



Thanks to the **Barry Shrage Travel and Research Fund for Jewish Studies**, I travelled to the United Kingdom for a week in 2024 and closely studied the works of an ascendant Jewish-American contemporary artist—Aliza Nisenbaum—in order to expand an academic paper that I previously written for visiting Professor Josh Lambert’s CJS course on “21st-Century U.S. Jewish Culture.” Alongside the thesis I wrote for the Harvard History Department, this CJS research project was an amazing capstone to my senior year—particularly given my consistent interests in both American art history and in Jewish studies throughout college. A month after my research trip, I was honored

to attend **an evening with CJS celebrating Peter J. Solomon ‘60**, an amazing leader/friend to this organization. I enjoyed speaking with the Solomon family about our shared interests in contemporary art, and left grateful for the well-wishes I received that entire day from CJS in support of my audition to deliver an undergraduate Commencement speech later that May. (I had just completed a finalist round right before dinner! Although my oration was ultimately not selected, I’ll forever be touched by how many people across campus resonated with my speech’s call to “choose compassion in the face of crisis.”)

As I transition away from my undergraduate experience at Harvard and begin a military career within the United States Air Force, there are many friendships, mentorships, and fond memories that I carry with me from my time with the Center for Jewish Studies. I also enter post-graduate life having learned one particularly powerful lesson: in a world where young adults increasingly self-constrain both their intellectual interests and post-graduate possibilities vis-a-vis racial, cultural, and/or socioeconomic identity (“I am X, so I can/should only study or work in Y”), my experience as a non-Jew studying Jewish history, culture, and artwork demonstrates to myself and to others that this dogmatic principle does not need to be so.

Although I am not Jewish myself, my sincere intellectual and cultural interest in learning more about one of the world’s most complex traditions—Judaism—has ultimately helped me to become not just a better scholar, but also a better person of faith, a better community member, a better friend and family member, and a better leader. Respectful cross-ideological and cross-cultural interaction—the kinds of which I found while at CJS—is precisely what our divided world needs more of today.

(The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of either the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government).

-Aldo Aragon
-Harvard College ‘24