

By Way of Introduction

Thirty Years of Judaic Studies: A Personal Memoir

Leonard H. Ehrlich

In teaching “Philosophy in the Middle Ages” I had always included Jewish philosophy, even though this was never a topic worth mentioning wherever I studied that area at the graduate level, whether at Basel, Columbia, or Yale. Around 1960 I began to introduce philosophical problems of “the Holocaust” in some of my philosophy courses. Soon graduate philosophy students suggested I teach a course on the subject, which I did, the first in the Pioneer Valley. I also taught a course on recent Jewish philosophy. Thus Judaic Studies as an academic field of research and teaching was not unfamiliar to me. When New York organizations began sending teams to hold two-day seminars “in the provinces” to demonstrate the feasibility and timeliness of establishing the field as a secular discipline at colleges and universities, I took up the challenge.

As my partner I chose Jules Piccus. Though a scholar of medieval Spanish poetry, Jules was a true polyhistor, having briefly gained international fame for discovering and identifying a long lost da Vinci manuscript in Madrid. In 1970/71 he had been the prime mover in establishing a program in Hebrew language, and was giving “independent study” instruction in Yiddish. He was instrumental in the appointment of Leora Baron, then a graduate student, to teach the Hebrew sequence, which she did with effectiveness and flair, designing her own textbooks.

Jules was ready and enthusiastic when I suggested to him that we start Judaic Studies on the campus. When we took our proposal to the administrative mid-level, we realized that they never heard of the field of “Judaic Studies,” and we were met with chagrin and skepticism: chagrin, because it sounded as if we were going to lobby for another of the ethnic studies that were springing up at that time; skepticism because it seemed as if we wanted to establish religious instruction at a state university. From the beginning, then, and for many years to come we faced the task of educating all administrative as well as academic policy levels in the fact that Judaic Studies is an established academic field of research and teaching, which -- like the origins of mathematics, philosophy, and the natural sciences in classical Greece -- has ancient roots long predating the rise of the universities in the Middle Ages. While these roots included, aside from both mythical and chronicle history, the critical exegesis of sacred texts, what we now call Judaic Studies has always easily blended with secular learning, and can readily take its place in a public university. We surely were not qualified, and nothing was further from our minds than to lay the foundations for a rabbinical seminary.

Another fact presented difficulties in the establishment of Judaic Studies, and had to be brought home, namely that Judaic Studies does not fit the normal mold of an academic field.

Instead, it is not just tangentially but essentially both interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary. Interdisciplinary: Languages, linguistics, various literatures, history; music and art; legal, religious, social, and culture studies; et al. Cross-disciplinary: For example, one cannot investigate the travails of modern civic emancipation of the Jews without expert familiarity with prevailing rabbinic law and custom, the historical circumstance of emancipation as regards the prevailing political authority, etc. How crucial the cross-disciplinary aspect can be comes to light if one compares, for example, the emancipation of Sephardi Jews in the south of France in the wake of the French Revolution to that of the Galician (Ashkenazi) Jews under the Hapsburgs.

Initially we were permitted to devise a “major” program of study using available faculty resources. A committee of about 15 mostly senior professors from various disciplines -- Robert Rothstein was an Associate Professor then -- devised a curriculum of courses these members had taught or were prepared to teach, as well as a two-semester survey designed as an introduction to the field. The first year this course was taught in segments by a team that included faculty from neighboring colleges and qualified members of the community.

Even during the planning stage a number of problems had to be addressed. First, we foresaw that the development of Judaic Studies would require that the initial offering be followed by upper level courses; the participating faculty from various departments would provide such courses only to a limited extent, if at all. This meant that from the beginning a “core faculty” would have to be appointed whose primary research and teaching field was clearly within “Judaic Studies,” and who would oversee its development. While faculty in other departments would always contribute vital offerings, it was expected that they would before long recede to a position adjunctive to a well-developed core faculty. But in 1972 the University was approaching the end of the era of its major development that had marked the 1960’s. Still, we were given one faculty position. A position has to be housed in a unit (such as a department) that reports to a dean. The question arose where our position would be housed. While the Judaic Studies Committee would be empowered to administer the program, the host department would search for candidates, choose the appointee, and monitor the performance of the incumbent, since according to the rules governing personnel, the incumbent is answerable to the head of the department to which the position is assigned. In any case, once the position had been provided, several heads competed to have it housed in their department. One recently established department that was still in the stage of an ambitious development won out.

Charles Isbell, a Biblical scholar who had just graduated from Brandeis, was appointed to the core position as we started the first semester of our program in the fall of 1972. The enrolment in our initial offerings was greater than expected, in the survey course it was enormous, and it would increase in subsequent semesters. This success would prove to be troublesome. New positions were now rare, and their assignment to departments was keyed to undergraduate enrolments. Soon it became clear that the department that housed our

position believed it had better use for it, even if this meant the demise of our fledgling but highly successful program. The incumbent soon saw that his career was threatened, and wisely left for a more promising venue, as did our Hebrew teacher. By then we had graduated our first majors, two of whom went on to graduate school in preparation of a career in Judaica.

It would be prolix to recount what forces we had to muster in support of our effort to save Judaic Studies in 1976. In the end, we retained the position, were given the responsibility of undertaking a candidate search, and after vetting the applications of fifty-two (!) candidates, most of them so well qualified that we wished we had one dozen positions to fill, we interviewed three finalists. (Corresponding and telephoning with and about fifty-two candidates without a secretarial staff and other administrative facilities was an unreasonably demanding task). The choice fell on Judith Baskin, who had then finished her graduate studies at Yale. It was a most fortunate choice, for Ms. Baskin accomplished nothing less than to place the Judaica component of our program on the firm foundation on which its development could be built. Ms. Baskin was with us a dozen years, during which she gained the reputation of a charismatic teacher, and eventually became a leading researcher in the developing area of the status of women in Jewish history, literature, and culture. While we did not intend our program to be a boot-camp for advanced academic careers, Ms. Baskin had our cordial wishes when she went to head a developing department of Judaic Studies at another state university; and is now President of the Association of Jewish Studies.

After a few years Ms. Baskin was granted a two-year's leave to be a guest professor at her alma mater. Once again an attempt was made to jeopardize the future of Judaic Studies. If there was no one to teach Ms. Baskin's basic course sequence, we would lose the enrolment in the courses for which her course was a prerequisite. By that time David Wyman, who was not a member of the original team, had taken a leading role in the interdisciplinary Judaic Studies Committee. Two weeks before the start of the semester we had still not received authorization to search and appoint a substitute. Our Dean served temporarily at the central administration, hence Wyman and I went to see the Acting Dean. We explained our enrolment problem, and justified our need for a substitute by pointing not only to our high enrolments, but to the fact that ours was the most cost effective program in the faculty. When the Dean opined that we were "manufacturing" our enrolment figures, we knew that our trouble was worse than we suspected. Only upon our representation at the highest administrative level were we able to save Judaic Studies this time.

It was not until 1978 that we could begin to firm up the Hebraica component of our program. This was the task and soon the remarkable accomplishment of Shmuel Bolozky, who came to us from Tel Aviv University, where he had taught after completing his doctorate in linguistics at the University of Illinois. Shmuel is a leading researcher in Hebrew linguistics (mostly in phonology and morphology). As such and as a specialist in fast speech phenomena, his work and research interests are closely associated with those of the

University's Linguistics Department. Within our program Shmuel heads a team of Hebrew teachers; he has chaired our department, and has been President of the Association of Professors of Hebrew. During winter intersessions he teaches seminars in Hebrew linguistics in Israel.

With the appointments of Baskin and Bolozky we had the nucleus of a solid core faculty in place, and the Judaic Studies Committee was faced with preparing for the development that the efforts of the two portended. This was not possible as long as the two positions were housed in a department to which the needs of Judaic Studies were extraneous.

There were other weighty considerations at that juncture of our history. First, successful as Baskin and Bolozky were, their positions within the department to which they were assigned continued to be in jeopardy. Secondly, even though some of our courses had taken their place in the undergraduate core curriculum of the College of Arts and Sciences and of the University, and even though ours was the most cost effective program in the College (because the core and associate part-time faculty were at lower rank, and the adjunct faculty offered their courses either voluntarily or within the offering of their respective departments), we had no authority to apply for funding to hire new faculty or to perform the necessary administrative tasks. For these tasks the leading members of the interdisciplinary committee had to draw on the services available in the respective departments, to the latter's understandable resentment. And finally, because we had no official administrative status, we had no claim on the use of any kind of funds raised on behalf of Judaic Studies.

What was needed to surmount these intolerable conditions was the establishment of Judaic Studies as an academic administrative unit in its own right, with a chairman, an academic staff, a faculty under its own control, as well as devising the course offerings, advising students, the assigning teaching schedules, the monitoring and evaluation of faculty performance, access to the Dean on matters of budget resources, personnel action recommendations, competition for the assignment of new positions, etc. etc.

The achievement of Judaic Studies as an administrative unit serving directly under the Dean occurred in two stages. It took not only the intensive cooperative effort of the Judaic Studies Committee, by then well practiced in academic politics, but also the interest and support of significant segments of the wider faculty, some members of the upper administration, prominent members of the community at large, of the profession, and of the Alumni Association. Much of the activity went on behind closed doors and unbeknown to us. Two of the many may be mentioned by name: Brandeis Professor Marvin Fox, and then Congressman Father Drinan. Two higher administrators on the campus, who were especially helpful were Dean of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences Thomas O. ("T.O.") Wilkinson, and Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Loren Baritz. For the Judaic Studies Committee the process entailed an endless succession of memos, forms, responses, appearances before Dean's Committees, Faculty Senate Councils, the Senate, and so on.

The first stage led to Judaic Studies being promoted in 1981 from a “major” to a “Program”, and as such to an administrative unit within the Faculty of Humanities and Fine Arts. The program was strengthened by the hiring of a third core faculty, Jay Berkovitz, a historian specializing in Jewish European history. At the second stage, Judaic Studies became a regular department. This was done under the leadership of Murray Schwartz, then the Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts, who had long been convinced of the necessity of such a department. From the start we promoted the establishment of a parallel development in Near Eastern Studies, which was promoted under the leadership of Walter Denny of the Art History Department. Thus when the department was established in 1985 we suggested that Near Eastern Studies be raised from a “major” to a “Program”, and, upon Shmuel Bolozky’s suggestion, that it be combined with us in a Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies. After fifteen hectic years, I felt that my work was done and resigned as chair of Judaic Studies. I happily handed the chairmanship of the newly established Department over to Shmuel Bolozky. At about the same time, a Center for Jewish Studies was founded, associated with the Department and coordinated by Jay Berkovitz, and an active schedule of lectures and symposia was initiated under its auspices.

By 1990, however, as so often happens in Massachusetts, dwindling resources lead to economizing, whose first and major victim invariably is the University at Amherst. While the great success of Judaic Studies and the development of its offering demanded a measured and steady growth of its core faculty -- the seniors of the interdisciplinary Judaic Studies Committee were retiring -- the number of positions remained more or less stable for the next dozen years. Even Judith Baskin’s position could not be filled when she left for the New York State University at Albany.

Similarly, the major fund drive that we were hoping to get underway with the establishment of the department was frustrated, and would remain so until the present. The reasons are twofold: First, even though for decades the membership of the Hillel organization at UMass Amherst has been the largest in New England, the Jewish community was slow in supporting its need for facilities more suitable than the two crowded little rooms in the old Campus Center, but began to do so at the time when Judaic Studies would have needed that support. Secondly, having their names attached to an endowment at one of the many prestigious, privately funded universities with which the Commonwealth is gifted is more attractive to donors than contributing to a public university such as ours, our greater need notwithstanding. The reason is the fact that even though UMass/Amherst is a research University, and our Judaic Studies faculty are active researchers in their respective fields, some with an international reputation, our offerings are deliberately keyed to the undergraduate; we do not intend to compete with the existing graduate programs in Judaic Studies. This leads to another reason for the long delay in starting a development funding drive: Donors would be prepared to contribute funds to special needs such as chairs in Judaic Studies, or major library acquisitions, or lectureships; they are not prepared to have

their endowments used for what the public university is supposed to provide, namely adequate staffing and library facilities, much less for anything that would fall under “operating expenses.” In short, the State’s grudging support of the development of Judaic Studies in the past discourages any readiness on the part of prospective donors to respond to a fund drive, and the community’s disinterest in funding is taken in turn by the State to be disinterest in development.

The secure status of Judaic Studies vouchsafed by being elevated to department level was shaken in the mid-1990’s, when the upper administration proceeded to economize by disbanding what it took to be superfluous and vulnerable small units such as Judaic Studies. Though busy with my writing in my retirement, I decided in this crisis to write still another memo explaining the nature of Judaic Studies as a valid and vital academic field, and what was at stake in the ill-considered plan once again to eliminate it. The memo was addressed to the two main administrators on campus (one of them serving on an acting basis), with copies to the uppermost administration, the relevant members of State agencies and legislators, and to the -- for the most part -- retired original members of the Judaic Studies Committee. Although not intended by me, my memo found its way to the Press. Jay Berkovitz conducted a parallel “campaign” in Boston, and Shmuel Bolozky and Julius Lester coordinated the efforts in Amherst. In the end, the danger was averted, and in time James Young, an international authority on the aesthetics of Holocaust memorials, was appointed departmental chairman.

Two events marked the time when we approached the thirtieth anniversary of Judaic Studies. First, James succeeded in having the two regular faculty positions we lost during the 1980’s be reassigned to the program, as well as another one. Secondly, to observe the anniversary, we decided to collect a volume of contributions from persons associated with the program in those thirty years, namely former and present faculty, part-time or temporary, core and adjunct, as well as former students who may have gone into Judaic Studies as an academic profession. The purpose of this commemorative volume is to showcase the diversity and caliber of research on the part of those associated with us, research and publication on par with any produced in the field.

With the evident diversification of our core faculty and the evidence of our professional standing, nothing stands in the way of initiating the kind of major fund drive that has long since benefited the academic standing of programs in Judaic Studies at other State universities, even where the interest in and demand for Judaic Studies fall well below that at UMass/Amherst, as measured by enrolment.

The present collection of essays mirrors the diversity of research areas that forms the fabric that is the cross-disciplinary nature of Judaic Studies. The editors of the volume have ordered that diversity by arranging the contributions in topical sections, for which Murray Schwartz and Shmuel Bolozky kindly provided consolidating introductions. On behalf of

the group of editors I thank the contributors for the time and care they took to prepare their essays.

Not one among the group of editors gave as unstintingly of his time as Shmuel Bolozky, especially, though not only, in corresponding with and patiently collating the contributions of more than two dozen authors, standardizing formats and otherwise providing the technical aspects of producing this volume. On behalf of his fellow editors I extend the special thanks that are due to Shmuel.

I conclude with a personal word. The extraordinary effort that it took to establish and to maintain Judaic Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst would not have succeeded without the teamwork of the colleagues from a dozen departments who formed the Judaic Studies Committee. True, for most of those early fifteen years they chose me to be their chairman. But as such I was merely the point man for the devoted individual and collective effort without which the project would not have gotten off the ground much less succeeded. I am grateful for the honor of having been part of that effort. Reflecting on the fact that what we worked so hard to establish has passed the thirty year mark, and is a vibrant actuality we can humbly be gratified that we had the opportunity to bring it about.

I only regret that my friend and colleague Jules Piccus did not live to see this day.

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