A Finding Aid to the
Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
Records

Manuscript Collection No. 873
Biographical Sketch

In the aftermath of a 1952 Supreme Court decision allowing "release time" from school for religious instruction and a seeming move in the courts to an emphasis on "free exercise" over "strict separation," the Jewish Reform movement felt the need to redouble its efforts to maintain a strict separationist ideology in the nation. The Commission on Social Action (CSA) became active in 1953, but there were intense discussions about its proper role in Washington. For years the debate raged over whether or not the organization should lobby in Washington. At the General Assembly in 1957, Kivie Kaplan approached Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, then president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), offering a gift of $100,000 for the purchase of a building in Washington to serve as the headquarters of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC). Kaplan, one of the 20th century's most extraordinary social justice figures, was then vice-chairman of the UAHC, a member of the CSA, and the national president of the NAACP. In 1959, the delegates of the General Assembly in Miami Beach voted to accept the gift of Emily and Kivie Kaplan and establish the RAC.

The RAC was formally dedicated on November 13, 1961, in the White House rose garden. At this ceremony, 250 leaders of the UAHC presented a sacred Torah belonging to Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise to President Kennedy. Kennedy's address at this ceremony can be accessed online: http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHA-054-004.aspx. Kennedy argued during this speech that the establishment of the RAC "is an effective answer to those who deny the responsibilities of religion for correcting injustice."

The RAC building, a historic structure located on Washington's Embassy Row, was formally dedicated at the Sheraton-Park Hotel in Washington D.C. on December 1, 1962. At the dedication there were four workshops on issues of religious and political concern. They were entitled, "United Nations-Peace-Disarmament," "Race Relation," "Church-State," and, "Religion meets the Press." These issues have been the focus of the RAC's efforts, but they have also tackled many other hot button topics that have affected Reform Judaism around the world. Some highlights of the Center's accomplishments include: 1) The landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were drafted in the Center's conference room by Jewish and Black leaders; 2) The RAC translated opposition to the Vietnam War into political and legislative action; and 3) the RAC raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from American Jews to create the Ethiopian Jewry Assistance Program.

Rabbi Eisendrath appointed Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch as the first director of the RAC. Rabbi Hirsch led the RAC during the turmoil and unrest of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. In 1973, Rabbi Hirsch moved to Israel and became executive director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ). Rabbi Hirsch was succeeded by Rabbi David J. Saperstein. Rabbi Saperstein has served as the director and chief legal counsel of the RAC for more than thirty years and is touted as one of the most influential rabbis in the country.

Today, the RAC is one of American Jewry's most respected institutions in Washington.
Provenance
Received from David J. Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center, 2008.

Processing Information
Processed by Dorothy Smith and Jeremy Katz, August 2012.

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Index Terms

Subjects
Civil rights / International peace / Reform Judaism / Religious liberty / Social action

Personal Names

Corporate Names
Central Conference of American Rabbis / Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism / Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism / Union for Reform Judaism / Union of American Hebrew Congregations

Media
Audiocassettes / Photographs / Video recordings

Series A. Historic Files, 1923-1976

Extent
2 linear feet (2 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note
Includes dedication material including photographs of Kennedy and RAC officials in the Rose Garden, correspondence with senior White House officials and Congressmen, and bylaws and articles of incorporation for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Most of the files pertain to Dr. Maurice Eisendrath, who was president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations during the founding of RAC.

Box and Folder Listing


Series B. Personnel Files, 1950-2000

Extent
42 linear feet (42 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note
Includes various files from the offices of Albert “Al” Vorspan, Lenore Siegelman, Melvin Merians, Mark Pelavin, and David Saperstein.

Arrangement


Extent
22 linear feet (22 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note
Contains documents from the office of Al Vorspan, who was Director of the Commission for Social Action (CSA) and vice president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). The subseries is arranged into correspondence, committees, and general files. Most of the files pertain to the CSA.
**Subseries 2. Lenore Siegelman, 1958-1990**

**Extent** 11 linear feet (11 record cartons)

**Scope and Content Note** Contains documents from the office of Lenore Siegelman, who was a citizen activist in the Washington community. She worked with the American-Israel Committee to Commemorate Martin Luther King Jr., the World Jewish Congress, the NAACP, and the Martin Luther King Jr. D.C. Holiday Commission. She also founded the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Forest in Israel.

**Box and Folder Listing**

- Box B2-1. Folder 1-62. Committee for MLK Memorial, 1974-1990
- Box B2-2. Folder 1-46. Committee for MLK Memorial, 1974-1990

Extent 1 linear foot (1 record carton)

Scope and Content Note Contains documents from the office of Mark Merians, who served as chairman of the Union of Reform Judaism, chairman of the Jewish Foundation of the Righteous, chairman of the Neuberger Museum of Art, and board member of the Hebrew Union College.

Box and Folder Listing

Box B3-1. Folder 1-15. Melvin Merians Files, 1992-1993


Extent 7 linear feet (7 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note Contains documents from the office of Mark Pelavin, who is the Associate Director of both RAC and the Commission for Social Action.

Box and Folder Listing

Box B4-1. Folder 1-41. A-C, 1997-2000
Box B4-4. Folder 1-55. M-Z, 1999
Box B4-5. Folder 1-76. M-Z, 1997-2000
Box B4-6. Folder 1-38. Past Trips, 1996-1997

Subseries 5. David Saperstein, 1974-1996

Extent 1 linear foot (1 record carton)

Scope and Content Note Contains documents from the office of David Saperstein, who is Director and chief legal counsel at the Religious Action Center.

Box and Folder Listing

Box B5-1. Folder 1-24. David Saperstein Files, 1974-1996

Extent 1 linear foot (1 record carton)

Scope and Content Note Contains the bylaws, articles of incorporation, and other documents related to UAHC.

Box and Folder Listing

Box C1-1. Folder 1-42. Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974-1991

Series D. Commission on Social Action, 1966-2007

Extent 14 linear feet (14 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note Contains internal briefings and correspondence as well as files on meetings and events held by the CSA.

Arrangement Arranged chronologically.

Box and Folder Listing

Box D1-1. Folder 1-33. Commission on Social Action, 1966-1971
Box D1-12. Folder 1-44. Commission on Social Action, 2000-2004


Extent 4 linear feet (4 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note Contains files concerning the Synagogue Council of America.

Arrangement Arranged alphabetically.

Box and Folder Listing


Extent 1 linear foot (1 record carton)

Scope and Content Note Contains correspondence and meeting minutes related to the CCAR.

Arrangement

Box and Folder Listing


Series G. Events, 1963-2001

Extent 9 linear feet (9 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note Contains files related to the various events hosted by RAC, CSA, and the UAHC.

Arrangement The files are arranged chronologically by event.

Box and Folder Listing

Box G1-1. Folder 1-35. Biennials, 1963-1995
Box G1-5. Folder 1-42. Miscellaneous events, 1963-1969

Series H. Fundraising, 1966-1989

Extent 2 linear feet (2 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note Contains files on different funds, charities, and causes RAC supported in its fundraising efforts.

Box and Folder Listing

Box H1-1. Folder 1-40. Fundraising, 1966-1989
Box H1-2. Folder 1-27. Fundraising, 1987-1989
Extent  5 linear feet (5 record cartons)
Scope and Content Note  Contains various magazines and journals on topics of Jewish interests.

Box and Folder Listing

Series J. Mailings, 1966-1978
Extent  1 linear foot (1 record carton)
Scope and Content Note  Contains mailings sent out by RAC to inform subscribers of various events and fundraisers.
Arrangement  Arranged chronologically.

Box and Folder Listing

Extent  2 linear feet (2 record cartons)
Scope and Content Note  Contains U-matic, VHS videocassettes, audiocassettes, photographs, and floppy discs of events and programs sponsored by the RAC.

Box and Folder Listing

Series L. Synagogue Files, 1964-1974
Extent  1 linear foot (1 record carton)
Scope and Content Note  Contains the files RAC maintained on various synagogues.

Box and Folder Listing
Box L1-1. Folder 1-54. Synagogue Files, 1964-1974
Series M. Organization Files, 1960-2000

Extent 8 linear feet (8 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note Contains the files RAC maintained on various organizations related to social, religious, and political action.

Arrangement Arranged alphabetically.

Box and Folder Listing

Box M1-3. Folder 1-78. F-I, 1960-2000

Series N. Issue Files, 1886; 1937-2008

Extent 161 linear feet (161 record cartons)

Scope and Content Note Contains the files RAC maintained on various social and political issues of the day. These files are extensive and range in topic.

Box and Folder Listing

Box N1-1. Folder 1-40. Big meetings, 2000-2008
Box N1-4. Folder 1-56. Africa, Middle East, Terrorism, Immigration, 1988-2003
Box N1-5. Folder 1-65. Disabled, Immigration, Deportation, 1989-2001
Box N1-10. Folder 1-44. Arms control, Peace, 1963-1999
Box N1-16. Folder 1-36. Black-Jewish relations, 1984-2005
Box N1-22. Folder 1-47. Campaign finance reform, Canadian Jewry, Bosnia, 1959-1994
Box N1-30. Folder 1-44. Census, Child Care, 1969-2000
Box N1-33. Folder 1-29. Church vs. State, AIDS, Abortion, 1972-2004
Box N1-34. Folder 1-70. Church vs. State, 1984-2004
Box N1-36. Folder 1-29. Church vs. State (court cases), 1992-2000
Box N1-37. Folder 1-33. Church vs. State, 1982-2003
Box N1-40. Folder 1-29. Civil Rights, Church vs. State, 1974-2000
Box N1-41. Folder 1-29. Civil Rights, Civil Liberties, Censorship, 1961-1993
Box N1-44. Folder 1-33. Climate change, COEL, 1987-2005
Box N1-47. Folder 1-41. Capital punishment, Hate crimes, 1967-1996
Box N1-53. Folder 1-45. Poverty, Jewish day schools, Civil rights, Elections, 1968-2004
Box N1-55. Folder 1-46. Campaign finance reform, Labor, 1975-2002
Box N1-59. Folder 1-42. FBI, Farm issues, Middle East, Foreign Aid, Interns, UN Peacekeeping, 1963-2007
Box N1-60. Folder 1-61. Germany, Foreign Aid, Ethiopian Jews, 1957-2001
Box N1-63. Folder 1-46. Genocide, Housing, German unification, Food, 1966-1997
Box N1-64. Folder 1-60. Khmer Rouge, Human rights, Gun control, 1975-1997
Box N1-68. Folder 1-44. Israel, Human rights, Middle East peace process, Jewish poor, 1973-2002
Box N1-69. Folder 1-48. Labor, Black-Jewish relations, Civil rights, Jews in politics, Demography studies, 1964-2005
Box N1-82. Folder 1-37. Religious Right, Medicare, 1997-2003
Box N1-83. Folder 1-45. Medicare, Health Care, 1998-2000
Box N1-84. Folder 1-81. Immigration, 1988-1994
Box N1-85. Folder 1-64. Hate Crimes, Israel, Homosexuality/HIV, 1999-2001
Box N1-87. Folder 1-63. Health Care, Homosexuality, Hate Crimes, 1997-2005