REMEMBERING CANTOR ILAN MAMBER *page 6*
RUTGERS STUDENT FIGHTS ANTI-ISRAEL BIAS ON THE SYLLABUS *page 8*
HELP FOR REFUGEES FROM NORTHVALE AND NYACK *page 12*

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Daring rabbinical students on the flying trapeze

Circus arts meets Talmud at the Academy for Jewish Religion

Page 16

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Cover Story

Hannah Mozden prepares to fly from Ayal Prouser to Eric Eliacin at Go! Emerging Artist Commissioning Program at the Streb Lab in Brooklyn in June. PHOTO BY LIBBY MARTIN

Dancing in air

Rabbinic, cantorial students learn circus to embody the power of Jewish texts

JOANNE PALMER

Circus performers live in their bodies.

Rabbis live in their heads.

Circus performers and rabbis live in relationship to other people.

These of course are gross overstatements. Ridiculous overstatements. But it is true that circus is an overwhelmingly physical art form, the study of rabbinics involves the extraordinarily in-depth analysis of text, and neither can exist in a vacuum.

The rabbinic system, more or less as we know it today, is about two thousand years old. The academic field of circus studies is perhaps half a century old, maybe, if you define it generously and trace its beginnings to France. (The circus as we know it today was created in England in the late 18th century.) And it probably is safe to say that it wasn't until a month or so ago that a formal trimester-long course in circus performance first was offered at a rabbinical school, open to both rabbinic and cantorial students.

The school is the Academy for Jewish Religion, the school in the old Otis Elevator building in Yonkers, on the east bank of the Hudson River, the one where sunlight glows through the glass and lights up the books, and where students who can be of any age but tend to be old enough to have traded in a first career for a second one, who come from all streams of Jewish life and are open to learning in ways that they would not have been had they done this earlier, when they thought they knew more but in fact knew far less.

And the class was prosaically called "Sacred Arts, Circus Arts," the school's executive vice president, Dr. Ora Horn Prouser of Franklin Lakes, said; she wishes she'd gone with the more dramatic title "Two Jews, Three Rings."

Okay. So what is this class?

"The idea started many years ago, because AJR has had a real focus on sacred arts for many years," Dr. Prouser said. "The idea is that we use the arts to process Jewish text. I want to be clear – the idea is not that we use the text as a jumping-off point to the arts, but to really use the art to process the text.

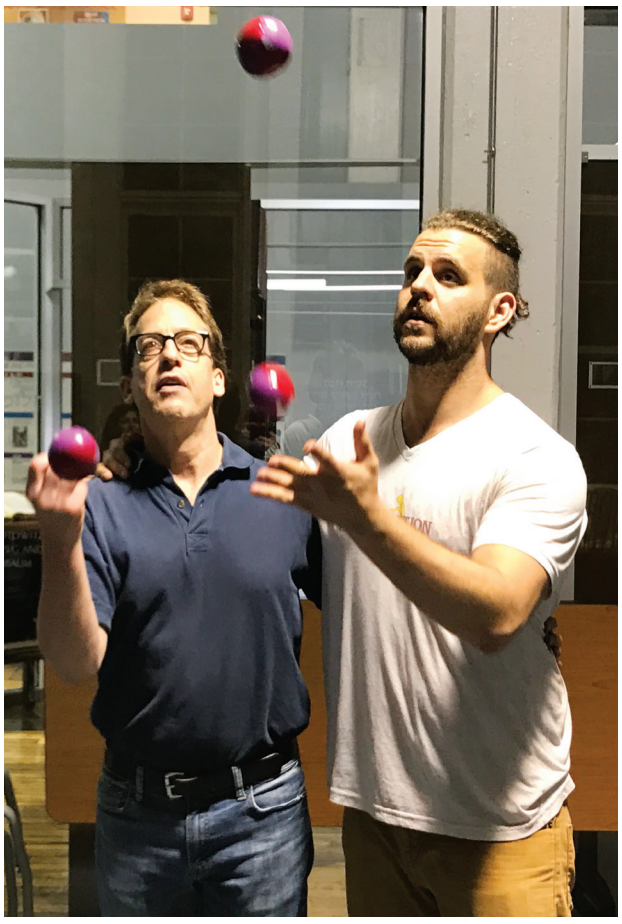
"We don't care if it's really great art, because the point is the study.

"This became important to us because Judaism is such a very text-based religion, and a lot of Jewish text study happens with everyone sitting around a table, studying together.

"I am not putting that down. Not at all. I love it. It is my life. But for many people, that is not their way of learning, and because of that they easily could feel that Jewish study is closed to them. So we have focused on whether there are alternative ways to approach text, ways that maybe can open the door to more people. And not only to artistic students – we believe that this works for everybody and is valuable for everybody."

The art involved does not have to be circus art, Dr. Prouser continued. "It took a fair amount of time to get there, to circus. We have done many retreats and workshops where we have brought in the arts – through dance, music, biblio-drama, and other arts. We once had a very intense conversation about patrilineal descent and the question of how to deal with it in a pluralistic community like ours. So we brought in a music therapist, who wrote songs with our students to help them process it.

Rabbinical student Robert Green and cantorial student Robyn Streitman hold rabbinical student Lily Lucey as Ayal Prouser stablizes the pryamid from behind. Rabbinical student Steven Goldstein directs. They're embodying the Jacob and Esau story. AJR



Robert Green and Ayal Prouser juggle; the text is the relationship between Moses and Aaron. AJR

"The material was so valuable. It helped people feel and think about things that were not in their head space, but in their heart space.

"And then we thought it would be interesting to look at the Talmud through the arts. Not the Bible" – that isn't so very unusual, given biblio-drama and the art of the meturguman, as resurfaced through the work by such people as Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie and his Storahtelling – "but the Talmud. So when this started with the circus, we said we don't want to chose a gem of a narrative text in the Talmud. Instead, we want to use a straightforward talmudic argument. The question was how do you use the arts to look at the structure of the argument?

"So the first time Ayal and I worked together, we had people build human pyramids to express the structure." How did that work? "You have a statement, and then another statement that is built on the other one; it might be countering the first one or it might seem to be unrelated. So if you can imagine the argument in that way, you can structure it with bodies."

There is no one right way to build that structure, so "People did it differently." They worked in groups, and had to decide how to work together. "Some groups made pyramids; others didn't want to get off the floor." Their arguments were expressed physically but horizontally. "Others drew pictures."

So, to back up, who is Ayal, and how does he know about the circus?

Ayal is Ayal Prouser; his mother is Dr. Prouser and his father is Dr. Prouser's husband, Rabbi Joseph Prouser of Temple Emanuel of North Jersey in Franklin Lakes. Mr. Prouser majored in film studies at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., and he has just finished a master's degree in film and media studies at Columbia. He's both a circus performer, focusing on the trapeze, and a circus coach. He worked closely with his mother and the five students in the intimate, intense class that just is finishing up now.

The two Prousers, mother and son, started working together when they began creating workshops using circus arts. "We would look at the biblical text through circus," Dr. Prouser said. "We would take a rich narrative text, like the story of Jacob and Esau, which has four very rich characters" – both the two brothers and their parents, Isaac and Rebecca – and we would ask people to use partner acrobatics to express the relationships between them. Ayal would teach them different moves, and they'd think about questions like how are they looking at each other? And who is supporting whom?

"We were looking at how these characters relate to each other," she continued. "This is not theater. We were not aiming to act anything out, but to get a clear picture. It was not about telling a story, but more like a freeze frame. What were the emotions and underlying feelings going on here?

"We are certainly not ignoring the text. Everything we do is based on really studying the text. So we are in no way ignoring the story, but we also are not trying to act out the story."

That was at the beginning, when this fusion of text study with circus happened at workshops and conferences, basically one-offs. "This, now, is the first time we've taught a full-length 11-week trimester course," Dr. Prouser said. "That gave us the luxury of trying out a variety of things.

We have worked hard to get away from acting out characters and instead moving toward what are the larger emotions going on."

What does that mean?

"For example, one week we brought a tight wire into school, and then we studied the Akedah," the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, because he thought that God would approve of that sacrifice; it's also the story of their trip up to the altar on the mountain, and of how that trip ended with a dead ram and a severed father/son relationship. "Then we said, 'We want you to think about Abraham while you are walking on the tight wire.'"

Don't worry. No one was expected to walk on a wire without help. "One of Ayal's gifts is that he can make people feel that they are ready to join the circus," Dr. Prouser said. "He is really great at helping people. He holds their hands"; before that, he held their waists.

The prerequisite for the class, open to all the school's rabbinical and cantorial students, was just a willingness to take it. The students were not young – "the age range is probably from late 30s to 50s," Dr. Prouser said – and "there was a whole range of fitness levels. It was not in any way like a class of acrobats.

"They all knew what they were getting into, and there were some times when somebody said 'I'm not comfortable with this,' and of course that was fine."

When the students were on the tight wire, "Ayal asked them what it means to be physically unbalanced when you are thinking about the Akedah," Dr. Prouser said. "What does it means to be struggling with your own balance? People were expressing all sorts of different ideas about how it affected them.

"I read the text out loud while people were walking, and then someone said 'No, no, no. I want to read it aloud myself as I walk on the tight wire, so he got on the wire with the Tanach. He literally looked like he was going to cry.

"And then he got off, and he said, 'I have been jaded about this text. It comes up so often, you read it so often, that you stop thinking about it.' But he was in tears, because of how he was experiencing it bodily, not through drama, but as embodying the feelings.

> *"Then we said, 'We want you to think about Abraham* ***while you are walking on the tight wire****.'"*

"That was what we are aiming for.

"How you embody these feelings has a huge impact on how you absorb and think about the text. And when you go back to it afterward, you realize connections and thoughts that you hadn't thought through before. Somehow, once you embody it it is different."

Although the class will allow newly ordained rabbis and cantors to bring the understandings they've gained in it to their communities, "it does not equip them to be circus coaches," she said. "We were clear that you need a professional to do this. It is not safe otherwise." In other words, kids, do not try this at home.

Ayal Prouser has been in love with circus since he was a child. "We used to go when I was a kid," he said. "We'd go on Passover. Ringling Brothers usually would be in town then." He's part of a close-knit family of siblings and cousins – "there are seven of us who were born in seven years, plus more who were born later" – so "when school would be closed for Passover, all the cousins would go to the circus. We'd bring our big brown bags of food with us.

"And then my mom bought me a learn-to-juggle book, and I learned. It came to me fairly naturally, and I loved it. And then I went to circus camp, and I met a guy there who became my mentor, and I started learning more and more circus skills."

There are a great many life skills in circus skills, Mr. Prouser continued. "In competitive sports, you are competing with other people. In circus, you are competing only with yourself. You can only be the best that you can be. You can't be better than someone else. And you are working with other people, supporting each other, everybody working together."

The bonds that circus people develop with each other extend way outside the ring, he added. "I am never nervous about moving someplace new," he said. "I know that there always will be a circus community there."

Dr. Prouser talks about the community the circus brings, even though it is not at the center of her life, as it is at her son's. She's seen it at workshops, at places like university Hillels, where the group that comes together

for a few hours stays together for longer. There is academic and hands-on work that shows that "when you are doing circus, you literally are holding other people up. That's a necessary part of circus, and that is how it can be used to build community."

She talked about a project her son did in Israel, in Kirkas Galil, a circus in the Galilee. "They were bringing together Israeli Jews and Arabs, who had to depend on each other and build relationships." Ayal did similar work in Uganda, she added, "taking kids who live in underprivileged areas and giving them skills and a trade, a way to feel proud of themselves, in addition to getting a meal and a shower. Circus is used for social good in a variety of areas, and it works partly because it builds community, based on the element of having to rely on each other."

Mr. Prouser is passionate about both the circus's history and its future. "It used to be considered a low art, rejected by the academy," he said. Recently, though, as it has been studied as both sociology and art, it is being taken more seriously. Still, it's necessary to sort of back into it as an academic study. "Everyone I know who does circus studies really is in a different field," he said. "I got my masters in film and media studies. Some people do sociology or performance studies or even science or education."

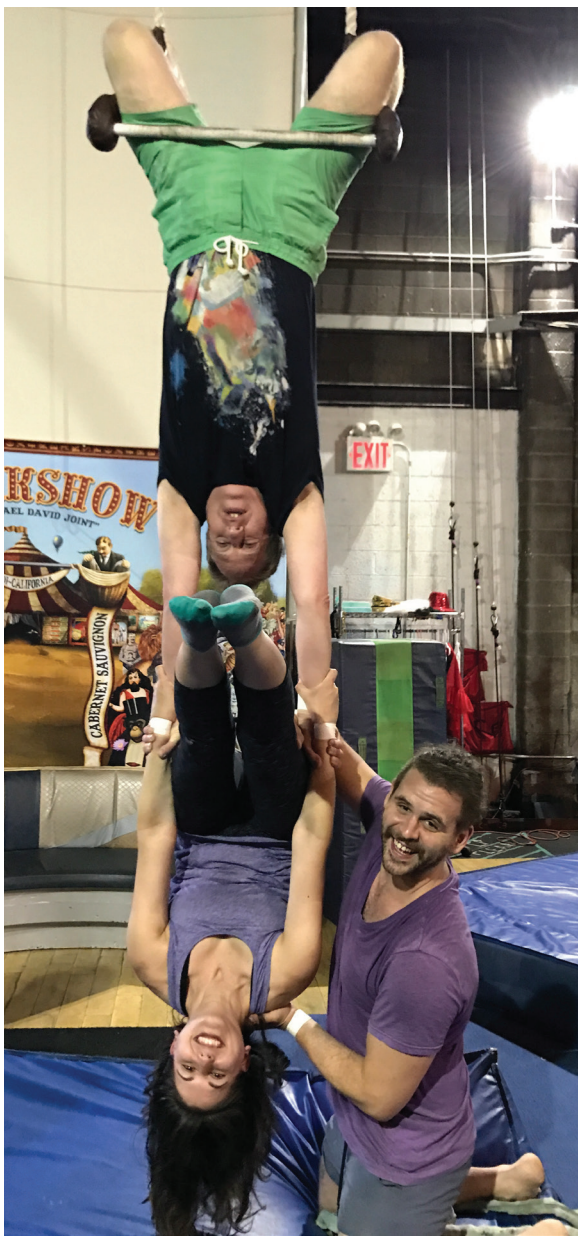
Gender also is an unavoidable part of circus study; it's impossible to watch circus without being struck both by the exaggerated gender stereotyping and also the way those stereotypes are thrown away with the elaborate sparkly cover-up robes when the real work – the real art – begins.

Contemporary circus – which flourishes mainly in Europe, and in this continent in Montreal, he said – is being seen more as art than as gaudy lowbrow cotton-candy throw-away entertainment. He now works mainly on the trapeze, both flying, where he's a catcher, and double, "which is two people on one bar," he said. "It's more like a dance or choreography than just one trick, and then another trick, and then the next one."

It's not tricks, it's dancing on air.

Mr. Prouser and the three people he works with won a joint grant from the Jerome Foundation and the Streb Lab for Action Mechanics. "Elizabeth Streb is a MacArthur Genius Award winner and choreographer," he said. "So we get to work with her to re-explore trapeze. It's not just about doing a trick and getting caught, but about getting people's bodies involved."

He also teaches workshops, he added, for groups



Lily Lucey hangs from Robert Green's arms; Ayal Prouser spots them. They're inspired by the story of Ruth. AJR

ranging from children to clergy; they include Jewish professionals and aspiring Jewish professionals as well as adult ed programs. (For more information, email him at acp2192@columbia.edu.)

Like his mother, Mr. Prouser was moved by the exercise involving the Akedah, back at the Academy for Jewish Religion, and by the student who "almost broke down in tears on the tight wire.

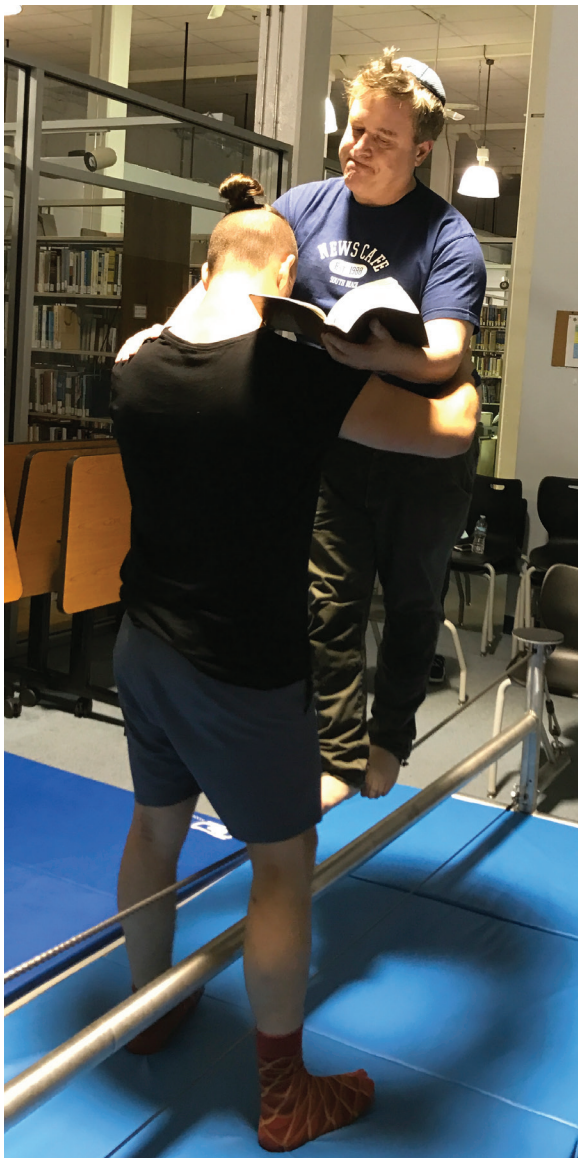
"That gave me a new perspective," he said. "A more personal, much smaller one."

"Circus is a very bodily art," he concluded. "Everything in circus is body. First body and feelings. Thoughts are later. With circus, you try to convey things through the body." Even in the class, "you emphasize the body, and let the body teach the mind, which of course is another kind of education."

So, is there anything particularly Jewish about the circus?

Well, yes, in a way, there is, Ayal Prouser said. There were many Jews in prewar European circuses, both owners and performers; when the Nazis demanded that the circuses give up their Jews, the circuses said no. "The circus community had its own culture and set of values, and they said 'Not our Jews. You can't have our Jews.'"

That story illustrates another connection between circus and Jews. A community, with its own culture and set of values, including trust, and the absolute knowledge that someone will be there to catch someone else who is falling. A romantic vision of community, yes, but isn't romance another big element of circus?



Steven Goldstein reads the text of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac as he walks a tight wire; Ayal Prouser supports him. AJR