



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

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Director's Note



Photograph by Jeff Fitlow

Dear Friends of Rice Jewish Studies,

From August 2021 to July 2022, I had the rare opportunity to take a full year off from teaching in order to fully devote myself to my research and writing. Rice is a top research university and in order to do research in the humanities and to stay active as scholars, we don't need labs or expensive equipment.

Our most precious commodity is time — time to read broadly, to think, to travel and to write. All of this takes time, which is why these sabbaticals are so essential for my colleagues and me to stay at the top of our game.

During the fall 2021 semester, I had a regular sabbatical, which I spent here in Houston, working at home. I always pursue multiple research projects at the same time. Of these, my main and by far most time-consuming current writing project is to produce a critical commentary on an ancient Jewish text known as 2 Baruch. Writing a commentary means to produce a new translation of the ancient text and then to go through it line by line, word by word and to comment on its language, literary form, theological significance, and place in early Jewish literature and thought.

For the spring 2022 semester, I was fortunate to have been invited to be a visiting professor at the University of Tübingen, one of Germany's leading universities, as the Martin Hengel fellow. (Martin Hengel, after whom the fellowship is named, was an internationally renowned scholar of ancient Judaism.) For four months, my wife and I lived in the heart of the beautiful town of Tübingen in Southern Germany. I had no teaching obligations but participated in some higher level reading groups and enjoyed spending some time getting to know my colleagues there and to discuss our work.

As much as I enjoyed the luxury of spending an entire year on my research, I missed my brilliant Rice students. So I was very glad to return to our campus in August. This is an exceptional

time to be at Rice. Students and faculty alike are excited to be back in the classroom together, with almost no COVID restrictions. How we have missed each other's company!

Rice is in the midst of a number of significant changes that will continue to better our university. In October, the Rice community celebrated the inauguration of the university's new president, Reginald DesRoches. Welcome, President DesRoches! In addition, at the beginning of the semester we also welcomed Amy Dittmar, Rice's new provost; Paul Cherukuri, vice president for innovation; Kelly Fox, vice president for finance and administration; Ramamoorthy Ramesh, vice president for research; Omar Syed, Rice's new general counsel; and Alex Alven-dia-Wienkers, director of admission. In addition to these changes in upper administration, Rice has ambitious plans to further increase the number of our undergraduate students and, as President DesRoches announced during his inauguration speech, to hire 200 new faculty over the next five years.

Rice continues to go from strength to strength. With all of these administrative additions and the growth of our university, it has never been more important to have a strong and vibrant Jewish studies program. In this edition of our newsletter, you will read about some of the amazing student projects, current and former. The theme of this edition is travel, which is such an important component of everything we do. On behalf of our students and all of my colleagues, many thanks for your interest and support.

With kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthias Henze". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name and last name clearly distinguishable.

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

On the Road Again: Travel and the Houston Jewish History Archive

Sometimes you have to leave Texas to find traces of its Jewish history, which can turn up almost anywhere. Joshua Furman, founder and curator of the Houston Jewish History Archive, takes us with him on some of his recent travels in search of archival treasures.

By Joshua Furman

**Associate Director and Lecturer,
Program in Jewish Studies
Curator, Houston Jewish History
Archive**



Joshua Furman

Every so often, the pursuit of Texas Jewish history leads me to travel beyond the Lone Star State. I once flew to North Carolina and back to Houston on the same day — Labor Day 2019 — in order to visit with

the daughter of Ruth Hutton Fred, a former Jewish Family Service executive director, and bring some of Fred's papers and recordings back to Fondren Library for preservation. There is a signed letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Ruth in the collection, dated November 1952, declining an invitation to come to Houston to speak. Even more exciting than that gem, however, is a collection of audio cassette recordings of "Ask Ruth," the call-in advice show that aired on radio station KTRH in Houston from the 1960s into the 1970s. We have digitized a few of these episodes, including one featuring special guest Dr. Joyce Brothers, ensuring that they will endure for years to come.

A quick trip to Denver in spring 2021 yielded another wonderful find: the scrapbooks of Ethel Bloomfield, who graduated from Rice in 1940 and worked as an editor for the *Thresher* and a campus correspondent for the *Houston Chronicle*. From Bloomfield's articles about student life at what was then still called the Rice Insti-

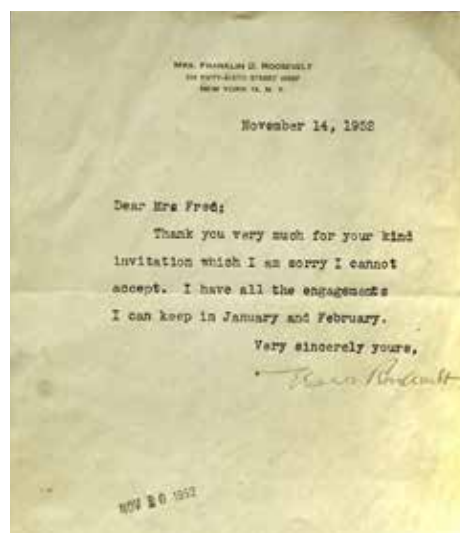
tute, we learn that arrangements were made to accommodate Jewish students in fall 1939, as the date for registering for classes fell on a Thursday, which was the first day of Rosh Hashanah that year. Instead, Jewish students could elect to register on Friday or the following Monday, the first day of classes. I think it is far less likely that a non-Jewish journalist in 1939 would have bothered to note how the High Holidays impacted Jewish students at Rice. We are grateful to Bloomfield for recording this information for posterity, and to her granddaughter for donating this wonderful scrapbook to the Houston Jewish History Archive.

Sometimes, travel on behalf of the archive isn't about building our collections, but about building bridges to other institutions in the field of Southern Jewish history. In August 2021, I had the pleasure of visiting the new Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in New Orleans. My wife, Alisha, and I met with Kenneth Hoffman, the museum's executive director, and Anna Tucker, then the museum's curator, to talk about the ups and downs of building a new museum during the pandemic. I worked closely with Hoffman and Tucker in the many

months before the museum opened, consulting on exhibit text and assisting them with the acquisition of photographs and artifacts, including a steamer trunk from a Galveston Movement immigrant that our very own Paula Sanders, the Joseph and Joanna Nazro Mullen Professor in Humanities and former director of the Boniuk Institute for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance, first alerted me to.

It is vitally important for our Program in Jewish Studies and the Houston Jewish History Archive to have strong ties to other institutions in the region doing similar work, so that we can share best practices, collaborate on projects, and advocate together for the greater cause of documenting and preserving Jewish history across the American South. (If you missed my interview with Kenneth Hoffman for *Branches*, take a look at the fall 2021 issue.)

Wherever you are reading this issue, if you have family ties to South Texas and have documents, photographs or artifacts to donate, please reach out to me at 713-348-3418 or JF36@rice.edu. I am looking forward to being on the road and in the air to pursue new collections in 2023. ■



Left: A signed letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Ruth Fred, dated November 1952. Right: From the scrapbooks of Ethel Bloomfield '40, who worked as a *Thresher* editor and campus correspondent for the *Houston Chronicle*.



Returning to Rice: Chetana Cates Joins the Jewish Studies Program

By Joshua Furman

FURMAN: So, Chetana, I've had the pleasure of working with you for a little over a month now and I'm excited for the rest of our Jewish studies community to get to know you better. Tell us a little bit about your family history and where you grew up?

CATES: I was born in Kathmandu, Nepal, and lived there until I was 14 years old and moved to the United States. My dad is one of 10 and my mom is one of six, so I grew up with lots of aunts and uncles, cousins and second cousins. Most winters, when we had school vacations, some of my aunts and uncles, along with their kids, would join my family and we would all go to the countryside in southern Nepal where we had a farm. That was the best part of my childhood, the vacations with aunts and uncles and so many cousins.

Around the mid-1990s, a Maoist/Communist movement started in Nepal. In the beginning, before 1996, it had very few members and mainly focused its activities in the countryside. As the movement gained momentum, social, political and economic conditions in Nepal started to deteriorate. My mom, whose sister lived in the U.S., suggested the idea of our family moving until conditions got better, but my dad was against the idea. However, he was finally convinced to move and send for my brother and me when they were settled. What started as a temporary move, became a permanent stay. Well



Chetana Cates

maybe not permanent, my dad plans to move back when he retires.

FURMAN: And how did your family end up in Houston?

CATES: My parents came to the U.S. a couple of years before my brother and I did. They ended up in Bellevue, Nebraska, where my dad was working on a master's degree at a university there. So that's where my brother and I lived first. None of us enjoyed Nebraska's very cold winters, so eventually we moved to Houston, where my mom's sister lived with her family.

FURMAN: And is there a significant community of Nepalese people here?

CATES: When we moved here, it was a very small community — maybe around a 100 or so people. But now there is a much larger community. It's in the thousands. There is also a large number of ethnically Nepali refugees from Bhutan who have been resettled in the Greater Houston area by the U.S. government.

FURMAN: Was there a culture shock for your family coming to Texas from Nepal?

CATES: The culture shock was in Nebraska. Almost everything there intimidated my brother and me. We'd learned to read and write English at school in Nepal, but having an actual conversation was a bit difficult. We looked and sounded different from most of the people at our schools so making friends was a challenge.

Moving to Houston was a pleasant experience. My aunt had been living in Houston for a while so it was very nice to be with family again. The schools we attended were quite diverse and we didn't have as much trouble fitting in. Also, like the weather, people seemed warm and easy-going. So, Houston has been a very good home for us over the past two decades.

FURMAN: I'm struck by the similarities between your family's story and the story of so many of the Jewish families who came to Texas, fleeing difficult political and economic situations in Europe and elsewhere. What did you study at the University of Houston?

CATES: My major was political science, with a focus on Latin America, and my minor was economics. Simultaneously,

I worked full time at one job and seasonally at another to put myself through college. At times, my grades suffered, but the professors at UH were very supportive and encouraging. I'm very grateful to them.

FURMAN: And then what was your path to first coming to work at Rice at the Baker Institute?

CATES: After I graduated from college, I worked for about five years, saved enough money to take a year off and return to Nepal. In Nepal, I reconnected with my family and volunteered at small local organizations. I also traveled to India, the United Arab Emirates, Thailand, France and Uruguay during that time. When I returned to Houston, I was interested in working somewhere that allowed me to travel as part of my job. I was lucky enough to get a job at the World Affairs Council. That is where I was introduced to the Baker Institute and the great work they were doing. After five years at the World Affairs Council, I took another year off. This time I traveled to Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines. When I was ready to return to work, I saw an open position at the Baker Institute.

FURMAN: And tell us about what you did for them?

CATES: I started off as an events manager but was interested in working in development. So, when a position opened up in the development department, I applied for it and was selected for the job. Working at the Baker Institute was a great experience. I learned a lot and had the pleasure of working with some of the most brilliant people I've ever met. I'm lucky I get to still count some of them as close friends.

FURMAN: Then, you left the Baker Institute and took some time away from Rice and the working world, correct?

CATES: Yes, I took a couple of years off, again — this time to stay home with my son. He is now at the Rice Children's Campus and I am back at Rice, part time. I get to enjoy extra time with him while he's still young enough to let me smother him with kisses and be excited to see me. I'm very happy to be back at Rice. The community is wonderful and the people I've met and worked with in the last

month have all been very kind, helpful and patient.

FURMAN: What are some things that you find most intriguing or exciting about the program and what are you learning about Judaism and Jewish culture as the program's administrator?

CATES: Though my position as the program administrator here is different from my role at the Baker Institute, some of the processes are similar so I've been able to hit the ground running. I'm also enjoying this opportunity to learn and do something different, especially learning graphic editing software like InDesign and Photoshop.

Regarding Judaism and the Jewish culture, a few days before my first day at work, I borrowed some Great Lecture Series CDs on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible and have been listening to them. I'm also learning a lot about Jewish culture, firsthand, from working with you, meeting students and reading some student reports.

I have always been fascinated by religion and the way religion, culture and geography are intertwined. I'm familiar with the history and practices of Hinduism and Buddhism and am very grateful that now I get to learn much more about Judaism, one of the oldest major religions in the world.

FURMAN: Well, we're grateful about that too and so excited to have you as an integral part of our team. Tell us about some of your favorite hobbies or favorite things to do in Houston.

CATES: There are so many things to do in and around Houston, but my favorite thing, at least for the last few years, has been spending time at Memorial Park with my family and visiting the Menil Collection and the surrounding areas. I love to read, so, on rare occasions when I have the afternoon to myself, I like to go to the Menil, check out new exhibits or revisit old favorites, and then sit under a tree outside and read for a while. Unfortunately, since it gets so hot in the summer it's not always feasible, but when the weather is nice, it's my favorite thing to do. ■

Jewish Studies Student Association Update

By Samuel Raphaelson '24

Rice's Jewish Studies Student Association (JSSA) continues to successfully help students connect with each other and to the Program in Jewish Studies through a variety of experiences, including museum tours, kosher restaurant visits, conversations with the faculty and staff of the Jewish Studies Program, and various other learning opportunities.

The JSSA's September trip to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) was a fun and engaging afternoon. Our group, consisting of several interested students, met at the MFAH café. After eating, we met with an MFAH docent and promptly began our tour of the "Beauty and Ritual: Judaica from the Jewish Museum, New York" exhibit. Our docent, Sally, was extremely knowledgeable of the various artifacts on display, giving us an in-depth analysis of each item's importance to Jewish tradition. There were Torahs; Torah accessories, including covers and pointers; menorahs with both seven and nine branches; paintings and drawings; and other miscellaneous items. One of the most interesting pieces was a set of glass beakers and jars with various dried plants and spices, called a "scent garden." The intention of the scent garden was for patrons to smell the different scents, each with a distinct connection to some part of Jewish tradition, giving the exhibit a second layer of depth beyond viewing the artifacts. Sally led us through the entire exhibit, pointing out historical significance and other interesting tidbits about each item. The tour was an awesome success that sets a precedent for future JSSA trips. ■



Above: MFAH docent shows JSSA members around the "Beauty and Ritual: Judaica From the Jewish Museum, New York" exhibit. Below: JSSA members pose for a picture at the entrance to the exhibit.

A Summer in Tel Aviv: The ‘Startup Nation’

By Rachel Rosenthal '25

My name is Rachel Rosenthal. Originally from Cleveland Ohio, I am a sophomore at Rice, and this past summer I had the opportunity to be a part of Tel Aviv University's summer internship program.

The program was organized in such a way that students could simultaneously work at an Israeli company and immerse themselves in one of the most innovative and dynamic cities in the world. Each person was matched to an internship and there was also an academic aspect that included a weekly class on Sunday called Foundations of Entrepreneurship taught by two Tel Aviv University professors.

I was an intern at Chatbot Summit, a tech/artificial intelligence company, working as their content writer. Chatbot Summit holds one of the world's leading international conferences and networks helping to accelerate the adoption of Conversational AI in the market toward a world where billions of people are using bots to improve their daily lives. I was working under Dina Paulson, head of content strategy, who was an extremely nurturing, interesting and inspiring leader. Me and one other college student, Talia, who was also in Tel Aviv's summer internship program, had weekly assignments and daily meetings. Once a week, we had a team meeting with the entire staff and one-on-one meetings with Dina. These meetings were a great opportunity to see the inner workings of a small company that does important work all around the world. The various tasks assigned to me included, summarizing their previous keynote speakers, writing creative pieces

about AI and working on collaborative projects with my fellow intern. Coming into the summer, I was a bit nervous to be writing about tech and AI — a topic that I really knew nothing about prior to joining. Talia had the same concerns so we made sure to do proper research prior to completing our writing which only aided in our understanding of this field. The internship was a great way to exercise my writing, networking and research skills. It definitely made me more interested in the tech field — an area I believed to be very unapproachable before — and specifically made me interested in joining the user experience side of tech. It was also interesting to be working with Chatbot at such an important time in their business' journey; as a company with a focus on large, in-person events, COVID definitely rocked their world. Joining at a time when COVID is not as much of a threat showed me how a small company had to adapt and turn their business model upside down. Their persistence and creativity was very admirable and are qualities that I intend to implement in my future.

The weekly class every intern participated in provided an overview of the landscape of the “startup nation” that is Tel Aviv. The professors had both started their careers working in startups and then moved to academia. We also had various guest speakers come to the class and present on their companies and startups that they built. Our final assignment was to do an in-depth presentation on an Israeli startup of our choice. Between both the internship and the class, I feel like I gained a valuable, educational experience that mimicked something I may be doing in the future.

Another important aspect of the summer was, of course, exploring the city of Tel Aviv and all of Israel. Having been to Israel a few times before, I was ecstatic to be going back to a city full of enthusiasm, intensity, beauty and history. One of my favorite parts of the summer was experiencing the coffee culture and doing work at a new shop every day.

Going to the beach on the weekends was amazing as they were bustling with people because so much of the city is shut down during Shabbat. I also explored Haifa, a mixed city where Israelis and Arabs are living in harmony, and saw the Bahá'í Gardens. ■

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The Little Prince Bookshop, an amazing coffee shop where I spent many afternoons working.



The Bahá'í Gardens



I also made a few day trips to Jerusalem, spending time at the Kotel, the Western Wall, and seeing the bustling Machaneh Yehudah Market.



"Woman Fish" (1962) by artist Marc Chagall, Tel Aviv Museum of Art



Eating at The Old Man and the Sea, a legendary Jaffa spot overlooking the port. Their specialty is 18 different types of salads.

Celebrating Our Jewish Studies Minors: Marykathryn Charles '22

This semester we celebrate Marykathryn “MK” Charles as she prepares to graduate and complete the requirements of the minor in Jewish studies. MK shared with us some of her reasons for pursuing Jewish studies and how the program has influenced her time at Rice.



Marykathryn Charles '22

Hometown: Corpus Christi, Texas

Major: Neuroscience

Minor: Jewish studies

Residential College: Lovett

Academic interest — What drew you to Jewish studies at Rice?

I was drawn to Jewish studies because of how uneducated I was about Judaism as a whole. I came into Rice as a Christian from a majority Christian city, so I was drawn to get to know this “sister” religion that was discussed so often but I knew next to nothing about. I also thought it would be really cool to learn Hebrew.

Favorite class in Jewish studies — What was the most memorable class you took and why?

I immensely enjoyed every Jewish studies class I took, so it's hard to choose just one favorite. The most memorable class I took, though, was Becoming Americans (JWST 338) with Professor Furman. We went to New York City over Spring Break, which is an experience I'll never forget.

Influence — How has the Program in Jewish Studies shaped your time at Rice and what impact might it have moving forward?

This program has given me so much: a nuanced understanding of race and ethnicity, a deeper awareness of how people build an identity and a broader conception of the world through the lens of a variety of different cultures.

Future plans — What's next for you?

I'm not entirely sure what's next for me, but I plan to take a year off to figure out what field I want to go into and then apply to a related graduate program. ■

Reflections

By Peachy Rudberg

Peachy Rudberg reflects on her late husband, Morton “Morty” Rudberg, a Rice graduate and supporter of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies.

My late husband, Morton “Morty” Rudberg graduated from Rice in 1954 with a major in accounting. After Rice, he attended the University of Texas Law School. Morty was a reserved person, mostly quiet, but a very good listener. Whenever he had something to contribute, the conversation often halted and all were eager to listen to his comments and learn about his views. Morty loved the arts and the opera in particular. Often, when he heard the first couple of notes of a piece of classical music, he could immediately identify the composer and the name of the piece. He also enjoyed going to various art museums. Most of all, he loved reading and was a lifelong learner.

One might call Morty a Renaissance man. He took up flying late in his life and piloted his own plane and also enjoyed skiing, sailing and playing tennis.

Always a big supporter of Israel, Morty was intrigued to learn about the creation of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies. He felt strongly that there was a real need at Rice for such a program. As soon as the program was established, Morty became one of its early supporters.

It is my great pleasure to continue to support the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University. I know Morty would be doing the same. ■



Morton “Morty” Rudberg '54

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Always a big supporter of Israel, Morty was intrigued to learn about the creation of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies. He felt strongly that there was a real need at Rice for such a program.  
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How Rice Jewish Studies Shaped My Journey in Academia

By Sparrow Gates '17

In this essay, alum Sparrow Gates '17 describes how her time at Rice as a Jewish studies minor, studying biblical and extrabiblical texts with Professor Matthias Henze, has guided her on an academic journey that has taken her to Jerusalem, Yale and now UCLA. We wish her much continued success!

I often joke that Rice's Jewish studies program knew me before they formed me in the womb that was the start of my career. I dreamed of attending Rice from childhood, and at 15 when I decided I wanted to become an academic and study religion, that dream started to become tangible. I was put in touch with Professor Henze before applying, and when I entered Rice University I took on a full course load of Jewish studies classes — at

professors I worked with in my first few years at Rice have since moved on, but the program allowed me to develop strong working relationships with scholars that I am grateful to say continue to this day.

Thanks to Professor Henze's mentorship, I found my way into a master's program at Yale, where I met my husband, studied with John J. Collins and Joel Baden, and discovered my deep passion for linguistic and identity-based questions within the text. I now find myself studying with Professor Schniedewind and Professor Bonesho in UCLA's Department of Near Eastern Language and Culture, where I consider myself lucky to be a teaching assistant for a class very similar to one I got to take at Rice: Jerusalem: The Holy City. My students won't get to travel for the course like us lucky Rice kids, but I have a unique and grounded perspective on both the history, the scholarship and the lived experience of the people there that I hope to pass on to my students as a direct result of my incredible experiences with the Jewish studies program.

This program sent me — and typically helped fund said travel — to Jerusalem

My time in the program was characterized by fast and varied development of a wide range of ideas and methodologies, but also by a number of intentionally built mentor/mentee relationships with brilliant teachers, who inspired me every day to challenge myself and my assumptions.

the beginning, aptly, was Professor Matthias Henze's course, The Book of Genesis. I quickly realized that I not only wanted to study religion, so broadly speaking, but that I was also falling in love with reading Hebrew text and all of the various skills and practices it requires. I took every single such course offered in my time at Rice, and now when I tell my students about this part of my pedigree, I claim being a Jewish studies student before my religious studies major! My experience in the program fundamentally changed the way I view myself, the world and the responsibilities that come with education.

My favorite classes, unsurprisingly now that I am a biblical scholar, were seminars centered on the books of Genesis, Jeremiah and 2nd Baruch. I was fascinated by learning these texts alongside a diverse student group, each of us coming to the text with different backgrounds and ideologies. I was also continuously in awe of the faculty, for whom that never presented a problem. Some of the

for the history, and New York City for yeshiva (an academy for intensive Jewish learning). They encouraged me to study abroad in Vienna and Berlin for yet more history and language and ultimately instilled in me a deep sense of wanderlust and a thirst for knowledge and culture. Simultaneously, I was keenly aware of my goal to become a professor just like Professors Henze and Furman, and I started taking notes from their teaching style and pedagogy that I hope I bring to my own classroom. My time in the program was characterized by fast and varied development of a wide range of ideas and methodologies, but also by a number of intentionally built mentor/mentee relationships with brilliant teachers, who inspired me every day to challenge myself and my assumptions. And it is my honor to now get to turn around and pay it forward to my students, who are currently freshmen at UCLA.

It is hard to believe that I started at Rice nearly a decade ago, but I feel the wide-reaching impacts of my time



L-R: Sparrow Gates '17, former Rice lecturer Melissa Weininger and Jeremy Reiskind '17, graduation day, 2017

with the program every single day. This summer, I was able to get a grant to add Arabic to my tool belt with the intention that someday I will go back to Jerusalem and this time be able to communicate with more people and understand their stories in their native languages. I am one of the lucky few who get to say that I am still doing largely what I got to do in the program; my path has been relatively straightforward, which I have been grateful for in the past few years of global chaos. But I credit Rice's Program in Jewish Studies for helping me figure out what I wanted to do with my life from such an early age, for encouraging me to pursue academia as a first-generation student and for guiding me into the academic I am today. I have spent the past five years fine-tuning what the program taught me, so that hopefully someday I can turn around and do the same for future generations of brilliant minds. ■

‘רק עברית’: My Summer at the Middlebury College School of Hebrew

By Grace Stewart '23

The Middlebury College School of Hebrew has a very specific method by which its students formally take the “language pledge,” a commitment to communicate exclusively in Hebrew for the entirety of its seven-week immersion program.

True to tradition, on July 4, 2022, my cohort of students sat in a circle as one of our teachers instructed us to count down from five and, upon reaching zero, to shout the phrase “רק עברית” (only Hebrew). At the time, I didn’t even know what the word “רק” meant; however, after hours of classes, meals, sports events and other activities conducted exclusively in Hebrew, I began to fully comprehend that phrase.

Some of my classmates were similar to me in that they were historians and students seeking to learn Hebrew for academic reasons; others were motivated by a desire to communicate more effectively with Israeli relatives or to connect to their Judaism in a deeper way. Although my classmates and I were as varied in our levels of speaking proficiency as we were in our motivations for learning Hebrew, I never once felt out of place or that I couldn’t strike up a conversation with anyone, regardless of their level. I was surprised how far simple phrases like “boker tov” (good morning) and “ma nishma” (what’s up) could go, and I felt welcomed by teachers and classmates alike.

The beauty of the language pledge is that I had the opportunity to listen to and speak Hebrew in a variety of settings from student-led Shabbat services; to karaoke nights, featuring Israeli music; to volleyball and soccer games (in which the School of Hebrew always came out victorious against the other language

schools). So my experience speaking and hearing only Hebrew was not limited to the traditional classroom setting. I learned practical, everyday vocabulary that may not have been featured in the textbook, as well as a healthy dose of Israeli slang; in addition to this, however, I also learned more formal Hebrew with my grammar teacher, Esther Shorr, who loves grammar more than anyone I have ever met and passed this love to each of her students.

My favorite moments of the summer were those in which my classmates and I would excitedly turn to each other and say, “אני מבינה/אני מבין!” (I understand!). These moments were frequent thanks to our patient and talented teachers. My time at Middlebury was as rewarding and fulfilling as it was intellectually challenging, and I am incredibly grateful that I had the opportunity to experience a summer of רק עברית. ■



Left: My friends and I (Grace Stewart, middle) on our “graduation” from the program. Above: My classmates and I having a “fashion show” as we learned clothing vocabulary.

Although my classmates and I were as varied in our levels of speaking proficiency as we were in our motivations for learning Hebrew, I never once felt out of place or that I couldn’t strike up a conversation with anyone, regardless of their level.

El Camino Sepharad: Exploring Sephardic Sites in Andalucía

By Sydney Rodman '23

The goal of my trip was to understand the intricate and hidden history of the Sephardic experience and persecution in Spain during the middle ages. I wanted to learn more about the history, landscape, human design and religious/cultural ideas that were shaped by these experiences and how they shaped Jewish history.

My academic objectives were to understand how an adventure focused method of cultural and physical immersion aids in a true understanding and connection to the whole story of Sephardim in Spain. I sought to grasp an understanding of why some of the darkest times in Spain were accompanied with the revolutionary spreading of ideas by Maimonides. I also learned how Christianity and Islam, dominant cultures/religions during different periods, aided in the metaphorical burying of Jewish identity and physical burying of Jewish places.

Day No. 1: Traveling on Tisha B'av

On Aug. 7, 2022, I left unintentionally on Tisha B'av. On this date, among other events, the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492.

Days No. 2–3: Seville

The first Jews settled in Seville and that is where I spent my first night in Spain. 1391, 99 years before the Jews were expelled, was one of the worst antisemitic episodes in Spain, far before officially antisemitic laws were enacted.

On my first day in Seville, to my surprise, I found that there was no Jewish feel or Jewish sites there other than street names in the Jewish Quarter. I found it interesting how the Jewish Quarter would be easy to miss due to the name, Plaza Santa Cruz, a Christian name for the area. After reflecting about my experience a few weeks later and looking at the photos, I realized how important it is to preserve Jewish evidence in Spain. The intentional covering of historic sites with modern construction hides a unique richness to the area. Overall, I have come away from Seville with a newfound appreciation for understanding the history of a place and letting it be known.



Left: Sydney Rodman '23 in Seville, Spain; Right: Sinagoga de Tránsito, one of the three intact synagogues in Toledo, Spain.

Day No. 4: Tangier, Morocco

Morocco is considered to be one of the most friendly Arab countries toward Jews and Israel. I was interested in learning about how current attitudes toward Jews in Morocco were influenced by Jews settling in Morocco after being expelled from Spain. I took a quick ferry and entered Africa for the first time in my life. I was astounded by the Islamic style of buildings. I could see how this classic architectural style was also present in Andalucía, where the Umayyad empire ruled.

Day No. 5: Málaga

Similar to my experience in Seville, I was shocked by how such a historically Jewish place had little remnants of its Jewish history. Málaga, which comes from the Hebrew word for salt, is a beautiful beach town. My Malagueño friend, who I met in Israel, showed me around the city and told me how small the Jewish community in Málaga was. This information confused me, as a quick search on google shows Málaga as one of the top three centers for Jewish life in Spain. Again, I quickly realized how small the Spanish Jewish population was and pondered how important it was to retain the Jewish heritage of a historical site.

Day No. 6: Córdoba

My favorite city in Spain has to be Córdoba because of how unique the streets were. The second the bus arrived in Córdoba, I walked straight to Casa de Sefarad, the Sephardi museum. Something that surprised me was that the museum



had no Jewish staff and the entire city of Córdoba only has a few Jewish families. Across the alleyway was one of the three Spanish synagogues left intact. Unfortunately, it closed at 3 p.m. and I was unable to enter. Fortunately, I found myself in the jewelry store next door and ended up talking with the clerk for 20 minutes about the synagogue.

Day No. 7: Toledo

Last but not least, was the city of Toledo, a UNESCO World Heritage Center. Two of the three intact synagogues are in Toledo — Sinagoga de Tránsito and Sinagoga Santa María la Blanca. For the first time on the trip, the Jewish Quarter was more on the periphery of the city. Because it was less central to Toledan tourism, the Judería was more outwardly Jewish. I spent the last two days of my trip reading and gathering information about the Museo Sefardí (housed in the Sinagoga de Tránsito) and Casa de Sefarad in Córdoba. Thus, I was able to better connect with and relate to the once seemingly daunting flood of historical information.

Overall, being able to visit the places central to the Jewish experience during the Middle Ages, I have come back to the States with a newfound appreciation for historical adventure travel and looking for signs of Jewish history where it is hidden. I am grateful to the Jewish Studies Program at Rice University for this amazing opportunity. ■

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