“Jewish Higher Education”
Jewish Response to the 2016 Fall McGinley Lecture
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The question of Jewish education is complex: are we speaking about the education of Jews, or is it education in Jewish subjects? Or related to Jewish “identity”? Pre-modern educational institutions were confessional. Universities established in medieval Europe were institutions of Christian learning. Jews were excluded from the majority of them until the 19th century. In fact, the Council of Basel issued a canon on September 7, 1434, prohibiting “Jews and other infidels” from being “admitted to any academic degrees.” Yet, despite this prohibition several universities, especially on the Italian peninsula, admitted Jews to the ranks of their students, especially in the field of medicine. The University of Padua was most notable in its matriculation of Jews. Between 1517 and 1721, 228 Jews earned doctorates from that university.

Jewish religious education was taught among Jews in private smaller settings of yeshivot, or among Christians at universities, but here its purpose was polemical and conversionary. The same Council of Basel stated that: “Since this preaching will be more fruitful in proportion to the linguistic skill of the preachers, we decree that there must be faithful observance of the constitution of the council of Vienne, which ordered the provision in certain universities of teachers of the Hebrew, Arabic, Greek and Chaldean languages.” Neither in the case of premodern Jewish education, nor in the case of teaching Jewish subjects at Christian universities was there a question of Jewish identity. The sense of Jewish identity was not threatened before the modern era, when the question of Jewish education became different.

In the modern period, the political transformations that reshaped the legal framework of the states from premodern corporative structure to a modern model of individual citizenship challenged Europeans’ sense of identity and also reshaped approaches to higher education. Europeans, Jewish and non-Jewish, were seeking new bonds that went beyond the legal bonds of estate and religion. This new process is exemplified in the writing of history. In his introduction to the History of the Latin and Germanic Nations, Leopold von Ranke promised to “keep close to the racially kindred nations either of Germanic or Germanic-Latin descent, whose history,” for
Ranke, was “the core of recent history.” He promised to touch only in passing on “what is foreign” and thus peripheral. In Ranke’s eyes, these Germanic nations developed “in unity and in common enterprise.” Jews, thus, though they had lived among those “Germanic and Germanic Latin nations” for centuries, were effectively excluded from the story. And just as history came to serve nation building, so too did the new approach to higher education, which became increasingly focused on the service to the state. Universities were charged in educating future bureaucrats, national educators, and useful citizens. Moreover, religious education was also increasingly sanctioned by the state.

For Jews these new developments meant new challenges, also in education. Because in modern universities topics of study were structured to aid nation-building, Jews, while no longer excluded from enrollment, would not feel they truly belonged there. Moreover, in a new modern state, in which legal boundaries no longer defined Jewish identity and community, new questions about identity were raised: Were they French Jews, or Jewish Frenchmen? Were they German Jews or Jewish Germans? What did Jewishness mean? What should Jewish education look like?

From the late 18th century, debates over Jewish education raged. Should it be Torah only? That is religious education alone. Or should it be Torah u-madda‘, religious learning and secular knowledge, or Madda‘ ve-Torah, secular learning first and then religious learning? Moreover, states began to require certain training for rabbinic positions. In 1797 for example, the edict of toleration in Bohemia required rabbis to have a university education. Under the Habsburg monarchy it became sometimes difficult to fill rabbinic posts because of those requirements.

But the question of Jewish identity continued to be important. Excluded from the story taught at the universities; challenged by new intellectual and political trends, Jewish intellectuals turned to writing the history of the Jews. They sought to respond to the fast changing world by anchoring Jewish identity in a national historical narrative of their own. They founded the society for the study of Judaism, or Wissenschaft des Judentums. Many of those scholars were trained at German secular universities and applied modern tools to the study of Jews. None found employment in their fields at secular European universities. Some turned to their energy to training rabbis for the modern world.

One of the earliest such institutions was the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, now Wrocław in Poland, which opened in 1854 and sought to prepare rabbis and Jewish teachers. It required of its students adherence to traditional Judaism, while applying the new
tools of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* to their training. Its curriculum included: talmudic literature, history and exegesis, philosophy of religion, homiletics and Midrash, and the calendar. Most of its professors held a degree from German universities, for example, Jakob Bernays, who taught philosophy, from University of Bonn, or Heinrich Graetz, the preeminent historian from the University of Jena. In 1855, in London Jews’ College was founded, its function to train rabbis and community leaders. In 1881, the College relocated near University College, to help its students combine secular and religious education; in 1904 it affiliated with the University of London.

In the United States, too, Jewish institutions of higher learning emerged in the late 19th century. In 1875, the Reform Hebrew Union College (HUC) was founded in Cincinnati. It trained Reform rabbis. The seal of HUC at the time showed a seven-armed candlestick with Hebrew words above “Seal the Torah upon my disciples!” and below “The morning has dawned.” The Reform HUC saw itself as an institution that was providing training for religious leaders ready for new challenges of modernity. As the president of HUC wrote in 1917, explaining the context: “Then came the trumpet blast of liberty, at which the walls of the Ghetto tumbled down, and with these also the medieval fences and witnesses of the Law. A trying period arrived for the ancient heritage of the Jew. Dazzled by the light of modern culture, thousands turned their back upon their ancestral faith.”

Facing this challenge Hebrew Union College was intended to be an institution of learning which stands for the progress, the enlightenment and elevation of Jew and Judaism in America. And, behold, with the limited means at its disposal it has achieved astonishing results; it consolidated the forces of progress and sent forth all over the land an army of workers in the cause of Judaism, enthusiastic, earnest and resourceful, who achieved great successes in the field of education and philanthropy as well as religion, so as to win many hearts for the cause of Reform; it gave the American congregations many pulpit orators, whose eloquence commanded the attention of Jew and non-Jew alike, and kindled love and zeal for Judaism in the rising generation.
The new seminary and its practices were not uncontroversial. When the first class of rabbis graduated, its reception included non-kosher food, a statement that reflected debates over the historical validity of Jewish dietary laws. But the Reform movement was quite successful, spurring a reaction. In 1886, Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) was formed. While JTS started as an Orthodox institution it then became a flagship for the Conservative movement, which became a mid-way between Reform and Orthodoxy. When Solomon Schachter took over the Seminary in 1902 in New York, he found that it was "amidst all the Judaisms and no-Judaisms" of the great city that he and his colleagues were called upon to "create a theological centre which should be all things to all men, reconciling all parts and appealing to all sections of the community." The four-year instruction covered: “all branches of Jewish literature, Bible, Apocrypha, Talmud, Midrash, Codes, Liturgy, Homiletics, including a proper training in public speaking and pastoral work, Hazanuth and ceremonial practices, Jewish Ethics and Jewish Philosophy, Theology, Jewish History and Jewish Mysticism, and even Jewish Folklore,” as well as “the duties of the Rabbi and on philanthropic topics.” Soon, the Seminary, which was tuition free, partnered with Columbia University, allowing its students to take Columbia’s courses. The comprehensive religious education of JTS was very attractive for potential rabbis (even if the numbers were rather small, 77 in 1917, for example) and so Orthodox Jews also were forced to rethink their education.

Father Ryan mentioned Yeshiva University, a modern Orthodox University. In 1897, New York State chartered Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, still a rather traditional yeshiva, which refashioned itself into a modern rabbinic school in the first decade of the 20th century, reimagining itself in response to the competition coming from JTS. Under the leadership of Bernard Revel, it became Rabbinical Seminary of America, described as “alternately… the ancient Yeshiva and the modern College, the Orient and the Occident, the old world and the new.” And in 1928, it became a Yeshiva College, providing a secular and traditional Jewish education to Orthodox male students.

But Jewish education in the United States also distinguished itself in creating non-religious institutions of Jewish higher learning, and a Jewish post-graduate institution. Gratz College in the suburbs of Philadelphia was founded as a liberal arts college steeped in Jewish values, and in its original goal was to serve as a teachers college. According a proposal for its founding, Gratz College was to “be devoted to the dissemination of the knowledge of Jewish
history, the Hebrew language, Jewish literature and the Jewish religion. The curriculum of the College shall be especially designed for teachers, and upon the successful completion of the course a certificate shall be awarded.”\textsuperscript{13} And in 1907, Dropsie College, now the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies in Philadelphia, was founded with the primary goal of post-graduate education “for the promotion of and instruction in the Hebrew and cognate languages and their respective literatures and in the Rabbinical learning and literature,” with “other languages and branches of learning” added if resources allowed, and did not “impair the efficiency of the instruction in the Semitic languages and Rabbinical learning.”\textsuperscript{14}

While the majority of Jewish institutions of higher education were focused on religious, rabbinical training, perhaps with the exception of Gratz College, there were no secular Jewish institutions of learning until 1925, when the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research was founded in Vilna, and the Hebrew University was founded in Jerusalem.

Both YIVO and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem were products of Jewish nationalist movements: Diaspora nationalism, and Zionism. YIVO was solely an institute for Jewish research. Its scholarship was to be in Yiddish, and cover social sciences: philology, history, economy and statistics, which focused on demography, and pedagogy.

While YIVO focused on research, and granted no degrees, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem was conceived as the first true Jewish university, in which Jewish education was only a part of the mission, and which would also support research in sciences and other areas of knowledge.\textsuperscript{15}

The first ideas were voiced already in the 1880s by Zvi Hermann Shapira, a mathematician and a Zionist, and the 1902 pamphlet written by Chaim Weizmann, the future president of the State of Israel, Martin Buber, a well-known thinker and philosopher, and Berthold Feivel, a prominent publisher, laid out detailed framework for such a university. In 1913, the 11th World Zionist Congress voted to establish a university in Jerusalem, whose language of instruction would be Hebrew. The corner stone was laid in 1918, and the University opened doors in 1925. In the United States, Brandeis University, founded in 1948, became the first non-sectarian, egalitarian Jewish university whose students were not asked about race, religion, and origin. Its educational focus was on the broad spectrum of knowledge with four schools: the School of General Studies, the School of Social Studies, the School of Humanities, and the School of Science.
One of the reasons for creation of Jewish institutions of higher education was the fact that Jewish studies were generally not included in the curricula of non-Jewish universities, and when they were—especially in Europe they were placed within theology faculties and studied from Christian perspective. In the United States, Jewish Studies entered the non-sectarian academe with the Miller Chair in Jewish History at Columbia’s History Department in 1928. By 1969, Jewish studies scholars were offering courses in Jewish studies at over 200 universities. Fordham University joined the now much longer list by instituting a minor in Jewish Studies minor. Now, at modern universities, including Fordham, Jewish and non-Jewish students have access to Jewish studies, alongside all other subjects.
NOTES


2. Ibid.


4. The debate’s most famous example is Naftali Herz Wessely’s *Divrei shalom ve-emet* [words of peace and truth] published in 1782, and the reactions to it. Wessely called the two kinds of knowledge *Torat ha-elokhim*, and *Torat ha-adam*.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


9. Ibid., 508, 513.

10. Ibid., 508.

11. Ibid., 513.


