

Self-Assessment of Teaching, 1975-2002

David G. Roskies

1. The Early Years.

Overprepared. Overdetermined. That is how I would characterize the first 5-8 years of my teaching career at JTS. These were years of transition, when the TI still met on Sundays, and the fate of your Sundays was decided by Sylvia Ettenberg. But these were also the heady years of the first major overhaul of the Rabbinical School curriculum, when one new course could change the direction of your life.

I came to JTS with ironclad ideas of how and whom I wanted to teach. Emulating Dan Miron, the most brilliant teacher of literature I had ever encountered, whose every course was an act of discovery and revolutionary synthesis, I used a tiny looseleaf notebook, crammed with notes. Since I was required to teach mostly in Hebrew, and because my Hebrew wasn't good enough to improvise, these notes were extremely crammed. Only gradually did I switch to 8 1/2 x 11, still writing longhand and in full sentences.

Intent upon teaching every subject methodically, I vowed not to waste a precious moment telling *mayselekh*, the way Chaim Brandwein was wont to do at Brandeis. And unlike Brandwein, I vowed never to set the students up for failure, asking trick questions, then pulling a rabbit out of the hat. I had a Method to impart: rigorous, and scientific. It never occurred to me that there could be a golden mean. And anyway, I was younger (at 26) than some of my students, and damned if I would let on how terrified I was of failing to answer their questions.

Not that there was much room for questions. I lectured, using the frontal approach, and they took notes. The most brilliant students, like Nili Gold, Eli Lederhendler, and Zvia Ginor, could replicate not only the content but also the

structure of my lectures. As I could have done for Miron.

It was my daunting task to bridge, for the first time, the study of Hebrew and Yiddish, and beyond teaching the undergraduate requirements in modern Hebrew literature, I had carte blanche. So I dedicated the early years to filling in the huge gaps in my training. From Graduate School I could replicate but a tiny repertoire of thematic courses: *The Image of the Shtetl*, *Between Hasidism and Haskalah*. High time, therefore, to read and prepare courses on all of Mendele, all of Sholem Aleichem, all of Peretz. I am grateful to JTS for offering me this postgraduate fellowship, even as I earned an assistant professor's salary.

Having dedicated my life to a scientific approach to the study of Jewish literature, I had no desire to teach rabbinical students who, I imagined, were interested in one thing alone: sermon material. Until that fateful day when Neil Gillman invited me to design a "synthesis course," the capstone of the new Rabbinical School curriculum, on Jewish responses to catastrophe. Drawing on the incredible talent concentrated at 3080 Broadway--Robert Gordis, David Wolf Silverman, Gerson D. Cohen, David Weiss-Halivni, Seymour Siegel, Mortimer Ostow, Gershon Bacon, and more--I made the sparks fly. Turned out, I had a knack for bringing people together, and for thinking synthetically, but unlike those of the Structuralist and Formalist persuasion, who worked synchronically, my real strength, I began to see, lay in pulling disparate things together diachronically. Maybe I was really a cultural historian parading as a literary critic?

2. Teaching Literature to Rabbis.

From that synthesis course, which I taught and coordinated twice, came *Against the Apocalypse*. In 1983, as I was feverishly trying to finish the book because my tenure hung in the balance and there was someone else coming out with a book on the same topic, I unexpectedly discovered how to wing a class. There were times (I must now admit) when I walked into class totally unprepared. From this I learned two surprising lessons: (1) that students couldn't tell the difference and (2) that the lectures I was forced to improvise were, on the whole, much livelier, and much more interactive, than the ones I knew by heart. Also, thanks to my two synthesis courses, I came to see rabbinical students in a very new light. While undergraduates were in class against their will, and graduate students wanted so desperately to please their (young and good-looking) teacher, rabbinical students were struggling with issues of meaning. They brought an existential seriousness to class that would not be satisfied with a display of analytic virtuosity. This meant that to do the job right, I could no longer hide behind the text. I had to make myself vulnerable. Ask questions to which I myself did not have the answer.

And the main question, one that only rabbinical students were unafraid to ask: Why is this important? Why should we be dedicating the last years of our professional training to these stories, these arcane subjects, these archaic Jews? Once again, it was the Rabbinical School curriculum that provided a possible direction, this time, through the so-called Critical Methodologies course.

From the course offerings in our department, one would hardly guess that the field of literary studies had been utterly transformed. Literary theory has never been our strong suit. We have been cited for this by the Middlestates Commission, and have yet to rectify matters. We expect our students to pick up a literary method through emulation--or to take Literary Theory at Columbia. The only faculty member who broke the mold, who structured a course not thematically, but theoretically, was the late Zvia Ginor. As literary trends have come and gone, only feminism seems to have taken root.

What, then, would a future rabbi need to know about critical methodologies in modern Jewish literature? I argued that such a course should explore the inner-literary dynamics of Jewish culture. A rabbi, for example, should know what to say when Philip Roth produced another outrageous satire of American Jewish life. He ought to refer the congregant back to Mendele, the original Jewish antisemite. Thus I divided the course by genre and subject matter: the fall semester dedicated to short stories set in the Old Country; novels and some poetry set in America and Israel in the spring.

Over the years, however, and driven by the need to meet the professional and existential needs of the students, a whole new set of questions emerged. Was Jewish Literature a form of modern midrash or did it represent a cultural revolution, a complete break with the past? To underscore the difference, I invited the students to my apartment at the end of the fall semester, and asked each of them to prepare an original story. Their sense of discovery at learning the lost art of storytelling made me realize that Brandwein, a product of Meah She'arim, had actually been modeling a Jewish pedagogy, a Jewish cultural idiom, that now required my intervention in order to be cultivated. During the spring semester, each rabbinical student was asked to deliver a mini-sermon based on a different novel we had studied. Their failure to assimilate these novels homiletically drove home the essential point: that modernism and Judaism were at opposite ends of the spectrum.

From this course grew my second big book, *A Bridge of Longing*--and my work on the born-again storyteller and ethnographer, S. Ansky. Thus, the parochial dimension and professional demands of JTS, rather than hindering my teaching and writing, gave them direction and depth, at precisely a time when the field of literary studies was up for grabs.

3. ** ** ** ** **, ** ** ** **

OK. So to teach at JTS was to acknowledge that modernity was just a blip on the Jewish screen. Thus far I had succeeded in finding ways to connect, to justify, what I was doing in terms of an historical continuum (Jewish responses to catastrophe) or genre (storytelling) rooted in the foundational texts of Judaism. But what about my primary responsibility to the Graduate School, to train a new generation of Jewish literary scholars? Unless I came up with something new, I would spend the rest of my career chasing my own tail. So I went in search of allies.

One year-long initiative was a series of seminars devoted to Jewish Cultural History. Such innovative scholars as Sacvan Bercovitch, Ruth Wisse, Yael Zerubavel, and Dan Miron were invited to speak and to interact with a select group of faculty.

A year later, Avraham Holtz and I team-taught a seminar on Jewish cultural history. It produced some interesting seminar papers, but otherwise, led nowhere.

Then, as an offshoot of some prior work I had done, I became interested in Jewish autobiography. Was there, I wanted to know, an inherent contradiction between the unfolding of the self and the demands of the Jewish collective? Was "Jewish autobiography," in other words, an oxymoron? When a pilot course did not provide a satisfying answer, I invited Marcus Moseley to team-teach it with me the second time around. From him I learned how far I had strayed from my earlier rigor; that my lectures, compared to his, were all-over-the-place, way too synthetic. Moseley was a no-nonsense scholar who never cited a source he had not read in the original language. He read comparatively: Jewish autobiography in the light of Saint Augustine, Rousseau, Tolstoy. Marcus reminded me of what I had learned at the Hebrew University about textual history. Never cite a text until you have a reliable text to cite. Marcus eschewed global answers. He read intensively, locally, and measured each autobiographer's work against the rest of his oeuvre or against the dominant forms of self-expression at the time. So how was it that Moseley, who knew the subject inside-out, was satisfied to fashion a limited set of pedagogic tools? And why wasn't that good enough for me? Why was I still trying to be Dan Miron, lo these many years later?

None of these collaborative efforts, of course, yielded a grand new literary-historical method. How could they, when all along, something else was driving my search? In the famous typology of Russian intellectuals, I am closer to being a hedgehog, digging constantly in the same ground, than a fox, roaming far and wide for food. Yet neither am I your sedentary scholar, satisfied with burrowing as its own reward. It is not enough for me to teach Jewish literary texts. I must do

so within a living context. When that context is lacking, I either have to create one, or look elsewhere.

This, after all, had been the reason for establishing *Prooftexts*. More than I needed an English-language forum to publish studies about Yiddish literature, I needed a group of editors, a peer group, to respond to my work. And this has remained a constant throughout my career. My enthusiasm for the Ginor Chair and my ever more frequent trips to Israel stem from the same felt need. Two years hence, when Haim Be'er occupies the Chair, he and I plan to team-teach a course on Jewish parody. Thanks to the Ginor Seminars, Alan Mintz and I have created the illusion that JTS is a center of Jewish literary studies. If it turns out that such a center cannot exist anywhere outside of Israel, at least we'll have opened the door to a lively conversation.

Were JTS a bigger school, and I wasn't already wearing a half-dozen hats, I would help establish a Jewish Creative Writing Program. Such a program, whatever else it accomplished, would produce the kind of synergy between the theory and practice of Jewish literature that I need in order to breathe.

4. Mentoring.

Meanwhile, in the midst of this brave collaborative quest, warm bodies were sitting in my classroom, and I was learning the difference between teaching a course and training a student. A course is a discrete, command performance. Mentoring is private, labor-intensive, and open-ended. Teaching is exhibitionistic. Mentoring is ethically demanding. While the JTS faculty has begun to take teaching to heart, I have yet to hear a single discussion of our responsibilities as mentors.

What I do exceptionally well is give encouragement. I model optimism. I am the relief pitcher of choice, picking up Ph.D. students whom others have abandoned (Mark Kiel, and at Columbia, Daniela Mantovan, Naomi Kadar). What I lack are the people skills to nip a problem in the bud. Some students, who will either never finish or never find jobs, should not be encouraged to enter Graduate School in the first place. Once they're in, it's too late. Naturally I was flattered that Mel Solman applied to our doctoral program after hearing me lecture at CUNY Graduate Center. But there were plenty of warning signals that I should have heeded along the way, before squandering close to \$100,000 of the Seminary's money.

With Gabriella Rozansky, I squandered a brilliant career by failing to focus on her specific needs. We wasted a year and a half on dead-ended dissertation topics, and by the time she was given a workable topic (by Abraham Novershtern), her personal life intervened. Even if she had ended up running the Hebrew

Language Department at the Westchester Solomon Schechter High School, she could and should have done so with a well-earned doctorate.

What to do with our TA's? Again, there is too little guidance. I invented a ***** format for my Rabbinical School course on modern Jewish literature so that Mel Solman could have some experience in front of a class, but even after two years and a session with Steve Brown, Mel was still unable to look the students in the eye. Contrariwise, the moment Leah Garrett stood up in front of my class to deliver a ten-minute mini-lecture on the novel of the day, it was obvious that she was born to be a teacher.

How much personal intervention is ethically permissible to help a student find a job? Francesco Melfi would never have landed the job at Oberlin without my personal connections. So when he went AWOL in mid-semester and has never been seen again, I felt morally implicated.

Then there are situations where the best solution is not to go by the book. Even as I write, Jillian Davidson is working on the final draft of her dissertation, despite a statute of limitations that expired a decade ago. Jillian will never pursue an academic career, and in that respect, the big bucks we spent on her were wasted. But the fact that she will finish I can attribute to one thing alone, as difficult as it is to put such things down on paper: It is an act of love for her teacher. If I had known that way back when, it would have saved me (and the Graduate School) much anguish and disappointment. But there you go. Teaching is an art, not a science, and in the arts, you make up the rules as you go along.

Recently, Leah Garrett paid me a visit with her newborn daughter in tow. How are things going at the University of Denver? I asked. The first year of teaching, she lectured from 8 1/2x 11 looseleaf notes, with key passages underlined in red, just the way she had seen me do. Only after switching to a different venue did she find her own voice. In one year, bless her soul, she accomplished something that I'm still working on.

Maybe I'm being too hard on myself. When you're building your own career, writing big books, crossing the globe, it is hard to make time for these needy students of yours, especially when they need so much more hand-holding than you ever expected to receive from your own teachers. Still, it is impossible to know when enough is enough. I now demand five, six or seven rewrites of the dissertation proposal. That sets the gold standard from my end, even though it will prove unsustainable for the dissertation as a whole.

Over the summer, I plan to compile a folder for all incoming students, which will contain the Ph.D. reading lists, a sample dissertation proposal, a list of all published dissertations in our department, and other supporting documents. If they're going to fall overboard, it might as well be with a life-vest on.

5. Modeling Yiddish.

Strange to say, it was the students who pushed me. A nonmatriculated student named Edith Post first requested that I teach a course in Yiddish, something I had not done since my apprenticeship at the Uriel Weinreich Summer Program. So I threw together a survey course on Yiddish lyric poetry. The next big push came from Dan Miron, who was cutting back his teaching load at Columbia. He suggested that I take over the Core Curriculum in the History of Modern Yiddish Literature. Thanks to the consortium, I would be guaranteed a quorum of warm bodies. The third push came when David Fishman created Project Judaica and sent me to Moscow to teach the first introductory course in modern Yiddish literature. The students had begun studying Yiddish but 18 months before and Yiddish was our only common language. The fourth push came when Rakhmiel Peltz was denied tenure at Columbia and I became the only show in town. (I'm leaving out the stillborn efforts to support a full compliment of Yiddish language courses at JTS, first taught by Peysakh Fiszman, then by Ellie Kellman.)

Why, then, has it taken so long to get it all together, and why aren't we there yet? Here I come up against the main obstacle: myself. Although (as I have just demonstrated) I am happiest when interacting and collaborating with others, I have the greatest difficulty learning how. To this day, I have not done what should have been done fifteen years ago: Convened a group of colleagues to fashion a Yiddish Studies major. Perhaps I need another push.

Slowly, however, as my beard turns grey and I finally begin to look the part, I am growing into the role of Yiddish Professor. And that role, I am astonished to discover, bears a closer resemblance to Chaim Brandwein than to Dan Miron. Like it or not, I have become a personal model for my students, a model of someone who grew up in and with Yiddish; who knew Max Weinreich and Jacob Glatstein and I. B. Singer in person; who still talks to Sutzkever on the telephone; whose mother could sing 227 songs in six languages; who sometimes interrupts his lecture to tell a funny story; who confides his latest problems with publishers and public figures; who dresses up for class; who takes his students on a biannual pilgrimage to the Workmen's Circle cemeteries in Queens; who rides his bicycle to and from work; who used to speak only Yiddish to his son; who invites his students home for a class party (something Miron would never think of doing!). Brandwein taught all his Hebrew courses in Hebrew. Miron teaches all his Yiddish courses in English.

That the personal synthesis is working I have on the authority of Janet Burstein, who has been auditing my course on Modern Yiddish Fabulists. Here is her evaluation:

For me, the pedagogy is multidimensional, but the effect is wonderfully unified.

First: the theoretical structure of the course -- the folktale/fairy tale material. I've heard two different kinds of response from your students to this material. a couple haven't been intrigued by it; a couple found it immensely useful. personally, I found it interesting but not nearly as interesting as the interpretive work that followed it in class. there's a personal catch here: all binaries are suspect for me. and I am always looking for the ways in which a really good story eludes the typology that tries to pin it down, stretch it out like a butterfly on a slide. so that piece of the pedagogy was working, in me, against a strong bias. and the fact that I found it interesting -- even moderately useful -- is truly a tribute to the work you did with it in class.

The interpretive and historical and biographical work: just couldn't be surpassed. let me take those in better order: you constructed each writer within the trajectory of his own life and work -- surrounded by the historical ambiance and the other writers swimming in it. so that by the time you began to work with individual stories, we were at home in them. I'm not sure you can see what that really means to me. no literature has ever seemed more foreign to me than this one. but by the time you began to lead the class through a reading of an individual story -- beginning with the concrete, literal surface and working toward the nimshal -- I was at home in it. and so were your students. if I ever doubted the value of historical and biographical contextualization, this course would have convinced me.

could I say another thing about class work: the readings you set up are wonderfully informed by everything you know and feel about the writer, about the time and place, about the literary tradition he enters and competes with, or disposes of, or parodies, or creatively betrays. the questions you ask lead students toward interpretive insights that most often -- but don't always -- follow the path you've marked out. and what I loved every time was watching you respond to the unexpected, off

the path, insight, sometimes corraling it into the flow and direction of your own reading, sometimes just accepting it as another way of understanding a story. it's that openness, I think, that leaves all of us feeling that the stories are not exhausted by even the most informed, most sensitive reading.

I think you know that once we got to Sholom Aleichem the class really did begin to dance. and *Der Nister* took all of us beyond dancing. the writers build, as you've arranged them, in a spectacularly cumulative way.

I have heard a couple of comments about the writing assignments; the need to do comparative work elicits some grumbling from my students too. but I think they realize that you're giving them as much help with the assignment as you can.

someone told me once that the second time is always the best for a new course. this one is in the bag as is.

6. Style Is Substance

In my course evaluations, students routinely underscore my tremendous enthusiasm. I always thought this was a put-down, as if they were saying that the lectures lacked substance. Carol Ingall, in a meeting I once attended, set me straight. It's supposed to measure how much they enjoyed learning with me, and love of learning is also an important lesson. Janet speaks of my "openness." This too I once viewed as a weakness, compared to Miron, who always knew the one-and-only correct interpretation. I overheard a student tell another about my generosity as a teacher, and it took me a few days to figure out what she must have meant. It has to do with the way I grade their papers and get really excited when they come up with a new reading, something I haven't thought of myself. Since in my field, unlike Talmud, say, I am only the second generation of academic scholars, there is plenty of room to innovate, and I view it as part of my pedagogic mandate to throw out research topics and to celebrate original insights. Someday, someone may run with it.

All well and good that my performance gets more polished, that I generate enthusiasm, that the teaching persona blends so much more effortlessly with the person. It still doesn't solve the underlying problem I have as a teacher (Janet Burstein's encomium notwithstanding)--that I am so inept at group process.

Last year I team-taught “Jewish Responses to Catastrophe” with David Kraemer. Kraemer, at home with our Great Books curriculum, and dividing his time between JTS and CLAL, modelled a very high comfort level and a wonderfully eclectic approach. His body language was the very opposite of mine. I sat crunched up behind the desk or paced nervously about the room. He usually sat **on** the desk, legs crossed. The most memorable lecture, however, was his last class, the whole session of which he structured around two questions written on the blackboard and the answers he was able to elicit from the students. I couldn’t do that for more than fifteen minutes! While it is easy for me to devise creative assignments, and to create a risk-taking environment, I find the awkward silences intolerable. I jump in and preclude the necessary give-and-take.

Lately, I’ve adopted a new technique. I start each class by jotting down on the blackboard three topics I hope to cover. Three has always been my magic number. I gauge the success of each class by how well the three topics cohere and my ability to get through them. Without this somewhat artificial structure, I find, the lecture tends to ramble; that when I have too much to impart, the students drown; that even three topics can sometimes be too many. It’s also a useful mnemonic--for them and for me. The course on Modern Yiddish Fabulists is among the first in which I succeeded in unpacking what I know, leaving ample room for the students to find their own way. I don’t consider the class a failure if they come away with half as many pages of orderly notes as I used to have from Dan Miron. And anyway, students nowadays don’t even take notes on paper, so who’s to know what, if anything, will remain for posterity?

Report on Professional Activities, 2001
David G. Roskies

1. **New Courses Prepared**

LIT 5518y *Introduction to Yiddish Folklore*. Fifth course in the Yiddish Studies major. Designed it from scratch and prepared a 340-page reader.

LIT 5714x *Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*. My chestnut. Only this time, having chosen the ideal team-teacher, it really worked. David Kraemer and I would like to model this course for the entire faculty.

2. **Supervision of Students**

Supervised Honors Thesis by David Schnitzer (LC) on Sulzberger, the *New York Times*, and the Zionist dilemma.

Began supervising Honors Thesis of Jacob Lewis (LC) on gender relations in the writings of Sholem Aleichem and Y. L. Peretz

Ongoing supervision of JTS doctoral dissertations by Jillian Davidson (LIT) and Lauren Strauss (MJS)

Working with Eddie Portnoy (MJS) on dissertation proposal.

Ongoing, at times intensive supervision of dissertations by NYU student Marc Caplan, and Columbia University students Beatrice Lang, Rebecca Margolis, and Naomi Kadar

Wrote countless letters of recommendations for students present and past.

3. **Committee Assignments**

Personnel Committee

Davidson School Committee

Planning Committee, JTS Conference Jewish Religious Leadership in the Modern Era

Tenure Review Committee for Miriam Hoffman, Dept. of Germanic Languages, Columbia University

4. Publications, Research and Writing Completed During the Past Year

"ספרות יידיש בפולין, " קיום ושבר: יהודי פולין לדורותיהם, כרך ב', עורכים ישראל ברטל, ישראל גוטמן (ירושלים: מרכז זלמן שזר, 2001), עמ' 207-224.

"Inside Sholem Shachnah's Hat," *Prooftexts* 21 (2001 [=Twentieth Anniversary Issue]): 39-56.

"Jazz and Jewspeech: The Anatomy of Yiddish in American Jewish Culture," in *Ideology and Jewish Identity in Israeli and American Literature* ed. Emily Miller Budick (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 131-46.

"The Master of Prayer: Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav," in *God's Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism*, ed. Shaul Magid (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), pp. 67-102 [rpt. from *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, 1995].

The Last Yiddish Novel: A Memoir. MS, 257 pp.

5. Papers Delivered at Conferences

"Where Writers Matter," paper read at "The Jewish People in the 20th Century: Looking Back, Facing the Future," Academic Convocation organized by The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture and Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, Center for Jewish History (NYC), 15 January 2001.

"Ansky's Russian Book of Jewish Symbols," keynote address at international conference on "Between Two Worlds: S. Ansky at the Turn of the Century," Stanford University, 18-19 March 2001.

"Covenantal Memory in a Secular Age," international conference on the Search for a Usable Past, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs (NYC), 25-26 October, 2001; respondent: Emmanuel Sivan.

"Pagan Rabbis in American Jewish Fiction," international conference on Jewish Religious Leadership in the Modern Era, JTS, 4-5 November 2001.

Planning Committee, Institute for Advanced Studies, Seminar on East European Jewish Culture, Phila.

Appointed to Academic Advisory Council, YIVO Institute.

8. **Service to JTS and the Larger Community**

Organized Zvia Ginor Memorial Lecture by Prof. Avner Holtzman (Tel Aviv University), 28 February 2001.

Participated in panel discussion on the use of syllabi, Annual Faculty Retreat, 21 May, 2001.

Co-chair, Adult Education Committee, Ansche Chesed (NYC).



**JEWISH
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November 20, 2002

Prof. Jack Wertheimer
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Dear Jack:,

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Sincerely yours,

David G. Roskies
Professor of Jewish Literature