

## Medievalist expands RU's Jewish studies offerings

Paola Tartakoff will open a window at Rutgers into medieval Jewish life.

Photo by Marilyn Silverstein

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A medieval specialist's arrival at Rutgers University this semester signaled the expansion of the Department of Jewish Studies in both breadth and depth, according to department chair Gary Rendsburg.

As the department's first specialist in medieval Jewish studies of any sort, Paola Tartakoff bridges the faculty's range between antiquity and modernity, he said.

"Her arrival is certainly the number one item we're excited about," said Rendsburg. "It immediately bridges for us a gap we all felt, and it brings us a very promising young scholar who is very well trained in the breadth of Jewish history."

Fresh from earning her doctorate at Columbia University, Tartakoff won a shared appointment in Jewish studies and history at Rutgers in New Brunswick, where she is serving this year as a postdoctoral fellow and teaching one course in Jewish culture and society. In July, she will begin her appointment as an assistant professor of Jewish studies and history.

Tartakoff's appointment brings to six the number of core faculty members in the Rutgers Jewish studies department, Rendsburg said.

"I think it's wonderful that the department is continuing to grow," said Tartakoff, 29, during a recent phone interview. "This was an important direction for the department to expand in, because the Middle Ages were a crucial time for the development of Jewish culture, Jewish intellectual life, and, really, for the formation of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewry as we know them today."

"I can only say that it's an excellent department," she added, "and I've been very impressed by my colleagues as scholars and as people."

A native of Geneva, Tartakoff grew up in Cleveland and Paris and earned her bachelor's degree in intellectual history at Harvard College. She lives in New Brunswick with her husband, Daniel Backenroth, an attorney who practices in Manhattan, and their six-month-old son, Isaac.

Over the years, Tartakoff has refined her fascination with medieval Jewish history into a focus on such subjects as Jewish conversion to Christianity, the Spanish Inquisition, and relations among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula.

"I'm designing two new courses for next year," she said. "One course will focus on the history of the Spanish Inquisition, and the second course will focus on the history of Christian-Jewish relations from the first century through the 21st century."

According to Tartakoff, "Many of the issues at the heart of Jewish life in the Middle Ages are still alive and well today." She pointed in particular to such issues as assimilation, persecution, intermarriage, conversion, and torture.

"I'm going to address the history of interactions between Jews and Christians as well as the development of popular attitudes and theological stances," she said. "We're going to look at both Jewish and Christian perspectives, and we will examine some horrible periods as well as some moments of positive collaboration."

In addition to designing her new courses, Tartakoff said, she is enjoying her teaching assignment and working on an article about the expulsion of the Jews of England in 1290. She is also tending to the task of turning her doctoral dissertation — a work that had her poring over handwritten parchments in dusty Spanish archives for eight months — into a book. It focuses on Jews who converted to Christianity in Spain prior to 1391.

Tartakoff also plans to write the curriculum for a junior-year seminar on Jewish life and literature during the Golden Age of Spain.

Such curricular versatility is keeping enrollment in Jewish studies courses at Rutgers at a healthy high, according to Rendsburg. The department, which was founded in 2000, currently has 603 students enrolled in courses, including 19 Jewish studies majors and 84 Jewish studies minors.

"Plans are under way to develop a graduate program in the fall of 2009. We're on the cusp of doing it," Rendsburg said. "The department continues to expand its curricular offerings, and we have plans to add additional faculty."