

by Deena Aranoff

**At the Center of Jewish Studies, the classical and the contemporary come together, producing new articulations of ancient themes.**



# Enlivening Jewish Tradition

**T**he GTU's Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies is an academic hub devoted to the critical examination of Jewish history, literature, and culture. For some, talk of such work conjures up images of scholars wading through the dustbins of history, making small and mostly irrelevant observations regarding minutia of the past. But the work that happens at CJS is anything but irrelevant—and that's one reason I am excited to be the Center's new director.

CJS degree programs provide students with an understanding of Jewish civilization that empowers them in their professional and personal lives, inside and outside the academy. CJS offers a PhD, an MA, and a certificate in Jewish Studies, and also provides faculty and resources for GTU students pursuing doctoral work in Rabbinic Literature, Hebrew Bible, and numerous interreligious concentrations. Our graduates often take up leadership roles in local Jewish communities; some continue on to rabbinical school or further graduate work. CJS public programs host hundreds of people each year and contribute to the advancement of popular understandings of Jewish phenomena throughout the Bay Area. Something magical happens at CJS—a kind of intellectual alchemy in which classical Jewish sources meet contemporary perspectives, producing new articulations of ancient themes. I am honored to be a part of this enterprise.

The scholarly work we do at CJS is a form of transformative inquiry. I often tell students that academic research has three phases. The first phase begins in the student's mind and springs from his or her passion for a particular subject. This first phase—humble, understated, and prolonged—is the most subjective phase of the academic process, a function of the curiosity of the inquirer.

The second phase of research usually involves an extended encounter with primary materials: literary, archival, published, or in manuscript. This is per-

haps the most important phase of academic research; it is both demanding and fragile. It is demanding because access to a source requires familiarity with its language, genre, and context. It is fragile because the specificity of the source material can easily be lost, swallowed up by researcher's assumptions. If handled well, however, this encounter is transformative. The researcher's questions change as a result of the scholarly attunement to the material itself.

In my view, the metric of good scholarship is not only whether it is engaging or interesting, but also the degree to which it emerges from this authentic encounter between the researcher and the material. How this encounter unfolds is different for each scholar. Some scholars present work that is a thinly veiled unfolding of a scholar's own interiority. Others present scholarship that privileges the primary sources at the expense of an authorial voice. I believe the best work strikes a balance between these two extremes.

Like many of the students at CJS today, I have sought to navigate these tensions in my own scholarship. My Jewish learning began in the traditional Jewish environments of my childhood. Those environments cultivated a devotional posture toward classical Jewish sources; the goal in studying biblical and rabbinic materials was simply to understand them. Toward this end, one relied upon the guidance of the authoritative readers of prior generations. The reader was encouraged to relinquish the value of his or her



perspective in order to access the text without contemporary distortions.

This type of devotional study was a tremendous source of delight for me and drew me closer to the tradition. The call to relinquish my own personal perspective and voice, however, was complicated by my status as a woman. I came to realize that male readers, especially those granted a measure of authority as teacher or rabbi, often came to confuse (or were invited to confuse) their own perspectives with that of the sources. Mastery of the sources allowed one to speak for the sources. Such teachers wove their own readings into the texts; their readings became the authoritative meaning of the text itself. As a woman, I did not undergo this process. Instead I remained in the early phase, locked in a posture of devotion and subordination. The invitation to the next phase, issued wordlessly and unconsciously to my male peers, never came.

I share this personal history because, in many ways, I transferred this traditional posture to my academic life. My decision to pursue a PhD in Jewish history was an extension of my earlier passion for Jewish learning. My teacher, Yosef Yershalmi, embodied the ways in which the study of Jewish history can help one forge and clarify a relationship to the tradition. But as I took my first, tentative steps towards becoming a scholar, I found it very difficult to move into the final phase of research—that stage in which the scholar puts forth an argument, summoning the materials toward a particular perspective. I could only make my way through the texts in devotional style.

Luckily, there were a few people who enabled me to find my voice. First, the series of scholars who helped me in the final stages of my dissertation: J.W. Smit, Jennifer Greenfield, and Benjamin Gampel. Second, I credit the support of my friend and colleague, former CJS director and current professor Dr. Naomi Seidman, who throughout my ten years at the GTU, has truly invited me to speak. Thank you, Naomi.

I offer these reflections about my own scholarly path as a way of illuminating the profound transformations that we hope are part of the academic process for all who study at CJS. Studies at CJS constitute nothing short of a transformation of the student. To be sure, our program includes “devotional” aspects, by which I mean the dutiful acquisition of the languages and major trends of Jewish history. At the same time, however, students cultivate their own perspectives and arguments. They acquire the theoretical tools that enable them to make their contributions to the world of Jewish Studies.

The academic study of Judaism that takes place at CJS has the capacity to enliven contemporary Jewish life. This might sound strange, since it has long been assumed that the critical study of the Jewish past, certainly of biblical and rabbinic materials, puts

*“Looking back on my past two years at the CJS, I imagine myself as a cartographer, and my two main professors, Naomi Seidman and Deena Aranoff, as experienced explorers in the world of Judaism. I now have the tools to map my own Jewish experience, and to continue to travel in the Jewish world, deepening into my own unique identity.” —GENEVIEVE GREINETZ (MA, '16)*



one at a distance from the heart and meaning of the tradition. I believe, however, that the conflict between historical study and the pursuit of religious meaning has begun to fade.

The great clash between history and religion has given way to a worldview in which a historical understanding of religion and its ruptures and changes over time can be readily assimilated by individuals seeking to strengthen their religious commitments. The contemporary *Zeitgeist* favors the notion that people and cultures can best be understood through their temporality, kind, and condition, through an inquiry into the past and its role in shaping the ever-shifting present. Indeed, historical inquiry has become a constructive mode of religious inquiry, a means by which an increasing number of individuals find meaning in Jewish practice, literature, and ideas.

This shift in sensibilities is everywhere apparent at CJS. Though the study of history may have signaled alienation from Judaism a mere generation ago, it has become a rich and viable point of entry for some who seek to deepen their relationship with it. We have arrived at a cultural moment in which postmodern perspectives have become a fertile means by which an increasing number of individuals make meaning out of both their own experience and the contingent, historical development of their religious tradition.

As director of CJS I am honored to be the custodian of this process—enabling CJS students and the broader Bay Area community to cultivate critical, analytical perspectives, facilitating a true encounter with classical and contemporary Jewish formations and the articulation of new perspectives. Far from foreclosing an enduring connection to Jewish life, the scholarly work happening at the GTU and its Center for Jewish Studies is a powerful and productive force shaping Jewish culture today.

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# My CJS Journey

By Tania Lowenthal

*“My time at the Center for Jewish Studies set the foundation for a lifelong commitment to creating, fostering, and nourishing Jewish communal life.”*

—Tania Lowenthal



**T**wenty years ago, with the muddy clarity of a twenty-something in search of a meaningful direction, I enrolled at the GTU’s Center for Jewish Studies. I did not know that Professor Naomi Seidman would become an esteemed Director of the Center, charting its academic and spiritual direction. I did not know that Professor Daniel Matt, would go on to become a world-renown Zohar scholar. I did not know what path would emerge for me. But I knew—rightly—that the journey would inform my life’s direction.

Here’s why the CJS, for me, is *besher*:

At CJS, I had the opportunity to learn from remarkable, visionary scholars in Jewish history, thought, and mysticism. But the generosity of their spirits and their view of themselves as lifelong learners allowed us to truly learn together. I was stretched intellectually and spiritually, and I was able to bring my wisdom and life experience to the learning of others around me. We were truly a learning community.

The CJS faculty encouraged me to write my thesis—a curriculum on Jewish Spirituality for Young Adults—because it was what I wanted to do (and *they*, at least, seemed undaunted by the fact that I had no idea how to do it). Since I’d grown up in Cali, Colombia, some assumed I would explore the history of Sephardic Jews in Colombia—and indeed, they have a fascinating story that has shaped contemporary Jewish life around the world. But it didn’t call me. I had questions

about Jewish mysticism—specifically, how young people could access its deep learning and traditions. Professor Matt understood what inspired me and guided me throughout my scholarship, offering feedback that was always insightful, humble, and extremely helpful. Although he is one of the world’s great scholars in Jewish mysticism, he was, to me, a very personal, wise, and accessible advisor. Quintessential CJS.

I’d grown up firm in my Jewish identity, but at CJS I discovered there were boundless ways that identity could be expressed in my life. I also learned to have faith in myself. Professor Naomi Seidman offered me the delicious opportunity to do an independent study with her to enhance my Hebrew. The work was remarkably challenging. But those meetings were precious, protected time. Furthermore, in typical CJS fashion, I was encouraged to find a creative way to use my skills as a native Spanish speaker to fund the crucial Aramaic lessons needed to unpack the

heavy texts I was devouring. I was encouraged, supported, and challenged to expand my boundaries in ways I could never have imagined.

Diversity of thought and experience is a starting point at CJS—and throughout the GTU. From the moment I stepped onto campus, my presence was received as an opportunity for deeper learning and understanding; I was Jewish, Colombian, gay, and left-handed—all welcome characteristics in our learning community.

More than anything, being a student at the CJS and years later serving on the advisory board has helped align me, professionally and personally. It set the foundation for a lifelong commitment to creating, fostering, and nurturing Jewish communal life on my own terms, and in ways that cultivate independent, thriving Jewish life where I live.

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