News from the Jewish Studies Program and the Center for Israeli Studies  Fall 2001

From the Directors

This year’s YediAUt from American University’s Jewish Studies Program and Center for Israeli Studies shows the growth in breadth and depth of our programs and activities, as well as the impressive accomplishments of the faculty who participate in these two university-wide undertakings. As the premier example on campus of interdisciplinary cooperation, they represent the best of what a university has to offer.

The pages of YediAUt reflect that fact, with information on contemporary dance, distinguished visiting in-residence faculty, guest lecturers, conferences, courses in Jewish studies and Israeli studies, and upcoming events. Taken together, these activities attest to the commitment of American University’s faculty to offer our students a truly exemplary educational experience, fulfilling AU’s mission in “Building a Global University.”

We thank you, our readers, for your past support, and welcome your continuing contributions. There is a donation form on the next-to-last page of the newsletter. Your help is vital to our further growth.

Howard Wachtel, Director, Center for Israeli Studies
Pamela Nadell, Director, Jewish Studies Program

Dance: A Window into Israel

In spring 2001, dance students in the Department of Performing Arts had the good fortune to work with Amir Kolben, choreographer, founder, and director of the Kombina Dance Company. His 12-day guest artist residency, sponsored by the Center for Israeli Studies, culminated in a performance of an excerpt from Kolben’s work “Arigat Shoma.” This was the second time the center sponsored a residency and performance of an Israeli choreographer; three years ago we performed “Echod Mi Yodea,” an excerpt from Ohad Naharin’s Batsheva Dance Company’s Anaphase.

The impact of Kolben’s work was powerful. For students and audiences, the dance provided a window into life in Israel—the tensions, conflicts, joys, hopes, and sorrows. I asked one of our graduates to share her experiences.

—Dr. Naima Prevots, Chair, Department of Performing Arts

Dance: A Window into Israel

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The phrases of movement slowly came together, phrase by phrase, with an overwhelming sense of rhythm and spatial patterning. And then Amir began to talk with us about the abyss and b Haus of the dance, the story of So-Dom, the biblical city of sin. This discussion helped us understand the inspiration behind his intentions. My thoughts held onto the words he spoke, linking them to the movement choices of the dance—the way hands and fingers were never fully stretched into the space, the line of energy often cut off at the wrists. With no prior knowledge of the biblical story, the choreographic decisions made by Amir told me all I needed to know about the tensions between real desires and the boundaries that constrain us.

I live in my memory as in a journey to another time and place. My own personal boundaries were pushed and tested. Kolben moved with aggression and spoke to us, holding nothing back. With his verbal and physical communication, Amir showed us how to test these perimeters and invited us to go along with him. When Kolben asked me to take a risk, I found it difficult to say no.

I can now reflect back to 1998 on my previous experience with an in-residence Israeli ensemble, the excerpt from Ohad Naharin’s Anaphase (“Echod Mi Yado”) that was taught to us by the Batsheva’s rehearsal director, Aya Israeli. I am privileged to be the only AU dance student who worked in both productions.

We started “Echod Mi Yado” fully clad in black suits, crisp white collared shirts, and black hats. Confined to chairs placed in a semicircle, we learned the short movement phrases that tugged us from our seats to the floor, plucking our arms and legs at the audience, and eventually stripping down to blue underwear. As a dancer and choreographer, I was inspired by the richly woven texture of the piece: The simplicity of accumulation and repetition seemed to communicate a sense of cleansing and ritual, while working through movement that felt physically violent. We chanted in Hebrew, yelling with passion and forwardness after each accumulation of another phrase, throwing a single piece of clothing toward the center of the stage, until we finally stood baring skin. Although the piece could be interpreted broadly, for me it stands as an abstraction of survival in universal terms. The work explores many metaphysical implications, including the search for knowing and the miracle of living in hope amidst fear.

These works provide a sense of what I imagine it might be like to live in Israel. It is rough around the edges, full of tension, with folk dancing placed in delicate spots, and through this humanity emerging through a universal voice. There is something beautiful and raw that comes from these two works by Kolben and Naharin, clearly pointing to the climate of Israel as each artist uses dance to find the real meaning behind survival and the boundaries we cross to achieve it.

Before his departure Amir Kolben asked me to join his dance company in Jerusalem. Although I remain here in D.C. for now, I am determined to travel to this place where dance is a true reflection of Israel in all its complexities.
Spotlight on Jewish Studies Interns

In addition, a major facet of the undergraduate experience in American University’s Jewish Studies Program is the internship. Jewish studies students gain invaluable experience working in a variety of national and local Jewish organizations. Often their hands-on experience, supplemented by a strong academic component, leads to their first jobs after graduation. Spring 2001 Jewish studies graduate Susan Fishman won a Jane and Jerrold Goodman Award for research for her dissertation, “Gender, the Market, and Jewish Identity in Suburban Nassau County, New York, 1946-1966.” Fishman has won nationally competitive awards from the American Jewish Archives, American Jewish Historical Society, Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, and National Women’s Studies Association. In addition, she recently received the highly competitive College of Arts and Sciences Dissertation Fellowship.

We also commend history graduate student Karin Parthe, currently a fellow of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, researching her dissertation, “Espionage, Ideology, and Personal Politics: The Making and Unmaking of a Nazi Foreign Intelligence Service.” Parthe, who previously won a Jane and Jerrold Goodman Award, has also received a fellowship from the Holocaust Educational Foundation.

Our congratulations to all.

Celebrating Lilith

In November 2000, the Jewish Studies Program hosted “Celebrating Lilith—Twenty-Five Years of Jewish Feminist Journalism,” on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the founding of this landmark magazine. Lilith’s founding editor in chief, Susan Weinbaum Schneider, was the keynote speaker. She was joined by a panel of Lilith authors: University of Maryland professor Evelyn Tozin Beck, activist and writer Yael Fischlag, and Sarah Willisman, assistant editor of The New Republic. The event was cosponsored by the Women’s and Gender Studies Program.

Faculty Notes

Richard Bre Chern (Department of History) continues his work with the Nazi War Criminal Records Interagency Working Group, examining newly declassified documents from the Office of Strategic Services. Erann Carmel (Kogod School of Business) completed his ethnographic study of the Forces behind Chaser Formation (with C. De Fontenay), which will appear in the book Sifting Valley of Ashes. With Richard Loniews (Kogod School of Business) Carmel is active with US-BERIX (Israel Business Exchange Group) which brings together American and Israeli business people.

Gershon Greenberg (Department of Philosophy and Religion) continues to research Jewish religious responses to the Holocaust.

Alon M. Krait (Department of History) has published a invited edition of his book, The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in America, 1889-1921. The volume contains a significant amount of material on the Jewish migration to the United States and other countries at the turn of the last century.

Robert Lerman (Department of Economics) will be a visiting professor at Hebrew University in the Public Policy Program (December 2001–January 2002) lecturing on social policy in industrialized countries.

Alon Levine (School of Public Affairs) received a grant from the Institute of United States Studies at the School of Advanced Studies (University of London); published a book, Silicon Valley and Its Imitators, which re-issues her book-length poem, The Witness Trees (Department of Literature), and has been invited to contribute an article on water and environmental security in Israel and the surrounding region to a book on food security.

Saul Newman (School of Public Affairs) continues to work on his manuscript “Conflict and Cooperation in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Israel.”

David Rosenbloom (School of Public Affairs) was awarded the American Political Science Association’s John Gaus Award for Exemplary Scholarship in the Joint Tradition of Political Science and Public Administration and published (with Allon Yaron) “The Transferability of New Public Management Reforms: Evidence from Israel,” American Politics Research (summer 2001) 81–99.

Daniel Schidlowsky (Department of Economics) has been named presidential counsel for economic affairs to Constitutional President Alejandro Toledo of Peru (starting in September 2001). In the spring 2001 semester, he was visiting scholar at the Harry S. Truman Institute for Peace of the Hebrew University, working on the economic determinants of the disillusion with the state in Latin America and lessons that can be drawn from this experience for the Middle East.

Rita Simon (Department of History) continues her work on “May be the year’s outstanding documentary.” He is advising the editor of the Jewish studies series published by the State University of New York Press.

Howard M. Wachtel (School of Technology) is completing a book, Street of Dreams—Boulevard of Broken Hearts. Wall Street’s First Century, and has been invited to contribute an article on water and environmental security in Israel and the surrounding region to a book on food security.
In Memoriam

Amos Perlmutter


His first book was on Israel and the region. The Life and Times of Menachem Begin (1987), Politics and the Military in Israel 1967–1977 (1978), Anatomy of Political Institutionalization: The Case of Israel and Some Comparative Analyses (1970), Egypt, the PLO, and the State (1974), and Military and Politics in Israel: Nation Building and Role Expansion (1969). In 1996 he was honored by a Festschrift, A Lifetime of Scholarship: Essays in Honor of Amos Perlmutter, edited by Benjamin Frankel. In addition to producing his body of scholarship, Perlmutter was an active commentator on politics and foreign policy, with a regular column in the Washington Times and frequent contributions to Foreign Affairs, the National Review, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and the Jerusalem Post.

Perlmutter was born in Bialystok, Poland, and grew up in Palestine. He fought in the 1948, 1956, and 1973 Israeli wars. He received his PhD from the University of California at Berkeley and became a member of the American University faculty in 1972. Before coming to American University, he taught at Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Free University of Berlin.

Benjamin Kahn

With great sadness, Yeshiva announces the death of Professor Benjamin Kahn, former director of the Jewish Studies Program, on July 4, 2001. A graduate of Harvard University (magna cum laude, 1934), Kahn was ordained rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He pursued graduate studies in philosophy at Columbia University and received an honorary Doctor of Hebrew Letters from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Kahn came to American University after a distinguished career in Jewish communal service. He was B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation director at Pennsylvania State University. In 1959 he came to Washington and became the first international director of B'nai B'rith Hillel. In 1971 he became executive vice president of B'nai B'rith International.

When he retired from B'nai B'rith in 1976, Kahn began teaching Jewish studies at American University. He subsequently became director of the Jewish Studies Program, a position he held until his retirement in 1994.

In his second career, Kahn won the respect of his colleagues and the deep affection of his students at AU. He was honored twice. First, in 1982, with the University Award for Outstanding Teaching by Adjunct Faculty and subsequently with a Special Merit Award for Outstanding Contributions to the College of Arts and Sciences.

Author of numerous articles and guide books published by Hillel for the campus, he was also coauthor of Exploring Religious Identities: The Great Western Faiths and he completed a history of B'nai B'rith Hillel. Donations in his memory may be made to the Jewish Studies Program.

New Deputy Director, Rhea Schwartz

Joining the Center for Israeli Studies is the new deputy director, Rhea Schwartz. She comes to the center after a career as a lawyer and businesswoman in Washington. Her impressive credentials cover private practice and corporate and government service, including as counsel to the Board of Directors of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. For the past 16 years she has also been president of RAPO Development, an investment and real estate development firm.

Schwartz has served on the board of the American Jewish Committee and last year undertook a mission for the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to the Baltic states. She has served on the boards of the Girl Scouts and the Washington Performing Arts Society. While serving as a member of the Board of Directors of the United States Figure Skating Association, she founded and developed the adult skating programs for the association. She was recently named by International Figure Skating as one of the 25 most influential people in figure skating.

Her addition to the staff will help bring the Center for Israeli Studies to its next phase of activity in programming, development, and extension of its external profile.

Lectures Sponsored by the Center for Israeli Studies

With American University's Washington College of Law and School of Public Affairs, the center hosted Zeer Segel, professor of public policy and law at Tel Aviv University and frequent commentator on the law for Ha'aretz, who spoke on freedom of information issues. Two guest lecturers from Tel Aviv University's Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research offered us unique insights on the state of public opinion in Israel. For about a decade, the center has conducted a monthly survey of Israeli public opinion on the Oslo process and related subjects pertaining to the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

In the spring of 2001, Tamar Arnon, from the Steinmetz Center, in a lecture entitled 'The Peace Index: Six Months after the Intifada,' presented the results of the Peace Index monthly survey some six months after the eruption of fighting.

Professor Ephraim (Eppie) Yaar, director of the Steinmetz Center, was on campus in early September 2000—some weeks after the meetings at Camp David and a month before the start of the second intifada—and spoke on the center's Peace Index monthly survey some six months after the eruption of fighting.

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