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Arts & Humanities

Lessons of Jewish History

For seventy-five years, the Institute of Israel and Jewish Studies at Columbia has connected the community to the currents of Jewish thought.

By
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|
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History never rests at the Institute of Israel and Jewish Studies (IIJS), the hub of Jewish academic life at Columbia. Throughout its existence, the IIJS has guided students to courses across the University and hosted talks that celebrate, analyze, and wrestle with Jewish culture, religion, history, and ideas as they have developed over the millennia — all while keeping up with fast-changing and sometimes momentous events in the present.

The October 7, 2023, attacks in southern Israel, in which Hamas militants killed some 1,200 people and took 251 hostages — the single deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust — marked a palpable turning point in this saga. In response, the IIJS posted a message expressing horror and grief. “We extend our deepest sympathies and support to the families of those who lost their lives and condemn the abhorrent slaughter and kidnapping of civilians. As it has since its inception in 1950, the Institute stands in solidarity with the people of Israel.”

By then, the Israeli siege of Gaza was underway and pro-Palestinian protests had quickly erupted on Columbia’s campus. Jewish students and faculty alike were divided among themselves over many issues: Israel’s response to the Hamas attack, Columbia’s response to the protests, the proper limits of speech and academic freedom, the definition of antisemitism, and the degree to which Zionism — a

political movement that began in Europe in the late nineteenth century in reaction to centuries of exile and persecutions, and which claimed the right of Jewish self-determination in the ancient Jewish homeland — is intertwined with Judaism. As Israeli military operations intensified, killing thousands of Palestinian civilians, some Jewish students on campus reported being harassed and ostracized. Other Jewish students, drawing distinctions between Judaism and Zionism, and between Zionism and the policies of the current Israeli administration, protested the bombing and blockade of Gaza. Some asserted that depictions of Columbia as a hotbed of antisemitism were grossly distorted, and that politicians were exploiting fears of antisemitism to silence political dissent and interfere in academic affairs.

These incredibly complicated and sensitive conditions thrust the IIJS into its most difficult period since its founding. “Initially, everybody was just shocked and traumatized,” says IIJS codirector Elisheva Carlebach ’86GSAS, who is Salo Wittmayer Baron Professor of Jewish History, Culture, and Society at Columbia. “But ultimately, our purpose on the campus is to provide a space where people feel safe airing their questions, their doubts, where they can listen to experts from different vantage points in this conflict, and try to understand it for themselves.”

Each year, as part of this mission, the IIJS connects some 250 to 450 students, many of them Jewish Studies minors (there is no major), to coursework in the departments of History, Religion, Classics, Music, Sociology, Political Science, Slavic Languages and Literatures, Latin American and Iberian Cultures, Germanic Languages, and Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies, as well as at the School of the Arts, the School of Journalism, and the School of International and Public Affairs. And IIJS’s public lectures and panels are archived on the IIJS website.

In the wake of October 7, the IIJS has committed itself to “meeting the moment,” Carlebach says. “We have poured an enormous amount of time, resources, and effort to bring in speakers who will be nuanced.” At a recent panel discussion moderated by IIJS codirector Rebecca Kobrin, for instance, three Israeli scholars examined the attack with a depth and candor too often in short supply.

“I am only here speaking with you because I was not physically present on my kibbutz on October 7th,” began historian Jonathan Dekel-Chen, who will join SIPA this year as a visiting professor. Dekel-Chen’s son, Sagui, was kidnapped on October 7 from Kibbutz Nir Oz, where Hamas killed dozens, and was released in February 2025, after 498 days in captivity.

A self-described peacenik, Dekel-Chen spoke of the horrors inflicted upon community — mass murder, rape, looting, kidnapping — and decried the Israeli government's "colossal failure of preparation, imagination, and arrogance" that allowed the attack to occur. His biggest worry going forward, he said, is the "schism" that has opened between the Israeli government and non-Orthodox Jews in the diaspora — a disaffection, especially among younger people, that "threatens the future of the state of Israel and the Jewish people in ways we have never seen."

Journalist Nadav Eyal, an adjunct professor at SIPA, saw in the immediate wake of October 7 "a window of opportunity" for unity among Israelis, which he believes the Israeli government, through its actions, proceeded to squander, and he wondered if that window had permanently closed. Historian Avi Shilon, a visiting scholar at IIJS and a biographer of Menachem Begin, also expressed anger at the government, saying, "I can't understand why Israel does not adopt the current international recognition of a demilitarized Palestinian state" and renew talks over "how such a state might be built in ways that safeguard Israel's security."

As for antisemitism, "it is far more of a minefield than it ever has been," said Dekel-Chen. "The Israeli government has made Israel into a pariah state. That, of course, feeds into all sorts of preconceived notions and latent antisemitism and opportunism by this or that political entity on the left or the right." Shilon, for his part, found it "suspicious" that "anti-Jewish outbursts erupted worldwide precisely after the day when Jews were attacked as they had not been since the Holocaust." There is, he said, "an enormous difference between criticism of Israel and hatred of Jews, but there are also points of overlap." In his estimation, Israel should not have let the war, "which was entirely justified in the beginning," drag on and "cause so many Palestinian deaths." Denouncing the Netanyahu government's "rejection of any political solution for Gaza with the Palestinians," Shilon called for an "internal reckoning" among Israelis about the "meaning of Zionism in the twenty-first century and the kind of society we aspire to be."

Hosting scholars to discuss Jewish topics and issues is just one way that the IIJS, which recently celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary, honors its founder, Salo Wittmayer Baron (1895–1989). Widely considered the twentieth century's greatest scholar of Jewish history, Baron believed that Jewish history was part of world history, that Jews influenced, and were influenced by, the societies in which they lived, and that the new state of Israel was a major development worthy of serious academic attention.

This wasn’t so obvious to everyone at the time, but then Baron, a pioneer of Jewish studies, was often ahead of the curve.

Salo Baron was known for many things — his vast scholarship, his titanic productivity (including his eighteen-volume *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*), his mania for books (he was an avid collector of Jewish manuscripts), and his testimony at the 1961 trial of former SS officer and Holocaust planner Adolf Eichmann, in which Baron described Jewish life in Europe before Nazism and after. But he is perhaps best known for his groundbreaking 1928 essay “Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional View?” In it, Baron challenged the reigning narrative of the Jewish saga as an unbroken litany of persecutions and suffering — what he famously called the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history” — and offered an alternative reading that emphasized Jewish resilience, adaptiveness, and creativity in the intervals between antisemitic outbursts. Fascinated by the history to be found in “the ordinary flow of life,” Baron portrayed the ghettoized European Jews of the Middle Ages as a “privileged minority,” who enjoyed more rights and better living conditions than the larger peasant population. For Baron, the nineteenth-century reforms following the French Revolution, which granted Jews full citizenship and encouraged assimilation, came at the high cost of Jewish communal autonomy.

Born into a wealthy family in Tarnów, Galicia (a region that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in what is now southeastern Poland and western Ukraine), Baron was a child prodigy with a flair for languages, math, and chess. He later earned doctorates in philosophy, political science, and law from the University of Vienna, and was also ordained as a rabbi. In 1926, Stephen S. Wise 1901GSAS, the Budapest-born, New York–based Reform rabbi and Zionist leader, invited Baron to teach at Wise’s new Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) on West 68th Street. Baron, who could read twenty languages and lecture in five, accepted.

He was teaching at JIR when, in 1928, Linda Miller, in honor of her late husband, Nathan Miller, endowed a chair in Jewish history at Columbia. President Nicholas Murray Butler 1882CC, 1884GSAS launched a search, and in 1930 he hired Baron to Columbia’s history department as the first professor of Jewish history in the Americas.

President Butler was known for his drawing-room antisemitism — in 1919 he imposed limits on Jewish students on the Morningside campus — but he did make

exceptions. Perhaps he perceived the erudite, genteel Baron as a better fit for the Columbia community, unlike the surplus low-income, urban Jewish enrollees at Columbia, who were sent to a satellite campus in Brooklyn, Seth Low Junior College. After hiring Baron, Butler asked Miller for an additional $50,000 so that Baron could build up the library collections of Jewish manuscripts.

In 1932 Baron corresponded with a colleague in Vienna, Rabbi David Fraenkel, a dealer of rare Judaica books. By then, the Nazis had become the largest party in the German Reichstag, and Fraenkel was attracting the interest of the wrong people, including Joseph Goebbels, propaganda chief of the Nazi party. “Fraenkel told Baron, ‘I need to get out of here,’” says Michelle Margolis, the librarian for Jewish Studies at Columbia. “And Baron agreed to buy his collection, using the money from his endowed chair. He believed that to teach Jewish studies, you needed to have strong collections.” The material dated from the tenth to the twentieth centuries, covering the globe from India to the Caribbean. Today, says Margolis, Columbia has the largest collection of Hebrew manuscripts of any secular research institution in the Americas.

Baron began his Columbia career as a one-man show for Jewish studies, teaching ancient, medieval, and modern Jewish history and religion. In 1933, German president Paul von Hindenburg named Adolf Hitler as chancellor of Germany, and the following year Baron married Jeanette Meisel, then a graduate student in economics at Columbia. She would become Baron’s constant collaborator, researching, typing, and proofreading his books and articles until her death in 1985. “Baron really recognized her as someone of equal brilliance,” says Margolis. “They were a team.”

In 1937, the year the Buchenwald concentration camp was completed, Columbia University Press published the first three volumes of *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, which covered a period from antiquity to the early Middle Ages. In the preface, Baron stated that the work was “primarily concerned with the interrelation of social and religious forces, as exemplified in the long historic evolution of the Jewish people.”

Even as Baron’s work promoted the anti-lachrymose conception, by foregrounding the periods of peace and productivity over the intermittent spasms of violence and persecution, the rabidly antisemitic Nazi program was progressing unchecked. In November 1938, Nazi leaders incited mobs to attack and loot thousands of Jewish

shops, synagogues, and homes throughout Germany and Austria (which Germany had annexed months earlier), an event known as Kristallnacht. On September 1, 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland, and six days later they occupied Baron's hometown of Tarnów, where his parents still lived, along with twenty-five thousand other Jews — half the town's total population. The Nazis burned Jewish houses of worship, confiscated property, and forced men into labor. Soon they established the Tarnów Ghetto, and in June 1942, deportations began to the Belzec death camp. Hundreds of Jews were also massacred in the streets. After the final liquidation of the ghetto in September 1943, the Nazis declared Tarnów free of Jews. Baron lost both his parents and his sister.

The Holocaust (1939–1945) — what Baron called "the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history, which has known many catastrophes" — posed a remarkable challenge to the chief critic of the lachrymose theory. But Baron spoke little of personal matters. Instead, after the war, he focused his energies on Jewish recovery. He continued writing and teaching while also working to bring refugees and scholars to the United States, and in 1947 he started an organization called Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, co-led by his friend, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, to rescue looted Jewish cultural property. The group recovered hundreds of thousands of books, manuscripts, Torah scrolls, and ritual objects, and distributed them to libraries and museums around the world.

"When we're faced with tragedy," says Margolis, "there are ways to respond. You can curl into a ball and not move, or you can do something — and Baron was a doer. He was determined to rebuild." For Baron, that meant restoring shattered Jewish communities and cultures in Europe, even as Zionist leaders, with much evidence in their favor, argued that the Jews could only be secure in a state of their own.

Within three years of the Holocaust, Jewish history took another earth-shifting turn with the founding, in 1948, of the state of Israel. In a 2009 essay on Baron, historian and Baron student Lloyd Gartner '57GSAS, who taught at City College, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Tel Aviv University, wrote of his teacher that he "supported Zionism in a moderate form, recognizing the postwar and post-Holocaust need for a Jewish state. . . . But unlike most Israeli leaders in the state's early years, he never wavered in his belief in the creative continuance of the Diaspora."

Baron also recognized the historical import of the birth of Israel, and in 1950 he founded the IIJS, which was first called the Center for Israeli Studies. That year saw

Israeli air lifts of Iraqi and Yemeni Jews and the addition of some 170,000 new immigrants overall. Closer to home, figures like Virginia Gildersleeve 1899BC, 1908GSAS, dean of Barnard College from 1911 to 1947, spoke out in opposition to Israel. Addressing the 1950 meeting of the New York chapter of the American Council for Judaism, Gildersleeve said, “Some Jews are now telling us what Hitler told us and we denied — that Jews are a race apart, a nation apart, that they should live apart from the rest of us either in their own state beyond the seas or, if here, in a community segregated from the currents of our American culture. The danger to our country is alarming.”

Interested in the historical moment and undeterred by the political one, Baron persisted in developing the IIJS, and created new courses such as Political and Social Institutions of Israel and the Prophets and Sages of Israel. Despite his own experience — and despite the criticisms of Jewish thinkers who, after the Holocaust, warned against downplaying the woe factor in Jewish history — Baron did not forsake his anti-lachrymose thesis. In his 1963 essay “Newer Emphases in Jewish History,” he wrote, “I have felt that, by exclusively overemphasizing Jewish sufferings, it distorted the total picture of the Jewish historic evolution and, at the same time, it served badly a generation which had become impatient with the ‘nightmare’ of endless persecutions and massacres.”

In an essay on Baron published in 1995, Ismar Schorsch ’69GSAS, chancellor emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary, took this idea a step further. Exile, he wrote, “is not just physical, but also mental. And the psychological scars of a millennial experience of damnation by others in lands not our own accompany us as we return to our homeland, and bedevil our pursuit of peace. Today the key to peace includes transcending our inner state of perpetual, excessive fear. The alternative is war without end, which would surely deprive Israel of the greatest of all blessings, peace.”

Baron, who with his wife raised two daughters on Claremont Avenue, retired from Columbia in 1963, but he remained a campus presence: speaking, supervising dissertations, rummaging in the Butler stacks, taking long walks on Riverside Drive, and writing his books. “Baron had something of the grace of a seigneur, imperturbably relaxed and serene, blessed with a long life and robust health, broad education, family felicity, high academic position and substantial means,” wrote Gartner. “He did much with what he was given, and it is difficult to think of encountering such a historian again.”

The last volume of *A Social and Religious History of Jews*, titled “Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion (1200–1650): The Ottoman Empire, Persia, Ethiopia, India, and China,” appeared in 1983. Baron wanted to shoot for twenty volumes, but it is fitting that, by the time of his death in 1989, at age ninety-four, his magnum opus should have stopped at eighteen, which in Judaism is the numerical symbol of life.

Like all history, Baron himself has passed through the filter of time and revision. His greatest contemporary critic, the German-Israeli historian Yitzhak Baer (1888–1980), believed that the condition of Jewish exile was an ongoing tragedy that could hardly be overstated, and that the diaspora was by definition vulnerable, the embodiment of a tragic displacement that must be remedied (his short book on this subject, *Galut*, which means “exile” in Hebrew, was published in 1936). And scholars today have charged Baron with romanticizing the ghetto and overcorrecting for Jewish suffering.

As it turned out, the world has come closer to fulfilling Baron’s ideal of an Israel *and* a diaspora, two populations coexisting and cross-pollinating culturally and politically. And the IIJS consistently covers this global ground: lately, in addition to its ongoing October 7 panels, codirectors Carlebach and Kobrin have featured talks on such diverse topics as the possibilities of Hebrew literature set outside of Israel, a comparison of the Yiddish and Ladino languages, the political thought of Reform rabbi Leo Baeck (the leader of German Jewry during the Nazi era), the interplay of Greco-Roman and Hebrew culture, and the essays in the *Oxford Handbook of Jewish Music Studies*, covering Asia, Europe, Australia, the Americas, and the Arab world.

At the recent October 7 webinar, Kobrin, reminding the speakers that they were, after all, at a university, shifted the discussion to the question of how to talk about Israel in the classroom — a crucial point in an academic climate pervaded by the idea that Israel is the product of “settler colonialism,” a process in which new arrivals, or settlers, claim the land and displace the indigenous population.

“There is a new orthodoxy,” said Nadav Eyal, “and orthodoxies are very dangerous in academia.” According to Eyal, what’s happening in too many classrooms is not a carefully reasoned analysis of the colonialist critique of Israel, but rather “an indictment” of Israel, with history and the social sciences being marshaled to bolster it. The challenge for faculty, Eyal said, is to teach the “truth or truths” without placing oneself “into the service of a narrative.”

Avi Shilon agreed. “We shouldn’t be afraid of discussing this issue,” he said. “There are some ingredients to settler colonialism that you can see in the Zionist story, and obviously there are a lot of other ingredients that can refute the attempt to put this paradigm on the Zionist story. In order to refute it, we should discuss it, we should engage with it, because the theory itself is already part of the conflict.” Indeed, Shilon said, “if we want to do our job correctly, we should not take sides,” and he reiterated the need to “delve without fear into the most volatile issues.”

This sort of engagement requires Israeli academics to “catch up” to “the language of young progressive and moderate people,” said Jonathan Dekel-Chen. “We have to get over ourselves and speak to students where they are, not where we’d like them to be.”

The panelists concurred that it was too soon to fully understand the impacts of October 7. As Dekel-Chen observed, “History is usually written from a distance.” Commentary, however, is of the moment, the stuff of history’s first draft. As of this writing, Elisheva Carlebach and the staff at the IIJS are figuring out how to address another war, this time with Iran. Just as in 1950, Jewish history is unfolding in real time, and in startling ways.

“You need perspective in order to really be able to respond responsibly,” says Carlebach. “There’s one response that you can give in the moment. And then, as time goes by, things become clearer.” As it has for more than seventy-five years, the IIJS is keeping alive the flame of inquiry and ideas — both in the moment and long after.

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