Introduction

By Bruce Zuckerman and Jeremy Schoenberg

The recent retirement of Sally J. Priesand, the first ordained woman rabbi in the United States, serves as a reminder of the number of remarkable accomplishments that have occurred in American Judaism during the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. The relationship between Jews and the U.S.A. is necessarily complex: Jews have been instrumental in shaping American culture and, of course, Jewish culture and religion have likewise been profoundly recast in the United States, especially in the period following World War II. A major focus of the Casden Institute—as its full name explicitly emphasizes—is to consider the Jewish role in American life. Naturally, the “flip-side” of this concern must also be considered: the American role in shaping Jewish life.

This fifth volume of the Casden Institute’s annual review continues our investigation of how Jewish culture helped shape modern America and vice versa. Organized along five broad themes—politics, values, image, education and culture—the 2006 edition of the *Jewish Role in American Life* spotlights what we believe to be a rich sampling of thought-provoking and under-examined issues.

Going right to the heart of Los Angeles, the volume begins with a look at the city’s most iconic industry—Hollywood—and how some of its most prominent stars and producers, many of them Jewish, struggled against government, colleagues and public opinion to alert the nation to the dangers of Hitler and Nazi Germany. USC historian Steven J. Ross, an expert on Hollywood’s emergence as a major player in American politics, digs underneath the industry’s “Golden Age” to shed light on a time when box-office profits often outweighed principles, and when moral indignation was met with isolationism and anti-Semitism. But despite hate mail and government investigations, stars such as Edward G. Robinson and Melvyn Douglas put values ahead of popularity in their efforts to counter fascist propaganda at home and abroad. In the face of industry sensors and Nazi threats, Harry and Jack Warner put a spotlight on their anti-Nazi message with the film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. Hollywood ultimately played an important role in shaping public opinion about fascism as well as Jews, but circumstances also linked anti-fascism with Communism, which ultimately led to the destruction of many Hollywood careers after the war.

In the next essay, historian and Jewish Studies scholar Andrew R. Heinze carries forward the theme of Jews bringing about change in American thought, but instead of popular culture, he examines academic culture, specifically the Humanities as studied, taught and presented in American colleges and universities. He begins by asking whether the disproportionate number of Jews teaching in the Humanities since WWII have brought a particularly Jewish perspective to the critical analysis of literature,
philosophy and culture. He then proceeds to make the case that indeed they have. Though the Humanities milieu—especially before the Second World War—was traditionally Protestant and often inclined toward being anti-Semitic, America’s essentially egalitarian nature allowed Jews to participate in opening up literary and cultural interpretation to a broad variety of approaches. In offering an overview of the esoteric field of postwar literary criticism and highlighting the work of three particularly prominent Jewish figures—Erich Auerbach, Harold Bloom and Leo Strauss—Heinze explains how Jewish thinkers have helped to “de-Christianize the public square” and infuse the Humanities with an appreciation of the importance of Jewish and Hebraic texts alongside the more traditional Christian canon.

We then turn from the world of intellectuals to one intellectual in particular, R. B. Kitaj, one of the world’s most well-known living easel painters, as we delve beneath the surface of his paintings to catch a glimpse of his life as a Jewish artist, the Jewish writers and thinkers who have influenced him, and his own fascination with the Jewish people. The first part of this chapter, in fact, is Kitaj’s prepared lecture—unedited—that he delivered in a rare talk for the Casden Institute’s Jerome Nemer Lecture Series in 2004. Kitaj was born in Ohio and eventually settled in London, where he became a leading figure among the artists known as “The School of London.” But after the sudden death of his second wife, artist Sandra Fisher (pictured at the beginning of the chapter), as well as being “attacked” by critics upon a major retrospective of his work at the Tate Gallery, he relocated to Los Angeles in 1997. In this sometimes blunt and sometimes nuanced and poetic essay, Kitaj describes how the “Jewish Question” is central to his life and art, a fact which alienates him from much of the art world; and he further laments the lack of great Jewish painters in history, as opposed to many more important Jewish intellectuals. But he also muses, “Violent opposition tells me I might be doing something right in art.”

Just as was the case for the 2004 Nemer Lecture, R. B. Kitaj’s self-exploration is complemented here by some context and further analysis from his good friend David N. Myers, Professor of History and Director of the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies. In his response to Kitaj’s essay, Myers delves further into Kitaj, the Jewish intellectual, and the “Jewishness” of Kitaj’s “textualism,” referring not only to the texts and ideas that shape his art, but also to Kitaj’s practice of putting those ideas front and center with his own commentaries appearing next to his paintings, something that further alienates him from some of the art world. He explains that Kitaj’s Jewish art is not concerned with people-hood but rather alienation—that of a Jew in a non-Jewish world and an artist with “Jew-on-the-brain.”

The next chapter, in contrast, concerns itself precisely with people-hood. Anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell shares her research on how Jewish leaders and educators in the mid twentieth century went about shaping a new generation of Jews by sending them to that quintessential rite of passage for American youth: the summer camp. From the ordination of women to the creation of Jewish Studies as an academic disci-
pline, Prell brings to light the profound effect that Jewish summer camping has had on American Judaism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Fearing that suburbanization would equal complete assimilation and that the parents of Baby Boomers were ill equipped to give their children a proper Jewish education, denominations and communal organizations founded numerous summer camps to create a “redeemer generation”; and while each camp reflected the particular values of its founders, they all “took as their mission to make Judaism, Jewish life and/or Zionism a ‘normal’ and integrated part of American life for children.” By emphasizing personal experience and incorporating Jewish learning and observance (or Zionism) into sports, crafts, art, music, drama, social activities, and daily life in general, summer camping has transformed American Jewish culture in ways that are still unfolding today. Prell thus reveals to us a Jewish story with a distinct American accent.

Returning to the Casden Institute’s particular focus on the West, the last chapter features the work of sociologist Bruce A. Phillips, a leading expert on American Jewish demography. In this look at his innovative research on Los Angeles, he challenges old assumptions and offers new insight into how to demarcate the area’s various Jewish communities, how they differ from one another, and how they are evolving. He explains that traditional urban models simply do not apply. Dividing Los Angeles into seven “socio-ecologies”—areas of residence defined by both geography and social distinctions—and using data from a variety of population surveys, Phillips demonstrates that conventional wisdom about Jewish population growth does not always hold. For example, even though LA’s West Valley is considered the “new Jewish hot-spot” and Jewish institutions in that area are rising quickly, it has not seen significantly more Jewish population growth than the region as a whole, while other less obviously Jewish areas have shown upsurges in Jewish population. In fact, Santa Clarita is surpassing the West Valley in the percentage of Jewish households with young children. From age and affluence to synagogue membership, Phillips analyzes a number of factors that not only point to the emerging Jewish areas to watch, but also make abundantly clear that, at least in Los Angeles, suburbanization does not easily equate with assimilation.

In many ways, these five essays tie into the Casden Institute’s activities over the last couple of years. For example, in 2004 the Institute awarded Steven Ross its annual USC faculty research grant for the work he discusses in this volume and which will be part of his forthcoming book, Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics. Past recipients include art historian John Bowlt and legal scholar Nomi Stolzenberg, whose work on émigré Russian artists and custodial issues for interfaith divorces, respectively, appeared in previous volumes. More recently, the Institute supported a project by film-scoring professor David Spear, who guided his graduate students in the creation of a new and wonderful score for the restored Yiddish American silent film Hungry Hearts, which will be screened at USC in Fall 2006. The current grant recipient is religion scholar Donald Miller, Director of the USC Center for Religion and
Civic Culture, who is studying the American Jewish community’s phenomenal activism regarding the genocide in Darfur. The Institute has also supported the research of graduate and postdoctoral fellows, including sociologist Tobin Belzer, whose article on Jewish “GenXers” with Jewish jobs appeared in last year’s publication.

These chapters converge with the Casden Institute’s public events, as well. In addition to R. B. Kitaj’s rare appearance at USC in 2004, Andrew Heinze is preparing to come to USC for the 2006 Jerome Nemer Lecture, in which he will discuss Jews and the age of psychology. Steven Ross’ interest in Jews and politics fits with the theme of another institute event, the Carmen and Louis Warschaw Distinguished Lecture Series, which invites prominent Jewish politicians—including Henry Waxman, Barbara Boxer, Norm Coleman, Howard Berman, Barney Frank, Joseph Lieberman and Dianne Feinstein—to consider how their religious and cultural backgrounds affect their political lives.

In celebration of USC’s 125th anniversary, the Casden Institute hosted a program in September 2005 exploring the beginnings of Los Angeles’ Jewish community, which has of course grown into the diverse and complex population described in this volume by Bruce Phillips. Isaias W. Hellman, a Jew who was one of three men to donate that land for the founding of USC, came to Southern California in 1859, saw the region’s potential, and rose to become one of the Pacific Coast’s leading financiers. Hellman’s great-great-granddaughter, Frances Dinkelspiel, spoke to a sold-out audience about her research into Hellman’s life and the early history of Jews in Los Angeles to a standing-room-only crowd. We plan to make the Jewish role in California—with special emphasis on Southern California—a particular scholarly project of the Casden Institute in the coming academic year and further expect to share the results of this project in future pages of this annual review.

One aspect of the Casden Institute’s mission is to link the academy with the community by working with a number of outside organizations, and this past year saw one of our strongest partnerships to date. The Institute joined forces with the National Foundation for Jewish Culture to host three film screenings (we are in Los Angeles, after all) and corresponding lectures as part of the NFJC’s American Jewish Icons national lecture series. Exploring Los Angeles’ historically Jewish Fairfax area, which Bruce Phillips discusses in his essay, the first event brought Faye Ginsburg from New York University to “unpack” *In Her Own Time*, the award-winning documentary about the final field work of late USC anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff. A few months later, USC documentary scholar Michael Renov dissected the “Jewishness” in Alan Berliner’s *Nobody’s Business*, in which Berliner persistently nudges his father to open up about his life and family. Finally, American University’s Pamela Nadell showed us how the Barbara Streisand film *Yentl* resonated with a generation of American Jews struggling over the right of women to become clergy and lay leaders, a generation and a struggle surely shaped by the camping experiences described by Riv-Ellen Prell. It was indeed a year of film for the Casden Institute, as we again co-sponsored the annual International Jewish Student Film Festival at USC, about to go into its seventh year.
The Jewish relationship to American life is of course far too expansive for this volume to address as a whole. What we show here instead are some of the more interesting and intriguing parts of the complex puzzle that defines the role of Jews in America. It is perhaps enough that each piece in itself is fascinating and gives the reader a new insight into American Jews, but as one reads the following essays, it is particularly striking how each chapter, seemingly so unique, informs and reflects the others. One might not imagine that a Jewish artist has faced the same intellectual obstacles as Jewish scholars in the Humanities, or that fears about suburbanization and assimilation discussed in a paper on summer camping are addressed in a paper about demography, or that the interdisciplinary field of Jewish Studies can be traced not only to Jewish scholars who helped open up academic discourse, but also to Jewish summer camps that inspired a whole new generation of scholars and religious leaders.

While this annual review could hardly attempt to provide any grand answers or visions nor can it address every important question, it invites the reader to sample the rich and varied dimensions of “Jewishness” and Jewish involvement in the U.S. and to consider relationships and intersections that might not otherwise be so obvious. Jews and America have a reciprocal relationship, as this volume of our annual review well documents. The reflections and refractions to be seen in the offerings of Volume 5 well exemplify the kaleidoscope of Jewish life in its multifaceted role in American culture.