Dear Friends:

I write this letter in the middle of my first semester as Director of the Center for Jewish Studies. I consider it an honor to serve in this position, and also a vital responsibility. CJS owes its existence to dedicated alumni and faculty members, beginning with Laurence A. Weinstein and George L. Mosse, who initiated our program more than a quarter century ago. My colleagues and I are entrusted with the task of carrying forward their efforts, an endeavor that calls for some reflection. As CJS proceeds into its twenty-sixth year, it is worth pausing to consider why we, as scholars and teachers, dedicate ourselves to the subject of Jews.

I recall a particularly vivid moment from my first semester at UW-Madison, in 1998. During the final week of my survey of American Jewish history, a student told me my course had disappointed her. Raised in the African American church, she complained that I made the Jews seem “ordinary,” as if they were no different from any other people. I had spent fifteen weeks giving lectures on migration patterns, economic niches, urban politics, cultural assimilation, and other topics I considered interesting and significant, but which had diminished the Jews in the eyes of my student. She thought of Jews as God’s Chosen People, but I seemed to treat them like any other group. While I could not agree with the theological underpinning of her criticism, I could not brush it off either. Did I really believe Jewish history was no different from that of any other people? If so, why teach it and not some other branch of history? What is significant, instructive, or maybe even profound in the history of Jews and their civilization?

My colleagues in CJS would surely offer any number of persuasive answers to those questions. For my part, I draw inspiration from David Hollinger, the eminent intellectual historian. Hollinger has written that, of all religious and ethnic communities, the Jews of modern Europe and the U.S. have proved “the most responsive to the global modernization processes entailing science, capitalism, socialism, and modernist movements in the arts.” For the past two centuries, Jews have played the role of creators and disturbers, of innovators. Not all Jews and not Jews alone, but Jews prominently and disproportionately have questioned established knowledge, challenged traditional social hierarchies, and expanded rights and liberties for the excluded. In the realms of culture, society, and politics, they have negotiated between elites and masses, dominant and minority religions, high art and popular entertainment. Put simply, the modern world cannot be understood apart from Jews. When we study them, we gain a better, deeper comprehension of the world they inhabit.

The classes taught, the public events organized, and the scholarship produced by CJS faculty have reached thousands of students and members of the Madison community. The following pages provide a glimpse into what we at CJS are doing. I will report back with more details next semester, but for now I’m proud to present a snapshot of the vibrant undertaking that is the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies.

With good wishes.

Tony Michels
Director
Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies
George L. Mosse Professor of American Jewish History
This fall caps off a busy publication year for faculty members at the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies. In addition to the publication of four new books, Scott Straus’s *Making and Unmaking of Nations* (Cornell University Press, 2015) was selected as a finalist for the prestigious Lemkin Book Award. Past recipients of this honor include Donald Bloxham and former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power.

Belzer Professor of Classical Judaism Jordan Rosenblum’s *The Jewish Dietary Laws in the Ancient World* is now out with Cambridge University Press. This new work—Rosenblum’s second book—draws on the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic literature, and other ancient sources to examine how Jews defended their interpretations of kosher practices under critique from early Christians, Greeks, Romans, and even other ancient Jews. Rosenblum analyzes how dietary restrictions were created, applied, and negotiated in antiquity, and the variety of motives and considerations important to this process.

Tony Michels and coeditor Mitchell B. Hart have recently completed *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 8, The Modern World, 1815-2000*. In this final volume of the series, leading scholars offer overviews of modern Jewish history interspersed with essays on political, social, economic, intellectual, and cultural developments that characterized the nearly two-century timeframe of their work. Organized in four parts, this book takes on the history of early modern Jewish settlements, emancipation, Jewish culture, and religion. In addition to completing this work, Michels serves as an editor of the journal *Jewish Social Studies*.

Sociology professor and CJS faculty member Chad Alan Goldberg’s *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought* is now also out with University of Chicago Press. Goldberg’s book examines how Western thinkers viewed Jews, how they used them as a reference point in the process of analyzing their own wider societies, and how Jews continue to function as intermediaries for self-reflection to this day. An excerpt from the book, which addresses whether Muslims have become the “new Jews,” was published online in June 2017 on the website *Public Seminar*.

Finally, and something truly different for our list of publications this year, Philosophy professor Steven Nadler and his son Ben Nadler worked together to create the graphic book *Heresics! The Wondrous (and Dangerous) Beginnings of Modern Philosophy* (Princeton University Press) about seventeenth-century thinkers and their challenges to authority that helped to change the world. Glowing reviews testify to the book’s ability to relate the contributions of philosophers from Galileo to Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, and Newton in a fun, engrossing, and visually appealing format.

It has truly been a year of diverse professional activities for our faculty.
Philosophy Professor Steven Nadler is known for serious scholarship, from an influential biography of Spinoza to *Rembrandt’s Jews*, a 2004 Pulitzer Prize finalist. For his latest book, Nadler has chosen a very different format: full of bright illustrations and characters speaking in word bubbles.

*Heretics! The Wondrous (and Dangerous) Beginnings of Modern Philosophy*, is a graphic novel, or a story told in comic-strip format. Incorporating a good bit of humor, the book explores 17th-century thinkers—Galileo, Descartes, Spinoza, Newton—who challenged authority and fundamentally changed how we view the world, sometimes at great personal risk.

Nadler pitched the idea to his publisher, Princeton University Press, as a way to make philosophy more accessible and interesting to a broader reading public. “Historians are very good at writing popular history books,” he says. “There’s no reason philosophers can’t do the same.”

The book is a collaboration with his son, Ben Nadler, a freelance illustrator in Chicago. The father-son aspect has sparked considerable curiosity at bookstore appearances. “People want to know how their relationship fared.”

Steven Nadler, 58, said to laughs at a packed book signing June 9 at Mystery to Me Bookstore in Madison. Ben Nadler, 25, says it was a relief to work with someone he didn’t have to “put on professional airs with.”

“We could be completely honest in critiquing each other’s work,” he says, during an interview at his parents’ home in Madison.

Ben had just graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design and was living in Seattle when his dad suggested the collaboration. He was trying to launch his freelance career while working at a cafe and doing an unpaid internship at a design firm.

“I was in no position to turn down a paying gig,” he says, making his dad laugh. “But it also sounded like a lot of fun, and it was an opportunity to learn about what my dad has been up to my whole life.”

His dad’s work had always gone over his head, Ben says. With this project, he had to understand it or the book wouldn’t make it. His dad bought him a copy of Bertrand Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy*.

“Did you read it?” his father asks.

“I flipped through it,” Ben says. “It didn’t have any pictures.”

*Heretics!* bursts with illustrations—more than 900 over 181 pages. After his father completed the text, Ben put ink to paper, a process that took about 18 months. He worked full time on the illustrations, supporting himself on the publisher’s advance and occasional cafe shifts.

As the deadline neared, he wore a wrist brace to bed and sought relief through acupuncture due to the repetitive nature of the work. In addition to the illustrations, Ben created the font for the text by formalizing his own handwriting. He and his father took to calling the font “Heretica.”

Ben had the difficult challenge of finding concrete ways to illustrate abstract ideas, his dad says. The two strived to hit the right tone in both the narrative and the graphics.

The two communicated mostly by email.

“There was a lot we had to talk through,” Ben says. “How do you render God? How do you illustrate a soul?” (continued on next page)
“We didn’t want to be too academic and dense, but we also didn’t want to be condescending or patronizing,” Steven says. “We decided that as long as the scholarship was accurate, we could take a few liberties with the illustrations.”

Steven says he noticed his son’s artistic potential early on. “Our daughter had a birthmark on her leg. Ben took a marker at age four and perfectly replicated it on his own leg.”

By high school at Madison West, Ben was taking private drawing lessons. He never considered anything other than art for college.

“I had total confidence in what Ben was going to do with the book,” his dad says. “When I started seeing the results—Wow.”

“Your tuition money hard at work,” Ben quips.

Though he’s written or edited 15 previous books, Steven says the publication of *Heretics!* offers a special thrill “because the success of this book is my son’s success.”

Critics are impressed. The National Post in Toronto, Ontario, calls the book “remarkable.” Publishers Weekly says it’s “a wonderful addition to the tradition of graphic nonfiction.” The Atlantic and the Los Angeles Review of Books have run excerpts.

The public reception also has been gratifying and suggests the book is introducing philosophy to a new audience, Steven says. Lots of young people are turning out for bookstore events, and the two have received many interview requests from general interest publications. The book was a hit at the recent Chicago Alternative Komics Expo—a first for the philosophy professor.

Steven is returning to a traditional format for his next book, a biography of Menasseh ben Israel, a rabbi in 17th century Amsterdam who he says is arguably the most famous Jew in Europe of that period.

Ben has been hired by Princeton University Press to illustrate a graphic novel on the life of Socrates by Debra Nails, a philosophy professor emerita at Michigan State University.

After that, he’s open to another intra-family collaboration.

“I’ll be making comics the rest of my life,” he says, “so just hop on board, Dad.”

This article was first published by UW-Madison in June 2017.
Lectures & Events 2017–2018

October 10
Luncheon Seminar: Elliot Ratzman (Lawrence University), “Jewish Theology Between Race and Anti-Racism”

October 18–19

November 2
Eliyahu Stern (Yale University), “Marx and the Kabbalah”

November 12–13
“The Highs and Lows of Sholem Aleichem: Yiddish Literature and the Pursuit of Popular Writing” Conference

February 26
Tobias Lecture by Nina Caputo (University of Florida), “Graphic Differences: Interpreting a Medieval Theological Debate through Comics”

March 19
Aaron Rubin (Pennsylvania State University), “Jewish Language Manuscripts”

April 11
Schrag Lecture by Olga Litvak (Clark University), “Dearest Father: Jewish Nationalism and the German Idea of Vocation”

Greenfield Summer Institute: Looking Forward, Looking Back
Following the huge success of the well-attended 2017 Greenfield Summer Institute, Center for Jewish Studies faculty and staff are busy planning for next summer’s Institute. The theme for July 8–12, 2018, will be Jews and Entertainment. We plan to host a very exciting line-up of speakers and performances.

We were fortunate to have Wisconsin Public Television’s University Place series record the lectures given by Professors Eric L. Goldstein (Emory University), Tony Michels (UW-Madison), and Amos Bitzan (UW-Madison). The premiere broadcast dates of the three lectures will be in January, 2018. We are excited about this opportunity to bring Greenfield Institute lectures to a wider audience!

Wisconsin Public Television’s University Place series brings recorded educational and enriching lectures, panel discussions and interviews to a statewide audience, on the Wisconsin Channel. Topics are wide-ranging and include science, art, history, health, culture, education, and philosophy, and presenters include university faculty and staff, graduate students, historians, authors, and artists. All University Place programs are archived for viewing any time on the WPT web site: wpt.org/universityplace.

Co-Sponsorships 2017–2018

September 14–16
“Back to the Future: Tradition and Innovation in German Studies”: The 50th Annual Wisconsin Workshop

September 19
David Hesch (Goldsmiths College, University of London), “Contemporary Left Antisemitism”

October 2

March 4–17
Halls Visiting Lecturer – Harriet Murav (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

April 2
Lecture by Geoffrey Levin (New York University) in the Middle East Studies Program Lecture Series
Two months ago I left Madison after two years as a fellow at the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies, returning to my home in Kibbutz Elion in northern Israel. In retrospect, I can mention several highlights of my stay in Madison: first and foremost, working with Tony Michels. Since my first days at the Center for Jewish Studies we discovered a deep, shared attachment to Jewish history and to the Jewish present and future. Almost every week we would have lunch together and talk about issues of research, politics, and more. In 2016 Tony visited Israel with me, where we began a new project: The Institute for the Study of Jews and the Left, a collaboration of the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies, Haifa University, and Yad Yaari—the Center for the Study of Hashomer Hatazh.

The moment from my time at the Center that I will remember for the rest of my life happened in Israel last December, when CJS faculty and board members traveled to Tel Aviv to collaborate with the Moshe Dayan Center and tour the Negev Desert. This magnificent group helped to reshape my point of view on Israel and my mission as a scholar and educational activist. The same transformation happened with my students. Teaching at UW-Madison contributed a great deal to my own perspectives by introducing me to American and Jewish American points of view on Israel and Zionism. My experience at Madison confirmed for me that my professional goal is not only to teach Israeli history, but also to be part of shaping its future.

Before returning to Israel I decided that I would not leave my educational career as a leader of Socialist Zionist youth groups—something I had been sure I would do by the time I reached the age of forty. Now, parallel to another year as a post-doctoral fellow at Ben Gurion University, I serve as chair of the well-known leadership “gap-year” program named for Yitzchak Rabin.

Along with everything else, my stay in Madison gave me what I came for originally: time to study and write. I visited archives, interviewed people, and met with other scholars who enriched my research about the field of Jews and the Left, especially Socialist Zionism. I submitted seven articles and two versions (in English and Hebrew) of a manuscript based on my PhD dissertation. I could not have asked for a more peaceful and supportive environment to help me develop as an historian. I thank you all for that!

- Tal Elmaliach, October 12, 2017