

# SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENT

REIMAGINING  
JEWISH TRADITION  
IN THE TWENTY-  
FIRST CENTURY





# SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENT

Essays in Honor of  
CHAIM SEIDLER-FELLER

REIMAGINING  
JEWISH TRADITION  
IN THE TWENTY-  
FIRST CENTURY

Edited by  
Shaul Seidler-Feller  
and David N. Myers

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The cover art graphic, conceived by David Moss, features text from the famous story of the oven of *akhnai* (*bBava metsi'a* 59a-b), in which Rabbi Eliezer is quoted as saying, "If the *halakhah* accords with my opinion, let the stream of water prove it," upon which the stream flowed backward. Chaim Seidler-Feller's Hebrew name, Chaim Shlomo, is superimposed thereupon, as though swimming against the current. The calligraphy was adapted by Shulie Seidler-Feller from National Library of Florence, Ms. Magl. II.I.8, pp. 188, 216, 230. The fish and boat imagery is © British Library Board: Ms. Harley 5794, f. 33r, and is reproduced here with permission.

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# Introduction: A Portrait of Chaim Seidler-Feller\*

Any argument that is for the sake of heaven will ultimately endure.

—*Avot* 5:17

This maxim from the Ethics of the Fathers, highlighting the principle of a *maḥaloket le-shem shamayim*, has served as both invitation to and justification for Jews to engage in passionate debate. They have, ever since, proven particularly adept at the art of argumentation. Indeed, Jews are a famously contentious lot, though few recall the original text from which this quality derives, much less the ancient actors—the sages Hillel and Shammai—who modeled it.

Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller is the living embodiment of the principle of “an argument for the sake of heaven.” He loves a good debate but also understands the moral and political imperative of listening to and learning from the other side; he seeks to parry but also to absorb the perspective of his foil. This ability to live—and to live productively and happily—with *maḥaloket*, with dissonance, is a defining feature of his career. It is also a key source of his capacity for innovation, for crafting new alloys from old

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\* This introduction-cum-biography, like the rest of the volume, was compiled without Rabbi Seidler-Feller’s direct involvement. Wherever possible, external sources are cited to buttress biographical details shared orally by him in various contexts. No claims of comprehensiveness are made by the authors of this essay.

material. Indeed, throughout the course of his life, Chaim has repeatedly swum against the current, especially in striking a balance between tradition and modernity. He has alternately stimulated and annoyed adepts of either pole but never surrendered a claim to both—or to the possibility of a synthesis between them. Along the way, he has modeled a path that, in an earlier, golden age, went by the name “Modern Orthodoxy”—before that designation itself became a source of controversy and argumentation. One can say that he is equally, and rather uniquely, at home in the worlds of Talmudic debate, Maimonidean logic, Hasidic communion, Zionist polemics, modern psychology, political science, religious theory, social critique, and feminism.

In Chaim, seeming opposites dissolve into a complex, but integrated, whole. He is a fully observant Jew and a fully modern man. He is a proud adept of the particular beliefs and practices of his people and an unreconstructed universalist who insists on the dignity of each human being. He has devoted almost the entirety of his professional career to one vocation, Hillel director, but is, by nature, a relentless multitasker (read: on two phones at the same time), ready to take on new challenges and explore new paths at every turn. He has the obsessive attention to detail of the experienced scholar that he is but also the tendency to leap from topic to topic with the enthusiasm of an excited college student.

This unusual amalgam is the product of what would, at first blush, seem like a typical immigrant home in Brooklyn. Born in 1947 in Borough Park to Isaac and Peppi Feller, Chaim grew up in an environment committed to full Jewish observance, a love for Zion (in a Betar-Revisionist key), and a passionate embrace of the Hebrew language. Isaac Feller was born in 1914 in Sanok, Galicia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), to a family of Belzer Hasidim and immigrated to the United States in 1927;<sup>1</sup> Peppi Kleinman was born in 1920 to an Eastern European family living in Berlin but came to America alone in November 1938. Isaac was fond of recounting how he first encountered Peppi on Thirteenth Avenue in Brooklyn challenging the anti-Zionist ravings of an interlocutor. He admired her passion and idealism in that moment and remarked to his best friend Nachum Maidenbaum that she was the type of person he would be interested in

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1 For background on the Feller family, see Susan Feller Siegel, ed., *A Family History of the Descendants of Shimshon Yechiel Mechel Feller* (Yorktown Heights, NY: Susan Feller Siegel, 2019).

marrying some day—and so they did, in 1940.<sup>2</sup> Together with his brother Milton, Isaac owned a clothing business known as Admiral Knitwear Corporation on Hall Street in Brooklyn; later, he and Peppi worked at different branches of a luggage store owned by a cousin.

Isaac belonged to a small but identifiable coterie of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Not only was he a regular consumer of *The New York Times* and the Yiddish press (both the *Tog-Morgn zhurnal* and the *Forverts*); he was also a twentieth-century *maskil*, an avid, self-taught Hebraist. In the 1935 words of American Hebrew journalist and educator Daniel Persky, he was *shikkor-ha-ivrit ha-nitshi* (perennially intoxicated with [a love of] Hebrew)—one who read the Hebrew journals that came out of New York, such as *Hadoar* and *Bitzaron*, to which prominent intellectuals such as Simon Federbusch, Abraham Halkin, Samuel K. Mirsky, and Simon Rawidowicz regularly contributed. Moreover, Chaim recalls that as a young boy he would go to the local kiosk on Saturday nights to pick up the newly arrived Israeli newspapers, including *Davar*, *HaTzofe*, *Maariv*, and *Haaretz*, for his father. It was through Isaac's reading interests, as well as his membership in the Histadruth Ivrit of America and attendance at Hillel Bavli's classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary, that Chaim was introduced to modern Hebrew literature. In short, the Feller home was a nurturing environment for Chaim to develop his love for Hebrew language and literature, as well as Zionism.

As advocates of traditional Jewish education, Peppi and Isaac sent Chaim to local Orthodox day schools where Jewish studies and Hebrew were emphasized: Hebrew Institute of Boro Park (Yeshiva Etz Chaim)<sup>3</sup> for elementary school (from which he graduated as valedictorian), followed by Yeshiva University High School of Brooklyn (BTA). In the summers, Chaim attended Massad Aleph in Tannersville, Pennsylvania, a non-denominational Hebrew-immersive camp where he expanded his knowledge of the language through such activities as Hebrew-only baseball, for which a separate glossary of terms was created.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his

2 See Chaim's "My Ima, Peppi Feller," *Jewish Journal* (January 30, 2013), accessed March 10, 2019, [https://web.archive.org/web/20130204204552/http://www.jewishjournal.com/obituaries/article/my\\_ima\\_peppi\\_feller](https://web.archive.org/web/20130204204552/http://www.jewishjournal.com/obituaries/article/my_ima_peppi_feller).

3 On the early history of the school and its "Ivrit be' Ivrit" curriculum, see Moses I. Shulman, "The Yeshivah Etz Hayim[,] Hebrew Institute of Boro Park," *Journal of Jewish Education* 20, no. 1 (1948): 47–48.

4 On the educational philosophy of the camp, see Dan Lainer-Vos, "Israel in the Poconos: Simulating the Nation in a Zionist Summer Camp," *Theory and Society* 43, no. 1 (2014):

high school career at BTA, which was characterized by his “zeal in the pursuit of excellence,”<sup>5</sup> Chaim was involved in numerous extracurricular activities, including organizing Variety Nite, coordinating the daily student *minyān* and weekly *mishmar* learning sessions, serving on the Student Court, editing *The Topics* student newspaper and the *Elchanite* yearbook, heading the local Arista honors society chapter, and participating in the glee club, math team, tennis team, and track team, among others.<sup>6</sup> “When asked about finding time for everything, Feller advised, ‘An amazing amount of work can be done if you don’t waste time.’”<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are only so many hours in the day, and Chaim was sometimes forced to cut class to fulfill his other obligations. The oft-repeated refrain of the faculty—“Where is Feller?”—continues to accompany the perennially tardy Chaim down to the present.<sup>8</sup>

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91–116. For a brief history of the camp’s sporting program, see J. Mitchell Orlan, “Ha-pe’ilut ha-sportivit be-maḥanot ‘massad,” in *Kovets massad*, ed. Shlomo and Rivka Shulsinger-Shear Yashuv, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Irgun Maḥanot “Massad” be-Yiśra’el, 1989), 177–83. The camp actually issued its own dictionary, including many neologisms, the first edition of which appeared as Shlomo Shulsinger and Hillel Rudavsky, *The Massad English–Hebrew Dictionary: A Classified Listing of Everyday Words, Cross Indexed*, ed. Daniel Persky (New York: Massad Camps, Inc., 1947). Many years later, Chaim would make a point of raising his own children in Hebrew; see Beverly Gray, “Talking the Talk,” *Jewish Journal* (July 12–18, 1996): 20, 22, and Chaim’s “Zionist Principles Can Drive Healing Process,” *Daily Bruin* (May 6, 1997): 15.

- 5 Anon., “Daiell Awarded Mayor’s Citation[,] Grand Street Prize to Feller,” *The Topics* 11, no. 4 (May 1964): 1.
- 6 See anon., “Feller, Novick, Kerstein, Shapiro Elected Editors of ’64 Elchanite,” *The Topics* 10, no. 2 (December 1962): 1, and Chaim Feller and Michael Novick, eds., *Elchanite* (Brooklyn: Students of Yeshiva University H.S. of Brooklyn, 1964), 22.
- 7 Gary S. Schiff, “Meet One of the Fellas,” *The Topics* 11, no. 4 (May 1964): 3. Many years later, Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis would astutely observe that Chaim is “always teaching” due to his concern for *biṭṭul ha-zeman* (wasting time), a sensitivity engendered by his “yeshiva culture”; see “UCLA Hillel Honors Rabbi Chaim & Dr. Doreen Seidler-Feller,” accessed March 1, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/13195592> (starting at approx. 1:49). See also Chaim’s 1968 letter of acceptance to Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh: “Whether you are in the Yeshiva Bet Midrash or elsewhere, at a study period or in a recess between studies, in the dining room or in your own room—[Torah study and its application] should occupy your attention and your time so fully that you will no longer find particular interest in those trivialities which previously occupied so much precious time.”
- 8 Feller and Novick, *Elchanite*, 22; see also *ibid.*, 34, 48, and the film *Searching for Chaim*, produced in 1998 by Marshall Goldberg.

## “For the Intellect Is the Glory of God” (Maimonides, Commentary on *mḥagigah* 2:1)

Upon graduating high school in 1964, Chaim enrolled in Yeshiva College, where his manifold intellectual interests blossomed. It was at Yeshiva that Chaim began to assemble the foundations of his distinctive *hashkafah*, or worldview. He deepened his knowledge of Talmud through *shi'urim* (lectures) given by Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik and his brother, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (the renowned “Rov”), with the latter of whom he studied for four and a half years.<sup>9</sup> In addition to his mathematics major (he had started college as a pre-med), he indulged his interest in philosophy by taking undergraduate- and graduate-level courses with the well-known scholar of medieval Jewish thought Arthur J. Hyman, the philosopher of language Sol Roth, the ethicist Walter Wurzbarger, and the theologian Yehuda (Jerome) Gellman.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps most influential among his teachers (aside from the Rov) was Rabbi Meyer Simcha Feldblum, a student of the yeshiva in Telz (present-day Telšiai, Lithuania) who survived World War II as a partisan and later immigrated to the United States. Having received his doctorate in Talmud from Abraham Weiss at Yeshiva University, Feldblum adopted Weiss's historical-critical methodology in analyzing the development of the Oral Law and transmitted it, in turn, to his own students.<sup>11</sup> For Chaim, this new way of looking at *halakhah* (Jewish law) and *minhag* (Jewish custom) as living,

9 For Chaim's reflections on Soloveitchik's thought and impact, including his personal experiences in his class, see “Jo[se]ph Baer Soloveitchik, The Lonely Man of Faith with Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller,” *The VBS College of Jewish Studies* (October 30, 2013), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/78668330>.

10 Chaim was eventually inducted into Pi Mu Epsilon, the national mathematics honorary society; see anon., “Initiates,” *Pi Mu Epsilon Journal* 4, no. 8 (Spring 1968): 364. He would later remark that, given his interest in ideas, he should have majored in philosophy.

11 For an analysis of Weiss's methodology, see Meyer S. Feldblum, “Prof. Abraham Weiss: His Approach and Contribution to Talmudic Scholarship,” in *The Abraham Weiss Jubilee Volume: Studies in His Honor Presented by His Colleagues and Disciples on the Occasion of His Completing Four Decades of Pioneering Scholarship* (New York: Abraham Weiss Jubilee Committee, 1964), 7–80. For appreciations of Feldblum as a scholar and teacher, see anon., ed., *Ha-Rav Prof. Meyer Simcha ha-Kohen Feldblum z”l: divre hesped ye-ha’arakah* (Ramat Gan: n.p., 2003), and Avinoam Cohen, “Meyer Simcha Feldblum: ha-ish ye-shittato ba-mehkar ha-Talmudi,” in *Universitat Bar-Ilan: me-ra’ayon le-ma’aś*, ed. Dov Schwartz, vol. 2 (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2006), 49–65. See also the double-issue of the journal *Bar-Ilan* 30–31 (2006), a volume of essays published in Feldblum's memory.

evolving traditions proved hugely influential in his thinking about the modern Jewish experience.

Chaim's time at Yeshiva was not only deeply rewarding for him; it was a fruitful period for the university's guiding ethos of Torah u-Madda, with rabbis and professors such as Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, Aharon Lichtenstein, and Shlomo Riskin serving as mentors. Through his Talmudic and philosophical studies, Chaim came to embody the harmonious blending of traditional Jewish learning, on the one hand, and secular scientific and humanistic studies, on the other, to which Yeshiva College was dedicated.<sup>12</sup> In fact, when Yeshiva President Samuel Belkin decided to separate the yeshiva from the university in 1970 in order to receive state funding without running afoul of church-state restrictions, Chaim and some of his friends protested (ultimately unsuccessfully) what they saw as a threat to the vision of "synthesis" that they so cherished.

As in high school, Chaim was involved in a host of extracurricular activities in college that reflected his evolving interests. He was copyeditor of *The Commentator* and managing editor and editor-in-chief of the *Hamevaser* student newspapers, vice president of the Student Organization of Yeshiva (SOY), and president of the Yeshiva chapter of Yavneh, the National Religious Jewish Student Association.<sup>13</sup> It was during these years of intense social upheaval in the United States that Chaim developed the core of his progressive political consciousness, shaped both by his parents and his firm conviction, imbued by Wurzbarger and Soloveitchik, in the ethical values of Judaism. Chaim attended a protest against the Vietnam War at Columbia University and hung an anti-nuclear proliferation "mushroom cloud" poster in his dorm room.<sup>14</sup> As the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ) movement took form, he went to meetings and demonstrations on

12 For an early formulation of Chaim's Torah u-Madda philosophy, see his "We Believe" essay in the 1964 *Elchanite*, p. 89: "It is the belief of the truly religious intellect that one's devotion to G-d will lead him to the ultimate perfection accompanied by the wealth of knowledge that civilization has uncovered." (Below his signature appears the Hebrew of "Know Him in all your ways" [Prov. 3:6].)

13 See anon., "Miller, Sonneberg Win Religious Council Posts," *The Commentator* 65, no. 6 (May 25, 1967): 1; Alan Rockoff, "Frimer Speaks on Prophecy at N.Y. Convention," *The Commentator* 67, no. 1 (February 15, 1968): 6–7; and Ivan Michael Schaeffer, ed., *Masmid* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1968), 116.

14 See David Suissa, "Lonely Man of Faith," *Jewish Journal* (April 21, 2010), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/opinion/78683/>. Years later at UCLA, he would sign declarations calling for an immediate freeze on all nuclear weapons production; see the March 8, 1982 (p. 12) and June 3, 1982 (p. 6) issues of the *Daily Bruin*.

and off campus. These causes, both Jewish and not, reflected Chaim's deep belief that particularistic and universal commitments were not mutually exclusive.

Following his graduation from Yeshiva College in 1968, Chaim spent about seven months (Elul through Adar) studying at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, the first *yeshivat hesder* (which combined Talmud study and army service) in Israel, under the tutelage of the school's dean, Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht. After his time at the yeshiva, Chaim came back to New York briefly before returning to Israel that summer to take classes at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Bible with Baruch Margalit and the history of the State of Israel with Avraham Avi-Hai. These initial exposures to Israel, to which Chaim would return scores of times in the decades that followed, not only solidified his dual commitments to traditional and academic Jewish studies, but also concretized his Zionism as he connected to the vibrancy of spiritual and cultural life in the Jewish State.<sup>15</sup>

After the summer, Chaim began his formal studies at Yeshiva's rabbinical school, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), as well as at its Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies. The RIETS curriculum at the time consisted of focused exploration of *halakhah*, with a special emphasis on the laws of *kashrut*, while in Revel, Chaim pursued a Master's in Rabbinic Literature under Feldblum's direction. Chaim also spent a year (1970–1971) of his time in the *semikhah* program in Lichtenstein's afternoon *kolel* for advanced rabbinical students.

### **“Love the Work, but Hate the Rabbinate” (Avot 1:10)**

In 1971, the young Chaim left the familiar world of Yeshiva University and entered the rabbinate. Although he had not yet completed all of his requirements for ordination (or for his Master's degree), he took a pulpit in New Bedford, Massachusetts, at Ahavath Achim (the synagogue previously ministered by Rabbi Zalman Schachter [later: Schachter-Shalomi], among others), a relatively small congregation with approximately two to three

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15 He would later write: “Speaking for myself, Zionism is no mere ideological appendage but an essential feature of my Jewishness” (“Zionism Is Not a Racist Policy; It's Just a Form of Nationalism,” *Daily Bruin* [January 15, 1992]: 18). See also his “Zionist Principles,” 15.

hundred member families at the time.<sup>16</sup> There, he not only taught Torah classes, but also served a number of communal organizations such as the local Jewish Community Center and Jewish Welfare Federation.<sup>17</sup>

From this early point in his career, Chaim evinced a characteristic quality: he regarded the quest for social justice, as well as his political interests more generally, as inseparable from his spiritual and religious mission as a rabbi. He served as chairman of the New Bedford Conference on Soviet Jewry, organizing a rally at a local park that drew three hundred participants and featured noted activist Rabbi Arthur Green as guest speaker. Similarly, on Rosh Hashanah 5733 (1972), Chaim devoted his sermon to a soul-searching discussion of the American bombing of Cambodia.<sup>18</sup> In the days that followed, he noticed that a larger-than-usual crowd had gathered to pray the evening service one night. Sensing that something was amiss, he asked them whether they had come to speak with him; they said that yes, they were disturbed by his *derashah* on Rosh Hashanah and wanted to know what he was going to talk about on Yom Kippur. Though the topic on which he planned to speak, aging, gained his congregants' approval, Chaim realized that he could not continue in his role as leader of a flock composed largely of conservative World War II veterans who would oppose his progressive leanings.

### **“Who Is Wise? He Who Learns from Everyone” (Avot 4:1)**

At around that time, Chaim's friends Rabbis Yehiel Poupko and Joseph Polak began urging him to consider a career with the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation. A 1973 meeting in Boston with Rabbis Samuel Fishman and Max Ticktin of

16 For two brief histories of the congregation, which ceased operations by the close of 2010, see Judy Farrar and Cynthia Yoken, *Historical Tour of Jewish New Bedford* (Dartmouth: University Library and the Center for Jewish Culture, 2005), 20, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.lib.umassd.edu/archives/jewish-tour/ahavath-achim-1>, and “The Story of Ahavath Achim Synagogue,” *New Bedford Cable Network* (2013), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vz\\_D58MKJQ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vz_D58MKJQ0). See also Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi with Edward Hoffman, *My Life in Jewish Renewal: A Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 87–88.

17 See anon., “Hillel Expands Staff,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (September 20, 1973): 3.

18 Years later, Chaim would sign a letter, together with other alumni of the Hebrew University, protesting the American Friends of the Hebrew University's decision to honor Henry Kissinger at their annual dinner in light of his role in the secret bombardment of Cambodia and in the ouster of its head of state, Norodom Sihanouk. See *Ha'Am* (November 27, 1979): 9.

National Hillel proved to be fateful. Not only was Chaim offered a position at the Ohio State University (OSU), but Fishman would become a lifelong friend. After a visit to the campus, Chaim chose Columbus as his new home and settled into a new rhythm of life as co-director of Hillel (along with Aaron Jay Leventhal).<sup>19</sup> He would later reflect: “I came to Hillel . . . because there was the sense that the university was the place where a new type of Judaism was going to [e]merge that was going to provide meaning for the future.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the environs of the university were exceptionally hospitable to Chaim. He quickly befriended faculty and engaged students with his unusual combination of intellectual, cultural, and spiritual interests.

Chaim also did not shy away from controversy. Shortly after his arrival, Chaim led a beginners’ service at Hillel, without a *meḥitsah* (the traditional partition between men and women), and invited anyone who wanted an *aliyyah* to the Torah to step up. One of those who approached the *bimah* on that Shabbat morning was a woman, and she was duly granted the synagogal honor.<sup>21</sup> This act made clear that Chaim, raised as an Orthodox Jew, had evolved in his own thinking, favoring an inclusive approach to religious observance.<sup>22</sup> Somehow, word made its way back to RIETS that Chaim Feller had sanctioned a breach of accepted Orthodox practice. In the fall of 1973, he received a phone call from someone he knew in the Yeshiva registrar’s office urging him to file for graduation as trouble was brewing.

19 For brief reflections on their time as co-directors, see Naomi Schottenstein’s interview with Leventhal on behalf of the Columbus Jewish Historical Society, accessed March 1, 2019, [http://columbusjewishhistory.org/oral\\_histories/aaron-leventhal/](http://columbusjewishhistory.org/oral_histories/aaron-leventhal/).

20 Tessa Nath, “Celebrating 40 Years of Ha’Am,” *Ha’Am* (December 11, 2012), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://haam.org/2012/12/11/celebrating-40-years-of-haam/>.

21 See the later report on this incident in Bill Cohen, “History Made as Conservative, ‘Traditional’ Rabbis Call Women to Bless the Torah,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (November 14, 1974): 1.

22 This shift in orientation grew in part out of Chaim’s exposure to the countercultural writings of contemporary Jewish feminist activists, such as Paula E. Hyman, “The Other Half: Women in the Jewish Tradition,” *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1973): 67–75, and Rachel Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman,” *ibid.*, 77–82. Before departing Ohio for California, Chaim would publish an article explaining the reasons for his position on women’s *aliyyot*, including his “commitment to the dynamic development of Halacha.” See his “Law and Changing the Law,” *Ha’Am* (May 20, 1975): 9, 13; republished with revisions as “The Public Invisibility of the Jewish Woman,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (June 5, 1975): 4; *ibid.* (June 12, 1975): 2, 13. See also the impassioned responses the latter article elicited, as printed in the June 19 (pp. 3, 12) and June 26 (pp. 2, 15) issues of the *Ohio Jewish Chronicle*.

He thereupon submitted the necessary paperwork for his Master's degree from Revel. But when he called a different Yeshiva official to find out where things stood with his ordination, he was told that it was not forthcoming: "That's what happens when you go off the deep-end." And then there was silence. . . .

About eight years later, having relocated to Los Angeles and worked as a rabbinic consultant to Barbra Streisand for the film *Yentl* (1983) starting in 1979, Chaim received a phone call from Rabbi Dr. Herbert Dobrinsky of Yeshiva asking if the institution's president, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, could speak with him. Lamm had heard that Chaim had a personal connection with Streisand and asked if he would hand deliver a letter on his alma mater's behalf asking her to endow a chair in Jewish studies at Yeshiva's Stern College for Women. Chaim agreed, and when Lamm arrived in L.A. a few weeks later, the two met for an hour at the Century Plaza Hotel. During their conversation, they spoke about their mutual interest in Hasidism and its absence from the course offerings at Yeshiva. As he was getting up to leave, Chaim recounted to Lamm the story about his never having received his rabbinical ordination. Lamm's jaw dropped, and he told Chaim to call his office the following Monday to check on its status. When he did so, he learned that the *kelaf* (ordination certificate) was already being processed.<sup>23</sup>

Back at Ohio State, Chaim threw himself into a host of activities. In his first Rosh Hashanah message to the OSU community, he laid out his view of an inclusive Judaism: "[W]e will strive to create community, to break the artificial barriers between groups and to educate towards commitment to an ideal rather than towards loyalty to an institution or to a building."<sup>24</sup> With typical sharpness, Chaim declared a month later that old forms of denominational affiliation may not speak to the contemporary generation of young Jews. He had come to recognize that "labels are irrelevant. They serve to divide people, and I look at religion as a unifying force." At this point in his budding career, Chaim saw little value in defining himself as an Orthodox rabbi, even though he remained Orthodox in his observance.

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23 This certificate was anomalous in at least two ways. First, despite the fact that it had been backdated to 28 Tishre 5735 (October 14, 1974), it was issued to "Rabbi Chaim Shlomo . . . Seidler-Feller"—even though Chaim had not yet married Doreen Seidler as of that date. Second, the document, although worded in the plural (as it was usually signed by two or three ordaining rabbis), only featured a single signatory, namely, Lamm himself.

24 Chaim Feller, "High Holy Day Messages," *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (September 20, 1973): 11.

Rather, he declared that “I refer to myself as a Jewish Rabbi who serves Jewish human beings.”<sup>25</sup>

In addition to breaking down barriers between Jews, Chaim was also committed to traversing the boundary between the particular and the universal. In December, the *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* reported that he participated in a prayer vigil organized by the United Farm Workers as part of its ongoing boycott against the purchase of grapes and lettuce not picked by its members. He joined, he said, out of “a sense of responsibility for the Jewish community’s lack of involvement in anything that’s not strictly Jewish.”<sup>26</sup>

Already in the first few months of his time at Ohio State, Chaim had managed to leave an unmistakable imprint on Jewish life on campus: it would be religiously intensive, tolerant, deeply committed to social justice work, and egalitarian in gender terms. In fact, Chaim was an early pioneer—particularly as an Orthodox-trained rabbi—in pushing the bounds of inclusion for women in Jewish life. It was only a year earlier, in 1972, that Sally Priesand became the first woman to be granted ordination by Hebrew Union College, the Reform rabbinical school.<sup>27</sup> Chaim, for his part, taught a number of classes at Hillel and in the Columbus Jewish community on themes relating to women, including “The Image of the Jewish Woman in

25 Bill Cohen, “New Hillel Rabbi Says Synagogue Movement Is Spiritually Dead,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (October 18, 1973): 17; see also Jonathan Jacoby, “Chaim: Issues in Jewish Life,” *Ha’Am* (October 28, 1975): 10, and Tessa Nath, “Campus Rabbis: The Mensches and Martyrs of UCLA,” *Ha’Am* (December 19, 2014), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://haam.org/2014/12/19/campus-rabbis-the-mensches-and-martyrs-of-ucla/>. Another term he used to describe himself in this period was “traditional rabbi”; see Cohen, “History Made,” 19.

26 Bill Cohen, “No Formal Stand from Jewish Community on Farm Workers,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (December 13, 1973): 5. See also Jacoby, “Chaim,” 10, 12, and Chaim’s essay in *I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, ed. Judea and Ruth Pearl (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004), 192–93, for his understanding of the relationship between his particularity and his universalism. In “Blacks and Jews: Troubled Times on the College Campuses,” *Tikkun* 4, no. 3 (July/August 1989): 94, Chaim advocates the cultivation of “an identity that is composed of an intense particularity that is not separatist, and of a broad universalism that is not assimilationist.”

27 For Chaim’s perspective on the ordination of women, see his “Female Rabbis, Male Fears,” *Judaism* 33, no. 1 (Winter 1984): 79–84; republished with revisions as “Opening the Last Door . . .,” *Ha’Am* (March 1984): 8–9. See also the *Daily Bruin* (February 20, 1980): 9; *Ha’Am* (February 21, 1980): 3; and *Ha’Am* (October 1983): 16.

Megilath Esther,” “The Changing Role of the Jewish Woman,” and “Women in Judaism, Martyrs or Mentors?”<sup>28</sup>

### “I Have Found the One I Love” (Song 3:4)<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, with the onset of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, Doreen Seidler, a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at OSU with a strong interest in women’s psychology, found herself isolated and without anyone with whom to talk about her fears for the survival of the Jewish State. The daughter of a Holocaust survivor, she had grown up in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a strong Jewish identity and love for Israel and therefore acutely felt the urgency of the situation. Having heard about the new, dynamic Hillel rabbi on campus, she approached Chaim for a meeting.<sup>30</sup> Struck by her ambition, intellect, worldliness, and progressive orientation, Chaim invited her to join his class on “Women in Judaism.” About a year later, they started dating, and in July 1975 they married. At that point, Chaim Feller and Doreen Seidler became Chaim and Doreen Seidler-Feller.<sup>31</sup>

28 See Cohen, “New Hillel Rabbi,” 17; anon., “Raana Meet to Feature Rabbi Feller,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (February 28, 1974): 9; and anon., “Twin Rivers BBW Announce Activities,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (February 6, 1975): 8. Chaim recalls that, when he started out at Hillel, Max Ticktin encouraged him to teach classes, like “Women in Judaism,” about issues at the cutting edge of the Jewish communal agenda; see “The Seidler-Fellers Reminisce about 36 Years at Hillel,” *Hillel at UCLA* (April 2010), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2hcyWwv9Kc> (starting at approx. 1:15). Once he met Doreen, she, too, played an important role in inspiring him to explore questions at the intersection of Judaism and feminism.

29 This phrase graces Chaim’s wedding ring.

30 In a letter to the editor of the *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (July 3, 1975): 2, 9, eight OSU students highlighted “some of the significant accomplishments that are a result of Rabbi Feller’s understanding of Jewish commitment: a group of students who daven every Shabbas and stay for an afternoon of chulent and discussion; opening his house on a number of occasions for seuda[h] shlishit and havdalah; a regularly attended Talmud class; teaching many other courses in the Free University; *meeting regularly with individual students* and providing instruction in specific Jewish subjects; the creation of a Jewish student journal; and advising and assisting the planning of various programs” (emphasis ours).

31 The story of their initial encounter and courtship is recounted briefly at the beginning of “The Seidler-Fellers Reminisce”; see also Danielle Berrin, “To Nudge and to Support,” *Jewish Journal* (April 27, 2010), accessed March 10, 2019, [https://web.archive.org/web/20160323180714/http://www.jewishjournal.com/community/article/chaim\\_and\\_doreen\\_seidler-fellers\\_marriage\\_nurtures\\_intellect\\_spirit\\_and\\_com](https://web.archive.org/web/20160323180714/http://www.jewishjournal.com/community/article/chaim_and_doreen_seidler-fellers_marriage_nurtures_intellect_spirit_and_com). The first published instance of “Seidler-Feller” is likely that in the title of the announcement “Seidler-Feller Wedding July 27,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (July 17, 1975): 6 (though in

## “Much Have I Learned from My Teachers and Even More from My Colleagues, but from My Students More Than from Them All” (*bTa’anit 7a*)<sup>32</sup>

Earlier that year, Chaim had received an offer to become co-director of Hillel at UCLA. Sensing that “there is a more intense Jewish life” at UCLA and that its atmosphere “is more compatible with my goals,”<sup>33</sup> he and Doreen left Ohio State, driving from Columbus to Los Angeles, where they eventually found an apartment across the street from the University Religious Conference (URC) building in which Hillel had its offices.<sup>34</sup> For the first seven or so years, Chaim shared the director position with David Berner, a Conservative rabbi who later moved to Israel but would always remain one of Chaim’s close friends.<sup>35</sup>

UCLA would become Chaim’s most important platform. It was there that he met, taught, and inspired thousands of students through Hillel classes and programs, occasional lectures, and university courses, the latter of which he taught as an adjunct faculty member in the Departments of Sociology and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures.<sup>36</sup> Shortly after arriving, as part of Hillel’s “Free Jew U” (sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles), Chaim began offering classes that reflected the vast range of

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that context it was not meant to convey that the newlyweds would take each other’s last names). See also “Doreen Seidler Is Bride of Rabbi Feller,” *New York Times* (July 28, 1975): 18.

32 See “Tilly Shames Farewell Address for Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller,” accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zioWknkrVQ> (starting at approx. 4:27).

33 Bill Cohen, “Hillel Rabbi Leaving for ‘More Intense Jewish Life’; Criticizes Jewish Leadership in Columbus,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (June 12, 1975): 11. Chaim had already published his article on women’s *aliyyot* (above, n. 22) in the May 20, 1975 issue of *Ha’Am*, UCLA’s Jewish newsmagazine. See also Jacoby, “Chaim,” 10, as well as Chaim’s reflections from forty years later, as quoted in Moshe Kahn, “*L’Chaim* to Rabbi Chaim: Celebrating 40 Years of Service to Hillel at UCLA,” *Ha’Am* (May 31, 2015): 21, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://haam.org/2015/05/31/lchaim-to-rabbi-chaim-celebrating-40-years-of-service-to-hillel-at-ucla/>.

34 The first published mention of Chaim’s presence in Los Angeles may be in anon., “Synagogues of the Southland,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger* 79, no. 35 (August 29, 1975): 31.

35 Interestingly, Berner had actually visited OSU on January 7, 1974, about a year before Chaim even entertained the thought of joining him in Los Angeles; see anon., “Hillel Happenings,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (January 3, 1974): 13.

36 See his Edah profile for titles of some of the courses he has taught, accessed March 1, 2019, <http://www.edah.org/bios.cfm>. See also Chaim’s UCLA Hillel profile for a list of favored lecture topics of his, accessed March 10, 2019, [http://www.uclahillel.org/rabbi\\_chaim\\_seidler\\_feller\\_bio](http://www.uclahillel.org/rabbi_chaim_seidler_feller_bio).

his interests and aptitudes: Talmud (Tractate *Kiddushin*), “Introduction to Judaism,” “The Woman in Judaism: A Historical Study of Jewish Attitudes,” and “A Study of Genesis: The Mythic Foundations of Biblical Judaism.”<sup>37</sup> In subsequent semesters, the subject matter of these courses would change, but the intensity and erudition with which they were taught would not. From the first, Chaim gained a reputation as a brilliant, deeply passionate lecturer who conveyed a sense of excitement about Jewish tradition to his pupils. Many years later, a close student of his described Chaim’s teaching style thusly:

[H]e continuously extrapolated on his previous statements, getting more enthusiastic as the threads of ideas spiraled out into a magnificently patterned web. He had worked himself into an intellectual frenzy—his usual demeanor when teaching, reflected in the whimsy of his tone and the wiggling of his hands. His whole body is wrapped up in his teaching; if he starts delivering his talk while sitting, at the peak of his excitement, he stands up, and if he starts while standing, then he ends up pacing. . . .

He interprets the texts and weaves them together, expanding on the statements and ideas of others, going off on tangents and telling anecdotes that all play into one another, for as long as you will listen to him, and then some.

Learning with Chaim is like watching an interpretive performance, but it is not a solo act. As Chaim drifts away further and further into the realm of ideas, he reaches out to the audience to make sure they are fellow travelers and not passive observers. He asks questions and even extends his arms, tapping those sitting next to him. When Chaim learns, he must be assured that you are learning too.<sup>38</sup>

As a committed pluralist and believer in what he calls “the God of possibilities,”<sup>39</sup> Chaim has never sought to spoon-feed the answers to his students,

37 See the advertisements in the *Daily Bruin* (October 3, 1975): 19, and *Ha’Am* (October 28, 1975): 8. Doreen also taught a “Couples Workshop” within the same framework.

38 Kahn, “*LChaim*,” 21. See also “UCLA Hillel Honors” (starting at approx. 4:14); “TEACHER—A Video Tribute to Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller,” *Hillel at UCLA* (January 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq9QHozQSVc>; and David Suissa, “Chaim Being Chaim,” *Jewish Journal* (February 3, 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/opinion/181956/>.

39 See Chaim’s “Searching for God in Judaism: A Rationalist’s Theory of a Mystical Reality,” *Orange County Community Scholars Program—Podcast Network* (September 14, 2008), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://podcast.occpsp.org/wp/category/>

instead placing a premium on independent thinking, questioning, doubting, complexity, and nuance. He is fond of giving the parable of two rabbis standing on opposite street corners, one of whom announces, “Come to me—I have all the answers,” while his fellow calls out, “Come to me—I have all the questions.”<sup>40</sup> This same approach has characterized his interactions with the university’s Jewish faculty,<sup>41</sup> for whom Chaim organized a Bible study group that met monthly for many years.

Aside from his primary role as teacher, Chaim also became an advocate, pushing to improve the quality of Jewish life at UCLA. He fought to bring kosher food to campus;<sup>42</sup> worked together with Streisand to establish the Streisand Center for Jewish Cultural Arts at UCLA Hillel, which sponsored the annual Streisand Awards for Student Film Makers and the Festival of Jewish Plays, as well as various Jewish artistic programs, concerts, and panel discussions;<sup>43</sup> and in 2001 helped found the UCLA branch

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seidler-feller-rabbi-chaim/ (starting at approx. 43:20), and Berrin, “To Nudge and to Support.” Relatedly, see his letter in the *Jewish Journal* (August 3, 2018), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://jewishjournal.com/letters\\_to\\_the\\_editor/236846/letters-editor-week-august-3-2018/](https://jewishjournal.com/letters_to_the_editor/236846/letters-editor-week-august-3-2018/); the letter he coauthored with Aaron Lerner, *Jewish Journal* (October 30, 2013), accessed March 10, 2019, [https://jewishjournal.com/letters\\_to\\_the\\_editor/122913/](https://jewishjournal.com/letters_to_the_editor/122913/); and “To Be a Religious Jew Is to Be a Pluralist!—Shmuly Yanklowitz Interviews R’ Chaim Seidler-Feller,” *Valley Beit Midrash* (November 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZfQbH5OD0Q>.

40 See Rachel Brand, “JAM’-Packed Campus Outreach,” *Jewish Journal* (February 27, 2003), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/culture/lifestyle/education/7513/>; Shaun Bishop, “Seidler-Feller Promotes Religious, Political Dialogue,” *Daily Bruin* (November 6, 2003), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2003/11/06/seidler-feller-promotes-religi/>; “Searching for God in Judaism” (starting at approx. 1:13:03); and “Jo[se]ph Baer Soloveitchik” (starting at approx. 1:23:17). Relatedly, see Chaim’s “Freedom to Doubt,” *OLAM Magazine* (Summer 2002): 5, on “the excitement and innovative spirit generated by an openness to alternative explanations, by the indeterminacy of halakhic discourse, and by never knowing with certainty.”

41 For Chaim’s reflections on the faculty as a largely untapped and underappreciated Jewish communal asset, see his “Between Assimilation and Identification,” *Sh’mā: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* 21, no. 405 (January 11, 1991): 38–40.

42 See anon., “Food Service Sells Kosher Sandwiches,” *Ha’Am* (May 10, 1977): 3; Rebecca Flass, “Bruins Brew New Java Contract with Local Coffee Firm,” *Los Angeles Business Journal* (November 1, 2004): 13; Julia Erlandson, “Hillel Offers Kosher Lunch Program,” *Daily Bruin* (October 17, 2006), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2006/10/17/hillel-offers-kosher-lunch-pro/>; and Kimberly Young, “Kosher Meal Plans Become Available,” *Daily Bruin* (September 26, 2007), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://dailybruin.com/2007/09/26/kosher\\_meal\\_plans\\_available/](https://dailybruin.com/2007/09/26/kosher_meal_plans_available/).

43 See Sally Ogle Davis, “Streisand Is Taking a Gamble, Bringing Singer Tale to Screen,” *Detroit Free Press* (May 2, 1982): 3C; Stephen J. Sass, ed., *Jewish Los Angeles—A Guide: Everything Jewish under the Sun*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Jewish Federation Council of

of the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus, a partnership between Hillel and the Orthodox Union dedicated to providing resources to students interested in Jewish observance and learning.

In addition to feeding the mind, Chaim also nourished the spirit, starting a weekly, traditional/egalitarian Shabbat morning *minyan* for students at Hillel in about 1984.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, members of the broader Los Angeles Jewish community would join him for services that, due to their popularity, had to be held in venues such as UCLA's Covell Commons, which could accommodate more than eight hundred people. Clad in his white High Holidays *kitl* (ritual robe), Chaim transformed into an inspiring soul on fire, praying and preaching with extraordinary feeling and intensity—and adding his voice to the beautiful holiday melodies of cantors Judy Dubin Aranoff and Ruth Steinberg. He would don the *kitl* again for the Seder held at Hillel on Passover each year, an evening of singing, eating, and discussion that was likewise open to the community.

Chaim's and Doreen's dedication was such that they would often bring Hillel home, not only regularly hosting faculty and students for classes, Shabbat meals, and Passover and Sukkot receptions, but even holding services—followed by dinner for about one hundred fifty students—in their house on the first Friday night of each quarter for many years.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, at some point in the late 1980s, Chaim initiated the "Wellworth Minyan," a Shabbat morning *havurah*-like gathering at their home, which drew an eclectic mix of students, faculty, and community members who appreciated its impassioned *dayenen* and erudite conversation. One participant

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Greater Los Angeles, 1982), 67, 69; and Reuma Ziskind, "Rav she-rosho ba-kokhavim," *Gever la-inyan* 63 (October 27, 1986): 6–7. While the Center, founded in 1981, ceased programming by the end of the decade, some of its activities and functions were subsequently taken over by the Dortort Center for Creativity in the Arts, accessed March 1, 2019, [http://www.uclahillel.org/dortort\\_center\\_for\\_the\\_arts](http://www.uclahillel.org/dortort_center_for_the_arts).

44 See, for example, the advertisement in the *Daily Bruin* (April 4, 1984): 7. For Chaim's thoughts on the decline and more recent resurgence of American Jewish spirituality, see his essay in "Jewish Spirituality in America: Listening to a Different Drummer: A Symposium," *Havruta* 3 (Spring 2009): 10–12, accessed March 1, 2019, [https://shivwebfiles.s3.amazonaws.com/Havruta\\_2009\\_Issue3\\_JewishSpiritualityInAmerica.pdf](https://shivwebfiles.s3.amazonaws.com/Havruta_2009_Issue3_JewishSpiritualityInAmerica.pdf).

45 See Chaim's "Judaism's Womb," *OLAM Magazine* (Spring 2000): 10. For Doreen's reflections on the importance of placing limits on communal involvement and carving out family time, see her "A Counterforce against the Seductions of a Perfect Rabbinate," *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* 32, no. 584 (September 2001): 6; "UCLA Hillel Honors" (starting at approx. 9:30); and Berrin, "To Nudge and to Support."

described it as the place where one could talk to the people with whom one *davened* and *daven* with the people to whom one talked—an uncommonly special meeting point of the intellect and the spirit.<sup>46</sup> Many remember these *minyanim*, which also featured a *kiddush* with *tsholnt* (both meat and vegetarian), as the best Jewish prayer experiences of their lives.

Perhaps Chaim's greatest achievement and most lasting legacy, institutionally, was the construction of the 25,000-square-foot Yitzhak Rabin Hillel Center for Jewish Life at UCLA, inaugurated in November 2002.<sup>47</sup> Until that point, Hillel had shared space with other religious organizations in the shabby, cramped, and inconveniently located building of the URC at the corner of Hilgard and Le Conte on the southeast edge of the UCLA campus. The turning point came in the early 1990s, when Chaim came into close contact with Richard M. Joel, Hillel's president, and the philanthropist Edgar M. Bronfman, founding chair of Hillel's International Board of Governors. It was Joel's and Bronfman's dream to build new centers for Jewish life at major college campuses in North America. This vision coincided with Chaim's own desire to create the space and infrastructure that would allow for a "renaissance of Jewish life at UCLA" and in the broader community.<sup>48</sup> Bronfman, as well as legendary Hollywood studio executive Lew Wasserman and filmmaker Steven Spielberg, each pledged \$1 million to the project, while UCLA Chancellor Charles Young helped secure the site.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, Chaim shifted professional gears, mobilizing his charm, charisma, and boundless energy in order to raise funds for the new edifice

46 This upended the formulation attributed to various Jewish thinkers over the course of the twentieth century, most memorably David Weiss Halivni, who, in a letter sent to the Faculty Assembly of the Jewish Theological Seminary on the occasion of a vote to ordain women in 1983, lamented that "[i]t is my personal tragedy that the people I *daven* with, I cannot talk to, and the people I talk to, I cannot *daven* with. However, when the chips are down, I will always side with the people I *daven* with; for I can live without talking. I cannot live without *davening*." See his *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning in the Throes of the Holocaust* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 114.

47 Anon., "New Yitzhak Rabin Hillel Center Opens Its Doors," *UCLA Today* (December 10, 2002), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/021210hillel>.

48 Lawrence Ferchaw, "New Jewish Facility Will Provide Greater Cultural Services, Awareness," *Daily Bruin* (November 1, 1998), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/1998/11/01/new-jewish-facility-will-provi/>.

49 Michael Weiner, "Jewish Center to Change Location," *Daily Bruin* (June 11, 1998), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/1998/06/10/billing-system-requires-more-s0/>.

and the substantially expanded programming that it would host.<sup>50</sup> It was particularly meaningful for him that the building would be named after Yitzhak Rabin, the assassinated Israeli prime minister whose transition from warrior to peacemaker in the 1990s left a profound impression on Chaim. Given his tireless efforts on its behalf, the Rabin Center can safely be described as the house that Chaim built.

### **“Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue” (Deut. 16:20)**

Chaim, however, did not restrict his activism to Hillel, UCLA, Los Angeles, or even the United States. Together with Doreen, he remained heavily involved in the Soviet Jewry movement, traveling to the Soviet Union in 1976 at the behest of the Israeli government to teach and meet with refuse-niks.<sup>51</sup> Thereafter, in 1977, Doreen became chairwoman of an exhibit at the Los Angeles Convention Center on “Soviet Jewry: Six Decades of Oppression,” organized in protest of the Soviet National Convention’s exhibit entitled “Six Decades of Progress,”<sup>52</sup> while Chaim addressed at least two Soviet Jewry rallies on campus.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, each of them continued to write and lecture—sometimes at the same forum—on Jewish religious feminism;<sup>54</sup> appropriately enough, the couple was featured on the cover of

50 Julie Gruenbaum-Fax, “A New Home for Hillel,” *Jewish Journal* (November 14, 2002), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://jewishjournal.com/news/los\\_angeles/community\\_briefs/6992/](https://jewishjournal.com/news/los_angeles/community_briefs/6992/); see also “UCLA Hillel Honors” (starting at approx. 5:55), and Berrin, “To Nudge and to Support.”

51 See the letter they published in *Ha’Am* (April 19, 1977): 10, sent by a Soviet Jew they had met during their stay who finally made his way to Israel and wrote to thank them.

52 Beverly Beyette, “Detente (Sort of) at Dual Exhibits,” *Los Angeles Times* (November 15, 1977), pt. IV, 10; see also *Los Angeles Times* (November 16, 1977), pt. II, 9.

53 The rallies were held on February 23, 1984 and April 8, 1987. See Philipp Gollner, “UCLA Students to Rally for Soviet Jew,” *Daily Bruin* (February 22, 1984): 6; Louise Yarnall, “‘Refusenik’ Supported at Rally,” *Daily Bruin* (February 24, 1984): 7; *Daily Bruin* (April 8, 1987): 9; and Nancy McCullough, “Soviet Jewry Group Holds Rally to Encourage Support for Emigration,” *Daily Bruin* (April 9, 1987): 3, 10.

54 See, for example, Doreen’s “Synagogue Design Reflects Women’s Status: ‘Separate but Equal’—A Lie,” *Ha’Am* (May 25, 1976): 7, and her letter in *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* 10, no. 4 (Winter 1976–1977): 120–23. Doreen lectured on “Aspects of Jewish Feminism” on August 11, 1976 (anon., “B’nai B’rith Women to Meet,” *Los Angeles Times* [August 8, 1976]: W10); “The Dawning of a New Eve: Does the Jewish Woman Need Liberation?” on March 22, 1977 (anon., “Sisterhood Forum on ‘Mothers,’” *Los Angeles Times* [March 10, 1977]: W7); and “The Changing Role of Women in Jewish Life” on July 14, 1985 (*Los Angeles Times* [July 14, 1985]: 4). Chaim and Doreen were also featured speakers at a workshop/conference held in Las Cruces, NM, on May 23, 1976,

*Davka* magazine's 1976 issue on "The Jewish Woman" studying a page of Talmud together in their home.<sup>55</sup>

Another special interest of Chaim's was working to achieve cohesion within the Jewish people, particularly between Americans and Israelis.<sup>56</sup> This issue tended to come to the fore whenever religious political parties in Israel proposed legislation negating the legitimacy of non-Orthodox forms of Judaism and Jewish conversion. On one such occasion, Chaim formulated his concerns in moral terms: "The central question the Jewish community is facing is what kind of Israel are we going to have. . . . This new legislation runs contrary to the humanistic, open and tolerant Israel that we love."<sup>57</sup> After the Neeman Committee released its recommendations for how best to address the conversion problem in January 1998, Chaim signed a statement issued by Edah, a Modern Orthodox think tank, endorsing the Committee proposal and urging the government of Israel to implement it as national policy.<sup>58</sup> In 2015, he likewise participated in the founding of

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lecturing on a range of topics including the Historical, Sociological, and Theological Role of Jewish Women; the Myth of Androgynous Creation and the Development of a New Jewish Theology; Jewish Feminism and Jewish Sexism; Women's Ritual Status in Divorce, Aliya, and Minyan; and Secular Issues in Jewish Feminism (*El Paso Times* [May 17, 1976]: 5-B; *Las Cruces Sun News* [May 20, 1976]: B1). Likewise, in Winter 1978, Chaim and Doreen taught some of the sessions at a Hillel seminar on Jewish Women's Studies (*Daily Bruin* [January 9, 1978]: 6). For context, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, "The Impact of Feminism on American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Year Book* (1989): 3–62, and, more recently, Pamela S. Nadell, *Feminism, American Style: Jewish Women and the Making of a Revolution* (Haifa: The Ruderman Program for American Jewish Studies, 2017), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://ajs.haifa.ac.il/images/Nadell\\_Research\\_Paper\\_final.pdf](http://ajs.haifa.ac.il/images/Nadell_Research_Paper_final.pdf).

55 *Davka* 17 (1976), as distinct from the similarly titled and dated *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), a publication which grew out of the aforementioned issue of *Response* (above, n. 22).

56 For an early expression of Chaim's desire to bridge the gap between Jews on opposite sides of the Atlantic, see *Dialogue: New Jewish Leadership* 1, no. 7 (Shavuot 1975): 2.

57 John Kifner, "American Jews Protest Israeli Threat to Identity," *New York Times* (November 21, 1988), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/21/world/american-jews-protest-israeli-threat-to-identity.html>. See also Elaine Woo, "Beyond Politics," *Los Angeles Times* (December 22, 1988), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1988-12-22/news/vw-888\\_1\\_american-jews](http://articles.latimes.com/1988-12-22/news/vw-888_1_american-jews), and Laurie Goodstein, "Feeling Abandoned by Israel, Many American Jews Grow Angry," *New York Times* (November 16, 1997), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/16/world/feeling-abandoned-by-israel-many-american-jews-grow-angry.html>.

58 See, for example, *St. Louis Jewish Light* (March 18, 1998): 14. See also, more recently, the statement Chaim signed advocating greater pluralism in Israeli religious policy:

Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel, a nondenominational network of Jewish clergy dedicated to fighting for change on a number of religion-state issues in the country.<sup>59</sup>

The question of Jewish continuity in America animated Chaim as well. Already in October 1974, he and Rabbi Dr. Marc Lee Raphael participated in an OSU Hillel forum on “Intermarriage and Jewish Survival,” and since then the issue has commanded much of his attention, even though his position on the matter was not always popular with fellow Jewish leaders.<sup>60</sup> In a recent interview, he explained: “It is a disappointment that we don’t have a framework in which we can promote the value of marrying other Jews. . . . I’m not interested in criticizing people for their personal choices. I’m interested in promoting a value.”<sup>61</sup> It was Chaim’s contention that, “[i]n general, intermarriage is a function of assimilation. And this generation of Jewish college students is the most assimilated and *least* Jewishly literate in history.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Chaim is fond of quoting the variously attributed aphorism to the effect that, in the modern period, Jews have been transformed from *am ha-sefer* (the people of the book) into *am ha-arets* (the people of the land, that is, ignoramuses).<sup>63</sup> A large part of

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Shmuly Yanklowitz, “Orthodox Rabbis Call for a ‘Truly Pluralistic Israel,’” *Forward* (June 27, 2017), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://forward.com/subscribe/375733/orthodox-rabbis-call-for-a-truly-pluralistic-israel/>.

59 See the organization’s January 2015 welcome letter, accessed March 1, 2019, <http://rrfei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2015.01.25-RRFEI-welcome-letter.pdf>.

60 Anon., “Hillel Happenings,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (October 17, 1974): 3. See also the programs advertised in *Ha’Am* (May 1983): 20, and the *Daily Bruin* (May 30, 1990): 36. On December 6, 1985, Chaim framed the question less in terms of survival and more in terms of communal unity. The title of his talk then was “Will There Be One Jewish People by the Year 2000?: The Growing Rift between Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Jews”; see *Ha’Am* (November 1985): 16.

61 Jared Sichel, “Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller’s 40-Year Legacy at an Evolving UCLA,” *Jewish Journal* (January 27, 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/culture/religion/181673/>.

62 See his “Jewish Life on Campus Today, 3,” *Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* 20, no. 393 (April 27, 1990): 102 (emphasis in the original). See also Amanda Miller, “Embracing Ethnicity,” *Daily Bruin* (February 3, 1997): 18, 22–23, on the prevalence of the “Jewish assimilationist fantasy.”

63 See, for example, Chaim’s “Exile: The Secret of Jewish Survival,” *Drisha* (May 2012), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://drisha.org/search-podcast/?teacher=4098> (starting at approx. 38:50). See also Alouph Hareven, “Are the Israelis Still the People of the Book?,” *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 30 (Winter 1984): 3–16, and Jacob Kabakoff, “Introduction,” *Jewish Book Annual* 42 (1984–1985): 4. Chaim would often speak and write about “creeping Jewish mediocrization” as a consequence of assimilation. “[N]o longer do Jews pursue excellence with their characteristic vigor. Instead they are opting out of

his work at Hillel—and in the community at large—then, was devoted to exposing American Jews to the depth and complexity of Jewish learning and values in the hopes that they would find positive meaning in being Jewish: “I was given the privilege of a very rich and textured Jewish education, and I think that my vision and my goal in life was to transmit as much of that as possible to my students. . . . That’s why it pains me to see when there’s a lack of interest.”<sup>64</sup> “For rapid assimilation is already under-way and the Jewish future is withering before our eyes.”<sup>65</sup>

Beyond addressing internal Jewish concerns, Chaim also invested much effort in improving intergroup relations. Guided by the Jewish teaching of humanity’s creation *be-tselem E-lohim* (in the image of God; Gen. 1:26–27, 5:1), he issued numerous joint statements together with fellow URC chaplains,<sup>66</sup> signed the famous September 2000 “Dabru Emet” declaration on Jewish-Christian relations in a post-Vatican II world,<sup>67</sup> participated in interfaith dialogue,<sup>68</sup> and helped organize UCLA Freedom Seders.<sup>69</sup>

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fields of academic research that were once exclusive Jewish domains, and abdicating their place at the head of the class to the New Jews: the Asians” (“Jewish Life on Campus,” 102). See also Yoni Herskovitz, “Rabbi Chaim Addresses Trends in Jewish Academic Success,” *Ha’Am* (November 4, 2011), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://haam.org/2011/11/04/rabbi-chaim-addresses-trends-in-jewish-academic-success/>.

64 Sichel, “Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller’s.”

65 See Chaim’s “Jewish Life on Campus,” 103; see also Mathis Chazanov, “Back to the Fold: More and More Jews Are Heeding Call of Tradition,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 4, 1987), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-04/news/we-32932\\_1\\_orthodox-tradition/3](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-04/news/we-32932_1_orthodox-tradition/3), and Linda Perl, “Jewish Identity: Can It Survive in an Open Society?,” *Ha’Am* (February 1989): 3, 16–17.

66 See, for example, *Daily Bruin* (June 3, 1982): 6; *ibid.* (October 24, 1994): 16–17; and *ibid.* (April 19, 1995): 8.

67 The text and signatories list are available on the ICJS website, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://icjs.org/resources/dabru-emet>; see also Richard Clough, “Followers Mourn Passing of Pope,” *Daily Bruin* (April 3, 2005), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2005/04/03/followers-mourn-passing-of-pope/>.

68 See Paige Litz, “Finding a Common Ground,” *Los Angeles Times* (February 20, 2004): A8, and Easter Khaw, “Many Religions, Just One Message,” *Daily Bruin* (January 18, 2006), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2006/01/18/many-religions-just-one-messag/>. See also the photograph taken of Chaim at the Sixth Doha Conference for Interfaith Dialogue on May 13, 2008, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/rabbi-chaim-seidler-feller-director-of-the-yitzhak-rabin-news-photo/81070033>.

69 See Shana Chandler, “UCLA Holds First ‘Freedom Seder’ for Passover,” *Daily Bruin* (April 26, 1989): 8, and Jennifer K. Morita, “Seder Gives Taste of Diversity,” *Daily Bruin* (April 13, 1995): 3, 15. Relatedly, see the advertisement in the *Daily Bruin* (April 13, 1995): 6: “People of Faith Gather to Pray for Peace.”

In the late 1980s, Chaim embarked on a personal campaign to reach out to other minority groups on campus. Recognizing that Jews had come to be seen as belonging to the privileged, “oppressive” white majority due to their successes in American society,<sup>70</sup> and especially at the universities,<sup>71</sup> he sought to reopen a dialogue between Jews and African Americans, harking back to the interethnic cooperation that characterized the civil rights era: “I pledge to rededicate myself to rebuilding our family, to listening to your grievances, to fighting for affirmative action and to establishing the struggle for economic justice as a priority within the Jewish community.”<sup>72</sup> Toward this end, Chaim participated in a UCLA Center for Afro-American

70 See Eric P. Rubenfeld, “Nothing in Common: The Reality of Black-Jewish Relations,” *Ha’Am* (June 1989): 3, quoting Chaim: “The Jewish community has come to be identified with the white majority, both in [the] view of others and their own self-assessment.” One way in which this newfound whiteness expressed itself was in “a rise in conservatism in the Jewish community,” including at the voting booth. See Chaim’s “Jewish Life on Campus,” 101, and Zahra Bazmjow, “Increasingly Conservative Jewish Voters to Hit Polls,” *Daily Bruin* (October 31, 2004), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2004/10/31/increasingly-conservative-jewi/>.

71 See Chaim’s “The Tension between Blacks and Jews,” *Daily Bruin* (March 4, 1988): 15; idem, “Blacks and Jews: Troubled Times on the College Campus,” *Ha’Am* (February 1989): 15; republished with revisions as “Blacks and Jews: Troubled Times on the College Campuses” (above, n. 26), where he discusses the preponderance of Jews in higher educational faculty and administrative positions. In Chaim’s view, Jews had integrated so successfully into the mainstream that they were no longer considered an ethnic minority by the university, even when they demanded such recognition; see his “Jewish Life on Campus,” 101; idem, “Response to Perry London and A[li]ssa Hir[s]hfeld,” in *Jewish Identity in America*, ed. David M. Gordis and Yoav Ben-Horin (Los Angeles: Susan and David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, University of Judaism, 1991), 61; and Nath, “Celebrating 40 Years of Ha’Am.” It is in part for this reason that Chaim celebrated the founding of the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies: “Jewishness is the invisible identity on campus—Jews are supposed to be whites, they have no particularity. By creating the center, it’s an affirmation of Jewishness.” See Shani Pines, “Jewish Studies Center Arrives,” *Daily Bruin* (May 31, 1994): 14.

72 See Chaim’s “A Common Heritage,” *Ha’Am* (January/February 1987): 4. On a number of occasions, Chaim stressed the need for American Jews to accept Jesse Jackson as a legitimate American leader and to not oppose affirmative action policies at the universities. In return, he asked that blacks reject the “Zionism is racism” equation and work together with Jews to create entrepreneurial opportunities for blacks, sponsor trips to Africa and Israel, and help to reconstitute the Democratic party. See, for example, his “Blacks and Jews” (both versions); idem, “Jewish Life on Campus,” 101; Greg Krikorian, “Jewish Leaders, Jackson to Meet,” *The San Francisco Examiner* (May 7, 1988): A-12; and Dick Polman, “In U.S. Politics, an Old Alliance Faces New Stress,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (December 23, 1988): 1-D, 6-D.

Studies panel on intergroup relations,<sup>73</sup> joined the fight against racism in the aftermath of the beating of Rodney King,<sup>74</sup> organized a series of events on campus meant to bring black and Jewish students and faculty together in dialogue,<sup>75</sup> and signed a URC statement supporting affirmative action.<sup>76</sup> While he recognized antisemitism when he saw it and made sure to object forcefully on such occasions,<sup>77</sup> Chaim's focus was always on promoting greater understanding, rather than engaging in "comparative victimology."<sup>78</sup> As he once wrote in a pre-Passover message: "The lesson we learned [from the exodus story] is that, since we suffered, we bear the special responsibility to make sure that others don't suffer as we did."<sup>79</sup>

73 See the advertisement in the *Daily Bruin* (October 19, 1988): 24. See also anon., "African Americans, American Jews Subject of New Exhibit," *Los Angeles Sentinel* (October 14, 1993): A-15, for an announcement of a panel discussion including Chaim on the "wave of distrust" between blacks and Jews on American college campuses.

74 See Sandy Lee, "Leaders Urge Students to Fight against Racism," *Daily Bruin* (May 4, 1992): 11, quoting Chaim: "When others are oppressed, (the Jewish community) must be with them in their oppression. . . . We will fight in humanity and unity until those who beat Rodney King receive due punishment."

75 See Lisa Klug, "Jews and African-Americans Strive for Harmony at UCLA," *Los Angeles Times* (March 21, 1993), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1993-03-21/news/we-13622\\_1\\_jewish-student-union](http://articles.latimes.com/1993-03-21/news/we-13622_1_jewish-student-union). Chaim is quoted therein as saying: "The point is that the more you spend time with one another and learn about each other—not by reading about each other, but as a human being—the more the connections grow."

76 See the notice in the *Daily Bruin* (April 19, 1995): 8.

77 For instance, Chaim signed a statement condemning the racist ideology of Louis Farrakhan on the occasion of his arrival at UCLA, printed in the *Daily Bruin* (March 3, 1988): 8; see also his "The Tension," 15. Later that year, he published a letter in the *Daily Bruin* (May 19, 1988): 22, protesting a hateful speech delivered on campus by Macheo Shabaka. And following the infamous NOMMO affair, when the February 1991 edition of the UCLA black student newspaper featured a baldly antisemitic screed to which faculty and administrators were slow to react, Chaim and Department of Sociology Chairman Jeffrey C. Alexander penned a series of articles decrying the hypocrisy of the campus response: "NOMMO Affair: Double Standard Can't Stand," *Ha'Am* (April 1991): 17, 29; republished with revisions as "As Barriers Erode, Jews Face Unique Problems," *Daily Bruin* (May 30, 1991): 24; "The Effects of Anti-Semitism on UCLA," *Jewish Journal* (June 14–20, 1991); and "False Distinctions and Double Standards: The Anatomy of Antisemitism at UCLA," *Tikkun* 7, no. 1 (January/February 1992): 12–14. See also Chaim's "Insults and Insensitivity Weaken Campus Relations," *Daily Bruin* (January 9, 1989): 22, replying to an article by a member of the UCLA Latino community that stereotyped Jews as controlling student life on campus.

78 See his "Blacks and Jews," 15 (*Ha'Am* version); 94 (*Tikkun* version).

79 See Chaim's "Strangers, Forever!," *UCLA Hillel* (April 3, 2015), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://www.uclahillel.org/passover\\_message\\_from\\_rabbi\\_chaim\\_seidler\\_feller](http://www.uclahillel.org/passover_message_from_rabbi_chaim_seidler_feller). See also his commentary on "Notes for Symposium on Black Power[,] January 6, 1967," in

## “Peace for Israel. Peace for Palestine. Share the Hope.”<sup>80</sup>

Finally, holding fast to the twin Hebrew maxims posted on his office door—“He who has the truth on his side is in the majority, even if he is alone” and “The rabbi whose community does not disagree with him is no rabbi, and the rabbi who is afraid of them is no human being”<sup>81</sup>—when it came to politics, Chaim was unabashedly progressive in his orientation, even if being so was deeply unpopular. For example, in 1974, he and three Columbus rabbinical colleagues signed a letter protesting the pardon by President Gerald Ford of Richard Nixon.<sup>82</sup> On the international front, Chaim manifested a strong concern for peace in the Middle East. Inspired by the pragmatism of Israeli strategist Yehoshafat Harkabi and the humanism of politician Aryeh “Lova” Eliav, he expressed support in May 1974 for a statement by the Jewish Peace Fellowship that called for mutual recognition by Israelis and Palestinians of the right to self-determination<sup>83</sup>—long before the Oslo accords of the early 1990s would bring such a position more into the mainstream. Later that year, he signed a call issued by the pro-peace group Breira: A Project

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*The Eternal Dissident: Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman and the Radical Imperative to Think and Act*, ed. David N. Myers (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 138, as well as Rivka (Rebecca) Cohen, “Racism Anywhere Is Racism Everywhere,” *Ha’Am* (January 22, 2015), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://haam.org/2015/01/22/racism-anywhere-is-racism-everywhere/>.

- 80 See Chaim’s “Different Tack on Campus Challenge,” *Jewish Journal* (June 22, 2006), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://jewishjournal.com/news/los\\_angeles/community/13274/](https://jewishjournal.com/news/los_angeles/community/13274/); abridged and revised as “Reconciliation and Renewal,” *Jewels of Elul* (August 28, 2006), accessed March 10, 2019, <https://www.jewelsofelul.com/jewels/2006-5766/>. See also “UCLA Hillel Honors” (starting at approx. 4:10).
- 81 Berrin, “To Nudge and to Support.” The original Arabic version of the first expression is attributed in various Muslim sources to Abdallah ibn Mas’ud, a companion of the prophet Muhammad; see, for example, *Daily Hadith Online* for August 23, 2014, where the aphorism is rendered as follows: “The true community (*jama’ah*) is that which adheres to the truth, even if you are alone.” The Arabic was later translated into Hebrew and printed on the title page of Arnold B. Ehrlich’s *Mikra ki-peshuto* (Berlin: M. Poppelauer’s Buchhandlung, 1900). Several different versions of the second expression are attributed to Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great nineteenth-century leader of the Musar Movement; see, for example, Dov Katz, *Tenu’at ha-musar: toledoteha, isheha, ye-shittoteha*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Abraham Zioni, 1958), 308 (no. 16), and Phinehas Miller, *Olam shel abba* (Jerusalem: Hod, 1984), 282.
- 82 See the letter printed in the *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (September 19, 1974): 2. See also Chaim’s “King David’s Greatest Victory,” *OLAM Magazine* (Winter 2001): 47, on speaking truth to power.
- 83 See Bill Cohen, “Hillel Rabbi Backs Call for Compromise among Israelis, Arabs, and Palestinians,” *Ohio Jewish Chronicle* (May 7, 1974): 1, 16.

of Concern in Diaspora-Israel Relations, again advocating for the right of Palestinians to their own state and urging the Israeli government to publicly affirm “its willingness to talk to the full range of Palestinian leadership, while at the same time demanding recognition of Israel’s right to exist.”<sup>84</sup> Chaim’s involvement with Breira, one of the first national Jewish groups in America to critique Israeli governmental policy publicly,<sup>85</sup> would not be the last time that he found himself on the margins of the Jewish community.<sup>86</sup> Not only was he a liberal challenging a conservative American Jewish

84 The statement was dated November 4, 1974 and distributed at a “Rally against Terror” held that day in front of the United Nations building in New York that was organized by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. It is reproduced in, for example, *Dialogue: New Jewish Leadership* 1, no. 5 (December 1974–January 1975): 10–11. See further the call by Breira for the formulation of an Israeli plan that would cede the territories captured in 1967 in exchange for Arab recognition of Israel’s sovereignty and a mutual commitment to maintaining peaceful relations, reprinted in *Congressional Record—Senate* (June 12, 1975): 18552–53, and also signed by Chaim. Chaim would later describe himself as “a lifelong Zionist and long-time Middle East peace activist who has publicly supported a two-state solution since the early ’70s”; see his “Middle East: Keep the Proposals Realistic,” *Daily Bruin* (February 7, 1989): 15.

85 For some of the (at times partisan) literature on the short-lived Breira, see Jacques Kornberg, “Zionism and Ideology: The Breira Controversy,” *Judaism* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 103–14; Paul M. Foer, “The War against Breira,” *The Jewish Spectator* 48, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 18–23; Jack Wertheimer, “Breaking the Taboo: Critics of Israel and the American Jewish Establishment,” in *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal (Jerusalem: Magnes Press; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 397–419; Michael E. Staub, “If We Really Care about Israel: Breira and the Limits of Dissent,” in *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 89–105; and Alex Klein, “J Street’s Forerunner,” *Tablet Magazine* (March 23, 2012), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/94906/j-streets-forerunner>. For recent discussion of the appropriateness of criticism of Israel, see *Havruta* 8 (Winter 2012), entitled “Engaging Israel: The Limits of Criticism,” accessed March 1, 2019, [https://hartman.org.il/publications\\_view.asp?cat\\_id=310](https://hartman.org.il/publications_view.asp?cat_id=310).

86 For two of the many attacks on Breira in the Jewish press, see Daniel Charles, “‘Breira’: Alternative of Surrender,” *The American Zionist* 67, no. 3 (November 1976): 12–17, and Rael Jean and Erich Isaac, “The Rabbis of Breira,” *Midstream* 23, no. 4 (April 1977): 3–17, the former of which made reference to a series of articles in *Heritage*, a Los Angeles-based Jewish newspaper, claiming to expose the work of Breira-affiliated UCLA Hillel rabbis (David Berner and Chaim) against the Zionist cause. See the open letter protesting this series in *Ha’Am* (October 26, 1976): 2, as well as the editorial in *Ha’Am* (January 18, 1977): 2. Years after Breira had folded, Chaim would reaffirm his commitment to the independence of Diaspora Jews and their right to “openly express their feelings (including their dissent from Israeli policies)”; see his “Rebutting Avineri,” *Ha’Am* (April 1987): 13.

establishment; he was an observant Jew whose fellow travelers in political matters were, for the most part, Conservative and Reform (many of them fellow Hillel rabbis).

Chaim's pursuit of peace between Israelis and Palestinians has been a regular feature of his public persona throughout his adult life. It is important to emphasize that this commitment was born of his fidelity to the Jewish ethical tradition<sup>87</sup> and his non-messianic conception of the meaning of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.<sup>88</sup> In Chaim's view, the great gift of the state's establishment consisted in the opportunity it granted the Jewish people to "reenter history" and to apply the teachings of the Torah to the problems of everyday life in the modern world<sup>89</sup>—especially to a "central religious question[:] . . . How do we juggle the tension between morality and power?"<sup>90</sup> It is for this reason that this loving critic of Zion never saw a

87 See Chaim's "The Relationship between Judaism and Morality," *Ha'Am* (November 1983): 13, where he is careful not to make any essentialist claims about the ethical superiority of Jews or Judaism, but instead to advocate "drawing on the wellsprings of moral teaching that is our heritage."

88 For Chaim's most in-depth published analysis of traditional Jewish attitudes to the Land of Israel and their modern-day political exponents, see "The Land of Israel: Sanctified Matter or Mythic Space," *Zionist Ideas* 15 (Spring 1987): 6–31; republished with addenda about the meaning of exile in Jewish tradition in *Three Faiths—One God: A Jewish, Christian, Muslim Encounter*, ed. John Hick and Edmund S. Meltzer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 137–64. See also Ira Rifkin, "Outspoken Right-Wing Rabbi Gives Orthodox Jews a Voice," *Los Angeles Times* (November 12, 1989), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1989-11-12/news/we-1856\\_1\\_orthodox-jews](http://articles.latimes.com/1989-11-12/news/we-1856_1_orthodox-jews); Irena Auerbuch and Val D. Phillips, "Rabbis Debate Jewish Settlement," *Daily Bruin* (November 29, 1989): 1, 9; and especially Chaim's "Exile: The Secret of Jewish Survival," and his "A Zionism of Power or a Zionism of Values? Toward a Renewal of the Zionist Idea," *Valley Beit Midrash* (November 2016), accessed March 10, 2019, <https://www.valleybeitmidrash.org/learning-library/a-zionism-of-power-of-a-zionism-of-values/>.

89 See Chaim's "Yom Ha'atzmaut 1989," *Ha'Am* (April 1989): 12; his essay in *Rebuilding Jewish Peoplehood: Where Do We Go from Here? A Symposium in the Wake of the Rabin Assassination*, ed. David A. Harris (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1996), 91–93; republished with revisions as "The End of Illusion," *Tikkun* 11, no. 1 (January/February 1996): 76–77; and idem, "Zionist Principles," 15. Chaim is fond of citing Rabbi Naphtali Zevi Judah Berlin (Netsiv)'s interpretation of Num. 2:20, wherein he recognizes that God's stewardship of Israel in the wilderness was miraculous, whereas the entry into the Land was "more inclined toward the natural order"; see *Sefer Torat E-lohim . . . im perush Ha'mek davar*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: El ha-Mekorot, 1959), 7a–8a.

90 See Bishop, "Seidler-Feller Promotes"; see also Chaim's "Yom Ha'atzmaut 1989," 12, and "By Power and by Spirit," *The Jewish Spectator* 48, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 26–27, in the latter of which he writes that "[the Israeli Labor party's] humanistic interpretation of power may be more authentically Jewish than [Menachem] Begin's."

contradiction between opposing those who would delegitimize the Jewish State and fighting equally hard for Israel's compliance with international law in ending the occupation of the West Bank so as to make way for a future Palestinian state.<sup>91</sup> The stress he placed on morality as *the* supreme Jewish (including halakhic) value made it obvious to him that the exchange of "land for peace" was the only just method of resolving the conflict.<sup>92</sup> And when religious figures such as Meir Kahane,<sup>93</sup> Baruch Goldstein,<sup>94</sup> and Yigal

91 For Chaim's most heartfelt published condemnation of the morally corrupting nature of the occupation—"the greatest catastrophe to befall the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Holocaust"—see "The Withering of the Zionist Dream: Reflections on the Occupation after 40 Years," in *A Rabbinic Guide to 40 Years of Occupation*, ed. John Friedman and Aliza Becker (Chicago: Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, 2007), 18–19, accessed March 1, 2019, <http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/resources/rabbisguide.pdf>; see also his "Omar Barghouti at UCLA: No to BDS, No to Occupation," *Jewish Journal* (January 23, 2014), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/opinion/126296/>.

92 See, for example, Anna Shen, "Mideast Problems Debated by Rabbis," *Daily Bruin* (March 8, 1991): 3, 10, and "Perspectives on Partition Part II: Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller," *Olive Tree Initiative* (May 29, 2012), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IC7mPl-giAo>; see also the essay Chaim coauthored with David N. Myers, "Jews Shouldn't Adulate Temple Mount," *Los Angeles Times* (January 21, 2001): M5, accessed March 1, 2019, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/jan/21/opinion/op-14982>. Relatedly, see Myers's and Chaim's call for a return to "some of the most exalted ideals of the Jewish and Zionist traditions": "These Rare Texts Will Remind You What Israel Once Aspired to Be," *Forward* (May 9, 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://forward.com/opinion/340202/these-rare-texts-will-remind-you-what-israel-once-aspired-to-be/>; republished as "Renew Our Days as of Old," *Jewish Journal* (May 26, 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/opinion/185819/>.

93 Kahane challenged Chaim to a public debate on at least two occasions; see Michael Ashcraft and Joseph Wolverton, "Kahane Speaks on Israeli Homeland, Draws Protesters," *Daily Bruin* (February 3, 1987): 5, as well as the advertisements in the *Daily Bruin* (October 25, 1989): 13; *ibid.* (October 31, 1989): 4; and *ibid.* (November 2, 1989): 8. For Chaim's denunciations of Kahane's racist ideology, see his "Not by Might and Not by Power: Kahanism and Orthodoxy," *Tikkun* 6, no. 1 (January/February 1991): 21–22, as well as Anna Hrachovec, "Kahane Denounced by Protesters for his 'Anti-Zionism,'" *Daily Bruin* (February 3, 1987): 8; Kristine Lucas, "Rabbi Meir Kahane to Protest at UCLA Jewish Center Today," *Daily Bruin* (November 2, 1989): 3, 17; *eadem.*, "Rabbi Gives Views on Racism, Israel," *Daily Bruin* (November 3, 1989): 3, 11; and Tina Anima, "Expert Says Kahane's Followers Will Falter," *Daily Bruin* (November 9, 1990): 1, 9.

94 See the letters written jointly by Chaim and David N. Myers printed in the *Daily Bruin* (March 3, 1994): 18, and the *Los Angeles Times* (March 4, 1994), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1994-03-04/local/me-29773\\_1\\_settler-jewish-history-west-bank-and-gaza](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-03-04/local/me-29773_1_settler-jewish-history-west-bank-and-gaza). See also Chaim's highly critical "Look within for the Personification of Evil," *Los Angeles Times* (March 14, 1994), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1994-03-14/local/me-33777\\_1\\_hebron-massacre](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-03-14/local/me-33777_1_hebron-massacre). (Impassioned responses to this article were printed in the *Los Angeles Times* [March

Amir<sup>95</sup> adduced traditional sources to promote hate and violence rather than tolerance and reconciliation, Chaim's righteous indignation spurred him to protest loudly for the sake of Zion and of Judaism.<sup>96</sup>

With his arrival at UCLA, Chaim continued to promote his pro-peace agenda in various ways. He helped organize a "social action coffeehouse series" to raise awareness about contemporary political issues;<sup>97</sup> gave public lectures and coordinated events relating to various aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;<sup>98</sup> and fought against what he saw as unfair

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23, 1994]: A10.) Chaim spoke at a Hillel-sponsored Jewish Town Hall Meeting held as a "Response to the Hebron Massacre" on March 20; see the advertisement in the *Daily Bruin* (March 17, 1994): 8.

95 See Chaim's "Rabin Deserves Respect for Transformation toward Peace," *Daily Bruin* (November 13, 1995): 16, 19, and his essay in *Rebuilding Jewish Peoplehood*.

96 Chaim wrote early on of the need to "work at modifying, refining and perfecting our tradition—sometimes by utilizing internal rabbinic ethics to humanize an oppressive law and at other times by adapting Judaism to the cultural norm" ("The Relationship," 13). His formulations would, however, grow sharper with time, for example, "The challenge for all Jews is to reclaim their tradition and decisively uproot, once and for all, the Jewish teachings of contempt that have attracted so many followers to Kahane's message" ("Not by Might," 22); "Next comes the most difficult move for traditionalists: acknowledging that the sacred teachings of Judaism contain passages that, when presented uncritically, constitute incitement to violence" ("Look within"); and "Therefore, it is the special responsibility of religious educators in the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities to acknowledge the intolerance and prejudice that is embedded in some of their texts, to expose those teachings, and to denounce them as immoral in their simple form, while, at the same time, presenting layers of interpretation offered by the tradition as a filter for that particularly ignominious textual passage" (essay in *Rebuilding Jewish Peoplehood*, 92). Perhaps the shift in language was due in part to Chaim's exposure to Swedish Lutheran theologian Krister Stendahl, who served as the second director of the Center for Religious Pluralism at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Stendahl taught that in confronting a Christian text that seems to be anti-Jewish, one must first be bold enough to identify it as such; second, one must contextualize it historically; third, one must attempt to reinterpret it; and fourth, failing that, one must declare it to be immoral.

97 See Batya Silverman, "Hillel Initiates Social Action Coffeehouse Series," *Ha'Am* (February 3, 1976): 3.

98 Examples of lectures include one on "Gush Emunim: A Threat to Israel's Survival?" (*Daily Bruin* [May 28, 1980]: 11); two on the topic of Chaim's "The Land of Israel" essay (above, n. 88; see the *Daily Bruin* [May 11, 1984]: 4, and *ibid.* [April 27, 1994]: 14); one on "Pollard, Boesky, and Co.: What's Happened to the Jewish Ethical Tradition?" (*Ha'Am* [April 1987]: 2); and another on the goals of Peace Now (*Daily Bruin* [November 20, 1989]: 20). For examples of events, including debates, see Tammy Peng, "Crisis in Israel Exposed to Discussion," *Daily Bruin* (February 3, 1988): 4; Auerbuch and Phillips, "Rabbis Debate," 1, 9; Shen, "Mideast Problems," 3, 10; and John Digrado, "Jewish Leaders Discuss Peace Process," *Daily Bruin* (May 9, 1996): 1, 14.

anti-Zionist<sup>99</sup> rhetoric emanating from members of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement and other groups on campus.<sup>100</sup>

99 Chaim believed that denying Jews the right to self-determination was tantamount to antisemitism: "It is known that anti-Zionism is a way of saying anti-Judaism" (Mike Timmermann, "Vandals Threaten Prof's Life," *Daily Bruin* [May 21, 1981]: 15); "The selective support of one national movement—Palestinian nationalism—while, at the same time, denying the legitimacy of another national movement—Zionism—must be seen as a form of discrimination bordering on racism" (letter printed in the *Daily Bruin* [February 7, 1983]: 11). See also the advertisement in the *Daily Bruin* (February 20, 1985): 22, for a talk Chaim was scheduled to give on February 22 entitled "Anti-Zionism: The New Anti-Semitism."

100 See, for example, Chaim's letter printed in the *Daily Bruin* (February 10, 1987): 15; idem, "Zionism Is Not a Racist Policy"; idem, "Omar Barghouti"; the statement he coauthored with Aaron Lerner, "Increasingly Blurred Lines between Politics and Hate on Campus," *UCLA Hillel* (February 27, 2015), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://www.uclahillel.org/increasingly\\_blurred\\_lines\\_between\\_politics\\_and\\_hate\\_on\\_campus](http://www.uclahillel.org/increasingly_blurred_lines_between_politics_and_hate_on_campus); and the essay he coauthored with David N. Myers and Maia Ferdman, "UCLA Must Take Action to Address Anti-Semitism," *Jewish Journal* (March 11, 2015), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/opinion/164300/>. See also Todd Belie, "Event Offers Students Insight on Conflict," *Daily Bruin* (November 26, 2000), accessed March 11, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2000/11/26/event-offers-students-insight/>, and Marcelle Richards, "Swastika Sparks Emotions at Teach-In on Oppression," *Daily Bruin* (May 24, 2001), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2001/05/24/swastika-sparks-emotions-at-te/>. Chaim argued that the image of Israel on campus changed from that of an underdog and champion of liberal values in the 1960s and 1970s to that of a powerful, even oppressive, force in the aftermath of the 1982 Operation Peace for Galilee, perceived by many as an offensive war on Israel's part. See his "By Power and by Spirit," 26; idem, "A Zionism of Power" (starting at approx. 24:33); and Sichel, "Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller's."

Still, he was careful to point out that antisemitism posed a relatively minor threat to Jewish life at the university and could not possibly, on its own, sustain Jewish identity for the long term in the absence of any positive reason for young Jews to identify with their heritage. See his "Jewish Life on Campus," 101; idem, "Response to Perry London," 61–64; idem, "Judaism as a Choice in Our Materialistic Universe," *The Jewish Spectator* 58, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 40; idem, "Reality for Campus Ills," *Jewish Journal* (December 19, 2002), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/opinion/7168/>; idem, "'Sense of Siege' at UCLA Requires Strategic Response," *The Leader* 3 (Spring 2003): 7–8; idem, "A Jewish Golden Age on Campus," *The Jewish Week* (January 10, 2012), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/a-jewish-golden-age-on-campus/>; and the essay he coauthored with Keri Copans et al., "The Truth about UC Campuses," *Jewish Journal* (March 8, 2012), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/opinion/101856/>. See also Udeitha Srimushnam, "Jewish Student Protection Advised," *Daily Bruin* (April 5, 2006), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2006/04/05/jewish-student-protection-adv/>; anon., "Ha-ma'avak be-BDS: 'iyyum asṭraṭegi al Medinat Yiśra'el,'" *The Pulse* (April 3, 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://thepulse.co.il/index.php/22742-2016-04-03-04-39-51>; Judy Maltz, "From the BDS Front Lines: How the On-Campus Brawl Is Turning

Crucially, Chaim also worked with partners in the Muslim community (much as he had with black leaders) to foster intergroup dialogue.<sup>101</sup> “By nature, I’m a boundary crosser. . . . I would like to demonstrate how the other and I are one.”<sup>102</sup> In a particularly celebrated case, he and a Palestinian graduate student co-taught a Spring 2003 course in UCLA’s Department of Sociology called “Voices of Peace: Perspectives on Confrontation and Reconciliation in the Arab-Israeli Conflict” in order to “give the students a perspective on the necessity of compromise and the need to reject violence as an option.”<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Chaim cultivated academic and personal relationships with Muslim intellectuals such as Sari Nusseibeh of Al-Quds

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Young Jews off Israel,” *Haaretz* (May 9, 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/MAGAZINE-how-the-bds-brawl-is-turning-jewish-students-off-israel-1.5379256>; and Liron Nagler-Cohen, “Ar[tsot] ha-b[erit] 2018: Yiśraēl hafekhah le-mashehu ra’il” *Ynet* (April 11, 2018), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5227227,00.html>.

101 On the importance Chaim has imputed to dialogue as a step towards conflict resolution, see his “Zionist Principles,” 15; idem, “Reality for Campus Ills”; idem, “Different Tack on Campus Challenge”; and his letter printed in the *Daily Bruin* (January 24, 2007), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://dailybruin.com/2007/01/24/letters\\_editor28/](http://dailybruin.com/2007/01/24/letters_editor28/). (In his “Conflict as Mitzvah,” *OLAM Magazine* [Winter 2004]: 7; republished with revisions as “The Mitzvah of Conflict Resolution—on Campus,” 9 *Adar* [2015], accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.9adar.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/The-Mitzvah-of-Conflict-Resolution-on-Campus-by-Chaim-Seidler-Feller.pdf>, dialogue is presented as secondary to action.) See also Jacoby, “Chaim,” 10; the advertisement in the *Daily Bruin* (May 31, 1995): 14; Belie, “Event Offers”; Teresa Watanabe, “UCLA Muslim, Jewish Students Build Bridges,” *Los Angeles Times* (December 1, 2001), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/dec/01/local/me-10252>; and Roopa Raman, “Dinner Held to Encourage Dialogue,” *Daily Bruin* (December 2, 2001), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2001/12/02/dinner-held-to-encourage-dialo/>.

102 Bishop, “Seidler-Feller Promotes.” Doreen also called him a “boundary crosser” (in a slightly different sense) in Berrin, “To Nudge and to Support.”

103 See anon., “Rabbi, Palestinian Teach for Peace,” *UCLA Today* (May 28, 2003), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/030528peace>; see also Brad Greenberg, “Sociology 195D Provides Forum for ‘Voices of Peace,’” *Daily Bruin* (May 21, 2003), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://dailybruin.com/2003/05/21/sociology-195d-provides-forum/>, and Stuart Silverstein, “Small Steps toward Bridging Middle East Chasm,” *Los Angeles Times* (June 4, 2003), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jun/04/local/me-class4>. Chaim had also taught the course previously in Winter 2001 without the participation of the graduate student; see Watanabe, “UCLA Muslim, Jewish Students.” For Chaim’s belief in the transformative power of education, as opposed to advocacy, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see his “Advocacy and Education as Divergent Strategies in the Effort to Support Israel on Campus,” in *American Jewry and the College Campus: Best of Times or Worst of Times?*, ed. Harold T. Shapiro and Steven Bayme (New York: Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations, American Jewish Committee, 2005),

University, Khaled Abou El Fadl of UCLA, and Amir Hussain of Loyola Marymount University in an effort to increase mutual understanding.<sup>104</sup>

Because of his activism, Chaim was sometimes cast by his Jewish critics as beyond the pale of legitimacy and subjected to protests by those who objected to his liberal political orientation.<sup>105</sup> In one case in the early 1980s, a pig was left by members of the Jewish Defense League (JDL) in front of the Seidler-Fellers' apartment building on Kelton Avenue on the first day of Passover. In 1988, together with Yael Dayan, Richard Dreyfuss, and Betty Friedan, Chaim participated in a rally held at Roxbury Park in Beverly Hills by Friends of Peace Now—of which he was a founding member following the demise of Breira<sup>106</sup>—praising Israel's negotiations with its Arab neighbors to end Palestinian unrest in the occupied territories.<sup>107</sup> Egged on by a local community figure, counter-demonstrators became agitated and began to charge the stage, threatening to upend it. Chaim quickly gathered his wits, walked to the microphone, and started singing "Hatikvah." At that point, the entire crowd, peaceniks and otherwise, stopped in its tracks and chanted the Israeli national anthem together.<sup>108</sup>

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32–39, as well as his letter printed in the *Jewish Journal* (March 18, 2015), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://jewishjournal.com/letters\\_to\\_the\\_editor/164915/](https://jewishjournal.com/letters_to_the_editor/164915/).

104 On his relationship with El Fadl, see Gary Rosenblatt, "In Search of Moderate Muslims," *The Jewish Week* (January 17, 2003), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/in-search-of-moderate-muslims/>, and El Fadl's online list of public lectures, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.searchforbeauty.org/latest-lectures/all-lectures-and-public-talks/>. On the same in connection with Hussain, see the course description for their Spring 2010 class on Muslim/Jewish Theology, accessed March 1, 2019, <http://faculty.lmu.edu/amirhussain/thst-398-muslimjewish-theology/>, and "UCLA Hillel Honors" (starting at approx. 1:20, 3:35, 10:45).

105 Chaim had apparently been attacked for his views on Israel already during his Columbus period; see Cohen, "Hillel Rabbi Leaving," 1, and Marc Lee Raphael, *Jews and Judaism in a Midwestern Community: Columbus, Ohio, 1840–1975* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1979), 417 with n. 9.

106 See Chaim's "Zionist Principles," 15, and the website of the American Jewish Peace Archive (1967–2017), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://ajpeacearchive.org/peace-pioneers/>. He would later join the faculty of the New Israel Fund's Rabbi Harvey J. Fields Institute as well; see their website, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://fieldsinstitute.nif.org/past-instructors/>.

107 The rally was advertised in the *Los Angeles Times* (March 8, 1988), pt. V, 3, and covered briefly in Ann Wiener, "Demonstrators Scuffle at Mideast Peace Rally," *Los Angeles Times* (March 14, 1988), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1988-03-14/local/me-648\\_1\\_peace-rally-demonstrators](http://articles.latimes.com/1988-03-14/local/me-648_1_peace-rally-demonstrators).

108 In more recent years, Chaim's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems to have gained greater acceptance within the Jewish mainstream, to the extent that he was named AIPAC Advocate of the Year in March 2015; see Sichel, "Rabbi Chaim

## **“Make for Yourself a Rabbi, and Acquire for Yourself a Friend” (Avot 1:6)**

In attempting to navigate between two poles, and as part of his own commitment to the possibility of a progressive Zionist vision, Chaim had an inspiring and influential mentor, Rabbi Dr. David Hartman. Hartman, who, like Chaim, had studied with Soloveitchik at Yeshiva, was the rabbi of Congregation Tifereth Beth David Jerusalem in Montreal and a professor at McGill University. When he visited Yitz Greenberg’s synagogue, the Riverdale Jewish Center, in 1969, Chaim and a small group of friends piled into a car to hear him speak. Hartman was a charismatic and impassioned teacher whose theology attempted to achieve a synthesis between tradition and modernity in a rationalistic key inspired by Rabbi Moses Maimonides, one of Chaim’s heroes. Taken with Hartman’s approach, Chaim reached out to him upon the latter’s visit to Los Angeles ten years later. (Hartman had moved to Israel in the interim and founded the Jerusalem-based Shalom Hartman Institute in 1976 in memory of his father.) The two arranged to meet in Hartman’s hotel room for what was supposed to be a fifteen-minute conversation but wound up lasting an hour and a half. When Hartman extended an institute fellowship offer to Chaim for the 1980–1981 academic year, he accepted the invitation and took a sabbatical from UCLA.<sup>109</sup> From 1984 on, he would return to the institute every summer to learn with and teach fellow Diaspora rabbis and, eventually, laypeople as well. Later in his career, in 2011, he joined the faculty of the North American branch of the institute on a part-time basis by developing and running a program, the Hartman Fellowship for Hillel (or: Campus) Professionals, that focused on

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Seidler-Feller’s.” It may also be the case that his views have themselves evolved somewhat in light of the intensification of anti-Israel activity on and off campus; see, for example, Rebecca Spence, “Once-Quiet Campuses See Surge in Anti-Israel Activism,” *Forward* (March 9, 2009), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://forward.com/news/103762/once-quiet-campuses-see-surge-in-anti-israel-activ/>; Chaim’s “They’re Attacking Us with Missiles,” *Jewish Journal* (July 15, 2014), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/opinion/130880/>; and his coauthored “UCLA Must Take Action.”

109 See Chaim’s “A Zionism of Power” (starting at approx. 29:17). See also the farewell wishes from the editors of *Ha’Am* in its October 1980 issue, p. 2. While on sabbatical, Chaim spent the first part of his days studying at the institute and then, after 1:00 pm, returned to his alma mater, the Hebrew University, to take classes in Jewish studies, particularly Kabbalah and Hasidism, with such luminaries as Rachel Elior, Moshe Idel, Abraham Malamat, Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, Ephraim E. Urbach, and R. J. Zwi Werblowsky.

“the complexity and challenges of the North American relationship with Israel and on other major issues facing the Jewish people.”<sup>110</sup>

Chaim’s time at the institute would prove decisive. It gave him a home in Israel, one that suited his heart, mind, and soul alike. There, he found a large cohort of scholars, rabbis, and thinkers who shared his tolerant form of observant Judaism and/or his progressive form of Zionism, including Moshe Halbertal, Donniel Hartman, Tova Hartman, Melila Hellner-Eshed, Yossi Klein Halevi, Israel Knohl, Menachem Lorberbaum, Yair Lorberbaum, Avi Sagi, and Noam Zion.<sup>111</sup> He also taught and befriended a broad range of North American rabbis from across the denominational spectrum, making him a highly sought-after speaker at synagogues throughout the United States. Similarly, through his work as an instructor for the Wexner Heritage Foundation,<sup>112</sup> which is devoted to providing serious training in Jewish history and thought to aspiring lay leaders, he also came into contact with a wide swath of talented Jewish community members.

In recognition of his years of dedicated service to UCLA and the Jewish community at large, UCLA Hillel has sponsored a number of tributes to Chaim at various points in his career. The first was held in honor of the bar mitzvah, or thirteenth year, of his tenure there, when Hillel ran a symposium entitled “Passion and Scholarship: Reflections on the Problematics of Commitment,” which brought together the various religious and intellectual communities in which Chaim moved, including UCLA professors Arnold J. Band and Steven Zipperstein, as well as then-local Rabbi Daniel Landes and Rabbi Dr. David Gordis of the University of Judaism (now

110 Anon., “Fellowship for Hillel Professionals Established,” *Shalom Hartman Institute* (March 5, 2012), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://hartman.org.il/SHINews\\_View.asp?Article\\_Id=910&Cat\\_Id=285&Cat\\_Type=SHINews](https://hartman.org.il/SHINews_View.asp?Article_Id=910&Cat_Id=285&Cat_Type=SHINews).

111 For appreciations by Chaim of Hartman and his institute, see his “Hosting Dr. David Hartman: Hillel Welcomes Scholar, Philosopher, Rabbi: All in One,” *Ha’Am* (November 1986): 15; Marjorie Miller, “In Jerusalem, an Educator in Tolerance Gets a Campus,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 28, 1996), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1996-10-28/news/mn-58698\\_1\\_hartman-institute](http://articles.latimes.com/1996-10-28/news/mn-58698_1_hartman-institute); and “Jo[se]ph Baer Soloveitchik” (starting at approx. 10:00). It is important to note that the admiration was mutual; see *Searching for Chaim* (starting at approx. 14:27), where Hartman addresses Chaim as follows: “I am happy to call you my friend. You like to call me your teacher; I don’t think I deserve such a title from you. I prefer saying that you are a *haver* . . . *le-de’ah* [like-minded friend] who studies with me and energizes my own intellectual curiosity.”

112 See, for example, the program of the foundation’s July 5–12, 1992 Summer Institute, held in Olympic Valley, CA, at which Chaim was scheduled to speak about “Maimonides and Modernity.”

American Jewish University).<sup>113</sup> Chaim would be feted by Hillel on three subsequent occasions as well: in 1998, when he was presented with a booklet entitled *Meḳor Chaim* that reproduced a selection of his writings with Talmud-style marginal comments by scholars and friends;<sup>114</sup> in 2010, when he and Doreen together were celebrated for their service to the UCLA community;<sup>115</sup> and in 2016, when leading academics and rabbis—Elliot N. Dorff, Laura Geller, Carole Goldberg, Avraham Yizhak (Arthur) Green, Moshe Halbertal, Asher Lopatin, and Suzanne Last Stone—convened for “A Day of Learning” organized by David N. Myers, followed by a gala dinner, to mark Chaim’s retirement from the position of executive director of UCLA Hillel.<sup>116</sup> At the last-named event, Hillel established the Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller Institute of Jewish Learning at UCLA to “organize and sponsor multidisciplinary avenues for Jewish study and spiritual growth” in perpetuation of Chaim’s distinctive work.<sup>117</sup>

As one might expect from a person of Chaim’s energy level and commitment, the distinction between his pre- and post-retirement schedules is not readily apparent. He continues to be involved in UCLA Hillel, serve on the faculty of the Hartman Institute, speak as a scholar-in-residence at various venues, and advocate for social justice causes that are meaningful

113 The November 13, 1988 program was advertised in the October 1988 issue of *Ha’Am*, p. 15, and covered in Marilyn Zeitlin, “Hillel Fetes Rabbi Seidler-Feller after 13 Years,” *Jewish Journal* (November 14, 1988), and Irena Auerb[u]ch and Shana Chandler, “Hillel Rabbi Recognized for 13 Years of Service,” *Ha’Am* (November 1988): 4.

114 See the film *Searching for Chaim* and Tom Tugend, “UCLA Hillel’s New Home,” *Jewish Journal* (March 19, 1998), accessed July 15, 2019, [https://jewishjournal.com/old\\_stories/806/](https://jewishjournal.com/old_stories/806/).

115 See anon., “Seidler-Fellers to Be Honored in Los Angeles,” *Hillel International* (April 12, 2010), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.hillel.org/about/news-views/news-views—blog/news-and-views/2010/04/12/seidler-fellers-to-be-honored-in-los-angeles>, and anon., “Hillel at UCLA Gala Honors Seidler-Fellers,” *Jewish Journal* (June 23, 2010), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://jewishjournal.com/news/los\\_angeles/community/80715/](https://jewishjournal.com/news/los_angeles/community/80715/).

116 See Jared Sichel, “A Night for Chaim,” *Jewish Journal* (February 11, 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, [https://jewishjournal.com/news/los\\_angeles/182405/moving-and-shaking-a-night-for-chaim-peachy-and-mark-levy-beit-midrash-and-more/](https://jewishjournal.com/news/los_angeles/182405/moving-and-shaking-a-night-for-chaim-peachy-and-mark-levy-beit-midrash-and-more/), and anon., “A Day of Learning / A Night for Chaim Wrap Up,” *UCLA Hillel* (February 11, 2016), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://www.uclahillel.org/a\\_day\\_of\\_learning\\_a\\_night\\_for\\_chaim\\_wrap\\_up](http://www.uclahillel.org/a_day_of_learning_a_night_for_chaim_wrap_up). See also the list of Chaim’s accomplishments over the course of his tenure at UCLA Hillel: anon., “Announcing Our New Executive Director,” *UCLA Hillel* (June 30, 2015), accessed March 1, 2019, [http://www.uclahillel.org/announcing\\_our\\_new\\_executive\\_director](http://www.uclahillel.org/announcing_our_new_executive_director).

117 See the invitation sent out ahead of “A Night for Chaim,” dated November 10, 2015.

to him.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, his pastoral duties as a rabbi in the community who visits the sick, counsels those in need, and officiates at lifecycle events, whether weddings or funerals, continue unabated.<sup>119</sup> Chaim and Doreen have also begun to spend more time in New York, where their children Shulie and Shaul live. There, Chaim is an active presence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, teaching classes at B'nai Jeshurun, JCC Manhattan, and the Jewish Theological Seminary. He has also found in New York a pair of Orthodox institutions that suit his progressive religious orientation: Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT), an "Open Orthodox" rabbinical seminary founded on principles of inclusiveness,<sup>120</sup> and Darkhei Noam, a so-called partnership *minyán* that defines itself as halakhically observant while seeking to maximize the participation of women in prayer services.

118 See, for example, Chaim's "Inequality: What Can Be Done? The Biblical Economics of Sufficiency," *Valley Beit Midrash* (November 2016), accessed March 10, 2019, <https://www.valleybeitmidrash.org/learning-library/inequality-what-can-be-done-the-biblical-economics-of-sufficiency/>, and Eitan Arom, "Orthodox Rabbis Urge 'Spiritual Resistance' against Trump Policies," *Jewish Journal* (March 7, 2017), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/news/nation/216168/orthodox-rabbis-urge-spiritual-resistance-trump-policies/>. Chaim put his money where his mouth was when he and other social-justice-minded clergy members were arrested in a protest of Trump administration immigration rules on April 13, 2017, which coincided with the intermediate days of Passover. See, for example, Ryan Carter, "LAPD Arrests 35 as Clergy, Immigration Activists Protest ICE Detention," *LA Daily News* (April 13, 2017), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.dailynews.com/2017/04/13/lapd-arrests-35-as-clergy-immigration-activists-protest-ice-detentions/>, and Veronica Rocha, "35 Demonstrators, Including Clergy, Arrested during ICE Protest in Downtown L.A.," *Los Angeles Times* (April 14, 2017), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-ice-protests-arrest-downtown-los-angeles-20170414-story.html>. Chaim would later write about this experience in "Reclaiming Activism," *Sh'ma Now* (March 2, 2018), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://forward.com/shma-now/returning/395525/reclaiming-activism/>. Relatedly, see Chaim's earlier piece, "Passover: A Taste of Freedom," *Daily Bruin* (April 12, 1990): 27, as well as the statement of the URC clergy on a State of California anti-immigration bill printed in the *Daily Bruin* (October 4, 1994): 16–17.

119 For one example among innumerable others, see "UCLA Hillel 2012 Gala Video—Gail Katz & Bruce Wessel," accessed March 1, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/41381222>.

120 See Sichel, "Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller's," on Chaim's self-identification with the Open Orthodox movement, and Drew Kaplan, "Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller Gives Talk," *YCT Chevre* (November 21, 2005), accessed March 1, 2019, <https://yctchevre.blogspot.com/2005/11/rabbi-chaim-seidler-feller-gives-talk.html>, for one instance of Chaim teaching at YCT. Chaim is likewise affiliated with two (approximately) Open Orthodox rabbinical organizations: Torat Chayim (<http://www.toratchayimrabbis.org/>) and the International Rabbinic Fellowship (<http://www.internationalrabbinicfellowship.org/>).

## “The Making of Many Books Is without Limit” (Eccl. 12:12)

One of the most noticeable features of the spaces Chaim occupies, whether at home or at work, is the ubiquity of reading material piled up in mounds on the floor and table and crammed into the crevices of his bookshelves, which not infrequently house an additional row of books behind the front row. A photograph of Albert Einstein posted on Chaim’s office door at Hillel quotes the renowned physicist saying, as if channeling Chaim, “If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?” As a *yodea sefer* (scholar) and an *ohev sefer* (bibliophile), Chaim derives no greater delight than when showing visitors a recently purchased volume—perhaps a first-edition kabbalistic treatise, a facsimile of an illuminated Haggadah, or an early-twentieth-century collection of essays by a maverick rabbi.<sup>121</sup> It was thus obvious to Chaim’s friends and admirers that the most appropriate way of celebrating his retirement would be to publish a book of scholarship in his honor.

As recounted above, Chaim is an iconoclast who has forged his own distinctive path in life. Hence the title of the present volume: *Swimming against the Current*. The metaphor of swimming calls to mind the midrashic comparison of the Talmud to “the Great Sea” (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 5:14; see also *Midrash mishle* 10:17). As such, it is an eminently suitable image and habitus in which to consider Chaim’s impact. For while he swims in that vast sea of knowledge, he also strains against the force of powerful opposing tides, modeling for others the passion and courage necessary to chart one’s own course. But even as he follows the example of Abraham—who, the *midrash* explains, is styled *ha-ivri* (the Hebrew; Gen. 14:13) because the whole world was on one *ever* (side, riverbank; the words share a root) while he was on the other (*Genesis Rabbah* 42:8)—he builds bridges to everyone he meets by dint of his extraordinary personality and love for humanity.

In that spirit, this festschrift brings together an array of scholars and thinkers whose essays swim against the current of intellectual convention in their respective fields. Part I of the book is devoted to “The Sources of the Tradition” and features a thought-provoking cluster of articles by Isaac Gottlieb, Shana Strauch Schick, Aryeh Cohen, Moshe Halbertal, and Elana

121 See Kahn, “*L’Chaim*,” 20. Unsurprisingly, Chaim actually cofounded a Jewish bookshop at OSU Hillel in 1974; likewise, soon after he came to UCLA, it was reported that “the staff has hopes of setting up a Jewish bookstore in the near future.” See anon., “Hillel Happenings,” 3 (above, n. 60), and *Ha’Am* (October 26, 1976): 6, respectively.

Stein Hain offering new and innovative readings of the Bible and Talmud. Akin to Chaim, these authors point to the indispensability of these sources as the foundational texts of the Jewish religion, while also fulfilling the ancient interpretive injunction to “turn it over again and again” (*Avot* 5:22) in order to render Jewish teachings relevant to shifting contexts. Thus, they explore the place of women, biblical sequence, Torah study, and secular legal theory in Jewish thought ranging from antiquity to the modern age.

Part II treats another major area of interest of Chaim’s: Jewish intellectual history and philosophy. Submissions to this section come from Avraham Yizhak (Arthur) Green, Michael Walzer, Howard Wettstein, Moshe Idel, and Elliot N. Dorff, who perform two key tasks. First, they revisit long-held assumptions about major modern Jewish paradigms of thought, and second, they explore the consonance between Judaism and ethics. The result is a fresh angle of observation on religious, historical, and moral questions that go to the heart of the Jewish tradition.

Part III shifts our attention to the realm of contemporary Jewish culture and society. The papers in this section, by Sylvia Barack Fishman, Sergio DellaPergola, Eugene R. Sheppard, and Deborah E. Lipstadt, employ an eclectic combination of literary, sociological, and historical methods to push to the fore central concerns of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Jewish life, including feminism, Jewish continuity, the Holocaust, and antisemitism.

Part IV explores the critically important issue of how to meld Jewish and democratic values into a coherent and just vision of Israel. The scholars contributing to this section—Suzanne Last Stone, David Ellenson, Carole Goldberg, and Shalom Sabar—address the phenomenon of Zionism from a variety of perspectives that highlight the status of minorities, the ethics of war, the question of indigeneity, and religious symbolism.

The volume concludes with two sets of tributes to Chaim. (Though the number could easily have been multiplied many times over, considerations of space necessitated imposing a limit.) The first consists of short encomia written by former students from different periods of Chaim’s tenure who have gone on to pursue diverse, meaningful careers: Meira Wolkenfeld, Adam Greenwald, Mayim Bialik, and Jonathan Jacoby. The second includes essays by past and current colleagues of Chaim’s from the Hillel, Jewish communal, and university worlds: Laurie L. Levenson, Edward Feld, David Berner, and Saul Andron.