

# FORUM RESPONSE

Paula E. Hyman

Last summer the American Association for Jewish Research's graduate student seminar framed its seminar as the interplay of the global and the local in Jewish studies. As I read these discussions of Jewish studies undergraduate majors in a variety of American settings, I was struck by that very tension. There is both commonality (the global) and diversity (the local). All, however, reflect general developments in American higher education.

It is striking that even the veteran Jewish studies major, at Brandeis University, is of postwar vintage. It was virtually impossible as late as the 1960s and 1970s for college students to put together a coherent program in Jewish studies, including at American institutions that boasted the presence of a renowned scholar. The current older generation of professors in the various fields of Jewish studies acquired at least part of their education under Jewish auspices, either at rabbinical schools or in Jewish-sponsored educational settings such as the Hebrew colleges. That is no longer the case. Large public universities and large and small private universities and colleges located throughout the country offer students a wide range of courses that are shaped by the standards of the American academy. American programs in Jewish studies rightly define themselves as embracing the goals of the American liberal arts curriculum, which endorses a critical perspective

and a pluralistic approach to learning not shared by all Jewish communal educational institutions.

All of the programs profiled here were described as interdisciplinary. This choice of terminology follows the trend in American universities to privilege the interdisciplinary (or the multidisciplinary), perhaps because of the recognition that the division



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of humanistic learning into discrete disciplines does not reflect the ways we learn or think. It also suggests that the study of Jewish historical, cultural, and spiritual experience requires diverse approaches. Jewish studies is a form of cultural or area studies, more akin to American studies or religious studies, which presume that multiple methodologies are necessary for their study, than to traditional fields like history or sociology. The recognition of the interdisciplinary nature of Jewish studies is quite appropriate and promotes further research, but it also raises the question of what enables students in Jewish studies programs or departments, with their diversified

courses, to feel that they participate in a common field.

Jewish studies undergraduate programs use one or two methods to provide a sense of a common field and to lay the foundation for further exploration of Jewish culture. Most offer historical survey courses that are required for majors. History has thus become the tie

that binds students with widely different interests together in the field of Jewish studies. Hebrew would seem likely to perform the same function, but not all programs include a required, rigorous study of Hebrew. Yiddish, which is not readily available on most American campuses in any case, does not link Jewish culture from different periods or places.

The local context plays a major role in the impressively different ways that faculty shape a Jewish studies major. Size of the institution and the demography of the student population seem to be the most salient characteristics that differentiate programs.

Larger universities have multiple options in devising ways to study Jewish culture, in creating several tracks within one major and in integrating Jewish studies as a track in other departments. They have the luxury of deciding among many possibilities in expanding their offerings. The presence of Jewish day school graduates in significant numbers along with students with little prior preparation requires innovation in designing courses and curricula. That our students include the "simply curious," Jews as well as non-Jews, is part of the normalization of Jewish studies that has taken place in the American academy.

The proliferation of Jewish studies

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in American universities in the past twenty-five years has been part of a broader recognition in American higher education of the need to expand our concept of the liberal arts curriculum to include cultures once deemed marginal to the

American (or more broadly, Western) experience. One phenomenon that these articles surprisingly did not mention is the emergence of large numbers of female scholars in the field and the adoption of gender as both an

analytic tool and a subject of study, again a reflection of broad changes in the American academy. I am happy that the discussion of what constitutes a Jewish studies curriculum appropriate for American college students has begun in these pages. I hope that we can extend the discussion to AJS meetings.

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