Critique

Adelman's historical account of the rise and development of Jewish studies in European and American universities has implications not only for the current debate regarding the appropriateness and place of Jewish studies programs in the academy but also for the place of ethnic studies in university curricula in general. I believe the most compelling argument against ethnic studies programs in higher education charges them with institutionalizing specific ideologies and thus undermining the self-critical investigation of divergent positions within a traditional discipline. But this charge raises an equally troublesome presupposition: that courses of study can and should be compartmentalized into a specific "discipline" or "field." With ethnic studies our more traditional notions of "field" collapse, because ethnic studies, by their very nature, are interdisciplinary, the very concept of which challenges scholarship based on traditional canons. Adelman, I believe, addresses both these concerns quite effectively in his argument for a critically fashioned methodology with which universities can successfully integrate Jewish studies (and by extension, ethnic studies in general) into traditional curricula.

The development and implementation of Jewish studies curricula have implications for ethnic studies programs in general (and may even, in a certain context, be regarded as a subset of ethnic studies). Jewish studies programs, in particular, raise even more complex issues than do other programs that, historically, we have defined as ethnic or minority. Although Adelman provides a workable definition of Jewish studies—"the critical study of the history, literature, and thought of the Jewish people since the biblical period"—unless we are speaking of Hebraic studies, Yiddish language and literature, or Israeli scholarship per se, we get into trouble with the definition of Jewish studies, because Jewish writers and scholars have for centuries been well-ensconced in our corpus of literary works. Is, for example, the "Jewish experience" in America since World War II as distinct from mainstream American culture as it was prior to that period of changing attitudes and involvement? In America, Jews, much more rapidly and effectively than other immigrant groups, have assimilated into the economic and cultural mainstreams of society and have had such a formative influence on intellectual culture that it is difficult to separate Jewish solely on religious grounds. Yet, it seems safe to say that those who advocate Jewish studies programs don't want to make Jewish studies into only religious studies. We want, instead, to offer courses in the history, politics, culture, and literature of the Jews. However, this ambition remains a problem. How, for example, are we to define a Jewish writer in America? Robert Alter, in *After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969, p. 18) makes this point: "It is by no means clear what sense is to be made of the Jewishness of a writer who neither uses a uniquely Jewish language, nor describes a distinctively Jewish milieu, nor draws upon

literary traditions that are recognizably Jewish." And so, if our intention is to construct a coherent program of study, do we include only those writers, let's say, who express explicit Jewish issues, themes, and political concerns in their works, or who can claim Jewish identity?

Thus, the definition of a uniquely "Jewish" point of view becomes virtually artificial, since, as Leon Yudkin points out in *Jewish Writing and Identity in the Twentieth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982, 112), "the Jewish voice is not only heard but increasingly accepted as the norm." If, indeed, Yudkin is correct, and the Jewish voice is no longer distinct, no longer on the "periphery" of American culture, then how can we isolate this voice and make it the center of a coherent and separate program? What would be the consequences of distinguishing such a program if any specific grounds for doing so are necessarily arbitrary and exclusive? Would such a program, by its self-consciously "political" nature, ideologize or, worse yet, sentimentalize the family of texts, topics, and myths we call "Jewish"?

Not so, argues Adelman, if we provide a format for a critical approach to the newly created discipline. The only way Jewish studies can find a place in the academy, a place of integrity and coherence, is if it becomes more than a subject, but a methodological process of inquiry as well, a study that is fluid and dynamic, one that questions its own traditions. Such programs, based on a critical and comparative methodological approach, a dialogue in which traditional values and policies are challenged, are, indeed, viable. Adelman's point that "the academic study of the Jewish people is the only opportunity to challenge tendentious, polemical, and self-serving interpretations of the Jewish experience" is well-taken. Only if the study turns in on itself, so to speak, criticizes its own assumptions, can we hope to secure the kind of academic integrity we expect from our institutions.

—Victoria Aarons