

EDUCATION & CULTURE

PROF. NAN GOOLDMAN • PROGRAM IN JEWISH STUDIES • CU
Literature meets law

By CHRIS LEPPEK
 IJN Assistant Editor

Dr. Nan Goodman has held for the past two years a very prestigious position in Jewish academia, as director of the Program in Jewish Studies at the University of Colorado, but she came to that place in a

“They share, among other things, the fact that they’re constructed on the basis of language, that they operate often within prescribed constraints, and that they’re both involved in mixing imagination and the normative, what is and what should be and what could be. That’s the essential underlying recognition

‘It’s both completely serendipitous and inevitable that I ended up being interested in this kind of stuff’

most unexpected and roundabout way — through Islam and Christianity.

Obviously in love with her job, and always ready with an infectious laugh when something strikes her as funny or ironic, Goodman delivers such a laugh when she explains the circuitous way that she has arrived at her present destination.

The humorous moment gone, Goodman shifts into her equally comfortable serious and scholastic gear. The hallmark of her academic career has long been what might be termed a confluence of disciplines, a mutual and simultaneous fascination with the law and the humanities, particularly literature.

That nexus, she said in a recent interview, is based “the recognition that neither one of those two disciplines operate alone. While that’s true of most disciplines, the two — law and literature in particular, the part of the humanities that I’m schooled in — really share a huge amount.

for why that kind of scholarship goes on.”

She pauses in perfect anticipation of her interviewer’s next question: “Now, what does that have to do with Jewish studies?”

Goodman begins with the admission that “I did not start out as a Jewish studies scholar.

“It’s both completely serendipitous and inevitable that I ended up being interested in this kind of stuff, because Judaism and the Jewish experience is really a very law-oriented experience. Anyone who knows anything about Judaism knows that it’s based on legal texts and that the law is extremely important.

“I think that the Jewish imagination and the Jewish notion of what is and what can be are very bound up in the world of law and literature.”

The obvious exemplar of Jewish law, of course, is Halachah, “but it’s not any one law,” Goodman says.

“It is law itself, in the sense that



Nan Goodman, whose academic career did not start with Jewish studies.

the world has a kind of regularity, it has a kind of prescription that there are ways to go about things, there are ways to imagine things. The minute you start thinking of the law that way you’re immediately involved in literature as well.

“All of the wonderful Jewish American literature, which is what I know best . . . a lot of the Jewish literary imagination, especially in Ameri-

ca, has to do with what’s permissible: how people lead their lives and how they’re constrained by laws, how laws need to be broken and remade. These are the stories that Jewish American authors have told time and time again. Even if they’re not dealing with the law as a subject it’s very much a part of how they’re understanding the world.”

Goodman’s is a compelling intellectual foundation, one that effortlessly manages to cross the line between science and art.

“They’re not only not mutually exclusive,” she says, “they’re completely and utterly interdependent. Texts in any context share a lot . . . but I don’t mean to be conflating law and literature. They have very different jurisdictions. Literature does not deal with life and death situations and the law certainly does. “But in their fundamental appli-

cations I think they’re very much appealing to the same human need, which is a need for understanding where the boundaries are and how you can either abide by them or break them.”

That introduction should offer at least a few clues to Goodman’s provocative modes of thinking, a central theme of which, it would seem, is to identify and elaborate upon the commonalities of seemingly diverse concepts.

Further evidence of that may be found in her many scholarly articles and such books as *Shifting the Blame: Literature, Law, and the Theory of Accidents*; *Banished: Common Law and the Rhetoric of Social Exclusion* and the upcoming *Halfway to Jerusalem: Varieties of Jewish Experience in Turkey*, co-authored with John Freeley.

The holder of a PhD from Harvard and a JD from Stanford, Goodman has taught at the Georgetown Law Center and in Istanbul as a Fulbright Scholar.

The Juris Doctorate in her curriculum vitae suggests that at one point Goodman might have considered a career as a lawyer.

“It’s true,” she says with another laugh, “and it’s even worse than you think.

“At law school I was being groomed to be a legal academic. I had a fellowship at the Stanford law school. It was in a roundabout way but it all makes sense now in terms of what I do. I love the law but I decided I

‘It wasn’t so much running away from the law as running back to literature’

wanted to deal with it more from an intellectual point of view.

“It wasn’t so much running away from the law as running back to literature, which was my first love.”

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EDUCATION & CULTURE

She has been associated with CU for six years, teaching Jewish studies under the program's first director, David Shneer, as well as English and Law. She assumed the Jewish Studies directorship in 2015.

Raised in a secular Jewish home in New York — "I don't think anybody would call me a religious Jew," she says — Goodman has nonetheless always been interested in the religious, mystical and cultural characteristics of Jewish history.

Her Jewish studies, however, led her into unexpected directions, most strikingly the impact of the Jewish covenant as it related to the Puritans of 17th-century New England and the interaction between Jews and Muslims during the time of the Ottoman Empire.

An expert in finding connections, Goodman has explored and articulated not only the effect of Jews and Judaism on such civilizations but fascinating links between the Puritans and Ottomans themselves.

Discovering that connection, she says, "was one of those wonderful serendipitous moments in my intellectual life."

In studying the covenant-Puritan confluence, Goodman became particularly interested in the minister Increase Mather, a figure with considerable influence on Puritan thinking who was, among other things, associated with Harvard College and the Salem witch trials.

"The Puritans believed that they were, in their words, the surrogate Israel," Goodman says. "They really, really believed it. It wasn't a metaphor for them. They believed that they had become the chosen people."

"They read and respected and internalized the stories of the Jews, of the ancient Israelites, and they believed that they were following out that history in what's called a typological fashion."

"They took on the idea that they were historically fated to be the continuation of the Jews. That was, of course, completely insane, especially from the Jewish point of view, but it was extremely respectful from an intellectual point of view. It had less to do with real Jews than with a movement called Christian Hebraism which fueled a lot of this."

She catches her breath and sighs. "Those are super-cool connections and very interesting," she says.

Later, when Goodman's academic pursuits leaned toward the Ottoman Empire, leading her to study and teach in Istanbul, she stumbled on another connection.

"I started reading about the Puritans and some of their thoughts about the Ottoman Empire," she says. "When I first started doing that it made no sense, but the truth is the Puritans were extremely cosmopolitan and very interested in what was going on in the Ottoman Empire where there were a lot of Jews."

That led to yet another fascinating discovery, Goodman's current intellectual passion.

"My next book is about Sabbatai Sevi, the false messiah. It turns out that Increase Mather, one of the greatest church intellectuals of his day, wrote a sermon series in which he actually references Sabbatai Sevi and the Jews of the Ottoman Empire. Palestine at that time was part of the Ottoman Empire and Sabbatai Sevi had gone to Jerusalem and stirred up a lot of interest all over the Ottoman Empire."

"Like many members of his consort, Mather was very interested in the ushering in of the Christian millennium. One of the prerequisites was that all the Jews would go back to the land, back to Jerusalem, and he saw Sabbatai Sevi as someone who could make that happen."

The whole thing seems outrageously incongruous — a triangular historical moment involving Muslim Turks, American Christians and a Jewish false messiah — but all these things were happening at the same time and influencing one another.

Goodman is proud of being among the first scholars to bring this story to light, and more than that, she is obviously enthused about it. "It's incredible," she says. "I was just fascinated."

She has to admit, though, with yet another laugh: "It's a somewhat peculiar way to come at it."

Both as a professor and a program director, Goodman has been bringing these and many other Jewish subjects to the students enrolled in the program.

It's been a busy two years for her, she admits, giving an appreciative nod to the program's executive manager Meghan Zibby Perea and its faculty.

"With Meghan's help I've been able to innovate a lot. We have a global seminar series and I took students to Istanbul to study Jewish-Muslim relations. I also taught a couple other classes based on Jewish-Ottoman relations."

With a grant from the Rose Community Foundation, Goodman has expanded the "Peak to Peak" program, which sends faculty members to teach Jewish and non-Jewish students in underserved areas. Another part of the program's outreach to the non-campus community is a

growing section on Jewish mysticism.

"We've been working to get a graduate certificate," Goodman adds. "We have a brand new advisory board. We've made major improvements to the post-Holocaust American

where. We know all our students by name. This is a large place and you can get lost. Our students really don't get lost — they find themselves."

Several CU Jewish studies majors are now studying in rabbinical sem-

still need attention.

"I want to leave the program bigger," she says. "I don't think it's reached its critical mass yet. I want to diversify it in terms of the disciplinary backgrounds of our faculty members. There are a lot more

'We have historians, anthropologists, music scholars, literature scholars. We're all over the map'

Judaism archive, which revolves in large part around the Jewish Renewal collections that we've made. We've streamlined the connection between the program and the archive.

"These are just some of the things that I've been up to that really have been very exciting for me and for our students."

Most of those students are undergraduates, Goodman says, adding that a sizeable number are evangelical Christians, "who are among our most wonderful and devoted students."

"We serve anywhere between 500 and 1,000 students a year in various courses and most of those students are not Jewish. We teach anyone who wants to know about the experience of the Jewish people, which is really a global experience. It's a way for people to relate to a lot of different groups, not just the Jews."

While the Jewish religion is a significant part of the curriculum at CU, Goodman emphasizes that the program is not designed to foster any form of religious observance nor does it allow itself to get involved with any Jewish extracurricular activism on campus.

"We are not an identity-building organization of any kind," Goodman says, referring to church-state separation restrictions on public universities like CU.

"We really avoid it and don't brand ourselves like that. But we really like what we do and we think what we do is different from what synagogues and JCCs do."

Unlike the minors, most of the students who major in Jewish studies are Jewish.

"The majors come to us for a combination of reasons. They're interested in Jewish culture, but they're not sure to what extent, so they take a class or two and they're hooked."

"I think they're hooked because in our interdisciplinary program when you're taking classes from us you're taking classes from people with very varied expertise. We have historians, anthropologists, music scholars, literature scholars. We're all over the map. We'd also like to branch out into the social sciences a little more."

"Our students learn about us, they take a class or two and then they come because the intellectual environment is wonderful... and because we provide a small college atmos-

inaries, Goodman says. One is in Israel doing a government internship. Another is now an intern with an anti-capital punishment advocacy group. Some, like Goodman herself, are off to law school.

"We've had students who've gone on to do all manner of things, many of them having to do with pursuing careers in Judaism and many not."

Halfway through her four-year contract as program director, Goodman isn't sure where her professional path might take her in another two years.

She set out to accomplish a lot at CU and feels that she's already achieved many of her goals. Others

Jewish studies that can be had. "I'm very interested in supporting and expanding the curriculum around areas we haven't really taught — Sephardic Judaism, Jewish politics, the Sephardic experience, Jewish film and music. I also want to deepen relationships with the community."

Goodman says she enjoys her job thoroughly, and like the serendipitous moments that have taken place in the course of her research, she feels that she is meant to be here.

"I really have a tremendous passion for it," she says. "I'm very grateful that I was given this opportunity. It's been like *beshert*."

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