

# Temple University Introduces Certificate in Jewish Secular Studies

In May, Elizabeth Manlin became the first in her class—or any class—to graduate with a certificate in Jewish Secular Studies. But she wasn't the only one marking the occasion. Ms. Manlin, an honors student at Temple University, shared the achievement with Dr. Laura Levitt and Dr. Miriam Peskowitz—two members of the Jewish Studies faculty at Temple who helped bring the program into existence.



Dr. Laura Levitt

When they began planning the program three years ago, Dr. Levitt envisioned it as a “mini-minor”: four courses in Jewish secularism, including one required “core” course and a possible internship. She and Dr. Peskowitz had worked together before, collaborating on a book that they co-edited (*Judaism since Gender*); but creating a program from scratch posed a different kind of challenge.

“At every step there was paperwork, questions and committees to answer,” said Dr. Levitt, the director of Jewish Studies at Temple. “Miriam played an instrumental role in writing the various documents and support materials to get official approval at Temple.”

For Dr. Levitt, the program was a way to bring “intellectual cohesiveness” to the study of Jewish secularism, which is seldom taught as its own subject. “We designed this to appeal to students who want to do Jewish Studies but don't see this as a career path,” said Dr. Levitt. Thus, the program is open to all students who want to do “sustained work in Jewish Studies.”

“Of course, it's also available for

Jewish Studies majors and minors,” said Dr. Levitt, who, along with Dr. Peskowitz, saw the program through a long gestation. Before 2005, Jewish Studies majors could choose between religion and history concentrations. A concept of Jewish secularism could best be acquired piecemeal. So Dr. Levitt pitched the idea, along with a detailed proposal, to the Posen Foundation. Once it was approved (and after a lengthy vetting by Temple University), the program was initiated last year.

At present, Temple's new concentration is the first of its kind in an American college or university. In that sense, it marks not only a leap for Temple University but a step in the evolution of Jewish Studies, a field that barely existed 40 years ago, and, until the 1970's, was mostly restricted to Holocaust Studies.

Today that is no longer the case—142 institutions now offer some kind of degree in Jewish Studies, whether a bachelor's degree, a master's, a doctorate, or a certificate, according to the Association for Jewish Studies. But few of those schools approach Jewish secularism as a discrete subject, and even fewer devote the kind of resources, and academic rigor, that Temple University has.

That commitment was apparent in Dr. Levitt's proposal, which included plans to expand Temple's Jewish Studies website with links and a discussion board, creating a formidable resource for students interested in Jewish secularism. Dr. Levitt also sought to integrate the new concentration into Temple's existing framework, and to develop new courses in Secular Jewish Studies.

It was with this last idea that the Posen Foundation, through its signature grant project, provided additional help. In the fall of 2003, Temple received \$50,000 towards developing and teaching new courses in Jewish sec-

ularism. The result was “Jewish Secularism and Jewish Civilization,” a core course that surveys Jewish ideas and cultures from the Second Temple period to the present.

Students must take the core course, but aside from that, they have freedom to cherry-pick courses from Temple's Jewish Studies catalogue, including four new courses related to Jewish secularism. An internship with a local community organization can count towards the three electives that are required.

For her part, Ms. Manlin began taking Jewish Studies courses as an underclassman—credits that counted retroactively towards her certificate. The program is still growing, thanks to positive reactions to both the courses and Dr. Levitt. “Wonderful and brilliant,” a student gushed on the website [ratemyprofessors.com](http://ratemyprofessors.com)—an admittedly subjective index of a professor's teaching ability. “Love her love her love her,” another student wrote. (A more objective measure may be that enrollment topped 50 in the core course last year.)

As Dr. Levitt makes clear, she and Dr. Peskowitz couldn't have created the program by themselves. First, there was the financial largesse of the Posen Foundation. Second, there was the cooperation from Temple University and the Temple faculty. (Eleven professors from seven different departments have taught courses now included in the concentration.) Rebecca Alpert, the chair of the Religion department at Temple, did a great deal of administrative work (“Rebecca has been a great supporter and helper with this,” Dr. Levitt said) and professor Elliot Ratzman, a doctoral candidate in Modern Jewish Thought at Princeton, taught the inaugural core course.

And last but not least, there was the enthusiasm of students like Ms. Manlin, the first at Temple and in the country to graduate with a certificate in Jewish Secular Studies. ☸