

The Beginnings of Jewish Studies at Stanford

Stanford today is home to a vibrant and prestigious program in Jewish Studies, which ranks among the finest in the world. This fact is all the more impressive given that the Program in Jewish Studies was formally constituted only in 1986, less than three decades ago. The Bay Area philanthropist Tad Taube's investments in the Program, which culminated in the endowment of the Taube Center for Jewish Studies in 2001, have created a permanent presence for the field on campus. The Center's conferences, colloquia, and curricular discussions advance high-level research and teaching in Jewish Studies. At the same time, faculty members and graduate students affiliated with Jewish Studies are fully immersed in their home departments and disciplines. The scholars, teachers, and students who form the Taube Center community at Stanford therefore inevitably continue Jewish Studies conversations in their departments and bring discipline-wide discussions – whether in History, Religious Studies, Comparative Literature, Education, or Biology – to Jewish Studies.

How did Jewish Studies first come to Stanford? The relatively recent formal institution of the Program in Jewish Studies, its subsequent growth into a Center, and the impressive achievements of its faculty members and graduates since then, have somewhat obscured the very beginnings of academic Jewish Studies at Stanford, which lay the foundations for the Program's later growth. The beginnings of Jewish Studies at the university in fact date to the late 1960s and were mostly the product of pioneering efforts by one Stanford alumna: Miriam Roland, a graduate of the Class of 1951 born in 1930. The following account retraces the pre-history of the Program and attempts to explain why Roland worked to bring Jewish Studies to Stanford.

Overview of Miriam Roland's Contributions

Roland, together with her husband, Dr. Samuel Roland (1923-1970), a clinical assistant professor of surgery at Stanford, established the university's first fund for research and teaching in the field of Jewish Studies in 1969. Named the Aaron-Roland Fund for Jewish Studies, it consisted of a principal of \$25,000. Income from the fund was devoted to inviting distinguished Jewish Studies scholars to lecture at Stanford once a year.¹

Four years later, in 1973, Miriam Roland pledged another \$100,000 in order to expand the Aaron-Roland Lectureship into a Visiting Professorship that would allow Stanford to invite a visiting professor from the field of Jewish Studies to teach at Stanford for one or two quarters every other year. The Aaron-Roland Visiting Professorship in Jewish Studies was then established in December 1976.²

Shortly thereafter, the Jewish Community Endowment Fund of the Jewish Welfare Federation of San Francisco, Marin County, and the Peninsula pledged \$150,000 for a Visiting Professorship in Jewish Civilization, which was established in October 1977, with \$50,000 matching funds from

¹ William Anthony Clebsch to Miriam and Samuel Roland, Letter, September 23, 1969, 2, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

² William Anthony Clebsch to Miriam Roland, August 9, 1973, 1, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

Stanford. Roland, who served as Chairman of the Federation's Endowment Allocations Committee, played a key role in making the gift happen.³

Today, both the Aaron-Roland Fund for Jewish Studies and the Jewish Community Endowment Fund continue to support annual lectures in Jewish Studies. Both funds also played important roles in the transition to a permanent Jewish Studies Program. The Aaron-Roland Fund was initially used to support the hiring of Arnie Eisen by the Department of Religious Studies in 1986.⁴ Later, in 1999, the Fund supplemented the salary of the new Curator of Judaica for Stanford University Libraries, Zachary Baker. Income from the Jewish Endowment Fund was used, together with a contribution from the family of Tad Taube, to purchase the Salon Baron Library Collection (now named the "Taube-Baron Collection of Jewish History and Culture").⁵

The Aaron-Roland Fund for Jewish Studies

The first steps toward bringing Jewish Studies to Stanford were taken by Roland in the late 1960s. She recalls having written to the president of the university to suggest that the teaching and research of Stanford include more on the contributions of Jews and Judaism to civilization.⁶ She proposed establishing a lectureship for this purpose. Roland's letter resulted in a meeting with three members of the faculty: William A. Clebsch and Lawrence Berman from Religious Studies and Lawrence V. Ryan, a Renaissance scholar serving as Dean of Humanities Special Programs. Clebsch was Chairman of Humanities Special Programs at the time.

In a September 1969 letter addressed to "Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Roland," Clebsch informed Miriam Roland and her husband that the university wished to take them up on the offer.⁷ The fund of \$25,000 was given the ID 352A106 and the endowment was to be called the "Aaron-Roland Fund for Jewish Studies," honoring both her husband's family and her own parents, Barnett ("Barney") Aaron and Laura Aaron (*née* Bronfman). Because Sam Roland died tragically in August 1970, at age 47, after the tractor he was driving on his Livermore farm tipped over, the Fund ultimately also commemorated him.

In November 1973, Miriam Roland and children announced that they would expand the 1969 fund in order to establish a visiting professorship. Roland pledged to give \$100,000 to be paid "over the next four years in a way that would also acquire one-third matching from the anonymous donor."⁸ On December 15, 1976, Stanford's Board of Trustees voted to establish the Aaron-Roland Visiting Professorship in Jewish Studies. This chair would enable Stanford to invite a visiting professor for

³ For evidence of her role, see Miriam Roland to Peter Haas, September 1, 1977, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

⁴ Pete Sylvester to Marianne Wilson, "Re: Miriam Roland," January 12, 1990, 1, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

⁵ Zachary Baker, "The Taube-Baron Collection of Jewish History and Culture," *Stanford University Libraries*, accessed April 16, 2013, <http://library.stanford.edu/collections/taube-baron-collection-jewish-history-and-culture>.

⁶ Miriam Roland, interview by Amos Bitzan, August 8, 2012.

⁷ Clebsch to Roland, September 23, 1969.

⁸ *Aaron-Roland Fd for Jewish Studies*, SUFIN Fund Authorization (Stanford University, October 28, 1998), Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

one or two quarters every other year.⁹ Professor R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (born 1924), who was the first Aaron-Roland lecturer in 1969, became the first Aaron-Roland Visiting Professor in spring 1978.¹⁰

In June 1985, Van Harvey, chairman of the Department of Religious Studies asked Roland about using the Aaron-Roland Visiting Professorship endowment to fund “a more permanent position in Jewish Studies” to be held by a scholar in the Department of Religious Studies. This scholar was to be named the “Aaron-Roland Fellow” in Jewish Studies and was to hold the position for six years. She agreed. Over the course of those six years, Harvey wrote, the university would seek additional endowed professorships and other support, one of which would go to the Aaron-Roland Fellow. It was left open to what use the fund was to be put after this.¹¹ The junior faculty member whom the Department of Religious Studies ultimately hired was Arnold Eisen, now Professor Emeritus at Stanford and the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In spring 1996, Roland was to discuss the future use of the Aaron-Roland Fund with faculty members and administrators in the School of Humanities and Sciences.¹² In February 1999, H&S Stewardship asked that Jewish Studies consult with Roland about possibly using the Aaron-Roland Fund for a salary supplement of \$6,000 per year for two years to be paid to the new Curator of Judaica for SUL-AIR [this was Zachary Baker].¹³ Miriam Roland and her children have continued to support the Jewish Studies Program with annual donations.

Roland’s Vision

From the 1969 letter sent by Clebsch to Miriam Roland and her husband, Samuel Roland, we get a sense of her vision for Jewish Studies at Stanford. Clebsch, in a note preceding a draft proposal, commented that he and Berman “scratched [their] heads a long time over the broad definition of ‘Jewish studies’” that Roland used in her proposal. He reported that the draft proposal combined Roland’s “very enlightened conception of this field” with “emerging definitions being made by leading scholars in this area.”¹⁴ The draft text about the Aaron-Roland Fund for Jewish Studies contained the following definition: “The field of Jewish Studies shall, for the purposes of this Fund, be interpreted broadly to include the intellectual, cultural, and religious achievements of Jewish people, individual and corporate, in all centuries and countries.”¹⁵

Noteworthy in this context is that Roland had apparently expressed concern about “Jewish Studies” being construed only as the study of Jewish religion. To anticipate these concerns, Clebsch wrote that he had “tried to guard against any possible narrowing of the projects by a faculty working exclusively in Religious Studies” by assigning the responsibility for selecting visiting scholars to the entire Faculty of Humanities Special Programs.¹⁶

⁹ “Stanford University News Service Press Release 146/8,” December 15, 1976, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

¹⁰ Richard Lyman and William Anthony Clebsch, “Draft for Aaron-Roland Lecture Introduction” (Stanford University, May 10, 1978), Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

¹¹ Van Harvey to Miriam Roland, January 16, 1986, 1, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

¹² Chris Ponce to Gerhard Casper, “H&S Memorandum,” March 1, 1996, 1, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

¹³ Ann Guss to Sue Dambrau and Rob Franklin, “Re: Use of Aaron-Roland Fund (352A016),” February 25, 1999, 1, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

¹⁴ Clebsch to Roland, September 23, 1969, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Clebsch did not name the leading scholars whose definitions he and Berman had consulted. Salo Baron (1895-1989), recently retired from Columbia University but still publishing volumes of his *Social and Religious History of the Jews* (18 volumes, 1952-1983), may have been the model. The reference by Clebsch to “achievements” demonstrates the influence of Roland, who was especially keen on highlighting Jewish contributions to human civilization broadly considered – i.e., not only those contributions in the area of religion.

Although grateful for her contributions, Stanford officials initially continued to struggle to understand Roland’s vision. Years later, in a 1976 statement about the creation of the Aaron-Roland Visiting Professorship, Stanford’s President Richard W. Lyman echoed Roland’s view that Jewish studies would help illuminate Jewish contributions to Western civilization. However, he also subsumed those contributions under the category of religion: “We are delighted that this has come about. It will enable the University to support a visiting professor for one or two quarters every second year in a field that is essential to the study and understanding of the role of religion, and particularly Jewish thought and culture, in the shaping of our civilization.”¹⁷

A year later, however, speaking about the programmatically-named Visiting Professorship in Jewish Civilization, Lyman said that the fund would “greatly strengthen not only the field of religious studies, but the broad spectrum of the humanities to which Jewish thought and culture have, throughout history, contributed beyond measure.”¹⁸ Likewise, in describing the Visiting Professorship in Jewish Civilization, William F. Miller, Vice President and Provost of Stanford, came very close to Roland’s vision of Jewish Studies at the university. The holder of the visiting professorship, he explained, could come from any discipline in which there had been “significant scholarly work on the Jewish experience,” listing as examples, Education, English, History, Law, Philosophy, Political Science, Religious Studies, and Sociology. Stanford’s support for this second position came in response to what Miller called “increasing evidence of interest in Jewish Studies at Stanford.” He did not fail to mention the importance of the Aaron-Roland Lectureship and Visiting Professorship in Jewish Studies in generating that interest.¹⁹

Roland’s Motivations

In an interview, Roland recalled that at Stanford, in courses such as the required Western Civilization sequence, Jews or Hebrews only appeared when the topic of discussion was the biblical period. In later time periods, when a thinker or figure was Jewish, this person would be identified only as, for example, “Frenchmen” or “Spaniards,” never as Jews. On the other hand, she remembered, in classes that she took in the 1950s and 1960s outside of the university through her congregation in San Francisco, Jewish studies were taught as if Jews had lived “in a vacuum,” impervious to influence from the social, economic, and religious factors acting on the rest of society.²⁰ Roland, in her words, wanted to change how “general studies and Jewish studies were taught.”²¹

¹⁷ “Stanford University News Service Press Release 146/8.”

¹⁸ “JWF Endowment Fund Establishes Visiting Chair At Stanford U.,” *San Francisco Jewish Bulletin*, October 21, 1977.

¹⁹ William Miller to Brian L. Lurie, November 2, 1977, Taube Center for Jewish Studies Archive.

²⁰ Roland, interview.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Two other forces may have motivated Roland to send her proposal to the university at the end of the 1960s. The first was biographical. Roland had, by that time, encountered three quite different approaches to Judaism and Jewishness over the first four decades of her life. Between 1930 and 1947, she lived in milieus dominated by Eastern European Jewish immigrants, in Montreal and several other cities. At Stanford (1947-1951), she found herself at a university with a very small number of Jews, more assimilated and established than those in Montreal. Her life in the San Francisco area following her graduation (1951-1969) likely brought her in contact with several activist currents of American Judaism. The second force was the thought of Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, who first published his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934, and wrote several other influential works in the 1950s and 1960s. In the following pages, I will describe these forces in more detail.

Of course, a number of other historical developments are of relevance in explaining Roland's conscious and unconscious motivations. Two years before her proposal for a Fund was accepted by the university, she also witnessed, the 1967 War, which some scholars of American Jewish history has seen as a turning point after which American Jews grew more assertive about public expressions of Judaism and Jewish identity. Likewise, the social protest movements of the 1960s, especially in the Bay Area, exerted their own pressures on Jewish institutions and identity. However, these causes are too large to consider in this account.

Biography

CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY

Roland spent her childhood in relatively large North American Jewish communities, in *milieus* composed primarily of Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe. The visibility of her parents and other relatives as Eastern European Jews contrasted sharply with the profile of the small number of Jewish students whom she would later encounter at Stanford and the more assimilated Jewish community of San Francisco.

Born in Montreal, Canada in 1930 to Barney and Laura Aaron (*née* Bronfman), Roland is a granddaughter of Yechiel Bronfman, the patriarch of what eventually became Canada's most prominent Jewish. Yechiel's son, Samuel Bronfman (1889-1971), the long-time CEO of Seagram, was Roland's uncle, and Edgar Bronfman her cousin.

Roland's mother, Laura, came to Canada as a child, when her parents and siblings emigrated from their native Bessarabia to the prairie province of Saskatchewan in 1889. Soon thereafter, they moved to Manitoba. A mill owner and tobacco planter in Eastern Europe, Yechiel brought a household and support with him, including a rabbi. After starting out as a laborer, he built a successful wood business and then acquired several hotels at the turn of the century. At Samuel Bronfman's initiative, the family soon expanded into the liquor distribution business. Roland's father, Barnett ("Barney") Aaron, had immigrated to Canada from the former Russian Empire, apparently to escape conscription into the tsarist army. He rose from poverty to wealth. In 1911, he married into the Bronfman family, then based in Winnipeg.²² There, he worked together with Laura Bronfman's brothers in the hotel business. During the Prohibition Era, Aaron and the Bronfman brothers ran

²² Peter C. Newman, *Bronfman Dynasty: The Rothschilds of the New World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), 72.

the Bronfman's Distillers Corporation, which legally produced alcohol in Canada that was then distributed, at great profit in American cities, where it was illegal.²³ After the Bronfman family acquired Seagram in 1928 and following the repeal of Prohibition in late 1933, Barney Aaron was employed in the large and more diversified business empire of the Bronfmans.

As a result of her father's work, Roland spent her childhood moving frequently and attending elementary schools in Miami Beach and New York. She graduated from high school in Montreal. Her parents and the Bronfman family had settled in Westmount, a tony enclave in Montreal.²⁴ Her particular surroundings were filled with people who displayed pride in their tradition and identities as Jews but also achieved success in business and society outside of the Jewish community.

ROLAND AT STANFORD

Roland's journey to distant Stanford in 1947 took her to a world where the few Jews around kept a low profile. The only Jewish professor whom she knew of taught Hebrew in the Ancient Languages department. At the time, there was no Hillel and Jewish students were very loosely organized. Some of the Jewish students on campus were actively opposed to the creation of a visible campus presence in the shape of a Hillel House. According to Roland, these students, many of whom were from Temple Emanu-El families in San Francisco, thought that identifying as Jews might jeopardize their success in the future. Unlike the Jews whom she knew in Montreal, Jews in the San Francisco area, she remembered, often had Christmas trees in their homes and served obviously non-kosher food like shrimp at functions.²⁵

The absence on campus of both Jewish life and course work connected to Jewish history bothered Roland as a student. The contrast between her life there and Montreal, where family members and friends expressed more pride in Jewish culture and religion, must have made a significant impression and may have planted seeds for her later work to bring Jewish studies to Stanford.

ROLAND IN SAN FRANCISCO

Post-graduation, Roland became involved in work for Jewish community organizations. After marrying Samuel Roland in 1951, she and her husband moved to San Francisco in 1952. There, she joined Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. She also participated in Jewish studies courses offered through her congregation. However, many of these courses, in Roland's recollection, taught Jewish history "in a vacuum," as if it had no relation to the history of the rest of the world.

Most academic historians of the Jews and many Jewish studies scholars working in the 1960s could hardly have been accused of conceiving of Jewish history in a vacuum. Although there were lively debates about the proper context for given religious, social, or cultural phenomena (e.g., was Jewish mysticism an "outgrowth" of Christian or Muslim mysticism or did it make more sense to focus on its Jewish precedents?), Jewish studies scholars since the beginnings of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* had been concerned with Judaism's relation to universal developments in history. However, little of this

²³ Ibid., 108.

²⁴ Roland, interview.

²⁵ Ibid.

work had made it to Stanford or to the Jewish history classes offered in congregations' adult education programming.

The Influence of Mordecai Kaplan

The importance that the term “civilization” played in Roland’s proposals in itself is a clear tip-off to the influence of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, on her. As anyone who has spoken to Roland will know, Kaplan’s thought has played a significant role in her conception of Jewish culture and its academic study. Following Kaplan, Roland sees Judaism as “the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people.” She has worked for and supported institutions that she sees as building modern expressions of this civilization. Especially important for her is that what she defines as “American” and “Jewish” civilizations influence each other reciprocally. Jewish Studies, in her vision, can reveal the many instances of Jewish civilization both contributing to and being shaped by other civilizations. Likewise, in Roland’s conception, dating to the late 1960s, the academic field of Jewish Studies as an institution and set of practices in its own right, ought to exist in a similar, reciprocally-influential relation to other fields at the university. In addition to her vision of including in Stanford students’ education some recognition that Jews, too, had played significant roles in the history of humanity, Roland also saw teaching and research of Jewish Studies as helping Judaism survive in the modern world. Knowing the history of “Jewish civilization” and its relation to “Western civilization,” she hoped, would allow American Jews to construct a modern Judaism, connected to its past and drawing on the present.²⁶

Conclusion

How might we describe the legacy of Roland’s contributions today? The visiting professorships established by Roland generated interest and momentum for Jewish Studies at Stanford. Subsequent endowments of permanent chairs have given the field a permanent home on the Farm. In many ways, the way in which Jewish Studies exists at Stanford today resembles part of Roland’s vision. Faculty members affiliated with the field play an important role in their disciplines, departments, and at the university as a whole. Their research and teaching is highly respected both by specialists in Jewish Studies and by colleagues in their professions. The more explicitly “Reconstructionist” part of Roland’s vision is more contested today. In part, this is connected to a questioning of the civilizational model and the primacy of “Western civilization” in the curriculum of the university. Most Jewish Studies scholars today are unlikely to identify their research agendas as efforts to demonstrate Jewish “contributions” to civilization. Likewise, few would see their work as directed toward the reconstruction of Jewish civilization as imagined by Kaplan. In the words of Steven Zipperstein, Professor of History at Stanford and a past director of the Taube Center, the allegiance of Jewish Studies scholars is to the university, which “exists to render ideas problematic, to dissect all that we presume we know and that, as scholars, we often learn we don’t.” Rather than building identities, Jewish Studies scholars aim “primarily to serve and to deepen Jewish knowledge, even when this knowledge might well make many—as learning sometimes does—uneasy.”²⁷

²⁶ Claire Sufrin, “Miriam Roland: An Interview,” *Stanford University Taube Center for Jewish Studies 2003-2005 Report*, Fall 2005, 5.

²⁷ Steven Zipperstein, “Message from the Director,” *Stanford University Taube Center for Jewish Studies 2005-2006 Report*, Fall 2006, 3, http://www.stanford.edu/dept/jewishstudies/downloads/2005_06_report.pdf.

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