

ON EDUCATION/ Samuel G. Freedman

Separating the Political Myths From the Facts in Israel Studies

RIGHT on time at 1:30 on a brisk February afternoon, a graduate student, Jonathan Gribetz, strode with his bomber jacket and baseball cap into a seminar room at New York University. There, amid shelves lined with reference books in Hebrew, dictionaries of Aramaic and translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls, waited Ronald Zweig, his professor in a seminar on the mandate system in the Middle East. This day they would discuss the effect of British policy in Palestine on the empire's restive Indian subjects, just the sort of thing to engage a doctoral candidate's capacious brain.

It was both coincidence and symbol that Mr. Gribetz had come downtown for the class from Columbia University, where he is enrolled — coincidence because he had no motive other than taking an interesting course, symbol because these two Manhattan universities some 110 blocks apart represent divergent approaches to the contentious issue of teaching about the Middle East.

While Columbia has attracted international attention in the last several months for allegations by Jewish and Israeli students that they were intimidated by several Middle East studies professors, N.Y.U. with rather less limelight hired Professor Zweig to hold a newly endowed chair in Israel studies.

A handful of other universities nationally have established similar positions, at least in part to bring a broader range of academic opinion about the Middle East to their campuses. Even Columbia itself is now conducting a search for an Israel studies professor. (By way of full disclosure, I am a faculty member in the Columbia Journalism School, which is not involved in the current dispute.)

The conflict over Middle East studies programs was building well before the recent controversy at Columbia. The House of Representatives in early 2003 passed a bill that would place an advisory board — critics say a political censorship board — over foreign-language and area-studies programs that receive federal money to make certain they

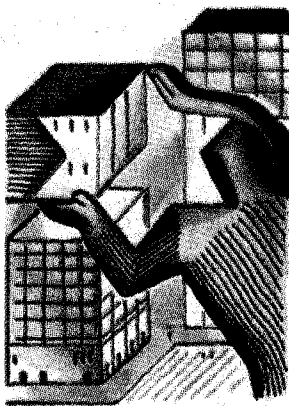
comparable chairs, in his case at Emory University in Atlanta. The dearth of Israel studies programs in the United States, even as Jewish studies departments have flourished, meant there was virtually no pool of senior academics. As for Middle East studies programs, even putting aside the question of prevailing attitudes toward Israel, most professors specialized in Arab and Muslim countries.

Meanwhile, though, Professor Zweig happened to take a sabbatical from his usual post at Tel Aviv University in the spring term of 2003. In coming to N.Y.U., he had no designs on competing for the Israel studies chairs; rather, he wanted to be close to a son-in-law in graduate school in the United States, near several archives valuable to his research and available for speeches on his recent book, "The Gold Train: The Destruction of the Jews and the Looting of Hungary."

Still, his N.Y.U. students revered him. In confidential evaluations of his class on "Israel and American Jewry," they rated him 4.22 on a 1-to-5 scale. "Ron Zweig is the MAN!" one undergraduate wrote. "I don't know why he is still teaching. He ought to run for prime minister."

Without holding that office, Professor Zweig had, in fact, experienced Israel's tumultuous political life. As the editor in the mid-1980's of a scholarly journal on Zionism, he published the first papers by the historian Benny Morris, whose accounts of Palestinian refugees during the 1948 war shattered the Israeli myth that all had left their homes willingly. So controversial was the Morris thesis that a member of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, once cornered Professor Zweig to harangue him for, essentially, letting facts get in the way of ideology.

So when N.Y.U. offered Professor Zweig the chair in the late spring of 2004, he had a condition of his own. "I insisted that this job is not advocacy," he recalled. "It's about scholarship. I will not justify Israel's policy as part of my job. Neither will I criticize it as part of my job. I have made it a matter of principle to keep my personal politics out of the classroom."



David Suter

"reflect diverse perspectives and the full range of views."

University leaders across the country, among them N.Y.U.'s president, John Sexton, have denounced the legislation. Yet in a recent essay, President Sexton warned of the "danger that ideologically driven actors within the university will attempt to stifle conversation, or will attempt to create a climate in which it is difficult to advance certain positions."

With a similar concern in mind, one of the university's largest philanthropists, Henry Taub, donated more than \$2 million in 2002 to endow a chair, a program and several graduate-student fellowships in Israel studies. "Our agenda was someone who would be effective, who would be a good communicator and who was a knowledgeable scholar about modern Israel," said Fred Lafer, the president of the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation. "This was not a political statement in the sense we wanted someone who believed in Likud or Labor or Sharon or Peres. It just could not be someone who said, 'Drive all the Jews into the sea.'"

The search committee, however, could find no available American scholar who met all those criteria. The few qualified experts, like as Prof. Kenneth Stein, already held

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INDEED, Professor Zweig assigns readings from Arab and Arab-American scholars like Rashid Khalidi, as well as dissident Israelis including Avi Shlaim, in his courses. His offerings in this academic year have ranged from an undergraduate class in Zionism to a graduate seminar on the Jewish community in Palestine before statehood to an independent study on educational policy by Jewish agencies in displaced-persons camps. Part of the purpose, he said, is to show Israel studies involves more than the conflict with the Palestinians.

When he met the other morning with the 20 students in the Israel and American Jewry class, Professor Zweig lectured without sentimentality about the illegal immigration of Holocaust survivors to British-ruled Palestine. Bribery, the black market, American friction with Britain over refugee policy — this was not exactly the romantic epic of "Exodus." Neither, though, was it the familiar narrative in Middle East studies of Western colonialism and Jewish racism.

"My goal is to make the students think, not tell them what to think," Professor Zweig said. "I'm glad when students walk away from my class feeling that I've had respect for their views. That's an obligation of professors. We have a mantle of authority and it is scandalous for us to exploit this position in order to propagate our own views."