

JEWISH STUDIES AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Steven Weitzman

The Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University established an undergraduate major in 1992 with the original objective to study Jewish civilization from antiquity to the present and its interaction with and impact on world civilization. At the time that I write this, seventy-five IU students are majoring in Jewish studies; forty-three students are seeking a Jewish studies certificate (slightly more demanding than a minor); and forty-four students are pursuing a Hebrew minor.

Our undergraduate program is organic and evolving as the faculty, student culture, and the field of Jewish studies itself evolves. In earlier years, it was shaped by the need to establish Jewish studies as a legitimate focus of study. In more recent years, as that legitimacy has been accepted and as our faculty has grown and become more specialized, we have ventured to deepen the quality and rigor of the program. Thanks in large part to the fund-raising prowess of my predecessor Alvin Rosenfeld, we have secured a large number of faculty positions—and, no less importantly, it is our own faculty, and not other departments, who determine how those positions are filled, control that has been essential in building a coherent curriculum. Still, there remain gaps in our curriculum—medieval Jewish thought, Israel studies, German Jewish history—and our effort to

fill them is what provokes debate about our future direction. Should we develop the social science part of our program or strengthen humanistic areas like literature or other arts? Should we seek to cover the breadth of Jewish experience or deepen areas of existing strength? Should hiring be dictated by our undergraduate program or by our graduate program?

As individuals, we answer these questions differently, and our curriculum represents a balancing act between depth and breadth, accessibility and specialization, disciplinary focus and the open-endedness of interdisciplinary inquiry. What makes compromise possible, I think, is a shared recognition of several overarching

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commitments and aspirations. Many of our students come to us with little or no background in Jewish studies, and so one of our basic obligations is to instill in students a rudimentary understanding of Jewish history, culture, language, and thought. But we also want to give students something beyond mere literacy, to complicate their sense of Jewish history, to empower them to draw insightful conclusions about the meaning of a text or the strengths and weaknesses of an idea, to broaden their sense of Jewish cultural and religious expression. Many of our students are motivated

by a desire to develop their own sense of identity. It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the role that we play for that kind of student, though we would certainly differ if asked individually to define that role. But we all embrace our responsibilities as part of a public research university, committed to a student constituency that includes both Jews and non-Jews and a core mission to teach those students how to think critically, comparatively, and contextually about Jews.

What is the goal of a Jewish studies major, and what constitutes a good or successful major? Here, too, I would not impute to my colleagues any single view, but I can describe the assumptions that inform my own efforts as a Jewish studies program director to shape the undergraduate education we offer.

1) *A good Jewish studies major should also be a good liberal arts major.* In its ideal form, our major will teach students how to read critically and carefully, write clearly and persuasively, and take ideas seriously. It will promote self-

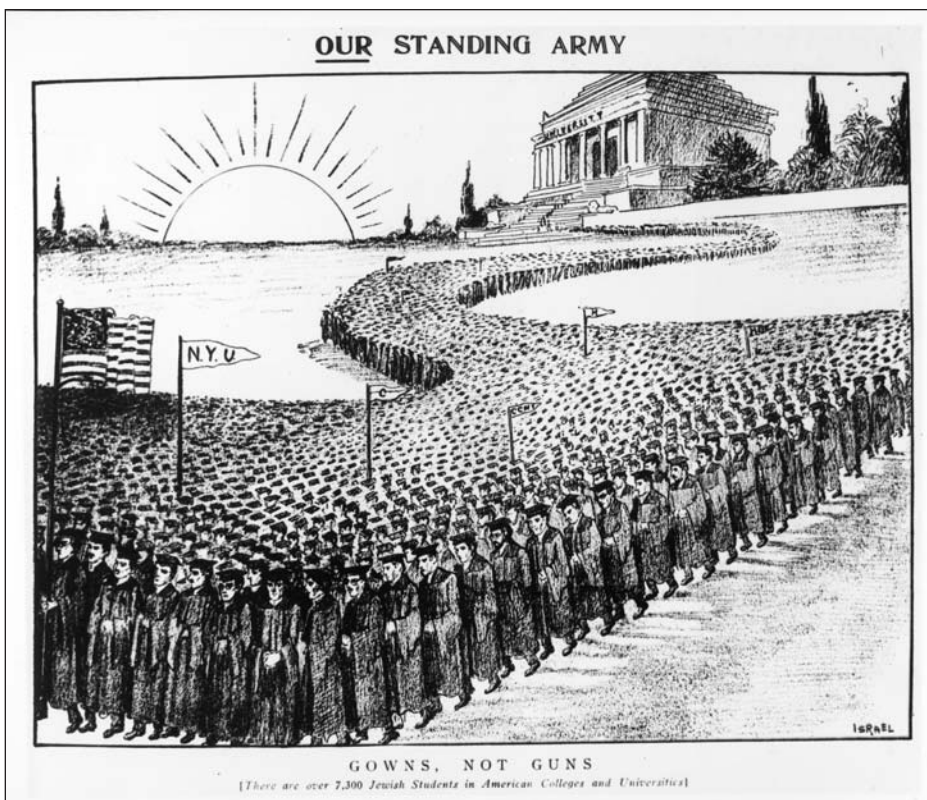
awareness and self-examination while also encouraging respect for the Other and his/her perspective. It will strengthen the ability to ask good questions, and, by exposing students to a range of humanistic and/or social scientific modes of inquiry, give them some of the intellectual skills they need to settle on their own answers.

2) *A good Jewish studies major should have multiple points of access.* Historical and textual study are the cornerstones of our major, and we recognize the need to strengthen those modes of intellectual

engagement. But the disciplinary borders of Jewish studies are shifting and broadening, and we are trying to adapt accordingly, making more room for the arts and other aspects of Jewish life not necessarily recorded in canonical texts. This is one of the reasons we created an Institute for Jewish Culture and the Arts whose goal, along with related courses, is to promote understanding of Jewish artistic creativity.

3) *A good Jewish studies major provides not just a structure but a structured relationship with teachers and mentors.* To launch our students properly, it is not enough to impose requirements or define goals; we also need to provide students with good advising, model intellectual and cultural engagement, alert them to the opportunities found outside the classroom, and help them connect what they learn to their intellectual or professional aspirations. We do what we can to provide scholarship opportunities and career guidance for our students and encourage them to take an active role in shaping their own educations.

All this might make for a respectable major but is there anything to distinguish a Jewish studies major from any other interdisciplinary pursuit in the liberal arts? The most obvious answer is to define the difference in terms of content—the texts and languages are different, the history and sociology, distinctive. But beyond subject matter, I also believe that what distinguishes Jewish studies is the creative tension it generates with the rest of a student’s education. It allows students to view Western civilization from the perspective of a people both inside and outside of that civilization. It cultivates the critical reasoning skills of modern secular scholarship even as it introduces other ways of thinking. It explores



Reprinted from the *American Hebrew*, July 16, 1915. This cartoon accompanied an article announcing the latest study by the Department of Synagogue and School Extension of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The article noted that there were 7,300 Jewish men and women attending colleges and universities in the United States—demonstrating that 3.6 per thousand Jews, as against 1.9 per thousand for the rest of the population, were enrolled in higher education. They declared this achievement “a remarkably good showing.” Courtesy of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

what it means to be on the margins, in the minority, or in an intermediate space between perspectives. It complicates the very idea of difference itself, challenging any neat or stable distinction between the self and the Other. In

short, a good Jewish studies major is a good liberal arts major in a self-consciously different mode.

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