Hebrew & Jewish Studies
Departmental Newsletter
- Hanukkah – December 2016
Best-kept college secrets?

Last week I was asked to join a meeting to talk about how to improve student recruitment to the Department. Although my first reaction was a defensive ‘...but I don’t know anything about student recruitment!’, the question made me think about our place in the world.

It’s not news that most students at UCL (in neuroscience or biochemistry etc.) are unlikely to know the Department exists. One of the most common responses I get when I explain my degree to others on campus is ‘oh, I didn’t know you could study that.’ From the point of view of medics and physicists it isn’t easy to keep track of all the numerically small humanities departments.

So when I hear of recruitment and bigging-up our dear Department part of me instinctively shouts: ‘Yes! Everybody needs to know about what a wonderful Department we have. No-one’s life can be complete without Jewish Studies!; we must do something for the ignorant masses!’ If only they knew what they’re missing.

Another voice, selfish, in the back of my head, however, whispers: ‘Small is beautiful.’ There’s a cosy feeling attached to being able to slip under the radar and focus on what we’re passionate about. Imagine if we were the size of Engineering? Huge, impersonal lectures, no time for office hours. So there’s also an irrationally jealous, protective feeling that goes along with this. We have the best department; why not just keep it for ourselves? It’s like when you’ve discovered a new, cool indy rock band – if everybody starts listening to them you lose that feeling you’re ahead of the curve.

One thing is for sure: the Department is what it is and we love it. And a few examples of what makes this a fabulous place to work and learn are on display in this newsletter. As usual all our contributors offer diverse and thought-provoking pieces, covering history and culture to fashion and reflections on UCL life. Without all the contributors this newsletter would not have been possible!

The same goes for Vanessa’s help in the office on all the admin. I’d also like to take the opportunity to thank Belinda for her work during her time in the office too!

Happy Hanukkah to one and all, and enjoy the break! /David Dahlborn

Newsletter Editor
I am writing this piece on a plane, flying back from South Korea. After such an amazing trip, I cannot hold myself back. This time, the Newsletter’s Head-of-Department column will not be about the Department, but about Korea.

For the most of the last millennium, Korea was a sovereign state with its own, distinctive civilization, though culturally and politically in the shadow of its powerful neighbour, the Chinese Empire. Its most traumatic experiences were at the hands of the Japanese, who invaded and occupied Korea in the last decade of the 16th century and again in the first half of the 20th, and on each occasion destroyed many of its public monuments, official archives, and other historical treasures. After World War II and the Korean war, the peninsula became divided. South Korea fell in the orbit of the USA, on which its current survival depends entirely.

Trapped between the threats of their maniac northern foe and uncomfortable American protectionism, South Koreans remain a proud, ambitious, and hard-working people, exuding a confidence that I can only admire. These people are wonderful. Their kindness and hospitality are not merely down to traditional rules of civility and etiquette. Forget about these orientalist stereotypes: they are truly good friends, nothing about them is superficial or insincere.

Although firmly rooted on the edge of east Asia, Korea strikes one as a strange mixture of east and west. Its main religions are Christianity and Buddhism; its culture, a blend of Confucianism and eastern wisdom with Americanisation and high technology. This is not the familiar cliché of globalism, but a hybridity quite unique and specific to modern, South Korean society. It was no surprise for

**FROM THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT:**

**A KOREAN MERIDIAN?**

Professor Stern has travelled farther than usual this term to bring us his insight on how the calendars of antiquity can enrichen our understanding of globalisation.

*by Professor Sacha Stern*

"Few people know that the first to have ever realized the need for a date line was a Jewish scholar, R. Judah ha-Levi"
me to discover that the National Theatre of Korea is currently performing a production of *Romeo and Juliet* – in Korean translation, of course (I only noticed this in a daily paper because it reminded me that Lily Kahn will soon be staging a Hebrew translation of the same play at the Bloomsbury Theatre on Tuesday 28 March 2017 – just a bit of publicity).
There are hardly any Jews in Korea, except for the predictable, valiant Chabad House family who kindly hosted us for Shabbat. Most Koreans know precious little about Jews and Judaism. Yet most amazingly, the Talmud (or rather, an eccentric selection of Talmudic passages) has been made part of school curriculum, and Talmudic anthologies in Korean are in sale in bookshops in airports and railway stations. Believe it or not, their interest in Talmud is fuelled by a desperate attempt, typical of highly driven Koreans, to learn and appropriate the secret of Jewish success. Are HJS students here in our Department for the same reason? I wonder. I have noticed quite a few of them at my Talmud class on Mondays at 1-2; perhaps even more should be coming.

I was in Korea by invitation, to participate in a conference on the theme of world calendars. The occasion was the 600th anniversary of the birth of Kim Dam, an eminent 15th-century Korean astronomer, calendar maker, and author of a major work on the Korean calendar, as well as something of a national hero. The opening session, which was held in Kim Dam’s hometown of Yeongju, was attended by no less than four hundred people, among them members of Kim Dam’s family and including a 19th-generation direct, patrilineal descendant of the great astronomer. In medieval Korea, astronomers and other scholars were state officials whose positions were earned but also hereditarily transmitted; although all this has changed, lineage remains to this date an important foundation of regional and national cultural pride.

My contribution to the conference was a paper on the date line – the meridian on the globe where the date changes for whoever crosses it. By international agreement reached in the late 19th century, the date line is currently located in the middle of Pacific Ocean. But few people know that the first to have ever realized the need for a date line was a Jewish scholar, R. Judah ha-Levi (early 12th century); whereas it took a few more centuries for Christian or other astronomers to recognize the problem and address it. Judah ha-Levi located the date line 90 degrees east of Jerusalem, which according to present-day cartography is a meridian that cuts across the Korean peninsula. If he had
got his way, our conference in Yeongju should have been dated one day earlier.

My presentation was part of research undertaken in my ERC-funded project on ‘Calendars in Antiquity and the Middle Ages: standardization and fixation’. The date line, wherever located, is not an objective reality but a matter of convention and agreement. For reasons that I explained, a date line only becomes necessary when an attempt is made to establish the same calendar, and use the same count of the days – such as the seven-day week – around the whole globe. Discussing the origins of the date line was thus not only appropriate for Korea, where Judah ha-Levi’s meridian lies, but also for the exploring the process of standardization and globalisation in time keeping and world calendars.
Interdisciplinarity is all the rage in academia these days. It is all about scholarly cross-pollination, bridging disciplinary gaps, fostering creative collaboration, and so much so, that after a while one grows somewhat numb to the buzz of all the words that keep ringing in one’s ears. Don’t get me wrong, I am all for interdisciplinarity, one could even say I embody it. But my brief reflection in this article is on the challenges of interdisciplinarity on the ground, here in the intellectual trenches.

I say the devil and the blue sea not in the traditional sense of having to choose between two evils, but rather emphasising the space between two elements, between two places. Thus far my student experience – my experience of interdisciplinarity – feels very much like living in that space, a narrow exploration, a confined freedom; a long and constant journey in the ‘between’ led only by the unrelenting scent of a particular research question.

Earlier this year I had the privilege of speaking at the European Association for Biblical Studies. I presented a paper on the conceptualizations of the human as the first domino in medicine, all within a panel of fascinating and varied
presentations on conceptions of disease in (late) antiquity (chaired by our very own Professor Mark Geller). That I spoke at the conference is not entirely odd, except that I am a doctoral candidate in ancient Greek philosophy. My colleagues all thought it strange that I was there because at first glance, I did not obviously belong. After a BSc in Psychology and specialising in art therapy, four years ago I completed an MA in the Department and then went on to pursue my research on the human within the Greek philosophical tradition, but with an emphasis on the cultural context of the ancient Near East. My main supervisor is an expert on the Presocratics and the Greek tradition, my other supervisor an expert on Jewish studies in antiquity, medicine and the ancient Near East. I have one foot in each camp and by virtue of conducting my research I am in a birthing process of sorts, blending two disciplines in the one body.

You may wonder if this birthing process comes with an academic manual with pages of detailed guidelines on how to achieve this elusive yet pervasive interdisciplinarity. Or maybe UCL’s Helpdesk could provide a technician to give me some guidance. Alas, there is no manual and the helpdesk’s automated message told me I called outside of their working hours. What certain pockets of academia do offer is encouragement but also clear delimitations of the ‘Other’; wonder and curiosity, but also apprehension and fear. While the explicit message is that of interdisciplinarity and creative exploration, the implicit message is: ‘What in heaven’s name are you doing?’, ‘Why are you venturing beyond the walls?’, ‘It cannot be done’, ‘You must choose’. So which is it?

From where I stand it seems that interdisciplinarity is the process of embodying the Other, whatever that Other may be. It is the embodiment of multiple Others who are only socially and conceptually construed as separate, while in actual fact not as alien to each other as the label ‘Other’ suggests. So where does that leave me, and students like me?

Are we the next-generation of hybrid students, genetically modified by virtue of having hatched in the ‘inter’ of interdisciplinarity? If so, who are we to become in the future? Are we to become the
Gamayuns and Minotaurs of academia? Where will we find our place? Will my place be in a department of History with a focus on the ancient Near East, or will it be within Jewish studies, or in Classics? Where will I belong? When our interdisciplinary education runs its course, where is the place for those of us who are the embodiment of that liminal space between the devil and the blue sea?

If academia does not manage to climb its way out of the silo mentality in which it has been sequestered and undergo a fundamental paradigm shift, who will we be and where will we go? To me this seems to be about much more than just finding a job and fitting the mould; it is about the very nature of academia and academicians.

So is it all doom and gloom? Far from it. The fact that I can even inhabit this liminal space is a profound statement of how far we have come. Yes, academia is far from perfect, and it is rife with contradictions: frail yet strong, stuck yet changing forward. But amidst all those contradictions and questions of the practicality of the pursuit of knowledge and beauty, is hope. Hope that we will find our feet in this new world of interdisciplinarity, that we will work through the implications of our assumptions to create an academia, and academicians, that continue to be specialised and deep, yet open, pliable and essentially, transformed. You may say I sound too idealistic, too optimistic, and that may be. But if you were me, birthing your interdisciplinary self for better or worse, would you not also be? Here’s to the buzzing in our ears.
This year's induction day of our Department at Cumberland Lodge was different from past years' exercises in many respects. For the first time, we asked both first year students and MA freshers to come along. For the first time, part of the teaching was transferred to the Lodge, with a class of both the BA and the MA Core courses taking place in these splendid surroundings. Also for the first time, we tried out a new approach to connect our various areas of disciplinary expertise in a joint session, thus implementing in practice what we have been discussing since last year, the so-called lateral research areas. Last but not least, I did not bring cigars to the Lodge: As Professor Michael Berkowitz roams the world, there was (unfortunately) no need to bribe him with Cuban cigars to come along.

Overall, all these innovations seem to have worked well. Instead of overloading the short stay at the Lodge with presentations, the focus on a joint session of Tsila Ratner and myself on Jewish migration around 1900 not only allowed us to reflect on a crucial chapter in Jewish history, but it also demonstrated the different approaches of literary and historical analysis. Tsila Ratner offered a close reading of a short story of Dvora Baron (‘As a Driven Leaf’), in which the author offers an approach of rendering the encounter of immigration to the Holy Land in a way which radically departs from the grand narratives of ascending (la’alot) to Erets-Yisroel. Similarly, I undertook a review of the master narratives of Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe by contrasting the success stories of these processes with the fact of re-migration to Eastern Europe as well as with the fact that a very considerable number of Jews rather moved from one (impoverished) region in Eastern Europe to a more successful one.

These lateral fields of research have the potential to intensify exchange among colleagues within the Department and beyond: Just as Tsila Ratner and myself demonstrated that from two different perspectives, an alternative, more comprehensive and more humane understanding of a specific phenomenon - in this case, migration - can be developed, colleagues might look at diplomacy, visuality, gender, the Middle East, history and transfer of knowledge from the points of view of our individual expertise.

Many discussions focused on Jewish languages and literature, greatly enriched by the presence of Belinda Stojanovic and Lily Kahn. Jointly watching Mi-safa le-safa (From language to language), a documentary by Nurit Aviv (Israel 2004), offered important additional perspectives of how people of
wildly different backgrounds (Hungarian, French, Arab-Palestinian, Russian...) entered and assimilated Hebrew in Israel. Thus, the induction day had a quite strong emphasis on languages.

I will not be around for our induction day 2017 at the Lodge, as next year I will be teaching for one term at Dartmouth College, but I'm already curious to know what next year's programme will look like... E

The Lodge, now sans cigars.
Tznuis Clothing, or ‘Orthodox Modest Chic’ has become one of the biggest trends in fashion this year, thanks to a new wave of modest wear designers and bloggers. i-D magazine recently published an article on Brooklyn locals Chaya Chanin and Simi Polonsky, who were restyling traditional Orthodox Jewish dress to suit more catwalk-savvy religious women. Mimu Maxi, The Frock and Junee are just some of the emerging boutiques offering bespoke below-the-knee skirts and dresses. These designers are keen to put their own twist on Orthodox apparel and challenge the perceptions around dressing modestly. They have also gained a big following amongst Muslim and Christian fashionistas, helping to boost the visibility of Jewish modest wear in the media.
This marks a significant turning point in the fashion industry’s immersion of Jewish heritage, which has been visibly lacking over the years. Jean Paul Gaultier’s ‘Rabbi Chic’ Winter Collection was one of the only shows to integrate Haute Couture with Hasidism on the runway. The 1993 show featured models strutting down the runway in black satin garmes and Shtriemels, to the sounds of violins and 90s electronica. Gaultier, who is not Jewish, generated mass controversy at the time amongst those who considered his work to be exploitative of Jewish ethnicity and religion. This new genre of modest fashion however seems to have found a balance between a consumer demand and adherence to religious and cultural values. As part of my new online zine on contemporary Jewish culture, I have been experimenting with the orthodox aesthetic. The photos above have combined luxury streetwear with religious clothing to reflect the break out of traditional orthodox modest wear into high fashion. The location of UCL gives additional authenticity to the concept, as a site that steeped in a rich Jewish intellectual tradition. The full editorial will be available on the website of Journal 5777 which launches in January 2017. E
Reading week! Under normal circumstances, I would spend the entire week in Berlin. But, as you will recall, everyone had to do plenty of make-up teaching, and I was no exception. On the bright side of things, staying a bit longer allowed me to listen to a brilliant talk of Lisa Leff. Currently a fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, Lisa presented her book about 'the thief in the archive,' Zosa Szajkowski, a historian as well known for his pioneering research into 18th and 19th century Jewish history (e.g. on the Jews and the French Revolution of 1789), as for the fact that made a living by stealing and selling archival material.

This talk took place on the eve of the presidential elections in the US, and you all know what came next: as the icing on the cake of Brexit year, Donald Trump, while losing the popular vote, won a majority in the electoral college - based on a misogynist, xenophobic, racist and antisemitic campaign. Among the many parallels to the Brexit campaigns the press and social media reported (and still report) about an immediate rise in hate-crimes, racist and xenophobic attacks and insults.

When I arrived home - we live in a flat in a typical turn-of-the-century Berlin tenants' block - I found a flyer stuck to the entrance door, inviting all neighbours to an inauguration of two new *stolpersteine*, or stumbling stones. In case you aren't aware of these, the stumbling stones are a creation of Gunther Demming, an artist who in 2000 started to replace cobble stones in the sidewalk pavement with bronze plaques of roughly 8 x 8 cm, wearing a short inscription, and commemorating people who had fallen victim to the Nazi regime. Most of these stumbling stones are dedicated to Jews, but you also find many for persecuted trade union activists, social democrats, victims of the so-called 'Aktion T4', handicapped people who were starved to death or killed by various means, sometimes in their care homes transformed into sites of murder.

**STUMBLING STONES**

by Dr François Guesnet
In the case of the new stumbling stones in the house next to ours, a Jewish couple – the Jakobovitzs – originally from the Prussian provinces further east, had settled in Berlin with their children after World War One. They ran a textile shop in this building, living in a flat right next to the shop. The building itself was destroyed during the war. In an entirely private endeavour, one of the tenants in the house had started researching the history of the house and its tenants, identified these Jewish tenants and investigated their fate: where they had been born and raised, where they got married, how many children they had (several of whom escaped from Nazi Germany and survived the war), and what happened to them during the Nazi period. They had to close their shop and were ordered to hand in all their valuables. Their children escaped from Nazi persecution, but the Jakubovitzs were eventually deported from Berlin to Riga (today Latvia, then occupied by the Wehrmacht), where they were shot upon arrival in January 1942.

This story was told in the course of the dedication ceremony, attended by a crowd of neighbours and friends - I counted around fifty people. Our neighbour told the story of the Jakobovitz family. At some point, a small van pulled up the sidewalk, and the artist stepped out of the car, with all the required tools, buckets, sand, mortar. After not more than a nod to us, he kneeled down and started undoing a small bit of the pavement, [auflockern] the ground, and carefully placed the shining new
stumbling stones in the ground, adding sand and a bit of mortar. This didn't take longer than a few minutes. After he was done, Demming gathered his tools, muttered a brief ‘tschüß’ through his teeth, got in the van, and disappeared. The ceremony carried on, among others with a message from a grand niece of the Jakobovitz who lives in Israel. At the very end, a minute of silence was held and flowers were laid around the stumbling stones.

I've seen many of these small memorials. They lose their shine a bit, but not their message, and I find them a powerful reminder that we should forget neither the victims nor the circumstances which allowed for their persecution. Some people object to the fact that the stumbling stones are part of the pavement, and that one can easily step on one of them. For this reason, and due to an intervention of the Jewish community, stumbling stones are for example not permitted in Munich, the Bavarian capital.

Especially in these times of populist mobilisation across Europe and the United States, I tend to disagree: I find the omnipresence of the stumbling stones a strong everyday reminder of what the consequences of this inciting type of ‘passionate politics’ (incidentally, a fascinating research project at the UCL European Institute) can be. They encourage us not to look the other way when we witness the undoing of the social fabric, the falling apart of communities, and the rise in hate crime.

I was impressed by the thorough research undertaken by our neighbour, and by the dignity of the ceremony. I was also surprised at the large number of people in attendance - it demonstrated that the message of the stumbling stones is still heard and understood. The ceremony also prompted me to look up the last pre-Nazi register of residents (the Adress-Buch of 1932) for the house in which we live, which the Berlin state archive has put online.
After the ceremony, everyone was invited to a hot drink (everyone had cold feet due to sub-zero temperatures) in the flat of the neighbour who had initiated the stumbling stones for the Jakobovitz. The conversation turned to an initiative which calls for a memorial for thousands of victims buried in unmarked mass graves on the grounds of one of the largest hospitals in Berlin - around four and a half thousand handicapped patients of this hospital were killed as ‘lives unworthy of living’ during the Nazi period. While there is a plaque on the hospital building, and an exhibition discusses these killings, the mass graves have been levelled in order to allow for building projects to proceed.

There is little doubt that the intense engaging with the history of the Nazi period, the famous ‘coming to terms with the past’, has left a strong mark on German society, and needs to be acknowledged as key factor in shaping the response of German society to the large numbers of refugees and migrants.

Look closely at the poster and you will notice a subtle self-portrait of Dr Guesnet, D.D.
from the Middle East and subsaharan Africa in 2015. According to a study of the Bertelsmann Foundation, around ten per cent of the adult population have volunteered in one way or the other in Flüchtlingsarbeit, or ‘refugee work’: language lessons, offering accommodation, child- and healthcare, and in many other ways. This sustained effort shows no signs of abating, despite the series of small scale terrorist attacks in Germany in the summer of 2016.

While the government funds some large scale programmes for the regions and municipalities, most of this volunteering is organised at grassroots level, through associations and charities. But also the branch of my bank (the British equivalent would be the Cooperative Bank) next to the former central city Airport Tempelhof, where several thousand refugees are accommodated, put large posters in its windows: ‘Account opening for refugees’. Thus, without much fanfare, a bank accepts its share in offering pragmatic solutions to everyday problems these refugees face; e.g. the need to have access to banking facilities. While the decision of the British government to focus its help for refugees from the violent confrontation in Syria to the relief institutions in the region makes sense, the extreme reluctance to accept more refugees into Britain nonetheless seems an inadequate response.
PORTRAITS

by Izzy Carter

The artist's grandmother.
Self-portrait.
When the Great War began, in August 1914, the British Army had literally one Jewish chaplain. He was the Reverend Michael Adler (not of the same family as Chief Rabbis Nathan and Herman Adler), who was the minister of the Central Synagogue in London W1. In the Britain of those days the status of being a Rabbi was reserved for the Chief Rabbi; ministers were referred to by the Anglican term of “the Reverend”, and like their Anglican counterparts wore clerical collars.

Before 1914 Britain had a small standing army and a large volunteer Territorial Force. Adler had been a commissioned chaplain, in the first chaplaincy rank of captain, in the Territorial Force since 1909. He had attended Territorial Force summer camps on Salisbury Plain, where he had conducted services for Jewish soldiers.

With the outbreak of war, the British Army mobilised for France. Christian chaplains had long served in the field in Britain’s military campaigns. But Jewish soldiers were scattered widely throughout the Army, and sailors throughout the Navy, and no Jewish chaplain had ever served with the British Army in the field during wartime.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the pre-eminent Jewish question, borne of political emancipation within the emerging nation states of Europe, was whether Jews were able to participate as full citizens of the nation state. In France the question was debated philosophically, and was brought into painful relief in the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s. In Britain the issue was essentially pragmatic, with a long slow incremental struggle throughout the nineteenth century for equal civic rights. As the twentieth century dawned, it was more or less accepted that the Jew could be, in the French phrase, a citoyen actif of his European nation state.

Yet the issue which never quite went away was that of loyalty to the nation state. Jews were international people. Some had relatives and business interests abroad. They had their own allegiances, religion and way of life. If national crisis came, where would their loyalties lie? It was a question as old as the Jewish encounter with other societies, first asked at the opening of the Book of Exodus by the new
Pharaoh who did not remember Joseph. It was the question that lay behind the Dreyfus Affair.

So within all of the combatant nations of Western Europe the outbreak of the Great War afforded Jewish communities a unique opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty and their gratitude to the nation states in which they lived. In every country they did so, by rallying to the national cause. As the war went on, it threw up in acute form many dilemmas: Jew fighting Jew, religious observance in the army, Jews fighting for countries allied to the hated Czarist Russia which they or their parents had fled.

In Britain Michael Adler, with the assent of his community, applied at the age of 46 to serve on the Western Front as a Jewish chaplain. The War Office refused. Where would he be based, they asked. How would he find his Jewish soldiers, and what would he do? There was, they said, no precedent.

So Adler applied to go for a visit to the Western Front. This was granted, and he did so in January 1915. On his return he wrote a report for the War Office. In consequence he received permission to serve on the Western Front, where he was the single Jewish chaplain.

Ministers of religion have never been conscripted into the British Army, so chaplains have always been volunteers. As time went on some Jewish ministers, including those of several London communities, volunteered to serve. Some were in their forties, well above normal military age. The War Office had to approve appointments. Very gradually, more Jewish chaplains were appointed: one in 1915, two in 1916 and larger numbers in 1917 and 1918. By the end of the war there were over twenty Jewish chaplains with British forces. Several were on the Western Front, and two on the Italian Front. Several were in Egypt and the Canal Zone. One was with the Jewish Legion within General Allenby's army which took Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Ottoman Empire, which was an ally of the Central Powers. Some served with home forces in Britain, where there were always large numbers of soldiers. There were also ministers who as civilians served in Britain as what were termed officiating clergymen.
Adler served for the greater part of the war as the Senior Jewish Chaplain on the Western Front. In July 1918 his health gave way and he returned home. This was immediately before the final Allied offensive which was to determine the outcome of the war. Adler recorded the whimsical remark of one of his colleagues that after he left the front all went well. He was succeeded as Senior Jewish Chaplain by the minister of Bayswater Synagogue, Rev. Arthur Barnett. At the end of the war the authorities marked their appreciation of the role of Jewish chaplaincy by awarding Adler the decoration of the Distinguished Service Order (DSO).

The Great War was a war like no other. Everything had to be rethought, including chaplaincy. Where, for example, should chaplains be stationed – at the front line, behind the lines, at regimental or divisional headquarters, in field hospitals and casualty clearing stations? Chaplains served in all of these locations.

Jewish chaplains faced particular challenges. Typically a Christian chaplain in the British Army was attached to a unit, remained with the unit and functioned within the unit. For Jewish chaplains, their chaplaincy “community” was Jewish soldiers, generally only a handful in any unit, dispersed throughout numerous units over huge areas of the Western Front and later of the Italian Front and the Middle East. So Jewish chaplains had to find their flock. To arrange a service, perhaps for the High Holydays or Passover or Chanukah, chaplains had, weeks ahead, to identify a location and obtain permission from the Army, which would circulate notices. Uniquely the Army gave Jewish chaplains the names and units of Jewish soldiers. Chaplains conducted a vast correspondence with soldiers and their families. Some had a clerk to help them. The chaplains sent postcards to all of the soldiers in their list of soldiers with details of forthcoming services. Nothing was static: neither the front itself, nor therefore the rear areas, nor the soldiers. Sometimes chaplains did not learn for a long time that their soldiers had been killed or wounded.

The Army supported Jewish chaplains, on occasion even providing transport to take soldiers straight from the front line to High Holydays services. There are
accounts of men trudging in from the line in full kit with their rifles for a service.

To locate their flock, Jewish chaplains had to travel widely. Other than Adler, who was fortunate to have been provided with a car, they had no transport. On the vastness of the Western Front, this was a real problem. Some chaplains rode horses. Chaplains were for ever hitching lifts on lorries. Often they had to trudge long distances in the mud.

Jewish chaplains would sometimes be based for a while in lodgings in a town, then perhaps at an army headquarters, then perhaps at a field hospital and then perhaps at a casualty clearing station. It was in hospitals and casualty clearing stations that they were able to be of most value to the largest number of soldiers, Jewish and non-Jewish. At least one Jewish chaplain assisted doctors conducting operations. Chaplains visited patients in the many hospitals behind the lines. They conducted funerals. Early on in the war, Adler arranged for Jewish graves to be marked with a Magen David rather than a Cross. With so few Jewish chaplains, there was often none available to conduct the funeral of a Jewish soldier. So Adler wrote out the Jewish Burial Service in English and distributed it amongst Christian chaplains who might be called upon to perform this duty. On occasion Jewish chaplains conducted the funerals of Christian soldiers.

Where possible, chaplains encouraged Jewish soldiers who were able to do so to conduct services, for example on the High Holydays, when the chaplain knew that he would have to be elsewhere. We have a letter from an RAMC sergeant to Adler narrating with pride how nervous he had been but how he had managed to conduct a service on the Day of Atonement in 1915 in the advanced dressing station where he was serving. Sadly he was killed a year later.

In all of the western combatant nations, Jewish chaplaincy in the field came of age in the Great War. There were Jewish ministers serving within the armies of Britain, Australia, Canada, France, the United States, Austro-Hungary and Germany.

After the war Michael Adler undertook the massive task of recording the names and units of all of the British Jewish
soldiers and sailors who had served, been killed and been decorated. The result was the huge British Jewry Book of Honour, published in 1922. Each of the copies was individually numbered, and the book is a collectors’ item today.

The experience of the Great War set the pattern for Jewish chaplaincy in the Second World War. By the end of the Second World War there were more than fifty Jewish chaplains serving with British forces around the world. But that is another story.

Jonathan Lewis is a doctoral student at University College London researching the history of Jewish Chaplaincy in the British Armed Forces. He would welcome any information, documents, photos, memoirs and recollections from the descendants of chaplains and from, for example, people who in the Second World War or as post-war national servicemen encountered Jewish chaplains. He may be contacted on lewisandr2004@yahoo.co.uk.
On Purim and all the days of Hanukkah, a curious piece of liturgy is added to both the blessing after meals and the thrice-daily silent prayer. The two festivals have in common that each is of entirely rabbinic invention and celebrates a miraculous deliverance from Gentile monarchy. There is a specific version for Hanukkah and a parallel one for Purim, but the two share the same opening lines, the first two words of which, Al ha-Nissim, give the prayer its name (I’ve used the Sephardi version here, but the wording in the Ashkenazi liturgy is nearly identical):

For the miracles and for the deliverance  
And for the great deeds and the rescues  
And for the wars, redemption, and release  
You performed for our fathers  
In those days and at this time.

That last phrase betrays a certain anxiety. By way of contrast, the binding of Isaac, a traumatic event by anyone’s calculation, is mentioned daily, and Abraham’s supreme act of devotion is noted as meriting divine favor, but without any felt need to draw the Almighty’s attention to the span of time separating the event and our cashing in the chit. What is Al ha-Nissim so anxious about? I suspect it stems from the fact that the victory described is not really past and the war isn’t really over. So, to start with, let’s look at the account the prayer gives of Hanukkah:

In the days of Mattathias son of Yoḥanan,  
Hasmonean high priest, and his sons,  
When the wicked Greek rule stood over them, over Your people Israel,  
To brainwash Your law out of them  
And draw them from the statutes You desired  
Yet You in your manifold compassion  
Stood by them in their hour of need  
Fought their fight, judged their judgment,  
avenged their revenge,  
Rendered up the mighty to the hands of the weak,  
The many to the hands of the few,  
The tainted to the hands of the pure  
The wicked to the hands of the true  
The impudent to the hands of those busy with Your law.  
For Yourself You made a great and sacred name in Your world.
And for Your people Israel You made a great deliverance and rescue as on this day.

Then, almost as an afterthought, we get the following bit about the Maccabees cleaning the Temple:

After that Your sons came to the inner sanctuary of Your house
And cleared Your hall and purified Your Temple
And lit lights in Your sacred courts
And appointed these eight days of Hanukkah
To thank You and praise You.

If that’s not anxious enough, we need only flip to the back of the prayer book for a more obscure variant of this prayer, said only by those who have forgotten to include it in its proper place in the blessing after a meal and need to recite it later:

May the Merciful One work among us
Wonder and miracles,
Just as He did for our fathers in those days and at this time.

There is something more immediate in this unusual plea than, say, our wish at the conclusion of the Passover seder that we celebrate next year in Jerusalem. Why do we require “wonder and miracles”—in this context, things that are needed in times of intense persecution—at this particular hour? Who is the enemy that we keep expecting at the door?

When we look at the Purim version, which starts exactly the same way, we have another decisively vanquished enemy and another triumphal dispatch, along with hints of the same anxiety:

In the days of Mordecai and Esther in the capital Susa
When the wicked Haman stood over them to try
To exterminate, kill, and wipe out
All the Jews from boy to elder, infant and woman
On a single day, the thirteenth of the twelfth month
Which is the month of Adar,
And to despoil their wealth.
But You in Your manifold mercies
Reversed his thought and spoiled his plot
Unlike its Hanukkah equivalent, this prayer doesn’t end with praising God’s name, or establishing a memorial feast (although the book of Esther does actually end with just that), and certainly not with a redemptive scene akin to the cleansing of the Temple. Instead, we’re just left with the image of Haman and his progeny swinging from the gallows.

Rabbi B.S. Jacobson in his magisterial Netiv Bina traces at great length the halakhic discussions of these two festivals and the question of exactly which miracle they are celebrating. In the case of Hanukkah, Jacobson follows the Babylonian Talmud: it is the miracle of the canister of oil found by the Maccabees in the corrupted temple, which, burning for exactly the right number of nights, served to link this celebration to the existing one of Sukkot.

All this is entirely absent from I Maccabees and II Maccabees. That doesn’t necessarily matter, because the rabbinic tradition (unlike the Catholic Church) excluded those books from the canon. But the story is also unknown to Josephus. In fact, even the Al ha-Nissim prayer refers to that part of the miracle only obliquely (“and they lit lights in your sacred courts”). I’m not here to dispute the miracles of the Lord, only to point out that the liturgy, even excluding the bit about the oil, insists on framing the conflict in one way when all the other available sources indicate it happened in quite a different way.

How different? I Maccabees tells the story of Mattathias stabbing a Hellenizing Jew who, in order to placate the conquering Seleucids (“the Greeks”), was willing to bow to a Greek idol. In that version, Mattathias cries, “Whoever is for the Lord, [come] to me,” a direct allusion to Moses’ cry to the Levites to arm themselves and go through the camp killing their own idolatrous kin who worshipped the golden calf. However you look at it, this is a story of civil war—a story that the rabbis are at great pains to frame
differently, turning an internal conflict into an external one.

II Maccabees is even less like the talmudic and liturgical versions. Its story—far less dramatic but, according to some scholars, much more accurate—is of a divided Jewish people slowly co-opted by the Seleucid invaders and of one priestly dynasty being ousted by another, the Hasmoneans. The latter were good at fighting local battles and obtaining the patronage of more powerful regimes, but also managed to keep out the highly inflammatory statues of idols and other Hellenizing touches and eventually to concentrate both the high priesthood and temporal leadership in their own hands. That story, which does conform with Josephus’ account, is even less heroic.

Moving on to Purim, Jacobson also notes that, while there is no mention of the Lord at all in the book of Esther, it is meant to be read in tandem with the book of Daniel, which follows it in the canon. The two—thought to be composed significantly later than the other biblical books—address what it means to be a Jew living under non-Jewish rule. Hence the book of Daniel is not really about the lion’s den, which—much like the Maccabees’ oil canister—is what people remember, but rather about Daniel and his companions surviving the physical and spiritual challenges of life as prisoners of a foreign court. Instead of non-kosher wine they ask to drink water, and instead of non-kosher meat they ask to eat seeds. (Rabbi Jacobson proceeds to list community after community around the world with a tradition of eating seeds on Purim).

I suspect Rabbi Jacobson is right, and is on to something. Just as the Al ha-Nissim prayer for Hanukkah seeks to portray a change of elites or a civil conflict as a war of liberation, the same prayer for Purim seeks to pin on the easily vanquished Haman an existential threat to Jewish civilization. In fact, the turning point in Esther is not the reversal of fortune in the middle of the book but the previous exchange between the archetypal incognito Jew, Queen Esther, and her embarrassingly
dressed cousin Mordecai, who warns her:

Do not imagine you’ll get out alive
There in the king's house, alone of all the Jews.
For if you keep silent and still at this time,
Relief and rescue will stand by the Jews from another place . . .

“Do not imagine you'll get out alive,” he tells her, without specifying the other place that rescue will come from if not from her. “The Place,” some commentators note, is a talmudic term for the Almighty, and it’s hard to see this passage as referring to anything but divine intervention, albeit of a non-obvious kind. But the book as a whole is about the temptations of assimilation. Jews in that kingdom do not fast regularly but only when under threat of extinction. And Mordecai, who represents Jewish pride and spirituality, nevertheless instructs Esther not to advertise her obviously problematic Jewishness when she goes for her royal interview, and doesn’t for a moment dream of withholding her from an all-but-forced marriage to the non-Jewish king.

These late biblical books and festivals describe the beginnings of the exilic world, a world in which it is not easy to be a Jew, and the challenges are internal as much as external. That is the war that Al ha-Nissim tells us implicitly has not yet been won, the war for which Jews beg the Almighty’s intercession in this day as He did then. We were delivered out of Egypt, but unlike Egypt, the world we live in, and the battle within ourselves to adjust to it while keeping our spiritual integrity, never really go away.

Atar Hadari's “Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of H. N. Bialik” was a finalist for the American Literary Translators’ Association Award. “Lives of the Dead: Poems of Hanoch Levin” was awarded a Pen Translates grant and is forthcoming from Arc Publications this spring. He currently holds a Vice-Chancellor’s PhD scholarship in Theology at Liverpool Hope University where he is writing a dissertation on the influence of Jewish commentators from the Biblica Rabbinica on
revisions to William Tyndale’s translation of Deuteronomy up to and including the KJV. He also contributes a monthly verse bible translation to the US digital magazine MOSAIC.
HAPPY HANUKKAH