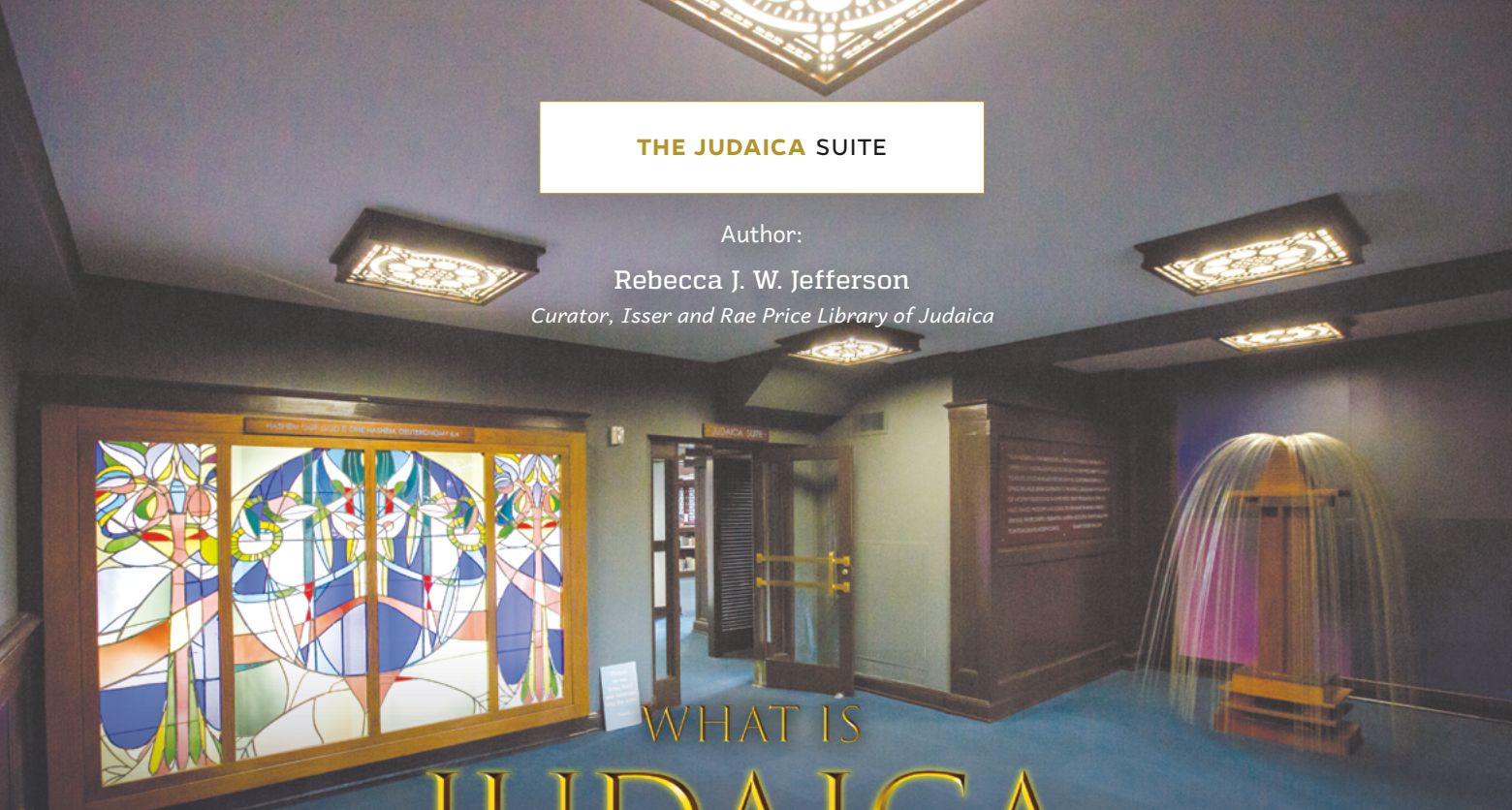


THE JUDAICA SUITE

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WHAT IS JUDAICA, AND WHY DOES IT HAVE ITS OWN SUITE?

These are questions you may be asking yourself as you encounter this article. The Judaica in question refers to the collection of books and other materials belonging to the Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica at the University of Florida. The term “Judaica” generally refers to objects of Jewish ritual and custom, but in a library setting it means anything written by or about the Jewish people. Such libraries also tend to hold “Hebraica” and “Yiddica”

which are bibliographer’s term to describe works written in Hebrew and Yiddish: two major Jewish languages. The Price Library has all of these and more; in fact, it holds over 120,000 items in over forty languages and from over fifty countries around the world. The question of why UF’s Judaica Library has its own “Suite” also ties into the question of how we came to acquire such an impressive collection.



Fig.1 - View of Judaica Suite after 2014 redesign from the second floor

The story begins with the building of a Jewish studies program at UF in the 1970s. This was among the first such programs to be established in the country, and the program’s first director, Barry Mesch, was the nephew of Rabbi Leonard Mishkin, an educator in Chicago who had built up the nation’s largest and best private collection of Judaica. Thanks to key support from the University’s Vice-President, Harold Hanson, and an award of one of the first National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge Grants, UF was able to buy Rabbi Mishkin’s collection to form the nucleus of a new Judaica Library.

The Judaica Library at UF expanded quickly in the first few years due to other major purchases and donations. Thanks

to a generous endowment gift from two UF alumni, Samuel and Jack Price, the library was named for their parents, Isser and Rae Price, in 1981. A significant collection required a knowledgeable and experienced librarian to curate it, and Robert Singerman from the prestigious Klau Library in Cincinnati eminently fit the bill. Singerman took the collection from strength to strength—broadening, deepening, and diversifying the library’s holdings until the Price Library ranked as the best Judaica collection in the southeastern United States, supporting Jewish studies at UF and across the region.

After I was hired in 2010 to manage the library, following Singerman’s retirement, I quickly realized that it held thousands of items of great rarity and

historical significance that were deserving of space to house them safely but also, ideally, a space that would allow them to be seen and appreciated by UF’s various stakeholders. Serendipitously, Judith Russell, the Dean of University Libraries, was on a mission to restore the historic spaces in Smathers Library, and she would soon be in conversation with the renowned Florida architect and artist, Kenneth Treister about one such space on the second floor. This was a small wing that had been added on to the building in the 1930s. If you had visited the Smathers Library Grand Reading Room some years ago, you might not have known it’s there, for it’s somewhat hidden at the far end of the room. This wing was first used to house various collections,



Fig.2 - Wing in 1970s-80s used to house Special Collections and as office space

including the rare books and the Latin American and Caribbean Collection (Fig.3) and, for a long period during the 1970s and 1980s, it was the home of the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature. Over time, each collection either outgrew the space or was re-assigned to an alternative location. Eventually, this tucked-away wing of the building was used by the librarians and curators in the Department of Special and Area Studies Collections as office and collection processing space (Fig.2).

Once it was agreed that the wing could be restored and redesigned as a home for the rare books in UF's preeminent Judaica library, Kenneth Treister set about reimagining it in a way that would accentuate the library's historic architectural features but with a Judaic theme. His design was inspired by a theory of art whereby different artforms such as architecture and works of art are seamlessly blended to create a *gesamtkunstwerk*, a "total work of art." In January 2014, the wing or suite of rooms, with its newly stained dark wood, artwork panels on the walls, bespoke furniture, and sculptures, was officially inaugurated as "The Judaica Suite" by former UF President, Bernie Machen (Fig.1).

The Judaica Suite encompasses a foyer space, six entry-floor study alcoves surrounding a lecture hall, a curator's office, a rare books room, an upstairs gallery with additional seating, and a seminar room on a separate level above that.

For each of the six study alcoves (Fig.4), Treister designed handmade furniture crafted from Honduran mahogany by Guatemalan artisans. Each table has two chairs symbolizing the Jewish tradition of partnered learning known as *chavrutah*. And each alcove features a gold plaque bearing a quotation chosen to reflect the subject matter of the books within. The warm, red-colored cushions on the alcove chairs beckon the eye invitingly into the space. Above the tables are carved wooden lights with an intricate pattern of circles and stars. The light coming in through the windows is similarly filtered through bespoke, lattice work grilles featuring hexagons and hexagrams. The hexagon and hexagram, both symbols of harmony and balance, were motifs found in many ancient religions before the hexagram, or star, became the main symbol associated with Judaism.

The mahogany table down the center of the main room, featuring a bird's head, is surrounded by six



The Judaica Library was named for Isser and Rae Price by their sons, Samuel and Jack Price in 1981 (pictured above at the Library's 30th anniversary celebration).

Members of the Price family still support the collection through their advocacy and by naming various spaces within the Judaica Suite. The most recent naming was the Diaspora Alcove by Ned Price (Isser and Rae's grandson) and his wife, Susan (below).



Fig.3 - Reading area in 1960s



Fig.4 - Another view of the Judaica Suite from second floor after 2014 redesign

matching chairs. The tables and chairs are often moved around to accommodate the main lecture hall's many uses, which include meetings, classes, and events. A large canvas panel at the end and in the center of the room uses a technique known as 'black on black artwork' to allow the subtle image of the Star of David to emerge as you stare at it. The Star—or, more accurately, the *Shield of David*—first emerged in the Middle Ages, inspired by medieval Arabic literature, as a symbol of protection. It did not have religious significance, and it only became fully associated with Judaism after some Jewish communities in the early modern era began using it as their official seal and later as a sign on their community buildings. But more than artwork, the canvas serves the purpose of blocking the unattractive exit doors, while its height and dark tone draws the eye up and around the room, soaking in the warm colors of the alcoves while appreciating the light expanse of the tall ceilings and arched windows.

Standing opposite this artwork, creating another focal point, is a wooden cabinet, known as an ark, which Treister designed to hold the Price Library's Torah scroll (Fig.5). Our unique scroll, handwritten in Russia in the 1930s, was donated to the Library by Isser and Rae's daughters, Eunice Zisser and Florence Schemer. The

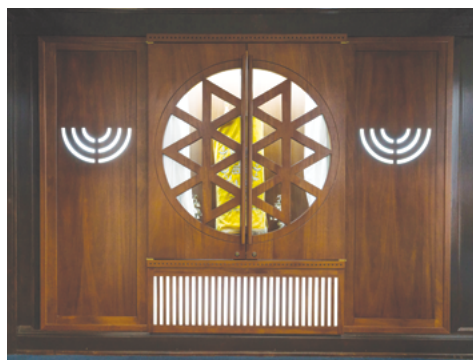


Fig.5 - The Ark

ark features another image in its carvings: the menorah (lamp). The menorah is one of the oldest symbols of the Jewish faith, first appearing in the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) as the light fixture used inside the tabernacle, or portable temple, carried by the Israelites in the wilderness.

Next to the ark, in a separate space, enclosed by a door, one

finds the Harold Hanson Rare Book Room. Inside this room, in addition to another handmade table, one encounters copies of significant Hebrew books printed during the handmade paper era (16th to 18th century). Many of the volumes are religious works: Bibles, prayer books, works of theology and religious commentary, including the first English version of the Hebrew prayers printed in America (1766) and the first Hebrew Bible printed in America (1814).

The "Judaica Suite Upper Arts Gallery," in addition to holding the library's rare Hebraica, Yiddica, Jewish Americana, and Jewish music collections, contains numerous sculptures created by Kenneth Treister. Here one can see many different types of sculpture, from figurative bronze busts of historic Jewish personalities to abstract sculptures in cascading, bursting or sharp pointed sticks of bronze symbolizing key Jewish (but also universal) experiences such as "slavery to freedom," "diaspora," and "six million souls

to heaven” (genocide).

The upper gallery is also distinguished by its many beautiful chess sets collected by Treister from around the world. To complement the chess sets, he also created bespoke chess tables and chairs for patrons to use. After it first opened in 2014, the Judaica Suite hosted a chess tournament between UF and FSU. Since that time, students regularly visit the Suite to play a game of chess. Additional chess sets have since been received as gifts, and a 3D-printed Judaic-themed chess set was added by the library’s youngest patron (my son).


Maintaining the space is an ongoing concern. Not long after the Judaica Suite officially opened, it was discovered that the historic wooden balcony of the mezzanine did not comply with UF Health and Safety regulations for public spaces as its low height presented a falling hazard. The Libraries’ Deans consulted with UF architects, and they designed an innovative glass barrier to protect the historic balcony and the visitors. They also designed period-authentic balustrades for the two staircases. Last year, the almost 100-year-old building was given much-needed restoration work to its walls and windows, and this included the Suite which had suffered interior wall damage due to water leaking through from outside.

Internally, as the curator, I maintain the book collection, and the artworks, and create displays for visitors; the Chair of the Department, Haven Hawley, ensures that the design of the space is preserved, and that the various uses of the space are supported. In some ways, the Judaica Suite has become a hybrid library-museum: a place to consult and study books but also to see and learn from them as objects, as well as from the artwork and other Judaic pieces

around the room.

The Judaica Suite continues to serve as a shared space for the curators and librarians of the department of Special and Area Studies. Here we bring classes that use our special collections so that students can experience the wondrous diversity of our globally sourced rare books, manuscripts, and archives up close and hands on. Thanks to its reputation for being a beautiful and quiet space on campus, the Suite has also served as a location for numerous oral history recordings, and TV crews from the BBC, Al Jazeera and local networks have filmed here too. Speaker events are regularly hosted in the Suite, as well as other types of events, such as Cicerone training sessions and UF President Fuchs’ inaugural robing session, to name but a few.

The Suite is now a popular tourist destination on campus. In the year prior to the pandemic, we offered tours to several hundred visitors, individually and in groups. The visitors included students, visiting faculty, members of the public, and VIPs. Visiting groups have been spreading the word, and this year we received bookings for six large group tours. The tours include a presentation and guided walk around the Suite. In addition, we’ve hosted special family presentations and naming events. We’ve even been booked as an aesthetic site for engagement photo shoots.

We look forward to visitors returning to see our stunning space, its unique artworks and rare materials. Indeed, there’s nowhere else in the world where you can view a scroll containing a handwritten poem and drawing by Albert Einstein on a lovely handmade mahogany table under an exquisitely crafted handmade wooden light. 

www.judaica.uflib.ufl.edu



40 years 40 objects

THE PRICE LIBRARY OF JUDAICA

Curated by Rebecca J. W. Jefferson

Designed by Lourdes Santamaria-Wheeler

A special exhibition celebrates forty years of the Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica at UF by showcasing forty of its special items.

Dedicated to all of the Judaica Library’s great friends, and its major benefactors, the late Samuel and Jack Price, the new exhibition features rare and unique items from the 15th – 20th centuries.



Gertrud Leistikow Kalendar. 1925. Amsterdam.

View entire showcase at:
www.exhibits.domains.uflib.ufl.edu/40objects