OVER THE PAST YEAR, we have been gratified to see the warm reception generated by Haverim, our new newsletter, and very grateful for the support many of you have offered. We hope you will enjoy learning more about our program and the activities of our faculty and students in this third issue of Haverim.

We are delighted to announce that Northeastern has been selected to participate in the Visiting Israel Professor Program, funded by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and run by the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. With the support of this Program, Dr. Daphne Tsimhoni, a distinguished professor of Middle Eastern History at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, will join our faculty for the 2009-2010 academic year. Tsimhoni’s courses and public programming will not only greatly enhance the offerings of our Jewish Studies and Middle East Studies programs, but also benefit the entire Northeastern community.

In addition to our very successful spring series, “Reinventing Tradition: Innovations in Jewish Ritual” (see article, page 2), we also sponsored a number of other events on campus this past year, especially on the subject of Israel and the Middle East. In the fall, we participated in an Advanced Academic Learning Community on the Middle East, which featured lectures, films, and music. This spring, Bill Miles, Professor of Political Science, shared his experience conducting research in Israel during the war in Gaza. Finally, Yisrael Ne’eman of the University of Haifa discussed the results of the Israeli elections in light of events in Gaza.

Congratulations to Laurel Leff, Associate Professor of Journalism, who has been selected as Northeastern’s next Stotsky Professor of Jewish Historical and Cultural Studies. Leff’s book, Buried by The Times: The Holocaust and America’s Most Important Newspaper, was selected as the best

continued on back cover

Fascination from Afar: Contemporary Images of Jews in China
Professor Jim Ross reflects on his latest research

Last fall, I taught journalism as a Fulbright professor at Nanjing University. In my travels, I encountered a remarkable cultural trend: bookstores in major Chinese cities are stocked with books analyzing the ways in which Jews conduct business, manage the world, and raise their children. Universities throughout China offer popular Jewish Studies programs, some with advanced degrees. Indeed, Jewish culture is a point of widespread fascination. Yet, there are virtually no Jews to be found in China.

I had the opportunity to observe this first-hand. Nanjing University has one of the most successful Judaic Studies programs in China, with a $15 million endowment, mostly from American donors. The director of the program, Xu Xin, has written extensively about the Jews of ancient Kaifeng. At the University, the demand for Jewish Studies courses is high; Xu Xin teaches a class on Jewish religion and culture to 300 undergraduates every semester. Currently, he has several dozen graduate students pursuing master’s and PhD degrees. Many of them spend a year in Israel studying Hebrew. They write theses on Jewish philosophy, identity, and even the films of Woody Allen.

continued on page 3

(Below) Chinese books about Jewish culture, observed by Jim Ross in his travels
This spring, Bryanne Mahoney interned at the Jewish Women’s Archive (JWA), an organization that works to chronicle and transmit the rich legacy of Jewish women and their contributions to our world. Bryanne, a Jewish Studies and History double major, has completed a BA/MA in History. Below, Bryanne shares her thoughts about JWA and Northeastern’s experiential education program.

Why did you choose to work at the Jewish Women’s Archive? Public history is my passion, and I chose to work at the Jewish Women’s Archive so I could gain experience in this area. It made sense to me to combine my interest in public history with my love of Jewish history, particularly Jewish women’s history and experiences.

What kinds of projects did you do for JWA? I particularly enjoyed working on a project that corresponded with Women’s History month in March. It covered weekly topics, including: Women Remember the Way Things Were, in which I captured oral history testimony about women’s experiences before the second wave of feminism; Women in Leadership, discussing politics, community activism, and various other leadership roles; Women in Activism, as Jewish women have been particularly active in social change movements; and Women in Judaism, in which women reflected on their lives within the Jewish community, as well as how Judaism has shaped them. The testimonies are fascinating, and I have grown quite attached to some of the women in a very short period of time. My favorite experience has definitely been working with the testimonies, as the women are so remarkable and interesting. I feel honored to be the one helping to tell their stories.

As China has undergone rapid economic expansion, its people’s fascination with Jewish women has also grown. With the assistance of Yan Li, a Chinese graduate student in History at Northeastern, I conducted research on the image of Jews in contemporary China. The outcomes were intriguing. My research suggests that the popular perception is that all Jews are wealthy and crafty, some writers also have promoted physical stereotypes, suggesting that all Jews have large noses. Books duplicate the distortions of the infamous Protocols of the Elders of Zion with an odd twist: the Chinese want to emulate the Jews rather than exterminate them.

In Chinese academia, some of the interest in Jewish Studies can be linked – as it is in the West – to the quest for financial backing from Jewish donors. Some Chinese scholars also view Jewish Studies as a window into Western civilization and thought. A number of Chinese academics see an affinity between the two ancient peoples.

Most fascinating, however, is the idea that the Chinese are constructing an identity for a people that the large majority of them will never meet. Here’s a passage from one of the most popular books, titled The Spirit of Jewish Culture: “Jews are the most intelligent, mysterious, and the wealthiest people in the world. In a sense, not knowing about Jews equals not knowing the world! When Jews sneeze at home, all the banks in the world would catch a cold one by one; five Jews together can control the gold market of the humankind.”

Chinese bloggers regularly discuss Jews and Judaism. Some of the blogs are critical of Israel, and I suggest that Jews should be role models for the Chinese. While divided in their opinion, they demonstrate a common, passionate interest in Jewish culture and affairs.

Taking my research on the road, I lectured on Jewish identity and culture at Henan University, located in the ancient Chinese capital of Kaifeng. This city was once home to a large Jewish community, until the Jews assimilated into the Chinese population by the 16th century. At Kunming University in southwestern China, I talked about American Jews and Israel.

The students and faculty asked many questions, some very well informed, and others connected to popular stereotypes. A few students, for example, said they thought American Jews were so powerful that they controlled American finances. I told students that many Jews would be flattered by the popular image of Jews. However, I thought it was important to emphasize that this image is based on stereotypes, and even “positive” stereotypes are inaccurate and dangerous.

One of the main goals of the Fulbright lecturer program is to encourage American professors to learn more about foreign people and cultures and spread that knowledge in the United States. I look forward to sharing my insights and questions with students and faculty at Northeastern. I also plan to speak at other institutions, academic conventions, and at synagogues and community organizations throughout the country.

Fascination from Afar, continued from page 1

Jim Ross and his son Marcus next to a poster announcing Prof. Ross’s talk in Kaifeng

Reinventing Tradition: Innovations in Jewish Ritual

This spring, the Jewish Studies Program presented “Reinventing Tradition: Innovations in Jewish Ritual,” a series of lectures and workshops with co-sponsorship from Hebrew College and Northeastern’s Women’s Studies Program. Department of Philosophy & Religion, Office of Spiritual Life, and Hillel.

The series opened with a presentation by Professor Vanessa Ochs of the University of Virginia. Ochs discussed the patterns she has observed as an anthropologist of Jewish ritual. Ochs noted that new rituals are often met with reactions of surprise, as people feel protective of a “tradition that feels vulnerable despite being venerable.” But she suggested that we do well to re-member that even those rituals that today seem most traditional were themselves once new. Rabbi Daniel Lehmman, President of Hebrew College, responded to Ochs’ talk, offering ways of thinking about ritual as a religious experience.

In February, poet/playwright Merle Feld led a workshop on the technique of using writing as a means of spiritual reflection. Spiritual writing, she said, is way of “speaking to one’s lonely soul.” She has developed this practice in her work as the founding director of the Rabbinic Writing Institute.

March brought singer and song-writer Basya Schecter to campus for “Singing Text, Finding Meaning.” With an oud and tambourine in hand, Schecter reflected on her process of using music as a mode of re-interpreting Jewish liturgy. She then coached participants through that same process.

Dr. Art Green, Rector of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College was the next featured speaker, with a response from Northeastern’s Professor of Sociology Debra Kaufman. Green drew on personal experiences, ranging from growing up with his immigrant grandparents’ traditional Judaism to developing a non-denominational curriculum for training rabbis. Green’s discussion of training rabbinical students to serve as hospital chaplains gave rise to a lively discussion among audience members, as did his discussion of the moral and historical interest in kabbalah and a Jewish mystical spirituality.

The series closed with a multi-faith panel discussion featuring Dr. Matthew Boulton (Harvard Divinity School), Salma Kazmi (Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center) and Rabbi Elaine Zecher (Temple Israel in Boston), and chaired by Dr. Jane Kanarek (Hebrew College). The panelists, all local religious leaders, reflected on ritual trends in their respective communities. Whether it is the return of Catholic-style worship practices in American Protestantism, the emphasis on Hebrews’ liturgy in the new movement prayer book, or using mathematical calculations in place of lunar observations to determine the beginning of Ramadan, negotiating between the past and the present emerged as a challenge faced by all three faith communities.

Plans are underway for next year’s series. Check out our website this fall: jewishstudies.neu.edu/events
New and Noteworthy
continued from page 1

media history book by the American Journalism Historians Association and the best history book by ForeWord Magazine. Her three-year term as Stotsky Professor will begin this July. To learn more about the Stotsky Professorship, visit www.jewishstudies.neu.edu/awards_and_fellowships/stotsky_professorship.

Finally, we would like to introduce you to a program recently launched by the College of Arts & Sciences. CHARM: Co-ops in the Humanities, Arts, Repertory, and Music is a program that enables students to take unpaid co-ops in nonprofit organizations. The co-op experience has a unique, life-changing impact on our students, but unfortunately many nonprofit organizations are unable to fund a co-op position. Too often, this situation forces students to accept co-ops less well suited to their studies, simply for financial reasons. With support from CHARM, Jewish Studies students would be able to accept co-ops at such organizations as Jewish Family & Children’s Services, the Jewish Community Relations Council, Facing History & Ourselves, or the Vilna Shul. If you are interested in supporting this very important initiative, please contact the CA&S Advancement Office at 617-373-7475.

www.neu.edu/jewishstudies