For You at Hanukkah
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Editor’s Note:

This edition of the Newsletter has a number of pieces discussing the stories and concepts behind the winter holidays, as well as interesting tales and academia! They have all been wonderful to read and edit and I hope everyone enjoys them as much as I did!

It has been a real pleasure editing the newsletter in my final year and getting a chance to reconnect with the department after a year abroad! Enjoy the Newsletter, stay warm and I hope all of you have a wonderful break!

Marlaina Rich

Editors:

Marlaina Rich * Stuart Stanton * Sefora Casto Scantlebury
OUR FUTURE IN RESEARCH

I accepted the position of Head of Department reluctantly – not because reluctance is a standard ritual of royal investiture, but because I felt this job would deflect me from another important contribution to the Department: research. To make up for this, my first article in the Departmental Newsletter (as new Head of Department) will not be about the joys of running a department, but about the much greater joys of research.

The UCL Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies is a wonderful place to work in, where excellent research is carried out and where we are glad to welcome, every year, new and old cohorts of students. Our weakness – but perhaps this is also a strength – is student recruitment: our subject is too specialized to attract large hordes of students. I like to think, however, that our students are given a better treatment than anyone else in the Department, and for a good reason: they now pay exorbitant tuition fees, and they deserve, therefore, a top service in return. We also happen to be very fond of all students. We would love to be able to recruit more; if you have any ideas how to do this, please let me know.

But let’s go back to research. In the last five years, I have been heavily involved in a string of ‘major research projects’, funded by government bodies (the AHRC, the British Academy) and private foundations (the Leverhulme Trust), with small teams of postdoctoral and more senior researchers. ‘Research in teams’ is a model borrowed from the Sciences, which governments worldwide (but especially in Europe) have been encouraging, for some time, the Arts and Humanities to adopt. This is all a new experience to us, who were formed in a culture where most of the research, from the doctoral thesis to retirement, was carried out by individual scholars on their own. Still in the mid 2000s (is that the way to refer to the first decade of the century?), I could not picture to myself clearly how it might be possible, in a field like ours, to ‘direct’ a team of ‘research assistants’ to carry out research tasks as instructed by their boss. This model appeared authoritarian and inappropriate for inspiring, ideas-led research, which characterized what researchers in the Arts and Humanities had traditionally aspired to.

My initial plan was to hire postdoctoral researchers to carry out the difficult, technical, and sometimes tedious tasks of philological research, such as the edition of medieval texts from manuscripts – which I knew I would never have time to do myself – while reserving for myself the more interesting task of interpreting them. But I realized very quickly that talented postdoctoral researchers cannot undertake such tasks without contributing their own insights and interpretations. And so, the projects were launched and team work began. I have now reached the conclusion that working in teams in not only possible in the Arts and Humanities, but also desirable and highly productive. As king Solomon said, ‘two are better than the one ... a threefold cord is not quickly broken’ (Eccl. 4:9-12).

Research projects make a tremendous contribution to the Department. They bring in new blood, with postdocs, senior researchers, and also PhD students who attach themselves, in various ways, to the research teams. Research projects are also financially lucrative, as the grants that support them usually include indirect costs, overheads, etc. Given our low student recruitment and limited scope in the area of teaching, the success of our Department, academic and financial, will largely depend on research.
That is why I have invited every member of staff to apply for major research grants, and to get their own projects started. The time is up for loners: we are now researching in teams.

This sea-change in the practice of research, which I think should be embraced, was not initiated by academics from below, but rather from somewhere above. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm does not extend to other interfering policies from government quarters. In the last few years, following the publication of the government’s Higher Education White Paper in June 2011 (http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/h/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf), and before that (in 2009) the ‘second consultation’ on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) by the UK higher education funding bodies (http://www.ref.ac.uk/background/secondconsultation), the future of universities and of research has been much debated in the public arena. Academic research will have to become increasingly self-funding, largely through closer collaboration with industry. Academics will have to justify the need for research by demonstrating its ‘impact’, social and especially economic.

There is no need for me to elaborate or comment on these short-sighted and inappropriate policies, conceived by government ministers and civil servants who have conveniently forgotten that they would not have achieved their positions without an education in the top, research-led universities of the country, often in the fields of Arts and Humanities. The internet is full of excellent responses to these policies, and very recently, a Council for Defence of British Universities, led by prominent academics ‘from below’ (see http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/nov/08/coalition-thinkers-fight-marketisation-universities), has been launched against the managerialist, marketisation agenda that are threatening the integrity and future of research in the UK. Academics like ourselves, in the Arts and Humanities, have been particularly alarmed by the implicit suggestion, in these new government policies, that research in our fields might be discounted or starved of funding unless they lead to the production of tangible, economic goods.

In response to all this, but also with an eye over its shoulder (as it is, after all, a government-appointed body), the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) recently issued a draft Strategy for 2013-18, which all UCL Heads of Departments were asked to comment on (downloadable here, if you have the patience to read it: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/News/Pages/Draft-Strategy-for-Comment.aspx). In a slightly defensive way, the document goes to great length explaining that researchers in the Arts and Humanities make, or should be making, a very significant contribution to society, through research, publications, and other forms of public dissemination, so far so good. However, on further reading, it turns out that this contribution is nothing but ‘economic benefit’ and ‘shaping public policy’. The document does refer, in a few places, to the promotion of cultural and intellectual life, but this element is significantly left out of the executive summary on the third page. Instead, perhaps to spice things up, the document refers in addition to the ‘understanding of national life in an international framework’ – nationalistic overtones that I would view with some suspicion.

Several key terms are completely, and worryingly, absent from this document. A word search brings up only once the word ‘scholarly’, and never the word ‘scholarship’ – I made a point of checking this. Scholarship is an old-fashioned concept, but it remains at the foundation of everything we do. It includes
the study of languages, modern and ancient, and a range of other technical skills; painstaking gathering of data from archives, collections, texts, documents; analysis, investigation, interpretation, and above all – rigour. The marginalization of scholarship is nothing short of political posturing; but it will torpedo research, not enhance it.

Another major lacuna in this document – again, I have made a word search – are the terms ‘emotional’ and ‘spiritual’. These terms, of course, do not go well with the document’s heavy emphasis on ‘economic benefit’ and ‘public policy’; and yet, they lie at the heart of our contribution, as researchers, to culture and society. As you may know, emotions and spirituality are not a central theme of either my research or my teaching, at least not explicitly; and I do have some reservations about the concept of ‘spirituality’, which I find excessively vague and of somewhat Christian inspiration (I am not the first to note this). Nevertheless, in conclusion to this article I would like stress the importance of emotions and spirituality, as I think they are central to everything we are trying to achieve.

UCL is traditionally viewed as a secular institution; unlike most large universities in the UK, it does not have a department of theology or religions. Although we generally subscribe to this ethos, our Department has often found itself acting as a proxy for theology and religions. For some reason, the assumption has been made at UCL that Hebrew is a more religious language than Latin or Greek, and that Jewish Studies is somehow intrinsically religious. This explains, perhaps, why our research will be assessed, in the forthcoming REF, by the sub-panel of Theology and Religions. In recent years, our Department has been flagging the study of religions in UCL at large, with a Grand Challenge project on ‘Negotiating Religion’ (see http://www.ucl.ac.uk/european-institute/events/religion); the point of this project is to restore a more balanced perspective on the culture and society we live in. In the present political climate, the Arts and Humanities are in great danger of getting lost. The intellectual, emotional, and spiritual contribution of our Department to UCL and to British academia at large is pointing research in the right direction.

Prof. Sacha Stern, Head of Department
Our year abroad at Hebrew University in Jerusalem involved many exciting trips. From hiking in the mountains of the Golan Heights to wandering the southern desert or travelling Israel from ‘sea-to-sea’ we were never short of educational trips. These trips were provided by the Rothberg International School, where we studied at Hebrew University.

Many exciting new things were happening when we arrived to Jerusalem. For example, the new ‘light rail’, an over ground train, was up and running after eight long years in construction. We had the opportunity of travelling on it free for three months while it was being prepared for normal service.

One of our first trips was to the Kotel, not far from our dorms. During Yom-Kippur we walked to the Kotel to see people deep in prayer and meditation. It was a magical experience to see people pray with passion and devotion.
We had the opportunity of visiting Tsfat, which truly lives up to its mystical reputation. It was amazing to see the beautiful mountains and luscious trees and grass. A priceless moment: seeing a student studying amongst the beauty of Tsfat which really takes you back to the days when mysticism in Tsfat was really alive.

We met many new people from all over the world who studied with us. We often enjoyed special Friday night dinners together. An amazing thing we learned and experienced was the gathering on Friday nights, of family and friends, and how it is so important to the culture in Israel.

We would like to wish the upcoming year abroad students a great year in Israel. We hope you have an amazing year and make the most of the opportunities available. If any of you have any questions about the year abroad we would be happy to help.

Hannah, Séfora and Marlaina

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Hannah Rachel Verbermacher is the full name of the woman coined ‘The Maiden of Ludmir’, who gained a certain amount of attention in the nineteenth century. According to her most recent biography, Nathaniel Deutsch indicates from records of the nineteenth century British Mandate of Palestine that she was most likely born in 1806. Hannah Rachel was perceived differently amongst different audiences which governed the direction of her life. This is because those critics who tried to normalise her, directly affected her life in a negative way which ultimately led to her demise.

In the small Ukrainian town of Ludmir, the Maiden was the only child born and raised to the Hasidic family of Monesh Verbermacher. Ludmir was part of an area where Jews suffered immensely. It was a dark period under the control of the Russian Tsar Nicholas 1\textsuperscript{st}, a military man who believed in Russian Orthodoxy and Nationality – that everyone was the same race excluding the Jews unless they converted to Russian Orthodoxy.

The Maiden’s story follows that after her mother passed away, that at the tender age of twelve she was due to marry a childhood friend. As is the custom within the Hassidic community, Hannah Rachel was separated from her fiancé leading up to the wedding and this gave her great sadness as she longed to be with her fiancé. According to Samuel Abba Horodecky, the legend is that one day she went on one of her frequent visits to the grave of her mother to tell her of her great pain. After falling asleep at her mother’s grave and arising with, as she is meant to have claimed, ‘a new and elevated soul’, she calls off the wedding and starts reciting Talmud in which she had never known beforehand, and eventually teaches herself Hebrew.

Hannah Rachel spent her days studying and praying and lived a solitary life up until the age of nineteen when her father passed away. She spent her wealthy inheritance, by opening a synagogue and beit midrash to spend her life teaching and praying. Hannah Rachel started to fulfill mitzvot including those which women are exempt from and increased her Torah study. As her following grew, she assumed the role of a Hasidic rebbe of the nineteenth century, such as receiving female audiences and accepting
prayer requests. She would teach Torah teachings to a male and female audience, although many accounts say that she did so from behind a screen out of modesty.

She remains an anomaly and had to withstand strong opposition from the fiercely traditional Hasidic community. At some point, the pressure for her to marry, as is what was expected of a woman in the Hasidic community in her time, crippled her. However, she did marry, twice, but both marriages ended in divorce. After much time she later made aliyah and lived in Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. There she continued to have a following even from the Arab community who were living there. One of her most notable roles was organizing trips for women to Rachel’s tomb. Unfortunately, she died in 1888 and is buried on the Mount of Olives. Her character remains mysterious and her existence unknown outside of the academic world. Yet her struggle to live a Hasidic rebbe’s life as a woman still remains a struggle today.

_Hannah Watkins_
THE RABBI WHO WAS ALWAYS GOING TO PRISON

My grandmother’s cousin was Rabbi Jacob Katz who was the rabbi at The Montefiore Synagogue 768 Hewitt Place in the Bronx. Dedicated in 1905 it belonged to the Reform Movement and was the first American shul to be built in the central European style with “onion” towers. At the time, in the 1920s - 1940’s some 57% of the 580,000 residents in South Bronx were Jewish. But today, it is now a church. There was a small memorial plaque to Isidor and Ida Straus who went down with the “Titanic”. Isidor and his brother Nathan were the owners of Macy’s in New York and were great philanthropists.*

At a time when most sermons were in Yiddish, the Montefiore had its sermons in English. By all accounts Rabbi Katz was quite a daunting figure. As one ex-pupil put it “How afraid we were of Rabbi Katz. If you stepped out of line you got a good putch.”

He did not demand respect. It was given to him. Once, while he was walking down the aisle towards the pulpit, a male visitor rose in his seat as the rabbi passed. The rabbi turned sideways, stared and snapped “I don’t believe in that humbug”.

However, there was another side to his life. He was always going to prison!

“Oy vay “ I hear you cry. But it was not in the way that you might think – he was the Jewish Chaplain to the infamous Sing Sing Prison!

During his time he attended a number of executions in the electric chair of Jewish killers and mobsters. But by far the most famous one he attended was the execution of Louis Lepke Buchalter (1897-1944). He was nicknamed "Lepkele" (Little Louis) by his mother. J. Edgar Hoover called him "the most dangerous criminal in the United States." Born on the Lower East Side of New York, where his family lived in a crowded flat over a small hardware store owned by his father, Louis was the only one of 11 children to embark on a life of crime. One brother became a rabbi, another a dentist, and a third a pharmacist.

In 1941 Lepke was indicted for the killing of Joseph Rosen, a garment trucker whom Lepke had driven out of business. Buchalter was the only top underworld figure of his generation to be tried, convicted, and executed for murder.

At that time, executions were generally carried out at midnight on a Thursday. But on account of technicalities arising out of various appeals for clemency it was postponed until Saturday night March 4, 1944.
Rabbi Katz called the governor and asked him for a stay of execution because normally a prisoner prior to being executed was allowed to have his chaplain with him all day long. Jacob explained that being a Saturday night he could not attend the prison until after the end of the Sabbath and by the time he drove out to the prison he would only have a few hours with Lepke. The governor would not change the time of the execution.

In due course, Lepke was led out along Death Row with Rabbi Katz behind him reciting psalms. In 1975 a film came out called “Lepke” in which Tony Curtis played the leading role. Towards the end as he is led out to the electric chair there is an actor walking behind him playing the role of the Rabbi reciting psalms. (This episode is also recounted in the book "Tough Jews" by Rich Cohen; a book about Jewish gangsters, and how they more or less faded out after World War II)

Rabbi Katz delivered a major sermon every Friday night. But as one congregant remembers of that Friday night before the execution; “A Jew (Lepke) had to be put to death - but he was still a Jew. This was unheard of in our generation. I can still see Rabbi Katz's contorted face, fingers and arms outstretched, body weaving and crying at this shame”.

Interestingly enough, Woody Allen’s parents were married in 1930 by a Rabbi Jacob Katz in the Crotona Park section of the Bronx, where the bride lived with her family at 1541 Hoe Avenue. Since this address is very close to the Montefiore “shul” we believe it is our cousin who officiated...

** ADDITIONAL NOTES **

Whilst doing further research I found as follows:

a) Nathan’s son (Nathan Jr., 1889–1961) attended Princeton University and arrived in Heidelberg University in 1908 where he met a young art history student and they became firm friends. The student accepted a job in Macy's working with Nathan Straus, Jr, where he fell in love with New York and its brashness. But in 1909, the student’s father died and he returned to Germany where he fought for Germany in World War I and lived to see the time when he and his family would have to leave Germany because of anti-Semitism. His name was Otto Frank - Anne Frank’s father.

b) The Straus Brothers Isidor and Nathan Straus, were touring Europe in 1912 and decided to make a side trip to Palestine. Nathan was so disturbed by the poverty he saw that he decided to remain behind while his brother, Isidor, returned to Britain to sail back to America on the “Titanic”. As a result, Nathan increased his philanthropic efforts. A street in Jerusalem and the town of Netanya were named after Nathan Straus.

Kenny Miller
I am currently involved in a book project focused on the ‘hidden’ or ‘secret’ Jews of Poland. Essentially, it will comprise a series of profiles of Poles of Jewish origin – or at least with some identifiable Jewish roots – and will be designed so that these profiles are very accessible to a general readership outside academia.

The profiles will comprehensively include three generations. Following recent trips to Poland, I have conducted various interviews with people who survived the Holocaust as infants, or as very small children, after being left by their Jewish parents with Polish Catholic families of religious institutions. These interviewees were raised as Catholics, but discovered their Jewish identity through a variety of ways during the post-war period – frequently after the fall of Communism. Many now belong to one of several branches of the Association of Children of the Holocaust in Poland.

Another major part of this project includes Jews who were born in post-war Poland, often the children of Jewish Communists, who were raised without any Jewish identity or knowledge of their Jewish roots. Nevertheless, many did discover their origins, frequently in a traumatic way, during the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968, or possibly with the emergence of Solidarity. Some of these people are now associated with the Second Generation group in Poland.

In addition, I am interviewing members of the Third Generation, some of whom are children of the Second Generation parents. They tend to have a different perspective on these issues, having grown up in the far more liberal climate of post-Communist Poland.

Besides recounting extraordinary personal histories of the hidden Jews and their offspring, this project aims to shed some additional light on the war-time history of the Polish Jews as well as provide insights into post-war Polish society. Moreover, this phenomenon of self-discovery reflects the revival of Jewish communal life and cultural activity in recent years and the impact it has generated within wider Polish society.

I would appreciate if any readers of the newsletter could suggest individuals they believe would be willing to be interviewed for this project – either in the UK, Poland or elsewhere. I plan further trips to Poland which will also include important centres outside Warsaw such as Krakow, Lodz and Wroclaw.

Barry Cohen

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One month has passed since I attended an International 2 day Symposium in the sumptuous UNESCO buildings in Paris, a mere stone's throw from the Eiffel Tower. Unusually, the two days were exclusively devoted to Yiddish and speakers had been invited from many parts of the world (France, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Israel, USA. Canada, UK and Australia) to participate in a sequence of roundtable presentations and discussions.

The idea for this event was initiated by the B’nai Brith Representation to UNESCO with the active participation of the Paris Yiddish Centre-Medem Library. There was some nervousness on the part of the organisers regarding the potential audience for such an event. The UNESCO hall could seat up to 500 people and it was easy to imagine a hall with many empty seats. As it turned out, the event was very well-attended by Yiddish professionals of all kinds: pedagogues, activists and students, and those who simply speak and/or are interested in Yiddish language and culture. The title of the symposium was somewhat confusing. The French "Permanence du Yiddish" somehow did not mean the same as the Yiddish which essentially translates as "Yiddish - still here and further" (Yidish: nokh alts un vayter).

At the opening session, attendees were addressed by a string of UNESCO and then B’nai Brith representatives. One Ambassador had sought help to include a few sentences in Yiddish (ouch!). The various proceedings were divided into five sections. Each had a chairperson and three speakers and questions from the audience followed. Speakers could present their material in either Yiddish or French (and refreshingly, not in English). Simultaneous translation was available on headphones (including English).

The first panel on the 'Continuity of Living Yiddish' essentially centred around the practice of the speakers to promote everyday Yiddish within family and organisational settings within the wider contexts of a non Yiddish-speaking world. This is particularly pertinent in a contemporary secular Jewish world where there are no longer enclaves of Yiddish speakers living in close proximity to one another as was more the case in pre-war Eastern Europe. Most of the speakers have young families and have chosen Yiddish as the language of the home.
The second session 'Creating in Yiddish' heard personal accounts from a poet and translator (France), a musician and folklorist (USA), an actor and singer (Israel) and the recently retired Director of the Yiddish theatre in Montreal (now active in the Yiddish theatre in New York).

Session Three was devoted to Yiddish in a digitalised world with speakers giving practical guidance on the availability of materials in digitalised form and also highlighting the ability of the internet to bring together scattered and dispersed Yiddish-speaking individuals and communities. A UNESCO representative described UNESCO's own "Index Translationum" The World Bibliography of Translation which gives bibliographic information on books translated and published in approximately 100 UNESCO member states (see: www.unesco.org/culture/translationum).

Session Four focused on interesting life paths with Yiddish, informed by family histories and multiple cultural influences. A noteworthy presentation addressed the issue of whether a secular Yiddish heritage can enrich a religious Jewish domain and vice-versa. Also fascinating was a very personal account given by a prize-winning translator (Yiddish-French), who as a small Yiddish-speaking child in occupied France, understood that she had to suppress her native language. It took her many years and a very emotional journey, to retrieve her language and to masterfully integrate it into her post-war life in France.

The subject of the closing panel was 'Yiddish: Worth and Values for the Future'. There was an interesting talk on the contemporary study of Yiddish in Poland. A journalist for Ha'aretz gave a fascinating talk on Yiddish culture in Israel ("A Hebraist in 'Yiddishland' in Nicolai's times, is similar to a Yiddishist in Israel in Netanyahu's times"). I had been asked to speak on whether Yiddish culture carries special values. Given the vagueness of the subject, I decided that I would focus on contemporary times and in response to my own experience of many years of teaching Yiddish in many places. I would try to describe and analyse the huge variety of people who come to study Yiddish and see whether one could be so bold as to say that Yiddish language and culture in all of its modern guises, displays some kind of unity of purpose and value in all of the disparate pockets where it can be found. I concluded that indeed something new was emerging and that avid learners of Yiddish through their own diversity, aspirations and human values contributed to a collective ethos in the modern world. In the words of an ex-student:

"I find myself on a Yiddish course. There I find an enormous bunch of warm and enthusiastic people with strong principles and standards, brought together by a language that I find totally impossible to
understand.... I find that everyone there is on some kind of mission and that all the complex missions fit

together into one enormously meaningful endeavour.... I immediately feel at home... I identified with a

Jewishness in a 'different' way, one that seems so compatible with my broader opinions about culture

and language and human rights and not forgetting... it feels like my own way of doing things".

The Eiffel Tower sparkled and glistened. The atmosphere at the UNESCO symposium was extremely

lively and positive. Colleagues met and discussed; there were many heated exchanges on a variety of

subjects. One met new Yiddishists and renewed older acquaintances. Ex-students re-appeared. UNESCO

plans to add Yiddish to its endangered languages list. The talks that were given at the Yiddish

symposium will be published. Participants continue their dialogues via the internet. And, I met the only

Yiddish-speaker living in Monaco.

Dr Helen Beer
A NEW TEXTBOOK FOR BEGINNING STUDENTS OF BIBLICAL HEBREW

Biblical Hebrew is a fascinating and endlessly rewarding language to study, but I have long felt that the existing grammars and teaching materials can obscure the enjoyment of the subject for beginning students because they generally have a very dry, solemn approach consisting mainly of paradigms and translation of individual sentences (not everyone’s cup of linguistic tea!). When I started studying Latin and Greek a few years ago, I was impressed by the range of dynamic and varied teaching materials with lively text-based approaches, and these inspired me to create something similar for Biblical Hebrew.

This led to the development of a new textbook for beginning learners of Biblical Hebrew (to be published by Routledge in 2014), with students in the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department kindly serving as guinea-pigs and providing valuable feedback throughout the writing and testing process. The textbook is designed to give complete beginners a solid grounding in Standard Biblical Hebrew grammar, vocabulary, and texts so that upon completion students will have acquired the skills necessary to read the Hebrew Bible independently as well as to progress to more advanced points of syntax, text-critical, and translation issues.

Each unit in the course starts with a story that serves to introduce grammar and vocabulary while involving readers in a continuously developing narrative arc. These stories are not based directly on biblical narratives, but feature characters, storylines, and language similar to what one would find in the Hebrew Bible. Their main protagonist is a horse who lives in a field near the palace of a fictional king in a non-specific biblical location. The king is something of a reckless fellow who is perpetually getting himself (along with his horse) into adventures and mishaps, including accidentally starting a war with neighbouring Moab, losing all of his silver to a conman posing as a prophet, taking the horse to far-off Sheba on the advice of a rogue dream interpreter, selling the horse to the king of Egypt in a fit of vexation, and subsequently trying to steal him back. The horse has plenty of his own adventures as well: along the way he gets kidnapped by idol worshippers, is kicked out of his field by a group of expansionist
camels and donkeys, rescues the king’s son from drowning in a well, and falls into a pit while trying to reach some tasty delicacies discarded from the king’s banquet table.

After each story there is a section explaining the new grammatical points introduced; this is followed by a variety of exercises designed to encourage understanding and use of the language in context. These include gap-filling exercises, comprehension questions, transformation exercises, and translation of stories from English to Hebrew. An answer key will be available online.

At the conclusion of each unit an authentic biblical text is introduced. This is designed to give learners a clear grounding in many of the most famous stories of the Hebrew Bible. The texts are presented in sequential order starting with the creation story at the beginning of Genesis and continuing through the Pentateuch and Former Prophets to Esther and Daniel at the end of the course. At the beginning of the book the texts are heavily abridged (though not rewritten), but they gradually increase in complexity and length so that by the middle of the course the reader is studying unadapted biblical narratives. By the end of the book students should thus be able to read biblical texts confidently and independently.

And what of the horse’s fate? Will things end happily for him or not? All will be revealed in the textbook’s final unit - or ask one of our first-year Biblical Hebrew students at the close of Term 2, and they may unveil the dramatic surprise finale of the saga!

Dr Lily Kahn
WHAT’S YOM KIPPUR GOT TO DO WITH IT?
Some remarks on the origins of Christmas

Christianity, as is generally known, originated as an offshoot of first-century Judaism, which makes it not surprising to find several parallels among the festivities celebrated in both religious traditions. The two most prominent cases are Pesach, the historical-calendarical ancestor of Easter, and Shavuot, which is mirrored by Pentecost. But what about Christmas, the best-known and most popular day in the Christian liturgical year? In public consciousness, Hanukkah is often singled out as the obvious Jewish equivalent, since both take place during the “holiday season,” but this equation owes a lot to contemporary popular culture and next to nothing to historical, conceptual, or calendrical ties between both feasts. Unlike Easter and Pentecost, which owe their dependence on the moon to the fact that the Jews use a lunar calendar, Christmas happens to be a fixed date in what is now the Gregorian solar calendar and would therefore appear to be unfettered by any Jewish influence. But is that really so? As we shall see in a moment, there is some evidence to suggest that even the invention of Christmas may, to an extent, have been rooted in Jewish tradition. The feast we need to look at in this regard turns out not to be Hanukkah, but an altogether unexpected candidate: Yom Kippur.

However, before I explain the reason behind this supposition let me briefly recap what we know about the origins of Christmas. The short answer is: remarkably little. This deserves some emphasis, since the mass of articles on websites, in newspapers, and even in scholarly handbooks, that are written each year on this subject tend to suggest otherwise. What the vast majority of them will tell you is something like the following: Christmas is a prime example for the “inculturation” of pre-existing pagan rites into the festive calendar of the early Church. In Rome, 25 December was traditionally regarded as the day of the winter solstice, which means that it carried an important symbolic significance for all those contemporary religions in which worship of the sun or the change of seasons played a central role. The Christians are thought to have simply “hijacked” this solstice date and fashioned it into the birthday of their saviour. This is generally supposed to have taken place in the fourth century, i.e. at a time when the Church first began to gain political dominance in the Roman empire thanks to Constantine and his successors.
Among scholars, the view just outlined is associated most often with the German philologist Hermann Usener (1834–1905), who was incidentally one of the pioneers in the modern academic study of religion. Usener regarded the institution of Christmas as a particularly significant example for how certain elements of Christianity originally developed out of an ancient pagan context. According to his view, the celebration of Christ’s birth in midwinter was essentially the heritage of a syncretistic sun cult, which already bore traces of an incipient “pagan” monotheism. The central turning point in this story comes with the year 274 CE, when the emperor Aurelian allegedly elevated the oriental sun god Sol Invictus to the supreme deity of the Roman Empire and established his cult on 25 December. Threatened by the persistent popularity of these rituals among newly baptized Christians, the early Church was moved to incorporate traces of the cult into its own liturgy and thus re-interpreted the annual “birth” of the sun at the winter solstice as the birth festival of Christ. This affinity between Christmas and pagan solar worship is seemingly reflected by the pervasive solar symbolism in late antique Christian art and literature, where Jesus Christ is sometimes referred to as the “true sun” or associated with “the sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2).

Usener’s “History of Religions Theory” on the origins of Christmas has enjoyed widespread acclaim ever since it’s first publication in 1889, with the result that many later scholars have tended to rather uncritically embrace its basic conclusions. The important point to note is that Usener’s thesis owes its popularity mainly to its rhetorical qualities: it sounds plausible, maybe even compelling, but do the sources bear it out? Some critical voices, including the papyrologist Hans Förster and the classical archaeologist Steven Hijmans, have recently answered this question in the negative. Their re-assessment of the available evidence has shown that the idea of Christmas being preceded by a popular and important feast dedicated to the sun god is to a considerable extent founded on anachronisms and a view of Roman religion that rests on nineteenth-century constructs rather than hard facts.

Does this mean that the origins of Christmas are altogether shrouded in mystery? From a strictly positivistic standpoint this is probably so, seeing that we simply lack reliable and unambiguous sources. At the same time, however, there remain certain alternatives to the “History of Religions Theory” that are worth looking into. The best-developed and most elaborate of these alternatives was presented in 1986 by the reverend Thomas J. Talley in his book Origins of the Liturgical Year. In a nutshell, Talley holds that Christmas on 25 December was derived from the day of Christ’s Passion, for which commemorative dates in the Julian
calendar had already been established in the late-second or early-third centuries. Assuming that Christ spent a perfect number of years in the flesh, Christian scholars established a chronological parallelism between the conception in Mary’s womb (Annunciation) and his death on the cross, which were both assigned to 25 March, the Roman date of the vernal equinox. In a further step, they added a schematically rounded number of nine months to the date of Jesus’s conception to arrive at his birth on the day of the winter solstice, 25 December. This process of chronological elaboration, Talley suggests, may already have come to an end by the beginning of the fourth century, since the Donatist sect, which split from the mainline Church in North Africa in ca. 311 CE, seems to have already acknowledged this nativity date in their liturgy.

The attractiveness of this “Calculation Theory” lies in its simplicity, i.e. in the way it presents the dating of the nativity as the natural outcome of an evolving process of thought about the chronology of Jesus’s life and its interconnections with the cardinal points of the Julian calendar year. As before, however, its downside consists in the fact that it rests on certain assumptions that find no direct confirmation from contemporary sources. The source critical problems we are faced with here are well-exemplified by the Latin treatise On the solstices and equinoxes of the conception and birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and John the Baptist, which once falsely circulated among the sermons of John Chrysostom. The author of this text, a certain Pontius Maximus according to one twelfth-century manuscript, assigns the conception and birth of Jesus to the vernal equinox and winter solstice (25 March and 25 December) based on the assumption that John the Baptist was conceived on the day of the autumnal equinox (24 September). While this is not unlike the kind of speculation that gave rise to the Christmas date according to Talley, the uncertain time (third, fourth, fifth century or even later?) and place of origin (North Africa or, more probably, Syria?) of this text make it difficult to dispel doubts that it merely offers a post-hoc rationalization of a date that had been originally chosen for different reasons.

And yet, the suggestion that John the Baptist provides the keystone for determining the date of Christ’s birth remains an intriguing one, since it is not devoid of any scriptural basis. In the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel, we are told that Zechariah, the father of John of Baptist, was a member of Abijah (1:5), the eighth of twenty-four mishmarim or priestly divisions at the temple in Jerusalem (see 1 Chronicles 24:7–18). One day, “he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when
the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside” (Luke 1:9–10). Whilst performing his service, an angel appeared to Zechariah and proclaimed that his barren and aged wife, Elizabeth, would soon conceive a son named John. We subsequently learn that this Elizabeth just so happened to be a relative of the Virgin Mary (1:36), who conceived Jesus in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy (1:26). By implication, the Gospel text thus informs us that the nativity of Jesus in Bethlehem took place roughly fifteen month (i.e. six months plus the duration of a pregnancy) after John’s annunciation. For a biblical literalist the message is clear: find a way to date the scene of Zechariah in the temple and the date of Christ’s birth will ensue.

Now, technically speaking, this is much easier said than done, seeing that it would require reconstructing the exact calendrical cycle by which the twenty-four priestly division regulated their turns at divine service in the temple. Unsurprisingly, late antique Christians did not burden themselves with such technicalities. Instead, some of them chose a peculiar shortcut. Our earliest hint in this regard comes from a highly entertaining text known as the Infancy Gospel of James, which was written in the middle of the second century. Another name it commonly goes by is the Protoevangelium of James, since most of its contents serve as a type of prequel to the nativity stories narrated in Matthew and Luke. Although not part of the New Testament canon, the Protoevangelium became very popular during late antiquity and left a strong mark on the way Christians remembered and depicted the nativity of Jesus and its backstory. Amongst other things, it claims that Mary had a miraculous conception not unlike John the Baptist and that her parents dedicated the girl to the temple in Jerusalem, where she lived among the priests until the age of twelve. Zechariah, who is already known from Luke’s Gospel, is here suddenly promoted to the position of High Priest.

In this capacity, he is claimed to have entered the Holy of Holies to ask God for advice on Mary’s future, who had reached sexuality maturity and was forced to leave the temple. The message he received back was simple: call all the widowers from among the people and wed her to the first man who is singled out by a divine sign. As one would expect, the choice fell on Joseph, who is here depicted as a man of advanced age, who already had several sons from an earlier marriage. The author of the Protoevangelium was thus able to account for the disconcerting presence of Jesus’s siblings in certain passages of the previous Gospels (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55–56). In a later passage of this fascinating text, the pious Zechariah, who functioned as the marriage broker for Jesus’s parents, is murdered by the henchmen of Herod.
From the point of view of the present discussion, the Protoevangelium’s most significant innovation is the claim that Zechariah was the High Priest. As we have seen, this idea stands in crass contradiction to Luke’s Gospel, where it is stated in no ambiguous terms that Zechariah was merely a member of Abijah, one of the twenty-four priestly mishmarim. What made this revision of the original text attractive, however, was not just the fact that it promoted Zechariah’s esteem and importance, but also its chronological consequences. After all, the foremost task of the Jewish High Priest was to enter the Holy of Holies only once a year, on Yom Kippur, to atone for the sins of the people by a series of rituals and offerings. For Christians familiar with the laws of the Old Testament, and especially for those who converted from Judaism, the close connection between the office of High Priest or kohen gadol and the Day of Atonement was immediately obvious. They would have also known that Yom Kippur takes place on the tenth day of Tishri, a lunar month which at the time would have mostly coincided with late September/early October. Its tenth day would have thus fallen relatively close to the day of the autumn equinox, which the Romans traditionally assigned to 24 September.

With this connection between Yom Kippur and the equinox in mind, it was only a small step to conclude that the nativity of Jesus should have taken place 15 months after this date and hence at the time of the winter solstice, i.e. 25 December. In the Protoevangelium, this idea is merely hinted at through its description of Zechariah as the High Priest, but a number of fourth-century Christian authors such as Ephrem of Nisibis and John Chrysostom actually did use something like the argument just outlined to justify the celebration of Christmas at the time of the winter solstice.

Due to the lack of definitive source evidence, it must of course remain a matter of conjecture whether Yom Kippur and the story of Zechariah’s High Priesthood really had any pull in getting Christmas established as a midwinter festival. Plausible as it may sound, it is quite imaginable that none of the scenarios mentioned is adequate on its own, but that a combination of them does the trick. Perhaps pagan solstice celebrations influenced the choice of the precise date, but Christian scholars had previously already convinced themselves that Jesus was born at wintertime based on their own chronological arguments. Regardless of what the solution may be, I wish everyone a good festive season.¹ – Dr Carl Philipp Emanuel Nothaft

¹ For further information and references to literature, see my forthcoming article “The Origins of the Christmas Date: Some Recent Trends in Historical Research,” Church History 81, no. 4 (December 2012): 903–11.
The song that I now associate with Hanukkah is not ‘Ma’oz Tzur’ but a joyful little song in Ladino, ‘Ocho kandelikas’, ‘Eight Little Candles’, referring to the candles that are lit each Hanukkah evening and mentioning the pastelikos, honey and almond pastries, so typical of Sephardi cuisine and eaten on Hanukkah.

The ditty with its catchy melody has become extremely popular among performers of Ladino music who, not surprisingly, assume that this is an old song. ‘Ocho kandelikas’ is, in fact, a recent composition, the work of a very special musician, Flory Jagoda, whom I met in 2007 at a workshop on Ladino organised by the Istanbul Sephardic Center. Despite the long journey to Istanbul from the States and despite her advanced age - she was then eighty two - Flory was out sight-seeing in the colourful bazaar before her evening concert where she performed with her ‘apprentice’, Susan Gaeta, and Ramon Tasat, a well-known cantor and performer. Their beautiful renditions of traditional Sephardi ballad and new lyric songs were enthusiastically received.

As Flora, Susan, Ramon and I were staying in the same hotel we had leisurely breakfasts together and I could find out more about Flora. Flory was born into a family of musicians in 1925 in Sarajevo, where, as elsewhere in the Balkans, the Jewish community suffered terrible losses during the Holocaust. More than forty members of Flory’s family perished. Flory, who married and moved to the States, resolved to keep alive their musical tradition and devoted herself to performing, teaching and handing down her musical heritage. You can still hear Ladino being spoken in community centres and old age homes in Sarajevo, Thessaloniki, Istanbul and Tel-Aviv and I’ve heard that charming song ‘Ocho kandelikas’, energetically performed by children’s choirs in Istanbul and in Thessaloniki, two centres where vigorous attempts are being made to promote Sephardic culture. Both Flory Jagoda and the Israeli singer Yasmin Levy (who has come in to sing in our ‘Culture of Sephardic Jewry’ course) believe that they can keep Ladino alive. It is not, however, by singing that Ladino will be kept alive but by learning to speak and communicate in it. As we light the Hanukkah candles or kandelikas this year, please bear in mind that you, too, will be able to keep Ladino’s flame alight by joining our Ladino course which is in the planning stage. – Dr Hilary Pomeroy

THE NOT-SO-INNOCENT HANUKIAH

Lighting candles, singing and eating festive food make Hanukah one of the most joyful and beloved festivals. However, this pleasurable festival carries not only historical and traditional meanings like all Jewish festivals, but in modern times has also been used to serve political means.

The songs Israelis sing alongside the traditional ones add a political dimension to the occasion. They reflect the way Zionism has interpreted and appropriated the festival. Kindergarten children sing: "A small jug (of oil) / gave its light for eight days. / If not, our Temple would not have been built", but much more boisterously: "We came to banish darkness, / fire and light in our hands. / Each one is a small light, / and all of us a mighty light". The call of the Zionist collective is evident in the latter. Equally animated yet also sombre is the song We Carry Torches which was written in the 40s and has gained an iconic status. The song expresses a defiant Zionist stance: "A miracle did not happen to us, / we did not find a jug of oil. / We hewed the rock until bleeding, / and there was light". The miracle of Hanukah turns here from a divine intervention that led to the rededication of the Temple into a human endeavour of daring and determined commitment. The prevailing sentiment of these songs is not surprising. It seems only natural for the Zionist narrative to appropriate the story of Hanukah which lends itself so readily to Zionist interpretation. After all, the Maccabean revolt which had successfully reclaimed the lost Jewish sovereignty was an obvious model for the new nation building narrative.

Like popular songs, designs of Hanukiahs or menorahs played their part in the Zionist project, endorsing its ideology in pre-state stages and reflecting shifts in the Israeli discourse after 48. As an illustration I have chosen the following images of menorahs, taken from the catalogue of an exhibition (Curator: Dr Yigal Sitri, Ramla, 2008). They represent the changing perception of Hanukah from the forties, the height of pre-state struggle, to the seventies.

Traditional Hanukiah:

On the right is a replica of an 18th century Moroccan menorah; on the left a modern menorah (note Israel in the middle) with traditional motifs: the inscription הנרות הללו קדש הם, the vine decorations and the traditional two lions (alluding to גור אריה יהודה).
This menorah, designed in the 40s, illustrates the trajectory of past glory into the present. The menorah has three panels. The central and enlarged one represents the courage, determination and victory of the Maccabees. The other two panels, of equal size, create an analogy between the Maccabees on the left and the Zionist pioneers on the right. The analogy between the two side panels is reinforced by the caption at the bottom of the central panel: 'in those days and our time'. By employing traditional-religious narratives Zionism signifies historical continuity and at the same time the menorah enhances the Zionist call. Furthermore, the analogy promises a successful outcome based on the precedent of the historical experience.

The extent to which Zionism should be placed on the continuum of Jewish history is apparent in the following image. While the previous image linked Zionist aspirations in pre-state period to ancient history, the image below links the Zionist revival to life in Diaspora. This link provides a more contemporary perception of the Zionist/Diaspora relation which was presented initially as a dichotomy. Fiddler on the Roof, based on Shalom Aleichem's story and the famous painting by Chagall, is a rather sentimental representation of Diaspora. The caption 'עם ישראל חי', lends a defiant tone associated with Zionism. Later on, in the 90s, this caption became a slogan of the right wing and non-secular factions in Israeli politics.

The Independence Menorah by Zeev Raban, designed in the 50s, celebrates the founding of the state. The symbol of the state, a seven branches menorah surrounded by olive branches, is positioned at the centre. The interaction between the two menorahs transposes the meaning of Hanukah. It is based now on the new Jewish state. The images of the boy and the girl leaning on the state menorah from both sides, replace the images of the Maccabees. They are the new heroes who sacrificed their life and bequeathed a state on a 'silver plate' as in Natan Alterman's iconic poem.
The identification of Hanukah with the state of Israel is illustrated in the following two images. The 'dripping metal' design of the one on the left recaptures that of the gates of the Knesset building. The one on the right incorporates the word 'Israel' in the design of the branches.

The Sabra, the humoristic representation of the native Israeli (thorny on the outside but soft and sweet inside), was created by the cartoonist Dosh (Kariel Gardosh). Dosh's bitter-sweet and ironic image soon became emblematic. Using it as the main feature of the menorah continues the state motif on the one hand, but transforms the bravery and sombre mood of the previous images into a light hearted perspective. The latter signals a move from the heroic struggle towards the social and civil context. In some way, this comical representation might also signal weariness at the grand narratives of nationalism and war.
The last image demonstrates the replacement of traditional motifs with new ones by the image of an Israeli soldier carrying the flag of the state. The candles are placed on a Hanukah banner, which is a play on the two meanings of the word [nes] in Hebrew: a miracle, alluding to the miracle of the oil jug, and a banner. Instead of the divine intervention as in the traditional story of Hanukah, the image here suggests that the present establishment of Jewish sovereignty is based on human might and determination. Although the inscription on the banner reads ah, its reference to the national flag is obvious.

The exhibition looked at designs of menorahs until the 70s but the process of change did not stop there. In the decades since, there has been a return to traditional-religious motifs and images, reflecting political, cultural and social shifts and polemics in the Israeli discourse. The menorah, like other national symbols, is still an arena of power and ideological struggles. Who said that lighting the candles is just an excuse to devour doughnuts and latkes?

Dr Tsila Ratner