

# Border crossing and Jewish studies

**B**y now, immigration and customs officers have been told to anticipate an invasion the likes of which they have never before encountered. Professors of Jewish studies, arriving by land and by air, will set foot on Canadian soil this weekend. More than 1,000 strong, they will converge on Toronto, armed with a powerful weapon: knowledge. Jewish knowledge.

Meeting for the first time outside the United States, the Association for Jewish Studies will hold its annual conference in Toronto from Dec. 16 to 18. Now in its 39th year, the AJS promotes and enhances teaching and research in all areas of Jewish Studies at the university level.

As AJS president, I invite my fellow Torontonians to check out the conference program, available online at [www.ajsnet.org](http://www.ajsnet.org). Some events are open to the public, while others are accessible upon registration to those with a special interest in Jewish studies.

While the AJS is headquartered in New York, its membership and activities extend globally, with a long history of Canadian professors in leadership roles. It has a solid base among North American and Israeli scholars, and a growing membership in western European countries. In recent years, the AJS has reached out to colleagues in eastern Europe, helping to facilitate the teaching of Jewish studies there. We look, as well, to other areas of the globe where Jewish studies can benefit from the expertise and resources of our organization and its members.

This year's geographic border crossing also

reflects a different kind of border crossing – one of knowledge and thinking. Jewish studies encompasses many areas of knowledge and a broad range of fields and disciplines that are in dialogue with one another. The annual conference is an important context in which professors can exchange ideas and learn from each other.

For the first 20 or so years of its existence, the AJS conference convened yearly at a cozy hotel in the heart of downtown Boston that many of its veteran members recollect with nostalgia. The hotel would tuck away the decorated evergreen tree in its lobby for the duration of the conference.

Eventually, the organization outgrew the facilities of that hotel, and moved its annual meeting to another, more spacious hotel just across the street. In 1999, the unthinkable occurred – the organization convened in Chicago rather than Boston, initiating a practice of moving the conference to different cities.

The migration of the conference on a yearly basis reflects changes in Jewish studies at the university level. In the 1960s and 1970s, the cluster of important Jewish studies programs in the greater Boston area, and in the northeast United States more broadly, made that city and region appear to be the epicentre of Jewish scholarship. But in the past several decades, the field of Jewish studies has proliferated across the continent, with serious centres for teaching and research developing elsewhere. The conference now moves to the different regions where our

members live and work.

When I was finishing my graduate degree and contemplating where I might end up working, my doctoral adviser, a native Torontonian, reminisced to me about the early years of his career. He took his first job in southern California. In those days, he recalled, “west of the Rockies” meant beyond the pale of civilization. The distance from “civilization” was symbolized for him by the number of days past Sunday when his issue of the *Sunday New York Times* would be delivered. In those days, in southern California, the *Times* showed up on Tuesday.

Today, the reach of technology puts “civilization” everywhere. As for Jewish studies, there is no longer one centre, no single locale where our conference must weigh anchor.

As the AJS takes the significant and long overdue step of convening outside the 50 states, it strikes me as altogether appropriate that it should come to Toronto. Toronto is, after all, the largest city in Canada and is home to the country's largest Jewish community. It's also home to the largest concentration of academic Jewish studies in Canada. The Jewish population of Canada is fourth largest in the world. On a per capita basis – that is, as a percentage of the total population – Canada's Jewish population is the world's third largest.

AJS members will encounter Canadian multiculturalism and the enduring strength of ethnic neighbourhoods on our mosaic landscape. For the few days of the conference, they will learn to say “washroom” and “zed,” and perhaps even the occasional “eh.” They will bring to Toronto the richness of Jewish studies.



*Sara R. Horowitz,  
in Toronto*