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Introduction

NAVIGATING A KNOWLEDGE EXPLOSION

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THIS BOOK is intended as an opening into the field of Jewish Studies for readers who want to learn more about the questions it is asking and the insights it is generating. It is not an introduction to the Jews or Judaism or Jewish history. Its subject is the academic study of the Jews, an interdisciplinary field that brings together historical research and the study of philosophy, language, culture, behavior, social organization, and personal experience.

Scholarship has long been important in Jewish culture, but academic Jewish Studies represents a distinctly modern kind of study and knowledge different from earlier modes. Individual scholars in the field may be religious in their personal lives, but the field itself is not religious in orientation. Its goal is to understand Jewishness as a particular strand of human experience. In contrast to other modes of Jewish study, academic Jewish Studies is not a religious undertaking, a way of relating to God or Torah, but an intellectual enterprise driven by curiosity about the world. The field is “critical” in relation to its subjects, which does not mean that it is hostile to them, but rather that it takes a skeptical approach to knowledge about them, constantly questioning what can be learned from its sources, questioning the findings of earlier scholars, and interrogating its own premises and methods. This is how scholars in other fields, humanistic and scientific, pursue the truth. Academic Jewish Studies embraces this same approach in its quest for a deeper understanding of Jewish sources, history, and culture.

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As this volume demonstrates, the subjects that scholars of Jewish Studies explore and the methods they use to do so are rich and diverse, but they all revolve around fundamental questions about Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness—distinct but at times related phenomena. Among the questions asked by scholars of Jewish Studies are the following: Who are the Jews? How do they differ from and relate to other peoples and cultures? Where do Jews come from, and what is their history? How have Jews influenced and been influenced by their assorted and at times divergent historical, political, and cultural environments? What do Jewish texts mean, and how does one make sense of them? What kinds of ideas and values have been central to Jewish traditions? How have these ideas and values changed and been expressed in different times and places? How have ordinary Jews lived their daily lives in the different worlds that they have inhabited? What kinds of languages, cultures, music, art, literature, and thought have Jews drawn from and produced? What is the role of law in Jewish life? Ritual? Family? Institutions? In one way or another, these are all questions about who Jews are, why they think and act as they do, and how they fit into the world.

To answer these questions, Jewish Studies draws on the disciplines and methods of the modern academy—critical historical research, anthropology, literary studies, philosophy, and sociology, among others—to illuminate the past and present of Jewish life, thought, and expression. The goal of such methods is to gain a better understanding of human experience through the careful observation and analysis of evidence, as well as through self-reflective examination of one's own assumptions, biases, and motivations. Such study is limited in what it can conclude, because it is confined by the available evidence; scholars interpret that evidence in different ways and can reach very different conclusions, and the field is always in the process of correcting and revising itself. And yet, Jewish Studies has succeeded in making many discoveries, big and small, and it has grown more nuanced, capacious, and sophisticated in its analyses. It is fair to say that we know more today about Jewish life past and present than ever before, with much yet to learn.

Jewish Studies originated in nineteenth-century Germany. The field has evolved significantly since its beginning, but it is still shaped by its origins and early history. In the context of European debates about Jewish emancipation, the initial main aim of Jewish Studies was to insist that Judaism and the Jewish people were worthy of academic study. Jews in Europe at the time faced hostility and discrimination from the Christian majority, but the Enlightenment and its belief in the power of reason to solve any problem had also penetrated Jewish intellectual culture in Europe. Early practitioners of what was then called *Wis-*

senschaft des Judentums and is now known as academic Jewish Studies brought this faith in reason to the study of the Jewish people. They adapted the methods of academic study at the time—the study of history, language, texts, and philosophy—and applied them to Jews with the hope of both overthrowing the shackles imposed by traditional modes of Jewish scholarship and helping the Jewish people develop and progress. They called what they did “science” (*Wissenschaft*)—not science in the sense that it is practiced today in the physical or life sciences but science in the sense of a rigorous, critical, evidence- and fact-based approach to research.

In the two centuries since the rise of academic Jewish Studies, the field has faced many challenges. The rise of Nazism proved especially devastating, first denying Jewish scholars access to universities, forcing many into exile, and slaughtering those who remained in Europe; it also brought to a tragic end some 750 institutions of European Jewish learning. But by this time academic study of the Jewish people had migrated to new contexts—to the United States; to mandatory Palestine, which saw the establishment of the Hebrew University in 1925; and even to the Soviet Union. The field took root in these new contexts. Academia today faces many challenges—declining interest in and funding for humanities-based scholarship, too few employment opportunities for scholars, disinterest or even suspicion in the broader community, and a movement to boycott Israeli academic institutions. Nonetheless, Jewish Studies has not only survived but also thrived, especially when granted sufficient resources.

In Israel, Jewish Studies research today is pursued in several universities at a very high level of specialization and benefits from the support of institutions that include a National Library housing some five million volumes. In the United States, in addition to Jewish institutions such as the Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College, many major research universities and smaller liberal arts colleges across the country are home to Jewish Studies programs. The Association for Jewish Studies, based in North America and the largest learned society in the field of Jewish Studies, counts upward of two thousand members. The academic study of Judaism also flourishes in parts of Europe, most especially—and inspiringly—in Germany, where Jewish scholars and scholarship were previously devastated by the Holocaust.

The field in terms of its membership has also become increasingly diverse, now encompassing male, female, and transgender scholars, as well as scholars from both religious and secular backgrounds. Although the majority of scholars identify as Jewish, Jewish Studies also draws non-Jews, including a small number of Muslim scholars in Arab countries. Jewish Studies is still centered in

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Israel, the United States, and Western Europe, but scholars can be found in many other contexts as well—in Latin America, South Africa, and even mainland China. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2023, which threatened Jewish-related archives and museums, made people elsewhere aware of how much Jewish Studies research has continued there in fields like Yiddish studies, Holocaust studies, and Jewish music studies. The digital revolution—the rise of the internet, the digitization of archives, and the use of computing tools for research and teaching—has transformed the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Thanks in part to these technological advances, Jewish Studies—like every other field of academic research in the last few decades—has undergone a knowledge explosion, a proliferation of new information, and an expansion of new ways of managing and interpreting it. Reference works published as recently as a decade ago now feel out of date as information continues to flow in through new discoveries and scholars think about the data in new ways. What counts as worth studying has been increasingly broadened—first to include the perspectives of women and now encompassing children, the poor, and those with disabilities: This increasing breadth and variety are only matched by the field's expanded power to assemble and analyze large amounts of data from archaeology, new archival research, and the digital humanities.

Research has also made its way into less familiar realms. Today, one of the most vital subfields of Jewish Studies is the study of Jewish life in contexts once deemed too peripheral to focus on, such as North Africa, Yemen, and India. Even the most seemingly familiar of Jewish Studies subjects—the Bible, the Talmud, canonical Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages and modernity—are unleashing new waves of study as they are read in new ways and placed in new historical and cultural contexts.

Jewish Studies today is no longer driven by the same defensiveness with which the field began. It does not need to justify its existence as in the nineteenth century, nor to defend Jews from the prejudices and forms of persecution that prevailed when the field originated. Still, like all fields in the humanities and social sciences, research in Jewish Studies continues to be driven by pressing contemporary concerns. Anti-Jewish prejudice was one of the reasons for the development of Jewish Studies in the first place, and its recent resurgence on college campuses is refocusing the field even in the short time it has taken to construct this volume. In the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, Jewish Studies was largely confined to Jewish institutions. Today it is based in non-Jewish universities, private and public, and in many of those

places, it is organized in a way meant to help integrate scholars into other fields. (In many U.S. universities, Jewish Studies is a program rather than a department—that is, it does not operate as a separate unit, but brings together faculty whose primary academic home is some other department.) The desire to integrate into mainstream academia remains a driving impulse of the field to this very day.

This volume aims to offer readers an engaging picture of Jewish Studies and its insights in the early twenty-first century—to convey how the understanding of the Jewish past has changed in recent decades and to introduce the many other disciplines that are being used to understand Jewish culture and society both past and present. Jewish Studies is so capacious that we do not claim to offer a complete or definitive overview of the field. Our goal is to give a sense of its intellectual diversity and to offer readers a readable entry point into some of the many different pathways of knowledge that recent scholars have been pursuing. What follows are a series of doorways into different areas of research from across the expanse of Jewish Studies: These brief chapters aim to share what scholars in this field are focused on, what questions they are asking, and how they go about addressing those questions.

How This Book Is Organized

All research is collaborative. Even the most solitary forms of library research depend on scholars cooperating with each other to provide the feedback and critique necessary to improve and validate each other's findings, as well as to publish the journals and other channels through which new insights and knowledge are disseminated. Scholarship, in its quest for truth, must remain open to different perspectives and embrace debate and difference of interpretation. To give a true sense of the field, we felt it was important for this book to mirror these qualities—both the collaborative spirit of research and its intellectual diversity.

Rather than presuming to represent the field ourselves, we commissioned scholars from a range of disciplines to offer snapshots of their fields of research, along with a brief bibliography at the end of each chapter for those who want to learn more. We sought to coordinate the efforts of the contributors by bringing them together in small Zoom working groups to share their work and exchange feedback—that was our attempt at promoting collaboration. At the same time, we sought to stay true to the field's diversity by encouraging scholars to frame

their chapters as they saw fit. One example of this diversity is scholars' use of different methods for rendering words in Hebrew and other Jewish languages into English. We have smoothed out some of the inconsistencies, but not all of them, out of respect for the norms of different subfields. Such is our approach for deeper methodological differences as well.

Part of what we want to introduce in this book is the intellectual variety within Jewish Studies—how different disciplines approach the challenge of introducing their subfields, how they organize their presentation, what questions they highlight, and what insights they emphasize.

Part 1: Rethinking the Past

The anchoring field of Jewish Studies today, the subfield populated by the largest number of scholars, is the study of Jewish history, and the first half of the book is devoted to current scholarship in subfields of the study of the past. This is not itself a history—if one is interested in Jewish history, there are many books on the subject (including *The Jews: A History*, cowritten by one of us). What we offer here is chronologically arranged but is more eclectic in approach. Some chapters are focused on sources such as the Bible or rabbinic texts, and others are organized around a particular theme or historical change. We are also very mindful that significant areas of historical research are not represented in this book. Unable to accommodate it all within a single volume, our goal was to offer samples of the research.

Two fields represented in this first half of the volume—biblical studies and Holocaust studies—have a complex relationship to Jewish Studies. The field of biblical studies is older than Jewish Studies, and Jewish biblical scholars are greatly outnumbered by Christian scholars interested in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as a founding document in Christian tradition. Holocaust studies, to the extent that it focuses on the perpetrators of the Holocaust, is not focused on the Jews per se. But both biblical studies and Holocaust studies obviously intersect with Jewish Studies, so we decided to include them. Although we have not presumed to try to cover all of Jewish history, the chapters do move chronologically from the earliest origins of Jewish culture into the modern Jewish experience. Part 1 captures how much this enormously vital area of research as practiced today differs in its focus from the historical research produced by earlier generations of scholars. Readers interested in how the study of history has changed within Jewish Studies will find the chapters that focus on medieval Jewish history particularly illuminating.

Parts 2 and 3: Ideas and Expression, and Interactions and Identity

History is not the only lens through which scholars have sought to understand Jews. This book's second half is devoted to research coming from other perspectives. Here, too, we make no claim to being comprehensive. The chapters in parts 2 and 3, however, make clear that Jewish Studies is a genuinely interdisciplinary field and one that has grown increasingly expansive in how it thinks about its subject.

Part 2 surveys scholarship focused on “ideas and expression.” By “ideas,” we mean important religious beliefs and concepts together with philosophy, the use of the intellect to explore life's purpose, questions of ethics and justice, and the relationship between revelation and reason. “Expression” encompasses language, ritual, material culture, literature, music, and visual culture—the processes and media through which Jews express imagination and emotion.

We were not able to include every kind of research that might be encompassed within these categories. Jewish folklore studies, the effort to document and analyze storytelling and popular culture among large groups of people, was once a very robust subfield and played an important role in the formation of Jewish Studies; however, this kind of research has gone into decline as the study of folklore in general has declined, although it continues to be part of the study of Jewish anthropology. On the upswing is the study of Jewish digital culture—how Jews use new technologies and social media to express themselves. That kind of research is so new that we were not able to digest and incorporate it, but it has grown increasingly important over the last two decades. The same is true for the impact of digital humanities on the practice of research in Jewish Studies; the increased accessibility of texts and art because of digitization, the construction of large databases, and the invention of new technological tools for the management and analysis of “big data.”¹ These developments, now further empowered by AI-expanded capabilities, are a driver of the knowledge explosion underway, and this volume does not pretend to keep up with it all.

What we have tried to do is give a sense of the diversity of *interpretive* approaches that scholars today are bringing to the study of Jewish culture. At the core of this study is the act of close reading—the careful study of language, texts, and art in search of meaning. Thus, this section of the book stresses the continued importance of such interpretation to the field of Jewish Studies. As scholars know well, the humanities, although always facing one challenge or another, have been in a state of acute crisis since the 2010s, losing student engagement

and university support. Jewish Studies is by no means insulated from this trend. One of our goals with part 2 is to assert the continued vitality of humanities-driven—and humanity-driven—Jewish Studies research.

The third part of the book, focused on “interactions and identity,” moves beyond the humanities into anthropology, sociology, the study of law, identity, and politics. The Association for Jewish Studies, the largest learned society in this academic field, is largely centered on history and the humanities, but there also exist scholarly organizations like the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry that draw on social-scientific fields to shed light on Jewish life. One of our goals in part 3 is to call attention to this kind of research. The concept of “identity” is double-edged, referring both to what distinguishes a person from others and to what connects one to others. Some chapters in this section focus on different dimensions of Jewish identity and what distinguishes Jews from each other, but they also explore the intersectional dimensions of Jewish identity; how Jewishness is inflected by gender, racial identity, and economics. In contrast to much of the research surveyed in part 1, which is focused on the Jewish past, the research explored in part 3 often concentrates on the Jewish present. We include chapters that think aloud about the challenges of such study to better understand aspects of Jewish life that are inexhaustibly variable and endlessly changing.

Because it was our goal to cover the field of Jewish Studies in a single, manageable volume, we had to make difficult decisions about what to include and thus what to exclude, and we are very mindful of all that we have left out. In addition to fields such as folklore studies and digital Jewish culture, there has been an explosion of relevant research in population genetics, the analysis of DNA evidence to study Jewish origins and ancestry, migration, and mating practices. Such research goes back to the early twentieth century but has taken off since the late 1990s, especially since completion of the Human Genome project. We have not been in a position to include it here or to include the vast amount of effort invested into genealogical research, a field distinguished by the important role played by hobbyists. Another entire field that did not make it into this survey is the study of Jewish education. Education is an essential part of any culture, and that is especially true for Jewish culture, which has placed great emphasis on study as a religiously and socially important endeavor since antiquity. Although the study of Jewish education itself is another relatively new field of academic research, intensifying in recent decades and growing increasingly capacious in what it counts as education, it too exceeded what we could accommodate within a single volume.²

We also acknowledge the North American bias of this book. We endeavored to include scholars from other regions, but we focused on scholars and scholarship that we thought would be of interest to English-language readers. We acknowledge falling short in conveying the global and multilanguage character of Jewish Studies scholarship, which includes research from the Soviet Union and Russia and the countries in the Soviet Bloc that came into their own after its collapse; Latin American Jewish Studies; the study of Jewish life in Africa and East Asia; and the study of anti-Jewish hatred in its many manifestations.

This last topic became newly central to the field following the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the surge in anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist animus that followed in 2023 and 2024, precipitating new centers and academic positions in the field of antisemitism studies. To be sure, antisemitism had long been a central focus of Jewish Studies, especially as it related to the Holocaust, and there had existed centers for antisemitism research at Yale, Indiana University, and a few other places in North America, Israel, and Europe. Yet, scholars in the United States, feeling well integrated into American society, tended to treat it as a subject of historical inquiry, as part of the Jewish past; research that focused on contemporary antisemitism was rare. Although there were indications that antisemitism had been ticking upward globally since at least the mid-2010s, the field was to a large degree caught off-guard by the vitriol and violence of the last two years; it is still adapting, and we do not know where the field is headed.

That brings us to something else that we were not able to convey: the politics of the field and the way it is affected by politics. We finished this book at an extremely fraught moment. The Hamas attack, followed by Israel's war in Gaza and the worldwide public condemnation it unleashed, affected Israeli colleagues in very direct ways and created new institutional pressures within Israel and from abroad. Anti-Israel protests, distinct from but intersecting with a global uptick in antisemitism, changed the landscape for Jewish Studies in the United States and Europe—creating feelings of isolation, stigmatization, moral conflict, outrage, and stress among many scholars. Jewish Studies has never been insulated from politics and political conflicts, including rifts over Zionism, but the current situation goes beyond anything in living memory in terms of the numbers of scholars it affects, the rifts it has created with colleagues, and its impact on the positioning of Jewish Studies within universities.

This era of crisis, trauma, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation also underscores the importance of Jewish Studies as a counter to anti-Jewish hostility and discrimination, as well as its ability to challenge unfounded generalizations

and simple binaries. While it is our hope that this volume reaches scholars, students, and other learners who are Jewish and are curious about what they can learn about their history, culture, and identity from academic research, we also very much want this book to reach learners who are not Jewish, believing as we do that Jewish Studies has insights to offer to anyone seeking to better understand what it means to be human.

We recognize that, just as the nineteenth-century European scholars who founded Jewish Studies were not as objective as they imagined themselves to be, it is likely future generations will see limitations in the perspective of today's scholars. But the questioning of scholarly objectivity does not mean that scholarship should abandon the pursuit of knowledge and truth based on evidence and arguments, rather than ideology. The integration of Jewish Studies within universities was a step forward in the struggle to make academia more encompassing of human experience, and the field has been able to make distinctive contributions to the study of minorities, among other subjects. Nothing that has happened in this era argues for knowing less about the Jews; it argues for knowing more. Indeed, the proliferation of competing ideologies that we are now experiencing only shows why universities have an obligation to be spaces dedicated to the pursuits of knowledge and truth above all, even when those findings are inconvenient for certain ideologies or points of view.

These are the beliefs that have sustained us in producing this volume, but its ultimate lessons will depend on you, the reader. If you are a scholar of Jewish Studies, the book offers a crash course in other subfields that may be unfamiliar. If you are a scholar from outside Jewish Studies, you may find it interesting to compare what is happening in this field to developments in your own area of specialty. If you are a reader being introduced to the field for the first time, you will encounter many of the fruits of contemporary Jewish Studies and get a sense of how many different pathways to knowledge coexist within the field. Whatever motivates you to learn more about Jewish Studies, each chapter ends with a brief bibliography of additional readings that can lead you further into the topic.

Two centuries of academic Jewish Studies inspire both pride and humility. The pride arises from all the insight and knowledge that scholars have generated and from the role that scholarship has played in sustaining the vitality of Jewish culture. The humility comes from knowing how much we don't know and from having to accept that scholarship has not had the transformative impact that the field's founders envisioned for it and that it is too often seen as irrelevant beyond academia. We will consider this book to be successful if it is able to open up

Jewish Studies as it exists today and help readers navigate its subfields—but even more so, if it is able to convey why this knowledge is worth pursuing and how much more remains to be discovered.

Notes

1. For a survey of this kind of research, see Heidi Campbell, *Digital Judaism: Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture* (Routledge, 2015).
2. See, for example, Ari Kelman, *Jewish Education* (Rutgers University Press, 2024).

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