Noted Folklorist, Professor Judith S. Neulander (CWRU/JDST), did her doctoral research on purported New Mexican survivals of a “secret” or “crypto-Jewish” folk religion that emerged on the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century. That research would lead to groundbreaking collaboration with genetic biologist Wesley K. Sutton (NYU/NYCEP), in summer of 2009.

“In 1492 Jews were expelled from Spain, but hidden Jewish practices were idiosyncratic and disappeared from Inquisitorial records by 1540” Dr. Neulander says. “Portugal was different. During the Portuguese expulsion of 1497, Jewish children were kidnapped and ransomed for parental conversion to Christianity, and converts were forbidden to leave. Unlike Spain, Portugal would have no Inquisition for another 40 years. That allowed Portuguese converts to identify as secretly Jewish, and to develop an underground folk religion of historical and ethnographic significance, known as crypto-Judaism.”

During the 1990s, the notion that many of New Mexico’s Spanish-American folkways are crypto-Jewish survivals was widely touted in the media by a small group of academics, none of them folklore specialists. While studying at The Folklore Institute at Indiana University, Dr. Neulander found all crypto-Jewish interpretations of New Mexican folkways to be demonstrably unfounded, and the theories and methods by which such interpretations are made, to be departures from ethnographic scholarship norms. In addition, she found that local claims of crypto-Jewish descent do not reflect privileged knowledge of the past, but can reflect personal agendas, special interests, or authoritative misdirection reinforced by the media, and by other misinformed institutions. “For almost ten years I stood alone against efforts to discredit my work, and often my person” she said. “But in 2004 I got a telephone call from a total stranger, and everything changed.”

In 2004 an independent DNA study was conducted in New Mexico by a team of scientists at Stanford University, led by Dr. Wesley K. Sutton. “The Y-chromosome evidence from Spanish-American males is unequivocal: regional claims of significant crypto-Jewish descent are refuted by the genetic profile of this population” Sutton says. Neulander was contacted, and with grants from the National Institutes of Health through the Center for Genetic Research Ethics and Law, and the Samuel Rosenthal Center for Judaic Studies (CWRU), they collaborated last summer, establishing the first genetic-ethnographic database for historical crypto-Jews in Portugal, and the first investigation of naïve medical adventurism in New Mexico, an increasingly widespread practice involving misidentification of non-Jews as “Jewish-by-disease.”

Drs. Neulander and Sutton spoke on their collaborative research at the recent conference on Heritage in Conflict at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and were invited guests at a roundtable following the conference at Bard College.

They will be presenting papers on their research at the Association for Jewish Studies conference in Los Angeles in December 2009.

“In broader academic context, our work suggests that collaboration by trained specialists in ethnography and genetics may be the most powerful means available for accurate recovery of histories and cultures that have been—or are being—subverted, distorted, or otherwise lost,” says Dr. Neulander.

For her crypto-Jewish research, Dr. Neulander received the prestigious Don Yoder Award from the American Folklore Society. In addition, she authored the crypto-Jewish entry for the Encyclopedia of American Folklife and co-authored the study published by Dr. Sutton in Annals of Human Biology.
**Rosenthal Reconfigured**

The Samuel Rosenthal Center for Judaic Studies was established in 1995 to enrich Jewish life and learning on Case campus. The Center brought stimulating professors and speakers to campus, supported research, and facilitated formal and informal gatherings to encourage Judaic scholarship and academic activity on campus, and in the broader community. The Center facilitated the creation of a Judaic Studies Program, and supported teaching positions in Judaic Studies and Modern Hebrew.

With the establishment of the Judaic Studies Program (JDST) in 2003, support from the Rosenthal Center had to change accordingly. The change took place in Fall 2009, when the Center was reconfigured as a new Endowment, adding a Samuel Rosenthal Chair in Judaic Studies to the Program, reviving an exchange student agreement with Hebrew University, and putting in place a base of support for JDST’s anticipated growth into one of Ohio’s major centers of Judaic Studies.

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**Congratulations to New Jewish Archives Intern!**

Erin O’Reilly will be the new CWRU Intern for Spring 2010 at the Cleveland Jewish Archives of the Library/Genealogy Center of the Western Reserve Historical Society, a Smithsonian Affiliates Program on CWRU campus. The Jewish Archives intern assists in researching questions related to local Jewish history, and in preparing resources and public programs. Erin will earn Independent Study credit at CWRU for her internship this Spring.

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**Professor Haas at Symposium on “Jews & Humor”**

In the early 1500s, a small, satirical volume titled *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Purim* was published in Pesaro, Italy. In October, 2009, Prof. Peter Haas presented a paper on this extremely clever parody for the 22nd Klutznick-Harris Symposium on “Jews and Humor” in Omaha, Nebraska.

Prof. Haas’ presentation, titled *Massechet Purim (Tractate Purim)*, not only introduced the text, but contextualized it in Jewish parodies of rabbinic literature, including prayers and piyyutim, as well as “sacred parodies” (*parodia sacra*) in the surrounding Catholic world.

Look for an anthology of papers delivered at the 22nd Klutznick-Harris Symposium, in a forthcoming book on *Jews and Humor*.
Much has been said about the notion of Jewish humor in the last hundred or so years. Most people agree that there is such a thing as Jewish humor, and the disproportionate success of Jewish comics in the twentieth-century is indisputable. But beyond popular ideas, a fair amount of scholarly attention has been devoted to the supposed uniqueness of Jewish humor. Beginning in 1905, Sigmund Freud claimed that Jewish stories are “directed against Jewish characteristics” and that such a quality is unique to the humor of the Jews. Although Freud’s idea grew to be very popular, it is an assessment that fails for two reasons: one, because Jewish traditions of oral humor are typically not self-critical, and two, because Freud’s assessment was based on then common, but false, Jewish cultural stereotypes (Ben-Amos, 112-113).

There are several variations of Freud’s primary stereotype of Jewish humor, all based on the theme of self-deprecation. Irving Howe wrote, “Jewish humor is often a thrust at the Jews themselves.” Similarly, Martin Grotjahn said “Aggression turned against the self seems to be an essential feature of the truly Jewish joke.” Maurice Samuel attributed the survival power of the Jews to their capacity for self-mockery. Theodore Reik went beyond humor to state that the behavior of the Jews in general could be explained by its masochism and paranoia. But all of these analyses took Freud’s analysis as axiomatic and primary even though his analysis was deeply flawed. It rested on the idea of a “uniquely Jewish” psyche and social environment (Ben-Amos, 114-116).

The idea of the “uniquely Jewish” psyche is a fallacy of the same order as those that allow (if not promote) the proliferation of anti-Semitic stereotypes. It is generally agreed upon today that there is no biological basis for the idea of race, and the idea of a “Jewish mind” is certainly a racist idea. If biology cannot support the existence of a “uniquely Jewish psyche” (and it cannot) then the only possible explanation would be the Jews’ social environment, which may actually be more varied than that of any other cultural groups. Some scholars have attempted to attribute the humor of the Jews to the suffering of the Jews, but to be fair, such suffering is far from unique among minority groups.

The most important body of evidence challenging Freud’s view of Jewish humor is Jewish humor itself. Numerous examples in both written and oral tradition show that Jews often make fun of other cultural groups. When they do make fun of Jews, they set themselves apart from the butt of the joke, rather than engaging in self-deprecation. The issue of “who tells the joke about whom” is therefore central to fully understanding a joke’s social function. For example, in the modern United States, the traditional spiritual influence of the rabbi “has been drastically weakened in light of the pursuit of material values”—the same pursuit that made it possible for the children of immigrants to leave the inner cities for the suburbs (Ben-Amos, 126). As a result, the suburban rabbi aims his jokes at the congregation’s neglect of traditional values:

“Mmmm, a new family. I wonder what religion, who is going to get them, which church.” So they said, “Well, the shades are up, let us take a look and see if we can recognize by the house, you know, whose it is.” So the Catholic looks into the house, peeps in, then says: “Oh, no, it is not one of my flock.” So the minister looks in and says, “Well, I don’t see any Bible that I can recognize, it is not one of my flock.” The rabbi says, “Well, let me take a look.” The rabbi takes a look and then says, “Oh yes, it is one of my flock.” They say, “What is it, you see a Jewish star or a menorah or something like that?” “No,” he says, “Wall to wall carpet.” (Ben-Amos, 126)

Without knowing the social context, it could easily appear that this joke is self-deprecating: Jews are attacking Jews! The truth is, however, that there is a historical rift between rabbinic and congregational values, and the
The rabbi’s way of relieving his frustration is to make fun of the offenders. The rabbi is certainly not making fun of himself—he is making fun of his congregation. Nor are Jews alone in employing this type of humor. In broader social context, for example, sons-in-law do not tell jokes that make fun of sons-in-law; they tell jokes that make fun of mothers-in-law. Clearly, one must know the social context of any tradition—including who is telling a joke about whom—in order to “understand the content, meaning, the ‘point’ of an item of folklore” (Bauman, 363). The literary tradition that Freud and his disciples were exposed to simply did not contain that information.

Freud’s assessment of Jewish humor treats the Jews as a completely homogenous body, equally sharing identical cultural characteristics. If we were to assume that all Jews do in fact consider themselves indistinguishable parts of a seamless whole, then perhaps it would make sense to interpret Jewish humor as self-deprecating. But the important question that Freud did not ask is “Do the individuals telling the jokes consider themselves a part of the subgroups they make fun of?” As we have seen, the answer is “No.” Clearly, the notion that Jewish humor is a uniquely self-deprecating tradition is itself a cultural stereotype.

Works Cited


RECOGNITION FOR OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT

Jay’s essay “Welcoming the Shabbes…Backwards” was written for Introduction to Jewish Folklore, JDST 233. His work recognizes the United States and Canada as a contiguous “culture area” for Yiddish song, dance and instrumental music. Jay discusses the musicians’ Backwards March, performed to welcome the Sabbath at KlezKanada, an annual summer retreat that celebrates Yiddish arts and letters in the Laurentian Mountains of Quebec. Jay was able to trace the tradition from its medieval origin to modernity in Eastern Europe, through its recent migration to the Americas. Jay also demonstrates the creative and strategic ways that KlezKanada, and its wintertime counterpart—the American KlezKamp—both adhere to the same tradition while holding fast to their own distinct cultural boundaries. By spring semester Jay’s essay will be accessible through Digital Case, the electronic archive of the Kelvin Smith Library at CWRU.
Hello!

It's been ages since I've been in touch.

I'm completing a doctoral program in counseling psychology at the University of Buffalo and I'm enjoying it immensely. The people are wonderful, the classes are interesting, and I feel challenged and engaged every day in my practicum work as a counselor.

I'm dating a lovely young lady named Tessa. We went to Peru this summer with a few of our friends; saw Incan ruins and otherwise had a great adventure. So I'm keeping pretty busy!

Finally, I just realized this now: in the last month I've had conversations about topics in two of my courses with you. The things I learned in your classes have really stuck with me. So thanks!

Keep in touch and all the best,

Jack Mack (CWRU ‘05)
Courses of Interest

For Spring 2010

**JDST 228**
**THE JEWISH IMAGE IN POPULAR FILM**
*Judith S. Neulander*

The course will explore film as social practice from the flickering silent era, through Hollywood’s Golden Age, to the technological dazzle of the present day. 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.

**RLGN/HSTY 254**
**THE HOLOCAUST**
*Peter J. Haas*

The Holocaust is one of the major events defining the 20th Century. Combining racial ideology, scientific technology, and modern industrial organization, the Nazi administration created the modern definition of Genocide as they targeted Jews, along with certain other groups, for extermination. The course provides an overview of the historical, political, and social context out of which the Holocaust grew. The main emphasis of the course will be on the Holocaust itself in all its forms across Europe. The course concludes with a consideration of the various implications the Holocaust has had for post-modern thinking in religion, ethics, philosophy, political science and psychology.

**SPRING BREAK 2010 IN ISRAEL**
(MAR 4-14)

**JDST 280/RLGN 280**
**ISRAEL: RELIGION AND HEALTH ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN**
*Approved for Global and Cultural Diversity*

This 3-hour course offers an intensive look at the relationship between religion and healthcare across the life span among various religious traditions in the Middle East, with special attention to Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities in Israel. The aim of the course is to generate an understanding of not only the religious and health issues among these communities, but also of the issues that generate debate within each community. Participants will interact directly with members of the region’s diverse religious groups within the political, social, and cultural contexts in which they live. The role of religion and healthcare delivery will be explored via university, NGO, and agency visits; lectures and discussion with Israeli experts in the area of healthcare. Pre and post meetings will be held at CWRU. For more information go to [http://msas.case.edu/international/tripfaq.html](http://msas.case.edu/international/tripfaq.html)
A Sampling of Final Paper Titles

A sampling of titles for final research papers in Introduction to Jewish Folklore JDST/ANTH 233 reflects the diversity of interests in a typical JDST classroom.

Lions and Eagles and Horses! Oh My!
Jewish Folk Art’s Adaptation to the New World
Kelsey Cornelius

Judaism and Superheroes: Comics and the Torah
Joseph Mintz

Angelology in Jewish Folklore and Belief
Ilya Aylyarov

The Ballad of Ida Straus: Jewish Response to the Sinking of the Titanic
Philip Heisler

Gematria’s Web
Sean Yeldell

The Forever Changing Tradition: Jewish Mysticism through the Ages
Allen Li

The Cultural Stereotype of the Jewish Mother
David Kent

The Star of David: Folk Etymologies and False Histories
Fred Douglas

The Biblical Well in Well-Known Tales of Betrothal
Leah Golub

‘Hey! You Got Your Culture in My Music!’
Jewish Musical Influence on Non-Jewish Classical Composers
Kim Girosky
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