

Julia R Lieberman
Saint Louis University (lieberjr@slu.edu)
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Panel: Teaching Israeli Studies on the Periphery

Teaching Israeli Studies at Saint Louis University

Saint Louis University

Saint Louis University is a Catholic, Jesuit University ranked by U.S. News and World Report 86th out of more than 260 national universities in the United States. According to the Office of Campus Ministry, among the 8,000 undergraduates about 1%, roughly 80 students identify themselves as Jewish. Three years ago, several undergraduates founded “SLU Jews,” a student-led group that was chartered this past academic year. Their mailing list consists of about 25 undergraduates who have expressed an interest in Jewish events but in reality only an average of six students attend SLU Jews meetings or show up for Jewish events. This past fall 2010 SLU Jews invited me to be their academic advisor and since then we have organized monthly meetings, co-sponsored several Jewish events and set up a web-site to announce Jewish events.

Israeli Studies at Saint Louis University

At the academic level, there are no Jewish or Israeli Studies programs. In the Department of Philosophy an adjunct faculty, who is a local rabbi, teaches two courses on Jewish Studies and the Department of Theological Studies offers a course titled: “Jerusalem: A city of Three Faiths.” As for Israeli Studies proper, several members of the faculty in History and Political Sciences teach courses on the Middle East that touch upon Israel.

Courses I Teach

Let me give you a brief summary of how I became involved in Israeli Studies in the first instance.

I am a professor of Spanish and International Studies in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages. I teach Spanish courses, such as writing, Literature of the 16th and 17th centuries, Spanish Muslim, Jewish and Christian Mysticism, and Medieval and Early Modern Iberian Jewry. My field of research is Sephardic Studies.

In the academic year 2005-2006 I served in a committee charged with designing an exchange program between Israel, Turkey and Saint Louis University. The committee was headed by the Director of the International Studies Program and had the support of the Dean of Arts and Sciences. We worked an entire academic year on plans for applying for funding for the program, establishing contacts with a Turkish University as well as with the University of Haifa in Israel and designing a curriculum for prospective students going to either Turkey or Israel.

I applied to the SIIS for the summer of 2006 so that I would design a course on Israeli Studies that students going to Israel would take before their departure. In May of 2006, right before I came to Brandeis, there were still many details to be worked out, but it looked as if the exchange program was on its way to becoming a reality. For reasons that I do not fully understand but dealing with issues of budget, the president of Saint Louis University did not approve the project and the program never materialized.

During my participation at the SIIS in the summer of 2006, I designed the course: "Israeli Culture: From the Birth of Zionism to the 21st Century." On my return to SLU, the course was approved by the Curriculum Committee and, since 2007, I have taught it a total of three times. This course is always cross listed with the departments of History and Theology and the Honors

Program and International Studies. The majority of the students taking this course are Christians and the average enrolment is of 13 to 15 students. Student's evaluations of the course are always highly positive and a number of them have expressed interest in taking more courses dealing with Israel. However, the course only counts as an elective and I teach it every other year.

Challenges I have encountered teaching about Israel

Teaching a course on Israeli Studies at Saint Louis University differs in a number of ways from the other courses I teach. One positive difference is that students are for the most part very talented and have excellent reading and writing skills. But I also face challenges that I do not have in other courses, such as, that the students know nothing about Israel and there is a lack of materials available, such as a textbook to suit their specific needs.

On the first day of class, I give students a form to fill out and one of the questions I ask is: Why are you interested in taking this course? The responses I get are varied, of course, but they often are a variation of the following: "I major in Theology and I'm interested in Christianity's root in Judaism." Or, "I've enrolled in this course because Israel is always at the center of so many conflicts."

This lack of previous knowledge about Israel affects negatively in their participation in class, specially the first half the semester, when they are encountering topics they have never heard of before and they are shy and hesitant to say anything in class. This past fall, at about the fifth week of the semester I had an eye-opening experience, when I realized that students were quiet because they found the readings too challenging. We were ending with the unit on the Yishuv and beginning with the founding of the State of Israel. The readings for that day were

selections from the book by Ilan Troen *Imagining Zion* and I was asking students to share their impressions on the readings. One student, who always did her best to contribute to class discussion, volunteered positive comments that were also very revealing (COMMENT: I hope Ilan Troen is around so that he can hear what this student considered most valued about his book). My student basically said that she liked the readings; she could tell that the author of the book was an American and wrote clearly, with sentences and paragraphs just about right: neither too long nor too short; further, she said she appreciated that the topics were introduced with subtitles. So she liked the style, but what about the substance? Just at that moment, I realized that the students had been quiet because they were having difficulty with the readings.

How do students approach the materials and topics we cover

One of the first topics we cover in the semester is Zionism. We read and discuss selections from the book, *The Zionist Idea*. Outside of class, students also watch the film on Eliezer ben-Jehudah, *The Wordmaker*. Students write a film review of *The Wordmaker* and, at the end of the unit, they write an essay comparing the works of at least two Zionists. From the students perspective this topic always elicit a similar comment: How could some individuals identify themselves as “secular and Jewish”? The more observant Christian students in particular are really bewildered by these contradictory terms and usually express their disappointment on their essays. Therefore, I have learned to predict that the topic merits attention and that we discuss it in class. Students have also other interesting reactions to the Zionists they encounter; they always dislike the selections by Herzl, because, in their words, “he focuses too much on the negative.” They also dislike what they learn about ben-Yehudah’s personality in the film. The selections by Ahad ha-Am are always well received, as they find his writings profound and

“religious,” in spite of the fact that the book *The Zionist Idea*, titles his section: “The Agnostic Rabbi.”

There are a number of assignments that students seem to truly enjoy. These are fiction, such as short stories and memoirs, for example the ones included in *The Plough Women* (on the Yishuv), selections from *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, by Amos Oz, and Israeli films that they usually watch outside of class. Although students are very critical of the quality of films made in Israel, after watching them, they tend to engage easily in lively discussions. Students also learn throughout the semester to sing simple Hebrew songs. I always begin teaching them “Havah Nagilah Havah” because they recognize it from weddings and celebrations. They also learn others such as “Hevenu Shalom Aleichem,” “Hine ma-tov,” and others, and I find it particularly moving to see them beaming with pride while they sing in Hebrew, a language that they don’t know. I also require that they read at least once a week the Israeli newspaper Haaretz and that they report briefly either to the class or in writing.

Teaching Techniques that I use to make the course meaningful

Some of the techniques I use are simply using common sense. By this I mean, I realize that my students are encountering a new world for the first time, but mainly that this encounter takes place in the midst of more familiar topics and for a very short time: three times per week for fifty minutes. Occasionally students have alluded to this disconnection between the topics discussed in this course and the other courses they take. To alleviate this, I do things that I do not do in other courses, for example, I provide them with summaries of the chapters that we do not cover in class, or with lists of Hebrew or Jewish words that they have never encountered before, and comment their meaning in class.

Role-Playing as a technique to engage students

One unit we cover in the second half of the semester deals with the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and we read selections from the book *Shared Histories. A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue*, edited by Paul Scham et al. This is an excellent book that I highly recommend it as it presents events in the history of Israel, from the perspective of both sides. Using it at the end of the semester makes a lot of sense, as the readings include information that students have been encountering gradually from the beginning. Instead of the more traditional ways of discussing the assigned readings in class, for this unit, students role-play what they have read. I divide the class into two: half of the students are “the Zionists” and are half “the Palestinians.” Invariably the results are always excellent, as even the most shy of the students have no problem defending “their side” and demonstrating their comprehension of the topic. For example, “a Zionist” may say that his or her grandparents made “aliyah to the Yishuv, from Eastern Europe” or that they were “secular Jews.” Similarly, “a Palestinian” may accuse the Zionists of the myth of reclaiming “a land without a people for a people without a land,” etc., etc.

In their final exam students always make comments that show the impact the course has had in their lives and I am always impressed by their efforts to be objective. As one student put it in her final exam: “Before studying the conflict I was strictly pro-Zionism. Why? Just because I had always heard people saying [that they were pro-Zionists]. After learning both sides (and Amos Oz was particularly touching), I started to realize the intricacies of the situation...”

The final paper for the course is always on a topic included in the book *Shared Histories* and invariably also students demonstrate a thorough comprehension of the topics they write about,

such as “The two conceptions of nationalism: Jewish and Palestinian,” and how they are similar and different at the same time.

Conclusions on Teaching Israeli Studies in the Periphery

By way of conclusion I would like to finish with a list of several ideas that I believe would benefit some of us and could result in establishing programs of Israel Studies in institutions on the “periphery,” such as my home institution Saint Louis University. Hopefully these ideas will be heard by SIIS faculty and administrators and they will lend some support to one or more of them:

- There is an acute need for textbooks and readers with primary sources appropriate for college students who are beginning to study about Israel and who may never become specialists. There two readers on the market, *The Zionist Ideas, and Israel in the Middle East*, but they do not address the needs of beginner students, such as appropriate introductory essays, and affordability. Funding for putting together such a text would be money well spent.
- Setting up an Annual Presentation on Israel Studies, deliver by a recognized scholar on Israel Studies and with funding for a number of years with the intention that our home institutions eventually would pick up the tab. I have tried in the past to rely on neighboring institutions with Israel Studies experts, but this has not worked well.
- Creating a competitive “Student prize” for essays written by students “on the periphery”, as this would be a meaningful way to booster student engagement.

- Offering SIIS graduates a second chance to come to Brandeis in the summer to work in either designing another course and or creating a curriculum of Israel Studies for our home institutions.