From the Director

In January of this year the Program in Jewish Studies celebrated its third birthday. Although still young, the Program has come a long way. In May, Jennifer Phillips will be the first student to graduate from Rice with a minor in Jewish Studies. Half of the students who took the Advanced Modern Hebrew course this year will spend their summer in Israel. In the fall semester 2012, we will again offer well over ten courses, our lecture series at the Jewish Community Center will be held in October, and we will offer another class at the Glasscock School of Continuing Studies on Jesus and Judaism.

As we continue to serve our students as well as the greater Houston community, please take advantage of our multiple learning opportunities. We are eager to share our resources with all who want to be part of Jewish Studies – on our beautiful campus and in the community at large. I look forward to welcoming you!

Kind regards,
Matthias Henze

Kabbalah and Cake

Hebrew University scholar Jonathan Garb connected modern Kabbalah to Harry Potter, psychoanalysis, modern Hebrew poetry, American pastoral poetry, Jewish philosophy, and contemporary Israeli politics, taking his audience on a magical mystery tour through the last century of modern culture. Demonstrating the resilience of the notion of the soul in Kabbalistic thought and practice, Garb noted its resurgence in popular culture. He concluded that a concern for social justice underlies conceptions of the soul; the heart of kabbalah is halakhah (the Jewish system of normative behavior), and justice is the heart of halakhah.

After the talk the audience gathered to celebrate the third birthday of the program in Jewish Studies, launched in January 2009. On behalf of the advisory board, chairman Max Blankfeld presented a seder plate in deep appreciation to founding director, Professor Matthias Henze. Henze remarked how pleased he was to see so many students at the event.

First Post-Doctoral Fellow

This academic year we welcomed Dr. Melissa Weininger as our inaugural Postdoctoral Fellow. Dr. Weininger has a B.A. from Harvard University, where she studied English literature and women’s studies, and wrote her senior thesis on gender and Holocaust narratives. She completed her Ph.D. in 2010 at The University of Chicago with a dissertation on Jesus in Jewish literature. Her scholarly interests include Hebrew and Yiddish literature, gender studies, Holocaust literature, and Jewish nationalism. In the spring semester she taught a survey course in the English department on modern Jewish literature, and in the fall she will teach the first course ever offered at Rice on gender and Jewish culture.

Upcoming Events

“Jesus and Judaism” with Rice faculty and visiting scholars, exploring Jesus in Jewish thought, history, literature, and culture. Six consecutive Mondays, 7:30 - 9:00 p.m., starting October 8 on the Rice University campus. For more information and to register, visit gscs.rice.edu.

Rice Jewish Studies lecture series at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center of Houston. Wednesdays at 8:00 p.m., October 3, 10, and 17.

Melton graduate class on Israeli literature at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center of Houston, taught by Dr. Melissa Weininger. Tuesdays at 7:00 p.m.
The Way I See It:
Digging into Israel’s Past

Through the Jewish Studies Fellowship at Rice, I was able to volunteer on an archaeological dig in a city close to Tiberius along the coast of the Sea of Galilee called Ein Gev. For two weeks in July, I participated in the twelfth season of excavations at Hippos. Hippos was a Roman Decapolis, one of ten cities that was predominantly a center of Greek culture. I was assigned to a new excavation area: the living quarters. Throughout the two weeks we found several walls and reached the floor in a few places. We even found a few really incredible artifacts: lots of pottery shards, a pot, a few coins, a ring, and a door latch. Finding these relics was the highlight of all of the digging. Participating in the excavations was such an amazing experience, not only because I learned so much about archaeology and the history of Hippos, but also because I was able to contribute to the findings and expose a previously covered area of the city. The people I met on this trip were definitely an amazing part of this experience. I was surprised to find that the volunteers were so international and diverse, with people from more than six countries and multiple religions. Overall, going to Israel to work on this archaeological dig was an amazing opportunity and a fantastic experience. I learned a lot about the different cultures in the area, as well as about how archaeological digs are performed and what there is to learn from artifacts. This is definitely an experience I would recommend to someone else, and repeat myself.

Michelle Shapiro ’13 was a recipient of the Desirée and Max Blankfeld Fellowship.

Spring Courses Offered Something For Everyone

Highlights of this spring’s course offerings were two graduate level courses. Dr. Matthias Henze taught a seminar on “Lost Judaisms: The Apocryphal Writings,” and Drs. Gregory Kaplan and Mark Kulstad taught “Spinoza’s Philosophy.” These courses marked the first graduate level courses offered through the Program in Jewish Studies.

Additionally, undergraduates enrolled in thirteen courses spanning eight different departments. A new course, “Rabbinic Interpretation” taught by Hillel Director Rabbi Kenny Weiss, was funded through a generous gift by Mr. Elton Lipnick in honor of Mr. Raymond Brochstein’s Gold Medal Award given by the Association of Rice Alumni. Hebrew classes continued to be successful and popular. Half of the students taking Modern Hebrew will be spending the summer in Israel.

To support Jewish studies at Rice, please contact Jeanette Zey at 713-348-4669 or jzey@rice.edu.