

Teaching

From Irvington to Idaho to Indonesia, Jewish studies branches out

By Ashanti M. Alvarez



Credit: Gary Rendsburg

The triple gate at Megiddo, dated to the 10th century. Megiddo is at the crossroads of several major routes and was an important site in ancient civilization and remains so today. This photo is one of several taken by Jewish Studies Chair Gary Rendsburg. He supplied his online course "The Bible and History" with numerous images collected from his travels to ancient sites.

People in South Korea, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Australia, Romania, England, Sweden, Nigeria, Malaysia, and South Africa are taking classes in Rutgers' Department of Jewish Studies.

They are learning about the history of the Bible and the Israeli political system. They are studying with department chair and world-renowned Biblical scholar Gary Rendsburg, Rutgers' faculty from across disciplines, and professors visiting from other universities.

And they are doing it from the comfort of their own homes, without having to register for class, pay tuition, or even provide their names.

"It was not my purpose to make it really complicated and deep," said Gene Hoffman, a benefactor from Essex County whose generosity helped launch [Jewish Studies Online](#). "I wanted to make it user-friendly with no fee."

The two courses at Jewish Studies Online – more are in development – have been taken by people [across the globe](#), in 13 countries and 37 states across America.



Gary Rendsburg created the first course for Jewish Studies Online, "The Bible and History." More than 250 people took the course in its first year from 13 different countries and 37 states.

"An entire group of students in Hong Kong took the course and, according to their feedback, enjoyed it," said Rendsburg, who prepared "The Bible and History" for the online studies program. Rendsburg transported the idea of online mini-courses from Cornell University, where he spent 18 years on the faculty. His experience there, and Hoffman's search for simple online education and easy access, gelled to create the online study program, launched in 2006. In its first year, more than 250 people viewed "The Bible and History."

Hoffman and his wife, Adele, are longtime friends with Allen and Joan Bildner, the eponymous founders of the [Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life](#).

Hoffman, who lives in Maplewood, New Jersey, is a devotee of lifelong learning – he estimates he has about 200 college credits accrued from seven different institutions and is considering finishing his master's degree at 79. He was dismayed when he encountered Jewish people who had very basic questions about their faith.

"My friends ask me a lot of questions, simple questions that Jewish people should know the answers to," said Hoffman, who owned a BMW and Chevrolet dealership in Bloomfield for 51 years before retiring in 2004. "Questions like: 'What is Talmud? What's so great about Judaism? Why do I have to go to temple all the time? Can I be a good Jew without believing in God?'"

"So many people don't know the first thing about anything. They know they go to synagogue; do they know what it means to be a Jew?"

Rutgers' Department of Jewish Studies, with its experts in rabbinical literature, ancient Israel, Hebrew and Yiddish languages, Israeli politics, and Jewish history, culture, and literature, seemed the perfect group to answer those fundamental questions.

But the courses aren't just for Jewish people. They are for lifelong learning enthusiasts like Hoffman, current Jewish studies students at Rutgers and other universities, prospective Rutgers students who want a taste of what the faculty has to offer, and anyone with an interest in Jewish, religious, historical, or cultural studies.

The professors teach courses that run about an hour and use [Sakai](#), an educational software platform popular at Rutgers. They write and record lectures at Rutgers' [iTV Studio](#) (see [FOCUS story on iTV](#)). Work study students and Bildner center staff help collect images and graphics to support the course material. Faculty also participate in discussion boards, provide links to relevant websites, and make documents and PowerPoint presentations available for download.

The courses are designed to be easily accessible; registration literally takes only a minute.

“What makes these unique and interesting is that they are not for credit, and they are a great vehicle for reaching out to the larger community and giving them a taste of what we do here at Jewish studies,” said Bildner Center Associate Director Karen Small.

Associate Professor Azzan Yadin became interested in online study after witnessing Rendsburg's experience.

“What was most intriguing about it was that Gary would come in occasionally and say, ‘Hey, my course was just reviewed by someone in Japan.’ He had people take the course from an incredibly wide geographic range,” said Yadin, who is finishing up an online course on rabbinic literature.

That such a narrow discipline can reach a broad audience also is attractive. “Rabbinics is a very small and often marginal part of the broader culture. That makes it all the more enticing. It might reach people who won't really have other avenues to come in contact with these texts,” Yadin said.

Yadin estimated that preparing the course took about a week's worth of work. Rendsburg said that in between regular teaching, research, outreach activities, and life's other demands, a faculty member could prepare a class over the course of a semester.

Both men recommend the experience to faculty in other departments at Rutgers.

“I gained a real sense of accomplishment in conceiving and constructing the course,” Rendsburg said, “and an even greater thrill knowing that people around the country and across the globe are learning about ancient Israel and the Bible from my online course.

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