



# Branches

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

Issue 18 • Fall 2020



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## Director's Letter

# Teaching in a Changed World: Reflections on Rice and the COVID-19 Crisis



Dear Friends and Supporters of Rice Jewish Studies,

The COVID-19 crisis caught most everyone off guard early this year. On Feb. 26, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the U.S., with no known source of exposure. I was traveling in the Northeast that week, giving a talk at Yale. The New York airport was packed, nobody was wearing a mask and nobody seemed particularly worried.

Just three days later, the first coronavirus death in the U.S. was recorded. That same day, Rice announced that an employee exposed to the virus had been on campus (the employee was later confirmed to be infected). Then, in early March, things began to move quickly. On March 8, Rice decided to cancel all classes the week before spring break in order to prepare for the possibility of classes going fully online. And March 11, the World Health Organization declared “can be characterized as a pandemic,” when referring to the outbreak. In response, Rice decided the very next day to move all classes online and to teach via Zoom for the remainder of the semester, beginning March 23. At the time, nobody suspected that this would be our “new normal” for the foreseeable future. In a matter of less than two weeks, some 1,900 Rice courses were moved online, including my own. Harris County issued a stay-at-home order March 24, and Rice employees began to work from home wherever possible. Fondren Library and the Recreation and Wellness Center closed down, and the campus was largely deserted.

In only a few weeks, Rice put together a large online summer school program that offered a wide range of newly created courses at greatly discounted prices open to Rice students, as well as to the public. When I saw that the summer school was an enormous success, particularly for the School of Humanities, with students from all walks of life enrolling, including a number of Rice alumni, I realized that we would never simply return to things as they were before the pandemic. Electronic media offer so many advantages that some form of online teaching and learning is surely here to stay and for good reasons. Rice will never be the same. As it became clear over the summer that the coronavirus was not going to be gone any time soon, a growing number of universities in the U.S. announced that they were teaching online in the fall and possibly for the entire academic year. Other universities, like Rice, by contrast decided to bring the students back to campus and to offer at least a percentage of courses in person. The Academic Restart Committee was formed, and its charge was to think about and prepare the university for the reopening for the fall semester. This turned out to be an enormously complex task. I was greatly impressed by the work of the committee, the carefulness of its deliberations, and the willingness of the Rice administration to do whatever was necessary to prepare the campus for the new academic year and to keep the safety of our

community the highest priority. As an example of this exemplary leadership, we include in this issue of Branches the message from President Leebron to the Rice community that he sent July 17. In it, President Leebron reminds all of us that Rice’s strategy continues to be to remain “flexible, agile and adaptable.” (To get an impression of the constant stream of information sharing and transparency on the part of the Rice administration, please visit [coronavirus.rice.edu](https://coronavirus.rice.edu).)

The decision of the Rice administration to bring our students back to campus for the fall semester did not go unchallenged. Concerned parents of current students wondered on Facebook whether it was safe to send their students back to campus, and about one-third of our students decided that it was safer to move off campus rather than live in the colleges. A group of faculty asked for a special plenary meeting of the entire Rice faculty and the administration to voice their concerns over the decision to reopen the Rice campus for residential life and in-person instruction. That meeting happened Aug. 19, just as students were returning to Rice. COVID-19 has forced all of us to make difficult decisions at a time when anxiety runs high and the general climate is not conducive to having a reasonable debate in which all sides are heard. And yet, that is precisely what our college campus is about. It is a place where we come together as a community, where all voices are heard without fear of retribution, where together we strive for excellence in teaching and research, where we work closely together to make it through the pandemic and where we develop solutions to the pressing problems of our times, including the pandemic.

While there is not a single aspect of Rice that has not been affected by the pandemic, I am mostly concerned for our students. A week after our son, Augustin, had begun his freshman year at Rice in 2017, Hurricane Harvey hit Houston, and his first semester was interrupted. Now a senior, all of Augustin’s classes this semester are online. Like all Rice students, he was tested for COVID-19 before he was allowed back to his college, and now he



Rice has erected outdoor structures to provide for safe in-person meetings.



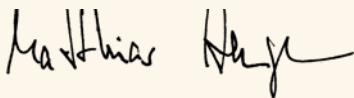
## Message From President Leebron

is being tested every week. The majority of our undergraduate students prefer to live on campus because, for many of them, Rice provides a healthier and safer environment than what they have at home. Rice's decision to open its campus allows all of our students to advance academically, even during the COVID-19 crisis. All students, regardless of whether they live on or off campus, have signed a Culture of Care Agreement. It reflects Rice's core values of Responsibility, Integrity, Community and Excellence.

Graduate students were especially hard hit by the crisis, and many of the personal stories I heard in my role as the director of graduate studies in the religion department were harrowing. In addition to the enormous level of financial and emotional distress many of them have experienced, graduate students could no longer travel, go to libraries, archives or museums, work in their labs or even do the most basic research. Kathleen Canning, dean of humanities, jumped into action, held regular meetings with the Graduate Student Association and, remarkably, was able to meet all of their demands, including very significant financial support. After much careful deliberation with the faculty in the School of Humanities, the dean made the wise, albeit very painful decision to implement a one-year admission pause for new graduate students for the academic year 2021–22. All leading U.S. research universities, including Rice, announced a temporary hiring freeze, which is devastating for an already deprived job market, and which will have lingering effects for freshly minted Ph.D. graduates for years to come.

These are stressful times that require a great deal of discipline, patience and some creativity from all of us. We are most fortunate to be at Rice, a strong and resilient institution that will not only make it through the pandemic but emerge strengthened and with an even greater commitment to making the world a better place. I have been greatly impressed with our leadership, our IT team (thank you for helping technologically challenged faculty like myself), my colleagues and with students, all of whom have shown great civility and an eagerness to work together. It is my hope that one day, when future generations will look back at the COVID-19 crisis, just as we are now looking back at Rice during previous international crises, they will be impressed with what they see. ■

Sincerely,



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

This summer, Rice President David Leebron communicated with the Rice community about the university's plans for the fall in light of the pandemic. The plans outlined in the letter continue to change and evolve with the situation.

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July 17, 2020

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Rice President David Leebron

To the Rice Community:

Today I write to provide updated information about our decisions and plans for the fall semester. As previously announced, we intend to welcome students back to campus for classes, both online and in person. As I described at the online town hall on May 22, our strategy is to be "flexible, agile and adaptable," recognizing both that the situation remains highly uncertain and

that we will need to respond to individual circumstances.

One of the four fundamental principles that has guided our decision-making is assuring that we will continue to fulfill our mission as a premier institution of higher education and research. What we do at Rice matters and has profound impacts on our students and society more broadly. These times pose many challenges. When we look back we will want to be able to say that we continued to provide the best opportunities for our students and that we had an extraordinary impact on our world. This is especially so now, as we confront not only the painful difficulties posed by COVID-19, but also the critical challenge to become a more just and inclusive university and society. We can sustain our mission, and indeed achieve new heights, while taking steps necessary to protect the safety of our community. But we can do so only if we all commit to making the best contribution that we can. Working together, we intend to provide a robust intellectual and social environment for the semester that starts on August 23, fortified by a system of measures designed to make our campus community as safe as we believe possible from COVID-19. I am grateful to all the faculty, staff and students who have worked tirelessly to prepare for the fall.

I know the uncertainty is difficult for all of us, particularly as the situation across Texas and in Houston has significantly worsened over the past month. But the only way we could have a certain plan would be to decide that our campus won't be open at all, that we will not deliver any classes on campus or conduct vital research this fall. Some schools have chosen that path, but we have not. We believe we have effectively prepared and that we are capable of responding very quickly to changing circumstances in

Continued on Page 4 ➔

a way that remains tailored to individual situations and choice. Our faculty has been preparing throughout the summer to deliver a high quality educational experience consistent with our standards. Many of our students have expressed a strong desire to return to Houston and to our campus, and we know that many students find our campus the most supportive environment for their educational engagement and achievement. We will accommodate those students, while closely monitoring the evolving circumstances. By adopting the strategy of being flexible, we can decide at a later time to adopt more measures if that proves necessary.

We are also deeply concerned about our international students. Although the government has withdrawn the terrible rules for international students it proposed 11 days ago, some very significant concerns remain that make it important to remain flexible with both in person and online instruction. International students are an essential part of our community and contribute to every aspect of our mission and to the success of our city and nation.

In light of the increased prevalence of COVID-19, we have already adopted stronger actions than we contemplated two months ago. Over the past three weeks, we have increased planned testing for COVID-19 threefold. All undergraduate students will be tested upon arrival and throughout the semester. Tailored testing protocols, based on risk of transmission, are being developed for all other parts of our community and will also continue throughout the semester. We have contracted for 60,000 tests during the fall semester and have access to more if it becomes necessary. We have reduced the maximum in-person class size from 50 to 25. We have lowered the occupancy level for the colleges in the fall to about 75% of normal and reserved significant space for isolation and quarantine. We have given all staff an additional five days of sick leave to be sure they do not feel compelled to come to campus if they are ill.

These actions are in addition to the systems approach we have already implemented to help protect our community. We have developed measures for avoiding spread of the disease on our campus, including contact tracing protocols. Many of those details were contained in the July 1 letter Dean Gorman sent to undergraduates and are also contained in weekly updates from the Crisis Management Team. We believe the protocols we have adopted make the campus safer for the level of operations we expect. Indeed,

as previously communicated, a comparatively small number of members of our community — 51 out of over 11,000 — have to our knowledge been confirmed to have COVID-19, and there is only one identified case of possible transmission that happened on campus.

We do want to emphasize that the rules we have adopted, such as wearing masks and physical distancing, are essential aspects of our safety plan. Those who violate our rules flagrantly, refuse to comply or engage in repeat violations will be excluded from the campus, and in extreme cases, separated from the university. Rules requiring masks and physical distancing will also be enforced against all visitors, who will be notified by signage around our campus. It is also vitally important that anyone in our community who feels sick not come to campus or, if living on campus, stay in their campus housing.

Some additional measures are now warranted. To the maximum extent possible, we have been using a principle of choice for both faculty and students, by offering the majority of our courses

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both online and in person. In light of the decisions of Houston, Fort Bend and other school districts to start the semester in online mode only, faculty with young children at home may, if they wish, choose to teach remotely. We encourage all those without health vulnerabilities or concerns for themselves or their families to teach their dual delivery courses in person on campus. Those choosing to teach only remotely must consult with their department chairs, as the vast majority have already done. Information from the survey of faculty suggests that more than half of the classes will be offered in person as part of dual delivery, although that number may change. Similarly, supervisors will try to accommodate staff members with children at home in their work plans for the fall. Supervisors will determine which staff may continue to work from home, whether partly or completely. We have already adopted a practice of encouraging those who are not fully occupied to contribute to other offic-

es and tasks when their help is needed.

In terms of finances, we will provide a more complete update in about a month as we confirm endowment returns for the fiscal year ended June 30 and student enrollment for the fall. There are very significant costs both from the protective measures we are taking and lost revenues from expected vacant housing and some student deferrals. Across the entire university, we have adopted modest budget reductions for the coming year. In addition, these circumstances may necessitate some personnel-related reductions and other actions focused on making the best use of our resources. But our decisions will continue to be guided by our commitments as a community, and we will seek to protect jobs. Our ability to do so depends on the commitment of all of us to carrying out our missions of teaching, research, advising and mentoring at the highest possible level, and not imposing unnecessary costs.

We know there will be many questions. We welcome your questions and suggestions which you can submit at <https://www.rice.edu/covidsurvey> (requires login). We will announce early next week town halls to provide additional information and begin to post websites with FAQs. In addition, we will have weekly communications about the status of academic and administrative planning for the fall.

We must accept that we are living in a time of great uncertainty, but we cannot allow that to interfere with fulfilling our mission and our obligations to create opportunity for our students and discover knowledge that improves our world. We have done our best to formulate plans that best reflect the four priorities that from the outset have guided our decisions: the health and safety of our community, following recognized expert advice (namely the Centers for Disease Control and other scientific experts), carrying out our core missions and adhering to the RICE values of Responsibility, Integrity, Community and Excellence. Changing circumstances may require us to take new and different steps, but I have never been more confident in the ability of our community to come together to meet the extraordinary demands of our time with compassion for our community and with confidence in the importance of our work. ■

With gratitude,  
David

# Graduate Student Life in a Pandemic

By C.J. Schmidt

Being a graduate student is never easy, especially when you have to teach full time at two separate universities in order to pay the bills. Doing all this in a pandemic — well, you get the idea.



C.J. Schmidt

I'll never forget spring 2020. It began with the hope that I would be finished drafting my dissertation by semester's end (or at least over the summer). But a pandemic — or rather our failure to address the pandemic — had other plans.

The pivot to what's being called #PandemicPedagogy or #TriagePedagogy (hashtags that circulated widely on social media among academics) in the spring was difficult for everyone. An entire spring break originally set aside for catching up on researching and writing turned into a whirlwind of adapting my training in evidence-based teaching from Rice's Center for Teaching Excellence to meet this new challenge. In the end, my students' own safety and well-being was the top priority, and both of my courses went as well as I could have hoped for. The real challenge began when the spring semester ended and I had to dig into the research on effective online teaching in preparation for my summer course and adapting my two fall classes for what I assumed would be an entirely remote semester.

Establishing a welcoming, learning environment with trust between instructor and students as well as between students is one of my top classroom priorities. Frankly, it was this shared sense of community that held the semester together as we transitioned to remote learning. Even though all of our seminar meetings were optional to attend, nearly every student showed up and participated day in and day out.

Of course, this means that the dissertation took a backseat. Again. But in the process, I've learned so much about how online learning doesn't have to be an inferior form of higher education (as I previously thought), and became a better teacher along the way. My students over the summer were perhaps more engaged with the course materials than ever before. I wound up building two course websites using the blogging platform Medium, and found many solutions to providing formative feedback to student learning along the way that I will implement when (or if) we ever return to face-to-face classrooms.

My progress in writing my dissertation has stalled, in large part due to the uncertainty and anxiety brought on by the pandemic. I have always found writing to be a difficult process, and our present situation has only heightened those difficulties. As programs across the country face increased budgetary pressures, we will likely see even fewer tenure-track jobs for the foreseeable future. This reality has already caused many graduate students across the U.S. to leave their programs or to take a leave of absence while they figure out their next moves. Honestly, if I were still in the coursework phase of my program, I would probably do the same. But being ABD (all but dissertation) and in my seventh year, I think

it best for me to work toward the goal of completing and defending my dissertation by the end of this current academic year. After all, I have come this far.

My goal for finishing this academic year is also spurred by the reality that, like many other doctoral programs, Rice graduate students only receive a stipend and funding for five years. After that, it is up to us to find out how to pay the bills, whether that is finding work on the side (in my case serving as an adjunct lecturer at nearby UH), taking out student loans, or applying to (and hoping to win) fellowships and grants — often some combination thereof. Thankfully, the School of Humanities has offered me and several other seventh-year graduate students a modest dissertation fellowship to help us graduate by the end of the academic year. It will certainly help free up my spring semester and allow me to devote my entire attention to revising each of my chapters. However, the fact remains that I and other graduate students will face an increasingly dismal job market in academia. Graduate programs must do everything they can to prepare their students for this reality. Our traditional model of training students for research-focused, tenure-track jobs — jobs that increasingly cease to exist — is, in my view, highly unethical if left unchanged. This was true before the pandemic, but it is the reality we can no longer afford to ignore.

As we head into the fall 2020–21 academic year, I count myself fortunate for the experiences I've had in the classroom leading up to this point, both as a student and an instructor. The mentorship and support of the faculty in Jewish studies, particularly Matthias Henze and Melissa Weininger, has made this time a little easier to navigate. And, for that, I am eternally grateful. ■



The homepage of C.J. Schmidt's online course at the University of Houston, a course he also has taught at Rice.

*C.J. Schmidt is a seventh-year Ph.D. candidate in New Testament and early Christian studies in the Department of Religion at Rice University. He has taught courses in classics, Jewish studies, ancient Mediterranean civilizations and religion while at Rice. He is currently a lecturer in religious and biblical studies at the University of Houston. Here he reflects on the unique challenges the current crisis has presented for graduate students in the midst of their studies. You may reach him at [schmidt@rice.edu](mailto:schmidt@rice.edu) or follow him on Twitter @CharlesJSchmidt.*



## New Horizons During the Pandemic

By Danielle Kessler '21

When her summer research plans were canceled by travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, senior Danielle Kessler found ways to enrich her time at home through online research and classes.



Danielle Kessler '21

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted my academic plans in the 2020 school year. The sudden switch to online classes in March was startling and unsettling given

the fear of the unknown impacts of the coronavirus. The pandemic caused substantial changes in my plans for the spring and summer of this year: I moved home for a few months, the MCAT was rescheduled and my summer plans were canceled. Specifically, my plans to participate in a Jewish studies research project abroad were impacted.

In summer 2020, I planned to travel to Poland and Germany to explore the Holocaust from a medical perspective. I am a psychology major and a Jewish studies minor, and I plan to attend medical school. These three academic interests motivated me to study the Holocaust from an academic perspective. Specifically, I wanted to analyze current medical practices and policies through the historical lens of the Holocaust. By examining primary sources from concentration camps and museums in Poland and Germany, I planned to study the impact of the unethical medical experimentation that occurred during the Holocaust. Additionally, I planned to study the history of the Nuremberg Code and reasons for its development. Lastly, I planned to meet with anthropology and social psychology researchers in Europe to learn about how the events of the Holocaust impact medical research today.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from undertaking this project. I planned to travel to Europe in May 2020, but was unable to do so because of outbreaks of the disease in both the United States and Europe. In fact,

Rice banned all university-sponsored international travel during that time period because of the spread of the coronavirus. Currently, I am hoping to complete this research project this winter, but I do not know if I will be able to do this, as it depends on the state of the world and the university's international travel policy.

Although the pandemic canceled my research plans, I was still able to participate in research this summer. I worked remotely with the Center for Neurobehavioral Research on Addiction at the UTHealth Science Center at Houston. At this research lab, I worked on a project investigating differences in brain responses to emotional and traumatic images in cocaine users with and without posttraumatic stress disorder. This experience taught me about the research process and the ethical standards required in research. Although I was unable to study the impacts of the Holocaust on research and the Nuremberg Code from a historical perspective, I was required to read about ethical standards in order to participate in research on human subjects as part of this research experience.

In addition to participating in substance use research, the pandemic allowed me to take online classes that I would have never taken. I am currently enrolled in an English course that explores narratives related to plagues and pestilence. Without the spread of COVID-19, I probably would never have studied these types of narratives. Changes in my summer plans due to the pandemic allowed me to learn about important parts of history, such as outbreaks of the bubonic plague in America and the AIDS epidemic. Although the pandemic derailed my summer research plans, it opened up opportunities for learning and reflection. ■

## Capturing History in the Present

By Joshua Furman, Director of the Houston Jewish History Archive

Although archives are repositories for historical materials, they also have a role to play in the present. The Houston Jewish History Archive is working to preserve local Jewish responses to the coronavirus pandemic.

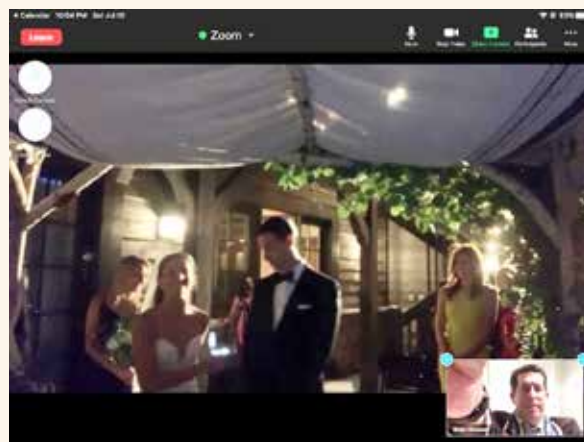
In normal times, as the curator of the Houston Jewish History Archive (HJHA), my focus and energy are channeled into the work of preserving memories of the past. Searching for answers to understand how previous generations carved out Jewish lives in South Texas, our team of Fondren Library staff, student interns and community volunteers collect and organize family photographs, diaries and letters that capture the experiences of Jewish Texans from decades ago. These days, when life feels anything but normal, and while most of us have been working from home for the past several months, we're collecting Facebook posts, Zoom meeting screenshots and email announcements about what's happening right now.

Since mid-March, we've launched an effort to collect a wide array of documentation to understand and preserve the history of how our Jewish community is responding to the current coronavirus crisis. Organizations such as Jewish Family Service of Houston and the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston are working to meet the substantial economic and emotional needs of all those affected in our community. Restaurants such as Kenny & Ziggy's New York Delicatessen and the New York Deli & Coffee Shop have shifted to offering curbside meal pickup and redesigning their interior seating to protect customers' safety. As most of Jewish communal life has moved online, providing a means for us to remain connected while staying apart, we've taken snapshots of Shabbat services broadcast via Facebook Live. In May, Congregation Beth Israel's clergy led Friday night services for congregants from their living rooms and home offices, while those watching on Facebook at home exchanged messages and Shabbat greetings in the comments. Elsewhere in town,

These days, when life feels anything but normal, and while most of us have been working from home for the past several months, we're collecting Facebook posts, Zoom meeting screenshots and email announcements about what's happening right now.

**Right:** Rabbi Brian Strauss of Congregation Beth Yeshurun officiated at the wedding of Houston native Leslye Barth and her partner, Adam Talpalar.

**Below:** Congregation Beth Israel's clergy led Friday night services for congregants from their living rooms and home offices.



United Orthodox Synagogues of Houston experimented with parking lot minyanim at various times during the summer, with congregants required to preregister and stand next to their cars while praying in a socially distant manner.

Other aspects of Jewish ritual have continued, even as lockdowns and other precautionary measures prevent us from gathering together and pursuing life as usual. In July, Rabbi Brian Strauss of Congregation Beth Yeshurun officiated at the wedding of Houston native Leslye Barth and her partner, Adam Talpalar. While the couple stood under the chuppah in Colorado and watched on an iPad, Rabbi Strauss led the ceremony from his home in Houston, reciting blessings over Zoom in accordance with new ritual guidance from the Conservative movement's Rab-

binical Assembly. Meanwhile, other Beth Yeshurun clergy participated in ensuring that this summer's group of conversion students could complete their journey into Judaism by immersing in the water at Galveston, rather than in an indoor mikveh, or ritual bath, as is traditional.

Here at the archive, we're doing our best to capture it all, in real time, with the help of institutional partners and community members that have sent in reflection essays, photographs and links to YouTube videos about their experiences during the pandemic. We've also partnered with Pandemic Religion, an exciting project based at George Mason University's Roy Rosenzweig Center for New Media. Pandemic Religion is creating an online, open-access archive about how American religion has been transformed by the

pandemic, and we will be contributing select materials from our collection to this effort. In this way, the Houston Jewish experience will become a central part of the historical record of COVID-19, and future generations will be able to remember and learn from all that we are experiencing now. ■



# A Center for the Community — Even at Home

**By Rabbi Samantha Safran, Director, Bobbi & Vic Samuels Center for Jewish Living and Learning, Evelyn Rubenstein JCC of Houston**

Like most institutions, the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center had to rethink their programming due to the pandemic. How can a community center be a center for the community when the community can't be together? Rabbi Samantha Safran explains how the JCC is doing just that.

In mid-March, we at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center of Houston were poised to kick off our 16th Annual Houston Jewish Film Festival, which brings an array of award-winning Jewish and Israeli films to our community each year. In the span of one week, we quickly realized that what we had been planning for the past 12 months was not going to come to fruition, at least not how we had originally envisioned it.

Of course, we weren't the only agency who would have to cancel programs. Across the country and the world, cultural institutions and community centers were faced with a new reality to which they had to quickly adapt in order to keep members engaged.

The film festival was just one of many programs that we at the JCC needed to reimagine, and fast. As a major community institution serving thousands of constituents, we wanted to minimize the disruption of our high-quality programs and services as much as possible.

Fortunately, we were able to work with film distributors and producers to offer many of the scheduled festival's screenings virtually, at low or no cost. In addition, we reached out to Jewish authors, scholars and entertainers to create even more opportunities for community engagement. We transitioned all of our Jewish learning classes to Zoom as well, and opened them up to the community at no charge. We organized do-it-yourself art projects for children and virtual bingo for adults. It quickly became apparent

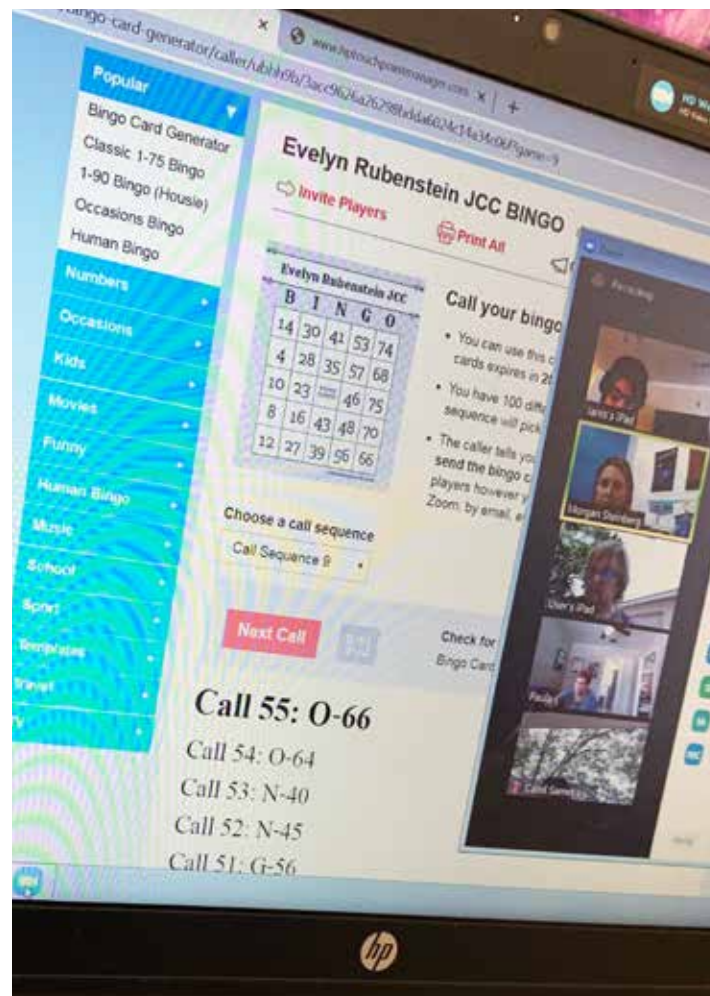
that our audience was thirsty for this type of programming, both for their personal enrichment and entertainment and even more for connection to each other. For many of these programs, we had significantly more participants than we normally have at a regular in-person event.

While we did our best to provide the community with a rich array of virtual cultural offerings, there were also some services that we could not provide online. Our Meals on Wheels program, which serves over 400 homebound seniors in the neighborhood, is one such program. We quickly changed our protocols to be able to provide continuous service, including requiring masks for packing and delivery, a drive-through line for volunteers to pick up meals and limiting the number of staff members in the packing room. In four months, the J's Meals on Wheels program served nearly 43,000 meals and added 74 new clients. Volunteers are still needed.

Another service that could not be offered virtually is childcare. Although we could not provide the camp experience as it usually runs at the J, we changed gears and created a Summer Fun at the J experience for both our preschoolers as well as elementary-age children. Again, special protocols were implemented and

daily structure was altered to maximize safety and minimize risk. And when infection levels spiked in Houston and the city changed to Level 1 Alert, the program again pivoted to provide childcare for the children of essential workers only. Now, we are gearing up for a School Days at the J experience, which will allow parents to offer their children a virtual learning environment so that they can return to work.

For the remainder of the fall, all adult programming will remain virtual. We are excited about an amazing lineup of authors to be featured in our Ann & Stephen Kaufman Jewish Book & Arts Festival. We are also proud to be partnering with Jewish studies at Rice for our annual lecture series in September. The subject this year is Beyond Heschel: Racial Justice & Jewish Responsibility in the 21st Century. We are grateful to those individuals and institutions, like Rice, who have continued to support our programming during this challenging time. And we are hopeful that we will be able to gather together soon and return once again to the classes, programs and events that make the J a truly special place and that enrich our Houston community. ■



The JCC has moved most of its programming online during the pandemic. Here, members play bingo virtually.



# New York City in the Time of Pandemic

By Irma Birnbaum, Member of the Program in Jewish Studies Advisory Board

When New York ground to a halt in March, it changed the face of the city that Irma Birnbaum<sup>71</sup> has lived in for four decades, but she has managed to maintain one of her favorite pastimes, biking outdoors.

I have lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan for the last 49 years. Early on in my residence, New York was riddled with crime and financial instability. The level of crime was so extreme that I dared not walk in large sections of the West Side. During a blackout in 1977, many businesses were looted and set on fire. In addition, the city was nearly at the point of being bankrupt during the 1970s. The subway system was falling apart. In essence, New York City was on life support. Throughout the subsequent years, things clearly improved. The largest jolt to the city before the onset of the coronavirus was the destruction of the World Trade Center towers Sept. 11, 2001. However, even after that horrendous event, nothing could have prepared the city for the onset of the pandemic. The sheer magnitude of all that has been wrought by this illness could never have been envisioned even in January of this year.

Like a lot of people, I was initially unconvinced of the severity of COVID-19 and all of its ramifications. I had no idea that not only would its victims become as sick as they did, but would also suffer the lingering effects that many of them have experienced for many months subsequent to their being virus-free. Within short order, I woke up.

What was so shocking was the speed at which it spread to many, particularly older people and those who were already suffering from a variety of ailments. On March 20, we were told to stay at home as much as possible, although we were permitted to go out for exercise and to buy essentials. Essential services could continue to be provided. Restaurants, which are popular in New York, were only allowed to offer delivery and take-out service. All of a sudden, the city ground to a halt. As people began to fear shortages of food, cleaning supplies and paper



Irma Birnbaum represents Rice as she rides her bike in New York City.

goods, shopping for groceries became a full-time occupation. I am stubborn and refused to use Instacart or any other delivery service, so I continued to make the trek to Costco and submitted to waiting in line for what always seemed to be an endless amount of time. Eventually, many stores established early hours for older people and, thankfully, I no longer have to stand in line.

Several weeks after everything had stopped, I took a walk to the theater district, which, prior to the advent of COVID-19, had never slept. I cannot convey the sense of sadness and distress that I felt on seeing the paucity of people walking around and the fact that every-

thing was shuttered. More recently, I was on Sixth Avenue and it was a ghost town. There were relatively few people walking and little cross-town traffic and office buildings are empty.

It will be a very long time before I can again undertake so many of the activities that were a part of my prior life. I used to enjoy going to movies, the theater, museums and meeting friends for meals in restaurants. These activities require being indoors, save for outdoor dining, which is currently available. The trauma of these months render me incapable of wanting to be in any indoor space with other people.

Physical fitness is extremely important to me. I began cycling outdoors with a coach 15 years ago and started working with an indoor trainer 14 years ago. While I was able to continue riding outdoors four times a week, early on, my building closed its gym and prohibited outsiders from entering. Fortunately, I have a full set of weights and balance equipment in my apartment. Thus, until outsiders were allowed in a few weeks ago, through the magic of FaceTime, I worked with my trainer three times a week. Now that he is allowed in the building, I am back to four times a week. As for going to my building's gym, which is located in the basement, as with any other enclosed space, I cannot imagine returning for a very long time.

Like most Reform synagogues, my synagogue started holding services online. I had an aliyah several weeks ago and was able to be a part of the service using Zoom. Not seeing a congregation from in front of the Ark but rather just reading from the siddur with all of the other people "attending" the service watching me read from my home was a most unusual experience, to say the least.

Over the last few months, because running and biking can be so easily undertaken and because our gyms are still closed, Central Park has become congested. Unfortunately, some of the people on bikes don't realize how important it is to keep a straight line and to pass with ample space between riders, which has made riding more challenging. ■





# Antisemitism and the Plague

By Maya Soifer Irish, Associate Professor of History

Xenophobic conspiracy theories about the origins of disease are not new. History professor Maya Soifer Irish explains the relationship between antisemitism and plague going back to the Middle Ages.

It did not take long after the surge of COVID-19 infections in China, and the emergence of the first recorded cases in the United States in February, for the xenophobic blame game to begin. Asian Americans were the first to be accused

of importing and spreading the virus: Chinese restaurants and stores were shunned, and Asian Americans were harassed in person and online. But that was just the beginning. Xenophobia and conspiracy theories thrive during crises, and novel accusations easily latch on to preexisting hatreds. That is also what happened in the 14th century, when the Jews in Germany, Catalonia, France and the low countries were accused of causing the black death. The plague's arrival breathed new life into allegations that Jews expressed their hatred toward Christians by committing ritual murder or desecrating the Eucharistic host. Fear of the rapidly spreading and deadly disease fed rumors that Jews, along with foreigners and beggars, out of sheer malice, contaminated rivers and wells

with poisonous powders. Local political conflicts and economic tensions between Jews and Christians, as well as the willingness of some secular authorities to take advantage of the persecutions, were also factors in the attacks.

The black death arrived in southern France at the start of 1348 and quickly

**Xenophobia and conspiracy theories thrive during crises, and novel accusations easily latch on to preexisting hatreds.**



An image of Jewish doctors being burned alive during the black death plague from "World History" (1943) by German physician Hartmann Schedel.



spread south into the lands of the Crown of Aragon, reaching Barcelona in early May and killing about one-third of its population. While there is no contemporaneous evidence of poisoning accusations against the Jews of Catalonia, it is nonetheless clear that some Christians blamed them for causing the epidemic. The accounts of the massacres in Catalonia come from the royal chancery records and the Hebrew narrative penned by Rabbi Hayim Galipapa. Barcelona's Jewish quarter was attacked May 17 and about 20 Jews were killed. In the town of Cervera, 18 Jews suffered the same fate. But the worst violence occurred in Tàrraga, where in early July a crowd armed with axes and other weapons, and shouting "death to the traitors," broke through the gates of the Jewish quarter, killing its inhabitants and ransacking their homes. At least 300 Jews lost their lives that day.

In Germany, what began as spontaneous outbreaks of violence fueled by rumors that Jews were spreading the plague, devolved into an organized murder of the Jews orchestrated by local rulers and municipal authorities. In August 1348, the municipal council of Strasbourg sent letters to the main cities in the Rhineland, Savoy and the Swiss cantons, asking for evidence of Jews poisoning wells, springs and food supplies. Many city councils and castellans responded by supplying lists of the accused individuals, and describing their confessions (under torture), trials, and punishments. For example, in September and October 1348, a number of Jews in the county of Savoy were accused of concocting a plot to put poisonous powder into wells, springs and rivers used by Christians. Judicial inquiries were conducted, and some Jews as well as their alleged Christian "co-conspirators" were tortured and "confessed" to the crime. The accusation quickly spread into German lands. According to the chronicler Heinrich von Diessenhoven, the first outbreak of anti-Jewish violence occurred in November 1348 in Sölden, where all the Jews were burned. In the course of the following year (November 1348 to September 1349), "all the Jews between Cologne and Austria were burnt and killed for this crime, young men and maidens and the old along with the rest," some in their own homes and synagogues, some in the houses constructed specifically for that purpose, some in the fields and pits, and some in the castles where they sought protection.

The attempts by church and state authorities to halt the persecutions largely

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## The proliferation of xenophobic and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories online during the COVID-19 pandemic proves the enduring power of these old narratives.

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A medieval drawing of the 2,000 Jews of Strasbourg who were killed Feb. 14, 1349, in the Strasbourg Massacre during the black death persecutions.

failed. In July 1348, Pope Clement VI reissued the bull *Sicut Judeis*, following it up with an edict urging the clergy to excommunicate anyone who attacked the Jews without a due process. The pontiff was skeptical of the accusations, pointing out that Jews were dying "throughout many parts of the world by the same plague, by the hidden judgement of God." Some secular authorities (the municipal council of Cologne, Duke Albrecht of Austria) also tried to protect Jews, but relented under popular pressure and had the Jews officially condemned and burned. Only the Jewish communities on the eastern and southeastern edges of the Empire — Bohemia, Slovenia and Austria — mostly escaped burnings, which continued until 1351. The persecutions of German (or Ashkenazi) Jews during the black death precipitated a permanent shift of the centers of Jewish population toward eastern Europe.

The proliferation of xenophobic and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories online during the COVID-19 pandemic proves the enduring power of these old narratives. Echoing the medieval trope, conspiracy theorists allege that Jews and/or Israel have manufactured the coronavirus and plotted to spread it in order to

establish a world Jewish government. Even more alarmingly, anti-Semitic signs were spotted at protests against coronavirus restrictions. At a recent protest in Ohio, a man carried a blue-and-white sign that mimicked the Israeli flag and depicted a rodent with the Star of David on its side and the words "The Real Plague." It should be a warning to everyone who doesn't pay enough attention to history. ■

# The Pryzants, Jewish History and COVID-19

By Joe Pryzant, Member of the  
Program in Jewish Studies Advisory  
Board

While so much in our lives has been disrupted, Joe Pryzant reflects on the big picture, viewing today's crisis through the lens of family and Jewish history.

Oh, how I long for a nice relaxing meal in a restaurant with friends!

We had such wonderful travel plans for 2020!

Our daughter's freshman year at her dream college — interrupted with no clear picture of when she can return or how long it will take until she can resume a real college experience!

We were just getting used to being empty nesters.

Alas, man plans, and God laughs. This curveball is COVID-19, the worst public health crisis in over a century. As I write, more than 150,000 Americans have perished, and the crisis appears to be

The flu hit Goose Creek hard and Grandpa did not want his pretty and pregnant wife exposed, so he began looking for a new town to live and earn a living in. While Grandma stayed with her parents in Houston, Grandpa booked a train ticket to Dallas. The first stop was Spring, Texas, but it was too poor and only piney woods. The second stop was Conroe, but it was dusty, dirty and not a good place to raise a family. But the third stop was a tiny farming community just north of Conroe called Willis. Grandpa liked what he saw of the Polish and German town and since he spoke both languages (and a spattering of English), he and Grandma decided to become the first Jewish family in Willis, Texas. He opened a general merchandise store called Pryzant, which survived until recently as an antique store. An employee sent me a photo of one of her relatives, a Willis resident, in front of the store.

Margaret was born in 1919, followed by my father, Nathan, in 1923, Jack in 1925, Hertzell in 1927 and Frank in 1940. Dad's birth, as the first Jewish boy born in Willis, caused quite a stir and the townspeople swarmed around the house to see if the baby had horns.

**When I think of the inconvenience and disruptions of living through this pandemic, not to mention the fear and terror of a loved one or dear friend becoming infected, I remind myself that our people lived through much worse and usually emerged as stronger people.**

accelerating rather than diminishing.

The last great crisis of this kind was the Spanish flu pandemic, which killed an estimated 675,000 Americans in 1919, far more than the 53,000 combat deaths in WW I. The CDC estimates that one-third of the world's population was infected by the Spanish flu and as many as 50,000,000 died worldwide, often within hours of infection.

The Spanish flu played an important role in Pryzant family history. My grandfather and namesake, Joseph George Pryzant, escaped an unhappy childhood and army conscription in Poland by booking passage through Bremen to Galveston in 1912 when he was 20 years old. He scraped together a living by peddling and working odd jobs until he met and fell in love with my grandmother, Annie Wilkenfeld, who emigrated from Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in 1901. They wed in 1917 and started married life in Goose Creek, Texas, now known as Baytown.

Grandpa's brother, Harry, soon joined them and the Pryzant family expanded with six Pryzant girls born to Harry and wife Doris.

In 1932, when Margaret was 13 and Dad was 9, Grandpa and Grandma sent them to Houston to get a better education, secular and religious. The rest of the family came to visit on weekends, eventually moving to the big city in 1936. Later, dad attended Rice University. The rest, as we say, is history.

In the long history of the Jewish people, disruptions and calamities are common. We survived the Shoah; Russian pogroms; and expulsions from Spain, England and many other European countries. We survived the Crusades, when Christian armies practiced their killing techniques on Jewish settlements in the Rhineland before attacking those they called infidels in the Holy Land. We survived destruction of two holy temples and resulting exiles. After the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, we survived



Joe Pryzant enjoys some time outdoors during the pandemic.

a war of independence, the Suez conflict, the Six Day War, the Yom Kippur War, two Intifadas and several other conflicts. Now, we can add the novel coronavirus to this long list.

When I think of the inconvenience and disruptions of living through this pandemic, not to mention the fear and terror of a loved one or dear friend becoming infected, I remind myself that our people lived through much worse and usually emerged as stronger people. I am confident we Americans, Houstonians and Jews will emerge from this crisis all grateful for our blessings and stronger as communities and people. ■



# No One Is an Island, So Love Your Neighbor

By Rabbi Steven Morgen, Associate Rabbi at  
Congregation Beth Yeshurun

Clergy around Houston have had to respond to changing modes of religious observance and new congregational needs during the pandemic. Rabbi Steven Morgen has used his sermons to address some of these issues. This article is excerpted from his May 2, 2020, sermon about the pandemic on Parashat Acharei Mot.



In 1623, the famous poet and cleric John Donne fell seriously ill with an undetermined disease. Although he was in the hospital, he encouraged his daughter to go ahead with her planned wedding. From his bed, he could hear church bells toll for both weddings, like hers, and deaths taking place all around him. It was under

these circumstances that he began to compose some of the lines for which he is best known:

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main ... any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.”

And Donne’s bells do indeed ring loud and clear for us today. We, too, are dealing with a disease that surrounds us and isolates us. And we hear the bells tolling on the news every night. But most of all, we hopefully recognize that we are not islands, we are not cut off and alone, we are not segregated from the rest of humanity — even if most of us are still somewhat isolated in our homes. The entire human race, all over the planet, is threatened with this disease.

We are confronting a common foe, a common enemy. It is not a Chinese virus. It is not a New York virus. It is not an Italian virus. It’s just a virus. One that doesn’t discriminate between blue states or red states. But the good news is, we are not alone. We have brilliant scientists, doctors and researchers working all around the world to learn about how this virus works, how to reduce the damage it can do to us when we get it and ultimately how to stop it.

No one is an island. The human race, together, has tremendous potential to overcome this new biological foe. But we need to cooperate with each other. We each need to do our part to defeat this new enemy. And what most of us can do — those of us who are not doctors and nurses, the real heroes who are putting their lives on the line — what most of us can do is avoid spreading the disease as much as possible, until we can adequately control the spread, treat the symptoms better and finally inoculate the population.

The governor has opened up some businesses, allowing people to go to restaurants and stores in limited numbers. But the governor’s reopening order also states:

“In accordance with federal guidelines ... every person shall, except where necessary to provide or obtain essential services or reopened services, minimize social gatherings and minimize in-person contact with people who are not in the same household.”

So although some of us may go back to work, those of us who

are fortunate to be able to work at home, should continue to work at home. And, we should avoid other social gatherings as the governor has suggested. Just stay home if you can. That is still the message. Even though we are stir-crazy.

But when we do choose to go out, we also need to consider, it is not just about you or me going out. Perhaps we believe we will be among the large percentage of people who won’t be seriously afflicted by this disease. But if we do get it, we might transmit it to someone else, maybe even someone we love. And that person may not fare so well when they get sick. We affect each other. We can infect each other. So in order to respect each other, we need to keep our distance.

There is something else, though, that we can also do. We can show some love for our neighbors. It actually is one of the many beautiful commandments in this week’s Torah portion. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The great sage Rabbi Akiba said that this was the most important commandment in the entire Torah.

How can we show our love for our neighbors? Well, first of all, many of us are now taking walks through our neighborhood. Because we need the exercise. We need the release. And while we

are out, we might see our neighbors who are also taking a walk or sitting on their lawn. So, be sure to wave and say hello — from a safe distance, of course.

But our neighbors may not exactly live in our neighborhood. We can think of anyone in Houston as our neighbor. And many of those neighbors have lost their jobs. So, if we are still employed, we should consider donating to the Houston Food Bank or other charitable organizations.

And there is one other neighbor we should also love. God. Yes. God is also our neighbor.

Abraham Joshua Heschel pointed out that Judaism holds that God is everywhere all the time. So, Heschel writes: “God is not hiding in a temple or a synagogue. You don’t have to come here to feel God’s presence in your lives! ... The Torah came to tell inattentive man: ‘You are not alone, you live constantly in [a] holy neighborhood; remember ‘Love [your] neighbor — God — as [yourself].’”

Being a holy person, part of a holy people, living a holy life, says Heschel, does not require us “to abandon life and to say farewell to this world, but to keep the spark [of the Divine] within [us] aflame, and to [allow God’s] light to reflect in our face,” to shine in our eyes — everywhere we go, and with everything we do, and especially in all our interactions with our real live human neighbors, our friends and our loved ones. ■

**No one is an island.  
The human race, together, has tremendous potential to overcome this new biological foe. But we need to cooperate with each other. We each need to do our part to defeat this new enemy.**

# Remembering Rabbi Samuel Karff

By Matthias Henze, Director of the Program in Jewish Studies

Rabbi Samuel Egal Karff, rabbi emeritus of Meyerland's Congregation Beth Israel, an influential civil rights advocate and lecturer in the religion department at Rice, died Aug. 15, 2020. He was 88 years old.

A graduate of Harvard University, Rabbi Karff was ordained at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where he also earned his Doctorate of Hebrew Letters. He was senior rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel from 1975 to 1999, and previously had served congregations in Boston, Massachusetts; Montgomery, Alabama; Hartford, Connecticut; Flint, Michigan; and Chicago, Illinois. After retiring from Beth Israel in 1999, Rabbi Karff founded the Health and Human Spirit Program in the Texas Medical Center, the precursor to the McGovern

Center for Humanities and Ethics at the McGovern Medical School, where he was an associate faculty member.

In Houston, Rabbi Karff is best known as a strong advocate for civil rights, social justice and equality. For the last three decades, he joined forces with Rev. William Lawson of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church and the Catholic Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza. The three faith leaders, affectionately known as the "Three Wise Men" and the "Three Amigos," were powerful voices in Houston. In April 2019, Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston opened The Brigitte and Bashar Kalai Plaza of Respect. The plaza includes three pillars of light in honor of the interfaith work of Rabbi Karff, Archbishop Fiorenza and Reverend Lawson.

Rabbi Karff had a deep affection for Rice. He was invited to deliver the invocation at Rice's 75th commencement in 1988. In his invocation, he urged the new graduates to "use power, the fruit of the tree of knowledge, responsibly." Rabbi Karff served as lecturer at Rice in what was then the Department of Religious Studies for 22 years. Throughout the 1990s, he co-taught a popular seminar on Jewish-Christian dialogue with Werner Kelber in Rice's religion department. The legendary seminar always met on Wednesday evening. When I joined the

With the passing of Rabbi Samuel Karff, we have lost a great faith leader, a sharp intellect, a powerful advocate for social justice and a strong Jewish voice.

Rice faculty in 1997, I heard many stories from students who had taken that seminar and raved about it. Rabbi Karff was also instrumental in raising the funds for the Anna Smith Fine Chair in Judaic Studies, Rice's first endowed chair in Jewish studies. Today, my colleague Brian Ogren in the religion department is the Anna Smith Fine Associate Professor of Judaic Studies.

When Rabbi Karff and Kelber taught their seminar, Rice did not have a Program in Jewish Studies. Their course, as well as Rabbi Karff's initiative to establish the first Jewish studies endowment at Rice, laid the foundation for the creation of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies in 2009. I told him many times during our lunches at Cohen House how immensely grateful we are for the important, pioneering work he did at Rice, but he was much too humble to take any credit.

Rabbi Karff was married for 57 years to Joan Mag Karff, who passed away in 2016. They have three daughters, Rachel Karff Weissenstein, Amy Karff Halevy and Elizabeth Karff Kampf.

With the passing of Rabbi Samuel Karff, we have lost a great faith leader, a sharp intellect, a powerful advocate for social justice and a strong Jewish voice. Above all, we have lost a delightful human being and a dear friend.

May his memory be a blessing. ■



**Religious Studies, 1989:** (L-R) Matthias Klinghardt, Sylvia Louie, John Stroup, Frank Schubert, Werner Kelber, Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., George E. Rupp, Elizabeth Heitman, Thomas Freeman and Samuel Karff.



# Teaching, Pandemic Style

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

While the switch to online teaching in the spring was abrupt and sudden, professors have now had time to prepare to teach under new circumstances. Melissa Weininger reflects on what the transition to online instruction has taught her about the value of the humanities.

In the last weeks of February, the emails started coming: a notification that a Rice employee had tested positive for the novel coronavirus, admonitions to increase our regular hand-washing and hygiene practices and finally, the notice that the last week of classes before spring break had been canceled. Before long, the final announcement: students had been asked to leave campus, and the rest of the semester would be conducted remotely.

I, like most other Rice professors, had to learn on the fly how to design and conduct online classes, and the second half of the spring semester became an experiment in real time. As I wrote to students in an email not long after the announcement that in-person instruction had been suspended: “I have never taught online before, so I am sure I will make mistakes and may have to correct course in the process; many of you have never taken a course online before and it may take time to get used to for all of us.” I quickly made changes to my classes, shuffling readings, setting up online discussion boards and recording lectures. I was pleased with how well they turned out, given the circumstances.

This semester is a different story. Professors have known for months now that our classes must be delivered in either a hybrid form or entirely online. I have

**I have spent many hours this summer, when I would normally have been on vacation or spending time with my family, engaged in preparation for teaching in this new format.**



Across the university, professors dropped summer plans and learned everything they could about designing and teaching courses online, thanks to the Adaptive Course Design Institute offered by Rice's Center for Teaching Excellence.

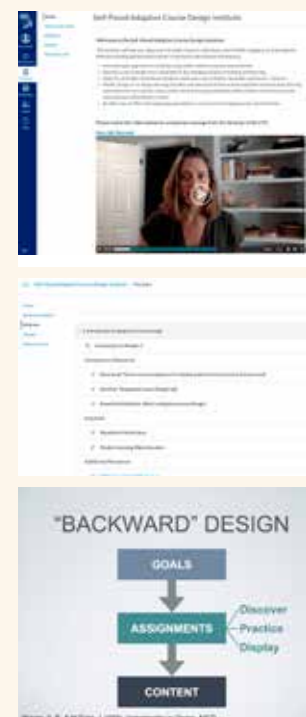
spent many hours this summer, when I would normally have been on vacation or spending time with my family, engaged in preparation for teaching in this new format. In July, I took a course, Adaptive Course Design, offered by the Center for Teaching Excellence, which offered strategies for both hybrid and online instruction as well as the opportunity for professors to discuss our new circumstances with each other.

As a result, I have created two online classes that I think will be as high-quality, engaging and instructive as any I have taught in the classroom. It may sound strange, but after many months of near-total isolation, I am actually excited to get back into my virtual classroom using new knowledge and technologies, much of which will serve me well in the future, even when we are able to teach in person again.

In fact, deeply considering my learning objectives for my classes and how best to achieve them in an online environment has strengthened my belief in the importance of the humanities, especially in times of crisis. My classes, whether focused on language, literature, culture or history, all explore what it means to be human. In Jewish studies, that often includes thinking about how individuals

and communities respond to crisis and catastrophe, as we did in my Holocaust Representation course last spring. Everything I teach gives students more tools to understand what is happening to them right now, to interpret events unfolding around them, and to engage with all that they are seeing, hearing and reading about the pandemic.

This period has entailed a great deal of loss for all of us — of our regular routines and rhythms, of contact with friends and loved ones and, tragically, of many lives. For many of us, our days are now full of uncertainty and fear. But as I told my students last semester when we transitioned to virtual instruction, although we are living through an uncertain and difficult time, and our world will almost certainly not be the same when it passes, we can cling as much as possible to the things that give our lives structure and meaning, even if that is just a class. ■



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