



Institute for Judaic Studies

A History of the Institute

How did it all begin?

Until 1960 there were no Judaic studies courses offered in higher education in Oregon. Then the Middle East Studies Center opened at Portland State College with the support of a Federal grant to cover studies in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew. Rabbi Joshua Stampfer joined the faculty to head the Hebrew section. This included language studies as well as Hebraic civilization.

This program continued for twenty-three years until it was abruptly cancelled due to fiscal emergencies in the state budget. Rabbi Stampfer was concerned that no college or university was offering any courses in Judaic studies. He called a meeting of the presidents of Reed, Lewis and Clark, and Portland State Colleges and they agreed to support the introduction of Judaic Studies on their campuses. Leaders of the Jewish community gathered to organize the Institute for Judaic Studies to put this goal into action.

Over the years the original goal of introducing Judaic Studies on local campuses expanded. The Institute saw the higher education community as a significant resource for the community at large and particularly for the Jewish community. As a result, Institute activities first centered on the colleges themselves, then on college-community activities, and lastly on community wide events, such as the Portland Jewish Film Festival.

Initially the goal of the Institute was to encourage financial support for the establishment of Chairs in Judaic Studies at Oregon colleges and universities. A bequest by Ernestine May to the National Council of Jewish Women made it possible to establish the Moe and Izetta Tonkon Chair of Jewish Studies at Reed College in 1984. The next chair was established by the Harold Schnitzer family at the University of Oregon and the third chair was created at Portland State University in 2006, also by the Harold Schnitzer family. The fourth chair in the state was created by Louis Lokay at Portland State University. P.S.U. has committed to the establishment of two more chairs in Judaic Studies, comprising a department of four full-time chairs in Judaic Studies by 2011. With that development, Oregon will become a major center of Jewish scholarship.

College community activities took on various forms. One of the most popular was the annual academic conference. These conferences were held on campus and involved leading scholars from all over the world discussing a specific theme. The first conference was held at the University of Portland on the theme of Abraham Joshua Heschel. All of the conferences q4e

listed in this anniversary publication. These conferences attracted large audiences from the campus and from the community at large. Over the years the Institute also brought guest lecturers to various campuses, including luminaries such as Alfred Kazin, Dr. Alexander Flinder, and Milton Viorst.

On two occasions Scholars-in-Residence came to Portland and spent up to a month lecturing at all the area colleges. They were Dov Noy, world renowned folklorist from the Hebrew University and Pinchas Peli, Biblical scholar, from Jerusalem. For a number of years the Institute conducted various all-day study marathons at Reed College, each centered about a particular theme. The History Marathon divided Jewish history into six periods and explored the major events and trends in each period. Other marathons included a Great Books Marathon, a Hebrew Marathon to teach Hebrew decoding in one day, and a Literary Marathon.

For five years the Institute conducted Elderhostels at Marylhurst College. Students came from all over the country to take a wide range of courses that were offered, as well as to taste the pleasures of the Pacific Northwest.

In 1984, the Institute launched a bi-annual Law and Ethics Conference in conjunction with Lewis and Clark Law School. The conferences attracted lawyers, law students, and members of the general community. They dealt with a wide range of issues. Early on it was determined that the conference should bear the name of one of the leading figures in the legal profession in Oregon, Jonathan Newman.

Another joint effort with a local institution of higher learning was the annual Interfaith Bible Conference held at Warner Pacific College. Jewish and Christian Bible scholars explored together major themes in the Bible.

Increasingly, the Institute devoted much of its energies to Jewish cultural programs for the entire community. Prominent among these programs has been the Portland Jewish Film Festival which recently completed its 16th season. It began on a modest scale at the Oregon coast for a weekend of films along with the comments of local film critics. This continued for five years. Interest was so high that a full scale film festival was launched in Portland in association with the Northwest Film Center. The festival is now one of the oldest in the country and screens twelve to fifteen films every year, drawn from countries all over the world. The attendance is over 2,000 each year.

The Institute also presented a number of music and dance performances. In 1985 it brought the Israeli dance troupe, Tsabarim. It sponsored an Ernest Bloch Festival with the Portland Symphonic Choir, and an Elijah Festival. In the area of theater, it produced the plays *The Immigrant*, *A Hamilton County Album*, and *The Prince of West End Avenue*, as well as Harold Schnitzler's play, *La Ronde*.

In 1998, the Institute launched the Writers and Scholars Lecture Series. This series brought to Portland leading figures in the Jewish world to share their contributions to Judaic thought. A few highlights of the series were Rabbi Harold Kushner, Professor James Kugel, Sir Martin Gilbert, A.B. Yehoshua, Chancellor Arnold Eisen, and many more who are listed separately in this publication. The Writers and Scholars Series has enriched the cultural life of the Jewish community beyond measure.

In recent years, the Institute has launched several new programs. The Institute co-sponsored two Weekends-in-Quest at the Oregon Coast. Professor Steven Wasserstrom was the first guest scholar, discussing Islam and Judaism, and Rabbi Alan Berg was the second guest scholar, and dealt with Jews and modern music. Two other new programs of the Institute are the Jewish Cinematheque and the Jewish Collaborative Theater.

The Institute can look back with great pride and joy over the past twenty-five years. During that time the Jewish cultural landscape of Portland has changed dramatically. The Institute for Judaic Studies can claim an important share of the credit for this change.

When asked, on the eve of the 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Institute which program is his favorite, Rabbi Stampfer responded, “The next one.”