

## Jewish studies alive and well, Brandeis prof says

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*Jonathan Sarna shared some hopeful news about Jewish studies in North America at York University Dec. 7. Sarna was a keynote speaker marking the 25th anniversary of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies.*  
JORDAN ADLER PHOTO

**TORONTO** — Even as interest in the humanities dwindles at universities, the number of classes and students in Jewish studies seems to be remaining steady, a renowned professor of American Jewish history says.

In a keynote address at York University on Dec. 7, Brandeis University's Jonathan Sarna said Jewish studies remains quite popular among North American students.

Sarna was in Toronto for a two-day symposium marking the 25th anniversary of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies at York University.

"In the circles in which I mix, I have heard stories of declining enrolments, smaller numbers of majors and minors and fewer employment opportunities," Sarna said, referring to the presumed decline of Jewish studies programs," he said.

"The good news... is that in Jewish studies, the decline is actually selective and much less clear-cut than many of us have imagined."

He cited a 2014 survey done among the hundreds of members of the Association of Jewish Studies. Sarna is the president of the AJS, which represents professors of Jewish studies in all fields.

When asked about the trend in Jewish studies enrolment, only 30 per cent of AJS members cited a decline. On the other hand, 21 per cent asserted there was an increase.

"Jewish studies, comparatively speaking, has actually fared better than many other humanities programs," Sarna said.

Nevertheless, the number of students pursuing humanities degrees in North America dropped by half between 1966 and 2010.

"There are certain areas where we've noticed a bit of a decline," says York professor Carl Ehrlich, director of the Koschitzky Centre. "Others are holding very, very strong."

The centre is the most prominent hub of Jewish studies in Canada. Between 25 and 30 Jewish studies courses are offered at York each year, with some 1,000 students registered in them.

But long before the centre existed, courses on Judaism were being taught at the University of Toronto by Christian professors. In the prewar period, Judaism was studied academically because it was seen as a precursor to Christianity, said York professor emeritus Michael Brown in another keynote address Dec. 7.

At the time, very few of the professors who taught these courses – and almost none of the students in their classes – were Jewish. This lack of representation was largely due to the prejudice against Jews in Canada in that era.

One factor that draws students to classes with Jewish topics today are enticing course titles, Sarna said. Classes that focus on the Israeli-Arab conflict also remain very popular.

The good news, he added, is that the number of students who major in Jewish studies in graduate school is healthy. Unfortunately, this means there are many people with PhDs looking for jobs that are not available.

“About half of recent North American PhDs in Jewish studies do not hold a tenure-track academic position,” he said, referring to recent data.

Among the more hopeful findings in the survey: there is gender equality in the field. Roughly half of all AJS members are women. Meanwhile, around one in six Jewish studies faculty members in North America are not Jewish.

The AJS survey also asked scholars to comment on how the field has changed in recent years. According to the findings Sarna presented, the views are all over the map. Some see Jewish studies as becoming more diverse, while others believe it’s more fragmented.

York professor and *CJN* columnist Sara Horowitz, also a past director of the Koschitzky Centre, told *The CJN* that York is a great place to learn about Judaism. The school has a reputation as an interdisciplinary campus, and Jewish studies is represented in a variety of departments and disciplines. For instance, York currently has courses in klezmer music, Israeli cinema and Sephardi studies.

“In order to study texts, civilizations, the lives and values of the Jewish People, it is necessary to look at this [subject] from multiple lenses,” Horowitz said.