



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

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Director's Note



Photograph by Jeff Fitlow

In May 2008, President David Leebron invited a small group of faculty to attend a baseball game at Rice's Reckling Park. While we were talking about a host of university-related issues, I proposed to the president that Rice ought to have a Program in Jewish Studies. Surprised at first, he responded very favorably. The next day, he asked me to make an appointment with him, so we could discuss the issue further.

Together with my colleague at the time, Gregory Kaplan, I began to work on what would become Rice's first Program in Jewish Studies. In January 2009, President Leebron hosted a reception at Wiess House to launch the program, marking the beginning of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice.

I often think back to President Leebron's strong endorsement and the memorable reception at his home 10 years ago. In 2009, I was an associate professor with no administrative experience; I had never been department chair and I had never run an academic unit. And yet, President Leebron was willing to take a chance because he firmly believed in Jewish studies, and he has remained one of our biggest supporters. I am immensely grateful to President Leebron and to the entire Rice administration for their unwavering support for Jewish studies over these years.

The Program in Jewish Studies stands on three pillars: teaching, research and community outreach. That means that there are three different groups of stakeholders: our students, our faculty, and our friends and supporters in the community. We have seen tremendous growth and expansion over the last 10 years in each of the three groups.

Our primary mission is to educate our students. We are committed to the study of Judaism in its many forms and expressions. Jewish religious practice and culture have thrived all over the world for thousands of years, making Jewish studies an important component of a liberal arts curriculum. The program offered one of the first minors available at Rice, and now there are more than 10 students studying toward the minor and the number grows each year. We offer about 10 courses per semester in different departments and across academic disciplines, ranging from the biblical period to the modern state of Israel. Four of our courses include a travel component over Rice's spring break. Heavily subsidized by the program, these courses take our students to New York, Berlin, Toledo and Jerusalem.



Left: The faculty of the Program in Jewish Studies. **Right:** Flyer from the antisemitism teach-in held in November.

Teaching in Jewish studies takes many different forms. In response to the Pittsburgh shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue Oct. 27, 2018, we teamed up with other groups on campus — the Boniuk Institute and the Religion in Public Life Program — to organize a daylong teach-in on antisemitism. We also offer scholarships for students to travel and study abroad over the summer and during the academic year. This past summer, seven Rice students pursued study and research projects in Israel.

The second pillar of our program is faculty research. There are currently 13 Rice faculty who are active in the Program in Jewish Studies. The program has created a space for faculty with interests in the field to come together. Our program aims to foster and promote a supportive research environment for our faculty: we provide resources to employ undergraduate research assistants, to travel abroad for research or to organize conferences. In May 2016, our program invited Jewish studies faculty members from other academic institutions in South Texas to come to the Rice campus for a weekend to get to know each other and to build a scholarly network. As a result, we created a consortium of Jewish studies faculty in Texas, known as the Texas Jewish Studies Triangle, with 19 participating academic institutions. Faculty members meet twice a year, talk about their research and exchange teaching ideas.

The Program in Jewish Studies stands on three pillars: teaching, research and community outreach. That means that there are three different groups of stakeholders: our students, our faculty, and our friends and supporters in the community.

Last year, the group organized the first Jewish studies undergraduate student conference in Texas, which was held on the University of Houston's campus.

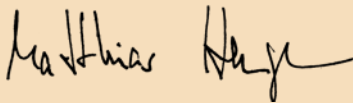
Our third pillar is community outreach. Rice Jewish studies works very closely with our community partners, including the JCC, the Federation, the Holocaust Museum Houston, many local

Jewish Studies at Rice

synagogues and the Israeli consulate. In August 2017 when Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston, Rice jumped into action. Joshua Furman and Melissa Kean rushed to synagogues and other institutions to rescue priceless historical documents from the flood. In July 2018, our program, together with the Woodson Research Center at Rice's Fondren Library, started the Houston Jewish History Archive. The mission of the archive is to collect, preserve and make accessible the documents, photographs, artifacts and memories that tell the story of Jewish life in Greater Houston and South Texas. Furman, the founding director, has already worked miracles to get the archive off the ground.

With this edition of Branches, we celebrate 10 years of Jewish studies at Rice. We have invited representatives of our stakeholder groups — students, faculty, supporters and community partners — to reflect on this amazing decade and to write about what the Program in Jewish Studies means to them. None of this would have been possible without the backing of the Rice administration, the enthusiasm of our students, and the tremendous support of our friends in the community, here in Houston and beyond. On behalf of our students and faculty, thank you very much. We are tremendously grateful.

Sincerely,



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



The Jewish Studies Program has earned our congratulations and recognition for its achievements over the past 10 years.

Jewish Studies and the Humanities

by Kathleen Canning, Dean of Humanities

The Program in Jewish Studies exemplifies the interdisciplinary work of the School of Humanities, writes Kathleen Canning, dean of the School of Humanities.

The Jewish Studies Program has earned our congratulations and recognition for its achievements over the past 10 years. It is a hub of interdisciplinary research, teaching, discovery and engagement conjoining distinguished faculty, postdoctoral fellows, archivists and students. Jewish studies has created a new curriculum and a new minor, which includes exciting study visits to New York and Jerusalem that allow Rice students to discover and engage definitive aspects of Jewish history and culture.

We particularly salute the exceptional work of the Houston Jewish History Archive, which is cataloging and curating crucial chapters in the history of Houston's Jewish communities. We salute the convening of the first Jewish studies undergraduate conference, including students from Rice, the University of Houston and other institutions in South Texas to present and exchange their research in Jewish studies.

The Program in Jewish Studies exemplifies the School of Humanities' new emphasis on interdisciplinary and connective study in the humanities and the emphasis on the ethical imperative of humanistic inquiry and exploration. The prospect of a Center for Jewish Studies, expanded to include new distinguished professorships, postdoctoral fellows and a public lecture series, promises to anchor Jewish studies in the School of Humanities and at Rice for the long term. Its proposed focus on migration and diaspora will invite conversation and shared inquiry with other interdisciplinary initiatives at Rice in African studies, Asian studies, the Boniuk Institute and the Religion in Public Life Program. As dean of humanities, I would like to recognize and thank Matthias Henze and his team for their excellent work in advancing faculty, student and public engagement in Jewish studies at Rice. We are also deeply grateful to the generous donors who have made the program's exciting growth and public outreach possible and look forward to the program's continued growth into a center! ■

A Center for Jewish Studies at Rice

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

Matthias Henze, director of the Program in Jewish Studies introduces the next phase of the program, a Center for Jewish Studies, and explains the vision behind this new project.

Since its inception in January 2009, Rice's Program in Jewish Studies has grown to become one of the most active and vibrant programs on the Rice campus, with a diversified curriculum, an engaged and inspired student body, strong community partnerships and new initiatives like the recently launched Houston Jewish History Archive. After 10 years of targeted expansion, we are now poised to build on our strengths to significantly enhance our impact at Rice and beyond. To take this important step forward, we seek to build what is currently a Program in Jewish Studies into a Center for Jewish Studies.

The vision for a new center is guided by the desire to expand our impact at Rice and in the community at large through the creation of a strong identity and sense of permanence. This means recognizing where we are, who our students are, the academic strengths of our faculty and how we can most effectively collaborate with our partners in Houston. While we will continue to offer courses and events on a large spectrum of topics, a center creates an opportunity to align our resources around an area of study that will serve as our intellectual center of gravity and magnify our reach. The thematic focus on migration and diaspora studies meets all of these criteria and will make Rice's center distinctive among Jewish studies programs across the U.S. More importantly, it will catalyze new research in the field, enhance our curricular offerings and expand our impact on the community.

Migration and diaspora are currently pressing issues around the globe, and we are uniquely positioned at Rice to contribute vital knowledge to the field, with several faculty members at Rice, both in Jewish studies and in other academic fields of study, already working in this area. Furthermore, Dean of Humanities Kathleen Canning has identified migration as one of the central collaborative research topics for Rice's School of

Humanities, to which multiple centers and departments in the humanities will be able to contribute. The new Center for Jewish Studies will thus be well integrated into the school and a key contributor to Rice's curriculum.

While our reach will always be global, our focus is local. Our new Houston Jewish History Archive, a collaboration between our program and the Woodson Research Center in Fondren Library, is dedicated to preserving priceless documents, photographs, artifacts and memories — including many historical records that were damaged and endangered in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey — that tell the story of Jewish life in Houston, an important port of entry for so many Jewish migrants. By collecting and preserving Houston's Jewish history, the archive anchors us in our local community, while serving as a catalyst for scholarly research in the field.

For these reasons, we are well positioned to become the premier university in the south for Jewish studies. To realize this vision, we must secure significant endowment funds in the range of \$12 million to support our strategic growth and firmly establish Rice University as a major player in Jewish history, culture and discourse. Specifically, this funding will enable the center to do the following:

- Strengthen our leadership in Jewish studies research and education — A newly endowed faculty chair will support the director of the center, who will set the strategic direction of the program, identify new avenues for research innovation, promote interdisciplinary collaboration and work closely with the dean of humanities and departments to develop curricula.
- Enhance our teaching and visibility in the community — A second endowed faculty position for the center's associate director will allow us to recruit a tenure-track teaching professor with expertise in migration and diaspora studies, who will oversee the center's programs and build connections within the local and regional Jewish community.
- Expand the Houston Jewish History Archive — We were able to launch the archive with a generous grant from the Stanford and Joan Alexander Foundation. Future plans for the archive include public exhibits and programs, educational programs

for Houston-area K-12 students and an extensive oral history project for which we plan to interview a number of individuals in and around Houston and record their remarkable life stories.

- Launch a highly visible lecture series — A lecture series will solidify our collaboration with our community partners and enable us to bring scholars, writers and other public figures to Houston to give presentations, both on and off campus.
- Launch a new visiting scholars program — The program is intended to make Rice a destination for scholars, activists, politicians, writers, composers and artists to be on campus for anywhere between two weeks to a full semester. Our visiting scholars will offer workshops, presentations, concerts and talks; they will come from across the United States, as well as from abroad, including, but not limited to, Israel.

The first 10 years of our program have been very successful. What we have been able to accomplish in a short period of time has far surpassed our expectations. Our alumni talk about how Jewish studies has completely transformed their Rice experience. Our community partners agree that the program has greatly enriched the opportunities for Jewish education in Houston. And our program is increasingly recognized in the U.S. and beyond for the many contributions it makes to Jewish learning. Together we have laid the foundation to take the next step and build a center that will continue to flourish.

I am grateful to Dean Canning for recognizing the many contributions a strong Center for Jewish Studies will be able to make to the School of Humanities and to the Rice campus in general. With the dean's support, and with the help from our friends and supporters, we will be able to transform our current Program in Jewish Studies at Rice into a center that will serve as a permanent hub for scholarship and teaching at Rice. ■

Community Voices

From Strength to Strength

by Joel Dinkin, Chief Executive
Officer, Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish
Community Center

The Program in Jewish Studies and the Evelyn Rubenstein JCC have a close working relationship, one that reflects a shared set of core values and priorities, according to Joel Dinkin, CEO of the JCC.

Some of the core values of the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center include embracing diversity, valuing community, a commitment to pluralism and support of Israel. Part of our mission is also to foster an understanding of how our past shapes our future. These core values are also central to the mission of the Rice University Program in Jewish Studies, now celebrating its 10th anniversary. It is no coincidence that throughout its 10-year existence the program and the JCC have created and nurtured a very meaningful partnership.

The visionary leaders that conceived the Program in Jewish Studies knew that it was critically important for the program's growth to establish and nurture meaningful off-campus partnerships. The

JCC has been honored to be a partner and looks forward to continued collaborations in the future.

The program's commitment to extending its reach off campus is a mutually beneficial initiative. Partnership with the JCC provides the Program in Jewish Studies exposure to the broader Houston Jewish community, and offers opportunities for Rice faculty to share their expertise with different kinds of students and community members with a vast array of experiences.

Our close relationship also provides the JCC with a supply of expert teachers and lecturers who can offer their knowledge to a community eager to learn. Rice faculty members teach in the JCC Melton program for lifelong learning, and each year offer a series of lectures to the entire community centered on a topic of interest to our members. And the new Houston Jewish History Archive, in addition to preserving documentation of the JCC's history, has also turned its focus to the broader Houston Jewish community. All of these partnerships illustrate the ways that the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice benefits our community.

Mazel tov on 10 years as we look forward to continued growth and success. May you grow from strength to strength. ■

The visionary leaders that conceived the Program in Jewish Studies knew that it was critically important for the program's growth to establish and nurture meaningful off-campus partnerships. The JCC has been honored to be a partner and looks forward to continued collaborations in the future.

Joel Dinkin with staff at the JCC.



Community Voices

continued

A Portal to Jewish Life

by Rabbi Kenny Weiss, Director of
Houston Hillel

In his work as Hillel director, Rabbi Kenny Weiss sees how the Program in Jewish Studies complements the work of Hillel, as the two come together to provide a well-rounded Jewish experience for Rice students.

When telling my personal story to prospective college students, I often share that I never participated in Hillel during my four years as an undergraduate at the University of California, San Diego. That sounds like an odd comment from a rabbi who works for Hillel. However, I imme-

Rabbi Kenny
Weiss



diately add that I found a Jewish home at UCSD taking classes in Jewish studies and modern Hebrew.

My story illustrates that students connect to Judaism through many different avenues, including Jewish studies. In my case, Jewish studies provided a vibrant portal through which I journeyed to life as a rabbi and Jewish professional.

I advocated for the establishment of Jewish studies at Rice University from the moment I arrived at Houston Hillel almost 19 years ago, because I knew the value of establishing multiple entry points to Jewish life at Rice. I also know that Houston Hillel's success and that of Rice's Jewish student community depends on a robust Jewish studies program. The degree to which we support and bolster each other provides our students with so much more than we can do individually.

Just one example occurred recently when Hillel hosted a Shabbat dinner on campus that featured two Israeli authors, Moshe Sakal and Dory Manor, whom Melissa Weininger and the Program in Jewish Studies brought to campus. Later this semester, the Program in Jewish Studies will host a lunch featuring poet Laura Even Engel, whom Hillel is bringing to Houston. The collaboration extends to planning, academics and scholarships and will continue in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

Jewish studies and Houston Hillel, along with the various student organizations on campus that reflect different approaches to Judaism and Israel, constitute what I see as a singular Jewish student community. I sense that our students, faculty and professionals also see Rice's Jewish student community as a single group. The collaboration between Hillel and Jewish studies reflects that approach. Together we help Jewish students — and non-Jewish students — take journeys through Jewish life, culture and history. ■

Rice students enjoy
Shabbat dinner at
the Jones College
Magister's house.



Rice Enhances Jewish Learning in Houston

by Rabbi Ranon Teller, Congregation Brith Shalom

The Program in Jewish Studies fills a crucial role for the community, says Rabbi Ranon Teller of Congregation Brith Shalom: It provides an intellectual complement to the spiritual work of Houston's synagogues and clergy.



Rabbi Ranon Teller

The Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University plays an essential role in our city's Jewish community, providing us with academic engagement and intellectual discourse, which is at the heart of the Jewish experience. Our rabbis claimed that the value of learning is equal to that of all of other Jewish values put together.

Synagogues provide the Jewish community with a myriad of opportunities for Jewish engagement, but the synagogue cannot fulfill all the needs

of the community. We need a network of partners to create an exemplary Jewish community. The Program in Jewish Studies at Rice provides an outlet for advanced academic scholarship that allows synagogues to focus on their core competencies.

I am grateful for the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University because I spend most of my rabbinic hours focused on synagogue concerns. I am the spiritual leader of an active synagogue community. I officiate, coordinate, program, plan, comfort, inspire, teach, learn, budget, develop, celebrate, discuss, decide, fulfill, care, manage, organize, recite, pray, bless and sing. There is little time to pursue the pleasures of academic pursuit. Our Houston Jewish community can depend on the professors at Rice University to provide us with thought-provoking and challenging academic engagement.

Despite my busy rabbinic calendar, I make time to connect with students in the program both on the university campus and in my synagogue. One of our many collaborations occurred in a class on the Psalms taught by Matthias Henze and Melissa Weininger. Their students studied the biblical text in the classroom, but the professors also wanted to expose the students to the context of the Psalms as they function in the contemporary Jewish liturgical tradition. I was invited to the classroom to demonstrate how we use Psalms in prayer. Then, I invited the students to a Brith Shalom service to experience the Psalms in real time. The students deeply enjoyed the insight into the historical, academic and contemporary value of the Psalms.

Each time I visit campus and each time we are honored with a visit from Rice University students, I am reminded of the great resource the Houston Jewish community has in the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University, and I am grateful for this deep wellspring of Jewish academic learning. ■

Jewish Studies Faculty in the Community

by Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun

Rabbi Steven Morgen of Congregation Beth Yeshurun reflects on the partnerships between the Program in Jewish Studies and the community, particularly the rich base of knowledge provided by the faculty.



Rabbi Steven Morgen

As a congregational rabbi in Houston, I am delighted that Rice University has an active Program in Jewish Studies. In addition to the courses offered to Rice University students, the faculty have partnered with several of the local Jewish institutions to bring their expertise to the Houston Jewish community.

For instance, at Congregation Beth Yeshurun, where I am one of the rabbis, I organized a three-part dialogue with Professor Matthias Henze dealing with the separation of Christianity and Judaism in the early centuries of the Common Era. We had very good attendance at this program — by both Christians and Jews — and we received a great deal of positive feedback. Many participants told us they learned a lot from Professor Henze's knowledge of Judaism in late antiquity.

Joshua Furman has been indefatigable in gathering documents from Jewish institutions in Houston for Rice University's Houston Jewish History Archive, supported by the Program in Jewish Studies. Many of our documents were preserved after the flood from Hurricane Harvey because Furman brought experts to dry out the documents before they were permanently destroyed, and the congregation has now donated many of those documents to the archive.

Both Furman and Melissa Weininger have also given a few lectures at our Sunday morning adult learning program on topics ranging from the history of the Jewish community in Houston to Israeli literature and culture.

The Program in Jewish Studies also brings in visiting scholars and shares those scholars with the Jewish community. Two years ago, Yale professor Christine Hayes gave several talks about the Talmud and rabbinic Judaism, which were well-attended and well-received.

Rice University faculty have also participated in the Houston Jewish community's annual citywide Yom Limmud — Day of Learning — offering lectures on various topics, and they also teach in the adult learning program at the Jewish Community Center and in other synagogues in town.

In short, the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University is an invaluable resource for our local Jewish community, and I look forward to sharing many more opportunities to collaborate with them on educational programs in the future. ■

Faculty Notes

Researching Antisemitism in Medieval Spain

by **Maya Soifer Irish, Associate
Professor of History**

History professor Maya Soifer Irish uses archival materials to advance her research on antisemitism in medieval Spain. This summer, she traveled to Madrid and Seville with the support of the Program in Jewish Studies.

Financial support from the Program in Jewish Studies has been indispensable for the success of the project since its inception.



on the terrible events of 1391. Since then, I have found crucially important records documenting the activities of Ferrán Martínez, a cleric whose anti-Semitic sermons sparked the riot.

Documents from the Cathedral Archive of Seville that I discovered during two subsequent summer research trips supported by the Program in Jewish Studies showed me that the Jewish community found success and prosperity in 14th-century Seville, but also faced grave challenges because of the changing religious and political climate in the city and in the kingdom of Castile as a whole.

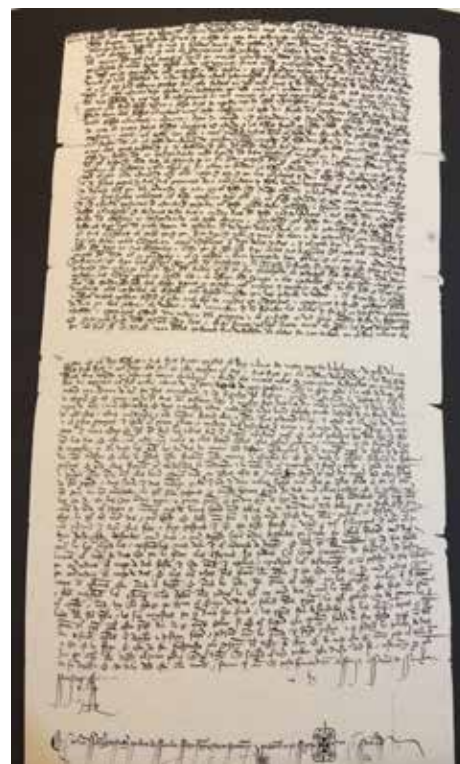
When my book is finished and published, I hope it to be a major breakthrough in our understanding of religious violence and coexistence in medieval Spain. This breakthrough would not have been possible without the existence and support of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, which has seen the value of this project from the beginning and has been instrumental in my research every step of the way. ■

Left: Professor Maya Soifer Irish in Seville, Spain.

Below: A document about Ferrán Martínez in Madrid's National Historical Archive.

In June 1391, a raging mob attacked the Jewish quarter in Seville, killing many Jews and forcing many others to convert to Christianity under the threat of death. The violence then spread to other cities in Spain, dealing a devastating blow to communities that had weathered many storms during their sojourn in Iberia under Muslim and Christian rule. Why did the first riot happen in Seville, an Andalusian city with a long history of religious coexistence? The book I am currently writing aims to answer this question.

Financial support from the Program in Jewish Studies has been indispensable for the success of the project since its inception. In summer 2014, using funds provided by the program, I traveled to Madrid and Seville to begin the search for archival documents that could shed light



Philosemitism and European History

by G. Daniel Cohen, Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor of History

Professor Daniel Cohen, the Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor of Jewish Studies, has been writing about postwar European philosemitism and how it reflects the relationship between contemporary Europe and the Jewish community.



Professor Daniel Cohen

How did the Holocaust affect perceptions and representations of Jews after World War II in Europe? This is the question at the heart of my current book project, titled “Good Jews. A Critical History of Philosemitism in Postwar Europe,” which I have been researching with the support of the Program in Jewish Studies.

Historians have recently shown how in East-Central Europe the end of Nazi rule was accompanied by violence against Holocaust survivors. Between 1944 and 1946, multiple attacks on surviving Jews occurred in the Western Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. In liberated Western Europe, blatant expressions of antisemitism were generally suppressed. But in occupied Germany, Nazi racial antisemitism mutated into latent antagonism toward Jewish refugees and the remnants of the prewar community. In Austria, the depth of antisemitic prejudice shocked numerous contemporary observers. In France, the Low Countries and Italy, antisemitism was banned from public discourse but in 1945–46 the issue of restitution gave way to anti-Jewish hostility.

Yet if the end of the war did not announce the end of antisemitism, Jews, Judaism and Jewishness also acquired positive value in the aftermath of the Shoah. My research demonstrates that not unlike antisemitism, European philosemitic discourse mutated over time. Philosemitism fulfilled three different functions: compensation, pity and more rarely, political solidarity. To counteract the image of the Jewish enemy, secular and Christian philosemites imagined successive types of loveable “good Jews.” This newfound sympathy was not of course devoid of ambiguities. It at times recycled negative stereotypes or reaffirmed Jewish difference. But while the demonic Israeli or cosmopolitan Jew continues to fuel antisemitic paranoia, an ever-shifting philosemitism also defines the relationship between contemporary Europe and its Jews.

My book highlights the evolution of philosemitic discourse in Europe from 1945 to the present. It is precisely this type of work that is made possible by the existence of a strong Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, which supports new research by faculty in a variety of ways. ■

Music and Cultural Exchange

by Richard Lavenda, Professor of Composition and Theory, Shepherd School of Music

One service the Program in Jewish Studies provides is financial support to our faculty. Professor Richard Lavenda was able to visit a number of Israeli music schools during his sabbatical leave thanks to this support.



Professor Richard Lavenda

When composers visit a music school, they are usually asked to present some of their music to the weekly composition department seminar. We do that here at the Shepherd School; it’s a wonderful opportunity for students to meet active composers and to

get some insight into their influences, their creative process and the specific circumstances surrounding the music that is played. The students ask questions, the visitor gets to meet the students and, whenever possible, they hear some of the composer’s music. During my sabbatical leave during the fall semester 2018, I was able to serve as a visiting composer at three music schools in Israel, a trip that was made possible, in part, by the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice.

I first gave a seminar at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. About 30 students were in attendance. I played recordings of two of my recent compositions, and we had a lively conversation about my music as well about some of the current trends in American contemporary music. I was very impressed with their sophistication and knowledge.

Two days later, I presented a similar seminar at Tel Aviv University, for about the same number of students, and the students were even more engaged and interesting. A very nice feature of this class was that a former student of mine, who received a Master of Music degree from the Shepherd School about 20 years ago, is on the faculty there and was able to attend my class. He and I talked for a long time afterward, mostly about the current situation in Israel for composers and for contemporary music in general.

I then gave a master class at the University of Haifa. Eight students played recordings of their music for me, and I commented on each one. While this is a fairly standard activity for a visiting composer, the music they played was remarkably diverse stylistically and extremely interesting.

This trip enabled me to talk about my music and to learn about what these Israeli students and faculty are doing. It is precisely this kind of academic and artistic exchange with Israel that is enabled through the work of the Program in Jewish Studies. ■

Students and Alumni

How Jewish Studies Stumbled Into My Life and Changed It Forever

by Sophia Pereira '21

Sophomore Sophie Pereira thought she had her course of study at Rice all planned out. Then an encounter with Jewish studies changed all that.

As we now approach the 10th anniversary of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University, I have been reflecting on how the program and its dedicated professors played an integral role in shifting the course of my academic plans. My freshman year at Rice, I was set on being a political science and psychology double major. I am on a prelaw track and wanted to take classes that forced me to write and think more critically. I also wanted two majors that stimulated my intellectual curiosity and provided me with skills that would assist in my job search upon graduation. One requirement for a degree at Rice is that all freshmen must take a Freshman Writing Intensive Seminar (FWIS) during their first year. I was excited to take a course about banned books to fulfill this requirement; however, on registration day I found out I was not accepted into this course, or the backup course I designated. In fact, there was only one spot left for a FWIS class, and it was titled *Jews on Film*.

My friends all know I do not enjoy watching old movies. I was not looking forward to this course. While I walked into this class a skeptic, I walked out a better student, a better writer and an ambassador for the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice. While this had a lot to do with my professor, Melissa Weininger, and her energy for the topic, her film choices were interesting, and her writing lessons and constructive critiques were incredibly valuable. The small class size also made this an ideal space to communicate ideas with my peers, ask in-depth questions, and become familiar with the Program in Jewish Studies. From that fortuitous first day of class freshman year, my academic plan changed.

After I completed the FWIS course, I switched my four-year plan, dropped psychology as a major and began mapping out the courses needed to complete a Jewish Studies minor. Then I stumbled on an incredible opportunity. With the help of Professor Weininger, I applied for and received a grant to research comparative politics in Israel, combining my passion for politics and law with my newfound

interest in Jewish studies. In the summer between my freshman and sophomore years, I spent two weeks in Israel studying the systems of the Israeli Knesset and the Israeli Supreme Court and comparing them to the United States Congress and Supreme Court, respectively. My research focused on Israel's political structure and how it is shaped by the country's unique history and culture. I visited several important historical sites in Israel, including former Prime Minister Ben Gurion's home, Independence Hall, the Palmach Museum, the Ayalon Institute, Caesarea, Akko, Gamla, Tzafat, Masada, Yad Veshem, the Ramparts Walk, the Temple Mount and the Israel Museum.

To further understand Israel's history, I also immersed myself into its culture and participated in several cultural activities, including attending a graffiti tour of Jerusalem, visiting a kibbutz, hiking the Ein Gedi Nature reserve, visiting the Dead Sea, exploring the four quarters in the Old City of Jerusalem and visiting the Machane Yehuda market. Lastly, in tying Israel's history and culture to its politics, I devoted a significant portion of my time in Israel studying Israel's relations with Syria, Jordan, and the Bedouin and Druze communities. Of course, I also visited the Knesset and the Israeli Supreme Court, watched arguments in sessions, and learned how laws are made and enforced.

This experiential learning cemented my love of politics, law and Jewish studies. I hope to expand on this research in the future, perhaps spending a full summer studying abroad in Israel. In the interim, I am content and fulfilled pursuing my Jewish studies minor at Rice, which has included courses such as *Jews on Film*, Hebrew, and *Jerusalem and Its History*. I also look forward to visiting Jerusalem this spring break with my Rice peers. Being part of Jewish studies at Rice has provided me with unique, rigorous and exciting opportunities. In truth, it has changed the course of my journey here at Rice and has provided me with an amazing support system inside the larger Rice University community. ■



Sophia Pereira

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**My friends all know I do not enjoy watching old movies. I was not looking forward to this course. While I walked into this class a skeptic, I walked out a better student, a better writer and an ambassador for the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice.**  
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Finding Myself in Jewish Studies

by Hannah Bosley '13

For alumna and Jewish studies minor Hannah Bosley, the program changed not just her course of study but also the way she lived her life.



Hannah Bosley

During my childhood, I genuinely thought that Jewish people didn't live in Texas. I grew up in a smaller city in the East Texas Bible Belt, and this was one of many misinformed beliefs that, as a kid, I just never questioned (i.e., pork chops are a balanced meal). I was the product of a culture that valued homogeneity over diversity, and conformity over questioning. Asking too many questions was at best annoying, and at worst a sign of fomenting revolution.

Like many college students, my early adulthood began with one big question: Who am I? During my first year at Rice, this search for identity led me to Jewish studies. Moving to Houston had opened my eyes to the vast diversity of people and experiences around me. I realized I had much to learn and many questions I wanted to ask. I set up a meeting with Rabbi Kenny Weiss of Houston Hillel, who graciously allowed me to pick his brain: What did it mean to be Jewish, if so many Jews were atheists? What do Jews believe? Why did their prayer books open backwards? As I shared with Rabbi Kenny my burgeoning desire to convert to Judaism, he told me that Judaism is about actions, rather than beliefs, and one of the most important actions is learning and asking questions. He encouraged me to continue learning more and following my questions about Judaism. Coincidentally, around this time I learned of the new Jewish studies program at Rice. It was *bashert* (inevitable).

Motivated equally by academic curiosity and my own search for identity, I began taking Jewish studies courses every semester. Jewish studies encouraged me to explore and follow my passions, academic and personal, by continuing to grapple with my questions. As I learned and grew through these courses, I had regular meetings with Rabbi Kenny, and also with my excellent Jewish studies professors, to ask new and increasingly complex questions over coffee or walks around campus. We talked for hours about topics big and small, from matzah ball recipes to ideas about the meaning of death and the afterlife. I quickly began to find my identity in the community created by Jewish studies at Rice. My courses were academically fascinating and also translated into my real life as I went through the process of conversion. Shira Lander's Introduction to Judaism course asked us to consider the question, "Who is a Jew?," which occasionally kept me up at night; I ended up discussing my thoughts about this question in front of the Beit Din a year later. I learned to read and write Hebrew during four heartwarming semesters in Luisa Kluger's Modern Hebrew class (which became a little *mishpacha* [family] of its own). In parallel with lessons from Rabbi Kenny and some amazingly patient members of Houston's broader Jewish community, I was soon leading Shabbat services in Hebrew at Hillel every week.

Through Jewish studies I met some of my closest friends and had some of my most interesting adventures at Rice. As one example, my friend Eli (also a Jewish studies alumnus) and I were so inspired by the richness of Jewish history in small southern towns like the one I had grown up in that we planned a winter break driving trip through Texas, from Corsicana to Del Rio, where we met generations of small-

town southern Jewish communities and learned about their history. My childhood self would have been fascinated to learn that many Jews do, in fact, live in Texas. Eli later joined the Israeli military, and I was able to meet up with him in Israel during my first trip there in 2015, two years after graduating from Rice. On this same trip, while watching the sunrise at Masada, I experienced the feeling of awe and connection to something greater than myself — a history, a culture, a people, a home — that many before me have described more articulately. In that moment, I realized with immense gratitude that my experiences in Jewish studies fundamentally shaped my identity in a way that helped me find myself and my home. ■

Jewish Studies in the World

by Louise Bentsen '13

Louise Bentsen '13 one of the first students in the program, reflects on how Jewish studies enriched her college experience and still informs her work in politics.



Louise Bentsen

"Jewish studies," they ask. "Yes! Jewish studies," I reply. In my role as a legislative director for U.S. Rep. Vicente Gonzalez (TX-15), I meet with a variety of constituents and stakeholders on issues ranging from foreign affairs and defense to international trade, energy and agriculture. As a young person in Washington, D.C., I meet ambitious, eager and inquisitive young people on a daily basis. These encounters almost always include some degree of small talk and friendly conversation, specifically questions about my hometown or schooling. My answer often elicits great curiosity and follow-up questions about the coursework, my experience with the program and how I use what I learned day-to-day. Each time that I recount my experiences in the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, I fondly remember my modern Hebrew classes with Luisa Kluger, visits with the Israeli Consulate, meeting former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren at the Baker Institute, Introduction to Judaism with Shira Lander, and all of my classmates and professors who welcomed me into what was then a fledgling but vibrant program focused on opening minds, experiential learning, fostering a sense of community and encouraging intellectual curiosity.

As an undergraduate, I found ways to weave my love for the subject matter into other courses, writing about the South African and Israeli relationship during the 1960s and 1970s and attending various events with Houston Hillel. I carried that same passion with me to graduate school as a student of conflict, war and democracy, and ultimately to the workplace where I continue to explore the U.S.-Israel relationship, build my own diverse network and interact with the Jewish community. Two years ago, I had the opportunity to join a bipartisan and bicameral congressional staff delegation to Israel. For years, I had dreamed of visiting Israel and seeing the sites referenced in my textbooks and class discussions and hearing the language I had spent two years learning. This was more than a dream realized. Visiting Israel sparked a renewed interest in Jewish studies as well as a profound appreciation for Rice's program and where it can take students like me. ■

Students and Alumni

continued

Immersing Myself in Jewish Studies

by **Chloe Wilson '19**

Senior and graduating Jewish studies minor Chloe Wilson has been all over the world with Jewish studies. From Taiwan to Jerusalem, Chloe has brought her interest in Jewish Studies with her wherever she goes.

Since my first Jewish studies course as a first-semester freshman, the Program in Jewish Studies has been a fundamental component of my time at Rice. The interdisciplinary nature of the program's courses has allowed me to incorporate Jewish studies into everything that I learn, ranging from personal to professional interests. Additionally, the generous funding provided by this program has enabled me to gain experiences that I otherwise would never have had the opportunity to explore.



Chloe Wilson

One example of how thoroughly the Program in Jewish Studies has impacted my Rice career occurred in Taiwan, while I was studying Chinese there in the summer after my freshman year. Although the program I was in had nothing to do with Jewish studies and was entirely focused on Chinese language acquisition, I had been so influenced by my Jewish studies courses that I gave my final presentation on the impact of the establishment of Israel on the Jewish population in Iraq. There I was, in Taiwan, speaking in Chinese about Israel and Mizrahi identity.

The following year, with the financial support of the program, I was able to study Hebrew over the summer, in preparation for studying abroad in Israel. Last year, once again with the help of the program, I spent six months studying at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. While there I was able to travel frequently, including bathing in the springs of Ein Gedi, hiking in the Golan and attending a folk music festival near the Galilee. Living in Jerusalem, I gained a firsthand understanding of the complex nature of Israeli life and culture. This year, I am excited to be writing my senior thesis on ritual innovation in the use of mikvah (Jewish ritual bath).

This overview barely scratches the surface of how deeply Jewish studies has shaped my time here. I have been continually amazed at the way in which this program has been able to bring people from all different backgrounds, disciplines, cultural contexts and varying levels of knowledge together to learn, discuss and above all, form a community. I am deeply indebted to the Program in Jewish Studies, its phenomenal professors and generous funding for enriching my Rice experience. ■

History and Archives

Szolem Mandelbrojt's Lifesaving Relationship With Rice

by **Melissa Kean, University Historian**

University Historian Melissa Kean has been researching Rice's Jewish history for many years and writes about the important role that Rice played in the life and career of the mathematician Szolem Mandelbrojt.

Szolem Mandelbrojt was one of the most important figures in the history of mathematics at Rice. He was born in Warsaw and earned his doctorate from the Sorbonne under another distinguished French Jewish mathematician, Jacques Hadamard. Mandelbrojt first arrived at Rice as a lecturer for the 1926-27 academic year, one piece of a lively and fruitful continuing interchange between Rice's mathematicians and their counterparts in France that began with Edgar Odell Lovett's visit to Hadamard during his 1909 trip around the world. Mandelbrojt returned to France in autumn 1927 and was successively professor at the Faculty of Sciences of Lille, professor at the Faculty of Sciences at Clermont-Ferrand, and holder of the prestigious chair of mathematics and mechanics at the College de France, the elite research institute founded in 1530.

With the declaration of war in September 1939, Mandelbrojt immediately entered the French army, serving as an artillery officer until the fall of France. Canadian scientist Louis Rapkine worked tirelessly in conjunction with the Rockefeller Foundation to move French Jewish scholars to safety for the duration of the war and through their offices Rice issued an official invitation for him to return to campus. This proved to be no simple journey but he arrived in Houston in October 1940 and immediately took up



Members of Rice's mathematics department with Szolem Mandelbrojt (front center), 1927

his duties at the institute. His time here was remarkably productive. He taught both graduate students and undergraduates, gave a series of lectures that were later published, and was the speaker at every math department colloquium for the next four years. In summer 1944, he was called by the French Committee of National Liberation to join the French Scientific Committee in England. Rice made clear that it considered this appointment a leave of absence and looked forward to welcoming him back when it became possible.



Above: (L-R) Radoslav Tsanoff (philosophy), Szolem Mandelbrojt and H.A. Wilson (physics).



Left: A letter dated 1926 from Szolem Mandelbrojt to Edgar Odell Lovett.

And come back he did. After the war, Mandelbrojt returned to his post in Paris, but also remained in Houston. For the next 20 years, he spent the first semester of each academic year at Rice and the second at the College de France, often taking his best student back and forth with him. Something of his importance to Rice can be seen in a note written by President Houston in 1951 when he learned that Mandelbrojt had agreed to continue this relationship indefinitely: "I am greatly pleased and happy ... You have been the principal stimulus to our mathematics department ever since I have known it, and I like to be able to look forward to its continuing growth and development under your inspiration."

Aside from his significant intellectual contributions, Mandelbrojt was an important figure on campus. He was popular with students, outside audiences, and his colleagues as personal testimonies from other faculty members tell of his warm and gregarious personality and especially his compelling ability as a storyteller. ■

Building Bridges With the HJHA

by Joshua Furman, Director, Houston Jewish History Archive

The Houston Jewish History Archive is the newest venture of the Program in Jewish Studies. Here, archive's director Joshua Furman writes about some of the many services provided by the archive and the progress it has made in preserving Texas Jewish history.

If you happen to walk into the Woodson Research Center in Fondren Library on a Tuesday afternoon, you might find one of our Rice student interns diligently sorting through a pile of donated black-and-white photographs, preparing to organize them into folders and boxes to create a Texas Jewish family history collection. You might come across another student intern with a Hadassah scrapbook in her hands, preparing it for digitization so that its contents will be preserved for generations to come. You might watch one of our archivists guide a visiting researcher in finding rare historical documents from a Houston Jewish soldier during World War II, or see a couple walk in with a box filled with family pictures and papers to donate. And you might see me bouncing around the reading room, supervising our student interns, conferring with archivists, meeting with families, or doing a little bit of everything for the cause of preserving South Texas Jewish history.

Since our official launch date last summer, we have made incredible strides, thanks to the generosity of our donors, the hard work of our students and staff, and the incredible outpouring of support from the wider Texas Jewish community. We have over 90 collections of historical material, documenting Jewish life in Houston, Galveston, Wharton, Beaumont and other South Texas towns. We have received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Texas Jewish Historical Society and the Southern Jewish Historical Society, as well as significant funding support from private foundations and families.

We have made professional connections with other American Jewish history archives in Dallas, Charleston, Cincinnati and New York. As the Program in Jewish Studies celebrates its landmark 10th anniversary, the Houston Jewish History Archive is an example of the kind of project that the program has been instrumental in bringing to the university and the community. The archive, like the program, builds bridges between the university and the community and enhances our appreciation and understanding of the variety and complexity of the Jewish experience in Texas and beyond. ■



Joshua Furman examining documents from the archive with Rice senior Katie Webber.

Advisory Board Spotlight: Irma Birnbaum

By Irma Birnbaum '71, Advisory Board Member

A member of the Jewish Studies Advisory Board, Irma Birnbaum supports the program from her home in New York. She celebrates the ability of the Program in Jewish Studies to appeal to a diverse array of students.

Metaphorically speaking, Judaism is in my DNA. My parents were both first generation Americans who grew up in very poor families in New York City. Their families were both Orthodox and they spoke Yiddish at home. (Un-

fortunately, I do not, as they spoke it in our house when they did not want my sister or me to understand what they were saying.) Growing up in New Jersey, my family was traditionally Jewish, but not observant, and we belonged to a conservative synagogue with an Orthodox rabbi. I went to synagogue on Saturdays as well as the major holidays. In addition, I spent 10 years attending afternoon Hebrew school and Sunday school. As a result, I have a deep appreciation for the customs and history of the Jewish people. Early on, I learned about the Holocaust, as my mother made a point of telling us what had happened. When I was 10 years old, my Hebrew school teacher was a survivor of one of the camps, and he educated

us as to how the Jews were gassed. At 14, I made my first trip to Israel and have gone back seven additional times. On one of those trips, I married my husband, Leo Steiner, who owned the Carnegie Deli in Manhattan until his death in 1987.

When I arrived at Rice in September 1967, I made a point of getting involved with Hillel, which was then under the auspices of B'nai B'rith. Through Hillel and the conservative movement's

college-age group, I was able to meet members of the Jewish community in Houston, who were most welcoming. I attended services at Temple Emanu El, Beth Yeshurun and others. After I graduated, I moved to New York, earned an MBA and became a CPA. Rice has always been important to me, as I value the education I received there.

Approximately 20 years ago when I was approached about making a contribution to one of the initial capital campaigns, I helped fund a modern Hebrew language program. From that point on, I continued to contribute to what eventually became the Program in Jewish Studies. When Matthias Henze asked me about joining the advisory board, I was honored.

Two years ago, Joshua Furman's immigration class was in New York and I met with the group. I was pleasantly surprised that of the 10 students, only one was Jewish. For me, it is gratifying to know that so many young people are curious about different aspects of Judaism. That is one of the most important things about the Program in Jewish Studies: It is a venue for people of myriad backgrounds to learn about our history and who we are. ■



Irma Birnbaum

Transforming Rice

by **Marty Sosland '76, Advisory Board President**

Marty Sosland, a graduate of Rice and the father of another graduate, hopes that Jewish studies at Rice can enrich the college experiences of students like him and his son.



Marty Sosland

I love Rice! Thanks to the generosity of the founder and other donors, a Jewish student of modest means from East Texas received an incredible education, was exposed to countless leadership opportunities and made lifelong friends. To the founder and early donors whose generosity allowed me that experience, thank you.

Karen and I have also joyously witnessed our son Marshall's equally rewarding undergraduate experience at Rice. Like many Rice students, past and present, my son and I both enrolled in classes over a broad range of

academic departments to take full advantage of a Rice education. Missing from the offerings available to both of us, however, was a Jewish studies curriculum.

Fortunately, Jewish studies is now present, vibrant and thriving at Rice. As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Program in Jewish Studies and revel in its achievements, I would like to focus on what the program adds to life at Rice, and how Rice's principles and goals are reflected in and integral to the program.

Through a diverse and challenging assortment of interdisciplinary classes, the Program in Jewish Studies is helping Rice provide transformative undergraduate education to its students. This is evident in the examples of student work available on the website, including an interactive map of Jerusalem and reports from summer research fellowships made possible by donors to the program.

But the Program in Jewish Studies serves a greater role than its course offerings and research fellowships. The program helps Rice engage Houston, through an annual lecture series with the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center, by bringing community speakers to campus, in volunteering to help the community in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey and now, through the Houston Jewish History Archive.

As a member of the board of the Association of Rice Alumni and as the chair of the advisory board for the Program in Jewish Studies, I am proud that the program and its faculty advance the goals set out in V2C2, Rice's Vision for the Second Century, Second Decade. To those who have supported Jewish studies in the past, thank you. To those who have not yet provided support, it's never too late to start. ■

From the Beginning

by **Max Blankfeld '95, Advisory Board Member**

Max and Deisi Blankfeld were two of the earliest supporters of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice. They now fund a special fellowship for student travel and research.

Back in December 2008, Melvin Dow sent me an email asking if I would be interested in a new initiative by Rice University to enhance Jewish studies and the Rice-Israel Initiative for scholarly exchange and collaboration. Melvin knew that I would not hesitate in joining and supporting this initiative.

On Jan. 13, 2009, we gathered at the home of Rice President David Leebron and Y. Ping Sun and listened to Matthias Henze, who detailed the idea of creating the Program in Jewish Studies, which later would hopefully develop into a full-fledged Center for Jewish Studies. I had the privilege to be one of several that enthusiastically decided to lend support to this initiative, and eventually was honored to be chosen as the first chair of the program's advisory board.

At the very inception of the Program in Jewish Studies, my wife and I established the Desirée and Max Blankfeld Fellowship for Jewish Studies, in support of a program that would emphasize the rich tradition of Jewish heritage, including its cultural, religious and historical elements. Our fellowship was designed to encourage students to pursue special projects or courses of study related to this goal.

Desirée and I have a sense of pride and fulfillment every time we hear the details of completed projects by those who have benefited from our fellowship. But even more fulfilling is seeing the Program in Jewish Studies grow and thrive to the point where now it is close to becoming the Center of Jewish Studies, which was just a dream and remote idea 10 years ago. ■



Max and Deisi Blankfeld

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