Message from the Director

It’s hard to believe that most of the 2019-2020 academic year took place before COVID-19 changed our world so completely. Yet, as I look back at the past year, I am pleased to remember the many ways that Jewish Life at Duke made an impact for Jewish students on campus—and how we found creative ways to continue our work for students virtually.

At the core of this work is our motto: we are the home away from home for Jewish Duke students. Before March 2020, we were seeing increasing numbers of students at the Freeman Center, studying in our comfy beanbag chairs, enjoying kosher dinners, engaged in our educational programs, and celebrating Shabbat each week. Across campus, 229 unique students met one-on-one with members of our engagement team for a coffee—conversations that helped students develop trusted mentor relationships as well as explore their own Jewish identities.

After our students shifted to remote learning, Jewish Life at Duke shifted with them, serving as the home away from campus for Jewish students. Our team reached out individually to every Jewish undergraduate student to check on them. We reimagined all of our programs, classes, and rituals to take place virtually, from Passover Seders to one-on-one coffee conversations to Senior Seminar. We created new programs, such as our Class of 2020 Senior Havdallah, our “Daily Hang” social space, and our virtual Torah trope class.

No matter the location, Jewish Life at Duke affirms to Jewish students—and indeed, to our entire Duke Jewish community—that we will always be here for you, wherever you are.

Our talented Jewish Life at Duke team puts their hearts into nurturing and sustaining our Jewish community. Our dedicated Advisory Board provides insight, feedback, and strategic leadership. Yet, it is our students who often teach us the most. They continue to show us the way forward toward a bright future—and the way to make the most of right now. As I look back at 2019-2020, I am grateful to our students for the many ways they have strengthened our campus Jewish community.

Joyce Gordon
Director for Jewish Life at Duke
Message from the Board Chair

In spite of the pandemic, the 2019-2020 fiscal year was another year of strong and growing support for the Freeman Center and Jewish Life at Duke as we surpassed our unrestricted fundraising targets. Our staff and board’s mission to increase visibility, participation, and passion for all that we offer to the Duke community is alive and thriving.

Twenty years ago, my family celebrated the opening of the Freeman Center for Jewish Life at Duke. The day of opening was a day I think of fondly: alumni, students, faculty, staff, and friends poured into the Freeman Center – the culmination of a dream for a permanent home for Jewish students at Duke, and my parents’ legacy. This past fiscal year, we had plans to celebrate all that the Freeman Center has meant to Jewish life on campus, however, coronavirus postponed those in-person celebrations.

Plans changed throughout the world and certainly no different at the Freeman Center over the last year. During the first three-quarters of the academic year, students enjoyed dinners, social gatherings, game nights, classes, and all kinds of activities within the walls of the Freeman Center. After the March shutdown, our staff stepped up and students remained active in the Duke Jewish community, attending virtual “Daily Hangs”, classes, speakers, and more. I can’t imagine what would have happened if the pandemic had struck before the Freeman Center was available to provide a strong foundation for the Jewish student community. The Freeman Center platform and our staff enabled Duke’s Jewish students to stick together, even while virtual in these uncertain times.

Finally, it continues to be a tremendous honor to serve as Chair of the Jewish Life at Duke Board, and I want to once again thank the staff and our Advisory Board for their passion, dedication, and service. I look forward to celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Freeman Center with everyone when it’s safe to do so.

Heath Freeman
Chair of the Advisory Board
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Matt Weiss, T’00
Elizabeth Winter, T’03
Jewish students (60% of self-identified Jewish students on campus) participated in Jewish Life at Duke events, programs, and holiday services, which pivoted to virtual engagement in the spring and summer.

285 students celebrated the festival of lights at Latkapalooza, noshing on latkes and jelly donuts while adorned in the best of tacky sweaters.

30 students and 4 student interns participated in the sixth and seventh cohorts of the Jewish Learning Fellowship: Life’s Big Questions.

43 students served in ongoing leadership roles for Jewish Life at Duke-advised student groups, helping to build and strengthen the Duke student Jewish community.

1 student was called to the Torah and became Bat Mitzvah, surrounded by family, loved ones, and friends.
64 students traveled to Israel in 2018-2019 Birthright Israel trips, connecting personally with our history, our people, and our land.

11 students extended their trips on Birthright Excel, Onward, or other programs, seeking deeper engagement with Israel.

On average, 60 students attended Shabbat services and dinner at the Freeman Center each week.

480 challah loaves were baked and sold by Challah for Hunger.

Thanks to donor support, more than 2,050 kosher, home-cooked holiday and Shabbat meals were served to students at no charge.

Special thanks to the Benenson Endowment Fund for its support of Shabbat meals.
Inspiring Student Connections with Israel

In August 2019, Reuven Remez joined JLD as our new Jewish Agency Israel Fellow, a rotating position held by a young Israeli professional for one to three years. The fellow’s role is to inspire individual students to develop meaningful and enduring relationships to the land, people, culture, and society of Israel. Reuven has brought new life to the role, sharing his love of puns, salsa dancing, and all things Israel, from Israeli food, dancing, and culture to insightful discussions on the Israel elections.

Enriching Jewish Life on Campus

“Jewish Life at Duke has made my time at Duke so much more amazing. I went from having never been to a Shabbat, to attending weekly at the Freeman Center. Anytime I am going to a JLD or JSU event, I know I am going to see great friends, have a great time, and feel welcome in an at-home environment. I am truly grateful to be involved with such great people who care about me so much. I always try to make it to as many events as I can to see my friends, and make new friends. Being involved with JSU and JLD has also inspired me to try and have a Bar Mitzvah through the Freeman Center. I never could have imagined this happening prior to my time at Duke, and being involved with JLD has been one of the best decisions I have made at Duke.”

– Alec Goodman, ’22
Ninth Annual Jewish Student Union B’nai Mitzvah

On February 29, students, friends, and family witnessed the Bat Mitzvah of Elizabeth Shulman as she was called to the Torah at the Freeman Center, following months of Hebrew and Torah lessons with Rabbi Elana. Friends then gathered at the Duke Jewish Student Union’s party of the year, a magical-themed celebration with a New Orleans slant, supported by the Freeman Family Program Fund. All enjoyed dancing to the Boom Unit Brass Band as well as the photo booth, fortune-telling, magic tricks, and dessert buffet.

Shabbat Squad

While Rabbi Elana Friedman was on parental leave, students stepped up to form the Shabbat Squad, a student-led group created to help to lead Shabbat singing and services. The students’ leadership was so successful that the Shabbat Squad continued to assist Rabbi Elana with leading Shabbat and holiday services following her return.

“Heading Jewish Life at Duke’s Shabbat Squad each week was really important to me, because for myself and many other students, Shabbat is our time to get to de-stress and come together with our Jewish (and some non-Jewish!) friends at the end of a long school week.”
– Taylor Fistel, T’20
Spring 2020 was a challenging semester as students returned to their homes or off-campus locations to finish their coursework remotely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At Jewish Life at Duke, it has always been our priority to provide strong support for our students and the entire Duke Jewish community. To that end, our team doubled down on our commitment to support Duke’s Jewish students no matter where they are. We quickly pivoted to creating JLD@Home, our online platform for programs and opportunities for connection and community. JLD@Home programming included:

- **PASOVER SEDER**
  Our JLD community, family, and friends joined Rabbi Elana at her dining room table for a virtual Passover “Zeder” (Zoom Seder).

- **TORAH CHANTING CLASS**
  Students learned to decipher trope and chant Torah over the course of five weeks with Rabbi Elana.

- **TORAH LUNCH CLUB**
  Students continued their intimate weekly Torah study of the parashat hashavuah, the weekly Torah portion with Rabbi Elana.

- **THE DAILY & WEEKLY HANG**
  While classes were taking place online, students missed their regular hangouts at the Freeman Center. In response, JLD staff hosted regular hangouts over Zoom for students to chat, play games, cook together, and more.

- **VIRTUAL SHABBAT ALL SUMMER LONG**
  To continue the beloved tradition of singing, sharing our “good things of the week,” Shabbat prayer, and intentions for healing, virtual Shabbat experiences continued through the summer. This was a great way for our students, alumni, parents, siblings, and even Bubbes to enter Shabbat wherever they were.

- **BOOK CLUB**
  Facilitated by Director Joyce Gordon, students enjoyed reading and discussing *Fly Already: Stories* by Israeli author Etgar Keret.

- **VIRTUAL COFFEE CONVERSATIONS ONLINE**
  Students continued to meet one-on-one for coffee conversations with our student engagement team.
Havdallah Honoring the Class of 2020

Jewish Life at Duke and the Jewish Student Union honored the Class of 2020 with a special virtual Havdallah service led by Rabbi Elana. Students, staff, family, and friends came together to sing songs, to share their wishes for graduates, and to light their Havdallah candles in unison. Kenny Green T'20, past JSU president, shared a heartfelt blessing for his class:

“My blessing for all of us is that we continue to embrace our hike. Tell our friends how much we appreciate them. Look back and remember experiences like JSU [Jewish Student Union] bar nights and Latkapaloozas. Look ahead and plan but remember that it's impossible to know what the path looks like just beyond the bend. And as the views come, and they inevitably will, let's really enjoy them because we know what it feels like to hike for a while without having them.

“But, nonetheless, here's to the Class of 2020: still on this winding and tumultuous trail living our lives appreciating the views as they come but living for the thrill of the trail.

“I can't wait to spend many more joyous occasions with you all... My Jewish experience at Duke has changed my life and I thank you all so much for giving me that experience. While this moment may not be the final view, it's one of many special moments that we get to share on this trail together.”

— Kenny Green, T’20

(Find the full text at www.tinyurl.com/JLDKenny)
As Covid-19 required social distance in our daily lives, religious practices also adapted. Our very own Rabbi Elana was featured in CNN, Duke Today, INDY Week, WUNC Public Radio, and ABC-11 News. In a CNN article entitled “This Passover, the Seders are virtual. The plague is real,” Rabbi Elana shared her thoughts on both the loss and necessity of spending Passover physically distanced from our loved ones. Following are excerpts from this coverage:

**INDY WEEK**

*Days Before Easter, Passover, and Ramadan, Local Faith Leaders Tell Believers to Use Technology to Stay Connected*

Friedman noted that an in-person Shabbat draws between 75 to 100 students. By comparison, the online service reveals people’s need to be connected. In addition to more students showing up online for Shabbat prayer, their parents, grandparents, siblings, and even their pets are participating.

“Shabbat marks a break,” she said. “It’s a spiritual moment, a switching of the gears, a rhythm, a sacred time.”

**DUKE TODAY**

*Faith Leaders Address Religious Life in Coronavirus World*

Rabbi Elana Friedman on counseling Jews approaching Passover:

“Saving a life is more important than any other Jewish law or custom. So we’re required to safeguard health and care for one of others, and therefore disregard laws if they conflict with preserving a life....

“This year, we have to adapt.

“(Normally, for Seder) we open our doors to everyone on campus, both Jewish and non-Jewish. We get to spend time with each other and share each other’s customs. This is a... huge emotional loss, but it’s a necessary one... Understand this year is the exception, not the norm.”
Christian, Jewish, Muslim leaders join together in call to stop politicizing steps to slow coronavirus spread

Faith leaders at Duke University came together Thursday to talk about how believers can continue to grow together in their religion despite not being able to gather at places of worship.

Rabbi Elana Friedman pointed to a principle in Jewish law known as *pikuach nefesh* that translates to “saving a life.” It’s a principle that states the preservation of human life overrules any other religious rule.

"I think this is extraordinary time. It’s a moment unlike any other...much of our focus needs to be tending to the flock, as they say," Friedman said.

She said it may feel like adhering to recommendations of health experts forces people to break dietary religious laws or go against the spirit of the holiday (by refraining from inviting all who are hungry to come in and eat). But in the spirit of *pikuach nefesh*, taking precautions to protect lives is not a religious violation.
Jewish Life at Duke provides many occasions for students to explore and strengthen their own Jewish identities, on their own terms, through study, travel, worship, and building relationships with their Duke Jewish community. Each year, we bring speakers to Duke who challenge, inspire, and encourage students to be curious. In 2019-2020, we offered the following enrichment opportunities:

**Lex Silbiger**

Holocaust survivor and retired Duke professor, discussed being a child refugee in Holland during World War II as well as his family’s escape and journey to Jamaica.

**Brothers for Life**

Israeli veterans from Brothers for Life came to share their experience with students over dinner. BFL is a unique organization created and completely run by injured Israeli soldiers to help newly injured soldiers reclaim their lives after combat injury.

**Anti-Defamation League Training**

Students participated in ADL’s Words to Action: Empowering Students to Address Anti-Semitism, a training focused on identifying and responding to anti-semitism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Israel bias.

**Israeli Election Discussions**

Israel Fellow Reuven Remez and Michal Hartman, Emory Hillel’s Israel Fellow, discussed the Israeli elections with students.

**Dr. Carolyn Rubenstein**

discussed handling the stress of sheltering in place.

**Helga Luden, Holocaust Survivor,**

shared her story (presented by the Coalition for Preserving Memory).

**Free-Expression Wall**

The Freeman Center for Jewish Life serves as the hub for Jewish life on campus, providing a place for students to study, to unwind with friends, or to share a kosher dinner.

In 2019, students were given the opportunity to put their unique stamp on the Freeman Center—our new, interactive, free-expression wall. Each year, we will refresh the wall with a new question intended to provoke thought about our Jewish identities, to which students will respond with words and art.
Coalition for Preserving Memory

The students of the Duke Coalition for Preserving Memory (CPM), a student group dedicated to memorializing victims of the seven United Nations recognized genocides, were not going to forget their mission, even if campus was closed and students were spread around the world. Organizers quickly pivoted when students were told to return home for the semester, and planned a 24-hour video of members of the Duke community reading names of victims of genocides and mass atrocities, this year including victims of COVID-19. 309 volunteers recorded and submitted 257 videos amounting to 24 hours of footage.

“We thought it would be powerful to virtualize our ceremony,” said Jill Jones, T’20, one of the leaders of the Duke CPM. “This would continue the spirit of the ceremony as a collective effort and allow people from all over the world to get involved.”

“We being in CPM at Duke is especially important for me because when on campus I tend to feel as if I am in a bubble removed from the world, and CPM pushes me and other Duke students to go outside that bubble and acknowledge and help prevent tragedies in the larger world.”
— Josh Rabinowitz, E’23, JSU Executive Board, CPM Executive Board

Celebrating the Freeman Center’s 20th Anniversary

In 2019, the Freeman Center for Jewish Life turned 20 years old. While the pandemic prevented us from celebrating in person, we shared the Freeman Center’s compelling history on our website and with the wider Duke community.

The Freeman Center story began in 1986 with Duke alumnus Gil Scharf T’70, P’16, who sought a space for Jewish students, faculty, and staff to call home. Prior to its construction, Jewish students celebrated holidays and other Jewish rituals in a variety of places on campus, ranging from the basement of Duke Chapel and Gross Chem (the Paul M. Gross Hall) to the Chapel Hill High School gymnasium and the former Hillel House on Alexander Avenue.

Though there were many challenges along the way, the dedication of the Freeman Center took place Sunday, October 24, 1999 during Family Weekend and honored several founding benefactors. Brian and Harriet Freeman, P’96, ’98, ’02, made the visionary primary private contribution toward the construction of the building, which was named in their honor.

At the dedication, Brian Freeman shared that it was his family’s intent that the center benefit and serve the entire Duke and Durham community. “My family and I have viewed it as a privilege and an opportunity to be able to help enhance the fabric of Duke, including its students’ cultural and social experience and perspective,” he said.

Additional founding benefactors, without whom this vision could have not become a reality, included Samuel and Veronica Heyman, P’94, ’93; Bernice Levenson Lerner, z”l, WC’53, P’79, ’85, ’87, and her husband Mort Lerner, z”l; Philip and Susan Oppenheimer Sassower, P’95, ’98, GP’21; and Gilbert D. Scharf, T’70, P’16, and Ruth Calvin Scharf, N’80, P’16.
Broadening Experiences for Jewish Student Leaders

**Jewish Learning Fellowship**

Jewish Learning Fellowship (JLF) is a 10-week experiential, conversational seminar themed “Life’s Big Questions,” designed for students looking to deepen their understanding of Judaism on their own terms. Students participate in JLF as Fellows in cohorts; in the 2019-2020 academic year, 30 students and 4 interns participated, exploring Jewish approaches to friendship, honesty, disagreement, intimacy, and more. The JLF experience often kicks off students’ involvement and leadership in the Jewish community on campus. This was true for Eliza Paradise, T’21, who after participating as a JLF Fellow continued for another year as a JLF Intern and returned as a leader among her peers.

“Being a JLF fellow was such an amazing experience for me. I did it in the fall of my freshman year and it really helped me find a community at Jewish Life at Duke. I loved getting to connect with Judaism on my own terms (instead of doing it because my parents said to). I really wanted the chance to create that community for other Duke students and to help them connect to their Judaism in whatever way that meant for them. My proudest accomplishment at JLD is getting the courage to lead a prayer every week at Shabbat with one of my friends (who I got to know through JLF!). I usually have the biggest fear of public speaking, but the community at JLD made me feel so comfortable and supported that I was encouraged to take more of a leadership role in services. Now, I always look forward to Shabbat and especially love the opportunity to lead a prayer which has become so special to me.”

– Eliza Paradise, T’21

**Roots to Rights**

Roots to Rights, a joint six-day biennial spring break bus tour and experiential education program hosted in partnership by Jewish Life at Duke and the Mary Lou Williams Center for Black Culture, allowed students to explore the South’s major historic Civil Rights sites and examine the history of the Movement from various perspectives and disciplines, including through a Jewish lens. Tour stops included Atlanta, Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham, Oxford, and Memphis. This program is generously supported by the Ronni Weksler Bermont Endowment Fund.
Ackerman Fellows at AIPAC Policy Conference

In partnership with Jewish Life at Duke, 19 Ackerman Fellows attended the March 2020 American Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Conference in Washington, DC, accompanied by Jewish Life at Duke’s Jewish Agency Israel Fellow, Reuven Remez. Thanks to the generosity of Duke alumnus Ari J. Ackerman, T’93, Duke University students received the opportunity to attend the conference, the largest gathering of America’s pro-Israel community, at no financial cost to them.

“The AIPAC Policy Conference was without a doubt one of the highlights of my second semester. We had no idea to what degree the Coronavirus would come to impact our lives at the time, but I find comfort knowing that my semester ended with several highlights: the policy conference followed by the Duke-Carolina game. At the conference itself, I was blown away by the caliber and consistency of the programming. It was very moving to see so many Jews in the same place, all with the same passion for advocating on behalf of Israel. There was one moment at the very first general session where all of the attendees joined in singing the Hatikvah; that’s the moment where I realized the importance of what we gathered in Washington to do. Though I at times disagreed with many of the speakers and several opinions expressed by other attendees, I appreciated the opportunity to engage in informed, respectful discourse with other people who care.”

– Brent Katz, T’23, Ackerman Fellow

JLF Interns Eliza Paradise and Jordan Diamond initiate their own Tashlich ceremony while studying abroad in Copenhagen during the High Holy Days.
Thank You for Being Here for Jewish Life at Duke

2019-2020 Honor Roll of Giving

THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS
Jewish Life at Duke depends on the generosity of alumni, parents, and friends. We wholeheartedly thank you for your contributions in the 2019-2020 fiscal year.

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"Thank you for providing me—and countless other students—a space of comfort. A space to connect with new friends, reflect, mourn, celebrate, and of course, eat. The sheer amount of generosity and selflessness that I experienced at JLD hopefully will make me able to provide that more for others in the future."
– Ben Thier, T’20
Thank you all so much for building such a welcoming community. I simply cannot imagine my Duke experience, particularly my last year, without everything and everyone the Freeman Center embodies. Jewish Life brought me closer to old friends, introduced me to new ones, and sparked a previously jaded interest in organized religion. Thank you so much for welcoming me so warmly, and giving me community I could turn to on campus of both a higher power and purpose. You all are doing so many things right in a world of many wrongs.

– Claire Gibbs, T’20
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“From the moment we walked on to campus for Orientation Week, we were impressed by the warm environment of the Freeman Center, Rabbi Elana, and all of the wonderful JLD staff. We knew we wanted to be part of helping to sustain JLD as a welcoming community and resource for Jewish students at Duke.”
– Jackie Lowey & David Kuperschmid, P'23

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*Denotes Parents Circle Donors (for parents or grandparents of students in the classes of 2020 – 2023)
There's nothing better than to see your child thrive in a new environment. Our daughter told us that the thing she looks forward to the most at Duke is weekly Shabbat at the Freeman Center. It warms our hearts to know that she has a Jewish family to be with, despite being 3,000 miles away from home.

– Dana & Justin Miller, P’23

Duke’s Family Weekend is always a great opportunity to welcome our wonderful parents and families to the Freeman Center to share in student activities. This year we had 100 family members join us for Shabbat singing and dinner and over 160 for Sunday’s Bagel Brunch.

Parents Michelle Vichnin, Mitchell Edelson, and their student Jessica Edelson shared with our brunch crowd heartfelt words about how Jewish Life at Duke embodies the three Cs: Comfort, Connection and Community:

“Jewish Life at Duke is an exemplar of a community on campus, providing something for everyone who participates. Whether a student attends once a year or several times a week, the Rabbi and incredible staff make sure there is always a place for every Jewish Blue Devil. And, at the end of the day, we all want our students to be part of something which brings them joy and happiness. Crisp matzoh at Passover Seders, sweet apples and honey at Rosh Hashanah, steaming chicken soup when you need a taste of home: could we ask for anything better than that?”

Michelle Vichnin, P’22, Jessica Edelson, T’22, and Mitchell Edelson, P’22, shared the 2019 Family Weekend Bagel Brunch address.
Many alumni embody the #ForeverDuke spirit by giving back to Jewish students on campus. Alumni offer advice, mentorship, and a sounding board for students exploring their academic, career, and Jewish pathways. Through this engagement and through generous giving, alumni sustain Duke and its Jewish community.

“Both we and our daughter have experienced firsthand the value of the Freeman Center as a welcoming place that brings together Jewish students and Jewish alumni. We are happy to support it!”

—Mike T’89 and Dana T’88 Roffman, P’23 (Larchmont, NY)

TOBACCO ROAD TZEDAKAH CUP
Young Alumni demonstrated their love for Jewish Life at Duke at the 6th Tobacco Road Tzedakah Cup (TRTC) challenge. TRTC took place over a three-week period in February and March, when Duke and Carolina battled on the court. Pitting our young alumni against Carolina’s, TRTC was an epic showdown over who could raise more money for Jewish life on their campus.

The classes of 2005-2019 raised over $3,200 from 86 young alumni donors. Efforts were once again led by young alumni volunteer captains as well as board member and long-time donor Elizabeth Heyman Winter, T’03, who matched gifts from every new and lapsed donor, an additional contribution of $1,088.
Recognizing gifts made between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020

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25 by ’25 is a 5-year planned giving campaign launched this year to support the future of Jewish Life at Duke. In partnership with Duke’s Office of Gift Planning, our goal is to secure 25 legacy commitments by 2025, and we need your support.

Join your fellow Duke Jewish alumni, parents, and friends by remembering Jewish Life at Duke with a legacy gift in your will, trust, or retirement account.

Learn more at tinyurl.com/JLD25by25

We sincerely apologize for any omissions or errors.
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We could not do it without you!

Jewish Life at Duke is guided by a mission to engage and inspire Jewish students through community building, collaborative ventures, leadership opportunities, and educational experiences. Comprising the Freeman Center for Jewish Life and the Rubenstein-Silvers Hillel, JLD takes a pluralistic approach to Judaism to ensure that all Jewish students, regardless of affiliation, feel welcome and included.

100% of JLD's operating budget comes from donations from parents, alumni, and friends.

If you’ve been inspired by the work and impact of Jewish Life at Duke, make a tax-deductible gift today at: www.tinyurl.com/dukegift

Thank you!