

Promoting the Academic Study of Modern Israel

A conversation with Dr. Steven Fine, director of the Center for Israel Studies, chair of the Department of Jewish History at Yeshiva College and professor of Jewish history at Yeshiva University.



Steven Fine received his doctorate in Jewish history from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, holds an MA in art history from the University of Southern California and a BA in religious studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Dr. Fine's most recent book is *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), and he is editor of *IMAGES: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* (E. J. Brill).

YUR: What is the purpose of the Center for Israel Studies?

SF: The Center seeks to transform the academic study of the State of Israel by providing the best expertise and new perspectives on Israel; by educating the next generation of Israel scholars; and by offering relevant and exciting public programming for the broad New York community. We have taken an area studies approach, meaning we're interested in everything having to do with Israel, from Abraham to Zionism. We bring people together from disciplines as distinct as political science, biology, archaeology and modern history to focus on this place in as broad and deep a way as we possibly can. At YU, that literally means from the very beginning of civilization to the present. Israel is deeply embedded in this institution, far more than at any other major university in North America. Our goal is to strengthen and deepen that relationship.

YUR: What does CIS do that's different from existing Israel-focused programs at YU?

SF: We're deeply involved in the curriculum in a way that hasn't happened before. CIS is developing minors in Israel studies at Yeshiva College and Stern

College. We want to affect how much Israel-related courses are being taught here. I've created faculty working groups in areas as diverse as the history of Zionism; Israel, Science and Technology; Modern Israel and International Affairs and Archaeology. The charge of these working groups is to act as a think tank to develop programming and, more importantly, to develop long-term projects that will transform our campus and the study of its subject areas. The truth is, our scholars have been doing that for three generations. But now is the moment where we can take something superb and show the world how great it is.

YUR: CIS celebrated its inauguration with a conference on "The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah." How did that represent CIS's goals?

SF: Our Temple conference was a real high. We had top-flight scholars from all over North America coming just to listen. There were Orthodox Jews and pious Christians and political scientists all in one room talking to each other. We're going to be bringing together people who have never talked to each other before, and they're going to be talking on our turf.

YUR: The topic for the next conference is "Israel and India: A Relationship Comes of Age." What is the significance of that topic?

SF: This is a relationship that is both deeply rooted in history and is up and coming. We know Jews have lived in India as long as Jews have been writing. We know of elephants being waltzed through Palestine to the Roman Empire. And we know of the military, economic and tourist relationships today. Twenty years ago, the relationship between Israel and India wasn't on the front page of international relations. Today it is.

There's an obvious Indian connection through the medical school. Sonia Suchday [co-director of the Institute of Public Health Sciences, a joint program between Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology and Albert Einstein College of Medicine] came to me and said, "This is a chance to deepen our relationship in a place where YU can make a real contribution. It's real synergy." So a group of Stern students and Ferkauf students went to India this summer to study global health initiatives, and a Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy group is going to India in the coming year to do service work in the Jewish community and, in the process, to learn about the Jewish



culture of India. We're looking for government and university sponsorship from both countries to make this a truly large event. We'll bring India onto campus and bring the India/Israel relationship onto the front page of New York culture for a year.

YUR: CIS is a huge umbrella. Which particular areas would you like to focus on first and why?

SF: What's most important at this point is everything having to do with modern Israel. We have enough faculty resources to satisfy the requirements for a general university, but not enough for YU to excel in Modern Israel studies. If we're going to be the top research institution in this area, we need real depth in everything from the Arab-Israeli conflict, to art and culture, to folklore, to Sephardim in Israel. We have people who have taught it extremely well, but it's not their research area.

We've begun the hiring process in a number of those areas and have hired more than a dozen academics from the junior to senior faculty level to complement the people who were here before. They're among the best in the country, but to be the best will

take time and money. One of the ways we're filling those gaps in the meantime is through distinguished visiting professorships. That will continue even after we've made the right hires because it adds spice to the entire system.

YUR: CIS offers a perfect way to practice YU's core philosophy of Torah Umadda. Which opportunities excite you the most?

SF: The most important opportunity is the coming together of the different parts of our university under this banner.

This year, for example, the Center co-sponsored the University's first Torah Umadda Week at Stern College. We invited world-renowned physicist Nathan Aviezer of Bar-Ilan University, along with Rabbi Natan Slifkin, a noted author in Israel, and our own Einstein professor and esteemed scholar Dr. Edward I. Reichman, to present a series of lectures on the intersections of Torah and science.

YUR: Where did you draw your inspiration for the Center?

SF: I was standing in the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv, trying to imagine a Center for Israel Studies at YU. The museum has

everything from a representative archaeological dig to an olive oil plant to a planetarium. Each subject has its own pavilion. I thought, wouldn't this be a wonderful model for a center at YU?

We have a museum where you can actually touch things, we have students learning Torah Umadda, our medical and law schools are world-class. Can you imagine finding a way to take all those individual pavilions that make up YU and get them talking across a big quad about Israel?

YUR: What is the nature of the relationship between CIS and the Yeshiva University Museum (YUM)?

SF: YUM is one of our major drawing cards. The Museum is

our window onto New York City. It's hard for the general public to know what exciting things are going on at the University, especially in the humanities. The Museum allows people to see what we're dreaming about. It is planning an India-related exhibit for this year's conference. We're already talking about an exhibit on early Zionism to enhance the 2009/10 CIS conference on Zionism before the Balfour Declaration. The Museum often comes up with an idea for a project and the University brings together academic courses and programs around that project. It's almost like symbiosis—the productive partnership of our public space and our academic life. ■

“ Our goal is to train students to understand the complexities and strategic environment of Israel, and to then interpret that understanding to the wider community. ”