

The Center for Jewish Studies at 50:

Remembering Our Beginnings and Becomings

by Naomi Seidman



IN 1964, JUST TWO YEARS AFTER THE FOUNDING OF THE Graduate Theological Union as a partnership of Christian seminaries, the school's dean, John Dillenberger, approached the Conservative and Reform Movements to share his interest in establishing Jewish Studies on campus "to stand in its own right in relation to other studies, and not just as an adjunct to Protestant studies." The radical vision of the early GTU is well reflected in its desire to establish a home for Jewish studies supported rather than constrained by its Christian context. After several years of development, the GTU's Center for Jewish Studies (CJS) was launched in 1968 with the hiring of David Winston, a scholar of Philo and Jewish Hellenism who had previously taught at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles (now American Jewish University).

The following year, Professor Winston spoke with the *San Francisco Jewish Bulletin* about the importance of seminarians having "live contact with Jewish scholarship," rather than encountering Judaism solely through Christian teachers and concerns. In fact, the generative partnership between Jewish and Christian scholars was often dramatized in the classroom, in the courses Professor Winston co-taught with Dean Dillenberger and Durwood Foster, a theologian at Pacific School of Religion.

It's essential to understand these developments at the GTU within a broader context. In 1968, the year the Center for Jewish Studies was founded, Hebrew literary scholar

Arnold Band of UCLA published a report on the resurgence of interest in Jewish studies in American universities in the quarter-century following the Second World War. While most seminaries had long taught Hebrew, and older universities offered Hebrew and other Jewish-related courses in such departments as Semitics or Oriental studies, new Jewish studies programs were emerging that included a wider range of courses and faculty specializations, and that were shaped less by the interests of seminarians than by their Jewish faculty and student bodies.

At the time CJS was established at the GTU, this resurgence Band spoke of was still gathering strength. In 1968, there were still only sixty full-time professors in Jewish studies in the United States; by contrast, there are now more than one hundred Jewish studies programs, generally with multiple faculty positions. Thus, the GTU was forward thinking not only in proposing to hire a Jewish studies professor but also in establishing a Center for Jewish Studies for this professor to direct. It would take until 1985 for Stanford University to appoint its first full-time professor of Jewish studies; its program for Jewish studies was formally constituted the following year. And while the University of California, Berkeley, had offered courses in Hebrew, Bible, and Semitics since the late nineteenth-century, in the 1960s it was just beginning to expand its



Naomi Seidman, David Biale, and Daniel Matt



David Winston and Daniel Matt

Jewish studies offerings to history, literature, and Near Eastern Studies. A formal program in Jewish studies at UC Berkeley, combining faculty in these different departments, was not instituted until 1995, through the founding of the Joint Doctoral Program in partnership with the GTU.

The GTU was part of a growing trend in the American university while also constituting a special case: the GTU was a union of seminaries, which had traditionally subsumed the study of Jews to Christian theological concerns; but it was a new and innovative kind of institution, as a union of seminaries that grew out of the ecumenical and interreligious ideals of post-Vatican II culture.

These conditions, already visible at the outset, shaped the development of the Center for Jewish Studies in distinctive ways. On the one hand, the commitment to academic excellence along the model of the University of California (where Professor Winston quickly forged ties) ensured that course offerings would be governed by rigorous methods; on the other hand, as part of a union of seminaries, and without formal connection to any single Jewish denomination, CJS was also shaped by experiential and community-oriented approaches to Judaism.

For much of the 1970s, CJS was staffed by visiting scholars and lecturers on the cutting edge of the emerging interdisciplinary field. In 1979, CJS hired its second full-time faculty member, Daniel Matt, a scholar of Jewish mysticism.

Matt deepened the GTU's connections with the Bay Area Jewish community, providing courses and public lectures fascinating to those interested in spiritual systems and practices of all varieties. To the academic luminaries who had taught at or visited CJS in the 1970s (some, such as Robert Alter and Jacob Milgrom, from UCB) were added such public figures and spiritual teachers as Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach and David Hartman.

CJS expanded further in the early 1980s, with the hiring of a third faculty member with a specialization in art and Judaism, Jo Milgrom (herself a gifted artist). At the time, CJS was offering about a dozen courses each year in a full range of subjects. In 1982, after CJS became established in its own offices (including a dedicated seminar room and kosher kitchen), the elements were in place to begin a Master of Arts in Jewish Studies degree program. Professor Matt declared that a "renaissance of Jewish life was underway in the Bay Area." CJS was playing a crucial role in this revival, hosting not only courses but also concerts, lectures, exhibitions, and celebrations of Jewish holidays.

The mid-1980s proved a period of particularly strong growth. In 1985-1986, the Center established its first endowed chair in Jewish Studies, with leading grants from the Koret Foundation and William and Flora Hewlett (along with gifts from many other supporters). The GTU recruited



Charlotte Fonrobert and David Biale

the eminent historian David Biale of SUNY Binghamton for the Koret Chair and as director of the Center. Professor Biale sought to expand CJS academic offerings and encouraged the local Jewish community to assume “ownership” of the Center, rather than leaning so heavily on the GTU member schools for financial support. CJS found more than a few such admirers and supporters; in 1998, the Center was renamed in honor one of its oldest and most loyal friends, Richard S. Dinner, who died that year.

With his extensive list of publications and growing visibility, Professor Biale was well positioned to solidify the academic connections between CJS and other Jewish studies programs being developed at neighboring institutions, particularly at UCB. In describing the CJS mission in 1991, Biale noted that the Center undertook not only to prepare students for advanced degrees in Jewish studies and serve the larger GTU and Bay Area communities by offering programs in Jewish and interreligious subjects, but also “to work cooperatively with the programs at UCB and Stanford to create a Bay Area-wide Jewish studies community with national and international standing.”

1995 saw the fruit of some of Professor Biale’s most inspired efforts, with the launching of the Joint Doctoral Program (JDP) in Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, Berkeley. For the nearly two decades of its existence (it was dissolved in 2011), the JDP was among the most highly regarded Jewish studies doctoral programs in the world, attracting international applicants eager to study in a program famous both for its academic rigor and for its interest in some of the newest and most exciting methodologies and approaches

Taube Gift Expands Conference and Learning Possibilities

Thanks to a generous gift from the Taube Family Fund, the GTU has established the Taube Conference Center, providing upgraded space for conferences and other events that opens the GTU’s rich educational and interreligious opportunities to the wider public. The gift also enables the GTU to expand its commitment to flexible learning environments by upgrading existing classrooms and study rooms. The improved spaces will be equipped with technology similar to that of the Collaborative Learning Space in the GTU Library, which has been in high demand since it opened in January 2017.

Both the Hedco Room at 2465 Le Conte Avenue and the Conference Room on the second floor of the library will be upgraded to provide more flexible learning spaces for smaller groups, with movable furniture, video conferencing capabilities, and touch-screen displays. The Collaborative Learning Space will be augmented with a two-camera video conferencing system. Two study rooms on the first floor of the Library will be equipped with new furniture and built-in displays. Other rooms on campus will also see upgrades in technology. Dr. Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, director of digital learning and lecturer in theology & educational technology, is spearheading the renewal of these conference and classroom spaces.

Thank you to the Taube Family Fund for their generous gift, which will help provide state-of-the-art learning technologies and conference capabilities at the GTU. ♦



including feminism, queer studies, and postcolonialism. The JDP joined other programs at CJS as part of a distinctive learning community in which academic rigor was combined with religious celebrations, films, a literary salon, a student-run newspaper, and a wide range of cultural programming.

1995 was also the year of Professor Winston's retirement. Naomi Seidman, author of this article and a 1993 graduate of the UCB Department of Comparative Literature in Hebrew and Yiddish, was hired to replace him, and became director in 1999. By 2002, the faculty, which over this period included not only Seidman but also Rabbi Yoel Kahn, folklorist Dina Stein, and Byzantine scholar Joshua Holo, was running, or co-running four programs—the MA in Jewish Studies, the Jewish studies track in the GTU's PhD program, a one-year certificate program, and the JDP—with a total of thirty-six students enrolled (including eleven in the JDP).

The new millennium brought some changes: In 2006, Deena Aranoff, a graduate of Columbia University in Jewish history, was hired for what had become the medievalist position on the faculty. In 2007, Holger Zellentin was hired to teach rabbinics, a particular strength of the JDP, given the prominence of Daniel Boyarin at UCB. Since 2016, CJS has been under the able directorship of Professor Aranoff, whose status as a master teacher has brought CJS increasing visibility. With Professor Seidman's impending move to the University of Toronto, CJS will be recruiting new talent in the area of modern Jewish history and culture.

This recitation of faculty members and programs hardly does justice to the much larger roster of visiting scholars

A Place to Discover Your Voice

by Glennis Lamm

Words are inadequate to express the impact that the GTU—and, more specifically, the Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies—has had on my life. During my time at CJS, I have grown both as a person and as an academic. CJS is a place where one learns from others' vast academic wealth as well as from their rich personal experiences and viewpoints. I have sat at many tables (usually with some form of good food), and have listened to others present their views and interpretations on a wide array of topics. I grew so much simply from being present and engaging in these moments. I enjoyed the content of my classes immensely; however, it was the people and conversations that forever changed me.



Beyond being an endless well of valuable information, my professors at CJS cared that their transfer of their knowledge went beyond a surface level and sparked something deeper. You need only spend a few moments with Deena or Naomi to understand that they are facilitating something powerful at CJS. During my time here, the most impactful moments I had were sitting in Deena Aranoff's office, as we discussed the points—and often chaos—in my work. I still credit Deena's consistently potent questions and creative direction with actualizing my thesis. She never made me feel I was undertaking a losing battle, despite my own lingering fear that this might be the case. Instead, Deena made me feel I had a valuable voice to contribute to the larger academic community. As much of an undertaking and an accomplishment a thesis is, what I got from those moments under Deena's and Naomi's tutelage was much more valuable.

It is an incredible thing to write a thesis, but it is an even more incredible thing to believe you have something to contribute going forward. The Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies instills and nurtures that confidence in its students.

CJS is a place where people from every walk and ideology sit together at the table, both theoretically and physically, to build a community. It is a place where you will be challenged. It is a place that will change the way you see the world; things can no longer be one-dimensional, rather they are vibrantly nuanced. It is a place where you discover that you have a voice and, by extension, a place that beckons you to contribute. I'm eternally grateful that CJS is part of my life's story. ♦

Glennis Lamm is a recent MA graduate of CJS, and currently works as a freelance writer and speaker.

and teachers who offered courses at CJS during this period, including poet and translator Marcia Falk, scholar of Jewish spirituality Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, anthropologist of childhood Orit Yafeh, queer activist and Orthodox rabbi Steven Greenberg, the late mystic and activist Rabbi Alan Lew, filmmaker and former director of the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival Peter Stein, feminist activist Rachel Biale, and historian and theorist of Jewish education Hanan Alexander. The linguist Yitzkhok Niborski, Director of the Medem Institute in Paris, twice offered Yiddish intensive seminars.

The emphasis on training students in text skills, and particularly in rabbinic sources, continued, with courses by Ishai Rosen-Zvi and by Charlotte Fonrobert (a GTU graduate and long-time Chair of Jewish Studies at Stanford). CJS also offered summer and winter intensive programs in rabbinic studies, often led by Rabbi Benay Lappe. Building on its annual “Winter Beit Midrash” (led for years

by Rabbi Lappe), CJS was instrumental in launching The Winter Madrasa/Beit Midrash in 2005, on the theme of “Gender and Sexuality in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity,” and co-taught by Dr. Ghazala Anwar, Rabbi Lappe, and Dr. Mary Ann Tolbert.

Such collaborations laid the foundations for the shared work between CJS and the GTU’s Center for Islamic Studies, founded in 2007. The Madrasa-Midrasha program, organized by the two Centers, was only the centerpiece of a full range of cosponsored courses, events, lectures, holiday celebrations, and public programs that brought together the Jewish and Muslim Bay

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Area communities. In 2015 the founding of the Center for Dharma Studies enabled an even richer network of interreligious collaborations. Among the most memorable events have been programs on the environment, on sacred time, and on national and international politics.

Innovative initiatives like these owe much to the creativity and energy of our students. Beyond the quality of the work they produce (including many published theses and dissertations), student initiatives have been part of CJS and GTU from the beginning, from Holocaust Memorial services in the 1990s to the 2010 public Qur’an reading (organized by MA student Robin Braverman) in response to Islamophobic attacks. CJS graduates have gone on to teaching, community activism, rabbinical and ministerial positions, and writing careers.

To conclude on a more personal note: I have personally witnessed nearly half of CJS’s fifty years of existence (or a little more than half, if you count my years taking GTU classes as a UCB doctoral student). It is no exaggeration to say that to review this history in preparation for writing this article was also to review my life. As with everyone who has ever taught or spoken at the GTU, I feel keenly the uniqueness of this place I have been privileged to call my academic home since 1995.

Some of this uniqueness began, no doubt, at the very founding, with John Dillenberger’s insistence that Jewish Studies would be no “adjunct” but rather a full member of the consortium. Nearly three decades after making that statement, John served on the search committee that hired me and was a part of the welcome I received at the GTU

The Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies

CJS @ 50

Join the Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies at the GTU as we celebrate fifty years of scholarship, leadership, and public engagement. Our day-long conference will feature presentations by CJS alumni, students, and faculty, and a collaborative oral history of CJS. We will also honor those people whose vision and commitment have enabled CJS to thrive for this half-century, and we will conclude with a celebratory evening reception. Please join us!

Thursday, May 3, 2018 | 8:30am–6pm
Dinner Board Room, GTU Library,
2400 Ridge Rd., Berkeley

(although I was barely aware of his role in CJS's founding). But even thinking back to my first encounter with CJS, as a cross-registered student sitting around a seminar table in "the Annex" (where the Center for Islamic Studies is now housed) where Danny Matt and David Biale were co-teaching a medieval ethical text, I felt the Center's distinctiveness. It would take many more pages to put this quality in words. But I trust that even if this history has not allowed the reader to feel it, opportunities to experience this extraordinary learning community will continue to present themselves, now and for another century to come. ♦

Naomi Seidman is Koret Professor of Jewish Culture at the Graduate Theological Union's Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies and winner of the inaugural Borsch-Rast Book Prize. In the fall she will begin a new faculty position at the University of Toronto.

Over its fifty-year history, the GTU's Center for Jewish Studies has been upheld by the generosity of thousands of friends and donors. In particular, CJS wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the financial support of the Aaron and Marie Blackman Foundation, Joan W. and Richard S. Dinner, Patricia H. Gibbs, the Walter & Elise Haas Fund, the Crescent Porter Hale Foundation, the Hellman Foundation, Douglas Herst, William and Flora Hewlett, the Koret Foundation, Stephen Leavitt, Raquel H. Newman, the Bernard Osher Jewish Philanthropies Foundation, Miriam Roland, Tobey H. Roland, Rita R. Semel, the Swig Foundation, Tad Taube, the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, and the Laszlo N. Tauber Family Foundation.

Naomi Seidman Wins Inaugural Borsch-Rast Book Prize

Naomi Seidman, Koret Professor of Jewish Culture at the GTU's Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies, is the winner of the GTU's inaugural Borsch-Rast Book Prize for her book, *The Marriage Plot, Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (Stanford University Press). The newly established Borsch-Rast Book Prize is given annually and carries a cash award of \$10,000. The Borsch-Rast Book Prize seeks to encourage innovative and creative theological scholarship by GTU graduates and current faculty.

In announcing Seidman's receipt of the award, GTU Dean Uriah Y. Kim stated, "Naomi Seidman's *The Marriage Plot* is a worthy choice as the inaugural winner of the Borsch-Rast Prize, which is among the most generous book awards in the field of religion and theology. Dr. Seidman has set a very high bar for future winners to meet."

Members of the selection committee heralded Seidman's work for its profound exploration of Jewish cultural attitudes toward love, sex, and marriage. Margaret Miles, professor emerita of historical theology and former academic dean of the GTU declared: "*The Marriage Plot* demonstrates a complex connection between literature and romantic practices in nineteenth century European Jewish communities. But Seidman's thoughtful and intriguing revisions of such common assumptions



Naomi Seidman and Uriah Kim

as secularism, assimilation, and modernity extend far beyond her strong contribution to Jewish Studies. Readers are sure to be engaged, challenged, and persuaded to rethink our understanding of all sex-gender systems and how they circulate both in literary form and in the erotic choices we make."

Kathryn Barush, assistant professor of art history and religion at the Jesuit School of Theology-Santa Clara University and the Graduate Theological Union, was awarded an honorable mention for her book, *Art and the Sacred Journey in Britain, 1790-1850* (Routledge).

As this issue of *Skylight* went to press, the GTU was preparing to host the First Annual Borsch-Rast Book Lecture, featuring Daniel Boyarin, Judith Butler, and Naomi Seidman sharing perspectives on Seidman's award-winning book. Video of the event (held on March 22 at 6:30 pm in the chapel at Pacific School of Religion) will be available via the GTU website at www.gtu.edu/borsch-rast-lecture-2018. ♦