



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

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Director's Note



Photograph by Ken Kosub

In the early 19th century, a group of German Jewish intellectuals came together to found the Wissenschaft des Judentums (Science of Judaism) movement. One goal of the Wissenschaft was to advocate for the inclusion of Jewish studies in the university curriculum. Many of the founders of the movement were the first Jewish scholars to read Jewish texts outside of their religious context, allowing for freedom to interpret traditional texts in a new way, without placing religious observance at the center of study.

The scholars of the movement did not live to see their dreams fulfilled. Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), one of the founders of Reform Judaism and a central figure of the movement, spent his life as a rabbi in Wiesbaden, Germany, publishing his research when he could, because university professorships were off-limits to Jews in Germany and the field to which his work properly belonged — what we now call Jewish studies — did not yet exist.

It is due to the work of scholars like Geiger and the other intellectuals of the Wissenschaft that Jewish studies exists as an academic discipline, and it is to them that we ultimately owe the existence of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice. Geiger could hardly have imagined a program like ours, in which we offer an average of 10 classes per semester for undergraduates

in various departments and fields to students of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. He would have been amazed at the number of faculty affiliated with the program; teaching in fields from sociology to art history; offering classes that take our students to Jerusalem, Berlin and New York; and doing research on topics as varied as medieval history and Hebrew literature. And he could not have foreseen such a close relationship between the university and the community at large, through which we are able to collaborate with Houston's Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center to offer programs like our annual lecture series, which this year drew hundreds of attendees to hear Rice professors discuss "Jewish Houston: Architecture, Politics, Suburbia." A world in which Jewish studies is an integral part of the university curriculum and in which Rice President David Leebron welcomes and promotes Jewish studies on campus would have seemed impossible to Geiger.

Recently, I received an invitation to attend a conference in Berlin on the tradition of Jewish biblical scholarship. The conference also celebrated the creation of the first chair in Bible and biblical exegesis at Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam and Zacharias Frankel College. Shani Tzoref, a scholar of ancient Judaism and the Dead Sea Scrolls, was named the first holder of that new chair.

It is through the continued work of Jewish studies programs everywhere — from Houston to Berlin — that we continue to make progress toward the goals of enlightenment and fulfill the dreams of Geiger and the scholars of the Wissenschaft.

Sincerely,

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



WATCH OUR NEW VIDEO WITH PRESIDENT DAVID LEEBRON
at jewishstudies.rice.edu.

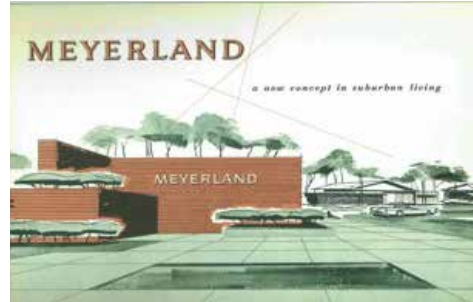
Selling the Suburban Lifestyle: How Meyerland Became Houston's Jewish Neighborhood

By Joshua Furman

Stanford and Joan Alexander Post-doctoral Fellow in Jewish Studies

In a span of just 15 years, from 1955 to 1970, the Houston Jewish community experienced dramatic demographic change. In 1955, nearly 80 percent of Houston Jewry lived east of Main Street, predominantly in the neighborhoods of Washington Terrace and Riverside Terrace, and most of the community's institutions were located there as well. Soon, however, affluent African-American families began moving into the area and the quality of the neighborhood was increasingly affected by highway construction and a lack of zoning restrictions. Over the next decade and a half, Jewish homeowners came under pressure from real estate agents to sell.

Fearing declining property values, many Jewish families migrated westward, following a larger trend of "white flight" among the general population. They settled in new and upcoming suburban neighborhoods along Braeswood Boulevard, particularly in Meyerland. By 1970, about two-thirds of the Houston Jewish community lived in this area of southwest Houston, now also home to the city's Jewish Community Center as well as most of its synagogues. Today, even as Houston has experienced tremendous



growth and Meyerland has been hit recently by two devastating floods, the city's southwestern quadrant remains the hub of the local Jewish community.

What has made Meyerland such an attractive destination for Jewish families? For starters, unlike other suburban developments in the Houston area, Meyerland made national news. In June 1955, Vice President Richard Nixon cut the ribbon for the opening of the Meyerland Parade of Homes exhibit. High-profile press coverage of Meyerland likely boosted its appeal to prospective middle-class Jewish homebuyers.

Astute advertising campaigns by the Meyerland Company, aimed at the discerning prospective homebuyer, also worked to attract new residents. A brochure from the late 1950s (see illustration) underscored that a Meyerland home would be a secure investment, as "restrictions for architectural control" protected the neighborhood's aesthetic

integrity. At a time when the vast majority of Jewish families still could not buy homes in Houston's most affluent neighborhoods, such as River Oaks, Meyerland developers consciously cultivated an upscale image for their new subdivision.

Finally, the name "Meyerland" itself may have had something to do with the neighborhood's appeal to the Jews of Houston. The subdivision was developed on land owned by the Meyer family, whose patriarch, Joseph Meyer, emigrated to the United States from Germany after the Civil War. Though this Meyer family was not Jewish, some have speculated that the Jewish-sounding name was enough to draw Jewish residents. "We did nothing to promote [Jewish migration to Meyerland] and nothing to prevent it," Rebecca Brown, Joseph Meyer's granddaughter, told *Bellaire Magazine* in 1995. "But it did seem to be a boom for the Jewish community." ■

Faculty Spotlight: Daniel Cohen



Daniel Cohen

I am associate professor of history, specializing in modern European history with an emphasis on the history of forced displacement, refugees and human rights in 20th-century Europe. This topic intersects with central aspects of Jewish history since the late 19th century: mass migration from the Russian "Pale of Settlement," statelessness after World War I, the German-Jewish refugee crisis of the 1930s, the fate of so-called "displaced persons" after the Holocaust, Jewish refugees from the Arab world after 1948, and Soviet Jews and the multiple human rights campaigns organized on their

behalf. My first book, "In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order" (Oxford University Press, 2012), tells the story of refugees in the aftermath of the Holocaust and discusses the rise of modern humanitarianism in postwar Germany. I have also published multiple articles and book chapters on these topics, including a recent essay on Christian humanitarianism and the Israeli War of Independence in 1948.

Currently, I am completing a book on "philosemitism" in postwar western Europe: has the experience of the Holocaust changed the ways non-Jews approached Jews, Jewishness and Judaism since 1945? I focus on France, Germany, England and Italy to trace new perceptions

and representations of Jews in Europe since the Shoah.

Since the inception of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice in 2009, I have been involved with the program and received extra support for my research. I also regularly teach a Jewish studies course, Jewish History, 1500–1948, which surveys Jewish history from the Spanish Expulsion of 1492 to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In spring 2015, I co-taught this class with our postdoctoral fellow, Josh Furman. Our team effort resulted in an exciting course, offering students a broader view of the Jewish experience in Europe and the United States. ■

Next Summer in Jerusalem: Blankfeld Fellowship Award

Michael Robinson '17

With the assistance of the Max and Deisi Blankfeld Fellowship, I was fortunate to spend June and July in Jerusalem, interviewing and filming various Israeli-Palestinian dialogue groups for the production of a documentary film.

I began with a focus on Hand in Hand, the center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel, which runs bilingual and bicultural schools around the country. In my film, I planned to explore how the organization imagines their mission and sees the possibility of future advancement in the current political climate.

As often happens, things did not go exactly as planned. Gaining access to the school and officials was more difficult than I had anticipated, so I quickly retooled my project with the help of new friends and acquaintances in Jerusalem and my adviser for the project, Melissa Weininger. I quickly expanded the scope of my film beyond Hand in Hand, talking with a multitude of nongovernmental organizations, including MACHSOM WATCH, Citizens Accord Forum, Roots, IPCRI and Kids 4 Peace, among others. As I collected various voices within the local grassroots front, my conception of conflict and change-making methods was complicated and challenged in new and fantastic ways.

But my stay in Jerusalem also exposed me more generally to Israeli

life and culture. Living in the German Colony for two months, I gained exposure to some of the inner workings of the city and began to recognize the myriad of different lifestyles playing out within such a small environment. This inspired me to connect to as many local narratives as possible. With film as the point of access, I was able to not only meet with organizational heads but also young Jewish students and activists, foreign nonprofit workers and other Americans abroad in the country for the summer. I attended the Jerusalem Film Festival and delved into the various ways in which cinema affects the landscape and the way the camera can produce different conceptions of place.

I was lucky that many of my informants shared their own incredible personal narratives about their experiences in Israel and how the country itself fits into their own sense of identity. Karin, a woman working with MACHSOM WATCH, detailed her complex relationship with activism and being both leftist and a Zionist. She then drove us around Tel Aviv and explained the city through her own



eyes, pointing out the old apartment complex that she grew up in, the parks she used to play in and the first building she ever designed after architecture school. Through her, we were able to engage with the spaces and history of Israel in a completely new and unique way.

Throughout my experience in Israel, I was able to apply skills and methods that I learned through my studies at Rice in film and anthropology to a real-world setting, exploring a tense sociopolitical moment on camera through the stories of citizens and activists. This incredible and transformative experience would not have been possible without the funding provided by the Blankfeld Fellowship and the guidance of the program. Courses I took through the Program in Jewish Studies, including the Jerusalem seminar, helped to prepare me for the experience of making a film about Israeli society. I am now in the process of editing the footage I shot in Israel and hope to screen my documentary by the end of the year. ■



Michael Robinson sets up a shot for his documentary on Jerusalem.

Student Profiles



Michael Robinson in Jerusalem, overlooking the Old City.

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Michael Abrams-Dyer

Hometown: East Hampton, NY
Major: Sport Management
Minor: Jewish Studies

“I came to Rice as a non-practicing Jew. I went to Hebrew school, I became a Bar Mitzvah and I even volunteered teaching Hebrew-school students in high school. But I never really felt much of a connection to the religion itself. I wanted to change that, or at least understand why I didn't connect to the religious aspects like I did to the community. So I took Introduction to Judaism with Melissa Weininger and started seeing my faith in a new light.

As we went through ancient Jewish history, rabbinic writings and comparisons of sects, I realized something: I am exceedingly proud to be Jewish. Jewish studies isn't a program that I originally considered when I came to Rice, but it helped me realize that there's so much more to Judaism than I ever imagined. The traditions make sense to me, and I take pride in them now. The academic side of Judaism is rich with great minds and theories and taking part in that has been one of the most rewarding experiences I've had at Rice.”



Chloe Wilson

Hometown: New York, NY
Major: Political Science
Minor: Jewish Studies

“From my first exposure to the Program in Jewish Studies in the course Jews on Film, my courses in the program have had a huge impact on my academic studies at Rice. The program has given me an incredibly unique and critical lens to apply to both my work in political science and in examining my own identity as a biracial woman in America.

The interdisciplinary nature of the program has also given me the opportunity to use what I learn in every part of my academic ventures. I spent the past summer in Taipei, studying Chinese at National Taiwan University. For my final presentation, I gave a speech in Chinese on the impact of the establishment of Israel upon the Jewish population in Iraq. The Program in Jewish Studies has grown to become a vital part of all aspects of my undergraduate experience, and I look forward to see how it will continue to build upon and support my academic studies at Rice.”

Faculty Works in Progress

Daniel Cohen, associate professor of history, is completing a book titled, “Second Emancipation: Europe and the Jewish Question, 1945 to the Present,” which focuses on “philosemitism” in postwar western Europe. The book will address the question of whether the experience of the Holocaust changed the way non-Jews approached Jews, Jewishness and Judaism since 1945. The book will focus on France, Germany, England and Italy to trace new perceptions and representations of Jews in Europe since the Shoah.

Matthias Henze, director of the Program in Jewish Studies and the Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies, spent August and September as the scholar in residence at the Mandelbaum House, the Jewish residential college at the University of Sydney in Australia. While in Sydney, he worked on his forthcoming monograph, “What Did Jesus Read? Ancient Jewish Literature and the Beginnings of Christianity.” The book, which is intended for a general readership, is concerned with the Jewish world of Jesus, namely the Judaism of the late Second Temple period. It makes the case that Jesus was deeply immersed in the Judaism of his time, a Judaism that is remarkably different from the religion of the Old Testament, which is the only form of Judaism most Christians are familiar with. The book aims to fill in the gaps in Christian understandings of Second Temple Judaism and Jesus in order to encourage more responsible readership of the New Testament.

Maya Soifer Irish, assistant professor of history, recently published “Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile: Tradition, Coexistence, and Change” (The Catholic University of America Press, 2016). The book examines the changes in Jewish-Christian relations in the Iberian kingdom of Castile during the 11th to mid-14th century. The study’s focus on the Christian heartland north of the Duero River, known as Old Castile, allows for a detailed investigation of the Jews’ changing relations with the area’s main power players, the monarchy, the church and the towns. In a departure from previous assessments, Soifer Irish

shows that the institutional and legal norms of toleration for the Jewish minority were forged not along the military frontier with Islam, but in the north of Castile. She also examines the Jews’ attitudes toward the various powers in the Christian society and shows that they were active players in the kingdom’s politics. The book breaks new ground in helping us understand more fully the tensions, and commonalities, between groups of different faiths in the late medieval period.

Brian Ogren, the Anna Smith Fine Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies, recently published “The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought” (Brill, 2016). The book offers a deep analysis of late 15th-century Italian Jewish thought concerning the creation of the world and the beginning of time. This is the first work to juxtapose the thought of Yohanan Alemanno, his Christian interlocutor Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the Spanish-Jewish exegete Isaac Abravanel, and Abravanel’s philosopher son Judah, known as Leone Ebreo. By bringing these thinkers together, this book presents a new understanding of early modern uses of Jewish texts. The book demonstrates that the syntheses of philosophy and Kabbalah carried out by these four intellectuals in their quest to understand the beginning of the world marked a new beginning in Western thought itself.

Yehuda Sharim, postdoctoral fellow in Jewish studies and Kinder Institute fellow, is the creative director of “Houston in Motion: Empowering Houston Migrant and Refugee Communities,” a multimedia project that provides a window into the lives and experiences of refugee communities in Houston. At the core of “Houston in Motion” is a vision for utilizing multimedia that extends traditional disciplinary boundaries in order to open a window into the complex circumstances of local migrant communities. The project aims to serve as an interdisciplinary clearing-house for instruction and information



Poster for Yehuda Sharim’s film, “We Are In It.”

regarding migration-related courses and resources at Rice and in Houston. Sharim also recently directed the documentary film “We Are In It,” which features scenes from the everyday lives of immigrants in Houston. The film has won a number of awards and has been screened at festivals and universities in Houston and across the country.

Melissa Weininger, the Anna Smith Fine Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies, and Diane Wolfthal, the David and Caroline Minter Professor of Humanities and professor of art history, are at work on a volume titled “Inside/Outside Yiddish.” This book will collect articles on a variety of time periods and in a wide range of disciplines that focus on Yiddish as a language that both crosses cultural and national boundaries and at the same time unites Ashkenazi Jewish communities. The articles in the volume are the product of an international conference of the same name held last year at Rice and organized by Weininger and Wolfthal. ■

Donor Spotlight: Marty and Karen Sosland

By Melissa Weininger

This year, the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice is delighted to be able to offer a new fellowship opportunity to students: The Sosland Family Endowed Scholarship. The goal of the scholarship is to provide funds for student travel abroad and independent research related to Jewish studies. According to the Soslands, “We hope and expect that the academic endeavors the scholarship will support reflect the same level of excellence that exists throughout the university. We have been privileged to hear marvelous presentations from students returning from summer study abroad or the marvelous Jerusalem seminar. We are proud of both the quality and diversity of the students who have participated in the program.”

The Soslands decided to support the program with a scholarship fund because of Marty’s own experience as a Rice undergraduate at Lovett College. Marty, class of 1976, said that “I have long appreciated Rice’s need-blind admissions policy and the generous grants that make attending affordable for all. A combination of merit scholarships, grants and relatively small loans made Rice affordable for me.” As a

result, he and his wife, Karen, have always dreamed “that if we were in a position to do so, we wanted to endow a scholarship as a permanent source of assistance.”

The Soslands’ son, Marshall, a member of Brown College, also graduated from Rice in 2008, so the Soslands have continued to maintain a close connection with the university. Marty noted, “As great as Rice was when I was an undergraduate, it was even better when Marshall attended and, almost unbelievably, is even better today. Yet I always felt it was missing a Jewish studies program, both as an academic program in its own right and as an attraction for Jewish students to attend Rice. So when Karen and I learned that Rice was instituting the Program in Jewish Studies, we were anxious to support it.” Marty serves as chair of the Jewish Studies Advisory Board.

The Soslands also are appreciative of the institutional support the university has provided to the Program in Jewish Studies. They feel that the program and the university have made great progress, and their gift is an investment in the future. “We appreciate the support that President Leebron and the university have provided and look forward to the day when no one can recall that there was a time when the Program in Jewish Studies did not exist.” ■

Marty and Karen Sosland



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— Marty and Karen Sosland

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