

The Blanche and Irving Laurie
Chair in Jewish History

Inaugural Holder

GARY A. RENDSBURG



Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

OCTOBER 2004

The Blanche and Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History

Inaugural Holder

GARY A. RENDSBURG

Department of Jewish Studies

Investiture Address

OCTOBER 14, 2004

Inaugural Lecture

The Genesis of the Bible

OCTOBER 28, 2004



The Allen and Joan Bildner
Center for the Study of Jewish Life



Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Investiture Address

GARY A. RENDSBURG

The Blanche and Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History

October 14, 2004



President McCormick, members of the Board of Trustees and other governing bodies of Rutgers University, Vice-President Fumanski, members of the FAS administration, my new colleagues in Jewish Studies, family and dear friends, and most importantly of all, Adelaide Zagoren, Ruth Patt, Laura Master, and Gene Korf of the Laurie Foundation.

As many of you know, I spent eight weeks this past summer in Australia, with my home base at the University of Sydney. Toward the end of my stay, I traveled to Melbourne for a day and a half to visit colleagues there. I spent the one night at Ormond College, a beautiful English-style residential college on the University of Melbourne campus.

At 5:30 in the afternoon on my second day there, just a half hour before I needed to depart the campus in order to catch my return flight to Sydney, I did what any other traveling professor would do under such circumstances: I went to the computer lab to check my email.

Now picture the scene. I am at one computer terminal busy at work, reading my emails. Next to me are two students sharing another terminal, doing some kind of class project together. The one has a typical Australian

accent, the other has an easily recognizable American accent. In medias res, the former turns to the latter and asks, “What university do you attend in the States?” to which the American replies, “Rutgers University.”

“You go to Rutgers?” I say, “I teach at Rutgers.” Not quite true yet, since I still had not stepped into a Rutgers classroom, but close enough, especially at a distance of 10,000 miles from home.

And then a voice from behind me, from a gentleman at a terminal in the next row of computers, “You teach at Rutgers? I teach at Rutgers.” And so we strike up a conversation. It turns out that this person does not teach at Rutgers exactly, he is on the faculty of UMDNJ, but close enough, either that or he was jumping the gun a bit, President McCormick.

But there is more. He is not a doctor or a dentist or a scientist at all. No, he is Rev. Bill Gaventa, the Director of Community Support at the Center on Developmental Disabilities at Robert Wood Johnson, with an office right here on George Street. We talk and the connect between us is instant and palpable.

But time is running out. I have a plane to catch, so we say our hasty good-byes, with a promise to be in touch when we are both back in New Brunswick.

Now, what are the chances of this triangular encounter happening 10,000 miles from home? Keep in mind that I was in Melbourne for no more than 36 hours total, that I could have been staying at any number of residential colleges on the campus, that it was only a quick decision on my part which sent me to the computer lab to check my email, and furthermore Bill had just arrived in Melbourne that very day! If we read of such a happenstance in the Bible, we would quickly dismiss it as an invention of the author simply to bring all the characters into the same time and same place in order to propel the story forward. But here we were, the three of us, in Melbourne, seated a meter or two away from each other. In a remote corner of the planet, I felt connected to a community in which I had not yet participated.

I left the computer lab with only one thought in mind – the biblical passage: והחוט המשלש לא במהרה ינתק “and the threefold cord is not quickly broken,” from the book of Qohelet (4:12). I was destined for Rutgers, and not just because I grew up in Middlesex County from the age of 10 onward, which is to say that I share with President McCormick the experience of local boy

returning home. And not just because the student newspaper is called The Targum, and Aramaic translations of the Bible are one of my areas of research. All that is fine, but I was destined for Rutgers because this university represents the best in public higher education, with a commitment both to serving the people of this state and to advancing research across the academic spectrum. I share this dual commitment, and I am proud and thrilled to participate in both activities through the two entities that reside at 12 College Avenue: the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life and the Department of Jewish Studies within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. I knew all of this in advance of my trip to Australia, but all was confirmed for me in the most unlikely of settings, a computer lab on the campus of the University of Melbourne—three individuals whose paths had crossed: “and the threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

Such is the mind of someone who works intimately with the Bible and with Jewish history—every life experience brings to mind a passage or an event which fits the mood. I call it the journey of Jewish history, and what an enriching journey it is.

Every Friday night when I sit down to Shabbat dinner and salt the bread, my mind takes me back to the priests of old who salted the sacrifices in the Temple, as prescribed in the Torah. Why salt? Because salt was the great preservative of antiquity, and it thus symbolized the eternal covenant with God, *ברית מלח עולם* is the Hebrew expression, “a covenant of salt forever.” It is the journey of Jewish history, and what an enriching journey it is.

Every Shabbat in synagogue when the Torah is held aloft for the congregation to see, to behold its words, to sense its beauty, my mind is directed to the first such ceremony in Jewish history, described in the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8: “And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform, which they had made for the occasion . . . And Ezra opened the scroll in the sight of all the people . . . and when he opened it all the people stood.” I sit in the synagogue today, and I cannot help but recall those words from the Bible as I envision the scene in Jerusalem more than 2400 years ago. It is the journey of Jewish history and what an enriching journey it is.

Every time I don my *tallit*, my prayer shawl, and look at its *tzitzit*, the fringes, again my mind is on a journey through Jewish history. Archaeological

evidence has shown that both the fringed garments themselves and the *tekhelet*, the dark blue or royal purple color of the fringes, symbolized nobility and aristocracy. The dye was obtained in ancient times from a tiny marine creature called the murex. When this dye became too difficult to procure, the rabbis decreed that one could wear white fringes, though happily the murex still lives in the Mediterranean today and fringes made of *tekhelet* are available once again. The message of the Torah is clear: all Israel is noble in God's eyes, all Israel must wear the fringed garment, all Israel must dye the fringes in royal blue or purple. I am sure that it is no coincidence that the two archaeological sites at which I have excavated are both on the Mediterranean coast, Tel Dor and Caesarea, and I cherish my little murex shells that I brought back with me from those adventures, and which I bring to class on a regular basis to show my students. All of this wafts through my thoughts as I hold the *tzitzit* in my fingers. It is the journey of Jewish history, and what an enriching journey it is.

And then there are the other aspects of Jewish history that we carry with us as well—the lachrymose side of Jewish history—the destruction of the Temple at the hands of the Romans, the Crusades, life in the ghettos of Europe and in the mellahs of North Africa, the pogroms, and most of all the Holocaust, an event which reverberates deep within me, for I grew up in its long shadow. These aspects of Jewish history may not be part of the enriching journey that I have illustrated, but even here we are able to take the lessons learned from these horrific experiences and incorporate them into our personal and collective lives.

All of these items, current Jewish practices which hark back to biblical times, the many disasters which have befallen the Jews during the millennia, and much more, all of these could be simple dots on a timeline. But in Jewish history they become much more. Each one is imbued with meaning, and collectively these dots are strung together to create the thread, the continuity, the trajectory of Jewish civilization. Herodotus may be the father of history, but Jews were the first to give meaning to history.

I can provide no better example of the thread of Jewish history than the following story. After both Bill and I returned to the U.S. for the new aca-

demic year, Bill sent me a sermon that he wrote several years ago, based on an experience he had on a previous trip to Australia in October 2001, just one month after 9/11. He was there to be the keynote speaker at an interfaith conference on spirituality and disability. He did his best to speak to the topic at hand, but in truth everyone present wanted to hear only about the recent events in New York City. When Bill was finished, Sam Ginsberg, another participant in the conference, came forward with a gift for Bill. And here I let Bill take over the story:

The gift was a prayer shawl, worn for years by Sam's father. It was blue and white silk, obviously handled with care for years, fingered with dedication and love, and grey with age. Sam talked about how his father, a doctor, had taught him about compassion as he went around with him on house calls in his youth. He shared how his father, dying with cancer, had fought to stay alive until Sam's bar mitzvah. His father made it, by two days, and while he had not been able to come, the synagogue had allowed a first-ever videotaping, which was shown to his father in the hospital room before his death two days later.

Sam Ginsberg then turned towards the side of the audience where I was sitting in the first row, and said in words that I could not believe I was hearing: "I would like to give this prayer shawl to Bill. I would like him to take it back to the States, and find a Jewish boy in New Jersey or New York who lost his father on September 11. Give it to him, on my behalf. I would like that boy to know, at this time, that he has a surrogate father in Australia."

The journey of Jewish history never ends—it is an ongoing process, and it appears on the canvas of life in the most unexpected ways, traversing time and space.

Ruth, Adelaide, Laura, and Gene—the *tallit* that Bill Gaventa brought back from Australia to find a new home here in New Jersey is one small example of the passing on of a tradition, an illustration of the threads, both literal and figurative, which run through 3200 years of Jewish history. You and the

other members of the Laurie Foundation board have seen fit to participate in that process, ensuring that Jewish history will be taught at Rutgers in perpetuity, that future generations of students will be able to share in the journey and discover its meaning for years to come.

Your dedication to this university and your generosity know no bounds, and we—the Rutgers faculty and more so the Rutgers students—are the beneficiaries of your good deeds and righteous acts. I thank you for the trust you have placed in Rutgers University, in our Department of Jewish Studies, and in me personally to carry this process forward. I am proud to be the first holder of the Blanche and Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History at Rutgers University. May the seeds which you have sown with your gift yield much fruit for years to come. Thank you, and thank you all.