



Rela Mintz Geffen (1943–2019): An Appreciation

Published online: 14 June 2019
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Contemporary Jewry and its parent organization the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry (ASSJ) mourn the loss of Dr. Rela Mintz Geffen who passed away at the age of 75 on Sunday, February 3, 2019. During the years 1998–2002, Professor Mintz served as Editor-in-Chief of this journal. I had the good fortune of following her in that position, and can say that she was extraordinarily helpful and gracious to me, especially during the transitional year. Before that she had served as President of ASSJ. More than that, she was one of the pioneering women in the field of Jewish Studies, publishing more than 40 articles and book chapters and authoring or editing four books including *Celebration and Renewal: Rites of Passage in Judaism* (JPS) and the Centennial Volume of Gratz College (co-edited with Dr. Marsha Bryan Edelman) entitled *Freedom and Responsibility-Exploring the Challenges of Jewish Continuity*. She also co-authored *Conservative Judaism: Dilemmas and Challenges*, with the late Daniel Elazar. Granddaughter of the famed Rabbi Tobias Geffen of Atlanta, and daughter of Sylvia Mintz and Rabbi Joel S. Geffen of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rela Geffen was educated at Columbia University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the University of Florida, where she received her Ph.D. Her major fields of interest were sociology of religion, the family, and gender roles. Her 1978 survey, “The Evolving Role of Women in the Ritual of the American Synagogue,” conducted with Elazar, showed the extent to which egalitarian principles were taking hold at Reform and Conservative synagogues. Her academic career included a term as President of Baltimore Hebrew University (2000–2007), as well as her many years on the faculty and as dean at Gratz College. She was a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard and was a fellow of the Center for Jewish Community Studies. She also taught at The Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Jewish Studies, where she was a Skirball Fellow; Boston University; the Jewish Theological Seminary; and Bryn Mawr College.

In addition to her academic accomplishments, she is fondly remembered as warm colleague, gifted teacher, and thoughtful mentor to many of us, and someone whose smile could fill a room. All of us who knew her could testify as to how she gave each of us the sense that we were not just colleagues but true friends, an impression one got even after knowing her only briefly. She had the special capacity to make people feel that their work was important and valuable, and she certainly did that in her role as editor of this journal. Her knowledge of what we all were doing was remarkable. In her days here at the journal, she was not only responsible for so many of the

normal editorial tasks but along with the late Egon Mayer saw to it that the journal was printed, published, and mailed.

In spite of her many accomplishments, Rela always made time to appreciate the work of others, a quality that accounted for her being editor of the ASSJ book series with Springer Verlag, a judge at the Jewish Book Council as well as for the Tuttleman Prize at Gratz. Her enthusiasm and friendship stood out as a key quality and will be sorely missed.



L to R: Joel Geffen, Rabbi Tobias Geffen, JTS Chancellor Louis Finkelstein, Rela Mintz Geffen, David Geffen

Rela Geffen's passing so moved many of our members and readers that many of them shared their thoughts with us. We present a selection of these, with permission, below:

From Harold (Chaim) Himmelfarb:

Rela and I go back together to Board activities in the early years of ASSJ. I always found her to be amiable, committed and helpful. As others have pointed out, her network of acquaintances was massive, and she could easily point to others elsewhere who shared a common subject interest, even if not all of them were fellow social scientists. Being bereft of fellow social scientists who studied Jewry when I was at Ohio State, Rela's knowledge of who was doing what elsewhere was always enlightening. Intellectually, she provided a useful counter perspective in the early years to those of us who were enamored by developing methodologies to study large population samples, and use multivariate statistics to attempt to establish causal relationships. Rela was quick,

and correct, to remind us that there were other useful insights to be gained by more qualitative methodologies, and that those type of studies required their own kind of rigor for which not all social scientists were well-trained or adept at executing. Her ability to maintain her social science expertise while being a major player in the broader field of Jewish Studies and adult Jewish education, was rare, if not unique. Rela leaves a legacy of many scholarly, organizational, and communal contributions.

From Barry Chiswick:

Rela was a very rare person – very warm, sensitive, curious, bright, open to new and different ideas and approaches, and a dear friend.

From Sarah Bunin Benor:

Rela Mintz Geffen was an important force in Jewish social science and in the Jewish community more broadly. I used articles of hers in my HUC classes, and I always enjoyed my interactions with her at conferences, including chatting about her Jewish summer camp experiences. I know she had more wisdom to share with the Jewish world; it's a shame we won't benefit from it.

From Carmel Chiswick:

Rela was a good friend and wonderful colleague for many of us in ASSJ. She had a bright and inquiring mind, a wide interest in and knowledge of the social science literature on the Jewish people, and a voracious appetite for new ideas and fresh approaches to old subjects. In her research as well as her social life, the exposure to an unfamiliar face caused her eyes to light up and a barrage of questions to pursue a new interest. Rela's warm heart and lively personality made her everyone's friend, and she reciprocated with generosity and grace. It seemed like every time I mentioned a piece of research, Rela knew the author and likely as not had worked with him or her on a project. As someone once said, the circle of her acquaintance in the profession was the universe. Rela was a mover and shaker in ASSJ as well as in the research community. She was a mentor to many of us and generously volunteered her time and expertise to this organization that she valued highly. She was a very special person, colleague, friend that we will sorely miss.

From Riv-Ellen Prell:

Rela was always larger than life, not only at ASSJ events, but in the women's caucus of AJS, and many other settings. She was a wonderful and generous colleague, as well as a good scholar who cared very much about this field.

From David Schoem:

I first met Rela when I was a camper at Camp Ramah and she was a Rosh Edah. I was very privileged and pleased to re-connect with her some years later as a colleague after I completed my Ph.D. Rela was always welcoming, kind, supportive, and caring to me - and while she definitely showed respect

for me as a colleague, I think in some important place in her mind and heart, I was always still her young camper which she showed through extra caring and attention. I will miss her.

From Ariela Keysar:

Rela was ahead of us in studying the role of grandparents. She was a demanding reviewer of manuscripts, not letting you get away with fuzzy thinking.

From Debra Kaufman:

Rela is the reason I am a part of the world of Jewish scholarship. I was one of the many gender scholars she actively recruited into the field of Jewish Studies from sociology. I knew little, if anything, about AJS or ASSJ until after I had already established my career as a feminist sociologist. I shall be forever grateful to her for making the last half of my career so meaningful.

From Chaim I. Waxman:

Rela may have been physically the shortest but her heart was the biggest, her smile was the warmest, and her cheer was the brightest. She beamed optimism as she steadfastly pursued the subjects and principles she believed in. She is missed.

From Samuel Klausner:

My friendship with Rela dates back some forty-five years when she arrived at the campus of the University of Pennsylvania with her husband.... She had been on track to do a Ph.D. at Columbia but brought one from a Florida university, the result of following the breadwinner.... I engaged her as a research associate in my social research center. She was bright, had a quick wit and was disputatious. She tried to promote a labor action among Center employees. I was amused at her spunk. In Philadelphia, Rela was recently awarded a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. Rela's heroism lies in the way she confronted problems.

From Jonathan Sarna:

My ties to Rela go back a long way – all the way back to the Jewish Theological Seminary, when my father was one of her teachers. Through the years, I saw Rela periodically – in Philadelphia, in Jerusalem, at Association for Jewish Studies Conferences, and more recently as a judge on the Rohr Prize. She displayed a Jewish knowledge that was broad and deep – far deeper, indeed, than many in the field of contemporary Jewry possess. She was especially proud of her abilities in Talmud: in her day that was rare for a woman. She was proud too of her *yichus*: she was a Geffen, part of one of American Jewry's most remarkable rabbinic and scholarly families. Rela was one of the women pioneers in the field of Jewish Studies. She did not have an easy time, but she persevered. Eventually, she served as vice-president of the Association for Jewish Studies and as president of Baltimore Hebrew University. Plagued by illness in her last years of life, Rela refused to give up: she was a profile in courage. She leaves behind a large community of colleagues, former students, and friends.

From Steven M. Cohen:

Rela combined so many extraordinary qualities as a Jewish social researcher, academic leader, and Jewish public figure. She was industrious, imaginative, indefatigable, generous, and kind. She supported and instructed so many of us in her dedication to the study of such matters as Conservative Judaism, intermarriage, the Jewish family and gender in Jewish life.

From Barry Kosmin:

A generous and friendly scholar. Her smile will be missed.

From Gail Glicksman:

I am deeply saddened by Rela's death. Many knew her from other vantage points and have many other memories of Rela. Having earned a PhD in 1972, before it was common for women to earn PhD's, Rela wrote about the relationship between family structure and female achievement. She was generous in encouraging women in Jewish studies and in Jewish communal life in ways some pioneers are not. Rela gave me my first chance to present a paper in an academic context – an ASSJ session at a sociology conference. Over the years, Rela offered opportunities to many others. Rela's academic work and her involvement in Jewish communal settings made a big difference.

From Harriet Hartman:

I first met Rela when my husband and I came to Gratz College on sabbatical and leave from Ben-Gurion University. I experienced first-hand her mentoring, her friendship, and her collegiality, as we explored many common areas of interest and research. She was a staunch supporter of our gender research and an advocate for my current work-in-progress on the Jewish family, which she had hoped to see to fruition as editor of the book series. I will miss our sporadic conversations, which always meandered from the personal to the professional on so many levels. A warm and generous soul, may she rest in peace.

Rela Mintz Geffen leaves behind two sons: Uri and Amiel Monson, five grandchildren and a sister, Lisa Schlesinger. I am sure all of my colleagues join me in wishing, in line with the traditional Jewish words of comfort, that her memory will for all of us be a blessing.

Samuel Heilman

Editor *Contemporary Jewry* 2002–2014

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