To survive and regrow from the upheaval of the past year, the Jewish Studies Program at UC Davis greatly expanded its audience and level of scholarly participation. We did this by using new programs and technology to draw on ways Jewish culture has long responded to isolation and catastrophe. We created a groundbreaking new fellowship and lecture series to support emerging scholars in the field that is helping set a new standard in Jewish Studies. By fostering new scholarship from Israel and Morocco to Paris and New Jersey, we reaffirmed the transnational, diverse nature of Jews and Judaism. And we reaffirmed the relevance of our work to issues from migration to inequality, climate change to racial justice, showing that Jewish Studies offers ways to understand not only Jews and Judaism, but the world we all share.

The past academic year, my first as director, marked several new moves for our Program. Our partnership with the Israel Institute brought Dr. Yael Teff-Seker from the Arava Institute to UC Davis to research and teach about the intersection of environmental sustainability, conflict, and cross-cultural cooperation. We welcomed Professor Bruce Haynes to the Jewish Studies Steering Committee, and began the year with his lecture, "Judaism and the Black Experience." And we launched the innovative New Directions in Jewish Studies Lecture Series, a competitive program that promotes cutting edge research by scholars working outside the rapidly-shrinking tenure track.

Born of necessity, our online programming brought its own benefits. We welcomed hundreds of new friends from around the world to our virtual community. Our final speaker of the year, translator Levana Mizrahi, joined us from Paris, with a personal account of life in Egypt, Israel, and France, and her surprising discoveries about Yiddish culture in Cairo - with attendees from every country in her story. While we are eager to welcome you back to campus in the fall, we will continue to offer accessible online programming.

In an age of diminishing support for the humanities and social sciences, our programming has shown just how far our funding can go. In the meantime, our faculty have continued to produce award-winning research. UC Davis students have been learning about Jews and Judaism across several departments. They’ve also been producing innovative work of their own, and thanks to the generosity of the Kunitz family, we have been able to celebrate them. Read on to learn more about last year’s highlights!

Eva Mroczek, Director
Our Students
UC Davis students inspire and impress us. Their resilience, their care for others, and their engagement amidst this year's challenges were downright heroic. Thanks to the generosity of the Kunitz family, we were able to reward their hard work with prizes and scholarships.

Jewish Studies Minor Scholarships

Fiona Heenan
Religious Studies Major and Peer Advisor Fiona Heenan is pursuing a Jewish Studies minor for the intellectual excitement and the vibrant conversations it sparks: “I have my favorite ideas,” she writes, “in Jewish Studies classes.”

Kristen Millstein
Majoring in Political Science, Kristen sees Jewish Studies as crucial preparation for her intended career in advocacy and justice work, pointing both to the diversity of Jewish life and identities and to the rich history of Jewish commitments to social justice.

Megumi Suzuki
A History major, Megumi finds that the global scope of Jewish Studies has helped her deepen her understanding of not only “European, North American, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Asian, and African history,” but also current events. She plans to go on to graduate school.

Don Kunitz Awards for Excellence in Jewish Studies

Julissa Ramirez
(Chicana/o Studies and Psychology 2020) won the Don Kunitz Award for her paper, “Civil Marriage in Israel,” a perceptive analysis of the competing interests at play in how the State of Israel legislates marriage. Ramirez deftly and authoritatively explains the role of party politics, religious interests, and the identity of Israel as a Jewish State, bringing impressive clarity to a complicated issue.

Jennifer Alpers
(History 2020) was awarded the Don Kunitz Award for her senior thesis in History, “((Deep State)): The 1930s Roots of an Antisemitic Conspiracy Theory.”

The thesis is a compellingly written piece of scholarship that situates contemporary ‘fringe’ conspiracy theories in a historical context, revealing their pernicious staying power and showing how antisemitism and other forms of racism are intertwined.

jewishstudies.ucdavis.edu
Introduction to Judaism

This year marked the first time in six years that UC Davis students have had the opportunity to take Introduction to Judaism, which will now be offered at least every other year. Housed in the Department of Religious Studies, the class introduces students of all backgrounds to the richness of Jewish tradition, culture, and religion, from Ancient Israel to contemporary California.

Students read primary texts from all eras - papyrus letters from a Jewish community in ancient Egypt, who sacrificed in their own temple; Talmud and Midrash, with records of generations of rabbinic debate and disagreement; contemporary legal Responsa applying Jewish law to live issues like vaccination mandates; and first-person reflections on multi-ethnic, multi-racial American Jewish life.

Students read and wrote about diverse Jewish ideas of homeland, from Israel to Spain, Morocco to Los Angeles; vibrant debate on everything from Jewish languages to kashrut; and Jewish responses to contemporary ethical crises, like racial justice and climate change.

We missed the vitality of in-person discussions, but the online format allowed students to meet a range of guest experts online. One highlight in the class was a guest appearance by Dr. Amanda Mbuvi, the newly appointed head of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and first Jew of color to lead a major rabbinical school. Dr. Mbuvi spoke on how her work as a scholar of the Hebrew Bible informs her understanding of Jewish identity, race, and belonging in America today.

UC Davis offers classes across the entire scope of Jewish Studies, from the formation of the Torah and rabbinic literature to contemporary Jewish American experience, in multiple departments, including History, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Political Science.

Modern Hebrew

UC Davis students had a chance to study Modern Hebrew with lecturer Itay Eisinger, who brings his skill and sensitivity as a published poet to his language teaching.

Dr. Eisinger is a scholar of modern Hebrew literature with a focus on dystopian fiction. He holds a BA in Philosophy and Literature from Tel Aviv University and a PhD in History from UT Austin. Dr. Eisinger will teach both elementary and intermediate Modern Hebrew in 2021-2022. He uses popular Israeli websites, online cultural resources, and social media to get students comfortable with real life Hebrew as it’s spoken today - faster than you think!
Five innovative scholars of Jewish Studies shared groundbreaking research with our community in the inaugural New Directions Lecture Series.

The series is the first to directly respond to the changing landscape of academic labor. Our program promotes and rewards cutting edge research by scholars outside the tenure track, introducing it to UC Davis and the broader scholarly community.

We learned about Jews and their neighbors in Morocco, how Jewish tradition might reckon with racial justice, ideas about divine bodies in ancient Jewish texts, and the rich history of how Jews have made their homes right here in California. Lecturers were paired with accomplished respondents from their fields.

All the New Directions lectures have been recorded and are available for viewing on our website.

We can't wait to announce next year's lineup of New Directions Lecturers!
The Jewish Studies Program continues its partnership with the Israel Institute, which allows UC Davis to host a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in the study of Modern Israel.

This year we welcomed Dr. Yael Teff-Seker, who studies the social, cultural, and political aspects of environmental policy, with a focus on the Middle East. At UC Davis, Dr. Teff-Seker teaches courses on conflict, cooperation, and environmental ethics in Sociology and Religious Studies.

With on-the-ground experience in environmental initiatives in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, Dr. Teff-Seker is not only an expert in Middle East conflict: she is also a visionary leader who sees the peacebuilding potential of cross-border, cross-cultural work around shared environmental concerns. She brings this unique combination of knowledge and experience to her courses on modern Israel and the Israel/Palestine conflict, highlighting the interconnectedness of political and environmental crises and the people who are working to solve them.
Nittel Nacht Party
Christmas Eve... Jewish Studies Style!

Why do many Jews eat Chinese food on Christmas? That might be the best-known Jewish Christmas custom, but it's not the only one! On December 24, 2020, students, faculty, and community members got together to discover “Nittel Nacht,” a 500-year old Jewish Christmas Eve tradition, with Professor Rebecca Wollenberg of the University of Michigan.

Christmas has long been a fraught time for Jews. On Christmas Eve, European Jews would avoid Torah study (still practiced in some communities today), and instead hold loud parties where they would stay up late, gamble, eat garlic, and sometimes read Jewish legends about Jesus.

Why? At the time, many Jews and Christians alike believed that powerful spiritual forces were at work on Christmas Eve. Demons prowled, animals could talk, and there was even a shared Jewish and Christian folk belief that on this day, Jesus would return - sometimes, oddly, to haunt latrines and outhouses, and sometimes to visit Jewish homes. Gathering for a loud party - and eating lots of garlic, a known mode of protection from supernatural forces - was one way Jews got through a holiday that was alienating and sometimes even dangerous, but utterly unavoidable in the Christian world around them. You can read Professor Wollenberg's study of this tradition here.

While we were all isolating in our homes, we got together to learn about this very old tradition, discuss some spooky Christmas lore, and share Jewish Christmas traditions that are still part of American Jewish life. (Yes, there is a good reason Jews go out for Chinese food on Christmas day!)

Look out for more innovative programming - in person and online - for 2021-2022!

Thank you from the 2020-2021 Jewish Studies Program Steering Committee: Eva Mroczek (Director), David Biale, Bruce Haynes, Jenny Kaminer, Sven-Erik Rose, Seth Sanders, Yael Teff-Seker, Diane Wolf, and Benjamin Fisher.

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