# Jewish Studies as an Interdisciplinary Project

***Interdisciplinarity is one of the key intellectual challenges of a field like Jewish studies which seeks to understand widely disparate cultural, geographic, chronological, and religious phenomenon. The richness of the enterprise is potentially threatened by eclecticism. Genuine comparison can give way to sweeping generalizations. The intellectual project will always raise important debates about sources and subjects of study. Two Jewish studies scholars comment on these issues through the lens of their own research.***

## Inside, Outside: Between the Disciplines

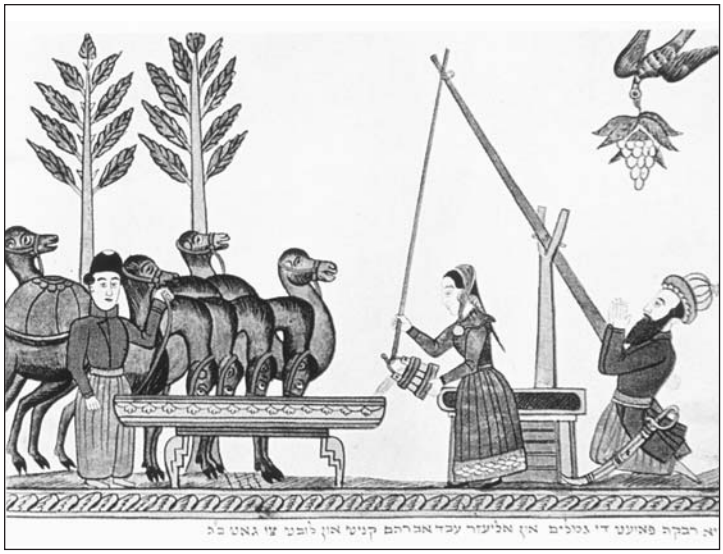
*Arnold Eisen*

If memory serves, my first exposure to the attractions of interdisciplinary scholarship came as an undergraduate in the early seventies. My teachers and mentors included a pioneering sociologist of medicine; a professor of "Am Civ" whose work combined political, economic, and cultural history; a social theorist who was as likely to analyze a painting by Cezanne as a passage from Weber or Freud; a scholar of modern Protestantism whose major book included history and philosophy as much as theology and New Testament studies; and a university president bent on new linkages among humanities, sciences, and professional schools. Research of this sort was a heady prospect for a student considering a career in the academy but worried that it would prove irrelevant or dull. Moving beyond and between existing disciplines seemed to guarantee intellectual excitement and to preclude the boredom of what Thomas S. Kuhn called "routine science." Interdisciplinary scholarship combined the promise of the new with the sheer pleasure of the transgression of crossing the line with the full blessing of teachers who had done so with exemplary results.

Thirty years and a dozen advisees later, my enthusiasm for intellectual boundary-violation remains, particularly if—as was the case with my role models—disciplines are crossed while pursuing answers to riddles that can be solved in no other way. Some of the most exciting scholarship I read, inside and outside of Jewish studies, flows from work of this sort, for example in the burgeoning literature on science and religion. Religious studies is by definition what one colleague calls a "field-encompassing field," pursuing its object with the help of insights and data garnered from the fields of anthropology, history, and psychology, among others. Think of the influence of anthropology on Jacob Milgrom's Biblical scholarship, or consult the bibliography in Moshe Idel's Messianic Mystics. On the other hand, it seems foolish to dismiss scholarship which is more discipline-bound just because it works squarely inside one field or methodology, however traditional. I am resolutely pragmatic when it comes to the issue of method. Show me the results, either way.

Then too, I have gained over the years a greater appreciation of the costs sometimes involved in interdisciplinary scholarship. There is, for one thing, the ever-present

danger of dilettantism. It is hard enough to get anything right when it comes to knowledge of an event or a social interaction. Books which skim the surface and miss what lies just below it, or sacrifice mastery of the basics because time and attention have been diverted too quickly to broader matters, fail to satisfy. As a teacher, I have found that the normal insecurity of graduate students—"Do I really know anything? Who am I to write about this?"—is best assuaged when they can point to a discrete body of material and skills which they have mastered, and on which their insight can usefully be brought to bear. Building up knowledge of texts, languages, historical developments, social groups, and theoretical literature, is an excruciatingly slow process, one that is hard enough without worrying about acquiring similar competence inside a second field—or even on its border.



Al´bom evreiskoi khudozhestvennoi stariny Semena An-skogo (= The Jewish Artistic Heritage Album by Semyon An-sky). ed. A. Kantsedikas, I. Serheyeva. Moskva : Mosty kul´tury, 2001. Plate 32

*Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library, University of Pennsylvania.*

The academy's professed interest in interdisciplinary research is rarely evident when job descriptions are set. Indeed, even when interdisciplinarity is explicitly sought, multidisciplinary scholarship is generally what is really wanted. Applicants are first asked to demonstrate mastery of a recognized body of knowledge or skills. Competence in a second discipline, through which one can usefully push against or past the borders of what a given field currently studies and how the field studies it, is seen as a bonus. New fields do occasionally arise as a result of disciplinary combinations, but for the most part existing fields are stretched rather than recombined into new ones. Departments do not die willingly. The onus always lies on the scholar who challenges the disciplinary status quo to prove that the challenge is necessary or even worthwhile.

True interdisciplinary work may have become both more and less common of late, for the simple reason that the parameters and paradigms of "normal" scholarship have loosened significantly. Attention to theoretical issues, for example, is an expected feature of work inside many disciplines. What theory of translation underlies a work of consummate translation, and why was it selected over others? Why was this particular set of superbly annotated texts chosen while other texts were omitted, and what notion of "text" guided the work? Challenges to disciplinary definition are rife, which means that disciplinary boundaries are blurred and border-crossings harder to identify. Cultural studies, by challenging the very notion of disciplinary mastery, and thereby the notion of interdisciplinary study, may well have raised the bar on quality of insight for everyone. If one is going to abandon the notion of mastery and invoke a competing standard, one's work had better be exceptionally smart and extremely interesting.

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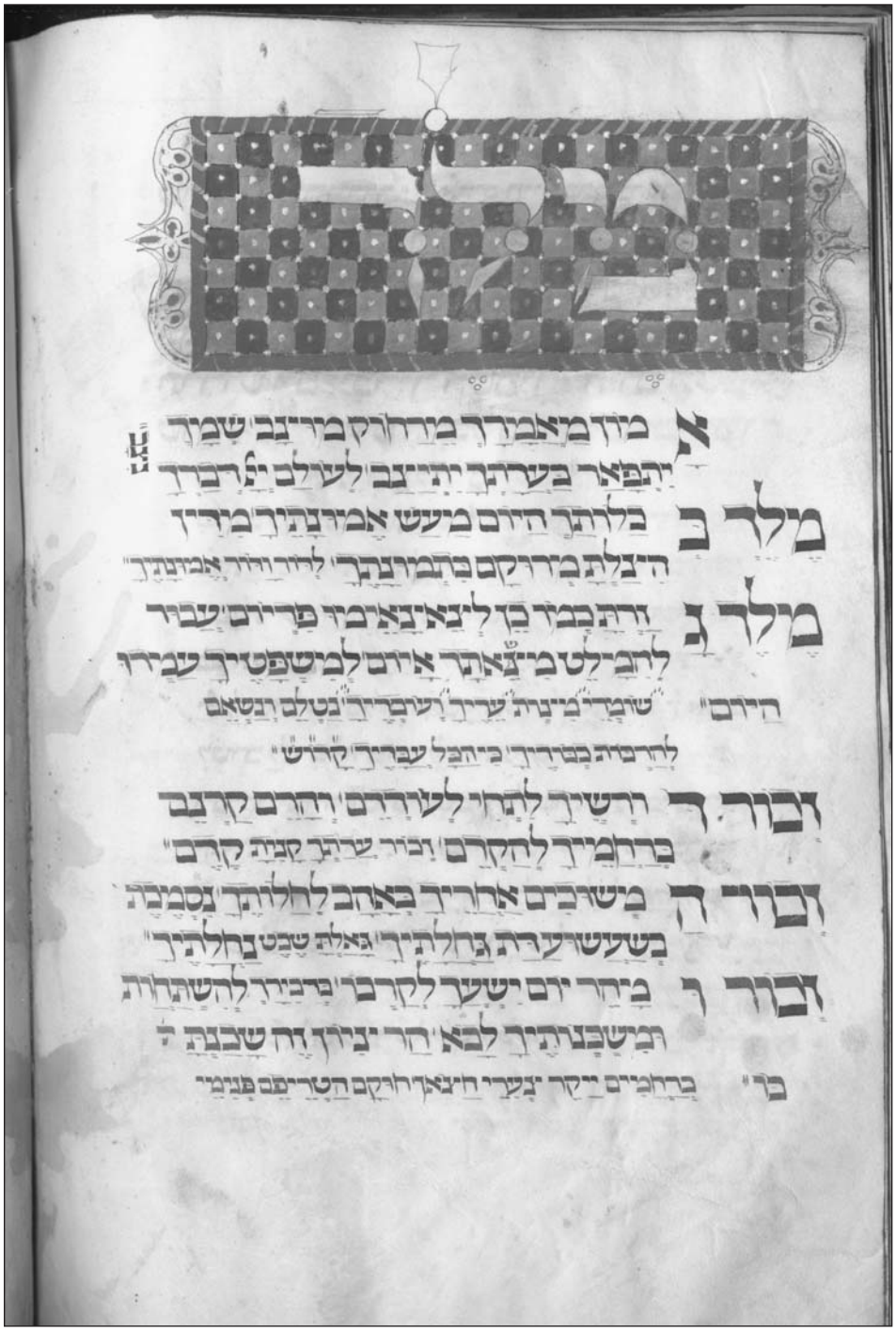
Graduate students who want to know how much knowledge and insight is enough to have their work count as excellent in a given field may learn that there are few fixed rules anymore; it all depends on what they are trying to accomplish. The definition of a project more often than not carries with it its own set of boundaries and standards—aesthetic, if you will—by which the project's completion or lack thereof can be judged.

As a Ph.D. student seeking a handle on the intellectual history of Judaism in twentieth-century America, I settled upon the topic of Jewish chosenness, which was admittedly congenial to me because I had ruminated about it since childhood, and my earlier research was related to Puritan thought, which was obsessed with it. I made that choice only when (1) a preliminary survey of elite and popular Jewish thought from the period I wished to study indicated that Jews argued more about this issue than any

other religious belief; and (2) it became clear that study of this material could prove helpful in addressing issues raised by a number of well-known sociologists of religion. I could have rested content with the works of recognized thinkers such as Abraham Joshua Heschel or Mordecai Kaplan but wanted to investigate rabbis, "laypeople," and secular intellectuals as well. That decision too carried consequences as to sorts of "data" to examine and methods of getting at it. At several junctures I tiptoed into additional investigations which might have yielded important insights (e.g. comparative study of other American ethnic and religious groups) but pulled back after quick feints in these directions for lack of time or proper training. In no case was I determined to engage in or to avoid interdisciplinary scholarship. My objective was to answer the questions I had posed. If I couldn't, I settled for questions I could answer.

Every scholar, perhaps more than ever before, must now make the case for each project's scope and character, and as always must satisfy readers that the questions entailed by the subject so defined have been asked and answered well. This is true "inside" as well as "between" disciplines. Jewish studies is thankfully replete with examples of excellent work of both sorts. For me, at this stage of my career, the pleasure of venturing into new fields has nothing to do with transgressing the rules of the game or with fomenting "scientific revolution." It consists in learning something new, getting it right, and conveying what I've learned to others—an experience no less available inside borders marked by scholarly predecessors long ago than it is outside or and across them.

*Arnold Eisen is the Daniel E. Koshland Professor in Jewish Culture and Religion, Stanford University*



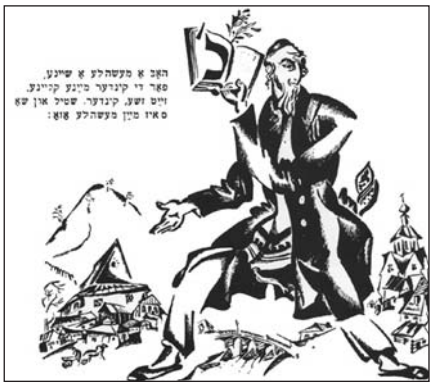
Franco-Ashkenaz Mahzor for Yom Kippur, 14th cent.
Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library, University of Pennsylvania.
MS382, fol.21 verso.

*Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library, University of Pennsylvania.*

# Challenging the Boundaries

*David Biale*

At one time, the field of Jewish studies could be subsumed under the title of "Leo Schwarz's Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People." The canon moved from the Bible, seen as a largely monovocal text, to the Talmud, medieval philosophy and codes, and finally, the emergence of modern Jewish thought. To be sure, Gershom Scholem overturned some of these verities by introducing the irrational, in the form of Jewish mysticism, into the equation, but once these mystics had been sufficiently domesticated, they, too, could take their place among the "great men" and their works among the "great texts." While literary scholars might join historians and philosophers, what we mean today by interdisciplinarity—namely, the examination of a culture in all its registers with the use of a wide range of disciplinary techniques—was virtually unheard of.



Yingl tsingl khvat, by Mani Leib.Varshe : Kultur lige, 1918. p.1, illustration by El Lissitzky

*Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library, University of Pennsylvania.*

I want to use the example of *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, a work that I edited recently for Schocken Books, to illustrate a different approach to Jewish culture, one that draws from contemporary cultural studies. This volume includes contributions by historians, an archaeologist, art historians, folklorists, and several literary scholars. Among the historians, some study intellectual history, others cultural or social. This is, in short, a diverse crowd, deliberately selected for that purpose based on the assumption that a subject as broad as Jewish culture requires approaches from a whole variety of disciplinary angles. High culture does not exhaust the subject; one must look as well at folk traditions. Literary culture needs to be evaluated together with the visual and the quotidian. The history of women, material culture, folklore, and popular practices takes its place at the table together with men, texts, and ideas. In general, no single scholar can accomplish this Herculean task. To be sure, each of these scholars approached his or her subject from a particular disciplinary vantage point, but the aggregate, rather than the individual parts, may be said to subject Jewish culture to a much broader definition than those of earlier synoptic works.

Beyond the array of disciplines, several common features characterize this project as an interdisciplinary work. First, Jewish culture emerges as at once unified and fragmented. Each geographical and temporal culture has its own unique characteristics, often determined by interaction with its surroundings, but such centrifugal forces exist in dynamic interaction with the centripetal. Thus, the power of local custom competed with a relatively universal legal tradition. But this rather unsurprising proposition about the unifying effect of elite rabbinic culture takes on an unexpected dimension with popular culture. As Shalom Sabar demonstrates in his essay on childbirth customs, far flung Jewish communities—from Yemen to Poland—made use of the same magical texts and practices, even as they painted them with their own local colors. Thus, on the level of folklore, Jewish culture had its unifying elements as well.

Second, every Jewish culture evolved in dynamic interaction with the surrounding cultures of the majorities among whom the Jews lived, a process Gerson D. Cohen provocatively defined a generation ago as "the blessings of assimilation." If Jewish culture is not merely the result of an internal, autochtonous process, then scholarship in the field must venture beyond its limited—one is tempted to say "ghettoized"—boundaries, and the scholar of Jewish studies must necessarily develop an expertise in the larger historical framework in which his or her subject resides. And disciplines like anthropology, which have pioneered in comparative methods, become especially relevant in trying to understand the particularities of Jewish culture in light of universal categories.

In addition, cultural interaction can be found on all levels of Jewish culture. Several scholars who have written on Jewish culture in the Muslim Mediterranean remind us how thoroughly Arabized this culture was, so that practices we assume to be particular to Jews—such as the genizah—have their analogues among the Arabs. Those pillars of Jewish history such as Saadia and Maimonides developed their philosophies of Jewish particularity in what was a universal intellectual idiom. In a similar way, popular practices such as pilgrimages to the graves of saints in Morocco were rituals of Jewish identity virtually identical to those of Muslims.

This concept of cultural interaction departs from Louis Finkelstein's "Jewish contributions to civilization," because it assumes much more multidirectional trajectories of influence. Indeed, the very word "influence" may be misplaced since no culture is merely a sponge that absorbs what surrounds it. On the contrary, Jewish culture, like all minority cultures, must be understood as part of a larger cultural system, an organ within a larger body rather than an independent organism. The issue is not influence but interaction.

One rereading of the cultural system leads us to understand the encounter in the State of Israel between Jews from all parts of the world as revealing that Jews are not only products of Western culture. Where earlier histories told little of the stories of Jews of North Africa, the Middle East, and Ethiopia, we now understand that Jewish culture has no single geographical center.
Moreover, the emergence in Israel of political and cultural movements of Middle Eastern Jews (of which the Shas Party is only the most visible) has brought to our consciousness a whole folk culture that many Western Jews thought had disappeared with modernity. The use of amulets in Israel elections has aroused a fear of the "primitive," a return of the culturally repressed. But as Eli Yassif shows in his essay on folk cultures in the State of Israel, it is not only the Jews of Middle Eastern origin who construct the world according to such folk beliefs and practices; understanding Israeli society as a whole requires an examination of popular culture together with the "high" culture of the Zionist revival of Hebrew.

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Bringing to bear a variety of non-traditional disciplines and questions onto the field of Jewish studies has uncovered the extraordinary diversity that comes from interaction with the non-Jewish world and from the different registers of Jewish culture. I would argue that it is precisely this diversity of Jewish expressions—from the religious to the secular, from the autonomous to the borrowed, from the "sublime" to the disreputable—that constitutes the vitality of our subject. And, indeed, the contemporary academic debate over these questions is yet one more proof that such creative struggle remains as alive in the world of Jewish scholarship as it does outside it.

*David Biale is the Emanuel Ringelblum Professor of Jewish History and Director of Jewish Studies at University of California, Davis.*