Northwestern U’s Israel Studies program—still thriving a decade later

By RICHARD HERMAN

A TYPICAL academic interview question for academic administrators is “Would you rather be lucky or smart?” Of course it is a false dichotomy, but it does speak to the issue of being in the right place at the right time with a compelling vision and the courage to “run with the bit” once offered.

Israel Studies at Northwestern University is just such a case with the two protagonists (pictured): the late Michael Kotzin, then Executive Vice President of JUF, and Elie Rekhess, a past Crown Visiting Professor of Israel Studies and currently the Associate Director for Israel Studies at Northwestern’s Crown Family Center for Jewish and Israel Studies.

“We, at Northwestern are dedicated to promoting the academic study of the modern State of Israel, and enhancing the understanding of the complexities of Israeli society through rigorous teaching, scholarship, and research, based on academic diligence and interdisciplinary approaches,” said Rekhess. “We strive to educate students on the history, politics, culture, and economics of contemporary Israeli society as well as on Israeli technological and scientific scholarship, while resisting any pressures to advocate any tendentially driven academic or political interest.”

The initiative to promote Israel Studies at Northwestern—developed in 2005—was encouraged and supported by Henry Bienen (then President of Northwestern) and Itamar Kahinovitch (then President of Tel Aviv University). Their vision is reflective of today’s meaningful and growing partnerships between JUF, Israeli universities, and Northwestern University under current Northwestern President Morton Schapiro.

Every year, post-doctoral visitors from Israeli universities visit Northwestern. It is not easy to develop programs anew and the fact that the program continues to prosper and is now an embedded part of the curriculum is no small matter. It has been deftly intertwined with Jewish Studies at the university’s Crown Family Center for Jewish and Israel Studies.

Israel Studies as a field has come of age in North America with some 20 centers, institutes, and programs at American and Canadian universities. Israel Studies programs are devoted to rigorous scholarship and research and, decidedly, not advocacy. As a field, Israel Studies could also be seen as part of Middle Eastern Studies as well as being an independent or stand-alone program. Each choice brings a set of issues with it. The choice of Middle Eastern Studies tends to portray Israel largely in connection with the “conflict.” Subversion into Jewish Studies, while natural in many ways, has the potential to see Israel largely as a manifestation of Jewish life.

The partnerships between JUF and four Illinois universities (Northwestern, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of Chicago) were created with the idea that there were few faculty to provide a scholarly approach to Israel. Considering the objective—to study the State of Israel—such programs are by nature interdisciplinary; this school year alone JUF has sponsored programs that have covered such Israel-related topics as women in film, public health, comparative politics, and Israeli literature.

A Brandeis study, conducted a decade ago, held that Israel Studies courses in the United States were offered by programs or departments in Jewish Studies, Political Science, History, Middle Eastern Studies, International Relations, and Religious Studies. This breadth is reflected in Northwestern’s own offerings, which focus on the history of Zionism, the British Mandate, statehood since inception and Israeli Society; with the latter including Israeli identity, social, ethnic, communal, religious, and national cleavages; immigration; urbanization; the kibbutz; economic development; socioeconomic gaps; and the Arab minority in Israel. These are offered by different disciplinary departments and, as the topics indicate, Israel Studies does not shy away from controversy.

Most recently, Northwestern’s Israel Studies program has promoted the critical issue of Water Studies in Israel and the Middle East—thanks to efforts by Professors Rekhess and Aaron Packman, of Northwestern’s Robert R. McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science. The launching of this effort was heralded by a symposium last spring titled “Water in Israel and the Middle East: Geopolitical Conflicts, Technological Challenges, and Sustainable Solutions.”

Over the course of the partnership between JUF and Northwestern, nearly a dozen post-doctoral visitors have added to the richness of offerings in Israel Studies through course offerings as diverse as contemporary Hebraic literature, political usage of the internet in Israel, and the history of the British Mandatory period in Palestine. In 2017, Northwestern will host Dr. Joseph Ringel, who also plans to address Jewish and other audiences in the Chicago area.

In addition, this spring, the Crown Center will host scholar-in-residence Prof. Ruth Gavison, a Hebrew University law professor (emerita), a prominent constitutional scholar, and an Israel Prize laureate. Gavison was asked by the Minister of Justice to formulate a proposal of a constitutional provision dealing with the character of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in a manner that balances and integrates these values, both the Jewish and the democratic.

The Crown Family Center for Jewish and Israel Studies at Northwestern University was established due to a generous gift from Lester and Renee Crown. Richard H. Herman is senior counsel to the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago and is the former Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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