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Jewish Scholarship In America

Daniel Jeremy Silver

The American university inherited from its European parent a classic curriculum which defined civilization as that culture which was European and Christian. Other cultures were studied not for their intrinsic merit, but for tangential reasons - to provide missionaries and diplomats with language or social skills needed for work in the field or to provide scholars with linguistic and historical background for their studies. Old Testament studies and Hebrew were pursued for their value in New Testament interpretation and for the light they cast on early church history. Philo and Maimonides were useful to flesh out studies in medieval religious philosophy; but there was no interest in the Talmud or The Guide To The Perplexed as literary and religious classics in their own right. The history of modern Europe was taught without reference to the presence of Jewish communities of size and cultural consequence.

Over the centuries the institutions concerned with Christian letters developed naturally from cathedral school to a university based on a classic curriculum in Western civilization; from Canterbury to Cambridge. Jewish learning entered the modern world in the nineteenth century when Jews entered the larger world with the political emancipation. By this time the academy was fully formed around a series of parochial assumptions which effectively blinded its scholars to the value of the Jewish literary deposit and to the pursuit of Jewish learning for its own sake.

As a Christian place, the European university not only operated with a narrow definition of civilization but with a social posture dependent on conventional anti-semitism. Quotas on enrollment and faculty appointment were the rule, if matriculation was even allowed. The American university system is the child of

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Europe's and in the beginning assumed the form of its parent. Nineteenth century

Harvard and Yale had Jewish quotas. Jews were not made welcome, but America's

Jews were unwilling to give the university a wide berth. A university degree was perceived as the ticket of admission to the larger community and its beckoning opportunity.

Respect for the scholar, an almost pathetic eagerness to be American and a hard-headed judgement that control of some professional skill was the way to mine the American lode led great numbers of young Jews to enroll. They were so eager for what they conceived as the main chance that they asked no questions about the tref in the curriculum and hopeful parents silenced their fears about assimilation and apostasy. In this respect, Jews differed significantly from Roman Catholic immigrants who, generally, were willing to support the plans of their bishops to establish colleges where their children could be educated in a spiritually supportive atmosphere, even though remaining among their own might deny them some useful contacts.

In their eagerness to take the degree bright young Jews abandoned the myths and the pieties which for centuries had supported the rabbinic curriculum and accepted a set of new pieties: the university as a society of reasonable men pursuing their studies without bias of any kind. The universities spoke boldly of scholarly independence and, in fact, in the late nineteenth century the elite universities began to cut their official ties with denominational sponsors. The university saw itself as a sanctuary of reason and there were many who accepted the "scientific" assumption that religious interests were outdated and unworthy in an age of reason. Caught up in the great hopes of the age few Jews paused to consider the reality of the Protestant chapel whose spire rose above the campus and whose services were attended by

'the president and the Board of Trustees or to earluate the limitations of the curriculum.

For many bright young Jews the late nineteenth century was not only an age of political and social emancipation, but an age of intoxicating cultural emancipation. The university represented the community of reason, what the world would soon be. College was the new Jerusalem from which a new Torah of universalist humanist teachings would shine forth and enlighten the world. Once his degree was in hand, the Jewish undergraduate went back to the rough-and-tumble world where the executive suite and the better suburbs were closed to him; but those who remained in this new Jerusalem became devoted citizens, academicians of Jewish descent who consciously and deliberately put as much distance as they could between themselves and the "unenlightened" and "parochial" community of their fathers.

Most of the Jews who poured into America's universities in the early decades of the century sought to become technically or professionally competent and did not ask too many questions about the liberal arts curriculum. It was enough that the course they took prepared them to dig in the American mother lode. Jews came, but Jewish learning did not follow. Jewish learning was outside looking in and had no alternative but to depend on those professional institutions which were organized by the Jewish community to train rabbis who could provide the synagogues with an inspiring pulpit, an effective religious school and liturgical guidance, as well as advice in the reformulation of Jewish practice in line with the ever changing realities of the American situation.

The first seminaries were established in the last quarter of the nineteenth century: Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati-1875); Jewish Theological Seminary of

America (New York-1886); Jewish Institute of Religion (New York City-1922, merged with the Hebrew Union College-1954). Those who founded these institutions took as their models the rabbinical colleges which had been established in the previous generation by the recently emancipated communities of central Europe, particularly the Jewish Theological Seminary (Breslau-1854) and the Hochschule Fur Die Wissenschaft des Judenthums (Berlin-1892), schools whose curriculum and approach were radically different from that of a traditional <u>yeshivah</u>. Instruction was in German, not in Yiddish. The library included general historical and philosophic works and not simply <u>sefarim</u>. Talmud was displaced as the curriculum in favor of a number of departments permitting specialization in Bible, Semitic languages, Hellenistic Studies, Rabbinics, Jewish History, Theology, Comparative Religions. . .

These schools approached Jewish learning in what was for Jewish learning a new way, the so-called Science of Judaism, die Wissenschaft des Judenthums. At base Wissenschaft was no more than Jewish scholarship carried out on the assumption that the critical approach developed for philological and literary investigations in the national universities was equally applicable to the Jewish literary deposit. Where the traditional student of Torah had sought God in his texts, the Wissenschaft scholar sought the original meaning of the text, its literary history, its place in the history of ideas etc. The Science of Judaism turned the Jewish scholar into a co-worker with Herr Professor even though they did not work as faculty colleagues; and it brought into question the key traditional piety that Judaism had been a consistent, single and unitary instruction and duty since Moses had received the written and oral Torah on Mt. Sinai.

The new breed of Jewish scholar, early twentieth century model, was one of a small band of men, women had not found their place in the world of Jewish letters, who controlled the traditional sources and knew something about the analytic methods favored in his particular specialty. Generally, he had earned a traditional <u>semichah</u> (ordination); and subsequently had qualified himself in linguistics, semitics, philosophy or folklore at a major university. The rabbi had been the learned man. A rabbi now was simply a rabbi; the rabbi with a PhD was on his way to being a recognized scholar. The PhD certified that his scholarship was modern and, in approach, distinct from the Talmudic dialectic.

The rabbinical colleges of America built their faculties around such men.

Their erudition and interests led the seminaries to develop extensive library collections and to publish scholarly monographs and their intellectual presence inspired an occasional student to start on the road of scholarship; but there were problems.

The Wissenschaft scholar was committed to a critical approach which inevitably questioned denominational pieties. In the event the seminaries proved remarkably open-minded and tolerant, but it was clear that cool academic research was not their major focus. They had been organized to produce synagogue professionals, not research scholars. The rabbi received a certificate which certified his capacity to serve. Those who wanted to teach at the seminary generally had to leave and take advanced academic courses elsewhere. For the first time since Rabbinic Judaism had become narrative, the title rabbi was no longer synonymous with the highest degree of scholarly attainment.

During these years the Wissenschaft spirit was instrumental in the founding of one unique institution, the Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Studies (1909-Philadelphia). This graduate academy was the result of the happy existence of a large and unspecific bequest for Jewish learning and the presence in America of a number of first-rate Science of Judaism scholars (Cyrus Adler, Max Margolis, Henry Malter) who were unhappy with seminary employment and eager for a freer, less vocationally oriented, setting. Dropsie's student body was drawn largely from maskilim, immigrant and first generation Hebraists, who loved Jewish literature, THADITICKAL and from rabbis who still held sacred the commitment of the rabbinate to scholarship and who wanted to pursue advanced textual studies. In 1910 Dropsie undertook to publish what had been a distinguished English scholarly journal, The Jewish Quarterly Review. The JQR, whose long-time editors, Alexander Newman and Solomon Zeitlin, were scholars of eminence, regularly published articles in Bible, Hebrew and cognate studies, apocraphal literature, rabbinics, linguistics, Jewish philosophy and Jewish history. Until this generation what the JQR published defined in effect the parameters of Jewish studies.

With their extensive libraries and sizeable faculty, HUC-JIR and JTS came to accept themselves as the centers of Jewish scholarship. In time both joined Drops sie in developing PhD programs, but research and original scholarship were never the focus of their pregram. Their funding constituencies were more concerned with their effectiveness as service institutions than as research centers. Soon, beside students preparing for the rabbinate, their halls were filled with school administrators and religious school teachers mastering classroom skills; cantors and music directors learning liturgy and choir management; laymen pursuing adult education interests

and, latterly, social workers preparing themselves for Jewish institutional settings. Much was accomplished, but the seminaries faced not only a basic question of purpose, but a number of practical problems. By tradition, women were excluded from seminary classrooms. Seminary faculties were sometimes forced to toe a sectarian line. Purely academic standards were sometimes lowered, even sacrificed, so that a rapidly expanding community would be provided with the needed number of congregational rabbis. A seminary graduate was not yet a full-fledged scholar, often not even a half-fledged one; a fact underscored throughout the early decades of the century by the continuing enrollment of future seminary faculty in European graduate schools (Julian Morganstern, Nelson Glueck, Jacob R. Marcus).

The wave of Eastern European immigrants to America (1880-1924) inevitably catalysed the replication here of a number of yeshivot of the Eastern European type. Yiddish was the language of instruction. The curriculum was limited to Talmud and Musar. Some yeshivot remained in this mold, but within a decade of its establishment, Yeshivat Rabbenu Yitzchak Elchahan (1897-New York City) granted its students permission to take courses at local universities and to have some of their classes in English. Under the leadership of a Dropsie graduate, Bernard Revel, this yeshivah transformed itself into the Rabbi Isaac Elchahan Theological Seminary "to prepare students for the Hebrew faith for the Hebrew ministry." RIETS went on to become a many-sided university, Yeshiva University (New York-1928), which offered a full range of undergraduate, graduate and professional studies within a traditional environment.

In Europe, <u>yeshivah</u> education involved the training of male adolescents.

Training was stiff, focused and unremitting, so that by the age of 17 or 18 the best minds were qualified as masters of the tradition. American law required that all preparatory students be trained in science, civics and English and there was less time

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for Talmud and much to master besides Talmud. By and large, American <u>yeshivot</u>
have remained places for the education of high school age youth and their graduates
are looked on more as narrow-gauged Talmudists than masters of Jewish Studies,
a field which is now both much broader and committed to other analytic approaches.

<u>Yeshivah</u> graduates who wish to qualify as scholars go on to graduate studies at some university.

In the nineteenth century the American university system, reflecting
America's democratic ethos, broke loose from the European model of a single track
elitist curriculum and began to spawn a variety of institutions, all called colleges,
each with its special curricula and clientele. Jewish Studies followed this lead. The
Jewish Studies equivalent of the Community College is a training center for religious
school teachers become a College of Jewish Studies. Gratz College (1897-Philadelphia)
was the first such community college. Similar schools opened shortly in other major
cities. Though such schools bear the title "college" and have sought accreditation and
taken inordinate delight in academic gowns and degrees, they are not research institutions and their teaching is at an undergraduate level.

There were fine scholars in America before the second World War. Most were located in the seminaries, some were on the faculty of Dropsie College, some were in the pulpit (Solomon Freehof, Abba Hillel Silver, Leo Jung, Milton Steinberg, Robert Gordis). A rarer bird was the scholar who found his way in to a university faculty (Harry A. Wolfson, Salo Baron). In 1920 an American Academy for Jewish Research was established with an invited membership. The AAJR published an annual, Proceedings, which was broadly distributed, but its membership was limited

to a baker's dozen. In 1935 its thirteen fellows included only five who had completed their advanced studies in the United States (Israel Davidson, Louis Finkelstein, Isaac Husik, Ralph Marcus, Harry A. Wolfson), an indication that America still did not provide the necessary research and graduate training institutions to be self-supporting. The field was small. The JQR's subscription list numbered less than one thousand. Dropsie and the seminary faculties continued to depend upon European immigrants (Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, Leo Baeck, Abraham J. Heschel).

The first Jews to teach Bible or Hebrew in American colleges had done so in what was, in effect, a seminary setting and some were apostates (e.g., Monis).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a few departments of religion and oriental language evidenced interest in Jewish faculty; preferably those trained in the renowned German academic tradition, particularly men who could teach Biblical criticism without being cowed by pressures from denominational councils and who could broaden New Testament studies with rabbinic parallels. Nordheimer, Gottheil and Jastrow were acceptable colleagues because they had been trained in Wissenschaft norms; trained, that is, to teach Judaism with critical dispassion. As members of a university faculty, their subject might be particular, but their perspective would be universal.

During the first half of this century Jewish Studies, that is, conscious and critical interest in Jews, Jewish institution, and the Jewish tradition as a subject area, developed slowly as established faculties in the "better" universities became dissatisfied with the traditional boundaries of the received curriculum. Hellenistic

Judaism and the Pharisees clearly had had an impact on the emerging Christian tradition; the Harvard of George Foote Moore needed a Harry Wolfson. Jews had played a significant economic role in medieval Europe and the Columbia History Department needed a Salo Baron. It did not hurt that Nathan Littauer and Nathan Miller were able to provide the wherewithal; but the impetus for the study of Jews and Judaism came from faculties, not from the development office, a fact of no small consequence, as the funding of Jewish Studies has required, and continues to require, a large and continuing outlay of university cash for men and books.

America's emergence as a world power after the second World War catalyzed an intellectual revolution on the American campus. The insularity of the earlier curriculum was no longer seriously defended. A wide range of area studies developed to complement the Western Civilization praxis. Religion departments began to include courses in Catholic, Buddist and Jewish Thought as well as the standard New Testament and Church History offerings. The monopoly of senior positions in Bible, long maintained by Protestant scholars, was broken. Semitic language departments began to list conversational Hebrew as well as Biblical Grammar. The social sciences offered courses in the History of the Jews as well as the History of Southeast Asia.

Near Eastern studies began to include seminars on Zionism and on the social and political institutions of Israel.

"Jewish Studies" had come into being; but it was rarely, and never easily, defined. To some it meant the classic disciplines of Tanakh, Hellenistic Literature and Rabbinics, Hebrew and Theology. Others were interested in Yiddish literature, kahal structures, Ladino, the demography of the modern community etc. The term

was as broad as the historic Jewish experience, and definition was pleasantly complicated as a number of scholars in various disciplines (by this time Jews provided a significant proportion of the faculty of America's universities) found that they were moved by emotions that they only partially acknowledged, particularly deriving from the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, and began to explore the Jewish component in their studies of Persian literature or the Gregorian chant or Renaissance art.

The post-war generation of Jewish undergraduates began to ask for Jewish learning as part of their general education. They no longer looked to college to provide them with a passport into American opportunity; they belonged. What they wanted was "an education," and that meant exploring themselves and their roots as well as their world. Other students had more practical motivations (preparation in Hebrew for a junior year program in Israel, content preparation for a social work career in a Jewish institutional setting). Still others were caught up in the ethnicity craze or wanted a Jewish parallel to black studies. The combined surge of faculty and student interest resulted in two remarkable decades of growth during which Jewish learning became firmly established in America's universities (1955-1975).

Before World War II, less than a dozen scholars taught Judaica on a fulltime basis in American universities, perhaps an equal number of Jews taught Hebrew.
By 1975, 300 colleges were offering one or more undergraduate courses in Jewish
Studies: nearly 250 faculty had appointments in the field, and perhaps another 400
persons taught on a part-time basis. Some estimates suggest that as many as 50,000
undergraduates took courses in Jewish Studies during the 1973-4 academic year. That
same year 125 applications for pre-doctoral grants from candidates for the PhD in

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an area of Jewish Studies were received by the National Foundation For Jewish Culture.

The colleges which now offer courses in Jewish Studies began to do so for varying reasons and continue to do so with varying emphases. Sometimes a religion department wanted to be ecumenical. Particularly after the Six Day War, some schools found it prudent to respond to student pressure for a Hebrew House or for a course on the Holocaust. In many cases there was no clear academic rationale for the offerings. It was the case of an idea whose time had come and of a program that was "up for grabs" by anyone interested in picking up the ball. In at least one instance a Jewish Studies program emerged out of a Jew in the English Department whose interest was radical literature, a Jew in anthropology whose interest was in the shtetl, and a Jew in history who was a specialist in labor organizations.

Jewish Studies programs have grown from above and below, out of faculty interest in Jewish data and undergraduate interest in Jewish values. Given this wide diversity of interest and the large number of specializations possible, after all, Jewish Studies encompasses nearly four millenia and all the continents, it is no wonder that vice presidents for academic affairs have had a difficult time deciding where a Chair of Jewish Studies should be placed and what capacities the incumbent should possess. Single scholars are usually placed in a Semitic language department, in Near Eastern studies or in Religion, with the promise that a cross-departmental offering would be developed.

The breadth of the field suggests that any Jewish Studies department which wants to offer graduate courses must have a sizeable faculty: someone must know the Bible and related literature, another Rabbinics, another contemporary Jewish

thought, still another the sociological and demographic components of modern Jewish life; and, since there is no scholarship without language competence, courses in Hebrew and Yiddish and perhaps Aramaic should be available in addition to all the languages in which Jews have written and in which scholars have written about Jews. A good case can be made that no one person can be expected to be competent within such obviously broad categories. Medieval Jewish philosophy is quite a different area from midrash or the legal codes. Can a single historian master a history which reaches from the Bronze Age in West Asia to the Space Age in America? No single scholar can teach all of the courses required for an undergraduate major, much less for a graduate degree. Add to the cost of faculty the cost of maintaining extensive library holdings and it is clear why a certain amount of makeshift exists even at facilities like the Phillip W. Lown Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies at Brandeis University where a considerable Jewish Studies faculty is in place. If a school can hire only a single person, he will have to spend much of his time teaching basic surveys of Judaica and finding people who can be borrowed from elsewhere on the faculty - sociologists who can contribute a course on the shtetl or the kibbut, classicists or philosophers who can offer a course in Alexandrian Jewish literature or medieval Jewish philosophy; or from the community rabbis and Hebraists from local Colleges of Jewish Studies who can be responsible for some of the basic courses. The use of local rabbis and teachers will continue to be a debated issue; some have denominational biases, some are truly not scholars, and academic types are not immune to the usual disdain of the professional for the amateur, however competent.

The situation is dramatically different at a few universities where the faculty is deeper, the academic tradition older, and where Jewish Studies has emerged

less in response to undergraduate soul-searching than out of the felt needs of the scholarly enterprise. These schools have supportive courses in language, history, religion, the classics, Islamic studies and the Middle East, which make it possible for well-conceived programs of undergraduate concentration and graduate studies to develop. In such schools, where the faculty often shares research interest in a broad range of topics - from the phenomenology of religion to patterns of cultural interaction - from the nature of religious leadership to the forms of mystical experience - a vigorous and significant scholarly exchange has developed.

American Jewish scholarship is no longer dependent on a brain drain from abroad. Jewish Studies involves a number of disciplines and students follow many paths and go to many places to gain competence. Graduate training in the core disciplines of Jewish Studies is available at Brandeis, Harvard, Brown, Columbia and Yeshivah as well as the seminaries. Centers exist for research and training in specific areas. Yiddish language and literature is the focus of a joint program of The Max Weinreich Center of the Yivo Institute of Jewish Research and Columbia University's Department of Linguistics. There are special reference libraries such as that of the American Jewish Historical Society at Waltham and the Leo Baeck Institute of New York City (German culture in Europe and here).

A corporation of men and women who share a common interest in Jewish learning, each with a specialty within the larger field, has come into being. Ten years ago the dozen scholars who participated in the first meeting of the Academic Advisory Council of the National Foundation For Jewish Culture were strangers to each other. The sociologists around the table had never met the historians and the men who taught in the seminaries did not know each other or, except by reputation, those who taught in a secular setting. Over the past decade an intellectual community

has emerged. The Association For Jewish Studies was founded in 1968 to provide a forum for professional interests and a focus for the Jewish Studies enterprise. The AJS has published several books and plans an AJS Review. Slowly, but perceptibly, a sense of order and articulated purpose has emerged and standards are being set. I suspect that for some time Jewish Studies will be defined as those studies which the members of the Association pursue.

The current membership of the AJS is comprised largely of post-war graduates of American and Canadian universities with a small sprinkling of graduates of the Hebrew University and Bar Ilan. Its 1975 conference included papers in six areas: American Jewish History, Medieval Biblical Exegesis, Bible, Emancipation and Enlightenment, Renaissance Jewish History, Medieval Hebrew Poetry, Midrash and Jewish Historiography and Historical Consciousness. The public interest issues of contemporary Jewish life were conspicuously absent, suggesting that although a number of significant social and political science scholars are AJS members, the Jewish Studies field has not fully bridged the distance which separates the liberal arts from the social sciences in most academic settings.

Jewish Studies is no longer carried on in isolation. Methodologies and concept structures common in the university will necessarily be appropriated for, and by, Jewish Studies. The special American interest in sociology and social analysis already has provided a set of methodological and analytic tools which the Sklares ar Elazars have applied with skill in their studies of the contemporary Jewish common ity and its institutions.

ost researchers now recognize the advantage of integrating Jewish data into their regoing research. S. D. Goitein's use of Genizah material to provide further understanding of the economics and the demography of the Mediterranean

Ribliagranh

Basin during the Middle Ages is a magnificent case in point. In return, Jewish scholars have available to them all the research and conceptual tools developed in this century.

There is no doubt that this two-way process is well advanced, nor that a practical problem has emerged which is yet to be faced, much less surmounted. The age of the Renaissance men is over. Each discipline, indeed, each sub-discipline, has its own language, set of conceptual tools and methodologies and no scholar can be expert in many. Yet, in most colleges, the Jewish Studies person will have to be something of a generalist. The Jewish experience is so long and its geography so scattered that even a competent survey course should require five or six professors; yet, usually, only one is available. The Jewish Studies field wrestles here with a problem not uncommon in the academic enterprise. Should the field organize itself for the pursuit of knowledge and to permit research by scholars, or ot provide insight and sensitivity to undergraduates? The answer is, of course, both/and; but it is not yet clear how the Jewish Studies field will adjust to this two-sided need.

Seminary faculties have been encouraged by their colleagues in the universities to use the new methodologies. The old anhistorical way is still the only way in some traditional schools, but no work of competence can long be denied if only because the traditionalists must refute "heretical ideas." There is already a good deal of movement between seminary and secular faculties and common membership in the AJS will certainly benefit studies in both types of institutions.

The field of Jewish Studies has made, and continues to make, significant contributions to the critical understanding of the Jewish experience, but it is not Jewish learning in the traditional value-laden talmud torah sense. Jewish Studies refines a perception of Torah which binds the dimension of time and the study of manking into the received tradition. Its results present a stimulating challenge

to the faith and the faithful, and it is the responsibility of the seminary and the rabbinate to blend the new insights with the old. Whether such a Torah can inspire and bind men to it remains an open question, one which, in the final analysis, the field of Jewish Studies is not compelled to answer.



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The following partial list of major figures on the early faculties of HUC and JTS indicates the European university where they received their advanced degree: Moses Buttenweiser (Heidelberg); Gotthard Deutsch (Breslau); Israel Friedlander (Strassbourg); Louis Ginzberg (Heidelberg); Kaufman Kohler (Erlangen); Jacob Lauterbach (Gottingen); Henry Malter (Heidelberg); Jacob Mann (Jew's College); Alexander Marx (Konigsberg); David Neumark (Berlin); Solomon Schechter (Cambridge).

The HUC-JIR complex now includes two schools of education, a School of Sacred Music, the Edgar Magnin School of Graduate Studies, the Jacob Loucheim School of Judaic Studies and the California School of Jewish Communal Service. JTS administers a Seminary College of Jewish Studies, Teacher Institute; The Cantors Institute, Seminary College of Jewish Music; An Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, the Abbell Institute in Rabbinics, the Melton Research Center (Education), the University of Judaism, and the Jewish Museum.

Its schools include Yeshiva College for Men, Stern College for Women, The Bernard
Revel Graduate School for Jewish and Semitic Studies, The Ferkauf Graduate School of
Humanities and Social Sciences, The Belfer Graduate School of Science, The Wurzweiler
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