



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

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**A Finding Aid to the  
Roland Bertram Gittelsohn Papers  
Manuscript Collection No. 704**



## Collection Summary

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| <b>Title</b>                    | Roland Bertram Gittelsohn Papers                              |
| <b>Dates</b>                    | 1934-1996   |
| <b>Collection Number</b>        | MS-704  |
| <b>Repository</b>               | The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives |
| <b>Creator</b>                  | Gittelsohn, Roland Bertram, 1910-1995                         |
| <b>Extent</b>                   | 25.6 linear feet (64 Hollinger boxes)                         |
| <b>Language of the Material</b> | English   |

## Administrative Information

### Biographical Sketch

Roland B. Gittelsohn was born on May 13, 1910 in Cleveland, Ohio. He received a B.A. in 1931 from Western Reserve University and a B.H. from Hebrew Union College in 1934. He was ordained at Hebrew Union College in 1936. Gittelsohn then undertook graduate studies at the Teachers' College, Columbia University and New School in New York. He also received two honorary degrees in 1961, the first being a D.D. from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the other a Sc.D. from Lowell Technological Institute (now Lowell University).

Gittelsohn led an active life, both in his position as a rabbi and in his political life. In fact, he hardly distinguished the two, arguing that the role of a rabbi, or any religious leader for that matter, is to lead by positive example, especially when political issues affect the poor, homeless, marginalized, or otherwise unlucky of society. His early sermons, prior to World War II, make his pacifism quite evident. Gittelsohn's resolve on the issue of war was tested when he became a chaplain in the Navy, though he reconciled this by drawing on the Jewish tradition of a "just war." Gittelsohn was a chaplain with the 5th Marine Division, participating in the Iwo Jima invasion. His dedication of the cemetery and memorial for Iwo Jima was widely publicized, mainly because of a controversy over having a rabbi say a prayer at the graves of non-Jews. This address is perhaps one of his most famous legacies. He was also awarded three ribbons for his service at Iwo Jima.

While it may appear to be a contradiction - a pacifist going to war - the war solidified his determination that war must be a last resort for the good of humanity. This was most evident in Gittelsohn's outspoken condemnation of the Vietnam War from the very beginning, which was a controversial position to take especially in the early to mid-1960s. He was labeled a traitor by some, but an upholder of democracy by many others whether they agreed with his position or not. This was also true during the McCarthy and House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) era when Gittelsohn publicly denounced the chipping away of civil liberties in America in a time of over inflated fears.

In addition to his public political life, Gittelsohn was devoted to his congregations. He first served at the Central Synagogue of Nassau County, N.Y. from 1936-1953. He then moved on to Temple Israel in Boston, where he would remain for the rest of his career. In addition to his congregational duties, Gittelsohn also was active in many organizations such as the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis, where he was president from 1958-1960; president of the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Boston 1961-1963, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) 1969-1971, founding president of the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) 1977-1984 and the founding president of the World Zionist Executive & Jewish Agency Board of Governors 1978-1984. Gittelsohn was also extremely active in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). He was on its Board of Trustees and was the Vice Chairman 1973-1977, was an honorary life member and the Chairman of the Commission on Jewish Education 1959-1968. Gittelsohn received two awards from the UAHC, the Eisendrath Award in 1983 and the Jay Kaufman Award in 1984.

Gittelsohn was also devoted to political causes beyond the scope of American Judaism, believing that the best work to be done is that which benefits all. He was on President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights in 1947, the Governor's Commission to Survey Massachusetts Courts in 1955, Massachusetts Commission on Abolition of the Death Penalty 1957-1958, the Governor's Committee on Migratory Labor 1960-1962 and the Governor's Committee to Survey Operation of Massachusetts Prisons 1961-1962. Gittelsohn was also involved in and kept abreast of the latest in political progressive ideas and movements, too diverse and abundant to recount.

Gittelsohn published numerous articles and books, such as *Little Lower than Angels*; *Man's Best Hope*; *Modern Jewish Problems*; *Consecrated Unto Me*; *My Beloved is Mine*; *Wings of the Morning*; *Fire in My Bones*; *The Meaning of Modern Judaism*; *Love, Sex, and Marriage: A Jewish View*; *The Meaning of Modern Judaism*; *The Extra Dimension*; *Here Am I*; *Harnessed to Hope*; *How Do I Decide?*; *Love in Your Life: A Jewish View of Teenage Sexuality*.

Gittelsohn died on December 13, 1995. His first wife was Ruth Freyer with whom he had a son, David B. Gittelsohn, and a daughter, Judith Fales. His second wife was Hulda Tishler. He had two stepsons, Gerald Tishler and Douglas Tishler, four grandchildren and three step-grandchildren.

### Scope and Content

These papers consist primarily of correspondence, writings and sermons of Rabbi Gittelsohn.

- Arrangement** This collection is arranged in three (3) series: A. Correspondence; B. Subject and Sermon Files; C. Writings.
- Terms of Access** The collection is open for use; no restrictions apply.
- Preferred Citation** Footnotes and bibliographic references should refer to the Roland Bertram Gittelsohn Papers and the American Jewish Archives. A suggestion for at least the first citation is as follows:  
[Description], [Date], Box #, Folder #. MS-704. Roland Bertram Gittelsohn Papers. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.
- Provenance** Received from Judith Fales, Naples, Fla., and David Gittelsohn of Natick, Mass., 2003.
- Processing Information** Processed by Christine A. Crandall, January 2004.

## Index Terms

- Subjects** Jews -- Massachusetts -- Boston / Rabbis
- Personal Names** Gittelsohn, Roland Bertram, 1910-1995
- Media** Sermons

## Series A. Correspondence, 1941-1995

**Extent** 12 linear feet (30 Hollinger boxes)

**Scope and Content Note** Contains Rabbi Gittelsohn's correspondence with various people and organizations. The file names used by Gittelsohn were maintained. Of special note are letters to and/or from Martin Luther King (10/5) and various politicians throughout the years such as Paul Tsongas, Edward Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, and Norman Thomas (4/21) among others.

**Arrangement** The series is arranged alphabetically within chronological order.

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## **Series B. Subject and Sermon Files, 1934-1995**

**Extent** 13.2 linear feet (33 Hollinger boxes)

**Scope and Content Note** The series is a collection of topics that Gittelsohn was interested in and involved with. Once again his file names were maintained. These files contain Gittelsohn's notes, sermons,

articles, writings and some correspondence. One can gain insight into the subjects that he was most concerned with from the titles of these files. Of particular note are the files on anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA). Gittelsohn was an ardent supporter of Israel throughout his life as these files evidence. The other topic that occupied much of Gittelsohn's time and work was pacifism and the search for social justice. His files on capitalism, fascism, war and peace tie in nicely with those on Jewish ethics and free will. Among the many interesting files in this series is the file on pacifism and conscientious objection to war (53/1). This file contains articles, Gittelsohn's notes and other thoughts on laws and ethics regarding conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War. Most stunning, however, are the first-hand accounts of objectors that Gittelsohn collected. He was a staunch defender of those who refused to support the war.

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- Box 31. Folder 4. Anti-labor activities.
- Box 31. Folder 5. Anti-Semitism. Causes.
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- Box 36. Folder 3. Bible lectures. Part I.
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Box 36. Folder 5. Bible lectures. Part III.

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Box 37. Folder 2. Bible exegesis.

Box 37. Folder 3. Bible and social problems.

Box 37. Folder 4. Biographies and memorials. Part I.

Box 37. Folder 5. Biographies and memorials. Part II.

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Box 38. Folder 2. Business ethics.

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Box 39. Folder 1. Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), 1969-1970

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Box 42. Folder 3. Education in Judaism.

Box 42. Folder 4. Euthanasia.

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Box 58. Folder 5. Sermons. "Message of Israel.", 1954-1955

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Box 59. Folder 10. Sermons. Television correspondence, 1959-1960

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Box 63. Folder 7. War, my experience.

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### **Series C. Writings, 1957-1996, undated**

**Extent** 0.4 linear feet (1 Hollinger box)

**Scope and Content Note** Contains some of Gittelsohn's writings as well as a collection of letters by his father in "The Little Town that is No More."

**Arrangement** The series is arranged alphabetically.

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Box 64. Folder 4. "The Little Town that is No More.", 1957

Box 64. Folder 5. "The Purest Democracy." Iwo Jima dedication.

Box 64. Folder 6. "My Cancer and My God.", 1996

Box 64. Folder 7. "Pacifist to Padre/Pacifist in Uniform/Pacifist No More."