



Israel Studies Project



Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago

A Groundbreaking Initiative

The Chicago Federation has emerged as a leader in the effort to embed courses in Israel Studies in the academy. They bring the best scholars and scholarship to Chicago and regional campuses and thereby provide a creative example of what might be done in communities across the country.

— Professor Ilan Troen, Director,
Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, and Stoll Family Professor of Israel
Studies, Brandeis University

Identifying a significant need, early in the first decade of the 21st century, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago determined that it would add to its already-extensive campus-based activities by embarking on a type of project then new for it and rare in Jewish communal life: the advancement of serious study of Israel in local universities. With that decision taken and initial funding provided thanks to the generous support of a handful of key donors, the Federation's Israel Studies Project was born.

The Federation began introducing programs on two major campuses in the fall of 2005, and shortly after that it added programs on two more campuses. Since then, support from additional funders and the



Federation itself, along with matching funds from several of the universities, have enabled the project to grow further. Today, the Chicago Federation's pathfinding effort stands as an exemplary achievement that has gained notice in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and elsewhere.

Perturbingly apparent, particularly since the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000, American university campuses have been shown to have large voids in teaching of topics relating to modern Israel. In response, a number of Jewish communities, foundations, and organizations have tried to fill the void. Few have succeeded as effectively as the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, which answered the challenge by supporting appointments to public and private settings alike. Chicago-area university officials have shown their awareness of the need for students to be educated about Israel, and donors have generously supported this model program. Knowing that learning is not episodic but continuous, the Chicago Federation has built, sustained, and broadened Israel Studies offerings. Chicago can be proud of the distance it has traveled and the sustained commitment it has made to collegiate Israel education.

— Professor Kenneth Stein, Director, Emory Institute
for the Study of Modern Israel, and President, Center for Israel Education



Postdoctoral Fellows at Northwestern University

The Israel Studies Postdoctoral Program has brought to campus Israeli scholars who have been able to provide our students with an excellent grounding in the issues of the region, bringing to bear direct personal insights along with solid scholarly evidence.

— Daniel Linzer, Provost, Northwestern University

Most of my students knew very little about the Middle East in general and Israel in particular before taking my class. I believe that my teaching had a real impact on their views of the Arab-Israeli conflict and helped them develop a fair and balanced assessment of the protagonists involved.

— Guy Laron, Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow, Northwestern University, 2008-2010

In the fall of 2005, Northwestern University introduced a program that enables outstanding Israeli scholars early in their academic careers to come to Northwestern for two years, during which time those scholars provide classroom instruction in courses they develop that bring Israel into the curriculum in a range of departments. While at the same time advancing their own scholarship, these postdoctoral fellows also relate to colleagues and students and are active in other programming on campus and in the broader community.

The fellows who have been at Northwestern since the inception of the program and the departments with which they have been linked are Jacob Michael (Political Science), Matt Evans (Political Science), Liora Sion (Sociology), Guy Laron (History), Oren Golan (Sociology), Tamar Merin (Contemporary Hebrew Literature), and Yakir Englander (Religious Studies). They have been recruited and selected in a process that involves a formal partnership between Northwestern and Tel Aviv University, with Northwestern's Jewish Studies Program and College of Arts and Sciences administering the program.

With the November 2012 expansion of Israel Studies, which will be housed in the newly named Crown Family Center for Jewish and Israel Studies at Northwestern, the post-doctoral fellowship program will benefit from enhanced opportunities for greater integration into broader efforts in the field on this campus—and at the same time will itself strengthen those efforts.

Teaching About Israeli Culture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In all my years of speaking about Israel on American campuses, no experience was as rewarding as the time I spent inaugurating the Israel Studies Project at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Nowhere else did I feel I had the chance to make as great an impact. I had the time to meet with groups ranging from the editorial board of the campus paper to a Women's Studies class. I felt I could touch students at various levels – from those with almost no knowledge of the Middle East to students in a Hebrew language class, some of them deeply connected to Israel. This visionary program should be a model for American campuses generally. I know of no more effective way of presenting Israel, in all of its complexity, than through a program like this.

— Yossi Klein Halevi, Senior Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, and Contributing Editor, The New Republic. Writer in Residence, UIUC, Fall 2005

Since the project was inaugurated at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign its primary focus has been to provide greater knowledge and appreciation of Israeli culture, both as an achievement in itself and as offering a window into Israeli life and society. The program on this campus initially brought both short-term and long-term visitors. While that dimension of the program has continued, it has been significantly augmented by the establishment of a full-time tenure-track position in Israeli literature and culture.

The shorter-term scholars and writers in residence in the program have come to engage in wide-ranging programs including campus-wide lectures, classroom opportunities, faculty colloquiums, meetings with students, and appearance in the broader community and through the media. They have included the following highly accomplished and well-known Israeli figures: Yossi Klein Halevi (2005), Hillel Halkin (2006), Hana Wirth-Nesher (2007), Yosef Gorny (2007), Orly Castel-Bloom (2008), Irit Linur (2009), Dalya Bilu (2010), Etgar Keret and Shira Gefen (2010), Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi (2011), Ron Leshem (2011), Dan Laor (2012), Joseph Cedar (2012), and Matan Hermoni (2012). Guy Ben-Ner is expected in Spring 2013.

Photo © Michael Revivo



Orly Castel-Bloom

Coming for longer visits which have included classroom teaching along with extensive additional activities outside of the classroom have been Gail Hareven, a novelist who was on campus for the fall semester of 2006, and Asaf Ashery, a novelist and instructor in film and television script writing, who was on campus for the entire school year of 2008-2009.

I started my visit here with very small groups of students and ended it with dozens of students that I had the pleasure to teach and have contact with. I knew that the Jewish students would have an interesting experience learning about their heritage and culture, but I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the non-Jewish students that had the opportunity to discover the different sides of Judaism and had a chance to get exposed to Israeli literature and cinema were quite moved and now see both Judaism and Israel in a new light.

— Asaf Ashery, novelist, teacher of film writing at Bezalel Institute, Jerusalem.
Visiting Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008-2009



Etgar Keret

Enunciating its strong support for advancing the goals of global education through this program and wishing to continue to maintain the visitor's program beyond its original term, the U of I came on board with matching funds at an early point. Shortly after that, it took the lead in moving the program to a next stage by offering to cover half the costs of a permanent, tenure track position, challenging the Federation to come up with matching funds. With the help of a generous new donor, the Federation was able to respond, and the result was that since the fall of 2009 there has been a full-time position in Israeli literature and culture. It has been filled by Rachel Harris, an Assistant Professor in Comparative and World Literature who holds a joint appointment in the Program in Jewish Culture and Society, the arm of the university that has spearheaded and coordinated Israel Studies activities on campus since their inception there. With the full-time position and visitors program both in full swing and integrating their efforts, Israel Studies has established itself at a particularly high level on this campus.

The Israel Studies Project has transformed the Program in Jewish Culture and Society at the University of Illinois and changed the entire climate on campus. Since 2005/06, the frequent visitors have ensured a strong and positive profile for Israel Studies on campus. This situation has been enhanced even further since the 2009 arrival of the tenure-track faculty member in Israeli Cultural Studies, whose hire was a direct outcome of the Israel Studies Project.

— Professor Matti Bunzl, Director, Program in Jewish Culture and Society,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Visiting Scholars at the University of Illinois at Chicago

The project was inaugurated at UIC in the fall of 2007

with a visit by Professor Shlomo Shoham of Tel Aviv University. A winner of the Israel Prize, he taught a senior level seminar in the Jewish Studies program and a course in the Criminal Justice Department while lecturing on International Terrorism and other subjects.

Professor Shoham's presence had a profound effect on the entire campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago, but especially so on his students, to whom he imparted the benefit of decades of academic research and writing. Over the course of a semester he touched the lives of many.

— Eugene Liebenson, Former Student, UIC

The visitor the following fall was Professor Nadav Davidovitch of Ben Gurion University, who taught a course on Israel's Multi-Cultural Society in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and team-taught in the School of Public Health while also offering a number of campus-wide lectures with a focus on public health in Israel.

In the fall of 2009, Professor Sergio DellaPergola of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, one of the world's leading experts on Jewish communities around the globe, came to teach a course on the Jewish people in Israel and the Diaspora while also offering lectures to the broader campus community.

The UIC program was originally conceived of as a three-year endeavor, with the Federation and the university committed to jointly exploring the possibility of extending it beyond that timeframe. Since 2010-2011 the university has provided matching funds to sustain the program. Visitors since then have included Professor Dan Porat, a historian at the Hebrew University (2010); Professor Todd Hasak-

Lowy, who previously served on the faculty of the University of Florida (2011); and Professor Dani Filc of Ben Gurion University, who taught a course on the Israeli Political System (2012).

The visiting Israel faculty program has been wonderful. It exposes Jewish and non-Jewish students to a different face of Israel through something that is already of interest to them. These faculty have also been a very strong presence outside the classroom and have mentored students so that it is an opportunity for students to build a strong personal relationship with an Israeli who has an academic area of interest but just as a human being as well. And that's a very powerful experience for students, especially at a school like UIC, a real contribution to our campus.

— Marla Baker, Executive Director, Levine Hillel, University of Illinois at Chicago

Sergio DellaPergola



Program on Religion and Culture at the University of Chicago

The Federation's Israel Studies Project got off the ground at the University of Chicago in 2008-2009, with the first quarter-long visitor in a program called "Religion and Culture in the 21st Century: New Perspectives from Israel." Visitors in the program, which is coordinated by the university's Divinity School, teach courses for advanced undergraduates and graduate students through that School that are cross-referenced with other departments while also giving a public lecture and being a campus presence in other ways as well.

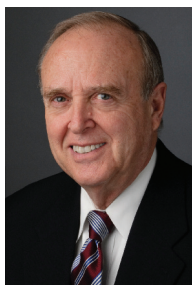
The U of C program was conceived of as an integrated effort aimed at bringing distinguished scholars for four consecutive years with a plan to then bring the four visitors back to campus for a public conference.

Israel Studies is a relatively new academic field that seeks to foster the interdisciplinary study of modern Israel.... [While] the field's primary focus has been the study of Israel in the context of international relations, political science, and the Arab-Israeli conflict, recently there has been increasing interest in approaching Israel in the framework of the nation's history, diverse society, political structure, and culture. The Divinity School's program is meant to shape the field by examining the place of religion in Israel's life and culture.

— University of Chicago Divinity School statement

The first visitor was Professor Shimshon Zelniker of the Van Leer Institute and Hebrew University, who taught a course on Religion, Culture, and Politics in Israel. The visitor during the 2009-2010 school year was Galit Hasan-Rokem, a Professor of Folklore at the Hebrew University, whose course on Ethnography and Literary Genres in Rabbinic Literature was cross-listed in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Religion and Literature, and History of Judaism. The anticipated visitor for the following year had a last-minute change in plans, but the program resumed in 2011-2012 with a visit by Yoram Bilu, a Professor of Anthropology at the Hebrew University, who taught a course on Sacred Space in Israel. The scheduled visitor for the spring quarter of 2013 is Professor Rachel Elior, who will offer a course on Major Issues in the Study of Jewish Mysticism.

Sustaining the Project



The Israel Studies Project is directed by Michael C. Kotzin, Senior Counselor to the President of the Federation. Dr. Kotzin came to his role with rich background in both academia and Jewish communal affairs, including 15 years of university teaching (11 of them at Tel Aviv University) and nearly 20 years of service at the Federation. Since the project's establishment he has emerged as a noted authority on the field of Israel Studies in academia today.

In framing its Israel Studies Project, the Federation assembled an Academic Advisory Panel consisting of Professor Arnold Eisen, a major figure in Jewish Studies previously at Stanford University and now Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary; Professor Kenneth Stein of Emory University, a distinguished scholar and one of the first American academics to hold a chair devoted to the study of Israel; and Professor Asher Susser, a leading expert in Middle Eastern Studies who, as head of the The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, was instrumental in getting the Israel Studies Project off the ground.

The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago has emerged as one of the only communal organizations to grasp the significance of Israel Studies and to begin raising money...to establish courses in the field.

— Samuel Freedman, Professor of Journalism, Columbia University, and education columnist for the *New York Times* (*World Jewish Digest*, September 2005).

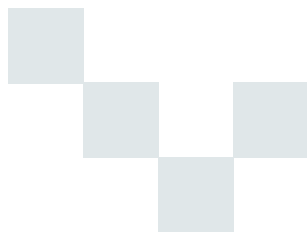


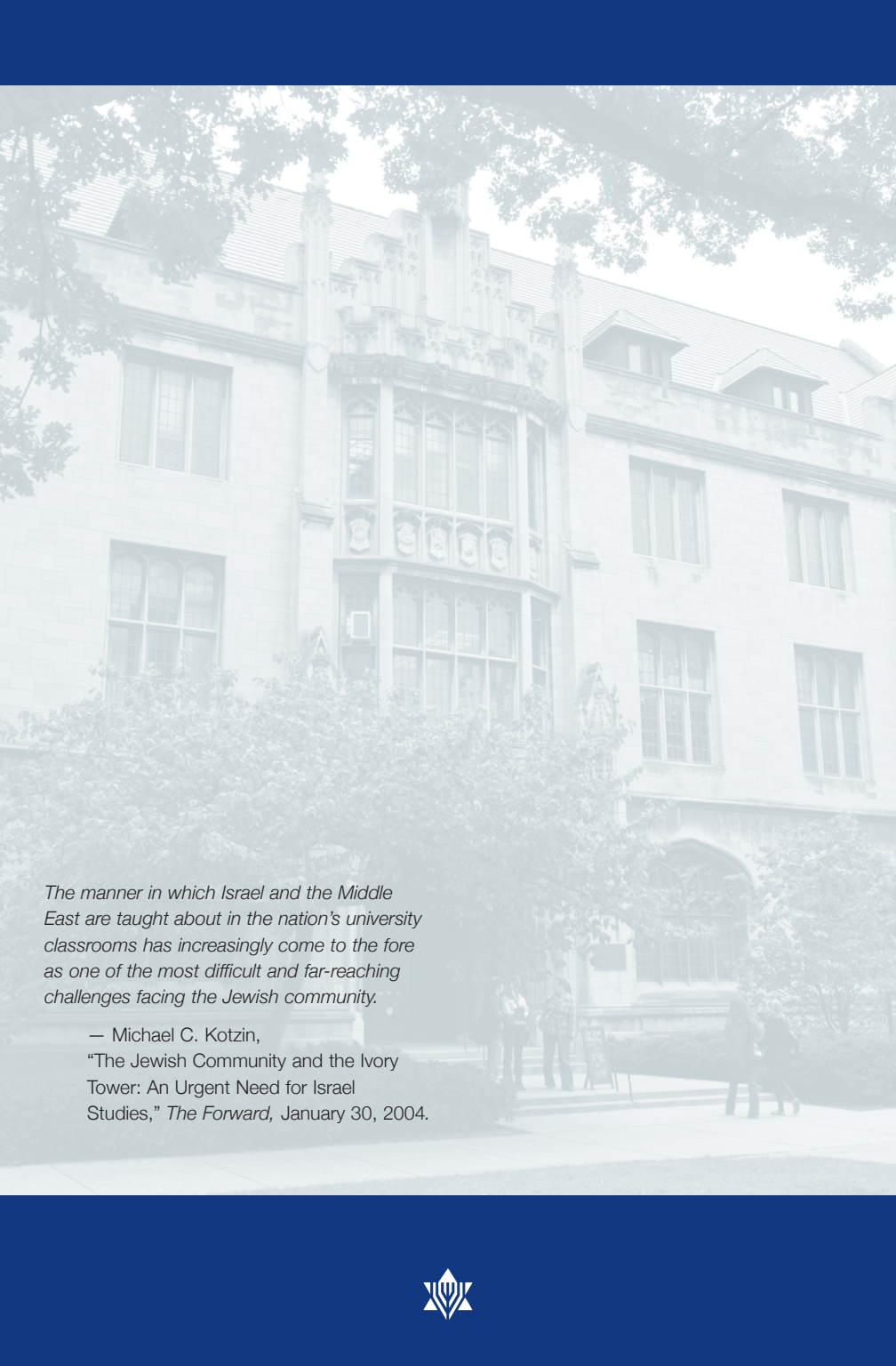
The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago's Israel Studies Project has been made possible thanks to the generosity of a handful of visionary major donors as well as the support of the Federation itself. To sustain the project on the campuses where its programs are currently in place and to enlarge the breadth of the project in Illinois still more, additional support is sought.



To learn more about the Israel Studies Project and for information about how it can be supported, contact Michael Kotzin at MichaelKotzin@juf.org (312-444-2858).

For information on the Federation itself, go to www.juf.org.





The manner in which Israel and the Middle East are taught about in the nation's university classrooms has increasingly come to the fore as one of the most difficult and far-reaching challenges facing the Jewish community.

— Michael C. Kotzin,
“The Jewish Community and the Ivory Tower: An Urgent Need for Israel Studies,” *The Forward*, January 30, 2004.

