

## Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt

*Peter J. Haas*

JEWISH STUDIES AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY FORMALLY BEGAN IN 1949, when Samuel Sandmel arrived to become the first instructor of Judaica at the University. The appointment of Sandmel was the result of a vision that the new chancellor, Harvie Branscomb, brought with him from Duke University. Branscomb sought to bring to theological education a new understanding of Judaism as a living religious tradition. In many ways, then, the story of Jewish studies at Vanderbilt has to be seen in light of the new and unprecedented appointment in Jewish studies made in 1943 by Branscomb at Duke University.

Duke was in many ways an ideal institution for innovation in religious and theological study. Founded in 1924, Duke quickly gained national recognition, finding a place alongside, or even in front of, other more traditional universities in the South. Despite its national recognition, however, Duke was still enough of a southern school to require courses in religion. By 1942, Branscomb had decided that such courses should address not only Christianity, but Judaism as well. Trained in the New Testament, Branscomb was especially aware of the importance of Judaism in the formation of Christianity. He therefore set out to establish a program that would introduce his students to the living reality of the Jewish religion.

Toward this end, Branscomb began his campaign by approaching the local Jewish community in Durham for funds. With some financial backing in hand,

he then set out to search for a suitable candidate for such an unprecedented professorship. The appointee was expected to be both a person who could present Judaism to the students through teaching and scholarship, and also, in Branscomb's words, "someone thoroughly representative of the religious spirit of Judaism."<sup>1</sup> Although rabbinic ordination was not an explicit requirement, it is significant that the first nominee for the position, Theodor Gaster, was ultimately turned down when he announced that he was an agnostic. The professorship went eventually to Judah Goldin.<sup>2</sup> It was this early experience in reconceptualizing and establishing a chair in Jewish studies that Branscomb brought with him when he became Chancellor of Vanderbilt University in 1946.

These developments begun at Duke and continued at Vanderbilt need to be understood in the larger context of the development of the American Jewish community and the emergence of Jewish intellectual life on American university campuses in the first half of the twentieth century. The Jewish community had remained small and highly assimilated throughout most of the nineteenth century. It was only in the 1880s that large numbers of traditionally observant Eastern European Jews streamed to America and re-created on American soil a reflection of the vibrant Jewish religious and cultural life that had developed in Europe. This wave of immigration, which lasted until about 1920, increased the Jewish population of the United States from barely a quarter of a million to some three million. Although this massive immigrant population remained largely isolated and ghettoized, this was not true of their children and grandchildren. The second and third generation moved out of the Yiddish-speaking ghettos and in ever increasing numbers went to colleges and professional schools. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, these American-born Jews had made their way into American society and brought their deep Jewish identities with them into American public life. Not surprisingly, as this generation of Jews grew, prospered, and matured, so did the presence of Judaism as a religious and cultural entity grow and mature on the American university scene. These sociological developments, along with the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust and the increasing prominence of Zionism, worked together to generate new popular and theological interest in Judaism as a living religious and cultural force, not just a religion that died two millennia before.

These trends coincided with the maturation of Jewish studies in American universities. The first university positions in Judaism appeared in America only at the end of the nineteenth century, made possible because of a number of developments within the university world itself. Perhaps of greatest significance was the secularization of American academia. Most institutions of higher education had been founded by religious denominations and still considered the teaching of Christianity and the training of Christian clergy to be their primary

missions. Although many taught Hebrew and Old Testament as part of their ministerial training, none really taught Judaism as such. But as universities broke from denominational affiliation, they gained the opportunity to include in their curricula sympathetic treatments of religious traditions other than Christianity. The study of Judaism benefited in particular because of certain developments within Protestant scholarship that led to a growing appreciation of the history of Christianity and especially of the importance of the Jewish background of much of the New Testament and the early church. Added to the arrival of masses of Jews, among them Jewish scholars trained in European universities, these trends led by the turn of the century to the creation of positions dedicated specifically to Jewish studies in several major universities.

The earliest such chair appeared at Cornell, which hired Felix Adler, unsuccessful heir apparent to his father's pulpit at Temple Emanuel in New York, in 1874 to teach Hebrew and Oriental Literature. This position lasted only about three years, however. But other universities soon followed Cornell's lead, with more permanent results. Positions in Semitic studies were established in the late 1880s by the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, the University of California, and the University of Chicago, all of which hired prominent rabbis to teach. Harvard and Johns Hopkins also had positions in Semitics, although these were not originally staffed by Jews.<sup>3</sup> In all events, by the 1940s, when Branscomb began to think about the nature of Jewish studies at Duke, only six positions existed in the country, all of them with a philological rather than a theological or "religious" focus. It was this paradigm that Branscomb proposed to challenge.

Branscomb's conception of a different mode of Jewish studies for the Duke appointment apparently grew out of a number of factors that had taken shape by the 1940s: the racial war of the Nazis in Europe, the increasing number of Jewish students attending university, and the publication of George Foot Moore's *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*,<sup>4</sup> which argued that Judaism had been systematically distorted and misrepresented by Protestant scholarship. The exact ways in which these affected Branscomb are hard to determine, but it is clear that by 1943 Branscomb had convinced the faculty to establish a position in Jewish studies that was unprecedented. It would be designed to teach Judaism as a living and vibrant religion, not merely a fossil worthy of historical dissection. It is of course for precisely this reason that Gaster's announcement of his agnosticism doomed his chances for the position. Branscomb had in mind not only a scholar but also a person who could serve as a credible advocate and spokesperson for Judaism as a living religious tradition.

These events at Duke set the stage for Branscomb's activities with regard to Jewish studies when he arrived on the Vanderbilt campus in 1946. Vanderbilt,

like Duke, seemed to offer fertile ground for Branscomb's revolutionary vision. The university had a long history of religious and theological education, with special concern for the education of ministers. Despite the break with the church, Vanderbilt continued to be, like Duke, an institution where religion was an important academic concern. Thus, in 1949, the faculty accepted Branscomb's arguments for having Jewish studies in the university. The position was to be in the Graduate School with courses listed both in the College of Arts and Science and the School of Religion, an arrangement that would remain in place for the next thirty years. Branscomb then turned to funding. Having succeeded in securing a three-year grant from the Carnegie Foundation to support at least part of the salary, he proceeded to search for an appropriate occupant.<sup>5</sup>

Samuel Sandmel was an ideal reflection of Branscomb's interest in having both a university-trained scholar and an "advocate" of modern Judaism. He was a Reform rabbi, having received ordination from Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati in 1937. After a brief stint in the congregational rabbinate, Sandmel took positions as Hillel director, first at the University of North Carolina and then at Duke. It was in this latter capacity that Branscomb first came to know Sandmel. But the relationship at Duke was short-lived; in 1942, Sandmel left Duke to serve as a Jewish chaplain in the Navy. After the end of World War II, Sandmel attended Yale, where he earned a Ph.D. in New Testament studies under Erwin Goodenough in 1949. It was just as he was completing his work at Yale that Branscomb began looking for a promising young scholar to fill the new position at Vanderbilt. The young Hillel director-turned Ph.D. came immediately to mind because he combined the scholarship and the religious commitment that Branscomb liked. In short order, Branscomb convinced Sandmel to come to Vanderbilt as associate professor of Jewish Literature and Thought. So in 1949, Sandmel began his tenure at Vanderbilt, teaching a course on the History and Institutions of Judaism. He went on to develop courses in Judaism in the New Testament Period, Hellenistic Judaism, and Post-Biblical Hebrew.

Vanderbilt's commitment to Jewish studies was reflected also by developments in its library. Already before Branscomb's appointment as chancellor, the local community had begun to support the acquisition of books of Jewish interest. Sarah Lowenstein Teitelbaum provided funding in 1944 for the University to purchase the library of the recently deceased scholar of early Judaism, Ismar Elbogen. Elbogen had taught Jewish history at the renowned Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums in Berlin until the Nazis came to power in 1933. He then moved to the United States, where he taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York until his death in 1943. His professional library contained more than two thousand books. In bringing the library of this eminent Jewish scholar to Nashville, Vanderbilt signaled its seriousness about

Jewish studies. The deep commitment on the part of the library to building up a Judaica collection is nicely illustrated by a statement made at the time of the purchase by Frederick Kuhlman, then director of the Joint University Libraries:

I need not tell you how important it is that there should be intensive open-minded study of the problem of the Jew, for if reason, truth, and justice are to prevail in the treatment of the Jews the world over, then we must combat ignorance, misrepresentation, and hate with education and enlightenment based upon the truth and upon goodwill. . . . New centers of Jewish learning are urgently needed. America must become one of the sanctuaries of Jewish scholarship to give the proper perspective for the Jews and the values for which [Elbogen's] best leadership has stood.<sup>6</sup>

The Elbogen collection was only the beginning. In 1951, Sandmel helped procure for the library a collection of some 160 books on the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo from the personal library collection of Howard Lehman Goodhart. This addition to the library seemed to indicate that Vanderbilt was committed to making Jewish studies a major presence in the intellectual life of the campus.

As it turned out, Sandmel remained at Vanderbilt only three years. In 1952 he joined the faculty of his alma mater, HUC. During his short tenure, however, he earned Jewish studies a solid place on campus and worked to develop the budding Judaica collection in the library. Upon Sandmel's departure, Branscomb turned to Lou Hackett Silberman, a colleague of Sandmel, to fill the position. Silberman seemed a logical choice as successor because he and Sandmel had many characteristics in common. In fact, the two had shared some time together at HUC in Cincinnati. Silberman received ordination and earned his Bachelor of Hebrew Letters degree in 1939, two years after Sandmel. After his ordination, Silberman stayed on at HUC for several more years, receiving Master and Doctor of Hebrew Letters degrees in 1941 and 1943, respectively. From there Silberman, like Sandmel, began his career as a pulpit rabbi, working with congregations in Dallas and Omaha. Like Sandmel, Silberman combined both scholarly training and active leadership in the Jewish community. He was thus an obvious choice for the position as Branscomb had conceived it.

Silberman took over Sandmel's position in the Vanderbilt Graduate School in 1952. He continued Sandmel's practice of teaching courses in Judaism in the New Testament period and in post-biblical Hebrew. He also began to offer courses for undergraduates, although these were only available for elective credit because no major in Jewish studies, or even religious studies, yet existed. Among

his undergraduate courses were History of the Jewish People, The Literature of Judaism, and Jewish Religious Thought. He also began teaching a course in Psalms for the School of Religion and later developed courses in the newly discovered Dead Sea Scrolls. As with Sandmel's work, his courses, both in terms of content and in terms of listing, were grouped in the biblical area. This dovetailed nicely with the predominant Divinity School paradigm of the time that Judaism was an "Old Testament" religion. It comes as no surprise, then, that Jewish studies at Vanderbilt continued to focus on the period around the time of the emergence of early Christianity. But Silberman was also keenly interested in Jewish-Christian dialogue and did much to foster such encounters at the Divinity School.

Funding continued to be a problem for the position, because the original Carnegie grant ran out after three years. Because the Nashville Jewish community was relatively small, little support could be expected to come from it. So Branscomb looked for outside sources of funding and succeeded in persuading the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation to provide at least partial support. In consequence, when Silberman was promoted in 1955, he was given the title Hillel Professor of Jewish Literature and Thought on the Graduate School faculty. Silberman became officially part of the Divinity School faculty in 1964, although he had had an office in the school and had been at least informally acknowledged as a member of the faculty from the time of his appointment.

Funding from the Hillel Foundation remained fairly constant until the mid-1960s, when it began a steady decline. Over the next decade, the College of Arts and Science gradually assumed a greater and greater proportion of the cost of the position. When budgetary constraints at Hillel finally forced the agency to terminate all financial support for the position in 1976, the University turned to the Nashville Jewish community. Realizing the importance of Jewish studies at Vanderbilt for the community at large, the Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee rose to the challenge and began to make regular annual contributions to the "Hillel Chair." At this same time, the Federation also began to provide partial support for an instructor in Modern Hebrew. These contributions lasted, with some fluctuations, until 1991. Beginning in 1992, only one Federation allocation was made for Jewish studies at Vanderbilt, to be split between the professorship and the Hebrew program, as the University saw fit. In practice, funding for the professorship was assumed entirely by the College, while Modern Hebrew, with its often very modest enrollments, was funded on a more or less equal basis by the College and the Federation allocation.

A number of important developments occurred during Silberman's long tenure at Vanderbilt. Most significantly, the library's Judaica collection grew impressively. Shortly after the purchase of the Elbogen library, family and friends

of Lee J. Lowenthal, a member of the Board of Trust, established a book fund to purchase Judaica materials. The main force behind the establishment of this fund was a relative, Mary Jane Werthan, who would later become the first woman member of the Board of Trust. The mandate of the fund was to purchase books published since 1914, especially with materials dealing with the crisis of Jewish life in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. The fund was used to provide books for the Judaica collection until 1960, when it was exhausted.

The end of the Lowenthal fund did not mean the end of significant acquisitions in Judaica, however. The collection received a tremendous boost in 1968 with the purchase of the private library of Arno Poebel. Although this was not a Judaica collection itself, it did contain a number of books relevant to the Judaica collection, strengthening in particular the library's holdings in Semitic language and archaeology. By 1971, Vanderbilt was able to boast that its Judaica collection numbered more than 6,300 volumes, making it one of the most significant in the Southeast.

Other changes were afoot as well. In 1967, Silberman and others succeeded in establishing an undergraduate Department of Religious Studies. From that point on he held appointments in both the College of Arts and Science and the Divinity School. This also opened the possibility for Jewish studies to be offered as part of a religious studies major, and eventually as a minor or major in its own right. At roughly the same time, the Divinity School and B'nai B'rith reached an agreement to hold an annual Graduate Summer Institute on Judaism on campus. It brought to campus some thirty college, university, and seminary professors in theology and religious studies, plus teaching faculty, for a ten-day intensive learning experience. Silberman contributed each year a course on Rabbinic Judaism. The Institute was first held in 1969 and continued annually through 1979.

In the late 1970s two further developments occurred. The first was the creation of the Holocaust Lecture Series in 1978. The prime mover in establishing this series was the University Chaplain, Beverly Asbury. Drawing on both University and community support, it soon became the longest running university-based series of its kind. Over the years, it brought to the campus such scholars and lecturers as Elie Wiesel, Christopher Browning, Jan Karski, and Telford Taylor, thus bringing the Holocaust and its theological implications into the public conversation of the University and the Divinity School. This was accompanied in 1979 by the first course in the Holocaust, developed by Silberman.

Central to the study of Judaism, of course, is the study of the Hebrew language. The study of Biblical Hebrew had been part of the School of Religion from the very beginning. But the Hebrew language continued to be used and to develop even after the Bible was completed. As we have already seen, Sandmel

introduced almost immediately upon his arrival at Vanderbilt a course in post-biblical Hebrew, meaning the Hebrew of classical Jewish texts such as the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash. Modern spoken Hebrew, however, remained beyond the horizon of Vanderbilt's interests until after the undergraduate department was established and a new constituency for Jewish studies began to form. The earliest course in Modern Hebrew was offered in 1974–75 under the auspices of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, which was already offering instruction in Arabic. The next year, coincident with the beginning of partial Federation funding, Modern Hebrew became a separate listing. Aviva Dekel, a native Israeli living in Nashville, was hired at adjunct level to teach both beginning and intermediate Modern Hebrew. Upon her departure in 1985, the course was taken over by Miriam Halachmi, another native Hebrew speaker living in Nashville, who also served as educational director of the Conservative West End Synagogue. Although these courses were open to Divinity and graduate students, enrollment figures show that very few such students at first had an interest in the language. This changed in the early 1990s as Modern Hebrew became more and more of a significant research language in such fields as biblical studies and Ancient Near East history. Enrollments remained low enough, however, for the College to make continuation of instruction contingent on partial funding from the outside.

These modest developments in Jewish studies at Vanderbilt were occurring during a time of considerable growth of Jewish studies in other American universities. It will be recalled that in 1949, when Sandmel came, Vanderbilt was one of fewer than a dozen universities that offered any courses in Jewish studies, and nearly the only one that taught Judaism as a living religious tradition. But by the late 1970s, the Association for Jewish Studies counted more than 350 college and university faculty members teaching in a variety of institutions from large public universities to small liberal arts colleges, some 124 of whom had already achieved the status of tenured faculty members in the field.<sup>7</sup> Even more remarkable, by this time several universities had separate full departments or programs in Jewish studies. Scholarly journals devoted specifically to the subject were appearing in ever larger numbers, and Jewish studies sessions were becoming regular features of scholarly associations such as the American Academy of Religion and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. The trends visible already in the early 1970s continued over the next two decades. By 1999, significant Jewish studies programs with large and varied faculty existed in more than fifty major universities, including several in the Southeast such as Duke, Emory University, University of Virginia, University of Florida, and Tulane University. Even the University of Tennessee established chairs in Jewish studies in Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Memphis. By the mid-1990s four national Jewish stud-

ies organizations existed and nearly two dozen major scholarly journals were being published. Jewish studies programs have become a significant and productive presence on the American university scene.

Unfortunately, Vanderbilt failed to keep pace. The position in Jewish studies remained split between the Divinity School and the undergraduate College of Arts and Science, thus restricting the number of courses that could be offered in each school. Although library resources had grown considerably, the actual course offerings in Jewish studies had changed little since Sandmel's days. Only near the end of Silberman's career were efforts made to raise money to fund a dedicated chair in Jewish studies.

With Silberman's retirement in 1980, Peter J. Haas was appointed to a three-year position in the College of Arts and Science to bridge the gap until money for the fully endowed chair was raised. Like his predecessors, Haas was an ordainee in the Reform rabbinate from HUC in Cincinnati, and in fact had studied early Judaism there under Sandmel. After ordination, Haas, like Sandmel before him, became a military chaplain, serving in the U.S. Army for three years. Following military duty, Haas earned his Ph.D. in History of Religions at Brown University as a student of Jacob Neusner. Haas's appointment marked a change in the pattern of Jewish studies at Vanderbilt in that his position was located completely in the College of Arts and Science. He taught one graduate seminar a year for the Graduate Department of Religion and cross-listed other courses to make them available to graduate and divinity students. Graduate seminars included courses in Judaism in New Testament Times, Dead Sea Scrolls, and various courses in Rabbinic literature, thus carrying forward the pattern established by Sandmel and Silberman. Other courses, offered mainly at the undergraduate level, included Introduction to Judaism, Jewish Ethics, and The Holocaust.

As it turned out, money for the full endowment did not materialize within the time allotted, although a significant gift had been made. Haas's three-year appointment eventually stretched into four years and then seven years, at which point it became a tenure-track position. Jewish studies thus became a regular part of the offerings of the Department of Religious Studies. Meanwhile, efforts continued to raise money for Jewish studies and to complete the endowment for a full chair. The process was still incomplete when Haas left the position in December 1999 to take up the Abba Hillel Silver chair at Case Western Reserve University.

Developments in the library continued apace. A significant gift was made in 1988 by the Raymond Zimmerman Family Fund in memory of his parents Harry and Mary Zimmerman. This gift enabled the library to expand the Judaica collection in a number of areas. The collection was further enhanced in 1991

with the purchase of the Nahum Glatzer library, acquired with money provided by the University. Besides books in Midrash and modern Jewish history and thought, the purchase brought to Vanderbilt a number of Nahum Glatzer's private collections, including part of the correspondence between Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber that became the basis for Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*.<sup>8</sup> Together these developments allowed the library to continue its claim to have one of the most significant Judaica collections in the Southeast.

Several other developments from the 1980s seemed to move Vanderbilt toward a more mature program in Jewish studies. In 1969, Randall Falk, senior rabbi of the then only Reform Jewish congregation in Nashville, completed his Doctor of Divinity degree at the Divinity School. His thesis was entitled "The Philosophy of Martin Buber on Jewish-Christian Relations, and Its Relevance for the Contemporary American Community." In 1986–87 Falk began to be listed in the Divinity School catalogue as lecturer in Jewish Studies. He first was involved in a team-taught course with Walter Harrelson, *Jews and Christians: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Concerns*; another followed, also with Harrelson and, later, with Dean Joe Hough, on *Jews and Christians: In Pursuit of Social Justice*. Soon he was teaching an additional course each year for the school on a specifically Jewish theme, including *Torah, The Religious and Institutional History of the Jewish People, and Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought*. Falk's involvement in the school was supported by a regular grant from the Jewish Chautauqua Society. Between Rabbi Falk and Professor Haas, Divinity students had regular offerings in Jewish studies.

Further enrichment came in 1994, when Amy-Jill Levine was appointed to the Divinity faculty. Although her field was New Testament rather than Jewish studies, her presence provided a powerful Jewish voice in the school and the Graduate Department of Religion. As head of the Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender, and Sexuality, she has brought a number of academicians, including Jewish scholars, to campus for lectures and colloquia. At the same time, her husband, Jay Geller, was offered an appointment as lecturer in the undergraduate Department of Religious Studies, where he offered courses in the Holocaust and in nineteenth-century thought and anti-Semitism. His courses thus supplemented the Judaic courses already being offered.

These appointments had an impact on the undergraduate college as well. Along with two professors of Judeo-Arabic thought located in the Philosophy Department, Idit Dobbs-Weinstein and Lenn Goodman, there was now a sufficient density of undergraduate courses in Jewish studies to make possible the creation of an undergraduate minor in Jewish studies. In addition, the creation of the program in the History and Critical Theories of Religion (HACTOR) in the Graduate Department of Religion gave a context within which graduate

work in Jewish studies might take place. Besides offering new possibilities for graduate study, these two initiatives provided a framework within which it became possible for the first time to conceive of working toward the formation of a full undergraduate program, with a major, in Jewish studies.

A significant initiative to enrich Jewish studies in the Divinity School came to fruition in 1997 with the reception of a major gift allowing for the establishment of the Mary Jane Werthan Professorship of Jewish Studies. After a lengthy national search, Jack Sasson was named as the first occupant of the chair, to begin teaching in the fall of 1999. Since Sasson's area is Ancient Near East history, his affiliation was with the field of Hebrew Bible. His appointment dovetailed nicely with a growing relationship taking shape between the Divinity School and the Megiddo archeological dig in Israel. This relationship had its beginning in 1997 when a number of graduate students took part in a dig at Megiddo and returned to Vanderbilt determined to recruit other students for further digs. A very enthusiastic group participated in the dig in the summer of 1998, and a second group went over, this time to Jaffa, in 1999. Both groups received subsidies from a generous gift made by Rabbi Falk and his wife Edna. As a result of the demonstrated interest in archaeology, Vanderbilt in 1999 signed on as a formal member of the Megiddo Expedition Consortium. These excursions, of course, also exposed the students to the vibrant Jewish life of the modern state of Israel.

It has been more than fifty years since Chancellor Branscomb's vision for a modern approach to Jewish studies at Vanderbilt brought its first Judaica scholar, Samuel Sandmel, to campus. Since then Jewish studies has had a significant presence in the Divinity School and the graduate program, a presence now significantly enhanced by new faculty appointments and a highly developed library collection. Branscomb could not but be proud of the legacy he left to Vanderbilt.

## CHAPTER 12

1. Paul Ritterband and Harold Wechsler, *Jewish Learning in American Universities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 127.
2. *Ibid.*, 127–28.
3. *Ibid.*, 23–30, 45ff.
4. George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927–30).
5. Paul K. Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 740–41, 489.
6. Letter to Mrs. Elbogen, December 6, 1944, cited in David Hopkins, *A Concise History of the Judaica Library* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Divinity Library, 1987).
7. Ritterband and Wechsler, *Jewish Learning*, 233.
8. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 2d ed. (1930), originally published as *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1921).