

Featured Faculty

Before coming to Cleveland I held research positions and taught at a number of universities including [Boston University](#), [Harvard University](#) and the [University of Michigan](#). I arrived here to serve as Director of the Jewish Studies division of the [Laura and Alvin Siegal Lifelong Learning Program](#), where I was able to teach, and organize a lively host of programs for the greater Cleveland Jewish community.

I am now thrilled to be joining [CWRU](#) as Visiting Assistant Professor in the [Department of Religious Studies](#), and as the [Abba Hillel Silver Chair in Judaic Studies](#). This spring I'll be teaching *Introducing Judaism* for the Judaic Studies Program (JDST). As a cultural anthropologist, I am interested in thinking about Judaism as a "lived religion." How did Jews practice their religion, what did it mean to identify as Jewish and - most interesting to me - how has all of this changed over time? And where are we today?

Take food-ethics for example. The earliest rabbis had a lot to say about what Jews may eat and not eat, and how they should produce their food. Today, though, we confront a whole new set of ideas about our environment and how we ought interact with it. How have these developments changed the way practicing Jews think about and practice keeping kosher?

We'll ask similar questions about religious change as we look at the categories of time, sanctity, religious authority, sexuality and others.



Prof. Alanna Cooper

I'll also be teaching a [SAGES](#) course called, *Collectors and their Collections*.

This course is not about Jews in particular, but it is informed by my fascination with collections of sacred objects. For example, the organization [Memorial Scrolls Trust](#) owns nearly 1,600 Torahs, referred to as Holocaust Torahs (because they were owned by Jewish communities that were annihilated during World War II). Who put this collection together? Why?

And now that the original collectors have passed away, who is tending to the collection and how?

In this course, we'll be looking at collections that hold weighty, difficult stories. We'll also be looking at collections that seem silly and whimsical, like troves of yo-yos and beer cans. What is the source of this urge to amass, organize and display things? Tune in to explore collecting as a creative act, which helps us to make sense of the world and our place within it.



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Program in Judaic Studies

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Serah bat Asher: Gender Bias in Biblical Genealogy

Recognition for Outstanding Achievement

Jordan ElHindi

Stories are written with a point of view, and the biases of biblical authors are reflected in their texts (Stone 1976: 1-8). Gender bias is so prevalent throughout the Bible, it can be found not only in stories, but even in the most bare-boned of narratives; the genealogical name-lists.

To begin with, biblical genealogies are traced primarily through the male. The names are typically listed to ten generations, and appear before each chapter in the Bible. It is extremely rare for a woman to be included in the genealogies, yet the female name “Serah bat Asher” is mentioned in three different genealogical name lists, with a 400-year span between the first and the last mentions.

In the first genealogy she is listed with her father Asher and her brothers on the sojourn into Egypt: “Asher’s sons: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah, and their sister Serah” (Gen. 46:17). Serah is again mentioned among the later generation that came out of Egypt, where the name-list adds: “The name of Asher’s daughter was Serah” (Num. 26:46). The rabbis took this to mean that Asher’s daughter Serah was still alive during the Exodus, and left Egypt with that generation. She appears yet a third time among an even later generation of male descendants who entered the land of Israel: “These are the sons of Asher, Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah, and their sister Serah” (1 Chron. 7:30). Once again, the presence, and placement, of her name was interpreted to mean she was still alive, and among the male descendants that entered Israel.

From this, the rabbis determined that Serah’s extraordinary longevity reflected a great historical importance. In their search for the nature of her importance they had only a name to go on, but the narratives they spun have bequeathed us a legacy that reveals the process of patriarchal sense-making, and the subsequent influence of biblical gender bias.

The genealogies confirm that Serah was Jacob’s granddaughter, making her a member of a royal prestige lineage. Yet, while names of some women, principally royals, do appear in biblical genealogies, they are outnumbered by males ten-to-one, and none have as many mentions, or appear over as long a time period, as Serah bat Asher. To the extent that the rabbis found anything to admire among biblical women of

independent action, like Deborah, Hannah and Miriam, they reduced these women’s importance to that of domestic nation-builders; to mothers who birthed, and/or served the needs of male Culture Heroes. In Serah’s case, lacking any information other than her name, the rabbis turned to *midrash*, a type of interpretation that cites a quote in Scripture, and allows fanciful speculation to make a desired point, or draw a desired conclusion, not intended by that quote. Midrashic literature became the primary vehicle through which the rabbis attempted to grasp and communicate the nature of Serah’s importance.



Jordan ElHindi



For the rabbis, biblical genealogies demonstrated God’s forethought in the unfolding of history, and they saw biblical lineage as the key to one’s destiny. Therefore, they felt comfortable using onomastic wordplay, or midrash using names, to draw meaning from biblical name-lists. They noted that the three consonants, or three-letter root in the Hebrew name “Serah” is SRH. Because Hebrew words that contain this same root relate to abundance, or overhang, they interpreted Serah as a person who enjoyed abundance

to the point of excess; that is, abundance in her age, importance, and action. This confirmed for them that Serah had the gift of prophesy, a visionary gift powerful enough to effect the course of history, over time.

One narrative reflecting this view holds that as a young girl, Serah soothed the grieving Jacob with harp and song, imparting a vision of his lost son Joseph as alive, and a ruler in Egypt (Noah 1972: 176-177). Consequently, the rabbis conclude, Jacob went down to the land of Egypt, and generations later, when Joseph’s bones had to be retrieved, Serah guided Moses to them, facilitating the Exodus.

The rabbis invested Serah with “powers of blessing

and saving people in distress . . . She also received the secret knowledge of how to identify the Redeemer. She was the only woman to receive this secret password, otherwise transmitted through the males of the family" (Bronner 1994: 46). She is said to have entered among the sages in the House of Study, a location and an action forbidden to women, where she not only trespassed, and instructed the sages, but corrected their errors.

Bronner points out that Serah is but one of many woman in the generation of the Exodus whom the rabbis invested with great righteousness. But even in that generation of women, misogynistic tales were spun to undermine the women's merits, and any woman who was not someone's wife—even Moses' sister Miriam—was married off in midrash by the rabbis. But they did no such thing to Serah. In their estimation, she was so uniquely important, domestic status as a wife and mother was not required for her to gain their approval.

In Bronner's view, the rabbis created an exemplary woman in Serah bat Asher, such that "For women of our times, she is a gift to reclaim" (1994: 56). But this view may also reflect the pervasive influence of biblical gender bias. That is, while Serah is an exception to rabbinic maligning of biblical heroines (whose independent action might otherwise have inspired their own wives and daughters to independent action), Serah was never in danger of becoming a biblical role model. By definition, her gifts are unattainably supernatural, emphasizing the futility of any mere mortal trying to merit the approval she received on that basis. Serah bat Asher more clearly bequeaths us a different legacy, but one that is also valuable: a peek into the process of patriarchal sense-making, and into the subsequent influence of biblical gender bias, even to this today.

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Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. 1985. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.

Happy Winter Break



From the JDST eJournal!

On/Off Campus



Chloe Mieras with Elizabeth Warren, Westerville, Ohio 2019

RLGN and POLI SCI major **Chloe Mieras** bravely signed up for both *Women in the Bible* and *The Mythical Trickster* this semester.

She then got an unexpected ticket to the **Democratic Presidential Debate** in Westerville, Ohio, on Oct. 15, 2019 (a gift from the gods, perhaps?).

Congratulations and thanks to Chloe for sharing her wonderful surprise, and for wearing **Girl Power** earrings to the event, caught in this great Elizabeth Warren selfie!

Chloe is now the student leader for Elizabeth Warren on campus and she has officially filed to be Elizabeth Warren's delegate for Ohio's 9th ward.

LET'S HEAR FROM YOU!

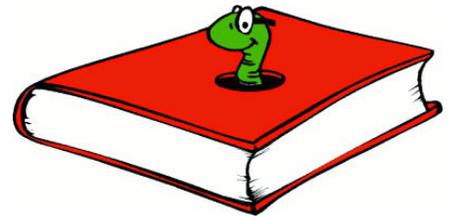
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Courses of Interest for Spring 2020

JDST/RLGN 173 – 3 credits
Introducing Judaism
Alanna Cooper

This “topics” course is an introduction to the academic study of Judaism. It can be taken singly for three credits, or in two sections for six credits, providing that the topics offered in the two sections are different. Each section will provide students with basic literacy in Jewish religious tradition, exploring traditional forms in a diversity of contexts around the world. Sections could include, but would not be limited to, such topics as: Festivals and Holy Days, Women and Gender, Jewish Ethics, etc.



JDST 220 – 3 credits
Jewish Traditional Art And Architecture
Judith Neulander

The course will trace tradition and transformation in Jewish artistic expression over time and across space. The semester will carry us from the Israelite phase beginning with Solomon’s Temple, to the present day in Israel and America, over the course of which 28 centuries terms like “Jewish” and even “art” will undergo remarkable change.
For RLGN credit contact RLGN Chair



JDST 228 – 3 credits
The Jewish Image in Popular Film
Judith Neulander

This course will explore film as social practice from the flickering silent era through Hollywood’s Golden Age, to the techno-dazzle of today. Standing at the confluence of society, history, ideology and culture, students will come to understand how popular film is shaped by, and how it actively shapes, the constant reconstruction of Jewish identity in the American mainstream.

For courses in Hebrew and Arabic visit the Modern Languages and Literatures website:
<http://www.case.edu/artsci/dml/>

Sampling of Final Paper Titles

A sampling of titles for final research papers in **Woman in the Bible JDST/RLGN/WGST 268** reflects the diversity of interests in a typical RLGN/JDST classroom

Six Women without Whom There Would Be No Moses
Colden Schemmel

*Venerated Virgin and Prostituted Whore:
The Christian Story of Two Jewish Marys*
Andrew Ford

The Influence of Ruth on Modern Faith
Sydney Fox

Jezebel: Murderer or Martyr?
Vivian Pot

Revered Relics: Maintaining Connections to Mary Magdalene
Chloe Mieras

Patriarchal Perspectives on Rape and Sex in the Bible
Jordan ElHindi

Esther the Brave: Strength and Integrity behind the Veil of Beauty
Kendall McConico

The Program in Judaic Studies

By bringing a variety of fields and disciplines to bear on its subject, the Judaic Studies Program at Case Western Reserve University conveys to students the complex interaction of forces that create Jewish ethnic identity. Students completing the program will have a broad knowledge of the field along with the tools necessary for continued academic study of Jewish civilization in all its manifestations.

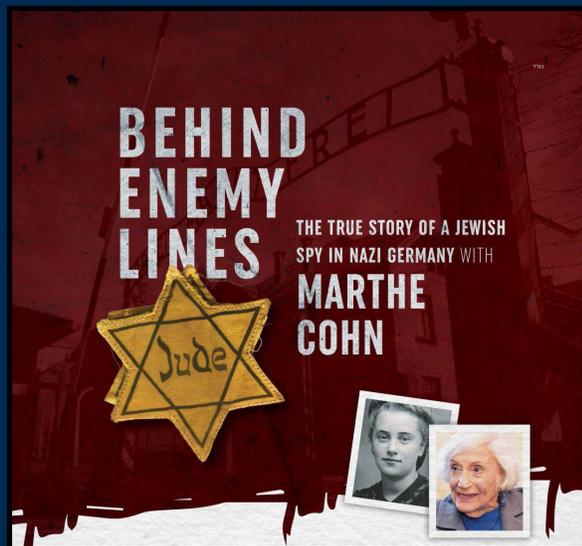


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Support the Program in Judaic Studies



Please consider supporting the Program in Judaic Studies as we continue building on our achievements. You can contribute to our success by making a gift to the College of Arts and Sciences. Your gift allows us to continue to offer opportunities for our students to excel academically and to conduct important research. You can give online at:

giving.case.edu

In Sept. 2019 students were able to attend a presentation at the Maltz Performing Arts Center by WW II spy Marthe Cohn. Sponsored by Chabad at CWRU and by the JDST Program, CWRU.

