



# Branches

**News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University**

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## Director's Note



Photograph by Ken Kosub

Higher education in the United States is undergoing some major changes, not all of which are positive. On the institutional side, resources are becoming scarce, professors do research in increasingly competitive environments, and more and more fields are left underfunded or with no funding whatsoever. On the instructional side, students are under tremendous pressure to streamline their educations, excel in everything they do and get their degrees as quickly as possible. The idea of a liberal education itself has come under assault. If we want to serve our students well, the Program in Jewish Studies has to respond to this rapidly changing landscape, while maintaining our current status as one of Rice's finest interdisciplinary programs.

When I joined the Rice faculty in 1997, about one-third of the incoming freshmen said they wanted to major in the humanities, one-third in the sciences and one-third in engineering. Today, less than 10 percent of incoming Rice students claim that they intend to study humanities. Nationwide, the trends are similar. Understanding the reasons behind this trend are crucial to ensuring that Jewish studies remains a valuable part of a Rice education.

One of the reasons why so few students choose to major in the humanities is the general perception that a degree in a humanistic field does not lead to a high-paying career. Recent reports suggest, however, that the "wealth gap" between humanities majors and other fields is not as large as imagined. The truth is that students who major in the humanities are exceptionally well positioned to be admitted to top professional schools in law or business, and these schools frequently seek graduates with well-rounded educations over those who rushed through their requirements. Our alumni routinely tell us that two of the most valuable professional skills they acquired at Rice are critical thinking and the ability to express themselves orally and in writing. Our classes in Jewish studies are ideal for developing these skills: students are constantly challenged

to reflect on some of the most pressing issues of our time, to articulate their thoughts and to form their own, well-reasoned opinions.

Another of Rice's greatest challenges is to attract and retain the best faculty and the best students. To this end, the Program in Jewish Studies has recently begun to support faculty research. Maya Soifer Irish, assistant professor of history, will spend six weeks this summer in Seville, Spain, finding archival material for her new book on the pogroms of 1391. Daniel Cohen, associate professor of history, will do research at the Parkes Library in Southampton, England, for his new book on philosemitism. And our research is not just for faculty: we now offer scholarships for students to actively participate in faculty research projects. Such direct contact between undergraduate students and professors has always been one of Rice's strengths, and the Program in Jewish Studies hopes to encourage these close interactions.

This kind of educational experience is particularly important now, as the value propositions of higher education are changing rapidly. Whereas 20 years ago, it was taken for granted that classroom instruction was the main component of a Rice education, a recent student poll revealed that for current students, learning in the classroom only constitutes 26 percent of their Rice experience. Today, education happens primarily outside the classroom, in labs, internships, practica or during study abroad. The Program in Jewish Studies has developed new courses that take these realities into account: a year ago we took a group of students to Jerusalem, and this spring a class traveled to Berlin, Germany, to study Holocaust memorials. These courses are part of the general Rice curriculum and are open to all students, regardless of major or background. The Program in Jewish Studies plans to continue to develop courses of this kind to accommodate the changing needs of our students and the changing face of higher education.

The changes in higher education in the United States present significant challenges to our universities. We like to think of them as opportunities to continue to build a Program in Jewish Studies that is an integral part of the Rice curriculum and that supports our faculty and students. Faculty, students and alumni alike have repeatedly emphasized what a difference the program has made to their Rice experience, and we intend to continue to adapt in order to prepare our students for the world.

Sincerely,

Matthias Henze  
Founding director, Program in Jewish Studies  
Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of  
Biblical Studies



**CHECK OUT OUR NEW VIDEO! View it at [jewishstudies.rice.edu](http://jewishstudies.rice.edu).**

By Diane Wolfthal

David and Caroline Minter Professor of Humanities

On March 19 and 20, an interdisciplinary conference, Inside/Outside Yiddish, was held at Rice. The conference, which was organized by Jewish studies faculty members Melissa Weininger, the Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish studies, and me, Diane Wolfthal, featured an international group of scholars from various fields speaking about work that spans the medieval to the modern period. The conference was free and open to the public.

Over the course of two days, the conference explored the ways in which Yiddish has been both a national language that creates internal cohesion among Jews and a vehicle for Jews to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. Among the themes explored by the invited scholars were audience and authorship, cultural exchange and Jewish identity, Yiddish and German in conversation, the politics of time and space, and the personal and the political in Yiddish poetry.

Scholars came from as far away as Amsterdam and as nearby as the University of Texas at Austin to participate. Participants included senior scholars such as Jean Baumgarten, professor



Detail from a manuscript of the romance Octavian, 1580. Bavarian State Library, Munich, Germany.

emeritus at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, and author of numerous groundbreaking studies of medieval and early modern Yiddish, and Naomi Seidman, the Koret Professor of Jewish Culture at the Graduate Theological Union, who has published extensively on Hebrew and Yiddish literature, translation and gender.

In addition to scholarly presentations, the conference also included a screening

of the documentary film “The Muses of Bashevis Singer” as part of the Houston Jewish Film Festival at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center of Houston. The film’s co-director, Asaf Galay, was also in attendance to introduce and discuss the film with the audience. Through the film screening, the conference brought some of its central themes and ideas to the larger Houston Jewish community. ■

## Faculty Spotlight: Astrid Oesmann, Associate Professor of German Studies

I am an associate professor of German and have been a faculty member at Rice since 2013. My work centers on the ways historical trauma and radical political change are represented in literature, performance and art. In particular, I focus on how 20th-century theater as a genre has responded to specific historical events in the context of philosophy and mass culture. I am also interested in

the topic of collective memory and how aspects of Holocaust history influenced the philosophical approaches of Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer.

The Holocaust has always helped to define the context of my research of persecuted and exiled authors and artists. This was one of the subjects of my first book, “Staging History,” about the work of Bertolt Brecht. Questions involving the representation of the Holocaust have become more and more central to my research. In my current book project, I build on my earlier discussions of Adorno and Brecht to examine how the Holocaust has altered our reception and perception of tragedy.

This year, I became an affiliate faculty member of the Program in Jewish Studies, and I am thrilled to be a part of this dynamic and interdisciplinary

group. This semester, I am co-teaching an upper-level seminar, Holocaust Memory in Modern Germany, with my colleague Melissa Weininger, the Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish Studies. This course traces and examines forms of Holocaust memory and memorialization in film, literature, art, architecture, city planning, museums and monuments in Germany. As part of the course, we traveled to Berlin, where students explored the ways in which Holocaust memory has been and is currently being preserved in the German capital. Through this course and others, the Program in Jewish Studies has offered me the opportunity to put my research to use in a way that really benefits Rice students in the classroom. ■



Astrid Oesmann

# Holocaust Memory in Berlin

By Allison Burns '16

## “Aryan and Jewish children are not allowed to play together. 1938”

We are standing in front of a playground in the Bavarian quarter of Berlin. The neighborhood is serene. At first glance, the pastel-colored houses and little shops lining the street give no indication that this neighborhood has a dark past. Yet a closer look shows signs affixed to lampposts, telling the difficult truth. Just 80 years ago, this neighborhood's thriving Jewish community was systematically isolated, deported and murdered. As we walk through the neighborhood, the signs unveil detail after detail of the anti-Semitism that was so integrated into daily life.

We read: “Jews are not allowed to use public transportation” in front of a busy subway station; “Jews are only allowed to buy groceries between 4 and 5 p.m.” by a line of shops; and “Baptism and conversion have no bearing on questions of race” across from a red brick church.

Berlin is a city in the midst of “Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung” — working through the past. For decades, Berlin tried to cover up and move on from its past, but now we encounter details of Berlin's history on every step of our weeklong experience. “Stolpersteine,” small plaques honoring Holocaust victims, are embedded in the cobblestones at our feet. A double line of bricks runs through tram stops and shopping

complexes, testifying that the Berlin Wall once divided these busy areas. After enjoying lattes at a university café, we brave the frigid outdoors to examine a memorial of a Nazi book burning that took place on that very spot. Berlin has layer upon layer of history integrated into the daily lives of its citizens.

As part of the spring course Holocaust Memory in Modern Germany, taught by Astrid Oesmann and Melissa Weininger, I, along with 15 other students, was able to personally experience the various strata of Berlin's history during a tour of the city.

After seven weeks learning about both sites in and around Berlin and the history and theory of memorialization, we were able to apply our classroom knowledge as we visited the places we knew only from photos and books. Coming into contact with the monuments, museums and landscapes we had read and heard about, added another dimension to the classroom experience, giving us a unique perspective on the material we studied.

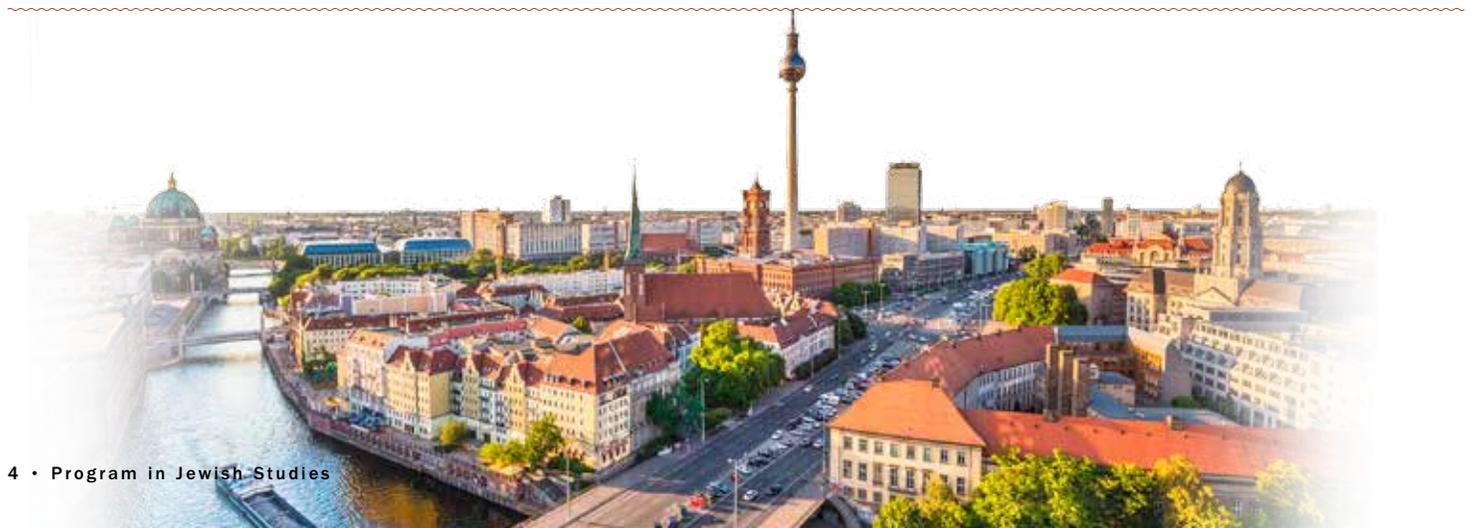
I loved getting to know the Berlin of 2016, full of Soviet concrete apartments and 18th-century architecture, buildings peppered with bullet holes and Holocaust memorials embedded in the cobblestones. Berlin is a city steeped in history,



Rice students display a Rice flag in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin in March 2016.

but not frozen in time. Every time we took the S-Bahn through the city, we would see countless cranes, rebuilding and reshaping the city. From the glittering dome of the Reichstag, made of glass to symbolize a transparent government, to the “Stolpersteine” at our feet, we experienced a city working through its dark past to build a brighter future. ■

**Berlin is a city in the midst of “Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung” — working through the past.**





**Berlin has layer upon layer of history integrated into the daily lives of its citizens.**



**Stolpersteine:** Small plaques honoring Holocaust victims, embedded in the cobblestones. Photo: graphia/shutterstock.com.

## Student Profiles



### Colton Cox '18

Sociology and Policy Studies Major  
Jewish Studies Minor  
Houston, Texas

“During my time at Rice, I have grown to cherish the Program in Jewish Studies for two specific reasons: commitment to students and academic breadth. Regarding

the first point, all of the Jewish studies professors whom I have met have been personally invested in creating an innovative and engaging academic environment. I traveled to Jerusalem for a Jewish studies course during my freshman year, and both professors who accompanied us really helped make the classroom come to life.

As a non-Jewish student in the program, I can truly say that professors in the Program in Jewish Studies present Jewish history and culture in a way that is fascinating for students from all backgrounds. Jewish studies courses are also unique in that they span the humanities and the social sciences. Through these courses, I have enjoyed gaining both a historical and a very relevant modern perspective on Jewish life.”



### Rachel Landsman '16

History and Visual and Dramatic Arts Major  
Politics, Law and Social Thought Minor  
Buffalo Grove, Ill.

“The Program in Jewish Studies has allowed me to broaden my academic horizons and under-

stand my own religious and cultural tradition in new ways. The program's small seminar-style classes have given me the opportunity to build close relationships with my professors and classmates, and those relationships have greatly enriched my learning experience.

In a class offered by the program, I was able to travel to Jerusalem, which was one of the major highlights of my undergraduate career. The courses I've taken in Jewish studies are not required for my major, nor are they directly related to my future career. Yet what I've learned and experienced through the Program in Jewish Studies has been one of the most valuable parts of my Rice education, and has helped me to grow personally and intellectually. Many years from now, when I look back on my four years at Rice, I know that my participation in the Program in Jewish Studies will stand out as something that both challenged and changed me.”

*Rachel is the recipient of this year's Morris and Shirley Rapoport Award in Jewish Studies, given to a Rice undergraduate student who has demonstrated exemplary achievement and dedication in Jewish studies courses.* ■

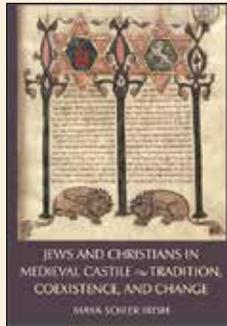
## Faculty Accomplishments

**Daniel Cohen**, associate professor of history, was invited to give a lecture in March at the Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, Birkbeck, University of London, where he gave a talk titled, "A Second Emancipation? 'Philosemitism' in Postwar European History." He also recently gave the keynote address at a conference at the West Virginia University College of Law, titled, "Europe's Refugee Crisis in Historical Perspective," and published the article "Birth of a Nation: Displaced Persons in Postwar Europe" in an anthology on demographic changes after World War II.

Stanford and Joan Alexander Postdoctoral Fellow in Jewish studies **Joshua Furman** recently delivered a public lecture titled "Justice Shall You Pursue: Interfaith and Interracial Cooperation in American Jewish History," at the Jewish Community Center in San Antonio. He also was invited to present a workshop on representations of diaspora Jewish life in American Jewish children's magazines at a conference on Jewish peoplehood at Philadelphia's National Museum of American Jewish History in April. And he has contributed chapters to two anthologies, due out in 2016: "Jewish Education Begins at Home": Training Parents to Raise American Jewish Children After World War II," in "Mishpachah: The Jewish Family in Tradition and in Transition" and "Across the Ocean and Across Town: Migration and Mobility in American Jewish History," in "Interpreting American Jewish History at Museums and Historic Sites."

Director of the Program in Jewish Studies and the Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies **Matthias Henze** recently published the chapter, "King Manasseh of Judah in Early Jewish and Christian Literature," in "On Prophets, Warriors, and Kings: Former and Latter Prophets Through the Eyes of Their Interpreters." At last year's Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in Atlanta, he presented the paper, "Undoing the Hegemony of the Bible? A Reconsideration of the Relationship Between Canonical and Extra-Canonical Texts in Early

Judaism." And for August and September 2016, Henze was invited to be the Mandelbaum Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Sydney in Sydney, Australia.



Assistant professor of history **Maya Soifer Irish** will see the publication of her first book, "Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile: Tradition, Coexistence, and Change." She

also was recently invited to participate in an interdisciplinary workshop, The Medieval Roots of Anti-Semitism, by The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm. In December, Houston's Jewish Herald-Voice ran an article on her undergraduate course, Coexistence in Medieval Spain.

New addition to the Jewish studies faculty **Astrid Oesmann**, associate professor of German, recently published "Sebald's Melancholic Method: Writing as Ethical Memory in Austerlitz" in the journal Monatshefte and "Tragedy Out of Joint: Bertolt Brecht's and Heiner Müller's Interaction with a Genre" in The Brecht Yearbook. In January, she presented a paper, Adorno's Bilderverbot and Brecht's Gestural Theater, at the 2016 Modern Language Association meeting in Austin, Texas.

**Brian Ogren**, assistant professor of religion, is finishing a yearlong fellowship at Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence, Italy. This year, he gave two invited talks: the first at the conference, Universalism and Particularism in Judaism, in honor of the 70th birthday of the Chief Rabbi of Florence; and the second at the International Studies Institute of Florence.

Anna Smith Fine Postdoctoral Fellow in Jewish studies **Yehuda Sharim** was recently appointed a Kinder Institute Scholar at the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice. In December, he

was an invited speaker at the Varieties of Transnational Institutions Conference at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Duisburg, Germany, where he spoke about "Houston in Motion: Alternative Visions of Migration in Houston." And he has a chapter titled, "Masculinity and War in Contemporary Israeli Culture" forthcoming in the book "Choreographies of 21st Century War."

Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish studies **Melissa Weininger** was invited to present a paper titled, "Language Politics: Diaspora and Homeland in Contemporary Israeli Literature," at the conference Journey Between Foreign Languages in Israeli Literature held at Bar-Ilan University in November. In December, she organized a panel, New Voices in Israeli Culture, at the Association for Jewish Studies conference. She also recently published the article, "Hebrew in English: The New Transnational Hebrew Literature," in a special issue of the journal Shofar dedicated to contemporary Israeli literature.

**Klaus Weissenberger**, professor of German, recently published the chapter "Stefan Zweig's Nonfictional Prose in Exile: Mastery of the European Genre of 'Kunstprosa'" in the book "Stefan Zweig and World Literature: Twenty-First Century Perspectives." Last year, he also gave a talk on Kafka as a modern writer for the Houston-Leipzig Sister City Association.

David and Caroline Minter Professor of Humanities and professor of art history **Diane Wolfthal** was one of this year's recipients of a National Jewish Book Award in the visual arts category for the anthology "Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink," in which she published an article titled "A Yiddish Minhagim Manuscript." She also has an article forthcoming in the journal Gesta titled, "Complicating Medieval Anti-Semitism: The Role of Class in Two Tales of Christian Violence Against Jews." ■

# Donor Spotlight: Max and Deisi Blankfeld

By **Melissa Weininger**

**Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish Studies**

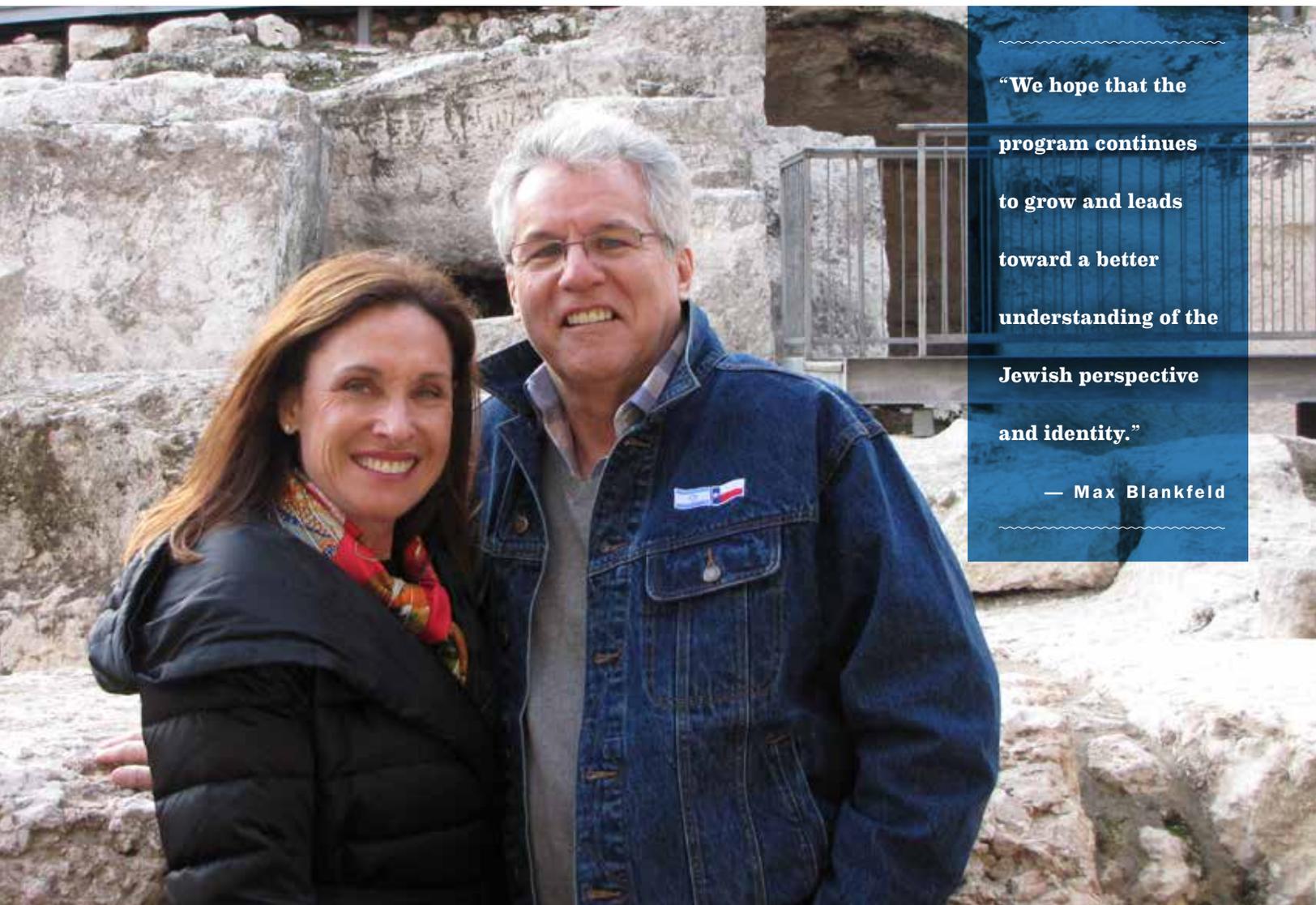
Max and Deisi Blankfeld owe their involvement in Rice's Program in Jewish Studies to a bit of luck. In December 2008, Max was traveling abroad when he received an email from advisory board member Melvin Dow '48 notifying him of an upcoming meeting at the home of Rice President David Leebron to discuss the establishment of a Program in Jewish Studies at Rice. The invitation had come by snail mail, and because the Blankfelds were traveling they had not received it. But as soon as they learned of the meeting, scheduled for the day after their return, they said, "We went to that event predisposed to support the program. What we heard at David Leebron's home definitely gave us the sense that it would be an important initiative compatible with our values."

Max and Deisi, who grew up in Brazil, became connected with Rice when they moved to Houston for professional reasons in 1991. Max, interested in learning more about the American approach to business, enrolled at the Jones Graduate School of Business, from which he eventually received

his MBA in 1995. As a graduate of Rice, Max is keenly aware of the importance of having a Program in Jewish Studies at the university. As he puts it: "On one hand it is important for the Jewish student community to continue and advance their Jewish education and connection to Israel while they are in college, and on the other hand, it's no less important to make all of the above open for the entire body of students as it helps them better understand our history and culture."

To further those goals, the Blankfelds established the Max and Desirée Blankfeld Endowed Fund for Jewish Studies, which offers fellowships to assist students who want to pursue a special project or course of study in Jewish studies, whether in the U.S. or abroad. The Blankfelds note that the reports written by winners of the fellowship "make us very proud to be part of the program."

The Blankfelds look forward to their continued involvement with the Program in Jewish Studies, and they "hope that the program continues to grow and leads toward a better understanding of the Jewish perspective and identity — both religious and national — in the realm of the wide community of peoples and nations." ■



"We hope that the program continues to grow and leads toward a better understanding of the Jewish perspective and identity."

— Max Blankfeld

Max and Deisi Blankfeld

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