

NEW JERSEY JEWISH NEWS – 6/24/04

Wise to the words

Bible scholar brings literary flair as new Jewish studies chair at Rutgers

by Marilyn Silverstein

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Sitting in his new office on the second floor of Rutgers University's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, Gary Rendsburg was sprinkling his conversation, so to speak, with salt.

"Jews salt bread on Shabbat; I think most Jews do it," said Rendsburg, the university's first Blanche and Irving Laurie Professor of Jewish History and newly appointed chair of the Department of Jewish Studies. "It has to do with the fact that in antiquity, sacrifices were salted.

"The tradition uses the term 'brit melach' — a covenant of salt," he said, referring to a passage in the book of Numbers and a pun on "brit mila," the covenant of circumcision. "Because salt was used as a preservative, it was a symbol of the eternity of the covenant. There's not a Friday night, as I salt a hallah, when my mind doesn't go back to the priests of antiquity, when my mind doesn't take me back to that passage in Numbers."

And there, in a pinch of salt, is a snapshot of Rendsburg — biblical scholar, student of ancient Semitic languages, delver into antiquity, traditional Jew.

Fresh from an 18-year stint at Cornell University, where he served as the Paul and Berthe Hendrix Memorial Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, the 50-year-old Rendsburg is taking over the reins of Rutgers' Department of Jewish Studies from Yael Zerubavel, who has held that position since the department was established in the summer of 2000. Zerubavel continues to serve as director of the Bildner Center in New Brunswick.

In his new role, Rendsburg will oversee a department that includes two other tenured professors, Zerubavel and Nancy Sinkoff; two assistant professors, who will be up for tenure in the spring; and an assortment of instructors and part-time lecturers. Last semester, 40 students majored in Jewish studies and 52 students minored, selecting from a schedule of about 15 interdisciplinary courses exploring the historical, social, cultural, religious, and political life of the Jewish people from ancient times to the present. Since Rutgers' program in Jewish studies started in 1998, some 250 students have been graduated with majors or minors in the field.

All of it is familiar territory to Rendsburg, who began blending his love of language and literature with his keen interest in Jewish studies while he was still an undergraduate at

the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He earned a BA in English and journalism from the university in 1975 and a PhD in Hebrew studies from New York University in 1980.

Bible as literature

A serious biblical scholar who is a master of ancient Semitic languages — Hebrew, Aramaic, Phoenician, Ugaritic, Akkadian, and hieroglyphic Egyptian — Rendsburg emerged from graduate school just as a revolution was beginning in the study of the Bible: a radical shift from a historical approach to a literary one.

“Once you learn how literature works, you can apply those rules to any corpus of literature, and that’s what I started doing as well,” Rendsburg said as he sat in his office, surrounded by packing boxes filled with books. “My greatest contribution since 1988 has been to work at the meeting ground of language and literature. I took the two loves I have and worked...at the intersection between the two.”

Specifically, Rendsburg studies the use of dialects in the language of the Bible to enhance the literary aspects of a story — for example, the use of Aramaic words and grammatical forms in the description of Jacob’s journey to Aram in the book of Genesis, a device that gives the reader/listener the feeling of being transported to Aram.

“The writer is assuming a certain knowledge of a few Aramaic phrases the educated reader would know,” Rendsburg said. “That’s what I mean by the interplay between language and literature and how this enhances the experience.

“It tells us how sophisticated literature was in ancient Israel,” he said. “It’s no surprise that we are the people of the book. The roots of this are in ancient Israel, and it’s something we’ve never lost.”

As a man of the book, Rendsburg has produced several volumes, including *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings*; *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, a college textbook coauthored with Cyrus Gordon; *Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew*, a study of literary colloquialisms in the text of the Hebrew Bible; and *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms*. His current research project involves the use of alliterative words and sounds in the poetry and prose of the Bible.

“The sounds of the text are very important,” Rendsburg said, stressing the importance of what he calls “the oral/aural effect.” “We Jews are one of the few people in the modern Western world who still retain the oral/aural process — the public reading of the Torah,” he observed. “The mitzva is to read it aloud and to listen to it.”

In a very real sense, coming to Rutgers is a homecoming for Rendsburg, who spent his formative years in Iselin. His parents, Julius and Irene Rendsburg, now reside in Edison. He has settled in Highland Park, where he has been exploring the bicycling trails and “shul-hopping” — looking for the right fit for his brand of nondenominational, traditional Judaism.

“I feel comfortable in an Orthodox or Conservative synagogue,” he said. “I think my study of Jewish history and especially of antiquity has made me identify more with the Jewish people, marveling at the continuity of the tradition. There isn’t another culture alive today that has that kind of continuity.”

Off to Australia

This summer, Rendsburg will seize what he called “the chance of a lifetime to track down dingoes and teach.” He will spend eight weeks teaching an advanced Hebrew seminar on the book of Hosea at the University of Sydney in Australia.

“When I come back, I’ll hit the ground running, hopefully,” he said. In the fall, he will teach a course on Jewish society and culture, and in the spring, a seminar on the way modern intellectual trends have affected the study of the Bible.

“The first year is just learning the ropes,” he said. “I don’t want to come in with a bulldozer. There’s not a lot of fixing that needs to be done. The place runs smoothly and is a success.”

Even so, Rendsburg said, he would like to see the department expand, adding several more full-time faculty members and possibly introducing courses in Sephardi studies, Jewish philosophy, and American-Jewish history. The fact that such a small department had as many as 40 students majoring in Jewish studies last semester is “phenomenal,” he said.

“It shows you there’s a success here and tremendous student interest,” he said. “We certainly have room to grow.”

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