‘Visionary intellect’ to retire from Rutgers’ Bildner Center

Yael Zerubavel to focus on academic research in Israel’s culture, history

By DEBRA RUBIN
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Twenty-two years ago, when Dr. Yael Zerubavel was recruited to join the staff of Rutgers University, she was given ambitious goals: get the newly established Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life up and running, turn the university’s Jewish studies offerings into a department, and continue her own academic research.

Now, as Zerubavel prepares to retire to in order to pursue that academic research full-time, she leaves behind an impressive legacy. Reflective of her record of achievement, the Department of Jewish Studies offers a master’s degree program, provides free non-credit on-line courses in Jewish studies, and supports students studying abroad.

The Bildner Center has garnered broad acclaim for its Holocaust remembrance and study initiatives, including the Herbert and Leonard Littman Families Holocaust Resource Center, a summer Master Teacher Institute in Holocaust Education that draws educators from throughout the state, and a collaboration with Steven Spielberg’s University of Southern California Shoah Foundation.

The center also fosters international scholarly exchanges and provides the campus and general communities with a full roster of free public lectures that regularly attract hundreds, Jewish communal initiatives, and cultural events, including the Rutgers Jewish Film Festival.

Zerubavel has been “a visionary intellect and truly the perfect partner of my parents to build the Bildner Center,” said Rob Bildner of Montclair, whose late mother and father cofounded the center, which Zerubavel serves as director. “Yael is an exceptional talent who mirrored my parents’ determination to also bring outreach to the community. She challenged and bulldozed to get it done,” Bildner told NJJN. Her attributes, he added, have turned the center “into an institution of first-rate academic excellence.”

On April 29 and 30, events were held in New Brunswick to celebrate Zerubavel’s scholarship and leadership. On the 29th at Douglass College Center, a cocktail reception was held in her honor for supporters and university leaders. It was followed by “Out of the Shtetl: Anarchists, Zionists, and Other Dreamers Encounter the World,” this year’s Raoul Wallenberg Annual Program.

The featured speaker, Omer Bartov, the John P. Birkeland Distinguished Professor of European History at Brown University, talked about the long association he has had with Zerubavel. The relationship began when the two, both Israeli natives, were students together at Tel Aviv University. They remained friends whose academic paths intersected once again years later when Bartov, then a faculty member at Rutgers, was on the search committee that hired Zerubavel away from the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.

On April 30, a day-long symposium for faculty and graduate students featured international scholars in Jewish and Israeli history and studies.

Zerubavel will step down from her position June 30; Nancy Sinkoff, director of the university’s Center for European Studies and associate professor of Jewish studies and history — and Zerubavel’s first hire at Rutgers — will take over July 1. Zerubavel will stay on until Dec. 31 to ease the transition.
“I’m really leaving to have more time to pursue my scholarship and writing,” Zerubavel told NJJN in a phone interview. “I’ve devoted quite a few years to institution building and I’m very happy with what I’ve achieved, but some of it came at the expense of my research.”

That research includes deep dives into Israel’s culture and history, particularly as they relate to the desert, the subject of her forthcoming book, “Desert in the Promised Land” (Stanford University Press). That work will delve into the desert’s cultures and the way Israeli society and its different populations relate to the arid region.

“The desert is associated with the Exodus from Egypt,” said Zerubavel. “Israel is associated with making the desert bloom. I look at how environmentalists look at the desert and how desert tourism is growing in Israel.”

Her overall research focuses on numerous areas, including history and memory, nationalism and national myths, tradition and change, and Israeli and Jewish immigrant literature.

Zerubavel’s first book, the award-winning “Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition” (University of Chicago Press, 1995), and her numerous articles focus on the cultural construction of Israeli national myths and the politics of commemoration. She also serves on the editorial boards of the Israel Studies journal, the Israel Studies Review, and the Journal of Israeli History.

“My work in the field of Israeli collective memory is very pioneering and has really shaped the field,” said Zerubavel.

A second-generation sabra, Zerubavel was born in Jerusalem in a house built by her grandparents. Her paternal grandfather, Avraham Granot, was a signatory to Israel’s declaration of independence, a founder of the Progressive Party, served in the first Knesset, and in 1940 was appointed director-general of the Jewish National Fund and in 1960 was elected chair of its board of directors.

Her maternal grandfather, Yaacov Patt, was a commander in the Haganah, the prestate militia, and served in its predecessor self-defense organization, Hashomer.

Both men have streets and neighborhoods named after them in Israel.

Zerubavel came to the United States to earn her master’s and doctoral degrees at the University of Pennsylvania and was invited to join its faculty.

Her retirement, said Zerubavel — who lives in East Brunswick with her husband, Eviatar, a sociology professor at Rutgers — will also allow her to lecture throughout the country and abroad. She does plan to continue working with university doctoral students at Rutgers and be involved with such Bildner activities as the Rutgers Jewish Film Festival.

“One thing that I am very proud of at both the Bildner Center and the Jewish studies department,” said Zerubavel, “is that I established and developed such a high standard of academic excellence and integrity.

“I recruited four of the six Jewish studies faculty,” she said, adding that Rutgers has developed “an international reputation” in the field. “People love to come from abroad to be affiliated with the center. We’ve established a network of international scholars, some of whom were visiting professors here. It’s really been an exciting meeting place for academic research.”

Many of those scholars have spoken at the free public programs offered throughout the school year and many attended the recent programs honoring Zerubavel.

James Masschaele, executive vice dean of the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, spoke at the April 29 program. He lauded Zerubavel’s contributions to the university, including her efforts to establish collaborations with other departments. He cited “world-class” conferences and programming that have drawn thousands of participants, connecting students and community members to Jewish culture and burnishing Rutgers’ academic standing internationally.
“Yael is almost synonymous with Bildner, and it’s hard to imagine Rutgers without Bildner,” said Masschaele. “Yael,” he said to her, “you have a great career to celebrate.”

Rutgers Jewish studies professor Jeffrey Shandler, who was hired by Zerubavel 18 years ago, expressed his and the department’s gratitude for her scholarship and support. “It won’t be the same around here without you,” he said.

Zerubavel told NJJN, “The highlight of my career at Rutgers has been watching the diversity of programs that have been engaged in at the Bildner Center. It’s been really rewarding watching the way people respond to the Master Teacher Institute or the film festival.”

She also credited the success of the department to “teamwork” and continuity of staff. Bildner associate director Karen Small and senior administrator and business manager Arlene Goldstein have been with her almost from the beginning.

Giving assurances that she will still be engaged with the center and the department, Zerubavel said, “I’ll always be with Rutgers in spirit.”