

The Rabbinical Assembly's Guide to Contemporary Rabbis' Papers

It is a pleasure to provide our rabbis, their families, and their congregations and organization with a guide for the proper maintenance of papers/archives, both hard copy and digital, reflecting the rich careers of the members of our Rabbinical Assembly (RA). The Rabbinical Assembly, the professional association of the Conservative/Masorti Rabbis, has a long history, having been established in New York City 1901, and now serves more than 1600 members internationally. The records of our rabbis are a rich resource for understanding the communities in which they worked, as well as the history of the Jewish people and of our global Movement. People often turn to such records to track Jewish lineage and information about their families. This document is offered to you as a guide for how to manage one's records that may have lasting value. Our goal is to make sure important materials are maintained for the future in a secure setting for future reference by one's institution, by one's family, and by interested researchers.

This guide to archives is a sequel to the "The RA Guide to Finding New Homes for Your Books." That guide was edited starting in 2023 by Rabbis Howard Gorin and David Fine as a service to our members who were nearing retirement, or to family members, needing to figure out how to disperse large rabbinic libraries that our rabbis may collect over the course of their career. That document is available at the bottom of the page for retirement planning:

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/career-center/retirement-planning>

This is a living document and we welcome corrections and suggestions to enhance it. (Please send to Rabbi David Fine dfine@synagogue.org and to Rabbi Harold Kravitz hjkrav@gmail.com). This present document is the next step in this process offering our rabbis a guide to managing one's records.

The RA extends its deep appreciation to Kate Dietrick, Archivist of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives at the University of Minnesota for her willingness to offer her expertise in creating this resource. Kate has done extraordinary work securing and organizing the papers of the Jewish community of the Upper Midwest. Like the RA's guide to dispersing one's library, we understand this to be an evolving document that we hope will be similarly valuable.

Given the deep commitment of our Conservative Masorti Movement to Jewish history, we urge our rabbis to pay attention to the preservation of their own personal papers and to the papers of the institutions where they are engaged. We know how easy it is for old papers to be lost or

discarded, especially at times of transitions. We know well that history is generally written based on the documents that are available to those who write it.

Thank you for your partnership in writing the next chapters of the history of the Jewish people and of our Movement. Please be in touch with us with suggestions for how to improve on this document.

Sincerely,

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How to manage one's papers while still actively employed

We appreciate how hard it is to keep one's records organized while working full time. In considering how to organize your papers, think ahead about the form they might take once given to the archives. We recommend reaching out to potential archives that seem best suited to working with your institution, or with you as an individual rabbi. An experienced archivist can guide you in thinking about what original materials they may want to preserve when you are ready to hand them over.

Where should my materials go?

Each rabbi should make their own decisions on where they would like to deposit their papers. There are international, national, and local archives and special collections that might be interested in accepting your papers. Archives are most interested in unique materials; it does not often make sense to duplicate records. Each one of these organizations will have their own collecting policies to determine if they can accept the materials, and you'll want to connect with them to learn more about their practices.

In evaluating where your materials should go, consider who might want to access the materials down the line. If you envision your local community interested in accessing your sermons or

eulogies, sending your collection across the country where your local community would have less access to them might not be the best option.

Jewish archives, historical societies, and special collections will seem like natural partners when considering where your papers should go. You may contact the library of the [Jewish Theological Seminary](#) to explore their collection policies. Jewish organizations will have a specialized knowledge and understanding of Jewish life and practices. Explore universities, state or national historical societies and archives, as they can and do sometimes have connections with Jewish communities and can be great stewards of Jewish collections. Find potential collections through:

- [Jewish Archives in the United States](#) (not an exhaustive list)
- Association of Jewish Libraries: [Mapping AJL Collections Directory](#) (not an exhaustive list)
- Council of American Jewish Museums: [CAJM Members](#)

What kinds of material are archives interested in preserving?

Archives house important materials that help document the history of communities. With the proliferation of print and electronic materials, it is necessary for archivists to curate collections to only keep materials that have historic value; archives cannot and should not keep everything ever created. As archivists make these curatorial decisions on what to keep and what not to keep, they think in terms of what researchers will be interested in in the future. To understand what kinds of materials archives are interested in, seek out examples of existing collections of rabbi's papers (one example: [Rabbi Bernard Raskas papers](#)).

Each archive will have their own collecting policies that determine what they can and can not accept. Please check with the intended repository for your papers on what their policies are and an archivist will guide you in these decisions.

Generally, archives **are** interested in:

- Correspondence, including electronic
- Sermons, presentations, and writings
- Administrative files
- Bulletins, newsletters, fliers for events
- Subject files
- Committee or leadership work
- Select published materials and/or books that have historic value (items that are rare or not already in their collection)

- Photographs and multimedia
- Select financial documents (annual reports, not accounts/payable or voided checks)

Archives **might not be** interested in:

- Artifacts and three-dimensional materials
- Duplicates of materials already in their collection
- Human resources materials that include resumes, salaries, performance evaluations
- Medical information or educational information that is guided by HIPAA or FERPA laws
- Sensitive or confidential materials (see below)

Keep in mind that the best materials to donate are:

- Unique (does this item exist elsewhere or are there a lot of them?)
- Include identifying information (are there names, dates, or locations included along with this photograph, or is it simply an unknown person in an unknown field?)
- Telling a story (are these materials historically valuable in helping researchers understand this place/organization/community?)

For further information, visit the Society of American Archivists guide on [donating your personal or family records to a repository](#).

Sensitive Materials and Confidentiality

There are materials that, for various reasons, are considered sensitive or even confidential. Some items have confidentiality laws that restrict them (eg. health information, educational information) and some personal sensibilities that might make someone want to restrict them (eg. counseling notes). Determining what is too sensitive to send to the archives can be subjective work, but it is something you should consider as you prepare your papers.

It is recommended that you work in conversation with an archivist to determine what to do with sensitive materials. You as the creator might know what and where these items can be found in your papers, and an archivist should know what data privacy policies they have enacted within their collections. Note that you do not need to go through every single piece of paper to find sensitive content. Talk with an archivist about what you would want to remain confidential and as the archivist organizes your papers they can weed out those materials. It is also possible to request that some materials are kept restricted for a number of years, as defined by you and coordinated with the archives.

Lifecycle records

It is helpful to maintain a set of certain lifecycles in the institution where these took place as there may be future inquiries to that organization. People commonly ask about birth, death, conversion, marriage and divorce. Here is a link to guidance from the RA for conversion information, which is exceedingly important when proof of conversion is sought.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NaLUUILLbI7JvMyoUxDE7pvNMWWxS2-o/edit>

Records related to divorce gittin are maintained by the RA's National Beit Din, but only certified Messadrei Beit Din can submit entries. Further questions about this may be directed to RA staff member Ashira Konigsburg akonigsburg@rabbinicalassembly.org. Archives are glad to have copies as well. Wedding talks and eulogies are a valuable source of social history. It is important for rabbis to impress upon those marking life cycles to safely maintain their own copies of important life cycle documents.

How much preorganizing does an archive expect?

It may be daunting contemplating organizing decades worth of professional work. The good news is, that is what archivists are for: it is their job to organize collections. You may choose for personal reasons to go through every box, every folder, or every item before you donate your papers. Or you may choose to simply send your boxes without any pre-organization. This is ultimately your choice, and you should talk to an archivist about what you will do before you send your collection. It is suggested, however, that you do a base amount of work to your papers before transfer:

- Discard duplicates: excessive duplicates of materials (newsletters, pamphlets, etc.) is unnecessary. Keep two and discard the rest.
- Remove sensitive materials: see the section about sensitive materials and confidentiality. Ideally you would remove these materials ahead of time.
- Label items: Try to put materials into folders that are labeled to identify what is inside the folder. Sharing your knowledge of what the materials are related to greatly helps archivists as they organize your papers.

Once materials are deposited into the archives, it is the job of the archivist to organize the materials into a cohesive, understandable collection for researchers to use and understand. They will weed out materials that, for example, might be out of scope, or materials you've identified that you would want returned or destroyed. Archivists will house the materials appropriately (see below) and create an inventory of the collection so that researchers know what materials can be found where.

Housing your materials

Part of the work of an archivist is considering the ways in which your materials will be stored so that they will be best preserved in perpetuity. That includes correctly housing the materials in properly sized acid-free boxes and acid-free folders. You can work with an archivist who might be able to provide you with boxes and folders ahead of time for you to organize before depositing your papers.

Transferring digital materials in diverse formats

Increasingly our work is in digital form and does not exist in a physical format. Do not assume that archives are not interested or not capable of handling digital content, but know that each archive will have a different process of how they handle digital content.

Access to one's material once they are donated

Once materials are donated to the archives, it may take months or years for them to organize your papers, depending on their staffing and backlog of collections. But once your papers are organized, a finding aid (also called a collection guide) will be created. This finding aid helps researchers navigate archival collections and includes descriptions of the contents of a collection, a biographical/historical note detailing the creator, and a box-level or folder-level inventory of the contents of the collection. These finding aids are available online for researchers to view so they know about the collection. Once available, you will want to bookmark a link to the finding aid so you can share it with people who might be interested in your papers.

If you would like access to your own papers once donated, work with the archivist and learn their policies on getting copies or scans of your documents. Each institution will have their own policies, but many times they are very open to working with donors on accessing their collections after donation. It is advised that you inform organizations where you worked of the location of your archived material, if they wish to access them.

Other things to consider

- Oral history: Along with your physical or digital files, your lived experience and stories have value as well. Consider sitting down for a formal oral history to share other stories

or give context to materials donated. Archives, libraries, and historical societies will have staff or know of historians who are trained in conducting oral histories.

- Financial support: A financial gift to support the work of organizing and maintaining the archives are of course appreciated and enable institutions to do their work.
- Synagogue or organization records: The synagogue or organization will also have documents that could benefit from being available within the archives. Work with your organization to see if they have considered the institutional records and potentially depositing those as well to a trusted archive.