

## Classes in Judaic Studies, Drawing a Non-Jewish Class

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

FOR Shivani Subryan, the whole thing started with a wig. There was this guidance counselor at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, a woman named Kornhaber, and she wore a blond wig. And when Shivani was a junior or senior there in the late 1990's, she heard all the whispers from her classmates about the reason. Mrs. Kornhaber was bald. No, Mrs. Kornhaber had cancer.

The counselor looked pretty healthy and normal to Shivani, though. She had a different idea, a vague sense that the wig had something to do with the fact Mrs. Kornhaber was Jewish. Not that Shivani knew much about Jews. She was an immigrant from Guyana of Indian ancestry, a resident of a mostly Latino neighborhood along the Grand Concourse, a neighborhood that hadn't been Jewish for 40 years, more than twice as long as Shivani had been alive.

That question about the wig, that stray bit of curiosity, kept rattling around Shivani's brain as she entered City College and took up a major in psychology. So last winter, having finished most of her required classes, she finally indulged the wonderment and registered for a course in Jewish studies on films about the Holocaust.

Intrigued and affected by that introduction, she interned for academic credit over the summer with the Jewish Community Relations Council. Then, this fall, she signed up for classes in Holocaust history and Jewish life in New York. There she learned that Mrs. Kornhaber wore the wig in compliance with Jewish religious law instructing that a married woman not show her real hair to any man except her husband.

Along the way, Shivani declared a second major in Jewish studies. To fulfill it, she will take no less than four Jewish studies classes next spring, her final semester. "People ask me all the time: 'Are you Jewish? Where are you from?' " she said after class one day last week. "And I tell them it's not about being Jewish. It's about exploration."

Her exploration typifies a striking trend at City College and in Jewish studies nationally - its appeal to gentiles. Of the 250 students enrolled in Jewish studies classes at City College, 26 of them majoring and 160 minoring in the field, some 95 percent are not Jewish, according to Prof. Roy Mittelman, the director of the program. The more than 100 colleges and universities offering Jewish studies include such Catholic institutions as Fordham and Scranton, the Quaker-based Earlham College in Indiana, and public ones like the University of Kentucky and Portland State in Oregon that are far from any sizable Jewish community.

This explosion in Jewish studies, a discipline that barely existed 35 years ago, reflects a confluence of forces: the roots-consciousness that gave rise to all sorts of ethnic studies programs in the late 1960's; the emergence of Jewish family foundations eager to endow the programs; and the growing popularity of Jewish parochial schools covering the elementary and secondary grades. At the outset, at least, Jewish studies was by Jews, about Jews, for Jews.

"No. 1 was the desire to reach Jewish kids," said Judith Baskin, the president of the Association for Jewish Studies, which has 1,500 professors and graduate students as members. "No. 2 was to demonstrate that Jewish studies has a place in the academic curriculum as part of Western civilization. No. 3 was that it would increase tolerance if non-Jewish students learn about the Jewish experience."

The recent fascination of gentiles with Jewish studies, then, arrived as a pleasant, and wholly unexpected, shock. Nowhere does this phenomenon carry greater historical resonance than at City College, an institution deeply intertwined with the history of American Jewry.

In the decades before World War II, when many elite universities held quotas on Jewish students, City became known as "the poor man's Harvard," the launching pad for intellectuals like Irving Howe and Irving Kristol. By the 1980's, with Jews now flocking to the colleges that formerly had barred them and City College a predominantly nonwhite school, it suffered national notoriety for the anti-Semitic diatribes of Leonard Jeffries, a tenured professor of black studies.

THE success of Professor Mittelman's program represents a third wave, part of the overall resurgence of City College. While the Jewish studies courses do attract a few Jews, most of them immigrants from the former Soviet Union, they overwhelmingly draw those self-described explorers like Shivani Subryan.

ALONGSIDE her in Rabbi Bob Kaplan's class on Jewish life in New York on a recent morning sat immigrants from Colombia, Slovakia, South Korea and the Dominican Republic. As they discussed Jewish poverty on the Lower East Side, Jewish disapproval of interfaith marriage and the struggle to learn English, as depicted in Leo Rosten's novel "The Education of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N," they were by inference learning about their own generation of new Americans.

"The kids see Jews as a successful immigrant group and are interested in what happened," Rabbi Kaplan said. "I always get asked, 'How did you guys do it?'"

More than pragmatism alone, though, has brought non-Jews into the classes, which range in content from theology to history to film and literature. Ardent Christians such as Jichan Kim, an immigrant from South Korea, and Jameelah Lewis, an African-American raised in Ohio, came seeking the Judaic roots of their faith and their savior. Kebba Jallow, an immigrant from Gambia, was motivated paradoxically by having heard so many anti-Jewish slurs in America.

"I had a weird curiosity because I'd accepted all those ideas - Jews are cheap, Jews are always whining about the Holocaust," he recalled. "I didn't have the knowledge to contest it. The classes redefined the stereotypes for me. They were just an eye-opener."

Sinia Randolph, a history major from Harlem, interviewed an aging survivor as part of her research for Professor Mittelman's class in the Holocaust. The experience changed her way of viewing the tragedies of Jews and African-Americans, which all too often have served as the basis of an invidious game of genocide one-upmanship.

"I know that a lot of time African-Americans think slavery was worst, and maybe deep down I did," she said. "I mean I knew of Hitler and the six million, but that was as far as it went. Coming into this class, I've realized that the suffering is the same. The same inhumanity. The same cruelty."

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