



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

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Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies

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Director's Note



Photograph by Jeff Fitlow

Dear Friends and Supporters of Rice Jewish Studies,

A little over a decade ago, when my colleague Gregory Kaplan and I began to talk to the administration about creating a new Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, we knew that we had to make our case: Why should Rice have a Program in Jewish Studies? Why should Jewish studies be prioritized over other equally important educational

initiatives, for example, the creation of a Center for African and African American Studies, which Rice has also never had?

It was not difficult to come up with compelling answers to these questions: It was clear that a Program in Jewish Studies would enrich Rice, its students and faculty, and the larger community. Many of our peer institutions had had long ago established Jewish Studies programs, leaving Rice behind. We knew that the new program would make Rice a more welcoming university.

For students, a minor in Jewish studies would make valuable contributions to the undergraduate curriculum open to all Rice students. Such a program could provide support for extracurricular projects related to Jewish studies and student travel, for example to Israel. And for faculty, a Jewish studies program could become a home to those with a shared interest in the field and raise money to support faculty research.

Outside the bounds of the university, a Jewish studies program could build new and valuable bridges between the campus and the community, host guest speakers, and organize conferences both on and off campus, and create links with other institutions of higher learning.

That was in summer and fall 2008. Since then, the place of Jewish studies, both within the university and outside its hedges, has changed dramatically. On the upside, our vision for what Jewish studies at Rice can do has become a reality. Thanks to the remarkable support of our alumni and friends in the community, the Rice administration, our students and our faculty, we have been able to do much more than what we had initially hoped for the program. We initiated the creation of a network of faculty in South Texas who teach Jewish studies (texasjewishstudies.com). The point of this network is to connect, share ideas and resources, provide opportunities for research and collaboration, and exchange innovative pedagogical solutions in difficult times. Under the leadership of Joshua Furman, we created the Houston Jewish History Archive (HJHA) in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. And each year, we bring a group of college counselors from predominantly Jewish high schools in the United States and a number of Jewish high school students who have been admitted to Rice to campus, with the goal of increasing the number of Jewish students at Rice.

Unfortunately, not all the changes over the last decade have

been positive. While Jewish studies at Rice has flourished, antisemitism in the United States has dramatically increased. According to the Anti-Defamation League, antisemitic incidents in the United States have risen steadily (adl.org). In 2017, antisemitic incidents surged nearly 60%, the largest single-year increase on record. Especially alarming is the significant increase in incidents in schools and on college campuses, which nearly doubled for a second year in a row.

One of the most disturbing recent manifestations of antisemitism in the United States was the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. Hundreds of marchers waved Nazi and Confederate flags and chanted, "Jews will not replace us." Antisemitism is hardly limited to the United States. On Yom Kippur, an armed assailant attempted to enter a synagogue in Halle, East Germany, and, when unable to get through the door, shot two people on the street nearby. He filmed the attack and uploaded the footage to a known white supremacist website.

This issue of Branches is devoted to the rise of antisemitism. Melissa Weininger offers a history of antisemitic violence and rhetoric in the United States. One of our recent graduates, Katherine Webber, considers Christian antisemitism in light of documents she encountered during her work in the HJHA. And Joshua Furman documents how the small Jewish community in Wharton, Texas, responded when it experienced antisemitism.

As a program devoted to the study of Jewish life, history and culture, we feel a strong obligation to do whatever we can to combat antisemitism. In the last 10 years, we have introduced hundreds of students at Rice to Jewish studies, inculcating an understanding and appreciation for Judaism and Jewish culture that they take with them into the world. We are also currently putting together new learning opportunities for students, most importantly a new college course on antisemitism, that will equip them to recognize and fight it. Education is a powerful tool.

Since the establishment of the program, so much has changed over the last decade. Today, nobody wonders why Rice should have a Program in Jewish Studies, and our program has become an integral part of the fabric of our university. This has been possible only because of your continuous interest in and support of Jewish studies. And, this month, we salute our faculty colleagues in the School of Humanities on the creation of a new Center for African and African American Studies at Rice. Congratulations.

I remain most grateful to you for your continuous interest in, and support of Jewish studies. On behalf of our students, faculty and university, thank you. I look forward to seeing you soon at one of our events.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthias Henze". The signature is fluid and cursive.

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 2020

ANTH 322: Global Im/mobilities: Borders, Migration and Citizenship
Charles McDonald

GERM 322: Marx, Freud, Einstein: Forebearers of Modernity
Klaus Weissenberger

JWST/FILM 351: Holocaust Representation in Literature, Art and Film
Melissa Weininger

JWST/SWGS 318: Israeli Women Writers
Melissa Weininger

JWST 325: Archival Research and Historical Methods: Jewish Houston
Joshua Furman

JWST 238: Europe and Its Others: Race, Religion and Multiculturalism
Charles McDonald

RELI 382/509: Lost Judaisms: The Apocryphal Writings
Matthias Henze

New Spain Postdoctoral Fellow

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

This fall, the Program in Jewish Studies welcomed its first Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellow, Charles A. McDonald. McDonald recently received his Ph.D. from the New School for Social Research in New York in anthropology and historical studies.

Charles A. McDonald, familiarly known as Cam, joined the Program in Jewish Studies in August. While he is the fourth postdoctoral fellow to work with the program, he is the first to be funded by the Spains 2016 estate gift.

McDonald's research focuses on contemporary Jewish identity in Spain, and during his time at Rice he will continue work on his book manuscript, "Return to Sepharad: Jews, Spain, and Europe's Moral Order." The book examines two types of contemporary "returns" of Jews to Spain: the "return" migration of diasporic Sephardic Jews to Spain and the "return" conversion of Spaniards to Judaism. McDonald says that his book "addresses a range of questions that animate Jewish studies today: Who is a Jew? How does authority work? How do liberal democratic states deal with the problem of Jewish difference? What is distinct about Jewish conversion?"

In addition to working on his book manuscript, McDonald is teaching a spring course titled, Europe and its Others. The course examines the shifting place of Jews and Muslims in modern Europe, and aims to "open up a space to think about the place of Jews and Muslims in a 'Europe' that is not now, and never has been, as white or as Christian as it imagines itself." He will also teach a course in Jewish studies through the anthropology department.

McDonald also was one of the featured speakers in this year's lecture series in collaboration with the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center. The theme of the series, Migration and Identity in the Jewish Hispanic World, brought together



Charles A. McDonald

the Spanish "Law of Return" offering citizenship to descendants of Jews expelled in 1492.

This year's lecture series is just one example of how McDonald's research fits nicely into the work being done at Rice and in the community by the Program in Jewish Studies. And he feels that the program is an excellent home for his work. "As someone whose scholarship and teaching is fundamentally interdisciplinary, the Program in Jewish Studies is an ideal home for me. I'm excited to spend time with colleagues and students across a range of fields and interests thinking together about how our scholarship matters now in this very particular historical and political moment." ■

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two other faculty members in Jewish studies, Maya Soifer Irish and Gisela Hefes, who also work on Sephardic Jewish history and culture. McDonald's talk, "The 'Return' That Wasn't: Spain's 2015 Sephardic Citizenship Law," discussed


Fighting Antisemitism in Wharton, Texas

By Joshua Furman, Director, Houston Jewish History Archive

The Houston Jewish History Archive is home to a trove of materials about Jewish small-town life in Wharton, Texas. Some of those materials reveal how such small Jewish communities dealt with everyday antisemitism from their neighbors.

A 60-mile trip heading southwest on Route 59 will take you from Houston to the town of Wharton, Texas. For more than a century, Wharton was home to a small but vibrant Jewish community with a synagogue, Shearith Israel, that also served Jewish families living in such nearby towns as Bay City, El Campo, Edna and Palacios. Unfortunately, today almost nothing is left to testify to a Jewish presence in the area. At its peak, Shearith Israel claimed 400 members, but by 2002, the membership had dwindled to fewer than 40, and the synagogue was forced to close. In 2010, the main building burned to the ground, and all that is left today is a community hall and a concrete slab where the sanctuary and school once stood.

Many Jewish Houstonians today have family roots in the soil of places such as Wharton, which is one reason why the study of small-town Texas Jewish life is so important.



Houston.
Wharton

Here in Wharton and in other small towns across America, generations of Jewish peddlers and retailers who found success in the first half of the 20th century watched their children and grandchildren leave for bigger cities to seek education, jobs and spouses. The synagogue and the community in Wharton are no more, but their legacy lives on in the documents, photographs and artifacts that have been donated to the Houston Jewish History Archive at Rice.

Many Jewish Houstonians today have

family roots in the soil of places such as Wharton, which is one reason why the study of small-town Texas Jewish life is so important. Another reason is that so many of these communities have disappeared, we cannot afford to lose their legacy. Why did Jewish immigrants and transplants choose to settle in small towns? How did they make a living? How did they meet their religious and communal needs as Jews? These are questions we can only hope to answer with the help of archives.

Another central issue this collection addresses is one of antisemitism. How were small-town Texas Jews welcomed and treated by their non-Jewish neighbors, who far outnumbered them? Was antisemitism more pervasive in these communities, or less so, than in larger cities like Houston and Dallas? An interesting exchange of letters in December 1953 between Edward Littman, a Jewish attorney and recent arrival to Wharton, and P.O. Heil, president of the board of directors of the Wharton Country Club, reveals quite a bit about the social treatment of Jews and changing attitudes in the mid-20th century.

Littman wrote to the board to express his surprise that Jews were not welcomed as club members, a policy shocking to him “since I left Germany for racial reasons and fought the war as an American enlisted man and officer [. . .] to eliminate persecution and prejudice.” Littman suggested that the club take the step of writing letters to local Jewish institutions in order to introduce a change in policy, which he argued will make Wharton

Top: Program from dedication of new building for Shearith Israel (1956). Shearith Israel Congregation collection.

Middle: Confirmation Class of 1960, Congregation Shearith Israel, donated by Ilene Rosenfeld Robinson.

Bottom: Rabbi Israel Rosenberg, Congregation Shearith Israel, donated by Rabbi Wayne Franklin of Providence, RI.

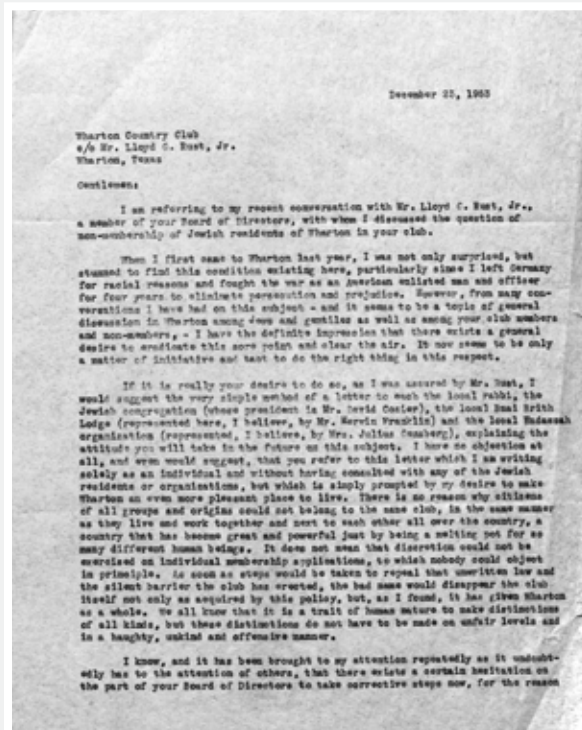


“an even more pleasant place to live” for citizens “of all groups and origins.”

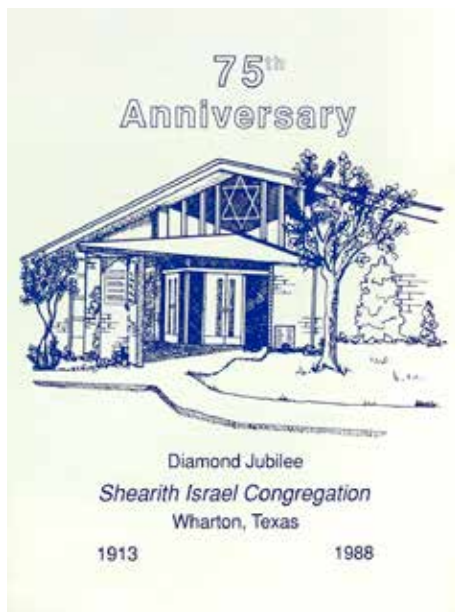
The president of the club wrote Littman back the next day, after conferring with the board at a meeting the previous evening. Although Heil acknowledged the problem, he almost immediately backtracked. Noting that the written policy of the club was to accept any resident of Wharton County “of good moral character,” he claimed that no Jews had ever before been denied membership on account of being Jewish, an argument that would seem to contradict his earlier admission. Nevertheless, Heil concluded, “no one of Jewish faith or blood will be turned down or refused membership [. . .] simply because they are Jewish.”

This correspondence helps us understand how Texas Jews faced barriers to full social acceptance in communities such as Wharton, and how they took it upon themselves to address these wrongs by bringing them to light, as Edward Littman did when he forced the Wharton Country Club to examine its unwritten discriminatory practices.

The Houston Jewish History Archive is home to several boxes of material related to the history of the Wharton Jewish community and Shearith Israel, including photographs, bulletins, meeting minutes, commemorative journals and artifacts. We are located on the first floor of Fondren Library and open to the public Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. ■

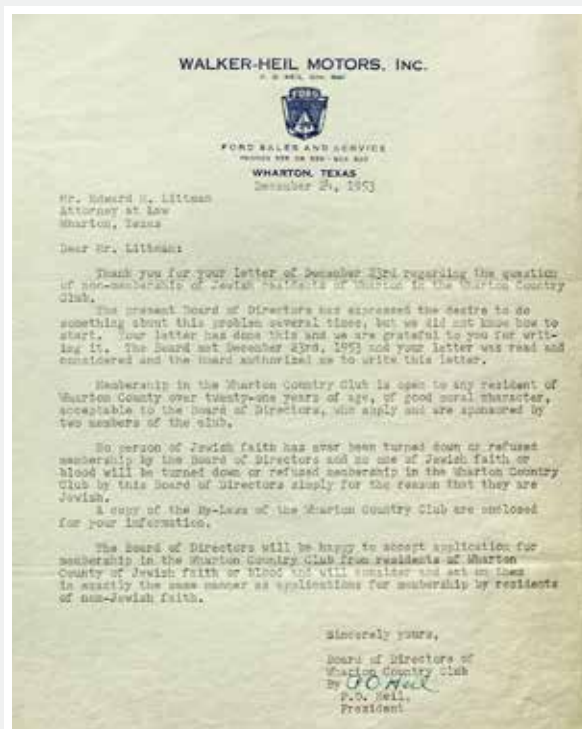


Letter from Edward H. Littman to the Wharton Country Club (1953).



Left: 75th Anniversary commemorative booklet, Congregation Shearith Israel, 1988. Shearith Israel Congregation collection.

Below: Shearith Israel Board of Trustees, 1988. Shearith Israel Congregation collection



Below: Letter from P. O. Heil, president of the board of directors of Wharton Country Club, to Edward Littman (1953).

Antisemitism and the Role of Jewish Studies

By Melissa Weininger

Increasing antisemitic incidents in the U.S. have led the program to consider its role in educating both students and the broader community about the roots and history of antisemitism as well as its connection to other racist and violent ideologies.

On the last day of Passover this year, a young man walked into a Chabad synagogue in Poway, California, and opened fire, killing one and injuring three. Six months earlier, in Pittsburgh, 11 congregants at the Tree of Life synagogue were murdered in what was the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history. In both cases, the perpetrators had publicly professed — in online forums and public manifestos — an antisemitic ideology that linked Jews to an imaginary plot to encourage mass immigration and increase the non-white population of the U.S.

In recent years, this dangerous white supremacist ideology, of which antisemitism is a central feature, is on the rise, or at least is more visible. According to FBI statistics, hate crime incidents against Jews and Jewish institutions increased by 37% between 2016 and 2017. And the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported that the number of Jewish victims of antisemitic assaults and violence more than doubled between 2017 and 2018, from 21 to 59.

Antisemitism and antisemitic violence, even in the U.S., is not new. And a brief review of the history of American antisemitism reveals clearly the way in which it underlies a broader, more sinister ideology of white nationalism that has seen a public resurgence in the last few years. As Eric K. Ward, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center, writes, “Jews function for today’s White nationalists as they often have for antisemites through the centuries: As the demons stirring an otherwise changing and heterogeneous pot of lesser evils.” Those evils include immigration, civil rights, and social justice movements that white nationalists claim lead to white genocide.

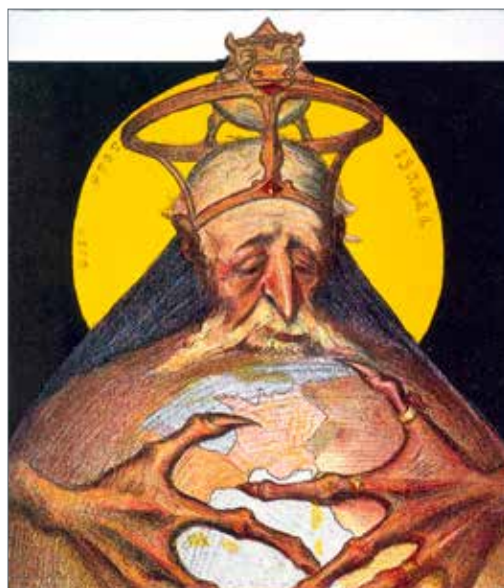
For evidence of this connection, we need look no further than the group of men marching in Charlottesville in 2017 to protest the removal of Confederate statues, chanting “Jews will not replace us,” while displaying Nazi and Confed-

erate flags. But the historical connection between antisemitism and white supremacy in America is a long one. In 1913, Leo Frank, the Jewish superintendent of an Atlanta pencil factory where the body of a young girl was found, was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. In 1915, after his sentence was commuted to life in prison for lack of evidence, he was abducted from prison and lynched by a mob. Members of that mob were later instrumental in forming the Ku Klux Klan.

It is no accident that Frank was lynched, the primary form of terrorist violence committed against African Americans in the South, nor that his murder

stirring religious conflict. In 1920, Henry Ford published an adapted version of the “Protocols in English” under the title “The International Jew.” Ford’s newspaper, The Dearborn Independent, accused Jews of everything from ruining baseball to attacking Christianity to fabricating evidence of Russian pogroms.

These antisemitic conspiracy theories underlie white nationalism and are, even now, the stated motivation for many of the recent antisemitic attacks committed in the U.S. They function as an explanation for inroads toward equality being made by what white supremacists see as “inferior” races: sneaky, smart Jews are controlling



Left: Caricature by C. Leandre, France, 1898, showing Rothschild with the world in his hands. Right: Front page of “The International Jew” in The Dearborn Independent, Henry Ford’s newspaper (1920).



was the precursor to the formation of an organization founded on a racist, white supremacist ideology. Attacks on synagogues in the South during the Civil Rights Era confirm the connection: white supremacist ideology figures the Jew at the center of a far-reaching conspiracy to advance civil rights in America, increase the political and social power and visibility of non-white citizens, and thereby decrease the power of whiteness in America through control of financial, educational and entertainment networks.

Conspiracy theories such as these also have a long history, dating to Christian anti-Judaism of the medieval period and before. Modern manifestations of Jewish conspiracies to secretly control world governments and financial networks date to the 1903 Russian publication of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” the fictional minutes of a meeting of Jews planning to control the world by manipulating the economy, controlling the media and

them, pushing an agenda of civil rights and social justice to decrease the power of white people in order to take over the world. The perpetrator of the Pittsburgh massacre cited the congregation’s support of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which originated to aid Jewish immigration to the U.S. but now facilitates immigration and refugee resettlement more generally. He claimed that “HIAS likes to bring invaders that kill our people,” implying, of course, that both Jews and immigrants are not “our people,” not real Americans and associating Jews with a broader conspiratorial plan.

Unfortunately, it is not only avowed white nationalists and domestic terrorists who have used the rhetoric and imagery of Jewish conspiracy in recent years. Antisemitic language and imagery have made their way into mainstream political discourse. Memes on the internet feature Jewish financier George Soros’ head on the tentacled body of an octopus, with the

names of media outlets, universities and liberal political movements around him, echoing an image of a Jewish octopus squeezing the globe that was featured on many copies of the Protocols. Politicians accuse opponents of globalism and cosmopolitanism, antisemitic dog whistles that also reference anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. Images of Jewish politicians with stacks of money, implying a connection to imaginary Jewish control of financial markets, appear in mainstream election contests.

The resurgence of anti-Semitic tropes and rhetoric, and the rise in anti-Jewish violence in the U.S., make the role of Jewish studies in the university more important than ever. In the classroom, we can make students aware of the history of Christian anti-Judaism and contemporary antisemitism, as well as teaching them to recognize antisemitic rhetoric in the public sphere. We can also equip them to respond to the rise of antisemitism in the U.S. both publicly, through political action and organizing, and privately, in personal encounters with friends, family and fellow students. And we can demonstrate the ways that antisemitism has and continues to animate other oppressive and discriminatory ideologies that continue to plague our society.

This year, I was asked by the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance at Rice to participate in a series of teacher-education programs on religious tolerance in collaboration with the Houston Independent School District. When I gave them a brief overview of the history of antisemitism in the U.S., including Henry Ford's involvement with the English publication of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," several of the teachers noted, with some horror, that they taught about Henry Ford every year in the context of automation, but never knew about his role in distributing antisemitic propaganda. They were grateful to have learned the new information and to integrate it into their classes, but their reaction also opened my eyes as to the importance for Jewish studies faculty to bring our knowledge of the sometimes hidden histories and manifestations of antisemitism in the U.S. to those beyond the borders of the university.

At the same time, our primary energies are focused on Rice students. The Program in Jewish Studies hopes, in the coming academic year, to offer new courses and programming around the topic of on antisemitism. Our goal is to fulfill our responsibilities to combat antisemitism with the best tool we have at our disposal — the education of the next generation of leaders. ■

Facing Christian Antisemitism

By Katherine Webber '19

Recent graduate and Jewish studies minor Katie Webber was an intern at the Houston Jewish History Archive. Some of the materials she encountered there caused her to question her own upbringing and her understanding of Jewish history.

"Are the Jews Guilty Above the Others?" A knot forms in my throat reading the words, the headline of this newspaper an accusatory question, as I sit in the cool and quiet reading room of the Houston Jewish History Archive. I check the date of the newspaper: July 1943. Maybe that explains it. But the headline is not in German, it's in English and the words Houston, Texas, are displayed proudly beneath the date. The paper isn't one I've heard of before, but it's not a KKK or white supremacist publication. Rather, it's a Christian periodical. Its title is Sound Words, and the title is flanked comfortably by several quotations from the book of 1 Timothy and what must be the paper's byline: "Standing like a wall of fire for the Gospel of Christ, as the Lord gave it, the apostles preached it, for the Church of Christ revealed in the New Testament." Scrawled across the top by an unknown commenter — probably Rabbi Aaron Blumenthal of Beth El Synagogue, as the rest of the box is full of his letters and materials that once belonged to him — a handwritten note reads simply, "Anti-Semitism Houston."

A year ago, I took a course on Holocaust representation, focused on how the Holocaust is portrayed in art, film and literature. I always think back to something the professor said on one of our first days of class, which can be paraphrased as, "The history of Judaism is often told as a history of tragedy. I reject that narrative." The point she was making was not that there is no tragedy in Jewish history. Certainly we can look back to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the expulsion from Spain, the denial of citizenship and ghettoization across Europe and, of course, the very subject of the course. Instead, the point was that Jewish history transcends just those negative elements. There are so many beautiful moments in the history of Jewish life. Jewish culture has flourished across the globe and resulted in diverse food, music, dress, art and language, and

the Houston Jewish History Archive celebrates that and the way that has developed in Houston and in Texas.

There was truly nothing more enriching for me about working in the archive than having members of the Houston community come in and tell us about their parents and how they ended up in Houston, the work and activism they did here; or presenting the research I'd done to community groups about and being



Article from Sound Words (1943).

interrupted by older patrons who told me about how they had been good friends with so-and-so or were in the yearbooks I had combed through looking for information. Yet with all of this joy, all of this beautiful history, holding this paper in my hand returned me to a lingering question — what about the ugly parts?

I am not Jewish, I am Christian. I have been a part of Jewish communities for just about two years now. I have a weekly invitation to my friends' Shabbat dinner, I served on my undergraduate Hillel board, I helped organize a breakout session for our antisemitism teach-in after the Tree of Life shooting last year, I did research in Israel last summer and I

Continued »

was a Jewish studies minor. My friends tease me about when I'm going to meet a nice Jewish partner and finally convert. My Christian family asked me on Christmas Eve if I was Jewish now, and I patiently explained that that's not quite how it works. Most of the time I don't think about it. I'm happy being a Christian in Jewish spaces, and I'm passionate about interfaith relations and what we have to learn from one another.

But this relationship comes with baggage that is the work of Christians to unpack. The issue of Sound Words is just one example of the myriad ways that Christianity can be used to fuel antisemitism. The tropes in this article from 1943, that Jews can't be loyal to the United States, that they are Communists, that they control the government and the media, that they "lower the moral tone" of the country, are not ideas that have died in the past century. Instead these ideas have flourished from Christian voices and sources, both explicitly and implicitly. As Christians, it is our duty to educate ourselves on antisemitism in our midst and our beliefs. Does your church, like megachurch pastor Robert Jeffress, teach that all Jewish people are going to hell? Does it teach that Christianity did — or should — replace Judaism or that Christians replaced Jewish people as God's chosen people? When you sit in the pews on Sunday after another devastating mass shooting at a synagogue or Jewish cultural center, does your pastor acknowledge this crime as antithetical and abhorrent to the gospel?

Here in Houston we have continuing work to do to counter antisemitism in Christianity. I can't answer what that work will look like for you, although probably the first step is just learning about the roots of Christian antisemitism or antisemitism generally. Then look into what organizations are already doing work here in Houston to create interfaith dialogue and respect, like Interfaith Ministries, the Boniuk Institute or the Rothko Chapel. This call to action is about the safety of our friends and neighbors first, but it is also about ourselves. What does it do to us when words that we believe are divinely inspired are used as a foil for hate and violence? When we leave a legacy do we want it to be one that is filed away for half a century later to be found with only the commentary, Anti Semitism Houston? ■

Student Summer Projects

✦ Israel From Many Angles

By Sofia Gereta '20

This summer, senior Sofia Gereta spent five weeks studying Modern Hebrew at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and traveling in Israel as a recipient of a fellowship from the Max and Desiree Blankfeld and the Sosland Family funds. Her experiences extended far beyond simply learning the language.

This summer, I spent five weeks in Israel not only learning Modern Hebrew through an ulpan, or immersive Hebrew course, but also discovering how differing historical and religious perspectives continue to shape Jerusalem and other parts of the country. Throughout my time there, I formed bonds with both locals and other international students, became familiar with Hebrew University and glimpsed the everyday lives of Israeli residents. I return to Rice this semester armed with a basic foundation of Hebrew, as well as valuable insights into both ancient history of the region and modern Israeli culture.

In Jerusalem, I began my mornings with a short walk from the kfar studentim, or the Student Village, to the Rothberg International School. As I came into the ulpan knowing only the Hebrew alphabet, I was placed into Aleph One, the absolute beginner course, along with seven other students. From the first day, my Hebrew instructors, Yonat and Shira, spoke with the class only in Hebrew in order to accustom us to the sounds and

flow of the language. Although the course lasted only a few weeks, the instructors emphasized constant Hebrew use, paired with about an hour or two of homework every night to build our vocabulary and grammar. I started every class with a basic conversation about my day, memorized and recited short dialogues, and even participated in a few Hebrew sing-alongs led by a visiting Israeli musician. While I struggled through these activities at first, by the end of the ulpan I felt confident using my basic phrases in public situations.

To practice my Hebrew skills, I tried (and usually failed) to haggle at the shuk, the outdoor market, asked shopkeepers questions about their products and chatted with locals. When I visited the Hurva Synagogue, for example, the gatekeeper happily offered to speak Hebrew with me after learning I was there to study the language; I returned a few times to test out my growing vocabulary and ask him about life in Jerusalem. During a few other occasions, I would not reply to English questions in order to force shopkeepers to use Hebrew phrases with me. These conversations informally taught me concepts like

Left: Sofia Gereta visiting the caves at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. **Right:** Sofia on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.



masculine numbers before we ever covered the topic in class. Of course, I was not well understood — and I often pretended to understand shopkeepers who answered my questions in complicated phrases — but it was extremely satisfying when a few people exclaimed with surprise, “At medaberet ivrit!” (You speak Hebrew!)

After completing the ulpan I spent another week immersing myself in the country's vast heritage. Over the course of the next three days, I hiked across more than 10 Israeli national parks, driving around the country with a French Catholic seminarian. As I walked through the streets of Beit She'an and Be'er Sheva, I could vividly imagine the everyday lives of the ancient Israelites, Romans and Byzantines, who once inhabited these spaces. I was also able to better make sense of biblical narratives and classical texts, like that of Josephus, after experiencing the environments surrounding an archeological site. For example, it was easy to envision a battle between King Josiah and the Egyptians when looking out at the plains around the city of Megiddo. In addition, I was able to contextualize the function and symbolism of archeological remains, such as the mosaics of the Hammath Tiberias Synagogue, by analyzing them within their original setting of a Hellenistic, waterfront town. Throughout these explorations, I found it fascinating to compare my secular, academically oriented viewpoints with those of my travel companion, who analyzed the sites using a traditional Christian perspective and a theological background. Through conversations with him, I better understood how various modern religious communities each place emphasis on different landmarks in the region — such as the two popular spots along the Jordan River both believed to be the location of the baptism of Christ — and what these locations continue to mean to people of different faiths.

I spent my last few days in Israel exploring Tel Aviv. After becoming used to the solemn, devout atmosphere of Jerusalem, I was shocked by the modern and relaxed character of Tel Aviv. While there, I familiarized myself with contemporary Israeli perspectives by visiting Beit Hatfutsot, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and various neighborhoods like Old Jaffa (which turned out to feel quite young). But even though the city reminded me so much of the U.S., I was acutely aware of some differences: Most people my age were missing from the streets unless they were dressed in the Israeli Defense Forces uniform. ■

✦ Yiddish in New York

by Rebecca Topper '20

Senior Rebecca Topper spent part of her summer at the Uriel Weinrich Yiddish Summer Program, an initiative of YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research, learning the language and immersing herself in the Jewish and Yiddish culture of New York City.

Shalom aleichem! Ich heys Rivke. Ich voygn in Houston, Texas, vu ich bin a studentke, ober shtam ich fun Atlanta, Georgia. Ich hob gelernt Yiddish far zeks vokhen dem zumer in New York mit YIVO (Yiddisher Vissenshaftlikher Institut). Ich hob gelernt tsu leyn, redn, un shraybn af Yiddish. Ich hob oykh gelernt lider tsu zingen af Yiddish! Take hob ich lib far dem shprakh – ich vil lernen nokh Yiddish in dem kumendike tseyt.

Hello! My name is Rebecca. I live in Houston, Texas, where I am a student, but I am from Atlanta, Georgia. I learned Yiddish for six weeks this summer in New York with YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research). I learned to read, speak and write in Yiddish. I also learned songs to sing in Yiddish! I really like the language, and I want to learn more Yiddish in the future.

I went in with very few expectations for what I was going to learn, aside from basic language skills. I was placed in the Beginner I class alongside 20 other students, ranging in age from 17 to 37 and ranging in knowledge from no experience with the aleph-beys (alphabet) to a small amount of experience. The program consisted of language classes every weekday morning, with conversation, electives and talks in the afternoons. Our morning classes covered grammar and literature, while the afternoon electives and seminars covered a wider range of topics.

The afternoon electives I chose to take, for example, were on the Yiddish short story, Jewish food and the Yiddish press. We also had programming with our cohort, like a trip to Yiddish Hoyz, which is a center for Yiddish in New York, and a tour of the Lower East Side.

Aside from the language itself, I am most excited to have learned about Yiddish culture, historical and contemporary. A song was taught in every language class over the course of the program, and there were also song workshops every Friday afternoon. I did not anticipate learning songs with the program, but I really enjoyed connecting with Yiddish musically. My cohort was full of interesting people from around the world learning Yiddish for many reasons. Many of the other students were not only young and Jewish, but also politically left leaning and active in their political beliefs. The summer program therefore also exposed me to a section of the Jewish community of whose existence I had been simply unaware. The last two Friday nights of the program my friends and I had Shabbos together and those are my favorite memories of the summer. Learning Yiddish this summer exposed me to a new way to connect with my religion and cultural heritage. ■



Left: Rebecca Topper hard at work on Yiddish. **Right:** Rebecca and some of her YIVO classmates enjoying appetizing food at Russ and Daughters in New York.

Faculty Accomplishments

Daniel Cohen, the Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and History, recently published an opinion piece in *Jüdische Geschichte & Kultur*, published by the Simon Dubnow Institute in Leipzig, Germany. The experience of Jewish migration in the aftermath of World War II, he argues, shows that the current migration crisis in Europe could be solved through burden-sharing. He also gave a talk on his current book project, “Good Jews: Philosemitism in Postwar Europe,” at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, in November.

Joshua Furman, director of the Houston Jewish History Archive, was featured this year on National Public Radio’s “Texas Standard” and Tablet Magazine’s “Unorthodox” podcast discussing the Houston Jewish History Archive. He contributed a chapter to the book “Making Houston Modern: Howard Barnstone’s Life and Architecture,” forthcoming in 2020 from the University of Texas Press.

Gisela Heffes, associate professor of Latin American literature and culture, is the co-founder and co-editor, with Uruguayan sociologist Eduardo Gudynas, of *Wayra – saberes de otros modos sobre sociedad y naturaleza*, a new peer-reviewed journal that will assess the relationship between nature and society in Latin America. She also edited, with Lisa Blackmore, a volume of the new “Latin American Environmental Humanities” series. And she recently published an essay titled, “Ansias de mirar: espacio urbano y opacidad,” in the volume “Más allá del mapa. Imaginarios del espacio abierto en la cultura latinoamericana contemporánea.”

Matthias Henze, director of the Program in Jewish Studies, published two edited volumes in 2019: “The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Fifty Years of the Pseudepigrapha Section at the SBL,” co-edited with Liv Ingeborg Lied, a collection of 21 articles that celebrates the 50th anniversary of an international group of scholars who study Israel’s ancient extra-canonical texts at the Society

of Biblical Literature; and “Textual History of the Bible, Volume 2: The Deuterocanonical Scriptures,” co-edited with Frank Feder, a three-volume, 1,200-page reference tool, devoted to the largely understudied textual history of the so-called Apocrypha, those texts considered part of the Christian canon of biblical texts but not included in the Jewish canon.

Maya Soifer Irish, associate professor of history, has been elected president of the American Academy of Research Historians of Medieval Spain. Last year she was a fellow at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, and her essay, “Towards 1391: The Anti-Jewish Preaching of Ferrán Martínez in Seville,” was published in a volume titled, “The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism: Continuities and Discontinuities from the Middle Ages to the Present Day.”



“Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca 250-750,” edited by **Michael Maas**, the William Gaines Twyman Professor of History, and **Nicola Di Cosmo**, has been selected as a Choice Outstanding Book of the Year.

Charles McDonald, the Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellow in Jewish Studies, gave a lecture titled, “The ‘Return’ That Wasn’t: Spain’s 2015 Sephardic Citizenship Law” at the Evelyn Rubenstein JCC as part of this year’s Rice lecture series. He organized the panel, “Race and Anthropology: Ethnographic Responses to Changing Political Climates,” at this year’s meeting of the American Anthropological Association and one on “The Return to Sepharad and the Politics of Memorial Identity” at the Association for Jewish Studies annual meeting, and presented papers at both.

Astrid Oesmann, associate professor of German studies, organized and co-hosted a five-day conference on Bertolt Brecht and the Fragment at the Literaturforum in Berlin, Germany, in February 2018, and she is co-editing a volume with the same title comprised of the strongest presentations. In March, she organized and presented at a three-day seminar, titled *Tracing the Fragmentary* at the American Comparative Literature Association. Paula Sanders, director of the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance and professor of history, was recently awarded an Association for Jewish Studies Arts and Culture Community Grant for the project *Celebrating the Music of Mieczyslaw Weinberg*. The project will involve a series of events in conjunction with Da Camera and Holocaust Museum Houston.

Melissa Weininger, associate director of the Program in Jewish Studies, participated in an international workshop devoted to the study of the Hebrew and Yiddish poet Uri Tzvi Greenberg at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in November. In September, she published three translations of Hebrew poems by the Israeli writer Tehila Hakimi in the “Tel Aviv Review of Books.” She is also awaiting the forthcoming publication of two essays, “Haunted Dreams: The Legacy of the Holocaust in ‘And Europe Will Be Stunned,’” in the “Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture,” and “Translingual at Home and Abroad: Israeli Literature Unbound,” in “Since 1948: Israeli Literature in the Making.”

Diane Wolfthal, the David and Caroline Minter Professor of Humanities, recently published “Scribe and Owner as Artist in a Sixteenth-Century Yiddish Miscellany” in the journal *Images*, and presented the paper “Sterile Coins, Bleeding Hosts, and Anti-Semitism in an Unpublished French Illumination” at the Renaissance Society of America conference in 2019. She is currently at work on an exhibition catalog for the Morgan Library and Museum titled, “Medieval Money, Merchants, and Morality.”

Advisory Board Spotlight: Carol and Michael Goldberg

By Melissa Weininger, Anna Smith Fine Lecturer in Jewish Studies

Carol Goldberg has served as a member of the Program in Jewish Studies' Advisory Board since 2016. Her husband, Michael, is a Rice alumnus, and serving on the board is one way for them to maintain a connection with a place they both love.

The Goldbergs' connection to Rice began in 1975 when Michael enrolled here as a freshman. Michael says that he received a "superb education," and his major in legal studies and political science laid the foundation for his rewarding career as an attorney.

Carol and Michael raised their three children in a home near Rice and fondly remember their children participating in summer camps at Rice and performing in piano recitals held at the Shepherd School of Music. For many years, Carol has run around the tree-lined perimeter of Rice and even after all this time, she says, she "continues to be amazed by the beauty of the Rice campus."

Because of these strong connections, the Goldbergs were delighted to learn about Rice's Program in Jewish Studies several years ago when Carol was introduced to Matthias Henze to discuss the possibility of a joint program between Rice and a Jewish organization based in Israel.

Shortly thereafter, Henze met with Carol to tell her more about the program and she was honored when he asked her to join the advisory board.

The Goldbergs support the program not only on its own merits, but because they see that Jewish studies enriches Rice in a number of ways. First, they believe Jewish studies can help Rice attract students, because, as they note "this jewel of a program should serve as an incentive to Jewish students from other parts



Michael and Carol Goldberg

of the country to apply to Rice." Second, Jewish studies has benefits for the whole university community at a time when antisemitism is a growing concern, and they believe that the program can help "prevent or counter any such strains of hatred or bigotry that could arise on the Rice campus, thereby upholding Rice's reputation for tolerance and acceptance."

While there are many things about the Program in Jewish Studies that the Goldbergs appreciate, Carol and Michael are most enthusiastic about the Jerusalem course that takes students to Israel. They have a deep love for Israel and feel that visits to Israel are a central component of understanding Jewish identity. They add that this trip gives "students a wonderful opportunity to see the beauty of the land of Israel and to learn more about its historical significance." At the program's 10th anniversary celebration at President Leebron's home in the spring, Carol thought "the highlight of the evening was hearing two of the students eloquently and enthusiastically describe their experiences in Israel." Creating that enthusiasm for Israel and for Jewish studies is the primary reason for the Goldbergs' excitement about helping to develop the Program in Jewish Studies. ■

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Co-sponsored by the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance, Consulate General of Israel to the Southwest, the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.



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