

## 2016-2017 Israeli Histories, Societies and Cultures: Comparative Approaches

More than six decades after its establishment, the State of Israel still poses considerable challenges for scholars who try to study and decipher it. There are numerous unanswered questions regarding Israel's origins, history and current trends; about the meanings of Israel as a "Jewish State" and as a modern democratic state; about relations between Israeli and Jewish diasporic cultures, between Israel and contemporary Jewry around the globe, between Israel and Palestinians (those who are Israeli citizens, as well as those in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967), and between Ashkenazim (immigrants from Europe and their descendants) and Mizrahim (immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa and their descendants).

Scholars of Jewish Studies—in various disciplines and fields—recognize that the existence of the Yishuv (the pre-State Jewish community in Palestine) and the State of Israel has significantly changed the dynamics of modern Jewish life. However, in spite of the undeniable importance of Israel in the modern Jewish experience, an unfortunate separation persists between Jewish Studies and Israel Studies. This chasm developed mainly because the academic study of the Yishuv and Israel has been deeply affected by notions of exceptionality, a misguided conception of Israel as *sui generis*.

The Frankel Institute year-long scholarly endeavor will strive to change this situation and chart new ways to study and understand Israel *comparatively*. It will be devoted to inquiry about the multiple histories, cultures and societies of Israel and the Yishuv from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (including the so-called "Old Yishuv") to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will bring scholars from a range of disciplines, contextualizing the study of Israel within new developments in Jewish Studies and Middle Eastern Studies. As such, it will create a greater integration of the study of Israel with the study of modern Jewish experience. Examining Israel through the lens of comparative Jewish studies will also enable a better incorporation into the study of the modern Middle East by considering recent debates on Mizrahi Jews as "Arab Jews," social interactions and cultural similarities between Mizrahi Jews and Arabs in Ottoman and Mandate Palestine and throughout the Levant; the Zionist project's complicated relationship with European colonialism; and relations between Jews and Arabs within the state of Israel, as well as the occupation of the territories conquered in 1967.

Thinking about Israel in multiple Jewish Studies and Middle Eastern contexts (literary, historical, religious, political and cultural) and through the lens of different geographies will change the character of scholarship and complicate established narratives about Israel. The Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan is uniquely situated to host a year-long comparative study of Israel because of the wide-ranging scholarly conversation that takes place in the intersections between the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies (CMENAS), the Near Eastern Studies Department, the departments of History, Anthropology and Political Science, the International Institute, Law School, School of Art and Design, as well as other units within the university (including the new Interdisciplinary program for Mediterranean Studies).

While academic study of Israel and the Yishuv is quite young (initially, it has been the exclusive domain of a small circle of scholars in Israeli academic institutions), the past decade has ushered rapid growth and maturation. During this time, in which the face of Israeli society also changed dramatically (for example, the existence of entire communities of non-Jewish migrant workers and refugees from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe), new questions and approaches have come to the forefront. Scholars have begun to probe complex relations between the local and transnational qualities of Jewish life and Jewish national culture in the Yishuv and Israel. Emerging studies explore relations between monolingualism (the attempts to constitute Hebrew as a sole “national language”) and Jewish multilingualism in Israeli society, literature and culture. Taking into consideration the role of Yiddish, Arabic, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Amharic and other languages necessarily leads to revisions of our understanding of Israel’s cultural history. A new emphasis in scholarship interrogates popular and mass culture in Israel, as well as the creation of Israeli urban space, themes which connect Israel to global Jewish and non-Jewish urban experience.

Questions of continuity and discontinuity between Israel and Jewish culture in Europe and the Middle East during the centuries prior to the establishment of State of Israel are being studied in new and fresh ways. While previously seen through the lens of Zionist ideology of complete rupture (“negation of exile”), scholars are currently exploring numerous links between social, political and cultural practices of communal life in the Jewish diaspora and those that have emerged in the Yishuv and in Israel. At the same time, the relations between Israel and contemporary Jewish communities around the globe (especially in North America and Europe) are being reexamined. Scholars are also conducting research on the new phenomenon of “Israeli diaspora” or transnationalism, namely migrant communities of Israeli citizens who live and congregate in such locations as Los Angeles, New York City, Silicon Valley, London and (most recently and controversially) Berlin.

The interplay between religion and secularization in Israeli society is being probed with a fresh critical acumen. The persistence of religion in Israeli society and culture in spite of many predictions and its interaction with such categories as “traditional” (for example within Mizrahi communities) instigate recent reevaluation of the “secularization paradigm” of modernity. A close analysis of gender and sexuality in Israeli society culture enables us to better understand the figure of “the new Jewish/Hebrew man,” which has been the model of individual subjectivity in much of the history of the Yishuv and Israel. Some of these innovative studies focusing on Israel have challenged accepted paradigms and led to reevaluations of processes of change. Thus, studying Israel in a comparative manner has important implications in a many scholarly fields beyond Jewish Studies and Middle Eastern Studies.

The year-long scholarly endeavor at the Frankel Institute will engage these questions in an unprecedented depth and breadth by bringing together scholars of various fields, including history, literature, anthropology, political science, philosophy, sociology, geography, economics, law, art, architecture, media studies, gender studies and film studies. The theme of Israeli history, society and culture will be an excellent opportunity to bring artists, writers and filmmakers to reflect on their work and to engage in a productive dialogue with prominent and emerging scholars in Israel and Jewish Studies.