

**THE ASSOCIATION FOR JEWISH STUDIES:
A BRIEF HISTORY**

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The Rise of the New Jewish Studies and the Founding Colloquium¹

In 1966, Arnold Band, a young professor of Hebrew literature at UCLA, published an article in the *American Jewish Year Book* addressing a phenomenon that had heretofore only been tacitly noted: since World War II a number of new positions in Jewish studies had opened up, heralding “a spread of Jewish studies as an accepted academic discipline in the American liberal-arts colleges and universities.”² On the one hand, the growth was a result of the postwar expansion in university course offerings and the 1960s proliferation of area studies, which also included African American, Latin American, and Asian American studies. Yet the case of Jewish studies was unique: it had a long academic tradition behind it and had already reached a high level of sophistication by the 1960s.³ As Band noted, the point of departure for Jewish studies was nineteenth-century Europe, particularly Germany, where Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger, and Heinrich Graetz developed *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. These originators imagined that practitioners of Jewish studies would apply German scholarship to Jewish texts, helping to adapt Judaism to a surrounding Western world culture while dignifying the discipline within that bastion of German respectability, the university.⁴ The rise of Jewish studies in 1960s America resituated Jewish studies at a new crossroads: it retained its goal of achieving recognition as a legitimate field within the Western academy, yet it also sought to realize the uniqueness of the Jewish experience as a field worthy of study from its own perspective.

The first to address the postwar rise of Jewish studies, Band’s article quickly set off a reaction amongst the new generation of Jewish studies professors. In response, Leon Jick, who would serve as the AJS’s first president, organized a Jewish studies colloquium at Brandeis University with funding from the Boston philanthropist, Philip W. Lown. The colloquium, whose proceedings were later published as *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, was intended to bring together a new generation of Jewish studies scholars in order to discuss their work and address problems in the growing field.⁵ A gathering of 47 academics, including one Israeli, who represented nearly all American university faculty in the field at the time, gathered at Brandeis from September 7 to 10, 1969.⁶ It was here that the Association for Jewish Studies was founded.

There were a few prominent scholars noticeably absent from the gathering; Columbia’s Salo Baron and Harvard’s Henry Wolfson, who collectively had taught nearly 80% of American professors of Judaica at the time, chose not to attend the Brandeis colloquium.⁷ This older generation, members of the American Academy for Jewish Research (AAJR), had shown little enthusiasm for a new organization seeking to address expansion in the field, and initially failed to acknowledge that Jewish studies in

¹ I wish to thank Sara R. Horowitz, Marsha Rozenblit, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Rona Sheramy for the essential feedback they provided on earlier versions of this narrative.

² Arnold J. Band “Jewish Studies in American Liberal-Arts Colleges and Universities,” *American Jewish Yearbook* 67 (1966), 1-30, 3.

³ Robert Seltzer, interview by author, New York, NY, 23 October 2008.

⁴ Band, “Jewish Studies,” 5.

⁵ Leon Jick, “Introduction,” *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities: The Proceedings of a Colloquium*, ed. Leon Jick, (New York: New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970), 4.

⁶ Leon Jick, “Introduction,” *AJS Newsletter* 2 (1989), 3.

⁷ Jacob Neusner, “Graduate Education in Judaica: Problems and Prospects,” in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 22.

America was in the process of developing far beyond Cambridge and Morningside Heights.⁸ Only Nahum Glatzer and Alexander Altmann among the older generation attended the first colloquium and supported the AJS's founding. The expansion and shift in the field thus fuelled a generational break, which would become cemented for many years in an institutional divide between the AAJR and the AJS. Founded in 1919 with scholars from the leading Jewish institutions of higher learning at the time, the AAJR began with a mission, very similar to the AJS's, to "stimulate Jewish learning by helpful cooperation and mutual encouragement...as well as to formulate standards of Jewish scholarship."⁹ By the mid-1960s, however, younger scholars saw the AAJR as an exclusive organization dominated by elder statesmen unable to meet the transforming field's needs.¹⁰ This lack of support from their elder statesmen would nonetheless drive the AJS to place tremendous emphasis on accreditation in its early years.¹¹

Debates at the Brandeis Colloquium, September 7 – 10, 1969

At this first colloquium, only Jewish practitioners of Jewish studies were invited to discuss the future of the field, a decision that one participant, Irving Greenberg, claimed was "recognition that more is at stake in Jewish studies than increasing research and teaching efforts in the field."¹² In fact, at that time, there were very few non-Jewish practitioners who had the same level of training in the field as their Jewish counterparts, nearly all of whom arrived at Jewish studies through rabbinical training.¹³ A number of those non-Jewish scholars who did study Judaism did so in religion departments, and much of their work had prompted Jewish studies scholars to assert the need to distance the study of Judaism from Christian Biblical scholarship, which had historically schematized Judaism as part of the "evolution" of all religions leading toward Christianity.¹⁴ Yet the climate of the late 1960s, when people were "hammering at the universities for being ivory towers" and the American Jewish community was turning inward from universalism to particularism, demanded that scholars in this fledgling field address the issue of communal relevance.¹⁵

At the request of Jacob Neusner, two historical articles, one by Harvie Branscomb and the other by Samuel Sandmel, each addressing the question of Jewish advocacy in the field, were included in the published proceedings of the colloquium. In his essay, Branscomb argued that the local Jewish community should be consulted in the planning and implementation of endowed chairs in Jewish studies.¹⁶ Sandmel, in turn, recounted

⁸ Arnold Band, telephone interview by author, 17 September 2008.

⁹ Ira Robinson, "Cyrus Adler, Bernard Revel and the Prehistory of Organized Jewish Scholarship in the United States," *American Jewish History*, 69 (June 1980) 497-505 at 505; Qu. in Paul Ritterband and Harold S. Wechsler, *Jewish Learning in American Universities: The First Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 138.

¹⁰ Ritterband and Wechsler, *Jewish Learning*, 214.

¹¹ Ruth Wisse, interview by author, Cambridge MA, 27 October 2008.

¹² Irving Greenberg, "Scholarship and Continuity: Dilemma and Dialectic," in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 116.

¹³ Robert Chazan, interview by author, New York, NY, 2 October 2008.

¹⁴ Samuel Sandmel, "Scholar or Apologist?" in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 108.

¹⁵ Ruth Wisse, interview by author, Cambridge MA, 27 October 2008; Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 307.

¹⁶ Harvie Branscomb, "A Note on Establishing Chairs of Jewish Studies," in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 99.

how Branscomb had once written to him regarding a chair appointment at Duke University and had made it clear that he “was interested only in a practicing Jew, not in an ex-Jew.” Sandmel questioned whether Branscomb’s desire for the incumbent to be a practicing Jew, and hence implicitly a Jewish spokesman, could be “reconciled with the supposition of the academic world that a scholar is, relatively, objective, dispassionate, and—above all—committed to the impartial search for the truth and not to some antecedent convictions.”¹⁷

The debate over the relationship of the AJS as a representative body of Jewish studies, to the Jewish community would not be settled at this first colloquium. Nonetheless Irving Greenberg, after highlighting the relevance of identity politics, proceeded to outline a rationale, which in many ways would come to structure the AJS’s own approach in subsequent years, as to why Jewish studies could not become a field of Jewish advocacy. First, Greenberg argued that if the field and the AJS wished to achieve academic respectability, they should not attain “too close an identification with the concerns of the Jewish community and for the Jewish civilization.” Second, he reasoned, “The teacher cannot serve in good conscience as a spokesman for any one version of the entire tradition or for the Jewish community as it sees itself.” In addition, while their students may have pushed for greater relevance of the field, many in this generation felt, as Ruth Wisse would express years later, “that the greatest thing you could do was provide an alternative to immediate applicability.”¹⁸

While students were occupying university buildings in the late 1960s and area studies was breaking apart long-embedded departmental boundaries, participants at the colloquium debated whether Jewish studies should have its own department or divide itself among many. Some saw the university as truly on the verge of a radical transformation toward an interdisciplinary and multicultural structure and argued that Jewish studies should have a department to itself. But many suggested that “Jewish studies [could] be simultaneously incorporated into the general departments they fit, and yet function as an interdisciplinary meeting group as well,” and believed that the tradition of housing Jewish studies in departments such as history or religion would prevail.¹⁹

Despite these initial, extended discussions, the AJS never took more than an informal role in advising the creation and evolution of Jewish studies programs and departments in North America. Two problems confronted a potentially more active role. First, AJS members were as yet undecided as to what exactly constituted a general Jewish studies education, whether Hebrew should be a requirement, what curricula should be included in survey courses, and whether Jewish studies had a specific methodology.²⁰ Further, it was in practice difficult to mandate a “one size fits all” program to universities, each unique in its structure, history, and rationale for Jewish studies. Ruth Wisse, who helped build the Jewish studies department at McGill University, nonetheless saw the AJS conference as pivotal for growing programs to create contacts and seek out newly-minted professors.²¹ And particularly in the early years, when fewer universities had Jewish

¹⁷ Sandmel, “Scholar or Apologist?” 104

¹⁸ Ruth Wisse, interview by author, Cambridge MA, 27 October 2008.

¹⁹ Lou H. Silberman, “The University and Jewish Studies,” in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 15; Greenberg, “Scholarship and Continuity,” 128.

²⁰ Gerson D. Cohen, “An Embarrassment of Riches: On the Condition of American Jewish Scholarship in 1969,” in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 141, 147.

²¹ Ruth Wisse, interview by author, Cambridge MA, 27 October 2008.

studies programs and its conferences were still small, the AJS conference itself assumed the role of an interdisciplinary meeting place for the field.

At the first conference, recalls Robert Chazan, a recent PhD at the time and later President of the AJS and then of AAJR, “there was a tremendous amount of fear, which I think it’s fair to say proved to be unfounded, that universities would go out and hire local rabbis and the field would be destroyed.” To obviate this possibility, the founders focused on the idea that the AJS should create standards for the field, though at the time there was little more than an inchoate sense as to what these were and how they would be implemented.

The AJS would slowly formulate its answer to the question “Who is a Jewish studies scholar?” but in 1969 Leon Jick defined the entity entirely in the negative: a Jewish studies scholar was neither an anti-Semitic propagandist, a scholar without Hebrew language, a Bible teacher in a fundamentalist Christian seminary, or a yeshiva rabbi whose “*a priori* commitments severely limit the range of problems or alternatives that [he is] able to consider.”²² The first step toward laying down the definition of a Jewish studies scholar was simply by providing a model: they would convene an annual gathering of serious scholars whose standards they hoped would pervade the field as a whole. Subsequently, the AJS endeavored to delineate experts in the field by using its membership categories to establish boundaries between full-time rabbis and university professors. However, the organization was constrained both by a desire to maintain a more inclusive constituency, in contrast to the invited membership of the AAJR, and by the limitations of its young infrastructure to enforce strict membership guidelines. This looseness drew criticism from some members of the older generation; Isadore Twersky particularly despaired of the lack of a Hebrew language requirement.²³ The AJS would also work to directly impact university hiring practices through the creation of a placement service, which served to funnel young scholars with doctoral training in Jewish studies to open positions.

The most immediate outcome of the Brandeis colloquium was the creation of a scholarly and professional organization for the field. Yet one final debate arose amongst the participants over whether Judaic studies or Jewish studies better encompassed the new purpose and subfields of the growing discipline. Over protests from Jacob Neusner, who believed that Judaic was the better term, the group finally settled on the “living, if more problematic designation” of Jewish to avoid an “implied narrowing of [the] field which does it injustice.”²⁴

The formation of the Association for Jewish Studies in 1969 was a recognition that Jewish studies in America now constituted a full-fledged field in need of an organization to monitor, react to, and assist in its growth.²⁵ It required a forum for the regular exchange of ideas; publications, periodicals, and monographic literature for written exchange; and a way to foster graduate students, as the large number of open Jewish studies positions needed a supply of professors to fill them.²⁶ In “A Proposal for a

²² Leon Jick, “Task for a Community of Concern,” in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 84.

²³ Jonathan Sarna, interview by author, Waltham, MA, 28 October 2008.

²⁴ Ibid.; Michael A. Meyer, “Toward a Definition of Jewish Studies,” *AJS Newsletter* 24 (1979), 2.

²⁵ Robert Chazan, interview by author, New York, NY, 2 October 2008; Jick, “Introduction,” in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 4.

²⁶ Jick, “Tasks for a Community of Concern,” 85.

Professional Association,” Joseph L. Blau, a younger colleague and former student of Salo Baron’s at Columbia, described how the AJS’s broadest goal was to make

a place in American higher education for the studies in the life, thought, and culture of Jews, past and present, not only as a means of stimulating the enrichment of educational content now, and as a factor in Jewish survival in time to come, but also because we are convinced that these studies have an intrinsic value that is like and yet unlike comparable studies of other ethnic groups.²⁷

He then called for the formation of an association for Jewish studies, both scholarly and professional in its aim.

For the founders, the formation of the AJS was more than just the creation of a professional organization; it was a testament to the vibrancy of Jewish scholarship and culture in America. Leon Jick revisited the significance of the event twenty years later:

Would Zunz, Steinschneider, or even Graetz have believed that in 1969 some fifty professors of Judaica, to a considerable degree American-born and trained, would gather at a major American university established by Jews to consider the status of their profession? Our presence at the conference is one among many, but by no means the most trivial of testimonials belying Zunz’s pessimistic prognosis of 1818.²⁸

Expansion and the Establishment of Standards in the 1970s

The 1970s saw the AJS slowly expand, working to meet a number of the goals first laid out at the 1969 colloquium. The organization sought to serve as an interdisciplinary meeting place and community for the field, to establish standards for Jewish studies training, and finally, to cement the place of Jewish studies in the American university through regional expansion. In the 1970s, however, the AJS more embodied a club of scholars located overwhelmingly on the East Coast, than a fully professional or national organization.

With only one or two sessions per timeslot, the early conferences allowed participants to experience a truly interdisciplinary Jewish studies field. According to Arnold Band, preparation for the meetings reflected the simple and intimate nature of the conference itself:

The night before the annual conference we would meet in Charlie [Berlin]’s house, sometimes I would sleep on the couch there, and there was Nahum Sarna and Michael Meyer and Marvin Fox and one or two

²⁷ Joseph L. Blau, “A Proposal for a Professional Association,” in *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*, 90.

²⁸ Jick, “Introduction,” *AJS Newsletter*, 3.

others, and it was a small group. It was like a club that was trying to break out of being a club to be a national organization, but it takes time.²⁹

After three years at Brandeis, the annual conference moved first to the University of Maryland and a year later, when Band became president and Charles Berlin, Executive Secretary, to the Harvard Faculty Club. “Imagine,” wrote Benjamin Ravid years later, “AJS fit into the Harvard faculty club, with NO simultaneous sessions.”³⁰ Participants at these first conferences experienced a fully interdisciplinary program; during the Third Annual Conference, attendees first attended a session on “Hebrew Language Instruction in the Judaica Curriculum,” then all moved on to “Agnon’s Posthumous Novel *Shira*,” followed by a panel on “Asiatic and Near East Jewish Communities in the Soviet Union.” Eventually, the conference outgrew the Harvard Faculty Club and moved to the Copley Plaza in Boston, where it remained until 1997. Emphasizing the “irresistible irony,” Arnold Band chose the Copley Plaza as a meeting place specifically because the hotel had not welcomed Jewish guests when he was a boy growing up in Boston.³¹

In an attempt to win recognition from their teachers, the AJS’s early conference banquets honored a member of the previous generation of Jewish studies scholars, and the organizers often attempted to invite these scholars to give papers or attend a session devoted to their work. “Few moments in the history of the AJS were as gratifying as when Salo Baron attended a working session devoted to a reconsideration of his writing, and was visibly pleased with the result,” remembered Ruth Wisse years later.³² The early conferences also saw the AJS address the place of Jewish religious practices in its official program. For over a decade, *benchers* with the AJS logo were distributed, courtesy of Ktav Publishing House, and the *birkhat ha-mazon* was recited at communal dinners. While some AJS members expressed discomfort with the appearance of public religiosity at an academic conference, many argued for the continuation of the communal recitation. The matter was settled, however, when one year a female member, Jane Gerber, stood up and led the prayer. Though Gerber doesn’t recall her decision as being motivated specifically by this debate, it was understood that the strongest proponents of the public prayer would protest its recitation by a woman, and from then on the practice was suspended.³³

Attendance at the annual conferences quickly grew, nearly doubling from the initial 47 at Brandeis to 90 participants at its Third Annual Conference in 1971; to 269 participants at its Seventh Annual Conference in 1975; reaching 443 registrants at its Twenty-First Annual Conference in 1989. Beyond the annual conference, anchored on the East Coast until the late 1990s, the AJS attempted to establish its presence across the United States through a series of regional conferences in the 1970s.³⁴ Made possible through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities secured by Baruch

²⁹ Arnold Band, telephone interview by author, 17 September 2008.

³⁰ Benjamin Ravid, “From Mentor and Colleague to Friend: The Legacy of Marvin Fox,” Folder “Legacy of Marvin Fox – Ben Ravid,” Box Records 2000-02, Association for Jewish Studies Records, AJS Offices, New York, NY (hereafter cited as AJS Records).

³¹ Arnold Band, “Von Berlin nach Boston,” *AJS Newsletter* 45 (1995), 3.

³² Ruth Wisse, “Presidential Address,” *AJS Newsletter* 36 (1986), 9.

³³ Jane Gerber, interview by author, New York, NY, 3 November 2008; Jonathan Sarna, interview by author, Waltham, MA, 28 October 2008.

³⁴ Baruch A. Levine, “Remarks at the Tenth Annual Conference,” *AJS Newsletter* 24 (1979), 10.

Levine, the AJS's second president, these conferences were intended to allow scholars and graduate students, who were unable to attend the Boston conferences, to meet and stay abreast of developments in the field, as well as to spread knowledge of Jewish studies to areas where the field was fairly unknown.³⁵ Over 16 regional conferences were held with many of their papers published by the AJS. The conferences helped establish the AJS's goal of creating an expansive field of Jewish studies across North America, and while these efforts were never again replicated, years later the AJS's flagship annual conference would begin to traverse the continent.

The AJS also sought to spread knowledge of the field through its publications. "If we are a school, where is our journal?" asked Jacob Neusner at the first colloquium, and one of the immediate priorities of the AJS after its founding was to establish a scholarly journal. *AJS Review*, published originally as a hard-cover annual, like the *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, was launched in 1976 and until 1983 was nearly single-handedly edited by Frank Talmage. The AJS, which would place heavy emphasis on the *Review* in its applications to join the American Council of Learned Societies, founded the journal in order to showcase Jewish studies' sophisticated standards and unique area of study.³⁶ In his first "From the Editor," Talmage outlined his vision for the journal, which reflected the AJS's general approach to the field's boundaries:

It is hoped that this *Review* will reflect some of the changes that have taken place in the situation of both Jewish scholarship and Jewish existence over the last eight decades. It should be open to all fields of inquiry and should be limited only by the geographical and chronological bounds of the Jewish people itself.³⁷

In 1984, Robert Chazan took over and reformatted the journal by creating an editorial board to provide more procedure for the review of submissions.³⁸ Arnold Band had meanwhile launched the *AJS Newsletter* in 1970. Initially a vehicle for organization news, including board meeting notes and conference announcements, as well as book reviews, updates on relations with the World Union of Jewish Studies, and editorials on the Yom Kippur War and the state of Jewish scholars in the Soviet Union, the *Newsletter* subsequently lapsed in the mid-nineties and was reborn as *Perspectives* in 1999, refocused to concentrate on the state of the field.

When Arnold Band became the AJS's third president in 1972, he found himself in a difficult position as the head of an organization that had established the rules and costs of membership, but had done little to create an infrastructure to enforce them. Band later joked: "When further asked about [my] aspirations, [I] uttered the wholly unprecedented statement, 'I pray I shall be a worthy successor to my predecessors,'—by which [I] meant: 'Why are we broke? And who has the membership list?'"³⁹ Enlisting the help of Charles Berlin as Executive Secretary, Band turned the organization from a 282 mostly

³⁵ "Editorial," *AJS Newsletter* 23 (1978), 1.

³⁶ Robert Seltzer, interview by author, New York, NY, 23 October 2008.

³⁷ Frank Talmage, "From the Editor," *AJS Review* 1 (1976), vii.

³⁸ Robert Chazan, interview by author, New York, NY, 2 October 2008.

³⁹ Arnold Band, "Remarks at the Tenth Annual Conference," *AJS Newsletter* 24 (1979), 5.

non-paying member organization in 1972 to an 800 paying member organization in 1975, all done through the regularizing and tightening of billing and membership requirements.⁴⁰ At the time, the cost of membership was \$15.00 for a regular member and \$5.00 for a student.

While more inclusive and democratic in its approach than the AAJR, the AJS's membership policy, first defined in 1970, aimed to build a membership consisting of well-trained academic scholars in the field. The organization defined a Regular Member as one whose "full time vocation is devoted to either teaching, research, or related academic endeavors in Jewish studies."⁴¹ Student Members had to be concentrating in an area of Jewish studies and, upon enrollment, had the opportunity to be listed in the graduate student registry so they could use the placement service of the AJS. Anyone who fell outside of these categories could join as an Associate Member, but could not attend business meetings, serve on the Board, or, most significantly, make use of the AJS placement service.⁴²

One of the AJS's great contributions to the field was to assume the seemingly simple yet revolutionary role of middleman between universities seeking Jewish studies professors and Jewish studies scholars seeking university positions.⁴³ The AJS leadership sought to guide universities towards academically trained Jewish studies scholars, fearing that universities with new programs would not understand the training required for a Jewish studies scholar. As early as 1971 members seeking jobs were asked to fill out a form listing universities attended, Jewish training, knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish, their major academic interest and thesis topics, and to provide the signature of a Regular AJS Member.⁴⁴ After discussing whether the AJS should become a clearinghouse that substantially vetted graduate students for positions, the leadership decided that it would act only as a "dating service": when a university position opened up, the university would contact the AJS, which would in turn send the university a list of young scholars with doctoral training in the position's field.⁴⁵

In part, the AJS's decision to take a hands-off approach was made for it by changes in university hiring practices put into effect by new government requirements aiming for greater transparency and reflecting a focus on affirmative action. In 1973, in response to a formal request by the Graduate Association for Jewish History, an organization of graduate students in the field, to provide an open listing of Jewish studies positions, the AJS could still defend its opaque practices by noting that universities did not want their positions made public; by 1980, however, the AJS had instituted a published job bulletin, which gradually morphed into the online positions listings of today.⁴⁶ A little over a decade after the organization's founding, the AJS leadership also felt that Jewish studies had become a recognized and standardized field, and that they could therefore remove

⁴⁰ "Conference Proceedings," *AJS Newsletter* 2 (1972), 2; Letter, Arnold Band to Moshe Greenberg, 7 May 1975, Folder "Israel," Box 4, AJS Records.

⁴¹ "AJS Third Annual Conference at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, September 7 – 9, 1971: Revised Program," Folder "Conference 1970-1972," Box Records 2000-02, AJS Records.

⁴² "Application for Second Annual Conference, Association for Jewish Studies, September 8 – 10, 1970," Folder "Conference 1970-1972," Box Records 2000-02, AJS Records.

⁴³ Robert Chazan, interview by author, New York, NY, 2 October 2008.

⁴⁴ "Information for Graduate Student Registry," Folder "Graduate Student Registry," Box 4, AJS Records.

⁴⁵ Ruth Wisse, interview by author, Cambridge MA, 27 October 2008.

⁴⁶ Note in margins, Letter, Gershon Hundert, Graduate Association for Jewish History, to Arnold Band, 24 December 1973, Folder "ACLS," Box 4; AJS Records; "Meeting of the AJS Board of Directors," *AJS Newsletter* 26 (1980), 3.

themselves from acting as a direct intermediary in hiring. As Ruth Wisse noted in 1986: “The period of testing [was] so firmly over that one has trouble reconstructing the way it was.”⁴⁷

The Legitimation of Jewish Studies and the AJS as *the* Jewish Studies Organization in America

When he became president, Arnold Band telephoned the organizers of the World Union for Jewish Studies (WUJS) Congress, which held its conference in Israel every four years, to let them know that he had become president of a “booming” American Jewish studies organization. They hardly welcomed the news. “They were appalled and said, ‘You have to call up right now and disband it, because there can be no association for Jewish studies outside Israel.’”⁴⁸ For years before the rise of Jewish studies in America, Israel had held primacy in the field and many in the AJS leadership feared that Israeli scholars regarded the establishment of a significant group of Jewish studies scholars in North America as rivals. WUJS was especially seen as devoting “its efforts to guarding its cultural hegemony.”⁴⁹

Throughout the 1970s the AJS attempted to reach out to WUJS, asking them to change policies on differentiated pricing for Israeli versus foreign scholars and seeking a more active role for the AJS in the Congress. But they often met with rebuke, causing the AJS to express its frustration through a long string of *AJS Newsletter* editorials. A rapprochement was ultimately achieved in 1981 during the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies, largely by the efforts of Michael Meyer, then president of the AJS, and Joseph Dan, of the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “For the first time we felt that our Israeli colleagues realize that if Jewish studies are to transcend the limits of one national state, however central it is, the AJS is the most logical and vital partner in this effort,” one *AJS Newsletter* editorial reported joyfully, revealing the extent to which the AJS had seen the scholarly rivalry on a higher plane of Israel-Diaspora relations.⁵⁰

The WUJS’s acceptance of the AJS was implicit recognition that Jewish studies in America had reached a point of significant standing and legitimacy, comparable to that of its Israeli counterpart. To acquire this legitimacy, the AJS worked to cement the field’s academic integrity, in part by seeking to become the sole arbiter of Jewish studies within the American higher education system. This entailed establishing boundaries between academic Jewish studies and the Jewish community and Jewish foundations, which had begun to see the potential for Jewish studies as a source of community revival and identity formation. In 1973, when the American Association for Jewish Education (AAJE), a national coordinating agency for Jewish educational activities, attempted to influence the creation of Jewish studies curricula with the overt goal of stimulating the identity of Jewish students, the AJS fiercely resisted. AAJE’s Executive Vice President Isaac Toubin had made clear his organization’s intentions: “We regard all forms of experience in American life, including college education, as a legitimate avenue for the

⁴⁷ Wisse, “Presidential Address,” 9.

⁴⁸ Arnold Band, telephone interview by author, 17 September 2008.

⁴⁹ “Editorial,” *AJS Newsletter* 25 (1979), 1.

⁵⁰ “Editorial,” *AJS Newsletter* 30 (1981), 1.

Jewish community to explore in its efforts to find ways to enhance the quality of Jewish survival.”⁵¹

The AJS responded first by declaring its status as the only external organization that should have any involvement with Jewish studies on the university campus. Wrote Arnold Band, “We are the professionals in the field; we teach the classes; we do the research.... In our estimation, an agency such as the AAJE has no competence and no place in the *internal* life of the academic community.”⁵² While the AJS recognized the value and sought the support of Jewish foundations, it emphasized that Jewish communal concerns must have no influence on their academic work and teaching. As Marvin Fox elucidated:

As a Jew who is devoted to his tradition and people, I allow myself to hope that Jewish students studying with my colleagues and myself will be helped by their Jewish studies to a deeper and more effective personal Jewish life and commitment. As a professor, I can give no consideration to that objective, since my task is to provide students with the tools, methods, and tentative conclusions of learning in my field, but not to save their souls.⁵³

The AJS sought to define these boundaries in dealings with other Jewish foundations as well, such as the National Foundation for Jewish Culture (NFJC, today the Foundation for Jewish Culture), which provided initial funding for the *AJS Review*. In 1984, as the AJS sought further funding for the *Review*, Abraham Atik, Executive Director of NFJC, suggested to Nahum Sarna, President of AJS, that the AJS seek funding through the NFJC’s Joint Cultural Appeal, which distributed funds from Jewish federations “to a number of cultural organizations.” In the end, Sarna refused the offer, noting that “it would be detrimental to Jewish studies in the universities were we to take any step that might give the appearance... of compromising the independence of the AJS.”⁵⁴

Sarna had good reason to be cautious about the appearance of communal influence on the AJS’s work. At the time, the AJS was gathering materials to make a final application to join the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the preeminent federation of American scholarly organizations in the humanities, whose endorsement would lay to rest any doubts about the association’s and the field’s legitimacy. The AJS had already sought this accreditation through two failed attempts.⁵⁵ In 1978, the AJS’s application for ACLS membership had been rejected on the grounds that the AJS had yet to demonstrate long-term financial stability and that its journal, then only two years old, still needed time to strengthen. In 1980, the AJS was discouraged from reapplying for membership to the

⁵¹ Letter, Isaac Toubin, Executive Vice President of American Association for Jewish Education (AAJE) to Charles Zibbell, Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, 8 August 1973, Folder “Correspondence: AAJE,” Box 4, AJS Records.

⁵² Letter, Arnold Band to Charles Zibbell, Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, 31 August 1973, Folder “Correspondence: AAJE,” Box 4, AJS Records.

⁵³ Letter, Marvin Fox to Philip Klutznick, AAJE, 22 October 1971, Folder “Correspondence: AAJE,” Box 4, AJS Records.

⁵⁴ Letter, Nahum Sarna, President of AJS, to Marver Bernstein, President of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture (NFJC), 14 August 1984, Folder “AJS Review,” Box 4, AJS Records.

⁵⁵ Arnold Band, telephone interview by author, 17 September 2008.

ACLS. From 1976 to 1985, the ACLS excluded many interdisciplinary fields from membership because of a strict interpretation of its guidelines, which deemed an organization ineligible if a large number of its members belonged to existing learned societies, or if the discipline was not degree-granting.⁵⁶ In preparing materials for the AJS's 1984 application to the ACLS, however, Herbert Paper had written Charles Berlin that he had "a suspicion that there may be an unspoken hesitation on the part of some members of that committee that AJS represents only a circumscribed 'ethnic' point of view. This has to be countered unobtrusively but clearly."⁵⁷

On hearing of the AJS's acceptance as the 45th constituent society of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) in 1985, Herbert Paper sounded a different note to Berlin: "I cannot let more time pass without congratulating you—and all of us—in carrying through this fine effort. It is really a noble moment for the AJS and I will be proud to be its delegate to the annual ACLS meetings."⁵⁸ The ACLS acceptance was a critical milestone for the association, and particularly for the first generation of AJS members. According to Robert Chazan, the excitement over AJS admittance into the community of learned societies was in retrospect charmingly immature, but very real: "That was a big deal. That was a stamp of Kosher."⁵⁹ It served as final validation that the academy recognized Jewish studies as "an important and well-populated field of study" with a "unique intellectual focus and interdisciplinary concerns."⁶⁰ Not only was the acceptance crucial for its legitimating force, it was a significant moment for the continued professionalization of the AJS as the association began to adapt to the organizational features of some of its ACLS cohorts.⁶¹

Expansion of Jewish Studies in the University and Transformation of the Field

In a 1989 report on Jewish studies, Herbert Paper noted that while before World War II the overwhelming emphasis of Jewish studies had been on philology and Semitics, contemporary Jewish studies represented "a religio-historico-cultural focus that involves every one of the social sciences and humanities."⁶² While many had feared and witnessed a decline in Jewish studies positions in the late 1970s, the 1980s saw an expansion of Jewish studies programs, departments, and endowed chairs. Though the AJS did not actively participate in promoting this expansion, its conference and journal acted as forums that showcased an increasing diversity of both Jewish studies scholars and subfields. The expansion of the field within the university and across the United States and Canada would push the AJS to develop into a more fully professional, national, and eventually international organization.

⁵⁶ Stanley N. Katz, "Report of the President, 1986-1997," American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 38 (1997), 16-17.

⁵⁷ Letter, Herbert Paper to Charles Berlin, 27 August 1984, Folder "ACLS," Box 4, AJS Records.

⁵⁸ Letter, Herbert Paper to Charles Berlin, 30 April 1985, Folder "ACLS," Box 4, AJS Records.

⁵⁹ Robert Chazan, interview by author, New York, NY, 2 October 2008.

⁶⁰ "Policy Statement on Admission of New Constituent Societies, Adopted on May 13, 1977" American Council of Learned Societies, Folder "ACLS," Box 4, AJS Records.

⁶¹ Jonathan Sarna, interview by author, Waltham, MA, 28 October 2008.

⁶² Herbert Paper, "The Association for Jewish Studies: 1969 – 1989," Folder "ACLS," Box 4, AJS Records.

In 1992, the AJS published “Jewish Studies Courses at American and Canadian Universities: A Catalogue,” which listed around 4000 courses (not including those taught at seminaries such as HUC-JIR or the Jewish Theological Seminary), 410 institutions of higher learning with Jewish studies courses, 104 endowed academic positions in the field, and 1300 members in the AJS, a far cry from the first conference’s 47 attendees.⁶³ The AJS conference had gradually expanded over the years from nine sessions at the Sixth (1974) and Seventh (1975) Annual Conferences to 21 at the Eleventh (1979) and 38 at the Eighteenth (1986).

The growth of the conference illustrated the vibrancy and activity of the field, and AJS leaders took pride in the high percentage of members who attended it. Nonetheless, such success was bittersweet for some who remembered the intimacy of early conferences, where only one or two sessions were held at a time, allowing participants to attend a large variety of sessions outside their field. The larger and more specialized the conference became, the more participants felt duty-bound to listen to sessions clearly relevant to their work, causing the conference to lose much of its original, overtly interdisciplinary nature.⁶⁴ It had become evident, however, that giving young scholars in particular the opportunity to present papers was an important educational and professional process for the next generation, and interdisciplinarity was maintained within sessions by virtue of the very nature of Jewish studies.⁶⁵

Driven in part by trends toward specialization in the university and in part by the progression of a field which, in gaining strength in numbers, had also gained breadth in topics, Jewish studies developed this interdisciplinarity to encompass a large variety of subfields, such as social science research, Yiddish literature, ethnomusicology, history in all fields, gender studies, cultural studies, and Jewish mysticism. As both its conference and journal illustrated, the AJS had maintained a tradition, prompted in part by generational shifts and an increasingly diversified membership, of taking a big-tent approach to what the field constituted.⁶⁶

The demographic changes in AJS membership were largely compelled by the altered nature of American graduate studies in the field. While the vast majority of AJS founders had rabbinical training, many in the next generation of Jewish studies scholars studied at Brandeis or Harvard instead of the Jewish Theological Seminary or HUC-JIR, thus bringing with them a greater diversity in background and experiences.⁶⁷ This shift in membership was reflected in AJS policy; though the AJS may have struggled in the beginning with questions of the pastoral role of its professors and public religiosity at its conferences, by the 1980s the AJS wanted to make clear that it was open to all scholars in the field, regardless of religious background or view. Nahum Sarna made this point in his 1984 presidential address when he questioned “the paucity of non-Jewish members in the AJS.”⁶⁸ By 1990 Robert Seltzer was able to assert in an article devoted to issues confronting Jewish studies that

⁶³ Robert Seltzer, “Issues Confronting Jewish Studies in the Mid-Nineties,” *AJS Newsletter* 43 (1993), 2.

⁶⁴ Ruth Wisse, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, 27 October 2008.

⁶⁵ Robert Chazan, interview by author, New York, NY, 2 October 2008.

⁶⁶ Robert Seltzer, interview by author, New York, NY, 23 October 2008.

⁶⁷ Robert Seltzer, interview by author, New York, NY, 23 October 2008..

⁶⁸ Nahum Sarna, “Presidential Address,” *AJS Newsletter* 35 (1984), 5.

the AJS has so far avoided the pitfalls of political or denominational relevance; I almost hesitate to observe (*keyn eyn-hore*) that the Association has been one of the truly ecumenical institutions in American Jewish life, because it has a mission that overrides our personal religious commitments or lack of them: the advancement of Jewish knowledge for its own sake.⁶⁹

The advent of the Women's Caucus in particular highlighted the changing nature of the AJS membership and of Jewish studies itself. In a 1978/9 membership survey, only 114 of the 708 respondents had identified themselves as female, while a 2007-8 survey found the gender balance nearly equal: 47% of AJS members were female.⁷⁰ In 1986, following a conversation in which a number of female AJS members noted the differentiated status of women in the field and the scarcity of women in the AJS leadership, the Women's Caucus was founded. The Caucus resolved both to foster the professional status of women and encourage and publicly make a place for the study of women and issues of gender in Jewish studies. First co-chaired by Ellen Umansky and Susan Shapiro, the Women's Caucus established an annual breakfast meeting during which the Caucus discussed various aspects of the field from a gender perspective and made plans for the next year. One of its first major projects was to build an archive of gender-inclusive syllabi and curricula in Jewish studies.

When first founded, however, the Caucus did not receive a resounding welcome from the AJS; it received no funding and was barred from using the name of the Association. While it would take a number of years for the AJS to fully embrace the Caucus, many Caucus members saw their efforts to introduce women's studies into Jewish studies as analogous to efforts to introduce Jewish studies into the mainstream liberal arts curriculum. In an article reflecting on the Caucus, Judith Baskin wrote, "In both cases the passage from marginal and parochial status to an accepted place in the academic pantheon has been hesitant and halting, even in the current academic atmosphere so celebratory of cultural diversity."⁷¹ Baskin went on to argue:

We must further recognition of the diversity of the Jewish experience... Acknowledgement and appreciation of our wealth of differences—geographic, ethnic, religious, and social, including the ramifications of class and gender—must become the accepted starting points of our scholarship and teaching.⁷²

Jewish studies, as part of the area studies movement, had represented a diversification of the western canon and American academic field. Yet over time and through an expansion of its own membership and subfields, the field had come to diversify itself.

Faced with a now legitimated and burgeoning field, from the 1990s through the new millennium the AJS worked to enact a number of administrative changes to realize its

⁶⁹ Seltzer, "Issues Confronting Jewish Studies," 2.

⁷⁰ Arnold Band, "AJS Survey of the Field of Jewish Studies," *AJS Newsletter* 24 (1979), 13; Steven M. Cohen and Judith Veinstein, "The 2008 Association for Jewish Studies Membership Survey," 27 April 2008.

⁷¹ Judith R. Baskin, "Report from the AJS Women's Caucus," *AJS Newsletter* 41 (1992), 5.

⁷² *Ibid.*

role as a national, and to some extent international, organization of Jewish studies, which would reach more than 1700 members by 2008. This period saw the ascent of a second generation of AJS members, who stepped into leadership roles and ushered through these changes. After twenty-five years as a consistent and critical force behind the AJS, Charles Berlin retired in 1995 from his position as Executive Secretary. At the December conference that year, Arnold Band paid tribute to Berlin: “As one who was there in the beginning, I can tell you that most of the features of the Association, which we all take for granted today, were the work of Charlie Berlin.”⁷³ Asked to “say something nice” about Berlin, Marvin Fox responded “The truth is: if he were so nice, we wouldn’t be here today. It’s only because he is not only efficient and skillful, but because he’s tough, and unyielding, that we survived...All of us can tell you: if we were presidents or other officers, we worked for Charlie, he didn’t work for us.”⁷⁴

Upon Berlin’s retirement, Aaron Katchen took over as Executive Secretary and the AJS moved from Berlin’s offices in Harvard’s Widener Library to Brandeis University. Katchen quickly recognized that the AJS and Jewish studies, in the post-Soviet era and at the advent of a technological revolution, would necessarily move far beyond its Boston roots. “Despite the natural diversity in the topics and questions that form the core focus and interest of scholars in any given country, those differences now appear less difficult to erase or bridge,” noted Katchen in 1995.⁷⁵ The AJS, like much of the scholarly world that wondered whether books would become obsolete and universities turn virtual, questioned the wide-ranging effects of technology and the internet on the organization’s work: “Will [members] continue to regard attending our annual conference in December in Boston as a worthwhile enterprise... Will chat rooms replace face-to-face contact? ... Will we be reduced to the modern version of a café society?” asked a 1995 *AJS Newsletter* article.⁷⁶ These fears would prove to be unfounded in the new millennium; while Katchen moved the AJS online, creating the AJS’s first website and conducting a major technological overhaul of the organization, he also helped to move the AJS conference out of Boston, first to Chicago in 1999, which made it easier for those beyond the East Coast to attend and connect with colleagues. Just as the regional conference program in the 1970s had attempted to expand Jewish studies beyond Boston and New York, the annual conference finally went national and, in 2007, international in Toronto.

By the new millennium, the shifting demographics of the AJS in the 1980s had become institutionalized in the AJS leadership; in 2003, Judith Baskin and Sara Horowitz became, respectively, President and Vice President for Program of the AJS. They had already worked together once before, as co-chairs of the Women’s Caucus. This new generation of scholars, who belonged to a variety of learned societies and were more familiar with the world of the university, pushed the AJS toward greater professionalization and pioneered a number of significant organizational changes. Lawrence Schiffman, who received his PhD in 1974 and served as AJS President from 2000-2003, and Baskin, who received her PhD in 1976 and was AJS President from 2003-2006, helped usher in a new phase in AJS history, overseeing the AJS’s move from

⁷³ Band, “Von Berlin nach Boston,” 3.

⁷⁴ Marvin Fox, “For Charles Berlin: Remarks by Colleagues and Friends,” *AJS Newsletter* 45 (1995), 4.

⁷⁵ Aaron Katchen, “The Internationalization of Scholarship and Scholarly Societies,” *AJS Newsletter* 45 (1995) 11.

⁷⁶ “Missions of a Learned Society in an Electronic Age,” *AJS Newsletter* 45 (1995), 12.

Massachusetts to the Center for Jewish History in New York City and the hiring of Rona Sheramy as Executive Director in 2003.⁷⁷

Settled in new offices in lower Manhattan, the AJS leadership commenced a spate of activity, initiating a number of new programs to support Jewish studies domestically and abroad. In 2005, the AJS established the International Cooperation Committee and inaugurated the Eastern European Scholars Travel Grant program to fund the conference participation of Jewish studies scholars from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Following the example of other learned societies, the AJS also introduced programs that recognized exceptional work in the field, such as the Cahnman Publication Subvention Grants to provide support for first books, and the Jordan Schnitzer Book Award to recognize the best published scholarship in the field. The AJS also dramatically expanded its website to create a virtual community for scholars; it continued to be keenly concerned with providing its members with data and resources critical to supporting a fast-changing and growing field. In view of the changing nature of the field and academy, the AJS also began to pay special attention to initiatives that would benefit graduate students.

In many ways, the AJS of today is unrecognizable from the AJS of its early years, having moved beyond the need for legitimation and having fulfilled its “broadest goal,” first proposed at the 1969 colloquium, “to make a place in American higher education for the studies in the life, thought, and culture of Jews, past and present.”⁷⁸ The itinerant annual conference, with more than 150 sessions and 1000 attendees, is a far ways away from a small gathering of scholars at the Harvard Faculty Club. These changes have been catalyzed over the years by generational shifts in leadership, which have ensured renewal of the organization, its form and function. Yet, one of the primary goals of the AJS remains the same. As Sara Horowitz wrote in a 2008 presidential note:

Remarkably for its size and scope, AJS at forty maintains a strong sense of community. Although membership has grown from a few hundred to more than seventeen hundred, we have managed to retain the feel of a small organization—familiarity, hominess, friendliness, ease of meeting. This is, perhaps, the natural outcome of the unusually high percentage of members who attend the conference regularly and thus build friendships and collegial relationships both within and beyond their fields of research. It is a product, too, of the engagement of our members with the projects and mission of the organization.⁷⁹

At the first colloquium, Irving Greenberg proposed that a “community” of Jewish studies scholars might be more essential than a “professional organization.”⁸⁰ While the AJS has developed through variant formations of the latter over the years, the former has remained paramount.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Sarna, interview by author, Waltham, MA, 28 October 2008.

⁷⁸ Joseph L. Blau, “A Proposal for a Professional Association,” 90.

⁷⁹ Sara R. Horowitz, “From the President,” *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2008), 6.

⁸⁰ Irving Greenberg, “Scholarship and Continuity: Dilemma and Dialectic,” 129.