

## Katya Gibel Azoulay



*Katya Gibel Azoulay, an Associate Professor of Anthropology and American Studies at Grinnell College, resides in Des Moines. Nine years now at Grinnell, Dr. Gibel Azoulay has brought a rare set of perspectives to the college, as a Black, Jewish, Israeli woman. Fluent in Hebrew, she is a prolific writer and sought-after speaker. In the following interview with the Jewish Press, Katya speaks primarily about her research on what she terms "the fiction of race" and identity -- Jewishness, in particular, culminating in her identification as a progressive Zionist.*

By means of background, the following: growing up in Manhattan, the child of a Jewish refugee from Nazi Austria and a Black Jamaican immigrant, she was raised as "all-Jewish and all-Black." She started Hebrew School at a Conservative synagogue and then the family joined the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, founded by the father of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Katya was taken to Israel in 1966 by her mother, I.M.A. Lederer, a writer and inter-religious affairs consultant, who was researching the question of ethnic tensions in Israel for which the Israel Government Press Office made arrangements. On this trip, Dr. Gibel Azoulay "fell in love with Israel," and after finishing the Brearley School in New York, made aliyah at age 18 where she was accepted at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Her studies were disrupted by the 1973 Yom Kippur War, by which time she had married an Israeli. After having three children, and earning a B.A. and M.A., in 1991 she returned to the States where she earned a PhD at Duke University in Cultural Anthropology.

Jewish Press: Where was your academic career leading?

Katya Gibel Azoulay: When I came back to the States, my intention was to write a dissertation about ethnic inequality within the [Israeli] women's peace movement -- which is very strong -- and in fact, it would have been an elaboration on an article I wrote for the Jerusalem Post. I came to Duke University, the only program to which I applied. In the end, my dissertation was on a different topic, later published as a book, *Black Jewish and Interracial: Not the Color of Your Skin, but the Race of Your Kin and Other Myths of Identity* (1997)

JP: How did you find your way to Grinnell College?

KGA: In the year I was completing the dissertation, I was invited to Grinnell as a scholar-in-residence for three semesters. After the first semester, based on my performance, they offered me a tenure track position as the chair of Afro-American Studies.

JP: You've noted that the program has changed since.

KGA: Yes. During my four years as chair, I changed the title to Africana Studies and expanded the program. Two years ago the program was absorbed into the renewal of the American Studies program at the College.

JP: What do you teach now that you are no longer chair of that program?

KGA: I'm now in Anthropology and American Studies. I teach theory courses in Post-Modernism, Cultural Hybridity (mixed race), Anthropology of Ethnicity, and Anthropology of American Culture as well as special topics of my choice.

JP: What approach do you take in teaching about American culture?

KGA: I place race, class and gender at the center of American culture, but not separated -- they always overlap -- and I integrate Jews into the discussions. I explore the ways social identity, social policy, and legal trends shape American society. *continued on page 15*

## Iowa Jewish Senior Life Center

### 168 Days

#### At the Iowa Jewish Senior Life Center

Much has been happening at your Jewish Senior Life Center in recent days. Please share a few minutes of your time to catch-up on the news.

During our recent, annual, week-long, relicensure & recertification survey by the Department of Inspections and Appeals, the Life Center received special commendation from the State for a deficiency-free survey. This designation is a direct reflection of our commitment to the highest standards of quality care and could not have been achieved without strong support from our community of service.

We are pleased to announce that two of our leadership positions have been filled. Peggy Luciano, R.N. has undertaken the position of Director of Nursing. Peggy comes to us with a very strong background in all phases of nursing administration and special expertise in the management of dementia-care services. Darlene Perdue, CDM, will be joining us as the new Director of Dietary Services. Darlene has long and extensive experience in long term care food service management, and we will be working together to enhance the dining experience for our residents.

Please feel free to join me for "Coffee With The Director." On the first Tuesday of each month, from 10:00 - 11:00 A.M., I will be welcoming residents, family members, staff, and anyone else who would like to do so to come and "schmooze" with me about what's going on at the Jewish Senior Life Center.

On Sunday, May 7, there will be a "Construction Celebration" held in the atrium of the Life Center. Join us as we celebrate the beginning of construction on our new Alzheimer's care unit.

And, since you asked, we have been told by our contractor that The Project to establish the new dementia-care unit will take 168 days. Rest assured, we'll be counting every one of them. In the meantime, if you've got any questions about the new unit or if you would like to join the many others who have shown their strong financial support of The Project, please give me a call (255-5433 or [ijslc@dwx.com](mailto:ijslc@dwx.com)).

- Steve Blend

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1997

## Azoulay from page 9

Without an understanding of these elements, there is no way to understand this entity called American culture.

JP: How would you characterize yourself professionally? You've written a book. Do you see yourself as a writer?

KGA: I'm an academic. As an academic, I write but I don't think of myself as a writer. I think of myself as a professor by vocation - and not as a teacher. The difference is that a teacher, teaches - passes on knowledge. A professor, professes - brings new ideas to the table that should be thought-provoking and enlightening and (a stimulus) to move things forward. In addition, more specifically, I am a researcher and a cultural analyst.

JP: What are some of your research interests?

KGA: One of my research projects, which is on hold, is looking at the way that the idea of Blackness travels, with a focus on how it has articulated itself in Israel among Ethiopian Jews and the larger Israeli society. The other area of my research pertains to how the fiction of race has remained within the fields of biology and medicine. So every time we turn around we read about how Blacks have this (genetic disease) and how Jews have that (genetic disease), which only reinforces the idea of race - the science of race - that was literally invented in the 18th century and peaked in the 19th. People believe that there are real biological differences rather than imposed differences. If Jews from Eastern Europe have Tay-Sachs, well, the reason is because they are Jews who lived in ghettos and married other Jews who lived in ghettos - Tay-Sachs was prominent among Eastern European Jews while it was not found among the majority of North African Jews. So in other words, it's not a Jewish disease - we have to look at the social and political contexts within which biological symptoms appear without attributing them to the notion that somehow there are different races.

JP: Where does that put you on the spectrum of people dealing with race in academia?

KGA: I am among those who say, number one, race is a social construction, but that it is a necessary topic to which we must attend, placing the focus of attention on racism. It is not an issue of whether there is or is not racism, there is. Racism is real, and if we don't talk about racism constantly, we're not going to solve anything. Do we need to have a census? Yes we do. If we don't have a census that uses arbitrary categories, we're never going to establish patterns of discrimination. If we don't discuss racism, which Americans tend not to want to, we can't undermine it - just as, in Europe and in America, if anti-Semitism isn't discussed, it doesn't go away, it just goes underground.

JP: Can you say more about racism?

KGA: Racism in its most extreme form can take the form of violent action, as we saw in Nazi Germany. Racism is built on the idea that some people are fundamentally different and that that difference is immutable. Racism expresses itself most clearly by people in power. I think that racism is related to issues of power, which isn't to say that people without power can't be racist or they can't have deep-seated prejudices, but power definitely puts racism into action.

I am always amazed by the extent to which educated people can repeat the same mistakes, even when we have the answers in front of us. A society must ensure certain pre-requisites: that its young have proper housing, proper nutrition, proper medical care and

an education - these are all the things that allow a human being to live a life of dignity, respect and have opportunities. A society that doesn't provide these pre-requisites is a society which is going to implode because it indicates a society whose values are unclear. And in that sense, both the United States and Israel are very worrisome to me.

JP: Do you have a theory of education?

KGA: The themes I choose to teach about are intellectual but they are also political, and I don't really separate the two. I try to transmit to my students that the classroom is the place where we can learn information and interpret that information to create an understanding of whatever the question is. It is imperative that we do so, initially, in as disengaged a way as possible, so that we can look at the various influences - disengaged as in, you don't go into a research project trying to prove your point. Academic work should be about trying to look at the breadth of a question and come at it from different angles. Part of the educative purpose is then to apply the knowledge and insights in practical ways. Practical ways may be policy, they may be laws, they may be social interactions.

JP: Please tell us something about your book?

KGA: It's worth buying (chuckling). It's an academic book and not "an easy read." The title is *Black Jewish and Interracial: It's not the color of your skin but the race of your kin, and Other Myths of Identity*. The book is an analysis of identity, theories of identity, and it looks at the ways in which Jewishness slips into whiteness, the ways in which American Jews have become comfortable thinking of themselves as simply another white group. And I wanted, as well, to present an unessentialist perspective of what Black means. Blacks in the U.S. are a very diverse population - not all are African American (U.S. born), or descendants of slaves, or Christian. Particular forms of racism however impact on all Blacks - American and immigrant.

Just as many American Blacks will assume that every Black is Christian, American Jews have traditionally assumed that everybody who is Jewish is white. This assumption by Jews has been upset, now, by the emergence of many Israelis who are not European, people who do not eat gefilte fish (as do I) and to whom Woody Allen's humor does not appeal (as it does to me; that is my Ashkenazi background.).

JP: What insights would you hope Jewish readers would take away from your book?

KGA: I would hope that American Jews who read my book would grapple with what Jewishness means. Jewishness is not just a go to synagogue religion. Jewishness is more than [ritual] practices, but that Jews are a people and a diverse people, at that - they look like people from their host countries, they conform to mores of their host countries.

Let me take this two steps further. My central assertions are that [multicultural] Israel is the center of Jewishness and that the essence of Jewishness (that which makes us distinctive) is still the school of Hillel - Do not do unto others that which is hateful to you (which is the opposite of the Christian formulation of Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.)

JP: And how, given your perspective, do you find the predominant Jewishness of the Midwest?

KGA: I found it troubling to come out to the Midwest where people don't say that they are Jewish; when I ask them what they are, they'll say they are white.

*continued on page 16*



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Tim Brien's 20 years of public service to Iowa's largest county has established the benchmark of service to the taxpayers of Polk County.

Tim Brien -- a professional Recorder who has been an active and loyal Democrat, supporting and working for many political campaigns.

## Pierre Rehov film screened May 16

A free deli dinner at 5 p.m. at the Caspe Terrace on May 16, will be followed by a screening of the forthright film by documentary maker Pierre Rehov called *Suicide Killers*. RSVP for the dinner to [dorothea@dmjfed.org](mailto:dorothea@dmjfed.org) or call 515-277-6321 x 218.

Pierre Rehov has made seven documentaries since the start of the second Intifada. His films have been widely lauded for their authenticity and their ability to depict aspects about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that are usually considered too politically incorrect to reveal. When asked

why his film *Suicide Killers* is particularly important, here's what Rehov had to say: "People don't understand the devastating culture behind this unbelievable phenomenon [of suicide bombing.] My film is not politically correct because it...points the finger against a [radical Islamic] culture of hatred in which the uneducated are brainwashed to a level where their only solution in life becomes to kill themselves and kill others in the name of a God whose word, as transmitted by other men, has become their only certitude." Read more at [www.pierrehov.com](http://www.pierrehov.com).

## Why We Should Be Wary of Censorship

by Deborah Lipstadt



In the 10 days since David Irving's conviction and three-year jail sentence in Austria for denying the Holocaust, I have repeatedly voiced my opposition to laws against Holocaust denial.

I believe they violate free speech and are generally not efficacious. Yet certain things need to be said about Irving's Austrian conviction for denying the Holocaust.

This man is no free-speech advocate. He demanded that I shred my book, in which I called him a "Hitler partisan," and when I refused he sued me for libel. He sued a British scholar for critiquing him in a newspaper. He threatened a libel suit against an American academic unless he excised criticism of Irving from his book. When the British edition of the American's book finally appeared, the comments in question were gone or greatly toned down.

Irving has shut down most critiques of him. My recent book, "History On Trial," which concerns my successful defense against him, could not find a British publisher. My editor and many of her colleagues at HarperCollins were convinced that it was because of fears of an Irving lawsuit.

Irving brought this trouble on himself. He announced he was coming to Austria even though there was a warrant for his arrest. He wanted, according to his partner, to "provoke" and have some "fun." Irving played the court for fools, claiming evidence he had seen in the 1990s convinced him that there was a Holocaust and gas chambers. He made this claim, despite the fact that during my trial in 2000 he repeatedly

denied these very things. As late as the fall of 2005 he posted documents on his Web site "proving" there were no gas chambers.

Claims in Al-Jazeera notwithstanding, he is no Galileo bravely defending the truth. My defense team tracked the sources for his claims about the Holocaust and found in every case a distortion, fabrication or complete invention. For example, Irving once had written that he had "incontrovertible evidence" that as early as Nov. 30, 1941, Hitler had explicitly ordered that there was to be 'no liquidation' of the Jews." Irving based his claim on a notation in Himmler's telephone log: Judentransport aus Berlin keine Liquidierung [Jew-transport from Berlin no liquidation.]

In Irving's hands, Himmler's order that that one specific trainload of Berlin Jews not be liquidated had morphed into an order concerning all Jews.

Irving also claimed that Himmler had ordered that "Jews are to remain where they are," i.e., not be taken to concentration camps or liquidated. In fact, the source on which he based this sweeping claim said nothing about Jews. It read *Verwaltungsführer der SS haben zu bleiben* [Administrative leaders of the SS are to remain where they are]. Irving, whose German is impeccable, tried to claim that he "misread" *haben* as *Juden*, which led him to wrongly assert that Jews were to stay where they are. The judge thought Irving's claims fanciful.

Even now from his cell in Austria, Irving is spouting anti-Semitic canards and backtracking on his recent recants. He has an impeccable record of racist commentary. *continued on page 19*

**Rabbi from page 1** There she assumed rabbinic responsibilities and directed its 210-student afternoon Religious School, work which included conducting its Junior Choir.

Don Schoen, president of the synagogue, said he believes Rabbi Padorr will bring a unique and personal sense of vitality to Tifereth Israel and to the community. "Rabbi Padorr is an extremely warm and dynamic rabbi who will move our congregation forward with what has been started by Rabbi Halevi. It is her desire to incorporate her love of music along with Torah and Judaism in the congregation at Tifereth Israel. She hopes to continue the warm, caring, and joyous atmosphere of learning that fosters knowledge and love of Judaism within our current congregants, to unaffiliated Jews and interfaith couples."

**Blank from page 1** A. H. Blank, a magnate in the movie industry, served as president of the Jewish Federation 1941-1942, fateful years in American and Jewish history. A.H.'s photographs of family and film alumni taken along with such movie stars as Mae West and Bob Hope are displayed in the Iowa Jewish Historical Society's Heritage Gallery at the Caspe Terrace. His grandson Steven, son of Myron (Mike) and Jacqueline (Jackie) Blank, was president of the Jewish Federation 1991-1993. Surviving Steve, Judy Blank is an esteemed member of the Jewish Community Relations Commission, Board of Directors of the Jewish Federation and the Caspe Programming Committee. Jackie passed away in 2002 at the age of 88 and Mike passed away in 2005 at age 93.

In acknowledging the gift, Foundation president Don Blumenthal summarized our community's feelings about the Blanks. "We were honored and moved to hear that we would be receiving this very generous gift from the Blank family. Their contribution to ensure the continuity of Jewish leadership in our Jewish community will benefit our entire community for generations to come. The Blank family will always remain in our hearts."

The Foundation expresses its gratitude to Trustee Judy Blank for her support of this important fund in the development of future leadership for the entire community.

**jewishdesmoines from page 1**

Wander around a bit and you might be surprised to see our new online calendar of community activities, the latest Jewish news and access to local Jewish congregational websites and to Jewish resources worldwide. There are current brochures to read, a way to make donations online, and some very special features - like recipes authored by members of the community.

You're just going to have to see for yourself! And we hope you will come back to [jewishdesmoines.org](http://jewishdesmoines.org) often, because we hope to have interesting and informative things for you to see each time you visit. And why not? [jewishdesmoines.org](http://jewishdesmoines.org) is your personal connection to the Jewish community online. We're part of the United Jewish Communities' web of community websites.

**concert from page 1**

President Toni Urban invites the entire Jewish community to "celebrate with the Federation on another impressive year of providing vital programs and human social services to enhance Jewish life. Join us as we thank the many dedicat-

ed leaders, volunteers and contributors who help the community stay connected and responsible one for another."

**Darfur from page 14** The African Union force (AMIS) has managed to improve security in certain places where they deployed, but none of the warring parties are respecting the ceasefire and the Sudanese government continues to support the abusive Janjaweed, rather than disarming them. AMIS lacks the numbers of troops and the kind of equipment needed to effectively operate in such a difficult environment.

A U.N. force would be larger, better equipped and more financially stable than the current AU force, since it could draw on global personnel, capacity and on UN financing. The current African Union forces would probably be absorbed into a UN force.

The U.N. force must have the strongest possible mandate to protect civilians, under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, and the international community must continue to pressure the Sudanese government to end its abusive policies in Darfur. Until a U.N. force comes in during the next six to nine months, the African Union must be bolstered with funds, equipment and other support.

What is the U.N. doing in Sudan?

The U.N. already has a peacekeeping mandate for southern Sudan, where the January 05 Comprehensive Peace Agreement recently ended the twenty-one year civil war between the Sudanese government and southern rebels known as the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M). The U.N. mission in Sudan, known as UNMIS, will eventually deploy 10,000 troops to monitor and implement the north-south agreement. As of January 2006, there are 5,300 foreign troops from sixty-one countries participating in UNMIS and deployed in Khartoum and southern Sudan.

From: *Human Rights Watch*, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)

**Azoulay from page 15** They treat being Jewish as if it were a deep secret.

JP: ...but you find an exception...

KGA: Yes, I am attracted to the Chabad out here because they don't treat being Jewish as a deep secret. Rabbi Jacobson and the Chabad community are in-your-face Jewish, and I, myself, am in-your-face Jewish. Part of that is that I'm a first-generation American who was raised to categorize myself as American (above and beyond all other attributes) - and that I went to Israel when I was 18 - and the Israeli personality fits me. So I am outspoken, in general.

JP: Does your Jewishness - Israeli-style-outspokenness - find an application with regard to Israel?

KGA: Yes, if people speak negatively about Israel, I have no problem standing up for Israel. One can disagree with the government. But I would not [let go uncontested] somebody in my presence denying Israel's right to exist - which to me is the definition of Zionism. So much to the irritation of my colleagues - this is the Midwest, so people don't say negative things to your face, they say them behind your back - I will stand up and say, I object, because I am a Zionist.

JP: Katya, you are a very reflective person and a person who takes Jewish identity very seriously. I wish you continued success. Thank you for sharing your thoughts.

KGA: You're welcome.

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