

What can the Jewish community expect from flourishing Jewish Studies programs? How will these programs influence the quality of Jewish intellectual life beyond the university world, and how will they defend Jewish interests within it? Does a fundamental conflict exist between the demand for critical scrutiny — the heart of academic inquiry — and a Jewish communal agenda that desires academics to promote Jewish identity?

Jews and the Academy: A Complicated Romance

Riv-Ellen Prell

The long-time romance between American Jews and higher education took an interesting turn in the 1960s. For the most part, prior to that period higher education was overwhelmingly the secular suitor to children and then grandchildren of immigrants. Their romance was most often a medium of “liberation” from the “parochialism” of Jewish life. It widened the view of children of one or another sort of ghetto who found, at least in the liberal arts, a larger world of ideas about Western culture. But most often this education rendered Jewish experience, knowledge, and culture invisible and trivial at best, inferior at worst.

Jews were educated within specific social and historical contexts. The young Jewish adults who, for example, attended New York’s City Colleges during the Depression found a cultural and intellectual environment that shaped a worldview that was fully Jewish and secular. Because of the prominence of Jews in the community of learners, secular education hardly shook their confidence about their own centrality to intellectual life. Nevertheless, their innovative and brilliant interpretations of Western literature and culture hardly challenged

Anglo-European hegemony.

The presence of Jewish learning in American universities dates to the 19th century and was located in semitics and religion departments, often taught by non-Jewish faculty. However, the 1960s marked the beginning of the inclusion of Jewish learning in a variety of academic fields and within centers and departments of Jewish Studies in secular universities throughout the United States. This transformation marked a real shift in the terms of the relationship between Jews and higher education. Jews were no longer outside of a history and culture worthy of study.

Students now pursue Jewish Studies within the liberal arts and

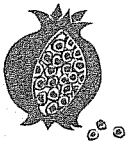
seek them out as part of personal and intellectual journeys. The burgeoning fields of Jewish history, Hebrew Bible, rabbinics, comparative Jewish literatures, social scientific studies, and more are testimony to the vitality of a Jewish cultural and intellectual life in the United States. Even the gloomiest critics of American Jewish life cannot avoid acknowledging this accomplishment of postwar American Jewry.

These programs were rarely created or funded by the initiatives of universities. More often than

Some of these essays reflect debates between scholars; some are challenges for further conversations.

INSIDE

Riv-Ellen Prell: Jews and the Academy	1	Steven M. Cohen: Jewish Social Research	10
Mitchell Hart: What Would Be Lost?	2	Davidman and Tenenbaum: Feminist Scholarship	11
Jonathan Schorsch: A Response to Mitchell Hart	3	Marc Brettler: Biblical Scholarship	12
Mitchell Hart: A Reply to Jonathan Schorsch	5	Carol Levithan: Applying Jewish Studies	13
Derek J. Penslar: Teaching Israeli History	6	David Kraemer: <i>NiSh'ma</i>	15
Steven J. Zipperstein: Jewish Studies at the Edge	8	Edward Feld: Book Review	16
Chaim Seidler-Feller: Between Assimilation and Identification (from the Sh'ma archives) appearing on www.shma.com			



not, they have grown because of important partnerships between generous philanthropists from various Jewish communities in the United States, Jewish Studies scholars, and often students. Universities eagerly embraced Jewish donors who traditionally funded schools of business, medicine, and law, and who were now willing to give their money to departments and centers of Jewish Studies.

Sh'ma invited a number of scholars to reflect on the possibilities and perils inherent in this relatively recent romance between not only students and a curriculum but also scholars and communities beyond the walls of the academy. Has this renaissance in any way changed our understanding of the Jewish experience?

Boundaries emerged, not surprisingly, as a central theme of these essays. Like the challenges that faced our 19th-century predecessors who began the "scholarly" study of Judaism in Germany, we raise issues about how we have negotiated the complex relationships involved in this enterprise.

Should Jewish scholars who define themselves within Jewish Studies have a different relationship to their subject matter or students than Jewish scholars of India, or Africa? Have we successfully built bridges between rabbis, educators, and other Jewish professionals and secular Jewish Studies scholars of the past three decades? Some of these essays reflect debates between scholars; some are challenges for further conversations; and some are simply reflections on the ways that scholars approach subjects of immense importance to Jews, such as Bible and Israel.

Jewish Studies would not exist today without a partnership between Jews within and outside of the university. How to think about that relationship, perhaps a new if hardly untroubled sort of romance, is a conversation we hope to encourage with this issue.

Riv-Ellen Prell, a Sh'ma Contributing Editor, is Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her most recent book is Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation.

What Would Be Lost?

Mitchell Hart

In 1991–92 I lived and studied in Jerusalem, doing research for my doctoral dissertation at the numerous libraries and archives in the city. I arrived with my wife, who is also a professional historian. We were both funded in part by a fellowship sponsored by the Friends of the Hebrew University. It was a rather generous fellowship, and all it required was a commitment to attend biweekly gatherings at the home of a distinguished Jewish philosopher, a professor at the Hebrew University.

So a group of twelve graduate students from Jewish Studies programs in the United States assembled in his living room, presented our on-going research, and discussed and debated points of interest. At one of these meetings, a member presented a paper about the recently released study on American Jewish population numbers and the question of continuity and survival. The issues are quite familiar to anyone acquainted with the literature on American Jewry: birth rates, intermarriage, federation studies on waning Jewish identity. During the discussion, both my wife

and I asked the same question: Why should the Jews in the United States survive? If at some point in the future American Jewry as an identifiable group ceased to exist, what would be lost?

We believed we were speaking as dispassionate scholars, in an academic environment in which all questions were at least worth asking, in which open inquiry was the supreme value. It was clear from the responses, however, that we were pretty much alone in this belief. The philosopher looked at us as if we were monsters, as if we had not merely asked about but insisted on a point so horrific that, if he could, he would physically eject us from his home, so that we could not further infect all that rested within it. The students started yelling at us, unable to believe that Jewish Studies scholars-in-the-making could entertain such notions, let alone verbalize them (in the holy city of Jerusalem, no less).

We did not linger for long in the philosopher's home, and I don't remember the subsequent visits, though I'm sure we returned to fulfill our ob-