Editorial

After several years, the Newsletter of the Association for Jewish Studies has finally reappeared. We hope that the new Newsletter lives up to the high standards of its predecessor and continues to provide an important forum for the exchange of ideas and information among the members of the AJS. Although the important function of reviewing books has now (appropriately) fallen to the AJS Review, the new Newsletter sees itself as more than a place to list conferences, fellowships, and new appointments. We would like the Newsletter to contain lively articles on the state of Jewish Studies as a scholarly discipline, on new programs and teaching methods, on controversial issues that effect us as Judaica scholars, and on such nuts-and-bolts issues as computer software.

This first issue contains two interesting pieces which challenge us to explore the relationship of Jewish Studies both to the world of scholarship and to the Jewish people. Susan Handelman’s article, “The State of Contemporary Literary Criticism and Jewish Studies,” provides a sobering assessment of that relationship, and raises important questions about the dialectic between the secular and the sacred in Jewish Studies. Gerashon Hundert’s “The Impact of Jewish Studies on Jewish Life on Campus,” deals specifically with the question of whether Jewish Studies professors have an obligation to raise the Jewish consciousness of their students. Both articles reveal the important fact that Jewish Studies is still self-consciously trying to define itself within the university, still struggling with issues of religious import even as it asserts its objectivity and dispassionate concern for scholarly truth. Despite their shyness about the term Wissenschaft des Judenthums, both Handelman and Hundert know that the concerns of the Wissenschaft movement are still with us, over 150 years later. Perhaps our field is healthier for that concern.

The sheer number of conferences certainly indicates that Jewish Studies is both lively and extensive. Last year, conferences were held at universities and institutions all over the country. Two major themes emerged in last years conferences: Israeli, occasioned by its fortieth birthday, and the work of S.Y. Agnon, occasioned by the 100th anniversary of his birth. This year’s conferences promise to be more eclectic. The program of the 1988 AJS Conference can be found on p. 9 of this Newsletter. The sessions and papers look very exciting and interesting. Incidentally, the March 1988 edition of Moment magazine contained a very positive review of last year’s AJS conference. Hershel Shanks, the new editor, touted the conference as a place where someone could “learn about the world of Jewish scholarship — in the best, disinterested sense.” He lauded the session on antisemitism and Yerushalmi’s talk on the history of Jewish hope, and concluded that more sessions should be devoted to general scholarly issues and more papers should be presented by senior scholars.

At last year’s conference, several of us thought that it would be a good idea to find out about the backgrounds, careers, and scholarly production of AJS members. Sociologist Rela Mosenon volunteered to prepare a short questionnaire and to do a statistical analysis of the results. We would appreciate if you would answer her questionnaire, found on p. 8, and return it to her at Gratz College as soon as possible. We will report the results in a future edition of the Newsletter.

In conclusion, let me repeat Ruth Wisse’s request of all of us at last year’s conference. We should make a point of sending copies of our books and articles to the National Library in Jerusalem. In addition, we should think about ways to help Judaica scholars in other parts of the world, especially in the Soviet Union. Jewish Studies is clearly flourishing in North America, in Israel, and in Western Europe in ways that our Wissenschaft forebears would not have dreamed possible. It is up to us to make sure that trend continues.

Marsha Rozenblit
Editor

IN MEMORIAM

Alexander Altmann

The passing of Alexander Altmann leaves a void and a legacy. One of the last surviving members of an illustrious company of German-Jewish scholars, Altmann demanded the most from everyone he worked with. As a teacher he had high expectations of his students. In his courses at Brandeis he assumed that his students could understand the fine points of his arguments. As founding editor (together with Nahum Glazter and Jacob Marcus) of the Judaic Studies series at the University of Alabama Press, he had high expectations of authors who submitted their manuscripts for consideration, thereby setting the standards for the series. He expected a great deal from his colleagues as well. Not infrequently he would vote to reject a manuscript of a well-known scholar because, as he put it, it was not his best work. Earlier, he set equally high standards for the Journal of Jewish Studies, which he edited when he lived in England.

His legacies to the world of scholarship include his seminal writings on medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophy and mysticism; his studies of Saadya Gaon, IsaacIsraeli and Maimonides; his definitive biography of Moses Mendelssohn; and his many students at the Institute of Jewish Studies, Manchester, and at Brandeis, Harvard, and Hebrew Universities.

Altmann began his career in Germany. Following the publication of his doctoral dissertation in 1931 on Max Scheler’s metaphysics, Altmann
The State of Contemporary Literary Criticism and Jewish Studies

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The obsession with the nature of linguistic meaning, however, has led much recent literary theory to personify “Language” as if it were an autonomous entity that knows and does things independently of human will or subjectivity. It is as if a person or society were an “effect” of linguistic and textual forces, not vice versa. As Harold Bloom puts it, “language here becomes a kind of “Demurage replacing the self-as-Abyss or even self-as-Jehovah” in modern thought.”

Like Jewish Studies, the study of the modern non-classical languages was professionalized only in the last one hundred years or so. A crude sketch of the history of English studies might be as follows. When English literature first entered the university as a legitimate subject, it took over the dominant model of typical nineteenth century scholarship, i.e., historical philology, bibliography, lower textual criticism, editing manuscripts, and so forth. Then, with the rise of the so-called New Criticism in the early part of this century, criticism swung over to an intense formalism, to a belief in the autonomy of the text and its independence of authorial intention or historical reference, to assertions about the special essence of literature as a unique kind of knowledge embodied in its particular aesthetic forms. In the last twenty or so

2. Eagleton, p. 207.
years, under the influence of currents in French and German thought, literary criticism became intensely self-reflexive and self-critical. Having left the comfortable nest of literary studies today is to unmask or "demystify," as we now say, everyone else's hidden ideology — not to replace it with a neutral, objective criticism, but to argue more strenuously for one's own ideology, superior because it is "self-conscious" and strenuously willed.

II

In following the history of Jewish Studies as it has moved from beit midrash to yeshiva to seminary to university, I often have a sense of deja-vu. Both in approach and in subject matter, we critics are always worrying about what is specifically "literary" about "literature" — and Jewish Studies has a similar problem of what is or should be "Jewish" about Jewish Studies. But the more we try strictly to define and limit these fundamental terms, the more elusive and impossible they become. I'm reminded of what my favorite storyteller, Garrison Keiller, said about his mythical town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota: "Lake Wobegon is a real place — as long as you don't go looking for it." Both Jewish Studies and literary studies also wonder who should be working in their fields, and how they should be trained, and how they fit into the university and relate to other disciplines. But here is the central problem for this discussion, which relates to the problematic way in which we define the powers of language in literary studies: the relation of sacred and secular. This is an issue which is infinitely complex and which I can only briefly raise here.

I remember my sense of confusion at the first Association for Jewish Studies meeting I ever attended when, after the first communal dinner was over, small prayer books (benches) were distributed imprinted with the AJS logo, and a communal recitation of the Birchat ha-Mazon ensued. As a Jew, I am familiar with those prayers, and have a considerable collection of benches from various occasions (but none from the Modern Language Association or American Academy of Religion). I can't imagine how a non-Jew at the conference might have felt at that moment, but that gesture symbolized to me the ambivalence and duality at the heart of academic Jewish Studies.

Later, at a session on literary theory and the study of Jewish texts, after a discussion of Derrida, Saussure etc., one of the panelists, a prominent Jewish Studies scholar, warned, "We who are inside the tradition have to be careful about what theories we import from outside." This statement implies that the criteria for the validity of literary theories had to be "the tradition," some undefined theological essence, or faithfulness, as opposed to ideas developed by secular people who had no overt link to Judaism. That remark only illustrated once more that whenever anyone begins to talk about "subjectivity or objectivity," "the nature of meaning," or the "meaning of meaning," even the 'study of signifying practices," we are, at bottom, talking about world-views, beliefs, politics, ethics, ideas of what is the good.

This perplexed and pained crossing of sacred and secular is also at work in literary theory. For the literary and religious impulses have always been intermixed; poets and prophets are always like Jacob and Esau vying for the same blessing. Even the category of "literature" itself, as opposed to "scripture" or "Torah" or "Gospel," already involves some act of profanation, as Geoffrey Hartman has shown in his essay on "The Jewish Imagination." And that profaning act is not, in the end, problematic for a literary critic. After all, literary studies has never had a Jerusalem, a yeshiva, a sacred tradition of holy interpreters inspiring an ongoing community of people living and dying according to its precepts. Not even Oxford or Harvard fits that bill.

But the intermingling of sacred and profane in the field of Jewish studies as it arose from the Wissenschaft des Judentums has always been problematic. We don't need to repeat at length here the warfare of Jewish Studies professors in his essay "Jewish Studies and Jewish Faith." And Daniel Blazar has written at length of the new sociological phenomenon of "The


somewhat like the rabbis who entered the theoretical, and ideological place —

authority, institution, discipline, the attack on universities. English Department, and the fate of the reasons, the disparity of truth and method are about literary meaning, the status of the issues of power, knowledge, discourse, undergoing the same crisis of relativism, Foucault on the left. Foucault has elaborated as Allan Bloom on the right and Michel deconstructing and punishing. Bloom thinks that the contemporary university is undergoing the same crisis of relativism, historicism, and nihilism that destroyed German universities in the thirties, with the Nazis.

On the other hand, due to institutional and economic factors, Jewish Studies is already interdisciplinary within the university. Most programs draw their faculty from various fields, and have faculty lines in different departments. Though it hasn't gone through a radical philosophical self-critique like literary studies, Jewish Studies in its boundary ambiguity, its hybrid nature, its crossing many fields and lack of dominant center, represents in a strange way, the “post-modern” ideal towards which literary studies is now hunching.

So instead of seeking its “systematic articulation,” Jewish Studies could use the model of literary studies to affirm and exploit this diffusion as its “epistemic truth” (if you will forgive this expression), the cognitive embodiment of the way in which a dispersed people has wandered through the history and literature and culture of almost every nation. But that would require a different, more self-reflexive way of being interdisciplinary, and a further willingness to enter into the thicknesses of contemporary philosophy, epistemology, and linguistics, not only for “practical applications to Jewish texts” but for reflections on the very “discourse” of Jewish Studies and its practitioners. If so, I think there would also be less of the anxiety of influence and turf war that I sometimes sense about the “invasion” of people from other fields into Jewish Studies.

On a deeper level, Jewish Studies in the university is part of the larger overall confrontation of Judaism with modernity. Jewish Studies will always have a somewhat tortured commingling of sacred and profane. Scholarly investigations into Jewish history and religion do affect the theologies of modern Jews as Jewish Studies circulate back and forth into the rabbinical seminaries, and from the pulpit to the congregation.

But literary, sociological, or historical studies of Jewish texts do not necessarily lead to a “Jewish” understanding of these texts — nor should they. From a scholarly point of view, who, after all, is to define what is appropriately “Jewish” and what isn’t? The “signifying practices” of the Jewish people are not those of Moby Dick to the Muppet Show, but Moses to the Marx brothers, not what Jews do “Jewishly,” but whatever Jews do.

Where, in conclusion, does this leave us? I do not think it necessary for Jewish Studies to become parochially self-reflexive, or to try to define the essence of Judaism, or to defend the faith. But to use the buzzwords of literary criticism, it too, should ask, “What is the status of our discourse? Who speaks it, to whom, and for what?” The great nineteenth-century paradigms of “system” and “neutral, objective knowledge” no longer compel the construction of knowledge in the late twentieth-century university.

I am, I fear, finally leaving you with chaos. If so, perhaps I can take heart from the fact that chaos has actually become one of the most innovative fields of scientific research. What would the founders of the rigorous “Science of Judaism” have made of that, I wonder? My own College Park campus at the University of Maryland is now a finalist for a National Science Foundation...
But the word "chaotic" in "chaos theory" does not mean "random" but "purposeful disorder," i.e. the intricately complex and unpredictable variations of phenomena woven around a set of repetitive rules. "Chaos is when something manages to be both simple and infinitely complicated at the same time." Examples of such random and regulated patterns are traffic flows, snowflakes, stellar orbits, fractal geometry, and the dripping of a faucet... a list to which I would add "Jews" and "literary texts." Indeed, chaos theory might be a wonderful mode for the interpretation of human history and texts, or an intriguing model for the seeming chaos of human contingency and divine providence at work in Jewish history and literature. It is precisely this indeterminacy as a tension between the divine plan and the disorderly character of historical events, God's will and refractory human freedom, disorder and design that for Robert Alter is the key to the literary narrative realization of the Bible, especially Biblical prose.

So, I'll leave you with chaos and with a story I heard from a Jew whom you might think of as a paradigm of order, a Lubavitcher Hasid. The Hasid was out in the middle of a city in one of his "Mitzvah Mobiles" trying to persuade secular Jewish passersby to perform the mitzvah of putting on tefillin. He stopped one man, affirmed that the man was Jewish, and asked him to lay tefillin. Retorted the angry passerby, "Look, I don't want to have anything to do with any organized religion!" Responded the Hasid, "Don't worry, we're completely disorganized."
