



# Branches

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

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Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of  
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## Director's Letter

### Celebrating Our Students



Dear Friends and Supporters of Rice Jewish Studies,

The education of our students has always been the core mission of our program. We are pleased to provide a variety of educational opportunities for all students at Rice. The faculty in Jewish studies continues to expand their course offerings in an effort to reach ever more stu-

dents. Especially popular are our travel courses that take students to New York City, Toledo, Berlin and Jerusalem. Students tell us about the profound impact these courses have had on them. The minor in Jewish studies continues to be popular with our students, and our fellowships enable students to travel abroad during the summer to pursue a particular research project, study Hebrew in Israel or simply trace their own family history across the world. Whenever we invite authors, artists, politicians or fellow academics to the Rice campus, we make sure that our students get a chance to meet them. And our Houston Jewish History Archive employs several student interns who learn about Houston's rich Jewish history by working with original materials.

This edition of Branches is all about our students. We have invited a cross section of them to write brief essays in which they tell their stories — how they have been, and continue to be involved with Rice Jewish studies and how this involvement has profoundly changed their Rice experience. I hope you will enjoy hearing from our students as much as we enjoy teaching them, one of the greatest privileges of being at Rice.

Our program has a wonderful history of collaborating with Houston Hillel. Rabbi Kenny Weiss, rabbi and executive director for Houston Hillel, has been a great friend and active supporter of our program since its inception, for which I am most grateful. Look for Kenny's article in this edition. You will also find an article by Richard Lavenda, professor of composition and music theory at Rice's Shepherd School of Music. Richard has been on the

program's executive committee since the beginning.

There are a number of changes in the leadership of Rice Jewish studies I wanted to bring to your attention. After several years of service as the associate director of our program, Melissa Weininger, the Anna Smith Fine Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies, has stepped down from her position as associate director at the end of last year. I am immensely grateful to Melissa for her boundless enthusiasm for Jewish studies, her many initiatives to develop our program further and her strong support for our students. There will be further changes next year. I was very fortunate to have received two fellowships for this coming academic year. In fall 2021, I will be a Lady Davis Fellow at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel. And during the spring semester 2022, I will be the Martin Hengel Fellow at the University of Tübingen,

Germany. That means that I will be on teaching leave from Rice for the entire academic year 2021-22, time I will use for my publication projects. Daniel Cohen, the Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor of Jewish Studies, has kindly agreed to be the acting program director in my absence. Daniel will work closely with Joshua Furman, curator of the Houston Jewish History Archive, and Starr Dickerson, our program administrator. It is very good to know that the program will be in excellent hands during my absence.

This has been an exceptionally stressful year for all of us. As I wrote in the last edition of Branches, Rice

has weathered the pandemic very well, thanks to our strong leadership and responsible students. We all miss our campus and our Rice friends so very much. It is my hope and prayer that we will soon be able to return to our beautiful campus and offer in-person events again for all of you. Hopefully, it won't be long.

Sincerely,

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

Matthias Henze, Program in Jewish Studies

Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor of Biblical Studies

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By Daniel Cohen

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When asked how many years I have taught at Rice University, I always think of my daughter's age. I joined the history department as an assistant professor in August 2003, a few weeks after her birth.

In 2016, I became the Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Associate Professor of Jewish Studies. I specialize in the history of Europe since 1945, with a focus on migration and refugees. My first book, "In War's Wake. Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order" (2012), explored the history of refugees in the aftermath of World War II. The so-called Jewish "displaced persons" in occupied Germany was particularly acute. Between 1945 and 1948, a quarter million of Holocaust survivors, predominantly of Eastern European origin, unexpectedly sought shelter in the cradle of Nazism. In the U.S. occupation zone of Germany, Jewish refugees awaited emigration to Israel or the United States. But as I showed in the book, Jewish displaced persons also rebuilt their lives in the confines of refugee camps. Their history is one of political, cultural and religious rebuilding after the Holocaust.

My current book project, titled "Good Jews. Philosemitism in Europe Since the Holocaust," asks the following question: How did the genocide of the Jews affect non-Jewish attitudes toward Jewishness, Judaism and Jewish statehood after 1945? The book discusses the multiple meanings of philosemitism in the second half of the 20th century. The positive discourse on Jews after the Holocaust departed from the prewar era. Yet philosemitism can also recycle old antisemitic stereotype or reinforce the idea of Jewish difference. The language of "love," I show, is fraught with ambivalence.

I have taught numerous history courses at Rice, both in history and Jewish studies. Directly related to my research is a course on immigration and refugees in the United States and Europe from the 19th century to the present. I also regularly offer an upper-level seminar on the history of World War II in Europe. This advanced class combines an overview of the Nazi-occupied continent with an in-depth study of the Holocaust. Other courses have been popular with Rice students: My survey of Europe Since 1945 and of Human Rights and Humanitarianism in the Modern Era are regularly offered. I also created a survey of Jewish History From the Spanish Expulsion in 1492 to the Present. The course introduces students to the history of Jews in the United States, Europe and the Middle East. In 2020, I offered a writing-intensive course for incoming freshmen, titled The Holocaust in History. In 2021, I will offer an interdisciplinary course on antisemitism. My goal is to explore the phenomenon of Jew-hatred through multiple angles: psychological, political, sociological and religious. The course will also include an introduction to theories of race: What is the place of antisemitism in the broader anti-racist movement?

I am delighted to serve as acting director of the Program in Jewish Studies for 2021–2022. I am looking forward to the exciting guest lectures, conferences and courses already in preparation. And like all of us, I hope that after such a difficult year normal life will return on the Rice campus and beyond. ■



Daniel Cohen

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**I am delighted to serve as acting director of the Program in Jewish Studies for 2021–2022. I am looking forward to the exciting guest lectures, conferences and courses already in preparation.**

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# Past, Present and Future: My Internship With the Houston Jewish History Archive

By Ari Forsyth

Ari Forsyth '21 describes how an internship with the archive has enriched her undergraduate experience and prepared her for graduate studies. She also reflects on the meaning of collecting artifacts about Texas Jewish life that may at first glance seem trivial, but in fact hold deep significance.

The Houston Jewish History Archive (HJHA) was founded in 2017 when the devastation caused by Hurricane Harvey convinced Houston-area Jewish families and institutions of the need to preserve the history of Jewish life in the region. Housed in the Woodson Research Center at Rice University, the HJHA collects artifacts from all facets of Jewish life in South Texas. We often think of these items as personal trinkets with no external value — a prayerbook from our grandfather's synagogue, an agenda from

nization and preservation of donated materials. I work on one collection at a time, with documents as far-ranging as synagogue mezuzahs, to Jewish school yearbooks, to the correspondence between the President of the Zionist Organization of America and his regional staff. For its staff, visiting researchers and members of the community, the HJHA offers a unique opportunity to work directly with primary sources, experiencing historical Jewish life in South Texas first-hand, through the eyes and ears of those who lived it. Joining the HJHA has pushed me to explore Jewish-American history; initially, in my independent historical research as a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow, currently, in an honors history thesis on Hadassah and women's Zionist activism, and next year, as a first-year Ph.D. student in Jewish American history at the University of Washington. As an HJHA intern, I feel excited and

spans two centuries.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once said, stories of the past “hold the group together horizontally across space and vertically across time, giving it a shared identity handed on across the generations.” As we uncover the past, we also gain insight into our own identity, both personal and collective. My work at the HJHA and scholarship on American women's Zionism offers me an opportunity to understand the interlocking layers of communal identity that I have inherited — Jewish, white, American, woman, feminist, Zionist — and to reform or reject them, rather than accept an intrinsic or fixed inventory of self.

Preserving historical artifacts is a vital task, but it is only half of HJHA's mission. The HJHA's other, equally crucial task is to make these materials accessible to the public. Toward this goal, my job also involves creating a digital finding aid, so

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**When crisis hits, most people are understandably quick to neglect the preservation of the past in order to attend to the urgent needs of the present.**

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privileged to be afforded access to these primary sources, rich pockets of Jewish-American culture and community which both clarify and complicate my identity as a Jewish-American.

When crisis hits, most people are understandably quick to neglect the preservation of the past in order to attend to the urgent needs of the present. Yet simultaneously, crises like Hurricane Harvey and the COVID-19 epidemic also reveal how much we depend upon history to speak to the present. In challenging times, we often turn to the past: to the heritage of wisdom and tradition of those who have come before us.

Most people think of historians as observers, or recorders, but the truth is that historians are investigators of the past. Using artifacts as evidence, we ask questions to try to help us understand how people lived in the past: how they weathered tragedy, found joy and envisioned their future. Historical preservation, then, is not a simple act of safekeeping artifacts: it is an active and ongoing attempt to prevent erasure in the present. At times of polarization and misinformation, and an unprecedented rise in anti-Semitism, the HJHA is an institutional testimony to a Jewish existence in South Texas that

that anyone — local families, historical researchers and even undergraduates like myself — can look through our archive catalog on their electronic devices, to know what materials are available.

It is a rare opportunity for an undergraduate student to be able to engage in professional historical preservation work of this kind. An internship with the archive offers a unique forum in which Rice students are able to become invested and involved in local Jewish history and leave their mark both on the campus and the community at the same time. Moreover, as an undergraduate history major, I benefit from the experience of working at the HJHA the same way my engineering peers might benefit from working as a research assistant in a lab. Being a part of the day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts work of the archive helped introduce me to a core aspect of the job of a professional historian. Working in historical preservation and community engagement as an HJHA undergraduate intern helped me realize that I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. in history, and it also gave me the experience to help me succeed. I am forever indebted to Joshua Furman, curator of HJHA; Traci Patterson; and all HJHA staff, volunteers and donors who gave me this opportunity,



Ari Forsyth

our mother's Hadassah meetings, photos from the JCC volleyball league — but the truth is, these family heirlooms and institutional records carry great historic significance. They reveal something about the context in which they were created, and they help us understand both the influence of Texan culture on Jewish life here, and the influence of Texas Jews on the state's economy, culture and politics.

I've been working at the HJHA since last spring, as an archival processing intern charged with the intake, orga-



# Houston Hillel: Keeping Jewish Students Connected During the Pandemic

The history of our community is a shared inheritance, and preserving that history for future generations is our shared responsibility.

and I hope I will become able to pay it forward to the next generation of scholars.

The history of our community is a shared inheritance, and preserving that history for future generations is our shared responsibility. Across the United States, community histories are being lost. By acting as a volunteer, a donor or even an intern like me, you can join the HJHA to save the history of Jewish life in South Texas. Who knows what treasures you might help us to uncover. ■

*Ari Forsyth is a senior at Rice University, majoring in history with minors in sociology and Jewish studies. Her research interests include the formation and transformation of Jewish racial/ethnic identity, American Zionism(s), Zionist settlement in Palestine/Israel, and women's activism and unpaid labor. Ari is currently completing her honors undergraduate thesis in history, which seeks to characterize the particular form of Zionist ideology and method practiced by Hadassah, the American Women's Zionist Organization, in the United States and Palestine between 1912 and 1947. After her undergraduate work, Ari plans to pursue a Ph.D. in history. Her internship with the archive was made possible by financial support from the Edith and Bernard Stolbun Family Foundation.*

By Moses Glickman

How Has Houston Hillel been working to keep students engaged and connected during the pandemic? Moses Glickman '22 offers some insights into a year of creative approaches.

In a typical year, Houston Hillel maintains a packed schedule of services, trips, events and get-togethers for the Jewish communities of Rice, UH and other area campuses. That's marketing copy, sure, but it's also accurate, and the primary reason I chose to get involved in Rice Hillel — I'm currently in my second year on the student board — and when I went to those events, I really liked what I saw. I liked packed Shabbat dinners at the Hillel campus on Bissonnet. I liked Wednesday bagels and discussions at Brochstein Pavilion. Last March, I was briefly curious, and concerned, about how Hillel's outreach would fare when such crowded events became impossible. Ten months later, it's clear that I was wrong to worry. At a time when many organizations' membership streams are drying up, Hillel now has more people at its (virtual) events than ever, and, remarkably, has gotten more freshmen involved this year than the year before COVID-19 hit. It did so, as far as I can tell, by doing what it's always been best at — focusing on creating a durable community.

While all of Hillel's past events have turned virtual, some had different paths than others. Bagel lunches rebranded as Shmear Society, where students signed up via a Google form for a bagel from the Bagel Shop Bakery in Meyerland, then found a seat around several enormous tables in the quad outside RMC for a socially distanced lunch. Although I was, and still am, quite OC (off-campus), I walked over every week, in part because what was once just part of my Wednesday was now one of my few chances to participate in a safe group gathering. After a couple weeks, Shmear Society attendance approached that of past Brochstein bagel lunches, despite far fewer people on campus, so I'm fairly sure I wasn't alone in my appreciation for the event. Services moved online fairly naturally, turning into Zoom events and, in the process, opening themselves

up to students and non-students around the country. However, Hillel fellow Ellie Rips noticed a disturbing trend in the first couple weeks; increases in non-student turnout were masking a decrease in the number of students attending. Hillel moved quickly, introducing Shabbat Sha-Bags in the fall semester; every week, Hillel distributed free boxes containing grape juice, challah, babka and a full meal to Rice students, encouraging them to observe Shabbat on their own or join the Hillel Zoom.

They also launched new initiatives. Recognizing new students' mental health struggles, Ellie and Hillel's new Israel Fellow, Lior Ashkenazy, started scheduling one-on-one Zoom discussions with individual students, both on campus and remote, on a regular basis. They also created a new, stipended discussion program, the Jewish Learning Fellowship (JLF), a low-key, open-discussion program. Although JLF had a slightly lower stipend than previous on-campus Jewish fellowships, Hillel emphasized its open, social focus — a bet that paid off. This semester, 17 students have already signed up for JLF, the most students involved in a Rice Jewish campus fellowship in recent memory, virtual or not. I'm one of them, and I'm very excited.

So how did Hillel solve the problem of COVID-era outreach? Certainly they invested a lot of money and time — a recommendation of limited utility for many organizations, because not all are going to be able to supply their level of funds and effort. More applicable, I think, was their level of care and trust. None of Hillel's events had any entry barriers; none required significant effort on the part of students before they could engage. With many students overwhelmed by other work and paralyzed by, frankly, despair, ease and openness of access was a major contributing factor to keeping levels of student engagement high and keeping the community strong. Hindsight is 20/20, but I honestly believe that if I had to write a single longform question to get a bagel or a Shabbat Sha-Bag, there were weeks I would have stayed home. Hillel's ease of access was, on a deep level, an act of respect and understanding. It worked, and it worked well. ■



Moses Glickman '22

## Jewish Life at Rice: Then and Now

By **Kenny Weiss, Rabbi and Executive Director of Houston Hillel**

Rice's Program in Jewish Studies has long enjoyed a very close collaboration with Rabbi Kenny Weiss. Here Rabbi Weiss reflects on the history of Rice Hillel.

When I asked a Rice graduate from the early 1960s about Jewish life at Rice, he spoke of drinking cocktails at a Jewish professor's home after Rice football games. Another graduate from the same period, who served as a Rice Hillel officer, told me the local B'nai B'rith chapter, under whose national structure the Rice University Hillel organization operated, expressed frustration and disappointment that Hillel held only social functions featuring alcohol. B'nai B'rith leaders told the student to schedule a prayer service or the Rice Hillel chapter would lose B'nai B'rith's support.

Jewish students averted disaster by conducting a Passover Seder that not only satisfied B'nai B'rith's request for a prayer service but also pleased students, who thoroughly enjoyed their four glasses of wine.

Jewish life at Rice began very differently, with a strong emphasis on learning. The first nonacademic clubs appeared at Rice in 1916, among them the Menorah Society. Menorah societies at universities around the country increased college students' Jewish identity through the study of Jewish history and culture. A Menorah Society announcement in the Jan. 16, 1916, issue of the *Thresher* states, "At present the society is devoting most of its time to a survey of post-biblical Jewish history, although some meetings are devoted to present day problems of the Jewish people." Those contemporary issues were featured at a meeting the following month, when members heard presentations on "The Jew's Relationship to the Law," and "Health and Diseases of Jews."

The 1939 Rice Menorah Society constitution states: "The purpose of this organization is to promote the study of Jewish culture, history, and the advancement of Jewish ideals." Unfortunately, the Menorah Society's singular emphasis on learning did not align with postwar college students who were more socially oriented and less inclined toward intellectual pursuits than their predecessors. Hillel, established in the 1920s with a



Menorah Society page from the 1918 Campanile

Menorah societies at universities around the country increased college students' Jewish identity through the study of Jewish history and culture.



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## Today Rice Hillel engages students not only through spirituality and community, but also with comprehensive learning opportunities reminiscent of the Menorah Society.

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more expansive approach to all aspects of the Jewish student experience, gradually replaced Menorah societies, and today Hillel is still the only pluralistic, egalitarian and inclusive Jewish campus organization.

Hillel appeared at Rice in 1940 with Rabbi Robert Kahn, then associate rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel, appointed as its director. However, Rice's Jewish student organization doesn't appear in the *Campanile* as Hillel until 1950. It seems that Rice students held on to the Menorah Society name, if not its identity.

Today Rice Hillel engages students not only through spirituality and community, but also with comprehensive learning opportunities reminiscent of the Menorah Society. Topics and formats change

with student preferences, and have recently included weekly midrash study sessions at the South Server, and Pop-Up Judaism gatherings at random times and places, featuring topics as diverse as Why Do Jews Eat Chinese Food? and Insights Into Jewish Voting Trends.

Rice Hillel also regularly partners with the Rice Jewish Studies Program to bring lunchtime speakers and Shabbat dinner guests, like Israeli author Ruby Namdar, who spoke about his Sapir Prize-winning book, "The Ruined House," and Leela Corman, author and artist of the graphic novel, "Unterzakhn."

This semester Rice Hillel is conducting ongoing courses for students. Two tracks of Hillel's Jewish Learning Fellowship help students deepen their under-

standing of Judaism on their own terms. The Israel Learning Fellowship centers around Israeli life and culture, through which students develop their own connection to Israel and learn how to have productive conversations with those who hold different perspectives about Israel.

For more than a century informal Jewish learning beyond the classroom has been, and continues to be one of the most important aspects of Jewish student life at Rice, because we establish relationships and create community when we engage in thoughtful conversations about ideas important to our lives. From the first day of classes more than a century ago to today, Jewish learning beyond the classroom occupies a central role in campus life, regardless of the decade. Despite what memory comes to mind first when asked about Jewish life at Rice, we can be confident that even if our memories focus on the cocktails at a professor's home after a football game, there was also a conversation about something Jewish. ■

Houston Hillel Shabbat dinner at the Martel Magister's home with Israeli author Ruby Namdar



# A Grounding Experience: Reflections of a Jewish Studies Graduate

By Colton Cox

After graduating from Rice with a major in sociology and a minor in Jewish studies, Colton Cox '18 stayed at Rice and became the policy assistant to Ambassador Edward Djerejian, director of Rice's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

When I think back on my time as a Rice undergraduate minoring in Jewish studies, several words come to mind — interactive, unique, eye-opening, etc. Each of these words describes the fantastic coursework and experiences that the Program in Jewish Studies offered to me as a curious young student. But perhaps the most important descriptor would be the word grounding. To elaborate, Jewish studies provided me with a valuable foundation to grow as a thinker, communicator and a professional, teaching me how to engage critically

not only with Jewish history and culture but also with important questions about modern life and society.

My introduction to the Program in Jewish Studies came through Professor Henze's The Prophet Jeremiah course as a first-semester freshman. What fascinated me about his lectures was that this class, which included perspectives from history and religious studies, actually began with a lesson in sociology: one of the first readings was German sociologist Max Weber's work on the concept of charismatic authority.

This course took me and my peers — a group of 15 students from a diverse range of personal and academic backgrounds — through the millennia-long and multifaceted history of Jerusalem.



Members of the Jerusalem Class at the Mount of Olives, Feb. 2015 (I am fourth from right in the back row.)



The way in which this course blended a range of disciplines piqued my interest and helped chart the path for the next four years of my undergraduate studies. I would go on to become a sociology major and found that my minor in Jewish studies provide a strong, humanities-centered basis for my social science curriculum.

When studying the Book of Jeremiah, I was engrossed by how Professor Henze's lectures and our interactive classroom discussions brought the text to life, metaphorically making the ancient feel modern. This fusion of the historical and the present would become even more central in the following semester, when I enrolled in Jerusalem: The Holy City in Time and Imagination, co-taught by Professor Henze and lecturer Melissa Weininger. This course took me and my peers — a group of 15 students from a diverse range of personal and academic backgrounds — through the millennia-long and multifaceted history of Jerusalem. This was accomplished not just through careful studies and presentations on Jerusalem's key sites, but also through a spring break trip to the Eternal City itself that would become one of the most memorable parts of my Rice experience.

On this trip, we arrived in Israel late at night, with myself and every other student experiencing the first stages of jet lag. But despite our tiredness upon checking into the Beit Shmuel hostel in Jerusalem, we all had a sense of enthusiasm to begin exploring the city we had been studying as soon as we possibly could. We unpacked our bags and began walking down King David St. and through the trendy pedestrian trail in the Mamilla Mall. At the end of this stretch, we were suddenly surprised to be standing in front of the Jaffa Gate to the Old City. "Look over there — that's the Tower of David that I presented on in class," one of my peers exclaimed. We were all amazed that in our 10-minute walk past hotels, clothing stores and coffee shops, we had metaphorically gone back centuries. This set the perfect tone for what would become a week of true discovery.

In the following days, we went through a varied itinerary that helped us explore Jerusalem in all of its splendor, but also its complexity and even conflict. We trekked through the biblical underground tunnels of the City of David while also discussing the perspectives on the politics of archeology from Israeli and Palestinian

perspectives. We climbed the heights of Masada and swam at the lowest point in the world in the Dead Sea. We explored Jewish cultural and religious identity in the huddled crowds at the Western Wall and in the quiet interior of the Hurva Synagogue. And, we had indelible conversations on Palestinian identity and socioreligious coexistence with a Muslim guide and community leader at the Dome of the Rock and with a Palestinian Lutheran pastor beyond the Green Line in Bethlehem.

This travel experience was without a doubt the perfect grounding for my current professional endeavors. Following my graduation from Rice, I remained at the university to work as the policy assistant to Ambassador Edward Djerejian, the director of Rice's Baker Institute for Public Policy and former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Syria. In acting as a researcher, speechwriter and manager for Ambassador Djerejian, I have relied upon my critical thinking skills and worldly awareness that the Program in Jewish Studies instilled in me. In June 2019, I traveled to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Ramallah with Ambassador Djerejian as part of a fact-finding project on the deep-seated political challenges surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On this trip, I frequently hearkened back to the important lessons I learned in my first time in Jerusalem four years prior, which gave me a greater sense of confidence in being able to discuss and present on intricate matters of Jewish history, faith and culture.

My Jewish studies experience was colored by many other enriching memories. My upperclassman coursework explored everything from African-American-Jewish relations to Judaic life in medieval Spain, from the origins of anti-Semitism to the nuances of mystic Jewish philosophy. As president of the Jewish Studies Student Association, I cherished the opportunity to form lasting relationships with other faculty and students in the program. Moreover, I was honored to receive the Morris and Shirley Rapoport Award in Jewish Studies at graduation, which assisted me in taking summer courses at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Ultimately, I remain ever so fortunate to have discovered Jewish studies at the beginning of my time at Rice, and I know that the grounding knowledge and community that the program gave me will continue to support me in my future academic and professional pursuits. ■

**This travel experience was without a doubt the perfect grounding for my current professional endeavors.**



Ambassador Djerejian, colleagues and leaders of the Israeli NGO "Women Wage Peace," June 2019 in Tel Aviv, Israel (I am top right)

# The Prayers Are Short and the Jokes Are Long

By Abby Shulman

Abby Shulman '19 reflects on how the program in Jewish studies and the classes she took at Rice helped her reconnect with her Judaism.

I grew up with Judaism fully oriented around family and food, surrounded by relatives both proud and irreverent. A typical Shabbat dinner consists of my grandmother's bragging about our very-great grandfather Yoel Sirkis, a 16th-century halachic scholar, over Costco chicken and guacamole. While we are pleased with a tradition of Jewish intellectuals, we are not always the most academic family ourselves. I learned very little about Judaism beyond funny Yiddish-isms and traditional foods growing up. In our household, the prayers are short and the jokes are long. My grandfather was perhaps the last Jewish academic of our line — I remember his house brimmed with the works of Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber — but he lost his intellect to Parkinson's disease when I was very young. I loved the idea of Judaism as an academic endeavor, even bragging about the dryness of my synagogue's services to friends. Yet I didn't feel personally connected to the academic study of Judaism. To be honest, I didn't even know where to start.

The Jewish studies program at Rice gave me the opportunity to connect with Judaism through the academic lens I had always craved. My first Jewish studies class was a course titled *The Bible and Its Interpreters*, taught by Professor Matthias Henze. We read biblical stories in their historical context and learned how to attribute passages to different biblical authors through stylistic clues. I was hooked. One class, we learned that Abra-

ham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God's command is more plausible — and as a result, even more poignant — when it is understood that human sacrifice was likely still practiced by some Jews at the time. We read important biblical texts and reconciled the repetitions and inconsistencies by acknowledging the many authors of the Torah (who apparently didn't always agree). It felt like the first time I had really read the Bible and discussed it in a historical way. Rather than feeling offended by the question of who wrote

the Torah, I felt more connected to my Judaism than ever before. I was engaging with my Judaism intellectually, not just through rabbi-in-a-bar jokes and hummus (though I still love both very much).

Following this class, I took Biblical Hebrew — which improved my shoddy reading skills and taught me how to say important words like “movable property” in the ancient language — and the much-acclaimed Jerusalem class. While *The Bible and Its Interpreters* provided me a fascinating historical context

**I learned very little about Judaism beyond funny Yiddish-isms and traditional foods growing up. In our household, the prayers are short and the jokes are long.**



View of the Old City with friends Rebecca Topper (middle) and Rose Kantorczyk (right)



on biblical stories, the Jerusalem class offered historical context on present-day geopolitical conflict. I learned about the many groups who lived in the land of modern-day Israel over past millennia, which gave me a more nuanced understanding of whose land it really was. Even more relevant to my interests, I learned about Zionism and its political, philosophical and religious origins. My grandmother was born in Palestine, modern-day Petach Tikvah, in 1930. While I knew that she came from an intellectual, wealthy family that migrated to Palestine prior to the rise of Nazi Germany, I never understood the creation of Israel outside the context of the Holocaust. Melissa Weininger's lectures on the waves of Jewish migration to Palestine — often comprised of privileged European Jews like my grandmother's family — cleared a lot of my own confusion regarding the state that exists today.

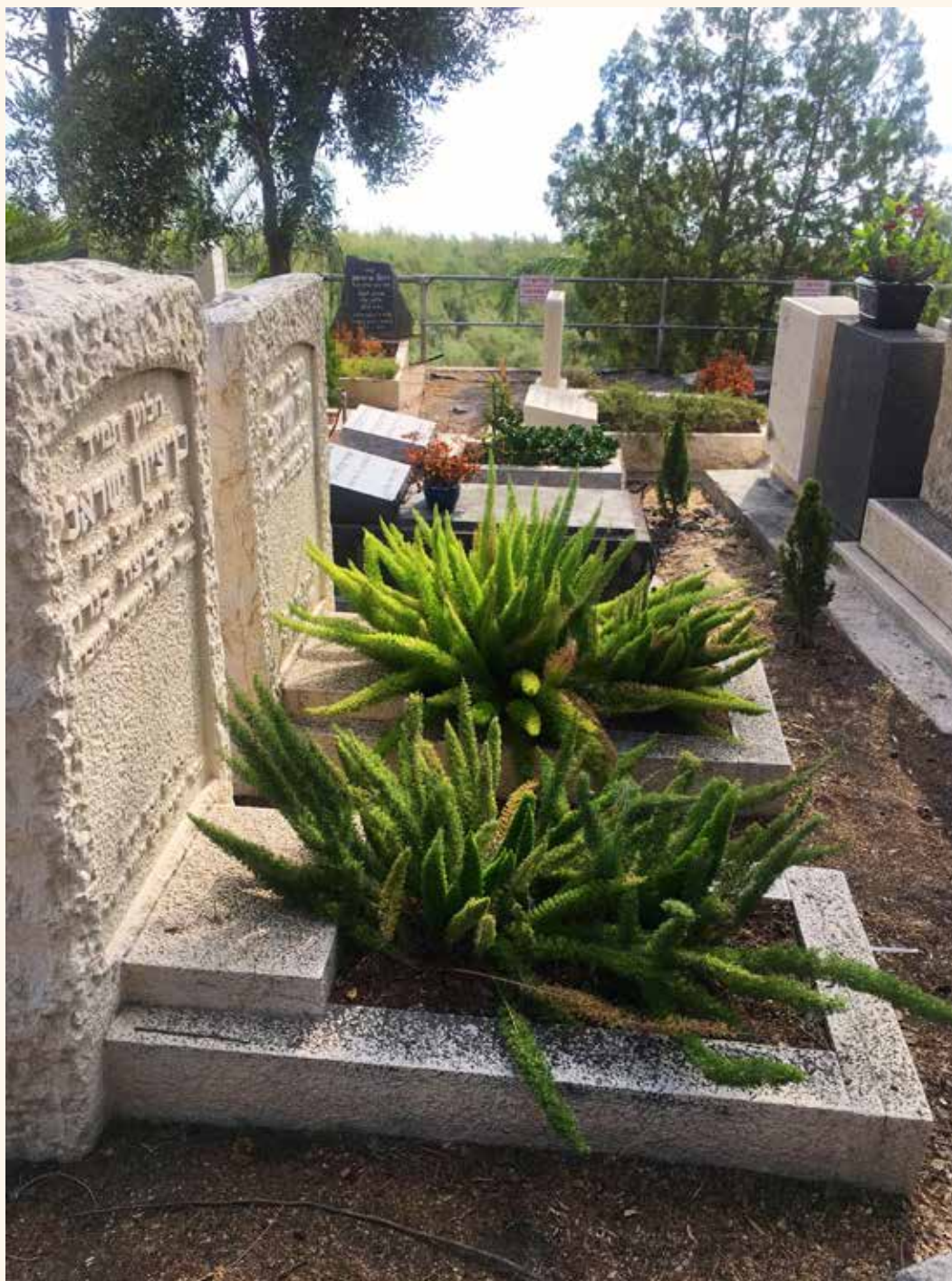
The Jerusalem class also provided deeper context for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a conflict that is extremely difficult to navigate through NYT op-eds. It's a cliché, but I learned how to get comfortable with the uncomfortable through discussions with Israel and Palestine-grown activists who manage to confront a painful reality and advocate for tangible and specific changes. I did not leave the class with any answers, but I believe that I emerged from it more informed, critical and empathetic than I entered.

As a closer to my Jewish studies experience at Rice, I wrote a senior thesis, comparing trends in Jewish commentary to certain modern reading theories. It was a sharp diversion from the classes I had previously taken, which focused either on the Torah itself or on historical events. My thesis was a dive into Jewish philosophy, a topic in which I had no experience. I chose the topic after an impactful conversation about a Jewish parable and some late-night arguments about postmodernism. While I was underprepared, it was my most intense attempt at Jewish academia thus far and an homage to my grandfather's bookshelves; a few of his passed-on books even found their way into my bibliography. Through this project, I felt connected to him, to my great-grandfather (a rabbi), and to my great-great (and on until the 16th century) grandfather, about whom my Israeli grandmother loves to brag. During those hectic semesters I felt the most Jewish I have ever felt, and for this I am very grateful to Rice's Program in Jewish Studies. ■

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**The Jewish studies program at Rice gave me the opportunity to connect with Judaism through the academic lens I had always craved.**

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Graveyard on the edge of the Kinneret

# Traveling to Jerusalem, Twice: What COVID Taught Me About Shared Experiences

By Sofia Gereta

With no background in Jewish studies, Sofia Gereta '20 traveled to Israel for the first time with the Jerusalem class. She liked it so much, she returned the next summer and enrolled in a Modern Hebrew course.

It only took a year of online classes and at-home sequestration to realize how lucky we once were. Today, just the thought of sitting around a single conference table in a seminar-style class or running into friends at the gym is a luxury in itself. It used to be easy to dismiss the buzz of day-to-day activity, but now the square-foot margins of the Zoom window remind us of what we miss — shared experience.

To illustrate the power of shared educational experience, I offer my reflections on one of the best courses I took at Rice, Jerusalem: Holy City in Time and Imagination, taught by Professor Matthias Henze and lecturer Melissa Weininger. It is a semesterlong course that travels to Jerusalem for 10 days over spring break. The class was both memorable and effective because it honed our independent thinking through four learning methods: It provided us with a foundation of facts; it built in space to engage with peers; it helped us experience Jerusalem firsthand; and it led us to reflect and synthesize. As the pandemic continues on, it is particularly essential to identify, connect to and apply these ideas to our modified forms of education in order to make it as active and collaborative as it was in person.

The first seven weeks of the course prioritized becoming comfortable with the framework of Jerusalem's 4,000 year old history — and with each other. We spent the first weeks of the course gaining essential historical knowledge. One exciting way we did this was by each becoming experts on a single architectural landmark of the city. Our task was to present a mini-lecture on our topic and compile our findings in a guidebook to reference on the trip. This was especially exciting when we visited Israel, since we could seek out the relevant expert at each new site. But this was not the only way we learned from each other. During class,

all 20 students and two professors all sat in a giant circle, facing each other. This unconventional organization forced us to look to each other for help and insight, rather than expecting a single right answer to be on the board. As one of the quieter students, it was definitely not easy to speak up at first with 21 pairs of eyes on me. But as I got to know my classmates who came from Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and secular backgrounds, I saw the situation as a rare opportunity where we could ask each other those burning questions in a safe and nonjudgemental environment.

The groundwork of historical knowledge and the beginnings of strong relationships allowed us to experience Israel in the most productive way. Despite taking the class two years ago, I can vividly recall standing atop Mount of Olives, gazing up at the West Bank barrier and exploring the Jewish Quarter. This is because our memory is tightly linked to our feelings, and this trip required not only intellectual, but also emotional involvement and growth. For example, I did not process the consequences of the West Bank barrier until we drove through Bethlehem. It only hit me when I felt Palestinians gazes upon us — some tired and suspicious, others hopeful that tourists would bring some business to the struggling town. Many classmates cried passing through Yad Vashem, overwhelmed by the emotions of the poignant Holocaust memorial. Despite all the readings and lectures, we had to experience *being* in this contested city to feel the emotional weight of its history.

The second half of our course was spent processing, reflecting and building on our shared experiences. Having traveled across the world together, we felt more comfortable than ever debating each other in a friendly manner. In addition, we spoke with current experts, such as a modern Israeli writer and director Nir Baram, who spoke about his film, "A Land Without Borders," and Omer Chechek Katz, deputy consul general of Israel, each of whom suggested their own approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was refreshing to hear such direct perspectives and empowering to be able to respond with well-informed arguments.

In hindsight, this class was particularly formative for me because those four ideas of basic knowledge, peer learning, experience and reflection gave us the

tools we needed to make deeper discoveries and draw independent, evidence-based conclusions. Jerusalem's history and people left such a striking mark on me that I knew I needed more than a week in the city to fully comprehend it.

With the generous aid of the Program in Jewish Studies, I was able to fulfill that goal: I returned to Israel in summer 2019 and spent four weeks studying Hebrew at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

When I got there, I was able to do — this time, all by myself — more than I ever imagined I would be able to do. Using the strong framework of historical and socio-political knowledge from the Jerusalem course, I could better appreciate the historical artifacts found at the Bible Lands Museum and the Rockefeller Archeological Museum. At the end of the Hebrew course in which I enrolled, I even felt confident enough with my language skills to take a short tour across Israel with another classmate. For three days, we drove and hiked from the Be'er Sheva to the Sea of Galilee. To walk down the main street of a Roman city from biblical times or to look out from a crusader fortress — while simultaneously knowing you were in a contested political territory — makes one feel like time travel is really possible. The varying layers of history in the land also made it clear that this land had always been contested; the region's current sociopolitical dynamic was not a new concept but a product of its history. As I tracked the historical patterns, I became confident that I was capable of applying history and using its lessons to find modern-day solutions as well.

Jerusalem, one of the most complicated, overwhelming locations on this earth, used to be intimidating to me. However, the knowledge and confidence I gained from this class allowed me to go back by myself. No longer intimidated, I was able to be there confidently and independently. If there is any testament to the success of Jerusalem: Holy City in Time and Imagination, it is that! ■





Left: The class posed for a well-earned picture after a long hike. Below: Visiting the Dome of the Rock on a windy morning.



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# The Immigrant Experience, Up Close and Personal

By Eitan Woloski

At a time when many of us have refrained from traveling because of the pandemic, Eitan Woloski '21 contemplates how a Jewish studies class trip to New York City in 2019 enriched his understanding of the American-Jewish immigrant experience and of his own family's journey.



Eitan Woloski and fellow Rice student Trevor Egerton, in New York



Eldridge Synagogue, New York City  
(©Felix Lipov/123RF.com)

Looking from the outside of the Eldridge Synagogue, the building appears unassuming, blending into the background of New York City's Lower East Side. However, once inside, I quickly realized that this was no ordinary building. It was the centerpiece of a community whose members still leave a lasting legacy. From indentations in the floorboards from rocking during countless services, to custom-designed ashtrays by the bimah, I was able to picture hundreds of Jews gathered in the atrium during Yom Kippur services, each gently nudging each other to try to hear part of the Kol Nidre service. Truthfully, I think I would have enjoyed the synagogue tour without any prior knowledge of the Jewish immigrant experience, admiring its beauty and significance to the Jewish community on the Lower East Side; however, after spending weeks dissecting the history of 20th century-immigration, the true significance of that building would have never dawned on me. The Eldridge Synagogue was a

Jewish peddler in mind, sites like the Eldridge Synagogue must have seemed like hallowed ground to them. After spending bitter nights on a tour around the northeastern countryside, being able to reconnect with one's community, even for just a brief moment was special. Hearing Yiddish being spoken and being able to understand the flow of a service, Jewish immigrants finally felt as if they had somewhere to belong to. Despite the course being centered around Jewish immigration, *Becoming Americans* was much more than recounting the history of immigration quotas and casual xenophobia directed toward Jews. It touched on universal themes of acceptance, tolerance and determination to make the most of dire situations.

Personally, my family's experience did not involve immigrating to America through New York; however, many of the themes of the class were applicable. Rather than being admitted to the United States, my family settled in Mexico City

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**The course helped shape my understanding of the difficulties that my predecessors underwent, leaving stability and normality behind for the chance of a better life for future generations.**

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haven for Jews who were yearning for a familiar feeling, while the rest of their lives were lived in a struggle to adjust to a new land and culture.

A key aspect to *Becoming Americans*, the course on the American-Jewish immigrant experience that I took with Joshua Furman in spring 2019, that really stuck with me was the experience of the Jewish peddler. Enduring what was often a solitary life, peddlers traversed the countryside, taking goods and trinkets from the city to rural homes. These peddlers were critical for connecting a large rural population with urban goods. However, these peddlers were often unable to communicate in length with their clients and many times did not know where they were going to stay the night. The days of travel were brutal, especially in the winter where they would be lucky to sleep in barns rather than outside alone in the frigid temperatures. Facing such a situation, it would be easy to call it quits, to leave America and go back to a troubled Europe because at least it was familiar. Yet, many were able to persevere, despite overwhelming odds.

With the trials and tribulations of the

to escape persecution from Poland. While the scope of this class did not directly represent their path, these struggles to assimilate to a new culture were still ever present. The course helped shape my understanding of the difficulties that my predecessors underwent, leaving stability and normality behind for the chance of a better life for future generations.

As a senior reflecting upon my time at Rice, this experience was a definite highlight — both for supplementing the readings and lectures of *Becoming Americans*, and encouraging me to reflect upon my family's own journey to the United States. I hope that after the pandemic, future classes of Rice students will be able to embark on the same journey and see aspects of the Jewish immigrant experience for themselves. ■

*Eitan Woloski is a senior at Rice, majoring in physics with minors in policy and business. Despite not minoring in Jewish studies, he enrolled in several of the classes in the minor and highly recommends them. After graduation this spring, he is looking forward to attending Emory Law School in the fall.*



# Fragments of Sephardic Tunes: Composing Music in the 21st Century

**By Richard Lavenda, Professor of Composition and Theory at the Shepherd School of Music**

The faculty in Rice's program in Jewish studies comes from across campus. Richard Lavenda, professor of composition and music theory at the Shepherd School of Music, has been with the program from its beginning.

I joined the faculty of the Shepherd School in 1987. However, my connection with Rice had begun 10 years prior to that: I was a master's student here from 1977–79. The school had started only a year or two before that, so it's fair to say that I've been here almost from its beginning. Obviously, there have been many changes over the years, but what has remained constant is that it is an exciting, stimulating, supportive, and busy place with many opportunities to work with superb colleagues, to teach excellent students, and to study and make great music. I teach composition lessons and classes in various topics in music theory, and I am also the director of graduate studies.

I am a composer. I write what's perhaps best described as concert music. It's also sometimes called contemporary classical music, which is true, insofar as I write music for classically trained musicians. I've composed about 80 pieces, ranging from large works such as an opera, concertos and orchestral music to smaller pieces such as solos for flute and violin, with chamber music for ensembles of various sizes in between. My compositions have been performed in many parts of the U.S., as well as in many European countries, Israel, South Korea, Canada and Australia.

For the past five or six years, I've incorporated some Ladino melodies into several of my pieces. I was first introduced to this repertory, essentially the music of the Sephardic diaspora, by my friend Etty Ben-Zaken. She is a wonderful Israeli singer, who has recorded many Sephardic tunes. Anyone interested can look her up on YouTube. I highly recommend it. Even though the melodies are really beautiful and evocative, I don't write arrangements of them. Instead, I use fragments of them,



Professor Richard Lavenda



Left: Etty Ben-Zaken; an Israeli singer and friend of Richard Lavenda; who has recorded many Sephardic tunes (Photo: YouTube). Right: The Apollo Chamber Players, a Houston-based group of mostly Shepherd School alumni for whom Lavenda has written a piece, titled "Distant Shores." (Photo: [www.apollochamberplayers.org](http://www.apollochamberplayers.org))



which emerge from my modern sound world and then recede back into it. For me, this becomes a reference, an allusion, perhaps a memory.

My most recent adventure in this aesthetic is a piece that will be premiered April 18, 2021. Because concerts with live audiences are almost entirely on hiatus due to the pandemic, the performance will be streamed, with the expectation that live performances will happen next year. The piece, which is titled "Distant Shores," is for bassoon and string quartet, an unusual ensemble, but one that interests me for several reasons. The major one is the people for whom I wrote it. The bassoonist is my friend and colleague Benjamin Kamins, an extraordinary musician, and for the Apollo Chamber Players. They are a Houston-based group of mostly Shepherd School alumni who specialize in playing music that explores different cultural influences and legacies.

Writing a piece for the five of them has been a great pleasure.

We've created a project that is concerned with immigration, dispersal and memory, not only among the Sephardim but more generally. I don't know what other pieces will be performed, but, knowing how Apollo puts together their programs, I expect that the other music will represent perspectives from other cultures. ■

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