HOW JEWISH IS THE JEWISH STATE?

Last October the Center for Israel Studies and the Jewish Studies Program hosted an all-day academic conference, “How Jewish is the Jewish State? Religion and Society in Israel.” Three panels of leading scholars reflected on the socio-religious issues challenging Israeli society and its identity as a Jewish state. In a keynote address, philosopher and public intellectual Moshe Halbertal (Hebrew University/NYU Law School) highlighted the most significant transformations that bring urgency to this subject.

Israel has a degree of toleration and inclusiveness that given its fragile political condition is rather remarkable and even miraculous.

—Moshe Halbertal

Many panelists observed the changing dynamic between the growing Orthodox population and the state, and, at the same time, the growth of the secular community and secular society. In the “Jewish Pluralism” panel, Michael A. Meyer (Hebrew Union College - Cincinnati) discussed the Jewish progressive movement’s lack of recognition by the Israeli Rabbinate despite its appeal to a growing segment of Israeli society. Nurit Novis-Deutsch (Haifa University) described the derogatory attitudes of the Haredim (Ultra-Orthodox) towards religious minorities in Israel, citing their views as “elective ignorance.” In his keynote, Professor Halbertal spoke about the relatively new phenomenon of Haredi participation in government and the pressure caused on the identity of the state by the prominence of Orthodox religious rulings, especially as they affect recognition of marriage and the question of citizenship.

Professor Halbertal also observed the different notions of Jewish identity held by Israelis from the former Soviet Union who represent 20 percent of the population and the weakening of the Sephardi modern Orthodox religious community. Finally, he noted the transformation of Israel’s Arab citizens and how this poses challenges to the Jewish nation state. The ultimate test of Israel’s democratic identity is how it treats its minorities whose rights are protected by Israel’s Declaration of Independence. Amal el-Sana Alh’jooj (McGill University) also addressed this subject. She enumerated three levels of oppression and limitations faced by Bedouin women in Israel, and highlighted how

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CIS AUTHORS’ NEW BOOK SERIES

Last winter the Center for Israel Studies hosted a popular Israel Studies Authors’ New Book Discussion Series. AU History Professor Richard Breitman and Norman Goda (University of Florida) presented their new book, To the Gates of Jerusalem, the third volume of U.S. diplomat James G. McDonald’s edited diaries and papers. Using McDonald’s writings about the Palestine Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, Breitman and Goda gave an insider’s view into why Britain gave up its mandate over Palestine in 1947.

AU Professor Guy Ziv (School of International Service), discussed his new book, Why Hawks Become Doves: Shimon Peres and Foreign Policy Change in Israel, to a standing room-only audience of mostly students and faculty. Focusing on Shimon Peres as “an exemplary case of a hawk-turned-dove,” the book examines the role that leaders’ personalities play in dramatic foreign policy change, Ziv’s book also serves as a political biography of one of Israel’s most important political players who has held every senior position in the Israeli government.

Concluding the series in February, Jonathan Rynhold (Bar-Ilan University) discussed The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture, surveying the American perception of Israel since 1991. He concluded that the United States’ support for the Jewish state is deeply rooted in American political culture and that this has increased since 9/11, especially amongst social and religious conservatives. But he also finds that Liberal and non-Orthodox Jews have become more critical of Israel’s role in the Arab-Israeli conflict.
MARTIN INDYK DELIVERS 2015 AMOS PERLMUTTER MEMORIAL LECTURE

In April, Ambassador Martin S. Indyk delivered the Amos Perlmutter Memorial Lecture, “Order from Chaos: The Challenges of Restoring Order in the Middle East” to a standing-room only crowd. Providing an overview of the history of the region from the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, Dr. Indyk touched on the lingering effects on the Middle East of European colonialism, the Cold War, and Arab exceptionalism. A former Ambassador to Israel and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, he also described his participation in the early diplomatic push by the Clinton administration in the peace process, attributing its failure to the death of Yitzhak Rabin.

The lecture was co-sponsored by the School of Public Affairs and the Center for Israel Studies in memory of Amos Perlmutter, who taught in the School of Public Affairs for thirty years.

ISRAELI ELECTIONS

There was much student interest in the spring 2015 Israeli elections. CIS co-sponsored an Israeli election-viewing party with AU Hillel, followed by a panel discussion a week later on the election results with Nathan Guttman, Washington Bureau Chief of The Forward, and Natan Sachs, a fellow at the Brookings Institution.

During the question and answer portion of the panel, the audience focused on the United States’ future relationship with Israel and the 2016 Presidential Election. Nathan Guttman commented on Senator Cruz’s statement announcing his candidacy, “Imagine a president who does not get into fights with Israel!”, contending that this plays to Christian evangelical voters who are more consequential in numbers than Jewish voters, who are few and heavily Democratic.

“A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC”

In November, an audience on two floors of the AU Museum in the Katzen Arts Center was treated to “A Little Night Music” by Israeli conductor and American University professor Yaniv Dinur and the AU Orchestra. Dinur put together the concert of Israeli and American music as a reflection of his two homes, including compositions from his mentors Menachem Wiesenberg and Menachem Nebenhaus. The conductor himself took up the accordion for the piece “Oblivion” by Argentinian composer Astor Piazzolla. By including works from South America, Professor Dinur sought to redefine the term America, expanding its meaning to both continents. “Seeing and hearing these kids play this music with such passion was a special experience. They even learned how to say the name of the Israeli pieces in Hebrew,” said Professor Dinur. The event was co-sponsored by the Center for Israel Studies, the Department of Performing Arts, and AU Museum.
AZERBAIJAN, ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES

His Excellency Rafael Harpaz, Israeli Ambassador to The Republic of Azerbaijan, and Mammad Talibov, political counselor at the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Washington, DC, discussed the strategic importance of Azerbaijan to Israel and the United States in an event co-sponsored by CIS, the American Jewish Committee, AU Students for Israel, Ameripac, and the Israel on Campus Coalition, moderated by KSB Professor Richard Linowes. Following the animated conversation, the diplomats joined the students for pizza.

RACHEL ERDOS DANCE RESIDENCY

Tel Aviv-based choreographer Rachel Erdos visited the campus in September for a week-long residency with AU dance students, bridging geographical barriers and connecting American students to the aesthetics of Israeli contemporary dance. The residency culminated with a performance by AU dance students and Company E who performed works by Erdos. Dance Program director Melanie George then moderated a discussion between Erdos, Paul Gordon Emerson, founder and executive director of Company E, and AU dancers. Emerson spoke about the “fundamental humanism present in Israeli choreographers, an Israeli aesthetic which is vibrant and not afraid.” Said George, “the dance students who worked with Erdos during this residency were influenced by this approach; their dance revealed so much emotion, revelation of their fears and willingness to express them and release them.” The AU dancers performed the Erdos “Confessions” piece several times throughout the year.

GUY GOLDSTEIN

The AU Museum, Center for Israel Studies and OUTSET co-sponsored visual Israeli artist and musician Guy Goldstein’s exhibition, Transcription of Blue: Guy Goldstein from April 4-May 24, 2015, in the AU Museum. During that time Guy met with students over a falafel lunch, gave gallery talks, and spoke at a reception for CIS and Museum donors. Transcription of Blue continues Goldstein’s ongoing occupation with the relationship between sound and image. He converted drawings to sound, and vice versa, using software based on an old cumbersome machine from 1940s Russia. The software makes it possible to obtain a visible image of a sound wave and added sound synthesized from an artificially drawn sound spectrogram.

JEWISH STATE

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they came from their own traditions, Sharia law, and certain civil laws of the state. Professor Salman Elbedour (Howard University) emphasized that, in adopting Islam and Arabic identity, some Israeli Arabs have discovered a new unifying identity that potentially leads to radicalization. Professor Halbertal concluded that, on the whole, “Israeli society is very democratic and tolerant,” but “there is work to be done,” especially vis-à-vis allocations for infrastructure and education. Israel “has a degree of toleration and inclusiveness that given its fragile political condition is rather remarkable and even miraculous.” Abstracts of most conference papers can be read here: http://tinyurl.com/ReligionConferencePapers.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Knapp Family Foundation, which made this conference possible.
FACULTY NEWS

Dan Arbell, Israel Studies scholar in residence, College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), published policy papers on “The U.S.-Turkey-Israel Triangle” (Brookings) and “Strengthening the Foundations of U.S.-Israel Ties at a Time of Change in the Middle East” (Center for American Progress, co-authored with Brian Katulis). He appeared regularly on US and international media outlets as a commentator on current Israel-related events.

Boaz Atzili, School of International Service (SIS), is working on a book that examines the role of deterrence in Israeli security policy and strategic culture.


Michael Brenner, Department of History (CAS), completed his book manuscript on Israel: Dream and Reality of the Jewish State. He was featured frequently on National Public Radio and European media channels.

Erran Carmel, Dean of the Kogod School of Business (KSB), and Tom Kohn, Executive-in-Residence (KSB), accompanied Kogod students to an Israeli entrepreneurial “bootcamp” at the College of Management in Rishon LeZion, Israel in summer 2015.

Yaniv Dinur, Department of Performing Arts (CAS), conducted a concert with the Netanya Chamber Orchestra in June 2014 at the Tel Aviv Museum. The program included 3 concertos by Bruch, Mozart and Schumann.

Calvin Goldscheider, Israel Studies Scholar in Residence (CAS), published Israeli Society in the 21st Century: Immigration, Inequality and Religious Conflict (Brandeis University Press, 2015). He also presented several lectures on religiosity, immigration and inequality in Israel at the Summer Institute for Israel Studies at Brandeis.

Gershon Greenberg, Department of Philosophy and Religion (CAS) continues to serve as Visiting Professor in the Department of Jewish Thought, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in the fields of Jewish religious thought during the Holocaust, and 19th -century Jewish thought.

Alan Kraut, Department of History (CAS), was appointed President of the National Coalition for History in June. He was honored at the May ribbon-cutting ceremony for his contributions to the new Ellis Island exhibits at a ceremony on Ellis Island.

Lisa Leff, Department of History (CAS), published The Archive Thief: the Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust (Oxford University Press, 2015) and Jewish Migration and the Archive co-edited with James Jordan and Joachim Schlör (Routledge 2015). She was also named a Distinguished Lecturer by the Association for Jewish Studies.

Robert Lerman, emeritus, Department of Economics (CAS), published an op-ed on Israel in US News and World Report. He helped frame an apprenticeship initiative in Israel with the Joint Distribution Committee.

Pamela S. Nadell, Department of History (CAS), currently Vice-President for Program of the Association for Jewish Studies, the international learned society for scholars and students in the field, has been nominated to a two-year term as president.


Naima Prevots, emerita, Department of Performing Arts (CAS), gave a presentation to the AU Osher Lifelong Learning Institute titled “Dance in Israel: A Powerful Force” in Spring, 2015.

Myra Sklarew, emerita, Department of Literature (CAS), continued work on three book manuscripts, including A Survivor Named Trauma: Holocaust and the Construction of Memory, (forthcoming SUNY Press).

Jeffrey K. Sosland, School of Professional and Extended Studies (SPEXS), published “Beat ISIS — Export Israeli Water to Jordan” in the Times of Israel (February 12, 2015) and participated in the Tenth Annual Tel Aviv University Workshop on Israel and the Middle East sponsored by the Moshe Dayan Center.

Thomas Zeitzoff, Department of Justice, Law and Criminology (SPA), published “Terrorism and Voting: The Effect of Rocket Threat on Voting in Israeli Elections” with Anna Getmansky in American Political Science Review 108.03 (2014).


AU WELCOMES UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA STUDENTS

Last spring Professor Pamela Nadell was the Ruderman Visiting Professor of American Jewish Studies at the University of Haifa. The University’s Ruderman masters program in American Jewish Studies, the first of its kind in Israel, was created by Professor Gur Alroey, director of Haifa University’s Israel Studies Program after he spent a sabbatical in the U.S. There he came to recognize that, while American Jews know a great deal about Israel, Israelis know little about the history and society of America’s Jews.

An expert in American Jewish history, Nadell was invited to teach the Ruderman faculty and graduate students at the University of Haifa. Then in June she and AU’s Jewish Studies hosted the students and faculty during their visit to Washington, DC. After Senator Cory Booker welcomed them to our nation’s capital, the students met with representatives from AIPAC and J Street. “This is an extraordinary opportunity for AU, to help prepare the next generation of Israel’s leaders dedicated to building bridges to America and to its Jewish community,” reflects Nadell.
OUR GRADS: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

We caught up with some recent graduates to find out how Jewish Studies graduates and Israel Studies minors are applying their studies “in the real world”.

Jason Benkendorf (BA/SPA ’04; Jewish Studies minor) returned to American University as Executive Director of AU Hillel in 2011. AU Hillel President Nancy Duber ’82 says “Jason has brought incredible skills and energy to Hillel, which is open and welcoming to all Jewish students and thriving under his leadership.” After completing a two year stint as Senior Officer of Public and Academic Affairs at the Embassy of Israel and five years directing programs at the Curriculum Initiative, which promotes Jewish culture and identity at independent high school campuses, Jason completed an MBA in organizational development at Johns Hopkins. “To practice the skills I’d developed at my old job and at graduate school, on behalf of an organization that I really love, in a place that’s home to me,” he added, “it doesn’t get better than that.”

Since graduating in May, Dan Hammerman (SIS ’15/Israel Studies minor) has been living in Lod, Israel, participating in the Yahel Social Change Program, a 9-month service-learning experience working with a variety of immigrant populations. He remains in close touch with SIS Professor Guy Ziv, whose senior capstone, Negotiating Israeli-Palestinian Peace, made him “look at Israel more broadly”. While at AU, Dan interned at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and AIPAC and during his study abroad at Hebrew University in 2014, he interned at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

Aaron Bregman (BA/CAS:History ’07; MAT/CAS:Teaching ’08) applies his history major and Jewish studies minor every day as a history teacher at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School (JDS) in Rockville, MD. His teaching focuses on Modern Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, and he also is the Coordinator of Israel Engagement and Activism at the school, using skills he acquired as Curriculum Program Manager for the David Project prior to joining JDS. Aaron credits his career path to the ongoing mentorship of Professor Pamela Nadell, from whom he took four courses at AU and whom he calls “an academic wizard”.

Trained as the first concurrent graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s rabbinical and cantorial programs Hillary Blank Chorny (BA/CAS:Jewish Studies ’07) brings her “full toolbox to any position of Jewish leadership. Since August 2014 Hillary has served as clergy for Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles, CA, a 980-family Conservative synagogue.

MARTHARTA CRAMER RECEIVES ISRAEL WRITING AWARD

Congratulations to Martha Cramer SIS/CAS History ’15, who received CIS’s award for the best paper or poem related to Israel. Cramer’s paper, “Identity in Question: The Development of the Hybridized Identities of Second and Third Generation Beta Israel,” examined the multiple identities (Jewish Ethiopian, and Israeli) of contemporary Ethiopian Israelis, called Beta Israel, who now number 135,000, about 2% of the Jewish population. According to Cramer, some young Ethiopian Israelis consider blackness also a part of their identities.

“As an African American I wanted to explore how second and third generation Beta Israel... have integrated into wider Jewish society,” Cramer explained. The Beta Israel, judged by some Israeli rabbis to have descended from the biblical tribe of Dan, were brought to Israel in several airlifts beginning in the late 1970s.

Cramer became interested in this population as a student in professor Michael Brenner’s History of Israel class and wrote this paper as an independent study with Professor Pamela Nadell. “There is so much more to the Israel story than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and I am glad that I had the privilege to learn about many of the different parts that make up Israel.”

The annual writing award was created by literature Professor Emerita Myra Sklarew, in honor of Benjamin and Eva Wolpe Reinkel and in memory of Harry Rinkel and Janice Eanet.

“Antisemitism Rising?” panel discussion with Rabbi Andrew Baker, American Jewish Committee, Ira Forman, Department of State and Michael Brenner. Co-sponsored by CIS and JSP.

Apples from the Desert screening followed by Fragile as part of the Washington Jewish Film Festival.


“From Eden to Exile: Unraveling Mysteries of the Bible”, Eric Cline, George Washington University.

“German Restitutions to Israel: Transition- al Justice and Public Debate” by Norbert Frei, University of Jena, Germany. Co-sponsored by CIS and Jewish Studies Program.

“Hebrew and Israel Studies in the Arab World” by Johannes Becke, Oxford University.


Mom and Dad I Have Something to Tell You documentary screening and discussion with filmmaker LGBTQA Rights Advocate, Assi Azar. Co-sponsored by CIS, AU Hillel, AU Students for Israel, and The Center for Diversity & Inclusion.

“North and South: Jewish Culture Wars in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe” by Olga Litvak, Clark University.

“Prague, City of Eugenic Minds,” Shoah Memorial Prague Presentation with Madeleine Albright and Gallery Talk with Pavel Stingl, and Xenia Hoffmeisterová. Co-sponsored by JSP, Katzen Arts Center and Embassy of the Czech Republic.

“Tel Aviv After Dark” by Eyal Rob, DJ of Soulico and Tel Aviv University professor. Co-sponsored by CIS, AU Students for Israel, ZBT, AEPi, AU Hillel, Sigma Delta Tau and Alpha Epsilon Phi.


“Water, Cooperation and Peace in the Middle East” by students from the summer 2014 SIS summer graduate practicum, SIS Global Environmental Politics Professor Ken Conca, with remarks by SPexS Professor Jeffrey Sosland. Co-sponsored by SIS and CIS.

“Water, Cooperation and Peace” practicum students in dialogue with Professor Jeff Sosland

“Weimar Culture”, lecture by Michael Brenner following performance by Ute Lemper. Co-sponsored by Embassy of Germany, CIS and JSP.

ISRAEL COMES TO AU OLLI

A year ago AU neighbor Frieda Raben approached Michael Brenner, Abensohn Chair in Israel Studies, with the suggestion of presenting a seminar on Israel for AU’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). Professor Brenner agreed, drafting seven other AU faculty members to present a series on Israel: Politics, Society, Culture. Based on the success of the first Israel class, which had more than 60 participants, the OLLI curriculum committee has asked CIS to organize a new seminar this spring. According to Professor Brenner, the new seminar, called “Israel and the World”, will focus on Israel’s relationship with the United States, Europe, and the Arab world and include topics like “Israel and the Jewish Diaspora” and “International Water Cooperation”. To find out more about the seminar beginning in February, see http://www.ollli-dc.org/home.
This represents a list of all gifts of $180 and up made to the Center for Israel Studies and the Jewish Studies Program in the College of Arts and Sciences between May 1, 2014 and April 30, 2015.

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FROM THE DIRECTORS

Our exciting fall semester was highlighted by a new “Global Israel” series which brought hundreds of our students and many Friends of the Center for Israel Studies to the Uruguayan, Ethiopian, German, and Chinese embassies. In conversations about Israel with diplomats and AU faculty, they experienced firsthand why studying in the nation’s capital and at the nation’s oldest center for Israel Studies is so special.

American University’s Jewish Studies Program and Center for Israel Studies explore, inside the classroom and out, the critical issues facing the Jewish people in a historical and contemporary context. In the upcoming year CIS will continue the “Global Israel” embassy series and focus on such diverse topics as cybersecurity, theater and film in Israel; JSP will continue its Holocaust Studies Forum lectures in partnership with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; and together we will present a project on music in the Theresienstadt concentration camp with the Choral Arts Society.

We are advancing scholarship, teaching students, and serving our community, especially by shining a spotlight on Israeli culture and society. Please consider gifts to CIS and JSP to sustain these vital efforts.

CENTER FOR ISRAEL STUDIES

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.

JEWISH STUDIES PROGRAM

American University’s commitment to the Jewish Studies Program dates back to the early 1970s. Since then, AU’s Jewish Studies Program has included a major and a minor and offered courses across the curriculum, including in our General Education Program, for all AU students. For more than forty years, AU’s Jewish Studies Program has advanced research and teaching and fostered a greater understanding of Jewish Studies scholarship on our campus and among our wider community.

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