



Rutgers talks explore Israel-Diaspora ties

Visiting profs say relationship evolving, bonds are deepening



Meir Buzaglo, Rutgers' Schusterman Visiting Professor in Israel Studies and philosophy professor at the Hebrew University, spoke May 18 about the ancient piyut musical tradition that has taken hold in Israel.

by [Debra Rubin](#)
NJJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

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Sixty years after its birth, modern Israel is discovering new ways to connect with Jews in the Diaspora and with its ancient cultural roots.

In a May 18 program at [Rutgers University](#) in New Brunswick, two visiting Israeli professors presented an overview of the metamorphosis of those relationships — from the

early days of the state when the Holocaust and Jewish life outside Israel were downplayed to the current acceptance of Jewish history and diversity.

The program was sponsored by Rutgers' [Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life](#). It featured Roni Stauber, the Aresty Visiting Scholar at Rutgers and a history professor at [Tel Aviv University](#), and Meir Buzaglo, Rutgers' Schusterman Visiting Professor in Israel Studies and a philosophy professor at the [Hebrew University of Jerusalem](#).

Stauber, also director of TAU's [Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Racism and Anti-Semitism](#), said David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, believed Israelis had little in common with Diaspora Jews, a view prevalent among early Israelis that ignored "2,000 years of Jewish civilization and culture."

In the years after the establishment of the state, Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders resisted evoking memories of the Holocaust and other periods of persecution, preferring to focus on the country's resurrection of the Jewish people "from destruction to rebirth."

Ben-Gurion looked to the Diaspora only as a source of additional Israelis. He felt, said Stauber, that "only aliya, immigration from the West — particularly the United States — was imperative for the continuation of the Jewish people and strength of the State of Israel."

Ambivalence about Jewish life in the Diaspora continued to cause tension with the international Jewish community, especially in America, said Stauber.



Roni Stauber, the Aresty Visiting Scholar at Rutgers and history professor at Tel Aviv University, spoke May 18 about Israel's evolution over 60 years during

a program sponsored by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life. Photos by Debra Rubin

However, over the decades, Israeli attitudes toward the Diaspora have changed, and a “normalization” of relations with the international Jewish community has been achieved.

With this evolution, Buzaglo said Israelis have turned inward, and with their society’s having evolved into a melting pot of nationalities and religious practices, they have shifted their focus to discovering and creating a sense of shared Jewish traditions and values. One way this is happening is through music; for example, many Israelis have rediscovered the ancient liturgical music of *piyut*.

The *piyutim*, he said, are poetic pieces, dating back to the second century, that provide a connection to the Talmud, Midrash, and the Bible and express the Jewish people’s “yearning for Israel.” They continue to be recited at synagogue services around the world.

Since Israel’s founding, however, *piyutim* have largely been forgotten, further evidence of the gap between ancient practices and modern Israel’s “new Jews,” who sought to distance themselves from the image of the Jew in the historic Diaspora, according to Buzaglo.

It is said that even Moses recited *piyutim*. “We are the only religion whose prophets sang,” said Buzaglo. “I cannot imagine Mohammed singing or, for that matter, Jesus. But we have a connection to singing and music.”

Buzaglo help found [Kehilot Sharot](#), a singing community whose Web site receives about 100,000 hits a month and whose festivals have drawn thousands of interested participants.

As Israelis have explored this link to their roots, “the top Israeli singers are now studying *piyutim*,” he said.

In the last 15 years the *piyut* movement has picked up steam. Because religious Jews were the most familiar with the music, secular Jews have turned to them for instruction, further creating a bond of understanding between the two communities. Moreover, some religious rabbis who once balked at teaching women now voice no such objections.

“I’m optimistic we are finding deep changes in the haredi community as a result of the *piyut* revival,” said Buzaglo. “All Israelis have a great respect for tradition. We can build on what we all share.”

After showing a film of a music festival, Buzaglo pointed out that the *piyut* melodies and instruments often have a distinctly Arabic sound, owing to the roots of many Mizrahi Jews in Israel.

He said he was optimistic that this shared cultural heritage could also serve as “a bridge between Jews and Arabs.”

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