



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

Issue 14 • Fall 2018



Director's Note

By Matthias Henze

Page 2

Rice's First Israeli Professor: Shmuel Agmon

By Melissa Kean, University Historian

Page 3

Jerusalem Stories

- *Chloe Wilson '19*
- *Daniel Russell '19*
- *Nikolas Liebster '19 and Katie Webber '19*
- *Daniel Cohen '20 and Abigail Shulman '20*

Page 4

Looking at America Through the Eyes of Refugees

By Yehuda Sharim

Page 6

Enshrining the Book: Israeli Literature @ 70

*By Melissa Weininger, Anna Smith Fine
Lecturer in Jewish Studies*

Page 6

My Israel

*By Gilad Katz, Consul General of Israel to the
Southwest*

Page 7

Advisory Board Spotlight: Dan and Patti Steiner

By Dan Steiner

Page 7

Director's Note

On May 14, 1948, as the British Mandate was about to expire, David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency, proclaimed “the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Yisrael, to be known as the State of Israel.” In this issue of Branches, we celebrate Israel’s 70th birthday with a look at the various ways Rice has been and is engaged with Israel.

Since the inception of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice nine years ago, Israel has been at the heart of our programming. Our engagement with Israel has taken many different forms.



- We have benefited greatly from our close collaboration with the consulate general of Israel in Houston. With the help of our partners at the consulate, we have been able to bring several speakers to the Rice campus. In September 2018, I participated in a roundtable discussion hosted by Gilad Katz, consul general of Israel to the Southwest, during which my colleagues from Rice and the University of Houston discussed the current political situation in Israel. I would like to thank Consul General Katz for this invitation, for the many opportunities to work together with the consulate and for his short essay in this issue.
- We have brought a number of Israeli writers and artists to the Rice campus. These visits, often co-hosted with the ERJCC, have been among the most successful events we have organized. Just last year, the Israeli writers Dorit Rabinyan and Ruby Namdar visited Rice, as well as the artist Hanoch Piven.
- Every summer, the Program in Jewish Studies offers fellowships for our students to pursue projects related to Jewish studies. We are able to offer these scholarships due to the generosity of Desirée and Max Blankfeld '95 and the Sosland family. Students may travel wherever they want, though Israel remains at the top of the list of destinations. This year alone, seven Rice students traveled to Israel. You will find some stories about their time there in this issue. (For more student reports, please go to <https://jewishstudies.rice.edu/students>.) One Jewish studies minor, Chloe Wilson '19, spent the spring semester studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and reports on her experience.
- Several of the Program in Jewish Studies faculty routinely travel to Israel to do research, participate in academic conferences and collaborate with our Israeli colleagues. The program provides financial support for these important encounters. We hope to be able to expand the ways in which we collaborate with our colleagues in Israel, thus strengthening the bonds between academic institutions.
- This coming spring semester, Melissa Weininger and I will again offer the course Jerusalem: Holy City in Time and Imagination. This semesterlong seminar will take 20 Rice students to Jerusalem during spring break 2019. While in Jerusalem, we will study the history and archaeology of the city and meet with several Jerusalemites to learn about their day-to-day lives. The Jerusalem seminar offers Rice students a unique opportunity to learn about Jerusalem and Israel. For many of them, it is the first time they will travel to Israel.

As we grow the Program in Jewish Studies during the next years, we will create even more opportunities for our students and faculty to engage with Israel; learn about its unique history and literature; meet Israeli artists, politicians and academics; and experience its unique history and culture. Happy birthday, Israel!

Sincerely,

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

The Program in Jewish Studies

Course Offerings — Spring 2019

FWIS 124

Witnessing the Holocaust
Astrid Oesmann

GERM 322

Marx, Freud, Einstein:
Forebears of Modernity
Klaus Weissenberger

HIST 308

World of Late Antiquity
Michael Maas

HIST 316

Jews and Christians in the
Medieval Islamic World
Paula Sanders

JWST 121

Israel: Language and Culture II
Melissa Weininger

JWST 238

Becoming Americans
Joshua Furman

RELI 329

Bible in Popular Culture
Brian Ogren

RELI 363

Jewish Philosophy
Brian Ogren

RELI 392

Jerusalem: Holy City in Time
and Imagination
Matthias Henze/
Melissa Weininger

Rice's First Israeli Professor: Shmuel Agmon

By Melissa Kean, University Historian

Shmuel Agmon was the first Israeli to teach at Rice. He arrived in 1950 fresh from earning his doctorate in mathematics at the University of Paris under the direction of Szolem Mandelbrojt. (Mandelbrojt had also taught at Rice during the 1920s and again during World War II.) Agmon returned to Israel when he left Rice in 1952. He went on to a distinguished career at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, focusing on analysis and partial differential equations.



Dr. Shmuel Agmon To Lecture In Math

By Werner Grunbaum

Rice has a new visiting lecturer in mathematics. He is Dr. Shmuel Agmon who is a native of Tel Aviv, Israel. He recently received his "Doctorat d'etat" from the University of Paris, and plans to teach at Rice one or two years.

Dr. Agmon, who thinks that Rice is "a very nice place," was impressed by the Fondren Library. "The people here are very hospitable, very kind, and always helpful," he said.

Dr. Agmon received his master's degree in mathematics from the Hebrew University in Israel and completed his studies in France before coming to Rice. During the war he served as a volunteer in the Jewish Brigade of the British army for four years in Cyprus, Italy, and Belgium. Dr. Agmon is interested in music, swimming, and chess. He was once the youth chess champion in Israel.

Mrs. Agmon holds a degree from Columbia and was formerly editor of an Israeli weekly. Dr. Agmon's father, Nathan Bistrizky, is a well-known Zionist worker and writer. He has published novels and articles, and has had many of his plays produced in Israel.

This semester Dr. Agmon will teach Math. 560 (Infinitely Differen-

tiable Functions), a Math 300 section and a seminar.

Israel is a new country. Every thing there is modern with the exception of the old monuments. Tel Aviv was founded thirty-five years ago and today has a population of 300,000. The entire country is being built up.

Since the Hebrew University's buildings are still occupied by Abdulla's Arab Legion, its 1,000 students are dispersed in seventeen buildings all over Jerusalem.

At the University each student elects a specific program which is subject only to very general limitations. Usually only one yearly examination is given in each subject. A very general examination is given after four or five years' study before a master's degree is awarded. This examination may be taken whenever a student is ready for it and work may be completed at the student's own speed.

At the Hebrew University all subjects including the sciences are taught in Hebrew.

At this time there are three professors from Israel, in addition to Dr. Agmon, who are teaching in the United States.

14 Rue Stanislas
Paris 6, France
March 13, 1949

Dr. W. V. Houston, President
The Rice Institute
Houston, Texas

Dear Dr. Houston:

Thank you for your letter of March 5, 1949 informing me of my appointment as Lecturer in Mathematics at the Rice Institute for the coming academic year.

It will be a great honor for me to lecture in your very distinguished university and I shall do my best to prove myself worthy of the confidence shown in me.

Thank you, too, for the very kind suggestions regarding arrangements for traveling and living accommodations. I shall carry them out as you have indicated.

I look forward with great pleasure to working with the Rice Institute.

Sincerely yours,

S. Agmon

S. Agmon



Accompanying her husband to Houston, Agmon's wife, Galia Yardeni-Agmon, became the first Israeli student at Rice. She entered the graduate program in English in 1950 and studied 18th-century English prose and poetry. Back in Israel, she joined the staff of the Chaim Weizmann Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel at Tel Aviv University. She died in 1968. ■

Jerusalem Stories

✦ A Rice Student Abroad in Israel

By Chloe Wilson '19

Last spring, with the support of the Program in Jewish Studies, I had the amazing opportunity to study abroad at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for six months.

This was my first experience in Israel, and as someone who has been a Jewish studies minor since freshman year, it was incredible to see many of the topics that I had studied for so long become tangible and real parts of my life. I took courses at the Rothberg International School on Jewish mysticism, Israeli

literature and Hebrew. In the larger university, I took graduate courses on the history of Islam's relationship with the state and the political history of Jerusalem. Additionally, I had the opportunity to serve as a research assistant under Renana Keydar, a postdoctoral fellow at the Minerva Center for Human Rights at Hebrew University, on a digital humanities project.

My coursework, both at Rothberg

and in the larger university, gave me the context I needed to best process my time abroad. Studying Hebrew gave me enough vocabulary to become friends with my vegetable seller at the shuk (outdoor market), as well as a new level of understanding of the Israeli literature that I had read in Professor Weininger's Israeli Women Writers course the previous year. Through my course on Jerusalem's political history, I learned about how the Zionist and Arab national movements shaped the spatial and political realities of the city that I was living in.

During my time in Israel, I also had the good fortune to be able to travel

across the country, both through Rothberg and independently. In addition to seeing the usual tourist sites, some highlights included hiking the Golan Trail, visiting Kibbutz Hanaton (an interdenominational kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley), visiting Jordan (a brief weekend excursion that included Amman, Petra, Wadi Rum and Aqaba) and attending the Jacob's Ladder folk music festival by Lake Kineret (Sea of Galilee).

While I am extremely grateful for my time in Jerusalem, living there was not always an easy task. Despite having grown up in New York City, living in Jerusalem required a level of awareness that I was not accustomed to. The difficulty of this task, however, is something I am ultimately grateful for. Over the course of six months, I navigated the delicate nature of the political realities of the city, learned by heart the invisible borders that crosscut the city, dividing it into its many segregated and distinct

Over the course of six months, I navigated the delicate nature of the political realities of the city, learned by heart the invisible borders that crosscut the city, dividing it into its many segregated and distinct parts, and developed chutzpah that I never knew I had.

parts, and developed chutzpah that I never knew I had.

My time in Jerusalem was a learning experience in every sense of the phrase; above all, one in which I learned what it means to love and try to understand a deeply complex and flawed place. I am indebted to the support that the Program in Jewish Studies has shown me through my time at Rice, both academically and financially. My work in Jewish studies both at Rice and in Israel have fundamentally shaped the person I am today and will continue to impact my work for years to come. ■





✦ Lessons Outside the Classroom

By Daniel Russell '19

One night, Daniel Cohen '20 and I went into the city for a Shabbat dinner in an Orthodox neighborhood. No vehicles were allowed into the neighborhood on Shabbat, so after dinner, we had to walk out of the area to get a taxi to go back to our dorms. The Arab taxi driver who picked us up had a very gregarious personality, maybe even too gregarious as he tried to impress us by calling out the window to women on the street in English. When he learned that we were Arabic students, his demeanor changed completely, and he became very animated as he offered us a lot of advice on strategies for learning the language. He introduced us to Arabic poets and musicians that he thought would be helpful. He told us how we should approach the Quran with respect and reverence, which was kind of amusing given his previous behavior. What should have been a quiet 20-minute cab ride through empty streets became an unexpected 40-minute lesson on Arabic language and culture, which I'll always fondly remember. ■



✦ One Day in Jerusalem

By Nikolas Liebster '19 and Katie Webber '19

Although we spent only one day together in Jerusalem, we spent it doing practically everything one could have on a traveling Jerusalem bucket list. We met inside the Old City, and spent the morning haggling in shops and eating pastries that Nik — always eager to eat pastries — had overpaid for. We had a walking lunch of shawarma and falafel pita overlooking the Western Wall, where we met a nice American tour group that was excited to have their picture taken. We then took a bus to the Mount of Olives, and meandered past the Jewish cemetery to the Garden of Gethsemane (which Katie learned she'd been pronouncing wrong her whole life) and the Church of the Agony. We walked through the Kidron Valley and saw tourists riding camels, went up to the steps of the Temple and entered the Old City again. We saw the room of the Last Supper and politely waited until we left to agree that it clearly couldn't be where the actual Last Supper happened. Finally, the only moments of the whole day that we spent apart was when we had to enter separate men's and women's areas at David's Tomb, where Nik was given a blessing and a red bracelet to give to Katie by a friendly Orthodox Jewish man. We said goodbye for the evening and the summer. We agree that one needs more than one day in Jerusalem to really experience it, but if you only have one day you should spend it sightseeing, snacking and with a friend. ■

✦ Breakfast in Jaffa

By Daniel Cohen '20 and Abigail Shulman '20

One weekend in early August, we took a bus to the Old City of Jaffa to have breakfast at Abu Hassan, which has the best hummus in Israel, according to some. Old Jaffa is an ancient port city now home to romantic crumbling dwellings, trendy restaurants and open markets for antique — or maybe just old — furniture and objects.

Abu Hassan itself is on an unassuming street in a residential neighborhood. Though the line stretched out the door, it moved fast — two tables were crammed on the narrow sidewalk outside, and the six tables inside were each filled to maximum capacity. All of Israel seemed to exist in the cramped room: Arab and Jewish families, a young soldier carrying an M16 and tourists. Customers of different parties were seated at the same four-person table. No one seemed to mind. They go for the hummus, not the ambience.

After one man cut in front of us and successfully shouted his way into an open table, we sat down and ordered a good Israeli breakfast, hummus and Coke. It was delicious, but we knew we couldn't linger to enjoy it. We left full and happy 15 minutes later and celebrated that perhaps this had been our most Israeli experience yet. ■



Looking at America Through the Eyes of Refugees

By Yehuda Sharim

Former postdoctoral fellow Yehuda Sharim, now assistant professor in the Program of Global Art Studies at the University of California, Merced, reflects on his time at Rice and how it has influenced his work.

Exiled. Becoming what Hana Arendt called the “scum of the earth.” Doomed to live and die in camps. Stateless. Over my last five years at Rice, I was able to look deeply into these characteristics of the Jewish experience and connect them with the contemporaneous narratives of immigration and displacement that shape and make Houston. Thanks to the magnanimity of the Program of Jewish Studies, and particularly Matthias Henze, along with the invaluable help of faculty across campus, community leaders and activists, I was able to document the experiences of Houston immigrant and refugee communities through film. In each of the films I made while at Rice, “WE ARE IN IT” (2016), “Lessons in Seeing” (2017) and “Seeds of All Things” (2018), I attempted to expose not only the challenges of border crossing but also the radical beauty and infinite hope in thinking what America can and

should be, at times against all odds. The goal of these films was to demystify the immigrant experience and humanize migrants for a wide audience. As part of this project, my partner, Yan Digilov, and I, together with Houston in Motion, are developing a digital space that offers resources to Houston refugee and immigrant communities. As a son of a farmer who devoted his life to his strawberry fields from age

10, my time at Rice enabled me to cultivate that particular human soil of our existence, one that reminds us that all is fleeting, and humans are constantly in motion in search of a new hope. ■

Yehuda Sharim's latest film, “Seeds of All Things,” premiered in Houston Oct. 28. For more information, visit <https://asiasociety.org/texas/events/seeds-all-things-houston-film-screening-premiere>.

The same film will be screened at the Rice Media Center Nov. 2 and Nov. 3.

Enshrining the Book: Israeli Literature @ 70

By Melissa Weininger, Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish Studies

Last spring, Melissa Weininger, associate director of the Program in Jewish Studies, attended a conference on the past and future of Israeli literature, just one example of our faculty's engagement with Israel scholarship.

On April 12 and 13, 2018, 11 scholars of Israeli literature convened at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., to discuss the past, present and future of Israeli literature on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Israel's establishment. Organized by Professor Nancy Berg of Washington University and Professor Naomi Sokoloff of the University of Washington, the conference offered an opportunity to reflect on Israeli literature and culture through 70 years of history and development.

I presented a paper at the conference titled, “American Hebrew: The Transnational Israeli Novel in the Twenty-First Century.” My work examined two recent Israeli novels, Nava Semel's “E-srael” (Isra Isle) and Ruby Namdar's “HaBayit Asher Nekhrav” (The Ruined House) in the context of the diaspora history of Hebrew literature.

Other scholars from the United States and Israel presented papers on topics as varied as children's literature, 1960s Israeli pulp fiction, the role of animals in Israeli Holocaust literature and Yiddish in Israel. The breadth of topics indicates the diversity of Israeli literature after 70 years of statehood.

Berg and Sokoloff, who recently edited the collection “What We Talk About When We Talk About Hebrew” (University of Washington Press, 2018), plan to collect the revised and improved conference papers into an edited volume to be published by Syracuse University Press. ■



My Israel

By Gilad Katz, Consul General of Israel to the Southwest

This year, the state of Israel celebrated its 70th anniversary. But the Jewish history related to the land of Israel is more than 4,000 years old, dating from the time the Israelites entered the promised land in the days of Joshua.



Ancient and new. East and West. Religious and secular. Jews and non-Jews. Israel is one big melting pot of contradictions. I had the privilege to be born into this varied society.

But the story of the state of Israel is not only the story of modern Israelis; it is the story of the Jewish people. After more than 2,000 years of exile, the Jewish people came back to their homeland.

On the one hand, the existence of Israel is a fact. On the other hand, from its first day as a country — May 15, 1948, the day Israel was officially founded and recognized by the United Nations — there has not been a time that Israel wasn't under existential threat. There is no other country in the world that has faced this situation. But this position does not intimidate us, rather it challenges us and makes us much more devoted and passionate about our country and our people.

Israel belongs to all Jews around the world; therefore, we see each and every Jew not only as a partner but as a stakeholder. We encourage all Jews to come visit Israel. We call on young Jewish adults to see their future in Israel, and we want them to take part in the project of building the state.

We also extend our hands to all of our partners worldwide. We embrace the countries, leaders and individuals who support us and stand with us against our enemies.

So what is Israel in my eyes? It is a dream coming true. It is a beacon of democracy. It is a state that, against all odds, contributes to helping humanity in all areas of life. More than that, Israel is my home, the home of my children and hopefully the home of all my future descendants. ■

Consul General Gilad Katz was appointed as head of post in August 2017 to lead the consulate general of Israel to the Southwest United States. Prior to assuming the post, Consul General Katz held the title of adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Advisory Board Spotlight: Dan and Patti Steiner

By Dan Steiner

Dan Steiner '77 is one of the newest members of the Program in Jewish Studies Advisory Board. He and his wife, Patti, were drawn to the program because of its commitment to experiential education and to transmitting knowledge about Jewish culture and history to the next generation.

As longtime supporters of the Jewish community in Houston, we first became aware of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies through friends. Our first encounter with the program was a small dinner at which we met and heard from Matthias Henze, the director of the program.

At that first meeting, we were immediately impressed and drawn to Professor Henze's unique and inclusive view of the Jewish story, both ancient and modern. Patti and I both came to Judaism later in life: she converted while in medical school, while I grew up in a more secular Jewish home and only became involved in the Jewish community as an adult. So we understand the need for an inclusive and varied approach to Jewish history and culture, one that enriches our understanding of Jewish identity.

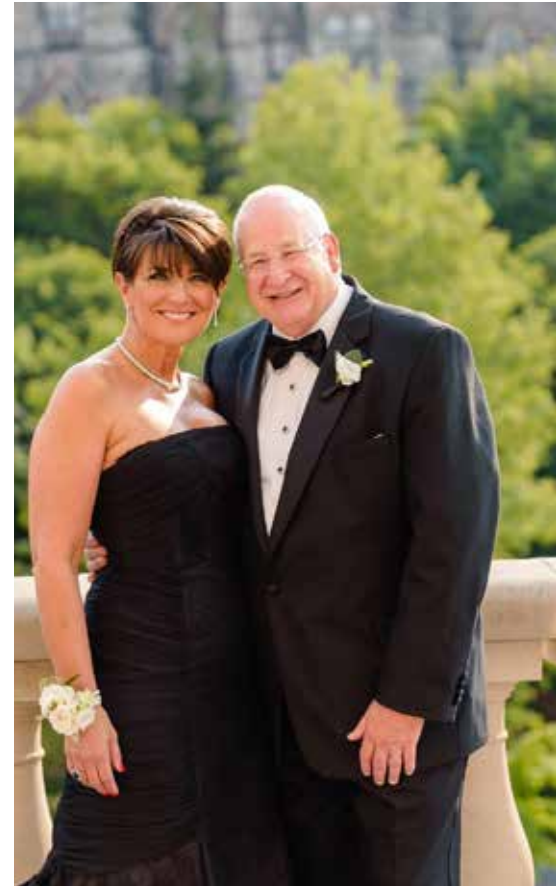
Rice has always been important to us and an institution that we have long supported, so supporting the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice is a natural outgrowth of our commitment both to the Jewish community and to the university.

When we were first approached about supporting the Jewish studies program at Rice, Professor Henze made clear the breadth of experience that the program offers to students. The program's emphasis on experiential learning particularly impressed us. We visited Israel together for the first time on a Federation mission trip, and our own experience there made us deeply aware of the transformative and inspiring potential of this type of educational travel.

One of our goals in supporting the Program in Jewish Studies is to inspire the next generation to support and participate in Jewish institutions and community in the future. We believe that the program's strongly experiential emphasis is very likely a way to encourage young people to better the world around them in a "Jewish" way, through both traditional and nontraditional causes.

We are also excited about the new Houston Jewish History Archive, supported by the program. Houston's recent experience with Hurricane Harvey is a devastating reminder of the importance of preserving our community's historical records.

We hope to continue to try to lead by example, and feel that our support of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice is a perfect example of a cause that provides just that encouragement to its lucky students. ■



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