FROM THE DIRECTORS

The past year was a banner year for American University’s Jewish Studies Program and Center for Israel Studies (CIS). CIS celebrates its 15th anniversary this year and community response has been tremendous to our many public events exploring Israel in all its complexities. In September 2013 Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren opened the extraordinary Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art exhibition in the AU Museum, attended by over 3,400 visitors. This was followed by our Abensohn Chair Inaugural lecture series, “The Founders of Israel and Their Relevance Today” with renowned scholars from Israel, England and the United States. We invite you to join us soon, as we shed a spotlight on modern Israel.

The wide national attention received by the publication of Richard Breitman’s and Allan Lichtman’s FDR and the Jews exemplifies the cutting edge scholarship of our Jewish Studies faculty. Our scholarship and work in the classroom is augmented by regular public programs open to the community exploring Jewish civilizations and the Jewish experience in its historical and contemporary contexts.

Our accomplishments rest on your continued generous support. Please consider gifts to the Center for Israel Studies and Jewish Studies Program to sustain these vital efforts.

Scholars Discuss Evolving Israel Studies Programs

Excerpted from Washington Jewish Week, with author’s permission
by Eric Hal Schwartz

One hundred Israel and Judaic studies scholars and educators came together March 3 at the “Israel Studies and Jewish Studies in America” conference at American University to examine the linkages and views of Israel studies as a separate academic field from Judaic studies. Attendees came from academic institutions as widespread geographically as the sponsors, AU’s Center for Israel Studies and Jewish Studies Program, the Israel Institute (Jerusalem and Washington) and Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. Speakers included prominent experts from Brandeis University (Ilan Troen and Sylvia Barak Fishman), UCLA (Arnold Band and Arieh Saposnik), NYU (Ronald Zweig and Hasia Diner) University of Texas (Ami Pedahzur), and University of Maryland (Yoram Peri and Marsha Rosenblit) among others.

American University president Neil Kerwin welcomed the conference attendees and highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of the subjects under discussion, while Michael Brenner, conference chair and incoming Abensohn Chair in Israel Studies at AU, spoke about the rise of Israel Studies programs like the one AU pioneered and how they have adapted over time.

“When I was a student, Israel studies was not an established discipline,” he said. “Today however, there are programs in Israel and all over the U.S. and more established all the time in Great Britain and in Europe. Interdisciplinary studies are the key to successful Israel studies programs, the speakers agreed.”

Today however, there are programs in Israel and all over the U.S. and more established all the time in Great Britain and in Europe. Interdisciplinary studies are the key to successful Israel studies programs, the speakers agreed, elaborating that while undeniably linked to the Jews, the country has developed a complex culture and heritage all its own, which should be acknowledged even as it draws from Judaic and regional studies.

Politicization of Israel studies and the concerns over where scholarship turns into advocacy motivated many questions by attendees of the conference, and the speakers spent a lot of time addressing those concerns. They repeatedly emphasized the essential need for academic objectivity for scholars and academics looking at the politics of Zionism and Israel, though they acknowledged it can be contentious.

The conference was sponsored by the Bender Foundation in loving memory of Sondra Dosik Bender, longtime American University trustee, with additional support from the Israel Institute and Salo W. and Jeanette M. Baron Foundation.
Israel on the World Stage

While Israel is increasingly renowned for more than merely conflict (see page four), there is great interest at American University in politics and security issues, especially during this time of transition in the greater Middle East. This past year hundreds of students flocked to CIS programs which explored Israel, its society and its relationship with a globalizing world.

In November 2012 SIS Dean Goldgeier moderated a standing room only panel discussion on “Israel, Iran and the Bomb” featuring Natan Sachs (Brookings Institution), Michael Singh (Washington Institute for Near East Policy) Trita Parsi (National Iranian American Council), and Sharon Weiner, SIS. These Middle East experts provided a spectrum of perspectives on the topic and cleared some of the “fog of war” that surrounds this increasingly threatening situation. Two weeks later Goldgeier sat down for a post-election discussion with Ambassador Dennis Ross on “US Policy in the Middle East during the Second Obama Administration” before a mostly student audience of two hundred.

The Israeli elections prompted a lively “Israeli Post-Election Analysis: So What’s New?” panel co-sponsored by CIS and SIS. Natan Sachs and Hilary Krieger, The Jerusalem Post’s Washington Bureau Chief, discussed the post-election landscape with SIS Dean James Goldgeier.

CIS hosted lectures by two Israeli security experts, Dan Schueftan (University of Haifa/Goldman Visiting Israeli Scholar, Georgetown University), presenting on “Israel and the New Middle East,” and Jonathan Fine of The Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, who contrasted religious and secular agenda terror. Schueftan detailed his decades-old recommendation that Israel unilaterally relinquish the West Bank to retain a Jewish majority in territory under its jurisdiction.

The year culminated with a student–moderated panel discussion, “Reflections on Israel at 65: Can President Obama Revive the Israeli/Palestinian Peace Process?” which brought together four AU professors (Dan Arbell, Schusterman Israeli Scholar in Residence, Mohamed Nimer, SPEx, Guy Ziv, SIS, and Adina Friedman, SIS) to examine the prospects for Israeli/Palestinian peace, as well as Israel’s relations with other countries in the region.

On April 29, 2013, Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren sat down with political talk show host David Gregory, SIS ’92, for a filmed segment of “Meet the Press at SIS.”

The spirited discussion was presented as part of the university’s celebration of the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy’s “Strategy of Peace” address. The speech, delivered at AU’s 49th Commencement on June 10, 1963, a mere five months before his assassination, is considered one of Kennedy’s finest orations.

A Princeton-trained historian, Ambassador Oren offered regional context while urging the audience to consider history when evaluating the legacy of turmoil in the Middle East.

After a lively question and answer session which included queries posted to Twitter, Oren left the crowd with one message about the Middle East: “Things can improve. They can move for the better,” he said. “Don’t lose hope.” The interview can be viewed in its entirety at http://www.american.edu/cas/israelstudies/news/video.cfm.

Photos by Jeff Watts
News From the Faculty

Boaz Atzili, School of International Service (SIS), published “Triadic Deterrence: Coercing Strength, Beaten by Weakness,” in Security Studies 21, No. 2 (June 2012).


Michael Brenner, Department of History, Seymour and Lillian Abensohn Chair in Israel Studies (CAS), was elected International President of the Leo Baeck Institute.

Erran Carmel, Department of Information Technology (KSB) presented a paper, “Time-Zone Challenged Workplace: What We Know & What We Don’t,” at the Israel Association of Information Systems conference in Haifa.

Calvin Goldscheider, scholar in residence for CIS and the Jewish Studies program is completing the book Emergent Israeli Society: Nation Building and Ethnic Transformation.

Gershon Greenberg has been appointed the Dorsett Fellow in Jewish Religious Thought at Oxford University for the Trinity Term 2013 and visiting professor to the Department of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University of Jerusalem for Spring 2014.

Gail Humpries Mardirosian, Department of Performing Arts (CAS), directed American University students and alumni in “Signs of Life”, a new drama (book by Peter Ullian, lyrics by Len Schiff and Music by Joel Derfner) about the Terezin ghetto. Performances occurred on campus during May and then in Prague during July as part of the International Psychoanalytical Association’s Annual conference.

Alan Kraut, Department of History (CAS), President of the Organization of American Historians, taught at Northeast Normal University in Changchun, China in June 2013.

Lisa Leff, Department of History and Jewish Studies Program (CAS), published “Rescue or Theft? Zosa Szajkowski and the Salvaging of French Jewish History” in Jewish Social Studies (Vol. 18, No. 2 (Winter 2012).

Robert I. Lerman, Professor of Economics (CAS), presented a seminar on “Why Israel Should Expand Apprenticeship” at the Brookdale Institute in Jerusalem on May 21, 2013.

Alan Levine, Department of Government, (SPA), directs AU’s Political Theory Institute.

Richard Linowes, Department of Management (KSB), directs Kogod’s Sustainability Management program, which builds upon CIS’s successful 2012 conference “Israeli Innovation in Greentech.”

Pamela S. Nadell, Patrick Clendenen Chair in Women’s and Gender History (CAS) published, with Kate Haulman, Making Women’s Histories: Beyond National Perspectives (New York University Press).


Herman Schwartz, Washington College of Law, founded and continues to oversee the Israel-U.S. Civil Liberties Law program, now named the Herman Schwartz Human Rights Law Fellowship Program.

Maina Singh, (SIS), delivered the keynote address on “Being Indian, Being Israeli: Indian Jews in Israel” at the JSIA and Middle-East Institute (MEI) Delhi Conference.

Myra Sklarew, professor emerita, Department of Literature (CAS) wrote the introduction to The New Promised Land: An Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poets, (Continuum Press,)

Jeffrey K. Sosland, School of Professional and Extended Studies (SPExS), taught International Politics of Water and focused on shared Israeli-Palestinian water resources.

Howard M. Wachtel, professor emeritus, Department of Economics (CAS), chairs the Association for Israel Studies Task Force on Israel Studies Centers & Professors.

Guy Ziv, SIS, directs the SIS Summer Abroad in Israel Program, and has launched the Israel National Security Project (INSP).

IN MEMORIAM Rita James Simon

We mourn the loss of our colleague, Rita James Simon, described by Provost Scott A. Bass as “one of our most exemplary senior scholars, a woman who has been one of the great thought leaders of her many interdisciplinary fields, from Justice, Law and Society to Sociology, and Legal Studies.” Rita Simon was one of the most prolific scholars at AU, with 68 academic books and more than 275 articles. A recipient of both Guggenheim and Ford Foundation Fellowships, she was a prominent public intellectual who made a real difference in fields ranging from juries, to social science methodology and data use in Supreme Court opinions, transracial adoptions, women and crime, the death penalty, immigration--with particular attention to Russian and Soviet Jewish immigration--and even Renaissance women in science.
The Center for Israel Studies brought together the Departments of Literature and Performing Arts in September 2012 to unpack the work of acclaimed Israeli poet and lyricist (“Erev Shel Shoshanim”) Moshe Dor. Dor, 80, is author of 40 books of poetry and children’s verse, recipient of Israel’s top literary prizes, and was formerly distinguished writer in residence at American University.

The occasion was prompted by a new translation of Dor’s poetry by Barbara Goldberg, MFA ’85, visiting writer in the MFA program. Goldberg read several of Dor’s poems from her recent translation, Scorched by the Sun, which were also recited in Hebrew. She described reading the works of Dor as “to breathe, taste and smell Israel... a land where hope and terror live side by side.” One of those poems was “Poppy.”

In the heart’s field of stubble blooms a lone poppy. Look at it. Carve its valor on memory’s slate: upright, solitary, red, despite not knowing if, or when, it will perish from the world of flora. Indeed, this is my Land of Israel, staunch in the face of reality, refusing to become a work of art: a single poppy in the heart’s field of stubble.

The AU Chorus performed three Dor poems from Scorched by the Sun commissioned for the occasion from Fernando Benedon, chair of the Dept. of Performing Arts by the music department’s Daniel Abraham. A chorale performance of “Erev Shel Shoshanim” began the evening, which ended with a contemporary version of the same piece performed by Aaron Shneyer (SIS MA ’14), founder of HEARTBEAT, which uses music to bring Israeli and Palestinian youth together.

In an essay written soon after the event, AU student Alex Karmazin summed up its significance this way: “From the standpoint of someone studying the intersection of Israeli history, politics, and society, this evening was invaluable. Aside from hearing the vivid imagery behind Dor’s descriptions of Israel, we got insight into what it... really means to live in Israel.”

Other cosponsors were the College of Arts and Sciences and its Departments of Performing Arts and Literature, the Speigler Endowment Fund, The Word Works, and the Embassy of Israel.
A team of eight masters students from the School of International Service returned in July from a 12-day research trip to Israel and the West Bank where they examined whether joint environmental projects between Israelis and Palestinians were resulting in wider peacekeeping benefits. “Environmental cooperation is contributing to relationships that are meaningful, that are hopeful, and that make a contribution in this very difficult political environment to peacebuilding and to hope,” remarked Dr. Eric Abitbol, the practicum’s advisor, in opening remarks at a research presentation for the students’ project sponsored by the Center for Israel Studies upon their return.

Organized through SIS’ Global Environmental Policy program in partnership with CIS, the month-long practicum – titled “Water, Cooperation and Peace” – emerged from part of the Center’s 2012 Israel Greentech Symposium. The project grew out of discussions with environmental attorney Julie Weisman, who attended the symposium, and is active in Palestinian water projects. The visit was an integral component of the students’ SIS capstone practicum to their master’s studies.

The team’s research objective examined, “What is the peacebuilding significance of the small-scale trans-boundary graywater (non-toilet wastewater) reuse projects implemented through a partnership between the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (Arava) and the Palestinian Wastewater Engineers Group (PWEG)?”

“—water is important for so many reasons: it’s a right...it’s a human need—”

“We spent a deep amount of time reflecting on water, cooperation and peace...water is important for so many reasons: it’s a right...it’s a human need, it’s a scarce resource in this region, it knows no boundaries so contamination...” noted Heather Speight, one of the practicum participants at their presentation.

Working on both sides of the seam line the students met with dozens of Israelis and Palestinians, from experts in the field working with the practicum’s partner organizations at The Arava Institute, PWEG and Water Resources Action Project, to the Israel Parks and Nature Authority and the Palestinian Water Authority, to Members of the Knesset and the Palestinian Authority, to residents of eight communities directly impacted by the region’s water scarcity and environmental degradations.

Speight further reflected in thanking the program’s faculty that, the “journey...was both challenging and really invigorating, ...[it] gave us a strong sense of the theory and the practice of how it all comes together in a really powerful and tangible way in Israel and in the Palestinian West Bank.”

Roosevelt Neither Villain nor Hero for the Jews
Adapted from article on American University’s website by Maggie Barrett

Accounts of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s response to the suffering and slaughter of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe have painted him as scourge or savior. Either he moved heaven and earth to help the Jews, or he turned a blind eye to their suffering and slaughter. But in their new book, FDR and the Jews (Harvard University Press, 2013), American University history professors Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman show that these extreme narratives fail to reveal the true strengths and failings of Roosevelt and of his presidency. Breitman and Lichtman discussed the book before a packed audience in the Katz-zen Arts Center in April.

“We describe him as one of the most private leaders in American history,” Breitman said. “FDR wrote no mem-oirs and precious few revealing letters, notes, or memos.” In their research for FDR and the Jews, Breitman and Lichtman scoured numerous libraries and archives and found new documents that, for the first time, present a full picture of a president weighing conflicting priorities in a country contending with depression and world war.

Drawing on these sources, Breitman and Lichtman debunk such persistent myths as Roosevelt’s culpability in the turning away of the S.S. St. Louis carrying 937 German Jewish refugees and his administration’s decision against bomb- ing Auschwitz. The book also provides fresh insight into FDR’s position on Palest- tine and his relations with Jewish advoca-tes and world leaders.

And in a discussion with important implications for today, Breitman and Lichtman reveal how limited information, bureaucraticlanguor, and domesticpolitical contingency can prevent a president from responding to foreign atrocities as forcefully or as quickly as circumstances demand.
Daniel Munayer Receives Israel Writing Award

Daniel Munayer received CIS’s award for the best paper or poem related to Israel for his researched personal memoir, “My Nation is at War With My State.” The paper explores his complicated identity as a Palestinian-Israeli-Christian living in Jerusalem. In the paper he imagines a dialogue between an Israeli and Palestinian, representing the different parts of his identity. In this dialogue levels of empathy are achieved where “each can see the reality through the other’s eyes, and societal walls of dehumanization crumble.” His goal is to always be a “man of reconciliation and attempt to bridge gaps between people”. Munayer has a British mother and Israeli Arab Christian father whose family has been in the Holy Land for over 800 years; growing up he attended Jewish schools and competed internationally as a member of the Israeli National Swim Team. Munayer is currently a BA student in AU’s elite SIS Global Scholars Program majoring in International Relations. An honors student, he is a campus tutor in Hebrew and Arabic, Vice President of the Arab Student Association, and student coordinator for the fall 2013 Heartbeat Jerusalem concert on campus.

The annual award was established by professor emerita of literature Myra Sklarew in memory of her uncle Benjamin Reinkel and aunt Eva Wolpe Reinkel in honor of her uncle Harry Rinkel.

Additional Lectures & Programs

Sponsored by the Center for Israel Studies and the Jewish Studies Program


“Fill the Void,” Israeli film screening and post-film discussion. Co-sponsored by DCJCC and CIS.

“Found in Translation: How the Son of a Catholic Priest and Nun Learned Yiddish and Became an Award-Winning Jewish Novelist” by author Peter Manseau. Co-sponsored by JSP and the Yiddish Book Center.


“IT Innovators” lecture by Roni Einav, Israeli Hi-Tech Entrepreneur. Co-sponsored by CIS and Kogod School of Business.

“Israel: Building a Shared Society,” half-day conference hosted by CIS and co-sponsored by the Greater Washington Forum on Israeli Arab Issues.

“Jewish History After the Imperial Turn: French and Comparative Perspectives” – A Workshop at Brown University co-sponsored by JSP; panel discussion featured Professor Lisa Leff.

“Texts and Traditions: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Visions of Creation” Panel discussion with Department of Philosophy and Religion faculty Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, Dr. Martyn Oliver, and Reverend Mark Schaefer.

“Moses and Myth: Jewish Encounters with Greek Philosophy”, Rene Bloch, University of Bern, Switzerland.

“My Father’s Paradise: A Son’s Search for his Family’s Past”, Ariel Sabar, author

“ROUTES: A Day of Jewish Learning”, community conference co-sponsored by CIS, JSP and Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning.


Thanks to our generous donors, these students received Jewish studies scholarships:

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Myra Sklarew and Daniel Munayer
American University’s Center for Israel Studies is one of the nation’s premier centers for educating about today’s Israel—its achievements and its challenges. Our approach is multidisciplinary, going beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict to study modern Israel’s history, vibrant society, culture, multiethnic democracy, and complex geopolitical issues. The center’s goal is to enhance scholarship and knowledge in the university and the wider community about a multifaceted Israel. Using AU’s expertise in global education, and its central location in Washington, D.C., CIS seeks to connect Israel to the next generation of young leaders and to serve as a national and international hub for nurturing and catalyzing Israel studies.

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