I joined the music faculty at CWRU in fall of 2017 as director of the new CWRU Klezmer Music Ensemble. I consider CWRU “home” as I earned two degrees in Violin Performance from CIM (1989, 1991). Post-graduation, my musical career involved international performances of klezmer and East European folk music, as well as leading klezmer music master classes, creating local educational projects and composing traditional Jewish folk music.

Even as a classical musician, my passion for Jewish and East European folk music took precedence. My solo appearances with orchestras featured performances of my own arrangements of East European Gypsy violin showpieces and the exotic Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto. As a chamber musician, I have performed Jewish violin and piano compositions of early 20th century composers from the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music. In addition to performances, I have led master classes at Yiddish folk arts festivals throughout North America and Europe and have been an artist-in-residence at several universities. My Jewish-Chinese fusion project, The Braided Candle, was recently performed in Harbin and Shanghai, China. I have an upcoming project in September 2018 as Violin Soloist with the Muncie Symphony Orchestra, featuring my original composition Klezmer Violin Concert Suite.

My journey to become a CWRU music faculty professor is a fascinating story. In 2002 I was the first recipient of the Louis E. Emsheimer Memorial Artist in Residence Program; I led klezmer master classes for CWRU and CIM string students and presented a klezmer music lecture. This drove me to pursue my dream of teaching a credited klezmer music ensemble course at CWRU. After developing a course proposal, my former CWRU professor, Dr. Russ Duffin, suggested I contact Professor David Ake, the music chair in 2013. Professor Ake and the music faculty were enthusiastic. Later that year I met with the new music chair, Professor David Rothenberg, to further develop my proposal.

Professor Rothenberg organized a klezmer master class in early 2016 that I led for CWRU music majors. The following year I led three klezmer master classes and prepared a performance of the learned repertoire. The momentum was building! In late spring 2017 David informed me that the klezmer ensemble course that I had dreamed about was to become a reality for 2017-2018. In December 2017 I led CWRU and CIM students in a klezmer concert open to the public, featuring traditional Jewish instrumental and vocal folk music.

It has indeed been a dream and honor to direct the CWRU Klezmer Music Ensemble and to share my deep love and passion for traditional Jewish folk music with enthusiastic and talented students.
Student Awards and Honors

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

Hometown: Columbus, OH
Academic interests: Biology, evolutionary biology, and Chinese
Extra-curricular activities: I am an active member of my sorority, Sigma Psi, and am currently serving as the New Member Educator. I also work in an entomology lab and volunteer at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. In my free time, I love to listen to music, cook, and explore Cleveland and the outdoors!

Hometown: Baltimore, MD
Academic Interests: Anthropology and medicine
Extra-curricular activities: I am involved in many organizations, including my sorority, Kappa Alpha Theta, Cleveland Hillel, The American Medical Student Association, and Global Medical Brigades. I also tutor adult students through Seeds of Literacy to help them receive their GEDs.

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

Hometown: Fort Lauderdale, Florida
Academic Interests: Major in Nutritional Biochemistry and Metabolism; Minors in Business Management and Chemistry
Extra-curricular activities: I am president of CWRU Hillel Undergraduate Leadership Committee. I also founded Ethnic Eats Club and turned it into a class on campus called Case Cooks: Ethnic Eats that I assist teaching. I participate in SEEDs tutoring service where I help adults get their GED. I am also a member of Alpha Gamma Delta sorority, Case Western Pre-Dental Society, and spend a lot of time shadowing different dentists. In my free time, I love watching shows and movies and exploring new restaurants!

Hometown: New Rochelle, NY
Academic Interests: Political Science, History
Extra-curricular activities: I am a co-VP of Programming on Hillel Undergraduate Leadership Council, as well as a member of Israel's CWRU. I also have an internship with the CWRU Office of Government Relations and teach Hebrew school at a synagogue outside of Cleveland. I also love going to a cappella concerts on campus.

Hometown: Atlanta, GA
Academic interests: Mechanical Engineering, Public Policy
Extra-curricular activities: I am currently the freshmen representative and secretary of the Hillel Student Board as well the Vice President of Israel’s CWRU. I am also involved with Case Engineers Council. Outside of Case, I work as a counselor at Ramah Darom, a Jewish overnight camp in northern Georgia.
The word “genizah” refers to a Jewish archive, or repository, where worn-out texts of sacred or other importance were designated for burial rather than destruction. From the ninth through nineteenth centuries CE, the genizah at the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo amassed one of the largest collections of medieval manuscripts in the world. The recent recovery of a midrash fragment from the Cairo Genizah, has renewed interest in the distinction of the midwives in Exodus as either Hebrew or Egyptian. Valid claims and refutations have been made for both arguments. Generally and traditionally, the midwives are assumed to be Hebrew. However, the newly recovered fragment provides compelling reason to believe that the midwives have been systematically misrepresented as Hebrew, the better to eclipse the role of righteous gentiles, and particularly of righteous gentile women in the Exodus story; a redaction reflecting and reinforcing the ethnocentric and misogynistic views of the redactors.

According to Exodus 1:15-21, the King of Egypt charged two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to take the lives of all male babies born to Hebrew women. But when the midwives failed to do so, they were confronted by the king, and gave this explanation (Ex: 1:19-21):

“... the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife can get to them.” So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

While one might wonder why Egyptian midwives would fear the Hebrew God, another might wonder why Hebrew midwives would be trusted by the king to annihilate their own people, and to do so by infanticide. Even if this was a test of Hebrew loyalty to the Egyptian throne, the king would have to assume that some Hebrew midwives would disobey him, and—even if they were put to death when caught—not every instance would come to light. Would he not more readily trust Egyptian women to carry out this task, as they would be less likely to fear the Hebrew God and more likely to place Pharaoh’s will above that of a deity not their own?

Upon examining evidence for the midwives’ Hebrew identity, it quickly becomes clear that most of it is referenced in rabbinic tradition. In the opening of Exodus 1:15, the Hebrew reads (my emphasis): “Then the King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives ...” which clearly refers to women who are Hebrews, as well as midwives. But until the late first millennium CE, the Hebrew Bible was un-pointed, or without indicators of vowel sounds, creating ambiguities in the text. In the third century BCE, for instance, when the concept of righteous gentiles was in favor, the Septuagint translated the same passage, as (my emphasis): “Then the King of Egypt said to the midwives of the Hebrew women ...” where the midwives could easily have been Egyptian. Because vowel sounds were not added until much later, understandings of ambiguous passages were dependent on “context and tradition as a guide for properly vocalizing the text” (Lavee and Strauch-Schick, 2015). This explains why the Septuagint could translate the passage as “midwives of the Hebrews,” while Masoretic redactors of the late first millennium—writing when the concept of righteous gentiles had lost favor—could vocalize and point the passage to read “Hebrew midwives.”

The fragment of midrash recently uncovered at the Cairo Genizah is arguably one of the most compelling arguments for Egyptian midwives. It is dated at 1000 CE and is a list of righteous gentile women about whom something unspecified “was said.” The list includes Asenath (Joseph’s Egyptian...
wife), Shiphrah and Puah (midwives of Exodus 1:15-21), Bityah (Pharaoh's Egyptian daughter), Tziporah (Moses' Midianite wife), Rahab (a Canaanite), and Ruth (a Moabite). The passage reads (my emphasis): “It [unspecified] was said so regarding the midwives, Puah and Shifra the Egyptians” (Lavee and Strauch-Schick 2015).

It seems more probable according to common sense and the written record that the midwives were in fact Egyptian, an identity apparently suppressed because the idea of righteous midwives, and particularly righteous Egyptian midwives, simply did not conform to the power structure in which male Israelite Jews were always held superior. As Lavee and Strauch-Schick state, it was probably unacceptable that righteous gentiles—and especially righteous gentile women!—could “play a vital role in the salvation, and even birth of the Jewish people out of Egyptian slavery”; an idea that undermines “the identity of this imagined male order, and thus must be removed from it” (2015).

Lavee and Strauch-Schick suggest that this censorship may well have been subconscious. However, based on the ethnocentrism and misogyny typical of much midrashic literature—and based on the reduced status of women, of gentiles, and particularly of gentile women at the time when the biblical text was pointed—I would argue that the midwives were Egyptian, and suppression of their identity not only became the literary convention, but did so in a manner both conscious and purposeful.

References Cited

A source in conjunction with the University of Haifa’s Center for Disciplinary Research of the Cairo Genizah.

On/Off Campus

UPDATE SILVER SEARCH

We are excited to announce that the search for the next Abba Hillel Silver Professor of Jewish Studies is underway. The search committee has spent spring semester 2018 conducting interviews and has met a wide range of scholars who work on religious, historical, legal, cultural, and literary topics, reflecting the diversity of the field of Jewish Studies. We look forward to a new colleague joining the Department of Religious Studies, and the Program in Judaic Studies, next year.

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Post It!

Great News!

Hello JDST Community,
I’m a graduating senior this spring, and will begin my first year at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine in late summer. I’m committed to providing compassionate healthcare to underserved populations, and I’m excited to pursue an academic career in the field of dental medicine. I just wanted to acknowledge the JDST Program for influencing my path to HSDM academically, and also personally.

On a personal level, my class in ethnographic approaches to "Women in the Bible" instilled in me a respect for the power of folklore, which has since evolved into a strong interest in American legends and tall tales. I’m extremely grateful for the full impact the JDST Program has had on my education! Thank you!

Robert Semco
BSE’18

LET’S HEAR FROM YOU!
postit@case.edu
Courses of Interest for Fall 2018

JDST/ARTH 220
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.

JDST/HSTY 389
History of Zionism
Jay Geller

This course seeks to elucidate the major strands of Zionism, their origins, how they have interacted and their impact on contemporary Israeli society. These may include political, cultural, socialist (labor), Revisionist and religious Zionism. This course will also examine the difference in the appeal of Zionism to Jews in different places, such as Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the United States.

JDST 228
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/artscl/dmil/
Sampling of Final Paper Titles

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

Castaway: Exploring the Motif of the Child Exposed at Sea
Isaac Kolevski

Jewish “Folk” Genetics: Racialization of a Religious Group
Lauren Spitzman

Toward Inclusion: The Orange on the Seder Plate
Hannah Pomerantz

The Rhythm of Faith: the Role of Music in Jewish Culture
Roston Shore

Interpreting Dreams: A Biblical Motif and its Place in Popular Culture
Madi Burhenn

Interwoven Narratives: The Jewish Experience and American Theater
Brianna Lichholt

The Dybbuck: The Jewish Variant of a Ghostly Tradition
Liz Hanna

Cultural Boundaries: A Study of Identity within Judaism
Jordin Sirody

Lilith: From Demonic Jewish Myth to Modern Feminist Icon
Leigh Emelko

The Blood Libel Legend: Roots and Modern Manifestations
Sandya Janardhan
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.