

On-line Jewish courses attract global audience

Hundreds taking part in Rutgers U. foray into remote learning

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The Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life

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ISRAELI POLITICAL SYSTEM

This online course was developed by Yaacov Yadgar while serving as the Schusterman Visiting Scholar in Israel Studies at the Bildner Center. The course offers an introductory overview of the Israeli political system. Focused mostly on the institutional and structural traits of this political system, the course also includes a preliminary analysis of historical and social issues.

The course is aimed at providing its audience with the basic knowledge and understanding of the Israeli political system, as well as highlighting some of the major dilemmas with which it has had to cope.

Among the main issues are: Israel's identity as a state; the executive branches of the Israeli government; the electoral system; and the relationship between the Israeli society and political system.

JEWISH STUDIES ONLINE

Introduction
Bible & History
Gary A. Rendsburg
Israeli Politics
Yaacov Yadgar

Register
FAQ

Defections: 3
Opposition: 58
Coalition: 59

The Bible and History

Almost three thousand years ago, a small group of ancient Israelites wrote the major narrative that spans the biblical books of Genesis through Kings, creating what may be called the world's first history. The narrative focuses on the people of Israel, but because the history of Israel constantly intersected with the surrounding countries, the Bible gives us a veritable tour of the ancient Near East. Great powers such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia, and lesser powers such as the Phoenicians and the Philistines, all make an appearance in the Bible's pages. In this online course, Professor Gary Rendsburg, the Blanche and Irving Laurie Professor of Jewish History at Rutgers University, will present both the evidence from the Bible and the wealth of archaeological data, with an eye to evaluating these two sources and to determining the manner in which they inform each other.

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To register or learn more about any Jewish studies on-line course, go to jewishstudies.rutgers.edu and click on on-line study.

by [Debra Rubin](#)

NJJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

August 7, 2008

People in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are now learning about the Israeli political system and other Jewish subjects while sitting in front of their computers.

They and others around the globe have registered to take courses on-line from Rutgers University's Department of Jewish Studies.

In the two years since the non-credit courses went on-line, they have attracted students from Europe, Africa, South America, the Middle East, and southeast Asia.

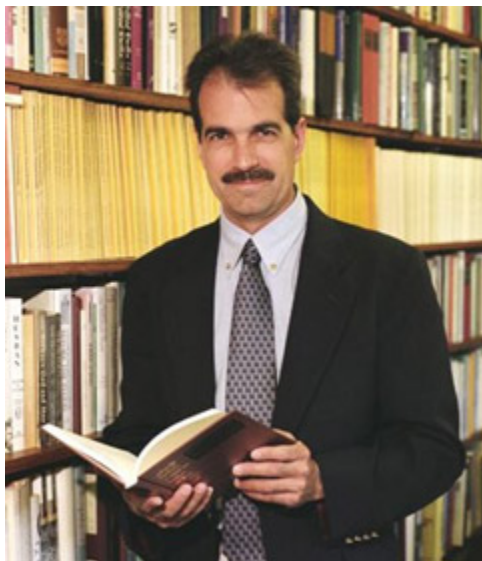
“We have about 500 people,” said Arlene Goldstein, administrator at Rutgers’ Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, located on the New Brunswick campus, and

academic coordinator for the Jewish studies department. “People find it by searching or learn of it by word of mouth.”

Although students must register on-line, the free courses cannot be taken for credit.

Two courses are now offered — the Bible and History, taught by Dr. Gary Rendsburg, chair of the Jewish studies department and the Blanche and Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History, and the Israeli Political System, taught by Dr. Yaacov Yadgar, senior lecturer in the Department of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and a visiting professor last year at Rutgers.

Within the next several weeks, said Rendsburg, a third course will be added, Introduction to Rabbinic Literature, taught by Dr. Azzan Yadin, associate professor of Jewish studies.



Dr. Gary Rendsburg, chair of Rutgers Jewish studies department, teaches a free on-line course, the Bible and History.

Photo courtesy of Rutgers University

“These are mini-courses; they not are not like regular courses,” said Rendsburg. “There are no papers, no exams. Here they are heavily audio-visual.”

Rendsburg’s course features slides and videos; Yadin’s offers slides and an audio stream.

“You take them at your leisure. You can watch a video in five or 10 minutes,” he said. “The whole thing could take two hours. My course has 13 separate videos.”

Rendsburg said he believes the courses have attracted such a worldwide audience because of their broad-based appeal.

“Certainly in the case of my course, the Bible is a topic of interest to Christians as well as to others,” he said. “Anyone interested in Middle Eastern studies or international affairs will be logging onto the Israeli politics course. Also, we have reason to believe professors at other universities are using our on-line courses for what used to be known as an optional reading assignment.”

Prior to coming to Rutgers in 2004, Rendsburg was a professor at Cornell University , which had a “cybertower” for a variety of courses.

“I was one of the guinea pigs, the second or third to have a course up and running at Cornell,” he said. “When I came to Rutgers, knowing that Bildner’s mission includes outreach to the general community, I said, ‘Okay let’s take the next step into the 21st century.’”

Working with Yael Zerubavel and Karen Small, the director and associate director, respectively, of the Bildner Center, a template was developed. Rendsburg’s course went on-line in 2006, Yadgar’s in 2007.

“We hope to add one or two courses a year,” said Rendsburg. “We hope it will catch on and whoever wants to — the English, biology departments — will also go on-line.”

Small agreed that the courses mesh with the center’s goals. “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.”

The on-line initiative was made possible by an “extremely generous” donation from Gene and Adele Hoffman of Maplewood, said Rendsburg (see below).

Learning devotee funds Rutgers cyber-studies



A donation from Gene and Adele Hoffman has enabled Rutgers Jewish studies department to put courses on-line.

GENE HOFFMAN said it was his lifelong devotion to learning that inspired him to offer others around the world the chance to explore Jewish subjects at no cost and from the comfort of their own homes.

The Maplewood resident and his wife, Adele, provided an “extremely generous” donation that allowed Rutgers University’s Department of Jewish Studies to place two courses on-line.

Gene Hoffman, who estimates he’s got five years of college and about 200 credits from several different institutions of higher learning under his belt, earned his bachelor’s degree in religious studies in 1995 from Seton Hall University at age 66. He is currently taking on-line courses from Gratz College in Elkins Park, Pa., toward his master’s degree in Jewish studies.

Because of his background, Hoffman said, friends and others query him all the time about subjects “Jewish people should know the answers to,” from Talmud to “why I have to go to temple all the time.”

“So many people don’t know the first thing about anything. They know they go to synagogue, but do they know what it means to be a Jew?”

“I’m interested in getting people to learn about Judaism,” he said. “I like the idea of an on-line program. You don’t have to pay for it and it’s not necessarily for credit, but just to learn.... Ultimately I want to make [Rutgers’ program] the finest Jewish on-line program anywhere.”

The owner of a BMW and Chevrolet dealership in Bloomfield for 51 years before retiring in 2004, the 79-year-old Hoffman has long had an interest in Jewish educational causes.

The couple has funded for many years the Gene and Adele Hoffman Award for Excellence in Jewish Education through the Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life of MetroWest, which honoring outstanding area Jewish educators.

Hoffman has also been an active member of the American Jewish Committee and involved in Jewish communal life for many years.

Hoffman said he has already been in discussion with Rutgers about expanding the on-line offerings to perhaps 10 courses — “We’ve discussed doing everything from Genesis to the Holocaust,” he said — and is excited about its prospects for increasing knowledge among Jews and others.

“Many people out of curiosity will take [the courses] and then begin to delve deeper into the subject matter, start learning, and then recommend it to their friends,” said Hoffman.

“I hope it brings a lot of recognition to Rutgers and the Bildner center because it’s a fantastic program.”

— DEBRA RUBIN

<http://www.njjewishnews.com/njcn.com/081408/njOnlineJewishCourses.html>