



The Jewish Studies Classroom  
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By [Kaustuv Basu](#)

WASHINGTON – Some websites can make Hezbollah sound like the local YMCA. That was the observation of Samuel Heilman, a professor of Jewish studies at Queens College of the City University of New York, at a discussion Tuesday of modern Jewish politics in the college classroom. The discussion took place here at the annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies.

Heilman, a sociologist of religion, was addressing the challenges of the potential for divisive elements rearing their head in classrooms and ways to accommodate openness while discussing topics that can be very controversial.

The challenges are many. Students may take for granted what they know or research only on Google. Tensions in the region – the Arab Spring or flying rockets – can change perspectives. And many here said that they fear students who are sympathetic with the Palestinian cause, or who identify with Islam, may not take the Jewish studies classes.

“My biggest enemy is Google,” Heilman said, referring to students who might go to the most readily available online resources to inform themselves instead of doing deeper research. While professors in many fields complain about search engine learning, the damage may be greater in a field like Jewish studies where so many valuable online resources compete with so much inflammatory schlock. It is his job to take them past the propaganda, he said. As for debates in class, Heilman said, his undergraduate students may not feel empowered intellectually to take a certain position. “They are too intimidated,” he said.

So, what might be one way to increase student interest or participation?

Nancy Sinkoff, associate professor of Jewish studies and history at Rutgers University's New Brunswick campus, who teaches a course on Jewish power and politics, said she sometimes uses contemporary images – like a [New York magazine cover](#) that asked whether President Obama was the first Jewish president or [a photograph](#) of West Bank settlers clashing with Israeli police officers -- to engage students.

Perspective could come from just looking at a map, said Ruth R. Wisse, a professor of Yiddish literature and comparative literature at Harvard University, who said she usually shows a map of the region to her class to illustrate Israel’s place in the Middle East and the countries that surround it. “I begin with where the Jews are on the map,” Wisse said. “The main ideology of the Middle East is anti-Semitism,” she added later.

Students who might add to a vigorous discussion stay away. “To my regret they never take my class,” said Malachi Hacohen, professor of history, political science and religion at Duke

University, said of students with ties or strong feelings about the Middle East who are not Jewish.

And when there is a diverse class, professors have to caution students not to use the “in-group speech,” Sinkoff said, like beginning a sentence in class with, “We, the Jews... .’ ”

“I ask them to think about the diversity of the classroom,” she said, referring to the smaller groups of students in these classes who are not Jewish.

An audience member at the discussion Tuesday asked whether it was legitimate for professors to advocate their political viewpoints.

“If I do any advocating, it is for people being informed,” Heilman said. “Students will bring their own point of view to the classroom depending on their background. I do have to be more sensitive to the needs of Muslim students.”

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