



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

Issue 23 • Fall 2023



In This Issue:

Director's Note

By Matthias Henze

Page 2

Introducing Ofra Amihay

By Ofra Amihay

Page 3

Introducing Mendel Kranz

By Mendel Kranz

Page 4

Introducing Melissa Cohen-Nickels

By Melissa Cohen-Nickels

Page 4

Looking Back, Looking Ahead: A Fond Farewell

By Joshua Furman

Page 5

The Space Between Hebrew and English

By Shelly Oria

Page 6

Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me

By JT Waldman

Page 7

"Space and Place": The Southern Jewish Historical Society Comes to Rice

By Joshua Furman

Page 8

On Being Jewish

By Moshe Vardi

Page 10

Digitization Project Support From the Samuels Family Foundation

By Joshua Furman

Page 11

Alumni Voices

By Rose Kantorczyk '20

Page 12

Unexpected Community: HEBR/RELI 125

By Ally Godsil '25

Page 13

Israeli Women Writers: A Lasting Impression

By Lily Primus '24

Page 14

In Loving Memory of Melvin Abbe Dow, z"l

By Matthias Henze

Page 15

Director's Note



Dear Friends of Rice Jewish Studies,

As I write this note, it has been a little over three weeks since Hamas' terrorist attacks on various settlements, kibbutzim and the Nova music festival in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. Nothing can justify the Hamas massacre. This is an exceptionally difficult time for all of us, a time of anguish, shock and anger. I am grateful to

President Reginald DesRoches for his message to the Rice community, in which he condemned the attack. A week after the attack I issued my own statement on Israel.

We have two primary concerns in the Program in Jewish Studies: The first has become the well-being of our students, and the second is to serve in our capacity as educators. My colleagues and I have been in constant conversation with them about the current situation. The Jewish Studies Student Association (JSSA), the student arm of our program, offers a safe space for students to gather, support each other and engage in dialog. Alex Byrd, vice provost for diversity, equity and inclusion, and Bridget Gorman, dean of undergraduates, are also offering small workshops for groups of five to seven students to discuss their struggles.

In addition to caring for our students, we are here to educate. The media, including and especially social media, are filled with misinformation and biases. The students have expressed how little they know about the history of the State of Israel and the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In response, Rice Jewish studies will increase our education opportunities to learn about the history and nature of the conflict in an academic, safe, nuanced and unbiased environment. We will do so while protecting free speech and fostering an open exchange of ideas, free of fear of repercussions, even if what is being expressed may seem uncomfortable or challenging to our preconceived notions about the conflict. However, protecting free speech also includes countering hateful rhetoric, intended to incite violence, information that is untrue, without nuance or historically inaccurate. It is our task as educators within an academic institution to foster these debates. Avoiding difficult conversations or omitting them from our curriculum because they are controversial would be a missed opportunity. If our students cannot practice how to debate complex and deeply emotional issues at Rice, where else will they learn it?

While the current conflict may dominate much of what we're doing right now, I assure you that Rice Jewish studies continues to move forward. We have welcomed two new faculty members to our team this fall semester. Ofra Amihay (Ph.D., New York University), originally from Israel, is our new Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish Studies. Ofra is a scholar of Hebrew and comparative literature. Our second new faculty member is Mendel Kranz (Ph.D., University of Chicago), the Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellow. Mendel is a scholar of modern Jewish intellectual history, with a focus on France and Northern Africa. He is also interested in antisemitism and Islamophobia in comparative perspective. I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to be able to bring these two new and brilliant young scholars to Rice. Ofra and Mendel will significantly broaden the scope of our course offerings and will be cherished colleagues in the School of Humanities.

On Oct. 20–22, 2023, the Program in Jewish Studies, along with the Texas Jewish Historical Society, co-hosted the 47th Annual Conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. The conference was largely organized by Joshua Furman, associate director of the Program in Jewish Studies, with significant support from Chetana Cates, our program administrator, both of whom worked tirelessly to make this possible. This year's theme of the conference was "Space and Place in Southern Jewish History." With its over 120 participants, the gathering was a wonderful success that brought national visibility to our program. The conference was also a fitting capstone for Joshua, who will bid adieu in December, after six years diligently building the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives.

Especially in this moment I want to thank you for your continuous support of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies. Please keep in touch and take advantage of our public lectures. The presence of our program at Rice has never felt more meaningful than during these trying times, for our students, administrators and faculty. On behalf of the entire Rice Jewish studies team, please accept my gratitude.

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

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

Welcomes and Introductions

Introducing Ofra Amihay

By Ofra Amihay

My name is Ofra Amihay, and I am the new Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish Studies, as well as the adviser of JSSA and Hillel, here at Rice. I was born and raised in Israel, and I'm a scholar of Hebrew and comparative literature with a special interest in text and image relations.

I have a B.A. in Jewish studies from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and an M.A. in literature from Tel Aviv University, and I did my Ph.D. at the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. Before coming to Rice, I taught at Lawrence University, Georgetown University and the University of California, Santa Barbara.

I have published articles on Hebrew literature, comics and graphic novels, children's literature and photography. As a Ph.D. student, I co-edited the volume "The Future of Text and Image" that brought together worldwide scholars who work on text and image relations in various disciplines. My recent monograph, "The People of the Book and the Camera," explores such issues as postcolonial thought, feminist discourse, LGBTQ culture and minor literature manifested in Israeli novels that use photographs as narratological tools.

I am currently working on Israeli authors, both Jews and Arabs, who symbolically use photography as a "third language." I'm also working on a new book, tentatively titled "Body Text." It



Ofra Amihay

explores representations of textual signs used as punishment in the form of written letters on bodies. By studying Jewish and non-Jewish literary texts that spread across a broad range, I hope to examine issues of gender discrimination, minor texts and resistance. In previous projects I focused on the status of the image as "Other" and "Migrant" in the literary text. This project looks at instances where language carries a semiotic meaning that extends its verbal function to a visually performative one, simultaneously announcing and subverting hegemonic authority. This is especially poignant in the context of the Hebraic tradition, where the taboo of visual representation is transposed in the form of its conceived opposite, the written word.

As a scholar of Jewish literature and visual culture, I was thrilled to join Rice's diverse Program in Jewish Studies. My first semesters are already presenting me with exciting opportunities to share my teaching and research experience with both students and the community. In the fall, I've been teaching a seminar on Israeli women writers, which is cross-listed with the Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality, as well as a FWIS course about Jews on film. I also coordinated this year's Rice/JCC series, which included my presentation on Israeli children's literature, a conversation between me and the Israeli American author Shelly Oria, and a workshop on Israel in comics by Jewish American comics artist JT Waldman. My talk enabled me to revisit a topic close to my heart and share it with the supportive Houston Jewish com-

munity, and you can get a glimpse of the two other events in the authors' contributions to this newsletter. Shelly Oria also met with Jewish studies (JWST) students on campus, answered their questions and signed the copies they received of her short story collection.

In the spring, I will teach a course on Transcultural Comics, which is an exciting collaboration between the Jewish studies program and the English department. It will examine the role transculturalism played in the history of comics, from the centrality of Jewish and Italian American figures in its genesis, to the influence of civil rights, women rights and LGBTQ rights movements on the development of 1970s underground comix and 21st-century graphic novels.

Another expertise I look forward to sharing with Rice students is my experience in teaching Modern Hebrew at the college level. The program is looking into the possibility of offering a full year of Modern Hebrew next year, in collaboration with the Center for Languages and Intercultural Communication (CLIC). This will fill a gap in the curriculum while offering an academic endeavor in which many Rice students have expressed an interest.

After spending many years in various parts of the U.S., I am especially excited about the opportunity to explore Houston, with its exceptional Jewish community, and call it my new home. Since arriving here in July, Houston has greeted me with the warmest welcome I've experienced in the U.S. so far (not only weather-wise!), and I look forward to meeting more colleagues and students and finding more exciting collaboration opportunities.

In these turbulent days, it is harder than ever for me to be away from Israel where I grew up and where many of my loved ones still live. This introduction is a chance to say thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the colleagues, students and community members who made my arrival at Houston such a pleasant experience and these difficult times more bearable. Thank you so, so much, or, as we say in Hebrew, "Toda Raba Raba!" ■

Welcomes and Introductions *(Continued)*

Introducing Mendel Kranz

By Mendel Kranz

My name is Mendel Kranz, and I'm a scholar and teacher of modern Jewish history and thought.



Mendel Kranz

I am interested in how the borders of religious, political and national identity have been shaped through the negotiation with, and often the exclusion of, Jews. I am also interested in how Jews have responded to that condition

and the range of ethical, philosophical and critical discourses that they developed. My research spans Western Europe and North Africa as well as the Middle East, and it focuses on key questions of universalism, secularism, race and antisemitism. I recently completed my Ph.D. at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and before coming to Houston I lived in Chicago for almost a decade.

Currently, I am at work on a book manuscript that tells the story of how the Jewish Question has evolved in the decades since the Holocaust, from the height of the struggles for decolonization in the 1950s through debates about “Muslim antisemitism” in the early 2000s. The post-Holocaust world has witnessed a shift in how the Jew is understood — especially in relation to other oppressed figures. My book tells this complex story by situating postwar Jewish thought in relation to the colonial question and its afterlives in debates around immigration and Islamophobia. During this period, Jews were still reeling from the effects of the Holocaust and developing rich and complex ways of thinking about Jewishness, alterity and difference that went far beyond the more assimilatory model that had historically dominated French Judaism. Concomitantly, however, they were also contending with their place in a new set of racial and colonial hierarchies as France waged its war in Algeria and as hundreds of thousands of North African Jews and Muslims ultimately immigrated to France, igniting debates about

racism and xenophobia. I demonstrate the ways Jews sought to forge connections with these struggles as well as how they distanced themselves from them, and I illustrate the effects this has had on the broader evolution of religion, race and difference in postcolonial Jewish thought.

This story has many resonances today, as Jews across the U.S. and Europe contend with how to understand their own histories and identities within the larger structures of racism and colonialism. At the heart of my current work is the question: What role does the Jew play in these discourses, and how has that evolved over the last 75 years?

Part of my research also focuses on the relationship between antisemitism and Islamophobia — and France is in many ways ground zero for thinking about this. Home to one of the largest Jewish and Muslim populations, many of whom originally came from North Africa, both antisemitism and Islamophobia have at different times been central components of French national and colonial rule. While today these are often thought of as separate, or perhaps even competitive forms of discrimination, I'm interested in showing how they have been thoroughly entangled with one another.

To that end, I'll be teaching a class next year on precisely this topic, and we'll be taking a long historical look at the relationship between antisemitism and Islamophobia. We'll think about different theories and ways of understanding them — are they racial, religious, ethnic or cultural forms of discrimination? — and we'll think about the different places — the U.S., Europe and Israel — where they have been operative. Unfortunately, these are two dominant forces on the world scene today, and I'm excited to think critically about them together with you.

Coming to Houston has been a whirlwind of fun and adventure. I got here almost immediately before classes started (due to an ill-timed case of COVID-19) and hit the ground running right away. I'm currently loving this rainy, cooler weather and can't wait for the “winter” — or what back in Chicago they might call a nice spring day. I've been enjoying all the good food and taking long slow runs around Memorial Park. If anyone has any good camping recommendations, let me know! ■

Introducing Melissa Cohen-Nickels

By Melissa Cohen-Nickels

I am so excited to join the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives (STJA) at Rice University in the role of program administrator.



Melissa Cohen-Nickels

Originally from Libertyville, Illinois, I earned my B.A. in history from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I then went on to earn my Master of Education from the University of St. Thomas in Houston.

I initially came to the Houston area to teach history in 2007. I taught for 10 years in Fort Bend ISD, serving as Social Studies Department chair for three years. Most recently, I taught Ancient Civilizations and World Cultures at The Emery/Weiner School in Houston.

As a history teacher for 16 years, I have always been engaged in historical research with organizations such as the Teaching American History Grant and the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia. As I move out of the classroom into this new role, I have really enjoyed diving headfirst into our local Jewish history. Every day, I am learning more about the history of the South Texas Jewish community, whether it's through discussion with local community members, reading the founding documents of the major Jewish institutions or listening to a lecture from Joshua Furman.

Recently, I attended the Southern Jewish Historical Society's conference: “Space and Place in Southern Jewish History.” It started me thinking about the place in which my family has chosen to settle. We have lived in Sugar Land for 10 years and did not know about its Jewish roots. The Imperial Sugar factory, for which the city is named, was founded by a prominent Jewish businessman, Isaac H. Kempner, from Galveston. This business grew into a large international company, and Sugar Land grew in turn. Today, Sugar Land has a small Jewish community among its 110,000 residents. When we chose to move to Sugar Land to raise our family, we found a small but dedicated Jewish community at Congregation Beth El. Discovering this Jewish origin of Sugar

Looking Back, Looking Ahead: A Fond Farewell

By Joshua Furman

It is truly bittersweet to announce my departure from Rice, the Program in Jewish Studies, and the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives as of January 2024.



Joshua Furman

I am excited to begin a new chapter in my career at the University of Denver, where I have been appointed to the Jeanne Abrams Directorship of the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society as well as affiliate faculty of the Center for Judaic Studies. In my new role, I will be working closely with the Beck Archives at the university, which document the experiences of Jewish Americans in Colorado. Rest assured, I will continue to write, teach and talk about Jewish Texans, even as my work will expand to focus on the experience of American Jews in the Mountain West region.

I first arrived at Rice and joined the Program in Jewish Studies in the fall of 2015, right out of graduate school, as a Joan and Stanford Alexander Postdoctoral Fellow. At the time, I had no inkling or intention to build a career out of studying or preserving Texas Jewish history, although I was born in Dallas and raised in San Antonio, where my father's family came from Mexico City many decades ago. A growing curiosity about Jewish history in Houston, sparked by an invitation to speak about Meyerland at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center in September 2016, led to conversations with Matthias Henze in the spring and early summer of 2017 about developing a Texas Jewish history project or institute under the umbrella of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice.

The original concept, titled South Texas Archive of the Jewish Experience (STAJE), envisioned an effort to “record and collect interviews with subjects about immigrant life and other aspects of the Jewish experience in South Texas, establish an archive of important historical records to be stored at Fondren Library, create an interactive webpage making the project's collections available to scholars and the general public, collaborate with other institutions engaged in the study of Southern and Texas Jewish history, and serve as a resource for Jewish organizations in Houston and beyond.” At the time, we had no idea that Hurricane Harvey would strike Houston in late August of that year, bringing unprecedented devastation to the city and its Jewish community.

In the aftermath of the storm, the concept quickly moved from a hypothetical project to an urgent necessity — recovering endangered records from the flooded buildings of United Orthodox Synagogues (UOS), Congregation Beth Yeshurun and the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center and bringing them to Rice's Fondren Library to give them a secure and permanent home. With early funding support from the Texas Jewish Historical Society, the Southern Jewish Historical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Stanford and Joan Alexander Foundation, the Houston Jewish History Archive began formal operations in July 2018, and we were off and running.

Collections started coming in via every imaginable avenue — emails, phone calls, text and Facebook messages, even eBay auctions and estate sales. There was so much historical material to gather and process and so many oral histories to record and publish. A wonderful team of archivists in the Woodson Research Center and student interns, generously supported by the Edith and Bernard Stolbun Family Foundation, made it all possible.

Last year, with the generosity of the Alexander family, the archives were renamed as the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives (Alexander STJA), enabling the project to fulfill its original mission. Hosting the Southern Jewish Historical Society's annual meeting here at Rice this semester, which you will read about in more detail, was a profound opportunity for us — a testament to the significance of our collections and the emergence of our university as a premier destination for the study of the Jewish experience in Texas and the South.

There is still so much wonderful and important work to do, but it is time for me to pass the torch. I look forward to supporting the Alexander STJA team in the months and years ahead in whatever ways I can be helpful to them, and I plan to return to Houston often to make use of these collections in my research, writing and teaching. To my treasured colleagues, students and friends: Thank you all for the support, generosity and kindness that have made my time at Rice and our family's years in Houston so memorable and so meaningful. ■

Land has sparked within me a desire to dive deeper into our local stories as the Jewish origin and identities of its founders are often obscured in our modern world. Just as South Texas was shaped by its early Jewish settlers, it continues to be influenced by the Jewish community today. My goal with joining the STJA is to collect the stories of Jewish community building and make them available to everyone.

Since joining STJA in late August, I have worked on a number of projects from oral histories to digitization to preparations for the Southern Jewish Historical Society conference. In September, I sat down with Suzie Kornblit to discuss the creation of a new collection centered on her family's experiences with Houston's B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO). My favorite project so far has been to create a pop-up exhibit of the archives for the recent Southern Jewish Historical Society conference. It was my first real plunge into the archives. Through this experience, I explored the wide variety of topics covered in our collection from women's history to community life in Galveston and Houston to religious affairs that have shaped the Houston Jewish community and beyond.

Currently, I am teaching at the religious school for Congregation Beth El in Missouri City. I have always had a passion for history and travel. In 2011, I was selected as a Fulbright-Hays scholar to Greece and Turkey. I have also worked closely with the World Affairs Council of Greater Houston as a member of its Core Teacher Council, creating programming and curriculum.

I live with my husband, three children, two dogs and a guinea pig in Sugar Land. ■

The Space Between Hebrew and English

By Shelly Oria

When people ask me about being bilingual and about my experience as an author who writes in her second language, they usually ask about my dreams: “In what language do you dream?”

I reply that in my dreams, language is fluid: Israeli news-anchor Oshrat Kotler might report the evening news in English, while my New York friends, who don't speak a word of Hebrew, might argue with me in the holy tongue with no trace of an accent. I suppose my dreams manifest this fluidity because it's my fantasy: a world free of linguistic boundaries, a world in which no real distinction between Hebrew and English exists, a

world in which I can speak whichever language makes its way to my mouth first, and always be understood.

Back in 2004, when I was neck-deep in the task of translating my stories and plays from Hebrew into English, with the goal of applying to MFA programs, my mother came to visit me in New York. Or, rather: my mother came to New York to visit Albany, the city to which lawyers travel when they've passed the New York Bar exam and wish to retrieve their hard-earned certificate. So we headed to Albany. I got nervous before her brief interview with a duty judge, and at the ceremony I applauded and took too many pictures; for a short time, it appeared we'd switched roles. During and following that experience, I started to write a story about Avner, an Israeli painter who lives in New York. When his 7-year-old daughter comes to visit from Tel Aviv, he drags her to Albany for a meeting with an art collector — a meeting for which he has high hopes.

That story, “The Disneyland of Albany,” comes to mind whenever I get questions about my bilingual experience. In the context of my writing life, there's no better example, it seems, of the chaos that is bilingualism. It's a story I wrote in Hebrew, then translated into English, later rewrote in English, and finally, years later, “The Disneyland of Albany” was translated back into Hebrew, this time by translator Ronnie Beck. But perhaps more importantly,

this was the first story I wrote which took place in New York rather than in Israel, and whose plot centered on an Israeli trying to “make it” in the United States, coping with the various challenges of life in a new culture, in a new language. This story, therefore, presented me with new challenges. For example, for the first time I had to figure out how to write — in English, and in a way that would sound natural — a character who spoke Hebrew poorly and with an American accent, or one who spoke broken English — specifically, the English some Israelis speak, the literal translation of Hebrew sentence constructions and idioms. But more than anything, perhaps, my journey with “Disneyland” has taught me the difference between bilingualism and interlingualism, which is sort of an academic way of saying that my life is far from the fantasy I shared here earlier. There is no world

without boundaries of language — or at least, I have yet to find it. Not only will English never be as immediate and elastic, as comfortable in my mouth and head as Hebrew, but Hebrew, too, will never again be the Play-Doh it once was in my hands.

That's the price of interlingualism: For all intents and purposes, I have been orphaned of my mother tongue, and a mother can never be replaced. And yet, the attempt to stretch toward the impossible — to live in the duality — creates in its failure a new, third, space: the space between the languages. In that space, for almost a decade now, I've been having an affair with the English language. Precisely because it is forever a mystery, forever both within and out of my reach, forever challenging me, teaching me, hiding from me and seeking me out, I wake up to it every morning as if it truly were my lover, excited for another day together. ■

[This essay is a revision of an essay originally published in Haaretz on April 24, 2016.]

Shelly Oria is an Israeli American writer, the author of “New York 1, Tel Aviv 0” (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). Her writing has won a number of awards, has been translated into several languages and appeared in prestigious platforms. Oria lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she has a private practice as a creativity coach. In October 2023, she visited Rice University and the fall series of the Rice Jewish Studies Program at the Houston JCC to discuss this book and her experiences as an Israeli American author.

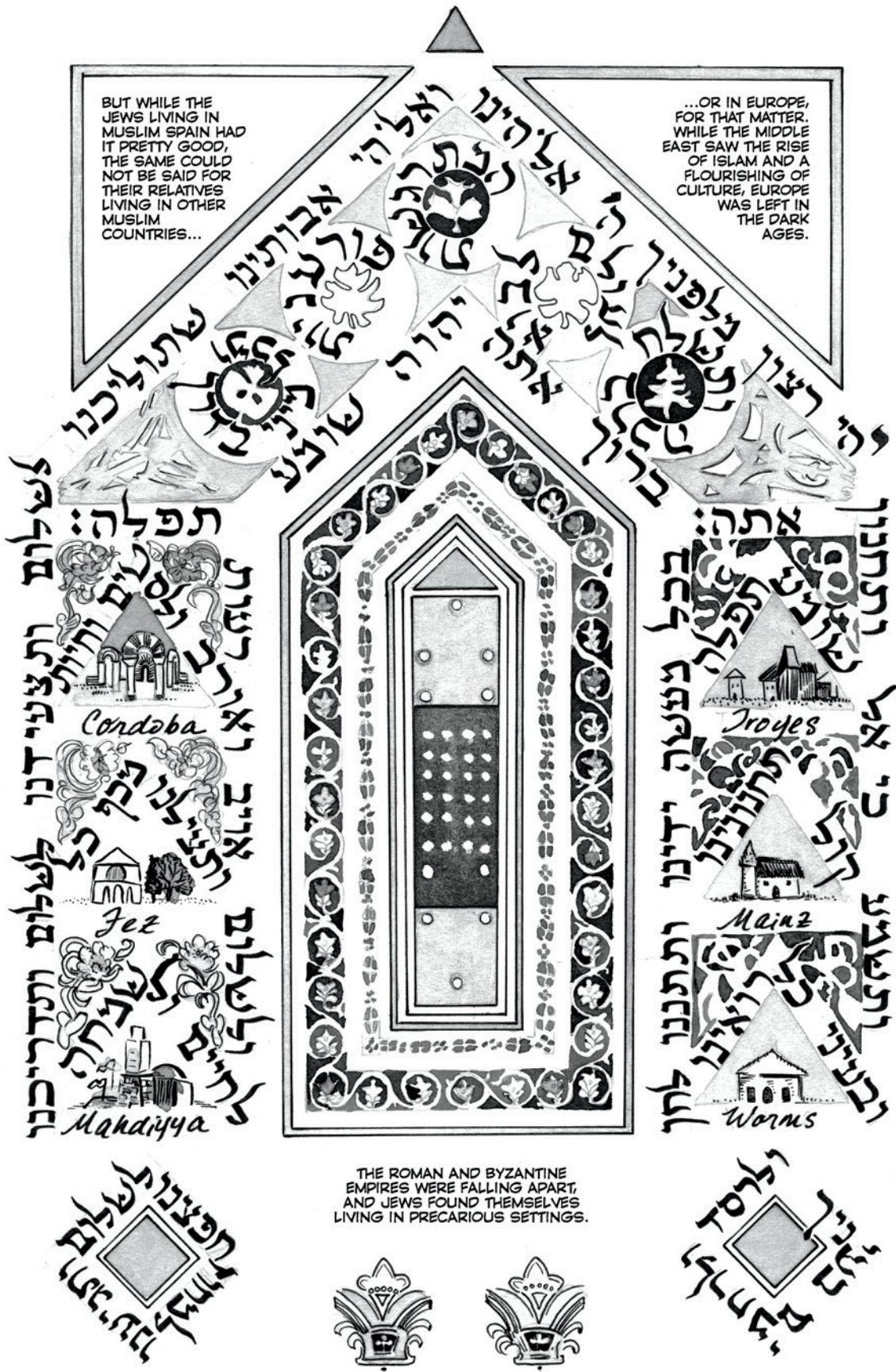


Shelly Oria

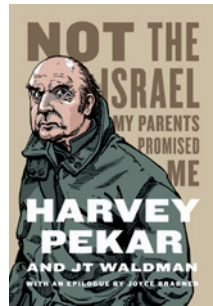
~~~~~  
That's the price of interlingualism: For all intents and purposes, I have been orphaned of my mother tongue, and a mother can never be replaced.  
~~~~~


Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me

JT Waldman's graphic novel, "Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me" (Hill and Wang), which he co-authored with Harvey Pekar, was published in 2012. In October 2023, he visited Rice University and the fall series of the Rice Jewish Studies Program at the Houston JCC to discuss this book and other representations of Israel in comics. ■



Left: Image showing the Hebrew prayer of the traveler from Harvey Pekar and JT Waldman's "Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me" (Hill and Wang, 2012) ©JT Waldman



“Space and Place”: The Southern Jewish Historical Society Comes to Rice

By Joshua Furman

It was a great honor for the Program in Jewish Studies and the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives to host the 47th annual conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS) at Rice during the weekend of Oct. 20–22.

Prior to the Rice conference, the SJHS had only met in Texas once before — in Austin in 2014 — so the opportunity to welcome more than 120 participants to Houston was a significant moment in the history of the Program in Jewish Studies. Our guests included speakers from across the country and students from Rice, the University of Houston and The Emory-Weiner School.

For those who were able to get here early, the pre-conference trip down to Galveston offered an exciting entry point into Texas Jewish history. We visited the newly redesigned Ship To Shore museum and its immigration exhibit and stopped at the Hebrew Benevolent Cemetery and Congregation B'nai Israel, where Rabbi Henry Cohen served the island's Reform community from 1888 to 1949. These provided an up-close and interactive experience for participants. We ended the day with a dinner at the Hotel Galvez, made possible thanks to Rice alum Buddy Herz '61 and his wife, B.J., who sponsored it.

Our conference program, centered around the theme of “Space and Place in Southern Jewish History,” launched Friday with two panels that explored the Southern Jewish experience from a variety of perspectives — oral history, photography, poetry, fiction, film and memoir. We were thrilled to have such a diverse group of presenters sharing their work with us this year. Many other wonderful panels filled out the weekend, covering a range of topics in the study of Southern Jewish life, from architecture to childhood and educational tourism. As the founder and curator of the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, I participated in a roundtable Sunday morning titled, “Activating the Archives: Embracing the Power of Southern Jewish Collections for the 21st Century.”

Both of our keynote presentations were outstanding. Professor Bryan Edward Stone of Del Mar College spoke about the fascinating life of a Jewish family in Eagle Pass, Texas, in his lecture, “Very Small Histories in a Very Big State.” Tyina Step-toe, associate professor of history at the University of Arizona, delivered a lecture titled “On My Block: The Ethno-Racial Landscape of Jim Crow Houston.” It examined relationships between Blacks and Jews in Texas in the early decades of the 20th century and explored how the Ku Klux Klan targeted both groups.

Other highlights of the conference weekend included Friday night services and dinner at Congregation Emanu El, which included memorial tributes to important people in the field of Southern Jewish history who have left us recently. Saturday evening, following a wonderful reception that was co-sponsored by the Texas Jewish Historical Society, local performer Joe Buchanan gave a rousing performance in Duncan Recital Hall, showcasing his unique blend of country and folk music infused with Jewish and Texan themes.

We would never have been able to run a four-day conference for more than 120 people without the hard work and dedication of an all-star cast of professionals, student workers and volunteers. I would especially like to thank Chetana Cates (program administrator for the Rice Program in Jewish Studies), Melissa Cohen-Nickels (program administrator for the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives), Traci Patterson (archivist, Woodson Research Center), and our students Felicity Phelan, Ally Godsil, Sam Raphaelson and Elias Hansen.

The SJHS is planning to meet in Louisville, Kentucky, next October for the 2024 annual conference. You can learn more about the Southern Jewish Historical Society, become a member and follow news of next year's conference at <https://www.jewishsouth.org>. ■



During the weekend of Oct. 20–22, 2023, more than 120 people from across the country convened in the Anderson-Clarke Center at Rice University for the 47th annual conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society, hosted by the Program in Jewish Studies and the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives.



A. Student volunteers Sam Raphaelson '24 and Elias Hansen '24 assist with conference registration and logistics. **B.** Conference attendees visit Fondren Library to examine an exhibit of collection highlights from the archives.



C. Student volunteer Ally Godsfil '25 shows off the conference T-shirt and tote bag. **D.** Joshua Furman, associate director of the Rice Program in Jewish Studies and conference co-chair, poses with musician Joe Buchanan after his Saturday night concert in Duncan Recital Hall. **E.** Conference attendees listen to opening remarks in Hudspeth Auditorium.



F. Josh Parshall, president of the Southern Jewish Historical Society, addresses the audience. **G.** Matthias Henze, director of the Program in Jewish Studies, makes opening remarks on the first day of the conference. **H.** Tyina Steptoe, associate professor of history at the University of Arizona, delivers a keynote address about Black-Jewish relations in Houston.

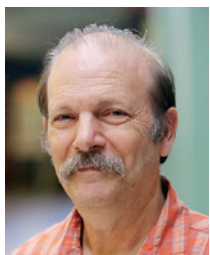


I. Conference attendees listen to opening remarks in Hudspeth Auditorium. **J.** Members of Rice's conference logistics team celebrate a successful weekend. Left to right: Chetana Cates, Traci Patterson, Joshua Furman and Melissa Cohen-Nickels.

On Being Jewish

By Moshe Vardi, a University Professor and the Karen Ostrum George Distinguished Service Professor in Computational Engineering at Rice University

I grew up in an Orthodox kibbutz and then a moshav in Israel. Both of my parents are Holocaust survivors. (See my talk about the Hungarian Holocaust at <https://youtu.be/6sGmVppnolY?si=YykhaZwmRIrv2CJR>). My father was a rabbi, as was his father. My father had hoped that I would continue that tradition, and he started teaching me Talmud at age 10.



Moshe Vardi

I did go to a yeshiva high school and even, for one year, to a rabbinical seminary. But at age 10 my father also bought me a 10-volume collection of “The Young Technologist.” Ultimately, science was a bigger attraction for me than Talmudic studies, and my path to science was clear.

After completing my doctoral studies in computer science at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1981, I went to Stanford University as a postdoctoral scholar. My Jewish involvement at Stanford was fairly minimal, but I met my future wife in Palo Alto. She was a member of a Conservative congregation and asked me to join too. Ultimately, we got married in that congregation. When we moved to Houston in 1993, there was no question that we would join a Conservative congregation.

While I have a very strong Jewish identity, my feelings about the details of Judaism are somewhat ambivalent. For my bar mitzvah, I had to read “Parashat Hukat.” This Parasha starts with Numbers 19 and discusses the Red-Heifer purification ritual, which decrees that “one shall burn the heifer in his sight; her skin, and her flesh, and her blood, with her dung, shall he burn” (Numbers 19:5). This did not and does not resonate with me at all. Other parts of the Pentateuch do resonate with me: “One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you” (Exodus 12:49), or “If you oppress him, if he cries out to Me, I will surely hear his cry” (Exodus 22:22).

Judgment and righteousness for me mean standing up for the weak.

It took me quite some time to understand that at the roots of Judaism there is a struggle between the emphasis on ritual and the emphasis on morality. I am strongly in the morality camp.

For me, Prophet Amos best summarizes being Jewish: “Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24).

Judgment and righteousness for me mean standing up for the weak. In 1992, I was department manager at IBM Research, and one of the departmental members was up for review. During his talk, my manager challenged him repeatedly. After the talk, my manager met with me and told me to inform the employee that he failed the review. I judged the work to be of high quality and told my manager, “I am afraid I cannot do that.” For me, that was just being Jewish. ■

...UNTIL JUSTICE ROLLS DOWN LIKE WATERS
AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE A MIGHTY STREAM

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

The Amos 5:24 quote of Martin Luther King Jr. at the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama

Digitization Project Support From the Samuels Family Foundation

By Joshua Furman

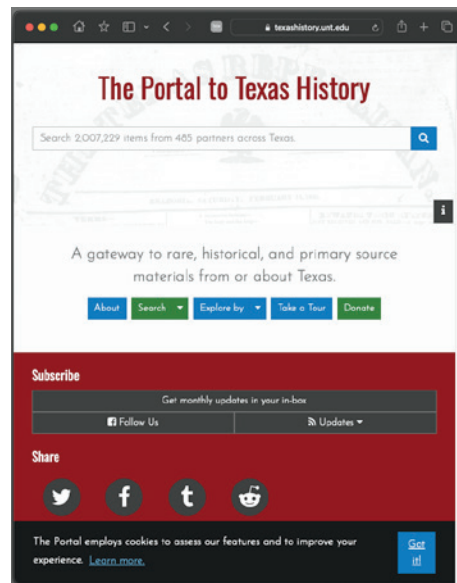
The Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives at Rice University (Alexander STJA) has received a generous grant from the Samuels Family Foundation that will enable the digitization of thousands of pages of Houston Jewish history in the coming year.

One of our most crucial ongoing priorities at the Alexander STJA is the digitization of materials in our most important collections. Digitization is a critical tool that furthers our central mission of preservation and accessibility — it ensures that Texas Jewish history will endure into the next generation, and it enables many more people to access the materials, from anywhere in the world at any time.

For many years now, we have partnered with the Portal to Texas History, a digital database of Texas historical material under the direction of the University of North Texas Libraries in Denton. The Portal to Texas History brings together newspapers, rare documents and photographs from hundreds of archives and repositories across the state, making them available online for free at <https://texashistory.unt.edu>. With the funds from this grant, thousands of pages of Texas Jewish history are now available online via the Portal, including more than 1,500 issues of *The Message*, the bulletin of Congregation Beth Yeshurun, along with commemorative booklets from other synagogues such as Beth Israel and United Orthodox Synagogues in Houston, Agudas Achim and Rodfei Sholom in San Antonio, Shearith Israel in Wharton, Beth Jacob in Galveston, and Kol Israel in Beaumont. Materials in the Portal are keyword-searchable and can be downloaded, and the platform is easy to use. According to the University of North Texas, sources on the Portal to Texas History website were accessed more than 1.6 million times in April 2023 alone.

In the coming months, thanks to the support of the Samuels Family Foundation, we are working to digitize important components from two of our largest and most significant collections: volumes of the board minutes of the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston (originally called the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Houston) between 1937 and 1980, and the Center News bulletins and program guides from the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center, which span a period of time from 1958 to 2000.

Enabling researchers, educators and community members to have digital access to Federation records from the first 40 years of the organization's history will unlock profound new directions in the study of the history of Houston's Jewish community. Federation records are a vital source of information about a range of topics, documenting efforts to welcome German Jewish refugees to Houston during World War II, the struggle against antisemitism, and the migration of the community from the Third Ward area to Meyerland/Southwest Houston, among other subjects. At the same time, the grand opening of the new Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center building this past February offers an impetus to look back at the rich history of the JCC in Houston and to make a portion of these historical records widely available to all. Together, this digital expansion of resources related to the history of two of the Houston Jewish community's most central institutions will have a lasting impact on the preservation and study of the Texas Jewish experience. ■



Rose Kantorczyk '20

I graduated from Rice in 2020 with degrees in sociology and policy studies, and, of course, a minor in Jewish studies.

My Jewish studies classes at Rice were some of my favorites — I loved getting to place the religious community in which I



Rose Kantorczyk '20

grew up into a larger social and historical context. I worked in the Houston Jewish History Archive through curator Joshua Furman's Jewish Houston course, had a memorable trip to Jerusalem with Jerusalem: The Holy City, and remember well the weirdness of telling people that my best class one semester was "my Holocaust class" (it was Holocaust Representation in Art, Literature and Film with Melissa Weininger [formerly the Anna Smith Fine Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies]).

I also worked for over two years as an undergraduate fellow at Rice's Religion and Public Life Program, where I got to study how religion affects the ways that people move through the world. I was especially fascinated by religion's role in movements for social change — I grew up in Jewish environments with very strong concepts of "tikkun olam" ("repairing the world"), and I loved getting to think about and apply those ideas beyond a personal scope. This fascination, paired with the robust sociological research skills that RPLP and Sociology Professor Elaine Howard Ecklund helped me to develop, culminated in writing a senior honors thesis in sociology about the Jewish concepts that drive immigration activism.

In early 2021, I came out as nonbinary and struggled with how to place my gender identity within Judaism. The following June, I began working for SOJOURN: the Southern Jewish Resource Network for Gender and Sexual Diversity. SOJOURN started in Atlanta in 2004 and became an independent nonprofit in 2013 — we're about to celebrate our 10-year anniversary. The organization educates synagogues, schools and nonprofits on LGBTQ+ welcoming and celebration, mobilizes Jewish communities to advocate around LGBTQ+ issues, and creates community spaces and events for queer Jews. We focus on the South, since both being Jewish and being queer in the South look very different than in other areas of the country. As SOJOURN's communications and legislative affairs coordinator, I spend most of my days writing everything from petitions to pronoun guides to posts for social media. I use Jewish teachings and values to make the case that gender and sexually diverse individuals have a place in Judaism. I also co-run Thrive: the Jewish Coalition to Defend Trans and LGBTQ+ Youth, where I work with Jews across the country fighting anti-trans bills in their state legislatures, and I write and speak on why Jewish communities should take a stand against legislation like gender-affirming care bans, "Don't Say Gay" laws and RFRA exemptions.

The first place where I learned to think critically about how Judaism and Jewish identity interact with our changing society was the Rice Program in Jewish Studies, and I'm immensely grateful for the groundwork it laid for my current career.

Bio: Rose Kantorczyk (they/them) is SOJOURN's communications and legislative affairs coordinator. They joined the organization in 2021, spreading the word about SOJOURN's programs, partnerships and advocacy work through our newsletter, website and social media. Rose cut their teeth in Jewish advocacy and storytelling as a fellow at Rice University's Religion and Public Life Program and landed at SOJOURN following a stint in digital fundraising for politics. They hold a bachelor's degree in sociology and policy studies from Rice University and are a 2023–2024 Hebrew Union College Jewish Ideas Fellow.

Rose lives in Montrose, Houston, with two roommates and two cats. In their free time, they enjoy reading queer sci-fi/fantasy novels, playing trumpet with the Houston Pride Band and riding shotgun on road trips across Texas. ■

Unexpected Community: HEBR/RELI 125

By Ally Godsil '25

If someone had told me in August that Biblical Hebrew would be the hardest class I'm taking this semester, I would have laughed at them. I also would have dropped the class.

As an aspiring scholar of Israeli history, I only added HEBR/RELI 125 to my schedule because it was the best alternative to studying modern Hebrew — a course not yet offered at Rice. Somehow, I have made it through the semester and emerged as a lover of biblical Hebrew, gladly putting in the hours memorizing such uncommon vocabulary as blessing (בְּרָכָה), prophet (נָבִיא) and king (מֶלֶךְ). How did I get here?

There is the matter of my conversion. Just as unexpected as the rigor of HEBR/RELI 125, my choice to convert to Judaism was something I could not have predicted in August. My interest in Jewish studies predated my decision to convert, and I had become used to the study of Jewish history, culture and religion with an outsider's lens. While there is value in the study of identities which are not your own, studying biblical Hebrew whilst taking my first steps into Jewish religious practice has created a particularly meaningful personal experience. Every class allows me to connect more deeply with Judaism.

One of the main reasons I decided to convert was the welcoming feeling I received from the Jewish community in Houston. I never would have expected that joy to extend to the realm of the Jewish studies classroom as well. My Rice classmates, Jewish or not, have created an energetic, fun, dedicated community which I look forward to joining every Tuesday and Thursday. Professor Henze routinely celebrates the fact that "we are doing something special in this class," learning biblical Hebrew at a speed that would impress Thomas O. Lambdin, the author of our textbook. This uniqueness goes beyond language study to the creation of a special community. I'm grateful to Professor Henze for his superb instruction of the course and look forward to more unexpected joys in the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice. ■



Ally Godsil

While there is value in the study of identities which are not your own, studying biblical Hebrew whilst taking my first steps into Jewish religious practice has created a particularly meaningful personal experience. Every class allows me to connect more deeply with Judaism.

Israeli Women Writers: A Lasting Impression

By Lily Primus '24

In working toward earning my minor in Jewish studies at Rice, I have been fortunate to take a variety of wonderful courses.



Lily Primus

This semester, I am lucky enough to be taking the course Israeli Women Writers with Ofra Amihay [the Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish Studies]. In this course, we have discussed

a variety of female authors from Israel, including Jewish and non-Jewish authors. The course spans throughout history, from pre-state Israel to modern day, studying women authors' texts that have made a profound impact on Israeli literature. I have been introduced to so many new incredible authors through taking this course — some of my favorites being Leah Goldberg, Yona Wallach and Dorit Rabinyan, to name a few.

Our class was also privileged to host author Shelly Oria for a Q&A on her collection of short stories, "New York 1, Tel Aviv 0." It was really special to meet an author who speaks about her work with so much honesty and openness and to learn more about her fantastic text. It was one of my favorite moments in the course, and I am so glad that my fellow students and I from the Jewish Studies Student Association, who co-sponsored the event, had the opportunity to meet Oria.

Israeli Women Writers is one of my favorite courses among the many that I have taken while studying at Rice. Ofra Amihay is incredibly knowledgeable and has introduced our class to so many phenomenal Israeli women authors, many of whom I likely would not have discovered if I had not taken this course. It has been extremely refreshing to be in a space where female, Jewish and Israeli identity is discussed with so much care and compassion. Through recognizing all the diverse texts written by the authors in our syllabus, it has become clear to me that there is so much more to learn about Israeli women's literature. This course has opened up a world of authors whose writing will leave a lasting impression on my life. ■

I have been introduced to so many new incredible authors through taking this course — some of my favorites being Leah Goldberg, Yona Wallach and Dorit Rabinyan, to name a few.

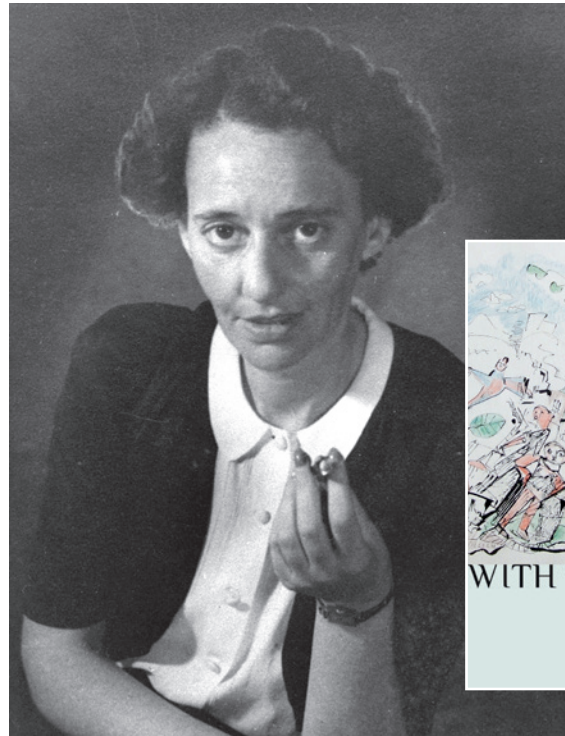
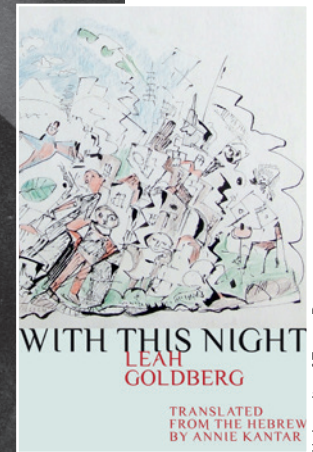
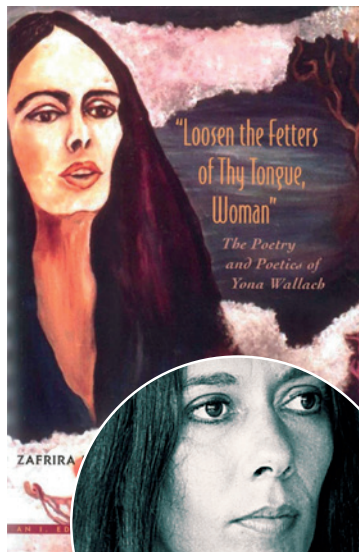


Photo: National Photo Collection of Israel, David Eldan



University of Texas Press



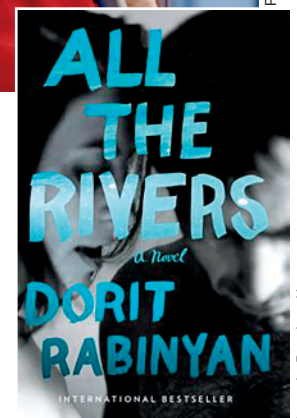
Hebrew Union College Press



Photo: © Yeeli Rozen



Photo: stephan-roehl.de



Penguin Random House

In Loving Memory of Melvin Abbe Dow, z”l

**By Matthias Henze, Director,
Program in Jewish Studies**

On Oct. 18, 2023, our dear friend and supporter of the Rice Program in Jewish Studies, Melvin Abbe Dow, passed away.

He was 95 years old. When I think of the very beginnings of our program and the initial conversations in the fall of 2008 — both on and off campus — about possibly launching a program in Jewish

What I remember most about Melvin, however, is his erudition and learning. Always eager to study and to help others, Melvin was a true champion of Jewish education. I count Melvin among my greatest teachers and mentors.



Melvin Abbe Dow

studies at Rice, I think of Melvin. Melvin and Frieda were there for us from the very beginning. They eagerly supported our program when it was just an idea, they provided much-needed startup funds, and Melvin opened many doors for us in the community, inviting others to champion the Rice Program in Jewish Studies. It was clear to me that with Melvin and Frieda involved, we were poised for success.

What I remember most about Melvin, however, is his erudition and learning. Always eager to study and to help others, Melvin was a true champion of Jewish education. I count Melvin among my greatest teachers and mentors. He was never shy to let me know when I had gone wrong (and, sure enough, I provided him with many opportunities to correct my missteps), and I soon discovered that I could always trust his advice. He could be stern, to be sure, and he was certainly strong on his principles, but he was always loving and unwavering in his support of Rice Jewish studies.

The list of Melvin’s professional accomplishments is long, as is the list of people who have benefited from his kindness and seemingly boundless energy. Karin and I feel lucky to count Melvin and Frieda as our dear friends. We remember fondly the many meals we have shared together. One year, when Melvin and Frieda invited us to their home for Passover, together with their five grown sons and many grandchildren, Melvin had prepared special study questions about the meaning and origin of the Haggadah. Melvin’s intellect remained sharp until our very last visit at their beautiful home, when he was still eager to learn about Rice and the latest news from the Rice Program in Jewish Studies.

I will never forget your warm smile, Melvin, and I will always follow your good advice. My heart is heavy; we have lost a true mensch. May his memory be for a blessing. ■

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

