



**Department of Jewish Thought**  
**Faculty of Humanities**  
**Hebrew University, Jerusalem**

**Report of the External Evaluation Team**  
**for**  
**The Council for Higher Education**

August 2010

The following document is the Evaluation Committee's report on the Department of Jewish Thought at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem to the Quality Assessment Unit of the Council for Higher Education (CHE).

### **General Background**

In response to the invitation of the Minister of Education and the Council of Higher Education a Committee of four members was created in early 2009 to review the undergraduate and graduate programs in Jewish Thought in four Israeli universities, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, and Bar Ilan University. The Committee is comprised of: Professor David Novak, University of Toronto; Professor Alfred Ivry, New York University (Emeritus); Professor Moshe Idel, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; and Professor Steven T. Katz, Boston University. Professor Katz also serves as the Chair of the Committee. Ms. Michal Kabatznik coordinated the committee on behalf of the CHE.

The Committee's letter of appointment is attached as **Appendix 1**.

The first round of meetings was held in May, 2009. It involved discussions in Jerusalem and 2 day on-site visits to Ben Gurion University and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The second round of meetings was held in December, 2009. It involved discussions in Tel Aviv and 2 day on-site visits to Bar Ilan University and Tel Aviv University.

In the present report the Visiting Committee will provide its views on, and recommendations concerning The Hebrew University.

The schedule of the visit, including the list of participants representing the institution, is attached as **Appendix 2**.

## Committee Procedures

The Committee members received the self-evaluation reports in January, 2009, and discussed them via email.

The Committee held its first meeting on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009, during which it discussed fundamental issues concerning higher education in Israel and the quality assessment activity, as well as General Philosophy study programs.

In May, 2009 December, 2009, the Committee members visited the institutions offering Jewish Philosophy and Jewish Thought study programs. During the visits, the Committee met various stakeholders at the institutions, including management, faculty, staff, and students.

The committee conducted its interviews of the Hebrew University Department of Jewish Thought on Sunday and Monday, May 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, 2009. At Hebrew University the Committee's first meeting was with the senior administration of the university and the chair of the Department of Jewish Thought. The Provost (and others) explained their views on the present situation in the department and expressed support for, and appreciation of, the Department of Jewish Thought. In subsequent meetings the Visiting Committee met with the Dean of the Faculty and with all the permanent members of the faculty, the non-tenured members of the faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students of the Department of Jewish Thought.

The committee was highly satisfied with the level of forthrightness, cooperation, and seriousness of those who participated in these meetings. No question went unanswered or was evaded. The committee was also extremely impressed by the clarity and sophistication, frankness and detail of the Department's Self-Evaluation Report.

The Committee wishes to thank the management of the institutions and the Jewish Philosophy departments for their self-evaluation reports and for their hospitality towards the Committee during its visits.

## Evaluation of the Jewish Thought Department at Hebrew University

*\* This Report relates to the situation current at the time of the visit to the institution, and does not take account of any changes that may have occurred subsequently. The Report records the conclusions reached by the Evaluation Committee based on the documentation provided by the institution, information gained through interviews, discussion and observation as well as other information available to the Committee.*

### Mission and Goals

- The Department of Jewish Thought has a distinguished history and continues to produce new generations of qualified young scholars, as well as high quality research by its faculty. Beyond this there appears to be some uncertainty about how these aims should continue to be achieved as the Department goes forward, as well as about various ideological aspects of its mission. There appears to be a significant division of opinion amongst the faculty as to the exact direction and ideology that the department should adopt as its own. This division turns mainly on the question of whether the department has a unique role in contributing to a distinctive Hebrew/Jewish nationalist culture in Israel or, alternatively, whether its goal is akin to those of other programs that have a more narrow and traditional academic focus.
- In addition, there is concern in the department over the university administration's desire to have Jewish Studies reach a greater number of students through a variety of curricular changes. While the faculty endorses the idea of increasing its

enrollment it is worried that this result might be achieved at the expense of teaching more specialized courses, thereby weakening the program. There are also members of the faculty who believe that presenting Jewish Thought in a more comparative manner as has been suggested in various quarters might weaken the significance of the Jewish dimension of the courses being offered.

These various divisions and alternative points of view find manifest expression in the organization of the department and its program. This fact will be seen to be present as we go through the report. For these reasons the committee feels that the department, lacking a unified and agreed mission, does not achieve, for all its real strengths, its goals and objectives with complete satisfaction.

#### Content, Structure and Scope

The department has many lacunae both in its course offerings and in its faculty. The members of the department are acutely aware of this and are anxious to fill these gaps with new appointments. With regard to this essential issue, there must be reasoned cooperation between the department and the central administration, given that the central administration alone can make the necessary resources available. In discussing this matter with both the faculty and the senior administrators it also became evident that there were additional concerns that the new reforms being proposed relative to the teaching of the Humanities at the Hebrew University will only compound these problems and will lead to the deferment of the appointments that are so critical to the successful enhancement of the faculty.

The present content, structure and scope of the program is also in flux – and its future direction uncertain – due to the efforts of the central administration to implement the far reaching curricular reforms proposed by the Gager Report of 2006. In the course of responding to the recommendations of the Gager report the department has found itself in an uncertain position. It seems clear to the Committee that there has been insufficient internal dialogue in the department over the recommendations made by the report. The department, especially its emeriti and a number of senior faculty, has reached a decidedly negative view of the implications of the report. A new round of clear, focused and informed discussions over the implications of the Gager Report should be undertaken within the department and between the department and the University Administration. This must, above all else, involve a serious conversation between ALL the senior and junior faculty of the department, in advance of their meetings with the Rector and the Dean. The Committee believes that it is imperative that ALL members of the department make themselves familiar with the details of the Gager report and the University's response thereto, and be actively involved in the present conversation over its implications. It is our understanding that such a round of conversations and meetings is being planned by both the Rector and the Dean.

The Committee takes it that the Gager Report and the University's response thereto, is a *fait accompli* in light of an overwhelming vote of the faculty. Given this reality, the focus of the future discussion should be on how to work with, and affect changes in, the new structures that are being put into place. Lastly, the Committee believes that the department, under difficult circumstances, is seriously attempting to keep up with the

professional challenges that it is facing. In those areas where it has sufficient personnel it is able, in the view of the committee, to meet its obligations very satisfactorily, however, there are large, fundamental areas of the discipline where the absence of appropriate faculty entail weaknesses that are consequential.

### Teaching and Learning Outcomes

Due to budgetary constraints teaching is largely done through lectures. Most teachers do not have the required time to meet with students individually due to their course load. Nevertheless, the quality of teaching appears to be generally high. The students we spoke to were enthusiastic about their instructors. They felt that on the whole they were well informed and concerned with their students, and a few of the faculty were described as often being inspiring and meeting the highest expectations that the students brought with them into the classroom. However, despite this praise, the students did note a number of areas of concern which the Committee discerned as well through reading the department's self-evaluation report.

The Committee would call attention to a number of significant pedagogical concerns.

- Most courses lack directed readings.
- There are no TAs to work more directly with students.
- Syllabi are uneven. Some show little pedagogical concern.
- Course requirements are uneven.
- There are, as a rule, no course prerequisites

- The department program reveals the lack of a clear, coherent, and structured curriculum
- A repeated complaint by students was their dissatisfaction with the lack of text oriented courses
- Many students felt they were not gaining the skills required to handle original material
- Students expressed disappointment at the lack of comments and feedback on their written work. The Committee considers this a matter of considerable significance

#### MA & PhD Students

- The graduate students expressed serious concern that there was a shortage of courses on and training in methodology. Given contemporary scholarly interests this is a significant lacunae in the department's graduate program and puts the students it trains at a serious competitive disadvantage
- There appears to be, based on the comments of the graduate students that the Committee met with, a lack of instruction in research techniques in their field
- M.A. students expressed concern that they did not have the opportunity to be TAs and could not begin to learn how to teach. The members of the Visiting Committee agree with the concerns of the students on this matter. It is important for the training of future university teachers that they begin to learn to teach as early in their graduate careers as possible.

As for methods of measuring learning outcomes, no data was presented. It is not clear if the department has any uniform criteria or procedures.

### B.A. Students

The data provided to the Committee by the department indicated that the level of the students was generally high and that the students possessed the skills required for admission to the various programs that were offered. When interviewed, the undergraduate students were vocal in their views of the department. Though appreciative of the faculty, they were disappointed with the limited variety of courses and the low level of academic demands made in the classes. In consequence, they felt the undergraduate degree in Jewish Thought to be devalued relative to other departments. These comments are consistent with the department's own self-evaluation report to the committee. The committee was informed that that the BA students perceive major weaknesses, and the MA students "generally feel insufficiently prepared by their BA studies."

### Student Drop-Out Rate

- As regards the question of drop-out rates among undergraduates pursuing a degree in Jewish Thought, one learns that in 2004 sixty-one students began their BA degree in this academic track and in 2006 only twenty-eight students graduated. This represents a serious problem with student erosion. The department feels that it, "does not appear to differ from others in terms of the estimated dropout rate (25-30%)." This conclusion, however, is not correct.

While the overall dropout rate in courses of study at the Hebrew University is 25-30% the dropout rate in Jewish Thought is over 50%. Therefore, there is evidence of considerable student dissatisfaction. We are unable to make any comment regarding alumni activity since we did not meet graduates of the program.

- The Committee believes that, given this situation, more personal and academic attention in the form of undergraduate seminars, more skillfully prepared individual course offerings, and a more integrated and coherent overall curriculum in Jewish Thought is required. And now!

#### Faculty

The Committee was impressed by the academic excellence of the individual faculty members. The scholarship produced by the faculty is of a high order and the faculty have the respect of their students as well as of the international scholarly community. The Committee also has no doubts that the present administration is well aware of the significant role that the Department of Jewish Thought has played and continues to play at the Hebrew University. The committee is confident that the Rector and the Dean are fully aware of the special role and prominence of the Department of Jewish Thought and truly mean what they say about supporting the program. Therefore the members of the Visiting Committee take it as a given that everyone concerned in planning the future of the department wishes to protect and encourage its success.

## **Recommendations**

In this context and against this background there are a number of significant issues that need to be addressed.

- The size of the faculty has been shrinking over the past decade. This is a matter of grave concern to the Visiting Committee as well as to the department. In this case quantity definitely affects quality.
- The Visiting Committee agrees with the faculty's own assessment that given the present size of the faculty the department is unable to meet its teaching mandate.
- The Visiting Committee and the department recognize that there are major, well established areas of study that fall within the domain of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah that are not being taught.
  - (a) For the medieval period there is a major gap in the teaching of *Zohar* and related materials.
  - (b) There will be a major gap in the teaching of Maimonides, and the entire medieval Jewish philosophical period from Maimonides to Crescas when the specialist in the area retires next year.
  - (c) The Visiting Committee also notes that no adequate replacement has been made for teaching in the area of medieval, post-Maimonidean thought.
  - (d) There is no teaching in the essential area of Lurianic Kabbalah.
  - (e) The area defined as Modern Jewish Thought manifests very serious problems from a pedagogical point of view. For the historical period covering the last 250 years, from the *Haskalah* to today, the offerings are very sparse. There is no

faculty member who specializes, for example, in the teaching of Moses Mendelssohn and the early modern period.

(f) Again, there is no real teaching in the highly significant 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> German philosophical tradition that runs from Hermann Cohen to Rosenzweig and Buber and their many disciples.

(g) There is no teaching on Jewish Thought as this area has developed in the United States or Europe. For example, the philosophies of Mordechai Kaplan and Emanuel Levinas are absent from the curriculum. The absence of Levinas, perhaps the most influential contemporary philosopher, is particularly notable..

(h) The large body of literature dealing with Jewish Thought after the Holocaust is not represented in the faculty.

The Visiting Committee considers that the lacunae here indicated represent major gaps in the department's course offerings that need to be corrected. Even with regard to modern currents in Jewish and Israeli thought there is an odd imbalance. For example, while rabbinic thought is well represented, there seems to be no teaching of important figures such as Achad Ha Am, Borochoy, A.D. Gordon, or Yeshayahu Leibowitz.

- We recommend that the faculty in the Department of Jewish Thought consider closer integration with the programs in Talmudic and Biblical Studies. The significance of these areas of scholarship is self evident, and in the present context are relevant because they provide attractive possibilities for creating new and dynamic courses in the department. In addition, the Visiting Committee would

advocate that more attention be devoted to the issue of *parshanut* over the centuries.

- The Visiting Committee would again emphasize that these recommendations are being made in order to strengthen the department, not to dilute it. In particular – we are NOT making these recommendations in order to encourage the central university administration to further shrink the existing number of faculty lines and course offerings. We are concerned to support, and if possible increase, the number of faculty members. This is a program with an especially distinguished tradition that deserves to be strengthened and reinforced.

### Departmental Structure

There appears to be no clear guiding vision, no coherent organizing principle, created through dialogue within the department, that sets out what the department should look like regarding teaching, the balance of resources within and between different areas of study, the exact areas to be covered, and the overall mandate governing the department's activities, research and teaching.

### Departmental Hiring

This is very questionable. Though the quest for excellence is desirable it should not be allowed to trump all else. Nor is it the only relevant value when one is trying to create a coherent faculty and program. This recognition is especially relevant when

making faculty appointments. The role and place of a particular appointment needs to be weighed not only in terms of the individual excellence of a given candidate within the pool of candidates but also in terms of the contribution that can be made by an individual to the overall functioning and teaching of the department.

The Visiting Committee would argue that a department is more than a collection of individuals, and a curriculum is more than a list of individual courses. There needs to be a common purpose and educational idea tying a department together. These elements were only modestly in evidence in our discussion with the department faculty in regard to the issue of appointments. In sum, the hiring practices of the department need serious review and revision.

**A Very Important Issue:** -- the Committee believes that the department should be assured by the central university administration that it will receive replacements at a ratio of 1:1 for retirements. A commitment of this sort given to the department by the central administration would go a long way towards solving many issues that are presently in play in the department.

#### Faculty

- The Visiting Committee found that the faculty at all levels does important and distinguished research.
- Students felt that the accessibility of the faculty needed to be improved.

- The Visiting Committee has a strong sense that the faculty is broadly dissatisfied with the current state of the department program. Many of the faculty are unhappy with the implications, as they understand them, of the Gager Report and the University's response thereto. The junior faculty is worried about the number of positions that will be available as the department goes forward; the senior faculty is worried about the size, strength and future of the department as such. The Visiting Committee believes that it is crucial for the administration to carry on an open and frank dialogue with the department on these issues. The present situation, which has created much anxiety and concern for everyone involved, is unhealthy for those involved and needs to be addressed directly by both the department and the administration.

### Infrastructure

The department is blessed with a national library and a world class research collection within easy access.

### Research

The Visiting Committee unanimously agrees that both the quality and quantity of the research done by the faculty members of the Department of Jewish Thought is very high and internationally recognized. The work of each and every one of the senior faculty members is known to all of us and appreciated for its quality.

However, the Visiting Committee feels that the research agenda of the department, as presently extant, has certain negative consequences for the study of specific areas of Jewish philosophy, especially in the area of Modern Jewish Thought. The department is also seriously undermined by the lack of faculty in two crucial areas – kabbalah (including Zohar and Lurianic kabbalah), and *chasidut*.

### **CONCLUSION**

The tradition of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University is a very distinguished one and there continue to be both faculty and students of distinction in the Department of Jewish Thought. Important new scholarship continues to be produced by the faculty of the department and the many students we met with seemed accomplished and possessed of real promise. The Committee, however, would like to note in conclusion its concern with six things:

(1) There seems to be a serious problem with collegial relations within the department. This has no doubt been exacerbated by the contentious debate over the Gager Report and its profound implications for Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University. While the Visiting Committee does not challenge the recommendations of the Gager Report – though it does have reservations about how the Report has been reviewed and discussed in the Department of Jewish Thought – it would strongly recommend a new, collegial, discussion within the department over its recommendations and implications.

(2) There is no doubt that the department cannot maintain its traditional visibility and distinction without additional senior faculty appointments. One simply cannot operate a major, world-class, Jewish Thought department without, for example, proper teaching and scholarship in Modern Jewish Thought (especially relative to the Germanic tradition from Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig and Buber), and in the area of medieval kabbalah (i.e., *Zohar* and related areas). This issue of holes in the faculty and course offerings needs urgent attention.

(3) There are serious problems with the curriculum. The Visiting Committee has noted many of these above. Here it needs only to stress that the faculty of the department must take the time to standardize its teaching procedures, review its syllabi and course material, and engage in a serious conversation regarding its overall curriculum.

(4) The Visiting Committee vigorously recommends that the curriculum be at least partially altered to include more topical (“problem”) courses in place of historically organized ones. It is the sense of the Visiting Committee that students would be attracted to courses dealing with important issues. Such courses are common in both European and American universities and meet with considerable success.

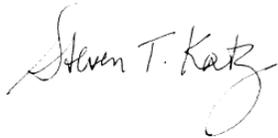
(5) The Visiting Committee feels strongly that the importance and value of Jewish Studies, and in particular Jewish Thought, needs to be recognized by the university administration independently of any argument – however good – of its relation to the humanities more generally. Given the history of the Hebrew University, the role of

the Hebrew University in Israeli life, and the role of the Hebrew University in Jewish life and culture outside of Israel, Jewish Studies, and particularly the core subjects related to Jewish Thought, i.e., Jewish philosophy and mysticism, cannot be evaluated as just one more program. They need to be, even if not cost-efficient, primes inter pares in some fundamental sense.

(6) The Committee would also strongly suggest that thought – and consultation – be given sooner rather than later to selecting the next Chair of the Program. This will allow the new Chair to develop an ongoing agenda for the department and to ruminate on how to implement the recommendations that have been made by the Visiting Committee in this report.

Though the analysis and recommendations made in this report imply a critical judgment regarding elemental aspects of the present conditions that exist within the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University, the Visiting Committee wants to emphasize that its suggestions are made out of a deep respect for the scholarly tradition of the Hebrew University in the area of Jewish Thought, and out of a true appreciation of its present faculty and students. The Visiting Committee is anxious to see the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University continue its historic role as a world-class center of study and scholarship.

**Signed By:**



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Prof. Steven Katz, Chair



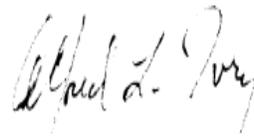
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Prof. David Novak



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Prof. Moshe Idel



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Prof. Alfred Ivry

# Appendices

## Appendix 1- Copy of Letter of Appointment



December 11, 2008  
14613083

**Prof. Steven Katz**  
**Prof. of Jewish Philosophy, Department of Religion**  
**Boston University**  
**U.S.A**

Dear Professor Katz,

The State of Israel undertook an ambitious project when the Israeli Council for Higher Education (CHE) established a quality assessment and assurance system for Israeli higher education. Its stated goals are: to enhance and ensure the quality of academic studies; to provide the public with information regarding the quality of study programs in institutions of higher education throughout Israel; and to ensure the continued integration of the Israeli system of higher education in the international academic arena. Involvement of world-renowned academicians in this process is essential, particularly as our nation reaches maturity in its 60<sup>th</sup> year.

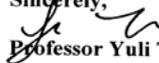
This most important initiative reaches out to scientists in the international arena in a national effort to meet the critical challenges that confront the Israeli higher educational system today. The formulation of international evaluation committees represents an opportunity to express our common sense of concern and to assess the current and future status of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. It also establishes a structure for an ongoing consultative process among scientists around the globe on common academic dilemmas and prospects.

I therefore deeply appreciate your willingness to join us in this crucial endeavor. It is with great pleasure that I hereby appoint you to serve as a Chair of the Council for Higher Education's Committee for the Evaluation of Jewish Philosophy Studies. The composition of the Committee will be as follows: Prof. Steven Katz – Chair, Prof. Moshe Idel, Prof. Alfred Ivry and Prof. David Novak. Ms. Michal Kabatznik will coordinate the Committee's activities.

In your capacity as a Chair of the Evaluation Committee, you will be requested to function in accordance with the enclosed appendix.

I wish you much success in your role as a Chair of this most important committee.

Sincerely,

  
**Professor Yuli Tamir**  
**Minister of Education**  
**and Chairperson of the Council for Higher Education**

*Enclosures:* Appendix to the Appointment Letter of Evaluation Committees

cc: Ms. Riki Mendelzvaig, Secretary of the Council for Higher Education  
Ms. Michal Neumann, Head of the Quality Assessment Unit  
Ms. Michal Kabatznik, Committee Coordinator

## Appendix 2- Site Visit Schedule

### THE DEPARTMENT OF JEWISH THOUGHT

#### HEBREW UNIVERSITY Tentative Schedule of Site Visit 24<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> May 2009

#### Jewish Thought - tentative schedule of site visit

#### Sunday May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009:

8:15-8:45	Opening session with the heads of the institution and the senior staff member appointed to deal with quality assessment	Prof. Sara Stroumsa (rector) Prof. Miri Gur-Arye (vice rector) Prof. Ya'acov Schul Prof. Eli Fridman	Rector's office
09:00-09:45	Head of the department of Jewish thought	Prof. Zeev Harvey	Room no. 5411
09:45- 10:30	Meeting with Senior Academic Faculty*	Prof Moshe Halbertal Prof. Shlomo Naeh Dr. Jonathan Garb Dr. Maren Niehoff Dr. Katrina Rigo	Room no. 5411
10:30-11:15	Meeting with Junior academic faculty*	Dr. Benjamin Brown Dr, Pawel Maciejko Dr. Avinoam Rosnak	Room no. 5411
11:15-12:00	Meeting with adjunct lecturers (most of them are Alumni)	Dr. esti Eisenmann Dr. Adam Afterman Dr. Alon Dahan Dr. Tzahi Weiss Dr. Oded Ysraeli Dr. Moshe Meer Prof. Amira Eran	Room no. 5411
12:00-13:00	Meeting with the Undergraduate and Graduate student advisor and	Dr. Katrina Rigo  Dr. Avinoam Rosnak	Room no. 5411

	Coordinator of the Dept's seminars	Dr. Maren Niehoff	
13:00-13:45	Lunch		
13:45-14:30	Tour of campus (Including classes, studios, library, offices of faculty members, computer labs etc.)		
14:30-15:00	Closed-door working meeting of the evaluation committee		Room no. 5411

**Monday May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009:**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Room/Location</b>
09:00-09:45	Tour of the Library		
09:45-10:30	Meeting with the Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Humanities	Prof. Israel Bartal	Room no. 5411
10:30-11:30	Meeting with B.A. students**	Up to 12 B.A. students (The students chosen by the institution must reflect a mix of all levels)	Room no. 5411
11:30-12:30	Meeting with M.A. students**	Up to 12 M.A. students. (The students chosen by the institution must reflect a mix of all levels)	Room no. 5411
12:30-13:30	Meeting with PhD	Up to 12 PhD	Room no. 5411

	students**	students (The students chosen by the institution must reflect a mix of all levels)	
13:30-14:15	Lunch		Beit Meirsdorf
14:15-15:30	Closed-door working meeting of the evaluation committee		Room no. 5411
15:30-16:00	Opening session with the heads of the institution and the senior staff member appointed to deal with quality assessment	Prof. Sara Stroumsa (rector) Prof. Miri Gur-Arye (vice rector) Prof. Ya'acov Schul Prof. Eli Fridman	Rector's office

\* The heads of the institution and academic unit or their representatives will not attend these meetings.

\*\* The visit will be conducted in English with the exception of students who may speak in Hebrew and anyone else who feels unable to converse in English.