

Newsletter No

64

September 2016

Australian Association for Jewish Studies

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L'SHANA TOVA TIKATEVU

As President of the Australian Association for Jewish Studies it gives me great pleasure to wish you a happy, healthy, peaceful and prosperous New Year, and to be well over the Fast.

May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life for another productive year and may our prayers and hopes for peace for all peoples afflicted by war and conflict be fulfilled as we all work together for a better future for all peoples.

Your participation and support of the AAJS is enormously important and we look forward to your continued support and contributions. May I also take this opportunity to thank the executive and the faithful and dedicated team of volunteers who continue to drive our association's activities.

To those of you who had contemplated submitting a conference paper proposal for our 2017 conference in Sydney and have not as yet, please do so – as we have extended the submission deadline until 12 September. Please refer to the 'Call for Papers' in the newsletter.

Wishing you a happy and a sweet year!

Shana tova and hatima tova!

**Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod,
President,
Australian Association for Jewish Studies**



Our Sincere Condolences

Recently we were advised of the very sad news of a sudden and tragic accident which resulted in the death of Mr Eli (Sam) Samra. Eli was the eldest brother of our journal's editor, Dr Myer Samra.

To Myer and to his entire family please know you are in our thoughts and prayers at this very difficult time and to both you and your family we wish you long life.

Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod on behalf of the AAJS

**Call for Papers – Australian Association for Jewish Studies
The 29th AAJS Conference, 14-15 February 2017
University of Sydney,
Sydney, Australia**



***Narratives and Counter-Narratives:
Jews, Nation and Nationhood***

2017 is the anniversary of several landmark events in Jewish history. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, the partition plan of 1947 and the Six Day War of 1967 comprise only a few modern examples of events whose legacies demand a re-examination of the concepts and practice of nation and peoplehood in the *longue durée* of Jewish history. An examination of the narratives and counter narratives in which these concepts are couched provide a compelling framework to examine their importance for understanding the Jewish past and also to delineate and assess their ongoing resonance in and for the present.

Debates as to what constitutes the 'People Israel' stretch back to antiquity, with biblical notions of who the Israelites were and what their communal obligations entailed fundamental to their identity and self-understanding. Yet, the Talmudic ideal of *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* (all Israel is responsible for each other) has often been sorely tested by the travails of Jewish history. In times of persecution, the framework of peoplehood has been pushed to its limits, and dissention among Jewry has left indelible marks. Collaboration and betrayal, both real and perceived, have pushed the limits of group identity and cohesion. Yet despite these conflicts, peoplehood has prevailed as a lasting and distinctive component of both ancient and modern Jewish identities.

The theme of AAJS Sydney, ***Narratives and Counter-Narratives:***

Jews, Nation and Nationhood invites exploration of notions of the nation, peoplehood, intra-communal conflict and *Klal Yisrael* from all perspectives, including but not limited to the topics of nationhood and identity, society, literature, art, philosophy, language, religious, ancient and modern connections to the Land and State of Israel, the concept and practice of *Klal Yisrael* and the experience of peoplehood *in extremis*, particularly with regard to the period of the Holocaust.

Narratives and Counter-Narratives: Jews, Nation and Nationhood convenes 12-13 February 2017 at the Sydney Jewish Museum, 148 Darlinghurst Road, Darlinghurst NSW 2010. The University of Sydney's Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies will host the conference in partnership with the Sydney Jewish Museum.

Please submit your paper proposal by **Monday, 12th September 2016** to Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod: michael.abrahams-sprod@sydney.edu.au. Notice of acceptance will be sent out **by 30 September 2016**.

Submissions must include the following:

- Postal and email address
- Abstract of the paper to be presented (no more than 250 words)
- Short biographical note (no more than 50 words).



AAJS encourages students engaged in academic research to submit proposals based on their work to the conference committee. Authors should clearly indicate their student status on their submission. Presenters are also invited to submit written articles for consideration for publication in the Australian Journal for Jewish Studies. Communication about the conference should be sent electronically to Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod and Dr Avril Alba via e-mail: michael.abrahams-sprod@sydney.edu.au and avril.alba@sydney.edu.au.

Conference Committee:

- Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod, AAJS President, Conference co-convenor
- Dr Avril Alba, Conference co-convenor
- Professor Emerita Suzanne Rutland OAM
- Dr Jan Lanicek

As this Conference addresses a small community of scholars, it is imperative that we all support the Association. Thus, it is a requirement that all presenters at this conference must have paid the conference registration fee, which includes the AAJS membership for 2016, by Friday 16 December 2016. Visit www.aajs.org.au for details.

Workshop

January 9 2017 - January 11, 2017 Vienna

Call for participation: Localization of videotaped testimonies of victims of National Socialism in educational programs

Workshop funded by the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" (EVZ) in preparation of the next

volume of the series "Education with Testimonies." 09/01/2017 -11/01/2017.

This workshop aims to connect international practitioners who work with videotaped testimonies of victims of National Socialism. The workshop intends to provide an overview of existing programs and an exchange of expertise on the work with videotaped testimonies of victims of National Socialism. The findings of the workshop will be presented in a

publication, which will appear as the upcoming volume of the series „Education with Testimonies“, financed and edited by the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" (EVZ). With funding from the Foundation EVZ, (erinnern.at) invites academics, students and others to an international Workshop in Vienna.

In the past 15 years a variety of educational projects based on videotaped interviews with victims of National Socialism have been developed. The focus of the workshop lies on the evaluation of such educational projects. We aim in particular to address the following questions:

- Do the offered videotaped testimony programs meet the interests and needs of the users?
- What educational opportunities do they offer?
- What problems can be identified in working with those programs and what are the lessons learned that could be taken into consideration for the development of new products?

The workshop and the following publication (schedule to be published in September 2017) seek to explore and to develop quality criteria for videotaped educational products. The workshop and the publication will pay their attention towards three user environments: Schools; Extracurricular Education; Museums and Memorial Sites.

The aim of the workshop is to facilitate exchange among practitioners and to provide an overview and an examination of existing projects with videotaped testimonies. It intends to stimulate and push forward the debate on videotaped testimonies, to document the discussions

and subsequently publish the contributions, in order to provide further inputs for future projects.

The key objective is the joint development of quality concepts (what is "good practice"?). The discussion will be centered on the presented projects. The presented learning materials will be discussed with reference to the following questions amongst others:

- What are the criteria for a good educational program or museum and memorial site project with videotaped testimonies?
- What is the standing of videotaped testimonies compared to other materials in the three user environments schools, extracurricular education, museums and memorial sites?
- What are the similarities and differences of these programs? Are there country specific differences?

We would like to invite to the workshop and to the subsequent publication practitioners responsible for educational programs or projects at museums and memorial sites, who work with videotaped testimonies of victims of National Socialism; practitioners who work at institutions collecting testimonies or are responsible for already existing educational programs on the basis of videotaped testimonies with victims of National Socialism for school, extra-curricular education and museums / memorial sites.

Travel, accommodation and subsistence expenses are covered; if necessary including the day before the workshop. Participation in the workshop is rewarded with € 200, -, the text for subsequent publication with additional € 300. The

detailed program of the workshop will be published in October and will be tailored upon the needs of the selected participants.

Working language: English

Participants are asked to prepare a short presentation of their educational project.

We kindly ask those interested in participation to provide a short description of their educational project (if applicable a link to the corresponding website) and a brief biographical note before **October 15, 2016**. The number of participants is limited. Please send your application to: office@erinnern.at Deadline for the submission of the article for publication is April 30, 2017. Specific instructions for structuring the contribution to the workshop and the subsequent publication will be provided on time.

We are looking forward to your application!

Exhibition Review: *We Are Here, The Contemporary Collective*, May 2016
Dr Anna Hirsh

The Contemporary Collective, a group of artists from Melbourne, held an exhibition in May 2016 at the Glen Eira Council Art Gallery, titled: *WE ARE HERE - MIR ZEHNEN DO: An exploration of contemporary portraiture as a response to hatred and hope*. The works, curated by Dr Helen Light, were based predominantly on Holocaust themes and narratives. This is a brief excerpt from a floor panel discussion, and only includes four of the artists.

A common thread that links many of the pieces in this exhibition is absence: while we cherish our survivors and applaud their strength and ability to overcome

terrible events and grief, acknowledgement of the void is essential. Who is telling the stories for those who disappeared without a trace or without someone to recite the mourner's prayer for them? Many of the pieces in this show are embedded with an elegy for both the survivors and the lost.

Moshe Idel explained that the Torah was written on the limbs of G-d, an inscription on the divine body, that the visual dimension of the text is black fire written on white fire, which is the divine substance of the Torah. This is the mystical realm, the divine skin. While we see the black fire, the essence contained within the white space is just as, if not more significant, as it presents a focus for mourning the absent.

Linda Wachtel's photographic installation *We Are Here* (2015) captured Marysia and Adolek Kohn, Holocaust survivors, and their descendants. We can perceive the couple as having successfully rebuilt their lives after tragedy. The numerous portraits have been printed onto a long length of photographic paper; analogy with the Torah scroll is immediate, and reverses the instinct to begin with the elderly couple. Instead, the infants, the next generation begin this narrative. Existing within the white space, however, are the individuals and families that were destroyed, the potential children and grandchildren who were not born, lives irreversibly ruined, and geography disrupted.

Lousje Skala's project *Prisoner 20671*, presents six metal neckpieces that are based on the design of the Shabbat Candlesticks that belonged to her late mother-in-law Alsbeta Skala, nee Weisz. Alsbeta reclaimed this last remaining heirloom on her return to her Czech

village after liberation. The transformed silhouettes echo sacred silver, but the manipulation and distortion of the traditional shape align with historic aberrations, of events that disturbed the natural order. The enclosed void within the centre of the neckpieces also represents the disappeared, of the vast numbers of other candlesticks that were damaged and destroyed, pillaged, and unclaimed. We also see our own reflections in their shiny surfaces, inviting us to apply our own stories.

Linde Ivimey's two sculptural installations, *Heirloom* (2012) and *Marta and Josef* (2012) reflect but also invert both materiality and emotions. Where we can see similar patterning in the chicken-bone skein as on the pressed glass, it is immediately understood that the opacity of the bones conceals the gravitas of suffering – beyond the Kleinman siblings at the hands of Mengele, the disappearance of Marta and her brother's eternal search for his twin - versus the transparent text and fugitive nature of crystal glasses of a familiar Eastern European type: the lead content within the molten alchemy.

Hedy Ritterman has similarly captured a midpoint in her installation, delineated by both the belt worn by her subject *Richard* (2012), and the open weave fabric that pre-empted the shroud. To live through concentration camps was to exist at the junction. The skein has been handwritten with the text of an oral narrative, captured at the point of tension that now, after Richard's passing, appears as a membrane between existence and non-existence.

What contributed to the strength of this cohesive exhibition was not just the portrayals of individual and family narratives, but also the acknowledgement of a fear of losing the duty and desire to remember and honor the Holocaust, through the passing of time and revived prejudices.

Notes: Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, Yale University Press, 2002.

We Are Here is documented at <http://www.thecontemporarycollective.com.au/#!/blank/x3b75>

Author: Dr Anna Hirsh is the Archivist at the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne.

The Shoah: A Turning Point Professor Suzanne Rutland

In June Professor Emerita Suzanne Rutland presented at the conference on 'The Shoah: A Turning Point? The Challenge to Concepts and Paradigms in Jewish, Christian, and Humanist Thought' at Bar-Ilan University. She spoke on 'Australian Generational Changes and Holocaust Commemoration: March of the Living'. Dr Avril Alba from the Department of Hebrew Biblical & Jewish Studies, University of Sydney, also presented on 'Secular or Sacred? Revisiting the Roots of the Holocaust Memorial' at this conference. Then, in July 2016, the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Bar-Ilan University held a special research seminar to celebrate Suzanne's 70th birthday. The event, entitled 'Globalisation, Immigration and Education at the Edge of the Diaspora' included speakers such as Prof. Zehavit Gross, Chairholder UNESCO-Burg Chair, Sal-Van Gelder Center, Rabbi Prof. Daniel Hershkowitz President of Bar-Ilan University, Emeritus Professors Sergio Della Pergola, Michael Laskier, Professor Hanan Alexander, Dr. Isi Leibler, a veteran international Jewish

leader and Helen Zhang, cultural attaché at the Australian Embassy. Her son, Benjy also spoke and a harpist entertained the guests with musical interludes during the first part of the seminar, adding to the atmosphere of the event, which was organized by Zehavit. Suzanne's presentation on 'Breaking the Silence Challenging the Myth: Arthur Calwell and Postwar Survivor Migration to Australia' has been accepted for the International Oral History Conference to be held between December 6-8, 2016 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus.

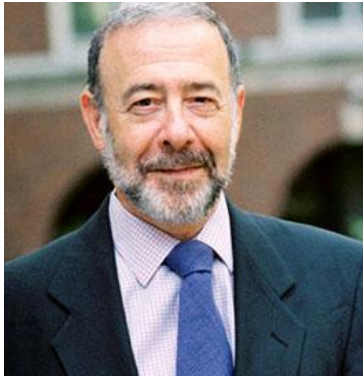


From L – R : Benjy Rutland, Professors Daniel Hershkovitz, Zehavit Gross, Suzanne Rutland, Dr Isi Leibler and Helen Zhang.

**Professor David Roskies' Lecture,
Thursday, 18 August 2016, the University
of Sydney
Dr Anna Rosenbaum**

If ever there were a lecture as lustrous as a string of pearls, Professor David Roskies' would have been its craftsman jeweller. His lecture on the life of that genius of Yiddish literature, Sholem Aleichem, was exactly that. This was not only a commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the writer's death, it was a narrative that reminded us of everything that Sholem Aleichem stood for and wanted to have preserved for eternity. Unbeknown to author, his depiction of Jewish folk inhabiting, suffering, surviving and poking fun at life, against all odds in the shtetls of Czarist Russia, was in reality a memorial to them and their descendants, who perished within the next quarter of the

20th century, long after he himself died. One is tempted to say that Sholem Aleichem was one of the lucky ones who passed away in time, even though the tragedy of his folks could not have reached him in the USA where he found a new home. Yet, the fictitious stories of those, who came to life in his works represented millions upon millions of those, who sind gegangen den letz'n weg. Therefore, his heart warming, lovable tales of his own perpetual struggling people who somehow overcame their tribulations with blatant chutzpah wit and endearing humour reaches to the heart of every Jew in a way like no other author did. Professor David Roskies' lecture with his trilingual interpretation of Sholem Aleichem's world, his word and his work was a brilliant tribute to the undisputed greatest Yiddish soul writer of them all.



Professor Roskies is in Australia as Monash University's Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation Kronhill Visiting Scholar. During his visit he lectured at Monash and Sydney Universities and at the Sydney Jewish Museum.

PaRDeS & Film Interpretation **Dr Vicky Schinkel**

The Jewish interpretative model, PaRDeS (*Peshat, Remez, Derash, Sod*) has implications for more than reading the *Torah*. Traditionally, the interpretation of the Jewish religious text was limited to males over the age of 40. In my PhD thesis at the University of Melbourne, I applied Kabbalistic notions of meaning in analysing five film texts. Post-modernism generally asserts, 'The Author is Dead.' This is an assertion with which I cannot agree.

Why? It is my belief that the creator, whether of divine origin or the human representative implants within their creation a meaning that is both profound and personal. In the 21st Century texts that are received by the general public are generally audio-visual – filmic and tele-visual. With respect to cinema, applying PaRDeS notions of the four levels of meaning allows us to integrate Maimonides and Aristotle in the development of interpretative frameworks. PaRDeS is a sophisticated method of analysis that reflects millennia of Judaic explorations of narrative

structure, interpretations and commentaries.

In using PaRDeS as a conceptualisation of film meaning, the coordination and synthesis of multiple interpretive strategies, including viewer response, differentiates the method from contemporary critical perspectives, and reflects specific ways in which cinema reflects a modern world that creates film texts.

Let us consider a film that has been interpreted multiple times – *Taxi Driver*. Can using the Jewish interpretative model of four levels of meanings (PaRDeS) yield new, relevant and important responses to filmic effects? My PhD thesis, 'PaRDeS and Film Interpretation: Multiple Levels of Cinematic Meaning' asserts that it does. *Taxi Driver* was written by a traditional Protestant, Paul Schrader (who wrote his own PhD Thesis on transcendent film and, like myself, was a film critic). It was directed by a Catholic, Martin Scorsese, and the main actor was of Italian origin, Robert De Niro. Bernard Hermann, a New Yorker living in the city where the film was set, provided the score.

Herrmann (often linked to his work with Alfred Hitchcock) knew he was dying when he wrote the score, and my research suggests that he was composing music that, at a very profound level (*Sod*), was his farewell/love-letter to New York. Schrader wrote a script that reflected not only his literal view (*Peshat*) of his World, but also served as an analogy (*Remez*) of his world perspective, and a response to universal human concerns (*Derash*). In doing so, he also imbued the script with his own 'transcendental' response to the human condition (*Sod*).

DeNiro, in his portrayal of Travis Bickle, the taxi-driver of the title, immersed himself in the character, driving a taxi in New York for a period of time prior to the shooting of the film, and living in an apartment similar to that occupied by the title character. His approach to the portrayal of the main character (linked to method acting) informed his representation of Bickle. When we apply PaRDeS we are able to see how the combination of Scorsese's Catholic, blood-drenched flamboyance, Schrader's Protestant austerity, Herrmann's highly developed understanding of music, and DeNiro's interpretation of character integrate and create a meaning for the film that extends beyond each of their individual contributions.

The combination of these four individuals evolves a symbiotic, synergistic level of meaning that extends beyond each personal contribution. Finally, the ultimate interpretation of *Taxi Driver* resides in each individual's personal response to the film (another version of *Sod*). Viewers interact with, and relate to the film in ways that are specific to their own personal experience of the world. This is true of all films and texts with which viewers/readers engage.

Using PaRDeS as the foundation of film interpretation promotes a response beyond the post-modernist nihilist notion, 'The Author is Dead.' Profound and existentialist meanings that cannot be expressed in words are neither religious or philosophic – they are personal, interactive creations that arise when individuals engage with creative works. 'Meaningfulness' matters. For readers interested in exploring these, and related notions further, you are referred to the PhD thesis upon which the ideas presented in this article are based,

available at: <https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/37694>

PROFESSOR DONALD BLOXHAM
Seminar at the University of Sydney,
Tuesday 9 August 2016

Dr Anna Rosenbaum

Professor Bloxham, of Edinburgh University, gave a fascinating 50-minute seminar to staff and students of the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies, and the Department of History at the University of Sydney. He analysed the origins of violence directed by leaders of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Russian empires. Also included were his comments on the little known Volta-Bani revolt in West Africa during the First World War, against the French colonial administration, which was brutally suppressed by the French in 1917.

Professor Bloxham also alluded to massacres that took place in South Western Africa (colonised by Germany) prior to the First World War. His lecture then turned to the Nazis' 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question,' which he placed 'in the context of multi-state violence perpetrated against ethnic and religious minorities.' While he set German policy of Jewish annihilation in the context of co-perpetrators of genocide, the critical analysis of the crucial and overwhelming extent of the Holocaust in world history, in my opinion, has not been adequately addressed.

The lively discussion that followed concentrated on issues regarding the Armenian genocide in 1915, the ethnic cleansing of minorities in Central Asia perpetrated by Czarist Russian authorities, and the situation of Jews in Slovakia at the beginning and during the Second World War.

Membership Fees for 2016

Benefactor: \$250.00
 Regular: \$60.00 (Aus)
 Pensioner/Full-time Student: \$25.00 (Aus)
 Institutional: \$70.00 (Aus)
 Overseas: \$80.00 (Aus)

All correspondence to:

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C/- Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod

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