

JEWISH STUDIES AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Nancy Sinkoff

Since its founding in 2000, the Department of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University has required its majors to take twelve courses: a two-semester survey in Jewish history; a majors seminar; one year of either Hebrew or Yiddish; and seven additional courses. The first three of these items have remained constant during the last six years; the fourth of these was recently reconstituted (see below).

The rationale behind requiring students to take the surveys “Jewish Society and Culture 1: The Ancient and Medieval Experience” and “Jewish Society and Culture 2: The Early Modern and Modern Experience” is that all of the disciplines in our interdisciplinary department (literature, folklore, rabbinics, Bible, political science, women and gender studies, sociology, etc.) assume a modern historical consciousness. Without a foundation in the historical development and change implicit in the Jewish past, students cannot begin to delve into the complexities of the study of the Jews.

The survey is periodized to break at 1500, the year denoting the end of professing Jewish communal life in Western Europe. Context is the watchword of the survey. In the first semester this means great attention to the ancient Near East, Hellenistic antiquity, Sassanian Persia, and the diverse environments of the medieval Muslim and Christian

spheres. The second semester begins in the sixteenth century with the effects of the *converso* migration to Europe, moves on to discuss Ashkenazic Jewish culture in early modern Poland-Lithuania, and continues with what is standard fare in courses on modern Jewish history (Enlightenment, Emancipation, religious change, modern Jewish politics, nationalism, and modern anti-Semitism). Unusually, perhaps, our survey concludes with Jewish life in interwar Europe. We quite consciously chose the interwar period as the survey’s endpoint because experience has shown that most of our students take separate

IDEALLY, THROUGH A JEWISH STUDIES MAJOR AT RUTGERS, STUDENTS WILL GAIN THE SKILLS THAT A LIBERAL EDUCATION SEEKS TO IMPART WHILE BEING EXPOSED TO THE VAST AND DIVERSE TEXTS, TRADITIONS, AND EXPERIENCES THAT HAVE CHARACTERIZED JEWISH CIVILIZATION.

courses on the Holocaust and on Israeli culture and society. Our required survey strives to challenge students’ teleological assumptions about the linearity of the Jewish past.

This raises another, but related issue: the nature of our student body. Situated in the Northeast, a large number of our students come to Rutgers with Jewish day school backgrounds. Many of them are drawn to Jewish studies because it is familiar cultural territory. What they encounter in our courses, however, are unexpected intellectual approaches. The faculty strives to introduce them to the diversity and complexity of the field and to situate the study of the Jews in the context of the humanities and social sciences. We do this by emphasizing

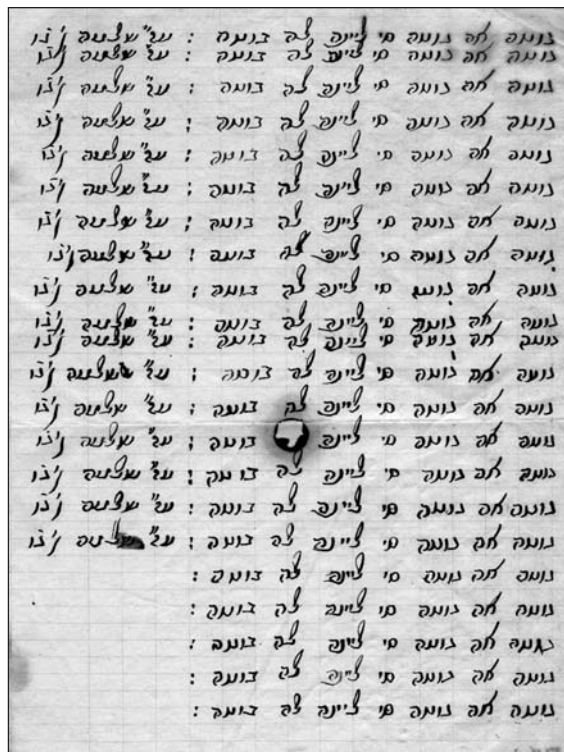
the analysis of primary sources and research methods, so that while exposing students to the content of Jewish studies we are simultaneously making them better readers, writers, and thinkers.

The majors seminar is designed to give juniors in Jewish studies the requisite skills (bibliographic, analytic, research, and writing) to pursue independent research in their senior year. Professors determine the seminar’s broad topics, which have included “Jewish Memory,” “Jewish Places, Jewish Spaces,” and “The Bible and Modernity.” Students are required to participate actively in class through individual oral and written presentations and to pursue independent research resulting in a well-argued seminar paper. Writing at all stages—from proposal to final paper—is a key element of the majors seminar. Our more talented and motivated students take the skills acquired in the majors seminar and complete year-long honors theses in their senior year.

We recognize that our one-year language requirement is not ideal, but the culture at Rutgers does not currently support foreign language acquisition to the extent that we would like (however, the university is presently engaged in an effort to transform undergraduate education, with foreign language as one of the issues under discussion). We would much prefer that our students take two years of either Hebrew or Yiddish, but logistical problems prevent us from offering the latter language beyond the elementary year. On the other hand, most of our majors take more than one year of Hebrew. Moreover, many students place out of elementary Hebrew or study at *ulpanim* in Israel and fulfill their requirement

with upper-level courses.

As noted at the outset, we recently changed the requirements for the seven elective courses. In the past, students took at least four courses in one of five areas of concentration, and at least two courses outside the area of concentration. The areas of concentration were: Jewish History and Society; Jewish Literature; Jewish Culture; Religion and Thought; and Israel Studies. Currently, the focus of the additional courses has shifted from a content- to a discipline-orientation. We now require two courses in literature (one in modern literature and one in classical texts, in either the original or in translation) and one course in the social sciences. We reconstituted the elective requirements to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of the field of Jewish studies and to help students understand the importance of close textual study,



A student's handwriting exercise in Haketia (North Moroccan Ladino) written in Sephardi script. Each line reads, "Gota a gota se lena la bota [Drop by drop, the wineskin fills up]." The exercise is signed by Shelomo Ben Jo. From Tangier or Tetuan, late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Courtesy of Norman Stillman.

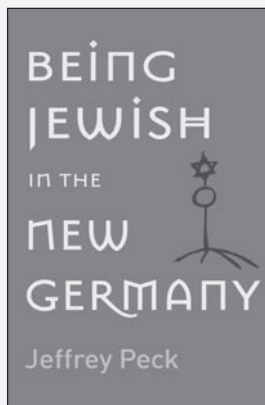
whether classical or modern. The remaining four courses may be of the student's choosing. Our location

in the Northeast also offers Jewish studies majors and minors the possibility of taking internships at local museums and communal organizations to fulfill an elective, provided they produce a semester-length research paper related to their work.

Ideally, through a Jewish studies major at Rutgers, students will gain the skills that a liberal education seeks to impart while being exposed to the vast and diverse texts, traditions, and experiences that have characterized Jewish civilization. We hope that by majoring in Jewish studies they will be better humanists and more informed citizens. As in all university departments, we struggle to balance our intellectual commitments with student interests.

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