CIS CELEBRATES TURNING 25 WITH A NEW NAME

by Patty Housman, adapted

“Twenty-five years after AU established the first Center for Israel Studies in the United States, we begin a new chapter with a new name – The Meltzer Schwartzberg Center for Israel Studies,” says Michael Brenner, the center’s director and American University’s Seymour and Lillian Abensohn Chair in Israel Studies. “The generous gift of the Meltzer and Schwartzberg families will enable us to add new classes, to increase the financial support for our students, and to build academic bridges between Americans and Israelis, Israel and the Arab world, and a divided Israeli society.”

The gifts were announced on Sunday, April 16, at the center’s 25th anniversary celebration dinner at American University in front of more than 150 invited guests. The event, with guest speaker, former US ambassador to Israel Daniel B. Shapiro, served as the culmination of 25 years of Israel-focused scholarship and a festive opportunity to thank the center’s friends and donors.

Said AU President Sylvia Burwell in announcing the name, “We celebrate the center as a preeminent place for ground-breaking learning and scholarship about modern Israel. But more than that it’s also a place where people engage with Israel’s culture, people and history and hear from a wide range of perspectives about Israel today and in the future. And through everything it does the center (cont’d on p. 8)
FROM THE DIRECTORS

These are heart-breaking and difficult times. The global rise in antisemitism in recent years has been exacerbated in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks against Israel. These developments have heightened our faculty’s roles as professors and public scholars, demanding more from our expertise than ever. We were invited as experts to develop strategies against antisemitism on campus; we wrote op-ed articles, gave interviews to international media, and developed tools to combat antisemitism on campus.

The role of Jewish Studies and Israel Studies on campus is today more important than ever. We are committed to providing our students with the knowledge and understanding not only of the events in Israel and its neighborhood, but also of our community’s ongoing battle against defamation and bigotry in all its forms. AU’s Meltzer Schwartzberg Center for Israel Studies (CIS) and the Jewish Studies Program (JSP), along with AU Hillel, and AU Chabad, have sought to create safe spaces on campus for the analysis and discussion of what is going on in Israel and the region, and to provide a strong sense of community and ongoing support for all of our students. We are working with AU’s administration to enhance mandatory antisemitism education for freshmen.

Finally, even as the Israel-Gaza war looms over us, prompting near-daily media interviews by CIS faculty, we invite you to peruse herein our recent accomplishments, including a new name for the Center for Israel Studies in its 25th year and ground-breaking new work by our faculty. We welcome Associate Professor Guy Ziv as Associate Director of CIS.

MY FIRST SONY

In February, Roy Horovitz, one of Israel’s leading actor/directors returned to American University to perform “My First Sony” in the Katzen Arts Center’s Abramson Family Recital Hall. This award-winning monodrama has toured Israel and abroad to great acclaim for more than 13 years now, and enjoyed rave reviews, from our appreciative audience. Based on Benny Barbash’s best-selling novel, it is the story of the deterioration of an Israeli family, told by Yotam, an eleven-year-old child. Obsessed with documentation, he records everything in his children’s tape recorder, “My First Sony.”

MENAHEM BEN-SASSON DELIVERS 2023 PELLMUTTER LECTURE

In March, Hebrew University Chancellor and former chair of the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee, Menahem Ben-Sasson, delivered the Amos Perlmutter Memorial Lecture, “Israel: The Lack of a Constitution and the Present Political Crisis.” Ben-Sasson discussed the Israeli government’s proposed judicial overhaul reform and the dangers it constitutes for democracy if the checks and balances that the Israeli Supreme Court provides presently are removed. The lecture was co-sponsored by the School of Public Affairs.

ISRAELI WRITERS SERIES WITH OMER FRIEDLANDER AND ALMOG BEHAR

As part of its 2023 Israeli Writers Series, CIS welcomed to campus Omer Friedlander, author of the award-winning short story collection, The Man who Sold Air in the Holy Land. Students and local book clubs enjoyed hearing about Omer’s writing process, including why he writes in English even though Hebrew is his first language.

In April, the series featured a zoom discussion with Almog Behar, an Israeli poet and self-described “political-language activist,” who aims to restore Arabic language in Jewish culture.

The 2023 Israeli Writers Series was made possible by the Knapp Family Foundation and co-sponsored by CIS, the Jewish Studies Program, and the Department of Literature.
In March with the generous support of the Knapp Family Foundation, the Department of World Languages and Cultures (WLC) under the leadership of Professor Erez Naaman, together with CIS, hosted a first conference on the topic of Israeli “Mizrahim,” Jews who came from Arab lands. Invited scholars explored the ways in which Mizrahim in Israel sought to be connected with their past, their place in Israeli society today, and their fight against discrimination.

Caroline Kahlenberg from the University of Virginia explained why many Mizrahi youth were attracted to join the Irgun and Lehi organizations, rather than the mainstream Haganah, who concentrated their efforts on building the economy. The Mizrahi under the British Mandate lived in lower social economic conditions, and the Irgun provided them with an inclusive social network.

Zvi Ben-Dor Benite from NYU talked about how the Jewish experience in modern Zionism was dominated by the European Jewish narrative. While in Israel half of the population is coming from the Arab world, the dominant perception of Israel’s society as seen from outside is that of a European people. Benite argued that the socialization process of the Mizrahi Jews into a European model-based country created social gaps that persist in the third and fourth generations.

In the keynote address, Yifat Bitton, President of Achva Academic College, a legal scholar and activist for equality, offered an innovative perspective explaining the most significant rift in Israeli society. Bitton distinguished between de facto and de jure discrimination of Mizrahi, demonstrating that in practice they often have no recourse that allows them to pursue legal action.

The Mizrahi Conference was unquestionably a landmark on this topic and was perceived by its participants as a unique and bold venture in US academia, bringing together scholars and activists for the purpose of introspecting, learning, and growing from past experiences that are still dividing Israel in present times.

“In A Nation Torn” Conference

Jews, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, as well as Jewish and Palestinian-Israelis. Viewpoints on what constitute the main issues and how they would be best addressed diverged between panelists, but one theme that seemed to dominate much of the analysis was that there exists on some level a conflict between Israeli and Jewish identities, with Mohammad Darawshe describing the national identity as Jewish with Israel being a secondary, more civic identity. All acknowledged that the rights of various minorities within Israel are not always handled in an ideal manner, and made a variety of suggestions for bridge-building between the various communities.

Dan Ben-David, head of the Shoresh Institution for Socioeconomic Research, identified shifting demographics as a key long-term threat to Israel’s continued prosperity. The average fertility rate among the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) population from 2018-2020 was 6.6 children per woman compared to 3.9 among national-religious Jews, 2.5 among traditional Jews, and 2 among secular Jews. He warned that the dramatic rising proportion of Haredi Jews in Israel, combined with the under-employment of the Arab population, will continue to be a real drain on the economy. Ben-David suggested this is the time to harness the energy of the protests to reform the education system, which is controlled by political parties. He said Israel needs to decide if it will continue to be a liberal democracy, because the answer to this “has major ramifications for how Jews are defined in other parts of the world.”

Additional Lectures and Programs 2022-23

Acts of Remembrance: Shaping Holocaust Memory in the Twenty-First Century series, with authors Ruth Franklin, Géraldine Schwarz, Rebecca Frankel, and Susan Rubin Suleiman

Global Israel: Discussion at Embassy of Germany with German Ambassador Emily Haber, Israeli Ambassador Michael Herzog and Michael Brenner (AU)

75 Years after the UN Partition in partnership with UCLA with Michael Brenner (AU), Maha Nassar (Univ. of Arizona), Avinoam Patt (U. Conn.), Penny Sinanoglou (Wake Forest)

The Netanyahu Government’s Legal Overhaul: A Threat to Democracy? With Michael Brenner (AU) and Dorit Beinisch, former Israeli Chief Justice

“A Third Way? Thinking Confederation as a Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” With Arie M. Kacowicz (Hebrew University/Georgetown University), Mohamed Nimer (AU) and Boaz Atzili (AU)
American University’s Meltzer Schwartzberg 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 multi-disciplinary, 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.

NEW AU CLASS WITH HEBREW UNIVERSITY

CIS will launch a pioneering joint class with Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the spring semester of 2025. This class will bring students and faculty from both AU and Hebrew University together for a 3-credit course on the topic of Relations between Israel and the US/American Jewry. Students from both schools will spend one week in Washington and one week in Israel together, with remaining classes being taught virtually. The class will be funded jointly by Hebrew University of Jerusalem and AU’s Meltzer Schwartzberg Center for Israel Studies.

OUR ALUMNI: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Rabbi Ariel Boxman SIS ’07, is proud to be the first student in the United States to graduate with an Israel Studies minor. After graduation she attended rabbinical School at Hebrew Union College, and is currently director of Lifelong Learning at Temple Shalom in Naples, Florida. Her strong love for Israel truly developed when she spent her AU junior year studying at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. “I love reading the CIS yearly newsletter and seeing that students benefit from CIS as I did,” she says. Her experience at AU and CIS helped form lasting connections; later this year Boxman will officiate at the wedding of her fellow Israel Studies minor, Esther Brilliant ’07!

Adam Cohavi SIS ’22, Israel studies minor and four-year CIS intern, is coordinator for the American Jewish Committee, Westchester Fairfield Region. Adam feels that his Israel Studies minor gave him “a better background to understand the history and work of the AJC.” Adam credits CIS managing director, Laura Cutler, for teaching him many of the practical skills needed for his current position and mentoring him in his professional development. Adam says his time with the Center for Israel studies set him up for success in his current position and ignited his passion for Israel and Jewish related work.

Jared Rosenfeld, SIS ’17, Israel Studies Minor, received a CIS travel grant in 2016 for his study abroad at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Says Rosenfeld, “That was my pilot for making aliyah. I gained insight on my Judaism and Israel. I fell in love with Tel Aviv, while studying abroad in Jerusalem!” After graduation, he completed a master’s degree in Security and Diplomatic Studies at Tel Aviv University, and never left. Pictured with his rescue dog Lily from the October 7 terror attacks, Rosenfeld lives in Ramat Gan and does marketing for high-tech start-ups. “SIS gave me a deep understanding of how the world functions and a sense of humanity... and how to work with different cultures all over the world. A lot of work in Israel isn’t domestic, so SIS has truly helped me in developing an understanding of international communications.”

Another Possibility and Seasons by Israeli sculptor, Rachel Rotenberg on exhibit in the AU Museum, Fall 2023
Ian Caplan ‘23 graduates this winter with a degree in Communication, Legal institutions, Economics, and Government (CLEG) and a minor in Israel Studies. He will pursue his master’s degree in political communications at AU, and is currently interning at the Jewish Center for Justice. His work at JCJ is heavily related to his Israel Studies classwork, in the area of US-Israel policy and social justice work. He considers Professor Strauss and Professor Arbell mentors, and he looks forward to “taking what he has learned and continuing his work in Jewish/Israel related work going forward.”

Sarah Havadala ‘25 International Studies major and Israel Studies minor, came to AU looking to be involved with Hillel and other aspects of Jewish life on campus. Through Professor Ziv’s Israeli politics lunch discussions, she got more involved with the center, eventually adding the minor. “Professor Ziv always encourages us to ask questions and doesn’t assume that everyone knows everything,” says Sarah. Outside of the classroom, Sarah interned for the Department of Defense and hopes to pursue a career related to counterterrorism, defense, and intelligence.

Congratulations to Zachary Ainbinder-Barkley ‘24, who received the 2023 CIS Israel Writing Award for his paper, “Christians United for Trump? A Case Study into the Christians United for Israel Organization during the Trump Administration.” The paper was written for his Historical Research in International Studies class. It analyzed the symbiotic relationship between the Trump administration and Christians United for Israel, an Evangelical Zionist organization, over US-Israel policy and the furthering of the evangelical movement. Julian Weiss ‘26 received an Honorable Mention for his submission of a poem using the liturgical reference of the “Dayenu” prayer in a contemporary context.

In recognition of her deep commitment to understanding Israel and her love of writing, Literature Professor Emerita Myra Sklarew established this annual student prize. Entries were judged anonymously by a panel of professors.

JEWISH SCHOLARS AND ANTISEMITISM

“I never thought I’d be writing and speaking about antisemitism,” says Dr. Pamela Nadell, Patrick Clendenen Chair in Women’s and Gender History and Director of the Jewish Studies Program at American University, but the rise in antisemitism since 2016 has changed Dr. Nadell’s role as a professor and public scholar, demanding more from her expertise than ever. She is currently working on a book to be published by W. W. Norton in 2025 exploring the history of American antisemitism and received a National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar Award to support this project. The rise has also changed Nadell’s teaching. She now teaches a course for college freshmen titled “Antisemitism: Enduring Hatred.”

Recently, Dr. Nadell joined Dr. Britt Tevis of Columbia University in an online webinar titled “Unpacking Antisemitism on Campus,” sponsored by American University and Columbia University, where they discussed definitions of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, the current situation in Israel, and how universities can improve their responses to antisemitism on campus. On a national level, Dr. Nadell recently testified before Congress in a session examining antisemitism on college campuses.

In the spring of 2023, Dr. Nadell completed “Understanding Antisemitism: A Guide for the American University Community,” in collaboration with Michael Brenner and other professors and staff members at American University. The guide is meant to help students, faculty and staff better understand antisemitism on college campuses, and to be more prepared to address antisemitism when it arises. The guide has been distributed across campuses and can be found on the Jewish Studies website homepage.

For Dr. Nadell, Dr. Brenner, and the rest of our faculty, the fight against antisemitism is a necessity. Changes in American society have called scholars from all over the nation into the spotlight, using their expertise on the subject to inform decisions and policies.
EL SAYED GHANNAM

We welcome Dr. El Sayed Ghannam as our 2023/24 Meltzer Postdoctoral Fellow. Dr. Ghannam is a political scientist who specializes in nuclear strategy, nuclear and conventional deterrence, the theory of war, alliances, and international relations theory. His Ph.D. dissertation at Virginia Tech addressed two comparative reactions to Israel’s nuclear posture, namely Egypt’s and Iran’s divergent nuclear decisions. Currently, he is working on a book manuscript that challenges prevailing narratives on nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

On leave from the Egyptian foreign ministry, Dr. Ghannam’s scholarly interests are informed by his nineteen-year service in diplomacy and exposure to key issues related to regional security and arms control. He will teach an undergraduate course in spring 2024 on the “Nuclear Age in the Middle East.”

EFRAT YERDAY

CIS welcomes Ethiopian-Israeli poet and activist Efrat Yerdag as our BAMAH Visiting Artist in Fall 2023. She is teaching a course on “Blackness in Israeli Popular Culture and Contemporary Art,” examining the historical roots of blackness in Israeli Jewish culture, its evolution, and current state. Yerdag is “thrilled by the rich experience teaching such an ethnically diverse class which allows for a rich teaching and learning experience for everyone, including myself.”

Yerdag is chair of the Association of Ethiopian Jews and a PhD candidate in Sociology at Tel Aviv University, researching “Ethno-national citizenship and Jewish illegality: Ethiopian Jews in Israel between 1955-1975 and the struggle for citizenship”. She has founded a number of initiatives, including the Young Ethiopian Students blog, Ra’ay (Hunger), African Film Festival ATESIB! the Color Line exhibition, and an “Ethiopolitics” reading group for students of Ethiopian descent to broaden their knowledge of Ethiopian history. Yerdag received the New Israel Fund’s Gallanter Prize in 2020.
This represents a list of all gifts of $250 and up ($72 for people 35 and under) made to the Meltzer Schwartzberg Center for Israel Studies and the Jewish Studies Program in the College of Arts and Sciences between July 1, 2022 and June 30, 2023.

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SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS

THESE STUDENTS RECEIVED JEWISH STUDIES AND ISRAEL STUDIES SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS

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Hannah Tell
Lucia Fishel
Macy Ward
Audrey Magill
Emilie Weingarden
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Max Lagoy
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Dan Long
Fall 2023

7
CIS 25 YEAR CELEBRATION (cont’d from p. 1)

continues to build bridges, break down barriers, and create the conditions for change and tolerance and that is a focus that is shared campus-wide,” Celebratory messages were delivered by U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides and Israeli Ambassador Michael Herzog.

“I’ve seen firsthand the important work of the Center for Israel Studies to fight antisemitism, to build bridges, and promote inclusivity. We’re proud to support the center’s impactful work,” says Alan Meltzer.

The Schwartzbergs, longtime friends of the Meltzers, were inspired to join in making this commitment in recognition of the center as a national leader committed to welcoming a diversity of thought and fighting antisemitism. “Preserving our Jewish heritage is something our family is very passionate about,” says Jaime Schwartzberg. “We feel honored to be a part of this incredible organization.”

To contribute to our programs please contact:

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JEWISH STUDIES PROGRAM
202-885-2425
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american.edu/cas/js

Left: Ambassador Daniel B. Shapiro, Right: Liz Leibowitz ’11

Theo Hyman-Bockman ’23, Sarah Havdala ’24, Maya Lobel ’26, Zach Ainbinder-Barkley ’24, Laura Cutler, Dahlia Linowes ’23, Max Lagoy ’25, Tamara Listenberg ’25, and Lila Wohl ’25 at the 25th Celebration