

From the Director of the Bennett Center	1
Fall 2025-2026 Highlights and Events	2
Looking Ahead	4
Faculty Focus.....	5
Undergraduate Courses – Fall 2026	6
Honor Roll July 2025 - June 2026	7
Judaic Studies Faculty & Friends	8

JUDAIC STUDIES ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

A PUBLICATION OF THE BENNETT CENTER FOR JUDAIC STUDIES
AT FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY



At the end of my first year directing the Bennett Center, I'm proud to say it continued to serve as a vibrant hub of learning and conversation at Fairfield University, bringing together students, faculty, and members of the wider community in pursuit of deeper understanding and meaningful exchanges. Thanks to our donors, supporters, and friends, we brought extraordinary speakers to guide, challenge, and stimulate lively discourse: David Brooks, Stav Shaffir, Pamela Nadell, Ken Stein, Malka Simkovich, Alan Verskin, Ashley Walters, and Ami Ayalon. And we hosted a multi-part symposium on the life and legacy of Viktor Frankl, featuring Chris Domig, Dr. William Breitbart, Dr. Alexander Batthyány, and Rabbi Darren Levine.

Looking ahead, we see extraordinary opportunities to grow our reach and deepen our impact. Fairfield University's serene campus and supportive administration have allowed us to become something increasingly rare in today's academic landscape, particularly in the Northeast: a place where conversation about Israel and Jewish life can unfold respectfully, openly, and without disruption. In the wake of October 7th, that distinction carries new weight—and new possibility. The Bennett Center is well-positioned to become the destination for Jewish- and Israel-related public programming between Boston and New York, to engage a broader swath of our campus and surrounding community, and to attract more Jewish students to Fairfield. Our chief challenge this coming year is to build on our momentum: reaching people who haven't yet found us, especially among the 20s-40s demographic, deepening our presence among students, and expanding our donor base to pursue the many opportunities ahead. We embrace these challenges with enthusiasm; they are, at their core, opportunities.

As we embark on a new and exciting academic year, I invite you to browse this newsletter, follow us on Facebook (facebook.com/bennettcenter), and email us to join our mailing list (bennettcenter@fairfield.edu). We have even more exciting plans for Spring 2027 that you will not want to miss!

Looking forward to seeing you at our events this year,

Yaron Ayalon, PhD

Director, Bennett Center for Judaic Studies
Carl and Dorothy Bennett Chair in Judaic Studies
Professor of Religious Studies



Fall 2025 – Spring 2026

HIGHLIGHTS AND EVENTS...

ADOLPH AND RUTH SCHNURMACHER
SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE LECTURE

“Forging Intellectual Bonds:
Jewish, Christian, and Islamic
Encounters in the Middle Ages”

SEPTEMBER 18

This talk featured **Alan Verskin, PhD**, the Samuel J. Zacks Chair of Jewish History at the University of Toronto. It is widely known that shared veneration of Greco-Roman texts led medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims to read one another's books. He asked, “what do we know about the actual, flesh and blood, meetings of such scholars, and how would intellectual respect translate into interpersonal relations?” His lecture shed insights on those questions by looking at several concrete examples of interfaith meetings between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars.

THE JOAN AND HENRY KATZ
LECTURE IN JUDAIC STUDIES

“Israel@77 Through the Lens of
October 7, 2023”

OCTOBER 16

This talk featured **Kenneth W. Stein, PhD**, professor emeritus of contemporary Middle Eastern history, political science, and Israeli studies, BA Franklin and Marshall College, MA Michigan (history), MA Michigan (Near Eastern literatures and languages), and PhD, Michigan, who taught at Emory from January 1977 to December 2022. This event was made possible by the generosity of Debby and David Zieff. Dr. Stein discussed the challenges facing Israel in the wake of the October 7th attacks within a broader Middle Eastern context.



28th Jacoby-Lunin Humanitarian Lecture
with Stav Shaffir

THE DANIEL PEARL MEMORIAL CONCERT

“*The Golem: A Vision in Sound
and Cinema*” with the Avalon
String Quartet, Saerom Kim,
clarinetist, and Jonathan Yates,
conductor

OCTOBER 30

This event paired a masterpiece of German Expressionist cinema with a live klezmer-infused score for a vivid audiovisual experience. Paul Wegener's 1920 silent film *The Golem: How He Came into the World* was an international sensation, inspiring stage works and influencing later classics like *Frankenstein*. Based on Jewish folklore, it tells of a Medieval Prague community that creates a clay protector, only for it to turn destructive. Israeli composer Betty Olivero's modern score blends Yiddish folk and liturgical music with avant garde techniques, performed live by clarinet and strings. Conducted by Jonathan Yates, the performance featured NSO Principal Clarinetist Saerom Kim and the acclaimed Avalon String Quartet, which created an unforgettable experience.

Co-Sponsored with the Quick Center for the
Arts and the Jewish Federation of Greater
Fairfield County

28TH JACOBY-LUNIN
HUMANITARIAN LECTURE

“An Evening with Stav Shaffir”

NOVEMBER 20

Stav Shaffir is a social entrepreneur, former member of the Israeli Parliament, and one of Israel's most prominent leaders for democracy. At 27, she became the youngest woman ever elected to the Knesset after leading Israel's largest ever movement for social justice. In Parliament, she transformed political culture by introducing new standards of transparency, public participation, and oversight into a rigid system. In her talk, she discussed the challenges and opportunities she encountered as a social activist and a politician.

Co-Sponsored with the Philip I. Eliasoph Open
VISIONS Forum



Yaron Ayalon PhD and Ashley Walters PhD

“How Did Nineteenth Century
Iraqi Jews View the World?”

FEBRUARY 17

This lecture was given by **Ami Ayalon, PhD**, of Tel Aviv University, Israel. Dr. Ayalon's scholarly work focuses on the cultural and political history of Arabic-speaking societies in modern times. He has written about printing and literacy in Middle Eastern societies and Palestinian history in the 19th and 20th centuries. In his talk, Dr. Ayalon spoke about the cultural and intellectual world of 19th-century Iraqi Jews—and Arab Jews more broadly—as reflected through the publication of a Jewish newspaper published in Baghdad in the 1850s and 1860s.

THE DIANE FEIGENSON LECTURESHIP IN
JEWISH LITERATURE

“Intimate Radicals: Gender,
Jewishness, and Revolution
in the American Popular
Imaginary”

FEBRUARY 19

Ashley Walters, PhD, associate professor of Jewish studies and director of the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture discussed early 20th-century relationships between East European Jewish women and white Protestant men within radical social and political circles. Drawing on letters, newspapers, and literature, she explained how these relationships blended romance with revolutionary ideals and helped shape a new cultural image of Jewish womanhood—modern, cosmopolitan, and politically engaged.



Man's Search for Meaning: A Symposium on Viktor Frankl

This symposium explored the life, ideas, and continued relevance of the often-overlooked Jewish intellectual and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, borne out of his experience of the Holocaust, has had a profound yet underappreciated influence on a wide variety of disciplines and on generations of readers. The symposium, in the spirit of the Jesuit ideal of *cura personalis*, encouraged the Fairfield community to reflect upon their search for meaning in a disorienting time of rapid technological, societal, and political change. Through lectures, performance, and conversation, the symposium brought scholars, medical practitioners, religious leaders, artists, and others together through interdisciplinary and interfaith dialogue.

"Why Frankl Matters Today: Rediscovering Meaning in an Age of Disorientation"

MARCH 2

The symposium's keynote lecture was given by **Alexander Batthyány, PhD**, Director of the Viktor Frankl Institute, Vienna, who discussed Viktor Frankl's relevance today. He explained how Frankl's ideas help people find meaning and purpose in a time of uncertainty, emphasizing that fulfillment comes from contributing to others as well as personal growth. Dr. Batthyány described Logotherapy as a practical approach for navigating challenges, understanding emotions, and building a more meaningful life.

Man's Search for Meaning, an immersive theatrical experience

MARCH 2

This immersive performance of *Man's Search for Meaning* was performed by **Christopher J. Domig**. Blending Viktor Frankl's experiences in Nazi concentration camps with personal reflection and audience interaction, the play explored resilience, love, and finding purpose in suffering. It challenged us to reflect on our own lives and emphasized the human ability to endure and create meaning even in the darkest times.

"The Many Legacies of Viktor Frankl"

A roundtable discussion with Dr. William Breitbart, Rabbi Darren Levine (Tamid Synagogue), Christopher J. Domig (Sea Dog Theater/The Viktor Frankl Project), and Eileen O'Shea, DNP, APRN-BC, CHPPN

MARCH 19

Hosted by the Humanities Institute, Bennett Center for Judaic Studies, Kanarek Center for Palliative Care and Nursing Education, and the Dean of the John Charles Meditz College of Arts and Sciences.

Panelists explored Frankl's insights on meaning, resilience, suffering, and human dignity, reflecting on how his ideas continue to shape fields such as palliative care, spiritual leadership, education, and the arts. Through a rich interdisciplinary conversation, participants examined the relevance of Frankl's legacy in helping individuals and communities navigate adversity, find purpose, and foster hope in contemporary society.

BENNETT CENTER LECTURE IN JUDAIC STUDIES

"How to Know a Person"

MARCH 29

The symposium concluded with the 2026 Bennett Lecture in Judaic Studies. This year's topic was *How to Know a Person* and it featured acclaimed author, columnist, and journalist **David Brooks** (*New York Times*, *The Atlantic*). Frankl saw the quest for life's meaning as the central motivational force for humankind. Brooks has been grappling with these issues his whole career, and in his talk discussed at length how Frankl's work has affected him.

We are especially grateful to Joe and Robin Bennett Kanarek, whose generous support made this symposium possible.



Yaron Ayalon PhD, Sunil Purushotham PhD, and David Brooks PhD

"Antisemitism, an American Tradition"

MARCH 5

Pamela S. Nadell, PhD, is an American historian, researcher, and author focusing on Jewish history. Former President of the Association for Jewish Studies, she currently holds the Patrick Clendenen Chair in Women's and Gender history at American University. In conversation with Patricia Behre, PhD, and Yaron Ayalon, PhD, she highlighted how antisemitism has shaped American history and emphasized the importance of understanding it today.

Co-Sponsored with the Jewish Federation of Greater Fairfield County and the Quick Center for the Arts

THE 20TH ANNUAL LECTURE IN JEWISH/CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT

"Sixty Years After *Nostra Aetate*: Catholic-Jewish Relations Then and Now"

MARCH 24

Malka Z. Simkovich, PhD, is the Editor-in-Chief of the Jewish Publication Society and Visiting Professor at Yeshiva University's Revel Graduate School for Jewish Studies, and served as the Crown-Ryan Chair of Jewish Studies and Director of Catholic-Jewish Studies at Catholic Theological Union from 2014–2024. Her lecture explored the modern history of Catholic-Jewish relations, and considered the future of Christian-Jewish relations in a post-October 7th world.

Co-Sponsored with the Center for Catholic Studies

Bennett Center Annual Holocaust Memorial Program

APRIL 16

Our Annual Holocaust Memorial featured a keynote by **Shay Pilnik, PhD**, director of the Emil A. and Jenny Fish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Yeshiva University and the grandson of Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Israel from the USSR about a decade after the founding of the Jewish State. Dr. Pilnik spoke about the massacre of Babi Yar (near Kiev, Ukraine) during the Holocaust, and what lessons it has to offer us today.

Co-Sponsored with Campus Ministry and the Jewish Federation of Greater Fairfield County



Looking Ahead to 2026-2027 PROGRAMS

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22 | 5:30 P.M.

"Jewish Prisoner-Physicians in Auschwitz-Birkenau"

Sari Siegel, PhD, will speak on her research into Nazi medical practices. Dr. Siegel is an expert on Nazi medicine and on the history of Jewish physicians in the Holocaust. She is a visiting scholar at the Dornsife Center for Advanced Genocide Research at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Her forthcoming book, *Jewish Doctors in Nazi Camps: Conscription, Coercion, and Resistance During the Holocaust, 1940-1945*, is slated for publication by Yale University Press in 2027. Dr. Siegel will also deliver a workshop for the Egan School of Nursing the following day, September 23rd.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6 | 7 P.M.

"The Evolution of Jewish Power"

An interview with Dr. Yaron Ayalon about his new project on Jewish Politics and recent work on Ottoman Jews, conducted by Dr. Gavriel Rosenfeld

Gavriel Rosenfeld, PhD, president of the Center for Jewish History in New York City and professor of history at Fairfield University and **Yaron Ayalon, PhD**, professor of religious studies, Carl and Dorothy Bennett Chair in Judaic Studies, and director of the Bennett Center for Judaic Studies, will discuss Dr. Ayalon's recent and ongoing research.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22

"An Evening with the Rock-Singers"

5:30 P.M.

Religion and Politics in Mandatory Palestine: The Roots of the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right Today

Aaron Rock-Singer, PhD, is a transnational historian of the modern Middle East with a particular focus on Islamic and Jewish movements that fuse religion and politics. Dr. Rock-Singer is currently a Research Fellow at the University of Michigan's Raoul Wallenberg Institute and teaches courses in both Judaic and Middle East studies.

6:15 P.M.

Reception

7:00 P.M.

ADOLPH AND RUTH SCHNURMACHER SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE LECTURE

Reproducing Judaism: How Jewish Tradition is Remade through the Everyday Lives of American Jews

Cara Rock-Singer, PhD, is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan (Frankel Center for Judaic Studies) specializing in the intersection of gender, Judaism, and science.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12 | 7:30 P.M.

THE JOAN AND HENRY KATZ LECTURE IN JUDAIC STUDIES

"A Conversation with Marc Dollinger"

Marc Dollinger, PhD, is among the leading scholars of Jewish-Black relations in America and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Chair and professor of Jewish studies at San Francisco State University.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 19 | 7:30 P.M.

THE 29TH ANNUAL JACOBY-LUNIN HUMANITARIAN LECTURE

"A Moral Emergency: What Judaism Demands of Us Today"

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, PhD, is president and dean of the Valley Beit Midrash, founder and president of Uri LTzedek, founder and CEO of Shamayim: Jewish Animal Advocacy, and founder and president of YATOM: The Jewish Foster and Adoption Network. Rabbi Dr. Yanklowitz's writings have appeared in outlets as diverse as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and *The Atlantic*. Rabbi Dr. Yanklowitz will present another, similar talk the night before (November 18th) at Congregation Agudath Sholom in Stamford.

FACULTY FOCUS



Yaron Ayalon, PhD, is director of the Bennett Center for Judaic Studies at Fairfield University. He received his bachelor of arts in Middle East history and education from Tel Aviv University, and his doctorate from Princeton University in Near Eastern studies in 2009. Dr. Ayalon studies Sephardic Jews, the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East, and Israel. He is the author of two books: *Ottoman Jewry: Leadership, Charity, and Literacy* (Brill, 2024) and *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and Other Misfortunes* (Cambridge, 2015). Dr. Ayalon has written over 20 articles, and served as an editor for the *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*. From 2020 to 2024, he co-chaired the Sephardi/Mizrahi division of the Association for Jewish Studies and now serves on its program committee, which sets up the agenda for each annual conference. Dr. Ayalon came to Fairfield from the College of Charleston, where for over five years he served as the director of the Jewish Studies Program.



Patricia Behre, PhD, continues as chair of the History Department, now in her third term. Under her direction, and in consideration of the 250th anniversary of the country, the History Department held a monthly lecture series by members of its faculty throughout the 2025-26 academic year, exploring the foundational ideas of American government and citizenship, designed expressly for undergraduates. Sessions attracted between 60 and 200 students to the campus center for each presentation. That series continues in fall 2026, and will culminate with a capstone lecture by Yale historian David Blight in November. Dr. Behre appeared onstage with Pamela S. Nadell, PhD, and Dr. Ayalon in spring 2026. She continues to serve on the coordinating committee for the Town of Fairfield's Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony, and is a member of the Board of Trustees for *Connecticut Explored*, a general interest history magazine. Her research includes the first Jewish residents of early Louisiana.



Continuing in his role as Special Assistant to the President for Arts and Culture, **Philip Eliasoph, PhD**, is innovating pathways for student and community engagement via arts and culture programming. Integrating Fairfield's Ignatian Mission with an ongoing passion for Jewish education and learning, Dr. Eliasoph strives to platform timely, thought-provoking programs to our community audiences inclusive of all ages, interests, and backgrounds. Over the past year, he has hosted 12 programs at the Quick Center's newly named Philip I. Eliasoph Open VISIONS Forum. Collaborating with the Bennett Center and the Humanities Institute of Fairfield Meditz, he co-hosted a memorable conversation with Dr. Ayalon, Dr. Purushotham, and iconic author David Brooks in a timely, free-wheeling conversation concluding the Viktor Frankl Symposium. Dr. Eliasoph has been working, alongside Dr. Ayalon, Rabbi Prosnit, and Campus Ministry, on actively recruiting and expanding the population of Jewish students at Fairfield.



Continuing to teach two courses a semester in the Department of Religious Studies, **Rabbi James Prosnit, DD**, serves through Campus Ministry as the University's Jewish Chaplain. He works to connect Jewish students through Kadima, Fairfield's Jewish Student Organization.



Gavriel Rosenfeld, PhD, is professor of history and continues to serve as president of the Center for Jewish History in New York City. An expert on Nazi Germany, Holocaust memory, and the politics of history, he is known for bringing scholarly insight to contemporary conversations—from remembrance of the Holocaust in the United States to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The author or editor of eight books, including *The Fourth Reich: The Specter of Nazism Since World War II* and *Building After Auschwitz: Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust*, and a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award, Dr. Rosenfeld continues to shape how audiences understand history's ongoing resonance. He holds a BA from Brown University and a PhD from UCLA.



LUNCH AND LEARN SPRING 2026

This spring, 31 adult learners attended “Sephardi & Mizrahi Jews: 1492 to the Present” with Dr. Ayalon. This six-session course explored the history of Arab/Middle Eastern and Sephardic Jews (the Jews from Iberia) from the expulsions from Spain in the late 15th century to their lives in Israel today. It began with Jewish life in Spain/Portugal before the expulsion and the persecution of Jews there, as well as in the Arab world (present day Syria, Iraq, Israel, and Egypt). It continued with the dispersal of Sephardi communities and the establishment of Sephardi centers in Western Europe and, mostly, the Ottoman Empire from the 16th century on. Major changes taking place in the 19th century and the emergence of Zionism were also discussed, as well as why Zionism appealed less to Sephardic Jews in the Middle East than to their eastern European counterparts. Finally, the course concluded with the mass migration of Sephardi-Mizrahi Jews from Arab countries in the 1940s and 50s, the destruction of many Diaspora communities, and those Jews’ experiences in Israel and elsewhere in the second half of the 20th century.

Spring 2027 topic coming soon.

MONTHLY SHABBAT SERVICES AND JEWISH HOLIDAYS

Rabbi Prosnit led monthly Shabbat Services in the Interfaith Prayer space on campus that were attended by Jewish and non-Jewish students, faculty, staff, and members of the broader Fairfield community. A Shabbat dinner sponsored by the Bennett Center and Campus Ministry followed each service. Other activities during the 2025-26 academic year included holiday celebrations for Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, Hanukkah, Purim, and Passover, and the annual Yom HaShoah service.

UNDERGRADUATE COURSES—FALL 2026

The following undergraduate courses in Judaic Studies will be offered this fall:

HISTORY

Modern Jewish History

Gavriel Rosenfeld

Early Modern France

Patricia Behre

Origins of the Modern World

Patricia Behre

Anti-Semitism, Medieval to Modern

Patricia Behre

Godless: Atheism and Skeptical

Thought in the West

Patricia Behre

European Society in the Middle Ages

Patricia Behre

LANGUAGES

Elementary Hebrew I

Keren Ayalon

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

James Prosnit

Jewish Interpretations of Scriptures

James Prosnit

Social Justice in the Jewish World

Yaron Ayalon

Introduction to Judaism

Yaron Ayalon

THE CARL AND DOROTHY BENNETT STUDENT SCHOLARSHIPS IN JUDAIC STUDIES

Embracing Fairfield's growing prominence as a top-tier academic institution, the Bennett Center seeks to promote a deeper collaboration and appreciation for Jewish heritage, while advancing multi-ethnic, intercultural, and interfaith understanding among all students at Fairfield. In collaboration with the John Charles Meditz College of Arts and Sciences and the University Admissions Office, the Bennett Center for Judaic Studies will focus on encouraging and supporting students with an interest in Judaic studies through new initiatives that will be unveiled in the coming years. First among these is the establishment of a new student scholarship. Thanks to the generous support of our donors, we are excited to launch the Bennett Center Student Scholarship Program. Our hope is to provide up to five students, typically rising juniors, with scholarship resources for their last two years at Fairfield, as they pursue a minor in Judaic studies. The minor in Judaic studies requires 15 credit hours (an average of 5 courses), with courses in several departments and up to four semesters of Hebrew fulfilling this requirement.

The first recipients of the Bennett Center Scholarship are Mia Ioukhnikov '28 and Olivia Rabin '28. Mia is majoring in Behavioral Neuroscience with a minor in Judaic Studies, while Olivia is majoring in Nursing and also pursuing a Judaic Studies minor. Both are active leaders in Fairfield's Jewish community through Kadima, the university's Jewish student organization. Mia's interest in Judaic Studies grew from a desire to deepen her understanding of a Jewish identity that had long been part of her cultural background but not her religious education, while Olivia seeks to strengthen her connection to her family's Jewish heritage, traditions, and community, honor the memory of her late father, and use her growing knowledge to enrich Jewish life on campus.

We are deeply grateful for the leadership of the Bennett Center Advisory Board for their vision and support of this critical new initiative. The Bennett Center student scholarships are funded through philanthropic gifts directed to the Bennett Center. If you have questions or would like to support this program, please get in touch. We look forward to hearing from you.

BENNETT CENTER DONOR HONOR ROLL

The Bennett Center for Judaic Studies was founded in 1993 by a gift from the late Carl and Dorothy Bennett of Greenwich, Connecticut. Endowments have funded the Bennett Chair in Judaic Studies, the Diane Feigenson Lecture in Jewish Literature, the Samuel and Bettie Roberts Lecture in Jewish Art, and the Littauer Fund.

We want to thank the following donors and foundations for their generous support of the Bennett Center and the Judaic Studies Program from July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2026. Your partnership and generosity ensure that the Fairfield University and greater Fairfield community can continue to benefit from the rich variety of programs and lectures offered by the Bennett Center.

A Special Recognition

We are deeply grateful to the Bennett Family Foundation and the Schnurmacher Foundation for their leadership annual support.



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2026-2027

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BENNETT CENTER NEWSLETTER



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