Scholar focuses a lens on the Jewish-Buddhist interface

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Surely you've heard the one about the woman from New Brunswick who travels all the way to a monastery in Nepal to seek an audience with a world-renowned guru, remarked Jane Marie Law, associate professor of Japanese religions and ritual studies at Cornell University.

After days of pleading with the monks there, the woman is finally ushered into the guru's presence — but cautioned that she may speak no more than four words.

"Moishe," she cries, "come home already!"

The nub of truth beating at the heart of that joke — the propensity for great and greatly disproportionate numbers of Jews (colloquially known as "Jew-Bu's") to be drawn to Buddhist practice — also drove the lecture Law recently delivered at a program sponsored by Rutgers University's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life. Close to 150 people gathered at Douglass College in New Brunswick on the evening of Sept. 19 to hear her lecture, Jewish and Buddhist Lenses on Ritual Practice.

The program, which was funded in part by the Sagner Family Foundation, came at the prompting of the university, which invited its various centers to sponsor activities in connection with the Sept. 25 appearance of the Dalai Lama at Rutgers, according to Bildner Center director Yael Zerubavel.

"This is a topic we never address, even though it is very much a part of contemporary American life," Zerubavel said in an interview before the program. "I think the idea of looking at the mutual influences of Judaism and Buddhism is a really important and interesting phenomenon."

Law is the author of *Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death and Rebirth of the Awaji Ningyo Tradition and editor of Religious Reflections on the Human Body*. She is a visiting professor at Vilnius University in Lithuania, where she is currently researching a biography of Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul in Lithuania who is credited with saving the lives of 6,000 Jews during the Holocaust.

From 1996 to 2000, she served on the board of the North American Seat of the Namgyal Monastery in Ithaca, NY, the personal monastery of the Dalai Lama.

Still, Law considers herself a practicing Jew who studies Buddhism. "My identity tonight is someone who exists in the borderland between Jewish experience and Buddhist communities," she said. "I decided I was going to talk about the different people I have known who have come out of the Jewish tradition but made deep inroads into Buddhist

tradition." Exploring the lives of such people, she said, "has a complexity and messiness to it that can teach us a lot."

A wonderful confusion

Law limned the lives of some of her friends in that Jewish-Buddhist interface: "Jess," a Zen Buddhist, organic gardener, and teacher of Japanese, whose husband died of anorexia, a consequence of addiction to Zen Buddhist meditation; "Dan," a philanthropist who set up charities for Tibetan Buddhist monks in India and traveled by motorcycle to Buddhist events throughout America; "Judith," a beautiful young student who hated Judaism and immersed herself in the study of Buddhism; "Ken," an angry but successful lawyer who gave up everything to become head chef at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in upstate New York; and "Bernie," a particle physicist who spent years living at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries all over America.

"It's interesting that we take these moments of people's religious lives and regard them in very static ways," Law said. "But, in fact, people change greatly throughout their lives. What I'd like to suggest is that these interfaces frequently come back in the other direction, and when they come back, they place demands — ritual, philosophical, and moral demands — on the tradition they come back to."

For example, Law said, back in the 1970s, she lived in a Zen community of about 1,500 people, most of whom came from American-Jewish families. As "Boulder Buddhists," they were seeking to master three central ideas: mindfulness, or being present in the moment; aesthetics — the cultivation of beauty — as a form of religious experience; and ritual purity.

"These are questions people hadn't thought to ask of Jewish tradition," Law said. "Suddenly, they were being asked left and right in the 1970s." In fact, she added, the Dalai Lama's teachings encourage us to apply ideas and questions from other religious traditions to our own. "One of the things he's done," she said, "is to realize that revitalizing people's ability to think about alternatives in their own religious tradition is what he wants to do in his work."

Perhaps unlike the guru Moishe in her joke, Law's "Jew-Bu" friends have all "come home already."

"They have one thing in common at this point," she said. "All of them…have either returned or come to Jewish practice as their sole form of religious experience."

Jess, who is now practicing in an Orthodox Jewish community, said something very poignant to her, Law said. "She told me, 'I came home to die.'"

Dan is still traveling around to Buddhist monasteries on his motorcycle — but now as a practicing hasid. "He has a wonderful confusion about him," Law said. "He said, 'I don't know if it's mindfulness or *kavana* (Hebrew for "intention" in prayer), and I don't really

care.’”

Judith is living in a hasidic community in Boston; Ken was recently displaced from a religious settlement in Israel; and Bernie makes his home in a fervently Orthodox community in upstate New York. “He says, ‘Movement is a good thing, as long as you find your way home,’” Law related.

“I would hope in the communities where people come back to the tradition, that we’re interested in entertaining their questions,” she said, “whether they come home to die or they come home to live.”