



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE  
**AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES**

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**A Finding Aid to the  
David Z. Ben-Ami Papers**

**Manuscript Collection No. 699**



## Collection Summary

<b>Title</b>	David Z. Ben-Ami Papers
<b>Dates</b>	1952-2002
<b>Collection Number</b>	MS-699
<b>Repository</b>	The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives
<b>Creator</b>	Ben-Ami, David Z., 1924
<b>Extent</b>	0.4 linear feet (1 Hollinger box)
<b>Language of the Material</b>	English

## Administrative Information

### Biographical Sketch

David Z. Ben-Ami was born in December 1924 in Germany. At age thirteen, he and his family emigrated to the United States to avoid rising anti-Semitism. Living in New York City, he earned several degrees, including a Bachelor of Arts from New York University, a Master's of Arts from NYU's Center for Human Relations Studies, a Master's of Social Service from NYU's Graduate School of Public Administration and Social Work, and a Principal's Certificate from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's School of Education. He was ordained as a rabbi by Dr. Felix A. Levy at the Academy for Higher Jewish Learning.

David Z. Ben-Ami held many different positions in religious and secular institutions throughout his adult life. He was an Information Education Specialist in the U.S. Army, teaching German and other subjects to soldiers. From 1952 to 1957, he served as the educational director of the Pleasantville Cottage School in New York, a school associated with the Jewish Child Care Association of New York. In 1957, Ben-Ami began his career as a congregational rabbi, serving Jewish communities in New York, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania. While attending to the needs of his congregation, Rabbi Ben-Ami reached out to the surrounding community, promoting interfaith cooperation and racial equality. He lectured before church groups, academic symposia, and student groups, and joined the faculties of academic institutions near the congregations he served. Ben-Ami also participated in conferences and organizations related to human rights, mental health, and social welfare.

While at Temple B'nai Israel in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Rabbi Ben-Ami supported civil rights activists and the oppressed African-American community. The congregants of Temple B'nai Israel did not approve of his efforts, which included visiting activists in jail and delivering free Christmas turkeys to poor African-American households. As a result, they decided not to renew his contract. Drew Pearson, a syndicated columnist, publicized Ben-Ami's story on December 25, 1964 and brought national attention to his case. Despite the public outrage caused by Pearson's article, Temple B'nai Israel did not reinstate Rabbi Ben-Ami.

After leaving Hattiesburg, David Ben-Ami moved to the Washington D.C. area. He helped found there a community center for African-Americans and organized a congregation in Reston, Virginia. In 1969, he moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, but remained involved with his activities in Washington. He became rabbi of Temple Beth Shalom, a newly formed congregation in Harrisburg and worked for the National Center for the Black Aged in Washington D.C. In 1980, he formed the American Forum for Jewish-Christian Cooperation, an organization which promoted interfaith harmony. Through the AFJCC Rabbi Ben-Ami organized events such as interfaith seders and thanksgiving celebrations to foster understanding and mutual respect between Jews and Christians. Many of the functions he planned became annual events which still occur today.

Rabbi Ben-Ami married the former Evelyn Reisman. They had three children: Raphael, born 1952, Aviva, born 1955, and Hillel, born 1958.

### Scope and Content

Collection consisting of addresses, letters, newspaper clippings, articles from periodicals and miscellaneous, with particular focus on Rabbi Ben-Ami's efforts in Hattiesburg, Mississippi during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Together with materials related to the American Forum for Jewish-Christian Cooperation.

### Arrangement

The collection is arranged in one (1) series: A. General.

### Terms of Access

The collection is open for use; no restrictions apply.

### Preferred Citation

Footnotes and bibliographic references should refer to the David Z. Ben-Ami Papers and the American Jewish Archives. A suggestion for at least the first citation is as follows:

[Description], [Date], Box #, Folder #. MS-699. David Z. Ben-Ami Papers. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

**Provenance** Received from David Z. Ben-Ami, Harrisburg, Pa., 2003.

**Processing Information** Processed by Jesse Feiman, June 2003.

## Index Terms

**Subjects** Civil rights / Rabbis  
**Personal Names** Ben-Ami, David Z., 1924-  
**Corporate Names** American Forum for Jewish-Christian Cooperation

## Series A. General, 1952-2002

**Scope and Content Note** The addresses cover Rabbi Ben-Ami's views on education, morality and culture. The documents relating to the American Forum for Jewish-Christian Cooperation explain the group's purpose and illustrate its ecumenical activities. The correspondence is arranged alphabetically and contains a variety of personal and business letters addressed to or sent by Rabbi Ben-Ami. These folders include letters from strangers praising Ben-Ami's civil rights work, letters from dignitaries involved in AFJCC programs, and miscellaneous letters regarding Ben-Ami's routine activities. One notable correspondence is a telegram from the Salvation Army to Rabbi Ben-Ami, refusing his donation of turkeys to the needy. The telegram documents the resistance Rabbi Ben-Ami met when trying to relieve poor African-Americans.

The miscellaneous documents are a collection of programs and bulletins from Ben-Ami's various congregations together with announcements of his speaking engagements and other papers he collected. The folders of clippings and photocopies from newspapers and periodicals contain articles about or collected by Rabbi Ben-Ami. These articles deal with his activities as a congregational rabbi, a civil rights worker, and an interfaith mediator. Many deal with the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. One article, by Drew Pearson, featured Ben-Ami's eviction from Temple B'nai Israel in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and brought national attention to his circumstance. Later articles cover Ben-Ami's involvement with the AFJCC. The photographs mostly show his later career. It contains many pictures of Ben-Ami at AFJCC functions with foreign and domestic dignitaries. The folder also contains several autographed photos from American presidents and eminent politicians.

**Arrangement** This collection is arranged alphabetically by topic.

## Box and Folder Listing

- Box 1. Folder 1. Addresses by Rabbi Ben-Ami.
- Box 1. Folder 2. American Forum for Jewish-Christian Cooperation.
- Box 1. Folder 3. Correspondence, General A-L.
- Box 1. Folder 4. Correspondence, General M-Z.
- Box 1. Folder 5. Miscellaneous documents, 1961-2000
- Box 1. Folder 6. Miscellaneous documents, undated
- Box 1. Folder 7. Newspaper clippings, 1953-1967
- Box 1. Folder 8. Newspaper clippings, 1969-2002
- Box 1. Folder 9. Newspaper clippings, undated
- Box 1. Folder 10. Periodical articles.
- Box 1. Folder 11. Photographic images.