

# Covenant

## TEACHING ABOUT ISRAEL IN THE BIBLE BELT: AN EXPERIMENTAL COURSE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

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### **Abstract:**

This article explains the evolution of an academic course about the State of Israel at a medium-size public university in the American rural South. It defines the context in which I teach and describes my experience meeting the curricular needs of our students. Most are Fundamentalist Protestants and are representative of a much larger constituency supporting Israel within the American political context.

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In the spring of 2005 I was invited by the Honors Program at my home institution, the University of West Georgia in Carrollton, Georgia, to offer our first course specifically about modern Israel. This article defines the context in which I teach and describes my experience creating a curriculum to meet the needs of our students.

The West Georgia region is sometimes defined as “the buckle on the Bible Belt.” It lies halfway between Atlanta, Georgia and Birmingham, Alabama. It is often confused with Atlanta proper, which is located fifty-five miles to the east and is definitely not the rural South. Atlanta is a major international, overwhelmingly Democratic, city in an overwhelmingly Republican state. In the words of former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young, “You take Atlanta out of Georgia, you got Mississippi.”<sup>1</sup> West Georgia is also not the world of Emory University Professors Kenneth W. Stein, Deborah Lipstadt, David Blumenthal, and especially Jimmy Carter, who has been involved in an ongoing flap about Israel.<sup>2</sup>

The West Georgia region is approximately the size of the State of Rhode Island. It has a population of about 900,000 people who live between the western suburbs of Atlanta, the

southern border of Tennessee, and the eastern border counties of Alabama. The state-sponsored University of West Georgia services many of these Alabama residents who enjoy reciprocal in-state tuition benefits within Georgia. In that way Alabamans can study a subject which is not offered in their local state colleges and universities, like the History of Modern Israel.

In terms of religious makeup, Baptists predominate in West Georgia as they do in most of the South. They constitute a plurality of about 37% in our region. Baptists subdivide into predominantly Black or White congregations. The White congregants, like the Jews, have in turn subdivided into “Orthodox,” “Conservative,” and “Reform” factions, known locally and informally as the “Inerrancy faction,” “the Peace Committee,” and “Concerned Southern Baptists.” In the West Georgia region the “Inerrancy faction”--the Orthodox equivalent--prevails. The remaining 63% of the regional religious population is dominated by other Fundamentalist Protestant sects including the Church of God, Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Disciples of Christ [Christian Church], Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter Day Saints [Mormons], Seventh Day Adventists, and two branches of the Assemblies of God.

The remnant of individuals who do not fall into any of the aforementioned categories are, in descending order of size, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics.<sup>3</sup> There are two Reform Jewish congregations in the region, neither with regular clergy. I attend a ghost of a synagogue in La Grange, Georgia which at one point was down to four families. I have had three identifiably Jewish students in the twenty-seven years I have taught at the University of West Georgia.. Despite that small number, I am proud to say that all three have made *aliyah*, or immigrated to Israel. I like to say that West Georgia, at 100%, maintains a statistically higher *aliyah* rate among its Jewish graduates than even Yeshiva University...

The University of West Georgia is the only institution of undergraduate and graduate learning servicing this vast, overwhelmingly Fundamentalist region. I was hired to teach East Asian history, the field in which I received my Ph.D. Seventeen years ago I developed a research sub-specialty on the Jewish communities of the Far East.<sup>4</sup> For that reason, the West Georgia administration asked me to develop courses on the Holocaust and on modern Israel. Brandeis University Professor Ilan Troen's 2004 summer institute about Israel and his 2006 follow up program on-site in Israel have been invaluable to me as I have tackled these assignments.

With Professor Troen's help, I developed the syllabus for an Israel studies course which was taught for the first time in 2005. I hope to teach it again next year. The course has two theoretical emphases which derive from the Brandeis program:

- (1) geographical/social/urban history, clearly the result of Professor Troen's own scholarship and teaching; and
- (2) intellectual history, clearly the result of Brandeis Professor Eugene Sheppard's input.

With respect to geographical/social/and urban history, I find Professor Troen's *Imagining Zion* to be a most useful text.<sup>5</sup> One advantage of the Fundamentalist context in which I teach is I can assume that a large number of students are familiar with English-language versions of both the Hebrew and Christian bibles, usually in the King James Version. I am fortunate in that many of these students come into class with a basic knowledge of Biblical history and of the historical geography of the Holy Land. They read *Biblical Archeology Review* in their churches, doctors' and dentists' offices, barber shops and beauty salons. Some students are familiar with even more sophisticated traditional texts such as Sir George Adam Smith's *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*. Professor Troen's book updates those students' awareness of traditional historical geography. Troen includes innovative sections on city planning; the founding of Haifa, Tel Aviv, and the collective settlements; the expansion of Jerusalem; industrialization; and ecology. My one objection to his text is its retail price of \$37.50. It is only available in hardback and, as a relatively new book, is virtually unavailable on discounted web sites. Early on I wrote Yale University Press suggesting that they publish an inexpensive paperback version to ease the financial strain on our students, many of whom are pulling themselves through college with full time jobs.

For intellectual history, I rely on the revised and updated 1997 version of Rabbi Arthur Herzberg's *Zionist Idea*, which covers the spectrum of Zionist thought from the forerunners through the General Zionists, Socialists, Culturalists, Agudat Yisroel, and Revisionists.<sup>6</sup> Precisely because our students come out of a disputational religious context, in which Protestants have battled Catholics, Baptists fought Methodists, and even relatively smaller denominations like the Assemblies of God have split into rival factions, they readily grasp Zionist sectarian differences. I can begin a class with a provocative quote such as the following by

Ya'akov Liberman, former head of the Organizational Department of the Herut Party. He begins his book *Tears of Zion* with the exhortation: "Zionism's political left, now scattered by the winds of self destruction, can be found not only in the Labor Party of Shimon Peres, but also in the outdated Peace Now Movement, Yossi Sarid's Meretz Party, and Yossi Beilin's group of Don Quixotish peace makers."<sup>7</sup> Because of our students' experience with Protestant sectarianism, they grasp the nuances of Israeli politics. They are in a position to evaluate these trends in class discussion and written assignments.

Anti-Israel professors routinely vilify Southern Christians for their support of Israel. Pro-Israel sentiment is widespread on our campus and community-wide. That support is expressed through international organizations like the "Christian Mission for Israel," headquartered on Rachel Emenu Street in Jerusalem, as well as on the grassroots American level. We have no strident campaigners for divestment from Israel or militants who want to invite Norman Finkelstein onto our campus—neither in my Israel class, nor in my Holocaust class, nor anywhere within our community. I witness opposite enthusiasms. As violence has escalated in Israel as a result of the last two *intifadas*, the enthusiasm for both Israel studies and visiting Israel has surged in the West Georgia region. In the spring of 2006, to tap into the growing Biblical tourism market, Delta Air Lines added daily non-stop flights connecting Atlanta and Tel Aviv. A further example of local enthusiasm for Israel is the "Explorations in Antiquity Center," an open air museum of biblical archaeology founded in 2006 in nearby La Grange, Georgia. That center is sponsored by a coalition of local Fundamentalist Protestant churches. In the spring of 2007, the Center organized three biblical archaeology tours to Israel. I know of no college, university, or synagogue-- in Georgia or anywhere else--with that many Israel tours in so short a period of time.<sup>8</sup>

There are several controversial issues which do intrude into my classes. The first is the missionary instinct which is shared by all of the Fundamentalist churches in our area. I regularly have to deflect questions about why I have not accepted Jesus Christ as my one true Lord and Savior. The second is the obvious conflict between literal interpretation of Biblical accounts of Creation and archaeological evidence. Many students have been exposed to Creationist texts not only in their churches but in the local public schools, where such doctrine is sometimes presented alongside, and even co-equal with, Darwin's "theories." Students ask, for example, how to deal with archaeological evidence which indicates that the city of Jericho existed many thousands of years before Creationists think the world was created.

My response to both Salvationist and Creationist concerns is that it is not appropriate to discuss the correctness of personal theological belief in a history class, and especially one in a public, secular institution. Such discussion would be appropriate in a church-sponsored institution. I see no problem in getting into personal theological questions in a well-structured academic context in a philosophy class. In the fall 2007 semester I gave two lectures on Jewish history in a course on the "History of Religion" offered by our Philosophy Department. My one condition for agreeing to give those two lectures was that I be preceded by a fully-ordained, professionally-trained rabbi, Yossi New of Atlanta Chabad. Rabbi New dealt with all the Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, Salvationist and Creationist issues before I entered in the class. I am neither professionally trained nor personally knowledgeable to be able to discuss any of those always-controversial issues.

I repeatedly have to remind myself that throughout Jewish history each of our not-so-many Christian friends, including those in the West Georgia region, has had a private agenda for his or her philosemitism. Oscar Schindler in his private life was a womanizer, an

alcoholic and a local stalwart of the Nazi party. His personal agenda in no way diminishes the fact that he probably saved more Jews from the Holocaust than any other individual except Raoul Wallenberg. My fundamental assumption in teaching Israel studies and dealing with the Salvationist and Creationist proclivities of West Georgians coincides with the thinking of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Bibi likes to say: “We Jews do not have that many friends, and for precisely that reason we like all of our friends, not just some of them.” His

admonition has become my byword for teaching about Israel in the rural South.

#### **About the Author**

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#### **Notes:**

[aris\\_index.htm](#);

[www.adherents.com/rel\\_USA.html](http://www.adherents.com/rel_USA.html)

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Young, introductory speech at “Georgia Governors’ Workshop on Trade With Japan,” Southern Center for International Studies, Atlanta, Georgia, May 21, 1982.

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<sup>2</sup> The controversy over Emory Professor Jimmy Carter’s comparisons between contemporary Israel and apartheid South Africa has resulted in numerous resignations from the staff and Board of Emory’s Carter Center, including those of long-serving Middle East adviser Professor Kenneth W. Stein and former Dekalb County Commissioner Leone Levetan. Brenda Goodman and Julie Bosman, “Former Aide Parts With Carter Over Book,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2006, p. A33; “Georgia: Commentator Says Work Was Copied,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2006, p.A14; Michael Jacobs, “‘Apartheid’: Separate From Reality,” *Atlanta Jewish Times*, November 17, 2006, pp. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> See Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman’s 1990 National Survey of Religious Identification and 2001 American Religious Identity Survey, available online as [www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_briefs/aris/](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/)

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, my books *The Jews of China* (Armonk, N.Y. and London: M. E. Sharpe, vol. one 1999, vol. two 2000) and *China and Israel, 1948-1998* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, Second Edition. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Ya’acov Liberman, *Tears of Zion: Divided we Stand* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *The World of the Bible Center Winter Newsletter*, 2006-07 (Lagrange, Georgia: Explorations in Antiquities Center, 2006), pp. 2, 4.