

The Questionnaire

What are three books you love to teach to undergraduates?

RESPONSES

Joyce Antler

Samuel Lane Professor of American Jewish History and Culture, Brandeis University

Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Penguin, 1997)

The iconic story of the transformation of an immigrant into an American compels student readers with its vivid images and language. Yet readers are usefully perplexed by its contradictory perspectives—celebratory and tragic, psychological and historical, secular and spiritual.

Tillie Olsen, *Tell Me a Riddle* (Dell, 1994 [1956])

In economical, deeply moving prose, Olsen's novella tugs on students' emotions as it conveys the meaning of Jewish humanism in personal, familial terms.

Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York University Press, 2001)

Oral histories bring to life a generation of activists whose commitment to civil rights and Jewish values (though often underplayed and unacknowledged) inspire students.

Judith Baskin

Knight Professor of Humanities, University of Oregon

These books have successfully supplemented primary and secondary readings in my course on "Medieval Jews and Judaism," which attracts an enrollment of fifty diverse students:

Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale* (Vintage Books, 1994)

Ghosh interweaves his own experiences as a Hindu anthropologist doing fieldwork in

Egyptian villages in the 1980s with Cairo Genizah documents about a twelfth-century Jewish merchant from Tunisia and his twenty-year sojourn in Mangalore, India. This humane exploration of intercultural coexistence and misunderstanding reminds us that medieval Jewish life extended east as well as west, illuminates Middle Eastern village life on the cusp of modernization, and also raises important questions about our approaches to the "antique."

Sharan Newman, *The Wandering Arm: A Catherine LeVendeur Mystery* (Forge Books, 2001)

This accessible and well-researched genre novel by a medievalist is set in twelfth-century Paris and deals with Jewish-Christian relationships of a number of kinds (social, economic, familial, romantic, and intellectual) revolving around a relic theft that threatens the security of the Jewish community. Newman provides detailed depictions of life in urban, monastic, and noble settings, as well as in the Jewish quarter of the medieval city, and the lively characters and situations engage student interest and provide connections to more conventional readings.

A. B. Yehoshua, *Journey to the End of the Millennium: A Novel of the Middle Ages* (Doubleday, 1999)

Yehoshua's demanding, richly textured narrative contrasts the mores of Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews against the backdrop of a journey from Morocco to Paris to the Rhineland set around the year 1000. Diverse characters—Jewish, Muslim, and Christian, merchants and scholars, slaves and rulers, physicians and artists, and most centrally women and men—interact in a stylistic tour de force (with virtually no direct dialogue) that succeeds in conveying some of the complexities and dilemmas of an ultimately mysterious era.

Murray Baumgarten

Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Co-Director of Jewish Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz

Rebecca Goldstein, *Mazel* (Viking, 1995)

Gender and the Yiddish world of Ashkenaz combine in Goldstein's magical tale. The narrative plays *Hasidic* parable and philosophical and feminist polemic against each other. This familial epic, centered around four generations of women, leads us from the shtetl to the *Haskalah* and the rebelliousness of the 1960s. Goldstein asks, Is the result freedom or another form of exile? and students enjoy the argument as they untangle its wonderful, multilingual plot.

Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, published as *Survival in Auschwitz*, translated by Stuart Woolf (Macmillan, 1961)

Reading Primo Levi, students discover "the gray zone"—the ambiguity of choice in the Lager—in this "gigantic biological and social experiment" dedicated to the destruction of the Jews. Here there is no "Warum," no why, and I join with my students in their questioning of the horizon of possibility in the post-Holocaust world. We are awestruck by the precision of Levi's careful and accurate account, yet puzzle over the meanings of the incidents he recounts as he asks, "Are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?"

A. B. Yehoshua, *Mr. Mani*, translated by Hillel Halkin (Doubleday, 1992)

This novel of Zionist longing and biblically inspired myth takes us from present-day Israel into the Sephardic world of nineteenth-century Jerusalem and the Mediterranean. Yehoshua crafts five conversations in which we hear only one speaker, one side of the discussion, and imagine the rest of the dialogue. Yehoshua's characters engage their neighbors in fateful experiences. Act

and rhetoric intertwine here: the English Ladies Reading Circle meets in the Jerusalem Bibliophile Society to discuss Charles Dickens's latest novel, *David Copperfield*, as Yehoshua asks us how novelists compete with their predecessors even as they acknowledge their achievement.

Adele Berlin

*Robert H. Smith Professor of Bible,
University of Maryland*

I teach Bible and so the main text is the biblical text. These are three biblical books I love to teach to undergraduates:

Ecclesiastes

An intellectual engagement about a perennial problem: the meaning of life. Non-religious students can feel as at home as religious students, if not more so.

Isaiah 40–66 (Second Isaiah)

Amazingly strong language and imagery. Students get to see that a prophetic message has rhetorical force; it is not just pious or pretty words.

Proverbs

I actually don't like Proverbs that much but the students always like it. They relate to it like a "how-to" book. And its parts are short enough to text or Twitter. They find the sayings relevant to their own lives, especially once they understand that the book is advice to adolescent males. They are surprised to learn that this is "establishment" literature, designed to make the next generation conform to society.

David Biale

*Emanuel Ringelblum Professor of Jewish History
and Chair, Department of History, University of
California at Davis*

Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (HarperCollins, 1997–2007)

Friedlander's book features individual stories of the victims so that their humanity does not disappear in the welter of big numbers. He successfully conveys the *experience* of the Holocaust in addition to its history.

Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete* (Henry Holt, 2001)

Segev tells the story of Mandatory Palestine from the viewpoints of Jews, Arabs, and the British, thus unsettling what is often a one-sided account. His contrarian arguments provide an effective springboard for class discussions of other points of view.

Benedict Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (Hackett, 2001 [1670])

Spinoza's radical, secular philosophy challenges students to think about the big questions and stretches their minds in unexpected ways. A perennial favorite!

Jonathan Boyarin

*Leonard and Tobee Kaplan Distinguished
Professor of Modern Jewish Thought, University
of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Indiana University Press, 1997)

Bodian's book makes abundantly clear that twentieth-century America isn't the first time-space where people have had to figure out how and whether to be Jewish.

Claudine Fabre-Vassas, *The Singular Beast: Jews, Christians, and the Pig* (Columbia University Press, 1997)

This rich and dense study shows the complex role of Jews and Jewishness in the traditional European Catholic imaginary.

Barbara Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales* (University of Michigan Press, 2007)

This volume is a portrait of a dying Jewish ethnographer who was fully alive to those she met, and who makes them live for the reader in turn.

Deborah Dash Moore

*Frederick G. L. Huetwell Professor of History
and Director, Frankel Center for Judaic Studies,
University of Michigan*

Richard Nagler and Isaac Bashevis Singer, *My Love Affair with Miami Beach* (Simon & Schuster, 1991)

Nagler's photographs surprise and startle students: could old Jews really be so

attractive? Bashevis Singer's commentary beguiles them (and fools them as well). The combination is powerful and always an unexpected hit. (Though the book is out-of-print, inexpensive, used copies can be found.)

Riv-Elle Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Beacon, 2000)

Prell provokes and engages, complicating the history of Jewish immigration to the United States and challenging students' assumptions.

Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Liberalism in Postwar America* (Columbia University Press, 2004)

Staub introduces students to their parents and grandparents' complex Jewish American world, encouraging them to choose sides in historic political debates.

Hasia Diner

*Paul S. and Sylvia Steinberg Professor
of American Jewish History and Director,
Goldstein-Goren Center for American Jewish
History, New York University*

Anna Igra, *Wives Without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, and Welfare in New York, 1900–1935* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007)

Jewish wives, Jewish husbands, and Jewish charitable bodies square off against each other in this book. It challenges students who have bought into a kind of romance about the solidity of the American Jewish family.

Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2006)

A deeply researched and seriously thought-out contribution to American Jewish history; probably the most sophisticated treatment of the whiteness issue that has so dominated historical writing in the last decade.

Tony Michels, *A Fire in their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Harvard University Press, 2005)

Profoundly challenges some deeply held ideas in American Jewish history and in the history of socialism. In this beautifully written book, Michels provides a new way of thinking about the sources of the socialist presence in turn-of-the-century New York.

Chana Kronfeld

Professor, Departments of Near Eastern Studies and Comparative Literature, University of California at Berkeley

Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, eds. and trans., *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Stanford University Press, 2007)

A paperback reissue of their epoch-making anthology. The introduction, along with Benjamin Harshav's classic *The Meaning of Yiddish*, also reissued by Stanford University Press in 1990 in paperback, are the most insightful guides to these truly great American Yiddish modernist poets.

Shirley Kaufman, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Tamar Hess, eds., *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present: A Bilingual Anthology* (Feminist Press/CUNY, 1999)

A groundbreaking collection from the Bible to the present with valuable biographical and historical information. Especially powerful selections of modern women's poetry from Rachel Morpurgo to the late 1990s. Having the Hebrew and English translation on facing pages is a great asset in teaching literature through language and language through literature.

Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anita Norich, and Anne Lapidus Lerner, eds., *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992; distributed by Harvard University Press)

Though the essays vary in degree of rigor, the joint historiographic narrative of Hebrew and Yiddish literature that emerges is an important corrective; includes helpful annotations.

David N. Myers

Professor, Department of History, UCLA and 2009/10 Fellow at the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania

Gerson Cohen, "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History," in *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny* (Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997)

Delivered as a commencement address to Jewish educators in 1966, this lecture briefly and elegantly introduces students to a

surprising key to Jewish survival: assimilation (as a ceaseless process of cultural absorption and exchange).

Baruch Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, R. H. M. Elwes, trans. (Cosimo, 2005 [1670])

A foundational text of Jewish modernity published in 1670, the *Theologico-Political Treatise* productively challenges and confounds students' assumptions about the secular, the religious, and the roots of modern Jewish identity.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Schocken, 1989)

This seminal book exposes students to a sweeping vista onto the Jewish past, while encouraging them to think about the ways in which historians work and history is constructed.

Derek J. Penslar

Samuel Zacks Professor of Jewish History, University of Toronto

Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All: A History of the Jews in Germany, 1743–1933* (Picador, 2003)

Although heavily criticized by academic historians, this book's taut, novelistic prose and spot-on characterization of the German-Jewish elite engage students. Once "hooked," they are prepared for, and interested in, more serious scholarly work on the social history of German Jewry more broadly understood.

Albert Memmi, *Pillar of Salt* (Beacon, 1992 [1975])

To my surprise, this rather dated existentialist novel about the impossibility of Jewish assimilation appeals to students from many ethnic backgrounds. Perhaps it works so well because the University of Toronto's student body consists largely of the children of immigrants, striving to redefine themselves in their new Canadian environments.

Tom Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis* (Free Press, 1986)

One of the first fruits of the Israeli "New History," and still one of the best. The book's ironic tone and pithy narrative strike a responsive cord in students weary of propaganda and eager to understand Israel in all its complexity.

Marsha Rozenblit

Harvey M. Myerhoff Professor of Jewish History, University of Maryland

***The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln* (Schocken, 1977 [1690–1719])**

This book provides an easy and interesting way for students to understand the complexities of pre-modern European Jewish life, including such issues as piety, the economic role of Jews, the role of women, and Jewish attitudes to non-Jewish society. It helps set the stage for the modernization of the Jews, my central focus.

Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1991)

Kaplan explains so cogently and so interestingly several important issues: how the Jews in Germany—and by extension everywhere in Western and Central Europe—assimilated into the society and culture in which they lived; how they retained Jewish identity and Jewish community; and the central role of women in both of those processes. She does so by examining everyday life and the role of German and Jewish culture in the lives of ordinary people. Students thus understand immediately the complexities of German and Jewish identity formation.

Dawid Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto* (Oxford University Press, 1996)

Reading this incredibly moving diary of a Jewish teenager in the Lodz ghetto, students can understand the terrible privations of life in the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Poland, the ways that Jews coped with those privations, and how they understood (without the benefit of hindsight) what the Nazis were trying to do to them. They also learn a good amount about Jewish life in prewar Poland. Because Sierakowiak is a young man, students identify with him and thus find the diary extremely compelling.

Susan Shapiro

Professor, Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies and Director, Religious Studies Program, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or On Religious Power and Judaism*, translated by Allan Arkush, introduction and

commentary by Alexander Altmann
(Published for Brandeis University Press
by University Press of New England,
1983 [1783])

This is a very useful text for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, occasioning a rereading of topics and issues often mistakenly thought to be already understood and surpassed, including the separation of religion and state and secularization, Jewish social contract theory, the parallels and differences between the emancipation of women and Jews, as well as Mendelssohn's critical notions of emancipation based on an acute understanding of contemporary (and not only contemporary) antisemitism.

Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Harvard University Press, 1992)

An excellent introduction to recent feminist and gender analyses of the Hebrew Bible, especially for undergraduates. I assign supplementary articles by scholars addressed—as well as others not mentioned—in her text, so that each chapter allows for a way of simultaneously framing and introducing not only the biblical texts examined but a range of contemporary interpretative approaches in this relatively recent but important field in Jewish biblical studies.

Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (University of California Press, 2000)

A very effective text for use in an introductory course to Jewish culture and history. Read alongside the relevant biblical texts (Exodus, Numbers, Joshua) and with the interpretations of other scholars, this text allows for an imaginative, engaged, and critical way into rereading the Hebrew Bible in the context of a large introductory university course.

Mark Smith

Skirball Professor of Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, New York University

For me, undergraduate teaching all begins and ends with the ancient classics, both “high” and “low”: books of the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls; the Baal Cycle and all sorts of other Ugaritic texts; all the Mesopotamian *varia*—Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, magic spells and various incantations (especially one against the worm-causing toothache with

its creation account). The translations that make these texts alive—by Thorkild Jacobsen, Benjamin Foster, Michael Coogan, and many others—are longtime companions.

In-between, I am inspired by:

Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 1997)

Unlike her earlier better known work, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, this book aims to be more holistic and pragmatic. For American culture increasingly devoid of a sense of ritual, a book like this stimulates the senses for understanding what ancient rituals are all about.

Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)

Where archaeology, texts, and iconography come together and make ancient Israel come alive.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By, with a new afterword* (University of Chicago Press, 2003)

A challenge to the usual ways in which many students think about metaphor and about that entire realm of ancient reality understood only through metaphor—divinity.

Bernard Wasserstein

Harriet and Ulrich E. Meyer Professor of Modern European Jewish History, University of Chicago

Among books of Jewish interest, three that I find evoke reflective, often sophisticated, and sometimes passionate responses from students are:

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (Classic House Books, 2008 [1947])

Which, in its bare-bones sobriety, strips away so much of the phony sentimentality, emotional exploitation, and political instrumentalization that frequently attach to literature of the Shoah.

Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* (Anchor Foundation, 1988 [1973]), which I generally teach together with J. L. Talmon, *Israel among the Nations* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1970)

Two cogently and eloquently argued

statements of diametrically opposed views of the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict by two of the great historians of the last generation.

Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (University of Nebraska Press, 1996)

One of the great humane works of historical scholarship of the late twentieth century and also an effective antidote to Hannah Arendt's unhistorical, indeed one might say anti-historical, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Steven J. Zipperstein

Daniel. E. Koshland Professor in Jewish Culture and History, Stanford University

John Efron, Steven Weitzman, Matthias Lehmann, Joshua Holo, *The Jews: A History* (Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009)

For many years the best of all one-volume treatments of Jewish life was Robert Seltzer's superb portrait of Judaism published by Macmillan. Seltzer's remains a standard work, but now we have an equally authoritative, lucid history of everyday life and lore written a group of first-rate, younger scholars. It is a seamless collaborative work that reveals none of the repetitiveness or awkwardness so characteristic of collective efforts of this sort.

Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (HarperCollins, 1997)

One of the finest synthetic histories of twentieth-century European life written in any language, both in its subtle interplay of social, cultural, and political history and its capacity to integrate the voices of historical actors—and victims.

***The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1945–59: The Lesser Evil*, abridged and translated from the German edition by Martin Chalmers (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003)**

The post-World War II musings about Nazism, Communism, and, above all, linguist Klemperer's keenly felt, day-to-day vicissitudes. This heroic and astonishingly narcissistic volume is a superb way of introducing students to the smell and the feel of a primary source.