

Faculty Profile: Steven Fine, PhD

Picturing the Jewish Past in Full Color

This is the most important piece of Jewish art in the world," whispers Dr. Steven Fine, professor of Jewish studies at Yeshiva College and Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies. He is standing in a darkly lit room—not in the hallowed chambers of some art museum, but on the first floor of the Mendel Gottesman Library on Yeshiva University's Wilf Campus—pointing at a replica of a fresco depicting the story of Elijah fighting the priest of Ba'al.

"These frescoes are the earliest Biblical illustrations in the world—they date back to 245 CE," says Dr. Fine, an enthusiastic teacher with an encyclopedic knowledge of Jewish life during Greco-Roman times.

The painting appears in a half-scale model of the interior of a third-century synagogue

Recruited from the University of Cincinnati last year, Dr. Fine likes to think of history as a living thing. "When I worked on this exhibit at the museum, I had fantasies of creating three-dimensional cut-outs of the figures of Moses and Miriam inhabiting the space," he says.

Academic Beginnings

Dr. Fine's journey as an academic with strong interdisciplinary interests began in another university library. After earning his bachelor's degree in Jewish studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he visited the university's Los Angeles campus to explore doing postgraduate studies there.

"Walking through the Jewish studies collection, I thought, 'This is what I want to do!' Then I walked through the art



Dr. Steven Fine draws on ancient art, archaeology and literature to offer a human-centered approach to history.



that was excavated in 1932 in Dura Europos, an ancient city in what is now eastern Syria. The model, a centerpiece of "Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World," an exhibition that Dr. Fine curated at the YU Museum in 1996, presents "another body of evidence for a world we know little about."

Imagining Moses

As an example of this, Dr. Fine points to a picture of Moses wearing a four-cornered Roman garment and *tzitzit* [the Biblically ordained ritual fringes], his beard cut in the style of the day. The Jews who painted this image of Moses imagined him by thinking of themselves, he explains, leaving historians in the 21st century a cultural artifact that tells us as much about the Talmudic world they depicted.

"Pictures like this quietly create connections between the world of the rabbis and the daily lives of a Jewish community far from the academies of Tiberias and Babylonia," Dr. Fine says.

history library and I thought, 'This is what I want to do!'" he recalls. "So I realized I had to do both!"

With years of yeshiva study in Israel and at Yeshiva University in Los Angeles, and a master's degree in art history from the University of Southern California (on medieval Hebrew illustrated manuscripts), Dr. Fine wrote his doctorate on the sanctity of the synagogue in the Greco-Roman world at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—a project that integrated history, art, folklore, and of course, Talmudic studies.

This interdisciplinary approach is one of the key reasons YU was attracted to him, says David Srolovitz, the college's dean.

"He combines Talmudic studies, archaeology, art, ancient culture, and history into an integrated perspective on Jewish life in ancient times," says Dean Srolovitz. "He adds a new element to Yeshiva College's strength in the academic study of Classical Jewish history."

Dr. Fine is as prolific as he is profuse. He has written dozens

of articles, monographs, and book reviews about ancient Jewish history, art, and archaeology. His seven books include a history of the synagogue for children written with his wife, Leah Bierman Fine (currently a master's student at Revel), and *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue in the Greco-Roman Period* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

often developing specific visual vocabularies that expressed their Jewishness. Problems with "art" began in the 19th century, however, "when Jews bought the Protestant notion that the Jews are 'the nation without art,' and some Jews saw making art as a way out of traditional Jewish life," Dr. Fine says.

In addition to his research

for Online Jewish Studies (cojs.org), an interactive Web encyclopedia that creates a "brain trust" of about a hundred world-class historians, educators, and education technology specialists in the US and in Israel, Dr. Fine and his team (which includes some of his finest Revel students) are making information on the ancient Jewish world accessible to interested people all over the world.

New Journal

In addition, as editor of *Images*, a new international journal of scholarship on Jewish art and visual culture published by Brill Academic Publishers, Dr. Fine hopes to bring together those who work to integrate the visual arts into Jewish studies. The journal will "fill a hole," he says, "creating an American and international place for the study of Jewish art."

For Dr. Fine, history, literature, archaeology, and art offer a portal into a time gone by. He calls it a "human-being centered" approach to history.

"To get to know who Rabbi Akiva was, I need to know what he ate, where he walked, what his house looked like," he says. "We can get a real sense of what life was like using the tools of modern scholarship. Jewish history is the place where Torah and *maddah* [secular learning] come into an intimate and creative relationship." ■

"To get to know who Rabbi Akiva was, I need to know what he ate, where he walked, what his house looked like."

Ground-Breaking

The culmination of more than 20 years of learning, his most recent book, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), has been described by one reviewer as "a ground-breaking work... the first methodologically sophisticated historiography of Jewish art and archaeology as a discipline."

Dr. Fine points out that he coined the term "anti-idolism" to describe Jews' traditional discomfort with art that they considered to be idolatrous. Nevertheless, as *Art and Judaism* argues, Jewish communities have always utilized the visual arts to enhance their lives,

and teaching responsibilities, Dr. Fine will share his knowledge of Jewish history and archaeology with YU students as director of the Summer in Israel Program for 2007, which, he says, "uses the Land of Israel as our classroom."

The program will offer students an opportunity to study Classical Jewish history or participate in an archaeological excavation—giving them a chance to "explore the sites where Jewish history happened" (see page 4).

Dr. Fine is also currently engaged in several projects to bring complex Jewish learning to a broad audience. As a content editor for the Center