



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

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In This Issue:

Student Spotlight: Jeremy Reiskind

Page 3

This Year in Jerusalem

Page 4

Jewish Studies Student Association

Page 4

**Desirée and Max Blankfeld Fund
Enables Student Travel**

Page 5

Jewish Studies Lunch and Learn

Page 5

**Welcoming Our New Postdoctoral
Fellow: Joshua Furman**

Page 6

**Advisory Board Spotlight:
Joe Pryzant**

Page 6

Faculty Spotlight: Maya Soifer Irish

Page 6

**The Aubrey '42 and Sylvia Farb
Postdoctoral Fellowship**

Page 7

From the Director



I'm pleased to introduce Branches, the newsletter of the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice. We have added a few new elements: a regular feature on one of our donors, a column by a student in the program and an article on faculty accomplishments. I look forward to receiving your feedback about the new format.

The last year has seen a number of significant changes in Rice's Program in Jewish Studies. Our goal during the early years was to create a viable program. Now that the program at Rice is well established, our mission has become bolder.

We began with the modest aim of creating a minor in the program, increasing the number of courses and offering stipends for students who wanted to travel abroad. Working closely with Hillel, we hoped to attract a niche group of students to the program. Now, far from being a small and isolated program that only serves a particular group of Rice students, the Program in Jewish Studies has become a centerpiece of the humanities at Rice and has made significant contributions to the university curriculum and culture.

This fall, we will welcome our third postdoctoral fellow to our campus, thanks to the generous support of the Stanford and Joan Alexander Foundation. Joshua Furman, who grew up nearby in San Antonio, recently received his Ph.D. from the University of Maryland. His work centers on American Jewish approaches to childrearing and education in the 20th century, and his first course at Rice will be a freshman seminar on the history of Jews during the Civil War.

In addition, this past semester we offered a new course on the history and the present-day city of Jerusalem. After seven weeks in the classroom learning about the history of the state of Israel, the significance of religious and archaeological sites, and the modern city of Jerusalem, Melissa Weininger and I took a group of 15 students to Jerusalem, of whom only two had previously been to Israel. The Jerusalem class is an excellent example of what Rice's Program in Jewish Studies is all about: integrating the study of Judaism and Jewish culture into the fabric of the university and the Rice curriculum; offering educational opportunities at the highest academic level; remaining open to all who want to learn about Judaism and Israel, regardless of background; supplementing traditional education with experiential encounters; creating links between academics, artists, writers, activists and religious leaders; and exposing our students to a wide variety of viewpoints, so they can learn to think critically and understand the material on their own terms.

None of this would be possible without the generous support of our donors and friends. We remain grateful for your support and look forward to many more years of growing the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice.

Sincerely,

Matthias Henze

Director, Program in Jewish Studies

Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies

On the cover: The Humanities Building, home to the dean of humanities, and several departments, interdisciplinary centers and programs, including the Program in Jewish Studies.

Student Spotlight: Jeremy Reiskind '17



Jeremy Reiskind

Judaism has always been an extremely important part of my life: I have always attended synagogue regularly and, since I was 9, I have gone to Camp Ramah Darom, a Jewish overnight camp, every summer. Growing up, my connection to Judaism had always been exclusively religious. When I came to Rice, I naturally continued my religious connection to Judaism through Hillel, which has been the ideal place for me to not only practice Judaism, but to meet other Jewish students. I am looking forward to increasing my commitment to Hillel as Rice's president this year.

But being at Rice also has allowed me

to explore another facet of my Jewish identity through scholarship. Before Rice, I had casually studied Judaism and Jewish life, but never in a formalized setting. One of the reasons I chose to attend Rice is because Hebrew was offered here, and I wanted to seriously study the language. Through my first-year Hebrew course, I learned more about the Program in Jewish Studies, its amazing professors and exceptional classes. I have since decided to minor in Jewish studies and in only two years I have learned so many things about Jewish life, history and culture that I could never have imagined.

One example of the kind of unique experience offered by the Program in Jewish Studies is Jerusalem: Holy City in Time and Imagination, which

I took last semester. At first, I wanted to take the course not so much because of what I might learn in the classroom, but because it was another way for me to return to Israel. But having been to Jerusalem and back, it turns out that my favorite part of the course was not the trip itself, even though it was a wonderful experience. Rather, I loved learning about the history of Israel and Jerusalem in an academic setting where politics is not always present. The diverse group of students in the class made the learning experience incredibly rich, as we all brought different ideas and views on the issues and the city. Like the Program in Jewish Studies itself, the course changed the way I think about not only Jerusalem, but about Judaism and being Jewish as well. ■



Fifteen Rice students traveled to Jerusalem over spring break as part of a new course, RELI 392: Jerusalem: Holy City in Time and Imagination. Special thanks to the donors who supported this unique opportunity.

This Year in Jerusalem

By Rachel Landsman '16

The sun was setting, and hundreds of people made their way through the closing shops of the Old City. Haredim and Modern Orthodox Jews walked the same weathered paths toward the Western Wall, their gait light in anticipation of Shabbat. Tourists followed suit. Within the walls, the day-to-day sounds of the city faded.

The last rays of the afternoon sunlight disappeared behind the horizon, and we joined the crowd in welcoming the Sabbath Bride.

The Western Wall plaza seemed to sway with the hundreds of people who occupied it, davening, dancing, rejoicing. I approached the right side of the wall, the women's section, which was crowded but quiet and, for the most part, still. I drew a chair up to the "mechitzah," the barrier between the men's and women's sides, and climbed on top of it, leaning over to see what was happening.

I picked out my male classmates in the crowd. They stood still at the center of a rushing sea, black hats and multicolored yarmulkes swirling around them like the tide. Prayers and shouts of joy mixed in the air.

We welcomed Shabbat with the crowd. We joined in the singing and dancing, even though we did not know the words or the steps.

Shabbat at the Western Wall plaza was Jerusalem at its holiest. Jews of different sects prayed and rejoiced together, and tourists joined in without hesitation. The energy was high, the people were joyful and the surrounding city was still. And yet, what struck me about Shabbat, and about our experience of Jerusalem as a whole, was the proximity of the base to the holy, the profane to the sacred.



The Western Wall

That evening, a few yards away from the Western Wall, we had paraded through metal detectors and endured the watchful gaze of armed guards. Mere hours before we welcomed the Sabbath, the streets of the Old City had been swarming with swindlers and pickpockets and merchants offering every passing tourist a "special deal."

The holy city is, after all, a city. It's easy to forget that, until you get there.

I've struggled, since my return, to describe what I experienced in Jerusalem. Friends ask, "What was the best part?" I joke, "The falafel," because it's the easy answer. The real answer is difficult to put into words. How does one describe the energy at the Western Wall on Shabbat? How does one explain the cacophony that occurs when the same gust of

wind carries both the sound of church bells and the sound of the muezzin? How can one express the feeling of being surrounded by the world's most devout believers? Of being enveloped in the unwavering faith of others? It cannot be described.

Though I struggle to find the right words, I am beyond grateful for the opportunity to experience the holy city the way I did — learning about its history, its significance to the three Abrahamic religions and its role in today's conflict. I left feeling more connected to the Jewish people and more equipped to grapple with the difficult issues that face Israel and the Middle East.

I also left with a yearning to return to Jerusalem some day soon. ■

Jewish Studies Student Association

By Sparrow Gates '17

The Jewish Studies Student Association (JSSA), now in its second year, serves as a bridge between the Program in Jewish Studies and Rice students. Co-founded by Jeremy Reiskind '17, Leah Topper '16 and I, with the help of postdoctoral

fellow Yehuda Sharim, the JSSA hosts events and communicates student interests and needs to the program. Last semester, the JSSA sponsored a screening of the film "Iraq N' Roll" about the Israeli musician Dudu Tassa and his quest to learn more about the music of his grandfather, Daud al-Kuwaiti, who was

once a popular musician in Iraq. After the film, students engaged in a follow-up discussion. The group also promotes the Program in Jewish Studies within the Rice student body, helping to draw students to events and classes sponsored by the program. ■

The Desirée and Max Blankfeld Endowed Fund Enables Student Travel

By Leah Topper '16



Leah Topper '16

This summer, I spent six weeks in the Negev, the desert region of Israel, with the Yahel Israel Service Learning program. For the first two weeks, I volunteered in the city of Beer Sheva at Maan, a nonprofit organization that serves Israel's Bedouin population by supporting Bedouin women and advocating for their rights. I worked both at their office and in nearby Bedouin towns teaching English to three different groups of children. However, plans quickly changed as tensions with Hamas developed into a full-fledged military operation. When a few rockets landed near Beer Sheva on the evening of July 5, the Jewish Agency made the decision to move us to Yerucham, a smaller town in the Negev, for the duration of the program.

Yerucham immediately welcomed us and integrated us into the community. We volunteered wherever they needed us: on bomb-shelter cleaning crews,

at a center for the elderly, in a café and at local schools. I chose to work at a "gan" (kindergarten), volunteering four days a week in a classroom of 4- to 6-year-old children. Although this wasn't my expected volunteer placement in Israel, my experience there allowed me to greatly improve my Hebrew while helping the community.

In addition to volunteering, the program had an educational component. Each Thursday, we learned about domestic social, economic and political issues affecting Israeli society by traveling to other places and speaking to people directly involved with these issues. I acquired a wealth of new knowledge about current problems and concerns facing Israelis, which opened my eyes to better understand and recognize Israel in her entirety.

Subjected to a week of ambiguity and uncertainty, relocation from Beer



An aerial view of the town of Yerucham, located in the Negev desert.

Sheva to Yerucham and a modified lifestyle due to red-alert rocket sirens, I also learned a lot about myself. Although I have always had a positive attitude, I recognized the power of my optimism when our circumstances were changed by war. I now realize that I live a very fortunate life, and these six weeks exposed my ability to cope with harsher situations. I have taken what I learned in Israel and applied it to my daily life at Rice, and I'm already looking forward to the next time I can visit Israel. ■

Jewish Studies Lunch and Learn

By Melissa Weininger

This year, the Program in Jewish Studies continued its regular Lunch and Learn lecture series with visits from some prominent writers, musicians and scholars. Topics included the world of Yiddish, world music, Jewish culture in medieval Spain and contemporary Jerusalem. We started off our year with a visit from Ayelet Tsabari, author of "The Best Place on Earth," a collection of short stories, published in English, about Israel and Israeli characters abroad. Tsabari's talk, "Language, Longing, and Belonging," centered on the challenges of writing about Israel, her birthplace, in English, her second language. Just last month, it was announced that Tsabari's book won the prestigious Sami Rohr prize, awarded by the National Jewish Book Council, so we were particularly lucky to be able



From left: Author Ayelet Tsabari, Tsabari's prize-winning book and hip-hop musician Sha'anán Streett

to host her. Last month, we also were treated to a special visit by the Israeli hip-hop musician Sha'anán Streett from the band Hadag Nachash, who spoke with us about life in Jerusalem, the city where he lives, and the intersections between arts, culture and politics. The students in the Jerusalem seminar offered this spring were able to continue the conversation

with Streett when he met us for an afternoon in Jerusalem, bringing our Lunch and Learn session to life with a personal tour. It was a great example of the way the series has brought a new dimension to the study of Jewish life and culture on the Rice campus, introducing students to the latest ideas and developments in Jewish arts and culture. ■

Welcoming Our New Postdoctoral Fellow: Joshua Furman

By Brian Ogren (Religion)



Joshua Furman

The Program in Jewish Studies at Rice is pleased to welcome Joshua Furman as the next Stanford and Joan Alexander Postdoctoral Fellow in Jewish Studies. Furman is a specialist in American Judaism who was raised in San Antonio and has strong family connections to Rice. He carried out his doctoral training at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he wrote his dissertation on post-World War II American Jewish approaches to childhood education.

As a fellow at Rice, Furman will continue to research the social history and lived experience of the postwar American Jewish family. This includes explorations into the understudied area of Jewish fatherhood in postwar

America, in light of gender roles and acculturation. It also includes the history of American Jewish youth groups after World War II.

In addition to his research, Furman will nicely complement the ever-broadening course offerings of the Program in Jewish Studies by teaching courses in his area of specialty. He brings with him experience teaching courses on modern Jewish identity and Jewish history. He also plans to offer courses that should be of special interest to our students, such as one on Jewish Houston and another on Jews during the Civil War. Furman's keen enthusiasm and engagement will be a great benefit to our student body, and he has already expressed an interest in becoming involved with the student-led Jewish Studies Student Association. We look forward to adding Furman's skills and expertise to our vibrant and growing program. ■

Advisory Board Spotlight: Joe Pryzant



Joe Pryzant

Rice University is an important part of my family history. In fact, I literally owe my life to Rice. My parents met at the university. My father, a proud alumnus, wore his 1947 graduation ring until he died.

Although I attended the University of Texas, I wear the same Rice ring as a tribute to the institution and to my father.

My strong connections to Rice make it an honor to serve on the Program in Jewish Studies advisory board. My involvement with this program goes back to its creation. Matthias Henze and I discussed the possibility of starting such a program in 2003 and I was an enthusiastic supporter. My enthusiasm stems from two sources. First, I am a great admirer of Henze, whom I first met shortly after he arrived at Rice. My wife, Gloria and I attended a Glasscock School class he taught on the Dead Sea Scrolls and I found his lectures so interesting that I became a Matthias Henze "groupie." Second, my father was initially denied entry into the Rice Institute because the engineering department allegedly had a quota for Jewish students. With help from the Cohen family, who endowed Cohen House, my dad was eventually admitted, but he was required to enroll in a different department. It gives me great satisfaction to see Rice evolve from an institution that was perceived as less than friendly to Jewish students into a place that now has a Program in Jewish Studies and actively seeks out Jewish participation and involvement in many areas. The Program in Jewish Studies has had a role in that change and I look forward to seeing the results of the program's influence on Rice's community and culture in the future. ■

Faculty Spotlight: Maya Soifer Irish



Maya Soifer Irish (History)

I have been an assistant professor of history at Rice since July 2010. My broad area of research and teaching is the history of Western Europe during the Middle Ages, from approximately 500 to 1500 C.E.

My interest in this field has deep roots. Even as an undergraduate, I developed a lasting interest in the history of interactions between Jews and Christians during the medieval period. My Ph.D. dissertation at Princeton University focused on the evolution of Jewish-Christian coexistence in the Iberian kingdom of Castile between the 11th and mid-14th centuries. This work will soon be published as a book titled "Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile: Tradition, Coexistence, and Change." My next book-length project will explore the growth of antisemi-

tism in 14th-century Iberia and seek an explanation for the unprecedented violence against Jews during the pogroms of 1391.

In addition to my research, I have regularly contributed to the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice by offering courses on the history of economic, cultural and social encounters between Jews and Christians in medieval Europe, Spain and the Mediterranean. I also have participated in the annual Rice lecture series at the JCC and presented my work to local community groups. The Program in Jewish Studies has been an invaluable source of financial support for research, conference travel and language study that has helped me to advance my work in many ways. Most importantly, the presence on campus of the vibrant intellectual community created by the students and faculty of the Program in Jewish Studies greatly enhances both my research and teaching. ■

The Aubrey '42 and Sylvia Farb Postdoctoral Fellowship

By **Melissa Weininger**

In 1938, a 15-year-old Aubrey Farb matriculated at Rice. In the next four years, he became an active member of the Menorah Society, a predecessor to Hillel, and a representative to the Student Religious Council. As he remembers now, “Most of the clubs at Rice did not ask Jews to join,” so the Menorah Society became an important focus of Jewish participation on campus.

For this reason, when Farb heard that Rice was establishing a Program in Jewish Studies and would offer a minor in Jewish studies through the School

of Humanities, “I was elated,” he said. But he also wanted to do something more. “I have always felt a great debt to Rice,” Farb said. “I received a tuition-free college education from an exceptional college. I have always wanted to give back and show my gratitude.”

To do that, Farb underwrote the Program in Jewish Studies postdoctoral fellowship for 2014–2015, a position held by Yehuda Sharim. According to Sharim, “the Aubrey '42 and Sylvia Farb Postdoctoral Fellowship in Jewish Studies has offered me the invaluable opportunity to grow and develop on many levels.” He cites the time it has

afforded him to work on his book manuscript, the enthusiasm of his students and the opportunity to work with other faculty at Rice as some of the benefits of the postdoctoral fellowship.

For Farb, bringing Sharim to campus has offered a new opportunity to continue his involvement with Rice and the Program in Jewish Studies. He regularly attends events sponsored by the program and maintains an active interest in all aspects of Jewish life at Rice. And for Sharim, the postdoctoral fellowship has been, in his words, “motivating and rewarding for a young aspiring scholar like myself.” ■



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“I have always felt a great debt to Rice. I received a tuition-free college education from an exceptional college. I have always wanted to give back and show my gratitude.”

—Aubrey Farb '42  
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Clockwise from above: Postdoctoral fellow Yehuda Sharim with Aubrey and Sylvia Farb, Matthias Henze and Aubrey Farb, and Aubrey Farb as a student at Rice, 1942.



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Students in the Jerusalem course look out at the Dead Sea from the ruins of Qumran, the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.