silence, all from American Jews—my people. I thought that I had made a great leap and given up a good position and a comfortable career in order to serve Israel, that I was using my academic skills to help build a country and bridge its internal gaps, and had valuable insight to share. But there was a disconnect that I struggled to fathom.

I began to see that at our talks, not

only did people from the Jewish community arrive with very strong preconceived notions, but they brought specific, often written, talking points. At the end of one talk, for instance, a man stood up and said: “I am sorry that I missed your talk, but there were a few points in it with which I want to disagree strongly.”

Three years later, when the Shenhar program was discontinued, I was no longer able to make ends meet in Israel and soon found myself once again on the North American job market. Here, I had a number of experiences that were reminiscent of what I had experienced on my earlier tours. To my surprise, on my visits to several college campuses, I saw that both donors and members of the local Jewish community participated actively in the search process. In addition to giving an academic “job talk,” I had to make presentations before panels from the Jewish community and submit to interviews by them. These community interviews revolved mostly around questions pertaining to fundraising and political litmus test questions about my views on Israel.

What I did not understand, the head of a major Jewish organization in one town informed me, was that Israel is in a position of existential danger from her enemies. This, I must say, was news to me, after having lived there for almost a decade. I tried to explain that I did not perceive such a danger, but experienced instead an excitement, at times frustrating and overwhelming, that I wanted to convey to my students in all its complexity. The head of the search committee then responded by arguing that as a Jewish professor I had to be a completely uncritical vocal advocate for Israel in my classes. Nuance is fine among ourselves, he seemed to be saying, but certainly not in front of them.

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Throwing caution to the winds, I suggested that here as in all other academic discourse, nuance is necessary, especially for a director of Jewish studies, who must above all maintain academic integrity. I now understood that on our lecture tour, my attempt to offer nuance, critical in an analytical sense, had been perceived as hostile and destructive.

I realized that I was out of sync with American Jewry not only because of my academic inclinations but precisely because I was Israeli. There is now a “pro-Israel” advocacy position that is not rooted in Zionism or in the reality of Israeli life. Indeed, the nuances of Zionism and Israeli history and life consistently put me at a distinct disadvantage when talking about Israel with American Jews. For example, in a course I taught for a local Jewish college program, one student expressed her distaste for Ahad Ha’am, one of the seminal figures in early Zionist history. She wanted to know why we had to read him. He was so negative, she complained, and surely not representative of the Zionist movement and those who lived in Palestine in his day. He was really anti-Israel and my assigning him reflected my anti-Israel tendencies. This student, like so many Diaspora Jews, was not willing to accept the premise that Zionism involves a critique both of Jewish life in the Diaspora and of developments in Israel.

Nuances of this kind do seem to be what interest my academic colleagues in other departments who are struggling to understand Israel in a global or even a personal context. Pro-Israel advocacy, especially on campus, isolates many people from the intellectual complexities of Zionism and the real struggles of Israel, most of which have little to do with campus discussions that are often subsumed under the rubric of “anti-Israel.”

What I experienced in Israel and what I would like to bring to academic life now that I am working outside of Israel is some of the excitement of Zionist thought and Israeli history and life. In particular, I would like to try to reproduce the teaching I did with my colleagues and students in Israel and the U.S. That is, I would like to create a safe space in the classroom to explore each other’s narrative. In Israel, the Ministry of Education, certainly not without resistance on both sides, is developing a curriculum in which Jews and Palestinians, living in both Israel and under the Palestinian

Authority, explore their dual narratives together. I see here the potential for Jewish studies as an academic field to build bridges between Jews and Muslims, as it has between Jews and Christians. At Queen's University—where the local Jewish community cooperates extensively with the Jewish studies program but plays no part in the selection of its faculty—I hope to work closely with the new program in Islamic studies and to implement co-taught dialogue courses.

In my 1988 essay I observed that Jews supported Jewish studies in part because they wanted it recognized and legitimized as a vital part of the academy, an enterprise that involves critical questioning. Now, however, many people regard such questioning directed at Israel as seditious and destructive. In turn, the involvement of pro-Israel advocacy in the activities of Jewish studies programs jeopardizes both our positions as serious scholars and the academic legitimacy of Jewish studies.

I would like to conclude by reiterating, especially on the basis of my recent experience, something that I wrote twenty years ago: The task before Jewish and ethnic studies scholars, therefore, is not to repress their own social and individual concerns but to create a methodology that will enable those concerns to find interdisciplinary expression. Jewish and ethnic studies provide a unique way to invigorate cultural creativity and to stimulate critical thinking in their communities. However, they will succeed not because they serve the needs of a particular constituency but because they contribute to the advancement of larger disciplines, offer a methodologically sound perspective, and aid the intellectual development of all students.

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