Friday Forum

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Jewish Studies and the University of Pennsylvania

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SEVERAL years ago, Dr. Irving Greenberg, now chairman of the department of Jewish studies at the City University of New York, startled the American Jewish community by declaring that in terms of its effect on commitment and identity, the college campus was a disaster area for American Jewry. At a time when an overwhelming majority of eligible Jewish youth was attending college, the overall effect of this experience on their loyalty and commitment to their Jewish heritage was, Dr. Greenberg declared, decidedly negative.

While many were aware of this situation at the time Dr. Greenberg made his comments, the public revelation of these conditions caused many to stop and take stock.

Recently, however, Dr. Leonard Fein, of Brandeis University, a well-known observer of the American Jewish community, was quoted as saying that the disastrous impact of university education on Jewish youth is now being successfully countered and we need no longer consider the college campus a disaster area for American Judaism.

The major factor to which Dr. Fein referred was the unprecedented growth of Jewish studies programs in the universities. Since the Second World War, courses and programs in Jewish studies embracing language, literature, history, philosophy and sociology have been established on literally hundreds of campuses throughout the country.

While one must be cautious in predicting the impact this phenomenon may have on Jewish college students, there is little doubt that its implications for the current and future state of American Jewish life are significant, as are its implications for the nature of university education in the United States.

What is it that prompts universities to take an interest in Jewish studies, and what accounts for the upsurge of such programs in recent years?

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FIRST we must distinguish between the motives of the university and those of the student body. From the perspective of the university, Jewish studies is an academic pursuit attractive because of the intrinsic interest of such subjects as Jewish religion, law and ethics, society and literature, and because of the extrinsic interest of the Jewish foundations of Christianity and Islam, the Jews' role in Western civilization and the rise of modern Israel in the Middle East. Furthermore, the fact that Jews have resided in so many societies and have left minority views of them can be of great use to historians seeking to gain a balanced view of these societies and their histories (an example of differing perspectives would be provided by a Jewish view of the Crusades).

In our age of rapid cultural change and breakdown of traditional values, universities are conscious as never before of another responsibility, the fostering of calm and rational examination of old and new values alike. Such an examination requires, among other things, an understanding of the origin and purpose of traditional values. Since many values of Western civilization have their origin in biblical and postbiblical Judaism, these fields may serve as a focal point of historical analysis.

In addition, since values are often brought into relief by comparison with different systems, the Jewish value system, which has remained distinct in many ways, provides an illuminating basis for analysis and comparison. In this respect Jewish studies, like the study of all unfamiliar cultures, may have the effect of breaking through students' preconceptions and suggesting alternative viewpoints and values. The weighing of such alternatives is vividly illustrated in the study of Jewish history, which has witnessed debates over the respective claims of values which ought to be examined in any undergraduate education: tradition and change, particularism and universalism, rational analysis and religious feeling, law and spirit, mythological polytheism versus transcendental monotheism.

Viewed from this perspective, the increasing interest in Jewish studies reflects the increasing deparochialization of university curricula. Since World War II, scholars on the campus have been broadening the scope of the curriculum beyond the Christian-Western European orientation which characterized American university education until recently. Increasingly, scholars have concluded that non-European civilizations and the non-Christian religions deserve a significant place in the college curriculum.

In addition, spurred in part by the renaissance of Jewish culture in the State of Israel, scholars began to correct their former image of Judaism as merely a pre-Christian phenomenon, and came increasingly to take notice of the Jewish elements that must be included in any serious study of Western civilization. Thus, on many campuses, the introduction of courses in Jewish studies symbolized the awakening of universities to the true nature of a humanistic education.

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AT the same time, one cannot ignore the thrust from below, as Jewish college students increasingly sought more courses in Jewish studies. This phenomenon may be viewed in part as a response to the feeling of rootlessness and lack of purpose which seemed to pervade student populations in the 1960s. Motivated by an often unconscious quest for roots, identity, community and meaningful existence, college students sought to satisfy their longings in a variety of ways, ranging from the drug culture and communes to religions, both Eastern and Western, and to political activism.

At the same time, blacks and other minority groups were coming to the recognition that true liberation required a self-respect and self-understanding that derived from a rootedness in one's own ethnic-cultural heritage. Eschewing assimilation, young blacks began to call for educational programs which would put them in touch with their own heritage.

The relevance of the blacks' struggle to recapture their own group identity was not lost upon Jewish students who, themselves, were experiencing the alienation that was sweeping the campuses. To many of the Jewish students, the destruction of six million Jews in the Holocaust and the existence of a Jewish state for the first time in almost two millennia were having their effects in ways which the students themselves did not yet understand. To this must be added the impact of the Six Day War, which brought home to many American Jews a deeper sense of the precarious state of Jewish group existence and a deeper understanding of the interdependence of world Jewry.

A further factor has been the achievement—and even in some cases the lack of achievement—of American Jewish education. The better Hebrew and day schools and camps have succeeded in sending to the universities a growing number of students who are capable of pursuing Jewish studies on an advanced level from the day they arrive on campus. A perceptible number of students has begun to choose the University of Pennsylvania, and even to transfer to Penn from elsewhere, for just that purpose. And students whose Jewish education has been poor or nil come to the university so hungry for knowledge of their past and present that they pursue courses in Judaica with the passion of new discovery.

Each of these factors played a part in arousing Jewish college students to explore their own roots, to lobby (successfully) for courses in Hebrew and Judaica and to enroll in these courses in large numbers. An informal survey conducted by the student publication, *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, recently found that 59 percent of Jewish students at the University of Pennsylvania had taken or planned to take a course on religious thought, religious history or a religion-related language, while 17 percent of Catholics and 30 percent of Protestants surveyed responded similarly.

Together with the increased receptivity of college faculties and administrations to Judaica courses, increasing student interest played a significant role in stimulating the growth of Jewish studies in the university.

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THIS leads us to the relationship of Jewish studies to the Jewish community at large. First, it should be understood that while the goals of Jewish studies programs and those of the Jewish community converge at certain points, the major justification for these programs on the college campus is the contribution they make towards broadening and deepening our understanding of human thought, society and culture. In other words, Jewish studies belongs in a college curriculum because it furthers, ofttimes in a unique way, the goals of liberal arts education. Accordingly, the scholarly study and teaching of Judaica in a university setting demands the same degree of dispassionate analysis, unencumbered by religious dogma or parochialism, that is required of all scholarly study.

But in addition to the broad goals of university education, Jewish studies may have particular effects on Jewish students. Our pluralistic society has an interest in seeing that members of individual groups know and understand their own heritages, and the university may fulfill an important role in combating the ignorance which

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members of groups often display toward their heritages. This is where the universal goals of the university and the specific goals of the Jewish community coincide.

While the university does not seek to foster commitment to specific cultural heritages, such commitment is not an unlikely result. A serious study of Judaism in a university setting can and does have a powerful impact on the consciousness and self-awareness of Jewish students. Time and again, Jewish students discover that Judaism is a profound tradition which merits serious respect and study in ways that they had never anticipated during their early years of Jewish education. They learn that the Jewish heritage is widely recognized as a significant factor in civilization, deserving careful study at the highest levels of academia, where scholars devote lifetimes to its study.

While the stance of the teacher must remain dispassionate and nonapologetic, there is no denying the existential effect that a careful reading of Isaiah or Pirke Avot, or a direct encounter with the writings of Martin Buber or Franz Rosenzweig can have on college students. In addition, the role models for Jewish living in the persons of many university teachers of Judaica do much to counteract students' sometimes negative attitudes towards Judaism as a viable lifestyle.

Thus, to the extent that self-understanding and knowledge of the Jewish cultural heritage are prerequisites for a strong Jewish community in the United States, Jewish studies programs can make a vital contribution toward that end.

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THE complex of attitudes and interests surveyed above developed only in recent decades. Until the beginning of the 19th Century, Jewish studies were conducted almost exclusively within the context of traditional Jewish society. While the methods of history, philology, grammar and philosophy had been applied to the study of Judaism, such studies were rooted in theological assumptions regarding the sacred character of Judaism. For example, while medieval scholars utilized tools of grammatical and literary analysis in their study of biblical texts, the reverence with which they approached these sacred writings precluded other avenues of inquiry, such as aesthetic appreciation of biblical literature, or the social and intellectual history of ancient Israel.

In the early 19th Century, a combination of social, political and cultural factors set the stage for the development of a form of Jewish scholarship in which the tools of critical, historical scholarship were applied for the first time to postbiblical Jewish history and culture. In Germany, the scholars who founded the "Science of Judaism" (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*), such as Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger and Heinrich Graetz, sought to apply to the study of Judaism the same kind of detached, objective critical inquiry then being applied to general history, and thus laid the foundations for a more dispassionate Jewish scholarship.

Throughout most of the 19th Century, however, such critical, historical study of Judaism remained confined primarily to rabbinical seminaries and a few private institutes of Jewish studies in Europe. Despite the hopes of Geiger and Graetz to gain scholarly recognition for Judaism as a legitimate realm of academic endeavor in its own right, the attitude of Western scholarship was still shaped by Christian theological assumptions, which viewed Jewish life and culture following the emergence of Christianity as devoid of life and spirit, Judaism having been "superceded" by Christianity. The Talmud was darkly regarded as a secret, anti-Christian tract.

Here and there certain Christian savants delved into postbiblical literature as a resource for biblical exegesis or for understanding the background of Christianity. Since most of the universities in colonial America had been founded under ecclesiastical auspices, they had from the beginning offered courses in Hebrew and biblical studies to their students who were preparing for the ministry. These courses were taught either by non-Jews or apostate Jews, such as Harvard's Judah Monis, whose entrance to the academic world was purchased with the abandonment of Jewish affiliation.

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THIS situation began to change near the end of the 19th Century, with the University of Pennsylvania playing a leading role in new developments. Unlike other colonial universities, Penn had been founded (in the mid-18th Century) as a secular university, and, therefore, did not immediately include Hebrew in its curriculum. By 1790, however, Penn had established a professorship of "German and Oriental languages," with "Oriental" referring to Hebrew. It remains unclear whether this was done for humanistic reasons or as a service to students who planned careers in the clergy, but it is noteworthy that with only seven full-time faculty members in 1790, a place was set aside for Hebrew.

Nearly a century later, increasing interest in the ancient Near East, stimulated by archaeological discoveries in the region, led Penn to establish a department of Semitic languages. In 1886 the appointments of scholars such as the Rev. John Peters in Hebrew and Morris Jastrow, the son of an eminent Philadelphia rabbi, as professor of Arabic and rabbinical literature formed the basis for what became a continuing program of Judaica within the context of ancient Near Eastern civilization.

Jastrow's course offerings included Apocrypha, Mishna, Talmud and medieval Jewish philosophy. To our knowledge, he was the first Jewish scholar appointed to teach courses in postbiblical Judaism at an American university.

Surprisingly, the establishment of Jewish studies on the university level at Penn preceded the opening of such other well-known Philadelphia institutions as Gratz College and Dropsie University by several years.

From 1886 into the first decades of the 20th Century, similar appointments were made at other American universities, such as Columbia, Johns Hopkins, the University of Chicago and Harvard, including such giants as the historian Salo W. Baron and the authority on philosophy, Harry A. Wolfson. Two distinguished scholars who began teaching at Penn in the 1910s and 1920s were Isaac Husik and Ephraim A. Speiser, who, respectively, taught Jewish philosophy and Semitic languages and literature.

In more recent years these early greats were followed by such outstanding figures as S. D. Goitein, a leading authority on Genizah literature and Jews in the Islamic world, and Moshe Greenberg, one of the most distinguished biblical scholars. Paced by these men and their colleagues, Penn established an admirable record in Judaic scholarship, a record which helps explain the welcome accorded the field at Penn today. To cite but a single recent example, more than a score of contributors to the new *Encyclopaedia Judaica* either taught or studied at Penn.

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IN the 1930s Speiser, along with the venerable Protestant biblical scholar James A. Montgomery and the eminent linguist Zellig S. Harris, offered a variety of courses in Bible, Hebrew (including modern language and literature) and Jewish culture and society. Nevertheless, at Penn and elsewhere, Jewish studies remained rather modest in extent. It was not until after the Second World War that the field began to expand toward its present proportions.

The expansion at Penn was spurred by the establishment of the Abraham M. Ellis chair in Hebrew and Semitic languages and literatures in 1954. Another sign of communal interest in fostering Jewish studies at Penn was the establishment of the Mauritz and Josephine Berg chair in religious thought to support a scholar whose area of competence was to include Judaism.

In 1954 Jewish studies comprised a few faculty members offering a handful of courses to less than 40 students. By 1973-74 Penn students could choose from among 30 courses in Jewish studies taught by 13 different faculty members, four of whom teach Judaica full-time, one of the largest numbers of courses and faculty teaching Judaica on the college level outside of Israel. These courses had an aggregate enrollment of 650, an increase of 250 over the previous year alone.

Moreover, the number of institutions of higher learning in the U. S. and Canada offering courses in Jewish studies has now grown to more than 350, with many offering undergraduate majors and graduate programs in the field. In addition, the newly created Association for Jewish Studies, an organization of college teachers specializing in Judaica, now boasts a membership of several hundred.

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TODAY, Jewish studies at Penn embrace numerous aspects of Jewish civilization, which is studied from a variety of academic perspectives. Thus, a student may enroll for courses in Bible, Midrash, Jewish law, Kabbalah, Hasidism, Jewish folklore, modern Hebrew literature and modern Jewish social and intellectual history, offered by such departments as folklore, history, the law school, religious thought and Oriental studies.

Furthermore, an undergraduate wishing to elect Jewish studies as his or her major may do so within the latter two departments or may design an individualized major tailored to his or her own special interests. In addition, graduate programs training scholars in several of the above fields may be pursued in the same two departments and the folklore department.

This distribution of Jewish studies among a number of departments reflects the multifaceted character of Jewish civilization. Social, cultural, political, economic and religious dimensions of Jewish life may be studied against the background of the various societies and cultures within which the Jews have lived in the course of their history. The Bible may be studied within the context of ancient Near Eastern civilization, medieval Judaism in the context of Christian and Islamic civilizations and modern Judaism within the context of Western and Middle Eastern civilization. The same subject matter may be approached with the tools of several different disciplines. The broadest possible perspective is allowed, thereby precluding a parochialism which has, in the past, marred our understanding of Judaism.

The growth of Jewish studies in American universities in general, as at the University of Pennsylvania in particular, is a subject that deserves much further study and research. In the course of such a study, much will be learned concerning the American university and the American Jewish community. One conclusion that can already be drawn, however, is that the future development of Jewish studies programs will greatly enhance university education and American Jewish life alike.