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News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

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Associate Director's Note



Photograph by Jeff Fitlow

Dear Friends and Supporters of Rice Jewish Studies,

Transitions, the theme of this issue, feels particularly appropriate for me as I write this note in the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In this season of new beginnings, both for the Jewish calendar and the academic calendar, the start of the fall 2021 semester brings hopeful sentiments of promise and renewal. At the same time, the ongoing pandemic casts a shadow of uncertainty over the

next several months. Just before the start of classes in late August, the administration announced that the semester would begin once more with remote instruction, due to concerns related to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 delta variant in late summer. Thankfully, we returned to in-person teaching in September, and the mood on campus is cautiously optimistic, buoyed by a shared commitment among faculty, staff and students to create a safe environment in which all of us can live and learn together.

While the central axiom of the historian's trade is that change is constant, I feel as though the past several months have brought change at a dizzying pace. The first change you will undoubtedly note is that I, and not Matthias Henze, am writing this introduction. In addition to my ongoing responsibilities as curator of the Houston Jewish History Archive, I have taken on the role of associate director of the Program in Jewish Studies as of July. I am extremely excited to play a larger role in leading our student recruitment efforts, organizing public programs, and developing strategic partnerships both on campus and beyond. While Matthias is on sabbatical during the 2021–2022 academic year, my colleague Daniel Cohen, the Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor of Jewish Studies, is serving as interim program director. In this issue, Daniel writes about an important new initiative that he is spearheading — a new course on antisemitism, to be offered to undergraduates in spring 2022.

This season of transition has also been marked by significant departures and arrivals. In May, David Leebron announced his intention to step down as Rice's president at the conclusion of this academic year, ending an 18-year term that has transformed every aspect of the university, including the Program in Jewish Studies. With deep respect and affection, we have reprinted President Leebron's message to the Rice community for our readers, along with reflections from Matthias about the legacy of the president's leadership.

In June, we bid farewell to Melissa Weininger, formerly the Anna Smith Fine Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies and my predecessor in the associate director role, as she accepted a tenure-track professorship in Jewish studies at California State University, Northridge. During her 10 years at Rice, Melissa developed many innovative courses, brought wonderful speakers and artists to campus, edited many issues of this newsletter, and worked tirelessly to engage our students and expand the reach of our program. She will be dearly missed, and we look forward to following her successes at CSUN from afar.

While these departures are significant, the future is bright. In July, we welcomed two outstanding new Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellows, Daniella Farah and Tamar Sella, to Houston. As specialists in the field of modern Middle East Jewish history and culture, Farah and Sella will enrich our

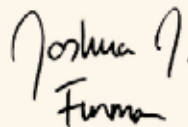
course offerings, contribute new energy to student engagement, and share their exciting and innovative research with the community. You will get to know each of them a little better in the pages that follow, and I am sure you will share my enthusiasm for all that they will accomplish in their time here at Rice.

Other highlights in this issue include two articles about student transitions. Sophomore Lily Primus, who stayed home in Colorado during her first year while classes were virtual, is now happy to be on campus and enjoying a fuller Rice experience. Sophie Pereira '21, one of the winners of last year's Morris and Shirley Rapoport Award in Jewish Studies given to an outstanding

senior, reflects on her time at Rice and her early experiences at Harvard Law School.

Last, but not least, this issue features an update from the Houston Jewish History Archive about an exciting digital partnership with the Portal to Texas History, an online database that now houses thousands of pages of Texas Jewish history for public access, and an interview with Kenneth Hoffman, executive director of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in New Orleans, about how his institution has survived a pandemic, a hurricane and other surprising challenges. We wish all our readers a safe, healthy and sweet year.

Sincerely,



Joshua Furman, Program in Jewish Studies
Associate Director
Curator, Houston Jewish History Archive

Why the Jews?: A Course on Theories of Antisemitism at Rice University

By Daniel Cohen

Daniel Cohen, the Samuel W. & Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor of History and interim director of the Program in Jewish Studies, shares plans for a new course on antisemitism to be offered at Rice during the spring 2022 semester.

“Britain is still a fine country to be a Jew of any complexion in,” wrote the novelist Howard Jacobson in 2018, but the Jewish community in the United Kingdom nonetheless lives “under the shadow of an unseen enemy.” Many self-identifying Jews in Western Europe and the United States would agree with Jacobson’s observation: Although their lives remain secure, manifestations of antisemitism during the last two decades have put into question their unprecedented acceptance and communal flourishing since the end of World War II. This period of incorporation and social mobility coincided with a steady decline of public antisemitism on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Yet as a scholar of Jewish history recently noted, “Nazism was defeated seventy-five years ago. Antisemitism was not.” Since the start of the 21st century,

what has been labeled as left-wing “new antisemitism” has indeed presented new challenges to Jewish communities in the West. The Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in 2018 and a similar event north of San Diego in 2019 have also demonstrated the lethal danger posed by far-right and white supremacist bigotry.

For educators and scholars, the oft-lamented “return of antisemitism” begs the questions — how to teach the phenomenon at the college-level and how to help students think critically about this important issue? A new course at Rice University tackles this problem head-on. Offered by the Program in Jewish Studies, Theories of Antisemitism (spring 2022) will expose upperclassmen to various interpretations of antisemitism across disciplines. Its alternative title could easily have been: Why do people hate or resent Jews? There are, unsurprisingly, multiple and complex answers to this classic query. The course will begin with a discussion of the general concept of antisemitism: Is this term satisfactory to make sense of the various forms of opposition to Jews throughout their history? As the New York University scholar David Engel provocatively argued, antisemitism does not always reflect the motivations of Jew-haters across time and space. They can sometimes be better explicated by anti-Judaism, racial supremacy, xenophobia or not fall under an exclusive label. Students in the class will then learn how antisemitism has been understood from the perspectives of history, Christian theology, Enlightenment thought, Marxism, psychoanalysis, critical theory, postcolonial thought and more. We will also explore the fraught contemporary arguments about the relationship between antisemitism and Zionism. Although I will serve as the main instructor for the class, students will benefit from the expertise of other Rice faculty and guest lecturers from other universities. ■



Daniel Cohen

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President Leebron Prepares to Step Down

Dear Colleagues and Students,

The joyous celebration of the commencements of the classes of both 2020 and 2021 two weekends ago, with families and friends and finally visible smiles, was a welcome sign that we are beginning the return to a more normal world for our university. The last 15 months of the pandemic upset many of our expectations.

Three years ago, in the summer of 2018, I extended my agreement with the university to serve as president for four years. I contemplated that given what I thought we could accomplish, 2022 would likely be the right time to end my service as president. Of course, I did not at the time anticipate a global pandemic. Working together, we have navigated the pandemic well, and also made a great deal of progress on the goals we set prior to the pandemic. As we now enter the summer, not only is there light at the end of the tunnel, but the light seems near and bright. Thus, I am writing to let you know that I informed the Board of Trustees earlier this month that this coming academic year will be my last year as president of Rice University, and I will step down at the conclusion of my 18th year, on June 30, 2022.

To many, it may seem that 18 years is an odd number, but in fact it has special significance in the two cultures that dominate my own family. In the Chinese culture it symbolizes “good fortune,” and in Jewish culture and Hebrew language it represents “life.” And certainly, I could not have asked for more good fortune than to serve for a significant part of my life as Rice’s president.

I am so grateful to Rice University for this incredible opportunity and to you, the extraordinary people who make up the Rice community and who have time and again demonstrated our common values and commitment to excellence, creativity and compassion. Working together, we have been driven by our desire to contribute to the betterment of our world and by our constant ambition to become an ever-better university.

There will be time enough to look back, so in this brief note I want to express my thanks, and to look forward to what we must accomplish together in the year ahead.

I want to thank our students. Your talent, creativity, engagement and care for each other has constantly inspired us to do better and to do more. You give us enormous hope and confidence for the future. There are many reasons that

Rice succeeded so well in navigating the pandemic, but none more so than the responsibility exercised by our students. Indeed, my return to the classroom to teach this past semester, even if on Zoom, has sustained my admiration for our students and optimism about what they will accomplish after they graduate.

I want to thank our staff, which in so many cases has made the challenging and the difficult appear smooth and easy, and most especially during this last year. Your dedication to the work of our faculty, the learning of our students and the



David Leebron

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service we provide to our community and beyond makes the difference in what we as a university are able to achieve. Your expressions and actions of care and compassion have often been determinative in propelling a student to success.

I cannot fully express my admiration for and gratitude to our faculty. No university of our size spans such a range of endeavors with such excellence and impact. You, our faculty, constantly push the frontiers, whether in astrophysics or racial justice, architecture or computer engineering, business or biosciences, mechanical engineering or music. It was the depth and breadth of Rice endeavors that inspired my choice to join Rice just over 17 years ago, and has provided energy and inspiration along the way. And to quote from my favorite speech — President Kennedy’s 1962 moon shot speech at Rice Stadium — our faculty “in [its] quest for knowledge and progress, is determined and cannot be deterred.”

I want to thank an extraordinary leadership team for its competence, integrity and values. Its excellence, as elsewhere in the university, has been fueled by its increasing diversity. I have also been grateful over many years for the leadership demonstrated by the Faculty Senate and by the students serving in the Student Association, Graduate Student Association and residential colleges, but never more so than this year.

Finally, our amazing experience here at Rice has been amplified by getting to know the people and institutions of the remarkable city of Houston. We are grateful and proud to have raised our family here, and to have had opportunities to work with many across Houston to contribute to the progress of our city.

All of our accomplishments as a university have been fostered by our faculty, staff and students working together with extraordinary support from our Board of Trustees, our alumni and friends of the university here in Houston and around the world.

The year ahead is an important one, with much to be accomplished that cannot be deferred. The world of higher education and knowledge is changing and expanding rapidly, and we must move forward to position ourselves for the future. In research and innovation, we will formally open the Ion innovation hub in midtown Houston and launch the Welch Institute for Advanced Materials. We will begin making the additional strategic investments recently approved by the Board

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of Trustees in neuro-engineering, in quantum science and engineering, in the study of disparities and inequities in our society, in environmental studies and in online education. To support our research and academic endeavors, we will begin construction of a major new science and engineering building, a new home for visual and dramatic arts, and an expansion of our architecture facilities.

We must continue the process of improving diversity and inclusion at our university, relying in part on the work of the Task Force on Slavery, Segregation and Racial Injustice. We will enter the next phase of our student enrollment expansion, and must plan and make changes for that and assure that we maintain our educational excellence and unique sense of community. We must continue our commitment to the Rice Investment so that our education is accessible to all. To fully support the increasing breadth of the Rice experience, we will begin construction on an extraordinary new center for student life and opportunity to replace the current student center. And we will also begin planning for the 12th residential college in connection with our expansion.

We will continue to increase our online offerings, which enable Rice to serve and empower new groups of students in Houston and around the world. As travel opportunities return, we will work to renew and enlarge our international engagements and outreach.

And to support all of these ambitions, we must move to the next stage of our capital campaign, which has already been crucial to many achievements in these areas.

That is a lot for one year, but all necessary as we work to position the university to continue providing the best educational opportunities and producing the most impactful research.

Ping and I are focused on and energized by the year ahead, and have not

made plans beyond that. We will then look for new opportunities to learn and to contribute to our world, at Rice and elsewhere.

Again, Ping and I are so grateful for the opportunity we have had, and look forward to the exciting year ahead.

With warm regards and deepest gratitude,
David

President David Leebron's Many Contributions to Rice Jewish Studies

Matthias Henze

In response to David Leebron's announcement to step down as president of Rice University, Matthias Henze, founding director of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies, reflects on the many contributions President Leebron has made to the program.

On May 26, 2021, President David Leebron announced in an email message to the Rice community that, having served as president of Rice University for 18 years, he will step down from that position June 30, 2022. It has been my great privilege to have worked with David for well over a decade in my role as founding director of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies. While much could be said about David's exceptional leadership and the many ways in which he has made Rice a better place, here I want to reflect on David's contributions to, and tremendous support of, our program.

It would be difficult to overstate how important David has been for the Program in Jewish Studies and its many successes. It all began in spring 2008. My former colleague Gregory Kaplan and I had been talking for a few months about starting a Program in Jewish Studies at Rice and were beginning to make initial plans. On the Saturday of Rice's commencement in May 2008, while a delegation from Germany was visiting



Matthias Henze

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President David Leebron's Many Contributions to Rice Jewish Studies

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Rice, David and his wife Y. Ping Sun invited my family and me to join them at Reckling Park for an afternoon baseball game. For some reason the German visitors never came to the game, so we had plenty of time to talk (and our boys, two of whom ended up graduating from Rice years later, had plenty of time to eat lots of hot dogs). When I told David that Gregory and I were thinking about a Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, he jumped at the idea. I dare say that our ideas were still a bit sketchy at the time. David followed up the very next morning with an email inviting me to make an appointment to continue the conversation.

In January 2009, David and Ping hosted a reception at Wiess House to mark the launch of the program. Five years later, in 2014, they hosted us again to celebrate our fifth anniversary. And in 2019, we returned to Wiess House to celebrate our first decade of Rice Jewish studies with David and Ping and many guests from the Houston community. It was a memorable evening!

David has always taken a particular interest in our program.

people will comment on his exceptional presidency. They will mention Rice's targeted growth that has been so successful, Rice's impressive standings in the rankings, the many new buildings on campus, Rice's remarkable fundraising successes, and (and this is particularly important to the humanist in me) David's truly inclusive view of Rice, where everyone has a place at the table and an opportunity to contribute to the success of our university. For me, all of this holds true, and much more could be said. But there is something else that is equally remarkable and that speaks to David's leadership: his willingness to take risks. When I approached David back in 2008 and proposed to launch the Program in Jewish Studies, I had no administrative experience. I was an associate professor. I had never been department chair, and I had never been in charge of any academic unit. I had no money to start the program (a generous 2009 grant from Rice's Faculty Initiatives Fund was tremendously helpful to jump-start the program), and I had no fundraising experience.

A truly great university president is a builder not just of buildings and academic units but also of people, a leader who enables others, even if, or especially when success is not guaranteed. David has been such an enabler and for that I remain profoundly grateful to him.

He has advocated for the program since its inception, both on and off campus. He has helped with our efforts to attract more Jewish students to Rice. He supported us when in 2015 we took the first group of Rice students to Jerusalem at a time when other universities deemed travel to Israel unsafe. He has been instrumental in our fundraising efforts, helping assemble a robust donor base. And a few years back, I was privileged to record an interview with him in his office in which he talked beautifully about the contributions of the Program in Jewish Studies to the Rice curriculum.

Some years ago, I attended an international conference. During the dinner conversation, a colleague asked, somewhat provocatively, what makes a university great. "The faculty," somebody proposed. But that idea was quickly dismissed, since, with the job market being what it is, one can find excellent faculty just about anywhere. "Resources?" Nobody will deny the importance of resources, but resources alone don't make a school great. "No," my colleague replied, answering his own question, "The administration — you need to have an administration that has a vision and is willing to take risks."

This academic year, David's last as president of Rice, many

None of this deterred David. He took a chance with me, he encouraged me, and he has been unwavering in his support of the program itself and of me personally. A truly great university president is a builder not just of buildings and academic units but also of people, a leader who enables others, even if, or especially when success is not guaranteed. David has been such an enabler and for that I remain profoundly grateful to him.

On behalf of the many students whose Rice experience has been forever changed by Jewish studies; on behalf of all the people who work at and have donated materials to our Houston Jewish History Archive and all the important work it does; of our partners in the larger Houston community with whom we work closely together to bring high-level Jewish education to Houston; of our postdoctoral fellows who have gone on to get tenure-track jobs at other universities; of our faculty for whom Rice Jewish studies has become an academic home; and our entire Jewish studies team at Rice — Thank you, David, for everything you have done for our program! Rice's Program in Jewish Studies would not be where it is today without your vision and ongoing support. ■

Discovering Iranian Jewish Identity: Introducing Daniella Farah

By Daniella Farah

Daniella Farah, who joined the faculty of Rice Jewish studies in July as one of two new Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellows, has already received several prestigious awards and grants for her groundbreaking research on Jewish life and identity in modern Iran and Turkey. In this essay, she explains how her scholarship is informed by her family's history and how it changes our understanding of Jewish-Muslim relations in the 20th century.

I am a scholar of modern Jewish history, with a geographic focus on the Middle East. My scholarship, which lies at the intersection of Jewish history, Middle Eastern history, education history and transnational studies, examines interreligious encounters, national belonging, and Jewish identity formation in modern Iran and Turkey. More broadly, I am interested in how Jews in Muslim-majority countries found their place within their broader national milieu while maintaining ties to their Jewish identities. I work in many language traditions, employing archival and printed material, as well as oral histories, in Persian, Judeo-Persian, Hebrew, French, Turkish, Ladino and English.

I received my Ph.D. in Jewish history from Stanford University in July 2021. For my doctoral dissertation, "Forming Iranian Jewish Identities: Education, National Belonging, the Jewish Press, and Integration, 1945–1981," I conducted research in 11 archives and libraries across Israel, France, England and the United States. My dissertation demonstrates how Jews integrated into the broader non-Jewish Iranian polity and made claims of belonging to the burgeoning nation-state. I also show how attendance at ethnically and religiously diverse schools in Iran mitigated antisemitic acts and helped Jews achieve significant socioeconomic mobility.

My research, in a way, began in my adolescence. As an Iranian-American Jewish woman, I grew up hearing my



Daniella Farah

relatives' stories about living as minorities in Iran. Over time, I learned conflicting narratives about 20th-century Iranian experiences. These accounts instilled in me a curiosity and passion for exploring the history and identity of Middle Eastern Jews and for reconciling seemingly contradictory historical accounts. My dissertation, therefore, was borne out of the desire to give voice to and historicize the modern history of Iran's Jews.

I have been awarded several national grants and awards, including a 2021 Salo Baron New Voices in Jewish Studies Award at Columbia and Fordham Universities and a 2021–2022 Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture Grant. I am also part of a collaborative book project, spearheaded by Pennsylvania State University, called "Reimagining Jewish Life in the Modern Middle East, 1800–present: Culture, Society, and History," that is geared toward writing a co-authored manuscript that will offer the first integrative, broad and transnational analysis of the Jews of the modern Middle East.

I am a passionate, award-winning educator. This semester, I am teaching the course Great Books of Jewish Culture — a survey of Jewish history, literature and culture, spanning the biblical period

to the present. In this class, we read a diversity of primary texts (memoirs, newspaper articles, biblical tales, short stories, political treatises) important to Jewish life and culture, as well as scholarship from various disciplines. In this course, I have integrated several texts pertaining to Jews in the Middle East and North Africa to address the erasure of these Jews' experiences in broader narratives about what constitutes Jewish history.

I look forward to exploring more of what Houston has to offer — restaurants, museums, parks, cafes! My daughter is especially eager to visit the Houston Zoo. But, more importantly, I am excited to be a part of Rice University's incredible intellectual community in general and the Program in Jewish Studies more specifically. The colleagues and students I have worked with so far at Rice have been some of the kindest, brightest and most encouraging people I have met during my time in higher education, and I envision growing immensely as a scholar here. ■

An Ethnomusicologist Walks into Rice: Introducing Tamar Sella

By Tamar Sella

Tamar Sella, our second Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellow, brings an extremely unique and important perspective to our faculty as a scholar of Mizrahi cultural production in the modern Middle East. Her work is situated at the intersections of several disciplines and fields, including ethnomusicology, performance studies, feminist and queer theory, and Jewish studies. She received two teaching awards from Harvard University, where she completed her Ph.D. in 2020.

If you see me around campus looking a little disoriented, know that this is my first time in a university outside of a music department. Well, I overstate my disciplinary allegiances (and understate my wanting navigational skills), but it is true that the majority of my university time has been spent wandering the halls of departments of music. First, at UC Berkeley as a performer; then, at

Harvard, where I received my Ph.D. My academic field is ethnomusicology, that critique-worthy term for the study of music and society. Like many of us, though, I like to read and think broadly, so I also draw from performance studies, feminist and queer theory, and, of course, Jewish history, to name a few. I write primarily about Mizrahi culture in Israel/Palestine, where I delineate Mizrahi (literally



Tamar Sella

My research, then, looks at the ways in which contemporary Mizrahi artists negotiate occluded memories of migration, displacement and assimilation within the present moment.

“Eastern”) as the racialized category that groups together Israeli Jews with origins across the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and the Balkans.

The path to my work has been circuitous. It follows the contours generated by growing up between Israel and the U.S. in the post-Oslo, post-9/11 years, deciphering my subject position within the broader histories and racial and colonial

logics of both countries, separately and in relation to one another. My family settled in Israel from various places in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. But uncovering the particular erasures of the stories of my maternal grandmother from Yemen, framed by the intellectual work of Mizrahi studies, remains a central catalyst to my current work. In considering what her story might mean for me today, I turned, as I am wont to do, to the work of cultural producers. My research, then, looks at the ways in which contemporary Mizrahi artists negotiate occluded memories of migration, displacement and assimilation within the present moment. Through their work, I am interested in exploring ideas from Mizrahi aesthetics that trouble the Arab/Jewish binary and disperse centers of power and hegemony. I am very excited to pursue this research at Rice through the development of articles, talks and my book project.

I am also excited to teach courses on topics of music and society that I care deeply about. In the fall, I am teaching a First-Year Writing Intensive Seminar, *Voicing Dissent: Music and Social Movements*, which examines grassroots movements and the interlocking systems of power they resist through the lens of musicians. We read and listen to figures who blur the lines between music and organizing, from Paul Robeson to the Rahbani Brothers to Violeta Parra. In the spring, I will teach *Music and Diaspora*, a seminar that looks at the creative and intellectual work of musicians to learn more about what diaspora means. One of the particular objectives of the course, and one that I am interested in far beyond, is to ask how Jewish diaspora might be in conversation with other diasporic formations in the modern world.

Texas is decidedly new terrain for me, and there are many aspects to Houston that I look forward to exploring. I am always eager to learn about past and present networks of intellectuals, artists and activists in the place where I live, and I am enthusiastic about doing the same in a city with such a rich cultural landscape. On a smaller, but no less significant scale, and as someone who was enculturated into mainstream secular Israeli life away from various cultural expressions of diaspora, I am always exceedingly excited about a good Ashkenazi Jewish American deli, and I await my first trip to the famous Kenny and Ziggy's when it is safe to do so. ■

New Beginnings and Sweet Transitions

By Lily Primus '24

Lily Primus '24, a harp performance major from Colorado, writes about the experience of finally arriving in Houston to begin her second year at Rice, after spending her first year of college learning and practicing at home. Through the lens of Rosh Hashanah, she offers profound wisdom for all of us about adjusting our expectations, letting go of circumstances beyond our control and finding beauty and contentment in the world around us.

As I write this article, it's been 23 days since I first moved to Houston. In these 23 days, I've learned, grown and changed so much. So many parts of my life are different. I'm away from my home in Colorado and experiencing what it means to be a Rice student on campus for the first time. But, I'm experiencing all this as a sophomore.

I spent the entirety of my freshman year doing remote learning. I'll be honest, it was not an easy year. I'm grateful I was able to start my college education, but I never truly felt like a Rice student until I arrived on campus. As we enter this new year, I've thought a lot about what it means to be in a new environment, in the place I've been longing to be since the moment I first visited the Rice campus in January 2020.

I went into this year trying to have no expectations. Thinking back to senior year of high school, I was so excited to have a graduation, senior prom, perform a harp concerto with two orchestras and so much more. But thinking about everything I missed out on because of the pandemic, and knowing I'll never get to experience all these things I was looking forward to doing, puts me in a bad headspace that is hard to dig myself out of. I wanted to go into college not setting myself up for disappointment, and I'm happy to say that so far, I think trying to have no expectations has worked out for me.



Lily Primus '24

My transition to Rice has not been easy, but these words from Rabbi Gidon Isaacs about Rosh Hashanah really show what I have been feeling, "Just because we start a new job, move to a new home, begin a new year, doesn't mean that 'we have arrived' . . . The more we honor new beginnings for what they are — times of transition — the sweeter those transitions will be." I often felt during my first week here that I was the only one having a hard time adjusting to this new phase of my life, when part of me had already started it back home. But I realized that I needed to allow myself time to adjust to the biggest transition I'll ever face in my entire life.

I first felt at home at Rice about a week after I first arrived on campus. I was walking back to my dorm from the Shepherd School of Music, and I took a moment to really take a look around me. The beautiful Houston sky at dusk, the buzz of the cicadas, the smell of freshly cut grass, the quiet of the Rice campus at night, where everything could just be still, just for a moment. I finally felt what I've been longing to experience — to truly feel like I'm in the right place after a year and a half of uncertainty and fear, making me forget what happiness could really feel like.

May you take Rabbi Isaacs's words to heart and know that you can take as much time as you need to transition into this new year. We have yet to be out of this pandemic, but I am so excited to finally be at Rice and cannot wait to see what the future holds for all of us. Shana tova! ■



As we enter this new year, I've thought a lot about what it means to be in a new environment, in the place I've been longing to be since the moment I first visited the Rice campus in January 2020.



From Houston to Harvard Law: A Rice Jewish Studies Student's Journey

By Sophie Pereira '21

In this essay about her journey at Rice and her transition to law school this fall, Sophie Pereira reflects back on how her experiences in Jewish studies coursework and extracurricular opportunities enabled her to go abroad to study the Israeli legal system firsthand and inspired and guided her postgraduate study and career plans.

After my first week of classes at Harvard Law School (HLS), I had an opportunity to reflect on my experiences at Rice University, which most notably included my involvement within the Program in Jewish Studies. I am grateful for its dedicated professors, all of whom played an integral role in shifting and remapping my academic journey at Rice, and consequently, my acceptance into HLS.

As an incoming freshman at Rice, I wanted to double major in political science and psychology. I was on a pre-law track, and I wanted to take classes I thought would help me to write and think more critically. Like all freshmen, I had to enroll in a core class, the Freshmen Writing Intensive Seminar (FWIS) course. I was excited to take a FWIS class I had pre-selected; however, on registra-



Sophie Pereira '21

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Though I walked into this class a skeptic, I walked out a better student, a better writer and an ambassador for the Jewish studies program at Rice, mostly due to my interactions with the professor in this class.  
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tion day, my expectations were quashed as I found the classes I had chosen were filled and unavailable. Ultimately, I chose a seat in a FWIS class titled Jews on Film. Those that know me know I do not enjoy watching old movies and so, understandably, I was nervous about this course. But, as a young Jewish woman, I was intrigued about the course content, exploring diverse Jewish communities around the world and their cinematic representations.

During this semester, my professor challenged me, at every turn, to think and write critically. I watched films that broadened my exposure to Jewish identities, and I wrote about these identities while intertwining themes that included race, gender, religion, nationalism and secularization. Though I walked into this class a skeptic, I walked out a better student, a better writer and an ambassador for the Program in Jewish Studies,

mostly due to my interactions with the professor in this class. Her energy, knowledge and dedication to Jewish studies were unmatched. Her ability to mold and improve my writing, through constructive critiques, was invaluable. The small class size, typical of the program, made this an ideal space to communicate ideas with my peers, ask in-depth questions and work closely with Jewish studies faculty.

From that fortuitous class in my freshman year, my academic plan changed. Following my completion of this FWIS course, I dropped psychology as a major and began mapping out courses needed to complete a Jewish studies minor. What I did not realize at the time was how beneficial this change would later prove. My sophomore year, I applied for and received a grant to go to Israel and research Israeli laws. I spent two weeks studying the comparative systems of the Israeli Knesset and the Israeli Supreme Court to the United States Congress and Supreme Court, respectively. This experiential learning opportunity, provided by the Program in Jewish Studies, cemented my love of the law and further motivated me to apply to law school.

As I continued to take more challenging Jewish studies classes, I studied under professors who became mentors and I learned the value of open-mindedness, thoughtful dialogue and patience, all essential skills I am using in law school. When I reflect on my time in the Jewish studies program, I am grateful to my professors for their guidance, and I am thankful for the education that provided me with unique, rigorous and exciting opportunities. It broadened my experiences and knowledge as a young Jewish woman, it changed the course of my journey at Rice, it changed the course of my future and it provided me with an amazing support system inside the larger Rice University community. ■

How a Museum Survives a Pandemic, a Hurricane and a National Acrylic Shortage — A Conversation With Kenneth Hoffman

By Joshua Furman

In May 2021, the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in New Orleans opened to the public after years of planning and development that were extended by the coronavirus pandemic. Only a few months later, in late August, Hurricane Ida struck the city, prompting museum staff to pack up rare artifacts and temporarily close the building. Joshua Furman spoke with MSJE executive director Kenneth Hoffman by telephone in September to review the interesting twists and turns in the museum's history and to find out how the museum weathered the storm.

This conversation has been edited for clarity and space considerations.

FURMAN: Kenneth, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us about the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in New Orleans. As you know, I had a chance to visit in early August, and it was just really wonderful, and I'm so excited to share the story of the museum with our readers. Why don't you tell us a little bit about your path to becoming the executive director at the Museum for the Southern Jewish Experience? How did you get here?

HOFFMAN: Well, I have to start by saying that my father, Harvey Hoffman, is a graduate of the Rice Institute. I believe it was 1960 [that he graduated], so we've got a connection there. I was born in Houston, moved to Baton Rouge when I was 3 and grew up in Baton Rouge, Jewish, going to summer camp at Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Mississippi. I went to Tulane University and got a master's degree in history, and I wrote my thesis on the Jewish community of Port Gibson, Mississippi, which doesn't exist anymore. I wrote it as a case study of Deep South southern Jewish communities. But when I graduated, I went off and started working in museums and left the southern Jewish angle behind. Then I worked for 18 years at the National World War II Museum, which is just down the street from the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. When I heard that MSJE was going to relocate from Henry S. Jacobs Camp, where it was established in the late 1980s, to New Orleans, I was very excited, and signed on to help out with the effort. Eventually, I was hired.

FURMAN: Why don't you tell us, for those unfamiliar with the story of the museum at Jacobs Camp, how that museum came to be, what was in it and then what considerations were behind the decision to relocate it to New Orleans?

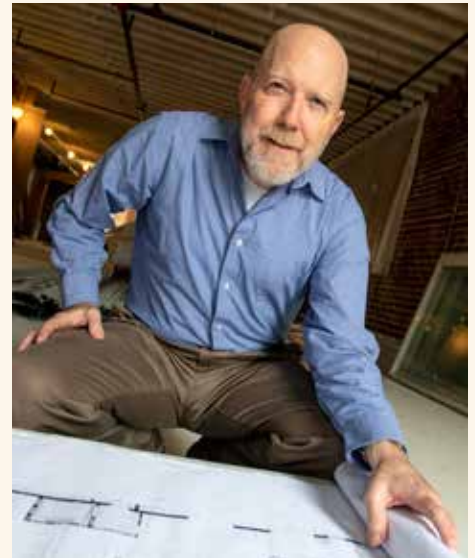
HOFFMAN: Throughout the '70s and '80s, a lot of the small-town Southern Jewish communities were very quickly disappearing, because the young people were going off to colleges, getting degrees, and not wanting to come home and work at their father's store. So the camp director would get phone calls along the lines of, "We're the last Jewish family in [blank town]. Um, what do we do with the Torahs? What do we do with all the Judaica? We're selling the building to the Baptist Church." And so the camp director decided to use the camp as a repository, and from there, they decided to build a museum and create an educational experience about what we feel is a unique form of American Judaism, being down here in the South.

FURMAN: And Jacobs Camp is in Utica, Mississippi, right?

HOFFMAN: Correct. And right there is a Southern Jewish experience that kind of shocks the sensibilities of some people — a Jewish museum in the middle of Mississippi?

FURMAN: Right.

HOFFMAN: But it was a great, it's a great place. It still is a great place. I was a camper there many years. I was on the staff as a counselor. It was a major part of my Jewish upbringing.



Kenneth Hoffman

FURMAN: Absolutely. But if your goal is to not just preserve items but make them accessible to the public, there's only so much foot traffic you can expect in Utica, Mississippi.

HOFFMAN: Well, that's true, and that was the major drawback to being in Utica, Mississippi, was that the museum was very inaccessible to the general public. In 2012, they decided to close the museum down, put all of the artifacts in storage and look for a more accessible place to put the museum. The board did a lot of talking to different communities, and they settled on New Orleans. New Orleans has a very old Jewish history, as do many Southern communities. It also has a very vibrant tourism economy and it has Tulane University, so for all those reasons, New Orleans was selected. And we started the effort of acquiring a space and designing exhibits and raising money to make it happen.

FURMAN: So, none of us, obviously, could have predicted that a global pandemic would break out in the middle of all that. Tell us about how COVID changed your plans, both in terms of being able to open the museum to visitors, but also in terms of exhibit design or accessibility and safety.

Continued on Page 12

HOFFMAN: When the pandemic hit, several things happened. We weren't able to travel anymore to fundraise, and so we switched to Zoom like everyone else did, but, you know, it's not the same as sitting down in someone's office and sharing blueprints and renderings and really getting them excited. However, we did what we could. Another thing was construction and the stopping of work when someone got COVID or was in near-contact with someone, so that slowed us down. And then the strangest thing of all is a national lack of acrylic. When you're building a museum, you need a lot of acrylic. You need acrylic for exhibit cases, you need acrylic for producing graphics on the wall, and all the acrylic was going to [making] sneeze guards in front of cashiers at the stores.

FURMAN: Never would have predicted that.

HOFFMAN: Who knew? There was acrylic, in particular, but also other items that got swept up in the supply chain disruption. They all slowed things down. We had wanted to open in October 2020, but that did not happen, but we took a risk, and set our opening for spring 2021, May 27, and we met that goal. So we opened during the pandemic, but we are very cognizant of safety and health. We follow all local and state mandates. People wear masks. And as far as exhibit design changes, there weren't many. We did have a certain number of interactive exhibits that you touch, and so what we've done is we have purchased disposable styluses and we give them out to our visitors, so when they want to push on the touchscreen, if they don't feel comfortable touching it, although we clean them regularly, they can use their stylus. So, there were some considerations with exhibit design based on COVID.

FURMAN: What have been some of the most memorable interactions with visitors that you've had in the first few months of the museum actually being open?

HOFFMAN: I would say that, universally, we have had positive reactions, and they're oftentimes very similar, meaning that they go along the lines of, "This is great; I am so glad you're telling our stories" — this is if it's somebody from the South — Everyone has a story to share, and that's a wonderful thing, because this museum is their museum. It's not just someone else's history; it is their history. And they want to be represented, they

Yes, we are talking about a specific population in a specific place: Jews in the South. But if you pull back from that, we're talking about everyone. We're talking about the human condition of being a stranger in a strange land, navigating your way through a new landscape, making decisions and choices about what to give up in order to fit in and what to hold onto to maintain your identity.

want to share their own family stories, and that's a really great thing. Now, when folks come in who are not from the South or who aren't Jewish, then we sometimes get a different reaction. Sometimes the reaction is, "I had no idea that there was a Jewish community in Selma, Alabama; that there were Jews in Odessa, Texas."

FURMAN: Right.

HOFFMAN: "That Galveston has had five Jewish mayors." Yeah, those kinds of things. We are truly enlarging people's understanding of what it means to be an American Jew and really what it means to be an American, ultimately.

FURMAN: It would be enough to deal with a pandemic as the executive director of a museum, but then in late August, Hurricane Ida slammed into New Orleans. Tell us a little bit about how Ida impacted the museum, and what you and your staff did to prepare.

HOFFMAN: Ida blew up very quickly. We lost electricity, of course. We made a financial decision a long time ago to spend a lot of money on a generator, and that came in very handy, because we were able to maintain our temperature and humidity in the museum, that's very important for old things, as you know.

FURMAN: I do. Temperature is everything.

HOFFMAN: Yes, absolutely. The museum building didn't sustain any damage. The building we're in was built in 1916. I guess back then they really knew how to do it. We were obviously closed for about two weeks, because people weren't even in the city, you know. Some of the staff was still away.

Now, everyone is back. The museum has reopened.

FURMAN: Tell us, and I know this question is like asking you to pick a favorite child, but what's your favorite artifact in the museum?

HOFFMAN: That is a tough question, but I have an answer because other people have asked me this. I think my favorite object in the museum is our crazy quilt from 1885. It was created by the Jewish Ladies Sewing Circle in Canton, Mississippi. It was raffled off to raise funds for the synagogue. It's a beautiful piece of textile history. There happens to have been a "crazy quilt" craze going around the world in the 1880s, so that shows that the ladies in Canton, Mississippi, were aware of and interested in the latest crazes. But even more important, I think, is the metaphor of the quilt: People coming together adding their work, their talent, their creativity to create something that benefits the community.

And that metaphor is part of the universal story of the museum. Yes, we are talking about a specific population in a specific place: Jews in the South. But if you pull back from that, we're talking about everyone. We're talking about the human condition of being a stranger in a strange land, navigating your way through a new landscape, making decisions and choices about what to give up in order to fit in and what to hold onto to maintain your identity. And then everything in between that creates a unique community. This is something that everyone can understand. Either it's happened to them, either they are immigrants or their ancestors were, so we're trying to shine a light on those experiences through our specific individual stories.

So, the quilt. And then, at the end of the exhibit, the last activity is an interactive where people can "sew" their own quilt square electronically by using a touchscreen, and create a quilt square that represents them by choosing different fabrics and different patches, writing on it, etc., and then adding it in the center of the table — this is all electronic — into a community quilt, and the more people who participate each day, the more vibrant the quilt gets, the stronger the community is.



FURMAN: Tell us about what you're most looking forward to over the last months of 2021 and the first part of next year.

HOFFMAN: Well, I'm looking forward to everyone getting vaccinated so that we can get past this pandemic and people and cruise ships start coming back to New Orleans and conventions start coming and people feel more comfortable traveling, because we want people in this museum. But until that happens, we are going to continue doing our virtual programs. We'll probably wind up doing most things in a hybrid way so that people who are here can participate and people who aren't here can participate as well. That's what I'm looking forward to.

FURMAN: That sounds great. I'm really grateful that here at Rice University and the Houston Jewish History Archive, we've been able to partner with the MSJE and assist with getting some photographs for your exhibits and some artifacts, including a steamer trunk [from a Galveston Movement immigrant]. It just gives me such joy to know that it's found a good home at the museum to help tell the story.

HOFFMAN: Well, I can't tell you how many people, especially visitors from Texas, come in here and the first thing they say is, "Oh, I hope you have something on Galveston." And we say, "Follow me!"

FURMAN: Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me. I hope that more and more people will be able to visit New Orleans and the museum in the months ahead. ■

To learn more and plan your trip to the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, visit www.msje.org.



The crazy quilt from the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience's collection.

A Digital Portal for Preserving Texas Jewish History Online

Joshua Furman, Curator, Houston Jewish History Archive

A major grant has enabled the HJHA to make thousands of pages of Texas Jewish historical records available online, thanks to a partnership with the Portal to Texas History and the University of North Texas.

As the pandemic continues into fall 2021, limiting in-person access to the collections of the Houston Jewish History Archive, it is more crucial than ever to digitize historical records about Texas Jewish life and to make them available to the widest possible audience. At the same time, Tropical Storm Nicholas, which touched down in Houston in late September, fortunately caused no serious impacts to the Rice campus, but reminded us all that we live in a region prone to adverse weather and flooding, which can cause serious and irreparable damage to precious documents and photographs.

Thankfully, the Houston Jewish History Archive at Rice University has been hard at work during the past year to dramatically expand its catalog of digital material. None of this work would be possible without the financial support of its donors. You can access our internal digital catalog via the Fondren Library's Digital Scholarship Archive at this link: <https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/105156>. Here, you will view a series of oral history interviews, an Alfred's Delicatessen menu from the 1960s,



Portal to Texas History, a digital database of Texas historical material.



The November 1968 issue of *The Message*, the bulletin of Congregation Beth Yeshurun.

and scrapbooks from Houston Hillel, Hadassah, Beth Yeshurun and other local Jewish organizations.

While digitization is an urgent need, it is also time-consuming and costly to do it properly. There also needs to be a strong infrastructure in place, not only to store the digital materials, but also a platform to make them accessible in a user-friendly format. If rare papers have been scanned, but no one can view the digital files, then the job is only half done.

Fortunately, back in 2019, the HJHA was a partner to a major grant that Fondren Library received from the Council on Library and

Information Resources, as part of its Digitizing Hidden Special Collections initiative. With the funding from this grant, we have partnered with the Portal to Texas History, a digital database of Texas historical material under the direction of the University of North Texas Libraries in Denton. The Portal to Texas History brings together newspapers, rare documents, and photographs from hundreds of archives and repositories across the state, making them available online for free.

Thanks to these efforts, thousands of pages of Texas Jewish history are available to you today, to read, search through and download wherever you live. More than 1,500 issues of *The Message*, the bulletin of Congregation Beth Yeshurun, have been digitized and added

to the portal, spanning the years from 1946 to 2014. You will also find commemorative booklets from other Houston synagogues such as Beth Israel and United Orthodox Synagogues, as well as Agudata Achim and Rodfei Sholom in San Antonio, Shearith Israel in Wharton, Beth Jacob in Galveston and Kol Israel in Beaumont. We hope to work with more South Texas congregations in the months to come to expand this growing collection even further.

To access the Portal to Texas History, visit <https://texashistory.unt.edu>, and type in the name of the congregation or Jewish organization you are searching for. I am sure you will enjoy reading through this amazing catalog of material. ■

From Generation to Generation: Carrying on a Family Legacy Through Supporting the Houston Jewish History Archive

By Seth Stolbun

The Edith and Bernard Stolbun Family Foundation began supporting the Houston Jewish History Archive (HJHA) in the wake of Hurricane Harvey and now continues to support the archive in the COVID-19 pandemic.

These years have been eventful. Without a doubt, photographs, emails and other materials documenting these events that are preserved in the archive will play a major role in shaping the narrative for future generations. I think what makes an archive special are not artifacts from major events, but rather the unexpected, unknown, overlooked, and forgotten stories that are preserved and brought back to life.

About a year ago, I decided I wanted to build a contemporary home for myself here in Houston. I began searching for architects and architectural history unique to our city and region. I soon discovered a book called "Making Houston Modern: The Life and Architecture of Howard Barnstone." I recognized the name Barnstone through my knowledge of the history of the Menil Collection. I was surprised to find a chapter on Barnstone's Jewish Houston, written by HJHA curator Joshua Furman. In reading the chapter, I discovered that family friends and their parents had worked with Barnstone to design and build their Houston homes in the middle of the 20th century. Without my knowledge of Josh and the archive, I would not have made this connection.

My grandmother, Edith Stolbun, was an amateur archivist. She saved everything! Recently I found she had saved breakfast vouchers from the Babson Executive Conference Center, where she stayed for my college graduation in 2011. Perhaps her greatest accomplishment

was the work she did on a group photo she was in as a young girl. She painstakingly identified and labeled all the members of the Houston chapter of the Workmen's Circle, a progressive Yiddish and Jewish organization, that were in the photo. I am proud to say that the photograph and her work have been part of the HJHA since late 2017.

The Edith and Bernard Stolbun Family Foundation seeks to honor the memory of my grandparents and support causes that my parents and siblings and I believe would have been important to them. I can think of no better cause than the HJHA as representative of my grandparents' wishes. Both were born in and lived almost their entire lives in Houston. They were the children of immigrants from what was then Russia and is now Ukraine. I am proud to count myself as a third-generation Houstonian.

I cherished the time I was able to spend with my grandparents. They took tremendous pride in Houston and South



Left: A picture of the Houston chapter of the Workmen's Circle. Right (L-R) Bernard Stolbun, Sam Stolbun and Seth Stolbun.

elementary, and how he used to walk over a giant hill of dirt that would eventually become the 610 Loop. As you can imagine, learning my family's history and legacy in Houston has always illuminated the city for me. In the more than 100 years since my great-grandparents came to Houston, my family has gone through many ups and downs, and is now fortunate enough to be able to preserve this history along with the history of our community and region through the HJHA.

Archives are special because they are repositories for information, just waiting for someone to come and contribute their own narrative, photograph or artifact. Anything tangible — or even digital — can find a home in the right collection. I know firsthand from my own experiences, working with Joseph Grigley and his archive at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as a graduate student, how transformative the experience of working with archival materials can be for young scholars like the undergraduates at Rice.



Texas. Both lived into their 90s, so they had a lot of Houston Jewish history to share. My grandmother told stories about how she was one of the first students at a brand-new West University Elementary, just down the street from Rice, or how during World War II she used to go to USO Dances at Westwood Country Club, where I am now a member. My grandfather set up his first law office in a desolate part of midtown Houston, now an upscale neighborhood where I would go out to meet friends in my early 20s. I was one of the first students at the then-new Emery/Weiner campus on Stella Link. On one of my first days of school, my dad told me how he went to elementary school on the opposite side of Stella Link at Shearn El-

That is why I am so proud that my family has made this investment in the next generation, so that today's students can benefit from the same opportunities that I had.

I look forward to working with the HJHA for years to come, and I am excited to see how the archive grows and flourishes and how students will continue to impact and benefit from connecting with our community's history. I hope that in 100 years a Stolbun is able to look back and find my own history through the lens of the HJHA. ■

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