



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University
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Associate Director's Note



Dear Friends and Supporters of Rice Jewish Studies,

Back in December 2021, I attended a fascinating panel discussion at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies in Chicago. The subject of the roundtable conversation was Globalizing Jewish History, De-Ashkenazifying the Jewish Studies Curriculum. A standing-room only crowd, which included Daniella Farah, one of our Samuel W. and Goldye

Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellows, listened as panelists spoke convincingly of the need to elevate the voices and experiences of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in our teaching. In many undergraduate Jewish studies courses, including ones I have previously taught, the typical approach is to designate a single day or week on the syllabus to pay lip service to the expansive topic of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula and the Middle East. This add and stir approach has been rightfully criticized, since it transforms non-Ashkenazi Jews into tokens of curiosity and minimizes their history and culture at the expense of other narratives.

Accordingly, in this semester's issue of Branches, we are highlighting the Sephardi and Mizrahi experience both globally and locally. Taking us on a tour of the vanished synagogues of medieval Spain, Maya Soifer Irish, associate professor of history and the director of Rice's Medieval and Early Modern Studies Program, examines the difficult history of anti-Jewish persecution in Spain that began in the 1390s, and the challenges involved in identifying and preserving sites of Sephardic Jewish communal worship that were converted into churches centuries ago. Daniella Farah writes about the connections between her experiences growing up in an Iranian Jewish family in the Chicago suburbs and her commitment to correcting the "erasure and misrepresentation of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in Jewish educational spaces" in the courses she teaches at Rice. Tamar Sella, our second postdoctoral fellow, introduces us to the rich musical legacies of Jewish artists with roots in Iraq, Morocco and Yemen. In the process, Sella encourages us to rethink our perspective about the labels "Arab" and "Jewish," reminding us that they are not identity categories that exist in binary opposition to one another.

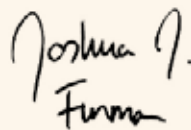
Closer to home, this issue also features my conversation with Rabbi Daniel Masri of Houston's Congregation Beth Rambam, which is located in the heart of the Fondren Southwest neighborhood and its Orthodox community. Founded in the early 1980s by a group of primarily Syrian Jews, Beth Rambam now serves a growing and diverse population of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews from literally every part of the world. In the interview, Rabbi

Masri shared anecdotes from his family history, which stretches from Aleppo to Mexico City to New York, with a brief sojourn in Texas along the way. The conversation also gives wonderful insight into Beth Rambam's cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, as evidenced by the community's Sephardic festival celebration that took place in January.

We complete this semester's issue of Branches with updates from our alumni and our current students. Daniel Cohen '20 writes about his internships and volunteer experiences in Israel over the past year, while our graduating seniors, Natty Askanase and Alyson Resnick, reflect back on their time at Rice and the classes and experiences they will remember long after they leave. You'll also read an update from the officers of the Jewish Studies Student Association about recent activities, and a news article about a memorable evening that my students in the fall 2021 Jewish Food class and I spent with the deli maven himself, Ziggy Gruber.

From all of us in the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, best wishes for a relaxing and restorative summer.

Sincerely,



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



The audience, including Joshua Furman and Daniella Farah, listens to the panelists during the session "Globalizing Jewish History, De-Ashkenazifying the Jewish Studies Curriculum" at the 53rd Association of Jewish Studies annual conference, Chicago, Dec. 19, 2021. Photo: Rachel Kohn for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Integrating Mizrahi and Sephardi Voices Into Jewish Studies Curricula

By **Daniella Farah, Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellow**

From kindergarten through eighth grade, I attended a Conservative Jewish day school in the Chicago suburbs.



Daniella Farah

This was a school in which the vast majority of students were of European Jewish descent and educators, parents and students treated the Ashkenazi experi-

ence as the normative Jewish experience. As the daughter of Iranian Jewish immigrants to the United States, at a school with no more than a dozen Sephardi and Mizrahi students, I was demographically in the minority. From that time onward, intra-Jewish prejudices shaped many of my experiences in Jewish spaces, especially educational ones.

In primary school, some of my earliest memories were of being different — from my peers’ grunts of disgust at the Iranian lunches my mother packed to nasty remarks on our strange accents. Many Jews I met at school were shocked to learn that Iranian Jews existed, let alone that Jewish communities had been living in the region for over 2,500 years. The Jewish day school did not take the students’ ignorance as an opportunity to teach them about the historical and contemporary multiplicity of Jewish voices, communities and experiences. None of the courses offered, for example, addressed Mizrahi and Sephardi customs, practices or liturgies nor did the school include the experiences of non-Ashkenazi Jews in its history curricula. At the same time, at the undergraduate level, the Jewish studies courses I encountered almost entirely left out Jews of non-Ashkenazi backgrounds, with Jewish history reduced to pogroms, the Holocaust, the foundation of Israel and the experiences of Ashkenazi Jews in the United States. When educators and syllabi did include Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews, they treated them as backward and passive outliers to the supposed mainstream (Ashkenazi) Jewish experience.

The erasure and misrepresentation of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews in Jewish educational spaces compelled me to uncover and uplift the voices absent from typical Jewish studies narratives, both

in my teaching and my scholarship. In the courses I teach for the Program in Jewish Studies, I weave in these histories throughout the syllabus. I often discuss these communities on the first day of class to center the experiences of underrepresented Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews from the very start. For example, in the Jewish history survey course I am offering at Rice University this semester, the first two sessions deal with the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Spain, the Sephardi diaspora and Jews in the early modern Ottoman Empire. The course will conclude with a session on the exodus of Middle Eastern and North African Jews following the establishment of Israel and a separate class on the experiences of Mizrahi Jews in Israel. As with my teaching, diversity is also at the center of my scholarship, which asks how religious minorities leveraged education to claim a place within multi-religious, multiethnic and multilingual nation-states.

A concrete way to ensure diversity in Jewish studies courses is to include primary sources produced by Sephardim, Mizrahim and Jews of Color in the syllabus. In all my courses, I assign short student presentations on primary sources, requiring students to present their analysis of a source to the class in a concise and compelling manner. I ask students to consider what these sources reveal and conceal and which voices are missing. For example, in the Great Books of Jewish History and Culture course I taught at Rice in fall 2021, students presented on segments of the first known Ladino-language memoir, “The Memoir of Sa’adi Besalel a-Levi.” I assigned passages that described interreligious encounters and the place of women in late Ottoman Jewish society — topics with which the students were previously unfamiliar. At the end of the semester, students read and analyzed the food memoirs of the African American-Jewish food writer, Michael Twitty. Likewise, this semester, when discussing the experiences of Mizrahi Jews in contemporary Israel, the students will examine the 2019 memoir “The Art of Leaving” by the Yemeni-Israeli writer Ayelet Tsabari. When learning about Jewish communists in Iran and Iraq in the 1940s, they will explore the memoir of the late Sasson Somekh, an Iraqi-born Israeli writer and academic.

Integrating primary and secondary sources about and by Mizrahim, Sephardim and Jews of Color in my syllabi has paid immense dividends, helping students understand the diversity of

Jewish voices and experiences that have existed in the past and that continue today. Students have consistently remarked that they enjoy learning about Jewish culture “from a non-European perspective” and that they crave more literature on non-Ashkenazi Jews.

Moving forward, Jewish studies educators in primary and secondary schooling and higher education need to work toward “de-Ashkenazifying” — as one panel at the 2021 meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies Conference called it — Jewish studies curricula. At the most basic level, this involves incorporating the histories of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews throughout the course, rather than isolating them to one or two sessions, and including the scholarship of Jews of Color. However, eliminating Ashkenormativity within Jewish educational spaces also entails working to understand how the problematic, racialized conceptions of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews first emerged within the broader Jewish community and challenging the systems of power that have helped intra-Jewish antagonism persist till today. Only through comprehending the origins and endurance of these negative conceptions of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews can we dismantle them. ■



Daniella Farah’s family in Tehran, Iran, 1969

Introducing Three Arab Jewish Musicians

By Tamar Sella, Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellow

As an ethnomusicologist, I am always interested in asking what music can teach us about underrepresented social, cultural and political histories.



Tamar Sella

In particular, I listen for sounds and ideas that open us up to narratives that may add new perspectives to the prevailing understandings we have of the ways in which our world is organized. These

new perspectives may come in the form of protest music or freedom songs or they may emerge in between the lines of the stories that trace the roots and routes of various musical forms.

Jewish musicians from across the Arab and Muslim world, in particular, open up a wide expanse of histories, narratives and questions that are indispensable to understanding contemporary Jewish culture and life as it relates to the broader society. Tracing the lives and trajectories of these musicians can teach us about the underrecognized stories of Jews across the Middle East and North Africa. Looking at the 20th century in particular, these stories may teach us about the dissolution of historic Jewish communities and the emergence of a new social category in Israel that grouped and disenfranchised Jews from across the Middle East and North Africa as Mizrahi (Eastern Jews). Relatedly, these musical stories may illuminate and challenge the contemporary binary between Arab and Jew that emerged alongside Zionism and the establishment of the state of Israel. In this piece, I present three short introductory vignettes about Jewish musicians from across the Arab and Muslim world who lived and passed on within the span of the 20th century.

Daoud and Salah al-Kuwaiti

Brothers Salah (1908–1986) and Daoud al-Kuwaiti (1910–1976) were born in Kuwait City to an Iraqi Jewish family of merchants. The brothers moved to Baghdad in the 1930s to continue to pursue their budding music career as prolific

In particular, I listen for sounds and ideas that open us up to narratives that may add new perspectives to the prevailing understandings we have of the ways in which our world is organized.

composers and as virtuosic violin and oud players, respectively. In Baghdad, they were a core part of the Arab classical music world and were central in establishing the orchestra of the new Iraqi national radio station, of which Salah was the director, conductor and composer. Songs that they wrote and performed ranged from the Iraqi maqam (system of melodic modes) to the Egyptian classical genres and were famously sung by some of the premier singers of the time, including the legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum.¹

The brothers both left Iraq and immigrated to the new state of Israel in 1951. In this, they were among the upwards of 120,000 Iraqi Jews who were airlifted to Israel in the years after 1948, upending centuries of Jewish life in Iraq after it became increasingly untenable

following the growth of Zionism and the establishment of the new state. In Israel, promises of a comfortable life were unfulfilled when Iraqi Jews were settled in transit camps and faced poverty and discrimination.² The al-Kuwaiti brothers eventually moved from the transit camps to the working-class Tikva neighborhood in south Tel Aviv.

The quick dissolution of Iraqi Jewish life in general also framed the Kuwaitis' musical trajectory. In Iraq, their names were sometimes officially erased from certain compositions. In Israel, like many other Arab Jewish classical musicians, they occasionally played with the Arab classical orchestra on the Arabic station of the Israel Broadcasting Authority and for community audiences in local cafés in south Tel Aviv. Their music continued to influence Iraqi Jewish musicians, particularly Daoud's grandson, rock and roll musician Dudu Tassa, who began a music project with their pieces and recordings, Dudu Tassa and the Kuwaitis.

Zohra El Fassia

Zohra El Fassia (1905–1994) was born Zohra Hamou to a Jewish family likely around the year 1905 in the city of Sefrou in the Fez region in Morocco. Fez is the city that would eventually give her the regional stage name later in life, El Fassia or “the woman from Fez.” El Fassia was driven by a conviction to



Zohra El Fassia recalling a schoolteacher telling her younger self, “You will be an artist!” Screenshot from filmmaker Haim Shiran's materials. Courtesy of Haim Shiran.

perform and sing from a very young age. Moving to Casablanca in the late 1920s, she became a superstar. She was primarily known for her expertise in the long-form poetic style of *malhun* and recorded dozens of records with the newly active record labels in the region including Pathé and Polyphon. She was an in-demand performer, singing at private family celebrations, well known venues, and, famously, like many other successful musicians of the time, at the Royal Palace of Rabat of King Mohammed V.

El Fassia left Morocco between 1962–64, around one decade after the Kuwaitis left Iraq. In this, she points toward the heterogeneity of histories of migration of Jews around the Middle East and North Africa. Around 200,000 Moroccan Jews left in stages mostly between 1948–67, primarily to Israel, but also to France and North America.

El Fassia settled in the southern coastal town of Ashkelon. She lived in a state-owned apartment in a neighborhood known as Atiqot Gimel (translated by Ammiel Alcalay as Antiquities 3) in the southern end of the city. The southern periphery became the site of settlement for many North African immigrants, across transit camps, public housing blocks or rapidly built development towns in an express attempt to settle the land.

In Israel, El Fassia regained neither the opportunities to work nor the recognition that she had in Morocco. However, within the Moroccan immigrant community, she was periodically invited to perform, and she recorded a number of songs with Zakiphone (later Koliphone), the Jaffa-based independent record label founded in 1953 by the Moroccan-born Azoulay Brothers. El Fassia's story circulated among younger artists after the Algerian-born poet Erez Bitton wrote a poem about her in 1975. Filmmaker Haim Shiran (1937–2022), for example, documented her life tirelessly. Among the many independent artists who were influenced

by her work, Neta Elkayam and Amit Hai Cohen created “Abiadi,” a tribute show to El Fassia.³

Sara Levi-Tanai

Sara Levi-Tanai (1910–2005) is primarily known as a choreographer and dancer, but she also composed many pieces of music both for and outside of her choreography. She was born in Ottoman Palestine around 1910 to parents who had immigrated from Yemen toward the end of the previous century. The largest and most well-known Yemeni migration happened after the foundation of the state, in 1949, as the American Joint Distribution Committee assisted in the airlifting of the approximately 50,000 Jews who had made their way down to the Hashed transit camp in Aden, then a British colony.

However, Yemeni Jews had been making their way to Palestine prior, independent from and unaffiliated with the European Zionist movement, though at times interacting with it in ways that reveal the Orientalism that was embedded within it. For example, in 1911, in an attempt to carry out the Zionist principle of *Avoda Ivrit* (Hebrew labor) to not employ Palestinian laborers, but struggling to work the land by themselves, early Ashkenazi settlers recruited Yemeni Jews who were seen as fit to carry out manual agricultural labor in the hot climate.

It was in those years of the early 20th century that an orphaned Levi-Tanai grew up in a boarding school attended primarily by Ashkenazi children. There, she was educated in Western European classical music, which she continued to pursue professionally. However, Levi-Tanai was impacted by the 1949 arrival of Yemeni Jews who were placed in transit camps and faced challenges and discrimination that included the widespread kidnapping of Yemeni newborns and infants from camps and hospitals, enmeshed in the Orientalist logic that Yemeni families had too many children and were unfit to parent them.

In the years that followed, she formed her own Yemeni-focused dance com-

pany, the Inbal Dance Theater. Though the group faced many challenges, they attained widespread international success, traveling to folklore and dance festivals the world over.⁴ This Yemeni-led company of original work was particularly meaningful at a time in which Yemeni folkloric tropes, seen as primitive and therefore reminiscent of the ways in which biblical times were imagined, were often appropriated in the creation of the new Hebrew identity in the early days of the state. Among the ways in which Inbal has influenced many artists over the years, contemporary performer Igal Mizrahi and his band Gulaza have incorporated some of Levi-Tanai's repertoire into their work, including the song “El Ginat Egoz.”

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Daoud and Salah al-Kuwaiti,

Zohra El Fassia and Sara Levi-Tanai leave behind musical repertoires that serve as windows to the heterogeneous, challenging, and underrecognized stories of Jews from the Arab and Muslim world.

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Musical Stories

Daoud and Salah al-Kuwaiti, Zohra El Fassia and Sara Levi-Tanai leave behind musical repertoires that serve as windows to the heterogeneous, challenging, and underrecognized stories of Jews from the Arab and Muslim world. They reveal the embeddedness of Jews in cultural life across the Middle East and North Africa, and the rupture of social life, cultural forms, and Arab Jewish identities that took place with the establishment of and migration to the state of Israel. Tracing these stories reminds us of the value of song and the endless power of listening. ■

¹ Seroussi, Edwin. “Kuweiti, Daud and Salah al-,” *Encyclopedia of the Jews in the World of Islam*, ed. Norman Stillman, vol. 3 (2010), 194–5.

² Bashkin, Orit. “Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel,” (Stanford University Press, 2020).

³ For more on Zohra, see “Zohra El Fassia,” Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women (June 23, 2021), at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/fassia-el>, by Tamar Sella, and Chris Silver's blog, “Gharamophone” (Jan. 30, 2022), at <https://gharamophone.com/>.

⁴ Toledano, Gila. “Sara Levi-Tanai,” Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women (Dec. 31, 1999), Jewish Women's Archive, at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/levi-tanai-sara>.

The Vanished Synagogues of Medieval Spain

By **Maya Soifer Irish, Associate Professor of History; Director, Medieval and Early Modern Studies Program; Affiliated Faculty, Program in Jewish Studies**

Every year, millions of people from all over the world travel to Spain to experience the artistic and architectural legacy of medieval coexistence between Jews, Christians and Muslims.



Maya Soifer Irish

What is popularly known as *convivencia* — literally, the living-togetherness of the three communities — has become the stuff of legend and an inspiration to

the modern world still fractured along many ethnic and religious lines. Since the Spanish economy heavily depends on tourism, it is hardly surprising that local governments are eager to attract Jewish visitors from the United States and Israel, who come to visit the sites where Jewish communities once flourished in a relatively tolerant environment fostered by Muslim and Christian rulers. Every town with a documented proof of Jewish presence in the Middle Ages (and sometimes without it) enthusiastically plays up its Jewish past. Tourists are taken to see the former Jewish quarter and the building rumored to have been the local synagogue. In many cases, this search for the signs of a vanished Jewish life is at least somewhat grounded in historical evidence. Jewish communities were found almost everywhere in medieval Christian Spain, not just in major towns, such as Toledo, Burgos, Seville and Barcelona, but also in small towns that housed no more than 150 or so Jewish families. However, the overwhelming majority of Jewish sites had been obliterated during the centuries when Spain's religious and secular authorities did their best to suppress even the faintest memories of Jewish presence in the country. Quite often, a building with a commemorative plaque stating that it was once a *sinagoga medieval*, is in reality an old-looking house dating to no later than the 18th or 19th century.

While there used to be hundreds of synagogues in medieval Sefarad, only a handful of buildings have been conclu-

sively identified as the former sites of Jewish worship. One of them is a small 14th-century sanctuary in Córdoba, a town famous for being the birthplace of Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher and religious scholar. Toledo boasts two restored synagogues, both named after churches that until recently occupied their interior spaces: Santa María la Blanca, probably built in the late 12th century by Joseph ibn Shoshan, the chief treasurer of the king of Castile; and the so-called synagogue El Tránsito, a private house of worship constructed in the mid-14th century by another royal administrator, Samuel Halevi Abula-

fia. Now a church, the erstwhile main synagogue of Segovia almost completely perished in a fire in the late 19th century, but has since been restored. Last year, news came that a team of archeologists was working to confirm the claim that a 14th-century building in Utrera (Andalusia), which most recently served as a bar, had been used as a synagogue during the late Middle Ages.

Many of the numerous synagogues that once dotted the streets and neighborhoods of medieval Spanish towns passed into Christian possession in 1492, after Fernando and Isabel, the rulers of the joint kingdoms of Castile and Aragon,



Santa María la Blanca Synagogue in Toledo, Spain

signed a charter ordering the Jews to “depart and never to return” to Spain. But the disappearance of synagogues and their conversion into churches began a hundred years earlier, in summer 1391, when a wave of anti-Jewish riots spread from Andalusia to other Castilian and Aragonese territories, resulting in the deaths and forced baptisms of thousands of Jews. It all began in the capital of Christian Andalusia, Seville, where Ferrán Martínez, a canon at the local cathedral chapter and the archdeacon of Écija, was publicly preaching that Jews were the enemies of God who deserved to be called criminals for persecuting the apostles and giving evil advice to kings. He was particularly incensed that Jews were flouting the church prohibition against the construction of new synagogues. Calling them “houses of the Devil” and “synagogues of Satan,” Martínez vowed to demolish the allegedly illegal synagogues if given the chance. The opportunity arrived in autumn 1390, after the king of Castile and the archbishop of Seville had both died. Finding himself at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the diocese, the archdeacon ordered the clergy in several small towns around Seville to tear down the local synagogues and use the lumber and the roof tiles for the repair of churches. In June 1391, a mere six months later, a violent mob burned down the gates of Seville’s Jewish quarter and rushed in, killing hundreds of people and selling many women and children into slavery. According to rabbi Hasdai Crescas of Aragon, when given the choice between baptism and death, the majority of residents converted to Christianity and “the streets of the Jews became desolate.”

The Jews of Seville never recovered from the disaster. With its membership greatly reduced in number, the community was disbanded and the Jewish quarter was divided into three Christian parishes. Just weeks after the pogrom, the royal council made arrangements for transferring the buildings that used to be synagogues to Christian owners. Before the killings, Martínez had complained bitterly about the existence of as many as 23 synagogues in the city. One of them was constructed using the money donated by Rabbi Yuçaf de Écija, the confidant and chief treasurer of the king. According to the terms of the endowment, drawn up in 1332, anyone who prayed for Rabbi Yuçaf’s soul at his synagogue on Yom Kippur was to receive a gold coin. Unfortunately, the location of this sanctuary is unknown. In fact, virtually no material



El Tránsito Synagogue in Toledo, Spain

remains have survived to remind visitors of the vibrant community that once existed within the walls of the Jewish quarter, today called Barrio de Santa Cruz. Located close to the Cathedral and the royal palace (the Alcázar), it is one of Seville’s chief attractions. As they sample tapas at the picturesque cafés and roam the labyrinth of narrow streets and winding alleys, tourists stop to gaze at the 17th-century wrought iron cross in the Plaza de Santa Cruz. It marks the place where the parish church of the Holy Cross once stood, before being demolished at the time of the Napoleonic wars. Prior to being converted into a church in August 1391, the original building had served as one of the Jewish quarter’s three main synagogues — at least two of them former mosques given to the community after the Christian conquest of Seville from the Muslims in 1248. A very determined visitor with a vivid imagination may wish to walk north to the church of San Bartolomé and try to envision the synagogue that used to occupy this spot before it, too, became a church. But more likely, the putative tourist will head to the present-day church of Santa María la Blanca, the only structure in Seville that preserves tangible remnants of a Jewish sanctuary. Located in the very heart of the Jewish

quarter, on its main commercial street and next to a marketplace, it was the most important synagogue in the city. Thoroughly remodeled in the 17th century in Baroque style, the present building’s interior seemingly bears no trace of its Jewish past. Until very recently, it was thought that nothing at all remained of the old synagogue. However, while a restoration project was being carried out at the church in 2012, archeologists uncovered the basement and the walls of what they determined to have been the medieval synagogue. At the top of the walls in the central nave, behind the baroque-period plasterwork, they found two rows of 12 blind arches (half of them used to contain a window), done in the Islamic style typical of medieval Iberian Jewish architecture. For a brief time in 2015, one could walk inside the church of Santa María la Blanca and see the outlines of the arches in the semicircular niches designed to accommodate paintings by the famous 17th-century Sevillian artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. Today, the copies of the original paintings are back in their places, once again concealing the church’s medieval Jewish origins. But the arches are still there — ghostly witnesses to the past — hidden, but not forgotten. ■

Celebrating Our Jewish Studies Minors: The Class of 2022



Seniors Alyson Resnick '22 and Natty Askanase '22

This semester we celebrate Alyson Resnick and Natty Askanase as they prepare to graduate and complete the requirements of the minor in Jewish studies. Alyson and Natty reflect back on the memorable moments and significance of their time spent at Rice. We wish them every success with their future plans.

Alyson Resnick '22

Hometown: Burlingame, California

Major: Cognitive Sciences

Minor: Jewish Studies

College: McMurtry

Academic interest — What drew you to Jewish studies at Rice?

My first semester at Rice I took JWST 120, Introduction to Israel Language and Culture, and after just a few weeks I knew I wanted to be a Jewish studies minor. I spent my freshman year studying Israeli music, television and Jewish life, and I even got to learn basic Hebrew. After this, my goal was to expand my academic study of Judaism through a historical, sociological and literary lens.

Favorite class in Jewish studies — What was the most memorable class you took and why?

The most memorable class I took was JWST 301, Jewish Food, with Joshua Furman. In this class, we learned about the history of Jewish dietary laws and the importance of food in Jewish culture. Then, at the end of the semester, we took a field trip to a kosher style Jewish deli, which was obviously amazing.

Influences — How has the Program in Jewish Studies shaped your time at Rice and what impact might it have moving forward?

As a cognitive sciences major, taking mostly D2 classes, I love how my Jewish studies minor helped me to engage in humanities courses and learn about interests outside my major. I definitely plan to continue my engagement with Jewish learning and culture throughout my future.

Future plans — What's next for you?

I will be pursuing a master's degree in speech language pathology to ultimately help children with speech and communication issues.

Natty Askanase '22

Hometown: New York, New York

Major: History

Minor: Jewish Studies

College: McMurtry

Academic interest — What drew you to Jewish studies at Rice?

I was always an active and engaged participant in the weekly Hebrew School lessons I attended from kindergarten through 12th grade; I always wanted to know more and to dive deeper. By the time I was preparing for college, I knew I wanted to include Judaism and Jewish history in my academic studies in some capacity. When I arrived at Rice, the intimate nature and extensive opportunities offered by the Program in Jewish Studies, along with the minor's flexibility, kept me involved as I decided to take on a minor in Jewish studies.

Favorite class in Jewish studies — What was the most memorable class you took and why?

While I have enjoyed all of the Jewish studies coursework in my undergraduate curriculum, I must say that the most memorable class that I have taken in Jewish studies was also my first: JWST 120, Introduction to Israeli Language and Culture. The class introduced me to the Program in Jewish Studies and the community that has made it such a unique educational opportunity, introducing me to other Jewish studies minors and, through guest lectures, several faculty members who would come to shape my experience as a Jewish studies minor.

Influence — How has the Program in Jewish Studies shaped your time at Rice and what impact might it have moving forward?

Without my participation in the Program in Jewish Studies, my time at Rice might have looked very different. Jewish studies coursework brought me into my first history class, the discipline which soon became my major. In almost all of my history coursework, my research has focused specifically on Jewish issues or history. This interest will certainly continue moving forward, as I plan to stay engaged with the Jewish community and with Jewish scholarship.

Future plans — What's next for you?

I will be moving back home to New York to work for a few years and find my footing before taking any big next steps. I am very interested in work within the Jewish community and am actively looking into opportunities to do so. Down the line, there are several compelling options I am considering, including a return to academia with a Jewish focus, rabbinical school or law school. ■

Alumnus Update: Working Toward Social Change in Israel

By Daniel Cohen '20

I graduated from Rice in 2020 with a degree in linguistics and cognitive sciences and a minor in Jewish studies.

After graduating, I spent the following year in Lod, Israel, as a member of the Yahel Social Change Fellowship. Yahel places fellows in Israeli cities in order to work with Israeli nonprofits, schools and community-based organizations. While living in Lod, a mixed Jewish-Arab city, I taught English at a local Arab high school; worked with a nonprofit organization teaching spoken Arabic to Jewish Israelis in an effort to build new cultural understandings; and volunteered with various outreach initiatives, such as a youth center and a community garden.

We also participated in seminars and workshops with many diverse community organizers and politicians: Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, Bedouins, Druze, Eritrean asylum seekers and more. My time in Lod was an eye-opening experience. I learned about many issues and fault lines within Israeli society, especially in areas known as the periphery.

Near the end of the fellowship, in May 2021, tensions between Hamas in Gaza and Israel escalated to war. At the same time, internal tensions inside Israel between Jews and Arabs boiled over into civil unrest and riots. Jewish mobs attacked Arab Israelis, and Arab mobs attacked Jews in random acts of violence. Simultaneously, Arab and Jewish protesters demonstrated in cities all over the country, and Lod became a focal point of the conflict.

For almost a week there were violent protests and clashes with police; Arab businesses and Jewish synagogues in Lod were burned down. All of the Yahel fellows were evacuated from the city. As we watched from afar, it felt like much of our efforts over the past eight months to foster goodwill and coexistence were being torn down.

A few weeks later, we returned to Lod, and people began to return to a semblance of normalcy. But through this facade of normalcy, you could see a city still scarred from the violence. What little social fabric and interconnection had existed between Jewish and Arab residents had been torn apart. In Lod, I learned firsthand how important it is to work toward creating a more civil society



Daniel Cohen '20

in a country as divided as Israel, but I also learned how fragile this work can sometimes be.

While taking classes in the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, I took a course with Matthias Henze and Melissa Weininger on the history of Jerusalem that included travel to Israel during spring break. The history of Jerusalem, and all of historic Palestine, is bloody. Many people have laid claim to the land and fought to control one of the holiest sites in the world. Throughout the course, we studied many of those claims, their historical bases and the ways in which Jerusalem exists as much in imagination as in reality. This way of thinking was important preparation for my time in the Middle East, where ancestries and historical ties abound, and I reflected on these lessons in the aftermath of the violent events in Lod.

In late January 2022, I arrived in Amman, Jordan, where I will be interning with EcoPeace, an NGO advocating for climate solutions in the Middle East based on Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian collaborations. The effects of climate change will deeply impact the Middle East in the years to come, but this issue can also provide an opportunity to fundamentally reshape the region for the better through mutual problem-solving. I look forward to building relationships with Jordanian organizations and advocates working toward a safer, peaceful future in the region. I am most excited to continue

studying Arabic in Jordan, building on everything I learned at Rice.

My studies at Rice afforded me many wonderful opportunities with incredible professors. I took many courses in Hebrew and Arabic, and I was able to spend a summer in Jerusalem with the help of Rice's Program in Jewish Studies.

One of my favorite memories from Rice was walking into the small office of David Cook, Arabic dictionary in hand, for our class studying religious Arabic texts. In addition to reading texts from the "Qur'an" and other Islamic sources, we even read Maimonides' "T'chiat Hamaytim" in the original Judeo-Arabic.

I will always be grateful for the many opportunities I had to learn from passionate and brilliant professors at Rice, and I am thankful that the education I received has prepared me for some of the challenges I've encountered and will continue to encounter in the intricate and wonderful region we call the Middle East. ■

Exploring Jewish Life in Unexpected Places: Meet Kenneth Taylor

By Kenneth Taylor

Kenneth Taylor joined the staff of the Houston Jewish History Archive in January 2022 as a program administrator. In addition to assisting with the day-to-day operations of the archive, Taylor is focused on strengthening and expanding the HJHA's oral history collections. In this essay, Taylor explains how his upbringing and education have prepared him to appreciate the important work of documenting Texas Jewish history.

I was born in 1992 in Phoenix, Arizona, and at a young age, I moved to a ranch outside of the town of Sweetgrass, Montana, near the Canadian border. I played football and golfed in high school, and I also competed on speech and debate teams. When I picked up the saxophone in fifth grade, I discovered a passion for music, which led me to play in regional and state honor bands and to perform in Montana's Red Lodge Music Festival. During this time, I also developed a strong intellectual affinity for history and geography, which has led me to my new position with the Houston Jewish History Archive at Rice University.

Following high school, I enrolled at the University of Great Falls in Montana, where I majored in history. My studies focused on the experiences of ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union and examined how their participation in Soviet society affected their livelihoods.



Kenneth Taylor performing at a Songwriters Circle in New Orleans, 2019

After graduation, I moved to Netanya, Israel, to work for an organization called MASA Israel Teaching Fellows, a program which employs native English speakers to teach English to Israeli stu-

I strongly believe that learning history helps us understand the impact of our choices. The ability to better understand the world, and help others understand why things are the way that they are is the driving force behind my love of history.

dents. During my time there, I also participated in a number of service projects. My students ranged in age from 9 to 12 years old, and they spoke a variety of languages — Hebrew, Russian and French. Over the course of a single class, it was not uncommon for me to have to switch languages each time I spoke to a different student.

Subsequently, I returned to the United States in order to study history at the University of New Orleans (UNO) in Louisiana, with a special focus on public history, archival studies and southern Jewish history. My master's thesis focused on the role and impact that social allies had on American civil rights history, using the life and work of Louisiana lawyer Herman Midlo as a case study. Outside of my academic studies, I continued my career in education, teaching art and urban agriculture/sustainability across multiple elementary and middle schools

in New Orleans' Ninth Ward and Central City neighborhoods. On top of that, I also performed as a blues and rock musician in many of the city's night clubs and concert venues and managed multiple music and arts programs in the French Quarter and Marigny neighborhoods.

Following my graduation from UNO with a master's degree in history in 2019, I moved to Houston. I am ecstatic to be able to use my education, experience and skills to benefit the HJHA and the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University. I strongly believe that learning history helps us understand the impact of our choices. The ability to better understand the world and help others understand why things are the way that they are is the driving force behind my love of history.

From my own life experience as a Jew who has lived nearly my entire life outside of traditionally Jewish areas in the United States, such as the East Coast and Southern California, I know all too much about just how underrepresented American Jewish history outside of those two regions can be. So much is widely known about Jews on Long Island, but not so much about Jewish life on Galveston Island. I hope that the work I do at Rice will elevate the voices and experiences of Jewish Texans, and in so doing, expand our understanding about the diversity of American Jewish life. ■

A Transnational Jewish Journey: Meet Rabbi Daniel Masri

By Joshua Furman

Rabbi Daniel Masri has served as the spiritual leader of Houston's Congregation Beth Rambam since 2010. Located in the heart of the Orthodox community in the Fondren Southwest neighborhood, Beth Rambam serves a diverse community of Jews with Sephardic roots from Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Iraq and other parts of the Jewish world. In this interview with Joshua Furman, for the Houston Jewish History Archive, Rabbi Masri shares anecdotes from his family history and his upbringing in Mexico City and New York, and he gives insight into the diversity of Houston's Sephardic Jewish community.

This conversation has been edited for clarity and space considerations.

FURMAN: Rabbi Masri, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today about your synagogue community, Beth Rambam, and about the Sephardic and Mizrahi communities here in Houston. Why don't we start by learning a little bit more about you? Tell me about your family and where you grew up.

MASRI: I was born in Mexico City. There's a large Syrian Jewish community there. My father was born there. My grandfather was actually born in Aleppo, Syria, in 1889. The Ottoman Turks at the time were drafting everyone to the army around when my grandfather was about 16 or 17 years old. So at that point, all the men, all the boys, before they turned 18, started to leave the country. My grandfather was one of them. So, I believe in 1906, he left Syria for the United States. And really, that's how the Syrian Jewish communities in Mexico City and Panama and Argentina and New York got started: all these men having been forced to leave Syria, because of the draft.

FURMAN: So, this is interesting. Our paths will intersect now because, in my own family's history — we are Ashkenazi Jews, but I also have a Mexico City story. My family left Poland and the Ukraine and went to Mexico City in the 1920s and 1930s. You said he left Aleppo and came to the United States first?

MASRI: Yes. He came to the United States first. I'm not sure if he came in through Ellis Island or he came in through Galveston, but he did make his way to Texas and lived here for a number of years.

FURMAN: And then what brought him down to Mexico City?

MASRI: I think he didn't find much of a community here; he didn't find himself in Texas. And there were many Syrian Jews already established in Mexico City, and so he made his way down there.

FURMAN: And that is where you said your father was born, and you also were born in Mexico?

MASRI: Yes.

FURMAN: Give us a sense of growing up in the Syrian community in Mexico City, and what that was like?

MASRI: Mexico City — so I left when I was young. I was 7-8 years old when we moved to New York. But the Syrian community in Mexico City then, and much more so today is, thank God, it's a beautiful community. Syrians are very family oriented and very traditional. Wherever they go, they build beautiful synagogues and they really establish full-fledged communities. And we have — we call it the Deportivo, which is kind of like a JCC, specifically for the Sephardic community. They now have two of them. They also established something



Rabbi Daniel Masri

similar to what we have in Houston as the JFS [Jewish Family Service]. We call it the Bikkur Holim in Mexico City, and it provides help to the community in all kinds of situations. It's a really close-knit community.

FURMAN: Tell me about the languages that you spoke and that you heard in your family growing up and about food and customs.

MASRI: So, my grandmother was born in Jerusalem in 1905, I think. My grandparents spoke Arabic to each other — that was their language. My father obviously is fluent in Arabic, and I heard it growing up as a kid, so I picked up some words. I can fool the Israeli cab drivers; I have enough words in my vocabulary. But I grew up speaking Spanish. My mother is Ashkenazi and it's actually a very unique story. My mother was actually born in Siberia. My grandfather escaped Poland in 1939, made it into Russia a day before they closed the border. The Russians put him in a Siberian labor camp, and they were there for about five years.

My mother was born in the Siberian labor camp. But they came to the States when she was 10 years old, and she grew up in Baltimore. So, my mother was just American.

So, we heard English growing up, as kids do. We heard Arabic. We heard Spanish. And uniquely, my father learned Yiddish. He left so he could study in the

Continued on Page 12

States, and there the Jewish institutions in New York, you know, they translate everything you studied into Yiddish, so he was forced to learn Yiddish.

So, my parents, when they didn't want us to understand, spoke Yiddish to each other.

FURMAN: And did you grow up observing Sephardi or Ashkenazi minhagim [customs] in your family?

MASRI: No, it was Sephardic, Syrian minhagim.

FURMAN: Give us a sense of some of the special Syrian minhagim.

MASRI: So in Mexico, what's unique is that, the deal was that all the children and grandchildren go to Grandma's house every Friday.

Friday after school we all hung out in Grandma's house. We had a big lunch, by tradition, and also the Shabbat meals have to be in Grandma's house.

So the whole family would get together. All the aunts, uncles, cousins, every Shabbat at Grandma's house. And obviously, the Syrian food is, I don't know if you are familiar with the food — the kibbeh [stuffed meatballs], laham b'ajeen [minced meat pies], sambousak [savory pastries] — is that we grew up with.

FURMAN: Yes, a little bit. One of the classes I teach at Rice is a Jewish immigration history class. I haven't done it since COVID, but I used to take my students to Brooklyn, and we'd go to the Syrian Jewish neighborhoods in Bensonhurst/Flatbush, and we would go to Magen David Synagogue and meet teenagers in the Syrian community. We had a chance to sample some of the amazing food, so, I've been exposed to that a little bit. Tell us about how it was that you came to Houston.

MASRI: I was married, studying for rabbinic ordination in Israel. And the Houston community reached out to try to bring me down. At the time, Jack Polatsek was the director of TORCH (Torah Outreach Center of Houston), and I had known him, met him the year before, and they brought me down to work with TORCH and with Beth Rambam at the same time.

FURMAN: For our readers who are not familiar, can you give us a quick history of the Beth Rambam community, when it was founded and by whom?

And it's a unique community, because we're actually a very diverse group. We have Syrian Jews from Mexico City and from Argentina and from Panama, and we have Jews from Venezuela and we have Jews from Israel. We have Jews from literally every part of the world — Moroccan and Syrian, and Yemenites, Turkish, Tunisian, literally representing every Jew from Sephardic lands.



Photographs of the Beth Rambam Community Sephardic Festival, Houston, Jan. 2022. Photos: Hagit Bibi Photography

MASRI: So, it was actually founded in 1982. It was a small group, most of them Syrian Jews, who either came through Lebanon or even New York, but they were Syrian Jews, and they founded a community in 1982 in a clubhouse on Bob White Drive. Eventually somebody gave the land where we are today, and they built a small synagogue. And it's a unique community, because we're actually a very diverse group. We have Syrian Jews from Mexico City and from Argentina and from Panama, and we have Jews from Venezuela and we have Jews from Israel. We have Jews from literally every part of the world — Moroccan and Syrian, and Yemenites, Turkish, Tunisian, literally representing every Jew from Sephardic lands. We all kind of sit together in one room, and I think what's unique about Beth Rambam is we also have all levels of observance. You know, we have people who only show up on Yom Kippur, and we have others who are very observant and literally everything in between. We all live together under one umbrella, as one shul [synagogue community], and it's a very nice atmosphere.



FURMAN: Is there a tricky dimension, though, to managing that diversity? People have different customs, different prayer traditions. How do you as the rabbi, as the leader of this diverse community, make everybody feel at home?

MASRI: We keep it simple. We follow the nusach of Yerushalayim [the prayer liturgy from Jerusalem]; this is kind of a universal Sephardic nusach, so we're not



favoring any specific group. But what's unique is, our cantor, our chazzan, is Moroccan, but was taught Syrian melodies, and he actually knows how to sing Moroccan music and Syrian music and all the different tunes from all the different edot [groups], and he throws it in during the prayer. So, everybody feels they have a little part.

So, we embrace all the customs. Actually, just a couple weeks ago, we had a Sephardic festival, where we highlighted Iraqi Jews and Yemenite Jews and Moroccan Jews, Syrian Jews, Persian Jews and Turkish Jews. We had the music and the food from all the different ethnicities. We had the music for all the ethnicities, and we highlighted different leaders and

rabbis in those different countries. It was really a fun event, and it highlighted all the different cultures that are represented in our shul.

FURMAN: Wow, that's incredible. How have you seen the community grow just in the time that you've been here as the rabbi at Beth Rambam?

MASRI: I first arrived in Houston in 2005. And I was at Beth Rambam only for a year at the time, and then I left, and they brought me back in 2010 to be their rabbi.

The community, it's growing tremendously. A lot of influx of families, both coming into Houston from the outside, and also families within Houston are

learning about our community and joining us. The growth is exciting: a lot of young people, a lot of young families, a lot of kids.

FURMAN: Another question I have for you has to do with questions of identity and passing on a Sephardic or a Syrian Jewish heritage. Being something of a minority within a minority, you may not only want your children to feel Jewish and to be religiously observant, but also to perpetuate Syrian traditions or to perpetuate Moroccan traditions. Is it harder to do that here in Houston than in Israel or New York?

MASRI: It's definitely much harder in Houston than it would be in New York. You know, the Syrian community is probably a couple hundred thousand Jews there, and very strong, and the customs are strong. Here, you're a small community, and even within your community, there are a limited number of Syrian Jews. There are all different kinds of Jews.

So, there are pluses and minuses to that, you know. The minuses may be that you can't perpetuate the Syrian customs, you know, as strongly, but on the other hand, you meet all kinds of Jews, and you grow up much more broad-minded, seeing different cultures and different personalities and different identities, and it's nice. It's healthy for children to see, to relate to all kinds of people. We even have Ashkenazi Jews in Beth Rambam.

FURMAN: Do they count toward a minyan [prayer quorum; in the Orthodox tradition, a group of 10 men]?

MASRI: We count them. We do a bris [circumcision] again, but we count them. Only kidding!

FURMAN: Thank you so much, Rabbi. It's been wonderful to spend time with you and learn a little bit about your background and your community. I really appreciate it.

MASRI: My pleasure. I look forward to seeing you. ■

Rice's Jewish Studies Student Association Update

By Alyson Resnick '22, JSSA president and Julia Engelhardt '23, JSSA publicity co-chair

Rice's Jewish Studies Student Association (JSSA) was revitalized this year, and it's exciting how successful it has been in helping students connect to each other and the Program in Jewish Studies through a variety of Jewish learning opportunities.

We have a team of six dedicated students serving on the board and are very grateful to have the support of several Jewish studies faculty and staff: Daniella Farah, Tamar Sella, Joshua Furman and program administrator Starr Dickerson.

The JSSA organized and put on three events in the fall semester, and we are planning at least two more this spring. Our first event gave students the chance to learn about our club and meet some Jewish studies faculty while enjoying free boba (bubble tea) and babka, a beloved Jewish pastry. Next, the JSSA went on a private guided tour of Holocaust Museum Houston and learned about the Holocaust and other genocides. We closed out the semester with a viewing party of "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel," complete with black and white cookies. This spring's events started with a trip to a kosher restaurant for lunch, and we are planning a second event to showcase all the amazing courses the Program in Jewish Studies has to offer. We encourage all interested students to come out to our events and get involved. ■



Jewish Food Class Visits Deli Maven for Dinner

By Katharine Shilcutt

The syllabus did promise dinner at a deli, after all.

Included among the coursework for Joshua Furman’s class, Jewish Food: Religion, Culture and Consumption from the Bible to Bagels, is a screening of “Deli Man,” a documentary examining the state of the Jewish deli through the lens of Houston’s own Ziggy Gruber. Students in the class were required to write a paper on the film, making it all the more exciting to meet Gruber himself during an end-of-course dinner at his deli, Kenny & Ziggy’s. “I’m a big believer in experiential learning, and it’s great to be able to look at cookbooks and read about the history of the Jewish deli,” said Furman, associate director and lecturer in the Program in Jewish Studies. “But to go to Kenny & Ziggy’s and to sit and break bread with Ziggy Gruber, the deli maven himself — for our students to have that opportunity — is just so special.”

At the head of a table laden with kishka, knishes and kasha varnishkes, Gruber told the students about the deli’s role in maintaining a connection with cultures and countries that can seem foreign to younger Americans.

A true old-school Jewish deli specializes in Yiddish cuisine, the food of Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews, but changing tastes and rising product costs have led to a nationwide disappearance of delis. Gone is the goulash, the classic whitefish salad, the comforting kreplach.

“When he talks about this food, it’s not just a livelihood for him; it’s about perpetuating a culture that is in danger,” Furman said.

From Los Angeles to Chicago to New York, much has been made of the decline of the deli. There were over 1,500 delis in New York City alone in 1931, but by 2019

“Ziggy really sees himself as one of the last guardians of this particular Jewish deli tradition in the United States, and to have that happening in Houston, Texas — in one of probably the most unlikely of places — is just wonderful.”

— Joshua Furman

there were around 200 left in the entire country. As such, much has also been made of an old-school Jewish deli surviving and thriving in Houston.

“Ziggy really sees himself as one of the last guardians of this particular Jewish deli tradition in the United States, and to have that happening in Houston, Texas — in one of probably the most unlikely of places — is just wonderful,” Furman said.

“We live in an amazing, diverse, cosmopolitan city and any chance that I have as an instructor to take our students off campus and let them experience it for themselves, I know it’s a night that they’re never gonna forget.” ■

Katharine Shilcutt is a media relations specialist in Rice University’s Office of Public Affairs.



Above: Madeleine Lyon, a Shepherd School of Music vocal performance graduate student, studied the menu ahead of dinner. **Below:** Students in Joshua Furman’s Jewish Food: Religion, Culture and Consumption from the Bible to Bagels class enjoy dinner at Houston’s Kenny and Ziggy’s Deli. Photos: Jeff Fitlow



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