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Session: Teaching the Survey Course: The Pedagogy of Including Meaningful Jewish Subject Matter in Survey Courses Outside the Jewish Studies Department

Insiders and Outsiders in Jewish Studies

Clearly Jewish Studies as a field, regardless whether historically or textually driven has no pedagogy of its own. If I claimed that it did, I would essentially be saying that the enterprise of Jewish Studies lays outside of the academic rubric and that it functions according to a set of operating procedures that distinguishes it from history, literature, sociology, or any other field. That flies in the face of not only my deepest views of the academic study of the Jewish experience, but also the work of several generations of scholars who have worked assiduously to make Jewish studies integral to the world of university-based learning.

Those scholars, in whose footsteps I like to think I am walking, made the case that the study and teaching of the history of the Jews, their texts, the ideas they argued about and the ways they defined themselves *vis-à-vis* the societies they lived in, offer a way to study not only a particular people, but also a wide range of times and places. For example to teach students the history of the Jews in the United States takes them into the history of the Jews but also the history of the United States and offers them a particular vantage point from which to study the European penetration of the “new world,” American politics, commerce, racial classification systems, religion, labor activism, suburbanization, internationalism, and the like. I do not teach American Jewish history any differently than I teach the history of women in America, or ethnic groups more generally. I am merely using a different example from which to get at the interplay between a particular narrative and a larger one.

But Jewish Studies shares with numerous other fields a few challenges which the teacher in the classroom must face that perhaps many other subjects do not. These challenges arise less from the subject matter and more from the expectations of the students. Students bring particular baggage or assumptions to Jewish Studies classes that they might not to other courses. That should not be taken to mean that students come to all other courses as blank slates. Obviously not, but Jewish Studies stands with a number of other fields of instruction and scholarly inquiry that force the instructor to engage in particular ways with students.

Many students of Jewish background come to Jewish Studies classes with fairly fixed ideas about the nature and meaning of Jewishness and the basic contours of Jewish history. Many of those ideas come from what we might call common knowledge, or better, common Jewish knowledge, firm commitments to particular truths derived from home, synagogue, supplementary Jewish schools or Jewish day schools, and youth movements. Many of these renditions of the Jewish past clash with the scholarship and this puts the instructor and the student into somewhat of a confrontation, one which follows the classic dichotomy between history and memory, between the fruits of scholarly research and the deeply held views of a group of people which serve as the binding narratives that hold them together. The teacher has no choice, as I see it, to do anything but present the best of scholarship, but must be mindful to help students explore why they believe what they do and how and why their beliefs clash with the scholarship.

Likewise, many of the Jewish students consider that taking a Jewish studies class amounts to an exercise in group identity building. This might be best represented by a tendency, not universal but always heard, to use the first person plural pronouns of “we” and “our.” I happen to take a pretty blunt stand on this, announcing the first time I hear the “w” or “o” word

that the only “we” in the course might be, “we would like the window closed” or “we would like the exam moved to a different day.” The classes will approach the activities of Jews in the past, or even the present, from an analytic distance and not a passionate sense of belonging.

Furthermore, I happen to not allow any groups, religious or political, including the Jewish student center or Birthright ever make presentations in my classes. They may not hand out material or try to recruit students to their activities. I announce lectures of an academic nature and none that in any way seek to make these students “more Jewish.”

Non-Jewish students also come with a set of expectations that I work hard to disrupt. They too think that the course must by definition be for Jewish students and that they have enrolled in a metaphoric sense as visitors. Often a student will come up to me and identify themselves by saying something like, “I’m not Jewish. Do you want to know why I am taking this course?” I always give the same answer. “No. Would you explain to your professor of ancient Egypt why you enrolled in that course?” I want them to view the history of the Jews, as I teach it, as they might some other group in which the class does not contain two category of student, an insider group and an outsider. All students, I explain to them, have the same ownership of the course as those students in the class who strut their Jewish *bona fides* in our discussions. (Needless to say, I am never interested if someone is or is not Jewish.)

As such this possible dichotomy between insider and outsider, as well as the one between scholarship and what some define as “good for the Jews,” or true as based on a communal narrative, does give the teaching of Jewish studies its own particular pedagogic challenge. These surely come up in other courses under other guises, but no matter the context, the need for the teacher to stay true to the best of scholarship, to treat all students as equal stakeholders in the

class, and to consider the goal of the course to be the asking questions rather than relying on tired, worn-out platitudes.