Blog Post: Jewish Studies for What? A Collaborative Vision of Engagement

By Lila Corwin Berman
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Lila Corwin Berman, of Temple University, and Noam Pianko, of the University of Washington, contribute this entry to our series from the Pedagogies of Engagement in Jewish Studies seminar.

In 1939, sociologist Robert Lynd published a polemical book called Knowledge for What? The book was a call to rethink why scholars studied what they did, and what their work had to do with the world in which they lived, and it came to mind as we thought about gathering a group of Jewish studies directors together. We found ourselves asking, “Jewish studies for what?”

When we were in graduate school, questioning the purpose of Jewish studies felt decidedly irrelevant to our training. The fact of the matter was that our teachers had answered the question already by working tirelessly to gain a place of legitimacy for Jewish studies in the academy. Although we knew that some of our teachers had deep engagements with communities outside the university, we also learned from them how intense the struggle had been to secure Jewish studies in the academy. We understood, therefore, how important it was that we continue to guard the position of Jewish studies by carrying out scholarship of the highest quality, which seemed to mean researching and writing primarily for our academic colleagues.

Then two things changed.

The first change was systemic. Fueled by the 2008 recession and accelerated by the standards of profitability that increasingly guide university governance, a firestorm of challenge and criticism threatened to engulf the humanities. Jewish studies is not immune from this assault and the growing pressure to prove its “relevance” to students and university administrations. We both felt and continue to feel this pressure. But we also found ourselves wondering what new pathways might be opened by the language of relevance.

The second change was personal. After receiving tenure, we both had the chance to direct Jewish studies centers. Even before that, both of us had always engaged with the public, by teaching adult education courses, serving as scholars-in-residence at synagogues, and lecturing to community groups. But when we became directors of Jewish studies centers, we realized that these two facets of our lives—the scholarly and the communal—stood to
enrich Jewish studies and its place inside and outside the university most if we learned better how to bridge them.

So what are we doing about it?

First, we partnered with Jon Levisohn and Brandeis’s Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education in 2013-2014, to create a study group we called Pedagogies of Engagement in Jewish Studies. The next step was to focus more specifically on the challenges and opportunities of directing Jewish studies programs and centers. With a grant from the Wexner Foundation, we have created a “Jewish studies collaborative” that pulled together a group of leading directors of Jewish studies programs and centers. Our first meeting, which took place in Seattle in October, was guided by a concern with “platforms of engagement.”

Jewish studies has an incredible opportunity to be relevant because of the history of the field’s emergence and the needs of a changing Jewish and non-Jewish public. Most Jewish studies programs were created at the hands of non-university communities who cared about Jewish culture, history, and texts—and did not always care about academic norms of objectivity. This genesis presented clear challenges, ones that our teachers often discussed as war stories and ones that remain with us as we navigate claims that various audiences make upon us and our programs. But it also positions Jewish studies in a tradition of thinking about relevance and the public.

What platforms do we have available to us to help spread the rigor and the intellectual importance of what we do in the Jewish studies classroom and in Jewish studies scholarship? Together with seven other Jewish studies directors, a digital media specialist and an arts administrator, we explored digital platforms, arts and culture platforms, and student-centered platforms. Our goal, as we move forward, will be to consider ways we can work together to build new horizons for Jewish studies, within and beyond the university. Could we construct arts and culture programs that travel, exposing wide audiences to the range of Jewish creative expression and framing these with scholarly approaches to cultural production? Could we share digital resources that allow us to teach more specialized topics, or, alternatively, bring together large group of students to reflect in cross-country conversations about texts or historical moments? And, in the process, might we rethink the role of the humanities in the university, making the case for its deep connectivity to intellectual engagement across disciplines and various publics?

We cannot afford to leave the question “Jewish studies for what?” unanswered. Instead of reading the question as a statement of resignation, shrugging our shoulders or throwing up our hands, we seek to read it as a call for creativity, for new thinking, and new partnerships.