

YIDDISH/JEWISH CULTURES: A GRADUATE STUDENT CONFERENCE

Shiri Goren, Hannah Pressman, and Lara Rabinovitch

What's in a name? As organizers of a Yiddish studies conference-in-the-making, our first thorny question was how best to name the gathering. We wanted to emphasize the focus on Yiddish, but not to the exclusion of other terrains of Jewish studies; we sought papers on modern Jewish culture and history, but struggled with the geographical and chronological boundaries of those terms. To encapsulate the fascinating multiplicity of the field, we decided upon the title, *Yiddish / Jewish Cultures: Literature, History, Thought in Eastern European Diasporas*.



The three graduate student organizers of Yiddish/Jewish Cultures: Shiri Goren, Hannah Pressman, and Lara Rabinovitch, all Ph.D. students at NYU's Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies.

As signified by the slash in our title, the complicated nexus between "Yiddish" and "Jewish" became an issue at the heart of the conference, hosted by the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University on February 26–27, 2006. Our graduate student and postdoctoral colleagues

presented on topics as varied as poetry, education, cabaret, film, and the Holocaust. Their research spanned much of the globe, ranging from Vilna to Paris, Warsaw to Tel Aviv, and Helsinki to New York. These diasporas represent the varied points of origin of the presenters themselves: nearly half of our thirty-two participants came from outside the United States, defying our modest expectations that the conference would draw mainly Northeast-based students. The conference thus provided an opportunity to showcase the interdisciplinary methodologies that a new generation of scholars is using to research Yiddish-related

topics not only in North America, but all over the world as well.

Diaspora was therefore a common theme throughout the paper presentations. The creative scheduling of the conference sessions allowed participants to make intellectual links between the Yiddish communities of

Montreal and Johannesburg, among other diverse geographical areas. The range of academic topics and themes presented was wide, including the Yiddish press; Yiddish science books and other models of education; African Americans in Yiddish literature; iconographic images of the violin in Yiddish visual

culture; culinary language hybridization; Yiddish theatre; theories of Yiddish culture; Yiddish conferences of the early twentieth century; Yiddish film melodrama; and studies of Yiddish literature, including *Der Nister*, Deborah Vogel, Israel Aksenfeld, David Fogel, and Kadya Molodovsky.

The rigorous level of scholarship and breadth of topics reflect the new approaches these emerging scholars are bringing to the field of Yiddish studies as they dialogue with other academic disciplines. Themes of gender, performativity, and transnationalism inform their work, which is often based on multimedia sources and multidisciplinary interactions.

Besides diverse conference sessions, the conference featured a keynote address by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet entitled "Yiddish Studies: Towards a 21st Century Mandate." The Israeli group Sala-Manca (discussed by Jeffrey Shandler in the Spring 2006 issue of *AJS Perspectives*) presented a unique digital art performance on the Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever. The second day of the conference featured a lively roundtable discussion moderated by Hasia Diner on the question, "What does the field of Yiddish Studies mean in the 21st century?" The faculty participants included Jeremy Dauber, Gennady Estrakh, Kathryn Hellerstein, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, David Roskies, and Jeffrey Shandler. While providing a stimulating and often humorous coda to the conference sessions, their comments also emphasized the challenging reality of teaching (about) Yiddish in contemporary university settings. The conference concluded with a book party celebrating recent scholarly publications in the field.

We see our conference on Yiddish / Jewish Cultures as a model for the way in which departmental support

can provide graduate students important leadership opportunities. Thanks to the mentorship we received, we ran a successful interdisciplinary event that among

conference sponsors demonstrates how different branches of Jewish studies within and outside of our academic institution came together in creating this special event. The

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other things taught us the meaning of academic collaboration. In planning the conference we worked

conference was principally sponsored by New York University's Skirball Department of Hebrew and



Panel on Yiddish Text and Context:
Itay Zutra (JTS), Dara Horn (Harvard), Beverly Bailis (JTS).

primarily with Gennady Estraiikh, the Rauch Associate Professor of Yiddish Studies at NYU, but we also benefited from the input and encouragement of such faculty as Hasia Diner, David Engel, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Lawrence Schiffman. We would also like to thank the incredible departmental administrative team of Shayne Figueroa and Diane Leon-Ferdico.

Planning the conference also exposed us to the delicate art of seeking and securing funding for academic gatherings. The variety of

Judaic Studies with the support of the Melvin Rauch Foundation, Inc. The NYU Graduate School of Arts and Science, the Goldstein-Goren Center for American Jewish History, and the Taub Center for Israel Studies at NYU also provided generous support. In addition, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

and the Yiddish Forward partially sponsored the conference. The assistance of all of these institutions, in addition to their generous financial support, enabled us to think “outside the box” regarding the scope of the conference, its programming, and publicity.

Yiddish / Jewish Cultures was a meeting of minds, a gathering that enabled a dynamic group of emerging scholars to engage with each other and with several faculty members. It was also a unique opportunity to grapple with the “metaquestions” concerning the

field of Yiddish studies. In two significant ways, the conference attests to the fascinating politics of choosing Yiddish. Many of the papers explored the personal politics and public consequences of choosing Yiddish as a means of cultural expression in various places and times in Jewish history. However, the conference also demonstrated the contemporary politics of choosing Yiddish as an academic field of study, at a time when the borderlines between Yiddish and other disciplines are particularly fluid. Therefore, this conference was not just a milestone for the graduate students who participated in it; it was also an important moment for Yiddish studies, and hence Jewish studies as well.

Hannah Pressman and Shiri Goren are Ph.D. candidates in modern Hebrew literature at NYU. Lara Rabinovitch is a Ph.D. candidate in modern Jewish history at NYU. Following the success of the conference, they were awarded the 2006 NYU President's Service Award for Programming.

The full Yiddish / Jewish Cultures conference schedule may be accessed at: <http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/hebrew/YiddishConf.html>

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