



# Branches

**News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University**

Issue 17 • Spring 2020



## Director's Note

*by Matthias Henze, Founding Director, Program in Jewish Studies*

*Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies*

Page 2

## "Beyond Duty" Exhibition Opens in Rayzor Hall

*by Melissa Weininger, Associate Director of the Program in Jewish Studies*

Page 3

## Serving the Community at Holocaust Museum Houston

*by Michelle Tovar, Associate Director of Education, Holocaust Museum Houston*

Page 4

## Houston Jews and German Jewish Refugees: A Community's Relief Efforts

*by Reagan Borick '20*

Page 5

## From Pariahs to Most Desirable Migrants? Jewish Refugees Since 1948

*by Daniel Cohen, Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor in Jewish Studies*

Page 6

## The Holocaust in Buczacz

*by Maurice Wolfthal*

Page 7

## Jewish Studies Minors Class of 2020

Page 8

## Exploring Kabbalah in Colonial America

*by Brian Ogren, Anna Smith Fine Associate Professor of Judaic Studies*

Page 10

## Advisory Board Spotlight: Lee Wunsch

*by Lee Wunsch*

Page 11

# Director's Letter



Dear friends and supporters of Rice Jewish studies,

Even though I was born 20 years after the end of WW II, the war was always present in our home. I was raised in Germany in a secular household. My father, Walter Henze, was drafted by Hitler as a young

man, against his will, and was sent straight to the front — first to the Eastern Front, where he was badly wounded, and later, after he had healed, to the Western Front. There he fell into the hands of the Americans, a day he fondly remembered for the rest of his life as his second birth, and was sent home as soon as the war ended. Even though it was only toward the end of his life that my father began to

which comes to us from the Israeli consulate, celebrates the international diplomats who courageously came to the aid of Jews during the Holocaust. For the opening celebration, we were honored to welcome Israel's Consul General to the Southwest, Gilad Katz, to the Rice campus.

Reading through the contributions in this issue, I am struck by how moving they are. This is a deeply personal topic for many of us, as it certainly is for me. As a teenager, I became curious about Germany's recent history and decided to learn more, particularly about the Shoah, or the Holocaust, as it is better known in the United States. I remember vividly how, during my first visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, I was able to read all the German signs in the photographs without any problem, but reading the signs in Hebrew was a challenge — a vivid reminder of my own past.

I am most grateful to all contributors for their articles. In particular, I am moved by Maurice Wolfthal's

---

Reading through the contributions in this issue,  
I am struck by how moving they are. This is a deeply personal topic  
for many of us, as it certainly is for me.

---

talk more about his experience in the war, somehow the war was always with us.

This edition of our newsletter is devoted to the memory of the Holocaust. Monday, Jan. 27, 2020, marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. To commemorate that day on campus, Moshe Y. Vardi, university professor and the George Distinguished Service Professor in Computational Engineering at Rice, gave a moving and deeply personal lecture about the Hungarian Holocaust. Both of Vardi's parents are Hungarian Holocaust survivors. He told their story, as well as the stories of many other Hungarian Jews.

A few days earlier, Jan. 22, we opened the exhibit "Beyond Duty: Diplomats Recognized as Righteous Among the Nations" on the Rice campus. The exhibit,

harrowing account of how his parents barely survived the war. It is my hope that you will find reading through these pages as worthwhile as I do. It is our duty to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive and to teach its lessons to the next generation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthias Henze".

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

## 'Beyond Duty' Exhibition Opens in Rayzor Hall

by **Melissa Weininger, Associate Director of the Program in Jewish Studies**

This semester, the Program in Jewish Studies, in collaboration with the Israeli consulate and sponsorship by the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance and the Baker Institute, mounted an exhibition titled, "Beyond Duty: Diplomats Recognized as Righteous Among the Nations," on the first floor of Rayzor Hall.

The exhibit was developed by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to highlight diplomats who came to the aid of Jews during the Holocaust and have subsequently been recognized for their work by Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust museum and foundation.

Anyone walking through Rayzor Hall this semester can't help but notice the 28 panels that make up the "Beyond Duty" exhibit hanging on the walls. These include both general historical material about the events of the Holocaust and specific

biographical sketches of diplomats honored by Yad Vashem, as well as details about their heroism during the war. They are mounted in a high-traffic space that is also frequently used by students for studying, language tutoring and gathering in the hope that the exhibition will gain wide exposure on campus.

On Jan. 22, the Program in Jewish Studies and its co-sponsors organized an opening reception for the exhibition, at which director of the program Matthias Henze, Dean of Humanities Kathleen Canning, Professor Allen Matusow of the Baker Institute, and Israel's Consul General to the Southwest Gilad Katz all made remarks. Katz began his remarks with the familiar talmudic dictum, "Whoever saves a life of Israel, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." He noted that this precept recognizes the significance of an individual life, a significance that the diplomats featured in the exhibit honored through their actions.

The mounting of the exhibition was also accompanied by an event at Holocaust Museum Houston Jan. 27, which featured a panel discussion between current diplomats from Israel, Germany and Japan about the question of diplomatic ethics and responsibility in times of crisis. These events were all part of the commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day and the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. ■



The "Beyond Duty" exhibition in Rayzor Hall.

Matthias Henze, Paula Sanders, Consul General Gilad Katz and Melissa Weininger at the exhibition opening.

# Serving the Community at Holocaust Museum Houston

by **Michelle Tovar, Associate Director of Education, Holocaust Museum Houston**

Holocaust Museum Houston reopened its doors to the public in June 2019 after a \$34 million expansion, doubling in size to a total of 57,000 square feet.

This development ranks HMH as the nation's fourth-largest Holocaust museum, and its exhibits are now fully bilingual

tion, "Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942-1964," in December 2016, a traveling installation from the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services (SITES). By hosting this exhibition, the museum created public programming that focused on Latinx history and labor history in the United States. Scholars such as associate curator Stephen Velasquez from the National Museum of American History, David Romo, Lori Flores and Mireya Loza, provided a new perspective on social justice and human rights issues for our Houston audience. The exhibition reached 19,900 students during school tours and the sev-

to teach the dangers of apathy, prejudice and hatred.

In December 2019, the museum hosted a second bilingual exhibition, "Dolores Huerta: Revolution in the Fields," from SITES, featuring the life of a living Mexican-American civil rights icon. The exhibition featured Dolores Huerta's social justice work and her contributions as co-founder to the United Farm Workers Union. Huerta is also featured in the museum's Human Rights Gallery alongside Cesar Chavez, where visitors can learn about the intercultural work that was done in collaboration with Jewish, African American and Filipino labor organizations. The museum was honored to host Huerta for a public event at HMH in which multiple generations of Houstonians listened to her experience and her call to action to vote and speak up. Her empowering chant, "Si Se Puede!," echoed throughout the entire building.

This year, the museum will host its inaugural Silverman Latin American Institute, supported by the Lt. David L. Silverman Endowment Fund, and will bring together 30 educators from Latin America and the United States to study the Holocaust, human rights and social justice. Working together between a number of countries, they will create networks that will enhance ongoing collaborations. The institute will serve university professors as well as educators in middle or secondary school art (visual and music), English/language arts, history, science, social studies and speech.

As we move forward with our Latino initiatives, the museum will feature a Spanish website and Spanish-only programming that will highlight the narratives of our local Latinx community, as well as international narratives such as Latinx-Jewish history in the Dominican Republic in collaboration with Rice Houston Jewish History Archive. These initiatives are just one example of the way that Holocaust Museum Houston seeks to serve the entire Houston community in teaching lessons learned from the Holocaust. ■



Dolores Huerta at the museum with Pearland High School students.

in English and Spanish. The museum features four new prominent galleries, including a Human Rights Gallery. Through the work of Michelle Tovar, associate director of education for Latino initiatives, the museum has expanded its outreach to the Houston Latinx community through exhibitions and programming.

Part of the Holocaust Museum Houston's value statement reads, "Holocaust Museum Houston builds a more humane society by promoting responsible individual behavior, cultivating civility and pursuing social justice." In line with this value, the museum displayed its first bilingual Spanish/English exhibi-

en public programs brought in as many as 400 attendees in the five months that the exhibit was on display. This positive feedback from the community spoke to a need for more inclusive programming and has led to more exhibitions that include narratives reflecting communities of color, creating an inclusive space benefiting the entire Houston community.

The Latino Initiatives has since expanded its programming to a film series highlighting Central American narratives, lectures on intergenerational trauma and scholars speaking on the experience of children in border detention centers, all linked to the museum's mission of using the lessons of the Holocaust

# Houston Jews and German Jewish Refugees: A Community's Relief Efforts

by Reagan Borick '20

For Joshua Furman's class on Jewish Houston in spring 2019, Reagan Borick wrote her final paper on Houston's Refugee Service Committee and their work resettling German Jewish refugees in Houston during the 1930s. Using materials from the Houston Jewish History Archive, she reflects on the success of this movement.

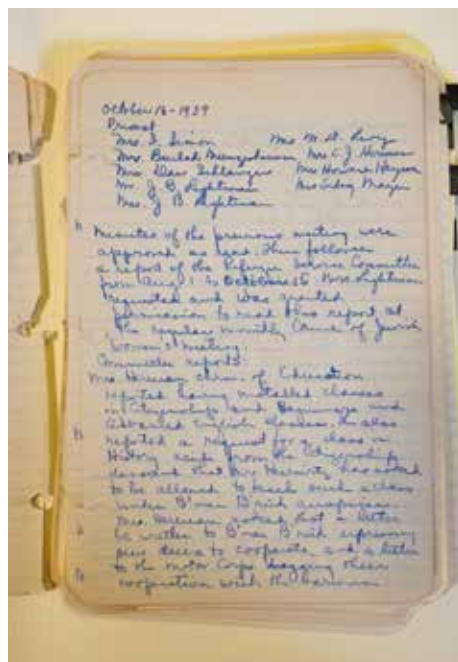
As American Jews began to learn of increasing repression in Germany after 1933, they were moved to help German Jewish refugees, and Houston Jews were no different; the efforts of the Houston Jewish community to assist with refugee aid can be described as a success story because they were ultimately able to overcome numerous obstacles to help hundreds of German Jews resettle in the United States and escape the Nazis.

In 1937, Simon Sakowitz, a prominent Jewish Houstonian and the head of the Houston Coordinating Committee for Aid to Refugees at the time (HCCAR), sent out a letter to members of Houston's Jewish Community Council encouraging them to make a financial contribution to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. His letter included a pamphlet titled, "The Schoolbells Sing in Germany," describing Jewish schoolchildren's plight in Germany. Sakowitz wrote, "We are certain it is not necessary for us at this time to go into details concerning the dire need that exists among millions of fellow-Jews ... They are looking to YOU for a measure of aid and reconstructive assistance ... the very existence of our less fortunate brethren depends on it!" The pamphlet goes on to further explicate challenges facing German Jewish children, and it encouraged members to give handsomely.

This fundraising effort was one of several undertaken by the HCCAR. It was formed contemporaneously with the Jewish Community Council in 1937 and existed under the JCC umbrella. Not only did they hold fundraisers to send money

to national organizations and provide small loans to refugees who were already in the city, but HCCAR also performed several other services, including providing affidavits in support of German Jewish immigrants.

Once immigrants arrived in the United States, they also needed employment and a place to live. These were two more areas that the HCCAR used its limited resources to tackle. As of 1938, Sakowitz reported that HCCAR had found jobs and professional placements for 10 refugees



Minutes from a meeting of Houston's Refugee Service Committee, 1939; the minutes are housed in the Houston Jewish History Archive.

and placed 12 others through the close cooperation of other Jewish welfare organizations in the city. Additionally, the HCCAR worked to find homes for German Jewish refugee children with the cooperation of the Houston section of the Council for Jewish Women.

In 1939, HCCAR changed its name to the Refugee Service Committee in order to better reflect the work that it was doing. The new committee was much more efficient than its previous iteration, with nine subcommittees focused on different aspects of the immigration process. While the previous committee's goals had been limited to those of greater immediacy, like finding affidavits, jobs for refugees, homes for refugee children and raising money, this new iteration of the committee took a more holistic approach to refugee aid. According to the minutes of the new committee's first meeting, Mrs. Howard Heyman, the new director, said

that "in order to make proper resettlement ... the need today is to Americanize families as rapidly as possible." Their primary aim was not just logistics, but rather to help German Jews who were seeking refuge in Houston feel like they belonged.

Furthermore, the committee assisted in helping the refugees learn valuable skills and information that would help them to become better acclimated in Houston, and more broadly, in the United States. While the committee continued with major works such as finding affidavits, jobs and housing for refugees, they were also able to do many smaller things to help the refugees feel at home. The religious committee, for example, was responsible for personally connecting refugees with local temples so that they might find a suitable service to attend. According to Mrs. J.B. Lightman, who was the committee head, "every refugee family interested in attending has been given an opportunity to do so ... The response to the work of this committee has been very gratifying."

Houston's refugee aid efforts were on par with those across the country, if not even more effective. According to the minutes of a Nov. 29, 1939, meeting, a representative from the National Refugee Service, Mr. Berdansky, said the following when asked what other Jewish communities in the South had done: "Except for Austin and Dallas, that discussion is better left unsaid. Houston is the liveliest community with which we deal with in the South." As of 1943, members of the Refugee Service Committee were able to meet with 485 German Jewish refugees. Only 164 of them ultimately left Houston, a 70% retention rate. They were able to find 212 affiants within the community, secured 225 jobs for refugees and connected 40 with the armed forces.

This success demonstrates the lengths to which Houston Jews were willing to go in order to provide German Jews with a land of refuge, a promised land where they could begin to recover from the trauma they had experienced. While it may have been an unlikely outcome, Houston eventually became the promised land to these German Jewish refugees, thanks to the hard work of Houston Jews. ■

# From Pariahs to Most Desirable Migrants? Jewish Refugees Since 1948

by Daniel Cohen, Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor in Jewish Studies

Daniel Cohen's work focuses on post-war European philosemitism and refugee issues. Here he outlines some of the ways that our contemporary understandings of and treatment of refugees stem from developments related to the Holocaust.

"Today, to our shame, Anne Frank is a Syrian girl," the New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof recently wrote. This latest appropriation of the child diarist to denounce indifference in the face of suffering has stirred the expected controversy over the comparability of the Holocaust with contemporary humanitarian disasters. But the Anne Frank invoked in this article was not merely the young Jewish girl trapped in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam between 1940 and 1944. It was also the potential child refugee from Germany whose fate was sealed by the reluctance of the United States to open

inhabitants of the Calais Jungle awaiting passage to England are treated like "Jews in Nazi Germany," and in Israel human rights advocates urge the government to grant Eritrean refugees "the asylum that was denied to Jews in Europe."

The popularity of the new Jews metaphor, however, masks a central dimension of Jewish history in the second half of the 20th century. In the wake of the Holocaust, the exceptionality of Jewish "pariahdom" gave way to a normalization of Jewish international migration. To be sure, the Exodus affair of July/August 1947 put on full display the drama

For American and European policymakers, the swift stabilization of the displaced persons crisis in post-war Germany through the resettlement of "freedom-loving" refugees across the world aimed to counteract the spread of communism; enabled in part by the International Refugee Organization, the emigration of Holocaust survivors from Central Europe to Israel was also part of a broader redistribution of displaced Europeans in the early Cold War period. "If we are saved we feel humiliated, and if we are helped we feel downgraded," wrote Hannah Arendt in 1943 to describe the travails of German Jewish exiles like herself. Despite the hardships of uprooting and new beginnings in Israel or the New World, this tragic vision of solitude and alienation was however less applicable to post-1948 European Jewish migrants.

The recognition of persecution as a key determinant in the definition of refugees in international law also contributed to a qualitative upgrade in the status of Jewish asylum seekers. The still-effective 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees did not make any direct references to the Ho-



Left: Jewish refugees from Europe being transferred by train from the Haifa port to the reception camp at Atlit (photo: Zoltan Kluger, 1944); Right: Syrian refugees (mainly from Aleppo and Idlib) entering Turkey in Kilis, most of whom will live in refugee camps. (photo: Radek Procyk/123RF, Sept. 8, 2017, Kilis, Turkey).

its gates to Jews like the Frank family, who sought American visas in vain. "History rhymes," contends Kristof: The nadir of Jewish refugee history in the late 1930s therefore parallels the desperate situation of Syrians and other migrants today. The image of the Jewish pariah, the epitome of rightlessness in the influential writings of Hannah Arendt, is indeed commonly used in the media to illustrate the plight of other stateless refugees abandoned to their fate. Thus the Burmese Rohingya boat people adrift off the coast of Malaysia and Indonesia "are becoming the Jews of Asia," the hapless

of humanity at sea. Indeed, until the creation of the state of Israel, the approximately 200,000 Holocaust survivors in the displaced persons camps of occupied Germany still faced a world closed off to large numbers of Jewish refugees. With its restrictive stipulations, the Displaced Persons Act passed in June 1948 by the United States Congress favored anticommunist Poles, Ukrainians and former nationals of the Baltic States over Jewish immigrants. By 1950, however, most Jewish displaced persons had left for Israel, others to the United States, Australia, Canada and Latin America.

locust but stipulates that a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality" is ground for protection and asylum. That Israeli legal scholars and diplomats were influential in the passing of the convention — as well as in the adoption of the 1954 Convention on Statelessness — was not incidental. Although the birth of Israel created a massive Palestinian refugee problem, the new state rapidly became a model for the wide-scale absorption and integration of the stateless.

Jewish refugees from North Africa and the Middle East were not affected by

these new guarantees. In Iraq between 1950 and 1952, the forced departure of nearly 130,000 Jews to Israel was accompanied by collective deprivation of citizenship in addition to material dispossession, a pattern repeated in 1956 in Egypt. The approximately 800,000 Jews who left Arab or Muslim countries under various degrees of coercion after 1948 symbolized the persistence of Jewish vulnerability: the Mizrahi replaced the German Jew in this new episode of hardship. But the experiences of Jewish refugees from Arab lands were ultimately of a different nature. In several cases, such as Yemen, Iraq or Morocco, the state of Israel entered in secret negotiations with Arab regimes to facilitate the safe departure of Jews. The Law of Return passed by the Knesset in 1950 ensured the automatic reintegration of all Jewish refugees into the realm of citizenship. In other host countries, such as France and England, denaturalized Jews from Egypt easily obtained citizenship in the favorable post-war context of open-door immigration.

Persecuted or endangered Jews in Communist Eastern Europe faced different hurdles. In Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu allowed more than 100,000 Jews to emigrate in return for Israeli economic aid, merchandise or cash. But fierce anti-Zionist campaigns in Poland forced small numbers of Jews to leave in the late 1950s and again in 1968. By then, however, East European Jews and Soviet refuseniks granted authorization to leave, as well as Iranian Jews who fled the new Islamic regime in 1979, found visas to Israel, the United States or Western Europe awaited them. In the United States, the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of 1974 put economic pressure on the Soviet Union in order to let Jews depart to Israel. In the early 1990s, a century after their forefathers fled poverty and oppression in the Pale of Settlement to reach the goldene medine, a million Jews from the former Soviet Union settled in Israel, thanks to unprecedented American loan guarantees. Others immigrated to the United States on special refugee visas issued under the Lautenberg Amendment of 1989, and despite the huge challenges presented by reunification, the Federal Republic of Germany similarly provided generous asylum to ex-Soviet Jews.

Today, thousands of young Israelis flock to Berlin to fulfill artistic or entrepreneurial dreams or reclaim the German citizenship lost by their grandparents during the Holocaust era. In Berlin too, well-meaning academics teach classes in Jewish history intended for Syrian migrants as part of their integra-

tion in Germany, or perhaps to help them make sense of their own “Jewish” predicament. Yet this Jewish metanarrative of refugeeness is also one of hope. In the second half of the 20th century, and even more so since 1989, Jewish migration has experienced a reversal of exceptionality. Thanks to the safety net provided by the state of Israel, American involvement and

the official philosemitism of the European Union, the specter of statelessness has been kept at bay. We can certainly bemoan the tragic similarities between Syrian girls and Anne Frank, but we should more urgently strive to alleviate the Syrian refugee crisis by replicating the successes of Jewish migration from 1948 to the present. ■

## The Holocaust in Buczacz

by Maurice Wolfthal

Maurice Wolfthal is a member of the Houston Yiddish Vinkl and a Yiddish translator living in Houston. His account of his parents' experiences details the tragedy of the Holocaust even for those who survived and their descendants. Maurice has translated a number of works related to the Holocaust from Yiddish to English, including Yitzhak Erlichson's memoir of his escape from the Nazis, “Mayne fir yor in sovyet-rusland” (“My Four Years in Soviet Russia”). His translation of Shmerke Kacerginski's “Khurbn Vilne” (“The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Vilna”) is under contract with Wayne State University Press.



Maurice Wolfthal

My parents were born in Buczacz, Poland. The Soviets and the Germans divided and occupied Poland in 1939. My father was 26, my mother 18. When the German army eventually occupied Buczacz in August 1941,

they forced the Jews into a ghetto, where starvation and disease decimated the population. Efforts at armed resistance were futile, as it was nearly impossible to obtain weapons. Some Jews escaped to the surrounding woods, but most of them were hunted down by the Germans and their collaborators. Periodically the Germans launched raids on the Jewish community, murdering them in their homes, in the streets, the shops, the Jewish orphanage, the Jewish hospital and the Jewish old-age home. They murdered others en masse in the pine forest at Fedor Hill, just outside the town. An estimated 4,000 were gassed at the Belzec extermination camp.

My mom and dad, along with others, escaped to the USSR on a horse-drawn wagon just before the Germans arrived. They struggled to survive along with other Soviet citizens fighting to drive out the German invaders while under the brutal, paranoid Stalinist regime. My father was sent to a lumber camp in the Ural Mountains. My mother survived in Uzbekistan

and Kazakhstan. My mother's brother, Maik, joined the Red Army and was badly wounded at the battle in Königsberg. My father's brother, Benjamin, fought in a Red Army guerilla unit and was killed in action behind the lines. When the Soviets allowed them to return to Poland, then to a displaced persons camp at the end of the war, my father had typhus and weighed about 100 pounds, my mother had typhoid and weighed about 85 pounds.

They spent two years in the displaced persons camp in Wetzlar, where they began to live normally again and regained their health. They renewed contact with the few other survivors from their town, but they learned that almost their entire families had been exterminated. It was a harrowing time for them, hearing the many accounts of savagery and murder that the Jewish community had endured. My mother's sister, Tonia, who had gone to Paris before the war, found them in the displaced persons camp and brought them to Paris.

In Paris, they tried to make a new life, but it was difficult. The war had ruined France, and Jewish refugees were not the first workers to be hired. My father left early every morning to look for work, while my mother kept house as best she could. I was born in Paris. But it was a bleak life for them, as they were haunted by the Holocaust.

We left for New York in 1955, when I was 7. ■



# Jewish Studies Minors



## Daniel Cohen

**Hometown:** Boston, Mass.  
**Major(s):** Linguistics and Cognitive Sciences  
**Minor(s):** Jewish Studies  
**College:** Will Rice

**Academic interests:** My academic interests within Jewish studies include Sephardic and Mizrahi cultural movements in Israel, wider Israeli social issues, and biblical and modern Hebrew literature. I had the opportunity to explore some of these subjects in my Rice classes, as well as through extracurricular lectures and study abroad. Moreover, as a member of the Jewish Studies Student Association board, I helped organize and attended various lectures exploring academic topics in religious and cultural Judaism.

**Favorite classes:** I have loved my Jewish studies classes at Rice! Some of my favorite classes have been Professor Furman's course, African American-Jewish Relations, and the Jerusalem history course, co-taught by Professors Weininger and Henze. These courses combined the study of historical sources with modern cultural studies, creating a unique examination of Jewish history in a multitude of contexts and time periods.

**Influences:** My course of study at Rice has been immensely influenced by Jewish studies. In addition to the many Jewish studies classes I took, I also incorporated these topics into other areas of study. For instance, while studying Arabic texts in Rice's Department of Religion, I spent one semester reading Judeo-Arabic texts written by Rabbi Saadia Gaon and Maimonides. Moreover, Rice's Program in Jewish Studies supported my study abroad experience in Israel in summer 2018. During that summer, I was able to take intensive language courses in Hebrew and Arabic and conduct a personal research project regarding Iraqi Jewish and broader Mizrahi history.

**Future plans:** I am interested in broadening my experience in the Middle East, expanding my familiarity with refugee services in the region and potentially working with USAID, an international NGO, or a policy center. To that end, I am exploring hands-on fellowship opportunities in Israel, Jordan and Egypt that will provide me with the tools and experience to collaborate with international aid institutions. I aim to interweave my past studies of Hebrew, Arabic and religio-cultural history into a regional fellowship opportunity. ■



## Sofia Gereta

**Hometown:** Philadelphia, Pa.  
**Major:** Medieval and Early Modern Studies  
**Minor(s):** Jewish Studies and Biochemistry  
**College:** Martel

**Academic interests:** I am drawn to studying how the Jewish religion and culture developed and how Jews have coexisted with other peoples throughout the Middle Ages, my time period of study. I also wanted to better understand modern Jewish history, such as the Holocaust and the founding of Israel.

**Favorite classes:** I loved the Jerusalem class because it gave me a rich, firsthand understanding of the city's history and the modern Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I also really enjoyed my medieval Spain and medieval Jewish philosophy classes since I love learning about how Jewish thinking and culture shaped and adapted aspects of regional societies.

**Influences:** My Jewish studies classes taught me how to objectively analyze different historical perspectives and allowed me to explore how the ancient Israelite religion evolved into modern strands of Judaism. The program also opened my eyes to the complexities of the modern political and socioreligious spheres, especially when it gave me a chance to spend the summer studying in Israel.

**Future plans:** I will be attending medical school for the next four years. ■

# Class of 2020



## Rose Kantorczyk

**Hometown:** Wayne, Pa.

**Major(s):** Sociology and Policy Studies

**Minor(s):** Jewish Studies

**College:** Lovett

**Academic interests:** My main interest within Jewish studies is Jewish social history and culture. I love examining Jews as a social group throughout history — how we've changed socially, economically and in relation to other

groups in the United States.

**Favorite classes:** Professor Furman's African American Jewish Relations class was the first class that I took where I got to look at Jews as a larger part of social systems. I also really enjoyed Professor Weininger's Holocaust Representation class. It got me thinking critically about monuments, museums, art and literature in a way that I never had before.

**Influences:** Jewish studies is responsible for my interest in studying religion from a sociology perspective. Now, I work at the Religion and Public Life Program, a sociology of religion research office at Rice, and I'm writing a senior honors thesis on Judaism and immigration activism. Jewish studies has shown me that the experiences of my people are worth studying in the other disciplines that I'm involved in.

**Future plans:** I plan to work in the social impact sphere, doing policy, advocacy or nonprofit work. ■



## Rebecca Topper

**Hometown:** Peachtree Corners, Ga.

**Major:** English

**Minor:** Jewish Studies

**College:** McMurtry

**Academic interests:** I am interested in the ways that language and culture interact with and reflect one another. I am particularly interested in Yiddish and in women and feminism in Jewish life and culture.

**Favorite classes:** The Jerusalem Class and Sex and Gender in Jewish Culture

**Influences:** I really enjoyed taking Jewish studies classes — my schedule was almost entirely courses for my major and Jewish studies classes. The Program in Jewish Studies also allowed me to start learning Yiddish, which has been an amazing opportunity, and exposed me to an aspect of Jewish studies with which I feel deeply connected and invested. Engaging with Jewish studies also allowed me to work in the Houston Jewish History Archive (HJHA), where I learned about a whole new way to engage with historical materials and did work I really enjoyed.

**Future plans:** I hope to continue learning Yiddish and engaging in Jewish studies outside of school. I graduated early and I'm currently completing an internship with a publishing company in New York; I see publishing and, due to my experience at the HJHA, archival work both as viable and interesting options for work after Rice. I am interested in potentially going back to school for something Jewish studies-related in the future, but I would like to gain a few years of work experience first. ■

# Exploring Kabbalah in Colonial America

by **Brian Ogren, Anna Smith Fine**  
Associate Professor of Judaic Studies

This year, Brian Ogren is spending his research leave in New York at the Center for Jewish History, where he is working on a book project exploring the role of Kabbalah in shaping American ideas about religious liberty and tolerance.

In July 2019, I relocated to N.Y. City with my family in order to take up residence as the 2019–2020 National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Scholar at the Center for Jewish History. The center is a conglomerate of five organizations, and it comprises the largest repository of Jewish historical materials in the United States. Over the course of the year, I have been leading an international cohort of graduate fellows, taking part in the activities of the center, and focusing most of my attention on my own research project on Kabbalah and the founding of America.

This is a book length project that seeks to broaden our understanding of the role that the Jewish esoteric lore known as Kabbalah played in the shaping of American notions of religious liberty, tolerance and the formation of individual

Though Jews made up less than one-tenth of a percent of the population of late colonial America, an early idea of America as the new promised land and a Puritan obsession with the Hebrew Bible propelled Jewish thought to a place of prominence in the formation of American religious identity.

identity. Though Jews made up less than one-tenth of a percent of the population of late colonial America, an early idea of America as the new promised land and a Puritan obsession with the Hebrew Bible propelled Jewish thought to a place of prominence in the formation of American religious identity. Hebrew learning was par for the course at institutions such as Yale and Harvard, and, by extension, Jewish interpretive traditions were used to inform both scriptural readings and understandings of history. At the same time, many early American Protestant thinkers held to what is known as a supersessionist reading of history, which means that they saw themselves as the true replacement of Judaism and ultimately hoped for the conversion of the Jews.

My research explores the complexities that stem from the seemingly conflicting impulses to learn from esoteric Jewish thought and at the same time to convert the same Jews who developed that thought. I am investigating notions of identity and boundaries, intellectual exchange and conversion. Among the figures I am researching are an early Quaker theologian who utilized Jewish Kabbalah to shape American Quakerism; the famed Puritan Cotton Mather, whose extensive Bible commentary contains multiple quotations from Jewish sources; a Jewish convert who became the first full-time Hebrew instructor at Harvard; and the seventh president of Yale College, who was fascinated by Kabbalah and whose first formal address to the college was in Hebrew, laden with rabbinic references.

In addition to accessing unique collections housed at the Center for Jewish History, generous support from the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice has allowed me to travel to other important archives in the northeastern United States. This includes the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass., and the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston. I have come across exceptional manuscripts within these archives and I have been able to consult extremely rare texts. I am grateful for the time and resources allotted to me, and I am hopeful that the resulting book will shed new light on early American religious developments and the adoption and adaptation of Jewish kabbalistic ideas and interpretive strategies. ■



Brian Ogren visits Newport, R.I., as part of his research.



The Center for Jewish History, New York City.

## Advisory Board Spotlight: Lee Wunsch

by Lee Wunsch

Lee Wunsch, a past CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston, has been involved in the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice since its inception. He reflects on the importance of the program to both the university and the broader community.

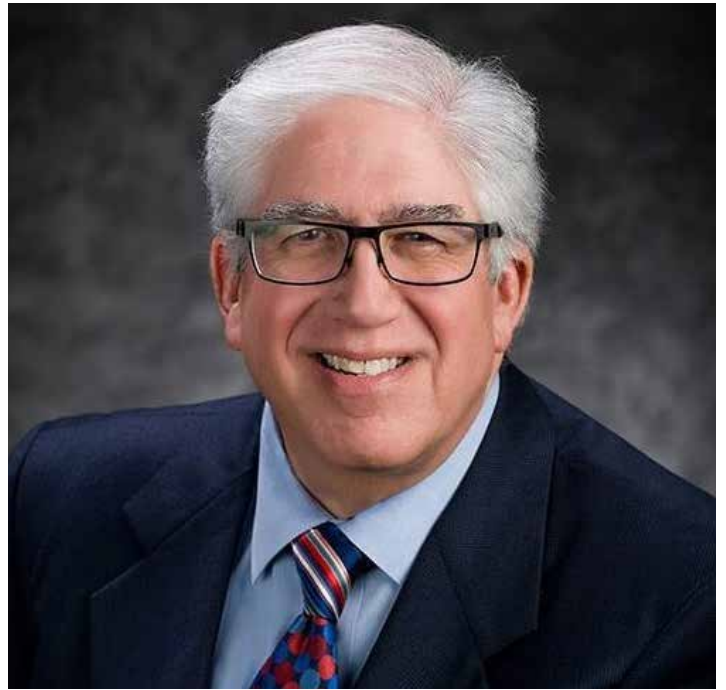
I first became familiar with Rice when I moved to Houston in 1978, and even more so in 1989 when, in my capacity as the then chief operating officer of the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston, I engaged with the Houston-area Hillel as it expanded its outreach efforts to students at Rice. It became evident to me then that Rice attracted top-level students to the Houston area and occupied a unique and important niche in Houston's academic, business and cultural landscape.

A few years after becoming the CEO of the Jewish Federation in 1999, I became aware of the nascent Jewish studies program at Rice. Soon after, I met with Matthias Henze, director of the program, and Gregory Kaplan, who was involved in its founding. I have been so delighted to see the program's growth. I am particularly impressed by the program's outreach to the surrounding Jewish community, providing scholarly and academic lectures and workshops to a myriad of Jewish organizations. This was my hope when the program was established — that it would not live in an “academic ivory tower,” but rather have an organic connection to the Houston Jewish community that would grow and be nourished over time.

The Program in Jewish Studies has benefits for the university, too. Such a program elevates the study of Judaism to a serious and academic pursuit. A well-structured program taken seriously by the university's hierarchy, like Rice's program, can also elevate the profile of the university and attract both Jewish and non-Jewish students interested in Judaism's place in world history, ethics and religion. I only wish I could return as an undergraduate to partake in the course offerings.

One of the things I really appreciate about Jewish studies at Rice is the way that Israel has become an anchor of the program not only through the academic curriculum but through student visits there, both as part of the Jerusalem class and for study abroad. Reading students' essays after they have returned from their studies has shown me what a great opportunity it is for students to understand not only the geopolitics of the region but also the complex fabric of Israel's society.

My hope is that the program will grow in stature over time and, like other university-level Jewish studies programs, it will become a source of strength, pride and inspiration for the university as a whole. I hope that the program will continue to attract greater and more meaningful financial support from local and national donors so that it can continue its upward trajectory and accelerate its impact, growth and prosperity over the coming years. ■



Lee Wunsch

~~~~~  
**My hope is that the  
program will grow in  
stature over time and,  
like other university-  
level Jewish studies  
programs, it will become  
a source of strength, pride  
and inspiration for the  
university as a whole.**  
~~~~~

Rice University  
Program in Jewish Studies—MS 340  
P.O. Box 1892  
Houston, TX 77251-1892

Nonprofit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit #7549  
Houston, Texas

# Program in Jewish Studies **at Rice University**

## **Learn**

Visit our website: [jewishstudies.rice.edu](http://jewishstudies.rice.edu)  
Like us on Facebook: Rice Jewish Studies  
Follow us on Twitter: @RiceJS

## **Contact**

[jewishstudies@rice.edu](mailto:jewishstudies@rice.edu)  
713-348-4512

## **Support**

Make a contribution now:  
<https://jewishstudies.rice.edu/donate/>  
or contact Jeanette Zey  
[jzey@rice.edu](mailto:jzey@rice.edu)  
713-348-4669

