



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University
Issue 23 • Spring 2023



In This Issue:

Director's Note
By *Matthias Henze*
Page 2

With Gratitude: Six Years of Preserving History, Telling Stories and Changing Lives
By *Joshua Furman*
Page 3

The Value of Archives
By *Amanda Focke*
Page 4

Alumni Reflections
By *Rebecca Topper '19 and Katie Webber '19*
Page 5

Reflections From Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives Interns
By *Sarah Davidson '25 and Grace Stewart '23*
Page 6

Program in Jewish Studies Spring 2023 Highlights
Page 7

Space and Place in Southern Jewish History: Rice Jewish Studies Conference
Page 8

Celebrating Our Jewish Studies Minors
Pages 8-9

On Being Jewish
By *Rabbi Kenny Weiss*
Page 10

A Conversation With J. Kent "Kenny" Friedman
By *Joshua Furman*
Pages 10-11

Director's Note



Dear friends of the Program in Jewish Studies,

We are more than halfway through the spring semester and while COVID-19 is far from over, things at Rice have largely returned to pre-pandemic conditions. This has meant that our Program in Jewish Studies has been able to offer in-person public lectures again — finally! Since January, we have hosted talks on topics ranging from

the Babylonian Talmud to contemporary antisemitism (or, as one of our speakers, Jonathan Judaken, prefers to call it, post-Holocaust Judeophobia). It is heartening to see how well attended our lectures have been, either on Rice's campus or in the community with our partner organizations.

This return to in-person exchanges has positively impacted our archives, too. Thus, we are devoting this edition of *Branches* to the recently renamed Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives. Back in spring 2017, just a few months before Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston, Joshua Furman, who at the time was completing his third and final year as a postdoctoral fellow in the Program in Jewish Studies, and I were beginning a focused discussion about starting a Jewish archive at Rice. The mission of the new archive, as we initially imagined it, was to collect and preserve documents that tell the story of the Jewish experience in Houston. Then Hurricane Harvey hit, and everything changed. What started out as an idea became an urgent imperative, as we watched in horror how countless precious historical documents were ruined in the flood waters. As Joshua keeps reminding us, "If we don't collect and preserve these documents, nobody will."

When Joshua assumed the role of the archives' curator, there were no funds to sustain his role. Fortunately, Joan and Stanford Alexander recognized the urgency and importance of this work from the beginning. Their early and visionary philanthropy continues to inspire many of you to help us with the community effort of building a permanent Jewish archive. As a result, the archives have expanded to include South Texas and become a meaningful collaboration between Rice's Woodson Research Center,

located in Fondren Library, and our Program in Jewish Studies. I would like to thank our colleagues at the Woodson, especially Amanda Focke, head of special collections, for their great enthusiasm and continuous support.

The Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives have become the crown jewel of our program that anchors Rice Jewish studies in the local community. It is important to emphasize that we are an academic institution, not a museum. This has important implications for the work of the archives.

It is our primary mission to collect, preserve and safeguard the legacy of Jews in South Texas. Since we are a research institution, these materials will not only be preserved, they will also form the foundation for academic research. This research is already being done by our own faculty and students, as well as by researchers who come to Rice from other places.

Everything we do in the Program in Jewish Studies benefits our students. The archives are no exception. Students studying Jewish studies at Rice have worked with archival materials to write their research papers. And Joshua has employed many student interns to work in the archives, some of whom have even gone on to pursue further education in library sciences because of their experience working in the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives.

I hope you will consider contributing to our expanded regional efforts. To donate, please follow this link, <https://riceconnect.rice.edu/donation/support-jewish-studies>. If you have documents you would like to donate or if you would like to come to the Rice campus and see the archives for yourself, please contact Joshua Furman at jf36@rice.edu. Thank you and hope to see you very soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthias Henze". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

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

With Gratitude: Six Years of Preserving History, Telling Stories and Changing Lives

By Joshua Furman

There is a Hebrew term, *hakarat ha-tov*, which can be translated as “recognizing the good.” Judaism offers many opportunities for us to engage in this practice of mindful gratitude each day, from the blessings we recite over food and drink, to the moments of sacred time built into the Jewish calendar that encourage us to cease from work and worldly cares in order to appreciate life’s deeper meaning.



Joshua Furman

When we recognize the good in our lives and in our labor, we also recognize that we have not done it alone, but that we have so many people to thank for what they have done to help us along the way.

At a time when we celebrate the renaming of the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, with profound appreciation for the Alexander family’s generous support of our efforts to preserve Jewish history across the region, I am so grateful to so many people who believed in this work, who supported the project from the very beginning, and who continue to make it possible for us to grow and expand our reach.

The first critical ingredient in the success of the archives has been the steadfast support of Rice colleagues. Recognizing my growing interest in local history and eagerness to build bridges between the Program in Jewish Studies and the wider community, Matthias Henze first suggested in early 2017 that we try to develop a project centered around the Texas Jewish past. He then worked to secure critical support from the administration and



our advisory board. In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, when the need to start collecting materials from flooded buildings was urgent, Melissa Kean, Rice’s former centennial historian, jumped in her car and met my wife, Alisha, and I at United Orthodox Synagogues, helping us sort through wet, moldy papers and advising us through archival disaster recovery techniques.

Those endangered materials, and others we recovered at Congregation Beth Yeshurun and elsewhere around Houston, needed a safe and secure home where they would be well cared for and made accessible to students, scholars and the public. We have been so fortunate to have a wonderful partnership in Fondren Library with the Woodson Research Center, first under Lee Pecht and now with Amanda Focke, head of special collections since 2019. They have provided steadfast support and guidance as we have moved to acquire important collections, digitize materials with significant research value and pursue strategic partnerships with other libraries. Day in and day out, the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives is sustained by archivist and special collections librarian Traci Patterson, who is singularly responsible for ensuring that our materials are properly accessioned and organized and that we are following proper protocol in everything we do. I am so thankful to Amanda and Traci for all they have done in nurturing the archives,

especially during these recent pandemic years when so much was in flux.

With generous support from the Edith and Bernard Stolbun Family Foundation, we launched a student internship program for the archives, so that Rice students would have an opportunity to contribute to the work of preserving Texas Jewish history, making their mark on the university and the field, while gaining valuable skills in archival processing, digitization and oral history. The Pryzant and Picus families and the Shirley and David Toomim Family Foundation have also been steadfast supporters of this initiative. I am so proud of all of our interns and even more proud that the experience of working for the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives has inspired several of them to pursue advanced degrees and professional careers in library sciences and history. You will have the pleasure of reading more about their experiences in these pages.

In closing, I would like to thank each one of our donors for enabling this work to continue, and I would like to thank my parents Joseph and Susan Furman, my wife, Alisha, and our children for giving me the inspiration and the motivation to pursue this calling. May the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives carry on, growing from strength to strength in the years ahead. ■

The Value of Archives

By Amanda Focke

In my role as head of special collections at Fondren Library, I have had the pleasure of working with a great variety of archival collections and rare books over the years.

We are open to the public, and our mission is to collect, preserve, and provide access to these rare and unique materials that inspire new histories, new creative works and new ways of looking at our world. My specific role is to guide the development of the collections and to explore new partnerships, such as with the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University, specifically, with Joshua Furman, director of the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives. The Jewish archives collection at Rice University has grown by leaps and bounds since it began in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in 2017. It now numbers 185 collections, including oral histories, scrapbooks, newsletters, family letters, photographs, posters, cookbooks and many other historical formats. These individual slices of life represent so many stories and so many opportunities for these stories to be discovered and included in new scholarship. It is an incredible archive, built in so little time, thanks to the collaborative spirit of all those involved. Furman's many ongoing outreach



Amanda Focke

efforts, via in person visits with families and organizations and online via social media, have raised key awareness of the program.

The real heart and soul of the success of the archives, though, rests in the families and organizations represented. Without their shared vision for our area's Jewish history being told and their trust in Rice University as a safe long-term home for their rare and unique treasures, this archive would not exist. We are truly grateful for their donations of these precious items each of which tell a story and build into a much larger story.

What is the impact of having a publicly accessible archives like this? One powerful example is the way in which local and regional Jewish history can

nationally.

Additionally, a key way of filling in gaps in our knowledge about the Jewish experience in South Texas is the oral history program. It is particularly important to document the memories of those who grew up Jewish in small towns, where few if any Jewish Texans remain today. Interviews with Paula Schwartz Stein (Schulenburg), Baruch Schmidt (New Braunfels) and Larry Wadler (Wharton) are critical sources of information about this aspect of Texas Jewish history.

In addition to researchers being inspired by these collections, student interns and volunteers gain a deep appreciation for the value of these materials. They will see their own family artifacts in a new light, and they will value their stories

The real heart and soul of the success of the archives, though, rests in the families and organizations represented. Without their shared vision for our area's Jewish history being told and their trust in Rice University as a safe long-term home for their rare and unique treasures, this archive would not exist. We are truly grateful for their donations of these precious items each of which tell a story and build into a much larger story.

now be included in broader narratives. As an illustration of this point, a forthcoming book, "Exploring American Jewish History Through 50 Historic Treasures," will feature a picture of the Beth Jacob World War II banner in its discussion of American Jewish military service. Accessible archives are the building blocks of history books. The Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives are highly visible to anyone interested in Jewish life in this area of Texas, with a simple web search, and increasingly, by word of mouth. We also post detailed guides to the collections online.

We raise awareness and provide access to the original materials in a number of ways, including our reading room in the library building, but also online — a need made even more critical by the recent pandemic. With funding provided by the Council on Library and Information Resources' Digitizing Hidden Collections grant program, we have digitized over 2,500 archival items and made them available publicly online via the University of North Texas Portal to Texas History. This portal, sharing statewide resources, is also a hub of the Digital Public Library of America, which expands our reach

with a more keen ear. The Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives is already having a major impact on research opportunities and community relationships, and we gratefully look forward to what the next five, 10, 20 years and beyond will bring. ■

By Rebecca Topper '19

Having graduated more than three years ago, I can confidently say that my Jewish studies experiences at Rice were some of my most impactful undergraduate experiences. My time with the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives was especially influential, as I was introduced to library science and enjoyed my work at the archive.

There were a lot of elements of the job I enjoyed; lifting old tape whose adhesive had disintegrated and removing rusty staples were tasks I found particularly satisfying. More than the basic tasks of protecting the artifacts, I also enjoyed the measured organizational task of the work — labeling the folders and sorting the material, first by category and then by date. Most of the collections that I worked with were donated by families. Sorting their materials meant sifting through pictures, newspaper clippings, and pamphlets that someone and, oftentimes, someone's children and grandchildren, had determined were important enough to hold onto. Opening a box or bag of archival material meant being trusted with a part of someone's legacy.

In the time it took me to completely process a collection, I was often familiar with at least a couple of generations of family members' names; on more complex collections, I drew family

trees to help understand family relationships. The last step of processing the collection was to create the finding aid. During this process, I would write a brief biographical sketch of the individual or family represented by the collection. I used everything I knew about the family and a helpful archivist's Ancestry account to list important dates and places to process the collection and make it accessible to researchers. I hoped that my work would allow

someone else to experience

the collection in a way that I had too — getting to know a family and their impact on the Houston Jewish community.

Beyond the work itself, which I obviously enjoyed, the archive was the first place I worked where I felt valued. I developed relationships with the other archivists and student workers and felt that I had a group of people who appreciated and enjoyed working with me. I am not the first Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives alumna to pursue a degree in library science, and I am confident I will not be the last. While my library science interests lean more toward youth librarianship, the reality of library work and the joy I first found in it at the archives gave me the confidence to pursue my interests further. ■



Rebecca Topper '19

By Katie Webber '19

I started working at the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, formerly known as the Houston Jewish History Archive, in 2018 when I was a student at Rice University. I had no experience in archives, but I was passionately interested in local Jewish history and was enrolled in a course specifically about Houston Jewish history. Working in the Woodson made me realize the importance of archives and how they can preserve diverse perspectives in and about a community.

One of the most important elements of an archive is how much it can reveal about a particular moment in history, including how individuals responded to historical moments and big changes. While I was working with the Congregation Beth Yeshurun collection, I found some of the ballots and the tally counts from a vote on women's participation in religious services and whether they would count in a minyan. These ballots were signed by congregants and some married couples even chose to split their vote with each spouse getting one half of a vote toward their choice. While we previously knew the outcome of this vote, these ballots revealed how people felt about the vote in a way that's not otherwise apparent in just the fact that the ballot measures passed.

Some of the most memorable and impactful work I completed at the archives were the oral histories I conducted with members of Houston's Jewish community. These oral histories capture individuals' experiences of Jewish life in the area. These oral histories also highlight so much diversity within the community and feature individuals who are engaged with Judaism and Jewish life in myriad ways. Yiddishists, religious leaders, Jews-by-choice, activists and more make up the tapestry of Jewish life in Texas, and the archives oral history collection allows their stories to be preserved in their own words. Oral histories can reveal experiences which can be hidden in institutional records and help fill the gaps in the historical record.

Currently, I am completing my last semester of a Master of Science in Library and Information Science with a concentration on archives management at Simmons University. All of my experiences at the Woodson and the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives led me to the decision to become an archivist, especially with the support of the curator, Joshua Furman, and archivist, Traci Patterson. I am overjoyed to be going into a field where my work can illuminate diverse perspectives and make history accessible. ■



Katie Webber '19

Reflections From Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives Interns

By Sarah Davidson '25



Sarah Davidson '25

I am a student intern at the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, formerly known as the Houston Jewish History Archive. Since I'm interested in Jewish history and museum studies, working at the archive was the perfect fit for me.

At the beginning of my freshman year, I started off by editing oral history transcripts — and now, as a second-semester sophomore, I conduct oral histories. The highlight of last semester was interviewing local politician Ellen Cohen, my first in-person

oral history. Our face-to-face meeting helped us develop a special connection that would have been impossible just with Zoom interviews. I had the opportunity to talk to her about our shared Jewish values and the ways they led us into social justice activism. The experience helped me clarify my desire to incorporate political activism into my life and future career.

As a Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives intern, I also process, sort and digitize archives of Jewish life in Houston. I'm fascinated by all the historical items, which have included original copies of newspaper articles from the 1960s, immigration papers from the 1910s and even doctors' records from the 19th century, because they give me insight into the everyday life of Houston's Jewish community. I once read a touching letter from a father to his son, who was attending Jewish summer camp; he just wanted to express how much he missed the boy. Photos, programs and books bore witness to moments of love and happiness, like bat mitzvahs, graduations and holiday celebrations. I even immersed myself in the growth of a congregation from a small group of founders to a community of hundreds of participants, simply by reading the meeting agendas of the executive board. Archiving connects me to the generations that have lived before me and serves as a reminder that every single emotion I've felt — grief and anger, joy and delight — has been experienced by other people across time and space.

My work at the archives has played a large factor in my decision to go into archiving and/or museum studies. I have deeply enjoyed honing my historical research skills and advancing my knowledge of digital archival resources. I also think more deeply now about how we think and imagine the past; I consider what items should — or shouldn't — be preserved, and I've learned how to use nontraditional historical methods, like oral histories. I've realized the importance of preservation, especially in Houston, where natural disasters have the potential to destroy unique and important historical documents.

I believe that working at the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives provides an excellent opportunity for anyone interested in Jewish culture and history and wishes to understand their Jewish heritage. Additionally, aspiring scholars who want to be part of a project are able to turn memories and old documents into historical records unique to the Houston community. ■

By Grace Stewart '23



Grace Stewart '23

As my internship at the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives comes to a close with my upcoming graduation from Rice, I appreciate the opportunity to reflect on the two years I have spent learning and working here.

I spent my first year at the archives editing and conducting oral histories, where I interviewed members of the Jewish community about their experiences in South Texas. One of the most important things I have learned as a history major at Rice (and during

my time at the archives) is that history is about ordinary people; while we are more likely to remember the names of monarchs, colonizers and other figures, the most accurate way in which we can study history is by examining the daily worries, joys, loves and hardships of average members of a community. While the people I interviewed were not celebrities, I was more inspired by their stories than by those of any public figure as I was allowed to discuss and preserve some of their most precious life experiences, ranging from a daughter's bat mitzvah to memories of a grandparent, to doing restoration work on a beloved synagogue. I was most impressed by the acts of service and devotion they performed out of love for Jewish tradition, their families and their neighbors.

In my second year, I transitioned into working primarily with archival collections. An average day of work would begin as I received a box of donated documents and other materials and set to work organizing them topically and chronologically, paying attention to the common story the materials shared. Most of the collections I worked on were family collections, which gave me the privilege of seeing various family histories play out over several generations, many times beginning with immigrant ancestors and ending with their descendants, still active in the South Texas Jewish community today.

Because it is the unique personal and family histories of many different Jews from various movements and backgrounds that come together to make the South Texas Jewish community so culturally, socially and historically rich, my time at the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives has taught me the importance of preserving individual stories. As I walk out of the Sallyport this May into a future filled with graduate schooling and further archival and historical work, I will leave with a deeper appreciation for microhistory and for the South Texas Jewish community. ■

Program in Jewish Studies Spring 2023 Highlights

The Program in Jewish Studies and the Jewish Studies Student Association (JSSA) hosted a number of events for the Rice community and the larger Houston community during the spring semester. The pictures highlight some of these events.

L-R: Matthias Henze, Paul Liptz and Joshua Furman with Marilyn Hassid



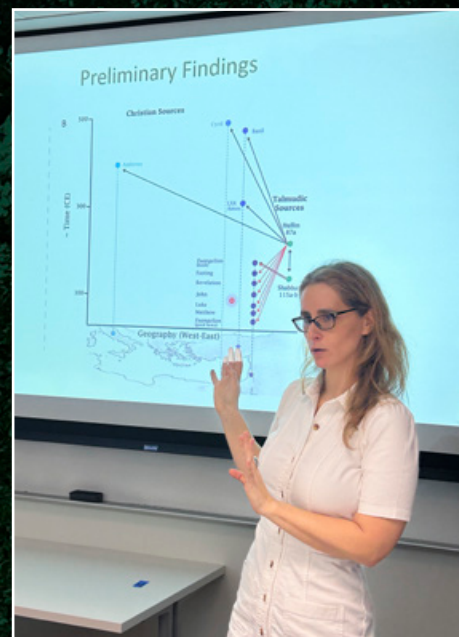
Michal Bar-Asher Siegal presents "It's Complicated! Network Analysis and Jewish-Christian Relationships in the Babylonian Talmud" to members of the Houston community.



Paul Liptz presents "Yemenite Jews After Centuries of Yearning" to members of the Houston community.



JSSA members bake hamantaschen in preparation for the celebration of Purim.



Jonathan Judaken presents "Critical Theory and Post Holocaust Judeophobia" to members of the Houston community.



L-R: Dan Steiner, Jonathan Judaken and Joshua Furman



Matthias Henze and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal

Space and Place in Southern Jewish History: Rice Jewish Studies Conference

The Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS) will convene in Houston, Texas, at Rice University for its 47th annual conference Oct. 20–22, 2023. The conference is co-sponsored by Rice's Program in Jewish Studies and the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives.

Established in 1977, the SJHS fosters scholarship about the Southern Jewish experience by publishing an academic journal and awarding grants to worthy projects that explore Jewish life in the southern United States. The society's signature program is its annual conference, which regularly brings together more than 100 scholars, public historians, museum and library professionals, and others interested in the field for a weekend of presentations, workshops and tours. This will be the first time that the conference

will be held in Houston and only the second time that it will take place in Texas. Members of the public are able to register for the conference and attend sessions.

As we gather just around the corner from NASA Johnson Space Center, this year's conference theme is "Space and Place in Southern Jewish History." We seek to understand how physical spaces — neighborhoods, borders, boundaries and the built environment — have shaped southern Jewish history, and we also aspire to make space in the field for underrepresented narratives, such as the experiences of Jews of Latinx, Black, Sephardi and Middle Eastern/North African descent, exploring how they have made a place for themselves in the American South.

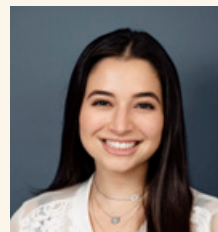
Centering the notion of "space and place" in various ways, paper and panel submissions are encouraged to explore southern Jewish history through the lens of social, cultural, environmental, transnational and legal frameworks. How has the idea of "space" — whether homeland, border, diaspora, neighborhood or building — informed and transformed southern Jewish identity? How can mapping software and other digital humanities tools help us to understand the southern Jewish experience in new ways? How have southern Jews found their place in a region defined by racial, political, sexual and other boundaries? Finally, how does making space for southern Jews who identify as Latinx, Black, Sephardi or Middle Eastern Jews, as well as those who come from crypto-Jewish backgrounds, modify and enrich our understanding of southern Jewish identity?

For updates about the conference, including registration, please visit <https://www.jewishsouth.org/upcoming-conference>. If you have any questions, contact Joshua Furman, program co-chair, at JF36@rice.edu. We hope to see many of you here in October! ■



Celebrating Our Jewish Studies Minors

Julia Engelhardt '23



Hometown: Boca Raton, Florida

Major: Cognitive Sciences

Minors: Jewish Studies and
Politics, Law and Social
Thought

College: McMurry

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

The Program in Jewish Studies at Rice provides an incredibly diverse course catalog and drew me in by allowing me to explore the history and culture, as well as religious components of Judaism. I am interested in so many aspects of Judaism, and Rice allowed me to explore them all with courses ranging from Jewish Foods to The Palms and everything in-between. Pursuing a minor in Jewish studies was a formative part of my Rice career.

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

My favorite class was Professor G. Daniel Cohen's Theories of Antisemitism. It was invaluable in providing me with the knowledge and ability to help combat and challenge antisemitism, especially given the recent rise of antisemitism.

Influences — How has the program shaped your time at Rice, and what impact might it have moving forward?

The Program in Jewish Studies helped shape me into the student and person I am now through teaching me invaluable academic skills like critical thinking, reading and writing, as well as life skills by broadening my worldview of society. It gave me a much deeper appreciation for my identity and Jewish history and culture, as well as a brilliant community of people to learn from and engage with.

Future plans — What might be next for you?

After graduation, I hope to attend graduate school to become a clinical psychologist and work with populations that have been impacted by trauma. I know that my experience with the Program in Jewish Studies will help me with whatever I do and wherever I go.

Kavya Sahni '23



Hometown: New Delhi, India
Major: Political Science Jewish Studies and Religion
Minors: Jewish Studies and Religion
College: Will Rice

Academic interest:

Growing up in Delhi, I attended the Mother's International School, which is based on a spiritual philosophy that draws from both Hinduism and Judaism. I have always been interested in Israel and the politics of the Middle East, and each class I took with the Jewish studies department strengthened my interest in the field.

Favorite class:

Israel: Language and Culture with Melissa Weiniger [the former Anna Smith Fine Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies], which was one of the first classes I took with the department. For my final project, I delved deeper into the history of the Hindu-Jewish spiritual community I had grown up with in India and conducted interviews with members of the community to better understand this interfaith connection. This project was very meaningful to me on a personal level.

Influences:

The Program in Jewish Studies has helped me connect better to the Jewish community at Rice through classes like Jewish Food with Joshua Furman (I loved our class visit to Katz's!) and has given me a stronger background on global Jewish history. With the support of professors in the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, I have pursued other Jewish studies and related opportunities as well. I interned with the Jewish advocacy group, American Jewish Committee (AJC) in summer 2021 and am currently vice president of Leadership Development on AJC's Campus Global Board. Getting the minor in Jewish studies at Rice has also helped me understand my religious background better and is something I hope to continue exploring in the future as well.

Future plans:

I will be attending law school starting this fall and am particularly interested in international law and diplomacy. Through my involvement with AJC, I've had the opportunity to meet with diplomats and leaders from Washington, D.C., and around the world, to strengthen relations with Israel and work on combating antisemitism. I plan to stay involved with AJC after graduating.

Lindsey Schirn '23



Hometown: Los Angeles, California
Major: History and Sociology
Minor: Jewish Studies
College: Martel

Academic interest:

I worked for the Museum of Tolerance in high school and have served as an undergraduate research fellow for the Religion and Public Life Program for three years. So, studying religious tolerance and my own Jewish background led me to pursue a Jewish studies minor.

Favorite class:

I would say Theories of Antisemitism because it is directly linked to my thesis which looks at how political ideology shapes perceptions of antisemitism.

Influences:

Given the recent upsurge in instances of antisemitism, it has definitely made me think a lot more critically on what it means to be an American Jew.

Future plans:

I will be attending law school.

Grace Stewart '23



Hometown: Waller, Texas
Major: History
Minors: Jewish Studies, French and Religion
College: Hanszen

Academic interest:

I was first exposed to Jewish studies at Rice because I took some religion classes that also overlapped with the requirements for the minor in Jewish studies, such as Professor Cindy Dawson's course on the Book of Genesis. I took a particular interest in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish interpretations of ancient texts, as well as the diversity and richness of modern Jewish culture.

Favorite class:

That's a really difficult question, because I've loved all of my Jewish studies classes at Rice, but one that particularly comes to mind is Professor G. Daniel Cohen's Theories of Antisemitism seminar. It's memorable because it was the first 400-level course I took at Rice, and it introduced me to the works of some of my favorite scholars, such as Jonathan Judaken and Deborah Lipstadt.

Influences:

I have so much gratitude for my time at Rice and for the Program in Jewish Studies in particular. First, it has given me a deeper sense of appreciation for Jewish belief and culture, and it has also, thanks to a summer fellowship, allowed me to strengthen my speaking and comprehension skills in Hebrew. Most of all, it has strengthened my belief in the importance of sharing Jewish stories with the public through museums, archives and historiography, which will be the focus of my graduate work.

Future plans:

My plans for the future include attending graduate school, satisfying my need to travel as much as I can, and reading as many books and learning as many languages as possible. ■

On Being Jewish

By Rabbi Kenny Weiss

I entered rabbinical school to learn and study, but today I find that being a rabbi — and being Jewish — is much more expansive than an isolated theological insight or occasional ritual practice.

I am reminded of my childhood rabbi, to whom I asked, “Why did you become a rabbi?” He replied, “Do you want the reason now or the reason when I applied to rabbinical school?”

Every generation encounters personal and communal challenges. We want to make sense of the obstacles in our path and instances of good fortune around us. Judaism provides a lens of values, culture, community, tradition and thought through which one can see the world.

Judaism is not something into which we insert ourselves at specific times and spaces. Rather, being Jewish is who and what we are. Being Jewish means seeing the world through a Jewish prism, whether we are responding to a recent incidence of antisemitism, determining our thoughts about reproductive justice, or even drafting a budget for our family or business.



Rabbi Kenny Weiss

For a long time, I compartmentalized Judaism. I felt that I could move from one sphere of my life to another, and in one aspect literally leave my Judaism at the door. In an effort to eliminate bias or assumptions among students in my courses

at the University of Houston, I would always take my kippah off when entering the classroom.

I changed this practice after the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The events that day impressed upon me the importance of recognizing in a very personal way that marginalized members of our community cannot pass as easily and conveniently as I can. It seems silly to me today to think that removing my kippah when entering a classroom would somehow hide my Jewish identity. I realized that being Jewish truly is my state of being.

Thinking of Judaism as an all-encompassing state of being provides answers and thereby comfort to our lives. Familiar activities take on different meaning as we encounter new people and the world around us changes. We can formulate our thoughts and actions by placing these new experiences within a Jewish context.

Knowing that Jewish tradition has been practiced and spoken of over centuries and centuries adds the depth of community to the state of being Jewish. We can easily find a place for ourselves as individuals, but the real power of being Jewish comes from a sense of connection to those who preceded us and those who will come after us. ■

A Conversation With J. Kent ‘Kenny’ Friedman

By Joshua Furman

In December 2020, I had the pleasure of interviewing J. Kent “Kenny” Friedman for the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives’ oral history collection. Friedman grew up in Biloxi, Mississippi, but he has had a tremendous impact on the city of Houston and our Jewish community.

A veteran lawyer and civic leader, he is chairman of the board of the Harris County-Houston Sports Authority. He has served as president of the Mickey Leland Kibbutzim Internship Foundation, president of the Southwest Region of the American Jewish Committee and chairman of the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston, among many other positions in Jewish communal and Houston lay leadership. He has received numerous awards and honors, including the Leon Jaworski Award from the Houston Bar Association Auxiliary and the Max Nathan Award from the American Jewish Committee. He is married to Dr. Ann Friedman, and has five children and eight grandchildren.



J. Kent “Kenny” Friedman

In the following excerpt from our conversation [edited for clarity and space] Friedman describes being one of the first Jewish lawyers hired by a major Houston firm and recalls his memorable relationships with prominent Houstonians of blessed memory, including Aaron Farfel, Reuben Askanase and Congressman Mickey Leland. Friedman also discusses the history and impact of the Mickey Leland Kibbutzim Internship Foundation on generations of Houston’s teens.

FURMAN: So, you were part of the first cohort of Jewish lawyers to be hired by major firms here in Houston. Can you tell us some of that story?

FRIEDMAN: The firm I went to work with when I moved to Houston was Butler and Binion; it doesn’t exist anymore, but was the fourth-largest firm in Houston at that time. And I was the first Jewish lawyer they had hired. One other firm, Fulbright and Jaworski, had hired two Jewish lawyers before that, but really not any of the other firms in town had done so. And so, it was really in the front wave of that sort of thing. They were ready to hire somebody who was Jewish, I think, and so all the pieces were in place for me to be successful there, and [I] very quickly made partner in that firm. It was a great experience for me. You know, a great place. Lots of really first-rate lawyers and first-rate people.

FURMAN: I know that there were two men, Aaron Farfel and Reuben Askanase, in particular who were very influential in your life and in your career. Can you talk about them a little bit?

FRIEDMAN: Aaron Farfel and Reuben Askanase were partners in various business ventures. They had become extremely successful, having put together one of the country's first conglomerates — Evenflo baby bottles and Spalding sporting goods and Dunhill pipes into a company. Very unusual for the late 1960s. And they were a terrific partnership because they were very different people. Aaron was by-and-large the “good cop” and Rube was by-and-large the “bad cop” in any negotiations they had, and it proved to be extraordinarily successful for them. They were both very interested in young Jewish people in town and trying to give them an opportunity to help themselves. They had in their careers both used Butler and Binion among other law firms, so they were very helpful to me in getting the job there in the first place and in making sure that I succeeded when I was there. Both of them played really major roles in my growth in Houston as a person, as a lawyer and as a Houstonian.

FURMAN: And I know Rube was very involved in politics, as well.

FRIEDMAN: Yes, he was very involved in politics. I had gotten involved with Fred Hofheinz's campaign for mayor. Fred was the son of Roy Hofheinz, who was the genius behind the Astrodome. And Fred was a very bright guy. He lost the first time, but won the second time. I'm not quite sure how Rube knew Fred, but Rube had been very involved with that campaign, as well, and that's how I first met him. He was one of the world's great fundraisers. Primarily focused on the Jewish community, but not entirely. And he was the first person I ever met who would have a fundraising event and basically locked the door and go through and call on people about how much they were going to give. I just had never seen anybody do anything like that before. Neither had anybody else, frankly, because most of the people in that room were not Jewish, right? And they were as stunned as I was at that tactic. Rube would say, “How much are you gonna give?” And somebody would say, “Well, I'll give \$1,000.”

And he would say, “You having a bad year? What do you mean, \$1,000? That's not enough for you, you know? You need to give \$5,000.” It was quite revolutionary for fundraising in Houston, Texas.

FURMAN: So, the association, between you and Reuben and the Hofheinz family, led to your involvement in local politics. Is that something that you had your mind set on when you came here, or it just sort of developed organically?

FRIEDMAN: I'd been involved in Fred's campaign, and through that, in addition to Rube, met lots of other people, including a young African American activist named Mickey Leland, who shortly thereafter ran for the state legislature and was elected, and I had helped him get there. Mickey and I became great personal friends and spent a lot of time together. I was a groomsman in his wedding, for instance, and things like that. We got to start a program together that continues to this day, [the] Mickey Leland Kibbutzim Internship Program. The genesis of that was, Mickey had been to Israel on a couple of occasions, taken over by various Jewish groups — I think the first one was the ADL — as an up-and-coming young politician, and he'd fallen in love with Israel. He was a very serious Catholic, and so he loved being in the Holy Land, and what he really was enamored of was the kibbutz concept of people living in kind of communal circumstances where, you know, if you wanted your child to take piano lessons, the kibbutz voted on whether or not to spend its money on your child taking piano lessons, and things like that.

He thought it was such a revolutionary way to live, that he thought it would be great to expose young people from his community, inner city Houston, to that way of life. So in 1980, we started this program. We set up a charity and raised money to send inner city kids to Israel. Forty years later, it's still ongoing and has revolutionized lots of young people's lives. We've sent kids who've never been out of Texas, or never been on an airplane, and things like that, and the criteria for selection is perception of future leadership. We have a large, diverse board covering all aspects of Houston, including several of our former interns who are now on the board. We interview and select kids every year. In fact, the hardest thing we do is decide which 10 kids are going and which ones are not. They're all very deserving of

going. It's just been a fantastic program in terms of exposing kids to the world, and their perspective of the world changes dramatically once they've done that. Exposing them to the Holy Land, which they've read about in Bibles, exposing them to the state of Israel, exposing them to the current conflict in the Middle East and so forth. It's just transformed who they are as people.

FURMAN: I think it's an incredible program that I suspect is not very well known outside of Houston, and perhaps even within Houston, especially since Congressman Leland passed away. But I think it's a really important story, particularly in our current moment, when a lot of renewed attention is being paid to Black-Jewish relations. Your friendship with Mickey evolved at a time when Black-Jewish relations were not so good. Can you talk about that a little bit?

FRIEDMAN: Well, of course, Black-Jewish relationships have historically been very good. I mean, the Jewish community has always identified with the African American community and [the] persecution [they have faced]. And so, the early origins of the NAACP and organizations like that have had significant Jewish involvement. By the late '60s, early '70s, a lot of that had deteriorated as African American folks wanted to take over their own organizations and didn't want help from white people of any kind. So relationships began to deteriorate because of that. Particularly with younger African Americans. The opportunity to be a friend of Mickey's, and his of mine, I think really helped bridge a lot of those gaps and, through him, I became friends with a lot of other African American politicians or business leaders. I spent some time on the board of Texas Southern University, the historically Black university here in town. And [I] became much more appreciative of the richness of our African American community here in Houston and what it's offered to the community. ■

Rice University
Program in Jewish Studies—MS 340
P.O. Box 1892
Houston, TX 77251-1892

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit #7549
Houston, Texas

Program in Jewish Studies **at Rice University**

Learn

Visit our website: jewishstudies.rice.edu

Like us on Facebook: Rice Jewish Studies

Follow us on Instagram: @ricejewishstudies

Contact

jewishstudies@rice.edu

713-348-4512

Support

Make a contribution now:

<https://jewishstudies.rice.edu/why-giving-matters>

or contact Emily Stein

emily.m.stein@rice.edu

713-348-3424

