Ethnographic Sketches from the Future of Jewish Studies

Marcy Brink-Danan

Fourteen untenured Jewish studies scholars from institutions across the country sat together in high-end office chairs in the glassy conference room. Everything was new: the ultramodern space, the participants' acquisition of their academic positions, and, of course, the concept of bringing us together at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan for the first American Academy for Jewish Research (AAJR) Workshop for Early Career Faculty in Jewish Studies.

With one hundred exams still ungraded, I joined the workshop on the tail of my first year in a tenure-track position in Judaic studies and anthropology at Brown University. I soon realized that grading would have to wait; Deborah Dash Moore (University of Michigan) and David Stern (University of Pennsylvania) guided and mentored the participants over the four-day workshop (May 13–16, 2007), whose intensive schedule included the sharing of intellectual biographies, presentation of academic papers, and brainstorming about pedagogy.

Over the course of the workshop, we managed to address three questions pertinent to all scholars in Judaic studies: How did we get here? What do we have in common? And, where are we going? These questions must not have come as a surprise to participant Shaul Kelner, who researches the sociology of American Jewish communal organizations. Nonetheless, when asking them with respect to an academic field, interesting patterns form.

How Did We Get Here?

Each participant was allotted fifteen minutes to share his or her intellectual genealogy. Many narratives centered on a formative Israel experience. For some, learning Hebrew (and, sometimes, other Jewish languages) opened doors to formerly forbidding texts and cultures. Multilingual competency is a prerequisite for much of the work we do in Jewish studies.

AAJR Workshop for Early Career Faculty in Jewish Studies, May 2007. Photo courtesy of Matt Weingarten.

Some credited their teachers for having guided them, such as participant Rachel Havrelock, whose encounter with Yehuda Amichai led her to realize that her future would be in Bible studies and not, as she expected, poetry. Participants noted the critical role of modeling and mentoring in Jewish studies; Dash Moore reminded us that our cohort benefited from previous generations that struggled to establish Jewish studies as a legitimate academic field.

What Do We Share?

Immediately before joining the workshop, I served on a committee in Brown's Judaic studies program for selecting the best student essay, judging submissions from history, literature, and rabbinics. I was forced to read with interdisciplinary eyes, a technique honed in Ann Arbor. A central feature of the meeting included the scholarly presentation and discussion of a sample of each participant's work. Workshop organizers paired presenters with discussants from obviously disparate disciplinary backgrounds: philosophers critiqued anthropologists, sociologists challenged historians, and linguists provoked literary critics. Discussants uniformly opened their remarks with a sheepish disclaimer: "This isn't my field; please accept my humble attempts to think like you." If I work on contemporary Turkish Jewry, how thoughtfully should I be able to discuss the landscape of Yiddish modernism, Maimonides' response to Saadiah, or

Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*? In a profession where we are judged on our ability to become experts, anxiety about not knowing enough is especially acute in an interdisciplinary field like Jewish studies, as Arnold Eisen has noted.

I responded to Indiana University professor Chaya Halberstam's apparently brilliant paper about rabbinic law. I say "apparently" because, by engaging with the essay, I swam into unchartered waters. Luckily, Halberstam's use of critical theory, a sort of intellectual Esperanto, offered me a lifesaver. When workshop participants brought different methods and sources to the table, critical theory offered us a common tongue.

As a collective, we agreed that, despite the commonality of something "Jewish" about all our subjects of research, the challenge of talking across disciplines was daunting but also refreshing. Not only do we use different methods to order our kaleidoscope of possible primary source material (ethnographic data, survey statistics, fiction, archival documents, classical and philosophical texts), we also come to our subjects with varying opinions about what is Jewish about them. What counts as a source-text (or, perhaps, source *material*) in Jewish studies?

Every good workshop produces a term that, at sessions' close, participants promise never again to utter. For our group, this term was *boundaries*. As we attempted to rethink the boundaries of the field, the issue of boundaries concurrently emerged in our respective research projects. Legal, rabbinic, spatial, literary, social, and linguistic "boundary work" characterize many participants' intellectual concerns. Are boundaries what constitute Jewish thought, culture, and practice? Are boundaries what preoccupy us as scholars?

If every meeting of scholars has a stated goal, what participants discuss *outside* of the official forum also reflects their mutual concerns. Over drinks at a local bar, lovers of Zion and supporters of Palestinian statehood (and, of course, those who are both) expressed concern about how to discuss Israel in the academy. When we brought this issue back to the conference room, participants bemoaned the fact that sensitivity about the "Israel problem" led to mutual silences on the campus. At a time when the campus might be a place for people with differing views to discuss Israel productively, fear of negative judgments on the part of senior colleagues or bad teaching reviews as a result of our political support of or opposition to Israel kept many participants from taking a public stance. This concern seemed particularly acute because of our delicate status as untenured faculty.

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An arranged meeting between workshop participants and a major donor to Jewish studies opened our early career eyes to the process of funding university research, department chairs, and individual research. Although we tend to imagine our relationship to funders as innocent, donors' charitable goals do not always neatly map onto researchers' intellectual goals. Participants discussed their sometimes uneasy relationship with colleagues envious of money poured into Jewish studies departments (including Israel studies programs) when so many other ethnic studies programs go underfunded.

Ongoing Professionalization of Jewish Studies: Where Are We Going?

A number of workshop participants questioned whether or not they were Jewish studies scholars, preferring to identify with the discipline in which they trained. This rejection of affiliation raises a troubling question: Who, among today's Jewish studies scholars, is comfortable with the title itself (and why)?

Despite these doubts, most workshop participants had an official Jewish studies position or taught at an institution dedicated to Jewish learning, testifying to the relationship between institutional support, research produced, and positions created. This support remains important as a number of participants recalled their initial job searches as frustrating attempts to prove to their home discipline that Jews are, in anthropologist Levi-Strauss's terms, "good to think with." Some mentioned the de-Judaification of curriculum vitae, syllabi, or affiliations in order to make themselves competitive on the non-Jewish studies academic job market.

Recognizing that our disciplinary training influences not only our scholarly research but also our teaching methods, the last part of the workshop involved group discussion of pedagogy in which we reworked syllabi with participants in similar fields. This session enabled us to share knowledge about what worked in the classroom and specifically focused on how we teach Judaism to diverse student populations.

The group size allowed for intimacy and frank conversation about the goals, challenges, and visions for Judaic studies. Our time in Michigan created a camaraderie with colleagues who, by virtue of the workshop, became future allies. While many of us balked at the packed schedule, this intensity created an atmosphere of "communitas" in which ideas flowed freely and social barriers came down. As participant Beth Berkowitz (Talmud and Rabbinics, Jewish Theological Seminary) put it, "Sometimes it seems to me that my scholarship represents my own idiosyncratic brand of concerns, but interdisciplinary workshops make it clear that there's actually something bigger going on . . . a zeitgeist that I am unconsciously participating in. I imagine when future scholars look at what we write it will be clear as day, in the way that when you read scholarship from the past you can see the sociology of the scholarship. But I think interdisciplinary settings are helpful in that they make it easier to see our work with this kind of perspective."

The workshop provided a space in which untenured Jewish studies scholars could strategize about the years ahead. Since the workshop ended, organizers have created a listserv enabling participants to communicate about conferences, publishing, and pedagogy. Informally, contacts made during the workshop have led to peer editing of works-in-progress and commissioned articles. This model could be adopted and extended to offer more early career scholars in Jewish studies the institutional and social support needed to propel the field in creative directions.

Our workshop's final academic presentation, given by Oren Kosansky, focused on the role of *mahia,* a beverage consumed in Morocco, as a link between Jewish and Berber identities. This talk exemplified core concerns of the workshop: the question of boundaries, methods, and, of course, what is "Jewish." Following Joshua Shanes' historical review of early Ukrainian-Jewish rapprochement, Kosansky's presentation highlighted the methodological breadth that Jewish studies scholars bring to the table by serving the beverage to participants, who enjoyed a taste of ethnographic fieldwork and toasted *"l'chaim"* to long careers.

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