Recent years have seen a sharp increase in the number of studies of both Russian Jewish literature and of the role of Jews in Russian literature. These studies seem to be in growing need of an institutional framework. On the one hand, Russian Jewish literature can be studied under the rubric of Judaica, as a Jewish literature in a non-Jewish language, similar to the German Jewish, French Jewish, or Polish Jewish literatures. On the other hand, the role of Jewish writers in Russian literature, even those whose works abound in Jewish images and motifs, can be described within the framework of Russian literary history or the poetics of Russian literature. This is the case, for instance, when it comes to the work of Isaak Babel. However, scholarly research in the field is hampered by problems stemming from a lack of interdisciplinary fellowship or mutual understanding; even a palpable lack of interest in the work or research topics of other scholars is remarkably common. In our opinion, this is the result of a basic asymmetry inherent in Judeo-Christian relations. A Jew can get along without being acquainted with Christianity, whereas a Christian must necessarily take the Old Testament into account. Similarly, an author of Jewish origin writing in a non-Jewish language has most probably mastered the language and the cultural codes of the surrounding milieu. But in addition, such an author also knows a Jewish language or languages, is versed in Jewish literature written in at least one of these languages, and, very likely, is aware of other Jewish literatures written in non-Jewish media, which are accessible to him or her in the original or in translation. Or, even if the Jewish author does not have command of any other languages, he or she still resorts to a national historical memory independent of the historical memory of the surrounding ethnos.

But titular cultures normally disregard the historical and cultural memory of their national minorities. This does not necessarily impede the reception of Jewish writings, whatever their authors’ location on the literary scene. Quite the opposite is true: a Jewish writer can play on the double
entendre of Biblical passages, which are interpreted in mutually divergent ways in the Jewish and Christian tradition. A Jew may hide the immediate impulse to write, which can add depth to a work or make it enigmatic. Alternatively, a Jewish author may conceal a general political motif, masking it as a peculiarly Jewish concern.

A story by Isaak Babel is a case in point. The plot revolves about a “Black wedding”—a wedding of two paupers—depicting the proceeding as an exotic instance of Jewish lore. Historically, such a “Black wedding” actually occurred, and was widely publicized in Odessa’s newspapers. The wedding took place in September 1918, when Odessa, after a short period of Red Terror, came under the control of Denikin’s Dobrovol’cheskaya Army. The Jews of Odessa were in dread of the approaching Ukrainian armies, famous for their anti-Semitic brutality, to say nothing of what was to be expected in case of the return of the Bolsheviks. The “Black wedding” was supposed to prevent the catastrophe. The tragic political context of the 1918 ritual became unmentionable after the establishment of Soviet rule, but unspoken it remained a familiar memory among the Jews of Odessa when Babel’s story appeared in 1923.

Wherever the titular non-Jewish press and the Jewish one coexist, the writings of the respective authors subsist in non-overlapping spaces. In Russia, it was possible for Russian Jewish authors’ work to be reviewed both in the Russian and the Russian Jewish press, as well as in Yiddish and Hebrew periodicals.

The non-Jewish readers’ and critics’ near total ignorance of the Jewish world and its realities rendered whole strata of Russian Jewish literature unreadable or misunderstood by the Russian public. Sometimes, Jewish motifs were borrowed by the titular literature with decorative aims, or else were jumbled, or even intentionally presumed to have negative connotations they did not actually possess.

It is against this background that recent research has attempted to explicate the national elements in the Jewish writers turned Russian classics. The endeavor has met with considerable obstacles on the way to interdisciplinary interaction. In the case of Judaica, literary phenomena are typically approached from the point of view of writers’ national self-definition, or in the context of the gap among generations, or else in connection with the choice between a Jewish and a non-Jewish language or between a religious and a secular worldview. Jewish scholars treat the Jewish element as being of paramount importance, sensing it as something akin to their own professional identity. As a result, this type of research tends to ignore or reduce the significance of phenomena familiar and acknowledged in Slavic studies.