

Michael S. Berger, Emory University



*Michael S. Berger is Associate Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Religion, Emory University. He is the author of *Rabbinic Authority* (Oxford, 1998). His research and teaching focus on issues of religious authority, and medieval and contemporary Jewish thought.*

One of the many challenges of modern religious studies in Western universities and colleges is the breathtaking diversity of the phenomena we try to help our students understand. No matter how much we qualify, nuance, or shade our descriptions and analyses, the very format of the semester or quarter course forces us, and therefore our students, to simplify, generalize, conflate, and reduce the realities of religious thought and practice. Site visits can, therefore, not only vividly bring to life what we must frequently flatly describe in the classroom; they can also render the reality “messier” than the more simplified impression students receive from readings and class presentations.

My course “Modernization of Judaism” exposes students to the emergence of denominations in Judaism since the Emancipation of the Jews in the 19th century. This process of denominationalism, which began in Europe and accelerated in the United States from the 1840s to the present, was in many cases driven by ideological debates as to how Judaism should best adapt to the modern period. Part of the Jews’ assimilation over the last two centuries often meant adopting the Western cultural norm of religion “happening” in the house of worship; indeed, many of the initial changes to traditional practice involved synagogue practice, and so I want students to see (or notice) these changes and to link them back to their ideological underpinnings. For instance, the direction the cantor faces, the amount of Hebrew in the service, or the subject of the sermon are often easily related to what the students have been studying. This understandably requires placing the site visit in the syllabus after we have covered sufficient material about each American denomination, which is usually *after* the midterm. I notify students of this at the outset of the semester, so that they can plan their weekends after the midterm to include a site visit (I require attendance at Friday night or preferably Saturday morning services, as that is when most congregations hold services).

Students are encouraged to attach to their reports any materials that might be distributed at the synagogue — flyers about upcoming events, homiletical messages, or other writings — and to discuss these handouts in relationship to what we have been studying.

Timing the site visit halfway through the semester has the added advantage of allowing students to think for several weeks about Jewish traditions as they are presented in historical and ethnographic texts — only to discover that many people in the pews do not conform to the students' expectations. These discrepancies can often only be ascertained through actual conversations with congregants. This personal interaction is probably the most challenging part of site visits. I realize not every student can do this, so I simply set out for them what makes a site visit report an "A," one criterion of which is conversations with congregants. Conversations are made easier if students visit the synagogues either alone or in very small groups. I encourage them to strike up conversation with congregants by asking them for assistance and by sticking around after services for some questions and answers. To be honest, in the ten years I have been living in Atlanta, this has become easier because more Jews are either familiar with me or are acquainted with this assignment, and so I now tell students to mention that they are there for Professor Berger's course, and most often, the conversation begins immediately.

As responsible neighbors, we must prepare our students to act appropriately on site visits. In most cases, this means alerting students to the sensibilities of congregants of particular denominations. Thus, I tell students that if they attend an Orthodox congregation, they should be aware of the modest dress code and should avoid writing or using tape recorders during the Sabbath, when Orthodox Jews forbid such activities. Students should be informed of the general structure of what they will see, and the length of services. I have had students who allotted only an hour for a synagogue visit and therefore did not really see the bulk of the service, which lasted over two hours. While I have found serendipity to be a good thing about site visits — sometimes students "stumble" into a bar mitzvah or special weekend for a congregation — I do suggest students call up a congregation in advance to ascertain the time services begin, precise directions on how to get there, and any other information that might help them act respectfully. As more congregations in the last five years have set up Web sites, I encourage students to check these out for information about the synagogue.

