Sarah Silverman and her sister Susan Silverman transformed the School of Management auditorium into a giant, congenial living room one night last November, when they spoke about their “Jewy-ness.” The rambling discussion between comedian Sarah Silverman and Rabbi Susan Silverman (CAS’85) was laced with humanity, wisdom, mutual affection, and a gentle helping of mischief.

The evening, which drew an overflow audience, was hosted by the Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies and a College of Arts & Sciences religion department hoping to broaden the focus of Judaic studies from sober examinations of anti-Semitism and the long historic shadow of the Holocaust.

“While Sarah may be the most famous Silverman sister, I knew Susan to be incredibly articulate, smart, and funny,” said Klepper. “I thought that the story of these two sisters—one a rabbi and one a comedian—emerging from their New Hampshire experience of Jewish otherness to forge careers in which Jewishness becomes absolutely central would be interesting to people, and I thought it could provide an opportunity for us to think about Jewish identity in new ways.”

When asked about growing up Jewish in New Hampshire, Sarah described being mystified when taunted as a “Christ killer” by classmates. “It’s not like we killed the baby Jesus,” she said. “He had a good run.”

When asked about the future of Jewish studies at BU, Sarah echoed her sister’s sentiments. “Don’t get your dogs from a breeder,” she said. “Get them from a shelter.”

WEB EXTRA
Watch a video of Sarah Silverman and Susan Silverman discussing all things Jewish at bu.edu/bostonia.

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Sarah Silverman, Rabbi Sister Riff on “Jewy-ness”

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The sisters Silverman (Susan is an adoption advocate living in Jerusalem with her husband and five children, including two from Ethiopia) disarmed their audience right off the bat by appearing on stage and plopping into their seats before being introduced. Dressed in jeans, lace-up boots, and a hooded sweatshirt over a T-shirt with the words “I love you so much,” Sarah Silverman, a former Saturday Night Live regular and star of a Comedy Central sitcom and the film Jesus Is Magic, repeatedly leaned into her older sister to pat, embrace, or plant a kiss. Jovial, articulate, and with a contagious laugh, Susan Silverman commanded the audience’s attention at least as much as, and at times more than, her famous sister, whom she described as “brilliant.” (“But you should know that this morning she described her venti Starbucks as brilliant,” Sarah added.) Sarah, 40, and Susan, 48, are two of four sisters who grew up in the predominantly Christian town of Bedford, N.H., with their parents, a father who ran a discount clothing store and a mother who founded a community theater company.

“We tried to frame the event in academic terms,” said Michael Zank, a CAS professor of religion and acting director of the Elie Wiesel Center. The discussion was highlighted by Sarah Silverman’s frank comments about the integrity of her art, and Susan Silverman’s impassioned defense of Israel as a place so progressive and steeped in history and spirituality that she would not think of raising her kids anyplace else.

The event “succeeded in raising the profile of Jewish studies at BU from the tried-and-true—and Holocaust-centered—to something that is more contemporary, fresh, irreverent, exploring new boundaries and giving room to different voices,” said Zank. The moderation by Virginia Sapiro, dean of Arts & Sciences, helped prevent the students from being starstruck and allowed Sarah “to just be herself,” he said.

When Deena Copeland Klepper, a CAS associate professor of religion and history and chair of the religion department, learned that the department had won a 2010–2013 grant from the Center for Cultural Judaism to develop new Judaic studies courses and programs, she thought immediately of her college friend Susan Silverman. The grant supports the BU Jewish studies faculty initiative The Other Within.

“Bring freshness and irreverence to Jewish studies”

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Asked by Sapiro to share a few parting words of wisdom, Sarah Silverman quoted her mother: “Be brave” and “keep your overhead low.”

Her sister concluded by urging the audience to promote adoption. Sarah echoed her sister’s sentiments. “Don’t get your dogs from a breeder,” she said. “Get them from a shelter.”

SUSAN SELIGSON