Featured Faculty

PROFESSOR GILLIAN WEISS

Prof. Gillian Weiss became interested in Jewish history when she left college for a year and found a job assisting a journalist in Paris. At first her duties were broadly defined: she walked the dog and unblocked the drain, answered the phone and summarized articles in the French press on any topic related to immigration, anti-Semitism or right-wing politics. In the wake of the “Carpentras Affair” in May 1990, which began with the desecration of a Jewish cemetery in the south of France, she also began doing some historical research. Her library sleuthing introduced her to minority religious groups in France, a topic that has fascinated her ever since.

Weiss’s undergraduate thesis at Princeton University examined the history of Jews in a different southern French town during the eighteenth century. In Bayonne, exiles from Spain and Portugal had returned to Judaism after living in France for over two hundred years as nominal Catholics. She became curious about double religious allegiances and the popular anxiety provoked by religious transformation. Meanwhile, the political and even existential stakes of writing history became tragically apparent to her when she discovered the fate of one local historian. Bayonne’s chief rabbi in the 1930s had composed his account of the Jewish community at night and by hand after members of the German Occupation confiscated the first draft of his manuscript. Painting an idealized portrait of Jewish-Christian relations, he attempted to convince readers that Jews had long been worthy French citizens. Before he was deported and killed, the rabbi invoked the history of Jews in the eighteenth century in an effort to save those of the twentieth.

As a graduate student at Stanford University, Weiss’s initial interest in the experience of Jews in France broadened to include that of Muslims. Her forthcoming book from Stanford University Press, Back from Barbary: Mediterranean Slavery and the Rise of France, uncovers the forgotten story of North African corsairs raids on French ships and shores and the resulting captivity of tens of thousands of subjects in “Barbary,” a region comprising the modern countries of Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco. Her next book will explore French domestic encounters with Muslim refugees, diplomats, slaves and Christian converts to Islam during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Since arriving at Case Western Reserve University in 2002, Prof. Weiss has taught courses that reflect her personal and political concerns and an amalgam of experiences. Focusing primarily on the period from 1350 to 1800, she offers surveys and specialized seminars on the histories of Jews in Europe and the Diaspora; impostors on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and cross-cultural encounters throughout the Mediterranean Basin. She also teaches a class on France and Islam from the Middle Ages to the present and another about comparative slavery across time and place. She lives with her husband (Prof. Elliot Posner, Political Science) and their son Oliver “in a Cleveland Heights house of dubious historical significance” she quips.
Student Awards and Honors

The Ira and Ruth Bressler Prize
To a student who has done outstanding work in the area of Jewish Studies.

The Eudese and Elmer Paull Prizes:
To one or several undergraduate or graduate students who demonstrates an interest in Jewish Studies or Jewish contemporary life.

Outstanding Achievement:
Liz Valasco

Extracurricular Activities:
Media Board Secretary, Discussions Research Journal Editor-in-Chief, AXΣ Professional Chemistry Social Chair, Playing the piano and painting.

Hometown:
Columbus, OH

Academic Interests:
Biochemistry and Music

Recognition for Outstanding Achievement
Rarely are students motivated to go beyond the requirements of an assignment and create skilled artwork to accompany their projects, as Liz Valasco did for her work on Hebrew symbolism in the traditional tale “The Golem of Prague”. Her pencil drawing, Golem (7 x 10) is both dynamic (in its vitality of line) and mute (in its soft color), much like the Golem, himself; it is a portrait in which the animating letters aleph-mem-tav (emet = truth) are strategically placed, according to tradition. Liz also created a three-dimensional paper cut “book,” repeating the same Hebrew formula. “Paper cutting is a traditional Jewish art form,” she says. “The methodical cutting of the pattern and letters gave me time to ruminate on the story, and on the mystical power the letters contain. The book’s shape is reminiscent of many European synagogues (like the Altneshul of Prague), their pyramidal rooftops shaped like sacred mountains, bringing one closer to G-d.” Liz is recognized for outstanding artistic achievement in completion of her final project for Jewish Folklore JSDT 233.

Liz Valasco

The Eudese and Elmer Paull Prizes

LYDIA BRONSTEIN
Hometown:
Clifton, Virginia

Academic Interests:
Double Major in Classical History & Political Science
Pre-Law

Extracurricular Activities:
Director serving on the Cleveland Hillel Foundation Board of Directors
Vice President of Case Students for Israel
Government Documents Assistant at the Case Law Library
Member of Alpha Chi Omega

SEAN YELDELL
Hometown:
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Academic Interests:
Double Major in Classical History & Political Science
Pre-Law

Extracurricular Activities:
Director serving on the Cleveland Hillel Foundation Board of Directors
Vice President of Case Students for Israel
Government Documents Assistant at the Case Law Library
Member of Alpha Chi Omega

The Ira and Ruth Bressler Prize

JONAH GREBELSKY
Hometown:
Skokie, IL

Extracurricular Activities:
President-Jewish Law Students Association (JLSA), Student Board Member-Cleveland Hillel, Leadership Team-Law Students for Social Justice (LSSJ), Member-Student Public Interest Law Fellowship (SPILF), Member-Case Western Reserve Big Buddies Program

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Member of Alpha Chi Omega

DAVID SCHINDLER
Hometown:
Russell, OH

Academic Interests:
Mechanical Engineering and Entrepreneurial Studies

Extracurricular Activities:
Sigma Nu, Cleveland Hillel Tzedeck Chair, Student Leadership Journey Council

Hometown:
Punxsutawney, PA

Academic Interests:
Major—Biology, B.S., Minor—Chemistry

Extracurricular Activities:
Research assistant, Alpha Chi Omega (Intramural Chair and Homecoming Chair), VP Programming for Panhel, Volunteer work with various organizations

Hometown:
Punxsutawney, PA

Academic Interests:
Major—Biology, B.S., Minor—Chemistry

Extracurricular Activities:
Research assistant, Alpha Chi Omega (Intramural Chair and Homecoming Chair), VP Programming for Panhel, Volunteer work with various organizations

KIM GIROSKY
Hometown:
Skokie, IL

Extracurricular Activities:
President-Jewish Law Students Association
Student Board Member-Cleveland Hillel
Leadership Team-Law Students for Social Justice (LSSJ)
Member-Student Public Interest Law Fellowship (SPILF)
Member-Case Western Reserve Big Buddies Program

Academic Interests:

KIM GIROSKY
Hometown:
Skokie, IL

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LIZ VALASCO
Anti-Semitism has caused much tragedy throughout history. Unfortunately, it is likely to persist as long as Jews remain a vulnerable minority. However, the magnitude of anti-Semitism within a culture can be controlled, given appropriate efforts to change prejudicial beliefs and attitudes. During the course of WW II, the feature film was recognized as a powerful means to diminish prejudice in general, and anti-Semitism, in particular. To this day, one of the best known movies to attack anti-Semitism is the 1947 blockbuster, Gentleman’s Agreement. The film, directed by Elia Kazan, focuses on Christian reporter Phil Green (Gregory Peck), who pretends to be Jewish in order to gain firsthand experience of anti-Semitic prejudice. Through this jarring experience Green gains a stronger understanding of his Jewish friend, Dave Goldman (John Garfield), and becomes a catalyst for his girlfriend, Kathy (Dorothy McGuire), to break the ‘gentleman’s agreement’ that constitutes anti-Semitism in ‘polite’ society. Although the film gained critical acclaim, many argued that Gentleman’s Agreement had not done enough; that it had failed to significantly impact mainstream prejudice. Contrary to this belief, however, modern scientific study shows the film had significant impact on anti-Semitism in its own time, and well beyond.

The first suggestion that Gentleman’s Agreement had failed occurred when the screenwriter was complimented by a stagehand on the film’s ‘wonderful moral’; when asked to describe the moral, the stagehand replied “I’ll never be rude to a Jew again because he might turn out to be a Christian” (Friedman 1987:145). Not surprisingly, the criticism leveled at Gentleman’s Agreement emphasized that nothing in the film differentiates Jewish characters from non-Jewish characters except the statement that someone is Jewish. The film shows none of the distinctive cultural or ethnic aspects of Jewish identity that are normally targeted by anti-Semitism; no one speaks with a Yiddish accent, there are no men with full facial hair, no one wears a yarmulke, no one conforms to ethnic stereotypes. Film scholar Lester Friedman writes that the audience relates to the characters in this film precisely because they lack ethnic specificity, while the fact that they are “certifiable white knights” allows the audience to sympathize with them, but not with Jewish culture (1987: 145).

But this criticism seems to lack substance because the Jewish characters discriminated against in this film, like most of the Jewish audience in the mid-twentieth century, were educated in America and displayed no ethnic specificity. For example, Green’s Jewish secretary, Miss Wales (June Havoc), is a capable employee who had to hide her religion to get hired. She fears being exposed, and tainted by ‘vulgar’ or ethnically recognizable Jews, should any be hired. It is Green who points out that the company hires only competent people, not ‘vulgar’ people; that ‘vulgar’ and ‘Jewish’ are not one and the same. Similarly, Goldman’s occupation as a combat soldier contradicts the stereotype of the cringing male Jew, and Professor Lieberman (Sam Jaffe), a Jewish man Phil and Kathy meet at a party, is a world-famous physicist. These film characters, like most children of European immigrants to America, had relinquished the ethnic specificity of their European parents in the process of growing up.
American (Smidgens 1990: 133-32). But at the same time these characters recognize and address the issue of anti-Semitism head on. Most likely, Jewish ethnic specificity did not appear in the film, since by 1947, most American Jews lacked such specificity and were effectively assimilated.

In the 1930s, the United States had developed an isolationist policy toward Nazi aggression in Europe, and had turned a blind eye to rising anti-Semitism at home. In response, Jewish studio heads reduced Jewish visibility on screen, and ignored contemporary social issues, hoping to avoid anti-Semitic targeting and accusations of war-mongering. Interest in films with Jewish relevance was delayed until the late 1940s. By 1947, the relative absence of Jews on screen drew particular attention to Gentleman’s Agreement, while postwar linkage of anti-Semitism with enemy Nazism favored acceptance of Jews into the American mainstream. But if WW II contributed to the effectiveness of Gentleman’s Agreement, progression of the Cold War detracted from production of more films like it. For Americans like Senator Joseph McCarthy, head of the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Judaism was affiliated with the new enemy: Communism.

The McCarthy hearings began in Hollywood a month before Gentleman’s Agreement opened, and lasted until 1951. Many left-leaning film artists, a majority of whom were Jewish, were targeted, blacklisted, and unable to continue working in the movie business. Even Elia Kazan, the film’s director, was pressured by McCarthy and succumbed to giving out names, and according to Bernheimer “no further overtly pro-Jewish films were made for more than a decade” (1998: 39; 40). Because of that setback, films that actually featured Jewish culture and ethnicity were not seen until the late 1960’s. But that did not diminish the impact that Gentleman’s Agreement had on American anti-Semitism in the 1940s, and perhaps into the twenty-first century.

An experiment conducted by Russell Middleton at a southern university in 1959 demonstrates the extent to which this popular film changed viewers’ anti-Semitic worldviews. The study’s experimental group consisted of 329 college students taking a required or semi-required introductory social science class, who were assigned by a teacher to go to a screening of Gentleman’s Agreement. The study’s control group consisted of 116 students who were not assigned to see the movie, but who went to the screening following their own interests. Before and after the movie, a questionnaire was given to all students, gauging their attitudes toward Jewish Americans and African Americans. The results from the questionnaires showed that anti-Semitic attitudes diminished in 69.3% of the experimental group and in 42.2% of the control group (Middleton 1960: 680-682). These results indicate that the film was highly effective at changing people’s anti-Semitic attitudes, even twelve years after its release.

Clearly, Gentleman’s Agreement did impact anti-Semitism in America. It was a film that broke ground after more than a decade in which Jews had effectively disappeared from the screen, and it paved the way for pro-Jewish movie-making after the fall of McCarthyism. Although the HUAC hindered an immediate pro-Jewish movement, films about anti-Semitism and Jewish culture were soon in production and continue to be made today. The ground that Gentleman’s Agreement broke for American film and culture accounts for its continuing status as one of the best known movies on anti-Semitism, and one of the most effective movies ever made against anti-Semitic prejudice.

References Cited


SPRING BREAK 2010: RELIGION AND LIFELONG HEALTH IN ISRAEL

Prof. Peter Haas (RLGN/JDST), Deborah Jacobson (MSASS), and Lacy Roth (JFC), led fourteen CWRU students, and two participants from other institutions, in a study conducted in Israel over Spring Break. The students studied the relationship between religious identity and lifelong health among diverse populations in Israel.

ANNOUNCING:

The Midwest Jewish Studies Association

Twenty-Second Annual Conference
October 10-11, 2010

hosted by

The Judaic Studies Program
at
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio

Call for papers:
http://www.case.edu/artsci/jdst/mjsa.html
JDST 220  
JEWS TRADITIONAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE  
Judith S. 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 29 centuries terms like "Jewish," and even "art," will undergo remarkable change.

JDST 268  
WOMEN IN THE BIBLE: ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO RITE, RITUAL, STORY, SONG AND ART  
Judith S. Neulander

From Ishtar to Esther, the Christian Marys to the Muslim Mary, we will examine the ways in which biblical texts reflect and reinforce the spirit and mentality of the times in which they were written. We will explore the strategic and creative ways that women in the Bible were shaped by, and came to shape, changing values over time and across space through rite and ritual, story, song and art. Using folkloristic theory and ethnographic methods students will come to understand how these various views of women inform, reflect and challenge gender roles in modern society.

JDST 201  
INTRODUCTION TO JUDAIC STUDIES  
Peter J. Haas

An introduction to the academic study of Judaic religion and culture, this course does not presuppose any previous study of, or experience with, Judaism. The course takes an interdisciplinary approach to Judaic Studies, drawing on a variety of methods used in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Through the use of these methods, the students will examine the diverse issues and questions that are driving the current field of Judaic Studies and come to conclusions about the state of the question. There may be some “field” experience, like a visit to a synagogue or to a Jewish museum. Required for the Minor in Judaic Studies.

RLGN 208  
INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN RELIGIONS  
Peter J. Haas

A basic introduction to the three great monotheistic religions of the Western World: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Since all three of these religious traditions trace their roots to the faith of Biblical Israel as revealed by a series of prophets including Noah, Abraham, and Moses, there are many points of contact, conflict, and comparison. We will examine how each absorbed the philosophy and science of the Greco-Roman world and went on both to influence, and struggle with, each other. Along the way, the course will touch on many of the religious issues of the modern world, from struggles in the Middle East to the rise of Fundamentalist Christianity to developments in contemporary Judaism.

GOING OFF TO GRAD SCHOOL!

Congratulations to  
Ariella Goldman:

Phi Beta Kappa  
Case Western Reserve University Medical School  
(class of 2014)
A Sampling of Final Paper Titles

A sampling of titles for final research papers in *The Jewish Image in Popular Film*.

*JDST 228* reflects the diversity of interests in a typical JDST classroom.

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*Borat:*
*Cultural Learnings of America for Make Hilarious Social Criticism*

**Jen Hannan**

*How to Dance the Hollywood Hora:*
*Scoring the ‘Sound’ of Jewish Music*

**Evan Antes**

*Death Sentence at Night:*
*Inaccuracies in Gibson’s ‘Passion of Christ’*

**Dan Parks**

*Jewish Masculinity and Heroism in Current Cinema, 1999-2010*

**Mike Marine**

*The Blacklist:*
*Politics, Economics and Anti-Semitism in Hollywood*

**Nick Tyler**

*G.I. JAP:*
*The Jewish Daughter Stereotype in ‘Private Benjamin’*

**Mallory Zehe**

*“Whoever Saves One Life Saves the World Entire”:*
*A Study of ‘Schindler’s List’*

**Rebecca Ciciretti**

*Like Peanut Butter and Jelly:*
*The Link between Jews and Neurosis in Woody Allen Films*

**Grant Slania**

*“Shomer F-ing Shabbos!”:*
*The Coen Brothers’ Jewish Identity on Screen*

**Josh Gershlak**
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