

Forum

Five Decades of New Vistas

The past was once the present, the leading edge of the future—every bit as challenging, exciting, problematic, and full of promise as our own moment now. In this issue’s Forum, scholars representing every decade of the AJS reflect, critically and sympathetically, on their own histories with Jewish Studies and the AJS, not for nostalgia but to (re-)capture the forward momentum of a precise past moment. In some cases, these pieces describe the energy that moved the field forward, or recall emergent shifts in the field we now take for granted. Other essays draw our attention to tasks that remain unfinished and problems as yet unsolved. Every piece reminds us that, in fifty years, everything we are doing today will be part of an archive, and we cannot always be sure we know what is significant and what is ephemeral.

1968

Reminiscence

Michael A. Meyer

זה הקטן גדול יהיה

In the fog-enshrouded distant past, somewhat over half a century ago, when no Association for Jewish Studies had yet been created—and there was still only a paucity of Jewish Studies within American universities—I agonized over what my freshly minted doctorate might enable me to procure. One could become a secular Hillel director (not all of them were rabbis) or perhaps find a nonacademic position in one or another Jewish organization. But that meant turning tail on the field and making all those papers and examinations into efforts for nought. I was fortunate that in 1964 HUC-JIR was expanding offerings at its new and very modest campus, nestled in the Hollywood Hills, and was eager



*Michael A. Meyer, circa 1960s.
Courtesy of the author.*

for a Jewish historian. And so, initially, I could go west from the Queen City to the Los Angeles in which I had grown up.

Five years later the scene was changing rapidly but without direction. Given the surge in Jewish Studies prompted in part by ethnic and Black Studies and by donors

increasingly willing to honor their alma mater Jewishly, the historian Leon Jick called some forty-seven scholars, including one critical Israeli (Nathan Rotenstreich) and but a single woman (Lucy Dawidowicz), to a meeting at Brandeis University. At the end of our deliberations Joseph Blau suggested a national organization of Judaica scholars. Our concerns at that meeting and in the years immediately following were to provide a vehicle for bringing order into a chaotic development by extending guidance for the new phenomenon, arguing for high standards, bringing Jewish Studies to new venues, and establishing an exchange of scholarship through a journal and an annual conference. We wanted to break the monopoly held by the narrowly focused American Academy for Jewish Research and to open the field to younger scholars with novel scholarly concerns.

The first AJS meetings were modest in the extreme: the Harvard Faculty Club could easily accommodate us in those days; the journal appeared only once a year. Thinking back on that time, I am sure we believed our organization would have a long life, but we did not imagine how vastly it would grow. The complex, multifaceted, and well-ordered AJS approaching its fifty-year anniversary is a fulfillment far beyond the expectations of even its most optimistic founders.

MICHAEL A. MEYER is the Adolph S. Ochs Professor of Jewish History emeritus at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. He is the author, among other works, of *Origins of the Modern Jew* (Wayne State, 1967) and *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Oxford, 1988).

There Are the Beginnings

Eric Meyers

In thinking back about the founding of the AJS fifty years ago I am reminded of how lucky I have been in my career. I started out at Brandeis studying modern Jewish thought but Nahum Glatzer, then chairman of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, told me that I had to do a bit of everything in order to qualify to teach Judaic Studies one day. That included Biblical Studies, Second Temple, Rabbinics, Zionism, Jewish History in all periods, and even Jewish Art and Archaeology, because E. R. Goodenough was there in those days. And I followed his advice to be a generalist and a specialist. At first I thought I would stay in German Jewish thought but along the way I fell in love with

Hebrew Bible, Archaeology, and Second Temple Studies. I also met my future wife, Carol, while there—she was at Wellesley—and so I combined Biblical Studies and archaeological work. For Glatzer it was simply unthinkable for anyone who wanted to teach Judaic Studies to lack mastery of the full chronological range of Jewish subjects that s/he might have to teach one day. This advice has been central to my life as a teacher and scholar and as a founder of two Jewish Studies programs, one at Duke and one at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (originally a joint program with Duke in the 1970s). I don't think many new PhDs today would want to accept this generalist advice, but it has served me well.

Even though I went on to Harvard to pursue a PhD in Biblical Archaeology, as quad masters at Brandeis University, Carol and I were very much part of campus life there in the tumultuous 1960s. Jack Neusner had been a recent postdoc at Brandeis working with Goodenough; he subsequently moved to Dartmouth and then to Brown in 1968, and it was around this time that there was talk about founding a Jewish Studies society. Because I had been a long-time friend of Jack—he was a JTS classmate of my late uncle Rabbi Marshall Meyer—Jack involved me in discussions and planning of the nascent AJS. Charles Berlin, Judaica librarian at Harvard, and Marvin Fox of Brandeis also were key local movers and shakers, along with many others, in getting the AJS started. I gave a paper at that first meeting in Boston on the relationship between Archaeology and Jewish Studies and used as my prime example Michael Avi-Yonah.

Nationwide at that time there were so few of us qualified to teach Judaic Studies that I had no trouble getting a job. In fact, I was offered several jobs without an on-campus interview at well-known institutions. But it was love at first sight after my campus interview at Duke and I have been there ever since. My Harvard teachers were the ones who more-or-less insisted I accept Duke because Frank Cross and Ernest Wright thought I could play a major role in the graduate program, which I hope I have. As for the undergraduate teaching, Glatzer's advice carried me for decades and some of my most popular courses through the years have been in areas that are not my specialty. I think Jewish Studies could benefit from a bit of that wisdom today.

ERIC MEYERS is Bernice and Morton Lerner Emeritus Professor in Jewish Studies at Duke University. Among his most recent publications are *Alexander to Constantine: Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, vol. 3, with Mark Chancey* (Yale, 2012) and *the final reports on Sepphoris* (Eisenbrauns at Penn State Press, 2018). He has served three times as president of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) and on the AJS Board during its early years.

1978

New Voices

Marsha Rozenblit

I began attending the annual meetings of the AJS in the mid-1970s when I was a graduate student in Jewish History at Columbia. It was enormously exciting to attend the AJS in those years. Jewish Studies was growing as

an academic field, but the conferences were still small and intimate, and graduate students, junior faculty, and the giants of the field were jointly creating a dynamic new area of academic exploration. Because the conference was small, with at most two sessions in every time slot, we attended sessions outside of our own field and got to know both those fields and the scholars who worked in them. I was in History, but I came to know the work of scholars in Bible, Rabbinics, Hebrew and Yiddish Literature, and Sociology, and I became friends with many of them, whether they were in my age cohort or not. I miss those days, and I regret that the very success of Jewish Studies means that now I rarely attend sessions outside of my own field of Modern Jewish History.

Naturally we scholars of Jewish Studies in the 1970s felt that we employed cutting-edge approaches. In my own field, many of us became social historians, studying not the rabbinic elite or great intellectual or political figures, but ordinary people. Some of us (like me) turned to cliometrics, that is, using the computer to analyze birth, marriage, school registration, communal membership, and tax records in order to study the behavior of people who only appeared in the historical record through such records. We used the published and unpublished memoirs of ordinary people who had lived through extraordinary times. As a result, we could open up new fields, including, perhaps especially, women's history. In those days, before the fall of Communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was still extraordinarily difficult to study the Jews in Eastern Europe (although some intrepid souls did so), but as soon as

it was possible in the early 1990s, many historians rushed to the long-neglected archives of Eastern Europe to study the creative Jewish communities that had lived there. We thus not only used new methodologies, but we turned to new areas of study.

I am grateful that I came of age as a scholar when I did, and I am proud of the fact that Jewish Studies continues to be a vibrant field of academic inquiry.

MARSHA ROZENBLIT is the *Harvey M. Meyerhoff Professor of Modern Jewish History at the University of Maryland, where she has been on the faculty since 1978. She is the author of The Jews of Vienna, 1867–1918: Assimilation and Identity (SUNY, 1983) and Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I (Oxford, 2001). She has also coedited (with Pieter Judson) Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe (Berghahn Books, 2005) and (with Jonathan Karp) World War I and the Jews: Conflict and Transformation in Europe, the Middle East, and America (Berghahn Books, 2017), and written over thirty articles on the Jews of the Habsburg Empire. She served as president of the AJS from 2009 to 2011.*

A Place at the (Conference) Table

Ellen M. Umansky

Looking back at the program from the 1978 AJS conference, I was surprised to discover that it easily fit on the front and back of a single piece of paper. I did remember, however, that there weren't many session options, most were on topics



*Ellen M. Umansky, circa 1970s.
Courtesy of the author.*

in which I had little interest, and less than a handful of papers focused on the lives of Jewish women. From the time I started attending AJS conferences in the mid-1970s, until a few years after the founding of the Women's Caucus in 1986, I felt like an outsider. There were few women registered, either as attendees or as presenters, and most of the men who were there, including those I knew, with few exceptions, primarily talked to one another.

In 1978, such fields of Gender Studies and Queer Theory had not yet emerged. Women's Studies had, yet despite titles that promised greater inclusivity, most of the papers at the conference that year ignored women's roles and contributions. Indeed, the notable exception, as at AJS conferences for the next several decades, was a separate session on women. In 1978, that session was "Women and Female Imagery in Jewish Literature." Serendipitously, there was a session that year on "Anglo-Jewish History in the Post-Emancipation Period" in which I was selected to be one of four presenters. My paper on "The Origins of the Liberal Jewish

Movement in England” primarily focused on Lily Montagu’s role as founder of the movement, although deliberately or not, I didn’t mention her in the title of my paper. It would be a year or two later before I began to undertake a gendered analysis of the late nineteenth-century Anglo-Jewish community. The material I presented at the 1978 conference was “new” and my perspective distinctly feminist, yet I would hardly call my paper cutting edge, as the writing of my dissertation was still in its early stages. The truth is, I don’t remember any of the papers at the conference being cutting edge. Many topics were innovative, yet safe. That the 1978 conference was held in the same city (Boston) in which it had been held since the AJS’s founding, and where it continued to be held for decades after, underscores the fact that even as it celebrated its tenth annual conference, the AJS still had a long way to go before its conferences encouraged intellectual boldness, acknowledged the geographical diversity of attendees, and welcomed the active participation of women.

ELLEN M. UMANSKY is the Carl and Dorothy Bennett Professor of Judaic Studies at Fairfield University. The author of numerous essays, book chapters, and reviews on modern Jewish history and thought, and on women in Judaism, she is also the author of two books on Lily Montagu, founder of the Liberal Jewish movement in England; coeditor (with Dianne Ashton) of *Four Centuries of Jewish Women’s Spirituality: A Source Book* (Beacon, 1992, rev. ed. UPNE, 2009) and *From Christian Science to Jewish Science: Spiritual Healing and American Jews* (Oxford, 2005).

1988

Gender Consciousness

Judith R. Baskin

In 1988 I attended the twentieth annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, held, as always in those years, at the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston. I delivered a paper, “The Education of Girls in Medieval Jewish Society,” in a panel entitled, “The Experiences of Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Women”; it also included presentations by Judith Dishon, Cheryl Tallan, and Howard Tzvi Adelman. We, and like-minded colleagues, were present at the beginning of modern scholarly study of Jewish women and it was an exciting and heady time. Our endeavor was still beyond the purview of most of the men who dominated the field in 1988. The advent of gender analysis within the various subdisciplines of Jewish Studies is unmentioned in the reflections of past presidents on “The Cutting Edge of the Study of Judaica,” delivered at the conference and published in the *AJS Newsletter* of Spring 1989. The



Judith R. Baskin, 1995.
Courtesy of the author.

panel in which I participated was one of four devoted to women; the other three addressed aspects of women in rabbinic literature and in American Jewish life and culture. The program describes one of these panels, which focused on life-cycle events, oral histories, literature, and film as sources for studying Jewish women, as offered “in conjunction with” the Women’s Caucus of the AJS. Yet, the Women’s Caucus, founded in 1986, is otherwise missing from the program; it was not considered part of the AJS because at that time it limited membership to women (see Rachael Kamel’s article on the Paula Hyman Oral Project in *Nashim* 27, 2014). The 1988 conference stands out for me because it was when the Caucus held its first breakfast meeting, under its own organizational auspices. Now the AJS Women’s Caucus’s annual public event, the breakfast had an affirming debut, signaling the arrival of a safe and empowering place for female scholars and for scholarship about women, men, and the constraints and expressions of gender.

JUDITH R. BASKIN, *Philip H. Knight Professor of Humanities Emerita, University of Oregon*, was cochair of the AJS Women’s Caucus from 1989–91 and president of the AJS from 2004–06.

Globalization

Yael Zerubavel

As the AJS approaches its fiftieth anniversary, it can note the remarkable changes within the organization and the field of Jewish Studies and the challenges ahead. Thirty years ago, when it marked its twentieth anniversary, the AJS had already witnessed a significant growth of Jewish Studies in the American

academy yet faced lingering concerns about its marginal position relative to the Israeli academy and the future development of Jewish Studies.

As a young scholar and an Israeli who had just received her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania and was working in the area of Israeli cultural history, I first arrived at the AJS annual conference in 1981. I do not have membership figures to support my impression during this first encounter, but as a newcomer I remember feeling unsure that I belonged to that scene where most participants seemed to be male and trained in more traditional Jewish scholarship. Within several years, rapid changes in the field turned me from a marginal member to an active participant, then a board member, of the society that became my main academic home base.

In the past three decades, the proliferation of programs and academic centers of Jewish Studies in American universities as well as English-language journals and book series dramatically diminished the sense of marginality of American scholars of Jewish Studies and brought larger and more diversified membership to the AJS. Contact between global centers of Jewish Studies has intensified as American and European students of Jewish Studies go to Israel, while Israeli students go abroad to pursue higher degrees. The growth in postdoctoral fellowships and visiting scholar positions in the field further accelerated this process. While Israel has remained an important center of learning, developments within the European and American academy have influenced Israeli universities, introducing new theoretical perspec-

tives and methodological approaches to the study of Jewish texts, Jewish history, and contemporary communities and their cultures. A stronger emphasis on interdisciplinary and comparative approaches to Jewish Studies has similarly reinforced closer scholarly ties with other academic fields as well as global networks focused on specific areas of expertise across the geographical and disciplinary divides. The field of Israel Studies provides a prominent example for these new academic trends. Created by American scholars and first viewed with suspicion by their Israeli colleagues, Israel Studies has become part of the Israeli academic landscape, with its own international association, journals, and programs.

Nonetheless, we may have reached the point where the expansion of Jewish Studies has reached its peak; given the recent decline in the humanities within the academy, we are currently faced with concerns about sustaining the present for the sake of the future.

Yael Zerubavel is professor of *Jewish Studies and History at Rutgers, and the author of Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition (University of Chicago Press, 1995) and Desert in the Promised Land (Stanford University Press, 2018). She has served on the boards of the AJS and the Association for Israel Studies.*

1998

It Was Twenty Years Ago Today ...

Aryeh Cohen

It is striking to me that of the two sessions I participated in at the thirtieth annual AJS conference, three of the eight scholars who presented along with me have now passed away. Of the three, Bonna Dvora Haberman was the one that I knew in more than a passing fashion. While I do not recall the specific paper she delivered, I do remember her larger project, which was what she then called a praxis hermeneutic—a feminist interpretation of text through action. I also remember Bonna's smile, her intelligence, the confidence with which she would come into a room. She was trying to do something hard. We often ended up on the same panel at the AJS or the AAR-SBL conferences, often in rooms too big for the panel, where optimism outweighed attendance. She was called to study in the *yeshivah shel ma'alah* in 2015 after a long battle with cancer, and many accomplishments.

I was very proud of the paper I gave that year ("This Patriarchy Which Is Not One: The Ideology of Marriage in Rashi and Tosafot"), and having spied Professor Chaim Soloveitchik in the audience, I tentatively went over to him after the session and asked him what he thought. I was very gratified by the fact that he did not pronounce it *drivel*. He even grudgingly seemed to approve. I was very taken with the project of a feminist hermeneutics, and committed to the fanciful idea that interpretive technique and textual analysis might be politically redemptive. I am still committed to the idea of mixing

the street and the seminar room within the interpretation of texts, which perhaps draws me closer to Bonna Haberman's project.

From the panel on midrash that I chaired, Ben Zion Wacholder and Aaron Panken have since passed away. Wacholder died after a long career and interesting life, *besevah tovah*, at the age of eighty-seven in 2011. Aaron Panken tragically died this year in a plane crash at the age of fifty-three. I, unfortunately, did not know either of them very well.

In 1998, the AJS, while still in Boston, was spreading its wings. As a graduate student at Brandeis I first attended the AJS conference in the Copley Plaza, which, in my memory, sported a two-story-tall Christmas tree in the lobby, and a modest attendance of mainly black-suited men and a smattering of black-suited women. It felt, in 1998, like the field of Jewish Studies was on the brink of something new. It still does.

ARYEH COHEN is professor of *Rabbinic Literature at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies of the American Jewish University. His latest book is Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism (Academic Studies Press, 2013).*

The Margins

Susan L. Einbinder

What were the "new vistas" of Jewish Studies scholarship twenty years ago? Were they reflected in the AJS conference in 1998 and how have they fared since? In 1998, when we still regularly convened in Boston, participation heavily weighted to the Eastern Seaboard and Israel. Today,

certainly, Jewish Studies thrives across a broader geography and multiple centers of influence. The same fissure between text and sociological topics endures, the same preoccupation with questions of identity, Holocaust, and Israel. In 1998, "gender" meant women, while today that rubric commands a much more sophisticated and variegated view. In 1998, Kabbalah and mysticism were lightly represented, and history of science, magic, or medicine not at all; today, these areas have gained considerable traction. Of the four of us who joined in 1998 for a session on medieval penitential themes, we have each evolved from our 1998 concerns. Most of our interests have remained peripheral to trending themes: no new wave of interest has buoyed studies of medieval Jewish preaching; or cultural contextualization of piyyut; or late medieval *maqāma*. Karaism has fared slightly better. In 1998, the plenary speaker, Natalie Zemon Davis, exhorted us to move past the binaries that characterized so much of our scholarship: contemporary or vernacular versus classical, secular versus religious, tradition versus modernity. Ironically, the conference program illustrates how deeply invested in those binaries Jewish Studies scholarship was. Twenty years later, those binaries remain a challenge, and "Jewish Studies" can seem a conglomerate of subspecialties that do not speak to each other and have increasingly become more balkanized from other academic disciplines and questions. This is true when the most promising work I read is richly interdisciplinary, in service neither to identity politics nor to a small group of power brokers. Where next, who knows? Today's young scholars will tell us.

SUSAN L. EINBINDER is professor of *Hebrew and Judaic Studies at the University of Connecticut and a Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America. Her most recent monograph is After the Black Death: Plague and Commemoration among Iberian Jews (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).*

From Strength to Strength

Adena Tanenbaum

By 1998, the AJS had undergone several metamorphoses since its earliest days in the Harvard Faculty Club. As the new millennium approached, the ten-member Program Committee included four women, and conference sessions



Adena Tanenbaum, circa 1990s.
Courtesy of the author.

were recorded on audio cassettes. But membership had burgeoned, and the association was far more inclusive and pluralist, both demographically and in the range of disciplines and critical methodologies it embraced. Alongside more traditional frameworks of inquiry, the conceptual tools of Gender Studies were being applied to Bible, exegesis, Rabbinics, liturgy, Holocaust Studies, and theology; considerations of race, class, and gender were being explored in

sessions on cultural and personal identities; and ethnographic perspectives were being brought to bear on Jewish law and narrative. Though textual studies were very much in evidence, there was also a move beyond the purely textual to engage with questions of orality, expressions of sacred time and space, artistic representation, and performance. But there were still significant lacunae; particularly underrepresented were the diverse Jewish subcultures of the Islamic world.

In the intervening years, those subcultures have gained greater visibility. Yet, my own area of research—premodern Yemenite Jewry—is still quite peripheral to Jewish Studies outside of Israel. Over more than a millennium, Yemenite Jewry has expressed itself in poetic, halakhic, philosophical, exegetical, and kabbalistic texts; in distinctive ritual, liturgical, and educational practices; in oral performance; folklore; material culture—manuscripts, costume, jewelry, and metalwork; in dance; women’s song, poetry, and childbirth rites; in messianic movements; with social, economic, and political agency, both internally and externally within the broader Jewish world, and as a *dhimmi* community vis-à-vis the dominant Muslim society; and more recently with a reassertion of its Arab Jewish identity. Many of these facets have been treated descriptively, but the analytical tools of ethnography, Gender and Postcolonial Studies are also being fruitfully applied. In this milestone year, which also marks the four-hundredth anniversary of Shalom Shabbazi, it is worth reiterating that the rich legacies of premodern Mizrahi communities are deserving of serious study. As the

AJS continues to innovate and broaden its canvas while responding to significant changes in the humanities, there are still fertile fields of endeavor to integrate.

ילכו מחיל אל חיל! - May they go from strength to strength!

ADENA TANENBAUM is associate professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the Ohio State University. Her book, *The Contemplative Soul: Hebrew Poetry and Philosophical Theory in Medieval Spain* (Brill, 2002), was a 2003 Koret Foundation Jewish Book Award finalist (Philosophy / Thought). She has published on medieval Hebrew poetry and belles lettres, and is completing a monograph on Zechariah Aldahiri’s maqāma, *Sefer hamusar* (Yemen, sixteenth century).

2008

Still Timely Flora Cassen

The AJS conference in 2008 was my first one with a PhD in hand and as a freshly minted assistant professor at the University of Vermont. It was the first time that I did not have to ask my advisor for a letter in order to submit a paper proposal. It was exciting, and on my way out of Burlington, I ran into a colleague who said: “Wear your UVM badge proudly”; I certainly did. Leaving through the 2008 program, it is nice to see that many friends and colleagues are still around and active. Ten years later, we still meet for lunches and drinks and continue to enjoy each other’s intellectual and social company.

As I continue to read through the program, it also strikes me that the

AJS and its scholars have not lost their edge or focus. What we were studying ten years ago is in many cases still relevant. There were panels on antisemitism (in history and on university campuses), on the many varieties and permutations of Jewish identity, on Jewish languages and literatures, multilingualism and translation, and global Diaspora(s), on anything Israel related, on Jews and nationalism and Jewish nationalism. I could go on, but my point is that many of these themes are being discussed today with renewed vigor



Flora Cassen, circa 2008.
Courtesy of the author.

in a wide variety of academic fields, and even outside of academia. It is common to hear that Jewish Studies is a step behind other fields regarding new trends, however, the program of the AJS in 2008 suggests on the contrary that many of the “traditional” questions in Jewish Studies have become increasingly useful to understanding our current times.

In 2008, my field of Italian Early Modern Studies was debating Ariel Toaff’s *Pasque di sangue*. In a panel devoted to the book, scholars not only reaffirmed the utter falseness of the claim that Jews ritually murdered Christian children, they also

1998 Program Committee

Arnold Dashefsky	University of Connecticut
Yaakov Elman	Yeshiva University
David Fishman	Jewish Theological Seminary
Christine Hayes	Yale University
Paula Hyman	Yale University
Marsha Rozenblit	University of Maryland
Mel Scult	Brooklyn College
Lawrence H. Schiffman	New York University
Elliot Wolfson	New York University
Sharon H. Flatto	Yale University (<i>student member</i>)
	<i>ex officio</i>
David Berger	Brooklyn College, <i>AJS President</i>
Aaron L. Katchen	<i>Executive Secretary, AJS</i>

From the Thirtieth Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies program book, 1998.

discussed the ins and outs of primary source analysis, especially testimonies obtained under torture, different theoretical frameworks, and the responsibilities of historians. In light of the recent rise in antisemitism and other hatreds, and talk of fake news and cherry-picking facts, this is another example of how prescient and relevant our work was and is.

FLORA CASSEN is associate professor of History and JMA and Sonja Van der Horst Scholar in Jewish History and Culture, both at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research focuses on the history of Jews in early modern Italy, Spain, and the Mediterranean. She is the author of *Marking the Jews in Renaissance Italy: Politics, Religion, and the Power of Symbols* (Cambridge, 2017).

Not Just a “Women’s Issue”

Beth S. Wenger

The opening pages of the 2008 AJS conference program contain a short paragraph about childcare services available to conference participants.

The initiative, as the conference program emphatically declares, was not sponsored by or affiliated in any way with the AJS but rather supported independently by the Center for Cultural Judaism. For many years, different private foundations subsidized the childcare program. By contrast, in 2018, childcare stands as a regular budget line in AJS conference planning.

The impetus to provide childcare at the conference began in the AJS Women’s Caucus, spearheaded by a group of Caucus members who, on their own initiative, successfully garnered the funding needed to make it a reality. In those years, the childcare effort emerged as one of the key projects of the Women’s Caucus, though its members recognized that it was not, in fact, solely a “women’s issue,” but one that fell disproportionately on young women scholars. It is no coincidence that childcare became part of the AJS agenda as former leaders and cochairs of the Women’s Caucus assumed greater roles in the leadership of the organization. At the same time, childcare services involved a complex matrix of financial and liability considerations, and required delicate negoti-

ations that extended beyond the desire to support parents attending the conference. In many ways, the question of offering childcare revealed the contested terrain of an organization grappling with inclusion as it struggled with its own economic challenges.

Many members might argue that today childcare provisions could be improved, as remains the case in many academic organizations. But certainly the evolution over ten years is striking. Providing childcare allows all parents to attend conference sessions, and to have access to all the opportunities for intellectual exchange and socialization so crucial to professional advancement, particularly at the early-career stages. Moreover, childcare services benefit the organization as a whole by allowing the contributions of individuals who might otherwise not be able to participate. In many respects, the issue of childcare reveals the strides made toward greater inclusivity in the AJS as it seeks to serve a more diverse and growing membership.

BETH S. WENGER is Moritz and Josephine Berg Professor of History and chair of the History Department at the University of Pennsylvania. Her books include *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton University Press, 2010), *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (Yale University Press, 1996), and *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America* (Doubleday, 2007). Wenger is a former cochair of the AJS Women’s Caucus.