

The Center for Jewish Studies at 50:

Looking Ahead to New Community, New Partnerships, and New Understandings of What Jewish Means

by Deena Aranoff

SOMETHING MAGICAL HAPPENS AT THE GTU'S RICHARD S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies: a kind of intellectual alchemy in which classical Jewish sources meet contemporary perspectives, producing new articulations of ancient themes. The intellectual buzz at CJS reverberates beyond the walls of the GTU, reaching Jewish and non-Jewish communities across the Bay Area and beyond. Through in-depth cultural, historical, textual, linguistic, and literary explorations, CJS transforms those who participate in its degree and public programs into a new kind of Jewish community.

At the heart of the CJS community are its students. For students in our Master of Arts program (as well as doctoral students with concentrations in fields related to Jewish studies), the transformation includes two years of course work devoted to the study of Jewish languages, cultures, and literatures. As the culmination of their studies, CJS MA graduates produce a thesis that examines a particular aspect of Jewish civilization. Some highlights of recent work by CJS students include a look at the earth-based character of early Judaism, an archeological study of a first-century synagogue, and examinations of Holocaust education in contemporary Germany and the use of poetry in hospice care, to name just a few. The breadth of student interests and the quality of their work is a hallmark of the Center for Jewish Studies, and signifies the capacity of academic study to transform individuals as well as the communities to which they belong.

Throughout its fifty years, the Center for Jewish Studies has combined a commitment to academic excellence with a commitment to empowering Jewish communal leadership

and advocating for social change. This is nowhere more evident than among the first cohort of students who have come to CJS through our Jewish Community Fellowship. This new fellowship provides Jewish educators and community professionals with tuition for a single course in Jewish studies, enabling them to invigorate their teaching and community service with the wisdom of Jewish scholarship. The capstone of this annual program is a workshop taught by a master Jewish educator, which will be taught this year by Miriam Heller Stern, National Director of the School of Education of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. We are excited to convene an amazing group of local educators to explore the theme of creativity and Jewish education.

CJS has a profound impact on the Bay Area community through the steady stream of people who attend our talks and who raise awareness of our programs and resources. In recent years we have hosted a series of fascinating and fantastic public programs, such as *Fiddler at Fifty*, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Jewish History*, *Curating Culture*, *Making Memory: On the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews*, *Captives of the Dawn: Remembering Soviet Yiddish Culture*, *Jewish Women's History Reconsidered*, and *Hasidism Re-appraised*. Our lecturers and adjuncts have included internationally known scholars from all corners of the Jewish and academic worlds, including Avivah Zornberg, Charlotte Fonrobert, Daniel Matt, Stephen Pearce, Dina Stein, John Efron, Erich Gruen, Shana Penn, Robert Alter, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Anna Shternshis, Sven-Erik

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Rose, Gabriella Safran, Ofer Dines, Shmary Brownstein, Francesco Spagnolo, Bernie Steinberg, and many others. CJS is a premier platform for Jewish ideas, scholarship, and culture in the Bay Area.

Jewish studies at the GTU transcends the boundaries of religion and culture, building new models of interreligious and intercultural conversation. One of the most exciting developments in recent years is our thriving Madrasa-Midrasha program. Since its inception in 2008, the program has provided a unique forum for interreligious explorations of Judaism and Islam among GTU students and throughout the larger Bay Area. The terms *Madrasa* and *Midrasha* (Arabic-Hebrew cognates, literally meaning “a place of study/learning”) refer to the traditional pedagogical settings and educational practices for the study of the classical Islamic and Jewish sources; in our case, these closely related practices are mobilized for the purposes of contemporary Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

The Madrasa-Midrasha program explores the deep historic commonalities between Judaism and Islam that are often overshadowed by mainstream media’s focus on differences and conflicts, and covers a gap that often exists in both theological education and public discourse. This highly popular collaboration bears none of the internal conflicts that occur with many academic cross-cultural programs. In some respects, the Center for Jewish Studies and the Center for Islamic Studies have become a single community of faculty and students. The common enterprise of scholarly inquiry has opened our hearts and minds to the exploration of one another in ways that have truly transformed us.



Another very exciting current trend at CJS is our increased role in training those who intend to pursue rabbinical studies locally and nationally. Studies at CJS now serve as an important first step towards rabbinical, pastoral, and academic Jewish leadership. Since rabbinical schools often require that entering students acquire greater Hebrew fluency and textual literacy, the GTU lays the groundwork for Bay Area individuals who intend to pursue such studies down the road. The transformative potential of CJS in the process of rabbinic education can only be anticipated.

As we celebrate our fiftieth anniversary, the Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies at the GTU continues to prioritize the kind of academic study and critical engagement that is necessary to address the challenges of our era, and build a more just and stable society. Now more than ever, many of us are inquiring into the nature of our political culture, our social life, and our relationship to the natural world. May our studies over the next fifty years and beyond contribute to the broader human effort toward understanding and cooperation. ♦

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