

From The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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The year 2003 was good for collection development at the American Jewish Archives. The AJA received nearly two hundred new accessions, covering a wide range of topics and formats. Some of these accessions, we believe, have the potential to open exciting new areas of research in the American Jewish experience. They represent the AJA's ongoing efforts to document the diversity of American Jewish life and thought.

Noteworthy among these new accessions are the papers of a number of prominent twentieth-century American Reform rabbis. These rabbis represent what might be considered the closing of an era – immediate post-World War II rabbis who not only were spiritual leaders and ministers, but who went beyond the pulpit and their congregations to advocate vigorous social justice and change.

From the papers of rabbis who led congregations in large metropolitan areas, such as Roland Gittelsohn, Edward Klein, and Jerome Malino, to Rabbi David Ben-Ami, who led a small congregation in Hattiesburg, Mississippi but was active in the front lines of the civil rights movement during the 1960s, this era of rabbis might be called “the greatest generation” of the American rabbinate. These men put their principles and sometimes their lives on the line for causes they felt were right and just. They didn't just preach about justice, they worked for it. And they left as their legacy an enduring example of leadership and commitment to standing in opposition to bigotry, oppression, and injustice. The papers of Ben-Ami, Gittelsohn, Klein, and Malino, now housed at the American Jewish Archives, will provide students and scholars even more data on these men, their lives, and times, as well as on the issues and concerns facing American Judaism and American society in the second half of the twentieth century.

Going beyond rabbinic papers, the AJA continues to receive collections that document the spiritual, educational, and organizational life of American Judaism. The records of Congregation B'nai Jehudah of Kansas City show the operations and activities of a major Midwestern Reform synagogue, as well as its rabbi, Samuel Mayeberg. The papers of Melvyn H. Bloom, an associate executive vice chairman and director of the Campaign Department of the United Jewish Appeal, reveal the organizational work of American Jewish philanthropy, another important but underrepresented area in the American Jewish community's documentary heritage.

Two accessions that we hope will open new research into important but underdocumented areas of American Jewish life deal with the American cantorate and Jewish education. The collected oral histories of American cantors, conducted by Mark Slobin in his project to compile a history of the American cantorate, reflect a seminal project in an area of American Jewish religious history that has, to date, received scant historical attention.

Jewish education is a major focus of attention at the American Jewish Archives these days. The AJA is working in collaboration with schools and educators to encourage the use of primary source documents inside and outside of the classroom for all levels of learning. The AJA also is working to collect records that document the history of American Jewish education. The records of the New York office of the Bureau of Jewish Education (BJE) represent prime source matter in this potentially groundbreaking area of study. Dating back to the BJE's formation in 1917, these records have tremendous potential for research into American Jewish education in the twentieth century. This is a rich and extensive collection and its opening for use will represent a significant moment in the study of Jewish education in America.

For the study of contemporary educational initiatives, the AJA has obtained through Rabbi Sam Joseph, professor of Jewish religious education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, a donation of materials on the second annual meeting of the UAHC-CCAR Commission on Lifelong Learning, which was held in 2003.

Even while gathering these new materials the AJA continues to collect what has always been the core of its collection: family histories, genealogies, community studies, and personal papers. This is the AJA's goal – not just to obtain what is obvious or easy, but to gather a representative sample of Jewish life in America. The American Jewish Archives understands that documenting the diversity and range of American Jewish life is an active process requiring creativity, initiative, and energy. The AJA invites you to join in locating new material and in adding to the legacy of the American Jew.